Assessing Saladin

Of all of those involved in the Crusades, possibly the most fascinating is Salah al-Din or Saladin. He has been credited as the paragon of chivalry, romanticized as the most humane of all participants in the wars, and also demonized as a crafty political manipulator. The author’s agenda as well as the primary sources used usually determine the depiction of Saladin. Although the Christian sources recognize that Saladin was certainly a unique character with several remarkable qualities, in them, he remained the enemy and an infidel. In many of the Muslim sources, Saladin was simply a man with no equal in terms of virtue. The truth is that Saladin was none of these, yet all of these.

Surprisingly, there are few biographies of Saladin that find a balance; most fall into panegyrics influenced more by the image of Saladin in modern novels and film. Hannes Möhring’s recently translated Saladin is a welcome corrective to this. The book, capably translated by David S. Bachrach, is a brief but highly readable and informative work. Until recently, most of the Islamic sources were inaccessible to most Western scholars of the Crusades or available only in very outdated translations (a situation now remedied largely thanks to the Crusading Texts in Translation series produced by Ashgate). Möhring, however, is an exception to the tendency not to take proper account of Islamic sources. His biography was the first German biography of Saladin—a bit startling considering it first appeared in 2005. In addition to using a large number of Arabic sources, Möhring also incorporates several German sources that are often overlooked or underutilized by scholars of the Crusades in discussing Saladin’s relations with the Holy Roman Empire.

In addition to Möhring’s biography, the book includes a nice introduction by Paul M. Cobb. Cobb, a respected historian of the Crusades, provides the framework to understanding the geographical and cultural background for Saladin’s life. He provides the context by discussing the development of Islamic civilization and the changes that occurred. Cobb concludes his essay by examining Saladin’s legacy, which ties in nicely with Möhring’s concluding chapter.

The volume is divided into seven chapters. The first discusses the creation of the Crusader states. The topics broached in chapter 1 go beyond a simple narrative of the first two Crusades. Möhring elaborates on the expansion of caliphal power, particularly the Fatimid caliphate, as well as competition between the Fatimids and the Seljuk Turks. He ends the chapter with an interesting, and too often neglected, discussion of the position of Muslims living under Crusader rule.

The second chapter, titled “Crusade and Jihad,” discusses the Crusades from the Muslim perspective in terms of ideology and intent. Möhring then moves into a discussion of the concept of “jihad” and its implementation. Möhring adroitly demonstrates that countering the Crusades revived the idea of jihad as a holy war. In
previous centuries, it had become essentially an obligation that rulers simply did not perform out of conviction. Rather, it had become something almost akin to making an appearance. Surprisingly, jihad as a source of legitimization and a form of war resurfaced under the leadership of Zengi, one of the least religious participants of the Crusading era.

It is not until chapter 3 that Saladin appears as a central figure in his own biography. Here, he appears in the familiar story in which he accompanies his uncle Shirkuh to invade Egypt, as part of a curious power struggle between the Fatimids, Crusaders, and Nur al-Din, Zengi’s son and successor. In this chapter, Möhring brings to light Saladin’s training and background, often overlooked or, in the case of many of the sources, reduced to hagiography. Möhring concludes the chapter with the demise of the Fatimid caliphate and Saladin’s efforts to secure and then expand his power there while still remaining, at least in appearance, a servitor of Nur al-Din.

Chapter 4 focuses on the consolidation of Saladin’s power. While most westerners (if for no other reason than the film *Kingdom of Heaven* [2005]) are aware of Saladin and his wars with the Crusaders, almost half of his career as a ruler was spent subduing and conquering other Muslim rulers. Möhring indicates quite strongly that war was almost certain between Saladin and Nur al-Din. With the latter’s death and the fragmentation of the empire in Syria, the door was open for Saladin’s intervention. In addition, Möhring examines Saladin’s wars and relations with the Crusader states. As with all of the chapters, his approach in this chapter is wide ranging as he examines not only what occurred but also plans that never materialized, such as an invasion of Egypt by Sicilian Normans.

The topics of chapters 5 and 6 will be most familiar as they deal with the fall of Jerusalem and the resulting Third Crusade. In chapter 5, Möhring discusses Saladin’s strategy in depth and pays particular attention to Saladin’s animosity with Reynald de Chatillon, former Prince of Antioch and later Lord of Karak, particularly about Reynald’s infamous Red Sea piracy and attempt to raid Mecca. Although chapter 6 discusses the European reaction to Hittin and the fall of Jerusalem, of particular interest is the section concerning Saladin’s attempts to find allies. When thinking of the medieval period, it is easy to underestimate the intelligence gathering capabilities of that era’s rulers. Saladin, however, was quite aware of what occurred in Europe and responded accordingly. Despite conquering Jerusalem, Saladin’s success also created fear and envy among his Islamic peers. Rulers in North Africa as well as the Abbasid caliph were more than a little concerned about Saladin’s rise.

The final chapter deals with Saladin’s image and legacy. Möhring begins with European views of Saladin beginning in the eighteenth century, demonstrating how Enlightenment ideas shaped the reimaging of Saladin by Voltaire. Anti-Christian sentiment generally helped recast Saladin as a more virtuous figure compared to any of the Crusaders. During the Romantic era, a similar event occurred, articulated primarily through Sir Walter Scott’s writings. Although many of Saladin’s historically attested actions were quite magnanimous, Scott often enhanced his image with fictitious events. Möhring contrasts the Enlightenment and Romantic view with a much less flattering medieval perspective. Indeed, all of chapter 7 is a nice corrective to the popular view, both the good and the bad, of Saladin.

After dealing with the Christian/European view, Möhring discusses the depiction of Saladin in the Islamic sources. This discourse extends to the modern era. Möhring adeptly points out that until nineteenth-century European imperialism in the Middle East, Muslims really did not express much interest in the Crusades, and by extension, Saladin. Why would they? Like the American North in regard to the Civil War, they won and thus did not obsess over it. Yet, with imperialism, Saladin reemerges as a figure of resistance and liberation. Of course, European imperialism also brought new attention to Saladin in Europe, gaining the very favorable attention of Kaiser Wilhelm, who built a tomb for Saladin. In the post-World War I Middle East, Saladin’s image took a new twist. As one would expect, he became the hero of the Kurds, but Arabs latched onto him as a Pan-Islamic hero, while Turkey transformed him into a Turk. Meanwhile, Shia’ Muslims typically view him as a villain, demonstrating that understanding Saladin and the modern world is anything but easy.

No book is perfect and Möhring’s *Saladin* is not an exception. The biggest criticism is that there are no footnotes. This reviewer did not have the opportunity to compare the translation against the original. Although Möhring refers to his sources when he includes quotations, in other instances, he makes passing remarks that cry out for follow up. One of the most frustrating instances concerns pre-Third Crusade diplomacy with Frederick Barbarossa. Another criticism is that Möhring does not discuss Saladin’s conflict with the Ismailis, also popularly known as the Assassins. His conflict with
the Assassins is an intriguing part of his career and receives but a few scant sentences. A final criticism is that the Crusaders’ victory at Arsuf is attributed to longbows rather than crossbows. Although the leader of the Crusaders at Arsuf was Richard I (the Lionheart) of England, the longbow did not become a standard English weapon until the fourteenth century. One may wonder if this was an issue of translation.

Nonetheless, these three points are very minor and should not distract from the overall quality of the book. Despite its brevity and lack of footnotes, the book is well suited for the general public and for classroom use. It covers Saladin’s life and world very well. Professors will enjoy its use not only as a biography, but also as a source that draws out many points, particularly on the diplomatic side, that general textbooks on the Crusades do not cover.

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