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Introduction: Isma'ilis and Isma'ili studies



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A MAJOR Shi'i Muslim community, the Isma'ilis appeared on the historical stage on the death of the Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq in the year 148/765. This 'Alid imam, in whose time the 'Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads and installed their own dynasty to the caliphate, had succeeded in consolidating Shi'ism on a quiescent basis and according a distinctive identity to its Imāmī branch, the common heritage of the Isma'ili and the Ithnā'asharī or Twelver Shi'is. The Imam al-Ṣādiq's succession was however disputed among his progeny and as a result, his Imāmī Shi'i following subdivided into a number of separate groups, including those comprising the earliest Isma'ilis.

The early Isma'ilis laid the foundations for a distinctive Isma'ili movement and community. However, early Isma'ilism, stretching until the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate, remains an obscure subject, because only a handful of authentic Isma'ili texts have survived from that formative pre-Fatimid period in Isma'ili history while non-Isma'ili sources have in general remained hostile towards the Isma'ilis. Nevertheless, our understanding of early Isma'ilism has been greatly enhanced during the last few decades by the results of modern scholarship in the field, especially the studies of S. M. Stern (1920–1969) and W. Madelung.

It is now generally agreed by Isma'ili scholars that a line of central leaders, descendants of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, worked secretly during that obscure early period from different headquarters to organize a revolutionary Shi'i movement against the 'Abbasids who, in the eyes of the Shi'a, had usurped the legitimate rights of the 'Alid family to the leadership of the Muslim community. This movement, designated as *al-da'wa* (the mission) or *al-da'wa al-hādiya* (the rightly guiding mission)

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by the early Isma'ilis themselves, began to be particularly successful from around the middle of the 3rd/9th century, when a multitude of Isma'ili *dā'īs*, religio-political missionaries or propagandists, started their activities in Iraq, Persia, eastern Arabia, and the Yemen. These *dā'īs* summoned the Muslims to the allegiance of the Isma'ili Imam-Mahdi who was to deliver them from the injustices of the established regime. His rule would also herald the restoration of the caliphate to the dispossessed 'Alids, the rightful leaders belonging to the Prophet's family, the *ahl al-bayt*.

The success of early Isma'ilism was crowned in 297/909 by the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate in Ifrīqiya in North Africa, where the Isma'ili imam was now installed to a new, and the first Shi'i, caliphate. Only a decade earlier, in 286/899, the then unified Isma'ili movement had split into two rival factions, the Fatimid Isma'ilis and the Qarmaṭīs, over the all-important issue of the imamate. The dissident Qarmaṭīs, who did not acknowledge 'Abd Allāh ('Ubayd Allāh) al-Mahdī (d. 322/934) and his successors in the Fatimid dynasty as their imams, founded a state of their own in Baḥrayn, eastern Arabia, and menaced the Muslim world for almost two centuries. The pillaging activities of the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn culminated in their sacking of Mecca in 317/930 during the pilgrimage season. The Sunni establishment, always ready to defame the Isma'ilis, capitalized on the ravaging acts of the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn to discredit the entire Isma'ili movement, also alleging that the Qarmaṭī leaders received their orders secretly from the Fatimid caliph-imams. Open warfare, in fact, broke out between the Qarmaṭīs and the Fatimids in the aftermath of the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 358/969.

The early Isma'ilis also laid the foundations of Isma'ili intellectual traditions which were further elaborated during the Fatimid period. They made a fundamental distinction between the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and the esoteric (*bāṭin*) aspects of the sacred scriptures and religious commandments, holding that every literal meaning implied an inner, hidden reality (*ḥaqīqa*). These immutable truths, the common and eternal truths of the religions recognized in the Qur'an, were in fact developed in terms of a gnostic system of thought by the early Isma'ilis. This system represented an esoteric world of spiritual reality, a reality common to the great monotheistic religions of the Abrahamic tradition. The early Isma'ilis further maintained that the religious laws enunciated by prophets, or speaker-prophets (*nuṭaqā'*), would undergo periodical changes while the *ḥaqā'iq* would remain eternal. It was the function of

