Islamisation

Comparative Perspectives from History

Edited by A. C. S. Peacock

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ISLAMISATION ON THE IRANIAN PERIPHERY: NASIR-I KHUSRAW AND ISMAILISM IN BADAKHSHAN

Daniel Beben

It has long been recognised in the scholarship on Islamisation that Muslim governors and administrators in Iran and Central Asia under the early caliphate, with few exceptions, displayed little interest in instigating mass conversion to Islam. As research by Wilferd Madelung, Patricia Crone and others has demonstrated, the cause of mass conversion was taken up more directly by the early Islamic sectarian movements, who sought out new converts to their causes among non-Arab populations and who often combined their religious appeal with various political objectives in opposition to the caliphate.[1] The competitive nature of these movements contributed in no small part to rapid Islamisation in the Iranian world from approximately the mid-second century of the Hijra onwards. Yet while many of these movements disappear from the sources in subsequent centuries, the populations among which they once held sway, by and large, retained an attachment to Islam.

In this chapter, I propose to tackle a number of methodological concerns regarding the study of Islamic sectarian movements as agents of religious conversion as well as the evaluation of their long-term relevance and consequences for the broader process of Islamisation.[2] I examine this question through a case study of the Shiʿi Ismaili community of the highland Badakhshan region of Central Asia, a historical province encompassing the mountainous districts of present-day north-eastern Afghanistan and eastern Tajikistan, along with bordering areas of northern Pakistan and north-western China (Figure 16.1). I focus particularly on the role of the eleventh-century Persian poet, philosopher and Ismaili missionary Nasir-i Khusraw, who is widely credited today with the introduction of Ismaili Shiism to this region. Through an analysis of a range of sources examining the legacy of Nasir-i Khusraw, as well as the broader array of literature on conversion within the Ismaili tradition, I argue that the idealised conception of religious conversion derived from this literature is untenable as a historical explanation. In its place, I propose a new framework for understanding the long-term significance of Ismaili and other 'sectarian' missionary activity, which measures their impact not merely through the 'success' of their particular communal interpretation of Islam, but rather through their contribution to the broader process

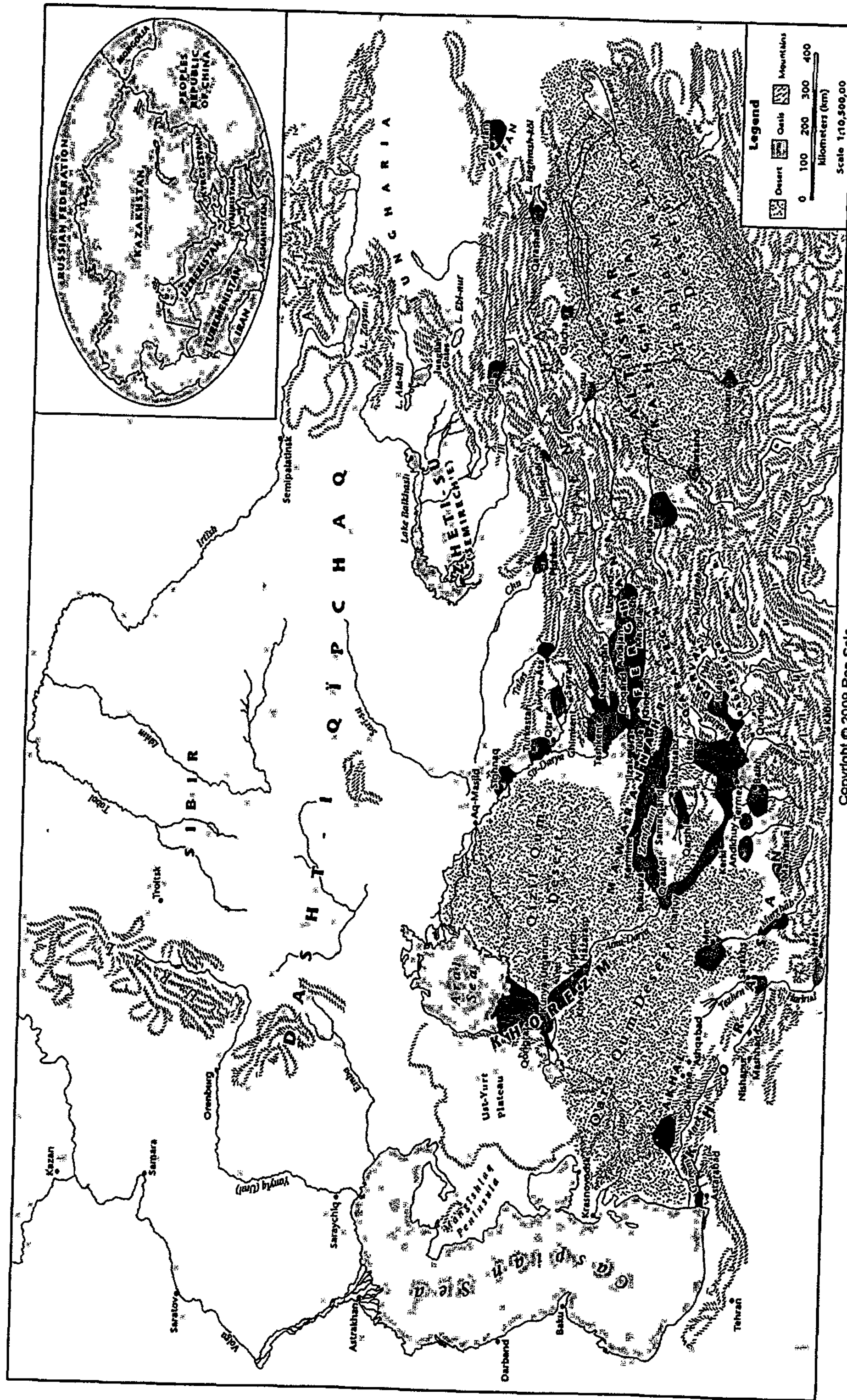

Figure 16.1 Central Asia. Reproduced by kind permission of Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela (eds), *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). © Ron Sela.

of Islamisation. In pursuing this argument, I stress a fundamental distinction between 'conversion' as a more immediate and individual shift in religious adherence and 'Islamisation' as a broader and more gradual process of social change. While the main significance of Nasir-i Khusraw's career has been most commonly assigned to the former category, rather I find that it is the latter category, namely his contribution to the process of Islamisation, which should rightly be considered his most notable legacy in Central Asia.

