

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
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Isma'ilis and Crusaders in Syria

Medieval Diplomacy



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Summary

This dissertation will focus on the Nizari Isma'ilis in medieval Syria and their relations with the Crusaders. Known to the Western reader as the Assassins, the sect was founded in Iran by Hasan al-Sabbah around 1090 and later extended its activities to Syria, where the Isma'ilis established themselves in the mountainous strongholds of Jabal Bahra'. For the next two centuries, the Syrian Isma'ilis had fought for the survival of their community, surrounded by the hostile Sunni Seljuks and Crusading Orders.

As a result of forged accounts by Sunni polemicists and imaginative legends circulated by the occidental observers, the Isma'ilis were portrayed as a vile cult of drugged assassins. Chapter 2 will trace this distorted image of the Isma'ilis in the contemporary Arabic sources, later passed on to the Western chroniclers.

Chapter 3 will outline the main encounters between the Assassins and their Frankish neighbours. By looking at the mixture of sporadic fighting, strategic alliances and assassinations, I hope to give an overview of the Isma'ili survival tactics – their own version of medieval diplomacy. The main focus will be on the days of their most famous leader, Sinan Rashid al-Din, who commissioned the murder of Conrad of Montferrat.

Chapter 4 will deal with the Isma'ili and Crusader castles in northern Syria. I will explain the strategic importance of these strongholds for both groups and compare the castles based on their military and defensive features, focusing in particular on the Crusader castle of Saone and the Isma'ili stronghold of Masyaf.

In Chapter 5 I will discuss the alleged connection between the Knights Templar and the Isma'ilis. The resemblance of their internal structures led historians to believe that the Templars had borrowed certain features from the Isma'ilis, who had a longer history as a secret organization, compared to the newly founded Knightly Order.

Dissertation plan

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1. Introduction

The Isma'ili Assassins were seen by their contemporaries as a vile and terrifying cult of hired mercenaries, who “set about spreading the nets of their wickedness and setting the snares of their foul perfidy and deceit”.¹ Members of this sect, founded by Hasan al-Sabbah in northern Iran around 1090, are said to have perfected the deadly art supposedly named after them – assassination.² Alleged victims of the Isma'ilis included the famous vizier Nizam al-Mulk, the Caliph of Egypt al-Amir, the King of Jerusalem, Count Raymond II of Tripoli, the Patriarch Albert of Jerusalem and many other prominent Muslim and Christian lords at the time of the Crusades. Even the mighty Salah al-Din had barely escaped the assassin daggers, and, fearing for his life, is said to have made peace with his former enemies.

Such was the image of the Isma'ilis, circulated in rumours and legends surrounding their sect. Recent scholarship has shown that this image was highly distorted, largely due to the false accounts fabricated by Sunni polemicists. At the same time, occidental observers and historians readily accepted the legends of murderous assassins who were drugged in the secret “gardens of paradise” before embarking on their deadly missions.³ Indeed, for the European audience, ignorant of Islam, intoxication provided the only reasonable explanation for the self-sacrificing acts of the Isma'ili assassins (*fida'is*), and the hashish legends were henceforth taken as the accurate description of the Isma'ili practices.

After establishing himself in the stronghold of Alamut, high in the Albruz Mountains, Hasan al-Sabbah now faced a truly difficult task. Having split from the Fatimids of Cairo, this group of Nizari Isma'ilis, a branch of the Shi'a Muslims, found itself within the hostile Seljuk

¹ Ibn al-Qalanisi, p. 229 (year 525); tr. Gibb, p. 202

² The term “assassin” is said to have derived from the Arabic “hashish” and is rooted in the medieval European legends of the Nizari Isma'ilis in Iran and Syria.

³ See Chapter 2

empire. Weak in territory and numbers, with only a vague hope of reforming the Fatimid state, Hasan and his followers devoted all their energies to consolidate and expand their position in the Muslim West.

Syria at the time presented a favourable terrain for extending the Isma'ili da'wa (mission). Central Seljuk control had collapsed with the death of Malik Shah in 1092, and the area became fragmented into numerous semi-independent states, governed by rival Seljuk lords. It was this political fragmentation that Hasan had hoped to exploit by playing one power against another and by uniting the local Shi'ite communities behind his da'is (missionaries), sent from Alamut to fight the Sunni rulers.

The Syrian Isma'ilis were famous mainly for their assassinations. It is true that Hasan and other Isma'ili da'is in Iran and Syria made extensive use of this technique to sow terror among their political enemies. Much emphasis was put on the physical training, discipline and indoctrination of the fida'is, as well as on the manner in which the assassinations were prepared and carried out.⁴ However, this was merely one of the elements in the Isma'ili strategy. The story of the Nizari Isma'ilis is, above all, a story of survival. The latter was the end which justified all means, including the use of assassination.⁵

It is also a story of castles, the magnificent Assassin strongholds, set in remote valleys and on top of impregnable rocks. Lack of mountain fortresses, the base of Isma'ili strength in Iran, became apparent after failure to establish their da'wa in Aleppo and Damascus, and they proceeded to take control over a number of castles in the Jabal Bahra' region. Henceforth, the

⁴ Assassins, often disguised as ascetics or merchants, would familiarise themselves with the victim's habits well in advance. Although prepared in great secrecy, the assassination itself had to take place in public, to serve as a lesson for the enemies. Thus for Muslim victims, the time of the Friday prayer was a common choice, whereas Sunday was a favourable day to kill Christians.

⁵ Assassination as such was hardly a new instrument in those days. Both the Seljuks and the Crusaders used it in their factional fighting. Paradoxically, as Farhad Daftary remarks, it was the Nizari Isma'ili sect, out of all groups, that this feature became so firmly identified with. Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, p. 129

Syrian Isma'ilis became associated with their impregnable castles, and every chronicler commenting on the Assassins would mention that "they lived in high mountains and in great fortresses".⁶

As I hope to show in this paper, both the Isma'ili assassinations and their strategically sited castles played a significant role in the movement's success. But it was mainly through skillful diplomacy and strategic alliances that the Assassin masters managed to turn their sect into an effective and feared force in medieval Syria.

⁶ Abbe Rothelin, Chapter 17

2. Isma'ili legends and sources

Much of the fascination with the Nizari Isma'ilis in Syria resulted from the numerous "Assassin" legends, recorded by their Muslim contemporaries and later passed on to the European chroniclers of the Crusades. The main contribution to these damaging accounts came from the hostile Sunni polemicists, who were eager to discredit the "heretical" Shi'ite movement and prevent its spread in the domains of the Seljuks, the champions of the orthodox Sunni faith. The space does not permit me to discuss the origin and evolution of these legends, which have been covered in great depth in the recent Isma'ili scholarship.⁷ It is important, however, to review the way Isma'ilis were portrayed in the contemporary Muslim sources, particularly those relevant to the subject of this dissertation.

Ibn al-Qalanisi, one of the earliest Arab historians to write about the Crusades, recorded the days of Isma'ili da'wa in Aleppo and Damascus. He provides detailed accounts of the first two assassinations, carried out by the "Persians ... belonging to the Batiniya", and mentions their extraordinary "allegiance and obedience" to their "Shaikh". The chronicler takes great pleasure in describing the Aleppine and Damascene massacres of the Isma'ilis, and it is in these accounts that we find first evidence of their alliance with the Crusaders, as those who survived are said to have "fled to the protection of the Franks".⁸

Ibn Jubayr, who journeyed to Syria in 1184/1185, recalls an incident in a village near Aleppo, which had previously been inhabited by "some Isma'iliyah heretics". He tells us how the local Sunnis, angered by the "malevolence" and "mischief" of the heretics, slaughtered them and "piled high their skulls", and praises God who "was sufficient defence to the Muslims

⁷ Dr Farhad Daftary, among others, has written several acclaimed books on this subject.

⁸ Ibn al-Qalanisi accuses the Assassins of plotting to hand over Damascus to the Franks, which he states as the reason for their persecution (see Chapter 3); pp. 142-3, 149, 187, 214-216, 221-224; tr. Gibb, pp. 57-8, 72, 145, 177-180, 187-193

against their enmity and evil”.⁹ Ibn Jubayr then gives details of the “sect which swerved from Islam and vested divinity in a man”:

Their prophet was a devil in man’s disguise called Sinan, who deceived them with falsehoods and chimeras embellished for them to act upon. He bewitched them with these black arts, so that they took him as a god and worshipped him.

