THE ASSASSINS OF ALAMUT

Anthony Campbell

CONTENTS

Chapter 1:
PROLOGUE

Who were the Assassins?

Assassins and assassination are, regrettably, very much with us today. Our heads of government must be protected by elaborate security day and night, while the rest of us in many parts of the world are constantly at risk of being caught up in the fanaticism of zealots of one kind or another who feel it justifiable, or even meritorious, to kill innocent bystanders. Assassination as a political weapon is no doubt as old as organized human society but the word itself is of mediaeval origin and refers to the activities of a Persian sect who were popularly supposed to drug themselves by means of hashish, whence the name. The Assassins did indeed carry out political murders with as much publicity as possible and therefore were terrorists, but unlike their modern counterparts they did not kill innocent bystanders; they were highly selective in their activities. But who were the original Assassins, and what did they believe about themselves? These are fascinating questions, whose interest is not confined to politics or history; the ramifications extend to religion, mysticism, and ideas about the millennium.

The Assassins were a heretical Islamic sect. They were a potent source of myth and legends; this emerges in an imaginative account written by Marco Polo, who visited the site of their castle at Alamut in Iran just after its destruction by the Mongols. He repeats the legend of how the future assassins were supposedly prepared for their missions by being drugged with hashish, brought into a secret pleasure garden, and told they had visited Paradise, to which they would return if they were killed in action.

By the time Marco Polo reached Alamut, the prevailing view of the sect as supremely wicked yet dangerously alluring was already well established in people's minds. Alamut was already well past its heyday when it fell to the Mongols, but the legend of depravity and license had arisen much earlier, when the castle was the centre of a widespread and, from the orthodox point of view, most dangerous heresy.

Even before Marco Polo, the West had encountered the Assassins through their Syrian branch, which was known to the Crusaders. The great contemporary historian of the Crusades, William of Tyre, had written about them in a way that reveals a fair amount of understanding, and a remarkable embassy had gone from them to the King of Jerusalem offering their conversion to Christianity. At one time the Syrian Asssassins were in loose alliance with the Franks against Saladin, whom they attempted more than once to murder, though later -- and especially after the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187 -- they took part in the Muslim struggle against the Franks. In 1192 Conrad of Montferrat was murdered by men disguised as monks, and it is generally supposed that these were Assassins, though the English King Richard I has also been suspected of instigating the murder. From this time on, it seems, the Crusaders, already severely demoralised by the loss of Jerusalem, became more fearful of the Assassins, to whom they ascribed devilish cunning, a mastery of disguise, and a knowledge of various Frankish languages.

Count Henry of Champagne visited the Assassins in 1194, and is supposed to have witnessed a remarkable display of loyalty on behalf of the followers of the "Old Man of the Mountain". (This is another misconception: "Old Man" is a literal translation of the Persian word "pir", which here means "sheikh" or "master".)

While walking together in the castle one day, Henry and the Assassin chief began to talk of obedience. Some youths in white were sitting on top of a high tower. "I will show you what obedience means", the chief said; he gave a sign, and immediately two of the youths leapt from the tower and were dashed to pieces at the foot of the rock.

Stories such as these made up the legend of the Assassins that persisted in the West until quite recently. In the nineteenth century a Viennese amateur historian called Von Hammer Purgstall wrote a book about the Assassins in which he ascribed to them, if not quite every conceivable form of infamy, at least most of those that could be openly referred to in print at the time. Whenever more than one possible interpretation of a statement or event existed, Von Hammer automatically preferred the one that showed the Assassins in the worst possible light. His motive in writing seems to have been as much to emphasize the wickedness of all secret societies (including the Jesuits and Freemasons of his day) as to make a historical study of the Assassins, and his book has little historical value; nevertheless, it remained the standard reference work on the sect as late as the 1930s, when Freya Stark went to Alamut.

Since that time, however, much new information has come to light, some of it material preserved by descendants of the Assassins themselves. This has been extensively studied and edited by the Russian scholar W. Ivanow, who apparently has had access to a large number of documents and manuscripts that are not generally available. The other main authority on the sect is the American M.G.S. Hodgson.

From all this modern scholarship has emerged a picture of the Assassins which, if it lacks some of the lurid qualities of the legend, has at least the merit of credibility. Moreover, the truth turns out to be more enthralling than the fiction. No longer can we believe in the Old Man of the Mountain hatching his evil plots and sending forth his murderous emissaries drugged with hashish. Such a state of mind hardly seems compatible with the legendary accomplishments of the assassins --their superlative cunning, patience, knowledge of languages, and so forth-- and in any case our modern experience of terrorism does not suggest that its perpetrators require any narcotic stronger than fanaticism itself. Besides, if the claims of modern users of hashish are to be believed, the effects of the drug tend more towards pacificism than murderousness. But there is no real evidence that the Assassins used hashish at all, at least for this purpose. (It is possible that they used it as a psychedelic agent for religious reasons, but that is another matter.) The term "hashishin", from which our word Assassin very probably derives, was not used by members of the sect themselves but was a nickname applied by their enemies; even so, it was not in common use. The usual names for the Assassins were "esotericists" (batinis), Ismailis, or Nizaris.

The real story of the Assassins contains several fascinating elements. First, there is the use of political murder, which is what the sect is chiefly remembered for today. Then there is their complex philosophy, which guided their development and culminated in the extraordinary proclamation of the `Resurrection' at Alamut. This in turn was followed by the tragedy of the destruction of Alamut by the Mongols. Yet, amazingly,

this was not the end for the Assassins, for they were reborn as the Khojas in India; the Agha Khan is the lineal descendant of the rulers of Alamut. This is the story that I tell in this book.

A visit to Alamut (1966)

I first heard of the Assassins many years ago when I read Freya Stark's classic travel book `The Valley of the Assassins'. Probably because she was such a remarkable writer, the notion of the Assassins lodged in my mind, so it was natural that when I later found myself living in Iran I should think of making a journey to see the Assassins' stronghold for myself. In 1966 I did so.

It was of course a much easier expedition for me, even in 1966, than it had been for Freya Stark thirty-five years earlier; it was also easier than it would be today, though for different reasons. In 1930 Freya Stark had to make the whole journey on foot, but in 1966 a road, of sorts, went at least part of the way, though there was still a half-day's walk to reach the Castle from the road. Even in 1966 not many people went there, however, and it was difficult to discover much reliable information in advance, so that a little of the spirit of discovery still attended the project. Indeed, shortly after I went I was followed by no less distinguished a traveller than Wilfrid Thesiger, who was passing through Iran on his way to some more adventurous journey. Thesiger no doubt regarded his visit to the Castle as little more than a pleasant stroll, whereas for me it was a major undertaking.

Unlike Freya Stark -- and thanks largely to the sketch map in my ancient Penguin copy of her book, which accompanied me -- I at least knew exactly where the valley lay. It is set among the mountains at the Western edge of the Alborz range, between the plain of Qazvin in the south and the province of Mazanderan bordering the Caspian Sea to the north. In earlier times a part of these mountains formed the district of Daylam, which was, and still is, remote and wild. They separate the central Iranian plain from the Caspian, and they are a formidable barrier, with passes at about 10,000 feet. On the south side the mountains are dry and barren, with scattered oases of cultivation. On the north side you enter a different world, where the slopes are densely forested. Wild animals -- boar, bear, leopard -- are still to be found there today, and in mediaeval times must have been much commoner.

The main castle of the Assassins lies in the Alamut valley, on a tribute of the Alamut River near a village called Qasir Khan. I had been told that there were lorries that carried paraffin from Qazvin to the mountain villages; they called at Shahrak, at the head of the valley, and from there it was about six hours' walk to reach Qasir Khan. My plan was to visit the castle amd then to go on northwards over the mountains and down through the forest to the Caspian. I knew no one who had done this but it looked quite feasible on the map.

My equipment consisted of a back pack in which I carried some spare clothes and emergency rations and also a sleeping bag and an aerial survey map of the mountains kindly lent me by a friend in the US embassy. The map was not really detailed enough for my purpose but it was all I had since Freya Stark had not continued on the route I intended to follow. I relied on being able to get local advice.

I took the bus from Tehran and got off a few miles from Qazvin at the point where a

dirt road led north towards the distant mountains. There I waited most of the day, but no lorry came by. In the afternoon, therefore, I took a bus into Qazvin and made enquiries. No one admitted to knowing anything about lorries; a man offered to take me into the mountains by jeep but named an absurdly inflated price. I was standing disconsolately in the street, on the point of giving up, when a small boy appeared from a shoemaker's shop nearby and invited me in for tea. I explained my problem to the proprietor; he turned out to be a friend of a man who owned a fleet of lorries and said he would take me to him. So matters were arranged; and at last I started from Qazvin, sitting between the driver and his mate. It was nearly evening. Soon we had crossed the dusty plain and were climbing the first range of hills on our way to the Chala Pass, on a dirt road that wound in hairpins so tight that we frequently had to reverse several times to get round them. By now it was dark; in our headlights flocks of jerboas skipped like tiny kangaroos, and once we saw an animal I did not recognize but which the driver said was valued for its pelt. A swooping rush down the far side of the pass and we arrived at the village of Chala.

Here my journey almost ended before it had properly begun. We stopped to eat at a `coffee house'. This is a ubiquitous Iranian institution, at which, despite its name, tea and not coffee is served; it fulfills the function of a meeting place for the local male population, much like the Greek kafeneion. This one was in a hollow filled with tall poplars that shut out the moon. In the inky darkness I stepped over a four-foot drop and landed awkwardly, spraining my right ankle. Two hours later it was swollen and I could hardly walk. At first I was sure I should have to give up the journey, but I was reluctant to do so, having planned it for so long and knowing that I was due to leave Iran shortly and would never have another chance. I therefore decided to wait until next morning and make a final decision about continuing then.

Soon after setting off again in the lorry we came to the confluence of the Taliqan and Alamut rivers, where they unite to form the Shah River. Here the road ended for a time and we drove up the bed of the Alamut River through water a couple of feet deep. At Badasht, a village further up the river, we lay down to sleep on the verandah of another coffee house -- unsuccessfully, so far as I was concerned, owing to the clouds of mosquitoes. After a couple of hours we went on. The lorry now broke down and had to be repaired by torchlight amid another cloud of mosquitoes; the driver remarked, accurately, that we were `being made into kebabs'. We eventually reached Shahrak, my destination, at three o'clock in the morning. Here I slept until dawn under a large communal mosquito net.

At first light I examined my ankle. It was still very swollen but I thought I could walk on it, so I set off. And in fact I managed to complete the whole journey as planned, without undue discomfort, and subsequently the ankle healed without permanent ill-effects. This experience taught me that the standard conventional treatments in vogue at the time, namely strapping and rest, were not essential or possibly even desirable, a view that is being increasingly adopted by casualty doctors today.

For several hours my path lay beside the Alamut River in the main Alamut valley, which is about a mile broad and contains many rice paddies, whose brilliant green stood out vividly against the red soil. At one point I was supposed to cross the river by means of a bridge consisting merely of two more or less parallel and very flexible poles, but this seemed too ambitious for my insecure ankle, burdened as I was by a

fairly heavy pack, so I looked for a ford and found one a little higher up. After about four hours' walking I reached a village called Shotur Khan and turned north up the tributary that led to Qasir Khan, which I reached after another two hours' hard walking.

Qasir Khan was a pleasant village, bordered by orchards and built, like the others in the district, of flat-roofed houses on top of which people were winnowing grain. Just behind the village rises the Rock itself, about eight hundred feet high and an imposing sight, but dwarfed by the great mass of Mount Haudegan behind. As you approach the Rock from the south you get a clear impression of its near-impregnability. Little of the scanty remaining ruins can be seen from below, but traces of a curious channel running transversely across the southern face can be made out, while just below the top is a patch of green -- the so-called Vine of Hasan-i-Sabbah.

The present-day inhabitants of Qasir Khan are not the descendants of the Assassins, who were either killed or scattered by the Mongols and later replaced by settlers imported from elsewhere. Were it not for foreign visitors to the site, indeed, it is doubtful if they would ever have heard of their illustrious predecessors. They were friendly, and made me welcome, and in the afternoon a youth called Ali, together with a friend, took me up to see the Rock. As we approached a large monitor lizard scuttled across the flank of the massif; Ali's friend threw a stone at it but missed.

To climb the Rock we went up to the left and round behind to gain access by the `neck' which joins it to the main mass of Mount Haudegan. This involved a rather perilous scramble along a shaly slope above some unpleasant-looking rocks. A strong wind was blowing and as we approached the `neck' stones fell from above; it was rather like what I imagine it must be when one is under fire. We gained the summit uninjured, however, and walked about inspecting fragments of wall and innumerable pottery shards. Ali's friend, who wanted to show off, kept runnning down the treacherous slopes, pulling up, shouting with laughter, at the very brink, and calling to me to do likewise, much to the dismay of Ali, who no doubt had no wish to find himself obliged to explain the death of a foreigner to the authorities.

At the western end of the Rock there was, as I knew from Freya Stark's account, a cistern that was invisible from above and which she had, wisely, not tried to reach. Rashly I asked if it was possible to climb down to it. I was assured that it was, and a few minutes later I found myself clinging with sweaty palms and soles to the walls of a shallow gully inclined at some forty-five degrees or more over an 800-foot drop to the tiny patchwork rice fields below. Only now did I realize quite how minute was the ledge at the foot of the gully, which was all that could prevent me catapulting off into space. When at last I stood rather shakily on level ground again I asked my guides if anyone ever fell off. They both laughed at the idea, but then Ali added as an afterthought: "Actually, there was one fall this year - but it was only a woman."

The cistern was now within easy reach a short way to our right, but first Ali's friend insisted on looking for grapes on the Vine of Hasan-i-Sabbah. This grew nearby in a cranny, but to reach it involved crossing several feet of utterly smooth rock that slanted at about seventy degrees. Even Ali felt that this was a little risky, but his friend was eager to impress the foreigner and insisted on performing the exploit. He returned safely, to my relief, but naturally there were no grapes.

The cistern was enclosed in an oblong excavation and was about the size of a small swimming pool. Here was the opportunity to recover a little lost ground. I suggested a swim. Ali was horrified; the pool, he said, was `bottomless'. Nevertheless I was firm, and disregarding a few waterbeetles and the rather uninviting greenish colour of the water I got in and swam a couple of lengths. Ali's friend, not to be outdone, followed my example. However, I seemed to have set some kind of record, and I was glad to find, on returning to the village, that Ali related my remarkable feat of daring with suitable expressions of awe.

Returning to the summit we sat at the mouth of a tunnel cut through a rib of rock and looked out over the Alamut valley, just as Hasan-i-Sabbah must often have done. `They say some people came from Tehran once and dug up treasure here; lots of gold and jewels', Ali said. He paused and then added sadly: `But I think it's all lies, myself; what do you say?'

Back in the village I discussed the prospects for going on to the Caspian. The route, it seemed, was quite straightforward provided one knew it, but there was general agreement I could not manage it alone; my pack was too heavy, and if clouds should come down it would be easy to lose the way. Why did I want to go, anyway?

I had expected this question. The villagers were used to the idea of visitors coming to see the Rock -- this happened every two or three years -- but no one had ever gone on over the mountains. Why should I want to? I could think of no convincing answer. We tend to forget how recent a historical phenomenon is our modern appreciation of wilderness; to these villagers, as to most people before the Romantic era, mountains were mere obstacles, not something to be enjoyed for their own sake. My feeble protestations that I found the country beautiful and wanted see more of it were not believed for a moment, but the villagers were too polite to press me. I heard one of them say: "He must have some reason of his own for going." I imagine they thought I was a spy. I couldn't follow all the discussion, in any case, because this was a mainly Turkish-speaking area.

After a good deal of discussion it was agreed that Ali's elder brother Mehdi should take his mule and guide me as far as the pass, from which I should have an easy walk to the first village on the north side of the range. We were to start as soon as the moon rose, at about two o'clock in the morning. I lay down to sleep until it was time to leave, but was kept awake by an army of fleas as numerous and bloodthirsty as the Mongol hords that captured Alamut from the Assassins, so that I was glad when it was time to start. We climbed past the rock and up through a dreamlike moonlit world of cool grey and black, in what seemed like a different landscape from the yellows and reds I had sweated through by day. We went fast and the altitude made my breath come short and my heart race. Sooner than I expected the stars began to fade. As dawn broke we paused at a little grove of poplars beside a spring; the water was so cold it made my bones ache. The sun rose and burnt my skin through the thin air. I began to understand why we were going so fast: Mehdi was charging me for two days, but he intended to get back in one.

We stopped on the way to sleep for an hour, but by ten o'clock, two hours earlier than Mehdi had estimated, we were at the pass. Here we met a man wearing rubber boots

and carrying an umbrella: an incongruous sight, for it was blazingly hot on the south side of the range; but Mazanderan to the north is a region of heavy rainfall even in summer.

I took my pack from the mule, said goodbye to Mehdi, resisting his request that I should give him my shirt, and set off downhill. On a slope to my left were the black tents of nomads; women in brightly coloured dresses were uttering piercing cries to marshall their goats. To my right was a bank of snow several feet thick, from which sprang the river I was to follow down to the sea that lay, still hidden under a bank of blue air, some ten thousand feet lower and thirty miles distant. The intervening gap was filled by forests, in which lay a little white lens-shaped cloud. This, I was to discover, hovered over the first village on the north side. I reached this towards evening, and found it to be surrounded by rushing waters -- the source, no doubt, of the overhanging white cloud. Here I ate a meal, surrounded by curious villagers who plied me with questions, and then fell thankfully into a deep sleep. Next day I set off, on horseback, with a group of some thirty people bound for the Caspian. I reached the coast in the afternoon and found a minivan that was returning to Tehran. The drive back through the mountains, during which the driver frequently overtook other vehicles on blind bends, was much the most dangerous part of the whole journey.

It was a memorable trip and I was very glad to have made it, for it gave me a feeling for the Assassins and their country which I could never have obtained from books alone. Certainly it served to stimulate still further my interest in their extraordinary story.

Chapter 2:
HASAN-I-SABBAH

In the year 1080 C.E. a man called Hasan was seeking for converts in the Iranian city of Isfahan. He was an Ismaili missionary or propagandist, and a very successful one, who was making converts throughout the northwest of Iran. But this success had made him a marked man; the authorities were in pursuit of him, and the vizier Nizam al-Mulk himself had given orders for his arrest, for the Ismailis were regarded as revolutionary and subversive.

What kind of man was Hasan?

The Ismaili missionary was a very special person. He was intensively trained in Ismaili doctrine and was expected to lead an exemplary life so as to attract people through his piety. Any shortcomings in the missionary would not only put off potential converts but would be a threat to the very existence of the organization. He was expected to take great pains with his own spiritual advancement, punishing himself when he behaved badly and rewarding himself if he did well. He behaved in a similar manner towards the people for whom he was responsible. He had to be skilled in a number of professions - carpenter, sailor, oculist, and so forth - so that he could earn his living and also have a cover for his activities, for being an Ismaili missionary was dangerous; it must have been something like being a Catholic priest in England in penal times.

The missionary must have a deep knowledge of both the exoteric and the esoteric aspects of religion. In character he must be kindly and compassionate, modest, reasonable, noble, generous, and truthful; he must have an outstanding intellectual capacity, be capable of keeping secrets, and be an agreeable companion, with a noble soul to lend dignity to his manner and to attract people to him and allow him to get on with them. He should associate only with ascetic and religious men and have nothing to do with the dissolute. He must not fool about or tell dirty jokes or use bad language. In short, he was expected to be a paragon of every conceivable virtue, and it is permissible to doubt if any such individuals actually existed. However, at least we know what constituted the Ismaili ideal, and Hasan, in particular, seems to have embodied a good deal of it.

In recompense for the high demands made of him, the missionary was given a good deal of authority over his flock, but this, too was a source of possible spiritual danger and he was forbidden to use his position for his own advantage or to show favouritism. He was expected to be an affectionate but impartial father-figure. In all of this his role was that of the Imam writ small, for he was the Imam's representative and vicar on earth.

In order to preach the gospel, the missionary would settle in a town and practice some profession from among his stock of skills, meanwhile building up a local reputation for probity and piety. Gradually he would gather round him a circle of followers, among whom he would seek the men who seemed most apt to receive new ideas. The

missionary would lead up to these ideas cautiously and obliquely, always ready to change the subject if people grew suspicious or hostile. He would speak of religion as a hidden science, and would ask questions such as: Why are there seven cervical and twelve dorsal vertebrae? Why has the face seven apertures but the rest of the body only two? (These questions were designed to focus the listeners' minds on the idea that the universe is a magnified man and Man is the universe in miniature; the number seven is particularly important in the Ismaili scheme - see below.) As his audience began to respond, the missionary would grow bolder and begin to hint that spiritual salvation depended on pondering these matters and reaching a true understanding of them.

When at last he found a man ready to take the step of becoming an Ismaili, the missionary would administer an oath of allegiance. The neophyte promised his loyalty and undertook to pay a financial contribution, and he swore never to divulge the Ismaili secrets to any unauthorised person. Becoming an Ismaili, therefore, was a solemn business, and was much more than merely giving assent to a series of religious propositions. It was an initiation into a secret society, which might well make the convert liable to considerable danger but also opened for him the path to salvation.

Most historians of Ismailism seem to think that initiation was entirely a matter of imparting esoteric doctrines about the interpretation of the Koran and similar matters, but there may have been more to it than that. There are close parallels between Ismaili and Sufi initiation ceremonies, and in the case of Sufism, at least, the esoteric knowledge included instruction in meditation techniques. Such techniques are generally passed on orally; this is true not only of Sufism but also of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. It is therefore very likely that techniques of this kind were taught during the Ismaili initiation ceremony. There is an early Ismaili book which gives a novelistic account of the conversion and initiation of a young man. Meditation instruction is not mentioned openly, but one page is written in a cipher which is quite different from that used in many books dating from the Fatimid period. So far no one has managed to break it, but it is tempting to guess that it contains highly esoteric meditation instruction.