Sources for the Study of Conversion in the Ismaili Tradition

Scholarship on Ismaili history has rightly emphasised the centrality of missionary activity in the development and propagation of the tradition. From an early period, and especially under the leadership of the Fatimid imam-caliphs in Egypt in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Ismailis pursued a vigorous agenda of expansion and propagation of the tradition, pursuing converts from among both Muslim and non-Muslim populations. This effort was carried out under the guidance of what was, at least in theory, a centrally controlled and hierarchical missionary institution known as the *da'wa*, or 'summons'.[3] In the early Fatimid era, the Ismaili *da'wa* obtained success in such far-flung regions as Yemen, the Sind region of the Indian subcontinent, the Caucasus, as well as, at least for a short while, Samanid Central Asia. Yet while the inner workings of the Fatimid-era *da'wa* and its theoretical elaborations have been the subject of some attention in scholarship, our understanding of the broader historical process of conversion within the Ismaili tradition remains regretfully underdeveloped.

Our understanding in this regard is hampered in large measure by the nature of our sources. Until fairly recently, scholars were almost entirely dependent on heresiographical literature for reconstructing the history of sectarian movements and groups such as the Ismailis.[4] By their very nature, such texts displayed an acute awareness of distinctions between Islamic communities. Furthermore, great attention is given in these sources to the role of individual agents and doctrines, while providing at best an unclear or exaggerated account of the geographical distribution and prevalence of the groups under consideration. Consequently, while the heresiographical sources may provide some filtered indication of the beliefs and doctrines of a various group, they remain insufficient for understanding the true extent or social prevalence of these communities. Historical chronicles, for their part, generally speak of the Ismailis and similar groups only once they have reached a critical mass and become an irritation to the ruling elite, often giving little indication of the internal workings of these communities or how they came to exist in the first place.

Ismaili sources, on the other hand, present their own set of problems and challenges. While the Ismaili tradition has left a rich body of doctrinal and theological writings, these sources generally present only limited and largely incidental references to the historical development of the community. Above all, the bulk of the communal lore regarding the conversion and foundation of the community is found within the context of hagiographical accounts of its missionaries (*dā'īs*). Below I will explore further the question of conversion as it is presented in the hagiographical accounts of the two leading *dā'īs* of the Persian Ismaili tradition, namely Nasir-i Khusraw and Hasan-i Sabbah. Yet despite the prevalence of these works within the literary tradition of the

Ismailis, on account of their 'legendary' character their study has remained largely neglected within the scholarship of Ismaili studies.

In the absence of more 'reliable' internal Ismaili sources concerning the historical spread of the community, scholars have come to rely upon another body of work for clues to the function of the *da'wa*. Among the aforementioned body of doctrinal writings is a distinct genre of works dealing with conversion and serving as manuals for the conduct of the Ismaili *da'wa*. One of the earliest texts dealing with the topic of conversion within the Ismaili tradition is the *Kitab al-'Alim wa'l-Ghulam* (The Book of the Master and the Disciple) of Ja'far b. Mansur al-Yaman (d. before 957), son of the renowned *dā'ī* Ibn Hawshab 'Mansur al-Yaman', who is credited with the introduction of the Fatimid *da'wa* to Yemen. The *Kitab al-'Alim wa'l-Ghulam* presents a paradigmatic model of conversion within the Ismaili tradition as illustrated through a series of extended Socratic dialogues between spiritual seekers and their instructors.[5] The model of conversion that emerges from this text is one entailing an extensive process of personal search, individual instruction and mentorship, as well as gradated levels of initiation.

This same model of individual conversion is presented in an early eleventh-century *da'wa* manual composed by the Iranian *dā'ī* Ahmad b. Ibrahim Naysaburi. The emphasis of this work is on the duties and obligations of the *dā'ī*, who is expected to be pious, humble, educated in a vast array of sciences and disciplines, skilled in the management of money, proficient in the etiquette of debate and diplomacy, and of noble lineage. As to the process of the initiation of a novice (*mustajīb*) into the secrets of the faith, the author writes:

> That he knows the objective of the novice and has investigated his purpose in entering the religion, and what caused it, is indispensable. If his goal was other than God, he should not be administered the oath of covenant. If his objective was God and religion, let the *da'i* first break him down and extirpate those notions he previously upheld, his prior beliefs having then become so thoroughly destroyed he no longer has an argument in their favor ... Shower him with arguments, as the sacrificial animal is not slaughtered until it has been watered. Then, when he has been broken down and wants to take the oath, the rule is to take it of him after he has fasted for three days ... Thereafter, if the covenant and the pledge is sure, he begins to educate the novice with the sciences, to ground him firmly in the fundamentals in their proper order, not to overly burden him at the state and thus cause him to mix them up ... The *da'i* should know that, if once having taken the noble oath from him, the *da'i* subsequently does not educate him and firmly fix the fundamental principles in him, that *da'i* is acting miserly with the knowledge that is due him.[6]

The process of conversion described in these works is intensely personal and extraordinarily labour-intensive, hardly suitable to the type of mass or community-level conversion that would explain the extensive and enduring presence of Ismaili communities found in Badakhshan or in other areas today.

