



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**Sayyida Hurra: The Isma'ili Sulayhid Queen of Yemen
Farhad Daftary***

Key Words:

Sayyida Hurra, Sulayhid, Yemen, Fatimid, education of women, Sitt al-Mulk, Adris 'Imad al-Din, *Uyun al-akhbar*, Sulayman, Sulayhi, Al-Afdal

Abstract:

This article explores the career of queen Sayyida Hurra, she was the political and religious leader of Sulayhid Yemen, which was an extremely rare occurrence and privilege for a woman in Fatimid times. Hurra was closely linked with the Ismaili *da'wa* in Cairo, and rose up the ranks of the Fatimid *da'wa* to receive the rank of *hujja*. Hurra was the first woman in the history of Ismailism to gain high rank in the Ismaili hierarchy, thus making this appointment a unique event. Daftary traces other events such as the Must'ali-Nizari split and looks at how Hurra dealt with these incidents and the implications for the Isma'ili *da'wa*.

The career of the queen Sayyida Hurra is a unique instance of its kind in the entire history of medieval Islam, for she exercised the political as well as religious leadership of Sulayhid Yemen; and in both these functions she was closely associated with the Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty.

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Few women rose to positions of political prominence in the medieval *dar al-Islam*, and, perhaps with the major exception of Sayyida Hurra, none can be cited for having attained leadership in the religious domain. A host of diverse factors have accounted for a lack of active participation of women in the political and religious affairs of the Islamic world during the medieval and later times; and the associated complex issues are still being debated among scholars of different disciplines and among Muslims themselves. Be that as it may, there were occasional exceptions to this rule in the medieval *dar al-Islam*, indicating that opportunities did in principle exist for capable women to occupy positions of public prominence under special circumstances. This article briefly investigates the career and times of the foremost member of this select group, namely the queen Sayyida Hurra who, in a unique instance in the entire history of medieval Islam, combined in her person the political as well as the de facto religious leadership of Sulayhid Yemen; and in both these functions was closely associated with the Fatimid dynasty and the headquarters of the Isma`ili *da'wa* or mission centred at Cairo.

Education Policies

The Fatimids, who established their own Isma`ili Shi'i caliphate in rivalry with the Sunni `Abbasids, were renowned for their tolerance towards other religious communities, permitting meritorious non-Isma`ili Muslims and even non-Muslims to occupy the position of vizier and other high offices in their state. As part of their general concern with education, the Fatimids also adopted unprecedented policies for the education of women. From early on in the reign of the founder of the dynasty, 'Abd Allah ['Ubayd Allah] al-Mahdi (297-322/909-34), the Fatimids organized popular instruction for women.¹ And from the time of al-Mu'izz (341-65/953-75), who transferred the seat of the Fatimid State to Egypt and founded the city of Cairo, more formal instruction was developed for women, culminating in the *majalis al-hikma* [sessions of wisdom] on Isma`ili doctrines. Al-Maqrizi (d. 845/1442),² quoting al-Musabbihi (d. 420/1029) and other contemporary Fatimid chroniclers, has preserved valuable details on these lectures which were delivered regularly on a weekly basis under the direction of the Fatimid chief *da'i*, the administrative head of the Fatimid Isma`ili *da'wa* organization. The entire program was also closely scrutinized by the Fatimid caliph-imam, the spiritual head of the *da'wa*. The sessions, organized separately for women and men, were arranged in terms of systematic courses on different subjects and according to the participants' degree of learning. Large numbers of women and men were instructed in various locations. For women, there were sessions at the mosque of al-Azhar, while the Fatimid and other noble women received their lectures in a special hall at the Fatimid palace. As reported by Ibn al-Tuwayr (d. 617/1220), special education for women evidently continued under the Fatimids until the fall of their dynasty in 567/1171.³

Women in the Fatimid Dynasty

As a result of these educational policies and the generally tolerant attitudes of the Fatimids, there were many educated women in the Fatimid royal household and at least some among them who were also endowed with leadership qualities did manage to acquire political supremacy. In this regard, particular mention should be made of the shrewd Sitt al-Mulk, the sister of the Fatimid caliph imam al-Hakim (386-411/996-1021), who ruled efficiently as the virtual head of the Fatimid state in the capacity of regent during the first four years of the caliphate of al-Hakim's son and successor, al-Zahir, until her death in 415/1024. There was also al-Mustansir's mother, who although not brought up in Egypt did become a powerful regent during the first decade of her son's caliphate (427-87/1036-94); and subsequently, in 436/1044, all political power was openly seized and retained by her for a long period. It is



significant to note that the ascendancy of these women to political prominence was not challenged by the Fatimid establishment or the Ismaili *da'wa* organization; and, in time, al-Mustansir not only acknowledged Sayyida Hurra's political leadership in Yemen but also accorded the Sulayhid queen special religious authority over the Ismaili communities of Yemen and Gujarat. It is indeed within this general Fatimid Ismaili milieu that the queen Sayyida's status and achievements can be better understood and evaluated in their historical context.

