

Bernard Lewis

The Assassins

An Historical Essay

IN THE YEAR 1332, when King Philip VI of France was contemplating a new crusade to recapture the lost Holy Places of Christendom, a German priest called Brocardus composed a treatise offering the king guidance and advice for the conduct of this enterprise. Brocardus, who had spent some time in Armenia, devoted an important part of his treatise to the peculiar hazards of such an expedition to the East, and the precautions needed to guard against them. Among these dangers, said Brocardus,

I name the Assassins, who are to be cursed and fled. They sell themselves, are thirsty for human blood, kill the innocent for a price, and care nothing for either life or salvation. Like the devil, they transfigure themselves into angels of light, by imitating the gestures, garments, languages, customs and acts of various nations and peoples; thus, hidden in sheep's clothing, they suffer death as soon as they are recognised. Since indeed I have not seen them, but know this of them only by repute or by true writings, I cannot reveal more, nor give fuller information. I cannot show how to recognise them by their customs or any other signs, for in these things they are unknown to me as to others also; nor can I show how to apprehend them by their name, for so execrable is their profession, and so abominated by all, that they conceal their own names as

much as they can. I therefore know only one single remedy for the safeguarding and protection of the king, that in all the royal household, for whatever service, however small or brief or mean, none should be admitted, save those whose country, place, lineage, condition and person are certainly, fully and clearly known.

For Brocardus, the Assassins are hired, secret murderers, of a peculiarly skilful and dangerous kind. Though naming them among the hazards of the East, he does not explicitly connect them with any particular place, sect, or nation, nor ascribe any religious beliefs or political purposes to them. They are simply ruthless and competent killers, and must be guarded against as such. Indeed, by the 13th century, the word Assassin, in variant forms, had already passed into European usage in this general sense of hired professional murderer. The Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani, who died in 1348, tells how the lord of Lucca sent "his assassins" (*i suoi assassini*) to Pisa to kill a troublesome enemy there. Even earlier, Dante, in a passing reference in the 19th canto of the *Inferno*, speaks of "the treacherous assassin" (*lo perfido assassin*); his 14th-century commentator Francesco da Buti, explaining a term which for some readers at the time may still have been strange and obscure, remarks: *Assassino è colui che uccide altrui per danari*—"An assassin is one who kills others for money." Since then "assassin" has become a common noun in most European languages. It means a murderer, more particularly one who kills by stealth or treachery, whose victim is a public figure and whose motive is fanaticism or greed.

IT WAS NOT ALWAYS SO. The word first appears in the chronicles of the Crusades, as the name of

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a strange group of Muslim sectaries in the Levant, led by a mysterious figure known as the Old Man of the Mountain, and abhorrent, by their beliefs and practices, to good Christians and Muslims alike. One of the earliest descriptions of the sect occurs in the report of an envoy sent to Egypt and Syria in 1175 by the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa.

Note, that on the confines of Damascus, Antioch and Aleppo there is a certain race of Saracens in the mountains, who in their own vernacular are called *Heyssessini*, and in Roman *segnors de montana*. This breed of men live without law; they eat swine's flesh against the law of the Saracens, and make use of all women without distinction, including their mothers and sisters. They live in the mountains and are well-nigh impregnable, for they withdraw into well-fortified castles. Their country is not very fertile, so that they live on their cattle. They have among them a Master, who strikes the greatest fear into all the Saracen princes both far and near, as well as the neighbouring Christian lords. For he has the habit of killing them in an astonishing way. The method by which this is done is as follows: this prince possesses in the mountains numerous and most beautiful palaces, surrounded by very high walls, so that none can enter except by a small and very well-guarded door. In these palaces he has many of the sons of his peasants brought up from early childhood. He has them taught various languages, as Latin, Greek, Roman, Saracen as well as many others. These young men are taught by their teachers from their earliest youth to their full manhood, that they must obey the lord of their land in all his words and commands; and that if they do so, he, who has power over all living gods, will give them the joys of paradise. They are also taught that they cannot be saved if they resist his will in anything. Note that, from the time when they are taken in as children, they see no one but their teachers and masters and receive no other instruction until they are summoned to the presence of the Prince to kill someone. When they are in the presence of the Prince, he asks them if they are willing to obey his commands, so that he may bestow paradise upon them. Whereupon, as they have been instructed, and without any objection or doubt, they throw themselves at his feet and reply with fervour that they will obey him in all things that he may command. Thereupon the Prince gives each one of them a golden dagger and sends them out to kill whichever prince he has marked down.

Writing a few years later, William, Archbishop of Tyre, included a brief account of the sect in his history of the Crusading states:

There is in the province of Tyre, otherwise called Phoenicia, and in the diocese of Tortosa, a people who possess ten strong castles, with their dependent villages; their number, according to

what we have often heard, is about 60,000 or more. It is their custom to install their master and choose their chief, not by hereditary right, but solely by virtue of merit. Disdaining any other title of dignity, they called him the Elder. The bond of submission and obedience that binds this people to their Chief is so strong, that there is no task so arduous, difficult or dangerous that any one of them would not undertake to perform it with the greatest zeal, as soon as the Chief has commanded it. If, for example, there be a prince who is hated or mistrusted by this people, the Chief gives a dagger to one or more of his followers. At once whoever receives the command sets out on his mission, without considering the consequences of the deed nor the possibility of escape. Zealous to complete his task, he toils and labours as long as may be needful, until chance gives him the opportunity to carry out his chief's orders. Both our people and the Saracens call them *Assissini*; we do not know the origin of this name.

IN 1192 the daggers of the Assassins, which had already struck down a number of Muslim princes and officers, found their first Crusader victim—Conrad of Montferrat, King of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. This murder made a profound impression among the Crusaders, and most of the chroniclers of the Third Crusade have something to say about the dreaded sectaries, their strange beliefs, their terrible methods, and their redoubtable chief. "I shall now relate things about this Elder," says the German chronicler Arnold of Lübeck,

which appear ridiculous, but which are attested to me by the evidence of reliable witnesses. This Old Man has by his witchcraft so bemused the men of his country, that they neither worship nor believe in any God but himself. Likewise he entices them in a strange manner with such hopes and with promises of such pleasures with eternal enjoyment, that they prefer rather to die than to live. Many of them even, when standing on a high wall, will jump off at his nod or command, and, shattering their skulls, die a miserable death. The most blessed, so he affirms, are those who shed the blood of men and in revenge for such deeds themselves suffer death. When therefore any of them have chosen to die in this way, murdering someone by craft and then themselves dying so blessedly in revenge for him, he himself hands them knives which are, so to speak, consecrated to this affair, and then intoxicates them with such a potion that they are plunged into ecstasy and oblivion, displays to them by his magic certain fantastic dreams, full of pleasures and delights, or rather of trumpery, and promises them eternal possession of these things in reward for such deeds.

At first it was the fanatical devotion, rather than the murderous methods, of the Assassins

that struck the imagination of Europe. "You have me more in your power," says a Provençal troubadour to his lady, "than the Old Man has his Assassins, who go to kill his mortal enemies. . . ." "Just as the Assassins serve their master unflinchingly," says another, "so I have served Love with unswerving loyalty." In an anonymous love-letter, the writer assures his lady: "I am your Assassin, who hopes to win paradise through doing your commands." In time, however, it was murder, rather than loyalty, that made the more powerful impression, and gave the word *assassin* the meaning that it has retained to the present day.