Another body of material that has been taken as a source for understanding the phenomenon of conversion to Ismailism are the biographical and autobiographical narratives of Ismaili converts. Among this group are included the two most renowned *dā'īs* of the Persian Ismaili tradition, Nasir-i Khusraw and Hasan-i Sabbah, both of whom found their way to Ismailism after having been born and raised in different Muslim traditions.[7] While the original autobiography of Hasan-i Sabbah does not survive, sources quoting from it preserve an account of his conversion at the hands of an otherwise unknown *dā'ī* named Amira Darrab:[8]

> I held to the faith of my forefathers, the faith of the Ithna'ashari Shi'a. In Rayy there was an individual named Amira Darrab, who was of the faith of the Batinis [Ismailis] of Egypt. We constantly used to debate with one another. He used to denigrate my faith, but I would not submit. However, those words took root in my heart. At that time, a frightful illness took over and I thought to myself: 'That is the true faith, and because of my great stubbornness I did not acknowledge it. If, heaven forbid, the promised hour should arrive, I would have died without attaining the truth'.[9]

Following his initiation, Hasan's training was continued by 'Abd al-Malik b. 'Attash, the head of the Fatimid *da'wa* in Iran, who later brought Hasan to Cairo. Hasan later returned to his homeland and in turn became the head of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Iran.

Nasir-i Khusraw, for his part, describes his conversion in two sources: his travelogue (the *Safar-nama*) and in his so-called 'Confessional Ode'. His *Safar-nama* in fact mentions nothing directly of a conversion, but rather describes only the 'midlife crisis' he encountered in the year 437/1045, on account of which he pledged to forswear drinking and to set out on the hajj.[10] In addition, there is considerable reason to question whether or not this portion of the *Safar-nama* is original to the text or was included in the course of a later editing process, which appears to have largely effaced any evident Ismaili elements from the text.[11] The main source, therefore, for understanding Nasir-i Khusraw's conversion is his famous *qasida* known commonly as the 'Confessional Ode'.[12] In common with the account of Hasan-i Sabbah's conversion, the 'Confessional Ode' relates Nasir-i Khusraw's conversion as the outcome of an extended process of personal search emerging from a deep spiritual yearning. The text tells of Nasir's travelling from city to city, speaking with sages of every faith and sect in search of religious truth, and culminates with his pledge of allegiance at the hand of his tutor, the renowned Iranian *dā'ī* Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi. Hence, the conversion narratives associated with both Hasan-i Sabbah and Nasir-i Khusraw present a model of conversion that broadly accords with the individualist paradigm presented in the *da'wa* manuals. In modern scholarship on Ismailism, the conversion narratives of these eminent converts have often been called upon, either explicitly or implicitly, to serve as a paradigmatic model of conversion more broadly within the Ismaili tradition, with little attention paid to the question of narrative agendas or audience in these works.[13]

Ismailism and Islamisation: Frameworks of Study

As I have outlined above, the emphasis placed in the Ismaili studies literature on the agency of individual *dā'īs* and the centrality of personal conviction in the process of conversion follows in large measure from an uncritical approach to this body of source

material. But it also accords with a more long-standing trend in Western scholarship, dating back to the nineteenth century, which placed strong emphasis on the role of individual preachers and missionaries as agents of Islamisation. This emphasis emerges from a broader and well-worn conception in Western approaches to religion of how conversion *ought* to have occurred: as a product of direct contact with the book and the messengers of the book. This framework for understanding religious conversion entered into academic discourse within the Anglo-German tradition of nineteenth-century historiography which, being rooted in a Protestant context and background, placed central emphasis on the role of personal faith and conviction, as well as direct intellectual engagement with scripture.[14] The extrapolation of this conception of conversion to the Islamic world was reflected already over a century ago in Thomas Arnold's survey of conversion to Islam, revealingly titled *The Preaching of Islam*.[15] In one sense, Arnold's work, with its emphasis on the spread of Islam by popular exhortation, represented a major development from the notion of 'conversion by the sword', which still dominates many popular Western understandings of Islamisation. A problem still remains, however, in that both paradigms (conversion by the sword versus preaching) take the process of conversion to be an essentially immediate and decisive event.

Given the nature and problems of our source material outlined above, it must be admitted at the outset that a reconstruction of anything beyond the broadest outlines of the *actual* process of conversion to Ismailism in Badakhshan, as with elsewhere, remains a near impossibility. Yet when examined in light of recent developments in scholarship on conversion within the Islamic tradition, this enquiry may at the very least provide some insight into the question of how this process *did not* happen, as well as some possible hints at how it likely *did* happen. The emphasis on the role of the individual *dāʿī* is, without a doubt, a necessary component of the explanation for the historical process of conversion to Ismailism. Yet it remains insufficient for understanding the diffusion of Ismaili affiliation beyond the individual level, to the communal or societal level. The importance of this is clearly evident when examining the social reality of Ismailism today. Like Muslim communities the world over, adherence to Ismailism is found to be deeply embedded and intertwined within social groups, communal structures and ethnic identities. This is particularly evident in Badakhshan, where Ismailism over the course of centuries has become nearly synonymous with a Pamiri ethnic identity, to the extent that there is almost a complete overlap today between the prevalence of Ismailism and the linguistic community of Pamiri language speakers in the region. It is impossible to imagine that such a situation could have emerged simply through a series of individual conversion experiences; rather, to explain this phenomenon one must look towards a model of conversion as a process of social and cultural change, entailing a broader array of factors and agents.

Among the most fruitful lines of enquiry in the historical study of religious conversion, which has been particularly developed in recent years within the historiography of medieval Christianity, is one that has sought to de-emphasise entirely the role of individual agents, focusing instead on conversion as a complex and lengthy process of cultural shift. In particular, I would like to call attention here to recent research on conversion to Christianity in Scandinavia, a region whose

peripheral position within Christian Europe invites comparison with the position of Badakhshan within the Islamicate world. In a recent study of the conversion of Scandinavia, Anders Winroth describes the process of a Christianisation there as a complex process of cultural, economic and political exchange, in which local rulers and chieftains accepted Christianity as a means of boosting their own political and economic positions.[16] In this context, acceptance of Christianity was driven not only by the persuasive arguments of missionaries, but also by the prestige of Christian literary culture and economy.[17]

