

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 29.  
The Second Crusade I.

Hello again. In last week's episode, we concluded our look at specialist topics for the time being, and here we are, ready to embark on the Second Crusade. The episodes on Eleanor of Aquitaine provided some background to the events which gave rise to the Second Crusade, but we really need to look at them in more detail. In particular, we need to look at the rise to power of one man. Imad ed-Din Zengi.

Zengi was born around 1084 to a Turkish warlord. He grew up surrounded by conflict, war and intrigue. First making himself noticed to history in 1120 by gaining the support of the Seljuk Sultan of Baghdad, he was appointed as governor of Mosul in 1127. Now there's two things you need to know about Zengi. Firstly, he's ambitious. Not happy with just ruling Mosul, he quickly went on to conquer Aleppo, then set about consolidating his power base in Syria, always keeping his eye on his main goal, Damascus, far to the south.

Secondly, he has an almost unbridled reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness, to the extent that he was feared as much by his own men as by those whom he wished to conquer. Crucifixion was his punishment of choice, and he used it often. If some of his troops marched out of line and trampled some crops, what did Zengi do? He crucified them. In one notorious incident, Zengi was attacking the ancient Roman city of Baalbek. The defenders of the city decided to surrender on the condition that its men would be spared and granted safe conduct. Zengi accepted these conditions and took the city. He then proceeded to crucify every single man in Baalbek's garrison. He also kept his generals in line by castrating their sons if they disobeyed him, and he regularly drank himself into a stupor.

But despite his character flaws, Zengi was a tireless and talented ruler and military strategist. He distinguished himself from other Islamic leaders by rejecting the trappings of power. He preferred to stay in a tent during a military campaign, rather than recline in a palace and enjoy the spoils of his victories. He traveled the length and breadth of Syria and northern Iraq, taking towns, demanding tribute, and working constantly to consolidate and expand his power base. Despite his reputation as a jihadist and as a champion of Islam against the Franks, it seems that Zengi's main interests lay in the heartland of Islamic territory. He wanted to rule Syria and Iraq. But if defeating the Franks assisted him in achieving his ultimate goal, then all well and good.

The rise of Zengi came about at a time of uncertainty and increasing discord for the Franks. We have already heard, back in Episode 21, how King Baldwin II chanced to intercept an envoy from his daughter Alice, the young widow of Prince Bohemond II of Antioch, to Zengi. The envoy was hard to miss. He was riding a stunning, pure white horse, which was decked out in superb armor, even sporting silver shoes on its hooves. The horse was a gift from Alice to Zengi. The envoy carried a letter, which was to have been presented to Zengi along with the horse. The letter beseeched Zengi to come to Alice's aid and to install her as ruler of Antioch. In exchange, she would recognize him as overlord. Luckily for the Franks, the envoy was intercepted, and Alice was duly punished by being sent into exile.

According to Amin Maalouf in his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Zengi was aware of the offer, despite the fact that the envoy was intercepted. He was no doubt amused at the thought of allying himself with a female leader of Antioch in opposition to her father, the King of Jerusalem. Not long after this incident, King Baldwin II died, and was succeeded to the throne by his son-in-law Fulk and his daughter Queen Melisende.

In June 1137, Zengi decided to attack the city of Homs, which was then under Damascan control. Homs was only two days march from Tripoli, and the Latin Christians had no wish to see Zengi set himself up in a city so close to Christian territory. The Muslim leader of Homs realized this and sent a message to Tripoli. Immediately, a contingent of French knights left Tripoli to confront Zengi. Pons, who had been Count of Tripoli for 25 years, had recently died and his young successor, his son Raymond II, sent a message to King Fulk in Jerusalem, for him to send reinforcements. The leader of Homs was delighted to see that his strategy worked.

After being informed of the approach of an army from Jerusalem, Zengi quickly negotiated a truce with Homs, then turned to face the Franks. He decided to lay siege to a nearby French fortress, the castle of Montferrand. King Fulk and his army arrived and a battle ensued. Surprisingly, given the fact that Zengi had been in power for a period of nine years by this time, this was the first recorded battle between Zengi and the Latin Christians.

And the battle went Zengi's way. Exhausted by their march, the army of Jerusalem, led by King Fulk himself, was overwhelmed by the much larger Muslim army. King Fulk and a small number of men managed to take shelter in the fortress, but the battle was a decisive victory for Zengi. Raymond II, Count of Tripoli, was taken prisoner.

King Fulk just had time to send a request for reinforcements, when the castle was surrounded by Zengi's forces, cutting off all communication between King Fulk and the outside world. King Fulk had no idea whether his messages for urgent assistance had reached their intended recipients, and day after day, he and his men remained inside the castle, running out of food and listening to the ceaseless pounding of Zengi's siege engines firing projectiles at the castle walls.

