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Hasan Sabbah

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Hasan Sabbah, prominent Isma‘ili *da‘i* and founder of the medieval Nizari Isma‘ili state (b. Qum, mid-440s AH/1050s CE, d. Alamut. 518 AH/1124 CE). Little information is available on the early life of Hasan Sabbah, who was referred to as *Sayyidna* (our master) by his contemporary Nizari Ismailis. The colourful story, according to which Hasan, Nizam al-Mulk, and ‘Umar Khayyam had made a pact when they were classmates in their youth under the same master at Nishapur, should be dismissed as a legend (see Rashid al-Din, pp. 110-12; Kashani, pp. 146-48; Mirkhand [Tehran], IV. pp. 199-204; Bowen, 1931, pp. 771-82). The events of Hasan’s career as the first ruler of Alamut are better documented; these events were recorded in the *Sargudhasht-i sayyidna*, the first part of which may have been autobiographical. Although this chronicle, which marked the initiation of a Nizari tradition of historiography in Persia during the Alamut period, has not survived, it was used extensively by Juwayni, Rashid al-Din and Abu’l-Qasim Kashani, who are the chief authorities on Hasan’s life and career (see Daftary, 1992, pp. 91-97).

Hasan Sabbah was born in Qum into a Twelver Shi‘i family. His father, ‘Ali b. Muhammad b. Ja‘far al-Sabbah al-Himyari, a Kufan claiming Himyari Yemeni origins, had migrated from Kufa to Qum. Subsequently, the Sabbah family settled down in Ray, where the youthful Hasan received his early religious education (in the Twelver Shi‘i tradition). It was at Ray, a center of Isma‘ili activities since the middle of the 3rd AH/9th CE century, that Hasan was introduced to their teachings by Amira Zarrab, a local Isma‘ili *da‘i*. Later, Hasan learnt more about Isma‘ili doctrines from Abu Nasr Sarraj and other *da‘is* in Ray, and consequently, after having just turned seventeen, Hasan converted to Isma‘ilism and took the oath of allegiance (*‘ahd*) to the Isma‘ili *imam* of the time, the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir (427-87 AH/1036-94 CE).

In Ramadan 464 AH /May-June 1072 CE, the newly initiated Hasan managed to impress ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Attash, the chief Isma‘ili *da‘i* in the Saljuq territories, to such an extent that he appointed him to a position in the *da‘wa* (mission) organisation. In 467 AH/1074-75 CE, Hasan



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

accompanied Ibn ‘Attash to Isfahan, the secret headquarters of the Isma‘ili *da‘wa* in Persia, where he stayed until 469 AH /1076-77 CE, when, on instructions from Ibn ‘Attash, he left for Cairo to further his Isma‘ili education. Hasan reached Egypt in Safar 471 AH/August 1078 CE and spent three years there, first in Cairo and then in Alexandria, before returning to Isfahan. Almost nothing is known about Hasan’s experiences in Egypt. According to the lost Nizari chronicles used by Persian historians, while in Egypt he clashed with the Fatimid vizier Badr al-Jamali, who at that time had just succeeded al-Mu‘ayyad fi’l-Din al-Shirazi as the chief *da‘i* (*da‘i al-du‘at*). Whether or not this conflict revolved around Hasan’s support for Nizar, Imam al-Mustansir’s heir-designate, who was eventually deprived of succession to the Fatimid caliphate by Badr al-Jamali’s own son and successor al-Afdal, Hasan was eventually banished from Egypt on Badr’s instructions. He returned to Isfahan in Dhu’l-hijja 473 AH /June 1081 CE.

Hasan’s subsequent travels over several years in the service of the *da‘wa* and to evaluate the military strength of the Saljuqs were limited to different localities in Persia. It was during this period that he formulated his own revolutionary strategy against the Saljuqs. By around 480 AH/1087 CE, Hasan was concentrating his efforts on the region of Daylam, which was a stronghold of Shi‘ism, remote from the centers of Saljuq control. He targeted for his headquarters the fortress of Alamut, located in the central Elburz Mountains of the Rudbar region. Hasan, who soon became the *da‘i* of Daylam, reinvigorated the *da‘wa* activities in northern Persia and finally seized Alamut in 483 AH/1090 CE by a clever plan of infiltration. This marked the foundation of what was to become the Nizari Isma‘ili state of Persia. Hasan made the fortress impregnable, and improved the cultivation and irrigation systems of the Alamut valley to make it self-sufficient in food production. Similar policies were later implemented in connection with other major Isma‘ili strongholds. Hasan also established an important library at Alamut, whose collections of manuscripts and scientific instruments had grown to impressive proportions by the time the Mongols destroyed the fortress in 654 AH/1256 CE.

