

THE FAMILY HISTORY OF ABŪ AL-FARAJ AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ: THE NINTH-CENTURY ‘ABBASID POLITICAL ELITE AND THE ṬĀLIBIDS IN SAMARRA

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In an often attested biographical entry on Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (b. 284/897–8, d. 356/967),¹ one finds the following passage: ‘It is

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¹ These dates are given by al-Iṣfahānī’s student, Ibn Abī al-Fawāris, and are recorded in: al-Khaṭīb al-Baghādī, *Tārīkh Madīnat al-Salām* (ed. Bashshār ‘A. Ma‘rūf; Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2001), xiii. 340. However, these dates are problematic. Yāqūt (574–626/1178–1225) notices that the reports in *Adab al-ghurabā* by al-Iṣfahānī attest to his being active after 356/967, and, in one of these reports, the author describes himself as a young man (*fi ayyām al-shabāba wa-l-ṣibā*) at the time of Mu‘izz al-Dawla’s death in 356/967, when al-Iṣfahānī is supposed to have died. See: Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’* (ed. Aḥmad F. Rifā‘ī; Cairo: Maṭbū‘āt al-Ma‘mūn, 1922), xiii. 95–97. This also gives rise to the controversy over the authorship of *Adab al-ghurabā*. The scholars who affirm al-Iṣfahānī as the author of *Adab al-ghurabā* include: A. Azarnoosh, art. ‘Abū al-Faraj ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn’ in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, 733; S. Günther, art., ‘Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī’ in *EI*³; Salāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid, *Muqaddima of Kitāb Adab al-ghurabā*, by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1972), 10–16; Hilary Kilpatrick, ‘On the difficulty of knowing mediaeval Arabic authors: The case of Abū l-Faraj and pseudo-Iṣfahānī’ in Robert G. Hoyland and Philip F. Kennedy (eds.), *Islamic Reflections, Arabic Musings. Studies in Honour of Professor Alan Jones* (Oxford: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004), 230–42; id., ‘The *Kitāb Adab al-Gurabā*’ of Abu l-Farağ al-Iṣfahānī’ in *La signification du bas Moyen Age dans l’histoire et la culture du monde musulman. Actes du 8ème Congrès de l’Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants Aix-en-Provence 1976* (Aix-en-Provence: Édisud, 1978), 127–35. On the opposite side are: Robert G. Hoyland, ‘History, Fiction and Authorship in the First Centuries of Islam’ in Julia Bray (ed.) *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam: Muslim Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2006): 16–46, at 36–9; Patricia Crone and Shmuel Moreh, ‘The Authorship of the *Ghurabā*’ in al-Iṣfahānī, *The Book of Strangers*:

astonishing that he is an Umayyad Shi'i (*al-'ajab annahu umawī shī'i*).² While the biographers find this combination bizarre, al-Iṣfahānī himself appears to suggest the possibility of reconciliation between Shi'is and their notional enemies, the Umayyads, in a story in which he relates that the Zaydi ruler in Ṭabaristān, Muḥammad b. Zayd (d. 287/900 or 289/902),³ pardoned and rewarded an Umayyad descendant of Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya (r. 60–64/680–683).⁴ What al-Iṣfahānī does not clarify is how his family, deriving from the last Umayyad caliph, Marwān b. Muḥammad (r. 127–132/744–750), ended up as 'Alid or Shi'i sympathizers.⁵

Mediaeval Arabic Graffiti on the Theme of Nostalgia (transl. Patricia Crone and Shmuel Moreh; Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), 128–43. Regardless of the controversy, it is possible to calculate the timespan within which al-Iṣfahānī was active on the basis of the dates of his teachers and students—the first six decades of the tenth century, from about 290/902 to 348/960; see: I-Wen Su, 'The Shī'i Past in Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī's *Kitāb al-Aghānī*: a literary and historical analysis' (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2016), 61–2.

² The cited statement expressing astonishment (*al-'ajab*) comes from: al-Dhahabī, *Siyar al-'alām al-nubalā'* (ed. Ḥassān 'Abd al-Mannān; Beirut: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawliyya, 2004), 2774; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh* (ed. Muḥammad Y. al-Daqqāq; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1987), vii. 302. The earliest mention of the Umayyad–Shi'i combination in the biographical sources is: al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh*, xiii. 340; this is then cited by: al-Qifṭī, *Inbāh al-ruwāt 'alā anbāh al-nuḥāt* (ed. Muḥammad A. Ibrāhīm; Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1986), ii. 253. A similar tenor, in a slightly different formulation, in 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī al-Umawī, the author of the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, the Shi'i, and this is rare for an Umawī (*wa-hādihā nādir fī umawī*), see: al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-ītidāl fī naqd al-rijāl* (eds. 'Alī M. Mu'awwad and 'Adil A. 'Abd al-Mawjūd; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1995), v. 151; Ibn Hajar, *Lisān al-mizān* (eds. 'Abd al-Fattāh Abū Ghadda and Salmān 'A. Abū Ghadda; Beirut: Maktabat al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 2002), v. 526. Another formulation '*min al-'ajā'ib annahu marwānī yatashayya'u*', see: Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahaba* (eds. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Arnā'ūt and Maḥmūd al-Arnā'ūt; Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1986), iv. 292.

³ Eds. (P. Bearmann *et al.*), 'Muḥammad b. Zayd' in *EI*.

⁴ al-Tanūkhī, *Kitāb al-Faraj ba'da al-shidda* (ed. 'Abbūd al-Shālījī; Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1978), ii. 334–7. The same report is found in al-Tanūkhī's *al-Mustajāḍ*, according to Muḥammad A. Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib al-Aghānī: Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī al-Rāwīya* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjlū al-Miṣriyya, 2nd edn., 1962), 39, n. 2.

⁵ Although Ibn al-Nadīm, being the earliest biographer of al-Iṣfahānī, says that he was a descendant of Hishām b. 'Abd al-Malik (r. 105–125/724–743), the majority of the sources support tracing his ancestry to Marwān b. Muḥammad; see: Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist* (ed. Riḍā Tajaddud; Beirut: Dār al-Masīra,

Two propositions, originally put forward by Khalafallāh, are frequently cited to explain this unusual combination. The first proposition suggests that the ‘Alids and the Umayyads, being both the targets of ‘Abbasid persecution, were pulled together and thus the conventional hostility defrosted.⁶ This may be further supported by a geopolitical factor. Isfahan, which was the refuge of various ‘Alids and their supporters in the late Umayyad period, was the destination of al-Iṣfahānī’s ancestral Umayyad branch after the ‘Abbasid revolution.⁷ It is in this geographical proximity that the connection between the ‘Alids and the Umayyads took root. According to the second proposition, the fact that al-Iṣfahānī was related to the Āl Thawāba from the maternal side was taken by Khalafallāh, and then Kilpatrick and Azarnoosh, as explaining al-Iṣfahānī’s Shī‘i conviction on the basis of the Āl Thawāba’s Shī‘i affiliation.⁸ However, this second view is in fact based on the assumption that the Āl Thawāba are Zaydi Shī‘is. Furthermore, it only accounts for al-Iṣfahānī’s Shī‘i sympathy, and does not explain why the Shī‘i-inclined (if this is an accurate description at all) Āl Thawāba decided to give their daughter’s hand to an Umayyad family.⁹ Moreover,

3rd edn., 1988), 127–8; Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamharat ansāb al-‘arab* (ed. ‘Abd al-Salām M. ‘A. Hārūn; Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 5th edn., 1982), 107. For the majority view, see n. 2 above.

⁶ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 34–40.

⁷ Andrew J. Newman, *Twelver Shiism: Unity and Diversity in the Life of Islam, 632 to 1722* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 37.

⁸ The idea that the Āl Thawāba sowed the Shī‘i affection in the young al-Iṣfahānī’s heart is first suggested by Khalafallāh: *Ṣāhib*, 52–9 (esp. 58); both Kilpatrick and Azarnoosh cite Khalafallāh’s work in their discussion of al-Iṣfahānī’s Shī‘i conviction. Kilpatrick accepts this suggestion: ‘The Banū Thawāba were Shī‘is, and if Abū l-Faraj’s mother was indeed a member of this family, his own Shī‘i convictions are easy to explain’ (Hilary Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author’s Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī’s Kitāb al-Aghānī* [London: Routledge Curzon, 2003], 15 [reference to Khalafallāh at n. 13]). A similar view is found in ‘It is possible that Abū al-Faraj inherited his Zaydi faith from his mother’s family, the Āl Thawāba, who were in all probability Zaydis’. See A. Azarnoosh, ‘Abū al-Faraj’, 728.

⁹ As will be shown in this article, this view also assumes that the Āl Thawāba are Zaydis—an assumption that is problematic in light of the socio-historical circumstances considered here, wherein many of the elite families like the Āl Thawāba themselves may have simply aligned with the ‘Alids or Ṭālibids, without committing themselves to any substantial Shī‘i (including Imāmī) doctrine. Furthermore, the Shī‘i conviction of the Āl Thawāba is based on attenuate evidence. See below pp. 15–16 and Section 2.

al-Iṣfahānī's grandfather, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, cultivated close relationships with some Ṭālibid notables.¹⁰ Thus, it seems that al-Iṣfahānī's Shi'i connection may be traced further back to his paternal ancestors. As for the first proposition, although reasonable, it lacks precision as to when, how, and why this branch of the Umayyads became Shi'i. Instead of joining the Sunni majority or other discontented groups under 'Abbasid rule,¹¹ what prompted al-Iṣfahānī's forefathers to revere 'Alī's offspring, and thus accept their superior virtues and, implicitly, hold (at least, notionally) their close kin, such as Mu'āwiya b. Abi Sufyān (against 'Alī b. Abi Ṭālib) and Hishām b. 'Abd al-Malik (against Zayd b. 'Alī), as wrongdoers for warring against 'Alī or his descendants?

To ask why al-Iṣfahānī's family became close to the *ahl al-bayt* is also to ask why many elite families working under 'Abbasid authority decided to align with the Ṭālibids, especially, the 'Alids—some of these families, such as the Banū Nawbakht, were deeply involved in the affairs of the Imami Shi'i community—in the second half of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth.¹² In the wider context of the socio-political milieu that facilitated association between the political elite and the Ṭālibids, this study addresses al-Iṣfahānī's family history (specifically, the three generations before him) with regard to their affiliation to the Ṭālibids. The explanation proposed in the present study is that the Ṭālibids, with their strong presence in Samarra in the second half of the ninth century, attracted the political elite under 'Abbasid rule, because, besides their spiritual guidance, their prestige as the Prophet's close kin and as a source of political legitimacy may have been used to secure the transfer of power in a turbulent time, in which deposing and killing caliphs, *kuttāb*, and military leaders became a quotidian scene on the political stage. Another question branching out of this one is the question of how

¹⁰ al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn* (ed. Aḥmad Ṣāqir; Qom: Manshūrāt al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, 2nd edn., 1416 [1995]), 547.

¹¹ This view also fails to take into account the fact that Isfahan was a Sunni-dominant city; see Andrew J. Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism: Ḥadīth as Discourse Between Qum and Baghdad* (London: Routledge, 2000), 13; al-Najāshī, *Fihrist asmā' muṣannifī al-shī'a al-mushtahar bi-rijāl al-Najāshī* (Beirut: Shirkat al-A'lāmī, 2010), 19–20.

