

## *Romancing Islam: The Lives and Afterlives of Saladin*

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### Book outline

*Romancing Islam: The Lives and Afterlives of Saladin* pursues one driving question: why and how does Salah al-Din exert such emotional appeal over centuries and in such surprising places? Stories of Salah al-Din continue to fascinate scholars, from the brilliant recent biographies of Anne-Marie Eddé (*Saladin* 2008) and Jonathan Phillips (*Life and Legend of Sultan Saladin* 2019) to the recent reading of Saladin as a whitewashing of Islam's threatening alterity by Geraldine Heng (*Invention of Race* 2019). However, most scholars make Salah al-Din an exceptional figure: the only Muslim warrior who provokes European admiration rather than horror. He appears as both threat and savior in chansons and narratives such as the *Pas Saladin*, *The Ordene de Chevalerie*, the *Tales of the Minstrel of Rheims*, and Boccaccio's stories of "The Three Laws" and the "Generosity of Saladin and Messer Torello". In Dante's *Inferno* at the very threshold of hell, Salah al-Din becomes even more singular: "And alone, apart, I saw the Saladin." ["e solo, in parte, vidi 'l Saladino"] (*Inferno* 4.129). Even in Arabic histories, such as Abu Shama's *Kitab al-Rawdatayn*, *The Book of the Two Gardens*, Salah al-Din and his predecessor, the Zengid emir Nur al-Din, stand out from all of history, isolated in glory as golden-age rulers, against more recent historical landscapes of self-division, religious indifference, and misrule. These post-facto exceptional Saladins do powerful cultural work for readers of Saladin's legend across the centuries, even as they create cultural ideals for new generations.

In one way, however, Salah al-Din and the Ayyubid dynasty he founded were genuinely exceptional even in their own time. When Salah al-Din joined the lands of both Syria and Egypt between a single Sunni rule, thus obliterating both the Fatimid and Zengid dynasties, he had to win hearts and minds not as a rightful inheritor but as an outsider and upstart. Salah al-Din and his family were Kurds who rose to state power not through high birth and right descent but through service and military leadership. They thus seized power from the margins and had to work in extraordinary ways to establish their rule. Salah al-Din fought against this exceptionality and succeeded by making himself model of Sunni Muslim virtuous leadership, build on a combination punch of personal piety, sovereign generosity and hospitality, and military success. In this he drew upon the highest ideals of Sunni Muslim culture. Throughout his career he linked himself to the founders of Islam, to Mediterranean traditions of noble hospitality, and to Arab traditions that celebrated kinship, both born and adoptive. He transforms cultural eccentricity into a performance of the most central and appeal cultural ideals of his constituents.

It is this legacy of outsider status that grounds my thesis: that Salah al-Din's extraordinary historical resonance is linked to his own careful crafting of his cultural centrality. Salah al-Din embodied a cultural ideal for so many later writers, because he and his supporters fabricated that identity from an outsider perspective, established by military conquests rather than high birth and right descent. In his propaganda, crucial to his survival and effectiveness, he fostered images of himself as pious Sunni Muslim, exemplary sovereign, and effective military commander. He

commissioned chronicles and narratives that would 1) display his own nostalgic replay of early Islamic military leaders, 2) extol his hospitality and enrichment of those who would ally to his cause, and 3) celebrate his weaving of kinship as a form of political dynastic maneuvering. His biographers thus create in him a vision of chivalric strength and piety remarkable in its appeal both within and beyond the Dar al-Islam. They helped create Salah al-Din's transhistorical appeal by making him the lynchpin of narrative emotional regimes that resonated not only with Islamic receptions but beyond them to Latin Christian and European ones.