Ibn Jubayr also mentions the “state of obedience and subjection” of the assassins, who are willing to hurl themselves from the mountain top if their master ordered to do so.¹⁰ Several variations of this so-called “death leap” legend, which later found its way into European accounts, are given in Kamal al-Din’s biography of Sinan. The Old Man of the Mountain would order his disciples to “throw themselves off the highest point of the fortress” (the castle of Kahf is mentioned) to demonstrate his power over the “innermost hearts” of his army, usually in front of a messenger from the enemy.¹¹

As the above sources show, the Isma’ilis were referred to by a variety of names. These were summed up by Ibn Khaldun, who passed by the fortresses of Khawabi and Masyaf, which he says belonged to the Isma’ili Assassins (“al-Hashishiya al-Isma’iliya”), who at that time were called “Fidawis”. The great 14th century historiographer goes on to explain their origin:

They are called “Isma’ilis” with reference to their recognition of the imamate of Isma’il. They are also called “Batinis” with reference to their speaking about the batin, that is, the hidden imam. They further are called “heretics” [mulahida], because of the heretical character of their beliefs.¹²

⁹ Ibn Jubayr, pp. 251-2; tr. Broadhurst, pp. 259-60

¹⁰ Ibn Jubayr, p. 256; tr. Broadhurst, p. 264-265

¹¹ Kamal al-Din, pp. 261, 266; tr. Lewis, pp. 230, 236.

¹² Ibn Khaldun, pp. 117, 356-357; tr. Rosenthal pp. 143, 412-3

Even those authors who were generally not concerned with the religio-political background of the matter they covered, often paused to mention the Assassins. The Syrian geographer Shams al-Din al-Dimashqi, for example, describes the Isma'ili castles, saying that their inhabitants are “known for their heresy” and goes on to tell how the sect sent its “fidawiya” to “kill kings and notables”.¹³

Other chroniclers and travellers, like Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khallikan and Abu Shama, tend to ignore the heretical beliefs of the sect and simply mention the dates of their assassinations. Usama Ibn Munqidh, for instance, who had spent his youth in Shayzar, surrounded by Isma'ili strongholds, never discusses their faith, but recalls at least four separate incidents when the inhabitants of his native town were attacked by the Isma'ilis, always seen with “daggers in their hands”.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that even when Isma'ilis assassinated prominent Frankish leaders (and, therefore, enemies of Islam), they were still seen as heretics and were never associated with the cause of the holy war against the infidels. 'Imad al-Din, who rejoices at the news of Conrad of Montferrat's murder in 1192 (“the Marquis was dead ... and the deepest circle of Hell-fire was burning ... as it waited for him”), still finds time to mention the Isma'ili “mulahida”: “An extraordinary case of two Unbelievers [the two assassins] shedding an Unbeliever's blood, two criminals killing a criminal!”¹⁵

As the sources show, the Syrian Isma'ilis at the time of the Crusades were seen as a cult of heretical assassins, bound by blind obedience to their evil Master. They are accused of alliances with the Frankish infidels, yet still judged as criminals when they assassinated the latter. In fact, the only positive account we have of this period is the “Manaqib Rashid al-Din”, an assembly of

¹³ Al-Dimashqi, p. 208; translation mine

¹⁴ Ibn Munqidh, pp. 100, 102, 149, 158, 205, 209; tr. Hitti, pp. 107, 108, 146, 153, 190, 192

¹⁵ 'Imad al-Din, pp. 420-1; tr. Gabrieli, pp. 238-9

legendary tales about Sinan collected by his 14th century admirer, Abu Firas. The “Manaqib” are, however, little more than hagiography, and allowance must be made for Abu Firas’ desire to portray his hero in the best light possible.

The Western contribution to the Assassin stories culminated in Marco Polo’s accounts of the secret “garden of paradise” and “death leap” legends, which achieved widespread popularity and legitimacy among the medieval European audiences.¹⁶ It is important to mention, however, that those Christian chroniclers, who had spent a considerable amount of time in the Holy Land, often did not contribute to the formation of these legends. William of Tyre’s accounts of the Assassins, for example, are sober and factual; he does not seek a mystical explanation for their self-sacrificing behaviour.

¹⁶ These accounts are discussed in Farhad Daftary’s *The Assassin Legends*

3. Isma'ili encounters with the Crusading Orders

Following the capture of Jerusalem on July 15th 1099 during the First Crusade, Frankish Crusaders established themselves in Palestine and Syria. A number of Crusading orders were soon formed in the Outremer by the Catholic Church to defend the Holy Land. The two most famous and prominent of these medieval orders were the Hospitallers (the Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem) and the Templars (the Knights of the Temple of Solomon), who for almost two centuries, until the fall of the last Christian fortress in Acre in 1291, exercised great military, territorial and political influence in Syria. The relations of these two orders with their new neighbours, the Isma'ilis, were formed by a series of military confrontations, diplomatic alliances and assassinations.

Early Days

In the beginning of the 12th century, the Isma'ilis, led by al-Hakim al-Munajjim, settled down in Aleppo under the protection of Ridwan, the son of the Seljuk ruler of Syria. Contemporary sources suggest that the reason why Ridwan, who was of course a Sunni, favoured the Nizaris, was his intention to use their services against the increasingly hostile local amirs. Furthermore, the rapid advance of Crusader armies from the north would certainly have made an alliance with the militarily efficient assassins seem more desirable.¹⁷ Ibn al-Qalanisi reports that the lord of Homs, Janah al-Dawla, was “set upon by three Persians belonging to the Batiniya” on his way to Friday prayers in May 1103: “they attacked the amir with their knives

¹⁷ This was not the first time Ridwan had taken extreme measures to stay in power. We know that he had two of his brothers strangled in 1095, fearing that they might challenge his rule. Maalouf, p 23.

and killed him”.¹⁸ The chronicler names Ridwan as the instigator of this assassination, since Janah al-Dawla blocked his expansionist plans.¹⁹

The first major military encounter between the Isma’ilis and the Crusaders took place in February 1106, when Abu Tahir, the sect’s new leader, seized the citadel of Afamiya.²⁰ Some eight months later, Afamiya was besieged by Tancred, the Frankish regent of Antioch. Although the initial siege was laid off in return for a “fixed tribute”, the stronghold was eventually captured on 14th September 1106.²¹

In the following years the Isma’ili fortunes reversed dramatically, as they were expelled from Aleppo - many were executed, some were hurled from the citadel walls.²² Most of their other strongholds were taken either by Tancred or by local Arab rulers, as it was the case with Shayzar, where Isma’ilis were slaughtered by the Banu Munqidh in 1114.²³ Thus the Isma’ili forces were beaten down and disorganized, and it was at that point that, as sources suggest, they fled to the protection of the Franks.²⁴

The movement was revived in the 1120s by its new leader, Bahram of Astarabad, who managed to consolidate his position in Damascus.²⁵ Bahram’s protector, al-Mazdaqani, the vizier

¹⁸ Ibn al-Qalanisi, pp. 142-3 (year 496); tr. Gibb, p. 57

¹⁹ Ibid. This allegation does pose certain questions, since it was Ridwan’s brother, lord of Damascus and a rival amir, who took over Homs, thus benefiting more from the assassination.

²⁰ Ibn al-Qalanisi recalls the “assassination of ... lord of Afamiya by a party of Batiniys, dispatched from Aleppo”, pp. 149-150 (year 499); tr. Gibb, p. 72

²¹ Ibn al-Qalanisi describes how “Tancred arrived at Afamiya in the hope of seizing it”, pp. 149-150; tr. Gibb pp. 73-74. Abu Tahir was able to ransom himself and return to Aleppo.

²² However, the initial attack on the Aleppine Isma’ilis must have been limited, since Abu Tahir was allowed to escape and would return later in 1111 to help Ridwan withstand Mawdud’s (Seljuk emir of Mosul) siege. According to al-Qalanisi, the power of the Assassins was still “formidable” as late as 1113, so the mass massacres probably took place after Ridwan’s death and were instigated by his son, Alp-Arslan, in or after 1114; pp. 187-191 (year 507); tr. Gibb, p. 145

²³ The slaughter took place after the Isma’ilis exploited the tribe’s hospitality and tried to seize the citadel while their hosts were “out to witness the festival of the Christians”; Ibn al-Qalanisi, p. 147 (year 507). Ibn Munqidh, p. 100, tr. Hitti, p. 107.

