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Cándida Ferrero Hernández (ed.)

**AUTORREPRESENTACIÓN Y CONTROVERSA  
EN EL MUNDO ORTODOXO Y LATINO**





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**FROM 'ALĪ TO DANTE'S ALĪ:  
A WESTERN MEDIEVAL UNDERSTANDING OF SHĪ'A\***

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the figure of *Alī*, found along with *Maometto* and sowers of scandal and schism in Dante's *Divina Commedia* (*Inferno* 28). While early commentators on the poem variously identify *Alī* as a companion or disciple of *Maometto*'s, or his heretical teacher, modern commentators identify him as 'Alī b. Abi Ṭālib, Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law. Both explain his condemnation as due to a religious schism he caused: according to the former, *Alī* inspired or pursued the division of Christianity provoked by *Maometto*; according to the latter, he was responsible for the division of the Muslim community into Sunnites and Shi'ites. Nevertheless, these interpretations do not clarify why *Alī* is not condemned by Dante along with heresiarchs but rather alongside characters responsible for violent divisions within social and political contexts. An analysis of the sources on 'Alī and the *Shī'a* available in Europe up to the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century shows that Dante, unlike his early commentators, relied on pseudo-historical biographies of Muḥammad in which the division between Sunnites and Shi'ites, ascribed to 'Alī, was interpreted as a political phenomenon concerning the dispute over authority and territorial control between Sunni Caliphs in the East and Shi'i imams in the West. By reading *Inferno* 28 from this perspective, through the social and political view expressed by Dante in the *Monarchia*, it is possible to infer that Dante considered Muḥammad as responsible for the subversion of the universal empire, and 'Alī as responsible for a further fragmentation of the imperial authority.

\* This investigation was pursued in the context of the research project *Fuentes medievales y modernas para el estudio de las relaciones transculturales en el Mediterráneo: redacción y transmisión*, FFI2015-63659-C2-1-P (MINECO/FEDER). I wish to thank Leonardo Capezone for discussing with me some issues related to the topic of this paper.

### Keywords

Dante, *Divina Commedia*, Islam, Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Sunnites, Shi‘ites, Biography, Historiography, Commentaries

### Resumen

Esta contribución estudia la figura de *Alī*, condenado junto a *Maometto*, como diseminadores de escándalo y de cisma en el *Infierno* de Dante. Mientras los comentaristas antiguos han identificado este personaje bien como un compañero o bien como un discípulo de *Maometto*, los comentaristas modernos opinan que se trata de ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, primo y yerno de Muḥammad. En ambos casos, su condena es atribuida al cisma religioso que causó: según los comentaristas antiguos *Alī* habría inspirado o perseguido la división de la cristiandad provocada por *Maometto*; pero, según los modernos, habría sido considerado como responsable de la división de la comunidad islámica en Sunnitas y Shi‘itas. Sin embargo, estas interpretaciones no dejan en claro por qué Dante no situó a *Alī* entre los herejarcas sino entre personajes responsables de violentas divisiones en un contexto social y político. El análisis de las fuentes sobre ‘Alī y la *Shi‘a* difundidas en Europa hasta los inicios del siglo XIV, y esto se evidencia en Dante, muestra que en la biografía pseudo histórica de Muḥammad la división entre Sunnitas y Shi‘itas atribuida a ‘Alī había sido interpretada como un fenómeno relativo a la disputa sobre la autoridad y el control territorial entre los califas de oriente, Sunnitas, y los imanes de occidente, Shi‘itas. A partir de la lectura del canto XXVIII del *Infierno* según esta perspectiva, mediante la visión socio-política expresada por Dante en su *Monarchia*, se puede formular la hipótesis que Dante considerase a Muḥammad responsable de la subversión del imperio universal y a ‘Alī de la ulterior fragmentación de la autoridad imperial. En consecuencia, los cismas que le son imputados a ‘Alī y Muḥammad tendrían una dimensión social y política más que religiosa.

### Palabras clave

Dante, *Divina Commedia*, Islam, Muḥammad, ‘Alī, Sunnitas, Shi‘itas, Biografía, Historiografía, Comentarios.

### INTRODUCTION

According to Islamic sources from both Sunnite and Shi‘ite contexts, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, died after being wounded with a



sword which may have been poisoned. While he was praying in the mosque of Kufa, a kharijite conspirator named Ibn Muljam struck him on his head (see, for instance, Ṭabarī, s. 1, vol. 6, pp. 3457-3469, and Ibn Shahrāshūb, vol. 3, pp. 308-318).

In the *Divina Commedia* Dante describes *Alī* as condemned to Hell along with *Maometto*.<sup>1</sup> They are both confined in the *bolgia* where sowers of scandal and schism are brutally and continuously mutilated by a devil armed with a sword (*Inferno* 28). While *Maometto*'s body is cut open from the neck to the groin, with its innards spilling out (*ibid.* vv. 22ff.), *Alī* is wounded on his head, cut from the chin to the hairline (*ibid.* vv. 32-33).

Since the time of the early commentators on the *Divina Commedia*, *Maometto*'s punishment has been explained according to the principle of *contrappasso*: as the inventor of a new sect within Christianity his split body bears the signs of the schism (literally "scission, split") he provoked within the body of the Church.<sup>2</sup> However, the specific injury endured by *Maometto* and the gesture of opening his breast in order to show his sufferance to Dante may be reminiscent of and an allusion to an event experienced by Muḥammad found in the Islamic biographical tradition, namely "the opening of the breast" (*sharḥ al-ṣadr*). This event occurred in Muḥammad's childhood or before his Night Journey (*isrā*) and Ascension to Heaven (*mi'rāj*), during which his heart was extracted from his body and purified by angels (Birkeland 1955). The "opening of the breast", indeed, may have been known to Dante through the *Liber de generatione Mahumet et nutritura eius* (for this hypothesis see Celli 2013, and Coffey 2013), a text included in the renowned and quite widespread *Corpus Islamolatinum*, a collection of Latin translations of Arabic texts dealing with Islam, including the Qur'ān, which was commissioned by Peter the Venerable in 1142 (see d'Alvéry 1956; Kritzek 1956; *Id.* 1964; Martínez Gázquez – De la Cruz Palma 2000, Martínez Gázquez 2011, Di Cesare 2013b).

Is therefore possible that *Alī*'s punishment is also reminiscent of 'Alī's death as narrated in Islamic tradition? Moreover, can the schism for which he is punished be identified as the division of the Muslim community provoked by his party (*shī'at 'Alī*), and were Dante and his readers aware of the divergences existing

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper non-Arabic forms of personal names are italicized in order to distinguish the protagonists of Islamic history as they are outlined in Islamic tradition from the corresponding characters as they are re-shaped by Christian authors according to their hermeneutical categories. On the latter, as applied to the image of the Prophet Muḥammad, see Di Cesare 2011, pp. 1-10 and *Ead.* 2013a. For a different approach see Daniel 1960, and Tolan 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See the commentaries summarized below in the text.

between the Sunnite and Shi'ite doctrinal systems? And which Shi'ite group was known to them?

