



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Introduction

Whether overtly or covertly, the Ismailis have played an important role in the cultural history of Islam, particularly in Syria and Egypt, where they constituted the Fatimid caliphate, which was to last for around 200 years. After the fall of the Fatimids in 1171 CE and during the subsequent diaspora, they became famous for their strongholds in Iran and Syria, from where they intervened in the various conflicts between Christian powers and the Muslim kingdoms in the Holy Land.

In religious terms, the Ismaili community is part of the larger diversity of the worldwide Muslim *umma*. Over the passage of time, Muslims constituted a variety of groups, which exemplified diverse ways of understanding the primal message of Islam and different approaches to how that commonly held message could be reflected in the practical life and organisation of the community. The Ismailis are one such group. They are part of the Shi'a branch of Islam, the Sunni being the other major branch, and have always constituted a minority, historically and in the contemporary world. At present, the Ismailis live in over twenty-five countries, in virtually every region of the world. In some of these regions, their history goes back over a thousand years. Syria is one such example where the Ismaili presence can be dated to the 9th century.

Among the Shi'a, there were those who remained faithful to the line of Imams who descended from Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765 CE) through his son, Imam Ismail. Hence, they came to be known as Isma'ilis. There were other Shi'i groups who gave their allegiance to different lines of Imams. The largest group among such other Shi'is are called Ithna'ashari; they believe in a line of twelve Imams, ending in the Mahdi who remains in occultation (*ghayba*) and would reappear to grant salvation at the end of time.

A Wide-Spread Network with Shifting Power Bases

The difficult and divisive political climate of the time caused the early Ismaili Imams, fearing persecution, to maintain anonymity. According to Ismaili historical sources, they lived during this time in Salamiyya in central Syria. It was from Salamiyya that the Imams secretly guided the activities of their followers from North Africa to Khurasan and Central Asia. During this early period, dating to the middle of the 9th century, the community came to be organised through the institution known as the *da'wa*. Although the term was not confined to the Ismailis, their skilful organisation and effective communications gave it a very unique character at the time. The individuals representing the *da'wa* were known to lead exemplary

The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies' Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.

Farhad Daftary and Aïm Nanji



The first Nizari leader in Syria, mentioned by the Damascene historian Ibn al-Qalanisi and later sources, was known as al-Hakim al-Munajjim, the physician astrologer. Probably accompanied by a number of supporters from Alamut, he appeared in Aleppo, and, by the very beginning of the 12th century CE, managed to find a protector in the city's Saljuq ruler, Ridwan. Aleppo, in northern Syria, proved to be a hospitable environment. It had an important Shi'i population and an existing link with Ismailis. They were thus able, under the protection of the ruler, to establish themselves in Aleppo from where they could build linkages with other Ismaili communities.

In due course, the Ismailis tried to extend their influence, with the support of the ruler of Aleppo, to adjoining areas and soon came in conflict with the invading Crusaders who had designs of their own for acquiring certain fortifications in the region. In the ensuing conflict,





unreliable account of the Venetian traveller Marco Polo, which became accepted by many as fact until disproved by modern scholarship.

Marco Polo recounts during his journey to the court of the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan in the years 1271-1290 CE that while passing through northeast Iran, he heard from local people about the 'Old Man of the Mountain' and his fanatical band of devotees who lived in a remote valley hidden in the mountains. The 'Old Man' was said to have built a garden in which there was a palace where young men were seduced by drugs and wine into believing that they were in Paradise as a reward for their acts of assassination.

The fictional nature of Marco Polo's account was long suspected by scholars, and its absurdities have been exposed more recently



Externally, Sinan aimed to protect the Ismailis from various potential threats and to balance the various interests in the region. Clearly the Ayyubids under Salah al-Din represented a stronger threat than the Crusaders at this time. Recognising existent realities, Sinan adopted suitable policies in his dealings with the outside world; policies which were revised when needed to reassure the safety and independence of his community. As a result, from early on, Sinan established peaceful relations with the Crusaders, who had been sporadically fighting the Nizaris for several decades over the possession of various strongholds.

Meanwhile, the Nizaris had acquired a new Frankish enemy in the Hospitallers, who in 1142 CE had received from the lord of Tripoli the celebrated fortress of Crac des Chevaliers (Hisn al-Akrad) at the southern end of the Jabal Bahra. The Nizaris continued to have minor entanglements with the Hospitaller and Templar military orders, which owed their allegiance directly to the Pope and often acted independently. Subsequently, around 1173 CE, Sinan sent an embassy to King Amalric I, seeking a formal rapprochement with the kingdom of Jerusalem. The negotiations were evidently proceeding successfully. But the Templars disapproved of this Nizari embassy, and on their return journey Sinan's emissaries were ambushed and killed by a Templar knight. Amalric took punitive measures against the Templars, but as he himself died soon afterwards in 1174 CE, the negotiations between Sinan, known to the Crusaders as the 'Old Man of the Mountain', and the Franks of Jerusalem proved fruitless.

When Sinan assumed power, Nur al-Din, the Zengid ruler of Syria, was preoccupied with his policies against the Crusaders and the later Fatimid caliphs who were recognised as Imams only by the Musta'li Ismailis. Nevertheless, relations between Sinan and Nur al-Din remained



exercise a certain degree of local initiative in dealings with their Muslim and Frankish neighbours. The Syrian Ismailis had, on the whole, maintained peaceful relations with Salah



Louis did not lead to any results. St Louis, himself more interested in establishing friendly relations with the Mongols, did not pay any tribute to them. But the French king and the Syrian Ismaili leadership exchanged gifts. It was in the course of these embassies that the Arabic-speaking friar Yves le Breton met with Ismaili scholars and discussed religious doctrines in Masyaf.

