THE SHRINE OF NASIR KHUSRAW:
IMPRISONED DEEP IN THE VALLEY OF YUMGAN

Under God’s protection I am here in Yumgan.
Look closely, and consider me not a prisoner.
No one says that silver or diamonds or rubies
Are prisoners in the rocks or lowly.
Even though Yumgan itself is lowly and worthless,
Here I am greatly valued and honored.

The above verse is a quotation from the *Divân*,¹ which
the “Ruby of Badakhshan,” Nasir Khusraw (d. ca. 1072–
78), wrote in the eleventh century during his exile in
Yumgan, a district tucked away in the mountains of
Badakhshan, the northeastern province of modern
Afghanistan. Yumgan was to be Nasir Khusraw’s final
abode, and it was there that he penned most of the sur-
viving works that have earned him a reputation as one
of the foremost writers of classic Persian poetry and as
an equally weighty figure in Isma’ili (Sevener Shi’i) phi-
losophy. The “hovel of Yumgan” did not become “famed
and glorified” through him “just as the Arab desert
became glorified by the excellence of the Prophet,”²
but in his lifetime Nasir Khusraw’s teachings attracted
a great concourse of followers from afar and, soon after
his death, the site of his burial developed into an impor-
tant place of pilgrimage.

It is surprising that despite Nasir Khusraw’s high
repute, the architecture of the shrine in which he is
believed to be buried has so far attracted little academic
interest. The remoteness of the site may be the prin-
cipal reason for this neglect. Even merited biographers
of Nasir Khusraw did not personally visit his tomb. So
when the pioneering scholars Ivanow and Corbin, as
well as Nanji in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, describe
the shrine as a “modest” construction, we must recog-
nize that these authors based their judgments merely
on pilgrims’ reports.³

In fact, published firsthand accounts are extremely
scarce. We owe an early, albeit brief, report to the
Scottish explorer John Wood, who stopped at the shrine
in late 1837 on his way to the source of the River Oxus.⁴
Almost a century later, in the early 1920s, Nader Shah,
who ruled Afghanistan from 1929 to 1933, travelled to
the shrine and described it in writing; unfortunately,
these records were lost. Another half century later, in
1976, the American scholar Louis Dupree wrote *Saint
Cults in Afghanistan*, focusing his travelogue-like study
on the shrine of Nasir Khusraw. Again, however, the
architecture of the shrine is examined only cursorily.⁵

In late summer 2003, I was given the opportu-
nity to travel to the *ziyārat* (a common abbreviation of
*ziyāratgāh*, the burial site or shrine of a venerated
holy person) on behalf of the Aga Khan Trust for Cul-
ture. The aim of the visit was to report on the building’s
state of preservation and to prepare recommendations
for a small-scale community-based restoration project
intended to commemorate the then-upcoming millen-
nium anniversary of Nasir Khusraw’s birth, which was
celebrated in 2004. The building that I found there was,
to my surprise, a centuries-old structure with many deli-
cate details, which, when carefully put together, reveal
an interesting story about the historical vicissitudes
of the cult of Nasir Khusraw and, more generally, of
Isma’ilism in Badakhshan.

The purpose of this essay is to bring this small and
modest, but exceptionally interesting building, the
product of the rich vernacular building traditions of
this remote mountain region, to the attention of art
and architectural historians, who have so far largely left
this field to ethnographers. I will explore the history of
Isma’ilism in Badakhshan in order to provide an under-
standing of the eminent importance of Nasir Khusraw
and his works for the local community, which in turn
explains the significance of the shrine and the various
facets of its veneration. Based on evidence gleaned from
the building itself, as well as from oral traditions and inscriptions, it is possible to trace the historical development of the shrine as a mausoleum with a resident Sufi brotherhood.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SHRINE

The *ziyārat* of Nasir Khusraw is located in a valley irrigated by the Kokcha (Blue River), a tributary of the upper Oxus (fig. 1). The modern district of Yumgan begins above the city of Jurm and rises rapidly in a southerly direction towards the central chain of the Hindu Kush. Due to the difficult terrain and a severe climate with hot, dry summers and cold winters, the valley is only sparsely populated and cultivation is limited to the vicinity of settlements. Public transport facilities are nonexistent. It takes even the modern-day traveler two days to journey from Kabul to the shrine of Nasir Khusraw, flying first to Faizabad, the administrative center of Badakhshan Province, and continuing thence by car on bumpy roads via Baharak and Jurm.

The shrine is nestled on an exposed conglomerate rock above the hamlet of Hazrat Sayyid on the eastern side of the valley, 1,960 m above sea level (figs. 2 and 3). A path leads from the south onto a stone-paved terrace, which is fringed by the remains of a low perimeter wall and ruined outbuildings—a verandaed “mosque” (possibly used as a pilgrims’ lodge prior to its destruction) and a charity soup kitchen (*langar-khāna*). A group of birch and maple trees lines a pool of water in the center of the terrace, in front of the entrance to the shrine.

The latter is a rather unassuming and small structure, a cluster of four flat-roofed room cells, with two encapsulated units in the back, each fronted with a veranda-like porch. Confined in size by the limited space available on top of the outcrop on which it sits, the shrine occupies the entire surface of the boulder conglomerate, leaving only a small pathway for the circumambulation of the building. The architecture in mud and timber

![Fig. 1. Map of northeastern Afghanistan, showing Badakhshan Province. (Map: Marcus Schadl)](image-url)
Fig. 2. General view of the shrine from the southeast, looking over the village of Hazrat Sayyid into the Kokcha Valley. (Photo: Marcus Schadl)

Fig. 3. The boulder and the shrine as seen from below. (Photo: Marcus Schadl)
speaks the language of the local building tradition. The varying heights, widths, and depths of the room units create an irregular roofscape and somewhat disjointed elevations. While the building shows blind mud walls on three sides, the entrance façade in the east, which is aligned with the spring of the boulder, communicates with the terrace outside, permitting showcase views deep inside the pillared porches.

The four rooms of the shrine are, starting in the north, the mazâr (tomb chamber) and an open pillared hall facing it in the east, and, in the south, a smallish mosque with a second, canopy-like front hall (fig. 4). The two room pairs are separated by a communal wall and function almost independently of one another. The smaller porch (measuring 3.3 by 4 meters in area and 2.8 meters in height) is subdivided into two aisles by two rows of three pillars (fig. 5). Almost level with the outside surface, it serves as a covered shelter, projecting like an awning in front of the entrance to the mosque. The entrance door, excentrically placed in the north-
Fig. 5. Interior of the small porch, with the entrance door to the prayer room in the back. (Photo: Marcus Schadl)

Fig. 6. The qibla wall of the prayer room, with the mihrab and the minbar. (Photo: Marcus Schadl)
western corner of the porch, is unusually low, forcing one to bend down to reach the floor level of the small prayer room a few steps further down.

Measuring 3 by 4 meters in area and 2.4 meters in height, the mosque is the least architecturally refined and ornamented room of the complex (fig. 6). Its crude construction, with a tiny aperture for lighting and ventilation, an uneven floor, bare walls, and roughly formed corners, lends the room an austere, almost cave-like character. The only focal points are, in the center of the western qibla wall, a mihrab, whose form reminds one of the keel of a ship, and, close by in the corner, a built-in, three-stepped minbar.6

The northern pair of rooms, comprising the larger vestibule and the mazār, has a similar spatial disposition and functional sequence: an antechamber in the front and an encapsulated, consecrated cell in the back. The floor levels of the two rooms vary only slightly, but they are raised waist-high above the forecourt, so that one needs to scale a few improvised stone steps to reach the entrance to the vestibule in the northern corner. The vestibule, the largest of the four rooms, is a nearly square pillared hall (5 by 5 meters in area and 3.4 meters high); like its southern counterpart, it is closed on three sides and open only to the east (fig. 7). Three rows of slender wooden pillars run parallel to the qibla wall, dividing the hall into nine equal bays. The hall is further compartmentalized into a stone-paved passageway, leading along the northern wall towards the entrance to the mazār, and a slightly elevated platform that takes up the southern two-thirds of the room. This area is reserved for three tombs, the occupants of which are ancestors of the shrine keeper.

A funnel-shaped and curiously long corridor connects the vestibule with the mazār. The narrowing of the passage width is explained by a turn of orientation between the burial room and its vestibule. While the former is aligned with the cardinal directions, it was obviously necessary to turn the pillared porch about seven degrees to the southeast in order to make it fit on the boulder. The gap in the dividing wall was then filled in, making the wall unusually thick.

The mazār, which holds the alleged tomb of Nasir Khusraw, is the centerpiece of the complex. Although

Fig. 7. Interior view of the pillared hall, with the entrance door to the mazār in the back. Note the bronze cauldron on the right. (Photo: Marcus Schadl)
the oblong room is the second largest of the four, its dimensions, too, are rather modest, measuring 4 by 5 meters in area and 2.5 meters in height. It is only dimly lighted by a small, barred window on each of the three external walls, which, together with the rather low wood ceiling, the close intercolumniation, and the bulky bracket capitals, create an intimate atmosphere in the chamber. Like the pillared hall, the mazār is divided into a northern zone (about one-quarter of the floor space) accessible to pilgrims and a slightly raised southern zone reserved for the tombs. The tomb area is fenced off with a wrought iron railing (fig. 8). This division into an impenetrable area and a public zone, where the devotees perform their rituals, is further emphasized by the position of the four supporting columns: while in the tomb area the two roof beams are supported by a single pillar each, beneath the northern beam the pillars are doubled, adding to the visual separation of the two zones. The grave or cenotaph of Nasir Khusraw occupies the northwestern corner of the room. It is hidden in a wooden enclosure, surrounded by a wooden trelliswork railing, and draped with cloth (fig. 9). Immediately to the south are two undecorated graves, which are believed to hold the remains of Nasir Khusraw’s closest companions, his brother Abu Sa’id and his faithful Indian servant.7
THE LIFE OF NASIR KHUSRAW

The illustrious man who is believed to be buried here in the seclusion of Badakhshan’s mountains enjoyed an eventful life, although when it comes to the facts only little is known with certainty about Nasir Khusraw’s vita. The existing biographies all rely heavily on the interpretation of a few autobiographical passages in the work of the poet-philosopher.8

We thus learn that Nasir was born in 1004 (394) in the town of Qubadhiyan in Khurasan, probably into a family of sayyids (male descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through the line of his daughter Fatima).9 His family must have been comparatively well-to-do, judging from the fact that Nasir himself, as well as some of his close relatives, held high government offices at the Ghaznavid and, subsequently, at the Seljuk court in Marv. In his early years, Nasir purportedly led a life full of travel, study, wine, women, and friends before experiencing, in 1045, a mid-life spiritual awakening that radically altered his ways. He claimed that he was called upon in a visionary dream to resign from his government post, abjure all of life’s luxuries, and set out on pilgrimage to Mecca.10

The hajj of Nasir Khusraw developed into a seven-year journey, vividly narrated in the classic travelogue Safarnāma (Book of Travels).11 Nasir Khusraw’s prolonged travels took him not only repeatedly to the holy city, but—even more importantly for his later career—also to Cairo, where he plunged into the vibrant social and intellectual life of the cosmopolitan capital of the Fatimid caliphate. Within three years, he was thoroughly imbued with Shi’i Isma‘ili learning and had attained a prominent rank in the Fatimid hierarchy. Appointed hujjat (“proof” or “witness,” designating the temporal and spiritual leader of the missionary activity) of Khurasan by the imam-caliph al-Mustansir, Nasir was commissioned to carry the Fatimid da‘wa (“call,” to convert, propaganda) to his homeland, to which he returned in 1052.

