HISTORY This Week EP 338: Saladin Takes Back the Holy City
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. September 20, 1187. I’m Sally Helm.

Daytime outside the walls of Jerusalem. Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt, has found the best point of attack.

For days now, he and his men have been circling the holy city in the shadows of its famous seven hills. They could hear shouts from inside, and, when they first approached, could see men crowded atop the actual walls. Inside Jerusalem are mostly Christians—including the descendants of European Crusaders who, back in 1099, captured this city themselves.

In the aftermath of that battle, the crusaders slaughtered tens of thousands of people. Muslims and Jews. But now, they’re the ones under siege. At the mercy of Saladin.

Because as the Sultan sets up camp on the city’s North side and surveys its defenses…he knows that he’s going to win. His position is too strong. And so, he has a choice to make. Should he undermine Jerusalem’s foundations and crack its walls, and then charge in, those are, after all, the general rules of war in the Middle Ages.

But that choice is not without its drawbacks. Balian of Ibelin, the knight who’s currently in control of Jerusalem, has sent Saladin a message. The two know each other—they’ve actually had friendly exchanges in the past—but Balian has issued a stark set of terms. If Saladin attacks, Balian knows he’ll lose. But he’ll also kill all the Muslim prisoners under his watch, kill as many of Saladin’s soldiers as he can, and destroy the Dome of the Rock. A sacred building marking a stop on the prophet Muhammad’s “night journey.” At the end of that journey, according to the Quran and other revered Islamic texts, he ascended to heaven and was in the presence of God himself.

So, Saladin has to decide: accept Balian’s terms, and show the crusaders a mercy that they themselves did not show? Or, attack, and risk being known in the Muslim world as the leader who lost one of Islam’s holiest places?

Today: the siege of Jerusalem. What brought Saladin’s army and the crusaders to this same contested spot? And, when faced with a wartime decision of monumental proportions…what did Saladin choose?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Saladin is not a young man as he stands outside the walls of Jerusalem, an army at his back. He’s 50—and, as the son and nephew of military men, he’s known war for most of his life. And when it comes to battles, he’s been on both the winning and losing side. This is not a
man whose life has been one long victory lap. But Dr. Suleiman Mourad of Smith College told us: Saladin’s rise before the siege of Jerusalem has seemed fueled by fate.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: The story of Saladin is like the story of any person who-- I like to say became very lucky as a result of a confluence of coincidences.

Sally Helm: He became a soldier at age 14. But his path to power--and towards Jerusalem--really takes off in his early thirties when he joins a military expedition to Egypt. The man who ordered the expedition was Nur al-Din.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: The son of the most powerful prince in what we call Northern Iraq and greater Syria.

Sally Helm: Nur al-Din is a renowned conqueror. He’s determined to unite the Muslim territories between the Euphrates River in Syria and the Nile River in Egypt. And he appoints Saladin’s uncle, a general in his army, to lead the expedition. Saladin serves under him.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: He was very close to his uncle. His uncle would deputize a lot of things to him when he was alive.

Sally Helm: And Saladin rises to the occasion. Some chroniclers say that during a key battle near the Nile River, Saladin had his forces pretend to retreat in order to lure their enemy into a trap. Others say Saladin simply commanded the Muslim army’s right flank. But either way, he risked his life to be in the thick of it.

That expedition is a success. Nur al-Din gains control of Cairo. Now he needs someone to be in charge of his newly conquered lands, to serve as his deputy in Egypt. He chooses Saladin’s uncle. Who, remember, likes to deputize things to his nephew. So, Saladin’s uncle is at the right hand of power, serving the great Nur-al-din. And Saladin, in turn, is at his uncle’s right hand. Just two right hands away from the top, while keeping his eye out for ways to advance.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: From what we can reconstruct. You realize that this is an extremely ambitious person. Someone who always grabs opportunity whenever it is presented to him. Someone who knows where to position himself for success.

