Ibn al-Athīr

Françoise Micheau

Al-Kāmil fi’l-taʾrīkh, (‘The Complete History’), which Ibn al-Athīr completed in Mosul in the late 620s/early 1230s, is almost unanimously considered to be ‘one of the most impressive achievements of pre-modern historiography in any culture’¹ and ‘the high point of Muslim annalistic historiography’,² and its author to be ‘l’un des plus grands historiens du Moyen Âge islamique’.³ For the history of the crusading period this universal chronicle provides a clear, balanced and detailed account which makes it one of the principal Arabic sources for the sixth/twelfth and early-seventh/thirteenth centuries. Its importance for the history of the Crusades was first noted in the eighteenth century by Dom Berthereau and for this reason the first two volumes of the magisterial Recueil des Historiens des Croisades: Documents Orientaux combined an edition and translation of large extracts from al-Kāmil fi’l-taʾrīkh, under the wrongly transcribed title Kamel-altevarykh.⁴ Later, Francesco Gabrieli made extensive use of Ibn al-Athīr’s chronicle in his Arab Historians of the Crusades, using it for at least a third of the translations contained within his text.⁵ Such a significant position accorded to Ibn al-Athīr’s major chronicle is certainly justified, despite some scholars’ criticisms surrounding his use of sources and his Zengid sympathies.

The Political Situation of Syria and the Jazīra and the Life of Ibn al-Athīr

Ibn al-Athīr (555/1160–630/1233) was born into a wealthy family of well-educated scholars, members of which rose to prominence in the service of the Zengid rulers of Mosul and who also had good relations with the Ayyūbids. Consequently, a brief survey of the political situation of the Jazira and northern

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¹ R.S. Humphreys, ‘Taʾrīkh’, in EII.
⁴ RHC Or., vols. 1–11.
⁵ This is the case at least for the period of time covered by Ibn al-Athīr’s chronicle (from the First to the Fifth Crusade); F. Gabrieli, Arab Historians of the Crusades (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1969).
Syria in the sixth/twelfth and early seventh/thirteenth centuries will be useful in order to gain a better understanding of the context in which Ibn al-Athīr lived and worked, and how this may have influenced his writings.6

With the exception of the first few decades, the sixth/twelfth century had been marked by the emergence of a number of powerful Islamic rulers who, for the first time, were able to unite the Muslim forces and lead them to some success in the jihad against the Frankish crusaders. From 521/1127 to 541/1146, Zengī (or Zankī), who ruled Mosul and Aleppo in the name of the Seljūq sultan, held de facto independence over his territory, and his jihad credentials were suggested in 539/1144 by his capture of Edessa which, since the year 491/1098, had been the capital of a Latin county. After his death in 541/1146 Zengī’s lands were divided among the members of his family. It was his son Nūr al-Dīn who succeeded him at Aleppo, ruling from 541/1146 until 569/1174, and during this period he made the fight against the Franks one of the main aspects of his wider policy of unifying and restoring Sunnī rule in Syrian territory, demonstrated in 549/1154 by his takeover of Damascus from the hands of a dynasty of Turkish emirs. Sayf al-Dīn Ghāzī i, Nūr al-Dīn’s brother, received Mosul, the other centre of Zengid power, and henceforth the fortunes of the two cities diverged. After Sayf al-Dīn’s death only three years later power passed to his brother Quṭb al-Dīn Mawdūd (r. 544–565/1149–1170), then to the latter’s son Sayf al-Dīn Ghāzī ii (r. 565–576/1170–1180), and finally to his second son ʿIzz al-Dīn Masʿūd i (r. 576–589/1176–1193). Other members of the Zengid family established themselves in Sinjār, to the west of Mosul, and in Jazīrat Ibn ʿUmar, on the upper Tigris, where they created their own petty principalities.7

However, the two main branches of the Zengid dynasty were threatened by the ambitions of Saladin, a Kurdish ruler who had hijacked the Zengid attempt to re-establish Sunnī authority in Egypt and made himself the champion of the fight against the Franks. Saladin had accompanied his uncle Shīrkūh in the expeditions by which the latter had captured Egypt in the name of Nūr al-Dīn in the 560s/1160s, and he was able to take advantage of the circumstances he encountered to further his own ambitions. Named as chief of the army and vizier in Cairo in 564/1169, Saladin became sole ruler of the country following the death of the last Fāṭimid caliph al-ʿĀḍid in 567/1171,8 when he re-established Sunnism with the official, if only nominal, recognition of the

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8 See the analysis which Ibn al-Athīr gives of these events, below, p. 79.