His initial successes in the dissemination of the Isma‘ili faith incited the Sunni orthodoxy to turn against the “heretic”; before long the Seljuk-controlled “demonland” that Khurasan had become proved to be too hostile to his zealous preaching. Nasir was eventually compelled to leave his base in Balkh and seek protection in Yumgan, which at that time belonged to the fief of a minor Badakhshani prince named ‘Ali b. al-Asad, who, in all probability, was also of Isma‘ili persuasion.

When exactly Nasir Khusraw ended up in the hideaway hills of Yumgan is unknown. The earliest evidence of his presence in Yumgan is the completion of one of his works there in 1061.12 The following years of involuntary exile were no doubt the most difficult phase of his life. Restrained from his proselytizing missionary work and surrounded only by a group of devoted adherents and an increasing number of local followers, Nasir turned his energies inward and became all the more productive as a writer. Alternate outbursts of hope and despair are scattered through his works, but in general bitterness about his fate prevails. He wrote in exasperation,

Pass by, sweet breeze of Khurasan,
To one imprisoned deep in the valley of Yumgan,
Who sits huddled in comfortless tight straits,
Robbed of all wealth, all goods, all hope.13

Nasir Khusraw lived out his years in this lonely seclusion. The author who had made the intellect and the role of reason in faith a dominant leitmotif of his poetry became towards the end of his life, to use his own words, a “shepherd to a herd of pigs” and a “lord of donkeys.”14 When he died around 1075 (or possibly as late as 1088),15 it was, ironically, the local community he despised that preserved his works and teachings for posterity and venerated him at his burial site, thereby keeping alive the memory of the Isma‘ili savant.

HAGIOGRAPHICAL TRADITIONS CONCERNING THE SHRINE

The locals preserved a number of oral traditions relating to the foundation of the shrine.16 One of these traditions holds that Nasir Khusraw magically created luxurious palaces and hammams for himself in order to sweeten his miserable exile. The magic he purportedly wielded was also instrumental in his choice of a burial site.

Nasir is said to have originally selected a different place for his burial. He had tried to strike a deal with
the proprietor of the land, but the purchase was never finalized, due to the greed of the farmer’s wife. Even a sack of gold, which Nasir magically created from dust, could not satisfy her. In the end, he was so annoyed about the vain bargain that he simply made the desired piece of land fly from its original location across the valley to the place where it now juts out from the mountain slope underneath the shrine. As if to lend more authenticity to the story, villagers today point to a cavity in the mountain on the opposite side of the valley. A few large pieces of rock scattered over the fields on the valley floor are believed to have fallen off during the boulder’s magic flight.17

The traditions vary as to exactly where Nasir was buried after his death, with some claiming that the savant was interred not on top of the conglomerate boulder but rather in a crevasse near its bottom. One version relates that, on his deathbed, Nasir called upon his brother Abu Sa’id to oversee his burial in a solid rock tomb, which he had previously chosen for himself. He warned his brother, though, not to look back after depositing his body in the crevasse. The end of the story echoes the fate of Eurydice as well as that of Lot’s wife: Abu Sa’id could not resist the temptation, turned around, and saw the rock close over the sepulchre. His own death is said to have followed not long thereafter. According to another version, Abu Sa’id buried Nasir in the crevasse at the foot of the outcrop and, as instructed, broke a bottle of holy water over the opening. The rock then closed to conceal Nasir’s corpse forever. In a third version, the site of the burial is believed to be at or near the cenotaph in the mazār. Accordingly, Nasir’s soul is said to have escaped through a hole in the floor.18

The topoi of these stories recur in legends of other local saints. The narration of how a saint selected the site and prearranged the mode of his burial portrays his passing as a self-conscious process; his deliberate choice for a burial site adds to the sanctity of the place. Very commonly, these sites are connected to the vita of the saint, as, for instance, a place that he preferred for his prayers. In the mountain regions of Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, the selected locales are often exposed outcrops overlooking a settlement; the ziyārat thus “guards” the villagers below. Sometimes, the sites had already been venerated as sacred places: we know of several ziyārats in Afghanistan and Pakistan that stand on sites previously occupied by Buddhist stupas (mound-like structures containing a relic). Moreover, the motif of interment in a rock is by no means exclusive to the hagiography of Nasir Khusraw. It was evidently derived from pre-Islamic, folk religious beliefs in superhuman beings inhabiting rocks.19

Of course, such stories, imbedded in a magical milieu and peppered with accounts of miracle-working, provide little factual information. Their plots are usually distorted, if not completely fabricated, in order to give meaning to the site of veneration, emphasize the sainthood of the revered person, or teach a certain moral. It nevertheless remains a tempting and very plausible hypothesis that the alleged site of Nasir Khusraw’s burial was already linked to the poet-philosopher while he was still alive. The contour of the burial chamber and possibly even its rising walls may well trace the house in which Nasir Khusraw dwelled and wrote his most essential works during the many years he spent in exile in Yumgan. It may have been a small one-room house above the hamlet of Hazrat Sayyid, possibly with a balcony with supports projecting over the boulder to the west, a raised porch on the east, and an annex containing a bathroom, a kitchen, or a storeroom on the site of the prayer room. Here, he would have lived close enough to the village to be supplied with food and, at the same time, remote enough to be undisturbed in his work.

There are many prominent examples of a revered person being entombed at his death in his own home (or, in the case of a Sufi master, in the place where he taught), which then developed into a pilgrimage site. We have most notably the case of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as that of the Sufi mystic Shaikh Salim Chishti (d. 1572) at Fatehpur Sikri, and, closer to Yumgan, Shaikh Saduddin Ahmad Ansari (d. 1810) at Pai Minar in the vicinity of Kabul. If this was also the case in Hazrat Sayyid, the site of the tomb or cenotaph may well have been Nasir Khusraw’s resting place even prior to his death.

ISMA’ILISM IN BADAKHSHAN

The history of the shrine and the cult is closely entwined with the history of Isma’ilism in Badakhshan, which in
A fundamental rift occurred within the Isma’il community over which of the sons of the Fatimid imam-caliph al-Mustansir (r. 1036–1094) would succeed him—al-Musta’li or Nizar. In the end, al-Musta’li (r. 1094–1101) managed to assert his claim and depose his brother. The schism had a lasting effect, heralding the doom of the Fatimids in Egypt, while shifting the center of the Isma’ili movement eastward, as the party of Nizar and his descendants gained support from a dā’ī based in Iran, the legendary Hassan-i Sabah (d. 1124).

In the exclusion of the Elburz mountains, Hassan and the succeeding lords (khudāwands) of Alamut created and defended a Nizari Isma’ili state of unconnected fortresses, which became a permanent thorn in the side of a hostile Seljuk sultanate. Alamut became the cradle of an independent Nizari da’wa, which developed into the largest branch of the Isma’iliyya. In 1256, however, the turbulent Alamut period ended abruptly when the Mongols of Hulagu Khan (d. 1265) captured the fortress and started to persecute Nizari Isma’ils.

Initially, these developments went almost unnoticed by the Isma’ils of Badakhshan, who had basically remained outside of the Nizari-Musta’li schism. The political landscape had kept them severed from their coreligionists in the west for decades after Nasir Khusraw’s death, before, in the heyday of Alamut, a fragile line of communication was reestablished by visiting vakils (representatives) and dā’īs like Sayyid Shah Malang and, later, Mir Sayyid Hasan Shah Khamush, who introduced the Nizari da’wa to Shugnan in northern Badakhshan. However, the first Mongol onslaught of 1220–21 and, later, the fall of Alamut forced the Isma’ili community in Badakhshan into isolation again. The last notable impulse from Persia was the influx of Nizari refugees, whom the collapse of their state had left disorganized and disoriented. When they began to scatter into adjacent regions, many escaped to the sheltering mountains of Badakhshan.

The period following the fall of Alamut is a dark chapter in the history of Isma’ilism. For two centuries, the Nizari Imam was in hiding. Persecution was commonplace and in Badakhshan, like elsewhere in the Mongol and, subsequently, the Timurid realms, Isma’ils resorted to the strict observance of taqīyya (precautionary dissimulation of one’s religious identity).

Nevertheless, during this time, Isma’ilism also received decisive new stimuli. Mysticism and the search
for an esoteric path to Islam were generally on the rise. Sufi orders (tariqat) sprang up in great numbers, some entering a diffuse Shi‘i-Sunni syncretism. When, in the highly hostile Sunni milieu of Badakhshan, Isma‘ili needed to practice taqiyya in the guise of Sunnism, for all practical purposes they did so under the mantle of Sufism, without actually affiliating themselves with any one of the existing Sufi orders. They adopted Sufi terminology—such as khānaqāh (dervish lodge), darwīsh (dervish, mendicant ascetic), ‘ārif (gnostic), qalandar (wandering dervish), and murīd (disciple)—and to outsiders the community leader appeared in the garb of a Sufi master, bearing the title pir, murshid, or shaykh. The rapprochement between Sufism and Isma‘ili that characterizes the post-Alamut period was by no means limited to terminology. A sort of coalescence emerged between these two independent esoteric traditions as Nizari Isma‘ilis developed close intellectual ties with the Sufi movement.21

Naturally, over the centuries, the variegated influences of taqiyya practices have left an indelible mark on the development of the Isma‘ili community. In Badakhshan, particularly in the valleys on the fringes of Isma‘ili settlement areas, the practice of dissimulation must have paved the way for conversions among the local population to Sunnism, or at least to a strong dilution of their religious practices. But in areas that were less accessible to Sunnis and where there was thus less pressure to assimilate, the Isma‘ilis continued to develop a distinctive tradition of their own, disconnected, as they were, from their Imam.

