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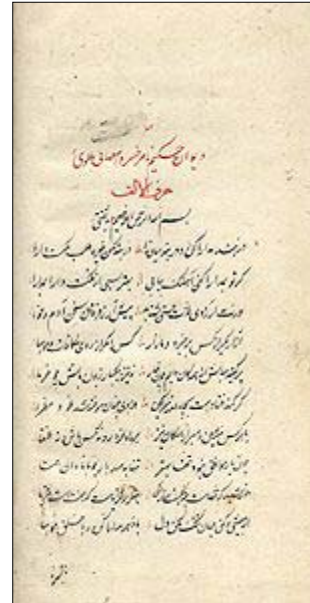
Nasir Khusraw: A Portrait of The Persian Poet, Traveller and Philosopher Alice C. Hunsberger*

Abstract

One of the foremost poets of the Persian language and a major contributor to Ismaili thought, Nasir Khusraw has attracted passionate attention, from admirers and critics alike, for nearly a thousand years. Celebrated for a poetry that combines art with philosophy, trusted for the details of his travels throughout the Middle East, revered and criticised for his theological texts, Nasir Khusraw remains one of the most fascinating figures in Islamic history and literature. This article provides an introduction to his life, travels and writing as well as his role as an Ismaili *da‘i* in Khurasan.

Keywords

Nasir Khusraw, *Safarname*, Iranian Studies, Islamic Studies, Ismaili Studies, Shi‘i Studies, Central Asia, philosophy, Yumgan, Badakhshan, Khurasan, *da‘wa*, literature, poetry, travelogue, Fatimids.



Opening page of Nasir Khusraw's *Divan*
(The Institute of Ismaili Studies Library, MS 903).

Introduction

By words, the Prophet's religion spread throughout the earth and by words, he reached to heaven's highest dome.

(*Divan*, 180:13)

This is a revised and edited version of Alice C. Hunsberger, 'A Soul Higher Than Fortune,' in *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan: A Portrait of the Persian Poet, Traveller and Philosopher* (I. B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000), pp. 1-16.

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For over nine hundred years, Nasir Khusraw has attracted passionate attention, from admirers and critics alike. Delight in his mastery of poetical form and expression has led centuries of Persian speakers to rank him among the best of Persian poets. In addition, his personal record of the seven-year journey he took from Central Asia to the Mediterranean coast, Egypt, Arabia and back home again has been studied word by word for its detailed descriptions of cities, societies and customs. French and German scholars of the 19th century stood where he stood in Jerusalem and could count out the steps he had counted out centuries before. Appreciation for the serious intellectual content found throughout his writings, both in poetry and prose, early on earned him the title of *hakim*, that is someone revered for scientific knowledge and analytical ability. In some parts of Central Asia, people still claim descent from him. On the other hand, his success as a missionary for the Ismaili faith caused public and official opinion to turn viciously against him, forcing him to flee for his life. He spent the last fifteen years or so of his life in exile under the protection of a minor prince, in a remote place tucked away in the mountains of Badakhshan, slightly north of the Hindu Kush. He has been falsely credited with founding an eponymous religious community, the Nasiriyya. Legends about him flowered so extravagantly that by 1574 a scholar was warned not to believe anything said about him. Today, his verses are still taught in Persian literature classes and, perhaps more significantly, are recited from memory and sprinkled throughout Persian conversations when a moral illustration is called for, as in the following example:

Have you heard? A squash vine grew beneath a towering tree.
In only twenty days it grew and spread and put forth fruit.
Of the tree it asked: 'How old are you? How many years?'
Replied the tree: 'Two hundred it would be, and surely more.'
The squash laughed and said: 'Look, in twenty days, I've done more than
you; tell me, why are you so slow?'
The tree responded: 'O little squash, today is not the day of reckoning
between the two of us.'
'Tomorrow, when winds of autumn howl down on you and me, then shall it be
known for sure which one of us is the real man!'

(Divan, 20)

Nasir Khusraw has written in three distinct genres — travelogue, poetry and philosophy — each of which provides a window into his character. In addition, there exists a corpus of secondary literature of biographies, anthologies and geographies that cite him and his work. One of the earliest is a hostile account by his contemporary Abu'l-Ma'ali, who charges him with preaching heretical views. From then on, references to Nasir Khusraw, with varying degrees of fantasy and prejudice, show up regularly about once a century in the major intellectual compilations. Thus, while from his own words we can



gain a picture of the man as he wished to be seen, from other writers we can glimpse something of the passions he aroused.

In an age when the international language of political and intellectual discourse from Spain to India was Arabic, Nasir distinguished himself by writing predominantly in his native Persian language. Most of his fellow Iranians — including the brightest stars of Islamic intellectual history, such as the philosophers Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and al-Farabi and some of his fellow Ismailis — made sure to write at least some works in Arabic and thereby secured a broader reputation. For example, Ibn Sina’s medical compendium, *al-Qanun*, translated from Arabic into Latin, served as Europe’s main medical text until nearly the modern age and its title introduced the word ‘canon’ into European languages. Nasir Khusraw himself was certainly well-schooled in Arabic and there are some suggestions that he also composed works in that language.¹ But all that exists today is in Persian, and that raises some questions. If indeed he wrote only in Persian, it would throw a provocative light on someone who, in all other aspects, took a global view of life. If, on the other hand, he did compose in Arabic also but all that remains are his Persian works, it would illuminate something about the audience that received him and took his words to heart.

