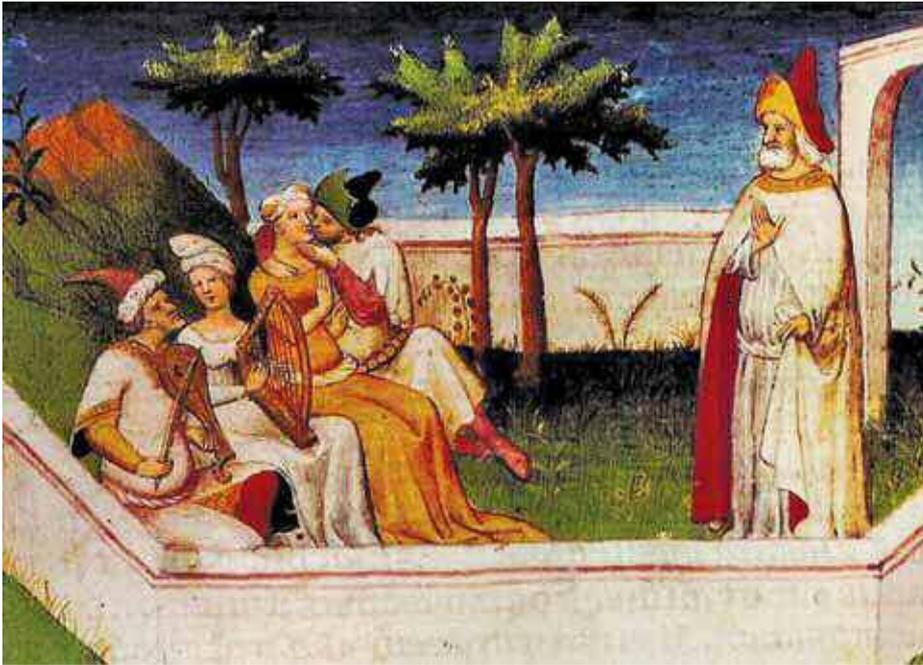


The Assassins



The Assassins refined the murder-for-profit business, cultivating Islamic religious fanaticism among young men to manipulate them to willingly sacrifice their own lives in order to kill.

by Charles Scaliger

According to legend, Count Henry of Champagne, returning in 1194 to the crusader kingdom of Outremer from a military expedition to Armenia, stopped to visit the famous castle Alamut in the Elburz Mountains in what is now northwestern Iran. The castle, whose name meant “eagle’s nest,” was perched atop a high cliff amid spectacular mountain scenery, and was approachable only by a narrow, well-guarded valley. Alamut had been constructed centuries earlier, and had been taken over in 1090 by Hasan-i-Sabbah, a leader of the Ismailis, a sect of Shia Islam with a strong esoteric bent. The community housed at Alamut and the surrounding countryside called themselves Nizaris, but to the rest of the world, had become known by a different name — the *Hashashin*, or Assassins.

The sheikh who presided at Alamut, nicknamed “the Old Man of the Mountain” since Hasan-i-Sabbah’s time, was rumored to command a secret legion of *fedayeen*, or holy warriors, perfectly trained in the arts of espionage, infiltration, and murder, who were willing — indeed, expected — to give their lives to destroy designated enemies. The Assassins were murderers for hire, able to infiltrate the most tightly guarded palaces and royal entourages, and to assassinate kings, noblemen, and generals, Christian or Muslim, if the price was right. They were active and unpredictable players in the power politics of Christian and Muslim during the crusades, and Henry of Champagne had stopped at Alamut to see whether the Old Man of the Mountain would be amenable to an alliance.

One day during his visit, Count Henry and the sheikh of the Assassins were stroll-

Garden of Earthly Delights: Walled gardens, such as this one, were common features of Medieval Arabian and Persian palaces. The fabled garden at Alamut, where drugged aspirants were placed before induction into the Order of the Assassins, was contrived to create an illusion of a blissful afterlife, where obedient *fedayeen* would go after giving their lives in service to the Order.

ing outside the fortress, when the conversation turned to military obedience. His *fedayeen*, the sheikh assured Henry, were the most faithful and dependable men in the world, and obeyed his every command instantly and unquestioningly. To demonstrate, he made a hand gesture at two young men standing high atop one of the walls. Without hesitation, the young men leaped to their deaths. When asked if he would like to see another demonstration, a shaken Henry politely declined.

