

History of the Crusades.
Episode 17.
The First Crusade XIII.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Crusaders finally arrive at the walls of Jerusalem. After a journey lasting three long years, the Latin Christians have reached their goal, Jerusalem, the birthplace of Christianity and the center of the known world. The city was ancient, imposing and well fortified.

The walls around the old city of Jerusalem today are not the walls seen by the Crusaders. They were rebuilt at a later date under Ottoman rule, but they followed the same lines and were of a similar scale. The walls totally enclosed the city, an area of around 86 hectares. They were four kilometres long, up to fifteen metres high and three metres thick. To the east and west, the walls' defensive capabilities were enhanced by the steep hills and rocky terrain upon which they were built. The sections of the walls to the north and south-west could be more easily approached, as they were built on flatter ground. To mitigate against this, they were reinforced by a series of dry moats.

The entry points to the city were via five gates, and each of these gates were guarded by a pair of towers built into the wall. In addition, the wall included two fortresses. Where the wall formed a corner to the northwest, the Quadrangular Tower had been built. Not surprisingly, it was rectangular in shape and was a formidable stronghold. Just to the south of the Quadrangular Tower was the ancient citadel of the Tower of David, which guarded the Jaffa Gate. The walls themselves were in good condition and had been solidly built. The Crusaders in particular were impressed by the solid construction of the Tower of David, which had been built with large square stones sealed together with molten lead.

The Crusading force at this time had dwindled to around 1300 knights and 12,000 foot soldiers, along with an unknown number of non-combatants. Like the situation at Antioch, the Crusading army was not large enough to attempt a full encirclement of the city. So, like Antioch, they opted to split up, and camp outside the gates to the city. Robert of Normandy took up a position along the northern wall near the Gate of Flowers, now called Herod's Gate, with Robert of Flanders nearby at the Gate of the Column, now called the Damascus Gate. Godfrey of Bouillon set up camp near the Quadrangular Tower, covering the wall from the New Gate to the Jaffa Gate. He was joined there by Tancred, who rode back, fresh from taking Bethlehem, to find the army already in position. Further to the south was Raymond of Toulouse and the southern French. He initially set up camp near the Tower of David, but finding it difficult to approach the walls due to the hilly terrain, he moved his men further south, to the more exposed position on Mount Sion, near the Sion Gate.

The man in charge of the defense of the city was the Egyptian governor, Iftikhar al Dawla. His role was to hold the city with the assistance of his garrison, comprising Egyptian and local militia, including a contingent of Jewish troops, until help arrived in the form of the Egyptian army. When news reached him of the approach of the Crusading army he took immediate action. He expelled all the Christians from the holy city and poisoned or blocked all the wells outside the walls. In contrast, within the walls were many cisterns, which produced a plentiful supply of water. He gathered food supplies together, and then took the unusual step of stringing sacks of cotton and hay around the towers, to cushion the blow from any Crusading catapults which may strike the towers. He gathered his forces and waited to see how the Crusaders would attempt to take the city.

From the Crusaders' point of view, time was of the essence. They knew that the Egyptians were in the process of massing a huge army to march to Jerusalem's aid, and they knew they had to take the city before the army arrived. That ruled out a lengthy siege like the one at Antioch, which in turn meant that somehow, with their depleted forces, they had to storm the walls and take the city by force.

At this time, decisions were again being made collectively by the council of Princes. Raymond of Toulouse's star was definitely on the wane. He had drawn much of his authority from possessing the Holy Lance and the holy man, Peter Bartholomew. But after Peter's failure and subsequent death, following his ordeal by fire, Peter's visions and the Lance itself was discredited. He had also been relying on the Emperor Alexius to join the Crusade, which hadn't happened, and the three month delay which occurred while he attempted and failed to take the city of Arqah further discredited his leadership abilities.

By the time they reached Jerusalem, Raymond of Toulouse was rapidly losing favor. Robert of Normandy withdrew his support, and even some of Raymond's own southern French troops changed sides and moved over to Godfrey's camp. And in the absence of Bohemond, it was Godfrey who assumed the role of de facto leader. Pious, quiet and popular among the rank and file, he didn't possess any obvious leadership abilities, but he hadn't really put a foot wrong in the campaign so far, and leadership authority eventually gravitated in his direction.

The first main problem confronting Godfrey and the other leaders when they arrived at Jerusalem was the lack of water. It was summer, and the days were hot. There was barely any shade outside the city walls, and the fully armored knights, in particular, must have suffered greatly. There was only one source of fresh water nearby, the pool of Siloam, below the southern walls. As thirsty men and animals gathered to drink their fill at the pool, they soon found out it was within arrow range of the walls. Anyone drinking or gathering water, there found themselves the subject of target practice by the Muslim archers, and soon the pool filled with the bodies of animals killed by arrows.