Nasir Khusraw’s life can be divided into four periods: his early years up until his religious conversion at about the age of forty, about which we know very little; the seven-year journey, for which we have his *Safarnama (Travelogue)* and some references in his poetry; his return home to Khurasan as head missionary for the Ismailis in the region; and finally his exile in the Pamir mountains of Badakhshan in the district of Yumgan, for which we have his poetry and some of his philosophical works with their dedications to the prince who gave him refuge.

The Early Years

Abu Mu‘in Hamid al-Din Nasir b. Khusraw b. Harith al-Qubadiyani al-Marvazi, generally known as Nasir Khusraw, was born in 394/1004 into a family of government officials.² In his prose philosophical works, he usually records his entire name when

¹ For further discussion, see Alice Hunsberger, ‘The Wonders of This World,’ in *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan* (London, 2000), pp. 33-48. Also, Nasir Khusraw’s *Risala dar bayan-i nadamat-i ruz-i qiyamat* is considered to have been written first in Arabic. See Ismail K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Isma‘ili Literature*, (Malibu, CA, 1977), p. 123.

² Part of the confusion on the issue of Nasir’s date of birth derives from two different dates given in two poems. The poem with the earlier date (‘I was born in 357 [967 CE] in the month of Dhu’l-Qa’da’) was identified in the Taqavi edition of the *Divan* as not belonging to Nasir Khusraw. Mohaghegh’s edition places it in the Appendix (*Mulhaq*, 1, line 56). The poem with the later date (‘Three hundred ninety four years after the Hijra [1004 CE] my mother placed me in this abode.’) appears in Mohaghegh’s edition of *Divan*, 247:27. If we followed the first date, he would have been at least 120-years-old at his death. However, Nasir provides other benchmarks of his life. One of the strongest appears in his *Safarnama* (p. 2), where he asks himself the pivotal question, ‘When are you going to wake from your sleep of forty years?’ He tells us this was in the late autumn months of 437/1045. His commitment to God was anchored a few weeks later on 19 December 1045, a day so important to him that he recorded it in both his contemporary Islamic calendar and the pre-Islamic Persian calendar: ‘On Thursday the 6th of Junada II of the year 437, which was by Persian reckoning the middle of the month of Day, the last month before the year 414 of the Yazdigirdi era, I cleansed myself from head to foot, went to the mosque, and prayed to God for help both in accomplishing what I had to do and in abstaining from what He had forbidden.’ If we accept Nasir Khusraw to be



claiming authorship; in the *Safarnama* he often refers to himself as ‘Nasir’; and in his poetry he primarily uses his pen-name ‘*Hujjat*,’ which means ‘Proof,’ his title of elevated rank within the Ismaili missionary organisation, but also ‘Nasir’ and ‘Khusraw.’ Khusraw is the only Persian word in his name (all the others, apart from the place names, being Arabic or Arabicised), and it would certainly have been a point of great pride to this defender of Persian culture and language. For example, Khusraw Parviz and Khusraw Anushirvan were powerful kings of pre-Islamic Iranian empires who established many of the administrative structures later adopted by the Islamic empire under the caliphs.

Nasir’s place of birth, Qubadiyan, was a small town in the outskirts of Marv, a major city in the Balkh district of the great province of Khurasan, which extended in eastern Iran roughly up to the Oxus River. The provincial capital, Nishapur, and the city of Marv were important stopping points along the Silk Route and, in Nasir’s time, cosmopolitan cities successfully mixing people from many ethnic groups and religions. Sizeable Jewish, Christian and Buddhist communities lived side by side with Muslims of both Sunni and Shi‘i persuasions, producing a society rich not only in material wealth but also in intellectual, religious and artistic products.

In the 4th/10th century, several decades before Nasir’s birth, the provinces of Khurasan and Transoxiana (in today’s Central Asia) had been the locus of a Persian cultural renaissance, following several hundred years in which Arabic temporarily gained ascendancy after the military conquest achieved by the Arabs around the year 30/650. This ‘Persian Spring,’ as I would call it, resulted in a new language, New Persian, that richly suffused Arabic words into Middle Persian vocabulary and grammar, and provided the vehicle to express a Perso-Islamic cultural identity. One of the most significant early fruits of this new language was the composition of the Iranian national epic poem, the *Shahnama* (*The Book of Kings*), completed by Firdawsi in 401/1010, when Nasir Khusraw was five or six-years-old. Then, within decades, Nasir established himself as a master stylist in this new language in both poetry and prose, fully able to express himself in complicated metres in which rules of Arabic poetry govern Persian poetry, and in a clear prose style unencumbered by the linguistic ornamentation so favoured several centuries later.

Nasir followed family tradition and entered the government bureaucracy in some financial capacity, perhaps tax collection, for which he gained a measure of fame. ‘I was a clerk by profession and one of those in charge of the sultan’s revenue service’ and ‘acquired no small reputation among my peers,’ he writes in his *Safarnama*.³ In his early days, familiar first with

around 40 rather than 80 at the time of his conversion and the start of his journey, then this argues for a date of birth closer to 394 than 357. This date is further corroborated in another verse, where he writes, ‘Forty-two years had the celestial dome passed over me when my speaking soul began searching for wisdom.’ Among the biographers, Riza Quli Khan Hidayat records this later date of 394/1004. In his extensive introduction to the 1925 edition of the *Divan*, Taqizada criticises those who accept the date of 357 for ‘falling into an error of rhythm.’ He explains that the two dates have the same number of metrical feet and the same rhythm and could be confused for that reason; but the earlier date makes no chronological sense. Following this, there is no excuse for two other dates in the 350s, 358 and 359. Thus, the accepted date for Nasir Khusraw’s birth is 394 in the Islamic calendar and 1004 in the Common Era.

