Chapter 1

Introduction

> I say, therefore, that this thing involves the description of the greatest catastrophe and the most dire calamity (of the like of which days and nights are innocent) which befell all men generally, and the Muslims in particular; so that, should one say that the world, since God Almighty created Adam until now, hath not been afflicted with the like thereof, he would but speak the truth. For indeed bistory does not contain anything which approaches or comes near to it ... Nay, it is unlikely that maukind will see the like of this calamity until the world comes to an end and perishes, except for the final outbreak of Gog and Magog.[1]

These foreboding remarks of the Arab historian Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233) vividly capture his impressions of one of the most catastrophic events to befall the Muslim world, constituted by the series of Mongol incursions which swept across a large part of Central Asia and the Middle East during the 7th/13th century. Ibn al-Athīr's words acquire particular poignancy when it is realised that he died in 630/1233, many years before the full onslaught of the Mongols actually materialised upon the largely Persian-speaking region from the Oxus to the Euphrates rivers,[2] culminating in the sack of Baghdad and destruction of the Abbasid caliphate in 656/1258. For the peoples of this region especially, the period of Mongol incursions was one of enormous human suffering and far-reaching social changes. The devastation of many towns and cities, the slaughter, enslavement and displacement of millions of

people, and the subsequent death of countless others from war, famine or disease resulted in a marked decrease of population in the region. Economically, there was a rapid decline in agriculture as large areas of previously cultivated land reverted to nomadic pastoralism. Politically and religiously, by destroying the central caliphal state based in Baghdad and introducing their own laws and standards of politics, the Mongols challenged the established norms and practices of Muslim societies – thus disrupting the emergence of new patterns of thought and social organisation in the Muslim world at a time when Western Europe was making a historically decisive transition from feudalism to the construction of a new social, economic and political order.

The Mongol conquest of Persia was destructive to all its inhabitants, especially those communities who happened to offer any resistance to the conquerors. For the Nizārī Ismailis of Persia in particular, it was the single-most disastrous event in their history. It caused, within a short span of five or six years, a total upheaval of this Shiʿi community which, in the previous century, had succeeded in carving out its own autonomous territorial state of fortresses and citadels in parts of Persia and Syria. The capture and dismantling of many of these strongholds by the Mongols put a permanent end to the political aspirations and prominence of the Ismailis in the region. According to the sources which have come down to us, a large proportion of the Ismaili population was exterminated by the invaders, the Ismaili Imam of the time was taken into custody and later murdered, and the community ceased to exercise any influence, or even make its physical presence known publicly, for several centuries to come.

In view of these cataclysmic events, it is not surprising that the Persian Ismailis were unable to maintain any historical record of their own from the era of Mongol domination (654–754/1256–1353). Much of the Ismaili literature of the Alamūt period was destroyed with the collapse of their state and very little was written or preserved by the community in the following two centuries. Hence, what we know about the Ismailis is largely derived from non-Ismaili historians and chroniclers of the time, who were for the most part hostile to the Ismailis and whose accounts were

written after the fall of the central Ismaili fortress of Alamūt in 654/1256.[3] The most famous of these historians, 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā Mālik b. Muḥammad Juwaynī (d. 682/1283), was in fact present in the entourage of the Mongol ruler Hülegü at the capture of Alamūt. In his *Ta'rīkh-i jahān gushāy*,[4] he describes how he inspected the contents of its famed library, took a few texts and astronomical instruments which interested him, and consigned the rest to the flames.

Another major source is Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh (d. 718/1318), who served as a physician, historian and chief minister to the Mongol ruler Ghāzān. He included a lengthy account of the Ismailis in his universal history, *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh*.[5] Rashīd al-Dīn appears to have had more information available to him than what we find in the extant text of Juwaynī and he preserves many details not previously recorded, possibly because he may have had independent access to other Ismaili sources. He also attempts to put forward a summary of the Ismaili doctrines of the time. Unlike Juwaynī whose narrative is distorted by his antipathy towards the Ismailis, Rashīd al-Dīn's account is somewhat more impartial; he is often reluctant to pass judgement and occasionally corrects Juwaynī where necessary.

