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Bankers and Politics: The Network of Shi‘i Moneychangers in Eighth-Ninth Century Kufa and their Role in the Shi‘i Community

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Abstract

The article studies the network of moneychangers in the Shi‘i community of Kufa during the eighth-ninth centuries. It argues that apart from exchanging currencies, some of these moneychangers acted as financial agents for the imams, collecting funds from their following, receiving donations on their behalf, and with the collected money regulating the internal affairs of the Kufan Shi‘i community. By looking at the history of the Shi‘i community and, still broader, of the region as a whole, the article seeks to explain why the group of moneychangers became important among the Kufan Shi‘is, especially during Ja‘far al-Sadeq’s time and later, while being virtually insignificant at earlier periods. The article combines a quantitative study of biographical dictionaries with evidence found in literary accounts.

Keywords

moneychangers – *sayrafi* – quantitative study – biographical dictionaries – Shi‘ism, Kufa

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Introduction

The sixth Shi'i Imam Ja'far al-Sādeq (d. 765) was once approached by some of his followers who complained to him that a certain Mofazzal b. 'Omar Jo'fi was mixing with thugs and wine drinkers, and urged the imam to stop him. Known by the nickname 'Sayrafi', i.e. moneychanger, Mofazzal was well known among the Kufan Shi'is and much appreciated by Ja'far and by his son Imam Musā Kāzem (d. 799). Upon hearing the accusers, Ja'far wrote a letter, sealed it, and asked them to deliver it to him. They brought the letter to Mofazzal, and when he opened the seal and read it, instead of the imam's rebuke he found a request to purchase for the imam several things. When Mofazzal showed the accusers the imam's request, they told him that what he was asking for was too much for them to pay. Mofazzal then summoned his friends, who in no time collected the needed sum (Kashshi, 326-27).

The protagonist of this *hadith* is but one of the numerous people with the occupational name 'Sayrafi' (i.e. moneychanger, pl. *sayārefa*) that appear in biographical dictionaries, both Shi'i and Sunni. Exchanging money was among the many trades practiced in Kufa, and along with 'Sayrafi', biographical dictionaries abound in names such as 'Khayyāt' (tailor), 'Hazzā' (cobbler), 'Sammān' (seller of oil), 'Khashshāb' (seller of wood), etc. (Najāshi I: 130, I: 143, et passim; Schatzmiller 1994, 101 ff.).¹ Moneychangers were an integral part of the economy of the town, making profit by exchanging high value currency for petty coins, gold for silver and vice versa, but also lending money and providing other financial services (Heidemann, 650; Kolayni, V: 244-52; Tusi 1401/1981, VII: 99-117; Ebn Bābuya III: 183-86).² As was the case with other professions, the *sayārefa* had their own neighborhood that was situated in the southwestern part of the town, in the quarter of Banu Jazima (Djaït 1986, 276-77; Massignon III: 49; Balāzori, 285).

In the forthcoming pages I will argue that apart from being a mere episode from Shi'i communal life of the eighth century, the above anecdote provides a window into the inner workings of the imams' collection and management of their finances through a network of moneychangers that emerged in Kufa during the Imamate of Ja'far al-Sādeq, and continued under subsequent imams. I will demonstrate that apart from exchanging currencies, these moneychangers acted as the imams' financial agents, whose function was to collect

¹ For a list of the crafts practiced in the Middle East in the first centuries of Islam by converts to Islam, see Judah, 167-69.

² Cf. also Duri, 192; Lindsay, 113; for the functions and practices of moneychangers who lived in Egypt and North Africa, see Goitein I:234 ff.

funds from the following of the imams, to receive donations on their behalf, and with the collected money to regulate the internal affairs of the Kufan Shi'is as the imams' representatives.³ After discussing the role of these money-changers, I will seek to explain why they became important among the Kufan Shi'is, especially during Ja'far's time and later, while being virtually insignificant during earlier periods.

The sources documenting the activities of the Kufan Shi'i *sayārefa* are of two main types. Along with several brief reports in historical works, one finds a number of *hadīth* in Shi'i compilations describing events from individual moneychangers' lives. An unexpectedly rich material is found in Shi'i biographical dictionaries, *rejāl* works.⁴ Although these often supply a bare minimum of information about the individuals under scrutiny, they provide an invaluable window into the distribution of men with the name 'Sayrafi' over time and space. This, combined with literary accounts about the lives of individual moneychangers, reveals much valuable insight into the time and place of their activities, and about their relation to the imams. (For reasons outlined below, I contend that when a person was called 'Sayrafi' in a biographical dictionary, he most likely was one.)

In the historiography of the Islamic Middle East the use of biographical dictionaries in what is called 'quantitative history' has long been established. Described briefly, it is based on analyzing a large number of entries on individuals found in one or more such dictionaries, and on deriving conclusions from broad patterns emerging from such analysis. While these entries mostly contain hardly enough information to pin down an individual's place of birth, occupation, and date of death, the study of a large enough number of them may yield patterns that are highly suggestive of the religious, social, and economic processes in the region and period covered by the dictionary. And when tested against other types of evidence, such as literary sources, the results of this form of research may be truly impressive.