The Ismaili initiation procedure provoked a lot of hostile comment from the Ismailis' enemies, who claimed that candidates were led step by step to the ultimate abandonment of all religious belief and moral restraint. The Ismailis were also accused of having mercenary motives, for - according to their critics - the level to which an adept could rise in the hierarchy was determined not by his knowledge but by how much he was prepared to pay.

However, the real nature of Ismaili initiation was rather different. It proceeded at a pace which was not the same for everyone but depended on the aptitude of the pupil. There were several stages, which were symbolised in physiological terms derived from contemporary theories of embryology, the idea being that the spiritual development of the candidate paralleled that of his earlier development in the womb. The candidate had to swear an elaborate oath, promising loyalty, obedience, and the preservation of secrecy about Ismail doctrines, under pain of terrible retribution if he renegued on his obligation. (All this is oddly reminiscent of modern Masonic initiation.) Should he default, God would abandon him in this world and the next and he would be left to his own devices.

Altogether, there were many more threats of retribution than promises of felicity and the general tone was uncompromising and tough. Candidates for initiation would have needed to be serious and determined - to ensure this, of course, was the purpose of the oath. There is certainly no hint of future licentiousness to draw the candidate into the Ismaili fold, nor is there any question of denying religion.

The candidate was indeed expected to be nearly as admirable as the missionary, not only morally but also physically, for he must not be ugly or suffer from any obvious deformity, nor must he have any of the physiognomic features supposed to indicate defects of character. At least for the more advanced initiations, the master of ceremonies must be at least forty years of age, for Ismailis younger than this were not allowed to pass on secret knowledge. At least two witnesses, as well as an assistant, had to be present, and the assistant must also be at least forty years old (not to mention handsome, eloquent, pleasant, patient, and so forth). The initiation ceremony was elaborate and included numerous symbolic acts, again reminiscent of Masonic ritual.

From Ismaili texts of the time there emerges a picture of Ismailism that is very different from that painted by its Sunni critics. Ismailism appears to have been a serious attempt to raise human consciousness to a higher plane. Whether this is possible at all, and, if so, whether the Ismaili method was a good one for achieving that goal, are open questions, but at least we can say that the Ismailis were not the irreligious libertines they are often represented as being. Far from offering its adepts a holiday from morality, the Ismaili Proclamation, as it was called, summoned people to a dedicated life of service and self-improvement. It promised a great deal, but the way was hard and the goal was a wholly spiritual one.

Who were the Ismailis?

The development of Ismailism must surely be one of the strangest phenomena in the history of religion. What started as a secret or semi-secret organization acquired a capital city and an empire, and yet in spite of its great temporal success it preserved its inner mystery. For in spite of all that has been written about the Ismailis, both in their own time and later, there is still much that we don't know and probably never shall know. Even when Ismailism became a state religion, it continued to have an important esoteric aspect, and the secret has still not been completely unveiled. (For further details of these esoteric ideas, please refer to the Appendices.)

The Ismailis were based in Cairo, and claimed descent from Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. After his death in 632 CE Islam was ruled in succession by four Orthodox Caliphs, the last of whom was Ali, the Prophet's cousin and Fatima's husband. Ali found himself embroiled in bitter struggles concerning the succession and eventually he was murdered at the door of the mosque in Kufa; not long after this his son Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, was killed in a battle in which he was enormously outnumbered. This led to the great schism in Islam between the Shia (which means Party of Ali) and the Sunni. The Shiites are still passionately devoted to Husayn's memory and Passion Plays to commemorate his martyrdom are performed annually in Iran. Today, Iran is Shiite, but in the eleventh century it was officially Sunni.

The Shiites regard Ali as the First Imam. The Imam is a spiritual authority of enormous prestige; indeed, within some of the Shiite sects he takes on quasi-divine status. The Imamate is passed on from father to son, but the succession of Visible Imams became broken at some point in the past and the Imam is now Hidden. This much is agreed by all, but there are differences of opinion about the details of the succession. The main body of the Shiites think that there were twelve Visible Imams and are therefore called Twelvers; but others regard Ismail as the seventh, and last, Visible Imam, and are accordingly known as Ismailis or Seveners.

This dispute within Shiism occurred before the foundation of Cairo, which was accomplished early in the tenth century by the Fatimids, who were probably Iranians. They claimed descent from Fatima. The authenticity of this claim has been questioned but at least one modern historian, Bernard Lewis, thinks it was probably genuine. When Ubaidullah, the first Fatimid Caliph, died in 934 he was succeeded by Qaim, who is supposed to have been his son; however, Lewis suggests that he was really descended from Ismail. There is support for this romantic idea from secret Ismaili works and from the Druze scriptures. (The Druze, a Syrian sect, were a later offshoot from the Ismaili tradition.)

As a result of these events, by the end of the tenth century there was established in Egypt a reborn Imamate, claiming descent from Ali and Fatima via Ismail. This was a source to which Ismailis could look for guidance and inspiration. From this centre missionaries were sent out to the rest of the Muslim world, but especially to Iran, which was thought most likely to be receptive to Ismailism. Hasan, usually known by the sobriquet Hasan-i-Sabbah (Hasan the Sevener), was one of these.

Hasan-i-Sabbah and the revolt against the Turks

Many Ismail missionaries, and many Ismaili intellectuals in Cairo, were Iranians, so it was natural that there should be a determined effort to spread Ismailism in Iran. However, the Seljuq Turkish conquest made this more difficult, for the Seljuqs were deeply hostile to Ismailism. Neverthless, the Ismailis by no means lost heart; indeed, if anything, they became more ambitious. Ismaili cells were to be found in many cities and towns throughout the country, proselytising and making converts.

The Ismailis were preparing a revolt against the Seljuqs, but they did not intend to form a single army and march to power as the Fatimids had done in Egypt; given the different situation in Iran, this would hardly have been possible. Rather, they hoped for a multiplicity of risings planned to occur simultaneously, which would deprive the Seljuqs of their base and be impossible to crush by virtue of their widespread nature. This revolt would have been essentially urban. But in the eleventh century the plan was to take on a different character, with a shift in emphasis from town to country. This development occurred thanks to Hasan-i-Sabbah.

Hasan was born at Qom, still today a major Shiite religious centre, and was brought up as a Twelver. His youth and early manhood, however, were spent at Ray (now a suburb of Tehran), which was Sunni at the time. He was an earnest seeker after truth, and is said to have been passionately fond of study from the age of seven (a significant age), becoming learned in mathematics, astronomy (and therefore astrology), and occult matters.

At about the age of seventeen he encountered an Ismaili missionary called Amir Zarrab. No doubt a young man of Hasan's ability seemed a find prize, and Amir Zarrab tried hard to convert him, but Hasan was not convinced. Nevertheless, after Amir Zarrab's departure Hasan continued to read Ismaili books and his mind was troubled.

Then, as often seems to have happened in the lives of mediaeval people, his conversion was brought about by a near-fatal illness. Alarmed at the possibility that he might die without having realized the Truth, he sought out another Ismaili, nicknamed the Saddler, and asked for further instruction. Fully convinced at last of the truth of the Ismaili doctrines, he took the oath of allegiance.

The senior Ismaili in Iran, Abu Malik of Isfahan, came to Ray soon after this and was impressed by Hasan. He drew him into Ismaili activities and, a few years later, sent him to Cairo, where he was well received. However, there were political tensions in Cairo at this time, which were to have momentous consequences for Hasan some years later, and there is a suggestion that he got into some kind of difficulty there. In 1080 he returned to Iran, surviving a shipwreck on the Syrian coast in the process, and became very active as an Ismaili propagandist. He travelled extensively, especially in the north-west of the country, and he had a large number of men under his command who covered other areas. He was by now a wanted man, but he evaded his would-be captors, and, in 1090, carried out the coup which made him famous and launched the Assassins on their romantic career: he gained possession of the Castle of Alamut.

Hasan at Alamut (1090-1124)

The castle of Alamut was held at this time by a castellan on behalf of the Sultan. Hasan gradually infiltrated his men into the garrison. The castellan got wind of this and pretended to be sympathetic to Ismailism in order to lull the enemy's suspicions, but when he decided to act it was too late. Hasan had by this time entered the castle himself under a pseudonym; the castellan found himself impotent and had to yield possession of the castle to Hasan, who gave him a draft for three thousand dinars as the price of the castle, to be paid by the Governor of Damghan. The castellan, not taking this very seriously, did nothing with the draft for some time, but eventually he found himself short of funds and presented it. To his astonishment, the Governor kissed the note reverently and paid him the gold.

In the Muslim calendar the year in which Hasan gained possession of the castle was 483. By a strange coincidence, in the `abjad' system of number-letter correspondences this date gives the name of the stronghold, Aluh Amut. This occult correspondence was naturally not lost on the Ismailis, who made much of it. But the name itself is something of a puzzle. It is usually said to mean `eagle's teaching', and there is a story that a monarch, out hunting with his falcon, had the Rock suggested to him as a suitable place for a castle by seeing his bird land upon it. Another possible meaning is `eagle's nest', which seems intuitively more probable. (Indeed, one of the first things I saw when I visited the Rock in 1966 was an eagle soaring out from the summit.) However, at least one authority denies that the name has anything to do with eagles at all.

Whether or not the name Alamut is connected with eagles, there is undoubtedly something aquiline about the character of Hasan, whom I cannot help picturing as a

gaunt figure with piercing eyes and a great beak of a nose. From his eyrie in Alamut he made himself respected and feared throughout much of Iran, and he successfully resisted all attempts to dislodge him. He seems to have built new fortifications on the Rock and is said to have constructed vast store chambers for grain, honey, and water.

Owing to the thoroughness with which the Mongols destroyed the castle we have no accurate information about this work. One of the most puzzling questions is how the castle was supplied with water. At present the stream that supplies the fields of Qasir Khan at the foot of the Rock does not flow anywhere near the castle, though possibly its course was different nine hundred years ago. There are stories of water being brought in lead pipes, but this seems improbable and in any case would not afford any security in a siege. An interesting suggestion put forward by Peter Willey is that the curious channel that can be seen running across the south face of the Rock was built to collect rain water and feed it into chambers cut in the cliff. This does seem possible. At any rate, we can be pretty sure that massive engineering works of some kind were carried out to provide water and were successful, for Alamut held out in the face of several determined attempts to capture it.

Hasan became known as a severe and austere ruler. He remained within his house, writing, thinking, and planning; he is said to have gone out only twice, and to have gone up on the roof only once. At one time, when things were difficult, he sent his womenfolk away to another castle, where they had to spin like the other women, and he never brought them back. He had both his sons executed, one for drinking wine, the other on a charge of murder which later proved false. Von Hammer, the nineteenth-century historian who attributed all kinds of wickedness to the Assassins, cited these sentences as evidence of Ismaili depravity and Hasan's want of natural affection, but it seems more plausible to regard them as instances of his impartiality. They also make it clear that in Hasan's time the Muslim ritual law (sharia) was enforced at Alamut with full rigour.

Under Hasan's leadership the Ismailis prospered. Other castles were acquired, some by capture, some by purchase or negotiation, and the Ismailis thus came to dominate quite a large area. There also continued to be Ismaili cells in nearly every Iranian city, especially Isfahan, where the Ismailis had acquired a stronghold just outside the city. However, the Isfahan centre was captured by the Turks in 1107. The wife of the Ismaili chief decked herself in her jewels and flung herself from the battlements; the Chief himself was captured, paraded through the town, and then skinned alive. This left Hasan as undisputed head of the Ismailis in Iran, and the Seljuqs mounted a protracted campaign against him. In 1118 Alamut was besieged, and Hasan had a hard time persuading his followers not to surrender. But at that momemt news came of the death of the Sultan; despite the commander's pleas, the army dispersed and Alamut was saved.

The use of terror

The name `assassin' is, of course, synonymous with political murder. In 1092 the famous statesman Nizam al-Mulk was on his way to Baghdad when he was approached from a youth from Daylam (the region of Alamut) in the guise of a suppliant. The man suddenly drew a knife from his robe and wounded the minister fatally. This is generally supposed to have been the first assassination carried out by Hasan's orders. The Ismailis claimed it was done to avenge the death of a carpenter,

but an elaborate legend has grown up about it, linking Hasan, Nizan al-Mulk, and the poet Omar Khayyam.

According to the story, Hasan and Omar Khayyam are supposed to have been fellow-students of Nizam al-Mulk, and the three agreed that whichever of them should gain a powerful position first should help the others. When Nizam al-Mulk eventually rose to be Vizier under Malik Shah, Omar Khayyam declined any office and asked only for a pension, but Hasan demanded a place at court. Here he did so well that he seemed likely to out-shine Nizam al-Mulk himself. The Sultan asked Nizam al-Mulk to prepare a general account of State revenues; Nizam al-Mulk said the task would take two years, but Hasan said he could do it in only a few weeks. Hasan, naturally, was given the commission, and was provided with all the necessary facilities; but when the day came for him to present his figures he was forestalled by the wily Nizam al-Mulk, who managed to sabotage his papers and poured scorn on him when he became confused. Hasan was thus disgraced and had to leave court, and this discomfiture was the motive for his ultimate revenge.

This romantic tale is almost certainly one of the many legends that have accumulated around Hasan-i-Sabbah. That this is so is evident from chronology: Omar Khayyam and Hasan died at almost the same time (1123 and 1124 respectively), whereas Nizam al-Mulk was born in 1017 and moreover seems to have finished his education and entered public life at an early age. If Hasan and Omar Khayyam had been Nizam al-Mulk's fellow students, therefore, they must have both been centenarians when they died, which are possible but unlikely. Even though the story is almost certainly apocryphal, however, it does seem that Hasan and Nizam al-Mulk met before Hasan's visit to Egypt; the Vizier evidently knew a good deal about Hasan, since, as we have seen, he ordered his arrest. There are thus straightforward reasons why Hasan should have wanted Nizam al-Mulk out of the way.

As for the legend, it may be that Nizam al-Mulk has been confused with a later, less famous, vizier, who almost certainly did meet Hasan when both men were students. This minister, Anushirvan ibn Khalid, says that he met and studied with some of the chief Ismaili leaders, especially "a man of Ray, who travelled throughout the world, and whose profession was that of a secretary". This was almost certainly Hasan-i-Sabbah.

Although the legend seems untenable in its full-blown form, it leaves open the intriguing possibility that Hasan and Omar Khayyam were fellow students. Unfortunately we know too little about the lives of both men to say anything definite about this, but it may be significant that Omar Khayyam was rumoured to be an Ismaili.

Murder as a political weapon was not, of course, an Ismaili invention, and indeed it appears that a number of groups in Iran were making use of it at the time. The Ismailis, however, undoubtedly took the trend further than most. They may have believed that it was more humane to kill one man selectively than a multitude in a battle. In this respect they were significantly different from modern terrorists. In any case, given the fact that they were so enormously outnumbered by their enemies, terrorism was a logical enough expedient.

It is usually said that a special corps of assassins - the fidais - existed, but this is doubtful, at least until a much later date. Marco Polo, who visited the site of Alamut in the thirteenth century, after its destruction by the Mongols, relates the romantic legend of how the fidais were trained by the Grand Master. The `Old Man', as Marco Polo calls him, following the Crusader usage, was said to have constructed a fantastic pleasure garden, flowing with wine, honey, milk, and water, and populated by beautiful women. This was a representation of Paradise as described in the Koran. The Old Man was supposed to drug his future Assassins and bring them, unconscious, into the garden; after a time they were once again rendered insensible and brought out into the ordinary world. They were thus convinced that they had been given a foretaste of the joys to come if they obeyed the Old Man's orders, which they naturally did unquestioningly, certain that they would once more find themselves in Paradise after their death.

It need hardly be said that this is a total fantasy. There is no need to suppose that any such elaborate method of preparation was needed; like other Muslim soldiers the assassins would be told, and would unquestioningly believe, that if they were killed they would go straight to Paradise. A similar belief motivates modern suicide bombers among the Palestinians and other minority groups who lack other means of getting at their enemies. Death on an assassination mission was counted a great honour by the Ismailis. There is an often-repeated story of the mother of a fidai who rejoiced greatly and put on her best clothes when she heard that her son had been killed on a mission, but changed into mourning when he came home safely after all.

The fidais were at least not underhand in their assassinations; they did not poison their victims or stab them in the back in dark alleys, but killed them openly in public. A favourite occasion seems to have been at Friday prayers in the mosque. Publicity, in fact, was an important part of their aim, and they were successful in attaining this. Prominent men took to wearing armour under their clothes, and sometimes the Ismailis could achieve their purpose merely by a threat. Sultan Sanjar made a truce with Alamut, persuaded, it is said, by a dagger thrust into the ground next to his pillow. And an amusing story concerns a professor of theology who made a practice of reviling the `heretics' of Alamut. At length, one of his students, who had impressed him by the attention he paid to his lectures, revealed himself as a fidai and offered the professor alternative inducements to mend his ways: a dagger or a bag of gold. The professor wisely chose the gold; and, when subsequently twitted about the reason for his changed attitude to the Ismailis, he replied that he had been convinced of his error by arguments that were `both weighty and pointed'.

Assassination as a political weapon may be hard to justify morally (although what about the bomb plot to kill Hitler?), and certainly it was this practice that made the Ismailis' name so execrated among both Muslims and Christians. Even so, one cannot help sensing the intensity of their devotion to their cause and the feeling of comradeship that inspired their heroism. For heroism it was: few fidais, survived, and their deaths were seldom easy.

The split with Cairo

At the end of the eleventh century there were disturbances in Cairo that had far-reaching effects on Iranian Ismailism. A dispute occurred concerning the succession of the Imamate; this was very much a re-run of the earlier dispute that had divided the

Seveners from the Twelvers.

The Fatimid caliph Mustansir had designated his eldest son Nizar as the next Imam, and according to Ismaili tradition this decision could not be revoked. But towards the end of his reign Mustansir lost control of his empire and effective power passed to an army officer called Badr al-Jamali. When Mustansir died, in 1094, Badr's son Afdal, who was now in effective control, put another of Mustansir's sons, Mustali, on the the throne. Nizar, not surprisingly, objected, and a brief civil war ensued; but Nizar was defeated, imprisoned, and eventually executed.

The Cairo Ismailis now accepted Mustali as Imam, but the Ismailis in Iran, led by Hasan-i-Sabbah, remained loyal to Nizar, and in so doing broke away from the political and spiritual tutelage of the Fatimids and launched forth on their own strange course. From this time they were generally known as Nizaris.

We do not know the reasons for this decision, though personal loyalty to Nizar does not seem to have been important. Perhaps Hasan had come into conflict with Badr in Cairo, as later Nizari accounts suggest, but more probably the motives for the schism were less personal. There were, it is true, genuine doctrinal reasons why the Iranian Ismailis should not accept the revoking of the designation of Nizar as Imam, for it was just this question that had led to the separation of the Ismaili sect in the first place, but no doubt politics and national pride entered into it as well. The Iranian Ismailis were fiercely independent, already in revolt against the Turkish invaders, and probably unenthusiastic about owning allegiance to a foreign power, especially since Badr's troops, on whom he relied for his position, were largely Turkish.

Whatever the exact reasons for the break, Hasan's authority ensured that it was generally accepted among the Iranian Ismailis, who henceforth were pretty well universally adherents of Nizar; and though there was at first some dissent in Syria, before long the Syrian Isamailis too were loyal to the new dispensation.

Allegiance to Nizar raised an important practical question, however: where was the Imam? After Nizar's death there was no obvious successor, but it was a central part of the Ismaili position that there must always be an Imam somewhere, otherwise everything would fall to pieces. For the moment the Imam was regarded as "Hidden"; later he was to stage a most dramatic reappearance.

One might have expected that Hasan himself would claim to be the Imam, but he never did so, and indeed it is said that when his followers wrote up a fanciful genealogy for him he threw it contemptuously in the river, remarking that he would rather be the Imam's favoured servant than his degenerate son. The title generally applied to Hasan was Hujja, "Proof". This was the name of a high rank in the Ismaili hierarchy and signified a senior missionary responsible for a particular territory. But the title could also refer to someone who served as a link with a more exalted level in the hierachy; Hujja could be applied to Hasan in this sense as well, and eventually he seems to have been regarded as the Imam's official representative.

Until the end of of his long life, Hasan remained in Alamut, a lonely and severe figure, administering his strange realm, ordering assassinations, thinking, writing, planning, and waiting... for what? Did he believe that a son of the dead Nizar would

one day appear to claim the Imamate? If so, how was he to be recognized as genuine? Or had Hasan perhaps given up all hope of finding a physical Imam, and now conceived of the Imam as existing on a spiritual (though nonetheless real) plane of existence?

My own guess, for it can be nothing more, is that the last possibility is the most likely. The Hasan whose character has come down to us is very far from naive, and he is totally uncompromising in his rejection of makeshift second-best solutions. Such a man must surely have realized that no genuine Imam was likely to appear in the foreseeable future, and that all the Nizaris could do was to preserve the Imamate as an idea. The most reliable information we have suggests that this was Hasan's position, and that in his time there was no specific teaching at Alamut about when or how the Imam would appear. Indeed, even Hasan's second successor, Muhammad I, issued coins bearing simply the name of Nizar, with no suggestion of the existence of any later Imam.

To the modern mind it may be tempting to suppose that Hasan was merely cynical, and used the legend of the vanished Imam for his own purposes while himself disbelieving in it. But this, I think, would be totally to misconceive the mediaeval outlook in general and Hasan's character in particular. All that we know of Hasan suggests that he was wholly sincere in his beliefs, and I am sure it would be a complete mistake to discount them. There is something almost Ciceronian about Hasan, an unyielding firmness and integrity which, though it may not inspire our affection, cannot but compel our respect.

