

History of the Crusades.
Episode 16.
The First Crusade XII.

Hello again. Last week we saw the dark side of the Crusading expedition, in the annihilation of the town of Ma'arrat al-Numan. At the end of the episode, we saw Raymond of Toulouse bow to pressure from the rank-and-file members of the army and start marching south to Jerusalem, along with Tancred and Robert of Normandy.

The combined armies of these three leaders amounted to only around 1000 knights and 5000 foot soldiers, which wasn't a big force at all when you consider that their aim was to proceed through hostile territory, taking cities that were heavily fortified and well defended. Luckily for the Crusaders, their reputation preceded them. News spread like wildfire through Syria and further south of the defeat of Kerbogha's massive army and of the events at Ma'arrat al-Numan. Stories of cannibalism at Ma'arrat became more and more exaggerated as they spread, until horrified residents of southern towns heard that the Crusaders roasted babies on spits and boiled adults up in huge cooking pots.

And for the first time, rumors spread of the actual goal of the Franks. They weren't Byzantine mercenaries after all. Their goal was Jerusalem. This news was met with relief all around. Jerusalem, at the present time, was in the hands of the Egyptians, and we will discuss this in more depth in the next episode. The Egyptians were Shia Muslims who were in conflict with local Sunni Muslims, so the local rulers were more than happy to negotiate with the Crusaders for them to pass through their territory as quickly as possible and get themselves on to Jerusalem, where they would become an Egyptian problem.

Time after time on the road south, Raymond would receive emissaries from nearby towns. The emissary would offer whatever they could to the Crusaders, gold, jewels, animals, or food, in return for an undertaking that the people of their town would not be harmed and their crops, orchards, and vineyards not damaged. This arrangement, of course, worked pretty well for Raymond, but there was the odd pocket of resistance, the most notable being at Hisn al-Akrad. Hisn al-Akrad, which translates as "the Citadel of the Kurds", was a crumbling fortification on top of a peak which looked over the fertile valley below. It guarded the Homs Pass, and provided views almost all the way to the Mediterranean. In the future, it will be the site of, to my mind at least, the greatest castle ever built, the magnificent Krak des Chevaliers, built by the Knights Hospitaller. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. At the moment, there's no castle here, just a run-down fortification that's seen better days.

The peasants who worked the land in the valley below Hisn al-Akrad saw the approach of the 6,000 strong army, and decided to herd their cattle and take their precious stores of grain and oil up to the old fortress, where they would be safer. They drove their cattle up the steep slopes into the fortress and shut the gates. Of course, Raymond and his men could have marched right on by, but they were always keen for extra supplies, and were probably also a little put out at this show of resistance, so they decided to attack the fortification. History, unfortunately, hasn't recorded the name of the person who led the peasants, but whoever he was, he missed his calling as a gifted military strategist.

After the attack was underway, the peasants opened the gate and let loose their herds of cattle into the hordes of Latin Christians. The hungry Crusaders abandoned the attack to

give chase to the animals, who panicked and scattered far and wide. Once the attackers had dispersed, the peasants emerged from the fortress to stage an audacious sortie against the much larger, fully armed, Crusading army. And they did a pretty good job of it. In fact, they nearly succeeded in capturing Raymond himself. His bodyguards had left him to try and bag themselves a couple of head of cattle, and his depleted camp struggled to hold back the attacking peasants. But in the end, their attack was repelled and the peasants retreated back inside the fortress.

Understandably, this whole saga was the source of considerable embarrassment for Raymond, who spent the remainder of the day planning a massive, all-out assault on the fortress. The assault was due to take place the following day. The army formed up and threw themselves at the fortifications, holding nothing back in their determination to take the fortress and teach those pesky peasants a lesson they wouldn't forget. They met with surprisingly little resistance, and when they finally overcame the defenses and burst into the citadel, they discovered why: the peasants weren't there. They had crept out of the fortress the night before, and without waking the sleeping Crusaders and without being seen by the sentry posted to keep a lookout for such an occurrence, they had made their way quietly back down the mountain to their farms and villages.