This method has afforded scholars what conventional analyses of medieval literary sources do not usually allow: to discern broad patterns of continuity and change over time and space. Naturally, it has been extensively used during the last several decades to study a variety of subjects, such as the secular

³ Louis Massignon (49–50) has briefly noted this role of Kufan moneychangers during Ja'far's time, calling them "secret bankers" and "receivers of funds."

⁴ For a brief note on Shi'i biographical dictionaries, see al-Qadi 1995, 109–11; see also Amoretti; Bottini. For Sunni books of *rejāl*, see, e.g. Juynboll 1983, chapters 4 and 5; id. "Ridjāl"; al-Qadi 2006, 23–75.

occupations of Muslim scholars, conversion to Islam, economy and labor, and the geographic distribution of Muslim jurists in the medieval Middle East.⁵

Naturally, too, it has had its critics. One of the major shortcomings that has been pointed out is that the biographical dictionaries used in such studies are necessarily limited to certain segments of the population, and extrapolating their evidence to entire regions is fraught with the danger of over-generalizing (Lapidus 1981; Bulliet 1996; Morony 1998; Humphreys, 282-83).⁶ The second caveat has been the use of occupational and geographic names as determinants of the real occupations and locations (or birthplaces) of individuals under study. It has been argued that when someone is called ‘Baghdādi’ or ‘Sammān’, he need not have been from Baghdad or made a living selling oil, but could have inherited these names from his father (Bulliet 1979, 3; Cohen, 23-25). Given these limitations of the quantitative method, then, when left untested against other (e.g. literary) evidence, its findings are bound to remain highly hypothetical; and even when additionally tested, failure to situate these findings in a broader historical context may leave the emerging patterns of change and continuity largely unexplained.⁷

Apart from being a study in the history of Shi‘ism in the eighth-ninth centuries, then, this paper is an attempt to test the validity of the quantitative method without falling into the above pitfalls. A detailed discussion of how I have tried to avoid these hazards will follow in the next section. Briefly stated, this has in large part been achieved, first, due to the very nature of the sources I have used and due to the narrow focus of this paper. Further, I have tried to avoid the second pitfall by relying, in my argumentation, on literary sources almost as heavily as on the patterns of the distribution of ‘Sayrafis’. Finally, in an attempt to make the picture more complete, I have concluded the paper by trying to situate those moneychangers in the broader context of the history of Shi‘ism and extending it to the entire region.

Quantitative Evidence

Let us first look at the evidence supplied by biographical dictionaries. The examination of all of the early Shi‘i books of *rejāl*, namely, Tusi’s *Rejāl*, Najāshi’s

5 Some of the best known works using the quantitative method are Cohen; Bulliet 1979; Bulliet 2009; Bernards and Nawas; Shatzmiller 1991; for a critical survey of several other works that use this method, see Humphreys, 205-08.

6 Bulliet himself warns of a sectarian bias in his sources (1979, 13).

7 As in Bernards and Nawas.

Rejāl, Barqi's *Tabaqāt*, Kashshi's *Ekhtiyār*, and Ebn al-Ghazā'eri's *Rejāl*,⁸ shows that there was a disproportionately large distribution of people with the nickname 'Sayrafi' during the lifetime of the sixth Shi'i Imam Ja'far al-Sādeq (with several names overlapping with the lifetimes of his predecessor and his successor). Before Ja'far's time there are almost none, while a number of moneychangers are mentioned among the followers of imams who lived after Ja'far. The vast majority of these *sayārefa* are explicitly or implicitly said to have lived in Kufa.

As shown in the table below, out of the seventy four persons whose name in any of the mentioned biographical dictionaries contains the element 'Sayrafi', sixty one lived during the lifetime of, and had personal contact with, Ja'far al-Sādeq; just two are said to have lived under imamates prior to that of Ja'far, and eleven during those of Ja'far's successors.

*The number of moneychangers who personally knew the imams
(according to early Shi'i biographical dictionaries)*

Imam	Number of his contemporary <i>sayārefa</i> (out of 74)
The five imams before Ja'far	2
Ja'far al-Sādeq (alone or together with another imam)	61
The five imams after Ja'far	11

The pitfalls of using quantitative data from biographical dictionaries have been briefly addressed above. One is their necessarily limited scope, i.e. there is no guarantee that a biographical dictionary, however comprehensive, would include all the people of a category it claims to represent. The second pitfall is the reliance on occupational epithets as a source of information about the actual occupation of a person. Let me dwell on these two problems in more detail, and show why I think the evidence thus collected is nevertheless valid for the forgoing analysis.

⁸ Tusi's *Fehrest* and Ebn Shahrāshub's *Ma'ālem al-'olamā'* have not turned up any names of moneychangers that are not also found in the four mentioned works.

Firstly, I consider this evidence valid because one of the major ‘shortcomings’ of biographical dictionaries—their necessarily limited scope—, turns out to be an advantage in the case of my analysis. True, they do list only Shi‘is, almost exclusively ones who were in the environments of the imams and personally knew them, and mostly those who lived in Kufa.⁹ But this paper is likewise concerned only with Shi‘is, only ones from the imams’ environment, and only those who lived in Kufa. This concentration of the material in the area with which the paper is concerned (not just geographically and temporally, but also socially), allows us to avoid undue generalizations.

