

MEDIAEVAL
ISMA'ILI HISTORY
AND THOUGHT



EDITED BY
FARHAD DAFTARY

The Institute of Ismaili Studies



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1996
Reprinted 1996
First paperback edition 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Garamond 10/13pt *System* Poltype® [vN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Mediaeval Isma'ili history and thought / edited by Farhad Daftary.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 45140 X

1. Ismailites – History. I. Daftary, Farhad.

BF195.I8M43 1996

297'.822'0902 – dc20 95-21159 CIP

ISBN 0 521 45140 X hardback

ISBN 0 521 00310 5 paperback

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ONE

Introduction: Isma‘ilis and Isma‘ili studies



FARHAD DAFTARY

A MAJOR Shi‘i Muslim community, the Isma‘ilis appeared on the historical stage on the death of the Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq in the year 148/765. This ‘Alid imam, in whose time the ‘Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads and installed their own dynasty to the caliphate, had succeeded in consolidating Shi‘ism on a quiescent basis and according a distinctive identity to its Imāmī branch, the common heritage of the Isma‘ili and the Ithnā‘asharī or Twelver Shi‘is. The Imam al-Ṣādiq’s succession was however disputed among his progeny and as a result, his Imāmī Shi‘i following subdivided into a number of separate groups, including those comprising the earliest Isma‘ilis.

The early Isma‘ilis laid the foundations for a distinctive Isma‘ili movement and community. However, early Isma‘ilism, stretching until the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate, remains an obscure subject, because only a handful of authentic Isma‘ili texts have survived from that formative pre-Fatimid period in Isma‘ili history while non-Isma‘ili sources have in general remained hostile towards the Isma‘ilis. Nevertheless, our understanding of early Isma‘ilism has been greatly enhanced during the last few decades by the results of modern scholarship in the field, especially the studies of S. M. Stern (1920–1969) and W. Madelung.

It is now generally agreed by Isma‘ili scholars that a line of central leaders, descendants of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, worked secretly during that obscure early period from different headquarters to organize a revolutionary Shi‘i movement against the ‘Abbasids who, in the eyes of the Shi‘a, had usurped the legitimate rights of the ‘Alid family to the leadership of the Muslim community. This movement, designated as *al-da‘wa* (the mission) or *al-da‘wa al-hādiya* (the rightly guiding mission)

by the early Ismaʿilis themselves, began to be particularly successful from around the middle of the 3rd/9th century, when a multitude of Ismaʿili *dāʿīs*, religio-political missionaries or propagandists, started their activities in Iraq, Persia, eastern Arabia, and the Yemen. These *dāʿīs* summoned the Muslims to the allegiance of the Ismaʿili Imam-Mahdi who was to deliver them from the injustices of the established regime. His rule would also herald the restoration of the caliphate to the dispossessed ʿAlids, the rightful leaders belonging to the Prophet's family, the *abl al-bayt*.

The success of early Ismaʿilism was crowned in 297/909 by the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate in Ifrīqiya in North Africa, where the Ismaʿili imam was now installed to a new, and the first Shiʿi, caliphate. Only a decade earlier, in 286/899, the then unified Ismaʿili movement had split into two rival factions, the Fatimid Ismaʿilis and the Qarmaṭīs, over the all-important issue of the imamate. The dissident Qarmaṭīs, who did not acknowledge ʿAbd Allāh (ʿUbayd Allāh) al-Mahdī (d. 322/934) and his successors in the Fatimid dynasty as their imams, founded a state of their own in Baḥrayn, eastern Arabia, and menaced the Muslim world for almost two centuries. The pillaging activities of the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn culminated in their sacking of Mecca in 317/930 during the pilgrimage season. The Sunni establishment, always ready to defame the Ismaʿilis, capitalized on the ravaging acts of the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn to discredit the entire Ismaʿili movement, also alleging that the Qarmaṭī leaders received their orders secretly from the Fatimid caliph-imams. Open warfare, in fact, broke out between the Qarmaṭīs and the Fatimids in the aftermath of the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 358/969.

The early Ismaʿilis also laid the foundations of Ismaʿili intellectual traditions which were further elaborated during the Fatimid period. They made a fundamental distinction between the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and the esoteric (*bāṭin*) aspects of the sacred scriptures and religious commandments, holding that every literal meaning implied an inner, hidden reality (*ḥaqīqa*). These immutable truths, the common and eternal truths of the religions recognized in the Qurʾan, were in fact developed in terms of a gnostic system of thought by the early Ismaʿilis. This system represented an esoteric world of spiritual reality, a reality common to the great monotheistic religions of the Abrahamic tradition. The early Ismaʿilis further maintained that the religious laws enunciated by prophets, or speaker-prophets (*nuṭaqāʾ*), would undergo periodical changes while the *ḥaqāʾiq* would remain eternal. It was the function of

the prophets' successors, the *amṣiyāʾ* and the imams, to explain in every era (*dawr*) the hidden meanings of the revelations through *taʾwīl* or esoteric exegesis. The gnostic system of the early Ismaʿilis was thus comprised of a cyclical view of the religious history of mankind; it also contained a cosmological doctrine. Their system was thoroughly Islamic and Shiʿi however, as the prophets of its cyclical history were those recognized in the Qurʾan and the Shiʿi doctrine of the imamate was superimposed on it; and this Shiʿi doctrine continued to occupy a central position in the complex metaphysical systems of thought developed by the Ismaʿili theologian-philosophers of the Fatimid times.

