

Crusades: The career of Saladin

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Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, commonly known as Saladin, was one of Islam's greatest champions during the second half of the twelfth century. Even though he was of Kurdish descent, a people despised among the Turks and Arabs, the evidence shows that he rose to exalted station in the Muslim world. He led the army that retook Jerusalem from the Christians, who had held it for almost a century, and was known for his honour towards enemy leaders. These factors alone justify his renown, as he was involved in more struggles in Egypt and Syria.

Saladin rose to power in Egypt and Syria through military strategy and good connections. According to Geoffrey Regan, Saladin was born in 1138 in Tikrit, Mesopotamia, and at the age of eight moved to Damascus, where his father Ayyub and uncle Shirkuh progressed up the ranks in their service of the great Muslim leader Zangi, and later of his son Nur al-Din. Saladin also entered the service of Nur al-Din in 1152 and was allocated a fief, and four years later succeeded his brother as deputy to Shirkuh, the military governor of Damascus (Regan, p 17).

In 1167 Saladin accompanied Shirkuh (now in command of an elite force of Syrian troops) to Egypt to fight against Shawar, the vizier, and Amalric, King of Jerusalem. He was put in charge of the defence of Alexandria, which he maintained for three months until terms were reached between Amalric and Shirkuh (Regan, p 20). In 1168, when Amalric's army was once again marching on Cairo and Shawar's power was dwindling, the Egyptian Caliph al Adid offered Nur al-Din one third of Egypt in return for assistance against Amalric.

In early 1169, Shirkuh and Saladin travelled to Cairo, where the vizier Shawar was subsequently murdered and Shirkuh became the new vizier, with Saladin as his right-hand man. Within three months, Shirkuh had died, and Saladin was elected commander of the Syrian army and accepted as vizier of Egypt (Regan, p23). The title conferred on him by the Caliph was El Malik al Nasir, 'the conquering prince'

After the Caliph of Cairo, al-Adid, died in 1171, Saladin became the undisputed ruler of Egypt. However, according to William of Tyre, a close friend of King Amalric of Jerusalem, Saladin murdered the Caliph when he went to pay homage, and then killed all of the Caliph's children, so that 'he might be subject to no superior but rule as both caliph and sultan' (Tyre, in Brundage, p 140). William's account is not supported by other sources, and he might be biased against Saladin because of his friendship with Amalric, so it is possible that this account is false.

Saladin's eyes soon turned towards Syria, and deposing his lord, Nur al-Din. Nur al-Din died in May 1174, and Saladin accepted his eleven year old son al Malikas Salih as his suzerain because 'it would have been unwise to have appeared to covet Syria so soon after Nur al Din's death' (Regan, p31). Later in 1174, Saladin set off for Syria, to 'uphold the rights of as-Salih' (Regan p34), but really to gain possession of as much of Syria as possible. In late 1175, the Caliph of Baghdad sent envoys who 'brought Saladin formal confirmation of his investiture with the combined governments of Egypt, Yemen, and the parts of Syria he already held' (Regan, p 36).

According to Stevenson, after the Battle of Hattin, where Saladin's soldiers 'decimated the knights and soldiers of the Latin states' (Brundage, p 159), Saladin advanced upon Jerusalem. On September 20th 1187 the Holy City was under siege. The Christians were worn down over two weeks by countless attacks, and 'arrows fell like raindrops' (Stevenson, in Brundage, p160). On the 26th, Saladin ordered that the camp be moved quietly, and when the people of Jerusalem saw this they relaxed, but Saladin had not left, only spread his camp out over the hills of the region. He then ordered engines built, and formed up ten thousand knights and ten thousand archers. At daybreak, Saladin's army broke down the walls and entered the city while the defenders, who thought that they were safe, were sleeping. The battle lasted for a few days and Saladin triumphed, but he did not kill everyone in the city; instead, on October 2nd, he asked for ransoms of up to ten bezants per person to leave the city (this seems to have been a fairly large sum of money), or be killed. The gates were closed, and the Muslims went to the 'Temple of the Lord, which they call Beithhalla' (Stevenson, in Brundage, p163) for prayer and other religious rites.

So Jerusalem was recaptured from the Christians, who had held it for only eighty-nine years, by the Muslims, for whom it is also a sacred city. This capture of Jerusalem makes a stark contrast to when the Crusaders took it in 1099, where 'our men followed, killing and beheading them [the defenders] all the way to the temple of Solomon. There was such slaughter there that our men waded in blood up to their ankles . . . Our pilgrims, on entering the city, pursued and slaughtered the Saracens all the way to the Temple of Solomon . . . The enemy fought most vigorously for a whole day and their blood flowed through the Temple' (Brehier, in Brundage, p 64). This contrast shows Saladin's chivalric behaviour, as most men would want to revenge themselves on the enemy, and because he did not slaughter all the innocents in the city.

Saladin, whose name means 'the bounty of religion', was a prudent man, who preferred to use persuasion in conquest rather than force. As a boy, he was quiet, fascinated by books on theology and that 'all we know tends to the belief that he . . . governed his life on principles of prudence and placidity' (Lane-Poole, p 73).

He was a devout Muslim, and his war against the Franks was a jihad (holy war), not a conquest of the land for himself. He treated prisoners fairly, and distributed booty and spoils among his men, keeping little for himself (Lane-Poole, p 144). He cared for the Christian pilgrims who came to Jerusalem, shielding them from the vengeance of Muslims whose relatives had been killed by Christians (Lane-Poole, p 361). After the treaty between Richard I of England and Saladin (that ended the Third Crusade) had been agreed upon, Saladin was told that Richard had wanted the truce so that he could get more money and men, to which Saladin replied that he thought Richard so pleasant, upright, magnanimous, and excellent that, if the land were to be lost in his time, he would rather have it taken into Richard's mighty power than to have it go into the hands of any other prince whom he had ever seen' (Stubbs, in Brundage, p 186). This shows that Saladin was a fair player of politics, and willingly accepted Richard as a good king and soldier, and did not hold any grudges against him.

Saladin's renown for military prowess and chivalry is justified, as he advanced from virtual unknown to ruler of Egypt in about four years, and then to ruler of Egypt, Yemen and much of Syria as well in another four. He led the siege of Jerusalem, and won it back from the Christians. He was also well known for his kindness to prisoners and enemies, and did not hold grudges.

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