Sally Helm: The first stroke of luck comes when Saladin’s uncle dies soon after becoming the Sultan of Egypt and Saladin is chosen to succeed him. So now he’s at the right hand of power himself. And he starts to push his luck.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: He was supposed to be the representative of Nur al-Din in Egypt, but he decided to run things on his own.
Sally Helm: Egypt was pretty far removed from Nur al-Din’s seat of power in Syria. And it’s a very wealthy place. Saladin figures he’s free to start augmenting his own power, not just remain the right-hand guy. And then, another stroke of luck: Nur al-Din dies in 1174. Perhaps just in time.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: We speculate as historian. We say, if Nur al-Din lived longer, very likely he would have led a military campaign to subdue Saladin and put him in prison.

Sally Helm: But instead, Saladin is now perfectly positioned to succeed Nur al-Din as the world’s most powerful Muslim ruler. No longer at anyone’s right hand. He launches a series of attacks against other Muslim rulers in Syria and defeats them all. He also marries Nur al-Din’s widow, which bolsters his claim that he’s the rightful heir to this empire.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: He was savvy. Shrewd. Incredibly intelligent enough to climb all the way to become the Sultan and the Supreme leader of the Muslims of his time in Syria and Egypt.

Sally Helm: It’s now 1186. Saladin’s goal is to consolidate his empire by conquering the lands that stretch between Syria and Egypt. These lands, bristling with castles, run along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. They’re called the Crusader States.

So, his main enemies are the Crusaders: The European Christian armies that, at this time, occupy much of the Holy Land. Ninety years earlier, Pope Urban II had given the Crusaders their marching orders in a speech at the Council of Clermont in France. The pope called on Western Christians to take up arms to recapture the Holy Land from Muslim control.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Pope Urban gave that address in Clermont, calling for the nobilities and the population in Western Europe to lead a campaign to liberate Jerusalem.

Sally Helm: His speech finished with a shout of, "Deus Vult" or "God Wills It."

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Out of that came what we consider the first wave of crusaders.

Sally Helm: And out of that came nearly two hundred years of blood and tumult that we now call “The Crusades,” religious wars between Christians and Muslims over sites revered by both.

Tens of thousands joined that First Crusade, many of them wearing a bold red cross on their tunics as a symbol of the Church. Less than a year after the pope’s call to arms, the Crusaders arrived in Jerusalem and besieged it.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: They captured the city--

Sally Helm: —massacred many of its inhabitants—
Dr. Suleiman Mourad: And they established the kingdom of Jerusalem.

Sally Helm: …which has, at its center, the city of Jerusalem. A city that is holy not just to Christians, but also to Muslims and Jews.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Jerusalem is the heart of the monotheistic project. If you look at Christianity, this is the climax of the Jesus ministry on earth. He was crucified there. He resurrected there and he ascended to heaven there.

Sally Helm: To Jews, it’s the holiest city of their ancestorial and spiritual homeland, a city centered on the great temple which symbolized their covenant with God. For Muslims—

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: The Muslims had their own experiences there primarily the legend about the prophet journeying to Jerusalem at night ascending from Jerusalem to heaven. Whether you talk about Judaism, Christianity or Islam, Jerusalem occupies a central place.

Sally Helm: And yet, Mourad told us, when the Crusaders initially captured Jerusalem in 1099:

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: As far as we can tell, in terms of documentary history, the Muslims were largely indifferent about it.

Sally Helm: But that sentiment had changed over time. Nur al-Din had planning to recapture Jerusalem before he died. The Crusaders had used the city as a rallying cry, and he realized that he could, too. And Saladin inherited that ambition. He reasoned: Retaking Jerusalem will help me stake my claim to leadership of the largest swath of the Muslim world and usher me into the pantheon of Muslim history.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: It would catapult him into the most important hero of Islam that, only equaled if once say, or surpassed by the prophet, and therefore in the back mind of Saladin, there was this dream that if you were to accomplish celebration of Jerusalem or recapture of Jerusalem. That is a feat that his pattern, supposedly Nur al-Din lived all his life dreaming about, but was never able to achieve.

Sally Helm: In 1187, Saladin doesn’t describe his plan for Jerusalem as simply a military campaign. Instead, he pulls a Pope Urban II: he describes it as a sacred cause pre-approved by God. Saladin proclaims himself as nothing less than the leader of a holy war defending Islam against Christianity.

