

THE ASSASSINS IN QUHISTAN

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RCAS 55 (1966)

IN my last lecture to the Society and my subsequent article in the June 1967 issue of the Journal, I described how in 1965 my team had surveyed the Assassin fortress of Qal'eh Khan-e-Lenjan near Isfahan, and how in 1966 we had begun an archaeological investigation into the old Assassin State of Quhistan, roughly corresponding to the southern half of the modern province of Khorasan. This mission had proved particularly fruitful as, by the end of our stay, we were able to come to the conclusion that the State was far bigger than we had previously thought, and had located the site of six major Assassin castles. In addition, we had carried out a detailed survey of the castle of Qa'in, the capital of the State, and had paid visits to some Ismaili communities still living in the area. More important, perhaps, than all this, had been a new interpretation of the movement that was beginning to emerge and a growing appreciation of the intellectual and aesthetic aspects of Ismailism—on my part, at least.

By 1967 considerable interest had been aroused in our work, both in this country and in Iran, and when I announced that I was planning to spend a further season in Khorasan, the Government of Iran was ready to make a generous donation to the cost of the mission, and both the National Iranian Oil Company and the Oil Consortium once more placed land-rovers at our disposal and provided us with free supplies of petrol. My team in 1967 consisted of Mr. Tabrizi, the representative of the Museum of Iran Bastan, Tehran, who had worked with me before on a previous mission; Andrew Dobson, of Christ Church, Oxford, now taking part in his third mission to Iran; Colin Harris, an old hand from the 1963 mission to Samiran, and some new recruits—David Chaldecott, David Halford and Christopher Wort. The main expedition travelled out once more in the middle of July by the Munich-Tehran bus, quite the cheapest if not the most comfortable way of getting to Iran, while Chaldecott and I, having less time at our disposal, flew out by Iran Air, who have now established excellent international flights from Tehran.

Our 1967 objectives can briefly be summarized as follows: (a) to carry out an economic survey of the town of Qa'in and the surrounding district; (b) to continue our investigations into the interior of old Quhistan, particularly on the Afghan border; (c) to attempt to ascertain as far as possible the boundaries of the State, and (d) at the end of our mission to carry out a photographic survey of the castle of Nevissar Shah in the Alamut Valley.

Thanks to the co-operation of the Iranian authorities, time spent in Tehran on administration can now be limited to four days, and on August 4 we were able to leave the capital in our two N.I.O.C. land-rovers for the Caspian and Mashhad. This is a lovely journey and the traveller passes through every type of scenery from the lush green of the Caspian littoral to

the parched arid uplands of northern Khorasan. After courtesy calls on the newly appointed Governor-General in Mashhad we once more headed south on the now familiar dust-road leading south from the provincial capital to Torbat-e-Haydarieh. Some 50 km. north of Torbat the first fortified outpost of the State of Quhistan can be seen. The northern boundaries of the State are the most difficult to define, and probably there were Assassin settlements well north of Mashhad, but in so far as it is now possible to speak of a continuous Assassin State it seems reasonable to draw the northern frontier at about the point I describe. This time we were able to locate some further fortifications guarding the main highway. Near Torbat we came across the first of the great irrigation projects that the Government is carrying out in conjunction with the local landowners. In this instance a well had been sunk and water pumped up from a depth of 100–200 metres. We were pleased to notice that the pumping machinery had been supplied by a British firm, from Learnington Spa. Pure, cool water, not a bit salty, gushed out into a large reservoir, and where last year there had been nothing but scorched desert there is now a profusion of sugar-beet and good corn. Herds of well-nourished sheep and goats give an almost pastoral, idyllic atmosphere, and although such projects are still all too scattered, the Government is tackling the water problem with vigour and a real sense of urgency. One of the most heartening signs of such progress is that we are able to see for ourselves each year the actual transformation of parts of the countryside. New landmarks appear, and where recently there were deserted villages there is now fresh life and hope.