Even when, in the fifteenth century, a certain Sayyid Suhrab Wali Badakhshani and, after him, his son Sayyid Omar Yumgani revived the missionary work in Badakhshan at a time when the Persian Nizari Isma‘ilis were regrouping in Anjudan, communications between the two areas continued to be weak. In fact, the Isma‘ilis of Badakhshan came within closer reach of the Imam (on whom the Qajar Fath Ali Shah bestowed in 1818 the honorific title of Aga Khan) only after he moved his seat from Persia to India in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the late 1990s, institutions of the Aga Khan started to implement humanitarian aid and development projects in Badakhshan, thereby reestablishing contacts with the imamate.

At present, the Isma‘ili community in Badakhshan is estimated to have about 70,000 members. They are concentrated in the sparsely populated northern and eastern districts neighboring the Upper Oxus, namely, Shughnan, Roshan, Zebak, Ishkashim, and Wakhan. Here and in the southern district of Kuran wa Mundjan, Isma‘ilis constitute a great majority of the population. In the Darwaz district in the north, they form a pivotal minority community. In the predominantly Sunni district of Jurm and its former subdistrict Yumgan (an independent administrative unit since 2005), which together have a total population of approximately 80,000, Isma‘ilis number over 5,000, and are mainly settled in the remoter side valleys.22

The inhabitants of Hazrat Sayyid claim to be Sunnis. According to a field survey carried out in 2002, Hazrat Sayyid (including immediately adjacent settlements) has a total population of nearly 2,000, of which around 150 (twenty-two households) are Isma‘ilis. Their actual number, however, may be considerably higher, since the Isma‘ilis living in this prevalently Sunni environment are to this day reluctant to reveal their identity and continue to practice taqiyya.23

THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY OF NASIR KHUSRAW

In view of their long history of persecution and discrimination, it is understandable that the Isma‘ili communities of Badakhshan vary in their degree of formal structure and self-representation, depending on whether they are settled in majority or minority areas. Generally, their communal organization centers around the authority of the pir (elder, also the title of the head dā‘ī in Nizari Isma‘ilism), who is the local representative of the Imam in a district, commissioned to supervise the religious, social, and cultural affairs of the community. The pir, in turn, appoints a trusted man as his khalīfa (deputy) in villages with resident Isma‘ilis. Historically, however, as there was often no contact with the Imam, the leadership of the pir was basically unrestrained. With the usually spurious claim of descent from ‘Ali, the pirs gained sufficient credence in the community to introduce a hereditary system of leadership, with the
result that, over the centuries, their families accumulated considerable power and wealth.

For the believer who sees in the Imam “the single cosmic individual,” who sums up in his person “the entire reality of existence” and is “God’s ‘proof’ on earth and guide to the ultimate truths of religion,” the pir as a lesser guide cannot possibly be a full substitute.24 But, in the hideaway hills of Badakhshan, where the Imam was for centuries out of the reach of the community, the highest local representative could bind some of the Imam’s nunnous status to his own religious authority. Thus, in the “popularized” form of Nizari Isma’ilism practiced by the mountain people of Badakhshan, the pir basically functions as the main intermediary between God and the faithful. This explains why he and his ancestors are devotedly venerated, asked for blessings (barakat), and sought out for help in both spiritual and worldly affairs.

Revered as a pir and held in high esteem as Shāh Sayyid,25 Nasir Khusraw is, besides the Imam and the local pir, a third eminent religious authority, who plays an absolutely pivotal role in the collective memory of the Isma’ilis of Badakhshan. Not only is he regarded as the founder of their communities, but, to this day, his writings are the primary source used for the religious education of the young at home and in the jamā’at-khānas (communal assembly halls). We owe to this zealously kept tradition the survival of Nasir Khusraw’s known works, in which he propagates the legitimate succession of ‘Ali after Muhammad and of Isma’il as the seventh Imam; reverence for the Prophet’s family (ahl al-bayt); and the recognition of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir as the Imam of the age.

Apart from his famous qaṣīdas (elegiac poems), Nasir wrote several treatises in which he expounds Isma’ili doctrine and provides theoretical descriptions of his religious and philosophical principles. Among them are the Shīsh fāsīl (Six Chapters), also known as Rawshnā’ī-nāma (The Book of Enlightenment), which provides a sort of practical cosmography and a collection of moral maxims; the Zād al-musāfirīn (Pilgrims’ Provisions); and the Jāmi’ al-hikmatayn (The Sum of the Two Wisdoms), which attempts to bridge theology and philosophy. In his Waḥḥ-i din (The Face of Religion), he introduces the reader to the Isma’ili gnosis through Qur’anic exegesis, imparting an esoteric (bāṭin) interpretation (ta’wil, an “analogy” leading back to a hidden meaning) of suras from which religious commandments, prohibitions, and rites were derived, such as the call to prayer, the ablutions for prayer, and the five assigned times and correct posture for prayer, as well as fasting, almsgiving, and the hajj.26

Nasir Khusraw’s treatises have to this day retained their absolute authority in Badakhshan. It is telling that both the widely circulated Umm al-kitāb (The Mother of the Book), composed in the eighth century, and the Kalām-i pir (Discourse of the Sage), known locally as the Haft bāb-i Sayyid Nāṣir (The Seven Chapters of Sayyid Nasir), were wrongly attributed to him by the local community.27 Oral tradition even holds that he founded the popular religious ceremony known as chirāgh-i rawshan (The Luminous Lamp), a three-day funeral rite probably of Zoroastrian origin, although his own works indicate that he himself never introduced any specific ritual.

The universality of Nasir Khusraw’s authority in the region is demonstrated by the fact that it is accepted even by the notoriously fanatical Sunnis of Yumgan. They consider themselves descendants of Nasir Khusraw and believe their ancestor was a Sufi pir, and a Sunni like themselves.28 Nasir Khusraw has evidently survived in Badakhshan both as the leading guide and mentor of the Isma’ili community and, beyond the sectarian divide, as a local patron saint.

ISMA’ILI SAINT CULTS IN BADAKHSHAN

The saint cults practiced by the Isma’ilis of Badakhshan remain almost completely unexplored. To my knowledge, the only serious study on the subject is a forthcoming publication by Jo-Ann Gross, which deals with the shrine culture in the Tajik oblast of Gorno-Badakhshan. According to her research, Isma’ilis north of the artificially drawn Oxus border make pilgrimages to shrines in which revered religious authorities, like their pir, khalīfa, or a “Sufi” dervish, are buried; sites (naẓargāh) that are believed to have been visited by early Islamic figures, like ‘Ali or the fifth imam Muhammad Baqir (d. 735); and places where the animals carrying them passed or left footprints in the ground or rock. (A recurring story is that an unusual crack in a rock
formation was caused by ‘Ali’s double-edged sword named Zulfiqar). Unusual trees, caves, rock formations, and hot springs are also revered. Like the custom of depositing animal horns and prayer stones at the shrine, these cults are evidently rooted in ancient nature religions.29

The visit to the shrine is most commonly a personal experience. Large gatherings and collective rituals are usually reserved for special holidays and religious festivals (bayrām), such as Nawrūz (literally “New Year,” marking the first day of spring) or ‘Id-i Qurbān (Feast of the Sacrifice). At the shrine, the believer tries to establish contact with the divine world through the mediation of the saint, to whom he or she pledges obedience and devotion. In exchange for the prayers and offerings, the saintly person is expected to let his devotee participate in his blessing (barakat) and to assist him in worldly matters by, for example, granting a good harvest, bestowing milk and grain, curing diseases, or ensuring fertility.

The results of Gross’s field research in Gorno-Badakhshan were not unexpected. Apart from the focus on ‘Alid legends, the shrine culture observed among the local Isma‘ilis does not differ fundamentally from the saint cults practiced in neighboring Sunni areas or, in fact, elsewhere in the Islamic world.30 After all, the belief in local saints and their miracles, which has often been discouraged and suppressed by the Islamic orthodoxy, contains a very strong popular element and retains pre-Islamic elements broadly shared regardless of sectarian affiliation.

It is not surprising that this popular belief is widespread and strong in a region like Badakhshan, where in the deep ravines and valleys cutting into towering mountain ranges peasant farmers are exposed to the forces of nature and must struggle for subsistence. Religion needs to be in the first place a non-intellectual, immediate experience, particularly since the vast majority of the population is illiterate. For most local Isma‘ilis, attaining a deeper understanding of Nasir Khusraw’s works and intellectual traditions is basically impossible. Even their pīrs are often limited in their knowledge about approaches to Qur’anic interpretations, and only a few are fully versed in the complex rituals of Isma‘ilism.

This lowers expectations that the shrine of Nasir Khusraw, given his great importance for the Isma‘ili community of Badakhshan, would be a perfect case study of specifically Isma‘ili saint cult practices. Moreover, the cult has over the centuries become so integrated through the practice of taqiyya that today the shrine is zealously guarded by Isma‘ilis and non-Isma‘ilis alike. Despite its remote location, the shrine is well known throughout Badakhshan and it is the most important pilgrimage site in the region.

PILGRIMAGE AND CULT

The main pilgrimage route leads to the shrine from the north, going upstream into the Kokcha Valley. Apart from local residents, most visitors to the shrine are probably from the aforementioned Isma‘ili strongholds in Badakhshan, to the north and northeast of Yumgan. They are mostly nomadic herders crossing the high mountain passes to and from the markets of Kabul.

