



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

# Ismaili Studies: Medieval Antecedents and Modern Developments

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## Introduction

A major Shi'i Muslim community, the Ismailis are currently scattered in more than twenty-five countries of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and North America. Ismaili historiography and the perceptions of the Ismailis by others, in both Muslim and Christian milieus, as well as stages in Ismaili studies have had their own fascinating evolution, of which we shall present a brief survey here; but first, a few facts about the Ismailis and their history.

## The Fatimid Period

The Ismailis have had a complex history dating back to the formative period of Islam. By the middle of the 3rd/9th century, the Ismailis, who represented one of the early Imami Shi'i groups, had organised a dynamic and revolutionary religio-political movement designated by them as *al-da'wa al-hadiya* (the rightly guiding mission). The primary aim of this movement was to install the 'Alid imam recognised by the Ismailis to actual rule over the entire Muslim umma and to have him acknowledged as the sole rightful



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imam by all Muslims; and the message of the movement was disseminated by a network of *da'is*, summoners, who were active in numerous regions, from North Africa to Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The success of the early Ismaili *da'wa* was crowned in 297/909 by the establishment of the Fatimid *dawla* or state in North Africa, where the Ismaili imam was installed to the first Shi'i caliphate. The foundation of the Fatimid state was a great success for the Shi'a in general and it posed a serious challenge to the authority of the 'Abbasid caliph, the official spokesman of Sunni Islam, and the position of the Sunni ulama' who legitimised the 'Abbasids' authority and defined Sunnism as the true interpretation of Islam. The Ismailis, who as Shi'i Muslims developed their own interpretation of Islam, now offered a viable alternative, protected by a powerful state, to Sunni "orthodoxy".<sup>1</sup>

The Ismailis elaborated a diversity of intellectual traditions. The recovery of Ismaili literature in modern times indeed attests to the rich literary heritage of the Ismailis and their intellectual achievements which reached their summit during the Fatimid phase of their history - often referred to as the "golden age" of Ismailism. The learned Ismaili *da'is* were at the same time the scholars and authors of their community. The Fatimid *da'is* of the Iranian lands, such as Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani (d. after 361/971), Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (d. after 411/1020) and Na'ir-i Khusraw (d. after 465/1072), amalgamated their theology with a variety of philosophical traditions, giving rise to a distinctive intellectual tradition labelled in modern times as "philosophical Ismailism".<sup>2</sup> These and other *da'is* also produced treatises on a multitude of exoteric and esoteric subjects as well as the science of ta'wil or esoteric exegesis which became the hallmark of Ismaili thought. The *da'i*-authors made seminal contributions to Islamic theology and philosophy in general and to Shi'i thought in particular. The Fatimids developed an elaborate *da'wa* organisation for the activities of their *da'is* throughout the Muslim world; and, ironically, the *da'wa* achieved long-term successes only outside of the Fatimid dominions, where the Ismailis were often persecuted.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Ismaili law was codified mainly through the



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efforts of al-Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 363/974), the foremost jurist of the Fatimid period.<sup>4</sup> The Fatimids also encouraged a historiographical tradition which resulted in numerous chronicles of the Fatimid dynasty and state; but these historiographical writings perished almost completely in Ayyubid and Mamluk times.<sup>5</sup> In sum, the Fatimids paid considerable attention to Islamic sciences in general as well as cultural and commercial activities; and they made important contributions to Islamic civilisation.<sup>6</sup> It was in recognition of these contributions that the 4th/10th century was designated by Louis Massignon as the "Ismaili century" of Islam.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Nizari / Musta'li Division**

In 487/1094, the Ismailis were permanently split into two rival communities, the Nizaris and the Musta'lis. The Musta'li Ismailis, who eventually survived only in the Tayyibi branch, soon found their stronghold in Yemen where their community flourished under the leadership of their *da'is*. By the end of the 10th/16th century, the Tayyibis themselves were subdivided into Da'udi and Sulaymani factions. By that time, the Tayyibis of the Indian subcontinent, known locally as Bohras, had greatly outnumbered their co-religionists in Yemen. The Tayyibis in general maintained the intellectual and literary traditions of the Fatimid Ismailis; they have also preserved, both in Yemen and India, a considerable portion of the Ismaili literature of the Fatimid period. The learned Tayyibi *da'is* of Yemen themselves engaged in literary activities and produced a voluminous literature.

