

History of the Crusades.
Episode 100
Baibars.

Wait, did I just say Episode 100? Woohoo! Wow, that seemed to go quickly. Even though there's clearly cause to celebrate, we have a lot to get through in this episode, so put the cork back in champagne bottles and we'd better press forward. So where am I? Here we go.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Egyptian Mamluks defeat the Mongols in the Battle of Ain Jalut. Now it's hard to overstate the historical importance of this battle. The Egyptians were victorious, and their victory meant that the Mongol invasion was driven back, with its western borders now lying in Persia. Egypt then occupied all of Syria, and the Egyptian Mamluks went on to establish a power-base which would see them prevail as the dominant Muslim force in the Middle East until the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the 1400s.

What would have happened if the Mongols won the Battle of Ain Jalut? Well, it's difficult to speculate, but Steven Runciman, in the third book of his trilogy on the Crusades, states that had the Mongols won the Battle of Ain Jalut, they no doubt would have pressed their advantage and gone on to conquer Egypt, meaning there would have been no great Muslim power remaining in the Middle East. The closest Muslim country would have been Morocco, far to the west in North Africa.

Kitbuqa, the Mongol commander defeated at Ain Jalut, was a Nestorian Christian. Had he prevailed in battle, it's likely that the native Christians in the Middle East may have for the first time, risen to power under the Mongols. With the subversion of Islamic rule in the Middle East, it's also likely that the Crusader states would have survived as Latin Christian centers of power. While it's unlikely that a Mongol victory would have totally destroyed Islam in the Middle East, Christianity is likely to have become the predominant religion of the rulers in the region. So a victory by the Mongols may have given rise to a Christian Middle East. The Battle of Ain Jalut is not known as one of the most important battles in history for nothing. Anyway, it's futile to speculate about the outcome of a Mongol victory at Ain Jalut, because the Mamluks prevailed, and the Nestorian Christian Mongol general Kitbuqa was beheaded by the Mamluks.

Five days after their victory at Ain Jalut, Qutuz and his Mamluk army arrived at Damascus, where they were welcomed by the citizens of Damascus as liberators. Qutuz restored Muslim rule in Damascus, then went on to place the Emirs of Homs and Hama back in their rightful positions. Within a month the city of Aleppo had also been recovered for Islam. A couple of months later, Hulagu the Mongol Khan sent troops to recover Aleppo. They were defeated, but still managed to massacre a large number of Muslims in reprisal for the execution of Kitbuqa.

Having secured all of Syria, Sultan Qutuz headed triumphantly back to Egypt. There was, however, one cloud on his victorious horizon. Tensions had been building between Qutuz and the head of the late Sultan Ayyub's elite Mamluk regiment, Rukn ad-Din Baibars. Baibars was an ambitious man, and the Sultan, quite rightly as it turned out, was suspicious of his intentions. When Baibars requested the post of the governor of Aleppo, Qutuz turned him down.

Baibars soon had his revenge. As the victorious Mamluk army approached the Nile Delta, Qutuz decided to take some time out to engage in one of his favorite pastimes, hunting hares. He set out with a small group of men, including Baibars. When they were some distance from the camp, one of Baibars' close associates made a request of the Sultan. The man grasped the Sultan's hand firmly as if he was going to kiss it, and while Qutuz was effectively rendered defenseless, Baibars attacked him from behind, stabbing him in the back with his sword and killing him. Having dispatched his second Sultan, Baibars was declared ruler, and when the victorious Mamluk army rode into Cairo, the new Sultan Baibars was at its head.

Right. I think it's time we discovered a bit more about Baibars. So far in this podcast series, he's made quite an impact already. We first came upon him in Episode 90 when he led the Egyptian forces to victory in the battle of La Forbie. He popped up again in Episode 94 when he led the crack Mamluk force, the chosen 1,000, to victory over the vanguard of King Louis' army when, under the leadership of King Louis' brother, Robert of Artois, they foolishly attacked the city of Mansurah. Soon after, this clearly talented military commander began killing Sultans. In Episode 96 he killed Sultan Turanshah, and now, in Episode 100 he has killed Sultan Qutuz. Clearly, he has some issues with those in authority.