AS THE STAY OF the Crusaders in the Levant lengthened, more information about the Assassins became available, and there were even some Europeans who met and talked with them. The Templars and Hospitallers succeeded in establishing an ascendancy over the Assassin castles, and collected tribute from them. William of Tyre records an abortive approach by the Old Man of the Mountain to the King of Jerusalem, proposing some form of alliance. His continuator relates a somewhat questionable story of how Count Henry of Champagne, returning from Armenia in 1198, was entertained in his castle by the Old Man, who ordered a number of his henchmen to leap to their deaths from the ramparts for the edification of his guest, and then hospitably offered to provide others for his requirements: "and if there was any man who had done him an injury, he should let him know, and he would have him killed." Somewhat more plausibly, the English historian Matthew of Paris reports the arrival in Europe in 1238 of an embassy from some Muslim rulers, "and principally from the Old Man of the Mountain." They had come to seek help from the French and the English against the new, looming menace of the Mongols from the East. By 1250, when St. Louis led a crusade to the Holy Land, it was possible for him to exchange gifts and missions with the Old Man of the Mountain of that time. An Arabic-speaking friar, Yves the Breton, accompanied the king's messengers to the Assassins, and discussed religion with their chief. In his account, through the mists of ignorance and prejudice, one can faintly discern some of the known doctrines of the Islamic sect to which the Assassins belonged.

The Crusaders knew the Assassins only as a sect in Syria, and show little or no awareness

of their place in Islam, or their connections with other groups elsewhere in the Muslim lands. One of the best informed of crusading writers on Muslim affairs, James of Vitry, Bishop of Acre, noted at the beginning of the 13th century that the sect had begun in Persia—but seems to have known no more than that. In the second half of the century, however, new and direct information appeared concerning the parent sect in Persia. The first informant was William of Rubruck, a Flemish priest sent on a mission by the King of France to the court of the Great Khan at Karakorum in Mongolia, in the years 1253-5. William's journey took him through Persia where, he notes, the mountains of the Assassins adjoin the Caspian mountains south of the Caspian Sea. At Karakorum, William was struck by the elaborate security precautions, the reason for which was that the Great Khan had heard that no less than forty Assassins, in various disguises, had been sent to murder him. In response he sent one of his brothers with an army against the land of the Assassins, and ordered him to kill them all.

The word William uses for the Assassins in Persia is *Muliech* or *Mulihet*—a corruption of the Arabic *mulhid*, plural *malāhida*. This word, literally meaning deviator, was commonly applied to deviant religious sects, and particularly to the Ismailis, the group to which the Assassins belonged. It appears again in the account of a very much more famous traveller, Marco Polo, who passed through Persia in 1273, and describes the fortress and valley of Alamut, for long the headquarters of the sect.

"The Old Man was called in their language *ALOADIN*. He had caused a certain valley between two mountains to be enclosed, and had turned it into a garden, the largest and most beautiful that ever was seen, filled with every variety of fruit. In it were erected pavilions and palaces the most elegant that can be imagined, all covered with gilding and exquisite painting. And there were runnels too, flowing freely with wine and milk and honey and water; and numbers of ladies and of the most beautiful damsels in the world, who could play on all manner of instruments, and sung most sweetly, and danced in a manner that it was charming to behold. For the Old Man desired to make his people believe that this was actually Paradise. So he had fashioned it after the description that Mahommet gave of his Paradise, to wit, that it should be a beautiful garden running with conduits of wine and milk and honey and water,

and full of lovely women for the delectation of all its inmates. And sure enough the Saracens of those parts believed that it *was* Paradise!

"Now no man was allowed to enter the Garden save those whom he intended to be his *ASHISHIN*. There was a Fortress at the entrance to the Garden, strong enough to resist all the world, and there was no other way to get in. He kept at his Court a number of the youths of the country, from twelve to twenty years of age, such as had a taste for soldiering, and to these he used to tell tales about Paradise, just as Mahommet had been wont to do, and they believed in him just as the Saracens believe in Mahommet. Then he would introduce them into his garden, some four, or six, or ten at a time, having first made them drink a certain potion which cast them into a deep sleep, and then causing them to be lifted and carried in. So when they awoke, they found themselves in the Garden.

"When therefore they awoke, and found themselves in a place so charming, they deemed that it was Paradise in very truth. And the ladies and damsels dallied with them to their hearts' content, so that they had what young men would have; and with their own good will they never would have quitted the place.

"Now this Prince whom we call the Old One kept his Court in grand and noble style, and made those simple hill-folk about him believe firmly that he was a great prophet. And when he wanted one of his *Ashishin* to send on any mission, he would cause that potion whereof I spoke to be given to one of the youths in the garden, and then had him carried into his Palace. So when the young man awoke, he found himself in the Castle, and no longer in that Paradise; whereat he was not over well pleased. He was then conducted to the Old Man's presence, and bowed before him with great veneration as believing himself to be in the presence of a true prophet. The Prince would then ask whence he came, and he would reply that he came from Paradise! and that it was exactly such as Mahommet had described it in the Law. This of course gave the others who stood by, and who had not been admitted, the greatest desire to enter therein.

"So when the Old Man would have any Prince slain, he would say to such a youth: 'Go thou and slay So and So; and when thou returnest my angels shall bear thee into Paradise. And should'st thou die, nevertheless even so I will send my Angels to carry thee back into

Paradise.' So he caused them to believe; and thus there was no order of his that they would not affront any peril to execute, for the great desire they had to get back into that Paradise of his. And in this manner the Old Man got his people to murder any one whom he desired to get rid of. Thus, too, the great dread that he inspired all Princes withal, made them become his tributaries in order that he might abide at peace and amity with them.

"I should also tell you that the Old Man had certain others under him, who copied his proceedings and acted exactly in the same manner. One of these was sent into the territory of Damascus, and the other into Kurdistan."

IN SPEAKING OF the Ismailis of Persia as Assassins, and of their leader as the Old Man, Marco Polo—or his transcriber—was using terms already familiar in Europe. They had, however, come from Syria, not from Persia. The Arabic and Persian sources make it quite clear that "Assassin" was a local name, applied only to the Ismailis of Syria, and never to those of Persia or any other country. The title "Old Man of the Mountain" was also Syrian. It would be natural for the Ismailis to speak of their chief as Old Man or Elder, Arabic *Shaykh* or Persian *Pir*, a common term of respect among Muslims. The specific designation "Old Man of the Mountain," however, seems to have been used only in Syria, and perhaps only among the Crusaders, since it has not yet come to light in any Arabic text of the period.

The use of these terms, for both the Syrian and Persian branches of the sect, became general. Marco Polo's description, followed some half-century later by a similar account from Odoric of Pordenone, deepened the impact which the Syrian Assassins had made on the imagination of Europe. The stories of the gardens of paradise, the death-leap of the devotees, the superlative skill of the Assassins in disguise and in murder, and the mysterious figure of their chief, the Old Man of the Mountain, find many echoes in the literatures of Europe, spreading from history and travel into poetry, fiction, and myth.

THEY HAD THEIR EFFECT on politics also. From quite an early date there were some who detected the hand of the Old Man in political murders or attempts at murder

even in Europe. In 1158, when Frederick Barbarossa was besieging Milan, an "Assassin" was allegedly caught in his camp; in 1195, when King Richard Coeur de Lion was at Chinon, no less than fifteen so-called Assassins were apprehended, and confessed that they had been sent by the King of France to kill him. Before long, such charges became frequent, and numerous rulers or leaders were accused of being in league with the Old Man and of employing the services of his emissaries to destroy an inconvenient enemy. There can be little doubt that these charges are baseless. The chiefs of the Assassins, in Persia or in Syria, had no interest in the plots and intrigues of Western Europe; the European needed no help from outside in the various arts of murder. By the 14th century, the word assassin had come to mean murderer, and no longer implied any specific connection with the sect to which that name had originally belonged.

The sect continued, however, to arouse interest. The first Western attempt at a scholarly investigation of their history seems to be that of Denis Lebey de Batilly, published in Lyons in 1603. The date is significant. The pagan ethics of the Renaissance had brought a revival of murder as an instrument of policy; the wars of religion had elevated it to a pious duty. The emergence of the new monarchies, in which one man could determine the politics and religion of the state, made assassination an effective as well as an acceptable weapon. Princes and prelates were willing to hire murderers to strike down their political or religious opponents—and theorists were forthcoming to clothe the naked logic of violence in a decent covering of ideology.

