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SALADIN'S 'SPIN DOCTORS'

Prothero Lecture

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ABSTRACT. We might flatter ourselves that the idea of a spin doctor is rather a modern one, but I wonder. Obviously enough, powerful rulers have always had their coterie of close advisers. But in the medieval Muslim world there is one outstanding example of something rather more than this: the team of three counsellors that Saladin assembled who watched over his interests and, crucially, his reputation, with unflagging devotion for decades. Two of them were, by any standard, intellectual stars who could have turned their multifarious talents in many directions but who chose rather to dedicate them to a man whom they not only admired but also loved. One of them, the poet 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, was a Persian with a truly awesome command of Arabic, a gift which he delighted to exhibit in and out of season. His pyrotechnic performances, solid with metaphor, saturated with puns, wordplay, alliteration, assonance and verbal acrobatics, are such a nightmare to understand that generations of Western Orientalists – and indeed Arab scholars too, for that matter – have recoiled from the task of editing certain of his works. Sometimes in his writings manner eclipses matter, but he is also capable of reaching heights of solemn eloquence, as in his paean of triumph at the recapture of Jerusalem, or his threnody on the death of Saladin. The other, the Qadi al-Fadil – his title means 'The Excellent Judge' – though only a somewhat pedestrian poet, was an acknowledged master of the epistolary prose that was de rigueur in Islamic chanceries, and for centuries his letters were regarded as models of their genre. His appearance, hunchbacked and skeletal, made him the butt of the court's satirical poets, but his political skills were beyond reproach, and indeed in his master's absence he governed Egypt for a time. It has been said that biography adds an extra terror to death, but in that respect Saladin need not have worried. For Ibn Shaddad, the third member of this distinguished triumvirate, who joined the team after the fall of Jerusalem but thereafter never left Saladin's side and therefore saw him in good times and bad, was a plain man with a plain style. But he rose to the occasion and crafted a biography of his hero Saladin that lets the facts speak for themselves. He has no time for stale panegyric; instead, his admiration for Saladin shines through his account at every turn, and it is he who laid the foundations for his master's posthumous celebrity. The lecture will explore the impact of these three men on the Saladin legend, which transformed a minor Kurdish warlord into an emblem of chivalry, piety and military glory which captured the hearts and the imaginations of Muslims for centuries to come – and still does.

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I Introduction

Saladin was the third, and easily the most famous, of the Muslim military commanders of the twelfth century who turned the tide and began to recapture the lands seized by the Crusaders from 1098 onwards. Saladin grew up in a Kurdish military family that served the Turkish barons who controlled the Middle East, and more especially Syria and the Holy Land. From the early eleventh century the nomadic Turks had swept from Central Asia right across the eastern Islamic world, and by the 1060s their military strength had pushed aside all opposition from the Persians and Arabs, whose lands they now ruled.

Severe religious and political disunity had made the Muslim world unable to withstand the onslaught of the First Crusade. Or to put it another way, the spirit of jihad had become forgotten. As a result, the Muslims saw with pain the rapid creation of four Crusader states on Middle Eastern soil. In 1099, the loss of Jerusalem, the third most holy city in Islam, with its two Muslim sacred monuments, the Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, in particular caused great anguish. But it took the Muslims well over half a century to find the kind of military leadership they needed to begin to defeat the Crusaders and regain their lands.

The first two Muslim military commanders who achieved major successes against the Crusaders were father and son, the Turks Zengi and Nur al-Din. Those names, incidentally, tell a story. Zengi did indeed have a title – 'Imad al-Din, 'Support of Religion' – but was commonly referred to by his given personal name, Zengi, whereas his son Mahmud was universally known by his title Nur al-Din, 'Light of Religion'. That difference spells the sea-change between the warlord and the wager of holy war, the *mujahid*. Saladin himself, raised in a Muslim Turkish military environment and serving Nur al-Din, was a Kurd whose family had originated from the Caucasus.[1] The way forward for Kurds in the twelfth century lay in service as mercenary soldiers, and that was Saladin's background. From 1171 onwards Saladin seized the territories of his Turkish predecessor and master, Nur al-Din – Egypt, Syria and Palestine. Saladin then built on the achievements of Nur al-Din. He acquired a power base with the help of his vast family network, won a famous victory against the Crusaders at the battle of Hattin in 1187 and that same year attained his crowning achievement – the reconquest of Jerusalem for Islam. He failed, however, to defeat the forces of Richard the Lionheart in the Third Crusade which immediately followed the Muslim reconquest of Jerusalem. Saladin died in 1193. But he had not finished the task. He had scotched the snake, not