The Ismaʿili *daʿwa* of the 3rd/9th century, as noted, led to the foundation of the Fatimid *dawla* or state, initiating a new phase in Ismaʿili history. The Fatimids made important contributions to Islamic civilization. It was in recognition of these contributions that the 4th/10th century was designated by Louis Massignon as the 'Ismaʿili century' of Islam.¹ It was also during this century, coinciding with the first century of Fatimid rule, that the famous *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* (*The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*) were compiled by a group of authors with strong Ismaʿili affiliations. The Ismaʿilis had now come to possess their own state, in rivalry with the ʿAbbasids, and the Fatimid caliphs were acknowledged as the rightful imams by Ismaʿilis not only within the Fatimid dominions but also in many other Muslim lands. It is worth noting that the Fatimids did not abandon their *daʿwa* activities in the aftermath of their victory in North Africa, as they aspired to extending their rule over the entire Muslim community. As a result, the Fatimids also developed an elaborate *daʿwa* organization for the activities of their *dāʾīs* throughout the Muslim world, also paying particular attention to the training of the Ismaʿili *dāʾīs*, especially after transferring the seat of their state to Egypt. Important institutions such as the Dār al-Ḥikma and al-Azhar were established for this purpose. These institutions as well as special quarters in the Fatimid palace compound in Cairo were also used for the dissemination of Ismaʿili teachings to broader audiences.

The Fatimid period, especially until the time of al-Mustaʿīn biʾllāh (427–487/1036–1094), was indeed the 'golden age' of Ismaʿilism. It was during this part of the classical phase in Ismaʿili history that Ismaʿili thought and literature attained their summit, while the Ismaʿili Fatimid caliph-imams ruled over a vast empire stretching from North Africa and Sicily to Syria and Palestine. The Fatimids developed elaborate administrative and financial systems, also paying considerable attention to the Islamic sciences and other cultural as well as commercial

activities. The newly founded Fatimid capital, Cairo, rivalled 'Abbasid Baghdad as the international metropolis of the Islamic world. It was during this same period that the classical works of Isma'ili literature dealing with theology, philosophy and other esoteric as well as exoteric subjects were produced by many learned *da'īs* and authors such as Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, al-Mu'ayyad fī'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, and Nāṣir-i Khusraw, who flourished during the 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries, while Isma'ili law was codified by al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān (d. 363/974), the foremost jurist of the period and the founder of a distinguished family of Fatimid *qāḍīs* or judges. At the same time, a distinctive intellectual tradition, designated as philosophical Isma'ilism by Paul Walker,² was elaborated by the *da'īs* of the Iranian lands, starting with Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 332/943), who is actually credited with introducing philosophy into Isma'ili thought, and Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/934). These *da'īs* and their successors, who starting with al-Sijistānī preached the *da'wa* in the name of the Fatimid caliph-imams, amalgamated in a highly original manner their Isma'ili theology with a form of Neoplatonic philosophy then current in Persia and Transoxania.

In 487/1094 the Isma'ilis were permanently split into two rival communities, the Nizāriyya and the Musta'liyya, over al-Mustanṣir's succession. The all-powerful Fatimid vizier al-Afdāl succeeded in installing al-Mustanṣir's youngest son to the Fatimid caliphate with the title of al-Musta'li bi'llāh (487–495/1094–1101), depriving al-Mustanṣir's eldest son and heir-designate Nizār of his succession rights. The Isma'ilis of Egypt and the regions dependent on the Fatimid regime now recognized al-Musta'li also as their new imam after al-Mustanṣir; they became known as the Musta'liyya. By contrast, the Isma'ilis of the Saljuq lands, then under the leadership of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ who was already following an independent revolutionary policy, upheld the succession rights of Nizār (d. 488/1095) and severed their relations with the Fatimid regime and the *da'wa* headquarters in Cairo, which were now working in al-Musta'li's name. The Isma'ilis of Persia and other eastern lands came to be known as the Nizāriyya.

The Musta'lian Isma'ilis themselves were soon split into Ṭayyibī and Ḥāfizī wings on the death of al-Musta'li's son and successor al-Āmir (495–524/1101–1130). The Ḥāfizī Isma'ilis recognized the later Fatimid caliphs as their imams, but Ḥāfizī Isma'ilism did not survive the downfall of the Fatimid dynasty in 567/1171. The Ṭayyibī Isma'ilis, who have not had a manifest imam after al-Āmir, soon found their

permanent stronghold in the Yemen where their community flourished under the leadership of their chief *dā'īs*, designated as *al-dā'ī al-mutlaq* or the *dā'ī* with absolute authority. By the end of the 10th/16th century, the Ṭayyibī Isma'ilis were split into Dā'ūdī and Sulaymānī factions over the issue of the rightful succession to the office of the *dā'ī*. By that time, the Indian Ṭayyibīs, known locally as Bohras, had greatly outnumbered the Ṭayyibī community of the Yemen. The Dā'ūdī and Sulaymānī Isma'ilis have since followed different lines of *dā'īs*. The Ṭayyibī Isma'ilis have also played an important role both in the Yemen and India by preserving numerous Isma'ili texts of the Fatimid period; the Ṭayyibī *dā'īs* of the Yemen themselves engaged in literary activities and produced a voluminous literature.