Lebey de Batilly's purpose was modest; to explain the true historic meaning of a term which had acquired new currency in France. His study is based exclusively on Christian sources, and does not therefore go much beyond what was known in Europe in the 13th century. But even without new evidence there could be new insights. These must have come easily to the generation that had seen William of Nassau shot by a hireling of the King of Spain, Henry III of France stabbed by a Dominican friar, and Elizabeth of England hard pressed to escape her consecrated would-be murderers.

THE FIRST REALLY IMPORTANT ADVANCE towards solving the mystery of Assassin origins and identity was a product of the early Enlighten-

ment. It came in 1697, with the publication of Bartholomé d'Herbelot's great *Bibliothèque orientale*, a pioneer work containing most of what orientalist scholarship in Europe could at that time offer on the history, religion, and literature of Islam. Here for the first time an enquiring and undogmatic Western scholar made use of Muslim sources—the few that were then known in Europe—and tried to situate the Persian and Syrian Assassins in the broader context of Islamic religious history. They belonged, he showed, to the Ismailis, an important dissident sect, and itself an off-shoot of the Shi'a, whose quarrel with the Sunnis was the major religious schism in Islam. The heads of the Ismaili sect claimed to be Imams, descendants of Isma'il ibn Ja'far, and through him of the Prophet Muhammad by his daughter Fatima and his son-in-law Ali. During the 18th century other orientalists and historians took up the theme, and added new details on the history, beliefs, and connections of the Assassins and their parent sect, the Ismailis. Some writers also tried to explain the origin of the name Assassin—a word generally assumed to be Arabic, but not as yet attested in any known Arabic text. Several etymologies were proposed, none of them very convincing.

The beginning of the 19th century saw a new burst of interest in the Assassins. The French Revolution and its aftermath had revived public interest in conspiracy and murder; Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt and Syria brought new and closer contacts with the Islamic orient, and new opportunities for Islamic studies. After some attempts by lesser men to satisfy public interest, Silvestre de Sacy, the greatest Arabic scholar of the time, turned his attention to the theme, and in 1809 read a memoir to the *Institut de France*, on the dynasty of the Assassins and the etymology of their name.

Silvestre de Sacy's memoir was a landmark in Assassin studies. In addition to the handful of oriental sources used by previous scholars, he was able to draw on a rich collection of Arabic manuscripts in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris, including several of the major Arabic chronicles of the Crusades hitherto unknown to Western scholarship; his analysis of the sources wholly superseded the efforts of earlier European writers. Certainly the most important part of the memoir was his solution, once and for all, of the vexed problem of the origin of the word "Assassin." After examining and dismissing previous theories, he

showed conclusively that the word came from the Arabic *hashish*, and suggested that the variant forms Assassini, Assissini, Heyssisini, etc., in the crusading sources were based on the alternative Arabic forms *hashishī* and *hashshāsh* (colloquial plurals, *hashshīyyīn* and *hashshāshīn*). In confirmation of this he was able to adduce several Arabic texts in which the sectaries were called *hashishī*, but none in which they were called *hashshāsh*. Since then, the form *hashishī* has been confirmed by additional texts that have come to light—but there is still, as far as is known, no text in which the Ismailis are called *hashshāsh*. It would therefore seem that this part of Silvestre de Sacy's explanation must be abandoned, and all the European variants derived from the Arabic *hashishī* and its plural *hashshīyyīn*.

THIS REVISION raises again the question of the significance, as distinct from the etymology, of the term. The original meaning of *hashish* in Arabic is herbage, more particularly dry herbage or fodder. Later it was specialised to denote Indian hemp, *cannabis sativa*, the narcotic effects of which were already known to the Muslims in the Middle Ages. *Hashshāsh*, a more modern word, is the common term for a hashish-taker. Silvestre de Sacy, while not adopting the opinion held by many later writers that the Assassins were so called because they were addicts, nevertheless explains the name as due to the secret use of hashish by the leaders of the sect, to give their emissaries a foretaste of the delights of paradise that awaited them on the successful completion of their missions. He links this interpretation with the story told by Marco Polo, and also found in other eastern and western sources, of the secret "gardens of paradise" into which the drugged devotees were introduced.

Despite its early appearance and wide currency, this story is almost certainly untrue. The use and effects of hashish were known at the time, and were no secret; the use of the drug by the sectaries is attested neither by Ismaili nor by serious Sunni authors. Even the name *hashishī* is local to Syria, and is probably a term of popular abuse. In all probability it was the name that gave rise to the story, rather than the reverse. Of various explanations that have been offered, the likeliest is that it was an expression of contempt for the wild beliefs and extravagant behaviour of the sectaries—a derisive comment

on their conduct rather than a description of their practices. For Western observers in particular, such stories may also have served to provide a rational explanation for behaviour that was otherwise totally inexplicable.

Silvestre de Sacy's memoir opened the way for a series of further studies on the subject. Certainly the most widely read of these was the *History of the Assassins* of the Austrian orientalist Joseph von Hammer (published in German in Stuttgart in 1818 and in French and English translations in 1833 and 1835). Hammer's history, though based on oriental sources, is very much a tract for the times—a warning against "the pernicious influence of secret societies . . . and . . . the dreadful prostitution of religion to the horrors of unbridled ambition." For him, the Assassins were a

union of impostors and dupes which, under the mask of a more austere creed and severer morals, undermined all religion and morality; that order of murderers, beneath whose daggers the lords of nations fell; all powerful, because, for the space of three centuries, they were universally dreaded, until the den of ruffians fell with the khaliphate, to whom, as the centre of spiritual and temporal power, it had at the outset sworn destruction, and by whose ruins it was itself overwhelmed.

In case any of his readers miss the point, Hammer compares the Assassins with the Templars, the Jesuits, the Illuminati, the Freemasons, and the regicides of the French National Convention.

As in the west, revolutionary societies arose from the bosom of the Freemasons, so in the east, did the Assassins spring from the Ismailites. . . . The insanity of the enlighteners, who thought that by mere preaching, they could emancipate nations from the protecting care of princes, and the leading-strings of practical religion, has shown itself in the most terrible manner by the effects of the French revolution, as it did in Asia, in the reign of Hassan II.

Hammer's book exercised considerable influence, and for about a century and a half was the main source of the popular Western image of the Assassins. Meanwhile scholarly research was progressing, especially in France, where much work was done in discovering, editing, translating and exploiting Arabic and Persian texts relating to the history of the Ismailis in Syria and Persia. Among the most important were the works of two Persian historians of the Mongol period, Juvayni and Rashid al-Din; both of them had access to Ismaili writings

from Alamut, and, by using them, were able to provide the first connected account of the Ismaili principality in Northern Persia.

AN IMPORTANT STEP FORWARD was made possible by the appearance of material of a new kind. The use of Muslim sources had added much to the knowledge derived from mediaeval European works—but even these were mainly Sunni; though far better informed than the Western chroniclers and travellers, they were if anything even more hostile to the doctrines and purposes of the Ismailis. Now, for the first time, information came to light which reflected directly the point of view of the Ismailis themselves. Already in the 18th century travellers had noted that there were still Ismailis in some villages in Central Syria. In 1810 Rousseau, the French consul-general in Aleppo, stimulated by Silvestre de Sacy, published a description of the Ismailis in Syria in his own day, with geographical, historical, and religious data. The sources are not given, but appear to be local and oral. Silvestre de Sacy himself provided some additional explanatory notes. Rousseau was the first European to draw on such local informants, bringing to Europe for the first time some scraps of information from the Ismailis themselves. In 1812 he published extracts from an Ismaili book obtained in Masyaf, one of the main Ismaili centres in Syria. Though it contains little historical information, it throws some light on the religious doctrines of the sect. Other texts from Syria also found their way to Paris, where some of them were later published. During the 19th century a number of European and American travellers visited the Ismaili villages in Syria, and reported briefly on the ruins and their inhabitants.