True or not, this story — retailed by a chronicler of the crusades, William of Tyre — epitomizes the almost superstitious fear with which the Medieval Christian world regarded the Order of the Assassins and its mythic leader. Called by some the world’s first terrorists and by others the Templars of the Islamic world, the order of the Assassins was for at least a century and a half one of the most powerful secret societies the world had ever seen. Although the motives of its founder, Hasan-i-Sabbah, are not entirely clear, the organization he founded gave many European languages, including English, a word for political murder, and with good reason: The Assassins appear to have been the first to institutionalize suicide attacks as a political tool. Behind a facade of extreme religious devotion, they — like many modern terrorist networks — hewed to a notably secular ideology of financial gain and political power, deploying as pawns impressionable youth conditioned by a fanatical, fundamentalist ideology.

Taking to Terror

When Hasan-i-Sabbah took control of Alamut in the year 1090, the Islamic world was in ferment. The Middle East, formerly under the sway of the Shia Fatimid Caliphate, had fallen mostly under the control of the Turkish Seljuk Dynasty, which was Sunni. The Fatimids still held sway in Egypt and part of Palestine, but the Middle



East meets West: Venetian merchant Marco Polo was one of the first Europeans to travel to the Orient. His account of the Order of the Assassins, whether accurate or embellished, remains one of the best known.

East, from the Mediterranean coast to the Persian plateau, was becoming inhospitable for Shiite Muslims, including Ismailis like the Old Man of the Mountain and his associates. And within nine years, the Middle East became more tumultuous still when the First Crusade created a Christian state in the Levant, with its capital at Jerusalem and crusader outposts as far afield as Syria and northern Iraq.

In such an unstable setting, Hasan-i-Sabbah was apparently determined to become a power broker, or, more accurately, to become one of the powers behind the thrones of Muslim sultans and Christian princes alike.

In 1092, Hasan's Assassins served notice of their arrival on the stage of power with one of the most extraordinary assassinations of the last millennium. On October 12, 1092, the Seljuk vizier, Nizam al-Mulk, was traveling from Baghdad to Isfahan (in modern-day Iran) on state business. Al-Mulk, a Persian-born Sunni, had been an advisor to several prominent Seljuk rulers, as well as to their Ghaznavid predecessors. He was widely admired in the Islamic world for his scholarship, as

well as statesmanship; al-Mulk had founded a number of schools and had authored several books. His most important work, completed only months before his journey to Isfahan, was a treatise on government, the *Siyasatnama*. In the latter chapters of the work, al-Mulk expended considerable ink warning of a new peril to which the rulers of the Islamic power had better pay heed: Hasan-i-Sabbah's Nizari order headquartered at Alamut.

On October 12, a man dressed as a dervish — a Sufi Muslim ascetic — approached al-Mulk's litter and, producing a dagger from beneath his robes, stabbed the vizier to death. The message to Islam's powerful was clear: Cross the Old Man of the Mountain at your peril.

The assassination of al-Mulk exhibited all the hallmarks of the Assassins of Alamut: proficiency with disguises, coupled with a brazen determination to eliminate the target, all under-

taken by men who often preferred to perpetrate their deeds before the eyes of the world, and with total disregard for their own well-being.

Hasan's (and his successors') method for recruiting and training fedayeen was the stuff of legend, albeit remarkably consistent legend. The Venetian traveler Marco Polo, one of the first Europeans to travel to the Far East, gave an account of the Old Man of the Mountain and the Order of Assassins (or Hashashin, supposedly from their use of hashish to dull their senses before committing murder). His famous description of the methods used to recruit Assassins has been dismissed by some modern scholars as myth, but is worth recounting nonetheless. According to one version of Marco Polo's account:

The Old Man ... had caused a certain valley between two mountains to be enclosed, and had turned it into a garden, the largest and most beautiful that ever was seen, filled with every variety of fruit. In it were erected pavilions and palaces the most elegant that can be imagined, all covered with gilding and exquisite painting. And there were runnels too, flowing freely with wine and milk and honey and water; and numbers of ladies and of the most beautiful damsels in the world, who could play on all manner of instruments, and sung most sweetly, and danced in a manner that it was charming to behold. For the Old Man desired to make his people believe that this was actually Paradise. So he had fashioned it after the description that Mahommet gave of his Paradise, to wit, that it should be a beautiful garden running with conduits of wine and milk and honey and water, and

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full of lovely women for the delectation of all its inmates.