The number of visitors seems to have notably decreased during the recent decades of war and insecurity. In the 1970s, it reportedly averaged about a dozen per night.31 By contrast, during my two-day visit in 1998, which was actually undertaken in a good time of the year to travel, not a single visitor came. No flags were posted on the outside of the shrine as in the photos taken by Dupree during his visit in 1975. The shrine showed no signs of neglect and was still well maintained by a guardian (mutawallī), who confessed during Dupree’s insistent interviews that he is the pīr of the resident Isma‘ili community. However, wartime damage has not been repaired. The small satellite buildings in the vicinity of the shrine—the soup kitchen and the mosque opposite the shrine mentioned earlier—now lie in ruins, no attempt having been made to restore them. Tellingly, the shrine is usually locked and one needs to ask in the village at the shrine keeper’s house to be allowed in.

The state of the ceremonial objects kept at the shrine similarly attests to a decline of the cult. Formerly, when a wealthy pilgrim wished to give alms (khayrāt) and share food in memory of his visit, communal meals were prepared in a huge bronze cauldron engraved with the date 1272 (1855–56) and measuring nearly one meter in diameter (fig. 7). It was common on these occasions for a cow to be slaughtered and wheat donated to make beef stew for the pilgrims. Nowadays, the cauldron is
kept in the vestibule in front of the mazār and has evidently not been used for some time.

Among the other cult objects are two wrought iron candelabra and a brazen oil lamp which, together with two wooden chests (probably dating from the eighteenth or nineteenth century), lie unused inside the mazār (fig. 8). During his visit in 1975, Dupree photographed an interesting “silver” (tin-plated bronze?) figurine, which is still preserved in situ in the mazār, as well as a pendant “bronze” (iron?) lamp.32 They apparently served as, respectively, an incense burner and an oil lamp, and were possibly used in fire and light ceremonies like the chirāgh-i rawshan mentioned earlier. Of the lamp, only the chain remains; the intricately chased body is missing. A bulbous tinned object hangs near the alleged grave of Nasir Khusraw.

Dupree’s group also found at the shrine an illuminated Qur’an manuscript (measuring 52 by 58 centimeters) with Persian annotations, which local tradition fancied to have been written by Nasir Khusraw himself. Upon news of the manuscript’s “discovery,” the government dispatched a commission of historians, who on stylistic grounds—that is, its “apparently post-Kufic and pre-Nasta’liq” calligraphy—suggested a vague pre-fifteenth-century date. The Qur’an manuscript was taken to Kabul, depriving the shrine of another important piece of its inventory.33

INFORMAL GRAFFITI

Details of the saint cult practiced at Nasir Khusraw’s shrine are difficult to obtain since the local community is secretive. Some information on the “visitation culture” and the experience of pilgrims can, however, be gleaned from informal graffiti scribbled on the walls. These graffiti basically fall into two groups, graphics and writings. The former comprise a few naively painted images of flowers in a pot. This motif is a traditional symbol of blossoming life, repeatedly used in the “folk art” of Afghanistan and neighboring countries, on the walls of mosques, shrines, private homes, and tea houses, as well as on the sides of trucks.

The writings of shrine visitors are more informative and specific. Like the popular custom of tying pieces of cloth to objects near the grave or depositing prayer stones at the shrine, the act of writing on the walls is a means for the pious pilgrim to leave behind a visible sign of his visit, reminding the revered saint of his devotion and supplication. These writings include invocations, prayers, expressions of gratitude, poems, and the names of the visitors and the dates of their visit, as well as names of deceased relatives and religious authorities. It must be remembered, however, that the authors of these scribblings do not represent the average shrine visitor, who would most likely be illiterate. They must rather be sought among educated town dwellers, local dignitaries, teachers, and clerics, including Sunni mullahs. Nearly all graffiti signatures are in Dari Persian, written by the ethnic Tajiks from the surrounding valleys.34

The graffiti are concentrated in the vestibule in front of the tomb chamber, primarily near the entrance door to the mazār and along the passageway leading to it. While the oldest dated signatures are from as early as the nineteenth century (the earliest one from 1828 [1244]), it is interesting that only a few graffiti have been added since 1975, to judge from Dupree’s photos. This supports the assumption that the number of visitors has notably decreased in the past thirty years. Since the political situation improved in the late 1990s, new graffiti have gradually filled the interspaces. However, in the context of a society shattered by decades of civil war, these recent yādgārs (mementos) are altogether of the casual “I was here” type and disclose little about the traditional cult.

The older writings, which were for the most part haphazardly scrawled on the wall, are mainly invocations (du’ā) composed in the form of doggerel, ranging from simple taṣbiḥs (devotional acts involving the repetitive utterance of short sentences in remembrance [dhikr] of God’s glory) to poems exalting Nasir Khusraw and his achievements. Appellations of God such as Allāh khudāvand (God, Lord) appear repeatedly. For example, visiting mullahs wrote khudāvand-i jahāni khudāvand-i zamīn-i āsmāni (Oh God, [you are] the lord of the world, the lord of the heavenly earth), as well as single invocations of yā Allāh (O God), Allāhu akbar (God is great[er]), and, in reference to his prophet, Muḥammad khabīr (Muhammad, the one who knows).
For the pious shrine visitor, the direct invocation of God seems to be interchangeable or even equivalent with the invocation of Nasir Khusraw, although the latter is generally more personalized and specific. The saint is addressed either directly by name (Nāṣīr-i Khusraw) or with various substitute titles like šāh (king), shāh-i buzurgvār (great king), mawlā (guardian), shīd-i Yumgān (son of Yumgan), and ‘uqāb-i Yumgān (eagle of Yumgan). The image of the eagle apparently alludes to one of Nasir Khusraw’s moralizing poems from the Divān. Drawing on an older fable, the story portrays an eagle circling in the air “full of selfish pride,” before it is shot down by an arrow fletched with eagle feathers. The moral of the poem is found in the climactic words, now a common proverb among Persian speakers, az māst ki bar māst, “what comes from us returns to us,” meaning that we have within ourselves the very quality that will bring about both our rise and downfall. Like the jewel embedded in rock, the one precious thing in a worthless surrounding, the doomed self-centered eagle is an image in which Nasir Khusraw often found consolation during his involuntary exile.

We may gauge from these graffiti that their authors were at least superficially familiar with Nasir’s poetry and vita. There are also sufficient indications that Isma’īlis (one devotee signed with the epithet “follower of Nasir Khusraw”) and Sunnis alike come to the shrine to seek the blessing of Nasir Khusraw. The favors they hope to obtain for themselves through their pious visits are multiple and of a rather general nature. On the one hand, Nasir Khusraw is sought as a spiritual guide, to whom the kalima, the confession of the faith, is confided. He is thought of as an all-powerful guardian of the faithful: “O heart, be patient, because if the enemy is powerful, our guardian is even more powerful” (Ay dil šabūr bāsh ki agar dushman qavīst nigahbān-i mā qavītar ast). It is believed that those who come to the ziyārat with a “pure heart” will find spiritual enlightenment there and improve their lives. There is also space for supplicatory prayers for deceased relatives and clerics. On the other hand, most of the concerns brought before the saint are of a rather worldly nature, e.g., intercession in daily affairs, good health, material benefits, and success. For instance, one visitor wrote that “through the blessing of this great king I gained repute and influence” (az barakat-i in shāh-i buzurgvār yāftam ‘izzat [va] i’tibār).

Close to the entrance to the mazār, several enigmatic letters are carefully written on the wall (fig. 10). In all
probability, the coded letter mysticism used here relates to esoteric gnostic beliefs, which may be taken as proof that Sufi dervishes (or more likely Isma‘lis disguised as such), too, visit the shrine and, historically, may have very possibly even presided over the cult of Nasir Khusraw.

**THE TARĪQAT MAUSOLEUM**

In his contribution to *The Dervish Lodge*, Baha Tanman writes that *tarīqat* mausoleums—shrines maintained by a Sufi order in memory of their deceased master—are “structurally exceedingly plain” and that “some… even have the structure, internal spatial arrangement, and façade” of vernacular buildings. Their modest and intimate scale may reflect the close day-to-day relationship between the members of an order and their saint. Despite their simplicity, however, *tarīqat* mausoleums are often larger and more spacious than ordinary mausoleums, since they were also built to accommodate the graves of *piřs* and their immediate families. A *tarīqat* mausoleum “would consequently undergo continuous evolution, being enlarged and restructured several times over the years.”

This description fits perfectly with the architecture of Nasir Khusraw’s shrine, as well as with the aura it projects as an incrementally grown structure. The assumption that a Sufi brotherhood had in the past maintained it also helps to explain the otherwise unclear function of the small prayer room adjacent to the *mazār*, the role of the tombs in the large pillared hall, and why, despite the size of the complex, the space reserved for processions by ordinary pilgrims is very limited. Allowed to pass through the building only on a relatively narrow corridor along the northern wall, they can halt and turn southwards twice to pay tribute to the tombs in the pillared hall and in the *mazār*.

This linear form of procession is very unusual in regional *ziyārat* architecture. Normally, even the simplest shrine (a tomb with a mud enclosure) provides the possibility of ritually circling the grave of the saint. In Hazrat Sayyid, however, the peripheral position of the tomb within the *mazār* (which supports the hypothesis that the tomb chamber was formerly Nasir Khusraw’s house, as the tomb in the corner may mark the site of his deathbed) precluded this circumambulation practice from the beginning. Instead, the pathway following the edge of the boulder on the outside of the *ziyārat* may have been used for ritual circumambulation. The small windows in the outer walls of the tomb chamber may then have served as the salutation windows characteristic of the mausoleums of most Sufi orders, whereby shrine visitors can offer prayers facing the spiritual presence of the saint without actually entering the *mazār*.

The interment of the *piř’s* ancestors (who were probably the shaikhs of the resident Sufi brotherhood) in the large pillared hall is further indication that the shrine was formerly maintained as a *tarīqat* mausoleum. The function of the small prayer room to the south of the *mazār* then appears less nebulous. Spatially separated from the *mazār* (with a porch of its own rather than a direct connection), it is very likely that the prayer room was not meant to be used by the normal wayfaring pilgrim. Rather, dervishes who temporarily or permanently resided at the tomb may have used the prayer room as a winter mosque, a seclusion cell, or a *dhikr-khāna* for their ritualized invocation ceremonies; this would explain the crude and austere character of the room. The reconstruction of Nasir Khusraw’s *ziyārat* as a *tarīqat* mausoleum with an attached *khānaqāh* thus seems to take shape. The dervishes were probably lodged nearby, perhaps in a shelter on the site of the now ruined “mosque” opposite the shrine complex.

