



*Saladin: The Life, Legend and the
Islamic Empire,*

J. Man

(London: Bantam Press, 2015)

Review by: Stephen Donnachie

Saladin: The Life, the Legend and the Islamic Empire. By John Man. London: Bantam Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-593-07372-8. xiii + 287 pp. £20.

Saladin is a historical figure whose actions in life created a far greater legend after his death. This legend makes Saladin a hero of fantasy, embodying all the noble virtues we desire, as much as a hero in historical reality. It is through this legend that Saladin has come to be known by so many making him readily identifiable as the hero of Islam. Even beyond the Muslim world to those unfamiliar with the medieval Middle East or the histories of the Crusades his legend ensures premier placement on a list of characters. It is through the context of this legend that John Man has now produced a readily accessible and engaging biography of Saladin for a wider audience. It is under the auspices of Saladin's life, legend, and the Islamic empire that he forged that Man examines his actions and charts his career from humble beginnings until he was the master of Egypt, Syria and of the holy city of Jerusalem. It therefore seems apt that a review of this work should follow a similar pattern.

As a biography of one of the most prominent medieval Muslim figures one would expect a considerable amount of detail and discussion devoted to the varying aspects of Saladin's life. However, this is not the case. The earliest chapters of the volume focus upon the history of the Middle East, Islam and the early Crusades that framed Saladin's world and coloured his formative years. Such contextualisation is necessary and Man does a very good job of setting the scene, producing a broad panorama of the age in which Saladin lived. Man's style of writing allows the reader to easily get to grips with the geography, politics and society that had an influence upon the young Saladin. Man like all other biographers of Saladin is limited in available source material describing his early life, and that of his family, until the 1160s when Saladin emerges fully into historical accounts. Yet, even from this point onwards when Saladin was rising to power in Egypt and then Syria, Man offers little insight into his life. The chapters proceed recounting the various stages of Saladin's political and military career, from his seizure of power in Egypt, his usurpation of Syria, his growing confrontation with the Crusader States and showdown with Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade. All these chapters do is to relate the passage of events and Saladin's involvement. They do not get to the heart of the matter, the purpose of a biography, in providing the reader with an understanding of Saladin the man. They do not explore the reasons and rationale behind his actions. The book details Saladin's life but does not give him any personality for the reader to relate to. Key events that might shed light on him are glossed over or ignored. Saladin's religious dimension and its effect upon his personality, politics and decisions is barely discussed. For example, while Saladin's near fatal illness of 1185 is

mentioned its effect upon confirming his commitment to *jihad* and his religious convictions are ignored. Man fails to bring Saladin to life because there isn't enough depth provided to adequately flesh him out. In some instances Saladin comes second to more well defined characterisations of his rivals and competitors.

The legend of Saladin is again an area where Man covers a lot of ground and a topic that could have provided a useful insight into historical and contemporary attitudes towards him. Man's examination of Saladin's legend is presented in very black and white terms, of heroes and villains, the thing that good films and fiction are made of. Saladin is the hero and his villain is Reynald de Chatillion. As Saladin's foil Reynald has two chapters devoted to his actions. This black and white dichotomy is maintained throughout and ultimately does the book and the reader a disservice. This division is too simplistic and hinders any meaningful analysis of Saladin, his actions and how his legend was created. Reynald is irredeemable and Saladin may fail but can do little wrong. Man readily picks up on the immoral acts of Saladin's rivals, such as Richard the Lionheart's execution of prisoners at Acre in 1191, and decries them. Yet Man is silent on Saladin's own less than rosy actions, such as his suppression of the Nubian regiments in Egypt in 1169 or his execution of prisoners after the Battle of Hattin in 1187. The discussion of such events is crucial not only to telling us more about the individual but also how these actions were reconciled with and incorporated into the legend. Man's discussion of Saladin's legend is a case of black and white, but that which more adequately reflects Saladin the man is to be found in the myriad of shades of grey. Man's analysis of Saladin would have been better served if more attention had been focused in this direction. Man does present a meaningful discussion of Saladin and his qualities of leadership in a later chapter. This is not something which appears frequently in biographies of Saladin and offers something of substance and insight that is to be commended. This particular chapter would have been improved greatly if there had been more depth and detail to Saladin's life and career throughout the volume.

While the final part of the title refers to the Islamic empire, that of the Ayyubids, which Saladin founded there is comparatively little discussion of it in this volume. Man does recount how Saladin forged an empire and its fate following his death but there is no real examination of that empire, its form, function or relationship with other Islamic polities. Saladin's political place within the wider Islamic world and his diplomacy against rivals and neighbouring states is only briefly discussed. His actions in Tunisia, Yemen and Turkey are mentioned only in passing. How Saladin held the empire together, the trials and challenges he faced and the toll it took are largely ignored. Saladin's political and military career up until the late 1180s was focused against his rivals in the Islamic world. Yet, it is the narrative of Saladin

and the Crusaders that dominates Man's account. This is a tired and worn narrative, one of simple heroes and villains. The Islamic empire features in the book's title but nowhere else.

Man is an excellent storyteller, his characterisation of Saladin and his enemies, of the world in which they existed is very evocative and easy to read. The story he tells is engaging, it makes the reader want to turn the next page. However, it is a story that has been often told and this volume provides little that is new. Saladin as presented in this volume is still a prince of chivalry. As a general introduction this volume, with some errors and inaccuracies, is more than adequate. For those interested in getting to grips with Saladin more substantial works by Malcolm Lyons and D. E. P. Jackson, Andrew E. Ehrenkreutz, and Anne-Marie Eddé should still be their first port of call.

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