Modern development is particularly evident in the town of Qa'in. We noticed, for instance, that since our visit in the previous year the bath-house had been rebuilt, and now it is clean, well run and efficient. A new hospital of thirty beds is in process of construction. Women and children were busy dressing stone at a nearby quarry when we arrived, and great pride was shown in this achievement. A new community centre in the town park is also being built, consisting of an all-purpose hall with a stage at one end and dressing-rooms underneath. Great efforts are being made to improve the literacy figure. This is given as about 20 per cent. and is measured by the ability to read the Koran. There are three primary schools and one secondary school in Qa'in, which has about 6,000 inhabitants, but also has to cater for the needs of the Qa'inat with a population of some 70,000. Many more schools must clearly be built, and parents persuaded of the vital need for education. The population of the area is expanding rapidly—there has been a 20 per cent. increase since 1960—but unfortunately the lure of Mashhad and Tehran is still too attractive for the better educated and the more ambitious. The local authorities are thus faced with the problems of a population explosion, a brain drain, drought and a falling water table, and an excess of population over natural resources, all at once.

From Qa'in as our headquarters we made long excursions into the mountains to the east to explore further Assassin sites. One of our most profitable journeys was to the village of Isfede. This was a subsidiary Ismaili centre, and as at Qa'in we found a complex of fortifications enclosing two or three valleys. In the same area we discovered a fine old mosque at Arfin which was clearly Assassin in origin. Our researches here were

rupted by illness. This seemed more of a problem on the 1967 expedition in earlier years, and on one occasion a member of our team had to be hospitalized at Herat. Even in the outback of Iran there is a very good medical service. Modern drugs were supplied to us and the necessary care was taken when necessary. No member was ever asked or accepted to return.

From Qa'in we moved to Ferdaus and carried out further detailed research work on the two big Assassin castles near the town and the old Mongol palace and city. One of the most rewarding expeditions from this centre was a journey along the old mountain road which linked Ferdaus with Qa'in. This resulted in the discovery of castles at Sirayan, Mazai, Bihud, Shahi and Faruth, as well as other smaller forts.

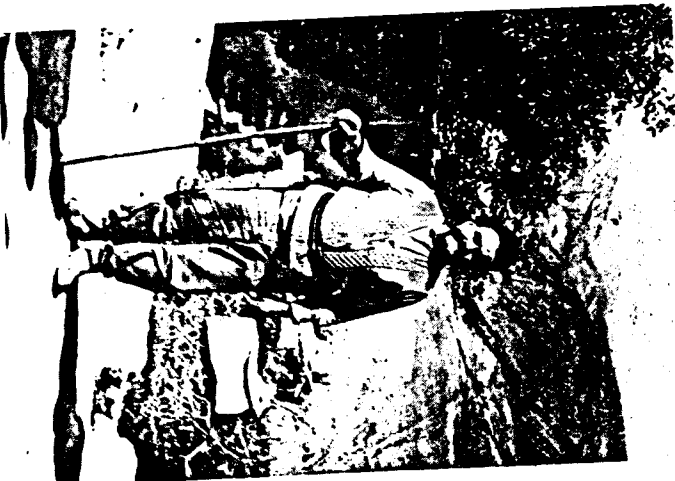
At the end of August we left the Ferdaus area for eastern Khorasan. Our main centre here was the town of Khaf (120 km. east of Torbat-e Haydariyeh), and from this base we discovered the castles of Qal'eh Dukhtar, near Zuzan, and the castle at Kheirabad, near Salamch, guarding the eastern approaches to the State of Quhistan. How much farther east the Assassin State spread is still a matter of conjecture and this will be one of the objects of the 1968 expedition. Tentatively, I think we can estimate the probable boundaries as follows: in the north, between Mashhad and Torbat-e Haydariyeh; in the west, Ferdaus; in the south, Brijand; and in the east, somewhere to the east of Khaf and in modern Afghanistan.