Wood’s account from the 1830s provides us with more details of the *tarīqat* mausoleum in the nineteenth century. He writes that the “inmates” of the *āstāna* (sanctuary, literally “threshold”) lived off the crops produced on the waqf land inalienably endowed to the *ziyārat* “at the time the buildings [note the plural!] were erected.”

“In turn for an indulgence which has been confirmed by the subsequent rulers of Badakhshan,” Wood continues his report, “the *mazār* is bound to furnish the wayfaring man with food, water, and a night’s lodging.” Evidently, the local potentates were favorably disposed to the shrine and provided for its maintenance, although a side note in Wood’s report casts doubt on how much support the religious brotherhood really received at that time from the resident community: apparently, the waqf land yielded only poor harvests, and in some seasons the dervishes went hungry.
THE INSCRIPTIONS OF 1109 (1697)

Inside the building, on the ceiling of the mazār and on the latticework railing around Nasir Khusraw’s grave, an extensive inscription program provides a window into a time when the cult at the tariqat mausoleum must have been in its heyday. The black ink calligraphy in nastāʿīq script, consisting mostly of quotations from the Qurʾān, contrasts beautifully with the unpainted reddish brown wood (fig. 11).

The inscriptions are written in single lines on the underside and chamfers of the secondary roof beams. The lines are neatly set in between the chip carved triangular ornament bands separating the chamfered shaft of the rafter from the star and rosette medallions at the joist ends and in the center. Most of the sarking boards spanning the narrow distance between the beams bear two lines of text. The verses in the interspaces of the beams run alternately parallel and perpendicular to those on the beams. The main beams only bear a single line on their northern side facing the pilgrims. Towards the southern wall of the room, that is, the side further away from the visitors’ area, the calligraphy is, in general, more sparsely applied on the wood. At the eastern end of the southern main beam, on the northern side facing the visitors’ area, there is an inscription written in Arabic (fig. 12):

Li-tajdid hadhīhi ‘r-rawdat al-munawwara wa-turbat al-muqaddasa ḥadrat Shāh Nāṣir ẗāba thārāhu l’iḥtimām rīf’at-ma’āb janāb Ḥājji Shāh Ḥiṭṭāb ibn al-maḥām Mir Muḥtār Beg Yumgānī sana 1109

For the renovation of this illuminated shrine and the holy dome of his Excellency Shah Nasir, may his earth be light [i.e., the earth of his grave, meaning “may he rest peacefully in his grave”], under the care of his noble Excellency Hajji Shah Khetab, son of the late Mir Muhtaram Beg Yumgani, in the year 1109 [1697].

This information is supplemented by a carved inscription on the northeastern wooden pillar of the smaller porch in front of the prayer room (fig. 13). On the eastern side of this pillar, facing outward to the terrace, the wood-carver left a personal dedication in the form of a Persian poem, starting with: gharaẓ-i naqsh kazmā bāz mānad… (the meaning of the symbol [the building] which we left behind…). The remaining lines are difficult to decipher. On the northern side of the same pillar, the text of a second (worn-off) relief carving reads:
[yā] Allāh
Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahim ibn
Shaykh Kalān ghafarahu [Allāh]
‘amala Ustā[d] Muhammad ibn
Ustā[d] Sangīn [ibn]
Ustā[d] […]
najjār Murād Jānī (?)
ghafru Allāh
‘alayhim ajma’in
kanishkār (?) ‘Ali

[O] God
The patron of the blessed building is
Shaikh ‘Abd al-Rahim son of Shaikh Kalan, may God
have mercy on him
Built by master Muhammad son of master Sangin [son
of] Master […]
The carpenter is Murad Jani (?)
God’s mercy on all of them
Carving (?) by ‘Ali

The aforementioned Hajji Shah Khetab, evidently the
local potentate in Yumgan who sponsored a renova-
tion of the shrine in 1697, is not otherwise known as a
historical figure. The same is true for the master builder
Muhammad and the other craftsmen listed above as
being involved in the construction project. The “imme-
diate” patron, ‘Abd al-Rahim, was very likely the master
of the resident dervish brotherhood, as the title shaykh
would suggest, and he apparently held a hereditary
position. This ‘Abd al-Rahim may be interred in one
of the anonymous tombs in the larger porch, which
would then make him a direct ancestor of the current
(Isma’i’il!) pīr of Hazrat Sayyid.

The fact that the wood-carver chose a lateral of the
wood pillar of the smaller, less prominent vestibule for
his inscription in honor of the shaykh of the time and
the workmen clearly supports the reading of the com-
plex as a tariqat mausoleum. The dervishes would pass
the inscription regularly on their way from the mazār
to the prayer room for their invocation ceremonies.

The presence of religiously educated dervishes is also
supported by the fact that the Qur’anic quotations cov-
ering the woodwork (and possibly the wall surfaces
beneath the later plaster) in the mazār required care-
ful selection. The verses in the area reserved for the
pilgrims take as their theme the power of true faith
in God and the prophethood of Muhammad (Qur’an
1:48); interspersed among them are the Beautiful Names
of God and the ḥawqala prayer, Lā ḥawla wa-lā quw-
wata illā bi-llāhi (there is no power nor strength save
in God). Other verses were selected for the mazār
because they refer to the religious cult (Qur’an 62:11
and Sura 110 (al-Naṣr (Succor)) or to the Last Judgment and Paradise (Qur’an 2:285–86; Sura 36 [Yā Sīn]; and Sura 78 (al-Nabā’ (The Tidings))).

Several of the quoted suras invite an esoteric interpretation, like the brief suras 97, al-Qadr (Power), and 93, al-Duḥā (Forenoon). The beginning line of the latter, “By the morning light,” was usually understood as a reference to Muhammad’s face; it was used as an oath formula alluding to the prophet’s marvellous beauty and majesty. Sura 53, al-Najm (The Star), is a favorite Qur’anic passage on which mystics meditate, as it describes Muhammad’s vision and lauds his steadfast concentration on God.

Near the entrance door, the last two verses of Sura al-Qalam (The Pen) are written on the ceiling. Throughout the Persian world, these words frequently appear on amulets to avert evil or bad luck:

\[
\text{wa-in yakādu ‘l-ladhīna kafarū li-yuzliqūnaka bi-ab-/s+dotbelowāri him lammā sami/lefthalfringu ‘dh-dhikra wa-yaqūlūna innahū la-majnūnun (Qur’an 68:51)}
\]

And those who disbelieve would almost smite you with their eyes when they hear the reminder, and they say: Most surely he is mad.

The epigraphic scheme of the calligraphy lends weight to the assumption that the mystical beliefs of local dervishes, their notion of veneration, and the symbolism resulting from it left their imprint in the ziyārat of Nasir Khusraw, and that at least in 1697, the shrine was maintained as a /t+d+dotbelowarīqat tomb. Still, it remains to be seen what kind of esoteric brotherhood had developed amidst the hybrid Sunni-Isma’ili milieu of Yumgan. The calligraphy on the ceiling of the mazār provides at least a clue. On the chamfer of the secondary beam closest to the southern wall, next to the quoted verses from Sura al-Qalam, we find the following (fig. 14):

\[
\text{lā fatā illā /lefthalfringAlī lā sayfa illā Dhū ‘l-fiqār sana 1109}
\]

There is no hero except ‘Ali, there is no sword except [his sword] Zulfiqar, the year 1109.

This sentence is inextricably connected with the futuwwa ideal of early Sufism, the fatā being the generous and faithful “young man” or “brave youth” commonly identified with ‘Ali. But the line is, interestingly enough, also central to the du‘ā’ (prayer) of Isma’ilis, whose beliefs were tinged with or at least related to those of Sufi futuwwa groups.

THE WOODEN ARCHITECTURE OF 1109 (1697)

The shrine of Nasir Khusraw as it stands today is basically the result of the renovation of 1697 recorded in the inscription. The construction in wood entailed a comprehensive renewal of the building. The two pilastered porches were built and the burial chamber was substantially altered. In particular, the construction of the large vestibule, which necessitated the aforementioned turn in orientation in order to fit the annex on the boulder, considerably enlarged the dimensions of the complex.

The two porches gave the shrine a new front with showpiece verandas (fig. 15). The smaller of the two, the airy portico-like porch before the prayer room, has a rather unrefined front elevation, its six pillars set against the shaded back. The cedarwood pillars are original in design and vary in shape and ornamentation (fig. 5); no two are exactly alike. The four lateral pillars have a high base that is girdled in the middle and stands on a square plinth. Their shafts are octagonal, with a square-profiled
upper part featuring a pair of rosettes in medallions and bands of triangular chip carvings on each of the four sides. The inscribed pillar in the northeastern corner of the porch departs from this scheme, as at half height it bears the inscriptions and then continues above in a narrow transitional zone and a square profiled top. The two pillars in the center of the room have round shafts. The pillar in the back starts immediately from the ground, whereas the front pillar has a low square base, followed by a circular plinth. Resembling contemporary designs of wood columns in Transoxania, the shaft of the front pillar is bulbous at the bottom and tapers towards the square section at the top. The capitals are corbelled out beneath the main roof beam, whose face sides are decorated with bands of triangles and rosette medallions. The underside of the beam features striated triangles; the wooden boards above the secondary beams are diagonally striated.

The front of the large pillared hall is more complex. Above the raised platform, a waist-high parapet is set in between the two southern front pillars and a wooden portal-like door in the northern third of the tripartite front. The wood panels of the parapet and the portal foil the open character of the hall. The parapet must have originally been even higher to judge from mortises in the stringers and a few wood fragments that can be found lying around in the building. A latticework screen similar to the one above the portal was apparently fixed on top of the parapet.

The portal is the masterpiece of the front façade (fig. 16). The surfaces of the two-leaf door and of the surrounding frame are lavishly decorated in a mesmerizing pattern: arranged in three rows on the frame, in seven rows on each door leaf, and in one row on the door mullion, “hanging chains” of pits are carved out of the wooden boards. The pits are shaped like lilies at the top and continue with a pattern of alternating lozenges and large drops. They were originally inlaid with pieces of limestone carefully trimmed to fit the form of the carvings, as tacks in the cavities and a single remnant sample of stone inlay show (fig. 17). The pattern is highly original and to my knowledge unique. It would be tempting to think that the wood-carver wanted to imitate cascading gemstones, perhaps as a metaphor for the “Ruby of Badakhshan.”

