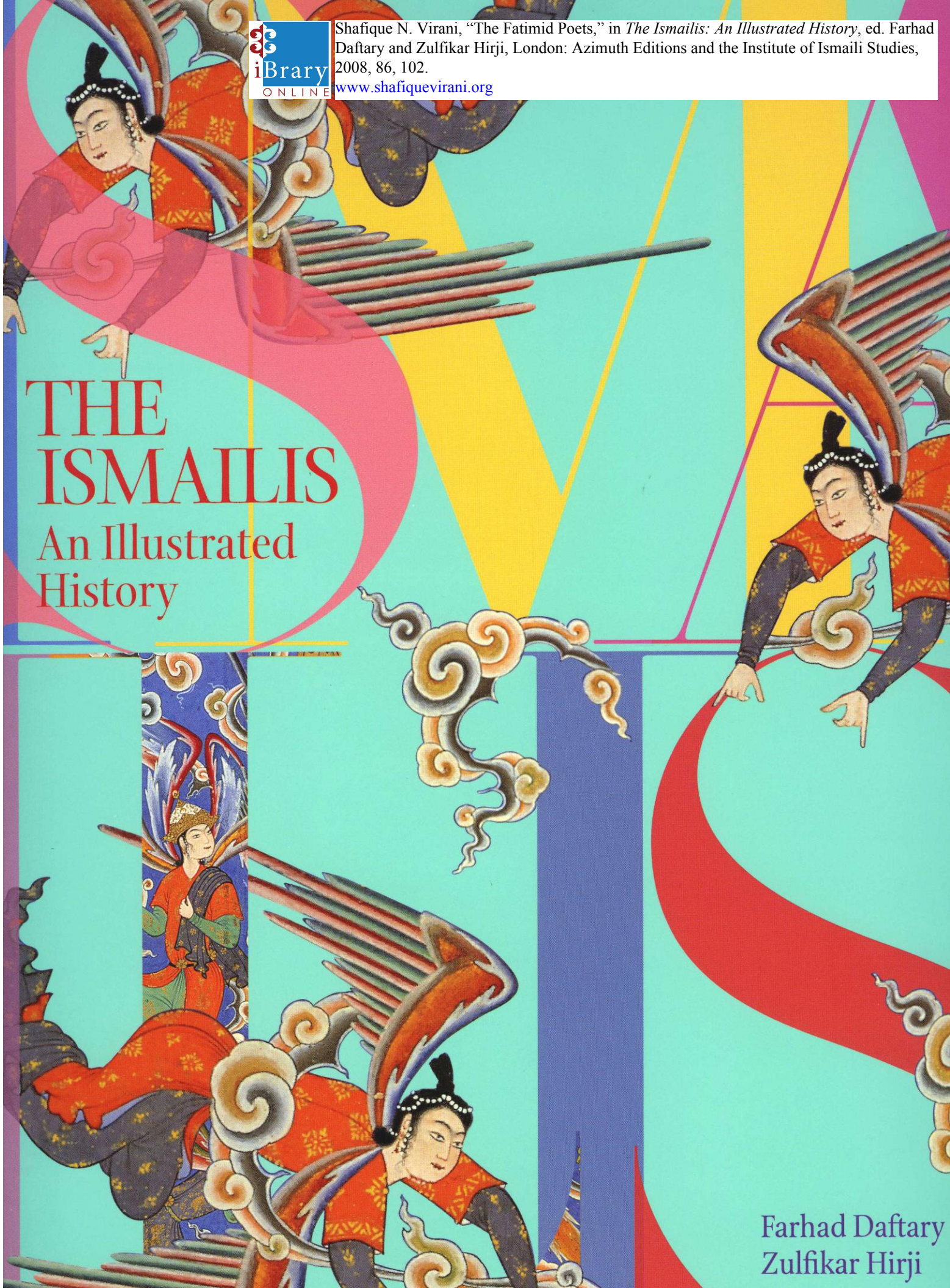


THE ISMAILIS

An Illustrated History

Farhad Daftary
Zulfikar Hirji



Al-Qahira, the Victorious Al-Azhar, the Radiant

Imam al-Mu'izz made meticulous preparations for the conquest of Egypt. General Jawhar b. 'Abd Allah, a freedman who had risen through the ranks of the Fatimid service, was chosen to lead the Egyptian expedition. Jawhar entered Egypt in 358/969, and set up camp outside Fustat, Egypt's first capital under the Fatimids. This camp rapidly developed into a city, initially called Mansuriyya like its namesake in Ifriqiya, the last Fatimid capital in North Africa.