There’s just one technicality to deal with: he and the kingdom of Jerusalem have a truce. But a prince named Reynald de Châtillon has been breaking it. Harassing Muslims on their way to Mecca. He attacks pilgrim ships, and hundreds of pilgrims drown.
Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Reynald of Châtillon would constantly attack them, kill them. And that angered Saladin, because if Saladin is unable to protect pilgrims, then all his legitimacy is put to question. So, Sullivan became very angry.

Sally Helm: Still, he feels he can’t just attack right away. Because of the truce. So instead, he issues an ultimatum to the king of Jerusalem, Guy de Lusignan. They know each other. And Saladin tells Guy:

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: You have to solve the problem of your bully. Reynold of Châtillon stop him, or otherwise I will stop him. Guy was indecisive and that gave an opening for Saladin to say, okay, you are not stopping him. Then the truce between us is over I'm marching against the kingdom of Jerusalem to solve this problem once and for all. And here the domino pieces fell exactly like Saladin dreamed they would fall.

Sally Helm: Saladin gathers an army and marches off to confront the Crusader army. It’s led by Guy de Lusignan and Reynald de Châtillon, and it’s one of the largest armies the region has ever seen. Saladin takes his own army to a spot about a hundred miles north of Jerusalem. Near the Sea of Galilee. Next to an extinct volcano at the village of Hattin.

Saladin’s three-part strategy is simple. Seize the best ground in Hattin. Lure the Crusaders there. Outmaneuver and then beat them.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: The Battle of Hattin was really fascinating. They teach it in military schools. It's just about the difference between smart tactics and smart, planning and reactive planning when you start reacting you always fall short.

Sally Helm: Getting to Hattin first has given Saladin several advantages and forced the Crusaders into that dreaded reactive position. Saladin sends his cavalry out to harass the Crusader soldiers as they march across an arid plain. Archers on horseback slow the Crusader advance by thinning their ranks. A Christian poet describes “the relentless arrows” that “engulf the pious cohort.” A Muslim historian says, "the arrows plunged into them, transforming their lions into hedgehogs."

Even more crucially, Saladin’s army is able to dominate the best fighting ground while seizing Lake Tiberias, or the Sea of Galilee, the area’s major water source.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: The crusaders arrived very late, and they realized they don't have access to the water. They can't camp next to the water. So, they decided to camp on the slope of Hattin.

Sally Helm: In a precarious position. They can’t take the better spot:

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Because Saladin's already there.
Sally Helm: Why were they late? They just like had trouble getting their boots together in the morning. Or why did they show up late?

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: That's the thing, you know coming late and deciding to camp there was probably the worst military blunder you could imagine.

Sally Helm: After studying the situation on the following morning – July 4th – Reynald of Châtillon is said to have muttered, “Great God … This is our grave.” The Crusaders are thirsty. Wearing heavy armor. And the brutal sun is beating down.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: You are talking here about July the hottest month of the year in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Sally Helm: Saladin and his army have plenty of water – water carried by camel in bulging goatskins from the banks of Lake Tiberias. Crusader King Guy de Lusignan and Reynald de Châtillon are becoming ever more desperate to reach the lake.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: As the hours start ticking, they don't have water and they don't have access to the water, and they start to panic.

Sally Helm: The Muslim force is blocking their way. But they have to get to the lake.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Essentially that forced them to decide that we should attack, even though they didn't have yet the whole plan figured out.

Sally Helm: The Crusaders march toward Saladin’s army across a long stretch of dry brush. Saladin’s horseman gallop forward and set that brush on fire. The thirsty Crusaders are now choked by smoke. The front rank of their army makes three desperate charges in a bid to reach Saladin himself and three times, they’re beaten back.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Finally, they were so fatigued, so exhausted, so thirsty that they just sat down, and the Muslims rallied around them and captured them.

Sally Helm: Saladin’s 17-year-old son, who is at the battle, writes that when his father realizes victory is at hand, he dismounts from his horse and “gives thanks to God almighty.” It’s a common gesture throughout The Crusades: chalking your victory up to divine intervention.

