

# THE SONG OF THE NIGHTINGALE

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

On 16 August 2011, while browsing in a second-hand bookshop in Vancouver, I came across a book by that pioneering historian of the Middle East, the Duke of Sermoneta, Leone Caetani. Entitled *Il manoscritto di Jafar bin Mahdi tradotto in italiano dalla versione araba di al-Maqrizi* (Milan: Casa Editrice Hoepli, 1905), the book claimed to reproduce faithfully a fifteenth-century manuscript that was itself an Arabic translation of a Persian text composed in 1145. Caetani had apparently come across the Arabic manuscript while cataloguing a library in Cairo, and it had immediately piqued his interest for the light it threw on the hitherto somewhat mysterious origins of the so-called Assassins. The Arabic translator did not, unfortunately, give any clues as to how the original Persian manuscript had miraculously survived the destruction of the Alamut library by the Mongols in 1256. Indeed, Caetani noted in his introduction that it was, to the best of his knowledge, the only literary work to have escaped that tragic cataclysm.

This scholarly discovery (mine, that is – the third in chronological order) entertained me while I was in Vancouver, where I was attending an otherwise tiresome academic conference on translating Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In a state of intellectual excitement, I read with fascination the terrible story of Jafar bin Mahdi, and, in a whirlwind burst of energy, I completed a rough translation while sitting through a series of lacklustre talks.

Unfortunately, my luggage was lost somewhere between Vancouver and Heathrow, and with it my copy of Caetani's remarkable book. And so I was left with my rough translation, without the possibility of going back over the original at greater leisure, as I had planned to do once I was back in England.

A few months later, I tried to obtain another copy of Caetani's book, but I could not find it listed in any of the numerous university libraries I consulted. Nor, after an exhaustive search of Caetani's *Annali dell' Islam*, could I find any mention of either the original Persian manuscript nor of the Arabic translation. I began to think I might have encountered a forgery.

If something new had not occurred, I may never have ventured to publish this book; but then, in 2015, I chanced upon some curious historical references while perusing a critical edition of Sir Henry Yule's translation of *The Travels of Marco Polo*. While dismissing the highly distorted and absurd accounts of the Assassins in Western literature, a long footnote mentioned several facts about Hasan-i Sabbah that dovetailed perfectly with the account in Caetani's volume. I concluded that both the author of the footnote and whoever wrote the mysterious lost book (whether Caetani or an impostor) must have had access to the same source, though whether that was itself a genuine document or a hoax remained unclear to me. Appropriately enough, the footnote also mentioned that the Assassin legends found in Marco Polo's travelogue may themselves have been inserted, as a digressionary note, by Rustichello of Pisa, the Italian romance writer who was responsible for committing the account of Marco Polo's travels to writing. We cannot be sure of this, for the original version of Marco Polo's

travelogue, written by Rustichello in a peculiar form of old French mixed with Italian, has itself never been recovered.

This esoteric footnote sent me scurrying back to my hurried translation, which filled several black Moleskine notebooks, whose distinguished pedigree the manufacturer likes to remind us of in those cute little paper inserts, and which were revived by a small Milanese publisher in 1997. In the absence of Caetani's Italian version, I have been unable to verify the accuracy of my translation, and so I present it more or less unchanged, with the exception of a few stylistic modifications which I shall now briefly describe.

First of all, I have simplified Caetani's somewhat baroque style which is no longer fashionable and would look distinctly pompous in English. There is also the fact that the Arabic translation from which Caetani supposedly worked seems to have embellished the Persian original, for there are occasional references to facts that could not possibly have been known to someone writing in twelfth century Persia. Caetani himself, in translating the Arabic, also seems to have taken certain liberties, and not only stylistic ones.

Finally, there was also the question of how to treat the large number of expressions which Caetani renders in transliterated Arabic. If I were to retain all of these, the result would be off-putting to the casual reader who is unversed in Islamic thought; and yet if I were to render them all in English, the reader might miss some important semantic connections. I have therefore plumped for a middle way, retaining the transliterated Arabic forms of certain particularly key terms in brackets following the English translation thereof. Thus I have rendered *al-dawa al-hadiya* always as "the rightly guiding mission," in English, without further ado, while appending the transliterated *aya* in brackets each time I have translated it, since it may be translated sometimes as "sign" (in the sense that a rainbow is a sign of God's mercy, and a footprint is a sign that someone has recently passed by), and at others times as "verse" (in the sense of a numbered line in the Qur'an). Whenever Jafar cites a verse (*aya*) from the Qur'an, I give the reference in square brackets, as in [24:35], which refers to chapter (*sura*) 24, verse (*aya*) 35. To assist those readers who are unfamiliar with Arabic, I have appended a brief glossary.