In the meantime, it was mainly through the efforts of Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ (d. 518/1124) that the independent Nizārī Isma'ili *da'wa* was founded in the East. By the time of the Nizārī–Musta'li schism of 487/1094, Ḥasan had already launched from his headquarters at Alamūt his anti-Saljuq revolt with much success in northern Persia as well as in Quhistān, in southeastern Khurāsān. In fact, Ḥasan's seizure of the mountain fortress of Alamūt in 483/1090 marked what was to become the Nizārī Isma'ili state of Persia with a later subsidiary in Syria. This state lasted for some 166 years until it, too, collapsed under the onslaught of the Mongol hordes in 654/1256. The Nizārī state went through numerous vicissitudes. Initially, it was led by *dā'īs*, but later the Nizārī imams emerged at Alamūt taking charge of the affairs of their community and state. The Nizārī Isma'ilis did not succeed in overthrowing the Saljuq Turks, whose rule was intensely detested in Persia, nor did the Saljuqs succeed in uprooting the Nizārīs, despite their much more superior military power. Eventually the Saljuq–Isma'ili relations developed into what Marshall Hodgson has termed a 'stalemate'; and the Nizārī state with its scattered territories found its own place among the principalities of the Muslim world.

The Nizārī Isma'ilis of the Alamūt period devoted much of their time and energies to their struggle and survival tactics in the midst of an extremely hostile milieu. Therefore, instead of producing learned *dā'īs* as in Fatimid times, they came to possess capable military commanders and strategists suited to their aims. These commanders were often placed in charge of the major fortresses, and they were at the same time *dā'īs* preaching on behalf of the Nizārī Isma'ili imam. Nevertheless, the Nizārī Isma'ilis, comprised mainly of mountain dwellers and villagers and with only scattered support among urban groups, did maintain a

sophisticated outlook and literary tradition. Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ himself was a learned theologian, and he was largely responsible for reformulating the old Shi'ī doctrine of *ta'lim*, or the necessity of authoritative teaching by the imam.

At any rate, the doctrine of *ta'lim*, emphasizing the teaching authority of each imam independently of his predecessors, laid the foundation for all the subsequent Nizārī teachings of the Alamūt period, including the declaration of the *qiyāma* or resurrection in 559/1164. This declaration, in fact, heralded the spiritual independence of the Nizārī Isma'īli community at large. However, resurrection was interpreted spiritually on the basis of Isma'īli *ta'wil* to mean the recognition of the unveiled truth in the spiritual reality of the rightful imam of the time who was none other than the Nizārī Isma'īli imam. It was through the recognition of the spiritual reality of this imam that Paradise would be actualized for the faithful, his community of followers. At the time of the declaration of the *qiyāma*, the Syrian Nizārīs were under the leadership of their most famous leader, Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān (d. 589/1193), who through an intricate network of alliances with his Sunni neighbours and the Crusaders ensured the survival of his community in difficult times. Later, Jalāl al-Dīn Ḥasan III (607–618/1210–1221), the sixth lord of Alamūt, attempted a daring rapprochement with the Sunni establishment, giving the Nizārī community a much needed respite. As a rare instance of Isma'īli historiography, the Nizārī Isma'īlis, like the Fatimids before them, also commissioned the compilation of official chronicles, recording the events of their state in Persia according to the reigns of the successive lords of Alamūt. Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ also founded an important library at Alamūt, whose collections of Isma'īli and non-Isma'īli books had grown impressively by the time the Mongols consigned it to fire. In Quhistān and Syria, too, the Nizārīs had established libraries, containing not only books written on different religious subjects, but also archival documents and scientific tracts and equipment.

It was under such circumstances that, despite the military entanglements of the Nizārīs with outsiders, many Muslim scholars, including Sunni and Twelver Shi'ī ones as well as Jewish scientists, availed themselves of the Nizārī libraries and patronage of learning. Some of these outside scholars even converted to Isma'īlism, at least while they were amongst the Nizārī Isma'īlis. The most prominent member of this select group was the celebrated philosopher, theologian and astronomer Naṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (597–672/1201–1274), who spent some three decades among the Nizārīs of Khurāsān and northern Persia and was with the

last lord of Alamūt, Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh (653–655/1255–1257), when the Nizārīs finally surrendered to the Mongols. The bulk of the meagre literature produced by the Nizārī Ismaʿilis during the Alamūt period was either destroyed by the Mongols or perished soon afterwards in Īlkhānid Persia. The Persian Nizārīs, unlike the Mustaʿlians of the Yemen, did not play a major role in preserving the Ismaʿili literature of the Fatimid period. In this connection it is important to note that Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, as an expression of his ‘Iranian’ sentiments, had adopted the Persian language as the religious language of the Persian Ismaʿili community. As a result, the Persian Ismaʿilis of the Alamūt period did not find ready access to the Ismaʿili writings of the Fatimid period, although such works were evidently available in the collections of Alamūt Library and elsewhere in the community. However, the Syrian Nizārī Ismaʿilis who used Arabic did preserve a certain number of the Fatimid Ismaʿili texts, also producing a literary tradition of their own.

In Persia, the Nizārī Ismaʿilis survived the Mongol destruction of their mountain fortresses and state in 654/1256, while many of them sought refuge in the adjacent regions in Afghanistan and Badakhshān in Central Asia as well as in the Indian subcontinent. The Syrian Nizārīs, who had been spared the Mongol catastrophe, were subdued by the end of the 7th/13th century by the Mamlūks who had checked the westward advances of the Mongols and had extended their own hegemony over Egypt and Syria in succession to the Ayyūbids. In the meantime, the Nizārī imamate had been handed down in the progeny of Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh, the last lord of Alamūt who was murdered by the Mongols in 655/1257. The early post-Alamūt centuries represent the most obscure phase in the history of the Nizārī Ismaʿili community, when the Nizārīs lived clandestinely in different regions under the local leadership of their *dāʿīs*. The Nizārī imams, too, were now living secretly in Persia without direct contacts with their followers. It was during these early post-Alamūt centuries that the Nizārī Ismaʿili imams and their followers began to disguise themselves under the mantle of Sufism, another Muslim esoteric tradition then flourishing in Persia in the form of diverse orders or *ṭarīqas*. By the end of the 9th/15th century when the Nizārī imams emerged at Anjudān, in central Persia, strong ties had been forged between Nizārī Ismaʿilism and Sufism. The Ismaʿili imam now appeared to the outside world as a Sufi *pīr* or *murshid* and his followers were his *murīds*, making it possible for the Persian Ismaʿilis to escape persecution in a hostile milieu.