²⁴ Ibn al-Qalanisi, p. 190 (year 507); tr. Gibb p. 145

²⁵ Ibn al-Qalanisi reports that the Assassins became so powerful in Damascus that “neither Sultan nor Wazir could condemn them”, pp. 214-216 (year 520); tr. Gibb, pp. 177-180.

of amir of Damascus, Tughtigin, convinced his master to “deliver up to him [Bahram] the frontier fort of Banyas in November-December 1126”.²⁶ In the next couple of years Bahram attempted to extend the Isma’ili territories but was killed in a battle. Shortly after, the Isma’ilis in Damascus, under ‘Ali ibn Wafa’, faced one of the worst massacres in the history of the movement. Ibn al-Athir claims that in September 1129 al-Mazdaqani and the Isma’ilis were negotiating with the Crusaders to help them capture Damascus and obtain Tyre in return (even a date had been set, Friday, when the Assassins would open the city gates).²⁷ Tughtigin’s son Buri is said to have discovered the conspiracy and, according to Ibn al-Athir, had the vizier beheaded and ordered the general attack on the Isma’ilis in Damascus, during which around 6,000 of them were murdered.²⁸ Al-Qalanisi gives a very detailed and vivid account of these events: “By the next morning the quarters and streets of the city were cleared of the Batinis and the dogs were yelping and quarrelling over their limbs and corpses”.²⁹ At the same time, the Persian da’i Isma’il al-Ajami, the new ruler of Banyas, traded the fortress to the Franks and went into exile among them.³⁰

It is hard to tell whether there really had been a plot. Ibn al-Athir is the only source we have on it, and even al-Qalanisi, who was known for his hatred of the Assassins (evident in the passage above) never accused them of such an alliance with the Franks. Indeed, it could have been nothing more than a mere power struggle, as Buri decided to remove the vizier’s hold on the city by getting rid of him and his Isma’ili supporters. However, the fact that the survivors of the massacre were taken under Baldwin’s protection and, above all, the arrival, several weeks later, of a large Frankish army (some 10,000 knights and soldiers) at the walls of Damascus, do lend credence to the plot’s authenticity. Alternatively, one could assume that al-Mazdaqani and

²⁶ Ibn al-Qalanisi, pp. 214-216 (year 520); tr. Gibb, pp. 177-180.

²⁷ Ibn al-Athir, X, pp. 233-234

²⁸ Ibn al-Qalanisi, p. 230; tr. Gibb, pp. 202-204

²⁹ Ibn al-Qalanisi, pp. 221-224 (year 522); tr. Gibb, p. 187-195

³⁰ Ibn al-Qalanisi reports that “Isma’il sent to the Franks, promising to deliver up Banyas to them, in order to seek safety with them”, p. 224 (year 522); tr. Gibb, p. 194

the Isma'ilis knew that the Franks were planning to attack anyway, so offered their assistance in a situation where they had more or less nothing to lose, or so it seemed.³¹ In any case, it is interesting to note that on both occasions, when persecuted by Muslims, the Assassins took refuge in Frankish lands.

Following these two major setbacks in Aleppo and Damascus, the Isma'ilis turned their attention towards the Jabal Bahra' region, where they managed to secure some ten fortresses between Hama in the east and Tartus in the west, most of which they held persistently thereafter.³² The citadel of Qadmus was acquired in 1132-33, and Masyaf, which became their most important stronghold and a frequent residence of the chief da'i, was taken in 1140-41.³³ These acquisitions provided the territorial nucleus for the Isma'ili state.

Around the same time Ibn al-Qalanisi and William of Tyre recorded the first case of a military alliance between the Isma'ilis and the Franks. In June 1149 the Kurdish leader of the Isma'ilis, 'Ali ibn Wafa', joined prince Raymond of Antioch in a battle against Nur al-Din, the Zangid lord of Aleppo. Little is known about this event, but the sources mention that both Raymond and 'Ali died in this battle at 'Inab and their armies were annihilated. Such an alliance was not surprising in the light of Nur al-Din's hatred of the Isma'ili "heretics". In 1148 he had abolished the Shi'ite formulae used in the call to prayer in Aleppo, and was planning to raid their territories.³⁴

Some sources suggest that it was due to their friendship with the Crusaders after the Banyas deal and the battle against Nur al-Din, that the Nizaris were able to consolidate their

³¹ This hypothesis is discussed in A. Maalouf's *Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, pp. 109-110

³² See Chapter 4.

³³ Ibn al-Qalanisi writes that "word arrived... of the seizure of the castle of Masyath by the Batinis, by means of a stratagem", pp. 273-4 (year 535); tr. Gibb p. 263

³⁴ Ibn al-Qalanisi, pp. 304-305 (year 544). William of Tyre, tr. Babcock and Krey, Vol II, pp. 196-198

position in the area, which was coming increasingly under Frankish control.³⁵ In any case, when the Hospitallers took over Krak des Chevaliers, they began extracting tribute from the Isma'ilis, who now inhabited the mountainous area in close proximity to the Order's base.³⁶ Furthermore, even though Isma'ilis were allowed to take over the strongholds previously owned by the Franks, they still seem to have constantly fought over some of them, according to Benjamin of Tudela, who traveled to Syria in 1163. He reports that there was fighting over Maniqa in 1151 and Hisn al-Sharqi, which the Isma'ilis lost before 1163.³⁷

One of the most interesting examples of such hostilities is the stronghold of Shayzar. It was captured by the Isma'ilis from the Crusaders in 1157, but they immediately returned it to its previous Muslim lord. However, it is unclear why the "men of Isma'iliya" who "defeated the Franks and drove them out of Shayzar", according to al-Qalanisi, did not exploit their victory to occupy the castle themselves (knowing their previous history with its lords). One of the possible reasons is that the Assassins constituted only a small part of the Muslim attacking force (al-Qalanisi says they were "amongst others"). A better explanation, however, is provided in the chronicles of William of Tyre, who says that a quarrel broke out between the besiegers (Baldwin III, Thierry, Reynald and Count of Flanders) over who should take control of the stronghold. As a result, the siege was abandoned and the Franks left. Furthermore, William of Tyre suggests that Shayzar had already been in Isma'ili hands since August 1157, when a disastrous earthquake damaged the castle.³⁸

In the same decade, amid sporadic fighting and short-lived alliances, the dagger of the Assassins found its first Frankish victim – Count Raymond II of Tripoli, who was assassinated in

³⁵ Ibn al-Qalanisi, p. 224 (year 522); tr. Gibb p. 194

³⁶ See Chapter 4

³⁷ Benjamin of Tudela, tr. Asher, p. 50

³⁸ Ibn al-Qalanisi, p. 337 (year 552); tr: Gibb p. 342. William of Tyre, tr. Babcock and Krey, Vol II, pp. 266-268. William of Tyre is probably mistaken, since we know that although the last Munqidhite ruler of Shayzar perished in this so-called Earthquake of Hamah, the stronghold was then repaired and given to Nur al-Din, rather than the Isma'ilis. Hitti, *Usama*, Introduction, p. 6

1152.³⁹ This event has not been well documented and the motives for the murder were never found, but it was in revenge for this assassination that the Templars invaded the Isma'ili lands and forced them to pay tribute.

Sinan's rule

The Syrian Nizaris attained the peak of their power under the leadership of their greatest chief da'i, Rashid al-Din Sinan, known in most Western chronicles as the Old Man of the Mountain (Shaykh al-Jabal). Sent to Syria in 1162 as a viceroy from Alamut, Sinan is said to have lived in Isma'ili provinces for seven years without identifying himself, in order to study the local political situation. He eventually announced his mission in 1169, a day before the death of the previous Syrian da'i, Abu Muhammad.⁴⁰ In the first few years Sinan devoted himself to reorganizing and strengthening the Nizari da'wa, fortifying its castles and acquiring more strongholds in Jabal Bahra', including Khawabi, Kahf, Masyaf, Ullayqa, Maniqa and Rusafa.⁴¹

Sinan is often credited with the establishment of the first Syrian corps of fida'is, whose missions to eliminate the prominent enemies of the Nizaris had such a powerful imaginative effect on the Crusaders. In reality, the fida'is were merely young self-sacrificing devotees who offered themselves for these missions to protect their community, and who do not seem to have received the kind of sophisticated training the European chroniclers ascribed to them.⁴²

One of the main tasks Sinan faced after coming to power was to end hostilities with the Crusaders and establish alliances with the two neighbouring Orders and their Latin states, since Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din, who were utterly opposed to Shi'ite "heresy", posed a much greater

³⁹ William of Tyre, tr. Babcock and Krey, Vol II, pp. 214-215. Ibn al-Furat, Vol VIII, p. 79

⁴⁰ Kamal al-Din, in Lewis, pp. 38-39; tr. Lewis pp. 7-8

⁴¹ Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, p. 143

⁴² Daftary (ed.), *Medieval Ismaili History and Thought*, p. 193

threat to the Isma'ilis. In 1173, Sinan, finding his lands surrounded by Frankish strongholds, is said to have offered to embrace Christianity in return for a remittance of the tribute paid to the Templars, and sent an envoy to King Amalric of Jerusalem, who allegedly accepted the offer.⁴³ It is hard to access the sincerity of Sinan's intentions to undergo baptism, which could be seen as an example of the Isma'ili principle of taqiyya (dissimulation). This practice could indeed involve abandoning one's religious beliefs (though only officially) in order to achieve a strategic or political advantage, which an alliance with the King of Jerusalem against Nur al-Din would have most certainly provided.⁴⁴

In any case, the Isma'ili envoy Abdullah was intercepted and murdered by Walter de Mesnil, a Templar Knight. According to William of Tyre, the King was outraged and demanded satisfaction from the Templar Grand Master, Odo de St. Amand, since the murdered envoy was protected by the royal safe-conduct. The Grand Master refused to hand Walter over, stating that his Order is responsible solely to the Pope. Amalric was then forced to go to Sidon in person and arrest the knight himself.⁴⁵ There are several possible reasons for the envoy's assassination. William of Tyre believed that the murder was prompted by a financial motive, since the Templars feared the loss of the tribute of some 2,000 gold coins, which they have been receiving from the Assassins annually since 1152, and which would have been cancelled in case of Isma'ili alliance with Amalric.⁴⁶ Walter Map, on the other hand, argued that Sinan had received a copy of the Gospels from the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and was so impressed that decided to convert to Christianity. The Templars, however, were determined to prevent peace and alliance with their natural enemy and resolved to kill the envoy.⁴⁷ Indeed, the mere fact of accepting the sincerity of the Assassins, seen as scandalous infidels and immoral murderers by the Crusaders, would have

⁴³ William of Tyre says that the Assassins "would join with the faith of Christ and be baptised"; tr. Babcock and Krey Vol. II, pp. 392-394

⁴⁴ Especially since the major Isma'ili castles were located within the Christian lands, which made Frankish neutrality desirable (see Chapter 4)

⁴⁵ Although Amalric did apologize for the murder of the Assassin envoy, the chance of an alliance had been lost.

