

History of the Crusades.
Episode 107
The Fall of Acre.

Hello again. Last week we saw another Crusader state, the County of Tripoli, wiped off the map, leaving only one Crusader state standing, the Kingdom of Acre. The towns within the Kingdom of Acre were protected by a truce, and for the moment at least, the truce seems to be holding. In fact, far from spending its days in fear and trepidation, the city of Acre itself seems to be thriving. As the now sole Latin Christian trading port in the Middle East, business is booming.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, people were starting to become concerned. Having learned of the obliteration of another Crusader state, the Pope and the monarchs of Europe were starting to think that maybe the proposal presented by the Mongols when they visited Europe a couple of years ago had some merit after all. In February 1290 the current Pope, Pope Nicholas IV, called for a new Crusade, one which ambitiously would achieve the, and I quote "total liberation of the Holy Land" end quote. None of the Kings of Europe personally took up the call to arms, but they did send some troops to Acre. King Edward I sent a military contingent to the Holy Land, and around 3,500 Italian Crusaders set sail for Acre in Easter 1290.

Now, the Pope decided to place the Italian Crusaders under the command of the Bishop of Tripoli. The Bishop of Tripoli had fled to Rome as a refugee after the fall of his city, and here at last was something he could do. He could lead a ragtag bunch of Italian warriors back to the Holy Land then liberate his city, and the remainder of the former Crusader states. Easy. Trouble was, the Bishop of Tripoli really couldn't control his Crusaders.

The first signs of trouble appeared not long after they arrived in Acre. Like many Europeans visiting the Crusader states for the first time, the Italians were shocked and appalled to find the streets, marketplaces, and commercial centers full of Muslims, and even more shocking, Latin Christian traders and merchants seemed to be interacting with the Muslims as if it were a normal thing to do. As bunches of Italians gathered together in taverns inside Acre, drinking heavily and voicing their disapproval, their intentions eventually turned violent. They had come to the Holy Land to kill Muslims, so they thought to themselves in their drunken state, it looks like they wouldn't have to go far at all to find some Muslims to kill. They might as well start right here, with the peaceful Muslim merchants and traders plying their wares inside Acre. And that's what they did.

In August 1290 a spark lit the powder keg of brewing Italian resentment and anger. In the third book of his trilogy on the Crusades, Steven Runciman speculates that an argument may have broken out during a drinking session in which both Muslims and Italians were present. Suddenly, drunken Italians were drawing their swords, and any Muslim they saw became a target. The riots spread to the streets, and soon anyone who even looked like a Muslim was fleeing for his life, with some Latin Christians who were unfortunate enough to have grown a beard being slain accidentally by rampaging Italians who mistook them for Muslims. The knights of the military Orders seemed powerless to stop the sword-wielding mob of drunken Italians. The best they could do was to round up as many Muslims as they could find and escort them to the safety of the citadel.

When news of the massacre of the Muslims at Acre reached Sultan Qalawun he was outraged. He immediately sent an envoy to Acre, demanding that all the Latin Christians who had taken part in the massacre be sent to Cairo so that the Sultan himself could punish them. Not wanting to send a bunch of Crusaders to their certain deaths, the government at Acre failed to comply with the Sultan's request, instead responding with half-hearted allegation that the Muslim merchants themselves had caused the conflict.

Unsurprisingly dissatisfied by this response, Sultan Qalawun began preparing both the Egyptian army and the Syrian army. Having been advised by his lawyers that the massacre at Acre was grounds to declare the truce between himself and the Kingdom of Acre null and void, he decided to teach the Latin Christians of Acre, a lesson. He wrote to the King of Armenia, declaring that he intended not to leave a single Latin Christian alive in the city. On the 4th of November 1290 he set out from Cairo at the head of his army, but almost immediately he fell seriously ill. Realizing he was close to death, he made his son and heir al-Ashraf Khalil promise to continue the military campaign.

Six days later, Sultan Qalawun died, having only marched five miles from Cairo. The new Sultan Khalil returned to Cairo, where he managed to quell a plot to overthrow him. He then spent some time establishing his power base. Deciding it was now too late in the season to commence a major military campaign, he declared the Egyptian army would march on Acre in accordance with his late father's wishes, in the spring of the following year. And that's what happened. In March 1291, the mighty Egyptian Army, along with a staggering number of siege engines and catapult machines, left Cairo and made its way northwards towards Acre.

Our intrepid reporter on the ground, the budding historian eighteen year old Abulfeda, who would one day become the ruler of Homs, also made his way to Acre. He was assigned to a wagon hauling a massive catapult machine, which was nicknamed "Victorious", and had been used at the siege of Crac des Chevaliers. Here is what he had to say about the journey, and I quote "It was the end of winter when we marched off with the wagons. Rain and snow storms struck us between Hisn al-Akrad and Damascus, causing great hardship, for the wagons were heavy and the oxen weak and dying of cold. Because of the wagons it took us a month to march from Hisn al-Akrad to Acre, usually an eight day ride. The Sultan ordered all the fortresses to send catapults and siege engines to Acre, and in this way a great number of large and small artillery concentrated under its walls, more than had ever before been assembled in one place." End quote.

