

History of the Crusades.
Episode 12.
The First Crusade VIII.

Hello again. When we left the Crusaders last week, they were in abject misery at the siege of Antioch. They were on the verge of starvation, cold, wet and unhappy. They had experienced an earthquake and seen an aurora and a comet, all of which they interpreted as signs of God's wrath.

They were clearly being punished for their sins, and they turned to Bishop Adhemar for guidance. In a stroke of genius, Bishop Adhemar ordered the Latin Christians to fast for three days, to purify their souls. This was really a brilliant move. There was hardly any food available, and a growing number of the Crusaders were on the verge of starvation. The fast preserved what little food there was and made the Latin Christians feel good about not eating, for three days at least. The Bishop also ordered all the women to be removed from the camps. Back in the Middle Ages, women were seen by the Church as agents of sin, and if God was displeased, you can be sure the women had something to do with it. Not only single women, but also married women were ordered away from Antioch. A new level of discipline was imposed on the Crusaders, and any transgressions, such as stealing, were dealt with immediately and harshly.

Bishop Adhemar then used his position as nominal leader of the army and the Pope's representative to appeal for outside assistance. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, that's the head of the Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, happened to be in Cypress at this time. Cyprus was not very far away. Bishop Adhemar wrote to him, appealing for assistance. The Patriarch sent all the food and wine the island could spare. Then the Bishop and the Patriarch jointly drafted a letter calling for reinforcements from the West.

Despite the generosity of the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the people of Cyprus, the food situation at Antioch remained critical. It was ironic, really. The siege was designed to starve the people of Antioch, trapped inside their city, into submission. Instead, with their well-stocked larders, the people of Antioch seem to be doing okay. It was the Crusaders themselves who were starving. And it wasn't just the men. The horses, too, were suffering. After the loss of so many animals on the march to Antioch, the remaining beasts were precious indeed, yet they were also beginning to starve. It is estimated that at this point, the entire army, numbering tens of thousands of men, had only 700 horses between them.

Farmers and people living near Antioch began visiting the camps, selling food at exorbitant prices. The leaders of the armies, who had money to spare, were able to keep some of the knights and foot soldiers alive by buying them food, but others were less fortunate. They were forced to fend for themselves, eating thistles, weeds and rats. Some even picked through animal droppings, looking for undigested seeds. Unsurprisingly, desertions started to occur. Parties who were sent on distant foraging expeditions sometimes didn't return.

It was one thing for rank and file members to abandon their mission, but when prominent members of the Army attempted to depart, action had to be taken. In the dead of night at the end of January 1098, two figures were spotted creeping away from Bohemond's camp. One was a knight, William the Carpenter, Lord of Melun. The other was, and excuse me a minute while I pause for dramatic effect, Peter the Hermit. Yes, we meet him again. He survived the Peasants' Crusade. He survived the trek across the plains of Anatolia. He

survived the treacherous journey across the Anti-Taurus mountains. And now history turns its spotlight on Peter the Hermit and finds him in the act of desertion. No, I hear you cry. Is this the last we will hear of Peter the Hermit? No, it isn't.

Word reached Bohemond of their desertion and Tancred was sent to find them and bring them back. They appeared before Bohemond, in shame and disgrace, and were made to swear an oath that they would persevere with the siege.

Soon after, there was another high profile departure: Tatikios, the Emperor's representative. This is surprising. Very surprising, in fact. Antioch had been a jewel in the Byzantine Empire little more than a decade previously, and you can be pretty certain that the Emperor Alexius would have liked it back. If the city fell to the Crusaders with no Imperial representative on hand, it would be by no means certain that the Crusaders would take the city in Constantinople's name. They might just decide to keep it for themselves. Yet Tatikios has left the siege in late January 1098. He stated that he needed to head back towards Constantinople in search of supplies and he left, never to return. He did leave his staff and most of his possessions behind, which indicates either he intended to return, or he intended people to think he intended to return. But he never did.

Why did he make this momentous decision? Well, it could be that he deserted the siege. Things were certainly going badly for the Latin Christians, and perhaps he decided there was no realistic chance of a Christian victory and that he might as well depart the scene before things got even worse. Or we could believe the story he told upon his return to Constantinople. He said the Bohemond had pulled him aside and told him that the other leaders of the Crusades suspected him of treachery and were plotting to have him killed. Bohemond suggested that Tatikios leave as quickly as he was able, with the excuse that he was seeking supplies, and Tatikios took up the suggestion.

