
Al-Afḍal the Son of Saladin and His Reputation

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Abstract

The period following the death of Saladin (589/1193) was a formative one in the history of the Ayyūbid empire. It saw the eventual establishment of Saladin's younger brother Sayf al-Dīn al-Malik al-ʿĀdil as the acknowledged sovereign of the various territories ruled by members of the Ayyūbid family, overturning the succession arrangements that Saladin had put into place; and it established modes of behaviour to be followed, mutatis mutandis, following the death of a leading Ayyūbid ruler on future occasions. The main loser in al-ʿĀdil's rise to the sultanate was Saladin's eldest son, al-Malik al-Afḍal ʿAlī, whom some have written off as an incompetent failure. In this paper for David Morgan, for many years my trusted colleague in the SOAS History Department, I suggest that that judgment on al-Afḍal is open to appeal.

“O consider this name and its fortune sore, to meet today what it suffered of yore”¹

The line given at the beginning of this article is taken from a poem attributed to al-Afḍal in which he is portrayed as appealing for the help of the caliph al-Nāṣir against his uncle al-ʿĀdil, who was supported by al-Malik al-ʿAzīz, the ruler of Egypt and al-Afḍal's own younger brother. Al-Afḍal is said to have complained to the caliph that his uncle and his brother had ganged up against him, and he alluded to the personal names of the three protagonists in order to claim that his situation mirrored that of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib in the years following the death of the Prophet. He asserted that he, ʿAlī al-Afḍal, was being attacked by his uncle, Abū Bakr al-ʿĀdil, and his own brother ʿUthmān al-ʿAzīz, just as the Prophet's son-in-law, ʿAlī, had been cheated by the first caliph, Abū Bakr, and the third, ʿUthmān. In his verse reply, the caliph al-Nāṣir, punned on his caliphal title to promise al-Afḍal the assistance (*naṣr*) which had been lacking for the earlier ʿAlī in Yathrib.

The authenticity of this exchange between al-Afḍal and the caliph is dubious to say the least, and the story has probably been developed from accounts of an embassy that al-Afḍal sent to the caliph to announce the death of his father when he succeeded him in Damascus. The earliest versions of the verses seem to be in Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī's *Mirʿat al-zamān* and Ibn Wāṣil's *Al-Taʾrikh al-Ṣāliḥī*.²

¹ *Fa-ʿnẓur ilā ḥaṣṣi ḥādhā ʿl-ismi kayfa laqiya min al-awākhirī mā lāqā min al-awwālī*

² Ibn Wāṣil, *Al-Taʾrikh al-Ṣāliḥī* (ed.) ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmūrī, 2 vols., Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 1431/2010) 2: 287; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mirʿat al-zamān fi taʾrikh al-aʿyān* (vol. 8, part 2, Ḥaydarābād: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif, 1371/1952): 638.

*Al-Afḍal's fall from power*³

Born in 565/1169–70, after Saladin's arrival in Egypt, al-Afḍal was appointed as *walī* 'l-*'ahd* by his father in Damascus in 582/1186,⁴ and when Saladin died he succeeded him as ruler of Damascus and became the pre-eminent Ayyūbid ruler. He sent an embassy to the caliph al-Nāṣir to inform him of his father's death and to convey to the caliph gifts that included the late ruler's arms, armour and horses. It is following his father's death that al-Afḍal's name and titles appear on coins, in inscriptions and in an extant decree appointing a leader for the Jews of Damascus and its associated lands.⁵ As ruler of Damascus, his court physician was Maimonides, two of whose surviving medical treatises were written for him.⁶

From Damascus al-Afḍal controlled extensive territories in southern Syria and Palestine, as well as parts of what is now Lebanon, and a number of coastal towns that had remained under Muslim control after the Third Crusade, extending as far north as Lattakia. As his father's nominated heir and as ruler of the most important town in Syria, he seemed to be in the strongest position to take over the leadership of the Ayyūbid empire, but over the next few years lost his power and influence relatively quickly to his uncle al-*'Ādil*. That was the outcome of a complex series of events, and became possible because al-*'Ādil* was able to exploit rivalries and divisions between al-Afḍal and his brothers in Cairo and Aleppo, and to take advantage of at least one instance of good luck that befell him.

Al-Afḍal's first competitor for the sultanate was his younger brother al-Malik al-*'Azīz*, who had been left as ruler of Egypt when their father died. Al-*'Azīz* twice sought to dislodge his sibling from Damascus, in 590/1194 and 591/1195, and both times al-Afḍal's ability to resist depended largely on the support given to him by his paternal uncle al-*'Ādil*, who possessed substantial territories in the Jazīra west of the Euphrates, as well Kerak and its lands to the east of the Dead Sea.

In the peace agreement made following al-*'Azīz*'s second failure to dislodge al-Afḍal, al-*'Ādil* arranged that he should live with al-*'Azīz* in Egypt. In that position he then changed his stance towards his nephew in Damascus and joined al-*'Azīz* in a third attack on Damascus. When the allies took the town in the summer of 592/1196, al-Afḍal was demoted to rule the castle and town of Ṣarkhad (now Ṣalkhad) in the Druze Mountains south of Damascus, while al-*'Ādil* took his place as ruler of Damascus.

³The following summary of the events following Saladin's death is much indebted to Chapter 3, "The Rise of al-*'Ādil*", in R. Stephen Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols*, (Albany, 1977). For a discussion of those events that focuses on Aleppo, see Anne-Marie Edde, *La principauté ayyoubide d'Alep (579/1183-658/1260)*, (Stuttgart, 1999); and for events involving al-Afḍal during the lifetime of his father, Eadem, *Saladin*, (Paris, 2008), English translation by Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2011), index.

⁴According to al-Maqrīzī, already in 580/1184 Saladin had provided for al-Afḍal to become the ruler of Damascus with his uncle Sayf al-Dīn al-*'Ādil* as his guardian (*bi-kafālat 'ammihī*), but those provision were not put into effect: Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-ma'rīfat duwal al-mulūk*, (ed.) Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyāda, vol. 1, part 1, (Cairo, 1934), p. 85, English translation, R. J. C. Broadhurst, *A History of the Ayyūbid Sultans of Egypt* (Boston, 1980), p. 75.