Sulayhid dynasty – early accounts

The earliest accounts of the Sulayhid dynasty, the queen Sayyida's career, and the contemporary Ismaili *da'wa* in Yemen are contained in the historical work of Najm al-Din `Umara b. 'Ali al-Hakami⁴ the Yemenite historian and poet who emigrated to Egypt and was executed in Cairo in 569/1174 for his involvement in a plot to restore the Fatimids to power. Ismaili historical writings on the Sulayhids and on the contemporary Ismailis of Yemen are, as expected, rather meager. Our chief Ismaili authority here is again the Yemenite Idris 'Imad al-Din (d. 872/1468), who as the nineteenth chief *da'i* of the Tayyibi Ismaili community was well-informed about the earlier history of the Ismaili *da'wa*. In the final, seventh volume of his comprehensive Ismaili history entitled *'Uyun al-akhbar*, which is still in manuscript form, Idris has detailed accounts of the Sulayhids and the revitalization of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Yemen under the queen Sayyida; here I have used a manuscript of this work from the collections of the Institute of Ismaili Studies Library.⁵ In modern times, the best scholarly accounts of the Sulayhids and the queen Sayyida as well as the early history of Ismailism in Yemen have been produced by Husain F. al-Hamdani (1901-62), one of the pioneers of modern Ismaili studies who based his work on a valuable collection of Ismaili manuscripts preserved in his family.⁶

Yemen

Yemen was one of the regions where the early Ismaili *da'wa* achieved particular success. As a result of the activities of the *da'is* Ibn Hawshab Mansur al-Yaman and 'Ali b. al-Fadl, the *da'wa* was preached openly in Yemen already in 270/883; and by 293/905-06, when Ibn al-Fadl occupied San'a, almost all of Yemen was controlled by the Ismailis. Later, the Ismailis lost the bulk of their conquered territories to the Zaydi imams and other local dynasties of Yemen. With the death of Ibn Hawshab in 302/914 and the collapse of the Ismaili state in Yemen, the Ismaili *da'wa* continued there in a dormant fashion for over a century. From this obscure period in the history of Yemenite Isma'ilism, when the Yemenite *da'wa* continued to receive much secret support from different tribes, especially the Band Hamdan, only the names of the Yemenite chief *da'is* have been preserved.⁷

Sulayman b. 'Abd Allah al-Zawahi

By the time of the Fatimid caliph-imam al-Zahir (411-27/1021-36), when Yemen was ruled by the Zaydis, the Najahids, and other local dynasties, the leadership of the Yemenite *da'wa* had come to be vested in the *da'i* Sulayman b. 'Abd Allah al-Zawahi, who was based in the mountainous region of Haraz. Sulayman chose as his successor 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi, the son of the *qadi* of Haraz, and an important Hamdani chief from the clan of Yam who had been the *da'i's* assistant. In 429/1038, the *da'i* 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi rose in Masar, a locality in Haraz where he had constructed fortifications, marking the foundation of the Isma'ili Sulayhid dynasty. With much support from the Hamdani, Himyari and other Yemenite tribes, 'Ali b. Muhammad soon started his rapid conquest of Yemen, and by 455/1063, he had subjugated all of Yemen. Recognizing the suzerainty of the Fatimid caliph-imam, 'Ali chose San'a as his capital and instituted the Fatimid Isma'ili *khuṭba* throughout his dominions. The Sulayhids ruled over Yemen as vassals of the Fatimids



for almost one century. Sulayhid rule was effectively terminated in 532/1138, on the death of the queen Sayyida, the most capable member of the dynasty.

Asma bint Shihab

'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi was married to his cousin Asma bint Shihab, a remarkable woman in her own right. Noted for her independent character, Asma took an active part in the affairs of the state and also played an important role in the education of Sayyida Hurra, who was brought up under her care at the Sulayhid court. 'Ali al-Sulayhi fell victim to a tribal vendetta and was murdered by the Najahids of Zabid in 459/1067; he was succeeded by his son Ahmad al-Mukarram (d. 477/1084), who received his investiture from the Fatimid caliph-imam al-Mustansir. The queen Asma assisted her son Ahmad, as she had assisted her husband, until her death in 467/1074. Thereafter, Ahmad's wife, Sayyida Hurra, became the effective ruler of Sulayhid Yemen.

