

Prolegomena: The Imamate tradition

Oman has a fundamentally split personality, reflected politically in the title used until 1970 by recent Al Bu Sa'idi rulers, Sultan of Muscat and Oman. On the macroscale this has developed out of its insularity, isolating it on the one hand from the rest of Arabia and opening it, on the other, to overseas expansion. Two traditions have resulted. The first is the 'interior' tradition of the closed, isolated, self-sufficient community, tribal in its organisation and governed by an elected Imam according to the ideology of Ibadi Islam. The origins of their ideology seem to go right back to the Khawarij, who resisted the political innovations that threatened the early Muslim community by subscribing to the principle 'no law but God's law'. The other is the 'Muscat' tradition embodied in the Sinbad the Sailor stories, or more prosaically in the nautical instructions of master mariners like Ibn Majid. This tradition sees Oman as a commercial, maritime power, whose merchants traded from one end of the monsoon world to the other, from China to the Sofala coast in East Africa, at least as far back as the eighth century A.D., and which periodically developed an overseas empire. Vestiges of such expansion left the state with an exclave of territory in Gwadar on the Pakistani Makran coast until 1958, and an East African community centred on Zanzibar, ruled by a collateral branch of the Al Bu Sa'id until evicted in 1964. Colonial expansion also added to the state the southern province of Dhofar, which, although territorially contiguous, belongs to a very different culture.

It is with the former tradition, less obviously exciting, largely ignored by the outside world and certainly less developed in the kinds of writing which reach the Omanis of today that this book is principally concerned. This old, autonomous tradition, developing from the core of the country, of necessity came to an end when the modern outside world forced itself on the interior. Which is not to say that the old tradition was isolationist. On the contrary: Omani society in the interior could not live without the outside world. But it was an autonomous society and its existence depended on the preservation of certain isolating conditions which kept relations with the exterior within the bounds of a set of historically well established patterns. As we shall see from the final part of this book, those conditions broke down at an increasing rate after the Second

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World War so that eventually the tribal-cum-Imamate system collapsed. Today, for the first time in the country's history, it is 'Muscat' which effectively rules Oman and the affairs of the interior have now become peripheral to Omani society and politics. So the tradition fostered is that of Sindbad the Sailor, the voyage of the Sohar (Severin 1982), which emphasises the cosmopolitan and commercial aspects of Omani history. The other tradition has become strange, even foreign to many Omanis. They have an awkwardness about it as though it is something they almost wish was never there: and yet they realise that the fostered tradition could not exist without it. The turbulent end of the Imamate is too recent for it to be discussed openly and the fact that all parties have a responsibility for the events of the 1950s and their bitter aftermath of the 1960s means that few really want to know what it was all about. Imams, like camels, *aflaj* and tribes, are the old way of life which most want to forget; like the man on the stairs who wasn't there, it will perhaps prove to be a non-thing that will go away if ignored. So the maritime image is promoted and Muscat society, which is becoming all Oman, turns its back on the interior tradition.

Research too has tended to follow the same lines. The archaeological investigations of the exciting third millennium civilisation are now being supplemented by discoveries of an equally important Iron Age culture. But there the effort usually stops and most accounts of interior Oman in modern published works tend to be an undigested and uncomprehended regurgitation of the two standard *siras*, which were translated into English in the last century, that is the historical chapters of the eighteenth century *Kashf al-Ghumma* and the mid-nineteenth century panegyric of the Al Bu Sa'id, the *Imams and Seyyids of Oman*, by Ibn Ruzayq. Such lack of research has left the stereotyped impression that the interior of the country was little more than a tribal, quasi-civilised backwater for the last two thousand years and all that was interesting happened on the coast. To the credit of the present government, it has made considerable efforts to collect manuscripts from the interior and the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture has a vigorous programme of publication. But the choice of texts falls mainly on the religious treatises and this without the historical context is of limited interest to modern scholarship. Names like Jabir b. Zayd, A. Sa'id al-Kudami or the *Musannaf* are therefore not completely strange to the better educated Omani, but they are little more than names. Not perhaps surprising, for if one is to pick up one of these old treatises it will almost inevitably turn out to be some sort of religious polemic or an *exposé* of what, in the final analysis, seems to be pretty standard Islamic law. And once one has waded through the *topoi* of orthodoxy the potentially interesting parts prove contextually hidden by such presentations as 'according to Abu Muhammad', or 'Abu 'Abdullah says'; who on earth is or was A. Muhammad or A. 'Abdullah? And if all one can discover is that A. Muhammad 'Abdullah b. Muhammad of