⁵For the coinage, see P. Bałog, *The Coinage of the Ayyūbids*, (London, Royal Numismatic Society, 1980), pp. 240–241; for an inscription, *Repertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe*, (Cairo, 1931) onwards, vol. 9, no. 3464; and for the decree, Geoffrey Khan, "A document of appointment of a Jewish leader in Syria issued by Al-Malik al-Afḍal 'Alī in 589 A.H. / 1193 A.D.", in Yūsuf Rāḡib (ed.) *Documents de l'Islam médiéval: nouvelles perspectives de recherche*. (Cairo, 1991), pp. 97–116.

⁶For the medical treatises, see G. Vajda s.v. Ibn Maymūn in *Elz*.

The stroke of luck that aided al-ʿĀdil was the accidental death of al-ʿAzīz, still under thirty, while out hunting late in 595/1198. He had appointed his son al-Manṣūr Muḥammad as his heir apparent, but the boy was only nine and needed an *atabeg*. Al-ʿĀdil, who was campaigning in Mesopotamia at the time, was not able simply to assume that role, however. A party of the Egyptian *amirs* and *grandees* considered him over-mighty and preferred al-Afḍal, in spite of all that had happened since Saladin's death.

Supported by another brother, al-Zāhir Ghāzī who ruled Aleppo, as well as by his party in Egypt, al-Afḍal emerged from Ṣarkhad, assumed the atabegate in Cairo, and was persuaded to attempt to regain Damascus. Al-ʿĀdil managed to enter the town shortly before the arrival of al-Afḍal with his forces, and there followed a siege that lasted for about six months. Although it was a close-run thing, eventually al-ʿĀdil was able to break the siege and pursue al-Afḍal to Cairo. There his support had evaporated and he had to accept the surprisingly generous offer made by al-ʿĀdil – that he could keep Ṣarkhad and also obtain various other lands, including Mayyafāriqīn in the Jazīra and Samosata (Sumaysāt, northwest of Edessa in southern Anatolia) – although in fact he was unable to enforce his control over all the lands offered by al-ʿĀdil.

Al-ʿĀdil then entered Cairo, removed the name of al-Manṣūr Muḥammad from the *khutba*, and substituted his own. In other words he now proclaimed himself not merely the ruler of Egypt, but sovereign of all the Ayyūbid lands. His son al-Muʿazzam became the ruler of Damascus, dependent upon his father in Egypt.

That was not quite the end of the story, for in 597/1201 al-Afḍal and al-Zāhir Ghāzī again joined forces against al-ʿĀdil, with the support of several leading *amirs* and the Ayyūbid rulers of Ḥamā, Ḥimṣ and Baalbakk. Another siege of Damascus, now ruled by al-ʿĀdil's son al-Muʿazzam, followed, until the two brothers leading the coalition against al-ʿĀdil fell out and moved away. Shortly afterwards al-ʿĀdil entered Damascus and al-Afḍal came to offer formal submission to his uncle. This time he was allowed to keep Samosata, a fairly important place but remote from the main centre of Ayyūbid power. There, in 600/1203–4, he recognised the suzerainty of the Seljuq Sultan of Rūm, having the *khutba* read in his name and, in effect, cutting his links with the Ayyūbids.

That was not his last attempt to reinstate himself as ruler of Ayyūbid lands, though. In 615/1218–19, following the death of his brother al-Malik al-Zāhir Ghāzī, he joined Kaykāwūs the sultan of Rūm in an unsuccessful attempt to seize Aleppo and its territories. Their agreement was that if Aleppo were taken, al-Afḍal would become its ruler under the suzerainty of the Rūm Seljuq, since its people would not accept a non-Ayyūbid, while Kaykāwūs would take over other lands controlled by Aleppo. After the defeat of this alliance at the hands of al-Malik al-Ashraf b. al-ʿĀdil, the ruler of the Ayyūbid territories in Mesopotamia, al-Afḍal retired to Samosata.⁷

There he died in 622/1225, but his body was brought to Aleppo for burial. The image of Saladin's heir apparent spending his last years on the fringes of, or even outside, the empire to which his father had made him heir, and then being brought post-mortem to rest at last

⁷For this last episode, see especially Eddé, *Principauté d'Alep*, pp. 89–92; Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols*, pp. 159–160.

within it, is quite pathetic. In keeping with that, Ibn Wāṣil (d. 697/1298) tells us that he died full of grief (*kamīdan*).⁸

Al-Afḍal's reputation

This bare narrative of events raises questions about their underlying causes and explanations, and to some extent the answers to them will affect our understanding of al-Afḍal's role in his loss of status and power. Most sources, however, report matters in a way that does not reflect well on the political and administrative ability of the still relatively young prince, and that is undoubtedly the main reason why – when he is not merely ignored – modern scholars have judged him to be weak and ineffective.

Most sources emphasize the way in which al-Afḍal was dominated by his advisors, especially his *wazīr*, allowing himself to be misled by them even when his own first thoughts were the right ones, and they tell us that he was prone to behaviour and interests that cut him off from public affairs.

His *wazīr* was Ḍiyā' al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (brother of the historian, 'Izz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr),⁹ and he is generally described as a malign influence on his nominal master. Ibn Wāṣil (d. 697/1298) has a fairly moderate statement about that in his *Mufarrij*, telling us that Ḍiyā' al-Dīn was young and inexperienced (*shābb ghīr*),¹⁰ but in his more moralistic *Al-Ta'rikh al-Ṣāliḥī*, where he does not provide the name of the *wazīr*, he describes him as duplicitous (*ghāshsh*) and as having deluded (*ightarra*) al-Afḍal. Abū Shāma (d. 665/1268) seems slightly less harsh on the *wazīr*, avoiding the descriptive language of Ibn Wāṣil, and sometimes including the *wazīr* among a number of those offering bad advice to the Damascene ruler.¹¹

Ḍiyā' al-Dīn's influence over the Ayyūbid ruler of Damascus is used to account for three policy errors that explain al-'Azīz's hostility. First, it was the *wazīr* who advised his master to dispense with the services of those *amīrs* and grandees who had served his father Saladin and to put new men in their place. As a result a number of Ṣalāḥī *amīrs* and administrators left Damascus for Cairo, where they incited al-'Azīz, to claim the primacy of the Ayyūbids for himself.¹²

⁸ Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-kurūb fī akhbār Banī Ayyūb*, (eds.) Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl, Ḥassanain Muḥammad Rabī' and Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Ashūr, 5 vols. (Cairo, 1953 onwards) 4:157; essentially repeated by al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1/1: 216–7. English translation, p. 193.

