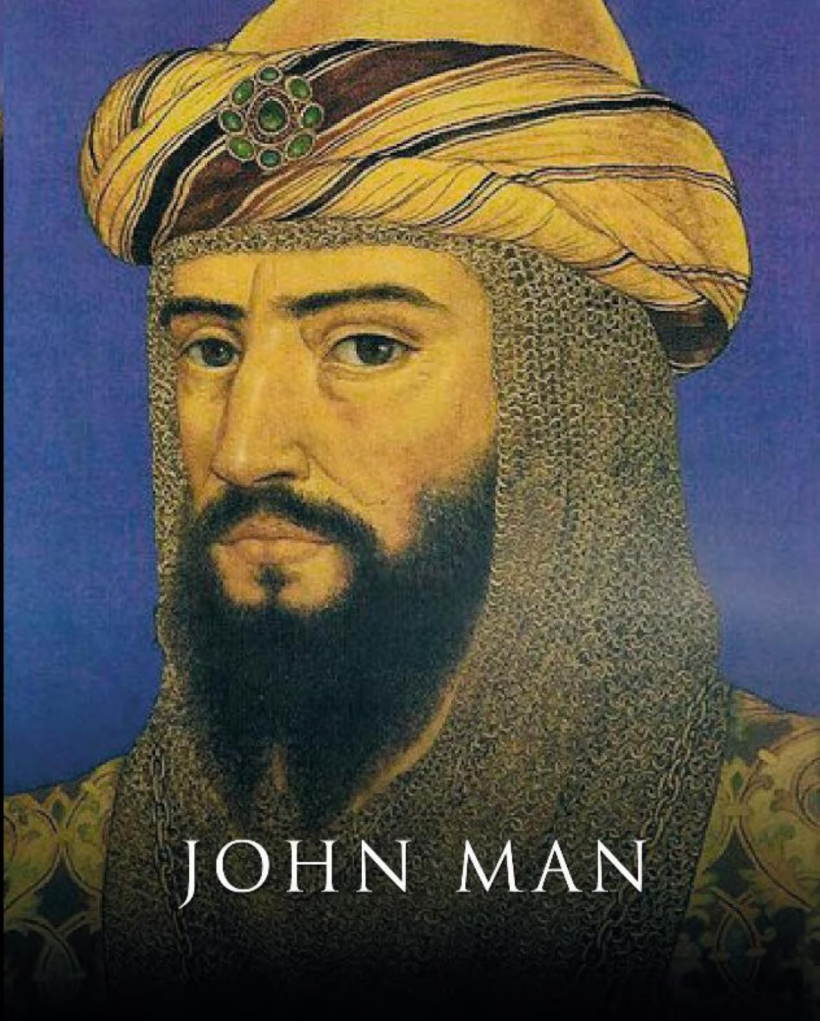

JOHN MAN

THE LIFE, THE LEGEND
AND THE ISLAMIC EMPIRE

'Fast-paced . . . thrilling'
The Times

SALADIN

The Life, The Legend and the Islamic Empire

JOHN MAN

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Preface

The Once and Future King

ASK ANYONE IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN TO name their greatest hero and the answer you will get is almost certainly 'Saladin'. All across Europe and America, if you ask for one *Arabic* hero, the answer, after a pause for thought, will probably be the same. One in a million might say that, strictly speaking, he wasn't Arabic but Kurdish. But you get the point. Kurds, Arabs, Iranians, Turks, north Africans, Jews and Europeans of all nationalities, and many Americans with Middle Eastern connections, think Saladin is one of the greatest leaders of all time, with virtues to match his achievements.

History supports them, up to a point. But there is more at work than history. Saladin is a fantasy hero as well as a real one. He embodies dreams and wishes, like Arthur, though rather better because so much more is known of him. Take one theme of his life story, which is like the plot of a good-guy v. bad-guy movie. Saladin himself is, of course, the good guy. Against him is set a baddie with such archetypical faults that he sounds like a caricature. His name was Reynald, and he came to the Holy Land for fame and fortune, which he found by doing terrible things. He caught the eye of a princess and took control of her city. He wrung cash from a prelate by torturing him and leaving him naked in the burning sun to be food for insects. He used that money to invade and ruin a beautiful and peaceful island. A spell in prison made him even more fanatical, greedy and bloodthirsty. By the time Saladin came up against him, Reynald was the grim master of the grimmest of Crusader castles. He ignored truces and insulted those who remonstrated. Saladin was so appalled by his behaviour that he set aside his usual magnanimity and swore he would kill Reynald with his own hands. Finally, after a famous victory, he did so, taking off his head with one blow of his sword. Insult, vengeance, retribution: these are themes that have driven great storylines from the ancient Greeks to Hollywood.