Hasan wrote a great deal but little of what he wrote has come down to us. His style was characteristically terse. From what can be surmised about his teaching, it seems to have differed somewhat, at least in emphasis, from that of the Fatimid Ismailis. The literature from Cairo contained much mystical speculation about the nature of the Imam. Hasan's Imam is more of an authoritarian figure, who seems to be as much a ruler and a law-giver as a mystagogue. Probably this change in emphasis was partly due to the situation of the Nizaris in Iran. They were broken up and scattered in small groups throughout the country, and there was a need for strong leadership from Alamut if they were to maintain their cohesion. No doubt, too, men tended to cast the Imam in their own image, and Hasan seems to have been by nature as well as by necessity a stern disciplinarian, so that his version of the Imam's character was a severe one.

Hasan's immediate successors

Hasan-i-Sabbah died in 1124. It is said that he concealed his fatal illness to the last, a piece of austerity that accords well with what we know of his character; he was always renowned for his laconicness. He was succeeded by his lieutenant, Kiya Bozorg-Ummid (Kiya Great Hope).

By now the Nizaris were ceasing to be an important power in the cities and were becoming an enclave within the Seljuq state. The Seljuqs had for some twenty years largely ceased hostilities against the Nizaris; soon after the accession of Bozorg-Ummid warfare broke out again, but the Nizaris held their own. They were also responsible for a number of assassinations, including that of the Abbasid Caliph Mustarshid, who was at the time a prisoner of the Seljuqs. At a more local level,

fighting went on intermittently with the neighbouring city of Qazvin.

Bozorg-Ummid, though evidently able enough militarily, seems not to have contributed anything to the community intellectually, and in this respect the Nizaris don't seem to have been very active during the rules of either Bozorg-Ummid or his son and successor, Muhammad I, who came to power in 1138. By this time the Nizari state had settled into its own pattern of existence, with a hereditary succession of rulers. An early event in Muhammad I's reign was the assassination of Caliph Rashid, son of the Caliph Mustarshid who had been assassinated earlier; Rashid was under house arrest in Isfahan at the time. Great celebrations were held in Alamut on this occasion, but the people of Isfahan took revenge by massacring anyone who they thought was an Ismaili.

Warfare with the Seljuqs continued under Muhammad I, though at a reduced intensity, and the Nizaris captured a number of new fortresses. But all this activity was relatively petty and there was beginning to be an increasing discrepancy between the original high hopes of the community and what had actually been achieved. Before long, however, the situation was to change dramatically, and the Nizaris' patience was to reap an unlooked-for reward.

Chapter 3:
THE RESURRECTION AT ALAMUT

In this chapter we encounter the central event in the story of the Assassins of Alamut, and an extraordinary event it was. By the middle of the twelfth century the third generation of Nizaris was reaching adulthood. A certain restlessness was in the air: the community was well established now, and seemed immune from any serious external danger, for the Seljuqs had done their worst and failed and there was as yet no other great power to offer a threat. So far as the outer world was concerned, the position was a stalemate. But the Nizaris had never forgotten that they were a spiritual elite, and their sense of their importance had if anything been enhanced by their separation from Cairo. However, they were at this time relatively inactive; they were simply waiting.

But for what? Hasan-i-Sabbah seems to have implied that he and his successors were the representatives of the absent Imam, who would one day appear to claim his inheritance and lead his people to victory. That was probably enough for the Nizaris of Hasan's day, but as the years passed it ceased to be so. Besides, Hasan's successors, though able enough as military and political leaders, lacked Hasan's intellectual gifts; they don't appear to have written anything and there is little evidence of any great spiritual ferment during their reigns. At first, no doubt, the Nizaris had little time to think about such matters, being too preoccupied with ensuring their own survival; but once this seemed assured they began to yearn to return to the old Ismaili habit of metaphysical speculation.

A further source of dissatisfaction was the strict discipline imposed by the first three Masters of Alamut. Hasan-i-Sabbah had set the tone in this respect, and both Bozorg-Ummid and Muhammad I followed his lead; the Islamic ritual law was enforced in its full rigour by all three. This was nothing new for the Ismailis; in Cairo, too, the Fatimids had emphasized the need to observe the outward forms of religion as well as the importance of understanding its hidden depths. But by the time Muhammad I came to power in Alamut the emphasis seems to have come to be on the outward aspects at the partial expense of inner truth.

All this was reversed, however, by Muhammad I's son, Hasan II.

Hasan II

Hasan was an able and learned young man, of great personal charm. He had made a deep study of the older Ismaili literature but was also attracted by Sufism. He was to fuse these two traditions in a bold new synthesis.

During his father's lifetime Hasan concealed his ideas as far as possible, but his eloquence and personality gave him a strong influence among the younger Nizaris, and this excited his father's suspicions. It is also said that he drank wine in secret. It's

interesting how often this theme emerges in the accounts of the Ismaili rulers, and one can never be sure if it is to be understood literally or metaphorically. The same is true of much classical Persian poetry, notably that of Hafiz, and it seems that wine, the forbidden gateway to altered states of consciousness, had a symbolic significance for Muslims that it lacked for Christians. For Hasan's contemporaries, the idea that he drank wine implied that he was above the law, and from this it was but a short step to think that he might be the Imam.

In an effort to counteract these dangerous ideas, Muhammad called a public meeting, at which he pointed out that the Imamate was hereditary; since he himself was not the Imam, his son could not be either. Hasan publicly denied that he was the Imam, but the Ismailis were accustomed to the idea of `dissimulation' of truth and many of them refused to accept the denial. Muhammad had 250 of these dissidents executed and made a further 250 carry the corpses away on their backs as they went into exile.

But Hasan was merely biding his time. When his father died in 1162 Hasan was about 35 years old; in his brief life he was to to bring about an almost complete change in the pattern of Nizari development, not merely in Alamut but throughout all the Nizari territories, including Syria.

It was an astonishingly bold coup that Hasan had in mind, and he took his time in preparing for it. For the first two and a half years of his reign he did little; he merely relaxed the oppressive restrictions at Alamut and refrained from punishing those who broke the ritual law. He also released a number of captives who had been held at Alamut.

Then, in 1164, he acted. It was the 17th day of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. He summoned his people from all the Nizari territories in Iran and assembled them at the foot of the Rock. It was a grand occasion. The people were arranged in groups according to the districts from which they came and a pulpit had been set up; this faced towards Mecca, so that the audience had their backs towards Mecca. (Normally in a mosque the arrangement is reversed.) At each corner of the pulpit a flag was set: white, red, yellow (the Fatimid colour), and green (the colour of the Prophet).

At about noon, when all the people were assembled, Hasan came down from the fortress. He was dressed in white and wore a white turban. He ascended the pulpit and addressed the audience.

Speaking first in Persian, he announced that someone had come to him in secret from the Imam and had brought him a message, which he proceeded to deliver. We don't have the text of this but we know its general sense. "The Imam of our time," Hasan proclaimed, "sends you blessings and compassion, for you are his special servants. And therefore he has lifted from you the burden of obeying the ritual law and has brought you the Resurrection (qiyama)."

Hasan now changed from Persian to Arabic, which was of course unknown to most of his audience; but an interpreter had been placed at the foot of the pulpit to give a running translation. Apparently the audience took the Arabic speech for the direct word of the Imam. Its essence was that Hasan was the Imam's representative and

mouthpiece, and all Nizaris must obey him in everything, for his word and the Imam's were one.

At the conclusion of his address Hasan came down from the pulpit, performed the two ritual prostrations that signified the Day of Festival ('Id) that marks the end of Ramadan, and announced that the fast was over. Food, possibly accompanied by the forbidden wine, was brought; musicians appeared and the people were invited to celebrate. In this way Hasan proclaimed the Resurrection; subsequently the same ceremony was enacted in the other Nizari territories, including Syria.

The full boldness of Hasan's coup may be lost on modern readers, especially those with a Christian background. For Muslims, Church and State are indivisible, and the ritual law is the civil law. Hasan had therefore abrogated the religious law and the civil law simultaneously, and had done so in the most dramatic manner possible, by publicly breaking the fast of Ramadan. From now on, the only law the Nizaris were to acknowledge was the word of the Imam, which in practice meant the word of Hasan himself.

At this stage Hasan does not seem to have claimed that he himself was the Imam, though he apparently did so later, or at least allowed it to be tacitly assumed. Even if he did not make the claim, his devoted followers doubtless soon made it for him; after all, this idea had been current among them even during the lifetime of Muhammad I.

So great was Hasan's authority that his reform was accepted with little question throughout his territories. He allowed no hesitation on this score, and it said that he at least proposed the death penalty for anyone who refused the new dispensation. But there don't seem to have been many such, and Hasan was so loved by his people that he came to be known simply as Ala Dhikri-Salam (On His Mention Peace).

But he was not loved by everyone. Among those who rejected the new ideas, in their hearts at least, was Hasan's own brother-in-law, Husayn-i-Namavar. Jealousy may have played a part, for Husayn came from a family which at one time had been locally powerful. Eighteen months after the proclamation of the Resurrection he murdered Hasan at the castle of Lamasar. Probably he intended to reverse Hasan's reforms and return the Nizaris to Islamic orthodoxy, but he was given no chance to do so. Muhammad II, Hasan's son, though only nineteen at his father's death, was capable and determined and fully in sympathy with the ideas of the Resurrection. He took power, executed Husayn-i-Namavar and all his family, and over the subsequent 44 years devoted himself to working out the philosophical and doctrinal implications of the Resurrection.

The boldest step taken by the new ruler was to claim to be the Imam. Hasan II, as we have seen, had probably also claimed to be the Imam, but only spiritually. Certainly there was nothing impossible about the idea of such a spiritual descent from an Ismaili point of view. But Muhammad's position was more extreme, for he claimed that his father was actually descended physically from Nizar.

The official version of how this came about seems to have been that Nizar's grandson had been brought to Hasan-i-Sabbah secretly and had grown up under his protection in the village of Qasir Khan at the foot of the Rock. Hasan II was supposed to be a

descendant of this grandson, though the exact details of how he came to appear to be the son of Muhammad I were left vague. They are filled in, somewhat scandalously, by the violently anti-Ismaili historian Juvaini, who gives two alternative versions which he says were current in Alamut.

The first version is that the Imam was living incognito in Qasir Khan; he had a son at the same time as the Lord of Alamut and an old woman exchanged the babies secretly, hiding them under her chador (veil). Apart from the fact that women in Qasir Khan don't wear chadors today and probably didn't then, the story derives from a well-known folkore motif and is obviously legendary. It may well have been current among the people of the valley.

The alternative version is less edifying. It is that the Imam committed adultery with Muhammad's wife. Muhammad found out and killed the Imam, but the Imam's son was born. In support of this story Juvaini says that the people used to dishonour the grave of Muhammad I. Although the Imam would doubtless be regarded as above the law and therefore entitled to behave in this manner, it seems possible that this version is a later fabrication by the Nizaris' enemies.

Is it conceivable that Hasan II was really descended from Nizar? It seems extremely unlikely, yet, as we have seen, a rather similar sequence of events may have led to the founding of the Fatimid dynasty; it is therefore just possible that history repeated itself at Alamut. On the other hand, we do know that the Ismailis recognized the possibility of a spiritual succession of the Imamate, and on the whole this is the more likely explanation for what happened at Alamut. The whole emphasis of Nizari thought at the time of the Resurrection was on inner, esoteric interpretation; probably all the rather literal-minded attempts to produce a Fatimid genealogy for Hasan II were intended mainly for the less sophisticated among the faithful, while the more esoteric conception of a spiritual descent was reserved for the more intellectual members of the community.

The doctrine of the Resurrection

Hasan did not live long enough to work out the full implications of his momentous announcement; that task was left to his son. We are told that Muhammad wrote a great deal, using the style of the (Greek) philosophers; like his father, therefore, he was an intellectual. Unfortunately none of his writings have come down to us, and the best that can be done is to piece the ideas together from a variety of sources, some of which are from a later time.

The essence of the Resurrection (qiyama) is that it was the fulfillment of the long-established Ismaili expectation of the Millennium. Ismaili eschatology had always predicted that the Imam of the Resurrection would come to usher in the rule of righteousness, when Ismailis would no longer have to `dissimulate' by obeying the ritual law; now that longed-for day had finally dawned.

Clearly, however, it had not done so in quite the way that the older Ismaili authors had expected. The Resurrection was supposed to be a cataclysmic event on a world scale, but now the world went on just as before; indeed, outside the Ismaili territories the great proclamation was almost unknown. But for the Nizaris themselves everything had changed; they were now living in a new age. But since everything on the physical

level went on just as before, the change must be internal and spiritual. The Resurrection meant, in fact, the dawning of a new phase of consciousness. (These ideas are developed at greater length in the Appendices, to which you should refer if interested.)

The esoteric interpretation of religion had always been fundamental to Ismailism, but under the Fatimids the teaching was that both aspects, esoteric and exoteric, must be given full weight. If you remained at the exoteric level you could never hope to advance spiritually, but this didn't mean that the exoteric religious forms had no importance. In a metaphor used by Abu Firas (Chapter 4), the exoteric aspect is the shell of the egg, which protects the yolk (the delicate truths hidden within).

The Nizaris of the Resurrection, however, threw away not just the shell of the egg but the white as well, and concentrated all their attention on the yolk - the Secret of Secrets. Nizarism thus came to be pure esotericism made into a state religious doctrine.

The whole of Nizari spiritual life centred on the Imam, who was divine, a manifestation of God. In a sense, of course, this was nothing new, for the Ismailis had always regarded the Imam in this light. But for the Nizaris the Imam had been hidden for a century and a half; none of them had ever been in his presence before. Now he was once again among his devotees, and their excitement must have been almost boundless.

Moreover, the relationship of the Nizaris to their Imam was quite different from that of the inhabitants of Cairo to the Fatimid Caliph. Cairo was a large city, where the Caliph lived in a palace surrounded by officials and guards, so that few of his followers can ever have seen him or heard him speak. Alamut, on the other hand, was small and rural, and the population of all the Nizari territories put together must have been much smaller than that of Egypt; no doubt almost every Iranian Nizari, at least those living in or near the Alamut valley, could see and hear the Imam.

These things made the Nizaris' devotion to their Imam a practical and personal affair and no doubt heightened its intensity to an extraordinary degree. But there was also something else: the Nizari Imam was no ordinary Imam but was the Imam of the Resurrection. In him the whole elaborate Ismaili cosmology found its fulfillment. The Ismailis conceived of creation as composed of a number of levels, and spiritual enlightenment consisted in moving upwards from level to level. All the Imam's followers would now ascend with him to the next higher level in the cosmic hierarchy. Indeed, they were there already, without having to die first. The Resurrection was thus an event of literally world-shaking importance.

Awareness of these momentous events must in itself have been enough to bring many of the Nizaris to something like ecstasy, but was there more to it? I have already said that there are important similarities between Ismailism and Sufism, and it seems likely that the Nizaris of this period were making use of techniques for inducing altered states of consciousness like those employed by the Sufis, including chanting and the inward repetition of the name of God. Hasan II certainly, and Muhammad II very probably, were interested in Sufism.

The rumours about the Nizari's use of hashish may be relevant here. Perhaps these reflect a distorted version of their use of meditational techniques, or perhaps they really did use hashish or other drugs as a means of inducing altered states of awareness. When the orientalist and scholar E.G. Browne, the visited Iran at the end of the nineteenth century he found that hashish was held in such superstitious awe that it was seldom referred to openly but was designated by code names such as Master Seyyid or the Parrot of Mysteries (the reference in both cases being to the colour green, for Seyyids - alleged descendants of the Prophet - wear green turbans). This fear of the drug cannot plausibly be attributed to its hallucinogenic properties, since the more potent opium was widely smoked at the time and was not referred to in these oblique ways. More likely the use of code names points to a folk memory of a link between hashish and the feared Nizaris.

If I am right in supposing that the Nizaris made use of various methods for altering consciousness, we could infer that the combination of these techniques with the state of excitement caused by Hasan's announcement of the Resurrection would have had an immensely powerful psychological effect. One set of influences would reinforce the other; the meditational techniques would act like a lens, focusing the Nizaris' devotion to their Imam into a white heat that was intense enough to transmute the consciousness of some of them, at least, into a new condition. This would go far to explain the impression of enthusiasm which filters down to us even through the fragmentary records that have survived. Something important happened at Alamut, and, whatever it was, it was momentous enough to make the Nizaris believe, at least for a time, that they had indeed experienced the Resurrection that Ismaili eschatology predicted.

What I am suggesting, in short, is that under Hasan II and Muhammad II there grew up at Alamut a mystical school similar to those that were developing at the time among the Sufis, and making use of techniques like those of the Sufis. The difference, however, was that the Nizari's spiritual leader was no ordinary human sheikh but the divine Imam himself.

At first glance it may seem puzzling that the Nizaris do not appear to have made much of the murder of Hasan II. One might have expected that he would become a Nizari martyr, as Ali's son Husayn did for the Shiites. The explanation, I think, is to be found in the way the Ismailis conceived of the Imam. They believed that the subtle body of the Imam is immune from harm even if his physical body is killed. Since Hasan was the Imam he could not really be killed, so there was no reason to be excessively despondent about his death. The Imam lived on in Muhammad II, who was in his essential nature identical with his father.

Life in the Resurrection

The Ismaili state before the Resurrection had had many grades of membership, but after the Resurrection all this was swept away, since it belonged to the past. Henceforth there were only three possibilities, three levels of being (or non-being).

The first level is that of the People of Opposition, meaning all those who rejected the Imam and his teaching. Even in the old dispensation these had been regarded as bound for hell; now they were simply obliterated, held to be non-existent. Since God is the only reality there can be nothing outside Him or in opposition to Him, so if anyone

appears to be in opposition they must merely be a kind of optical illusion. While they are supposedly alive they have a kind of provisional or illusory existence, like that of a mirage, but when they die they disappear utterly and vanish into that nothingness which they have been in all along.

The second level is occupied by the People of Order. These are the Ismailis, living and dead, who are not participants in the Resurrection. They are called People of Order because they cling to the elaborate Ismaili hierarchical scheme. They, too, it seems, are non-existent. The assignment of the dead Ismailis to non-existence seems rather harsh, though they may possibly have been saved by an old teaching that the doctrine and truth of one Imam have no necessary application to those of any other. The general idea, however, is clear: the old Ismaili hierarchy is superseded and those who cling to it are hardly better off than outright unbelievers.

Only the third group, the People of Union, is saved. They are the ones who have grasped something at least of the truth of the Imam of the Resurrection and are striving to unite themselves fully to him. It is in principle open to people in the other two groups to see the light and join the People of Union, but we don't get the impression that the Nizaris spent much time or effort in trying to convert non-Ismailis, who were presumably regarded as too non-existent to be worth troubling about. The inhabitants of the Nizari territories in Iran and Syria were expected to participate in the Resurrection, and in most cases they did so; we do not know how many old-style Ismailis there were in Iran at this time or what their reaction to the new teaching was.

The new teaching was supposed to have literally cosmic reverberations. The events at Alamut were thought to have vast significance, set against the Ismaili cosmology of cyclical time. All space and all time were focused on the Rock of Alamut on that fateful seventeenth day of Ramadan when the Resurrection was proclaimed. There was nothing accidental about the date; it was predetermined from eternity. There were elaborate esoteric teachings concerning time, which was conceived of as cyclical. (See the Appendices for more details of these ideas.)

With the Resurrection we touch the high point of the story of Alamut, and perhaps of the whole Ismaili venture. The Resurrection was to produce a fascinating offshoot in Syria, which I shall describe in the next chapter, but in Alamut the excitement dies away somewhat after the death of Muhammad II and the Nizaris begin the long decline which was to end in the general catastrophe of the Mongol invasion. Long before then, however, the original creative impulse had spent itself. Yet that there was a strong and genuine impulse at the beginning is hard to doubt. We who must perforce try to understand the Resurrection through fragmentary written descriptions, across the gulf of seven centuries, can only guess at what it meant in terms of inner experience, but there is no doubt that the inner experience was what mattered. The Nizaris were asked to shift to a new state of being, and for a time, at least, they believed that they had done so - that they were actually living in a transformed world.

This idea may seem ridiculous, if we contrast the grandiose nature of their claims with the political reality outside. The rest of the world went on as before, untroubled by the fact that it had now ceased to exist. To look at the matter in this way, however, is to miss the point as the Nizaris saw it. For them, time itself had come to an end with the proclamation of the Resurrection. It was a magnificent answer to the failure of a

military undertaking: the enemy was simply annihilated.

In the end, of course, the dream could not last. Muhammad's successor Hasan III brought the community, kicking and screaming, back into the `real' world, by reinstating the Islamic ritual law; but even if he had not done so, the vision would have crumbled and dissolved at last, as has every other attempt to create the perfect society on earth. But probably the Nizari state was particularly unstable because of the basis on which it was founded.

Almost every long-lasting mystical tradition we know of seems to have existed against a background of exoteric religion. Sufi masters, for example, expected their pupils to have fulfilled the requirements of orthodox Islam before undertaking the esoteric practices of Sufism. In the case of Ismailism itself, the parent regime in Egypt always emphasized the need for observation of the exoteric aspects of Islam as well as for study of the esoteric aspects. Nizarism at the period of the Resurrection was an anomaly, in that it abandoned the exoteric forms altogether and concentrated wholly on the esoteric side of Ismailism. This may have been its undoing. The Ismaili doctrine, taken undiluted, proved in the end too strong a medicine.

Chapter 4:
THE ASSASSINS IN SYRIA

There had been Ismailis in Syria for a long time, since the Fatimid triumph of the tenth century. During the rule of Hasan-i-Sabbah at Alamut a few of his emissaries made the long and hazardous journey to Syria to bring the new teaching to the Ismailis of that country. Syria offered opportunities to the Iranians, for the Syrians, although they all spoke Arabic, were by no means orthodox Muslims; they were fragmented into many different sects, a tendency which was encouraged by the broken nature of the terrain. There were several heretical groups that offered potential converts to the Iranian missionaries.

