

From Julius Wellhausen to Wilferd Madelung: The Transformation of Western Models for Explaining the Origins of Shi'ism

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Abstractt

This article examines the transformation of Western academic explanations of the origins of Shi'ism from Julius Wellhausen to Wilferd Madelung. It asks how the meaning of "origins," the unit of analysis, causal priority, and the hierarchy of evidence changed across this historiographical trajectory. The study employs analytical historiography, structured-focused comparison, and comparative source criticism. Seven principal authors are compared through five variables: starting point, event-based or processual temporality, the relationship between politics and religion, endogenous or exogenous causation, and source use. Four historical episodes—the succession dispute, Karbalā' and the Penitents, al-Mukhtār's movement, and the consolidation of Imāmī authority—serve as common tests. Recent studies published after 2011 are used as a validation and counterexample corpus. The findings show that Wellhausen located Shi'ism within Arab society but privileged political opposition and a stage model of religious development. Hodgson recast the problem as sectarianization; Watt added tribal and social structure; and Jafri rejected a purely political first phase. Madelung then restored Qur'anic norms, kinship, the Prophet's family, material rights, and competing Hāshimite claims to the center of the succession debate. Post-2011 research on early texts, ritual, religious media, and institutions both supports and limits this shift. The article concludes that the hypothesis is supported across all five variables, but not as a linear succession of theories: explanatory priority moved from a "political party" to an asynchronous formation of legitimacy, protest memory, religious authority, practice, and community.

Keywords: origins of Shi'ism; Western historiography; Julius Wellhausen; Marshall Hodgson; Wilferd Madelung.

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2 Islam and the Contemporary World

1. Introduction

The “origins of Shi‘ism” constitute one of the most difficult problems in early Islamic history because contemporary documentation is scarce and the relevant labels changed meaning. During the first civil war, *shī‘at ‘Alī* could denote ‘Alī’s political supporters; later allegiance to the Prophet’s family encompassed competing ‘Alid and Hāshimite lines. Stable Zaydī, Imāmī, and Ismā‘īlī boundaries emerged only gradually. Dating the origin to al-Saqīfa, ‘Alī’s caliphate, Karbalā’, al-Mukhtār, al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq, or the Occultation therefore depends on whether “Shi‘ism” means partisanship, a familial claim to authority, a community with a distinct religious authority, or an institutionalized sect (Hodgson 1955, 1–3; Modarressi 1993, 19–52; Haider 2011, 3–23).

Much Western scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resolved this ambiguity through a stage-based model. An initially political dispute, it was argued, developed after defeat and through contact with other social groups or religious traditions into a religious and theological system. This model had the merit of resisting the wholesale projection of later Imāmī doctrine onto the first Islamic century. It could, however, easily turn religion into a secondary addition to politics and impose modern concepts of party, state, and church on early Muslim society. Julius Wellhausen’s importance lies in the fact that his systematic and philologically grounded account of “religio-political opposition parties” became a point of reference for several generations. Wilferd Madelung’s significance lies in his challenge, from within historical method and without simply reverting to confessional Imāmī historiography, to many of the assumptions underlying that influential account.

The phrase “from Wellhausen to Madelung” does not designate a direct progression. Goldziher rejected Iranian origins but retained external influence for some later ideas; Hodgson shifted from origin to sectarianization; Watt emphasized Kūfa’s social structure; Jafri joined religious and political authority; and Halm synthesized these developments. Madelung inherited and criticized parts of this trajectory. The issue is thus not a catalogue of views but a transformation in the rules of historical explanation.

The principal research question is as follows: how did the unit of analysis, temporality, causation, and hierarchy of sources change between Wellhausen’s model and Madelung’s reconstruction of the origins of Shi‘ism? Four subsidiary questions follow. First, did the scholars under discussion regard politics and religion as successive phases or as simultaneous dimensions? Second, how did they relate endogenous factors—succession, the status of the *ahl al-bayt*, and the conflicts of Kūfa—to exogenous factors such as the mawālī, Iran, and earlier religious traditions? Third, what effect did the turn from later heresiography to historical

narratives, poetry, the Qur'an, and ḥadīth have on their conclusions? Fourth, which limitations of classical models remained even in Madelung's reconstruction?

The article argues that the principal transformation was less a replacement of error by truth than a change in analytical level. Wellhausen emphasized religio-political opposition; Hodgson, sectarian boundaries; Jafri, the religious legitimacy implicit in political conflict; and Madelung, succession through Qur'anic kinship, familial rights, Hāshimite plurality, and critical reading of the victors' narratives. "Origins" thereby becomes several asynchronous processes: claim, movement, authority, and community.

The article makes three contributions. First, rather than cataloging agreements and disagreements, it subjects each author to the same questions and states in advance what would count as support for the hypothesis. Second, it corrects the widespread attribution of a simple "Iranian origin" theory to all early Orientalists, especially Wellhausen. Third, it uses post-2011 research as an external check on the proposed trajectory. Studies of the *ḥadīth al-manzila*, *Kitāb Sulaym*, the Penitents, al-Mukhtār's media of authority, and Imāmī institutions reveal developments that a history centered on succession alone cannot explain (Miskinzoda 2015, 67–82; Gleave 2015, 83–103; Hylén 2018, 300–31; Hylén 2019, 5–36; Hayes 2021, 188–204). This validation corpus also protects the argument from treating Madelung as the inevitable endpoint of scholarship. His work takes the succession dispute and familial expectations seriously, but does not posit either an indisputably explicit designation or a fully developed Twelver imamology in 11/632 (Madelung 1997b, 1–18).