In fact, the identity behind the name of the two characters (*Ali* and 'Alī) and their relationship to *Maometto*/Muḥammad are not sufficient to provide a definitive answer to these questions, as is evident from comparing modern and ancient commentaries on the *Divina Commedia*. As we shall see, the former take for granted both the identification of *Ali* as 'Alī and the reference to the differentiation of *Shi'a* from *abl al-sunna*, while the latter rather identify *Ali* as one of *Maometto's* companions, his heretical teacher or his most zealous disciple. Thus, in order to answer these questions we should investigate the sources of information on 'Alī and the *Shi'a* available in the Medieval West up to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

#### ALÌ AS 'ALĪ

Modern commentators on the *Divina Commedia*, from Porena onwards, identify *Ali* as Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law and fourth successor, and therefore as 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. The wound on his head is considered a continuation of *Maometto's* laceration, thus symbolising that the former carried on the latter's schism.<sup>4</sup> Porena states that, according to common opinion, 'Alī was a continuator and perfectioner of Muḥammad's work, while according to others (unspecified), he is condemned among the schismatics because he disagreed on some points of Muḥammad's doctrine. He also asks himself whether Dante knew about it and deems it odd that a separation from within an impious religion might be considered a schism. Of the following commentators, Chimenez supports the "common opinion", while Sapegno, Fallani, Giacalone, Pasquini and Quaglio, and Chiavacci Leonardi consider 'Alī as the founder of a sect, and Fallani even considers him a Shi'ite. Recently, Fosca has re-proposed both Porena's explanations. Only Bosco and Reggio quoted Gabrieli's explanation along with that provided by Porena, thus clarifying that the *Shi'a* arose as a political and religious

<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, only the brief analysis by Norman Daniel (Daniel 1960, pp. 349-350) is so far available on this topic. A paper by Stefano Resconi, entitled *Dante e gli sciiti: sulla presenza di Ali nella Divina Commedia*, presented at a seminar for PhD students held on 14-15 September 2015, is mentioned at <[http://www.academia.edu/15966032/Dante\\_e\\_gli\\_Sciiti\\_sulla\\_presenza\\_di\\_Al%C3%AC\\_in\\_Inf\\_XXVIII\\_vv\\_32-33](http://www.academia.edu/15966032/Dante_e_gli_Sciiti_sulla_presenza_di_Al%C3%AC_in_Inf_XXVIII_vv_32-33)> (accessed on 15 May 2016).

<sup>4</sup> I have consulted the ancient and modern commentaries to the *Divina Commedia* at <<http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu/reader?reader%5Bcantica%5D=1&reader%5Bcanto%5D=28>>, except for Inglese 2007.

movement after 'Alī's death (see also Gabrieli 1965). This correct understanding is also found in Inglese's commentary. A different interpretation of the *contrappasso* endured by Alī is proposed by Singleton. Though he identifies the Shi'ites as the Fatimids and labels *ahl al-sunna* and *Shi'a* as "two great sects", he points out the relationships between the schism ascribed to Alī and authority. Indeed, he writes that Alī's split head symbolises the discord sown "among the heads of the Mohammedan sect".

As we shall see, except for Bosco and Reggio, Inglese, and Singleton, the attitude of modern commentators toward *Alī* and his schism is heavily influenced by the interpretation proposed by early commentators.<sup>5</sup>

#### ALĪ AS MAOMETTO'S COMPANION, TEACHER OR DISCIPLE

Iacopo Alighieri, Dante's son, hesitantly identified *Elī* as a certain companion of *Maometto's* and interpreted his punishment as a consequence of preaching against the Christian faith. Iacopo recalled the story of *Maometto*, a great prelate from Spain, whom the Pope, jealous of his skills, sent to preach in *Outremer* after promising him great rewards. After succeeding in his mission *Maometto* came back, but as the Pope did not keep his promise he returned to *Outremer* to preach the opposite of what he had formerly preached and spread the beliefs currently held by the Saracens. This image of Muḥammad as a Christian cleric who founded his own heresy is a *topos* found in several Latin and Romance biographies of the Prophet, belonging to the well-known legendary type, such as the *Tultusceptrum de libro domini Metobii* (Díaz y Díaz 1970), the brief mentions in Aimericus's and Suguinus's *Ars Lectoria* (D'Ancona 1994, pp. 65-66), the *Liber Nicholay* (González Muñoz 2004) and so forth (see D'Ancona 1994). The figure of Muḥammad's teacher and partner in crime is missing in these narratives, unlike others of the same type, such as the *Vita Mahumeti* by Embrico de Mainz (González Muñoz 2015, pp. 97-167), the *Otia de Machomete* by Gautier de Compiègne (*Ibid.* pp. 173-241), a chapter in Guibert de Nogent's *Gesta Dei per Francos* (*Ibid.* 243-257), the *Vita Machometi* ascribed to Adelphus (*Ibid.* 259-289), the *Libellus de partibus transmarinis* in Vincent de Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale* (Di Cesare 2011, pp. 319-320), the anonymous *Vita pisana* (Mancini 1934), some

<sup>5</sup> This also holds true for studies devoted to *Inferno* 28, such as Niccolai 1963, Fubini 1967, Crescini 1971, Esposito 1985, Chiavacci Leonardi 1993, Peterson 1998, Allegretti 2000, Volpi 2011.

chapters in Jacopo d'Aqui's *Imago Mundi* (Avogadro 1848, cols. 1458-1465), the *Legenda Aurea* by Jacopo da Varazze (Maggioni 1998, vol. 2, pp. 1261-1266), Giovanni d'Andrea's commentary to the *Constitutiones Clementine* (D'Ancona 1994, p. 122 n. 107), the second Italian version of the *Livre du Trésor* by Brunetto Latini (*Ibid.*, pp. 33-35), *Sobre la seta mahometana* ascribed to Pedro Pascual (González Muñoz 2011, pp. 123ff.), and so on. The partner in crime is also missing in the texts that ascribe Spanish origins to Muḥammad, such as the *Vita Sancti Isidori* (Martín 2005, pp. 227-228), the *Chronicon* ascribed to Liutprand of Cremona (PL 136, cols. 973-974), the *Chronicon Mundi* by Lucas de Tuy (Di Cesare 2011, pp. 237-240), the *Livre des secrets aux philosophes* (D'Ancona 1994, p. 128, n. 125). Thus, it seems that Iacopo did not know who *Ali* was, and inferred from Dante's verses that he was a certain companion of *Maometto*'s.

Graziolo de' Bambagioli simply stated that *Macommettus* and *Ali* were two deceiving prophets of the pagans who, in their time, concocted many heresies. This statement is repeated in the *Chiose latine*, where it is followed by a reference to the story told by Iacopo Alighieri. Here, however, *Ali* is given more relevance as he features in the story from the beginning as a companion sent along with *Maometus* to preach in *Outremer*. When *Maometus* experiences the Pope's and cardinals' envy, *Ali* aids him in preaching the beliefs the Saracens now hold as their religion. Thus, implicitly, *Ali* is also considered as belonging to the Catholic hierarchy. He is deemed responsible for the schism within Christianity due to his primary role as *Maometto*'s companion rather than his teacher or disciple.

Guido da Pisa, instead, identified *Ali* as *Machumet*'s teacher, namely the cleric from Rome or the heretical monk and archdeacon of Antioch called *Sergius*. According to the two versions reported in Jacopo da Varazze's *Legenda Aurea*, the former used the young man to pursue his revenge, while the latter taught him the Old and the New Testament and, hidden in a cave, pretended to be the Archangel Gabriel (Michael in Guido's commentary). In order to justify his explanation, Guido states that *Ali* is the name by which the Saracens refer to *Sergius*. According to Guido, he receives his punishment from the devil's sword just before *Maometto* as he had taught him heretical beliefs, and his face is split since—given that God is known through the Divine Scripture, which thus represents His appearance—a heretic is recognized through his appearance (here there is a play with the polysemy of *facies*). Thus, *Ali* seems to be considered a heretic rather than a schismatic.

*Sergius* and *Ali* also overlap in Maramauro's commentary, where even their names are conflated into *Elisergi*. This figure is identified as the apostolic legatee who exploited *Maommetto* for his revenge. Maramauro also infers that he

was punished as a schismatic as he had persuaded the Saracens to abandon the Christian faith prior to *Maometto's* preaching, thus his schism was more public. The same conclusion is offered by Francesco Buti, who also refers to the *Legenda Aurea*, and infers that *Ali* probably means teacher "in that language". *Sergius* also appears in the *Chiose Ambrosiane*, but no mention is made there of his possible identification as *Ali*.

