

The Assassins - An Apology

In November of the year 1256, the Mongol armies of Prince Hulegu camped on a hillside in the Alburz Mountains of Iran. From all directions, the regiments of the Mongol generals converged on the encampment overlooking the Alamut Valley. Reinforced by an assortment of Muslim and Christian allies and a battery of powerful assault machinery, tens of thousands of the most efficient archers and swordsmen in the world waited for the signal to launch their attack.

Across the valley, perched on a mountain crag, lay the castle of Maymun-Diz, stronghold of Rukn ad-Din, Grand Master of the *Nizari Isma'ilis*, a branch of Islam regarded by the mainstream Sunni Muslims as heretics and dangerous fanatics. These people were the *Assassins* of later Crusader myth, their Grand Master the so-called Old Man of the Mountains.

Hulegu had demanded that Rukn ad-Din acknowledge him as his overlord and dismantle the castles. For days, Rukn had dissembled and prevaricated, evacuating castles with few or no defences and sending envoys to negotiate with the Mongol leader. Some 60 castles altogether may have existed in the 30-mile-long valley and many of these were quite small and of no strategic importance. However, three especially were vital and regarded by their occupants as virtually impregnable. These were Alamut, Lamassar and Maymun-Diz itself.

Winters in the Alburz can be severe but the winter of 1256 was relatively mild. No snow had yet fallen on the mountains. Rukn may have prayed that it would do so before long and that conditions would throw the Mongol invaders into disarray. He may have underestimated Hulegu's strength and determination, and hoped that enough support would come from elsewhere to bolster Maymun-Diz's formidable natural defences. It was not to be.

Too late, the Grand Master realised the hopelessness of his position and capitulated.

Surrender did not save him or his castles. Maymun-Diz was besieged, looted and burnt. Within a week, Alamut Castle suffered the same fate. Lamassar held out for almost a year, perhaps because Hulegu thought its destruction less important than the destruction of the others, or because he had more important things on his mind - such as the defeat of the Caliph of Baghdad. Rukn ad-Din was held as a prisoner, though enjoying many privileges, for several months but was eventually put to death brutally along with his family and thousands of his followers. The Mongol *yasa* had decreed that *none of that people be spared, not even the babe in its cradle.* (*1)

We are so used nowadays to religious conflict that it would be easy to dismiss Hulegu's conquest of Persia as an anti-Muslim crusade. Having attacked and burnt the Nizari castles in the Alamut Valley, his armies moved on Baghdad, seat of the Sunni Caliph whom they overwhelmed. In the years that followed these campaigns, Jews and Christians rose to positions of importance and influence out of proportion with their numbers. Hulegu Khan, his son Abaqa and his grandson Arghun embraced Buddhism as their personal religion.

The Mongols themselves were originally shamanists. However, the Great Khans relied on native governors to administer the conquered territories and many of their advisers were followers of Islam. Thus it would be quite wrong to attribute religious motives to Hulegu's invasion, certainly not at first, and not in the sense that he favoured one belief system over another. Later, Hulegu would play on inherent prejudices, including those of the Christians, but that was not part of his initial strategy. By the time he began his westward advance, he already had Muslim allies and there were Muslim soldiers in the Mongol army.

Of course, Islam was the dominant faith in Persia, but Muslims were far from united in their religious and political beliefs. The success of Hulegu's campaign had depended on the defeat of not one but two powerful Muslim leaders. One of these was the Sunni Caliph, al-Musta'sim, who represented a dynasty. The other was Imam Rukn ad-Din, Grand Master of the Assassins, who represented an ideology.

It is easy to see Mongol purpose in the humiliation and destruction of the former, but what of the latter?

There is no mistaking the vitriol in the *History* of 'Ata Malik Juvaini, who writes of the Nizaris' fate that ... *So was the world cleansed which had been polluted by their evil.* (*1) It is interesting, however, to recall that of the books the historian recovered from the great library of Alamut, while destroying other 'heretical' works, one was a history of the people he so demonised. Indeed, he devotes several chapters of his own work to that very history.

Europeans of the time were less accommodating. Taking their lead from orthodox Muslim opinion, and being in no position to challenge it, they exaggerated supposed heresies and concocted myths from rumour and gossip. The Nizaris were portrayed by returning Crusaders as crackheads and murderous thugs, and several centuries were to pass before Westerners began to search for the truth beyond the myth.

Who then were the Nizaris - these so-called Assassins? Where did they come from, what were their beliefs, and why was it so vital to Hulegu that they be destroyed?

The Nizaris emerged in the late eleventh century of the Christian era as a radical sect of the *Shi'a* branch of Islam. Under their leader, Hasan-i-Sabbah, they built and consolidated a power base in the mountainous country south of the Caspian Sea, not far from Teheran. For the next hundred and fifty years, from their castles in the Alamut Valley, they spread their religious message and their influence throughout Persia and beyond.