⁹ On those two and the third brother, Majd al-Dīn, see F. Rosenthal in *EI2* s.v. Ibn al-Athīr.

¹⁰ That is the sense of the Arabic: *wa-kāna Ḍiyā' al-Dīn al-madhkūr lammā 'itaṣala bi-khidmat al-Malik al-Afḍal shābban ghīrān*. The idea is odd, though, and one might think the adjectives more apposite if applied to al-Afḍal (it may refer to a time before he succeeded his father). At the time of Saladin's death Ḍiyā' al-Dīn was 30, having been born in 558/1163.

¹¹ Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij*, 3:10; cf. his *Al-Ta'rikh al-Ṣāliḥī*, 2: 251; Abū Shāma, *Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn fī akhbār al-dawlatayn* (ed.) Ibrāhīm al-Zībaq, 5 vols., (Beirut, 1418/1997) 4: pp. 419, 420; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt*, 8/2: pp. 441–442, ascribes the joint attack of al-'Azīz and al-'Ādil against al-Afḍal in 592/1196 to the fact that one of this last's *amīrs* and other notables had written to al-'Ādil complaining about the *wazīr's* pernicious acts. Al-'Ādil wrote to al-Afḍal telling him to get rid of the *wazīr*, and it was when al-Afḍal rejected that advice that al-'Ādil agreed with al-'Azīz to send an army against Damascus. Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī 'l-ta'rikh* (13 vols. Beirut, 1965–67) 12: pp. 109–110, English translation D. S. Richards, *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athīr for the Crusading Period*, 3 vols. (Farnham, 200[5]6–8) 3, p. 16, unsurprisingly, has no criticism of Afḍal for appointing his brother as *wazīr*.

¹² Ibn Wāṣil *Mufarrij*, 3: 14 (*waqa'ū fī 'l-Malik al-Afḍal 'inda 'l-Malik al-'Azīz wa-ḥassanū lahu al-istibād bi'l-mulk wa'l-qiyām bi'l-salṭana maqām abīhi*). According to Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil* 12:118, English translation 3: 23, the nature of the incitement was somewhat different; see below.

Secondly, the *wazīr* seems to have persuaded al-Afḍal to transfer control of Jerusalem, heretofore part of the lands of Damascus, to al-‘Azīz in Cairo. The subsequent withdrawal of this offer is said to have been one of the things that fired al-‘Azīz’s resentment against his brother and strengthened his determination to take up arms against him. The reason for this rather strange proposed transfer was that the upkeep and garrisoning of the holy city was expensive and al-Afḍal would benefit financially by transferring the expense to the account of his brother. When the latter received the letter making the offer, we are told, he was delighted and gratefully accepted, but then al-Afḍal had second thoughts.¹³

A third manifestation of Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn’s influence over the ruler of Damascus came once hostilities had started between the brothers. Al-Afḍal, we are told, was inclined not to resist but to allow al-‘Azīz to take the symbols of sovereignty. He was overruled by his advisors, “especially his *wazīr* Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr”. He was advised to spend and build up his army and resist injustice (*al-ḍaym*), “for you are the eldest son of the Sulṭān (Saladin) and have more right than he (al-‘Azīz) to the *khuṭba* and the *sikka*”. The aged ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣḫānī (d. 597/1201), one of Saladin’s leading servants, was also in favour of conciliation with al-‘Azīz and tells us that he asked al-Afḍal to be allowed to write to his brother – “he will not answer my pen with the sword” – but he too was overruled by the advisors of al-Afḍal who accused him of being in sympathy with al-‘Azīz.¹⁴

The picture emerges then, of a ruler unable to make his own decisions, and dominated by self-seeking advisors. This is reinforced by a report that shows al-Afḍal, once the first threat to him from al-‘Azīz was over, turning to a life of carousal, drinking, and music, and handing over the running of his kingdom to his *wazīr*, who governed it corruptly (*birā’iyihī al-fāsīd*). True, we are then informed that the ruler experienced a sudden repentance, having the wine poured away and imposing a heavy tax on (the making of?) containers, while turning to asceticism and piety, wearing coarse clothes, commencing the writing of a copy of the Qur’ān, appropriating a mosque where he could be alone in worshipping God, and persisting in fasting and attending sessions of the *fuqarā’*. In the context, however, extreme piety – and the accounts emphasize the suddenness and lack of obvious cause for the conversion – was as bad as loose living.¹⁵

Faced, in the next year (591/1195) with a renewed determination on the part of al-‘Azīz to invade Syria, the wise heads (*al-‘uqalā’*) at al-Afḍal’s court counselled him to treat with his brother in order to ensure the survival of his rule in Damascus. He should agree to his brother’s demand for the *khuṭba* and *sikka* since al-‘Azīz was ruler of the Egyptian territories and had the majority of the Ṣalāḥiyya soldiers. If he did that, al-‘Azīz would be satisfied

¹³Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij*, 3:15; *idem*, *Al-Ta’rīkh al-Ṣāliḥī*, 2: 251; Abū Shāma, *Rawḍatayn*, 4: 420. Saladin had allocated one third of the income from Nāblus and its districts as a *waqf* for the upkeep of Jerusalem, but the governors of Nāblus had been misappropriating the sum for other purposes. When they heard of al-Afḍal’s plan, therefore, they wrote to him saying that they would provide for the upkeep of Jerusalem and its garrison entirely out of the *waqf* and there would be no need to find money for it from any other source. Al-Afḍal then confirmed them in office. Since the Egyptian ruler had already promised Nāblus to two of the *amīrs* who had come to him from Damascus, he was not best pleased.

¹⁴Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij*, 3: 27-8; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir’āt* 8/2: 442 says that when al-‘Azīz and al-‘Azīz launched their third attack on Damascus all of al-Afḍal’s advisors urged him to negotiate with them, and only the *wazīr* advised resistance; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* 1/1: 116, English translation, p. 103.

