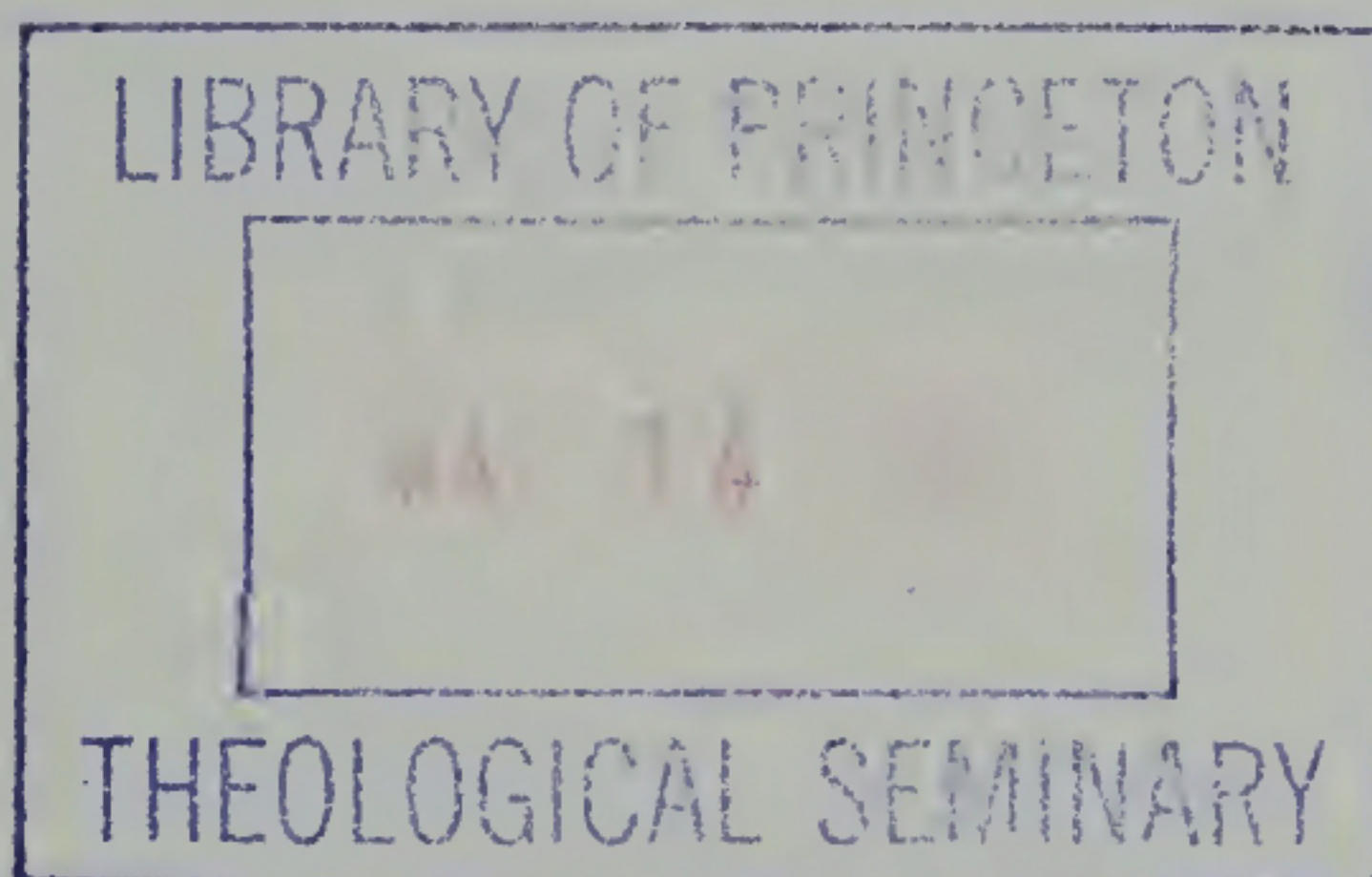


The Second Crusade

Scope and consequences

edited by

Jonathan Phillips & Martin Hoch



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from an early age must have turned Zengi to the shedding of blood and to the strategies needed to remain alive. This is indeed a far cry from the chronologically impossible but common legend mentioned in passing by Barani, according to which his, the Dhuwajir Margharat of Asmara, one of the great heroines of her day, sought the redemption of a crusade after the first shock of youth and when, ending her days as a captive in a distant house, gave birth to Zengi.

One would like to know more about what happened to Zengi between his loss of his father when he was a child of only 10 and his appointment as governor of southern Iraq at the age of about 38. These were his formative years, and details pass largely unrecorded by the chroniclers. Ibn al-Athir (died 1233), who wrote a 'universal history' as well as a chronicle of the Zengid family, gives some information about Zengi's early career. He served in the armies of powerful Turkish commanders. In 502/1108–9 Zengi was fighting in the army of Jawali Saqao,⁸ the governor of Mosul, against Tancred of Antioch.⁹ In 508/1114–15 he was in the service of another governor of Mosul, Aq Sunqur al-Bursuqi,¹⁰ and in 512/1118–19 he was with the Seljuq prince Mas'ud.¹¹