The mediaeval period in the history of Nizārī Ismaʿilism came to an

end with what W. Ivanow has termed the Anjudān revival,³ a renaissance of Nizārī *da'wa* and literary activities. During this period, lasting about two centuries until the 11th/17th century, the Nizārī imams succeeded in asserting their central leadership over the various Nizārī communities. The literary and proselytizing activities of the Nizārī *da'wa* were also revived during this period. The Nizārī *da'wa* now achieved particular success on the Indian subcontinent, where large numbers of Hindus from the Lohāṇā caste converted to Isma'īlism, especially in Sind and Gujarāt, and they became locally known mainly as Khojas. The Indian Nizārī Isma'īlis developed their own indigenous literary tradition in the form of devotional hymns known as *gināns*, representing an interfacing of Isma'īli and Hindu elements. Originally transmitted orally, the *gināns* were in time collected and recorded in writing in different Indic languages, mostly in the Khojkī script which is unique to the Isma'īli Khojas. In modern times, the Nizārī Isma'īlis have benefited from the progressive policies and the network of institutions of their imams, who have acquired international fame under their hereditary title of Aga Khan. The Nizārī Isma'īlis are currently scattered in more than twenty-five countries of Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. Representing diverse ethnic, linguistic and literary traditions, the Nizārī Isma'īlis have remained united as a *jama'at* or religious community in their devotion to their spiritual leader or current imam (*hādīr imām*).

Most of what is now known about the history and doctrines of the Isma'īlis of the mediaeval times was not known until a few decades ago. This is simply because the Isma'īlis had been studied almost exclusively on the basis of sources and accounts produced by non-Isma'īlis who were generally hostile towards them. In particular, Sunni polemicists, starting with Ibn Rizām who flourished in the first half of the 4th/10th century, began to fabricate evidence that would lend support to the refutation of the Isma'īlis on specific doctrinal grounds. The 'Abbasids themselves continued to encourage the compilation of such anti-Isma'īli tracts, culminating in the writings of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/III) who addressed his polemics particularly to the Nizārī Isma'īlis. In his *al-Mustazhiri*, written in refutation of the Isma'īlis at the request of the 'Abbasid caliph al-Mustazhir (487–512/1094–III8), al-Ghazālī presented his own elaborate Isma'īli system of graded initiation and indoctrination leading to an ultimate stage of unbelief. The anti-Isma'īli authors also produced a number of travestied accounts in which they readily attributed all sorts of heretical beliefs to the Isma'īlis. These forgeries

circulated as genuine Ismaʿili works and were used as source materials by subsequent generations of heresiographers and polemicists. As a result, they contributed significantly to shaping the anti-Ismaʿili opinions of the Muslims at large.

In sum, by the 4th/10th century, a widespread anti-Ismaʿili literary campaign had come into existence in the Muslim world. This campaign, led by heresiographers and polemicists, aimed to discredit the entire Ismaʿili movement from its very beginnings. Concerted efforts were now persistently made by these anti-Ismaʿili sources to attribute all sorts of sinister objectives, heretical beliefs and immoral practices to the Ismaʿilis, while the ʿAbbasids themselves sponsored carefully designed campaigns to refute the ʿAlid ancestry of the Ismaʿili imams. There soon came into being a ‘black legend’ which portrayed Ismaʿilism as the arch-heresy (*ilhād*) *par excellence* in Islam, conceived by some non-ʿAlid imposters, perhaps even a Jewish magician, to destroy Islam from within. In time, this ‘black legend’, with forgotten origins, came to be accepted as an accurate description of Ismaʿili motives, beliefs and practices, leading to more anti-Ismaʿili polemical writings and contributing further to the anti-Ismaʿili stances of other Muslims.

The Europeans of the Crusader and later times added their own fanciful tales to the anti-Ismaʿili travesties and polemics produced by the Muslims. Mediaeval Europeans remained almost completely ignorant of Islam and its internal divisions, including Shiʿism, even though the Crusaders had come into contact with a number of Muslim communities in the Near East. In fact, the Nizārī Ismaʿilis of Syria were the first Shiʿi community with whom the Crusaders had diverse encounters from the opening decades of the 6th/12th century. However, it was some half a century later, in the time of Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān, the original ‘Old Man of the Mountain’ of the Crusaders, that occidental travellers and Crusader chroniclers began to collect some fragmentary information on the Nizārī Ismaʿilis of Syria. They were particularly impressed by the self-sacrificing behaviour of the Nizārī *fidāʾīs*, or devotees, who were sent on dangerous missions to eliminate the prominent enemies of their community, especially since almost any assassination then taking place in the central Islamic lands was attributed to the daggers of the Nizārī *fidāʾīs*.

