

'OLD MEN OF THE MOUNTAINS': A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE GHŪRIDS AND THE ISMĀ'ĪLĪS OF ALAMŪT

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The twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE saw tumultuous political and social upheavals in central and western Asia. The 'Abbāsids, the erstwhile regional power and leaders of the Muslim world, were incapable of repelling the threat of the Crusaders – the Saldjūks, Turkic nomads from the steppe, had virtually imprisoned the 'Abbāsīd caliphs in their harems, after seizing control of Baghdād in 447 AH / 1055 CE.¹ Less than a century later, however, the Saldjūk's greatest sultan, Sandjar b. Malik Shāh, was himself held captive by nomads encroaching on the sedentary Muslim world, in search of pasture and bounty. As the political landscape continued to fracture, quasi-independent fiefdoms emerged. Two such fiefdoms were the Ismā'īlī Nizārīs (known colloquially to Crusader chroniclers as the 'Assassins') and the Ghūrid dynasty in central Afghanistan.

Striking parallels exist between these two dynasties – marginalised and despised by their neighbours, they established secure mountain strongholds, which acted as refuges and bases from which to expand. They reached their zenith under charismatic and astute leaders, who extended Ismā'īlī and Ghūrid domains far beyond their heartlands. Ultimately, however, both dynasties succumbed to invading nomad armies from the steppe – the Khwārizm-Shāh and then Ögedey's Mongol armies overran the Ghūrids in 619/1222, while thirty-five years later, Hülegü's Mongol armies forced the surrender and dismantlement of the Ismā'īlī fortresses. Both dynasties were lost to the vagaries of history – all that remains, apart from the tumbled stones of their fortresses, are the often biased and exaggerated accounts of medieval chroniclers.

Amidst the similarities between the Ismā'īlīs and the Ghūrids, distinct differences are evident which help to explain their changing fortunes. The Ismā'īlīs were an oppressed Shī'a minority, viewed as heretics by the majority of their Muslim brethren. Consequently, they developed a strong sense of identity and ideology that ensured unquestioning allegiance to their 'Grand Master'. Ismā'īlī leaders generally recognised their limitations, and modified their goals and tactics in the light of the prevailing political and military circumstances.

The Ghūrids were more prone to internecine rivalries, but once united, they were territorially more ambitious than the Ismā'īlīs. Seizing upon the weaknesses of their neighbours, they rapidly accumulated an empire stretching from eastern Iran to Bengal in India. The primary purpose of Ghūrid expansion, however, seems to have been to extract tribute and appropriate booty. These external sources of income enabled them to aggrandise their urban centres and sustain a population beyond the natural carrying capacity of the land.

Although the histories of these two dynasties are now relatively well understood, they have received little archaeological attention. Archaeological fieldwork at Djām (the Ghūrid summer capital of Firūzkūh) in central Afghanistan, and exploration around Alamūt, the Ismā'īlī fortress capital in the Alburz mountains north-west of Tehran, are starting to complement the historical sources. This paper will present some of the historical and archaeological data available and conclude by comparing the reasons for the downfall of these two intriguing dynasties.

'Old men of the mountains'

A plethora of quasi-independent fiefdoms emerged in the eastern Islamic world during the twelfth century CE, as the power of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate waned. None was more infamous than Hasan-i Sabbāh's Ismā'īlīs of Alamūt, who were labelled by the chroniclers of the Crusades

as 'The Assassins'. Marco Polo visited Alamūt in 1273 and perpetuated the tales of Hasan-i Sabbāh, the Shaykh al-Djibāl ('Old Man of the Mountain'),² whose secretive Shī'a sect had seized and established a series of fortified strongholds in the Alburz mountains around Alamūt, in Kūmis and Kūhistān (also in Persia) and in parts of Syria. Despite several more recent, scholarly studies,³ the 'Assassins' continue to be associated with drug-fuelled, fanatical political killings, partly as a result of the literary works of Dante, Vladimir Bartol and William Burroughs.⁴

Only forty years after the death of Hasan-i Sabbāh in 518 AH / 1124 CE, another, less well-known 'mountain warlord' came to prominence at the head of the Ghūrid dynasty in central Afghanistan. The rise of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad (d. 599/1203) coincided with the demise of the Ghaznavids to the south and the diminishing power of the Saldjūks to the north. Unlike many of his ancestors, Ghiyāth al-Dīn set aside fraternal rivalry and ruled in conjunction with his younger brother Mu'izz al-Dīn Muḥammad (d. 602/1206). From their remote, impoverished power-base, the Ghūrids accumulated a large 'empire' stretching from Nīshāpūr in eastern Persia to Bengal in India.

In this paper, I will use historical and archaeological data to outline the characteristics of the Ismā'īlīs of Alamūt and the Ghūrids. I hope to demonstrate that although both dynasties have much in common, the significant ideological, strategic and geo-political differences between the dynasties explain their respective life-cycles and ultimate demises.

Geographical, historical and religious backgrounds

The Ismā'īlī and Ghūrid heartlands lie in remote, rugged, mountainous environments at opposite ends of the Persian world (Fig. 1). The hostile terrain, in particular the harsh climate, limited water resources, thin soils and dearth of arable land played a significant role in shaping the lifestyles of their inhabitants – subsistence-level transhumance and opportunistic dry-farming predominate in the Alburz⁵ and semi-nomadic pastoralism in Ghūr.