Now no man was allowed to enter the Garden save those whom he intended to be his Ashishin.... He kept at his Court a number of the youths of the country, from 12 to 20 years of age, such as had a taste for soldiering, and to these he used to tell tales about Paradise, just as Mahommet had been wont to do, and they believed in him

just as the Saracens believe in Mahommet. Then he would introduce them into his garden, some four, or six, or ten at a time, having first made them drink a certain potion which cast them into a deep sleep, and then causing them to be lifted and carried in. So when they awoke, they found themselves in the Garden.

When therefore they awoke, and found themselves in a place so charming, they deemed that it was Paradise in very truth. And the ladies and damsels dallied with them to their hearts' content, so that they had what young men would have; and with their own good will they never would have quitted the place.

When he wanted one of his Ashishin to send on any mission, he would

cause that potion whereof I spoke to be given to one of the youths in the garden, and then had him carried into his Palace. So when the young man awoke, he found himself in the Castle, and no longer in that Paradise; whereat he was not over well pleased. He was then conducted to the Old Man's presence, and bowed before him with great veneration as believing himself to be in the presence of a true Prophet. The Prince would then ask whence he came, and he would reply that he came from Paradise....

So when the Old Man would have any Prince slain, he would say to such a youth: "Go thou and slay so and so; and when thou returnest my Angels shall bear thee into Paradise. And shouldst thou die, nevertheless even so will I send my Angels to carry thee back into Paradise." So he caused them to believe; and thus there was no order of his that they would not affront any peril to execute, for the great desire they had to get back into that Paradise of his. And in this manner the Old One got his people to murder any one whom he desired to get rid of.



Cross against crescent: Leaders of the First Crusade advance into the Holy Land. The First Crusade, by establishing Christian states in the heart of the Islamic world, created a target-rich environment and political leverage for the nominally Muslim Assassins.

This story, redolent of Oriental intrigue, was widely believed and probably contained more than an element of truth. And there are a number of accounts, from widely divergent sources, that appear to corroborate Marco Polo's tale of narcotics, secret pleasure-gardens, and religious indoctrination. An Arabic source, *The Memoirs of Hakim*, for example, gives an account almost identical to that of Marco Polo. Moreover, according to a Chinese source, "When [the Assassins] see a lusty youth, they tempt him with the hope of gain, and bring him to such a point that he will be ready to kill his father or his elder brother with his own hand. After he is enlisted, they intoxicate him, and carry him in that state into a secluded retreat, where he is charmed with delicious music and beautiful women. All his desires are satisfied for several days, and then (in sleep) he is transported back to his original position. When he awakes, they ask what he has seen. He is then informed that if he will become an Assassin, he will be rewarded with the same felicity." And Jacques de Vitry, one of the chroniclers of the crusades, who died more than a decade

before Marco Polo was born, noted that “[the Old Man of the Mountain] used to bring up in his palace youths belonging to his territory, and had them taught a variety of languages, and above all things to fear their Lord and obey him unto death, which would thus become to them an entrance into the joys of Paradise. And whosoever of them thus perished in carrying out his Lord’s behests was worshipped as an angel.”

