

History of the Crusades.
Episode 38
Changing Fortunes.

Hello again. Last week we examined the aftermath of the Second Crusade, and it wasn't pretty. The Count of Edessa was imprisoned. The entire Crusader state of the County of Edessa ceased to exist and fell under Muslim rule. Then Raymond, Prince of Antioch, was killed in a battle, leaving the Principality of Antioch vulnerable.

Prince Raymond's wife, Princess Constance, was encouraged to remarry to ensure the Principality had a male leader. You may recall that Princess Constance was the daughter of Queen Melisende's headstrong sister Alice, and has perhaps inherited some of her feistiness. At the time of Prince Raymond's death, Princess Constance is just 19 years old. She has been married for ten years and has four children. Not surprisingly, unlike the first time around, she wants a say in who will be her husband. Unfortunately, the bar is set pretty high. Prince Raymond had been an unusually good looking man and a successful and charismatic ruler. Finding someone of a similar calibre to replace him, who was also going to appeal to Constance, was not going to be an easy task.

Probably the person who was most keen to see Princess Constance married off was King Baldwin of Jerusalem. He had taken it upon himself to rule Antioch until Princess Constance married. Geographically, the Principality of Antioch was the furthest Crusader state from Jerusalem, and King Baldwin had his hands full already, dealing with the aftermath of the failure of the Second Crusade in his own Kingdom and trying to reduce the power of his mother, Queen Melisende. King Baldwin scoured the nobility of his kingdom, searching for eligible men who he believed would make an appropriate husband for Princess Constance. After much deliberation, he narrowed the field down to three contenders. Unfortunately, Constance rejected all three of them.

Not only did she reject the suitors, she seems to have been singularly unimpressed with them, so much so that she decided to look elsewhere for a husband, away from the Crusader states. The Byzantine Emperor was, technically at least, her overlord, and she sent an embassy to Constantinople, asking Emperor Manuel to choose a husband for her. Of course, Manuel leapt at this opportunity to gain a stronger foothold in the Principality.

Now, at this time, the Empire had lost territory in Cilicia to an Armenian prince, so Emperor Manuel dispatched two men to do two tasks. He sent his cousin, the dashing and brilliant Andronicus Comnenus, to deal with the Armenians, and sent his favorite brother-in-law, Caesar John Roger, to Antioch to seek Princess Constance's hand in marriage. Now on paper, John Roger was probably a good choice. He was a Norman by birth and thus had European breeding, which Manuel thought would be acceptable to the Latin Christian rulers of the Crusader states. Secondly, despite being a Norman, he had proven himself a loyal supporter of the Byzantine court. He had been married to Manuel's sister Maria and had since been widowed.

So how did the two men fare? Well, Andronicus was all set to besiege the Armenians at the city of Mamistra, but the Armenians launched a surprise attack against his forces, taking him totally unawares. His army was consequently defeated and made its way back to Constantinople in disgrace. John Roger made his way to Antioch, but Princess

Constance was utterly unimpressed with the middle-aged, unattractive Byzantine suitor, and quickly sent him packing. Emperor Manuel's plans both failed spectacularly.

Stephen Runciman points out in the second volume of his series on the history of the Crusades, that Manuel may have had a better chance of success if he had swapped the men around, sending the dashing Andronicus to Antioch and the stoic, dependable and aging John Roger to deal with the Armenians. But I guess we will never know.

So Princess Constance is still no closer to getting married. She has now rejected suitors from the Crusader states and the Byzantine Empire. In a desperate move, King Baldwin decides to send his mother, Queen Melisende, to have a stern word to her. Queen Melisende enlists the support of her sister, Countess Hodierna of Tripoli. The King orders Princess Constance to travel to Tripoli, and there her aunts try to talk some sense into her. However, the two women aren't exactly fine examples of how wonderful married life can be with a husband not of your choosing. Queen Melisende's marriage to King Fulk certainly had its rocky moments, and Count Raymond of Tripoli is intensely jealous at any attention shown towards his attractive wife, Countess Hodierna, with the result that for much of the time the Countess is kept in seclusion. The situation has become so bad that the Queen has decided to intervene.