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the prophets' successors, the *amṣiyā* and the imams, to explain in every era (*dawr*) the hidden meanings of the revelations through *ta'wil* or esoteric exegesis. The gnostic system of the early Isma'ilis was thus comprised of a cyclical view of the religious history of mankind; it also contained a cosmological doctrine. Their system was thoroughly Islamic and Shi'i however, as the prophets of its cyclical history were those recognized in the Qur'an and the Shi'i doctrine of the imamate was superimposed on it; and this Shi'i doctrine continued to occupy a central position in the complex metaphysical systems of thought developed by the Isma'ili theologian-philosophers of the Fatimid times.

The Isma'ili *da'wa* of the 3rd/9th century, as noted, led to the foundation of the Fatimid *dawla* or state, initiating a new phase in Isma'ili history. The Fatimids made important contributions to Islamic civilization. It was in recognition of these contributions that the 4th/10th century was designated by Louis Massignon as the 'Isma'ili century' of Islam.¹ It was also during this century, coinciding with the first century of Fatimid rule, that the famous *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (*The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*) were compiled by a group of authors with strong Isma'ili affiliations. The Isma'ilis had now come to possess their own state, in rivalry with the 'Abbasids, and the Fatimid caliphs were acknowledged as the rightful imams by Isma'ilis not only within the Fatimid dominions but also in many other Muslim lands. It is worth noting that the Fatimids did not abandon their *da'wa* activities in the aftermath of their victory in North Africa, as they aspired to extending their rule over the entire Muslim community. As a result, the Fatimids also developed an elaborate *da'wa* organization for the activities of their *dā'īs* throughout the Muslim world, also paying particular attention to the training of the Isma'ili *dā'īs*, especially after transferring the seat of their state to Egypt. Important institutions such as the Dār al-Ḥikma and al-Azhar were established for this purpose. These institutions as well as special quarters in the Fatimid palace compound in Cairo were also used for the dissemination of Isma'ili teachings to broader audiences.

The Fatimid period, especially until the time of al-Mustaṣir bi'llāh (427–487/1036–1094), was indeed the 'golden age' of Isma'ilism. It was during this part of the classical phase in Isma'ili history that Isma'ili thought and literature attained their summit, while the Isma'ili Fatimid caliph-imams ruled over a vast empire stretching from North Africa and Sicily to Syria and Palestine. The Fatimids developed elaborate administrative and financial systems, also paying considerable attention to the Islamic sciences and other cultural as well as commercial

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activities. The newly founded Fatimid capital, Cairo, rivalled 'Abbasid Baghdad as the international metropolis of the Islamic world. It was during this same period that the classical works of Isma'ili literature dealing with theology, philosophy and other esoteric as well as exoteric subjects were produced by many learned *dā's* and authors such as Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, and Nāṣir-i Khusraw, who flourished during the 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries, while Isma'ili law was codified by al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān (d. 363/974), the foremost jurist of the period and the founder of a distinguished family of Fatimid *qāḍīs* or judges. At the same time, a distinctive intellectual tradition, designated as philosophical Isma'ilism by Paul Walker,² was elaborated by the *dā's* of the Iranian lands, starting with Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Nasafi (d. 332/943), who is actually credited with introducing philosophy into Isma'ili thought, and Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/934). These *dā's* and their successors, who starting with al-Sijistānī preached the *da'wa* in the name of the Fatimid caliph-imams, amalgamated in a highly original manner their Isma'ili theology with a form of Neoplatonic philosophy then current in Persia and Transoxania.

