

*The Institute of Asian and African Studies
The Max Schloessinger Memorial Foundation*

Offprint from

JERUSALEM STUDIES IN
ARABIC AND ISLAM

33(2007)

Katia Cytryn-Silverman

REVIEW OF

P. Willey. *Eagle's Nest:
Ismaili Castles in Iran and Syria*

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM
THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

P. Willey. *Eagle's Nest: Ismaili Castles in Iran and Syria*. I.B. Tauris Publishers in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies. London, 2005. xxvii+321 pp., 3 maps, 16 color plates, 54 black and white illustrations (including 9 ground plans). ISBN (Hardback) 1850434646.

Eagle's Nest is a lively journal by an enthusiastic English explorer,¹ who has set as his goal in life the documentation of the remote Ismā'īlī fortifications in Iran and Syria, built — or re-built — by the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs, a Shī'ī sect also known as *al-Hashshīyya* or, as they are popularly called in the West — the Assassins (483/1090–654/1256).

The book is composed of sixteen chapters and four appendices, two of which are contributions by other scholars to the study of Ismā'īlī culture. Chapters 1 to 5 are a chronological account of the history of Ismā'īlism, from its inception (Chapter 1) to the Mongol conquest in the mid-thirteenth century (Chapter 5). The following chapters deal with the fortifications surveyed by the author: Chapter 6 is an introduction to the main concepts of the Ismā'īlīs' military architecture; Chapters 7 to 15 are arranged regionally, starting from the Alamūt valley and the area south of the Caspian Sea (Chapters 7–9), continuing eastwards to the area of Qā'ināt and Qūhistān (Chapters 10–11), then westwards to the area of Iṣfahān (Chapter 12), and finally discussing the fortifications at Jabal al-Summāq and Jabal Anṣāriyya (Jabal Bahrā') in Syria (Chapters 13–14). Willey also included a short account of his visit to Afghanistan and Pakistan, both to survey the remaining military structures of the Ismā'īlīs and also to visit Nāṣir-i Khusraw's tomb in Badakhshān in Afghanistan (Chapter 15). These descriptive chapters are followed by an epilogue (Chapter 16) and four appendices. The first two list the author's expeditions (Appendix I) and the sites surveyed (Appendix II). The last two include a discussion by R.A. Wade Haddon on the pottery of the period (Appendix III), as well as a catalogue of Ismā'īlī coins by H. Hamdan and A. Vardanyan (Appendix IV).

Willey's narrative style is rather reminiscent of westerners' travelogues to the East from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which the descriptions of sites were intermixed with references to historical facts and proposed identifications, as well as personal experiences. Though beasts of burden have been exchanged for Land-Rovers, Willey still manages to express the spirit of adventure underlying his missions, the geographical obstacles overcome and the different levels of interaction with the local populations.

This might make for interesting reading but those looking for a book on military architecture, a gazetteer of buildings or a summary of the

¹Peter Willey is today a lecturer on Middle East and Islamic Art at Bristol University (The Centre for Public Engagement).

Ismā‘īlī fortifications will not find a detailed description of every site. Despite having been the head of various expeditions to Iran and Syria from 1959 to 1998 (an activity interrupted between 1979 and 1995 due to the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath), Peter Willey is neither a trained surveyor nor an archaeologist, although he occasionally included professionals in his staff.² Willey’s descriptions are more those of an explorer, describing the various fortifications as he sees them, trying to connect their various features to given functions, as well as projecting into their grounds the various events of Ismā‘īlī history. His rendering of life in Alamūt is characteristic of his style (p. 53):

Life inside the castle would have been spartan and uncomfortable at the best of times. In winter the temperatures are always icy, with freezing gales blowing down from the snowy peaks of the Hawdeqan Range, surrounding the valley. In spite of the altitude, the summer months are hot and dusty, requiring the greatest vigilance for attacking forces. The castle itself would have been the center of continuous activity in all seasons. The water channels and cisterns had to be kept clean, the armourers were busy forging new weapons, the carpenters and masons constructing or maintaining mangonels, or repairing and enlarging the defences. The cooks were busy in the kitchens, replenishing the food stores and keeping them in good order. Study, learning and discussion filled the day for many, especially for those who aspired to become *dā‘īs*. The basic problem of Alamut castle, however, is one of space. The castle is just too small. Where could all this activity have taken place?

