

Saladin and jerusalem

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Saladin and the Capture of Jerusalem Saladin stands out in Western accounts of the Middle Ages because his beliefs and actions reflected supposedly Christian characteristics: honesty, piety, magnanimity, and chivalry. Unlike many Muslim rulers, he was not cruel to his subordinates; Saladin believed deeply in the Koranic standard that all men are equal before the law. He set a high moral tone; for example, he distributed war proceeds carefully to help maintain discipline in the ranks. As an administrator, Saladin showed great vision.

He altered the tax structure in Egypt and elsewhere to conform to Koranic instructions, and he supported higher education. It was his vision—together with luck and military skill—that enabled him to begin a quest for Muslim unification that would bear fruit many years later. Saladin was born in 1138 in Tikrit, Mesopotamia (now modern-day Iraq). His formal name was Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub. Salah al-Din was an honorary title that translates as “Righteousness of Faith.” His father, Ayyub, and his uncle, Shirkuh, were both generals in the army of Zengi, the Muslim leader who captured the County of Edessa from the crusaders in 1144.

When Zengi died in 1146, Saladin moved with his father and uncle to Damascus in Syria, the main city of Zengi’s empire. Zengi’s son, Nur-ad-din, had taken over Damascus after his father’s death, and Saladin began work for Nur-ad-din, following in the footsteps of his father and uncle. The Muslim world was rent by religious differences. The Seljuk caliphate, ruled by Nur al-Din, was of the more liberal Sunni sect and had its seat of power in Baghdad. The Fatimid caliphate of Egypt, which had embraced the more orthodox Shict, was a volatile agglomeration with weak rulers.

Like a splinter between them was the Latin Kingdom, a Christian stronghold along the eastern Mediterranean coast, ruled by a Frank, Amalric I. Nur al-Din believed that if Amalric were able to join forces with the Byzantine emperor to conquer Egypt, the whole Islamic world would be threatened. The stakes were great: Rich trade routes to the Orient, religious and educational centers, and plentiful agricultural lands could be lost. Saladin, as one of Nur al-Din's primary advisers, helped plan three Syrian invasions of Egypt between 1164 and 1169 to conquer the Fatimid caliphate.

During part of this period, Amalric had a treaty to defend Cairo against Syrian invaders. Saladin's first command came at Alexandria, where he was in charge of one thousand men under difficult conditions. After a short time back in Damascus, Saladin returned on Nur al-Din's orders to Egypt after the Fatimid alliance with Amalric broke down. Saladin had solemn uncertainties about returning to Egypt, in part because he distrusted the motives of his powerful uncle Shirkuh, who was leading the return. The political situation there was dangerous and unstable.

When Shirkuh suddenly died, however, Saladin was well placed to assume Shirkuh's place as vizier of Egypt commanding Nur al-Din's forces there; in this case, he was the compromise candidate among many factions. At the age of 30, Saladin drew strength from Koranic exhortations to fulfill God's purpose. Saladin, like Nur al-Din, was pious. He kept little money, acting instead as caretaker for the whole Muslim community; the proper function of wealth, he believed, was to further the aims of Islam. Both men saw stable leadership in Egypt as a key to preserving Muslim unity.

Still, Nur al-Din was suspicious when Saladin insisted on independence to do this—including lessened payments of tribute. Not only did Saladin have military bases on the Egyptian front, but he also had to fight political battles at his rear. Saladin consolidated power in Egypt by getting rid of Fatimid commanders and substituting loyalists; uprisings continued in the provinces for some years, but finally Fatimid rule was abolished. Now Saladin built up the military and raided nearby areas. His strength was growing just when Ayyub, Nur al-Din, and Amalric died in quick succession.

Both Nur al-Din's and Amalric's successors were young boys; thus, both kingdoms were weakened. Saladin quickly moved to consolidate the empire under his own rule, citing the need for a unified Islam. He struck quickly at the Frankish Kingdom, taking a string of small towns, but the important town of Aleppo did not fall and remained a refuge for al-Salih. Mosul, too, was a holdout, but with other victories Saladin became Sultan of Syria, succeeding Nur al-Din. The Damascus-Cairo axis was all-important to Saladin as he set out on a jihad to drive the Franks from the region.

After 1176, he undertook major public works, religious, and educational projects in Egypt, but at the same time he needed military action to convince his critics that the jihad was not a fraud merely intended to further his personal power. After a serious reverse at the strategic outpost of Ascalon, he quickly returned to the attack. Angered by the Franks' breaking of a truce, Saladin was successful against them in southern Lebanon, and he consolidated troops from Syria and Egypt in order to destroy the fort at Jacob's Mill. In capturing Frankish defenses, Saladin often destroyed them so they could not be recaptured.

