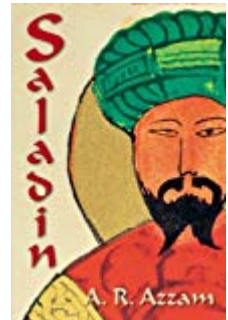


**A. R. Azzam.** *Saladin*. Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009. ix + 277 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4058-0736-4.



**Reviewed by** Timothy May

**Published on** H-War (January, 2010)

**Commissioned by** Brian G.H. Ditcham

Although Saladin, or more properly Salah al-Din, is one of the best-known figures from the era of the Crusades and indeed all of medieval Islamic history, surprisingly few scholarly biographies have been published on him. In 1972, Andrew S. Ehrenkreutz published his *Saladin*. Nineteen eighty-two saw the appearance of Malcolm Lyon and David Jackson's *Saladin: The Politics of Holy War*, which was followed in 1983 by Philip Newby's *Saladin in His Time*. Then in 2008, the English reading world received David S. Bachrach's translation of Hannes Mohring's *Saladin: The Sultan and His Times, 1138-1193*. Of course there have been numerous biographies targeted to the popular audience but of varied quality. A. R. Azzam's *Saladin* is a panacea for all audiences.

While it is impossible to avoid the Crusades while discussing Saladin, Azzam does an excellent job of demonstrating that Saladin did many other things besides capture Jerusalem and fight Richard the Lionhearted. Indeed, Azzam's prologue focuses on peeling away the myths surrounding Saladin so that the reader may gain a

better understanding of the figure who is at some point cast as a symbol of jihad or the paragon of chivalry. He notes that in his discussions with various people who learned that he was writing about Saladin, most did not appreciate it when he pointed out that particular events were actually fables—something that I think most historians have encountered at one point or another. This section also contains a discussion of the authors of the most important sources on Saladin: al-Qadi al-Fadil, Imad al-din al-Isfahani, and Baha al-din Ibn Shaddad.

The first chapter has less to do with Saladin and more with the context of the Islamic world during the rise of Saladin. In this reviewer's opinion, it is possibly the most significant chapter of the book and what sets it apart from other works on Saladin. Azzam convincingly demonstrates the importance of the great wazir of the Seljuk Empire, Nizam al-Mulk, and his influence on Saladin through the creation of the Nizamiyya madrasa network. Nizam al-Mulk's primary goal through these schools was to revive Sunni orthopraxy and

counter the growing influence of Shia Islam, particularly that of the Ismailis.

Chapters 2 and 3 continue this vein of thought by discussing the rise of Nur al-Din, the devout son of Zengi, atabeg of Mosul who had been the Seljuk's primary military leader in their western domains. Here, Azzam continues to provide intellectual and geopolitical context for the life of Saladin. After a brief discussion of the arrival of the Crusaders, he then delves into the rise of Zengi and of Ayyub and Shirkuh (Saladin's father and uncle respectively) in Zengid service. From there, Azzam discusses how Nur al-Din was pivotal to the spread of the Nizamiyya madrasas not only by being a patron but also by living the ideals espoused by the madrasa. Azzam argues that no matter what he did, Saladin had to live his life in the shadow of Nur al-Din.

In chapters 4 through 6, Azzam examines Saladin in Egypt--from the initial involvement of Nur al-Din in that country to counter the Crusader attempts to dominate the Fatimid Empire to Saladin's eventual emergence as the ruler of Egypt. Of particular note is Azzam's consideration of Saladin's appointment as vizier of the Fatimid dynasty and then in chapter 6, of how Saladin established his authority over Egypt.

Azzam then considers Saladin's relations with the successors of Nur al-Din as well as the religious elite in chapters 7 and 8. What is often overlooked in most studies of Saladin, with their emphasis on his fight against the Crusaders, is that many Muslim rulers did not trust Saladin. Azzam does a magnificent job of illustrating the difficulties of Saladin in maintaining his empire through a mix of conquest and cajoling while also maintaining his legitimacy in the eyes of the religious elite.

The second half of the book (chapters 9 through 15), like the second half of Saladin's life, is connected to the Crusades. Azzam carefully considers the Arabic and Latin sources on Saladin's encounters with various Crusader leaders

and his dealings with his own relations and allies. It is this well-rounded approach that demonstrates the complexity of Saladin's relations with his vassals and family. Indeed, it is also what makes this book so suitable for classroom use.

In the final analysis, Azzam has written a book that portrays Saladin as neither hero nor villain but rather a human being with faults and merits. It is an ideal biography as the reader not only learns about an individual but also gains a greater appreciation of the geopolitical milieu (a topic often covered in this genre) and the intellectual environment that shaped Saladin's world view.

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**Citation:** Timothy May. Review of Azzam, A. R. *Saladin*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.

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