A comparable model has been proposed by Richard Eaton to account for the Islamisation of the frontier regions of India through a process he terms 'accretion and reform', or the 'process whereby preliterate peoples on the ecological and political frontier of an expanding agrarian society became absorbed into the religious ideology of that society'.[18] This framework likewise provides an insightful paradigm for understanding how the process of conversion to Islam may have unfolded in the Badakhshan region. Within this process, consideration must be given to the attraction of Islam not only from a strictly 'religious' perspective, but also as a cultural, economic and civilisational force. In addition, a number of studies have highlighted the role of merchants, trade and patterns of economic exchange in the acculturation of frontier communities to Islam.[19] Above all, consideration should be given to the prestige of Persian literary culture, which often arrived as a companion to Islamisation. It is within this context that we might see the greatest significance to Nasir-i Khusraw's role in the Islamisation of Badakhshan, not merely as a preacher of a particular sectarian interpretation of Islam, but, more importantly, as a purveyor of Persianate high culture. Nasir's own writings make it clear that it was his mastery of the literary sciences that drew the attention of his patron in Badakhshan.[20] He alludes repeatedly in his poetry to the respect he earned there on account of his learning.[21] Nasir is noteworthy for being one of the earliest authors to conduct Islamic Neoplatonist philosophy in the Persian language, but he is also notable for being the first individual known by name to have composed writings in any language within Badakhshan. He is, therefore, an important figure for the process of Islamisation in Badakhshan and for the related process of the spread of Persianate high culture in the region.

Beyond these considerations, there remains the question of the much more mundane and largely unquantifiable motivations that drove conversion at the local level. One critical study in this regard, which has inexplicably remained largely overlooked in the field of Ismaili studies, is an anthropological study by Robert Canfield exploring religious identities among the Shiʿi Hazarahs of the Hindu Kush region, among whose number are included both Ismaili and Ithnaʿashari communities.[22] In this work, Canfield explored the multidirectional phenomenon of conversion and reaffiliation between these two communities. Canfield finds that conversion in this context emerges primarily as a result of intermarriage and economic considerations, as well as an opportunity to escape internecine conflicts within a convert's own community. Yet instances of conversion based purely on belief or personal conviction find little record in Canfield's account. While recognising that it is impossible to base assumptions regarding the wider phenomenon of conversion on a single case study, Canfield's survey nonetheless provides a plausible paradigm to explain instances of religious conversion and communal reaffiliation in other historical contexts. Taken

together, these considerations suggest that the paradigm of conversion found in the Ismaili sources presents an idealised model that may indeed have been applicable in a number of individual cases, but which is far from sufficient to explain the broader phenomenon of conversion to Ismailism or its long-term implications for the process of Islamisation.

Conversion to Ismailism in Central Asia

The enduring establishment of an Ismaili presence in the Badakhshan region was preceded by an earlier, and largely failed, effort launched by the Ismaili *da'wa* in Central Asia in the Samanid era of the tenth century. The focus on individual conversion found in the early *da'wa* manuals in fact appears to have largely defined this earlier phase of Ismaili activity in Central Asia, in which conversion efforts were targeted chiefly at the Samanid political elite. The elite emphasis of the *da'wa* in this period explains both the prominence of the Ismailis in the Samanid-era sources as well as their lack of long-term success, and hence serves as an illustration of why this model of conversion cannot account for the later establishment of an enduring Ismaili presence in Badakhshan.[23] From the start, the Ismaili *da'wa* in Central Asia, focused primarily on the conversion of figures within the Samanid court, was intended to build strategic depth for the Fatimid struggle against the Abbasid caliphate in the Near East. The Ismailis achieved particular success during the reign of the Samanid amir Nasr II b. Ahmad (r. 914–43), eventually leading, according to some sources, to the conversion of the amir himself.[24]

This fluorescence of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Central Asia proved to be short-lived. A violent repression of the Ismailis was led by Nasr's son, Nuh, who forced his father to abdicate and reprimanded him for permitting the sect to flourish in his realm. A brief reappearance of the Ismaili *da'wa* under Nuh's son, Mansur I (r. 961–76), was met with another violent repression, led by his governor of Khurasan, Abu'l-Hasan Muhammad Simjuri. Following these assaults, according to Nizam al-Mulk, 'there remained not a single Batini [Ismaili] in all of Khurasan and Central Asia. This group (*madhhab*) disappeared entirely from the earth and not a single of its members remained.'[25] It would appear that Nizam al-Mulk's boasting here was no mere hyperbole, as from the late tenth century onwards the sources reveal no evidence for Ismaili activity in Central Asia until the career of Nasir-i Khusraw nearly a century later. This hostility towards Ismailism was perpetuated under Mansur's son, Nuh II, who, among other measures, patronised a Persian translation of the Hanafi tract *al-Sawad al-A'zam* of Abu'l-Qasim Ishaq Samarqandi, which sought to defend the creed of the Sunni 'majority' against the Ismailis and other perceived heresies.[26] Following the collapse of the Samanid state, Fatimid missionary efforts shifted westwards to the Buyid territories of Iraq and western Iran, where the *da'wa* was spearheaded by such prominent figures as Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi (d. 1078) and Hamid al-Din Kirmani (d. after 1020). Generally speaking, the early efforts to propagate the Ismaili *da'wa* among political elites in Central Asia in the tenth century appear to have had little long-term impact, aside perhaps from a hardening of anti-Ismaili views among the Sunni scholars of the region. The modern Ismaili presence in Central Asia, centred in the Badakhshan region, owes its origins to a later period, bearing no connection with the earlier *da'wa* efforts of the Samanid era.

Following the collapse of the effort to convert the Samanid elite, as well as the collapse of the Samanid state itself, the Ismaili *da'wa* in Central Asia appears to have fallen silent for nearly a century. The next major phase in the history of Ismailism in Central Asia is associated with the career of Nasir-i Khusraw. Born in the Balkh region in c. 1004, Nasir came to the Fatimid capital of Cairo in 1045 following his conversion, as outlined above. After seven years, he returned from Egypt to his native Balkh region in 1052, this time as a proponent of the Ismaili *da'wa*. While the details of his career at this stage are obscure, it would appear that at some point over the next two decades he encountered fierce opposition to his *da'wa* activities in Khurasan and was consequently forced into exile further east in the region of Badakhshan, where he was given refuge by a local ruler in the remote province of Yumgan.