³ Nasir Khusraw, *Safarnama*, trans., Wheeler Thackston, Jr., *Nasir-e Khosraw’s Book of Travels (Safarnama)*, (Albany, NY, 1986), p. 1. This and all subsequent references to the *Safarnama*, from Thackston’s English translation, are given in the text.



the Ghaznavid sultans and then working for their successors the Saljuqs, Nasir Khusraw enjoyed a life of travel, study, poetry, wine, women and friends. He had done well at school, having learned Arabic and Persian with their rules of prosody, and studied philosophy, religious sciences, literature, history and mathematics. Later in life, he wrote a book on mathematics, even though he could find ‘not one single scholar throughout all Khurasan and the eastern lands like myself [who] could grapple with the solutions to these problems.’ But he felt it his responsibility to take on the task, for readers he would never see, ‘those yet to come, in a time yet to come.’⁴

Nasir Khusraw relished the opportunity to see new places and to admire the accomplishments of the human hand and mind. In his travels, he turned his keen eye toward both the physical and administrative structures put in place by each society. such as city walls, irrigation canals and road surfaces in one, and taxation conditions, employment practices and shop rental policies in another. Intellectually precise and attendant to detail, nothing fell outside his curiosity: he admired the luxurious feel of silks and damasks; tested local superstitions; arranged a private preview of a royal banquet; held poetry sessions with local poets; struck up conversations with peasants, shopkeepers and princes; visited Christian shrines; noticed the presence of women in the cafés of Armenia; compared fruit bazaars in Cairo, Mecca and Khurasan; delighted at the sight of a child holding a red rose in one hand and a white rose in the other; and struggled across the Arabian desert but refused to eat the recommended lizards.

But, for Nasir Khusraw a more urgent current ran under such delights of the world, namely his aching desire to have some purpose, some answer to the question of why all this exists. Why the world, why human happiness, why human sadness, why beautiful pearls within ugly, scabby oysters? He asked all the teachers and clergy he knew, inquired of all denominations and schools of thought, and read all the books he could, but no response was adequate enough for him. This restless searching and inner discontent lasted until it all came together in the conviction that the answers to these ultimate questions could be found in the doctrines of the Ismaili Shi‘i faith.

At some point in his 40th year (or 42nd, depending on the source), Nasir experienced a spiritual upheaval. It culminated in the conviction that truth could be discovered in the Ismaili message. He also became convinced that he must change his life completely and use this truth to change the world. In his *Safarnama* he describes a powerful dream that shocked him out of his ‘forty years’ sleep,’ and transformed his life into one of religious conviction and preaching. Elsewhere, in an autobiographical poem, he recounts his years of spiritual searching and credits his teacher, al-Mu‘ayyad fi’l-Din al-Shirazi (d. 470/1078), with guiding him on the path of knowledge. Both accounts of conversion are valid psychologically and possible historically. For a dream or a quest need not be merely a literary convention or a topos of human mythology. People do have dreams and do have moments of exquisite clarity, which they interpret as having revealed a profound truth that thereafter guides their lives.

⁴ Nasir Khusraw, *Jami’ al-hikmatayn: Le livre réunissant les deux sagesse ou harmonie de la philosophie grecque et de la theosophie ismaélienne*, ed. H. Corbin and M. Mu‘in (Tehran and Paris, 1953), pp. 307-8. The original work by Nasir Khusraw, *Ghara’ib al-hisab*, is now lost.



The Journey of a Life

Following this conscious, vivid conversion, Nasir Khusraw quit his administrative post and set out from his home province of Khurasan, ostensibly to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. His route took him westward through northern Iran, across Armenia and Azerbaijan, down through Syria to Jerusalem, Hebron and other cities of the region. He spent three of the seven years of his journey in Cairo, the capital of the Fatimids and the heart of Ismaili power and intellectual life. The Fatimids directly challenged the ‘Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, both militarily and theologically. Their missionary network aimed not only to guide men and women to a life of intellectual and spiritual salvation, but also to attain the Shi‘i vision of an Islamic state. While in Cairo, Nasir studied Ismaili doctrines, law and governance with either leading scholars. He also made four pilgrimages to Mecca. From his last pilgrimage, he continued north across Arabia, then through Iran, going eastward, back home to Balkh.

When Nasir left Cairo, he apparently left as the *hujjat* of Khurasan, the head of the Ismaili *da‘wa* (missionary organisation) in his home province. The Fatimids had divided the Islamic world into 12 regions and assigned for each of them a supervisor, or *hujjat*, to direct and coordinate the propagation of the faith. For Khurasan, they could not have chosen a better person for their purposes than Nasir Khusraw. His love of his homeland was now combined with his fervent commitment to guide others to the right path, just as he himself had been guided.