*Romancing Islam* shows how premodern writings about Salah al-Din condition his reception. In some texts, writers focus on Salah al-Din as a weaver of inter-cultural connections and mutual tolerance. These include Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1779 plea for tolerance of both Jews and Muslims in *Nathan der Weise*; Tariq Ali's richly revisionist *Book of Saladin* (1998); and Ridley Scott's 2006 Muslim-friendly, anti-crusading film, released in the aftermath of 9/11, *Kingdom of Heaven*. In yet other texts, Saladin becomes a flashpoint for searing irreconcilable cultural divisions into place: in Sir Walter Scott's orientaling *The Talisman*, or Saddam Hussain's claim to be a "second" Saladin. Mediterranean Saladin legends thus bespeak the power of the past itself to generate emotional narratives that extend broad appeal across centuries and cultures up to and including our own.

### Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction: lays out the driving question and central points of the book: what are the appeals of Salah al-Din's life and legendarium both to his contemporaries (Islamic and Latin Christian) and to subsequent historian's or story teller. Main argument: we have no way of knowing who Salah al-Din was personally, but we can trace how he nurtured particular narratives about himself by cultivating biographers, clerics, and observers, and performing himself in ways that would appeal both culturally and emotionally to those hearing the tales. Effectively his own propaganda created the image that subsequent readers revered and feared.

Chapter 2: Chronicling the Sultan: treats contemporary chronicles and biographers, (Baha' al-Din, Imad al-Din, Ibn al-Athir, and several Latin Christian chroniclers) both among Salah al-Din's allies and his enemies, arguing that he cultivates narratives of 1) personal piety and nostalgic revival of Islam's previous golden ages, 2) narratives of generosity and largesse to enemies, and 3) narratives of support for his family and descendants as he lays the groundwork for the Ayyubid dynasty he founded. The early crusades and the significance of Jerusalem will provide context for Salah al-Din's biography and his conquest of the Latin Kingdoms and Jerusalem.

Chapter 3: Romancing Salah al-Din into Saladin in the Islamic and Latin Christian Middle Ages: These narratives shape subsequent chronicles and narratives in ways that enhance emotions such as nostalgia, gratitude, admiration, and fear. Muslim narratives focus on the nostalgia and generosity, while Christian narratives focus on the generosity and fear, laying claims to relationships with Salah al-Din even as they shy away from his power and Muslimness. Texts treated will include Ibn Shama's *Book of the Two Gardens* (Rawdatayn), Boccaccio *Decameron* 10.9, the Minstrel of Rheims' story of Eleanor of Aquitaine's romance with Saladin,

and the *Pas Saladin*. Texts will be situated in the context of thirteenth-century Mamluk rule, and crusade, with reference to Joinville's Life of King Louis IX and the account of the Franciscan friar, William of Rubruck,

Chapter 4: Saladin and Baibars: Post medieval Islamic histories of Salah al-Din will be treated, in the view of his eclipse as a champion of Islam by the Mamluk Sultan Baibars after 1250. Why did Baibars replace Salah al-Din as the supreme anti-crusader of the medieval period? – by making Salah al-Din one of his ideals and following his model; he studied Salah al-Din's use of war as an effective tool of political unification and counter-crusade, and he was idolized in a similar way in subsequent histories and romances. Baibars effectively became a second Salah al-Din. Meanwhile in the Boke of John Mandeville: the Sultan of Egypt creates a hinge between the Anxious Christian-centered Mediterranean haunted by the dynamics of Crusade and recovery and the stranger reaches of the spherical world dominated by Asia. To that doorway, the Muslim Shahada provides a key!

Chapter 5: Salah al-Din and European nationalisms: England takes exception: discusses the creation of Richard I, Salah al-Din's chief adversary in the Third Crusade, as a national champion whose legend eclipses Salah al-Din. The chapter also considers French assimilations of Salah al-Din in the thirteenth-century *Pas Saladin*, the Fille de Comte de Ponthieu, and the fifteenth-century romance of *Saladin*. Late devolutions of crusade and pilgrimage will also be treated as well as changing attitudes to Islam.