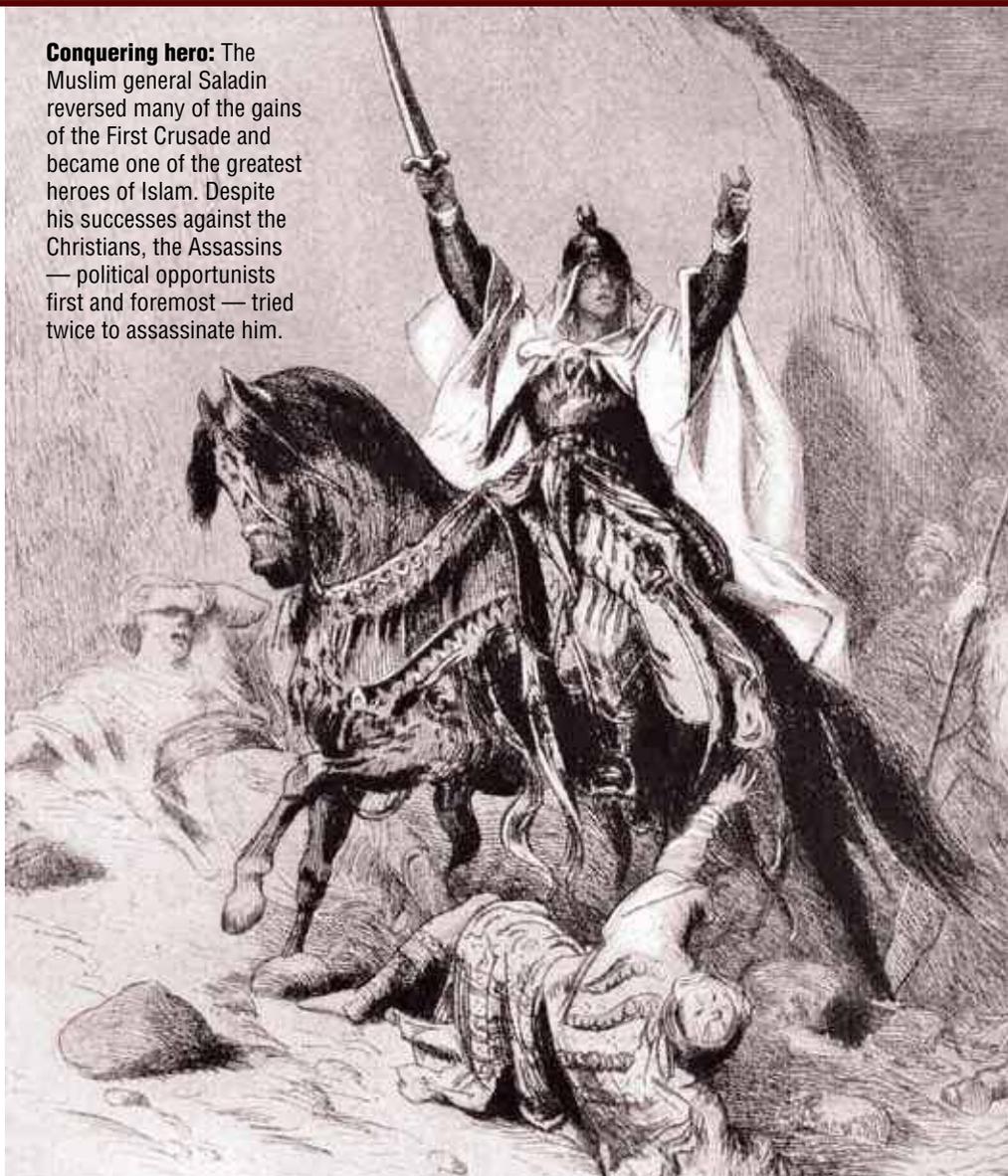
Whatever the secret details of the Assassins’ recruitment and training, it seems clear that they took advantage of the ignorance and piety of local peasants to create a veritable invisible army of brainwashed fanatics ready and even eager to die in carrying out the commands of the Old Man of the Mountain.

