

BOOKSHELF

‘The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin’ Review: A Portrait of a Champion

The legend of Saladin as an ideal Quranic leader who fought back invaders remains a potent symbol in the Islamic world’s public memory.

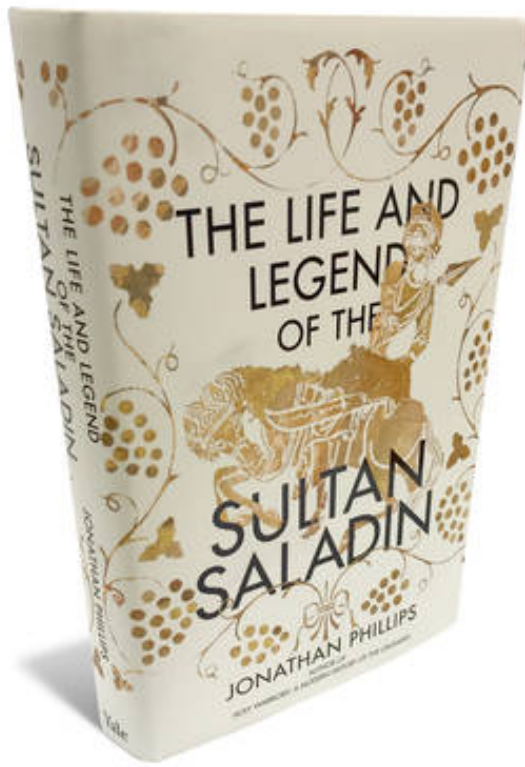
By Christopher Tyerman

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Until the 21st century, Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub (Righteous of the Faith; Joseph, son of Ayyub), known in Europe as Saladin, was probably the most famous Muslim in Western culture after the Prophet Muhammad himself. The historical reputation of Saladin (1137-93) rests on a few celebrated achievements, each recounted and analyzed in Jonathan Phillips’s learned and engaging biography. He created a new Near Eastern empire that united Egypt with Syria, in the process suppressing the heretical (to orthodox Sunni Muslims) Shiite Fatimid caliphate in Cairo (1171); he recaptured Jerusalem for Islam (1187), defeating Christian rulers who had held the city since the First Crusade in 1099; and he resisted the massive Third Crusade (1188-92) led, in part, by Richard the Lionheart.

Saladin’s legendary status was burnished early on by elaborate Western fantasies that emphasized his supposed chivalric qualities of bravery and mercy, and in later fictions from Walter Scott’s “The Talisman” (1825) to the movie “Kingdom of Heaven” (2005), which similarly portray him as a worthy opponent. These depictions employ Saladin as a sophisticated, tolerant, just and generous cipher, intended to contrast with Western leaders’ supposed narrow-minded aggression or myopic enthusiasm. This anachronistic rebranding of an archenemy into an icon of praiseworthy rule is only equaled, perhaps, by the admiration some have for Napoleon Bonaparte.

In the Islamic world, Saladin’s actual achievements were also, if less tendentiously, refashioned to create a lasting portrait of a champion of Muslim tradition and power, a hero who successfully overcame heretics and infidels. The image of Saladin as the ideal pious Quranic leader remained a potent symbol in regional public memory, serving as an abiding challenge to politically divisive or corrupt local rulers. As Western powers encroached on the eastern



Mediterranean over the last two centuries, he also came to be seen as the epitome of resistance for proponents of Arab unity and independence, from secularists such as Gamal Nasser, Hafez Assad or Saddam Hussein to the religious radicals of the Muslim Brotherhood, al Qaeda and Islamic State.

PHOTO: WSJ

THE LIFE & LEGEND OF THE SULTAN SALADIN

By Jonathan Phillips

Yale, 478 pages, \$32.50

Thus there are two Saladins, the 12th-century ruler and the equally historical subsequent political and literary invention. Not the least virtue of “The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin” is Mr. Phillips’s wide-ranging scrutiny of both. Saladin’s achievements as a Kurdish mercenary captain who founded an empire are startling on any scale—the result of skill and luck, as well as the fluid political and social setting of the 12th-century Near East, which Mr. Phillips captures well.

Inevitably Saladin has inspired many previous scholarly biographies, most recently a rich investigation of evidence by Anne-Marie Eddé (2008), translated from the French by Jane Marie Todd in 2011. Unlike his predecessors, however, Mr. Phillips is not an Arabist; he is a professor of history at Royal Holloway, University of London. Nonetheless, aided by existing translations and new ones (not least those of his former research pupil Osman Latiff), Mr. Phillips has fruitfully extended the range of Arabic source material to create a rounded portrait of Saladin’s world, often sketched in sharp, unexpected detail.



Portrait of Saladin. PHOTO: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

The author makes telling observations on the importance of Saladin's Ayyubid family, particularly the loyalty of his father (Ayyub), brother (al-Adil), and nephew (Taqi al-din), who all held land and power under him. His speculations on Saladin's psychological and physical state in his exhausting final years are finely judged, drawing on biographies by the sultan's intimates. The taxing bodily burdens of life as politician, administrator, ruler and warrior come across well, and the picture is lent immediacy by Mr. Phillips's own travels in the region, from the sands around Acre to Saladin's mausoleum in Damascus.

Mr. Phillips draws in the reader with vivid accounts of people, places and events, relying on apt quotation from primary sources of scenic descriptions and direct speech. Yet the unwary might miss a central difficulty: Much of the biographical material about Saladin was composed after his success by apologists following formal patterns to create an image of an ideal prince, or was written many generations later. More generally, it is a bit odd that a third of Mr. Phillips's biography is dedicated to the climactic confrontation with the Franks and crusaders between 1187 and 1192—well-trodden territory in which Mr. Phillips can excavate little new. This account also underplays the important effects within the Islamic world of Saladin's suppression of the Shiite Fatimids.

The picture that emerges of the historical Saladin is admiring. Mr. Phillips sidesteps what he calls the “eternal dilemma” of seeing Saladin either as a pious holy warrior or a grasping dynast, a paragon of sanctity or of selfish ambition. The two are not mutually exclusive. Because he was a Kurdish upstart, Saladin needed to wrap himself in the aura of holy warrior and upholder of orthodox Islam. It justified his own usurpation of power and lent respectability to followers of previous regimes who were changing allegiances.

All medieval rulers lived their lives—domestic no less than official—in public. Saladin’s austere, Quranic lifestyle, even if gilded by his eulogists, could be seen as a necessity; it hardly opens a window into his soul. After all, he failed to complete the Hajj, sending a proxy, and spent most of his career fighting fellow Muslims (Sunnis as well as Shiite). Only after the capture of Jerusalem did the mission to expel the Christians—with whom he previously had made a series of alliances—appear an inevitable trajectory.

Mr. Phillips’s book concludes with an innovative and sweeping final section on posthumous images of Saladin, demonstrating precisely how memories of the past are unfixed and easily manipulated. He has been recast as everything from a chivalrous knight to a tolerant gentleman of the Enlightenment to a modern jihadist fighter. Whatever the truth behind this image-making, Saladin’s was a truly astonishing career, one to which Mr. Phillips does justice.

Mr. Tyerman is a professor at the University of Oxford and the author, most recently, of “How to Plan a Crusade.”

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