2. Conceptual Framework and Historical Method

2.1. Object of Study and Working Definitions

In this article, "Western models" denotes neither an ethnic identity nor a civilizational value judgment. It refers to a historical and philological academic tradition developed largely in European and North American languages and institutions, but joined by scholars of diverse backgrounds. Jafri is included because his work intervened in this scholarly conversation, not because he was "Western" by identity. The unit of assessment is therefore the proposition and its evidentiary basis, not whether its author was Muslim or non-Muslim, Shi'i or Sunni.

"Origins" is likewise treated as an analytical variable rather than a self-evident date. It may designate (1) a claim to 'Alī's legitimate authority, (2) an identifiable coalition called *shī'at 'Alī*, (3) a community organized around distinctive religious authority and practice, or (4) a codified Imāmī or Twelver sect. The article does not assume that these four objects arose simultaneously. Nor does it treat "Ori-

4 Islam and the Contemporary World

entalism” as a single agent: one work may combine critical achievement with evolutionary or partisan language characteristic of its period (Goldziher 1981, 210–15).

2.2. Hypothesis and Variables

The hypothesis is that the major change between Wellhausen and Madelung was a relocation of explanatory priority: from a political opposition whose defeats generated later religion to a multilayered, endogenous, and asynchronous formation of legitimacy, memory, authority, and community. This is not a claim that every later scholar was methodologically superior or that one model simply replaced another.

The hypothesis is operationalized through five variables. First, the *starting point* records which of the four objects defined above is treated as the origin. Second, *temporality* distinguishes a single founding event from a process with several turning points. Third, the *politics-religion relation* asks whether doctrine follows political failure or whether religious conceptions of leadership already inform political claims. Fourth, *causal location* compares endogenous explanations—succession, kinship, Kūfan society, Umayyad rule, and communal needs—with exogenous explanations based on the mawālī, Iran, or prior religions. Fifth, *source regime* records the relative authority granted to chronicles, heresiographies, ḥadīth, poetry, the Qurʾan, ritual, and institutional evidence.

The hypothesis is considered supported only if convergent change appears in at least four variables, is visible in the treatment of the same historical episodes, and survives counterexample testing. It would be weakened if the difference proved merely terminological, if Madelung retained the earlier causal sequence and source hierarchy, or if cases such as Wellhausen’s rejection of an Iranian origin contradicted the proposed direction of change. This rule prevents a preferred conclusion from being inferred from chronology alone.

2.3. Corpus Selection and Scope

The primary historiographical corpus was selected purposively according to four criteria: influence on later research, an explicit account of early Shiʿism, representation of a distinct explanatory move, and sufficient overlap for comparison. It comprises Wellhausen’s study of religio-political factions; Goldziher’s chapter on sects; Hodgson’s article on sectarianization; Watt’s article on Shiʿism under the Umayyads; Jafri’s reconstruction from al-Saqīfa to Jaʿfar al-Šādiq; Halm’s synthesis; and Madelung’s study of al-Kumayt’s *Hāshimiyyāt*, his “Shīʿa” entry, and *The Succession to Muḥammad*. The chronological frame runs from Wellhausen’s German publication in 1901 to Madelung’s book in 1997. It is a strategic sample of models, not a census of Western scholarship.

A second, out-of-period corpus tests whether the reconstructed trajectory explains research published after 2011. Miskinzoda traces the use of *ḥadīth al-manzila* in formulating ‘Alī’s special authority; Gleave dates a layer of *Kitāb Sulaym* through internal hermeneutic and isnād evidence; Hylén studies the dating, ritualization, and media of authority in reports of the Penitents and al-Mukhtār; Hayes reconstructs the institutions and material practices of the Imāmī imamate; and Amir-Moezzi reopens the place of apocalypticism, civil war, and Qur’anic interpretation (Miskinzoda 2015, 67–82; Gleave 2015, 83–103; Hylén 2017, 175–205; Hylén 2018, 300–31; Hylén 2019, 5–36; Hayes 2021, 188–204; Amir-Moezzi 2022, 1–21). Haider’s recent model of Muslim historical writing supplies an additional methodological check (Haider 2019, 1–44). These works are not appended merely to update the bibliography; they are used below to test the explanatory reach and limits of Madelung’s model.

The study is limited to scholarship that directly altered the five variables. French, German, Italian, and Russian research is discussed only where it shaped the selected models. English translations are cited where available so that page references remain readily verifiable.

2.4. Historical Procedure and Hypothesis Testing

The research combines contextual intellectual history with structured comparison and source criticism. It proceeds in five stages. First, each work is subjected to external criticism: publication date, genre, intended problem, available source base, and position within contemporary debates are recorded. Thus Wellhausen’s category of “opposition party” is read in its turn-of-the-century philological setting, whereas Madelung’s argument is located within late twentieth-century disputes about the recoverability of early Islamic history.

Second, internal criticism distinguishes explicit statements from conclusions inferred from practice. For each scholar, passages defining the beginning of Shi‘ism are extracted, but so too are the actual sequencing of events, attribution of causes, and weighting of sources. A scholar’s declared rejection of an ethnic-origin theory, for example, is not treated as equivalent to an endogenous account of later doctrine.

