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When did the East-Iranian Quhistāni fortresses become “Ismaili”? New perspectives for a History of Ismailism

Simone Cristoforetti / Matteo Sesana

Abstract

This article questions whether the expression “Ismaili castles” is appropriate to describe the fortifications of the historical region of Quhistān, in Eastern Iran. “Ismaili castle” is a locution largely used among the historiographical studies of Persian Ismailism of the Alamūt period (1090-1256), since it would reflect the strategy of political control experienced by the Ismailis in the territories they ruled. However, this expression derives from the crystallization of a 19th and the 20th century idea in line with identity-based and ideological perspectives circulating among the European scholars. According to this perspective there was a sort of “Ismaili” identity recognizable in all their mountain “castles”. The expression is not adequate in terms of historical interpretation, and specifically for reconstruction of the history of medieval Quhistān. We aim to trace back the chain of transmission of the interpretative categories which permitted a widespread use and diffusion of the locution “Ismaili castles”, and to analyze its impact among the modern studies on Persian Ismailism. We will then reconsider the role and function of the castles in Quhistān, in light of the preliminary observations we made during a survey conducted in the region. This article contributes to the recent debate on the necessity to free current historiographical approaches from outdated paradigms and to widen the scope of the research to new and unedited sources. To this regard, in our conclusion we propose possible research paths and methods of historical investigation on the medieval history of Iran.

Key words: Ismailis, Ismaili castles, Quhistān, Seljuqs, Mongols, medieval fortifications, medieval history of Iran

When did the East-Iranian Quhistāni fortresses become “Ismaili”?

“Identity” we argue, tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity).

(Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1)

Ma soprattutto non vi preoccupate perché più delle cose o delle persone sono importanti le relazioni tra una cosa e l'altra, una persona e un'altra, e tra cose e persone.

(Valerio 2020, 6)

Since 2000, in an illuminating article dedicated to the use and sometimes abuse of the concept of “identity”, the sociologists Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper wisely alerted us against the uncritical use of words or locutions simply due to their broad diffusion among the scholarship, and even the common people (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).¹ At the beginning of their article, the authors quote *verbatim* a passage by George Orwell, as follows: «The worst thing one can do with words, is to surrender to them». If language is to be «an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought», Orwell continued, one must «let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about» (Orwell 1953: 169–170; *apud* Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

Let the meaning choose the word is our aim, as we take into consideration a widespread locution that one inescapably encounters upon learning about the past political and military activity of the Ismailis, and especially their taking control over and building of a formidable network of strong fortresses, covering an area that encompasses the territories of modern Syria, Iran and Afghanistan. Indeed, the case in point is that of the “Ismaili castles” (or “Assassins’ castles”²), and more precisely those of the

¹ As for the authorship of this article, pp. 158–182 are by S. Cristoforetti and pp. 182–197 M. Sesana. In the present article, we shall be using two forms of quotation marks. Guillemets («...») report statements, expressions, and terms explicitly quoted from primary sources or from the secondary literature. Curved quotation marks (“...”) are used to cite commonly accepted expressions, on whose appropriateness we are going to discuss over the course of the article.

² The locution “Assassins’ castles” appears in a conspicuous share of 20th century scholarly production on the matter. The preference for this definition rather than “Ismaili castles” could be due to its suggestiveness, directly linking these structures to European historiographical categories and *tropoi* widespread in Medieval Studies, such as the idea of the *castle* as autonomous politic and administrative unity and c as we shall discuss in detail in the course of the article – the myth of the Old Man of the Mountain. For a brief, but very clear account on the development of the legend of the *Old Man of the Mountain* see Daftary 2015a: 15-16.

“remote” historical region of Quhistān, mostly in the Eastern Iranian areas now bordering Afghanistan.³ Here, we are referring to the Nizari branch of the Ismailism, or the Persian Ismailis of the so-called Alamūt period (1090–1256 CE).

Our intent is not to ascertain *when* most of the Quhistāni fortresses felt under control of the Nizari Ismailis – this point has been already partially clarified, even though we still lack a detailed chronological reconstruction for the major part of the sites⁴ –, but rather to reconstruct how those mountain fortifications in Quhistān came to be known as “Ismaili castles” (or “Assassins’ castles”) *tout court*. A proper understanding of the origins of this label will allow us to avoid some interpretative problems that emerged in casting the trope of the “Ismaili castle” on the complex of fortresses and fortifications scattered in Quhistān.

“Ismaili castles” is a definition widely used in the studies on the matter. If “Ismaili” indicates the Nizari branch of Ismailism, or just the Persian Ismailism, the word “castles” translates the plural form *qilāʿ* of the Persian word *qalʿa*.⁵ The term “castle” is lacking and imprecise when applied to the Ismaili network of fortresses and strongholds, and it calls for some discussion. There are two main orders of problems. First, in

³ The medieval sources place the historical region of Quhistān – an arabicized form of the Persian *Kōhistān*, *i.e.* “the Region of the Mountains” – within the borders of Khurāsān, at the south of the city of Nīshapūr and at the north of the region of Sīstān, including in its boundaries the cities of Bīrjand, Qāʿ in Turshīz, Tūn Gunābād, Ṭabas, and Ṭabas-i Masīnān (Kramers 2012). The region encompassed the territories of the two modern Iranian regions of Southern Khorasan, and the meridional portion of Rezavi Khorasan, including the districts of Turbat-i Ḥaydariyya and Turbat-i Jām. It covered also a portion of the area westward Herat in nowadays Afghanistan. The place name Quhistān is no longer used in the current topography, and it defines exclusively the historical region.

⁴ The early successful Ismaili uprising in Quhistān dates to the end of Malikshāh’s reign (1072–1092) and the years after he and his powerful minister Nīzām al-Mulk (d. 1092) died. Those were years of political uncertainty in the Seljuq empire, caused by a decade of struggles, first among the two main political factions of the empire, the Nīzāmiyya, headed by Nīzām al-Mulk’s family members and entourage, and the supporters of the four-year-old son of Malikshāh, Maḥmūd, headed by his mother, the powerful widow of Malikshāh Terken Khātūn, and her minister Tāj al-Mulk, and later between the Sultan Barkyārūq, one of the leaders of the Seljuq family, and other members of the family.

⁵ In the absence of comprehensive lexicographical analysis of the term *qalʿa*, its significance and usage among the medieval Arabic and Persian sources, – although aware of its inadequacy – we shall render it with the English word “castle”, or alternatively “fortress” and “fortification”, used as synonymous. We shall return on this in the course of the article.

which manner a “castle” can be qualified as “Ismaili”? In what consists the “Ismailicity” of the various but sometimes imposing defensive structures to which the term “Ismaili castle” is usually applied? Second, more specifically, is the categorization of a certain sort of “castle” as “Ismaili” useful for the study of Quhistāni Ismailism? In other words, even accepting that such a locution is somehow suitable (for example, in the case of the Ismaili defensive network in the Sub-Caspian region of Rūdbār), is it helping us to better understand what happened in Quhistān between the 11th and 13th century CE? These are only but a few questions in need of adequate answers before we can reconsider the presence and military activism of a strong Ismaili enclave within the Seljuq empire at the end of the Abbasid age.

What an “Ismaili castle” is and how it differs from other similar defensive structures, has been asked several times. Recently, the need for a more robust definition became apparent. The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) attempted to provide a valid definition of «Ismaili castle» in the section *Nizari Ismaili Concept of Castles* of its official website, listing its key features and structural characteristics. According to the present definition, «Ismaili castles» differ from others – namely from those that Normans and the Crusaders built – in their *position*. «Ismaili castles» are set on «the crown of a great mountain dividing the fortifications up into self-contained sections culminating in a great citadel». The same webpage gives the four main principles that informed the decision to fortify a place or build a new fortress on a pre-existing fortified site:

« 1) The area chosen for fortification must be in a naturally strong defensive position with a terrain sufficiently remote and difficult to approach in order to discourage attack hostile parties; 2) The complex of fortresses within the chosen area must have the ability to support each other in the event of an attack and enable an efficient system of communication to be established, whether by beacon or other means; 3) The chosen area must contain enough material, especially wood and stone, to allow the construction and reconstruction in the case of an existing fortress, to be carried out expeditiously and with a minimal labour force; 4) The terrain should have fertile ground and water nearby to provide adequate water and food supplies. The site chosen must also be sufficiently elevated to prevent undermining of sapping and it must be out of range of mangonel attacks. As a result, the immediate surroundings and approaches of a fortress must be as steep as possible. The fortress areas must also be of sufficient size to allow large underground storage

chambers to be built for water and food and the surface area must be as sloping as possible to allow rainfall to run into the specially constructed water cisterns».⁶

This definition, although comprehensive, is inadequate. All the features described above are not uniquely Ismaili. Instead, many fortresses in Persia, Syria, and even in Afghanistan, Anatolia, and Central Asia share the same features. Indeed, what Ismaili fortifications ought to be and how they differ from others remain vague. In other words, the definition proposed focuses on the fact that the fortifications stood on strategic points at considerable heights for defensive purposes, and, at the same time, they had to be situated near water sources and fertile fields. These assertions are too generic. All of this could be said for most fortresses, regardless of Ismaili control, and for fortresses built before the Alamūt period and occupied by the Ismailis only later. In short, there is no discriminating factor that allows us to distinguish an “Ismaili fortress” from the coeval Seljuq, Khwārazmian or Ghūrid ones. If we narrow it down to the case of Quhistān, the inadequacy of this interpretative frame becomes more evident. On what basis should we apply the definition of “Ismaili castles” to the entire network of castles of that region?

