



*The Life and Legend of the
Sultan Saladin*

Jonathan Phillips

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Review by: Stephen Donnachie



The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin. By Jonathan Phillips. London: Bodley Head, 2019. ISBN 978-1-847-92214-4. xviii + 495 pp. £25.

The Ayyubid Sultan, Saladin—much like his great adversary Richard the Lionheart—is a larger than life historical figure who continues to attract considerable historical attention, and whose posthumous legend has ensured a place in popular imagination. Saladin is a heroic figure as much as a historic one. Indeed, it seems that every few years a new publication on the life of Saladin appears in print, offering further insights into the Sultan's famed magnanimity or keen political ability that enabled him to forge an empire that spanned the Middle East and which brought defeat to a century of western crusading endeavours. Jonathan Phillips in *The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin* has produced an engaging and accessible biography of Saladin that seeks to move beyond the traditional, and well-trodden, narrative of the individual 'great man,' by explicitly placing the life of Saladin into its cultural and chronological context. Phillips deftly weaves the complex histories of Syria, Egypt, and Islam in the twelfth century into a biography without becoming bogged down in unnecessary detail. The result is a highly successful and lively account of the life of Saladin, that simultaneously explores the greater social, economic, and religious forces that shaped his political career.

The volume is broken into two sections. The first part, which accounts for much of the book, is about the life of Saladin. Chapters cover each of the key moments in his life, from his youth in Syria in the 1140s, his political rise in Egypt in the 1160s, the establishment of his regional dominance in the 1170s and 1180s, through to his great conflict with the Crusader States and the Third Crusade in the 1180s and 1190s. Phillips overcomes the challenge encountered by many biographers of medieval figures, that of a lack of information about their subject's early life, by thoroughly contextualising Saladin's formative years through an examination of the political figures and religious forces that influenced him. The actions of Saladin's father and uncle, as well as his family's great patron, the Zengid ruler of Syria, Nur al-Din, had a profound effect upon Saladin, and provided models for his own actions later in life. Regular comparisons are drawn between Saladin and these men to place Saladin's career within a wider framework of political behaviour and practices that were common to Muslim rulers in the twelfth century. Saladin had many exemplary traits, but these traits had an origin. Saladin's achievements were impressive, but his accomplishments were the continuation of works started by others. The importance of family unity, and Saladin's ability to attract learned and capable men to his service, are key themes that appear across his life, and are factors which Phillips considers to be essential to Saladin's success. Likewise, Saladin effectively married the political and religious rhetoric of his age with his own dynastic interests. The Saladin that Phillips presents is no prince of chivalry, but is instead a charismatic politician and capable administrator, surrounded by a dedicated cadre of loyal family and experts.

Despite this valuable contextualisation that is of great benefit to the reader, Phillips never loses sight of Saladin, and he remains clearly foregrounded throughout the work. Furthermore, Phillips does not fall into the trap that can easily overwhelm biographies of

Saladin. Given the scope of Saladin's career, and the numerous opponents he faced in forging his empire, it is easy to present the narrative of Saladin's life as one of a series of direct conflicts with his various adversaries. Though many chapters are dedicated to Saladin's conflict with the Franks and his struggle against the Third Crusade, which were the high points of his career, Saladin's story is not lost in the broader details needed to explain these events, or in the unnecessary characterisation of his rivals. Saladin's opponents appear throughout the work, but they never overshadow him. Similarly, Saladin is never isolated or raised on a pedestal independent from his environment. He is always explicitly grounded in the twelfth century Islamic world in which he lived, and the underlying forces that brought him victory are regularly asserted. This is a refreshing approach to tackling a figure of Saladin's stature.

The second section of the volume covers the posthumous legend of Saladin from both Christian and Islamic perspectives. This includes chapters on the development of the figure of Saladin in medieval historical writing, later popular literature, and modern politics. While other biographies have dedicated some space to similar discussions, noting the popularity of Saladin in twentieth century Arab nationalist and Islamist discourse, these have usually been quite limited and are often consigned to concluding chapters. Phillips provides a more thorough discussion of Saladin's afterlife, and challenges the commonly held notion that Saladin was largely forgotten in the Middle East before re-emerging in the nineteenth century. Phillips argues that Saladin became entrenched in the popular memory of the peoples of the Middle East, becoming a figure whose life and achievements made him a malleable point of reference for a diverse range of causes and organisations in the centuries since his death. These chapters are a welcome addition to the historiography on Saladin, and they provide much food for thought for historians on the legacy and use of historical figures.

Phillips's biography is dynamic and engaging, providing a wealth of information and new insights on the life of Saladin, as well as the world in which he lived. It is a pleasure to read and leaves the reader with a firm understanding of Saladin's life and personality, as well as the forces that moulded him. The volume is ideal as introductory reading for the general reader as well as academics and provides a valuable contribution on the historic legend of Saladin.

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