

# The Role of Personal Bias in Historical Narratives: ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Işfahānī’s Portrayal of ‘Imād al-Dīn Zangī

ISSAM MUSTAFA OKLEH\*  
ALMAHDI ALRAWADIEH\*\*

## Abstract

The article examines the role of personal bias in historical narratives, focusing on the portrayal of ‘Imād al-Dīn Zangī by the historian ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Işfahānī in his work *Nuşrat al-fatra*. Al-Işfahānī’s depiction of Zangī is notably hostile, attributing various negative traits and actions to him, such as alliances with the Nizāri Ismā‘īli Assassins and tyrannical behavior. The study suggests that al-Işfahānī’s bias stems from personal animosity and Ayyubid propaganda, which aimed to undermine the Zangids. This view is contrasted with other contemporary sources, including Muslim, Christian, and Syriac accounts, which often portray Zangī in a more favorable light as a just and capable ruler, particularly in his efforts to secure and develop his territories. The article highlights the importance of critically assessing historical sources, especially when personal biases may influence the accuracy of the narrative.

**Keywords:** ‘Imād al-Dīn Zangī, ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Işfahānī, Zangids, Ayyubid propaganda, Historiography.

## Tarihsel Anlatılarda Kişisel Önyargının Rolü: ‘Imād al-Dīn el-İşfahānī’nin ‘Imād al-Dīn Zengī’yi Tasviri

### Öz

Bu makale tarihsel anlatılarda kişisel ön yargının rolünü incelemekte ve tarihçi *İmādüddīn el-İşfahānī’nin Nuşretül-fetre* adlı eserinde İmādüddīn Zengī’yi nasıl tasvir ettiğine odaklanmaktadır. İşfahānī’nin Zengī’yi betimlemesi dikkate değer derecede olumsuzdur;

\* Doç. Dr., University of Khorfakkan & University of Jordan, College of Arts, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences / Doç. Dr., Khorfakkan Üniversitesi & Ürdün Üniversitesi, Sanat Fakültesi, Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Bölümü. Sharjah, UAE & Jordan. ORCID: 0000-0002-5947-6420; e-posta: issam.okleh@ukf.ac.ae

\*\* Doç. Dr., The University of Jordan, School of Arts, Department of History / Doç. Dr., Ürdün Üniversitesi, Sanat Fakültesi, Tarih Bölümü. Amman, Ürdün. ORCID: 0000-0002-7151-4709 e-posta: a.rawadieh@ju.edu.jo

onu Nizârî İsmâilî Haşhaşiler'le ittifak yapmak ve zalimce davranışlar sergilemek gibi çeşitli olumsuz özelliklerle ilişkilendirir. Çalışma İsfahânî'nin ön yargısının kişisel husumet ile Eyyübîler tarafından Zengîliler'i itibarsızlaştırmayı amaçlayan propaganda etkisinden kaynaklandığını ileri sürmektedir. Bu bakış açısı, Zengî'yi âdil ve yetenekli bir hükümdar olarak tasvir eden müslüman, hıristiyan ve Süryânî kaynakları dahil olmak üzere diğer çağdaş anlatılarla karşılaştırılmaktadır; özellikle onun topraklarını güvence altına alma ve geliştirme çabaları vurgulanmaktadır. Makale tarihsel kaynakların eleştirel bir yaklaşımla değerlendirilmesinin, özellikle kişisel ön yargıların anlatının doğruluğunu etkileyebileceği durumlarda, önemine dikkat çekmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** 'İmâd al-Dîn Zengî, 'İmâd al-Dîn el-İsfahânî, Zengîler, Eyyübî propagandası, Tarih yazımı.

## Introduction

This study examines the antagonistic stance that 'İmâd al-Dîn al-İsfahânî (d. 597/1201) took toward the Atabek 'İmâd al-Dîn Zangî ibn Âq Sunqur (d. 541/1146) in his book *Nuşrat al-fatra wa-'Uşrat al-fiṭra*, the complete edition of which has only recently been published.<sup>1</sup> After scrutinizing the careers of both 'İmâd al-Dîn and Zangî, the study assesses the accuracy of the information and judgements that 'İmâd al-Dîn recorded and compares them with other contemporary Muslim Arabic, Syriac and Latin Christian sources. In doing so, the study attempts to understand what motivated 'İmâd al-Dîn to adopt such a hostile stance.

The significance of this study derives in part from 'İmâd al-Dîn's exceptionally detailed awareness of the history of the period. He was descended from an İsfahânî family, whose members served in high administrative posts of the Seljuk state, and he himself served in the Zangid and Ayyubid administrations. He was fluent in both Persian and Arabic and had wide contacts with the rulers, administrators, scholars, and men of letters of the region. He is considered the foremost author and historian of the Islamic world in the second half of the sixth century (second half of the twelfth) century. Lastly, 'İmâd al-Dîn was a fundamental source for later historians and was one of those who influenced Arab Islamic culture in his time.<sup>2</sup>

## 'İmâd Al-Dîn Al-İsfahânî's Life, Education and Career

'İmâd al-Dîn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥamid ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allâh al-Ḥamawîni al-Qurashî al-İsfahânî<sup>3</sup> was born in 519/1125 in the city of Isfahan into a family of secretaries and administrators working for

1 al-İsfahânî, *Nuşrat al-Fatra wa-'Uşrat al-fiṭra*, ed. 'Issâm Oqleh, London: Mu'assasat al-Furqân lil-turâth al-İslâmî, 2019.

2 Massé, "İmâd al-Dîn", III, 1157-1158.

3 al-İsfahânî, *Kharidat al-qaşr*, (Tehran, 2000), 21, 60.

the Seljuk state.<sup>4</sup> His uncle al-'Aziz Aḥmad ibn Ḥāmid (d. 528/1132) was a prominent member of the family and occupied the post of chief financial officer for the Sultan Maḥmūd ibn Muḥammad ibn Malikshah (d. 527/1131) and so had great power in the Seljuk state until his rivalry with the vizier al-Darqazini (d. 528/1132) led to his arrest and execution in 525/1129.<sup>5</sup>

The arrest of al-'Aziz in 525/1129, along with that of 'Imād al-Dīn's father, other uncles and the confiscation of their property was a catastrophe for the family. After his father's release from prison, 'Imād al-Dīn departed with his family for Baghdad in 534/1139, where they lived until his father's death in 560/1164.<sup>6</sup> 'Imād al-Dīn was first educated in Isfahan and then in Baghdad's schools and academic seminaries, in addition to learning at the hands of his father. He became famous in Baghdad, known by the name of the son of the brother of al-'Aziz.<sup>7</sup> In Baghdad, he continued his education in Arabic grammar, language, literature, and the art of narrating poetry, as well as in the religious sciences of hadīth, the Shafi'i legal tradition, and the sciences of the Qur'ān and its recitation. 'Imād al-Dīn also cultivated his connections with scholars in Baghdad who had had good relations with his uncle al-'Aziz. He also came into contact with administrators of the Seljuk state who were subordinates of his uncle al-'Aziz, or had good relations with him, among them Jamāl al-Dīn al-Iṣfahāni, the vizier of Zangid Mosul (d. 559/1164), and Raḍī al-Dīn the chief financial officer of the Sultan Mas'ūd ibn Muḥammad (d. 547/1152).<sup>8</sup>

'Imād al-Dīn's first administrative job was in the administration of the Abbasid caliphate, where he served as an administrative assistant of the vizier 'Awn al-Dīn ibn Hubayrah in Wāsiṭ and then in Basra. His work there continued until Ibn Hubayrah's death in 560/1164, which resulted in the dismissal of his entire staff, including 'Imād al-Dīn, who was briefly placed under arrest. After his release, 'Imād al-Dīn went to Bilād al-Shām and, in 562/1167, he served in the *Dīwān al-Inṣā'* (the office of official correspondence) in the government of Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Zangī (d. 569/1174), where he was soon placed in charge, remaining in that position until Nūr al-Dīn's death.<sup>9</sup>

4 al-Iṣfahāni, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr*, (Baghdad, 1959), II, 330.

5 al-Iṣfahāni, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr* (Tehran, 2000), 43-45.

6 al-Iṣfahāni, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr* (Baghdad, 1959), II, 53-54; al-Iṣfahāni, *Nuṣrat al-fatra*, II, 143-144, 215.

