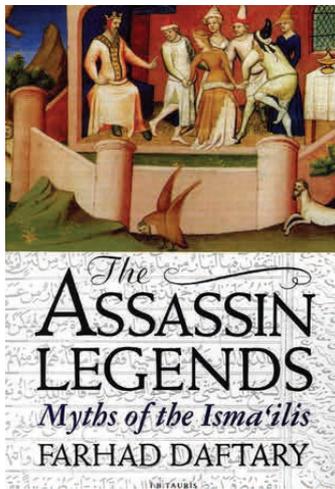




The Institute of Ismaili Studies



## *The Assassin Legends*

Myths of the Isma'ilis

**Farhad Daftary**

I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2001.

A Reading Guide prepared by Nabila Hussein for the Department of Community Relations, 2014

Farhad Daftary's *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis*, seeks to deconstruct the fabricated stories about the Nizari Isma'ilis as hashish smoking killers, obedient to their leader, the "old man of the mountain". By charting the origin and evolution of these legends, and investigating the historical circumstances that allowed for their immense popularity, Daftary attempts to reveal these legends as nothing more than "the imaginative constructions of uninformed observers" (p. 7). Building upon popular lore and local polemics, these uninformed observers - particularly the Christian West - created a series of sinister tales about the Persian and Syrian Isma'ili communities; these tales would remain influential due to their sensational appeal from the time of the First Crusade to the 19th century. Drawing on an array of sources including previously un-translated works, Daftary's book not only attempts to discredit the Assassin Legends but in doing so seeks to rectify the crude image that has been associated with the Isma'ili community for over eight centuries.



Nizari Isma'ili Castles of Iran and Syria

### Introduction

The book is comprised of an introduction, three interconnected chapters, and an Appendix. After a brief introduction to the aims and ambitions of the book, Dr Daftary's second chapter provides a concise history of the Isma'ilis. This chapter sets the historical stage upon which the Assassin Legends were formed. Chapter 3 builds upon the historical survey in chapter 2 and focuses in particular on the interactions between the Europeans and the Isma'ilis commencing with the Crusaders. It is not until the 4th chapter, after having provided the necessary background and insights, that Dr Daftary comes to the main subject matter of his book, the Assassin Legends. Outlining the various legends and detailing when and how each first appeared, this chapter demonstrates the legends as "fabricated and put into circulation by Europeans," rather than factual accounts of Isma'ili practices (p. 7).

The Appendix, the final section of the book, is the first English translation of the, "M emoire sur la dynastie des Assassins, et sur l' etymologie de leur Nom" by Silvestre de Sacy, an important 19<sup>th</sup> century study of the Isma'ilis. According to Daftary, de Sacy's piece finally solved the mystery of the term

'Assassin' - a label that had been accepted as synonymous with Isma'ilis for centuries - and in doing so, made a significant contribution to the renunciation of the Assassin Legends.

### Guiding Questions

1. Why did the Isma'ilis of the medieval period contribute so minimally to the refutation of the Assassin Legends?
2. For what reasons did the occidental travellers prefer to exaggerate, and in most instances fabricate, their accounts of the Isma'ilis rather than attempt a genuine portrayal?
3. Why is an understanding of the historical circumstances under which the Assassin Legends were formed and disseminated of such importance?
4. What are the implications of modern scholarship revising much of what was previously accepted as fact?
5. How significant a role does history play in the construction of communal identity?

### The Isma'ilis in History and in Medieval Muslim Writings

As is clearly articulated in Daftary's work, *A Short History of the Isma'ilis*, the Isma'ilis are a community whose history is fraught



with schisms. However, for a multitude of reasons – including geography and deliberate secrecy – many of these divisions were unknown to the Sunni, and larger Shi'a communities from whom the Isma'ilis found themselves separated in the mid-8th century. The fact that other Muslim communities were unaware of the subdivisions within the Isma'iliyya, resulted in their categorising the various Isma'ili communities as one; this classification had serious and long-term implications. In particular, the Qarmatis, who split from the Isma'ilis in 899 CE, went on to commit sacrilegious acts – including the stealing of the black stone from the Ka'ba – which were then attributed to the Isma'ilis. This act was not only considered profane, but it caused the Abbasids public embarrassment and ultimately resulted in the first Sunni polemics against the Isma'ilis.

