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Abstract

In 1187 Saladin recovered the holy city of Jerusalem for Islam; in subsequent years he fended off the armies of the Third Crusade before his death in 1193. Even though over 800 years have passed since his death the sultan continues to have a prominent profile in history, politics and culture. This paper is designed to give an overview of his career and to see which aspects of his life have been taken and moulded by people over the centuries and to explain his sustained and continued popularity in the Muslim world and in the West.

In the early years of the twenty-first century three biographies of Saladin have been published: by Hannes Möhring (a translation of an earlier work from German to English), Abdul Rahman Azzam and Anne-Marie Eddé (2008). He was the subject of major exhibitions in France (2001-2002) and Germany (2005-2006). Saladin has also been invoked by the Islamist leader of *al-Qaeda*, Osama bin Laden. He was the subject of a major music and dance performance in Damascus, Syria, in October 2009, and he has starred in a multi-part children's cartoon series made by Malaysian TV and al-Jazeera channel, broadcast in 2010-11.¹ Not a bad range for a man who died over 800 years ago... The purposes of the paper, given here in an abbreviated form, are to give an overview of his career and to see which aspects of his life have been used and moulded by people over the centuries in order to maintain or to return him to the public spotlight. I will then try to explain his (largely) sustained and continued popularity in the Muslim world and in the West. The paper will also trace how his reputation was created in the first instance.

A Brief Outline of Saladin's Life

Saladin was born in Takrit (modern Iraq) in 1137-1138 to a Kurdish mother. His father and uncle were in the service of, first, Zengi, the brutal ruler of Aleppo and Mosul, and then (after Zengi's murder in 1146) of his son Nur ad-Din, the man who really gave the Muslim counter-crusade its spiritual and military vigour. Saladin emerged as a promising young soldier, although certainly of a fairly secular disposition in his early years. His real advance came when Nur ad-Din conquered Egypt in 1169 and, soon afterwards, his representative

¹ Hannes Möhring, *Saladin: The Sultan and His Times, 1138-93*, trans. David S. Bachrach, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008), first published in German as *Saladin, der Sultan und seine Zeit, 1138-93* (Munich: Beck, 2005); Abdul Rahman Azzam, *Saladin* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009); Anne-Marie Eddé, *Saladin* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008). The French and German exhibitions were held, respectively, at: Paris, l'Institut du monde arabe, 2001-2; and Halle, Oldenburg and Mannheim, 2005-6. For the bin Laden reference, see note 8 below. The cartoon can be located at: www.saladin.tv/

there (Saladin's uncle, Shirkuh) died, to leave the 32 year-old in charge of the country. One major complication was that Egypt was Shi'a and that Nur ad-Din, Saladin and Syria were Sunni. Saladin began to encourage the construction of *madrāsas* (teaching colleges) and, more importantly, was behind the removal of the Shi'a caliph and survivors from the now-deposed Fatimid regime. Around this time Saladin himself became more austere and ceased to drink wine, for example. All of these things were a source of delight to Nur ad-Din but Saladin also began to form his own power base in Egypt. His father became the treasurer of Cairo and his brother took power in the Yemen and the Mecca-Medina area. Such behaviour was entirely conventional in terms of the Muslim Near East but to Nur ad-Din it looked like a challenge to his authority. When Saladin refused to assist his master in campaigns against the Franks of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem in the early 1170s, civil war seemed likely. But then Nur ad-Din died (April 1174).

Over the next 13 years Saladin spent much of his time trying to take over Nur ad-Din's former lands (he had left a son) and he became frequently involved in armed conflict with his co-religionists. Exhortations to join him in the Muslim holy war (*jihad*), the production of material emphasising the importance of Jerusalem as the place where the Prophet began his Night Journey, and the need to expel the Franks; plus a series of campaigns (of varying degrees of success) against the Christians all helped to balance out or to overshadow the fact that he was, in some ways, a usurper who had moved in on Nur ad-Din's lands. By the summer of 1187 he had gathered a precarious confederation of the Muslim Near East consisting of Egypt, Syria and the Jazira (northern Iraq). He managed to bring the Franks to battle at Hattin in 1187 and there he destroyed the Christians' military strength. By October he had recovered Jerusalem for Islam – the apogee of his career and the event that stamped his name on history. His lenient treatment of the Frankish prisoners – in contrast to the brutal slaughter that had accompanied the conquest of the First Crusade in 1099 – was widely admired.

