



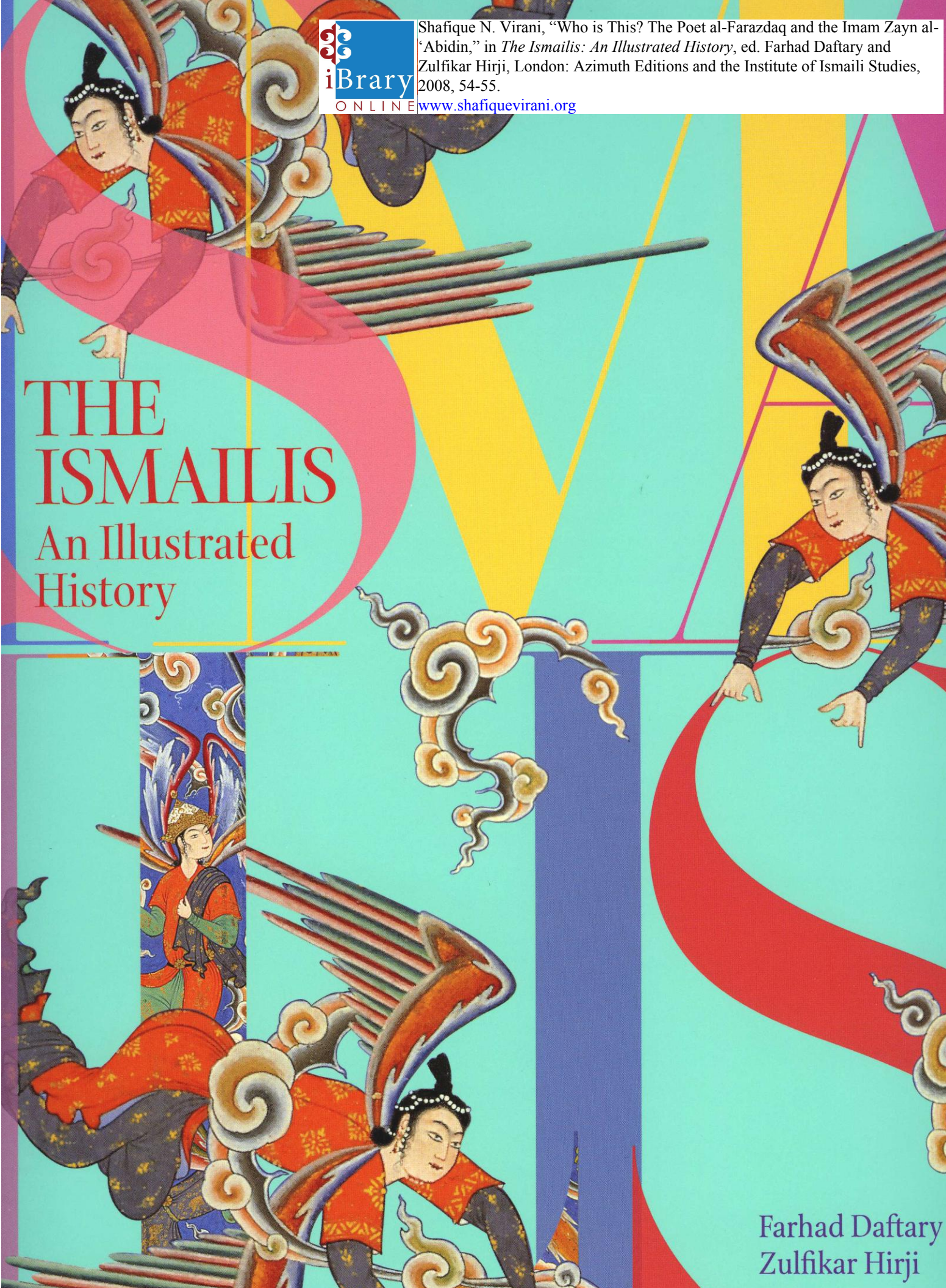
Shafique N. Virani, "Who is This? The Poet al-Farazdaq and the Imam Zayn al-'Abidin," in *The Ismailis: An Illustrated History*, ed. Farhad Daftary and Zulfikar Hirji, London: Azimuth Editions and the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2008, 54-55.