A century later, still associating the Isma'ilis with the Qarmati transgression, the Sunni Abbasids responded to the emergence of the Fatimid Empire in 909 CE, with heightened polemical activity. Most notably, the Sunni polemicists created the “Black Legend”, a tale stating that the Isma'ili Imams did not truly descend from Imam 'Ali, but rather that Isma'ilism was a conspiracy founded to destroy Islam from within (p. 25). This was the first legend to emerge about the Isma'ilis and the only one intentionally created by other Muslims.

As well, great scholars were commissioned by the Abbasid and Seljuk rulers, such as al-Ghazali (d.1111 CE), to write treatises using intellectual arguments, rather than crude accusations, to denounce the Isma'ilis. In response to these polemics, the Isma'ilis produced their own treatises which both discussed their distinction from the Qarmatis and provided the details of their beliefs so as to prove the Black Legend fictitious. However, the sensational appeal of the Abbasid accounts coupled with the loss of the Fatimid Isma'ili texts in 1171 CE, allowed for the vast proliferation of these polemical claims.

This situation was to worsen still after 1094 CE with the Nizari-Must'ali schism within the Isma'iliyya; this split not only produced internal polemics but ultimately led to the

appearance of the Nizari Isma'ilis (the focus of this work) in Egypt to Iran and Syria. In Iran, to protect themselves from the powerful Seljuks, the Isma'ilis adopted a “policy of assassination”; a survival strategy where trained Isma'ilis would eliminate particular religious, political and military adversaries (p. 34). These assassinations inevitably aggravated the ruling Seljuks, as many of the targets were their own men and they responded with further anti-Isma'ili compositions.

However, during this period the Isma'ilis, confined to the mountains, were struggling to survive; thus, commissioning responses to these polemics was not their priority. In 1164 CE, with the announcement of the Qiyama, the misunderstanding of Isma'ili identity held by most of the Muslim world was strengthened once again. Understood as the abolishment of *shar'ia* for the Isma'ilis, the Qiyama was clear proof for other Muslim communities that Isma'ilis were an “arch-heresy carefully designed to destroy Islam from within” (p. 5).

Less than a century after the declaration of the Qiyama, the Mongols arrived in Persia; entering into an environment hostile to the Isma'ilis, the Mongols unsurprisingly adopted the biases of the visible Muslim majorities. In 1256 CE the Mongols massacred the Isma'ili community of the Alamut period, damaged their forts, burnt their library and with it destroyed all evidence countering Isma'ili polemics; thereafter, fearing for their safety, the Isma'ilis adopted *taqiyya* until the 19th century.

### Medieval European Perceptions of Islam and the Isma'ilis

During the medieval period, while the Isma'ili minority were subject to slander at the hands of the Muslim majority groups, the Christian West began their verbal and physical crusade against Islam. Prior to the

#### **Textbox 1:**

##### **Rashid al-Din Sinan (d. 1193 CE)**

Sinan was the leader of the Isma'ili Muslim community in Syria during the time of the Crusades. After his first visit to Alamut, in present-day Iran, he was sent by the then Imam, Hasan Ala Dhikrihi al-Salam to Syria to serve the Isma'ili community there.



Crusades, and perhaps integral to their commencement, the European view of Muslims was one of disdain; they believed that Muslim expansion during the Umayyad Caliphate into Spain, and Muslim presence in the holy land (of Palestine) was an encroachment onto Christian territory. Moreover, for many Christian scholars, “Muhammad was the Anti-Christ and the rise of Islam heralded the imminent end of the world” (p. 51). Thus the initial rationale behind the Crusades was to reclaim Christian lands from a people they had identified as synonymous with their Biblical enemies, the “Saracens”.

Prior to the Crusades, the Christians were unfamiliar with the various divisions of Islam. However, by the end of the first Crusade (1096-1099 CE) and with the creation of Frankish states in Outremer, what could previously have been ascribed to naivety became strategic ignorance.

During the 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, those who lived in the Frankish states, amidst various groups of Muslims, began to have economic and social relations with the so-called “Saracens”, including Salahuddin Ayyubi and the Isma‘ili *da‘i* Rashid al-Din Sinan. Through these interactions, the Crusaders and various occidental scholars, began to see the Muslims as several distinct communities and most importantly, as communities that were civilised adherents to a monotheistic faith.