Inevitably, western Europe responded. The armies of the Third Crusade, led by the greatest monarchs of the day, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa of Germany, King Richard the Lionheart of England, and King Philip Augustus of France managed to recover some of the Franks' possessions on the Levantine coast but they failed to take Jerusalem. In spite of several defeats Saladin could justifiably claim that he had seen off the finest warriors of Christendom. The fight had taken an enormous toll on the sultan, however, and he died soon afterwards, in March 1193.²

Medieval Western Views of Saladin

This is one of the most intriguing aspects of Saladin's life – and 'afterlife'. Medieval Latin chroniclers from the First Crusade (1095-99) characterised Muslims as animalistic creatures who gabbled and howled and performed

² For details of Saladin's life and career see the three works cited above, plus: Carole Hillenbrand, *Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1999); Malcolm C. Lyons and David Edward Pritchett Jackson, *Saladin: The Politics of the Holy War* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982).

unspeakable acts of barbarism against Christians. The Frankish settlers in the Levant, by dint of living alongside Muslim lands and with many Muslims amongst the indigenous peoples whom they ruled over, had acquired a more sophisticated viewpoint. William, archbishop of Tyre, saw Saladin as "a keen and vigorous mind, valiant in war and generous beyond measure". He recognised the sultan's personal charm when he wrote, before 1184, that a Frankish diplomat got on too well for comfort with him: "a prince who should have been resisted to our utmost won our goodwill". William was, however, highly critical of Saladin's behaviour towards Nur ad-Din, he alleged that the sultan had clubbed the caliph of Egypt to death in person and noted that he had distributed all his treasure. William died before the loss of Jerusalem so his testimony is untainted by that event. Saladin's real bridge to the European consciousness was the Third Crusade when several writers ended up spending years in close proximity to the Muslims and their charismatic leader.

Not all were won over: the anonymous *Itinerarium peregrinorum*, the first part of which was written c.1191-2, described him as a "persecutor of the Christian faith" whose first job was licensing a levy on prostitutes in Damascus. He was allegedly knighted by a Frankish knight whom he had captured although he remained a treacherous, greedy tyrant. Ambroise, a Norman-French priest, wrote a long account of the Third Crusade c.1195 and while the Muslims were characterised as a 'hated pagan race', Saladin was described as a generous and valiant man who protected pilgrims when they visited Jerusalem. He reported an interesting conversation between the bishop of Salisbury and the sultan in which the former said: "if one combined your [Saladin's] qualities with his [Richard's] then nowhere in the world would two such princes be found", a clear mark of esteem. There was clearly much here that the knights of western Europe liked. Aside from the small matter of the capture of Jerusalem, Saladin's courtesy, generosity and bravery were traits that they deeply admired. It is also worth noting, however, that respect for this one individual did not extend to a wider understanding of Muslims in Western Europe.

During the 1220s to 1240s there were a series of extensions and modifications to the first accounts of the Third Crusade and William of Tyre's chronicle was extended beyond 1184 and translated into Old French and widely circulated. Saladin's virtues were embedded within these texts and his virtues became familiar to many. Before looking at these further I would like to look at some Muslim views of the man – is there any consistency with those from the West?

