

## **Crusaders and the Construction of Assassin Myth**

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### **Introduction**

Words are strange creatures because within them they contain multiple lives of meaning that inhabit them in the history. They die their own natural death or become irrelevant over time. But some words get rejuvenated because of a major historical event or incident. When we use any word in the contemporary space and time, we tend to focus more on its prevalent meaning, and thus forget the archeological layers hidden beneath its apparent meaning. Assassin is one of such words with long historical association. It has reappeared in academic discussion after the 9/11. According to Oxford dictionary defines assassin as ‘a person who murders somebody important or famous, for money or for political reasons.’ Etymologically, this word is derived from Arabic word ‘*hashīshīn*’. However, its meaning is not the same as the word assassin in English. In Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages ‘*hashīshīn*’ word is used in its original sense of ‘drug’.

The existence of word same word with different meaning in the West and Muslim societies connotes three things. Firstly, it points to interface between the both societies at a particular phase. Secondly, it shows operation of epistemological and ideological postures which were incomputerate. Lastly, it manifests that the Europe had mythical understanding about Islam in general and Shi’ism in particular not historical. This situation elicits the attention of a student of history to track the course of the translocation and transformation of the word assassin to and in the West. So, the research in this regard takes us to a time and space where the interaction between crusaders and Islam took place. It is during the period of crusades, the word crusader enter into European languages and later in literature and history. The interaction was confined to the military and in few cases to diplomatic field, and interface at intellectual level is marked by absence. That is why misperceptions of the Crusaders generated legends of mythical proportion about the *fidā’īs* called assassins in the West.

This essay intends to take stock of the relationship between the Crusaders and Nizārīs of Syria, and the process of the formation of the assassin legend. Its main focus will be the examination of the misperceptions of the Crusaders about the Nizārīs Ismailis and how the lack of knowledge about Islam in general and the Ismailis in particular gave way to imaginative speculation to fill the gaps of knowledge. This is not to deny presence of any kind of effort on the part of Christian Crusaders to understand the Ismailis, but to highlight the fact that the Crusaders’ effort to understand the Ismailis, however meager, was informed by their knowledge and collective memory about Islam prevalent in Europe before the Crusades.

For the first time, Christians came to know about Islam as a military force extending its boundaries. They were unable to understand Islam as a historical and intellectual phenomenon because the religion was new and most of them feared its military prowess.

It was out of this fear the Christian world perceived and tackled militarily not intellectually. Even centuries after the advent of Islam, chroniclers and military adventurers during the time of Crusaders perceived and interpreted the phenomenon of the 'Other', in this case Islam, according to their inherited perceptions, prejudices and interests. The outcome of this approach was the creation of several myths about Islam and the assassin myths are prominent among them.<sup>1</sup>

### Crusaders' Nizārīs Encounters

After the Musta'li and Nizārī schism in Ismailism during Fatimid period, the Nizārīs established their centers in the mountainous regions of Syria and Persia. Owing to their proximity to the Latin states of the Crusading orders the Nizārī Ismailis of Syria came into direct conflict with them. The Crusaders became aware of the Ismailis when the latter murdered Janah al-Dawla in a broad daylight. Thereafter, the capture of Apamea by the Ismailis sent waves of concern to the regent of Antioch, Tancred, who responded by besieging Apamea and forced its surrender. After the conquest of Apamea, Tancred apprehended an Ismaili dā'ī Abu Tahir who afterwards managed to free himself by paying ransom. It was considered as the first encounter between the Ismailis and the Crusaders.<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of defeats in Aleppo and Damascus, the Ismailis changed their strategy and succeeded in establishing strongholds in Jabal Bahra. In 1137, the local Ismailis dislodged the Frankish garrison at the fortress of Khariba. Later in 1140, the Ismailis captured Masyaf and fortresses around the southern part of Jabal Bahra. It opened the way for fights with the military orders of the Crusades.