However, as Dr Daftary says of the occidental chronicler William of Tyre:

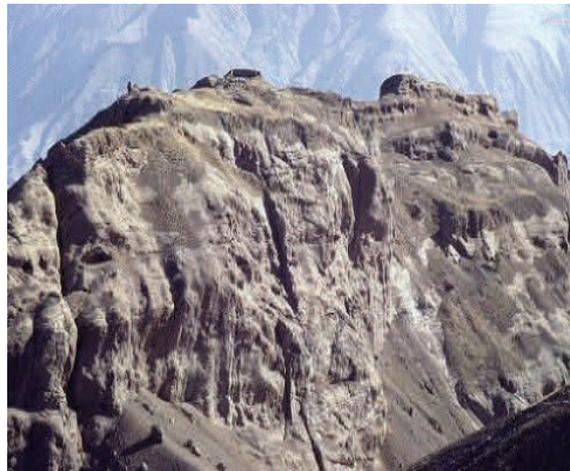
*“[His] main objective was to show that the Crusade was a holy war against the Saracen infidels, and that its triumphs were, therefore Gesta Dei per Francos, divine deeds done through the Franks” (p. 56).*

Thus, William of Tyre, like most other chroniclers of the Crusades, was not concerned with producing an accurate account of the Muslims and their religion; rather these individuals wished to show the Crusades as necessary wars against infidels. In essence, these scholars had to ensure that those at home in the Christian West continued to pledge support to the Crusades

and did so by continuing to spread and even exaggerate, stories which they had learnt to be false. Once these accounts reached 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe, which had entered a period of “great imaginative development”, they took on a life of their own in which “Muslims were idolaters worshipping a false trinity and Muhammad was a magician” (p. 57).

In part due to the fact that the Crusaders hoped to defeat Islam, they felt no need to truly understand the religion; only when it became of political benefit to them did they take heed of the various Muslim communities.

Although by the 12<sup>th</sup> century the Crusaders were aware of the division of Sunni and Shi‘a within Islam, they knew almost nothing of the Isma‘ilis. What they did know was acquired through first hand encounters with Sinan and their observations of the *fida‘is* (who they referred to using variants of *heisessini* and *assissini*). The first occidental report of the Isma‘ilis was produced by Benjamin of Tudela who wrote of the Isma‘ilis as a community “...who do not believe in the religion of Islam, but follow one of their own folk, whom they regard as their prophet, and all that he tells them to do they carry



Castle of Alamut © The Institute of Ismaili Studies

out” (69).

Later accounts would go on to elaborate upon this prophet as Sinan - who would, in later accounts would be termed, “the old man of the mountain” - and the obedience of these assassins to him. Thus the Isma‘ilis, in 12th century accounts, were not designated as Muslims but rather as highly skilled and



obedient assassins living in mountains. However, it was not until the third Crusade and the murder of Conrad of Montferrat in 1192 CE, arguably committed by two *fidai'is*, that the Isma'ilis began to gain real and lasting attention.

Prior to what they understood as a direct attack on one of their men, the Crusaders did not care to understand the faith of these assassins, but shortly after, in the early 13th century, visits to the Isma'ili castles in the mountains of Syria became common.

However, as they had done with the Muslims of Levant, rather than attempt to understand this community, the Crusaders sensationalised the activities of the *fidai'is* and the personality of Sinan. Certain occidental chroniclers claimed to have visited Sinan in the Syrian mountains, including Friar Yves, who reported that the Isma'ilis “Did not believe in Mahomet, but followed the religion of Aly who was... the uncle of the Mahomet” and further claimed that the Qiyama was a proclamation that Sinan wished to be Christian (pp. 80-81). Thus, by the mid-13th century, the Christian West had designated the Isma'ilis a non-Muslim community, obedient to the religiously schizophrenic Sinan and had found in them a scapegoat for the murders of many “magnates and Catholic princes” (p. 76).

### Origins and Early Formation of the Legends

Thus, during the medieval period not only had the Muslim majorities created a heretical identity for the Isma'ilis and proliferated that image through various treatises, but the Christian West had begun to compose their own polemical works identifying the Isma'ilis as an exclusive community of trained assassins. And, in the mid-13th century, these two anti-Isma'ili perspectives merged, both deliberately and inadvertently, to formulate the infamous Assassin Legends.