Guy de Lusignan, the King of Jerusalem, is captured and eventually imprisoned at Damascus. He’ll be released a year later. As for Reynald de Châtillon, some reports say Saladin ordered him taken away and executed for breaking the truce that was supposed to protect Muslim religious pilgrims. Others say that Saladin used his own scimitar to behead him then and there.
Saladin has won an unexpectedly decisive victory. He’s even captured a shard of the True Cross, a Christian relic that had been carried into the battle by a bishop. Now the whole balance of power in the region has been upended. The Crusader army is all-but wiped out.

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** A large part of them now are either injured, killed, or prisoner in Saladin’s camp. So, all the remaining territories are weak. They cannot defend themselves. Jerusalem included.

**Sally Helm:** Saladin hadn’t planned to pursue his ultimate goal so soon. But now he finds himself a hundred miles north of Jerusalem. With a clear path to seize the city.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** As Saladin gathers his forces to march on Jerusalem, a Crusader knight finds himself in an unexpectedly powerful position. Balian of Ibelin is kind of where Saladin once was—at the right hand of power. He’s a second-tier knight with no real path to the throne.

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** Balian was at Hattin, and he managed to flee. He decided to go to Jerusalem.

**Sally Helm:** En route to the city, Balian reaches out to Saladin.

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** He tells Saladin, "I want to bring my family and kids to Jerusalem. Would you let me?"

**Sally Helm:** Saladin has become known as a leader who will sometimes vanquish his enemies…and sometimes cut a deal. And he grants Balian’s request. With conditions: Don’t take up arms against me. And don’t stay in Jerusalem long.

But when Balian arrives in the city, he finds chaos. The king is in prison. Many of the top-tier knights are dead. And it occurs to Balian…maybe he’s a second-tier knight no longer.

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** Balian become one of the contenders ultimately to the title of King of Jerusalem. You could compare him to Saladin in some ways. He's very savvy, very intelligent.

**Sally Helm:** It’s clear to him that someone needs to organize Jerusalem’s defenses.

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** The people are pleading with him that; you have to stay here and help in the defense of the city and Balian agreed.

**Sally Helm:** If he can mount a defense force, he’ll become the de facto king of Jerusalem. The problem is:
Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Not enough knights around, right? Most of them are dead or have left or are in the prison of Saladin. So he start actually, knighting certain lower ranking soldiers who otherwise would never have dreamt to become Knight.

Sally Helm: It might not be the world’s best fighting force…but it’s something. When Saladin arrives at the walls of Jerusalem with his army behind him…he finds himself negotiating with: Balian of Ibelin.

The Christian knight has clearly broken his promise to Saladin. Not only has he stayed in Jerusalem, he has become its leader. But Saladin had actually seen this coming.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Saladin wasn't angry with him because I think probably Saladin all alone assumed that once Balian get to Jerusalem, they're not gonna let him leave because they don't have enough people.

Sally Helm: But it’s clear to Saladin which of the two men has the upper hand.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: He realized right away that the city will fall any day.

Sally Helm: And yet … Saladin doesn't attack.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: He start negotiating was Balian about what to do.

Sally Helm: Balian sends out that message: if you storm the city, I’ll go scorched Earth. Destroy Muslim holy sites, kill Muslim prisoners. Saladin considers this. The two sides talk…and talk and talk. In fact, Saladin might’ve had an ulterior motive for stretching out the discussion.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: You could say that he actually intentionally prolonged the siege for two weeks so that his entry to Jerusalem coincides with the celebration of the prophet's night journey to Jerusalem.

Sally Helm: Remember the Dome of the Rock? According to Islamic scripture, it was a stop on the prophet Muhammad’s “night journey.”

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: And this is a legend by the way. What you call the night journey. So, Saladin is telling the Muslims, I'm almost equal to the prophet.

Sally Helm: Especially if he can march into the city on the journey’s anniversary, which is a Muslim holiday.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: And often, you know, today we don't think seriously about religious thought, but in the Middle Ages, those things were extremely important. You know, when, when you think, you know, what are the chances that Saladin will capture the city on the
exact day, the anniversary, when the prophet came to it. And, and it started giving ideas about him, did God plan all of this along? And then if God planned it, then Saladin then occupies a huge part in this plant. Right. You know, God is thinking of Saladin before even he created the world.