*Ali's* identity appears even more uncertain in the third redaction of Pietro Alighieri's commentary. After briefly recalling the first story told by Iacopo da Varazze and quoting a few passages from Martino Polono's *Chronica Pontificum et Imperatorum* (Di Cesare 2011, pp. 342-343), Pietro simply states that *Ali* was *Macometus's* companion and that his schism was lesser than that of the former. However, in the first redaction of his commentary, Pietro states that *Aly* was a disciple of *Mahometus* and belonged to his group of followers, consisting of heretical and schismatic Christians and Jews who became Saracens. He was also called *Nicolaus* and *Selle*. *Nicolaus* recalls the identification of Muḥammad as a nicholaite, found in Paschasius Radbertus (Di Cesare 2011, pp. 49-51) and Peter the Venerable (*Ibid.*, p. 85), which evolved into naming Muḥammad *Nicholas* and overlapping his character with that of the cleric as testified by Aimericus (D'Ancona 1994, pp. 65-66), Mark of Toledo (*Ibid.* p. 202), Lucas de Tuy (*Ibid.*, p. 239), and the *Liber Nycholay* (González Muñoz 2004). However, *Nicholaus* is the name borne by the Roman cleric who exploited *Macometus* for his revenge in the story narrated in the *Imago Mundi* by Iacopo d'Aqui (Avogadro 1848, col. 1459). There, *Nicholaus* and *Macometus* pursue their plans with the aid of a heretical monk named *Sergius*. Thus, Pietro may have conflated into a single character *Macometus's* two partners in crime in order to give an identity to the quite obscure *Ali*. *Selle*, indeed, might be a corruption of *Sergius*, but, on the other hand, this form also recalls *Sellem*, a Jew also known as *Abdia*, *Salon* and *Habdalla*, mentioned by Riccoldo da Monte Croce in his *Contra legem Sarracenorum* (Di Cesare 2011, p. 420), and *Abdalla Ibensellem*, the name taken by *Abdia Ibensalon* after his conversion to Islam according to the *De Doctrina Mahumet* (*Ibid.*, p. 116). This character can be identified as 'Abdia ben Salām, one of the early Jewish converts to Islam and important transmitter of *Isrā'īliyyāt*, who effectively took the name of 'Abd Allāh b. Salām after his conversion (EI2, vol. 1, p. 52). In any case, Pietro considers *Ali/Nicolaus/Selle* as a simple follower and disciple of Muḥammad's, thus less guilty than his teacher.

*Aly Baietta Fiteen* is considered as a schismatic Jew and *Maometto's* partner in crime along with *Abdias* in the *Chiose Cassinesi*. There, the reference to Riccoldo is more evident since in the *Contra legem* he mentions *Finees* and *Abdia nomine*

*Salon postea dictus Habdalla nomine Sellem* as the Jews who joined the Jacobite monk *Baheyra* in supporting *Mahomet's* plan (Di Cesare 2011, p. 420). *Baheyra* is an evolution of the character of the monk Bahīrā who, according to Islamic tradition, recognized in the young Muḥammad the signs of prophethood (Roggema 2009). It is evident that the author of the *Chiose Cassinesi* has overlapped him (Bāhīra > Baheyra > Baietta) with *Fiteen* (> Finees), establishing that *Alī* must be one of these followers of *Macomettus's*.

*Aly* and *Sergius* were *Macomettus's* apostles according to the Anonimo Fiorentino. He also states that *Aly* was the most important one, like Saint Peter among Christ's disciples. *Sergius* is depicted as a very learned cleric from Rome who, after being excommunicated and condemned as a heretic, denied Christ and joined *Macomettus* and a cultured Jew, also excommunicated and condemned as a heretic. Since these are the only two followers of *Macometto's* mentioned in his confused narration, the Anonimo seems to hint at an identification of *Alī* as the Jew. Maybe *Alī* was a quite obscure character for him, too, as he was for the Ottimo, who simply writes that *Alī* was a great disciple of *Maometto's* and excellent in his doctrine, and for the pseudo-Boccaccio, who also interprets *Alī* as a disciple and preacher of *Maometto's*, thus deserving a lesser punishment.

Benvenuto da Imola states that *Alī* was *Maometto's* paternal uncle, one of the supporters and founders of his sect. His punishment is lesser than *Maometto's*, since the noblest part of his body is cut open. Indeed, he taught *Maometto* and aided him, but he was less dangerous. The fact that Benvenuto presents *Alī* as *Maometto's* paternal uncle might suggest that he confused 'Alī, Muḥammad's paternal cousin, with his father, Abū Ṭālib, thus revealing knowledge of some traditions concerning Muḥammad and 'Alī's kinship. However, in Benvenuto's reconstruction of *Macomethus's* biography, which follows the pseudo-historical type, only two characters are mentioned besides the protagonist, namely the paternal uncle who became *Macomethus's* guardian after the death of his parents (with the topical reference to Qur'ān 93, 6-8), and the Nestorian monk *Sergius*. Therefore, it seems that Benvenuto did not confuse 'Alī with Abū Ṭālib, but rather identified *Alī* as the second relevant character in the story, whose name he did not know.

Guiniforte Barzizza also recalls the story of *Maometto* as told in the *Legenda aurea*. There, he paraphrases "dinanzi a me sen va piangendo Alī" as follows: "*Alī*, my teacher, who taught me what to do and say in order to sow a schism and separate many peoples from the womb of the Church, as I am split in the chest and the belly, goes ahead split in his face from the chin to the forehead. This, because he was my head and teacher, though, after he had been a public preacher,

he pretended to be a disciple of mine for me to acquire more credibility". Thus, he tries to reconcile the previous commentators' identification of *Ali* as *Maometto*'s teacher and disciple.

From this survey of the earliest commentaries on the *Divina Commedia* it is clear that *Ali* was a rather obscure figure for Dante's exegetes, and that they tried to guess his identity by searching for a suitable character in the Latin biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad, mostly belonging to the legendary type. Consequently, Dante ought to have used a different kind of source, where he could have found some details that gave some relevance to a character named *Ali* and a schism provoked by him.

#### LATIN SOURCES REFERRING TO 'ALĪ AND THE SHĪ'A

Anastasius the Librarian, in his translation of the *Chronographia* by Theophanes Byzantinus, mentions an *Ali* in reference to the succession to the throne after the death of *Huthmanus* ['Uthmān b. 'Affān]. He states that when the *amīras* [*amīr al-mu'minin*] died, in the 14th year of Constans' reign [655-656], a quarrel broke out between the Arabs of the desert, who supported the candidature of *Ali*, cousin of *Ali*, son-in-law of *Muamed*, and those of Syria and Egypt, who supported *Maubiam* [Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān]. The opposing armies met the following year [656-657] between Barbalissus [now Qala'at Balīs] <and *Kaisarion*> [unidentified] near the Euphrates. However, *Maubiam*'s army prevailed and reached the water, while *Ali*'s army died due to thirst. Three years later [658-659] the Arabs murdered *Ali* at Saphin [Şiffin] and *Maubia* remained the only emperor. During the 19th year of Constans' reign [659-660] the heresy of the *Charurgitae* [Khawārij] arose and *Maubia* defeated the people of Persis ['Iraq] and supported those of Syria, whom he distinguished as *Hisamitas* [Hāshimiyyūn] and *Heraclitas* [?] respectively (De Boor 1883-1885, vol. 2, pp. 217-218).