The Crusaders and Ismailis were not always at daggers drawn with each other. There are instances of co-operation and in some cases fighting together against a common enemy. For instance, al-Ajami wrote to King Baldwin promising help in exchange for asylum, and Ali b. Wafa died alongside Raymond of Antioch while fighting against the Zangid ruler.<sup>3</sup> Dajani-Shakeel includes the Ismailis of Syria along with Bedouins of southern Palestine among the non-Christian groups who were ready to deal with the Crusaders against the Muslim rulers.<sup>4</sup> Around 1152, for some unknown reason, fidā'īs killed Raymond II of Tripoli.<sup>5</sup> He was the first Frankish victim who fell victim to the assassination by the Ismailis. The infuriated Crusaders responded to this murder by

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<sup>1</sup> For the process of western perception of Islam see, Arkoun, Mohammed. *Imagining Islam in Rethinking Islam*, ed. And English trans. Robert D. Lee. Boulder, San Fransico., and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994, pp 6-14; Daftary, Farhad. "Introduction: Western Progress in Ismaili Studies" in *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines*. pp 1-32; Daftary, Farhad. *A Short History of the Ismailis*. Pp 13-16; Danial, Norman. *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Daftary, Farhad. 'The Ismailis and the Crusaders: History and Myth', in Hunyadi, Zsolt and Laszlovszky, ed., *The Crusaders and the Military Orders: Expanding the Frontiers of Medieval Latin Christianity*, p 26; Daftary, Farhad. *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis*. pp 64-5; Lewis, Bernard. *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*. p 102.

<sup>3</sup> Daftary, Farhad. *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis*. pp 76; William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, trans. Banbock, Emily Atwater and Krey, A. C, Vol. 2, pp 196-198.

<sup>4</sup> Dajani-Shakeel, Hadia. 'Diplomatic Relations Between Muslim and Frankish Rulers 1097-1153 A.D.', in Shatzmiller, Maya, ed. *Crusaders & Muslims in Twelfth-Century Syria*. p193.

<sup>5</sup> William of Tyre. *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*. p 214.

massacring Muslims and the Templars invaded Ismaili castles in Jabal Bahra and exacted taxes from the Nizārīs of Syria.

With the advent of Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān (1193)<sup>6</sup> the Ismailis of Syria entered a new phase. Sinān was a diplomat par excellence. He tried to cultivate good relations with the neighbouring Frankish kings. Feeling the threat of Salāh al-Dīn and Zangi on the one hand, and in an attempt to relieve the Ismailis from the heavy tributes on the other, Sinān sent an emissary in 1173 to king Amalric. His emissary succeeded in extracting concessions from king Amalric, but he was killed by a group of Crusaders while returning from his mission.<sup>7</sup> Amalric reacted to this act by arresting the culprits and apologized to Sinān, but he died soon afterwards in 1174. With the death of Amalric, Sinān's efforts of rapprochement came to the halt. William of Tyre, bishop of Tyre, misconceived this rapprochement and reported in his book that at the time of this embassy Sinān had informed the king that he and his community intended to collectively convert to Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

In 1213, two fidā'īs killed Marquis Conrad of Montferrat, in Tyre. Both the Muslim and occidental historians reported this murder, but opinion about the real abettor behind the murder varies from writer to writer.<sup>9</sup> Most of the Muslim and some European sources declare Richard I as a culprit behind the murder because there was enmity between them. Indeed, later on Raymond was apprehended in Austria on charge of the murder.<sup>10</sup> Ibn Athīr names Saladin as the instigator, and even knows the sum of money paid to Sinān for the work.<sup>11</sup> Bernard Lewis thinks that only Ibn al-Athīr and Abū Firas attributed it to Saladin, and both suspect the murder of Conrad on the instigation of Saladin for different reasons.<sup>12</sup> The Syrian Ismaili sources attributed it to the personal decision of Sinān.<sup>13</sup>

Sinān's signing of a truce with Saladin before his death resulted in the cessation of the killing of Muslim rulers. After the death of Sinān, there was no instance of the killing of Muslim figures, but the Christians were still vulnerable to political assassination. Among the murders in the post Sinān period the assassination of Raymond, son of Bohemond IV

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<sup>6</sup> For Sinān's life and career see Burman, Edward. *The Assassins: Holy Killers of Islam*. pp 110-121; Farhad Daftary, "Rāshid al- Dīn Sinān" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*. vol 8, 442-443; Lewis, Bernard. 'Kamāl al- Dīn's Biography of Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān ' Arabica XIII. pp225-267 reprinted in Bernard Lewis. *Studies in Classical and Ottoman Islam*. chap X; Nasseh Ahmad Mirza. *Syrian Ismailism*. pp 19-39.