¹² Newman, *Twelver Shiism*, 42–3. On the role of the Banū Nawbakht in the Shi'i communities during the Minor Occultation (260–329/874–941), see Heinz Halm, *Shiism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 35–9; Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 76–7, 162–5.

Shī'i this political elite was (what kind of Shi'ism and to what extent they regarded themselves as *shī'at* 'Alī and his descendants).

In what follows, we will begin by introducing al-Iṣfahānī's family members (as shown in the Figure 1), with regards to the people with whom they were associated. The main information, derived from the *Aghānī* and the *Maqātil*, has been analysed by Khalafallāh. I summarize Khalafallāh's key points, with additional material. Where Khalafallāh cites from the *Aghānī* and other primary sources, the reference(s) to the cited passage(s) are given, from the editions I am using, in parenthesis. After this section, the wider historical context, especially the Ṭalibid interaction with the political elite, is examined. Then, the family's networks are analysed and re-situated in the context of the 'Abbasid court in the ninth and tenth centuries. Finally, how the family's alignment with the Ṭalibids in the given context can be interpreted in terms of Shi'ism is treated in the last section.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE IṢFAHĀNĪS

When treating the connection between the city, Isfahan, and al-Iṣfahānī himself, Khalafallāh argues convincingly that there is no evidence showing that al-Iṣfahānī was born in Isfahan—he may not even have been to that city.¹³ The epithet, Khalafallāh suggests, is derived from the offshoot of Marwān b. Muḥammad's descendants that settled in Isfahan after the 'Abbasid revolution—they became al-Iṣfahānī's family; this is further supported by the fact that many of al-Iṣfahānī's relatives bear the same name tracing them to Isfahan.¹⁴ Just as Isfahan seems to be nothing more than al-Iṣfahānī's *nisba*, the city leaves no trace in the family's history, as the earliest member of it of whom we have record appears to have settled in Samarra, that is, al-Iṣfahānī's great grandfather, Aḥmad b. al-Haytham.

¹³ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 22–8; in Khalafallāh's view, al-Iṣfahānī is included by Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī in *Akhhbār Aṣbahān* simply because of his *nisba*, al-Iṣfahānī, an indication of his familial origin from Isfahan (on p. 25). Abū Nu'aym mentions nothing of al-Iṣfahānī's being born in Isfahan: Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb Dhikr akhhbār Iṣbahāni: [wa-bi-dhaylihī] Ithāf al-ikhwān bi-fihris aḥādith wa-āthār tārikh Iṣbahān Aṣbahān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, n.d.), ii. 22. According to Azarnoosh, the idea was first disseminated by Ṭāshkubrīzāda (d. 968/1561): 'Abū al-Faraj', 719.

¹⁴ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 22–5.

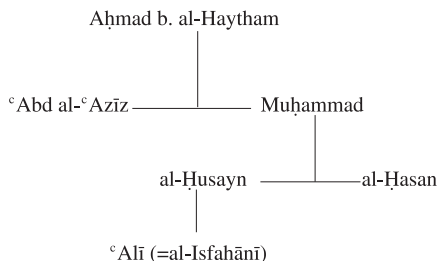


Figure 1: The family ancestors of al-Iṣfahānī¹⁵

1.1. *Aḥmad b. al-Haytham*¹⁶

According to a report in the *Aghānī*, Aḥmad b. al-Haytham, to whom al-Iṣfahānī refers as *jadd abī* (my father's grandfather), lived somewhere between the residence of the well-known musician, Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (155–235/772–850), and the caliphal palace (*dār al-khalīfa*) in Samarra; for this reason, Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm, often passing by, once stopped by his great-grandfather's house and joined the party inside.¹⁷ Khalafallāh says this report does not inform much, but it actually gives three important clues.

First, Aḥmad b. al-Haytham and his brothers (*ikhwān*; it cannot be said whether the word is being used literally or metaphorically in the given context), at the end of the given report, rewarded Iṣḥāq b.

¹⁵ There is some information about al-Iṣfahānī's cousin, Aḥmad, the son of al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad. However, as the purpose of this article is to investigate what motivated the generations before al-Iṣfahānī to side with the Ṭālibids, Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan will not be included in our discussion; for his narrations and life, see Manfred Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen des Kitāb al-Aḡānī* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), 35; Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 46, where he cites two reports from Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (eds. Yūsuf al-Baqā'ī and Gharīd al-Shaykh; Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lamī li-l-Maṭbu'āt [Al Alami Library], 2000), xvi. 312; xviii. 92. The two reports cited by Khalafallāh here show that Aḥmad narrates from Muḥammad b. Mūsā and from Abū Ja'far b. Rustam al-Ṭabarī, who was a grammarian of Imāmī tendencies; see Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Fihrist* (ed. Muḥammad Ṣādiq; Qom: al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, 198?), 158–9; al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, vi. 90; Ibn Ḥajar, *Lisān*, vi. 29–30. This, nonetheless, does not mean that Aḥmad was an Imāmī.

¹⁶ This Aḥmad b. al-Haytham should be distinguished from another Aḥmad b. al-Haytham b. Firās, or al-Firāsī, who is often cited as Aḥmad b. al-Haytham; concerning the latter, see Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen*, 75–6.

¹⁷ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 41 (al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xx. 248–9).

Ibrāhīm's servant (*ghulām*) with 20,000 dirhams. That means Aḥmad b. al-Haytham was sufficiently well-off to patronize others, to own slaves (as mentioned in the report), and to have ready cash to give away at home, given that Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm's visit is reported as unplanned.

Second, as Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm became blind and retired to Baghdad before the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–247/847–861), the background of this report should be set at some point between the year 221/835–6, when al-Mu'taṣim (r. 218–227/833–842) constructed Samarra,¹⁸ and 232/847, the beginning of al-Mutawwakil's caliphate.¹⁹

Third, al-Iṣfahānī does not narrate directly from his great-grandfather, but via 'Alī b. Ṣāliḥ b. al-Haytham al-Anbārī, who bears the professional attribute, *al-kātib*, the scribe.²⁰ That is, Aḥmad b. al-Haytham appears to have been associated with at least one (and, perhaps, more) scribe.

Taken together, it may be suggested that al-Iṣfahānī's great-grandfather came to settle in Samarra sometime before al-Mutawakkil's reign; he may have been a *kātib* like al-Anbārī, or at least engaged in a profitable profession that allowed for spare money for occasional rewards and keeping servants. Being the master of his own house, Aḥmad b. al-Haytham would have been at least in his thirties when hosting Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm, for his son worked as a *kātib* for al-Mutawakkil.²¹ This means that, if Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm's visit took place in 221/835–6, he may have been born before 191/806–7, but it is very unlikely that he survived until after 294/906–7, when al-Iṣfahānī, born in 284/897–8, reached the age of ten, presumably old enough to take down his great-grandfather's narrations, as direct transmission was not available to the latter.²² Although the record we have is lacking precision, we can say of Aḥmad b. al-Haytham that, probably, he was mainly active in the first half of the ninth century and led a privileged life, which would fit with the prominence his sons enjoyed.

¹⁸ al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh al-Ya'qūbī* (ed. 'Abd al-Amīr Muhannā; Beirut: Sharikat al-A'lamī li-l-Maṭbū'āt, 2010), ii. 433.

¹⁹ One report notes that al-Mutawakkil summoned blind Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm to Samarra, to entertain himself; see al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, v. 299–300.

²⁰ Other instances in which al-Iṣfahānī narrates from Aḥmad b. al-Haytham through al-Anbārī: al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, iv. 135, vii. 78. For the biographical information about al-Anbārī and his *kātib* attribute, see al-Khaṭīb, *Tārīkh*, xiii. 396–7; see also: Fleischhamer, *Die Quellen*, 41.

²¹ See 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Aḥmad, below p. 8.

²² The calculations here and in what follows are all based on the *hijrī* dates, which are then converted into common era dating.

1.2. 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Aḥmad

As Khalafallāh notes, it appears that the only biographical information about 'Abd al-'Azīz comes from Ibn Ḥazm's *Jamhara*, where 'Abd al-'Azīz is identified as 'one of the high ranking scribes in the days of al-Mutawakkil' (*min kibār al-kuttāb fī ayyām al-Mutawakkil*).²³ Like his father, he also lived in Samarra, and his personal encounters with Abū al-'Ibar (d. ca. 250/864) support this. As 'one of the high ranking scribes', 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Aḥmad would have been born at least twenty years before this caliph's rule, that is, around 212/827-8. Al-Iṣfahānī transmits reports directly from his grand-uncle.²⁴ Thus, it can be suggested that 'Abd al-'Azīz remained active after 294/906-7, when al-Iṣfahānī was ten years old.

1.3. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad

Compared with the narrations from 'Abd al-'Azīz, al-Iṣfahānī narrates fewer reports from his own grandfather, Muḥammad, but the information related to Muḥammad is useful. Although there is no hint as to Muḥammad's profession, he was well-connected among the elite in the court, such as the vizier, Ibn al-Zayyāt (d. 233/847),²⁵ Ibrāhīm b. al-'Abbās al-Ṣūlī (176-243/792-857), and the vizier-to-be, 'Ubaydallāh b. Sulaymān (d. 288/901), in addition to the Tālibid notables.²⁶ His contact with the first two is found in a report, in which he heard Ibn al-Zayyāt's comment that Abū Tammām (188-231-2/804-845-6) was the best poet, of which he was not sure:

Thus, I wanted to confirm [the comment] with Ibrāhīm b. al-'Abbās, who in my view is more knowledgeable and more proficient in the art of letters (*ādab*). I sat next to him, as I was like a son to him (*wa-kuntu ajrī 'indahū majrā al-walad*), and said to him: 'Who is the best poet of our time?' [...]²⁷

²³ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 41 (Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamhara*, 107).

²⁴ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 46-7. For the eyewitness reports about Abū al-'Ibar as narrated by 'Abd al-'Azīz, see al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xxiii. 161, 163-4. In the *Aghānī*, 'Abd al-'Azīz's narrations come from, respectively, Tha'lab (200-291/816-904): iv. 111-12; al-Zubayr b. Bakkār (171-256/788-870): iv. 120, ix. 120, xix. 121; al-Riyāshī (177-257/793-871): viii. 9, xxi. 208; and al-Kharrāz (d. 258/872): ix. 217.

²⁵ For a summary of his appointments to the vizierate from the caliphate of al-Mu'taṣim in 221/833 to his dismissal from the post and demise during al-Mutawakkil's rule in 233/847, see D. Sourdél art., 'Ibn al-Zayyāt', *EI*².

²⁶ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 39, 42-43.

²⁷ al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xvi. 302. My translation.

