

Saladin: The Sultan Who Vanquished the Crusaders and Built an Islamic Empire

John Man

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With the character depth and literary finesse of a novelist, bestselling historian and travel writer John Man portrays the life of renowned twelfth-century sultan Saladin, who united Muslim kingdoms against Christian crusaders to retake the holy city of Jerusalem.

Saladin is much more than a character study, however. As expected, the battle chapters are riveting and full of medieval heroics. But in building the foundation of this larger-than-life historical figure and the conflicts that defined his reign, the book necessarily explores the Muslim Sunni-Shia split and larger religious sectarianism plaguing the Middle East during the Crusades. Parallels are astutely drawn to present-day sectarian strife and civil war, allowing for some insightful commentary. Though medieval battles were barbaric by today's standards, medieval politics were infinitely complex and nuanced. The power struggles Saladin faced, the betrayals and reversals, read like modern political dramas.

As a character study, *Saladin* does more than describe the events of its hero's life. It cracks the nut of his psychology, discovering qualities of ambition and fierceness, yes, but also magnanimity and generosity. The later chapters demonstrate how these leadership qualities gave Saladin an advantage against the Crusaders, who could be ruthless, reckless, and greedy. Not only did the sultan become a hero to his people—still honored and imitated by Islamic leaders—but he garnered respect and admiration from his enemies that eventually led to folklore and legends of his heroic feats.

Saladin is a worthy biography of an important Muslim hero; yet it reaches beyond one personality to examine religious currents and cultural conflicts as relevant today as they were 800 years ago.

SCOTT NEUFFER (Summer 2016)

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