The future conqueror of Edessa, Zengi, was brought up in a hard school. Indeed, to rise to prominence among the Turkish commanders and fellow princes, especially in the highly volatile period after 1100 is no mean feat. In which both the fellow soldier Malikshah and his powerful chief minister Nihsan al-Mulk died, was a time when Zengi possessed the key qualities of intelligence and cool calculation, and more than the usual degree of good luck. This was especially important in his case, since he had lost his father at an early age, but the shedding of power and the ability to survive as high officer were already in his blood. His father Aq Sunqur ('White Falcon') had been a member of the fellow soldier Aq Arslan ('Harrow Hawk'), d. 1072) and was brought up with Aq Arslan's son and heir Malikshah whose name and title as Arslan designated the traditional designation for royalty of the Arslan and Persians.¹² This personal link with the fellow soldier is of crucial importance not only in assessing the career of Aq Sunqur himself but in the career of his son Zengi. In which his Aq Sunqur continued to enjoy fellow soldier, he became one of Malikshah's greatest commanders and, according to Ibn al-Athir, was given the governorship of Aleppo and its dependencies by Malikshah at the beginning of 490/1097–98.¹³ The Islamic sources stress that Aq Sunqur ruled with justice and order

Hovering over Syria throughout the 1130s and the early 1140s was the redoubtable and terrifying figure of Zengi, the first of the three major Muslim leaders who spearheaded 'the counter-crusade' in the twelfth century. Zengi's sheer longevity, especially in such violent and anarchic times, points to his exceptional ruthlessness and sagacity. The picture drawn of him in the Islamic sources, normally so laconic and stereotyped in their depictions of prominent men, is one of an unusually tyrannical and brutal leader with extraordinary powers of cunning and self-preservation. He was in fact the archetypal Oriental despot. The longer he ruled, the more awesome his quasi-legendary reputation became. That he managed to survive a life in the saddle and almost continuous military engagements into his early sixties is sufficient testimony to his remarkable abilities. Even by the standards of the times he was regarded as exceptionally brutal, and the sources dwell on his chillingly ruthless personality, his cruelty and his iron grip on affairs. By the time of his capture of Edessa, Zengi had turned 60 and had seen many a rival off. When he died, it was not just the Franks who heaved a sigh of relief.

Moreover, Zengi's fear-inspiring attributes were accompanied by undoubted military and political skills and rare qualities of leadership. He came from a family long used to military service and rulership, and he is praised in the sources for his excellent government. H. A. R. Gibb speaks rather vaguely of Zengi's 'defects of character and grasping policies'.⁹⁶ It has to be said, however, that Nur ad-Din and Saladin pursued similar expansionist policies. But the sources, and indeed earlier generations of orientalist scholars, usually portray the latter two heroes of the 'counter-crusade' in much more glowing terms, depicting them as pious Muslims who pursue a personal as well as a public *jihad* against the Franks.⁹⁷ Zengi, on the other hand, while being praised for his achievements at Edessa, receives unusually harsh treatment from the chroniclers. Certainly Zengi was viewed as a ruler of great status at the time. The Frankish and Byzantine leadership had to negotiate with him, because he was the major Muslim potentate in the Near East in the period from his capture of Aleppo onwards. In the east he behaved as a kingmaker, meddling in the affairs of both sultan and caliph in Baghdad; in the Levant he became the sultan himself, bearing grandiose titles and conducting the affairs of war and peace with Latin rulers and the Byzantine emperor. In Mosul, which he held for twenty years, Zengi minted gold coins and beautified the city.

Because of the division of Zengi's lands between his two most important sons, Sayf ad-Din Ghazi inherited the eastern portion of Zengi's possessions and focused his attentions there, while Nur ad-Din concentrated his power in Syria and did not meddle in affairs further east. Despite the laudatory descriptions of Nur ad-Din in the Islamic sources as a fighter of *jihad* and a pious Muslim, it is important to stress that he was a third-generation Turkish warlord who had usurped power in Syria and that he had the blood of Aq Sunqur and Zengi in his veins.

To sum up: it is clear that on the Muslim side, the two decades preceding the Second Crusade in the Levant were dominated by one man – Zengi. In the generation after the First Crusade, the Muslims gradually came to terms with the unexpected phenomenon of the Franks. By degrees, they began to evolve counter-strategies and the Muslim revanche crystallized around this charismatic and ruthless figure, who bore the title of *Imad ad-Din* ('the Support of Religion'). What Zengi achieved were stability and consolidation. Without his foundation of stable power over an unusually long period, the momentum which culminated in the Muslim triumph in 1187 would not have been possible. The fall of Edessa infused the Muslims with new hope.

For the career of Zengi, the conqueror of Edessa, the medieval Islamic sources provide a wealth of detailed insights. Above all, they reveal the model of strong leadership embodied in Zengi, the first really powerful military leader who came into conflict with the Franks and who went some way towards uniting Syria under his firm hand. Indeed, he did much of the preparatory work for which his son Nur ad-Din took the credit. The Islamic sources also show that the Muslims of Syria were still far from willing to accept the unifying rule of a commander whose focus of power was outside Syria itself. Damascus still eluded Zengi because he was viewed as a 'prince of the east'. It fell to his son Nur ad-Din to take Damascus in 1154 and to unite Muslim Syria, and in large part that was because his centre of operations was Syria itself. Zengi, then, was an outsider; his son, perhaps learning the necessary lesson, took care to become an insider.