A CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL STUDY OF SALAH AL-DIN'S HARSH TREATMENT OF EGYPTIAN CHRISTIANS

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ABSTRACT: *Sultan Salah al-Din (d.1193 CE) was a model of gallantry for many Muslim and non-Muslim historians and scholars alike. He was kind to Crusader women and humane to captured high-ranking prisoners. His attitude towards Christians was substantially distinct from the Crusaders' attitude towards Muslims, and his treatment of Christians and non-Muslims in Islamicjerusalem was marked by tolerance, respect, and generosity. Nonetheless, according to some Muslim and non-Muslim historians, Salah al-Din's relations with Egyptian Christians started off on the wrong foot and then deteriorated further. For example, Coptic historian Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffaʻ stated that churches in Egypt were severely damaged, particularly after Salah al-Din became wazir in 1169 CE, and at the start of his Ayyubid sultanate. He also stated that on Salah al-Din's orders, all wooden crosses atop basilica domes and churches in Egypt were removed, and churches with white exteriors were painted black. Furthermore, the ringing of bells was prohibited throughout the country, and Christians were not permitted to pray in public and so forth. Surprisingly, Salah al-Din's hostility towards Christians did not continue for long; after about five years (1174 CE), Salah al-Din showed tolerance towards Egyptian Christians. He was generous to them and other non-Muslims in the surrounding areas, and granted them certain privileges. This paper seeks to critically examine Salah al-Din's attitude towards Egyptian Christians and why that attitude later changed. It will attempt to answer the following questions: Why did Salah al-Din impose such severe restrictions on Egyptian Christians? and whether his treatment of Egypt's Christians was related to the Crusaders' occupation of Islamicjerusalem?*

KEYWORDS: Salah al-Din, Egypt, Copts, Fatimid State, Conspiracies.

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INTRODUCTION

Following the appointment of Salah al-Din as Fatimid state minister (*wazir*) (Rabbat, 1995: 4-5), he faced numerous plots and conspiracies, prompting him to take decisive action against those involved, particularly Egyptian Christians. It is historically proven that as soon as Salah al-Din became a minister, Mu'taman al-Khilafa, one of the men with great influence in the Fatimid palace, launched a revolt against Salah al-Din and a project to ally with the Crusaders to eliminate Salah al-Din and remove him from the position of minister with the help of the black African troops (al-Jund al-Sudani) (Kohler, 2013:200). This conspiracy was accompanied by the efforts of Armenian soldiers (Al-Sallabi, 2008:182), who were afraid that under Salah al-Din's rule, their interests would be jeopardised, so they sought to weaken Salah al-Din's authority with the goal to expel him from Egypt. Salah al-Din faced the problem of the Crusade-Byzantine campaign against Egypt as soon as he finished eliminating the conspiracies of Mu'tamain al-Khilafa and the Armenian soldiers (Stevenson, 2013: 196). The campaign's goal was to eliminate Salah al-Din's authority and prevent any attempt at unity between the al-Sham and Egypt. This joint campaign, however, failed due to Salah al-Din's and his army's resolve. Aside from a number of factors related to both the Crusaders and the Byzantines. The conspiracies and revolutions of Fatimid Caliphate supporters and those who lost their interests and influence did not stop, especially after Salah al-Din succeeded in overthrowing the Fatimid Caliphate. Interestingly, Salah al-Din was able to suppress both the 1173CE revolution led by Najm al-Din ibn Masal and the 1174CE revolution led by Kanz al-Dawla (Jubran & al-'Amadi: 2000: 70-73). It is worth noting that during this period, Salah al-Din treated non-Muslims in general, and Christians in Egypt in particular, with firmness and severity, but he changed his policy once he had dealt with the revolts and conspiracies.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Yusuf ibn Ayyub, Salah al-Din, known in western literature as Saladin, was born in 532 AH /1137 CE in the town of Takrit, in modern Iraq (Ibn Shaddad, 2000:4 & Ibn al-Athir, 1998: vol. 10, 16). At the young age of 14 Salah al-Din began to learn the art of fighting, and soon stood out among the troops of Nur al-Din, the son and successor of 'Imad al-Din Zanki (Regan, 1987:17), who was based in Damascus. Like his father, Nur al-Din was battling with the Crusader kingdom of Jerusalem, and both were attempting to take over Egypt. In the several campaigns to Egypt between 558 and 564 AH (1163-1169 CE) Salah al-Din performed impressively, outstripping his peers. He served under his uncle Shirkuh, who was commander-in-chief of the Syrian army. In the third campaign, the two men led the Syrian forces to Egypt at the request of Shawar, the powerful *wazir* (prime minister) of the Fatimid Caliph al-'Adid in Cairo, to help Egypt resist the Crusaders. When Shawar was killed, al-'Adid appointed Shirkuh as *wazir* of Egypt, effectively its ruler, as under the weak Fatimids power was in the hands of the *wazir*. Two months later Shirkuh died unexpectedly and was succeeded by Salah al-Din. It