⁴⁶ Barber, p. 103

⁴⁷ As quoted in Barber, p. 103. Barber remarks that William of Tyre's account is more likely to be accurate, in the view of his direct access to Amalric.

seriously undermined the Templar credibility as the protectors of the Christian faith in the eyes of their western patrons.⁴⁸

At the same time, hostilities suddenly ceased between Salah al-Din and Sinan (previously Sinan dispatched several teams of fida'is to assassinate the Sultan without success).⁴⁹ During Salah al-Din's siege of Masyaf in 1176, they are said to have reached a truce, and the siege was lifted. Ibn al-Athir mentions a letter sent to Salah al-Din, in which Sinan threatened his family with certain death, as a decisive factor.⁵⁰ A more logical explanation is given by Abu Shama, who claims that the Sultan's "main motive" behind making peace with Sinan was his fear of "Frankish disturbances" in Syria, which forced him to return to Damascus.⁵¹ Contemporary Isma'ili sources, however, give a much more glorious and mystical account of the events. In anecdotes narrated by Abu Firas, Salah al-Din's troops failed to capture Sinan, as they became paralyzed by a mysterious force. The following night a poisoned loaf of bread, with a dagger inside, was left in Salah al-Din's tent with a note that said "You are in our power". Salah al-Din, the story goes, became terrified and hurried to lift the siege off.⁵² Whichever of the two accounts is closer to the real story, it is a fact that Salah al-Din would never again threaten the domains of the Assassins, who were previously among his vilest enemies.

It can be suggested that Sinan's decision to ally himself with Salah al-Din can be explained by the increasingly hostile attitude of the Templars and the Hospitallers towards the Isma'ilis in disregard of the official policy of Jerusalem, and the aggressiveness of the Hospitallers in

⁴⁸ Barber, p. 104

⁴⁹ We have the dates for two of these assaults – first one in 1175, when Salah al-Din was wounded, and the second one in 1176. Ibn Khallikan describes one of these attempts, saying that during the siege of Azaz on the 15th May 1176 the Sultan "was traitorously assailed by some Ismailians, but God saved his life and the assassins were taken", Ibn Khallikan, Vol. III, p. 492, tr. MacGuckin de Slane, Vol. IV, p. 507

⁵⁰ Ibn al-Athir, XI, p. 165

⁵¹ Abu Shama, pp. 669-670 (year 572); translation mine

⁵² This story has many variations and is very popular among the Isma'ilis. In a video interview given to me by the Isma'ili Mukhtar of Qadmus, he tells his own version of this anecdote and recites a poem, sent by Sinan to Salah al-Din. Kamal al-Din provides several variations of this poem ("The dove rises up to threaten the hawk"), pp. 40-42; tr. Lewis pp. 10-11.

particular, who in 1186 set up their military headquarters at Marqab, less than 13 miles north-west of Qadmus.

The most famous Isma'ili assassination is, of course, that of Conrad of Montferrat, the titular King of Jerusalem and ruler of Tyre, in April 1192.⁵³ Although all contemporary Muslim sources agree that the assassination was carried out by the Isma'ilis, they disagree as to who ordered it. Ibn al-Athir's account supports the theory of the newly emerged Isma'ili alliance with Salah al-Din, mentioned above. He states that the "Frankish Marquis", who was "the greatest devil of all the Franks", was murdered as a result of "Saladin's negotiations with Sinan, leader of the Isma'ilites". The initial agreement, according to Ibn al-Athir, was that both the King of England and the Marquis (for an additional sum of "2,000 dinar") should be killed. Sinan refused to assassinate the former, realizing that "it would free Saladin of all worry about the Franks and he would then turn on the Isma'ilites themselves", but he nevertheless "resolved to organize the death of the Marquis", being "anxious to have the money".⁵⁴

Ibn al-Athir's allegations are reinforced in the only Isma'ili account we have of this assassination from the "Manaqib". We are told that Sinan sent "two of his assassins" to help his "friend Saladin" by killing "his enemy the King of Franks". The latter's death, Sinan is reported to have said, would allow the Sultan to "attack the Frankish army, drive them off, cut them to pieces, please God, and kill many of them". After the mission had been accomplished and the enemy's head was presented to Salah al-Din, he indeed proceeded to attack the Franks, "almost exterminating" them. The "victorious conqueror", "happy and content" then "loaded the two Brethren with gifts and sent a splendid gift to ... Lord Rashid ad-Din".⁵⁵

⁵³ The chroniclers describe how the "two Batinites fell on him [Conrad] and inflicted mortal wounds upon him" "with their daggers". Imad al-Din, pp. 420-2; tr. F. Gabrieli, pp. 238-240. Ibn al-Athir, XII, p. 31; tr. F. Gabrieli, p. 241-2

⁵⁴ Ibn al-Athir, XII, p. 31; tr. F. Gabrieli, p. 241-2

⁵⁵ Abu Firas, pp. 463-6; tr. F. Gabrieli, pp. 242-5

A different version is presented in the chronicles of ‘Imad al-Din and Baha’ al-Din, who both name Richard, King of England, as the instigator.⁵⁶ ‘Imad al-Din argues that “the death of the Marquis ... was of little benefit” to the Muslims, since not only was he “one of King of England’s enemies”, but he had also been in contact with the Sultan, negotiating for peace - something Richard was utterly opposed to. Indeed, it was Richard who benefited most from Conrad’s death, as he “assumed control of Tyre and conferred it upon Count Henry [his nephew and protégé], arranging it all with him”.⁵⁷ Even Ibn al-Athir admits that such a convenient sequel to the assassination does explain why “the Franks attributed the murder to a command from the King of England, so that he could be sole ruler of Palestine”.⁵⁸

Another possible suspect was, of course, Count Henry of Champagne himself. ‘Imad al-Din notes that he “married the Marquis’ wife on the same night, maintaining that he had first right to the dead man’s wife”.⁵⁹ This “first right” here refers to the fact that Henry was the first husband of Isabella, king Amalric’s daughter. Thus Henry had the motive to employ the Assassins to murder Conrad – his wife and the crown that came with her. Henry’s visit to the Isma’ili stronghold in 1194 could be seen as proof of his connection with the Assassins.

Personal circumstances of the chroniclers are also worth taking into account, as they might explain their “choice” of the instigator. Ibn al-Athir is known to have favoured the Zangid dynasty, whose power Salah al-Din had usurped; hence it is not surprising that he would accuse the orthodox Muslim leader of an alliance with the Isma’ili heretics. The fact that both ‘Imad al-Din and Baha’ al-Din served at Salah al-Din’s court (as a chancellor and Qadi to the army respectively) would likewise explain why they would refrain from admitting such an alliance, if the latter did exist, in their biographies of the Sultan.

⁵⁶ When questioned, the assassins admitted that “it was the king of England ... who had commanded them to commit this murder”. Imad al-Din, pp. 420-2; tr. F. Gabrieli, pp. 238-240

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibn al-Athir, XII, p. 31-2, tr: F. Gabrieli, pp. 241-2

⁵⁹ Imad al-Din, pp. 420-2; tr. F. Gabrieli, pp. 238-240.

