



STERN, SAMUEL MIKLOS

STERN, SAMUEL MIKLOS (b. Tab, 22 November 1920; d. Oxford, 29 October 1969), Hungarian-British orientalist and a leading scholar of modern *Ismaʿili* studies. He was born in Tab, a small town in Hungary, and was the only son of his orthodox Jewish parents. Stern's father died when he was three years old, and it was to his mother that he owed his solid foundation in Hebrew learning. She taught him to read Hebrew before he could read the Latin alphabet. Although he later lost his early religious beliefs, he remained attached to the Jewish community.

Stern completed his early education in a Benedictine school and then attended a gymnasium affiliated to a Jewish theological seminary in Budapest, where he received a classical education in Greek and Latin. At the age of sixteen, Stern had already started to learn Arabic on his own, a language he later proficiently mastered. In 1939, when Hungary was threatened by Nazi Germany, Stern's mother sent him to Palestine; she herself would perish in the Nazi persecutions. In Palestine, Stern studied Arabic, Hebrew, and Romance languages at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Later, he also learned Persian and Turkish as well as a variety of European languages. One of his early teachers in Jerusalem was the Arabist David H. Baneth (1893-1973), who was very impressed by this young Hungarian student (Walzer, p. 3). Stern's other main teachers in Jerusalem, who influenced his intellectual development, included the Semiticist Hans J. Polotsky (1905-91), the philosopher Leon Roth (1896-63), the historian of Islamic philosophy Julius Guttman (1880-1950), and Hiram Pflaum-Peri (1900-1962), professor of



Romance languages and literature, a field that became significant in Stern's early contributions to Hispano-Arabic poetry. While studying in Jerusalem, Stern also met and established a lifelong friendship with the historian Shelomo/Solomon Dov Goitein (1900-1985), who kindled his interest in Islamic history and documents.

Stern's studies in Jerusalem were interrupted by three years of war service in the office of the British censor in the Near East, initially in Baghdad and then, for two years, in Port Sudan (Walzer, p. 3). During the years in Sudan, while on a visit to Cairo, Stern made the acquaintance of Paul Kraus (1904-1944), the Czech orientalist, who kindled Stern's interest in early Isma'ism, another one of his major fields of enquiry. On the termination of World War II, Stern returned to Jerusalem and completed his studies there.

In 1948, Stern arrived in Oxford to pursue postgraduate studies at St. Catherine's College, under the supervision of Sir Hamilton A. R. Gibb (1895-1971), the eminent British orientalist and the then Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford. In 1950, he completed his doctoral thesis on the Hispano-Arabic *strophic poetry* of Muslim Spain, entitled "The Old Andalusian *Muwashshah*," a highly original work revealing many lines of the earliest Spanish lyric poetry in the refrains of Arabic and Hebrew strophic poems. Stern's thesis examiners included the Iranist *Arthur J. Arberry* (1905-1969). His thesis was published in an abridged version, posthumously in 1974, under the title of *Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry*, together with several of his articles on that subject.

In 1951, Stern was appointed assistant editor of the new (second) edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, a post he held until 1956, having meticulously seen pp. 1-320 of the first volume of this work of reference through the press. During 1956-57, he served briefly as Assistant Keeper of Oriental coins at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. In 1958, Stern, who had meanwhile acquired British citizenship, was given a permanent position at Oxford as a research fellow at All Soul's College. In 1964, Stern also became a university lecturer in the history of Islamic civilization and was entrusted with tutoring students at Oxford's Faculty of Oriental Studies. In his last year at Oxford, he had twelve research students under his supervision, including Etan Kohlberg, the future professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Stern remained very faithful to Oxford. During his years there, he accepted short-term invitations to lecture at a number of universities, but he



categorically declined permanent appointments at many such institutions, including Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania. In Oxford, Stern shared a house for twenty years with Professor Richard Walzer (1900-1975) and his wife Sofie, who remained his main companions and occasional academic collaborators. Samuel Stern died in October 1969, as a result of a severe asthmatic attack, a few weeks before his forty-ninth birthday. He had bequeathed his library to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Stern was an indefatigable scholar, attentively collecting and assessing the available information on a specific topic before formulating his own original conclusions. Adopting sound philological methods, he handled his sources carefully. As a result of his particular research methods, including periodic revisions of his ideas on a subject of inquiry, Stern discovered a variety of new primary sources while putting forward new interpretations based on already known sources. Stern was a prolific scholar and produced a remarkable body of works in a relatively short period of time, covering an impressive variety of fields. However, his chief areas of interest throughout his academic career were, as noted, the Arabic and Hebrew poetry of Muslim Spain; Ismaʿili studies, especially early Ismaʿilism and [Fatimid](#) history; Islamic philosophy and its Greek antecedents; and Islamic documents and coins. Stern had some 265 publications to his credit, including a small number of books (see Latham and Mitchell, pp. 226-38; repr. with additions, in his *Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry*, pp. 231-45).

