

# Usāma ibn Munqidh

Usāma ibn Murshid ibn 'Alī

DATE OF BIRTH 1095  
PLACE OF BIRTH Shayzar  
DATE OF DEATH 16 November 1188  
PLACE OF DEATH Damascus

## BIOGRAPHY

Usāma is the best known of the Banū Munqidh clan of Shayzar. He lived in the town from his birth until 1131, when he joined the ruler Zangī at Aleppo and, due to a family dispute over the succession, returned only once, the occasion of his father's death and also the siege of the town by the Byzantine Emperor John Comnenus in 1138. After leaving Shayzar for the last time, he eschewed returning to Zangī's service, instead opting to enter the entourage of Mu'īn al-Dīn Unur of Damascus, for whom he visited crusader Jerusalem on a number of occasions. However, intrigue took its toll on Usāma, and he was forced to leave Damascus for Cairo in 1144.

In Egypt, Usāma became an envoy for the Fatimids to Nūr al-Dīn, Zangī's son, but was soon accused of complicity in a plot against the Caliph al-Zāfir and was forced to flee in 1154. He came to Damascus again, which Nūr al-Dīn had recently taken, and entered into his service for a period of ten years. Following this, he moved to the court of Qara Arslān, the Artuqid ruler of Ḥiṣn Kayfā, and started his copious writings. Most of them are lost, although those extant include his *diwān* and a book on staffs (*Kitāb al-ʿaṣā*). In 1184, he was invited and moved to Saladin's court, again in Damascus, where he stayed until his death, though he quickly fell out of favor. During this time, he continued his writings, and his sayings, which form the *Kitāb al-i'tibār*, were pronounced.

## MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

### *Primary*

Usāma ibn Munqidh, *Kitāb al-i'tibār*  
Ibn Khallikān, *Wafāyāt al-a'yān*, i, 195-99

Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ*, ed. D. Margoliouth, 7 vols, Cairo, 1907-27, ii, 173-97

Ibn ʿAsākir, *Al-taʾrīkh al-kabīr*, ed. A. Badrān, 7 vols, Damascus, 1927, ii, 400-4

Other works that briefly refer to Usāma and/or his family are listed in Humphreys, *Banū Munqidh* (see below).

#### Secondary

P. Cobb, *Usama ibn Munqidh, warrior poet of the age of the crusades*, Oxford, 2005

R. Irwin, 'Usamah ibn Munqidh. An Arab-Syrian gentleman at the time of the crusades reconsidered', in J. France and W.G. Zajac (eds), *The crusades and their sources. Essays presented to Bernard Hamilton*, Aldershot UK, 1998, 71-87

A. Miquel, *Ousama, un prince syrien face aux croisés*, Paris, 1986

Q. Kilānī, *Usāma ibn Munqidh. Dirāsa*, s.l., 1982

H. ʿAbbās, *Usāma ibn Munqidh, ḥayātuhu wa-āthāruh*, Alexandria, 1979

R.S. Humphreys, art. 'Banū Munqidh', in *EI2*

A.K. Zakī, *Usāma ibn Munqidh*, Cairo, 1968

J. Ālūsī, *Usāma ibn Munqidh, baṭal al-ḥurūb al-Ṣalībiyya*, s.l., 1967

H. Derenbourg, *Ousāma ibn Mounqidh, un émir syrien au premier siècle des croisades, 1095-1188. pt. 1, Vie d'Ousāma*, Paris, 1889

## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

### *Kitāb al-iʿtibār*, 'Instructions'

DATE 1183

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

#### DESCRIPTION

The *Kitāb al-iʿtibār* is an autobiographical work, dictated by Usāma when he was almost 90, and its contents reveal to the reader aspects of medieval Islamic society rarely seen in other writings. There are other autobiographies, but they do not have the same richness or appeal of material as Usāma's work. Through a number of anecdotes, the book shows methods of warfare, medicine, ways of life, modes of thinking, geographical locations and aspects of the lives of ordinary Muslims in 12<sup>th</sup>-century Syria that may not otherwise have been known. The anecdotes Usāma includes were carefully chosen to reflect the aim of the work, as demonstrated by its title.

With regard to Christian-Muslim relations, Usāma has plenty to say about the Latin Franks. They appear throughout his memoirs and,

while he fairly often lapses into the usual Muslim curses called down on and epithets given to the Franks, and is to a large extent cementing pre-existing stereotypes, he is one of the few Muslim writers from this period to have both interacted with the Franks and recorded that interaction. He thus has plenty of interesting, amusing, and, to his Muslim readership, scandalous accounts of their behavior, devoting a whole section of his work to examining them.

Among his observations, he claims that the Franks are not jealous in sexual matters – and cites three famous examples as proof of this – and that they have strange medical practices, an inferior judicial system, demonstrated by their use of the duel to settle disputes, and strange festival practices – including a race between two elderly women. He also distinguishes between the newly-arrived Franks, who are boorish, and those who have been in the Levant for some time, among whom he has friends, meaning he can appreciate the differences within this alien population.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

This work gives a fascinating insight into a world of interaction between Muslims and Latin Christians in the areas around the crusader states, which would not otherwise be known. It shows the sense of both ridicule and horror that the Franks evinced in the Muslims, as well as how theoretical boundaries were broken down by the higher levels of society and mutual accommodation was found, at least for a time.

#### MANUSCRIPTS

MS Madrid, El Escorial – 1947 (4 July 1213; the first 21 folios of this unique MS are lacking)

#### EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

P. Cobb, *The book of contemplation*, London, 2008 (trans.)

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M. Cassarino, *Le lezioni della vita. Un cavaliere siriano e le Crociate*, Milan, 2001 (Italian trans.)

A. García Algarra, *Libro de las experiencias*, Gredos, 2000 (Spanish trans.)

*Kitāb al-ʿitibār*, ed. Q. al-Samarrāʾī, Riyadh, 1987

H. Pressier, *Die Erlebnisse des syrischen Ritters Usāma ibn Munqidh*, Munich, 1985 (German trans.)

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## STUDIES

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- A. Schauer, *Muslims und Franken, ethnische, soziale und religiöse Gruppen im Kitāb al-I'tibār des Usāma ibn Munqidh*, Berlin, 2000
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- D. Nicolle, 'Wounds, military surgery and the reality of Crusading warfare. The evidence of Usāmah's memoirs [sic]', *Journal of Oriental and African Studies* 5 (1993) 33-46
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