Less information was available from Persia, where the remains of the great castle of Alamut still stand.¹ But there were more than remains to commemorate the past greatness of the Ismailis in Persia. In 1811, Consul Rousseau from Aleppo,

in the course of a journey to Persia, enquired about Ismailis, and was surprised to learn that there were still many in the country who owed allegiance to an Imam of the line of Ismail. His name was Shah Khalilullah, and he resided in a village called Kehk, near Qumm, half-way between Tehran and Isfahan.

"I may add" [says Rousseau] "that Shah Khalilullah is revered almost as a god by his followers, who attribute the gift of miracles to him, enrich him continually with what they bequeath, and often embellish him with the pompous title of Caliph. There are Ismailis as far away as India, and they can be seen regularly coming to Kehk from the banks of the Ganges and the Indus, to receive the blessings of their Imam, in return for the pious and magnificent offerings which they bring him."

In 1825 an English traveller, J. B. Fraser, confirmed the survival of Ismailis in Persia, and their continued devotion to their chief, though they no longer practised murder at his behest: "even at this day the sheikh or head of the sect is most blindly revered by those who yet remain, though their zeal has lost the deep and terrific character which it once bore." There were followers of the sect in India too, who were "particularly devoted to their saint." Their previous chief, Shah Khalilullah, had been murdered in Yazd some years earlier (in fact in 1817), by rebels against the governor of the city. "He was succeeded in his religious capacity by one of his sons, who meets with a similar respect from the sect."

THE NEXT ACCESSION of information came from quite a different source. In December 1850, a somewhat unusual case of murder came before the criminal court in Bombay. Four men had been set upon and murdered, in broad daylight, as the result of a difference of opinion within the religious community to which they belonged. Nineteen men were tried, and four of them were sentenced to death and hanged. The victims and their attackers were both members of a local Muslim sect known as the Khojas—a community of some tens of thousands, mainly traders, in the Bombay Presidency and other parts of India.

The incident arose from a dispute that had been going on for more than twenty years. It had begun in 1827, when a group of Khojas had refused to make the customary payments to the head of their sect, who resided in Persia. This was the son of Shah Khalilullah, who had succeeded his murdered father in 1817. In 1818 the

¹ In 1833, in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, a British officer called Colonel W. Monteith described a journey in which he had got as far as the entrance to the Alamut valley but did not actually reach or identify the castle. This was achieved by a brother officer, Lieutenant-Colonel [Sir] Justin Sheil, whose account appeared in the same journal in 1838. A third British officer, named Stewart, visited the castle a few years later, after which nearly a century passed before the exploration of Alamut was resumed.

Shah of Persia had appointed him governor of Mehellat and Qumm, and had given him the title of Aga Khan. It is by this title that he and his descendants are usually known.

Confronted with this sudden refusal by a group of his followers in India to pay their religious dues, the Aga Khan sent a special envoy from Persia to Bombay, to bring them back into the fold. With the envoy went the Aga Khan's grandmother, who "herself appears to have harangued the Bombay Khojas" in an effort to regain their allegiance. Most of the Khojas remained faithful to their chief, but a small group persisted in their opposition, maintaining that they owed no obedience to the Aga Khan and denying that the Khojas were in any way connected with him. The resulting conflicts aroused strong feelings in the community and culminated in the murders of 1850.

IN THE MEANTIME the Aga Khan himself had left Persia, where he had led an unsuccessful rising against the Shah, and after a short stay in Afghanistan he had taken refuge in India. His services to the British in Afghanistan and Sind gave him some claim to British gratitude. After staying first in Sind and then in Calcutta, he finally settled in Bombay, where he established himself as effective head of the Khoja community. There were still, however, some dissidents who opposed him, and who sought to use the machinery of the law to defeat his claims. After some preliminary actions, in April 1866 a group of seceders filed information and a bill in the High Court of Bombay, asking for an injunction restraining the Aga Khan "from interfering in the management of the trust property and affairs of the Khoja community."

The case was tried by the Chief Justice, Sir Joseph Arnould. The hearing lasted for twenty-five days, and involved almost the whole of the Bombay bar. Both sides brought elaborately argued and extensively documented cases, and the enquiries of the court ranged far and deep, in history and genealogy, theology and law. Among numerous witnesses, the Aga Khan himself testified before the court, and adduced evidence of his descent. On 12 November 1866 Sir Joseph Arnould delivered judgment. The Khojas of Bombay, he found, were part of the larger Khoja community of India, whose religion was that of the Ismaili wing of the Shi'a. They were "a sect of people whose ancestors

were Hindu in origin; which was converted to and has throughout abided in the faith of the Shi'a Imamee Ismailis; which has always been and still is bound by ties of spiritual allegiance to the hereditary Imams of the Ismailis." They had been converted some four hundred years previously by an Ismaili missionary from Persia, and had remained subject to the spiritual authority of the line of Ismaili Imams, the latest of whom was the Aga Khan. These Imams were descended from the Lords of Alamut, and, through them, claimed descent from the Fatimid Caliphs of Egypt and, ultimately, from the Prophet Muhammad. Their followers, in mediaeval times, had become famous under the name of the Assassins.

The Arnould judgment, supported by a wealth of historical evidence and argument, thus legally established the status of the Khojas as a community of Ismailis, of the Ismailis as heirs of the Assassins, and of the Aga Khan as spiritual head of the Ismailis and heir of the Imams of Alamut. Detailed information about the community was provided for the first time in the *Gazeteer of the Bombay Presidency* in 1899.

THE ARNOULD JUDGMENT had also drawn attention to the existence of Ismaili communities in other parts of the world, some of which did not in fact recognise the Aga Khan as their chief. These communities were usually small minorities in remote and isolated places, difficult of access in every sense, and secretive to the point of death about their beliefs and their writings. Some of these writings, in manuscript, nevertheless found their way into the hands of scholars. At first these all came from Syria—the first area of Western interest in the Ismailis, in modern as in mediaeval times. Others followed, from widely separated regions. In 1903 an Italian merchant called Caprotti brought a collection of some sixty Arabic manuscripts from San'a, in the Yemen—the first of several batches which were deposited in the Ambrosiana library in Milan. On inspection, they were found to include several works on Ismaili doctrine, coming from among the Ismaili population still living in parts of Southern Arabia. Some of them contained passages written in secret cyphers. At the other end of Europe, Russian scholars, who had already received some Ismaili manuscripts from Syria, discovered that they had Ismailis within the frontiers of their own Empire, and in 1902 Count Alexis Bobrin-

skoy published an account of the organisation and distribution of the Ismailis in Russian Central Asia.²

SINCE THEN, the progress of Ismaili studies has been rapid and remarkable. Many more Ismaili texts have become available, especially from the rich libraries of the sect in the Indian sub-continent, and much detailed research has been produced by scholars in many lands, including some who are themselves Ismailis. In one respect the recovery of the lost literature of the sect has been somewhat disappointing—in history. The books that have come to light are concerned almost exclusively with religion and related matters; works of an historical nature are both few in number and poor in content—perhaps inevitably in a minority community which possessed neither the territorial nor the institutional focus about which alone the mediaeval historian could conceive and write history. Only the principality of Alamut seems to have had its chronicles—and even these are preserved by Sunni, not Ismaili historians. But Ismaili literature, though poor in historical content, is by no means lacking in historical value. Its contribution to the narrative history of events is small—something on the Assassins of Persia, rather less on their brothers in Syria. It has, however, contributed immeasurably to the better understanding of the religious background of the movement, and has made possible a new appreciation of the beliefs and purposes, the religious and historical significance of the Ismailis in Islam, and of the Assassins as a branch of the Ismailis. The resulting picture of the Assassins differs radically both from the lurid rumours and fantasies brought back from the East by mediaeval travellers, and from the hostile and distorted image extracted by 19th-century orientalists from the manuscript writings of orthodox Muslim theologians and his-

torians, whose main concern was to refute and condemn, not to understand or explain.