The sectarian identity of the individuals listed, their place, and their relation to the contemporary imams, is easy to establish. All of them can safely be assumed to have been Shi‘i since the aforementioned *rejāl* works recorded exclusively the names of Shi‘is.¹⁰ Furthermore, most of the people bear the geographical name ‘Kufi’ (i.e. Kufan), or are said to have lived in that town. And while the value of geographic names as accurate indicators of a person’s location or birthplace has been doubted, literary accounts do confirm that many of these individuals were Kufan. Finally, personal acquaintance with an imam is even more easily verifiable. In some cases this is stated directly, for instance by saying that such and such narrated *hadīth* from (*rawā ‘an*) one of the imams, as Najāšī often does in his *rejāl*. In others it becomes apparent in a situation where both that person and the imam are present, as in Kashshī’s *Ekhtiyār* (408–9). Finally, it is alluded to or implied by the very structure of the dictionary, as in Tusi’s and Barqī’s works.¹¹

One more argument in favor of the acceptability of the data provided by biographical dictionaries should be made. While these works are likely to contain only a small sample of the people from the environment of the imams, let alone the Shi‘i population of Kufa in general, still, there is no reason why the disproportionately large number of *sayārefa* listed among Ja‘far al-Sādeq’s followers—and to a lesser extent among the followers of later imams—should not be suggestive of the real ratio of moneychangers in their circles. This is because from the point of view of one’s economic occupation, the sampling of names in all the examined works is random; i.e., in compiling a dictionary, the

⁹ This is precisely why the *sayārefa* mentioned in Cohen, 32–33, 36–37 are not relevant for this study despite that he lists many more people with this occupational name.

¹⁰ Save for some characters from early Islamic times, such as Salmān Fāresī or Jāber b. ‘Abd Allāh Ansārī (Kashshī, 6 ff., 40 ff.); but even they made it into these works because they were highly regarded by Shi‘is. On some of the principles of inclusion in Shi‘i biographical works, see Qadi 1995, 110–11; Bottini.

¹¹ Tusi also states this directly in the introduction to his *Rejāl* (Tusi 1381/1961, 2).

compiler was not guided by the people's occupation but by their acquaintance with the imam (and perhaps by their position among the Shi'is), recording people's names regardless of their occupation. True, there may not have necessarily been more moneychangers among Kufan Shi'is during Ja'far's time than during the time of earlier imams. However, if inclusion in the biographical dictionaries was based on the criterion of the person narrating *hadith* from the imam, the disproportionately larger number of moneychangers among the followers of Ja'far does indicate that there were more of them in his environment than among the followers of earlier imams.

The same logic does not, however, apply to followers of later imams. In this case, the disparity between numbers of *sayārefā* among Ja'far's followers as opposed to followers of later imams (more than fivefold) can simply be explained through the overall number of the names of followers listed for each imam. The sources from which the names of moneychangers are culled contain more names of Ja'far's contemporaries than of any other imam—and more than the contemporaries of all other imams taken together. The most telling in this respect is Tusi's *Fehrest*,¹² which lists more names than each of the other two. Here, the section about Ja'far's narrators contains more than three times the number of names found in sections about the remaining five imams—Ja'far's narrators are 3213, while those of the subsequent imams only 943. This could indicate that the larger distribution of moneychangers among Ja'far's narrators, as opposed to narrators of later imams, is simply a matter of ratio: i.e. the moneychangers among his followers are more numerous only because the overall number of his listed followers is bigger. Barqi's *Tabaqat* provides a slightly different ratio but nevertheless upholds the trend; more names, more 'Sayrafis' among them. Here, Ja'far's narrators are more than twice more numerous than the narrators of his successors, 790 as opposed to 359.

In the same vein, one might argue that the prevalence of moneychangers among Ja'far's contemporaries does not reflect their distribution in time, but is simply the result of a larger number of followers recorded for Ja'far than for any other imam. However, while the prevalence of *sayārefā* among Ja'far's followers as opposed to followers of later imams is a matter of ratio (more names—more moneychangers), their virtual absence among earlier imams' followers is not; the number of their overall followers is not only no smaller than that of the

¹² This work has not only supplied most of the names of *sayārefā*, but is the most comprehensive of the early Shi'i *rejāl* works in general. 'Abd al-Hosayn Shabestari has collected a comprehensive list of people who personally met, or narrated from, Ja'far, where their number is 3759, more than Tusi's only by 500, which indicates that Tusi's *Rejāl* contains most of the names found in other sources.

followers of the later imams, but in some works is even larger. In Tusi's *Rejāl*, the number of the companions of the imams who preceded Ja'far is almost one and a half times the number of those of his successors (1379 vs. 943); while in Barqi's *Tabaqāt* it is almost equal (345 vs. 359). Still, the number of moneychangers among the former is more than five times smaller than among the latter (and truly insignificant compared to Ja'far's and the later imams' taken together, 72 vs. 2). This is an indication that their number peaked under Ja'far al-Sadeq, and probably remained substantial during subsequent imamates. Literary evidence confirms this, providing further details about what their actual role might have been in Ja'far's regime.

