

History of the Crusades.
Episode 11.
The First Crusade VII.

Hello again. Last week we followed the journey of Tancred and Baldwin across Cilicia and beyond, seeing Tancred secure key towns in the name of Latin Christendom, and Baldwin become Count Baldwin of Edessa. This week, we begin our examination of the most epic battle of the First Crusade, the Siege of Antioch. It is so epic, in fact, that it will take more than one episode to do it justice. So let us begin.

Thomas Asbridge in his book "The First Crusade", which by the way, has a very comprehensive yet readable section on the siege, which is well worth reading if you are interested, states that the Siege of Antioch was quote "One of the most brutal, grueling and prolonged military engagements of the Middle Ages" end quote. So strap yourselves in, listeners. You're in for a rough ride.

To fully understand the siege, it's necessary to examine the city itself, as well as the political situation in northern Syria at the time. Even in 1097 Antioch was an ancient city of central importance to the Christian Church. Founded in 300 BC, in the aftermath of the conquests of Alexander the Great and named after one of his generals Antiochus, its importance as a trading town saw it rise to prominence under the Roman Empire. At one stage, its population swelled to over 300,000 people. It was also important to the early Christian Church. St Peter preached there in a cave used as a chapel. St Luke wrote his Acts of the Apostles there. It was conquered by the Arabs in the 600's, then in the 900's it was over-taken by the Byzantines. It thrived under Byzantine rule, becoming one of the key cities of the Byzantine Empire. Then in 1085, only twelve years before the arrival of the Crusading armies, it fell back into Muslim hands.

Capturing Antioch was going to be the key to the success of the First Crusade. Left under Muslim control, the Crusading armies would be vulnerable to attack as they marched to Jerusalem, and their lines of supply would be difficult to maintain. It was crucial, therefore, that the city be taken. The Emperor Alexius, of course, was also very keen to see the city once more absorbed into the Byzantine Empire. So that was what everyone was thinking in autumn of 1097: We have to take Antioch. But they also knew it wasn't going to be easy.

Lying at the base of two mountains, Mount Silpius and Mount Staurin, the city was completely surrounded by massive walls built during the rule of the Emperor Justinian. The walls were two metres thick and up to twenty metres high, and stretched for seven and a half miles. In an impressive feat of Roman engineering, the walls not only surrounded the town itself, but ran up the sides of both mountains, culminating in a fortified citadel on top of Mount Silpius. The walls were strengthened by 360 towers, nearly one for every day of the year, and entry through the walls was via six gates, spread out along its circumference.

Contained within the walls was the city itself, covering an area of around three square miles. The villas of the wealthy were spread over the wooded hillside, while ordinary houses, churches, and mosques lay on the flatter ground. There was plenty of room for market gardens and pasture for livestock. Water was in abundant supply. Not only would its impressive fortifications make it almost impervious to attack, its pastures and market gardens and water supply meant that Antioch could easily withstand a prolonged siege. The Crusaders had their work cut out for them.

In 1097 Syria was controlled by the Seljuk Turks. The politics of the time were fraught with conflict, violence and intrigue. The dominant political event of the day was the War of the Two Brothers, a power struggle between Ridwan, King of Aleppo, and his younger brother, Duqaq, King of Damascus. The hatred between these brothers ran deep, and you could be pretty sure that the chances of them uniting to do anything, even to fight against a common enemy such as the Crusaders, would be almost non-existent.

And if we delve a little into their background, you can see why. In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf explains that Ridwan was a thin, severe looking man, who in his younger days had fallen under the influence of a physician-astrologer from the recently formed sect the Order of Assassins. When he became King of Aleppo in 1095 he decided to consolidate his rule by killing his three brothers. Two of his brothers were strangled to death, but a third one, Duqaq, escaped and fled to Damascus. He eventually became King of Damascus, but remained in constant fear of being assassinated by his older brother.

In 1097 Antioch is under the rule of Yaghi-Siyan. Antioch at this time has around 40,000 inhabitants, including a Turkish garrison of between 5,000 and 7,000 soldiers. Yaghi-Siyan is an experienced and wily politician, and it's worth mentioning a contemporary description of him. Quote: "His head was of enormous size, the ears very wide and hairy. His hair was white, and he had a beard which flowed from his chin to his navel." End quote.