The Assassins no longer appear as a gang of drugged dupes led by scheming impostors, as a conspiracy of nihilistic terrorists, or as a syndicate of professional murderers. They are no less interesting for that.

THE ISMAILI ASSASSINS did not invent assassination; they merely lent it their name. Murder as such is as old as the human race; its antiquity is strikingly symbolised in the fourth chapter of Genesis, where the first murderer and the first victim appear as brothers, the children of the first man and woman. Political murder comes with the emergence of political authority—when power is vested in an individual, and the removal of that individual is seen as a quick and simple method of effecting political change. Usually the motive for such murders is personal, factional, or dynastic—the replacement of an individual, a party or a family by another in the possession of power. Such murders are commonplace in autocratic kingdoms and empires, in both East and West.

Sometimes the murder is conceived—by others as well as the murderer—as a duty, and is justified by ideological arguments. The victim is a tyrant or a usurper; to kill him is a virtue, not a crime. Such ideological justification may be expressed in political or in religious terms—in many societies there is little difference between the two. In ancient Athens two friends, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, conspired to kill the tyrant Hippias. They succeeded only in killing his brother and co-ruler, and were both put to death. After the fall of Hippias, they became public heroes in Athens, celebrated in statuary and song; their descendants enjoyed privileges and exemptions. This idealisation of tyrannicide became part of the political ethos of Greece and Rome, and found expression in such famous murders as those of Philip II of Macedon, Tiberius Gracchus, and Julius Caesar. The same ideal appears among the Jews, in such figures as Ehud and Jehu, and, most dramatically, in the story of the beautiful Judith, who made her way to the tent of the oppressor Holofernes, and cut off his head as he slept. The book of Judith was written during the period of Hellenistic domination, and survives only in a Greek version; the Jews, followed by the Protestants, reject it as apocryphal. It is, however, included in the canon of the Roman Catholic

² At about the same time a colonial official called A. Polovtsev acquired a copy of an Ismaili religious book, written in Persian; it was deposited in the Asiatic Museum of the Imperial Russian Academy of the Sciences. Another copy followed, and between 1914 and 1918 the Museum acquired a collection of Ismaili manuscripts, brought from Shughnan, on the upper Oxus river, by the orientalists I. I. Zarubin and A. A. Semyonov. With these, and other subsequently acquired manuscripts, Russian scholars were able to examine the religious literature and beliefs of the Ismailis of the Pamir and of the adjoining Afghan districts of Badakhshan.

Church, and has inspired many Christian painters and sculptors. Though Judith has no place in Jewish religious tradition, the ideal of pious murder which she represents survived to inspire the famous Sicarii, or dagger-men—a group of zealots who appeared about the time of the fall of Jerusalem, and devoutly destroyed those who opposed or hindered them.

Regicide—both practical and idealistic—was familiar from the very beginnings of Islamic political history. Of the four Righteous Caliphs who followed the Prophet in the headship of the Islamic community, three were murdered. The second Caliph, Umar, was stabbed by a Christian slave with a private grievance; learning this, the Caliph on his death-bed thanked God that he had not been murdered by one of the faithful. Even this consolation was denied to his successors, Uthman and Ali, who were both struck down by Muslim Arabs—the first by a group of angry mutineers, the second by a religious fanatic. In both murders, the perpetrators saw themselves as tyrannicides, freeing the community from an unrighteous ruler—and both found others to agree with them.

The issues crystallised in the course of the Muslim civil war that followed Uthman's death. Mu'awiya, the governor of Syria and kinsman of the murdered Caliph, demanded the punishment of the regicides. Ali, who had succeeded as Caliph, was unable or unwilling to comply, and his supporters, to justify his inaction, claimed that no crime had been committed. Uthman had been an oppressor; his death was an execution, not a murder. The same argument was used by the extremist sect of the Kharijites to justify the murder of Ali himself a few years later.

TO SOME EXTENT, Islamic tradition gives recognition to the principle of justifiable revolt. While conceding autocratic powers to the sovereign, it lays down that the subject's duty of obedience lapses where the command is sinful, and that "there must be no obedience to a creature against his Creator." Since no procedure is laid down for testing the righteousness of a command, or for exercising the right to disobey one that is sinful, the only effective recourse for the conscientious subject is to rebel against the ruler, and to try to overrule or depose him by force. A more expeditious procedure is to remove him by assassination. This principle was often invoked, especially by sectarian rebels, to justify their acts.

In fact, after the death of Ali and accession of Mu'awiya, the murder of rulers becomes rare, and when it occurs is usually dynastic rather than revolutionary in inspiration. On the contrary, the Shi'a claimed that it was their Imams, and other members of the house of the Prophet, who were being murdered at the instigation of the Sunni Caliphs; their literature includes long lists of Alid martyrs, whose blood called for vengeance.

In sending their emissaries to kill the unrighteous and their minions, the Ismailis could thus invoke an old Islamic tradition. It was a tradition which was never dominant, and had for long been dormant, but which had its place, especially within the circle of the dissident and extremist sects.

THE ANCIENT IDEAL of tyrannicide, the religious obligation to rid the world of an unrighteous ruler, certainly contributed to the practice of assassination, as adopted and applied by the Ismailis. But there was more to it than that. The killing by the Assassin of his victim was not only an act of piety; it also had a ritual, almost a sacramental quality. It is significant that in all their murders, in both Persia and Syria, the Assassins always used a dagger; never poison, never missiles, though there must have been occasions when these would have been easier and safer. The Assassin is almost always caught, and usually indeed makes no attempt to escape. There is even a suggestion that to survive a mission was shameful. The words of a 12th-century Western author are revealing: "When therefore any of them have chosen to die in this way . . . he himself [*i.e.*, the Chief] hands them knives which are, so to speak, consecrated. . . ."

Human sacrifice and ritual murder have no place in Islamic law, tradition, or practice. Yet both are ancient and deep-rooted in human societies, and can reappear in unexpected places. Just as the forgotten dance-cults of antiquity, in defiance of the austere worship of Islam, reappear in the ecstatic ritual of the dancing dervishes, so do the ancient cults of death find new expressions in Islamic terms. In the early 8th century, the Muslim authors tell us, a man called Abu Mansur al-Ijli, of Kufa, claimed to be the Imam, and taught that the prescriptions of the law had a symbolic meaning, and need not be obeyed in their literal sense. Heaven and Hell had no separate existence, but were merely

the pleasures and misfortunes of this world. His followers practised murder as a religious duty. Similar doctrines—and practices—were ascribed to his contemporary and fellow-tribesman Mughira b. Sa'id. Both groups were suppressed by the authorities. It is significant that they were restricted, according to their beliefs, to a single weapon in their murderous rites. One group strangled their victims with nooses; another clubbed them with wooden cudgels. Only with the coming of the Mahdi would they be permitted to use steel. Both groups belonged to the extreme fringe of the extremist Shi'a. The parallel they offer to both the antinomianism and the weapon-cult of the later Ismailis is striking.

As custodians of esoteric mysteries for the initiate, as purveyors of salvation through knowledge of the Imam, as bearers of a promise of messianic fulfilment, of release from the toils of the world and the yoke of the law, the Ismailis are part of a long tradition, that goes back to the beginnings of Islam and far beyond, and forward to our own day—a tradition of popular and emotional cults in sharp contrast with the learned and legal religion of the established order.

THERE WERE MANY SUCH SECTS and groups before the Ismailis, but theirs was the first to create an effective and enduring organisation. It was a sign of the times. The earlier sodalities of the poor and powerless were scattered and insignificant, and rarely achieved the literary mention which alone could make them known to the historian. In the atomised and insecure society of the later Caliphate, men sought comfort and assurance in new and stronger forms of association; these became more numerous and more extensive, and reached from the lower to the middle and even the upper levels of the population—until finally the Caliph al-Nasir himself, by ceremonially joining one of them, tried to incorporate them in the apparatus of government.