The second methodological caveat, the unreliability of naming patterns, has been offset by the following considerations. While a person bearing an occupational name could have inherited it from his father or grandfather without himself engaging in the trade, this still likely reflects the economic background of his family (Bulliet 2009, 3; Cohen, 24). Secondly, even if some of the *sayārefa* from an imam's environment did not themselves engage in the trade but inherited their names from their fathers or grandfathers, this still means that there were many of them around in his time, even if removed by a generation or two, which but little disturbs the temporal pattern of their distribution. Most importantly, however, that many of the people with the occupational name 'Sayrafi' did in fact deal with money is well documented in literary accounts.

To sum up, the biographical dictionaries provide the following picture: moneychangers did not play any particular role in the Kufan Shi'i community before the Imamate of Ja'far al-Sādeq, but during his time they became very important for reasons outlined below. Moreover, during the time of subsequent imams, their importance probably persisted (although we have thinner evidence to demonstrate this). Why the *sayārefa* became important, especially from Ja'far's time on, will be discussed in the final section of the paper. Now let us turn to the role of individual moneychangers in Kufa.

Literary Evidence

The main source of information about the lives of individual moneychangers is Shi'i *hadīth*.¹³ And although its use as a historical source is not without problems—forgery for political and sectarian reasons being one of the most

¹³ Some of the Sunni biographical works have entries on several moneychangers mentioned in the Shi'i sources, but they do not add anything new (e.g. 'Asqalāni I: 408, II: 66, IV: 17–18, et passim).

common sources of its unreliability¹⁴—I contend that the details it furnishes about the activities of *sayārefa* are not forged and can largely be trusted. The reason is that there was no apparent advantage in forging such details, either from the perspective of a person's enemies, or his friends, as these details had no bearing on his image as a good or bad person (or Muslim).¹⁵ (In contrast, when there is a tradition where the imam curses someone, there is every reason to think that it is the creation of his enemies.) Secondly, when such a detail persists throughout numerous stories, it is more likely to be historically reliable.

The best known moneychanger in Ja'far al-Sādeq's and Musā al-Kāzem's regime was Mofazzal b. 'Omar Jo'fi, the alleged author of a number of apocryphal treatises.¹⁶ His biography, reconstructed from Shi'i traditions, provides the best illustration of the functions of the Kufan moneychangers, the services they rendered the imams of the time and the role they played among the Shi'is of Kufa. The sources portray him as someone who could raise large sums of money for the imams in case of need, who received donations on their behalf, and who used these funds to regulate relations within the Shi'i community of Kufa. Furthermore there are indications that he was not alone in his activities, but was part of a group of moneychangers and operated with their help.

Let us look at the *sayārefa* in Mofazzal's environment. Several moneychangers appear in the sources as his partners or friends. Perhaps the most famous among them was Shi'i theologian Abu Ja'far Mohammad b. 'Ali Ahwal, known as Mo'men al-Tāq in Shi'i sources, and Shaytān al-Tāq in Sunni ones (Modarressi 2003, I: 338–9). In one report, Ja'far orders Mofazzal not to speak.¹⁷ Kashshi mentions a certain Abu Ja'far Mohammad b. al-Fozayl b. Kathir Azraq Azdi/Thaqafi Sayrafi Kufi.¹⁸ In Tusi's *Ketāb al-ghayba*, Mofazzal appears in the

¹⁴ The literature arguing for or against the reliability of *hadith* as a historical source, or offering methods of extracting historical information from it, is too vast to be listed here. Suffice to mention one of the latest and most comprehensive surveys of *hadith* studies by Reinhart (2010).

¹⁵ Although exchanging money could entail interest and thus become reprehensible from the point of view of different schools of Islamic law, including the Shi'is, this does not automatically mean that calling someone a moneychanger would imply condemning him, as exchanging money itself was not a vice, cf. Zysow; Saleh, 21, 24.

¹⁶ None of the works attributed to him had anything to do with money, so for this discussion they are irrelevant; on Mofazzal Jo'fi's life and on the tradition attributed to him, see Modarressi 2003, I: 333–37; Asatryan, 2011.

¹⁷ Perhaps because of his quarrelsome character (Kashshi, 248–249).

¹⁸ Quoted by Heinz Halm from Ahmad Husayni's edition of Kashshi's work, printed in Karbala (Halm 1978, 228); he lived during Ja'far's, Musā's, and 'Ali Rezā's lifetimes (Najāshi, II, 272; Barqi, 155; Tusi 1381/1961, 297; Tusi, 1380/1960, 312).

company of yet another moneychanger, Sadir Sayrafi (Tusi 1385/1968, 105; Tusi 1381/1961, 91, 125, 217; Barqi 1428/2007, 127, 145). Qāsem Sayrafi appears in several sources as “Mofazzal’s partner” (*sharik Mofazzal*; Kolayni II: 24, 25, VIII: 231-32, 374; Tusi 1381/1961, 274; Barqi n.d., 285; Barqi 1428/2007, 189). Finally, at least two moneychangers narrate *hadith* on Mofazzal’s authority. Eshāq b. ‘Ammār Sayrafi narrates in Kolayni’s *Kāfi*, together with Mofazzal, a tradition about the poor Shi‘is (Kolayni II: 265),¹⁹ and in Kashshi’s *Rejāl*, recounts their meeting with Mofazzal and their travel to the grave of Hosayn (Kashshi, 320). Finally, ‘Ali Sayrafi narrates on the authority of Mofazzal in Tusi’s *Estebsār* (III: 104).