Ibrāhīm b. al-‘Abbās’ answer agreed with that of Ibn al-Zayyāt. Apart from Muḥammad’s high regard for Ibrāhīm b. al-‘Abbās, this account illustrates his easy access to the two prominent figures in the court and, moreover, his intimate relationship with Ibrāhīm b. al-‘Abbās, who worked as the *kātib* of al-Mu‘taṣim, al-Wāthiq, and al-Mutawakkil, in charge of different *dīwāns*, including *al-dīyā’* and *al-nafaqāt* (the offices of estates and expenditure).²⁸

The second report is also narrated in Muḥammad’s voice: ‘Ubaydallāh b. Sulaymān told me, and he was very close to me, because of the long-term friendship and childhood friendship (*kāna ya’nasu bī unsan shadīdan li-qadīm al-ṣuḥba wa-i’tilāf al-mansha*): ‘al-Mu‘taḍid summoned me one day [...].’²⁹ The fact that Muḥammad and ‘Ubaydallāh b. Sulaymān, who later became the vizier,³⁰ were friends growing up together highlights Aḥmad b. al-Haytham’s privileged status, given that Sulaymān b. Wahb, being the *kātib* of Ītākḥ and Mūsā b. Bughā, and the vizier later, was an influential figure.³¹ Furthermore, this may support the possibility that Aḥmad b. al-Haytham was a *kātib* too, as it was a common practice for the scribes to bring their children to work.³²

His relationship with the Ṭalibids seems rather strong, as illustrated in an account in the *Maqātil al-Ṭalibiyyīn*:

Hakīm b. Yahyā informed me, saying: ‘al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn b. Zayd was the leader of the Banū Hāshim, one possessing the closest lineage [to the Prophet] among them (*shaykh Banī Hāshim wa-dhā qu’dudī-him*), to whom money from the different corners of the world was brought.’ Then, he [the narrator, Hakīm b. Yahyā] said [to al-Iṣfahānī]: ‘One day, we gathered at your grandfather’s, Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Iṣfahānī’s, house, with a group of the Ṭalibids including al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn b. Zayd b. ‘Alī, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza al-‘Alawī al-‘Abbāsī, and Abū Hāshim Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Ja‘farī. Then, said your grandfather to al-Ḥusayn: ‘O Abū ‘Abdallāh [the agnomen of al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn], you possess the closest lineage among all of the descendants of the Prophet (*anta aq’ad wuld Rasūl Allāh kullī-him*), while Ja‘far possesses the closest lineage among the descendants of Ja‘far; you both are the leaders of the family of the Messenger of God (*shaykhā Āl Rasūl Allāh*).’ Then, he started

²⁸ For a summary of Ibrāhīm b. al-‘Abbās al-Ṣūlī’s career, see Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-‘Ālām: qāmūs tarājīm li-ashḥar al-rijāl wa-l-nisā’ min al-‘arab wa-l-musta‘ribīn wa-l-mustashriqīn* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li-l-Malāyīn, 15th edn., 2002), i. 45.

²⁹ al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, x. 57.

³⁰ See below, pp. 12–14.

³¹ For the history of the Banū Wahb, see C. E. Bosworth art., ‘Wahb’, *EI*².

³² al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara wa-akḥbār al-mudhākara* (ed. ‘Abbūd al-Shālījī; Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2nd edn., 1995), vii. 200–2.

to pray for them, for their long lives. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza became jealous of them and said: ‘[O Abū] *[sic]* al-Ḥasan, possessing close lineage in this age does not do any good to them; if they ask from the people of this era for a bunch of grass (*bāqat baql*), they shall not be given.’ Al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn was angry at this and then said: ‘You say this to me? By God, I would not want that my genealogy be one generation farther away from the Messenger of God than it is, even if the whole world belonged to me (*mā uḥibbu anna nasabī ab’adu mim mā huwa bi-ab wāḥid yub’idunī min Rasūl Allāh wa-annā al-dunyā bi-ḥadhāfiri-hā lī*).’³³

The report highlights four points. First, al-Ḥafṣahānī’s grandfather was associated with the Ṭālibids, including ‘Alids and Ja‘farids, and, through those leading members, he may have reached out to more Ṭālibids than those mentioned in the report. Second, Muḥammad showed great respect to al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn and Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Ja‘farī, either out of his pro-Ṭālibid inclination or in order to consolidate his ties with this group. Thirdly, the Ṭālibids, as a group with its inner hierarchy within, seem to have enjoyed some influence and privileges, which brought them tributes, as ‘money from the different corners of the world was brought’ to al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn. Fourth, if the event was set in Samarra, it would have taken place some point between 252/866, when Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim was brought to Samarra, and 261/875, when he died.³⁴ This report also offers insights into the socio-political milieu in Samarra, where the political elite lived close alongside the Ṭālibids—a point on which I will elaborate further in Section 2.

Khalafallāh suggests, based on these inter-personal connections, that Muḥammad was probably born around or before the 220s/835-44, when he was old enough to understand and remember Ibn al-Zayyāt’s words before the latter’s execution in 233/847, and lived through 279/892, when al-Mu‘taḍid (r. 279–289/892–902) became the caliph;³⁵ but he may have died before 294/906-7, as al-Ḥafṣahānī narrates from him only via his uncle.

1.4. al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad

Al-Ḥasan is the only person among the Ḥafṣahānīs given an entry in al-Khaṭīb’s *Tārīkh*, while he is also mentioned in Ibn Ḥazm’s *Jamhara* alongside his uncle, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz.³⁶ While al-Khaṭīb only notes

³³ al-Ḥafṣahānī, *Maqātil*, 547.

³⁴ al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh al-Tabarī. Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (ed. Muḥammad A. Ibrāhīm; Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 2nd edn., 1968–1975), ix. 370–1, 512.

³⁵ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāḥib*, 43–4.

³⁶ Ibid, 41 (Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamhara*, 107; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh*, viii. 440).

al-Ḥasan's narrations from 'Umar b. Shabba and Ibn Abī Sa'd, Ibn Ḥazm informs us that he was a *kātib* in Samarra, reaching maturity by the time of the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil.³⁷ Given al-Ḥasan's personal encounter with Abū al-'Ibar (d. ca. 250/864) in Samarra and his direct narration to al-Iṣfahānī, Khalafallāh concludes that he was born around the 240s/854-64 and lived after the 300s/912-22, active mainly in Samarra but likely to have visited Baghdad.³⁸ It may be argued that al-Ḥasan eventually retired to Baghdad, where al-Iṣfahānī settled after 300/912-3, learnt from and studied with him.³⁹ Khalafallāh also notes al-Ḥasan's literary savvy (as well as his being a fan of the poet Ibrāhīm b. al-'Abbās al-Ṣūlī), and many of his *shuyūkh* (teachers), of whom we know little.⁴⁰ Although Khalafallāh rightly points out the scarcity of the information about al-Ḥasan's informants, the inter-personal networks are nonetheless useful for insights into how and to what extent the family was entrenched in the court.⁴¹

Apart from 'Umar b. Naṣr, 'Abdallāh b. 'Uthmān al-Kātib, and Muḥammad b. al-Dihqāna al-Nadīm, of whom we know little except for their connection with the court, as indicated in their *nisbas*,⁴² al-Ḥasan narrates from two *nadīms* of al-Mutawakkil, Yazīd b. Muḥammad al-Muhallabī, who was a Shī'ī,⁴³ and Abū al-'Aynā' Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim b. Khallād (191-282 or 3/807-895 or 6). He also transmits from a *nadīm* of al-Mu'taḍid—Aḥmad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī (d. 286/899).⁴⁴

³⁷ Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamhara*, 107; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh*, viii. 440.

³⁸ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 47-8 (al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xxiii. 164).

³⁹ al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xxiii. 21. According to Khalafallāh, al-Iṣfahānī shares a number of sources with his uncle, such as Ibn Durayd, Abū Khalīfa al-Jumāhī, and 'Alī b. Sulaymān al-Akhfash; this may imply the mutual experience of attending similar learning circles (*halaqāt*); see *Ṣāhib*, 48.

⁴⁰ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 49-51.

⁴¹ For al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad's sources, see Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen*, 48-9. Here I only address those involved in the court.

⁴² al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad's sources such as 'Umar b. Naṣr and 'Abdallāh b. 'Uthmān al-Kātib do not feature substantially in the *Aghānī*; the former is 'one of the senior figures among the *kuttāb* in Samarra (*kāna min mashāyikh al-kuttāb bi-Surra Man Ra'a*)', while the latter's involvement in the *kātib* post is not specified: al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xx. 144 ('Abdallāh b. 'Uthmān); xxiii. 52, 81, 91 ('Umar b. Naṣr). As for Muḥammad b. al-Dihqāna al-Nadīm, living under al-Wāthiq's rule, he was associated with al-Wāthiq, Ibn al-Mu'tazz, al-'Abbās b. al-Faḍl al-Khurāsānī—one of Ṭāhir b. Ḥusayn's and his son's leading generals—and Ibrāhīm b. al-Mudabbir: al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, v. 259; vii. 235; xii. 79; xvi. 286.

⁴³ al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar* (ed. Yūsuf al-Biqā'i; Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Aṣriyya, 2nd edn., 2011), iv. 110.

⁴⁴ Their narrations to al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad and their biographies are examined by Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen*, 78, 96, 106-7.

A prominent figure that al-Ḥasan was in contact with is Muḥammad b. Dāwūd b. al-Jarrāḥ (243–296/857–908), from the Banū al-Jarrāḥ, who dominated the political scene during the caliphate of al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–932).⁴⁵ Muḥammad b. Dāwūd, besides being a *kātib*, with knowledge concerning reports about the caliphs, the viziers, and the past, and the author of a few works including those about poetry and poets,⁴⁶ was executed after the unsuccessful *coup d'état* supporting the two-day caliph, by Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d. 296/908).⁴⁷ Al-Ḥasan also transmits from the three sons of Ibn al-Zayyāt, 'Umar, Hārūn, and 'Ubaydallāh, to some extent continuing his father, Muḥammad's, tie with the Banū al-Zayyāt, although none of Ibn al-Zayyāt's sons ever achieved their father's fame.⁴⁸

In a similar vein, al-Ḥasan maintains his bond with 'Ubaydallāh b. Sulaymān: 'My uncle [i.e., al-Ḥasan, the narrator being al-Isfahānī] told me: "I gathered with Hārūn b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Malik and Ibn Burd al-Khiyār in the *majlis* (literary salon) of 'Ubaydallāh b. Sulaymān before he became vizier [...]." Then, al-Ḥasan recounts how Ibn Burd al-Khiyār bragged about Ibrāhīm b. al-'Abbās al-Ṣūlī's poetry and silenced Hārūn b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Malik's attempt to boast of his father's works.⁴⁹ Being a member of the vizier-to-be's entourage implies an intimate relationship between the Banū Wahb and al-Isfahānī's family that lasted for two generations at least.

Although we do not find any hint that al-Ḥasan hosted any Ṭālibid at his house as his father did, he did narrate from the aforementioned

⁴⁵ al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad's narrations from Muḥammad b. Dāwūd: al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, ii. 144; vi. 198; vii. 192, 194, 197; x. 55; 22: 116, 118, 123, 128, 134. The most famous member of the family is his nephew, 'Alī b. 'Isā. For an introduction to him and his family, see M. L. M. van Berkel art., 'Alī b. 'Isā b. Dāwūd b. al-Jarrāḥ', *EI*³.

⁴⁶ Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 142; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārīkh*, iii. 156. Al-Isfahānī cites a book of his, see Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen*, 94, 126.

⁴⁷ Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam wa-ta'āqub al-himam* (ed. Sayyid K. Ḥasan; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003), v. 4–8.