The region of Badakhshan down to the arrival of Nasir-i Khusraw there in the mid-eleventh century had remained largely on the frontier of Islamicate society. While the Arabic geographical sources indicate that the region came under Muslim rule by the late eighth century, they provide little concrete information on the region aside from an account of its trade routes.[27] Among the very few pieces of evidence for a Muslim presence in Badakhshan in this period is a collection of paper fragments discovered by a Soviet archaeological expedition to the Bazardarah valley in the eastern Pamirs in 1966, dating from the ninth to the eleventh century and written in both Arabic and Persian, which testifies to the presence of a Muslim merchant community in the region in this period.[28] The author of the *Hudud al-'Alam*, writing in 982, provides the most thorough account of the Badakhshan region prior to the arrival of Nasir-i Khusraw. He describes the mountainous territories in and around Badakhshan as being populated largely by non-Muslims (*gabrakān*), with Tibetan and Muslim traders living in the area as well.[29] Among the notices provided in the text is a description of a large 'idol-temple' (*but-khāna*) in the town of Khamdadh in the Wakhan region; this same structure was also noted three centuries earlier by the Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang, who described it as a Buddhist monastery featuring an adorned statue of the Buddha.[30] The reference in the *Hudud al-'Alam* to an evidently prospering Buddhist community in the heart of Badakhshan in the late tenth century accords with other evidence pointing to the persistence of active Buddhist communities in Central Asia well into the Islamic era.[31] The geographer Ibn Hawqal, writing around 988, describes the territories of Wakhan and Shughnan within the region of Badakhshan as the 'realm of unbelief' (*dār al-kufr*).[32] Hence, despite the scarcity of the sources, it seems evident that, by the beginning of Nasir-i Khusraw's career, Badakhshan was still in the early stages of Islamisation, although parts of it had been nominally under Muslim rule for nearly three centuries.

Nasir-i Khusraw and the 'Problem' of Ismailism on the Periphery

Nasir-i Khusraw's own works leave little doubt of his strong intentions to propagate the Ismaili *da'wa* in the name of the Fatimid imam of his time, Mustansir bi'llah.[33] Yet his effort to implant Ismailism into the Badakhshan region would appear by

all accounts to have been a largely abortive one. While he undoubtedly obtained a number of converts to the Fatimid cause during his lifetime, including the Amir of Yumgan, there is no record in the sources of an Ismaili community in the region that sustained past his own lifetime. In fact, neither Ismaili nor non-Ismaili sources make any reference to an Ismaili presence in Badakhshan before the fifteenth century, by which time the region had undergone a massive shift in the extent of its Islamisation and in its cultural and political position within the Islamic world.[34] When Ismailism does make an appearance in Badakhshan, it is within the context not of the Fatimid Ismaili *da'wa* propounded by Nasir-i Khusraw, but rather the Nizari or 'New' Ismaili *da'wa* linked with Hasan-i Sabbah. Rashid al-Din, in his account of Hasan-i Sabbah, explicitly mentions that, while Hasan was preceded in his mission by Nasir-i Khusraw, 'no success came to him'.[35] Furthermore, the available evidence suggests that the earliest establishment of Nizari Ismailism in Badakhshan was rooted in large measure on the arrival there of Nizaris from surrounding areas of the Islamic world, predominately Iran, many no doubt seeking refuge from the persecutions unleashed under the Mongols. While a complete discussion of the *actual* process of the spread of Ismailism in Badakhshan cannot be offered here, it suffices to mention that both the manuscript record as well as oral histories preserved among Ismailis of the region point to a significant migration of Ismailis from various localities in Iran to Badakhshan in the wake of the Mongol conquests. It was only gradually that in subsequent centuries the Ismaili tradition came to enjoy a wider following among local populations in Badakhshan.

As I have outlined elsewhere, the earliest layer of Ismaili literature from Badakhshan displays little interest in the career of Nasir-i Khusraw.[36] Yet Nasir-i Khusraw himself was not forgotten in Badakhshan; far from it. In the centuries following his death in the late eleventh century, a wide array of reports and legends began to circulate concerning him, first in oral tradition and then in textual form beginning in the thirteenth century. What is most remarkable about this body of legendary biographical material is that it demonstrated an almost complete effacement of Nasir's status as an Ismaili *dā'ī*, and instead reshaped his biography as one of a Sufi ascetic and holy man. In particular, Nasir's shrine in Yumgan became the recipient of patronage by Sunni rulers as early as the fourteenth century, who lauded Nasir as a saint and as a fellow Sunni in their endowments.[37] Hence, while it is evident that Nasir-i Khusraw had an enormous impact upon the religious and cultural history of Badakhshan, it is not clear that this impact was felt primarily through his propagation of Ismailism in the region; rather, his broader legacy in the region should be seen as akin to that of a 'patron saint', whose arrival and burial in the region sanctified the land of Badakhshan as sacred space. The subsequent 'adoption' of Nasir-i Khusraw as the founding figure of the Badakhshani Ismaili community emerges not from a direct historical connection between this community and his career, but rather appears to have emerged as part of a later effort by Ismaili authors of the region to nativise the tradition within the local religious environment.

There is also a broader question that should be taken into consideration here: in what sense can we speak of the proliferation of a discrete 'Ismaili' identity in a context such as eleventh-century Badakhshan? To put the question more generally, do such intra-communal or 'sectarian' Islamic identities have any cogency in a predominately non-Muslim or newly Islamising environment? To a significant degree, our ability to answer such questions is hampered by the nature of our source material. As noted above, our information on Badakhshan in the early Islamic period is limited almost entirely to the slim notices given in geographical sources, which provide only the roughest outline of the confessional situation to be found in the region. Non-Muslim sources that might offer insight into perceptions by outsiders of Muslim sectarian identities are relatively rare for Central Asia in general, and virtually non-existent for Badakhshan. The earliest such record available for the period following the career of Nasir-i Khusraw is the travel account of Marco Polo, who passed through the Wakhan Corridor around 1274 on his journey to China. Polo is renowned for his accounts of the Ismailis in the Near East and his work played a major role in introducing the legends of the 'Assassins' to medieval European readers.[38] Given his clear fascination with the Ismailis, one may expect him to have reported on even a hint of members of this sect living in Central Asia. Yet he reports only that Badakhshan is 'inhabited by people who worship Mahommet and have a peculiar language', with no mention of the dreaded Assassins residing in the region.[39] His mention of the 'peculiar language' of the inhabitants suggests that he is most likely referring to the same Pamiri peoples who in later centuries would be unmistakably identified as Ismailis.