Similar questions have been posed also by a team of archaeologists of the Iranian superintendency. The Iranian archaeologists put forth tentative answers in an article containing the results of the archaeological researches they carried out on «the Ismaili castles of Quhistān». While they recognize that «the Ismaili fortresses are mostly fortresses existing before the Ismailis’ emergence, or bought by them», they point to the fortresses’ strong defensible position and the facility of communicating with other fortifications as the key feature of the Ismaili network of fortresses (Surūsh and Naṣrābādī 1386/ 2007–2008: 114–115). The Iranian experts identified 37 «Ismaili fortresses» in Southern Khorasan according to four criteria: position, construction materials, architectural style, and textual proofs. Regrettably, they do not provide an explicit definition of what they understand as «Ismaili construction materials and architectural style». Textual proofs are very scant of information about the matter,

⁶ “Nizari Ismaili Concept of Castles | The Institute of Ismaili Studies,” <https://iis.ac.uk/library/nizari-ismaili-concept-castles> (accessed February 16, 2020). The definition is clearly based to what Peter Willey reports in his work *Eagle’s Nest*. It seems that the redactors of the webpage – albeit not explicitly – are quoting from Peter Willey’s considerations about «the cardinal principle that governed the construction of all the Ismaili castles» (Willey 2005: 95–7).

which leaves us once again with the sole *position* criterion, «Ismaili fortresses are located on the summit of the mountains in order to be better protected by the enemies and they are constructed in the vicinity of natural water sources like springs or streams» (Surūsh and Naṣrābādī 1386/ 2007–2008: 115). These generic characteristics are due to strategic and military concerns. As such, position is in no way useful to ascertain the “identity” of any castle. However, this archaeological study rightly underlines the important relationship of the most relevant fortresses in the region with main routes and cities in their surroundings. This was the case of Mu’minābād and Gurask fortresses, that controlled the routes and the area of Ṭabas-i Masīnān. Hawz-i Ghulāmkush fortress controlled the city of Bīrjand. Shāhdīzh is a fortress situated few kilometers far from the urban center of Nihbandān, the ancient Nih. Rustam fortress overlooked the small city of Khūsf. These are only a few examples among many more. We will come back later to the implications of these crucial yet overlooked relationships between fortresses, routes and cities. In the face of these difficulties we are inclined to ask ourselves: is the definition of “Ismaili castles” necessary? And more importantly, does it help our understanding of the history of Quhistān?

We shall argue that the notion of “Ismaili castle” is misleading. To do so, we must reconsider when the locutions “Ismaili castles” and “Assassins’ castles” appeared in the modern scholarship, and how they became category labels applied to all the remains of medieval mountain fortifications of Quhistān.

The emergence of the “Ismaili castles”

The first ideas circulating in Europe about the Ismailis date back to the Crusade period, and identified the Nizaris as members of a sectarian movement (Daftary 2015a: 14–15). The Ismailis were held to be ruthless killers hidden in the mountains and willing to commit political murders under the effect of drugs to overthrow the established government (Ar. *ḥashishiyyīn*, from which the appellation “Assassins”). These legends culminated in a synthesis popularized by Marco Polo (d. 1324). The Venetian traveller, in the section dedicated to the Persian region of *Timochoim* – or *Tunocain* in the Tuscan version, *i.e.* Tūn and Qā’in, two main centers of medieval Quhistān – describes the land as thick with castles and cities, and proceeds narrating the novel of the *Old Man of the Mountain*, his impregnable castle and his loyal followers (Ramusio 2015:

R, I, 20–21). This version of the Assassins' legend, – whose authenticity is doubtful⁷ – by the 14th and 15th century became accepted as a reliable description of the sect of the Nizaris.

Similar notions would last until the 19th century when the French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838) correctly identified the Ismailis as a Shiite community. However, in terms of historical narrative, he relied mostly on hostile Sunni traditions and prior myths. It was in this context that the Austrian orientalist Joseph Von Hammer-Purstagall (1774–1856) addressed the subject. In his *Die Geschichte der Assassinen* published in 1818, which is the earliest Western book dedicated to the Nizaris of the Alamut period, Von Hammer-Purstagall conferred undue importance to the legend of the *Old Man of the Mountain* and gave credence to the medieval legends on the fanatic and bloodthirsty nature of the Ismailis. Von Hammer-Purstagall's work was to inform later studies on the Ismailis until the Thirties of the 20th century (Daftary, 2012).

Wladimir Ivanow (1886–1970) takes the credit for his enormous effort to lead the studies on Ismailism within a proper historical framework through the study and the edition of Ismaili primary sources (Ivanow 1922). His results led the way for the tangible results of historical synthesis of Marshall Hodgson (1922–1968) (Hodgson 1955). Largely thanks to Ivanow and Hodgson, we dispose of an excellent reconstruction of some crucial phases of the development of Ismaili thought and doctrine, and of an historical reconstruction of some phases of Ismaili history, marked by political and military activism, although significant shortcomings remain. Hodgson's work was continued by brilliant scholars like Samuel Stern (1920–1969) and Louis Massignon (1883–1962), who both contributed to a deeper knowledge in the fields of religious thought and early propaganda of the Ismailis, and in more recent times by the leading scholar Farhad Daftary (see, for instance, Daftary 2007).

By contrast, much less attention has been reserved to archaeological sites and material culture. This is painfully true for the great number of fortifications commonly attributed to the Ismailis

⁷ As Daftary (2015a: 16) pointed out: «Strangely, it did not occur to any European observer that Marco Polo may have actually heard the tales in Italy after returning to Venice in 1295 from his journey to the East – tales that were by then widespread in Europe – not to mention the possibility that the Assassin legends found in Marco Polos's travelogue may have been entirely inserted, as a digressionary note, by Rustichello of Pisa, the Italian romance writer who was actually responsible for committing the account of Marco Polo's travels to writing».

scattered on the Iranian Plateau. Archaeological remains could yield crucial information on the construction technologies and architecture of the Ismailis, and, more importantly, on their relationship with the territory they controlled. Indeed, as Hodgson argued, only a deeper reconstruction of the social and economic history of Seljuq times will allow to understand the role played by the Ismailis in their context (Hodgson 1955: 28–29). This is not to say that the field is completely lacking. We have the travelogue of Freya Stark who visited the Alamūt Valley in 1930 describing the fortresses of the region, and Wladimir Ivanow’s archaeological survey on Alamūt and Lamasar, published in 1960 and followed by Samuel Stern’s description of the fortress of Khān Lanjān (Stark 1934; Stern, Beazley and Dobson, 1971: 45–57). Moreover, significant studies were conducted by the German archaeologist Wolfram Kleiss (b. 1930) and by the independent researcher Peter Willey (1923–2009) through various reports on the medieval fortresses of Alamūt Valley, Qūmis and Quhistān.

In sum, we have considerable scholarship on the Iranian Ismailism in the Alamūt Valley, focusing mainly on the Ismaili thought and doctrine, but, regrettably, little attention has been paid to the Quhistāni Ismailism and its rise and fall in Eastern Iran. In fact, we still not have an adequate historical reconstruction of the history of this region between the end of 11th and the second half of the 13th century. This is in spite of the fact that primary sources report Ismaili missionaries in Khurāsān in the 9th century CE and speak of Quhistān as an important center of Nizari Ismailism under the leadership of Ḥusayn Qā’inī (since 1091–1092 CE).⁸ It is not by

⁸ Even though the region was at the center of significant political and historical events such as the «Iranian upheavals» (Scarcia Amoretti 1975) during Early-Islamic times, and the appearance of the Khārījī movement of Ḥamza ibn Ādharak at the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th century, Quhistān is more often associated with the presence, from the 11th to the end of the 13th century, of the Ismaili communities and the so-called «Ismaili independent territorial State» (Daftary 2015b: 48). Indeed, Quhistān represented, after the region of Rūdbār, the most important center of Nizari Ismailism in the Iranian Plateau (Daftary 2015b: 48–49). In its territories, there is a remarkable large amount of fortifications, which since the first studies regarding the region, have been commonly considered to be part of the «Ismaili network of castles» (Willey 2005: 189). The region of Quhistān is incredibly thick with mountain fortresses, and this contributed to strengthen the conviction that it was the perfect habitat for heresies and, in the present case, for the Ismailis, due to the multitude of mountain ranges and peaks and its remoteness from the center of the Abbasid caliphate, «for this reason the Ismailis were often called *al-malāhida al-qūhiyya* [*i.e.* “the heretics of the mountains”]» (Kramers 2012).

random chance that the Ismaili presence and the power over Quhistān lasted until the Mongols invasions of Iran and in some cases even later. This neglect of Quhistāni Ismailism stands in stark contrast with the impressive amount of archaeological evidences available, largely datable to this period of Eastern Iranian history. The only comprehensive studies on this region in relation to the Ismailis, are focused on their *modus gubernandi* over the territory, forcibly insisting – as we shall see – on a regional military and political control based on the extensive network of mountain “Ismaili” fortresses spread all over Quhistān.

It is beyond doubt that the numerous and, in some cases, imposing ruins of mountain fortresses we see today were in use at the time of the Ismailis, and, in some cases, they were much older fortifications renovated by the Ismailis. However, we argue that the association between “castles” and Ismailis is not based on reliable textual and archaeological data. Instead, it appears to be derived from the crystallization of an idea conceived in the 19th century. The studies produced during the 19th century and in the early 20th century have recognized an Ismaili “identity” for the totality of the Quhistāni castles. The same studies inferred from this the existence of an «Ismaili state» based on the control of strongholds and fortifications (Daftary 2015b: 48–50). As we said, this approach was largely due to 19th century historiographical studies on the Ismailis and to the importance given to the legend of the *Old Man of the Mountain* living in a well-fortified mountain castle. This legend would resonate among the scholars until the first half of the 20th century. It was only after the second half of the 20th century following Hodgson’s work that these mythical elements were purged from the reconstruction of the history of the Ismailis. However, the assumption of a link between the Ismailis and their “castles”, at least for the case of Quhistān, has not been adequately challenged.

The notion of Ismaili castles is shaky or, at the very least, ill-defined. Nevertheless, it has enjoyed widespread use in modern scholarship. It is useful to see how some of the most significant studies on Ismaili Quhistān adopted this category, and how they were shaped by it.

The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate by Guy Le Strange, published in 1905, is one of the earliest modern academic work proposing an historical reconstruction of the Ismailis of Quhistān. The brilliant British Orientalist Guy Le Strange (1854–1933) spearheaded the scholarly effort to reconstruct the medieval geography of the Islamic Middle East. In his highly valuable work, he drew the geography of the Abbasid Caliphate as

it appears from Arabic and Persian geographical sources. In this book, he presents all information derived from Arab, Persian, and Turkish geographers, travelers, and historians from the 9th to the 17th century, reporting data about routes, lands, cities, and villages as well as trades, manufactures, and agriculture of the regions of the Caliphate, from Anatolia to Western Afghanistan. In the chapter XXV, Le Strange describes the historical geography of Quhistān. The author lists the cities of the region, and records relevant historical information for each of these.

