

History of the Crusades.
Episode 15.
The First Crusade XI.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Crusaders delayed at Antioch, while they struggled to resolve the question of who would govern the city, and who would lead the Crusade after the death of Bishop Adhemar. At the end of last week's episode, we saw Raymond of Toulouse decide to capture the nearby town of Ma'arrat al-Numan, as part of a strategic move to secure territory to the south of Antioch, with a view to restricting supplies into the city and loosening Bohemond's hold on the town.

By all reports, prior to the arrival of the Crusaders, Ma'arrat al-Numan was a nice place to live. Situated on gently sloping plains around three days' march from Antioch, the city had no natural defenses. It rectified this problem by being heavily fortified. Similarly to Antioch, the entire town was surrounded by a high wall, which itself was then surrounded by a dry moat. The inhabitants of Ma'arrat al-Numan were nominally ruled by King Ridwan of Aleppo, and kept themselves busy growing figs, olives and grapes. They enjoyed modest prosperity, and the town's fortifications ensured that they were largely untroubled by the instability of local politics. And a famous poet once lived there, a blind poet who was an influential figure in early Arab literature.

And then came the Crusaders. On the 27th of November, Raymond of Toulouse and Robert of Flanders, along with a large contingent of southern French troops, arrived at Ma'arrat. Having followed events at nearby Antioch, and the fall of the city to the Latin Christians, some residents of Ma'arrat had already decided to leave the town, taking their families to the more secure cities of Aleppo, Homs and Hama. But when the Crusaders arrived at the end of November, the majority of the residents were still at Ma'arrat, hoping that they were safe behind its walls. They numbered less than 10,000 people. The town had no permanent garrison, just an urban militia comprising most of the able-bodied men of the city, many of whom lacked military experience.

The morning after they arrived at Merat, Raymond and Robert attempted to storm the town's walls, with no success. While some of the Latin Christians managed to make it across the dry moat to the walls, the scaling ladders they had brought with them were not up to the job. Too short and not sturdy enough, the ladders proved useless, and the Crusaders retreated, to the taunts of the citizens of Ma'arrat.

Later that afternoon, Bohemond arrived with a contingent of southern Italian Normans. Now you might think it's strange that Bohemond has turned up to help his rival secure the town, but Bohemond was not so much assisting Raymond of Toulouse, but keeping him in check. Bohemond had immediately spotted Raymond's strategy, and he wasn't just going to stand back and watch Raymond take the fertile territory to the south of Antioch and thereby control a goodly portion of the supplies coming into the city. Bohemond knew that if he shared Raymond's victories in the region, then Raymond would not have sole rights over the territory.

So the combined forces of Bohemond, Robert of Flanders, and Raymond attempted to storm the walls. They, too, were unsuccessful. The leaders decided a different strategy was needed. They opted for a close encirclement siege. The town wasn't large and was easily surrounded. But as they experienced during the siege of Antioch, the Crusaders

found that they, and not the townspeople, would be suffering the most from using this tactic. One week into the siege, the Crusaders started to get hungry. It was now the beginning of winter, and food was scarce. The lines of supply began to falter, and the Latin Christians started venturing out into the plains surrounding the city, searching for grains or anything edible.

When discipline began to slip, the leaders decided a new strategy was needed. They attempted, unsuccessfully, to negotiate the town's surrender, then decided on an assault siege. This involved the Crusaders doing all they could to breach the town's defenses, while the town's people did all they could to repel them. In preparation for the assault, wood was obtained from a nearby forest, and new, stronger ladders were made. Then Raymond commissioned the building of a siege tower. The tower took ten days to complete, and by all accounts was fairly impressive. It was two storeys high, which made it taller than the city walls, and ran on four wheels. When it was ready for use, knights and a huntsman occupied the top storey. The huntsman blew his horn, as the Crusaders on the bottom story pushed the tower towards the walls. Of course, one thing the tower couldn't do was traverse the dry moat. The Latin Christians filled in a few sections of the moat, then the siege tower was ready to be employed.

On the 11th of December, the assault was launched. The huntsman sounded his horn, and the siege tower was pushed close to the walls. The siege tower wasn't the sole point of attack. Men were dispatched to different spots around the walls to attempt a crude method of undermining. From some accounts, it seems, they were just running up to the walls in packs, and then attempting to pry loose the stones in the wall, before retreating again. This may have been done to wrest the defenders' attention away from the siege tower, and force them to spread their defenses more thinly.