Anyway, none of this convinces Princess Constance to give up her widowhood anytime soon, and she returns to Antioch with the situation unchanged. She ends up marrying a man of her choice nearly a year later. Unfortunately, her choice was not a wise one. Raynald of Chatillon, a French knight with no real political connections or advantages, turned out to be a brutal and cruel man.

Anyway, back to Queen Melisende and Countess Hodierna. Whilst in Tripoli, the Queen decided to mediate in the marital problems between her sister and the Count. In the end, the Count agreed to let Hodierna accompany the Queen back to Jerusalem for a short break. King Baldwin, who accompanied his mother to the city of Tripoli, decided to stay in the capital, due to rumors that Nur ad-Din was planning an attack on the County. The Queen and the Countess started their ride southwards towards Jerusalem.

Count Raymond decided to accompany them for a short distance, then turned back towards his capital, as he approached the southern gate of his city, a shocking and very odd thing happened. A band of Assassins swooped down out of nowhere and stabbed him to death. The Count was accompanied by two of his knights. They tried in vain to save him, and in the fighting they too were killed. The Assassins slipped away, and news of the attack made its way around the garrison to King Baldwin, who was relaxing in the castle playing a game of dice. The garrison, wild with rage and grief, roamed the streets of Tripoli, killing every Muslim they came across, but the Assassins were never caught. Since they were never caught, no one discovered why Count Raymond had been the target of their assassination, and in fact, it remains a mystery to this day.

Messengers galloped off after the Queen and the Countess, and they returned to Tripoli. Countess Hodierna was installed as regent of the County of Tripoli, in the name of her twelve year old son, Raymond III. But as was the case with the Principality of Antioch, King Baldwin was obliged to take an active role in the administration of the state.

So let's just recount what has happened. The Crusader state of Edessa has fallen to the Muslims and has ceased to exist. Count Joscelin of Edessa remains a prisoner of the

Muslims. Prince Raymond of Antioch has been killed by the Muslims, and the Principality is being ruled by a young woman under the guardianship of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The Count of Tripoli has been assassinated, and the County is being ruled by a woman under the guardianship of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Oh, dear. Well, at least things are okay in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, aren't they? No, they're not.

The relationship between King Baldwin, who is now 22 years of age, and his mother Queen Melisende, is becoming increasingly strained. They have ruled together since Baldwin was a young child, but now King Baldwin wishes to rule in his own right. Queen Melisende, who also ruled jointly with her late husband King Fulk, has been an effective ruler and has no wish whatsoever to give up her hold on power. King Baldwin started making moves to increase his power base, and Queen Melisende started doing her best to counter all his attempts to sideline her.

King Baldwin declared that he was going to hold a coronation ceremony, so his subjects could see him formally crowned as an adult ruler. Queen Melisende then arranged to participate in the ceremony alongside her son. She thought that she should be formally crowned as well, so the subjects of Jerusalem could see that they were each as important as the other. King Baldwin announced that the coronation ceremony would be held on Easter Sunday 1152, but once he heard of his mother's plans he postponed the ceremony. Then, on Easter Tuesday, King Baldwin entered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in secret and demanded that the Patriarch of Jerusalem crown him alone.

This pretty much signaled the start of a major split between King Baldwin and his mother. And when I say a major split, I mean a major split. They both had their own staunch supporters amongst the nobility, and their supporters tended to be based in particular geographical locations across the Kingdom of Jerusalem. So they decided to split the Kingdom between them based around the areas in which they received the most support. As a result, King Baldwin ended up with the northern part of the Kingdom, the area of Galilee and surrounding cities, while Queen Melisende held the southern half, the areas of Judea and Samaria, which included the lands held by her ally Baldwin's younger brother, Count Amalric of Jaffa. Crucially, the cities of Jerusalem and Nablus were under Queen Melisende's control. Nablus was important as it was located in the center of the Kingdom, between the two territories. The Queen began fortifying the cities of Jerusalem and Nablus against her son.