Third, a structured-focused comparison applies the same five questions to four control episodes: the succession dispute of 11/632; Karbalā’ and the Penitents; al-Mukhtār and the Kaysāniyya; and the consolidation of Imāmī authority from al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq to the Occultation. The resulting evidence matrix records not only each author’s conclusion but the kind of evidence by which it is reached. This controls the comparison: an interpretation of al-Saqīfa is not allowed by itself to stand for a complete theory of communal formation.

Fourth, the article audits how early evidence is handled. Chronicles, heresiographies, ḥadīth collections, and poetry are not treated as transparent deposits of first-century fact. Their date, genre, transmission, sectarian location, conceptual vocabulary, and relation to independent reports are considered. Multiple independent attestation, survival in different genres, and details inconvenient to later communal memory increase historical plausibility; anachronistic terminology, harmonization, and dependence on a single late recension reduce it. These are probabilistic criteria, not a device for certifying whole books. Recent studies illustrate the procedure: Gleave dates one passage rather than all of *Kitāb Sulaym*, while Hylén combines recensional comparison, transmission history, and cumulative indicators in dating parts of the Penitents narrative (Gleave 2015, 98–101; Hylén 2017, 175–205; Hylén 2019, 8–9).

Finally, within-case findings are compared across time and tested against negative cases. Goldziher’s and Wellhausen’s rejection of a simple Iranian origin checks any claim of linear progress; Hodgson’s critique of Imāmī retrospection tests an overly confessional reading; and post-2011 studies test whether succession-centered history can also explain ritual, texts, and institutions. Because the object of this article is a change in historical explanation, “confirmation” means cumulative support for the stated historiographical hypothesis. It does not mean proof of a theological claim about succession or certainty regarding every event preserved in later sources.

3. Wellhausen and the Model of “Religio-Political Opposition”

3.1. Philological Achievement and the Politicization of the Unit of Analysis

The original title of Wellhausen’s work, *Die religiös-politischen Oppositionsparteien im alten Islam*, framed the Khārijites and the Shī’a as “religio-political opposition parties.” He did not describe fixed religions, but groupings formed through caliphal power, tribal allegiance, and disputes over legitimacy. His account moves from ‘Alī’s camp in the first civil war through Kūfa, Ḥujr ibn ‘Adī, Karbalā’, the Penitents, al-Mukhtār, the Kaysāniyya, Mahdism, and competing ‘Alid lines (Wellhausen 1975, 89–154).

This formulation produced enduring gains. It rejected the projection of a fully formed Twelver sect into the Prophet’s lifetime, connected defeat with the production of memory and hope, located change in the tribal and social field of Kūfa, and distinguished ‘Alid from broader Hāshimite claims. Return (*raj’a*), Mahdism, and occultation were thus related to the death of leaders and the survival of communities rather than treated as ideas appearing in a theological vacuum.

By the standards of his period, Wellhausen’s chronological ordering of scattered reports was a major advance over polemic and bare heresiographical clas-

sification. It should not, however, be redescribed as the full source criticism practiced today. Recent comparison of the al-Mukhtār traditions characterizes Wellhausen's treatment as largely compilation and harmonization, because he did not consistently establish the independence and stratification of parallel reports (Hylén 2019, 5–9). The achievement was a powerful historical synthesis; its weakness was that a coherent narrative could conceal contradiction and transmission history.

3.2. Correcting a Cliché: Wellhausen and the “Iranian Origin” of Shiʿism

Some critical accounts identify Wellhausen's model with the theory that “Shiʿism was created by Iranians.” This attribution is inaccurate. His explanation of the earliest stages is located within Arab society, especially Kūfan politics, tribal competition, and loyalty to ʿAlī's family. The mawālī and non-Arab elements become important in al-Mukhtār's revolt and subsequent developments, but they do not explain the original support for ʿAlī. In this respect, Wellhausen stands close to Goldziher, who insisted that the rise of Shiʿi ideas did not require an Iranian influence and that Shiʿism was as Arab in its roots as Islam itself, although he allowed a secondary role for Iranian traditions in later developments (Goldziher 1981, 210–12).

This correction is not merely a defense of an Orientalist. It has methodological consequences. If Wellhausen is assigned a theory that he did not hold, subsequent scholarship will be misrepresented as a simple transition from an “Iranian origin” to an “Islamic origin.” His disagreement with Madelung in fact concerns the role of religion and the timing of the formation of a claim to legitimacy more than the Arab or Iranian origin of the movement. The exogenous model has sometimes been more pronounced in contemporary representations of Wellhausen than in Wellhausen's own text.

3.3. Limitations: “Party” and the Stage of Religious Development

The category of “party” nevertheless carries an analytical cost. In modern usage it implies organization, membership, and a program; in the first Islamic century *shīʿa* could denote situational allegiance, a tribal network, a dynastic preference, or a religious community. Even when used broadly, the category makes revolt, allegiance, defeat, and succession the principal evidence. Households, ritual, ḥadīth transmission, scholarly relations, and everyday boundary-making recede from view.

A second limitation is the implicit sequence “politics first, religion later.” Defeat certainly intensified martyrdom, Mahdism, return, and claims to sacred authority, but it does not by itself explain the original language of leadership. If ʿAlī's standing rested partly on kinship with the Prophet, precedence, and privileged

knowledge, the political claim was already religiously articulated. The early caliphate was not a secular office that only later became religious.