Sixty-six villages were known in the Alamūt district at the time of Vladimir Ivanow's visit in 1928, although many were uninhabited.⁶ Ivanow argues that the Alamūt valley had almost no chance of being self-sufficient without imported supplies.⁷ Other travellers in the 1930s also noted the poverty of the mountain folk around Alamūt, although Freya Stark states that "... except for sugar and tea and paraffin, and rice, of which the home supply is inadequate, and which comes with the tea from the Caspian, the Alamut valley seems to be sufficient to itself."⁸

The Ismā'īlīs of Alamūt periodically raided the more fertile lowlands around Kazwīn, 80 km to the south-west, in part to supplement their food-stocks. Such raids, however, often proved counter-productive. Although secure in their near impregnable fortresses, the Ismā'īlīs were relatively powerless to prevent the destruction of their own fields and orchards during reprisal raids, and the massacres of their co-religionists who could not take refuge in the fortresses. The Saldjūk forces of Sultan Muḥammad Tāpār, for example, destroyed crops in the area of Alamūt for eight consecutive years prior his death in 511/1118.⁹

Although slightly lower in altitude, the Ghūrid heartland in central Afghanistan was, and continues to be, as inhospitable as the Alburz. The larger area and deep narrow valleys dissecting the mountains have throughout history made the region difficult to penetrate – the road running east-west along the Herī Rūd on a recent map is a figment of the cartographer's imagination.¹⁰ As recently as the 1960s, when studies estimated that 15% of the Afghān population was semi-nomadic, Ghūr formed one of the centres of summer pasturage and kuchis (nomads) are still a common sight in the region (Fig. 2), living off their flocks of sheep and goats, exchange and trade.¹¹ Ghūr province still relies on imported and stockpiled food aid during the snow-bound winter months.¹²

Preliminary archaeo-botanical and -zoological studies at Djām, the Ghūrid summer capital of Fīrūzkūh,¹³ provide evidence of a comparable lifestyle during the medieval period. Wheat, barley, pulses and fruits were cultivated locally or imported, while sheep/goats dominate the faunal remains and seem to have been kept primarily for secondary products rather than their meat. Anthracological studies and comparison of photographs taken in 1959 point to denser and more varied vegetation at Djām in the past than that found lining the Herī Rūd today.¹⁴

The Ismā'īlīs lacked the cohesive heartland that formed the Ghūrid core. They were concentrated in dozens of fortresses with surrounding lands and villages, and a few towns, scattered from Syria to eastern Persia.¹⁵ This geographical disparity, however, was in marked contrast to what Farhad Daftary has described as '... a remarkable cohesion and sense of unity both internally and against the outside world'.¹⁶ Although periodically semi-autonomous, the Ismā'īlī centres continued to acknowledge and follow the leadership of the 'Grand Master' of Alamūt.¹⁷ Conversely, the more cohesive Ghūrid heartland was prone to fracture politically because it lacked a dominant geographical, political and ideological focal point. The rival branches of the ruling Shansabānī family and other chieftains, ensconced in the myriad valleys of central Afghanistan, tended towards independence whenever the opportunity arose.¹⁸

The medieval landscape of Ghūr was dotted with towers, strategically positioned to defend the valley pastures and routes leading north to Fīrūzkūh.¹⁹ These defensive precautions are understandable given the historical, geo-political and religious milieu. The Ghūrids were regarded by their neighbours as little more than backward mountain brigands – Islam did not penetrate the region until the campaigns of the Ghaznavid Sultan Maḥmūd in 401/1010-11.²⁰ The Ghūrids subsequently adhered to the parochial Karrāmiyya branch of Sunnī Islam until 595/1199, when Ghiyāth al-Dīn officially abandoned it in favour of the more mainstream Shāfi'ī school of jurisprudence.²¹ This was an unpopular move domestically – rioting broke out in Fīrūzkūh and other urban centres. Bosworth interprets the shift as an attempt by the Ghūrid elite to gain greater acceptance in the wider Islamic world.²²

The Shī'a Ismā'īlīs had their own religious upheavals. They were persecuted as heretics by many of their Sunnī neighbours (including the Ghūrids), prompting them to adopt an even starker doctrinal shift – under their ruler Hasan III (r. 607-618/1210-1221), the Ismā'īlīs converted *en masse* to Sunnī Islam. The Ismā'īlī populus accepted this apparent theological *volte face* within their tradition of occultation or concealment, and belief in the infallibility of the Grand Master. Although this flirtation with orthodoxy gradually lapsed after Hasan III's death, it was sufficient to end temporarily the Ismā'īlīs' theological isolation and Ghūrid raids on their territories, and thus was deemed expedient.²³