However, proximity to the Syrian Nizārīs, who were soon made famous in Europe as the Assassins, did not motivate the Europeans to gather more accurate information on the teachings and practices of this oriental community. Instead, the Crusaders and their occidental observers now resorted to their imagination in order to explain to their

own satisfaction the reasons behind the devotion of the *fidāʾīs*. By the middle of the 7th/13th century, a number of Crusader chroniclers and other European sources claimed to possess reliable information on the secret practices of the Nizārī Ismaʿilis and their leader, the Old Man of the Mountain, especially regarding the recruitment and training of the *fidāʾīs*. These so-called Assassin legends developed gradually and in stages, and they culminated in the version popularized by Marco Polo (1254–1324) who synthesized a number of such legends with his own contribution in the form of a ‘secret garden of paradise’. The Venetian traveller whose tales were treated as eyewitness reports in mediaeval Europe, explained in great detail how the *fidāʾīs* were motivated for carrying out their missions by their deceitful chief who procured bodily pleasures for them in his secret garden of paradise into which they would be temporarily admitted under the influence of hashish or some such intoxicating potion. Henceforth, the Nizārī Ismaʿilis were readily reduced in mediaeval European sources to a sinister order of drugged assassins, bent on senseless murder and mischief. The anti-Ismaʿili ‘black legend’ of the Muslim authors, rooted in hostility, had now found its companion in the ‘Assassin legends’ of the mediaeval Europeans, rooted in ignorance and imaginative fantasies. And both sets of myths continued to circulate for centuries as accurate descriptions of the Ismaʿili teachings and practices in their respective eastern and western milieux.

The orientalists of the nineteenth century, led by Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), began their more scholarly study of Islam on the basis of the Islamic manuscripts which were written mainly by Sunni authors. As a result, the orientalists studied Islam according to the Sunni viewpoint, treating Shiʿism as the ‘heterodox’ version of Islam. The orientalists did identify the Ismaʿilis correctly as a Shiʿi Muslim community, but they were obliged to study the Ismaʿilis exclusively on the basis of the hostile Sunni sources and the fictitious occidental accounts of the Crusader times. Orientalism, too, had now lent its own seal of approval to the myths of the Ismaʿilis. In his ‘Memoir on the Dynasty of the Assassins’, de Sacy summarized all the information on the Nizārīs of the Alamūt period that he was then able to extract from Islamic sources and a number of Crusader chronicles. It is, therefore, not surprising that he endorsed, at least partially, some of the Assassin legends.⁴ Later, in the long introduction to his major work on the Druzes,⁵ de Sacy also reaffirmed the ‘black legend’ of the Sunni polemicists regarding the origins of Ismaʿilism. De Sacy’s distorted evaluation of the Ismaʿilis set

the frame within which other orientalists of the nineteenth century studied the mediaeval history of the Ismaʿilis. At the same time, misconceptions, negative biases, misinformation and plain fiction came to permeate another widely read book, the first of its kind based on oriental sources and devoted to the Nizārīs of the Alamūt period, written by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856);⁶ and the Ismaʿilis continued to be misrepresented and misjudged to various degrees in the studies of later orientalists such as Charles François Defrémery (1822–1883) and Michael Jan de Goeje (1836–1909). The myths of the Ismaʿilis had indeed found a new lease on life by Orientalism; and the deplorable state of the Ismaʿili studies remained essentially unchanged until the 1930s.

In the meantime, the recovery and study of genuine Ismaʿili sources was establishing a scholarly basis for Ismaʿili studies, a development that led to the initiation of nothing less than a revolution in this field of Islamic learning. These manuscript sources had begun to surface on a limited scale already during the nineteenth century. However, it was not until the opening decades of the twentieth century that more of such sources, hitherto guarded secretly in many private Ismaʿili collections, began to become more systematically available to public libraries and scholars from diverse provenances such as the Yemen and Central Asia. By the early 1920s, the number of Ismaʿili works known to orientalists was still relatively meagre.⁷

Subsequently, this crucial breakthrough for Ismaʿili studies acquired a new momentum through the efforts of a handful of scholars based in Bombay. The leading member of this group was Wladimir Ivanow (1886–1970), who played a key role in the modern progress in Ismaʿili studies.⁸ He succeeded through his network of Ismaʿili friends in India and elsewhere to identify a large number of Ismaʿili sources which he described for the first time in an annotated catalogue published in 1933.⁹ The initiation of modern scholarship in Ismaʿili studies may in fact be traced to the publication of this very catalogue, which attested to the hitherto unknown richness of the literary heritage of the Ismaʿilis. In the same year, Ivanow was instrumental in founding the Islamic Research Association in Bombay which produced a series of publications devoted mainly to Ismaʿili works. Ivanow's systematic efforts towards identifying, recovering, and studying Ismaʿili manuscripts led to the creation of the Ismaili Society of Bombay in 1946, under the patronage of Sir Sulṭān Muḥammad Shāh, Aga Khan III (1877–1957), the forty-eighth imam of the Nizārī Ismaʿilis. Ivanow acquired a large number of manuscripts for

the Ismaili Society's Library, also publishing numerous Isma'ili texts and monographs in the Society's series of publications. By 1963, when Ivanow published a second revised edition of his Isma'ili bibliography, many more manuscript sources had become known.¹⁰

In the meantime, besides Ivanow, several Isma'ili scholars, notably Zāhid 'Alī (1888–1958), Ḥusayn F. al-Hamdānī (1901–1962), and Asaf A. A. Fyzee (1899–1981), belonging to the Isma'ili Bohra community, had started to produce important studies based on their own private collections of Isma'ili manuscripts. These manuscripts were now made readily available also to non-Isma'ili scholars, who produced valuable studies and critical editions. In this connection, particular mention must be made of the Fatimid texts edited by the Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn (1901–1961) in his *Silsilat Makhtūṭāt al-Fāṭimiyyīn* published in Cairo, and the Isma'ili works of the Fatimid and later times edited with elaborate contextualizing introductions and textual analysis by Henry Corbin (1903–1978) and included in his renowned *Bibliothèque Iranienne* series published simultaneously in Paris and Tehran. By the mid-1950s progress in the field had already enabled Marshall Hodgson (1922–1968) to produce the first scholarly study of the Nizārī Isma'ilis of the Alamūt period,¹¹ a long overdue replacement for von Hammer's hostile and distorted tract on the subject. The modern progress in Isma'ili studies was now truly proceeding at a remarkable pace. By 1977, some 1,300 titles attributable to more than 200 Isma'ili authors had been identified in the monumental bibliography of Ismail Poonawala.¹² Many of these texts have now been published in critical editions, while numerous secondary studies of Isma'ili history and thought have been produced by three successive generations of Isma'ili scholars, including some of the contributors to this collective volume.

