

THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF THE SULTAN SALADIN

(JONATHAN PHILLIPS)

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In the classic 1970s Irish Republican Army anthem “My Little Armalite,” the lyrics include “Well the army came to visit me, ’twas in the early hours / With Saladins and Saracens and Ferret armored cars.” One wonders why would the British, back when there still was an England, name their military equipment after the Kurdish warlord Saladin, a famous enemy of England? He was, after all, the bitter rival of Richard I, the Lionheart, whom the English once revered. Moreover, Saladin seized the holy city of Jerusalem from the Christians a second time. The answer to this oddity is that Saladin is a man obscured by modern myth. And as is very often the case, recovering the real man under the myth is a worthwhile exercise.

The author of this detailed book, somewhere between an academic and a popular work, is Jonathan Phillips, an Englishman who has written numerous books on the Crusades. Modern fascination with Saladin in both West and East, dating back to the nineteenth century, far exceeds interest in any other non-Western figure of this period, something Phillips is at pains, excessive pains perhaps, to explain. Objectively, Saladin’s relevance to modernity is insignificant. His major accomplishment was founding the Ayyubid Sultanate, which for a century ruled Egypt and parts of Syria, as well as parts of the Holy Land (collectively generally referred to, in historical discussions of this period, as the Near East) and of the Arabian Peninsula. But many other men founded short-lived dynasties in this area during the first centuries of the second millennium. Nor did Saladin succeed in expelling the Crusaders from the other lands they had, several decades before, re-conquered from the Muslims.

To understand modern views, we have to understand the underlying actual history. The name Westerners use, Saladin, is a corruption of a typical lengthy Muslim ruler’s name, part of which is “Salah al-Din,” an honorific meaning “Righteousness of the Faith.” His given name (Christian name, if you will), was Yusuf, that is, Joseph, and he was born around 1136. His father was a Kurdish mercenary, Najm al-Din Ayyub, whose given name, Ayyub, means Job—the Biblical Job, also

honored as a prophet in Islam. It was from Najm al-Din that the name of Saladin's dynasty, the Ayubids, came.

All of the Near East, other than Outremer, the Crusader lands conquered during and after the First Crusade in 1099, was Muslim at this time, taken from the Christians a few centuries earlier by the armies of Muhammad's successors as the Eastern Romans contracted. That does not mean these lands were united in any meaningful way. Fracture lines were many, resulting in what Phillips accurately terms "flux and division." One essential split was between the Sunni lands, nominally under the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad, and the Shiite lands, at this time mainly Egypt, under the Fatimid Caliphate, headquartered in Cairo. Baghdad was far away from the Holy Land, and the caliph there had little influence on the events in this history, despite lip service being paid by the Ayyubids and others to his overlordship. The Crusader States held all the most important coastal cities in the Holy Land and their hinterlands—the principalities of Jerusalem, Tripoli, Antioch, and Edessa, ranged along the Mediterranean. Naval supremacy, to which we will return, gave the Crusaders an important edge when their cities were attacked.

The Ayubids were Kurds from Armenia, where the Seljuk Turks (another of several key ethnic groups) held sway, and Najm al-Din initially served the Seljuks as governor of Tikrit (now in Iraq), as his father had before him. In a conflict among the Seljuks, Najm al-Din picked one contestant, Imad al-Din Zengi, to serve, and served him and Zengi's son, Nur al-Din, his entire life. The Zengids rose, becoming rulers of Mosul and Aleppo, along with much of what is today Syria and northern Iraq. As a result, Saladin's father ultimately became governor of Damascus, a high position. Saladin's uncle Shirkuh was another of Najm al-Din's top lieutenants, which meant that the Ayyubids had rapidly become one of the most important families under the Zengids, though they ruled nothing in their own name. Crucially, they headed a large and important Kurdish clan which, like the Turks, operated on the unbreakable principle of ethnic solidarity, providing a built-in base of powerful support. Damascus became Saladin's home, even if he spent most of his life on campaign all across the Near East, although almost nothing is known about Saladin as a young man.

Intermittent conflict was endemic among Muslims and between the Christians and Muslims. At this point, however, the Muslims made little headway against the Franks, as they called the Christians, who for example in 1163 destroyed Nur al-Din's army when it attempted to take Krak des Chevaliers, one of the most famous of the Crusader castles. (As a child, I had a picture book of the Crusades, which depicted this castle in loving detail. Crusader castles, to which there was no Muslim counterpart, are a fascinating topic all their own. Perhaps another day.) The Zengids had better luck in Egypt, after the Fatimid caliph died young and they took advantage of the inevitable succession crisis to invade that wealthy country, sending Shirkuh to do the work, in a confused set of battles that involved Christians also supporting the Fatimids. At some point Saladin, now around thirty years old, had become attached, or attached himself, to his uncle, and so he also participated actively in this accomplishment—at one point being briefly a guest of the Franks as a hostage, connected to a negotiated peace.

