

The Institute of Ismaili Studies

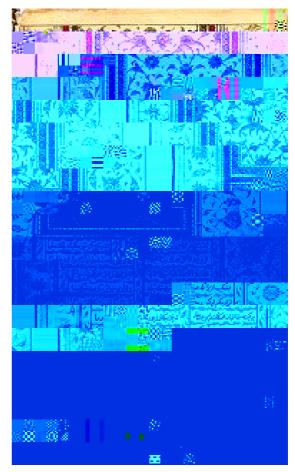


of Persian poetry compiled since his death in 1077 CE. Today, both his prose and his poetry are studied by schoolchildren in Iran and Tajikistan, and his *qasida*s (odes) are sung by communities all over Central Asia.

Alice Hunsberger's vivid and compelling account of Nasir Khusraw's life and writings provides an overview extraordinary of this individual. Peppered with excerpts of his writings, it draws the reader into understanding the life, personality and characteristics of Nasir Khusraw. The book is highly readable and written in an engaging narrative style, transporting the reader to the richness of the past which Nasir Khusraw so meticulously describes during histravels:

For this is a man who does not just visit Jerusalem; he measures it, pacing out the dimensions of the city with his own feet, step by step. This is a man who does not just observe people at their daily work; he inquires what they are doing and why. This is a man who does not just listen to local lore: he tests it out. When told by local inhabitants that a certain valley near Jerusalem is called the Valley of Hell because from the edge one can listen and hear the cries of the people in hell, he goes to see for himself: 'I went there but heard nothing,' he records (Safarnama, 22; Ruby of Badakhshan, 33).

General readers as well as specialists will find this book a tremendous source of detailed historical information about the Ismaili *da'wa* (mission) at the height of the Fatimid Caliphate-Imamate, while also providing detailed descriptions of places, people and events that are of relevance to the larger context of Islamic history.



*Divan* 13<sup>th</sup>/ 19<sup>th</sup> century

## Structure and Content of the Book

The book is divided into 12 chapters which follow Nasir Khusraw through the various stages of his life and the stops along his journey, providing commentary and insight into features of Ismaili philosophy. Nasir's Neoplatonic philosophy<sup>2</sup> is delicately weaved within Hunsberger's narrative of his travels: while in Jerusalem, there is an analysis of his philosophy of God;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The modern term for a school of philosophy that took shape in the 3rd century AD, based on the teachings of Plato and other Platonists. Neoplatonists did not consider themselves as anything other than Platonists; however, their interpretations of Plato were perceived by others to be so significantly different or novel from Plato's own teachings and writings that it was felt that distinction was warranted. Neoplatonism was also present among medieval Muslim and Jewish thinkers such as al-Farabi and Maimonides, and it experienced a revival in the Renaissance with the acquisition and translation of Greek and Arabic Neoplatonic texts.

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journey home, his philosophy				no does not just
of the Soul.	visit Jerusalem; he measures it,			

visit Jerusalem; he measures it, pacing out the dimensions of the city with his own feet, step by step.

Readers will find a broad overview of

his life and writings, including brief descriptions of the content of each of his edited writings, including his poetry, travelogue and philosophical texts. Hunsberger scrutinizes the most significant biographical statements that have been made by other writers about Nasir Khusraw over the past millennium, and weighs their veracity and verifiability. She also includes a chronology of events and a map illustrating the Nasir extent of Khusraw's seven-year journey.

## The History of Nasir Khusraw

The first chapter 'A Soul Higher Than Fortune' presents an overview of the life of Nasir Khusraw as four key periods: about the little-known early years of Nasir's life, up until his religious conversion at about the age of forty; the seven-

year journey when he wrote his Safarnama and some references in his poetry; his return home to Khurasan as head of the da'wa for the Ismailis in the region; and, finally, his exile in the Pamir mountains of Badakh-

...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...?

shan in the district of Yumgan.

The content and context of Nasir Khusraw's writings in this chapter (i.e. the *Safarnama*, his *Divan* and philosophical texts) provide insight into the character of Nasir Khusraw, giving the reader an appreciation of

the spirit and steadfastness with which he approached life. Hunsberger vividly illustrates his great appreciation for the

physical world and the human talents employed to improve it, pointing out:

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 qt4-4.5( the (y )]TJ9)3.04.60[(fnJ9)4TJ5 4(.60 bde 6(oyr s9Tw(rs?ter5)sts.)]-.72 8J0 - 1.2275 cn0 Tc0 Tw( o(pfents )Tj0 - 1.225 2c5.445 Tfe and threads that reveal his personality and the historic events in which he illustrate Nasir Khusraw's new consciousness about himself and life's purpose:

Feeling that to me my own body is the dearest,

I inferred that in the world there must be someone who is the

most precious of all that had been created,

Just as the falcon is the noblest of the birds, or the camel among the quadrupeds,

Or the date palm amongst the trees, or ruby amongst the jewels,

Just as the Qur'an amongst the books,

or Kaʻba amongst the houses,

Or the heart amongst the organs of the body,

the sun amongst the luminaries (56).

Chapter Five, 'Knowledge and Action,' illustrates the ways in which Nasir sought to make his inner change manifest in his external life, and it is from this point that the author delves into the heart of what underlies Nasir's writing on the *zahirl batin* doctrine of Islam.

Using examples from his philosophical writings in the *Wajh-i din*, the reader is invited to appreciate "one of the most important lessons of Nasir's newly life, converted captured in this metaphor: 'The price of each jewel is determined not by its external qualities, but by its inner qualities" (72-73). It is from this metaphor that Hunsberger determines that Nasir Khusraw sees that "everything manifest has a hidden quality which is not only the essence of the thing, but which indeed carries the explanation, the meaning, the true significance of the thing" (73).