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Bahla, sometimes known as Ibn Baraka, lived in the late fourth/tenth century, and A. 'Abdullah Muhammad b. Mahbub (d. 260/873) was the son of the last Basran 'Imam', one is not very much further advanced. What is interesting about these personalities in fact is that Ibn Baraka represents the extreme dogmatic approach which divided Oman into a Rustaq and Nizwa school and that the dominance of his Rustaq dogma, in reality, legitimised Yahmad tribal hegemony and spelt the end of Ibadism in northern Oman, as too in the Hadramawt. The resulting decline of Imamate authority was to pave the way for almost half a millennium of non-Imamate Nabahina rule. A. 'Abdullah, on the other hand, represents the other aspect of Ibadi tradition, that of moderation and pragmatism, the ability to adapt and accept new ideas, the antithesis of the harsh doctrinaire practitioners of the Rustaq policy of rigid adherence to extremist principles. He is the legal forebear to whom the Nizwa school looked for precedent to suspend judgement over past events and thereby reunite Oman in the terrible aftermath of the civil war which brought the First Imamate to an end. A. 'Abdullah's own background, as one who had been brought up in the heyday of doctrinal disputes in Iraq and then succeeded as spiritual guide to the whole Ibadi community from the Maghrib to the Mashriq, helps explain his reconciliatory approach and his reaction to the 'primitiveness' of the interior ulema who tried to have him thrown out for 'heresy' when he came to live in Oman. In the end he had his way and the moderate Imam he managed to have elected eventually appointed him *qadi* of Suhar (Sohar), then Oman's great international port. Recognising the need for the coexistence of different patterns of life in an international world, A. 'Abdullah developed the basic commercial laws of Omani foreign trade observed by the Imamate from then on, laws which regulated such modern sounding problems as double taxation, overseas residence, transit goods, reciprocal trading rights, copper concessions, and so on. A. 'Abdullah Muhammad b. Mahbub is as much to do with the maritime tradition of 'Oman' as the sailors who took the ships of Suhar to Ceylon and perhaps even China.

All this, of course, remains ancient history. Unless one also begins to realise that the structure of the autonomous Omani state, right down to the mid-twentieth century, was largely based on constitutional forms and institutional practices that were moulded by the disputes of that period. For it was then that the tradition of universal Islam with its ideological concept of Imamate legitimacy began to find a sustainable constitutional shape and a practical form of law that harmonised with another ancient, universal code, that of the tribe. That tribal organisation had also undergone major transformation by that time, largely as a result of sedentarisation and the Arab migrants' adaptation to the needs of a village society based on the *falaj* irrigation system. So in certain respects the tribal and Ibadi codes evolved together and Omani history seems to

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have established a form in which the patterns of geographical, tribal and political-religious association developed the dynamics of what I have termed the Imamate cycle (see fig. 1).

This apparent repetitiveness of tribal manoeuvring interacting with an Imamate system that always declined into dynastic power, but equally inevitably re-emerged as the national ideology reuniting the state after the Omanis 'had quaffed the draught of terror . . . which encompassed religion, property, and life' as the result of their 'soaring ambitions' (*Kashf* tr. Ross, 154-5), seems to form the essence of Omani history. It poses fundamental problems for the