After his victory, Shirkuh promptly died (after unwisely gorging himself on "rich meats"), which left the chief office of government in Egypt, the vizierate (who technically ruled in the name of the caliph until the Ayyubids got rid of the caliph), open. Saladin was chosen as his successor, in 1169, and his father came south from Damascus to join him in 1170, at the command of the man who was still their overlord, Nur al-Din. Saladin and his father (who accepted a subordinate position, and died after a fall from a horse in 1173) consolidated their hold over Egypt, including by defeating the Nubians to the south and by dismissing Coptic Christians and Jews from all government positions and confiscating their property. Tensions inevitably arose with Nur al-Din, who like most men in his position was not stupid and could see perfectly well that the Ayyubids were becoming a competing power. But Nur al-Din died in 1174, delaying open conflict.

Still, soon Saladin had moved north with an army and began fighting with Nur al-Din's son. He fought the Crusaders as well, since they dominated the land immediately north of Egypt and threatened all the travel routes in the Holy Land held by Muslims. But he was soundly thrashed by a Frankish army in 1177 at the Battle of Montgisard (a battle where, as Phillips notes, the first mobile field hospital in history was used, run by the Knights of Saint John, the Hospitallers). Saladin took

nearly ten years to fully recover from this defeat, and it was after this battle that he adopted his policy of executing any captured knight of the military orders (the most important of which were the Templars and the Hospitallers), because he feared them so greatly.

Unfortunately for the Franks, their own unity fractured badly in the years after Montgisard. The details are complex, and involved various lords out for their own interests, and therefore happy to enter into limited tactical alliances with Muslims against their Christian enemies. Baldwin IV, the illustrious leper King of Jerusalem who had fought at Montgisard, died at age twenty-four in 1185, and several men vied to succeed him. Saladin, meanwhile, spent the next several years focusing on the north, consolidating his hold over Aleppo and Mosul, part of his now long-running conflict with the Zengids, which only ended with Saladin's complete ascendancy over the area in 1186. He also acquired a degree of overlordship with respect to Arabia, including the cities of Mecca and Medina, and Yemen. When Reynald of Châtillon, lord of Antioch by marriage, a hugely competent and heroic if not-very-nice man and leader of the Franks at Montgisard, began raiding trading caravans in Muslim-held lands, around 1183, Saladin turned to confronting the Franks, with whom he had had an uneasy truce for some years. His aim was to advance both his religion and his personal interests. (Reynald had been imprisoned by the Zengids in an underground dungeon in Aleppo for sixteen years; no doubt this explains his implacable hostility to Islam.) Reynald compounded his offenses, in Saladin's eyes, by building ships in kit form, shipping them overland to the Red Sea, and launching an expedition (though he did not go himself) to steal Muhammad's body from Medina. Sadly, this quixotic effort did not succeed, and led to the deaths of all the Franks involved.

Most of all, Saladin wanted to retake Jerusalem from the Christians. This would solidify his position, both strategically and in the eyes of the wider Muslim world. He assembled a large army (very large for the time and place, around thirty thousand men) and provoked the Christians by attacking a monastery on Mount Tabor (the site of Christ's Transfiguration) and the town of Nazareth, and then by besieging the wife of the sometime Regent (and sometime aspiring King) of Jerusalem, Raymond, in Tiberias, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. A large Christian force set out to relieve Tiberias, carrying their most

sacred relic, the True Cross, but Saladin had cleverly either seized or poisoned all the water sources in the area. This eroded the effectiveness of the Christians, whose heavy cavalry charges were usually impossible for the lighter-armed Muslim forces to resist. The Crusaders could not make it to the sea to get water, and were trapped in the basin between two extinct volcanoes, the Horns of Hattin. They surrendered.