Al-Sayyida al-Hurra

The queen [*al-malika*] al-Sayyida al-Hurra [the Noble Lady] al-Sulayhi, who evidently also carried the name Arwa, was born in 440/1048 (or less probably in 444/1052) in Haraz. As noted, her early education was supervised by her future mother-in-law, Asma, who as a role model must have had great influence on Sayyida's character. Ahmad al-Mukarram, who proved to be an incapable ruler, married Sayyida in 458/1066. The sources unanimously report that Sayyida was not only endowed with striking beauty, but was also noted for her courage, integrity, piety, and independent character as well as intelligence. In addition, she was a woman of high literary expertise. Almost immediately on Asma's death, Sayyida consolidated the reins of the Sulayhid state in her own hands and had her name mentioned in the *khutba* after that of the Fatimid caliph-imam al-Mustansir. Ahmad al-Mukarram, who had been afflicted with facial paralysis resulting from war injuries, now retired completely from public life while remaining the nominal ruler of the Sulayhid state. One of Sayyida's first acts was to transfer the seat of the Sulayhid state from San'a' to Dhu Jibla. She built a new palace there and transformed the old palace into a great mosque where she was eventually buried.

The re-establishment of the Ismaili *da'wa*

In the meantime, the foundation of the Sulayhid dynasty had marked the initiation of a new, open phase in the activities of the Isma'ili *da'wa* in Yemen; and the reinvigoration of the Yemenite *da'wa* continued unabated in Sayyida's time under the close supervision of the Fatimid *da'wa* headquarters in Cairo. The founder of the Sulayhid dynasty, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Sulayhi, had been the head of the state [*dawla*] as well as the *da'wa*; he was at once the *malik* or sultan and the chief *dd'i* of Yemen. Subsequently, this arrangement went through several phases, leading to an entirely independent status for the head of the *da'wa*.⁸ In 454/1062, 'Ali sent Lamak b. Malik al-Hammadi, then chief *qadi* of Yemen, on a diplomatic mission to Cairo to prepare for his own visit there. For unknown reasons, however, 'Ali's visit to the Fatimid headquarters never materialized, and the *qadi* Lamak remained in Egypt for almost five years, staying with the Fatimid *da'i al-du'at*, al-Mu'ayyad fi'l Din al-Shirazi (d. 470/1078), at the Dar al-'Ilm, which then also served as the administrative headquarters of the Fatimid *da'wa*. Al-Mu'ayyad instructed Lamak in Isma'ili doctrines, as he had Nasir-i Khusraw, the renowned Ismaili *da'i* and philosopher of Badakhshan, about a decade earlier. Lamak returned to Yemen with a valuable collection of Isma'ili texts soon after 'Ali al-Sulayhi's murder in 459/1067, having now been appointed as the chief *da'i* of Yemen. Lamak, designated as *da'i al-balagh*, henceforth acted as the executive head of the Yemenite *da'wa*, while Ahmad al-Mukarram succeeded his father merely as



the head of state. The exceptionally close ties between the Sulayhids and the Fatimids are well attested to by numerous letters and epistles [*sijillat*] sent from the Fatimid chancery to the Sulayhids 'Ali, Ahmad, and Sayyida, mostly on the orders of al-Mustansir.⁹

Hurra's ascension in the Fatimid *da'wa*

It is a testimony to Sayyida Hurra's capabilities that, from the time of her assumption of effective political authority, she also came to play an increasingly important role in the affairs of the Yemenite *da'wa*, which culminated in her appointment as the *hujja* of Yemen by the Fatimid al-Mustansir shortly after the death of her husband in 477/1084. It is to be noted that in the Fatimid *da'wa* hierarchy, this rank was higher than that of the *da'i al-balagh* accorded to Lamak.¹⁰ In other words, Sayyida now held the highest rank in the Yemenite *da'wa*. More significantly, this represented the first application of the rank of, *hujja*, or indeed any high rank in the Ismaili hierarchy, to a woman; a truly unique event in the history of Ismailism.