The *Nizari Ismailis*, on the other hand, acquired political prominence within Saljuq dominions, especially in Persia where they organised a state of their own with a subsidiary in Syria. The Nizari state, founded by Hasan-i Sabbah (d. 518/1124) and centred at the mountain fortress of Alamut, lasted some 166 years until it too was destroyed by the all-conquering Mongol hordes in 654/1256. Hasan-i Sabbah designed a partially successful revolutionary strategy against the Saljuq Turks, whose alien rule was intensely detested in Persia, and thus he capitalised on the Persian sentiments of different social strata there. Preoccupied with their struggle



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and survival tactics in the midst of an extremely hostile milieu, however, the Nizaris of the Alamut period did not produce as many learned *da'is* and a substantial volume of literature as in Fatimid times. Nevertheless, they did maintain a sophisticated outlook and literary tradition, also elaborating their teachings in response to changed circumstances. The Nizari Ismailis of Persia, like the Fatimids, also developed a historiographical tradition and commissioned the compilation of official chronicles recording the events of their state according to the reigns of the successive lords of Alamut, starting with the *Sargudhasht-i Sayyidna* which covered the life and career of Hasan-i Sabbah.<sup>8</sup> But none of these chronicles survived the Mongol catastrophe. However, the Nizari chronicles were seen and utilised by a number of Persian historians of the Ilkhanid period, notably 'Ata Malik Juwayni (d. 681/1283), who had access to the famous library at Alamut before it was burned by the Mongols, Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah (d. 718/1318) and Abu'l-Qasim Kashani (d. ca. 736/1335), who remain our main sources on the history of the Nizari state in Persia.<sup>9</sup> And the Syrian Nizaris preserved a portion of the Ismaili literature of the Fatimid period.

The Nizari Ismailis of Persia survived the Mongol destruction of their fortresses and state in considerably reduced numbers, while the Syrian Nizaris were subdued by the end of the 7th/13th century by the Mamluks who had also checked the westward advances of the Mongols. By the middle of the 9th/15th century, the Nizari imams emerged in Anjudan in central Persia, initiating a revival in Nizari *da'wa* and literary activities. The Nizari *da'wa* now achieved particular success in Central Asia, and on the Indian subcontinent where large numbers of Hindus converted to Ismailism and became locally known as Khojas. The Nizaris of the post-Alamut period developed distinctive literary traditions in Syria, Persia, Central Asia and India. The Persian Nizaris now adopted poetic and Sufi forms of expressions, while the Central Asian Nizaris preserved a good share of the Nizari literature of the Alamut and subsequent times written in Persian, chosen as the religious language of the Persian-speaking Nizaris from the early Alamut



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times. The Nizari Khojas elaborated an indigenous literary genre in the form of devotional hymns known as *ginans*.<sup>10</sup> Originally transmitted orally, the *ginans* were eventually committed to writing mainly in the Khojki script developed within the Nizari Khoja community in India.

