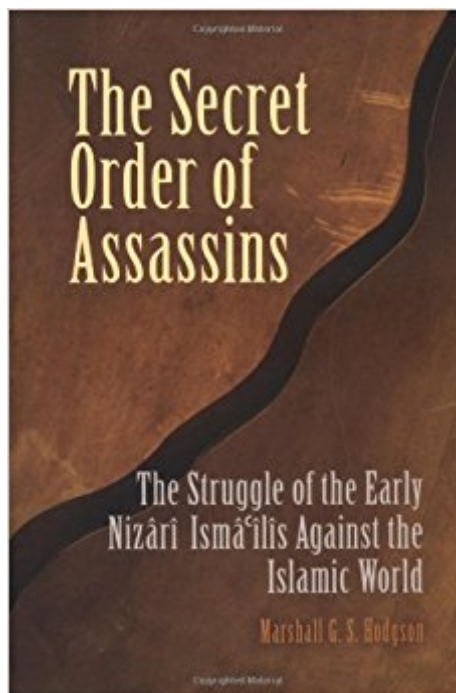




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# The Secret Order Of Assassins: The Struggle Of The Early Nizari Ismai'lis Against The Islamic World



## Synopsis

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 Fāṭimid, Shi'ite Muslims who believed Mohammed's daughter Fāṭimah was his successor, attempted to control the Islamic world from their seat in Cairo. Following the death of the Fāṭimid caliphate al Mustansir in 1094, members of a faction in Persia that supported a deposed claimant to the caliphate, Nizār, believed they now represented Fāṭimid interests. These Nizārī Ismā'īlīs 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 Nizārī Ismā'īlīs used political murders and spies to subjugate or influence rival caliphates and the dominant Saljuqs. 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 Ismā'īlism, 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 Nizārī Ismā'īlīs 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.

## Book Information

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: University of Pennsylvania Press (March 8, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0812219163

ISBN-13: 978-0812219166

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 9 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #938,479 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #51 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Shi'ism #606 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > History #633 in Books > History > World > Religious > Islam

## Customer Reviews

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

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*.

Mr Hodgson's book is a good work about the Nizaris. However, it is based on his researches for his phd and because of that his approach to the theme is in my opinion too "academic" making the reading a little tiring for people who are not used to this kind of writing style. (there is no illustrations also and it definitely doesn't make the reader's task easier...) I don't recommend this book for people who want to just read a good history book for leisure but I recommend this for an academic research about the Nizaris and their time.

Marshall G. Hodgson's *The Secret Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizari Ism Against the Islamic World* investigates the origins of Nizari Ism and how they became a formidable threat to Sunni and Shia sects of Islam. As most histories centered on the Muslim world tend to do, the account commences at the formation and rise of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula, and the schism that occurred with the murder of Ali, the fourth Caliphate, in 661 C.E. From this schism emerged the division of Islam into two sects: Sunni and Shia. This partitioning of Islam led to further fissures in the religion, giving rise to various sub-sects. Hodgson notes that there is no clear picture of the rise of Ism, but, after 900 C.E., a clear structure and organization became evident. The sect erected a power structure known as the Ism Dyansty of Egypt, also known as the Fatimid Caliphate. Within this empire, the doctrinal foundations of the sect are further elaborated and solidified; however, another schism occurred over the succession of the

imāfā'Ā Ām. The setting aside of Nizāfā'Ā Ār, in his rightful ascendancy to the position of imāfā'Ā Ām, led āfĀ Ā Āasan-i āfĀ Ā Āabbāfā'Ā ĀāfĀ Ā Ā to set out on his own with his followers to establish their sect: Nizāfā'Ā Ārāfā'Ā Ā  
Ismāfā'Ā Āāfā'Ā Āāfā'Ā Ās. Under āfĀ Ā Āabbāfā'Ā ĀāfĀ Ā Ā, the sect underwent a reformation of the original Ismāfā'Ā Āāfā'Ā Āāfā'Ā Ā doctrines and practices. Hodgson pieces together the history of the sectāfā Ā Ā exodus from Fāfā'Ā ĀāfĀ Ā Ā Ā-imid Egypt, indicating that āfĀ Ā Āabbāfā'Ā ĀāfĀ Ā Ā initiated a military campaign simultaneously with their alienation away from their former home. The military operations were aimed at both Fāfā'Ā ĀāfĀ Ā Ā Ā-imid Egypt and the Saljāfā'Ā Āq Turks, who occupied Sunnāfā'Ā Ā lands. They seized Alamāfā'Ā Āt in 1090 C.E., an inaccessible, rough terrain location, which provided short routes between the important city of Qazwāfā'Ā Ān and the Caspian Sea. The barrage of assaults unleashed by the Nizāfā'Ā Ārāfā'Ā Ā Ismāfā'Ā Āāfā'Ā Āāfā'Ā Ās horrified and baffled the Saljāfā'Ā Āq Turks, as they were devastated by the sect of āfĀ Ā Āabbāfā'Ā ĀāfĀ Ā Ā. Hodgson presents a picture that shows the complexity of Islamic world and how factional disputes among the Saljāfā'Ā Āq Turks benefited the Assassins. Also, Hodgson discusses and examines the employed method of struggle used by the Nizāfā'Ā Āris, assassination. He reexamines Islamic history when such precedents for the use of assassinations were set. Just as the Khāfā'Ā Ārijites had done, they sought to overturn all who did not agree with their view of puritanical Islam. They labeled all their enemies as backsliders. This was deliberate imitation of that archetype deployed by Muhammadāfā'Ā Ā Ās own military stratagem to take Mecca, posits Hodgson. Not only was assassination employed, but the use of blockages and the disruption of supply routes. However, from various other sources Iāfā'Ā Ā Āve read, this seems to be a polemical view towards the sect. Understanding the religious teachings of the sect over time evinces a different motive behind their use of assassination. They aimed at protecting their hierarchical structure of knowledge, which they desired to preserve for future generations. This structure is what scared the Sunnāfā'Ā Ā establishment. Hodgson asserts that such tactics were not used for the sake of carving out a vast expanse of territory, but rather for the purpose of evincing to their enemies that they rule by a formidable power. Assassinations demonstrated to all that the absolute power of fear was the method for Ismāfā'Ā Āāfā'Ā Āāfā'Ā Ā governance. These methods allowed them to gain outposts away from Alamāfā'Ā Āt, where they captured fortresses in Syria and IāfĀ Ā Ā Āfahāfā'Ā Ānāfā'Ā Ā Ā Ā just to name a few. Later, Syria would become an