Whatever the reason, Tatikios' departure changed the ballgame. Antioch was a powerful city, and without an Imperial representative on the ground, it was up for grabs. Perhaps it was no coincidence then, that around about now, Bohemond suggests that he is considering pulling his men out of the siege and heading back to Italy. His interests in Italy after all, were suffering from his absence, and his men were suffering by remaining in Antioch, and the suggestion had the desired effect. Everyone knew that Bohemond was a talented military commander. The siege of Antioch was not going well, but if Bohemond departed with his southern Italian Normans, defeat would be all but certain. The Council of Princes were desperate. What, they pressed him, would induce him to stay? Bohemond may have made a show of scratching his beard and pondering deeply on this question, but the answer may well have been clear for a while: Antioch, the ancient city itself. If Antioch fell, then Bohemond wished to become lord and ruler of the city. Should that promise be made to him, he would definitely stay.

In the end, all the leaders, except Raymond of Toulouse, agreed with the proposal. After all, at this stage of proceedings, it was doubtful whether the Crusaders could win Antioch. If Bohemond left, defeat was a certainty. So the promise was made. To top it off, all the leaders swore an oath that they would continue the siege at Antioch for another seven years, unless the city fell sooner.

And it was just as well for the Crusaders that they all decided to pull together. In January 1098, disappointed by the failure of King Duqaq to come to his aid, Yaghi-Siyan sent his son, Shams al Dawla, off on a mission to seek assistance from Aleppo. Shams duly

departed and once at King Ridwan's court, he did a fine job of pleading, threatening and begging the King to send troops to the aid of Antioch. Usually, such a request would have fallen on deaf ears. King Ridwan was not known for his reliability in responding to calls from assistance from neighbors in distress. However, he had his own territorial concerns. Armed raiders and foraging parties from the Crusading army were venturing ever closer to Aleppo in their search for food, and King Ridwan decided it was time to put a stop to it. Accordingly, he decided to send an army to Antioch's aid. Shams triumphantly informed his father of the date of the Aleppan offensive, and suggested that Yaghi-Siyan arrange for a massive assault on the Crusaders from the garrison at Antioch on the same day, meaning that the Latin Christians would be fighting on two fronts.

The Crusaders became aware of the planned Aleppan attack, and on the 8th of February 1098 they met in Bishop Adhemar's tent to discuss strategy. What they decided upon was audacious, and bore all the hallmarks of Bohemond's flair for military strategy. They elected to send their remaining cavalry, numbering roughly 700 knights, in a surprise attack against King Ridwan's forces, while the bulk of the army, including all the foot soldiers, would remain back at Antioch, maintaining the siege. Later that night, the 700-strong Crusader cavalry force crossed the Bridge of Boats and took up position near the Iron Bridge, between the river and the lake of Antioch.

At dawn the next morning, the 12,000-strong Aleppan army came into view. Yes, you heard right. 700 knights have chosen to take on an army of 12,000 men. Luckily, they chose the site of their ambush well. Electing to mount their attack on a section of road bordered by a lake on one side and a river on the other meant that the knights could not be outflanked. Still, it is likely that the 700 knights were more than a little nervous when they saw the size of the army they were up against.

Again, it's likely that Bohemond decided on the tactics that would be employed. The 700 knights were divided into six squadrons. When King Ridwan's army appeared, five of those squadrons were deployed to attack the Aleppan vanguard, while the remaining squadron, commanded by Bohemond, waited in reserve.

The attack played out, as Bohemond had hoped. The bulk of King Ridwan's army pressed forward to repel the knights. They couldn't spread out due to the proximity of the lake and the river, so the Aleppans were crowded into a relatively small area as they worked to push back the attacking knights. Once King Ridwan's army had concentrated into a tightly packed bunch, Bohemond made his move. He and his knights charged with full force into the battle. The packed lines of the Turkish army bore the full brunt of the assault, and King Ridwan's forces began to panic and flee. Soon the entire army was in retreat. The Crusaders pursued them as far as Harim, capturing horses and supplies.

Meanwhile, back at Antioch, things didn't seem to be going quite so well for the Crusaders. At dawn, Yaghi-Siyan's entire Turkish garrison mounted an attack against the Latin Christian infantry. By noon, they had penetrated through to the Crusader camps, when word came through of the defeat of King Ridwan's army. Yaghi-Siyan realized that he couldn't hope to defeat the Crusader army on his own, and as the knights returned victorious he ordered his men to retreat back within the city walls. To cement their victory, the Crusaders mounted the heads of slain Turks on posts around the camp, in sight of the city walls. In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf reports that some heads were catapulted into the city itself. The Crusaders had won a morale-boosting battle.