When Yaghi-Siyan hears that a massive French army is heading towards Antioch, he's not surprised. He assumes that the Franj are mercenaries from Constantinople sent by the Emperor to take the city. Antioch has only been in Muslim hands for 12 years, and it was only a matter of time before the Byzantine Empire, or "The Rum", as the Turks called them, tried to take the city back. Yaghi-Siyan has no idea at this stage that the taking of Antioch is just part of a plan by the Latin Christians to conquer the entire region, all the way to Jerusalem. He also doesn't realize that the Crusading armies aren't Byzantine troops, as much as the Emperor Alexius would like them to be. What he does know is that an enormous army is heading his way, intent on taking his city.

It's time for action. He oversees the storing of provisions and begins preparations for a long siege, rationing the distribution of grain, oil and honey. He's not that concerned about the ability of the town's fortifications to withstand attack. Nor is he worried about the possibility of a lengthy siege. But he is worried about betrayal. With that in mind, he imprisons the Christian leader of the city, the Patriarch, then expels most of the Christian men from the city, promising to protect their wives and children who remained behind, a promise which, by and large, he was able to keep.

He then decides to call for assistance, and this is where things get tricky. For years he has played the warring brothers against each other, sowing discord, making and breaking alliances, and doing everything he could to duck and weave around the volatile politics of the region, and ensure the independence of his city. Aleppo was only three days march from Antioch and was its closest neighbor. Two years earlier, Yaghi-Siyan had given his daughter in marriage to King Ridwan of Aleppo, but he knew that Ridwan coveted Antioch, and like King Duqaq of Damascus, Yaghi-Siyan became increasingly worried about the Assassins sect, to the extent that he was in fear for his life. So, Yaghi-Siyan sends his sons to Damascus, Aleppo, and Mosul on a diplomatic mission to seek military aid.

Of these cities, he decides that Damascus is his best bet. Both Yaghi-Siyan and King Duqaq are united in their fear of King Ridwan and his Assassins, so he sends his son, Shams al Dawla, to Damascus to try to convince King Duqaq to come to Antioch's aid. King Duqaq is reluctant, mainly due to the fear that his brother, King Ridwan, will attack his army and destroy him on his way to Antioch. We will leave Shams al Dawla in Damascus, where he will camp out at the royal palace, pestering, pleading and threatening King Duqaq and his advisers relentlessly.

The envoy sent to Mosul was more successful. The ruler of Mosul in Upper Mesopotamia was a man called Kerbogha. Along with the threat posed by the Crusaders, he spied an opportunity. He had long held a desire to expand his territory to include Aleppo and Antioch. If he could acquire Antioch, Aleppo would be effectively surrounded and could be easily taken. Accordingly, Kerbogha started preparations to lead an army to Antioch.

Meanwhile, back at the main Crusader army, the Council of Princes needed to make some decisions. They knew that Antioch needed to be taken, the question was: How? On the 20th of October 1097, the vanguard of the combined Crusader army, led by Bohemond, arrived in Antioch early in the morning, followed a few hours later by the remainder of the Army. They were confronted with two stark realities. Firstly, they realized they possessed neither the equipment nor the expertise to attack the city and storm its walls. The fortifications were simply too high, too strong and too well built. Secondly, on seeing the wall stretching all the way up the sides of the mountains, they realized they did not have the manpower to undertake a complete siege of the town, involving a complete encirclement. Instead, they were going to have to go with the only option left available to them, a partial blockade. They decided to blockade the gates into the city, all of them that is, other than the Iron gate, which stood in a rocky canyon high above the city between mountains Silpius and Staurin. This they left unguarded, leaving Yaghi-Siyan with a crucial outlet for resupply and communication.

Incidentally, you can see the remains of the Iron Gate today. Antioch is now in Turkey and is called Antakya. Apparently, not many tourists visit the Iron Gate, mostly preferring to visit religious sites, and there's every chance that if you go there you'll have the place to yourself. Anyway, as you can guess, the geography of the city is going to be crucial to the plans of both the Latin Christians and the Muslims, and to appreciate it properly you really need to look at a map. Most textbooks on the Crusades contained a map of Antioch and if you can get your hands on one of those, well and good. I scoured the Internet to find a half-decent map of Antioch and found there were slim pickings indeed. Luckily, I was saved by the Catholic University of America, who have a couple of very good maps on their website.

If you go to the section containing Episode 11 at my website, at HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com, and click on the link provided, you will be taken to the appropriate page on the Catholic University of America website. The first two pictures on the page show you the ruins of some of the fortifications, which will give you an idea of what the Crusaders were faced with. Scroll down and you will find a map of the environs of Antioch. Scroll down further and you will reach the one we are most interested in, the map of the Siege of Antioch. The brown bits you can see are the mountains and the green parts are the town. The map clearly shows the location of the gates and the various Crusader camps surrounding them.