[1] Vladimir Minorsky, *Studies in Caucasian History* (1953), 107–57.

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killed it. Indeed, the Crusaders were to remain in the Middle East for almost another century before the Mamluks of Egypt finally expelled them in 1291.[2]

The combination of Saladin and Richard has entranced western Europe ever since. Popular legend has linked them together and both have enjoyed heroic status until modern times. Saladin's reputation in medieval Europe was extremely high; he was praised for his magnanimity, and most unusually a portrait of him hangs in the Uffizi in Florence.[3]

Many people, then, have heard of Saladin, but why is he the best-known medieval Muslim in the West apart from Muhammad himself? The prosaic reality, underlined by scholars such as Ehrenkreutz and Holt in their writings about Saladin, is that in his time Saladin was no more than a regional warlord, certainly not a figure of pan-Islamic significance.[4] They would argue that had Saladin died just a year or two before his conquest of Jerusalem he would have been remembered as simply yet another military baron. It could also be pointed out that the Muslim success against the Crusaders was more the achievement of Nur al-Din (in sole power for twenty-eight years) rather than Saladin (in sole power for nineteen years), who built on the foundations of conquest that Nur al-Din had left him.[5] And unlike his illustrious predecessor, Nur al-Din, Saladin did not leave a significant number of religious monuments in the Levant which testified to his commitment to Islam and the prosecution of jihad. Saladin is celebrated for just one outstanding achievement, his reconquest of Jerusalem for Islam.

In wider Islamic terms, moreover, Saladin had no great legacy to speak of; his nephew, al-Kamil, the Ayyubid sultan, surrendered Jerusalem to Frederick II of Sicily in 1229, and his own family dynasty foundered after fifty-seven years. The territories that he ruled were substantial but not vast. His reign was relatively short; he captured Jerusalem but not Outremer. So, his achievements were not colossal. Saladin has had his detractors,[6] and his key successes should indeed be placed alongside his reverses, the less savoury aspects of his career in Egypt and his harsh treatment of certain Crusader leaders and the Knightly Orders.

[2] See Anne-Marie Eddé, *Saladin* (Paris, 2008); Anne-Marie Eddé, *Saladin*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

[3] See Jonathan Phillips, *The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin* (2019).

[4] Andrew Ehrenkreutz, *Saladin* (Albany, 1972); Peter Holt, *The Age of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517* (1986).

[5] Nikita Elisséeff, *Un grand prince musulman de Syrie au temps des Croisades* (2 vols., Damascus, 1967).

[6] The great medieval Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir (d. 1233), who wrote in detail about the Crusading period, was clearly biased in favour of Nur al-Din and his Zengid dynasty and he was discreetly critical of Saladin; Ibn al-Athir, *Tar'ikh al-dawla al-atabakiyya*, ed. 'Abdul Kader Tulaymat (Cairo, 1963).

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So, with this curriculum vitae, how did Saladin garner such fame east and west? How did it happen? The answer in the Muslim east (the Christian west, from Crusader times onwards, is a different matter) lies with his three major advisers, his 'spin doctors'. So how did he attract these brilliant men? And how did they manage to burnish his reputation so successfully that the whole Sunni Muslim world subsequently accepted their story, and a number of twentieth-century Muslim leaders vied for the title of 'the Second Saladin'?