On the 5th of April, Sultan Khalil arrived at Acre with the Egyptian army. Sources at the time estimated that the army contained as many as 60,000 mounted warriors and 160,000 Muslim foot soldiers. This was most likely an exaggeration, but regardless of the actual numbers, it was certain that the Egyptian force was absolutely massive, and way out-numbered the Latin Christian defenders. In addition to vast numbers of men, Sultan Khalil had managed to muster around a hundred siege engines and catapult machines. This was a staggering number, but the Sultan knew that he would need them.

Acre itself was very well fortified. It was located on a peninsula jutting out into the Mediterranean. Two sides of the city bordered the sea, and the remaining side of the rough triangle that was the city of Acre was separated from the inland by a double set of walls protected by twelve towers. The walls and the towers were in good repair, with work on them having been done recently by King Henry II of Cyprus. As the Egyptian forces had taken so long to make the journey to Acre, the defenders had had plenty of time to muster

their own forces. As the Muslim soldiers surrounded the city and placed their siege engines into position, inside the city were between 30,000 and 40,000 citizens. Defending this civilian population were around 1,000 knights and 14,000 foot soldiers.

The Orders of the Temple and the Hospital had gathered all their knights, including some who had traveled all the way from Europe and were present in the city. King Edward I of England had sent a small contingent of English soldiers, and King Henry II of Cyprus, who we mustn't forget was also King of Acre at this time, traveled to Acre from Cyprus along with 200 knights and 500 foot soldiers. Despite these reinforcements, the numbers were difficult to ignore. The Latin Christians were hopelessly outnumbered by the Muslims.

Sultan Khalil directed his army to line up outside the city walls, then the relentless bombardment of the walls began. One hundred catapult machines can hurl quite a few missiles, particularly if they are manned in rotating shifts enabling them to operate 24 hours a day. The two biggest machines, the massive "Victorious" which had accompanied Abulfeda, and the equally formidable one named "Furious", were armed with large boulders, which they regularly lobbed at the walls. The smaller machines hurled smaller missiles, and squadrons of archers, protected from attack by large screens, shot arrows at the defenders manning the towers and the walls. Teams of under-miners worked on digging beneath the towers. It was stated at the time that the Egyptians allocated 1000 men to undermine each tower, although this is probably an exaggeration.

The Latin Christians remained in control of the seas around Acre and took full advantage of this fact. Shiploads of women, children, and the elderly, who could afford the passage, were transported away from the besieged city to Cyprus, while supplies were regularly brought into the city from the sea. One of the ships was fitted with a catapult machine, and it scored some direct hits on the Muslim camp. Smaller boats, containing archers protected by wooden turrets lined with animal skins, fired arrows into the Muslim camp. Occasionally, knights from the military Orders made secret raids into the Muslim camp under cover of darkness, with the aim of setting fire to one of the giant Muslim catapult machines.

While this sounds impressive, the raids were largely ineffectual. Abulfeda reports that one raid was discovered when a Knight Templar tripped over a guy rope securing one of the Muslim tents, alerting those inside the tent to the raid. They then rushed out and killed eighteen of the raiding knights. Another particularly unfortunate knight fell into the Muslim latrine pit and died in there.

The first breakthrough for the Muslims occurred on the 15th of May 1291, just over a month after the siege began. Under-miners managed to collapse one of the twelve defensive towers, the Tower of the King, and within 24 hours Muslim forces had taken control of the section of the wall adjacent to the Tower. Panic now set in amongst the defenders. Earlier, King Henry had attempted to interest Sultan Khalil in negotiating a truce. The Sultan wasn't interested. It seemed that his only goal was the total destruction of Acre, and it now looked as though that goal was about to be realized.

On the 16th of May, the Latin Christians abandoned their defense of the outer wall and retreated to the inner wall. The following day, the Muslims gained control of the outer wall, and on the 18th of May, the Sultan ordered a concerted attack to be launched. To the background of the terrible sounds of the Muslim drums, cymbals, and trumpets, a storm of arrows was released into the city, along with a barrage of missiles from the catapult

machines. The noise was deafening and the attack terrifying in its intensity. Tower after tower fell into Muslim hands, and despite some gallant attempts by the military Orders to launch counterattacks to recover the vital towers, the defenses crumbled and the attackers poured into the city.