But the Ismaili faith, which is a branch of Shi‘i Islam, was by no means universally appreciated. Both the Sunnis and some non-Ismaili Shi‘is regarded the Ismailis as heretics. The significant difference between the Sunnis and the Shi‘is (including Ismailis) is that in Shi‘i theology the spiritual and temporal leadership of Muslims is believed to flow through the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, specifically the progeny of his daughter Fatima and her husband ‘Ali, a cousin of the Prophet. The early, pre-Fatimid Ismailis recognised a particular line of such spiritual leaders or *imams*. Subsequently, with the rise of the Fatimids, the Fatimid caliphs were recognised as *imams* by the Ismailis; and this line of Ismaili *imams* has continued to the present day. The other main branch of Shi‘ism recognises 12 *imams*, the last of whom disappeared in mysterious circumstances in the year 260/871 and its followers are known as Twelver Shi‘is (Ithna‘ashariyya). Sunni theology, on the other hand, does not accord ‘Ali such extraordinary veneration and generally accepts the progression of leadership as it unfolded after the Prophet Muhammad, that is, the first four caliphs, followed by the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid dynasties of caliphs — a historical continuity which lasted over 600 years, from 11/632 to 656/1258, when the Mongols executed the last ‘Abbasid caliph.

As equally long lasting as the theological difference between Shi‘ism and Sunnism, was Shi‘i opposition to the concentration of political power in the hands of the Sunnis. The Fatimid Caliphate, which lasted from 297/909 to 567/1171, was the first and only major Shi‘i ruling power until 907/1501 when Twelver Shi‘ism was established as the state religion of Iran under the Safavids. Since the Fatimids directly challenged the authority of the ‘Abbasid caliphate, both doctrinally and politically, the Sunni ‘Abbasids conducted a campaign of threats,



killings and theological polemic against the Fatimids from their capital in Baghdad. Other than the Ismaili Fatimid caliphate in Cairo, most other political power bases were Sunni, and strongly so. Nasir Khusraw's employers before his conversion, first the Ghaznavids and then the Saljuq sultans, were all staunch Sunnis and showed their support for the Sunni caliph in Baghdad through decisive efforts to quell Shi'i activism, especially that of Ismaili missionaries working for the Fatimid caliph.

As the head of Ismaili missionary activity in Khurasan for the Fatimid *da'wa*, Nasir's missionary successes put his life into danger. Both the Sunni and the Twelver Shi'i religious scholars (*'ulama*), as well as the crowds of common people under their influence, threatened his life. We have no clear picture of how much or how frequent the persecution of Nasir Khusraw was, nor do we know what forms it took. But we do know that other Ismaili preachers were often put to death because of their work. So when public pressure against Nasir escalated even in his hometown of Balkh, he realised he had to flee. He found refuge further east, in a place called Yumgan, in the court of 'Ali b. al-Asad, an intellectual Ismaili prince in the mountainous region of Badakhshan.

Years of Exile

In exile, remote, far from the intellectual centres of Cairo and his beloved Khurasan, Nasir Khusraw turned his energies inward, producing most of the written works we now have. Stylistically, his philosophical texts move methodically through the fundamentals of Ismaili faith, and his *Safarnama* displays a straightforward, even spare, language with only a few moments of personal expression for the reader. So it is in his poetry where Nasir portrays the greatest range and depth of his feelings. His poetry is filled with the despair and bitterness of his exile, calmed only at times by his unflinching conviction of the rightness of his actions and the surety of his ultimate salvation before God on the Day of Judgement. He heaps his anger on his countrymen for throwing him out of his own land and for being so ignorant as not to see the truth of his message. He bewails his exile, his suffering in intellectual solitude. He pounds his fist at the world for promising pleasure and delivering destruction. But he cannot escape the safety of his refuge. His protection tightens round him. Yumgan becomes synonymous with prison. In one poem, he sets the tone by calling to the wind:

Pass by, sweet breeze of Khurasan
to one imprisoned deep in the valley of Yumgan,
Who sits huddled in comfortless tight straits,
robbed of all wealth, all goods, all hope.

(*Divan*, 208:1-2)



One image in which our poet often found consolation was of a jewel in a mine. He sees himself as the one precious thing to be found in his entire surroundings. By extension, we are all jewels in the mine, buried beneath tons of muck and dirt, but surely there. No matter the external circumstances, no matter the physical conditions — and luxury and victory can be as deceptive as poverty and enslavement — each person is a work of God, a creation of intrinsic value. Each person contains a piece of eternity, a soul that is the true self. To find this essential self a person must work and dig. Without work, without sacrifice, without conscious effort, the jewel will not be found and will not shine. If the jewel does not shine it does not fulfil the purpose for which it was made. Intrinsic value must be brought into view.

The soul's purpose is to move toward God. For Nasir Khusraw, the conscious effort to find and polish the jewel, that is, to purify the soul of its base bodily surroundings, can only take place when the intellect (Arabic, *'aql*, or Persian, *khirad*) leads the way. Since it is the defining characteristic of human beings, not found in any other of God's creatures, the intellect is the tool for fulfilment in this world and salvation in the next. Through the intellect the human soul is able to learn the things it needs to learn in order to separate what is essential from what is not, the *batin* from the *zahir*, and thereby direct the person's actions to achieve the finest pleasures possible.⁵

Nasir's flight and exile provide the overt content of much of his later poetry. In his verses he allows full rein to his sense of separation and homesickness, pointing surely to one of the most compelling reasons for his enduring popularity, touching as he does upon universal feelings not only of loss and abandonment, but also of hope and confidence in the eventual triumph of good over evil. It is one of the ironies of oppression that the solution chosen to eliminate an enemy often guarantees that enemy's enduring fame. In Nasir Khusraw's case, no one knows the names of his oppressors, but his poems from exile, longing for his homeland, speak across the centuries to anyone whose world has been swept away by war, oppression or terror.

