



The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin by Jonathan Phillips.

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The Kurdish warrior and Ayyubid sultan of Egypt, Saladin (1137/38–1193), rose from modest origins to become one of the most famous generals of the Middle Ages: he overthrew a caliphate, conquered Syria, won the Battle of Hattin, and turned back the armies of the Third Crusade. He has been the subject of a wide range of works, from biographies long and short¹ to political and religious histories,² military analyses,³ polemics,⁴ and popular treatments.⁵ Does the world need another Saladin book? If “yes,” Jonathan Phillips is the right man for the task. A professor of crusades history at Royal Holloway, he is a leading expert in his specialty and author of many well regarded publications, including the only monograph on the Second Crusade.⁶

Phillips’s new book comprises twenty-six chapters, grouped in Parts I, “The Life of Saladin,” which gets the lion’s share of coverage, and II, “Afterlife,” concerning the mutable memory of the sultan since his death. Part II is now the most thorough and accessible treatment of Saladin’s legacy.

Chapters 1–4 concern Saladin’s rise to power in Egypt in the context of the wars of the Turkish Zengids. In 1144, the warlord Imad ad-Din Zengi seized the Latin county of Edessa, sparking the unsuccessful Second Crusade (1147–49). His son, Nur al-Din, thereafter consolidated Zengid power in Syria and ruled as the master of Damascus. But Nur al-Din faced three serious military threats: in the northwest, Byzantine forces in and around Antioch; to the west, Latin Christians operating from Jerusalem and Tripoli; and to the southwest, the Shia caliphate of the Fatimids in Egypt. Phillips discusses all three but wisely concentrates on Egypt, where Saladin eventually became sultan. By the mid-twelfth century, Egypt had been weakened by political infighting and attacks by diverse Christian forces, to the point that its caliph had to appeal to the Sunni Nur al-Din for aid. He sent Shirkuh, a Zengid loyalist and Saladin’s uncle, to organize Egyptian defenses. Bringing Saladin along for the experience, Shirkuh eventually maneuvered his way into the position of vizier; upon his death in 1169, he was succeeded by his nephew.

Successive chapters chart Saladin’s growing regional significance in the 1170s and early 80s, thanks to his military prowess, keen diplomatic sense, and recourse to the unifying call of jihad. Chapters 5–7 examine Saladin’s seizure of Egypt; this required military acumen and shrewd overtures to potential allies in the merchant and legal classes. Saladin’s overthrow of the Fatimid caliphate in 1171 featured the infamous “Battle of the Blacks,” where he annihilated the Fatimid

1. Respectively, David Nicolle and Peter Dennis, *Saladin: Leadership, Strategy, Conflict* (Oxford: Osprey, 2011) and Hannes Möhring, *Saladin: the Sultan and His Times, 1138–1193*, tr. D.S. Bachrach (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 2008).

2. Malcolm Cameron Lyons and D.E.P. Jackson, *Saladin: The Politics of the Holy War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1982).

3. Yaacov Lev, *Saladin in Egypt* (Boston: Brill, 1999).

4. Andrew S. Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin* (Albany: SUNY Pr, 1972).

5. John Man, *Saladin: The Sultan who Vanquished the Crusaders and Built an Islamic Empire* (Boston: Da Capo, 2016).

6. Viz., *The Second Crusade: Extending the Frontiers of Christendom* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2007).

African regiments. This remains controversial and Phillips underplays it. Despite Saladin's overwhelmingly positive reputation in Islamic circles,

In more recent decades some Shi'ite scholars have moved away from the customary veneration of Saladin as a hero of the Muslim world and vilified him as a murderer and heretic for his removal of their caliph; they characterize him as a man "who tolerated the crusaders and oppressed Muslims." (70)

After this displacement of history's only Shia caliphate, Saladin broke with Nur al-Din, which he could afford to do given Egypt's massive revenues and standing army. After Nur al-Din's death, Saladin marched on Damascus itself and extended his political power into Syria.

Chapters 8–12 concern Saladin's successes and failures as he tried to consolidate Sunni political and military assets in Syria. This entailed delicate diplomacy with the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, to whom Saladin routinely (and wisely) deferred, and lavish gift-giving to the emirs. Phillips describes Saladin's deft use of praise, cajoling, and veiled threats to turn rivals into allies and then keep them in the fold. Such political scheming pervaded his entire professional life. His ambitions, however subtle and calculated, nonetheless brought him into major conflicts with both Christian enemies and Muslim rivals. Saladin was defeated by King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem at Montgisard (Oct. 1177), but two years later he besieged and destroyed the Latin fortress at Jacob's Ford. Phillips describes these actions in good detail. Saladin also besieged Mosul (1185–86), eventually winning the allegiance and promises of future military support by its Zengid ruler. Phillips is to be commended for his elucidation of these elements of the sultan's biography, most of them virtually unknown to non-medievalists.

