

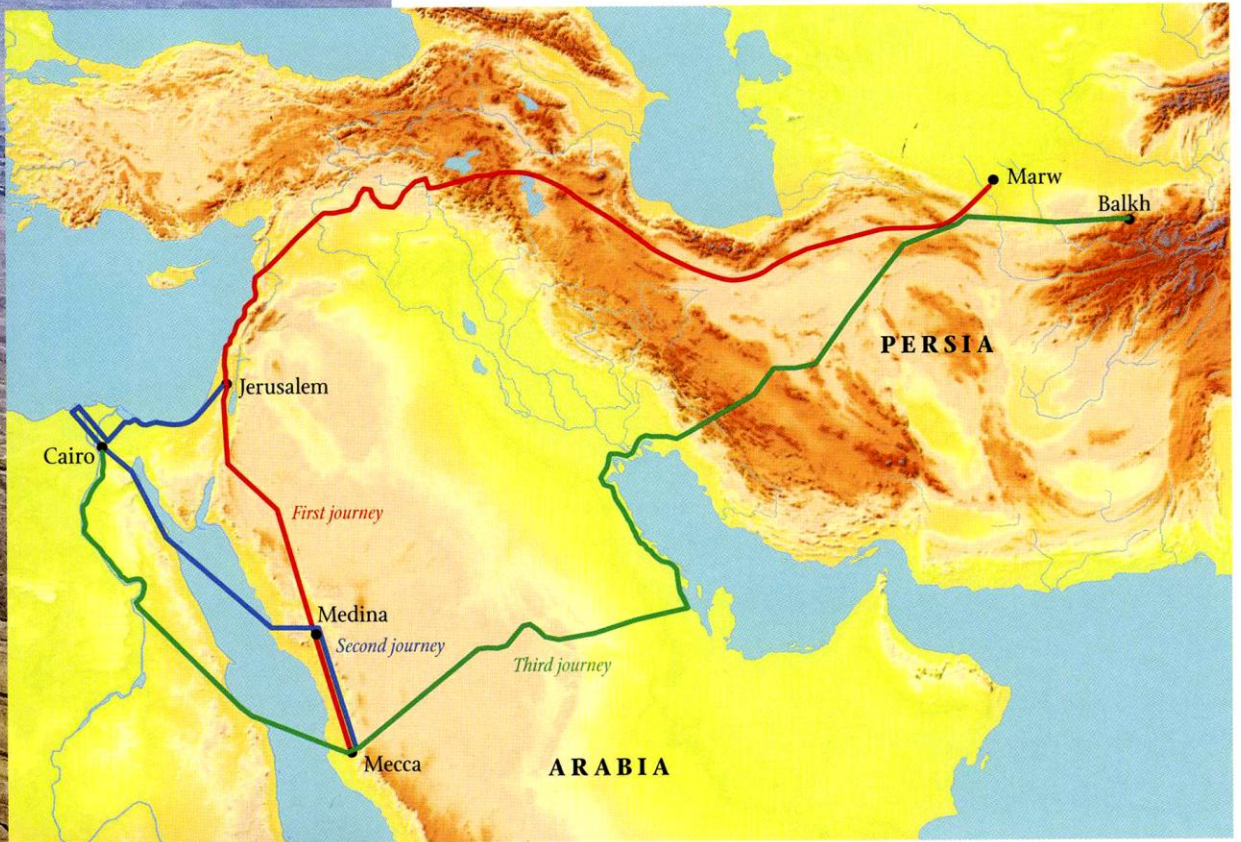
# THE ISMAILIS

An Illustrated History

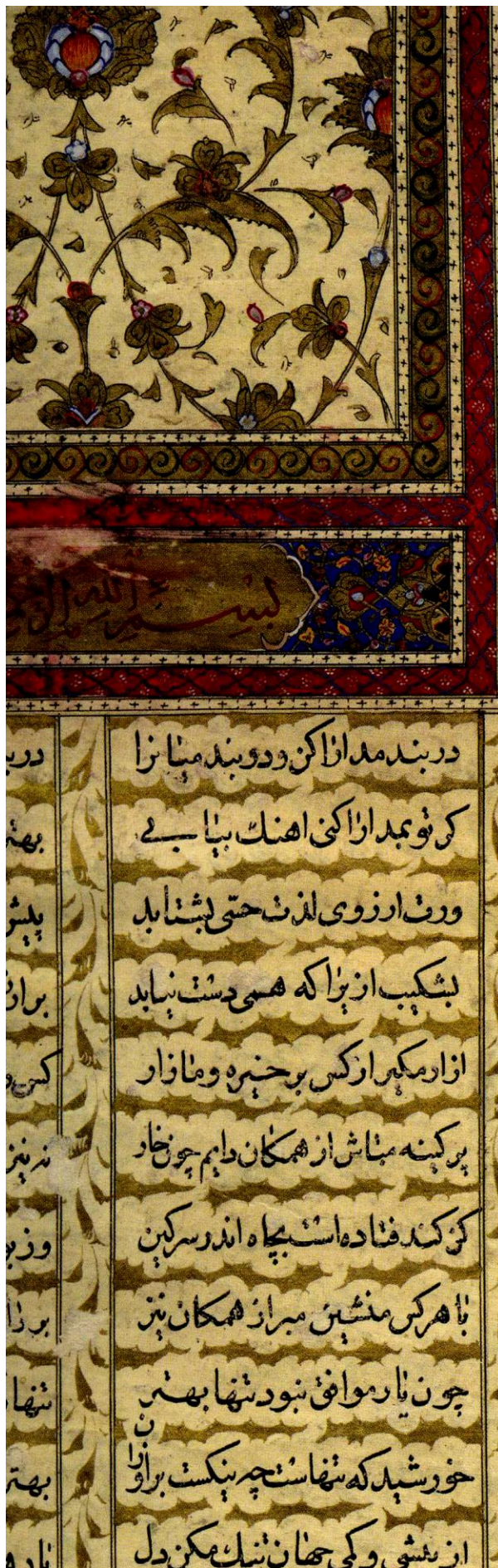
Farhad Daftary  
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By the early 460s/1070s, the Ismailis of Persia were under the leadership of 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Attash who had his secret headquarters in Isfahan, the capital of the Saljuq Sultans, the heads of the ruling dynasty, in central Persia. In Badakhshan and other eastern parts of the Iranian world, too, the *da'wa* had continued to spread even after the downfall of the Samanids in 395/1005. One of the most prominent *da'is* of Imam al-Mustansir's time, Nasir-i Khusraw (d. after 462/1070) played an important part in the propagation of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Central Asia as the *Hujja* of Khurasan. The Ismailis of Badakhshan, which nowadays is divided between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, along with their offshoot groups in the Hindu Kush region, situated in Hunza and other northern areas of Pakistan, as well as in the Sinkiang (Xinjiang) region of China, regard Shah Sayyid Nasir-i Khusraw as the founder of their communities. His writings form one of the central expressions of their faith. Nasir's varied works include his autobiographical ode. During a month-long sojourn in Juzjan (where he ruefully admits to drinking excessively) the poet experienced a vision that transformed his life:

The Travels of Nasir-i-Khusraw



*One night I was approached in a dream by someone who chided me, 'How long will you drink this brew that destroys human intellect?' 'Tis better to be sober.' I responded, 'The sages have failed to find a better elixir to drive away the sorrows of the world.' He said, 'Never has drunkenness brought peace of mind. Can one who leads people to stupor be called a sage? Seek that which increases intellect and wisdom.' I asked, 'Where can I find such a thing?' He replied, 'Those who seek shall find.' And then, pointing in the direction of the qibla, he fell silent. [sv]*