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THE ISMAILIS

An Illustrated History

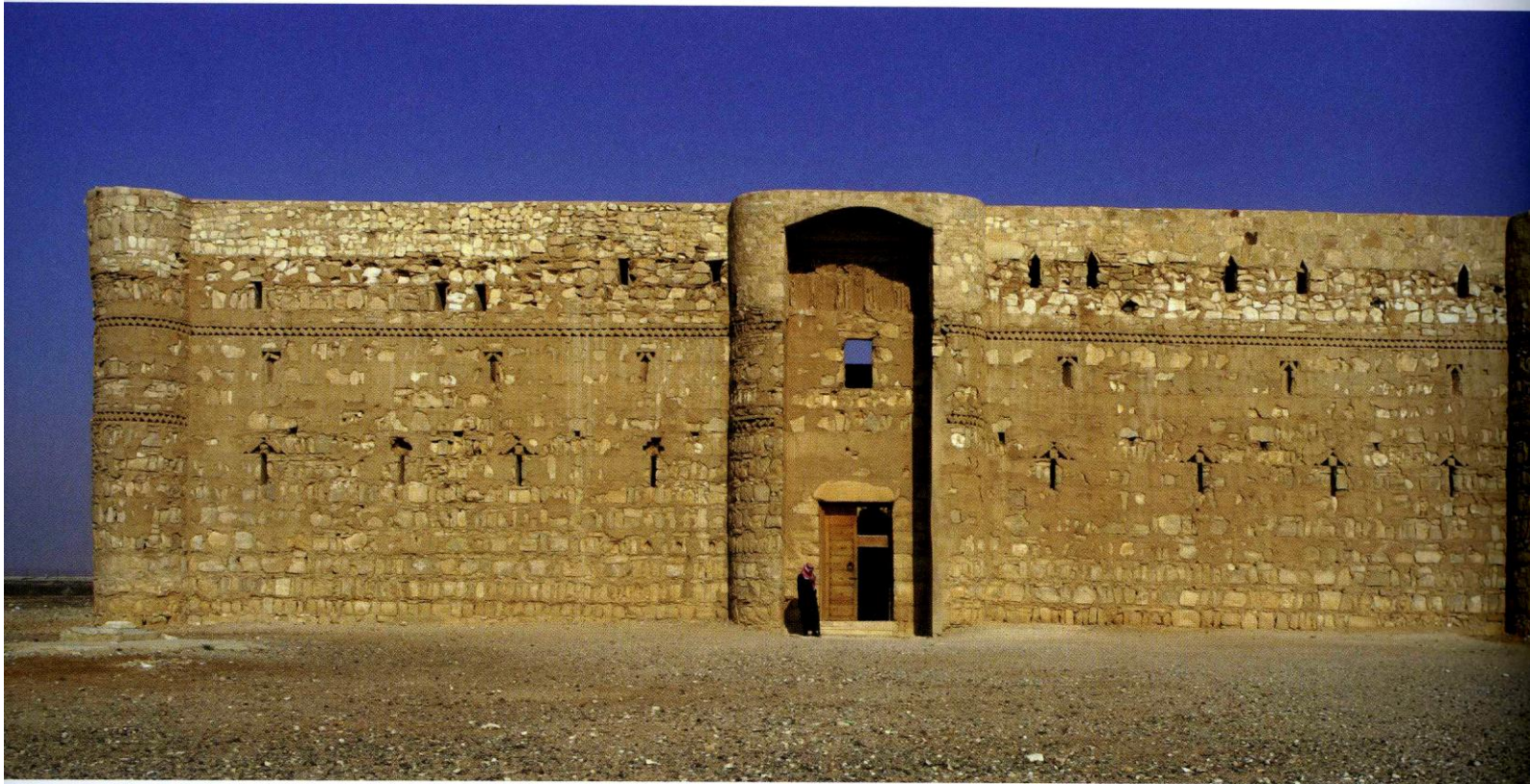
Farhad Daftary
Zulfikar Hirji



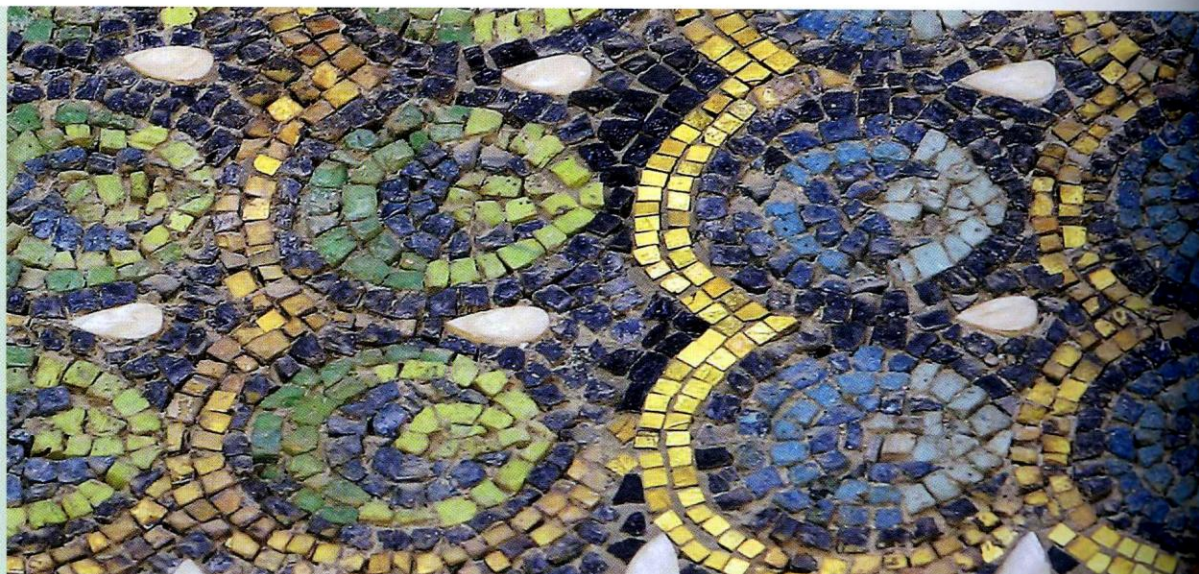
Meanwhile, there had developed the other major branch of Shi'ism, later designated as the Imamiyya. This branch (representing the early common heritage of the Ismailis and the Ithna'asharis) acknowledged a particular line of Husaynid 'Alids, descendants of al-Husayn, as Imams and remained removed from any political activity. These Imami Shi'is, traced the Imamate through al-Husayn's sole surviving son 'Ali b. al-Husayn (d.95/714), who carried the honorific title of Zayn al-'Abidin (Ornament of the Pious). A powerful indication of the reverence for the *ahl al-bayt* and the Imams in this period is illustrated in a story told about the poet al-Farazdaq. Ibn Kathir, Ibn Khallikan, Abu

al-Faraj al-Isfahani and many other Muslim historians narrate the incident which occurred at this time and involved Hisham b. 'Abd al-Malik (d.125/743), the Umayyad heir and future Caliph. At the time of the Hajj, Hisham was circling the Ka'ba attended by his courtiers and servants. Among them was al-Farazdaq (d. circa 112/730), a panegyrist for the Umayyads and one of the most renowned Arab poets of all time. Along with two other poets, al-Jarir and al-Akhtal, al-Farazdaq is known for composing the finest Arabic verse of his age. Hisham tried in vain to reach the sacred Black Stone and to touch the holy relic, but despite his aristocratic status the crowds of pilgrims ignored him. He therefore

moved aside until such a time as the crowd would disperse. His entourage, however, noticed that the crowds parted reverently for the Prophet's great-grandson 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin, who easily approached the stone and kissed it. Offended at the greater respect given by the pilgrims to the newly arrived personage, the Umayyad prince feigning ignorance of his identity asked, 'Who is this?' Hearing the remark, al-Farazdaq stepped before the prince and spontaneously composed this poetic rejoinder which has since been considered a masterpiece of Arabic literature.