Saladin slaughtered most of the knights (though the actual killing was largely done by Muslim clerics, as was customary). When Reynald scornfully rejected Saladin's demand that he convert to Islam or die, Saladin (allegedly) killed him himself. Having also captured Guy of Lusignan, now the King of Jerusalem (married to the dead Baldwin's sister Sibylla, whose son had briefly reigned as Baldwin V), Saladin proceeded to besiege Jerusalem. Balian of Ibelin, the Outremer lord now in charge of the defense of Jerusalem, played a bad hand well. Saladin repeatedly tried and failed to take the city by storm, despite Christians having very few experienced soldiers in the city. Balian threatened Saladin that if he did not agree to an acceptable negotiated resolution, he would execute the five thousand Muslim prisoners he held and demolish the Dome of the Rock, one of the most important Muslim holy sites, along with the rock on which it stood, and the Crusaders would all die fighting. Saladin caved, and agreed to allow the Christian inhabitants to buy their way out. As a result, the actual transfer of the city was mostly bloodless, although the reason for that was not Saladin's mercy, given that he was no stranger to slaughtering every Christian he could get his hands on, but purely practical motives.

This was the high point of Saladin's career, even though he still had almost ten years left to live. He tried and failed to capture Tyre from the Franks. He was defeated in Tunisia, where he was trying to extend his lands at the expense of Almohads, the Muslim rulers of that area of North Africa. Then he spent two years trying and failing to prevent the Franks from capturing Acre, where he encircled a Frankish army that was besieging the city. It was during this siege, in 1191, that Richard I arrived as part of the Third Crusade. The siege dragged on longer than most, featuring the usual Western innovations in war technology, such as "the Crawler," a "wheeled machine covered with sheets of iron"—in essence, an early armored personnel carrier, used to allow protected assaults on the city walls. The Crusaders also used ramps attached to

the top of a ship and dropped to allow crossing directly to the top of the city wall, an invention supposedly of the Romans, but not used since their time.

Acre fell to the Christians, surrendering on terms largely dictated by the Franks, including the return of the True Cross, the relic captured at Hattin. Saladin delayed and prevaricated on both payment and identifying the prisoners to be ransomed, as well as delivery of the True Cross, which Richard saw as an attempt to re-arm and re-start the battle, so he executed around two thousand prisoners. This was not a particularly notable event; Saladin himself was in the habit of executing prisoners (and Phillips neglects to mention that Saladin's response to Richard's action was to kill all of his Christian prisoners, both those he had already and any he acquired later). It was somewhat out of normal practice, however, to kill prisoners after a negotiated peace, albeit a fragile peace, rather than after storming a city. This episode would be entirely forgotten today, except that Richard's supposed cruelty along with Saladin's supposed mercy after the fall of Jerusalem are both often used today by Muslims as justifications for their present-day actions.

The other major effect of the disintegration of the peace deal was the permanent loss of the True Cross, uncovered in the fourth century by the Empress Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine the Great. Nobody knows what happened to it, though it was most likely last seen in Damascus. (Fragments of the Cross exist in many places, some real, some not, but those were split from the Cross earlier; what the Crusaders called the True Cross was the bulk of the Cross.) Presumably the Muslims destroyed it. But as with other important relics, notably the Ark of the Covenant, perhaps it lies hidden somewhere, to be revealed at some point in the future.

The rest of the Third Crusade was anticlimactic. Frederick Barbarossa, the most powerful of the Christian kings, had unexpectedly died of a heart attack, greatly reducing available manpower, because most of his troops went home. Richard and Saladin marched around, skirmished, and conducted minor sieges, while engaging in courteous negotiations (Saladin did not negotiate in person and he never met Richard; he sent his brother Saphadin). Richard wanted to reconquer Jerusalem, but he could not protect his supply lines that far from the coast, and so he had to abandon the effort, greatly disappointing his followers. Ultimately,

in 1192, the kings signed an agreement, essentially involving everyone keeping what he had and Christians being allowed to go to Jerusalem on pilgrimage, and Richard went home. Nobody expected that to be the end of the fighting; Muslim agreements with the Franks were only ever temporary truces, for a set term of years, which were, however, usually strictly observed by both sides. Islam, we should note, forbids any permanently binding treaty with non-Muslims, because Muhammad's unalterable command of *jihad* is eternal struggle until the entire world is under Muslim domination.

It is interesting to observe that the Frankish capture of Acre (which they held until the end of Outremer, when Acre was recaptured by the Muslims in 1291) was only possible because the Franks controlled the Mediterranean. A constant difficulty for the Muslims was that the Franks by ship could easily resupply their own coastal cities under siege, and often prevent resupply of enemy cities and armies on the march. The Muslims were aware of this weakness, but as Phillips notes, "seafaring was regarded [by Muslims] as the occupation of criminals." Thus, despite occasional halfhearted efforts, Saladin and other Muslim rulers of the time never managed to put any kind of decent navy together. Much later the Ottoman Turks solved, or at least addressed, this problem by using Christians as galley slaves, but failure to build a navy inevitably hampered Saladin in his goals.