So the Crusaders managed to take the fortress. They stayed there for three weeks, feasting on the cattle they managed to grab and the stores the peasants had left behind in the citadel. Raymond also received emissaries from nearby towns and cities, offering gifts in return for the Crusaders' assurances to leave their towns alone. The most notable of these was the Emir of Homs, who gave the Crusaders gold and much-needed horses, and the Emir of Tripoli.

Tripoli was a short journey from the citadel down south, on the coast, and in a strange move, the Emir invited representatives from the Crusading army to come to his city for detailed discussions about the passage of the army, and to bring the banner of Toulouse, which the Emir promised to unfurl over the city walls. The representatives duly accompanied the Emir back to Tripoli, and were amazed by what they saw. Tripoli was a beautiful and clearly very prosperous city. They were shown around the cultivated gardens and the palace. There was also an impressive public building, Dar al Alim, or House of Culture, which featured a library housing over 100,000 books, one of the largest collections in the Middle East. The city's port was busy, its exports, including harvests from the impressive fields of olives, carob, and sugar cane grown around the city. The Crusaders were very impressed and returned to Raymond with reports of the city's status as a jewel of the Middle East.

Raymond at this point was in a quandary. Yes, he was enjoying being leader of the Crusade and marching his troops onwards to Jerusalem, with gifts being thrown at him and cities surrendering left, right and center, but he was smart enough to understand that this could only take him so far. He knew the city of Jerusalem, their ultimate goal, would not open its gates without a fight, and he wouldn't stand a chance of taking Jerusalem unless his small army was joined by the remaining Crusader forces, led by Godfrey de Bouillon and Robert of Flanders, and of course Bohemond, if he could be persuaded to leave Antioch.

And that was another source of conflict for Raymond. Baldwin had Edessa, Bohemond had Antioch, but what did Raymond of Toulouse have? Nothing. Then again, it was clear he couldn't lead the Crusade and secure a nice city for himself. It had to be one or the

other. It was with this in mind that Raymond made a surprising military decision. He decided to lay siege to the town of Arqah, which was situated some 15 miles from Tripoli. Raymond and his army arrived there on the 14th of February. Over the centuries, historians have pondered the reasons for Raymond's decision. Did he intend to take Arqah and then use it as a stepping stone to take Tripoli itself? Or did he intend to take Arqah and use the victory to negotiate more spoils from Tripoli? The truth was, the town of Arqah was not strategically important, nor did it pose any threat or obstacle to the Crusaders on their journey south, and Raymond had only 6,000 combatants at his disposal, which was not really enough to besiege a city of this size. So his decision to lay siege to the city was surprising. Tancred opposed the move, advising instead that the army should maintain its momentum and proceed straight to Jerusalem, but Raymond was the leader and his decision prevailed.

At first, the siege went rather well. The Latin Christians captured two nearby ports. The city of Arqah was a mile also inland, so capturing nearby ports was essential if lines of supply to the city were to be established. And they conducted successful raids in the region around the city, their attacks proceeding as far as the outskirts of Tripoli. But as time dragged on, the Crusaders came no closer to their goal of taking Arqah. Unfortunately, few details of the siege are known, but it seems that the city was well fortified and that the Muslim defenders had access to catapult machines, which they put to good use, raining projectiles down on the besieging army and causing quite a few Crusader deaths.

As time dragged on, it became increasingly clear that Arqah wasn't going to fall easily. After three months, Raymond sent the Bishop of Albara northwards to find Godfrey, Robert of Flanders and Bohemond, and to urge them to come to his aid. The message said that Raymond had heard a rumor that the Seljuk Turk forces near Baghdad were marching to the aid of the besieged city, and he begged the remaining Crusading army to come to his rescue. Whether Raymond did hear such a rumor, or whether it was concocted, is a matter for debate.

Anyway, the armies of Godfrey de Bouillon and Robert of Flanders duly made their way south. Bohemond elected to remain in Antioch in case the Emperor Alexius showed up. When the armies arrived at Arqah, they found no sign of approaching Seljuk Turks. Instead, they settled in to join the siege.

While Raymond was no doubt relieved to see the size of the Crusading army swell with the arrival of the extra forces, the arrival of the other leaders posed a bit of a problem. He had become used to being sole leader of the army, and now he found himself once again among rivals. Tancred switched allegiance from Raymond to Godfrey de Bouillon, and tensions between the leaders increased, particularly since no one but Raymond could see the point in continuing the siege at Arqah.