<sup>7</sup> Mirza, Nasseh Ahmead. *Syrian Ismailism: The Ever Living Line of the Imamate*. p 38; Runciman, Steven. *A History of the Crusades*. Vol II, pp 397.

<sup>8</sup> Barber, Malcolm. *The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple*, pp 100-5; William of Tyre. *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, trans. Banbock, Emily Atwater and Krey, A. C, Vol 2, pp 390-392.

<sup>9</sup> Hodgson, Marchall G.S. *The Order of Assassins*. pp 189-190; Ibn Shaddad (Baja ao- Dīn), *Al-Nawadir al-Sultāniya wa al-Mahāsin al-Yūsufiya*. Cairo AH 1346/AD 1927, p.1927, p 202; On Franco-Syrian chroniclers, see note on sources in Mirza, *Syrian Ismailism*, p 119.

<sup>10</sup> Daftary, Farhad. *The Isma'ilis and the Crusaders: History and Myth*. p 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn al-Athīr, *al-kāmil fi 't-ta'rikh*, ed. Carolus Johannes Tornberg, Leiden 1851-1876, vol. 12, 51; Lewis, Bernard. *The Assassins*, p 118.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, Bernard. Saladin and the Assassins. *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies*, xv/2. London 1953. p 244, reproduced in *Studies in Classical and Ottoman Islam*, article IX.

<sup>13</sup> Abu Firas Shihad ad-Dīn. *Fasl miin al-lafz al-sharīf, hādhihi manāqib al-mawlā Rāshid al Dīn*, English trans. Gabrieli. *Arab Historians*, pp 242-5.

of Antioch, in the church in Tortosa in 1213 is famous. Although his father, in order to seek revenge, laid a siege to the fortress of Khawabi, he failed to subdue the Ismailis because they were supported and relieved by the Muslim forces. Even after this event the military and diplomatic relations of the Ismailis with the Crusaders were not severed. Arab sources have recorded two events. First is the receiving of envoys from Emperor Frederick II by the chief dā'ī Majd al-Dīn, and second is the paying of tributaries by the Assassins to the Knights Hospitallars.<sup>14</sup>

Events that were recorded in history before the political extinction of the Ismailis of Syria are about a plot to kill King Louis (1226-1270) and the meeting of the Ismaili emissaries with St Louis after his arrival in Palestine. Joinville, the biographer of St Louis, has recorded the later event.<sup>15</sup> Bernard Lewis dismisses the first account as an account without foundation. However, he accepts the authenticity of the second account that deal with the coming of assassin emissaries to the king in Acre asking him to pay tribute to their chief as other Emperors do.<sup>16</sup> With the emergence of the Mamlūks, the political power of Ismailis and Crusaders came to an end. At the same time, it also marks the end of the relationship between the Crusaders and Ismailis.

### Construction of the Assassin Myths

The crusaders came into contact with the Ismailis when Muslim polemicists were reviling the Ismailis. It was the time when opponents applied the abusive term 'hashīshī'<sup>17</sup> to demean them. Besides denoting narcotic products, the terms related to narcotics also connote abusive meanings within a social context of the Muslim society. Daftary suggests that the word hashīshī is used by Muslim sources against the Nizārī Ismailis in its abusive senses of "low-class rabble" or "irreligious social outcasts", without any reference to the actual use of hashīsh or any other narcotic product by the sectarians.<sup>18</sup> Daftary's observation gains credence when we examine the use of narcotic terms, albeit anachronistically, in contemporary Muslim societies. For example, in Urdu language and literature a bohemian, lewd, cleaner or socially low-cast person is referred as *bhangi* - means hashish - without considering whether a man referred to is addicted to drugs or not.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lewis, Bernard. *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*. pp 119-129; Muhammad al-Hamawi's 'Al-Ta'rīkh al-Muansūrī' ed. P. A. Gryaznevic, Moscow 1960, fols. 164 a and b, 166b-167a, 170b.