There's Hollywood in another strand of Saladin's story too. In the battle following the one in which Saladin slew Reynald, the Crusaders bore aloft their greatest treasure, which they called the True Cross. In fact, it was a wooden fragment set in a gold-and-silver cross. This object had its own back-story, which totally convinced the Crusaders of its authenticity. It was for them what Alfred Hitchcock called the McGuffin, the object of power that everyone wants, and which therefore drives the plot. It may have 'real' power (as the Ark does in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*) or it may not, just as long as it is desired. The True Cross was an object of both desire and power. For Christians, it was more than a *symbol* of why they were crusading; it was the very reason why. It was, to them, the actual thing upon which Christ was crucified, or part of it. It had the power to work miracles, a talisman that would confound all enemies, confer victory, and keep Jerusalem in Christian hands for ever and ever amen, until Christ returned in glory.

Well, they lost the battle to Saladin, and they lost Jerusalem, and they lost the True Cross – enough, one might think, to demonize Saladin in their eyes. And yet Christians admired him, not simply because he was in fact admirable, but because his fine qualities were explained and magnified, with a convoluted logic, which ran as follows:

Christians are good, and must prevail in the end because God is on our side. But in this case Saladin prevailed. This must be because we are not good enough Christians, so God is punishing us. Saladin is his instrument. Therefore, in this instance, Saladin is close to God and is to be seen as a closet Christian, and therefore admirable, an embodiment of Christian virtues, the perfect knight.

How to separate out the strands of fact and fantasy is one object of this book. Another is to see why down the centuries Saladin has remained a hero, and remains one still.

The quick answer is that there are many similarities between then and now.

Now, as then, the Muslim world is divided by the great Sunni–Shia schism; now, as then, sects multiply; now, as then, Arabs are hungry for some way to heal the split; now, as then, they are eager to confront and confound the challenge from without – then the Crusaders, now the USA, working through its proxy, Israel, and its other allies, its armed forces, its companies. There is a hunger for simpler problems and a solution as simple as 'Liberate Jerusalem!' One cry remains the same: 'Jihad!' – though it was simpler then, because the enemy was not a distant and indestructible superpower but was on the spot, occupying cities and castles, with finite forces, which

could be vanquished with the right leadership.

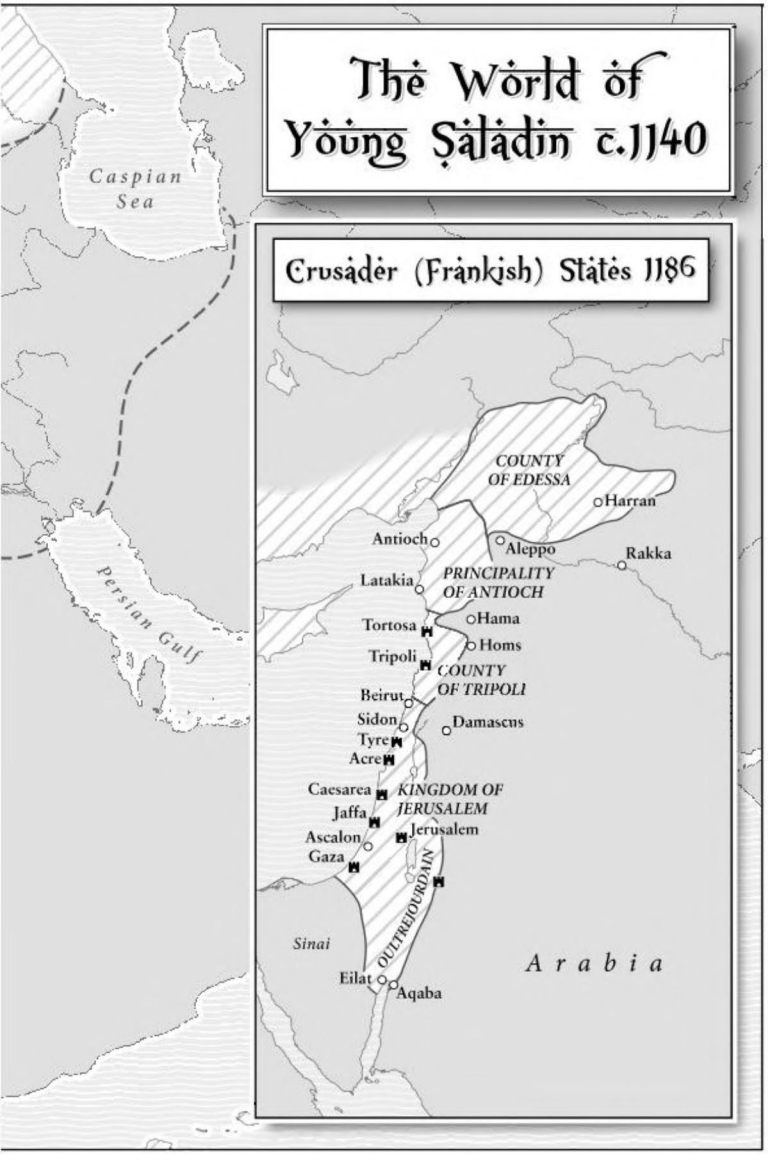
Another echo from the past is the habit of taking hostages. The circumstances in Iraq and (as I write) Syria are often remarkably similar, even more so recently. Not long ago, announcing the taking of a hostage and the terms for his – almost always his – release took a simple call on the victim's mobile phone. But today mobile phones are easily traced, revealing hiding places and summoning drones. Kidnappers have resorted to medieval means: hand-written demands, go-betweens and in one case . . . well, a source who advises on kidnap-and-ransom cases told me the story. An Iraqi businessman was taken hostage. Soon after, his family received a large crate. It contained homing pigeons, along with instructions: tape $100 to the legs of each pigeon, and release it. When the last pigeon was released, so was the prisoner. Any Muslim leader in the twelfth century would have understood, because carrier-pigeons were the equivalents of email servers, linking in hours even the most distant of friends and enemies.