As winter turned into spring, the situation at Antioch continued to improve for the Crusaders. A delegation of diplomats arrived by ship from Egypt. The Shia Muslims from Egypt inspected the Crusaders camp outside Antioch, and were no doubt content to see the Latin Christian's making so much trouble for their rivals, the Sunni Seljuk Turks. The Egyptians and the Crusaders agreed on a position of neutrality towards each other, a policy which was vital to the success of the Crusade, as the Latin Christians could not afford to be fighting on two fronts. The Egyptians may have remained in the Crusader camp for as long as a month. They then sailed back to Egypt, accompanied by a couple of Latin Christians who would serve as ambassadors.

In early spring 1098, more supplies arrived by ship. An English fleet sailed into St Symeon, laden with siege materials and men experienced in the construction of siege towers. Bohemond and Raymond led some forces down to the port to collect the precious materials and recruit any willing sailors to the Crusading cause. Their journey back to Antioch was slow and arduous as they transported the heavy and cumbersome siege equipment back to the city. Their burdens and slow passage made them vulnerable to attack, and attacked they were.

Bohemond and Raymond's forces were ambushed by a garrison sent from Antioch. The battle could have been disastrous for the Crusaders, and as it was, Raymond and Bohemond just managed to hold their own. Much of the siege equipment was taken by the Turks, and two knights and up to 500 foot soldiers were slain. Word of the battle reached the Crusader camp back in Antioch, and there were even rumors that both Raymond and Bohemond had been killed in the skirmish. As Godfrey prepared his men to go to the rescue, the Turks returned to the city, laden with the heavy siege equipment they had captured.

Yaghi-Siyan sent a contingent out of the Bridge Gate to assist their compatriots, but Godfrey intervened, sending his men into attack. Bohemond and Raymond, who hadn't been killed, arrived with their forces and a battle ensued on the ground next to the Bridge Gate. The Crusaders were victorious. Burdened by their loads, the Turkish forces were outmaneuvered and many were killed. In fact, the toll from the battle was around 1500 Turks killed, including twelve commanders. This was a huge blow. Yaghi-Siyan's total forces only amounted to between 5,000 and 7,000 men, so a sizable portion of his garrison were lost that day. The Crusaders had scored another morale-boosting victory, and had recovered their precious siege materials.

Later that night, the Turks crept out of the city to bury their dead in the grounds of a mosque outside the city walls. The Latin Christians let the burials take place, but after the Turks departed, a group of Crusaders set about digging up the bodies, which they robbed of coins, ornaments and weapons. The graves of the dead were destroyed, and the corpses thrown into a pit. It's unclear whether these actions were sanctioned by any of the Latin Christian leaders, but the brutality of the event, and the desecration of the burial grounds, deeply affected the Turks inside the city. Witnesses stated that the Turks were grief-stricken, and for days did nothing but weep and wail.

After their victory, the Crusaders set about putting their siege materials to good use. Their priority was to tighten the blockade of the city. Yaghi-Siyan had been taking full advantage of the fact that the Bridge Gate was not part of the blockade. Workmen set about building a fortress on the site of a mosque near the Muslim cemetery, which could guard the

approach to the bridge. After four days of labor, it was finished, and the Crusaders named it "La Mahomerie", from the old French word for "mosque" according to one historian, or from the old French word for the Virgin Mary, Christ's mother, according to another historian. It was commanded by Raymond of Toulouse.

Next, they turned their attention to the gate of St George. Yaghi-Siyan had been using this gate to receive convoys of food and to let his horses and other flocks graze in pastures outside the walls. The Crusaders set about constructing a fortification on the site of an old convent, on a hill near the gate. Unfortunately, and inexplicably, it wasn't given a name. It was given to the command of Tancred, who quickly proved its usefulness by capturing an Armenian trade caravan destined for Antioch, laden with corn, barley, wine and oil.

The building of these two forts marked a turning point in the siege of Antioch. While supplies were still able to reach the city via the Iron Gate, high up on Mount Silpius, the Crusaders had managed to block Yaghi-Siyan's main sources of supply. The noose around Antioch had tightened, and the citizens of Antioch soon started to feel the pinch. Winter had turned into spring, the weather improved, and the food situation, while still a concern, had gone from critical to wavering somewhere between serious and bad.

