

Material Culture and Rethinking the History of Shi'ism

Reviewed by Hossein Mohseni, Tarbiat Modares University

1. Introduction

In the methodology of historical research, scholars have traditionally relied on written documents as primary sources. They are, however, expanding their reliance beyond writings to include material culture as a supplementary—and sometimes rival—source to texts. This methodology was conventionally employed by archaeologists in response to scarce written materials but is now being applied to the study of more recent periods as well. Mary Lindemann in her entry titled “The Sources of Social History” in the first volume of the *Encyclopedia of European Social History* categorises various sources used in social history. Among these, she highlights “non-written sources and artifacts,” which encompass material culture.¹ This approach places objects at the forefront of inquiry, with historians aiming to decode their meanings by exploring the objects’ relationships with their historical contexts and examining their “collective biographies” alongside written records.²

2. Material Culture Research in Existing Literature

The scope of this type of study has been covered through publications such as the *Journal of Material Culture* by the well-known publisher Sage and, more specifically in the field of material culture within the Islamic world, through the publication of the series of articles in journals like *Muqarnas* and *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World* by Brill publishers.

¹ See Mary Lindemann, “The Sources of Social History,” in *Encyclopedia of European Social History* (Scribner: 2001), 1:31–2.

² *Ibid.*, 1:33.

Successful examples of using material culture as a primary source for research include the two books *The History of the Sarbadār Dynasty, 1336-1381 A.D. and Its Sources* by John Masson Smith Jr. and *Islamic History Through Coins: An Analysis and Catalogue of Tenth-Century Ikhshidid Coinage* by Jere Bacharach, both of which have used numismatic evidence to study the history of the Sarbadār movement and the Ikhshidid dynasty. Additionally, in the field of architectural studies, Yasser Tabbaa has published a volume of articles entitled *The Production of Meaning in Islamic Architecture and Ornament*, that collectively examine the reflection of the system of meaning in the mirror of architecture.

Despite numerous studies of Shī'ī history, the emergence of Shī'ism in different regions of the Islamic world and its continuation into later centuries are among the issues that require serious and fundamental study. Scholars in this field have deep disagreements about the background of Shī'ism in different geographical areas. For example, many believe that Shī'ism in the eastern regions of the caliphate (Persian cultural sphere) until before the rise of the Safavid dynasty in the 10th/16th century, had neither a social base nor a role in the political, social and cultural developments of the area. To some extent, these hasty and static conclusions are due to the limitation of the scope of research resources, a lack of attention to historical-religious trends, and historians' mental presuppositions. In recent decades, with the emergence of interdisciplinary studies in the humanities and attention to new trends in social history, cultural history, economic history, etc., historians have had to use other sources.

Non-written sources, the most important of which are historical objects, profoundly impact the understanding of the context and extent of Shī'ī history in the geography of the eastern regions of the caliphate. This methodology has two specific advantages i.e. historicity and less possibility of fabrication and distortion in material culture, thus providing a suitable foothold for foundational research.

The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London has published 22 essays in a collection titled *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam* that specifically explores the diversity of Shī'ī

beliefs and practices expressed through various traditional and contemporary sources including material culture.

Pedram Khosronejad, a professor at Western Sydney University, has also published a collection of articles titled *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam*, although the collected articles were limited to a small circle of objects and only focused on the material culture in the post-Safavid period. The Western academy's desire to advance studies and produce works within this semantic field in the history of Islam, especially the Shī'ī narrative, has created new research opportunities. Recently, Karen Ruffle and Babak Rahimi, as part of their *Studies in Shi'i Materiality* series, a project for the University of Edinburgh, have invited researchers to write a collection of books in the field of social and cultural history of Shī'ism based on objects.³

The importance of including material culture as a primary source is also becoming embedded in education. The book *A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources: History and Material Culture*, a collection of articles edited by Karen Harvey—a professor of cultural history at the University of Birmingham—is a methodological effort to familiarise scholars within this field and considered essential reading for students of historical theory and methodology,

In this adopted approach, objects and their interpretive frameworks are not only foundational for understanding the social phenomena of the Islamic world but also, when prioritising objects over texts, they can lead to a fundamental transformation. Indeed, when there is a conflict between the implications of a material phenomenon and historical accounts, the tangible elements are given precedence. These elements then become crucial criteria for modification and adjustment of an inferred narrative.

³ For studies exploring theories and concepts related to Shī'ī material culture, the sensorium, and ritual, see <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/series-studies-in-shii-materiality/>.

The works highlighted below are only a small part of the efforts of non-Iranian researchers to explain some examples of the material culture of Imāmī Shī'ī in the field of numismatics and architectural studies.

