



HASAN ŞABBĀḤ

HASAN ŞABBĀḤ, prominent Isma'ili *dā'i* (q.v.) and founder of the medieval Nezāri Isma'ili state (b. Qom, mid-440s/1050s, d. Alamut, 518/1124). Little information is available on the early life of Ḥasan Şabbāḥ, who was referred to as Sayyednā (our master) by his contemporary Nezāri Isma'ilis. The colorful story, according to which Ḥasan, Neẓām-al-Molk, and 'Omar Kayyām had made a pact when they were classmates in their youth under the same master at Nišābur, should be dismissed as a legend (see Rašid-al-Din, pp. 110-12; Kāšāni, pp. 146-48; Mirkvānd [Tehran], IV, pp. 199-204; Bowen, 1931, pp. 771-82). The events of Ḥasan's career as the first ruler of Alamut (q.v.) are better documented; these events were recorded in the *Sargodāšt-e Sayyednā*, the first part of which may have been autobiographical. Although this chronicle, which marked the initiation of a Nezāri tradition of historiography in Persia during the Alamut period, has not survived, it was used extensively by Jovayni, Rašid-al-Din, and Abu'l-Qāsem Kāšāni, who are the chief authorities on Ḥasan's life and career (see Daftary, 1992, pp. 91-97).

Ḥasan Şabbāḥ was born in Qom into a Twelver Shi'ite family. His father, 'Ali b. Moḥammad b. Ja'far al-Şabbāḥ al-Ḥemyari, a Kufan claiming Ḥemyari Yemenite origins, had migrated from Kufa to Qom. Subsequently, the Şabbāḥ family settled down in Ray, where the youthful Ḥasan received his early religious education (in the Twelver Shi'ite tradition). It was at Ray, a center of Isma'ili activities since the middle of the 3rd/9th century, that Ḥasan was introduced to their teachings by Amira Żarrāb, a local Isma'ili *dā'i*. Later, Ḥasan learnt more about Isma'ili doctrines from Abu Naşr Sarrāj and other



dā'is in Ray, and consequently, after having just turned seventeen, Ḥasan converted to Isma'īlism and took the oath of allegiance (*'ahd*) to the Isma'īli imam of the time, the Fatimid Caliph al-Mostanşer (427-87/1036-94).

In Ramazān 464/May-June 1072, the newly initiated Ḥasan managed to impress 'Abd-al-Malek b. 'Aṭṭāš, the chief Isma'īli *dā'i* in the Saljuq territories, to such an extent that he appointed him to a position in the *da'wa* (mission) organization. In 467/1074-75, Ḥasan accompanied Ebn 'Aṭṭāš to Isfahan, the secret headquarters of the Isma'īli *da'wa* in Persia, where he stayed until 469/1076-77, when, on instructions from Ebn 'Aṭṭāš, he left for Cairo to further his Isma'īli education. Ḥasan reached Egypt in Şafar 471/August 1078 and spent three years there, first in Cairo and then in Alexandria, before returning to Isfahan. Almost nothing is known about Ḥasan's experiences in Egypt. According to the lost Nezāri chronicles used by Persian historians, while in Egypt he clashed with the Fatimid vizier Badr-al-Jamāli, who at that time had just succeeded al-Mo'ayyad fi'l-Din Şi-rāzi as the chief *dā'i* (*dā'i al-do'āt*). Whether or not this conflict revolved around Ḥasan's support for Nezār, al-Mostanşer's heir-designate, who was eventually deprived of succession to the Fatimid caliphate by Badr al-Jamāli's own son and successor al-Afzal, Ḥasan was eventually banished from Egypt on Badr's instructions. He returned to Isfahan in Du'l-ḥejja 473/June 1081.

Ḥasan's subsequent travels over several years in the service of the *da'wa* and to evaluate the military strength of the Saljuqs were limited to different localities in Persia. It was during this period that he formulated his own revolutionary strategy against the Saljuqs. By around 480/1087, Ḥasan was concentrating his efforts on the region of Deylam, which was a stronghold of Shi'ism remote from the centers of Saljuq control. He targeted for his headquarters the fortress of Alamut, located in the central Alborz mountains of the Rudbār region. Ḥasan, who soon became the *dā'i* of Deylam, reinvigorated the *da'wa* activities in northern Persia and finally seized Alamut in 483/1090 by a clever plan of infiltration. This signaled the commencement of the Persian Isma'īlis' open revolt against the Saljuqs and also effectively marked the foundation of what was to become the Nezāri Isma'īli state of Persia. Ḥasan made the fortress impregnable, and improved the cultivation and irrigation systems of the Alamut valley to make it self-sufficient in food production. Similar policies were later implemented in connection with other major Isma'īli strongholds. Ḥasan also established an important library at Alamut, whose collections of manuscripts and scientific instruments had



grown to impressive proportions by the time the Mongols destroyed the fortress in 654/1256.

Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ seems to have had a complex set of religio-political motives for his revolt against the Saljuqs. As an Isma'ili Shi'ite, he could not have tolerated the ardently Sunni Saljuq Turks' attacks on Shi'ism and their aim to uproot the Fatimid caliphate. Ḥasan's revolt was perhaps also an expression of the Persians' resentment of the Saljuq Turks, since they accounted for a large proportion of the early popular support he received. Ḥasan himself is reported to have said that the Turks were jinn and not men, descendants of Adam (Ivanow, 1933, p. 30 [*Haft bāb-e Bābā Sayyednā*]; Rašid-al-Din, p. 112; Kāšāni, p. 148). It was also as an assertion of his ethnic identity that, in spite of his Islamic piety, Ḥasan took the unprecedented step of replacing Arabic with Persian as the religious language of the Isma'ilis of Persia.

After firmly establishing himself at Alamut, Ḥasan extended his influence in the region by winning more converts, taking over more strongholds in Rudbār, and building new fortresses wherever he found a suitable location. Alamut was soon raided by the forces of the nearest Saljuq emir, marking the initiation of an endless series of Saljuq-Isma'ili military clashes. In 484/1091, Ḥasan sent the *dā'ī* Ḥosayn Qā'eni to his native land in southeastern Khorasan to mobilize support there. The early success of the Isma'ilis of Qohestān soon erupted into a popular uprising seeking independence from the oppressive Saljuqs. The Isma'ilis thus seized control of several towns in Qohestān, which became another region, along with Rudbār, for their activities. In this way, in less than two years after the capture of Alamut, Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ had founded an independent territorial state for the Persian Isma'ilis in the midst of the Saljuq sultanate.

In 485/1092, major Saljuq expeditions were dispatched against the Isma'ilis in both Rudbār and Qohestān, but these operations came to a halt later in the same year on the assassination of the all-powerful Saljuq vizier Neẓām-al-Molk, followed by Sultan Malek-šāh's death a few weeks later. Taking advantage of the prolonged disorder and the rivalries in the Saljuq camp after Malek-šāh's demise, Ḥasan consolidated and extended his power in Rudbār, where he seized the strategically located fortress of Lammasar (Lanbasar) to the west of Alamut. The Persian Isma'ilis now also captured a number of strongholds, including Gerdkuh (q.v.), near Dāmḡān, as well as in Arrajān (q.v.), the border region between Kūzestān and Fārs.



By this time, the revolt of the Persian Ismaʿilis against the Saljuqs had already acquired its distinctive pattern and methods of struggle designed by Ḥasan himself; in view of the decentralized nature of political and military power in the Saljuq sultanate, Ḥasan's plan was to uproot the Turks one by one from their separate strongholds by sending instructions from Alamut to his followers in each locality. He is famed for his decision to use assassination as an effective technique of struggle against the decentralized Saljuq opposition with its vastly superior military strength. This policy soon became identified with the Nezāri Ismaʿilis in an exaggerated manner, even though it had been adopted by many before them as well as their contemporaries. The actual Nezāri assassinations of their prominent enemies were carried out by their *fedā'is* (q.v.; self-sacrificing devotees), and they were countered by massacres of Ismaʿilis.

The dispute over the succession to the Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Mostaṣfer, who died in 487/1094, led to a permanent schism, splitting the Ismaʿilis into rival Nezāri and Mostaʿli factions. Ḥasan Şabbāḥ, who was by then the undisputed leader of the Persian Ismaʿilis and had already adopted an independent policy, supported the cause of Nezār, al-Mostaṣfer's eldest son and designated successor, who had nonetheless been denied the Fatimid caliphate. Recognizing Nezār as his father's successor to the Ismaʿili Imamate, Ḥasan now severed his ties with the Fatimid regime and the Ismaʿili *da'wa* headquarters in Cairo, which had transferred their own allegiance to Nezār's younger brother, appointing him to the Fatimid caliphate with the title of al-Mostaʿli. Ḥasan Şabbāḥ had now in effect founded an independent Nezāri Ismaʿili *da'wa*, and his decision to support Nezār's cause was endorsed by all the Ismaʿilis of Persia and Iraq, who came to be known as the Nezāriya.

From the early years of the 6th/12th century, Ḥasan began to send *dā'is* from Alamut to Syria to propagate the Nezāri *da'wa*. As a result of the activities of these *dā'is* an expanding Nezāri community soon emerged in Syria which eventually became the sole representation of Ismaʿilis there. However, almost half a century of continuous efforts were needed before the Nezāris could gain possession of a group of permanent strongholds in central Syria, which then amounted to a subsidiary of the Nezāri state in Persia.

