

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 26.  
Eleanor of Aquitaine Part 2.

Hello again. Last week we started to look at the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine. We saw Eleanor rise to become Queen of France and, along with her young husband King Louis VII, we saw them provide some pretty salient examples of what can go wrong if you place a couple of teenagers in charge of a country. Their reign to date has been marred by conflict, poor decision-making, and a desire to do whatever they pleased with little regard for the consequences.

We will take up the examination of Eleanor's life on Sunday, the 10th of June 1144. Eleanor is now 22 years of age and has been Queen for seven years. Eleanor, her mother-in-law, and King Louis have travelled from Paris to Saint-Denis for the consecration of a new church. The church was a Gothic masterpiece. It was massive, with 20 altars, gorgeous stained glass windows and contained a crucifix 20 feet high, which stood on the main altar. It was dedicated to Saint-Denis, and during the consecration ceremony, the bones of the saint were placed in a highly decorated tomb inside the church. Lords, counts, and dukes from across France sent gifts to the church, which were placed on display. The King and Queen of France donated an ornate vase which had been gifted by Eleanor to her new husband on their wedding day. The vase is currently on display at the Louvre, and is apparently the only object in existence which can confidently be associated with Eleanor. I'll place a photo of it on the website. Anyway, back to the ceremony at Saint-Denis.

The church itself was packed to capacity with pilgrims, curious onlookers, and distinguished guests. Among the guests were King Louis' rivals, Bernard of Clairvaux and Count Theobald of Champagne. Now just a word here about King Louis. He is still wracked with guilt over the church fire at Vitry some 18 months previously. In stark contrast to the Queen, who has come to the ceremony dressed in a sumptuous robe of damask, and is wearing a pearl-encrusted crown, King Louis is dressed as a penitent, wearing only a simple robe and sandals. His attire and his demeanor seemed to have made quite an impact on those present.

Now, I mentioned that the church was filled to capacity. There wasn't much in the way of ventilation, and it was summer, so the atmosphere inside the church quickly became hot and stuffy, so much so that Eleanor and her mother-in-law both started to feel faint. Whether it was the lack of oxygen, whether the ceremony was particularly moving, or whether King Louis' appearance truly affected people, an atmosphere of peace and friendship appears to have descended after the ceremony. So much so that Bernard of Clairvaux exchanged some encouraging words with King Louis, telling him not to give in to despair and to have faith in God's mercy.

Even more surprisingly, Eleanor and Bernard seemed to have had a frank and lengthy conversation after the ceremony. Eleanor is said to have pleaded with Bernard to use his influence on Rome to lift the punishment of excommunication from her sister Petronilla and her husband Count Raoul, and to have their marriage recognized by the Church. She must have misjudged Bernard, who saw in this extravagantly dressed young woman much of what was wrong with the Kingdom of France. He admonished her severely for taking an interest in the affairs of state, so severely in fact, that she burst into tears. She responded,

weeping, that she only involved herself in the affairs of her Kingdom to fill her days, which were empty. She wanted to have a child, but the past seven years had not produced the heir to the throne so longed for by both herself and Louis. Bernard must have been touched by her story as he agreed to pray for her. Perhaps Bernard's request for divine intervention was successful, as the following year she gave birth to her first child, a daughter whom she named Marie after the Virgin Mary, to whom Bernard had offered his prayers.

After the ceremony at Saint-Denis, under Bernard's guiding hand, negotiations began, to end the conflict between the King and Theobald of Champagne. It resulted in a peace treaty being signed by both parties. King Louis agreed to give back the land he had taken during his invasion of Champagne, and he also agreed to allow the Pope's man to become Archbishop of Bourges. The King's penitent state was starting to have practical effects on royal policy.

But these concessions did nothing to reduce Louis' guilt. If anything, it became worse. He tried all sorts of things to alleviate his feelings. He took to wearing a hair shirt, which left him in constant discomfort. He started fasting three days in every week, which left him weak and lethargic. He donated money to the town of Vitry, enabling the town to be rebuilt, and the people who had lost relatives in the fire, compensated. Still, Louis' fear of eternal damnation prevailed, as did his crippling feelings of guilt. Louis had started to think of other ways to alleviate his suffering, and had begun to consider whether he should undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, when some disturbing news reached Europe from the Middle East.