Today, as then, the main focal point is Damascus, the home town of both Assad and Saladin. Today, warring factions make it impossible even to imagine a solution. In Saladin's day, the problems were similar. Even if he had expelled all crusading Christians, Muslim divisions would have remained. The

underlying difference between then and now is leadership. Saladin was a genius, able briefly to focus Islamic energy on the tasks of unity and jihad. He was the best his people could have hoped for, and a role model for any leader working for a better tomorrow.

A Note on Dating

Since this book is initially for western readers, I use AD/BC, increasingly called the Common Era (CE) or Before the Common Era (BCE). The Muslim calendar has a different system. Its base-year is the Hijira (also spelled Hijra and Hegira), the year of Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina. In theory all AD dates can be transferred into AH (After Hijira). But it is not straightforward. The two systems overlap and the relationship between them in the early years of Islam is still disputed. The base-year of 1 AH runs for a year, roughly from the spring of 622. By convention, Saladin's birth was in 532 AH, which ran for a year from September 1137.



1

A World in Conflict

BAALBEK, LEBANON, 900 YEARS AGO WAS A WONDERFUL place and a wonderful time for a curious boy. So much life. Such mysteries.

The Temple of Jupiter, with fifty-four columns, each of them 63 feet high, looked like the work of titans, but this Roman glory stood on massive monoliths which are today, as they were then, the world's greatest hewn stones. Weighing up to 1,000 tonnes each – twenty times the weight of the megaliths of Stonehenge – they hark back to some ancient culture whose people had somehow managed to cut and shift

them. Who made them? How did they move them? No one knew then, no one knows now.

Other ruins recalled construction and destruction by Macedonians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs and the earth itself. This is a region of earthquakes, which ruined buildings and buried ruins. But Baalbek was a phoenix, endlessly renewed by its people and by nature. Standing half a mile high, its crisp, clean air smelled of orchards and gardens. It was at the centre of the Islamic world, almost on the frontier between Islam's two rival Arabic empires, Abbasid and Fatimid, almost equidistant from their two ancient capitals, Baghdad and Cairo. What a mixture of security and apprehension the young Saladin would have breathed – the security of his religion set against the region's unending wars, power struggles, rebellions and assassinations, all this mayhem made worse in living memory by a new set of invaders, alien in creed and culture.

Saladin – little Yusuf (Joseph) as he was then – was not born in Baalbek. He was brought there by his father, Ayyub (Job) al-Din,[1] for reasons we will get to in due course. So it was in Baalbek, during his unrecorded childhood, that Saladin began to

[1] To give them their full names, Yusuf al-Din ibn Ayyub and Ayyub Najm al-Din ibn Shadhi ibn Shadhi.

learn something of the world into which he had been born.