The Ghūrid raids exemplify the periodically fractious relationship that existed between the two dynasties, despite the 1,280km separating their isolated capitals. The tensions were partly due to the Ghūrid's adherence to the anti-Ismā'īlī Karrāmiyya sect²⁴ and the proximity of Ismā'īlī strongholds in Kūhistān to the south-west of Ghūr. The Ismā'īlīs sent emissaries to Ghūr *ca* 550/1155, and considerable quantities of Ghūrid gold coins have been found at Alamūt, possibly sent as tribute by Ismā'īlīs in Kūhistān.²⁵ Ismā'īlī attempts to gain a foothold in Ghūr, although initially tolerated, were soon ruthlessly extinguished by the Sunnī Karrāmiyya establishment; the Ghūrid historian al-Djūzdjānī enthuses that following the accession of Sayf al-Dīn Muḥammad (r. 556-8/1161-3) the '... slaughter of all heretics was commanded. The whole of them were sent to Hell, and the area of the country of Ghūr, which was a mine of religion and orthodoxy, was purified from the infernal impurity...'²⁶ Al-Djūzdjānī also attributes the assassination of Mu'izz al-Dīn in India in 602/1206 on local Ismā'īlīs, although the Ismā'īlīs claimed to have acted for the Khwārizm-Shāh, possibly in an attempt to divert reprisals.²⁷

Historical evidence

Al-Djūzdjānī's chronicle highlights some of the problems with the historical sources from the period. His *Tabakāt-i Nāsiri* is a history of the Muslim dynasties of Asia down to the 'irruption of the infidel Mughals [Mongols]'; it is the main historical source for the Ghūrids. The *Tabakāt-i Nāsiri* was completed in 1260, when al-Djūzdjānī was in the service of the Ghūrids' successors in Delhi and is, unsurprisingly, highly partial in their favour. Unfortunately, it is also incomplete and often contradictory – Major H.G. Raverty had to draw on twelve copies of the chronicle for his translation and describes it as 'hopelessly defective' in places.²⁸

Al-Djūzdjānī's Sunnī prejudices are shared by another major chronicler of the period, Djūwaynī, who also completed his *Tārīkh-i djahān-gushāy* (The history of the world conqueror – i.e. Čingiz-Khān and the Mongols) in 1260. Djūwaynī accompanied the Mongol Khān Hülegü during his campaign against the Ismā'īlīs and drew up the terms of the surrender of the last Ismā'īlī ruler, Rukn al-Dīn Khur-Shāh, in 654/1256. He went on to become the Mongols' governor in Baghdād and its dependencies in 657/1259 and survived an assassination attempt (blamed on Ismā'īlīs) in 669/1270.²⁹ Given these factors, Djūwaynī's anti-Ismā'īlī bias

and the influence of his patrons are equally unsurprising – as the historian David Morgan notes, in a piece of masterful understatement: ‘A degree of tact and caution was doubtless expected of a Mongol government servant’.³⁰

Like most medieval Islamic dynasties, the Ismā‘īlīs and the Ghūrīds placed high value on intellectual activities and built up libraries of scholarly and literary works, scientific tracts and equipment.³¹ Patronage attracted astrologers, poets, philosophers and religious scholars to the remote Ghūrīd royal courts,³² while Ismā‘īlī fortresses in Kūhistān acted as refuges for scholars such as the prominent astronomer and Shī‘a theologian Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ḥūsī during the initial Mongol campaigns.³³ Djuwaynī’s exalted position in Hülegü’s entourage enabled him to select many ‘choice books’ (Kur‘āns, some Ismā‘īlī treatises and astronomical instruments) from the library at Alamūt, before consigning the rest to the flames.³⁴ The thirteenth century historian Rashīd al-Dīn also seems to have had direct access to some of the books from the Alamūt library, by virtue of his grandfather being present at the Ismā‘īlī surrender.³⁵ Unfortunately, little archaeological evidence of the intellectual vibrancy and patronage of either dynasty’s court has been unearthed thus far.

Archaeological evidence

Most of the archaeological evidence that has survived consists of architectural remains – the monumental minarets, madrasas (religious colleges) and towers of the Ghūrīds, and the Ismā‘īlī fortresses. The historian Hamd Allāh al-Mustawfī refers to nearly fifty strongly fortified Ismā‘īlī castles in the neighbourhood of Alamūt, while Hülegü is recorded as having taken seventy Ismā‘īlī castles in Kūhistān.³⁶ Most of these were destroyed by the Mongols, although Djuwaynī’s assertion that ‘... there remains not one stone of the foundations upon another’ at Alamūt is clearly an exaggeration – elsewhere, he records that Ismā‘īlī renegades briefly re-took the fortress at Alamūt in 673/1275.³⁷

The limited archaeological studies and excavations that have been undertaken in the Alamūt region leads Daftary to conclude that the ‘non-literary sources on the Nizārīs of Persia are rather insignificant’,³⁸ although he overlooks Ivanow’s 1960 study *Alamut and Lamasar. Two mediaeval Ismaili strongholds in Iran. An archaeological study* and Peter Willey’s 1963 work, *The castles of the Assassins*.³⁹ Willey has more recently published *Eagle’s nest: Ismaili castles in Iran and Syria*, the product of more than twenty expeditions to Ismā‘īlī fortresses, spread over forty years.