Eventually, it all became too much for King Fulk. He asked Zengi for terms of surrender. Zengi offered generous terms, which King Fulk quickly accepted. The French would hand the castle over to Zengi, along with a cash payment, then King Fulk and his men would be allowed to go free.

It turns out that reinforcements were on their way, and if King Fulk had held out a little longer, Zengi may well have been defeated, but King Fulk wasn't to know this. The Muslims at this time had perfected the use of carrier pigeons to relay messages between cities. The pigeons were fast and stood less chance of having their messages intercepted. So long as a leader kept his cage of pigeons handy, he could dispatch messages quickly across a wide area. But King Fulk didn't have any pigeons. The Latin Christians would later learn how to train pigeons to relay messages and would take this skill with them back to Europe, but at this time there were no pigeons in the French camp, and King Fulk was isolated from the outside world.

Historians have often pondered why Zengi let the King off on such favorable terms. While it is true that the castle at Montferrand was of strategic importance, it is likely that carrier

pigeons informed Zengi of some startling news, which made it imperative that he resolved the siege quickly. The Byzantines were coming.

Now, an invading Byzantine army was never something to be taken lightly, but Zengi, in this case, needn't have worried. The army didn't have Zengi in its sights. It was marching towards the Crusader states with one thing in mind and one thing only. It was going to attack Antioch. Why, you ask, why on earth had the Emperor in Constantinople decided to attack one of the Latin Christian Crusader cities? Well, to answer that question, we will need to take a closer look at what has been taking place in the Byzantine Empire over the past few years.

It all began way back in 1118, with the death of the Emperor Alexius, one of the central figures of the First Crusade. The deaths of Emperors were often followed by a power struggle, as family members and other contenders vied to be the next to take up the purple, and the death of Alexius was no exception. His eldest child was his daughter, the intelligent, ambitious, and headstrong Anna Comnena. His eldest son was Anna's younger brother, John. Anna and John had never really hit it off. In fact, in his book "Byzantium, The Decline and Fall", John Julius Norwich states that Anna hated her brother John all her life, and apparently that hatred was caused simply by jealousy. Anna wanted to rule the Empire. She wanted it badly, but upon the birth of John, her Imperial ambitions were shattered. She ended up marrying Nikephoros Bryennios in 1097. Bryennios was a successful soldier and a natural leader and was highly regarded by Alexius. Again, Anna was hopeful that her husband might one day don the purple. But the dying Emperor Alexius summoned John to his bedside and placed the imperial ring on his finger. Knowing the tensions within his family, he urged John to have himself proclaimed emperor without delay.

And his father's advice was wise. There was a plot to murder John at Alexius' funeral. Anna was probably behind this scheme, and John, who became aware of the danger, wisely decided not to attend the ceremony. A few months into John's reign as Emperor, Anna tried again. She conspired with her husband Bryennios, to murder John at his country palace, but at the last minute, Bryennios lost his nerve and failed to turn up at the planned rendezvous. His fellow conspirators were arrested and John was surprisingly merciful in the punishment he meted out. The conspirators merely had their possessions confiscated. Bryennios ended up serving John loyally in his army for the next 20 years.

But John came down harder on the person he knew to be responsible for the assassination attempt, his sister Anna. She was banned from the Imperial Court for the remainder of her life, and was effectively exiled from Constantinople. She lived the next 35 years of her life in a convent, spending her time writing a history of her father's reign, "The Alexiad".

Like his father, John, was a soldier and was comfortable leading an army and living a military life. Also like his father, John's aim as Emperor was to defend the Byzantine Empire against its foes, although John was a bit more ambitious than Alexius. He actually wanted more than just to hold the Empire's current borders. He dreamed of restoring the Byzantine Empire to its glory days, pushing the infidel out of lands which had once been Imperial territory. As such, John's reign was pretty much one big military campaign. And one of the territories he set his sights on was the city of Antioch, which had once been a glorious Byzantine stronghold.

But for the first part of his reign, John had no time to think about Antioch. He was busy fending off more assassination plots, trying to consolidate his political interests in Europe, and leading military campaigns against the Danishmend Turks in Anatolia. One of John's traditional enemies in Europe were the ambitious and powerful Normans, currently led by Roger of Sicily, and it wasn't long before John joined the dots and came to an inevitable decision. The Norman Principality of Antioch used to belong to the Byzantine Empire. What better way to chalk up a victory against those pesky Normans than to take Antioch, a move which would also strengthen the Imperial position against the Turks and feed John's goal of reclaiming old Imperial territory? With his mind made, up in the spring of 1137 John amassed a huge army and marched through Cilicia. The army conquered new territory and towns, and on the 29th of August 1137 it arrived at the city of Antioch.