In 487/1094 the Isma'ilis were permanently split into two rival communities, the Nizāriyya and the Musta'liyya, over al-Mustanṣir's succession. The all-powerful Fatimid vizier al-Afḍal succeeded in installing al-Mustanṣir's youngest son to the Fatimid caliphate with the title of al-Musta'li bi'llāh (487–495/1094–1101), depriving al-Mustanṣir's eldest son and heir-designate Nizār of his succession rights. The Isma'ilis of Egypt and the regions dependent on the Fatimid regime now recognized al-Musta'li also as their new imam after al-Mustanṣir; they became known as the Musta'liyya. By contrast, the Isma'ilis of the Saljuq lands, then under the leadership of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ who was already following an independent revolutionary policy, upheld the succession rights of Nizār (d. 488/1095) and severed their relations with the Fatimid regime and the *da'wa* headquarters in Cairo, which were now working in al-Musta'li's name. The Isma'ilis of Persia and other eastern lands came to be known as the Nizāriyya.

The Musta'lian Isma'ilis themselves were soon split into Ṭayyibī and Ḥāfiẓī wings on the death of al-Musta'li's son and successor al-Āmir (495–524/1101–1130). The Ḥāfiẓī Isma'ilis recognized the later Fatimid caliphs as their imams, but Ḥāfiẓī Isma'ilism did not survive the downfall of the Fatimid dynasty in 567/1171. The Ṭayyibī Isma'ilis, who have not had a manifest imam after al-Āmir, soon found their

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permanent stronghold in the Yemen where their community flourished under the leadership of their chief *dā'īs*, designated as *al-dā'ī al-muṭlaq* or the *dā'ī* with absolute authority. By the end of the 10th/16th century, the Ṭayyibī Isma'ilis were split into Dā'ūdī and Sulaymānī factions over the issue of the rightful succession to the office of the *dā'ī*. By that time, the Indian Ṭayyibīs, known locally as Bohras, had greatly outnumbered the Ṭayyibī community of the Yemen. The Dā'ūdī and Sulaymānī Isma'ilis have since followed different lines of *dā'īs*. The Ṭayyibī Isma'ilis have also played an important role both in the Yemen and India by preserving numerous Isma'ili texts of the Fatimid period; the Ṭayyibī *dā'īs* of the Yemen themselves engaged in literary activities and produced a voluminous literature.

In the meantime, it was mainly through the efforts of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ (d. 518/1124) that the independent Nizārī Isma'ili *dā'wa* was founded in the East. By the time of the Nizārī–Musta'li schism of 487/1094, Ḥasan had already launched from his headquarters at Alamūt his anti-Saljuq revolt with much success in northern Persia as well as in Quhistān, in southeastern Khurāsān. In fact, Ḥasan's seizure of the mountain fortress of Alamūt in 483/1090 marked what was to become the Nizārī Isma'ili state of Persia with a later subsidiary in Syria. This state lasted for some 166 years until it, too, collapsed under the onslaught of the Mongol hordes in 654/1256. The Nizārī state went through numerous vicissitudes. Initially, it was led by *dā'īs*, but later the Nizārī imams emerged at Alamūt taking charge of the affairs of their community and state. The Nizārī Isma'ilis did not succeed in overthrowing the Saljuq Turks, whose rule was intensely detested in Persia, nor did the Saljuqs succeed in uprooting the Nizārīs, despite their much more superior military power. Eventually the Saljuq–Isma'ili relations developed into what Marshall Hodgson has termed a 'stalemate'; and the Nizārī state with its scattered territories found its own place among the principalities of the Muslim world.

The Nizārī Isma'ilis of the Alamūt period devoted much of their time and energies to their struggle and survival tactics in the midst of an extremely hostile milieu. Therefore, instead of producing learned *dā'īs* as in Fatimid times, they came to possess capable military commanders and strategists suited to their aims. These commanders were often placed in charge of the major fortresses, and they were at the same time *dā'īs* preaching on behalf of the Nizārī Isma'ili imam. Nevertheless, the Nizārī Isma'ilis, comprised mainly of mountain dwellers and villagers and with only scattered support among urban groups, did maintain a

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sophisticated outlook and literary tradition. Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ himself was a learned theologian, and he was largely responsible for reformulating the old Shi'i doctrine of *ta'lim*, or the necessity of authoritative teaching by the imam.