Hasan-i-Sabbah's propaganda was on the whole successful; the Syrian Ismailis mainly followed his lead and broke with Cairo, remaining loyal to Nizar as required by Hasan. They also acknowledged the authority of Alamut. The chiefs of the sect in Syria seem to have been mainly Iranians, sent by Hasan. There were, however, difficulties in the conduct of the revolt, perhaps because the circumstances in Syria were different from those in Iran.

During the early part of the twelfth century, up to about 1130, the Ismailis attempted to operate from bases in the cities. For a time they were allied with Ridwan, the Seljuq ruler of Aleppo. The reasons for Ridwan's friendship are unclear; his father had ruled the whole of Syria, but his own position was much less secure and he had to contend with numerous rival Turkish emirs. He may have found the Nizaris useful as military allies, or he may have feared them. There is even a suggestion that he was himself convinced of the truth of Nizari religious doctrines. In any case the alliance did not last long. Ridwan was under intermittent pressure from Muhammad Tapar (Hasan-i-Sabbah's arch-enemy) to repudiate the Nizaris, and he may well have come to think that they were too independent and dangerous to have as allies. He executed some and expelled others from Aleppo, although it seems he continued to employ Nizaris from time to time in his campaigns even after this.

The Nizaris themselves, however, decided that in future they must not depend on the good will of rulers, and did in Syria what they had already done in Iran: withdrew from the cities to strongholds in the mountains. This transfer was not complete until after Ridwan's death in 1113, but from about 1130 onwards their chief centre was in the Jabal Bahra (Jabal Ansariyya) mountains in central Syria, where they acquired a number of fortresses. At about this time, too, there arrived from Alamut a new chief called Abu Muhammad, who remained in office for 50 years until he was succeeded by Sinan.

The political situation in Syria was always complex, but at the very end of the eleventh century it was made even more so by the arrival of the Crusaders. They reached Syria in 1097; at first they were taken to be merely raiders, but by 1099 they had captured Jerusalem and evidently intended to stay. In the early years of the twelfth century they had established themselves all along the east coast of the Mediterranean and showed that they were a power to be reckoned with; henceforth the

Nizaris found themselves obliged to conduct hostilities on two fronts, although they were often able to play one power off against the other.

During the first thirty years of the twelfth century the Muslim chroniclers tell of numerous assassinations by the Ismailis. Most of these coups were carried out against the Seljuqs, but the Fatimids (who were, of course, regarded as usurpers by the Nizaris) also came in for their share of attention. In 1121 the Commander-in-Chief, Afdal, was murdered by three Ismailis from Aleppo, and in 1130 the Fatimid Caliph himself was killed. After this, however, the Nizaris were mainly concerned with internal affairs and consolidating their position in the mountains.

By the time Sinan arrived in Syria they held a number of castles; the principal ones we hear of are Qadmus, Kahf, and Masyaf.

Rashid al-din Sinan and the Resurrection

The introduction of the Resurrection in Syria was a delicate matter, clearly requiring someone of more than ordinary authority and ability. Such a man was found in Rashid al-din Sinan.

Sinan was born near Basra, in Iraq, and was brought up as a Shiite. As a youth he quarrelled with his brothers and set out on foot for Alamut. He arrived there during the reign of Hasan II's father, Muhammad I, who received him kindly and educated him along with his two sons. We may assume that Sinan was won over by the young Hasan and adopted his religious ideas, for when Hasan came to power in Alamut he appointed Sinan as chief of the Nizaris in Syria.

The exact timing of these events is conjectural, but the most plausible reconstruction is that Sinan left Alamut a few years before Muhammad's death (perhaps because he had incurred Muhammad's displeasure as one of those who looked on Hasan as the Imam). For the details of Sinan's life we must rely mainly on Abu Firas, an Ismaili author of the fourteenth century who collected a number of stories about Sinan that were current in his day. Abu Firas's account is frankly hagiography and some of his tales are obviously legendary, but he gives us the picture of Sinan that was generally accepted among the Syrian Ismailis of the time and no doubt it allows us to form a reasonably accurate general impression of the man.

According to Abu Firas, Sinan arrived in Syria incognito but furnished with a letter of appointment from Alamut. He did not present this at once but took up residence in the village of Masyaf. While walking one day with a companion he came to a pool; his companion was astonished to see that Sinan's face was not reflected in the water. Sinan told him to say nothing about this to anyone.

Soon afterwards Sinan left Masyaf and went to a village near Kahf, where he worked as a school teacher and physician, achieving great renown because his prescriptions were invariably successful. Chief Abu Muhammad, learning of his fame, invited him to stay in the castle of Kahf, where he remained for seven years. He wore a Yemeni cloak, which every year he would unpick, wash, and sew together himself; he used also to cobble his own sandals. This asceticism gained him a reputation for sanctity, which was enhanced by his habit of sitting for hours motionless on a rock while he

held converse with invisible beings, his lips moving silently.

When Abu Muhammad fell terminally ill (probably in 1162), Sinan visited him and told him he would die next day. He then showed him his letter of appointment. At this, Abu Muhammad began to weep.

"Why do you weep?" Sinan asked.

"And how should I not weep?" replied Abu Muhammad, "seeing that for seven years I have failed to carry out a vital instruction, while you were living among us like a servant although it was I who should have been a servant to you." But Sinan assured him that his conduct of affairs had been so exemplary that he had nothing to reproach himself with. Next day Abu Muhammad died, at the exact time that Sinan had foretold.

Probably Sinan delayed taking command so that he should have time to make a proper assessment of the situation in Syria; he may also have been waiting for Hasan II to come to power. If he really waited as long as seven years, however, it implies that he must have left Alamut well before the accession of Hasan, which would tend to support the idea that he got into difficulties with Muhammad I. At any rate, it seems pretty certain that he was expressly charged by Hasan with the proclamation of the Resurrection in Syria.

Sinan's first task in coming to power was to quell dissent among the Nizaris. As soon as Muhammad was dead a separatist faction put their own man in power, but the usurper was murdered at the instigation of one Fahd. News of these events reached Alamut; letters were sent to Syria appealing for unity, confirming the appointment of Sinan, and ordering that Fahd, who had been arrested, should be released, although the actual murderer was to be executed. In spite of these directives dissent grumbled on, but Sinan quickly showed his determination and resourcefulness. A group of malcontents met secretly at Masyaf to plot against him, but Sinan wrote the same night from Kahf to the governor of Masyaf, giving the names of the plotters and a verbatim account of what they had said; he ordered the governor to reprimand them severely. This was done; the conspirators confessed their fault and begged for forgiveness, which Sinan magnanimously granted. After this his position seems to have been secure.

We see here an example of Sinan's ability to know what was happening in men's minds, whether close at hand or at a distance. Presumably in this case he had spies, but there are many stories imputing telepathic powers to him. Abu Firas says that it was a usual practice for Sinan to reply to letters without unsealing them, and the replies always tallied point for point with the content of the unopened letters. As the historian Hodgson remarks, it is interesting that Sinan's alleged psychic feats are of fairly constant kinds: there are, for example, no reports of miraculous cures or of the materialization of objects, which might be expected if the stories were pure inventions.

Sinan was deeply respected and loved by his people. He had no personal bodyguard; his word alone was enough to secure obedience. He moved about continually in his territory, building new fortifications and renovating old ones, and these activities

reportedly gave rise to a number of paranormal feats, often performed for the purpose of helping his followers.

Sinan's paranormal abilities

Once, for example, the villagers were rebuilding a castle under Sinan's direction. It was their custom to stop work at four o'clock each afternoon. One day, however, Sinan told them to down tools and go home early, although it was not yet noon. They asked him the reason, and he replied that a small boy had tried to lift a stone that was too heavy for him and had bitten through his lower lip. They went home and found that this was indeed what had just happened.

Another anecdote concerns the same castle, where there was an enormous rock at the mouth of a cave. Sinan, being afraid that it might roll down and damage the castle, ordered it to be removed. The men worked at it for many days but couldn't budge it, so they went to Sinan to ask for advice. Sinan took a light hammer, and going up to the rock tapped it at each side. At once it went bounding away down beside the castle. The workmen now became alarmed and cried out: "Lord, this rock will crush our vines!". But Sinan called out an order, and the rock came to rest on a slope which was too steep for a man to stand on.

This story has a tailpiece. Much later, when the Mamluk ruler Baybars conquered the Nizari fortresses, one of his lieutenants heard the story about the rock and had the soil dug out from under it to make it roll down; but the rock merely toppled into the hollow and lodged there so firmly that it was quite impossible to move it again.

The lawyers' visit

A number of stories refer to Sinan's apparent foreknowledge. Once he told his entourage that a group of forty lawyers was on its way from Damascus; he named the leader and said that they would stay in Hims that night and be at Masyaf the following evening. Their purpose was to hold a religious discussion with him. "When they arrive," he went on, "have them stay in the garden of Jirsiq; send them live sheep and poultry, pots, dishes, and new spoons, and also money so that they may buy whatever they want and do their own cooking; for they think that we are not Muslims and therefore they are not permitted to eat our food." After three days, he said, the party would ask to see him; then they were to be told that he was at Kahf.

Everything happened as Sinan had foretold. Eventually the lawyers reached Kahf, where they were accommodated in the same way as at Jirsiq. Sinan then called them before him and said: "I shall allot each of you a special day, during which I shall debate with that person alone, no on else being allowed to say anything at all, until one of us is reduced to silence; either he or I." (This rather artificial mode of discussion seems to have been widely practised at the time.)

This plan was adopted. Sinan overcame the learned visitors one by one, and as each was defeated he made the others sign a paper to agree that this was in fact the case. At last there remained only the group leader. After four hours he, too, was speechless; Sinan sportingly offered him an intermission, but he replied that he saw no way out of the impasse. Once more Sinan obtained the participants' signatures to this effect. Then he said: "Gentlemen, since your arrival among us you have not touched any food or drink that we have prepared but have bought all your provisions with the money we

gave you, because you don't believe us to be Muslims." The lawyers admitted that they had thought in this way at first, but now they were convinced of their error and recognized Sinan and his people to be true Muslims. "God knows your minds, and your secrets are not hidden from Him," Sinan remarked somberly; and he made them once again write down and sign a statement that they had not eaten anything that had been provided for them. Then he said: "What you have spoken is the opposite of your true thoughts. When you leave here you will all die." He gave details of how each one would die, one after another, until he reached the leader of the group. "You alone," he said, "will reach Damascus, and will tell the Qadi (governor) what has happened, after which you will go home and will die the same night". And everything turned out just as Sinan had foretold.

In what is evidently an alternative version of the same story, Abu Firas records an interesting discussion between Sinan and the visiting delegation on the subject of previous Adams. The leader of the group said that he wanted to begin by questioning Sinan about Adam. The riposte was swift:

"Which Adam do you mean?" Sinan asked; "the first, or the second, or the third, or the fourth, or the fifth, or the sixth, or the seventh, or the eighth?"

"Sir," replied the leader, understandably out of his depth, "I know of only one Adam; the one who is mentioned in the Qur'an."

"He is the last Adam, not the first," Sinan replied; and he went on to say that he knew of 360 Adams, together with their descendants and their religions, and he was prepared to hold forth on any of them.

"I know nothing of that," the leader replied.

"Can you prove me wrong?" Sinan demanded. The hapless leader attempted to do so but was decisively routed. (This obscure reference to 360 Adams relates to the elaborate Ismaili cosmology based on cyclical time divided into epochs, each with its own Adam; the number is significant. See Appendix 2 for further details of this.)

A member of another deputation which visited Sinan was also caught out in an attempted deception but his fate was happier. The chiefs of ten of the mountain tribes visited Sinan intending to seek alliance with him. Each of them bowed to him and Sinan greeted them in return; but one man bowed, not to Sinan, but to the sun which was shining on the carpet. Sinan did not return his greeting. Three days later, when the chiefs were leaving, Sinan sent a robe to each man with the exception of the one who had failed to salute him. A servant came with the robes and read out from a list the names of the nine who were to be honoured. Noticing that the tenth man had received nothing, his companions were perturbed; he would, they said, lose face if he went away empty-handed. The servant relayed these remarks to Sinan. "Tell the tenth chief to ask the sun for a robe, since it was the sun he saluted," Sinan replied. The chief now acknowledged his fault and apologised to Sinan, who relented and sent him his robe.

The boy and the snake

This story, if true, is evidence of Sinan's psychological acumen if not of his telepathic powers. Another psychological story concerns a young man who had an invincible dislike of Sinan. His father, who was devoted to Sinan, tried to persuade his son to change his mind, but without success. He told Sinan of his difficulty.

"Bring him to me tomorrow," Sinan said. When the boy arrived, Sinan told him to take a bag and go to a certain spot where there was a cairn. Here he was to call out a name and say: "Come out of your hole and enter this bag, so that I may bring you to someone who will deliver you from your present condition." At this a large snake would come into the bag; the youth was to close the bag and bring it to Sinan.

The young man did as he was told and captured the snake. When he tried to pick up the bag, however, he found that he could not even lift it. At last, with the help of a man whom Sinan had sent as a guide, he got the bag on his back and staggered a few steps. Then a doubt occurred to him: surely it was futile to carry this snake to Sinan? He must have been mad to agree. At that moment the snake became so heavy that his knees buckled; he fell and could not get up again.

"Put the bag down," his companion said; but he was unable to do so without help. Then the young man realized that what had happened was t he result of his own doubting thoughts. Moreover, he reflected, the fact that the snake obeyed the name that Sinan had supplied and had come willingly at Sinan's command could only mean that Sinan was close to God. While these thoughts were passing through his mind his companion was loading the snake on his back again, and now he found that it was very light. Each time he entertained a doubting thought it grew heavy again, but when he thought well of Sinan it grew lighter. So at last he became fully convinced of his error.

When he returned, Sinan told him to untie the bag. As soon as he did so the snake emerged, and placing its head on Sinan's foot it died. "This snake," Sinan explained, "was So-and-so in a previous life; God shut it up in the cairn for five hundred years, but today He has delivered it." As for the young man, he became one of Sinan's loyallest followers.

Reincarnation

This story obviously contains a large element of fairy-tale, but it brings up the interesting question of transmigration. Reincarnation, in human if not in animal form, is a theme which appears from time to time in the Ismaili literature. So far as we know it was not part of the official doctrine put out from Alamut but there are references to it in some of the documents known as the Guyard Fragments, one of our main sources of knowledge of these events. Fragment XVI, for example, says:

> "When the soul appears in a human form it begins to think and reason so as to grasp, through the intermediary of the body, the theological sciences; that is, to recognize the Imam of the time. When it has achieved this recognition it rises towards the world of light. As long as the soul has not recognized the Imam of its time it will return to the world of birth and death, the world of the body and the place of suffering, until it does eventually recognize the Imam and acknowledge his authority. Then it will be purified and saved. But if it does

not recognize him, it will continue to come and go for many centuries.

"A certain wise man used to say to his `son' (his pupil): `O my son! Try to release your soul by a single residence in the body and not by a second passage through a new body.'"

Some of Abu Firas's stories imply that Sinan accepted the possibility of human rebirth in animal form. Once, when Sinan was travelling with a group from Qadmus to Masyaf, they met a large snake. His men would have killed it, but Sinan prevented them, saying that the snake was Fahd - the Ismaili who had arranged for the murder of the man who had tried to seize power after the death of Abu Muhammad. Fahd, Sinan explained, had assumed this form to expiate his many sins, and must not be released.

Another transmigration story concerns a monkey which was brought to Kahf by a wandering musician. Sinan told one of his people to give the monkey a coin. The monkey took it, examined it carefully, and then fell dead. Sinan paid the disconsolate musician for his animal and then explained the reason for its death. The monkey, he said, had been a king in a former life, and the coin bore the king's head. When it saw the coin it remembered who it had been, and so great was the shock of its present degradation that it died.

Kindness to animals

Once at Masyaf the butcher was about to slaughter a bullock, but it broke its halter and ran away with the knife between its teeth. The butcher would have recaptured it and killed it, but Sinan said that it had already been killed seven times in that place and should be spared; and he made its owner swear he would not kill it.

A man came to see Sinan in a village where he was staying. As soon as he dismounted, his mare, which was a particularly fine animal, escaped and ran up to Sinan; its eyes filled with tears and it rubbed its muzzle on against the ground. Sinan spoke to it kindly and reassuringly, saying that all would be well and it should return to its master. It did so; but almost at once it fell dead. The owner, thunderstruck, begged Sinan for an explanation. "You would not understand," Sinan replied, but still the man begged to be told. "Very well," Sinan said; "this mare was in previous life the daughter of a king. She came to me to complain of the cruel way you treated her, and she asked me to implore God to release her from you."

Sinan's kindness to animals -a most unexpected trait to find at that time and place- emerges yet again in another story, in which transmigration does not seem to play a part. A pigeon once flew in at his window and began to walk about on the carpet, cooing loudly. Sinan asked for a certain man to be brought before him. "Is this your pigeon?" he demanded. The man confirmed that it was. "This bird," Sinan said, "has come to me to complain about you. I swear to you that it you kill its nestlings again I will see to it that you burn at the stake first and in hell later."

A bogus magician

That this was no idle threat emerges from another story. There came to see Sinan a miracle-worker from Baghdad, whose specialty was to light a fire and go into it without suffering any harm. Sinan received him with honours, entertained him royally, and next morning sent him to the bath. He ordered the bath attendant to scrub

the man thoroughly and to take all his clothes away and bring them to him; in their place he provided cotton garments. When the magician came out of the bath and asked for his clothes, he was told that they had gone to the laundry, and he must therefore wear the ones that Sinan had supplied. Then he was brought before Sinan and given a meal. When he had eaten and washed his hands, Sinan said:

"I hear you can walk through fire; won't you be so good as to give us a demonstration?"

"Can I have my clothes?" begged the unfortunate magician.

"Why, does your fire-resistance depend on your supernatural powers, or only on your clothes?" Sinan demanded, and he went on: "Very well; we will neither boil you nor burn you on a pyre; we will throw you in a pit and light a fire there."

This was done; the wretched man was burnt until nothing was left but his hands, which Sinan sent to the Governor of Baghdad with a covering note; "and his soul," as Abu Firas remarks sententiously, "was thrown into the fires of hell." It seems a rather severe penalty for fraud.

It will be evident that a number of Abu Firas's stories concerns snakes, over which Sinan seems to have had special powers. When the fortress of Khawabi was being restored the workmen were at the point of clearing the soil from a large flagstone at the threshold of the main gate. Sinan sent a messenger post-haste to stop them until he arrived. When he reached the spot he said: "If you had moved this flagstone you would have damaged the talisman it covers, and then no one could have lived here because of the snakes." Then he told them to raise one side of the stone a little, and when this had been done there appeared a bronze snake. When everyone had seen it, Sinan had the stone replaced exactly as it had been.

As will be evident from these stories, Sinan's followers regarded him as more than human. Indeed it is said that because he limped (his foot had been injured by a falling stone, possibly in an earthquake) the more simple-minded among his people wished to kill him, in the confident expectation that he would be restored to them whole and uninjured; and he had quite a hard time to dissuade them.

Sinan's version of the Resurrection

Sinan's version of the resurrection appears to have differed somewhat from that put out from Alamut. Possibly the differences are more apparent than real (for our information about the whole matter is very scanty), but there are decided differences in emphasis, especially as regards the role of the Imam. The importance of the distant ruler of Alamut is played down, and instead the spotlight is focused on Sinan himself.

We can see this from Guyard's Fragment I, a fascinating, if obscure, Arabic text which is ascribed to Sinan. The title is as follows:

THE CHAPTER CONTAINING THE HOLY WORDS OF OUR LORD RASHID AL-DIN (PEACE BE UPON HIM): IT IS THE MOST EXCELLENT OF EXPLANATIONS. I PLACE MY TRUST IN MY LORD: THERE IS NO OTHER

GOD BUT HE: HE IS THE HIGH AND THE GREAT.

This title makes it clear at the outset that Sinan is a manifestation of the Divine Impulse; in other words, he seems to be equivalent to the Imam. The text elaborates this idea, by identifying Sinan with a variety of historical and legendary figures, including Khidr (the Green Man, an important Near Eastern mythological figure). Sinan, we are told, appears in the periods of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. Sometimes he is one personage, sometimes another; sometimes he is several at the same time, and he even appears as the stars, sun, and moon. But the final epiphany, the culmination of all the rest, is as Sinan himself.

> "Religion was not complete for you until I appeared to you in Rashid al-Din. Those who were prepared to recognize me did so, while others denied me; but the Truth goes on, and those who teach it continue their work; this is the pattern in every age and every cycle.
>
> "I am the master of creation. The dwelling [the world] is not empty of the eternal seeds. I am the witness, the watcher, the dispenser of mercy at the beginning and the end. Do not be deceived by the changing of appearances. You say, `So-and-so passed away, So-and-so succeeded him.' But I tell you to regard all the faces as one face, for as long as the master of creation is in this world, present, existent. Do not depart from the orders of him to whom you are engaged, whether he is Arab, Persian, Turk, or Greek. I am the ruler, the sovereign master of orders and of will. Whoever knows me from the esoteric aspect possesses the Truth, and no one can know me who does not obey my orders."

And the text concludes with a doxology which I find particularly delightful: "Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds! This is a clear explanation." Clarity is hardly a quality that I would have attributed to this treatise myself, and the commentators seem to have made heavy weather of it, to judge by the discrepancies in their interpretations.

Although there is room for argument about the details of the text, however, the general idea is clear. The Divine Impulse has appeared again and again throughout history in different forms. This is standard Ismaili doctrine, but what is new about the present version is that the latest epiphany is not the Imam but is Sinan himself.

Some such exaltation of Sinan's role would make good sense. Alamut was far away and the Syrians could hardly be expected to feel personal devotion for an Imam whom they would never see. Sinan, on the other hand, was in their presence. But he could hardly claim to be the Imam, except at the cost of branding the lord of Alamut as a usurper. If he were to avoid this, and at the same time not to represent himself as spiritually inferior to the lord of Alamut, he had to present a more flexible version of the Resurrection, in which all the leading figures were roughly equal and in which it was conceivable that the Divine Impulse could appear simultaneously in different forms.