Chapter 6: Centuries of Saladin: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1779 *Nathan der Weise* as a plea for mutual toleration between Jew, Muslims, and Christians (even Templars); Sir Walter Scott's disguised wise and kindly Saladin, moderate and canny against extremist Christian crusader, but once revealed as the Sultan wielding a fearsome absolutist Orientalized power; Tariq Ali's *Book of Saladin* in the context of Islamic revisionist history and intellectualism. Ridley Scott's Saladin in *Kingdom of Heaven*, his casting of beloved Syrian actor Ghassan Massound, as the Sultan; how it was received in the wake of 9/11 to mixed U.S. reviews and enormous approval in the Middle East, particularly Syria.

Chapter 7 War, Peace and the Postmodern Mediterranean: Political Salah al-Din and Arab nationalism: explores political seizures of Salah al-Din as model for state building, collaborative self-governance, and anti-Western critique in the age of decolonialization: Ottoman Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid and Kaiser Wilhelm II at Salah al-Din's cenotaph; Gamal 'abd al-Nassar in Egypt (1952) and Yousseff Chahine's film, *Al-Nasir Salah al-Din*; The iconography of Salah al-Din: the eagle and the autocrat – from the Citadel and the coats of arms of Egypt, the Federation of Arab Republics, and (briefly) Libya, to Hafiz al-Asad of Syria (1992 monument) and Saddam Hussain (a stamp issued during the first Gulf War). Then moves to Tariq Ali's *Book of Saladin* as a deconstruction of both occidentalist and orientalist Saladins.

Abstract for Chapter 7:

Abstract

This chapter teases out two influential ways that Saladin stories can be made to work as mythographies for Western culture, first creating and then dividing West from East, and placing them in a zero-sum struggle for dominion. In the first way, we see Saladin as a man of peace and toleration, who inspires better forms of Western sovereignty: he heals and reinvigorates a West in need of assistance. The West emerges as stronger in its teleologies of development even when those teleologies proceed toward Orientalist and colonialist domination of Mediterranean and Afro-Asiatic cultures. In the second, we see Ṣalāh al-Dīn as a man of war, whose power was sufficient to unite all the divided sovereignties of the eastern Mediterranean to resist the imperial power of Western aggressors. The West emerges as imperial and colonial power from whom independence and social justice must be violently wrested, even as a resistant independence-seeking, Occidentalizing East is also consolidated. Whether Ṣalāh al-Dīn/Saladin is mobilized in Orientalizing or Occidentalizing ways, West and East are divided from each other into intransigent enemies, and their histories are trimmed accordingly. One of the amputations is frequently the Mediterranean itself, in all its entanglements and intercessions.

In the first section of this chapter I will trace how Saladin the healer emerges from the premodern Mediterranean, arguing that Saladin's healing power reshapes crusade ideologies in England between C14 and C19, in the cultural fantasies of the Middle English *Richard Coer de Lyon*, which Sir Walter Scott transforms in his historical novel of crusade, *The Talisman*. In the second section, I will briefly look at how appropriating Ṣalāh al-Dīn as a warrior victorious against Western aggression has bolstered the nationalist agendas of authoritarian West Asian regimes in Iraq and Syria, ending with an analysis of the nationalizing work Youssef Chahine does in the 1963 film *Al-Nāṣr Salāh al-Dīn*, *Saladin the Victorious*.

In the final section I will argue that Tariq Ali's postcolonial and postmodern *Book of Saladin* takes aim at both of these world-dividing Saladins: the healer and the warrior, to create a Saladin who models a hope that Western readers can realize that the East and the West have always been neighbors. Tariq Ali's *Book of Saladin* deconstructs the dynamics of historiography, literary mythography, authoritarian power, and religious boundary-policing, that both Occidentalists and Orientalist Saladins require. Tariq Ali's *Book of Saladin* and his Islam quintet as a sequence imagine a future where past histories of Mediterranean Christian and Muslim neighboring (in all their frictional, fractious, and fabulous complexities) can manifest in a new global Mediterranean where living with difference yields pleasure as well as terror, and richness as well as retrenchment.