Elaborating this point in looking at pairs of opposites in the physical world, Nasir writes:

One element of each pair is apparent to the senses, while the other is hidden. But each does not, and cannot, exist without the other. Like the two sides of a coin, one may seem to be solely in evidence at any time but the other still necessarily exists (75).

This metaphor is applied to religion:

The scriptures and the law are both manifest. That is, the Qur'an as the Book of God is visible and tangible to everyone, as is the *shari'a*, the law of Islam. But their inner meanings and esoteric interpretations (*ta'wi*l) are hidden to those who do not know, while obvious to those who do know

(*Wajh-i din*, 82; *Ruby of Badakhshan*, **75**).

Nasir's Travels

Chapter Six, 'The Journey Begins,' sees Nasir, having now committed to the Ismaili interpretation of Islam, ready to He visits many monuments: the Dome of the Rock, the tombs of Abraham, his wife Sarah, and his son Isaac, as well as the tombs of Jacob and his wife and their Joseph. son Nasir observes that local cultivation and production near the tomb of Joseph provide all pilgrims with food:



Everyone who goes there is given a daily ration of one loaf of bread, a bowl of lentils cooked with olive oil and raisins, a custom that has been maintained from the time of Abraham himself down to the present. On some days there are five hundred people present, all of whom receive this hospitality (137).

Hunsberger uses the city of Jerusalem, filled with many sacred places of praver and meditation, as the backdrop to discuss Nasir's philosophy of God; for Nasir, 'God is a very real, living presence' and at the same time, 'His essence (*huwiyyyat*) is above everything, and nothing can have a relation to Him' (Shish fasl, 34; Ruby of Badkhshan, The apparent contradictions 114). between these two approaches (one affirming God's presence even in the things of this world and the second declaring his absolute otherness) is a different product of levels of interpretation, as well as two modes of understanding God, through the concepts of the transcendent and the *immanent*<sup>3</sup> (115).

gratitude and worship, before concluding with a discussion on the oneness of God (*tawhid*).

Chapter Eight, 'The Splendour of Fatimid Cairo', provides the reader with detail upon detail about court life, politics, administration, governance and prosperity under the reign of the Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Mustansir.

The author discusses the significance of the Fatimid Caliph-Imams "who represented for their followers the earthly summit of all temporal and spiritual matters" (141) as they ruled over both faith and politics. In doing so, they embodied a core tenet of Shi'i Islam. This tenet is exemplified through Caliph-Imam al-Mustansir, who was not only a blood descendant The people are so secure under the [caliph's] reign that no one fears his agents, and they rely on him neither to

Cairo was the place where in the 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, 'some of the liveliest theological and intellectual debates of the Muslim world' took place.

Nasir 'taught the necessity of both the *zahir* and the *batin*, that true faith entails observing both its exoteric and esoteric aspects.' the stations of knowledge which the believer achieves through taking action and acquiring knowledge. Each time a pilgrim leaves one of the stations (signifying his house, his current situation), it corresponds to his rejection of a false faith in order to arrive at the way of truth. For Nasir, this destination is 'the Imam of the Time, who is the house of the knowledge of God.' Thus we see again that while the Ka'ba may serve as the physical goal of all Muslims, the Imam and his knowledge are in fact the spiritual goal of the Ismaili Muslim (190).

## Nasir's Return to Iran

'The Journey Home' to Iran is where Chapter Ten begins. Nasir and his brother have experienced a radical shift in fortune, from the wealth of the Fatimid court to being almost destitute within a few months of leaving Mecca. They encounter long delays waiting for local Arab tribesmen to give them safe passage through the next legs of their journey. On the way north, they have an extended stay in Basra, a major centre of Shi'i piety and learning where Nasir visits all 13 shrines in the city dedicated to Imam 'Ali.

For Nasir, the physical changes and scenery that he encounters on the journey home are paralleled with an equally rigorous spiritual journey. It is at this point that Hunsberger introduces a discussion of Nasir's philosophy of the Soul, found in philosophical works like his *Shish fasl*.

Nasir Khusraw holds that within each human being is an individual soul (*nafs-i juz'i*) which directs the person's life. For Nasir, it is this soul – not the intellect – which decides to seek knowledge, which directs both the person's intellect and senses and which chooses between good and evil (212).

This concept is also illustrated within Nasir's poetry, where the soul is the driving force behind human action, and one's intellect provides the counsel:

Your soul is king of your body,

Your mind the scribe, your intellect the vizier

(*Divan*, 91:15;

Hunsberger highlights the important historical consequence of Nasir Khusraw's teaching and preaching at this time; it prompted the conversion

66 Hunsberger describes the challenges and loss this extraordinary philosopher-poet experiences at the times when he becomes embittered and resentful with his forced exile and loss of youth.

The impetus and will is upon the

Whether in private acts, personal prayer, or public displays of faith such as the pilgrimage, Nasir maintains, the believer must look deep within his or her soul to fathom the esoteric meanings of such acts (*Ruby of Badakhshan*, 223).

The communities from the present-day areas of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran, China and Pakistan sustain a rich cultural and musical tradition<sup>9</sup>, suffused with poetry, music and dance that are a testament of Nasir's teachings. His teachings focused on the understanding of the relationship between the physical world and the spiritual world, the message of God brought by the Prophet Muhammad and the inner meanings of this message