7 Massé, "Imād al-Dīn" III, 1157; al-Iṣfahāni, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr*, (2000) 67; al-Iṣfahāni, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr* (1959) II, 53; al-Iṣfahāni, *Nuṣrat al-fatra*, II, 245; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mirāt al-zaman*, XXII, 199.

8 al-Iṣfahāni, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr* (1959), I, 44, II, 53; al-Iṣfahāni, *Nuṣrat al-fatra*, II, 251-253, 289-290.

9 al-Bundāri, *Sanā al-barq al-Shāmi* 16, 18, 22, 49-50, 63, 69; Massé, "Imād al-Dīn", III, 1157.

It is clear from indications given by ‘Imād al-Dīn that upon his arrival in Damascus, he contacted Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb ibn Shādhī (d. 568/1172), the father of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, and his brother Asad al-Dīn Shirkūh (d. 564/1168), as well as the *qāḍī* Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Shaharzūrī (d. 572/1176), all of whom were acquaintances with his uncle al-‘Azīz.<sup>10</sup> In this period, his relationship strengthened with Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsuf al-Ayyūbī (d. 589/1193)..<sup>11</sup> This group of members of Nūr al-Dīn’s government are who introduced ‘Imād al-Dīn to Nūr al-Dīn, who employed him in the *Dīwān al-Inṣā’* and placed him in charge.<sup>12</sup> After Nūr al-Dīn died and his son al-Malik al-Ṣālīḥ Ismā‘īl (d. 577/1181) came to power as a child, the group of administrators hostile to ‘Imād al-Dīn and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn succeeded in forcing him to leave his post and go to Mosul. However, he returned to Damascus after Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn took over in 570/1175, where he served in the *Dīwān al-Inṣā’* as the second man in Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s administration, second to al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (d. 596/1194), the first administrator in Bilād al-Shām.<sup>13</sup> During this period, ‘Imād al-Dīn became identified with Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s political and military policies. He became a spokesman for Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in his poetry, letters, and books, most of which were written in this period.<sup>14</sup> After Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s death, when conflict broke out among his sons, ‘Imād al-Dīn was removed from his administrative positions, and he dedicated most of his time to teaching in Damascus and writing historical works until his death in 597/1201.<sup>15</sup> ‘Imād al-Dīn wrote a number of books that were of fundamental importance for all Arab and Muslim historians concerned with the history of the sixth/twelfth century. The most important ones were *al-Barq al-Shāmī*, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr*, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, *al-Fatḥ al-qussī*, *Kitāb ‘Utabi al-zamān*, and the collections of his letters and poetry.<sup>16</sup>

### The Atabek Zangī and ‘Imād Al-Dīn’s View of Him

‘Imād al-Dīn Zangī ibn Qasīm al-Dawlah Āq Sunqur was born and brought up in Aleppo. His father served as a military commander under Sultan Malik Shāh. After Sultan Malik Shāh captured Aleppo from Tāj al-Dawlah

10 al-Bundārī, *Sanā al-barq al-Shāmī*, 16-17, 21.

11 al-Bundārī, *Sanā al-barq al-Shāmī*, 21.

12 Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*, VI, 2624.

13 Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*, VI, 2624; al-Bundārī, *Sanā al-barq al-Shāmī*, 84, 90; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafiyāt al-a’yān*, V, 149.

14 Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*, VI, 2626; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafiyāt al-a’yān*, V, 149.

15 Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*, VI, 2626; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafiyāt al-a’yān*, V, 152; Abū Shamah, *al-Rawḍatayn*, IV, 419.

16 Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-udabā’*, VI, 2627.

Tutuş in 480/1087, he appointed Āq Sunqur as governor of the city. Zangī received the title "Atabek" for his role in educating the Seljuk sultan Maḥmūd's two sons in Mosul. He played a prominent role as one of the leading figures of the Seljuk state from 516/1122 onward and served as assistant to Āq Sunqur al-Bursuqī (d. 520/1126), who was in charge of the police in Baghdad, and later as his deputy in Basra. He then was in charge of Mosul and fought Dubays ibn Şaḍaqaḥ, who was threatening Baghdad with wreckage and destruction, and was able to arrest him. Zangī also ruled Aleppo, Ḥamāh, Ḥims, and Ba'albak, and continued fighting the enemies of the Seljuks, occupying some Kurdish castles. He led the military campaigns against the Crusaders, during which he was noted for bravery, courage and good conduct, and was able to recover numerous major cities from their hands, such as Ma'arat al-Nu'mān, al-Athārib, Sarūj and al-Ruhā (Edessa) until he was killed during the siege of Ja'bir Castle in 541/1146; his body was transported to al-Raqqa and buried there.<sup>17</sup> Many Arab and non-Arab sources recorded his biography and recognized his achievements, commending his policies in all the posts that he occupied. 'Imād al-Dīn, however, contradicted all the others who dealt with his biography. Our study is mainly interested in explaining the reasons behind 'Imād al-Dīn's hostility toward Zangī.

'Imād al-Dīn, as previously mentioned, wrote a number of books that became the basic sources for all subsequent historians of the Seljuks, Zangids, and Ayyubids, and the history of Arabic literature and poetry in the fifth/eleventh and the sixth/twelfth centuries. However, his books that cover limited topics or periods cannot convey his stance towards Zangī. *Al-Barq al-Shāmī* was the longest of his historical books, but only the third and fifth parts, along with a summary by al-Bundārī (d. 643/1245) under the name of *Sanā al-barq al-Shāmī*, are extant. 'Imād al-Dīn wrote about Bilād al-Shām after he arrived there in 562/1167, and so *al-Barq al-Shāmī* does not cover Zangī, who had died twenty years earlier. Likewise, 'Imād al-Dīn's book *al-Faṭḥ al-gussī*, in which he chronicles the history of Şalāḥ al-Dīn from before the Battle of Ḥiṭṭīn until his death (582-589/1186-1193), does not reveal his stance toward Zangī. His books *Utbā al-zamān*, *Khuṭfat al-bāriq* and *Niḥlat al-riḥlah* cover Ayyubid history after Saladin's death and the conflict among his successors. His books *Kharīdat al-Qaṣr* and *Ḍḥayl al-Kharīdah* are also devoted to writers, scholars and poets of the Islamic world, and so it was difficult for 'Imād al-Dīn to show his stance toward Zangī, because the Shām poets and men of letters admired Zangī and his

17 Heidemann, "Zangī", II, 451-452; Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab*, VIII, 404-421; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Tārīkh al-bāhir*, 15-84; Ibn al-Qalānisi, *Ḍḥayl tāriḫ Dimashq*, 284-288; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, XVIII, 51.

successor Nūr al-Dīn and praised the efforts of both of them in fighting the Crusaders, and politically unifying Bilād al-Shām.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, ‘Imād al-Dīn’s stance toward Zangī can only be found in his book *Nuṣrat al-fatrah wa-‘Uṣrat al-fiṭrah*, which is devoted to the history of the Seljuks from their rise until the fall of their state in Iraq and Persia. Al-Iṣfahānī composed this work in 579/1183,<sup>19</sup> and it was natural for him to address the figure of Zangī in it, since Zangī had served as atabek for the Seljuqs in Mosul and Aleppo.

Those who have studied *Nuṣrat al-fatrah wa-‘Uṣrat al-fiṭrah* have relied on al-Bundārī’s abridgement *Zubdat al-Nuṣrah wa-nukhbat al-‘uṣrah*.<sup>20</sup> Among those are Carole Hillenbrand in her study on the Crusades,<sup>21</sup> Henri Massé in his article about ‘Imād al-Dīn,<sup>22</sup> Bernard Lewis in his work on the Assassins,<sup>23</sup> and Lutz Richter-Bernburg in his works on ‘Imād al-Dīn.<sup>24</sup> The latter has been among the most prominent European scholars to study ‘Imād al-Dīn and edited part of his work *al-Barq al-Shamī*, which documents the year 573/1177. However, unlike the full text of *Nuṣrat al-fatrah* upon which the current study draws, Bundārī’s abridgement represents around half of the original text and thus does not clearly show ‘Imād al-Dīn’s attitudes towards those who conspired to kill his uncle al-‘Azīz. Therefore, the current study responds to a question raised by Richter-Bernburg over two decades ago on the effect of the murder of al-‘Azīz on the then seven-year-old ‘Imād al-Dīn.<sup>25</sup> In sum, the above-mentioned studies have little to offer regarding ‘Imād al-Dīn’s stance toward Zangī, which is the focus of the present study. Moreover, the present study makes use of the original book, recently published in London<sup>26</sup> and not the abridgement.