As the siege towers approached, men from the town hurled stones from catapults they had built at the tower, while also hurling down anything they could throw at the under-miners, who were attempting to destabilize the wall at various sections around the perimeter: rocks, darts, lime, and even full hives of bees, which must have been unpleasant, were dropped on the under-miners. As the siege tower drew closer to the wall, the Crusaders threw rocks at those defending the wall, then used long iron hooks to drag the tower right up to the wall. Then they engaged the town's men in hand to hand combat. The town's men fought back, concentrating most of their forces in repelling the attack from the tower, and using Greek fire in an attempt to burn the tower to the ground. Priests and clergy stood behind the tower, praying and requesting divine assistance, which in this case may have worked, as the Greek fire had no effect.

Just as an aside, Greek fire is one of the more interesting military developments of the early Middle Ages. It had been invented in Constantinople by the Byzantines in the 600's, and was a liquid weapon, which would burn even on water, which made it a formidable substance in naval warfare. It was very difficult to extinguish, and in fact seem to burn more fiercely if doused with water. Its ingredients were a closely guarded military secret, so secret in fact, that no record of its manufacture currently exists. There is, of course, much speculation about how Greek fire was created, and most experts agree that it would have been petroleum-based, with additional ingredients such as pine resin, quicklime and sulfur. Anyway, it seems that the Muslims must have got their hands on some if it was used in the siege of Ma'arrat. So back to the battle.

While the townspeople were concentrating on defending themselves from the knights in the tower, two things were happening. The Crusaders on the bottom storey of the tower were busy undermining the wall. They would have been protected in their activities by the upper storey of the tower. In fact, it's likely that the defenders were unaware that undermining was taking place. On the other side of the town, some southern French placed scaling ladders against the wall and attempted to climb up and enter the town. After a false start when one of the ladders broke, some Crusaders made it to the top of the wall. Despite most of the defense concentrating on repelling the attack from the tower, the Crusaders on the scaling ladders faced quite impressive resistance. Defenders from the town below shot at the Crusaders with arrows, while the defenders on the wall engaged the Latin Christians in hand-to-hand combat. Indeed, the resistance was so impressive that many Crusaders ended up jumping off the wall.

And then came a vital breakthrough for the Crusaders. Towards the end of the day, the under-miners on the lower storey of the tower completed their work, and a section of the wall collapsed. The Latin Christians poured through the breach, and the Muslim defenders retreated away from the walls into the town. By this time, night was approaching. Perhaps remembering the chaos, which ensued after the Crusaders stormed Antioch at nighttime, the leaders declared that the capture of the town could wait until morning. The knights placed themselves strategically around the outside of the walls, to ensure that no one could escape from Ma'arrat and then settled down to wait for dawn.

By this time, some of the more notable citizens of the town had approached Bohemond with an offer of surrender. Bohemond assured them that if they ceased fighting, and gathered with their families in a hall near the main gate, they would be spared from death. The men gathered their wives and children and went to the appointed place. They no doubt spent an anxious night, wondering what dawn would bring.

Unfortunately, not everyone had a quiet night. Some of the poor, less disciplined, and you would have to say hungrier, Crusaders ignored the orders to wait until dawn, and spent the night pillaging the town. When dawn broke on the 12th of December, the knights woke to find they had been beaten to the plunder. The town had been stripped of most of its wealth already, and the furious knights took their anger out on the citizens of the town. They forced their way into houses, killed the inhabitants, took anything they found of value and then set the dwellings on fire. Any Muslim they encountered in their desperate search for plunder was put to the sword until, one contemporary remarked, "No corner of the town was clear of Saracen corpses, and one could scarcely go about the streets except by treading on their dead bodies."

And what about the notable citizens and their families sheltering in the hall, to whom Bohemond had granted terms of surrender? Were they spared? No, they weren't. After being stripped of their possessions, most of the men were killed, while the women and children were kept aside to be sold into slavery.

But, sacking the town of Ma'arrat al-Numan was never going to be just about plunder. It was also a game-piece in the contest of strategy between Raymond of Toulouse and Bohemond. Raymond wanted the town for himself but Bohemond wasn't going to let him have it. He wasted no time positioning his men in the defensive towers along the city walls. When Raymond requested that he remove his men and cede the town to himself and the southern French, Bohemond told him: Sure, I'll remove my men from the towers and grant

you Ma'arrat, if you will remove your men from the Bridge Gate and grant me Antioch. Raymond wasn't tempted by this offer, and the tension between the two leaders increased.

To further irritate Raymond, Bohemond began openly questioning the validity of Peter Bartholomew's visions, and doubts about the authenticity of the visions, and of the Holy Lance itself, began to be expressed by most of the southern Italian Normans.

