

History of the Crusades.
Episode 101
Baibars Attacks.

Hello again. Last week we saw the rise to power of Rukn al-Din Baibars. Sultan Baibars' territory now stretches all the way from his capital in Cairo to northern Syria. With his realm secured and consolidated, Baibars sets his sights on his two enemies in the region, the Mongols and the Franks.

Now, most Muslim leaders in the past had been content to arrange peace treaties with the Crusader states, leaving them to maintain their presence in the Holy Land. Not Baibars. He viewed the busy commercial port cities in the Crusader states as centers which could be incorporated into Muslim territory. The Latin Christians controlled a strip of fertile land running down the coast of the Mediterranean. Baibars wanted to drive them from this strip of land.

With Hulagu's Mongol armies still a potent force, Baibars knew he had to bide his time. Instead, in the early 1260s, Baibars looked further afield and tried his hand at international diplomacy. Unsurprisingly, the first person he reached out to was King Manfred of Sicily, the illegitimate son of Emperor Frederick II who had deposed young Conradin as ruler of Sicily and Acre. The Egyptians had enjoyed a close relationship with Emperor Frederick, and Manfred seemed of a similar disposition. Hoping to encourage the growing split between Manfred and the Papacy, and perhaps reduce the chance of Europe mounting another Crusade in aid of the beleaguered Latin Christians of the Crusader states, Baibars sent an envoy to Sicily bearing gifts for King Manfred. The overture was successful, and Baibars and Manfred ensured that strong ties continued to exist between Sicily and Egypt.

Baibars also reached out to a rival of Hulagu, the Mongol ruler of a region on the southern Russian steppes. Berke Khan. Berke Khan had converted to Islam and was currently in conflict with his neighbor Hulagu, the Mongol ruler of Persia. Baibars sent envoys and gifts to Berke Khan and even went so far as including his name in Friday prayers at mosques in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. This ensured Baibars had a steady supply of slave boys from the steppes to fill the ranks of his army and went some way to curbing Hulagu's power in the region.

To top off his diplomatic feats, Baibars forged a trading alliance with the Genoese merchants who had been forced out of Acre following their conflict with the Venetians. From their new base in Tyre, the Genoese began trading with the Mamluks. Baibars also made contact with the close Genoese ally, the newly restored Byzantine Emperor Michael Palaeologus.

While all these diplomatic maneuvers were taking place, Baibars busied himself training and expanding his army, and making small exploratory raids into Latin Christian territory. The raids weren't large enough to invite intervention by Hulagu or the Latin Christians of Europe, but they did let the Franks know of Baibars' hostile intentions and allowed him to assess their military capabilities. Some of the raids were pretty successful from Baibars' point of view. In autumn 1261, using Aleppo as a base, he made a number of incursions into the Principality of Antioch, resulting in the sacking of the vital port of St Symeon. At one stage, Antioch itself looked like it may come under attack, but the King of Armenia and Hulagu both sent forces to defend the city, and the Egyptians were driven back.

Baibars also sent his forces into the Kingdom of Acre. John of Ibelin, who was the Count of Jaffa, attempted to negotiate a truce with Baibars, and was surprisingly successful. In February 1263 John met with Sultan Baibars and managed to negotiate a truce regarding the exchange of prisoners. The military Orders at this time were keeping a number of Muslim prisoners, and the Egyptians also held their fair share of Latin Christian captives. However, when time came to make the exchange, the Orders of the Temple and the Hospital refused to release their Muslim prisoners, as apparently they were highly trained craftsmen and their skills were much in demand within the Orders. A furious Baibars immediately broke off negotiations and marched into Galilee. His soldiers destroyed a church in Nazareth, then marched all the way to Acre. He destroyed some properties in the outer suburbs of the city but, deciding it was not yet time to attack the capital of the Frankish Kingdom, he withdrew back to Egypt. These small raids into Latin Christian territory continued on and off until 1265.

In 1265, Baibars decided the days of exploratory raids were over. With his army strengthened and expanded, with his diplomatic ties established, and with his knowledge of the Latin Christians, their territory, and their military capabilities secure, it was time to get serious. As an added bonus for Baibars, Hulagu died in February 1265. It would be some months before his son Abaqa would officially take over as Khan. Even then, all of Abaqa's time and resources were spent in the southern Russian steppe region, fighting off incursions made by his late father's rival, Berke Khan. This essentially left Baibars free to mobilize his army northwards into Latin Christian territory without fear of Mongol interference.

