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Ismaili Historiography

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Ismaili historiography has been closely related to the very nature of the Ismaili mission, or *da'wa*, and the changing fortunes of the Ismailis during the various phases of their history. The Ismailis were usually persecuted by their numerous detractors, necessitating the observance of *taqiyya* by them. The Ismaili *da'is*, who were at the same time the scholars and authors of their community, often operated in hostile territories and were obliged to observe utter secrecy in their activities. These *da'i*-authors were, moreover, normally trained as theologians and, as such, they were not interested in compiling annalistic or other types of historical accounts. The general lack of Ismaili interest in historiography is well attested by the fact that only a few works of historical nature have been found in the rich corpus of Ismaili literature recovered in modern times, which comprises mainly of theological works, with a substantial number of treatises related to the so-called esoteric, or *haqa'iq*, subjects, as well as numerous titles utilising the methodology of esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*), the hallmark of Ismaili thought (see Majdu'; Ivanow, pp. 17-173; Poonawala, pp. 31-297). It should be added, however, that the religious works of the Ismailis, written in Arabic, Persian and Indic languages, do occasionally shed light on aspects of Ismaili history, while at the same time they serve themselves as sources for understanding the nature and development of the intellectual and literary traditions of the Ismailis.

Among the few historical works produced by Ismaili authors mention may be made of Qadi Nu'man's *Iftitah al-da'wa* (Beirut, 1970; Tunis, 1975), completed in 346 AH/957 CE, which is the oldest known Ismaili history covering the background to the establishment of the Fatimid state in North Africa. In later medieval times, only one general history of Ismailism, covering from the earliest period until the mid 6th AH/12th CE century, was written by an Ismaili author, namely, the seven-volume '*Uyun al-akhbar* (Beirut, 1973-84) of Edris 'Imad al-Din (d. 872 AH/1468 CE), the 19th *da'i mutlaq* of the Musta'li Tayyibi Ismailis in Yemen. This *da'i* produced two more historical works, the *Nuzhat al-afkar* and the *Rawzat al-*



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akhbar (Sana‘a, 1995), which continue the history of the Tayyibi *da‘wa* until 870 AH/1465 CE. There are also certain brief, but highly significant, accounts of particular events in Ismaili history, notably the *Estetar al-emam* (ed. W. Ivanow, 1936a), written by the *da‘i* Nishapuri (or Naysabur), relating the settlement of the early Ismaili imam ‘Abd-Allah al-Akbar in Salamiya, and the subsequent prolonged journey of imam ‘Abd-Allah al-Mahdi from Syria to North Africa where he was installed to the Fatimid caliphate in 297 AH/909 CE.

In spite of the general absence of an Ismaili historiographical tradition, there were two periods during which the Ismailis concerned themselves with historical writings and produced or encouraged works which in a sense served as official chronicles. During the Fatimid and Alamut periods of their history, the Ismailis possessed states of their own and ruling dynasties whose achievements needed to be recorded by reliable chroniclers. In Fatimid times (297-567 AH/909-1171 CE), especially after the transference of the seat of the Fatimid state to Cairo in 362 AH/973 CE, numerous histories of the Fatimid caliphate and dynasty were written by contemporary historians, both Ismaili and non-Ismaili, such as Ibn Zulaq (d. 386 AH/996 CE), Mosabbihi (d. 420 AH/1029 CE) and Qaza‘i (d. 454 AH/1062 CE). With the exception of a few fragments, however, none of these chronicles survived the demise of the Fatimid dynasty. The Sunni Ayyubids who succeeded the Ismaili Shi‘i Fatimids, systematically destroyed the renowned Fatimid libraries, including the collections of the Dar al-‘Ilm in Cairo, also persecuting the Ismailis of Egypt (see Daftary, 1990, pp. 144-52; [Walker](#), pp. 152-69).

In addition to historical writings, the Ismailis of the Fatimid period, who enjoyed the protection of their own state, also produced certain biographical works of the *munazara* and *sira* genres with great historical value. Among the extant examples of such works, special mention may be made of the *Kitab al-munazarat* (ed. and tr. W. [Madelung](#) and P. E. Walker, London, 2000) of the *da‘i* Ibn Haytham, containing unique details on the first year of Fatimid rule in Ifriqiya; the *Sira* of Ja‘far b. ‘Ali (ed. W. Ivanow, 1936b), chamberlain (*hajib*) to the first Fatimid imam-caliph al-Mahdi; and the *Sira* (Cairo, 1954) of Ustad Jawdhar (d. 363 AH/973 CE), who served the first four Fatimid caliph-imams. There is also the important autobiography of al-Mu‘ayyad fi‘l-Din al-Shirazi (d. 470 AH/ 1078 CE), who held the office of the chief *da‘i* in Cairo for almost twenty years (Walker, pp. 131-51).