The remote mountainous terrain and the turmoil in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979 have similarly limited the archaeological investigation of the Ghūrīd heartland – the Minaret of Djām only came to world attention following a French expedition in 1957.⁴⁰ Even after its re-discovery, the archaeological remains around the minaret were largely overlooked, prior to the inception of the Minaret of Jam Archaeological Project in 2003. Djām became Afghanistan’s first World Heritage Site in 2002, but this international recognition of the unique importance of the site has merely resulted in further restrictions being placed upon fieldwork – indeed, UNESCO and the Afghan authorities have now inexplicably put on hold all archaeological fieldwork at the *ca* twenty hectare site,⁴¹ until efforts to stabilise the leaning minaret are completed. The extensive looting of the site, which occurred during the mid-1990s and early 2000s, has also significantly hampered archaeological research at the site.⁴²

Despite these challenges, two recent seasons of fieldwork by the Minaret of Jam Archaeological Project have added considerably to our knowledge of this well-organised, sophisticated medieval urban centre.⁴³ The architectural and engineering skills of the Ghūrīds are evident in the standing remains at Djām – the magnificent sixty-three metre tall minaret (Fig. 3) is merely the most obvious architectural monument. To its east, robber holes, exposed sections of the river bank and soundings excavated in 2003 and 2005 have revealed evidence of a large courtyard building (probably a mosque or madrasa) extending for over ninety metres; the robust fortress of Kaṣr Zarafshān overlooks the centre of the medieval capital, while four-hundred metres higher up are the more ephemeral remains of a badly looted elite mountain-top residence of Kūh-i Khāra. The most prominent surviving feature of the residence is a baked-brick cistern with a capacity of over 85,000 litres. The remnants of a baked-brick bridge are also visible beside the minaret. This monumental architecture vividly portrays the pretensions and piety of Ghiyāth al-Dīn and the Ghūrīd elite, as well as the resources in materials and labour available to them during the Ghūrīd florescence – nothing of comparable

scale or durability has been built at Djām in the intervening eight hundred years.

Ghūrid appreciation of aesthetics is also evident in the small finds from Djām, such as fragments of ornate stucco, carved brickwork and the repeated plastering and painting of domestic structures.⁴⁴ The high quality ceramics from China and Iran, glass shards, bronze objects and coins littering the surface of the site and spoil heaps around innumerable robber holes indicate access to a wide range of imported products.⁴⁵ The importance of trade, and the existence of ethnic diversity and religious tolerance are also evident in the fifty-four tombstones, inscribed with Hebrew, Persian and Aramaic names in a cemetery to the south of the minaret.⁴⁶

Al-Djūzdjānī states that the fortress and city of Fīrūzkūh were founded by Ghiyāth al-Dīn's uncle Kutb al-Dīn Muḥammad (d. 541/1146/7) and completed by another uncle in 544/1149.⁴⁷ Alamūt has a much longer history – the Daylamite fortress at the site dates back to 246/860, although it was re-built after Hasan-i Ṣabbāḥ took possession of it in 483/1090.⁴⁸ He immediately made improvements to the fortifications, storage facilities and water supply, as well as irrigation systems and cultivation in Alamūt valley. The fortress is built on the Rock of Alamūt, a 365 m long ridge, no more than 32 m wide, towering 275 m above the surrounding valley.⁴⁹ The military astuteness of the Ismā'īlīs in their selection of defensive locations and preparations for long sieges impressed even their implacable enemy Djuwaynī,⁵⁰ and Willey compares it favourably with that of the Crusaders.⁵¹

The fortress at Alamūt was in an 'extremely dilapidated' state when visited by travellers in the 1920s and 1930s, due in part to fifty years of robbing by treasure-hunters.⁵² Laurence Lockhart, however, was able to discern major stretches of defensive walls, two reservoirs cut into bedrock and tunnels and caves for stores during his visit to the site in 1928. Possible foundations for superstructures, burnt brick and good mortar, and masses of broken pottery give tantalising glimpses of the former glory of the site. Willey has since published a relatively detailed sketch map (Fig. 4), although it is unclear how many of the discernible remains date to the site's re-use as a royal prison by the Ṣafawids in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵³

High quality ceramics dating to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries have been collected at Alamūt,⁵⁴ although several Ismā'īlī leaders were renowned for leading ascetic lives and forcing their followers to do the same.⁵⁵ These include lustre painted wares, underglaze painted pottery, plain turquoise vessels, *sgraffiato* ware and one piece of imitation porcelain. Thousands of comparable medieval ceramics were noted by Stark at Lamasar, another major Ismā'īlī fortress, built by Hasan-i Ṣabbāḥ's successor Kiyā Buzurg-Ummīd.⁵⁶ Many of these ceramics probably came from the major production centres at Rayy and/or Kāshān, although the fifteen kilns found in the nearby valley of Andīj and a *seggar* (used to keep bowls separate during firing)⁵⁷ indicate that Alamūt may have been more self-sufficient in ceramics than Djām where only one kiln has thus far been located.