To the skeptical modern mind, inured to the machinations of power politics, it may seem as if this were merely a cynical ploy on Sinan's part, designed to secure his own position as undisputed master in Syria, and perhaps this is partly what it was. I think,

nevertheless, that there is more to the story.

So far as we can tell, Sinan left Alamut with the blessing of Hasan II and probably furnished with instructions about how to proclaim the Resurrection. Indeed, the two men may well have discussed the ideas of the Resurrection many times in Alamut. Sinan may thus have had Hasan's authorization for the version which he eventually put out at Alamut. On the other hand, it is also possible that Sinan took matters very much into his own hands after the death of Hasan. He was certainly able and independent, and conditions in Syria were quite different from those in Iran. He may well have felt entitled to go his own way to a large extent when Hasan was murdered, and to make his own interpretation of Nizari doctrine. Aware as he was of his own power and authority, he probably felt little awe of Muhammad II, the youthful new ruler of Alamut, who was much younger than himself and whom he did not know personally, at least as an adult. We must remember, too, the difficulties of mediaeval communications, especially for a persecuted sect like the Nizaris, whose messengers must always travel clandestinely. Alamut was a long way off, and the temptation to a man of Sinan's resourcefulness to go his own way must have been almost irresistible.

The Syrian Nizaris remained nominally under the control of Alamut, but it appears that during Sinan's lifetime they enjoyed a good deal of autonomy. This is reflected in the reports which were current among them that Sinan had been seen on top of a mountain at night, talking to a green bird that glowed with light. Sinan said that this was the martyred Hasan II who had come to ask for his help - which implied, of course, that Sinan was at least Hasan's equal. We do not know much about relations between Syria and Alamut at this time, but there are suggestions that they were strained and even that Muhammad II wanted to get rid of Sinan and sent assassins against him; but Sinan discovered them in time and, instead of executing them, won them over. (But this may actually refer to attempts on Sinan's life made earlier, during the reign of Muhammad I, which would place them in a quite different light.)

Sinan is undoubtedly one of the most impressive of all the Nizari leaders, and a legendary awareness of this has persisted in the West, for Sinan, rather than the lord of Alamut, is the original Old Man of the Mountain. (`Old Man' is a literal translation of the Persian `pir', which really means a sheikh.) How much his alleged paranormal powers were genuine and how much they were due to rumour and folklore we cannot know, and to some extent the attitude you take to them depends on what you think about the reality of such phenomena as telepathy and clairvoyance. If you find such things credible there seems no reason why Sinan should not have been gifted in this way; if you don't, other explanations are of course possible. Guyard suggests that Sinan's alleged clairvoyance was really due to his use of carrier pigeons, and finds evidence for this in his fondness for pigeons; but this seems rather a contrived explanation.

Whatever his status as a seer may have been, Sinan was no mere fanatic or rabble-rouser. He was a remarkably able ruler, who preserved the independence of his people in the face of serious threats from outside and potentially dangerous tensions internally. His renown was well deserved.

Sinan's foreign policy: Muslims and Christians

Until his death in 1192, Sinan conducted a foreign policy that was as vigorous and resourceful as his internal one. His attention seems to have been divided approximately equally between his two main enemies, the Franks and the Sunni Muslims, both of whom represented threats which he overcame decisively.

Relations with the Muslims: Nur el Din and Saladin

During the early part of Sinan's rule the dominant figure in Syria was Nur el-Din, who did much to unite the Muslims against the Frankish invaders. A tall, dark-skinned man with regular features and a gentle, sad expression, he was an ardent Sunni; he lived simply and austerely, and seldom smiled. Not surprisingly, he was strongly opposed to the Nizaris and may have been planning an expedition against them when he died in 1174. The historian Ibn Khalikan records a letter apparently sent to Nur el-Din by Sinan: "To threaten us with war is like threatening a duck with water... The dove is threatening the eagle... You say you will cut off my head and destroy my castles? Vain hopes! The substance cannot be destroyed by accidents, any more than the soul can be destroyed by disease..."

This letter (which is also quoted as having been sent to Saladin) may really be from Sinan; certainly the reference to substance and accidents is an unmistakable Ismaili touch, and the avian metaphors accord well with Sinan's fondness for animals.

In 1169 Nur el-Din's lieutenant Shirkuh conquered Egypt for his master and became ruler in Cairo. But soon after this triumph he died, and was succeeded by Saladin - still a young man, who had given little token as yet of the pre-eminence he was later to achieve. The Fatimid dynasty survived the conquest for a year or two, but Saladin brought Egypt back into the Sunni fold. This he did at the insistence of Nur el-Din, and rather against his own will; not that he had any sympathy for Ismailism - on the contrary, he was if anything even more ardently Sunni than Nur el-Din - but after two centuries of Fatimid rule Egypt was a dangerous place for a foreign Sunni ruler, and Saladin feared for his life. His position was in fact unenviable: at home the Egyptian nobility was intriguing against him in collaboration with the Franks, who had long harboured designs on Egypt, while abroad his relations with Nur el-Din had deteriorated seriously. Then, in 1174, two events occurred that transformed the situation totally.

First, Nur el-Din died and was succeeded by his son, a boy of eleven. At once the western Muslim world fell apart in rival factions; there was no longer a serious threat to Saladin from Syria.

Shortly afterwards came the death of Amalric, King of Jerusalem. Like Nur el-Din, Amalric had been a strong ruler; according to Steven Runciman he was the last king of Jerusalem worthy of the name. At the time of his death he was planning further campaigns against Saladin, but now the unity of the Latin Kingdom, too, was in question, for Amalric's son Baldwin was thirteen and a leper.

Saladin took the opportunity which these events offered and marched into Syria. Soon he found himself in conflict with the Nizaris. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but Sinan may well have felt apprehensive at the thought of having such a powerful and virtually unopposed Sunni general more or less on his doorstep.

Whatever his exact motives may have been, Sinan dispatched assassins against Saladin on at least two occasions. The first was in December 1174 or January 1175, when Saladin was besieging Aleppo. The assassins got into his camp but were recognized; there was a fight and many people were killed, but Saladin escaped. The second attempt was in May 1176, when Saladin was attacked by assassins disguised as soldiers. He was wearing armour, however, and was not seriously hurt, although again a number of his officers were killed. After this, Saladin took to sleeping in a special wooden tower and no one whom he did not know personally was allowed to come near him.

In the summer of 1176 Saladin decided it was time to finish these dangerous Nizaris once and for all. He therefore invaded their territory and laid siege to Masyaf. For what followed we are once more indebted to the invaluable Abu Firas.

Sinan was not at Masyaf when Saladin encamped before it, but was staying at a village near Qadmus with only two companions. Saladin wrote him a letter demanding his surrender. The messenger arrived at the village, where Saladin was sitting on the terrace of a house. Unable to believe that such a great man should attended by only two companions, the messenger asked where Sinan was. On being assured that this was Sinan, he laughed scornfully and went towards him. As he approached, however, he saw Sinan enveloped in a bright light; the nearer he came, the more dazzling grew the light, until he was overcome by fear and unable to advance another step. Sinan told one of his companions to bring the man to him.

When he had recovered, the messenger confessed his slighting thoughts and begged Sinan to take him into his service. But Sinan sent him back to his master with a reply. "Tell the Sultan," Sinan said, "that if he wants me he should come here; I have only these two men whom you see. If he doesn't come to me, I shall go to him tomorrow."

Saladin, suspecting a trap, was unwilling to lead his army into the mountains, where an ambush would be easy. Sinan meanwhile left the village and and went to the top of a mountain overlooking Masyaf. Seeing him there from the valley below, Saladin surrounded the foot of the mountain with troops and sent about fifty or sixty high-ranking officers on horseback to arrest him. Sinan's companions urged flight, but Sinan reassured them, saying that the horsemen could not reach them. And indeed they were unable to do so; they had to confess their powerlessness and return to Saladin. Greatly surprised, the Sultan wrote a second letter to Sinan, who meanwhile, even before the letter had been sent, was composing a reply. A messenger set out on horseback with Saladin's letter. Seeing this, Saladin said to his companions: "That man is a Kurd. He thinks he can approach us but he will be unable to do so." Then he took a ring from his finger and told one of his men to place it on the ground at a distance from where they were sitting.

When the messenger reached the spot where the ring had been placed his horse stopped dead and refused to go on in spite of all he could do with whip and spurs. At last he had to dismount. "Take him my answer," said Sinan, "but when he wants to give you the letter, do not accept it; tell him to return it to the Sultan with the seal intact." Having given these instructions, Sinan took no further notice of the messenger.

When Saladin received Sinan's answer he found that it corresponded point for point with his own letter. Deeply impressed, he began to think that Sinan was more than human, and took elaborate precautions to prevent possible assassination attempts. But during the night Sinan came down from the mountain holding a lantern that was so bright that his people in the castle could see him clearly. Nevertheless he made his way unseen into the enemy camp and entered the tent of the sleeping Saladin. There were lamps at the head and foot of Saladin's bed; Sinan changed their positions, so that the lamp which had been at the foot now stood at the head and vice versa; also, he placed at the bedside some of the special cakes which the Ismailis baked and transfixed them with a poisoned dagger, on which was a piece of paper inscribed with threatening verses. Then he returned to the mountain.

Saladin woke just in time to see Sinan's retreating form. He gave a terrible cry, which brought his guards running. They assured him that they had seen and heard nothing. Everyone was overcome by fear, especially Saladin. Recognizing his peril, he now sent to Sinan asking for a safe-conduct, but Sinan replied that he must first cease his attack on Masyaf. Saladin thereupon raised his siege and marched away, abandoning all his military equipment, which Sinan parcelled into lots and distributed among his castles. When Saladin had left the area he once more asked Sinan for a safe-conduct, and this was now granted. Henceforth Saladin was Sinan's firm friend.

Abu Firas, in a note to this account, is at pains to assure us that Sinan's exploits were not performed by magic but were due to the grace of God. Our own reservations about this remarkable tale are likely to be somewhat different: how much is to be believed? Clearly the story includes a large element of the fabulous, but the fact remains that Saladin did raise the siege of Masyaf and from this time on he seems to have been on good terms with the Nizaris. It may well be that assassins did penetrate his camp and that fear for his personal safety was the reason for his change of plan. The historian Kamal al-Din tells an interesting story that supports this ideas.

Sinan sent a messenger to Saladin. The man was searched and found to be unarmed. He was therefore brought to Saladin, who told him to deliver his message, but he replied that Sinan had ordered him to do so only in private. Saladin therefore told everyone to leave except for two officers, but still the man would not give his message. Sinan refused to dismiss his two remaining companions, saying that he regarded them as his own sons. The messenger then turned to the two men and asked them whether they would kill Saladin if ordered to do so in the name of Sinan. "Give us your orders," they said, and drew their swords. Saladin was speechless; and the messenger left, taking with him the two officers. After this, Saladin decided to make peace with Sinan.

This account, if true, would certainly help to explain Saladin's changed attitude to the Nizaris.

Relations with the Franks

The Nizaris came into conflict with the Franks on a number of occasions in the early part of the twelfth century. Some of their mountain strongholds were captured from the Franks. At this early stage, however, the Franks considered the Nizaris simply as another group of Saracens; not until 1152 did the Nizaris first achieve widespread notoriety among the Christians, as the result of their murder of Count Raymond II of

Tripoli.

At this time Raymond's marriage was in a bad state: his wife Hodierna, sister of Queen Melisende, was headstrong and flighty, and Raymond, who was intensely jealous, tried to keep her shut up like a Muslim woman. Melisende came to Tripoli with her son, the king, to try to effect a reconciliation. In this she was successful, but it was decided that Hodierna should return with her to Jerusalem for a long holiday. The king was to stay on at Tripoli for military reasons, so the two ladies set off for Jerusalem without him and Raymond rode out along the road for a mile or two to escort them. As he returned to his capital a group of Assassins sprang on him and stabbed him to death. Two knights who tried to protect him were also killed. The news of the murders brought the garrison rushing out into the streets; they slaughtered all the Muslims they met, but the attackers escaped. The motive for this assassination is unknown.

After this, not much is heard of the Assassins in the Frankish chronicles for some time. At about this period they came under an obligation to pay tribute to the Templars; possibly this was connected with the murder of Raymond, or it may be the price that Sinan had to pay for bringing hostilities to an end when he came to power. But in 1173 there occurred one of the most surprising events in the whole story of the Nizaris in Syria, for in that year Sinan sent envoys to King Amalric in Jerusalem, proposing an alliance with the Franks against Nur el-Din and hinting that he and his people might convert to Christianity.

Much argument has centred on this amazing proposal, both at the time and subsequently. Was it genuine? Certainly it would have been a momentous step, for the Nizaris were still Muslims, even if heretical ones. Yet study of the Christian gospels was a long-standing tradition in Nizari circles and it seems likely that, for the more intellectually sophisticated Nizaris at least, Christianity was no further from the truth than was Sunni Islam. Sinan may genuinely have believed that he could interpret Christianity esoterically just as he did Islam; in both cases the outward form of the religion was of little consequence compared with this inner meaning, to which the Nizaris alone had the key. As for his people, presumably he trusted to his own prestige and authority to keep their allegiance during the transition.

The story of the would-be conversion is recorded by William of Tyre, whose work as a historian is highly thought of today and forms one of our principal sources of knowledge for the period. At this time he was Chancellor of the Kingdom and was therefore intimately involved in the events which he narrates. The story is therefore doubtless authentic.

To speculate on the might-have-beens of history is notoriously unwise, yet the temptation to try to picture the Nizaris as a Christian sect is almost irresistible. Hodgson suggests that they may have hoped to become a special military Christian order, like the Templars and Hospitallers. This idea recalls the intriguing possibility suggested by some writers, notably Von Hammer, that the organization of the Templars was to some extent modelled on that of the Assassins. Von Hammer's main reason for supposing this seems to have been his strong disapproval of both groups. However, the resemblances are accidental and superficial. Both Nizaris and Templars were, in the broadest sense, religious organizations with a hierarchical structure, but

the similarity is not at all close. Both had a Grand Master who enjoyed extensive powers, but this, too, is hardly very significant. The Templar knights wore white, and Von Hammer believes that the Assassins did likewise; but actually the evidence for this is scanty, though it is true that Hasan II wore white when he proclaimed the Resurrection at Alamut.

The main grounds for the supposed resemblance between the Templars and the Assassins, however, seems to have been the Templars' alleged heretical tendencies. But if, as seems likely, the Templars were innocent of the charges brought against them the whole argument falls to the ground. What appears to have happened is that the popular imagination played with the idea of a secret society and projected their unconscious fantasies and desires on the Templars; and Philip IV, who disbanded the Templars in France, made use of the resulting hostility as a pretext to satisfy his own greed. There is no evidence that the Templars modelled themselves on the Nizaris or even that they had any real knowledge of the Nizari organization, and the alleged resemblances tell us more about the preoccupations of nineteenth-century historians and antiquaries than they do about either the Nizaris or the Templars. Nevertheless, the legend of the Templars as a secret society possessed of ancient wisdom has persisted among later occultists, especially in France.

Far from having any covert sympathy with the Assassins, the Templars in fact destroyed the possibility of an alliance with them. One of Sinan's conditions for his offer of alliance was that the tribute which the Nizaris paid to the Templars should be remitted. His envoy was favourably received by King Amalric, and started homeward with an escort provided by the king and with the promise of an embassy to follow. But as they were passing Tripoli a Templar knight, one-eyed Walter of Mesnil, acting with the connivance of his Grand Master, ambushed and killed the envoy. Amalric was furious and ordered the Grand Master to hand Walter over for punishment. The Grand Master refused, saying merely that Walter should be sent to the Pope to be judged; but Amalric descended on the Order at Sidon, seized Walter, and threw him into prison at Tyre. It seems that Amalric intended to go to Rome himself next year to demand that the Order be dissolved.

The Assassins recognized that justice had been done and accepted the king's apologies, so that an alliance might still have been concluded; but next year Amalric died. Had he lived, the fate of the kingdom might have been different; not that the alliance with the Assassins would itself have been of decisive importance, but the fact that Amalric was willing to entertain the idea shows the breadth of his vision. The Templars' action, in contrast, shows the narrowness of theirs, and this narrowness was soon to contribute decisively to the loss of the kingdom.

The Nizaris made their peace with Saladin and the Franks found themselves facing a united Islam at a time when their own state was in disarray. Raymond III of Tripoli, son of that Raymond who had been murdered by the Assassins in 1152, became regent; he was able and determined but he could not unite the kingdom. Two parties arose, one composed of the native barons and the Hospitallers, who followed Raymond and who were prepared to reach a sensible accommodation with the Muslims, and the other, aggressively and militantly Christian, composed of the Templars and of newcomers from the West with little understanding of the situation in

the East.

The kingdom struggled on for a time but finally met its end at the Battle of Hattin in 1187, when the main part of the Christian forces was destroyed. Within three months Saladin had captured Jerusalem and the Latin Kingdom was at an end.

Closing years: the murder of Conrad of Montferrat

Although Jerusalem was lost, the other Frankish states endured much longer. In 1192, just before the deaths of both Sinan and Saladin, there occurred one of the most famous assassinations of a Frankish leader, that of Conrad of Montferrat.

Conrad had played a vital part in the saving of the Frankish states after the disaster of Hattin. He had been living in Constantinople at the time but had become involved in a murder there; he therefore sailed away secretly with a company of knights to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Places. Arriving at Acre, he discovered to his dismay that it had fallen to Saladin. He therefore sailed north to Tyre, which was also on the point of surrendering; but Conrad's vigour and determination saved the city and with it the Christian presence in Outremer.

Conrad massacred the Muslim prisoners in Tyre: a shabby return for Saladin's generosity in sparing the life of Conrad's father, the aged Marquis of Montferrat, who was Saladin's prisoner. This, perhaps, was Saladin's motive for wishing to have Conrad assassinated - if, indeed, Saladin was, as rumoured, the instigator. Two Assassins, dressed as monks, entered the service of Reynald of Sidon and Balian of Ramlah, who were both in Tyre with Conrad. They waited six months for an opportune moment. At last, as the Count was coming away from the Bishop's residence, they attacked him and stabbed him to death.

According to Abu Firas, Sinan ordered the assassination as a favour to Saladin. Abu Firas's account, however, contains a number of obvious discrepancies and the truth of the matter is unclear. According to one Muslim historian, Saladin did not welcome the death of Conrad, since Conrad was the rival of the even more feared Richard the Lion-Heart. Richard has also been suspected of complicity; according to Saladin's envoy in Tyre the two Assassins confessed under torture that Richard was the instigator, and this was widely believed among the Franks, especially when Richard's friend Count Henry of Champagne married Conrad's widow and succeeded to the throne. But it is unsafe to place much reliance on confessions obtained in this way.

If Saladin was responsible he did not live to profit from his action, for he died the same year, in March. Sinan died in September and was buried at Masyaf. He left the Nizaris of Syria in a strong position, and though this was somewhat weakened in the years that followed they maintained their independence until the Mongol conquest. After Sinan's death, however, Nizari activities in Syria lacked their earlier colourfulness and were more closely controlled by Alamut.

Chapter 5:
DECLINE AND FALL

While Sinan was conducting his more or less independent activities in Syria, Muhammad II was elaborating his ideas of the Resurrection in Alamut. He enjoyed a long reign - 44 years - but his final years were embittered by ill-feeling between himself and his son Hasan. The hostile historian Juvaini tells us that father and son went in mortal fear of each other, and while this may be an exaggeration there seems no doubt that relations were bad; for Hasan, to whom Muhammad had long ago given the irrevocable designation of future Imam, was already, even in his father's lifetime, showing signs that he hankered after that outer world which Muhammad had declared to be non-existent. The relationship between father and son was almost a mirror image of the earlier one between Muhammad I and Hasan II.

Muhammad died on 1st September 1210. Immediately on his accession Hasan reversed the policy of his father and grandfather and brought his people back to observance of the ritual law; moreover, the form of Islam which he reintroduced was Sunnism. For a time the Nizaris became almost respectable in the eyes of the outside world, while Hasan became known to the world at large as the "New Muslim".

The "New Muslim"

At first, the unexpected conversion to Sunnism of the lord of Alamut caused some eyebrow-raising, especially among the people of the nearby city of Qazvin, who knew the Nizaris of old. Was it genuine, or yet another example of Ismaili `dissimulation'?

It is certainly possible that Hasan was playing a complicated game, merely pretending to be a good Sunni for political reasons, but if so he was extremely thorough about it; for he arranged a public cursing of his father and grandfather and brought eminent men from Qazvin to go through the library at Alamut and pick out heretical books, which he then burnt ceremonially. Moreover, Hasan's family background gives reason for thinking he was sincere: his mother was a Sunni Muslim who after her son's accession went on pilgrimage to Mecca and is said to have been an ascetic, and he married four Sunni wives. His sister, too, was probably a Sunni. It may well be that he identified himself with his mother's religion in reaction to his father's views.

Within his own territories Hasan not only insisted on the observance of the ritual law, but he also built a mosque and a bath in every village to mark the incorporation of his territory into the orthodox community. In all this he was obeyed unquestioningly, for to his people he was still the Imam; a somewhat ironical situation.

Hasan's foreign policy reflected his Sunni enthusiasm. He was on good terms with the Caliph of Baghdad, who accorded his mother special honours when she passed through that city on her way to Mecca. This was important, for although the Caliphate had little political authority it had enormous prestige among the Sunnis even though Nasir, the Caliph at the time, was probably a Shiite. Nasir's friendship was instrumental in securing Hasan his wives from the Gilan nobility, among whom his

conversion was at first viewed with suspicion.