Anastasius and Theophanes present 'Alī as Muḥammad's son-in-law, not as cousin to the Prophet however but to another 'Alī. They also create great confusion in the chronology of 'Alī's caliphate. Indeed, a battle between 'Alī's army and Mu'āwiya's never took place near Barbalissus in Syria in 656-657, but in 656 'Alī defeated 'Ā'isha, Ṭalḥa and Zubayr's supporters at Baṣra, in Southern 'Iraq and close to the Tigris, during the famous Battle of the Camel. Moreover, the detail about 'Alī's army suffering from thirst recalls the similar difficulty experienced by the followers of al-Ḥusayn, 'Alī's son, at Karbalā' in central 'Iraq and close to the Euphrates, where they were massacred by an army sent by Yazīd, Mu'āwiya's son, in 680.

Only the young son of al-Ḥusayn ‘Alī, later called Zayn al-‘Abidīn, survived. The battle of Ṣiffīn did not occur in 658-659, but in 657, and ‘Alī was not murdered on that occasion but later on, in 661 in Kūfa. Moreover, the Kharijite secession took place at Ṣiffīn as a consequence of ‘Alī’s acceptance of arbitration, while several dissenters among ‘Alī’s supporters were slain by him and not by Mu‘āwīya in 658 at Nahrawān near the Tigris in ‘Irāq (see Donner 2010, pp. 155-170). Though the group called *Heraclitas* is difficult to identify, the *Hisamitas* might be the supporters of al-Ḥasan, ‘Alī’s other son by Fāṭima along with al-Ḥusayn, who recognized Mu‘āwīya as *amīr al-mu‘minīn* after ‘Alī’s death, but after Yazīd’s accession to the throne turned to support the claim of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya, ‘Alī’s son by Khawla bt. Ja‘far al-Ḥanafīyya, and later that of the ‘Abbasids who allegedly received an ‘Alid legacy from Abū Ḥāshim, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya’s son (see Sharon 1983). In any case, from Anastasius’s and Theophanes’s accounts this group does not appear to be defined as belonging to the *shī‘at ‘Alī*, and ‘Alī’s character is very negligible if compared to the dominating image of Mu‘āwīya.

Further confusing information on ‘Alī and his party is found in the *Dialogus* by Petrus Alfonsi. In his detailed biography of Muḥammad Petrus, the Christian alter ego of the Jew Moses with whom he dialogues, states that after the Prophet’s death and his failed resurrection his followers wanted to apostatize. However *Alius*, son of *Abitharii* [‘Alī b. Abī Ṭalīb], who obtained the kingdom prevailing over his ten companions, cunningly persuaded the people that *Mahometh’s* words had been misinterpreted. He had not preannounced his assumption into Heaven as occurring before burial and in the presence of everyone, but rather after it and in secret. For this reason his corpse had started to smell bad and needed to be buried as soon as possible, and only thereafter could it rise to Heaven. *Alius* thereby succeeded in perpetuating *Mahometh’s* error among this people. Petrus adds that two brothers, *Hazan* and *Hozein* [al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn], who were *Mahometh’s* scribes, mortified their bodies through fasting and staying awake, and almost died due to these privations. Their father, worried about their imminent ruin, revealed the truth of *Mahometh’s* wickedness to them. So they resumed eating and drinking wine and deviated, though not completely, from *Mahometh’s* religious law, being followed in this by “a part of their people” (Di Cesare 2011, pp. 69-70). Although Petrus skips over the Caliphate of Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān, does not identify ‘Alī as al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn’s father, and ascribes to them a refusal of Islamic dietary prohibitions, he is aware of a separation within the Islamic community or even of its denomination as *shī‘a*, as we can grasp from the phrasing: *sed quaedam pars gentis istos in consuetudine insecuti sunt*. Nevertheless, he does not clearly ascribe this division to ‘Alī.



A more detailed and reliable account of 'Alī's caliphate —despite its title— is found in the *Chronica mendosa*, a short chronicle dealing with Muḥammad and his early successors up to Yazīd (680–683) which is inserted in the *Corpus Islamolatinum* (see de la Cruz Palma 2015). In this text, 'Alī is introduced as Muḥammad's fourth successor and kinsman through common descent from *Heschem* [Hāshim b. 'Abd Manāf]. Indeed, *Hali* was the son of *Abitalif* [Abū Ṭalīb b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib], son of *Heschem* [in truth 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib b. Hāshim], son of *Abdemeinef* ['Abd Manāf] and *Fatima* [Fāṭima], daughter of *Azad* [Asad], son of *Heschem* [Hāshim b. 'Abd Manāf], thus the Prophet's paternal uncle and aunt. When he was elected as the Prophet's successor, on the day of *Odmen* ['Uthmān]'s murder, many disagreed and a group of dissenters led by *Ayisca* ['Ā'isha], daughter of *Eubokere* [Abū Bakr] and wife of the Prophet, fled to Mecca. After *Hali*'s victory at the Battle of the Camel he went back to *Alcupha* [Kūfa] and *Aysca* to *Iethrib* [Yathrib, today Madīnat al-nabī]. Then, *Moawia* son of *Cephin* [Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān] and *Odmen*'s son moved against *Hali* in order to vindicate the murdered caliph, and the armies met near *Abforat* [al-Farāt, Euphrates] at the city of *Aracha* [al-'Irāq, i.e. Ṣiffīn]. After a 40-day fight, *Hali* and *Moawia* agreed on settling the dispute by appointing *Alascari* [Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī] and *Ammara* son of *Alasei* [Amr b. al-'Aṣ], respectively, as arbitrators. Thus, they met in a place named *Algendel* [Dūmat al-Jandal, today al-Jawf in Saudi Arabia] but did not reach an agreement, and *Hali* went back to *Alcupha* and *Moawia* to *Heschem* [al-Shām], both claiming the throne for themselves. After a while, a man called *Abdarakmen* son of *Mulgem* ['Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muljam] killed *Hali* in the mosque of Kūfa, and his son *Alhacen* [al-Ḥasan] arranged to bury him to the west of that town (*Corpus Islamolatinum*, fols 9r–9v). As far as al-Ḥasan is concerned, the *Chronica* recounts that he was chosen as king by his supporters and, at the beginning, he tried to face Mu'āwiya but then decided to submit to him. Thus, he fulfilled a ḥadīth according to which the Prophet had said: “This boy will reconcile two armies that want to kill each other” (*Ibid.*, fol. 9v). As for al-Ḥusayn, it is stated that during the reign of *Iezid* [Yazīd] the citizens of Kūfa invited *Alhuacen* to join them in order to acclaim him as king. However, *Amer* son of *Yazīd*<sup>6</sup> intercepted him along the borders of Kūfa [at Karbalā'] and killed him on the tenth day of the month of *almuharam* [al-muḥarram] (*Ibid.*, fol. 11r *in marg.*).

<sup>6</sup> Al-Ḥusayn and his followers were attacked and killed by an army led by 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād. *Amer filius Iezid* in the text seems to be a misinterpretation of Arabic *al-amīr ibn Ziyad*, i.e. the commander Ibn Ziyād.

Though there are some inconsistencies probably due to the translation from Arabic into Latin, the account appears to be very accurate and oddly neutral—its perspective is not pro-Sunnites nor pro-Shi‘ites. However, it does not provide any information on the following history of the *shī‘at* ‘Alī.

