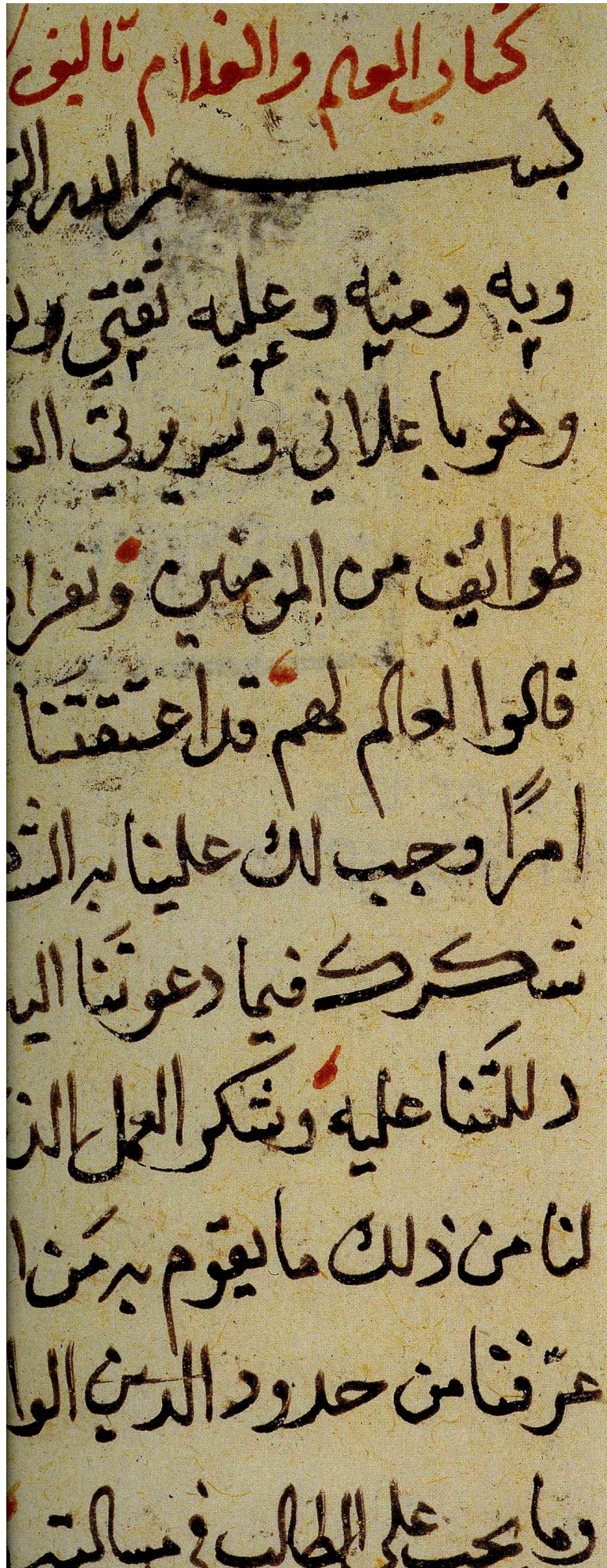


# THE ISMAILIS

An Illustrated History

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It was in this early period of the *da'wa* that *The Book of the Master and the Disciple* was produced. This text, written by Ja'far b. Mansur al-Yaman (d. circa 346/957), is considered Arabic literature's most accomplished example of the full-scale narrated dramatic dialogue. The theme of the tale is universal – the quest for truth and the search for meaning in life. However the text is also a vital source for the activities of the *da'wa* and a testimony to the literary creativity of the Ismailis before the establishment of the Fatimid state. The subject matter of the book is a series of encounters between spiritual seekers including the youthful Salih, and the learned mentors, the *da'is*, who guide them along the path of enlightenment. Salih's first true understanding as a seeker is that he knows nothing of reality. Everything he thinks he knows is only the creation of his own mind, or the fallible minds of others. Salih soon realizes that he must seek out the one who does know; one who is blessed with knowledge that is divinely inspired. This infallible knowledge, he comes to understand, is the source of life itself. 'How did water become a symbol for knowledge?' he asks his teacher. The teacher responds, 'Because, as water is life for every living thing, similarly knowledge is life for every knower.' Thus it becomes apparent that, as one must seek the source of water to receive it fresh and pure, one must also search for the source of knowledge, who is appointed by God in every age as the Prophet or, after him, the Imam of the time. Upon attaining spiritual knowledge, the adepts are duty bound to seek out those who also thirst for it and convey it to them. The teacher, remembering the proverb 'the most excellent of good deeds is giving life to the dead', reflects at the beginning of the tale regarding his own master:

*I too was dead, and he gave me life; I was ignorant, and he gave me knowledge. I was not the first person to be ignorant, such that I attained knowledge before everyone else; nor am I the last one to be ignorant, so that the process of (spiritual) teaching will come to an end. Therefore, it behoves me, because of my gratitude for this blessing, to pass on this (divine) trust to those who come after me, just as I received it from those who preceded me.*

Ja'far's works were held in great esteem by his Ismaili successors. The erudite Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (d. after 411/1020), for example, considered Ja'far to be one of the most learned shaykhs among his predecessors.

By 280/893, following Ibn al-Hawshab's instructions, the *da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i was already active amongst the Kutama Berbers in the Lesser Kabylia mountains of the Maghrib (North Africa), the region in which the Ismaili Imams would eventually establish their first state.