Usamah ibn-Munqidh (pronounced oo-SAW-mah ib-in moon-KEED) was born in 1095 to an Arab lord of a castle in Syria. Usamah was strongly influenced by his father, who, according to Usamah, spent his time reading and studying the Qur’an, fasting during the day, hunting, and copying the Qur’an at night. Usamah’s father was widely respected for his strength in battle, bravery, honor, and religious devotion. Born one year before the First Crusade, Usamah spent his childhood surrounded by danger. He was taught good manners and learned not to be afraid of danger and to accept the judgment of God. Private tutors educated the young Usamah in grammar, writing, poetry, and the Qur’an. Usamah later became a poet, a hunter, and a warrior who defended the Holy Land from the Christians during the crusades.

Stop Here and Discuss
- When was Usamah born?
- Describe Usamah’s father. How do you think he influenced Usamah?
- Describe Usamah’s childhood and education.

Usamah fought in many battles against the attacking Christians during the Second Crusade. He also wrote extensively about the conflict. His memoir, Memoirs of an Arab-Syrian Gentleman, is filled with descriptions of having been cut and stabbed with swords and wounded with darts and stones thrown at him in battle. He describes his first battle against the crusaders and comments: “O my lord, that was the first fight in which I took part [August 4, 1119]…. But the moment I saw that the Franks [crusaders] were in contact with our men, then I felt that death would be an easy matter for me. So I turned back to the [crusaders], either to be killed or to protect that crowd.” Yet Usamah fought in battle after battle, neither fearing death nor feeling sorry for himself for the danger and injury he endured. His greatest sadness came in old age when he was forced to accept his physical weakness. Usamah lived to know that the Muslims recaptured Jerusalem in 1187. He died a year later in Damascus.

Stop Here and Discuss
- What was Usamah’s role in the crusades?
- Why do you think Usamah fought so willingly?
- What did Usamah live to know?

Usamah also wrote extensively about dedicated Muslims—including the heroic actions of Muslim women—defending themselves against the enemy crusaders. Usamah called the crusaders “devils” and “infidels” who were betraying, according to him, the true religion of humankind, Islam. After mentioning the crusaders in his writing, Usamah often made the comment that they should be cursed by God, as when he wrote, “May Allah render them helpless!” He compared the crusaders to animals whose only good quality is their bravery in battle. At the same time, Usamah expressed tolerance of the Christians in Syria who had lived among the Muslims for some time. Usamah wrote about at least one crusader who became his friend. Considering the angry atmosphere that resulted from years of Christian and Muslim fighting, Usamah’s dislike of the crusaders seems relatively mild.

Stop Here and Discuss
- What did Usamah write extensively about?
- How did Usamah refer to crusaders in his writings?
- Describe Usamah’s attitude toward crusaders.
An important reason for Usamah’s relatively open-minded attitude toward the crusaders was his intense devotion to Islam. An extremely religious man, he considered Christians and Jews spiritually similar to Muslims since they shared the belief in one God. Although he was a skilled and experienced soldier, Usamah did not put much faith in the value of military planning. “Victory in warfare is from Allah (blessed and exalted is He!) and is not due to organization and planning.” Similarly, no matter how many bad things the crusaders said about Muslims and Islam, Usamah felt that their words did not matter. The constant risk of danger and death that was a part of the crusades did not destroy Usamah’s spirit.

He was not afraid of being killed in battle, because he was confident he was fighting for a just cause: the liberation of the Holy Land from the crusaders. This confidence came from his view that whether he lived or died, he would be fulfilling the role God had assigned him. This belief enabled Usamah to fight courageously time after time, never showing cowardice in the face of his adversaries. In 1140, when Usamah went to Jerusalem as an ambassador of the Muslim forces in Damascus, he participated in diplomatic negotiations with the crusaders, which gave him an opportunity to meet his opponents off the battlefield. Usamah continues to be recognized for his inquisitive mind and his keen observations of life during the crusades.

Stop Here and Discuss

• Why was Usamah accepting of Jews and Christians?
• Why was he confident about fighting the crusaders?
• What gave Usamah the opportunity to meet his opponents off the battlefield?