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EARLY ADVENTURES

The history of mediaeval Islam and its civilisation provides a series of problems of definition and interpretation, but, in general, the materials necessary for their analysis are inadequate. In such a context, the career of Saladin is perhaps unique because of the volume of contemporary evidence.

Here, the narratives are, in the main, well-known.¹ Of Saladin's contemporary biographers, Ibn Shaddād's work has survived intact. Most of 'Imād al-Dīn al-İşfahānī's huge *Kitāb al-Barq al-Shāmī* has been lost, but its abridgement by al-Bundārī has recently been edited in part.² The manuscript on which this edition is based ends with the close of the year 583 A.H., where it overlaps with the start of the *Kitāb al-Faiḥ al-Qusṣī fī l-Faiḥ al-Qudṣī* and so provides a complete cover by 'Imād al-Dīn of Saladin's career. A less partisan view is given by another contemporary, Ibn al-Athīr,³ and facts and attitudes can be checked by reference to William of Tyre and other western writers. The *Kitāb al-Rauḍatayn*, with its quotations from the lost work of Ibn Abī Ṭāyī, is of particular value and local histories, such as the *Zubdat al-ḥalab min tarīkh Ḥalab* by Ibn al-'Adīm, also have their points of interest.

With the principal exception of al-Bundārī's abridgement, these sources have been covered by recent writers, whereas a valuable collection of contemporary letters has not yet received its proper share of attention. In the main, these are attributed to Saladin's administrator, the Qaḍī al-Faḍīl,⁴ and they comprise both personal letters sent by al-Faḍīl himself and others drafted for Saladin. Some are quoted by the narrative historians or are found in other works; twenty-six are included, complete or in part, in a Cairo edition,⁵ but a large number are still unedited. This collection is supplemented by a manuscript of letters wrongly attributed to 'Imād al-Dīn⁶ and by the

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writings of another of Saladin's contemporaries, the North African al-Wahrānī.⁷ The scope of their material is, of course, limited and they cannot compensate entirely for the dearth of official documents, but in addition to the details that they provide, many show the construction that Saladin himself wished to have placed on his actions, while others supply this with an unofficial commentary.

Gombrich, referring to "the old-fashioned biography of the 'Life and Letters' type", has pointed out in his *In Search of Cultural History*: "we know how little we know about human beings and how little of the evidence we have would satisfy a psychologist interested in the man's character and motives".⁸ It is certainly true that, in spite of the letters, Saladin's own personality can, at best, be seen in glimpses. The purpose of any new study must be to provide evidence for an analysis of his role in the context of his background. He can be seen as a hero of Islam, a dynastically-minded politician, a war-band leader or as a pawn manipulated by external forces, and it is for the insight that they give into these questions and, by extension, into the structure of mediaeval Islamic society, that the sources must be appraised.

Not surprisingly, there are no references to Saladin's birth and early boyhood in the letters and no evidence can be added to the well-known account.⁹ According to this, two Kurdish brothers from Dvin near Tiflis, Ayyūb and Shīrkūh, moved to Iraq, where Ayyūb was appointed castellan of Takrīt. A report quoted by Abū Shāma says that he owed this position to the Seljuq Sultan Muḥammad ibn Malik-Shāh and that he was later confirmed in it by the powerful administrator, Bihruz.¹⁰ By this time, as Seljuq power weakened, the Crusaders' great opponent, Zangī, was establishing himself in virtual independence in Mosul and its adjoining territories. Ayyūb used his position at Takrīt, roughly halfway between Mosul and Baghdad (map 4), to help Zangī after his abortive expedition against Baghdad in 1132. This show of independence seems to have gone unchallenged at the time, but six years later, in 1138, Shīrkūh got his brother expelled from his post by killing a man in a private quarrel. The dead man was said to have been a Christian, which may have angered Bihruz, "the Christians' friend".¹¹ At all events, Ayyūb and Shīrkūh were ordered to leave and Abū Shāma quotes the story that this coincided with the birth of Ayyūb's son Yūsuf,¹² whose title, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, was corrupted by western writers to Saladin.

The brothers now joined the service of Zangī, who put Ayyūb in

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charge of the citadel of Baalbek. On Zangr's death in 1146 Shīrkūh remained in the service of one of his sons, Nūr al-Dīn, who took over Aleppo, while another son, Saif al-Dīn, became ruler of Mosul. Meanwhile Ayyūb found himself besieged in Baalbek by troops from Damascus, then held by the Burid Mujīr al-Dīn Abaq. As no relief force came to his rescue, he surrendered the place on favourable terms and later went with his family to Damascus. When Nūr al-Dīn moved against the city in 1154, Ayyūb was chiefly responsible for arranging its surrender, after which he joined the victors.