Jafar's manuscript is divided into seven days, and each day into periods corresponding to the five daily prayers that are obligatory for all Muslims. Since the precise timing of these prayers varies by place and season, and the events that Jafar describes took place in the first week of Rajab, 483 AH (which corresponds roughly to the first week of September, 1090 AD), in the Castle of Alamut (which is about 60 miles south of modern day Tehran), I believe the following schedule is credible:

|                |       |
|----------------|-------|
| <i>Fajr</i>    | 07.00 |
| <i>Dhuhr</i>   | 14.30 |
| <i>Asr</i>     | 16.30 |
| <i>Maghrib</i> | 18.30 |
| <i>Isha</i>    | 20.30 |

This calculation is based on the fact that in that part of Iran at the beginning of September, the sun rises around ... AM and sets around .... PM.

At the time when the events described here took place, Iran was ruled by the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. However, the Caliph ruled in name only; real power lay with the Seljuk Sultan and his two Viziers. This vast Sunni empire stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean to mountains of the Hindu Kush, and from the Aral Sea to the Persian Gulf. But even in its heyday the Seljuk Sultanate did not embrace the whole Islamic world. Half of Spain was ruled by a patchwork of Islamic kingdoms, while Egypt was ruled by the Fatimid Caliphs from Cairo. Unlike the Seljuks, the Fatimids were Shiites, and the theological differences between these rival dynasties form an important backdrop to Jafar's narrative.

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to give a full account of these differences, so I will limit myself to a few brief remarks for the benefit of those readers who are entirely unfamiliar with this, the most important schism in the history of Islam.

The origin of this division can be traced to the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 11 AH (632 AD), which confronted the nascent Islamic community (*umma*) with its first major crisis. According to the Sunni view, the Prophet had failed to designate a successor, and it therefore fell to the community to elect a new leader. Amidst much debate, the Prophet's father-in-law Abu Bakr was elected, and became the first Caliph (from the Arabic *khalifa*, meaning deputy). According to the Shiite view, however, the Prophet *had* designated a successor – his son-in-law Ali – and by electing Abu Bakr as the first Caliph the Muslim community had disregarded this sacred command.

Now, the question as to whether Abu Bakr or Ali should have succeeded the Prophet as the new leader of the Islamic community might appear at first blush to be a rather trivial matter, but in fact it turns out to have significant implications for a whole range of religio-political issues, and above all for the very nature of authority in Islam. By endorsing the succession of Abu Bakr and subsequent Caliphs, the Sunnis showed themselves to be more accepting of the status quo. By questioning the succession of Abu Bakr, however, the Shia evinced from the start a revolutionary tendency that looked to the establishment of new orders and alternative leadership structures. The election of Abu Bakr may have given him temporal power as Caliph, but for the Shia spiritual authority remained with Ali and his descendants, the Imams. Whereas for Sunnis the Caliph enjoyed both temporal and spiritual authority merely in virtue of his position as Caliph, such a happy conjunction could only exist in the Shiite mind if the Caliph also happened to be an Imam.

Over the following centuries, the Shia themselves subdivided into a number of major communities, notably the Twelvers, the Ismailis, and the Zaydis, as well as several minor groupings. The Fatimids, for example, were Ismailis, while Jafar's father, the Lord of Alamut Castle, was a Zaydi. Given the location of Alamut, in the midst of a vast Sunni empire, this might have posed a problem for Jafar's father, were it not for the fact that the Zaydi Shiites had become, by the time of the events described here, as conservative as their Sunni overlords. Hence Jafar's father was quite happy to assist the Seljuk Sultan in his campaign to eradicate the fifth column of Ismaili missionaries who were regarded by the Seljuks as something akin to terrorists. The Ismaili movement had, from the very beginning, paid particular attention to social grievances and inequities and, as such, it acquired the character of a movement of social protest, posing a serious threat to the established order. Charismatic

missionaries known as *dai* spread the Ismaili gospel among the underprivileged classes, for whom the idea that a messiah would soon appear to establish the rule of justice was particularly appealing, and the movement gained an increasing number of adherents despite repeated attempts to stamp it out.