In 1964, a third source came to light from a contemporary and collaborator of Rashīd al-Dīn called Jamāl al-Dīn Abu'l-Qāsim 'Abd Allāh b. 'Alī Kāshānī (al-Kāshānī) entitled *Zubdat al-tawārīkh*.[6] He was a relatively unknown chronicler, also in the employment of the Mongols, who collaborated with Rashīd al-Dīn in the compilation of the *Jāmi' al-tawārīkh*. There is much in common between Kāshānī's account of the Ismailis and that of Rashīd al-Dīn, indicating that both writers relied on the same sources, but Kāshānī also provides certain details not reported by the latter. Another account of the Ismailis is provided by the historian Shihāb al-Dīn 'Abd Allāh b. Faḍl Allāh of Shīrāz, also known as Waṣṣāf or Waṣṣāf-i Haḍrat, in his well-known history, *Tajziyat al-amṣār wa tajziyat al-a'ṣār* (also called *Ta'rīkh-i Waṣṣāf*).[7]

Perhaps the most comprehensive chronicler of the time to give attention to the Ismailis was Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233) cited at the beginning of this chapter. In his work *al-Kāmil fi'l-ta'rīkh*,[8] this

Arab historian records much information about the Persian and Syrian Ismailis which is not found in other sources. He also reports many 'newsworthy' incidents involving skirmishes, massacres and other military engagements between the Mongols and the Ismailis; but he gives only sketchy information about these events, not going into the details of the circumstances surrounding them. Furthermore, his chronicle ends in the year 628/1230–31, two years before his death, so that he was unable to report the fall of Alamūt or the subsequent capture of Baghdad by the Mongols.

It is impossible to verify the accounts of these non-Ismaili historians and chroniclers against works by Ismaili authors since the bulk of their literature perished during the invasions. The few books that did survive were not easily accessible, being preserved uutil recently in private collections. In any case, since these are largely doctrinal in content they provide little historical information. The extreme scarcity of Persian Ismaili sources is a problem not confined to the period of Mongol rule; it extends, in fact, over four centuries until the rise of the Ṣafawids in the 10th/16th century. The decline in literary activity among the Ismailis may indeed reflect their disintegration as an organised community, but it is also likely to have been a result of the traditional Ismaili practice of *taqiyya*, 'protection' or precautionary dissimulation of belief, by which means individuals tried to conceal their religious identity in order to escape political and religious persecution.

In the absence of Ismaili sources, a number of orientalist scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, relying largely on the histories and chronicles mentioned above, came to the conclusion that the Persian Ismailis had been totally exterminated by the Mongols. This was the view, for instance, of the distinguished French scholar Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), who was one of the earliest Europeans to study the Ismailis and also offer a satisfactory theory of the etymology of the term 'assassin'.[9] The same theory was advocated by the Austrian diplomat and historian Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856), the first Western author to devote an entire book to the Ismailis. But uulike de Sacy's sober and discriminating scholarship, von Hammer's work

is marred by his uncritical acceptance of the anti-Ismaili prejudices of the sources he consulted.[10]

Among other scholars, however, it became increasingly clear that the old received image of a decimated Ismaili community was indefensible. Wladimir Ivanow (1886–1970), one of the pioneers of modern Ismaili studies, was the first to recognise that even though the political power of the Ismailis came to an end and the community was considerably diminished, a small minority did survive the massacres, as did also the Ismaili line of Imams.[11] His view was supported by Marshall G.S. Hodgson (1922–1968), the author of the most comprehensive study of the Ismailis of the Alamūt period to date,[12] and confirmed more recently by Farhad Daftary who writes:

> The Nizārīs of Persia, contrary to the declarations of Juwaynī and later historians, did in fact survive the destruction of their state and strongholds at the hands of the Mongols. Despite the Mongol massacres, the Persian Nizārī community was not totally extirpated ... and significant numbers survived the debacle in both Rūdbār and Quhistān.[13]

In spite of these corrections, the post-Alamūt period of Ismaili history remains extremely obscure and problematic, and there are many questions which remain unanswered. If, as seems to be the case, a large proportion of the Persian Ismailis were killed or displaced during the Mongol incursions of 651–654/1253–1256, what evidence is there of their continuity as an organised community in the second half of the 7th/13th century? What happened to the Ismaili *da'wa*, the central religious and cultural organisation of the community? Did it collapse and disintegrate following the Mongol conquest or survive in a much diminished form? How did the Ismailis maintain their religious ethos and identity over long periods during which they were obliged to conceal their beliefs and practices? Where did the Ismaili Imams reside after the fall of Alamūt and how did they relate with their followers? What was the connection between the Ismailis and the Sufi fraternities which began to exercise increasing influence in the religious life of Persians during this period?