### **The Anti-Ismaili Campaign**

In the course of their history the Ismailis have often been accused of various heretical teachings and practices and, at the same time, a multitude of myths and misconceptions circulated about them. This is mainly because the Ismailis were, until the middle of the twentieth century, studied and evaluated almost exclusively on the basis of the evidence collected or often fabricated by their enemies. As the most revolutionary wing of Shi'ism with a religio-political agenda that aimed to uproot the 'Abbasids and restore the caliphate to a line of 'Alid imams, the Ismailis from early on aroused the hostility of the Sunni establishment of the Muslim majority. With the foundation of the Fatimid state, the Ismaili challenge to the established order had become actualised, and thereupon the 'Abbasid caliphs and the Sunni '*ulama*' launched what amounted to nothing less than an official anti-Ismaili propaganda campaign. The overall objective of this systematic and prolonged campaign was to discredit the entire Ismaili movement from its origins so that the Ismailis could be readily condemned as *malahida*, heretics or deviators from the true religious path. In particular, Sunni polemicists, starting with Ibn Rizam who lived in Baghdad during the first half of the 4th/10th century, began to fabricate evidence that would lend support to the condemnation of the Ismailis on specific doctrinal grounds. Ibn Rizam's anti-Ismaili tract does not seem to have survived, but it was used extensively a few decades later by another polemicist, the Sharif Abu'l-Husayn Muhammad b. 'Ali better known as Akhu Muhsin whose own anti-Ismaili work, written around 372/982, has not survived. However, the Ibn Rizam -- Akhu Muhsin accounts have been preserved fragmentarily by several later historians, notably al-Nuwayri (d. 732/1332) Ibn al-Dawadari (d. after 736/1335) and al-Maqrizi (d.845/1442).<sup>11</sup> The polemicists concocted detailed



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accounts of the sinister teachings and practices of the Ismailis, while refuting the 'Alid genealogy of their imams, descendants of the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765) and the last of the early 'Alid imams recognised jointly by the Ismaili and the Twelver (Ithna'ashari) Shi'is. Anti-Ismaili polemical writings provided a major source of information for Sunni heresiographers, such as al-Baghdadi (d. 429/1037), who produced another important category of writing against the Ismailis;<sup>12</sup> while the earliest Imami Shi'i heresiographers al-Nawbakhti (d. after 300/912) and al-Qummi (d. 301/913), who were better informed than their Sunni counterparts on the internal divisions of Shi'ism, were less hostile towards the Ismaili Shi'is.<sup>13</sup>

Polemicists also fabricated travesties in which they attributed a variety of shocking beliefs and practices to the Ismailis; these forgeries circulated widely as genuine Ismaili treatises and were used as source materials by subsequent generations of polemicists and heresiographers. One of these forgeries, the anonymous *Kitab al-siyasa (Book of Methodology)*, acquired wide popularity as it contained all the ideas needed to condemn the Ismailis as heretics on account of their libertinism and atheism. This book, which has survived only fragmentarily in later Sunni sources, such as al-Baghdadi's heresiography<sup>14</sup>, is reported to have candidly expounded the procedures that were supposedly followed by Ismaili *da'is* for winning new converts and instructing them through some seven stages of initiation or *balagh* leading ultimately to unbelief and atheism. Needless to add that the Ismaili tradition knows of these fictitious accounts only from the polemics of its enemies. Be that as it may, the anti-Ismaili polemical and heresiographical traditions, in turn, influenced the historians, theologians and jurists who had something to say about the Ismailis.

### **Heterodoxy and Heresy**

The Sunni authors, who were generally not interested in collecting accurate information on the internal divisions of Shi'ism and treated all Shi'i interpretations of Islam as "heterodoxies" or even "heresies", also readily availed themselves of the opportunity of blaming the Fatimids and indeed the



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entire Ismaili community for the atrocities perpetrated by the Qarmatis of Bahrayn who, in 317/930, attacked Mecca and massacred the pilgrims there and then carried away the Black Stone (*al-hajar al-aswad*).<sup>15</sup> The Qarmatis, it may be recalled, seceded from the rest of the Isma'iliyya, at the latest by 286/899, and never recognised continuity in the imamate which became the central doctrine of the Fatimid Ismailis. At any rate, the hostile accounts and misrepresentations contributed significantly to shaping the anti-Ismaili opinions of Muslims at large.

By spreading these defamations and forged accounts, the anti-Ismaili authors, in fact, produced a “black legend” in the course of the 4th/10th century. Ismailism was now depicted as the arch-heresy, *ilhad*, of Islam, carefully designed by some non-‘Alid impostors, or possibly even a Jewish magician disguised as a Muslim, aiming at destroying Islam from within.<sup>16</sup> By the 5th/11th century, this “black legend”, with its elaborate details and stages of initiation, had been accepted as an accurate and reliable description of Ismaili motives, beliefs and practices, leading to further anti-Ismaili polemics and heresiographical accusations as well as intensifying the animosity of other Muslims towards the Ismailis.