The historical background

The first five chapters of *Eagle’s Nest* are a survey of Ismā‘īlī history, starting from the beginning of Islam and culminating with the overthrow of the Ismā‘īlīs by the Mongols. It is derived mainly from M.G.S. Hodgson’s *The order of the Assassins* (The Hague, 1955) and F. Daftary’s *The*

²Tony Garnett was the team archaeologist in 1972 (referred to by Willey in p. 142, as well as by R.A. Wade Haddon in her appendix on the pottery from the Alamūt period, p. 279 ff.), but it is not clear which other expeditions, if any, he joined. Willey also refers to Elizabeth Beazley and Andrew Dobson’s work as surveyors (p. 211), but their contribution seems to have been limited to the expeditions to Khān Lanjān in 1965 (see below, note 6), as well as to Qal‘eh Dokhtar in the region of Qā‘in (p. 180).

Ismā'īlīs (Cambridge, 1990), but also refers to many other studies which have dealt with the topic (pp. xvi–xx).³

Despite neither adding new historical information to the history of Nizārī Ismā'īlism, nor referring directly to primary sources, Willey's accounts on the two central Nizārī leaders — Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ (d. 518/1124) and Rāshid al-Dīn Sinān (d. 588/1192 or 589/1193) — for example, read almost as an intimate account of a contemporary biographer. The superlatives used to describe the two leaders and their projects are endless:

He [Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ] must have a superb sense of audacity and timing, the absolute loyalty of his followers and conviction of his own invincibility, plus more than his fair share of luck — all qualities which Alexander and Napoleon demanded from their generals. Ḥasan's coup must count among the most daring and successful feats of military history [on Ḥasan's capture of Alamūt (p. 24)].

Perhaps there is no better illustration of Sinan's military and diplomatic genius than his response to the invasion of Syria by Saladin, who ended Fatimid rule in Egypt and was a zealous opponent of the Ismailis (p. 47).

Apart from presenting Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ's military talents, Willey took care to stress his positive and illustrious character: he was the one who rebuilt and improved the fortifications of Alamūt; developed the agriculture in its valley by introducing an extensive irrigation system, by terracing slopes and by planting trees (p. 27), and erected the famous library of Alamūt (p. 28), which was only to be destroyed by the Mongols (1256). Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ is never presented in a negative light, and his role as the leader of the Assassins, whose first victim was none other than the famous Saljūq vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 1092), is hardly emphasized (p. 29). Neither is his extreme asceticism, which even led to the reprimand

³Willey generally ignores B. Lewis's *The Assassins — a radical sect in Islam* (London, 1967). Even though preserving many of the old views on the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs, Lewis's popular book has been translated into many languages and widely distributed all over the world, and the impact of this work is clearly worthy of mention. Willey's omission may thus be part of his emotional approach to all those who had given the sect a bad name. This seems to be confirmed by Willey's remark (p. xix): "Of course, these legends were rooted in 'fear, hostility, ignorance and fantasy,' but what is astonishing is that they are still half-believed and popularized as fact by many who should know better. As the post-September 11 writings on the origins of political terrorism show, there is still quite a long way to go before the dross of seven centuries of myth and fiction is finally swept away." The only instance in which Lewis's book is clearly referred to by Willey is related to Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's precautions after being twice threatened by Sinān in the course of 1175–6 (p. 47).

and eventual execution of his two sons, brought forward (Daftary 1990, p. 367).⁴

Willey's statements and descriptions reflect an idealized vision of the Nizārī state, and flavor much of the book with a taste of a novel. Willey does not hide his wish to render his account partly in a romantic fashion. In fact, the second chapter, "Hasan Sabbah and the Ismailis of Iran," starts in a purely literary style (p. 21):

It was nearly noon on a hot day in the early summer of 1090. Mahdi, the lord of the castle of Alamut, was beginning to sweat a little. He had spent the last few weeks in Qazvin, a modest town some 60 km away in the Daylaman region of northern Iran (...). The lord of Alamut had arisen early that morning for the return to his castle so that he and his armed escort would not have to travel during the heat of the day. He was already past his prime and disliked traveling long distances on horseback. But today he quite enjoyed the long ride back to his castle over the foothills of the Alborz mountains. (...)