II Short biographies of Saladin's three spin doctors

Firstly, al-Qadi al-Fadil (1135–1200).[7] Abu 'Ali 'Abd al-Rahim al-Baysani al-'Asqalani, al-Qadi al-Fadil – his title means 'the excellent judge' – was one of the most famous political and literary figures in medieval Islamic history. Born in Ascalon in 1135, he came from a family of judges (*qadis*). His father sent him to Cairo in 1148 to study epistolary prose (*insha'*) and he worked as a trainee in the chanceries of Fatimid Alexandria and Cairo. He survived there precariously in the unstable decade which preceded the downfall of the Fatimid Isma'ili Shi'ite caliphate in 1171. Like many Fatimid officials and courtiers, the Qadi al-Fadil had been imprisoned for a while before being released by Saladin's uncle, Shirkuh, who had taken power in Egypt in 1169 on behalf of Nur al-Din, who was a devout Sunni.

After Shirkuh's death, Saladin took over the role of ruling Egypt as the vizier of the Fatimid caliph al-'Adid, and the Qadi al-Fadil gained favour with Saladin when he composed a grand diploma of investiture in this new role for him.[8] After he had assisted Saladin in abolishing the Fatimid caliphate and restoring Egypt to Sunni Islam in 1171, the Qadi al-Fadil accompanied Saladin in his expeditions to Syria and he remained Saladin's most valued adviser for the rest of Saladin's life.

The medieval Muslim biographer Ibn Khallikan (d. 1282) writes that the Qadi al-Fadil was 'one of the ornaments of the age' who was 'always treated with the very highest favour' by Saladin.[9] For him, the years when he had to carry the heaviest responsibilities were 1188–91, when Saladin charged him with the management of the financial administration and the reorganisation of his army and his fleet. After Saladin's death in 1193, the Qadi al-Fadil lived in Cairo until his death in 1200. His tenure of the office of vizier – twenty-two years – was the longest of any

[7] Hadia Raghib Dajani-Shakeel, 'Al-Qadi al-Fadil. His Life and Political Career' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 1972).

[8] The Arabic text of this document is given in Adolph H. Helbig, *Al-Qadi al-Fadil, der Wezir Saladins* (Leipzig, 1908), 53–64.

[9] Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat al-a'yan*, trans. W. M. de Slane as *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary* (4 vols., Paris, 1843–71), II, 112.

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vizier in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the Levant. Most viziers found their high office to be a poisoned chalice.

Little is known of the early life of Saladin's second spin doctor, the Persian 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani (1125–1201). He was born in Isfahan in 1125 and studied Islamic religious sciences in Baghdad and Basra. He became secretary, first to Nur al-Din and then to Saladin himself. He was treated with great respect by both these men. 'Imad al-Din drew up letters equally well in Persian and Arabic. He tried to win the favour of Saladin by reciting eulogies to him. He wrote several books on history, including *Al-fath al-qussi fi'l-fath al-qudsi*,[10] which covers the fall of Jerusalem until Saladin's death, and *Al-barq al-shami* (The Syrian Bolt of Lightning), which describes Saladin's life and deeds from 1175 onwards.[11] He also wrote hundreds of poems and collected those of other writers in anthologies which filled ten volumes. He eventually became Saladin's secretary and enjoyed high favour. Thereafter he rarely left Saladin's side.

Saladin's third spin doctor, Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad (1145–1234), was born in Mosul.[12] His early career was the customary one of an aspiring young scholar of the Islamic sciences; he memorised the Qur'an in his youth and studied Islamic law, first in Mosul and then in Baghdad. In 1174 he returned home to Mosul where he was appointed professor in a madrasa there. In 1188, the year after Saladin's victory at the battle of Hattin and his reconquest of Jerusalem, Ibn Shaddad went on the pilgrimage to Mecca and he then visited Jerusalem and Hebron. Saladin had admired a work written by Ibn Shaddad called *Fada'il jihad* (The Merits of Jihad), and when he learned of Ibn Shaddad's arrival in the Holy Land, he sent for him and invited him to join his entourage of specialist advisers.[13] Ibn Shaddad was soon given the important posts of *Qadi al-'askar* (judge of the army) and governor of Jerusalem. He also accompanied Saladin on his later campaigns to reconquer the Crusader-held ports on the Levantine coast. Saladin left Ibn Shaddad in charge of Jerusalem whenever he went to take a rest in Damascus, his favourite city.[14] When Saladin became very ill in 1192, he summoned Ibn

[10] *Kitab al-fath al-qussi fi'l fath al-qudsi*, ed. C. Landberg (Leiden, 1888). Note the rhyming and punning title of this work. See also 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, *Conquête de la Syrie*, trans. H. Massé (Paris, 1972).