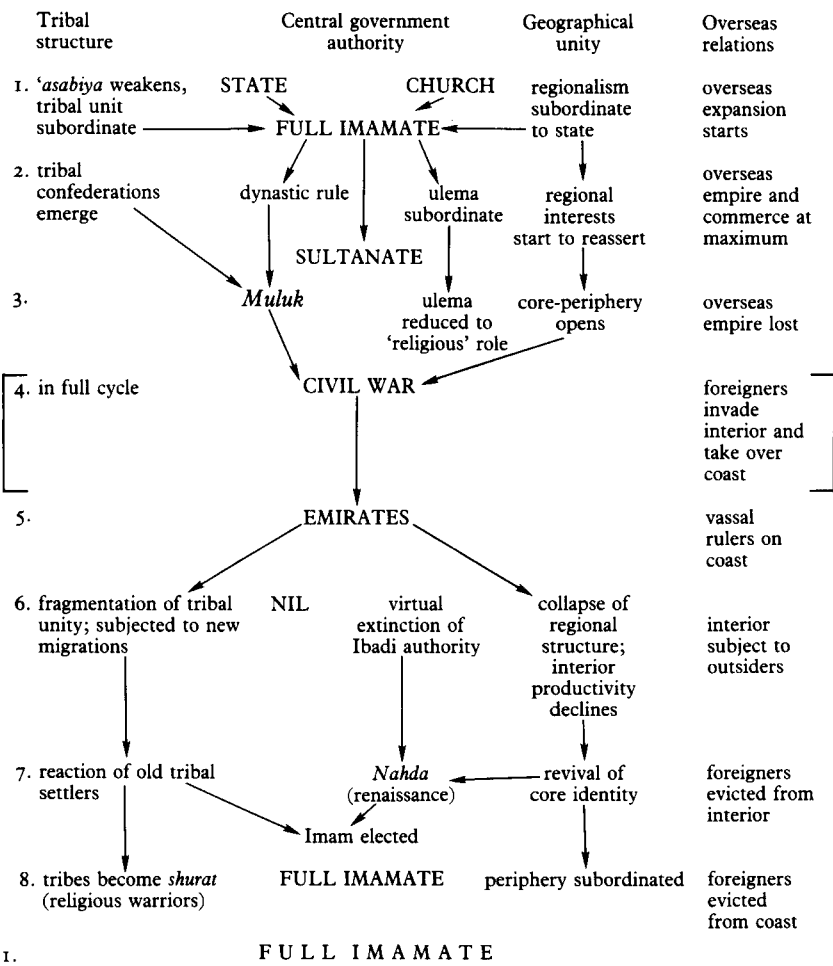


Figure 1 The Imamate cycle

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historian. Cycles and timeless history are very largely academic abstractions when applied to our own society. Whilst we might pursue the notion of an apparent fixed institution or tradition, we know that in reality it is always evolving. The configuration of the known world alters, its demographic patterns expand or contract and are continuously modified by migration and technological changes. Depending on where one starts, the change is slow or fast, but it is ceaseless and cumulative, so that even the most 'traditional' areas accelerate towards some form of 'revolution' with the progress of time. And just as the good historian looks askance at the 'timeless countryside' and is highly mistrustful of repetition, so he naturally presumes that timeless history in a place like Oman must be largely due to the eye of the beholder, a product of European romanticism or of failure to understand the nature of local historiography: or else it is a super-model, a gross deterministic simplification of the Wittfogel ilk. Whatever, it will prove to be the product of inadequate information or research. Detailed investigation will automatically break down these simple structures, the neat dichotomies will disappear and the cycles will be shown to be fictive; a real history will emerge, real by its very complexity, even though not necessarily devoid of evolutionary pattern. Just as the maritime tradition has taken on a fictive form in the Sindbad stories, so probably has the Imamate developed images of a Golden Age and a repetitive history of attempts to restore it. And so it has. But the fact remains that the forms of government which operate in Oman, whether those of Imam, Sultan, *Amir* or *tamima* (shaikh of a major tribal grouping), are operating within an antique social and religious structure that is fixed within a more or less rigid geographical and economic framework, fixed by insularity, by an ancient settlement pattern and by a long established population structure little altered (in the core) by migration. As we shall see in the opening chapters, economic and political contact with the outside world is essential to Omani society, but that of itself provides no impetus towards 'development'. There is no transformation of the land, no urbanisation, no evolution of class structures, no creation of institutions. 'Oman' is a sociological *cul de sac* and change from the outside world is absorbed by 'Muscat'; tribal and constitutional systems are structured to ensure that evolutionary changes are rejected by the tribesmen when they reach a certain stage of impact. The Imamate thus takes on an unchanging form, the minimal state apparatus that a tribal order is able to develop to maintain some form of regional cohesiveness and thus permit the exploitation of its resources to maintain subsistence.