In terms of historical reconstruction, Le Strange affirms that the region between the 11th and the second half of the 13th was the theatre of a struggle between the Ismailis and the central ruling powers occupying the region, namely Seljuqs, Khwārazmshāhs and Mongols. Le Strange stresses the Ismaili power over Quhistān in connection to fortresses and strongholds (Le Strange 1906: 354). At this regard, it should be remembered that Le Strange was writing in a scholarly context that was still strongly anchored to a picture of the Ismailis distorted by medieval legends and mythical tales. Le Strange bases his considerations on older studies on Ismailism that focused on the Nizaris' apogee in the Alamūt Valley. It was in fact in Alamūt that «Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ surnamed the Old Man of the Mountain» came into possession of several impregnable fortresses (Le Strange 1906: 221). These perspectives led Le Strange to postulate that was the case also in Quhistān. The Ismaili capillary control over the region was due to «the Old Man of the Mountain, who conquered strongholds and erected fortresses to overawe Kūhistān» (Le Strange 1906: 354). The British historian read the medieval sources on this basis, and over-emphasized the importance of the castles among the Ismailis in Quhistān. Le Strange in fact, recognized an Ismaili *identity* in the fortifications of region, applying the category “Ismaili castles” to all mountain fortifications of Quhistān, even where an association of the fortresses with the Ismailis is not openly stated by primary sources.⁹ Le

⁹ For instance, while describing the historical geography of the city and district of Turshīz, Le Strange (1906: 354) cites a passage from Mustawfī's *Nuzhat al-qulūb* (1336/1958: 175). The medieval Persian historian reports the presence of several fortifications in the outskirts of Turshīz, including Qal' a-yi Bardārūd, Qal' a-yi Mīkāl, Qal' a-yi Mujāhidābād and Qal' a-yi Ātashgāh. Le Strange argues that the “castles” in question «doubtless had been those of the Ismailians». However, since in Mustawfī's work there is no evidence associating these “castles” with the Ismailis, this identification can only be a conjecture by Le Strange; cf. Le Strange's translation of *Nuzhat al-qulūb* (Mustawfī 1919: 142), «In the Turshīz district there are many strong castles (that belonged to the Assassins) as for instance these four the Castle of Bardā Rūd, the Castle

Strange's assumptions contributed to forge the idea – then amply systematized by subsequent studies – that, in Quhistān as in the Alamūt Valley, the Ismailis followed a distinctive pattern of control of the territory, conducted through a network of strongly fortified mountain castles.

Finally, Le Strange establishes a direct relationship between medieval Nizaris and the contemporary Ismaili communities in Quhistān: «the representative of the Old Man of the Mountain, at the present time is Āgā Khān, chief of the Khūjah community in Bombay and» – he continues – «it is curious to find that some of the Ismailian sect still linger in Quhistān, who now pay their tithes to Āgā Khān, as their predecessor did with the chief of Alamūt. At the village of Sidih, to the south of Qā'in, Major Sykes found nearly a thousand of families of these Ismailians, who yearly transmitted a considerable sum to their religious head in India» (Le Strange 1906: 355, n. 1). Le Strange relies here on Major Percy Sykes' overview of Quhistān and, in particular, of the village of Sidih, that the British diplomat described in his travelogue entitled *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*. Sykes published his travelogue in 1902, after years of observation and travels in Iran and Central Asia since 1893.

Major Sykes gives a very detailed travel record of the lands and cities of Sīstān and Quhistān where he travelled in the summer of 1900. After having visited the city of Qā'in and having described the fortress of Qal'a-yi Kūh – without mentioning any association with the Ismailis – he focuses on the description of his visit to the small village of Sidih, located between Qā'in and Bīrjand, where he met the Ismaili chief of the village, a young man named Murād Mīrzā. The latter told Sykes how many Ismaili families lived in the area and talked him about the relationship of the Quhistāni Ismaili community with the Āqā (Āgā) Khān in India (Sykes 1902: 409).¹⁰

Le Strange, combined the data concerning the Ismaili presence in the region collected by Sykes with the historical sources he read through the lens of a 19th historiographic perspective (*i.e.* resorting to a well-

of Mikāl, the Castle of Mujāhidābād and Ātashgāh (The Fire-temple)».

¹⁰ This information is reported also by Wladimir Ivanow in his *Ismailitica* (1922: 52), «At the present time the sectarians [*i.e.* the contemporary Ismailis] live in many villages in north-west from Bīrjand, although it is strictly disguise. They are more open only in Sedeh, a village on the Meshed-Sistan road, half way between Qain and Bīrjand, where their headman, the tax collector lives»; at this regard, he adds in the footnote 8, «At the present time [the tax collector] is a certain Murād Mīrzā, a clever and practical man».

established narratological frame into which he embedded the scattered information he extracted from the sources). In doing so, he could underline the importance of the connection between the Ismailis and Quhistān, and to see the castles as the most significant clues of the Ismaili apogee in the region between 11th and 13th century. In all likelihood both the (European) legend of the *Old Man of the Mountain* and the utmost importance of the “castle” in the European medieval history played a role in Le Strange’s reconstruction of the history of the Quhistāni Ismailism.

Between February 1923 and October 1925, the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld (1879–1948) embarked on a research journey to Iran with a quite similar perspective in mind. In 1926, he published a travel report titled *Reisebericht*, where he provides a detailed description of the archaeological remains of Persia he visited from Kurdistān to Khurāsān (Herzfeld 1926: 225). Between March and May 1925, the German scholar stayed in Quhistān. He was perhaps inspired by the reading of Sykes’ travelogue and Le Strange’s work, when he surveyed the main cities of Qā’in and Bīrjand and in the village of Sidih, this latter cited by both the prior studies.¹¹ In Sidih, Herzfeld met the Ismaili chief of the village, and asked him some questions about the history of the local community. The headman explained to Herzfeld that the region abounded of “Ismaili castles”, which were in ruin at that time. Then, the German orientalist visited in person four of these fortresses and reports their names: Ferizdūn, around the village of Durukhsh, Qal’a-yi Dukhtar on Kūh-i Arg in Sunnīkhāna (*i.e.* on the outskirts of Ṭabas-i Masīnān), Sarāb three *farsakh* far from Sidih, and Qal’a-yi Kūh-i Abāzar in Qā’in. Wherefore, Herzfeld relied on prior studies and direct oral sources, arguing that the ruins of the mountain fortresses of Quhistān were actually remains of “Ismaili castles”. Herzfeld noticed the poor state of conservation of these fortresses, and aptly notes that only a comparative study between Alamūt and Quhistān may lead to tangible achievements in piecing together the history of Ismailism of the region (Herzfeld 1926:

¹¹ Herzfeld’s research journey was preceded by Ivanow’s visit in Quhistān in 1920. Ivanow visited Qā’in and Bīrjand in September 1920 with the object of conducting a research on the contemporary Ismaili communities. While describing the Ismaili villages of the area, he adds a brief historical note, «This corner of Iran [*i.e.* Quhistān], situated off the trading roads, was till quite recently the scene of a very patriarchal and old-fashioned life. Still more was the case in the middle ages, and no wonder that the *Ismaili castles* which appeared as early as XI c. A.D. could flourish practically unmolested till the troops of Hulagu Khan in the second half of the XIII c. destroyed many of them» (the italics is ours; Ivanow 1922: 52–52).

273–274). Herzfeld's warning showed the only way forward towards a proper historical analysis of the Ismailis of Quhistān. Nevertheless, what followed has not been a comparative analysis of the two regional realities, but rather a *sic et simpliciter* application to Quhistān of an outdated interpretative frame mostly based on what historians knew of the Ismaili presence in Rūdbār and in the Alamūt region. This interpretative frame – on which nature we will return soon – informed most of the historical interpretations of the Ismaili phenomenon available today; we shall call it *Alamūt paradigm*.

Starting from the Sixties of the 20th century, some archaeological surveys have been conducted on the “Ismaili castles” of Eastern Iran. The aforementioned German archaeologist Wolfram Kleiss produced one of the first studies on the matter (Kleiss 1969: 72–77). Since his first researches, Kleiss tended to believe that the «Assassin influence» covered an extremely large territory within Persian borders extending from Azerbaijan to Sistan. According to the scholar – and this was obvious enough at this stage of the studies – Ismaili power projected from a network of mountain fortresses dislocated all over the country (Kleiss 1994: 315–321). However, Kleiss dated the great number of fortresses scattered in this area only according to architectural features and pottery findings, both datable to the Seljuq period, between the 11th and 13th century (Kleiss 1994: 318). With welcome clarity, Kleiss discusses the «striking feature of all the Assassin castles». First of all, the natural features on which the castle is located have to be well incorporated in its defensive structure; secondly the fortification must be equipped with water cisterns in order to resist a siege; thirdly, the presence of barracks complex made the castle impregnable (Kleiss 1990). In the cases of two Quhistāni fortresses of Qal‘a-yi Kūh in Qā‘in and Qal‘a-yi Mu‘minābād in the district of Ṭabas-i Masīnān, Kleiss recognized such similar features (Kleiss 1977: 44–49). Kleiss' criteria do not differ significantly from those proposed by the Institute of Ismaili Studies, discussed earlier, that in turn rely on Peter Willey's definition of «Ismaili castle» (Willey 2005: 95). In light of the general agreement between Kleiss, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, and Willey, it seems likely that Willey drew from Kleiss and expanded Kleiss' discriminating factors to construct a conclusive definition of «Ismaili castle».

To his credit, Kleiss earnestly admits that the precise identification of the «Ismaili fortresses» remains problematic. As he points out, we do not have textual sources that allow us to identify any single castle as

Ismaili (Kleiss 1994: 318). With regard to Quhistān in particular, except for few cases like the fortress of Mu'minābād in the outskirts of Ṭabas-i Masīnān and the Shāhinshāhī (or Shāhdizh) fortress in Nihbandān, whose association with the Ismailis is reported by the sources, the data emerging from the texts is all too scant. Therefore, in the absence of sufficient archaeological data, the identification of these fortresses as “Ismaili castles” can only be hypothetical.