Hasan Sabbah seems to have had a complex set of religio-political motives for his revolt against the Saljuqs. As Shi‘i Isma‘ili, he could not have tolerated the ardently Sunni Saljuq Turks’



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

hostility towards Shi'ism and their aim to uproot the Fatimid caliphate. Hasan's revolt was perhaps also an expression of the Persians' resentment over the alien rule of the Saljuq Turks, since they accounted for a large proportion of the early popular support he received. It was also as an assertion of his ethnic identity that, Hasan took the unprecedented step of replacing Arabic with Persian as the religious language of the Isma'ilis of Persia.

After firmly establishing himself at Alamut, Hasan extended his influence in the region by winning more converts, taking over more strongholds in Rudbar, and building new fortresses wherever he found a suitable location. Alamut was soon raided by the forces of the nearest Saljuq *amir*, marking the initiation of an endless series of Saljuq-Isma'ili military clashes. In 484 AH/1091 CE, Hasan sent the *da'i* Husayn Qa'ini to his native land of Quhistan in southeastern Khurasan to mobilise support there. The early success of the Isma'ilis of Quhistan soon erupted into a popular uprising seeking independence from the oppressive Saljuqs. The Isma'ilis thus seized control of several towns in Quhistan, which became another region, along with Rudbar, for their activities. In this way, in less than two years after the capture of Alamut, Hasan Sabbah had founded an independent territorial state for the Persian Isma'ilis in the midst of the Saljuq sultanate.

In 485 AH/1092 CE, major Saljuq expeditions were dispatched against the Isma'ilis in both Rudbar and Quhistan, but these operations came to a halt later in the same year on the assassination of the all-powerful Saljuq vizier Nizam al-Mulk, followed by Sultan Malikshah's death a few weeks later. Taking advantage of the prolonged disorder and the rivalries in the Saljuq camp after Malekshah's demise, Hasan consolidated and extended his power in Rudbar, where he seized the strategically located fortress of Lamasar (Lanbasar) to the west of Alamut. The Persian Isma'ilis now also captured a number of strongholds, including Girdkuh near Damgan, as well as in Arrajan, the border region between Kuzistan and Fars.

By this time, the revolt of the Persian Isma'ilis against the Saljuqs had already acquired its distinctive pattern and methods of struggle designed by Hasan himself in view of the decentralised nature of political and military power in the Saljuq sultanate. Hasan's plan was to uproot the Turks one by one from their separate strongholds by sending instructions from Alamut to his followers in each locality. He is famed for his decision to use assassination as an



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

effective technique of struggle against the decentralised Saljuq opposition with its vastly superior military strength. This policy soon became identified with the Nizari Isma'ilis in an exaggerated manner, even though it had been adopted by many before them as well as their contemporaries. The actual Nizari assassinations of their prominent enemies were carried out by targeting key leaders and were never aimed at civilian populations. Invariably, they were countered by massacres of Isma'ilis by the Saljuqs.

The dispute over the succession to the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mustansir, who died in 487 AH/1094 CE, led to a permanent schism, splitting the Isma'ilis into rival Nizari and Musta'li factions. Hasan Sabbah, who was by then the undisputed leader of the Persian Isma'ilis and had already adopted an independent policy, supported the cause of Imam Nizar, Imam-caliph al-Mustansir's eldest son and designated successor, who had nonetheless been denied the Fatimid caliphate. Recognizing Imam Nizar as his father's successor to the Isma'ili *imamat*, Hasan now severed his ties with the Fatimid regime and the Isma'ili *da'wa* headquarters in Cairo, which had transferred their own allegiance to Imam Nizar's younger brother, appointing him to the Fatimid caliphate with the title of al-Musta'li bi'llah. Hasan Sabbah had now in effect founded an independent Nizari Isma'ili *da'wa*, and his decision to support Imam Nizar's cause was endorsed by all the Isma'ilis of Persia and Iraq, who came to be known as the Nizariya.

From the early years of the 6th AH/12th CE century, Hasan began to send *da'is* from Alamut to Syria, an early Isma'ili centre of activity, to propagate the Nizari *da'wa*. As a result of the activities of these *da'is*, an expanding Nizari community soon emerged in Syria which eventually became the sole representation of Isma'ilis there. However, almost half a century of continuous efforts were needed before the Nizaris could gain possession of a group of permanent strongholds in central Syria, which was affiliated to the Nizari state in Persia.