Modern scholarship in Isma'ili studies promises to continue unabated as the Isma'ilis themselves are becoming interested in studying their literary heritage and as the Institute of Ismaili Studies founded in London under the patronage of H. H. Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, the forty-ninth present imam of the Nizārī Isma'ilis, is preparing to make its own contribution to the field through its diverse programmes of research and publications, including its Ismaili Heritage Series. It is also noteworthy that the Institute's collection of some 1,000 Isma'ili manuscripts in Arabic,¹³ Persian and Khojki, including the bulk of the collections formerly in the possession of the Ismaili Society of Bombay and the Ismailia Association of Pakistan, representing the largest

collection of its kind in the West, is readily accessible to both Ismaʿili and non-Ismaʿili scholars and researchers.

This volume aims to make available to students, scholars, and Ismaʿilis themselves, some of the scattered results of modern scholarship in Ismaʿili studies on aspects of mediaeval Ismaʿili history and thought, especially on those themes or topics which have not received sufficient attention in contemporary scholarly literature. The leading chapter in Part I, devoted to the pre-Fatimid and the classical Fatimid periods in Ismaʿili history, was originally published in German in 1959. Here Professor Wilferd Madelung offers a somewhat updated English version of his earlier article, a landmark in modern Ismaʿili studies and a major contribution to our understanding of early Ismaʿilism in general and the relations between the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn and the Fatimids in particular. The Sunni heresiographers, polemicists, and historians had propagated the idea that the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn, notorious for their pillaging and anti-Islamic activities, were in collusion with the Fatimids, an idea that was reaffirmed by de Goeje and other scholars in modern times. In this classical study, which is still also the best modern survey of the relevant sources, Madelung shows that the leaders of the Qarmaṭī state of Baḥrayn could not have acted under orders from the Fatimids. The important findings of this study, published some thirty-five years ago, attest to the meticulous scholarship of Professor Madelung. In his second contribution, contained in chapter 4, Professor Madelung briefly deals with the more technical topic of the Intellect (*al-ʿaql*) in Ismaʿili thought on the basis of a major work by al-Sijistānī. In particular, he shows how the defective conditions of some Ismaʿili manuscripts could lead to erroneous interpretations of their subject matter.

More than any other modern scholar, Professor Heinz Halm has studied the earliest cosmological doctrine of the Ismaʿilis. He has in fact reconstructed this doctrine on the basis of fragmentary evidence preserved in later sources, devoting an entire monograph in German to the subject. In chapter 3, Professor Halm presents for the first time in the English language a summary of his study of this particular cosmology, which was later superseded by an Ismaʿili Neoplatonic one. In chapter 5, Halm takes up an entirely new field of investigation. Initiation into Ismaʿilism was a favourite subject matter for anti-Ismaʿili authors who produced imaginative travesties showing how the neophyte would be led by Ismaʿili *dāʿīs* through several stages of initiation until he reached the final stage of unbelief and atheism. In this chapter, the

first scholarly treatment of the subject, Professor Halm investigates the actual initiation process of the Ismaʿili adepts, using a variety of Ismaʿili and non-Ismaʿili sources. He also presents the evidence for the more advanced education programmes of the Ismaʿilis in Fatimid times, especially the Ismaʿili lectures known as the ‘sessions of wisdom’.

In chapter 6, Professor Ismail K. Poonawala takes up the subject of Ismaʿili legal thought and explains how Ismaʿili law became codified almost exclusively through the efforts of al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, the foremost jurist of the early Fatimid times. He discusses the chronological sequence of al-Nuʿmān’s legal compendia, published and unpublished, and examines both the main sources of Ismaʿili law and its agreements and disagreements with other schools of jurisprudence.

Much controversy has surrounded the questions of the authorship and the date of composition of the *Rasāʾil Iḳḩwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, frequently translated as the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*. The French orientalist Paul Casanova (1861–1926), who produced some valuable studies on the Ismaʿilis, was the first western scholar to have recognized, in 1898, the Ismaʿili origin of the *Epistles*. Using an astrological prediction contained in the *Epistles*, Casanova also tried to date this encyclopaedic work, concluding that it was compiled shortly before 439/1047. In chapter 7, Professor Abbas Hamdani, who has published several important articles on the subject, refutes Casanova’s dating on the basis of internal evidence contained in the *Epistles* and other relevant information.

Chapters 8 and 9 investigate how the Ismaʿilis perceived the ‘other’ during the early Fatimid times. The Ismaʿilis, in line with their cyclical view of the sacred history of mankind, in fact, made interesting attempts to accommodate the major religions known to them, such as Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, in their gnostic system of thought. Professor Azim Nanji presents selected evidence, drawn particularly from the *Rasāʾil Iḳḩwān al-Ṣafāʾ* and the writings of certain Ismaʿili thinkers, which would define an Ismaʿili perspective on the history of religions, reflecting above all the pluralistic and non-dogmatic approaches of the Ismaʿilis towards other religions. Dr Paul Walker, in a complementary study, introduces the only known Ismaʿili heresiography on Muslim sects, which has been discovered only recently. This work, called *Kitāb al-shajara*, was produced by an obscure Khurāsānī *dāʿī*, Abū Tammām, who flourished in the first half of the 4th/10th century. As a follower of the *dāʿī* al-Nasafī, Abū Tammām probably belonged to the dissident branch of Ismaʿilism. In

contrast with other Muslim heresiographers, Abū Tammām seems to have been more concerned with understanding and explaining sectarian differences than with refuting and condemning the ‘other’; his descriptions of several sects are, in fact, unique. As a result, his book promises to be highly valuable for the study of Muslim ‘sects’ and the heresiographical tradition about them.