The Mongol onslaught on the Muslim world and in particular on the Ismaili state in Iran must have disheartened the Syrian community, who could no longer count on the support and leadership of Alamut and the personal guidance of the Nizari Imam after the destruction of Alamut in 1256 CE. Considerably weakened, the Syrian Ismailis eventually submitted to al-Malik al-Zahir Rukn al-Din Baybars I (1260-1277 CE), the Bahri Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, who soon extended his hegemony over Syria and its different principalities.

Meanwhile, having destroyed the Ismaili state of Iran, Hulagu, the Mongol conqueror had proceeded towards his second major objective, the extinction of the Abbasid caliphate. By February 1258 CE, the Mongols seized Baghdad and devastated the ancient capital of the Abbasids for a whole week. The Caliph al-Mustasim, who had endeavoured in vain to prevent the Mongol cataclysm, was put to death on Hulagu's orders. Hulagu's third campaign was directed against the Ayyubid states in Syria. In 1260 CE, the Mongols seized Aleppo, and soon afterwards Hama and Damascus surrendered to the Mongols. In March 1260 CE, Ket-Buqa, who had been in charge of the advance operations of the Mongols in Syria, made his triumphal entry into Damascus. It was during the same year, 1260 CE, that four of the Nizari fortresses, including Masyaf, were surrendered to the Mongols by their governors. The Mongol success in Syria was, however, short-lived. Hulagu returned to Iran in the summer upon hearing the news of the Great Khan Mongke's death, which in fact had occurred a year earlier in 1259 CE, leaving Ket-Buqa in command of his reduced forces in Syria. In 1260 CE, the Mongols suffered a drastic defeat at Ayn Jalut, in Palestine, at the hands of the Mamluk



Increasingly, Baybars compelled the Ismailis to adhere to a practice of paying them tributes and ensuring that they acknowledged the suzerainty of the Mamluk state. Around 1270 CE, Baybars demanded possession of Masyaf, which was to be entrusted to one of his own amirs, Izz al-Din al-Adimi. Sarim al-Din, who was to hold the Nizari castles as the deputy of Baybars, proceeded to take charge of them. But Sarim al-Din, too, angered the sultan by attempting through trickery to take possession of Masyaf, in violation of the sultan's instructions. Once inside, he put to death a large number of the residents of Masyaf, who, abiding by the sultan's orders, had refused to yield the castle to him. On Baybars' request, al-Malik al-Mansur, the ruler of Hama, dislodged the rebellious Sarim al-Din from Masyaf and sent him as a prisoner to Cairo, where he later died.

By February 1271 CE, Baybars had decided to deal more assertively with the Ismailis. Their leaders were arrested and forced to surrender control of the fortresses to the Mamluks. The Ismaili castles now began to submit in rapid succession to Baybars, who used military blockades, threats and negotiations in dealing with the Ismailis. Ullayqa and Rusafa surrendered in May 1271 CE, and by May 1273, Khawabi, Qulay'a, Maniqa and Qadmus had also capitulated. The residents of Kahf mustered some resistance, and with the fall of that fortress in July 1273 CE the last independent Nizari outpost in Syria fell into the hands of the Mamluks, less than three years after Girdkuh, the last stronghold in Iran had surrendered to the Mongols.

The Ismailis were permitted to remain in their fortresses in the Jabal Bahra, but only under the strict supervision of Mamluk lieutenants. Amongst the later medieval sources speaking of the Syrian Nizaris, an elaborate account is related by the celebrated Moorish traveller Ibn Battuta, who passed through Syria for the first time in his travels in 1326 CE. He names Maniqa, Ullayqa, Qadmus, Kahf and Masyaf as the fortresses which were still in the hands of the Ismailis, and then proceeds to give interesting details on the arrangements existing between them and the Mamluk Sultan al-Nasir al-Din Muhammad, who reigned intermittently between 1294 CE and 1340 CE. The Syrian Ismailis thus lived at the time as loyal subjects of the Mamluks and after them, the Ottoman Empire's representatives in Syria.

In the midst of fluctuating political fortunes, the Ismailis of Syria as elsewhere, sought to maintain, as far as was possible, an active and vibrant intellectual and cultural life. As the late Marshall Hodgson observed: "The Ismaili society was not a typical mountaineer and small-town society (...) Each community maintained its own sense of initiative in the framework of the wider cause, and probably a sense of large



3. M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins*, The Hague 1955

Selected Bibliography

Berchem, Max van. “Epigraphie des Assassins de Syrie”, *Journal Asiatique*, 9 série, 9 (1897), pp. 453-501; reprinted in his *Opera Minora*. Geneva, 1978, vol. 1, pp. 453-501.

Bianquis, Thierry. *Damas et la Syrie sous la domination Fatimide, 359-468/969-1076*. Damascus, 1986-89. 2 vols.

Canard, Marius. “Fatimids”, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (revised ed.), vol. 2, pp.850-862.

Daftary, Farhad. *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*. Cambridge, 1990.

Daftary, Farhad. *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis*. London, 1994.

Daftary, Farhad. “The Ismailis and the Crusaders: History and Myth”, in Z.Hunyadi and J. Laszlovszky, ed. *The Crusaders and the Military Orders*. Budapest, 2001, pp. 21-41; reprinted in his *Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies*. London, 2005, pp. 149-170.

Daftary, Farhad. “Rashid al-Din Sinan”, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (revised ed.), vol. 8, pp. 442-443.

Daftary, F. and J.H. Kramers. “Salamiyya”, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (revised ed.), vol. 8, pp. 921-923.

Ghalib, Mustafa. *The Ismailis of Syria*. Beirut, 1970.