Finally, labels such as Saba'iyya, Kaysāniyya, and *ghulāt* derive largely from later classification. Reading them as bounded first-century groups transfers the categories of opponents or later Imāmīs into a fluid past. Wellhausen historicized these materials without consistently dismantling their taxonomy. Hodgson's intervention began at this point: the question should be how dispersed allegiances acquired durable sectarian boundaries.

4. From "Origin" to "Sectarianization": Goldziher, Hodgson, and Watt

4.1. Goldziher: Arab Origins and Secondary Influences

In the chapter on sects in *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, Goldziher examined Shi'ism in relation to the legitimacy of 'Alī and the *ahl al-bayt*, distinguishing its Arab beginnings from later influences. The significance of this position becomes evident against the intellectual background of his period, when the opposition between a "Semitic mind" and an "Aryan spirit" was commonly invoked to explain the difference between Sunnism and Shi'ism. Goldziher regarded this dichotomy as an invalid explanation of the origin of Shi'ism. Arabs had participated in 'Alid allegiances, including radical forms, before Islam became deeply rooted in Iran (Goldziher 1981, 210–12).

His model nevertheless continued to use comparative religion and the transmission of elements to explain aspects of later development. In discussions of Mahdism, incarnation, esotericism, and sacred authority, he identified parallels with Christianity, Judaism, and Iranian traditions (Goldziher 1981, 174–229). The problem is not the possibility of influence or exchange, but the conversion of similarity into a causal relationship without demonstrating a route of transmission. Moreover, his language about the imam's authority and Shi'i legal practices occasionally moves from historical description into civilizational judgment. Goldziher thus made two moves at once: he weakened the ethnic-origin thesis while preserving, for some stages, a model of an "Arab core plus external religious additions."

This intermediate position demonstrates that making an origin endogenous does not necessarily entail treating politics and religion as simultaneous. A scholar may regard a political beginning as thoroughly Arab while understanding its later theological and esoteric richness primarily as borrowing. The more decisive shift occurs when doctrines are no longer interpreted as elements accumulated upon a party, but as internal communal responses to the problems of authority, defeat, and the continuity of guidance.

4.2. Hodgson: Critiquing Imāmī Retrospection and Recovering Identity Formation

Hodgson's 1955 article announced a methodological turn in its title: "How Did the Early Shī'a Become Sectarian?" The question discarded two assumptions. First, it did not treat the earliest Shī'a as an incomplete Twelver Imāmism from which Zaydī, Kaysānī, and Ismā'īlī groups had subsequently separated. As Hodgson observed, Zaydism could not have "split" from Twelver Shi'ism when the Twelver sect did not yet exist. Second, he took seriously the breadth of Ṭālibid and Hāshimite loyalty: at early stages, a potential imam did not necessarily belong to the Ḥusaynid line, or even descend from Fāṭima (Hodgson 1955, 1–3).

The decisive change was that fluidity itself became a phenomenon requiring explanation. Hodgson acknowledged the importance of Karbalā', the Penitents, and al-Mukhtār, but emphasized that at this stage "Shī'a" and "Uthmāniyya" were primarily positions on the imamate, not exhaustive divisions of the entire Muslim community. The movement of the Penitents intensified repentance and martyrdom, while al-Mukhtār combined vengeance, equality for the mawālī, and Mahdist expectation. These elements made sectarianization possible, but they did not yet complete a sectarian boundary (Hodgson 1955, 3–4).

Hodgson also criticized the retrospective use of the term *ghulāt*. If a later "moderate" Imāmism is placed at the center, every teaching it eventually rejected appears "extremist." Yet beliefs in return, inspiration, light, or extraordinary knowledge circulated through diverse networks in the first and early second centuries and did not belong exclusively to the "left wing" of an established sect. This critique transformed heresiography from a transparent report into an object of analysis: historians must ask who called whom a *ghālī*, at what time, and in order to construct which boundary (Hodgson 1955, 4–8).

In Hodgson's explanation, the age of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq was a turning point. The failure of 'Alid expectations after the 'Abbāsid victory allowed a reconfiguration of Shi'i allegiance. Principles such as *naṣṣ*, the concentration of authority in a particular individual even without revolt, the continuation of the imamate through designation, and loyalty to a non-ruling imam granted the community temporal stability. The Shī'a no longer needed to assemble only in moments of rebellion around an 'Alid claimant; they could persist in periods of defeat around an enduring chain of authority (Hodgson 1955, 9–13).

Hodgson's lasting achievement is the distinction between an 'Alid orientation and an Imāmī sect. His institutional emphasis can, however, reduce *naṣṣ*, knowledge, and *walāya* to strategies of communal survival, although believers understood them as divine guidance. Later research strengthens both sides of the argument. Miskinzoda shows how a widely transmitted prophetic report was

progressively interpreted as evidence for ‘Alī’s special authority, illustrating continuity between an early semantic resource and later doctrinal formulation (Miskinzoda 2015, 67–82). Gleave’s analysis of *Kitāb Sulaym*, by contrast, warns that a text attributed to the first century can contain late second- or early third-century hermeneutic layers (Gleave 2015, 98–101). The two studies together support processual formation without making either “early” or “late” a blanket judgment on an entire tradition. Ritual and legal research further shows that prayer, supplication, dietary rules, gatherings, and sacred space also created boundaries (Haider 2011, 95–186, 231–48).

