Salah al-Din

Salah al-Din (Saladin) was born in 1138 to a powerful Kurdish Muslim family in Syria. He was a schoolboy in Damascus when the Christians attacked the city during the Second Crusade. He observed firsthand how important it was for Muslims to defend their religion and themselves from the Christian crusaders. When Salah al-Din was a teenager, he served in the army of Nur al-Din, the powerful Syrian-Mesopotamian leader. As a soldier, Salah al-Din was respected and successful. In 1156, at the age of 18, he was put in charge of the Muslim security forces in Damascus. He became the personal assistant to Nur al-Din and relayed messages between Nur al-Din and his military commanders. Salah al-Din gained valuable experience in military and political organization and effective communication. He fought successfully with the Syrian Muslim troops in Egypt against the crusaders.

Stop Here and Discuss
• When and where was Salah al-Din born?
• What happened when he was a schoolboy? How do you think this affected him?
• Describe Salah al-Din’s early military experience.

Salah al-Din’s successful military performance brought him more honors and leadership positions. When Syria took over control of Egypt, he was appointed to be the Muslim military leader in Egypt. In 1169, he was chosen commander-in-chief of the entire army of Nur al-Din. At this time, the many groups of Muslims fighting against the crusaders were not united. Often Salah al-Din and his army fought against other rival Muslims. This wasted much of the Muslims’ money and energy, and contributed to the success of the crusaders. Salah al-Din was a strong leader and was widely respected among many different Muslim groups. Consequently, he was able to unify many groups into a more powerful Muslim army. In 1174, he became the leader of both Syria and Egypt.

Stop Here and Discuss
• What happened when Syria took control of Egypt?
• What was Salah al-Din successful in doing?
• What happened in 1174?

Under his leadership, Muslim forces defeated one crusader attack after another. By 1187, Salah al-Din was directing an army of over 12,000 cavalrymen (soldiers on horseback) and close to 12,000 other soldiers on foot. In July 1187, his forces defeated the crusaders at Horns of Hattin (two hills). This victory strengthened the Muslim army and their spirit. On October 2, 1187, Salah al-Din and the Muslim army reconquered Jerusalem. Unlike the crusaders who massacred Muslims and Jews when they captured the holy city in 1099, Salah al-Din was generous with the Christians and other inhabitants of Jerusalem who surrendered to his army. Although the Muslims now controlled Jerusalem, they never succeeded in chasing all the crusaders out of the Holy Land. Some crusader fortresses outside Jerusalem remained, and these helped the Christians to begin the Third Crusade two years later.

Stop Here and Discuss
• How big was Salah al-Din’s army in 1187?
• What happened on October 2, 1187? How did Salah al-Din treat the Christians and Jews in Jerusalem?
• What was Salah al-Din unsuccessful in doing? What did this enable the crusaders to do?
The Third Crusade was difficult for Salah al-Din and his army. The crusaders were vicious to the Muslims they attacked and captured. After the crusaders’ victory under King Richard I at Acre in 1191, many Muslims were massacred and the others left exhausted. Salah al-Din’s army began to lose some of its energy and spirit. Salah al-Din was a devout Muslim, dedicated to the cause of Islam and his people. He was also wise and careful. When he realized he could not defeat the Christians in the Third Crusade, he signed a peace treaty with King Richard in September 1192. Under the agreement, the crusaders remained in control of the cities on the Mediterranean coast and the Muslims remained in control of Jerusalem and surrounding lands, but the Christians were still able to visit the holy sites in Jerusalem. It was largely due to Salah al-Din’s leadership that the crusaders failed to recapture Jerusalem during the Third Crusade and that Richard turned around and went home to England. Despite the pain and deaths the Muslims had endured from the crusaders, Salah al-Din was able to talk reasonably with King Richard.

Salah al-Din remarked that he thought so highly of King Richard that if he himself had to lose Jerusalem, he would rather see it ruled by Richard than by anyone else.

Stop Here and Discuss
• What happened to Salah al-Din’s army when Richard I was victorious at Acre?
• What happened in 1192?
• What was decided in the treaty between Salah al-Din and King Richard?

Throughout his life, Salah al-Din was respected by his people and considered a sincere, generous, and religious man who was truly devoted to the cause of Islam and the Muslim people. Wanting revenge for the crimes Christian crusaders had committed against the Muslim people and Islam, he killed many crusaders in the Battle of Hattin. His strength was weakened by the difficulty of the Third Crusade. He returned to Damascus and died shortly thereafter on March 4, 1193.

Stop Here and Discuss
• How do you think the Muslims felt about Salah al-Din?
• Why were so many crusaders killed in the Battle of Hattin?
• What happened in 1193?