¹⁵Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij*, 40; Abū Shāma, *Rawḍatayn*, 4: 424; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* 1/1: 118-119, English translation, p.105.

and would allow al-Afḍal to continue ruling in Damascus. Al-Afḍal, however, followed his *wazīr*'s advice to call on his uncle al-ʿĀdil, for help against the Egyptian ruler. “This was a pernicious judgment (*min aḥsād/fāsīd al-raʿy*)”, eventually to lead to al-Afḍal's downfall.¹⁶

The hatred of the *wazīr* among the opponents of al-Afḍal was so strong that, when Damascus fell to the combined forces of al-ʿAzīz and al-ʿĀdil in 592/1196, he had to be smuggled out hidden in the luggage of al-Afḍal and then fled to his own town of Mosul.¹⁷

In their accounts of the years following Saladin's death, until the seizure of the sultanate by al-ʿĀdil, therefore, most of the sources present an image of al-Afḍal as a weak character dominated by his *wazīr*, and that has largely been accepted by a number of modern writers and scholars. H. A. R. Gibb refers to the “incapacity” and “self-indulgence” that caused his downward spiral from his position as supreme sultan to that of prince of out-of-the-way Samosata.¹⁸

Humphreys, unsurprisingly, does not see things quite so simply and shows greater understanding of the political and economic situation following Saladin's death, a situation within which al-Afḍal had to work. Nevertheless, Humphreys too refers to al-Afḍal's “incapacity to rule” and “weakness of character”. He also talks of the lack of intelligence displayed in the way he treated the Ṣalāḥī *amirs* in Egypt when he went there as *atabeg* to al-ʿAzīz's son, and alludes to his habitual lack of perseverance in the face of adversity when accounting for his and al-Zāhir's failure to take Damascus in 595/1199.¹⁹

Accepting this view of al-Afḍal, an anonymous discussion in the journal *Kurdish Life*, which acknowledges the influence of Humphreys' account, draws on the work of the psychiatrist and specialist in allergies, Professor Sheldon Cohen, to discuss the medical and psychological determinants of his behaviour.²⁰ According to Cohen, Maimonides' treatises for al-Afḍal suggest that the latter suffered from asthma, and his position as the son of an over-achieving father stifled his own personal development. The article in *Kurdish Life* alludes to Cohen's psychoanalytical theory in its title, a quotation from Ben Jonson's *Timber* (first published 1640 after the author's death): “The shadow kills the growth”.²¹

An Alternative View of al-Afḍal?

These modern evaluations of al-Afḍal are certainly in line with the accounts of his career following the death of his father in most of the sources. The psychoanalytical interpretation seems plausible and could be supported by reference to the failure of Saladin to charge his

¹⁶Ibn Wāsil, *Muḥarrirj*, 3: 41; *al-Taʿrīkh al-Ṣāliḥiyya*, 2: 253–254 (again more virulent than the *Muḥarrirj*: the *wazīr* is described as *sayyiʿ al-raʿy fāsīd al-tadbīr radīʿ al-sīra*); al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* 1/1: 123, English Translation p. 109.

¹⁷Subsequently, Ḍiyāʿ al-Dīn, most of whose written works are concerned with literary criticism, rejoined al-Afḍal and remained in his service in Samosata until 611/1214; he died in 637/1239 in the service of the rulers of Mosul. See Rosenthal s.v. Ibn al-Athīr in *EL*.

¹⁸*EL*, s.v. al-Afḍal. See too his censure of the “misgovernment and weakness” that turned Saladin's troops against Al-Afḍal in his chapter “The Aiyūbids”, in Robert Lee Wolff and Harry W. Hazard (eds.), *The later Crusades 1189–1311, A History of the Crusades*, volume II, (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 695.

¹⁹Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols*, pp. 104, 112, 113.

²⁰*Kurdish Life*, (ed.) Vera Beaudin Saeedpour, Brooklyn, New York 32 (Fall 1999), pp 18–20; “The Shadow Kills the Growth: Al-Malek al-Afḍal ʿAlī, the Second Ayyubid Sultan”.

²¹Greatness of name in the father oft-times overwhelms the son; they stand too near one another. The shadow kills the growth . . .

son with administrative responsibilities during his own lifetime, although skepticism about the possibility of psychoanalysis on our limited evidence is in order.²² How far these negative judgments are valid, however, depends in part on assessment of the evidence on which they are based and in part on as full an appreciation as possible of the circumstances within which al-Afḍal had to operate.

First, the question of the literary sources. The similarity of most of the accounts of the way in which al-Afḍal lost his grip on power, and their unanimity of judgment, is striking. Abū Shāma, Ibn Wāṣil, Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 654/1256) and al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) all provide rather similar accounts of and explanations for al-Afḍal's loss of position, and only Ibn al-Athīr offers a somewhat distinctive narrative. Al-Maqrīzī is, of course, writing considerably later than the others, whose work he draws on and is influenced by. The earlier writers apart from Ibn al-Athīr all cite from works by 'Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī, formerly Saladin's secretary, who continued to live in Damascus until his death in 1201, and the citations both colour their accounts of these years and indicate how they see them. As a pillar of the former regime, it is not surprising that 'Imād al-Dīn was strongly critical of the successor who attempted to replace the old guard with his own men.²³

Only Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233), who tells us that he was in Damascus during the first attack on it by al-'Azīz, offers a different perspective. In some ways Ibn al-Athīr's account is disappointing since, given his relationship to al-Afḍal's *wazīr*, one might have hoped for detailed inside information that supports an interpretation counter to that of the other sources. What we have, though, is largely a descriptive account that occasionally presents things from an alternative viewpoint to that of the others.