Under Hasan the Ismailis for the first time engaged in open warfare as opposed to terrorism. Hasan entered into an alliance with the lord of Azerbaijan against a man who had formerly been an Azerbaijani general but who had now set himself up as lord of Eastern Iraq. The Caliph of Baghdad also sent forces, troops coming from as far away as Syria. Most of the expenses were paid by the lord of Azerbaijan, and one gets the impression that the whole enterprise was regarded by the participants as something of a lark. The campaign lasted for a year and was successful; perhaps undeservedly so. The rebel lord was killed near Hamadan, and Hasan received two towns as his share of the loot.

These military adventures, including the preparations, occupied the first two years of Hasan's reign. It was the first time that any ruler of Alamut had left his territory at all, let alone been absent for such a long time. But after this Hasan returned home and went no more a-roving, relying instead on the traditional Nizari method of assassination to rid himself of enemies.

Hasan does not appear to have been an intellectual or to have written anything. He reigned for only eleven years, dying of dysentery in 1221. His heir was his son Muhammad III, but he was aged only nine at his father's death and so the government was in the hands of the vizier. Suspecting that Hasan's death had been due to poison, the vizier put to death Hasan's wives and sister and a large number of his relatives and confidants. Probably the suspicion was unjust, for Hasan's womenfolk had nothing to gain from his death and much to lose.

Muhammad III

Muhammad, it seems, had received no education; Juvaini suggests that this was because the Nizaris thought that education was unnecessary for the Imam and rejected any attempt to discipline him. As a result he grew up wild and uncontrollable. After some five or six years a physician bled him excessively and this induced `melancholia'. It is not easy to decide exactly what kind of disorder this was. In any case it grew worse, but no kind of treatment was permitted lest it be said that the Imam's commands issued from a disturbed mind. His chief amusement was to herd sheep. He became dangerously moody - so much so that those about him did not dare to report anything that had gone wrong for fear of torture and execution. His ambassadors, when they returned from foreign courts, told him what they thought he wished to hear and not what had really been said.

Muahammad is said to have undone all the work of his father and to have broken once more with orthodoxy. However, this does not seem to have been a deeply thought out rejection of Sunnism, for Muhammad, even if he was perhaps not so mad as some historians made out, was certainly no intellectual and was incapable of formulating sophisticated theological doctrines. It seems probable, in fact, that Hasan III's rapprochement with Sunnism was never formally abandoned but that breaches of the ritual law were no longer punished severely.

We actually know little about how far the Nizari community had accepted Hasan III's Sunni ideas. Although the early excitement of the Resurrection nearly fifty years earlier must have faded away by the time Hasan came to power, the Nizaris continued

to think of themselves as special. Clearly, however, their situation needed to be thought out anew in the changed circumstances brought about by Hasan III's reform. Oddly enough, however, this revision occurred, not in Hasan's own time, but in the seemingly unpropitious reign of his son Muhammad III. This was due largely to the work of a remarkable scholar called Nasir al-Din Tusi.

Tusi

Tusi was born in 1201. As a young man he became astrologer to the Ismaili lord in Quhistan, in the eastern Nizari territories. He hoped to go on from there to Baghdad, but -so he later claimed- his employer discovered his negotiations and prevented him from leaving, sending him instead to Alamut, where he remained until its capture by the Mongols. A born survivor, he then entered the service of the Mongol ruler Hulagu, for whom he worked for a further eighteen years despite intrigues against him by his enemies. He finally died a natural death in 1274: a considerable feat in the circumstances. He died in Baghdad, to which city he had accompanied his master Hulagu, and he obtained many books when the enormous library there was burnt by the Mongols.

Tusi always maintained that he was kept in Alamut against his will, but this is probably untrue. The library at Alamut (in spite of Hasan III's depredations) was renowned for its excellence and it attracted scholars from throughout Iran; it must have been a powerful draw to an intellect of the calibre of Tusi's. For Tusi was not merely an astronomer and astrologer; he wrote a vast amount on religion, philosophy, mathematics, and physics. He is listed as the author of no less than fifty-six works, most of which were in Arabic though some were in Persian, and he also wrote Persian poetry. Among his prose works were treatises on ethics, mineralogy and precious stones, and geomancy. Nor was he merely a bookworm; he also conducted scientific experiments, for he is recorded as investigating the effect of sudden loud noises on troops to see what difference it made if they were warned in advance.

Not surprisingly in view of the breadth of his interests, Tusi became involved in Ismaili philosophy and theology while he was at Alamut and he made an important contribution to late Ismaili thought. His own religious views, however, are uncertain. He is said to have been brought up as a Twelver Shiite, but he was accepted among the Ismailis as one of themselves. Whatever he may have been, his writings have played an important part in shaping Ismaili ideas down to our own day.

It is perhaps a pity that so original a thinker was not born some sixty years earlier, for it would have been fascinating to have had his account of the doctrine of the Resurrection when that event was still pristine. As it was, he found himself at Alamut when its greatness was in the past, and he was obliged to write about Nizari ideas, not as they had been at their zenith, but in the context of Hasan III's repudiation of them. This involved him in much subtle reasoning, for the Nizaris' position was a strange one. The outer world, declared non-existent by a previous Imam, Hasan II, was still there, and the Nizari community as a whole had not been translated to some celestial plane of being. These facts had to be explained away somehow. To a cynical observer the Imam might appear to be in the position of a prophet who predicts the end of the world on a given day and then has to explain the failure of his prophecy to his disillusioned followers.

Of course, the doctrine of the Resurrection was much subtler than this rather unfair analogy implies, and the Nizaris succeeded in coming to terms with their situation without too much difficulty. Nevertheless some considerable rethinking was required, especially as regards Hasan III's reconciliation with Sunnism.

The way out of the difficulty was found in the idea of alternating periods of concealment and manifestation. This had always been part of Ismaili thinking, but now it was refurbished and brought up to date to fit the new circumstances. It had long been accepted that it was legitimate, indeed praiseworthy, for Ismailis to practise tactical dissimulation of their teaching during difficult periods. In the same way, it was now held, the Imam might arbitrarily decide to conceal his true nature, wholly or partially. This had happened in the past, after the disappearance of Ismail's son and again after the death of Nizar. At other times, as in the reigns of Hasan II and Muhammad II, the Imam was visible and his true status was known to all. But Hasan III had chosen to revert to a condition of only partial manifestation, in which he could be seen but his true status was hidden.

No reason, Tusi said, could be assigned for these changes. The will of the Imam is inscrutable, because it is the Will of God. Moreover, it is not only the Imam's actions that are inscrutable; his words may be so too. This deliberate obscurity of utterance is obviously likely to make things difficult for his people, and indeed Tusi cites one Imam (perhaps Hasan II or Muhammad II) as saying: "Our orders are very difficult to carry out, our mystery is closely guarded, a hard thing made harder. No one can bear it except for the angel who stands close to the throne of God, or a prophet who is the apostle of God, or the believer whose heart God has tried with faith." Tusi probably quotes these words to help his readers to adjust to the changes brought about by Hasan III, but in the historical perspective of the Mongol invasion, soon to be loosed on the People of the Resurrection, they carry an unconscious note of terrible prophecy.

In spite of Tusi's arguments, many Nizaris probably did not relish the idea of a compulsory return to the observance of ritual law. Tusi confronts this difficulty at some length. There are, he says, two classes of people among the faithful: the strong and the weak. The strong are those who have reached union with God; having gained this state, they never lose it. The weak, on the other hand, are on the path to Realization but have not got there yet. Anyone who neglects the ritual law without having first attained union with God is a heretic and lacks all religion.

It seems that by Tusi's time the notion of a hierarchy of initiates had been revived in Alamut. Tusi describes this hierarchy, though he does not give the functions of the various grades; indeed, he says that the Ismaili student must not disclose this knowledge to unauthorised people. At the top, of course, is the Imam; next to him is the Supreme Proof, and other ranks are the Door to the Secrets, the Tongue of Knowledge, the Missionaries, the Teachers, and finally the Pupils. Another official, who seems to be an innovation at this time, is the Hand of Strength. This last rank was probably introduced in the reign of Hasan III, and its occupant was possibly a disciplinarian charged with imposition of the ritual law. There is a suggestion that the Hand of Strength came into conflict with a Proof who maintained the esoteric teaching.

Tusi's exposition of of Ismaili doctrine is an important work, but I can't help feeling that his approach lacks something. The sense of excitement that comes to us from the scanty writings of the Resurrection period is missing in Tusi; for all his intellectual sophistication, he was no mystic; he conveys subtle ideas but no passionate conviction.

Death of Muhammad III

Muhammad's condition worsened as time went by. His eldest son, Khur Shah, who had been born when Muhammad was only eighteen, was his designated successor; Muhammad wanted to revoke the designation but, as usual, could not do so. Instead he used to torment the boy, keeping him shut up in the women's quarters, from which the youth would escape to drink wine in secret when his father was away looking after his sheep. At length Khur Shah began to fear for his life and decided on a coup; the Nizari notables were willing to cooperate with him provided Muhammad was not hurt.

One day in 1255, however, when Khur Shah was ill in bed, Muhammad got drunk and lay down to sleep with some companions in a hut near his sheepfold at Shirkuh. At midnight he was found murdered, his head having been struck from his body by a single blow from an axe. Two of his companions had also been wounded, one fatally.

After a week of uncertainty and rumour, suspicion fell on one Hasan-i-Mazanderani, who was Muhammad's favourite companion. This man had fled to Alamut from the Mongols; he was handsome, and Muhammad conceived a passion for him. He allowed Hasan great liberty of speech, but in spite of his fondness for the youth he used to torment him in all kinds of ways: most of his teeth were broken and part of his penis had been amputated by the sadistic Muhammad. Even when Hasan grew older, Muhammad still preferred him to anyone else; he gave him his own mistress as a wife but continued to sleep with her openly himself, whereas Hasan might do so only when Muhammad permitted it. It is said that it was Hasan's wife who denounced her husband after Muhammad was murdered.

Because Hasan had Muhammad's ear, anyone who wanted a favour had to approach Muhammad via Hasan, and sometimes Hasan would issue orders on behalf of Muhammad without consulting him. In this way Hasan accumulated great wealth through bribes, though he was unable to make use of it for fear of Muhammad. He had to follow Muhammad's example by wearing old tattered clothes and going with him on his sheep-tending expeditions. For these reasons - and, according to Juvaini, for love of Islam and hatred of heresy, though this seems less probable - he murdered Muhammad. Khur Shah is said not to have had anything to do with the crime directly, though he may have connived at it.

Hasan was not arrested, but one day he was sent to see to the royal flock of sheep. While he was with them a man sent by Khur Shah crept up on him and struck off his head with an axe. Some say that this was done to prevent him talking about Khur Shah's complicity in the murder of Muhammad, though it may also have been to serve Hasan in exactly the same way that he had served Muhammad.

Even if Khur Shah was guilty of complicity in his father's murder, he did not have long to enjoy the fruits of his crime, for the Nizari state, which had survived so many

threats, was soon to meet its end from the implacable Mongols.

The coming of the Mongols

Probably few Westerners have any clear conception of how terrible was the destruction wrought in the Middle and Near East by the Mongol invasion. It was not the first nomad incursion into the area; the arrival of the Seljuq Turks had been enormously destructive, but what was distinctive about the Mongols was that they made a systematic policy of massacre. Contemporary accounts of their savagery are almost beyond belief, even today when we have witnessed appalling atrocities in many parts of the world. The material devestation they produced, likewise, remained unmatched until modern times.

The Mongols came from the eastern part of Central Asia. They conquered much of the known world and indeed became a serious threat to Europe at one time. The first Mongol rule, Jenghis Khan, invaded Transoxiana and Iran in 1219-27. At first he proposed a treaty of friendship with the Seljuq Sultan, Shah Muhammad, but the Sultan treacherously killed some Mongol envoys. Jenghis Khan then embarked on a series of campaigns, during which great cities were captured and destroyed, their populations being slaughtered by the million. Shah Muhammad evaded the pursuing Mongol force and took refuge on one of the off-shore islands in the Caspian, where he died. The Mongol troops now continued on what has been described as the greatest reconnaissance raid in history, for they invaded Georgia, passed into what is now southern Russia, entered the Crimea, where they defeated a Russian army, and returned across the Volga to rejoin Jenghis Khan, who was on his way home. This momentous expedition covered some 6,000 miles and brought the Mongols knowledge of the wider world that lay further to the West beyond the Islamic lands, a knowledge that was the foundation of their subsequent invasion of Russia and Europe.

Shah Muhammad was succeeded by Jalal al-Din, who conducted a dashing and temporarily successful campaign against the Mongols. Such was his valour that even Jenghis Khan was impressed: surrounded by his enemies after a battle, he cut his way through their ranks, recaptured his standard, and galloped his charger over a thirty-foot cliff into the Indus, bearing the banner over his head. Jengis Khan forbade his men to shoot at him and held up his courage as an example to his sons.

After this escape Jalal al-Din, with the few men who remained to him, invaded India and compelled the king at Delhi to give him his daughter in marriage. From this base he tried, a few years later, to reinvade Iran, but after many battles and adventures he was finally defeated, and while fleeing was killed by Kurdish tribesmen. His legend lived on, however, and in subsequent years a number of pretenders arose claiming to be Jalal al-Din.

The Mongols and the Nizaris

At first, these great events impinged only on the periphery of the Nizari's territory and consciousness. Although the Nizaris, like everyone else, had to adjust their policies to take account of the Mongols they remained independent. Indeed, their interests and those of the Mongols coincided up to a point, for both were opposed to the Seljuqs. However, a second Mongol invasion occurred in 1255-65 under Jingis's grandson Hulagu, brother of the Great Khan Mangu and founder of the Il-Khans (Independent

Khans). Another grandson, Khubilai, was dispatched to the east, where he conquered China and attempted, but failed, to invade Japan.

Hulagu's invasion was planned to deal with the Nizaris among other enemies. The reasons for this hostility are not wholly clear, but probably the Mongols had not realized at first how dangerous the Nizaris were reputed to be; increasing contacts with Muslims revealed this to them. For example, a Muslim official at the Great Khan's court was found to be wearing mail beneath his clothes, and on being questioned explained that he did so for fear of Ismaili assassins.

As for the Ismailis, they, like the Mongols, dreamt of world-wide domination, and therefore naturally looked on the Mongols as enemies, especially after an embassy they sent to the Mongol court was rejected. Impossible though the Ismaili's ambitions may seem today, they may not have looked so hopeless to the Mongols, for Ismaili representatives were widespread at the time and were possibly to be found as far afield as India. There are even reports of an Ismaili mission to Western Europe to try to arrange an alliance with the Christians against the Mongols. The Christians, however, still bemused by the delusion that the Great Khan was a Christian monarch (the legendary Prester John), were hoping for an alliance with him against Islam, so the Ismailis' mission had little chance of success.

Hulagu reached Nizari territory in Quhistan in the spring of 1256. Assassins were sent against him but he continued his advance, although the fortress of Gird Kuh held out. By September the Mongol armies wre approaching the castle of Maymun Diz, where Khur Shah was in residence. Hulagu demanded his surrender; he tried to temporize.

Khur Shah first sent his brother Shahanshah to Hulagu to offer his submission. Hulagu accepted, on condition that Khur Shah came in person and that all the Nizari fortresses were destroyed. Khur Shah said he would come in a year's time; he needed the year, he claimed, to dismantle the castles. He also asked that the castles of Alamut and Lamasar be exempted from the destruction order. Hulagu replied that he must either come himself in five days or send his son.

Khur Shah sent his son and carried out some token dismantlings. Hulagu suspected that the boy was not really Khur Shah's son; in any case, he was ony seven or eight years old, so Hulagu sent him back and asked instead for another brother to replace Shahanshah, who had been there for many months. Khur Shah sent another brother, Shiranshah, and also a number of Nizari dignitaries. By now, however, Hulagu's leisurely advance had brought him only three days' journey away; he sent Shiranshah back with an ultimatum. Khur Shah must either destroy Maymun Diz at once and come himself, or face the consequences. Meanwhile, Hulagu secretly killed a number of the Nizari hostages and then laid siege to Maymun Diz, arriving so suddenly that he nearly captured Khur Shan there and then at the foot of the castle.

The castle was very strong and could have held out almost indefinitely. However, Khur Shah was under pressure from the non-Ismaili scholars at Maymun Diz, notably Tusi, to surrender. The Mongols bombarded the castle with mangonels built from timber planted there by the Nizaris themselves. Khur Shah prevaricated desperately for a final fortnight, but at last he sent down a negotiating party, one of whose

members was Tusi. Next day he came down himself.

The Mongols then started demolishing the castle, though first they had to dispose of a devoted band of Nizaris who refused to surrender; this took four days. Khur Shah was treated well to start with, for the Mongols needed him to persuade the rest of the Nizari fortresses to surrender. Not all of them did so at first, evidently supposing that Khur Shah's orders were a ruse and not intended to be obeyed. Gird Kuh, Alamut, and Lamasar held out. After a few days the Alamut garrison changed its mind; they were allowed three days to remove their belongings, and then the Mongols moved in to destroy the buildings, even Hulagu himself climbing up to take a look. So great was the strength of the fortifications that the soldiers' task proved very hard; picks were useless and the men had to light fires on the roofs.

The historian Juvaini was a member of Hulagu's entourage and it is to him that we owe most of what little we know about the structure of Alamut. He describes how the rocks had been hollowed out to make tanks for all kinds of provisions; a man waded into the honey tank without realizing how deep it was and nearly drowned. Juvaini was allowed to examine the library; he picked out the Korans and other books which he regarded as non-heretical and also the astrolabes and other astronomical apparatus, but everything else, including no doubt hundreds of fascinating books about Ismaili philosophy, he burnt. For this piece of philistinism it is hard to forgive him.

Lamasar continued to hold out for a further year, and Gird Kuh for longer still. With the surrender of Alamut, however, Khur Shah's usefulness to the Mongols was largely finished. He was still treated as an honoured guest rather than as a prisoner, however; he fell in love with a Mongol girl and was allowed to marry her, and he was presented with a hundred male camels so that he could indulge his taste for watching camels fighting. He then asked to be sent to the Mongol court. According to Juvaini he reached it, but was reproached by Mangu for failing to secure the surrender of Gird Kuh and Lamasar, and was murdered by his escort on the way back to Iran. According to another source he never reached Mongolia at all but was killed on his journey out by orders of the Great Khan, who said that he was not worth providing relay horses for.

As soon as Khur Shah set out on his fateful journey all the Nizaris held by the Mongols, including Khur Shah's own family, babies and all, were put to death. Nevertheless, later generations of Ismailis were to claim that a son of Khur Shah - the next Imam - had previously been taken away to a place of safety.

So ended the long saga of the Nizaris at Alamut. The Sunnis rejoiced at their downfall, but unwisely. The Nizaris were perhaps enemies of Islam, but the Mongols were no friends to it. Two years later Baghdad followed Alamut to destruction. Hulagu was confirmed in his decision to attack the city by Tusi, who advised him that a fellow-astrologer's warnings of dire consequences that would follow from such a course might safely be disregarded. The Caliph was killed by being rolled in a blanket and trampled to death, the Mongols having a superstitious fear of spilling royal blood. As usual, the inhabitants of the city were slaughtered, only the houses of Christians being spared; 800,000 people are said to have been killed. The destruction of Baghdad was perhaps the crowning disaster of the whole Mongol invasion: an incalculable material, literary, and scientific treasure was obliterated. As the literary historian E.G.

Browne puts it, the loss suffered by Muslim learning defies description and almost surpasses imagination; `the very tradition of accurate scholarship and original research, so conspicuous in Arabic literature before this period, was almost destroyed. Never, probably, was so great and splendid a civilization so swiftly consumed with fire and quenched with blood.'

The Mongols in Syria

In Syria the advent of the Mongols was less disastrous than in Iran. They arrived in Syria in 1260 and captured some of the Nizari fortresses, including Masyaf. Next year, however, they were defeated and expelled by the energetic Mamluk Sultan Baybars of Egypt.

There is a Nizari story which relates to this period. After the expulsion of the Mongols some of the Nizaris who had surrendered to them were imprisoned by their indignant comrades. Among these prisoners was one Jamal al-Din, whose father had once been caught out by Sinan in a theft. He had stolen a casket containing gold during an earthquake, but Sinan, instead of making him give it back, ordered him to keep it. On this man's death the treasure had passed to his son, who had buried it at Masyaf when the Mongols arrived.

Jamal al-Din made a vow that, if he were released, he would build a shrine to Sinan. While he was in prison Sinan came to him in a dream and told him that he would be released next day. As soon as he was free he was to go to Masyaf and retrieve the casket, which would be unharmed except for a scorch mark caused by the Mongols' having lit a fire near the spot where it was hidden. He was to use the money it contained to build a shrine to Sinan on the mountain where he had confronted Saladin. Everything happened as the dream foretold, and the shrine was duly built.

Although Sultan Baybars seemed at first to be friendly to the Nizaris, their position deteriorated under the Mamluks, and gradually they came to be mere hired assassins at the orders of the Sultan. And yet the Nizaris survived, and their descendants have continued to live in the fastness of their mountains down to the present day.

The fate of the Ismailis in Iran

Although the impact of the Mongols in Iran was so much greater than in Syria, the Iranian Ismailis were not wholly cowed by their defeat. In 1275 they even regained possession of Alamut briefly, though they were soon expelled. Large Ismaili populations persisted in the Rudbar district and in Quhistan at least until the fourteenth century, and the grave of Hasan-i-Sabbah remained a place of pilgrimage for a long time. Indeed, it is said that a few Ismailis were still to be found in Quhistan even in the twentieth century.

It might seem that this would be the end of the story. But Ismaili ideas were not so easily disposed of. They have continued to flow secretly underground ever since, and have sprung forth in unexpected places right down to our own time.