<sup>15</sup> Hodgson, Marshall G. S. *The Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizārī Ismailis Against the Islamic World*. pp 208; Joinville, chapter lxxxix, 307.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, Bernard. *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, pp 121-2.

<sup>17</sup> *Hashisyiyya*, pp 267-268. *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. Edited by B. Lewis, V.I. Menage, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht. Volume III. Leiden. E.J. Brill. 1971.

<sup>18</sup> Daftary, Farhad. *The Isma'ilis and the Crusaders: History and Myth*, p 34; *A Short History of the Ismailis*. p 13; Daftary, Farhad. *The Assassin Legends*. pp 90-92.

<sup>19</sup> In Urdu literature the term *hashishin* is popularised through famous novel of Abdul Haleem Sharar and Inayat Ullah in his serialized fiction. For more see Lakhnawi, Abdul Haleem Sharer. *Firdous-e-Bareen*. Ilmo Irfan Publishers. Lahore, 2003. Ullah, Inayat. *Firdous-e-Iblis: Hasan Bin Sabah Or Uski Bihisht Ki Purisar Dastan*. Maktaba-e-Daastan. Lahore. 2010. It is interesting to note that the narrative about assassins/Ismailis transformed more into polemical than historical one. That is why we see assassins abode changed from *Firdous-e-Bareen (The Sublime Paradise) in Haleem Sharer* to *Firdous-e-Iblis (Paradise of the Devil)* by Inayat Ullah.

By the time of the arrival of the Crusaders, the negative appellation against Ismailis were prevalent in Syria and Palestine. Coupled with this, the inherited prejudices of the Crusaders against Islam and their ignorance of the sectarian division within Islam a fertile soil for the imagination to plant the myths of assassins in the hearts and minds of the Crusaders and subsequently the Europeans. Muslim-Christian relationship in the crusading areas presents a diametrically opposite set-up from that of the Muslim Spain or al-Andalus that is marked by the harmonious relationship and intellectual interaction between the Christian, Muslim and Jewish community. This harmonious ambiance in its turn gave birth to a literary and intellectual efflorescence and understanding among the three communities. The Crusaders on the contrary did not try to learn about Islam and society, let alone understanding the main sectarian divisions of Islam into Sunni and Shia sects, and sectarian division like Ismaili and Ithnā 'ashari within the Shī'ī tradition.

The Christian chroniclers started to write about the Ismailis during a period of the dynamic leadership of Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān (d.1193) when the crusaders knights started to fall victim to the Syrian Ismailis.<sup>20</sup> According to Farhad Daftary, Benjamin of Tudela, who passed through Syria in 1167, seems to be first chronicler who has mentioned the Syrian Ismailis.<sup>21</sup> One of the earliest descriptions of the sect occurs in the report of an envoy sent to Egypt and Syria in 1175 by the Emperor Fredrick Barbarossa (1152-1190).<sup>22</sup> The content of the report and Benjamin's account illustrate the misrepresentation and glossing by imagination in order to fill the lacunae of knowledge about the real ethos and doctrines of the sectarians.<sup>23</sup> During this time the title of Sinān as shaykh al-jabal, which was translated by the Crusaders' chroniclers as "le vieus' de la montagne" the old man of the mountain, become famous among crusading forces.<sup>24</sup>

Almost all of the chroniclers of the Crusaders had noticed the devotion of the fidā'īs to their master. Even William of Tyre, who did not contribute to the formation of Assassin legends, notices 'the bond of submission and obedience that binds' Ismailis to their chief.<sup>25</sup> Although Crusaders' chroniclers had the eyes to observe and the heart to be impressed by the devotion, which made the fidā'īs sacrifice their lives for their religion at the behest of their leader, they did not have knowledge about the concept of the

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<sup>20</sup> Daftary, Farhad. *The Isma'ilis and the Crusaders: History and Myth*. p 35; Hitti, Phillip K. *History of the Arabs*. p 448; Lewis, Bernard. *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*. p 2.