Meanwhile, there was plenty happening behind the scenes. Back in Episode 12, during the siege of Antioch, we saw Egyptian ambassadors meet with the Crusaders. They agreed on a position of neutrality with each other, and the ambassadors returned to Egypt, accompanied by a couple of Latin Christian representatives. Well, during the siege of Arqah, these representatives returned from Egypt with an offer from the Egyptian leader, Al-Afdal.

Al-Afdal and the Emperor Alexius had united in an informal alliance against the Seljuk Turks many years ago. The Sunni Muslim Seljuks had seized land from the Byzantine

Empire in Anatolia and northern Syria, while also taking Damascus and Jerusalem and land in southern Syria from the Shia Muslim Egyptians. Both Cairo and Constantinople shared a common goal in taking back their territory from the Turks. Then into this mix was thrown a wild card, in the form of the invading Crusading army.

Al-Afdal watched the progress of the Latin Christians with interest. The two Seljuk Turk governors of Jerusalem had left to join Kerbogha's army in its march to Antioch, and on their return, no doubt dispirited by their defeat, Al-Afdal attacked Jerusalem with a large Egyptian force. After a siege lasting 40 days, the city capitulated. It was again under Egyptian control. So the Crusaders were having a positive effect on Egyptian policy. But as the Crusading army made its way south, the Egyptian leader became increasingly uneasy.

He wrote to his ally, the Emperor Alexius, to get his take on the matter. Alexius, no doubt smarting from the Crusaders failure to hand Antioch back to the Empire, and having no interest in the Crusaders activities in southern Syria, which was outside the realms of the Byzantine Empire, was forthcoming in his assessment of the Crusading forces. In a letter, Alexius advised that the Latin Christian army was much diminished, and no longer under his control. He advised that the army intended to take Jerusalem, whatever the cost.

This news alarmed Al-Afdal, who was no doubt now regretting having taken Jerusalem. It would have been much easier, after all, to let the Seljuk Turks deal with the Franks. But what was done was done, and it now looked like he was going to have to raise an army to defend Jerusalem. He wrote back to Alexius, imploring him to delay the Latin Christians in any way he could. Alexius duly wrote to Raymond, telling him to delay his journey south, and to wait for Alexius and his Byzantine forces to join them. Alexius would then take charge of the Christian army and lead them on their journey south.

It was around about this time that the Latin Christian representatives returned to the army with a message from Cairo. The Egyptians offered the Crusaders free access to their holy places in Jerusalem, and would undertake not to impede the progress of any pilgrims to the city, so long as the Latin Christians agreed not to take Jerusalem by force. The Crusaders rejected the offer immediately.

As for Alexius' request that the Crusaders wait for him to join them, Raymond supported this whole-heartedly. It would mean that his siege of Arqah could continue, and having been a vocal supporter of Alexius, he envisioned himself in a position of power should Alexius take over leadership of the Crusade. The other leaders, however, weren't so keen. They saw no reason to delay their journey south, and they certainly didn't welcome the prospect of falling under Byzantine Imperial command. So Raymond's position as leader was starting to look decidedly shaky.

And things were about to get even shakier. Much of the authority for Raymond's leadership was tied to the Holy Lance, and the power of the Holy Lance was tied to its founder, Peter Bartholomew. But Peter Bartholomew's visions were becoming increasingly erratic, and his messages more extreme. Far from replacing Bishop Adhemar as the spiritual leader of the Crusade, which seems to have been his goal, Peter Bartholomew was really starting to get on people's nerves. His visions supported continuing the siege at Arqah. In fact, they supported most of Raymond's policies, but they were beginning to get a little out of hand.

Things finally came to a head after the 5th of April, when Peter Bartholomew had a bizarre vision. He reported that there were sinners in the Crusading army and that, in a vision, the Lord had shown Peter Bartholomew how to deal with these sinners. Raymond of Toulouse was to order the entire Crusading army to line up as if preparing for battle. Then Peter Bartholomew would miraculously find the troops divided into five ranks. The members of the first three ranks would be devoted Christians, but the remainder would be sinners. The vision then urged Peter Bartholomew to arrange the execution of the sinning Crusaders.