Chapter 6:
EPILOGUE

Continuing echoes

The fall of Alamut was greeted with savage glee by orthodox Muslims like Juvaini, but their joy was premature, for the early Mongol rulers cared nothing for Islam. Jenghis Khan had been a shamanist and Mangu seems to have taken little interest in religion of any kind. Hulagu almost certainly became a Buddhist, and during the reign of Argun (1284-91) Buddhism became widespread in Iran. Unfortunately little is known about this fascinating topic, although it appears that during Argun's reign Iran was full of Buddhist temples, which were all destroyed when Prince Ghazan was converted to Islam, an event which occurred shortly before his accession to the throne at the end of the thirteenth century. Ghazan took the name Muhammad and Islam once again became the official religion of the country, after a lapse of some seventy years. The Buddhist priests were forcibly converted to Islam, but there was a good deal of backsliding and many of them were later sent home to Tibet, India, and Kashmir.

Ghazan was a Shiite. His brother Oljeitu, who succeeded him, started as a Christian, became a Buddhist, and ended as a Muslim; he became disillusioned by the sectarian squabbling of the various Sunni schools and turned, like his brother, to Shiism. Abu Said, his son and successor, was however a Sunni.

The Il-Khanid rulers of Iran who became converted to Islam were thus predominantly Shiite, and their Iranian subjects likewise moved gradually towards Shiism. During this time Twelver Shiism was taking on its definitive character which it has largely preserved since; a process in which Tusi played a major part. In view of Tusi's known association with Ismailism, it is difficult not to think that he must have caused Shiism to take on at least some subtle flavour of his old faith.

Whether or not this was the case, there is no doubt that Ismaili ideas continued to find expression within Islam via Sufism. As Henri Corbin, the historian of Ismailism, has said: `Ismailism...survived in Iran under the khirqa (the cloak) of Sufism, or, if one prefers, Sufism [took] on certain aspects of a crypto-Ismailism.' Nor was it only in Iran that Ismailism survived in this guise; it is possible that Ismailism influenced the development of Sufism in Spain. It may even have had an effect on mediaeval Europe. Odd echoes of Ismailism crop up in the most unlikely places.

A good example is the theme of the green bird. Sinan, it will be remembered, used to hold conversations at night with a mysterious green bird. This motif also figures in Sufism, for it was said that when a dying sheikh nominated an unexpected man as his successor, a green bird would then descend on the head of the selected individual as a sign that he was indeed the rightful spiritual heir. This is perhaps not so surprising, but what is very odd is that similar tales are told about mediaeval papal elections. It is difficult to explain this except as a roundabout transmission from Islamic, and perhaps Ismaili, sources.

Another echo of Ismailism can be found in the life of the great Sufi mystic and poet, Jalal al-Din Rumi. He had an extraordinary mystical relationship with a man called Shams-i-Tabriz, who is described as a weird figure wrapped in a a coarse felt blanket. He was more or less illiterate, but possessed of exceptional spiritual authority. He believed himself to be the mouthpiece of God - to be, in fact, divine. He was devoted to poverty, and wandered continually. So great was his influence on Rumi that the poet's followers finally had him murdered, but Rumi's most famous poetry, written subsequently, continued to be inspired by a sense of mystical identity with Shams.

According to E.G. Browne, Shams-i-Tabriz was said to have been a son of Hasan III of Alamut. This story, if true, links the spiritual legacy of the Nizaris with one of the most important mystical poets to have written in Persian - indeed, one of the foremost mystical poets in world literature.

Ismailism in modern times

Nizari Imams apparently continued to live secretly in Azerbaijan after the fall of Alamut. By the middle of the fifteenth century they had left this area and settled eventually in Anjudan, a large village near Sultanabad (now Araq). Meanwhile, in the fourteenth century missionaries had gone to India and had made a number of converts there. The Ismaili community in India came to be known as the Khojas.

In the nineteenth century the Ismaili Imam of the day, Hasan Ali Shah, received the title of Agha Khan from the Shah, but as a result of political difficulties he had to flee from Iran to India, where he was greeted as Imam by the Khojas.

At first his right to the title was disputed. A number of years before this, while he was still in Iran, he had sent an agent to Bombay to claim the tribute from the Khoja community which he said he was entitled to receive as their spiritual head. Some of the Khojas agreed to pay but others did not; the wrangling became bitter and in 1850 four of the recusants were openly assassinated by adherents of the Agha Khan. Four of the murderers were executed, and one of the judges at the trial, Sir Joseph Arnold, was given the task of investigating the background of the affair. The Agha Khan, who by that time was living in India, was called to give evidence in support of his claim. Finally, in 1866, Sir Joseph presented his conclusions.

His report wholly supported the Agha Khan's claims. The Khojas, Sir Joseph said, were undoubtedly members of the ancient sect of the Assassins. Four centuries earlier an Ismaili missionary had arrived in Sind from Khorasan and had made numerous converts, and from this centre the sect had spread throughout India. The missionary had followed the ancient Ismaili method of propaganda, claiming that Ismailism held the key to all religions, and he had written a book, the Desatir, which had remained the sacred book of the Khojas. Sir Joseph said that he had seen this book and that it consisted of ten chapters: the first nine dealt with nine incarnations of the god Vishnu, while the tenth dealt with the incarnation of Ali.

Ismailism, therefore, had been adapted for Indians by identifying Vishnu with Ali. For the Ismailis, all prophets and Imams, whatever their appearances, are the same; all are Divine manifestations. What could be more natural, therefore, than to represent Vishnu and Ali as simply different versions of the same Divine Impulse?

The Agha Khan, Sir Joseph concluded, was exactly what he claimed to be: the lineal descendant of Hasan II, fourth Lord of Alamut. He was, in fact, the Imam; and his descendants are so regarded by the Khojas to this day. Few spiritual leaders can boast so romantic a pedigree.

Appendix 1:
ISMAILI THEOSOPHY

The Ismaili world view was remarkably rich and complex. It cannot accurately be called either a philosophy or a theology but has features of both of these and is best referred to by the term theosophy, in the older sense of "divine wisdom". Ismailism must indeed have a strong claim to be one of the most remarkable speculative systems ever devised. To understand it you have to be prepared to make an imaginative leap into a conceptual universe which at first seems utterly remote from our own. And yet the Ismaili's motives were in some ways surprisingly similar to those of science. They sought to understand the world and our place within it; they made use of the information and concepts that lay to hand, and from these they built up a complex and all-embracing cosmology. They thus are a supreme example of what I have called the *Casaubon complex*.

Many influences played a part in shaping the Ismailis' world view, but three stand out in particular: first, the belief that the Koran contained an esoteric significance; second, the "science" of the day, especially astronomy (and astrology), which could also be understood esoterically with the help of the Ismaili interpretation of religion; and third, Neoplatonism, which provided the philosophical underpinning for the whole system. These three strands were interwoven to give a rich and remarkably coherent pattern.

The Ismaili principle of esoteric interpretation

The Ismailis were Muslims, even though heretical ones in the eyes of the Sunnis, and the Koran lay at the centre of their thinking. But in common with other Shiite sects the Ismailis were not content to dwell on the surface meaning of the text but made use of a subtle and elaborate method of textual exegesis, called *ta'wil*, which led them into a strange and exciting world that reminds me of the "fictions" of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges. Every verse of the sacred book, indeed every word and even every letter, is found to have an esoteric significance, the *batin*, which is additional and complementary to the exoteric, surface, meaning, the *zahir*. This quest for inner meaning in sacred texts was, it is true, a widespread obsession in the Middle Ages, and it can be found to some extent in Christianity as well, though it never became institutionalized among Christians as it did among the Ismailis; it is only on the fringes of Christianity, in the writings of Boehme or Swedenborg, for example, that a comparable intensity of purpose is to be found.

It may seem strange that the Ismailis should have believed that God had concealed his meaning in this abstruse manner. But the idea that Truth must not be given out recklessly to all and sundry but may be revealed only to those who are ready to receive it was widespread in the ancient world. This important principle was reinforced in the Ismailis' case by the need - in a predominantly hostile Sunni environment - to dissimulate and conceal their ideas. the concept of dissimulation (*taqiya*) was important for the Ismailis, and they frequently made use of it both to protect their doctrines from hostile critics and to interpret the otherwise inexplicable

behaviour sometimes exhibited by religious figures such as the Imam. If people acted in a way that appeared incompatible with their status, it was always possible to explain it as dissimulation.

The idea that the Koran contains different levels of significance was not peculiar to the Ismailis but was common to all the Shitte groups. The Shiite writers speak of there being four levels of meaning in each verse of the Koran: the first is the surface meaning, the second is the level of the allusion, the third is the occult sense, and the fourth is the level of spiritual teachings. These four levels are intended for different audiences: the first is for ordinary Muslims, the second is for the elite, the third is for the Friends of God (the "Inner Circle" of humanity), and the fourth is for the Prophets. A saying attributed to Ali, the First Imam, also gives four levels of meaning as contained in the Koran: the first is for oral recitation, the second is for interior comprehension, the third sets out thos things that are allowed and those that are not, and the fourth indicates the effect that God intends to produce in man by the verse in question.

A slightly different analysis, this time into three levels of significance, comes from the fourteenth-century Syrian Ismaili called Abu Firas (Chapter 4). As I mentioned briefly in Chapter 3, he compares the structure of religion to that of an egg. The shell is the exoteric aspect (*zahir*), which protects the delicate interior. The white is the esoteric aspect (*batin*), but inside this lies a still deeper truth (the *batin* of *batins*) corresponding to the yolk. Having given us this analogy, Abu Firas expands it. The shell symbolizes the physical body of man, the white his soul, and the yolk his Highest Principle. In terms of the senses, these three levels are related respectively to hearing, sight, and the heart (here regarded as a spritual sense-organ). The exoteric aspects of religion are apprehended with the ears, the esoteric with the eyes, and the Secret of Secrets with the heart.

By a typically Ismaili extension of the idea, the three levels of understanding also have a cosmological reference. The first level corresponds to the physical world and the earth element; the second level to the world of religion and to water; the third to the spiritual world and to air. But even this third level is concerned merely with *knowledge* of Reality, not with Reality itself; only prophets have access to Reality, through direct acquaintance with the Mystery. This faculty depends on the immediate reception of divine inspiration via the brain and corresponds to the fire element, which is too burning for ordinary mortals to withstand.

It might be thought that the attempt to find esoteric interpretations of the Koran would be a comparatively late idea, but there are indications that it goes back to the very beginnings of Islam - indeed, to Muhammad himself. This is suggested by a saying attributed to one of the most famous of Muhammad's Companions, Abdallah ibn Abbas. Once, while speaking to a large group of men about a verse of the Koran (6/12) which deals with the creation of the seven heavens and seven earths, Abdallah cried out: "O men! If I commented on this verse in the way I have heard it explained by the Prophet himself, you would stone me."

Although the Koran had a central role in Ismaili speculation, however, the search for esoteric significance was not confined to its pages. The method could in principle be applied to any field of knowedge, and in practice it often was. The Ismailis believed

that the whole of nature has an esoteric significance, if only we have eyes to see it. Thus, there are are seven planets, seven apertures of the body, seven cervical vertebrae, and so on. Such facts were regarded by the Ismailis as having the utmost occult significance. It was as if God had constructed the universe as a gigantic cryptogram, or intelligence test, to which he had provided the key in the Koran. But to use the Koran to solve the cosmic riddle one had to understand how it worked, and only the Ismailis possessed the requisite knowledge.

The Arabic language, being the raw material, so to speak, out of which the Koran was constructed, also contained vital clues to the organization of the universe, and here tha analogy with a cipher system is particularly close. for example, the Divine Command which give rise to creation is represented by the Arabic letters *kaf* (k) and *nun* (n). Two letters are needed because all creatures come together in pairs in order to reproduce; this represents a fundamental lawo the universe. The letters k and n are chosen because of their numerical values in the "abjad" system, according to which each letter in the Arabic alphabet is assigned a number equivalent. The value for k is 20 and that for n is 50, giving a total of 70 (10 x 7, the key Ismaili number).

The symbolism can be extended further. Between kaf and nun in the alphabet come *lam* (l) and *mim* (m). K and n symbolize respectively the First and Second Intelligences (to be discussed shortly), from which proceed Matter and Form, symbolized by l and m. L and m can also symbolize the Prophet and the Imam, or emanation and the return to the source; the list of possible correspondences can easily be extended, but those I have mentioned will give an idea of the Ismaili method of exegesis. Vital though it was, however, the search for occult significance in the Koran and in Nature was only one aspect of the Ismailis' intellectual activity. Another was the attempt to formulate their insights philosophically, and for this they drew heavily on Neoplatonism.

Neoplatonism and the concept of levels in Ismailism

Neoplatonism is a modern term coined to refer to the version of Platonism inaugurated by Plotinus (204-270 CE). Plotinus lived in Alexandria, but after his death his pupils carried his ideas to other places, notably Athens, where they continued to be taught until the School was closed by Justinian in 529. At about the time the Athenian School was declining (fifth and early sixth centuries), Neoplatonism was reintroduced in Alexandria, and Neoplatonic philosophers were active there when the city was captured by the Arabs in 641 CE. In about 720 the School moved to Antioch and in about 900 to Baghdad, and it thus had a direct influence on Islamic thought.

It was, however, far from being the only route by which Neoplatonic ideas reached the Arabs. Another was Syriac translations of Greek texts, and still another was the so-called Theology of Aristotle, which had immense authority because of its supposed authorship. It was however a forgery, being made up of extracts from Plotinus's "Enneads" padded out with material perhaps derived from Porphyry's lost commentary on the "Enneads". Another Neoplatonic work, the "Elements of Theology", almost certainly by Proclus, was also translated into Arabic and eventually reached thirteenth-century Scholastic authors such as St Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus as the "Liber de Causis".

Both these books fully expound and discuss the doctrine of *emanation*: that is, the view that the One gives rise to the world in a hierarchy of stages of manifestation, starting with the subtlest, most ethereal, level and ending with the material world. They also contain the idea of a return to the One, all the desires of of earthly creatures being in reality a longing for the One from which they come.

So far as Plotinus is concerned, we know that the concept of the One was not merely a philosophical speculation but derived from an actual experience. Plotinus himself says that he attained this experience many times, and his biographer Porphyry tells us that his master attained it four times in the six years that he knew him; Porphyry himself attained it once. The experience in question seems to be what has been described by the philosopher W.T. Stace as the "introvertive" mystical experience, meaning a condition in which first awareness of outer stimuli is lost, then all mental images, and finally the whole process of thought comes to a stop. Consciousness is not lost, however; the individual remains awake but with nothing to experience. This condition is described as a state of "pure awareness" - pure in the sense that it lacks any content save consciousness itself. Techniques of meditation exist that are intended to bring this state into being.

Even if we accept that this state is logically possible (not everyone does), the question remains: does it "mean" anything? The average modern Westerner, who has been brought up to distinguish sharply between the "real" objective world "out there" and the inner subjective world, may well feel that a "trance" state of this kind is a flimsy basis on which to found a philosophy. However, such experiences appear to underlie not only Neoplatonism but also other systems such as Advaita Vedanta in India, in which the state of pure awareness is believed to provide direct experience of the nature of reality. We don't know for certain that the Ismailis cultivated methods for attaining the state but their concept of Emanationism suggests that they may have done.

The essential idea of Emanationism is that everything that exists is produced by the One in a timeless act of generation. It is not that the One created the universe at a time in the past (the Big Bang, perhaps); rather, it gives rise to the universe outside time, for time itself is created by the One.

This idea contains an essential paradox. The One does not merely give rise to the universe, it actually **is** the universe. At the same time, the universe obviously consists of a multitude of different things. Here, then, is one statement of a basic paradox: the universe is simultaneously One and Many. Another way of stating the same paradox is to say that although the One gives rise to the universe, it remains quite separate and unaffected **and nothing happens to it at all**. When we pour wine from a bottle the bottle becomes empty, but this is not true of the One, which never changes at all. It is the Absolute ground of being.

The Ismaili version of the central mystical paradox

The Ismaili authors sometimes use the Neoplatonic term "the One" to refer to the Absolute ground of being. They also call it Allah and Bari. Whatever name is used, the essential point is that it is totally unknowable by any creature, even the very highest. Indeed, it should not really be named at all, for every name is composed of letters, and letters, being created things, cannot designate That which is beyond all

conception. (It is tempting to see here an echo of the Jewish idea that the true name of God cannot be uttered.)

The unknowable, then, is the source of all creation, yet it is totally uninvolved with creation. How, then, does it give rise to the universe? The answer is that it does not; and yet, creation does after all occur. This is again the central paradox. We cannot say anything about how creation happens, because it is prior to logic and inaccessible to it. We are therefore in the situation of the author of the thriller serial who, having landed his hero at the end of one instalment in an impossible predicament from which there was no conceivable way of escape, began the next instalment with the masterly sentence: "With one bound Jack was free". Creation simply happens, by virtue of a Divine Command (*amr*) or Word (c.f. the Logos of the Fourth Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word"). In so far as we can think about God at all, we are compelled to do so in terms of the Word.

A closely related concept is that of the First Intelligence, or Universal Reason. Many Ismaili authors, in fact, seem to regard the Word and the First Intelligence as identical. The First Intelligence, therefore, is the link between the unknowable Absolute and the universe. But we must not forget that this statement contains a mystery and a paradox, for it is also true to say that no such link exists.

The First Intelligence is not part of creation; rather, it is the act of creation itself, by virtue of which the universe comes into being. The first manifestation of the universe is the Second Intelligence, also known as the First Emanation and the Universal Soul. Below the Second Intelligence come further Intelligences, giving a total of 10 Intelligences (9 Emanations).

- First Intelligence (Command, Word) = Universal Reason
- Second Intelligence = Universal Soul = First Emanation
- Third Intelligence = Second Emanation
- Fourth Intelligence = Third Emanation
- Fifth Intelligence = Fourth Emanation
- Sixth Intelligence = Fifth Emanation
- Seventh Intelligence = Sixth Emanation
- Eighth Intelligence = Seventh Emanation
- Ninth Intelligence = Eighth Emanation
- Tenth Intelligence = Ninth Emanation

Notice particularly that the universe proper begins with the First Emanation (Second Intelligence); this is important for the Ismaili doctrine of the Fall, discussed below.

Each level is a world of its own, peopled by Forms of light (or archangels). The universe is thus conceived of as a hierarchy of spiritual planes, each with its appropriate denizens. (There is nothing as yet in this scheme about our physical world. To account for the existence of this the Ismailis, as we shall see in a moment, invoked the doctrine of the Fall.)

For each level of the hierarchy, the one above represents a boundary which it would be impious to attempt to cross. Divinity lies always on a higher plane, and longing for

union with the Divine tends to draw beings always upwards, towards the Source. A very interesting point brought out by H. Corbin is that the Ismailis derive the Arabic word *lah* (God, as in *Al-lah* from a root which conveys the idea of sadness and longing, as of a wanderer in the desert; similarly the Arabic letters that represent the word meaning "divinity" can also be read as meaning "sighing, desire". This is a deeply mystical idea, and it is fundamental to the Ismaili scheme. The occupants of each level of the hierarchy always long to move upwards, and this applies to human beings too. The goal of Ismailism is to provide the means whereby this cosmic desire may find fulfilment.

Running through Ismaili thought is the notion that true existence belongs to God alone, and that any reality which created beings and things possess is, so to speak, lent to them by God and is therefore ultimately illusory. The Persian writer Suhrawardi expresses this idea in a mystical novel, in which he says that the archangel Gabriel has two wings. The right wing is pure light and is turned towards God, while the left wing bears a dusky mark like the reddish tint sometimes seen in the moon or on the foot of a peacock; this wing faces away from God, towards non-existence. The two wings correspond to the First and Second Emanations respectively; the First Emanation is pure light, but the Second is sullied by the darkness of non-existence. From one aspect, therefore, Gabriel exists, but from the other he is non-existent. This means that in himself he is nothing, and his existence depends on God.

Throughout Ismaili theosophy this insistence on the nothingness of created things and beings is emphasized again and again. Everything is ultimately God and nothing but God. Here is an Ismaili address or sermon, evidently preached by one of the Imams.

> "The Prophet of God has said: `He who knows his own soul knows God', and he has also said `You shall know God through God himself'. By this he means that you are not you; he alone is you and it is through him that you exist. `He does not unite with you or you with him'; he does not become separate from you or you from him': by these words he does not mean to affirm your existence or to say that you have such-and-such properties; quite the contrary. He means that you have never existed and never will exist except through your soul; never by your own person, which is nothing. Therefore you cannot be either annihilated or caused to exist; if you know this, you know God ... ."

There is also a hint in this text to suggest that the Ismailis were using techniques for inducing mystical experience.

> "Whoever dies a mystical death witnesses the disappearance of his essence and his attributes. Here are the words of the Prophet: `Die before you die,' which means: `Know your souls and know the nothingness of your existence, if you wish to see the Being of the True Existent'."

The metaphor of dying is commonly used by mystics to describe the progresive abandonment of ordinary awareness which occurs in the introvertive mystical experience.

The Ismaili version of the Fall

The Ismaili version of the Fall is quite different from that which most Christians are familiar with (and which derives ultimately from St Augustine). Before time began, the Ismailis say, the First Intelligence issued a Proclamation or Summons to all the Forms of Light that occupied the various levels of the hierarchy. The word used for this Summons (davat) is important, because it is also applied to the Ismaili preaching on earth, which is thus regarded as a reflection or copy of the archetypal Summons in heaven. (The word is still in common use in modern Persian to mean simply "invitation".) The Universal Soul - the First Emanation - obeyed the Divine Invitation, but the Chief Archangel of the Second Level (the Third Intelligence) became confused in some way and refused. The exact reason for his refusal is unclear, but according to H. Corbin it was a failure to recognize the "boundary" constituted by the Universal Soul above him; this failure led him to try to reach God directly, which amounted to thinking that he himself was divine. His "sin" seems in fact to have been an error in theology. As a result of his mistake he was relegated from the second rank to the lowest of all, the tenth, while all the others moved one step up. (Notice that the interval from the Third Intelligence to the Tenth Intelligence is seven, the Ismaili mystic number.)