The Content of His Writings

As a writer who wrote extensively in the Persian language, Nasir Khusraw is admired not only for his dedication to his mother tongue, but particularly for his imaginative rhetorical skill and his ability to create new words, in addition to new twists on old phrases. As a traveller who visited much of the Islamic world, his personal record of his seven-year journey continues to be scrutinised for all clues it might possibly offer to the history, politics, archaeology, administration, society, religion, customs and military defences of the region and time. As a preacher, he provides not only the tenets of faith in his works, but also the reasons for faith and prescriptions for living in faith. As a moralist warning of the dangers of troubling too much over the pains and pleasures of the world, his verses are recited to this day to illustrate the lessons of

⁵ I began the task of distinguishing the relative characteristics and functions of the intellect and the soul according to Nasir Khusraw in A. Hunsberger, 'Nasir Khusraw's Doctrine of the Soul: From the Universal Intellect to the Physical World in Isma'ili Philosophy,' PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1992.



life and, also, to provide solace by diminishing vanity which places excessive importance on this life. As a thinker living in exile, his prolific literary output from his 'prison' of Yumgan stands as testimony to his passion and drive for life which were not extinguished even by his own very palpable despair. From whichever angle one chooses to look, what appears is a man trying to live life as ethically and purposefully as possible, one who has examined his past and then decided to make a fundamental change, one who has come to some sort of accommodation with the massive upheavals and disappointments of his life.

His answer was not, however, to fatalistically take refuge in the world's pleasures, or to retire from the world and ignore its social and physical attractions, as many ascetics and some Sufis did, but rather to reject the primacy given to these pleasures by many people and warn all who would be seduced by them. Nasir Khusraw is no ascetic. He chooses as his place of exile a prince's court, not a dervish's hut. Nor does he remove himself from an active life in the world. From his exile in Yumgan, he pours out his writings, 'a book a year,'⁶ continuing to see the education of others as his personal responsibility.

The Travelogue

In his *Safarnama*, Nasir Khusraw leaves a record of the seven-year journey from his home in Khurasan to Egypt and back.⁷ He adopts a personal style, often referring to himself as 'I, Nasir,' to explain something he did or saw in a certain place. From internal evidence, we can deduce that he wrote the *Safarnama* in a later period from notes that he had taken along the way. Writing in a comparatively simple Persian prose, Nasir Khusraw gains the reader's trust with his straightforward descriptions of cities and towns. He is not trying to impress anyone with his language skills but rather with the strange and wonderful things he saw during his travels. Thus, when words fail even him, as in this attempt to describe the sumptuous richness of Fatimid Cairo, we are also amazed at what he saw:

I saw such personal wealth there that were I to describe it, the people of Persia would never believe it. I could discover no end or limit to their wealth, and I never saw such ease and comfort anywhere.

⁶ *Divan*, 103:26.

⁷ A lithographed edition of the *Safarnama* was published in Tehran in 1314/1896, along with his *Divan* of poetry. Of translations, we have no record of an Arabic version of the *Safarnama* until this century when Yahya al-Khashshab published his translation in 1945 and the second edition in 1970. A Russian translation came out in 1933, reflecting a strong interest in Nasir Khusraw's works in certain areas of the former Soviet Union, notably Tajikistan. The Urdu version appeared not long after in 1937 and the Turkish in 1950. These translations in languages spoken in countries geographically adjacent to Iran actually came after the 1881 edition and French translation by Charles Schefer. While a few passages on Syria and Palestine were translated into English a few years later (in 1883) by Guy Le Strange, a full century had to pass before the next complete English translation appeared, by Wheeler Thackston, Jr. Scholarly editions of the Persian text itself were produced first by Schefer with his translation mentioned above, then in Delhi (1882) and Bombay (1892); these were followed by editions by the Iranian scholars Zayn al-'Abidin al-Sharif al-Safavi (1895), M. Ghanizada (1922), Muhammad Dabir Siyaqi (1957), Dabir Siyaqi (1976, 2nd edn) and Nader Vazirpur (1972).



(*Safarnama*, 55)

The account he did make, then, ought to be seen as a reserved response to exciting experiences. His serene, simple prose style, along with his gentle confessions of personal weaknesses, strike an authentic chord.

Unfortunately, the reports from Nasir Khusraw's sympathetic and discerning eye, open to all architectural and administrative achievements, did not enjoy a wide readership in the Muslim world. Certainly the *Safarnama* suffered from being written in Persian in a culture where Arabic was still the *lingua franca* of the intelligentsia from all lands, but perhaps even more for describing the glories of Ismaili political success. When the Fatimid state splintered and finally fell in 567/1171, the Sunnis again took over the reins of government in Egypt. Deprived of political rule and subject to persecution, the Ismailis once again resorted to the practice of *taqiyya*, or concealing their faith, and advertisements of the glories that had been Fatimid Cairo such as Nasir Khusraw's *Safarnama* were purposefully ignored.