The final stage of the expedition took us back once more to the Alamut Valley. Whenever I approach Alamut I immediately fall once again under the spell of this most majestic landscape. The mountains plunge, soar and sweep like the eagles to which the valley gives its name. Cloud shadows racing across the hills change the earth's colour from wine-dark pools to harsh, glaring ochre and back again through the spectrum. It is a valley of many moods and much mystery. Nature seems to have become the macrocosm of the human personality, mirroring the best and the worst—cruelty, gentleness, ruthlessness and tranquil serenity. Our goal this time was the castle of Nevisar Shah, standing sentinel on the great rock walls near Garmarud. I had climbed up the exhausting scree and rock on my first expedition, nine years ago, but on the way down the mule carrying our exposed film had been swept away in a mountain torrent and the film was lost. This time we were again prevented from accomplishing our task as there was no water on the spot our guides had chosen for our camp. Frustrated, we had to descend, but this year we mean to succeed.

For now, as a Fellow of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, I am setting out on a six-month tour of Assassin sites with my energetic young Deputy Leader, David Chaldecott, with the object of fitting all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle into place. We hope we are approaching the end of our road of discovery in the field and that on our return we shall be able to present a fuller and more complete picture of this remarkable movement. Our expedition will take us first to the castles in Syria, thence along the road the Assassin messengers took through Baghdad to Tehran. We shall continue our investigations in Khorasan and over the border, in Afghanistan. We shall visit Ismaili communities on the Soviet border, in Pakistan and India. In Rampur we shall be particularly interested in the fine library

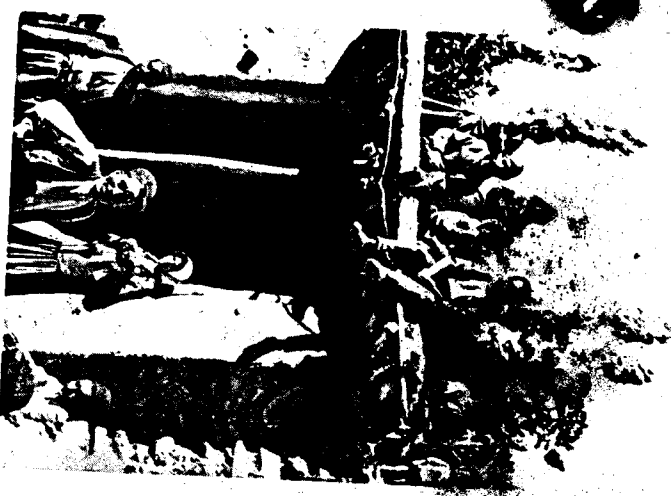


FALCONER IN MOUNTAINS. THE ASSASSINS USED SIMILAR BIRDS FOR SENDING MESSAGES

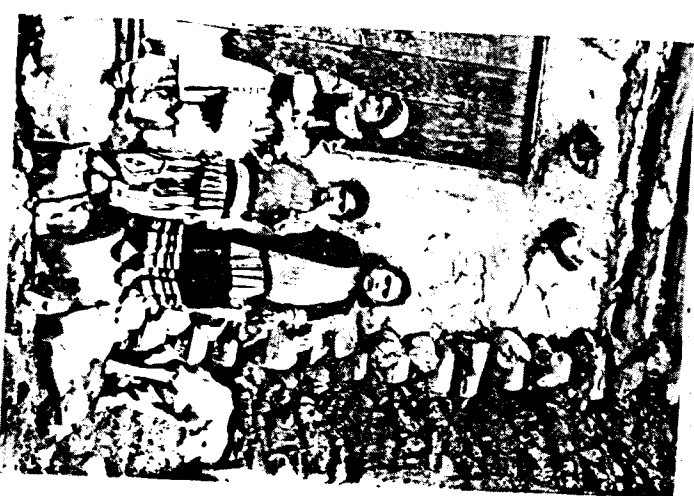


GUIDE AT ALAMUT WHO WAS ONCE THE IRANIAN NATIONAL CHAMPION WRESTLER

of Persian miniatures belonging to His Highness the Nawab, and we shall go along the Pilgrim Route in the Himalayas. Finally we shall end up at Alamut, where we will be joined by fresh members of our team from England. There, with the help of the Iranian Government and our old friends, we shall complete a last survey of the castles and also hope to have a closer look at the Arnesh sites which I first found nine years ago.



VILLAGERS IN THE MOUNTAINS WELCOMING THE EXPEDITION



VILLAGERS IN ALAMUT OUTSIDE THEIR HOUSE

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