Atef Mansour Mohamed Ramadan, a renowned numismatist and professor at Cairo University, has written a book titled *al-Mahdī wa-l-Mahdawiyya 'alā al-Maskūkāt al-Islāmiyya* (The Mahdi and Mahdism on Islamic Coins). Part of this book deals with some of the Shī'ī coins of Iran and while the text does not have an analytical approach to the coinage system, Ramadan has tried as much as possible to collect historical data related to the minting governments.

Luke Treadwell, a famous numismatist and professor at the University of Oxford, is another scholar who has written a book about mints, focusing on the Būyid dynasty during the period of 322/934–435/1044.⁴ In addition, Treadwell has also written two substantial articles about Qur'ānic verses⁵ and phrases related to the Prophet's Household⁶ on coins from the 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries. Other works include an article by numismatist Aram Vardanyan describing some of the coins of the 'Alawī dynasty of Ṭabaristān.⁷

In the field of architectural studies, Dr. Erica Cruikshank Dodd, in collaboration with Shereen Khairallah, has written a book titled *The Image of the Word: A Study of Quranic Verses in Islamic Architecture*

⁴ Luke Treadwell, *Buyid Coinage: A Die Corpus (322-445 A.H.)* (Ashmolean Museum: 2001).

⁵ Treadwell, "Qur'anic Inscriptions on the Coins of the *Ahl al-Bayt* from the Second to Fourth Century AH," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14, no. 2 (October 2012), 47–71, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2012.0055/>.

⁶ Treadwell, "Ali Wali Allah' and Other Non-Qur'anic References to the Ahl Al-Bayt on Islamic Coinage before the Saljuq Period," in Fahmida Suleman (ed.), *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam* (Azimuth Editions: 2015), 126–35.

⁷ Aram Vardanyan, "Numismatic Evidence for the Presence of Zaydī 'Alids in the Northern Jibāl, Gīlān and Khurāsān from AH 250 to 350 (AD 864-961)," *The Numismatic Chronicle* (1966-) 170 (2010): 355–74, <http://www.jst-or.org/stable/42678897/>.

about Qur'ānic verses on inscriptions, part of which is dedicated to Shī'ī inscriptions. Raya Shani has authored a book about the 'Alawī Dome of Hamadan and its Shī'ī aspects.⁸ In addition, Sheila Blair, a well-known researcher in architectural studies, has written a short article about how Shī'ī elements were incorporated into the lustre tiles of Kashan in various Shī'ī tombs during the 7th/13th century.⁹

3. Conclusion

By studying the material culture left by the Shī'a, one can review afresh the fluctuations of Shī'ī history across the geography of the Islamic caliphate. This would allow researchers to discover previously unnoticed achievements in the historical course of this religion and their effects and influences in political, social, and cultural arenas.

For example, coins, as one of the main tools of the political elite, show their identity elements and are a statement declaring the political and religious positions of the time. Also, the extent of minting these coins reveals various points in understanding different aspects of the social phenomenon of Shī'ism. Seeking the answers to relevant questions opens the narrative to new perspectives. Is the ruler who minted the coin one of the Shī'ī political elites or not, and which religion did he follow? Were the cities where these coins were minted Shī'ī? What meaning did people infer about the religious concepts—and their legitimacy—that were minted on those coins? From what semantic origin do the religious terms on the coin originate? What foundation of legitimacy do the religious concepts minted on the coin portray for the ruler in the face of political rivals?

⁸ Raya Shani, *A Monumental Manifestation of the Shi'ite Faith in Late Twelfth-Century Iran: The Case of the Gunbad-i 'Alawiyan, Hamadan* (University of Oxford: 1996).

⁹ Sheila Blair, "Writing about Faith: Epigraphic Evidence for the Development of Twelver Shi'ism in Iran," in Fahmida Suleman (ed.), *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam* (Azimuth Editions: 2015), 106–14.

On the other hand, the answers related to the semantic system reflected in coins can be evaluated with the material culture of the scientific elites in that geographical-cultural space. This will clarify to some extent the aspects of the scientific movement of the time, the prosperity or recession of the scientific situation, scientific trips, influences and relationships with other scientific currents, and the type of relationship between scientific elites, political elites, and the general public.

Finally, the artefacts related to the general public provide a suitable platform for understanding the social and discursive power of the Shī'ī, religious aspects, behavioural systems, cultural eclecticism, and various aspects of the acceptability and credibility of the semantic system of the Shī'ī (in the general sense) in connection with the two currents of scientific and political elites.

It can be hoped that renewed research on the individual categories of material objects mentioned above over the various historical and geographical periods will provide new awareness and understanding of the history of Shī'ism.