The erring archangel did not fall alone. With him at the second rank had been a number of other beings, and they fell into the same trap as he, misled by his bad example, so they had to accompany him to the tenth level. Realizing his mistake too late, the fallen archangel told his companions that the only way they could regain their former station was by following his orders and obeying the Intelligences whom they now found above them. Perhaps not unreasonably, most of them refused to listen to him, and the most recalcitrant of all went so far as to incite rebellion. This was the future Satan. "The archangel," he said, "has brought all this trouble on us; we merely did what he did himself. Now that he has landed us in this mess he wants to drag us into something even worse." Most of the other Beings agreed with him, but some rejected his arguments and others were uncertain what to do. The brilliance of those who rejected the archangel's authority became darkened and they were plunged into ignorance.

Realizing that if they remained as purely spiritual beings they would never be able to extricate themselves from their confusion, the archangel determined on a plan to liberate them. He made himself the Demiurge (a kind of minor creating deity) and created the material world to serve as the means by which these beings could regain their former status and enlightenment. It seems that the inertia of the material world is in some way necessary for redemption, rather as the presence of the atmosphere is necessary for the flight of a bird or an aircraft even though it is also a source of resistance that has to be overcome.

Were it not for the Fall, then, the material world would not exist. We could almost say that the material world is a collective illusion produced by our distorted vision. Rashid al-Din Sinan, the great Nizari chief in Syria during the period of the Resurrection, is quoted as saying: "Were it not for our passionate attachment to material things, there would exist God and nothing but God." This doesn't merely mean that we fail to see God because we are attached to the pleasures of this world. Sinan's point is more radical: the very existence of the world is due to our ignorance of our own true nature, which is God.

The former archangel of the second level, now become the Demiurge of our world, is the Celestial Adam, of whom the various Terrestrial Adams (for there are many such in the Ismaili scheme) are copies or reflections.

The Celestial Adam's companions were overcome by panic when they found themselves being overtaken by the darkness of the material world that Adam had created. They felt themselves to be drowning in matter, and from the struggles they made to resist being overwhelmed came the three dimensions of space. The densest material occupied the centre, while the substances of lesser density took up their relative positions as the various spheres of the Ptolemaic universe, which thus consists of eleven concentric layers. The earth is at the centre, and is surrounded by a shell of air; together these make up the lower, sublunary, world, which also contains the infernal regions. This is the realm of change and decay. Outside the earth come the nine celestial spheres: the seven "planets" (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn), the sphere of the fixed stars (the Zodiac), and finally the outer enclosing sphere. Each of the celestial spheres is under the tutelage of one of the Emanations.

Within this great concept of the universe as the means by which the cosmic return is to be effected, human life finds its meaning and purpose. We, indeed, are at the heart of the process of return, for we are the fallen Adam's companions. Moreover, every creature, indeed every created thing, is part of this process, and the world will endure until everything has returned to the Source. There is an interesting similarity here to the Mahayana Buddhist idea that all sentient creatures must eventually gain enlightenment, but the Ismaili position is even more radical, for even the mineral kingdom seems to be included. Thus we find the great Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, who may have been influenced by Ismaili ideas (Chapter 6), saying that he has died and been reborn successively as a mineral, a vegetable, an animal, and a man; why, then, should he fear to die again, since he will be reborn at a still higher level?

Human beings are midway between the material and the celestial worlds, and our nature partakes of both of these. Our animal nature draws us downwards, towards hell, while our souls incline upwards, towards heaven. This is why animals walk on all fours, with bent backs, while plants - even worse - have roots that actually penetrate the earth. Man, on the other hand, walks upright. (Birds, presumably, should be even more enlightened than men, but the Ismailis don't seem to have drawn this inference.)

Man's relationship to the other inhabitants of the earth is a reflection of the relationship of the Universal Soul to the rest of creation: that is, man (the microcosm) is the universe (the macrocosm) writ small. The Universal Soul governs the universe; Man, likewise, commands the creatures of the material world. By the same token he is responsible for their welfare and enlightenment. For the Ismailis, everything interlocks, and every level reflects the others. Ismailism thus accords well with modern notions of the ecological significance of human activity.

The Return to the Source

The Ismailis had a detailed explanation of the way in which the cosmic return is even now being accomplished. This process comes about, they believed, in a cyclical manner, through the agency of prophets and their helpers. The first prophet was the

first Terrestrial Adam, who was generated by cosmic forces. As the earth developed, it was acted upon by the various celestial spheres which enclosed it. Each sphere exerted its influence for a thousand years, until at the beginning of the seventh cycle the Moon brought into existence the first human being and his companions. (This is a good example of the Ismaili principle of esoteric interpretation, here applied to the seven days of creation specified in Genesis.)

The first Terrestrial Adam appeared in Ceylon, and he had twenty-seven companions, who were the manifestations on the material level of those Forms of Light who received the Celestial Adam's preaching favourably. The first Terrestrial Adam had many of the qualities of his celestial counterpart: he was sinless and perfect, and he transmitted these qualities to all the later Imams. During his rule men lived in Paradise and saw spiritual truths directly, not through the veil of symbolism as at present. He sent twelve of his companions to the various parts of the world, and inaugurated the series of historical cycles which has continued ever since.

When he appointed his successor, the first Terrestrial Adam went to the Tenth Level to replace the original Celestial Adam, who now moved one level up. (It is not clear what happened to the occupants of the Third Level; there seems to be nowhere for them to go.) This celestial game of Musical Chairs will continue until the whole cosmic situation is restored to its original condition.

The first Terrestrial Adam was, as I have said, merely the first of many subsequent Adams. Each Adam rules for 1000 years. Units of this duration are grouped together in cycles of seven. The first prophet of the 7000-year cycle - the Adam of that cycle - inaugurates a period of openly revealed truth, during which men live in a paradisal state. During the rule of his six successors, however, truth is hidden, and men have to follow an exoteric religious law, until at the end of the 7000 years comes the renewal of the paradisal state by the New Adam; this is the Resurrection (qiyama) - which of course took place at Alamut.

Each prophet (*natiq*) has a Companion called the *Wasi* (executor). The Wasi, together with a further six successors, make up the seven "silent" Imams (so called because they do not add anything new to what the prophet has taught). Different Ismaili authors explain the relation between prophet and Imam in various ways, but in general it appears that the prophet is responsible for the law and the exoteric aspects of the faith, while the Imam teaches inner spiritual truth.

The 7000-year cycles are themselves grouped into larger cycles of 7, which therefore each contain 49,000 years. The end of each large cycle is marked by a major Resurrection. There will eventually come a time when the whole sequence comes to an end and creation is restored to its original state. The time given for this is sometimes said to be 360,000 x 360,000 years. This figure is of considerable interest; see Appendix 2 for a discussion of the possible reasons why it was chosen.

Appendix 2:
CYCLICAL TIME IN ISMAILISM

The Ismailis attached great importance to the figure 360,000. They held that the duration of the universe would be 360,000 x 360,000 years. To the casual reader this might seem to be merely a very large number, perhaps selected arbitrarily in order to impress by its sheer size. However, there was nothing haphazard about the Ismailis' symbolism, so where did the number come from?

There is an important clue in the text known as the **Haft Bab** (Seven Gates), which says that in 360,000 years *the heavens revolve full circle*, and - it is implied - history repeats itself. The figure therefore has some connection with astronomy. There was an esoteric society within Islam at this time known as the Brethren of Purity, who also quote this figure. They are said to have obtained it from the Sindhind tables. The Sindhind was an Indian astronomical work composed in 628 by Brahmagupta and brought to Baghdad in 771. We thus have a direct historical link between Ismaili and Indian cosmologies. But where did the Indians get the 360,000 figure?

To discover this we have to look more closely at the number itself. The figure 360,000 is of course a multiple of 60; 60 x 3600 = 216,000, and 216,000 x 2 = 432,000. We have now arrived at a very significant number indeed, which turns up in the most surprising places. For example, Berossos, a Babylonian priest who wrote in Greek in about 280 BCE, gives a list of 10 mythological kings, the sum of whose quoted reigns is 432,000 years. A Sumerian tablet gives a similar though not identical list of kings, the total number of years in this case being 456,000. Fairly similar lists are to be found in Genesis, and it's evident that the authors of all these texts are drawing on a common tradition.

Again, in certain Indian texts (the Mahabharata and the Puranas), which were probably written some time after 400 CE but contain older material, we find the concept of the four *yugas* - great cycles of mythic time. The duration of the yugas is 1200 Divine Years. One Divine Year is 360 human years, and 1200 x 360 = 432,000.

These coincidences cannot have arisen by chance; there has to be a common source. This appears to be Mesopotamia. The Sumerians were fascinated by astronomy, and astrology may have originated in Sumeria. Sumerian calculation is based on 60, which was called the *soss*. There were also the *ner* (600) and the *sar* (3600); the *Great Sar* was 3600 x 60 = 216,000, half of 432,000. Evidently there is something very important and special about this figure.

In fact, it is related to the phenomenon known as the precession of the equinoxes. If you spin a top you will nearly always find that it doesn't remain exactly upright; instead, its summit (and its point) describe small circles, so that if the point on which it revolves were dipped in ink it would trace a circle on a sheet of paper. The axis of the earth also describes a circle of this kind, but very slowly, taking about 26,000 years for a complete rotation. This is the Platonic "Great Year".

For observers on the earth this slow rotation results in an apparent shift in the relative positions of the stars and the planets, with a consequent change in the apparent position of the sun in the Zodiac (as determined by noting the Zodiacal sign that rises above the horizon just before sunrise). Over a very long period the sun seems to "move backwards" in the Zodiac. The length of time that the sun spends in each sign is about 2,200 years. At the time of Christ it had just moved from Aries to Pisces (which is almost certainly why in early Christian times the symbol of Christ was taken to be the fish); shortly it will move from Pisces to Aquarius, hence the "Aquarian Age".

Corresponding to this apparent movement of the sun there is a change in the times of the summer and winter solstices and of the equinoxes; hence the description of the phenomenon as the precession of the equinoxes.

The duration of the Great Year is only approximately 26,000 years. More precisely, it is 25,920 years. But 25,920/60 = 432.

In view of all this it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Sumerians' interest in 60 (which survives in our 60 seconds in a minute and 60 minutes in an hour) derives from their awareness of the precession of the equinoxes - a phenomenon to which they evidently attached profound significance. All known multiplication tables from Nippur, Sippur, and Ashurbanipal are, according to Joseph Campbell, based on 12,960, which is half the Great Year of 25,920. Moreover, the Sumerian year (excluding the five festival days) consisted of 72 weeks, each of 5 days; and 72 x 360 = 25,920.

That the Mesopotamians knew of the precession of the equinoxes seems from these facts to be a near-certainty. In *Hamlet's Mill*, Santillana and Von Dechend suggested that the ancients would have been deeply impressed by this knowledge, and though many of these authors' claims seem to me far-fetched, I think they may well have been right about this. At a time when it was widely believed that events on earth were governed by the stars, the discovery would imply that the heavens were apparently revolving slowly and inexorably, like a giant mill grinding out the fate of mankind. "The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small." It followed that nothing on earth would endure for ever, for eventually the configuration of the stars would change and with it the fate of mankind. However, it was possible to infer that the sun would in the end traverse the whole Zodiac and return to its starting point, at which time, perhaps, history would repeat itself. Is this the foundation of the ancient belief in eternal recurrence? At any rate, the Ismailis' emphasis on the figure of 360,000 now makes sense; it was not arbitrary or haphazard, but was located in the complex structure of ancient cosmology and astrology.

Appendix 3:
THE NATURE AND ROLE OF THE ISMAILI IMAM

The Imam played a central role in the Ismaili scheme of redemption, as indeed he did for all the Shiite sects. There is a remarkable text, probably of very early date, in which the Imam claims to be divine: "I am the Door of Doors ... I am the Face of God". And in a later text, attributed to the Fatimid Caliph Muizz, the Imam again explicitly identifies himself with God. "O my God! I was one with you, until you manifested yourself by fragmenting your Unity ... I am great like you, in your supreme power...".

These pronouncements might suggest that the Imam is suffering from megalomania, but it is interesting that he insists that he himself is nothing at all; he is simply an appearance of God, as are all the Imams. For the Ismailis, everything is really God anyway, so the divinity of the Imam is not surprising. The whole of the material world, including the Imam, is merely an appearance, a virtual reality. We are such stuff as dreams are made on.

In this world of appearances, however, the Imam has a vital part to play; he is the beacon of light that shines amid the darkness of materiality. This is more than a mere metaphor; the concept of light is very important in Ismailism and turns up repeatedly. Thus the Imam is said to shine divine light on the souls of his followers, and their souls reflect the light as when the sun shines on glass. And the Imam in turn is linked to the heavenly worlds by a beam of light.

Whenever a man is initiated into the Ismaili community a spark of light forms within him. If he thinks well and acts rightly, this spark grows into a Form of Light and he is drawn towards the Form of Light of the adept who is in the rank immediately above. The Ismailis are responsible for one another and are bound together into a mystical brotherhood. The Ismaili community as a whole makes up a "Temple of Light". As soon as the young Imam received the designation making him an Imam, he becomes the pillar of this mystical Temple; each Imam has his own Temple, and all the Imams together have a kind of Grand Temple. When an Imam leaves this world, his Temple - that is, all the Ismailis who owe him devotion and allegiance - mount with him to the Tenth Level to await the end of the Cycle and the Resurrection. As the various historical periods succeed one another and the cosmic cycles revolve, the Imams and their attendant spirits move gradually upwards towards the Source.

This account might suggest that there are many different Imams, but this is not really so. All the Imams are really one. Thus, the Sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, says: "The current of divine power which belongs to the Imamate is present in all the Imams, even though they differ from one another in appearance and undergo changes from childhood to youth and from youth to old age... The Unity which is in us is not

multiplied."

The Imam is an ordinary human being in appearance, subject to the ordinary accidents and changes of human existence, but in his essential nature he is divine. When the physical body of the Imam dies, a subtle substance emanates from the corpse under celestial influence and gradually separates from it over three days. Attracted first by the moon, it passes upwards through the various heavenly spheres until it reaches the sun, which helps to free it from any impurities it may have acquired during its connection with the body. The other planets, especially Jupiter and Venus, also participate in this process, which Corbin calls "cosmic alchemy". Later, the purified essences descend in the light of the moon like dew and settle on the surface of pure water or on fruit that does not require to be cooked before eating. Divine Providence so arranges matters that these will be consumed by the Imam of the time and his wife, and will form the embryo of the future Imam.

When the Imam-to-be reaches the age of four years he becomes the focus for certain discarnate entities who occupy a high level in the Ismaili hierarchy. These merge with one another in the boy and become his soul; in so doing they gain fulfilment for themselves, while for the future Imam the event constitutes a second birth. Each of the entities takes on the function of a bodily organ, and the development is completed by the addition of the Divine Intelligence. This transformation involves the acquisition by the young Imam of a subtle body (*nasut*), distinct from and additional to his physical body. The subtle body cannot be seen by anyone except certain sages. The Imam thus has three sheaths or levels of existence: his physical body, his subtle body, and a Form of Light which is his Imamhood.

The subtle body may persist unchanged under different physical appearances or may appear under more than one physical form simultaneously. If the physical body of the Imam ceases to exist, either by natural death or as the result of accident or assassination, the subtle body is not harmed. The Ismailis believed that this explains the resurrection of Jesus, and they claimed that Muhammad, likewise, came to life three days after he was buried and appeared to Ali and Abu Bakr. A similar explanation is advanced for the reported appearance of Ismail in Basra three days after his death.

Although the Imamhood is transmitted directly from the Divine level, every Imam has to be designated formally as such by his predecessor. It isn't a question of *making* him an Imam, for he is that already, but rather of recognizing what is in fact the case. An Imam knows who his successor will be even before the child is born. In general, the Imamhood passes from father to eldest son, though there are exceptions. The Imamhood passes to the new incumbent only when his father is at the point of death, so there can never be two Imams at the same time.

During his father's lifetime the future Imam makes rapid progress through the various degrees of knowledge. If it should happen that the father dies before his son's esoteric initiation is complete, the son receives an infusion from the subtle body of his father to make good the deficiency. During infancy, however, an Imam cannot carry out his spiritual functions, and these may be taken over by a proxy Imam, as seems to have happened after the death of the seventh Imam, Muhammad ibn Ismail. During his minority the Imam remains hidden and is accompanied by three high-ranking

members of the Ismaili hierarchy, who also remain hidden but who govern the Ismaili community via three lesser dignitaries who represent them in the outer world. This "occultation" (*satr*) is a difficult time for the Ismaili community, which can no longer see the Imam or receive divine grace through him. Occultation is thus a testing time for the faithful, and it is also a severe trial for the Imam himself. He must remain in silence and take no part in outward Ismaili activities. He may also have to take on himself the spiritual work of the whole hierarchy, which is a difficult and exhausting task. But this testing time, which constitutes part of the spiritual training of the Imam, does not in any way diminish his glory. Such periods of occultation may be major or minor and occur as part of the great cosmic cycles.

The task of every Ismaili was to comprehend as far as possible the real nature of the Imam by cultivating his interior vision. It was not a question of seeing the external appearance of the Imam, for that meant nothing, but of grasping his true spiritual significance. The way to do this was by inceasing *self*-knowledge, since every creature, including oneself, is in essence an aspect of divinity. "He who knows his own soul knows his Lord." The knowledge referred to here is not of course an acquaintance with facts or theories but an inner transformation. By progressing step by step through the Ismaili hierarchy the pupil gradually refined his awareness, polishing his soul like a mirror until it could reflect Truth without distortion. We may picture the Ismaili faithful as sitting round the Imam in concentric spiritual circles, one inside another with the Imam at the centre. Wherever you happen to be, there is one circle inside yours, which is your "limit", and another outside, for which you are like an Intelligence. Your task is to move inwards, circle by circle, until you reach the Imam.

The purpose of the Ismaili Summons or Invitation was not merely to convince people of the truth of the Ismaili doctrines; the scope of the Ismaili vision was far wider than that. The Ismaili missionary activity was a reflection and a continuation of the activity of the Celestial Adam, who took on the task of bringing his confused and benighted companions back to the Light. For the Ismailis, human beings, and indeed all material creation, were not merely made in the image of celestial beings, they actually **were** those beings who had fallen into the ocean of matter and now were struggling to free themselves, like flies stuck to flypaper. The Ismaili Summons was thus a truly momentous undertaking of cosmic dimensions and significance.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Muslim names are a difficult topic; I've not attempted to be scholarly here. For a good discussion of the question, see `Mémoire sur les noms Musulmans', by M. Garcin de Tassy, in **Journal Asiatique**, Ser.5, Vol. 3 (1954), pp. 422-516.

- For the history of Iran, see P.M. Sykes, **A History of Persia**, Vol. 1, and E.G. Browne, **A Literary History of Persia**, Vols. 1 and 2. An excellent modern short introduction to the history of the period is David Morgan, **Mediaeval Persia 1040-1797**, in which the story of the Assassins is briefly outlined.

- For the early history of Islam, see J.B. Glubb, **A Short History of the Arab Peoples**.

- For B. Lewis's theory of the origin of the Fatimids, see **The Origins of Ismailism**, pp. 42-54.

- Ismaili Theosophy is a vast and complex subject, only touched on briefly in the main text, with further information in the appendices. For further information, see H. Corbin, **Histoire de la Philosophie Islamique** and H. Feki, **Les Idées Religieuses et Philosophiques de l'Ismaelisme Fatimide**. Another important source is the collection known as the **Guyard Fragments**; these are a number of Ismaili texts of mostly uncertain date that were translated and published by the French orientalist S. Guyard in the nineteenth century. Some of these appear to have been composed by the Fatimid Caliphs, while others are probably texts which were used by groups that came together to study Ismaili ideas. For the material in the Appendices, see the preceding references and also Joseph Campbell (1962), **The Masks of God**, vol. 2, pp. 115ff, and G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, **Hamlet's Mill: An essay on myth and the frame of time**.

- The main source for the history of the Assassins is M.G.S Hodgson, **The Order of Assassins**. See also `The Ismaili State', in **The Cambridge History of Iran**.

- Juvaini's **History** has been translated by J.A. Boyle.

- There is a great deal of material about Ismailism in E.G. Browne, op.cit., but his interpretations are somewhat out of date. The other main authority is W. Ivanow, but in reading him one needs to take account of his somewhat idiosyncratic bias, as discussed by Hodgson, op. cit., pp. 31-32 and passim, which makes him unsympathetic to `mysticism'.

- For accounts of Ismaili initiation ceremonies, see W. Ivanow, *The Book of the Teacher and the Pupil*, in **Studies in Early Persian Ismailism**, pp. 61-86; also H. Feki, op.cit.

- There are several sources for the Syrian period. The Abu Firas stories are to be found in S. Guyard's **Un Grand Maitre des Assassins au Temps de Saladin**.

Other material is in B. Lewis, **The Assassins** and Hodgson, op.cit. For the quotations from Sinan, see Guyard's Fragment I. For the suggestion that the Nizaris wished to become a Christian military order like the Templars, see Hodgson, op. cit., p. 204; the event is described in William of Tyre's **History of the Crusades**. For the general background to this period the main source is S. Runciman, **A History of the Crusades**, Vols. 1 and 2.

- For the period of decline at Alamut and the Mongol conquest, see Juvaini's **History** and Hodgson, op. cit.. Tusi's account of Ismaili ideas is found in the **Tassawwurat**.

- The story of Shams-i-Tabriz as the possible son of Hasan III is told by E.G. Browne, op. cit., II, p. 516. The green bird motif is discussed by Anne-Marie Schimmel in **The Mystical Dimensions of Islam**, p. 313.

- The Institute of Ismaili Studies in London has a large amount of information, including academic publications, about Ismailism both ancient and modern. Their website is well worth looking at for anyone interested in the subject.