A World of Opportunity

In July of 1099, a motley army of Christian invaders led by the likes of Raymond of Toulouse and Godfrey of Bouillon stormed the city of Jerusalem, butchering thousands of resident Muslims and Jews, and installing a Christian ruler (Godfrey) in Palestine for the first time in more than 450 years. The conquest of Jerusalem, preceded by resounding victories over the Turks at Dorylaeum in Asia Minor and at Antioch in Syria, and followed by the defeat of the Egyptian Fatimids at Ascalon, set the stage for the foundation of the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem, the most important portion of the crusader states thereafter known informally to the Franks as Outremer. No other crusade was as successful as the first; indeed, the Third Crusade was the only other in which the Christian invaders managed to enlarge their holdings in the Levant. For the most part, the history of Outremer subsequent to 1099 was a story of gradual attrition, as the powerful Islamic states that surrounded Jerusalem, Tripoli, Antioch, and Edessa worked to reconquer them. Yet Outremer endured for nearly 200 years, in spite of overwhelming odds; the last crusader bastion, Acre, fell to the Turkish Mamluk horde in 1291.

In the civilizational struggle that took place in the Middle East during the 12th and 13th centuries, the Assassins flourished. In the upstart crusader states, they perceived a common enemy that transcended factional disputes between Sunni and Shia. In 1152, after decades of Islamic

Conquering hero: The Muslim general Saladin reversed many of the gains of the First Crusade and became one of the greatest heroes of Islam. Despite his successes against the Christians, the Assassins — political opportunists first and foremost — tried twice to assassinate him.



assassination, the Assassins struck out at the Christian world for the first time.

The victim was Raymond II, Count of Tripoli, the grandson of Raymond of Toulouse, a hero of the First Crusade. Raymond II, following a fight with his wife over the paternity of their son, decided to let her travel to Jerusalem to stay with her sister for what we would now call a “cooling-off period.” He escorted her in person part of the way, but on returning to Tripoli, was attacked outside the city gates by dagger-wielding Assassins, who killed him and two of his knights.

The Assassins struck an even more potent blow against the crusaders a few decades later, in the wake of the Third Crusade. This time their victim was Conrad of Montferat, one of the leaders of that crusade, and

a political rival of Richard I (“the Lionhearted”), the Franco-English monarch who had led the crusading army. It was Conrad who had broken the siege of Tyre by Saladin’s formidable army, and put the Muslim forces to flight. He also participated in the long struggle to reclaim Acre from the Muslims. And, although the Third Crusade fell short of winning back Jerusalem, Conrad of Montferat was nevertheless elected King of Jerusalem, giving him title to portions of Outremer coveted by Richard.

However, Conrad never saw his coronation. On April 28, 1192, he was attacked and killed by two Assassins on the streets of Tyre. One of his assailants was killed by his guards, but the other was captured and, under interrogation, claimed that they had been commissioned by none

With their mastery of disguises, they frequently infiltrated royal households in order to gain access to a victim's bedchamber.

other than Richard himself. While the charge was never proven, neither was it implausible. The Assassins, after all, had become by this time the most feared and efficient killers anywhere in the known world, and were said to be willing to murder Muslim and infidel alike, if the price was right.

Nor did the Assassins only commit murder. They were also used to deliver threats, usually in the form of a dagger with a note left beside a would-be victim's pillow. With their mastery of dis-

guises, they frequently infiltrated royal households in order to gain access to a victim's bedchamber.

And on occasion, even the Assassins failed. Two attempts to murder Saladin himself, in 1174 and 1176, were unsuccessful, as was

an attempt in 1272 to kill Prince Edward of England (afterward Edward I "Longshanks"), who had come to Acre in a last-ditch crusade to relieve the city and restore failing Outremer to its former glory. On that occasion, Edward managed to kill his assailant but, having been wounded by the Assassin's poisoned blade, was sick for months thereafter.

Their attacks on crusaders notwithstanding, the Assassins took a dreadful toll on Islamic princes and potentates in the 12th and early 13th centuries. Among their

many prominent victims were Maudud, Prince of Mosul (1113); Amir Afdhal, Wazir of Egypt (1121); Moyin-uddin, Wazir of Sanjâr Shah of Persia (1127); Amîr Billah, Caliph of Egypt (1129); Taj-ul Mulûk Buri, Prince of Damascus (1131); the Caliph Mostarshid, the Caliph Rashîd, and Daûd, Seljukian Prince of Azerbaijan (1135-1138); Kizil Arzlan, Prince of Azerbaijan (1191); and Oghulmish, Prince of Hamadân (1217).