Scenes of chaos ensued. Fierce hand-to-hand fighting was now taking place in the streets, and terrified groups of women and children were trying desperately to make their way to the docks, trying to flee to the safety of Cyprus. Some managed to escape on the few remaining boats, including King Henry, the mortally wounded Master of the Temple, and the less wounded Master of the Hospital. Tragically, many smaller boats were swamped by groups of people desperate to flee the carnage, and sank, drowning those on board before they could be ferried onto the ships waiting offshore to take them to Cyprus. Back in the city, Muslim fighters were killing every Latin Christian they came across: men, women, and children alike. A handful were taken captive and became slaves, but the majority were put to the sword.

By the evening of the 18th of May, most of Acre was in Muslim hands, but both the fortified compounds of the Order of the Temple and the Order of the Hospital held out a little longer. The citadel of the Templars finally succumbed to efforts to undermine it on the 28th of May. As the Muslim attackers made their way into the Templar stronghold, the damaged structure collapsed, killing both the Muslim attackers and the Latin Christians sheltering inside it. As to the fortress of the Hospital, the Latin Christians inside agreed to surrender in return for safe passage out of the city. However the Sultan broke his word. Leading the captured Latin Christians to a plain outside the city, he executed them all, almost a hundred years to the day since Richard the Lionheart had done the same thing to his Muslim captives.

Now that Acre was completely defeated, Sultan Khalil ordered it to be destroyed. Houses were pillaged and burned. Defensive structures were dismantled, and the walls were left to crumble. The nearby cities of Tyre, Beirut and Sidon all fell into Muslim hands within a month or so, with the Latin Christians already living there deciding to evacuate the cities in preference to sharing Acre's fate. On the 3rd of August 1291 a small group of Latin Christian knights fled the coastal city of Tortosa. They made their way to a tiny island just a mile offshore. Their flight marked the end of the Latin Christian occupation of the Holy Land.

The Kingdom of Acre was officially at an end. There were no Crusader states left standing. After nearly two hundred tumultuous years, the attempt by the Papacy and by the Latin Christians of Europe to establish a permanent outpost in the Holy Land had failed.

And along with the end of Latin Christian rule in the Middle East, we have also come to the end of this podcast series. I think the final word should go to the young Muslim chronicler Abulfeda, who wrote that, and I quote "All the lands of the coast were returned to the Muslims, a result undreamed of. Thus were the Franj, who had once nearly conquered Damascus, Egypt, and many other lands, expelled from all Syria and the coastal zones. God grant that they never set foot there again." End quote. And here ends The History of the Crusades Podcast.

Well, thanks for listening, everyone. To say that I've enjoyed bringing this series to you is, of course, an understatement. And hats off to you for making it this far. Listening to 107 episodes covering nearly 200 years of history is no mean feat, particularly when many of

the episodes were of dubious sound quality. Well, it wouldn't be a podcast about the Crusades if it didn't have its share of hardships, equipment failures, and unplanned mishaps. Of course, I could have taken a leaf out of King Louis IX's book, and had everything meticulously planned and spared no expense from the outset, but, well, then I might also have died of dysentery without ever finishing the podcast.

So I guess you're wondering "Where to now?" Well, I may do a short series on the Crusade against the Cathars, which I didn't cover in this podcast series, which was predominantly about the Crusader states and the Middle East. I may raise money for the new series by using crowdfunding. I'll give myself a few months off and then make a decision. If I do decide to go ahead, I'll make a short announcement using this audio feed, and also post about it on the podcast's Facebook page and the website.

In the meanwhile, this now completed podcast series will remain available for others to download, free of charge, from the Internet, which is a wonderful thing. Your generous donations to date have meant that the hefty hosting site fees are now fully paid until September 2015, and there's enough money in the kitty to cover its expenses for a few more months after that.

If you would like to show your appreciation to me for the podcast, well, there's no better way to do that than to make a donation, which will go towards paying future hosting site fees, which of course will mean that the podcast will continue to remain available on the Internet for others to download, free of charge. Should you wish to make a donation, just head to the Web page supporting the podcast, which you can find at "HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com". I believe there's also a donation button at the hosting site, which can be reached by going to "HistoryOfTheCrusades.podomatic.com". For those not in the US, please note that the donation is processed via Paypal and is in US Dollars.

Why is it so important that the podcast remain available? Well, because there's a lot to be learned from history, and with religious conflict once again raising its ugly head in the Middle East, it's important to learn from what has happened in the past. A wise person once said "The best way to forge a clear path ahead is with one eye on the path behind", meaning, of course, that a knowledge of history is essential to both understanding the present and choosing the right path into the future. Which wise person spoke those words? Well, it was me. I just made that up. But I really believe it's true, and that the explosion onto the Internet of oodles of free history podcasts is a fantastically brilliant thing.

Well, that's it for me. You have been listening to the History Of The Crusades Podcast by Sharyn Eastaugh. Thanks again for listening. Goodbye.

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