Now, the way the Crusaders organized their blockade was as follows. Starting on the right hand side of the map, the road into Antioch from the Iron Bridge enters the city at the gate of St Paul, which was so named due to a nearby shrine to Paul the Apostle. Bohemond took up position in front of this gate. Moving to the left, the next gate is the Dog Gate, so called because of its proximity to the Dog Bridge which crossed the Orontes River. Raymond of Toulouse set up camp next to this gate. The next gate was nicknamed the Duke's Gate, after the man who set up camp near it, Duke Godfrey of Bouillon. Further to the left, the next gate is strategically important. It's called the Bridge Gate, and, along with St Paul's Gate, provides the main access into and out of the city. It's an impressive gate on the riverbank, leading straight onto a fortified bridge. The final gate is St George's Gate to the far left. For the moment, the Crusaders leave these last two gates unguarded. Guarding them would mean crossing the Orontes River, which would mean dividing and isolating part of the army, and for the moment, that's not something they want to do. Tatikios and the Byzantine forces camp some distance from the walls, probably acting as a reserve force.

So everyone's in position, and for the first couple of weeks things go really well for the Crusaders. Yaghi-Siyan and his forces remain inside Antioch, probably content to watch the Crusaders and try to guess their intentions, while also waiting for news on the appeals for aid. Without having to worry about defending themselves from attack, the Crusaders set about recovering from the harsh journeys across Anatolia and the mountains. By this, I mean, they eat. They eat lots and lots. It's autumn and the plains of Antioch are known for their fertility. In the orchards, trees are laden with fruit, and the village granaries are full. There's herds of cattle and sheep, and there's wine. The men ate like there's no tomorrow. They slaughter sheep and cook only the best cuts, throwing the rest away. They cut down fruit trees to build siege engines.

As I mentioned previously, it's autumn. In the Middle Ages, the yearly food cycle went something like this. In spring, you planted all your seeds for your crops. By mid summer, you could start to harvest, and by autumn the harvest would be in full swing. The vast majority of the harvest was stored away to get you through winter, spring and early summer. If you failed to plant enough food, or if the harvest was poor, or if you ate too much during winter, then your family would begin to starve, particularly during the so called hungry months of spring and early summer. You can probably guess where I'm going with this. Yes, the area around Anatolia was fertile, but there were 30,000 to 50,000 crusaders eating their fill, drinking wine, and slapping themselves on their backs, thinking that there's no better place to be than at the Siege of Antioch in autumn 1097.

Within a few weeks, the food started to run out. The Crusaders found themselves heading into winter, with no provision for food. It was around about this time that the Turkish forces began to push back. Many Christian men who had been expelled from the city by Yaghi-Siyan were able to communicate with their wives inside Antioch, mainly via the Iron Gate and other gaps in the blockade. In some respects, this worked well for the Crusaders, as the wives were able to report on the goings-on inside the Turkish garrison, but it also worked against them. The information also flowed the other way.

Yaghi-Siyan learned of the reluctance of the Crusading army to mount a direct assault on the city. Perhaps emboldened by this intelligence, he ordered his garrison to attack the Crusaders. This attack was not an all out assault, but took the form mainly of harassment. Turkish archers would position themselves on the walls near the base of Mount Silpius and fire upon Bohemond's camp. Small groups of mounted Turkish horsemen would race out

of the Bridge Gate and pick off the odd Crusader, before wheeling around and galloping back inside the city. In addition, raiding parties emerged from the fortification of Harim, about 15 kilometers east of Antioch. These Turkish forces would attack any Latin Christian stragglers found scavenging for food away from the main armies.

The Council of Princes decided it was time for action. They built a bridge across the Orontes River. Previously, if they needed to cross the river, they would have to do so by ferrying people across in boats. This was clearly a slow and labor-intensive exercise, particularly if large groups wanted to cross. So they built a bridge, a bridge of boats. They gathered a whole bunch of small boats and lashed them together, forming a crossing point, and they called it the "Bridge of Boats". It was far from ideal, but apparently even horses could use it if they took it slowly. It provided a vital link between the army and the road to the nearby ports of Alexandretta and St Symeon. You may remember from last week's episode that Tancred had taken Alexandretta at the end of his journey across Cilicia, and by mid-November the main port of supply to Antioch, the port of St Symeon, was also in Crusader hands.