<sup>21</sup> Daftary, Farhad. *The Isma'ilis and the Crusaders: History and Myth*. p 35.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, Bernard. *The Sources for the History of the Syrian Assassins*. Speculum XXVII. Cambridge, Mass. 1952. p 482, reprinted in his *Studies in Classical and Ottoman Islam (7th – 16 Centuries)*, article VIII; According to Dr. Bernard Lewis 'the report of Gerhard (possibly, as the editor suggests, an error for Burchard)[sic], vice-dominus of Strasburg, is cited by the German chronicler Arnold of Lubeck in his *Chronicon Slavorum*, vii, 8 (ed. W. Wattenbach, *Deutschlands Geschichtsquellen*, Stuttgart-Berlin 1907, ii, 240)' see also Lewis *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* s, p 142.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold of Lubeck. *Chronicon Slavorum*, vii, 8, iv,16. ed. W. Wattenbach, *Deutschlands Geschichtsquellen*, Stuttgart-Berlin 1907, ii, 178-9, 240. Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, ed. and trans. M. N. Adler, London 1907, pp 16-17. See also a passage about Assassins quoted in English translation by Bernard Lewis in 'The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam' p 2.

<sup>24</sup> Daftary, Farhad. *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines*. p 13; Hitti, Phillip K. *History of the Arabs*. p 448.

<sup>25</sup> William of Tyre. William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, trans. Banbock, Emily Atwater and Krey, A. C, Vol 2. p 191.

imamate or the leadership in shī'ism, and shī'ī tradition of martyrdom. Owing to this, they tried to explain reasons for an unfathomable behavior of the fidā'īs through myths. Amidst confusion in interpreting the actions of the fidā'īs, the Crusaders' chroniclers came across the wide spread rumours, propaganda and oral stories about the use of hashīsh by the Ismailis, and they explained the daring deeds of the fidā'īs by connecting them with hashīsh. Thus, the Crusaders instead of understanding Ismailis through Ismaili doctrine understood them through the hashīshiyn connection.

This is not to deny any possibility of an attempt to understand Ismailism on the part of the Crusaders. Runciman is of the opinion that the Assassins had never showed animosity towards the Franks.<sup>26</sup> The process of improving relations was continued after the death of Sinān. It resulted in exchanges of emissaries, religious scholars and precious goods to each other. Hence, we see a visit of Henry of Champagne, successor to the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, to the Ismailis on his way from Acre to Antioch.<sup>27</sup> Besides this, there are instances of alliances between the Crusading orders and the Ismailis. For instance, Ismailis participated in the Hospitaller campaign of 1230 against Bohemond IV of Antioch. It seems that after several encounters and interactions, attitude on both sides of the Crusaders and Ismailies changed from adamancy towards pragmatism of the ground of realities and strategic necessities. Therefore, we notice the germination of an effort to understand Ismailis on the part of the Crusaders. For example, an Arabic speaking friar, Yves the Breton, accompanied the entourage of the gift bearing ambassadors of King Louis to the chief of the Nizārī Ismailis. He had discussion with Nizārī chief about the Ismaili faith.<sup>28</sup> Even though he did not speculate much about secret practices of the Ismailis, he failed to apprehend the Ismaili thought, and confused different ideas of Ismailis with ideas like metempsychosis/ transmigration of soul, cyclical view of history, Alī's opposition to Mohammed and seeing Nizārī chief's admiration of St Peter in the line of Prophet.<sup>29</sup>

Although the behavior of the participant crusaders mellowed with the passage of time and gave way to co-operation in certain matters with other communities, this did not permeate into the office of papacy. The adamant attitude of the pope is manifested in a letter of Pope Gregory IX to Archbishop of Tyre and other religious authorities in outremer, where he orders the termination of any kind of relations between the military orders and the 'Assassins' declaring them as the 'enemies of God and of the Christians'.<sup>30</sup> Due to this, the Crusaders ended their co-operation in military and other fields that consequently closed the door for a co-operation and interplay on the intellectual level. As a result, the

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<sup>26</sup> Runciman. *A History of the Crusaders*. p 316.

<sup>27</sup> Mirza, Nasseh Ahmad. *Syrian Ismailism*, pp 38-39; R. Grousset. *Histoire des Croisades*, Paris, 1934, vol. III, pp.91, 133.