This style is certainly in great contrast to Daftary's academic rendering of the events (Daftary 1990, p. 339) which is based on 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā-Malik Juwaynī's *Ta'riḫ-i jahān gushāy* (697/1297).

Ismā'īlī castles in Iran

Of the many structures visited by Willey and discussed in his book, those which stand out are the major fortifications of Alamūt — the power center of the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs from the time of Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ; Maymūndiz — fortified under the rule of Kiyā Buzurg-Ummīd (d. 532/1138); Nevisar Shāh — for a while thought to be the site of Maymūndiz for its commanding position over the mountains to the east and the valley of Alamūt to the west; Lamasar in the Shāhrūd (west of the Alamūt valley) — seat of Buzurg-Ummīd until he was nominated as Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ's successor; Samiran — also west of Alamūt and interesting for its triple wall; Girdkūh in Qūmis — strongly fortified by the *ra'īs* Mu'ayyad al-Dīn Muẓaffar b. Aḥmad al-Mustawfī (from 489/1096 onwards), and the last

⁴With regard to assassination, Willey writes (p. 62): "Despite all the twists and turns of the Ismaili struggle and putting aside the mindless massacres, if we try to look objectively at the military tactics of Hasan Sabbah and Rashid al-Din Sinan, we must conclude that their use of assassination was ethically no worse or better than any other act of warfare."

fortification in Persia to surrender to the Mongols (669/1270); Qā'in in the Qūhistān — placed in a different topographic setting and of a different architectural approach, which Willey interpreted as indicating “that this fortress was primarily regarded more as an administrative and research center than a major military facility” (p. 176); Mu'minābād — also in the Qūhistān and of great historical importance, for being one of the two sites of the proclamation of the *Qiyāma* (Day of Resurrection, read by *ra'īs* Muẓaffar in the name of Ḥasan II in 559/1164) and Shāhanshāh — “a very large and complex structure, and certainly the most massive and capacious Ismaili fortress I [Willey] have seen” (p. 201).

The description of the above structures, and to a certain extent that of fortifications of lesser importance, includes reference to their topographic setting, ways of approach, their general outline, as well as remarks on the main evidence *in situ*. Nevertheless, such descriptions usually lack details and technical information. In addition, unlike Willey's first publication *The castle of the Assassins* (London, 1963), *Eagle's Nest* lacks good maps. In *The castle of the Assassins*, the area north of Qazwīn, between Rūdbār in the west and Alamūt on the east, is well mapped, allowing the reader to follow not only Willey's travels, but mainly to become acquainted with the geography and topography of the state of the Nizārīs and the positioning of their fortifications. A new and comprehensive study of the castles surveyed calls not only for the reproduction of this map, but also for the inclusion of similar ones relating to all the areas discussed — Khurāsān, Qūhistān, Khūzistān, as well as the area around Iṣfahān.

This holds true also for ground plans and photographs. The plans of the important fortifications of Alamūt and Lamasar in Daylamān, for example, repeat the “rapid sketches” already published in 1963 (Willey 1963, pp. 216–217, 275; 2005, pp. 111, 131). The photographs unfortunately do not complement the plans, as they are few in number and are usually too general.

The descriptive information on the sites poses further problems. The various building stages of the fortifications, for instance, are not pinpointed. There is some reference to Sasanian, early Islamic, as well as to post-Ismā'īlī (Mongol, Ṣafawī and Qājārī) activity, but those have rarely been clearly distinguished (p. 98).⁵ Without that basis for a compar-