Poetry

Nasir Khusraw's poetry is located in several works, the main corpus having been collected into his *Divan*,⁸ which now totals more than 15,000 lines. The poems in the *Divan* are primarily odes composed in *qasida* form, portraying lofty sentiments and thoughts in a formal and stately style. The *qasida* is characterised by a single rhyme carried throughout the whole poem. Each line (*bayt*) consists of two equal parts (*misra*). Besides the odes, the *Divan* also contains shorter poems and quatrains. The poems in the *Divan* have, so far, received two major treatments in English: forty poems were translated by P. L. Wilson and G. R. Aavani in 1977,⁹ and, more recently, Annemarie Schimmel has translated and discussed key themes in quite a number of selected verses.¹⁰

⁸ Nasir Khusraw's *Divan* was first compiled in a lithographed version in Tabriz in 1280/1863 with a second lithographed edition appearing in 1314/1896 in Tehran. In Calcutta a few poems were published for teaching purposes at the University of Calcutta in 1926, and there is a report of another copy, undated, in India. (See the Foreword to Mohaghegh's edition of the *Divan* for additional information.) In the 20th century, the *Divan* appeared in two scholarly editions, both based on several original manuscripts. The first was prepared in 1925-28 through the creative collaboration of Hajj Sayyid Nasr Allah Taqavi, 'Ali Akbar Dihkhuda, Sayyid Hasan Tagizada and Mujtaba Minuvi, using the 1314/1896 edition as the basic text but incorporating other copies in circulation, plus verses attributed to Nasir Khusraw in literary anthologies. Taqizada wrote an in-depth introduction covering the poet's biography and an analysis of his thought, while Minuvi contributed a piece on the sources used for the edition. The second edition was published in 1974 by Mujtaba Minuvi and Mehdi Mohaghegh in Tehran, under the auspices of the Tehran branch of the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal. For this major undertaking, the editors increased the number of manuscripts under review and used much older sources than had been the case for the 1925-28 edition, including the oldest complete version of the *Divan* found to date, located in the Chelebi Abdullah Library in Turkey and dated 736/1335. The editors note the existence of a microfilm copy (no. 290) of this manuscript in the Central Library of Tehran University. Other manuscripts consulted include one in the India Office Library in London, copied between 712 and 714 AH during the reign of Sultan Khudabanda Uljaitu, and another prepared for Sultan Muhammad Fatih who ruled during 855-886 AH, as well as individual odes in a few other manuscripts. Both these editions provide introductions with further detail.

⁹ P. L. Wilson and G. R. Aavani, trans., *Nasir-i Khusraw: Forty Poems from the Divan* (Tehran, 1977).

¹⁰ Annemarie Schimmel, *Make a Shield from Wisdom* (London, 1993).



Nasir Khusraw also has two long free-standing poems, both of which were included in the 1925-28 edition of the *Divan*, even though there was some question of the authorship of one. The first, *Rawshana'i-nama* (*The Book of Enlightenment*) must be distinguished from his prose work of the same name — which surely marks Nasir Khusraw as the sole example of a Persian writer to have two different works, one in prose, the other in verse, bearing the same name. Fortunately, the prose work carries another name, *Shish fasl* (*Six Chapters*), and for the sake of clarity will be referred to here as such. The second long poem, *Sa'adat-nama* (*The Book of Happiness*), has caused considerable debate for over a century. As it had been traditionally attributed to Nasir Khusraw, it was included in the 1925-28 edition of the *Divan*, even though one of the editors considered it spurious. Malik al-Shu'ara states in his *Sabk shinasi* that it must have been composed by another person, a certain Nasir Khusraw-i Isfahani.¹¹ G. M. Wickens translated the *Sa'adat-nama* into English in 1955, without taking sides on its authorship. Given the doubts about its authorship, the present work makes no further reference to the *Sa'adat-nama*.¹²

Philosophy

As the leader of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Khurasan, Nasir Khusraw produced a number of prose works on Ismaili doctrine, all of them in the Persian language as far as we know. To date, six of these works have been edited from manuscripts and several have been translated, at least partially, into Western languages. The six edited works are *Gushayish wa rahayish* (*Unfettering and Setting Free*), *Jami' al-hikmatayn* (*Uniting the Two Wisdoms*), *Khwan al-ikhwan* (*The Feast of the Brethren*), *Shish fasl* (*Six Chapters*, i.e., the prose *Rawshana'i-nama*), *Wajh-i din* (*The Face of Religion*) and *Zad al-musafirin* (*The Pilgrims' Provisions*). In addition to these, I. K. Poonawala has identified a number of manuscripts of other works by Nasir Khusraw, and Nasir himself refers to about ten other works, missing to this date.¹³

The *Gushayish wa rahayish*¹⁴ is arranged as a series of 30 questions and answers dealing with theological issues which range from the metaphysical ('How can a non-

¹¹ Malik al-Shu'ara Bahar, *Sabk shinasi* (Tehran, 1355/1976), vol. 3. pp. 188-9.

¹² The *Sa'adat-nama* has had two other editions by E. Fagnan (1880, 1882) and M. Ghanizada who published it as a supplement to his edition of the *Safarnama* in Berlin, 1922. G. M. Wickens' translation, 'The "Sa'adat-namih" Attributed to Nasir Khusraw,' *Islamic Culture*, 2 (1955), pp. 117-32, improves on Fagnan's French prose version and corrects some of F. Teufel's commentary in the German edition. Wickens also brushes aside the Russian scholar Berthels' view of the work as 'a sort of outspoken revolutionary tract on land-reform.'