### **al-Ghazali**

By the end of the 5th/11th century, the widespread anti-Ismaili campaign of the Sunni authors had been astonishingly successful throughout the central Islamic lands. The revolt of the Persian Ismailis led by Hasan-i Sabbah against the Saljuq Turks, the new overlords of the ‘Abbasids, now called forth another vigorous Sunni reaction against the Ismailis in general and the Nizaris in particular. The new literary campaign, accompanied by military attacks on Nizari strongholds in Persia, was initiated by Nizam al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), the Saljuq vizier and virtual master of Saljuq dominions for more than two decades. Nizam al-Mulk himself devoted a long chapter in his *Siyasat-nama* (*The Book of Government*) to the condemnation of the Ismailis.<sup>17</sup> However, the earliest polemical treatise against the Persian Ismailis and their doctrine of *ta'lim*, propounding the necessity of



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authoritative teaching by the Ismaili imam, was written by no lesser a figure than al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), the most renowned contemporary Sunni theologian and jurist. He was, in fact, commissioned by the 'Abbasid caliph al-Mustazhir (487-512/1094-1118) to write a treatise in refutation of the Batinis - another designation coined for the Ismailis by their enemies who accused them of dispensing with the *zahir* or the commandments and prohibitions of the *shari'a* because they claimed to have found access to the *batin* or the essence of the Islamic message as interpreted by the Ismaili imam. In this widely circulating book, completed around 488/1095 and generally known as *al-Mustazhiri*, al-Ghazali fabricated his own elaborate "Ismaili" system of stages of initiation leading to the ultimate stage (*al-balagh al-akbar*) of atheism.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, al-Ghazali wrote several shorter works in refutation of the Ismailis, and his defamations were adopted by other Sunni writers who, like Nizam al-Mulk, were also familiar with the earlier "black legend". It is interesting to note that the Nizaris never responded to al-Ghazali's polemics, but a detailed refutation of the *Mustazhiri* was much later written in Yemen by the fifth Musta'li-Tayyibi *da'i* who died in 612/1215.<sup>19</sup> At any rate, Sunni authors, including especially Saljuq chroniclers, participated actively in the renewed literary campaign against the Ismailis.

### ***Hashishiyya***

By the opening decades of the 6th/12th century, the divided Ismaili community had embarked on internal Nizari versus Musta'li feuds to the obvious delight of their Sunni adversaries. In one anti-Nizari polemical epistle, issued in 516/1222 by the Fatimid caliph al-Amir (495-524/1101-1130), the Nizari Ismailis of Syria were for the first time referred to with the abusive designation of *hashishiyya*, without any explanation.<sup>20</sup> This term was later applied to the Syrian Nizari Ismailis by a few Sunni historians, notably Abu Shama (d. 665/1267) and Ibn Muyassar (d. 677/1278), without accusing the Ismailis of actually using *hashish*, a product of hemp.<sup>21</sup> The Persian Nizaris, too, were designated as *hashishis* in some Zaydi sources written in northern Persia during the Alamut period.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that in all





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the Muslim sources in which the Nizaris are referred to as *hashishis*, this term is used metaphorically and in its abusive sense of “low-class rabble” and “irreligious social outcast”. The literal interpretation of this term in reference to the Nizaris is rooted in the fantasies of medieval Europeans and their “imaginative ignorance” of Islam and the Ismailis. At any event, the Fatimids and the Syrian Nizaris soon found a common enemy in the Christian Crusaders, who seized Jerusalem in 492/1099. Subsequently, the Crusaders founded four principalities in the Near East and engaged in extensive military and diplomatic encounters with the Fatimids in Egypt and the Nizari Ismailis in Syria, which had lasting repercussions in terms of the distorted image of the Nizaris in Europe.