4.3. Watt: Tribe, Family Charisma, and the Mawālī

Watt placed ‘Alid movements from Ḥujr ibn ‘Adī through Karbalā’, the Penitents, al-Mukhtār, and the Kaysāniyya within Kūfa’s social structure (Watt 1960, 158–72). Tribal balances, the privileges of notables, stipends, the slowing of conquest, and a growing non-Arab population shaped mobilization. To explain attraction to the *ahl al-bayt*, he invoked “family charisma”: inherited Arab status acquired further force when the family was that of a prophet who had united revelation and rule (Watt 1960, 160–61).

The mawālī gave al-Mukhtār’s movement a supra-Arab and egalitarian potential, but Watt did not make them or the Iranians the creators of Shi‘ism (Watt 1960, 162–65). His strength was to explain failure and revolt through tribal coalition, state pressure, and unequal status as well as ideas. His limit resembled Wellhausen’s: a focus on armed opposition left scholarly networks, ḥadīth, ritual, and non-insurrectionary authority at the margins. Moreover, “family charisma” could reduce the sacred status of the Prophet’s family to a reflection of tribal culture.

The contrast with Madelung is clearest over succession. Watt treated Abū Bakr’s role as senior adviser as making him the obvious successor (Watt 1961, 35–36). Madelung judged this a modern organizational analogy: in a traditional society, kinship and genealogy could matter more than administrative deputyship, while later anti-hereditary theory partly justified the history that had occurred (Madelung 1997b, 5–6). The same social factor that naturalized Abū Bakr’s selection for Watt thus made ‘Alī’s claim more historically plausible for Madelung.

5. Jafri and Halm: Toward a Synthetic Model

5.1. Jafri and the Unity of the Religious and Political

S. Husain M. Jafri’s 1979 book reconstructs the beginnings of Shi‘ism from al-Saqīfa to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq. It contests the division between an early “political Shi‘a” and a later “religious Shi‘ism,” arguing that this sequence transfers a modern separation of church and state to a society in which the Prophet bore revelation and

led the community. Succession therefore concerned administration, guidance, law, and the relationship between the Prophet's family and the community (Jafri 1979, 1–20).

This argument need not project mature Imāmī doctrine into 11/632. Early allegiance lacked fixed sectarian boundaries: kinship, precedence, knowledge, and proximity to the Prophet could support 'Alī before *naṣṣ*, infallibility, and a determinate chain of imams were systematized. In Jafri's account, Karbalā' transformed an existing claim through martyrdom memory; the Penitents and al-Mukhtār then offered sacrificial and mobilizational responses. After the failure of revolt and the 'Abbāsīd victory, al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq more sharply defined religious authority and community boundaries (Jafri 1979, 157–307).

Jafri privileges historical reports over later heresiographical taxonomies, compares divergent narratives, and uses poetry and 'Alid reports to recover the language of legitimacy. His weakness is a possible preference for continuity where the evidence also permits rupture. His achievement is nevertheless methodological: he compelled the assumption of a "purely political beginning" to justify itself and showed that endogenous explanation could be combined with source criticism.

5.2. Halm and the Consolidation of a Synthetic Narrative

Heinz Halm's general study, published in English in 1991, condensed several decades of scholarship into a synthetic narrative. He described Shi'ism as coeval with the beginnings of Islam, located its point of departure in the Arab problem of succession, and treated its broad reception in Iran as a later development (Halm 1991, 1–46). This formulation clearly distanced itself from the Iranian-origin thesis, although it still described the beginning principally as a "political problem of succession." The later chapters add branches, imamology, *ghuluww*, Ismā'īlism, and Zaydism to this nucleus.

Halm's importance lies less in an entirely new theoretical innovation than in evidence of a changed pedagogical consensus. By the early 1990s, Shi'ism could no longer plausibly be introduced as the invention of a Jewish convert or as an Iranian national reaction. The plurality of branches, the precedence of the Arab-Iraqi environment, and the processual character of differentiation had become broadly accepted. Yet the narrative grammar remained partly unchanged: first a political problem of succession, then the development of doctrine and ritual. Madelung reconsidered this grammar at its very point of departure.

6. Madelung and the Endogenous Reconstruction of the Succession Dispute

6.1. Critiquing the Narrative of an "Unproblematic Succession"

In *The Succession to Muḥammad*, Madelung begins not with a later sect but with the succession event. Many historians rejected Sayf ibn 'Umar's Ibn Saba' legend

while preserving one of its assumptions: Abū Bakr's selection was essentially unproblematic and the Sunni-Shi'i dispute was later projected backward. 'Alī's alleged immediate pledge then signifies consensus, whereas his status as legatee becomes later fabrication (Madelung 1997b, 1–3).

Madelung locates this consensus between two tendencies. Lammens and Caetani reduced conflict to ambition and rivalry; reaction to their excesses encouraged the image of Abū Bakr as the natural successor because he had advised the Prophet. Sharon, by a different route, dated the familial claim and the Prophet's *ahl al-bayt* to late Umayyad or 'Abbāsīd propaganda. Both positions diminished the historical seriousness of Hāshimite contestation (Madelung 1997b, 2–6).

Madelung does not simply accept later Imāmī narratives. He concedes that the Qur'an gives no explicit succession rule and that explanations of the Prophet's silence remain speculative (Madelung 1997b, 6, 18). His narrower claim is that the evidence does not warrant treating Abū Bakr's choice as self-evident or Hāshimite objections as inventions. This is a historical challenge to complete initial consensus, not a theological proof of explicit designation.