[11] Gabrieli comments that this is an important author for Saladin's life but he adds that concrete details are lost in a complicated mass of verbiage; Francesco Gabrieli, *Arab Historians of the Crusades* (1969), xxx.

[12] For a detailed biography of Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad, see *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, trans. de Slane, IV, 417–35.

[13] Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad, *The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin or al-Nawadir al-Sultaniyya wa'l-Mahasin-al-Yusufiyya*, trans. D. S. Richards (Aldershot, 2001), 81.

[14] *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, trans. de Slane, IV, 541.

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Shaddad to come to him there and Ibn Shaddad was with him during his last illness.[15] After Saladin's death in 1193 Ibn Shaddad moved to Aleppo where he worked for one of Saladin's sons. He died in 1234.

It is important to note that Ibn Shaddad worked for Saladin for a much shorter time than the Qadi al-Fadil and 'Imad al-Din – a mere five years. But during that period he was most of the time in contact with Saladin, wherever he went. Ibn Shaddad's book about Saladin is called *Al-nawadir al-sultaniyya wa'l mahasin Yusufiyya* (The Sultan's Rare Deeds and Joseph-like Merits).[16] This laudatory title contains a pun on the personal name of Saladin, i.e. Joseph, who is highly praised in both the Old Testament and the Qur'an.

III The relationships of the three spin doctors with Saladin

All three men have left copious written personal evidence of their roles in Saladin's life and work. There is no doubt that they treasured their privileged intimacy with him, and that they also had a clear sense of his historical significance. Details of their relationships with Saladin are also recorded at length in contemporary and later medieval primary Arabic chronicles.

The Qadi al-Fadil

It will be convenient to begin with the Qadi al-Fadil. Whatever the primary and contingent purpose of the official letters, diplomas and other government documents that he prepared, another crucial motive was ever-present, namely to build up Saladin's political profile. In this respect, although 'Imad al-Din's written output was enormous, it was the work of al-Qadi al-Fadil which was without doubt continuously more important in matters of state. Al-Qadi al-Fadil is said to have kept a diary for thirty-six years (from 1164 to 1199). Moreover, the complete collection of the letters of the Qadi al-Fadil, of which all were considered technical masterpieces of elevated chancery prose, is said to have comprised not less than 100 volumes. Whilst this statement may be a rhetorical exaggeration, it is important to note that even today there survive literally hundreds of official letters, diplomas and decrees which bear the name of al-Qadi al-Fadil and which are still preserved in unedited manuscripts in London, Beirut, Paris and Tübingen. Already in his own lifetime, the epistolary style of al-Qadi al-Fadil gained him an extraordinary reputation. As Saladin's counsellor and secretary, and as the head of his chancellery, he was the sultan's right-hand man. Saladin very soon found in al-Qadi al-Fadil a man of diverse

[15] Ibn Shaddad, *The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin*, 243–4.
[16] Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad, *Al-nawadir al-sultaniyya*, ed. J. El-Shayyal (Cairo, 1964).

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capabilities and immense energy who became indispensable to him. According to his friend and colleague, 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani:

> Under the administration of al-Qadi al-Fadil things were stable … Saladin was afraid that some mishap might happen in al-Qadi al-Fadil's absence, and whenever they were parted for a long time, Saladin was apprehensive about dealing with matters alone.[17]