Qasr al-Kharana (shown above), in present-day Jordan, built in 91/710 by the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid is one of a few surviving Umayyad desert palaces. Al-Walid was also responsible for constructing the Great Mosque of Damascus. The details shown right and opposite are from the mosaic panels in the mosque. The coin shown opposite dates from 76/695-696 and was probably minted in Syria. The figure on the coin is said to be of al-Walid's predecessor, 'Abd al-Malik (r.65-86/685-705), shown surrounded by the *shahada*. These 'standing caliph' coins, perhaps emulating Byzantine and Persian coins, were replaced by issues that only displayed calligraphy.



Who is this?

This is he whose very footsteps are known to the valley of Mecca!

The surrounding land, the sanctuary and the sacred House itself know him well

This is the child of the best of all God's servants Peerless, pious, pure and pristine

Are you ignorant of who he is? He is the son of Fatima God's prophets were sealed with his grandfather

Your words, 'Who is this?' harm him not For Arabs and non-Arabs, all know well the one of whom you feign ignorance

His liberal hands, ever-generous like the bounteous rain clouds Shower abundantly, untouched by want

So gentle and mild, there is no fear of outbursts For two ornaments adorn him: charming character and delightful disposition

When cares weigh heavily on the people, he bears their burdens

So sweet-natured that the word 'yes' is sweet to him

He would never have uttered the word 'no' had it not been for "There is no deity save God!"

Were it not for this declaration of faith, every 'no' of his would be a 'yes'

He has embraced all creatures with his favours Such that their gloom is dispelled, their poverty and privation put to flight

When the Quraysh see him, their locutor proclaims: Nobility culminates in his noblesse

He lowers his gaze in modesty, while others do so in awe of him

A smile always accompanies his speech

Recognizing his touch, the Ka'ba's wall Almost leaps forth to greet his hand

God exalted and ennobled him in pre-eternity For the Pen decreed this for him on His Tablet

Those who express gratitude to God, they express gratitude for the precedence of this man For faith was bestowed upon all nations through his House

His tree springs from that of God's Messenger How delightful its orchard, its nature, its character

The vestments of darkness are rent asunder by the light of his forehead As night's gloom vanishes before the glorious rays of the rising sun

To love his family is religion, to hate it is disbelief Closeness to them is safety and refuge

After the mention of God himself, they are mentioned At the beginning and end of all orations

They are the Imams of those reckoned among the pious Or if asked, 'Who are the best among the inhabitants of the earth,' the response is, 'They indeed!'

The generous cannot vie with them in generosity Nor can any nation, no matter how magnanimous, approach them

When calamity befalls, they are the copious rain of mercy In the heat of battle, mighty lions of Mount Shara, intrepid warriors

Hardship does not decrease the liberality of their hands Whether they are rich or poor, it matters not

Love for them wards off misfortune and calamity And brings the copious flow of favours and bounties [SV]

It was with Zayn al-'Abidin's son and successor Muhammad al-Baqir (d. circa 114/732) that the Husaynid line of the 'Alid Imams and the Imami branch of Shi'ism began to increase their prominence among the early Shi'a. Imam al-Baqir, like his father, refrained from political activity and concerned himself with the religious aspects of his Imamate. In particular, he elaborated the fundamentals of some of the ideas that later became the legitimist principles of Imami Shi'ism. Among Imam al-Baqir's many teachings is found the exposition of the important principle of *taqiyya*, or precautionary dissimulation of one's true religious belief under adverse circumstances (a practice later adopted widely by both the Ismaili and the Twelver Shi'is).



The Imamiyya expanded significantly and became a major religious community during the long and eventful Imamate of Imam al-Baqir's son and successor, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d.148/765), the foremost scholar among the Husaynid 'Alid Imams. Imam al-Sadiq had a position of prominence during the turbulent period when the Umayyads were finally uprooted by the Abbasids.