was still 564 AH/ 1169 CE, (Ibn Shaddad, 2000: 23-26 & Richards, 2001: 41-45) a significant year for the 32-year old commander.

Salah al-Din had little regard for al-'Adid, and on the caliph's death in 567 AH/ 1171 CE he immediately seized power, not as caliph, but in the name of Nur al-Din, who recognised the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. Salah al-Din began to reform Egypt and to turn it into a powerhouse, restoring the Sunni school of *fiqh* and becoming the country's unquestioned ruler (Ibn Shaddad, 2000:26-28). After Nur al-Din's sudden death in 569 AH/ 1174 CE, leaving a 12-year-old son, al-Malik al-Salih Isma'il, Salah al-Din asserted his right to the succession on grounds that al-Salih would not be able to shoulder the burden of kingship or defend the lands against the Crusaders. It was also apparent that the unity Nur al-Din had achieved between the various emirates in al-Sham was in danger of fragmenting (Ibn Shaddad, 2000: 31 & Richards, 2001: 51). The following year Salah al-Din proclaimed himself sultan (ruler) of Egypt and al-Sham –those parts of it that he now held. Two months later the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, al-Mustadi' Bi'amrillah (d. 576 AH/ 1180 CE) formally confirmed Salah al-Din as sultan of the combined governments of Egypt, Yemen and *al-Sham* (Regan, 1987:36).

Western writers regard Salah al-Din as a remarkable man. For instance, the most impressive feature of Lane-Poole's book is its enthusiastic admiration for the personality of Salah al-Din. *"Gentleness was the dominant note of his character"*, wrote Lane-Poole (1985:368-369):

> We search the contemporary descriptions in vain for the common attributes of Kings. Majesty? It is not mentioned, for the respect he inspired sprang from love, which 'casteth out fear.' State? Far from adopting an imposing mien and punctilious forms, no sovereign was ever more genial and easy of approach. He loved to surround himself with clever talkers, and was himself 'delightful to talk to'. He knew all the traditions of the Arabs, the 'Days' of their ancient heroes, the pedigrees of their famous mares. His sympathy and unaffected interest set every one at his ease, and instead of repressing freedom of conversation; he let the talk flow at such a pace that sometimes a man could not hear his own voice. Old-fashioned courtiers regretted the strict propriety of Nur al-Din levees, when each man sat silent, 'as if a bird were perched on his head,' till he was bidden to speak. At the Saladin court all was eager conversation - a most unkingly buzz. Yet there were limits, which no one dared to transgress in the Sultan's presence. He suffered no unseemly talk, nor was there any flippant irreverence or disrespect of persons permitted. He never used or allowed scurrilous language. He kept his own tongue, even in great provocation, under rigid control, and his pen was disciplined: he was never known to write a bitter word to a Muslim.