Saladin died, of intestinal disease, in 1193. He had (it appears) seventeen sons, which Phillips treats as "dynastic safeguarding," superior to the Christians producing fewer sons. This is silly; succession problems have always been the bedeviling problem of Muslim regimes, because primogeniture was never adopted, unlike in Europe (not that the Europeans avoided succession problems entirely either). That many co-equal sons was a bug, not a feature. The result, unsurprisingly, was Ayyubid chaos. In the short term Saphadin, the brother, not a son, emerged on top, but the Ayyubids gradually lost the land and power Saladin had gained, and passed from history.

Phillips narrates all this competently. But the book suffers from several major problems. One is that it offers almost no background or explanation. If you do not already know the basics about the twelfth-century history of the Holy Land and the Near East, and something about Europe and England of the time, as well as about the Crusades,

you will basically be at sea. Or, rather, you will learn all about Saladin, but disconnected from any larger picture. No doubt this was a deliberate choice by Phillips to reduce length, but given that he spends the last quarter of the book trying, and mostly failing, to make Saladin relevant to modernity, the reader would have been better served by adding background and cutting lecturing.

The author also makes occasional factual errors. Not many, but more than he should. Several of these are related to Christian doctrine. For example, he says Melkites (Eastern Rite Christians who recognize the authority of the Pope) differ from other Christians because they “believe in the two natures of Christ, divine and human.” But that is an absolutely core Christian belief, with some dispute over the exact relationship of those natures, and Melkites adhere to the mainstream, Chalcedonian position of the Hypostatic Union. Maybe Phillips confused Monophysites (who believe that Christ only had a divine nature) and Melkites. He also repeatedly states that Saladin used Greek Fire in battle, the famous and unique weapon of the Byzantines, which burned on water and was dispensed under pressure. That’s a common enough claim, but completely untrue. Muslims at various times did use incendiaries of different types, notably naphtha, but no scholar believes those were actual Greek Fire, the secret of which was entirely lost and never revealed to the Muslims (and which in any case was almost exclusively a naval weapon).

Aside from such errors of fact, Phillips also exhibits distinct bias against the Christians in his story, no doubt because that is the fashion among elites today. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that he is enamored of Muslims and takes any chance to exalt them and to denigrate Christians by contrast. Almost invariably he applies superlatives to any Muslim achievement, such as “wonderful,” “stupendous,” and “stunning,” while individual Muslims are “great,” “generous,” and demand “immense respect.” By contrast, he rarely uses any positive term for Christians, who are often “foolish,” “scurry,” “tremble in fear,” and so forth, and have no achievements worth praising. It gets tedious.

Such differential treatment extends to Phillips joining in with modern propaganda that Saladin exemplified typical Muslim mercifulness, unlike the nasty Christians. This claim would have surprised Muslims of Saladin’s time. Zengi, for example, when he captured Edessa in northern

Syria in 1144, killed all the men (after torture) and sold all the women and children into slavery. Saladin slew his prisoners more often than not; if lucky, they became slave laborers. Such actions are always glossed over by Phillips, while similar Christian behavior is dwelt on at length. Their dubious (by modern standards) actions are always ascribed to “greed” and “savagery,” while Muslim bad behavior is excused as out-of-the-ordinary and done as part of walking the path of spiritual progress.

Killing Christians (and Jews) has always been doctrinally *de rigueur* for serious Muslims, and it’s simply that truth which is visible in this book. At this very moment, in fact, with the United States and its frequently one-way partner Israel having overthrown Bashar al-Assad in order to benefit Israel, Muslims are busy slaughtering thousands of Syrian Christians, causing no outcry at all by the same people who simultaneously demand America take any action necessary to protect Israelis and punish anyone who attacks them. (And, to be fair, causing no outcry at all from Christian leaders, from the Ecumenical Patriarch to the Pope.) The claim is often heard (and was heard constantly in the years after September 11) that Christians and Jews are “People of the Book” in Islam, whose civilians are entitled to some degree of protection, as long as they submit to Muslim overlordship. By contrast, the Koran commands the extermination of polytheists who refuse Islam. But as passage after passage in this book makes clear, in actual practice Muslims consider Christians (though not Jews) polytheists, because of their belief in the Trinity (which is also a separate extra-special sin, *shirk*, attributing partners to God), and polytheist was for Saladin and all Muslims of his time the standard term used for Christians. Thus, the idea that there can ever be permanent Christian peace with Muslims is a delusion. Or Muslim peace with Jews for that matter, although that is for somewhat different reasons, relating to the Jews rejecting Muhammad during his lifetime, and the present-day state of Israel being a thorn in the side of Islam’s core belief that any land conquered by Islam must be Muslim forever.