<sup>28</sup> Hodgson, Marshall G. S. *The Orders of Assassins*. pp247-248; Joinville, *Histoire de Wailly* (nouvelle edition; Paris, 1888), pp 189-94,105,186; Lewis, Bernard. *The Sources for the History of the Syrian Assassins*. *Speculum* XXVII. Cambridge, Mass. 1952. 482, reprinted in his *Studies in Classical and Ottoman Islam (7th – 16 Centuries)*, articleVIII; p 483; english translation quoted in Edward Burmen's *The Assassin: Holy Killer of Islam*. p 129.

<sup>29</sup> See quotations regarding Yves' account of negotiations in Daftary *The Assassin Legends*, pp 80-82.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St. John in Jerusalem and Cyprus*, London 1967, pp 138-140, 162, 164.

Crusaders observations remained an observation about the “Others” from the point of ‘Us’. The only source of their knowledge was stories of military exploits and murders committed by the alleged assassins.

Meanwhile a devastating force of Mongol hordes emerged in the East and swept across the western lands of the Asia. Its emergence strangled the nascent process of a dialogue on religious matters with the Ismailis, initiated by Yves the Breton. With the advent of the Mongols, the Crusader-Ismaili encounter took a new turn. Initially, Ismailies tried to enter into an alliance with the monarchs of Europe to address the Mongol menace. Matthew of Paris, an English historian, reports the arrival in Europe in 1238 of an embassy from some Muslim rulers, ‘and principally from the Old Man of the Mountain’. They came to seek help from the French and the English against the new, looming menace of the Mongols from the East.<sup>31</sup>

The diplomatic negotiations of Crusaders were not direct result of their urge to understand Ismailism. The Mumlūk’s emergence in Egypt had dealt a great blow to their power and drastically changed the power balance in the Fertile Crescent and surrounding areas. Facing defeats at the hands of the Mamlūks, the Crusader initiated diplomatic maneuvers. Thus the negotiations of the Crusaders were propelled by military compulsions. These negotiations were limited to the political and military arena, and an intellectual dialogue was absent especially in the last years of the Crusades. Edward Burman accepts the suggestion of Novell that the Templars understood the ‘Assassins’ better,<sup>32</sup> and finds the Assassins’ influences on the Crusaders at military level. He finds resemblances of the Crusaders’ military organization with that of the Assassins. For example, the higher rank of both Templars and Hospitallers orders, with the prior, the grand prior and the master correspond to dā’ī, dā’ī kabir and the Grand Master. Lay brothers, sergeants and knights of the Templars duplicate the lasīq (layman), fidā’i (agent) and rafīq (companion) of the Assassins.<sup>33</sup> Yet there is not evidence of intellectual influences on the Crusaders except the distorted perceptions about the Ismailis.

Even the extant diplomatic relations came to the end when the leadership of the Crusaders and European monarchs refused to co-operate with Ismailis against the Mongols, and preferred to enter into an alliance with the Mongols in order to crush Muslims. In the years 1253-5, the King of France sent a Flemish priest on a mission to the court of the Great Khan at Karakorum in Mongolia.<sup>34</sup> Despite all their efforts the Ismailis and Crusader/Europeans failed to enter into a military alliance with Mongols.

Nevertheless, both the Christians/Europeans as well as Muslims managed to enter into corridors of the Mongol power. Among the Muslims serving in the Mongol court, all but Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī were adversaries of the Ismailis. On the European side, Marco Polo

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<sup>31</sup> Lewis, Bernard. *The Assassins: Holy Killers of Islam*. p 5; Matthew of Paris, *Chronica Majora*, ed. H. R. Luard, *Rerum britannicarum medii aevi scriptores*, 57, iii, London 1876, pp 488-9.

<sup>32</sup> Nowell, C.E., ‘*The Old Man of the Mountains*’. *Speculum*, xxii (1947), pp 497-519.

<sup>33</sup> Burman, Edward, *The Assassins: Holy Killers of Islam*. p 124. See also Nowell, op. cit., 504; Hammer-Purgstall, *History of the Assassins*, pp. 56-9.