For example, not surprisingly, Ibn al-Athīr does not tell us that al-Afḍal was dominated by his *wazīr* Ḍiyā' al-Dīn, and does not even mention that the latter was the historian's own brother. Ibn al-Athīr puts the emphasis on al-'Azīz's favouritism towards the Ṣalāḥī *amīrs* and their manipulation of him, rather than on criticising al-Afḍal for causing them to leave Damascus. It is true that he tells us that the Ṣalāḥīs were discontented with al-Afḍal because he had driven away some of those formerly in his service, but he stresses the way in which they worked to incite al-'Azīz by claiming his brother had plans to take Egypt from him. In order to forestall that, Ibn al-Athīr tells us, the Ṣalāḥīs who had left al-Afḍal said that al-'Azīz should take Damascus. Furthermore, Ibn al-Athīr claims that his favouritism towards the Ṣalāḥīs (Ibn al-Athīr calls them *Nāṣirīs*) caused other groups to abandon al-'Azīz on the occasion of his second attack on Damascus. The overall effect is to take al-Afḍal and his mistakes out of the limelight and to put the focus on al-'Azīz.²⁴

²²At the time of his father's death, al-Afḍal was still only in his early twenties and for the previous four years or so the struggle against the Third Crusade had hardly left Saladin scope for training his family for administering his lands, should he die. Al-Afḍal had participated in the build-up to Haṭṭīn in 583/1187, and was present with his father at the battle when, according to Ibn al-Athīr, Saladin chided him for prematurely rejoicing at the victory. To say, as the author of the article in *Kurdish Life* does, that Saladin "systematically excluded" al-Afḍal from administrative affairs is to put it too strongly.

²³On 'Imād al-Dīn, see H. Massé s.v. in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition and Donald S. Richards, s.v. 'Emād-al-Dīn Kāteb in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Of the other leading companions of Saladin, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil joined al-'Azīz soon after his master's death, and Bahā' al-Dīn Ibn Shaddād left to become *qāḍī* in Aleppo under al-Zāhir.

²⁴Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 12: 118–119. English translation pp. 23–24.

More notably, al-ʿĀdil does not appear in a flattering light in Ibn al-Athīr’s account. When he came to the aid of al-Afḍal in 591/1194–5, as al-ʿAzīz attacked Damascus for the second time, according to Ibn al-Athīr, he had agreed with his nephew in Damascus that, should they defeat al-ʿAzīz, al-Afḍal would become ruler of Egypt and al-ʿĀdil would replace his nephew in Damascus. When he saw the extent of the support for al-Afḍal in the army, however, al-ʿĀdil became worried that al-Afḍal would break the agreement and not give him Damascus. So he conspired with al-ʿAzīz in a way that lengthened the campaign and prevented a comprehensive defeat of the Egyptian ruler. In the peace agreement that followed, al-ʿĀdil had it arranged that he would remain in Egypt alongside al-ʿAzīz, because he understood that the latter would be powerless to oppose him, given the antipathy to the Egyptian ruler of the army factions other than the Ṣalāhīs.²⁵

When al-ʿĀdil and al-ʿAzīz took Damascus from al-Afḍal in 592/1196, Ibn al-Athīr makes it clear that he thinks the main reason for al-Afḍal’s loss was his trust in al-ʿĀdil, whereas the latter was inclined to conspiracy and trickery. Entry into Damascus was gained because al-ʿĀdil had conspired with one of al-Afḍal’s *amīrs*, one to whom al-Afḍal had shown special favour, and, once inside the city, al-ʿĀdil and al-ʿAzīz tricked al-Afḍal into thinking that they would allow him to keep possession of it because they feared that he had enough support there to overcome them.

After they had obtained control of the town, Ibn al-Athīr continues, al-ʿAzīz, who had taken possession of the citadel, got drunk and, under the effect of alcohol, said that he would restore it to al-Afḍal. Whereupon, al-ʿĀdil, having heard about this, broke in on his still drunk nephew, and harangued him until he agreed to give the citadel over to him.

As justification for the seizure of Damascus, al-ʿĀdil claimed that al-Afḍal had plotted to kill him. The latter denied it. Ibn al-Athīr is not explicit as to whom he believes, but it is not hard to guess that his sympathies were more with al-Afḍal.²⁶ Near the beginning of his account of how al-Afḍal came to Egypt as *atabeg* following the death of al-ʿAzīz in 595/1198, Ibn al-Athīr tells us he was “loved by the *nās* and they wanted him (as *atabeg*?)”²⁷

Compared with our other main sources, then, Ibn al-Athīr presents a more sympathetic view of al-Afḍal and is relatively critical of al-ʿĀdil. Furthermore, he suggests that there was significant support for Saladin’s eldest son at least among some elements of the army. Naturally, it is not being suggested here that Ibn al-Athīr is necessarily to be believed more than those sources that portray al-Afḍal as weak and dominated by his *wazīr*. Ibn al-Athīr is well known for his, to say the least, lack of enthusiasm for Saladin and his dynasty. He was a son of Mosul and a supporter of the legitimacy of its Zengid rulers, against whom Saladin and the Ayyūbids fought.²⁸ But his account shows that alternative points of view and evaluations of al-Afḍal’s actions during these years are possible. The dominant image of the other sources, that of the over-powerful *wazīr* and the ruler who neglects public affairs

²⁵ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 12: 119–120. English translation pp. 23–24.

²⁶ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 12: 122–123. English translation pp. 25–26.

²⁷ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 12: 140. English translation p. 39: *kāna . . . maḥbūban ilā ʿl-nās yurīdūnahu*; Richards translates, “beloved by the *people* and their favourite”, but possibly *nās* here refers to the soldiers?

²⁸ For a highly critical view of Ibn al-Athīr as a source, see H. A. R. Gibb, “Notes on the Arabic Materials for the History of the early Crusades”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 7 (1935), pp. 739–754; but cf. D. S. Richards in the Introduction to his translation of the *Kāmil*, *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athīr for the Crusading Period*, Part 1, (Farnham, 2005), p. 4.

for a life of pleasure or religious withdrawal, has a stereotypical feel to it, and it must reflect not only the disenchantment of figures like ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī, but inevitably too the hindsight of the later chroniclers who knew that al-‘Ādil had triumphed at the expense of al-Afḍal.

Emphasizing the culpability of the *wazīr* and other bad advisors, could exonerate al-Afḍal himself to some extent, and it is possible that that was one motivation for the way in which most of the sources present the events following the death of Saladin. As the son of the founder of the dynasty and of the champion of the *jihad*, it would be natural if the chroniclers felt some inhibition about criticising al-Afḍal too directly, even though the modern writers referred to display no such compunction. That may to some extent explain why, when one turns to the biographical and obituary notices for al-Afḍal, a rather different image emerges.