The mediaeval phase of Nizārī Ismaʿili history, especially its Alamūt period, provides the focus of Part II, which opens with a study of the origins of Nizārī Ismaʿilism. Adopting a somewhat novel approach to this subject, and instead of treating the Nizārī Ismaʿili movement merely as a schismatic movement, chapter 10 investigates the complex circumstances leading to the anti-Saljuq revolt of the Persian Ismaʿilis under the leadership of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, who played a key role also in the establishment of the independent Nizārī *daʿwa* and state. In particular, an attempt is made to identify the ‘Ismaʿili’ and the ‘Iranian’ roots of this revolt, also tracing these roots to earlier religio-political and social traditions of protest. This chapter also looks at certain political and doctrinal developments during the initial decades of the Nizārī history which proved crucial for the survival of the Nizārī community and state under highly adverse circumstances of the early Alamūt period. In a complementary study in chapter 11, Dr Carole Hillenbrand looks at the Saljuq’s attitudes and conduct towards the Ismaʿilis of Alamūt during the same period of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ’s leadership. Examining closely the relevant historiographical evidence, including especially the reports of the general chroniclers such as Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn al-Jawzī, she also draws attention to some hitherto unknown anti-Ismaʿili biases of these sources in connection with their reporting of particular Saljuq-Ismaʿili encounters.

Quhistān (Persian, Kūhistān) in southeastern Khurāsān, was the second most important territory, after Rūdbār in Daylam, of the Nizārī Ismaʿili state in Persia during the Alamūt period. The Nizārīs of Quhistān possessed the authority of a local chief, called *muḥtasham*, who was appointed from Alamūt but enjoyed a great deal of local initiative in managing the affairs of the community there. From early on, these *muḥtashams* were confronted with the hostile reactions of the Saljuqs and other rulers of Khurāsān and adjacent regions, who could not tolerate the success of the Nizārī Ismaʿilis in their midst. Drawing on his vast knowledge of Khurāsān and Sīstān or Nīmruz in eastern Persia, and their regional Persian chronicles, Professor Edmund Bosworth presents in chapter 12 an overview of the encounters between the Quhistānī

Nizārīs and their ruling neighbours to the south, the Naṣrīd Maliks of Sīstān and their successors, during the Alamūt period.

Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's religious affiliation and the circumstances of his long stay in the Nizārī Isma'īli strongholds of Persia have been subjects of different interpretations throughout centuries. The same issues have been debated in the contemporary writings on this controversial Muslim philosopher, theologian, and astronomer. While al-Ṭūsī's modern Ithnā'asharī biographers generally contend that he was kept amongst the Isma'īlis against his will, others reject this view and further argue that in fact he converted to Isma'īlism voluntarily during that same period. In chapter 13, Professor Hamid Dabashi takes a fresh look at these issues. Arguing that too much emphasis on the 'sectarian' affiliations of major intellectual and political figures of mediaeval times only distorts the complexity of their characters, he examines al-Ṭūsī's character and his Isma'īli connection from the perspective of a philosopher/vizier, simultaneously concerned with matters of knowledge/power or philosophy/politics, and as such representing an important mode in Persian political culture.

In chapter 14, Dr Charles Melville examines the curious reports of the Sunni chroniclers concerning the Mamlūk employment of *fidā'īs* or *fidāwīs* in the wider context of Mamlūk–Mongol relations during the early decades of the 8th/14th century. More specifically, he analyzes the detailed reports on how the Mamlūk sultan on numerous occasions despatched *fidāwīs* to Mongol Persia for the assassination of a Mamlūk defector there. Doubtless, assassins, and probably professional ones, were sent on these missions. However, the term *fidāwī*, linked so closely with the Nizārīs of earlier times, seems to have been used rather loosely in the Mamlūk sources in the sense of a 'murderer', rather than an 'Isma'īli *fidāwī*'. By that time, the Syrian Nizārīs no longer had any *fidāwīs*, and the Mamlūk sultan could have recruited such *fidāwīs* from anywhere. It is also possible, however, that the Syrian Nizārīs were forced on occasion to supply individuals for the missions in question. That the chroniclers evidently identify the Syrian Nizārī Isma'īli community of the Mamlūk times as the sole source of supply for the sultan's would-be 'assassins' clearly attests to the durability of the legends and hostile rumours regarding the practices of the Nizārī Isma'īlis of the Alamūt period.

In chapter 15, Professor Ali Asani re-examines the traditional views on the 'authorship' of the *gīnāns*, the devotional poems that enjoy a

‘sacred’ status within the Nizārī Isma‘ili Khoja community. The *gināns*, as it is well-known, contain instructions on a range of themes and topics related to religious obligations, moral issues, and the spiritual quest of the soul. The authorships of the *gināns*, which were initially transmitted orally for several centuries, are attributed by the Khoja tradition to a few early missionaries or *pīrs* who converted the Hindus to Isma‘ili Islam on the Indian subcontinent. In this thought-provoking essay, Professor Asani discusses the complex issues stemming from the traditional interpretation of the ‘authorship’ of the *gināns*, including the significance of their *bhanītās* or signature-verses, and demonstrates that a better understanding of this subject requires a new approach that would allow for a clear distinction between ‘authority’, in the sense of invoking someone’s seal of approval for a work, and ‘authorship’, his actual authoring of that work in the modern sense of the term.