As the occidental chroniclers began to access Sunni and Shi'a tracts against the Isma'ilis, they soon realised that the assassins of Syria were in fact a community of Muslims with counterparts in Persia. However, this was the extent of the accurate information they gained. It was the tales created by the Muslim

majority to depict the Isma'ilis as immoral and the various events and fabrications in support of the Black Legend that the Christian West adopted. In addition to deliberately adding these Muslim accounts to their already sensationalised understanding of the Isma'ilis, the Crusaders also misread certain Sunni tracts ultimately creating their own legends. Most notably, in several of their treatises the Sunni authors utilised the term “Hashishiyya” in reference to the Isma'ilis to denote their “low social and moral status” (p. 91). The effects of the drug hashish “impaired all [of one's] faculties but in particular those moral and character qualities that determine the individual's standing in society”, and thus rendered its users morally degraded social outcasts (p. 91). In other words, the term was designated metaphorically to reference the Isma'ilis as immoral.

While an insulting label, these Sunni works were not accusing the Isma'ilis of taking drugs; unfortunately, however, Western readers took the use of this term literally. For the Christian West, the obedience of the *fidai'is* was unheard of and the willingness with which these assassins sacrificed their lives at the command of the Old Man

#### **Textbox II:**

##### **Taqiyya**

Precautionary dissimulation of one's religious beliefs, especially in times of persecution or danger, a practice especially adopted by the Shi'i Muslims.

required an explanation. Whereas Muslim communities understood martyrology, Western observers were new to the notion and on their search for a rationale found their answer in the label Hashishiyya; the assassins were obedient because they were drugged by their leader (p. 93). However, as Dr Daftary points out, the *fidai'is* had to execute their tasks discretely and with precision and thus their use of hashish - a mind altering substance - would have been counter-productive.

Despite the use of hashish by the *fidai'is* as impractical, the stories of their drug use quickly spread and developed throughout the Western world; before long a flock of individuals, who travelled to the Orient and encountered the Isma'ilis, began to produce works further sensationalising the beliefs held



**Textbox III:  
Crusades**

European Christian military expeditions undertaken from 1096 CE onwards with the aim of capturing the ‘Holy Land’ under Muslim rule. While Palestine was recaptured by Salah al-Din al-Ayyub after an initial loss, the Crusaders had gained Sicily and the majority of the Iberian Peninsula by the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The first Crusade (1096-1099 CE) was the most effective among them, for the Crusaders managed to establish four states in the Holy Land and territories around it.

about the Isma‘ilis. Legends created and accepted as truths include the “Training Legend” which claimed that *fiḍa’īs* were “recruited in childhood and then trained by special teachers in complete isolation until they were ready to be dispatched on their missions”, and the “Death Leap Legend” where the assassins would jump to their death at Sinan’s command (pp. 97, 104).

While, these legends built upon the Hashish Legend, demonstrating the *fiḍa’īs*’ unwavering obedience to Sinan, the “Paradise Legend” granted a further reason for the compliance of the assassins, the promise of “secret and delightful places” (p. 99). First hinted at by James of Vitry in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of a sensual paradise that awaits martyrs would be replicated numerous times over the next century, culminating with Marco Polo.

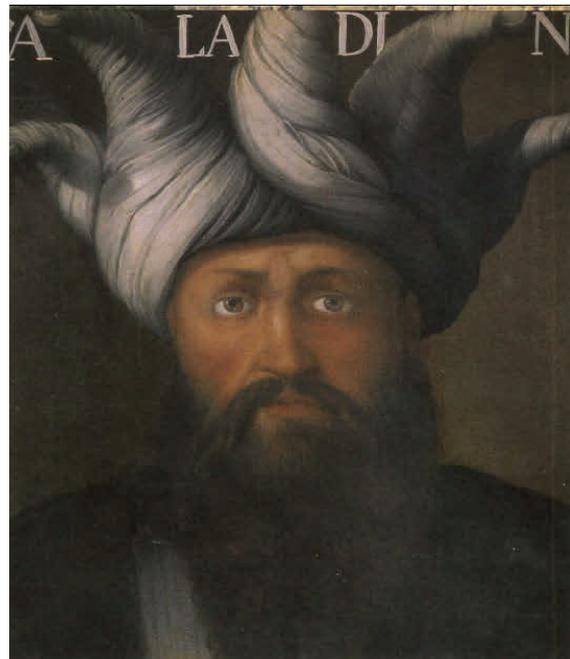
With the Isma‘ilis adopting a policy of *taqiyya* after the Mongol attacks, direct contact between the Europeans and the Isma‘ilis came to a complete halt; however, rather than put an end to the Assassin Legends, the likes of Marco Polo gave these stories based in “imaginative ignorance” a new life (p. 108). Polo, who we now know never encountered the Old Man or the *fiḍa’īs*, claimed in his writings, to have studied this community in depth.