6.2. The Qur'an, Kinship, and the Ahl al-Bayt as Historical Evidence

Madelung's decisive methodological move was to bring the Qur'an into the discussion of succession. Since the Qur'an does not name the Prophet's successor, non-Muslim historians had often treated it as irrelevant to the issue. Instead of searching for an explicit designation, Madelung investigates the text's general norms: its emphasis on kinship, the rights of near relatives, inheritance, and the succession of earlier prophets within their families. These materials, he argues, illuminate the conceptual horizon of the Prophet and the first Muslims and cannot be wholly irrelevant to their expectations (Madelung 1997b, 6–17).

In interpreting the Verse of Purification and the verse of *mubāhala*, Madelung understands the earliest use of *ahl al-bayt* as referring primarily to the Prophet's blood relatives and secondarily to his wives. He does not infer an explicit appointment of 'Alī from these verses, but he treats the family's privileged status as historical. He therefore considers analogies between the Prophet's succession and the appointment of a manager for a party or corporation inappropriate. In traditional Arab society, descent and family mattered in the transfer of status and leadership; in the case of prophets, the Qur'an joined this importance to religious meaning (Madelung 1997b, 15–17).

This argument produces a subtle displacement. In the stage-based model, kinship is first a tribal factor and becomes sacred later. In Madelung's account, the foundational text of Islam itself had invested the Prophet's kin with rights and religious status. The contrast between "tribal politics" and "later theology" is therefore insufficient. The familial claim could initially have political, legal, and

religious dimensions even though the doctrine of infallibility and a chain of twelve imams had not yet been formulated.

Miskinzoda's later history of *ḥadīth al-manzila* both supports and qualifies this move. The report supplied an early language for 'Alī's exceptional proximity to Muḥammad, but its deployment as a systematic argument for authority developed across genres and controversies (Miskinzoda 2015, 67–82). Semantic availability and doctrinal stabilization must therefore be distinguished: neither the lateness of a formulation nor the antiquity of a report settles the date of the doctrine built from it.

6.3. The Material Rights of the Family and the Political Economy of Legitimacy

Madelung does not regard the status of the *ahl al-bayt* as purely symbolic. The Prophet's inheritance, Fadak, the share of near relatives in booty and *fay'*, and the prohibition on alms for the family reveal the relationship between authority and material resources. In his narrative, the dispute of Fāṭima and al-'Abbās with Abū Bakr over inheritance and the Prophet's property formed part of the redefinition of the *ahl al-bayt* within the new caliphal order. By setting aside normal inheritance and controlling the family's shares, that order limited both their economic independence and their political status (Madelung 1997b, 46–54, 356–62).

This dimension does not negate Wellhausen's political model; it deepens it. Politics is not merely competition for the office of caliph. It also encompasses the allocation of wealth, the definition of legal entitlement, and the relationship between the Prophet's family and the state. Madelung's "Shī'a" entry expresses the same connection concisely, presenting the deprivation of the family's privileged position as a fundamental motive in the emergence of the Shī'i movement (Madelung 1997a, 420). From this perspective, Shī'ism was not only an emotional response to defeat but also an alternative memory of justice, kinship rights, and legitimate authority.

Causal language must nevertheless be used with care. Material rights alone did not "cause" Shī'ism; numerous families in history have disputed inheritances without generating religious movements. These rights mattered because they stood within a wider network of Qur'anic status, kinship with the Prophet, claims to knowledge, and experiences of political exclusion. Madelung's strength lies in revealing that network, not in reducing the movement to a family economy.

6.4. Hāshimite Plurality and the Reconstruction of Umayyad Political Language

In his study of al-Kumayt ibn Zayd's *Hāshimīyyāt*, Madelung uses poetry to reconstruct the language of legitimacy in the Umayyad period. This source is particularly important because it stands at some distance from the heresiographical

schemes of the third and fourth Islamic centuries and shows how the idea of the Prophet's family operated in competition between 'Alid and 'Abbāsīd claims. Al-Kumayt's poetry affirms the virtue and rights of the Banū Hāshim while preserving the ambiguities of a broader Hāshimite spectrum, ambiguities that later 'Alid-'Abbāsīd boundaries diminished (Madelung 1989, 5–26).

The use of poetry leads to an important conclusion: the "early Shi'a" did not necessarily name a closed line of succession. The 'Abbāsīd movement could deploy the slogan *al-riqā min āl Muḥammad* and the emotional capital of the *ahl al-bayt* because all supporters did not define Āl Muḥammad and the Banū Hāshim in the same way. The history of the origins of Shi'ism must therefore be studied together with the gradual narrowing of the family's scope and the consolidation of rival authorities. This conclusion is compatible with Hodgson's criticism of projecting the twelve imams into the first century, but Madelung provides more extensive political and literary evidence for it.

6.5. The Source Regime: Between Credulity and Wholesale Skepticism

In the preface to *The Succession to Muḥammad*, Madelung explicitly opposes the wholesale rejection of narrative sources as late legends. In his view, there is a spectrum of reliability between manifest fabrication and credible testimony. Through careful selection, comparison of conflicting versions, and attention to the tendencies of transmitters, historians can construct a more precise account (Madelung 1997b, xi–xii). This is neither traditionalism nor naive positivism: the sources are late, but lateness is not equivalent to worthlessness.

Madelung's difference from Wellhausen involves more than an expanded corpus. The Qur'an is used to reconstruct a normative horizon, poetry to recover the language of legitimacy, genealogy and rights to reveal structures of status, and historical reports to establish a sequence of actions. Reports discordant with the victors' narrative—the objections of the Banū Hāshim, the delay in 'Alī's allegiance, the Prophet's private burial, the Fadak dispute, and statements attributed to 'Alī—are taken seriously not merely because they approximate Shi'i memory, but because they survive in diverse and sometimes unsympathetic sources.