Not surprisingly, this arrangement didn't really work. King Baldwin found it increasingly difficult to administer the northern part of the Kingdom, and oversee the administration of the County of Tripoli and the Principality of Antioch, without the resources contained within the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the administrative center of the Kingdom, and he needed it to rule effectively. Gradually, the nobility on both sides of the conflict began to realize this as well, and support for Queen Melisende began to slip. Nur ad-Din's power was growing daily, and it really seemed crazy to hobble the defense of the remaining Crusader states by splitting the Kingdom this way.

Queen Melisende, losing the support of the lay nobility but still having strong supporters amongst the powerful Church factions, refused to cede any of her territory to her son, so he launched an attack. His troops captured a castle at Mirabel, near the coast, and not long after the town of Nablus surrendered to him. Queen Melisende attempted to retain Jerusalem, but the citizens rose up against her. In the end, she was obliged to surrender

the city to her son and to release her hold on power. King Baldwin granted her the town of Nablus, and she retained her influence and support in Church affairs.

In regard to secular rule, however, there was no longer any doubt. King Baldwin, and King Baldwin alone, now ruled the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

So, while the Crusader states were lurching from one disaster to another, what was happening in the Muslim world? Well, as the fortunes of the Latin Christians in the Middle East were falling, those in the Muslim world were rising. As the Crusader states went into meltdown one by one, did Nur ad-Din take advantage of the situation and launch an attack against them? No. Like his father Zengi, Nur ad-Din was more interested in the Islamic heartland. Like his father, he was interested in Damascus. The Second Crusade had played nicely into his hands, with the Christians attacking the city and adversely affecting the alliance that had been formed between Jerusalem and the Damascan leader Yuna. Unlike his father, Nur ad-Din was a diplomat as well as a warrior. He sensed that Damascus couldn't be conquered by force alone and that he would need to gain the support of its citizens to be truly accepted as the ruler of the city. He knew that he would have to be patient and choose his moves wisely.

His first opportunity to move on Damascus came in 1149. After the failure of the Second Crusade, the Damascans stepped up their conflict with the Latin Christians, but their leader, Unur, knew that Nur ad-Din posed a more serious threat to his city. In May 1149 Unur signed a two year peace accord with Jerusalem, allowing him to focus on repelling any advances by Nur ad-Din. Three months later, Unur sat down to a lavish feast. He overindulged somewhat at the feast and was struck down with a nasty case of dysentery. The dysentery persisted, and a few weeks later Unur died.

Damascus was plunged into chaos, and a new leader eventually emerged: the nominal sovereign of the city, in whose name Unur had been ruling, the sixteen year old boy Abaq. Unfortunately for Damascus, young Abaq was not noted for his intelligence, nor for his ability to rule. It was a perfect time for Nur ad-Din to make his move, but it wasn't to be. In a very bad case of timing, Nur ad-Din's older brother Saif ad-Din, ruler of Mosul, died and Nur ad-Din raced to Mosul, hoping to stake a claim to his late brother's city and lands. He was unsuccessful, and the inheritance went to Nur ad-Din's younger brother. But the trip wasn't entirely wasted, as Nur ad-Din was able to convince his younger brother to recognize him, in part, as his overlord.

In March 1150 Nur ad-Din finally made his move. He marched on Damascus. But it's not quite as you would expect. Nur ad-Din approached his conquest of the city in an entirely novel way. As his army advanced through the orchard surrounding Damascus, instead of attacking the citizens, he made sure his soldiers went out of their way to befriend the Damascans. Then, in a surprising move, instead of launching an assault on the city, Nur ad-Din sent them a letter. The letter was addressed to the young Abaq and the leaders within the city who were helping him to rule.

This is what the letter said, and I quote. "I have not pitched camp here in order to make war against you or to lay siege. Only the many complaints of the Muslims have induced me to act in this way, for the peasants have been despoiled of their goods and separated from their children by the Franj, and they have no one to defend them. Since God has bestowed upon me the power to grant succor to the Muslims and to wage war on the infidels, and since I command great quantities of resources and of men, it would be

impermissible for me to neglect the Muslims and fail to take up their defense, especially since I well know that you are unable to protect your provinces, and am aware of your degradation, which led you to seek the aid of the Franj and to deliver the goods of your poorest subjects to them, subjects whom you have criminally wronged. This pleases neither God nor any Muslim.” End of quote.