Among the texts collected in the *Corpus Islamolatinum* the *Rescriptum Christiani*, a translation of the *Risālat al-Kindī*—Petrus Alfonsi’s source (see Forster 2014)—also deals with ‘Alī, but from a Christian perspective. The author recounts that, after *Mahumet*’s death, during *Ebubecr* [Abū Bakr]’s reign, his followers returned to their previous sects, but *Hali*, son of *Abitalib*, did not. Therefore, the three Jews who helped *Mahumet* in writing the *Alcoranus* tried to persuade him to proclaim himself a prophet. When *Ebubecr* discovered this he succeeded in diverting the young man from this plot and in getting him to accept his leadership. Indeed, in reference to the collection of the Qur‘ān, al-Kindī states that *Ebubecr* asked *Hali* why he was not present at his coronation and did not provide him with his aid. *Hali* replied that he was busy collecting the Scripture, as ordained by the Prophet. Thus, *Hali* is considered as the author of a version of the Book, which he did not make available to *Ozmen* [‘Uthmān] when he undertook its recension. Al-Kindī then adds that the great enmity existing between *Hali*, *Ebubecr*, *Ozmen*, and *Gomar* [‘Umar], contributed to the manipulation of the text (González Muñoz 2005, pp. 67-70). In this case too, then, the information regarding ‘Alī’s biography and *Shī‘a* is very scarce.

In contrast, the *Historia rerum gestarum in partibus transmarinis* by William of Tyre, approximately coeval to the *Corpus Islamolatinum*, is very detailed. Chapter 21 of Book 19 is devoted to the history of the early Caliphate and the rivalry between the “Caliph of Egypt” and the “Caliph of the East”. William aims to explain why they share the same title and, for this purpose, he begins by recounting that after *Mehemeth*’s death, his kingship was taken on by his co-operator *Bebecre* [Abū Bakr], after him by *Homar* son of *Chatab* [‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb], then by *Uthemen* [‘Uthmān], and *Hali* son of *Bitaleb* [‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib]. These four kings and their successors were named Caliphs, namely heirs to their teacher. However, since *Hali* surpassed the others for his strength and military experience, and was *Mehemeth*’s paternal cousin, he became offended by the fact that he was considered a mere successor rather than an excellent prophet, or even superior to *Mehemeth*. He began to spread the word that in truth the angel Gabriel had been deceived and thus bore to *Mehemeth* the Law which had been sent to him instead. Absurd as this was, this story was believed by the people and a great schism, still standing, arose between those deeming *Mehemeth* to be superior to *Hali* and the greatest of the prophets, who are called *sunni* [*Sunnī*] in

their language, and those considering only *Hali* as the prophet of God, who are called *ssia* [*Shī'ā*]. When *Hali* died, the former prevailed and persecuted the latter. However, 286 years after *Mehmeth's* reign<sup>7</sup> the noble *Abdalla* ['Abd Allāh], son of *Mehemeth* [Muḥammad al-Mahdī b. Ismā'il b. Ja'far al-Šādiq] son of *Iaphar* [Ja'far al-Šādiq], son of *Mehemeth* [Muḥammad al-Bāqir] son of *Hali* ['Alī Zayn al-'Abidīn], son of *Hussen* [al-Ḥusayn], *Hali's* eldest son, moved from *Selemia* [Salamiyya in Syria] in the East to Africa. There, he named himself *Mehedi* [al-Mahdī], which means "he who makes something plain",<sup>8</sup> as if leading everything to peace, and indeed, without violence, he made the roads pervious for his people. He built a city called *Mehediam* [Mahdiyya] which he intended to be the capital of his kingdom, and assembled a fleet by which he conquered Sicily and sacked some places in Southern Italy. *Abdalla* was the first, after *Hali*, who dared to name himself Caliph, but as *Hali's* successor rather than *Mehemeth*. He also dared to publicly curse *Mehemeth* and his followers, and to impart different rituals and prayers. His grandnephew *Ebuthemin* [Abū Tamīm], whose epithet was *Elmehedinalla* [Ma'add al-Mu'izz li-dīn Allāh],<sup>9</sup> conquered Egypt aided by his general *Iohar* [Jawhar b. 'Abd Allāh] and built *Cahere* [al-Qāhira], which means victorious and was meant as the seat of the victorious prince. Thus, the capital of the reign was moved from *Caroen* [Qairawān]<sup>10</sup> in the diocese of Africa [Ifriqiya] to Cairo in Egypt. From that day until the present<sup>11</sup> the Caliph of Egypt has always claimed to be equal and even superior to the Caliph of the East (Huygens 1986, vol. 2, pp. 890-892; see also vol. 1, pp. 109-110).

This passage is very important as it contains the earliest mention of the distinction between *abl al-sunna* (*sumni*) and *shī'at 'Alī* (*ssia*) in a Latin writing, and an attempt to explain both its religious and political dimensions. William, indeed, presents the *shī'ā* as a movement originating from 'Alī's claim to be recognized as the prophet sent by God to the "Saracens" in Muḥammad's stead and, consequently, their rightful ruler. Therefore, the religious differences between Sunnites and Shi'ites — Ismā'ilis in this case — is ascribed to doctrinal and ritual

<sup>7</sup> 'Abd Allāh reached Ifriqiya in 905 and was proclaimed Mahdī in 909. William probably refers to the latter date, otherwise we should consider the possibility that he dates the hijra to 619.

<sup>8</sup> Mahdī, from the root *h-d-y*, means "rightly guided". It seems that William or his source has mistaken the root *h-d-y* for *m-h-d* which means "to make something plain, flat".

<sup>9</sup> His *laqab* (epithet) was Mu'izz li-dīn Allāh, Ma'add his name, and Abū Tamīm his kunya.

<sup>10</sup> Here Qayrawān stands for al-Manṣūriyya, the capital founded a short distance away by Ismā'il al-Manṣūr bi-llāh in 946. As mentioned above by William himself, 'Abd Allāh al-Mahdī (and his successor Muḥammad al-Qā'im bi-amr Allāh) resided in al-Mahdiyya, which he founded.

<sup>11</sup> 1179 or 1176, see n. 8 above.

innovations introduced by 'Alī, while the political rivalry between the 'Abbasid Caliphs and the Fatimid Imams is explained as an antagonism between Muḥammad's successors and heirs, and 'Alī's successors and heirs. The emphasis placed on Muḥammad's succession and 'Alī's kinship to the Prophet and 'Abd Allāh's genealogy underlines the opposition between elective and dynastic principles, and turns out to be an interpretation of the Shi'ites' refusal to recognize the early three Rightly Guided Caliphs as legitimate. On the other hand, the projection of the rise of the *shī'a* at 'Alī's time and upon his initiative appears to be an interpretation of the centrality of the doctrine of the imamate and the importance of the *ahl al-bayt* to *shī'a*. In any case, William depicts the alleged antagonism between 'Alī and Muḥammad, and the rivalry between the 'Abbasid Caliphs and the Fatimid imams as a schism, namely a fracture of the unity within the Islamic community and a dispute over authority. However, William wrote the passage we are analysing in 1176 or 1179,<sup>12</sup> when Egypt was no longer ruled by the shī'ite Fatimids but by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, who established the Sunnite Ayyubid dynasty and recognized the authority of the 'Abbasid Caliph. It is impossible to understand why he did not mention such an important change in this context, but it is worth noting that the following writers who used the *Historia* as a source continued to perpetrate this misunderstanding. For instance Oliver of Paderborn, in his *Historia Regum Terre Sancte*, quotes William's conclusive passage and states that from Muḥammad's reign up to the present day the Caliph of Egypt has always claimed to be equal and even superior to the Caliph of the East (Hoogeveg 1894, pp. 122-123). In fact, Oliver's present was set in the years 1219-1222.

In the almost coeval *Historia Orientalis* by James of Vitry, written between 1216 and 1223 or 1224, we find a similar situation and account. James narrates that after *Mahometus*'s death his place at the head of the community was taken by a *calipha*, which means successor or heir, elected by his disciples. However, *Mahometus*'s father-in-law, called *Achali*, out of envy and greed, opposed and finally deposed him, taking the reign. *Achali* was succeeded by *Haly*, *Mahometus*'s paternal cousin, who claimed he was closer to God than *Mahometus* and altered his Law and rites. Thus, those who retained *Mahometus*'s Law established a Caliph in Baghdad, whom they also called *Soldanus*, while *Haly*'s successors established their seat in Egypt. Since then, great enmity has existed between the Egyptians and the Easterners, and the Saracens are divided into two factions: one abiding by *Mahometus*'s Law and the other by *Haly*'s (Di Cesare 2011, pp. 233-234).