Once Saladin had seized full independent power in Egypt and broken away from his master Nur al-Din in Syria, there was a pressing need for him to gain legitimacy quickly. In the early years of his independent rule, after the death of Nur al-Din in 1174, his regime, under the skilful hand of the Qadi al-Fadil, relied heavily on many official letters written by him and sent in many directions, and especially to the Sunni caliph in Baghdad, to spread his jihad propaganda and to communicate with the different areas of his growing empire in Syria, which he seized from the family of Nur al-Din. The letters of the Qadi al-Fadil would be read out to the individuals to whom they were addressed but they were also read out in public places, such as in the mosques, as well as in the camps and citadels of the minor Turkish military barons who gradually allied themselves with Saladin. Again, the evidence of 'Imad al-Din is valuable here; he writes that the Qadi al-Fadil

> conducted the empire by his counsels, and fastened the pearls (of style) on the thread (of discourse); when he pleased, he could compose in a day, nay, in a single hour, documents which, were they preserved, would be considered by masters of the epistolary art as the most precious materials they could possess.[18]

The Qadi al-Fadil wrote decrees after towns were conquered; a typical example is the one he sent on Saladin's behalf to Aleppo in 1183. This document allowed protection and fair treatment for the Jews and Christians living there and permitted them to keep their jobs in the administration.

So much for the superb administrative work of the Qadi al-Fadil in support of Saladin. It is perhaps surprising that he also found time to write poetry. But it should be noted too that Saladin himself is reported to have listened regularly to recitations of poetry.[19] The Qadi al-Fadil's poetic output is mentioned in the primary Arabic sources as being spectacularly large;[20] according to one Arabic chronicler,[21] Sibt b. al-Jawzi, the Qadi al-Fadil composed 100,000 verses of poetry. Such an

[17] Hadia Dajani-Shakeel, *Al-Qadi al-Fadil 'Abd al-Rahim al-'Asqalani* (Beirut, 1993), 54.

[18] *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, trans. de Slane, II, 112; Ibrahim Hafsi, 'Correspondance officielle et privée d'al-Qadi al-Fadil' (4 vols., Thèse Université de Paris 3, 1980).

[19] Al-Bundari, *Sana' al-barq al-shami*, ed. R. Sessen (Beirut, 1971), 233–7.

[20] *Diwan al-Qadi al-Fadil*, ed. A. Badawi and I. al-Ibyari (Cairo, 1961).

[21] Dajani-Shakeel, *Al-Qadi al-Fadil*, 17.

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exaggerated number as this is clearly implausible but it is evident from a range of sources that the Qadi al-Fadil did indeed write a large amount of poetry, and in various genres, such as panegyrics, satires and religious odes. When young, he had memorised quantities of early Arabic poetry, and this knowledge enriched his own poetic style.

Moreover, in the often poisonous atmosphere at court, full of competitors and rivals for power, the Qadi al-Fadil wrote satirical poems taunting those who cruelly mocked his physical disability. He was portrayed by his contemporaries as ugly. He had a hunchback which he used to conceal in a shawl-like garment worn over his head and shoulders.[22] A Syrian poet, Ibn Unayn, did not hesitate to mock al-Qadi al-Fadil's physical appearance, saying: 'Our sultan is lame, his secretary ['Imad al-Din] is bleary-eyed and his vizier [al-Qadi al-Fadil] is a *hunchback*.'[23] Another rival poet, this time a Moroccan called al-Wahrani, also wrote light verse of a sharply malicious kind, referring to al-Qadi al-Fadil, though not by name, as 'strange-looking with neither a head or a neck. His face is sunk in his chest and his beard in his stomach.'[24]

After 1184, when Saladin finally focused intensively on fighting the Crusaders and expelling them from the Holy City, the Qadi al-Fadil, not surprisingly at this crucial time, concentrated on spreading the message of Saladin's jihad ideology in his letters. And after Jerusalem had been reconquered, he wrote joyful, passionate and triumphant lines to the Sunni caliph in Baghdad, glorifying Saladin's achievements, vigorously emphasising his removal of the Christian defilement of the Holy City and attacking the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Ibn Khallikan cites a letter of the Qadi al-Fadil to the Sunni caliph, al-Nasir, in Baghdad about the conquest of Jerusalem.[25] It is extremely long, enriched with Qur'anic references covering nine pages. It is full of jubilation, not only because Saladin has conquered but also because Islam has triumphed. Its phrasing, though lofty, is not too baroque or overblown:

> The affairs of Islam have taken an excellent turn, and the faith of its followers is now fixed by the most evident proofs … In this country, the true faith was like a stranger in a foreign land, but now, it finds itself at home … The order of God has been executed in despite of the infidels … God's promise of making his religion triumph over all the others received its fulfilment … The Holy Land has become the pure one, after being in a state of impurity; there the only God is now one, He being one who, according to them, was the third. The temples of infidelity have been overturned and the fangs of polytheism are now plucked out.