Muslim views of Saladin

Without going into great detail it is certainly the case that the many sources writing about him project a spectrum of virtues. He was renowned for his generosity, his piety, his cultured court, his courtesy and kindness to others, including Christians. In one story, a young Frankish mother was brought to the sultan, weeping because her infant had been taken from her tent by a Muslim raider. Saladin found out who had brought the baby, repaid him, and had it reunited with his mother amidst scenes of great emotion. Finally, he was, of course, the hero of Islam for his recovery of Jerusalem. The fact that two of

the principal sources were part of Saladin's personal entourage and/or administration could be said to render the overall picture as rather biased. That said, Saladin was not entirely above criticism – his coalition was often fragile and some were angry with him for his years fighting Muslims rather than Christians in the period before Hattin. Those favourable to Nur ad-Din's dynasty were also inevitably muted in their praise at times too. For a more neutral view it is perhaps it is worth looking at the account of Ibn Jubayr, a Spanish Muslim pilgrim who visited the Middle East in 1184-5 and by virtue of his background had no need to appease this particular master. In short, his verdict was highly positive: Ibn Jubayr judged Saladin "a gift from God, a righteous man, always waging holy war against the enemies of God".³

The Evolution of Saladin's Image in the West

Returning to the medieval West, and reflecting upon the evidence of the Muslim writers, there is, I believe, a fairly sound basis for the positive characteristics attributed to him. But to explain why Saladin was embraced so enthusiastically in the West it is necessary to acknowledge the major cultural force in thirteenth century Europe; namely, the blossoming of chivalry. Consisting of a combination of bravery, status, courtly love, deeds told in *chansons des gestes*, it was an ideal in which conduct defined one's nobility. From the 1250s the *Ordene de chevalerie*, the *de facto* handbook of chivalry, was widely circulated and one of its central characters was – ignoring the fact (or in spite of the fact) that he was a Muslim – Saladin. With his famous virtues of truth, justice, generosity, fair treatment of women – he was (notwithstanding the inconvenience of his religious beliefs) a courtly man who could play a vital didactic role in this text.

Within the literary realm over subsequent decades his career began to take several improbable turns, including his alleged descent from the countess of Ponthieu, his relationships with women in the West (including Eleanor of Aquitaine) and various excursions to Europe. He also appeared in more distinguished locations such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c.1320) in the first circle of Hell with the pagan heroes of Troy and Rome, and Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353). In later centuries Saladin continued to feature as an exemplar of generosity and austerity in various moral works. By the time of the Enlightenment, however, crusading had fallen into considerable disrepute, although one of its prime critics, Voltaire (1756), still emphasised and contrasted the sultan's mercy and toleration compared to the barbaric, misguided hordes of the Catholic West.⁴

The main vehicle for Saladin's continued presence in the popular imagination of the West became the writing of Sir Walter Scott. Scott's novels were the

³ Jonathan Phillips, *Holy Warriors*, 43-50. The story about the mother and the infant is to be found most easily in: Francesco Gabrieli, *Arab Historians of the Crusades* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 111.

⁴ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (London/New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1984); Margaret A. Jubb, *The Legend of Saladin in Western Literature and Historiography* (Lewiston, NY: Lewiston [et al.] : Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).

international best-sellers of the nineteenth century, widely translated and the inspiration for numerous theatrical, musical and artistic ventures. In *The Talisman* (1825) Saladin's courtesy, generosity, medical skill (a new talent) and chivalric behaviour set him up as a figure of almost unmatched virtue.⁵

Saladin's Position in the Muslim World Down to the Present Day

In 1898 Kaiser Wilhelm II courted the Muslim world with his journey to Jerusalem and Damascus. In November the Kaiser visited Saladin's tomb in Damascus and laid a wreath with the message: "from one great emperor to another". He also paid for the restoration of the building and the marble shrine next to the wooden medieval coffin. There is little doubt that this ceremony helped to draw attention to Saladin. It is a matter of current academic debate as to the extent of Saladin's profile in the Muslim Near East by this time. It is true that the deeds of Baibars continued to attract far greater attention; in fact, in Cairo during the 1830s no less than 30 street performers earned a living reciting a verse account of the Mamluk sultan's life (although Saladin played a small role in this). While acknowledging the importance of the Kaiser's visit as an external stimulus in a revival of the memory of the crusades, especially amongst the elite levels of Muslim society, the transmission of a memory of the crusades – and therefore Saladin – through popular culture should not be underestimated and is an area of research ripe for further work.