The story related to us by Abu Firas in the “Manaqib” is the least convincing of all three. Even if we assume that Salah al-Din had indeed hired the Assassins to kill Conrad, one would find it almost impossible to believe that the Sultan, known for his rigid orthodoxy and piety, would order “that in every city a ‘House of the Company’ should be built as a centre” for the Isma’ilis.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Sinan’s miraculous knowledge of the exact time and date when the Frankish King will be “drunk and sleepy, with head drooping and no one at his side” also seems unlikely.⁶¹ Finally, this hardly accounts for the assassins’ preparation for their mission, on the contrary to ‘Imad al-Din’s and Ibn al-Athir’s reports, which give very similar and more probable description of how the assassination went to live in Tyre and became Christians (and even monks, according to Ibn al-Athir) six months before the murder took place, “so that they could both be close to the Marquis, ensuring his confidence in them by their constant presence”.⁶²

Henry’s visit to the citadel of Kahf, mentioned above, is described in Isma’ili anecdotes, reminiscent of those told Sinan and Hasan al-Sabbah. He was met by Nasr, the new Old Man of the Mountains, who took over after Sinan’s death in the previous year.⁶³ To show off the absolute authority he exercised over his disciples, Nasr ordered two of his guards to hurl themselves off the tower, which they immediately and willingly did. The Assassin Master wanted to proceed with this demonstration, but Henry begged him to stop. After the treaty of alliance between the two parties had been signed, the newly appointed King of Jerusalem was asked whether there was any assassination he would like the Isma’ilis to carry out for him, but this generous offer was declined. A mystical touch is added to this story by the events of Henry’s

⁶⁰ ‘House of Company’ means a centre for the Isma’ili da’wa. “In every city” refers to the “ten villages” which Salah al-Din had assigned as tributaries to the Isma’ilis. Abu Firas, p. 466; tr. F. Gabrieli, p. 245

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Imad al-Din, pp. 420-422; tr. F. Gabrieli, pp. 239. Ibn al-Athir, XII, p. 31; tr: F. Gabrieli, p. 241

⁶³ Runciman remarks that when the Assassins apologized for the murder of Conrad, it was “a crime that Henry found easy to forgive”. Vol III, p. 89

death on 10th September 1197, as he fell out of a window of his castle in Acre, just three years after having witnessed a similar scene at Kahf.⁶⁴

Later encounters

After Sinan's death in 1193, the Syrian Isma'ilis were never again in a position of power in their dealings with the Crusading Orders. Although Henry's visit was followed by further exchange of embassies, tribute to the Templars was still being paid. Furthermore, by 1228 the Assassins had become tributaries of the Hospitallers as well, following the Order's attack on the Isma'ili domains after the initial demand of tribute had been ignored.⁶⁵ Some historians have even suggested that in the 13th century the Isma'ilis became allied, though in a subordinate position, to the Hospitallers as their protectors.

It has been further argued that even when the Isma'ilis did assassinate Christians, they were the enemies of the Hospitallers. In 1213, for instance, Bohemond IV's eldest son, Raymond, was killed by the Assassins in the Tortosa cathedral.⁶⁶ Another enemy of the Hospitallers, the Patriarch Albert of Jerusalem, was assassinated in the following year. Seeking vengeance, Bohemond attacked the Assassin stronghold of Khawabi, but the siege was eventually lifted as the Ayyubid army came to the rescue.⁶⁷ Cahen gives further examples of how Christian rulers would either ask for assurance that the Isma'ilis were not planning to assassinate them on behalf of someone else, or hire them against rival Muslim or Christian lords. Another interesting account is that of the Pope Gregory IX sending letters to the archbishop of Tyre demanding that

⁶⁴ Runciman, Vol III, p. 89

⁶⁵ Al-Hamawi, pp. 340-41

⁶⁶ The Isma'ilis of modern Tartus even seem to know the exact location where the assassination took place.

⁶⁷ Runciman, Vol III, p. 139; Setton, Vol I, p. 128

both the Hospitallers and the Templars cease any alliances with the Assassins, which certainly does indicate that such an alliance was at least considered as an option.⁶⁸

In 1238, if Matthew Paris, the English Benedictine monk, is to be believed, a delegation from the Old Man of the Mountains together with embassies from other Muslim princes journeyed to England and France to seek assistance against the Mongol threat.⁶⁹ The authenticity of the Assassin embassy is given further evidence in A.H. Morton's study of the records of King Henry III in 1241 and 1242. The Ghurid coins, mentioned in these records, are identical to the coins used by the Isma'ilis to pay tribute to Sultan Jalal al-Din in 1229-30, which led Morton to believe they must have come to England as part of the funds of the alleged embassy.⁷⁰

The last important encounter between the Nizaris and the Crusaders related to diplomatic dealings with Louis IX, the French king better known as St. Louis, leader of the Seventh Crusade. Joinville, the king's biographer and secretary, has preserved valuable details on the embassies exchanged during the early 1250s between St Louis and the Old Man of the Mountain.⁷¹ The first embassy from the Assassins arrived in 1251, demanding not only to be released from the tribute paid to the Crusading Orders, but further insisting that the King himself should pay them for their neutrality and "protection". It seems that the Assassins had been encouraged by their previous successes in receiving tributes from a number of Muslim and Christian rulers, and came to believe they were powerful enough to add Louis to their list of tributaries. Indeed, earlier in 1227, for example, an embassy was sent from the titular King of Jerusalem, Frederick II, which brought some 80,000 dinars worth of gifts to Majd al-Din, the Assassin Master.⁷²

⁶⁸ Cahen, pp. 615-19; Wasserman, p. 139

⁶⁹ Matthew Paris, tr. Giles, p. 131

⁷⁰ Morton, pp. 167-70

⁷¹ Joinville, pp. 218, 222-4; partial English tr. in Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, pp. 79-81

⁷² Al-Hamawi, pp. 335-336, 340, 348

Having received a firm negative answer from Louis IX in the presence of the Grand Masters of the two orders in question, the Assassins must have realized their mistake. The next embassy was, therefore, rather humble and apologetic, presenting the King with a number of precious gifts as tokens of friendship.⁷³ It was in the aftermath of this second embassy than an Arabic-speaking friar, Yves the Breton, was sent to meet the chief Isma'ili da'i, Taj al-Din, to discuss religious matters and to sign a treaty of mutual non-aggression. Joinville, who accompanied Yves on his trip, reports that the friar was fascinated by the library kept at Masyaf, in which he is said to have found an apocryphal sermon addressed by Christ to Saint Peter.⁷⁴

It is symptomatic of the weakened position of the Isma'ilis that, when in 1271 Baybars took over Krak des Chevaliers, the Assassin Old Man of the Mountain was present among other guests at the Sultan's tent to observe the defeat of the powerful Order and his former allies. Ibn al-Furat reports that when Baybars "besieged Hisn al-Akrad on 9 Rajab 669 [21st February 1271]... a tent was brought and pitched for him ... Najm ad-Din the Grand Master of the Isma'ilites also arrived."⁷⁵

⁷³ Barber, p. 153

⁷⁴ Joinville, pp. 218, 222-4; partial English tr. in Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, pp. 79-81

⁷⁵ Ibn al-Furat, in Lyons, pp. 184-185; tr. F. Gabrieli, pp. 317-318

4. Isma'ili castles in the Frankish kingdom

Hardly any historical or archaeological studies of the Crusader castles had been carried out before the second half of the 19th century, when a general rise of French interest in the military architecture of the Levant provoked the earliest scholarly works on these grand structures and their legends. Emmanuel Guillame Rey was among the first ones to undertake expeditions to northern Syria, examining the castles of the Latin Kingdom. In the 20th century, T.E. Lawrence, Paul Deschamps and Hugh Kennedy, embarked on a similar mission. However, their works focused primarily on the Frankish strongholds, giving little, if any, mention to the neighbouring Assassin fortresses.⁷⁶ A recent publication, Peter Willey's book "*The Eagle's Nest*", examines the Isma'ili castles in medieval Syria and Iran. This chapter is based on the information provided in the above-mentioned studies, as well as personal observations during my visits to some 30 medieval strongholds in Syria.

By 1142, when the Hospitallers bought the famous Crusader fortress Krak des Chevaliers (Hosn al-Akrad), the Syrian Isma'ilis had acquired a number of castles in the Jabal Bahra' (modern Jabal Ansariyya), which allowed them to establish virtual control over extensive territories between Hama and the sea (*Map*).⁷⁷ The citadel of Qadmus, which was bought by Abu al-Fath in 1132, became their forward post in the west, together with Kahf, sold to the Isma'ilis

⁷⁶ Works in question are Rey's *Etudes sur les monuments de l'architecture militaire des Croises en Syria*, Deschamps' trilogy *Les Chateaux des Croises en Terre Sainte*, Kennedy's *Crusader Castles* and Lawrence's *Crusader Castles* (which, although only an undergraduate dissertation, offers a remarkable wealth of information and personal insight). An important boost for the study of Crusader castles was given by the French Mandate in Syria post-1921, when castles like Krak des Chevaliers were purchased from the Syrian government.