⁴⁸ Except for Hārūn, who, it can be securely established, was a *kātib*, the occupations of the other two are not clear. The narrations from Hārūn are numerous; see Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen*, 85. There is also a note of Hārūn's association with 'Ubaydallāh b. Sulaymān, which will be quoted below. His *kātib* identity is specified in al-Khaṭīb, *Tārīkh*, xvi. 38; Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 137 (where Hārūn is placed under the category of *kuttāb* authors). For the narrations from 'Umar and 'Ubaydallāh, see respectively al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xx. 74 and xix. 176.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, x. 54–5.

jealous Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza (d. 286-7/899-900).⁵⁰ Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza, being among the companions of the tenth and eleventh imams of Twelver Shi‘ism, transmits from al-Ḥasan b. Dāwūd al-Ja‘farī; al-Riyāshī; his father, ‘Alī b. Ḥamza al-‘Alawī; ‘Abd al-Ṣamad b. Mūsā al-Ḥāshimī; and ‘Umar b. Shabb.⁵¹ That is, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza seems to be a knot through which further connections to other Ṭālibids can be reached.

There are two other persons operating in functions similar to that of Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza: Muḥammad b. Mūsā b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Furāt (*fl.* in the ninth century) and ‘Alī b. al-‘Abbās al-Nawbakhtī (d. 327/939).⁵² Muḥammad b. Mūsā, derived from the Shi‘i Banū al-Furāt,⁵³ supported the Shi‘i pretender, Muḥammad b. Maṣṣūr b. Nuṣayr—who caused a schism among the followers of the tenth imam of Twelver Shi‘ism, claiming the imam, ‘Alī b. Muḥammad (212–254/828–868), to be a divine being and himself the imam’s prophet—while his son, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad, became the leader of some of Muḥammad b. Maṣṣūr b. Nuṣayr’s partisans, after the latter’s death.⁵⁴ Although ‘Alī b. al-‘Abbās al-Nawbakhtī’s biographical information emphasizes his quality as a poet and litterateur, being a member of the Banū Nawbakht—a family nurturing a number of Imāmī Shi‘i theologians and polemicists—itself means that ‘Alī b. al-‘Abbās had the potential to bring in more contact with ‘Alids and their partisans.⁵⁵ As both of the families were intricately entwined with Imāmī Shi‘i politics and communities, being associated

⁵⁰ Ibid, xiii. 123; xviii. 263. Al-Iṣfahānī, in addition to his uncle, relies on other transmitters for Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza’s reports, such as Wakī‘ (d. 306/918); see Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen*, 59–60; al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, vii. 163; xv. 240–1; xvi. 133, 240; xix. 82; xx. 156. In addition, ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza’s nephew, who let al-Iṣfahānī copy his uncle’s work, presumably, another *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn* (*Maqātil*, 32; perhaps, for this reason, al-Iṣfahānī can quote the list of the dead Ṭālibids given by Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza in his own *Maqātil*, 552–64). Regarding Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza’s works, see al-Najāshī, *Rijāl*, 332.

⁵¹ al-Najāshī, *Rijāl*, 332; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārīkh*, 4: 105–6; al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl fī asmā’ al-rijāl* (ed. Bashshār ‘A. Ma‘rūf; Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 2nd edn., 1983), xxvi. 144–5.

⁵² al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xviii. 120 (Muḥammad b. Mūsā); xxi. 34 (‘Alī b. al-‘Abbās).

⁵³ Newman, *The Formative*, 15–19; D. Sourdel art., ‘Ibn al-Furāt’, *EI*².

⁵⁴ al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī and Sa’d b. ‘Abdallāh al-Qummī, *Firaq al-shī‘a* (ed. ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Ḥafnī; Cairo: Dār al-Rashād, 1992), 94–6.

⁵⁵ al-Ṣafādī, *Kitāb al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt* (ed. Aḥmad al-Arnā’ūt and Turkī Muṣṭafā; Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2000), xxi. 113; al-Marzubānī, *Mu‘jam al-shu‘arā’* (ed. Fārūq Aslīm; Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2005), 193; Yāqūt,

with one or more member of each would suggest al-Ḥasan's plausible outreach to the Ṭālibids—which may have been no less than his father's.

1.5. *al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad*

Al-Isfahānī's father is a rather opaque person, not only because of the absence of biographical information about him, but also because al-Isfahānī's narration from him is scanty. Kalafallāh finds only one report from al-Ḥusayn, about the poet al-ʿAttābī.⁵⁶ In fact, al-Isfahānī also notes that his father had taught him a work of Ḥammād b. Ishāq (*nasakhtu min kitāb li-Ḥammād b. Ishāq ḥaddathanī bi-hi abī*)—likely to be Ḥammād b. Ishāq's *Akhhār al-Ḥuṭayʿa*.⁵⁷ In addition, al-Ḥusayn and his son, al-Isfahānī, were both authorized to relate reports about the poet Abū Shurāʿa by the poet's son, Abū al-Fayyād Sawwār b. Abī Shurāʿa.⁵⁸ Whatever accounts for al-Ḥusayn's sparse narrations, it seems that he did not leave notable remarks on al-Isfahānī's intellectual output. However, when it comes to the family's social networks, it is al-Ḥusayn who serves as the link to the Āl Thawāba.

In a number of places, al-Isfahānī identifies Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad b. Thawāba as his grandfather on his mother's side (*jaddī li-ummī*); his book was used by al-Isfahānī as source material for the *Aghānī* and his occupation may have been a *kātib*—a post several members of the Āl Thawāba held, as in the case of al-Isfahānī's family.⁵⁹ As Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad b. Thawāba's relationship with other members of the Āl Thawāba is not specified elsewhere—the *Aghānī* is the only book mentioning the name Yaḥyā—Khalafallāh argues, with caution, for the plausibility of Yaḥyā being the brother of Aḥmad and Jaʿfar, the sons of Muḥammad b. Thawāba, on the basis of the common patronymics, al-Isfahānī's (seemingly amicable) connection with Abū al-Faḍl ʿAbbās b. Aḥmad b. Thawāba, and the favourable presentation of this family.⁶⁰

Muʿjam al-udabāʾ, xiii. 267–8; al-Dhahabī, *Sīyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ* (ed. Ḥassān ʿAbd al-Mannān; Beirut: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawliyya, 2004), 2791.

⁵⁶ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāḥib*, 45 (al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xiii. 90).

⁵⁷ This point is made in Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen*, 50, 118 (al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, ii. 124–5).

⁵⁸ al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xxiii. 21.

⁵⁹ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāḥib*, 52–4 (al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xii. 29; xiv. 113, 157; xvi. 317–18; xix. 35, 49; xx. 116); see also Fleischhammer, *Die Quellen*, 133. Given that there is no direct transmission from him, it is likely that Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad b. Thawāba deceased before al-Isfahānī was ready to receive education.

⁶⁰ al-ʿAbbās b. Aḥmad b. Thawāba gave al-Isfahānī a work of Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī in Ishāq's own hand, see Khalafallāh, *Ṣāḥib*, 54–8 (al-Isfahānī,

Another factor that escapes Khalafallāh's attention, but supports his argument, is the Āl Thawāba's connection with the Banū Wahb. We have noted above al-Iṣfahānī's grandfather's and uncle's close relationship with 'Ubaydallāh b. Sulaymān. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Thawāba (d. 277/890) was highly regarded as a scribe by Sulaymān b. Wahb, when he was the vizier of al-Muhtadī (r. 255–256/869–870).⁶¹ His brother, Ja'far b. Muḥammad b. Thawāba (d. 284/897), took charge of the *diwān al-rasā'il* and *diwān al-ma'āwin* for Sulaymān's son, 'Ubaydallāh, who too became the vizier during al-Muṭaḍid's reign.⁶² That is, with Sulaymān b. Wahb and his son, 'Ubaydallāh, being the common link between the two families, it is possible that the Āl Thawāba may have considered al-Iṣfahānī's family a potential ally in the court, to whom they gave their daughter's hand.

That Yaḥyā was a member of the Āl Thawāba seems like a valid argument, but the Shī'i affiliation of this family, on the basis of which Khalafallāh (followed by Kilpatrick and Azarnoosh) accounts for al-Iṣfahānī's sectarian inclination, does not. According to Khalafallāh, the Āl Thawāba, originally Christian, when converting to Islam became Ghulāt Shī'i (believers in an extreme form of Shī'ism), but the evidence he relies on for such a statement comes from a passage in *Mu'jam al-udabā'*.⁶³ According to Yāqūt, Muḥammad, the son of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Thawāba, the *kātib* of the Turkish general, Bāykbāk,⁶⁴ was accused by al-Muhtadī of being a Rāfiḍī (the Shī'is who do not acknowledge the first two caliphs and are usually identified with Imāmīs⁶⁵); only after the intercession of Bāykbāk and Mūsā b. Bughā was Muḥammad b. Aḥmad pardoned.⁶⁶ This is the only reference to the family's Ghulāt Shī'i conviction.⁶⁷ The problem with Yāqūt's report is that no such accusation is found in the early sources. The enmity

al-Aghānī: x. 119; xxi. 37–8). For a brief introduction to the Āl Thawāba, see S. Boustany art., 'Ibn Thawāba', *EI*².

⁶¹ al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xxiii. 121–3.

⁶² Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, vii. 187–90.

⁶³ Khalafallāh, *Ṣāhib*, 58, n. 4.

⁶⁴ In Rifā'ī's edition of *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, which I use, it is spelled 'Bākbāk'; in the *Murūj al-dhahab*, it is 'Bāykiyāl'. Here I follow: al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 453, *et passim*; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, iv. 148; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 150.

⁶⁵ Etan Kohlberg, 'The Term 'Rāfida' in Imāmī Shī'i Usage', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 99/4 (1979): 677–9.

⁶⁶ Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, iv. 147–9.

⁶⁷ Although the author of *A'yan al-shī'a*, Muḥsin al-Amīn al-Āmilī, attributes Muḥammad b. Aḥmad's Shī'ism to all the Āl Thawāba, his only evidence is from Yāqūt. See Muḥsin al-Amīn al-Āmilī, *A'yan al-shī'a* (ed. Ḥasan al-Amīn; Beirut: Dār al-Ta'āruf li-l-Maṭbū'āt, 1983), iii. 89.

between al-Muhtadī and Bāykbāk is well-documented, despite inconsistencies and incongruences in some details. Amidst their conflicts, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Thawāba was accused of treason—being in cooperation with the *mawālī* attempting to depose the caliph—and, as a result, his blood was deemed lawful.⁶⁸ While it is possible that the accusation of being a ‘Rāfidi’ was a pretext for the caliph to take measures against Bāykbāk, it should be borne in mind that al-Muhtadī seems to have had a reputation for disliking Shi‘is.⁶⁹ In short, the evidence to support ascribing extreme Shi‘ism to every member of this family is thin. Even if we take Yāqūt’s account at face value and say that some of the Āl Thawāba were Shi‘is, how far they were so, what their being so signifies, remains a question, somewhat applicable also to other elite groups or individuals, such as al-Isfahānī’s family, to whom the Shi‘i designation was attached. Regardless of the uncertainty surrounding the Āl Thawāba’s sectarian affiliation and its extent, the family’s ties with Ismā‘īl b. Bulbul (d. 278/892) do point to their having the potential to build up wider networks with Shi‘is.⁷⁰

With these links on the part of al-Isfahānī’s family borne in mind, we now move to the questions of what led them to affiliate with the Ṭālibids and whether their connections with the Ṭālibids ought to be construed in terms of Shi‘ism or ‘Alidism.’⁷¹

⁶⁸ al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 443–4, 468 (for details about the coup against al-Muhtadī, see 456–69).