The lack of attention given in the sources to sectarian distinctions may itself point to a certain reality of religious life on the Islamic periphery, in which such intra-communal distinctions lose their cogency in the face of contact with the other. Not unexpectedly, the writings produced by religious communities, with rare exceptions, frequently display a lack of concern for internal differences within other religious traditions, instead ascribing to them an essentially monolithic reality. In the context of a frontier zone such as pre-Mongol Badakhshan, in which Muslims interacted with non-Muslims far from the watchful eye of formal religious institutions and other centres of power, it is not difficult to imagine that such perceptions may have become reified to a degree, in which *intra*-communal distinctions became less vital than the broader distinction of Muslim versus non-Muslim. Furthermore, we face the broader question of how a self-conscious 'Ismaili' or 'Shi'i' identity could be fully realised in a predominately non-Muslim or newly Islamising environment. Ismailism, like all Shi'i traditions, is at heart an interpretation of Islam, distinguished from other interpretations primarily by the question of religious authority within the Muslim community. But this is a distinction that becomes relevant largely in engagement with other interpretations of Islam.

So what might it mean for a Muslim in a context such as eleventh-century Badakhshan to identify himself or herself as an 'Ismaili'? I argue that it would mean, first and foremost, to be a Muslim. While this assertion may appear tautological at first glance, it holds significant implications for understanding the long-term consequences of religious conversions attributed to agents of Ismailism. While the introduction of Ismailism into Badakhshan has generally been considered the primary legacy of Nasir-i Khusraw in the region, I contest that it would be more proper to speak of Nasir as an agent not only of 'Ismailisation', but also more broadly, and more importantly, of Islamisation. By use of the term 'agent' here I do not mean in the narrow sense of the direct propagation of Islam, but rather in the broader sense of 'opening up' the

Badakhshan region to Islam and the cultural force of Persianate Islamic civilisation. Hence Nasir-i Khusraw's most important contribution to the Islamisation of Badakhshan should be seen not in the ephemeral realm of individual conversions, but rather in his role as a facilitator of the long-term process of acculturation that marked the course of Islamisation in the region.

The fruition of this process of acculturation and Islamisation also enabled the emergence, in later centuries, of a distinct Ismaili identity in the Badakhshan region. Notably, it is only in the Timurid era, by which time the region had become decisively integrated into the broader religious and cultural framework of Persianate Islamic society, that the sources first take note of the presence of Ismailis in Badakhshan, who are portrayed as instigators of a series of uprisings against Timurid rule.[40] At first glance, these revolts may appear simply as acts of resistance on the part of mountain communities to the tax collectors and forces of cultural assimilation of the agrarian-based Timurid state. Yet what is noteworthy about the accounts of these revolts is the fact of their expression within the idiom of the Islamic tradition. Accordingly, the flourishing of a 'heretical' variant of Islam in the Badakhshan region in the form of Ismailism may itself be seen as an outcome of the Islamisation of that society. Hence, while Nasir-i Khusraw may have offered only a relatively minor direct contribution to the spread of Ismailism in Badakhshan, his contribution to the process of Islamisation, in the long term, proved to be far more decisive for the later success of the Ismaili tradition in its establishment in the region.

The fate of Nasir-i Khusraw's legacy in Badakhshan bears comparison with those of Ismaili *dāʿīs* in other areas, who have similarly seen their legacies diffused among a wider array of interpretations of Islam. In particular, we may point to the example of several renowned *dāʿīs* within the South Asian Ismaili tradition, such as Pir Sadr al-Din and Pir Shams al-Din, who are widely credited with the conversion of many Hindus to Ismailism within the Sind region of South Asia.[41] While the sources are clear that both figures, like Nasir-i Khusraw, were commissioned as Ismaili *dāʿīs* by the imams, in the centuries following their deaths their legacies came to enjoy wide followings among Sunni and Ithnaʿashari communities as well; their shrines, like that of Nasir-i Khusraw, remain in the keeping of non-Ismailis to this day. Rather than examining such interpretations as 'deviations' from the original significance of these figures, it would be more productive to view the development of their legacies within the context of their role in the broader process of Islamisation. The nature of the communal memory associated with these individuals provides the clearest indication of how their significance was understood within the communities targeted by their conversion efforts – as bearers not of one particular interpretation of Islam, but rather of Islam itself. Consequently, the legacies of these individuals present a case study for what might be seen, under comparative examination, as a broader trend within the historical trajectories of Islamising figures associated with other 'sectarian' traditions in the Muslim world. A closer examination of these legacies and their evolution over time, as opposed to the more limited scope of the successes attributed to the particular traditions they represented, may provide firmer ground for an assessment of their long-term significance for the history of Islamisation.