The origin of the English word *assassin* is disputed, but in Europe it is generally thought to be derived from the Arabic *hashish*, meaning *herb*. It was rumoured that Hasan-i-Sabbah had built a paradise garden in Alamut to which the young men chosen to be martyrs were led. Once in Hasan's presence they were plied with heroin and, convinced that their reward would be eternal bliss, given their assignment, the assassination of a political enemy.

As Alexandre Dumas puts it in the words of his hero Edmund Dantes - *reality was but a dream; but it was a dream so soft, so voluptuous that they sold themselves body and soul to him who gave it to them.* (*2)

The myths can be traced back to the writings of Marco Polo, though he did not invent the tale, and many authors, including Dumas, have taken up the theme since, the latest to do so being American thriller writer Dan Brown. (*3)

It is true that the followers of Hasan were involved in political assassination. In an age when such things were commonplace it would be surprising if they weren't. And, to judge from the fear they instilled in their opponents, they seem to have developed an extraordinary talent for it. However, the stories of secret gardens, beautiful virgins and youthful assassins deluded by *hashish* were undoubtedly fabrications.

Whilst a thousand years were to pass before the first great schism of the Christian Church, the religion founded by Mohammad experienced its first split soon after the Prophet's death in the year 632. Divisions of this kind are most often about governance and ritual rather than doctrine and the breach in Islam was no exception. It was dynastic.

Mohammad had not named a successor and, by a majority, his followers elected Abu Bakhr, a prominent convert, as their first Caliph. Many Muslims believed the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, Ali, had a better claim to the leadership. They formed their own party, the *Shi'atu 'Ali*, or *Shi'a*.

Since, in Islam, politics and religion are not separable as they are in western societies, it was inevitable that the Shi'a should evolve from a political into a religious movement, as Professor Bernard Lewis puts it, *when [they] formulated a challenge to the existing order ... their challenge was a theology and their organisation a sect.* (*4)

The Shi'a doctrine is rooted in the concept of the *Imams*, spiritual leaders descended from the family of the Prophet himself, through his daughter Fatima and her husband. Ali was the first Imam of their faith, and became eventually the fourth Caliph of Islam. When he was

murdered in 661, the Caliphate passed to the Umayyad Dynasty, who ruled it for the next hundred years.

The first real watershed in Shi'a history occurred on the death of the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq. Ja'far had nominated his eldest son Isma'il to succeed him but a majority of his followers recognised instead a younger brother, Musa. Musa was proclaimed Imam and his successors held the office for about a hundred years until, in 873, as tradition tells, the twelfth of the Fatimid line 'disappeared'.

The historical facts surrounding the sidelining of Isma'il are disputed; the theological implications are almost impossible for a non-Muslim to understand. Three quotations will serve to illustrate the difficulty:

Professor Lewis writes that ... *probably because of his association with extremist elements, Isma'il was disinherited.* (*4)

Muslim scholarship presents a different picture and indeed it seems possible that Isma'il died before his father. How could Ja'far, as an infallible Imam, have made such a mistake, asks Reza Aslan, an American writer of Iranian parentage? Ultimately, he writes, Isma'il's followers were *compelled by the force of their theology to argue that Isma'il had not died but gone into ... 'occultation' in a spiritual realm.* (*5)

Farhad Daftary, an Ismai'li scholar and historian notes that *matters become rather confused as Isma'il apparently predeceased his father, and as several of [Ja'far] al-Sadiq's sons laid claim to his heritage.* He goes on, however, that *according to Isma'ili religious tradition and as reported by some of their sources, Isma'il survived his father and succeeded him in due course.* What is clear, as Dr Daftary concludes, was that Ja'far died in 765 and *the dispute over his succession led to historic divisions in Imami Shi'ism, also marking the emergence of the Isma'ilis.* (*6)

Several splinter Shi'a groups formed, the largest being that following the lines of Musa and known as the Twelvers. Twelver Shi'ism is today the state religion of Iran.

On Musa's succession, the supporters of Isma'il seceded from mainstream Shi'ism and formed a new sect, the *Isma'ilis* or Seveners. The Seveners were no incohesive, uncouth sect and they attracted many intellectuals and devout theologians to their ranks. The flowering of scientific and artistic ideas that took place during the mediaeval period owes much to their influence. Isma'ili scholars such as Ibn Sina and Nasir Khusraw, physicians and mathematicians as well as poets and musicians, played a significant part in the Muslim golden age from the ninth century of the Christian era.

The Isma'ilis sent out missionaries to Syria, Yemen, India and Africa and gradually gained support, but it was only in 909 that they were sufficiently powerful to challenge the Sunni Caliphate. Their Imam proclaimed himself Caliph in North Africa, founding a new dynasty, the Fatimids, with headquarters in Egypt. Fatimid armies moved across the Middle East and established a new empire, extending eastwards to Persia and westwards along the North African coast. For a time, it included Mecca and Medina, the holy cities of Islam.