It is this phenomenon that gives me one reason for publishing my English version of an otherwise obscure work written in Persian in the middle of the twelfth century. If the manuscript of Jafar bin Mahdi, so far removed in time and worldview from my likely readership, possesses any relevance for our present day, it is surely in the light it may throw on that process described, somewhat vaguely, as “radicalisation.” In the end, however, my main reason for publishing this book is merely a desire to convey an exciting story, in the hope that it may give the reader some narrative pleasure.

William Baskerville  
Oxford, 5 January 2017

## SHIA NOVEL PROLOGUE

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful.*

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of all the Worlds, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful, King of the Day of Judgment. It is you whom we worship, and it is you in whom we seek help. Guide us on the straight path – the path of those on whom you bestow your favours, not of those on whom you vent your anger and of those who go astray.

Now that I approach the end of my life in this world, to await in darkness that day when we shall all be raised from dead to receive our final judgment, I have decided to commit to writing my memory of those terrible and wondrous events that I happened to observe in my youth, recording exactly all that I saw and heard, so that the signs (*ayat*) I was privileged to witness may also guide those who come after me – unless, that is, the last hour should arrive first and render my words redundant.

May Allah grant me the power to do justice to those happenings that took place in that fateful week, 483 years after the Prophet, Peace be upon Him, emigrated and found refuge in the holy city that now bears his name. In those days, when the Imam did not have to hide from his enemies in remote and forbidding mountains, but commanded an empire from a palace in Cairo; before the wicked usurper Al-Mustaali stole his throne at the behest of that foul son of Shaytan, Al-Afdal, and the name of Al-Ghazali was barely a rumour on the horizon; before our holy community was besmirched by that foul epithet, *hashishiyya*; before the City of the Night Journey fell into the hands of the Franj, and the Furthest Mosque was desecrated by the polytheists – in those blessed days, indeed, it seemed that the sun would shine forever. But every day is followed by a night, and now we must work in the shadows, while our enemies spread lies and the Theatre of War (*Dar al-Harb*) encroaches ever further on the Realm of Peace (*Dar al-Islam*). Were it not for the impregnable fortresses in which we shelter, spread out like distant oases across a wasteland of heresy and unbelief, who knows what

might have become of the light that the descendants of Ali have, like men in underground caverns who pass a torch from one to another, handed down to us in one continuous line?

But I am getting ahead of myself. For when the events I am about to recount took place I was merely a boy of twelve, ignorant of the truth and unaware even of my own captivity. It was not that I lacked a teacher. On the contrary, my father had procured for me some of the finest tutors in Jabal. Yet it was not until Allah placed me under the guidance of Dehkhoda that I realized how empty were the pretensions of all those apparently learned men.

The situation in which I then found myself was as follows: my father, Mahdi bin Zaydi, was the Lord of Jibal, and governed this small region of Persia from the lofty castle of Alamut. Though he was a Zaydi Shia, he was tolerated by the Seljuk Sultan, Malik Shah, for he did not share the extremist views of the Ismaili Shias, and was in some ways more Sunni than the Abbasid Caliph himself. The Sultan had tasked my father with hunting down the infamous Hassan-i Sabbah, who was thought to lead a vast conspiracy and who worked in the shadows, flitting about like a mosquito from place to place and spreading his subversive doctrine through subtle and insidious means.

There were rumours that Sabbah was then lurking in the environs of Alamut, and that he intended to infiltrate the castle itself, so the number of guards had been increased, and not a soul could enter or leave the castle without being thoroughly searched. A pallor had descended on my previously carefree existence, and I was no longer allowed to move freely about the castle, let alone to venture outside and play with my friends in the valley below. I was never left alone; as soon as I had finished my lesson with one tutor, one of my father's bodyguards would accompany me to my next lesson, and at the end of the day I would be locked inside the harem with my mother.

My father's mood was blacker than ever. He saw enemies everywhere. Were it not for the kind words of my tutor Dehkhoda, and the tender caresses of my mother, I believe I might have succumbed to the same paranoia myself. It was at this point that my father was summoned to XXX by the Sultan's vizier, Nizam Al-Mulk, leaving the castle in the hands of his Deputy, the venerable XXX. And it is here that my tale begins.