After Nezār was killed in Cairo in 488/1095, the Nezāri Ismaʿilis were left without an accessible Imam. Indeed, Nezār's own name and caliphal title (*al-Moṣṭafā le-Din-Allāh*) continued to be mentioned for almost seventy years after his death on coins struck at Alamut (see Miles, 1972, pp. 155-62). In the absence



of a manifest Imam, Ḥasan himself served as the supreme head of the Nezāri *da'wa* and state, with the rank of *ḥojja* (chief representative of the hidden Imam). The Nezāri Imam was to return some four decades after Ḥasan's own death (see Ivanow, 1933 [*Haft bāb-e Bābā Sayyednā*], p. 21; Ṭusi, 1950, text p. 148, tr. p. 173; Qohestāni, 1959, text pp. 23, 43).

Outsiders from early on gained the impression that the movement of the Persian Isma'ilis led by Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ represented a new teaching, and it became designated as the “new preaching” (*al-da'wa al-jadida*) in contradistinction to the “old preaching” (*al-da'wa al-qadima*) of the Fatimid Isma'ilis. However, the “new preaching” was no more than the reformulation of the established Shi'ite doctrine of *ta'lim* (authoritative instruction). This doctrine was restated more vigorously by Ḥasan in a Persian treatise entitled *Čahār faṣl*, “The Four Chapters” (Ara-bic: *al-Foṣul al-arba'a*), which, although not extant, has been preserved fragmentarily by, amongst others, his contemporary Abu'l-Faṭḥ Šahrestāni (d. 548/1153), who may have been a crypto-Isma'ili (see Šahrestāni, 1968, II, pp. 195-98; idem, 1984, pp. 165, 167-70; Joveyni, 1912-37, III, pp. 195-99; idem, 1958, II, pp. 671-73; Rašid-al-Din, pp. 105-7; Kāšāni, pp. 142-43). In a series of four propositions Ḥasan argued for the inadequacy of human reason in knowing God and for the necessity of an authoritative teacher (*mo'allem-e šādeq*) as the spiritual guide of men, who would be none other than the Isma'ili Imam of the time. Henceforth, the Persian Nezāris became known also as the Ta'limiya. The anti-Isma'ili polemics of the contemporary Sunni establishment, led by Moḥammad Ġazāli and endorsed by Neẓām-al-Molk, were focused directly against this doctrine of *ta'lim*, which served as the central teaching of the Nezāri Isma'ilis.

The fortunes of the Persian Isma'ilis continued to rise in Barkyāroq's reign (487-98/1094-1105), when they achieved new gains closer to the seat of Saljuq power in Isfahan, seizing the fortress of Šāhdez, also known as Dezkuh (q.v.). Having grown weary of the general threat of the Isma'ilis to Saljuq rule, Barkyāroq and Sanjar now agreed to check, in their respective territories, the rising power of the Isma'ilis. This strategy was more effectively pursued, however, by Moḥammad Tapar (498-511/1105-18) who, in 503/1109, initiated a major and prolonged campaign against Alamut itself. Ḥasan's defense of Alamut during this period amazed the Saljuqs, who failed to take the fortress by assault or attrition despite their superior military power. By the time of Moḥammad Tapar's death, Saljuq-Isma'ili relations had entered a new phase of stalemate, with the Persian Isma'ilis successfully defending important



territories, including mountain strongholds, villages, and towns in Rudbār, Qohestān, and Kumeš (Arabic: Qumes). Although Ḥasan Şabbāḥ had failed to uproot the Saljuqs, he did succeed in founding both a state and the independent Nezāri Ismaʿīli *daʿwa*, which survived the downfall of the Nezāri state.

An organizer and a political strategist of the highest caliber, Ḥasan Şabbāḥ was at the same time a trained theologian. He led an austere life and is said to have observed the *şariʿa* very strictly himself as well as imposing it on his Nezāri community: equally strict with friend and foe, he had both his sons executed, one for alleged murder, the other on suspicion of drinking wine. He is also said to have sent his wife and daughters away permanently to Gerdkuh, where they were forced to earn a living by spinning. The Persian historians relate that during all the thirty-four years that Ḥasan lived at Alamut he never descended from the castle. Rašid-al-Din (pp. 133-34) reports that he spent most of his time inside his personal quarters reading books, committing the teachings of the *daʿwa* to writing, and administering the affairs of his realm.

When he sensed that he was reaching the end of his life, Ḥasan summoned Kiā Bozorg-Omid, his capable lieutenant at Lammasar, and designated him as his successor in Alamut. He died, after a brief illness, on 26 Rabiʿ II 518/12 June 1124 (or possibly twenty days earlier), and was buried near Alamut. Ḥasan Şabbāḥ's mausoleum was regularly visited as a shrine by the Nezāri Ismaʿīlis until it was demolished by the Mongols in 654/1256.

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