Nasir rose suddenly, the vision still vivid in his mind. He lamented, 'I have woken up from last night's dream; but now I must awaken from a dream that has lasted forty years!'" He resolved to forsake his careless ways, knowing that he would never attain true happiness until he did so. Resigning from service in the government of the Saljuq Turks, he set out on his famous journey in search of truth, travelling westwards to the lands of the Fatimid Caliphate. In a poem in which he recounts what plagued him, he writes:

*Awake from your complacent sleep, Oh you who have slumbered forty years! Can't you see that not one of your friends remains here?... When the celestial spheres measured out forty-two years for me, my enquiring soul began to seek wisdom. I listened to the learned expound the sciences of the spheres, time and elements, read book after book. I found myself more learned than those around me, but said, 'There must certainly be someone superior!' Like the hawk among birds, the camel among beasts, the date palm among trees, the ruby among jewels, the Qur'an among books, the Ka'ba among houses, like the heart in the human body, the sun among stars. My spirit was vexed with such ponderings and thoughts, this pensive soul enquired of every thinker: I sought from Shafi'i, Maliki, and the words of the Hanafis the path to God's chosen one, the ruler of the world, the guide. Each one indicated a different path – one summoned to Tartary, one to the folk of Barbary. When I asked 'why' and 'wherefore' and desired strong proofs, they squirmed in helplessness, this one blind, the other deaf.*