In the Fatimid *da'wa* organization, the non-Fatimid regions of the world were divided into twelve *jaziras*, or islands; each *jazira*, representing a separate and independent region for the propagation of the *da'wa*, was placed under the jurisdiction of a high ranking *da'i* designated as *hujja*. Yemen does not appear among the known Fatimid lists of these *jaziras*.¹¹ However, it seems that the term *hujja* was also used in a more limited sense in reference to the highest Ismaili dignitary of some particular regions; and it was in this sense that Sayyida was designated as the *hujja* of Yemen, much in the same way that her contemporary Fatimid *da'i* of the eastern Iranian lands, Nasir-i Khusraw, was known as the *hujja* of Khurasan. At any event, the *hujja* was the highest representative of the *da'wa* in any particular region. In addition to the testimony of the *da'i* Idris, the Fatimid al-Mustansir's designation of Sayyida as the *hujja of Yemen* is corroborated by the contemporary Yemenite Ismaili author al-Khattab b. al-Hasan (d. 533/1138), who uses various arguments in support of this appointment and insists that even a woman could hold that rank.¹²

Responsibilities

The queen Sayyida was also officially put in charge of the affairs of the Ismaili *da'wa* in western India by the Fatimid caliph-imam al-Mustansir.¹³ The Sulayhids had evidently with the approval of the Fatimid *da'wa* headquarters supervised the selection and dispatch of *da'is* to Gujarat in western India. Sayyida now played a particularly crucial role in the Fatimids' renewed efforts in al-Mustansir's time to spread Ismailism on the Indian subcontinent. As a result of these Sulayhid efforts, a new Ismaili community was founded in Gujarat by the *dais* sent from Yemen starting around 460/1067-68. The *da'wa* in western India maintained its close ties with Yemen in the time of the queen Sayyida; and the Ismaili community founded there in the second half of the fifth/eleventh century evolved into the modern Tayyibi Bohra community. It should be added in passing that the extension of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Yemen and Gujarat in al-Mustansir's time may have been directly related to the development of new Fatimid commercial interests which necessitated the utilization of Yemen as a safe base along the Red Sea trade route to India.

Nizari-Musta'li schism

It was also in Sayyida's time that the Nizari-Musta'li schism of 487/1094 occurred in Ismailism. This schism, revolving around al-Mustansir's succession, split the then unified Ismaili community into two rival factions, the Musta'liyya who recognized al-Mustansir's successor on the Fatimid throne, al-Mustali, also as their imam; and the Nizariyya, who upheld the rights of al-Mustansir's eldest son and original heir-designate, Nizar, who had been set aside by force through the machinations of the all-powerful Fatimid vizier al-Afdal. After the failure of his brief revolt, Nizar himself was captured and murdered in Cairo in 488/1095.



Due to the close relations between Sulayhid Yemen and Fatimid Egypt, the queen Sayyida recognized al-Musta`li as the legitimate imam after al-Mustansir. She, thus, retained her ties with Cairo and the *da'wa* headquarters there, which now served as the center of the Musta'lian *da'wa*. As a result of Sayyida's decision, the Ismaili communities of Yemen and Gujarat along with the bulk of the Isma'ilis of Egypt and Syria joined the Musta'lian camp without any dissent. By contrast, the Isma'ilis of the eastern lands, situated in the Saljuk dominions, who were then under the leadership of Hasan-i Sabbath (d. 518/1124), championed the cause of Nizar and refused to recognize the Fatimid caliph al-Musta'li's imamate. Hasan-i Sabbath, who had already been following an independent revolutionary policy from his mountain headquarters at Alamut in northern Persia, completely severed his relations with Cairo; he had now in fact founded the independent Nizari *da'wa*, similarly to what the queen Sayyida was to do for the Musta`li-Tayyibi *da'wa* a few decades later.

Al-Afdal

The queen Sayyida remained close to the Fatimid al-Musta`li (487-95/1094-1101) and his successor al-Amir (495-524/1101-30), who addressed her with several honorific titles.¹⁴ Until his death in 515/1121, the vizier and commander of the armies, al-Afdal, was however the effective ruler of Fatimid Egypt, also supervising the affairs of the Musta'lian *da'wa*. During this period, the Fatimid state had embarked on its rapid decline, which was accentuated by encounters with the Crusaders. Egypt was in fact invaded temporarily in 511/1117 by Baldwin I, king of the Latin state of Jerusalem. In Yemen, too, the Sulayhid state had come under pressures from the Zaydis and others, while several influential Yemenite tribal chiefs had challenged without much immediate success Sayyida's authority. In particular, the *qadi`* Imran, who had earlier supported the Sulayhids, attempted to rally the various Hamdani clans against her. In addition to resenting the authority of a female ruler, he also had his differences with the *da`i* Lamak. As a result of these challenges, the Sulayhids eventually lost San'a' to a new Hamdani dynasty supported by the family of the *qadi`* Imran. Meanwhile, Sayyida had continued to look after the affairs of the Yemenite *da'wa* with the collaboration of its executive head, Lamak; and on Lamak's death around 491/1098, his son Yahya took administrative charge of the *da'wa* until his own death in 520/1126.