Notes

1. Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Wilferd Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, NY: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988). Among the more general treatments of conversion in early Islamic Iran and Central Asia, see Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation: Zoroastrian Subalterns and Muslim Elites in Medieval Iranian Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Devin DeWeese, *Islamisation and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory and Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
2. I employ the term 'sectarian' here to refer to those groups that were generally cast outside of the framework of the Sunni-Jamaʿi 'consensus' in the heresiographical literature of the Abbasid era. For a review of recent scholarship on sectarianism in the Islamic tradition, see Zulfikar Hirji, 'Debating Islam from Within: Muslim Constructions of the Internal Other,' in Zulfikar Hirji (ed.), *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses amongst Muslims* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 1–30.
3. For overviews of the Fatimid-era *daʿwa*, see Farhad Daftary, 'The Ismaili *Daʿwa* outside the Fatimid Dawla,' in Marianne Barrucand (ed.), *L'Égypte fatimide: Son art et son histoire* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999), pp. 29–43; Farhad Daftary, 'Ismaili *Daʿwa* under the Fatimids', in Urbain Vermeulen and K. D'Hulster (eds), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Eras*, vol. 5 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 73–90. Far less attention has been paid to the development of the Ismaili *daʿwa* in the post-Fatimid and post-Mongol eras. The most complete survey of the period from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century is given in Shafique N. Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, a Search for Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
4. For a survey of the historiography of Ismaili studies, see Farhad Daftary, *The Ismaʿilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–33.
5. For the text see Jaʿfar b. Mansur al-Yaman, *Kitab al-ʿAlim waʾl-Ghulam*, ed. and trans. James Winston Morris as *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).
6. Ahmad b. Ibrahim Naysaburi, *al-Risala al-Mujaza al-Kafiya fi Adab al-Duʿat*, ed. and trans. Verena Klemm and Paul E. Walker as *A Code of Conduct: A Treatise on the Etiquette of the Fatimid Ismaili Mission* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 46–8 (Arabic text); pp. 60–2 (English trans.).
7. The sources largely concur that Hasan-i Sabbah was of a Twelver Shiʿi background. In the case of Nasir-i Khusraw, there is no direct evidence to attest to his original religious identity. While Ivanow and other scholars speculated that he too may have been of a Twelver Shiʿi background (largely based on the assumption that the presence of pre-existing Shiʿi sympathies would have facilitated the later adoption of Ismailism), there is no evidence for this in his writings. To the contrary, the fact that Nasir held a position in the Ghaznavid court in Marv suggests it is unlikely that he had a Shiʿi background.
8. Accounts of Hasan-i Sabbah's conversion are found in the following sources: ʿAtaʾ Malik Juvayni, *Tarikh-i Jahan-Gusha*, ed. ʿAllama Muhammad Qazwini and Sayyid Shahrukh Musawiyan (Tehran: Dastan, 2006), pp. 735–7; Rashid al-Din, *Jamiʿ al-Tawarikh: Qismat-i Ismaʿiliyan va Fatimiyan va Nizariyan wa Daʿiyan wa Rafiqan*, ed. Muhammad Taqi Danishpazhuh and Muhammad Mudarrasi Zanjani (Tehran: Intisharat-i ʿIlmi wa Farhangi,

2009), pp. 76–7; Abu'l-Qasim Kashani, *Zubdat al-Tavarikh: Tarikh-i Isma'iliyya wa Nizariyya wa Malahida*, ed. Muhammad Taqi Danishpazhuh (Tabriz: Danishkadah-i Adabiyat-i Tabriz, 1964), pp. 120–2; Hamdullah Mustawfi Qazwini, *Tarikh-i Guzida*, ed. 'Abd al-Husayn Nawa'i (Tehran: Amir-i Kabir, 1983), p. 518.

9. Juvayni, *Tarikh-i Jahan-Gusha*, p. 736.
10. Nasir-i Khusraw, *Safar-nama*, ed. Muhammad Dabir Siyaqi, trans. W. M. Thackston as *Nasir-i Khusraw's Book of Travels* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2001), pp. 1–3.
11. On this see Daniel Beben, 'The Legendary Biographies of Nasir-i Khusraw: Memory and Textualization in Early Modern Persian Ismailism', doctoral thesis, Indiana University, 2015, pp. 154–7.
12. For the full text of the *qasida*, see Nasir-i Khusraw, *Diwan-i Ash'ar*, ed. Mujtaba Minuwi and Mahdi Muhaqqiq, 8th edn (Tehran: Intisharat-i Danishgah-i Tihran, 2010), pp. 505–15, no. 242. For translations and analyses of the ode, see Alice Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw, the Ruby of Badakhshan: A Portrait of the Persian Poet, Traveler and Philosopher* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), pp. 55–69; Wladimir Ivanow, *Problems in Nasir-i Khusraw's Biography* (Bombay: Ismaili Society, 1956), pp. 22–36; Nasir-i Khusraw, *Forty Poems from the Divan*, trans. Peter Lamborn Wilson and Gholam Reza Aavani (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), pp. 4–9; Gholam-Reza Mirshahi, 'The "Confessional Ode" of Nasir-i Khusrav and His Conversion to Ismailism', master's thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1989.
13. On the role of authorial agenda in conversion narratives, see Ryan Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
14. For a historiographical survey of this topic, see James Muldoon, 'Introduction: The Conversion of Europe', in James Muldoon (ed.), *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp. 1–10.
15. Thomas W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co., 1896).
16. Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).
17. Similar arguments have been advanced regarding religious conversion among the nomadic peoples of Inner Asia; see Anatoly M. Khazanov, 'The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies of the Eurasian Steppes', in Michael Gervers and Wayne Schlepp (eds), *Nomadic Diplomacy, Destruction and Religion from the Pacific to the Adriatic* (Toronto: Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies, 1994), pp. 11–33.
18. Richard M. Eaton, 'Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India', in Richard C. Martin (ed.) *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), p. 111. For an illustration of this process see his *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). See also Chapter 19 by Richard Eaton in this volume.
19. On the role of merchants in Islamisation in Central Asia, see Reuven Amitai, 'Towards a Pre-History of the Islamization of the Turks: A Re-reading of Ibn Faḍlān's *Riḥla*', in Étienne de la Vaissière (ed.), *Islamisation de l'Asie centrale: Processus locaux d'acculturation du VIIe au XIe siècle*, Cahiers de Studia Iranica 39 (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2008), pp. 277–98; Patrick A. Hatcher, 'Peddling Islam: The Merchant in Early Conversion Narratives of the Central Asian Turks', in Michael Gervers et al. (eds), *Traders and Trade Routes of Central and Inner Asia: The 'Silk Road' Then and Now* (Toronto: Asian Institute, University of Toronto, 2007), pp. 31–44.
20. For example, see Nasir's comments in his *Jami' al-Hikmatayn*, a work dedicated to Nasir's patron, 'Ali b. Asad al-Harith, who commissioned Nasir to compose the work as a commentary on the *qasida* of an obscure Persian author named Abu'l-Haytham Ahmad Jurjani; see Nasir-i Khusraw, *Kitab-i Jami' al-Hikmatayn*, trans. Eric Ormsby as *Between Reason and Revelation: Twin Wisdoms Reconciled* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 32–3.