Not much is known about the activities of each of the individual moneychangers mentioned in Mofazzal Jo‘fi’s circle. What we do know indicates that they were loved by Ja‘far al-Sādeq, such as Mo‘men al-Tāq and Sadir Sayrafi (Kashshi, 135, 191, 210, 239-240),²⁰ or close to Mofazzal himself, such as Qāsem Sayrafi, who is explicitly called the latter’s partner, and Mo‘men al-Tāq, who in the several stories recorded by Kashshi appears to have been on friendly terms with Mofazzal (Kashshi, 248). His financial activities are illustrated in a note that describes Abu Hanifa asking him to lend him a dinar (Najāshi II: 203-4).

One of Mofazzal’s acquaintances is Eshāq b. ‘Ammār Sayrafi, whose dealings with money and social position as a member of the community of moneychangers are well documented. He was wealthy (Kashshi, 408-9) and a member of a large clan of moneychangers, Banu Hayyān, many of whom narrated *hadith* from Ja‘far al-Sādeq and Musā al-Kāzem (Najāshi I: 193; Tusi 1381/1961, 149; Barqi 1428/2007, 218; ‘Asqalāni II: 66).²¹ Together with his brother Esmā‘il he lent money for interest, and Ja‘far gave them advice on how to do so without loss (Kashshi, 408). His occupation explains why he is frequently listed as the narrator of *hadith* on issues of currency exchange (Tusi 1401/1981, VII: 102-3, 105, 107, 110, 113-14; Ebn Bābuya III: 184-86).

Mofazzal b. ‘Omar’s life provides the richest documentation of the activities of moneychangers in Kufa during Imam Ja‘far’s time. Stories about him show that he was part of a group of people who not only exchanged money but could raise money for the Imam. Mofazzal is portrayed as receiving donations on

¹⁹ In the *isnād* he refers to them as “Eshāq b. ‘Ammār wa Mofazzal b. ‘Omar, qālā . . .” “Ishāq b. ‘Ammār and Mofazzal b. ‘Omar [the two of them] said.”

²⁰ He could also have had shared religious views with Mofazzal Jo‘fi, for ‘Asqalāni says he exaggerated in his Shi‘i beliefs, an accusation which was also leveled against Mofazzal (Asatryan 2011).

²¹ Another clan of moneychangers was the Banu Zobayr Sayārefa (Kashshi, 570).

the Imam's behalf, and regulating inner-Shi'i affairs with the Imam's money. The following story, paraphrased in the beginning of this article, provides a good example:

Some Kufans wrote to Sādeq, saying: "Mofazzal mixes with unruly youths (*shottār*),²² pigeon fanciers (*ashāb al-hamām*),²³ and people who drink wine. You should write to him and tell him not to mix with them." [Ja'far al-Sādeq] wrote a letter to Mofazzal, sealed it, gave it to them, and ordered them to hand it to Mofazzal. They brought the letter to Mofazzal. Among them were Zorāra [b. A'yan], 'Abd Allāh b. Bokayr, Mohammad b. Moslem, Abu Basir, and Hojr b. Zā'eda. They gave the letter to Mofazzal, he opened it and read it. Written in it was the following: "In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate; purchase this, this, and this." He [Ja'far] did not mention [in the letter] either much or little about what they had said about him [Mofazzal]. When he read the letter, he gave it to Zorāra, Zorāra gave it to Mohammad b. Moslem, until it circulated among all of them. Then Mofazzal asked them: "What do you say?" They replied: "This is a lot of money for us to look for, to collect, and to bring to you. We never knew of this [amount of money] until we saw you look at it [the letter]." They wanted to leave but Mofazzal said: "You have to stay with me till morning." He locked them up till morning and summoned his friends who had been slandered. They came, and he read to them the letter of Abu 'Abd Allāh [Ja'far]. They left him, and he locked up those men so that they would have breakfast with him [later]. The young men came back, each of them carrying, in accordance with their income, one or two thousand [dirhams], [some] a bit more [some] a bit less; so [when all of them] had arrived, they had brought with them 2,000 dinars and 10,000 dirhams before those would finish their breakfast. Mofazzal then asked them:

²² The term *shottār* (sg. *shāter*), which literally means dexterous, has been used to refer to members of the so-called *futuwwa* groups, semi-military organizations of young men that existed in the cities of the medieval Middle East, who had their own codes of conduct and sometimes functioned as a police or military force. However, they were largely independent of the government and often acted on their own, see Cahen, 33 ff.; Zakeri, "Javānmardi." Whether Zurāra's and his associates' use of the term means that Mufazzal and his company were part of *futuwwa* groups is unclear, but most probably it doesn't, for in the numerous *hadīth* featuring Mofazzal, there is no mention that he had been part of such a group. It is probably just used to refer to the unruly nature of the people with whom he mixed.

