

Al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī

Al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī, (born January 626, Medina, Arabia [now in Saudi Arabia]—died October 10, 680, Karbalāʾ, Iraq), Shīʿite Muslim hero, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and son of ʿAlī (the fourth Islamic caliph) and Fāṭimah, daughter of Muhammad. He is revered by Shīʿite Muslims as the third imam (after ʿAlī and Ḥusayn’s older brother, Ḥasan).

After the assassination of their father, ʿAlī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn acquiesced to the rule of the first Umayyad caliph, Muʿāwiyah, from whom they received pensions. Ḥusayn, however, refused to recognize the legitimacy of Muʿāwiyah’s son and successor, Yazīd (April 680). Ḥusayn was then invited by the townsmen of Kūfah, a city with a Shīʿite majority, to come there and raise the standard of revolt against the Umayyads. After receiving some favourable indications, Ḥusayn set out for Kūfah with a small band of relatives and followers. According to traditional accounts, he met the poet al-Farazdaq on the way and was told that the hearts of the Iraqis were for him, but their swords were for the Umayyads. The governor of Iraq, on behalf of the caliph, sent 4,000 men to arrest Ḥusayn and his small band. They trapped Ḥusayn near the banks of the Euphrates River at a place called Karbalāʾ (October 680). When Ḥusayn refused to surrender, he and his escort were slain, and Ḥusayn’s head was sent to Yazīd in Damascus (now in Syria).

In remembrance of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, Shīʿite Muslims observe the first 10 days of Muḥarram (the date of the battle according to the Islamic calendar) as days of lamentation. Revenge for Ḥusayn’s death was turned into a rallying cry that helped undermine the Umayyad caliphate and gave impetus to the rise of a powerful Shīʿite movement.

The details of Ḥusayn’s life are obscured by the legends that grew up surrounding his martyrdom, but his final acts appear to have been inspired by a definite ideology—to found a regime that would reinstate a “true” Islamic polity as opposed to what he considered the unjust rule of the Umayyads.

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