[22] *Ibid.*, 26.

[23] Malcolm C. Lyons and David E. P. Jackson, *Saladin. The Politics of the Holy War* (Cambridge, 1982), 118.

[24] Al-Wahrani, *Manamat al-Wahrani*, quoted by Dajani-Shakeel, *Al-Qadi al-Fadil*, 27.

[25] *Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, trans. de Slane, IV, 515ff.

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'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani

It is now time to move to 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani.[26] He was one of those authors who would never use three words when 300 would do. As the French historian, Claude Cahen, writes: 'Imad al-Din is an embarrassing author. A stylistic virtuoso … It is often impossible to distinguish in his writings between what comes from history and what is stylistic acrobatics.'[27] Henri Massé, who translated *Al-fath al-qussi* into French, speaks of the florid rhetoric of 'Imad al-Din's state documents and set pieces of eulogy, but he also adds that 'Imad al-Din writes other passages which are striking in their sober vigour.[28]

However, the rhetorical literary style in medieval Arabic and Persian prose-writing has received very little true appreciation from Western scholars, partly because it is so difficult to read and partly because it sacrifices content to form. For example, Francesco Gabrieli, who courageously translated excerpts from one of the books of 'Imad al-Din about Saladin, spoke of his 'wearisome obscurities'. [29]

'Imad al-Din has gained a certain notoriety for the prurient piece of baroque pornography[30] which he wrote about the arrival of 300 Crusader women in the Levant; his tone is one of gleeful outrage:

> There arrived by ship three hundred lovely Frankish women, full of youth and beauty, assembled from beyond the sea and offering themselves for sin … They glowed with ardour for carnal intercourse. They were all licentious harlots, proud and scornful, who took and gave, foul-fleshed and sinful, singers and coquettes … ardent and inflamed, tinted and untinted, desirable and appetising.[31]

And this high-flown licentious rhyming prose continues for two more pages in similar vein. Even in English translation the virtuosity of this passage, saturated in metaphor and simile, compels astonishment. But in Arabic it attains a different level altogether, for the puns, the alliterations, the assonances, come thick and fast and their cumulative impact is simply overwhelming. The whole passage is one long anti-Crusader propagandistic, lascivious coloratura aria delivered at full throttle. It reveals to the full 'Imad al-Din showing off his egotism and pride.

[26] For a detailed analysis of the writing of 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, see Lutz Richter-Bernburg, *Der Syrische Blitz. Saladins Sekretär zwischen Selbstdarstellung und Geschichtsschreibung* (Beirut, 1990), esp. 257–382, where passages of the text are translated.

[27] Claude Cahen, 'Review of 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani. tr. Henri Massé, *Conquête de la Syrie et de la Palestine par Saladin*', *Arabica*, 21 (1974), 213–14.

[28] See P. M. Holt's review of Henri Massé's translation of *Al-fath al-qussi*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 37 (1974), 691–3.

[29] For a balanced account of 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, see Donald S. Richards, "Imad al-Din al-Isfahani: Administrator, Littérateur and Historian', in *Crusaders and Muslims in Twelfth-Century Syria*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Leiden, 1993), 133–46.

[30] This phrase is Gabrieli's in *Arab Historians*, 204, n. 2.

[31] Trans. Gabrieli, *Arab Historians*, 204.

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Other aspects of 'Imad al-Din's brilliant mind concern his portrayal of Saladin. Straightforward narratives of events in his career are found in the Muslim chronicles of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But 'Imad al-Din's accounts are contemporary. He lived through the heights of Saladin's successes against the Crusaders; he was there with Saladin or heard about the events from eyewitnesses. He then presented them in his own inimitable fashion, in poetic prose which was meant to be recited aloud to a scholarly elite at court or in the mosques.