²³ On playing with pigeons (*le'b al-hamām*) as a vile occupation, see Halm 1978, 231, n. 81.

"Do you order me to dismiss these?" [Then he turned to the slanderers and said:] "Do you think God needs your prayers and your fasting?!" (Kashshi, 326-27).

During the last quarter of the eighth century 2,000 dinars and 10,000 dirhams were huge sums. For a comparison, in the second half of that century, wheat prices in Iraq ranged from 0.112 to 0.51 dinars for 100 kg of wheat, and a soldier's wage during Saffāh's reign (d. 754) was 6.5 dinars per month. (Campopiano, 47, 49; cf. also Ashtor, 1976, 93; Ashtor, 1969, 68, 70). We do not know whether Mofazzal's companions' financial capabilities could match this amount of money, and an element of exaggeration is certainly a possibility. Still, it does indicate that he operated as part of a network of men who wielded financial power, and who could raise money upon the imams' call.²⁴

A cautious remark about the relations between the *sayārefa* and two of the most famous of Mofazzal's accusers, Zorāra b. A'yan and Abu Basir, could be made here. Zorāra, who was a member of the powerful Kufan clan of A'yan and a well-known theologian,²⁵ is reported to have been in conflict with a Kufan moneychanger from Ja'far's milieu, 'Ozāfer b. 'Isā Khozā'i Sayrafi (Tusi 1381/1961, 264; Barqi 1428/2007, 335),²⁶ who dealt with Ja'far's money and practiced the

²⁴ Furthermore, if viewed in the larger context of Mofazzal's image and his relations with the Imams as portrayed in Shi'i hadith, this and other reports showing Mufazzal's closeness with the Imams can be trusted. The reason is that while the later Imami tradition portrays him as a heretic and an "extremist," in most of the hadith where he appears, he is described as Ja'far al-Sadeq's and Musā al-Kazem's close person who was much loved by them, and there are virtually none stating the contrary. If we bear in mind that most of the collectors who recorded hadith about him were Twelver Shi'is of the orthodox camp (such as Kolayni or Tusi), it becomes apparent that should they have found a single *hadith* showing Mofazzal's bad relations with the Imams, they would have surely recorded it. The absence of such, then, indicates that Mofazzal was indeed close to his contemporary Imams (Asatryan 2012, 47-58). In this context, the Imam's call for financial help to a close associate who happened to be a moneychanger contains no logical contradictions, and the *hadith* should hence be trusted as historical.

²⁵ On Zorāra b. A'yan and his clan, see Zorāri; Modarressi 2003, 404; van Ess I: 325-26; Najāshi I: 397; Kashshi, 133-160. The other people who accused Mofazzal were also prominent members of the Kufan Shi'i community, see Modarressi 2003, 272-73, 395-96; Najāshi I: 347, II: 23, II: 199-200; Kashshi, 170.

²⁶ In the year 786, 'Ozāfer took part in the battle between the supporters of 'Alid rebel Hosayn b. 'Ali and the 'Abbasid forces at Fakhkh, near Mecca, was taken prisoner, beheaded and crucified on one of the gates of Baghdad; incidentally, executed with him was 'Ali b. Sābeq Fallās who, judging by his name—derived from the word for a copper

craft as a family business.²⁷ ‘Ozāfer’s dislike for Zorāra is apparent in a tradition in which he tells that he heard Ja’far al-Sādeq curse him thrice (Kashshi, 149–50). Whether the *hadith* is forged or not, (and given Zorāra’s powerful position in Kufa it most probably is), it illustrates ‘Ozāfer’s dislike for Zorāra. On the other hand, the other accuser of Mofazzal, the famous narrator of *hadith* Abu Basir, appears in a similar situation, where Hasan b. Qayāmā Sayrafi claims that Imam ‘Ali Rezā (d. 203–818) called Abu Basir a liar in front of him (Kashshi, 476; on Abu Basir see Modarressi 2003, 395). While the evidence is too scant to make a definitive argument, these two episodes, together with the aforementioned *hadith*, might indicate that the grudge held by Zorāra, Abu Basir, and their comrades, against Mofazzal, reflected a more deeply seated conflict between them and the moneychangers of Ja’far’s environment in general.

There are several more traditions illustrating Mofazzal’s dealings with the imams’ finances. For example, he is portrayed as receiving donations on behalf of Musa al-Kāzem:

Musa b. Bakr²⁸ [narrates], “I was in the service of Abu'l-Hasan [Musā al-Kāzem], and I saw that he receives nothing except through Mofazzal b. ‘Omar.²⁹ Often I saw people bringing something to him [i.e. the imam], while he refused to take [those things] and told them to give them to Mofazzal” (Kashshi, 328).

Several other traditions further indicate that he could use the imams’ finances as he saw fit in order to regulate inner-Shi‘i affairs. In one, Mofazzal reconciles two people arguing over inheritance by giving them four hundred dirhams, which toward the end of the eighth century was a considerable sum (cf. Campopiano, 43, 49). This money, he then told them, was given to him by Ja’far al-Sādeq so that he would be able to reconcile those Shi‘is who happened to

coin, *fals*—also dealt with money in one way or another (Tabari III: 560, 563; on the rebellion of Hosayn b. ‘Ali and the battle at Fakhkh, see Vaglioti).