Here a word of warning must be inserted anticipating later discussion: to note that the local resources of Oman are inadequate to support its society. Not only is a certain minimum exchange with the outside world essential by reason of its specialisations, but some activity overseas appears to be basic, even for subsistence. As we shall see in chapter 2, the divide between 'Muscat' and

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'Oman', between coast and interior, is artificial. 'Oman' has never been a closed space, and the nearest it ever came to being so was in the twentieth century Imamate; hence part of the peculiarities of that period. On the other hand, the economic and political organisation of the region has developed into two subsystems so that overseas operations are basically subordinated to maintaining autarky in the core of the state. 'Feedback loops' maintain 'homeostasis' and the goal of the system as a whole may be identified as the self-perpetuation of the autonomous tribal-Islamic community within the geographical space of Oman. So it will be seen that even though isolation is the key to maintaining the Omani Imamate-tribal tradition, this means at once both more and less than separation from outsiders and their customs. It is not just conservatism. New technologies, for example, may be introduced and absorbed, as was the case with new crops in Ya'ariba times. But modifications to the agricultural system can only be accepted so long as there is no development of a class in control of the land. So it is at the institutional level that innovation is rejected, by violence, if necessary. The same thing happens at the level of the Imamate itself, which at an institutional level largely represents a religious translation of the tribal tradition, a tradition rooted in decentralised power. Tribalism certainly contains notions of the nation-state idea, with the theory of clan genealogy explaining a sense of *gens*, a nation or people, and the tribe itself corresponding with the state, controlling territory or *dar* through a shaikhly government. But of itself the tribe cannot progress beyond a certain point in state formation. The shaikh's centralising authority is based on a real or fictive kinship relationship with those he governs, and although his position is partly hereditary and partly elective by his peers, he enjoys no stable institutional power and his position depends greatly on his personal ability; he has no hierarchy of officials specialising in the functions of government on which to lean and his authority is only enforceable through his leading fellow 'clansmen'. The tribe can only develop into the 'semi-state' and has no inherent potential for progressing in the direction of full statehood (Runciman 1982). That is the difference between what Ibn Khaldun called *badw* and the urban-based elite structure of full civilisation, *hadar*. Tribalism fights centralisation in all its forms – geographic, economic and political. In doing so it operates its own redistributive system, spreading population, power and wealth so that centres never become more than semi-cities, large settlements rather than nodes in the urban hierarchy of a state. In all this it is reinforced by the Ibadi fundamentalist ethic which itself originated in opposition to the centralisation of power in the early Islamic empire. Of course that had to be modified when the Ibadis themselves formed 'states', but it was a minimal shift in position. Their apparatus of statehood was minimalist also, aimed only at a gradualistic progression towards re-establishing the true Islamic state founded by the Prophet. The institutions Ibadism put in place in Oman, therefore, were too weak to force basic change in the social system so that

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government authority remained largely decentralised and dependent on the tribes. Above all, its power to collect revenue was absolutely controlled by the Islamic constitution and the tribesmen ensured that it never exceeded this power, at least at home. Together, Ibadism and tribalism prevented the development of capital, whether in the form of a capital in an urban hierarchy, which itself would have elicited changes in the agricultural production system (cf. for example the difference between the expansion of cultivation incited in its hinterland by the internationalisation of Suhar in the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D. with the static or declining agricultural area of the Imamate capital of Nizwa), or of a capitalisation of the land production system, or through the development of a market economy, or through a centralised bureaucracy. Any attempts to centralise power automatically triggered off resistance in the two institutional frameworks which governed the social and political system of interior Oman. And so the 'Imamate cycle' might exhibit periods of expansion or contraction but never enough change to explode or collapse the basic socio-political order. Hence apparent 'timelessness' in Omani history and also 'closure' of the social 'system'.

Yet the appearance is also deceptive, for there is a changelessness which does indeed turn out to be part of Omani historiography. For a good Muslim, history has a different conceptual framework from our own, for it has a moment of perfection: pre-Islamic history is *jahiliya*, the time of ignorance before the revelation, whilst post-Islamic history is precisely that, events that have led, more or less, to a divergence from the Islamic state which the Prophet created. If therefore one is writing about the Imamate, and that is the only subject worthy of record since it is the story of the attempt to maintain the Prophet's community, then there must be an image portrayed and its great periods made to conform to the Golden Age of the original Muslim state. So a stereotype in which real situations are reduced to a series of fixed patterns is created, and all matters irrelevant to the study of the central theme of just government rigorously excluded. For this reason Omani history appears incredibly parochial. Any interaction with the outside world is omitted and any foreign rule impinging on the Imamate is characterised under the term *jababira*. Since virtually all Omani primary sources are *shari'a* studies of some sort, ideal types are naturally emphasised and practices rationalised. Only in the details of judgements in the major legal compilations do the realities of everyday life emerge and occasionally record information about Oman's relationships with foreigners. In the standardised accounts such matters are reduced to a set of fixed situations covered by religious terminology. This normalisation parallels the way the originality of Ibadi law was itself eventually made to conform to the norms of Sunni 'orthodoxy' (J. C. Wilkinson 1985): in the same way the theory of the Imamate itself became based on a sort of abstraction from Ibadi history that determined both its pedigree and constitutional form.