<sup>34</sup> William Rubruck. *The Journey of William of Rubruck to the eastern parts of the world, 1253-55*, ed and trans. W.W. Rockhill. pp 118-222.

worked in the Mongol court in different capacities. Not long before Marco Polo, the Bishop of Acre named James of Virty (1216-1228) had introduced a fanciful account of delightful places specially prepared for the training of the *fidā'īs*.<sup>35</sup> Working in the anti Ismaili milieu and relying on fanciful oral stories and anti-Ismaili propaganda he narrated information about the assassins, recollected after 30 years of his journey, to his fellow prisoner who happened to be a romance writer. Farhad Daftary thinks that the itinerary of Marco Polo did not take him to Alamut and his account is not based on personal observation.<sup>36</sup>

Absence of a proper knowledge about the Ismailis gave way to the Assassin myths, which gained preponderance in the imagination of the Crusaders, who later on became the importers of the Assassin myths to the West. Marco Polo's account about the *fidā'īs* augmented this myth and paved the way for literary figures to embellish the Assassin myths with their imagination. The successive centuries after the Crusades, experienced the movement of Renaissance in the fourteenth century that gave birth to adventures, and flowering of arts, architecture, and literary and imaginative activities. Italy was the initiator and hub of the activities of the Renaissance movement. It is this region that produced Marco Polo and Dante.

The creative and imaginative ambiance of renaissance proved conducive for the legends of Assassin to thrive and incorporated into the literary masterpieces of the West. A perusal of the literature produced in the eve and during the renaissance period, manifests misconceptions about Islam. Even the great literary figures were not immune from misunderstanding. In addition to this, the traditional prejudice against Islam enacted a vital role in the misrepresentation of the Islamic figures and events. Dante, a paramount literary figure of the western literature after Homer, in his monumental book "Divine Comedy" shows his prejudice by putting the prophet Mohammad and Alī in the lowest pit of the purgatory. In the 19<sup>th</sup> canto of the Inferno he reveals his misapprehension and fascination with the myth of Assassin by using the word in a context that demands the most abominable of crimes. Dante describes himself as

'lo stava come 'l frate che confessa  
lo perfido assassin, che, poi ch'è fitto,  
richiama lui per che la morte cessa.'

Translation:

(I stood as does the friar who confesses  
the foul assassin who, fixed fast, head down,  
calls back the friar, and so delays his death;)<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Refer to English translation of Virty's account quoted in Farhad Daftary, 'The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis' pp 77-78; James of Virty. *Historia Orientalis*, in *Gesta Dei per Francos*, Vol 1, pp 1062-3.

<sup>36</sup> Daftary, Farhad. *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis*. p 114.

<sup>37</sup> Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*. Translation Allen Mandelbaum. Bantam Books. New York. 1980. Canto XIX, pp 170-171.



Under such atmosphere the word assassin enter into the themes, imagery and vocabulary of European literature and languages. If a learned literary figure like Dante was vulnerable to myths about the assassins, then it is not surprising to see the Crusaders, who had no idea about Islam and Ismailis, misunderstanding and misrepresenting Ismailis. Despite the ‘advancement of learning’ the myths of assassin continued to get more layers of imaginative and speculative explanations complemented by orientalist discourse until the twentieth century. Now in the hands of modern scholarship these mythical layers have been removed and the reality beneath the assassin myths is visible to the students of history in the scholarly research of W. Ivanow, Michal Hogdson, and especially Dr. Farhad Daftary. Daftary succinctly describes crusaders’ and mediaeval European perception of Islam and the Ismailis and the whole process of the formation of the Assassin myths in these words:

‘In sum, medieval Europeans learned very little about Islam and Muslims, and their less informed knowledge of the Ismailis found expression in a few superficial observations and erroneous perceptions scattered in Crusader histories and other occidental sources. Yet by the middle of the thirteenth century, many of these sources claimed to possess intricate details about the secret practices of the Ismailis and their chief, the Old Man of the Mountain; the Assassin legends had by then truly come into being.’<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Daftary, Dr Farhad. *The Assassin Legend: Myths of the Ismailis*. p 84.

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