21. For an example, see Nasir-i Khusraw, *Forty Poems from the Divan*, pp. 106–7.
22. Robert L. Canfield, *Faction and Conversion in a Plural Society: Religious Alignments in the Hindu Kush* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, 1973).
23. On the early history of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Central Asia, see Yahia Baiza, 'The Shi'a Ismaili Da'wat in Khurasan: From its Early Beginning to the Ghaznawid Era', *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2015), pp. 37–59; Samuel M. Stern, 'The Early Ismaili Missionaries in North-West Persia and in Khurasan and Transoxania', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 23, no. 1 (1960), pp. 56–90.
24. On Ismailism in the Samanid court, see Patricia Crone and Luke Treadwell, 'A New Text on Ismailism at the Samanid Court', in Chase Robinson (ed.), *Texts, Documents, and Artefacts: Islamic Studies in Honor of D. S. Richards* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 37–67; W. L. Treadwell, 'The Political History of the Samanid State', doctoral thesis, Oxford University, 1991, pp. 186–210.
25. Nizam al-Mulk, *Siyar al-Muluk*, ed. Hubert Darke (Tehran: Bungah-i Tarjuma wa Nashr-i Kitab, 1978), p. 305.
26. On this work, see Wilferd Madelung, 'Abu'l-Qasem Eshaq Samarqandi', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 1 (1983), pp. 358–9; Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Maturidi and the Development of Sunni Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 97–121. On the 'anti-heresy' agenda of Samanid literary production, see also Elton L. Daniel, 'The Samanid "Translations" of Tabari', in Hugh Kennedy (ed.), *Al-Tabari: A Medieval Muslim Historian and His Work* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 2008), pp. 263–97; Julie Scott Meisami, 'Why Write History in Persian? Historical Writing in the Samanid Period', in Carole Hillenbrand (ed.) *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth*, vol. 2: *The Sultan's Turret: Studies in Persian and Turkish Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 348–74; cf. A. C. S. Peacock, *Mediaeval Islamic Historiography and Political Legitimacy: Bal'amī's 'Tārīkhnāma'* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 103–36.
27. On Badakhshan in the early Arabic geographical sources, see Vasilii V. Barthold et al., 'Badakhshan', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005), pp. 851–5.
28. O. F. Akimushkin, 'Fragmenty dokumentov s vostochnogo Pamira', in *Pis'mennye Pamiatniki Vostoka: istoriko-filologicheskie issledovaniia. Ezhegodnik 1972* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), pp. 130–6.
29. *Hudud al-'Alam: 'The Regions of the World': A Persian Geography, 372 A.H.–982 A.D.*, trans. Vladimir Minorsky, 2nd edn (London: Luzac, 1970), pp. 120–1.
30. Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, trans. Li Rongxi (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996), pp. 364–6. The ruins of this structure were later noted by Auriel Stein in his visit in 1915, who recognised them as belonging to the *vihara* described by Xuanzang; see Aurel Stein, *Innermost Asia: Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia, Kan-Su and Eastern Iran*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), vol. 2, p. 866.
31. Richard W. Bulliet, 'Naw Bahar and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism', *Iran* 14 (1976), pp. 140–5. Active patronage of Buddhist institutions in the Hindu Kush region is recorded as late as the tenth century; see Deborah Klimburg-Salter, 'Buddhist Paintings in the Hindu Kush ca. VIIth to Xth Centuries: Reflections on the Co-existence of Pre-Islamic and Islamic Artistic Cultures during the Early Centuries of the Islamic Era', in Étienne de la Vaissière (ed.), *Islamisation de l'Asie centrale: Processus locaux d'acculturation du VIIe au XIe siècle*, Cahiers de Studia Iranica 39 (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2008), pp. 131–59.
32. Abu'l-Qasim ibn Hawqal, *Kitab al-Masalik wa'l-Mamalik*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1873), p. 349.

33. See Beben, 'The Legendary Biographies of Nasir-i Khusraw', pp. 74–99.
34. The Russian scholar Wladimir Ivanow was the first to speculate that the present-day Ismaili community of Badakhshan may not be directly traceable to Nasir-i Khusraw; see Ivanow, *Problems in Nasir-i Khusraw's Biography*, pp. 40–8. For a review of the sources on this question see Beben, 'The Legendary Biographies of Nasir-i Khusraw', pp. 233–50.
35. Rashid al-Din, *Jami' al-Tawarikh: Qismat-i Isma'iliyan*, p. 76.
36. Beben, 'The Legendary Biographies of Nasir-i Khusraw', pp. 114–19.
37. For the texts of these endowments, see Khalilullah Khalili, 'Yumgan wa Watha'iq-i Tarikhi darbara-i Nasir-i Khusraw', *Yaghma* 20 (1967), pp. 438–42, 472–6; reprinted in his *Yumgan: Mazar-i Nasir-i Khusraw dar Badakhshan*, ed. 'Inayatullah Shahrani (Delhi: Department of Persian, Delhi University, 2000).
38. For his account of the Ismailis, see Marco Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian, concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, trans. Henry Yule, 3rd edn, 2 vols (New York: Scribner's, 1903), vol. 1, pp. 139–48. On his contribution to medieval European legends on the Ismailis, see Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994), pp. 108–18.
39. Polo, *Book of Ser Marco Polo*, vol. 1, p. 157.
40. Beben, 'The Legendary Biographies of Nasir-i Khusraw', pp. 250–5.
41. On these figures, see Ali S. Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Tazim R. Kassam, *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: Hymns of the Satpanth Ismā'īlī Muslim Saint, Pīr Shams* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1978).

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