

Book Review:

James, Boris. *Selahaddin ve Kürtler: Haçlılar Döneminde Bir Topluluğun Kavranması* [*Saladin and the Kurds: Perception of a Group at the Time of the Crusades*]. Translated into Turkish by Nazlı Bilgiç. Istanbul: Avesta, 2011, 178 pages.

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Selahaddin ve Kürtler is the recent Turkish translation of Boris James' book that appeared as a special edition of the *Études Kurdes* in May 2006.¹ James analyzes the Kurdish community and its influence on the decision-making processes of the Ayyubid institutions during the reign of the famous Sultan Saladin (1169-1193) whose armies challenged the Crusaders and whose rule stretched from Yemen to Egypt and from there to Bilad Al-Sham and Upper Mesopotamia. Through a critical and sometimes unconventional reading of a variety of the medieval Arabic sources including chronicles, geographical works, and biographical dictionaries from the 12th through the 17th Centuries, the author identifies the leading Kurdish figures in Ayyubid Egypt and Syria and the meaning of Kurdishness in that period of the Middle Ages. James is well aware of the limitations of using ethnic terms while looking at the middle ages. The Arab medieval authors to whom he refers, such as Ibn al-Athir, Al-Isfahani, Yaqt al-Hamawi, and Ibn Jubayr, tell the story from an urban Arab-Muslim elite perspective. Saladin and his uncle, Shirkuh, were originally Kurdish and they were a part of the military oligarchy of a Turkish dynasty based in Bilad Al-Sham, the Zankids. They were sent to Egypt by Nur ad-Din Zanki (1118-1174) to defend the area against the Crusaders. They became viziers in the Fatimid State ruling Egypt, and eventually established their own dynasty, the Ayyubids. The Ayyubids would gain independence from the Zankids, following the death Nur ad-Din, and incorporate the former Zankid territories of Syria and Upper Mesopotamia into the Ayyubid Empire. From their coming to Egypt until the end of the dynasty, they were assisted by Arabs, Kurds, Mamluks, Persians, and Turks. The author therefore identifies the Kurds in this Ayyubid kaleidoscope through the written sources available.

In the first part of the book, before turning to focus on the Kurdish elite in the Ayyubid political and military system, James analyzes the depiction of Kurdish areas in the contemporary Arabic sources located roughly to the north of Mosul, Jazirat ibn Umar, the Arbil region, and the Sharezor region to the east of Arbil. He then lists the major Kurdish tribes populating those areas and from which the Zankids recruited a substantial part of their military force. As James indicates, even though the Saljukid Sultan Sanjar (r.1117-1157) officially used the term Kurdistan in 1152 for a part of the territory mentioned above, the Arabic sources at the time preferred other terms: balad al-Akrad (the country of the Kurds), Zuzan or Zuzan al-Akrad (in Kurdish, Zuzan means a summer pasture), and Jabal or Jabal al-Akrad (the mountain(s) of the Kurds). James indicates that these terms define the tribal territories of the Kurds which were neither politically unified nor ethnically homogenous. James follows this with a listing of the major Kurdish tribes who played important roles in the Ayyubid system. The Kurdish tribes established states like the Marwanids, and Kurdish figures had been incorporated into the military, political, religious and legal systems in the urban centers in Syria and Egypt long before the Ayyubids came to power. Their tribal territories were later conquered by the Zankids and the Kurdish tribal units entered the Zankid service as soldiers or political elites.

The second part of the book examines the definitions of Kurds or the parameters of Kurdishness as explained in the medieval Arab sources. The author notes that the meaning of the term changes over time or according to the different genres, in chronicles, geographical works or biographical dictionaries.

Agreeing with scholars such as Jean Aubin and Martin van Bruinessen, he presents examples of how the term Kurd was used by the medieval Arab authors in an ethnographic sense; connoting lifestyle rather than language and ethnicity. The medieval Arabic speaking authors, including those during the Ayyubid dynasty, associated Kurdishness with what settled Arab urban culture was not: nomadism, mountainous life style, rebelliousness, trapping, plundering, abduction, uncontrolled violence, extravagance or looseness in religious practice, and lack of refinement. James notes that the very same stereotypes were used for the Turks in these sources, and that negative characteristics such as quickness to violence were praised when used against the invading Crusader enemies. The Kurdish figures incorporated into the urban elite circles, including Saladin, are treated differently in the medieval chronicles and biographical works. Their ethnic identities are purposely not mentioned; instead their occupations, status and scholarship are emphasized. The Kurds themselves were aware of this and hid their ethnic origin as well. Moreover, the author indicates the difficulty of identifying the ethnic identity of an urban elite by analyzing his patronymics; showing lineage (*nasab*) or personal virtues (*suhra* and *laqab*) does not necessarily give a clear idea of a person's ethnic identity, especially in the case of civil elites. However, there are also cases in the Arabic sources in which the term Kurd is used in an ethnic sense. One striking example in the book is the manifestation of "Kurdish" solidarity by the two Kurdish leaders narrated by Ibn Khalilkan. Accordingly, Isa al-Hakkari convinces Qutb ad-Din Tulayl not to lay claim to the office of the Fatimid vizierate after the death of Shirkuh and to support Saladin instead, in order to prevent Turks from taking over the office. The fact that this 12th century Kurdish solidarity was noted by the Arab sources suggests the author cannot avoid the existence of an ethnic dimension to Kurdishness at the time.

The third part of the book looks specifically at the positions and influences of the leading Kurdish military and civilian personalities in the Ayyubid institutions. James indicates that Kurds had already held important government positions, especially in the urban centers of Bilad al-Sham before the Ayyubids. He then shows how initial dominance of the Turkish military units later declined as the Ayyubids became more independent from the Zankids. He mentions how serious the degree of enmity between the Turkish and the Kurdish units was in comparison to the conflicts between the Turkish and Mamluk units. After the military elite, he identifies the Kurdish judicial and religious functionaries such as judges, chief judges and savants who joined the military apparatus in Egyptian and Syrian urban centers. He then gives examples indicating how influential they were on decisions taken by the Ayyubid state. For example, the so-called Turkish-Kurdish conflict manifested in one case in terms of Hanafi-Shafi'i ritual differences between Turks and Kurds in Aleppo. Faqih Isa, a Kurdish figure, convinced Saladin to expel Hanafi judges in Aleppo in favor of Shafi'i ones following the conquest of the city by the Ayyubids.

Boris James' meticulous and nuanced reading of the medieval Arabic sources is a welcome contribution not only to the scholarship on the Medieval Middle East but also to the studies of nationalism in the region. The author avoids essentialist conclusions and asks many questions arising out of his work. Kurdish nationalists of the early 20th century who criticize Saladin for not asserting his national identity would be surprised to learn the influence of Kurdish figures in his empire. Turkish and Arab nationalist historians of the same period who present Saladin as their own national hero will be disappointed by reading this book. As a student of national movements in the Middle East, I was surprised to see that Kurdish figures incorporated into the urban societies in the 12th century Bilad al-Sham and Egypt happened to act out of their "ethnic" solidarity when they encountered people from other ethnic groups. No matter how representative these instances, they should make us revisit the meaning of Kurdishness, Turkishness or Arabness before the advent of the modern ideology of nationalism in the Middle East.

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ⁱ Boris James, *Saladin et les Kurdes: Perception d'un Groupe au Temps des Croisades*, A Special Issue of *Études Kurdes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, May 2006).