The Syrian Nizaris attained the peak of their power and fame under the leadership of Rashid al-Din Sinan, who was their chief *da'i* for some three decades until his death in 589/1193. It was in the time of Sinan, the original “Old Man of the Mountain” or “Le Vieux de la Montagne” of the Crusader sources, that occidental chroniclers of the Crusades and a number of European travellers and diplomatic emissaries began to write about the Nizari Ismailis, designated by them as the Assassins. The very term Assassin was evidently based on the variants of the Arabic word *hashish* (plural, *hashishiyya*), applied to the Nizari Ismailis in a derogatory sense by other Muslims and picked up locally in the Levant by the Crusaders and their European observers. At any rate, the Crusader circles and their occidental chroniclers, who were not interested in collecting accurate information about Islam as a religion and its internal divisions despite their proximity to Muslims, remained completely ignorant of Islam in general and the Ismailis in particular. It was under such circumstances that the Crusader circles produced reports about the secret practices of the Ismailis. In the event, medieval Europeans themselves began to fabricate and put into circulation both in the Latin Orient and in Europe a number of tales about these secret practices. In this connection, it is important to note that none of the variants of these tales can be found in contemporary Muslim



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sources, even the most hostile ones, produced during the 6th/12th and 7th/13th centuries.

### **Assassin Legends**

The Crusaders were particularly impressed by the highly exaggerated reports and rumours of the Nizari assassinations and the daring behaviour of their *fidai's*, or the self-sacrificing devotees, who carried out the actual missions in public places and normally lost their lives in the process. It should be recalled that in the 6th/12th century, almost any assassination of any significance committed in the central Islamic lands was attributed to the daggers of the Nizari *fidai's*. This explains why these imaginative tales came to revolve around the recruitment and training of these *fidai's*; for they were meant to provide satisfactory explanations for behaviour that would otherwise seem irrational or strange to the medieval Western mind. These so-called Assassin legends consisted of a number of separate but interconnected tales, including the “paradise legend”, the “hashish legend”, and the “death-leap legend”. The legends developed in stages, receiving new embellishments at each successive stage, and finally culminated in a synthesis popularised by Marco Polo (d. 1324). The famous Venetian traveller added his own original contribution in the form of a “secret garden of paradise”, where bodily pleasures were supposedly procured for the *fidai's* by their mischievous and beguiling leader, the Old Man, as part of their indoctrination and training.<sup>23</sup>

Marco Polo's version of the Assassin legends, offered as a report obtained from reliable contemporary sources in Persia, was reiterated to various degrees by subsequent European writers as the standard description of the “Old Man of the Mountain and his Assassins”.<sup>24</sup> Strangely enough, it did not occur to any European that Marco Polo may have actually heard the tales in Italy after returning to Venice in 1295 from his journeys to the East - tales that were by then widespread in Europe and could already be at least partially traced to European antecedents on the subject; not to mention the



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possibility that the Assassin legends found in Marco Polo's book may have been entirely inserted, as a digressionary note, by Rustichello of Pisa, the Italian romance writer who was actually responsible for committing the account of Marco Polo's travels to writing. More cannot be said on this subject in our present state of knowledge, especially as the original version of Marco Polo's travelogue written by Rustichello in a peculiar old French mixed with Italian has not been recovered. In this connection, it may also be noted that Marco Polo himself evidently revised his travelogue during the last twenty years of his life, at which time he could readily have appropriated the Assassin legends regarding the Syrian Nizaris then current in Europe. The contemporary historian Juwayni, an avowed enemy of the Nizaris who accompanied Hülegü to Alamut in 654/1256 and inspected that fortress and its library before their destruction by the Mongols, does not report having discovered any "secret garden of paradise" there, as claimed in Marco Polo's account.

Different Assassin legends or components of particular legends were "imagined" independently and at times concurrently by different authors, such as Arnold of Lübeck (d. 1212) and James of Vitry (d. 1240), and embellished over time. Starting with Burchard of Strassburg who visited Syria in 570/1175 as an envoy of the Hohenstaufen emperor of Germany, European travellers, chroniclers and envoys to the Latin East who had something to say about the "Assassins" participated, as if in tacit collusion, in the process of fabricating, transmitting and legitimising the Assassin legends. By the 8th/14th century, the legends had acquired wide currency and were accepted as reliable descriptions of secret Nizari Ismaili practices, in much the same way as the earlier "black legend" of Sunni polemicists had been accepted as accurate explanation of Ismaili motives, teachings and practices. Henceforth, the Nizari Ismailis were portrayed in medieval European sources as a sinister order of drugged assassins bent on senseless murder and mischief.