¹³ See Ismail K. Poonawala's *Biobibliography of Isma'ili Literature*, pp. 123-5. The missing works which Nasir Khusraw himself refers to in his other books are: *Muftah*; *Musbah* (these first two being, perhaps, one work); *Dalil al-mutahayyirin*; *Bustan al-'uqul*; *Ikhtiar al-imam wa ikhtiar al-iman*; *Lisan al-'alam*; *'Aja'ib al-sun'a*; *Ghara'ib al-hisab wa 'aja'ib al-hussab*; *Dala'il*; *Kitab andar radd-i madhhab-i Muhammad Zakariyya al-Razi*. In addition, Poonawala lists five works with no reference: *Kanz al-haqa'iq*; *al-Ihsir al-a'zam f'il-hikma*; *Mustufa dar fiqh*; *Dastur-i a'zam dar fiqh*; *Qanun-i a'zam*.

¹⁴ The *Gushayish* was edited by Sa'id Nafisi in 1950 and reprinted in 1861 for the Ismaili Society, Bombay, and translated into Italian in 1959 by Pio Filippani-Ronconi. Nafisi's edition was made from a single manuscript dating from the 8th/14th century from the collection of Sayyid Nasr Allah Taqavi. A new edition and English translation based on this and another manuscript from the collection of the late Muftaba Minuvi was



body [such as God] create a body?') to the soteriological ('On the injustice of compelled acts and eternal punishment'). Most of the questions are concerned with the human soul, its relation to the world of nature, and its quest for salvation in the next world. They discuss whether the soul is a substance and whether it has been created, and how a person can know about God and His work. However interesting the questions, Nasir Khusraw's answers always remain general and synoptic, presenting succinct versions of his understanding of Fatimid doctrine on each of the topics. The work stands as a catechism identifying the key theological questions of the Fatimid *da'wa* and summarising its teaching on these issues.

In *Jami' al-hikmatayn*,¹⁵ Nasir Khusraw contributes to the larger medieval goal of combining the two 'wisdoms' of philosophy and religion, specifically Greek philosophy and Islam. Our author not only attempts to bridge the methodological gap between the two, namely philosophy's method of arriving at knowledge through logical proofs and religion's method of arriving at knowledge through revelation from God, but also to show that the two are in essence the same, that is, they lead to knowledge of the same truth. The catalyst for Nasir's work was an Ismaili poem written by Abu'l-Haytham Jurjani a few decades earlier (in the 4th/10th century) which posed certain theological questions. This poem had come to the attention of the Ismaili prince of Badakhshan, 'Ali b. al-Asad, Nasir's protector. Curious, the prince asked him to respond to the questions, and the *Jami' al-hikmatayn* was his voluminous answer.¹⁶ After establishing a theoretical foundation based on Aristotelian principles such as the different kinds of causes (including formal, efficient, final), Nasir Khusraw covers a wide range of topics, including proofs for the existence of the Creator, divine unity (*tawhid*), divine perfection, universal nature, the angels, *paris* and *divs*, genus and species, various types of eternity, the properties of the moon, creation, the difference between perception (*mudrik*) and understanding (*idrak*), the relation between body, soul and intellect, the concept of 'I' or self, and the influence of heavenly bodies on human beings and souls. In addition, he includes a section on the poem's author and disparages theologians for destroying both religion and philosophy.

The third edited text, *Khwan al-ikhwan*,¹⁷ is divided into 100 chapters. These chapters cover such topics as resurrection; how an incorporeal soul will be punished or

produced by Faquir M. Hunzai under the title of *Knowledge and Liberation* (London, 1998). I have used the Hunzai Persian edition with my own translations for the present work.

¹⁵ The Corbin and Mu'in edition of the *Jami' al-hikmatayn*, the only one to date, was based on a copy held in the Central Library of Tehran University of a manuscript in the Aya Sofia Library in Istanbul. Along with the text itself the editors have included an excellent introduction in French which presents the historical and theoretical background for the work. Isabelle de Gastines published a French translation of the complete work: *Nasir-e Khosraw: Le Livre réunissant les deux sagesse (Kitab-e Jami' al-hikmatayn)*, (Paris, 1990).

¹⁶ The questions raised by Jurjani's poem inspired another commentary, the *Sharh-i qasida-i Abu'l-Haytham Jurjani*, by one of Jurjani's students, Muhammad b. Surkh al-Nishapuri. Both Nasir Khusraw's and al-Nishapuri's commentaries have been studied in *Commentaire de la qasida ismaélienne d'Abu'l-Haytham Jurjani*, ed. H. Corbin and M. Mu'in (Tehran and Paris, 1955).

¹⁷ The *Khwan al-ikhwan* has been edited twice, first by the Egyptian scholar Yahya al-Khashshab in Cairo, 1940, and then by A. Qavim in Tehran, 1338/1959. Al-Khashshab based his edition on an original manuscript in



rewarded; the necessity for carrying out the requirements of the religious law (*shari'a*); the meaning of the word Allah; the different ranks of Intellect and Soul; the difference between soul and spirit; how the 'many' of the world come from 'one' command of creation; the superiority of spiritual power over physical power; that the declaration of faith (*shahadat*) is the key to heaven; the difference between the Qur'an and the word of the Prophet; and why two prophets could not function at the same time. Chronologically, we know that this is one of Nasir Khusraw's later works since he refers in it to his *Gushayish wa rahayish*.¹⁸ The *Khwan al-ikhwan* is remarkably similar to the *Kitab al-yanabi'* written in Arabic by his fellow Persian Ismaili philosopher, Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani (d. after 361/971), a similarity which strongly suggests that Nasir may have merely translated his colleague's work into Persian, at least in part.¹⁹ However, Nasir Khusraw's work contains unique sections not found in al-Sijistani's Arabic text and should therefore be studied as an independent text, for these sections may either represent lost parts of al-Sijistani's work, a portion of another work by him, or original writing by Nasir Khusraw himself.