Al-Mu'izz himself had supervised the planning of the new city which, like its North African predecessor, was given northern and southern gates called Bab al-Futuh and Bab Zuwayla, respectively, as well as a mosque (later also used as a major centre for teaching and learning) which was named al-Azhar (the Radiant). Jawhar built two palaces, for the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz and his heir-designate, separated by a large area for public parades and ceremonies. Special lodgings and buildings were erected for government departments and the Fatimid army. Jawhar ruled over Egypt as the Fatimid viceroy for four years. In 362/973, accompanied by the entire Fatimid family, Ismaili notables, the Kutama chieftains, as well as the Fatimid treasuries, and with al-Qadi al-Nu'man riding at his side, al-Mu'izz himself rode in triumph to Egypt, crossed the Nile and took possession of the royal palaces in his new capital. The new Fatimid capital was renamed 'al-Qahira al-Mu'izziyya' (the Victorious One of al-Mu'izz), or al-Qahira (Cairo) for short. With this move the North African phase of the Fatimid Caliphate (297–362/909–973) was now ended. The Fatimid conquest of Egypt was immediately lauded and glorified by Ibn Hani al-Andalusi (d.362/973), the chief court poet to al-Mu'izz and the foremost poet of the Fatimid era. Ibn Hani, renowned as the 'Mutanabbi of the West', in reference to the poetic genius of one of his predecessors, extolled the gallantry of Jawhar who led the Fatimids to victory in Egypt:

*If the Abbasids ask, 'Has Egypt been taken?!'
Tell them, 'It is done!'*

*Jawhar is in the vicinity of Alexandria
And has received the glad tidings:
Victory is his! [SV]*

The sense of optimism and the rich cultural ambience of this period are also demonstrated in a more spiritual composition by the Fatimid prince Tamim (d.375/985), one of the sons of Imam al-Mu'izz and a talented poet. The poem refers to the spring festival which became the occasion for great public ceremony in the Fatimid era, when the Imam would proceed from his palace to the banks of the Nile where he would preside over a great feast and bestow gifts. The poem also finds a spiritual meaning in the signs of nature, seeing the source of the physical blessings of spring in the Imam's munificence and spiritual light:

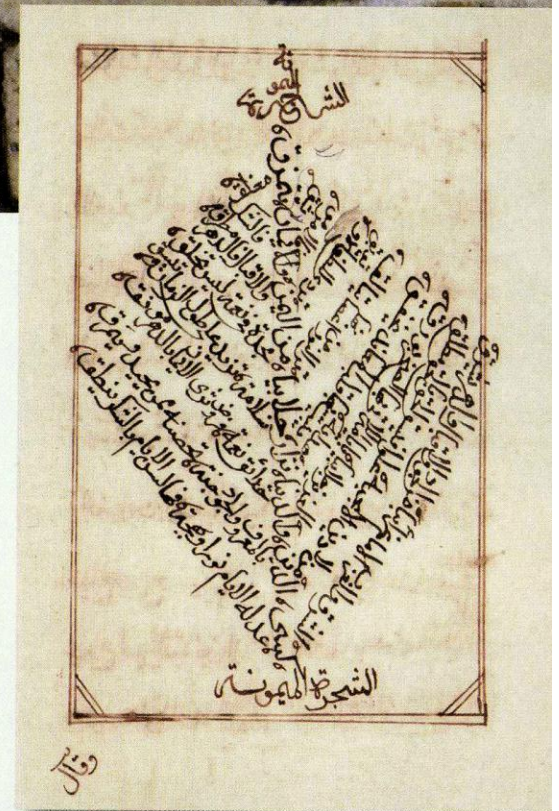
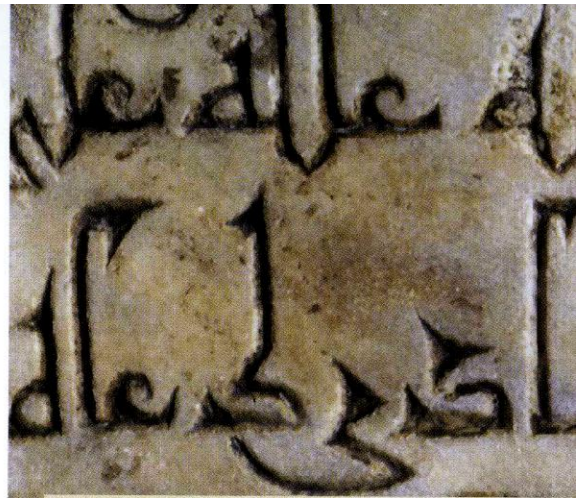
*Composing an ode in praise of you
Beautiful words spring to mind
But praising someone other than you
My tongue falters, the words lie
For you are inherently gracious, exalted
Such gifts are innate to your very nature
Your right hand scatters blessed rain upon the creation
Your forehead is dawn itself, your face a glittering star
You are the illustrious one through whose light we are illuminated
Our beloved, for whom we would give our very lives
Indeed, if the spring festival of Nawruz is to be filled with joy
It is only through your light that it becomes resplendent
God's blessings upon you, O Son of the Prophet
For indeed you are a time-tested sword to fight life's sorrows [SV]*

