

History of the Crusades.
Episode 24.
The Assassins.

Hello again. Over the past two weeks, we have looked at the Knights Templar. This week we will take a closer look at what some see as the Islamic equivalent of the Knights Templar, the Assassins.

But before I begin just a little comment and a disclaimer. Trying to present an accurate history of the Assassins is no easy task. Their history has mainly been written by their enemies, and much of it has been embellished and sensationalized. The “truth”, in historical studies, is often a fluid and changing thing. It changes with our attitudes, our politics and our perspectives. For instance, a history of slavery written in the 1700’s, and gaining mainstream acceptance during that time, would be much different to a general history of slavery published today. The facts may not have altered, but our attitudes and viewpoints have, and this affects the way we tell the history of the subject. A History Of The Crusades podcast series presented in the 1800’s would be vastly different to the podcast series you are listening to now. Putting aside the technology issues, the Crusades were highly romanticized in the 1800’s, and the mainstream view was of a bunch of heroic, godlike knights journeying to the Holy Land, triumphing over the evil Muslims, their every action applauded and sanctioned. I'd like to think that the podcast series you're listening to today takes a more balanced view, seeing the perspectives of both sides of the conflict, and perhaps seeing a little of what unites the adherents of the two religions rather than what divides them. Undoubtedly, in 100 or so years, this will be seen as an inaccurate portrayal of the Crusades, as a different perspective evolves and takes hold. I'd like you to keep this in mind as we look at the Assassins.

Until relatively recently, the Western view of the Assassins was highly mythologized. The first instance in which the Assassins were formally mentioned in Europe occurred around 1175, in the report of an envoy who had been sent to the Middle East by the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. He reported that there were a race of Muslims called Heysessini, who lived in strongholds in the mountains. These strongholds were beautiful palaces, isolated, and surrounded by very high walls. Young men enter the palaces and are trained by a master who chooses them meticulously, educates them in various languages, and demands absolute obedience. At the end of their training, the men are given a golden dagger and asked to go and kill a selected person, as a sign of their devotion and obedience.

The Latin Christians at this time really hadn't come in contact with the Assassins, and were basing their knowledge of the sect on rumor and hearsay. This changed in 1192 when Conrad of Montferrat, the then King of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, was murdered by the dagger of an Assassin. Everyone suddenly wanted to know more about the shadowy figures, and stories abounded about the fundamentalist sect who lived in palaces in the mountains, ruled over by an elder called the Old Man of the Mountain. It was said that the Old Man of the Mountain drugged his trainees and fed them promises of paradise, and demanded their total obedience, so that they would, without question, jump off a high wall to their death at his command.

The fanatical devotion of the adherents to the sect, whose name by this time had evolved from Heysessini into Assassins, and their willingness to murder on command, caught the

imagination of Europeans, and eventually the word “assassin” entered the English language, meaning “a person hired to murder”. The intrepid traveler and explorer Marco Polo wrote an extensive account of the Assassins when he passed through the Middle East in 1273, although reading the account, it's likely that he made most, if not all, of it up. He describes the Old Man of the Mountain living in a beautiful palace in the mountains whose gardens had been fashioned into a paradise on earth, flowing with rivers of wine, milk and honey, and filled with every variety of plant and fruit. Beautiful women playing musical instruments wafted through the gardens. Young men would be drugged and imprisoned within the garden and palace, and were trained to kill on command, with the promise that they would be allowed to return to the earthly paradise once they had carried out their orders. This account by Marco Polo added fuel to the fire, and the imagery and the mystery surrounding the Assassins captivated Europe.

Every time a prominent figure died a mysterious death, rumors abounded that the hand of the Assassins might have been behind it. This was likely to be untrue. The Assassins were uninterested in European affairs and had more than enough to occupy them back in the Middle East, but the rumors persisted.

Further complicating matters was the fact that within Islam itself, an anti-Assassin literary campaign was being carried out. There was strong anti-Assassin sentiment in the Middle East, and what became known as the Black Legend evolved. The Black Legend portrayed the Assassins as being the ultimate heresy within Islam, and essentially accused the sect of being created by outside forces to destroy Islam from within.

All this propaganda and myth meant that the actual origins of the Assassins, and their true nature, was clouded in misinformation for centuries. Finally, in the 1930's, a scholar based in Bombay, India, named Vladimir Ivanov, contacted the people holding the same faith as the Assassins, in India, and discovered private collections of manuscripts, which he compiled into a catalogue. It's those works which today let us see more clearly the history of the Assassins.

To understand the Assassins, you have to know a little bit about the internal conflicts within Islam. Way back in Episode 2, we took a brief look at the rise of Islam. Now we need to take a closer look at what was happening within Islam in the 11th century. Basically, at the time of the First Crusade, the situation was as follows. Islam had split into two main camps. The Sunnis were based around Baghdad and took a conservative approach to Islam, believing that the foundation of their faith could be found in the texts and teachings already in existence, particularly within the Sharia, a body of ritual and legal precepts.