'Imad al-Din mentions that he worked with Saladin every evening, discussing matters of state:

> Saladin was very fond of sitting with his particular friends from amongst men of intelligence … If he needed a letter written … he would dictate what he wanted to me to write and I would remain awake that night and bring it to him in the morning.[32]

'Imad al-Din's book about Saladin's life from the fall of Jerusalem in 1187 until his death in 1193 is an elaborate eulogy. In it, Saladin is depicted as an ideal Muslim ruler, pious, just, generous, a fighter for the faith. This work begins in March 1187. 'Imad al-Din writes that he will deal only with the period which he knows and which he has seen with his own eyes. For example, only a few hours after Saladin's victory at Hattin, 'Imad al-Din went to survey the battlefield. He mentions explicitly Saladin's ruthless treatment of the Templars and the Hospitallers who had fought at Hattin. Nor does 'Imad al-Din gloss over Saladin's involvement in the killing of his arch-enemy, Reynald of Chatillon. He writes that after the victory at Hattin, Saladin summoned Reynald. He went straight up to him, struck his shoulder with his sword and then ordered his head to be cut off.[33]

'Imad al-Din is at his most eloquent when he writes about Saladin's death. Indeed, his obituary notice is a linguistic tour de force; it is extremely long; it contains many pages of heavy, highly elaborate, full-blown, florid rhetorical prose, piled high, as usual, but imbued with feelings of grief and deep affection.

Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad

Finally, let us turn to the third member of this distinguished triumvirate of Saladin's devoted advisers, Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad. He wrote a very moving and detailed personal biography of Saladin in a style which is simpler than the writings of the Qadi al-Fadil or 'Imad al-Din. The work is in two parts: the first discusses in detail Saladin's

[32] Al-Bundari, *Sana' al-barq al-shami*, 244.
[33] Gabrieli, *Arab Historians*, 134.

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qualities and especially his devotion to Islam, and the second is a history of his conquests.[34]

Part 1 of the book is a romanticised idealistic view of Saladin's personal commitment to Islam; his piety, his love of justice (every Monday and Thursday he sat in public to administer justice), his generosity (when he died his treasury was almost empty), his courage in battle, his endurance of frequent ill-health and other virtues. Part 2 is a very detailed account of the history of Saladin's conquests. Ibn Shaddad describes the battle of Hattin in much milder panegyric than that used by the Qadi al-Fadil and 'Imad al-Din. He does not elaborate on Saladin's killing of the Hospitallers and Templars. He just notes soberly that he spared none of them. As for the reconquest of Jerusalem, Ibn Shaddad is overjoyed. He provides ample details of this momentous event, but without the fanfare given to it by the Qadi al-Fadil or 'Imad al-Din, or indeed by many of the Arab chroniclers.

How did Ibn Shaddad write about Saladin's death? After his account of the last time that he and the Qadi al-Fadil had been with Saladin, he ends with the following simple but profoundly moving words: 'We left the citadel, each longing to give his own life to ransom the sultan's.'[35] His intense, deeply felt and eloquent elegy on the death of Saladin comes right from the heart rather than from conventional flowery panegyric:

> Never since Islam and the Muslims lost the first caliphs, never from that time, had the faith and the faithful suffered a blow such as that they received on the day of the Sultan's death. The castle, the city, the whole world, were thereby plunged into grief, of which God alone could fathom the intensity.[36]

What light do Saladin's closest associates shed on his personality and how he lived when he was not campaigning? For all their intense and thorough focus on Saladin's military achievements and his prosecution of jihad, the three spin doctors do also on occasion discuss more personal aspects of Saladin's life. Ibn Shaddad reports that Saladin was very fond of his children but that he bore parting with them manfully. Saladin also wept bitter tears when he heard the news of the death of one of his nephews. He is described as being hospitable to guests, even the occasional Crusader one.