The Ismaili *da'wa* outside the Fatimid *dawla*

The activities of the Ismaili *da'wa* were particularly successful in regions outside the Fatimid dominions, where Shi'i traditions had a long history. These activities reached their peak in the reign of Imam al-Mustansir (427–487/1036–1094), even after the rise of the Sunni Saljuqs, who replaced the Shi'i Buyids as the keepers and protectors of the Abbasids in 447/1055. The *da'is* won many converts in Iraq and also in different parts of Persia and Central Asia.

One of the most prominent *da'is* of this period was al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi (d.470/1078), who played an active role in the affairs of the Fatimid *dawla* and Ismaili *da'wa*. He has left an invaluable account of his early life and career in his *Sira*, which also reveals his central role as an intermediary between the Fatimids and the Turkish military commander al-Basasiri who briefly led the Fatimid cause in Iraq against the Saljuqs. Al-Basasiri seized Baghdad in 450/1058 and had the *khutba* read there for a whole year in the name of al-Mustansir before he was eventually defeated by the Saljuqs. Al-Mu'ayyad also established closer relations between Cairo and several of the *jaziras*, especially Yaman. Poems are preserved in which the Imams pay tribute to their disciples in the *da'wa*. It was upon receiving a versified message from al-Mu'ayyad that the Imam al-Mustansir bi'llah replied to him in eight verses in the same metre and rhyme as the original composition, and praised him as 'a towering mountain of knowledge before which climbers are helpless'.

By the time of al-Mustansir, the leadership of the *da'wa* in Yaman had fallen into the hands of the *da'i* 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi, an important chieftain of the Banu Hamdan in the mountain region of Haraz. The *da'i* 'Ali al-Sulayhi (d.459/1067) rose up in Haraz in 439/1047, marking the effective foundation of the Sulayhid dynasty which ruled over various parts of Yaman as vassals of the Fatimids until 532/1138. From the latter part of the reign of 'Ali's son and successor, Ahmad al-Mukarram (d.477/1084), effective authority in the Sulayhid state came into the hands of Ahmad's consort al-Malika al-Sayyida Arwa (d.532/1138). She played an increasingly important role in the affairs of the Yamani *da'wa*, culminating in her appointment as the *hujja* of Yaman by al-Mustansir. This represented the first assignment of a high rank in the *da'wa* hierarchy to a woman. The Sulayhids also played an active part in the renewed efforts of the Fatimids to spread the *da'wa* in the Indian subcontinent.



top

A marble panel, probably used as a foundation stone for a building, bearing the names and titles of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir and the date 477/1084–1085.

above

Page from a 13th/19th century copy of the *Diwan* of al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi. The volume contains praise-poetry in honour of the Fatimid Imams and *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation) of the Qur'an.