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He hoped to win strategic territory in Mesopotamia as a base from which to move against Christian-held Jerusalem, his ultimate target. Saladin was keen to get the war with the Christians underway, but there was one main stumbling block. In 1183, Saladin had signed a treaty with the leader of the Christians, Guy of Lusignan. Saladin being an honorable man, felt bound by the truce, disregarding his desire to start the war. Fortunately for him, and unfortunate for the crusaders, the truce was broken in 1187 by a crusader called Reynald of Chatillon. Reynald attacked a group of Muslims and held them as prisoners of war.

Despite being angry at this break in the truce, Saladin felt that he should negotiate with Reynald and keep his side of the truce, instead of attacking the crusader. Foolishly, Reynald refused to meet with Saladin and furthermore refused to release the prisoners after receiving orders from his leader Guy Lusignan. Saladin now had a reason he needed to go to war. On July 1, 1187, Saladin marched his troops to a mountain, the Horn of Hattin. The weather at the current time was extremely hot, and the crusader army that had been sent to defend Jerusalem was hot, exhausted, and dehydrated.

Recognizing the crusaders' distress, Saladin devised a plan to make the crusaders situation worse. He set fire to some nearby dry brush, whose smoke quickly made its way into the crusader camp. On July 4, Saladin attacked and the crusaders were quickly defeated. Christian Jerusalem had suffered an enormous loss at the Battle of Hattin. The army had almost been destroyed and the city's leader, Guy of Lusignan, was a prisoner of Saladin. Unfortunately, the city's troubles did not end there. There were shortages of food in the city, since the Battle of Hattin occurred during the harvest.

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With the area in the enemy's hands, all crops were lost. All of the refugees who flocked to the city to seek shelter from Saladin's army made the shortage of food worse. Jerusalem was able to house thirty thousand people, but after the Battle of Hattin, the population doubled to sixty thousand. Most of these people were women and children who had no intentions of fighting against the invading Muslim army. By September 20, 1187, Jerusalem was under siege. Saladin first chose the western side of the city for his beginning attack. The western wall of

Jerusalem was heavily fortified by the crusaders, who had built the strong citadel there around the Tower of David. Most of the crusader soldiers that were left in Jerusalem went to this tower to defend the city. While the fighting continued, Saladin looked for a superior position from which to attack the crusaders. He eventually settled outside the northeastern section of the city, between St. Mary's Postern and Jehoshaphat Gate. Saladin used large wooden catapults to bombard the walls and towers of Jerusalem, weakening the city's defenses and driving the crusaders away from their positions.

Saladin then sent 10,000 archers to shoot at the wall's defenders, followed by 10,000 horsemen armed with lances and bows in the north to prevent a crusader counterattack. The crusaders tried in vain to drive away the invading army, but once the wall had collapsed the end was in sight. Realizing their cause was hopeless, the city eventually surrendered on October 2, 1187. The Kingdom of Jerusalem was at an end. Two knights and ten soldiers were placed in every street in Jerusalem to keep order during the takeover.

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When Saladin's victorious army had secured the city, they understood what the first act was to be completed. The most sacred Islamic monument in Jerusalem was a massive building called Quabbat as-Sakhrah, or Dome of the Rock. As soon as the Muslims entered Jerusalem, they climbed up to the top of the dome and removed the cross, immediately showing that it was the Muslims who were now in charge, not the Christians. Saladin's troops were tired now and not easily disciplined; the European forces were regrouping for a Third Crusade, led by the dashing Richard I (the Lionhearted) of England.

Muslim-held Acre, after a long siege, was finally given up in 1191. Yet the cost was high for the Crusaders, and Richard did not want to be gone too long from England. The final confrontation between Saladin and Richard came in July 1192. After a day of prayer, Saladin and his troops were ready to face the Crusaders as they poised for an attack on Jerusalem. Suddenly, the Crusaders withdrew. Saladin attributed the retreat to divine intervention, but military historians say that Richard had decided to attack Egypt instead. Such an attack, however, was not undertaken. The Third Crusade was over.

Saladin retired to Damascus to spend time with his wives and children. In the winter of 1193, he rode out in bad weather to meet a group of pilgrims returning from Mecca. He became ill and died a short while later at age fifty-five, penniless by choice. Saladin's title, al-Malik al-Nasir, or "Strong to Save the Faith," was appropriate in his lifetime. Within a hundred years of his death, however, the many tensions beneath the Muslims' surface unity split apart what Saladin had accomplished. Today, Saladin is remembered a great war leader who conquered an empire and drove invaders out of his homeland.

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He is honored as a Muslim hero, a fighter of his faith, who led jihad to recapture the city of Jerusalem and restore Muslim worship there. He is admired for his skills at organizing a vast army, planning battles and ambushes, and inspiring loyalty among his men. He is respected for his love of learning, generous gifts to charity, and personal devotion to religious beliefs.

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