**Sally Helm:** But…he doesn’t want Balian to destroy the Dome of the Rock. That’s the opposite of the symbolism that he’s going for. And Balian is doing his best to exploit that.

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** This is a very kind of shrewd strategies on the part of Balian and of Saladin of how you can negotiate with the most benefits for the least damage.

**Sally Helm:** For Saladin, that means winning, while keeping the holy sites intact. And so, he makes his choice. He defies the rules of war that he’s known his whole life and accepts Balian’s terms. He orders his officers to spare the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

On October 2, 1187, Balian surrenders.

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** Balian comes out and leads whatever soldiers still there out of the city.

**Sally Helm:** He hands over the keys to the Tower of David to Saladin…then exits the scene.

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** Saladin let him leave toward the coast.

**Sally Helm:** The Christians, many of whom have paid ransom to Saladin, are allowed to depart in peace. This is a very different scene from the 1099 massacre. Finally, the city is all but empty.

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** So, there was that kind of moment where now the city of Jerusalem is ready to welcome Saladin.

**Sally Helm:** So, he does eventually break through, into the city on October 2nd. I mean, tell me about that day. What's the sort of victory of Saladin look like?

**Dr. Suleiman Mourad:** It's remarkable how much planning went into Saladin's conquering entry to Jerusalem, and here is a second major hero of Islam that Saladin wanted to compare himself to. He's not only entering the city on the anniversary of when the prophet came and went in the city, he's also entering the city, liberating it and making it Islamic again, similar to when the second Caliph supposedly came from Medina in Arabia to Jerusalem, in the year 638, to oversee the terms of its surrender to the Muslims.
Sally Helm: As with the Muslim conquerors of 638, Saladin’s capture of Jerusalem results in centuries of Muslim rule. It won’t end until 1917 at the close of the First World War, when British troops occupy the city.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: There was this kind of anger and need to claim it back, because in that century it was hyped up in Christian religious psychology.

Sally Helm: Some have interpreted Saladin’s decision at the walls of Jerusalem in terms of pure self-interest. That, given the circumstances, he did what was best for himself and his legacy. This may well be right. But Saladin’s name continues to resound in both the Muslim and Western worlds. For a couple of reasons. The first is for his prowess as a conqueror…and for what that suggests.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: There's part of the legacy that if the Muslims unite under a leader like Saladin, they will be able to achieve what Saladin achieve, which is defeat the enemy. So here Saladin stands to be the symbol of this potential unity that would be victorious.

Sally Helm: The second reason is the mercy shown to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. For whatever reason, Saladin chose to break with the horrible protocols of war in the Middle Ages—he decided not to ruthlessly crush his foes. He chose to not put most of them to the sword while enslaving the rest, as so many armies had done so many times before. It’s a moment that stands out in the history of The Crusades…and that some have interpreted as an act of humanity.

It almost doesn’t matter why he did it. What matters is that, for once, a victorious army outside a fallen city did not just rush in for a massacre.

Nearly 500 years later, Dutch artist Jan Luyken depicted the scene in a richly detailed etching. It seems almost unreal. There, on the rocky ground outside the walls, the ranks of Muslims soldiers have parted, and a long line of unarmed Christians walks between them, safely. And some of the Christians have their arms raised, as if in rejoicing. Even if you know all about the ruthless political and military and financial machinations that preceded this moment, it’s still moving.

Dr. Suleiman Mourad: Saladin started as this foe that gradually, many in the west they respected him so much that they start thinking him as one of them. And that is this origin of the fascination with Saladin.

Sally Helm: A fascination, most of all, with what he decided to do one day in 1187 outside the walls of Jerusalem.

[CREDITS]

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212-351-0410. We are reading and listening, and we'd really love to hear from you. So please reach. Special. Thanks to our guest Dr. Suleiman Mourad, Professor of Religion at Smith College and author of Ibn ‘Asakir of Damascus: Champion of Sunni Islam at the Time of the Crusades. This episode was produced by Morgan Givens sound designed by Brian Flood and story edited by Jim O’Grady. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. History This Week is also produced by Julia Press and me, Sally Helm.

Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer, McCamey Lynn and our executive producer is Jesse Katz. Don't forget to subscribe, rate and review history this week, wherever you get your podcasts. And we'll see you next week.