And, finally, Phillips spends nearly a hundred pages talking about modern views of Saladin. This is very boring, frankly, and ten times too long, offering such gems as discussion of a 2009 dance troupe presentation in Damascus and a 2010 Malaysian children’s cartoon. The heart of the matter is that nineteenth-century anti-Catholic Westerners,

most notably Walter Scott in *The Talisman*, created a mythical Saladin to admire—a merciful, open-hearted healer who met and bonded with King Richard. Scott's fantasy (which I read multiple times as a small child) was part of the surge of interest in all things Eastern at the time, tied, among other things, to colonialism. Ever since, Westerners have treated Saladin as a towering example of chivalry and honor, the Lionheart's doppelgänger. And this is why the British, several decades later, named armored cars after a Kurdish warlord.

A little later, Muslim nationalists discovered in Saladin someone they could use as a unifying figure, a propaganda vessel, who could be similarly fictionalized and his less-attractive actions whitewashed. He became a proto-anti-colonialist and crucial protagonist of expansionist Islam, and Muslims (and their Western allies who view history through the lens of emancipation of supposedly oppressed groups) resurrected and tirelessly flogged the memory of unpleasant Crusader actions, such as Richard's execution of prisoners (another episode we were reminded of endlessly after September 11, and earlier by, of all people, Bill Clinton).

Anti-Christian bias isn't just a problem with Phillips. It's ubiquitous among modern examinations, of any type, of this period. After reading this book, I re-watched Ridley Scott's 2005 movie, *Kingdom of Heaven*, which is set in precisely these times, centered around the Battle of Hattin and the fall of Jerusalem. I watched the Director's Cut, having been told it was better than the original. It wasn't. It was awful. As Phillips notes, that movie was "presented to great acclaim in the Near East," and this, given the well-known tendency of Arabs toward fabulism in their history (and everything else touching their pride) tells you all you need to know about the movie. One hundred percent of the movie is unalloyed pro-Muslim, anti-Christian propaganda. I have rarely, if ever, seen a more grossly historically inaccurate and unfailingly tendentious movie.

The howlers are never-ending, from Reynald of Châtillon being a Templar to Balian of Ibelin being a French-born poor blacksmith, the bastard son of an Outremer lord (and a Mary Sue who, despite no training at all, in a single day becomes an invincible knight). The Christians, rather than Saladin, seek war. Sibylla poisons Baldwin V, her child son, because he is developing leprosy, and travels the country on her own, dressed and adorned as a Muslim, attended only by a handful of Muslim guards, while conducting an adulterous affair with

Balian. Naturally, all the Christians who actually try to defend Christian lands or Christians from the wholly-justified attacks of Muslims are depicted as psychopathic killers of women and children with the grossest personal defects and no redeeming features. Any putative Christian who is a decent person entirely rejects actual Christianity in favor of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, while stating constantly that Islam and Judaism are better. No Christian is ever seen worshipping. All priests and clerics are filthy, cowardly brutes. Balian threatens Saladin not with destroying the Dome of the Rock, but also all the Christian holy places, because "they drive men mad." Saladin lets everyone go for free. Muslims, meanwhile, are endlessly praised for their religion, the wonder and joy of which is on constant display. Of course, no Muslim ever does anything unpleasant or mean. They desire nothing but peace, but the nasty Christians, who execute Saladin's sister, drive him to fight. And on, and on, and on. And on.

None of this is surprising; the movie was made at the high point of post-September 11 attempts to convince Americans that Islam wasn't the enemy, but rather some combination of "radical Islam" (a tautology) and modern Christians who were equally bad if they actually believed in Christianity. Sadly, however, huge numbers of Americans have, over the past two decades, been successfully propagandized into believing total lies by this execrable film. Very few Americans will ever read the actual history of Saladin and his times. Nor is there any sign of change in films; if the Left is defeated, their last bastion will be the entertainment industries. A movie that simply showed the reality of the events in this book would sell a billion dollars of tickets, or more, but that movie has no chance of being made until America is rebuilt entirely. Which, hopefully, will be soon.