

PART THREE  
POETRY



# Introduction

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In the vast corpus of poetic literature produced by Muslims over the centuries, the contribution of the Ismailis has been relatively small. This may be partly accounted for by the minority status of the community and the loss of a substantial amount of their literature through the upheavals of history. Nonetheless, what remains is of sufficient quality to warrant increased attention in modern scholarship, which has hitherto been inclined to concentrate on the history and theology of the Ismailis. Although the works of several poets represented in the selection that follows have appeared in edited form, there has been little by way of systematic study and translation of the major Ismaili poets. This neglect is all the more surprising considering that the poetic compositions of the Ismailis enable a valuable and perhaps a unique insight into their religious life, and which is rarely conveyed in their historical and doctrinal traditions.

As we turn to the third part of this Anthology, the reader will sense immediately the change in focus, perspective and tone of the selections. Admittedly, the thematic structure of the poetry is homologous with the discursive and expository writings of the preceding parts in many respects. There is the same engagement with the quest for knowledge, the meditations on *ta'wīl* and *bāṭin* of the Qur'an, the commitment to the Prophet and his progeny, the imperative of recognizing the imam of the time, and so on. But what characterizes Ismaili poetry above all, in contrast to the objectified delivery of the prose narratives, is its self-referential intrinsicality. It offers a mirror reflecting the personality and motivations of the individual poets, exposing the shifting moods, tensions and dispositions of their selfhood. In short, the primary function of these poetic compositions is to disclose the inner, spiritual life of the poets and the communities they represent.

In common with the larger literary traditions of Islamic civilization, Ismaili poetry is the product of diverse cultures, languages and historical epochs, and as such exhibits elements of both heterogeneity and homogeneity. The first section of our selection focuses on poetry in Arabic, produced chiefly during the Fatimid period, and represented by two of its foremost exponents of the poetic art, namely, Ibn Hānī' al-Andalusī, the court-poet to the Imam al-Mu'izz, and al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, the chief *dā'ī* of the Imam al-Mustanshir. While the former produced verse in all the major modes of classical Arabic poetry including panegyric and

amatory, which attained him fame beyond the Fatimid world as the ‘Mutanabbī of the Maghrib,’ the poetic work of the latter is infused with a pronounced devotional spirit and personal engagement in the cause of his faith that henceforth became characteristic of all subsequent Ismaili poetry.

Al-Mu’ayyad’s influence, both as teacher and exemplar, was transmitted most fruitfully to another Fatimid *dā’ī*, the famous theologian, philosopher and poet Nāṣir-i Khusraw, whose verses feature in Section II as he composed all his works in Persian. Arguably the most accomplished Ismaili poet, Nāṣir’s poetry abounds with originality of diction, freshness of imagery, intellectual depth and ethical sensibility, together with a passionate commitment to his faith, that is rarely found in the literary genre categorized (often incorrectly) as ‘religious poetry.’ The Alamūt period is represented by Ḥaṣan-i Maḥmūd, whose collection on the theme of ‘Resurrection,’ the *Dīwān-i qā’imīyyāt*, has been discovered only recently. He is followed by Nizārī Quhistānī, the most significant poet of the post-Alamūt period. The notable feature of Nizārī’s poems is his imaginative synthesis of Ismaili and Sufi ideas, which is also illustrated in the miscellany of other verse from the same period, as well as in the sample of poetry in Persian from the Badakhshān region of Central Asia.

The focus of the third and final section is the *ginānic* tradition of devotional and mystical poetry from the Indian subcontinent. Consisting of several hundred poems of variable length, the *gināns* are attributed to a series of preacher-poets, generically called *pīrs* or *sayyids*, who came to the subcontinent from the 7th/13th century onwards to propagate the Ismaili path of Islam. Proselytizing within a complex milieu of historical, social and cultural contexts at the local level, including the Sufi and *bhakti* movements, the *pīrs* employed a variety of indigenous linguistic, poetic and musical idioms in their compositions. The outcome was a rich and extensive corpus of lyrical, didactic and homiletic verse that was transmitted orally for several centuries and collected in recent times. This tradition constitutes not only an important part of the Ismaili poetic heritage, but also a continuing source of inspiration for Ismailis of South Asian origin to this day.