But Baibars really doesn't need to work through the problems which resulted in him personally taking the knife to the leader of Egypt on two occasions. He doesn't need to stop killing Sultans because there are no more Sultans for him to kill. There's just himself, Sultan Baibars.

Baibars originally came from the Russian steppes. He was a Kipchak Turk. Mongol invasions of the steppes during his childhood forced his family to flee to the Crimea, where he was enslaved at the age of fourteen. He was sold into the service of the Emir of Hama in Syria, but apparently his new master was unsettled by his physical appearance and sold him onto an Egyptian Mamluk officer. What was it about his appearance which so unsettled the Emir of Homs? Well, it seems that Baibars was a very memorable man so far as his looks were concerned. He was unusually tall, with dark skin and dark hair. His eyes, however, were a piercing light blue, and one of his eyes was marred by a large white fleck, which reduced his value in the slave market. He also possessed a loud, resonant voice which he could use to great effect. Once sold into the service of the Mamluks, he rose rapidly, becoming one of the elite Mamluk unit which served as the personal bodyguards to Sultan Ayyub. He excelled in his military training and gained the respect and admiration of his fellow Mamluks. When he became Sultan, Baibars was around 50 years of age and is described by Steven Runciman as, and I quote "a statesman of the highest caliber, unimpeded by any scruple of honor, gratitude, or mercy." End quote.

Sultan Baibars now finds himself head of a vast territory, stretching from Egypt right across to northern Syria. This in itself poses a challenge. Much of Syria has been ravaged and traumatized by the recent Mongol occupation and, even in his own country Egypt, Baibars' legitimacy as a ruler is questionable. The first thing he needs to do is to consolidate his hold on power and he needs to do this quickly. The Mongols may have been defeated at the Battle of Ain Jalut, but Baibars knew that they could gather their vast armies and re-invade his territory at any time. He needed to shore up the defenses of his new realm as quickly as possible.

Then there were the Syrians. His own people, the Egyptians, were used to the idea of being ruled by a former slave, as the Mamluks had taken over the reins of power since the death of Sultan Turanshah. The Syrians, however, were different. They might not take too kindly to being ruled by an Egyptian. The fact that the new Egyptian leader was a former slave wasn't exactly going to make Baibars a more popular leader.

It was pretty clear that as Baibars rode victorious into Cairo in the autumn of 1260 to start his reign, he had quite a few things to do on his to-do list. Firstly, he needed to consolidate his power base in Egypt and ensure that the Egyptian people, and in particular the members of the Egyptian nobility and the Egyptian military, accepted him as their leader. He swept into Cairo on a wave of victory and promptly installed himself in the great citadel in Cairo, ensuring the support of key Emirs across Egypt by bestowing upon them gifts and positions of power. He installed the remnants of the Mamluk Regiment established by Sultan Ayyub as his personal bodyguards.

He then began an effective propaganda campaign, determined to establish himself in the eyes of the Egyptian people as the savior of Islam and the essential hero that Egypt needed to survive against the Mongol menace. He ordered a monument to be erected on the battlefield at Ain Jalut. He then quietly demolished the grave containing the body of the late Sultan Qutuz, doing everything he could to exaggerate his own role in the historic victory while downplaying any contribution made by Qutuz. And it worked. In his book "The Crusades", Thomas Asbridge writes that when Baibars' official biography was released many years later, the Battle of Ain Jalut was portrayed as having been won almost single-handedly by Baibars.

To reinforce his image as the all-powerful, all-conquering hero that Egypt needed, Baibars adopted for his emblem the symbol of a lion, with its fore-paw raised as a symbol of both dominance and action. The lion was stamped on coins issued in Baibar's name, and also appeared on the many public works he commissioned over the years: bridges, public buildings, and monuments. Baibars seemed to know instinctively exactly how to assert his authority.

As soon as it became clear that Egypt was securely under his command, Baibars turned his attention to Syria. Causing him concern was the fact that some of the Syrian leaders who predated the Mongol invasion were once again in positions of power. Baibars needed to be assured of their loyalty to him, or he would have to eliminate them. Worrying also was the fact that one of his fellow Mamluks, Sinjar al-Halabi, had seized power in Damascus and appeared to have the support of the Damascan people. Baibars gathered the Egyptian army together and marched into Syria, determined to deal decisively with these issues.