Even scholars such as Ibn Wāṣil and Abū Shāma, on whose narratives the idea of the weak and incompetent ruler is based, present a quite flattering summary of al-Afḍal in their obituaries. Instead of the ruler withdrawn from public affairs, immersing himself in pleasure or piety, and dominated by malign advisors, we find encomia of a model prince. Ibn Wāṣil says he was “excellent, cultivated, gentle, just, well-behaved and (properly) pious (*fāḍil*, *muta’addib*, *ḥalīm*, ‘*ādil*, *ḥasan al-sīra*, and *mutadayyin*). He rarely punished faults in others, and he united in himself virtues and qualities (*faḍā’il wa-manāqib*) that were, otherwise, scattered among various princes. He also had excellent handwriting and composed competent verses. Nothing bad is reported about him. What he lacked was luck (*[huwa] qalīl al-ḥazz wa’l-sa’āda jiddan*). Ibn Wāṣil numbers him among other virtuous men whose fate it was to have power for only a short time — such as the caliph al-Murtaḍā, whose caliphate had lasted for one day only in 295/908.²⁹

Now, the qualities listed in the obituary and biographical notices are, of course, not ones likely to bring success in the tough world of Ayyūbid politics, and they might to some extent reflect the conventions and wishes of the chroniclers. Nevertheless, they do not quite chime with the image of the incapable and self-indulgent prince that Gibb formed, and, what is more, there is material even in the largely critical narrative reports that suggest they are not entirely fanciful.

For example, some accounts criticise al-Afḍal for allowing his uncle to ride before him carrying the banners of the sultanate (*sanājiq al-saltana*), while he followed in his train as if in his service, the second time that al-‘Ādil came to Damascus to help his nephew against al-‘Azīz. Al-‘Ādil had already been in the city for some days before al-Afḍal, who had gone north to seek help from his brother al-Zāhir, came back. Both Ibn Wāṣil and Abū Shāma make it clear that they consider al-Afḍal’s behaviour to his uncle on this occasion as beyond what was due — they use the verb *bālaḡha*, “to exaggerate”, “to overdo something” — and they link it with al-‘Ādil’s growing dissatisfaction with what he had seen of his nephew’s

²⁹Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij* 4, pp. 155–158; *idem*, *Al-Ta’rīkh al-Sāliḥī*, 2: 286–287; similar obituaries are to be found in Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir’āt* 8/2: 637–638; Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil* 12: 428–429. English translation 3: 253–254; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* 1/1: 216–217. English translation pp. 193–194; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a’yān*, (ed.) Iḥsān ‘Abbās, (Beirut, 1968) 72, 3: p. 486.

administration in Damascus. Abū Shāma explains al-Afḍal's deference to his uncle as an attempt to placate him for refusing his request that the *wazīr* Ḍiyā' al-Dīn be dismissed.³⁰

Retrospectively, this incident no doubt seemed significant, indicative of the way things would turn out. But its importance might be exaggerated. Al-Afḍal did not have the advantage of hindsight and perhaps he thought he was doing no more than displaying honour and gratitude to the senior member of the family who had come to offer help that he could not do without. That would be in keeping with the courteous and somewhat mild individual portrayed in his obituaries. Ibn al-Athīr's account does not mention the matter of the flags and the order of precedence in the procession, but, referring to the fact that al-ʿĀdil reached Damascus before al-Afḍal, he says: "Because of his trust in him al-Afḍal had instructed his lieutenants to allow him access to the citadel".³¹ While that suggests that al-Afḍal may have been naïve, it also implies that al-ʿĀdil was unworthy of the trust placed in him.

If al-Afḍal may have been naïve on that occasion, another report suggests that he was not unaware of the dangers of alienating the other leading members of his family. Abū Shāma, citing ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī, notes that when he sent his embassy to the caliph to announce officially the death of Saladin, he took care to keep his brothers in Egypt and Aleppo informed, "lest it be suspected that he was acting on his own behalf in making his petition" (*ḥattā lā yuẓannu annahu ʿnfarada bi-sūlihī*).³² Part of the point of the embassy was probably to obtain caliphal recognition of al-Afḍal as his father's successor, as well as to improve the rather poor relationship that Saladin had with the caliphate by the end of his life. We do not know of any positive response from the caliph, but the care shown to demonstrate that the embassy was not intended for his own benefit alone is worth noting.

Al-Afḍal's reported willingness to treat with his younger brother, and even to offer him the prerogative of *khuṭba* and *sikka*, until talked out of it by his more militant advisors, also accords with the image that comes from his obituary notices. The way this is presented in the sources is slightly odd. One might expect that it would be treated as a sign of al-Afḍal's feeble character, but instead it appears a policy that might have resulted in his retaining control of Damascus. Ibn Wāṣil cites ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī who offered to write to al-ʿAzīz on behalf of al-Afḍal since he was sure he would listen to him and accept his advice. Al-Afḍal's advisors, though, caused him to reject the experienced statesman's advice, and he listened to them instead.³³ Negatively, this seems to illustrate both al-Afḍal's lack of political ambition and of firmness in sticking to his policies, but, more positively, it shows not merely a wish to avoid conflict but also, perhaps, a realistic understanding of his own weakness vis à vis his brother in Cairo.

³⁰ Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij* 3: 44; Abū Shāma, *Rawḍatayn* 4: 425; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* 1/1: 123-124. English translation pp. 109-110.

³¹ Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil* 12: 119. English translation 3: p. 23.

³² Abū Shāma, *Rawḍatayn* 4: 407-409, citing ʿImād al-Dīn's *Fath*. The last word is written without *hamza* and rhymes with *rasūlihī*, but is related to the verb *saʿala*, "to ask": see Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. *s-u-l*.

³³ Ibn Wāṣil, 3: 27-28; Abū Shāma, *Rawḍatayn* 4: 421. Ibn Wāṣil has al-Afḍal explicitly state his willingness to allow his brother to have the *khuṭba* and *sikka*, whereas Abū Shāma, citing ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī's *Al-ʿUtbā waʾl-ʿuqbā*, puts it more ornately: al-Afḍal considered writing to his brother *bi-kulli mā yaḥibbu min iʿlāʾ kalimatihī waʾl-ijtimāʾ: ʿalayhī wa-yakūnu ʾl-Afḍal min baʿḍi al-qāʾimūna bayna yadayhī*. The motive attributed to al-Afḍal is his wish to avoid civil strife (*fitan*) and hatred (*iḥān*), but he received wrong advice. Cf. al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* 1/1: 123. English translation p. 103.