⁵It seems worthwhile exploring the possibility that some of the fortifications were actually reconstructed over pre-Islamic fortresses and early Islamic frontier fortifications (*ribāṭāt*), referred to by the sources. See, for example, the various references to *huṣūn* and *ribāṭāt* in the regions of al-Daylām and Mashriq by al-Muqaddasī in *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aqālīm*, M.J. de Goeje, ed., *Bibliotheca geographorum Arabicorum* III (Leiden, 1906). The pre-Ismā'īlī activity detected in some of the sites explored by Willey calls for a careful study of the various toponyms found in the

ative and a typological work, it is difficult to understand what Willey means by “typical Ismā‘īlī architecture,” and to truly understand which basic elements he used to classify the many fortresses spread over Iran as ‘Ismā‘īlī fortresses’.⁶ Apart from water conduits, rock-cut cisterns, and great storerooms certainly built by the Nizārī Ismā‘īlīs, Willey provides no typology of the fortresses’ planning and/or construction style. Willey points to “five cardinal principles that governed the construction of all Ismaili castles” (p. 96), but they all refer to the choice of terrain on which the various fortifications were built, even though most of the structures referred to by his survey were in fact reconstructions of previous fortifications. In this case, those principles did not directly affect the Ismā‘īlī architects, but their predecessors. Having said that, the merits of the Ismā‘īlīs are notable, mainly for having developed, as noted by Willey, a “considerable experience in building and reinforcing castles in difficult terrain”, in areas deprived of skilled labour, as well as of difficult access to sources of building material (p. 97).

Ismā‘īlī castles in Syria

When describing the castles of Syria, shortcomings similar to those encountered in the survey of Iran are repeated, apart from the case of Maṣyāf, the usual headquarters of the chief leader of the Syrian Nizārīs, surveyed and published by M. Braune of the German Archaeological Institute in Damascus (pp. 226–227).⁷

sources, and their correlation to later site names.

⁶ It is clear that the task of distinguishing between the various building stages of these castles is a difficult one. Elizabeth Beazley and Andrew Dobson, professional surveyors, joined P. Willey in 1965 to explore the site of Khān Lanjān, later publishing their results in a joint article with Samuel M. Stern (S.M. Stern, E. Beazley, and A. Dobson, “The fortress of Khān Lanjān.” *Iran* 9 [1971]: 45–57). There the surveyors remark: “We were not involved in archaeological work but were simply exploring with the aim of making surface record. It is therefore not possible to date any of the buildings. . . .”

⁷M. Braune, *Untersuchungen zur mittelalterlichen Befestigung in Nordwest-Syrien: Die Assassinenburg Masyaf* (Damascus, 1985), reporting on his archaeological work in 1983 and 1984. Since 2000 the Aga Khan Development Network (Historic Cities Support Programme) has been working on the conservation and reconstruction of Maṣyāf’s citadel (only briefly mentioned by Willey in p. 221), parallel to archaeological works directed by Haytham ‘Alī Ḥasan (Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées de Syrie, DGAMS). Ḥasan’s excavations took place between 2001 and 2004, and are the basis of his doctoral thesis on Maṣyāf and the system of Ismā‘īlī castles (to be submitted at the Sorbonne, Paris). To this work we can also add a short note on the numismatic finds from Ḥasan’s excavations by S. Heidemann (“Münzfunde aus der Zitadelle von Masyaf / Syrien,” *Numismatisches Nachrichtenblatt* 55 (2006): 74–75).

The Ismāʿīlī castles of Syria, nevertheless, pose a different challenge. The need to refer to, and compare, Muslim and Crusader fortifications still standing, first and foremost to Crac des Chevaliers (Ḥiṣn al-Akrād), drove Willey to compare the merits of Crusader and Ismāʿīlī architects.⁸ In Chapter 6, “The Strategy of Ismaili Castles,” Willey writes the following on the Crusader castles of Syria (p. 90):

To an observer like myself, who has studied both Krak and the great Ismaili strongholds in Iran, it is evident that the Crusaders had far fewer problems to overcome in the construction of their castles than did the Ismailis. As we shall see, the Ismailis well understood how to build a defensive structure of great size and strength, capable of resisting long sieges and difficult to attack. The Crusader castles did not often have to withstand long sieges, while the Ismaili fortresses often held out against Saljuq and Mongol offensives for many months, and in the case of Gerdkuh for as long as 17 years. In fact, Alamut and other Ismaili fortresses in Rudbar were so strongly built with enormous provisions of food and weapons that, as Hodgson claims, they could have held against the Mongols indefinitely and thus should have been able to reach favourable accommodation short of surrender.