Baibars took full advantage of this turn of events. At the end of February 1265 he marched his army into Latin Christian territory. He didn't do this with a great deal of fanfare, but managed to keep things pretty quiet. He set up a giant pavilion tent outside the Latin Christian town of Arsuf, perhaps fooling any watching Latin Christians into thinking he was embarking on an elaborate hunting expedition. Inside the tent however, he was constructing in secret five giant trebuchet catapult machines. When the siege engines were ready, Baibars transported them northwards with his army to Caesarea. Having taken the city totally by surprise, he quickly secured most of the town, with a startled and frightened residents managing to seek protection inside the citadel within the city. Fortunately for those trapped inside Caesarea, the citadel had recently been re-fortified by King Louis IX. Baibars pummeled the citadel relentlessly for the next seven days, sending missiles of stones and Greek fire hurtling from his trebuchets and building a siege tower to attack it more closely. The defenders knew that under such a sustained barrage, even King Louis' new and improved citadel could not remain standing for much longer.

On the 5th of March, the defenders and those inside the citadel managed to flee Caesarea by using ships sent down from Acre. With the city now abandoned, Baibars ordered it, along with its citadel, to be destroyed completely.

With Caesarea now wiped off the map, Baibars took his men and his trebuchets and marched to Haifa. By this time, news of the fall of Caesarea had spread, and most of the citizens of Haifa, watching the approach of the formidable Egyptian army, decided to take what they could carry and flee their town. It was fortunate for them that they did. Baibars took the town easily, massacred any remaining Latin Christians within the city, and then destroyed the town.

Baibars then decided to head back southwards to Arsuf. Unlike his previous two conquests, the town of Arsuf was garrisoned with knights from the Order of the Hospital, 270 of them. Arsuf itself was heavily fortified and surrounded by a deep moat. Baibars attempted to cross the moat by filling it with logs, which he obtained by felling trees in a nearby forest. During the night, however, the Latin Christian defenders set fire to the logs, reducing them to a useless pile of ash. Baibars then changed tactics and subjected the town's walls to a barrage of missiles from his trebuchets. The Egyptians poured into the lower town of Arsuf on the 26th of April, after its walls were breached. The Knights Hospitaller retreated to the citadel, but their commander surrendered three days later, having lost a third of his men. He apparently negotiated for the survivors to be allowed to walk free, but Baibars took them all into captivity.

Right, well now the Egyptian army is running rampant through Latin Christian territory and has managed to capture and destroy three towns, where, you may ask, is the army of the Kingdom of Acre? Why isn't it being sent to repel the Egyptian attacks? Well, the current Regent of both the Kingdom of Acre and the Kingdom of Cyprus, Hugh of Antioch, has been caught on the hop. He was in Cyprus when the Egyptians first appeared before the walls of Caesarea, and he has been scrambling to effectively deal with the situation. He gathered all the men he could from Cyprus and sailed to Acre, arriving there on the 25th of April 1265, just as Baibars was attacking the citadel at Arsuf.

Having secured the city of Arsuf, and with his group of captured Knights Hospitaller in tow, Baibars moved northwards to the outskirts of Acre. Hearing that Hugh of Antioch had just arrived with an army, Baibars decided to call it a day, and headed back to Egypt. He left behind some men to secure his new territory, ordering them to demolish Arsuf, then marched triumphantly back to Cairo, having destroyed three major Latin Christian towns and having extended Egyptian territory all the way northwards to within sight of Acre. As he marched into Cairo, Baibars paraded the captured Latin Christian knights before him, complete with broken crosses adorning their necks.

After the dust had settled, Baibars wrote to King Manfred of Sicily to inform him of his success. Showing that he was definitely his father's son, Manfred apparently rejoiced in the Egyptian victory, even going so far as to send some congratulatory gifts to his buddy, Sultan Baibars.

In the late spring of 1266, the new Khan of Abaqa's armies were once again occupied by the invading Mongol armies of his rival, Berke Khan. Once again, Baibars decided to take full advantage of the preoccupied Mongol forces by invading the Crusader states. Keen to repeat his successful surprise smash-and-grab campaign of the previous year, this time, he sent two Egyptian armies northwards. The first army, led by Sultan Baibars himself, marched up to Acre, arriving there on the 1st of June 1266. Finding the city strongly garrisoned, he led his troops instead to the massive Templar castle Safed, from which the Latin Christians ruled northern Galilee.