In contrast, the Shia adherents supported the notion that Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's cousin and son in law, and his wife, Fatima, and their descendants, held the key to the Islamic faith. They believed that Ali and Fatima's descendants were the only authoritative religious teachers, or imams, and that the truth was a changing and flexible notion, not set down in texts but arising from the teaching of the imams. Adherents of the Shia sect tended to be dramatic, passionate supporters of their faith, and their search for truth encouraged free thinking, with the result that many advances were made in the field of medicine and literature under Shia rule.

Back in the 700's, a new sect was formed within the Shia faith based around the son of one of the Shia imams, a man called Isma'il. The Isma'ili accepted the Koran, as did the

Sunni and Shias, but they differed from the rest of the Shias by accepting the possibility that a person could transcend the limitations of Sharia law by their own spiritual quests.

At the time of the First Crusade, Sunni Islam was on the rise. It had readily absorbed a wave of new adherents, most notably the Seljuk Turks, and the Shiites were on the defensive. The Shia religion, including the Isma'ili sect, was at that time based around Egypt and North Africa. The Shias had attempted to storm Baghdad itself, the center of the Sunni faith, in the mid-11th century, but had failed. Pockets of Isma'ili adherents remained within Sunni territory, and in their isolation they began to develop policies of their own, eventually splitting from the Shia sect entirely.

These people were known as the Nizaris or the Nizari Isma'ilis, and they sought to destroy Sunni Islam piece by piece, ultimately aiming to overthrow it entirely. To achieve their goal, they seized isolated fortresses, which they made their power bases. They murdered their enemies and attempted to stage coups in Sunni cities. They were brash, reckless and passionate in the pursuance of their goals, and despite many setbacks, they struck repeatedly at the Sunni leaders, trying for two centuries to engineer the downfall of the Sunni faith. But they failed. Sunni orthodoxy prevailed, and the Nizari Isma'ilis faded out of history. The Nizari are the people known to the West as the Assassins.

So who were the Nizari Isma'ilis? Well, doing our best to untangle myth and propaganda from historical fact, let's take a closer look at them. The early Nizaris established themselves in the largely inhospitable mountainous regions of Persia. The mountains suited them well. They were home to a largely scattered, disaffected population whom successive rulers had found difficult to conquer. Generally, the population were adherents of the Shia Isma'ili faith, and it wasn't a huge step for these hardy, isolated people to convert to the Nizari Isma'ili faith.

An influential figure in the early history of the Isma'ili faith was Hassan-i Sabbah. Born in Persia to a Shiite family, he was influenced at a young age by an Isma'ili follower and ended up traveling to Egypt after converting to the Isma'ili faith. He traveled extensively across North Africa and Syria, eventually spending most of his time in the mountainous region in the far north of Persia. Searching for a base from which he could seek converts and wage war against Sunni Islam, he decided upon the castle of Alamut. The castle had been built on a narrow ridge deep within the mountains, overlooking a fertile valley, thirty miles long and three miles wide. The castle was very difficult to access. The only approach was via a narrow gorge on the Alamut River, then up a steep and winding path through spectacular cliffs. Hassan entered the castle in the year 1090, and from that time until his death 35 years later, he never left. He spent his time reading, training his followers and directing missionaries and agents to convert people to the Nizari faith. He also encouraged them to take more castles, generally remote strongholds in the mountains. Their influence gradually spread across Persia, their passionate beliefs contained within a secretive, hierarchical order, which appealed to many, particularly the hardy mountain dwellers.

On the 16th of October 1092, the Nizaris performed the first recorded act of the activity that was to secure their place in history, an assassination. Their chosen victim was a local leader who had ordered the execution of a Nizari who had murdered a man. The leader was assassinated in a manner which became the hallmark of the Nizaris. Killing influential figures for political gain was not that uncommon, but it had generally been done in a manner designed either to mask the fact that the death was intentional, and/or to hide the identity of the murderer. Frequently, poison was used to dispatch public figures, being both

hard to trace and difficult to connect to the killer. It was a popular way of murdering those in positions of power.

The Nizaris flipped this practice on its head. The dagger, and not poison, was their weapon of choice. Frequently waiting until the victim was in a public place, surrounded by witnesses, a Nizari, sometimes disguised to blend in with their surroundings, would rush in and stab the victim, and then blend back into the crowd. Over the course of two centuries, the Nizaris were responsible for many such deaths. Generally, their targets were people in positions of power, who either opposed Isma'ili teachings or who stood in the path of Isma'ili expansion. Sovereigns, generals, governors, and even religious leaders fell victim to the daggers of the Assassins.

