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Nizari Ismaili Monuments

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Although many of these castles in Persia were taken and demolished by the Mongols, the ruins still give an impression of their immense power. As far as we know, there are no other Ismaili monuments still extant with the exception of isolated remains of pottery kilns, for instance at Andij in Alamut. It should be remembered that Ismaili castles, especially the larger ones, were used not only for defensive military purposes, but often constituted complete towns in themselves, acting as the seat of the local governor and his officials, and centres of learning and study, with extensive libraries built within the castle walls and containing valuable manuscripts and scientific instruments. They were also bases from which *da'is* (the Ismaili missionaries) could be sent to other parts of the state.

From 483 AH/1090 CE, when Hasan-i Sabbah gained control of the castle of Alamut, until 654 AH/1256 CE, when Imam Rukn al-Din Khurshah surrendered to the Mongols, the Ismaili state consisted of four principal semi-autonomous areas —“ Rudbar in which Alamut and Lamasar were the principal fortresses, Qumes, the area around Damgan and Simnan, which contained the formidable castles of Girdkuh and Suru, and Quhistan, in the south of Khurasan, in which most of the recent discoveries of castles have been made. There were also additional sites in Khuzistan, Arrajan in particular, where the Ismailis established their hegemony for a few years. The fourth important Ismaili area was in Syria where the Ismailis were able to retain their independence until 671 AH/1273 CE, when the last of their castles surrendered to Baybars. The most important Syrian fortress was Masyaf, though the castle of Kahf was probably the main residence of the Ismaili leader, Rashid al-Din Sinan. This impressive stronghold remained a military post until Ottoman times and was destroyed only at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Another important Ismaili centre was the cluster of castles around Qadmus, including Khawabi, Rusafa, Qulay‘a, Maniqa and ‘Ulleyqa.

In their attempts to persuade their fellow-citizens to join them in their fight against the Saljuqs, the Ismailis often gained control of large fortresses that eventually had to be relinquished after



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a few years' occupation. The outstanding example was their infiltration and occupation of the great castle of Shahdiz overlooking the Saljuq capital of Isfahan, a considerable blow to the prestige of the Saljuqs. Almost at the same time, around 598 AH/1100 CE, the Ismailis seized Khan Lanjan, only seventeen miles south of Isfahan and over 1,000 feet above the valley. Although the capture of Shahdiz ended tragically, we must admire the verve and ingenuity of the Ismailis.

From the very earliest days of its inception, the boundaries of the new Ismaili state had been firmly fixed and the main line of fortresses did not change during the next 166 years. From Alamut, the line stretched east to Firuz Kuh and then along the road to Mashad, past the great complex of strongholds between Simnan and Damgan. In Khurasan the line ran southward to Quhistan and the border with Sistan, and westward to Firdaws and Tabas. The Ismailis well understood the need for quick communications between each of the centres and these were provided by means of smaller forts, watchtowers and beacons. The vital line of communication between Alamut and the Ismaili community in Syria was always kept open and there was regular interchange between these two centres.

The Ismaili fortresses are notable examples of military architecture. Their strategic position and the skilled use of natural resources ensured that, despite the difficulties of the terrain, the residents were well supplied with food and water and able to withstand a prolonged siege of many months, even years. Several major considerations were observed in the construction of Ismaili castles: The area chosen for fortification was in a strong and naturally defensive position, and in a terrain sufficiently remote and inaccessible to discourage attacks by their far more numerous Saljuq foe and other enemies. The complex of fortresses within the chosen area were able to support each other in the event of attack and possessed an efficient system of communication, whether by beacon or other means. The chosen area usually contained enough natural material, especially wood and stone, to allow for any construction or reconstruction to be carried out expeditiously and with the minimum labour force. The terrain was self-sufficient in water and food supplies; that is to say there was fertile ground and water near by.

The strategy was thus a defensive one and, in the mountains of Quhistan, Alamut, and in Syria, it worked admirably. It differed from that of the Crusaders, who built strong bases from which



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they pursued an offensive strategy. The Ismailis were able to overcome, often in an astonishing way, the difficulty of building large fortresses on the rugged crest of a high mountain and solidly anchoring the fortress into the hard and unyielding rock. As precipitous an approach as possible was important as this avoided the need for extensive outer walls, and a steep angle of slope made it very difficult for an enemy to set up his ballistae or rely on conventional siege tactics such as sapping and mining. Of course, the Ismailis took every precaution to block off any approach that lay in dead ground and so made their castles virtually impregnable.

Several of the castles were already in existence at the time of the Ismaili uprising in the early 480s AH/1090s CE and after declaring his allegiance to Hasan-i Sabbah the new governor would set about rebuilding and enlarging his castle. This was an urgent matter as it was not long before Saljuq troops set out to defeat the “heretics.” The imminent task was to build underground storage rooms containing sufficient food for the garrison for several years. These were so well built that ‘Ala’ al-Din ‘Ata Malik Juvayni, the historian of the Mongol era, complains bitterly how difficult it was to demolish the castle of Alamut after it had surrendered to the Mongols. He is clearly astonished at the amount of stores, both liquid and solid, the castle contained, all still in very good condition.

