



'ALĪ AKBAR

'ALĪ AKBAR, Imam Ḥosayn's eldest son, killed at the age of 18, 19, or 25 at the battle of Karbalā on the day of 'Āšūrā (10 Moḥarram 61/10 October 680). According to most historical sources, 'Alī Akbar was the first of the Talebites to go out to the battle-field and be killed (Ṭabarī, II, pp. 356ff.; Dīnavarī, *al-Akbār al-ṭewāl*, Cairo, 1330/1912, p. 254; Mofīd, *al-Eršād*, Tehran, 1377/1957-58, pp. 222ff.). His mother was Laylā bent Morra b. 'Orwa b. Mas'ūd Ṭaqafī (Ṭabarī, II, p. 387; Mofīd, *al-Eršād*, pp. 222ff.; idem, *al-Ekṭešāš*, Tehran, 1379/1959-60, p. 82; *Tārīk-eQom*, ed. S. J. Tehrānī, Tehran, 1313 Š./1934, pp. 195ff; in this last work "Alī Akbar" refers to 'Alī Zayn-al-'ābedīn and "Alī Ašḡar" to 'Alī Akbar). His heroic deeds on the battlefield are told in semi-legendary accounts, and his fame as a valiant warrior of the Ahl-e Bayt might have preceded that of 'Abbās b. 'Alī. Thus, according to Baḷ'amī (p. 267; *Chronique* IV, pp. 42ff.) 'Alī Akbar charged the enemy ten times before his father's eyes and killed two or three men each time. Exhausted and parched with thirst, he came back to Ḥosayn, who put his own tongue in his mouth. When he returned to the fight, a man called Morra b. Sa'd struck him from behind; he fell and was immediately surrounded by foes who cut him to pieces. Seeing his son fall, Ḥosayn, who had never been known to weep, burst into tears. According to most traditions, his murderer was called Morra B. Monqed 'Abdī. His head, along with those of the other martyrs, was brought to Ebn Zīād in Kūfa and then to Yazīd in Damascus, where, according to a tradition, it was buried in the Bāb al-Ṣaḡīr cemetery (H. ul-Ameene, *Islamic Shi'ite Encyclopaedia* IV, Beirut, 1973, p. 180; on the "Torbat-al-šohadā" in Bāb al-Ṣaḡīr, see J. Sourdél-Thomine, "Les anciens lieux de pèlerinage damascains d'après les sources arabes," in *Bulletin*



d'Etudes Orientales de l'Institut Français de Damas 14, 1952-54, p. 79, note 5). Their bodies were buried by the Banū 'Ažera, a branch of the Banū Asad (Mas'ūdī, *Morūj* V, p. 147). The Arabic "historical romance" of Ebn Ṭā'ūs Ṭā'ūsī (tr. F. Wüstenfeld, *Der Tod des Husein ben 'Ali und die Rache*, Göttingen, 1883), probably composed in the late 'Abbasid period, contains further accounts of 'Alī Akbar's heroic deeds. Here, as in other such narratives, 'Alī Akbar is one of the last to fall (just before 'Alī Ašğar and Ḥosayn), killed treacherously after having dispatched eighty-one of his foes (Wüstenfeld, *Der Tod*, p. 90). The circumstances of his martyrdom are generally the same in subsequent popular literature (on 8th/14th century Turkish narratives, see I. Mélikoff, "Le Drame de Kerbéla dans la littérature épique turque," *REI*, 1966, p. 142). In the most comprehensive compilation of these early narratives, the *Rawzat al-šohadā'* (completed 908/1502-03; ed. M. Ramažānī, Tehran, 1341 Š./1962, pp. 336-42), Wā'ež Kāšefī gives a detailed account of 'Alī Akbar's death, making him the 70th martyr at Karbalā and the 17th among the Talebites. 'Alī Akbar shows his eagerness to sacrifice his life; at first Ḥosayn prevents him, but he finally yields and equips him for the fight. Weeping tears of blood, 'Alī Akbar's mother and sisters try vainly to hold back his horse. Ḥosayn orders them to let his seventeen-year-old son meet his fate. 'Alī Akbar heads toward the battlefield, his face shining like the sun and his hair as black as pure musk; nobody resembles the Prophet more than he (hence his surname Šabīh-e Payğambar, the "Prophet's Likeness"). Upon seeing his face and hearing him sing his *mofākara* ("boast"), none of the enemies dares to attack him; he throws himself upon them and slaughters many. Exhausted by thirst, he returns to Ḥosayn, who places the Prophet's ring, upon which is the miraculous seal of Solomon, in 'Alī Akbar's mouth. He returns to the fight and kills many enemies; 'Omar b. Sa'd is able to send these against him only by promising great worldly rewards (e.g., Ṭāreq b. Šayṭ is promised governorship of Raqqā and Mosul). 'Alī defeats all his foes and even kills the valiant Mešrā' b. Ġāleb, cleaving him in two with a single blow of his sword. After hearing from Ḥosayn that his thirst will soon be quenched from the water of Kawṭar in Paradise, 'Alī Akbar goes forth for the third time and is killed by numerous foes. Ḥosayn hears him cry out, rushes to the field, and brings him back to the camp. Kāšefī's account contains many features from the Iranian national epic, such as stereotyped battle scenes and the episode where 'Alī Akbar's horse guides Ḥosayn to its dying master (*Rawza*, p. 341). Kāšefī's failure to mention 'Alī Akbar's mother Laylā while describing Šahr-bānū's lamentation may have influenced the belief, sometimes encountered (according to Gobineau, not before Nāšer-al-dīn Shah's reign; *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie*



