



## The Institute of Ismaili Studies

### Dawr

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Dawr (Ar. and Pers.), period, era, or cycle of history, a term used by Isma'ilis in connection with their conceptions of time and the religious history of mankind. The early Isma'ilis conceived of time (*zaman*) as a progression of cycles or eras, *dawrs* (Ar. pl. *adwar*), with a beginning and an end. On the basis of their eclectic temporal vision, which reflected Greek, Judeo-Christian, and Gnostic influences, as well as the eschatological ideas of earlier Shi'i, they worked out a view of history, or rather hierohistory, in terms of the eras (*dawrs*) of different prophets recognised in the Holy Qur'an. This prophetic interpretation of history was, moreover, combined with the Isma'ili doctrine of the Imamate.

The Isma'ilis thus believed from early on that the hierohistory of mankind comprised seven prophetic eras (*dawrs*) of various durations, each inaugurated by the speaker-prophet or enunciator (*natiq*) of a revealed message that in its exoteric (*zahir*) aspect contained a religious law, or *shari'a*. The *natiqs* of the first six eras were the Prophets Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, respectively. Each was succeeded by a legatee (*wasi*), also called "foundation" (*asas*) or "silent one" (*samit*), who revealed to the elite the inner (*batin*) meanings of the message for his *dawr*. These inner meanings represented the unchangeable truths (*haqa'iq*) of Isma'ili gnosis. Each *wasi* was, in turn, succeeded by seven Imams, who guarded the true meaning of the message in both *zahir* and *batin* aspects. The seventh Imam of each *dawr* became the *natiq* of the following *dawr*, promulgating a new *shari'a* (*Firaq al-shi'a*, pp. 61-63; Qomi, pp. 83-85; Stern, pp. 49-55; Madelung, pp. 48 ff.; Daftary, pp. 104-05, 136-40). This pattern would change only in the seventh and final *dawr* of hierohistory.

In the sixth *dawr*, the era of Prophet Muhammad and Islam, the seventh Imam was Muhammad b. Esma'il b. Ja'far al-Sadiq, who had gone into hiding due to the prevailing circumstances. On his reappearance as the *qa'im* (restorer of justice on earth and true Islam), or *mahdi*, he would become the seventh *natiq*, ruling over the final, eschatological *dawr*. Imam Muhammad b. Esma'il's message would not entail a new law, however, but would consist of the full revelation of the esoteric truths (*haqa'iq*) concealed in all the previous messages, the immutable truths of all religions, which had previously been accessible only to the elite of mankind. In this final, messianic age there would be no need for exoteric religious laws. Imam Muhammad b. Esma'il, the last of the *natiqs* and Imams, would rule in justice as the eschatological *qa'im* and would then bring to an end the physical world. His *dawr* would thus mark the end of time and human history (Ebn Hawshab, pp. 189, 191-92, 197 ff.; Ja'far b. Mansur al-Yaman, 1952, pp. 14 ff., 50, 97, 104, 109, 113-14, 132-33, 138, 150, 170; Abu Ya'qub, 1966, pp. 181-93 and 1980, pp. 47-56; Corbin, pp. 30 ff.; Halm, pp. 18-37; Walker, pp. 355-66).

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The whole cycle from Adam to the advent of the *qa'im* as the seventh *natiq* was also called the “era of concealment” (*dawr al-satr*), because the truths were concealed in the laws. By contrast, the seventh *dawr*, when the truths would be fully revealed to mankind, was designated the “era of revelation, or manifestation” (*dawr al-kashf*), an era of pure spiritual knowledge with no need for exoteric religious laws. The Isma‘ilis also used the expression *dawr al-satr* in reference to a period when the Imams were hidden (*mastur*) from the eyes of their followers, in contradistinction to *dawr al-kashf*, when the Imams were manifest and accessible. This Isma‘ili view of history was evidently first committed to writing in Persia and Transoxania by prominent early *da'is* (missionaries) and authors there, notably Muhammad b. Ahmad Nasafi (d. 332 AH/943-44 CE), whose major treatise *Kitab al-mahsul* has not survived, and Abu Hatim Razi (d. 322 AH/934 CE), whose ideas on the subject were primarily expounded in his *Kitab al-islah*, which is still unpublished. Both these early Isma‘ili theologians envisaged hierohistory in terms of the scheme of seven prophetic eras, though they disagreed on some details. In fact, they became the protagonists in a scholarly debate over religious obligations and certain metaphysical issues, later joined by Nasafi’s disciple Abu Ya‘qub al-Sijistani. Subsequently the *da'i* Hamid al-Din Kirmani acted as arbiter in this controversy (Kermani, pp. 176-212). Nasafi and Abu Hatim devoted much energy and imagination to accommodating other religions, notably those of the Zoroastrians and the Sabaeans, within their scheme of seven prophetic eras, assigning these religions to specific *dawrs* and *natiqs*. Abu Hatim also introduced the concept of an interim period (*dawr al-fatra*), marked by the absence of Imams and occurring at the end of each prophetic *dawr*, between the passing of the seventh Imam of that era and the advent of the *natiq* of the following era. According to him, the Zoroastrians belonged to the fourth era, the *dawr* of Moses, and Zoroaster himself had appeared during the interim period at the end of that *dawr* (pp. 52 ff., 59, 69 ff., 160 ff., 171-77; Abu Ya‘qub, 1966, pp. 82-83; Corbin, pp. 187-93; Madelung, pp. 101-14; Stern, pp. 30-46; Daftary, pp. 234-39).