Public storytelling was an extremely important aspect of Middle Eastern culture and such tales helped to provide a seed-bed of memory that political and religious leaders could tap into whether they were Islamists or Arab nationalists. Furthermore, as Muslim empires began to decline during the nineteenth century, the concept of looking to the past to learn lessons for the present also emerged. Through this variety of means, therefore, the history of the crusading era started to resonate to religious and political movements across the (Sunni) Muslim world.

In the course of the last 50 years a number of Arab nationalist leaders have chosen to identify themselves with Saladin as the man who defeated the West. Their reasoning can reveal fascinating parallels – and contrasts – between their own agendas and the career of the medieval hero. Gamal Abdel Nasser, president of Egypt between 1954 and 1970 drew a particularly close tie with the medieval sultan. Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956 set Egypt against Israel, France and Britain and was, as he saw it, a stand for Arab identity against western colonial powers and their Zionist allies. In 1958, Nasser created the United Arab Republic, a confederation of Syria and Egypt – the same lands ruled by Saladin back in the twelfth century. Nasser's speeches often referred to his famous predecessor and in February 1958 the president planned a formal visit to the sultan's tomb in Damascus.

Nasser drew an explicit connection to the crusading period with his claim that "the whole region was united for reasons of mutual security to face an imperialism coming from Europe and bearing the cross in order to disguise its ambi-

⁵ Elizabeth Siberry, *The New Crusaders: Images of the Crusades in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

tions behind the façade of Christianity. The meaning of unity was never clearer than when the Christianity of the Arab Orient joined the ranks of Islam to battle the Crusaders until victory." He also spoke of the Third Crusade: "Fanatic crusaders attacked us in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Arab Muslims and Christians fought side by side to defend their Motherland against this aggressive, foreign domination. They all rose as one man, unity being the only means of safety, liberty and the expulsion of the aggressors. Saladin was able to take Richard... as prisoner of war and was able to defeat his forces." This last point is entirely false, but it enabled a comparison to the Egyptian victory in the Suez Crisis: "We had the honour of beating Britain and France together [at Suez] after we had beaten each of them before separately". He boasted that the westerners "had never forgotten their defeat [by Saladin]" and wanted revenge in another "fanatical, imperialist, crusade."

Another facet of this atmosphere was an epic product of the Egyptian film industry, Youssef Chahine's *Saladin* (1963), in essence a manifesto for Pan-Arabism. Thus, early on in the film, Saladin says: "my dream is to see an Arab nation united under one flag." The Arabs only fought the Christians because the latter had attacked them; Saladin stated: "I hate war. Islam and Christianity condemn bloodshed. Yet we shall fight if necessary to save our land". By the end of the film there was a clear message: Saladin and his trustworthy allies presided over a cosmopolitan and humane society, they were worthy guardians of Jerusalem and would freely welcome outsiders to visit. Saladin explained: "Christianity is respected here; you know that. Jerusalem belongs to the Arabs. Stop this bloodshed." Religion has a limited place in the film. As noted above, there was a strong spiritual dimension to Saladin's *jihad* against the Christians, but for Chahine and Pan-Arabism in the early 1960s this was not something to emphasise. That aside, the history of the crusades and the role of Saladin at the head of resistance to the westerners was firmly established in the public consciousness.

President Hafiz al-Asad of Syria was another to link his image to that of Saladin. The impressive equestrian statue that stands outside the Damascus citadel was part of that process (erected 1992). This monument shows a triumphant Saladin on horseback, preceded by a Sufi holy man and a *jihad* warrior, while trailing behind him slump disconsolate, defeated crusaders. The message is clear: just as Saladin defeated the West, so too, will Asad. Similarly, his office was adorned with a massive picture of Saladin's victory at Hattin signifying his hope that one day Israel would share the same fate as the crusaders.