The demise of the Ismā'īlīs and the Ghūrids

External sources of income – in particular tribute and plunder from India, for the Ghūrids,⁵⁸ and bribes to gain immunity from assassinations for the Ismā'īlīs⁵⁹ – played a major role in the twelfth to thirteenth century florescence of Djām and Alamūt. Political and ideological differences, however, help to explain their demise. The Ghūrids, under the inspired leadership of Ghiyāth al-Dīn and Mu'izz al-Dīn, seized upon the weakness of their enemies in the late twelfth century, but remained pre-occupied by the threat from their traditional enemies, the Ghaznavids, to the south.⁶⁰ They made little attempt to co-opt or establish administrative, social and ideological structures to consolidate their territorial gains, particularly in India – a short-termist desire for booty seems to have been their primary motivation. The Ghūrids reverted to internecine conflicts following the deaths of the ruling brothers, just when they most needed unity to counter the emerging power of the Khwārizm-Ṣhāh and the Mongols, to the north and east. The rapid collapse of their empire is, consequently, unsurprising.

Ironically, it was the tradition of centralised authority and hierarchism that proved to be the Ismā'īlīs' downfall. They survived the initial Mongol campaigns in Persia in the 1220s, but were betrayed by weak leadership thirty years later. It is important, however, to take into account the relatively small number of Ismā'īlīs and the psychological effects of massacres and repeated attempts to unseat them from their fortresses.⁶¹ The

sheer size and terrifying reputation of the Mongol forces⁶² may have intimidated Rukn al-Dīn Khur-Shāh and persuaded him to attempt to appease rather than resist Hülegü. He may have been hoping that Mongol succession disputes would dispel the invasion, as had happened following the death of Ögedey in 1241.⁶³

Hodgson and others have pointed out that at least some of the Ismā'īlī fortresses could have held out given the thirteen year long resistance at Girdkūh, where eventually a lack of clothing, rather than provisions forced their submission.⁶⁴ Rukn al-Dīn Khur-Shāh's stalling tactics, however, merely infuriated the Mongols and their Sunnī advisors (as well as some of his own followers). The eventual surrender of the Ismā'īlī fortresses was followed by their dismantlement, the murder of Rukn al-Dīn Khur-Shāh and massacres. The capitulation of Alamūt and internal divisions disheartened the Ismā'īlīs in Syria, who eventually submitted to Baybars I (r. 658-676/1260-1277), the Mamlūk sultan of Egypt.

Despite the rather tame ends to these medieval dynasties and the desolate remains at their capitals, the Ismā'īlī and Ghūrīd legacies live on.⁶⁵ Ismā'īlī communities remain dotted around the region and their spiritual leader, the Agha Khān, is one of the wealthiest men in the world. The Ghūrīds have become an important national symbol in post-Taliban Afghanistan; their magnificent minaret adorns postcards, books and election posters (Fig. 5) and continues to attract tourists (and archaeologists) from around the world.

Endnotes

1 The Islamic calendar is lunar, and thus on average 11 days shorter than the solar Julian calendar. It starts with the Prophet's *Hijra* or emigration from Mekka to al-Madīna in 622 CE, hence the AH (*Anno Hegirae*) Islamic dates. I have followed the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* with regard to diacritics.

2 Ronald Latham, ed., *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London: The Folio Society, 1968), 4-57; see Henry George Raverty, ed., *Tabakāt-i-Nāsirī: a General History of the Muhammadan Dynasties of Asia, including Hindustan; from A.H. 194 (810 A.D.) to A.H. 658 (1260 A.D.) and the Irruption of the Infidel Mughals into Islam*. (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1970), 1187 fn. 7 and Laurence Lockhart, "Hasan-i-Sabbah and the Assassins." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 4 (1930): 681 fn. 1 for explanations of the mistranslation of the appellation *Shaykh al-Djibāl*. Ghūrīd rulers were known as *Malik al-Djibāl* ('king of the mountains') – Finbarr Barry Flood, "Ghurid Monuments and Muslim Identities: Epigraphy and Exegesis in Twelfth-century Afghanistan." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 42(3) (2005): 266.

3 Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis* (London: Tauris, 1994); Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: a Radical Sect in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

4 Vladimir Bartol, *Alamut* (Seattle: Scala House Press, 2005); Burroughs dedicates his work to Hasan-i Sabbāh, amongst others – William Seward Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night* (London: John Calder, 1981), xviii; Alighieri Dante, *Inferno* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971). See also the 1986 film *The Alamut Ambush*, directed by Ken Grieve, based on the 1971 Cold War novel by Anthony Price, *The Alamut Ambush* (London: Gollancz, 1971).

5 Freya Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins and Other Persian Travels* (London: J. Murray, 1934), 207 ff.

6 Wladimir Ivanow, "Alamut." *The Geographical Journal*, 1 (1931): 39.

7 Wladimir Ivanow, *Alamut and Lamasar. Two Mediaeval Ismaili Strongholds in Iran. An Archaeological Study* (Teheran: The Ismaili Society, 1960), 20.

8 Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins*, 226.

9 Ivanow, *Alamut and Lamasar*, 20; Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*, 363. Ivanow, *Alamut*, 43 notes that the word for 'fortress', *kal'a*, can refer to a fortified refuge, left unoccupied when not under attack.

10 *Reise Know-How* 2001, 1:1,000,000 map. In 2003, the 215 km drive east from Hārat to Djām took twelve hours to complete, while in 2005, the 70 km drive west from Chaghcharān, the capital of Ghūr province, to Djām took six hours by four-wheel drive.