Nasir concluded that God, in his mercy, always vouchsafed for humankind a source of infallible knowledge. This belief led him to swear his allegiance to the Imam of his time, the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir. Like so many Ismailis before and since he attributed his spiritual transformation to the Imam:

*When the light of the Imam of the time shone upon my soul  
 Even though I was dark as night, I became the glorious sun  
 The supreme name is the Imam of the time  
 By which I ascended, Venus-like, from the earth to heaven [sv]*

Nasir-i Khusraw's travels are recorded in his celebrated *Safar-nama* and his descriptions of Cairo and the lands of the Fatimid Caliphate are an invaluable first-hand account of the era. Whilst in Cairo furthering his Ismaili education, he longed to enter the palace of the Caliph. In 441/1094 he was able to see the preparations for the feast for the end of Ramadan:

*Taken by my friend [a clerk of the Caliph], as I entered the door to the hall, I saw constructions, galleries, and porticos that would take too long to describe adequately. There were twelve square structures, built one next to the other, each more dazzling than the last. Each measured one hundred cubits square, and one was a thing sixty cubits square with a dais placed the entire length of the building at the height of four ells, on three sides all of gold, with hunting and sporting scenes depicted thereon and also an inscription*

*in marvellous calligraphy. All the carpets and pillows were of Byzantine brocade and buqalamun [an iridescent textile produced in Egypt at the time], each woven exactly to the measurements of its place. There was an indescribable latticework balustrade of gold along the sides. Behind the dais and next to the wall were silver steps. The dais itself was such that if this book were nothing from beginning to end but a description of it, words would still not suffice. They said that fifty thousand maunds of sugar were appropriated for this day for the Sultan's [Caliph's] feast. For decoration on the banquet table I saw a confection like an orange tree, every branch and leaf of which had been executed in sugar, and thousands of images and statuettes in sugar.*

Nasir-i Khusraw has also come to be closely associated with the ceremony of *Chiragh Rawshan* that continues to be performed by the Ismailis of Badakhshan and the surrounding regions, and he has a central place in much of their subsequent literature as can be seen in an anonymous poem of Badakhshan:

*If you read the poetry of Nasir-i Khusraw  
Your soul shall be touched by a ray of light from the knowledge of faith  
If you follow the words of Nasir  
You shall become a gnostic of God, versed in faith's path  
If you are possessed of intellect, in every ode of his  
You will behold wonders anew with the eyes of spiritual meaning  
If you sincerely recognize your Mawla  
A thousand times, thank and remember him  
The words of Nasir-i Khusraw consist of mysteries and realities  
Recognize this with the eyes of your heart, hearken with soul and intellect  
[sv]*

It was through the work of dedicated and highly trained *da'is* like Nasir-i Khusraw, men of exceptional abilities and devotion, that the Ismaili *da'wa* spread and became firmly established in many regions over such a wide geographical area. Thus by the time the Qarmati state in Bahrayn had been finally uprooted in 470/1077, by local tribal chieftains of eastern Arabia, other Qarmati groups in Persia, Iraq and elsewhere, had either disintegrated or switched their allegiance to the Ismaili *da'wa* of the Fatimids. There was now, once again, only a single unified Ismaili *da'wa* under the supreme leadership of the Ismaili Imam who ruled from Cairo as the Fatimid Caliph.



*left*

The Ismaili *da'i* Nasir-i Khusraw began his career in the employ of the Saljuq Sultans. The Saljuqs were a Turkic dynasty of Central Asian nomadic origins. They became the rulers of the eastern Islamic lands in 435/1044. By 447/1055, the Saljuqs took Baghdad and established themselves as the new protectors of the Abbasid Caliphate and Sunni Islam. The main branch of the Saljuq house maintained control over Persia, whereas another branch

ruled over northwestern Anatolia. The figure shown here was made in Saljuq Persia around 597/1200.

*opposite left*

A page from a 19th-century copy of Nasir-i Khusraw's *Diwan*, a work comprised of odes (many autobiographical) composed in the *qasida* form.