Islam, despite all its diversity and violence, was united by religion and culture. At its heart was the Quran, which distilled and stimulated a language at a crucial moment in its evolution. Muslim scholars from the Hindu Kush to southern Spain all worshipped the same god, honoured the same prophet, shared Arabic as a lingua franca, and inherited the same astonishingly rich intellectual mantle. All Islam shared the same economic strength, with trade linking north Africa, Europe, Russia, the Middle East, India and China. Since Islam accepted the enslavement of non-Muslims, all benefited from a lucrative trade in slaves, whether African, Turkish, Indian or Slav. Arab coins found their way north as far as Finland, and Muslim merchants wrote cheques honoured by banks in major cities. One trader had a warehouse on the Volga, another near Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan and a third in Gujarat, India.

Fuelled by staggering wealth, medieval Islam hungered for learning and inspired brilliant scholarship. Paper displaced papyrus, bookshops thrived, libraries graced the homes of the rich. At the end of the ninth century, according to the geographer al-Ya'qubi, one street in Damascus had a hundred bookshops. Since

Arabic was the language of divine revelation, the written word was venerated and calligraphy became an art form valued above painting. Medieval Islam, assured of its superiority, was innovative and curious. The Arabs, looking back to the Greeks for the foundations of science and philosophy, translated Greek classics en masse (a strand of scholarship that would eventually feed into Europe's Renaissance in the fifteenth century). Many other languages and creeds – Persian, Sanskrit and Syriac, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism – also formed part of this rich amalgam.

One consequence of Islamic scholarship and self-assurance was its tolerance. This was not a world of inward-looking fundamentalism. True, Jews and Christians were seen as benighted, the Jews for believing that divine revelation had stopped with the Hebrew prophets, the Christians for abandoning monotheism, believing that God was not one but a Trinity. Yet Judaism and Christianity were seen as stepping-stones from barbarism to revelation and Islam. All three were 'Peoples of the Book', namely what Christians know as the Old Testament.

The arts flourished. Urbanized literati patronized the ornate and elegant creations of poets. Historians recorded and honoured Islamic achievements. Though Islam discouraged (and later banned) human

likenesses in art, there was nothing to inhibit design and architecture. Wonderful domed mosques arose, pre-dating Italian Renaissance domes by centuries. Potters tried to match Chinese porcelain (they failed, but they created lustrous, wonderfully decorated glazes). Stuccoed and frescoed palaces set an ornate style emulated throughout Islam.

Science also blossomed. It was not seen as a threat to Islam. How could it be, seeing as all Creation reflected the glory of Allah? Indeed, the late-tenth-century bibliographer ibn al-Nadim said that Aristotle had appeared to him in a dream and assured him there was no conflict between reason and religion. Thousands of scientific works were translated from Persian, Sanskrit and – most notably – Greek. 'Arabic' numerals, derived from Indian ones, provided a far more powerful mathematical tool than any previous system, as Europe later discovered. Though Arab scientists remained convinced that gold could be produced by the transformation of metals, their rigorous search for the 'philosopher's stone' that would cause this to happen created the bridge between alchemy (*al-kimiya*, 'transmutation') and modern chemistry. Muslim travellers wrote reports of China, Europe and much of Africa. European languages, enriched by translations from Arabic into Latin, still contain many other tributes to Arab scientific predominance: zero

(from *sifr*, 'empty'), algebra (*al-jebr*, 'integration'), star-names such as Betelgeuse (from *bayt al-jawza*, 'the house of the twins') and Altair ('the flyer'), zenith, nadir, azimuth.

Among the great centres, Baghdad was the greatest. With its roots in the wealth of ancient Persia, the city was a magnet for traders, scholars and artists from as far afield as Spain and northern India. By 1000, it had become one of the largest cities in the world, equalling Constantinople – 1,200,000, about the same size as London in 1800 – with wealth to match. One caliph greeted a Byzantine ruler with a pageant of 160,000 cavalrymen and 100 lions. The city's wharves harboured vessels bringing porcelain from China, silk, musk and ivory from east Africa, spices and pearls from Malaya, Russian slaves, wax and furs.