11 Ludwig W. Adamec, ed., *Herat and Northwestern Afghanistan* (Graz: Akademische Druck - u. Verlagsanstalt ADEVA, 1975), 57-64; Sophie R. Bowlby, "The Geographical Background," in *The Archaeology of Afghanistan from Earliest Times to the Timurid Period*, eds Frank Raymond Allchin and Norman Hammond (London: Academic Press, 1978), 25-33.

12 "One month to avert mass displacement in Ghor", IRIN 23 October 2007.

13 For a summary of the debates over the identification of Djām as Firūzkūh, see David Colin Thomas, "Firūzkūh: the Summer Capital of the Ghurids," in *Cities in the Pre-modern Islamic World: the Urban Impact of State, Society and Religion*, eds Amira K. Bennison and Alison Lucy Gascoigne (London: Routledge Curzon, 2007), 118-121.

14 See Holmes, Hald and Deckers in David Colin Thomas, Katleen Deckers, Matilda Holmes, Mette Marie Hald, Marco Madella and Kevin White, "Environmental Evidence from the Minaret of Jam Archaeological Project, Afghanistan." *Iran* XLIV (2006): 253-276.

15 Willey calculates that the Ismā'īlīs seized up to two hundred fortresses during their history, although not all of these were held simultaneously. Available [Online] – http://iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=105073 [25 February 2008]. Both dynasties are thought to have used pigeon postal system to communicate between their isolated fortresses and towers – Enno Franzius, *History of the Order of Assassins*, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 109; Raverty, ed., *Tabakāt-i-Nāsirī* I: xlvi.

- 16 Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 324.
- 17 Ibid., 381.
- 18 Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "The Early Islamic History of Ghur." *Central Asiatic Journal* 5 (1961): 118-119. More recently, with regard to the post-Soviet breakdown of Afghanistan, Gannon noted: "Each of the seven big mujaddeen factions had hundreds of local commanders, who imposed their own rules in their own area, like little fiefdoms... It was a system of medieval simplicity." Kathy Gannon, *I is for Infidel: from Holy War to Holy Terror: 18 Years inside Afghanistan* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005), 8.
- 19 Warwick Ball, "The Towers of Ghur: a Ghurid Maginot Line?" in *Cairo to Kabul. Afghan and Islamic Studies Presented to Ralph Pinder-Wilson*, eds Warwick Ball and Leonard Harrow (London: Melisende, 2002).
- 20 Bosworth, *The Early Islamic History of Ghur*, 120, 125 ff.
- 21 Flood, *Ghurid Monuments and Muslim Identities*, 281.
- 22 Bosworth, *The Early Islamic History of Ghur*, 130-131.
- 23 Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 405-406.
- 24 Flood, *Ghurid Monuments and Muslim Identities*, 269.
- 25 David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 176.
- 26 Raverty, ed., *Tabakāt-i-Nāsirī* I, 365.
- 27 Franzius, *History of the Order of Assassins*, 86.
- 28 Raverty, ed., *Tabakāt-i-Nāsirī* I, 392, fn. 6; 400, fn. 3; 404, fn. 9, *inter alia*.
- 29 Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 327; Franzius, *History of the Order of Assassins*, 144; Shafique N. Virani, "The Eagle Returns: Evidence of Continued Isma'ili Activity at Alamut and in the South Caspian Region following the Mongol Conquests." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 2 (2003): 355.
- 30 Morgan, *The Mongols*, 18.
- 31 Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 382.
- 32 Bosworth, *The Early Islamic History of Ghur*, 131; Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, "The Ghurids," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia. Volume IV. The Age of Achievement: A.D. 750 to the End of the Fifteenth Century. Part One. The Historical, Social and Economic Setting*, eds M.S. Asimov and Clifford Edmund Bosworth (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1998), 189.
- 33 Hamid Dabashi, "The Philosopher / Vizier: Khwāja Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī and the Isma'ilis," in *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought*, ed. Farhad Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 406, 408-409. See Timothy May, "A Mongol-Isma'ili Alliance?: Thoughts on the Mongols and Assassins." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Series 3) 14/3 (2004) on a possible alliance between the Mongols and the Isma'ilis until some time between 1243 and 1246.
- 34 Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 327. The library at Alamūt had already been purged of 'heretical' texts by scholars from Kāzwīn during Ḥasan III's Sunnī phase (Ibid., 406).
- 35 Ibid., 329. Rashīd al-Dīn was a Jew who converted to Islam and provides a more objective appraisal of the Isma'ilis in his *Djāmi' al-tawārīkh* (Collection of Histories) than most of his contemporaries.
- 36 Guy Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate. Mesopotamia, Persia and Central Asia from the Moslem Conquest to the Time of Timur* (New York: AMS Press Inc, 1976), 221. Lewis feels the hundred fortress taken by Hülegü is "certainly an exaggeration" (Lewis, *The Assassins*, 94).
- 37 Lewis, *The Assassins*, 95.
- 38 Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 326.
- 39 Peter Willey, *Eagle's Nest: Ismaili Castles in Iran and Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005). See also Pinder-Wilson's study of the ceramics of the period – Ralph Pinder-Wilson, "Appendix C: Persian Pottery at the Time of the Assassins," in *The Castles of the Assassins*, by Peter Willey (London: George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd., 1963).
- 40 *The Illustrated London News*, 10 January 1959 – Andre Maricq, "The Mystery of the Great Minaret: the Remarkable and Isolated 12th-century Tower of Jham Discovered in Unexplored Afghanistan"; Andre Maricq and Gaston Wiet, *Le Minaret de Djam: la Découverte de la Capitale des Sultans Ghurides (XIIe-XIIIe siècles)* (Paris: Mémoires de la délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan, 1959); Janine Sourdelle-Thomine, *Le Minaret Ghouride de Jam. Un Chef d'Oeuvre du XIIe Siècle* (Paris: Mémoire de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, 2004).
- 41 See David Colin Thomas and Iain Shearer, "Accessing Firuzkuh, the Summer 'Capital' of the Ghurids," in *Papers from the Archaeology of the Inaccessible Session 2005 TAG Conference in Sheffield*, ed. Thomas L. Evans (in prep.), for estimates of the site's size and medieval population, using fieldwork data and satellite images.
- 42 David Colin Thomas, "Looting, Heritage Management and Archaeological Strategies at Jam, Afghanistan." *Culture Without Context* 14 (Spring, 2004); David Colin Thomas and Alison Lucy Gascoigne, "Recent Archaeological Investigations of Looting around the Minaret of Jam, Ghur Province," in *Art and Archaeology of Afghanistan: its Fall and Survival. A Multi-disciplinary Approach*, ed. Juliette van Krieken-Pieters (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006).
- 43 David Colin Thomas, Giannino Pastori and Ivan Cucco, "Excavations at Jam, Afghanistan." *East and West* 54 (2004); Thomas et al., *Environmental Evidence*; Thomas, *Firūzkūh*; see also Werner Herberg and Djelani Davary, "Topographische Feldarbeiten in Ghor: Bericht über Forschungen zum Problem Jam-Ferozkoh." *Afghanistan Journal* 2 (1976).
- 44 Miranda Semple, "Micromorphological Report." Unpublished, 2007.
- 45 Thomas and Gascoigne, *Recent Archaeological Investigations*; Thilo Rehren, "Metallurgical Report." Unpublished, 2005.
- 46 Walter Joseph Fischel, "The Rediscovery of the Medieval Jewish Community at Firuzkuh in Central Afghanistan." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85 (1965); Erica C.D. Hunter, "More Hebrew-script Tombstones from Jām, Afghanistan," in prep.
- 47 Raverty, ed., *Tabakāt-i-Nāsirī* I: 339-341; Leshnik suggests a date of ca 1146, although the Hebrew tombstones at Djām