There are indications suggesting that during the final years of al-Afdal's vizierate, relations deteriorated between the Sulayhid queen and the Fatimid court. It was perhaps due to this fact that in 513/1119 Ibn Najib al-Dawla was dispatched from Cairo to Yemen to bring the Sulayhid state under greater control of the Fatimids. However, Ibn Najib al-Dawla and his Armenian soldiers made themselves very unpopular in Yemen, and the queen attempted to get rid of him. In 519/1125, Ibn Najib al-Dawla, whose Yemenite mission had been reconfirmed by al-Afdal's successor, al-Ma'mun, was recalled to Cairo, and was drowned on the return journey. By the final years of al-Amir's rule, the queen Sayyida had developed a deep distrust of the Fatimids and was prepared to assert her independence from the Fatimid establishment. The opportunity for this decision came with the death of al-Amir and the Hafizi-Tayyibi schism in Musta'lian Isma'ilism. Meanwhile, on the death of the *da`i* Yahya b. Lamak al-Hammadi in 520/1126, his assistant *da`i*, al-Dhu'ayb b. Musa al-Wadi`i al-Hamdani, became the executive head of the Yemenite *da'wa*. This appointment had received the prior approval of both the queen Sayyida and the *da`i* Yahya.

Collapse of the Fatimid Empire

Al-Amir, the tenth Fatimid caliph and the twentieth imam of the Musta'lian Ismailis, was assassinated in Dhu'l-Qa`da 524/October 1130. Henceforth, the Fatimid caliphate embarked on its final phase of decline and collapse, marked by numerous dynastic, religious, political, and military crises, while a new schism further weakened the Musta'lian *da'wa*. According to the Musta'li-Tayyibi tradition, a son named al-Tayyib had been born to al-Amir a few months before



his death. This is supported by an epistle of al-Amir sent by a certain Sharif Muhammad b. Haydara to the Sulayhid queen of Yemen, announcing the birth of Abu'l-Qasim al-Tayyib in Rabī II 524AH.¹⁵ The historical reality of al-Tayyib is also attested to by Ibn Muyassar (d. 677/1278),¹⁶ and other historians. At any rate, al-Tayyib was immediately designated as al-Amir's heir. On al-Amir's death, however, power was assumed by his cousin, Abu'l-Maymun `Abd al-Majid, who was later in 526/1132 proclaimed caliph and imam with the title al-Hafiz al-Din Allah.

Musta'lian schism

The proclamation of al-Hafiz as caliph and imam caused a major schism in the Musta'lian community. In particular, his claim to the imamate, even though he was not a direct descendant of the previous Musta'lian imam, received the support of the official *da'wa* organization in Cairo and the majority of the Musta'lian Ismailis of Egypt and Syria, who became known as the Hafiziyya. The situation was quite different in Yemen. There, a bitter contest rooted in power politics ensued within the Musta'lian community. As a result, the Yemenite Ismailis, who had always been closely connected with the *da'wa* headquarters in Cairo, split into two factions. The Sulayhid queen, who had already become disillusioned with Cairo, readily championed the cause of al-Tayyib, recognizing him as al-Amir's successor to the imamate. These Ismailis were initially known as the Amiriyya, but subsequently, after the establishment of the independent Tayyibi *da'wa* in Yemen, they became designated as the Tayyibiyya. Sayyida now became the official leader of the Tayyibi faction in Yemen, severing her ties with Cairo, similarly to what Hasan-i Sabbah had done in Persia on al-Mustansir's death in 487/1094. Sayyida's decision was fully endorsed by the *da'i* al-Dhu'ayb, the administrative head of the Yemenite *da'wa*. By contrast, the Zuray`ids of `Adan and some of the Hamdanids of San`a', who had won their independence from the Sulayhids, now supported Hafizi Isma'ilism, recognizing al-Hafiz, and later Fatimid caliphs as their imams. Hafizi Ismailism, tied to the Fatimid regime, disappeared soon after the collapse of the Fatimid dynasty in 567/1171 and the Ayyubid invasion of southern Arabia in 569/1173. But the Tayyibi *da'wa*, initiated by Sayyida, survived in Yemen with its headquarters remaining in Haraz. Due to the close ties between Sulayhid Yemen and Gujarat, the Tayyibi cause was also upheld in western India, which was eventually to account for the bulk of the Tayyibi Ismailis, known there as Bohras.