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In the meantime, the word “assassin”, instead of signifying the name of the Nizari community in Syria, had acquired a new meaning in French, Italian and other European languages. It had become a common noun designating a professional murderer. With the advent of this usage, the origin and significance of the term “Assassin” was soon forgotten in Europe, while the “oriental sect” that originally bore that name continued to arouse some interest among Europeans, mainly because of the enduring popularity of the Assassin legends which had indeed acquired an independent life of their own. Henceforth, a number of European philologists and lexicographers began to collect the variants of the term “assassin”, such as *assassini* and *heysseini*, occurring in medieval occidental sources, also proposing many strange etymologies. By the 12th/18th century, numerous etymologies of this term had become available, while the sectarians in question had received a few more notices from the pens of travellers and missionaries to the East. In sum, by the beginning of the 13th/19th century, Europeans still perceived the Nizari Ismailis in an utterly confused and fanciful manner.<sup>25</sup>

### **Orientalism**

The orientalist of the nineteenth century, led by Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838), began their more scholarly study of Islam on the basis of the Arabic manuscripts which were written mainly by Sunni authors. As a result, they studied Islam according to the Sunni viewpoint and, borrowing classifications applicable to Christian contexts, treated Shi‘ism as the “heterodox” interpretation of Islam by contrast to Sunnism which was taken to represent “orthodoxy”. It was mainly on this basis, as well as the continued attraction of the seminal Assassin legends, that the orientalist launched their own study of the Ismailis. In his famous *Memoir on the Nizaris*,<sup>26</sup> de Sacy succeeded in finally solving the mystery of the name Assassin; he also produced important studies on early Ismailis as background materials for his major work on the Druze religion.<sup>27</sup> The orientalist now correctly identified the Ismailis as a Shi‘i Muslim community, but they were still obliged to study



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them exclusively on the basis of the hostile Sunni sources and the fictitious occidental accounts of the Crusader circles. Consequently, the orientalist, too, lent their own seal of approval to the myths of the Ismailis, namely, the anti-Ismaili “black legend” of the medieval Sunni polemicists and the Assassin legends of the Crusaders.

Indeed, de Sacy’s distorted evaluation of the Ismailis, though unintentional, set the frame within which other orientalists of the nineteenth century studied the medieval history of the Ismailis. The orientalists’ interest in the Ismailis had now received a fresh impetus from the anti-Ismaili accounts of the then newly-discovered Sunni chronicles which seemed to complement the Assassin legends contained in the occidental sources familiar to them. It was under such circumstances that misconceptions, misrepresentation and plain fiction came to permeate the most widely read study of the Ismailis, namely, the first Western book on the Persian Nizaris of the Alamut period written by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856). This Austrian orientalist-diplomat endorsed Marco Polo’s narrative in its entirety as well as all the medieval defamations levelled against the Ismailis by their Sunni enemies. This book, originally published in German in 1818, achieved great success in Europe and continued to be treated as the standard history of the Nizari Ismailis until the 1930s.<sup>28</sup> With rare exceptions, notably the French orientalist Charles F. Defrémery (1822-1883) who produced valuable historical studies on the Nizaris of Syria and Persia<sup>29</sup>, the Ismailis continued to be misrepresented to various degrees by later orientalists such as Michael J. de Goeje (1836-1909), whose own incorrect interpretation of Fatimid-Qarmati relations was generally adopted.<sup>30</sup> Orientalism gave a new lease of life to the myths surrounding the Ismailis; and this deplorable state of Ismaili studies remained essentially unchanged until the 1930s. Even an eminent scholar like Edward Browne (1862-1926) could not resist reiterating the orientalistic tales of his predecessors on the Ismailis.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, Westerners had retained the habit of referring to the Nizari Ismailis as the Assassins, a misnomer rooted in a medieval pejorative appellation.<sup>32</sup>



