

PART ONE
HISTORY AND MEMOIR



Introduction

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From the time of their origins, the history of the Ismailis was largely depicted in the words of their detractors. It is only recently that their own traditions of recording and remembering the past have become better known. As Ismailis were often persecuted and reviled, their records tended to be closely guarded within the community. Many records were also lost in the widespread destruction that followed the fall of the Fatimid dynasty in 567/1171 and the demise of the Nizārī state centred at Alamūt in 654/1256. Nevertheless, Ismaili historiography spans a variety of genres, from official chronicles to personal memoirs.

The first text included here is the *Kitāb al-munāzarāt* (*Book of Discussions*), the memoir of Ibn al-Haytham, a north African *dā'ī* of the 4th/10th century, which concentrates on the opening phase of the Fatimid caliphate. Ibn al-Haytham's words bring out the fervour of the *da'wa* of those early times when a pair of charismatic brothers – the *dā'īs* Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Shī'ī and Abū'l 'Abbās – were the chief agents of Ismaili activities in North Africa. It was about this time that the Ismaili Imam al-Mahdī (d. 322/934) decided, in the face of danger and dissidence in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, to travel towards Egypt. The imam and his followers endured a long and perilous journey to North Africa, eventually entering the town of Raqqāda (now in Tunisia) in 297/910, where he was proclaimed caliph.

The Fatimid era of the subsequent two and a half centuries is perhaps the period of Ismaili history that is best recorded in surviving historical texts. Works that chronicle this period include official histories such as the *Iftitāḥ al-da'wa* (*Commencement of the Mission*) written by the *dā'ī* and jurist al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān in 346/957 and *'Uyūn al-akhbār* (*Choice Stories*) composed centuries later by the Ṭayyibī *dā'ī* Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn (d. 872/1468). The Fatimid caliphate and its outposts in Persia are recalled in the vigorous memoirs of the *dā'ī* al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078) and in the journey to Egypt made by the poet Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. after 462/1070).

The records of the Nizārī state in Persia were systematically destroyed by the Mongols who sacked the Ismaili fortresses in 654/1256. Although some court chronicles and archival sources were selectively used by later Persian historians, few histories or memoirs from this period have yet been found, with the major exception of Nizārī Quhistānī's *Safar-nāma* (*Book of Travels*), recollections of the

poet's journey to northwestern Persia written in verse. After the fall of Alamūt, the Nizārī *da'wa* spread towards South Asia. The *pīrs* or preacher-saints in India, seeking followers in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment, observed *taqiyya*, the Shi'ī practice of precautionary dissimulation, and kept a low profile, refraining from producing formal histories or records of their activities. While the history of the mission is recalled in some of the devotional poetry of South Asian Ismailis, much of this poetry is oblique and coded. The history of the post-Alamūt period in Iran, Central Asia and South Asia must, perforce, be pieced together from scattered sources, regional histories and devotional poetry.

While historical context can be discerned in many Ismaili texts, the extracts chosen here offer glimpses into ways in which Ismailis recorded their own experiences and traditions. In the following pages we see the past through the words of eyewitnesses to various events. From Ibn al-Haytham's emotional encounter with a charismatic *dā'ī*, we turn to the picaresque adventures of Ja'far, the chamberlain to the Imam-Caliph al-Mahdī, in the bazaar of Tūzar. Ja'far's vivid and intimate description of al-Mahdī's great reception complements al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's account, in which the new imam-caliph's administrative measures play a greater role. A history of the Fatimids written in 15th-century Yemen preserves details of al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's entire oeuvre and shows that the Imam al-Mu'izz personally supervised some of his writing.

Finally, extracts from journeys made almost nine hundred years apart demonstrate how the faith of individual Ismailis enabled them to undertake hazardous journeys into unknown lands. In the mid 11th century, the *dā'ī* al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī left Shīrāz in southern Iran after the local Būyid ruler had turned against him and travelled in disguise through hostile territory until he reached safety in Egypt. Around the same time, the Persian poet and philosopher, Nāṣir-i Khusraw, experienced a spiritual awakening and journeyed through distant territories to the Fatimid capital. His descriptions of Cairo reveal him to be an urbane and critical observer. Nine centuries later, in the 1920s, Pīr Sabzālī made a very different journey when he was dispatched by the then imam, Sulṭān Muḥammad Shāh Aga Khan III to visit the Ismaili communities deep in the mountains of Central Asia. Among the snowbound Pamirs, far from home in India, he and his entourage were buoyed by their faith in the imam.