---

18 Gibb, “Saladin al-Ayyubid”, 71-96; Gibb, “al-Barq al-Shamī: The History of Saladin”, 52, 93-110; Aḥmad, “Some Notes on Arabic Historiography during the Zengid and Ayyubid Periods”, 79-80.

19 al-Iṣfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, I, 72; Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion*, 27, Peacock, “‘Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī’s Nuṣrat al-fatrah”, 88, Massé, ‘Imad Al-Din III, 1157.

20 Peacock, “‘Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī’s Nuṣrat al-fatrah”, 79-85; Cahen, “The Historiography of the Seljuqid period”, 68-72.

21 Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 262.

22 Massé, “‘Imād al-Dīn”, III, 1157-1158.

23 Lewis, *The Assassins: A radical Sect in Islam*, 68.

24 See for example: Richter-Bernburg, *Der syrische Blitz*; Richter-Bernburg, *Funken aus dem kalten Flint*.

25 Richter-Bernburg, *Der syrische Blitz*, 32; Richter-Bernburg, *Funken aus dem kalten Flint*, 126.

26 Edited by ‘Issām Oqleh, London: Mu’assasat al-Furqān lil-turāth al-Islāmī, 2019.

'Imād al-Dīn recorded his stance toward Zangī in *Nuṣrat al-fatrah* on three occasions: first, his stance toward the Abbasid caliph, al-Rāshid (529-530/1135-1136),<sup>27</sup> second, when he was accused of killing the Seljuk Dāwūd ibn Maḥmūd in 538/1143,<sup>28</sup> and third, in his speech about Zangī's death.<sup>29</sup> The image he drew can be summarized as follows. First, Zangī was allied with the Nizāri Ismā'ilis (Assassins), who killed Dāwūd, the son of Sultan Maḥmūd II, for him. Zangī feared that Dāwūd would come with an appointment from Sultan Maḥmūd II's younger brother and successor, Sultan Mas'ūd ibn Muḥammad (527-547/1133-1152), to rule in Mosul and al-Shām. Second, in his general description of Zangī at his death, 'Imād al-Dīn wrote that he was a haughty man, a tyrant, distinguished for intense violence, who did not recognize the good and did not come with anything good, oppressed his people and did not aid them during his rule in Aleppo and Mosul. But all these bad traits and deeds were made good by his conquest of the city of al-Ruhā (Edessa). By doing that, 'Imād al-Dīn was attempting to strike a blow against the legitimacy of the Zengids, attacking in particular the personality of the founder of the Zengid state. The states in the Islamic east based their legitimacy to rule on establishing justice, supporting their subjects and building a strong state and opposing the Crusader enemies of the Muslims. 'Imād al-Dīn also threatened that if Zangī were angry with his commanders, he would kill them, castrate their sons, and then enslave them and make them his private guard. They belonged to numerous groups of Turks, Armenians, and Rūm, and they hated him, so when they had an opportunity, they killed him in his bed.

This is a summary of the rather dark image that 'Imād al-Dīn attempted to draw of Zangī in *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*. If we compare this view with that found in 'Imād al-Dīn's last book *Kharīdat al-qaṣr*, the only one to mention Zangī a few times in a general form, 'Imād al-Dīn reconfirms his hostile position and attempts to minimize Zangī's status. The former does not describe Zangī as the contemporary and later historians did, referring to him with the honorific title of "martyr," which the majority of kings, sultans, and rulers wished to bear. Indeed, 'Imād al-Dīn does not glorify Zangī with honorific titles or note poems that praise Zangī from his biography, with the exception of some verses that mention his conquest of al-Rahā.<sup>30</sup> All of this strengthens his negative portrait. Nevertheless, numerous aspects need to be clarified to understand 'Imād al-Dīn's view of Zangī. It is necessary to clarify whether these charges align with the image of Zangī presented

27 al-Isfahāni, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, II, 208.

28 al-Isfahāni, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, II, 248.

29 al-Isfahāni, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, II, 269-287.

30 al-Isfahāni, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr* (*Qism al-'Irāq*) II, 267, III, 2, (*Qism al-Shām*) I, 35, 130, 329, III, 102, 108, 128, 158.

in other contemporary sources. Additionally, it must be emphasized that ‘Imād al-Dīn himself was not a contemporary of Zangī. He only entered Bilād al-Shām in 562/1167 and Mosul in 542/1147, well after Zangī’s death in 541/1146.

The first accusation put forth by ‘Imād al-Dīn concerns Zangī’s alleged alliance with the *Nizārī Ismā‘īlī Assassins*, whom he purportedly commissioned to assassinate Dāwūd ibn Maḥmūd. However, ‘Imād al-Dīn stands alone among contemporary sources in making such a claim. Ibn al-Qalānīsī simply recorded that Dāwūd was killed in 538/1143 by three unnamed individuals, whose identities remained unknown—an account that aligns closely with those of his contemporaries al-‘Azīmī (d. 562/1167), al-Fāriqī (d.577/1181), and Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī (d. 622/1225).<sup>31</sup> No other historical authority made reference to this particular accusation except Ibn Abī Ṭayy al-Ḥalabī (d. after 621/1224)<sup>32</sup> and Ibn Shākīr al-Kutubī (d. 764/1363), both of whom clearly derived their accounts from ‘Imād al-Dīn.<sup>33</sup> This highlights the isolated and uncorroborated nature of ‘Imād al-Dīn’s report.

Moreover, ‘Imād al-Dīn’s presentation of this information adopts the stylistic form of *riwāyah* (reported speech), notably through the use of the expression “it was said” (*qīla*), which casts further doubt on the certainty of the account. According to this narrative, Zangī allegedly resolved to eliminate Dāwūd after Sultan Mas‘ūd had resolved to bestow upon him the governorship of Bilād al-Shām. This development, it is claimed, aroused Zangī’s fears regarding the security of his own position, prompting him to plot Dāwūd’s assassination via the *Nizārīs* of Bilād al-Shām.<sup>34</sup> However, contemporary Arabic sources dealing with Zangī’s life and rule do not record any alliance, cooperation, or even favourable contact between Zangī and the *Nizārī Ismā‘īlīs* in that region.

Even within ‘Imād al-Dīn’s own writings, a degree of narrative inconsistency emerges. Prior to levelling this accusation, he had stated that Dāwūd lived as a fugitive after his conflict with his uncle, Sultan Mas‘ūd—a struggle rooted in Dāwūd’s claim to what he perceived as his rightful inheritance, which he believed had been usurped by Mas‘ūd. Following Zangī’s defeat,

31 Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mirāt al-zaman*, XX, 339; al-Fāriqī, *Tārīkh al-Fāriqī*, 13; al-Husaynī, *Zubdat al-tawārīkh*, 313; al-Qalānīsī, *Dhayl Tārīkh Dimashq*, 43; al-‘Azīmī, *Kitāb al-Tārīkh al-‘Azīmī*, 491.

32 See: al-‘Ashmāwī, *Kitābāt Ibn Abi Ṭay’ fi al-maṣādir al-Islāmiyah*, 48-126.

33 Ibn Shakir al-Kutubī, *Uyūn al-tawārīkh*, XII, 277; Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīkh al-duwal wa-al-mulūk*, the National Library, Vienna No. A.F 814.

34 For Nizārīs, see: Daftari, *The Isma‘īlīs Their History and Beliefs*, 607-617; Alrawadieh, “The History of the Baṭaniyyah in Aleppo”, 31-47.