There is nothing surprising in the geographical span of the brothers' careers or in their changes of employment. Mercenaries, scholars and pilgrims were constantly on the move in the mediaeval Islamic world, with the result that the nucleus of an administration, civil as well as military, could quickly form around an ambitious paymaster.

Saladin was reported to have had a particular fondness for Damascus,¹³ as being the home of his boyhood, but his early days are, for the most part, a blank. Adolescence was a period which contemporary society tried to shorten as much as possible by emphasising the need for early maturity. For this reason al-Faḍīl told his son not to show childishness;¹⁴ elsewhere he praised a boy for "resembling a grey-beard in his gravity",¹⁵ and gravity is associated with youth in a eulogy of Saladin's own children.¹⁶

Of the process of education, Saladin wrote: "children are brought up in the way in which their elders were brought up",¹⁷ and the influence on Islamic society of this traditional approach cannot be overemphasised. In spite of the fragmentation of its sects, Islam was a great assimilative force not least because the Quran was at the heart of its education. Admittedly, al-Wahrānī pictured the educated man as being able to answer questions on Euclid, the *Almagest*, arithmetic and law,¹⁸ but this was an academic ideal and most obviously it was study of the Quran and "the sciences of religion" that linked the young Saladin to his contemporaries. In addition, they shared a common cultural heritage based on specifically Arab traditions. Saladin is said to have had a knowledge of the genealogies, biographies and histories of the Arabs, as well as of the blood lines of their horses.¹⁹ More significantly, he is credited with having learnt by heart the *Ḥamasa* of Abū Tammām.²⁰ This anthology offers a ready-made set of values and attitudes, emotional and at times self-contradictory, based in the main on the tribal society and Arabian background of its poets. These do not necessarily coincide with the

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dictates of religion, but together they provided a framework of convention that overrode racial differences for those whose education they coloured.

Study, of course, had to be backed by practical training. Al-Wahrānī added archery and the use of arms to his ideal scholar's accomplishments.²¹ Ibn Jubair later reported that every evening Saladin's own sons would come out of the citadel of Damascus to shoot, ride and play polo²² and Saladin himself must have done the same. Such training necessarily divided social groupings, but what is not so clear is the extent to which it was linked to a class structure. To the Franks, Saladin was "not of noble parents, but not a low plebeian of obscure blood",²³ and a hierarchical view of society was certainly current at the time. Usāma ibn Munqidh praised his mother's readiness to kill his sister rather than "see her captive in the hands of the peasants",²⁴ and references are not hard to find to the riff-raff at the bottom of the social ladder. Al-Faḍīl wrote of the "furniture and books of religion and literature" needed by the middle classes,²⁵ while an upper class can be provided by emirs and princelings. This vertical classification, however, was matched in importance by a horizontal division. History and geography were responsible for a number of cellular groupings in Islamic society, representing minority religions or the fragments of conquered races. But these were not confined to what had originally been the non-Arab parts of the Islamic state. The obvious Arab illustration is that of the Bedouin tribe and this clan pattern was reproduced in the sectional organisation of Islamic cities, where tribes, races and groups had quarters of their own. Even where there was no apparent reason for fragmentation, denominational differences within Islam itself provided a focus for groupings and it can be argued that for the individual his group and not his class was the determining factor of his life.²⁶ A qualification here is the extent to which the group represented a closed community. What could apply to a Bedouin tribe largely out of contact with the outside world has to be modified in relation to more widely developed societies. The importance of Saladin's Kurdish background can be seen throughout his career, but Ayyūb and Shīrkūh had cut themselves off from a specifically Kurdish environment and to that extent the Frankish assessment of their position on a social scale was of obvious relevance to their standing.

Not unnaturally, for Saladin's contemporaries authority was linked directly to military power which, in turn, was based primarily on cavalry. As a result, the horse was promoted to a position of