Madelung's method nevertheless remains dependent on historical judgment. Selecting the "most credible" account, attributing motives to actors, and constructing a coherent narrative from contradictory materials will always be contestable. At times he prefers a report because it accords with political logic or with the character of the actors; such a criterion can become circular, since their character is itself reconstructed from those reports. His innovation restores the possibility of historical reconstruction, but it does not eliminate source uncertainty.

Recent source criticism sharpens this caution. Gleave's analysis assigns a passage of *Kitāb Sulaym* to a late second- or early third-century hermeneutic layer

rather than accepting or rejecting the work as a whole (Gleave 2015, 98–101). Hylén similarly combines recensional comparison, independent attestation, and details potentially inconvenient to transmitters when testing reports about the Penitents and al-Mukhtār (Hylén 2017, 175–205; Hylén 2019, 8–9). These procedures complement Madelung’s recovery of contested reports while making the unit of authentication smaller and the conclusion more explicitly probabilistic.

7. Comparative Analysis and Critical Evaluation

7.1. From a Single Origin to Multiple Emergences

Comparison of these works demonstrates that disagreement over the “birth date of Shi‘ism” results partly from a conflation of analytical levels. If Shi‘ism means a preference for ‘Alī and a familial claim to succession, its roots extend to the final years of the Prophet’s life and the crisis of 11/632. If it denotes *shī‘at ‘Alī* as a recognizable political coalition, the first civil war and ‘Alī’s caliphate constitute its moment of emergence. If it is defined as a memory of martyrdom and ‘Alid opposition, Karbalā’, the Penitents, and al-Mukhtār become decisive. If the object is a community loyal to a non-ruling imam and distinguished by *naṣṣ*, privileged knowledge, and social boundaries, the age of al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq and the aftermath of the ‘Abbāsīd revolution are crucial. If the subject is Twelver Imāmism with a fixed number of imams and a doctrine of occultation, the analysis must extend into the third and fourth Islamic centuries (Hodgson 1955, 1–13; Modarressi 1993, 19–106).

Wellhausen recognized these stages within a historical narrative, but tended to make the political stage causal and the religious stage consequent. Hodgson recast them as a problem of sectarianization. Jafri demonstrated that the earliest political claim itself carried religious value. Madelung identified a level prior to the “party”: structures of kinship, Qur’anic status, and familial rights that gave meaning to the succession dispute. The best answer is therefore not to choose one date, but to specify the level of origin under investigation.

7.2. From Exogenous Causation to Endogenous Formation

The trajectory examined here shows a gradual reduction in the weight accorded to ethnic and diffusionist explanations, although the reduction had already begun with Wellhausen and Goldziher. Neither required Iran to explain original support for ‘Alī. Iran, the *mawālī*, and other religious traditions entered their accounts of expansion and later formulation. Watt showed that the *mawālī* were important in particular movements without having created the movement. Hodgson interpreted doctrines as creative responses to defeat and the needs of authority. Jafri and Madelung placed semantic resources internal to Islam—prophecy, the *ahl al-bayt*, martyrdom, designation, and justice—more fully at the center.

“Endogenous,” however, should not imply a closed society. Kūfa was a meeting place of Arabs, Iranians, Christians, Jews, and diverse traditions, while conquest intensified the movement of persons and ideas. The methodological issue is not whether exchange occurred, but how its mechanism can be demonstrated. Similarity between *rajʿa* and beliefs in other religious traditions is not sufficient evidence of borrowing. The carriers, chronology, and transformation of meaning in a Shiʿi environment must also be established. Madelung’s model encourages this caution, although his focus on elite politics leaves limited room for the social history of cultural exchange.

7.3. Politics and Religion: From Sequence to Entanglement

The most important theoretical transformation is the abandonment of the dichotomy “political first, religious later.” This does not deny doctrinal change. *Naṣṣ*, infallibility, the imam’s knowledge, return, and occultation were transformed and systematized over time. The claim is that the political character of the earliest conflict did not make it irreligious. In a community in which the Prophet was simultaneously the source of revelation, adjudication, warfare, wealth distribution, and moral guidance, the identification of his successor was necessarily a question of both political and religious authority. The dispute did not later “become religious”; its religious dimensions acquired new formulations in response to historical experience.

From this perspective, Karbalāʾ was not the point at which a secular party turned into a religion, but an event that intensified and concentrated the meanings of justice, martyrdom, and loyalty to the Prophet’s family. Imāmī *naṣṣ* was likewise not merely an organizational device invented after defeat. It was a theoretical answer to the question of how divine guidance continued in the absence of a just state. Hodgson’s analysis reveals its organizational advantage; Jafri and Madelung clarify its roots in legitimacy. An adequate explanation requires both dimensions.

7.4. Madelung’s Limits in Light of Post-Madelung Scholarship

Madelung fundamentally reconstructed the narratives of succession and familial legitimacy, but his book is not a comprehensive history of the origins of Shiʿism. Its focus on the first four caliphs, elite actors, and caliphal politics leaves community formation in households, mosques, rituals, and scholarly networks comparatively obscure. Haider’s study of Kūfan *basmala*, *qunūt*, and intoxicant traditions shows how everyday law and ritual created boundaries unavailable to a history of revolts alone (Haider 2011, 24–230).