The Muslim leader Zengi had taken Edessa, threatening the very existence of the Crusader states. Antioch in particular, was looking vulnerable, and if Antioch fell to the Muslims, Tripoli and Jerusalem would soon follow. Queen Melisende sent an urgent plea to the Pope requesting assistance, and on the first of December 1145 a Papal Bull was issued urging King Louis to gather the faithful and liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims. All who participated in this new Crusade would receive remission for their sins. This was exactly the kind of solution to his suffering that Louis had been seeking. Without consulting his advisers, he wrote to the Pope, declaring that he would lead a Crusade to the Holy Land.

Eleanor then made her own equally startling declaration. She was going to accompany her husband on the Crusade. While it is likely that she was motivated by genuine desire to come to the assistance of her uncle, Raymond of Antioch, Amy Kelly in her book "Eleanor and The Four Kings", attributes Eleanor's decision to embark on the Crusade to one factor. Boredom. Eleanor was a vivacious, energetic young woman, and court life was becoming increasingly monotonous. Since she had taken Bernard of Clairvaux's advice to stay out of the affairs of state, there wasn't really a lot to occupy her active mind. Her sister was married and living in northern France, and although she had recently given birth to her first child, it seems that Eleanor was a distant mother, preferring, as was the case with most noble women at the time, to leave her child's upbringing to others. She needed something to do and journeying to the Holy Land on a mission from God, and being able to visit her uncle in Antioch, that would certainly remedy the situation. And it's not as if King Louis was going to stop her. In declaring her intention to join the Crusade, Eleanor's vassals in Aquitaine and across her vast ancestral estates were obliged to also take up the cross.

And at a personal level, Louis would like Eleanor at his side. A Crusade would take at least a year, and Louis was a devoted husband to his beautiful, strong-willed wife. In fact, he was quite obsessed with her, to the extent that it provoked comment amongst his advisers. Did Eleanor feel the same about him? Um, probably not. Louis was really rather a strange man. With his monastic leanings, he probably wasn't the ideal picture of manhood in Eleanor's eyes. Best to keep her close then, thought Louis. After all, he didn't want Eleanor tempted by other men while he was away in the Middle East.

Despite Eleanor's clear enthusiasm, the general feeling about the Crusade in Europe was lukewarm, and you can see why. The First Crusade resulted in thousands of Latin Christian deaths, and this Crusade was being led by the young King Louis, who had limited experience as a military commander, and whose few military campaigns to date had been, well, disastrous. But the Crusade had been declared, and in the spring of 1147 its participants set off for the Middle East.

Now, I'm not going to go into the Second Crusade in much detail here, as the Second Crusade will have its own episodes, if we ever finish these ones on Eleanor of Aquitaine. I will just be mentioning the parts of the Second Crusade as they pertain directly to Eleanor, and we will be seeing the Second Crusade through her eyes.

Right. Well, Eleanor's decision to embark on the Crusade prompted many other noble young ladies to do the same, so Eleanor was not short of traveling companions. One chronicler, Gervase of Canterbury, describes Eleanor and her closest friends setting off for the Crusade dressed as Amazons, riding white horses, sporting white tunics decorated with red crosses with matching bright red boots. The women let their hair loose and galloped around on their horses, yelling encouragement and brandishing shiny, bright swords. Now, with anyone else, I'd be tempted to dismiss this as a later embellishment, but it actually sounds exactly like a sort of thing that I imagine Eleanor would do, so I'm going to leave it in with a disclaimer that Eleanor of Aquitaine may or may not have started out on the Second Crusade dressed as an Amazon.

Like the First Crusade, the first port of call was Constantinople. With its magnificent palaces, gardens and churches, it must have made quite an impact on Eleanor. The Emperor, Emperor Manuel Comnenus, allocated the Palace of the Blachernae to the King and Queen, and they stayed in separate apartments. Compared to her own lodgings in Paris, the palace at Constantinople was luxurious and offered a level of comfort and opulence beyond Eleanor's wildest dreams. The palace boasted more than 200 rooms and at least a dozen chapels, which were decorated with gold and mosaics. The rooms themselves were immense, with marble floors and gilded columns. The walls were decorated with sumptuous tapestries depicting the victories of the Imperial family over the Turks. There were chandeliers, and balconies from which Eleanor could survey the elegant and carefully tended gardens, complete with fountains and shady groves. All in all, it would have made Paris look pretty shabby in comparison.

The King and Queen spent nine days in Constantinople, attending banquets at which they were served exotic foods such as artichokes, fried frogs, and sauces flavored with spices rarely seen in Europe. The floor was strewn with rose petals. Music played throughout the meal, and at its conclusion the guests were entertained by dancers and jugglers. They attended Church services in the magnificent church of Saint Sophia, and Eleanor would have spent most of her days being entertained by the Empress Irene, and waited upon by an impressive array of eunuchs and slaves.