Sometime in the early 12th century, the Assassins managed to establish a separate stronghold in the Nusayriyya Mountains of Syria, where a second "Old Man of the Mountain," Rashideddin Sinan, ruled almost independent of the Alamut Assassins from his castle, Mastyaf. It was the Syrian branch of the Assassins who, in 1173, entered into serious negotiations with Amalric I, king of Jerusalem, in hopes of effecting a nominal conversion to Christianity in exchange for more favorable rates of taxation. Whether the Christian king intended to enlist the nefarious services of the Assassins for his own gain is unclear, but when Christian knights murdered several Assassin envoys, negotiations with Amalric were broken off.

Turn in the Tides of Fate

By the middle of the 13th century, the political tides turned decisively against the Assassins. A new power had arisen in the east, a continent-spanning empire created by the Mongol warrior Genghis Khan, and enlarged by his children and grandchildren. One of his grandsons, Hulagu (a brother of the better-known Kublai Khan), was tasked with subjugating the remaining Islamic powers in southwest Asia, especially Baghdad. To this end, Hulagu was given in 1256 the largest army yet fielded by any Mongol commander, and ordered to spare those who surrendered unconditionally while slaughtering all those who did not. The Mongols were familiar with the Assassins and their deeds, and the reduction of Alamut (and other Assassin

Hands off: English prince Edward (later to become Edward I "Longshanks") fends off an Assassin in the Middle East. Though sickened by a wound from the Assassin's poisoned blade, Edward managed to kill his assailant and ultimately lived to return to England to be crowned king.



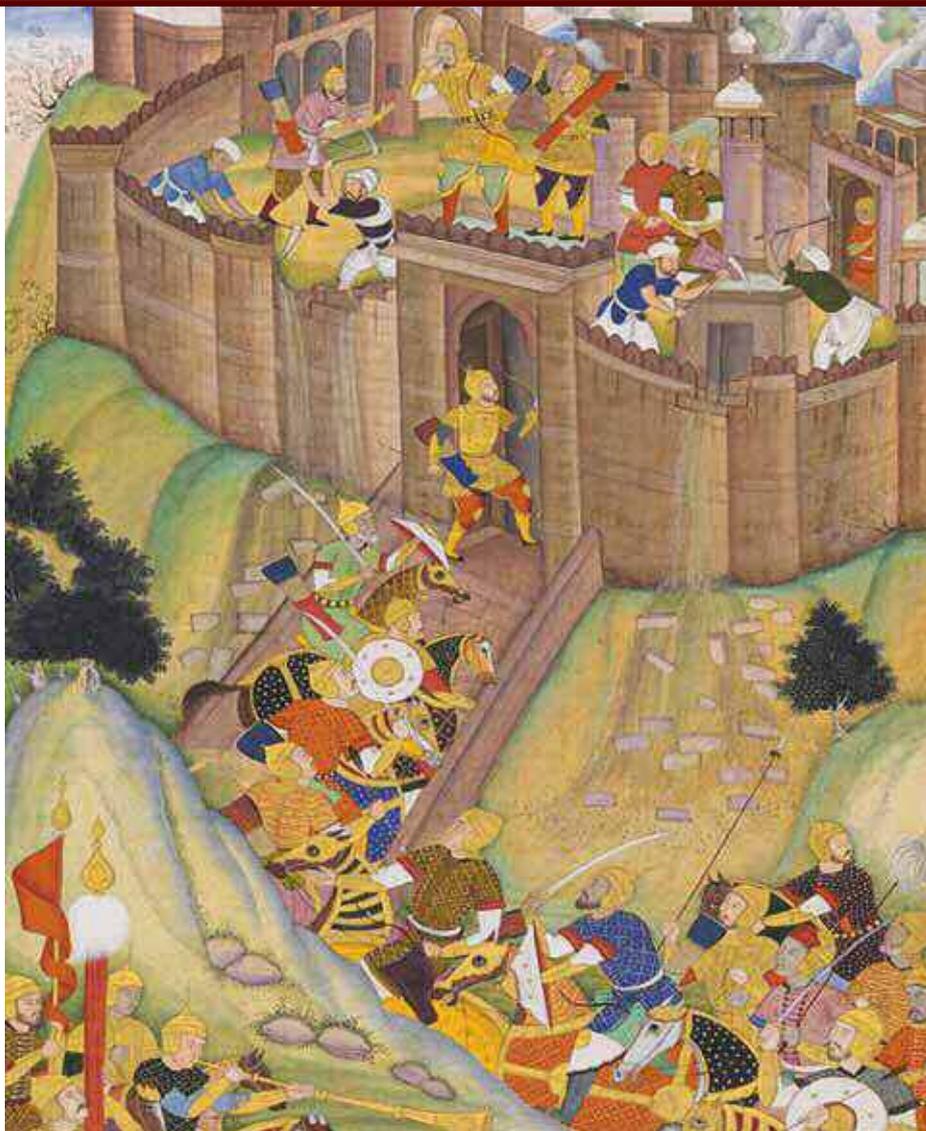
fortresses that had sprung up in the area) was on Hulagu's bucket list. By the time he arrived with his army at the valley of Alamut in December 1256, the Assassins and everyone in the surrounding countryside were terrified. The Mongols' reputation for wholesale massacre preceded them, and the Assassins surrendered their stronghold after a brief siege.

