Ismāʿīlism from the Fāṭimids to the Assassins

HSTAFM 162
Class 4.2 (1/28)
What’s in a name?

• Example: ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib

• Given Name = ‘Alī

• Patronymic (name derived from father), marked by ‘ibn’, ‘bin’, or ‘bint’ (sometimes abbreviated to ‘b.’ “son or daughter of”).

• Pedonymic (name derived from child) marked by “Abū” or “Umm” “father or mother of.”

• ‘Alī’s name therefore tells us a lot about his family.
Another Example

- Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī
- al-Ṭabarī is called in Arabic *nisba*, typically a relation to a place or tribe, in this case Ṭabaristān. So what do we know about al-Ṭabarī?
Hejaz, Syria, and Palestine. By 1038, the Fatimid caliphate had extended from present-day Algeria and Tunisia to the island of Siqilliyya (Sicily). By the end of al-Mustansir’s rule, of the Saljuq principality of Syria and Damascus, became the capital of the Saljuq sultanate. The Zirids, ruling over the former Fatimid possessions in Syria and Palestine, were lost to the Franks in 1153.

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The *da‘wa*

- Descendants of Ismā‘īl, the seventh Imam of the Ismā‘īlīs, lived in hiding in northern Syria during the 10th century.

- From Syria, they began a proselytizing movement (*da‘wa*), in which agents (*dā‘ī*) were sent to far-flung corners of the Islamic world to spread Ismā‘īlī teachings.

- In 909, the Dā‘ī to North Africa Abū ‘Abd Allāh, who had succeeded in converting local Berber tribes, successfully defeated the local vassals of the ‘Abbāsids.
Consolidation of North Africa

• In the beginning of the tenth century, the Fāṭimid Imām Mahdī moved from Syria to Raqqada in Tunisia, receiving allegiance from the populace and claiming the title Caliph.

• Already in 914, the Fatimids attempted to attack Egypt.

• From 943–7, a Kharijite rebellion arises among Berber tribes, finally put down by the Caliph Manṣūr.
Conquest of Egypt

- In 969 CE, Caliph Mu‘izz conquers Egypt, taking the old regional citadel-city of Fuṣṭāṭ, and building a new capital city, al-Mu‘izziyya al-Qāhira (“The City of Mu‘izz the Victorious”, modern Cairo) a few miles to the north.

- At its height, the Fāṭimid realm extends over parts of the Arabian Peninsula and Mesopotamia, even conquering Baghdad in 1058, briefly deposing the ‘Abbasid caliph.

- Eventually, Fāṭimid control recedes to Egypt proper. The Fāṭimids are ultimately deposed by Ṣalāḥuddīn, who re-establishes Sunnism in Egypt.
Fāṭimid Administration

- Multiethnic, multidenominational army, consisting of Turks, Armenians, Arabs, Berbers, and Sudanese troops.

- Powerful wazīrs and administrators drawn largely from non-Shīʿī communities—Sunnis, Jews, Copts, Melkites, etc.

- Perhaps the most powerful of all these wazīrs was a man called Jawhar al-Ṣiqillī “The Sicilian”, who was instrumental in the conquest of Egypt and who founded al-Azhar in 970 CE.
Al-Azhar Mosque, founded 970 CE.
The Travels of Nāṣir-i Khusraw
The Later History of the Ismāʿīlīs
The Later History of the Ismāʻīlīs

The Siege of Alamūt 1213–4, *Jāmiʿ al-Tavārīkh* (14th c.)