⁶⁹ al-Isfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xxiii. 119.

⁷⁰ Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*, iv. 150–2, 157–8. Ismā‘īl b. Bulbul promoted Shi‘i retinues, including the Banū Nawbakht, during his vizierate. See Louis Massignon, ‘Recherches sur les Shi‘ites extrémistes à Bagdad à la fin du troisième siècle de l’Hégire’, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 92/3 (1938): 378–82. Given that the Shi‘i confession of the Āl Thawāba is not firmly established, I am not fully convinced by the view that Ismā‘īl b. Bulbul’s ‘conciliatory attitude towards’ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Thawāba is related to their mutual Shi‘i identities, as suggested in S. Boustany art., ‘Ibn Thawāba’, *EP*².

⁷¹ Bernheimer defines it as follows: ‘“Alidism,” characterized by a non-sectarian reverence and support for the family, as distinct from ‘Shi‘ism,’ the political and religious claims of some of its members or others on their behalf.’ See Teresa Bernheimer, ‘Genealogy, Marriage, and the Drawing of Boundaries among the ‘Alids (eighth-twelfth centuries)’ in Morimoto Kazuo (ed.), *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: the Living Links to the Prophet* (London: Routledge, 2012): 75–91, at 76. Although I agree that one could be an ‘Alid supporter without being a Shi‘i and an ‘Alid could be a Sunnī, as Bernheimer points out (esp. 81), I am less certain about the boundary between Shi‘ism and ‘Alidism, which, in my view, is fluid and contingent upon time and place. In the context in which sectarian conflicts intensified, for instance, Baghdad under

2. THE ṬĀLIBIDS IN SAMARRA

What are the factors that led these Iṣfahānīs to align with the Ṭālibids and perhaps, even, to profess Shi'ism or 'Alidism? To address this question, it is imperative to take into account the socio-political context of late ninth-century Samarra, where the three generations before al-Iṣfahānī were active. The generation of Aḥmad b. al-Haytham, al-Iṣfahānī's great-grandfather, settled in Samarra before the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil. Samarra is not an ideal location for taking up arms with a Ṭālibid rebel, for it is where the Ṭālibid suspects were confined and put under the caliphs' surveillance.⁷² However, it is the location that allows for military leaders and scribes to cultivate a relationship with the Ṭālibids and their followers, thanks to the Ṭālibid presence there.

When al-Ma'mūn appointed 'Alī al-Riḍā as his successor, a group of the Ṭālibids was brought with the latter to the east.⁷³ What happened to this group afterwards is unclear, but al-Mu'taṣim did continue the trend of bringing the Ṭālibids to the east, among them the ninth Twelver imam, Muḥammad b. 'Alī (d. Baghdad, 220/835).⁷⁴ Al-Mu'taṣim's successor, al-Wāthiq, had a reputation for leniency towards the Ṭālibids, who were brought together in Samarra and entitled to a pension, as noted in al-Iṣfahānī's *Maqātil*.⁷⁵ Al-Wāthiq's pro-Ṭālibid policy was reversed by al-Mutawakkil's adoption of Sunni 'orthodoxy', which abolished the *miḥna* and took measures against the Shi'is, including razing the shrine of al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī to the ground, forbidding any donation to the 'Alids, negating their entitlement to the inheritance of Fadak, and harsher punishment against those who anathematized the *salaf* (the Companions, including the first two caliphs).⁷⁶ As a result, the tenth imam of Twelver

Buyid rule, pronouncing one's reverence and support for the 'Alids may have been interpreted as Shi'i conviction, regardless of how one actually conceptualized such reverence and support. That is, it is doubtful whether, in practice, one's affection for the *ahl al-bayt* can be categorically defined as either 'Alidism or Shi'ism.

⁷² An example during al-Mu'taṣim's reign is a Ja'farid who refused to wear the black robe and was thus jailed in Samarra; a number of 'Alids suspected of treason were brought to the same city during the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil; see al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 464–73, 480–1, 491–2.

⁷³ Ibid, 454.

⁷⁴ al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl min al-kāfī* (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Fajr, 2007), i. 314 (hereafter cited as *al-kāfī*); al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 43.

⁷⁵ al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 476; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* (ed. 'Abdallāh 'A al-Turkī; Jīza: Dār Hajar, 1998), xiv. 330.

⁷⁶ al-Mutawakkil's ill treatment of the Ṭālibids is recorded in detail by al-Iṣfahānī: *Maqātil*, 478–80. The property of Fadak was returned to the 'Alids by

Shi'ism, 'Alī b. Muḥammad (d. 254/868), and his family were brought to Samarra from Madina in 233/847.⁷⁷ The next caliph, al-Muntaṣir, despite his short reign, overturned his father's policy and behaved kindly and generously towards the Ṭālibids.⁷⁸ From then on, we know less in this regard about the stances of the subsequent caliphs, for the historians are devoted to the accounts of the civil war and anarchy during the time from al-Musta'in to al-Muhtadī.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, al-Mu'taḍid was known for his pro-'Alid inclination, the result of which was his tolerance of the fund sent from the 'Alid ruler, Muḥammad b. Zayd, in Ṭabaristān, being distributed to the Ṭālibids in Baghdad and a formal decree that Mu'āwiya was to be cursed from the pulpits.⁸⁰ Given that Samarra remained the caliphal centre despite a short interval during the civil war, it may be assumed that a number of the Ṭālibids remained there, alongside their families and Hashimi relatives, until the reign of al-Mu'taḍid (r. 279–289/892–902), when the capital moved back to Baghdad.⁸¹

The presence and prestige of the Ṭālibids attracted associates and allies among high-ranking officials, who either were convinced of their superiority, even of their thaumaturgic power, or saw the advantage in forging alliances with this group. The military leader, Abū Dulaf—one of al-Mu'taṣim's generals derived from the *abnā'*—is said to have been an ardent Shi'i partisan to the extent that he repudiated his son, who had

al-Ma'mūn, and then al-Mutawakkil revoked this policy; for the history of the disposal of Fadak until the caliphate of al-Mutawakkil, see al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-buldān* (eds. 'Abdallāh A. al-Ṭabbā' and 'Umar A. al-Ṭabbā'; Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 45–7; al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, ii. 447; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 200–201; Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, iv. 120–1.

⁷⁷ According to al-Kulaynī, al-Mutawakkil politely invited 'Alī b. Muḥammad to visit him and bring with him his family; 'Alī b. Muḥammad's debauchee brother, Mūsā, seems to have been one of them: al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, i. 318, 320–1; see also: al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 77–8; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 163; al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, ii. 447.

⁷⁸ al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 279–80, 503; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 110; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 254.

⁷⁹ According to al-Kulaynī's *Kāfī*, al-Musta'in placed the imam al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī in a predicament in the hope of having him killed, but, of course, on account of the Imam's thaumaturgic power, that did not work out: i. 325–6. Also from *al-Kāfī*, it is claimed that al-Muhtadī was hostile to the Imam, but the report in question also seeks to highlight the Imam's power to predict future events: i. 327.

⁸⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, x. 41–2, 44, 54–63.

⁸¹ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: the Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Routledge, 3rd edn., 2016), 156–7.

expressed his animosity towards ‘Alī.⁸² When the tenth imam of Twelver Shi‘ism was brought to Samarra on al-Mutawakkil’s order, the official in charge, Yahyā b. Harthama, was first warned by the Ṭāhirid governor of Baghdad, Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm, against instigating al-Mutawakkil against ‘Alī b. Muḥammad, for ‘the Prophet will be your plaintiff [*khaṣm*, before God at the Final Judgment],’ and, then, on arrival in Samarra, he first visited Waṣīf, who solemnly threatened him: ‘By God, if one single hair falls out of this man’s head, I shall be the one asking for it.’⁸³ Bughā al-Kabīr (d. 248/862)—one of the Turks who had been rising to power since the caliphate of al-Mu‘taṣim—was reputed for his kindness and generosity towards the Ṭālibids.⁸⁴ Muḥammad b. al-Faraj—the brother of one of al-Mutawakkil’s king-makers, ‘Umar b. al-Faraj—was ‘Alī b. Muḥammad’s follower; he sought the imam’s advice in face of the calamity befalling him and his brother.⁸⁵ The same imam is said to have associated with Aḥmad b. al-Khaṣīb, who was appointed *kātib* of al-Mutawakkil’s heir apparent, al-Muntaṣir, and became the vizier in the latter’s court, where he continued to play a role until his exile in 248/862.⁸⁶ The eleventh imam, al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī (d. 260/874), commanded the respect of the anti-Shi‘i vizier, ‘Ubaydallāh b. Yahyā b. Khāqān, besides other generals and *kuttāb* in Samarra.⁸⁷ Although the sources

⁸² al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 51–2; E. Marin, art. ‘Dulafids’, *EI*².

⁸³ al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 137–8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 130–1.

⁸⁵ al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, i. 320. ‘Umar b. al-Faraj was one of the members of the council which decided the successor of al-Wāthiq. Later, when al-Mutawakkil struggled against the growing influence of the Turkish regiment, headed by Waṣīf and Itākh, ‘Umar b. al-Faraj, like Ibn Abī Du‘ād and Ibn al-Zayyāt, fell victim to the caliph’s ambition in 233/848. For the conflict between al-Mutawakkil and ‘Umar b. Faraj, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 156–61; al-Khaṭīb, *Tārīkh*, viii. 46; al-Ya‘qūbī, *Tārīkh*, ii. 448; al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 29–30. For further analyses of al-Mutawakkil’s manoeuvres, see Matthew S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: a History of the Turkish Military of Samarra* (A.H. 200–275/815–889 C.E.) (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 80–3; John P. Turner, ‘The End of the *Mihna*’, *Oriens*, 38 (2010): 89–106. On Muḥammad b. al-Faraj, see also al-Najāshī, *Rijāl*, 356.

⁸⁶ al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, i. 320; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 240–4, 246, 253, 256–9; al-Ya‘qūbī, *Tārīkh*, ii. 450–1, 458–60; al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 107–8, 118. Aḥmad b. al-Khaṣīb is listed among ‘Alī b. Muḥammad’s companions: al-Barqī, *Kitāb al-Rijāl* (Tehran: Chāpkhāna-yi Danishgāh-i Tihirān, 1382 SH), 60.

⁸⁷ Apart from ‘Ubaydallāh b. Yahyā b. Khāqān and his son, Aḥmad, who was in charge of the *diyā‘* and *kharāj* in Qom, ‘Alī b. Utānish (in *al-Irshād*) may have been one of al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī’s partisans, but the orthographic variance (spelled ‘Alī b. Nārmash’ in *al-Kāfi*) leaves this less certain: al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, i. 322–5;

derived from the *akhbār/siyar al-a'imma* by Shi'i compilers may be tendentious—their purpose being to highlight the imams' merits, even their thaumaturgic power—and, inevitably, imam-centred, they nonetheless reveal the plausibility of alliances between the Ṭālibids and the functionaries of the 'Abbasid caliphs, be they in the bureaucratic or military division. The imams and their kin lived closely with the political elite, with whom interaction was inevitable. In addition, the reports about the imams provide us with the chains of transmission, which specify the direct transmitters from the imams. Amongst the transmitters are distant Qurashī relatives, such as 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Nawfalī, as well as closer ones, including Ja'farids, such as Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Ja'farī, and 'Alids, such as Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al-'Alawī.⁸⁸ Despite the absence of concrete details, it can be said that the Ṭālibids and other Qurashī nobles, including the Banū 'Abbās, lived closely in the same city, alongside other functionaries.

