

Preface

I have been conducting research into the history and doctrines of the Ismailis since the mid-1960s, when I was completing my doctoral studies at the University of California, Berkeley. This field of Shi'i studies was still relatively new, with a handful of scholars making original contributions on the basis of the recently recovered Ismaili manuscript sources. Meanwhile, in 1988 I had joined The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, where I have maintained my interest in Shi'i studies, with special reference to its Ismaili tradition.

Much progress has been made in understanding the true nature of the history and teachings of the Ismailis, who have been misrepresented throughout the centuries for a variety of reasons. However, the Ismailis constitute only one of the major Shi'i communities, second in size to the Twelvers, or Ithna'asharis, who are dominant in Iran, Iraq and certain other regions of the Middle East. It is, indeed, a fact that Shi'i communities of all traditions still continue to be variously misunderstood and misrepresented, whether by other Muslims or by non-Muslims as well. In recognition of these realities I embarked, several years ago, on studying more inclusively all the major Shi'i Muslim communities and their distinctive traditions. The result is the present book, which draws on the scattered findings of modern scholarship in the field. I have attempted here to explain the formative era of Shi'i Islam, when a multitude of Muslim groups and schools of thought were elaborating their doctrinal positions; I then devote separate chapters to the history of the Twelvers, the Ismailis, the Zaydis and the Nusayris, who are now more commonly known as the 'Alawis. These four communities account for almost the entirety of the Shi'i Muslim population of the world. I have striven to produce a survey of Shi'i Islam that can serve as an accessible work of reference for both academics and broader non-specialist readers. I hope I have achieved this goal, at least to some extent.

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