While a comparison between the two architectural approaches is definitely legitimate, Willey leaves the reader with two methodological questions:

1. To which degree can the Syrian Ismāʿīlī architectural approach be pinpointed in the absence of a professional study of the various stages of the fortifications? — a methodological problem already encountered in the rendering of the Iranian constructions;
2. Due to their different military challenges, as well as geographical settings, can the approaches of the Ismāʿīlīs and the Crusaders be compared? Would Frankish architects have achieved different results than those of the Ismāʿīlīs if challenged to build in the Alamūt

On the system of Ismāʿīlī fortifications in Syria, see also V. Vachon's “Les châteaux Ismāʿīliens du Djabal Bahrâ’,” in N. Faucherre, J. Mesqui and N. Prouteau, eds., *La fortification au temps des Croisades* (Rennes, 2004), pp. 219–241. I am grateful to Dr. S. Heidemann, from Jena University in Germany, for bringing these works on the Syrian fortifications to my attention.

⁸Perhaps the most emotional and personal comparison is that between Crac des Chevaliers and Nevisar Shāh in Iran (p. 122): “No other fortress, in my opinion, brings home so forcibly the utter determination and sheer genius of Ismaili military architecture. The construction of a Crusader castle, even as splendid as Krak des Chevaliers, is child’s play compared to Nevisar Shah...”

valley? Would Ismāʿīlī architects still have built as they did if offered better topographical conditions?

Of course any answer to the second question would be merely speculative. The choice of the Ismāʿīlīs to build their fortifications in almost impregnable terrains clearly resulted from the political and the military conditions in which they lived. In Willey's own words in Chapter 13, "Citadels of the Syrian Mountains — I," the Ismāʿīlīs were "hemmed in by the Mediterranean to the east and the great fertile plains of Syria to the south" (p. 217), leading them to positions in Jabal Bahrā' where the architects were successful in taking advantage of the inaccessibility of their castles.

Material culture of the Ismāʿīlī fortifications

Appendix III, "Ismaili Pottery from the Alamut Period" (pp. 277–287)⁹ was written by R.A. Wade Haddon of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Wade Haddon discusses the finds from seventeen of Willey's sites, based on the reports by the team's field archaeologist, Tony Garnett, as well as on the fragmentary collections kept at the British Museum and by Willey himself. Wade Haddon's efforts to gather further information on the material culture of the Ismāʿīlī fortifications are of note, but the sources of information are nevertheless limited.¹⁰

It is of course unfortunate that the pottery account refers to such a small portion of the ca. 150 sites which Willey explored.¹¹ This hinders

⁹It should be mentioned that to the present appendix we should add R. Pinder-Wilson's brief report on the pottery from Willey's early expeditions, found in *The castle of the Assassins* of 1963.

¹⁰Wade Haddon refers, for example, to a report found at the Cultural Heritage Central Archives in Tehran of a Japanese expedition to the Alamūt area in 1970 led by M. Honda, who passed away in 1991. The final results of that expedition were regrettably never published.

¹¹The pottery from Maymūdiz, for instance, is neither discussed in the appendix, nor illustrated by photographs, even though Willey refers to it in his account on that fortification (p. 119): "There was a lot of broken pottery on the ground, most of it plain, but we did find one almost undamaged and very fine cobalt blue ewer, probably dating from the 12th century, and a large slim, grey jug that may well have been used for storing grain..." The same with regard to some "good pottery shards, including gold lusterware" (p. 194) found at Sarbīsha, south of Birjand in Qūhīstān, and at Khān Lanjān, in the region south of Isfahān (p. 211). Willey writes: "The pottery we recovered on the site confirms that the most important occupation period of the castle was about 1100, when the Ismailis were known to be in possession of Shahdez. The earliest recovered pottery is 9th and 10th century, which again fits into the known pattern whereby the Ismailis took over an already existing castle and rebuilt or enlarged it."

any in-depth study of the pottery of the period, as well as any assessments dealing with typology and distribution.