⁷⁷ The following chart gives the original Arabic names for the main Crusader and Isma'ili castles and their most commonly used French equivalent:

Marqab	Marqat
Hosn al-Akrad	Krak des Chevaliers
Masyaf	Masyat (Masyad)
Safita	Chastel Blanc
Sahyun (later renamed into Qal'at Salah al-Din)	Saone
Tartus	Tortosa

in 1135-6 by a Muslim lord who had previously recovered it from the Crusaders. Ullayqa was on the north-western fringe of the Assassin territories. The castle of Masyaf in the east, which the Isma'ilis took between 1140 and 1141, was their most important stronghold and served as a window on the Muslim principalities of Hama and Homs. In the south, the citadel of Khawabi was rebuilt during Sinan's reign sometime after 1170.⁷⁸ Those were the key Isma'ili strongholds, part of a total of some 200 castles captured by the Assassins seeking to establish their own autonomous states in Iran and Syria. Masyaf seems to have been the preferred residence of the chief Syrian da'i, although both Kahf and Qadmus are mentioned.

As the map shows, these Isma'ili castles were not only in close proximity to, but were in fact located within the ring of Crusader castles. Ullayqa is less than 10 miles to the north-east of Marqab; Khawabi is situated between Marqab in the north and the Templar Tortosa in the east (around 10 miles). Kahf, Qadmus and Masyaf are facing Tortosa and Marqab in the west, Safita in the east and Saone in the north. Krak is just within a day's journey due south of Masyaf. This arrangement certainly does explain why Sinan not only devoted much time and energy to fortifying his strongholds, but even considered converting to Christianity in order to obtain greater protection from his Frankish neighbours.⁷⁹ To quote Ibn Jubayr, the Mountains of Lebanon were "the frontier between Muslim lands and those of the Franks" and "on their slopes are castles belonging to the heretical Isma'ilites".⁸⁰

The fact that both the Assassins and the Crusaders chose the same region for their strongholds was hardly a coincidence. As we know, the main enclave of Crusader castles was located in the southern parts of the Latin Kingdom, where they were in charge of the pilgrim

⁷⁸ Sources for the acquisition of these castles are reviewed in Cahen's *Syrie du Nord*, pp. 353-4

⁷⁹ The account of this proposed alliance with the King of Jerusalem is given in Chapter 3.

⁸⁰ Ibn Jubayr, pp. 256-7; tr. Broadhurst pp. 264-5

traffic from the coast to the Sepulcher.⁸¹ Their later interest in the northern territories and subsequent extension of their presence in the County of Tripoli was due to the strategic importance of the area, which provided the sole channel of communication between Tripoli, the valley of the Orontes, Homs and Hama, as well as a vital military and commercial link between Egypt and Asia Minor. Furthermore, since Aleppo and Damascus were never captured by the Franks, their exposed and vulnerable eastern flank necessitated the fortification of the coastal plain.

The Assassins first appeared in Jabal Bahra' long before the Franks, in 1106, when they tried to take over its mountainous citadels from their base in Aleppo. For the Assassins, the region presented a perfect opportunity to extend their presence in Syria. Located at an almost equal distance from the two main Seljuk cities, Damascus and Aleppo, Jabal Bahra' was ruled by numerous rival Muslim lords, who could, if necessary, be played against one another. But above all, the Lebanon range afforded maximum protection for their castles, which, as it is discussed later in the chapter, was an important consideration for the Isma'ili leaders.

Indeed, the land itself, with its combination of fertile plains (between the Mediterranean and the Orontes) and highly inaccessible areas, favoured the establishment of strongholds.⁸² 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani described the way to one of the castles being "through valleys and mountain paths, difficult openings, soft flat ground and rough terrain, highlands and low-lying areas".⁸³ The strategic importance of coastal cities such as Tortosa was obvious in the view of the considerable pilgrim traffic the Franks were responsible for.⁸⁴ The Hospitaller Marqab, Assassin Khawabi and Templar Arimah were also built in this coastal belt, which gave them

⁸¹ The traffic was placed under Templar control after 1119, and at least seven strongholds were created between the port of Jaffa and Jerusalem

⁸² Abbe Rothelin says that "the country was rich in game, which was very useful to them [Assassins]", Chapter 17. Ibn Jubayr reports that this area "is one of the most fertile and productive regions in Islamic lands", p. 255; tr. Broadhurst, p. 264.

⁸³ Imad al-Din, p. 143; tr. Hillenbrand, p. 471

⁸⁴ Tortosa was granted to the Templars by William, Bishop of Tortosa, in 1152. Barber, p. 81

direct access to the sea, and which would at the same time allow them to guard areas where passes from hinterland led through to the coast.

The importance of castles in general for the Crusaders and the Assassins also deserves to be mentioned. Both groups were always a beleaguered minority in Syria and we know that their castles were often garrisoned by very few people.⁸⁵ Thus the numerical disadvantage had to be compensated by the impregnability of their castles. A few men had to do the work of many, so greater emphasis was put on the strength of the strongholds.⁸⁶ Sunni Muslims, on the other hand, were always plentiful in numbers and preferred walled towns rather than isolated fortresses; and their castles did not serve the same defensive functions (of which they had no need), since the Franks were often too few to inflict significant damage on them.⁸⁷ These specific circumstances are reflected in the masonry, where large square blocks of stone used in thick walls of Crusader and Isma'ili castles (Masyaf, Marqab, Khawabi, Krak) are a contrast to the brick or rubble masonry used by the Muslims.⁸⁸

With the exception of Tortosa, the Assassin and Crusader castles in the Jabal Bahra' provide an example of this shift from the Muslim and Crusader ideas of a fortified town with a stronghold attached to it. Kahf, Marqab, Krak, Qadmus and Khawabi were all strategic bastions set in isolated surrounding, which were not associated with the defence of a particular town.

Thus, it can be argued that strongholds did in many ways provide the framework for the military strategy of the Assassins and the Crusaders in the Jabal Bahra' region, as their dependence on fortified sites was necessitated by the constant shortage of manpower. Stones

⁸⁵ The reported size of garrisons in the largest Crusader castles in 1212: Krak – 2,000 men, Marqab – 1,000 men. In 1285, 25 Hospitaller knights surrendered and were allowed to leave Marqab. Marshall suggests that this was probably their full contingent; p. 115

⁸⁶ Hillenbrand, p. 467

⁸⁷ Ibid. With the exception of the sieges of Jerusalem and Damascus, assembling of a large field army was hardly possible, unless the siege coincided with a new crusade.

⁸⁸ Hillenbrand suggests that it was one of the reasons why fewer Muslim castles have tended to survive, p. 468

were made to do the work of soldiers.⁸⁹ Indeed, we know that Sinan was determined to fortify the existing Assassin castles and acquire new ones. However, it has to be mentioned that, unlike the Crusader castles, the Assassin fortresses were not designed with the same offensive role in mind, but were built essentially in defensive mode. Frankish castles, on the other hand, were constructed as fighting machines, which could constantly defend themselves against the enemy, as well as launch efficient attacks of their own.

A brief examination of the main defensive features of the Assassin castles can be conducted by mentioning the most common siege techniques and weapons used in those days and looking at how their castles responded to those challenges in comparison with their Frankish counterparts.

Location and terrain were, of course, a primary concern, and defensible posts were then often preferred to strategic ones. Even the Franks, who in the early days of the First Crusade merely occupied and strengthened the already existing Byzantine fortresses (as for example in the area of Tripoli), were later often forced to change their strategy due to the lack of man-power and take advantage of an easily defended position (natural rather than man-made). Good examples of this newly adopted strategy are Marqab (*Photo 1*) and Arimah.⁹⁰

The Isma'ilis, who, as mentioned, also did not have the luxury of large garrisons or field armies, would always opt for a naturally strong position of their castles. In many ways the Syrian Isma'ilis had adopted the same approach as their Persian counterparts, who were famous for building inaccessible strongholds in the mountainous areas of Iran in the early 1100s. By looking at their strongholds, one can derive the main principles on which the Assassins would base their decision to fortify or build a fortress on a particular site. The most favourable solution seems to

⁸⁹ Fedden, p. 14

⁹⁰ Abu al-Fida who witnessed the siege of Marqab in 1285, wrote that it was “very high and well fortified; none of the previous kings had hoped to capture it”, p. 21; tr. Holt, p. 12.

have been fortifying the crown of a high mountain, where the stronghold would be impregnable, like it has been done in case of Kahf (*Photo 2*) and Qadmus.⁹¹ Where that was not an option, the site of the castle had to be sufficiently elevated and located in a remote area, which would be difficult to approach (Khawabi and Ullayqa).