Sultan Mas'ud, still apprehensive about Zangi's ambitions, sought to secure his loyalty by marrying him to one of his daughters. Furthermore, he named Zangi as crown prince and granted him dominion over the region of Tabriz in Ādharbāyjan in an effort to deter him from pressing any future claims to the throne.<sup>35</sup>

It appears that the growing influence of the Emir Khaṣ Ibn Balunkarī (d. 547/1152) over Sultan Mas'ud provoked the ire of the leading military commanders within the Seljuk state. These commanders began threatening the Sultan, intervening in governance, removing ministers, and conspiring to eliminate Emir Khaṣ. Sultan Mas'ud, fearing an insurrection and the possibility that the commanders might exploit the presence of minor royal princes — the sons of previous sultans — as rival claimants to the throne, acquiesced to their demands. In practice, the commanders did indeed attempt to leverage these princes, and it is therefore likely that either Sultan Mas'ud, Emir Khaṣ, or both acted to eliminate Dāwūd, who represented the most significant remaining Seljuk rival. Dāwūd maintained considerable support among the military elite, and both Mas'ud and Emir Khaṣ feared he would seize the opportunity to lay claim to the sultanate.<sup>36</sup>

In light of this, Sultan Mas'ud, wary of Dāwūd's aspirations, was unable to dispatch him to al-Shām as a replacement for Zangi, for doing so would have placed Dāwūd in close proximity to 'Irāq. This would have allowed him to gain the support of the caliph and other leading Seljuk dignitaries, thereby strengthening his claim to power. Consequently, the assertion of 'Imād al-Dīn that Zangi was involved in a conspiracy to eliminate Dāwūd appears unfounded. Furthermore, the extant sources make no mention of any alliance between Zangi and the *Nizāris* of Bilād al-Shām, which would have facilitated the orchestration of such an assassination.

Zangi's previous alliance with Dāwūd against Sultan Mas'ud in 530/1135—during which Zangi had advocated for Dāwūd to assume the sultanate in place of Mas'ud—was eventually abandoned. This withdrawal likely stemmed from the increasing strength of Mas'ud and the waning influence of both Dāwūd and the caliph al-Rashīd. Despite this, Zangi maintained cordial relations with Dāwūd.<sup>37</sup> This fact casts serious doubt on Zangi's purported involvement in Dāwūd's murder, particularly since Zangi

35 al-Isfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-fatra*, II, 248. See: Issam Okleh -Nadjib Benkheira, "The Saljuq al-Malik Dā'ud ibn Maḥmūd ibn Muḥammad", 147-151.

36 al-Isfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-fatra*, II, 248.

37 al-Isfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-fatra*, II, 201. For the relationship between Zangi and Dāwūd, see Belotto, *Power and Legitimacy in the Medieval Muslim World*. Interestingly, however, the study does not refer to 'Imād al-Dīn al-Isfahānī nor uses any of his works. The study also does not refer to the accusation against Zangi.

himself distrusted Sultan Mas'ūd and therefore preserved his connections with Seljuk princes and military commanders as a strategic counterweight.<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that 'Imād al-Dīn was neither present in Tabriz, where Dāwūd was killed, nor residing within Zangī's domain in a position to reliably transmit such a report. He was thus neither an eyewitness nor did he cite any identifiable source. The account, therefore, remains unsupported, stemming from an anonymous origin and contradicted by more credible testimonies which favour an alternative narrative.

This account was transmitted through two later historians: Ibn Abī Ṭayy and Ibn Shākīr al-Kutubī. The former, a well-known Shi'ite historian, was notably hostile to the Zangid dynasty, owing to their severe treatment of Shi'ites, especially in Aleppo, which Zangī governed for two decades and which later passed to his son Nūr al-Dīn. Ibn Abī Ṭayy's father was himself a prominent Shi'ite figure, exiled from Aleppo by Nūr al-Dīn ibn Zangī.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, Ibn Abī Ṭayy compiled numerous accounts hostile to the Zangids in his works, contributing to the negative portrayal of their legacy.<sup>40</sup> As for Ibn Shākīr al-Kutubī, he was a copyist and bookseller who compiled his works from earlier sources, including al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) and Ibn Kathīr (d.774/1372).<sup>41</sup> However, his transmission of 'Imād al-Dīn's report appears to have been uncritical and imprecise.

In fact, Bernard Lewis refutes the accusation against Zangī, noting that “it is certainly curious that a murder in North Western Persia should have been arranged from Syria and not from nearby Alamut”.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Peacock, reporting the murder, does not attribute it to the Assassins supported by Zangī.<sup>43</sup> While Lewis does not back his view with any written source, Peacock had only access to al-Bundārī's abridgement and not al-Iṣfahānī's original book *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*.

The second charge advanced by 'Imād al-Dīn was that Zangī was a tyrannical ruler (*jabbār*) — an accusation frequently repeated in his writings and presented as a defining characteristic. This depiction appears

38 Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Tārīkh al-bāhīr*, 65.

39 Abū Shamah, *al-Rawḍatayn*, II, 77, Khaṣṣat, “The Ṣīte rebellions in Aleppo”, 181-182; Alrawadieh - Okleh, “Shi'ites in Aleppo during the Seljuq, Zangid and Ayyūbid Periods”, (479-658 AH/1086-1260 CE)”, *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, 14/3 (2021). 165-166.

40 For Ibn Abī Ṭayy, see: al-'Ashmāwī, *Kitābāt Ibn Abī Ṭayy fī al-maṣādir al-Islāmīyah*, 36-40.

41 For an evaluation of the writings of Ibn Shākīr al-Kutubī and their level, see: Rosenthal, “al-Kutubī”, V, 570-571.

42 Lewis, *The Assassins: A radical Sect in Islam*, 68.

43 Peacock, “'Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī's Nuṣrat al-fatrah”, 78.

to have been deliberately utilised to reinforce the claim that Zangī ruled unjustly and committed acts of aggression against the populations under his control. However, such claims find no support in other contemporary or near-contemporary sources.

A closer textual analysis of *Nuṣrat al-fatrah* reveals that 'Imād al-Dīn's characterisation of Zangī departs significantly in tone, method, and narrative focus from the rest of the work. Notably, he devotes an entire chapter to Zangī, in a manner not paralleled in his treatment of any other *atabek*. Furthermore, 'Imād al-Dīn states that he began writing the work in 579/1183 — the very year in which Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī captured Aleppo and initiated his campaign against Mosul, seeking to dismantle the Zangid state. It is within this political and ideological context that 'Imād al-Dīn's portrayal must be situated, particularly given that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn launched a broad propaganda campaign aimed at justifying his actions and securing both popular and Abbasid support.

Significantly, 'Imād al-Dīn employed especially severe and polemical language in describing Zangī—language typically reserved in Islamic historiography for non-Muslim rulers or Muslim leaders deemed to have violated Islamic norms. The term *jabbār*, from the root *j-b-r*, signifies a tyrannical ruler whose oppressive nature provokes rebellion, as in the Qur'ānic depiction of Pharaoh.<sup>44</sup> When applied by 'Imād al-Dīn to Zangī, it served less as description than as ideological condemnation. He also referred to Zangī as *qaysarī al-kibr*, likening him to arrogant Roman emperors, whose haughtiness is censured in Islamic tradition. Additionally, 'Imād al-Dīn portrayed Zangī as one who transgressed established custom, denied the normative social order, and exhibited excessive pride — features he associated with tyrannical rule.<sup>45</sup> Through these characterizations and others, he crafted a portrait of Zangī that stood in stark contrast to how the latter was perceived by his contemporaries — a perception that will be discussed in detail below.

By contrast, Ibn al-Qalānisī al-Dimashqī (d. 555/1160), who lived during Zangī's lifetime and served under the Damascene regime (which was politically opposed to Zangī), describes the aftermath of his death as a time

44 For different uses of the word *jabbār* in the Qur'ān, see: Q. 11:59, where it denotes the oppressive pride of 'Ād; Q. 14:15, referring to those who act arrogantly and unjustly; Q. 26:130, describing tyrannical builders among Pharaoh's people; and Q. 40:35, highlighting those who dispute God's signs with arrogance. In each instance, *jabbār* conveys an image of defiance, coercion, and illegitimate authority, invariably linked to divine condemnation. McAuliffe (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, I: 160<sup>a</sup>, 161<sup>a</sup>; II: 320<sup>b</sup>, 432<sup>b</sup>, 484<sup>b</sup>, 541<sup>b</sup>; III: 504<sup>b</sup>; IV: 137<sup>b</sup>, 264<sup>a</sup>, 264<sup>b</sup>; V: 455<sup>b</sup>.

45 al-Isfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, II, 271-272.

of instability, and composes verse praising Zangī's wisdom and confirming his justice.<sup>46</sup> Though recognizing his severity and strict enforcement of law, Ibn al-Qalānisī acknowledged that this discipline had led to flourishing economic conditions and improved public security.

Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/ 1175), another eminent Damascene historian, similarly referred to Zangī as "magnanimous and strict," a description implying firm but just governance, particularly in his attention to public order and the protection of his subjects.<sup>47</sup> Al-'Aẓīmī, historian of Aleppo and a direct contemporary of Zangī, offered no suggestion of injustice or oppression by Zangī in either his *Tārīkh Ḥalab*<sup>48</sup> or the preserved fragments of his larger chronicle, cited in Ibn al-'Adīm's (d. 660/1262) *Bughyat al-ṭalab*.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, al-Fāriqī (d.577/1181), another contemporary source, does not report any acts of oppression by Zangī toward his subjects.<sup>50</sup>

The distinguished Aleppine historian Ibn al-'Adīm characterizes Zangī as "a great, brave, and tyrannical king, possessed of glory and pride, yet observant of the *shari'ah* and honouring scholars."<sup>51</sup> He adds that Zangī rehabilitated devastated lands, eliminated corruption, abolished unjust levies and fines, and enforced the rule of law. However, he later explains that some rural inhabitants of Aleppo had complained of Zangī's severity, specifically his conscription of peasant men into military service during times of siege. Yet Ibn al-'Adīm justified this action within the framework of *jihād*, especially in the face of overwhelming Crusader threats, and thus saw it as sanctioned by Islamic law.<sup>52</sup>

Taken together, these sources present a unified picture that diverges sharply from 'Imād al-Dīn's portrayal. None of Zangī's Muslim contemporaries echoed 'Imād al-Dīn's severe allegations.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, his claims contradict

46 Heidemann, "Zangī", II, 451-452; al-Qalānisī, *Dhayl tārikh Dimashq*, 446-449.

47 Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, XIX, 85.

48 al-'Azīmī, *Tārīkh Ḥalab*.

49 Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab*, VIII, 407-410.

50 al-Fāriqī, *Tārīkh al-Fāriqī*.

51 Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab*, VIII, 406.

52 Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab*, VIII, 414.

53 Hillenbrand quoted two historical sources when discussing Zangī's control over the city of Edessa, one of them by Ibn al-Athir, and the other by 'Imād al-Dīn. These two sources overall praise Zangī as a brave fighter and a commander against the Crusaders. Hillenbrand argued that this was the image of Zangī in the Arabic sources (as also highlighted in our study). While this conclusion derives from Hillenbrand's reference to al-Bundārī's abridgement *Zubdat al-nuṣrah*, it is curious to find that 'Imād al-Dīn insults Zangī and describes him with the worst descriptions, but he redresses that by saying that his conquest of the city of Edessa and his death as a

reports that the people of Aleppo, under threat from a severe Crusader siege, had themselves sought Zangi's assistance, sending a delegation to Mosul to request his aid. Zangi responded by defeating the besieging Franks, taking control of Aleppo, and restoring order.<sup>54</sup>

Even the Latin chronicler William of Tyre (d. 582/1186), a contemporary Crusader, noted only Zangi's severity and hatred toward the Crusaders; not any injustice toward his Muslim subjects.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Syriac Christian sources portray Zangi as a powerful and experienced military commander, lauding his leadership without attributing acts of tyranny or oppression to his rule. They emphasize his fair treatment of the population of al-Ruhā (Edessa) following its conquest, his efforts to repair damage, promote agriculture (including the introduction of new grape varieties), and expand trade. These sources also characterize him as ascetic, harsh with criminals, yet equitable irrespective of ethnicity or faith.<sup>56</sup>

The renowned historian Ibn al-Athir (d. 630/1233), closely associated with the Zangid dynasty, extolled Zangi's virtues. Drawing on his father's firsthand experience in Mosul and al-Jazirah, Ibn al-Athir praised Zangi's statecraft, noting how he restored devastated regions, imposed justice, promoted agriculture and commerce, and ensured the security of the weak against the strong. He cited examples of Zangi's firm treatment of military commanders who acted unjustly and his consistent severity toward wrongdoers.<sup>57</sup> While Ibn al-Athir's account may be biased in favour of the Zangids, it remains largely consistent with other contemporary sources, and stands in marked opposition to the bleak portrayal crafted by 'Imad al-Din.<sup>58</sup> The latter's perspective, shaped by his personal loyalty to al-'Aziz, appears as politically motivated as Ibn al-Athir's allegiance to the Zangids.<sup>59</sup>

---

martyr is perhaps the only good thing in his life! See: Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, 112-113 and al-Isfahāni, *Nuṣrat al-fatra*, II, 271-272.

54 Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, V, 2079; Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat al-ṭalab*, IV, 553-558, VII, 630; Ibn al-'Adīm, *Zubdat al-Ḥalab*, I, 421; Ibn al-Athir, *al-Tāriḫ al-bāhir*, 34; al-Dhahabī, *Tāriḫ al-Islām* XI, 314, and see also: Alrawadieḥ, - Okleh, "Shi'ites in Aleppo during the Seljuq, Zangid and Ayyūbid Periods", 165-166, 168.

55 Wilyam al-Ṣūrī (William of Tyre), *al-A'māl al-Munjazah*, III, 242.

56 Mikhā'il al-Siryānī (Michael the Syrian). *Tāriḫ Mār Mikhā'il al-Kabir*, III, 242; al-Ruhāwī al-Majhūl, *Tāriḫ al-Ruhāwī al-Majhūl*, II, 144-154; Ibn al-'Ibrī, *Tāriḫ al-zamān*, 160.

57 Heidemann, "Zangi", XI, 451-452; Ibn al-Athir, *al-Tāriḫ al-bāhir*, 76-84; Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kāmil fī al-tāriḫ*, XI, 110-112.

58 Abū Hudhūd, *Ibn al-Athir wa-Dawruhu*, 404-418.

59 Richter-Bernburg, "'Imad al-Din al-Isfahāni", al-Isfahāni, *Nuṣrat al-fatra*, II, 286-287.

Interestingly, ‘Imād al-Dīn, in his *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, relates that the vizier Jamāl al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d. 559/1164) displayed no outward signs of wealth during Zangī’s rule and contributed generously only after Zangī’s death, when his sons inherited power.<sup>60</sup> This anecdote, likely unintended as praise, demonstrates Zangī’s vigilance in safeguarding state finances and his control over public officials, deterring embezzlement or misappropriation of state funds.

Modern economic analysis by Henry Khayyāt, comparing inflation rates and commodity prices in Aleppo during Zangī’s reign, has further shown that the city experienced notable commercial and economic growth.<sup>61</sup>

The broader context of ‘Imād al-Dīn’s account becomes more intelligible when situated within Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī’s campaign between 570–581 / 1174–1185 to displace the Zangids in Syria and Mosul. This campaign, aimed at legitimising Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s claim to Zangid lands, mobilised all those who had grievances against Zangid rule. Among these was Ibn Abī Ṭayy, who vilified the Zangids even more vigorously than ‘Imād al-Dīn, albeit for different reasons. Yet both narratives stand in contrast to other contemporary and later historical sources, which cast doubt on the objectivity and veracity of ‘Imād al-Dīn’s account and raise questions about the political and personal motives underlying his singularly negative depiction of Zangī and his legacy.

The third accusation leveled by ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī against Zangī is that whenever he became irritated with one of his military commanders, he would execute them, enslave and castrate their children, and assign the latter as his personal guards and servants. According to al-Iṣfahānī, these commanders were of various ethnic backgrounds, including Turks, Armenians, and Rūm. However, this claim is entirely unsupported by any other contemporary or later Islamic historical sources. None of the Arab-Islamic historians who documented Zangī’s life and rule, whether contemporaries or later writers, repeat such an account. ‘Imād al-Dīn was not a contemporary of Zangī; he entered Bilād al-Shām in 562/1167 and Mosul in 542/1147, after Zangī’s death in 541/1146. As mentioned above, As noted above, ‘Imād al-Dīn himself was not a contemporary of Zangī. Moreover, he fails to cite any source for this account, just as he does for his previous two accusations, casting serious doubt on the credibility of his narrative.

60 al-Iṣfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, II, 286-287.

61 Khayat, “The Šite rebellions in Aleppo”, 175-176, Alrawadieh, - Okleh. “Ši’ites in Aleppo during the Seljuq, Zangid and Ayyūbid Periods”, 165.