Al-Tayyib

Nothing is known about the fate of al-Tayyib, who seems to have been murdered in his infancy on al-Hafiz's order. It is, however, the belief of the Tayyibis that al-Tayyib survived and went into concealment; and that the imamate subsequently continued secretly in his progeny, being handed down from father to son, during the current period of *satr* [concealment] initiated by al-Tayyib's own concealment. The news of al-Tayyib's birth was a source of rejoicing at the Sulayhid court. For this event, we also have the eyewitness report of al-Khattab, who was then assistant to the *da'i* al-Dhu'ayb.¹⁷ From that time until her death, the aged Sulayhid queen made every effort to consolidate the Yemenite *da'wa* on behalf of al-Tayyib; and al-Dhu'ayb and other leaders of the *da'wa* in Sulayhid Yemen, henceforth called *al-da'wa al-Tayyibiyya*, collaborated closely with Sayyida. It was soon after 526/1132 that Sayyida declared al-Dhu'ayb as *al-da'i al-mutlaq*, or *da'i* with absolute authority. Having earlier broken her relations with Fatimid Egypt, by this measure she also made the Tayyibi *da'wa* independent of the Sulayhid state, a wise measure that was to ensure the survival of Tayyibi Ismailism after the downfall of the Sulayhid state. The *da'i mutlaq* was now in fact empowered to conduct the *da'wa* activities on behalf of the hidden Tayyibi imam. This marked the foundation of the independent Tayyibi *da'wa* in Yemen under the leadership of a *da'i mutlaq*, a title retained by al-Dhu'ayb's successors.¹⁸ The *da'i* al-Dhu'ayb thus became



the first of the absolute *da`is*, who have followed one another during the current period of *satr* in the history of Tayyibi Ismailism.

Tayyibi da'wa

As noted, al-Dhu'ayb was initially assisted by al-Khattab b. al-Hasan, who belonged to a family of the chiefs of al-Hajur, another Hamdani clan. An important Ismaili author and Yemenite poet, al-Khattab himself was the Hajuri sultan who fought as a brave warrior on behalf of the Sulayhid queen. His loyalty to Sayyida Hurra and his military services to the Ismaili cause contributed significantly to the success of the early Tayyibi *da'wa* in difficult times. Al-Khattab was killed in 533/1138, a year after the queen had died. On al-Khattab's death, al-Dhu'ayb designated Ibrahim b. al-Husayn al-Hamidi, belonging to the Hamidi clan of the Banu Hamdan, as his new assistant; and on al-Dhu'ayb's death in 546/1151, Ibrahim (d. 557/1162) succeeded to the headship of the Tayyibi *da'wa* as the second *da'i mutlaq*. Al-Dhu'ayb, al-Khattab, and Ibrahim were in fact the earliest leaders of the Tayyibi *da'wa* who, under the supreme guidance and patronage of Sayyida, consolidated this branch of Isma'ilism in Yemen. The Tayyibi *da'wa* had now become completely independent of both the Fatimid regime and the Sulayhid state, and this explains why it survived the fall of both dynasties and managed in subsequent centuries, without any political support, to spread successfully in Yemen and western India. That the minoritarian Musta'li-Tayyibi community of the Ismailis exists at all today is indeed mainly due to the foresight and leadership of Sayyida Hurra, much in the same way that the survival of the majoritarian Isma'ili community of the Nizaris *may* be attributed in no small measure to the success of Hasan-i Sabbah in founding the independent Nizari *da'wa*, while in both instances the imams themselves had remained inaccessible to their followers.

End of the Sulayhid dynasty

The Malika Sayyida Hurra bint Ahmad al-Sulayhi died in 532/1138, after a long and eventful rule. Her death marked the effective end of the Sulayhid dynasty, which held on to some scattered fortresses in Yemen for a few decades longer. A most capable ruler, Sayyida occupies a unique place in the annals of Ismailism, not only because she was the sole woman to occupy the highest ranks of the Ismaili *da'wa* hierarchy and to lead the Yemenite *da'wa* in turbulent times, but more significantly because she in effect was largely responsible for the founding of the independent Musta'li Tayyibi *da'wa*, which still has followers in Yemen, India, Pakistan, and elsewhere. It should also be noted here that the Tayyibi Ismailis have been responsible for preserving a large portion of the Ismaili texts produced during the Fatimid period, and the preservation of this Ismaili literature too may be attributed largely to Sayyida's foresight. The queen Sayyida's devotion to Isma'ilism and the cause of al-Tayyib found its final expression in her will in which she bequeathed her renowned collection of jewellery to Imam al-Tayyib.¹⁹