<sup>12</sup> See ns 8 and 12 above.

Unlike William, James does not recognize 'Alī's successors as his descendants, i.e. the Fatimids, and, by identifying the Muslims living in the East and recognizing the authority of the Caliph of Baghdad as Sunnites, and those living in Egypt and ruled by the Caliph of Egypt as Shi'ites, he overlaps the geo-political and religious dimensions. A further step towards a geo-political interpretation of the schism as a division of the Islamic empire between a Caliph of the East and a Caliph of the West is made in the *Notitia de Machometo* (ca. 1271) ascribed to William of Tripoli. The text completely obliterates the history of the origins of the Fatimid imamate and sets the 'Abbasid revolution (750) and the Almohad conquest of Maghreb and Ifrīqiya (1130-1149) back to the aftermath of the Prophet's death (632). Indeed, the author writes that, after the conquest of Mesopotamia, the Saracens recognized as the Prophet's heir and successor, vicar of God and pope, namely Caliph, a descendant of his named *Helmas* [Abū al-'Abbās al-Ṣaffāh]. The Berber Saracens then conquered Africa and the city of *Marroch* [Marrakesh] where they established a Caliph, whom they called *Emir Elmau menin* [*amīr al-mu'minīn*]. The Saracens thus boast of ruling all over the world through these two emperors: the Caliph of Baghdad and the Caliph of the West (Engels 1992, pp. 204-208). A more confusing scenario is found in the *De statu Sarracenorum* (1272-3), also ascribed to William of Tripoli. In this text, *Hali* appears as the fourth of *Machumet's* successors and the conqueror of Boşra during the reign of Constans II (641-668).<sup>13</sup> It is said that when the Mongols conquered Baghdad (1258) they fulfilled a prophecy concerning the duration of the caliphate up to the 43rd of *Machumet's* successors and descendants, after which the Turks took over the empire from the Arabs and reigned from Egypt. The author recalls the conquest of Mesopotamia and ascribes it to *Hebbas* [Abū al-'Abbās al-Ṣaffāh], the 15<sup>th</sup> Caliph, who established his seat in Baghdad and was recognized as Caliph and emperor. He then states that when the Arab Africans [*sic!*], known as Berbers, knew of the endeavours of their Eastern fellows, they conquered the whole of Africa and established an emperor called *Emir Elmau menin* [*amīr al-mu'minīn*] in *Marroch* [Marrakesh]. However, in the meantime, the Saracens who had conquered Egypt established their own Caliph in the city of *Carre* [al-Qāhira], which they founded. Thus, for a time, there were three Caliphs: the Caliph of Baghdad, the Caliph of Cairo, and the Caliph of Marrakesh. After the Mongols killed the first and Saladin the second, only the third

<sup>13</sup> Bosra was conquered by Khālid b. al-Walīd in 634.

remained, but the end of the Saracens was at hand since the Caliph of Tunis<sup>14</sup> and the Sultan of Egypt, who was then *Bibars* [Baybars, r. 1260-1275], did not belong to the Prophet's lineage (Engels 1992, pp. 292-304).

Though these two accounts do not hint at any religious difference between the Saracens of the East, ruled by the 'Abbasid Caliphs, and the Saracens of the West, ruled by the Fatimid imams or the Almohad Caliphs or the Ayyubid or Mamluk Sultans or the Ḥafṣid Caliphs, they set a geographical framework for the following elaborations on the schism. For instance, in the *Nuova Cronica* (1322-1348) by Giovanni Villani the information that can be traced back to William of Tyre is summarized as follows: after *Maomet's* death his relatives did not want to lose their power and therefore established a sort of Pope, named *Calif*. Therefore, out of envy, some Saracens established their own *Calif*, giving rise to a schism endorsed by religious differentiation. The Saracens of the East retained *Maomet's* Law and established their Caliph in Baghdad, whereas the Saracens of Egypt and Africa established their own in their region. Their heresy is thus differentiated in several heretical doctrines, but their immoral habits are the same (Porta 1991, vol. 1, pp. 91-92). A similar view is found in the *Dittamondo* (1346-1367) by Fazio degli Uberti, a Florentine writer, like Villani and Dante. He also draws on material from William of Tyre, but definitively ascribes the schism to *Alì* and identifies his followers as those obedient to the *Miromelin* [*amīr al-mu'minīn*] of Morocco, who opposes those obedient to the Caliph of *Baldach* [Baghdad] (Corsi 1952, vol. 1, pp. 375-376; see also Cerulli 1949, p. 505ff.).

Another Florentine provides interesting though scanty information on 'Alī and the *Shī'a*, namely the Dominican friar Riccoldo da Monte Croce, who knew Arabic and travelled to Baghdad. In the *Contra legem Sarracenorum* (1299-1300 ca.) he introduces *Hali* son of *Abitaleb* ['Alī b. Abī Ṭālib] when dealing with the collection of the Qur'ān. Riccoldo states that the traditionalists disagree on whether *Hali* knew part of the Qur'ān or not when the Prophet was still alive. He also says that *elfocaha* [*al-fuqahā*], either Easterner or Westerner, differ in their interpretation of the sacred text as they belong to several sects and debate their positions in schools. The majority follow *Mahometus*, others *Hali*, since they argue that the former seized what was due to the latter. Both groups are opposed by philosophers, who use Plato's and Aristotle's works as textbooks and abhor all Islamic sects as well as the Qur'ān (*CL* 50 and 92). A passage from the

<sup>14</sup> The Ḥafṣid Muḥammad al-Muṣṭansir (r. 1249-1277) who claimed the Caliphal title of *amīr al-mu'minīn* after the death of Idrīs al-Wāthiq (1266-1269), the last Almohad ruler.

*Liber peregrinationis* is more informative. When describing the ruins of Baghdad, Riccoldo states that only a few inhabitants remained after the destruction of the city [perpetrated by the Mongols in 1258]. They are Saracens who follow *Ahaly* and wait for the return of a son of his who died 600 years earlier [700 ca.]. They nurture a female mule in order to welcome him with honour, and their pontiffs show her saddled and harnessed every Friday to the people gathered for prayer. They also say that this son of *Ahaly* will return to them altogether, and at that time Jesus will appear and become a Saracen (*LP* 15).

This passage contains the earliest mention in a Latin writing of a distinctive tract of the Twelver-*Shī'a*, namely the belief that Muḥammad al-Mahdī, the 12<sup>th</sup> imam descendant of 'Alī who disappeared in 874, will manifest himself after his occultation (*ghayba*) at the end of time (EI2, vol. 4, pp. 277-279). Moreover, it describes a popular and local ceremony which is very similar to those held in Kāshān according to Yāqūt (d. 1229; Wüstenfeld 1845, vol. 4, p. 15), in Ḥilla according to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1368; Defrémery-Sanguinetti 1853-1858, vol. 2, pp. 97-99), and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406; Rosenthal 1958, vol. 1, p. 408), in Sabzawār according to Ḥāfīz-i Abrū (d. 1430; Tauer 1959, p. 25), and more recently in Iṣfahān according to Chardin (d. 1713; Langlès 1811, vol. 9, pp. 143-145)<sup>15</sup>. Though Riccoldo confuses Muḥammad al-Mahdī with a son of 'Alī's and the return of Jesus as his helper with the conversion of Jesus to Islam, he clearly identifies the *Shī'a* as the Twelver-*Shī'a* and one of the three main groups into which the Islamic community is divided.