From a historical and logistical standpoint, the claim also lacks plausibility. If Zangī truly sought slaves for his guard, why would he risk alienating his commanders and provoking discontent by enslaving their children, especially when the Islamic markets of the period abounded with slaves available for legal purchase? Additionally, the claim that Zangī's elite guard consisted of enslaved sons of Turkish, Armenian, or Rūm commanders finds no corroboration in contemporary accounts, which do not mention such an ethnically diverse or internally targeted group within his military hierarchy. Even those historians known for their criticism of Zangī—such as Ibn Khallikān and Abū Shāmāh (d. 665/1267)—never repeat this allegation,<sup>62</sup> despite their familiarity with 'Imād al-Dīn's *Nuṣrat al-fatrah* and their use of it in other contexts. This silence suggests that they did not find the account credible and deliberately chose to disregard it, further highlighting its dubious origin.

It is especially telling that Abū Shāmāh, a well-respected historian who was geographically and temporally closer to the Zangid period, quoted from *Nuṣrat al-fatrah* in his *al-Rawḍatayn fī akhbār al-dawlatayn al-nūriyyah wa-al-ṣalāḥiyyah*, yet refrained from citing or engaging with any of 'Imād al-Dīn's derogatory remarks about Zangī. Instead, he selected passages related to the latter's campaigns and achievements, particularly the liberation of al-Ruhā, and omitted any mention of the alleged cruelty.<sup>63</sup> This silence, rather than mere oversight, likely reflects a conscious decision not to propagate unsubstantiated or slanderous material. Given Abū Shāmāh's otherwise balanced tone and lack of overt bias, it seems he deemed it more prudent to ignore such claims than to give them visibility by refuting them directly.

In this respect, 'Imād al-Dīn's method can be better understood not as a deviation from the historiographical norms of his era, but as part of a broader tradition of blending literary expression with historical narrative, especially when directed by political alignment, personal experience, or institutional patronage. His depiction of Zangī, marked by strong emotional language and morally charged vocabulary, should thus be viewed within the continuum of Islamic historiography, where history was often not merely a record of facts, but also a commentary shaped by the historian's values and affiliations.

It becomes apparent that *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, though formally a historical chronicle, also functions as a vehicle for rhetorical and political engagement. The use of embellished language, personal judgments, and

62 Ibn Khallikān, *Wafiyāt al-'ayān* II, 327-329; and note his taking it from the book *Nuṣrat al-fatrah* II, 189, IV, 67; Abū Shāmāh, *al-Rawḍatayn*, I, 164.

63 Abū Shāmāh, *al-Rawḍatayn*, I, 164.

selective sourcing places it closer to the genre of *adab*-informed historical writing than to strictly empirical annalistic traditions.<sup>64</sup> His admiration for Şalâh al-Dîn and hostility towards the Zangids appear to guide not only the content of his reports, but also the tone and structure of his narrative.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, the selective reception of his works by later historians, such as Abû Shâmah, who accepted some elements while consciously omitting others, highlights the contested value of his reports.<sup>66</sup> It also illustrates the evolution of critical historical methodology in later Islamic historiography. Rather than accepting earlier texts wholesale, scholars like Abû Shâmah engaged with them critically, recognising the need to filter literary embellishment from factual substance.

This pattern of personal critique and polemical tone, therefore, has deep roots in Arabic historiographical and literary traditions.<sup>67</sup> What distinguishes 'Imâd al-Dîn is not the invention of such a style, but his sophisticated appropriation of it to serve his political and ideological objectives.

By incorporating and translating texts such as *Nafthat al-maşdûr* into *Nuşrat al-fatrah*, 'Imâd al-Dîn reinforced a literary-historical framework already predisposed to moral judgement and character assassination. His selection and adaptation of Anûsharwân's vitriolic portrayals of Saljûq officials suggests a conscious effort to align with and perpetuate a genre that blurred the line between historiography and invective.<sup>68</sup> This further underscores the interpretative challenge his writings pose: while they contain valuable data, they must be subjected to rigorous source criticism and contextual analysis.

The case of Ibn al-Athîr, who responded to Şalâh al-Dîn with his own critique driven by Zangid loyalties, exemplifies the extent to which political and dynastic allegiance shaped historical narratives in the period. Thus, the hostility expressed in 'Imâd al-Dîn's account of Zangî should not be isolated as an anomaly, but rather seen as part of a contested historiographical landscape in which authors positioned themselves as ideological partisans within broader power struggles.

In sum, 'Imâd al-Dîn's portrayal of Zangî is not to be dismissed outright, but must be read as a product of its author's milieu, shaped by literary

---

64 Richter-Bernburg, *Der syrische Blitz*, 9-16.

65 Gibb, "al-Barq al-Shamî: The History of Saladin", 97-98, 102.

66 Abû Shamah, *al-Rawđatayn*, I, 30-31.

67 Abû Ḥayyân al-Tawḥîdî, *Akhlaq al-wazîrayn*.

68 See: al-Işfahâni, *Nuşrat al-fatrah*, (Editor's introduction) I, 34-66, Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion*, 27; Lambton, "Anûshirwân b. Khalîd", I, 522-523.

tradition, ideological inclination, and personal allegiance. The task of the modern historian is to unpack these layers carefully, distinguishing between historical core and rhetorical flourish, and situating each within its appropriate cultural and intellectual context.<sup>69</sup>

## **Memory, Loyalty, and Political Alignment: Personal Trauma and Dynastic Legitimacy in 'Imād al-Dīn's Portrayal of Zangī**

### **1. 'Imād al-Dīn's Hostility Toward the Adversaries of His Uncle al-'Azīz**

This praise of Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb and Asad al-Dīn Shirkūh, figures foundational to the Ayyūbid dynasty, may also signal 'Imād al-Dīn's strategic alignment with the emerging Ayyūbid political order. His literary and administrative career flourished under Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbi, and he may have sought to reinforce the moral legitimacy of his patrons by affirming their loyalty to justice and honour during the earlier Seljuk period.<sup>70</sup> In doing so, he contrasted their virtue with the betrayal and corruption he associated with the figures responsible for the demise of al-'Azīz.<sup>71</sup>

This dichotomy permeates *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, and helps to explain the deeply personalised, emotive, and morally charged tone that characterises 'Imād al-Dīn's narrative of Zangī. His condemnation was not driven by impartial historical analysis, but by inherited grievance, familial loyalty, and political alignment. In this context, his work may be viewed as both a vindication of the victims of Seljuk political purges—especially his uncle—and a rhetorical condemnation of those he perceived as complicit in their downfall.<sup>72</sup>

---

69 Most studies about the history of feelings concentrate on the emotions connected with practice, such as religion, love and sex. Those who carry out such studies are usually sociologists and anthropologists and there are institutions specialized in research on the history of emotions. In the case of 'Imād al-Dīn, it is possible to consider him as an example the feelings of hate connected with revenge that accompanied him for a long period of his life until he found the appropriate available space to express his hostility. For more about the study of emotions and desires see the articles: Plamper, "The History of Emotions", 237-265. This article presents the ideas of three researchers about the study of the history of feelings. and also the article: Scheer, Are Emotions a Kind of Practice, 193-220. In each of the two articles are references to a number of studies related to the topic.

70 al-İşfahāni, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr* (2000) X, 15; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafiyāt al-a'yān*, I, 189.

71 Richter-Bernburg, "Imād al-Dīn al-İşfahāni", 30.

72 al-İşfahāni, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, II, 15; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzi, *Mirāt al-zaman*, XX, 335; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafiyāt al-a'yān*, V, 141-142; Ibn al-Jawzi, *al-Muntaẓam*, VIII, 18; Ibn

Thus, the construction of Zangī's negative image emerges not merely from a dispassionate historiographical enterprise, but from a complex intersection of personal trauma, dynastic rivalry, and ideological affiliation.<sup>73</sup> It underscores how *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*—far from being a neutral chronicle—should be read as a literary act of remembrance and retribution, one that simultaneously records and reshapes historical memory in favour of its author's lineage and loyalties.

## 2. 'Imād Al-Dīn's Adoption of the Narrative of the Victors

The second reason that likely influenced 'Imād al-Dīn's depiction of Zangī lies in a broader historiographical trend: the adoption of the perspective of the dominant political faction. In medieval Islamic historiography, especially that composed within courtly environments, authors often aligned their narratives with the views and interests of those in power.<sup>74</sup> 'Imād al-Dīn's loyalty to the victorious faction within the Zangid polity — represented by figures such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī and the Ayyūbid household — meant that his historical construction naturally reflected their interpretation of events.

