

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 106  
The Fall of Tripoli.

Hello again. Last week we saw more Latin Christian territory in the Middle East fall into Muslim hands. It was pretty clear to everyone by now, Latin Christians, native Christians, Muslims, and Mongols, that without a massive Crusade from the West, the days of the remaining Crusader states were numbered.

It was also pretty clear to everyone that there would be no mass intervention by the West. Not only had the Latin Christians of the Holy Land tried to muster support for a Crusade, even the Mongols had attempted to do so. Dangling the very tempting and sensible (you would have thought) offer of joining the mighty Mongol forces to the Latin Christian forces of Europe before the Kings of the West, the Mongols' efforts came to nothing. With no major outside assistance forthcoming, the days of the Crusader states were numbered.

Now, you may recall from last week's episode that in 1283 the Egyptian Sultan Qalawun signed a treaty with the Kingdom of Acre proclaiming peace for a period of ten years, ten months, ten days and ten hours. Importantly, the northern port of Latakia, which is all that remains of the Principality of Antioch, and the County of Tripoli are not covered by this peace treaty, and it is these Latin Christian possessions which will be the subject of our episode today.

In early 1287 the port of Latakia was still being used by the Latin Christians as a trading outpost. Goods from the city of Aleppo were taken to Latakia to be shipped across the Mediterranean. It occurred to the merchants of Aleppo that, all things considering, it would be better if Latakia was in Muslim and not Christian hands. Sultan Qalawun agreed. In March 1287 an earthquake rocked the region around Latakia, and its defensive walls were seriously damaged. Sultan Qalawun decided to take full advantage of the fact that the city was now vulnerable to invaders. He sent an Emir to conquer Latakia. The city fell easily into the Emir's hands. The Latin Christian garrison retreated to the relative safety of a small fort at the end of a causeway in the harbor, but on the 20th of April they were convinced to give themselves up. Tellingly, no Latin Christian forces had come to the aid of the beleaguered city.

With Latakia now in Muslim hands, Sultan Qalawun turned his attention to the city of Tripoli and its County. That was unfortunate for the Latin Christians, as six months after the collapse of Latakia, the final outpost of his former Principality, Bohemond VII died. The County of Tripoli had lost its count. The bad news was that Bohemond was childless. The good news was that he had nominated an heir, his sister Lucia. Unfortunately though, Lucia had married Charles of Anjou's former Grand Admiral and now lived in Europe. Charles of Anjou wasn't exactly a popular figure in the Crusader states, and no one really wanted to import a Countess from Europe to rule Tripoli, particularly one associated with Charles of Anjou, so the nobility got together and came up with their own candidate for the job, the Armenian Princess Sibylla, the widow of Bohemond VI. You might remember Sibylla from Episode 104, when she assumed the title of Regent of the County of Tripoli prior to Bohemond VII coming of age, and had delegated her administrative duties to one Bishop Bartholomew.

It shouldn't have come to a surprise to anyone that as soon as the County was offered to Sibylla, she threw her hands into the air with delight and promptly wrote a letter to her old buddy Bishop Bartholomew, inviting him to rule Tripoli on her behalf, just like back in the old days. But this wasn't what the nobility had in mind at all, and they traveled to Armenia to inform Sibylla that she would need to rule the county herself. Sibylla stood her ground, and in the end the noblemen came to the surprising decision that they didn't need a Count or Countess after all. They would rule Tripoli themselves.

Together with the leading merchants of the County, they formed a governing body called the Commune. They declared the dynastic rule of the County to be a thing of the past, and settled down to take charge of the state. Princess Sibylla seemed to take this new development pretty well. She remained in Armenia and seemed happy to put the whole incident behind her.

Not so, however Lucia. Early in 1288, Bohemond's sister and nominated heir arrived in Tripoli with her husband to take up her inheritance and become the new Countess of Tripoli. The Knights Hospitaller, who have been steadfast allies of Bohemond and of the past rulers of the County, were happy to see her. The Commune, however, was not happy. They were getting used to the idea of ruling the County by themselves. Instead of graciously making way for Bohemond's heir, they presented her with a long list of grievances concerning the rule of her brother Bohemond and previous Bohemonds who had come before him, and declared themselves, the Commune, the new governing authority. They then placed themselves under the protection of the Genoese.

I imagine you can guess what happens next. The military Orders and the Venetians declared support for Lucia. Yet again, the Venetians and Genoese found themselves in conflict, and yet again the conflict threatened to descend into civil war. The head of the Commune, an ambitious man named Bartholomew Embriaco, decided to test the waters and see if he couldn't make himself the new Count. He wrote to Sultan Qalawun in Cairo, asking whether the Egyptian leader would support him if he declared himself the ruler of Tripoli. The Venetians hurriedly sent their own envoys to Cairo, informing Sultan Qalawun that if the Genoese-backed Bartholomew Embriaco became Count, there was a risk the Genoese would dominate trade in the Middle East, developing a monopoly that would adversely affect Egyptian interests.