With the Ṭālibid presence in Samarra, the already-divided political elite was further divided into those sympathetic to them and those against them, in addition to those standing in a neutral or unknown position. The Ṭālibid sympathizers may have evolved into or come to be involved in the affairs of the Shi'i communities—as we have noted above in the case of the Banū al-Furāt.⁸⁹ The other end of the spectrum is best exemplified by the entourage of al-Mutawakkil, such as 'Alī b. al-Jahm and Marwān b. Abī al-Janūb, both of whom were notorious for their lampoons against the Āl Abī Ṭālib in support of the 'Abbasid caliphate.⁹⁰

al-Mufīd, *al-Irshād fī ma'rifat ḥujaj Allāh 'alā al-'ibād* (ed. Mu'assasat Āl al-Bayt li-Iḥyā' al-Turāth; Beirut: Mu'assasat Āl al-Bayt li-Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 1995), ii. 329–30.

⁸⁸ al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, i. 314, 316–17, 322, 325–8; on other narrators and companions of the Imams, see al-Barqī, *Rijāl*, 57–61. On al-Nawfalī, see Sebastian Günther, 'Al-Nawfalī's Lost *History*: the Issue of a Ninth-Century Shi'ite Source used by al-Ṭabarī and Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 36/2 (2008): 241–66.

⁸⁹ Another example that may be added here is Ibrāhīm b. al-Mudabbir, who brokered Muḥammad b. Šāliḥ al-'Alawī's marriage to the daughter of 'Isā b. Mūsā, despite Muḥammad b. Šāliḥ having just been released from prison; another hint as to his pro-Ṭālibid stance is shown in his hostility towards 'Alī b. al-Jahm; see al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, x. 175–8, 182–5, 187–8, 189–90, 192–3; xvi. 286–8.

⁹⁰ al-Iṣfahānī portrays 'Alī b. al-Jahm in a negative light: *al-Aghānī*, x. 175–97; Ibn Khallikān remarked 'Alī b. al-Jahm's dislike for 'Alī: *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān* (ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās; Beirut: Dār Šādir, 1972), iii. 355. On Marwān b. Abī al-Janūb, see al-Marzubānī, *Mu'jam*, 374; Ibn al-Mu'tazz, *Ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā'* (ed. 'Abd al-Sattār A. Farrāj; Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 3rd edn., 1976), 393; al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xii. 62; xxiii. 168. Apart from these two

However, not every official's attitude towards the Ṭālibids, or, more so, the 'Alids, is always so categorical as to allow us to characterize him as anti- or pro-Shi'ī. For example, 'Ubaydallāh b. Yaḥyā b. Khāqān who, despite his enmity towards the Āl Abī Ṭālib, showed great respect for the eleventh imam, al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī, as mentioned above.⁹¹ 'Ubaydallāh b. Yaḥyā b. Khāqān's ambivalent manner towards the Ṭālibids, though seemingly irreconcilable at the first glance, illustrates well the dilemma many of the political elite encountered in the ninth century. That is, in their vicinity, there was a distinct group—the Ṭālibids, or a specific lineage of them, such as the 'Alids—who could rally support or claim special treatment (sometimes monetary) from the populace on the basis of their ancestral relationship with the Prophet.⁹² Nonetheless, the

poets, Miskawayh lists a number of boon companions who either mocked 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib or suggested that the caliph alienate the 'Alids: *Tajārib*, iv. 120–1. Another figure in al-Mutawakkil's retinue known for being hostile to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is the buffoon poet, Abū al-'Ibar, with whom al-Iṣfahānī's grand-uncle and uncle, 'Abd al-'Azīz and al-Ḥasan, had direct contact; see al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, xxiii. 167. Although differing in detail, Ibn al-Nadīm agrees with al-Iṣfahānī that Abū al-'Ibar was killed by a Kūfan Shi'ī; see Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 169–70; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, xvii. 126.

⁹¹ See n. 87; al-Iṣfahānī himself specified 'Ubaydallāh b. Yaḥyā b. Khāqān as the implementer of al-Mutawakkil's anti-'Alid policy. Another example would be Muḥammad b. al-Faraj, who is regarded as 'Alī b. Muḥammad's companion (see above, p. 00), while his brother 'Umar b. al-Faraj, imposed harsh regulations upon the Ṭālibids, who were impoverished as a result, according to: al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 478–9.

⁹² In addition to the case of al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn, mentioned above (p. 10), the Ṭālibids also received funds from the Zaydī rulers in Ṭabaristān and some of them or their deputies could claim the *khums* from their followers. The accounts that explain why Bughā al-Kabīr and al-Mu'taḍid treated Āl Abī Ṭālib with benevolence mention the encounters of both with 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in dreams, wherein they are promised good rewards (a long healthy life and the caliphate, respectively) on condition that they show respect and kindness to 'Alī's kinsfolk. Although the authenticity of these accounts may be dismissed as literary *topoi*, this kind of story does highlight the importance (or benefits) of being munificent to the Ṭālibids in the eyes of the historians of the late ninth and the tenth centuries. This also dovetails with al-Iṣfahānī's description of al-Mutawakkil's anti-Ṭālibid policies, which forbade the Ṭālibids from asking favours from people and people's *birr* for them. That is, the Ṭālibids could and did claim special status in the community. See al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, 10: 41–42 (the fund from Ṭabaristān and al-Mu'taḍid's encounter with 'Alī); al-Mus'ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 130–1, 214–15 (Bughā al-Kabīr and al-Mu'taḍid); al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 479. Morimoto Kazuo, 'How to Behave toward Sayyids and Sharīfs: a Trans-sectarian Tradition of Dream Accounts' in Morimoto Kazuo (ed.), *Sayyids and Sharīfs*, 15–36;

official attitude towards this group at the top oscillates greatly between tolerance and persecution. Thus, the elite figures like 'Ubaydallāh b. Yahyā b. Khāqān had to go with the trend at times, but it does not mean that they would disregard the potential benefits of allying with this group, especially when the power of the caliphs faded after al-Mutawakkil's reign. Another case may be found in al-Musta'in's *kātib* in charge of *dīwān al-rasā'il*, Sa'īd b. Humayd, who is also noted for his dislike for 'Alī and his descendants.⁹³ However, he was a friend of the Tālibid (from the Ḥasanid lineage), Muḥammad b. Šālīh, who was brought to Samarra under governmental surveillance.⁹⁴ In other words, one could notionally deprecate, or even depreciate, what the Tālibids represented—martyrdom under tyrant rule, superior Muslim traits, or the only source of legitimacy—but that did not entail complete social segregation from them.⁹⁵

Why was it expedient for the political elite to associate with the Tālibids? It was mentioned above that the Tālibids constituted a source of legitimacy, which could be used to mobilize popular support. With the political system breaking down after the assassination of al-Mutawakkil and the sudden death of al-Muntaṣir, the military leaders and their retinues vied for power with the caliphs and *kuttāb*, as well as with one another. The struggle resulted in murder, confiscation, torture, and new struggle. As chaos reigned, this led to the illegitimate deaths of the prominent figures, including the caliphs. To contain potential opposition, the person or group responsible for the illegitimate death had to legitimize their deeds—attributing the death in question to natural causes, for instance. To be effected, this process required the testimony of the notables, at least as a starting point. It is at this point that the association with the Tālibids came to be useful.

When al-Muntaṣir removed his brothers, al-Mu'tazz and al-Mu'ayyad, from the line of succession, the ceremony in 248/862, at which the pair revoked their statuses as heirs apparent, was witnessed by the leading

although the examples that Kazuo adduces are derived from later compilations (the earliest being the work of Ibn al-Jawzī, who died in 597/1200), it is likely that some of these accounts go back to the tenth century, see, *par excellence*, pp. 21, 26–9. This perhaps implies that the act of being benevolent to an 'Alid was something viewed as commendable. For the different Shi'ī sects' expositions of *khums*, see A. Zysow and R. Gleave, art. 'Khums', *EI*².

⁹³ al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 119.

⁹⁴ al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 480, 488–9.

⁹⁵ This tallies with the point reiterated by Bernheimer ('Genealogy', 81): '[...] this clearly shows that the disengagement of 'Alidism and Shi'ism goes both ways: not only could one be a supporter of the 'Alids without being a Shi'ite, one could also be a Shi'ite without proposing any special treatment for the 'Alids.'

figures at the court, including the Banū Hāshim, comprised of the ‘Abbasids and Ṭālibids.⁹⁶ After the sudden death of al-Muntaṣir, the appointment of al-Musta‘īn, as determined by the Turkish generals, Bughā al-Kabīr, Bughā al-Ṣaghīr and Utāmish, was legitimized by the ascension ceremony, attended by the elite, including the Ṭālibids.⁹⁷ When the Ṭālibid rebel, Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar (d. 250/864-5) was killed, a group of the Hashimis and Ṭālibids came to congratulate the Ṭāhirid governor, Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh. Although Abū Hāshim Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Ja‘farī—one of the attending Ṭālibids and one of al-Iṣfahānī’s grandfather’s associates, who implicitly condemned the execution of the Prophet’s relative—did not deliver the most appropriate felicitations, the purpose of such a gesture is clearly meant to enhance ‘Abbasid authority and that of the governors deputized by the caliphs.⁹⁸ The body of al-Mu‘tazz, who was tortured to death, was brought to Hashimi witnesses to show that the caliph died of natural causes.⁹⁹ When the conflict between al-Muhtadī and the men of Bāykbāk was on the verge of breaking out, the tension was eased by the caliph’s solemn oath in the presence of the Hashimis.¹⁰⁰

Counted as part of the Banū Hāshim, the Ṭālibids may have been included among those called to give testimony. Maintaining an amicable relationship with the Ṭālibids may have facilitated the process of power transfer and, ideally, downplayed opponents’ accusations (although this certainly did not guarantee the stability and longevity of groups in power).¹⁰¹ Thus, when al-Musta‘īn and his Turkish regiment moved to Baghdad, a group of the Banū Hāshim, who could potentially boost their legitimacy, came along with them.¹⁰² Furthermore, when living in time of uncertainties, wide outreach may have improved one’s chance of survival. When Ṣāliḥ b. Waṣīf was being pursued, a group of his associates, suspected of offering him refuge, were assaulted, including a

⁹⁶ al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 246.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 256.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 266–70.

⁹⁹ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vi. 199–200. The same process took place with the death of al-Mu‘ayyad, who had been either beaten or smothered to death in 252/866, but instead of the Banū Hāshim, the witnesses here are identified with the *quḍāt*, *fuqahā’*, *shuhūd*, and *wujūh*, who may have included some of the Ṭālibids. See al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 362.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 442–3.

¹⁰¹ For more details on the *bay‘a* and the political rituals and ceremonies of this period, see Andrew Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy: Accession and Succession of the First Muslim Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 283–308.

¹⁰² al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 283.