To the east lay a subdivision of Islam that was not Arabic, but Persian and Turkish. Its centres were the ancient oasis cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, Merv and Gurganj (later Urgench), all worthy if lesser counterparts to Baghdad. Once, for a long century (874–999), this region had been independent. Looking back to their eighth-century Persian ancestor Saman Khudat, the Samanids had thrown out their Arab overlords and built their own brand of Islam, spreading east into Afghanistan, holding off the Arabs to the west and, for a while, the Turks, who ended Samanid rule

in 999. All four cities were trade emporia linking east and west, China and Islam, their exports including soap, sulphur, silks, sable, leatherware and ornamental arms. Watermelons packed in snow were couriered westwards from the foothills of the Tien Shan to Baghdad. Paper from Samarkand was in demand all over the Muslim world. Caravans the size of small armies – one numbered 5,000 men and 3,000 horses and camels – ranged back and forth to eastern Europe, trading silks, copper bowls and jewellery for furs, amber and sheep skins. From China came pottery and spices, in exchange for glass and horses, of which China could never get enough.

Bukhara, the old Samanid capital, with a population of 300,000, almost rivalled Baghdad itself. Its scholars and poets, writing in both Arabic and Persian, made it the 'dome of Islam in the east', in a common epithet. Its royal library, with 45,000 volumes, had a suite of rooms, each devoted to a different discipline. In the words of an eleventh-century anthologist, al-Tha'alabi, it was the 'focus of splendour, the shrine of empire, the meeting-place of the most unique intellects of the age'. Perhaps the greatest of the greats was the philosopher-physician ibn Sina, known in Europe by the Spanish version of his name, Avicenna (980–1037), who poured out over 200 books, most famously his medical encyclopedia, *Canons of*

Medicine, which when translated into Latin became Europe's pre-eminent medical textbook for five centuries.

So, in theory, all were united under Allah, the Prophet, and his divinely inspired words, the Quran. All owed allegiance to God's earthly representative, the caliph, a sort of Muslim equivalent of the Pope.

In theory.

In practice, Islam had been divided against itself almost from the start. The main division was the split between Sunni and Shi'ite. One doctrinal source was the *sunnah*, the deeds and sayings of both the Prophet and his successors, whereas those who belonged to the Shi'a (party) of Ali, claimed that authority derived from Muhammad's descendants through his son-in-law Ali. Sunnis, for whom the Quran is the intermediary between God and mankind, established their caliphate first in Damascus then in Baghdad. Shi'ites proclaimed their 'leader in prayer', the imam, as their intermediary with God (though one Shia branch also set up its own rival caliph in Cairo, a development which demands a more detailed look a few paragraphs further on). Shi'ites claimed that from Ali's descendants a divinely appointed imam would emerge as Mahdi, 'the guided one'. Since there was no obvious Mahdi, Shi'ites came to believe that he was being

story is rooted deep in Shi'ite Islam. They claimed that Ismail, the disinherited son of the Sixth Imam, represented the true line of authority from Muhammad. Ismail's followers claimed that he had been succeeded by 'hidden imams'. When the Turks swept into the Islamic world from the Asian heartland around the year 1000, they turned on Shi'ites, including the Ismailis, who responded by forming a network of underground cells, with extraordinary consequences. In the second half of the eleventh century, a man named Hassan i-Sabbah, newly converted to Ismailism, decided to wage his own war for Ismailism and its 'hidden imam' in the heart of Turkish territory. He spotted the perfect base: a formidable castle, Alamut, 6,000 feet up in the Elburz mountains south of the Caspian. Here he set about asserting his own peculiar version of Ismailism, based on the premise that Nizar, the heir to the Fatimid state murdered in 1097, would produce the Mahdi who would magically reappear to save Islam from impurity and its Turkish invaders. The fact that Nizar had no designated heir was a problem quickly solved. The line was merely declared 'hidden' and one of them would reappear in due course. Meanwhile, Hassan named himself Nizar's deputy and champion. Technically, his followers were Nizaris, an offshoot of the Ismailis, an offshoot of the Shi'ites – a sect of a sect of a sect. This

'New Preaching' (as Hassan called it) appealed strongly to the poor and dispossessed, who were happy to devote themselves to a cause in absolute and unthinking obedience. Hassan sent them out in ones and twos and threes to kill with knife or sword whatever Arab, Turk, sultan, emir, priest, vizier or general seemed to him to deserve death, whether Sunni or Shia. These were, of course, the original Assassins.

It is a puzzling term. The European word in various spellings derives from the Arabic *hashish*, Indian hemp, *Cannabis sativa*. Some people referred to the Nizaris as *hashishiyya* (or a Persian equivalent) – hashish-users – and that was the term picked up by the Crusaders in the twelfth century when they heard of them in Syria. So everyone assumed that's what they were, hashish being their secret drug of choice to relax them before going off to stab some high official and perhaps meet their own death. By the early nineteenth century, it was a conventional wisdom and is still widely believed today. But it was not so. Hashish was well known, not a Nizari secret; and no Nizari source mentions it. More likely, the term was an insult applied to this despised and feared group.