SALAH AL-DIN AND THE CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT

Although Salah al-Din recalled Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab and the way he dealt with non-Muslims, particularly Christians, and attempted to imitate the Caliph's method in many cases (Abu Shama 1997, Vol. 3, 392-393), Salah al-Din's dealings with Christians at the beginning of his rule in Egypt differed from what was known about Caliph 'Umar's way of dealing with non-Muslims. It may be useful to

compare the two men's reigns in order to identify the circumstances that led Salah al-Din to initially treat Christians differently than 'Umar. It is well known that the political situation during the reigns of Salah al-Din and 'Umar was very different. In the time of 'Umar there was one Muslim state, with a central government in Madinah controlling the whole of the state and its subjects. In Salah al-Din's day there was more than one Muslim government and caliphate. The caliph in Baghdad represented the Sunnis, but was very weak and had no control over the many rival emirates in al-Sham. Up until the time Salah al-Din took power, the other caliph in Cairo, who was dominated by his *wazir*, represented the Shi'is. The security situation in both caliphates was unstable, and Islamicjerusalem and large tracts of former Muslim land in al-Sham were in the hands of the Crusaders.

Some historians writing at the time reported that Salah al-Din's relations with the Christians in Egypt began uneasily and then deteriorated further. For instance, Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffa'(1959: vol. 3, part 2, 97), the Coptic historian, states that the churches in Egypt suffered extreme destruction, particularly after Salah al-Din became *wazir* and at the beginning of his Ayyubid sultanate. He records that all wooden crosses on the tops of basilica domes and churches in Egypt were removed on Salah al-Din's orders. Churches with white exteriors were painted black. The ringing of bells was prohibited throughout the country, and the Christians were not allowed to pray in public. On Palm Sunday (*Sha'anin*) the Christians were not allowed to hold their traditional procession in the streets of Egyptian towns and villages, or to carry olive branches and crosses (Ibn al-Muqaffa', 1959: vol. 3, part 2, 97). Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffa' (1959: vol. 3, part 2, 97) also says that at the beginning of his reign Salah al-Din promulgated harsh social restrictions on the non-Muslims, ordering the Christians to wear clothes that distinguished them from the Muslims and waist belts of a different colour, not to ride horses or mules, but only donkeys, and not to drink alcohol in public. Salam (1982: 228-229), an Egyptian historian, confirms that the Coptic patriarch and priests suffered greatly in the early years of Salah al-Din's rule.

While he was still *wazir*, Salah al-Din ordered the Armenian patriarch of Cairo to close down his court in the *al-Zuhri* area of the city in 564 AH /1169 CE, and to move to the John the Baptist church in the *Zuwayla* neighbourhood (al-Armani, 1895: 4). Four years later, when Salah al-Din tightened his grip on the Armenians, the Armenian patriarch left Cairo of his own accord for Jerusalem (al-Armani, 1895: 4). Abu Salih al-Armani (1895: 5) says the sultan allowed the patriarch to take all the religious books he could carry, as well as the church utensils and some golden *dinars*. The patriarch appointed a priest to stay behind and lead the prayers in the John the Baptist Church. Abu Salih al-Armani (1895: 5) adds that Salah al-Din allowed the Armenian Christians to carry out their religious duties freely in spite of their participation in the conspiracy against him.

SALAH AL-DIN'S NEW ATTITUDE

Salah al-Din's harshness towards the Christians did not, however, continue. After about five years, when the situation had settled down and he had developed more confidence in the Christians, he allowed them become clerks in the army and to hold higher positions than before. They were also permitted to ride horses and mules and to wear shoes and garments similar to those of Muslims (Ibn al-Muqaffa', 1959: vol. 3, part 2, 98).