A third nationalist leader to embrace the legacy of Saladin – and a man who also invoked *jihad* was Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi president made much of the fact that he shared Saladin's birthplace, the village of Takrit. Given Saddam's persecution of the Kurds, presumably no one felt inclined to point out that Saladin himself had been of Kurdish stock. That historical inconvenience aside, the president lauded the sultan's recovery of Jerusalem and his resistance to the West. Saddam's methods of making these connections ranged from a colloquium: "The Battle for Liberation – from Saladin to Saddam Hussein"; to a

children's book, while a mural on his palace wall depicted the medieval sultan watching his horsemen, as next to him Saddam admired his tanks rolling to an imagined victory against the West.⁶

It has not been solely Arab nationalists who have used Saladin's memory to their advantage. When President Bush so disastrously used the word 'crusade' in his unscripted response to the 9/11 atrocities he simply fulfilled the claims that Osama Bin Laden had been making for years: "So Bush has declared in his own words: 'Crusader attack'. The odd thing about this is that he has taken the words right out of our mouth." He deftly turned Bush's words against him: "So the world today is split into two parts, as Bush said: either you are with us, or you are with terrorism. Either you are with the Crusade or you are with Islam. Bush's image today is of him being in the front of the line, yelling and carrying his big cross."

Bin Laden praised Saladin's wisdom and his use of the *jihad* to succeed in defeating the West; thus once more he provided an appropriate exemplar for a cause.⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion it should be emphasised that one should not push the memory and legacy of crusading too far in exploring parallels between the medieval and the present – crusading proper certainly ended in the sixteenth century; on the other hand one should certainly be aware of its powerful and toxic resonance in the Muslim Near East today.

Saladin's defeat of the westerners and his recovery of Jerusalem means that his achievements have matched the aspirations of many in the Muslim world. Yet his attributes as a man of courtesy, generosity and mercy captured the imagination of people in the West from the medieval age onwards as well. Such traits cross boundaries and generations and still loom large in some modern treatments of him such as the 2010-11 cartoon series where he stands as a moral exemplar to the teenage audience. Saladin has become a metaphor, albeit a remarkably flexible and adaptable one. As we have noted, he was far from perfect but history has chosen to concentrate on his more positive aspects, and his image is, in many respects, based on reality. The contemporary eulogy of 'Abd al-Latif, who visited Saladin in 1192 stands as a suitable note to close on:

I found a great king who inspired both respect and affection, far and near, easy-going and willing to grant requests. His companions took him as a model... [when he died] men grieved for him as they grieve for

⁶ Jonathan Phillips, *Holy Warriors*, 308-344; Paul B. Sturtevant, "SaladiNasser: Nasser's Political Crusade in El Naser Salah Ad-Din," in: *Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*, Nickolas Haydock and Edward L. Ridsden, eds. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009) 123-46; Mordechai Kedar, *Asad in Search of Legitimacy: Message and Rhetoric in the Syrian Press under Hafiz and Bashar* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005); Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

⁷ *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, Bruce Lawrence, ed., tr. James Howarth (London: Verso, 2005), 218.

prophets. I have seen no other ruler for whose death the people mourned, for he was loved by the good and the bad, Muslim and unbeliever alike.⁸

*This text is a shortened version of the lecture presented at the Braunschweig conference in February 2011. Elements of it are based on sections from my book *Holy Warriors: A Modern History of the Crusades* (London, 2009), translated into German and published in October 2011 as *Heiliger Krieg: Eine neue geschichte der kreuzzüge* (Munich, 2011). A more detailed, research-based, version of the paper, exploring further some of the ideas outlined here will be published in 2013.*

⁸ Abd al-Latif translated in: Bernard Lewis, *Islam: From the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople: Volume 1: Politics and War* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 66-67.