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importance not only as a military but also as a social factor. Amongst the settled population, as opposed to the nomadic tribes, horses could only be maintained by those who could afford to pay for their forage. Further, the characteristic Muslim battle tactic was that of the Parthian charge and retreat, where the horse was not, in the main, a weapon of shock but a vehicle for the archer, who would ride up to the enemy, shoot, in order to break his line or lure him out of position, and then retire. This required a high standard of horsemanship. How effective Saladin's troopers were can only be guessed at by approximation, but William of Tyre seems to have agreed with Napoleon in classing the professional Muslim cavalry above the Bedouin.²⁷ To the Bedouin, riding was a natural accomplishment, but to the professionals it was something to be practised for the specific ends of war. Military exercises, hunting and polo were all combined in cavalry training and those who were not able to spare the time for practice would be at a disadvantage when facing those who could. In such circumstances one would not expect to find citizen armies, but, rather, an employer/employee relationship in which recruits were hired, equipped and trained by a leader who could afford their services. The existence of these professional soldiers cut across class lines, but also helped channel the transmission of power within family groupings. A leader required experience and judgement in order to win acceptance from his men²⁸ and, in the absence of a formal command structure with opportunities for training, these could best be acquired by tuition on the battlefield. This process is illustrated by Usāma ibn Munqidh, who was initiated by his family in the Frankish wars,²⁹ and Saladin himself wrote that he had fought in company with his father and his uncle at the start of his career, "taking part in victories and leading troops against the unbelievers".³⁰

In part, then, Saladin's education helped to identify him with his Islamic background and, in part, he was marked out for command. The scope for command, however, must have appeared limited in the context of the political situation of the day. Whatever the complexity of its underlying forces, superficially this was clear enough in so far as it affected Saladin's immediate surroundings. The Zangid dynasty was firmly in control of Mosul and Syria. It was faced with no serious challenge except on the Frankish frontier and under Nūr al-Dīn war against the Franks had come to be represented as the major activity of the state. Within Syria itself, Ayyūb and Shīrkūh were probably

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not the most powerful of Nūr al-Dīn's subjects³¹ and although Saladin could hope for a career as a commander in the Frankish wars, reasonably enough his early ambitions, as quoted by 'Imād al-Dīn, were modest in the extreme.³²

This was the situation when, in the summer of 1163, Shāwar, the deposed vizier of Egypt, arrived in Damascus. Egypt was in decline.³³ The foundation of Cairo in 969 had marked the start of a period of Pharaonic expansion under the Fatimids, who challenged Sunni Islam, claiming descent from the Prophet's daughter, but by Nūr al-Dīn's time their dynasty had dwindled to the "scheming old woman and conceited child" of al-Wahrānī's description.³⁴ With the capture of Ascalon by Baldwin III in 1153 they had lost their last foothold in the Levant and, in their isolation, they had no longer any necessary involvement in the power struggles of their neighbours. Egypt's wealth, however, and its growing reputation for weakness were dangerously enticing.³⁵ It was "the beautiful bride, led out by her attendants",³⁶ waiting for the first bold suitor.

The author of the Latin *Continuation* of William of Tyre noted that the Egyptians credited the Nile flood to the power of the Fatimid Caliph,³⁷ but he went on to say of al-'Āḍid, who had become Caliph in 1160 at the age of eleven, that he left all the affairs of the kingdom to his vizier – a reflection of the old Egyptian division between the divine Pharaoh and his chief servant. The vizier, however, was in an exposed position in that he could expect no help from his nominal master. William of Tyre wrote that the Caliph was unconcerned in cases of rivalry for the vizierate³⁸ and Ibn Shaddād added with some justification that, according to Egyptian custom, whoever could kill the vizier would be confirmed as his successor.³⁹ The dangers inherent in such a system finally destroyed it. Shāwar, a former governor of Qūṣ, had taken the vizierate from the powerful Banū Ruzzaik in January/February 1163. Within six months he had been driven out by Dirghām, a protégé of the Banū Ruzzaik, and it was at this stage that he came to ask help from Nūr al-Dīn to recover his position by force.

Not unreasonably, Nūr al-Dīn took time to reach a decision. Success in Egypt would strengthen his position against the Franks and Shāwar is said to have made him large promises of money and land.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the main road to Egypt, the *Via Maris*, skirting the Mediterranean, was controlled by the Franks and the land road by the Gulf of 'Aqaba across Sinai was threatened by Frankish garrisons at Kerak, Shaubak and Eilat (map 7). Too small a

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force would be ineffective and the failure of a large expedition would damage Syria. Shāwar's supplanter, ʿDirghām, sent an envoy to Damascus to urge, presumably with inducements, that Shāwar should be abandoned and Nūr al-Dīn appeared to agree to the proposal, "although secretly he was with Shāwar".⁴¹

In the event, he must have decided that the advantages to be gained outweighed the dangers and by the spring of 1164 he had abandoned secrecy and decided on an expedition. Shāwar is said to have hoped for sole command, but Nūr al-Dīn entrusted his men to Shīrkūh, whom "he had never sent on a mission in which he had not succeeded"⁴² and who "paid no heed to danger"⁴³. While Nūr al-Dīn watched the Frankish frontier, Shīrkūh and Shāwar moved off on 15 April 1164 to follow the line of the Rift Valley to the head of the Gulf of 'Aqaba and with them, according to Ibn Shaddād, went Saladin, who was now twenty-six years old.