Another understanding of 'Alī's role in Islamic history and of his *Shī'a* is found in the *Livre des saintes paroles et des bons faiz de nostre saint roy Looijs* (1305-1309) by Jean de Joinville, almost coeval to Riccoldo. The author recounts that when King Louis was at Acre between 1250 and 1254 he exchanged embassies and gifts with the Old Man of the Mountain, the head of the *Assacis* [the Assassins] in Syria. Yves le Breton, the King's ambassador who knew Arabic, had a conversation with the Old Man of the Mountain and returned with information on his sect's beliefs. Yves discovered that the Assassins adhered to *la Loy de Haali*. He was *Mahommet's* uncle and the one who favoured his rise to power, but was thereafter dismissed. Therefore, he lured as many followers as he could and taught them a doctrine different from that preached by *Mahommet*. Since then, all those who follow *Haali* consider *Mahommet's* followers to be unbelievers and all those who

<sup>15</sup> A similar ritual regarding the expectation of Abū Sayyid's return at Lahssa is described by Nāṣir-i Khusraw (Schefer 1881, p. 82-83 and 228-229).

follow *Mahomet* consider *Haali's* followers to be unbelievers. The latter believe that if they are killed while obeying their master their souls will migrate into the body of a man of a higher station, and for this reason the Assassins do not hesitate to sacrifice themselves at their master's command. They also believe that they cannot escape death when the day decreed by Fate has come, like the Bedouins, who go into battle unarmed due to this belief, and think that the Franks arm themselves out of fear of dying. Yves also stated that he had suggested the Old Man of the Mountain read a collection of Jesus' sayings to Saint Peter, which he had found in the Old Man's residence. His host replied that he often did so, since he highly esteemed Saint Peter. Indeed, since the beginning of the world Abel's soul had migrated into Noah, then into Abraham, then into Jesus, and lastly into Peter. Yves tried to persuade the Old Man that this belief was inconsistent, but the latter was adamant (Monfrin 1995, pp. 222-224; see van Berchem 1897, and Daftary 1994, pp. 80-83).

Joinville is the only Western medieval author who links the Nizarites (i.e. the Assassins) to 'Alī. Indeed, previous and coeval sources considered them to be followers of Muḥammad (Pages 2007). However, he does not seem to be aware that the Nizarites are a branch of the Fatimid Isma'īlis, thus one of several Shi'ite groups, and merely identifies them as 'Alī followers, namely the *Shi'at 'Alī* tout court.

#### DANTE'S ALĪ AND MAOMETTO

Given that 'Alī has a definite identity and relevance in the *Historia* by William of Tyre, that by James of Vitry, Riccoldo's *Contra legem* and *Liber*, and the *Livre* by Joinville, and for chronological reasons, it appears clear that we have to look for Dante's source among them. We can even narrow down the possibilities by excluding Riccoldo and Joinville. In the former's writings 'Alī's role in the Islamic "schism" is not very detailed and the divergences among his followers and those of Muḥammad only regard the exegesis of the Qur'ān. Thus, it does not seem to explain 'Alī's condemnation to Hell and its possible meaning. We could also discard the identification of 'Alī's followers as the Nizarites/Assassins, proposed by Joinville, since *assessino* in the *Commedia* (*Inferno* 19, 50) is used in the sense of killer (Malato 1970). As is known, the term originally referred to the *fidā'īs*, a special group among the Nizarites who sacrificed their life for the cause by murdering those considered as enemies, but it gradually acquired the meaning of a killer blindly devoted to his master (EI2, vol. 2, p. 882).



We therefore have to turn to William of Tyre and Jacques of Vitry. They are the only sources that identify 'Alī as the cause of a schism in the Islamic community, and therefore they should be the sources of Dante's Ali, though it is difficult to determine which of them he used and if he read their works directly or only texts based on them. It is important, however, to stress that neither William nor Jacques confine the meaning of the schism ascribed to 'Alī to the religious sphere, indeed they endow it with a specific political and spatial dimension. According to them, the schism is the result of 'Alī's rebellion against Muḥammad's authority and the consequent division of the Islamic *ecumene* into two territorial entities, Eastern and Western, which are ruled by two rival sovereigns who are also religious leaders of the respective communities. This context splendidly suits the interpretation of the *contrappasso* as suggested *in nuce* by Singleton: 'Alī's head is split since he not only caused a fracture within the religious community brought together by Muḥammad, but also the division of his legacy, namely the religious and political authority exerted over the conquered territories.

Nevertheless, if this is the case, why would an inner division of the Islamic world matter to Dante? We can try to answer this by re-considering Muḥammad's meaning in *Inferno* 28. His punishment among the sowers of scandal and schism has been unanimously interpreted by medieval and modern commentators as due to the schism he produced within Christianity. His sin would be to have led a consistent number of souls astray from salvation by concocting a powerful heresy (see Locatin 2002). However, this explanation does not justify Dante's choice of not placing him in the 6<sup>th</sup> circle of Hell where the heresiarchs are condemned along with their followers (*Inferno* 9, 106-11, 15), but in the 9<sup>th</sup> bolgia of the 8<sup>th</sup> circle, where people who caused social disunity are found. On the other hand, if we consider schism as a technical term used in ecclesiastical language to define an aberrant doctrine that would not necessarily turn into heresy (e.g. *STh* 2, 2, q. 39), we should also place scandal in the same context, thus as an instigation to sin, whatever this sin might be (*Ibid.*, 2, 2, q. 43). Therefore, Muḥammad would be the only sower of schism amidst a group of sowers of scandal. Nevertheless, the sin inspired by the latter is very well defined: Pier da Medicina was held responsible for the war between Guido da Polenta, Lord of Ravenna, and Malatesta da Verrucchio, Lord of Rimini, or for their rebellion against Bologna; Curio was accused of causing the civil war between Ceasar and Pompeius; Mosca de' Lamberti was considered as the originator of the feud between the Guelf and Ghibelline families in Florence; Bertran de Born was blamed for the rebellion of Henry the Young, Richard (the future King Richard I), Geoffrey, and their mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, against their

father, King Henry II of England.<sup>16</sup> Thus, their sins appear to consist of setting up cities against cities, citizens against citizens, families against families, sons against father, creating violent discord with political implications which involved a division into groups and factions belonging to the same social unity, and thus a schism in its literal sense. If Muḥammad's sin is to be considered in the same way, it would mean that Dante considered Muslims as belonging to the same unity, namely Christendom, along with Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Armenian Christians, and so forth. This vision, though, does not find any basis in the Medieval understanding of Islam. Even if Islam was considered as a heresy rooted in Christianity, Muslims, like Jews, were considered excluded from Christendom (Cohen 1999, pp. 147ff.), and even as its enemies, as also suggested by Dante himself in *Inferno* 27, 85-87.

A hint at which unity Dante might mean comes from the view of human society that he expressed in the *Monarchia*. There, in attempting to show the need for a temporal monarchy/empire, conceived as the government of a sole ruler over all humankind to ensure justice and happiness, he analyses the various forms of social aggregations. These are: family, neighbourhood, city, kingdom, empire. Family, whose purpose is to prepare its members to provide for their welfare, must be guided by the *paterfamilias* or the eldest member; neighbourhood, whose purpose is to support people and provide goods, must be guided by one appointed from the outside or by the community, since if the community fails to cooperate and contests the authority it is destroyed; the city, whose purpose is to be self-sufficient and provide for its welfare, must have one ruling body, either good or bad, otherwise social life and the city itself ceases to exist; the kingdom, whose purpose is the same as that of a city but with more opportunities to maintain peace, must have one king otherwise it will fall into ruin; thus humankind, whose purpose is happiness, must have one monarch or emperor (Chiesa-Tabaroni 2013, pp. 24-29). His rule must be extended to the whole world (*Ibid.*, pp. 42-43) so that he can ensure peace to all humankind (*Ibid.* p. 60-61). Moreover, the empire is compared to a body whose members exist as parts of the whole and in subordination to it (*Ibid.* pp. 14-15).