Other hilltop castles fell to Hassan, giving him an impregnable power-base from which to launch his malign campaign against anyone whom he judged to stand in his way. He never again left Alamut, where

for thirty-five years he instructed, inspired and organized his followers, who, like today's suicide bombers, embraced death as martyrdom, knowing they would be rewarded by an after-life in Paradise. Rulers everywhere lived in fear. They wore armour under their robes, remained locked indoors, ordered special protection, dared not condemn, but kept a panic-stricken silence. Terror spawned counter-terror, with other echoes of modernity – random accusations, round-ups, imprisonments and deaths in custody. Nothing worked. Alamut remained impregnable, while the Assassins' ideology became ever more eccentric, eventually proclaiming them free of all laws but their own. Naturally, mainstream Muslims looked on all this with horror, and condemned the Assassins as heretics.

There was more, however, to the Assassins than duplicity, violence and heresy. They were, after all, asserting what they believed was a truth about God's will. Truth can always do with extra help, in the form of reason and science. Surprisingly, Ismaili imams were lovers of objective as well as esoteric knowledge. They built a famous library. Scholars were welcomed, one being the famous astronomer and theologian Nasir al-Din Tusi, who lived in Alamut for many years.

Alamut was not their only base. They had

metastasized, like some sort of cancer. Soon after Hassan captured Alamut, his agents began to spread the word in Syria. From 1103, the Persian-based Assassins had an Arabic branch, an enclave centred on a castle almost as formidable as Alamut – Masyaf, in Syria, 45 kilometres from the Mediterranean. From here, they sent agents to kill Turks, Crusaders (with whom on occasion they also collaborated) and any Muslim leader, Sunni or Shia, who offended them. Their most redoubtable leader, Rashid al-Din Sinan, became known to Crusaders as 'the Old Man of the Mountain', after the massif in which he was based. To Sunni and Shia alike, Sinan was as vile as Hassan. In the words of the Spanish traveller and poet ibn Jubayr, he led 'a sect which swerved from Islam and vested divinity in a man. The prophet was a devil in disguise named Sinan, who deceived them with falsehoods and chimeras embellished for them to act upon. He bewitched them with these black arts, so that they took him as a god and worshipped him.' Later, the term was applied vaguely to any Assassin leader.

In 1256, a century after Saladin's death, the Assassins were destroyed by Islam's next and greatest scourge, the Mongols. In 1273 the Syrian Assassins were cowed by the sultan of Egypt, Baybars, and that was the end of the real Assassins (though the Nizaris endured, flourishing today under their imam, the Aga Khan).

*

In 1096, just forty years before Saladin's birth, there had come into this united, disunited world a new, alien element: the Crusaders.

Saladin would not have known, for no Muslim could have known, of the original seed or why it had fallen on such rich soil. It had been tossed by the Pope in 1095. Urban II was supposedly head of a super-state, Christendom, which in theory included most of Europe and also Rome's so-called eastern empire in Constantinople, made into Rome's successor by its founder Constantine. But Urban had severe problems. Firstly, he had just received a plea for help from Constantinople: the Seljuk Turks were advancing into the world of Islam and had, seventeen years before, taken the revered city of Nicaea, in Anatolia, present-day eastern Turkey, famous as a Christian centre for almost 800 years, since the great council of 325 that formalized what Christians were supposed to believe by stating the tenets in the Nicene Creed. Nicaea, the one-time symbol of Christian unity, was a mere 70 kilometres from Constantinople, so the barbarians who had swarmed through the city's sturdy Roman walls were already inside the outer bulwarks of Christendom. Secondly, Christendom was not united at all, but divided between Rome and Constantinople, who were at loggerheads over a point of doctrine that

risen from the dead. Somewhere in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre lay a piece of the True Cross, which would surely have miraculous powers. The city had been in Turkish hands for 450 years. The time had come to take it back.

