



The Secret Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizari Isma'ilis Against the Islamic World

By Marshall G. S. Hodgson

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The sect known as "the Assassins," a corruption of an Arabic word that means hashish smoker, is familiar to the West as a mystical cult of killers led by the "Man in the Mountain" encountered by the Crusaders. But it was not defeat at the hands of Christians that ended more than a century of Assassin rule; it was the massive and brutal invasion of Mongols from the East who conquered Assassin strong points and mountain fortifications one by one, crushing nearly all traces of this once fearsome sect. For nearly two centuries the Fâtimids, Shi'ite Muslims who believed Mohammed's daughter Fâtimah was his successor, attempted to control the Islamic world from their seat in Cairo.

Following the death of the Fâtimid caliphate al Mustansir in 1094, members of a faction in Persia that supported a deposed claimant to the caliphate, Nizâr, believed they now represented Fâtimid interests. These Nizârî Ismâ'ilîs ended up separating themselves from mainstream Islam and creating their own state in parts of present-day Syria, Iraq, and Iran. In order to establish and maintain regional control, the Nizârî Ismâ'ilîs used political murders and spies to subjugate or influence rival caliphates and the dominant Saljûqs.

Marshall Hodgson's first major book, *The Secret Order of the Assassins* remains the most complete history of the Assassins. Beginning the story with the separation of Sunnis and Shi'ites and the rise of Ismâ'ilîsm, an offshoot of Shi'ism, Hodgson traces the long and complex history of power struggles within Islam that led ultimately to the separation of the Nizârî Ismâ'ilîs and their direct challenge to Muslim leadership. Hodgson goes on to explain the principles of the movement, provides an examination of their sacred texts, and follows the history of the group from the pinnacle of power in the mid-eleventh century to its legacy in the form of small pockets of followers in parts of contemporary Syria and India. Long out of print and appearing for the first time in paperback, this book is an illuminating study in the history of Islam.

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Review

"The essential work on the Assassins."—*Times Literary Supplement*

About the Author

Marshall G. S. Hodgson (1921-68) taught history at the University of Chicago. A major scholar of Islamic civilization, he was the author of numerous books and articles, including *The Venture of Islam*.

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