

A Brief Note on the Life of Nasir-i Khusrau

By

Iraj Bashiri



Nasir-i Khusrau

Copyright, Iraj Bashiri 2004

Hakim Abu Mo'in al-Din, Nasir-i Khusrau al-Qubadiani al-Balkhi al-Marvazi, also referred to as *al-Hujjat* (Proof), was born in July 1003-4 in Qubadian of Balkh. He died in Yumgan, a principality of Badakhshan in 1088. Nasir-i Khusrau grew up in Qubadian in a relatively wealthy scholarly Shi'ite family. His father was a landowner and a government employee. Nasir-i Khusrau received his early education in Qubadian and went on to Balkh and Merv for further study. His education consisted of the Arabic language, especially Arabic syntax, and the study of the *Qur'an*. He could recite the *Qur'an* from memory. He was also fond of Arabic and Persian literatures, as well as Greek philosophy. Additionally, he studied algebra, geometry, poetics, astronomy, medicine, jurisprudence, theology, and music. In religion, in addition to Islamic theology, he studied Manicheism and Hinduism. His poetry reflects the depth of his knowledge of these fields

As a youth, Nasir-i Khusrau spent a considerable amount of his time in Balkh, especially at the winter quarters of the Ghaznavid sultans, Mahmud (d. 1030) and later his son Mas'ud (d. 1041). According to his own *Safarnameh* (book of travels), in his early forties, he was a secretary and tax collector for the Ghaznavids and the Seljuqs of Khurasan. He also served both courts as a poet and participated in the celebrations at court. His job as tax collector familiarized Nasir-i Khusrau with the tyranny of the Seljuqs and prompted him to seek a solution to not only his own problems but also those of the poor peasants of the region.

In 1045, while he was living in Juzjan, Nasir-i Khusrau had a dream which caused him to resign his position and, accompanied by his younger brother, Abu Sa'id, and a Hindu slave, he set off for the Hijaz in search of Truth. He intended to observe life in far-off places, assess other peoples' beliefs, and choose a creed for himself. His travels (1045-1052), which lasted nearly seven years, took him to Afghanistan, Sughdia, Iran (Nishapour, Semnan, Ray, Qazwin), Azerbaijan, Armenia, Anatolia, Aleppo, Syria, Palestine, Arabia, and Jerusalem. From Jerusalem he went to Egypt where he stayed for three years (1047-1050). At the end of his travels, he returned to Balkh with a mandate from the Imam of the Isma'ilites to attract the Muslims of Khurasan to the Isma'ili creed.

The events that led to Nasir-i Khusrau's life-long commitment to Isma'ilism are the following. Cairo impressed Nasir-i Khusrau tremendously, especially the administration of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir Billah. There he was exposed to Isma'ili thought and joined the order being promoted by the Fatimid rulers of Egypt. The Fatimids claimed to direct descent from the Prophet of Islam through the line of al-Hussein, the son of Ali and Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet. Once he was distinguished as an accomplished scholar in both Persian and Arabic literature as well as Greek thought, he was promoted to the rank of *da'i*. When the time came for him to leave Egypt (1053), he was promoted once again, this time to the rank of Hujjat. The territories that the Fatimids controlled or planned to bring into their control were divided into twelve *jazirahs* or islands. Khurasan was one of those "islands." The Fatimid Imam Abu Tamim Ma'd ibn Ali al-Mustansir bi-Allah appointed Nasir-i Khusrau the Hujjat for Khurasan. He was to propagate the Isma'ili doctrine among the Muslims of his homeland. Nasir-i Khusrau was fifty years old at the time.

Nasir-i Khusrau did not hide either his rank as a Hujjat, his closeness to the Fatimid Caliph, or indeed, his intention of propagating the Isma'ili *da'wa*. Rather he entered into enthusiastic debates with not only the scholars in Khurasan but also with Seljuq officials and nobles, some of them ardent supporters of the Sunni faith. Predictably, Nasir-i Khusrau's activities created heated debates, arguments and conflict in the Islamic world in general and in the Seljuq realm in particular. Nasir-i Khusrau's open criticism of the amirs and wazirs of the Seljuqs, on the one hand, and his open call to all to join the Isma'ili faith, on the other hand, infuriated the Caliph in Baghdad. It also incensed the Sunni faithful, the *ulema*, and the government. In fact, the *ulema* issued a *fatwa* for his death.