Meanwhile, after the overthrow of the Umayyads by the Abbasids in 749, the seat of the Sunni Caliphate had moved from Damascus to Baghdad. Although the Abbasids, descendants of an uncle of the Prophet, were revolutionaries, they chose a pragmatic course. The authority of the Caliph gradually waned and real power came into the hands of military commanders and provincial emirs. In 946, a Persian Shi'ite dynasty, the Buyids, took control of Baghdad but decided to retain the Abbasids as puppet rulers.

When the Fatimid challenge came, the Sunni Caliphate was not well placed to meet it. However, with the help and support of Turkish *emirs*, it recovered and drove the Fatimids back. Thus beset, and weakened by internal conflicts, the Fatimid Empire was finally destroyed by a new schism that took place on the death in 1094 of its eighth caliph, al-Mustansir.

There were two claimants to the succession, the legitimate choice, al-Mustansir's eldest son Nizar, and Ahmad, a younger son and

protégé of the Commander of the Armies. The Commander, also Ahmad's brother-in-law, placed the latter on the throne as Caliph al-Mustali. As with the earlier schism, the sequence of events is often disputed. However, the outcome was clear.

Despite having considerable support, Nizar was defeated by his rival, imprisoned and eventually executed or murdered. His supporters in Persia would not recognise al-Mustali as Caliph. As the Fatimid Empire collapsed and died, and the followers of al-Mustali were driven into relative obscurity, the party of Nizar grew in strength, largely due to the emergence of a new revolutionary hero. His name was Hasan-i-Sabbah.

Hasan was born in Qom between 1050 and 1060. His family were Twelvers. When he was still a child, they moved to Rayy where he came under the influence of the Isma'ili scholar, Amira Zarrab. To quote Hasan's own words - *we constantly disputed ... and he tried to destroy my beliefs. I did not give into him but his words took root in my heart.* (*1) However, he took his recovery from a serious illness to be a sign and around 1070 converted fully to the Isma'ili faith.

Hasan travelled to Egypt by way of Iraq, Syria and Palestine and was welcomed at the Fatimid court in Cairo. He later fell foul of the regime, was imprisoned then deported. Over the next few years he travelled extensively, preaching his new faith and gaining converts, before concentrating his attentions on the mountainous provinces bordering the Caspian Sea. The region's independent, warlike inhabitants, now Shi'ites but already influenced by Isma'ilism, had been one of the last peoples to be converted to Islam and were obvious targets for Hasan's Isma'ili message.

Searching for a base for his activities, Hasan finally settled on the castle of Alamut and in 1090 took possession of it. It was later claimed that a grandson of Nizar had been taken to Alamut and brought up there, and the new sect became known as the *Nizaris* - the Assassins of Crusader mythology. And so came into being an Isma'ili state that stretched from east Persia to the Mediterranean and was ruled from mountain strongholds in the Alburz Mountains and in central Syria.

Until his death in 1124, Hasan-i-Sabbah never left Alamut. He may have built a garden there - Persians are fond of gardens - but it is likely to have been for his own pleasure rather than for esoteric purposes.

To the Twelver Shi'ites of Persia and to the Sunnis, the Nizaris were heretics. Juvaini dismisses Hasan with the words ... *upon him be the curse of God, and the angels, and all of mankind ...* (*1) and the closing remarks in his *History*, already quoted, leave us in no doubt of his opinion of Nizaris as a whole. But though he glories in their apparent destruction, even Juvaini does not promulgate the myth of the *Hashishiyyin* and the paradise garden. Neither does the later historian Rashid. Whatever was in Hulegu's mind when he besieged the castles of the Alamut valley, it seems likely he was not motivated by religion or Islamic morality but thought merely to destroy a powerful military enemy.

History has depicted the Nizaris as murderers, heretics, and drug addicts - and as anti-Christian. However, to describe them thus leave it at that is not only misleading but unjust in the extreme.

The idea that the Assassins were mediaeval crackheads is ludicrous. Heretics are only heretics to their orthodox opponents, and the Assassins had plenty of those. They did not target Christians; most of their victims by far were fellow Muslims, mainly princes and dignitaries of the Sunni Caliphate and Seljuk emirs. Murder it may have been, but no society or culture can look to its past without tinges of shame at deeds perpetrated in its name.

The Nizari Isma'ilis made significant contributions to Islamic science and art during the Fatimid era and influenced many more orthodox Muslims, such as Nasr ad-Din Tusi. As already noted, even Juvaini was interested enough in their history to rescue a record of it from the flames of Alamut.

Their descendants in modern times have played an important part in the history of the Middle East and Asia. Today, Nizari Isma'ilis are engaged in development and philanthropic work on four continents, and not only among Muslims. Their forty-ninth Imam, known in the West as

the Agha Khan, heads a Foundation that brings help to vulnerable peoples worldwide. The Agha Khan Health Service finances hospitals in Africa and India while the Foundation's educational programme focuses on poor and geographically remote areas. It lays special stress on the need to educate young women.

References

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