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The [Nizari](#) Isma‘ilis, too, maintained a historiographical tradition during the Alamut period of their history (483-654 AH/1090-1256 CE), when they had a territorial state in Persia centred at the mountainous fortress of Alamut, with a subsidiary branch in Syria. During this turbulent period, they compiled chronicles in Persian, recording the events of their state according to the reigns of the successive lords of Alamut (Daftary, 1990, pp. 324-33; idem, 1992, pp. 91-97). This historiographical tradition commenced with the *Sargodhast-e Sayyedna*, a work describing the life and the events of the reign of Hasan Sabbah (d. 518 AH/1124 CE) as the first lord of Alamut. The first part of this work, which has not survived directly, may have been autobiographical. The reign of Kia Buzurg-Umid (518-532 AH/1124-1138 CE), Hasan’s successor as the leader of the Nizari state and *da‘wa*, was covered in another chronicle entitled *Ketab-e Bozorg-Omid*. The events of the Persian Nizari state during the subsequent times, until the reign of the eighth and final lord of Alamut, Imam Rukn-al-Din Khursah and the Mongol destruction of that state in 654 AH/ 1256 CE, were narrated by other Nizari chroniclers such as Dehkuda ‘Abd-al-Malik b. ‘Ali Fasandi and Ra’is Hasan Salah-al-Din Munshi Birjandi. All these chronicles held at the libraries of Alamut and other Nizari castles in Daylaman and Quhistan are believed to have perished in the Mongol invasions or soon afterwards, during the period of Ilkhanid rule over Persia. However, these chronicles as well as other Nizari writings and documents were seen and used extensively by three Persian historians of the Ilkhanid period, namely, Joveyni (d. 681 AH/1283 CE), Rashid-al-Din Fazl-Allah (d. 718 AH/ 1318 CE) and Abul-Qasim Kashani (d. ca. 736 AH/1335 CE), in their own histories of the Ismailis. Indeed, these histories remain our most important primary sources on the Nizari Ismaili state in Persia; and they provided the main sources of reference for later Persian historians, like Hamd-Allah Mustawfi (d. after 740 AH/1339 CE) and [Hafizi](#) Abru (d. 833 AH/ 1430 CE), writing on the subject. Unlike their Persian coreligionists, the Syrian [Nizaris](#) and the Nizari [Khojas](#) of the Indian subcontinent did not elaborate historiographical traditions.

In the turbulent conditions of the post-Alamut period, when the Persian Nizaris often had to resort to practicing *taqiyya*, and the Nizari imams remained in hiding for several generations, their literary activities almost ceased to exist and the Nizaris of different regions, who now



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developed independently of each other, remained largely ignorant of their historical heritage. The situation ameliorated somewhat during the Anjudan revival in Nizari *da'wa* and literary activities, which coincided almost exactly with the Safavid period in Persian history. However, the Nizari works of this period, such as those produced by Abu Ishaq Quhistani (d. after 904 AH/1498 CE) and Kayrkhah Harati (d. after 960 AH/1553 CE), although doctrinal in nature, do contain some historical information. In Badakhshan and other regions of Central Asia, the Nizaris of later medieval times elaborated a distinctive literary and doctrinal tradition, based especially on the teachings of Nasir Khusraw as well as certain Sufi traditions. However, the Central Asian Nizaris, too, did not develop any interest in historiography. Indeed, in the entire extant literature of the Nizaris of Persia and Central Asia, written in the Persian language and preserved mainly in private libraries of Badakhshan now divided between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, there are no historical works worth mentioning, with the major exception of the *Hedayat al-mo'menin* of Fida'i Khurasani (d. 1342/1923).

On the other hand, the Musta'li-Tayyibi Ismailis, especially those belonging to the majority Da'udi branch, have produced a number of works in Arabic on the history of their *da'wa* and the dynasties of their *da'is* in Yaman and India. In order to make them more accessible to the Da'udi Bohra community, some of these histories produced in modern times have been written in Gujarati and transcribed in Arabic (Daftary, 1990, pp. 256-61). Amongst more reliable histories of this kind, mention may be made of the *Muntaza' al-akhbar* (Beirut, 1999) of Qutb al-Din Sulaymanji Borhanpuri (d. 1241/1826), and the *Mawsem-e bahar* (Bombay, 1301-1311/1884-93) of Mohammad-'Ali Rampuri (d. 1315/1897). In more recent times, a number of learned Da'udi Bohras such as Zahid 'Ali (1888-1958) and members of the scholarly Hamdani family have produced historical works in Arabic, Urdu and English on the basis of their ancestral collections of Ismaili manuscripts. Since the 1960s, a growing number of Ismailis, belonging mainly to the Nizari community, have written doctoral dissertations on aspects of Ismaili history.

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