Post-2011 research alters both scale and method. Miskinzoda traces the changing argumentative use of a prophetic report instead of treating doctrine as either primordial or invented at one date; Gleave stratifies a passage of *Kitāb*

Sulaym rather than certifying the whole text (Miskinzoda 2015, 67–82; Gleave 2015, 83–103). Hylén dates components of the Penitents narrative and interprets Karbalā’ memory through the reciprocal formation of myth, ritual, and social identity (Hylén 2017, 175–205; Hylén 2018, 300–31). His study of al-Mukhtār further shows how claims about Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, vengeance for al-Ḥusayn, and ‘Alī’s chair operated as media of persuasion, joining symbol, emotion, and political authority (Hylén 2019, 5–36).

Hayes shifts the unit of analysis from doctrine and elite succession to institutions, material practices, agents, and the problem of what constituted an Imāmī community (Hayes 2021, 188–204). Haider’s later work asks how Muslim historical writing constructed figures such as al-Mukhtār for different audiences and genres (Haider 2019, 1–44). Amir-Moezzi, more revisionistically, reconnects the Shi’i question to apocalyptic expectation, civil war, empire, and disputes over Qur’anic meaning (Amir-Moezzi 2022, 1–21). The latter is not treated here as consensus, but as a counterexample to any model that restricts endogenous causation to kinship and constitutional politics.

These studies support Madelung’s refusal of both credulity and wholesale skepticism, yet they expose the limits of a succession-centered macrohistory. They replace the whole-report verdict with stratification, add ritual and material institutions to the archive, and reconstruct how narratives performed authority. Madelung remains necessary for familial legitimacy and the earliest contest, but not sufficient for explaining the making of a community.

7.5. Results of the Hypothesis Test: A Multilayered and Asynchronous Model

The coded comparison supports the hypothesis on all five variables. Table 1 displays the observations used for this judgment rather than inferring change from chronology alone.

Table 1. Evidence matrix for testing the historiographical hypothesis

Variable	Earlier dominant tendency	Transitional test	Madelung and post-2011 result	Outcome
Starting point	Political opposition party	Sectarianization and fluid identity	Claim, coalition, community, and codified sect distinguished	Supports
Temporality	Defeat followed by religious development	Several historical turning points	Overlapping, asynchronous processes	Supports
Politics and religion	Political succession precedes doctrine	Religious meaning within political allegiance	Leadership, law, kinship, guidance, and wealth entangled	Supports

Variable	Earlier dominant tendency	Transitional test	Madelung and post-2011 result	Outcome
Causal location	External additions to an Arab political core	Kūfan structures and communal needs	Endogenous conflicts and resources, with exchange still possible	Supports with qualification
Source regime	Chronicles and heresiographical labels	Comparative narratives, poetry, and ritual	Qur'an, textual strata, material rights, performance, and institutions	Supports

The four control episodes confirm this pattern at different rates. Al-Saqīfa tests familial and Qur'anic legitimacy; Karbalā' and the Penitents join event, memory, and ritual; al-Mukhtār reveals social coalition, Mahdist language, and persuasive media; and the period from al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq to the Occultation shows that durable authority required texts, practice, agents, and boundary rules. No episode alone supplies a complete origin. The negative cases also qualify the direction of change: Wellhausen and Goldziher already rejected a simple Iranian origin, while recent studies show that Madelung's endogenous reconstruction does not by itself explain ritual or institutions. The result is relocation of explanatory priority, not linear intellectual progress.

A model adequate to these findings has four interacting layers: (1) a claim to 'Alī's and the *ahl al-bayt*'s legitimacy; (2) mobilization and protest memory from the first civil war through Karbalā' and the 'Alid revolts; (3) consolidation through designated authority, ḥadīth, ritual, social rules, and agents; and (4) sectarian codification in named branches, theology, the number of imams, and occultation. The layers overlap and have distinct chronologies. This formulation preserves political conflict, social participation, and doctrinal development while refusing to make any one of them the origin of all the others.

8. Conclusion

The comparison rejects a simple story of "prejudiced Orientalism" yielding to neutral history. Wellhausen located Shi'ism in Arab and Kūfan history, rejected an exclusively Iranian origin, resisted projecting Twelver Imāmism backward, and connected defeat with conceptual change. Yet his category of party and political-to-religious sequence privileged revolt over norms, ritual, and community. Goldziher weakened ethnic causation; Hodgson made sectarianization and fluid identity the problem; Watt added tribal and social structure; Jafri restored religion to the initial dispute; and Halm synthesized these changes.

Madelung reopened succession itself. By placing the Qur'an, kinship, the *ahl al-bayt*, inheritance, *khums*, *fay'*, Hāshimite poetry, and reports of protest within the evidentiary field, he made the 'Alid claim a historically real possibility rather than

a presumptively late invention. His acknowledgment that the Qur'an contains no explicit rule and that many details remain uncertain distinguishes historical reconstruction from confessional proof.

The hypothesis is supported because convergent change occurs in all five variables and across all four control episodes. The change is neither complete nor linear: earlier scholars supply negative cases, and post-2011 research shows that Madelung's macrohistory must be extended through textual stratification, ritual, narrative performance, material practice, and institutions. The most defensible explanation is therefore a multilayered and asynchronous formation of legitimacy, protest memory, authority, practice, and community. Future studies should specify which "origin" they mean and select evidence appropriate to that level instead of assigning a single birth date to Shi'ism.

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