Overall, Salah al-Din displayed tolerance towards the non-Muslims of Egypt. He gave generously to them and to non-Muslims in surrounding areas, and allowed them certain benefits. The Coptic patriarch, Marcus Ibn Qunbur, was greatly pleased by the favours bestowed by the Sultan on the Copts and their churches (Ibn al-Muqaffa', 1959: Vol. 3, part 2. 97-98). Evidence of Salah al-Din's more benign attitude to churches and monasteries is that between 570-75 AH / 1174-79 CE, soon after he became Sultan, Egypt witnessed a large building and renovation programme of Christian churches (Salam, 1982: 244). Later in Salah al-Din's reign, the Christians were able to celebrate Palm Sunday and other festivals in the atmosphere of greater religious tolerance (Ibn al-Muqaffa', 1959: vol. 3, part 2, 97-98). Salah al-Din placed great importance on allowing freedom of religious practice in Christian places of worship. When Qadi Shihab al-Din al-Tusi, a Muslim judge, ordered some restrictions on the Christians and closed down two churches in Cairo in 582 AH/ 1186 CE (al-Nuwairi, 1940:Vol. 17, 10), the Christians raised the matter with al-Malik al-'Adil, Salah al-Din's brother. Salah al-Din ordered that the churches be opened immediately.

Salah al-Din's tolerance extended to the non-Muslim peasants. Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffa'(1959: vol. 3, part 2, 96) mentions that Coptic farmers, like all inhabitants, benefited from the justice and tolerance of Salah al-Din's era. The farmers were grateful that their land was safe from confiscation. Sawirus comments that the religious officials had complete freedom from government interference when collecting the proceeds from farms belonging to the church and from lands endowed to churches and monasteries (Ibn al-Muqaffa', 1959: vol. 3, part 1, 1). Nor did Salah al-Din intervene in matters of church leadership. For example, when the Coptic patriarchate became vacant in 584 AH/ 1188 CE on the death of Marcus Ibn Qunbur, the 73rd patriarch of Alexandria, the Coptic community chose Yunus Ibn Abi Ghalib as the 74th patriarch (Al-Maqrizi, 1998: vol. 4, 415). Salah al-Din did not oppose this appointment and made no attempt to confiscate the great wealth of the new patriarch, which was spent on building churches and paying alms to poor Christians (Salam, 1982: 230). His attitude was similar to that of 'Umar in Islamicjerusalem, who took no part in the appointment of a new patriarch in the holy city.

The variation in Salah al-Din's policy towards non-Muslims during his rule was explained by Hillenbrand (2012: 414), who argues that the Copts enjoyed mixed fortunes under Salah al-Din and his family. At one point they were dismissed from office because of alleged links with the Crusaders, and their churches were

destroyed. However, some Copts were still appointed to high positions. She gives the example of Ibn Sharafi, who was appointed private secretary to Salah al-Din himself. Moreover, al-'Adil, Salah al-Din's brother, appointed the Copt Ibn al-Miqat to head the army bureau *(diwan al-jaysh)*. She concludes that the appointment of Christians to such powerful positions in wartime and in an area that was militarily so sensitive speaks for itself. Another example is from Ibn Jubayr (n.d.: 36) an Andalusian Muslim traveller (d. 614 AH/ 1217 CE), who visited Egypt during Salah al-Din's reign and passed through several cities and villages, including the city of *Akhmim.* He says that he saw churches populated by Coptic Christians. Salam (1982: 246) regards Ibn Jubayr's report as evidence that Christians enjoyed freedom of religion under Salah al-Din.