Incidentally, St Symeon was named after a Christian hermit who lived in Aleppo in the fifth century. For 37 years, he lived on a one meter wide platform on top of a 60 foot high pillar. Once he was up on his pillar, he didn't come down for 37 years. People would climb up to give him food or have a chat, but that was the extent of his contact with the world. He endured 37 winters on top of his pillar, and they even built a church around him. Eventually he died, still on top of his pillar, and for his achievement, he was awarded a sainthood and had a port named after him. Apparently, the remains of the pillar and the church still exist, near Aleppo in Syria. There's not much left of the pillar, as, over the centuries, people have carved bits off and ground them up to make a healing powder. According to Wikipedia, the Guinness Book of Records has acknowledged that St Symeon holds the world record for the length of time spent living on top of a pillar, a record that's unlikely to be broken any time soon.

Anyway, I digress. The point I was making was, by mid-November 1097 the Crusaders had secured the two nearby ports, which allowed vital supplies to arrive by ship, and also, fortunately for historians, it allowed letters to be sent from Antioch to families back home in Europe. On the 17th of November, thirteen Genoese ships docked at St Symeon, loaded with vital supplies, equipment, and men experienced in the construction of siege engines and towers.

Using the said men and equipment, the Crusaders wasted no time. They hastily constructed a tower on the slopes of Mount Silpius, near Bohemond's camp. The tower was a bit rough-and-ready, but it did the job, effectively protecting the camp outside St Paul's Gate from Turkish harassment. They decided the tower needed a name, and they called it "Malregard".

They also decided it was time to neutralize the Turkish threat on another front. Bohemond and a contingent of knights managed to draw the Turkish garrison out of their fortress at Harim, using the by now well-known Muslim tactic of feigned retreat. The garrison were neutralized and would no longer pose a threat to the forces camped outside Antioch.

These successes might lead you to think that things were going well for the Crusaders at this point, but things were actually starting to take a turn for the worse. The first problem was the weather. Autumn turned into winter, and to their dismay and disappointment, the

Crusaders discovered that winter in Syria was not the balmy, mild affair that they had expected. It was actually really cold. Stephen of Blois wrote to his wife, and here's an extract from his letter. Stephen starts and finishes his letter so nicely that I'll read those bits out, too. It's rather a long letter, but I'll only read a short section of it.

"Count Stephen to Adela, his sweetest and most beloved wife, and to his dear children and all the faithful members of his household, from the greatest to the least, blessing and grace and every greeting. We found Antioch to be enormous beyond belief, and very strong and well fortified. More than 5,000 bold Turkish soldiers had flocked together within the city, not to mention the boundless mass of Saracens, Arabs, Turks, Syrians, Armenians and various other peoples who had gathered there. Many were the trials and countless the evils we bore there, by the Grace of God, in order to overcome these enemies of God and ourselves. Many even spent all they had in this holy passion. Many of our Franks would have suffered death from hunger had not the mercy of God and our money come to their aid. Throughout the whole winter before Antioch, we suffered bitter cold and driving rain, for Christ our Lord. Those who say that the heat is the only thing there is to suffer in Syria are wrong. Their winter is just like ours in the West." Then Stephen finishes his rather long letter with the following words. "I am only telling you snippets of our many doings, dearest, and since I cannot express to you what is in my mind, dearest, I can only say, Keep well, manage your estate well, and treat your children and your servants honorably, as befits you, since you will certainly see me as quickly as I can arrange it. Farewell."

Now, those last words, where he says "since you will certainly see me as quickly as I can arrange it", just keep those words in mind. Make a mental note of them, if you will.

As Stephen stated in his letter, the cold was beginning to become a problem for the Crusaders, but by far the worst problem was the lack of food. Foraging parties were having to travel further and further each day in their search for food, and while the Latin Christians were doing their best to secure the territory around Antioch, the foraging parties were always at risk of being attacked. With between 30,000 and 50,000 mouths to feed, there was never enough food to go around. The Crusaders were being drenched by heavy showers of freezing rain. They were cold, they were miserable and they were very, very hungry.

By mid-December, the situation had worsened, to the extent that the Council of Princes met to try and resolve the problem. The solution they came up with was risky but totally understandable. They decided that a major foraging expedition needed to take place. Part of the Crusader army would head off into the hills, plundering and collecting food, while the remainder of the army continued the siege. It was risky because it divided the army, making both the foraging part and the sieging part vulnerable to attack.

On the 28th of December 1097 around 400 knights and many more foot soldiers, in fact some historians estimate that around 20,000 foot soldiers were involved, set off under the command of Bohemond and Robert of Flanders. They headed in an easterly direction to the fertile plateau of Jabal al Summaq. After a few days of raiding and foraging, they have gathered an impressive amount of stores and are camped near the town of Albara.

