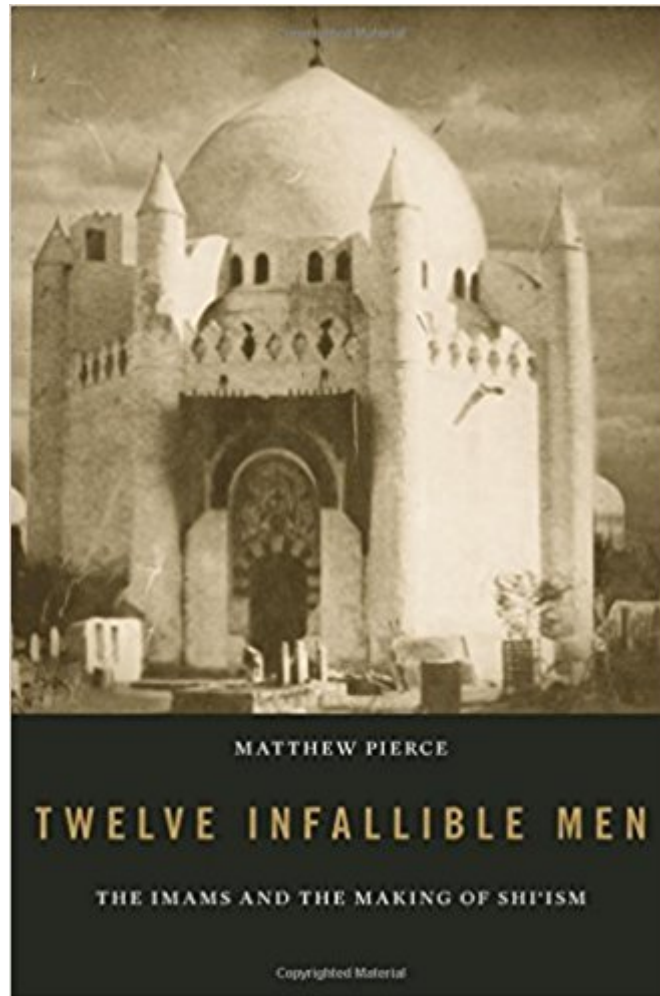




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Twelve Infallible Men: The Imams And The Making Of Shi'ism



Synopsis

A millennium ago, Baghdad was the capital of one of history's greatest civilizations. A new Islamic era was under way. Yet despite the profound cultural achievements, many Muslims felt their society had gone astray. Shi'a Muslims challenged the dominant narrative of Islamic success with stories of loss. Faithful Muslims have long debated whether Sunni caliphs or Shi'a imams were the true heirs of the Prophet Muhammad. More influential has been the way Muslim communities remembered those disputes through stories that influenced how to think and feel about them, Matthew Pierce argues. *Twelve Infallible Men* focuses on the role of narratives of the imams in the development of a distinct Shi'a identity. During the tenth century, at a critical juncture in Islamic history, a group of scholars began assembling definitive works containing accounts of the twelve imams' lives. These collective biographies constructed a sacred history, portraying the imams as strong, beautiful, learned, and pious. Miracles surrounded their birth, and they became miracle workers in turn, but were nevertheless betrayed and martyred by enemies. These biographies inspired and entertained, but more importantly they offered a meaningful narrative of history for Muslims who revered the imams. The accounts invoked shared memories and shaped communal responses and ritual practices of grieving. Mourning the imams' tragic fates helped nascent Shi'a communities resist the pressure to forget their story. The biographies of the imams became a focal point of cultural memory, inspiring Shi'a religious imagination for centuries to come.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An exemplary work on a hitherto understudied yet highly significant topic. Pierce succeeds

admirably in making these biographies speak to central concerns in the contemporary study of Shi'ism in particular and of Islam in general. He writes with ease and precision, and is especially effective at using collective memory to document the formation of communal boundaries and expressions of piety. This compact and accessible work will go a long way towards offering a robust understanding of a major religious phenomenon. (Ahmet Karamustafa, University of Maryland) A successful book that singles out a number of the most influential themes related to the portrayal of the imams and treats them with considerable insight. (Devin Stewart, Emory University)

Matthew Pierce is Assistant Professor of Religion at Centre College.

An erudite survey of salient themes found in Imami Shi'i hagiographical literature from the 10th to 12th century. Pierce provides an analysis of the key features of the Imam's collective biographies and demonstrates how these works eventually came to influence a unique Twelver Shi'i identity. There is an extensive notes section at the end which leads the reader to other interesting studies also available in English. This is not a book about the Imams per se, but a book about the "sacred biographies" of the Imams. Recommended for students of Shi'ism already familiar with the basics.

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