Raymond of Poitiers, uncle to the recently crowned young Queen of France, Eleanor of Aquitaine, had been Prince of Antioch for barely a year, and here he was, besieged within his still unfamiliar city, surrounded by a massive army, which was doing its best against Antioch's formidable defenses. The walls were being pummeled by projectiles hurled from siege engines, under-mining crews were doing their best to tunnel beneath the city walls, and it looked to Raymond that the city was bound to fall.

He knew that any assistance from the other Crusader states would be slow in coming. The Latin Christian armies from the Kingdom of Jerusalem had just been at the wrong end of a battle with a formidable Islamic overlord Zengi, and Zengi seemed to be growing stronger every day. His power was now a real threat to the survival of the Crusader states. If King Fulk also took on the Byzantine Empire, he would be fighting on two fronts, and it was clear to everyone that he just didn't possess the manpower to do this.

So Raymond chose the only option reasonably available to him. He offered to recognize Emperor John as overlord, if John would let him remain as ruler of Antioch. But John was having none of it. He knew that Antioch had little chance of defending itself against the might of the Empire, and he told Raymond that he would settle for nothing less than the unconditional surrender of the city.

Raymond sought King Fulk's advice, and it seems that King Fulk was wise to the reality of the situation. He wrote to Raymond, pointing out that Antioch had, after all, once belonged to the Empire and that it was understandable that the Empire wanted it back. The leaders of the First Crusade had promised to cede all the lands which were formerly part of the Byzantine territory back to Byzantium, but this hadn't happened with Antioch. Perhaps it was now time to put things right.

And so Antioch surrendered. In the end, John was pretty generous with his terms. Raymond had to swear allegiance to John and give the Byzantines unrestricted access to the city. Should the Byzantine army take Aleppo and Homs from Zengi, which was John's ultimate ambition, then a new Christian state would be created out of this territory. John would then hand the new state over to Raymond in exchange for the Principality of Antioch, which would officially become part of the Byzantine Empire. Raymond readily agreed. John showered Raymond and the local nobility with gifts, and then departed.

With Cilicia subdued and Antioch under his control, John turned his sights upon his next foe, Zengi. After wintering in Cilicia, Emperor John returned to Antioch in March 1138. The Byzantine Army joined forces with troops from Antioch, as well as a contingent of Knights Templar and troops from Edessa led by the unlikable Joscelin II. With this impressive force

under his command, the Byzantine Emperor advised his commanders of their goal. They were going to venture into Syria and take Aleppo.

Aleppo at this time was a heavily fortified city. After his victory at Montferrand, where he heard the Byzantine army was approaching, Zengi had assumed the army had him in its sights. Consequently, he had raced to Aleppo, where the citizens quickly prepared it for a siege, emptying the trenches around the city walls of rubbish and shoring up its defenses. It turned out that the Byzantines had decided to attack the Franks instead of Zengi, but the result was that Aleppo was siege-ready.

In anticipation of the attack, Emperor John ordered all the merchants and traders from Aleppo and its surrounds who were currently in Antioch to be detained, to prevent word of the imminent attack reaching the city. Then, in April 1138, the combined armies of Constantinople, Antioch and Edessa left Antioch and marched towards Aleppo. They took a couple of fortified towns on their way, but when they arrived at Aleppo, they saw that their initial hope to catch Aleppo unprepared and undefended was not going to be realized. While Zengi himself wasn't at Aleppo, the Byzantines and Latin Christians were surprised at how well defended the city was, so well defended in fact, that they didn't feel at all confident they could take it.

Instead, Emperor John focused his attention on the much smaller but strategically important town of Shaizar. John knew that if he took this town, he could effectively block any further advance, by Zengi into Syria. He placed his eighteen siege engines into position and began bombarding the town, expecting it to quickly capitulate. But it didn't. Despite sustaining considerable damage, the town stood firm. And if John thought that Zengi would leave the town to its fate, he was about to be disappointed on that front as well.

Zengi's forces were much smaller than the combined Christian armies, and he couldn't risk a frontal attack. Instead, he launched a more subtle attack. He sent letters to Raymond and Joscelin, warning them that if Constantinople gained a toehold in Syria, it would eventually move to occupy all the Latin Christian cities. His spies spread similar rumors amongst the soldiers. Zengi's words probably touched a nerve, and the result was that Joscelin and Raymond lost all interest in taking Shaizar.

Emperor John was tireless. Distinguished by his golden helmet, he could be seen inspecting the siege engines, encouraging the soldiers, and comforting the wounded. Meanwhile, Joscelin and Raymond were spending an increasing amount of time in their tents, playing games of dice. Zengi also sent envoys to Baghdad, requesting military assistance. When no assistance was forthcoming, his envoys goaded the citizens into a riot, demanding that their ruler send soldiers to assist Zengi's holy war. He also urged the Danishmend Emir, the traditional Byzantine enemy in Anatolia, to start attacking Imperial territory and create a further headache for John.