- ²⁷ His brother ‘Omar b. Isā and his two sons Fazl and Mohammad are also called ‘Sayrafi’. On ‘Omar b. Isā, see Tusi 1381/1961, 253, on ‘Ozāfer’s sons, see ibid., 270, 297, 322; Tusi 1380/1960, 301; Barqi 1428/2007, 158, 357; Najāshi II: 260–62. Of course, in the case of ‘Ozāfer’s sons it is uncertain whether they did practice their father’s craft or just inherited his occupational name. On ‘Ozāfer’s dealings with Ja’far’s money, see below.
- ²⁸ He was Musa Kāzem’s companion and probably a *wāqefi* (Tusi 1381/1961, 359; Najāshi II: 339).
- ²⁹ The Arabic reads “nothing except from the direction of Mofazzal (*ellā men nāhiyat al-Mofazzal*)”, but the context indicates that those things did not just reach the imam *from* Mofazzal but *through* him, i.e. he served as a kind of intermediary.

argue over something. In another *hadith*, Ja'far tells Mofazzal that if he sees two people from among his followers arguing, he should use his, i.e. the imam's, money to make peace between them (Kolayni II: 209). Mofazzal also uses the imam's money by sending Safwān Jammāl (lit. 'cameleer') to buy a camel (Barqi n.d., 638).³⁰

Another story showcasing Mofazzal's connection to money portrays Ja'far picking a forged coin from a handful of coins in front of him. This particular coin was made of two layers of silver, a layer of copper, and another layer of silver, so he told Mofazzal to break it and never to use it (Tusi 1401/1981, VII: 109).³¹

Finally, the abovementioned 'Ozāfer Sayrafi is said to have received from Ja'far seven hundred dinars, making one hundred off for himself (Ebn Bābuya, III: 96). The story does not specify how exactly 'Ozāfer made the profit; what is important is the imam's personal involvement in 'Ozāfer's financial transaction, which suggests personal interest on the part of the imam.

Lastly, Ja'far al-Sādeq's positive attitude toward the *sayārefa* is reflected in a *hadith* in which he repudiates Hasan Basri's alleged condemnation of moneychangers by stating that "the People of the Cave were also moneychangers" (Ebn Bābuya III: 96-97; Kolayni V: 113-114), referring to the Qur'ānic 'Ashāb al-Kahf. Of course, in both sources which quote the *hadith*, its narrator is Sadir Sayrafi, himself a moneychanger, which makes the historicity of the account dubious. However, given what was said about the *sayārefa* above, this report quite logically fits into the narrative of their importance for the imams and of the role they played among Kufan Shi'is.

To sum up, the preponderance of moneychangers during the imamate of Ja'far al-Sādeq and later imams, which we find in biographical dictionaries, is affirmed, and their role is illustrated through literary accounts describing the activities of individual *sayārefa*. Apart from exchanging currencies, they lent money, collected funds, and accepted donations on the imams' behalf; and at least one of them had the authority to use those funds to regulate affairs among the Shi'is.

³⁰ Another moneychanger, the abovementioned Sadir Sayrafi, reports that Ja'far sent him on some busyness to Medina (Qommi, 116).

³¹ The term used for the forged coin, *sattuq*, appears in a story about Mo'men al-Tāq, one of the moneychangers mentioned above: when the people complain to him about a coin, probably suspecting it is forged, he looks at it and says, "*sattuq*," and this shrewdness of his, according to Kashshi, was the reason people called him Shaytān (Devil) (Kashshi, 185; see also Ebn Shahrashub, 84-85).

The Kufan Moneychangers in the 8th Century: A Broader Perspective

Having to some extent clarified the role of moneychangers among the followers of Ja'far and later imams, an important question still remains to be answered; namely, why did the *sayārefa* become prominent among the Shi'is of Kufa, especially from Ja'far's time onwards? But first, let us consider why they were moneychangers, and why in Kufa.

That an imam would use, as his financial agents, changers of money can be explained by the following consideration: by the very nature of their profession they dealt with lots of money, and possessed the means and skills to manage it (and perhaps to store it safely). In fact, there are reports showing that *sayārefa* in general (not just the Shi'i ones) wielded considerable financial power, which they used to influence politics, or even had money that belonged to the government, acting perhaps as some sort of bankers.³² For instance, the first 'Abbasid caliph Saffāh's (d. 754) vizier Abu Salama Khallāl, who had been instrumental in the establishment of the 'Abbasid dynasty, was a wealthy moneychanger from Kufa who used his money "for the establishment of the state of the Banū'l-'Abbās" (Zahabi, VIII: 400-1; Agha, 39-53). Moreover, his successor Caliph Abu Ja'far Mansur (d. 775) had a spy in Kufa among the moneychangers (Tabari VI, 248). Finally, in a report in Abu'l-Faraj Esfahāni's *Maqātel al-tālebiyin*, Kufan moneychangers are said to have possessed government funds. Thus, when 'Ali's great-great-grandson Yahyā b. 'Omar b. Hosayn revolted in Kufa in the ninth century, he "sent [his men] to moneychangers, who were holding governmental money, and had it confiscated" (Esfahāni, 507).³³