Between 1970 and 1974 a team of Japanese researchers headed by Minobu Honda from Hokkaido University, led three expeditions to Alamūt and Quhistān, investigating the fortresses of the Seljuq period. In 1972 Honda produced a handwritten report concerning the results of his first two expeditions in Iran (1970 and 1972), entitled *Report on the Study of Ismaili Castles*. Unfortunately, the unpublished report was lost soon after Honda passed away in 1999. Honda's expeditions produced other materials as well: a large photographic collection, short reports, Honda's observations, all of which is now in possession of one of his collaborators, Seiichi Kitagawa, who is gradually making them available online.¹²

The most substantial published studies on the «Ismaili castles» of Quhistān are those conducted by Peter Willey. From 1959 to 2000 he undertook several small-scale expeditions and surveys to Iran to investigate on the «Ismaili network of fortresses», producing several articles and books. In 2005, Willey published *The Eagle's Nest*, a compendium of years of work. In his *Introduction* to this book, Willey says that he started his researches after reading Freya Stark's *The Valleys of The Assassins* and having met Dr. Samuel Stern, who encouraged him to study the «Ismaili castles» in the Alamūt Valley (Willey 2005: *preface* xx). Here, during the first expeditions conducted between 1959 and 1963, he was able to identify the exact location of the castle of Maymūdizh, and subsequently published his first book *The Castles of the Assassins* (Willey 1963). From 1963 to 1979, Willey focused on the Iranian regions of Qūmis and Quhistān, looking for «undiscovered Ismaili castles» (Willey 2005: *preface* xxi). A further expedition in Quhistān was conducted in 1997 during which, as Willey himself claims, notable results were achieved (Willey 1998; 2005: *preface* xxii). According to Willey, the network of the “Ismaili fortresses” counted over 250 strongholds located

¹² We would like to thank Seiichi Kitagawa for this precious information, and for his efforts to publish Honda's extant materials. A compendium of Honda's photographic collection is now available on Seiichi Kitagawa's website <https://jami7-altawarikh8.webnode.jp/>.

between Syria and Khurāsān, and Quhistān had the highest concentration of «Ismailis castles» (Willey 2005: 168). Consequently, he assumed that the region must have played a crucial role in the «Ismaili state» (Willey 2005: *preface* xxiv). It must be said that Willey detected several misstatements in older studies. Notably, he found that some of the information collected by Herzfeld was inaccurate, and states that the real number of the fortifications in Quhistān had been underestimated, leading to the general assumption that the «Ismaili state» consisted of Alamūt and a few other castles in Quhistān and elsewhere in Iran (Willey 1967: 156–162). In the report of his last expedition in 1997, he affirms that he identified forty new «Ismaili castles» in the region, eight of which located in the outskirts of Qā' in (Willey 2005: *preface* xxii).

However, Willey's researches are not devoid of significant shortcomings and methodological weaknesses. Willey, on the basis of the prior scholarly literature, not only accepted the category of «Ismaili castles», but even he conducted his researches presuming that the entire amount of Seljuq and Mongol fortresses of Quhistān were «Ismaili». Furthermore, Willey does not base his claims on archaeological excavations or actual textual proof. Rather he relies on personal observations. Willey's discriminating features of an «Ismaili castle», appear vague and, again, they are applicable to other periods and actors of Iranian history (Willey 2005: 95–97). In short, many of Willey's findings are arbitrary and they can only amount – at least for a considerable number of the fortifications in Quhistān – to unproven hypotheses, however promising they may be. On the one hand, Willey's researches showed that the region was very well fortified, «apart from the great fortresses, there are a very large number of smaller forts and military outposts» (Willey 2005: 168), but, on the other hand, the relationship between fortifications and Ismailis remains foggy.

The studies of Peter Willey – and specifically his last book, *The Eagle's Nest* – are the most recent researches on Quhistāni castles and are the reference work in the field. Willey's work stands at the end of a chain of transmission of the idea of the «Ismailicity» of the Quhistāni castles. This idea – firstly developed by Le Strange and later detailed throughout the 20th century – resulted in a fossilization in scholarly understanding of the Ismaili phenomenon in Quhistān.

Increasingly, scholars at large gave an historical, almost substantial, not due reality to the *idea* of the «Ismaili castles». They often misused this locution, to the extent that every castle of Quhistān has come

to labeled as “Ismaili”. All in all, the widely-believed connection between mountain castles and Ismailism relies only on the reception of prior studies, superficial direct observations, local informers, and arbitrary interpretations of textual passages. As a consequence of its wide diffusion, mostly due to Willey’s works, the category of “Ismaili castles” took hold, and became the key for the interpretation and reconstruction of the entire history of Nizari Ismailism between the 11th and 13th century. This is not to deny that a significant number of castles have been controlled by the Ismailis, but rather to question the seamless identification of each and every mountain castle as “Ismaili” and the categories that led to it. The aim is to lay the ground for new research endeavors that will look at the evidence with fresh eyes.

An Alamūt paradigm?

Currently, scholarship holds that the so-called “Ismaili State” was founded by Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ in the Sub-Caspian region of Rūdbār, and spread by the Ismailis propagandists and missionaries first to Quhistān and later to other regions of the Iranian Plateau (Daftary 2015b: 41–57). The existence of an Ismailis state in a mountain region such as Rūdbār, strengthened the idea that there was a sort of Ismaili model of government and military expansion, connected with a network of mountain fortresses (Daftary 2015b: 50). All too easily, this led scholars to postulate a direct and fixed association between the castles and the Ismailism. The idea that there was a standard model of territorial control through the “Ismaili castles”, resulted in an historical reconstruction that inevitably over-estimated the importance of these structures and the link between Ismaili political and military activism and mountain regions.

However, this *Alamūt paradigm* does not account for the crucial variance between different regions of the vast Iranian Plateau, such as their geophysical profile and climate. In the case in point, the stark differences between Rūdbār and Quhistān hardly entail comparable models of anthropization and exploitation of the territory. It is simply wrong to apply a standard interpretative model, namely the *Alamūt paradigm*, to the analysis of the history of both regions. A single element – the mountain castle – does not constitute evidence of a *modus gubernandi* peculiar to the Ismailis. Any implicit comparison of Quhistān to the Rūdbār region that fails to take into account climatic and geophysical features leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of how the

interrelation between the human beings and their environment actually worked (an interrelation, whose importance is well stressed by Chiara Valerio's words, 2020: 6).

Generally speaking, scholars of medieval Iran often overlooked urban conglomerates and their interrelation with rural areas. With regard to the Eastern Iranian lands, and, in particular, Khurāsān, consistent attempts in this direction have been made by Richard Bulliet in his studies on the city of Nīshābūr (Bulliet 1972). More recently, Arezou Azad proposed an historical reconstruction of the urban space of the city through an innovative analysis of the Persian local story *Faḍā'il-i Balkh* (Azad 2013). But, then again, most regions of the Iranian Plateau still await a comprehensive study of urban settlements and their surroundings.

Recently, the preeminent scholar Jürgen Paul published his translation of Jean Aubin's article titled *Elements for the Study of Urban Agglomerations in Medieval Iran*, written by the French historian and presented at the conference on the *Islamic City* held in Oxford in 1965 (Paul 2018). As Jürgen Paul himself claims in his introduction, the reason that has prompted him to translate in English Jean Aubin's study is that, «it hasn't had the impact it deserves, and in spite of all progress achieved over the intervening half century, many of the questions it raises still seek full answers» (Paul 2018: 21).

In his study, Aubin attempts to provide innovative methodological elements in order to comprehend in depth the characteristics of the conurbation of medieval Iran, avoiding prejudices and the idea of a standard model of Islamic city. Indeed, as he notes, an important aspect which has been neglected by the historians for too long is the relation between the urban and the rural sphere, beyond simplistic descriptions of the city as an agglomeration surrounded by fields and irrigated gardens. The hinterland usually recognized as vital for the subsistence of the entire city, it is overlooked in most studies. Moreover, historiographical sources often feed historians with a narrative reflecting the point of view of the court and its ruling elite. In primary sources the city is merely the backdrop of the narration and it does not have agency. The same applies to the countryside. Scant information emerges from the sources about the role of the hinterlands and this reflects in the little interest that modern historians have in it.

Obvious enough, Aubin's method is especially valid when we look at Qūhistān. Yet, it did not enjoy the widespread application one would expect. To date, studies on rural lands and the cities are still informed by a

sort of separation between the rural and the urban sphere. This (frankly untenable) separation of the urban and the rural is intimately linked with the current understanding of the political settings of the Seljuq age. The complex relationship between the Seljuqs and the Ismailis that emerges from the sources is simplified, and to some extent polarized into two main systems of territorial control: the Seljuq central power, equipped with a court and an urban-type administrative system, exercised power over the main cities, commercial centers, and routes, while the Ismailis, whose power is acritically associated with the network of fortresses located outside urban spaces, controlled the hinterlands, and exercised control over the principle routes in the plains from their strongholds, gaining their proceeds from the predation of passing caravans.

This reconstruction does not appear to be entirely exhaustive in light of multiple medieval accounts of consistent Ismaili presence in the main urban centers of Quhistān. We will return later on this. For now, it will suffice to note that the relationship between Ismailis and cities attested by primary sources, has been reported by the modern historians as a mere historiographical data. This led them to de-emphasize the role of Nizari activism in the urban agglomerations of the region, which were, and still are, usually found in the plains that lay at the foot of the mountain hills. Available scholarship does not account satisfactorily for the role played by Quhistāni cities where Ismailis often lived and by those rural areas that were by necessity connected to the network of fortresses during Seljuq and post-Seljuq times.

As Aubin taught us, before analyzing the social and urban history of the Iranian lands, one must question the phenomenon of urbanization, the reasons for its formation, how an urban agglomeration originates, the factors which contributes to its transformation and, accordingly, investigate why urbanization stopped and receded. On the wake of what has been affirmed by the French scholar, three factors are at play in the rise and the decline of urban phenomena. First, the geographical factor: different geographical and climate characteristics call for different systems of social organization. Second, the economic factor: for instance, the development or the loss of importance of a commercial artery at which a city is located, determines its growth or its decline. Third, the political factor: the prestige of an urban formation or its loss of strategic importance, can be determined by political decisions of the ruling class (Paul 2018: 32–33). It goes without saying that each of the three factors can have a stronger or weaker influence on urbanization processes at any

given moment. What is crucial here, is how different their outcomes in terms of urban and social configurations can be, even when comparing conurbations in neighboring provinces and regions.