point to some occupation of the site dating back to 1115 – L.S. Leshnik, “Ghor, Firuzkuh and the Minar-i Jam.” *Central Asiatic Journal* 12 (1968-69): 39.

48 Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 340.

49 Lockhart, *Hasan-i-Sabbah*, 692-693.

50 Cited in Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 429; note, however, Hillenbrand's analysis of why *Djuwaynī* may have over-emphasized the Mongol achievement in forcing the submission of the *Ismā'īlīs* – Carole Hillenbrand, “The Power Struggle between the Saljuqs and the *Ismā'īlīs* of Alamūt, 487-518/1094-1124: the Saljuq Perspective,” in *Medieval Isma'ili History and Thought*, ed. Farhad Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

51 Available [Online]: http://iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=106256 [25 February 2008].

52 Laurence Lockhart, “Some Notes on Alamut.” *The Geographical Journal* 1 (1931): 47; Ivanow, *Alamut and Lamasar*, 30. Monteith was the first Westerner to visit the site, a century earlier. He noted a strongly built enclosure wall and tower. “A bath reservoir and extensive place are the only buildings now remaining” – Colonel Monteith, “Journal of a Tour through Azerbaijan and the Shores of the Caspian.” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 3 (1833): 16-17.

53 Lockhart, *Hasan-i-Sabbah*, 693; Sylvia A. Matheson, *Persia: an Archaeological Guide* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1972), 57.

54 Pinder-Wilson, *Appendix C*, 323-324.

55 Anthony Campbell, 2004. *The Assassins of Alamut*. Available [Online]: <http://www.acampbell.ukfsn.org/assassins/assassins.html/index.html>, 37, 56; [14/11/2007]; Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 366-367; Lockhart, *Hasan-i-Sabbah*, 685.

56 Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins*, 231, 247. Of Lamasar, Stark noted: “There is nothing left of the buildings except a bit of wall here and there; a piece of the keep still upright with a loop-hole on the highest point; and masses of *débris* of masonry over all the top of the crest, which is a good-sized place and must have contained a little hamlet as well as the castle itself.” (*Ibid.*, 231, although she gives much more detailed descriptions on pages 246-248). Lamasar guarded the western approach to Alamūt and was renowned for its ample water resources and cisterns, fine buildings and gardens (Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 438).

57 Pinder-Wilson, *Appendix C*, 327; see also kiln photographs, 2007, available from http://iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=105078#6, [25 February 2008].

58 Peter Jackson, “The Fall of the Ghurid Dynasty,” in *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth Vol. II. The Sultan's Turret: Studies in Persian and Turkish Culture*, ed. Carole Hillenbrand (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 210; see also Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Artifacts, Elites and Medieval Hindu-Muslim Encounters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, in press).