At any rate, the doctrine of *ta'lim*, emphasizing the teaching authority of each imam independently of his predecessors, laid the foundation for all the subsequent Nizārī teachings of the Alamūt period, including the declaration of the *qiyāma* or resurrection in 559/1164. This declaration, in fact, heralded the spiritual independence of the Nizārī Isma'ili community at large. However, resurrection was interpreted spiritually on the basis of Isma'ili *ta'wil* to mean the recognition of the unveiled truth in the spiritual reality of the rightful imam of the time who was none other than the Nizārī Isma'ili imam. It was through the recognition of the spiritual reality of this imam that Paradise would be actualized for the faithful, his community of followers. At the time of the declaration of the *qiyāma*, the Syrian Nizārīs were under the leadership of their most famous leader, Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān (d. 589/1193), who through an intricate network of alliances with his Sunni neighbours and the Crusaders ensured the survival of his community in difficult times. Later, Jalāl al-Dīn Ḥasan III (607–618/1210–1221), the sixth lord of Alamūt, attempted a daring rapprochement with the Sunni establishment, giving the Nizārī community a much needed respite. As a rare instance of Isma'ili historiography, the Nizārī Isma'ilis, like the Fatimids before them, also commissioned the compilation of official chronicles, recording the events of their state in Persia according to the reigns of the successive lords of Alamūt. Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ also founded an important library at Alamūt, whose collections of Isma'ili and non-Isma'ili books had grown impressively by the time the Mongols consigned it to fire. In Quhistān and Syria, too, the Nizārīs had established libraries, containing not only books written on different religious subjects, but also archival documents and scientific tracts and equipment.

It was under such circumstances that, despite the military entanglements of the Nizārīs with outsiders, many Muslim scholars, including Sunni and Twelver Shi'i ones as well as Jewish scientists, availed themselves of the Nizārī libraries and patronage of learning. Some of these outside scholars even converted to Isma'ilism, at least while they were amongst the Nizārī Isma'ilis. The most prominent member of this select group was the celebrated philosopher, theologian and astronomer Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (597–672/1201–1274), who spent some three decades among the Nizārīs of Khurāsān and northern Persia and was with the

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last lord of Alamūt, Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh (653–655/1255–1257), when the Nizārīs finally surrendered to the Mongols. The bulk of the meagre literature produced by the Nizārī Isma'ilis during the Alamūt period was either destroyed by the Mongols or perished soon afterwards in Īlkhānid Persia. The Persian Nizārīs, unlike the Musta'lians of the Yemen, did not play a major role in preserving the Isma'ili literature of the Fatimid period. In this connection it is important to note that Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ, as an expression of his 'Iranian' sentiments, had adopted the Persian language as the religious language of the Persian Isma'ili community. As a result, the Persian Isma'ilis of the Alamūt period did not find ready access to the Isma'ili writings of the Fatimid period, although such works were evidently available in the collections of Alamūt Library and elsewhere in the community. However, the Syrian Nizārī Isma'ilis who used Arabic did preserve a certain number of the Fatimid Isma'ili texts, also producing a literary tradition of their own.

In Persia, the Nizārī Isma'ilis survived the Mongol destruction of their mountain fortresses and state in 654/1256, while many of them sought refuge in the adjacent regions in Afghanistan and Badakhshān in Central Asia as well as in the Indian subcontinent. The Syrian Nizārīs, who had been spared the Mongol catastrophe, were subdued by the end of the 7th/13th century by the Mamlūks who had checked the westward advances of the Mongols and had extended their own hegemony over Egypt and Syria in succession to the Ayyūbids. In the meantime, the Nizārī imamate had been handed down in the progeny of Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh, the last lord of Alamūt who was murdered by the Mongols in 655/1257. The early post-Alamūt centuries represent the most obscure phase in the history of the Nizārī Isma'ili community, when the Nizārīs lived clandestinely in different regions under the local leadership of their *dā'īs*. The Nizārī imams, too, were now living secretly in Persia without direct contacts with their followers. It was during these early post-Alamūt centuries that the Nizārī Isma'ili imams and their followers began to disguise themselves under the mantle of Sufism, another Muslim esoteric tradition then flourishing in Persia in the form of diverse orders or *ṭarīqas*. By the end of the 9th/15th century when the Nizārī imams emerged at Anjudān, in central Persia, strong ties had been forged between Nizārī Isma'ilism and Sufism. The Isma'ili imam now appeared to the outside world as a Sufi *pīr* or *mursbid* and his followers were his *murīds*, making it possible for the Persian Isma'ilis to escape persecution in a hostile milieu.