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The isolation of the interior, that in some measure exists as part of the socio-political system, is thus enhanced and the appearance of a totally unchanged culture artificially emphasised. Tribal politics are similarly stereotyped whilst local leaders are basically classified into 'baddies' (*ahl al-baghi*) or 'goodies' (*ahl al-fadl*); biographies are only given of these latter and in them the qualities deriving from '*ilm*', true Islamic wisdom, are emphasised and *imara*, or temporal authority, considered as subordinate to it. Nowhere is this better displayed than in the major historical work essential for studying the history of the Imamate, the *Tuhfat al-A'yan* (abbreviated in this book *Tuhfa*), completed by 'Abdullah b. Humayd al-Salimi just before the restoring of the Imamate in 1913. This is a remarkable work of scholarship, but it should always be remembered that it was written with the express purpose of inspiring the true believers to revive the Imamate. And the subsequent history of the Imamate, as recorded by his son, Muhammad (Shayba) b. 'Abdullah, in the *Nahdat al-A'yan* (abbreviated *Nahda*), continues the same tradition down to the death of the Imam Muhammad b. 'Abdullah al-Khalili in 1954. So key figures like Sulayman b. Himyar, 'Isa b. Salih al-Harithi as well as the Imam himself appear to be fitting certain 'niches' in the political ecology of Oman. They were; but the role they were playing also extended considerably beyond the isolated system portrayed by the younger al-Salimi and their real political behaviour has to be read between his lines.

With the death of the Imam Muhammad b. 'Abdullah al-Khalili it might be said that the old autonomous tradition came to an end. Certainly there is a brusque change under his successor, Ghalib b. 'Ali al-Hina'i. But the changes which came to a climax in the painful events of 1954–5 were a product of what went before and the old Imamate system only survived so long as it did because Muhammad b. 'Abdullah al-Khalili continued to live. For almost two decades of fragile health the outside world was kept at bay, partly by his own xenophobia and strict rule, partly by his informal understanding with the Sultan over the accommodation reached at Sib in 1920, and partly by the British who considered him as officially subordinate to the Sultan and therefore under their 'protection'. So, for once, the Imamate really was isolated. But just as this was a peculiarity of the time so too was the new political ambience in south-east Arabia. Inevitably the intrusion of the oil companies and the ambitions of the emerging Saudi Arabian state were bound to come into conflict with the reactionary aims of the old guard in Oman – British, Sultan and Imam. The political crisis came in 1952 when the Saudis entered the Buraimi oasis and exploded when the Imam Muhammad b. 'Abdullah al-Khalili died in May 1954. By the end of the following year the Saudis were out of northern Oman and the Imamate was a thing of the past.

Underlying this rapid demise of the Imamate, however, was the fact that the twentieth century Imamate was from the start an anomaly in the region's

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history. The Imamate al-Salimi and others established in 1913 was a throw-back to an imagined past. The fact that its leaders fostered an institutional form that was based on an ideological abstraction of religious practices and not the real traditions of Oman not only explains why, when the last of the old guard died, there was no real political substance to perpetuate this form of statehood, but also why it is treated with unease by Omanis today. There is a certain feeling that the cause the old Imam was trying to preserve was betrayed by his followers. The development of such a mystique could prove highly dangerous if manipulated by Islamic fundamentalists. It is thus useful to see the Imamate tradition in some historic perspective right from the beginning of this study, for whilst much of what is said here will be treated more extensively in the course of this book, some initial knowledge of the outline of Imamate history is required before embarking on detailed study.