By vilifying the figures of the opposing (and defeated) alliance, and by extension their primary patron, Zangī himself, 'Imād al-Dīn not only fulfilled a political obligation but also contributed to shaping a new collective memory, one that justified the ascendancy of the Ayyūbid state. This method of writing, in which the vanquished are erased or disparaged and the victors glorified, is consistent with the practice of *tārīkh al-mansūbīn*, or the “history of the affiliated,” where political allegiance and factional loyalty colour the representation of past events.

'Imād al-Dīn's selective praise and omission of key actors from the earlier Zangid alliance, particularly those like Sayf al-Dīn Siwār and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Yāghhisīyānī,<sup>75</sup> underscore his historiographical alignment.<sup>76</sup> His focus on personalities such as Jamāl al-Dīn and Shirkūh, accompanied by hyperbolic praise, appears to be more than a literary flourish. Rather, it constitutes a form of narrative recompense to those who had triumphed politically and materially.<sup>77</sup>

---

al-Dubaythī, *Dhayl Tārīkh Baghdād*, III, 26; for Anushirwan's narration: Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh*, XI, 106; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Tārīkh al-bāhīr*, 24.

73 al-Iṣfahānī, *Kharīdat al-qasr* (2000) I, 8, XVI, 291.

74 Okleh, “Emir Sewar Bracelet”, 687-691.

75 al-Iṣfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, II, 275-282; Okleh, “Emir Sewar Bracelet”, 692-693.

76 See about this conflict: al-Iṣfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, II, 278, 278, 284, 287; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Tārīkh al-bāhīr*, 84, 72.

77 al-Iṣfahānī, *Nuṣrat al-Fatrah*, II, 278, 282-284, 285-287.

### 3. 'Imād Al-Dīn and Ayyubid Propaganda against Zangī

As mentioned earlier, 'Imād al-Dīn was among the civilian elites in the Ayyubid administration who served as a principal agent of Ayyubid propaganda during their contestation of Zangid legitimacy. This role is clearly reflected in his official correspondence and poetic compositions, in which he articulated and defended the Ayyubid cause against their political rivals.

The Ayyubid state emerged from the remnants of the Zangid polity and, beginning in 570/1175, was engaged in protracted, at times violent, conflict with the heirs of Nūr al-Dīn in Aleppo and Mosul—a struggle that persisted until 581/1185.<sup>78</sup> This intra-Muslim conflict extended beyond the battlefield into the realm of ideological and political discourse, in which the Ayyubid leadership—headed by Şalāḥ al-Dīn—sought to dismantle the residual legitimacy of the Zangids, especially their claim over Bilād al-Shām. Within this context, 'Imād al-Dīn's writings formed part of a discursive strategy to undermine the memory of Zangī and elevate the Ayyubid narrative.

Şalāḥ al-Dīn, in particular, aimed to reinterpret the legacy of Nūr al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Zangī by attributing his military successes against the Crusaders to his own family—namely his father, his uncle Asad al-Dīn Şirkūh, and himself. In official correspondence with the Abbasid caliph, Şalāḥ al-Dīn argued for the legitimacy of his rule over Syria by claiming that it was his kin who had realised the victories formerly credited to Nūr al-Dīn.<sup>79</sup> In such a framework, vilifying Zangī became an effective tool of delegitimisation—discrediting not just his rule but the entire foundation of the Zangid legacy.

'Imād al-Dīn's *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, composed in 579/1183 at the height of this conflict, fits seamlessly into this broader campaign. Rather than being an impartial historical account, it functions as a sophisticated textual instrument of Ayyubid statecraft. Through selective memory, literary embellishment, and the suppression of favourable narratives surrounding Zangī, the work contributed to a rewriting of history that favoured the political interests of Şalāḥ al-Dīn and his court. This antagonistic portrayal was neither incidental nor merely personal, but deliberately crafted to serve the Ayyubid narrative strategy, which sought to minimize Zangī's legacy and reassign the honor of resisting the Crusaders to the Ayyubid line.

78 About the conflict see: al-Bundārī, *Sanā al-barq al-Shāmi*, 26; Telfah, "The Abbasid caliphate Recognition of the Ayyubid State", 44-69; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Tārīkh al-bāhīr*, XI, 427, 516. and see about the negative propaganda of the Ayyubids against the Zangids: Köhler, *Alliances and Treaties between Frankish and Muslim Rulers*, 239-244.

79 The text of Saladin's letter to the Abbasid caliphate is reported in al-Qalqashandī, *Şubḥ al-a'shā*, X, 82-83.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that ‘Imād al-Dīn’s portrayal of Zangī, ruler of Mosul and Aleppo, is markedly singular, diverging from the narratives preserved in other contemporary and near-contemporary sources. In *Nuṣrat al-fatrah*, ‘Imād al-Dīn crafted a uniquely negative image of Zangī—an image unsupported by the historical accounts of Zangī’s time. Unlike his brief references to other emirs of Mosul, Zangī is the only figure to receive an extensive and sharply critical treatment. This exceptional focus raises questions about the motivations behind such a portrayal, particularly given the absence of cited sources and the author’s non-contemporaneity with the events described.

The analysis suggests that ‘Imād al-Dīn’s antagonism was not rooted in dispassionate historical inquiry but in a nexus of personal grievance, family tragedy—especially the execution of his uncle al-‘Azīz—and political alignment with Ayyubid interests. The work reflects an effort to delegitimize Zangī’s legacy during a period of active conflict between the Ayyubids and the Zangid successors, offering a propagandistic narrative rather than a neutral chronicle.

Beyond its specific historical claims, *Nuṣrat al-fatrah* serves as a compelling case study in the role of emotion, memory, and political allegiance in historical writing. The prominence of feeling—whether grief, loyalty, or vengeance—raises broader methodological concerns about the subjective nature of premodern historiography. Historians, including those like Abū Shāmah, often veiled their emotions or alluded to them obliquely, constrained by political circumstances or personal vulnerability. This underscores the need for a critical reading of historical texts, attentive to both what is said and what is silenced. Thus, the study cautions against accepting at face value emotionally charged judgments in historical narratives, however venerable the source may be. ‘Imād al-Dīn’s *Nuṣrat al-Fatrah*, though foundational in the historiography of the Seljuk era, should be approached with careful scrutiny and contextual awareness, not only for what it reveals about its subject matter, but also for what it reflects about its author and his world.