In his book "Holy Warriors", Jonathan Phillips gives an account of the fall of the castle. He states that Baibars initially offered gifts to the contingent of knights defending the castle as an inducement to them to surrender. The knights not only turned down Baibars' offer, but they put his gifts into their catapult machines and hurled them back towards the Egyptian army as missiles. Furious at this slight, Baibars attacked the castle with his own siege engines. The Latin Christian defenders put up a valiant fight, but eventually the Knights Templar defending the castle had to face the fact that their castle would fall. On the 23rd of

July 1266 they requested terms of surrender. According to Jonathan Phillips, to avenge himself for having his gifts hurled back to him previously, Baibars didn't go personally into the castle to arrange its surrender, but instead sent a look-alike. The false Baibars secured an agreement for the knights inside the castle to be given safe conduct back into Latin Christian territory, an agreement that the actual Baibars decided he didn't need to honor. As a consequence after the 1500 knights from the castle marched out, expecting to make their way safely to Acre, they were instead captured, led to a nearby hill, and beheaded. All of them that is, except for one man who was spared and sent to Acre to inform the residents there of the folly of messing with the almighty Sultan.

Instead of destroying the castle of Safed, Baibars ordered it to be repaired, re-manned and re-fortified. He also built two mosques inside the castle. Thereafter, the castle was used as an Egyptian outpost.

Baibars then went on to attack the castle of Toron, which fell with barely a fight.

Meanwhile, the second Mamluk force was making its way up to the County of Tripoli. It easily captured the town of Arqa, which guarded the way into the County from the mountain ranges separating the County from the Muslim territory to the east. The Mamluks then joined up with the forces from Hama and marched northwards towards Armenia.

King Hethum of Armenia had been expecting a revenge attack from the Mamluks ever since the death of Khan Hulagu. Without Hulagu's protection, he knew it was just a matter of time before Baibars punished both himself and the Prince of Antioch for supporting the Mongols. He had tried in vain to negotiate a peace treaty with Sultan Baibars following Hulagu's death, but Baibars was having none of it. He was determined to see Armenia thoroughly punished.

As rumors of the Mamluk army mobilizing northwards reached him, King Hethum raced to the court of Hulagu's rival, Berke Khan. It was while he was away in the north, seeking assistance, that the Mamluk invaders clashed with the Armenian army, which was led by King Hethum's two sons, Leo and Thoros. The Armenian army had been waiting at the Syrian Gates which guarded the pass into Cilician Armenia. However, the Mamluks ignored the Syrian gates and marched northwards, deciding to use a lesser-known path through the mountains. The Armenian army rushed back into Cilicia, hoping to prevent the Mamluks from descending onto the Cilician plains. On the 24th of August 1266 a battle took place between the two forces. It was a decisive win for the Mamluks. Of King Hethum's sons, Prince Thoros was killed and Prince Leo taken prisoner.

The Mamluks then slashed and burned their way northwards to the capital of Armenia, Cis. Once at Cis, the Mamluks ransacked the royal palace, burned down the main cathedral in the town, and slaughtered thousands of Armenian residents. When King Hethum hurried back to his Kingdom, he found his remaining son and heir imprisoned, his palace plundered, his people murdered, and his capital in ruins. Sultan Baibars had taken his revenge. Stephen Runciman, in the third volume of his trilogy on the Crusades, writes that the Armenian Kingdom never recovered from this event, and thereafter only played a passive role in the politics of the region.

What, might you ask, were the armies of Cyprus and Acre doing at this time? Well, in an almost identical fashion to the previous year, Hugh of Antioch was in Cyprus when the Mamluks struck. Once again, he sailed to Acre and arrived there just in time to prevent

Baibars from attacking the city itself, but not in time to prevent vast swathes of Latin Christian territory falling to the Mamluks.

Hugh of Antioch then tried to redeem himself. When Baibars retired back to Cairo in the autumn of 1266, taking most of his army with him, Hugh gathered knights from all the military Orders and conducted a raid into Galilee, hoping to win back some lost territory for the Kingdom of Acre, and perhaps even re-take the vital Templar castle Safed. But the expedition was a failure. The group of Mamluk warriors garrisoned at Safed ambushed the vanguard of Hugh's Army on the 28th of October, and local Muslims simultaneously attacked their camp. Hugh was forced back to Acre, having lost a sizable amount of men.

Well, things don't look that good for the Latin Christians at this stage. Unfortunately, next week things will get even worse. Join me next week as we see an entire Crusader state wiped off the map courtesy of the Mamluks, in an episode ominously entitled "The Fall Of Antioch". Until next week, bye for now.

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