There was a marsh nearby, but the water taken from there was stagnant and foul, so the crusaders began to look further afield for their water source. The problem then became one of transportation. They found fresh water around ten miles away, but how could they gather and store it, and transport it back to the camps at Jerusalem? They decided to use the skins of freshly slaughtered buffalo and oxen, which they sewed up to create water storage devices. Unsurprisingly, any water stored in the skins soon became rancid, but also unsurprisingly, there were still men thirsty enough to drink this water. Also unsurprisingly, many of these men were struck down by dysentery and became rather unwell. To make matters worse, Muslim forces began ambushing any Latin Christians who traveled to gather the water.

The water crisis just reinforced what everyone already knew: they needed to take Jerusalem as quickly as possible. To storm the walls they were going to need ladders and siege towers. Usually this equipment was made on site using wood from local trees. The trouble with the area around Jerusalem was that it was almost entirely devoid of trees. This problem was alleviated, somewhat entertainingly, by Tancred. He experienced a particularly nasty pang of dysentery, and raced into a nearby cave for some privacy. Hidden within the cave he found a decent supply of wood, not enough to build a siege tower, but enough to fashion one long scaling ladder.

Armed with their one long scaling ladder, the Crusaders decided to launch an assault on the city on the 13th of June. It seems mightily optimistic for the Crusaders to decide they could take Jerusalem simply by using this ladder, but they had been buoyed by the prophecies of a nearby Christian hermit who predicted their success. They managed to maneuver the ladder past the dry moat and protective outer wall and set us against the main wall. Fortune fell to a knight from Chartres, Raimbold Creton, to be the first to climb the ladder. He succeeded in making it to the top, then grabbed the wall with his left hand, and then a Muslim defender armed with a two handed sword, sliced downwards with his weapon, all but severing Rainbold's hand. He survived the terrible wound, but when the knight's coming up the ladder behind him also found themselves facing the swords and spears of their opponents, they soon realized the futility of the situation and withdrew.

This, of course, was a disappointing start to the siege of Jerusalem. Clearly, the Crusaders were going to need more equipment. The trouble was, they simply didn't have the wood or tools to make the siege towers, extra ladders, catapult machines and battering rams they needed to mount a proper assault on the city.

Strangely, help came just in time. It arrived in the form of six Christian ships which docked at the nearby port of Jaffa. The ships were from Genoa and England. Miraculously, the Genoese ships not only contained food supplies, but nails, ropes, hammers, and axes, all essential tools for crafting siege machinery. Escaping an ambush set for them by the Muslims, the men and supplies from the ships were welcomed within the Crusader camp with open arms.

Unfortunately, when dawn broke the next day, the new arrivals discovered their ships surrounded by enemy vessels, and the port of Jaffa blockaded by the Egyptian fleet. As a consequence, the sailors were forced to abandon their ships and instead found themselves joining the siege of Jerusalem.

The Crusaders still needed wood for their constructions, and this problem was solved when local Christian guides led them to a forest many miles away from Jerusalem. Tancred, Robert of Normandy, and Robert of Flanders took a contingent of men to the forest and returned with camels laden with logs of wood. Work on the siege equipment could finally begin.

The plan was to build two siege towers three stories high, rising to a height of 50 feet, built on wheeled platforms, enabling them to be pushed against the main wall. Sections of the dry moat also needed to be filled in, to enable the towers to be wheeled over to the main wall when completed. The wealthy Raymond of Toulouse took a novel approach to this laborious task, paying a penny to any person who dropped three rocks into the moat. After three days and three nights, the moat was filled. Scaling ladders would also need to be constructed, along with catapult machines and giant battering rams.

The Crusaders were still suffering from a lack of water, and were working on their constructions in the summer heat, with no shade. Work progressed slowly. Morale started to falter, and tensions once again broke out between the leaders. This time, the argument centered around whether Tancred should be allowed to claim Bethlehem. He had taken the city, and his banner currently flew over the Church of the Nativity, but the clergy and other leaders believed the town to be of too great a biblical significance to be possessed by one leader. The issue hadn't been resolved before the arguments spilled over to the

issue of who should govern Jerusalem if it fell. Some of the leaders believed a king should be appointed from their midst to rule the city, but the clergy were adamant that it would be inappropriate for anyone to call themselves "king" in a city where Christ suffered and died. Again, the issue wasn't resolved.

This discontent spread down to the rank and file, and desertions started occurring. Some Crusaders, having made it all the way from Europe to the walls of Jerusalem, decided the attempt to take the city would be futile, and left the city to seek passage on a ship back home. But the majority of the Latin Christians remained, and progress was made on the siege equipment.