According to Dr Daftary, rather than write on his own experiences, Polo was likely to have adopted the various legends that had gained currency in the West and synthesised them into an elaborate account depicting Sinan as a deceitful magician who tricks the *fiḍa’īs* into obedience. He writes of the *fiḍa’īs* being put to sleep with opium and then taken to a “secret garden bearing a close resemblance to

the Paradise described in the Qur’an and promised by the Prophet Muhammad to the pious believers”, when they awaken in this garden they are treated to “a variety of carnal delights” and made to believe that they are experiencing a glimpse of paradise, and finally they are put to sleep a second time, removed from the garden and placed in a damp place to reinforce the beauty that awaits them if they obey the Old Man (p. 113). This elaborate legend gained currency in the West and until the 18<sup>th</sup> century was accepted as a factual account of the Isma‘ilis.

**De Sacy’s Memoir Revisited**

Because the Isma‘ilis remained in *taqiyya* for several centuries and could not defend themselves, these legends continued to developed unchecked. However, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when genuine attempts to understand the Orient began to surface, attempts at revising the Assassin Legends began. Several attempts were made to decipher the etymology of the term “Assassin” and also to answer the questions, when and why did the term first appear? According to Dr Daftary, it was not until 1818, with Silvestre de Sacy that we find the answer to the Assassin question.



A 12<sup>th</sup> AH/18<sup>th</sup>-century CE portrait of Salah al-Din al-Yusuf ibn Ayyub (r.564-589 AH/1169-1193 CE), in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. © *The Ismailis: An Illustrated History*, 2008.



De Sacy's "Memoir of the Dynasty of the Assassins and on the Etymology of their Name", was the first comprehensive investigation into Nizari Isma'ili history. Due to his extensive study of the Druze, de Sacy was much more informed on the division within the Isma'ilis than scholars that preceded him. He understood that the Qarmatis were a separate community than the Isma'ilis who founded the Fatimid Empire, and thus he exposed - though he does not acknowledge - the earliest attacks

**Textbox IV:  
Abbasids**

A Sunni Muslim dynasty whose period of rule, in varying degrees of dominance, lasted from 750 CE to 1258 CE. They came to power claiming descent through an uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, al-Abbas.

**Fatimids**

Major Muslim dynasty of Ismaili caliphs in North Africa (from 909 CE) and later in Egypt (973–1171 CE), who claimed descent from Prophet Muhammad through 'Ali and derived their name from the Prophet's daughter, Fatima.

**Ayyubids**

The Ayyubids were a Sunni Muslim dynasty that ruled Egypt, Syria, Yemen and other centres in the Middle East from 1171 CE until the Mamluk conquest in 1250 CE.

on the Isma'ilis by the Abbasids as misplaced. Moreover, he includes in his Memoir a fairly accurate history of the Isma'ilis, from their formation to the invasion of the Mongols, based on Sunni tracts and Crusader sources. He makes two significant revelations in this historical survey: firstly, he confirms that the Persian and Syrian Isma'ilis were one community, and secondly, clarifies that not all Isma'ilis were *fidai's*, that *fidai's* were in fact a specific contingent of the community who were given the responsibility of assassinating enemies.

In addition to composing one of the earliest documents on the Isma'ili past, de Sacy provides the first accurate etymology of the term Assassin. To his credit, de Sacy examined all of the sources that were available to him from the accounts of Crusaders, occidental chroniclers and the various Arabic sources; he does not assume, as he accuses scholars before him of doing,

but rather carefully examines all of the evidence before concluding. He commences by addressing the conclusions of the scholars that preceded him including Falconet who suggests that the term assassin is a corrupted form of *sikkīn*, the Arabic word for dagger, and Assemani who suggests that assassin is derived from 'asas or night watch. De Sacy refutes these and several other etymological explanations, by arguing that these scholars had weak language skills which led them to misunderstand the roots and plural forms in Arabic. After demonstrating previous scholars as having made assumptions, he traces the etymology of assassin, himself.