The fourth edited text, *Shish fasl* (the prose *Rawshana'i-nama*)²⁰, presents a succinct version of the Fatimid Ismaili doctrine of creation, beginning with the concept of unity (*tawhid*), continuing through the succeeding Neoplatonic hypostases of Intellect, Soul and Nature, and ending with a discussion of human salvation and how it relates to the hypostases. However superficial this short treatment of these topics may appear, *Shish fasl* nevertheless serves a valuable purpose in laying out essential doctrines in compact form suitable for teaching purposes, a value visible in the work's popularity even today. It points to the widespread appeal of these doctrines among many Ismailis and thus a continuity of belief stretching back 900 years.

In the *Wajh-i din*,²¹ Nasir Khusraw provides his most straightforward esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*) of a variety of religious regulations and rituals, giving the inner (*batin*) meaning of certain externals (*zahir*) of religion. The book's 51 sections include, for example, his *ta'wil* of certain verses from the Qur'an, the call to prayer, ablutions for prayer, the assigned times of prayer, the movements of praying, alms for the poor, the *hajj* (pilgrimage to the Ka'ba in Mecca) and certain prescribed punishments. Following Ismaili hermeneutics, he shows the parallels between the structure of the physical world and that of the spiritual world, and between the human

the Aya Sofia collection. It has been suggested (Poonawala, *Biobibliography*, p. 435) that it is likely that Qavim derived his edition from al-Khashshab rather than referring to an original manuscript.

¹⁸ See *Khwan al-ikhwan*, ed. al-Khashshab, pp. ix-x, 28, 85.

¹⁹ See Paul E. Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom: A Study of Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani's Kitab al-Yanabi'* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1994).

²⁰ *Shish fasl*, edited and translated by W. Ivanow from two manuscripts from Qanjut, was published as *Six Chapters or Shish Fasl, also called Rawshana'i-nama* (Leiden, 1949).

²¹ Mahmud Ghanizada and Muhammad Qazvini used a manuscript from Leningrad (now St Petersburg again) to prepare their edition of the *Wajh-i din* in 1343/1924 at the Kaviani Press in Berlin. This edition was reproduced in Tehran in 1348/1970 under the auspices of the Kitabkhana-i Tahuri. But the first critical edition was produced in 1398/1977 in Tehran by Giuliani Reza Aavani for the Imperial Academy of Philosophy. Several manuscripts of the *Wajh-i din* are listed in a number of libraries in St Petersburg, Tashkent, Dushanbe and Tehran. One chapter has been translated into Russian and analysed by A. Sernenov (Tashkent, 1926).



body and the human soul. As an example of the latter, he explains that since drinking wine corrupts the body and usury corrupts the soul, both are therefore prohibited by religious law. For Nasir Khusraw the rectitude of religious law is revealed in its balanced concern for a believer's body as well as soul. The 'face of religion' can be seen as both that beautiful reality which needs to be veiled, as well as the superficial cover itself which hides the inner reality. By choosing this title, Nasir is also alluding to the verse in the Qur'an, 'All things perish, except His face' (28:88), meaning that when all superficialities are removed, only the reality of God remains.

In the last of his six works edited so far, the *Zad al-musafirin*,²² Nasir Khusraw covers a wide variety of physical and metaphysical topics such as simple matter, bodies, motion, time, place, creation, cause and effect, and reward and punishment. But in keeping with the title of the book, he devotes most of his discussion to the human soul, that is, the pilgrim soul travelling through this physical world to salvation in the spiritual world. He discusses the fundamental substance of soul and its essential activities. He devotes one entire chapter to how the soul is united with the body and another to explain why. In another chapter he describes how individuals emerge in the physical world and later are annihilated. One chapter treats the experience of pleasure and heaven. He refutes the doctrine of metempsychosis (*tanasukh*), the theory that souls reincarnate in different human bodies over time. He argues for the necessity for the reward of heaven and the punishment of hell, that is, the ultimate state of the soul. Throughout the text, Nasir asserts that the most important provisions which the pilgrim needs for this journey are knowledge and wisdom.

²² The *Zad al-musafirin* is the earliest to date of all Nasir Khusraw's works, since he himself tells us (p. 280 of the printed edition) that he composed it in 453/1061. It has been edited once so far, in 1341/1923 by Muhammad Badhl al-Rahman, and published in Berlin by the Kaviani Press. This edition was based on two manuscripts, one from Paris and the second from Cambridge. Other manuscripts have been recorded in the Bodleian Library (with a microfilm in the Central Library of Tehran University), in the Mashhad Library, in Danishsara-yi 'Ali's collection of 'Abd al-'Azim Khan Gurgani, in the Majlis Library, Tehran; and the Central Library of Tehran University holds a microfilm of Tabataba'i's manuscript of the same. In Russian, Semenov reviewed it in *Iran I* (1927), pp 224-31, and G. Ashurov wrote two studies (both published in Dushanbe, 1965) on Nasir Khusraw's philosophy based on the *Zad al-musafirin*.