Midway through the book, Phillips enters territory more familiar to non-medievalist military historians. Chapter 13, "The Battle of Hattin," covers Saladin's destruction of the army of the Kingdom of Jerusalem (4 July 1187) at the Horns of Hattin, a dormant volcano west of the Sea of Galilee. This victory has been the subject of many written and cinematic accounts. Phillips's narrative is vivid and satisfying, but he avoids asking whether it was truly decisive.⁷ Pope Urban III reportedly died of a heart attack after hearing of the battle. His successor preached a new crusade, not to avenge Hattin but to retake Jerusalem, which all (correctly) presumed would soon be lost. Saladin indeed captured the Holy City in October 1187 (chap. 14)

Chapter 15, "The Siege of Tyre," concerns Saladin's campaigns against the Kingdom's lesser fortresses. Chapters 16–18 are devoted to the central event of the Third Crusade—the siege of Acre (1189–91). In his greatest defeat, Saladin spent two years trying in vain to pry the crusaders away from the city or break their siege. Acre's fall into Christian hands gave the West a valuable Levantine port and a city that served as the capital of the Kingdom of Jerusalem for a century.

Chapters 19–21, the last in Part I, round out Saladin's life story. In the remaining years of the Third Crusade, Richard the Lionheart defeated Saladin at Arsuf (a battle Phillips describes too briefly) and also at Jaffa. Richard failed to reach, much less besiege, Jerusalem itself. The last chapter of Part I, "Peace at Last," ends with the two leaders agreeing to the three-year, eight-month Treaty of Jaffa, and Richard's sailing for home (Oct. 1192). Saladin died (4 Mar. 1193), perhaps, like his uncle Shirkuh, from health problems caused by overeating fatty meats.

The author is deeply familiar with the venues he recreates. In chapter 2, for instance, he takes the reader on a vivid, detailed tour of medieval Damascus that (seemingly) only someone who has walked its streets could write. His apt interpretations match these evocations: Nur al-Din's Da-

7. On this, see, further, John France, *Great Battles: Hattin* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2015) 130–31.

mascus, for example, was “the theological engine room for the jihad” (26). Consider the following description of Jacob’s Ford:

Towards the bottom of a gradually sloping valley lies an unassuming grassy mound.... [R]unning along one section of it the vegetation and soil have been stripped away to reveal a stretch of pale limestone wall.... [W]alk about a hundred metres south and another length of wall, a broken gateway and the lower level of a tower ... what at first glance may seem slightly unpromising ruins comprise the remains of the crusader castle that constituted one of the most serious challenges Saladin had faced to date. (125)

Throughout, Phillips cites germane archaeological studies to bolster his recreations of combat and tactics. Seven maps and many black-and-white plates enrich the narrative; the map of Saladin’s Cairo is especially useful. That said, this is a biography, not strictly speaking a work of military history. Saladin’s life story predominates and accounts of military actions are somewhat uneven.

Part II concerns Saladin’s posthumous legacy, which left a “detective trail down the centuries” (313). Its detailed content and lucid prose, at once learned, accessible, and immensely enjoyable distinguishes Phillips’s book from others on the same subject.⁸

The legend of Saladin was born in the later Middle Ages. He features as a knight, a master of disguise, and a noble pagan in Dante.⁹ By the seventeenth century, he had become a virtual Frenchman of distinction: “nimble ... valiant, generous, liberal, courtly” (324). Despised by Daniel Defoe but admired by Voltaire, the sultan enjoyed a high stature in Europe while all but vanishing from Middle Eastern discourse until Kaiser Wilhelm II visited his tomb in Damascus in 1898. Thereafter, he returned in popular and academic contexts, in Middle Eastern stories and histories and, along with the Crusades in general, in textbooks and Islamic fundamentalist tracts. Fascination with Saladin was especially poignant during the Nasser years, as evidenced by his appearance in film, plays, and propaganda. Anwar Sadat made him into a symbol of Arab unity. Saddam Hussein changed his birth year from 1939 to 1937 in order to match Saladin’s (1137). The PLO, Hamas, Osama bin Laden, the list of those who invoked his memory goes on and on. In a 1984 speech, President Jimmy Carter characterized President Hafez al-Assad of Syria as a man who spoke like “a modern Saladin” (379). Phillips rightly observes that “It is, I would venture, impossible to think of another figure from history who dealt such a deep wound to a people and a faith, and yet became so admired” (315).

So, does the world need this new book on Saladin? The answer is surely “yes” because there is not another one like it. Jonathan Phillips’s Saladin is not merely an interesting figure of the Middle Ages. He is, rather, a *persona* unfrozen by time, whose vitality in modern discourse matches his dominance on Levantine battlefields. I recommend *The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin* to anyone interested in medieval warfare, the Crusades and their remembrance, the history of Abrahamic religions, and Middle Eastern affairs in general.

8. He devotes twice the space to the memory of Saladin that Anne Marie-Eddé does in her *Saladin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2011), and in a more colorful and thoughtful fashion.

9. “E solo, in parte, vidi ’l Saladino”—*Inferno*, 4.129.