important outpost for one of the most heroic and well-known names of the sect, Rāshid ad-Dīn Sināfī. The history contained in this book tries to evince not only chronology of events, but also the guiding philosophy behind the sect. Hodgson sets the account of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs in the light of their philosophical underpinnings. This seemed to be a painful chore, as the scholarship and pertinent documents addressing Ismāʿīlī history had not been fully developed. As this book was written in the 1950s, many of the sources relied upon by scholars were those of medieval Sunnī sources or Crusader accounts. Ismāʿīlī sources were rare and seldom available for scholars. The Sunnī accounts resort to polemical attacks on the Assassins, which may have been justified. It must be remembered that most of the Middle East at that time, was ruled by Sunnī Muslims, who sought to extinguish all other sects of Islam. Hodgson makes ample use of these statements from the sources, but, just because they are Sunnī sources, does not mean they should be discounted. Hodgson works with the sources that are available to him, rendering scholarly work with an interesting perspective of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs. The picture provided by Hodgson is a foundational starting point for any who are interested in the Assassins. Hodgson is not only known for this book, but also for the standard volume of texts that provide the best account of Islamic history as a whole, *The Venture of Islam*.

The definitive work on the topic of the now-infamous Nizari Assassins and the small independent state they tried to create back in the 1100s and 1200s. Despite the fact that the original work dates back to 1955, it remains the best and most informative book on their history, customs, and beliefs. No other book packs quite the information that this one does on this topic. There are many other books on this topic that try to do it, but just don't come close, as they often get too sensational, political, or biased, or they just don't go into much detail. As a disclaimer, this book is not for those looking for an easy, action-packed retelling of the Nizari efforts. It is excellent for those doing scholarly research on them or for dedicated enthusiasts who want hard info and facts to the best of an author's ability with what sources were and are available on this secretive group.

very good publication, Mr. Hodgson mentions all the essential information about Assassins, as well as many interesting facts

After reading this, you will have scholarly knowledge.

Very interesting book, written by a giant in middle eastern studies. Anybody with a background in this area will thoroughly enjoy this book. His word usage is advanced and can be a bit confusing.

Hodgson's treatise on the Ismaili's was first published in 1955. While much has changed in scholarship around Near Eastern studies since then, *The Secret Order of Assassins* remains the seminal work on the topic. Beginning with a brief history on the early history of Islam, attention is quickly focused on the religious dogma of Isma'ilis and the confrontation between Fatimids and Seljuqs. For students of Islamic history, this is not new ground, and can be skipped; the real meat of the book (and the reason it warrants five stars) is Hodgson's discussion of the Nizari state and the policies, patterns and rationale behind the assassinations for which the sect is so well known. The historical details Hodgson provides and his analysis behind the actions of the sect are intriguing, arguing that (1) assassination arose as an all-out assault against the Seljuqs, but never was there an agenda to wipe out all Seljuqs; (2) the reputation of the Nizaris assassination and murder were common enough in the 11th century, the Nizaris falsely credited for many political murders they did not have an active role in; (3) the Sunnis were on possibly good terms with them much of the time, and (4) the Nizaris were destroyed not by Crusaders, but rather by the arriving Mongols. For the lay reader, there is little of interest here. However, for those studying medieval history, and especially those interested in Islamic history, this is a must-read - especially chapters 4, 5 and 6).

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