But before I commence, I should perhaps describe the castle, for my story will be more comprehensible if the reader has some understanding of the unusual environment in which it takes place. The origins of the fortress can be traced back to the Justanid ruler, Vahsudan, who, during a hunting trip, witnessed a soaring eagle perch down high on a rock. Realizing the tactical advantage of the location, he chose the site for the construction of a fortress, which he called Alamut, from the words *aloh* (eagle) and *āmūkt* (taught), in virtue of the winged messenger who had called his attention to the peak. And it is surely not by chance that the values (*abjad*) of the letters of *Aluh-Amut* (ALH AMWT) – not, it is to be noted, of *Alamut* (ALMWT), the usual form of the name – add up to 483 (= 1 + 30 + 5 + 1 + 40 + 6 + 400).

The mountain on which the fortress is perched resembles a kneeling camel with its neck resting on the ground. The castle sits on the spine of this beast, towering over the valley below. Behind the heavily fortified walls are buildings whose beauty rivals those of Baghdad and Damascus. [The mosque....](#)

The minaret...

The palace...

The library was not then the magnificent place it is today, with its astronomical instruments and rare manuscripts, yet it already possessed a decent collection, including a variety of beautifully bound Qur'ans, Tafsirs, Sahifas, Musnads, Sunans and Siras, as well as numerous philosophical, scientific and historical works, such as the *Theology of Aristotle* as well as his *Exposition of the Pure Good*, the *Enneads* by Plotinus, the *Elements of Theology* by Proclus, *On First Philosophy* by Al-Kindi as well as his *Discourse on the Soul*, al-Farabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences*, Al-Haytham's *First Book Of Optics*, Al-Tabari's *History*, and *The Healing* of ibn Sina, to mention only some of the most renowned volumes.

The harem...

The armoury...

The madrassa..

In the cavities of these rocks they had constructed several long, wide and tall galleries (*sabat*) and deep tanks, dispensing with the use of stone and mortar, as in the verse: *And hew out houses in the hills* [Q7:72]. So too they had dug magazines and tanks for wine, vinegar, honey and all sorts of liquids and solids.

And from the river Bahru they had brought a conduit to the foot of the castle and from thence a conduit was cut in the rock halfway round the castle and ocean-like tanks, also of rock, constructed beneath so that the water would be stored in them by its own impetus and was continually flowing on. The remainder of the description of the implements of war and stores is more than can be inserted in a book without tedium.

The valley below the castle is fertile land on which dry crops such barley, wheat and rice were grown in abundance even before the ground was terraced. To the east, the valley is bordered by a mountainous range called The Throne of Solomon (*Alamkuh*) between which a turbulent river flows. The valley's western entrance is a narrow gorge shielded by vertiginous cliffs. For much of the year, the raging waters of the river makes this entrance nearly inaccessible. Qazvin, the closest town to the valley by land, can only be reached by an underdeveloped mule track upon which the presence of an enemy can easily be detected given the dust clouds arising from their passage.

I could go on...

I believe I am obligated to tell the story of what followed in gratitude to my master for liberating me from ignorance by the method and means that I will describe. For just as the Holy Qur'an has both an outer and an inner meaning, so also the perceptive reader will see that events which I recount here are not merely of historical interest, but also illustrate in wondrous detail the path of spiritual growth by which any Master (*alim*) gradually guides his disciple (*ghulam*) out of the darkness and into the light. My tale, then, is really about the proper behaviour of those who are seeking the truth (*adab al-talibin*), and the ways of proceeding – through appropriate action, teaching and belief – of the righteous, of those who are spiritually receptive, prepared, and suited for those ways (*madhahib al-salihin*).

Yet, as Ibn Al-Haytham reminds us in his *First Book Of Optics*, perplexity prevails, certainty is hard to come by, and there is no assurance of attaining the object of inquiry. How strong is the excuse for the truth to be confused, and how manifest is the proof that certainty is difficult to achieve! For the truths are obscure, the ends hidden, the doubts manifold, the mind turbid, the reasonings various; the premises are gleaned from the senses, and the senses (which are our tools) are not immune from error. The path of investigation is therefore muddied and the inquirer, however diligent, is not infallible.

And with this caveat in mind, I begin my story.