One of the few Ismaili authors who survived the Mongol conquest and whose works are accessible to us is the poet Saʿd al-Dīn b. Shams al-Dīn b. Muḥammad, more commonly known as Nizārī Quhistānī. Nizārī was born in 645/1247 in Bīrjand, a small town located south of Mashhad in the highlands of Quhistān in south-eastern Khurāsān, alongside the present border of Iran with Afghanistan. His poetical writings and links with Ismailism were discussed at length by medieval Persian authors,[14] and they have also attracted the attention of recent scholars in Iran, Russia and the West.[15] Both W. Ivanow and Jan Rypka regarded Nizārī as a much talented and underestimated poet, whose works deserve more examination.[16] The most comprehensive account of Nizārī Quhistānī is that by the Central Asian scholar Baiburdi, whose works have been an invaluable source of information for this study.[17]

Nizārī was about ten years old when the Mongols overwhelmed the Ismaili fortresses in Quhistān and massacred large numbers of Ismailis in the region, before proceediug to subjugate the rest of Persia under their rule. Hence, the major portion of Nizārī's life was spent in a political and social milieu dominated by the Īl-Khānid dynasty. After acquiring his education and developing the skills of a poet, he pursued administrative and poetic careers in the service of the local Sunni dynasties of the Karts and the Mihrabānids who ruled Khurāsān and Quhistān under Mongol patronage. Although the difficult circumstances of the time precluded Nizārī from expressing his Ismaili beliefs openly in his works, it is possible through an analysis of his poetical works to discern some information about the Persian Ismailis after the destruction of their political power. This evidence has often been overlooked or underestimated by historians, probably because of the poetic and mystical character of his works which have often been associated in Persian literary history with Sufism rather than as an expression of Ismaili religiosity. In fact, it is arguable that Nizārī Quhistānī provides a more accurate and reliable account of Ismaili activities during this period than any other contemporary Persian source.

This work represents the first study in English of Nizārī Quhistānī as an Ismaili poet in the social, cultural and political context of his time. It will focus, more specifically, on the poet's *Safar-nāma* (*Travelogue*) in which he describes his two-year journey from Quhistān to the Transcaucasian region, ostensibly for the purpose of supervising government revenue and expenditure, but perhaps to meet with leaders of the Ismaili community, including the Ismaili Imam of the time who was then residing in the Ādharbāyjān region. Through this exploration, an attempt will also be made to establish Nizārī's religious identity, his association with the Ismailis of his time, and to evaluate the evidence in his writings for the continuity of the Ismaili *daʿwa* through the period of Mongol rule. Nizārī's poetical works will also be scrutinised for their reflection of the Ismaili doctrines of his time and the emergence of a close relationship between Persian Ismailism and Sufism.

The overall perspective of this work is both collective and individual, in that it is concerned with the fate of the Ismaili community on the one hand, as well as with the fortunes of a highly talented, individual Ismaili poet on the other, in their respective efforts to survive the calamity of the Mongol invasion. This dual focus is reflected in the structure of the book, which is divided into two parts: the first dealing with the historical evolution of the Ismaili community and, in particular, its *daʿwa*; the second part is concerned chiefly with Nizārī Quhistānī and his efforts to make a living in a political and religious environment that was inimical to the Ismailis. As will become clear to the reader, the struggles of both the community and the individual to endure in a period of profound social change are very much interconnected. The historical experiences of one are often mirrored in the face of the other; and after an interval of disengagement and separation, the two eventually come together to confirm their common destiny and to reaffirm the same spiritual vision which has inspired this Muslim community from the beginning of its history.