This remarkable Isma'ili Sulayhid woman of the medieval Islamic world was buried in the mosque of Dhu Jibla that she had erected herself. And throughout the centuries, Sayyida's grave has served as a place of pilgrimage for Muslims of diverse communities; the pilgrims not always being aware of her Ismaili Shi'i connection. Various attempts were made in medieval times by Zaydis and other enemies of the Isma'ilis in Yemen to destroy the mosque of Dhu Jibla; but Sayyida Hurra's tomb chamber, inscribed with Qur'anic verses, remained intact until it, too, was damaged in September 1993 by members of a local group who considered the established practice of visiting it to be heretical.²⁰



Notes:

1. See Idris `Imad al-Din b. al-Hasan, *Uyun al-akhbar wa funun athar*, ed. M. Ghalib (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1973-78), vol. 5, pp. 137-38, reprinted in S.M. Stern, *Studies in Early Isma`ilism* (Jerusalem-Leiden: The Magnes Press, 1983), pp. 102-103.

2. Taqi al-Din Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-mawa iz wa' l-i'tibar bi-dhikr al-khitat wa'l-athar* (Bulaq, 1270/1853-54), vol. 1, pp. 390-91. and vol. 2, pp. 341-42. See also H. Halm, "The Isma'ili Oath of Allegiance ('*ahd*) and the 'Sessions of Wisdom' (*majalis al-hikma*) in Fatimid Times," in *Mediaeval Isma`ili History and Thought*, ed. F. Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially pp. 98-112, and H. Halm, *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), pp. 41-56.

3. See Ibn al-Tuwayr, *Nuzhat al-muqlatayn fi akhbar al-dawlatayn*, ed. A. Fu'ad Sayyid (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1992), pp. 110-112, and S.M. Stern "Cairo as the Centre of the Ismaili Movement," in *Colloque international sur l'histoire du Caire* (Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1972, p. 441, reprinted in Stern, *Studies*, pp. 242-43.

4. 'Umara b. 'Ali al-Hakami, *Ta'rikh al-Yaman*, ed. and trans. Henry C. Kay, in his *Yaman, its Early Mediaeval History* (London: E. Arnold, 1892), text pp. 1-102, translation pp. 1-137; more recently, this history has been edited by Hasan S. Mahmud (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1957).

5. See Idris `Imad al-Din, *Uyun al-akhbar*, vol. 7, Arabic manuscript 230, The Institute of Ismaili Studies Library, London, containing the history of the Sulayhids on fols. 1-222, with fols. 117v-222v devoted to Sayyida Hurra. See A. Gacek, *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of The Institute of Ismaili Studies* (London: Islamic Publications, 1984-85), vol. 1, pp. 136-40.

6. In this article I have drawn on the following works by H.F. al-Hamdani: "The Doctrines and History of the Ismaili *Da`wat* in Yemen," (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1931), especially pp. 27-47; "The Life and Times of Queen Saiyidah Arwa the Sulaihid of the Yemen," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 18 (1931): 505-17, and *al-Sulayhiyyun wa'Iharaka al-Fatimiyya fi'l-Yaman* (Cairo: Maktabat Misr, 1955), especially pp. 141-211, which is still the best modern study on the subject. Some recent publications on Sayyida Hurra, including L. al-Imad's "Women and Religion in the Fatimid Caliphate: The Case of al-Sayyida al-Hurra, Queen of Yemen," in *Intellectual Studies on Islam: Essays written in Honor of Martin B. Dickson*, ed. M.M. Mazzaoui and V.B. Moreen (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), pp. 137-44, and Fatima Mernissi's *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, trans. M.J. Lakeland (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp. 139-58, provide new perspectives without adding significant details to al-Hamdani's studies. See also F. Krenkow, s.v. "Sulaihi," EI(I), ed. M.Th. Houtsma et al. (Leiden-London: E.J. Brill, 1913-38), Vol. 4, pp. 515-17; M. Ghalib, *A`lam al-Isma`iliyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Yaqza, 1964), pp. 143-53; Khayr al-Din al-Zarkali, *al-A`lam*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Khayr al-Din al-Zarikli, 1969), vol. I, p. 279, and `Umar R. Kahhala, *A`lam al-nisa'*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Mu'asisat al-Risala, 1999), vol. 1, pp. 253-54.