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The breakthrough in Ismaili studies had to await the recovery and study of genuine Ismaili texts on a large scale - manuscript sources which had been preserved secretly in numerous private collections. A few Ismaili manuscripts of Syrian provenance had already surfaced in Paris during the nineteenth century, and some fragments of these works were studied and published there by Stanislas Guyard (1846-1884) and other orientalists.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Paul Casanova (1861-1926), who produced important studies on the Fatimids and the Nizari coins, was the first European orientalist to have recognised the Ismaili origin of the *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa'*, a portion of which had found its way to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.<sup>34</sup> More Ismaili manuscripts preserved in Yemen and Central Asia were recovered in the opening decades of the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> In particular, a number of Nizari texts were collected from Shughnan, Rushan and other districts of Badakhshan (now divided by the Oxus River between Tajikistan and Afghanistan) and studied by Aleksandr A. Semenov (1873-1958), the Russian pioneer in Ismaili studies from Tashkent.<sup>36</sup> The Ismaili manuscripts of Central Asian provenance found their way to the Asiatic Museum in St. Petersburg, and are currently held there in the collections of the Institute of Oriental Studies. However, by 1922, when the first Western bibliography of Ismaili writings was prepared by Louis Massignon (1883-1962), knowledge of European libraries and scholarly circles about Ismaili literature was still very limited.<sup>37</sup>

### **Modern Ismaili Studies**

Modern scholarship in Ismaili studies was actually initiated in the 1930s in India, where significant collections of Ismaili manuscripts had been preserved in the Ismaili Bohra community. This breakthrough resulted mainly from the pioneering efforts of Wladimir Ivanow (1886-1970), and a few Ismaili Bohra scholars, notably Asaf A. A. Fyzee (1899-1981), Husayn F. al-Hamdani (1901-1962) and Zahid 'Ali (1888-1958), all of whom based their studies on their family collections of manuscripts.<sup>38</sup> Asaf Fyzee, who studied law at Cambridge University and belonged to the most learned



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Sulaymani family of Tayyibi Ismailis in India, in fact, made modern scholars aware of the existence of an Ismaili school of jurisprudence. Among his numerous publications on the subject<sup>39</sup>, Fyzee also produced a critical edition of al-Qadi al-Nu'man's major work which served as the legal code of the Fatimid state and is still observed by the Tayyibi Ismailis of India, Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> Husayn al-Hamdani, who belonged to an eminent Da'udi Tayyibi family of scholars with Yemeni origins and who received his doctorate from London University, was a pioneer in producing a number of studies based on Ismaili sources, calling the attention of modern scholars to the existence of this unique literary heritage. Zahid 'Ali hailed from another learned Da'udi family and was for many years the principal of the Nizam College at Hyderabad after receiving his doctorate from Oxford University; he was the first person in modern times to have produced in Urdu, on the basis of a variety of Ismaili sources, a scholarly study of Fatimid history and a work on Ismaili doctrines.<sup>41</sup>

Ivanow, who eventually settled in Bombay after leaving his native Russia in 1917, collaborated closely with the above-mentioned Bohra scholars and succeeded, through his own connections within the Khoja community, to gain access to Nizari literature as well. Consequently, he compiled the first detailed catalogue of Ismaili works, citing some 700 separate titles which attested to the hitherto unknown richness and diversity of Ismaili literature and intellectual traditions. The initiation of modern scholarship in Ismaili studies may indeed be traced to the publication of this very catalogue, which provided a scientific frame for further research in the field.<sup>42</sup> Ismaili scholarship received a major impetus through the establishment in 1946 of the Ismaili Society of Bombay under the patronage of [Sultan Muhammad Shah](#), [Aga Khan III](#) (1877-1957), the forty-eighth imam of the Nizari Ismailis. Ivanow played a crucial role in the creation of the Ismaili Society whose various series of publications were mainly devoted to his own monographs as well as editions and translations of Ismaili texts.<sup>43</sup> He also acquired a large number of manuscripts for the Ismaili Society's Library, which were



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transferred to [The Institute of Ismaili Studies Library](#) in London during the early 1980s.