REASONS FOR THE HARSH POLICIES

The question arises of why Salah al-Din imposed strict restrictions on the non-Muslims, and whether his treatment of Egypt's Christians bore any relation to the occupation of Islamicjerusalem by the Crusaders. An answer is found in the circumstances in which he became *wazir*. As we have seen, Salah al-Din succeeded his uncle Shirkuh as *wazir* on the latter's untimely death in 564 AH/ 1169 CE. Within the next three years he consolidated his power base, and on al-'Adid's death he overthrew the Fatimid caliphate and became the country's sole ruler (Ibn Taghribardi, n.d., :Vol. 66-67). Both the Fatimids and some non-Muslim subjects strongly opposed this. Salah al-Din therefore faced threats from Fatimid supporters; from the large number of Armenian soldiers who had held positions of authority and had been exempted from the *jizya* tax (Ibn Wasil, 1960: vol. 3, 292), a privilege now denied them; and from Christian and Jews who had played a significant role in the disturbances and plots against his new government (al-Maqrizi, 1998: vol. 3, 4). Al-Maqrizi (1998: vol. 3, 5) reports that the Armenians had fiercely resisted Salah al-Din's army in 564 AH/ 1169 CE when it challenged the rebellion by *Mu'taman al-Khilafa*, one of the powerful civilian controllers of the Fatimid palace in Cairo (Lyons & Jackson, 1982: 34).

Understandably, Salah al-Din took harsh measures to protect himself and his new regime. His uncle Shirkuh had taken ruthless measures against the Christian and Jewish of Egypt, forcing the Christians to change the colour of their dress and wear distinctive waist belts, and dismissing non-Muslims from government departments (Al-Hamawi, 1999: vol. 2, 403-404) Salah al-Din seems to have followed his uncle's example. Abu Shama (1997, vol. 2, 130-131) and Ibn Wasil (1960: Vol.2, 479) confirm that savage punishments, including death and crucifixion, were meted out to Jewish and Christian participants in the conspiracies against Salah al-Din in 564 and 568/69 AH (1169 and 1173/74 CE). The plotters were also found guilty of a secret connection with the Crusaders, whom they had contacted to ask for help in overthrowing Salah al-Din. Salam (1982: 228-229), too, reports that Salah al-Din imposed severe restrictions on the non-Muslims because Christians and Jews had been very active supporters of the Fatimids and had conspired to overthrow Salah al-Din and revive Fatimid rule.

It seems clear that the unstable political and security situation was the reason for the harsh rules and regulations (al-Maqrizi, 1998: vol. 3, 4 & Lyons & Jackson, 1982: 34), as it was at the time of the Pact of 'Umar. Salah al-Din's restrictions would, first, compel the Christians to submit to his rule, since they were his subjects, and second, would control them and restrict their freedom. This would make it easier for him to assert his authority, and if the non-Muslims breached the regulations they would be accountable to him. Some scholars argued that Salah al-Din went further, ordering the Christians to obey the restrictions laid down in the Pact of 'Umar. 'Abd al-Mun'im (1968: 487-488), an Egyptian historian, concluded that all this was a result of the non-Muslims' conspiracy against Salah al-Din.

The turning point came when Salah al-Din abandoned these oppressive procedures after four to five years. It was not a sign of weakness on his part. The conspiracies had been suppressed and the situation had calmed down. Salah al-Din was now the sole ruler of Egypt, supported by the army that had accompanied his uncle Shirkuh from al-Sham, as well as by many Egyptians who had been opposed to the Fatimid caliphate.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that Salah al-Din's actions against the Christians in Egypt were not related to the Crusader occupation of Islamicjerusalem, but were a direct response to the rebellion of local Christians and other non-Muslims as well as Muslims against him. Furthermore, the relationship between the Latin Crusaders and the Egyptian Orthodox Copts was not good. The latter had been banned from the holy city ever since the establishment of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, nearly ninety years, because the Crusaders regarded them as heretics (Ibn al-Muqaffa', 1959: vol. 2, part 2, 249). To sum up, no doubt that the motive of Salah al-Din's repressive policies against non-Muslims in general and Egyptian Christians in particular was not anti-Christian sentiment, but rather the state of emergency that prevailed upon his becoming the minister of the Fatimid caliph. If Salah al-Din had been religiously motivated, he would not have reversed the repressive policies when the emergency ended.

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