Then there was a breakthrough, a vital but secret, breakthrough. In April 1098 Bohemond opened a line of communication with the commander of one of the towers near the gate of St George, a man called Firuz. For a man who was about to change the course of history, we know only a little about Firuz. Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about his motives and actions, but nothing concrete. The best we can say is that he was probably an Armenian resident of Antioch who had converted to the Muslim faith, and now, for reasons which are unclear, he has decided to conspire with the Crusaders and betray his city. Bohemond kept this information to himself. He stayed in contact with Firuz, and worked to keep him on plan. Anna Comnena, in fact, reports that Bohemond would stand at the base of the wall, Firuz would lean over the top of the wall, and they would chat.

Then Bohemond sought to play this card to his advantage. He met with the Council of Princes and proposed that if one leader, such as himself for example, should manage to engineer the downfall of Antioch, then they should be allowed to take sole possession of the city. The proposal, understandably, was howled down. All the leaders had made great sacrifices to get this far, and they agreed that, if the city fell, it would be divided equally among them. Of course, to complicate matters further, should the Emperor Alexius come to the Crusaders' aid and should his troops be involved in the defeat of the city, then it will be handed over to him to be absorbed into the Byzantine Empire. But something was about to happen, which would change the Princes minds. The siege of Antioch was about to face its biggest threat yet. Kerbogha was on his way.

As I mentioned in last week's episode, the envoy sent to Mosul at the beginning of the siege of Antioch was successful. Mosul was the capital of Mesopotamia. It was surrounded by the fertile plain between the two great rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates and was famous both for its fruits, mainly apples, pears, grapes and pomegranates, and its delicate cloth called muslin, a name which derived from the name of the city, which was exported far and wide. The governor of Mosul was Kerbogha.

An ambitious man, Kerbogha saw the plea for assistance from Antioch as an opportunity to expand his growing influence in the region. He spent six months building an army. Kerbogha decreed that his army would be waging the Jihad against the infidels, and he

attracted recruits not just from Mosul, but from cities across Syria who were keen to maintain cordial relations with him.

In the last days of April 1098, nearly 30,000 men gathered in Mosul, ready to march to Antioch's aid. Worried about being caught in a pincer movement by the Latin Christians to the north in Edessa and the Crusaders to the south in Antioch, Kerbogha decided to first lead his army north to the city of Edessa. He planned to spend a couple of days taking the city from its current ruler, Count Baldwin, before turning his forces south, to march on Antioch. However, things didn't go quite to plan. Baldwin's troops retreated inside the walls of Edessa, and after three weeks of laying siege to the city, Kerbogha decided to abandon his plan to take Edessa. He turned his 30,000 men southwards and headed towards Antioch.

French scouts soon confirmed the dire news, and panic raced through the Crusading army. Faced with this new threat, the Council of Princes met to reconsider Bohemond's proposal. This time, they viewed it more favorably. All the leaders, with the likely exception of Raymond of Toulouse, agreed that should Bohemond or one of his men take the city, then it would be his, save if the Emperor Alexius came to the Crusaders' aid, in which case Antioch would be handed over to the Byzantines.

Bohemond had what he wanted. Now it was time to go to work. He contacted Firuz and formulated a plan. On the evening of the 2nd of June, a large contingent of the Crusading army would march off, in full view of the Muslim garrison. The garrison would assume the Crusaders had set out to intercept Kerbogha's army, and they would settle back for a quiet night. But, under the cover of darkness, Bohemond's men would creep back to the Tower of the Two Sisters, the tower controlled by Firuz. Firuz would lower a ladder, and an advance party would climb the ladder, take the tower, and open the gate for the remainder of the troops. It sounded like a fine plan, but it seemed not everyone was impressed.

Do you remember last week's episode, when Stephen of Blois concluded his letter to his wife by stating, quote "You will certainly see me as quickly as I can arrange it." End quote? Well, on the 2nd of June, the day Bohemond's plan was due to be put into effect, Stephen makes a major decision. The siege has now been underway for eight months, and the Crusaders, for all their efforts, are no closer to taking the city. Stephen clearly dismisses Bohemond's plan as unlikely to succeed, and ponders on the fact that an army of 30,000 Muslims is marching their way. He carefully weighs all these factors, and makes the only sensible decision he believes open to him. He decides to go home. He walks out of Antioch towards Alexandretta, with a large portion of the northern French army, and heads back to Europe.