## Bibliography

- Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, 'Alī b. Muḥammad, *Akhlāq al-wazīrayn*, ed. Muḥammad b. Tawīt Altanji, Beirut: Dār Sādir, 1991.
- Abū Hudhūd, Tāriq, *Ibn al-Athīr wa-dawruhu fī al-Kitābāt al-Tārikiyah*, Amman: Dār fiḍā'at, 2009.
- Abū Shamah, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Isma'il, *al-Rawḍatayn fī akhbār al-dawlatayn al-nūriyah wa-al-ṣalāhiyah*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Zeibag, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-risālāh, 1997.
- Aḥmad, Muḥammad Hilmy, "Some Notes on Arabic Historiography during the Zengid and Ayyubid Periods (521/1127-648/1250)" in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. Bernard Lewis - P. M. Holt, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- al-'Ashmāwī, Shīrīn, *Kitābāt Ibn Abi Ṭay' fī al-maṣādir al-Islāmiyah, Dirāsah taḥlīliyah*, Cairo: Maktabat al-thaqāfah al-dīniyah, 2010.
- al-'Azīmī, Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Ḥalabī, *Kitab al-Tārikh al-'azīmī* (al-'Azīmī history book), ed. 'Issām Oqleh, London: Mu'assasat al-Furqān lil-turāth al-Islāmi, 2024.
- al-Bundārī, al-Faṭḥ b. 'Alī, *Sanā al-barq al-Shāmī*, ed. Faṭḥiyah al-Nabrāwī, Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1979.
- al-Dhahabī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. 'Uthmān Shams al-Dīn, *Tārikh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhir wa-al-a'yān*, ed. Bashār 'Awād Ma'rūf, Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-Islāmi, 2003.
- al-Fāriqī, Aḥmad b. Yūsuf, *Tārikh al-Fāriqī*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī, Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'aṣriyah, 2016.
- al-Husaynī, Ṣadr al-Dīn 'Alī b. Nāṣir, *Zubdat al-tawārikh*, ed. Muḥammad Nūr al-Dīn, Beirut: Dār iqrā', 1985.
- al-Iṣfahānī, 'Imād al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad, *Kharīdat al-qaṣr wa-jarīdat al-'aṣr*. ed. 'Adnān Muḥammad al-Tu'meh, Tehran, 2000.
- al-Iṣfahānī, 'Imād al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad, *Kharīdat al-Qaṣr wa-Jarīdat al-'Aṣr*. ed. Muḥammad Bahjat al-Atharī, Baghdad: al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Irāqī, 1959.
- al-Iṣfahānī, 'Imād al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad, *Nuṣrat al-fatra wa-'uṣrat al-ḥāṭir*, ed. 'Issām Oqleh, London: Mu'assasat al-Furqān lil-turāth al-Islāmi, 2019.
- al-Qalqashandī, Aḥmad b. 'Alī b. Aḥmad, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā fī ṣinā'at al-inshā'*, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Khadiwīyah, 1915.
- Alrawadieh, Almahdi, "The History of the Baṭaniyyah in Aleppo and Its Vicinity until the Middle of the Seventh Century AH/ Thirteenth Century AD", *Jordan Journal for History and Archaeology (JJHA)*, 12/3 (2018).
- Alrawadieh, Almahdi - Issam Mustafa Okleh, "Shi'ites in Aleppo during the Seljuq, Zangid and Ayyūbid Periods (479–658 AH/1086–1260 CE)", *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, 14/3 (2021).
- al-Ruhāwī al-Majhūl, *tārikh al-Ruhāwī al-majhūl*, Trans., Albeer Abouna, Baghdad: Maṭba'at Shafiq, 1986.
- Barthold, Wilhelm, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928.
- Belotto, Nicholas, *Power and Legitimacy in the Medieval Muslim World: The Career of Imad al-Din Zengi (1085-1146)*, M.A. Thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 2014.
- Cahen, Claude, "The Historiography of the Seljuqid period", in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. Bernard Lewis - P. M. Holt, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Daftari, Firhad, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Beliefs*, Trans., Sayf al-Dīn Qaṣir, Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2017.
- Gibb, Hamilton, "al-Barq al-Shamī: The History of Saladin by the Kātib 'Imād ad-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 52 (1953).
- Gibb, Hamilton, "Saladin al-Ayyubid", in *Studies on Islamic History*, ed. Yousef Aybashi, Beirut: Dār Bisān, 1996.
- Heidemann, Stefan, "Zangi", *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Leiden, Brill. 2002, II, 451-452.
- Hillenbrand, Carole, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 1999.

- Ibn al-'Adim, Kamāl al-Din b. Aḥmad, *Bughyat al-ṭalab fī tāriḫ Ḥalab*, ed. Almahdi Alrawadieh, London: Mu'assasat al-Furqān lil-turāth al-Islāmi, 2016.
- Ibn al-'Adim, Kamāl al-Din b. Aḥmad, *Zubdat al-Ḥalab min tāriḫ Ḥalab*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār, Damascus and Cairo: Dār al-kitāb al-'Arabī, 1997.
- Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muḥammad al-Jazari, *al-Kāmil fī al-tāriḫ*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1979.
- Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muḥammad al-Jazari, *al-Tāriḫ al-bāhir fī al-dawlah al-Atabakiyah*, ed. 'Abd al-Qādir Ṭulaymāt, Cairo: Dār al-kutub al-ḥadīthah, 1963.
- Ibn al-Dubaythī, Muḥammad b. Sa'īd, *Ḍhayl tāriḫ Baghdād*, ed. Bashār 'Awad Ma'rūf, Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-Islāmi, 2006.
- Ibn al-Furāt, Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Raḥim, *Tāriḫ al-duwal wa-al-mulūk*, Part 2, (manuscript), in the National Library, Vienna, No: A.F814.
- Ibn al-'Ibrī, Abū al-Faraj Ghrīghūras al-Malṭī, *Tāriḫ al-zamān*, Trans., Iṣḥāq Armalah, Beirut: Dār al-shurūq, 1991.
- Ibn al-Jawzī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Ali, *al-Muntaẓam fī tāriḫ al-umam wa-al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā - Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā, Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmīyah, 1992.
- Ibn al-Qalānisi, Ḥamzah b. Asad al-Tamimī, *Ḍhayl tāriḫ Dimashq*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār, Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 1983.
- Ibn 'Asākīr, 'Ali b. al-Ḥasan b. Ḥibbat Allāh, *Tāriḫ Madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Muḥibb al-Din 'Umar b. Gharāmah al-'Umari, Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1996.
- Ibn Khallikān, Shams al-Din Aḥmad b. Muḥammad, *Wafiyāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zaman*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1969.
- Ibn Shakir al-Kutubī, Muḥammad, *Uyūn al-tāwarikh*, ed. Faysal al-Samirra', Baghdad: Dār al-ḥurriyah, 1977.
- Issam Okleh - Nadjib Benkheira, "The Saljuq al-Malik Dā'ūd ibn Maḥmūd ibn Muḥammad and his role in the struggle for the throne of the Saljuq Sultanate (525-538 AH/ 1131-1143 AD)", *Jordan Journal for History and Archeology (JJHA)*, 15/2 (2021).
- Khaṣyat, Henri Michel, "The Ṣite rebellions in Aleppo in the 6<sup>th</sup> A. H./12<sup>th</sup> CE Century", *Rivista degli studi orientali*, 46/3-4, 1971.
- Köhler, Michael, *Alliances and Treaties between Frankish and Muslim Rulers in the Middle East*, Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Lambton, P.K.S., "Anūshirwān b. Khālid", *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Leiden: Brill, 1986, I, 522-523.
- Lewis, Bernard, *The Assassins: A radical Sect in Islam*, Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Massé, Henri, "Imād al-Din", *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Leiden: Brill, 1986, III, 1157-1158.
- McAuliffe, J. D. (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, I-VI, Leiden, Brill, 2001-2006.
- Mikhā'il al-Siryāni (Michael the Syrian), *Tāriḫ Mār Mikha'il al-Kabir*, Trans., Mar Gregoros Ṣalibā Sham'un, Dār Mārdin, Aleppo, 1996.
- Okleh, Issam, "Emir Sewar Bracelt (sic) Bin Aitken and his role in the Muslim Conflict Crusader 1123-1146 AD-517-541 AH)", *Dirāsāt: Human and Social Sciences. University of Jordan*, 41/3 (2014).
- Peacock, Andrew, "Imād al-Din al-Iṣfahānī's Nuṣrat al-fatra, Seljuq politics and Ayyubid origins", in *Ferdowsi, the Mongols and the History of Iran*, ed. Robert Hillenbrand - Andrew Peacock - Firuza Abdullaeva, London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013.
- Plamper, Jan, "The History of Emotions", *History and Theory*, 49/2 (2010).
- Richter-Bernburg, Lutz, "Imād al-Din al-Iṣfahānī", *Medieval Muslim Historians and the Franks in the Levant*, Brill, 2014.

- Richter-Bernburg, Lutz, *Der syrische Blitz: Saladins Sekretär zwischen Selbstdarstellung und Geschichtsschreibung*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, Beirut, 1998.
- Richter-Bernburg, Lutz, "Funken aus dem kalten Flint: 'Imād ad-Dīn al-Kātib al-Iṣfahānī (I), *Die Welt des Orients*, 20-21 (1989-1990).
- Rosenthal, Franz, "al-Kutubī", *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Leiden, Brill, 1986, V, 570-571.
- Scheer, Monique, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A bourdieuan approach to understanding emotion", *History and Theory*, 51/2 (2012).
- Sibt Ibn al-Jawzi, Yūsuf b. Giz Oghli, *Mirāt al-zaman*, ed. İbrahim al-Zeibag, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-risālah, 2013.
- Telfah, Modar, "The Abbasid caliphate Recognition of the Ayyubid State in 1175: A study of the caliphate's Relationship with the West Wing Powers in the Second Half of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century." *Mu'tah Lil-Buḥūth wad-Dirāsāt – Social and Human Sciences Series*, 32/2 (2017).
- Wilyam al-Ṣūri (William of Tyre), *al-'māl al-Munjazah fīmā warā' al-Biḥār* (History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea), Trans., Ḥasan Ḥabashī, Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyah al-'āmmah lil-kitāb, 1990.
- Yāqūt b. 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī. *Mu'jam al-udabā' aw irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb*, ed. İhsān 'Abā bās, Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-Islāmī, 1993.