These associations were of many kinds. Some were primarily regional, based on cities or quarters, with civic, police or even military functions. Some, in a society where crafts often coincided with local, ethnic, or religious groups, may also have acquired an economic role. Often they appear as associations of youths or young men, with ranks and rites to mark the attainment of adolescence and of manhood. Most were religious brotherhoods, the followers of

holy men and of the cults established by them. Common features were the adoption of beliefs and practices belonging to popular religion and mistrusted by orthodoxy; a close bond of loyalty to comrades and devotion to leaders; a system of initiation and of hierarchic grades, supported by elaborate symbols and ceremonials. Most of these groups, though vaguely dissident, were politically inactive. The Ismailis, with their militant tactics and revolutionary aims, were able to use this form of organisation for a sustained attempt to overthrow and replace the existing order. At the same time, they gradually abandoned the philosophical refinements of their earlier doctrines, and adopted forms of religion that were closer to the beliefs current among the brotherhoods. In one respect, according to the Persian historians, the Ismailis adopted an almost monastic rule; the commandants of their castles, as long as they held office, had no women with them.

IN ONE RESPECT the Assassins are without precedent—in the planned, systematic and long-term use of terror as a political weapon. The stranglers of Iraq had been small-scale and random practitioners, rather like the thugs of India, with whom they may be connected. Previous political murders, however dramatic, were the work of individuals or at best of small groups of plotters, limited in both purpose and effect. In the skills of murder and conspiracy, the Assassins have countless predecessors; even in the refinement of murder as an art, a rite, and a duty, they have been anticipated or pre-figured. But they may well be the first terrorists.

"Brothers" [says an Ismaili poet], "when the time of triumph comes, with good fortune from both worlds as our companion, then by one single warrior on foot a king may be stricken with terror, though he own more than a hundred thousand horsemen."

It was true. For centuries the Shi'a had squandered their zeal and blood for their Imams, without avail. There had been countless risings, ranging from the self-immolation of small groups of ecstasies to carefully planned military operations. All but a few had failed, crushed by the armed forces of a state and an order that they were too weak to overthrow. Even the very few that succeeded brought no release for the pent-up emotion that they expressed. Instead, the victors, once invested with the panoply of authority and the custodianship of the Islamic

community, turned against their own supporters and destroyed them.

Hasan-i Sabbah knew, when he launched the so-called New Preaching of Ismailism in the late 11th century, that his preaching could not prevail against the entrenched orthodoxy of Sunni Islam—that his followers could not meet and defeat the armed might of the Seljuq state. Others before him had vented their frustration in unplanned violence, in hopeless insurrection, or in sullen passivity. Hasan found a new way, by which a small force, disciplined and devoted, could strike effectively against an overwhelmingly superior enemy. "Terrorism," says a modern authority, "is carried on by a narrow limited organisation and is inspired by a sustained programme of large-scale objectives in the name of which terror is practised." This was the method that Hasan chose—the method, it may well be, that he invented.

"The Old Man of the Mountain," says Joinville, speaking of a later Ismaili chief in Syria, "paid tribute to the Templars and the Hospitallers, because they feared nothing from the Assassins, since the Old Man could gain nothing if he caused the Master of the Temple or of the Hospital to be killed; for he knew very well that if he had one killed, another just as good would replace him, and for this reason he did not wish to lose Assassins where he could gain nothing." The two orders of knighthood were integrated institutions, with an institutional structure, hierarchy and loyalty, which made them immune to attack by assassination; it was the absence of these qualities that made the atomised Islamic state, with centralised, autocratic power based on personal and transient loyalties, peculiarly vulnerable to it.

Hasan-i Sabbah showed political genius in perceiving this weakness of the Islamic monarchies. He also displayed remarkable administrative and strategic gifts in exploiting it by terrorist attack.

FOR SUCH A CAMPAIGN of sustained terror there were two obvious requirements—organisation and ideology. There had to be an organisation capable both of launching the attack and surviving the inevitable counter-blow; there had to be a system of belief—which in that time and place could only be a religion—to inspire and sustain the attackers to the point of death.

Both were found. The reformed Ismaili religion, with its memories of passion and martyrdom, its promise of divine and human

fulfilment, was a cause that gave dignity and courage to those that embraced it, and inspired a devotion unsurpassed in human history. It was the loyalty of the Assassins, who risked and even courted death for their Master, that first attracted the attention of Europe, and made their name a by-word for faith and self-sacrifice before it became a synonym for murderer.

There was cool planning, as well as fanatical zeal, in the work of the Assassins. Several principles are discernible. The seizure of castles—some of them the former lairs of robberchieftains—provided them with safe bases; the rule of secrecy—adapted from the old doctrine of *taqiyya*, religious dissimulation—helped both security and solidarity. The work of the terrorists was supported by both religious and political action. Ismaili missionaries found or gained sympathisers among the rural and urban population; Ismaili envoys called on highly-placed Muslims, whose fears or ambitions might make them temporary allies of the cause.

Such alliances raise an important general issue concerning the Assassins. Of several score murders recorded in Iran and Syria, a fair number are said by one or another source to have been instigated by third parties, often with an offer of money or other inducements. Sometimes the story is based on an alleged confession by the actual murderers, when caught and put to the question.

Clearly the Assassins, the devoted servants of a religious cause, were not mere cut-throats with daggers for hire. They had their own political objective, the establishment of the true Imamate, and neither they nor their leaders are likely to have been the tools of other men's ambitions. Yet the persistent and widespread stories of complicity, involving such names as the Seljuq Sultans Berkyaruq and Sanjar in the East, Saladin and Richard Coeur de Lion in the West, require some explanation.

SOME OF THESE STORIES were current because they were true. In many periods and places, there have been ambitious men who were willing to enlist the aid of violent extremists. They may not have shared or even liked their beliefs, but they thought they could use them, in the hope, usually misplaced, that they would be able to abandon those dangerous allies when they had served their purpose. Such was Ridwan of Aleppo, a Seljuq prince who did not scruple to switch from a Sunni to a Fatimid allegiance, and then to welcome the

Assassins to his city, as a support against his kinsmen and his overlord. Such too were the scheming viziers in Isfahan and Damascus, who tried to use the power and terror of the Assassins for their own advancement. Sometimes the motive was terror rather than ambition—as for example with the pathetically frightened vizier of the Khorazmshah Jalal al-Din, described by Nasawi. Soldiers and sultans, as well as viziers, could be terrified into compliance, and several of the most dramatic stories that are told of Assassin skill and daring seem to have as their purpose to justify some tacit understanding between a pious Sunni monarch and the Ismaili revolutionaries.

The motives of men like Sanjar and Saladin are somewhat more complex. Both made their accommodations with the Assassins; neither is likely to have been swayed purely by personal fear or personal ambition. Both were engaged on great tasks—Sanjar on the restoration of the Seljuq Sultanate and the defence of Islam against heathen invaders from the East, Saladin on the renewal of Sunni unity and the ejection of Christian invaders from the West. Both must have realised the truth—that after their own deaths their kingdoms would crumble and their plans come to nothing. They may well have felt that a temporary concession to what was ultimately a less dangerous enemy was justified, in order to secure their personal safety, and with it the chance to complete their great work for the restoration and defence of Islam.

For the Assassins themselves, the calculation was much simpler. Their purpose was to disrupt and destroy the Sunni order; if some Sunni leaders could be tempted or terrorised into helping them, so much the better. Even in the days of their early fury, the Assassin leaders never disdained the help of others when it was forthcoming; later, when they became in effect territorial rulers, they fitted their policies with skill and ease into the complex mosaic of alliances and rivalries of the Muslim world.