Ṭālibid.¹⁰³ Although Ṣāliḥ b. Waṣīf did not get away, the point here is that broadening one's network of alliances matters, as the association with the Ṭālibids could furnish not only legitimacy but also sanctuary at the moment of crisis.

We have addressed the broad context in which the political elite came to adopt Ṭālibid or 'Alid affiliation and the incentives that pulled them together. Now, let us turn to al-İṣfahānī's family and their embrace of this Ṭālibid affiliation. Whether the generation of Aḥmad b. al-Haytham, settled in Samarra, the headquarters of the caliphate with a noticeable Ṭālibid presence, had begun the familial outreach to the Ṭālibids cannot be answered, given the scanty information about him. Yet, the familial outreach to the Ṭālibids certainly took place in the next generation, the generation of al-İṣfahānī's grandfather, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad. Muḥammad's brother, 'Abd al-'Azīz, was a senior member of the *kuttāb*. Although his networks, as we can reconstruct them, only reveal his connection with the scholars mentioned in Section 1, it is very likely that he was in touch with some of the Ṭālibids, as well as other court elite, as his brother, Muḥammad, also was. In contrast, we do not know whether Muḥammad was a scribe or held any other official appointment, but we do know the identities of his associates: Ibn al-Zayyāt, 'Ubaydāllāh b. Sulaymān b. Wāḥb, and Ibrāhīm b. al-'Abbās al-Ṣūlī, as well as Ṭālibids, such as al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn b. Zayd b. 'Alī, Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza al-'Alawī al-'Abbāsī, and Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Ja'farī.¹⁰⁴ Here, we can see a pattern more or less conforming to the description above: a *kātib* himself or his close kin building a connection with the Ṭālibids—as in the cases of Muḥammad b. al-Faraj and 'Ubaydallāh b. Yaḥyā b. Khāqān. Via these Ṭālibids, among whom was the prominent al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn and those unnamed, Muḥammad (and presumably his brother, too) may have further reached other Ṭālibids, including the imams, whose transmitters include Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Ja'farī and Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza.¹⁰⁵ The networks with the Ṭālibids as well as other notables were inherited by the next generation, that of al-İṣfahānī's father and uncle, al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥasan. Again, we do not know much about al-İṣfahānī's father's associates, apart from his marriage link with the Āl Thawāba, who may have brought the İṣfahānī family into contact with Ismā'īl b. Bulbul, but his uncle appears to have maintained Muḥammad b. Aḥmad's connections with the Banū Ibn al-Zayyāt, 'Ubaydallāh b. Sulaymān, and the Ṭālibids, as shown in his narrations from the sons of Muḥammad b. 'Abd

¹⁰³ Ibid, 453.

¹⁰⁴ See above, pp. 8–10.

¹⁰⁵ See above, nn. 51 and 88.

al-Malik b. al-Zayyāt and the aforementioned Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza.

In the context of these interpersonal connections, it is less surprising that a family derived from the Umayyads turned to support the Ṭālibids, as many of those surrounding them, whether with or without direct contacts, sought to forge alliance with this group in one way or another. However, the question which remains pending in our discussion of the Āl Thawāba comes back: how Shi‘i was al-Iṣfahānī’s family in the generations of his grandfather (Muḥammad b. Aḥmad and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Aḥmad) and father (al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad and al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad)? Or, to rephrase the question, does being connected with the Ṭālibids make one Shi‘i? If so, in what sense?

3. SHI‘ISM OR ‘ALIDISM?

The question of the Shi‘ism of al-Iṣfahānī’s family (if we can call it Shi‘ism at all) is indeed a tricky one, for, while we know about their interpersonal networks, their beliefs are not revealed. Thus, the following suggestions are built upon two hypotheses: first, the perspectives of the Iṣfahānī family’s Ṭālibid associates may manifest the Iṣfahānīs’ attitudes toward the Ṭālibids as well as the ‘Abbasid authority; second, al-Iṣfahānī’s works, the *Maqātil* and the *Aghānī*, may to some extent reflect his family’s religious conviction.

The three Ṭālibids, Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Ja‘farī, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamza, and al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn, might have had one thing in common: they all adopted a conciliatory position towards the ‘Abbasid authority. When al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn’s spoiled son, Zayd, who intermingled with the sons of al-Mutawakkil and envied their luxurious lifestyles, asked his father for money so that he could treat the caliph’s sons with the equivalent grandeur, he got what he wanted by threatening to rebel against the caliphate if his father did not obey him.¹⁰⁶ In the given account, al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn, in tears, implored his son not to go against the regime (*sulṭān*) and could only satisfy his demanding son by forcing his concubine (Zayd’s mother) to sell her jewellery. Al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn’s submissive manner towards the obstreperous Zayd surely illustrates the fatherly concern for the child, but it may also indicate that some of the Ṭālibids would rather cooperate with the ‘Abbasid caliphate than rebel against it.

¹⁰⁶ al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 547–8.

A similar stance can be seen in the case of Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Jaʿfarī, who was sent by Muzāḥim b. Khāqān to dissuade al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad from revolt in 250/864-5.¹⁰⁷ When al-Muʿtazz ordered a few Ṭālibids under suspicion to be brought to Samarra, aware that the Ṭāhirid governor, Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh, might not comply, the caliph claimed in his letter that he planned to dispatch Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim to Ṭabaristān to restore order there (*li-iṣlāḥ amri-hā*).¹⁰⁸ Although employing a Ṭālibid to deal with other Ṭālibids is a ruse, al-Muʿtazz's statement illustrates Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim's role as a broker between the ʿAbbasids and their potential Ṭālibid rivals. In a sense, it is a kind of alliance between the cooperative Ṭālibids and the ʿAbbasids *vis-à-vis* less cooperative Ṭālibids.

As mentioned above, a list by Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Ḥamza—al-Iṣfahānī's grandfather's guest and his uncle's source—about the death of Ṭālibids is quoted in al-Iṣfahānī's *Maqātil*.¹⁰⁹ If al-Iṣfahānī adduces the list faithfully, as he claims,¹¹⁰ it may reveal Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Ḥamza's views. Unlike al-Iṣfahānī's *Maqātil*, which includes details of the battles and biographical information about its subjects,¹¹¹ Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Ḥamza's list is a brief thirteen-page (as quoted

¹⁰⁷ According to al-Ṭabarī (*Tārīkh*, ix. 328–9), Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim al-Jaʿfarī delayed and was not able to carry out his mission before Muzāḥim defeated the rebels and put them to flight. It is noteworthy that al-Iṣfahānī presents a very different story, in which the ʿAlid rebel came to Samarra, offering allegiance to the rival caliph, al-Muʿtazz, and was then let be by Muzāḥim. As al-Iṣfahānī does not cite any source, it may be that he presents a Kūfan perspective on an event which caused high casualties in that city and perhaps, as a result, resentment against al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad. See also al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 521–2. For a more concise account, see al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj*, iv. 125. Another instance of Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim's intercession for a rebellious ʿAlid is recorded for the year 252/866-7, see the note following (108).

¹⁰⁸ al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, ix. 370–1.

¹⁰⁹ See above, n. 50.

¹¹⁰ al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 552: 'And Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Ḥamza mentioned the death of a group of the Ṭālibids, whose death is not executed by the government, and he did not specify the historical dates of their death; thus, I mention that [the death of the given Ṭālibids] following his account, exempt from (or not responsible for) mistake, if any, slip or negligence [*dhakara Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Ḥamza maqātil jamāʿa min al-Ṭālibiyyin lam yatawalla qatla-hum al-sultān wa-lam yaḥṣur awqāt maqātili-him bi-tārīkh fa-dhakartu dhālika bi-ḥikāyati-hi mutabarriʿan min khaṭaʿ in kāna fī-hi aw zalal aw sahw*]').

¹¹¹ The personal traits, such as bravery, generosity, and handsome appearance, are sometimes mentioned under each biographical entry. See, for a summary of the Ṭālibids in the *Maqātil*, Su, 'The Shīʿī Past', 327–32 (Appendix One).

in the *Maqātil*) register of the Ṭālibids' names with notes on the causes of their deaths. Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza explicitly points out the fratricides between 'Alids and Ja'farids, in which there were numerous Ṭālibids killed, as well as the victims under the rule of al-Ḥasan b. Zayd (d. 270/884).¹¹² An abrupt exception to the laconic narrative of Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza's list is the passage about the deaths of al-Ḥusayn b. Aḥmad al-Kawkabī and 'Ubaydallāh b. al-Ḥasan. About to rebel against al-Ḥasan b. Zayd, they were tortured (their bellies stamped upon) by al-Ḥasan b. Zayd, thrown into a pool (*birka*), drowned, and their corpses left in a cellar, from where they were taken out and buried later by the Saffarids.¹¹³ Not only the gruesome details appear at odds with the overall tone of the list, so too does al-Iṣfahānī's interpolation of the verses that condemn al-Ḥasan b. Zayd's deed.¹¹⁴ Although it is hard to reconstruct Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza's own take on the basis of al-Iṣfahānī's quotation, we are left—by virtue of the vivid details of al-Ḥasan b. Zayd's brutal disposal of the two—with some impression of Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ḥamza's lukewarm, perhaps even critical, manner towards his bellicose relatives. In a sense, his perspective tallies, to some degree, with that of Dāwūd b. al-Qāsim and al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥusayn.

The Ṭālibids' reconciliatory relationships with the 'Abbasid officials and the distance from the Ṭālibid activists—also reflected in the lives of the tenth and eleventh imams—can be discerned in al-Iṣfahānī's *Maqātil*, which is reticent concerning the Ṭālibid movements in Ṭabaristan and Yemen. The Ṭālibid compromise with the caliphate facilitated their connection with the political elite, whose privileged status depended on the 'Abbasid caliphal authority and legitimacy.¹¹⁵ Those elite figures who are known to have persecuted or disliked the Ṭālibids but somehow associated with some of them, such as Sa'īd b. Ḥumayd and 'Ubaydallāh b. Yahyā b. Khāqān, likely recognized that the Ṭālibids or 'Alids consisted of variegated elements, some of which *in potentia* jeopardized

¹¹² al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 558–63.

¹¹³ Ibid., 558.

¹¹⁴ It is an interpolation on al-Iṣfahānī's part, as the source mentioned here, Aḥmad b. Sa'īd, is one of al-Iṣfahānī's major sources in the *Maqātil*. See Sebastian Günther, *Quellenuntersuchungen zu den 'Maqātil al-Ṭālibīyyīn' des Abū-l-Farağ al-Iṣfahānī (gest. 356/967): Ein Beitrag zur Problematik der mündlichen und schriftlichen Überlieferung in der mittelalterlichen arabischen Literatur* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1991), 127–31.

¹¹⁵ The political alignments of the 'Alids are reflected in their marital patterns; see Asad Q. Ahmed, *The Religious Elite of the Early Islamic Hījāz: Five Prosopographical Case Studies* (Oxford: Prosopographica et Genealogica, 2011), 19–20; Teresa Bernheimer, *The 'Alids: The First Family of Islam, 750–1200* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 32–50.

their careers and prestige at the caliphal court, and some of which, at the opposite end, served as useful networks, allies, or even refuges in times of trouble.¹¹⁶ However, what does it mean to be allied with the politically quietist Ṭālibids? Does that make one a Shī'ī?