Surprisingly, Saladin makes no separate mention of this expedition in an account of his career that he later sent to Baghdad.⁴⁴ Ibn al-Athīr goes so far as to quote an anecdote which, if genuine, would prove that he stayed behind⁴⁵ and, while Ibn Abī Ṭayy gives him a small part to play in the later stages of the campaign,⁴⁶ Ibn al-Athīr transfers this to anonymous "lieutenants".⁴⁷ Admittedly, Ibn al-Athīr's anecdote has the hallmark of invention, but more significantly there is no reference to Saladin in the brief account given in Bundārī's version of the *Barq*. It can reasonably be suggested, however, that Ibn Shaddād, who can be shown to have checked on points of doubt, is the best authority in this context and certainly in Shīrkūh's next campaign Saladin was thought experienced enough to have earned independent command, but there is a genuine problem here to which no firm answer can be given in the present state of the evidence.

Whatever Saladin's role may have been, for the Syrians the campaign was not entirely satisfactory.⁴⁸ They defeated an advanced force under the command of ʿDirghām's brother Muḥam at Tell Baṣṭa, 11 miles (18 km) from Bilbais, and from then on Shāwar appears to have taken the initiative while Shīrkūh stayed in reserve. There was some skirmishing at Arḍ al-Ṭabbāla immediately to the north of Cairo (see plan of Cairo). Shāwar was forced to draw off and after marching around Cairo he camped to the south-east of Fuṣṭāṭ at Birkat al-Ḥabash. From there he moved to the hill of al-Raṣad overlooking Fuṣṭāṭ and then, apparently without any serious opposition, he took Fuṣṭāṭ itself. His attacking force next took up its

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position at al-Luq, on the north-west corner of Cairo, and he seems to have made probing attacks on the west, south and east sides. The quarter of al-Yānisya outside Bāb Zuwaila, the great south gate of Cairo, held firm but al-Hilāliya on the east side was evacuated and houses were burnt on the west side from Bāb al-Sa'āda to Bāb al-Qanṭara. Ḍirghām's troops were badly mauled; the Caliph refused to help him and on 24 May Ḍirghām and his brothers were killed while attempting to flee.

On 25 May Shāwar was reinstated as vizier by the Caliph. In his letter of appointment there is only a passing reference to Shīrkūh's force – "those whom you have brought with you, hoping for vengeance"⁴⁹ – but Shīrkūh himself was not to be dismissed lightly. He is now reported to have sent Shāwar a message saying that he and his men were tired of tent life and of heat and dust, clearly implying that he had not entered Fuṣṭāṭ.⁵⁰ At this, Shāwar sent him 30,000 dinars, but asked him to leave the country. Shīrkūh refused, saying that Nūr al-Dīn had ordered him to stay, as by the terms of their agreement Nūr al-Dīn had been promised one-third of the grain revenues of Egypt. Shāwar refused to hold to this and followed the precedent of his rival, Ḍirghām, in writing to Amalric, King of Jerusalem, to ask for help. He pointed to the dangers that would threaten the Franks were Shīrkūh to establish himself in the country and he promised them 1000 dinars for each stage of their march, together with an allowance of barley for their horses and a special grant for the Hospitallers. Amalric marched from Ascalon to Faqūs, 26 miles (42 km) north-east of Bilbais on the Syrian caravan route. By this time Shīrkūh, having heard of his move, had retired from Cairo to Bilbais where, according to Ibn Abī Ṭayy, he had ordered Saladin to collect stores.⁵¹

The siege of Bilbais began in the third week of July 1164. Shāwar had now advanced from Cairo to join Amalric and according to Ibn al-Athīr Shīrkūh had only a low wall and no fosse to shelter him from their combined attack.⁵² This attack, however, was not pressed. Shāwar must have been hoping to play off Franks against Syrians and he is said to have told Shīrkūh that he was deliberately holding the Franks back.⁵³ At the same time he made offers of land to Shīrkūh himself and to his followers in the hope of recruiting some of them into his service.⁵⁴ For his part, Amalric seems to have made no serious attempt to take the initiative and he may have been content to extort subsidies from Shāwar rather than risk his men. Meanwhile, Nūr al-Dīn took advantage of his absence to capture the castle of

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Hārim, midway between Aleppo and Antioch (map 3), and on 10 August he crushed Bohemond of Antioch who had been reinforced by Raymond of Tripoli and by Thoros of Armenia, as well as by a Byzantine detachment sent by the Emperor Manuel. By October, after three months of stalemate, it must have been clear that none of the armies involved wanted to stay at Bilbais any longer.