Building on Aubin's discourse, it could be argued that not only the categorization of «Islamic city» is unsound, but that it is just wrong to assume that there is a standard pattern valid for all the cities of the Iranian Plateau.

While Aubin himself does not go this far, his model should also apply to rural areas in symbiotic relationship with the cities (*i.e.* the hinterland). This means that we need to take into account the same three factors that shape urbanization processes, and drop the unproductive idea of a standard "Iranian" or "Islamic" model applicable to regions with different geophysical profiles and climates.

In the present case, it is misleading to apply the *Alamūt paradigm* and assume natural resource management and the means of livelihood of the Quhistāni fortresses were the same of those in Rūdbār region. The significant geographical and climatic differences imply different systems of agricultural production, water management, and food and water supply networks. The same goes for the economy. The mountain region of Rūdbār is characterized by a lack of significant urban centers and important commercial routes – in fact, the crucial trading road of Rayy-Hamadān passed through the city of Qazwīn, located in the plain, which was, notoriously, in perpetual struggle against the Nizaris of Alamūt. On the contrary, Quhistāni fortresses are often located in the proximity of the several urban centers in the plains. These cities, which in some cases were quite populous as it is the case of Qā'in, Tūn and Turshīz, were crossed by important caravan routes linking some of the major world trading hubs of the 12th and 13th centuries, as the Nīshābūr-Hirāt road, the Nīshābūr-Nīh-Sīstān, the Nīshābūr-Ṭabas-Yazd and the Nīshābūr-Ṭabas-Kīrmān routes (Cornu 1985: 144–156, tables vi, xvi, xvii; Krawulsky 1978: 123–133).

Even from a political perspective, there is a crucial difference between Rūdbār and Quhistān. The Alamūt Valley was the headquarters of the Ismailī power in Persia, while Quhistān remained subordinate to it at least until the second half of the 13th century, when the army of Hülagü Khān invaded Iran and destroyed the fortresses of Alamūt (654/1257). Quhistān survived the destructions and for several years offered effective resistance to the Mongols during the first Ilkhanid age, by creating alliances with Mongol forces and finding support in local rulers (Dashdondog 2020: 314; May 2004: 233).

To sum up, modern historians have conceptualized the existence of an essentially Ismaili model of politico-territorial administration founded by Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ and put in place in Alamūt. This model relied on a network of mountain strongholds, from where the Ismailis launched raids against enemies and committed political murders with the objective of destabilizing the precarious dynastic equilibria within the Seljuq central administration.¹³ Scholars commonly accept that the political project of Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ consisted in sending missionaries (*dā'īs*) to areas outside the Rūdbār region, namely Quhistān and Iṣfahān, in order to spread the doctrine, and disseminate the Ismaili model of political and territorial control, as well as the Ismaili methods of political struggle against the Seljuqs, he had already deployed in the establishing of the Alamūt enclave (Daftary 2007: 313–319). This model of administration constitutes the *Alamūt paradigm*.

The uncritical application of the *Alamūt paradigm* beyond Rūdbār and specifically to Quhistān has led to the identification of most if not all Quhistāni fortresses as Ismaili. This happened in spite of lack both of a sound definition of what makes any fortress Ismaili and material or textual proof for case by case identifications. Overall, the success enjoyed by the *Alamūt paradigm* meant that the otherwise self-evident differences between Rūdbār and Quhistān were grossly overlooked. To put it briefly, scholarship on Quhistāni Ismailism is plagued by a fundamental anageographism, a sort of geographical anachronism. The failure to account for Quhistān's specificities impaired the efforts to reconstruct the history of Ismailism in this region. For instance, it prevents historians to answer why Ismaili resistance here was relatively longer-lived than in Rūdbār.

What we propose is an analysis of available archaeological and textual sources that casts aside any *identity* and *ideological* perspective stressing opposing religious affiliation as the bedrock of opposing systems of territory occupation and modalities of social-economic organization – the Ismailis in the mountain castles and the urban Sunnis of the plain (Hodgson 1955: 79–80). Instead, our polestar is the interpretation of social and economic data in light of the environment in which the castles are placed, the natural resources at their disposal, and the interrelation between urban and rural landscapes. This approach accounts for the fact

¹³ As Daftary (2015b: 50) points out, «The Ismailis strategy was based on the seizure of a host of strongholds from where a multiplicity of simultaneous rising could be launched throughout the Seljuq realm to overwhelm the existing decentralized order from within».

that each geographic and climatic condition calls for specific modes of territory exploitation, water and food supplies systems, and concurs in how human societies devise their different economic, social and political structures.

Contrary to what its name may suggest, Quhistān is not a region of impervious mountain ranges. Its territory is a vast alluvial desert plain, interrupted by mountain ranges of medium altitude, and dotted with isolated mountain hills with slopes softened by natural erosion. The climate is generally arid and the precipitations are significantly scarce throughout the year (Fisher 1968: 73–76). Quhistān has no significant watercourses with a stable annual flow rate, and the water supply is mostly through a complex system of artificial underground channels (*qanāt/kārīz*) and occasionally by natural spring of modest flow. According to the records of medieval geographers in pre- and post-Seljuq times, the region was quite populous, with several small and medium size urban agglomerations, as well as sizeable centers of strategic importance, such as the already mentioned Turshīz, Tūn, Qā'in, and Bīrjand. For these reasons, Quhistān has little in common with Rūdbār and the Alamūt Valley, in particular for what concerns agricultural production. Rūdbār is a mountainous region located in the Sub-Caspian region, comprising several narrow valleys between high mountain ranges in the core of the Alburz mountain range (Fisher 1968: 38). The region is rich in springs, streams and stable watercourses and it is crossed by the second largest river of the country, the Sifidrūd. This latter originates in the North-western Alburz, it runs for 650 km and enters in the Caspian Sea on north-east of Rasht, draining the waters of several tributaries, including the Qizil Uzan and the Shāhrūd rivers. The Shāhrūd rises from the Takht-i Sulaymān Massif, in the Eastern Alburz mountain and one of its tributaries is the Alamūt river, which gives the name to the valley where it is located the famous castle of Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ (Fisher 1968: 42–44). The valley has a relatively high annual precipitation, with sparse rainfalls in spring and autumn, that turn frequent in winter (Ganji 1968: 227). Similar climatic conditions – peculiar of the entire Rūdbār – favour even rice cultivation, which is typical of well-watered alluvial slopes and riverside areas, as well other cereals like millet, wheat, barley which are proper of dry lands and are grown on the piedmont unirrigated terraces.¹⁴ In terms of water and food

¹⁴ Fisher (1968: 41–42) affirms «In common with most of the central and Western Caspian plain, the abundance and luxuriance of natural vegetation as compared with the rest of Iran are a most striking features»; see also Volk 1963: 317.

supply, Rūdbār was a somehow self-sustaining region, since available water allowed for a double type of cropping, practiced in the immediate proximity of castles or even at their slopes. In addition, the geographical and geological features of Rūdbār – high mountain ranges, rugged peaks and narrow valleys protected by fortresses – served as natural barriers, contributing to the region’s political self-sufficiency.¹⁵

Quhistān is quite different. Agriculture in Quhistān depends almost entirely on sophisticated systems of water canalization, the *qanāt* (or *kārīz*), which draw water from a “mother well”, usually located on the upslope of a range of mountains or hills, and brings it to villages, towns and cities in the arid and dry plains (Bulliet 2009: 22–23). Throughout Iranian history, *qanāts* were built to make fertile vast arid and semi-desert areas. Even where other water sources were available, *qanāt* made the water supply more efficient, permitting more abundant crops throughout the year.¹⁶ A new *qanāt* could be dug to increase agricultural production or to sustain a new city. In the words of Richard Bulliet, this was the case of the so-called *fulān-ābād* centers – such as, for instance, Muḥammad-ābād, Aḥmad-ābād etc. – whereas *fulān* stands in for the name of the founder, who financed the digging of the *qanāt*, gives sustenance to the villagers, and supplied plow animals, seeds and building materials, while the *ābād/ābādī*, “settlement or inhabited space”, derives from the Middle Persian *-āpāt*, “developed, inhabited, cultivated”.¹⁷ *Qanāts* vary in length

¹⁵ Colin Volk, the geologist who joined Peter Willey’s expedition to Alamut in 1960, writes that at the time of his visit, the region of Rūdbār was economically dependent on other lands outside its borders, and this was «in contrast to the greater degree of self-sufficiency that may have existed in former centuries, as during the Assassin movements. At that time, in the attempt to make Rūdbār an economically viable unit, the agricultural potential, from the mountain slopes to the valley terraces and alluvial fans, would have been used to the uttermost, protected as the valley was by a series of castles and fortresses, themselves cannily utilizing the natural features of the land» (Volk, 1963: 319).

¹⁶ As Bulliet (2009: 22) states, «In thousands of instances the cultivation of village lands depends entirely on a *qanāt*. However there are certainly exceptions. [...] water from other sources may suffice for growing winter crops (e.g. wheat and barley), which benefit from the winter being rainy season in most of Iran, but be insufficient for summer crops (e.g. cotton), which grow throughout the hot, dry season and utilize the regular flow from a *qanāt*.».

¹⁷ Contrary to what Ahmed Ashraf argues, Richard Bulliet does not exclude a folk etymology associating *ābād/ābādī* with *āb*, “water”, which, while not philologically correct, could have a part in the popular use of the term *ābād* for *qanāt*-watered settlements; see, Bulliet 2009: 19–27, and Ashraf 2011.

from a maximum of 50 km, as in the exceptional case of the *qanāt* of Yazd, to a length between 0,5 and 2 km, as most of the *qanāt* in the Iranian Plateau. Another exceptional case is the *qanāt* of Gunābād – which is still in use – in Quhistān, in the southern part of the modern Iranian province of Rezavi Khorasan. The *qanāt* of Gunābād reaches a length of 35 km and it disposes of extremely deep vertical shafts, one reaching 300 meters of depth, while in most *qanāts*, the shafts are not deeper than 50 meters (de Planhol 2012). Not just the digging, but also the maintenance of the *qanāts* was very expensive, and it had to be conducted frequently to prevent structural collapses and wear due to the water flow. The investments behind the *qanāts* indicate the utmost importance of this structure in arid areas, as the cultivation of villages and city lands depended on it. For these reasons, the economic prosperity and wealth of the arid regions of the Iranian Plateau – and for once Quhistān is no exception – lied in the cities of the plains and their surrounding agricultural hinterland.