Ibn al-Athīr's narrative, as we have seen, presents al-ʿĀdil as a rather scheming and tricky character, and any attempt to achieve a more rounded assessment of al-Afḍal needs to take his uncle's actions into consideration. It was the switch of his support from al-Afḍal to al-ʿAzīz that was crucial in undermining al-Afḍal's position. Ibn al-Athīr considers al-Afḍal too trusting of his older relative, and that is why he lost Damascus. The ruler of Aleppo, another brother, al-Malik al-Zāhir Ghāzī, who was related to al-ʿĀdil by marriage, warned al-Afḍal about this excessive faith in their uncle, telling him to keep him out of their affairs, but al-Afḍal said, "You have a bad opinion of everybody. How does it benefit our uncle to damage us?"³⁴

There is perhaps a temptation to see al-ʿĀdil as someone who plotted to take over the sultanate immediately following the death of his brother and worked constantly to that end. That does not quite accord with the facts, however. As the senior member of the family after the death of his brother Saladin, it would have been natural for him to have ambitions to become the sovereign of the Ayyūbid realms, but his route to the top would not have been clear from the outset. Saladin had appointed his own sons to the key centres of power, and those sons would perhaps outlive their uncle. It is probable, rather, that it was only relatively gradually that al-ʿĀdil saw the possibilities and took the chances that developed to strengthen his own position.

His experience on the two occasions he was called on by al-Afḍal to help him defend Damascus against al-ʿAzīz probably made clear to him the weakness of the former's position. That need not be attributed to al-Afḍal's personal failings or the influence of inadequate advisors, but arose from the existing political and economic circumstances, of which more will be said later. When al-ʿĀdil came to Egypt, he had to accept the primacy of al-ʿAzīz as ruler, and he cannot have known, that within a couple of years al-ʿAzīz would be dead, but he had put himself in the best position to take advantage of that. Al-ʿĀdil, then appears, as an opportunist rather than a long term forward planner.³⁵

Even so, one does not have to accept Ibn al-Athīr's view of al-ʿĀdil completely, to agree that the way he undermined al-Afḍal took advantage of a nephew who lacked experience as well as, perhaps, suspicion. As early as the defeat of al-ʿAzīz's first attack on Damascus, al-ʿĀdil took care not to distance himself too far from his nephew in Cairo, and gave his daughter in marriage to him. Then, after the second invasion of Syria by al-ʿAzīz, al-ʿĀdil saw to it that the peace terms provided for his going to live in Egypt alongside al-ʿAzīz. Once there, he quickly adopted the Egyptian point of view and supported, or even incited, al-ʿAzīz in his ambition to oust al-Afḍal from Damascus, until eventually his way to the sultanate opened after the death of al-ʿAzīz. It is not necessary to make a moral judgment on al-ʿĀdil, to recognise that any attempt to understand the career of al-Afḍal must allow for the role of his uncle in his loss of power.

As for the more fundamental political and economic conditions that need to be understood if al-Afḍal's fall from grace is to be put in a proper context, this is not the place to discuss in

³⁴Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, 12: 122. English translation p. 25.

³⁵This assessment agrees with that of Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols*, pp. 122–123, who suggests that Saladin may have consciously planned for a period of uncertainty that would allow the most able to establish his rule.

detail matters that Humphreys, Eddé and others have already treated, but three issues deserve brief further comment.³⁶

First, as Humphreys has noted,³⁷ the immediate causes of the move by al-‘Azīz to oust his brother from Damascus and to claim sovereignty over the Ayyūbid family so soon after the death of their father are rather obscure. Probably no deep explanation is required, though. Appointment by a ruler of one of his sons as heir apparent, only for that son to be challenged by his brothers and uncles following the death of the father, was a common enough occurrence in the Turkish and Kurdish family polities out of which that of the Ayyūbids had emerged.³⁸ After the death of Saladin it was to be expected that his leading relatives would see the matter of the succession as still to be decided, and the speed with which al-‘Azīz acted suggests he was well aware that the issue of sovereignty was open after his father’s death. Al-Afḍal was probably not surprised either, and reacted in the obvious way by forming a coalition of other Ayyūbid rulers against the Egyptian ruler. It can hardly be argued, therefore, that al-Afḍal’s alleged weakness of character or incapacity was responsible for the outbreak of the series of struggles that followed Saladin’s death. At most, he can be held partly responsible for the way things went once the struggles had begun.

The second point concerns the relative strengths of al-Afḍal as ruler of Damascus and al-‘Azīz in Egypt. It might seem obvious that al-Afḍal’s loss of power and status is to be explained by the advantages enjoyed by the ruler of Egypt over his Ayyūbid rivals elsewhere. The natural economic superiority of Egypt compared with the other principalities, based on its agriculture and commerce, allowed the ruler of Egypt to support a much bigger army than his rivals could. Humphreys has pointed out that during the Ayyūbid period the Egyptian army was never less than three times as large as that of Damascus. Although al-Afḍal as ruler of Damascus had inherited extensive territories in Syria, his possessions were fragmented and could only support a smaller number of soldiers compared to al-‘Azīz.³⁹

It is possible to overstate the wealth of Egypt in the immediate aftermath of Saladin’s death. Saladin, it is well-known, had bankrupted his treasury in the cause of the struggle against the Third Crusade. For the years following his death the sources, and especially al-Maqrīzi, often refer to famine, plague and public disturbances as a result of hunger and high prices in Egypt. Al-Maqrīzi reports that before al-‘Azīz could set out on his second expedition against Damascus in 591/1195 he had to raise a loan from the merchants of Alexandria, and another – of 14,000 *dīnārs* – from the orphans’ fund (*māl al-aytām*), which had to be approved by the chief *qāḍī*. Apparently, of the 30,000 *dīnārs* that Saladin had found it necessary to take from

³⁶In addition to the works mentioned above in note 2, see the articles s.v. Ayyūbids in *EL2* (by Claude Cahen) and *Encyclopaedia of Islam THREE* (by Anne-Marie Eddé); Michael Chamberlain, “The Crusader era and the Ayyūbid dynasty”, in Carl F. Petry (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 211–241; Donald P. Little, “Historiography of the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk epochs”, *ibid.* pp. 412–144; Anne-Marie Eddé, “Bilād al-Shām from the Fātimid conquest to the fall of the Ayyūbids (359–658/970–1260)”, in Maribel Fierro (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 2, *The Western Islamic World Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries*, (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 161–200; and Yaacov Lev, “The Fātimid caliphate (358–567/969–1171) and the Ayyūbids in Egypt (567–648/1171–1250)”, *Ibid.* pp. 201–236.