And that's exactly what he did. First up was Damascus. Baibars met the Damascan army outside the city on the 17th of January 1261. Despite the fact that the Damascans fought bravely for their new leader, Sinjar was no match for Baibars. Baibars scored a decisive victory against the Damascans, and went on to eliminate Sinjar and his key supporters. Meanwhile, at the eastern extreme of his empire, the Mongols had invaded and were threatening the city of Aleppo. The Ayyubite leaders of Homs and Hama combined to defeat the invading Mongol forces. As a reward for this service, Baibars allowed them to keep their territories, so long as they were prepared to acknowledge him as overall leader. The former leader of Kerak was not so lucky. He too had slipped back into power following the Mongol retreat, but unfortunately for him, Baibars was unsure of his loyalty. Baibars

soothed the Emir of Kerak with promises of future rewards, and then, in the words of Steven Runciman, he was quietly eliminated.

Once he was satisfied that no effective challenges to his authority existed in Syria, Baibars set about winning the hearts and minds of the people of Syria. He wanted to be viewed by the Syrians, not as a former slave who killed an Egyptian Sultan to illegitimately seize power, but as their true legitimate ruler, someone chosen by God to assume the mantle of the Hero of Islam. So Baibars decided to appoint a man called Ahmad as the new Caliph of Baghdad. Baibars went through the motions of proving that Ahmad was related to the Caliph slain by the Mongols and was therefore the true heir to the Abbasid dynasty. The new Caliph Ahmad duly declared Baibars to be the sole and legitimate Sultan of the entire Muslim world, not only in Egypt and Syria, but beyond, an act which, according to the historian Thomas Asbridge, not only ensured Baibars' legitimacy as the true ruler of Egypt and Syria, but provided tacit authorisation for Baibars to expand his regime across the Middle East.

To complete the picture, Baibars dressed himself in apparel fit for the ruler of the Muslim world, donning a black turban, a purple robe, shoes complete with golden buckles, and an ornamental ceremonial sword. Suitably attired in his finery. Sultan Baibars paraded with the new Caliph through the streets of Cairo.

To further reinforce his image as the Savior of Islam, Baibars set about restoring Cairo's main mosque, as well as the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa mosque, all of which had become somewhat dilapidated under previous rulers. Once his legitimacy was assured, Baibars set about creating the mechanisms needed to effectively administer his vast territory. During his years in power, Baibars will create a truly impressive system of government.

He based his seat of power in Cairo. Of course, establishing his capital in the far western corner of his territory meant that he needed to put in place effective systems of communication. Early on in his reign, he became well known for his ruthlessness in eliminating any signs of disloyalty or insurgency, but he knew that this alone wasn't enough. To rule effectively he needed to know what was happening across his territory, and needed to be able to receive messages and issue commands all the way from Cairo deep into Syria. So he established a courier system. Using relays of mounted messengers whose horses would be changed for fresh mounts at designated stations, Baibars ensured that a message could pass between Cairo and Damascus within four days. This system of horse relays was supplemented by the use of carrier pigeons and signal fires, which meant that Baibars, far away in Cairo, could respond to military invasions and civil insurrections anywhere within his territory at an impressive speed.

Baibars also spent vast sums of money expanding and improving the Egyptian army, and re-fortifying key towns and castles within his realm. He expanded the elite Mamluk regiment to 4,000 men, who were garrisoned at the citadel in Cairo and schooled daily in the arts of sword-fighting, archery, horsemanship, and hand-to-hand combat. He also increased the main Egyptian army four-fold, to around 40,000 mounted warriors.

With his power effectively consolidated and his new dominion protected and fortified, Baibars can now turn his mind towards a subject dear to our hearts, the Latin Christians of the Crusader states. Join me next week as Baibars establishes diplomatic ties with

Europe, and decides to punish the Christians who actively supported the Mongols, King Hethum of Armenia and Prince Bohemond of Antioch.

Well, that's it for me. That's the one hundredth episode over and done with. I'm off to do some celebrating. Until next week, bye for now.

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