Important commercial routes contributed to shape Quhistān. The main fortresses of Quhistān – *i.e.* those that modern historians labeled as “Ismaili” – are not located in some remote valley. Instead, they are found in immediate proximity with the main cities at the crossroads of crucial trading routes, in stark contrast, once again, to the fortresses in Rūdbār. This shows that in Quhistān the urban sphere was the center of political and economic life, and this was also valid for the Nizaris, who ruled, or tried to rule, the region. Moreover, the remaining fortresses in Quhistān are often located on the summit of single mountain peaks of medium height, just a few kilometers outside the cities, and sometimes right above them. They do not dispose of natural barriers or protections, making them easily surrounded and besieged. These fortresses are much more vulnerable in comparison to the those in Rūdbār. This is the case of the Shāhānshāhī castle in Nihbandān, placed on the top of an isolated peak five kilometers far from its nearest town; the same can be said of Qal‘a-yi Kūh, located on an a hill just three kilometers from Qā’in, Kūh-Qal‘a in Firdaws (the medieval Tūn), situated on an isolated mountain peak at twelve kilometers as the crow flies from the city, and watching a wide stretch of the main route Nīshābūr-Tūn-Qā’in. Another example is Qal‘a-yi Kūh, which is located just above the town of Sarbīsha. Clearly, the proximity of these castles with urban centers in the plains raises questions concerning the relationship between the fortresses and the cities.

If the *Alamūt paradigm* is in some way recognizable in the case of Rudbār, it is useless for Quhistān, given the specificities of the region in terms of natural and economical environment and (supposedly all-important) location of the fortresses. This is true, by way of example, for the castle of Qā'in, or the Shāhānshāhī fortress in Nihbandān among the many that we mentioned above.

As we said, the fortress of Qā'in is located just outside the town walls on a hill about a hundred meters higher than the city allowing a clear line of sight on Qā'in, the wide surrounding plain, the villages, crop fields and routes therein. Evidently, the symbiotic relationship between the fortress, the city, and the plain cannot be overlooked. In fact, control over the fortress, meant control over the city due to their proximity, and vice-versa. The city was the actual commercial and economic powerhouse and, therefore, the seat of political power in the area. The fortress was there to keep things that way, it was not an autonomous and separate entity. As a matter of fact, fortresses in Quhistān could not be self-sufficient, they had to be sustained by agricultural production in the plains.¹⁸ Modern studies on Ismailis do not account for these facts. Instead, they stress the conflict between cities and fortresses, as if Quhistāni fortresses mimicked the opposition between the city of Qazwīn and the fortresses of Rūdbār, typical of the *Alamūt paradigm*.

This leads us to reflect on what Jean Aubin affirmed more than half a century ago about the necessity to investigate the relationship between the rural and the urban sphere in order to better understand the characteristics of conurbations in medieval Iran and the interrelations between the agricultural production and cities, and subsequently to investigate the relationship linking the castles with this two entities.

¹⁸ These considerations are the results of an expedition we conducted in Southern Khorasan in 2018, on which we shall return later. The size of the castles and the geomorphology of their location generally could not allow agriculture. Where agriculture was practiced, the cultivated area was anyway exiguous and it clearly insufficient to feed a military contingent, let alone the entire population of the castle. A possible exception might be the castle of Darah which is described by Mustawfī as having crop fields at its top, see Mustawfī 1336/1958: 178. Moreover, the arid climate of the region only allowed agricultural production where stable water sources (*i.e.* *qanāt/kārīz*) were made available. It is therefore difficult to think that the agriculture practiced on the castles of Quhistān would have been sufficient to sustain the «Ismaili state» founded on the network of fortresses. It follows that the cities, along with their productive hinterlands, must have played a major role in the control of the region.

But what was the role and the importance of the city under Ismaili power in Quhistān? The question is worth asking because the cities were the pivots of the region, it stands to reason to assume that Ismaili rulers had an economic and political interest in them. In other words, it is conceivable to assume that political actors in Quhistān had more at stake in the cities rather than in the fortresses. A similar interest in the cities pertained not only to the Seljuqs, Khwārazmshāhs or Ghūrīds and later Mongols, occupying the region between the 11th and 13th century, but reasonably also to the Ismailis. Indeed, if this last point has been addressed by the studies, although timidly and only partially, by recognizing that historical records indicate an Ismaili presence in the main urban centers of Quhistān, this data has not been fully investigated and it has not received the attention that it deserves.¹⁹

Reconsidering the role of the castles

According to the historical sources, prosperous centers of the region, such as Turshīz, Qā'in, Gunābād and Ṭabas, had consistent urban communities of Ismailis. In some cases, these communities controlled politically their cities and were well military organized; they had armies to attack the enemies and defend the urban population from the assaults of the nominal ruling Sultanate during Seljuq and Khwārazmshāh periods. Multiple accounts report that the Ismailis of Turshīz had been besieged repeatedly. According to *al-Kamīl fī al-Tārīkh* by Ibn al-Athīr, in 520/1126 Sultan Sanjar's *wazīr* attacked the Ismailis controlling the city (Ibn al-Athīr 1871: vol. 10, 445). In his *Tārīkh-i Jahān-Gushāy*, Juwaynī mentions a siege of Turshīz conducted in Khwārazmshāh times (Juwaynī, 1912: vol. 2, 46–47; trans. 1958: vol 1, 313–14). This author reports on a long-lasting blockade put in place against the Ismailis at the hands of Shāh Takish. With the objective of capturing Turshīz, Shāh Takish ordered to fill the deep moat around the city, but after months of siege he had to desist. The same event it is recorded by the Persian historian and geographer Mustawfī Qazwīnī in his *Tārīkh-i Guzīda*. After the killing of the *wazīr* Shams al-Dīn Hirawī (or Nizām al-Mulk, in Juwaynī's version) at the hands of an Ismaili *fidā'ī*,

¹⁹ A partial exception is the already quoted article *The Isma'ilis of Quhistān and the Maliks of Nīmrūz or Sīstān* written by Clifford Edmund Bosworth in 1995. The historian, relying on a plurality of historical sources, recognizes a sizeable Ismaili urban presence both in the main centers of Quhistān and in the villages.

Shāh Takish sought revenge and gave the order to eradicate the Ismailis presence in Persia, starting with Quhistān (Mustawfī 1362/1983: 489).

It seems that the Ismailis controlled not only Turshīz, but also other cities of Quhistān. In Seljuq times, on Sultan Sanjar’s orders expeditions were conducted against the Ismailis of the city of Ṭabas in 496/1103 (Ibn al-Athīr 1871: vol. 10, 216–217), and again, under the Khwārazmshāhs against the «Ismaili» Qā’in and Gunābād, as well as against smaller centers in Northern Quhistān like Khūsf, Zūzan and Khwāf, this latter openly described as «Ismaili» (Ibn al-Athīr 1871: vol. 10, 217 and vol. 12, 110).²⁰

Primary sources yield interesting information on the numbers of the Nizaris in the urban centers. The Persian writer Muḥammad ‘Awfī reports that, when Turshīz was conquered by the last Naṣrid *amīr* Yamīn al-Dīn Bahrām Shāh ibn Tāj al-Dīn (III) Ḥarb (r. 610–618/1213–1221), one hundred thousand Ismailis were slaughtered (‘Awfī, 1335/1956: vol. 1, 49). In Nih it is recorded the defeat of an army of one thousand four hundred Ismailis (*Qarāmiṭa*) by the Naṣrid forces in 489/1096 (Bahār 1314/1935: 388; trans. Gold 1976: 317). During the Mongol invasion, the cities of Tūn and again Turshīz had been devastated. The historian ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Juwaynī refers that Hülagü after conquering the city of Tūn ordered the entire male Ismaili population to be slaughtered (Juwaynī, 1912: vol. 3, 102–103; trans. 1958: vol 2, 615–616).

The numbers recorded are clearly exaggerated. They are modeled on a well-known propagandist narrative that overstates the numbers of the enemies defeated – here the Ismailis –, to make the victories of the conquerors more valuable. Nonetheless, such information should not be underestimated. If read in light of what we said above, these passages confirm our assumption on the pivotal role the cities had for the Ismailis in the Quhistānī context. By this, we do not intend to disregard the fact that the sources record a high number of the Quhistānī fortresses under Ismaili control. An evident example is a passage of Jūzjānī’s *Ṭabaqāt-i Naṣīrī* where the author affirms that there were seventy fortresses all over Quhistān in the hands of the Ismailis (Jūzjānī 1342–1343/1963–1964: vol. 2, 186). The high number recorded by Jūzjānī – which, if reliable, reasonably indicates a widespread control of the region by the Ismailis, since it would represent approximately the same number of fortresses found by the archaeologists in Quhistān – indicates a widespread Ismaili

²⁰ See also Jūzjānī 1342–1343/1963–1964: vol. 1, 380.

control on the entire region. But we must be careful not to read too much in the sources. Instances of Ismaili control over the fortresses does not allow us to talk of an *Ismaili identity* of these fortresses, since these were simply one among the means of control of the region, together with the control over its cities and routes. The fortress was crucial not only for the Ismailis, but also for any power willing to hold the region at that time. As an evidence of a similar scenario, Jūzjānī himself, in another passage of his *Ṭabaqāt-i Naṣīrī*, reports that the Naṣrid ‘Uthmān Shāh ibn Naṣīr al-Dīn ‘Uthmān, cousin of Yamīn al-Dīn Bahrām Shāh (ruling in Sistan) sold the Shahānshāhī fortress in Nih to the Ismailis, and later Yamīn al-Dīn Bahrām Shāh tried again to recover it, but failed (Jūzjānī 1342–1343/1963–1964: vol. 1, 282). This account confirms the strategic and political importance of this fortress in exercising control over strategic commercial routes, namely the route crossing Nih and connecting the Persian Gulf with North Khorasan. Of course, the fortresses were key in the maintenance of the power over the region for any ruling group or dynasty and they could be military conquered, or at times sold and bought. In light of this, the effort to identify “Ismaili castles” by their architecture, defensive structure, pottery remains or infrastructure of food and water supply, is just misleading. Even worse, this effort leads scholars to underestimate a wider phenomenon, which encompasses different patterns of rural resistance and defense against the enemies. Specifically, in addition to the existence of fortresses located in the immediate vicinities to the urban centers, it must be noted that there are in Quhistān other types of castles with different placement on the territory and architectural features.