Not surprisingly, the vision caused an outcry. Peter Bartholomew still enjoyed the support of a core group of southern French within Raymond's forces, but other Latin Christians weren't so convinced. Doubts about the accuracy of Peter Bartholomew's visions, and about the authenticity of the Holy Lance began to be openly expressed.

But there was one person who was utterly convinced of the authenticity of the Lance and the visions, and would go to any lengths to prove it, and that person was Peter Bartholomew himself. He requested that he undergo an ordeal by fire. He intended to walk through fire in a manner in which an ordinary person would be terribly burnt. He, however, would be holding the Lance. The Lance's power would protect him from the flames, and people would then be in no doubt of its authenticity.

Peter Bartholomew prepared for the ordeal by fasting for four days. Then, on Good Friday in the year 1099, two rows of olive branches were blessed by the Bishops. The rows were four feet high, 13 foot long and only one foot apart. The branches were set alight, and once they were fully ablaze, Peter Bartholomew, dressed only in a simple tunic and clutching the Holy Lance in his hand, entered the flames. Unfortunately for Peter Bartholomew, he emerged from the other end badly burnt and collapsed, dying from his injuries a few days later. His core group of supporters from southern France had a different version of events. They maintained that Peter received his fatal injuries not from the fire, but from being set upon by a frenzied mob of supporters after he successfully completed his ordeal. But whatever spin they tried to put on the situation, they couldn't escape the fact that Peter Bartholomew died following his ordeal by fire. Peter Bartholomew was no more, and the authority of the Lance died with him.

This was clearly a major blow for Raymond of Toulouse. To make things worse, there was still no progress in the siege of Arqah. The townspeople were stubbornly defending their city against the Crusaders for all they were worth. And it's not surprising. After what happened at Ma'arrat al-Numan, the people of Arqah believed that should their city fall to the Latin Christians, they would be killed, eaten and their town left a smoldering ruin. So they doggedly persisted in their resistance.

Finally though, Raymond of Toulouse was forced to bow to public pressure. There was a sense of urgency building among both the rank and file and the leaders. They needed to get to Jerusalem before the Egyptians had time to muster their armies. That meant leaving now. Raymond reluctantly agreed, and abandoned the siege of Arqah. With his authority greatly diminished, the Crusaders reverted to collective leadership, and the united forces proceeded with due haste down the coast towards Jerusalem.

And they made excellent progress, completing the march from Tripoli to Jerusalem, a distance of 225 miles, in just 23 days. They marched their forces hard for two to three days at a time, then allowed them to rest, and in this way a fast pace was able to be maintained. And it helped, of course, that the towns along the way were happy to negotiate the army's

safe passage. The coastal towns, after all, had no real interest in taking on the Crusaders. They now knew that their goal was Jerusalem, and as long as the Latin Christians agreed to leave their crops alone and neither pillage nor plunder, the cities sent supplies to the army, and were happy to see them move on southwards where the Egyptians could deal with them. The towns of Beirut, Tyre, Acre, Haifa, and Caesarea all stood back and let the Crusaders pass on through, and the army made rapid progress.

As they arrived at the hills of Judea, an envoy from the nearby town of Bethlehem approached the army. The Christian population of the city begged the Crusaders assistance in liberating them from their Muslim rulers. Tancred obliged, leading a small contingent of men to the famed biblical city. The knights were received with rapture at Bethlehem, and the Christian citizens led them on a parade through the town, bearing relics and crosses from the Church of the Nativity. Tancred raised his banner above the town and, with the birthplace of Christ restored to Christian rule, he departed to re-join the army.

On Tuesday, the 7th of June 1099, the Crusading army reached its goal. They arrived at the walls of Jerusalem. Oh, I hear you say, so that's the end of the First Crusade, then. Not so. The Latin Christians don't just want to sit outside Jerusalem. They need to take the city, and with their diminished forces (by this stage the army has dwindled to perhaps around 14,000 fighting men) that is going to take some doing. Join us next week as we embark on the final chapter of the First Crusade, the Siege of Jerusalem.

There's no further reading for this week, but there is a map. If you go to the website www.HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com and scroll down to Episode 16, you will find a map showing the route the Crusaders took from Antioch to Jerusalem. I hope you enjoy it. Until next week, bye for now.

End