In the end, it all became too much for John. The town of Shaizar offered to surrender. The terms included providing John with horses, silk robes, and money, as well as a table studded with gems, and a cross set with rubies that had once belonged to the Imperial family. John reluctantly accepted the terms, and the army retreated back to Antioch.

Back in Antioch, John decided it was time to teach his lazy, unreliable new allies a lesson. He insisted on making a ceremonial entry into the city. He rode in splendor on horseback,

while Raymond and Joscelin walked either side of the horse like two lonely attendants. Once within the city, John demanded that Raymond hand the citadel over to him. John had decided that Antioch would make an ideal base from which his future military campaigns in Syria could be planned, and he needed the Citadel to store his treasure and his war material.

The Latin Christians were stunned, no doubt remembering Zengi's warning that Constantinople intended to take over the Crusader states once they were established in Syria, Joscelin slipped out of the palace where they were meeting, and told his soldiers to spread rumors that the Emperor was demanding that all the Latin Christians be expelled immediately from Antioch, and to attack any Greeks in the city. The rumors spread quickly, and by the time Joscelin had rejoined the meeting, sounds of rioting could be heard.

John now had a choice to make. Jocelyn was urging him to preserve his life and leave the city, and, while John probably saw through Joscelin's ruse, it was clear that if he stayed in Antioch, he would have to keep a close eye on his allies as well as his enemies. With the sounds of the riot in the streets getting louder, John abandoned his original plan and told Raymond and Joscelin that he intended to leave immediately for Constantinople.

For the next few years, John was occupied with events closer to home, and Zengi also spent most of his time in southern Syria attempting to take Damascus. Joscelin and Raymond failed to take advantage of Zengi's absence, and apart from the odd raid into Muslim territory, no major campaigns were fought.

In the spring of 1142, John once again turned his attention to Syria. He gathered his forces together and marched through Cilicia, when tragedy struck. His eldest son and heir, Alexius, was struck down with an illness and died. John's next two sons, Andronicus and Isaac, were instructed to take the body back to Constantinople by ship, but during the journey, Andronicus caught the same illness and also died. Despite losing two of his four sons, John pressed on, and the army advanced towards the County of Edessa. In September, the army arrived at Turbessel, the Count of Edessa's second capital. Joscelin was taken totally by surprise, and hurriedly made his way to the Emperor, paying homage to him and offering him his daughter Isabella as hostage.

With Joscelin's loyalty assured, John then turned his attentions to Antioch. This time, he demanded that Raymond hand the entire city, not just the citadel, over to the Byzantine Empire. Unsurprisingly, Raymond refused, leaving John no option but to declare war on Antioch. However, winter was approaching, and it was the wrong season to be starting a major campaign, so John led the Byzantine army back into Cilicia, where he could plan his attack. During the winter, John sent an envoy to King Fulk in Jerusalem requesting that the army be able to enter Jerusalem, where John could visit the holy sites and discuss, in person with King Fulk, a joint military campaign against Zengi.

King Fulk hesitated. Like Joscelin and Raymond, he was concerned that the result of all this Byzantine interference in Latin Christian affairs would be the Emperor becoming overlord to the Latin Christian leaders, with all the Latin Christian Crusader states under Imperial control. King Fulk sent a diplomatic reply to the Emperor's request. He said that the Kingdom of Jerusalem was a poor country which couldn't accommodate the entire Byzantine army. However, if John himself and a small escort would like to visit Jerusalem, then that would be fine. John didn't pursue the matter further, and continued with his preparation to invade Antioch.

In March 1143, when he was almost ready to launch his campaign, he decided to take a brief break to go hunting for boar in the Taurus mountains. This was an unfortunate decision. During the hunt, he suffered a minor wound from an arrow, which quickly turned septic. When he realized he was dying, he summoned his youngest son, Manuel, to his side. He decided that Manuel would be a better leader than his older brother, Isaac, and in front of his guards, he crowned Manuel and named him Emperor. After his father's death, Manuel led his father's army back to Constantinople, where he would secure his new position and quash any attempt by Isaac to take the throne. Antioch was safe for now.

If Raymond was relieved by the death of Emperor John, there was one person who was possibly even more relieved: Zengi. The prospect of the Byzantine army invading Syria would have put a halt on his plan to conquer Syria himself.

And things were about to get even better for Zengi. In November 1143, while on a picnic, King Fulk urged his horse to chase a hare. The horse stumbled and King Fulk was thrown to the ground, suffering serious head injuries, which resulted in his death three days later. So within a short space of time, fate had managed to rid Zengi of his two greatest enemies.

And that's all we have time for this week. Join me next week when we see Zengi achieve his greatest victory against the Latin Christians, the fall of Edessa. Until next week, bye for now.

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