Shīrkūh could not maintain himself indefinitely in the face of superior numbers. The Franks had their own weakened frontiers to guard and Shāwar must merely have hoped to rid himself of both his sometime allies. The emir Shams al-Khilāfa, whom Shīrkūh and Shāwar had captured at Tell Baṣṭa now acted as an intermediary between them and an agreement was reached by which Shīrkūh was to leave Egypt in return for another 30,000 dinars and a safe-conduct. The Franks made their own arrangement and the only obvious beneficiary of the campaign was Shāwar. Even he, however, had bought his return to power at the price of showing his weakness to both the Franks and the Syrians.

It is perhaps appropriate that Saladin's own part in this is obscure as it underlines the fact that for the first twenty-six years of his life we have had no picture of him at all. His uncle, small and violent, seen mace in hand watching his garrison leave Bilbais,⁵⁵ and his taciturn father, the only man allowed to remain seated in Nūr al-Dīn's presence,⁵⁶ have discernible characters, but Saladin at this stage is nothing but a name. An elder brother, Shāhanshāh, had been killed in a Frankish raid on Damascus;⁵⁷ a quotation, not necessarily authentic, notes that he was expected to rise to serve another elder brother, Turān-Shāh,⁵⁸ but nothing else shows him in the context of his family. There are no references to his mother, his younger brothers, al-ʿĀdil, Būrī and Ṭughtekīn, his sisters, or to his relations with his cousins.⁵⁹ He was brought up against a confused background of power politics, involving Seljuqs, Zangids, Fatimids and Franks, but the narratives add no fresh evidence of importance for its interpretation. It was his good fortune to coincide with a period in the decline of the Fatimid Caliphate when it could be decisively influenced by the actions of individuals, such as Shāwar and Shīrkūh, but details of their Egyptian expedition throw no clear light on the underlying causes of this process.

None of this is surprising as it merely reflects Saladin's dependence at the start of his career on what lay outside his own control. He could only prepare himself for what opportunities might arise, and it

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must be noted that it was presumably because of his competence that Shīrkūh chose him as an *aide-de-camp* in place of his own sons, while in 1165 Nūr al-Dīn gave him more administrative experience by appointing him to the post of *shihna*⁶⁰ (defined by Ibn Jubair as “police chief”⁶¹) of Damascus. It is here, perhaps, that he comes more nearly into focus as an individual. The poet al-‘Arqala played on the Quranic story of Potiphar’s wife and wrote: “go softly, thieves of Syria – this is my advice to you... The hands of women were cut because of that Joseph, but this one cuts off the hands of men”.⁶² On the other hand, it was presumably his Muslim enemies who supplied the Franks with the basis for the account that: “Under Noradin, sultan of Damascus, as a first omen of his power [Saladin] began by raising an infamous tribute for himself out of the venal courtezans of that city, for he would not allow them to exercise their profession until they had first purchased of him a licence”.⁶³ He also found himself at loggerheads with the learned but difficult Kamāl al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī, the Qāḍī of Damascus, of whom al-Wahrānī pictures overworked angels complaining to God on the Last Day that he wanted a Day of Judgement for himself alone.⁶⁴ Saladin had taken over some of his functions and ‘Imād al-Dīn wrote that he used to “upset Saladin’s purposes through decisions based on Islamic law”.⁶⁵

These details perhaps sketch an identifiable outline of an individual, young enough to be compared to the handsome Joseph of the Quran and to be thought an upstart by his elders, in a position to command attention, favourable and unfavourable, in his own right. The picture, however, is an isolated one and almost immediately Saladin is relegated to the background while it is Shīrkūh who continues to lay the foundations for his career.

Shīrkūh had no intention of leaving Egypt to Shāwar and made preparations on a considerable scale for two years. The Franks heard that he had collected “an infinite number”⁶⁶ of men from the east and the north and that he had written to the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad, who had instructed “all the leaders of his false doctrine”⁶⁷ to send help. According to Ibn Shaddād, Shāwar heard of these preparations and decided to counter them by again inviting the Franks to Egypt.⁶⁸ William of Tyre, however, reported that “he was found to be supine in the matter and crassly ignorant”,⁶⁹ and it was said that he got his first news of Shīrkūh’s move in a letter from Amalric.⁷⁰ In fact, he had been having troubles of his own at home. Firstly, there were old scores to be settled with his enemies. Then another rival, Yahyā ibn al-Khayyāṭ, made an unsuccessful attempt on the vizierate and the