³⁷*From Saladin to the Mongols*, p. 93.

³⁸As well as the Seljuq empire and its successor states, the Kurdish ‘Annāzid and Shaddādid dynasties provide examples of fragmented polities, various parts of which were ruled by members of the same family.

³⁹Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols*, p. 80.

the same fund for the vain attempt to defend Acre against the Third Crusade, only a small amount had been paid back at this time.⁴⁰

Even after the reforms of al-‘Ādil in Egypt in the following year, which al-Maqrīzi says magnified the wealth of the land, when al-‘Azīz and his uncle wanted to attack Damascus for the third time, some of the Egyptian army mutinied because they had not received the pay they were owed, and the rulers’ difficulties in financing the expedition are evident in that they had to borrow money from their *amīrs* to be paid back out of the poll-tax (*jawālī*) of the following year.⁴¹

Nevertheless, it remains sure that in terms of wealth and resources al-Afḍal was at a disadvantage compared to his brother in Egypt. The military superiority of Egypt meant that if Damascus was successfully to defend itself against an Egyptian attack, it needed to be able to rely on the support of the other Ayyūbid princes, especially those of the Jazīra and Aleppo. From that perspective, it was al-‘Ādil’s decision to abandon al-Afḍal and switch his support to al-‘Azīz that was decisive in determining the loss of Damascus by Saladin’s appointed heir, and al-‘Ādil’s ability subsequently to weaken the alliance between al-Afḍal and his brother al-Zāhir, the ruler of Aleppo, meant that al-Afḍal was virtually isolated.

The third point concerns the developing factionalism in the army following the death of Saladin. The rival groups that we most often hear about are the Ṣalāhiyya (or Nāṣiriyya) and Asadiyya groups of *mamlūks*, and the Kurds, who are usually associated with the Asadiyya. The Ṣalāhiyya were *mamlūks* recruited by Saladin, the Asadiyya those of Saladin’s uncle, Asad al-Dīn Shīrkūh. It was the alienation from al-Afḍal of some of the Ṣalāhī *amīrs* who had been important in the last years of Saladin, and their flight to al-‘Azīz in Egypt, where they are said to have incited the Egyptian ruler against his brother in Damascus, that is the most widely reported proximate cause of al-‘Azīz’s attack on Egypt.⁴² As suggested above, though, such incitement was probably unnecessary to fire al-‘Azīz’s ambitions.

As we have seen, most of the sources are critical of al-Afḍal for listening to his *wazīr*’s advice that he should end the privileges that the leading Ṣalāhī *amīrs* had come to enjoy in the later years of Saladin and replace them with his own new men. Humphreys has already noted that it is not evident from the sources what exactly was done to them. Some sources use the word *ib‘ād*, but whether that refers literally to banishment or merely to a more metaphorical estrangement is not clear: we have the impression that those who left al-Afḍal to go to Egypt did so of their own volition.

Humphreys, while questioning al-Afḍal’s administrative competence, at least shows understanding of the difficult position in this regard that faced him at the beginning of his reign.⁴³ It is not hard to imagine how powerful individuals from the previous regime would expect to dominate the young new ruler and become bitter in their resentment when they found they could not. Possibly al-Afḍal could have handled things better, but it was a difficult position for him, and much subsequent history in Syria and Egypt illustrates the

⁴⁰Al-Maqrīzi, *Sulūk* 1/1: 121–122. English translation pp. 107–108.

⁴¹Maqrīzi, *Sulūk* 1/1: 133. English translation pp. 117–118.

⁴²Abū Shāma, *Rawḍatayn* 4: p. 420; Ibn Wāṣil, *Muḥarrirj*, 3: pp. 10–11, 12, 14; al-Maqrīzi, *Sulūk*. English translation pp. 101–102; Ibn al-Athīr refers to the defection of the Ṣalāhiyya *amīrs* from al-Afḍal in his account of the second attack of al-‘Azīz on Damascus (*Kāmil*, 12: 118. English translation 3: p. 123).

⁴³From *Saladin to the Mongols*, pp. 91–92.

problems for rulers that arose because of the competing interests and loyalties of *mamlūk* factions. Again it seems that the way in which most of the sources report the issue does not do justice to the problems al-Afḍal had to face. If he had continued to rely on his father's men, his future would still have been difficult.

It is difficult to see that these divisions among the soldiers benefitted any one of the rulers at the expense of another. Al-ʿAzīz and al-ʿĀdil at various times both faced opposition from one or other faction. In assessing al-Afḍal's abilities, the extent to which his actions might have exacerbated the divisions and rivalries is important, such as his treatment of the Ṣalāḥiyya when he came to Egypt as *atabeg* for the son of al-ʿAzīz. Perhaps he could have handled this problem better, but factionalism seems to have been inherent in the system of *mamlūk* recruitment that he inherited.⁴⁴

Simply to dismiss al-Afḍal as incapable and self-indulgent, therefore, does not contribute to historical understanding. That judgment, based merely on the criterion of political success, accepts too readily the accounts of the events following the death of Saladin by Ibn Wāṣil and Abū Shama especially.⁴⁵ It does not do justice either to the complex political situation that Saladin had left for his descendants or to al-Afḍal's character, insofar as it can be seen from the sources. If it is true that he did not have the experience or, perhaps, the instincts necessary for political success in competition with relatives who were more politically adept in the case of al-ʿĀdil, or inherited greater resources in the case of al-ʿAzīz, he does appear nevertheless as someone with more substance than the two-dimensional character evident in some of the modern references to him. gh@soas.ac.uk

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⁴⁴Michael Chamberlain, "The Crusader era and the Ayyūbid dynasty", p. 220, appositely quotes one of the leaders of the Ṣalāḥiyya admitting that they had become known for continually raising up one prince and deposing another (Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij* 3: p. 118).

⁴⁵On the contrasting careers and agendas of these two historians of Saladin and the Ayyūbids, see: Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography. Authors as Actors*, (London and New York, 2006).