Even an important find such as that of the pottery kilns at the village of Andij (between the fortifications of Maymūndiz and Nevisar Shāh, pp. 141–142) — discussed by Garnett in an article published in 1984–1985 and again by Wade Haddon (pp. 279–281) — loses part of its impact when the overall distribution of *Andej Wares* among the various castles and villages cannot be traced.¹²

Appendix IV, “Ismaili Coins from the Alamut Period,” by H. Hamdan and A. Vardanyan (pp. 288–307) is of a different nature than Wade Haddon’s study. It is not based on survey finds but is rather a catalogue of the coinage by the Nizārī Ismā‘īlīs known to date, and as such is of remarkable importance. Forty-three coins are reproduced, 35 of them in gold, ranging from 536 to 651 AH (1141 to 1253). The reader, nevertheless, is left wondering as to what was the nature of the coins seen by Willey and his travel partner A. Woodfine on the wrists of the villagers living at Naṣrābād in Qūhistān, and said to have been recovered, together with weapons and amber necklaces, at the fortress of Mu‘minābād, standing right above the village (p. 199).

The tomb of Nāṣir-i Khusraw

In addition to his travels in Iran and Syria (as well as to Baltit in Pakistan, pp. 255–261), Willey set off to visit the tomb of Nāṣir-i Khusraw in Badakhshān in Afghanistan. The author justified this digression from the main topic of the book as a kind of homage to this important Persian traveler, considered a saint by local Ismā‘īlīs. The shrine is described in some detail (pp. 253–254), together with the author’s itinerary and experiences.

Conclusion

Eagle’s Nest is a popular and accessible book on the Ismā‘īlīs and their ostensibly impregnable castles. The author brings forward information

¹²Willey also refers to a kiln site at Kay-Ghrobad (p. 124), in the Ṭāliqān valley to the east of Alamūt. His identification, nevertheless, is refuted by Wade Haddon, based on Garnett (p. 283). According to Garnett’s report, it consists of a fired pottery cistern.

on the many sites he explored, while sharing his knowledge — partly academic, partly based on accounts by locals — of Ismāʿīlī history. Willey's personal opinions, usually tending to be biased in the light of his passion for Ismāʿīlism, are interwoven in the text, along with his experiences during the trips, the unverified data provided by locals, and acknowledgments to staff and sponsors.

Eagle's Nest summarizes a survey by the author of ca. 150 castles (out of the more than 250 strongholds he counted; see p. xxiv), where he manages to render the sense of adventure of his various missions, his great enthusiasm regarding the magnitude of the various fortifications and their respective geographical settings, but he leaves the reader with little technical information.

Willey's account lacks a careful description of the sites, a crucial element in a study on art or architecture, be it of a single building or of a vast archaeological site. This is in contrast to his stated purpose, which was to describe as fully as possible the main castles and fortresses of the Ismāʿīlīs in Iran and Syria (p. xxiv).

The information drawn by first-hand analysis of surveyors and archaeologists is still irreplaceable.¹³ An example of a good analytic description is Robert W. Edwards' *The fortifications of Armenian Cilicia* (Washington, 1987), in which he deals with the same architectural category as Willey. In the case of the fortifications in Syria, but especially in Iran, a thorough display of data becomes even more fundamental, as most of the buildings under debate are located in remote and largely inaccessible areas.

Few are the Western explorers, let alone scholars, who have managed to penetrate the vast country of Iran and explore its remotest sites, as did Willey. He has brought forward the great archaeological potential of the Ismāʿīlī sites, leaving us waiting for an in-depth architectural and archaeological analysis.

Katia Cytryn-Silverman
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

¹³Photographic collections showing buildings, often in detail, are becoming available on internet sites. A good example of a professional architectural archive is that offered by *The Islamic Art Network*, <http://www.islamic-art.org>. The site enables scholars to study the numerous corners and details of various Cairene buildings, which are being systematically photographed and surveyed by the organization. A 'photo gallery' on the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī castles of Iran and Syria, including images from Peter Willey's archive, has been uploaded by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=105073). Nevertheless, this internet site lacks detailed pictures of the buildings surveyed.