It is highly likely that when Saladin went back to his favourite city, Damascus, to rest in between his military campaigns, he would enjoy the usual court pursuits of a medieval Muslim ruler: giving banquets; falconry; hunting; listening to music and to poetry. On the other hand,

[34] In the detailed introduction to his translation of Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad, Richards explains the structure of the book; see *The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin*, 1–9.

[35] *Ibid.*, 243.

[36] Quoted by Lyons and Jackson, *Saladin*, 374.

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Saladin disapproved of ostentation. On one occasion, seeing 'Imad al-Din writing from an inkwell embellished with silver, he condemned its usage. The inkwell was never seen in public again.

But it seems likely that in general Saladin and his entourage of close advisers had very little spare time for the pursuit of pleasure. In modern parlance, they may be labelled 'workaholics'. 'Imad al-Din reports that Saladin dictated letters to him at night. He then turned Saladin's words – it is not clear in which language Saladin used to dictate to him – into the flowery prose for which 'Imad al-Din is celebrated.

IV Conclusions

Saladin is unusual in medieval Islamic history in that he had the benefit, so to speak, of three court biographers, three 'spin doctors', if you like: the Qadi al-Fadil, 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani and Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad. They have all three left glowing accounts of their master. These provide more information for him than we have for previous Muslim rulers of the twelfth century, and what is much more, they have an unmistakable personal touch. On occasion, their devotion to him seems to transcend the customary panegyric and clichéd phrases familiar from court titulature on inscriptions and coins, so much so that it does seem that in Saladin we are dealing with an exceptional person.

The Qadi al-Fadil and 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, one an Arab and one a Persian, were clearly what we might now call public intellectuals. They had, furthermore, been in Saladin's service for a very long time, without losing his favour. Both were deeply committed to promoting Saladin's image as a pious Muslim ruler and a fervent jihad warrior, a man who could show pity and dispense justice. As already mentioned, the Qadi al-Fadil was the rock on which Saladin leaned at all times. Al-'Umari (d. 1343) writes of him:

> The Qadi al-Fadil was the state of Saladin. He was its secretary, its vizier, its master, its adviser, and the supplier of its army. He carried all its burdens, ruled over all its regions … He was invested with full authority in the state of Saladin and was the one who decided on the fate of people and on matters of life and death.[37]

What of 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani? It is likely that he spent more time with Saladin than the Qadi al-Fadil, who for lengthy periods had to look after Egypt on Saladin's behalf, let alone Ibn Shaddad who joined Saladin's service much later. It is probable that alongside his superb literary versatility 'Imad al-Din must have been an entertaining companion for

[37] Dajani-Shakeel, *Al-Qadi al-Fadil*, 1.

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Saladin. Ibn Shaddad, on the other hand, joined Saladin's entourage in 1188, spending only five years with him at the very end of his life. Nevertheless, their daily relationship, at a time when Saladin was tired and unwell, was intense and very meaningful at a religious level.

Despite some differences of approach, Saladin is thus seen by his three spin doctors as the greatest Muslim opponent of the Crusaders. His rule forms the precise focus of these three men's writings and they are unanimous in their laudatory view of him. Of course, these three major advisers of Saladin were not the only people who contributed to the 'spin' around him. Famous Arab poets wrote long panegyrics about him and declaimed them in Saladin's court. Moreover, contemporary Arab chroniclers praised Saladin's achievements, and later Muslim historians and biographers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries eulogised him in hindsight, helping to create in the Muslim world a highly favourable image of Saladin, the victor over the Crusaders at Hattin, the Kurdish military leader and jihad warrior, who reconquered Jerusalem for Islam.

In modern times Saladin has been not just an inspirational model for military success but also for the political unification of the Arab world against the infidel and the external aggressor. Saddam Husayn, Hafez Asad and Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi each promoted themselves publicly as the second Saladin. And yet others, like President Sadat of Egypt in the 1970s, have invoked him as one worthy of emulation by heads of state for his fabled qualities of generosity, compassion and tolerance towards those of other faiths. And that formidable and fragrant legacy rests most of all on the devotion of his spin doctors, which shines across the centuries.

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