ALL THIS DOES NOT MEAN that their services were for sale, or that every story of complicity, even those supported by confessions, was true. The leaders might make secret arrangements, but it is unlikely that they would inform the actual murderer of the details. What is much more probable is that the Assassin setting out on a mission was given what in modern parlance would be called a “cover story,” implicating the likeliest character on the scene. This would have

the additional advantage of sowing mistrust and suspicion in the opposing camp. The murders of the Caliph al-Mustarshid and the Crusader Conrad of Montferrat are good examples of this. The suspicion thrown on Sanjar in Persia and on Richard among the Crusaders must have served a useful purpose in confusing the issues and creating discord. In addition, we cannot be sure that every murder ascribed to or even claimed by the Assassins was in fact committed by them. Murder, for private or public reasons, was at least normally common, and the Assassins themselves must have provided “cover” for a number of unideological assassinations in which they had no part.

The Assassins chose their victims with care. Some Sunni authors have suggested that they waged indiscriminate war against the whole Muslim community.

“It is well known and established” [says Hamdullah Mustawfi], “that the Batinis [*i.e.*, the Ismailis], may they get their just deserts, neglect no moment in injuring the Muslims in whatever way they can, and believe that they will receive rich reward and bounteous recompense for this. To commit no murder and to subdue no victim they regard as a great sin.”

Hamdullah, writing in about 1330, presents a later view, contaminated by the myths and legends that were already current. The contemporary sources in both Persia and Syria suggest that the Ismaili terror was directed against specific persons, for specific purposes, and that apart from a few, quite exceptional outbreaks of mob violence, their relations with their Sunni neighbours were fairly normal. This seems to be true both of the Ismaili minorities in the towns, and of the Ismaili territorial rulers, in their dealings with their Sunni colleagues.

THE VICTIMS of the Assassins belong to two main groups; the first of princes, officers and ministers, the second of qadis and other religious dignitaries. An intermediate group between the two, the city prefects, also received occasional attention. With few exceptions, the victims were Sunni Muslims. The Assassins did not normally attack Twelver or other Shi'ites, nor did they turn their daggers against native Christians or Jews. There are few attacks even on the Crusaders in Syria, and most of them seem to follow the Ismaili agreements with Saladin and with the Caliph.

The enemy, for the Ismailis, was the Sunni establishment—political and military, bureau-

cratic and religious. Their murders were designed to frighten, to weaken, and ultimately to overthrow it. Some were simply acts of vengeance and warning, such as the killing, in their own mosques, of Sunni divines who had spoken or acted against them. Other victims were chosen for more immediate and more specific reasons—such as the commanders of armies attacking the Ismailis, or the occupants of strongholds that they wished to acquire. Tactical and propagandist motives combine in the murder of major figures, such as the great vizier Nizam al-Mulk, two Caliphs, and the attempts on Saladin.

It is much more difficult to determine the nature of Ismaili support. Much of it must have come from the countryside. The Ismailis had their main bases in castles; they were most successful when they could rely on the population of the surrounding villages for support and also for recruitment. In both Persia and Syria the Ismaili emissaries tried to establish themselves in areas where there were old traditions of religious deviation. Such traditions are remarkably persistent, and have survived, in some of these areas, to the present day. Some of the religious writings of the New Preaching, in contrast with the sophisticated urban intellectualism of earlier Ismaili theology, show many of the magical qualities associated with peasant religion.

Ismaili support could be most effectively mobilised and directed in rural and mountain areas. It was not, however, limited to such areas. Clearly, the Ismailis also had their own followers in the towns, where they gave discreet help when needed to the men from the castles proceeding on their missions. Sometimes, as in Isfahan and Damascus, they were strong enough to come out into the open in the struggle for power.

It has usually been assumed that the urban supporters of Ismailism were drawn from the lower orders of society—the artisans, and below them the floating, restless rabble. This assumption is based on the occasional references to Ismaili activists of such social origin, and to the general lack of evidence on Ismaili sympathies among the better-off classes, even those that were at some disadvantage in the Seljuq Sunni order. There are many signs of Shi'ite sympathies among the merchants and *literati*, for example—but they seem to have preferred the passive dissent of the Twelvers to the radical subversion of the Ismailis.

INEVITABLY, many of the leaders and teachers of the Ismailis were educated townsmen. Hasan-i Sabbah was from Rayy, and received a scribal education; Ibn Attash was a physician, as was the first emissary of Alamut in Syria. Sinan was a schoolmaster, and, according to his own statement, the son of a family of notables in Basra. Yet the New Preaching never seems to have had the seductive intellectual appeal that had tempted poets, philosophers, and theologians in earlier times. From the 9th to the 11th centuries Ismailism, in its various forms, had been a major intellectual force in Islam, a serious contender for the minds as well as the hearts of the believers, and had even gained the sympathy of such a towering intellect as the philosopher and scientist Avicenna (980–1037). In the 12th and 13th centuries this is palpably no longer true. After Nasir-i Khusraw, who died some time after 1087, there is no major intellectual figure in Ismaili theology, and even his followers were limited to peasants and mountaineers in remote places. Under Hasan-i Sabbah and his successors, the Ismailis pose terrible political, military and social problems to Sunni Islam, but they no longer offer an intellectual challenge.

More and more, their religion acquires the magical and emotional qualities, the redemptionist and millenarian hopes, associated with the cults of the dispossessed, the disprivileged and the unstable. Ismaili theology had ceased to be, and did not again become, a serious alternative to the new orthodoxy that was dominating the intellectual life of the Muslim cities—though Ismaili spiritual concepts and attitudes continued, in a disguised and indirect form, to influence Persian and Turkish mysticism and poetry, and elements of Ismailism may be discerned in such later outbreaks of revolutionary messianism as the Dervish revolt in 15th-century Turkey and the Babi upheaval in 19th-century Persia.

THERE IS one more question that the modern historian is impelled to ask—what does it mean? In religious terms, the New Preaching of the Ismailis can be seen as a resurgence of certain millenarian and antinomian trends, which are recurrent in Islam and which have parallels—and perhaps antecedents—in other religious traditions. But when modern man ceased to accord first place to religion in

his own concerns, he also ceased to believe that other men, in other times, could ever truly have done so, and so he began to re-examine the great religious movements of the past in search of interests and motives acceptable to modern minds.

The first great theory on the "real" significance of Muslim heresy was launched by the Count de Gobineau, the father of modern racialism. For him, Shi'ism represented a reaction of the Indo-European Persians against Arab domination—against the constricting Semitism of Arab Islam. To 19th-century Europe, obsessed with the problems of national conflict and national freedom, such an explanation seemed reasonable and indeed obvious. The Shi'a stood for Persia, fighting first against Arab and later against Turkish domination. The Assassins represented a form of militant, nationalist extremism, like the terrorist secret societies of 19th-century Italy and Macedonia.

The advance of scholarship on the one hand, and changes in European circumstances on the other, led in the 20th century to some modifications in this theory of racial or national conflict. Increased knowledge showed that Shi'ism in general, and Ismailism in particular, were by no means exclusively Persian. The sect had begun in Iraq; the Fatimid caliphate had achieved its major successes in Arabia, in North Africa and in Egypt—and even the reformed Ismailism of Hasan-i Sabbah, though launched in Persia and by Persians, had won an extensive following in Arab Syria and had even percolated among the Turcoman tribes that had migrated into the Middle East from Central Asia. And in any case, nationality was no longer regarded as a sufficient base for great historical movements.

In a series of studies the first of which appeared in 1911, a Russian scholar, V. V. Barthold, offered another explanation. In his view, the real meaning of the Assassin movement was a war of the castle against the cities—a last and ultimately unsuccessful attempt by the rural Iranian aristocracy to resist the new, urban social order of Islam. Pre-Islamic Persia had been a knightly society, to which the city had come as an Islamic innovation. Like the barons—and robber-barons—of mediaeval Europe, the Persian land-owning knights, with the support of the village population, waged war from their castles against this alien and encroaching new order. The Assassins were a weapon in this war.

Later Russian scholars revised and refined Barthold's attempt at an economic explanation

of Ismailism. The Ismailis were not against the towns as such, in which they had their own supporters, but against certain dominant elements in the towns—the rulers and the military and civil notables, the new feudal lords and the officially favoured divines. Moreover, the Ismailis could not simply be equated with the old nobility. They did not inherit their castles, but seized them, and their support came not so much from those who still owned their estates, as from those who had lost them to new owners—to the tax-farmers, officials and officers who had received grants of land and revenues from the new rulers at the expense of the gentry and peasantry.