They had an opportunity to try out one of the newly constructed catapult machines when an Egyptian spy was caught ferrying messages in and out of the city. Someone decided to try and catapult the spy, who was still alive, over the walls, into the city. They loaded him into the machine and launched him, but he was too heavy, and he didn't make it very far. He crashed into some rocks at the base of the wall and died.

Finally, by early July, the work was nearing completion. Women from the Crusader camp dipped animal skins in vinegar and nailed them to the outside of the towers. Vinegar was the one substance thought to be effective against Greek fire, and the skins were designed to protect the towers from the flames. They were just about ready to begin their assault.

Around about this time, one of the clergy reported having a vision of Bishop Adhemar. He stated that the Bishop had told him that the Latin Christians should undergo a purifying fast and should walk barefoot in procession around the walls of Jerusalem. If they did so, in the appropriate spirit of repentance, then they would capture Jerusalem within nine days. The Council of Princes agreed to organize the parade. On the 8th of July, led by the clergy carrying relics and crosses, the knights and foot soldiers, fully armed but barefooted, marched around the base of the walls, to the tune of trumpets. Unfortunately, they came too close to the walls at one stage of their parade, and Muslim arrows wounded some of the clergy. But the procession wound its way around Jerusalem, then proceeded to the nearby Mount of Olives to hear some rousing words.

Now, who are you going to choose to preach to the masses? Someone who can convince them that they will triumph despite the terrible odds against them. I'm not even going to give you any clues. You know who it is. Peter the Hermit. Yes, Peter makes another appearance in the First Crusade, giving a rousing sermon to the Latin Christians on the Mount of Olives, followed by a couple more rousing sermons by other Crusader clerics. Go, Peter!

Finally, on the 14th of July, the Crusaders were ready to stage their attack on Jerusalem. The army had been purified, and the siege towers, ladders, catapult machines, and battering rams were all ready to be deployed. On the night before the 14th of July, Godfrey de Bouillon made a clever move. Two siege towers had been built, one for Raymond and his men, which was positioned on Mount Sion near the Sion Gate, and one for Godfrey and his men, which was positioned near the Quadrangular Tower. As a consequence, the Muslim defenses were concentrated around these two points. But as soon as darkness fell on the night of the 13th of July, Godfrey ordered his men to dismantle the siege tower, carry the parts to the Gate of Flowers nearly a kilometre away, and rebuild it. It was a bold move, and Godfrey must have been more than a little nervous that it wouldn't be reassembled in time. But he needn't have worried.

As dawn broke on the 14th of July, and as battle horns rung out over the Crusader camp, signaling the start of the assault, the Muslim defenders must have been horrified to discover that their carefully placed catapult machines, and their stocks of projectiles and other defensive equipment, were now all in the wrong place. This gave Godfrey some breathing space. There was an outer wall protecting the main wall at his point of attack, and while the Muslims were occupied moving their equipment, he decided to employ the battering ram to punch a hole in the outer wall so that the siege tower could be moved up to the main wall.

The battering ram was effective, so effective, in fact, that it not only broke through the outer wall, it continued through to the main wall and wedged itself there. The Muslim defenders panicked and poured pitch and fire onto the ram, setting it alight. The Crusaders responded by using some of their precious supplies of water to put the fire out. But when the Crusaders went to remove the battering ram, to clear the way for the siege tower, it became apparent that there was a problem. The battering ram had wedged itself so securely into the main wall that it was stuck fast. In its current position, it was blocking the way for the tower's approach. Since it couldn't be moved, the Latin Christians decided to destroy it instead. In an almost comical reversal of position, the Crusaders now set fire to the battering ram, while the Muslim defenders, realizing what had happened, poured water down on the battering ram to try and extinguish the fire.

While this was happening, on the other side of the city, Raymond and his men were facing fierce resistance. Raymond hadn't moved his tower in the dead of night, so he and his men faced a barrage of projectiles. There was no protective outer wall in this part of the city, so all Raymond had to do was push his siege tower straight over to the main wall. But the Muslims were well prepared. They hurled wave after wave of arrows and rocks at the tower from their catapult machines, and when it came closer it was bombarded with heavy pieces of ignited wood, which had been studded with nails and were designed to fasten themselves to the wooden tower and set it alight. Raymond's tower didn't make it to the wall, and by the end of the day's fighting it was withdrawn back to safety.

By the end of the day, Godfrey's men had managed to successfully burn their battering ram to a pile of charcoal, ready for the approach of the siege tower the next day.

When the battle resumed at dawn on the 15th of July, Raymond's tower again came under heavy attack. Throughout the morning, he attempted to maneuver the tower close to the wall, but was repelled with such force that, by the middle of the day, his tower was a smoking, damaged ruin which threatened to collapse.