And they did, with extreme violence, because, in the words of the historian John Roberts, there would be opportunities for looting unavailable in Europe; 'they could spoil the pagans with clear consciences'. By the spring of 1097, hundreds of knights leading a rabble of some 30,000 met in Constantinople. They were mainly French, or Franks as they were known – Franj as the Muslims called them – though there was little sense of nationhood to unite Normans, Provençals, Angevins and Flemings. Despite a scattering of Italians and Hungarians, 'Franks' became a catch-all term for the Crusaders. The only war aims were vague: take the Holy Land, convert the heathen, seize Jerusalem. And then? No one said. A few leaders were high-minded, some saw a chance to grab territory, many were romantics and adventurers, and most no more than rough peasants happy to escape a harsh life or ruffians eager for loot. All, though, could *claim* to be high-minded, displaying the Cross as the symbol of Christianity. This was what came to be called the First Crusade, the first of eight campaigns to the Holy Land over the next two centuries. Most failed, some

were disastrous, but this first one did indeed achieve its aims, so is sometimes called a success, if extreme and unprovoked aggression can ever be classified as such.

There followed the recapture of the new Turkish capital, Nicaea, today the little town of Iznik. The siege involved an aspect of warfare that would soon have significance for Saladin. The Crusader army was simply not strong enough to overwhelm Nicaea's immense walls or batter down its gates. The Byzantine emperor, Alexios Komnenos, knew this, because he had seen the army and knew the walls: 5 kilometres around, 10 metres high, 100 towers. It would of course be wonderful if the town could be retaken for Christianity, pushing back the Turkish and Islamic frontier. But how to do this, without throwing soldiers uselessly against the city's walls? What the Crusaders needed was heavy artillery. The emperor happened to be a great military leader, aged forty-three, at the height of his powers, eager to recapture borderlands in present-day Turkey lost to the Seljuk Turks. War is often the necessity that mothers invention, and in this case Alexios was the father. He knew as much as anyone about heavy artillery in the form of trebuchets, the machines that could sling rocks astonishing distances. He had commissioned several of these devices for his army. They were of various

types, all referred to as 'city-takers', and they will take centre stage in due course. Alexios was a designer as well as a commander. He created machines that broke new ground, literally and figuratively. His daughter Anna wrote of his new city-takers and their effect in the siege of Nicaea: 'most of them were not old-fashioned according to the conventional designs for such machines, but followed ideas he had devised himself and which amazed everyone.' Possibly these devices were the prototypes of the so-called counter-weight trebuchets, whose specifications dwarfed earlier machines: 10-tonne counterweights, lever-arms 15 metres long, projectiles weighing over 100 kilograms, ranges of 200 metres. They cracked Nicaea open like a hammer on a nut, though Alexios took care to seize control of the town before the Crusaders had a chance to loot it. Alexios's machines, which had so 'amazed everyone', changed warfare from then on. The improved versions would have dramatic effects when, eighty years later, Saladin got the power to command them.

On the Crusaders went: a pitched battle, a five-month advance across Turkey, an eight-month siege of Antioch (where by happy chance a mystic named Peter Bartholomew, guided by St Andrew, found a chunk of iron which he declared to be the Holy Lance that had pierced the side of Christ), and more sieges,

including the taking of Ma'arat, 80 kilometres south-east of Antioch, in today's Syria. It was winter, the end of 1098, with food in short supply, so, according to a chronicler, the French 'boiled pagan adults in cooking pots; they impaled children on spits and devoured them grilled.' An exaggeration? If the source had been Arabic, perhaps; but this was a Frank, Ralph of Caen, speaking.[4] Another French chronicler, Albert of Aix, confirmed it: 'Not only did our troops not shrink from eating dead Turks and Saracens; they also ate dogs.'

What could Muslims do? Not much. There was no hope of a united response, whether from Islam as a whole or from local princes. Every leader, Sunni or Shia, wondered if the new arrivals might perhaps be of use against their Islamic rivals. Every town was on its own, and the only way to survive was to flee or to fawn: 'Kiss any arm you cannot break', in the words of a popular proverb. Delegates arrived bringing gifts of gold, jewellery and horses, hoping to bribe the 'Franj' either to become an ally or to move on in peace.