After Imam Nizar was killed in Cairo in 488 AH/1095 CE, the Nizari Isma'ilis were left without an accessible *imam*. Indeed, Imam Nizar's own name and caliphal title (*al-Mustafa li-Din Allah*) continued to be mentioned for almost seventy years after his death on coins struck at Alamut (see Miles, 1972, pp. 155-62). In the absence of a manifest *imam*, Hasan himself served as the head of the Nizari *da'wa* and state, with the rank of *hujja* (chief representative of the



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

hidden *imam*). The Nizari *imam* assumed authority four decades after Hasan's own death (see Ivanow, 1933 [*Haft bab-i Baba Sayyidna*], p. 21; Tusi, 1950, text p. 148, tr. p. 173; Quhistani, 1959, text pp. 23, 43).

Outsiders from early on gained the impression that the movement of the Persian Isma'ilis led by Hasan Sabbah represented a new teaching, and it became designated as the 'new preaching' (*al-da'wa al-jadida*) in contradistinction to the 'old preaching' (*al-da'wa al-qadima*) of the Fatimid Isma'ilis. However, the 'new preaching' was no more than the reformulation of the established Shi'i doctrine of *ta'lim* (authoritative instruction). This doctrine was restated more vigorously by Hasan in a Persian treatise entitled *Chahar fasl*, 'The Four Chapters' (Arabic: *al-Fusul al-arba'a*) which, although not extant, has been preserved fragmentarily by, amongst others, his contemporary Abu'l-Fath Shahrastani (d. 548/1153), who may have had Isma'ili leanings (see Shahrastani, 1968. II, pp. 195-98; *idem*, 1984, pp. 165, 167-70; Juwayni, 1912-37, III, pp. 195-99; *idem*. 1958, II, pp. 671-73; Rashid al-Din, pp. 105-7; Kashani, pp. 142-43). In a series of four propositions, Hasan argued for the inadequacy of human reason in knowing God and for the necessity of an authoritative teacher (*mu'allim-i sadiq*) as the spiritual guide of men, who would be none other than the Isma'ili *imam* of the time. Henceforth, the Persian Nizaris became known also as the *Ta'limiya*. The anti-Isma'ili polemics of the contemporary Sunni establishment, led by Muhammad Ghazali and endorsed by Nizam al-Mulk, were focused directly against this doctrine of *ta'lim*, which served as the central teaching of the Nizari Isma'ilis.

The fortunes of the Persian Isma'ilis continued to rise in Barkyaruq's reign (487-98 AH/1094-1105 CE), when they achieved new gains closer to the seat of Saljuq power in Isfahan, seizing the fortress of *Shahdiz*, also known as Dizkuh. Having grown weary of the general threat of the Isma'ilis to Saljuq rule, Barkyaruq and Sanjar now agreed to check, in their respective territories, the rising power of the Isma'ilis. This strategy was more effectively pursued, however, by Muhammad Tapar (498-511 AH/1105-18 CE) who, in 503 AH/1109 CE, initiated a major and prolonged campaign against Alamut itself. Hasan's defense of Alamut during this period was a blow to the Saljuqs, who failed to take the fortress by assault or attrition despite their superior military power. By the time of Muhammad Tapar's death, Saljuq-Isma'ili



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

relations had entered a new phase of stalemate, with the Persian Isma'ilis successfully defending important territories, including mountain strongholds, villages and towns in Rudbar, Quhistan and Kumesh (Arabic: Qumis). Although Hasan Sabbah had failed to overcome the Saljuqs, he did succeed in founding both a state and the independent Nizari Isma'ili *da'wa*, which survived the downfall of the Nizari state.

An organiser and a political strategist of the highest calibre, Hasan Sabbah was at the same time a trained theologian. He led an austere life and is said to have observed the *shari'a* very strictly himself as well as imposing it on his Nizari community; equally strict with friend and foe, he had both his sons executed, one for alleged murder, the other on suspicion of drinking wine. He is also said to have sent his wife and daughters away permanently to Girdkuh, where they earned a living by spinning. The Persian historians relate that during all the thirty-four years that Hasan lived at Alamut, he never descended from the castle. Rashid al-Din (pp. 133--34) reports that he spent most of his time inside his personal quarters reading books, committing the teachings of the *da'wa* to writing and administering the affairs of his realm.

When he sensed that he was reaching the end of his life, Hasan summoned Kia Buzurg-Umid, his capable lieutenant at Lamasar, and designated him as his successor in Alamut. He died, after a brief illness, on 26 Rabi' II 518 AH/12 June 1124 CE (or possibly twenty days earlier), and was buried near Alamut. Hasan Sabbah's mausoleum was regularly visited by the Nizari Isma'ilis until it was demolished by the Mongols in 654 AH/1256 CE.

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The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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