One view sees Ismailism as a reactionary ideology, devised by the great feudal magnates to defend their privileges against the equalitarianism of Sunni Islam; another as a response, varied according to circumstances, to the needs of the different groups which had suffered from the imposition of the Seljuq new order, and thus embracing both the deposed old ruling class and the discontented populace of the cities; yet another simply as a "popular" movement based on the artisans, the city poor, and the peasantry of mountain regions. According to this view, Hasan's proclamation of the Resurrection was a victory of the "popular" forces; his threats of punishment against those who still observed the Holy Law were directed against feudal elements in the Ismaili possessions, who were secretly faithful to Islamic orthodoxy and hostile to social equality.

Like the earlier attempts at an ethnic explanation, these theories of economic determination have enriched our knowledge of Ismailism, by directing research into new and profitable directions. Like earlier theologues, they have suffered from excessive dogmatism, which has stressed some aspects and neglected others—in particular the sociology of religion, of leadership, and of association. It is obvious that some extension of our knowledge of Islam and its sects, some refinement of our methods of enquiry, are needed before we can decide how significant was the economic element in Ismailism, and what precisely it was. In the meantime both the experience of events and the advance of scholarship in our own time may suggest that it is not so easy to disentangle national from economic factors, or either from psychic and social determinants, and that the distinction, so important to our immediate predecessors, between the radical right and the radical left may sometimes prove illusory.

NO SINGLE, SIMPLE EXPLANATION can suffice to clarify the complex phenomenon of Ismailism, in the complex society of mediaeval Islam. The Ismaili religion evolved over a long period and a wide area, and meant different things at different times and places. The Ismaili states were territorial principalities, with their own internal differences and conflicts; the social and economic order of the Islamic Empire, as of other mediaeval societies, was an intricate and changing pattern of different élites, estates, and classes, of social, ethnic and religious groups—and neither the religion nor the society in which it appeared has yet been adequately explored.

Like other great historic creeds and movements, Ismailism drew on many sources, and served many needs. For some, it was a means of striking at a hated domination, whether to restore an old order or to create a new one; for others, the only way of achieving God's purpose on earth. For different rulers, it was a device to secure and maintain local independence against alien interference, or a road to the Empire of the world; a passion and a fulfilment, that brought dignity and meaning to drab and bitter lives, or a gospel of release and destruction; a return to ancestral truths—and a promise of future illumination.

CONCERNING the place of the Assassins in the history of Islam, four things may be said with reasonable assurance.

The first is that their movement, whatever its driving force may have been, was regarded as a profound threat to the existing order, political, social and religious. The second is that they are no isolated phenomenon, but one of a long series of messianic movements, at once popular and obscure, impelled by deep-rooted anxieties, and from time to time exploding in outbreaks of revolutionary violence. The third is that Hasan-i Sabbah and his followers succeeded in re-shaping and re-directing the vague desires, wild beliefs, and aimless rage of the discontented into an ideology and an organisation which, in cohesion, discipline and purposive violence, have no parallel in earlier or in later times.

The fourth, and perhaps ultimately the most significant point, is their final and total failure. They did not overthrow the existing order; they did not even succeed in holding a single city of any size. Even their castle domains became no more than petty principalities, which in time were overwhelmed by conquest, and their followers have become small and peaceful communities of peasants and merchants—one sectarian minority among many.

Yet the undercurrent of messianic hope and revolutionary violence which had impelled them flowed on, and their ideals and methods found many imitators. For these, the great changes of our time have provided new causes for anger, new dreams of fulfilment, and new tools of attack.



THE ASSASSINATION OF THE NIZAM AL-MULK. (From a Persian manuscript of the Jami al-tavacikh of Rasbid al-Din, in the library of the Topkapı Palace Museum, Istanbul. Early 14th century.)



Column

THE Greek *chiloi* means a thousand, and hence we have *chiliasm*, *chiliast*, *chiliastic*, all deriving from the belief that a thousand-year cycle has a special significance

in human history; its close may presage the end of the world, the Second Coming, the establishment of the Kingdom of God, or, as in *The Republic*, the return to earth of the souls of the departed after a millennium in the underworld.

What do we ourselves expect of the year 2000, now only thirty-three years away? Curiously enough, for the first time in history the objective conditions exist which could transform what was once a matter of superstition into a reality; the end of the world may really be at hand. But even if this is averted, the rate of scientific and technological change is by now so great that it is certain that thirty-three years hence the world will be in many respects so transformed as to be unrecognisable.

This prospect is both alarming and exhilarating; but it also creates so many problems in every sphere of life that by now serious attempts are being made to predict the future in the hope that, with foreknowledge, the pressure of change may be made more tolerable. In Paris, there is the project called *Futuribles* directed by Bertrand de Jouvenel, and in Britain the Committee on the Next Thirty Years set up by the English Social Science Research Council. In the United States, the American Academy has established a Commission on the Year 2000, under Professor Daniel Bell, and has now devoted the whole of the summer issue of its journal, *Daedalus*, to publishing its proceedings during its first year of work.

Of course, the business of prediction, as the Commission recognises, has its own built-in logical gimmick; if we can foresee the future and don't like what we see, why shouldn't we make it otherwise? But this also provides the justification for the hazardous task of prediction. If we are really in a position to define, however tentatively, the shape of things to come, then we can and should take immediate steps to control or modify its ugliest features; and if this is not done now it may soon be too late.

This becomes evident in the case of one of the predictions which the Commission makes with some confidence; the rapid increase in urbanisation, combined with growth of population, in the advanced industrial, or rather "post-industrial," countries. By the year 2000, in the

United States, a minimum of 280 million people, or over 80% of the population, will live in urban areas, and of these a half will be concentrated in three giant megalopolises, here christened Boswash, Chipitts, and Sansan. Boswash will stretch continuously from Washington to Boston and contain nearly 80 million people, about a quarter of the American population; Chipitts, with 40 millions, from Chicago to Pittsburgh and north to Canada; Sansan, 20 millions, from Santa Barbara, or even San Francisco, to San Diego. In Britain, the whole of south-east England will form another megalopolis, and in Japan the Tokyo-Osaka strip. But these urban giants, or monsters, will have few of what we have hitherto considered the amenities of life in a city, from which the word "urbane" derives its agreeable associations. In the American megalopolis, for instance, if present tendencies continue, racial segregation would be stricter than ever. The central cities would belong to the coloured races, with a white minority consisting exclusively of the poor and deprived; the surrounding suburban areas would be white. Some of the cities would have become "ungovernable," and the gap, in wealth, in education, in technical skills, between them and the rich suburbs would be greater than ever.

BUT THERE ARE other features of the year 2000 which some at least may find even more disagreeable. The Commission, quite rightly, does not overrate (as Marshall McLuhan so often does) the effects of the purely technical innovations which will appear more and more rapidly during the next thirty years; it would not in fact greatly affect the quality of our lives if the Hovercraft were to displace the highway and the wheel. But what would be the effect if, as the Commission suggests, in the year 2000 the scarcest, most expensive, almost unobtainable luxury will be human privacy? The citizen of the year 2000 will be under constant surveillance, by long-distance photography, concealed microphones, closed-circuit television, tapped telephone lines, and other electronic instruments, and technology will have made these devices available not merely to governments but to private agencies and individuals, from large corporations with a commercial interest in the private lives of their employees to insurance companies anxious about the health of their clients and estranged wives and husbands seeking grounds for divorce. "Thus, by 2000, man's technical inventiveness may, in terms of privacy, have turned the whole community into the equivalent of an army barracks."

Moreover, and this will be one of its aspects which will most differentiate the year 2000 from any other, it will be possible for all of the information derived by such means to be recorded,