The pillars of the large porch are more slender and uniform—and also less experimental in design—than those of the southern porch (figs. 7 and 18). They have
round cylindrical shafts, which stand on the floor without a base. The transition from the round profile of the shaft to the square top is V-shaped in the case of the pillars at the front and in the row closest to the qibla, whereas the V-shaped transitions of the pillars of the middle row have an extension below in the shape of a heart turned upside down.

The capitals extend in carved brackets with stylized volutes. As in the smaller porch, the underside of the ceiling is embellished with diagonally laid sarking sticks. The motifs of the ornamental carvings on the pillars and roof beams are similar to those found in the smaller porch, comprising bands of triangles, striated surfaces, and rosettes in medallions. In general, however, the details and the ornamentation of the woodwork in the larger porch, and in the mazâr, are more elaborate.

The appearance of the interior walls at the time of the 1697 renovation can safely be reconstructed only for the pillared hall. Where the wall is damaged (fig. 19), we can see that the original wall surface was on a level with the roof beams, in contrast with the later wall plaster, which was smeared rather carelessly over the wood (figs. 14 and 19). Traces of paint show that both the wall and the beam up to the height of the carved ornament band were originally painted in crimson. The sarking sticks of the ceiling, too, were painted alternately in crimson and green.

The finish of the walls and ceiling of the smaller porch may have originally been similar, but has not been preserved. In the mazâr, by contrast, the original ceiling bearing the calligraphy is well preserved. The original wall finish may also have been decorated with Qur’anic verses, but more likely it has always been whitewashed only.

The architecture and ornamentation of the renovation of 1697 are clearly rooted in the vernacular building traditions of Badakhshan and the secluded mountain regions adjoining it. It can thus be safely surmised that the master-builder Muhammad and his fellow craftsmen mentioned on the inscribed pillar came from the region. Certain architectural and design elements can similarly be found in contemporary mosques and shrines, as well as in private dwellings across the northwestern Himalayas, the Karakoram, Swat, Chitral, Indus Kohistan, Tajik Badakhshan, and the border regions of

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**Fig. 16.** The carved portal of the pillared hall. (Photo: Marcus Schadl)

**Fig. 17.** A detail of the carved entrance door showing the iron tacks and the limestone inlay. (Photo: Marcus Schadl)
Fig. 18. The pillared hall: view of the ceiling. (Photo: Marcus Schadl)

Fig. 19. The plasterwork in the northwestern corner of the large pillared hall. The original wall surface and painting can be seen underneath the stuccoed plaster on the top left of the photo. (Photo: Marcus Schadl)
northeastern Afghanistan. These include: the veranda-like canopy in front of the prayer room; the pillared hall with a fretted parapet and a lavishly carved front portal; the variform cedarwood columns of the porches and the mazār, with their ornate shafts and bundled bases; the volutes extending from the bracket capitals; the ornamental bands of triangular chip carvings; and the carved rosettes of floral and geometric designs.44

The inhabitants of this wider cultural area at the periphery of the Muslim world are ethnically highly heterogeneous. They belong to various ethnic splinter groups, some of whom have preserved archaic cultural traits and religious beliefs into modern times. The Islamicization of the area occurred relatively late, although it accelerated just at the time when Nasir Khusraw’s shrine was renovated in 1697, bringing the cultures of the neighboring mountain regions again in closer contact with each other.45 This increased interaction may help to explain why, on the level of folk art, pre-Islamic architectural and decorative elements experienced a kind of renaissance in Yumgan. As we know from Swat and Nager carvings, the voluted capital, for example, is associated with long-held popular beliefs and could be a stylized representation of either ibex horns or the tree of life.46 Likewise, decorative motifs such as the floral rosette and triangular chip carvings already flourished in the Buddhist Gandhara art of the Kushana period (ca. first to third centuries A.D.) and were probably nurtured since antiquity by early Iranian influences.47

THE REPLASTERING OF THE INTERIOR UNDER THE DURRANIS

No substantial changes or additions have been made to the shrine since 1697. Earthquakes have repeatedly damaged the building, however, and much of the original plaster on the interior walls has been lost, making emergency repairs necessary.48 The somewhat deformed pier at the building’s northeastern corner was the result of this sort of local repair, which disfigures somewhat the front façade of the shrine (fig. 15).49

The only intervention that altered the shrine’s appearance significantly was the aforementioned renewal of the interior plasterwork. In contrast to the “folk” style of the carpentry and the carvings, the later plasterwork on the walls of the two porches and the mazār is derived from the urban-oriented Mughal tradition, borrowing from its ornamental repertoire the shallow stuccoed recesses with cusped tromp l’œil arches; the rectangular wall paneling that emphasizes the architectural divisions of the rooms; the emblematic figure-ground frieze of five-lobed flowers; and the one-quarter baluster column preserved in the northwestern corner of the pillared hall.

Unfortunately, the plaster was whitewashed over at a later point. Near the entrance door to the mazār, however, the whitewash has fallen off, allowing the original wall finish to shimmer through. The shallow recess of the plasterwork was fully covered with text in black nastalīq calligraphy on a beige background, arranged in registers by red dividing lines (fig. 10). The texts apparently included Arabic prayer formulas and also, interestingly enough, Persian prose. To judge from the word fragments that can be deciphered, the Persian text is probably an excerpt from a passage in Nasir Khusraw’s Safarnāma, in which he describes his visit to Basra on his return journey to Khurasan. He and his companions, “naked and destitute as madmen,” were not permitted into a hammam, but chased away by children throwing stones at them. Ashamed of his nakedness, Nasir then wrote a letter to the vizier, who had clothes made for the esteemed travelers and presented them with gifts. When Nasir returned to the bathhouse a few days later, the bath attendant was embarrassed and apologetic. This story, which was recounted “so that men may know not to lament adversity brought on by fate and not to despair of the Creator’s mercy,”50 is fittingly placed at the threshold to Nasir’s tomb.

It is difficult to determine when the plasterwork was renewed. Mughal motifs were popular for centuries in northern India and adjacent countries, from the reign of Shah Jahan in the mid-seventeenth century down to the eclectic architecture of the nineteenth century. The earliest dated graffiti on the later whitewash of the wall does, however, provide us with a terminus ante quem, i.e., the year 1828.

Supposing that it would take a few generations to see a need to renovate the finish of the walls (and to
whitewash them again later on), the plastering must have been done at some point in the latter half or near the end of the eighteenth century. The political constellations support this dating, since this was the time when the Afghan Durrani rulers, as self-styled heirs to the Great Mughals, consolidated their empire and fully expanded their power over the province of Badakhshan. The great construction works initiated in the imperial capitals of Kandahar and, subsequently, Kabul during the relatively stable reigns of Ahmad Shah (r. 1747–72), Timur Shah (1772–93), and Zaman Shah (1793–1800), such as the mausoleum of Ahmad Shah and the renovation of the Kabul Bala Hissar (citadel), attest to the Durrans’ preference for Mughal architectural decor. Coating the shrine of the Badakhshani patron saint with this “imperial” decorative language would then appear as a modest show of goodwill by the Durrani shahs, who perhaps intended with this renovation to herald their (rather nominal) suzerainty over the remote mountain province.

**REFLECTIONS ON THE MEDIEVAL SHRINE**

The architecture and development of the shrine prior to its renovation in 1697 are almost completely shrouded in obscurity. The only concrete evidence that can help to develop theories about the shrine’s medieval history and design is an inscription on the oblong wooden panel (ca. 90 by 26 centimeters) above the lintel of the entrance door to the tomb chamber (fig. 20). The panel’s bas-relief carvings are organized into three compartments. The text, in *thuluth* script, fills the two narrow lateral compartments facing outward on each side:
He renovated this gate of the holy grave of Khwaja Nasir, may his earth be light, the exalted Shah Khudadad in the year 769 (1367).

The tympanum panel and its inscription are extremely valuable. For the eastern fringes of the Persian Islamic world, this board is one of very few dated wood carvings to survive from medieval times; it is a fine example of the formative phase of Timurid wood decor during the late Chaghatay period.\textsuperscript{51}

The central compartment in between the text features a close-meshed reticulated pattern of angular interlacing strapwork, radiating from a ten-pointed star in the center.\textsuperscript{52} The enclosed polygons contain floral ornaments, full lotus blossoms presented in top and side view, and small-scale arabesques mainly of superimposed, lyre-shaped pairs of lancet leaves, all executed meticulously and with great technical capacity. The lush, intricately woven screen of the bas-relief foreshadows the dynastic taste for complexity and surface articulation that guided much of later Timurid artistic production across the fields of manuscript illumination, tilework, and wood and stone carving.

In the case of Nasir Khusraw’s shrine, the panel is also important because it establishes that in 1367 the door to the mazār was renovated under the auspices of a certain Shah Khudadad (meaning Gift of God, the name can also be read as Khudā’iddād or Khudāyī-dād). In the given context, this patron can be none other than the Chaghatay amir Khudadad (r. before 765 [1363]–before 850 [1446]), to whom Mirza Muhammad Haidar (1499 or 1500-1551) refers in the Tārīkh-i Rashidi.\textsuperscript{53} The high quality of the craftsmanship suggests that the panel was not produced locally, but instead manufactured in urban workshops, whose artisans were well versed in the fashions of contemporary eastern Iranian and Transoxanian court art.

Putting the pieces of the puzzle together, we can say that, interestingly enough, a Chaghatay overlord known for his piety sponsored the renovation of a shrine that commemorated an Isma’ili saint. Khudadad was no doubt a devoted Sunni, although the conversion to Islam among the heirs to Chingis Khan had occurred only recently and their belief at this time was to some degree still flexible. In fact, Sufism was a great factor in the Chingisids’ conversion to Islam, and perhaps the Isma’ili cult in Yumgan had by then already adopted the guise of Sufism. But Khudadad’s tolerance may also be explained by his difficult political standing. After the death of Tughlugh Timur in 1363, the Chaghatay Khanate basically collapsed; years of war and tumult followed before Timurlane eventually emerged as the omnipotent restorer of the “Mongol” Empire. In the turbulent decade of the 1360s, Khudadad must have still been an adolescent (in the 1440s, when he resigned after reigning for ninety years, he was allegedly 97 years old) and had only recently been established as the amir of East Turkestan, which included Kashgar, Yarkand, and Khotan.