The mediaeval period in the history of Nizārī Isma'ilism came to an

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end with what W. Ivanow has termed the Anjudān revival,³ a renaissance of Nizārī *da'wa* and literary activities. During this period, lasting about two centuries until the 11th/17th century, the Nizārī imams succeeded in asserting their central leadership over the various Nizārī communities. The literary and proselytizing activities of the Nizārī *da'wa* were also revived during this period. The Nizārī *da'wa* now achieved particular success on the Indian subcontinent, where large numbers of Hindus from the Lohāṇā caste converted to Isma'īlism, especially in Sind and Gujarāt, and they became locally known mainly as Khojas. The Indian Nizārī Isma'īlis developed their own indigenous literary tradition in the form of devotional hymns known as *gīnāns*, representing an interfacing of Isma'īli and Hindu elements. Originally transmitted orally, the *gīnāns* were in time collected and recorded in writing in different Indic languages, mostly in the Khojki script which is unique to the Isma'īli Khojas. In modern times, the Nizārī Isma'īlis have benefited from the progressive policies and the network of institutions of their imams, who have acquired international fame under their hereditary title of Aga Khan. The Nizārī Isma'īlis are currently scattered in more than twenty-five countries of Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. Representing diverse ethnic, linguistic and literary traditions, the Nizārī Isma'īlis have remained united as a *jama'at* or religious community in their devotion to their spiritual leader or current imam (*ḥādīr imām*).

Most of what is now known about the history and doctrines of the Isma'īlis of the mediaeval times was not known until a few decades ago. This is simply because the Isma'īlis had been studied almost exclusively on the basis of sources and accounts produced by non-Isma'īlis who were generally hostile towards them. In particular, Sunni polemicists, starting with Ibn Rizām who flourished in the first half of the 4th/10th century, began to fabricate evidence that would lend support to the refutation of the Isma'īlis on specific doctrinal grounds. The 'Abbasids themselves continued to encourage the compilation of such anti-Isma'īli tracts, culminating in the writings of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/III) who addressed his polemics particularly to the Nizārī Isma'īlis. In his *al-Mustazḥirī*, written in refutation of the Isma'īlis at the request of the 'Abbasid caliph al-Mustazḥir (487–512/1094–III8), al-Ghazālī presented his own elaborate Isma'īli system of graded initiation and indoctrination leading to an ultimate stage of unbelief. The anti-Isma'īli authors also produced a number of travestied accounts in which they readily attributed all sorts of heretical beliefs to the Isma'īlis. These forgeries

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circulated as genuine Isma'ili works and were used as source materials by subsequent generations of heresiographers and polemicists. As a result, they contributed significantly to shaping the anti-Isma'ili opinions of the Muslims at large.

In sum, by the 4th/10th century, a widespread anti-Isma'ili literary campaign had come into existence in the Muslim world. This campaign, led by heresiographers and polemicists, aimed to discredit the entire Isma'ili movement from its very beginnings. Concerted efforts were now persistently made by these anti-Isma'ili sources to attribute all sorts of sinister objectives, heretical beliefs and immoral practices to the Isma'ilis, while the 'Abbasids themselves sponsored carefully designed campaigns to refute the 'Alid ancestry of the Isma'ili imams. There soon came into being a 'black legend' which portrayed Isma'ilism as the arch-heresy (*ilḥād*) *par excellence* in Islam, conceived by some non-'Alid imposters, perhaps even a Jewish magician, to destroy Islam from within. In time, this 'black legend', with forgotten origins, came to be accepted as an accurate description of Isma'ili motives, beliefs and practices, leading to more anti-Isma'ili polemical writings and contributing further to the anti-Isma'ili stances of other Muslims.

