

ETYMOLOGY OF ASSASSIN

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NOTE: For a synopsis of this document and more information about the history of Alamut please refer to my [Index to the History of Alamut](#).

In the 'History of Alamut' there are at least four etymologies given for the word assassin.

1. User of hashish
2. Follower of Hassan
3. Rowdy people
4. Asas

Below I've included excerpts from various sources which argue the 'correct' etymology of the term. Generally contemporary Isma'ili sources reject the 'hash' root entirely (though do not, interestingly enough, reject the Alamutis 'terrorist' reputation) as demeaning to Isma'ilis.

Myth : The word assassin is derived from the word hashish.

It is a common myth that the word assassin comes from the Arabic word haschishin for hashish user.

The story is that al-Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah used hashish to enlist the aid of young men into his private army known as assassins (aschishin - or follower of Hassan). One of the primary sources for this information comes from the writings of Marco Polo who visited the area in 1273, almost 150 years after the reign of Al-Hassan.

There are many conflicting facts and sources for this information.

In the early 11th century, al-Hassan became the head of the Persian sect of the Ismailians, a rather obscure party of fanatics which gained local power under his guidance. In 1090, al-Hassan and his followers seized the castle of Alamut, in the province of Rudbar, which lies in the mountainous region south of the Caspian Sea. It was from this mountain home that he obtained evil celebrity among the Crusaders as "the old man of the mountains", and spread terror through the Mohammedan world.

In the account given by Marco Polo in "The Adventures [or Travels] of Marco Polo" it is told that "The Old Man kept at his court such boys of twelve years old as seemed to him destined to become courageous men. When the Old Man sent them into the garden in groups of four, ten or twenty, he gave them hashish to drink. They slept for three days, then they were carried sleeping into the garden where he had them awakened.

"When these young men woke, and found themselves in the garden with all these marvelous things, they truly believed themselves to be in paradise. And these damsels were always with them in songs and great entertainments; they; received everything they asked for, so that they would never have left that garden of their own will."

When the Old Man wished to kill someone, he would take a young man and tell him they could return to Paradise if they entered his service and followed his instructions or died in his service.

From this account it is farily clear that hashish was not the substance used. First, hashish is seldom prepared in a liquid form Hassan would drug young men with a substance which "cast them into a deep sleep" from which they could not be awakened. They were then carried to a beautiful secret garden which was impenetrable and unseen by any but those intended to be his haschishin. When they awoke in the garden, surrounded by beautiful naked women and boys, they were told that they were in Paradise. After a few hours of bliss, they were again made unconscious with the unknown substance. Awakening back in the presence of "The Old Man of the Mountain" they were told that he had given them this glimpse of Paradise and that they would go to Paradise if they entered his service and followed his instructions or died in his service. Thus, he recruited an army of assassins who were the first terrorist gang.

It is from this story that the connection between the words assassin and hashish is drawn. It is said that the word assassin comes from the Arabic word haschishin for hashish user. But Hassan and his followers didn't speak Arabic; they were Persians. Assassin comes from Hassassin -- a follower of Hassan.

Hassan, in fact, was a hashish prohibitionist. He argued that the Koran's ban on alcohol was a ban on all intoxicants, so his assassins were drug free terrorists. Except in the false Paradise where they were served wine as one of the joys of heaven. So, it is desire for alcohol not hashish that helped motivate the Assassins.

At the same time, within the crusading-culture of a pre- and early-modern Europe, the Syrian and Persian Nizaris took shape as Muslim mercenaries-cum-fanatics who murdered their victims while high on opium or hashish. If this propagandist concoction of a 'stoned' assassin fails to fit the complex reality of the discipline and training required for committing what was always an explicitly political act, the popular notion of Nizaris as a community of killers also denies their rich, multivalent culture.

- Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis*

"The Old Man kept at his court such boys of twelve years old as seemed to him destined to become courageous men. When the Old Man sent them into the garden in groups of four, ten or twenty, he game them hashish to drink [sic]. They slept for three days, then they were carried sleeping into the garden where he had them awakened.

"When these young men woke, and found themselves in the garden with all these marvelous things, they truly believed themselves to be in paradise. And these damsels were always with them in songs and great entertainments; they; received everything they asked for, so that they would never have left that garden of their own will."

And when the Old Man wished to kill someone, he would take him and say: 'Go and do this thing, I do this because I want to make you return to paradise'. And the assassins go and perform the deed willingly."

- Marco Polo - on his visit to Alamut in 1273

"Many scholars have argued, and demonstrated convincingly, that the attribution of the epithet 'hashish eaters' or 'hashish takers' is a misnomer derived from enemies the Isma'ilis and was never used by Moslem chroniclers or sources. It was therefore used in a pejorative sense of 'enemies' or 'disreputable people'. This sense of the term survived into modern times with the common Egyptian usage of the term Hashasheen in the 1930s to mean simply 'noisy or riotous'. It is unlikely that the austere Hasan-i Sabbah indulged personally in drug taking."

"There is no mention of that drug [hashish] in connection with the Persian Assassins - especially in the library of Alamut ('the secret archives')."

- Edward Burman, *The Assassins - Holy Killers of Islam*

"He goes on to state, that years passed by, and both his old school-friends found him out, and came and claimed a share in his good fortune, according to the school-day vow. The Vizier was generous and kept his word. Hasan demanded a place in the government, which the Sultan granted at the Vizier's request; but discontented with a gradual rise, he plunged into the maze of intrigue of an oriental court, and, failing in a base attempt to supplant his benefactor, he was disgraced and fell. After many mishaps and wanderings, Hasan became the head of the Persian sect of the Ismailians.--a party of fanatics who had long murmured in obscurity, but rose to an evil eminence under the guidance of his strong and evil will. In A.D. 1090, he seized the castle of Alamut, in the province of Rudbar, which lies in the mountainous tract south of the Caspian Sea; and it was from this mountain home he obtained that evil celebrity among the Crusaders as the old man of the mountains, and spread terror through the Mohammedan world; and it is yet disputed where the word Assassin, which they have left in the language of modern Europe as their dark memorial, is derived from the hashish, or opiate of hemp-leaves (the Indian bhang), with which they maddened themselves to the sullen pitch of oriental desperation, or from the name of the founder of the dynasty, whom we have seen in his quiet collegiate days, at Naishapur. One of the countless victims of the Assassin's dagger was Nizam ul Mulk himself, the old school-boy friend.

excerpt from Mirkhond's *History of the Assassins*
(published in an article about Omar Khayyam in the Calcutta Review, No. 59.)