Tensions spread through the entire Crusading force, and by Christmas Day things were at breaking point. Representatives from the rank and file members of the army approached Bohemond and asked him to lead the Crusade on to Jerusalem without further delay. If Raymond declined, they asked that he hand the Holy Lance over to the army, and they would then march on to Jerusalem themselves, led only by God. But Raymond was reluctant to agree. Firstly because leaving for Jerusalem would mean ceding Antioch to Bohemond, and secondly because he really didn't have the support from the other Princes to take overall command.

After pondering the issue for a few days, Raymond made a decision. He left Ma'arrat in the hands of one of his vassals, Peter Narbonne, who he had recently appointed the Bishop of Albara, and requested that the Council of Princes meet in the nearby town of Rugia. At the meeting, Raymond effectively tried to bribe his way to overall leadership. To make matters even more awkward, he decided to offer differing amounts to the leaders, according to their perceived importance. Godfrey and Robert of Normandy were offered 10,000 sous for their allegiance, Robert of Flanders 6000, Tancred 5000, and Bohemond wasn't offered anything. Unsurprisingly, this didn't go down too well and didn't do anything at all to increase Raymond's authority or popularity.

Meanwhile, back at Ma-arrat, things were going very badly. Lines of supply had dried up, all the town's stores had been used up, and the neighboring regions had been bled dry of produce. The soldiers were starving. Lacking any authoritative leadership in the town, with no indication that they were going to be relieved from their posts, or be allowed to depart the town soon to proceed to Jerusalem, they turned to cannibalism. They sliced pieces from the bodies of the Muslims, cooked them, and ate them. Keep in mind the fact that the bodies were now three weeks old or so. Even if it was winter, they must have started rotting. Those men must have been really, really hungry. The event was met with utter revulsion by both Crusader and Arab contemporaries.

But while I don't want to be seen as excusing cannibalism, this was by no means the only act of cannibalism recorded in history, and it's certainly not even the worst. The place where I live, for instance, is the island of Tasmania, to the south of mainland Australia. It used to be called Van Diemen's Land. Much of it was, and still is, covered in impenetrable wilderness. And in the early 1800's, Great Britain decided it would be a good idea to send all of its criminals here. Sending its worst citizens halfway around the world to a place no one had heard of seemed like a good idea. Anyway, one such criminal was an Irishman called Alexander Pearce. He was sent to a jail on the rugged west coast of the island and managed to escape with a bunch of others. After he was captured, he admitted to having killed and cannibalized the others, having faced starvation in the impenetrable wilderness. He wasn't believed and was sent back to prison. He escaped again, with a young fellow inmate. He was captured soon after with loads of food, but also with cooked body parts of his companion, human flesh apparently having become his preferred protein.

So Alexander Pearce had killed a man and eaten him when he wasn't even very hungry. That's at the high end of cannibalism. The Crusaders at Ma'arrat ate parts of humans who were already dead and, in fact had been so for three weeks, in a situation where the alternative was death by starvation. Still, it was not a good look.

In addition to the acts of cannibalism, the desperate men at Ma'arrat decided to try and force Raymond's hand. They thought, if the town was unable to be defended, Raymond might abandon it and start southwards to Jerusalem. With that goal in mind, they started dismantling the defensive wall surrounding the city, stone by stone. Even the weak and the sick rose from their beds and assisted in this task. A desperate Bishop of Albara tried to stop them, but as soon as his guards passed by, the men would resume their work.

And it seems that the events at Ma'arrat did act as a catalyst. Raymond of Toulouse finally made a decision. He would abandon his newly won territory, leave Antioch to Bohemond and head to Jerusalem, with however many people were prepared to follow him. In a symbolic act of penance, probably in recognition of the terrible acts that had been perpetrated in the town, Raymond started his journey to Jerusalem from Ma'arrat. He walked out of the town barefooted, praying and requesting God's mercy. Behind him, the town of Ma'arrat al-Numan was set on fire and burnt to the ground. He was joined in his march to Jerusalem by the southern French contingent, as well as, somewhat surprisingly, Tancred, with a contingent of southern Italian Normans who weren't interested in remaining at Antioch. A few days later, they were joined by Robert of Normandy and his men.

So in early 1099, the outstanding issues were finally resolved. Bohemond was in possession of Antioch and Raymond of Toulouse set out for Jerusalem, assuming overall leadership of the Crusade. Join us next week as we accompany Raymond and his contingent on their journey south to Jerusalem.

There's no further reading for this episode, but if you do want to read more about the siege of Ma'arrat, the most comprehensive account I could find is in Thomas Asbridge's book "The First Crusade". Until next week, bye for now.

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