So the Franks advanced, with almost no opposition, to the walls of Jerusalem, which they assaulted

[4] Or Radulph, as he is also known; in *Gesta Tancredi*, quoted in Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, as is Albert of Aix.

for a month with two siege-towers and fourteen stone-throwing catapults. In mid-July 1099, they took the city, with terrible consequences for the place they claimed to venerate. In an outpouring of xenophobia and greed, all suffered – Muslims, Jews, Orthodox Christians. The Crusaders sacked the Dome of the Rock (sometimes wrongly called the Mosque of Umar, the second successor of the Prophet). They expelled from the Holy Sepulchre all eastern Christians – Greeks, Georgians, Armenians, Copts and Syrians – who had shared the place for centuries. There followed the indiscriminate slaughter of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of men, women and children. 'Some of the pagans were mercifully beheaded,' wrote the chronicler Raymond d'Aguilers. 'Others pierced by arrows plunged from towers, and yet others, tortured for a long time, were burned to death in searing flames. Piles of heads, hands and feet lay in the houses and streets, and indeed there was a running to and fro of men and knights over the corpses.' The mob of Crusaders, apparently berserk with bloodlust, burned the main synagogue around a mass of Jews hoping for sanctuary. Afterwards, Muslim survivors were forced to drag the bodies outside the walls, where they made piles 'as big as houses'.

In early August, the newly appointed Patriarch of Jerusalem, Arnulf, made the discovery that all

more an unholy peace. Both sides accommodated. The Franks employed locals, introduced a form of feudalism that promoted mutual responsibilities, adopted the local dress and cuisine, and married into local families. Each side sought alliance with the other, each mini-state squabbled with others, each had its disputes over succession. Much changed superficially, and nothing changed fundamentally. By the time of Saladin's birth in 1137–8, almost forty years after the loss of Jerusalem, hatred of the Franks had been diluted by both complacency – since many ordinary Arabs preferred the Franks to their own grasping and unreliable leaders – and a growing belief that no great leader would arise to heal Muslim rivalries and drive the Franks into the sea.

2

A Teenager in Damascus

WHAT BROUGHT ONE-YEAR-OLD YUSUF – SALADIN AS he would become – to Baalbek?

He was born in Tikrit, in present-day Iraq, now famous as the birthplace of Saddam Hussein. His father Ayyub was there because his father, a Kurd from Armenia, had sought a better life in Baghdad, the capital of the decaying Abbasid Empire, now under new Turkish rulers, the Seljuks. Ayyub's father was appointed governor of Tikrit, a position inherited by Ayyub, who was therefore governor when, in the 1130s, civil war broke out between the Seljuks. One of the participants was a bristly bearded, heavy-drinking,

brutal and erratic Turk named Imad al-Din ('Pillar of the Faith') Zangi,[6] who had won the governorship of Aleppo and Mosul (today's northern Iraq and northern Syria) in earlier, more stable times. He was more than the sum of his faults, also being austere, immensely tough, a leader who identified with his state, and a strict disciplinarian who knew how to win respect from ordinary soldiers. He was not interested in luxury. When he arrived at a city, he would disdain its palaces and sleep outside the city walls in a tent. No wonder one chronicler, al-Athir, overlooked his faults and called him 'the gift of divine providence to the Muslims'. He would become a vital link in the chain of events leading to Saladin's rise.

Character is not always destiny, but it was in the case of Zangi and Ayyub. In 1132, Zangi fought and lost a battle near Tikrit. Wounded, he needed help to get back to his power-base in Aleppo. Ayyub might have stuck with his masters in Baghdad and handed Zangi over. But he didn't. Perhaps it was his innate generosity, perhaps some political insight that guided him, for he was, in the chronicler Baha al-Din ibn Shaddad's words, an 'honourable, generous and good man'. In any event, he treated Zangi's wounds and ferried him and his army to safety across the river

[6] Or Zengi. As usual, transcriptions vary.

notables were taken aside, stripped of their robes, and led away in chains to Aleppo. Of the rest, the artisans were identified, and Zangi kept them as prisoners, setting each to work at his craft. All the other Franj, about 100 men, were executed.

News of the victory took the Arab world by storm, proving that the enemy could be beaten, inspiring talk of the re-conquest of Jerusalem. Zangi was the hero of the hour, being granted a string of titles by the caliph in Baghdad: victorious king, ornament of Islam, and many more. There would also be interesting consequences when the news reached Europe.

But Zangi had no time to do more, because two years later he was killed by one of his own slaves. He was the fifth of Aleppo's rulers in thirty-two years to die by violence, but unlike the previous four there was no political motive. According to one account – there were several – he was besieging a fortress, Qal'at Jabr,[7] in September 1146. He awoke from a drunken sleep to see the slave, a eunuch named Yarankash, snatching a surreptitious glass of wine. Zangi angrily swore he would punish him the next day, and went back to sleep. To avoid punishment, Yarankash

[7] The ruins of pink bricks jut up from a rocky hillock which is now a peninsula in a vast reservoir on the Euphrates, finished in 1974 and named Lake Assad after Syria's then ruler.