If al-İṣfahānī's views, as present in his works, can be extended to his family, then, to some degree, the answer is positive: the İṣfahānī family were Shī'is of some sort. Al-İṣfahānī, in the entry on 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in the *Maqātil*, unequivocally states that 'Alī's merits are uncountable (*aktharu min an tuḥṣā*) and, as his partisans and foes both agree, are too manifest to be belittled or veiled (*mā lā yumkinu 'ghamṭu-hu wa-lā yansāghu satru-hu min faḍā'ili-hi al-mashhūra*).¹¹⁷ I have addressed al-İṣfahānī's sectarian perspectives in his *Aghānī* in detail. Analysis of his selection and juxtaposition of reports in the *Aghānī*, shows that he scatters references to 'Alī's merits therein, so that their role in the *Aghānī* is far more conspicuous than those of the three caliphs before him.¹¹⁸ Al-İṣfahānī accentuates 'Alī's legitimacy and rightfulness in a way that marks anyone challenging his authority as deviant from guidance, while justifying the partisanship of his Shī'is, even if in excessive form.¹¹⁹ Al-İṣfahānī also emphasizes the importance of love for the virtuous members of the *ahl al-bayt*, but does not scruple to condemn less virtuous 'Alids such as Ismā'īl b. Yūsuf.¹²⁰ In my research, I have also argued against the view that al-İṣfahānī is a Zaydī, which originates from al-Ṭūsī's *al-Fihrist*;¹²¹ this view can arguably be refuted on the basis of al-İṣfahānī's ignorance of the Zaydī imams' recent activities in Yemen and Ṭabaristān, that is, Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq

¹¹⁶ While al-İṣfahānī does mention the death of Muḥammad b. Zayd and notice al-Ḥasan b. Zayd and others' campaigns in Ṭabaristān and Rayy, which he reserves for another work, he claims that he did not have access to the latest information about the Ṭālibids in Yemen and Ṭabaristān by the time he finished the *Maqātil* in 313/925; see *Maqātil*, 490–1, 542, 565.

¹¹⁷ al-İṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 42.

¹¹⁸ For a thorough analysis of al-İṣfahānī's editorial hand and his treatment of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, see Su, 'The Shī'ī Past', 253–7.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 223–41.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 183–203, 218–23, 242–7, 257–60. On the atrocities committed by Ismā'īl b. Yūsuf in Makka in 251/865, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh*, ix. 346–7.

¹²¹ This view is accepted by many: Najam Haider, *The Origins of the Shī'a: Identity, Ritual, and Sacred Space in Eighth-Century Kūfa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 197; id., 'The Community Divided: A Textual Analysis of the Murders of Idrīs b. 'Abd Allāh (d.175/791)', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 128/3 (2008): 459–75; Kilpatrick, *Making*, 14–16; S. Günther art., 'Abū al-Faraj al-İṣfahānī', *EL*³; Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 100.

(245–298/859–911) and al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī al-Uṭrūsh (d. 304/917), and his disinterest in identifying the imams in the past, including Zayd b. ‘Alī. Imamatology’s absence from his *Aghānī* and *Maqātil* marks a contrast between al-Iṣfahānī and his Imāmī and Zaydī contemporaries, who hold the imams to be bearers of knowledge and consider obedience to them to be obligatory.¹²²

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that al-Iṣfahānī’s Shi‘ism cannot be equated with the beliefs of the so-called Ṭālibiyya—a group active in Kufa until the tenth century, according to Madelung—for the following reasons.¹²³ First, the papyrus remarking on this Ṭālibiyya, first and foremost, is far from clear as to the group’s doctrine, due to the lacunae in it.¹²⁴ Second, if Abbott’s reading of the text is to be accepted, then ‘the author of the text belonged to the Zaidite sect, which advocated equality among the descendants of Abū Ṭālib as against any claim to superiority by ‘Alī or any of his descendants.’¹²⁵ Al-Iṣfahānī does not seem to comply with this view, for he categorically shows his disapproval for ‘Abdallāh b. Mu‘āwiya, who, counted among the descendants of Abū Ṭālib, is praised in the papyrus.¹²⁶

Taken together, al-Iṣfahānī’s Shi‘i tendencies can be characterized as unequivocal reverence for ‘Alī and his virtuous descendants, without subscribing to the indispensability of the imams and of repudiating most of the Companions, including the first three caliphs. Nevertheless, this kind of Shi‘ism cannot be identified with Zaydism or Ṭālibism, as

¹²² See above, n. 116 and Su, ‘The Shi‘ī Past’, 253.

¹²³ Wilferd Madelung, *Der Imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), 47. Crone (*Medieval*, 100, n. 4) suggests that al-Iṣfahānī was a member of this group without giving any evidence beyond citing Madelung’s view. Furthermore, in the light of our review of the family’s connections with the politically quietist Ṭālibids, it makes little sense to pre-conceive a (Zaydī or any other) label to define al-Iṣfahānī’s sectarian affiliation. Given the fluidity of the sectarian boundaries in the second half of the ninth century, al-Iṣfahānī and the Iṣfahānīs’ sectarian conviction ought to be defined on its own terms.

¹²⁴ This papyrus, which is the sole source of Madelung’s understanding of the Ṭālibiyya (*Der Imam*, 47, n. 22), is transcribed and analysed by Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri I. Historical Texts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 100–8.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 101–2. In the *Maqātil*, al-Iṣfahānī explicitly states that he only includes ‘Abdallāh b. Mu‘āwiya for the sake of making his book comprehensive. Thus, ‘Abdallāh b. Mu‘āwiya is portrayed negatively in both of his works: *Maqātil*, 152–9; *al-Aghānī*, xii. 171–90. For an analysis of ‘Abdallāh b. Mu‘āwiya’s image, see Su, ‘The Shi‘ī Past’, 275–6.

Madelung proposed. Being disinterested in the recent campaigns led by the 'Alids in Ṭabaristan and Yemen, it seems that al-Iṣfahānī's Shi'ī belief dwells on the remote memories of 'Alī and his mistreated descendants, and does not necessarily engage sympathy for the Ṭalibid contenders in the present.¹²⁷ If a Shi'ism of this temper underlies the Iṣfahānīs' conceptualization of their relationship with the Ṭalibids, it appears to match the political orientation of the Ṭalibids with whom they associated and fit the socio-political context in which they and many other elite families lived.

However, it has to be emphasized that it remains an open question whether or not al-Iṣfahānī's Shi'ī thought was inherited from his family. The dialogue taking place in the *majlis* of al-Iṣfahānī's grandfather, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, seems to imply some kind of hierarchy, based on pedigree, among the Ṭalibids themselves and their associates,¹²⁸ and thus contradicts Ṭalibid egalitarianism, to which the so-called Ṭalibiyya, mentioned above, subscribed. In this sense, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad's reverence for the *ahl al-bayt* dovetails with al-Iṣfahānī's Shi'ism. Nevertheless, the evidence that reveals the Iṣfahānīs' religious take is not sufficient to suggest that they embraced a conviction beyond 'Alidism.

CONCLUSION

This essay has addressed al-Iṣfahānī's family history with regard to why they chose to associate with the Ṭalibids and the implications of such an

¹²⁷ Also, note that al-Iṣfahānī's conviction, based on my research, should be construed as a form of Shi'ism. Given that al-Iṣfahānī emphatically highlights 'Alī's political legitimacy, which is contested in the ninth century, and his precedence over the first three caliphs, which does not conform to the hierarchical trajectory of the four rightly-guided caliphs embraced by the *ahl al-ḥadīth*, the core group constituting Sunni Islam, his sectarian profession is thus more than 'Alidism. See Su, 'The Shi'ī Past', 253–7; Crone, *Medieval*, 135; al-Nāshī' al-Akbar, *Masā'il al-imāma wa-muqtaṭafāt min al-Kitāb al-Awsaṭ fī al-maqālāt* (*Frühe mu'tazilitische Häresiographie: zwei Werke des Nāshī' al-Akbar* (gest. 293 H) ed. Josef van Ess; Beirut/Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1971), 10–21; al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (ed. Abū Ṣuhayb al-Karamī; Riyadh: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawliyya, 1998), 698–709; Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (ed. Naẓār M. al-Fāriyābī; Riyadh: Dār Ṭayba, 2005), 1119–31; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūt and Muḥammad K. Qarah Balilī (Damascus: Dār al-Risāla al-'Ālamiyya, 2009), vii. 33–52.

¹²⁸ See above, pp. 8–10.

association in the context of their being functionaries at the 'Abbasid court in the second half of the ninth century. Previous studies account for al-Iṣfahānī and his family's Shi'ism on the basis of, first, the geo-political atmosphere in Isfahan that brought the Ṭālibids and al-Iṣfahānī's ancestors together, and, second, on their marriage links with the Shi'ī Āl Thawāba. However, these views do not take into consideration, first, the fact that the family's service at the caliphal court exposed them to the Ṭālibids, including 'Alids, in Samarra, and, second, the lack of sound evidence to argue for the Shi'ī conviction of the Āl Thawāba as well as the Iṣfahānīs themselves.

In Samarra, some of the political elite aligned with the Ṭālibids, who, by virtue of their special bond with the Prophet, enjoyed high status with prestige: they were regarded as a source of divine guidance, of Prophetic intercession or blessing, and political legitimacy. Military leaders and scribes were attracted to the Ṭālibids, either by religious affection or by political interests. It is likely that it was this spatial proximity to the descendants of the Prophet in Samarra, where three generations of his family before al-Iṣfahānī had settled and worked as *kuttāb* (at least, two of the Iṣfahānīs) that drew the Umayyad Iṣfahānīs toward the Ṭālibids and their allies. While this analysis does not negate Khalafallāh's first proposition, which argues for an earlier connection between al-Iṣfahānī's ancestors and the 'Alids in Isfahan around the time of the 'Abbasid revolution, the networks that the Iṣfahānīs built up highlight their substantial contact with the leading members of the Ṭālibids and other Shi'ī functionaries, such as the Banū al-Furāt and the Banū Nawbakht. In light of their interpersonal connections, it can be argued that the family's relationship with the Ṭālibids was further consolidated, if there was such a relationship, before the generation of al-Iṣfahānī's grandfather, Muḥammad.

Whether close association or alliance with the Ṭālibids meant conversion to Shi'ism it is hard to know. The bifurcation of the Ṭālibids into those who rebelled against the 'Abbasids and those who chose to cooperate facilitated the connections of the officials, who sustained and depended upon the caliphate, with the politically quietist Ṭālibids, who were honoured (as well as kept under surveillance) by the caliphs. That is, those who denied the Ṭālibid entitlement to political leadership did not necessarily cut off their ties to the cooperative Ṭālibids, who lived around them and played their parts in the operation and continuation of the 'Abbasid caliphate. The Ṭālibids with whom the Iṣfahānīs associated seem to fit into this quietist category. However, whether or not the Iṣfahānīs' ties to the Ṭālibids can be considered a kind of Shi'ism can be only answered on the hypothesis that al-Iṣfahānī's own Shi'ī belief reflects that of his family.

Al-Iṣfahānī's works reveal his attempts to present 'Alī as the most virtuous and rightly-guided person, any opponent of him being portrayed negatively. If this tendency can be qualified as Shi'i in the sense that a Shi'i is a partisan of 'Alī, then, al-Iṣfahānī and, perhaps, the Iṣfahānīs, can be seen as Shi'is of some sort.