Intervisibility of the castles played an important role in the choice of locations. We know that defenders of Safita, some 380 metres up in the Nusairi Mountains, could see the Hospitaller Krak to the south-east and the Templar Arimah, further towards the coast.⁹² The arrangement of the Isma'ili castles has a circular setup, whereby Ullayqa, Kahf and Masyaf are all some 10-15 miles away from Qadmus, the centre point. Only Khawabi is at a further distance, some 20 miles from Qadmus. Thus the defenders could communicate with fire signaling and carrier-pigeons (in use of which Arabs were experts). Undoubtedly, this circle of key strongholds gave Sinan an excellent strategic position within the Frankish crusading state. Formidable enough as isolated units, Assassin castles would have gained additional strength when linked to each other

An elevated position, favoured by the Isma'ilis, would not only allow greater visibility over the surrounding area (and intervisibility between the castles themselves), but would also increase the speed of missiles fired from the wall curtain, as well as the damage they inflicted. More importantly, a high place would make their castles better protected against sieges. Of course, no masonry could stand up to the enemy's artillery (mangonel, ballista or trebuchet) indefinitely. However, castles built on solid rock (Kahf, Qadmus, Khawabi, Saone, Arimah, Marqab) were impregnable to enemy's attempts to scale or breach the walls, since scaling ladders, wooden towers, rams and bores could all only operate on level ground. Mining and sapping, the most dangerous of all contemporary siege weapons, were similarly ineffective against rock

⁹¹ The 20th century owners of Qadmus even managed to avoid paying property tax to the Ottomans, claiming that the citadel was not a castle, but a continuation of the natural rock.

⁹² Barber, p. 81

platforms.⁹³ Even Masyaf, which was an exception from the overall Isma'ili principle of building on top of natural rock, was nevertheless protected from most siege weapons by an almost perpendicular solid rock platform of some 20 meters above the surrounding plane.

Choice of difficult terrain often limited the natural resources available nearby, which could seriously undermine the castle's ability to withstand a prolonged siege, one of the basic techniques of siege warfare (laying siege to a castle for months and even years, until the defenders would run out of food and water supplies)⁹⁴. Ibn Jubayr says that "in all the conditions of defence there are no more important and certain than these two attributes [food and water]".⁹⁵ In case of Khawabi and Ullayqa, Isma'ilis had established their castles on the river, which meant not only constant water supply, but also fertile grounds. In castles without direct access to a water source, large chambers were built to serve as water cisterns, which the rainfall would run into. Crusader Saone had two vast water tanks, one of which was 117 feet long and 52 feet high. Masyaf has a number of such cisterns (in addition to some three or four wells), and in Kahf I have counted five covered cisterns (although there might be more), carved in the rock, some of them at least four metres deep.⁹⁶

We know that major Isma'ili and Crusader castles had great stocks of provision. Vast cellars at Marqab were constructed to hold a thousand men's provisions for a five-year siege. Krak had a windmill within the castle walls to grind corn. Assassin Masyaf also had a number of ovens and granaries, and the size of one of its storage chambers is impressive. This underground chamber would have probably served as the last defensive resort as well, equipped with a secret

⁹³ Abu al-Fida, however, claims that mines played a crucial role during the capture of Marqab: "when the mines had got the better of the castle walls, its people asked for terms". It was probably at a later stage of the siege, when weakened defence allowed Qalawun's sappers closer access to the walls; p. 21; tr. Holt, p. 12

⁹⁴ It was also a technique favoured by both Christian and Muslim rulers when dealing with a major stronghold, out of "a desire to keep it in being, for if [they] had taken it by the sword and destroyed it, its restoration would have been troublesome". Abu al-Fida, p. 21; tr. Holt, p. 12.

⁹⁵ Ibn Jubayr, p. 203; tr. Broadhurst, p. 261

⁹⁶ One of the cisterns at Kahf supplied water to the bath-house on the lowest level of the castle, which is still rather well preserved. Peter Willey has managed to locate yet another source of water – from the natural springs surrounding the castle, p. 235

passage leading to the outer line of the castle walls. Traces of multiple storage chambers can also be found at Qadmus, Kahf and Ullayqa (at least six). Thus, regardless of the terrain, Isma'ili castles would have always possessed adequate food and water supplies, even when inaccessible location had to be chosen over fertile grounds.

Masyaf, the largest and the best-preserved Isma'ili castle, deserves a special mention. It is described by al-Dimashqi as the “mother of [Isma'ili] fortresses [used] to manifest their missionary message [da'wa] and to send fidawis to states and provinces to kill kings and notables”.⁹⁷ However, the castle had often been criticized by historians and dismissed as being defensively useless.⁹⁸ Masyaf is indeed based on an earlier Byzantine strongpoint, many characteristic features of which were impractical in the light of advanced siege tactics of the Crusader period. However, if we compare the defensive structures of Masyaf to those of Saone, which was seen as “probably the finest example of military architecture in Syria”, a lot of the criticism becomes invalid.⁹⁹

Both castles were originally Byzantine fortresses, which makes them more suitable for comparison. Through extensive works the Crusaders had transformed Saone into a vast and inaccessible mountain castle between 1108 and 1132.¹⁰⁰ Imad al-Din al-Isfahani wrote that the mountain side of the castle was “cut off by a great ditch and a firm wall to which there is no access except by fate and divine decree”.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, no reports have survived of the fortification of Masyaf, which is said to have been carried out by Sinan Rashid al-Din. In any

⁹⁷ Overall, al-Dimashqi gives the most complete description of Isma'ili castles at the time of Sinan: he mentions Khawabi, Kahf, Qadmus, Ullayqa, Maniqa, Rusafa, Abu Qubais and Masyaf. He does, however, seem to confuse Kahf and Qadmus – saying that Sinan is supposedly buried at Kahf, and that Qadmus is known for its baths, whereas it was most certainly vice versa; p. 208; translation mine.

⁹⁸ T.E. Lawrence referred to Masyaf and Qadmus as “the absurdly weak castles”. He further says that Masyaf “is contemptible”, p.53, ff.

⁹⁹ T.E. Lawrence, p. 58

¹⁰⁰ To strengthen the castle's defences, the Franks removed some 170,000 tons of solid rock to create a ditch of 450 feet long, between 60 and 130 feet high and 50-90 feet wide. One needle of rock was left in the middle of the ditch to carry the drawbridge. Hillenbrand, p. 472

¹⁰¹ Imad al-Din, p. 144; tr. Hillenbrand, pp. 471-2

case, major works must have been completed by 1176, when Salah al-Din besieged the stronghold.

Byzantine castles, which relied mainly on man-power and outworks, often had thin curtain walls defended by rectangular towers, which were placed far apart and did not communicate with the wall-walk. This latter lack of intercommunication is evident at Saone in two of its three rectangular towers on the south side.¹⁰² In Masyaf, however, the walls are reasonably thick and allow entrance into the towers.¹⁰³ Furthermore, the rectangular towers at Saone project only slightly beyond the line of the curtain (which would allow ‘dead zones’ in between any two towers) and there is a general absence of loopholes in the towers and walls.¹⁰⁴ In Masyaf, the rectangular towers are often placed almost outside the curtain wall, especially in its corners, where the wall follows the shape of the rock platform. Each tower has at least six loopholes throughout its full height. Thus, unlike Saone, the defence at Masyaf was possible on all levels and was not confined to wall tops [*Photos 3 and 4*].

Saone boasts a set of round towers on the eastern side (above the ditch), which were possibly one of the first ones built by Crusaders in the region: we know that Franks had built hardly any large round towers before 1170, whereas Saone was captured by Salah al-Din in 1188. These towers would have provided stronger flanking fire than the rectangular ones. Masyaf also has a number of semi-round towers, placed on the lowest and therefore less defended part of the platform.¹⁰⁵ The towers are projected at close intervals, allowing greater firing range, and each had at least four loopholes, whereas one of the towers at Saone had only

¹⁰² Smail describes this interruption of communication as a Byzantine feature, p. 240

¹⁰³ Peter Willey notes that “the overall thickness of the walls is 1.80 metres though the thickest measure five metres”, p. 224.

¹⁰⁴ Smail notes that even the round towers at Saone are projecting only a few inches beyond the wall; p. 237

¹⁰⁵ It would be more accurate to describe their shape as “cut glass” rather than completely round. However, this shape would have provided exactly the same fire range.

two.¹⁰⁶ One can not be certain about the date when the semi-round towers were introduced in Masyaf, but it is likely that the entire refortification was completed during Sinan's time.

Further parallels can be found in the stone work of the two castles, which is often similar and equally smooth, allowing less hold for scaling ladders. In both Saone and Masyaf the main gate is placed at a re-entrant angle (the so-called "bent entrance"), an effective technique against an enemy who wished to rush the entrance, since he was forced to change the direction of his attack, exposing himself to lateral fire from the curtain wall.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, in Masyaf the main gate opens into two consecutive narrow and dark rooms, with little space to maneuver and loopholes cut in the walls and ceiling – yet another opportunity for the defenders to break up the momentum of the attack.

Thus, although Saone's rock-cut channel and deep ravines on the two sides of the castle certainly did make it one of the most sufficiently fortified Crusader castles, Masyaf does not seem to lack any of the other defensive features present at Saone and can hardly be seen as defensively inferior. Furthermore, the double concentric fortification, which was first used by the Franks to strengthen Krak and Marqab, is also present at Masyaf.¹⁰⁸ In a similar way to the defensive arrangement in Krak, the inner line of defence in Masyaf (the citadel itself) is much higher than the outer encircling wall and the gap between the two is minimal, so that the enemy could be engaged simultaneously from both. The sketch of the castle's proposed original state gives a clearer idea of the castle's elaborate and impressive defensive structures. (*Figure 1*)¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ The third round tower at Saone was damaged and later rebuilt with seven loopholes.