The cyclical prophetic view of hierohistory elaborated by the early Isma‘ilis was retained by the Fatimid Isma‘ilis, who refined or modified certain aspects of it, especially in connection with the duration of the sixth *dawr*, the era of Islam; the number of Imams during that era; and the *qa'im* and his functions (see, e.g., Ja‘far b. Mansur al-Yaman, 1984, pp. 21 ff., 57 ff., 67 ff., 101, 105, 109, 112, 164 ff., 201 ff., 217, 219, 229 ff.; al-Qadi al-Nu‘man, pp. 40-368; Daftary, pp. 176-79, 218-20, 234). Some authors of the Fatimid period introduced new concepts into the cyclical scheme. The Persian Nasir Khusraw (394-ca. 471 AH/1004-ca. 1078 CE), for instance, distinguished between a grand cycle (*dawr-e mehin*), encompassing the entire sequence of the seven *natiqs*, and a small cycle (*dawr-e kehin*), coinciding with the latter part of the grand cycle and including the era of Islam and thereafter (pp. 62-64, 126-27, 157, 169-70, 245, 256, 331).

Later Isma‘ilis introduced further innovations into the earlier interpretation of hierohistory expressed in terms of the seven prophetic *dawrs*. On the basis of astronomical calculations, the Yamani Tayyebis conceived of a grand eon (*kawr a‘zam*) comprised of countless cycles, each divided into seven *dawrs*, which would be consummated in the *qa'im* of the “great resurrection” (*qiyamat al-qiyama*). Furthermore, the grand eon was held to progress through successive cycles of concealment (*satr*) and revelation (*kashf* or *zuhur*), each composed of seven *dawrs* (see e.g. Hamed, pp. 149 ff., 205-27, 232 ff., 258-72; Walid, pp. 100 ff., 121-28; Corbin, pp. 37-58; Daftary, pp. 140-41, 291 ff., 295).

The Nizari Isma‘ilis of the Alamut period (487-654 AH/1094-1256 CE) in Persia followed a religious and political path of their own and, unlike the Tayyebi Isma‘ilis, were not particularly concerned with the earlier cyclical view of history, though they generally adhered to the scheme of seven prophetic eras. However, in connection with elaborating their own doctrines, they allowed for transitory eras of resurrection (*qiyama*) during the *dawr* of the Prophet Muhammad, who, like the five enunciating prophets before him, had initiated an era of concealment (*dawr al-satr*). In the era of Islam, and in special honour of Prophet Muhammad’s greatness, there could be occasional anticipatory eras of

resurrection, each offering a foretaste of the *qiyama* that was to occur at the end of Prophet Muhammad's era, ushering in the seventh and final millennium in the religious history of mankind. The condition of *qiyama* could in principle be granted at any time, to mankind as a whole or to the elite, by the current Nizari Imam, for every Imam was potentially also a *qa'im*. As a result, in the era of Prophet Muhammad, human life could alternate, at the will of the Imam, between *dawrs* of *qiyama* and *satr*, the normal condition of human life. The Nizaris, however, interpreted the *qiyama* symbolically and spiritually as the manifestation of the unveiled truth in the person of the Nizari Imam, whereas *satr* meant concealment of the true spiritual reality of the Imam, when truth was again hidden in the *batin* of the laws, requiring the strictest observance of the *shari'a* and *taqiyya*, or precautionary dissimulation (Tusi, pp. 61-63, 83-84, 101-02, 110, 117-19, 128-49; Corbin, pp. 117 ff.; Hodgson, pp. 148 ff., 225-38; Daftary, pp. 386 ff., 404 ff., 410-11).

The cyclical view of time reflected the ethos and intellectual debates in the mediaeval period of Muslim history and, from the Alamut period, started to lose currency amongst the Ismailis and, more broadly, in Muslim thought. Very few and isolated references are found in Ismaili writings to these ideas from the 15th century (CE) onwards. In contemporary times, these notions do not find expression in Ismaili thought.

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