The Mongols spared the inhabitants of the fortress, but its treasures were looted and its gardens and considerable library destroyed. The Assassins as an order had not been extirpated, however, and in 1275 they managed to retake Alamut briefly before being crushed. With Edward Gibbon's assertion that the destruction of Alamut "may be considered as a service to mankind," it is difficult to quarrel, but the burning of their library and lore-books also denied posterity any significant information about the Assassins' body of esoteric beliefs and practices. After its final fall, the fortress was mostly destroyed, although its mournful ruins may still be seen on the mountaintop where they were abandoned, their dark secrets mostly intact.

The Syrian branch of the Assassins remained independent until 1273, when they were conquered by the Mamluk Sultan Baibars. Unlike the Mongols, Baibars, who had already distinguished himself both as the victor over the forces of King Louis IX's Seventh Crusade and at the Battle of Ain Jalut in 1260 (the first major defeat of a Mongol army), perceived the utility of the Assassins. He permitted the Syrian branch of the order to continue its operations — provided they work for him and his successors.

Under the patronage of Baibars and his Mamluk successors, the Syrian Assassins remained a force to be reckoned with well into the 14th century. Increasingly, however, the Order went underground, and while it may have persisted into the 15th century, its final fate is unknown. A story that will probably never be written is the potential relationship between the Medieval Assassins and modern-day Islamic terrorist organizations. The more orthodox version of Nizari Ismailism, meanwhile, is still around, numbering as many as 15 million adherents and headed by the Aga Khan.

Of the many secret societies and esoteric religious orders that have perturbed human affairs, the Assassins is one of the



How the mighty have fallen: The Assassins' nearly impregnable fortress at Alamut falls to a foe more ruthless than themselves: the Mongol general Hulagu Khan and his army. Despite the fall of the Old Man of the Mountain, the Assassins continued for at least another century from their base in Syria.

very few (along with the Thugs of India) to traffic so brazenly and systematically in professional murder. But whereas the Thugs specialized in the murder of anonymous travelers for the sake both of gain and ritual (a preference that enabled them to survive for centuries more or less unmolested until finally unmasked and extirpated by the British in the 19th century), the Assassins seemed almost to revel in open and mostly successful attacks on the wealthiest and most powerful. Many of their most notorious murders were carried out in broad daylight in crowded city streets, in mosques, and in royal courts, and in spite of the presence of guards and gates. Such sensational mayhem conferred

on the Assassins an aura of invincibility for a season, but in the end, the Oriental powers, unable to ensure their allegiance, tired of their services.

By any measure, the Nizari Assassins must be reckoned one of the most successful and ruthless terrorist organizations of all time, a veritable al-Qaeda of the Middle Ages. And though the order itself dissolved centuries ago, its bloody legacy lives on in the modern Middle Eastern underground of suicide bombers and assassins that continue to ensure that the land of crusaders and Mamluks, and of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, remains the world's deadliest and most dangerous place. ■