The Europeans of the Crusader and later times added their own fanciful tales to the anti-Isma'ili travesties and polemics produced by the Muslims. Mediaeval Europeans remained almost completely ignorant of Islam and its internal divisions, including Shi'ism, even though the Crusaders had come into contact with a number of Muslim communities in the Near East. In fact, the Nizārī Isma'ilis of Syria were the first Shi'ī community with whom the Crusaders had diverse encounters from the opening decades of the 6th/12th century. However, it was some half a century later, in the time of Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān, the original 'Old Man of the Mountain' of the Crusaders, that occidental travellers and Crusader chroniclers began to collect some fragmentary information on the Nizārī Isma'ilis of Syria. They were particularly impressed by the self-sacrificing behaviour of the Nizārī *fidā'īs*, or devotees, who were sent on dangerous missions to eliminate the prominent enemies of their community, especially since almost any assassination then taking place in the central Islamic lands was attributed to the daggers of the Nizārī *fidā'īs*.

However, proximity to the Syrian Nizārīs, who were soon made famous in Europe as the Assassins, did not motivate the Europeans to gather more accurate information on the teachings and practices of this oriental community. Instead, the Crusaders and their occidental observers now resorted to their imagination in order to explain to their

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own satisfaction the reasons behind the devotion of the *fidā'īs*. By the middle of the 7th/13th century, a number of Crusader chroniclers and other European sources claimed to possess reliable information on the secret practices of the Nizārī Isma'ilis and their leader, the Old Man of the Mountain, especially regarding the recruitment and training of the *fidā'īs*. These so-called Assassin legends developed gradually and in stages, and they culminated in the version popularized by Marco Polo (1254–1324) who synthesized a number of such legends with his own contribution in the form of a 'secret garden of paradise'. The Venetian traveller whose tales were treated as eyewitness reports in mediaeval Europe, explained in great detail how the *fidā'īs* were motivated for carrying out their missions by their deceitful chief who procured bodily pleasures for them in his secret garden of paradise into which they would be temporarily admitted under the influence of hashish or some such intoxicating potion. Henceforth, the Nizārī Isma'ilis were readily reduced in mediaeval European sources to a sinister order of drugged assassins, bent on senseless murder and mischief. The anti-Isma'ili 'black legend' of the Muslim authors, rooted in hostility, had now found its companion in the 'Assassin legends' of the mediaeval Europeans, rooted in ignorance and imaginative fantasies. And both sets of myths continued to circulate for centuries as accurate descriptions of the Isma'ili teachings and practices in their respective eastern and western milieux.

The orientalist of the nineteenth century, led by Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), began their more scholarly study of Islam on the basis of the Islamic manuscripts which were written mainly by Sunni authors. As a result, the orientalist studied Islam according to the Sunni viewpoint, treating Shi'ism as the 'heterodox' version of Islam. The orientalist did identify the Isma'ilis correctly as a Shi'i Muslim community, but they were obliged to study the Isma'ilis exclusively on the basis of the hostile Sunni sources and the fictitious occidental accounts of the Crusader times. Orientalism, too, had now lent its own seal of approval to the myths of the Isma'ilis. In his 'Memoir on the Dynasty of the Assassins', de Sacy summarized all the information on the Nizārīs of the Alamūt period that he was then able to extract from Islamic sources and a number of Crusader chronicles. It is, therefore, not surprising that he endorsed, at least partially, some of the Assassin legends.⁴ Later, in the long introduction to his major work on the Druzes,⁵ de Sacy also reaffirmed the 'black legend' of the Sunni polemicists regarding the origins of Isma'ilism. De Sacy's distorted evaluation of the Isma'ilis set