¹⁰⁷ Smail says this was a later Roman and Byzantine technique, p. 242. Similar "bent entrance" can be found at Kahf, where a set of gates marks the first 'bend'.

¹⁰⁸ The scheme of concentric defence is reversed at Saone, where the outer ring of defences is stronger than the inner one. Smail, p. 240

¹⁰⁹ Having visited Masyaf several times, I certainly do share Peter Willey's "great temptation" to "compare it with Krak des Chevaliers". The sketch makes such comparison a lot easier. Willey, p. 226.

5. Isma'ilis and Templars: shared identities

Joinville, King Louis IX's chronicler, when speaking about the relations between the Isma'ilis and the Crusading Orders, remarked that "The Old Man of the Mountain 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".¹¹⁰ However, the same was true of the Isma'ilis themselves, since their internal organization and hierarchy made them similarly immune to an attack by assassination. This structural resemblance led some historians to believe that the two Crusading Orders of knighthood, and the Knights Templar in particular, were not only secretly allied to the Assassins, but also borrowed and adopted certain features and doctrines directly from them.¹¹¹

Von Hammer-Purgstall and F.A. Ridley provide further analogies to illustrate how the Templars "stand in the next rank" to the Assassins.¹¹² The Templar assassination of the Isma'ili envoy is seen as reminiscent of the notorious Assassin practice.¹¹³ The castles of the Crusading Order were similarly established in remote and naturally fortified locations, as opposed to the earlier Crusaders, who opted for strategic rather than impregnable sites. Finally, the accordance of the white dress and red fillets of the Assassins with the white mantle and red cross of the Templars, is mentioned as the most striking resemblance.¹¹⁴ However, all these similarities are most certainly coincidental. The use of assassination, as well as the fortification of inaccessible mountains, were merely a reflection of the general atmosphere during the time of the Crusades, rather than of a distinctive doctrine. Furthermore, white was the color of Christian purity and the

¹¹⁰ Joinville, p. 218 ff; tr. Barber, p. 153

¹¹¹ Von Hammer-Purgstall, p. 129

¹¹² Ibid, p. 216. Ridley, pp. 187-194. Wasserman, pp. 149, 246

¹¹³ This assassination is discussed in Chapter 4

¹¹⁴ Von Hammer-Purgstall, p. 216. Ridley, p. 191

Islamic color of ahl al-beit (the family of the Prophet), which explains the similar coloring of the orders.

Thus the only argument worth considering is the resemblance of the Assassin and Templar organizations. The Isma'ili da'is (missionaries), the rafiq (companions), and the lasiq (adherents) accorded with the Templar knights, chaplains and the serving brethren, while the Chief Da'i (Da'i al-Kabir) was, of course, the counterpart of the Grand Master, who was similarly chosen for his strategic and military abilities.¹¹⁵

We know that in 1152 the Templars invaded the lands of the Syrian Assassins to avenge the murder of Count Raymond II of Tripoli. The two orders, who had thus become nearest neighbours and operated from mountain fortresses in close proximity to each other, had maintained their relations for more than a century thereafter, right down to the fall of the last Christian stronghold in Acre in 1291. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that at least some interchange of ideas and techniques must have taken place. It is also important to note that the Knightly Order of the Temple first came into direct contact with the Isma'ilis some twenty years after receiving its formal charter.¹¹⁶ Thus for the Templars, who were at an early stage of their formation as an Order, it would have seemed logical to borrow from the hierarchical structure of the Assassins who were, after all, a much older model of a secret organization present nearby. However, there is no direct evidence to prove any such adaptation, which is not at all surprising when dealing with two of the most powerful secret orders of the Middle Ages.

¹¹⁵ It has to be mentioned, however, that the Templar Grand Master was elected, while the Syrian da'i was chosen by the Chief Da'i in Alamut, who himself was appointed by the Imam. The latter, of course, had no parallel figure in the Templar Order. Another grade, which was peculiar to the Assassin sect, was that of fida'is (devoted ones), who were responsible for carrying out the assassinations.

¹¹⁶ The Order, which derived its name from its initial headquarters near the Solomon's Temple, was founded in 1119; the formal charter was granted in 1128 at the Church-Council of Troyes.

6. Conclusion

With the arrival of the Mongol and Mamluk regimes onto the historical stage, the virtual independence of Isma'ili state came to an end. By 1256 Hulegu Khan had destroyed most Assassin strongholds in Persia and put the last master of Alamut, Rukn al-Din, to death. In Syria, the last Isma'ili castle, Kahf, surrendered to Baybars on 22 July 1273. Commenting on the fall of the Isma'ilis, the Persian chronicler 'Ata-Malik Juvayni discussed the "extent of the mischief they wrought and the confusion they cast into the hearts of men", and celebrated the event which was the "cure to the disorders of the Faith":

So was the world cleansed which had been polluted by their evil.

The days when kings and rulers "went in fear and trembling" for their lives had gone, and the Isma'ilis were now reduced to the status of obedient assassins.¹¹⁷ The famous traveler Ibn Battuta, who passed by the Syrian "castles of the Fidawis" in 1326, referred to the sect as "the arrows of al-Malik al-Nasir, by means of whom he strikes down ... his enemies, ... and they receive fixed emoluments".¹¹⁸

Thus it seems that, on the contrary to Bernard Lewis' argument that after the 13th century there were no further "authenticated murders by Syrian Assassins", the Isma'ilis in Syria had not only survived the onslaught of the Mamluks, but were also active, albeit not independently, some 35 years after the Crusaders had been expelled from the Holy Land.¹¹⁹ Ibn Battuta's comment

¹¹⁷ Juvayni, tr. Boyle, p. 725

¹¹⁸ Ibn Battuta, Vol. I, pp. 61-3; tr. Gibb, Vol I, pp. 106-109. Ibn Battuta also recalls al-Nasir Muhammad's numerous attempts to assassinate amir Qaransunqur by sending the Fidawis against him.

¹¹⁹ Lewis, *The Assassins*, p. 123. Melville, p. 248.

that “none may visit them [Isma’ili castles] save members of their sect” further suggests that the sect had managed to maintain its exclusive character.¹²⁰

Throughout their history in medieval Syria, the Nizari Isma’ilis had always remained a power to be reckoned with. For almost two centuries they had preserved their territories right in the heart of the hostile Seljuk empire, and the Order of Assassins had outlived the other two great secret orders of the time – the Templars and the Hospitallers. It would be a mistake, however, to attribute the survival of the Syrian Isma’ilis solely to their use of assassination. Undoubtedly, this was their most famous and rather effective political device, but one should not forget that almost all assassinations, or alleged plots, were countered by massacres of the Isma’ili community. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the ignorant and imaginative accounts produced by contemporary chroniclers had often over-exaggerated the scope of these assassinations. From very early on it became common to ascribe almost every assassination to the Isma’ilis. It is true that the murderers themselves often admitted belonging to the sect, but it is unwise to fully rely on confessions obtained through torture, which had always been the case in those days.

Above all, the Isma’ilis owed their political prominence to the strategic and diplomatic skills of their chief da’is who, like Sinan Rashid al-Din, were determined to maintain the independence of their community under the chaotic and difficult circumstances of the Middle Ages. Their sophisticated network of shifting alliances with their Sunni and Christian neighbours, which exploited, to the advantage of the Isma’ilis, the political decentralization in Syria and internal rivalries of Seljuk and Crusader lords, does indeed provide a fine example of successful medieval diplomacy.

¹²⁰ Ibn Battuta, Vol. I, p. 61; tr. Gibb, Vol I, p. 106. Melville, pp. 248, 258

Map. Isma'ili and Crusader castles in Jabal Bahra', northern Syria



Photo 1. Marqab was one of the first Crusader strongholds built on a naturally elevated and defended site.



Photo 2. Built on top of a solid rock, Kahf was impregnable to most contemporary siege weapons.



Photo 3. Saone, one of the finest examples of Crusader architecture, has nevertheless inherited a number of defensively weak Byzantine features.



Photo 4. Masyaf was one of the most sufficiently fortified Assassin strongholds. Thick walls, far-projecting towers and numerous loopholes are among the defensive features that put it in one line with the strongest Crusader castles.

Figure 1. Masyaf. Proposed original state, mainly 12th century, Syria

List of illustrations

Cover page: Engraving by Ruhierre after a painting by Rouget, *Louis IX at Acre receives a deputation from the Old Man of the Mountain*, Mary Evans Picture Library (www.maryevans.com)

Map: Barber, Figure 8, p. 102

Figure 1: Hillenbrand, Figure 7.67, p. 502

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