7. See Idris, *Uyun al-akhbar*, vol. 5, pp.31-44; Ibn Malik al-Yamani, *Kashf asrar al-Batiniyya wa-akhbar al-Qaramita*, ed. M.Z. al-Kawthari (Cairo: Matab`at al-Anwar, 1939), pp. 39-42, written for a Yemenite Sunni jurist who lived at the time of the founder of the Sulayhid dynasty; he later became an Ismaili but then abjured and produced this anti-Ismaili treatise which is also reproduced in *Akhbar al-Qaramita*, ed. S. Zakkar, 2nd ed. (Damascus: Dar Nissan, 1982), pp. 243-48. Ibn Malik's work evidently served as the primary source on the early Ismaili *da`wa* in Yemen for all subsequent Sunni historians of Yemen, including Baha al-Din al-Janadi (d.



732/1332), who reproduces Ibn Malik's list of the Yemenite *da`is* in his *Akhbar al-Qaramita bi'l-Yaman*, ed. and trans. Kay, in his *Yaman*, text pp. 150-52, translation pp. 208-12. See also al-Hamdani, *al-Sulayhiyyun*, pp. 49 - 61.

8. A. Hamdani, "The Da'i Hatim Ibn Ibrahim al-Hamidi [d. 596 H/1199 AD] and his Book *Tuhfat al-Qulub*," *Oriens* 23-24 (1970-71): especially 270-79.

9. See Abu Tamim Ma'add al-Mustansir bi'llah, *al-Sijillat al-Mustansiriyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Mun'im Majid (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 1954), and H.F. al-Hamdani, "The Letters of al-Mustansir bi'llah," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental (and African) Studies* 7 (1934): 307-24, describing the contents of the letters.

10. F. Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 227ff.

11. See al-Qadi al-Nu`man b. Mubammad, *Ta'wil al-da`a'im*, ed. M. H. al-A'zami (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif bi-Misr, 1967-72), vol. 2, p. 74, and vol. 3, pp. 48-49; Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, *Ithbat al-nubuwwat*, ed. 'Arif Tamir (Beirut: al-Matba'a al-Kathulikiyya, 1966), p. 172; Ibn Hawqal, *Kitab surat al-ard* ed. J. H. Kramers, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1938-39), p. 310, and Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, pp. 228-2.9.

12. Al-Khattab b. al-Hasan, *Ghayat al-mawalid*, Arabic manuscript 249. The Institute of Ismaili Studies Library, London, fols. 4r-8r; see Gacek, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, p. 21. See also I.K. Poonawala, *al-Sultan al-Khattab* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif bi-Misr, 1967), pp.78-80, and S.M. Stern, "The Succession to the Fatimid Imam al-Amir, the Claims of the Later Fatimids to the Imamate, and the Rise of Tayyibi Ismailism," *Oriens*, 4 (1951): 221, 227-28, reprinted in S.M. Stern, *History and Culture in the Medieval Muslim World* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), article XI.

13. Al-Mustansir, *al-Sijillat*, pp. 167-69, 203-06, and al-Hamdani, "Letters," pp. 321-24.

14. See al-Maqrizi, *Itti`az al-hunafa'*, ed. J. al-Shayyal and M.H.M. Ahmad (Cairo, 1967-73), vol. 3, p. 103.

15. This *sijill* is preserved in the seventh volume of the *'Uyun al-akhbar* of the *da'i* Idris and in other Tayyibi sources; it is also quoted in 'Umara, *Ta'rikh*, text pp. 100-102, translation pp. 135-36. See also Stern, "Succession," p. 194ff, and al-Hamdani, *al-Sulayhiyyun*, pp. 183-84, 321-22.

16. Ibn Muyassar, *Akhbar Misr*, ed. A. Fu'ad Sayyid (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1981), pp. 109-110.

17. The relevant passage from al-Khattab's *Ghayat al-mawalid* is also contained in W. Ivanow, *Ismaili Tradition Concerning the Rise of the Fatimids* (London. H. Milford for the Islamic Research Association, 1942.), pp. 37-38; English translation in Stern, "Succession," pp. 223-24.

18. The earliest history of the Tayyibi *da'wa* in Yemen is related by the *da'i* Hatim b. Ibrahim in his unpublished *Tuhfat al-qulub*. The *da'i* Idris has biographical accounts of al-Dhu'ayb and his successors in his unpublished *'Uyun al-akhbar*, vol. 7, and *Nudhat al-afkar*. See also Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, p. 285ff.

19. Sayyida's testament, containing a detailed description of her collection of jewels, has been preserved by Idris in his *'Uyun al-akhbar*, vol. 7, reproduced in al-Hamdani, *al-Sulayhiyyun*,



pp. 323-30.

20. I owe this information to Tim Mackintosh-Smith, a long-time resident of Yemen.