The roots of Stern's scholarship may be traced to his formative years in Budapest and Jerusalem, and the lasting influences of two eminent orientalist, his compatriot Ignáz Goldziher (1850-1921) and the German pioneer of modern Islamic studies, [Julius Wellhausen](#) (1844-1918). In the final years of his life, Stern edited and co-translated (with C. R. Barber) Goldziher's perennial work on early Islam, *Muhammedanische Studien*, as *Muslim Studies*, in two volumes. He also initiated the project on an English translation of Wellhausen's seminal work on early Islamic factions, *Die religiös-politischen Oppositionsparteien im alten Islam*, but he did not live to participate in it.

Stern maintained a lifelong interest in Ismaʿili studies, from the time he met Paul Kraus and wrote his first English article in 1946, whilst still in Sudan, on the identity of the anonymous authors, the so-called [Ekwān al-Ṣafāʾ](#), who produced their corpus of fifty-two encyclopedic *Rasāʾel*, commonly translated as the "Epistles of the Sincere Brethren." In line with his research



methodology, he returned to this subject again in 1964 with further new ideas based on additional sources. He studied this work in the context of early Ismaʿilism. A few years earlier, in 1959, Stern had formulated his own groundbreaking ideas on the early Ismaʿili missionary activities (*daʿwa*) in a paper entitled “Ismāʿīlīs and Qarmaṭians” read to a colloquium at Strasbourg. In fact, Stern and Wilferd Madelung were the first Western scholars who correctly recognized the nature of the early Ismaʿili movement. They argued for the existence of a unified movement before its split in 286/899 into rival Ismaʿili and Qarmaṭi (*Carmatian*) factions.

Stern’s interest in Ismaʿili studies received a significant boost in his final years as a result of his friendship with a prominent Ismaʿili Bohrā scholar, Ḥātem Ḥamid-al-Din, who had settled in Oxford. Ḥamid-al-Din was one of the brothers of Moḥammad Borhān-al-Din (d. 2014), the contemporary chief *dāʿī* of the Dāʿudi Ṭayyebi Ismaʿili Bohrās, and had a vast collection of Ismaʿili manuscripts at his disposal. Thus, Stern had found access to some of these manuscript sources that led his scholarship to an entirely different level. However, as in his other fields of interest, Stern’s Ismaʿili scholarship remained unfinished. He never completed a book on the early Ismaʿilis, on which he had been working intermittently for many years. But several chapters of this work were found among his papers, including one reconstructing the early *cosmology* of the Ismaʿilis; and they were published posthumously together with reprints of seven of his articles, under the title of *Studies in Early Ismāʿīlism*.

In one of his major Ismaʿili articles, “Early Ismāʿīlī Missionaries ...,” published in 1960, Stern shed light on the initiation of the Ismaʿili *daʿwa* in Persia and Transoxania, drawing on a range of hitherto-unused Arabic and Persian sources. In 1961, while visiting Iran, Stern presented a shorter version of the same article in a lecture delivered at the University of Tehran. On that occasion, Stern also visited the Ismaʿili castles of the Isfahan region, including the fortress of Ḳān Lanjān, and wrote a full historical account of the site, which was published posthumously in 1971 in the journal *Iran* (pp. 45-53). Earlier, in 1959, Stern had encouraged Peter Willey (1922-2009) to organize and lead an expedition from Oxford to explore the Ismaʿili castles of northern Iran, including *Alamut*; Stern himself acted as the historical adviser to this group (Willey, 2005, pp. xx–xxi, xxv, 115, 168, 212). The findings of this expedition, the first of its kind, appeared under the title of *The Castles of the Assassins*, and Willey went on to become the foremost expert in the field.



From early on, Stern's interest in Isma'ili studies also extended to Fatimid history and archival materials. In particular, he clarified aspects of the confusing final decades of this Isma'ili dynasty, when the Mosta'lian branch of Isma'ilism itself split into Ḥāfeẓi and Ṭayyebi factions (see his "The Succession to the Fatimid Imam al-Āmir ..."). He also discovered and studied numerous Fatimid documents belonging to the so-called Geniza collection of papers, now housed chiefly at Cambridge University Library, or those issued to the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, among others. The results of these archival studies appeared in a book entitled *Fāṭimid Decrees* (1964), as well as in several articles. He also studied a variety of Ayyubid and other Islamic documents. Stern made lasting contributions to all his other areas of scholarship, including Islamic history, philosophy, and numismatics. The bulk of his writings on the intellectual and cultural history of mediaeval Islam were collected and reprinted in three *Variorum Collected Studies Series* (published in 1983, 1984 and 1986).

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