Secretly rubbing his hands together at this unexpected turn of events, Sultan Qalawun moved the Egyptian army into Syria. Word reached Tripoli that the Sultan was on his way, and that he intended to resolve the succession problem by taking over the County. This of course, wasn't in the interests of Lucia or Bartholomew Embriaco or the Commune. At long last, the military Orders, the merchants, and the prospective leaders of Tripoli united to prepare the defense of the city. Countess Lucia was given overall command of the city with the consent of the Commune, the military Orders, and the merchants. The Knights of the Orders busied themselves preparing their defenses. The City of Acre sent a contingent of men northwards to assist them, the Genoese and Venetian ships manned the harbor, and young King Henry of Cyprus sent a company of knights and four ships to Tripoli under the command of his brother, Amalric. Sensibly, while fighting men were streaming into the city and its defenses being shored up, many of the citizens of Tripoli decided to take what they could carry and flee, down the coast to Acre or across the sea to Cyprus.

The Crusader town of Tripoli was located on a peninsula which jutted into the Mediterranean. Nowadays, the peninsula is home to the suburb of Al-Mina in the modern

day city of Tripoli. Land walls blocked access to the city from the peninsula, and sea walls protected it from the coast. The Latin Christians didn't have much to worry about from the sea, as the merchant ships dominated the waters around the peninsula. Their main concern was the land wall.

And they were right to be concerned. The vast Egyptian army arrived at Tripoli on the 25th of March 1289 and immediately began a prolonged siege. Masses of catapult machines pummeled the walls relentlessly. After a month of bombardment, the Tower of the Bishop in the southeast corner of the land wall and the nearby Tower of the Hospital both began to crumble, and seemed on the verge of collapse. Realizing that the walls wouldn't hold out much longer, the Venetians decided to call it a day. They loaded all they could carry onto their ships and sailed off towards the horizon. Concerned that the Venetians might somehow gain a financial advantage from this move, the Genoese quickly followed suit. With the Latin Christian defenses now in a state of chaos and confusion, the south-eastern wall of the city collapsed, and the Egyptians poured into the city.

In the scenes of slaughter, looting, and destruction which followed, many citizens of Tripoli tried in vain to board boats to flee from the fallen town. The Countess, Amalric of Cyprus, and the commanders of the Orders of the Hospital and the Teutonic Knights managed to escape to the safety of Cyprus, but the commander of the Templars and the head of the Commune, Bartholomew Embriaco, were both killed. Every Latin Christian man found within the town was put to death, while women and children were captured to be sold as slaves.

A young Muslim nobleman, the sixteen year old Abulfeda, was present at the sacking of Tripoli. He would later become the ruler of Homs and a respected poet and historian. Honing his skills at the destruction of Tripoli, he wrote down his observations of the event. Some Latin Christians, desperate to escape the carnage but unable to secure a place on one of the ships sailing to Cyprus, made their way on small boats to a nearby island, the island of St Thomas. Abulfeda describes what he saw, and I quote. "A short distance from Tripoli in the Mediterranean Sea there was a small island with the church. When the city was taken, many Franj took refuge there with their families. But the Muslim troops took to the sea, swam across to the island, massacred all the men there and carried off the women and children with booty. I myself rode out to the island on a boat after the carnage, but was unable to stay, so strong was the stench of corpses." End quote.

After every citizen of Tripoli had been either killed or taken captive, and all the loot from the city was in Muslim hands, Sultan Qalawun ordered the total destruction of the city, which was then razed to the ground. Nearby Latin Christian settlements, which had relied on the city of Tripoli for protection, also fell into Muslim hands. Another Crusader state, the County of Tripoli, had been wiped off the map.

To say that the citizens of Acre were shocked by this event was an understatement. They had understood the Mamluk motivation behind the destruction of the Principality of Antioch, because Prince Bohemond had openly opposed the Egyptians in battle when he combined with the King of Armenia to support the Mongols. The County of Tripoli, however, had done no such thing. The citizens of Tripoli and of Acre had assumed that the Egyptian Sultan would be content to leave the Latin Christian trading cities alone, particularly since they served as centers of commerce for Muslims as well as Christian merchants and traders. The fall of Tripoli proved them wrong. Their sole hope now was

that the ten year, ten month, ten day and ten hour treaty still in place would protect the remaining Latin Christians settlements in the Kingdom of Acre.

Meanwhile, back in the Egyptian camp, Sultan Qalawun was experiencing pressure of a different kind. His military commanders were urging him to break the truce, seize the initiative, and attack Acre. According to Amin Maalouf, in his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", the Sultan refused to even consider breaking his oath. His commanders pressed him further. Would he instead look for a loophole, some way for the treaty to be declared invalid or void? Again, the Sultan refused. Instead, he declared, he would hold steadfastly to the truce and leave Acre alone until the truce expired. In fact, Amin Maalouf writes that Sultan Qalawun even decided at one stage to renew the truce for another ten years.

Acre was now the sole Latin Christian trading port in the Middle East, and it quickly became an absolutely thriving commercial center. Traders who had once shared their business between ports up and down the coast now only had one place to go to, Acre. Acre became packed to the brim with Muslim and Latin Christian merchants wishing to ship their harvests and goods to lucrative markets in Europe. They mixed with wealthy Venetian traders and even wealthier Templar money lenders and bankers. Even Muslim peasants and farmers from nearby Galilee and surrounding areas flocked to the city, hoping to sell their goods and profit from the intense commercial activity taking place.

Well, if you are thinking that this means that we can all breathe a sigh of relief, sit back, and watch ten peaceful years fly past, you would be wrong. Join me next week for the final episode in this podcast series. The title of the final episode, ominously and unsurprisingly, is "The Fall of Acre". Until next week, for the last time ever, bye for now.

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