But all good things must come to an end. No doubt King Louis would have informed Eleanor that the Emperor was keen to have them press on to Jerusalem, and on the 16th of October, 1147 the Latin Christian Army crossed the Bosphorus into hostile territory.

And that's when things started to get serious. King Louis chose to follow the coastline, instead of taking the same route as the First Crusade. And like the First Crusade, the journey became increasingly dangerous and uncomfortable. After a while, they started running out of food. To make things even worse, the weather was getting colder and the army often found itself marching through rain and sleet. The troops were becoming ill-disciplined and hungry. Eleanor would have been shielded from most of the deprivations. She wouldn't have gone hungry, and she started to travel in rustic, horse-drawn carriages, screened from the worst of the weather by leather curtains.

The down point of the whole journey for Eleanor occurred in January of 1148. The Crusading party was crossing a mountainous area in the region of Paphlagonia. King Louis ordered one of Eleanor's vassals, Geoffrey de Rancon, to press ahead with the Queen and her ladies and the vanguard of the army, and to set up camp on a plateau, so that the army could rest before tackling the next mountain pass. Geoffrey did as he was told. He took the vanguard and the ladies to the plateau, which was bleak and windswept. Quite possibly at the Queen's urging, Geoffrey then made a fateful decision. He decided to look for somewhere more suitable to make camp, somewhere less bleak and windswept. So he took his men over the mountain pass and discovered a sheltered and fertile valley, which all in all, looked like a much more comfortable and pleasant place to make camp. The ladies were taken across the pass into the valley, and they proceeded to settle in.

When King Louis and the main army made its way to the plateau, they were shocked to find it deserted, with no sign of Geoffrey, the vanguard, or the Queen. While they were trying to work out what this meant, they were set upon by the Turks, who had been waiting in the mountain pass. Some 7,000 Latin Christians were killed, and their baggage train was ransacked, the Turks making off with many essential supplies and most of the women's luggage. The King himself only narrowly escaped with his life.

Geoffrey and his men were blissfully unaware of what had happened. Night fell, and since there was still no sign of the main army, Geoffrey began to worry. He sent scouts back over the mountain pass, and they stumbled upon a scene of absolute carnage on the plateau. As dawn broke, King Louis made his way over the mountain pass on a borrowed horse, and was appalled to find his vanguard in a vulnerable position, sitting in the valley, surrounded by hills from which the Turks could descend any moment. Surprisingly, King Louis didn't order Geoffrey's execution. He had after all, disobeyed orders, and as a result caused the death of thousands of his compatriots. And this perhaps confirms what likely happened, that in moving camp to a more comfortable place, Geoffrey was acting on orders, not those of his King, but of his Queen. Instead, Geoffrey was sent packing back to Europe in disgrace.

The army made its way over the mountains and down to the coast. By this time, things were looking dire, and the King made a decision that the rest of the journey be completed by sea. King Louis, Queen Eleanor and others who could afford the expensive passage, boarded ships and set sail for the port of St Symeon. The voyage was meant to take three days, but the fleet was beset by terrible weather, storms and unfavourable winds. After an

extremely uncomfortable three weeks, the bedraggled fleet limped into St Symeon on the 19th of March 1148, to an amazing reception.

As soon as the sails of the ships on the horizon were reported to Antioch, Eleanor's uncle, Prince Raymond of Antioch, set to organizing a welcome party. As the weary royal party were being rowed ashore, choirs sang and crowds cheered. Uncle Raymond himself was there to greet the King and Queen, and to personally escort them to his capital.

Now, just a word about Eleanor's Uncle Raymond. He's not the gray-haired elderly gentleman that you might be imagining. Oh no, far from it. In 1148, Raymond Prince of Antioch is around 36 years of age, tall, unusually good looking, personable, and with a keen intellect. He was also unusually strong, and had earned the nickname Hercules, from being able to bend iron bars with his bare hands. Eleanor was in her early twenties. She hadn't seen her uncle for 10 years, and they got along like a house on fire. They both welcomed the opportunity to converse in the language of their childhood, the French languedoc, and converse they did. Often.

Raymond did everything he could to ensure the royal couple were comfortable in his city. He provided Eleanor with new clothes to replace the ones she had lost, and spared no expense entertaining his guests, serving them wine cooled with snow brought down from the mountains, and food rich with spices and the exotic fruits of the Middle East. For Eleanor, this must have been blissful after the deprivations of her nearly 3,000 mile long journey from Europe. In the words of Amy Kelly in her book "Eleanor of Aquitaine and The Four Kings", when Eleanor first arrived in Antioch she was tired, and I quote "Tired of movement, of mountainous scenery, of ruined apostolic cities of stinking boats and drafty tents, of snow and rain, roast mutton, sour cheese, and reveille." End of quote.