Why the majority, if not all, of our *sayārefa* were from Kufa is also easy to explain. From almost its very founding this town was an important center of the pro-'Alid movement (Modarressi 2003, 39-41), and it is not by chance that after the Battle of the Camel, in 656, 'Ali b. Abi Tālib decided to transfer his capital from Medina to this town. A year later in the battle of Siffin, 'Ali's partisans were mostly Kufans (Djaït 1976, 167; Djaït 2007, 290-98; Wheatley, 46, 89). Later on, Kufa became a hotbed for religious uprisings of the supporters of 'Ali's house. Thus, the last quarter of the seventh century, and most of the eighth, was punctuated by revolts and movements of pro-'Alid coloring, with Kufa as their center (Tucker). No wonder, then, that Ja'far al-Sādeq, himself

³² The word 'banker' can be anachronistic here, but I use it conventionally, following earlier practice (Fischel, 571; Ehrenkreutz 1978, 39).

³³ On later periods, see Fischel, 571.

based in Medina (Gleaves), had many prominent followers in Kufa, and that the network of moneychangers that he used was based in this town.

It is interesting to note that around one third of the moneychangers listed in the mentioned *rejāl* books have the epithet *mawlā*, i.e. a Muslim convert of non-Arab origin. While their ethnic identity is difficult to ascertain, one may assume that many of them were Iranians. During Sasanian times Iranians were a significant minority in Iraq, while after the Arab conquest their numbers in garrison cities like Kufa grew due to captivity, defection, and clientage (Morony 2005, 181-213).

As I discussed above, the disproportionate prevalence of *sayārefa* in the referenced Shi'i works during Ja'far's, and later imams' time does not mean there were none in Kufa, or in Iraq, before or after that period. In fact there were plenty, and they even had their own quarter in Kufa (Duri, 192-95; Cohen, 32-33, 36-37; Zahabi VIII: 60-61, 285, et passim), but only those of them who appear in these Shi'i works can be counted as people who either had close relations with the imams or were part of their following. This is because the Shi'i *rejāl* works do not just indicate their diffusion over time and space, but their distribution among the followers of the individual imams as well.³⁴ Why is it, then, that they figure so prominently, primarily among the followers of Ja'far and the later imams, but not the earlier ones?

The clue is the economic position of Ja'far al-Sādeq and subsequent imams. It was during Ja'far's imamate that the collection of funds from the community of followers in the form of gifts began (as in the above *hadīth*, where Ja'far accepts gifts through Mofazzal). Under Musā al-Kāzem and his successor imams, the collection became more institutionalized, as funds now flowed through a well-organized network of agents who possessed considerable wealth (Modarressi 1993, 12-17; Arjomand, 498; Dakake, 244-45; Abdulsater, 308; Buyukkara, 86 ff.; Hussain, 38). These agents, or at least some of them, were presumably moneychangers. This explains why their names figure so prominently in biographical dictionaries among the followers of Ja'far and the subsequent imams, as opposed to the earlier ones.

In order to situate this network for the appropriation and redistribution of funds³⁵ among the Kufan Shi'is in a broader historical context, I will suggest two interconnected, if speculative, explanations as to why it emerged especially in the second half of the eighth century. One possible reason could be that it is precisely in this period, i.e. during the imamate of Ja'far al-Sādeq, that the Shi'is emerged as a community with clearly defined boundaries

³⁴ See my earlier discussion on this.

³⁵ To use Dakake's terms (245-46).

(cf. Hodgson, 9-10; Modarressi 1993, 4; Haider 2011, 190 ff.; Haider 2009, 153 ff.; Halm 1991, 28-29; Buckley 1998, 180-82). This communal identity no doubt implied closer relations between its members on the one hand, and between the members and the leadership (i.e. the imams) on the other. In turn, this would require a more involved leadership, one that would be able to effectively regulate internal affairs and solve disputes. A network of appropriation, then, served precisely this purpose by helping the imams to raise funds and to use them to regulate the affairs of their flock.

Viewed more broadly, the rise to prominence of the Shi'i *sayārefa* of Kufa roughly coincided with the emergence and proliferation of Islamic coinage in the eighth century. The introduction of Islamic coins by the Caliph 'Abd al-Malek (685-705) at the end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth century led to an increased production and circulation of Islamic currency in the Caliphate during the subsequent hundred years (Ehrenkreutz 1978, 38-39; Ehrenkreutz 1992, 92-97; Lombard, 105-11; Ashtor 1971, 84-89; cf. also Shatzmiller 2011, 146-49; Shatzmiller 2013; Grierson, 241-64). Furthermore, the last fifteen years of Ja'far's life—presumably the years of his prime as a leader of the Shi'i community—coincided with Kufa and Basra being the main silver mints of the Caliphate (Heidemann, 657). While a causal relationship between the increased circulation of currency in the region and the rise to prominence of Shi'i moneychangers is difficult to prove, the correspondence seems all too suggestive.

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