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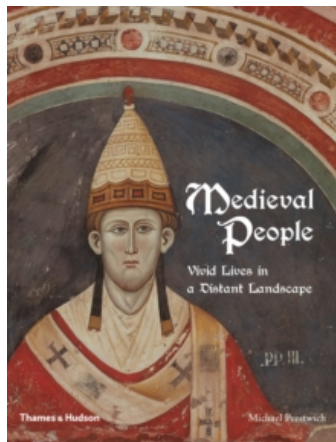
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Prestwich, M. (2014). *Medieval people*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Saladin

(Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb)

MUSLIM LEADER AGAINST THE CRUSADERS

1137–93

The small child was stolen in the night. Distraught, her mother was advised to go through the enemy lines, and ask Saladin himself for help. She was brought before him, wailing and tearing at her clothes. Saladin wept on hearing the tale, and ordered a search of the camp. An hour later, the child was found, and returned to her crusader mother. It was acts like this which led to the view in the west that Saladin, although a heathen, was a chivalrous and noble man, and a worthy opponent.

Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb, known as Saladin, was a Kurd, born in Tikrit, in modern Iraq, in 1137. Little is known of his early years, which were mostly spent in Syria gaining a good Islamic education. He first came to prominence when he was appointed vizier in Egypt in 1169, and 'he gave up wine and the pleasures of the world, and devoted himself to serious business and to work'. When the Egyptian Fatimid dynasty came to an end in 1171, Saladin soon established his authority there as sultan. He then extended his power over Syria, completing his work when Aleppo surrendered to him in 1183. This unification of the Arab Middle East was his greatest achievement. In part, he owed his success to military skill, notably with the defeat of the forces of Aleppo and Mosul at the Horns of Hama in 1175. His diplomatic skill was also important, while his religious conviction gave him the drive to succeed.

Since their creation almost a century before, the crusader states had depended for their survival in large measure on the weakness of the Islamic powers. Saladin's success in unifying Egypt and Syria transformed the situation. At Hattin, in 1187, he defeated and captured Guy de Lusignan, king of Jerusalem, in an overwhelming triumph. 'God, having granted his aid to the Muslims, sent them victory.' Jerusalem itself then fell on the anniversary of the ascension of the Prophet, and the crusaders soon held little more than the towns of Tyre, Tripoli and Antioch. In the west, the news was shattering. It led to the preaching of the Third Crusade, in which Saladin faced his greatest foe, Richard I of England. 'God alone could protect the Muslims against his wiles; we never had among our enemies a man more crafty or bolder than he.'

The Third Crusade began in 1189 with the lengthy siege of Acre. In July 1191, the town finally fell to the crusaders. Richard I then marched south. Successful harrying of the crusader army was followed by disaster at Arsūf, when the heavily armed crusader cavalry proved too powerful for Saladin's forces. Saladin now found it increasingly difficult to



This early thirteenth-century silver vessel depicts a triumphant Saladin.

maintain morale. An attack on Richard's camp failed, as the crusaders 'displayed such hardihood in the face of death that our troops lost heart at their sturdy resistance'. Saladin made generous offers to his men, but they would not charge. The armoured western knights, backed up by crossbowmen, were all too formidable. The situation drifted into stalemate when Richard halted his advance on Jerusalem just a few miles short, and withdrew. Lengthy and frustrating negotiations took place; Saladin had no trust in Richard, but his hopes of driving a wedge between him and another crusade leader, Conrad of Montferrat, came to nothing when the latter was assassinated. Eventually, in September 1192, an agreement was reached which allowed western pilgrims access to Jerusalem. Saladin, who had suffered ill-health for some time, died in the following year.

As a commander, Saladin had an excellent sense of strategy. He was well aware of the importance of good intelligence. When Richard I was ill, he wanted nothing more than fresh pears and peaches. Saladin was only too ready to oblige, for his messengers could carry fruit one way and intelligence the other. He was also a master of the latest siege technology, and made good use of stone-throwing machines to batter defensive walls. Mining was also employed to good effect. Castle after castle fell to his troops. However, his greatest success in battle, at Hattin, was due at least as much to crusader failings as to his qualities as a general. The outnumbered enemy, exhausted, hungry and above all thirsty, were hardly a



The fortress of Qal'at el-Gindi, in the Sinai peninsula, constructed by Saladin in about 1170. Saladin was a master of the warfare of castles and sieges.

formidable foe. It was a different matter when he faced Richard I at Arsūf. The biggest weakness in his forces was the navy. Despite efforts to improve and modernize his fleet, Saladin was unable to counter the sea power that Richard I and the crusaders had at their disposal, a fact that was crucial at Acre.

Although chivalry was not an Islamic concept, the values that Saladin espoused were not dissimilar to those held by western knights. He was generous and humane, and was a man who kept his word. He was viewed with some justification as tolerant of religions other than Islam. However, he did not invariably display these qualities. The treatment of prisoners by both Saladin and the crusaders failed to match chivalric ideals. After the battle of Hattin, Saladin had the captive Templar and Hospitaller knights put to death. At Acre, Richard I ordered the killing of a large number of Muslim prisoners, said to number 3,000. 'The Franks rushed upon them all at once, and slaughtered them in cold blood with sword and lance.' To his credit, Saladin did not take revenge in like manner. He 'acknowledged that it was an abominable act, but said that it was the king alone who had decreed and commanded it to be done'.

Saladin was personally indifferent to the possibilities of profiting from office, and so did little to prevent corruption by others, while his policy of giving full authority to his sons or to favoured individuals was dangerous. He consistently abolished those taxes which were

against Islamic law, showing a creditable devotion to his religious principles, but also a lack of financial awareness; lack of money was a significant problem in his later years. He did, however, appreciate the importance of trade. He made treaties with Pisa, Genoa and Venice, so as to encourage their merchants to come to Egypt. The actions of the maverick crusader Raynald de Châtillon, who plundered caravans and engaged in piracy on the Red Sea, were completely unacceptable to Saladin, who personally executed Raynald after Hattin.

A pious Muslim, committed to *jibād*, or holy war, Saladin died before he could fulfil his promise to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. His Islamic heritage was important to him; he knew the genealogies not only of the Arab heroes of the past, but also of their horses. He was an upright man, who kept nothing for himself when the capture of Jerusalem meant that vast wealth was available from booty and ransoms. He was no great patron of learning, and took a matter-of-fact view of literature, objecting to a poetic reference to silvery leaves, on the understandable grounds that leaves are in fact green. Remarkably, he earned the full respect of his enemies. William of Tyre, the great historian of the crusader states, summed him up: 'He was a man wise in counsel, valiant in war, and generous beyond measure.'



Saladin's troops, as imagined by a western fourteenth-century artist.