59 Monteith, *Journal*, 16.

60 Ball, *The Towers of Ghur*.

61 Three hundred *Ismā'īlīs* are reported to have relieved the siege of *Hasan-i Sabbāh* and seventy followers in Alamūt in 485/1092 (Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 341; Franzius, *History of the Order of Assassins*, 42). In 511/1118, however, *Hasan-i Sabbāh* boasted to Sultan *Sandjar* that he had 60,000 followers ready to die at his command (*Ibid.*, 65).

62 Raverty, ed., *Tabakāt-i-Nāsiri* I: 1191 fn. 1 refers to the Mongol force amounting to 120,000-180,000 horse, plus 1000 families of catapult workers, naphtha-throwers and shooters of fiery arrows worked by a wheel.

63 Hülegü did indeed return to Mongolia with many of his forces from the west following the death of Möngke, but this was in 1259, two years too late to save the *Ismā'īlīs*.

64 Marshall Goodwin Simms Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins. The Struggle of the Early Nizari Isma'ilis against the Islamic World* (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1955), 259-260; Franzius, *History of the Order of Assassins*, 138. Cholera forced the surrender of the garrison of Lamasar in 655/1258, after a year of resistance.

65 The ‘Hashish Assassins’ featured in the ‘Great moments in Science’ slot on Triple J in 2007, although Dr Kruszelnicki is at pains to dismiss the hashish link. Available [Online] <http://www.abc.net.au/science/k2/moments/s1842501.htm> [25/02/2008].

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Figure I- map of the region





Figure 2. *kuchis* on the 'road' to Djām, 2005.



Figure 3. the minaret of Djām

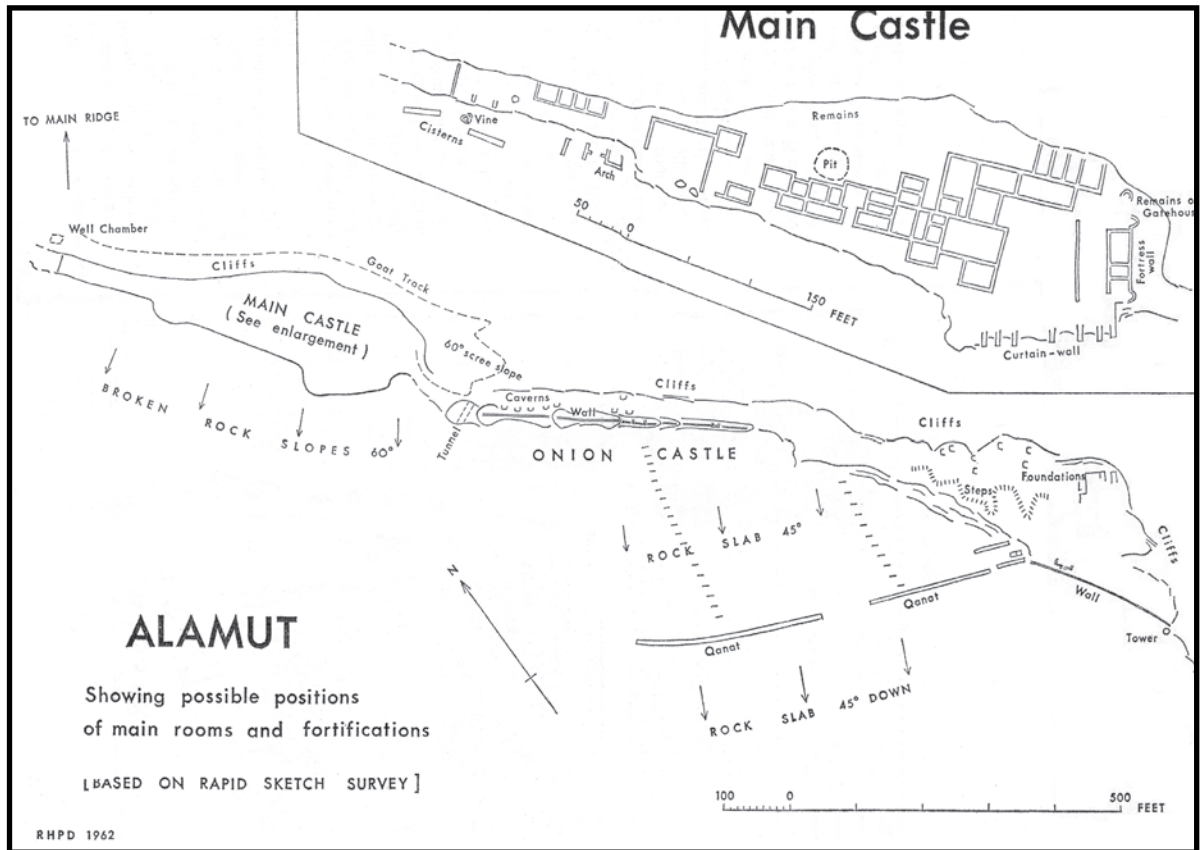


Figure 4. plan of Alamūt (Willey 1963).



Figure 5. election poster at Djām, 2005.

