

Passionate Histories: Romancing Saladin

One of the guilty pleasures of doing history, whether social, cultural, or (in my case) literary, is the emotional connection we may feel to the past. Premodern Mediterranean writers themselves often mobilize their passions in the pursuit of history. Abu Shama, looking back from the first heady period of the Mamluk dynasty at the deeds of Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din, seizes upon the past as a kind of passionate friendship. In the prologue to the *Rawdatayn*, [The Two Gardens], he writes love poetry to his source books, and speaks of seeking the lost past in passionate congress with a former age: “The book that I read is an intimate friend whom I cherish more than a mistress/ and as I study it, the centuries revive in my sight, present, though their greatness has been extinguished.” In the *Rawdatayn*, Abu Shama interweaves two lost epochs with passionate nostalgia: the lives of Salah al-Din and Nur al-Din, and the lives of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions and the first four Caliphs.¹ This is high praise for the two anti-crusading leaders, who, whatever their accomplishments, were Seljuq and Kurdish in origin, and thus seemingly inept for mourning the ultimate springs of Arabian Islam. Salah al-Din’s Kurdish roots in particular seem to have discouraged writers after Abu Shama from lauding him as a cultural hero, at least until the Pan Arab movement in Egypt, and twentieth-century radicalizations of Islam.²

However, surprisingly, Salah al-Din attracts such emotional attachments not only from Mamluk chroniclers such as Abu Shama and Ibn Rawil, but also from the descendants of his enemies in the Latin Christian Mediterranean. Launching from the *Rawdatayn*, this paper explores the emotional legacies of Salah al-Din, upon writers around the Mediterranean and beyond. In particular, Boccaccio, the Minstrel of Rheims, and the writer of the *Pas Saladin* make Salah al-Din into a magnet for multiple attachments generated from a heady mixture of fear and admiration. I will argue that Salah al-Din is both exceptional -- as a figure who either sparks love of Islam, or love despite his Islam -- and fascinatingly typical, symptomatic of a chivalric aristophilia that crosses confessional lines. Romances of Saladin explore accelerating gift economies whose exchanges bind together donors and receivers through gratitude, fortune, and friendship, while never quite escaping the threat of violence. I will draw upon Sara Ahmed’s work on affect theory in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, as well as James A. Schultz’s discussions of aristophilia as an emotion that transforms courtly love into love of courtliness, without regard to gender dimorphism, race or religion. Mediterranean Saladin legends bespeak the power of the past itself as lost opportunity and occasion for strange nostalgia, that remains intimately tied to engagements with a variety of presents, up to and including our own. If there is time, I’d love to screen Saladin’s silent entry into Jerusalem from Ridley Scott’s *Kingdom of Heaven*, which is almost fetishistic in its intensity, and discuss Tariq Ali’s novel from the Islam Quintet, *The Book of Saladin*.

¹ Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

² Carole Hillenbrand, “The Evolution of the Saladin Legend in the West,” *Mélanges Louis Pouzet*, Beirut, 2006, 1-13.