Godfrey was having better luck. He, too, spent the morning pushing his tower towards the wall. While also coming under the same level of bombardment as Raymond, the wattle screens on his tower seemed to be able to deflect most of the blows. As Godfrey's men maneuvered the tower through the gap in the outer wall created by the battering ram, both sides changed tactics. The tower was now too close for the catapult machines stationed on the wall to be effective, so the Muslims concentrated on pummeling the tower with a mixture of slingshot and arrows. They even managed to throw some Greek fire at the tower, which the Crusaders managed to extinguish with some vinegar they had kept handy for just that purpose.

The Crusaders responded to the renewed Muslim attack. The three story tower was filled with men, and those on the top story, including Godfrey himself, had a clear line of fire to those defending the walls. Fire arrows and ordinary arrows found their targets as the tower inched its way forward. When the tower was only a metre or so away from the main wall, the Crusaders had a stroke of luck. One of their fire arrows had hit the wall's wooden substructure, and the flames had spread along the wall to a nearby defensive tower. The resulting smoke and heat was causing the Muslims to cough and retreat, and Godfrey seized the moment. He broke off one of the wattle screens, and used it to bridge the gap between the siege tower and the top of the wall. Two brothers were first to scramble across the rickety platform onto the wall, followed closely by Godfrey and the other men on the top story of the siege tower. Scaling ladders were positioned against the wall by the Crusaders who had been on the lower stories of the tower, and the wall was soon crowded with Latin Christians. The terrified Muslims retreated and the city's defenses quickly collapsed.

News of the breach reached the Muslims defending the walls against Raymond on Mount Sion, and the Islamic forces, who until now had the upper hand against Raymond's assault, began to panic and desert their posts. Raymond took the opportunity to breach the walls, and soon the crusading army was pouring into the city of Jerusalem on two fronts.

Now, there are a lot of places in history where you just don't want to be, and now we can add another one. You would not want to be in Jerusalem on the 15th of July 1099 after the Latin Christians stormed the walls. Having finally reached their goal after years of toil and deprivation, the Crusaders went on a murderous rampage through the city, slaughtering anyone they could find: Muslims, Jews, men, women, and children. And they weren't content just to kill people they came across. Bodies were decapitated and had their hands and feet struck off. Some Muslim defenders were tortured by fire. There were barely any survivors. Tancred gave his banner to a group of civilians who surrendered at the Temple of Solomon, but they were cut down and killed by other Crusaders. Most Jewish residents fled to the main synagogue in the city, but the Crusaders set it alight, burning alive the people within.

The Egyptian governor of Jerusalem, Iftikhar al-Dawla, fled to the heavily fortified Tower of David citadel, where he negotiated the surrender of himself and his bodyguards, in exchange for an impressive ransom. Raymond accepted the treasure and the terms of surrender, and Iftikhar al Dawla and his men were allowed to leave the city. They were among only a handful of Muslims to survive.

The Crusaders also went plundering. They entered houses, killed the residents, and took whatever of value they could find. They raided mosques and synagogues, stealing anything of worth. By the time they had finished their rampage, corpses were piled high in the streets, and there was blood everywhere. Around the temple area where the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of al-Aqsa stood, blood was a foot deep, reaching up to the Crusaders' knees. Most Latin Christians were covered in blood and gore. When there was no one left to kill, the leaders of the Crusade led a procession to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where the Latin Christians prayed and gave thanks to God for their victory.

The massacre at Jerusalem was one of the most notorious events of the Middle Ages. Although it did seal victory for the First Crusade, it also scarred relations between Christianity and Islam, a scar that, some argue, remains to this day.

The Egyptians did attempt to retake the city. In early August, the Crusading army left Jerusalem and surprised the approaching Egyptian army, who were camped outside the town of Ascalon. The Latin Christians had left behind only the clergy and a handful of men to garrison Jerusalem. Making his last recorded appearance in the history of the Crusades, Peter the Hermit remained in the city with the clergy, leading them in prayers for the army's success.

The army was successful, and the final battle of the First Crusade was won. More than three years after Pope Urban II launched the Crusade from Clermont in November 1095, Jerusalem was now firmly in Christian hands.

Join me next week as we look at the aftermath of the First Crusade.

Now, just a quick word here about future episodes. Although we've now finished the First Crusade, we won't be launching straight into the Second Crusade. There's roughly a fifty year gap between the First and Second Crusades, and we will need to have a bit of a look at what happened in those fifty years.

I'll also be posting some special episodes. Before we start on the Second Crusade, I'm aiming to provide you with episodes on the Knights Templar, the Muslim Assassins, and Eleanor of Aquitaine, so stay tuned. I've also posted a map and a picture on the website at www.HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com, of the clergy leading the Crusading army on their barefoot march around the walls of Jerusalem. I've also posted a link to a recreation of the siege of Jerusalem, done by a group called "The Tin Soldiers of Antwerp". It's really quite good, and I hope you enjoy it. Until next week, bye for now.

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