Centrale, 10th ed., Paris, 1957, p. 347), that the latter was ‘Alī Akbar’s mother.

‘Alī Akbar’s memory is celebrated in Moḥarram ceremonies from the West Indies to Southeast Asia. Of all the young men of the Ahl-e Bayt, he is “the Persians’ most beloved, most exalted, most regretted; for he is Imam Ḥosayn’s own son, he is the fatherland’s blood” (Gobineau, *Religions*, p. 347). Many features of his story appear in *ta’zīa* (passion play) rituals, such as the love and devotion shown ‘Alī Akbar by his sisters (Sakīna/Sokayna at Karbalā, and Fāṭema Ṣoḡrā, who was sick and remained in Medina) and his aunt Zaynab; separate platonic love stories have also developed (on Khotanese or Egyptian princesses in love with ‘Alī Akbar see Rossi and Bombaci, *Elenco*, indices, p. 355). He is pictured as a brave and unfortunate youth martyred before he could marry; allusions to worldly and heavenly marriage abound. Chronology is reshuffled, and ‘Alī Akbar is martyred before Qāsem, who competes with him in his eagerness to sacrifice his life for Ḥosayn. In the dramatization of Qāsem’s marriage and martyrdom, the dead bodies of ‘Abbās, ‘Alī Akbar, and Zaynab’s children appear on stage (see I. N. Berezin, *Puteshestvie po severnoi Persii*, Kazan, 1852, p. 322). Zaynab’s offering of her own children in sacrifice for ‘Alī Akbar was first dramatized as part of ‘Alī Akbar’s martyrdom (*ibid.*, pp. 316ff.; P. Chelkowski, *Tārīk va janba-ye adabī-e ta’zīa*, thesis, Tehran University, 1347 Š./1968, pp. 230-35) before becoming a separate play (Rossi and Bombaci, *Elenco*, indices, p. 356). ‘Abbās is shown testing and training ‘Alī Akbar before the battle (a scene apparently performed only in Caspian coastal areas; see Chelkowski, *Tārīk*, pp. 180-86; Rossi and Bombaci, *Elenco*, no. 716). A parallel has been observed between Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Esmā’īl and Ḥosayn’s sacrifice of ‘Alī Akbar (Lassy, *Muharram Mysteries*, pp. 79ff.; Chelkowski, *Tārīk*, p. 211). In Jawharī’s *Tūfān al-bokā*, the story of Esmā’īl is related within that of ‘Alī Akbar (Tehran, n.d., pp. 249ff.). The actor playing ‘Alī Akbar had to be a young and handsome man with a slim waist, and melodious voice (A. Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendegānī-e man* I, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1341 Š./1962, p. 289). In popular iconography, ‘Alī Akbar appears in a coat of mail (sometimes covered with a shroud) dying in Ḥosayn’s lap, arrows stuck in his chest and his head wounded by a sword. Young Boys were often dedicated to ‘Alī Akbar as *nadr* or ex-voto, and thus were made Moḥarram ceremony celebrants for ‘Alī Akbar. A tradition says that ‘Alī Akbar wore a scalp lock; young boys, especially in villages, used to wear scalp locks in his memory (B. A. Donaldson, *The Wild Rue*, London, 1938, p. 187). Persons who do not expect to meet again may express the wish to meet on Judgment Day by quoting ‘Alī Akbar’s farewell words to the Ahl-e Bayt (A. A. Dehḳodā, *Amtāl o ḥekam*, Tehran, 1352



Š./1973, II, p. 849).

‘Alī Akbar should not be confused with the brother and vizier of Moḥammad b. Ḥanafīya in the latter’s own saga (see for instance L. F. Brakel, *The Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyyah, a Medieval Muslim—Malay Romance*, thesis, Leiden, December, 1975, index). His grave lies under the central dome of Imam Ḥosayn’s mausoleum in Karbalā. The two tombs are placed at right angles and are surrounded by railings (E. Aubin, *La Perse d’aujourd’hui*, Paris, 1908, p. 380). Bāb ‘Alī Akbar is one of the seven gates of the shrine (H. ul-Ameene, *Islamic Shi’ite Encyclopaedia*, Beirut, 1973, IV, p. 207).

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