So, what Nur ad-Din is saying in this letter is that he has approached Damascus, not to conquer it by force but to save its citizens from the poor decisions of its leaders, especially the decision to ally Damascus with the Latin Christians. While this didn't go down too well with the leaders, the citizens themselves were fairly impressed. To top it all off, as Nur ad-Din arrived on the outskirts of the city, it started pouring with rain, signaling the end of a long and destructive drought. So the people were starting to warm to the idea of Nur ad-Din as their savior. In recognition of this, Nur ad-Din's name started to be mentioned in the Friday sermons held within the city, just after the names of the Caliph and the Sultan. Coins were also struck in his name, indicating allegiance by the people. Nur ad-Din had made his first move against Damascus, and it wasn't a violent move, but one carefully considered and clothed in diplomacy.

Content for the moment to leave it at that, he retreated from the city and moved his army to the north. Nur ad-Din's slow conquest of Damascus continued in this vein for the next few years. He would approach Damascus at the head of his army, then send letters into the city, urging the city's leaders to abandon their alliance with the Franj and join instead with him. He started writing not only to Abaq, but to the nobility and the religious and military leaders within the city. He wasn't yet ready to use his army. His aim was to win the hearts and minds of the citizens of Damascus, and to gradually obtain the support of influential leaders within the city.

By the year 1153 Nur ad-Din had managed to garner widespread support. However, Abaq and a small core of his closest allies still refused to accept Nur ad-Din as leader. Deciding it was time to isolate Abaq even further, Nur ad-Din sent word to Abaq that his advisers were plotting against him and that his life was in danger. Without taking the time to discover the truth or otherwise of the warning, Abaq gathered his advisors together and had them either imprisoned or executed. Nur ad-Din's plot had succeeded. Abaq was now totally isolated.

Nur ad-Din then moved to intercept supplies of food being imported into Damascus. As a result, prices skyrocketed and the people started to get restless. Nur ad-Din spread rumors that the food shortages were the result of Abaq's links to the Franj, and stated that if Nur ad-Din himself were to rule Damascus there would be no shortages. Still Abaq stood firm.

In April 1154, Nuruddin decided to make his move. Once again, he led his army to the gates of Damascus. This time, however, there were to be no letters. The time had come for action. As the army approached the city, Abaq sent word to Jerusalem, urging King Baldwin to send reinforcements.

By the time Nur ad-Din launched his attack seven days later, the troops from Jerusalem hadn't yet arrived. Most of the city's militia were on Nur ad-Din's side, and this showed in their defense of the city. There were hardly any soldiers manning the walls, and only a handful of men guarded the towers. One of Nur ad-Din's soldiers approached the walls and a Jewish woman threw a rope down to him. The soldier was able to scale the wall without being noticed. He assisted other soldiers to make the climb, and they unfurled a

banner on top of the wall. The city's defenders put up only a token resistance. One of Nur ad-Din's men managed to damage the mechanism on the East Gate to the city, and he quickly opened it, letting the remainder of Nur ad-Din's army into Damascus. They were welcomed by the citizens, and Nur ad-Din himself was applauded and welcomed by the Damascans as he made his entrance into the city. Nur ad-Din allowed Abaq to flee with his possessions to a property near Homs. His victory was complete.

Through a combination of persistence and diplomacy, Nur ad-Din was able to conquer one of the great cities of the Middle East, with little fighting and little loss of life. He had achieved his lifelong ambition and succeeded where his father Zengi had failed. For the first time since the arrival of the first Crusaders fifty years earlier, the great cities of Aleppo and Damascus were ruled by one man.

So after this period of changing fortunes in the Middle East, what will happen next? Well, somewhat surprisingly, the fortunes of the Crusader states take a turn for the better. Join me next week as we examine a period of Frankish revival in the Middle East. Until next week, bye for now.

End