After experiencing so much hostility and hardship, finding herself safe inside Antioch's impressive walls with her uncle attending to her every need, Eleanor could relax and enjoy herself for the first time since leaving Constantinople five months previously.

And there was a lot to occupy Eleanor's restless nature at Antioch. While it lacked the size and grandeur of Constantinople, Antioch was still an exotic and cosmopolitan place. It had been a great city in Roman times, over 1,000 years before Eleanor's arrival, and while it still bore the hallmarks of its Roman origins, with its impressive marble paved streets, architecture, Roman baths, temples, amphitheaters, and the impressive forum in the center of the city, presided over by a statue of the Roman God Apollo, it also bore the signs of many other cultures and religions. Antioch had been rocked by earthquakes throughout its long history. It had also been conquered by Greek, Persian, Sassanian and Byzantine forces over the years, all of whom had left their mark on the city. This meant that Antioch contained a curious mixture of hanging gardens and citrus groves, domed mosques, terraces, colonnades, minarets, churches, and dwellings and luxurious villas in all styles, all encircled by the massive city walls.

The people within the city reflected its mix of buildings. The wealth of Antioch depended on its success as a center for trade, and this meant welcoming people from all races and religions to its markets and bazaars. The newly arrived Latin Christians might have been shocked to hear the Muslim call to prayer ringing out from one of the city's mosques, while turbaned Saracens, having arrived from the desert in caravans, sold their goods in the market place, along with Jews and traders from faraway lands such as Moorish Spain, Sicily and Africa. Coins from Baghdad and Esfahan in Persia would be weighed against

coins from Venice, Alexandria and Bordeaux. With the aroma of spices from the markets and the refreshing scent from cypress trees and citrus groves wafting across the city, it must have seemed very removed from what Eleanor was used to in Europe.

The Crusaders would have been shocked too, to see the second generation Latin Christians who called Antioch home. Many of the original foot soldiers and knights from the First Crusade who had stayed in Antioch had married local women. As a result, their children were raised in both the ways of the west and of the Middle East. Now growing to adulthood, many of these sons of the First Crusade dressed in the flowing robes of the Middle East, and spoke the language of the Turks and Saracens with ease. They could even be seen in the eating houses, sharing food and conversation with the infidel. For those who had embarked on the Second Crusade and had arrived in the Holy Land to battle Muslim forces, this was all rather disturbing and confusing. But Eleanor loved Antioch and thrived under the attentions of her uncle.

Both the King and Queen were granted lodgings in Prince Raymond's palace, high on Mount Silpius. With stunning views that stretched to the rocky coastline, the palace boasted luxuries never seen in Europe, such as glass windows and running water. Walking around the vast rooms scented with candles, in her new silk gowns presented to her by Raymond, and wearing jewelry that he had also given her, Eleanor blossomed. She spent a lot of time with her uncle, and they seemed to delight in each other's company. They got on so well, in fact, that rumors started circulating that their relationship had developed into something not quite appropriate for an uncle and his niece.

And this, of course, didn't make King Louis happy at all. Unlike his wife, he was not impressed with Antioch's exotic luxuries, and he was disturbed by the religious tolerance being exhibited within the town. His relationship with Prince Raymond became increasingly strained.

And that's all we have time for this week. Join me next week as we see Eleanor make a surprising declaration to King Louis, that she no longer wants to be Queen of France and wishes to revert back to being the Duchess of Aquitaine. Oh, and that she's decided to stay in Antioch and live with Prince Raymond in his palace on Mount Silpius.

Now, as you've probably guessed, by now, there are going to be more of these Eleanor of Aquitaine episodes than I had originally intended. I thought I'd wrap Eleanor up after one or two episodes, but it looks like it's going to take a couple more than that. Anyway, we'll finish them eventually and then get started on the Second Crusade.

Now, just before I go, I should point out an error in last week's episode. The period of anarchy during the reign of King Stephen in England was known as the time during which "Christ and his saints slept". This is a quote from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, and it's a quote I know well, but for some reason, when I stated the quote in last week's episode, it came out as "when Christ and his angels slept". And that, of course, is wrong. It was a time during which Christ and his saints slept. There were no angels involved at all, and I don't know how they made their way in there. I just thought I should clear that up for you all. Until next week, bye for now.

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