At this regard, we shall present own direct observations. These are the result of a survey we conducted between September and October 2018 in the modern Iranian regions of Southern Khorasan and Rezavi Khorasan (*i.e.* the territory of the historical Quhistān). The purpose of our expedition was to better comprehend what historically had been the role of the castles and to observe directly the environment in which they are located, as well as the remains of their buildings, architecture and defensive systems. During our expedition, we visited sixteen sites (see the following map) and mapped approximately forty fortifications, fifteen of which in the region of Bīrjand alone. Surprisingly, we found that, in addition to well-fortified fortresses of considerable size, located in proximity of the cities, overlooking the main roads – as those described above –, there was a different type of fortification. First of all, this type of site was located in an

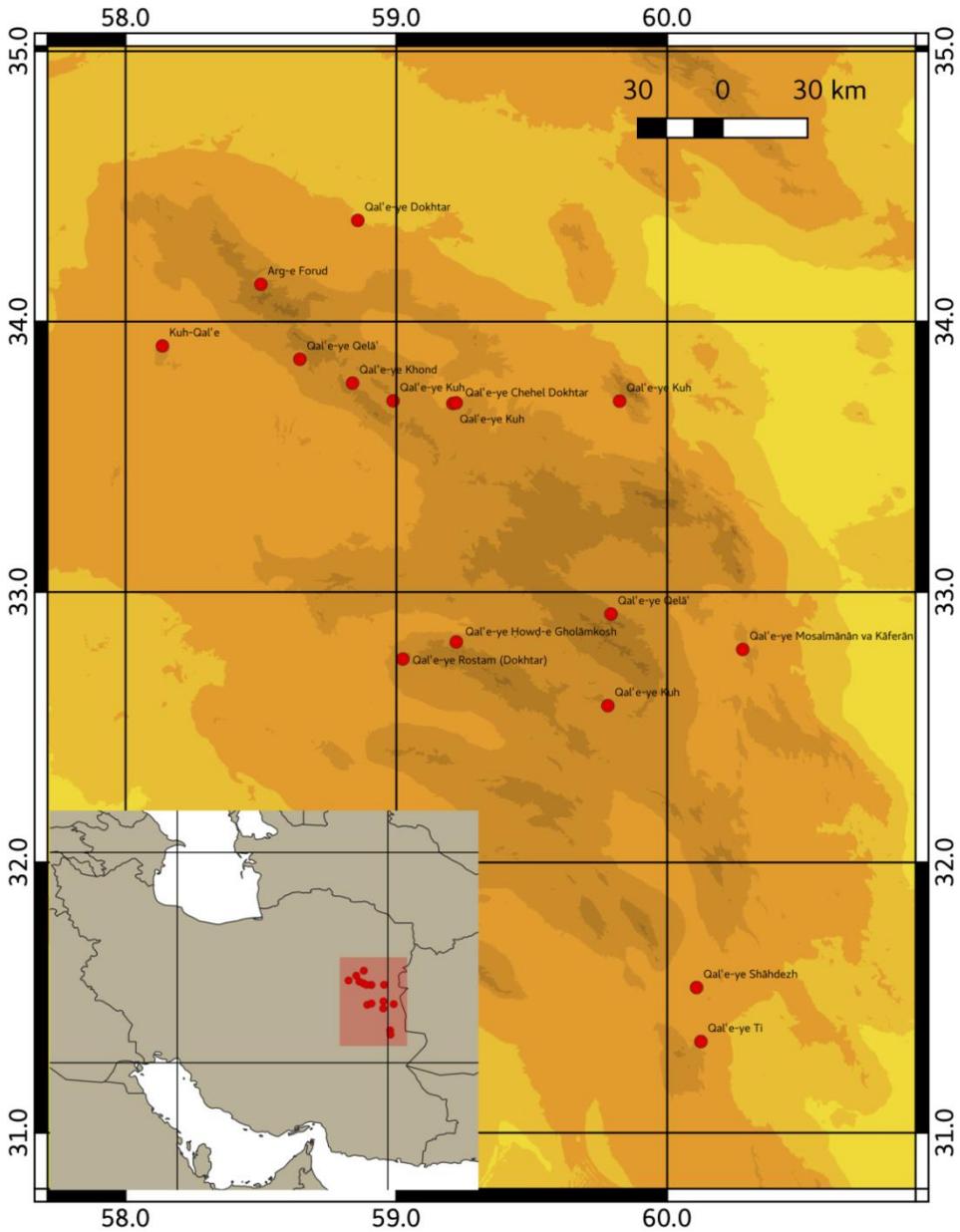
entirely rural environment, in the hilly countryside at dozens of kilometers far from the main urban centers of the plains. These fortifications had been built near very small agricultural villages and were weakly fortified. These rural fortresses had one or two watching tower at most, and in some cases no defensive walls at all. Moreover, due to their extremely small size, they were not able to sustain a military contingent, nor dwelling spaces. A good example is the case of the castle of Qal‘a-yi Khund, located near the small village of Bīhūd, in an entirely rural and agricultural environment 60 kilometers far from Qā‘in.²¹ The fortification lies just above the village, on a low hill at the heart of a vast flat and *qanāt*-irrigated area, particularly suited to the cultivation of saffron, barberry and jujube. The archaeological remains show that the area had essential defenses, since it disposed of just a single ring of walls. We found the same features in some other fortifications we visited, for instance Qal‘a-yi Kūh in Jazanān (in the county of Qā‘in) and Qal‘a-yi Ṭī in Nihbandān. The former is located in the very small village at 35 kilometers far from Qā‘in, while the latter is located in an extreme rural area at 30 kilometers far from Nihbandān. Both these fortifications are constructed at the top of isolated or semi-isolated hills, they are small, weakly fortified. At Qal‘a-yi Ṭī in Nihbandān the rests of just one small-sized tower and a small dam – presumably intended to collect rainwater for watering livestock – are still visible.

These buildings are quite different in size in comparison to the fortress of Qal‘a-yi Kūh near Qā‘in, and the Shāhānshāhī fortress of Nihbandān. An even starker comparison could be made with Kūh-Qal‘a in Firdaws which is the biggest and most fortified castle we have seen in the region, with three lines of defensive walls, about twenty watch towers still visible, remains of palaces and dwellings, and a fortified citadel at its top.

The structure of these three small-sized fortifications makes it clear that they did not have a military function *stricto sensu*. During our survey we were able to identify two common characteristics of this second type of fortress: the rural setting, and the presence of an extraordinary amount of surface remains such as ceramics, potteries, and jars. These findings suggest that this kind of fortifications were mainly built to store grain, other crops and flocks, and to defend them from potential plunders. The

²¹ As Peter Willey (2005: 168) pointed out, the Quhistāni district of *Qā‘ināt* (*i.e.* the area of Qā‘in) was thick with mountain fortifications, «some large and imposing citadels, others smaller fortifications and outposts». Willey visited the castle of Bīhūd during an expedition conducted in 1966, and included the fortification in his list of «Ismaili Castles and Fortifications» (2005: 273).

agricultural use of the land where these structures stand, supports the hypothesis of a close connection with local agricultural production.



Map of the Quhistāni fortresses we visited in 2018.

However, abundant findings of potteries and rest of jars is a common feature of all the Quhistāni fortresses, indicating a general usage of the fortresses as granaries and warehouses. The main difference between the two types of fortresses we observed in the region lies in their territorial placement: those overlooking the plains are larger and heavier fortified than those located in rural areas distant from the main routes and cities in the plains.

If that is indeed the case, the fortifications of Quhistān would not have a much different function from those we usually find, for instance, in the Levant and in North Africa. We are referring specifically to the Agadir, «a fortified enclosure where chambers are allotted to the various families of the tribe for storage of grain, and where the tribe takes refuge in times of danger», which is typical of the Berbers of Tunisia, Algeria and above all Morocco (Bearman *et al.*, 2012). Similar structures were also present in the Levant in medieval times. In fact, in the case of Syria, the usage of the fortresses as granaries is attested from the Fatimid to the Mamluk period (Raphael 2013: 56–67). To give just an example, the Mamluk Sultan Baybars (r. 1260–1277) reportedly stocked some of the fortresses of Egypt and Syria with grain to prevent food shortage and to supply his military campaigns (Ibn al-Furāt 1942: Vol. 7, 192; *apud* Raphael 2013: 63–64). The usage of fortresses as granaries is attested also in Northern India at the time of Bābur’s expeditions. Bābur, founder of the Mughal dynasty (r. 1526–1530), attacked the fortifications of the region of *Hashtnagar* – *i.e.* along the Swat River in nowadays Northern Pakistan, notoriously characterized by a remarkable agricultural production – and plundered the grain stored therein to supply his military campaigns (Bābur 1921: 376, 410).

The hypothesis that a large amount of the Quhistāni fortifications had served as granaries, poses a further challenge to the category of the “Ismaili castle”. Instead, a storage function would be disconnected from any identity discourse — in medieval Quhistān everybody needed to store and keep their crops safe, whatever their political or religious identity may be. A storage fortress is an expression of the shared economic and social way of life experienced in rural provinces of medieval Iran.

For a history of Quhistān

Over the course of this article we showed that the widespread adoption of “Ismaili castle” as interpretative historical category is groundlessness and

inadequate in the Quhistāni context. Although the sources confirm a connection of some of the fortifications of the region with the Ismailis, this fact has been overly emphasized and thus misunderstood. Since the first studies on Ismailism this misunderstanding led to a crystallization of the concept of “Ismaili castle” and to an enduring stagnation in the field of research.