The final chapter 16, contributed by Professor Abbas Amanat, stands apart from other studies in this volume. It deals with the Nuḳṭawiyya, an obscure esoteric sect that emerged as a significant religio-political movement in Ṣafawid Persia and, later, briefly enjoyed some eminence in Mughal India. The Nuḳṭawiyya, as well as their parent sect of the Ḥurūfiyya, cannot be regarded as part of the spectrum of Isma‘ili communities. Maḥmūd Pisīkhānī (or Pasīkhānī), the founder of the Nuḳṭawī sect who died around 831/1427–1428, in fact claimed to have founded a new religion. However, the Ḥurūfīs and the Nuḳṭawīs did belong to those esoteric and mystic movements of post-Mongol Persia which were influenced by Isma‘ilism. Indeed, Ivanow cited the Nuḳṭawiyya among the post-Mongol sectarian movements influenced by Isma‘ilism.¹⁴ But the matter has been barely investigated by modern scholars, mainly because Nuḳṭawī writings have not survived. As the first scholarly attempt of its kind, Professor Amanat has pieced together in this chapter a good deal of information on the ideas propagated by Maḥmūd Pisīkhānī. His study demonstrates that the central Nuḳṭawī doctrines, such as its materialist type of metempsychosis, were fundamentally at variance with Isma‘ili teachings. There is also the crucial matter of Maḥmūd’s ‘un-Islamic’ claim to prophethood, not to mention the fact that the Nuḳṭawīs did not uphold the Shi‘i doctrine of the imamate so central to Isma‘ilism. However, Isma‘ili antecedents may be detected in the Nuḳṭawī cyclical view of time and hierohistory. The Nuḳṭawīs also relied heavily on esoteric (*bāṭini*) exegesis which had found its fullest elaboration among the Isma‘ilis.

FARHAD DAFTARY

NOTES

- 1 L. Massignon, 'Mutanabbi, devant le siècle Ismaélien de l'Islam', in *Al Mutanabbi: Recueil publié à l'occasion de son millénaire* (Beirut, 1936), p. 1.
- 2 Paul E. Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 13 ff., 30 ff., 61, 147 ff.
- 3 W. Ivanow, *Brief Survey of the Evolution of Ismailism* (Leiden, 1952), p. 29.
- 4 Silvestre de Sacy, 'Mémoire sur la dynastie des Assassins, et sur l'Étymologie de leur Nom', *Mémoires de l'Institut Royal de France*, 4 (1818), pp. 1–84; English trans., 'Memoir on the Dynasty of the Assassins, and on the Etymology of their Name', in F. Daftary, *The Assassin Legends* (London, 1994), pp. 136–188.
- 5 Silvestre de Sacy, *Exposé de la religion des Druzes* (Paris, 1838), vol. 1, introduction pp. 1–246.
- 6 Joseph von Hammer, *Die Geschichte der Assassinen* (Stuttgart-Tübingen, 1818); French trans., *Histoire de l'Ordre des Assassins*, tr. J. J. Hellert and P. A. de la Nourais (Paris, 1833; reprinted, Paris, 1961); English trans., *The History of the Assassins*, tr. O. C. Wood (London, 1835; reprinted, New York, 1968).
- 7 See, for instance, V. A. Ivanov, 'Ismailitskiya rukopisi Aziatskago Muzeya', *Bulletin de l'Académie des Sciences de Russie*, 6 série, 11 (1917), pp. 359–386; English summary in E. Denison Ross, 'W. Ivanow, Ismaili MSS in the Asiatic Museum', *JRAS* (1919), pp. 429–435, and L. Massignon, 'Esquisse d'une bibliographie Qarmate', in *A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne*, ed. T. W. Arnold and R. A. Nicholson (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 329–338.
- 8 See F. Daftary, 'W. Ivanow: A Biographical Notice', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 8 (1972), pp. 241–244; also his 'Bibliography of the Publications of the late W. Ivanow', *Islamic Culture*, 45 (1971), pp. 56–67, and 56 (1982), pp. 239–240, and 'Anjoman-e Esmā'īlī', *EIR*, vol. 2, p. 84.
- 9 W. Ivanow, *A Guide to Ismaili Literature* (London, 1933). See also P. Kraus, 'La Bibliographie Ismaélienne de W. Ivanow', *Revue d'Etudes Islamiques*, 6 (1932), pp. 483–490.
- 10 See W. Ivanow, *Ismaili Literature: A Bibliographical Survey* (Tehran, 1963).
- 11 M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizārī Ismā'īlīs against the Islamic World* (The Hague, 1955).
- 12 I. K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismā'īlī Literature* (Malibu, Calif., 1977).
- 13 See A. Gacek, *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the Institute of Ismaili Studies* (London, 1984). Catalogues of the Institute's collections of Persian Ismā'īlī manuscripts and the *gīnāns* have not been published yet. The Institute also holds photocopies of the Ismā'īlī manuscripts donated by Fyzee to the Bombay University Library; see M. Goriawala, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Fyzee Collection of Ismaili Manuscripts* (Bombay, 1965).
- 14 See Ivanow, *Ismaili Literature*, pp. 12–13, 188–190; now also see H. Algar, 'Nuḳṭawīyya', *EI2*, vol. 8, pp. 114–117.