Now, remember Yaghi-Siyan sent his son, Shams al Dawla to Damascus to convince King Duqaq to send an army to Antioch's aid? Well, in a fine example of the operation of Murphy's Law, which for those of you who don't know, is the rule that "anything that can go wrong will go wrong", King Duqaq did decide to send an army, and that army just happens

to be on the same road used by Bohemond and Robert of Flanders. In fact, the army containing King Duqaq, Shams al Dawla, and around 10,000 warriors, is just around the corner.

In the early morning of the 31st of December 1097, the Damascus army came upon the Crusader camp, taking them totally unawares. The army of Robert of Flanders, who was camped further down the road, was nearly surrounded. Luckily, Bohemond kept his head and left most of his troops in reserve, waiting until the Damascan army sensed victory, before launching a frontal assault. Bohemond's attack was sufficient to scatter the Muslim troops, and the knights took the opportunity to escape with their lives, leaving all their hard-won provisions behind, as well as thousands of foot soldiers. The knights returned to Antioch empty-handed.

In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf provides his description of the battle. He relates that two months of pestering at the Damascan court by Shams al Dawla finally paid off, and in late December, against his better judgment, King Duqaq finally agreed to send an army to Antioch's aid. Shams al Dawla decided to accompany the army. He knew that Antioch was a week's march away, and that would leave King Duqaq ample opportunity to change his mind and return to Damascus. Around two-thirds of the way to Antioch they were surprised to come across part of the Crusader army. King Duqaq's forces surrounded a section of the army, but he failed to give the order to attack, despite his clear numerical advantage. This allowed the Franks to regroup and slip away.

While there was no clear winner or loser from the skirmish, King Duqaq lost many men. It was enough to convince him to turn back to Damascus. Despite the desperate pleading of Shams al Dawla, King Duqaq turned his men around and headed home.

Meanwhile, back in Antioch, things were also not going well for the Crusaders. It was inevitable, really. Yaghi-Siyan, looking down upon the Crusader forces, noticed that a sizable contingent had departed. Of course, he viewed this as an excellent opportunity to mount an attack, and he was right. Not only were Bohemond and Robert of Flanders off on their foraging trip, Godfrey de Bouillon was seriously ill. His leg wound (remember Pisidia, the bear, the slicing of his own leg with his sword) had flared up, and most likely it had become infected.

On the 29th of December. Yaghi-Siyan sent his forces out of the Bridge Gate. They charged towards the Bridge of Boats and the Crusader camp. Luckily, Raymond of Toulouse was able to respond. He gathered together his knights and foot soldiers. They crossed the Orontes River via the Bridge of Boats, and confronted the Muslim contingent.

Things seemed to be going well for them, a little too well, in fact. Raymond's forces pushed the Turks all the way back to the Bridge Gate, and even managed to get a foothold on the bridge, when the true situation became apparent. They had fallen into a trap.

The Turks regrouped and launched a massive counterattack from the Bridge Gate. Raymond's forces realized they were now outnumbered and about to be surrounded. They broke away and made a chaotic dash back to the Bridge of Boats, before crossing the river back to the relative safety of their camp. The loss of men to the Crusaders was not huge. The tally was around fifteen knights and twenty foot soldiers killed. But the damage to morale was huge.

The end of 1097 saw the Crusader army in a sorry state indeed. They had suffered embarrassing losses in battle, were close to starving, and were getting sick. The freezing rain was relentless, and the constantly wet tents, bedding and clothing began to rot. There was mud everywhere, and the camps resembled quagmires. Disease began to spread.

To add to the Crusaders' misery, a series of earthquakes shook the ground in January 1098. The residents of Antioch were used to these tremors, and it didn't worry them much at all. The Latin Christians, though, were terrified. Sounds of their prayers and pleas for divine mercy could be heard all the way inside the city. To top it off, an aurora and a comet both appeared in the night sky around the same time as the earthquake. To the Crusaders, all these events could only mean one thing: God was displeased. Not just a little displeased, but very, very displeased. Drastic measures were going to be needed to be taken to address this displeasure.

And I'm afraid we're gonna have to leave it there for this week. So join me next week as we continue the Siege of Antioch.

For further reading this week, I recommend Thomas Asbridge's book "The First Crusade", for a thorough and readable account of the Siege of Antioch. And as I mentioned previously, I've also posted some links to maps and pictures of Antioch, on the website. Go to HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com to view them. Until next week, bye for now.

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