Only a few decades earlier, Isma’ilism had expanded under the ruler Taj Mughal (d. 1325) from Badakhshan into the northern mountain regions of modern Pakistan,\textsuperscript{54} where the da’wa was at the same time invigorated by Pir Shams (d. 1356) operating from his base in the Punjab. Thus, the most plausible explanation for the support of the shrine in Yumgan in 1367 (disputing the general notion that Isma’ili faced discrimination in the Mongol and Timurid periods) is that, during his early emirate, the politically weak Khudadad needed to come to terms with the Isma’ili communities that were thriving at the southern and western fringes of his dominion.

The question remains as to what the renovation of the “gate” entailed—whether it was really limited, as the wording of the inscription suggests, to the wooden entrance door to the mazār, or actually involved a more comprehensive renewal of the shrine, which seems far more likely.\textsuperscript{55} How else could the need for such a refined inscription panel and the grandiose dedication text honoring Khudadad’s charitable donation be justified?

Popular tradition has preserved a legend that may provide us with a reasonable explanation for the restoration. According to this story, the shrine was destroyed by Chingis Khan’s marauding troops when they passed through the area in 1220–21. A governor of Badakh-
shan, the legend continues, later started to rebuild the ziyyārat in lapis lazuli, but again and again the walls that were erected during the day collapsed the following night. After several such days and nights, Nasir Khusr–
raw appeared to the governor in a dream and demanded that the new shrine be built simply, with mud bricks, as this would befit the modest way he had conducted himself during his life.56 It is a tempting thought that Khuda–
daid hides behind the governor of the story, which may then be linked to the restoration of 1367, undertaken more than a century after the possible destruction of the shrine by the Mongols.

According to my hypothetical reconstruction of the shrine as it was in 1367, the original position of the door with the inscription panel was presumably slightly further back, in line with the external wall of the tomb chamber, before the pillared hall was added and the wall doubled in 1697 to accommodate the turn in orientation. Even without the historic inscription and the fine carvings, in a sparsely wooded area, the material value of the timber alone would explain the reuse of the door. Without the two-pillared porches of the seventeenth-century renovation, the medieval ziyyārat consisted only of the tomb chamber and the adjacent prayer room. However, the existence of a covered veranda in front of the mazār, a smaller precursor of the pillared hall, is very likely, since elevated porticos are still today standard in the local vernacular architecture. Besides, such a canopy would have been needed to protect the wooden door and its delicate carvings from weathering. Judging from the geometry of the floor plan and the space available on the top of the boulder, this older canopy in front of the mazār was probably aligned with the eastern façade of the prayer room.

The general disposition of the interior of the burial chamber has presumably not been altered significantly in over six centuries. The separation of the tomb area from the space reserved for visitors most likely predates the renewal of the shrine in 1697. The wrought iron railing may also be older (fig. 8). Its bars are square in section, fixed at the joints with finely ribbed cylinders. The grille’s two prefabricated halves are plugged at mid-height into cubic bosses with chamfered corners. The grille is difficult to date, but the quality of the ironwork seems to point to an urban provenance, bringing it nearer to the inscribed tympanum panel than to the more “indigenous” architecture of the late seventeenth century—although we know that historically iron ore was mined and smelted not far from the shrine.57

The entrance door below the inscribed tympanum panel is proof that an ironsmith was present during the restoration of 1367. If the inscription is to be taken literally, the “renovation” of the gate to the shrine can only refer to the (rather poor) repair work on the top right of the right door leaf (fig. 21). Securing cracks in the wood with ferrules was also necessary at the bottom of the right door leaf and at the top of the left door leaf. Perhaps the door was then also fitted with the iron chains, buckles, and rings. None of these shows consideration for the carved designs on the door leaves. The
only original metal fittings seem to be the doornails with which the door panels are fixed onto crossbeams in the rear. Their relatively small heads, designed as eight-petalled blossoms, are well positioned within the layout of the door decoration.

Apart from the damage in the top corner of the right door leaf, which could have stemmed from an attempt to pry the door open, the same leaf also bears signs of fire damage near to where the original fittings for the fastening may have been situated. These signs of damage could be traces left by the Mongols when they looted and destroyed the shrine in the thirteenth century. The door would then be a remnant of the earlier ziyārat, which was probably the first architecturally refined structure built over the tomb of Nasir Khusraw.

A closer examination of the carved designs on the door panels and on the doorframe supports the theory that the door predates the restoration of 1367. The carvings on each of the two elongated door leaves show an outer frame, which consists of a continuous band of interlacing bas-relief foliate scrolls—a symmetric composition of four overlapping undulant stalks, which develop in pairs into interlacing leaves at the pattern’s central axis.

At the bottom and top of each door leaf, the same decorative pattern sets off within the frame two compartments of larger and more complicated arabesques. Their axis-symmetric composition features similar coiling stems that widen to form leaves. The main design motif, two counterposed lancet-shaped leaves ending in a knot-like bud, is repeated twice within each compartment. In the almond-shaped area in between the leaves, two smaller leaves intersect and then continue as outward curling stems, beneath the leaves of the foreground.

The space of the door leaf within the frame of arabesques is decorated with three roundels, vertically arranged along the central axis. The roundels feature a central blossom and a geometrical star pattern, from which vegetal patterns radiate linearly in the case of the identical designs of the bottom and top medallions, and circularly in the central medallion. The rest of the door surface is plain and undecorated. The inner doorframe is embellished with another running foliate scroll, an interlace of three sinuous lines of stalks and leaves, while the outer frame is decorated with a more complex axis-symmetric foliate pattern.

We are on admittedly uncertain ground if we try to date the door through comparative stylistic analysis. Unfortunately, relatively few examples of Ghaznavid, Ghurid, and contemporary Transoxanian woodwork have survived the welter of invasion and conquest marking the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Even if we broaden our search by looking at works in other material, particularly stone and stucco, the corpus of objects from the region is rather meager and the development of their ornamentation understudied.

The abstract, flat-carved, figure-ground designs of the foliate patterns, particularly the expressively swung lancet-shape of the addorsed leaves, have close, though not complete, analogies with decorative motifs on Ghaznavid stonework of the early twelfth century. Recently, a wooden fragment, presumably a leaf of a double door, was unearthed at Jam, the alleged site of the Ghurid capital, Firozkoh. It was plausibly ascribed to the late twelfth century. The designs of the sinuating stems and leaves on the inner doorframe of the door in Hazrat Sayyid and in the decorative framing on the door from Jam are nearly identical. The fragment from Jam also has a roundel set within the plain inner area of the rectangular ornamental frame, and two rectangular compartments at the top and bottom of the frame that are filled with foliate scrolls more densely knit than in the door in Hazrat Sayyid. The design of the roundel on the Jam door is not directly related to either of the two motifs of the roundels on the door in Hazrat Sayyid, but they all seem to be en route to abandoning the more clear-cut and bold character of interlacing foliate patterns that distinguishes works from the later Ghaznavid period, in favor of finer foliate designs, integrated in increasingly intricate patterns of extensive surface ornamentation.

The door to Nasir Khusraw’s mazār seems to have been made considerably earlier than the dated tympanum panel, very possibly even earlier than the period of the Mongol storms in the early thirteenth century. In the century following Nasir Khusraw’s death, Isma‘ilism maintained a strong following in the mountain areas of Badakhshan, while in more accessible regions and in urban centers Isma‘ilis suffered severe discrimination.
under Ghaznavid, Karakhanid, Seljuk, and later, Ghu-rid and Khwarezmian overlords—all declared defenders of Sunni orthodoxy. If the door to the mazār indeed dates from the latter half of the twelfth or the turn of the thirteenth century, it is surprising that the style of door carving clearly reflects urban traditions. Perhaps an Isma’ili city dweller commissioned the door—and possibly an extensive reconstruction of the original shrine. The work may even have been initiated at the behest of Alamut, which was in its heyday at the turn of the thirteenth century. Interestingly, this was also the time when the Isma’ilis of Badakhshan openly professed their allegiance to the Nizari da’wa.

CONCLUSION

This survey of Nasir Khusraw’s shrine has yielded a number of surprising results. Nasir Khusraw’s involuntary residence and missionary activities in Yumgan earned him great respect and lasting veneration among the local populace. He is connected with the spread of Isma’ilism in Badakhshan in the latter half of the eleventh century and, as a result of his works, he remains to this day the main spiritual guide of the local Isma’ili community.

The specifically Isma’ili character of saint veneration and cult practices at the shrine of Nasir Khusraw is, however, strongly blurred. The cult does not differ fundamentally from popular saint cults at other shrines and, interestingly, the Sunni population of Yumgan also visits the shrine and reveres Nasir Khusraw as a patron saint. This can be explained by the centuries-old Isma’ili practice of taqiyya, which evidently in this case took the form of a Sufi dervish brotherhood. Thus, the tariqat mausoleum of Nasir Khusraw can serve as concrete physical evidence of the close relations between Isma’ilis and Sufis in the post-Alamut period, which has so far been demonstrated by research almost exclusively on the basis of historical evidence, or by looking at the philosophical discourse between Sufi and Isma’ili writers.

From an architectural angle, the present ziyārat is a rather modest structure, which through a series of subsequent extensions adopted a heterogeneous, accretive aura. It has been possible to elucidate how the shrine was built under different auspices, from the original ziyārat of the eleventh century, which may have been Nasir Khusraw’s home, to traces of renewal in possibly the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, a comprehensive renovation in the late seventeenth century, and minor interventions and repair work in later times. The patrons and workmen must be sought in urban or court circles at one time and more in the vicinity of the shrine at another. The checkered history of the building perfectly reflects the problems that the cult of the Isma’ili philosopher encountered living within a pre-dominantly Sunni environment, where there has always been a political dimension to the veneration of Nasir Khusraw. The crossover of more refined urban-oriented styles and the “relapse” into vernacular traditions best express these vicissitudes.

Aiming at a comprehensive portrayal of the shrine, this study has obviously only been able to provide a cursory analysis of certain details and aspects of the structure. Many of the subjects that have been raised require more exhaustive research and debate. The saint culture of Isma’ilis in Badakhshan still remains an understudied field. The suras and invocations calligraphed on the ceiling of the mazār likewise deserve the attention of an expert, as they promise to yield further insights into the intellectual rapprochement between Isma’ili and Sufi mysticism.