Outline of Imamate history

In reality the Imamate has always been a more or less dynastic institution, the religious legitimisation of a clan or family seeking to hold a tribal state together. As we shall see in chapter 9, there have effectively been only five dynasties of any durable importance, the Julanda, the Yahmad–Kharus, the Nabahina, the Ya‘ariba and the Al Bu Sa‘id. So the first Imam, who ruled briefly towards the middle of the second/eighth century, was a member of the Julanda, a family whose shaikhly position (*dhu‘l-imama*) as leaders of the ‘Yamani’ Shanu‘ah Azd confederation had been vested with more formal temporal power (*dhu‘l-taj*) when appointed as **Julanda** of the Arab tribes of the Sasanid province of Mazun in pre-Islamic times. A half century after this initial attempt to establish an Ibadi Imamate Julanda rule was finally undermined by the Ibadi ulema playing on tribal rivalries, and it was on another branch of that same Shanu‘ah confederation, the **Yahmad** (whose clans and descendants include the Kharus and Khalilis) that Imamate power was conferred (Table 1). Underlying this new constitution was an informal division of authority which gave the actual choice of Imam to the ulema of the B. Sama, the major ‘Nizari’ tribe of the interior, and it became the rule that the Imam lived in Nizwa and not in his tribal homeland of the Rustaq area. This arrangement also had very important geographical implications, for it united the dominant clans of the cismontane regions, the Jawf (Nizwa region), Sirr (‘Ibri area) and Tuwam (Buraimi), with the transmontane region of the Ghadaf (Rustaq area) which dominated the Batina coast. It was the breakdown of this old informal distribution of power with growing dynastic-cum-tribal rivalry over control of the expanding economic base, engendered by overseas trade, that led to the civil war which brought to an end the hundred year ‘Golden Age’ of the **First Imamate** at the end of the third/ninth century. Tribally it was portrayed as ‘Yaman’ *versus* ‘Nizar’; in reality it

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Table 1. *The first Imams*

1.	al-Julanda b. Mas'ud (c. 131–c. 133/748–50)
	—Interregnum—
2.	Muhammad b. 'Abdullah b. A. 'Affan al-Yahmadi (Ibn A. 'Affan) (Fajhi?) c. 177–9/793–5. Removed from office
	Main Imams of First Imamate
3.	al-Warith b. Ka'b (Kharusi) 179 (officially)–192/795–808
4.	Ghassan b. 'Abdullah (Fajhi) 192–207 (208?)/808–23
5.	'Abd al-Malik b. Humayd (B. 'Ali Azd) 207 (208?)-26/823–41
6.	Muhanna b. Jayfar (Fajhi) 226–37/841–51
7.	al-Salt b. Malik (Kharusi) 237–(deposed)272/851–86, replaced by Musa b. Musa with
8.	Rashid b. al-Nazr (Fajhi) 272–(deposed)277/886–90, replaced by Musa b. Musa with
9.	'Azzan b. Tamim (Kharusi) 277–80/890–3, killed by Caliphate invading force in civil war

N.B. Fajh and Kharus are Yahmad Shanu'ah Azd.

was core versus periphery. At almost exactly the same time the only other major Ibadi Imamate, that of Tahert, was similarly collapsing. But whereas the **Rustamid** dynasty was the first and last full Ibadi Imamate in North Africa, the strong sense of regional identity amongst the tribes of the Omani mountain heartland began to reassert itself through appeal to the Ibadi Imamate tradition during the fifth/eleventh century, so that eventually the Mukramids, vassal rulers of the Buyids (Buwayhids) were driven out of the great seaport of Suhar and the country briefly reunited. But this **Second Imamate** was founded on a narrow tribal base, with the Yahmad leaders now trying to reinforce their dynastic legitimacy in terms of the dogma of the Rustaq school which excommunicated the followers of those who had been responsible for deposing the Imam al-Salt b. Malik al-Kharusi in 272/886, the act that had sparked off civil war a century and a half before. This period of the rise of the Rustaq school legitimising the Yahmad–Kharus Imams, and of Omani 'nationalism' seeking identity through religious ideology, led to some interesting developments of Ibadism itself. This is the period when Ibadi history was really formalised in the concept of a teacher line carrying the true faith (*haml al-'ilm*) from its founding forebears (Ibn 'Abbas and A. Sha'tha Jabir b. Zayd), and trying to make manifest (*zuhur*) the true *imama*; as the political situation permitted, so Imams of corresponding capacities and qualifications (*shari, difa'i, da'if* Imams) were elected (*'aqd*). Parallel with this development of the theory of the Imamate was that of a formal legal and theological school (*madhhab*), a process which even went to the extremes of producing its own *hadith* collection. It was thus a period of great scholarship, a scholarship which brought into existence the essential pieces upon which was based the *salafiya* (return to origins) movement that was to develop in mutual exchanges between the surviving Ibadi communities of North Africa (Mzab, Jabal Nafusa and Jerba) and Oman from the end of the eighteenth century.