The very consequences of division within social aggregations, produced by insubordination to the respective rulers, along with the metaphor of the mutilation of body parts, are shown in the cases of scandals and schisms listed in *Inferno* 28. The rebellion of Henry II's sons against their father caused by Bertran de

<sup>16</sup> See the references mentioned in n. 5.

Born was insubordination to the *paterfamilias*, who in this case was also a king, and resulted in the division of a family and a kingdom; the person responsible —Betran de Born— is condemned to have his head cut off. The feud inspired by Mosca caused the subversion of family ties in Florence and the ruin of the whole city; the person responsible —Mosca— is condemned to have his hands cut off. The war instigated by Curio ruptured the harmony between two members of the government and brought about the fight of Romans against Romans; the person responsible —Curio— is condemned to have his tongue cut out. The enmity between Ravenna and Rimini, or Ravenna and Rimini against Bologna instigated by Pier da Medicina provoked a conflict between neighbouring cities; the person responsible —Pier da Medicina— is condemned to have his nose and ears cut off and his throat slayed.

In this social and political framework which we have proposed for the 9<sup>th</sup> *bolgia*, Muḥammad's punishment as being responsible for a religious schism would appear to be quite out of place. At the same time, the absence of a reference to the empire, the supreme form of human aggregation incorporating family, neighbourhood, city, and kingdom, would leave the picture incomplete. However, if we consider Dante's probable source on Muḥammad, we can find a solution to these apparent inconsistencies. We noted above that *Ali*'s relevance in the *Commedia* is due to William of Tyre's or James of Vitry's writings. Therefore, it seems logical to postulate that Muḥammad's biography, to which that of 'Alī is appended, was also known to Dante through these texts. Though the length of the two biographies differ, William's is very brief and James's lengthy and detailed, both point out that the most dramatic effect of Muḥammad's endeavour was the conquest of almost two-thirds of the world, namely Asia and Africa. Indeed, William writes that Muḥammad's successors conquered Syria, Egypt, Africa, and almost the whole world (Huygens 1986, vol. 1, pp. 105 and 108), while James states that his doctrine was spread through violence, fear and war among the Arabs and other Eastern peoples, namely Syrians, Medes, Persians, Egyptians and Ethiopians, up to Africa and Spain (Di Cesare 2011, p. 222). Thus, the conversion to Islam is presented by William and James as the consequence of the conquest and the establishment of a new political order. According to the socio-political view which Dante expressed in the *Monarchia*, the whole *ecumene* and humankind had to be united under one ruler and one political order, the empire. Therefore, from this perspective, the Islamic conquest effectively produced a schism within this supreme unity and Muḥammad could be held responsible for it. Not only did he lead astray many souls from the Church, but he deprived the empire of its subjects, territories, and authority, splitting its body into two parts. The religious

aspect of the schism was no doubt important, since the empire was conceived as Christian, but this was collateral to the political aspect. As exposed in the *Monarchia*, the Empire and Church had two separate spheres of action: the former had to lead humankind to happiness in this world, and the latter to happiness in the next. Only the establishment of universal peace and order through the empire could guarantee the achievement of salvation through the intervention of the Church (Chiesa-Tabarroni 2013, pp. 222-227). Thus, the political and territorial unity of the *ecumene* was a prerequisite for the religious mission.

This interpretation would privilege the socio-political meaning of Muḥammad's schism over the religious, and may be supported by a probable reference to it found in *Purgatorio* 32. There, the history of the relationship between the empire and the Church are allegorically represented in seven scenes. In the first, Dante sees an eagle attacking a chariot; in the second, he sees a fox jumping on the bottom of the chariot, but Beatrice drives it away; in the third, the eagle goes down again and leaves its feathers in the middle of the chariot; in the fourth, the earth opens up between the wheels of the chariot, and a dragon rips through the bottom of the chariot carrying part of it away with its tail; in the fifth, the feathers of the eagle completely cover the chariot; in the sixth, the chariot sprouts seven heads, three of which have two horns and the other four only one; in the seventh, a harlot sits on the chariot and kisses a giant standing beside her, then the giant beats the harlot and drags the chariot into a forest. This allegory, which heavily relies on the Book of Revelation, has been interpreted as referring to specific historical events concerning the empire, symbolised by the eagle, and the Church, symbolised by the chariot. The first would allude to the persecution perpetrated against Christians by the Roman Empire; the second to theological disputes and the rise of heresies (heretics are symbolized by foxes, theology by Beatrice); the third to the corruption of the Church originating from Constantine's donation; the fourth a schism also associated with Islam or the work of the Antichrist or Satan; the fifth to the interferences of the Carolingian emperors; the sixth, possibly, to the corruption of the clerics; and the seventh to the Avignonese captivity, which began in 1309.<sup>17</sup> Thus, according to this chronology, the appearance of the dragon should be set between the Constantinian and Carolingian periods, namely the time span of the fourth persecution against the Church included in Joachim of Fiore's septenarian scheme (Potestà 2004 and Rainini 2006). There,

<sup>17</sup> See the references mentioned in n. 5.

the fourth persecution is always ascribed to Muslims, and Muḥammad is identified as the fourth of the corresponding seven antichrists (Di Cesare 2012, and Patchovsky 2014). Moreover, Joachim contextually remarks on the territorial, and thus political, aspect of the Islamic conquest. He recalls the expansion of Muslims into the eastern and southern regions of the earth, their war against emperor Heraclius and the consequent return of the empire to the West, their conquest of Spain and incursions into France (Di Cesare 2012). Though it is difficult to determine whether Dante was directly influenced by Joachim's writings or those of his followers, the Joachite interpretation of history is evident in this chant (status quaestionis in Forni 2012). Therefore, the identification of the schism alluded to by the wreckage and mutilation of the chariot covered with the eagle's feathers might refer to the division of the empire perpetrated by Muslims. Indeed, the Constantinian and Carolingian periods not only correspond to the development of a temporal attitude by the Church, but also to a more intimate relationship between the empire and the Church. Constantine was the author of the Christianization of the empire and, though blaming the effects of his donation, Dante locates him in Paradise (*Paradiso* 20, 55-60) recalling that he transferred the seat of the empire to the East (also in *Paradiso* 6, 1-2). The Carolingians, on the other hand, restored the empire in the West when Charlemagne was crowned by Pope Leo III in 800, and Charlemagne is compared to an eagle which protects the Church under its wings in *Paradiso* 6, 94-96. We can also recall that the advance of Muslims into Europe was halted at Poitiers by Charles Martel, Charlemagne's grandfather, and later by Charlemagne himself at the Pyrenean border. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Islam, the Antichrist, Satan, and a dragon/snake, the explanations proposed for the dragon in the *Commedia*, are connected to each other by Jacques of Vitry when he labels *Mahometus quasi alter antichristus et primogenitus Satane filius* (Di Cesare 2011, p. 222), and uses a verb referring to the movement of reptiles to express the spreading of his doctrine (*doctria enim eius pestifera serpens ut cancer; Ibid.*).

Thus, in the light of these arguments, Muḥammad cannot be considered a heresiarch, since his message and action caused the subversion of a providential socio-political order. Indeed, his sin appears to be the scandal and schism he provoked within the empire through his successors, namely the disruption of the harmonious and necessary unity of all humankind under one Christian ruler, the superior form of social aggregation. Consequently, 'Alī's sin could be identified as a further fragmentation of the imperial authority over its dominion, already jeopardized by Muḥammad, thus a schism and scandal "among heads".

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