All these oppositions together made residence in Khurasan untenable, if not outright very dangerous, for Nasir-i Khusrau. Unable to protect himself against all

eventualities, he fled to Mazandaran and Tabaristan. He hoped that the Shi'ite Ispahbads would support and hide him. But the officials of the Seljuq court sought him out; he was forced to flee again and again. Nearly a decade after his return to Balkh, he fled to Yumgan, a far-off valley in the Badakhshan highlands. The governor of Yumgan, Ali ibn Asad, welcomed Nasir-i Khusrau and accepted the Isma'ili faith. The bond of friendship that developed between the two lasted for the rest of their lives.

Nasir-i Khusrau spent the last twenty-five years of his life in Yumgan, free from both the tyranny of the Seljuq rulers and the interference of the Sunni *ulema* in his affairs. From Yumgan, he dispatched epistles far and wide, creating a network of Isma'ili communities throughout the region. He also wrote. In fact, most of his major works, especially those related to the Isma'ili *da'wa*, were written during this time. Many of them testify to the harsh circumstances under which he had to live. Rather than a bitter or broken man, however, his writings reflect the attitude of a stoic upholder of his faith.

Nasir-i Khusrau was an Isma'ili in word and deed. After returning from Egypt, he gave up all his worldly possessions and lived like a monk. He did not drink alcoholic beverages and spent most of his time in study and prayer. He followed the *shari'a* so closely that often he avoided consuming what is permitted, lest there be some question regarding his choice.

His religious tendencies aside, Nasir-i Khusrau was one of the most famous poets, philosophers, and travelers of his time. Even those who did not like his adherence to the Isma'ili sect, respected his erudition and piety. He was also quite aware of his own strength of character and the lofty status that he held among his peers.

Nasir-i Khusrau was a disciplined individual. When he accepted to lead the Isma'ili faction in Khurasan, he accepted the difficulties that the task entailed. He was also a moralist and wrote on philosophical and didactic themes.

Nasir-i Khusrau's works include both poetry and prose. His style is simple and direct. His *Safarnameh*, a record of his observations in Mecca and Egypt, is at once aesthetically pleasing and overwhelmingly informative. He was the first poet to renounce the composition of panegyrics. His *qasidas* express moralistic and mystical thoughts.

Nasir-i Khusrau: a short bibliography

Safarnameh (book of travels): a compilation in simple prose detailing the travels of the poet.

Zad al-Musaferin (Pilgrims's Provision): written in 1062 deals with the scholar's philosophical and theological investigations.

Vajhi Din (Path of Faith): contains Nasir-i Khusrau's Isma'ili thoughts.

Gushaish va Rahaish (Unfettered and Free): contains the scholar's philosophical thoughts.

Jami' al-Hikmatain (Compendium of Two Truths): compares Isma'ili doctrine with Greek thought. In the process, it reconciles reason and revelation, explores man's nature, and distinguishes the inner drives that give vent to benevolence and evil.

Nasir-i Khusrau's other contributions include the prose work *Khan ul-Ikhvan* and two *divans*. His Arabic *divan*, which is lost and his Persian *divan*, which contains the *Roshanai Nameh* (Book of Light), a moralizing sequence in rhyming couplets) and the *Sa'adatnameh* (Book of Felicity), which has been reproduced a number of times.

Reproach Not the Firmament!

By Nasir-i Khusrau

Translated by Iraj Bashiri
Copyright, Iraj Bashiri, 2004

[Click here](#) to see the Farsi text of this poem. You must have Acrobat Reader on your computer to read the file. If you don't have Acrobat Reader, you can download a free copy by clicking on the icon



Reproach not the Firmament deep and blue,
Forget thy stubborn nature to reveal a clue.

Neither expect from the Firmament any joy,
When your own star you knowingly destroy.

Fruitless trees are, at best, fuel for fire,
Fruitless men, alike, to oblivion retire.

Forget about fragrant tresses and lips sweet,
About hedges, and tulip cheeks to greet.

Lavish not praise on a filthy creature,
With dastardly deeds as its only feature.

Adore not with verse the Lie or the Greed,
Smite down the infidels' most cherished creed.

Be not Unsuri, who groveling worshiped Mahmud,
Lavished on him all flattery and paeon he could.

I pledge never to sprinkle before the swine,
These precious, peerless Dari pearls of mine.