From the standpoint of architecture and art historians, the architecture of the seventeenth-century shrine and its ornamentation still wait to be placed in more detail in the broader context of the wooden architecture of the Hindukush and the Pamirs, building upon Dani’s rather unsystematic 1989 study, Islamic Architecture: The Wooden Style of Northern Pakistan. The dated tympanum panel, which documents the craftsmanship of the late Chaghatay / formative Timurid period, and the possibly twelfth-century double door—arguably the greatest treasures hidden in the shrine of Nasir Khusraw—will hopefully also stimulate a wider debate.

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2. Ibid., 249.


5. Louis Dumpe, Saint Cults in Afghanistan, American Universities Field Staff Reports, South Asia Series 20, 1 (Hanover, N.H., 1976). The article is based on a journey that the author undertook in October 1975.

6. In his diary-style travelogue, Wood reported that in late 1837 the ziyārat was crowned by a white dome that was “visible a considerable distance down the valley”; see Wood, Personal Narrative, 261. A look at the architecture of the shrine today reveals that only the small mosque would possess the geometry apt for such a domed structure. But if the prayer room was indeed domed at the time when Wood passed by, it still remains difficult to explain how this dome could have possibly been seen from as far away as was claimed by the author. From the south, the higher roofline of the burial chamber and the pillared hall would certainly have reduced the effect of a domed mosque, and from the north, a clear view of the cupola would have been practically impossible.

7. The buried persons could just as well be any other prominent follower or early religious authority. For a ziyārat in Kishm that is also venerated as the burial place of Nasir Khusraw’s closest companions, see Dumpe, Saint Cults, 11–12.

8. The first scholarly biography of Nasir Khusraw was written by Edward G. Browne, “Nasir-i-Khusraw: Poet, Traveller, and Propagandist,” Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (April 1905): 313–52. For an overview of later biographies, see Alice C. Hunsberger, “Nasir Khusraw: Fatimid Intellectual,” in Intellectual Traditions in Islam, ed. Farhad Daftary (London and New York, 2000), 127 n. 3. The most recent publication on Nasir Khusraw’s life is Hunsberger’s Nasir Khusraw: The Ruby of Badakhshan, in which the author mixed passages from Nasir Khusraw’s principal works with his biography. Faquir M. Hunzai is currently preparing a translation of Nasir Khusraw’s Wa/j-h-i din ar at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. In the introduction, which I am grateful he shared with me, he outlines Nasir Khusraw’s vita and works.


tion Series 4 (Bombay and London, 1935), xi n. 3. Nasir Khusraw’s date of birth is discussed in Hunsberger, Nasir Khusraw, the Ruby of Badakhshan, 255–56. See also Wood, Personal Narrative, 260.

10. Wheeler M. Thackston Jr., Nāṣer-e Khusraw’s Book of Travels (Safarnāma), Persian Heritage Series 36 (Albany, N.Y., 1986), 1. Nasir Khusraw’s “dream” was probably only the culmination of the process that triggered his zealous quest for knowledge and eventually made him embrace Isma’ilism. His “dream” and his conversion to Isma’ilism are discussed in Corbin, “Nāṣir-i Khusraw and Iranian Ismā’īlism,” 533–34.

11. For an English translation of the travelogue, see Thackston, Book of Travels.


13. From the Divān (208:1–2); translated in Hunsberger, Nasir Khusraw, the Ruby of Badakhshan, 228.


15. Nanji argues that Nasir Khusraw must have died between 465 (1072) and 471 (1078): see Nanji, “Nāṣir-i Khusraw,” 1006. Ivanow points out that Nasir Khusraw was still alive in 1070, the year in which he composed his Jāmi’ al-hikmatayn for the Amir of Badakhshan: see Ivanow, Problems, 47. The dubious date 481 (1088) was suggested by the seventeenth-century Ottoman historian Katip Çelebi.

16. These legends were recorded by Dumpe in 1975: see Dumpe, Saint Cults, 13–14. Some of them were recounted by the locals during my visit.


18. A hole at the base of the wall behind Nasir Khusraw’s tomb is revered as the entrance to the tunnel through which Nasir’s soul is said to have left the material world after the burial. It is marked with a stone on which pieces of cloth and an iron “hand of Fatima” are attached, and the iron grille that screens off the pilgrims from the tomb has a miniature gate opening to the crack in the floor.

19. For a similar tradition on a miraculous rock interment in northern Pakistan, see Frembgen, “Sayyid Shiwal Wali,” 83–84.

20. Farhad Daftary, A Short History of the Isma’ilis: Traditions of a Muslim Community (Edinburgh, 1998), 165. A strong Isma’ili community still lives in the districts of Shugnan and Darwaz on the Upper Oxus, where after the Alamut period the Isma’ili da’wa was first reinvigorated. A local tradition claims that although Nasir died and was buried in Yumgan, his remains are in Darwaz. He is said to have walked there through a tunnel after his resurrection: see Dumpe, Saint Cults, 13.

21. The rapprochement between Isma’ili and Sufism in the post-Alamut period has been studied by Nasrollah Pour-javady and Peter L. Wilson, “Ismā’īlīs and Ni’matullahīs,”


24. Daftary, Short History, 168; Hunsberger, Nasir Khusraw, the Ruby of Badakhshan, 223.

25. On the Sufi background of the titles and their use among Isma‘ili, see Ivanow, Kalami Pir, xi nn. 1–2.

26. A comprehensive bibliography of Nasir Khusraw’s published works is listed in Hunsberger, Nasir Khusraw, the Ruby of Badakhshan, 273–74. For works still only in manuscript form, see Ismail K. Poonawala, Biobibliography of Isma‘ili Literature, (Malibu, 1977), 123.

27. Ivanow, Kalami Pir, xi–xv.

28. Ivanow, Problems, 43.

29. Jo-Ann Gross is professor of Middle Eastern and Central Eurasian Studies at the College of New Jersey. She has written an article on “Foundational Legends, Shrines, and Isma‘ili Identity in Tajik Badakhshan,” which is to be published in the forthcoming volume Muslims and Others in Sacred Space, edited by Margaret Cormack. This work will be expanded significantly in a book chapter on Badakhshan in a forthcoming volume entitled Mapping the Sacred Landscape: Muslim Shrines in Tajikistan.


31. Dupree, Saint Cults, 16.

32. Ibid., 19.

33. Ibid., 21.

34. Faizabad and Jurm are mentioned most often as the place of residence. According to the signatures, visitors also come from Takhar, Kohistan, and Tajikistan.


36. For a case where a pilgrim was relieved at the shrine of the “evil spirits” that had plagued him, see Dupree, Saint Cults, 16–17.


39. The quoted verse from Sura 62, _al-jumu‘a_ (The Congregation), counsels a life of abstinence and austereness as a path to God: “But when they see merchandise or diversion, they scatter off to it, and they leave thee standing. Say: ‘What is with God is better than diversion and merchandise. God is the best of providers’” (Qur’an 62:11).


41. Ibid., 221.


43. Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions, 245–46. The term _javânmârd_, the Persian equivalent of _fata‘_, is often used in the hagiographies of Sufis.


46. Frembgen, “Traditional Art and Architecture in Hunza,” 137, fig. 103; Kalter, Arts and Crafts, 148, fig. 212.

48. Only in the burial chamber is the ornate plasterwork comparatively well preserved, but even there the plaster has lost its cohesion with the wall near the ceiling and is about to fall off. The most endangered sections are at the moment secured with temporary supports.

49. The date of this repair work can only be conjectured. In 1893, Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman (r. 1880–1901), who unified Afghanistan in a centralized state, also subjugated Badakhshan. While Isma’ilīs were widely harassed under the new overlordship, forcing many to emigrate, the limited repair work at the shrine may have been a deliberate show of power by the Kabul government or the appointed governor.


53. Haydar Mīrzā, A History of the Mughuls of Central Asia: Being the Tarikh-i-Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Haidar, Dughlāt, ed. N. Elias (London, 1972). Chapter 7 contains biographical information on Amir Khudaidad, who is said to have been very religious. Khudaidad was also highly impoverished, which is an interesting side note if he indeed patronized the reconstruction of the shrine.


55. Ivanow pointed out that bāb was also an honorary title applied to the chief lujjat of the Fatimid da’wa and occasionally also to the Imam: see Ivanow, Kalami Pir, xiv.


57. Wood, Personal Narrative, 259.


59. Two works that have pointed the way forwards are Lazar I. Rempel, Arkhitekturnyi ornament Uzbekistana: Istoriia razvitiia i teoriiia postroeniia (Tashkent, 1961), 115–255; and Rogers, “The 11th Century.”

60. See the outer band of the mihrab fragment published in Johannes Kalter, Abteilungsführer islamischer Orient (Stuttgart, 1987), 36, fig. 28. For the decor on the wooden mihrab in Charkh-i Logar, see Melikian-Chirvani, “Un chef-d’œuvre,” 79. For the foliate scroll on marble friezes in the David Collection, see Kjeld von Folsach, Art from the World of Islam in the David Collection (Copenhagen, 2001), 246–47, figs. 394–95; for foliate scrolls on similar friezes, see Bombaci, “Summary Report,” figs. 3, 5, and 7. More complex patterns employing the motif of the addorsed leaves can be seen on fragments published in Umberto Scerrato, “The First Two Excavation Campaigns at Ghazni, 1957–1958,” East and West 10, 1–2 (1959): 23–55, fig. 31; and in Kalter, Abteilungsführer, 62, fig. 53. In Ghaznavid stonework, the lancet-shaped leaves sometimes transform into figurative representations similar to pre-Islamic Persian motifs, such as the wings of griffins, winged lions, and humans: see Bombaci, “Summary Report,” 13–14, figs. 11–12.


62. See, for example, medallions from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries discussed in Rempel, Arkhitekturnyi ornament Uzbekistana, 163, fig. 70; 236, fig. 113. The motif of addorsed lancet-shaped leaves survives in filigree form, e.g., in the façade ornamentation of mausoleum “1360” in the Shah-i Zinda complex in Samarkand: see Rempel, Arkhitekturnyi ornament Uzbekistana, 271, fig. 127. One can find similar motifs in the Mediterranean also, e.g., on a doorframe in the qibla īwān of the Sultan al-Nasir Hasan funerary complex (1356–63) in Cairo, which was built around the same time that the tympanum panel (and probably the outer doorframe) was made.

63. However, the slightly distorted door mullion with its triangulate patterns was no doubt produced locally and must have been added at a later point.

64. See n. 44 above.