Evidently a master of Arabic and a thorough investigator, de Sacy's Memoir culminates with proving that, "the word *hashish*, plural *hashishin*, is the origin of the corruption of *heisessini*, *assassin*, and *assissini*" (p. 160). This conclusion is in line with Dr Daftary's own assertion in this book.

Unfortunately however, because Isma'ili sources were not available to him, de Sacy's account, though thorough, does not question the validity of the Assassin legends. After revealing the term assassin as a corruption of the word hashish, de Sacy moves into a discussion on the historical use of the drug and concludes, along with the likes of Marco Polo, that the Isma'ilis were in fact given hashish by the Old Man to keep them obedient. Thus, despite uncovering the etymology of the term assassin, de Sacy accepts the myths that were created around it. Dr Daftary states:

*That an eminent savant of the calibre of Silvestre de Sacy should so readily have fallen victim to the twin influences of the anti-Isma'ili campaign of the Sunni polemicists and the 'Assassin' fantasies of the Crusaders is once again a reminder of how the Isma'ilis had been studied, until recent times, almost exclusively on the basis of evidence collected or fabricated by their enemies and by ignorant observers." (p. 134)*

With polemical sources at his disposal, and no insights into the Isma'ili community, the fact that de Sacy falls victim to Marco Polo's account is unsurprising. It must be remembered that de Sacy had no counter-



claims to work with; the Isma'ilis produced few historical tracts after the burning of their sources in the 13th century and those that were produced were inaccessible. Thus based on available source material de Sacy had no grounds to reject the Assassin Legends. In sum, de Sacy was "obliged to approach the subject from the narrow and fanciful viewpoint of the medieval Crusaders and the travesties of hostile Muslim authors" (p. 6).

Despite the fact that de Sacy accepted, at least partially, the Assassin legends as accurate accounts of the Isma'ilis, his work proved to be a landmark in Nizari Isma'ili studies and his writing paved the way for the likes of Dr Daftary himself.

It is upon de Sacy's Memoir, which demonstrates the term assassin as the combined creation of Muslim polemicists and occidental chroniclers, that Dr Daftary builds his own argument that "...the Assassin Legends [themselves] were generated as a result of an extraordinary type of tactical cooperation between the Christians and the Muslims during the Crusader times" (p. 125). In essence, Dr Daftary completes the study de Sacy began.

### Dr Farhad Daftary's Contribution

Farhad Daftary's *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis*, is today what de Sacy's work was to 19th century scholars of the Orient - groundbreaking.

Dr Daftary, who draws from a multitude of sources including previously un-translated Isma'ili works, brilliantly demonstrates the Assassin Legends as absurdities based in "imaginative ignorance" (p. 108).

A specialist in Isma'ili history, Dr Daftary discusses the activities of the Isma'ilis during the creation of these polemics, including their periods of *taqiyya* and the burning of their counter-claims, so as to provide his reader with a complete picture; scholars previously - including de Sacy - lacked access to this information.

Moreover, Dr Daftary traces the historical trends that were occurring alongside the formation of these legends, such as the policy of assassination:

*The Nizaris of the Alamut period were not the inventors of the policy of assassinating religio-political adversaries in Muslim society; nor were they the last group to resort to such a policy; but they did assign a major political role to the policy of assassination...As a result almost any assassination of any religious,*



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*political, or military significance during the Alamut period was attributed to them. (p. 34)*

Demonstrating that this policy was not unique to the Isma'ilis, but rather a common tactic, is important for dispelling the idea that the Isma'ilis were an anomaly.

This example, and others provided in the book, reveal that the Isma'ilis adopted the same political strategies as other communities of the medieval period. It is through Dr Daftary's mastery of Islamic and in particular Isma'ili history that the aforementioned fact, and others, could be exposed.

Ultimately, Dr Daftary's thorough historical survey of the events surrounding the creation of the Assassin Legends has resulted in a revisiting of the assumptions made about the Isma'ilis and ultimately a discrediting of the Assassin Legends.

Dr Daftary concludes his work by giving credit to Wladimir Ivanow, Marshall G.S. Hodgson and Bernard Lewis for their contribution in rectifying Isma'ili identity: he states that due to these scholars, "the Nizaris of the Alamut period who patronised learning and spiritualised their mission can no longer be judged as an order of drugged Assassins trained for senseless murder and mischief" (p. 124).

#### **Further Reading List**

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