By 1963, when Ivanow published a revised edition of his catalogue, many more Ismaili sources had become known and progress in Ismaili studies had been truly astonishing.<sup>44</sup> In addition to many studies by Ivanow and the Bohra pioneers in the field, numerous Ismaili texts had now begun to be critically edited by other scholars, preparing the ground for further progress in this new field of Islamic studies. In this connection, particular mention should be made of the Ismaili texts of Fatimid and later times edited together with analytical introductions by [Henry Corbin](#) (1903-1978), published simultaneously in Tehran and Paris in his “Bibliothèque Iranienne” series<sup>45</sup>; and the Fatimid texts edited by the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Kamil Husayn (1901-1961) and published in his “Silsilat Makhtutat al-Fatimiyyin” series in Cairo.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, ‘[Arif Tamir](#) (1921-1998), who belonged to the small Muhammad-Shahi Nizari community based in Syria, made the Ismaili texts of Syrian provenance available to scholars, although regrettably often in faulty editions; and a number of European scholars, such as Marius Canard (1888-1982) and several Egyptian scholars such as Hasan Ibrahim Hasan (1892-1968), Jamal al-Din al-Shayyal (1911-1967) and ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Majid (1920-1999) made important contributions to Fatimid studies.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Yves Marquet had embarked on a lifelong study of the Ikhwan al-Safa’ and their *Rasa’il*.

### **Contemporary Research and Scholarship**

By the mid-1950s, progress in the field had already enabled Marshall G. S. Hodgson (1922-1968) to produce the first scholarly and comprehensive study of the Nizari Ismailis of the Alamut period.<sup>48</sup> Soon, others representing a new generation of scholars, notably Bernard Lewis, Samuel M. Stern (1920-1969), [Wilferd Madelung](#) and Abbas Hamdani produced major studies, especially on the early Ismailis and their relations with the dissident Qarmatis.<sup>49</sup> Progress in Ismaili studies has proceeded at a rapid pace during the last few decades through the efforts of yet another generation of scholars





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such as Ismail K. Poonawala, [Paul E. Walker](#), [Azim A. Nanji](#), Thierry Bianquis, Ayman Fu'ad [Sayyid](#), Farhad Dachraoui and Mohammed Yalaoui, who have devoted their attention mainly to Fatimid studies. The modern progress in the recovery and study of Ismaili literature is well reflected in Professor Poonawala's monumental *Biobibliography*, which identifies some 1300 titles written by more than 200 authors.<sup>50</sup> Many of these texts have now been published in critical editions, while numerous secondary studies of Ismaili history and thought have been produced by three successive generations of scholars.

Modern scholarship in Ismaili studies will, in all probability, continue at an even greater pace as the Ismailis themselves are now becoming widely interested in studying their literary heritage and history - a phenomenon attested by an increasing number of Ismaili-related doctoral dissertations written in recent decades by Ismailis. In this context, a major role will be played by The Institute of Ismaili Studies, established in London in 1977 under the patronage of [H. H. Prince Karim Aga Khan IV](#), the present imam of the Nizari Ismailis. This institution is already serving as the central point of reference for Ismaili studies while making its own contributions through various programmes of research and publications. Amongst these, particular mention should be made of the monographs appearing in the Institute's "[Ismaili Heritage Series](#)" which aims to make available to wide audiences the results of modern scholarship on the Ismailis and their intellectual and cultural traditions; and the "[Ismaili Texts and Translations Series](#)" in which critical editions of Arabic and Persian texts are published together with English translations and contextualising introductions.<sup>51</sup> Numerous scholars worldwide participate in these academic programmes, and many more benefit from the accessibility of the Ismaili manuscripts held at the Institute's Library, representing the largest collection of its kind in the West.<sup>52</sup> With these modern developments, the scholarly study of the Ismailis, which by the closing decades of the twentieth century had already greatly deconstructed and explained away the seminal anti-



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Ismaili legends of medieval times, promises to dissipate the remaining misrepresentations of the Ismailis rooted either in hostility or imaginative ignorance of the earlier generations.