His desertion must have come as a hard blow to the Latin Christians, but his actions also ensured that history remembers him mostly for this act, and not for the time that he spent laboring with and battling for the Crusading army on its way to Antioch. Fulcher of Chartres, after reflecting on Stephen's sullied reputation, stated, and I quote "For to start well is of no use to anyone, unless he also ends well" end of quote. Which basically means: how you do at the beginning of a venture is not really remembered; it's how you end the venture that counts. So Stephen did end up seeing his wife soon, but at quite a cost to his reputation.

Back at the walls of Antioch, everything was running smoothly, and at 3 AM, on the 3rd of June, around 700 Crusaders gathered quietly on the slopes above the Gate of St George.

Godfrey de Bouillon and Robert of Flanders took a sizable portion of the men and followed the walls up the mountain towards the citadel. The rest of the men stayed with Bohemond. As planned, Firuz lowered an oxen-hide ladder, and 60 Latin Christians carefully and quietly climbed the ladder. There was a heart-in-mouth moment when the ladder, overburdened with so many men, collapsed, causing a bunch of Crusaders to topple loudly down to the ground. Luckily, there was a strong wind blowing which covered the noise. The ladder was fixed, and the remaining men reached the top of the battlements. They managed to kill some patrolling watchmen and sleeping guards in the Tower of the Two Sisters and the adjacent two towers without raising an alarm. More ladders were lowered, and the remaining men, including Bohemond himself, were able to climb the walls. Once all his men had breached the battlements, Bohemond ordered bugles to sound, both to signal the start of the attack on the city and to alert Godfrey and Robert to commence their attack on the Citadel.

Then all hell broke loose. The Crusaders, finally able to go on the attack, began a murderous rampage. Dawn hadn't yet broken and it was still dark, so many Christians and women were killed, as the Crusaders found it difficult to tell enemy apart from friend. The city awoke to chaos and confusion. Armenian Christians within the city turned on the Muslim garrison, and opened the remaining gates to the waiting Crusader army. The Latin Christians poured into the city and embarked on a killing spree. In the midst of the chaos, Bohemond ordered his banner to fly from the walls above the city, indicating to Crusaders and residents of Antioch alike that he had taken the city.

Yaghi-Siyan assumed all was lost and fled the city on horseback. He was thrown from his horse on a steep mountain path, and left for dead. An Armenian peasant recognized him and beheaded him, eventually taking the head back to the city and presenting it to the Crusaders for a reward. It was too much for the Muslim garrison. Most of them fled without bothering to stand and fight, and by the following night, no Turk remained alive inside the city.

Unlike everyone else, Yaghi-Siyan's son, Shams al Dawla, managed to keep his wits about him. He gathered as many men as he could find and made his way up to the Citadel. Godfrey and Robert of Flanders had failed to take the impregnable fortress, and Shams ensured it remained in Muslim hands.

Back down in the city, the roads were piling up with corpses. The Crusaders entered the houses and buildings of the city, slaying any Muslim they could find and searching for booty. There wasn't much to be had. They found some nice clothes in the sought-after purple color, as well as spices and the odd small amount of money, but that was about it. It appeared that the residents of Antioch had used all their wealth to purchase food and supplies to get them through the siege. There were so many corpses that you couldn't walk down the streets without stepping on them, and in the days after the city had fallen, the stench from the rotting bodies became unbearable.

Still, the Crusaders had achieved their goal. The city was now in Latin Christian hands. The Crusaders set about burying the bodies of the slain and restoring the churches to Christian worship. They barely had time to settle into their new surroundings. On the 4th of June, Kerbogha's army started to arrive. The Crusaders looked on in horror, as the 30,000 strong Muslim force set up camp in the same positions the Crusaders had used to blockade the city. In a bizarre twist of fate, the besiegers had become the besieged.

And I'm afraid we're going to have to leave it there. I had hoped to conclude the siege of Antioch before Christmas, but the epic and long siege resulted in two epic and long podcast episodes, and we'll need one more to wrap it up. It's the summer holidays here in Australia, and school's out till February. I'm not sure that school holidays and podcasting are compatible, but I'm going to give it a shot. All being well, I'll post my next episode, which will conclude the siege of Antioch, on the 18th of January. In the meanwhile, I wish you all compliments of the season, and until we meet again in January, I hope Christmas brings you comfort and joy, comfort and joy. Until next year, bye for now.

End