To speak of “Ismaili castles” means to insist excessively on the “identity” of these buildings, to the point that it had led several scholars to *recognize* a sort of ill-defined “Ismailicity” in the architectural features, materials of construction, and location of the castles. Likewise, the label «Ismaili pottery» have been applied to the remains of the ceramics and jars found in the fortresses. On this matter, the art historian and archaeologist Rosalind Wade Haddon underlined the meaninglessness of both the definitions “Ismaili pottery” and “Nizari pottery”. In fact, there is no element allowing us to *recognize* a specific ideological or religious identity of the pottery remains found on the fortified sites, which are instead generally datable to the Saljuq period.²²

As scholars failed to isolate architectural or material elements that would clearly define the Ismaili identity of the fortresses, they turned to the political field, discussing how the Ismailis were politically organized and exercised power. It was as part of this effort that the idea of an “Ismaili state” connected with «Persian “national” and cultural sentiments» emerged.²³ In fact, following the legends circulating in Europe regarding the Ismailis – whose echoes persisted until the first

²² Rosalind Wade Haddon contributed to Peter Willey’s *Eagle Nest*, writing an *Appendix* to the book, entitled *Ismaili Pottery from the Alamut Period*, where she says that: «although the Nizari polity in Persia lasted over 150 years, we do not, as yet, have any pottery defined as ‘Nizari’ or ‘Ismaili’. This does not mean that they did not manufacture their own diagnostic wares; it simply means that insufficient archaeological work has been carried out in their known strongholds and settlements to establish such a fact. Indeed, we will see below that Peter Willey’s team may well have identified a typical Nizari product. It is to be hoped that this picture will gradually change as both national and international teams work at these numerous sites» (Wade Haddon 2005: 277–87).

²³ Daftary (2015b: 45–46) recognizes that «Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ revolt in Persian went beyond a strictly Ismaili one, having a broader appeal in Persia», «Ḥasan’s revolt was an expression of Persian “national” and cultural sentiments». In this scenario, «Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ, as an expression of his Persian identity, and in spite of his intense Islamic piety, adopted Persian as the religious language of all the Persian-speaking Ismailis». Daftary’s considerations do not differ significantly from what Hodgson stated in 1955 «Unlike the bands of warlords, the Isma’ilis strength could survive even serious defeats; for it was based on *free patriotism* rather than on pay» (the italics is ours; Hodgson 1955: 116).

decades of the 20th century – modern scholars theorized the historical existence of an Ismaili state founded by Ḥasan-i Šabbāh, instated first in the Alamūt Valley and then spread all over medieval Iran. The identity of the Ismaili state was to be *recognizable* in a formidable network of mountain fortresses which served as «*dār al-hijras* and bases for further operations» (Daftary 2007: 328), since «the characteristic pattern of Nizari warfare appear to have been modeled upon the story of Mohammed himself» and «Madina was the first *dār al-hijra* of Islam, the first *place of refuge*» (Hodgson 1955: 79; original in italic). In this perspective, the strongholds represented «so many lesser Madina, from which the Ismailis made raids on the surrounding Sunni lands» (Hodgson 1955: 80). Such a concept of an Ismaili *modus gubernandi* became a fixed pattern and it was seamlessly applied to other regions of medieval Iran to explain the success of Ismailism throughout the entire Iranian Plateau. As we showed, this *Alamūt paradigm* does not account for crucial differences existing between Rūdbār and Quhistān. These differences are primarily geographical and climatic, and secondarily, but not less importantly, economic and social. In light of this, a direct translation of the *Alamūt paradigm* from Rūdbār to a different region can be misleading and hampering.

These considerations led us to reflect on the function of the fortresses in Quhistān given the environmental, urban, social, economic setting of the region at that time. We know that in medieval Quhistān climatic and economic circumstances gave cities a dominant role over the fortresses. Undoubtedly, in strategical terms the fortresses represented an important tool to keep one’s political power over the region, as they watched over the main commercial routes and cities. Therefore, fortresses had a military function and were used as such both by the Ismailis and by other coeval ruling groups or dynasties as the Seljuqs, Khwārazmshāhs or Ghūrīds. But these typically military fortresses, found just above the main cities or close nearby, are not the only ones found in Quhistān. Our preliminary survey in the region taught us that there are other types of fortification in Quhistān. This second type of fortification is of small dimensions, poorly fortified in comparison with the fortifications overlooking the plains, and located deep in the countryside, surrounded by crop-fields and small farming villages. Their clear connection with the agricultural environment and the nature of surface remains strongly suggest that these structures were mainly used as defensible granaries and warehouses. Farmers would store grain and other agricultural products, as

well as some head of cattle, and were able to defend them to some extent against aggressors. Similar practices are attested in North Africa, Levant and Northern India. Unfortunately, this hypothesis still needs to be supported by strong archaeological data. So far, only superficial surveys have been conducted on the rural fortifications sites of Quhistān.

Even if archaeological excavations were to support our hypothesis, a crucial question would still remain answered. Why and when a so many fortifications were left abandoned? What changed in the socio-economic framework of Quhistān that caused this? Is the catastrophist view of the Mongol conquests convincing? Did the Mongols destroy fortresses and cities provoking a devastating economic crisis throughout the entire Persia? Historians have rejected the idea of the Mongol era as a dark period for the Iranian Plateau. On the contrary, scholarship has come to recognize the dynamism, the vivid commercial and cultural exchanges, and the religious and linguistic pluralism experienced during the Ilkhanid rule.²⁴

In the absence for the foreseeable future of archaeological data that could shed light on this question, we need to find other meaningful, albeit limited, avenues of research. We propose two.

First, the field is painfully in need of a fresh reading of the historical accounts freed from the typically 19th century identity-based perspective, whose faults we have discussed at length. Second, key data could emerge from a study of the Persian lexicon used by the medieval sources. We suggest specifically a lexical analysis of the Arabic-Persian term *qal'a*, which in the course of the present article we rendered in English as “castle”, “fortress” or “fortification”. Even through these renderings are the most common in current scholarship, they conceal more than they reveal. The term *qal'a* in primary sources refers to both the fortresses located on mountain peaks, and the urban citadel, within the city walls. Already Wladimir Ivanow in 1931 expressed perplexities concerning the translation of this term, «the term “castle” is a very unhappy rendering of the original term *qal'a*, which means simply, and first of all, a fortified village or town, as well as a specially fortified refuge, used in the time of danger, and left unoccupied in ordinary times» (Ivanow 1931: 43). Although there is some recent lexicographical work on the medieval Arabic and Persian terms for city and countryside, there is

²⁴ For a recent treatment of political, military and cultural history during the Mongol period, see Michal Biran, Jonathan Brack, and Francesca Fiaschetti (eds.) 2020.

not any comparable investigation on the term *qal'a* and its usage or meaning.²⁵

These two paths would allow Iranian and Ismaili studies to leave typical 19th expressions such as “Ismaili castle” or “Ismaili state” behind, and to avoid the simplistic application of outdated paradigms. This theoretical shift would be on top of a much needed clarity on the practical issue of what exactly Persian sources mean by expression like *qal'a-yi Turshīz* or *qal'a-yi Qā'in* – i.e. are they referring to the fortress located on mountain peaks nearby the city or to the fortified citadel within the city-walls?²⁶

However, these two avenues of research would not fully address the shortcomings concerning the reconstruction of the social and economic history of Quhistān. Nor they would answer why these castles were left abandoned. Despite some notable progresses, we still not have a full picture of social, economic and everyday life during the pre-Mongol and Ilkhanid era. In pursuit of new historical details and clues, historians of this period have over-investigated and over-stressed edited and translated sources. In doing so, scholars limited their researches to a small number of sources, neglecting the many more texts which still are unedited and could yield crucial information.²⁷ There is a large amount of manuscripts – in the range of thousands of texts – preserved in European and Asian collections which still remain unstudied (De Nicola 2020: 14). Precisely in this sense, particularly productive would be the investigation of the Persian-written literary genre of the *tadhkirāt*, (“*memorandum*”, biographical

²⁵ See, for instance, Mottahedeh 2018: 46–49. Despite its exhaustiveness regarding the Arabic and Persian terms for the city, streets, markets and systems of irrigation, this compendium overlooks the medieval terminology for the fortified constructions in the urban and extra-urban contexts. The Arabic-Persian term *qal'a* did not make it into the sections dedicated to the terms used to describe the “fortresses and palace” located within the city walls, and to the terms on rural constructions and the countryside.

²⁶ By way of example, the Persian historian and geographer Mustawfī in his *Tārīkh-i Guzīda* (1362/1983: 489) uses the expression «Turshīz qal'a» in his description of the siege of Turshīz perpetrated by Shāh Takish against the Ismailis. It is not clear whether the author is referring to a mountain fortification outside the city or to the urban citadel within the city-walls; cf. Juwaynī, 1912: vol. 2, 46–47.

²⁷ We are quoting here what Bruno De Nicola (2020: 4–21) affirmed in a recent illuminating article, «There is an unbalanced use of resources in the field. While scholars (myself included) have been debating over the same edited/translated sources, using and reusing them in search of new information and approaches, they have been narrowing down the scope of the research to a limited amount of narrative sources that only represents a tiny portion of the literary heritage of Ilkhanid Iran».

compendiums) – in large part still unedited – collecting information, anecdotes, acts of the life of memorable persons, as poets, Ṣūfī shaykhs, military leaders, kings. A preliminary study on this kind of compositions has been conducted – once again – by the preeminent historian Jean Aubin through the investigation of an unedited *tadhkira* narrating the life of the early 15th century Ṣūfī *shaykh* Akhī Muḥammad-Shāh, living in the village of Shārakht in Northern Qūhistān (Aubin 1967: 185–204). The text is very detailed and contains interesting geographical and economic data regarding the town – as the presence of the *mazra‘a*, *i.e.* seasonal farming villages surrounded by fields at the dependences of a major center – as well as information about the religious and social landscape of Timurid Qūhistān. Anyway, Aubin’s work – published in 1967 – remains surprisingly enough a pioneering study, and it has not been furthered by any similar investigation.

As a concluding note, we would like to put the considerations proposed in this article towards a methodological renewal of the field in the broader context. The brilliant historian Bruno De Nicola recently issued a call to widen the scope of historiographical research on the Ilkhanid period. De Nicola is aware that even though significant progresses have been made, «however, as scholars of the period, we cannot be complacent and remain neither stationed in the same paradigm nor constantly revisiting the same sources» (De Nicola 2020: 5).

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