The military genius behind the construction of Ismaili castles seems to have been Buzurg-Umid, Hasan-i Sabbah’s successor (518-32 AH/1124-38 CE). He rebuilt the castle of Lamasar, the largest Ismaili castle, with its complex and highly efficient water storage system. Wherever the slope of a fortified hill was large enough, a well-constructed water-catchment area was constructed. When the present author located the site of Suru, not far from Damgan, it was noted that in addition to the water-catchment area, which needed to be defended by strong thick walls, water had also been channelled to the main castle from a smaller castle a mile away. The Ismailis were skilled water engineers and agriculturists. Every Ismaili castle had a large number of deep limestone-lined water storage cisterns, which were roofed over. Steps led down to the water. Many of the valleys below the castles are now barren and infertile, but some still contain flourishing little farms. Suru is a prime example. In 1972, the present author and his team estimated that the castle of Lamasar was able to rely on almost 400,000 litres of water stored in the castle’s water cisterns and that supplementary water supplies could easily be obtained



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from the nearby Naina Rud. This amount would be sufficient to keep 500 men and 50 mules or horses in water for three months.

The Ismaili castles in Syria, apart from Kahf and Masyaf, were not built on the same massive scale as those in Persia. It was some time before the Ismailis were able to acquire their own castles (524-34 AH/1130-40 CE) and often there was insufficient space available to enlarge them greatly, although the walls, entrances and outworks were often rebuilt or strengthened considerably. Thus the Syrian castles tended to be more compact, although they were well provisioned and able to withstand a prolonged siege. The castle of Khawabi, for instance, was never taken by Crusaders and the site was reoccupied at the beginning of the 20th century by Syrians who continue to live in the castle ruins. An epigraph shows the date of 708 AH/1308 CE.

Kahf and Masyaf are the two most interesting castles in the area. Kahf was the headquarters of Rashid al-Din Sinan and the last Ismaili stronghold to submit to Baybars. It is set on a rocky hill, almost completely covered by undergrowth, overlooking a deep valley and is over 600 meters long. The most important building still standing is the hammam or bathhouse, a large and exceptionally well proportioned and elaborate complex, hewn from solid rock on the south side of the castle. Water was brought from a spring 2 kilometres away. Three gates lead into the castle, again hewn from the rock, on which are carved important inscriptions and Qur'anic verses.

Masyaf is the best preserved of the Ismaili castles in Syria. It had its origins in Seleucid, Roman and Byzantine eras, and was acquired by the Ismailis in 535 AH/1140 CE and together with Kahf became the centre of Ismaili power. It was, however, more exposed than Kahf, besieged unsuccessfully by Saladin in 571 AH/1176 CE, and eventually surrendered to Baybars. The castle was surveyed by Michael Braune in 1983-84 in conjunction with the German Archaeological Institute in Syria and he has compiled a list of thirteen epigraphs in Masyaf, most of them dating from 646-47 AH/1248-49 CE, although there is an earlier one of 621 AH/1224 CE. The latest was 1191 AH/1777 CE. Such epigraphs are not found in Persian Ismaili castles, but are fairly common in Syria. The defensive arrangements of Masyaf are very



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impressive, and include extensive use of the bent entrance and the concentric principle of fortification.

When the Mongols under Hulagu Khan invaded the Alamut Valley in November 654 AH/1256 CE, they wisely made for the weakest Ismaili castle from the military point of view, Maymun Diz. The castle was not set on a great ridge like Alamut and the Mongols were able to use their mangonels with devastating effect. The Ismaili Imam, Rukn al-Din Khurshah, like most other rulers, stood in awe of the Mongols, and soon agreed to surrender all his castles to them. Some of his garrison commanders were reluctant to follow and Lamasar did not surrender for a year. Girdkuh held out for 17 years. It would have been interesting to see what the outcome would have been if the Ismailis had been able to offer a more spirited resistance. Many of the castles could have withstood a prolonged siege without much difficulty.

The present author has identified the location of a large number of Ismaili castles in the last decades of the 20th century, thus making it possible to appreciate more fully the power and influence of the Ismaili state, especially the part played by Quhistan. The fortresses at Qa'in, Fourk, and Shahdiz are particularly impressive. The ruins of Muminabad cover a large area and this must have been a particularly impressive fortress and city. It was not far from the borders of Quhistan and because of its importance needed to be strongly protected. The Mongols set about its destruction with ferocity. The main curtain wall stretched for about 2 miles over sandy dunes. The track leading to it was closed in 1997 and declared impassable.

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This is an edited version of an article that was originally published in *The Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Columbia University, New York, Vol. XIV, pp. 205-208.