It's almost impossible to assess exactly how many assassinations were carried out by the Nizaris. Chroniclers at the time were notoriously inaccurate, and the records which were made were frequently lost or destroyed. The Nizaris were probably also blamed for a number of deaths which weren't their doing. Unsurprisingly, they gained quite a reputation over the years, and any suspicious death of an influential figure resulted in a finger being pointed at the Nizaris, so we'll probably never know how many assassinations they actually carried out. Anyway, back to their history.

While Hassan was ruling from his castle in Alamut, he directed some of his followers to spread the message further away from Persia, deep into Sunni territory in Syria. Syria, Hassan thought was ripe for conversion. It's people were diverse, and there was a long tradition of conflict between warring factions. The people of Syria in recent times had never been united under one leader or one religion, and there were quite a few pockets of people who adhered to the Shia faith. The two most prominent rulers in Syria at the time were two Seljuk overlords, King Ridwan of Aleppo and King Duqaq of Damascus. The two rulers were brothers who didn't get along. We've come across them before. They featured heavily in the siege of Antioch episodes. The coming of the Crusaders added a bit more spice to the brew of conflict in Syria, and all in all, the Nizaris thought that Syria was ripe for the taking. They moved first to the mountainous regions in Syria, then slowly extended their influence into the towns, finding a sympathizer in King Ridwan of Aleppo.

King Ridwan was in a state of almost constant conflict, fighting his brother and other territorial rulers, as well as the Franks. Perhaps he saw in the Nizaris a useful tool to assist in his struggles, or perhaps he was genuinely drawn to their esoteric system of beliefs. Whatever the reason, it seems he was converted to the faith by a Nizari astrologer, the local leader of the sect. King Ridwan built the Nizaris a place in Aleppo where they could teach and worship, and for a few years at least, the Nizaris moved freely around Aleppo.

And this in itself caused some problems. The Nizaris weren't exactly good neighbors. Used to living an isolated existence in the mountains, where they could follow their own rules, the Nizaris were accused of robbing and killing in the town with impunity. They allegedly gained a reputation for smoking hashish, and earned the nickname "The Hashishshyya", which evolved into the name by which they were known in the West, the Assassins.

You won't be surprised to learn that they carried out assassinations, mostly to further the political interests of their patron, King Ridwan. The most notorious of these was in the year 1103 against Janah al-Dawla, the ruler of Homs. Janah al-Dawla was attending Friday prayers at the main mosque in Homs when he was attacked by a group of Assassins wearing disguises. Janah al-Dawla's attendants rushed to his aid, and in the skirmish that

followed, Janah al-Dawla was killed, along with the Assassins and some attendants. The killing sent shock-waves through the city, and many of the town's Turks fled to Damascus.

But really, this is about the extent of their influence. Back in the isolated fortress at Alamut, plans were formulated for the Nizaris to infiltrate Syrian affairs, with the ultimate aim of destabilizing the Sunni religion and replacing it with Nizari beliefs, but this never actually happened. While the Nizaris were adept at killing, they never really found themselves in positions of power, nor possessed the administrative skills to firmly plant themselves within the ruling structure. Even at the height of their influence in Aleppo, their enemies occupied all the offices of the city. The Nizaris never even got a toe-hold onto that vital step which was so necessary if they were to realize their ambition of usurping Sunni rule: administration.

One thing you need to keep in mind here is the relationship between religion and the state in the Middle East. In the West, both during the time of the Crusades and in the present day, the Church and the state are quite separate entities. Not so in the Middle East. To generalize a quite complex subject, religion and the state in Islam are intimately intertwined. To dominate Syria and the Middle East in a religious sense, the Nizaris needed to rule the Middle East. To rule they needed administrative skills. Killing people in positions of power who opposed their religion just wasn't enough. History has shown that ruling by terror and an iron rod alone is generally only effective in the short term. To consolidate your rule over a territory for a long period of time, you have to be able to provide some carrots with your sticks. The Assassins had no carrots. They just had a fervent belief in their faith and a willingness to kill for their beliefs, and that wasn't enough.

After 200 years of being a thorn in the side of both the Sunni and Shia faiths, the Assassins finally abandoned their quest for religious domination. They still adhered to their beliefs, but settled down to practice those beliefs amongst themselves, while subjecting themselves to being ruled by those who didn't share their faith. There are people practicing the Nizari Isma'ili faith today. There are small pockets of them scattered through Syria and India. So, unlike the Knights Templar, the Assassins managed to survive in an unbroken line from the Crusades until today, albeit in a more subdued form.

Well, that completes our look at the Assassins. Next week we will conclude our special interest episodes with a look at Eleanor of Aquitaine. I hope you'll join me then.

For further reading, if you would like to know more about the Assassins, for me the standout text in this area is a book called "The Secret Order of Assassins. The Struggle of the Early Nizari Isma'ilis Against the Islamic World" by Marshall Hodgson. It was first published in the 1950's and was out of print for some years, but it's recently been re-released in paperback form. So if you're interested in delving deeper into the very interesting subject of the Assassins, I recommend you get yourself a copy. Until next week, bye for now.

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