

History of the Crusades.
Episode 40
Egypt, Part 1.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Baldwin's younger brother Amalric become King of Jerusalem after Baldwin died of an illness. This week, we will see the spotlight of the History of the Crusades Podcast swing around, and shine in a place which has largely been off the Crusading map until now, Egypt.

Of course, you will already know that Egypt is a large country that borders the Kingdom of Jerusalem to the southwest. And of course, you will also know that at the time of the Crusades, Egypt already had a rich and impressive history stretching back millennia. Putting aside the legacy of the pharaohs and their incredible monuments, the period of Egyptian history we are interested in commenced around the year 641, when the country was conquered by proponents of the Islamic faith who were expanding out of their base in the Middle East and conquering territory across the north of Africa. The Arab rulers established themselves in two administrative centers: the port city of Alexandria and the smaller city of Fustat at the head of the Nile Delta. A significant portion of the native Egyptian population were Coptic Christians, and over the centuries the Christians generally assimilated into the culture of the conquering Arabs, taking on their language if not their religion.

From the 900's AD (or CE, to use a more modern term), Egypt was ruled by the Shi'ite Fatimid dynasty. As we have discussed previously, the Shi'ites split from the established Sunni Muslims who were based in Baghdad. The Shiites created their own caliph to rival the caliphate Baghdad, who had been the sole Islamic religious leader. The Shi'ite Fatimids built up an impressive power-base in Egypt. They created a new administrative center north of Fustat which they called Cairo, a word meaning "conqueror", and by the time of the Crusades, Cairo was the center of Egyptian rule. It was an impressive walled city containing two opulent palaces, and a mosque which had a reputation as a center for theological Islamic studies. They also built an impressive navy, which dominated the Mediterranean, cementing Egypt's reputation as a busy trading center based around the ancient port city of Alexandria. Over the years, the ruling caliphs in Egypt began to share power with their chief administrative official the vizier. This in turn led to problems, with rival powers battling to become the vizier, and the vizier clashing with, and often dominating, the caliph. By the mid-1100's, the caliph had taken a step back, and the administration of the country was largely left the vizier.

Of course, the powerful position of vizier became a role that was highly sought after, and increasingly it became a position that people were willing to kill for. By the year 1162, of the previous fifteen viziers, only one had left the office alive. The other fourteen had been killed in various ways by their rivals. Some had been hanged, others beheaded, stabbed, poisoned, crucified, or lynched by mobs. One vizier had been murdered by his adoptive son, and another by his own father. Of course, all this intriguing, murder, and instability did nothing for the fortunes of Egypt itself. It slowly drifted into decay and anarchy. Its once feared Navy was no longer maintained and fell into disrepair and disuse. The once strong economy faltered and its citizens became restless. In short, Egypt went from being an economic and political powerhouse in the region to being a plum, ripe for the picking.

Not surprisingly, there were two people who immediately put their hands up and expressed interest in taking the country over. The first, and most eager, of the two was King Amalric of Jerusalem. Egypt, of course, was a very wealthy country. The River Nile flooded every August, nearly without fail, making the banks of the river extremely fertile. Egypt was able to grow more crops than were needed to feed its people, and from its handy port of Alexandria they were able to export the excess far and wide. This meant the taxes could easily be paid, and the wealth generated to the state coffers by these taxes meant that whomever was fortunate enough to be ruling the country could access an impressive pool of funds, which over the centuries had often been used to finance impressive buildings and monuments. King Amalric of course, could see that extending the Crusader states into Egypt would have huge benefits and would ensure the long term viability of the faltering Latin Christian presence in the Middle East.

Nur ad-Din had different reasons for eyeing off Egypt as a prize. His power base already stretched from Aleppo in northern Syria to Damascus in southern Syria. If he conquered Egypt, the Crusader states would be surrounded by territory controlled by him. There were religious considerations as well. Nur ad-Din was a Sunni Muslim whose spiritual leader was the caliph of Baghdad. Defeating the Fatimid Shi'ite dynasty in Egypt would be a huge victory for Sunni Islam.

Right, enough background. It's the year 1162. Egypt is caught in the grip of another power struggle. Al-Adil is the current vizier. He came to power in 1161 after his father, the previous vizier, had been stabbed to death by the aunt of the current caliph. But he is just about to be overthrown. The new contender for vizier is the governor of Upper Egypt, Shawar. He seized power in 1162 and, in an entirely expected move, proceeded to murder his predecessor along with his entire family. He moved into a palace in Cairo and spent some months luxuriating in the wealth of his new position. But of course it wasn't long before he, in turn, was ousted. After ruling Egypt for only nine months, Shawar became aware of a plot to overthrow him. The instigator was his own chamberlain, a man called Dirgham. Luckily for Shawar, he discovered the plans just in time and managed to flee Egypt with his life. His staff and the country's administrative leaders were not so lucky. When Dirgham assumed the role of vizier he put them all to death.

Now, this habit of making a clean sweep every few years, as the new vizier killed all those in power before him, had a disastrous effect on the long term prospects of the country. Every time a new vizier came to power, Egypt was wiped clean of its experienced administrators. By the early 1160's, the ruling elite of Egypt and anyone with hands-on experience in running the country had all been eliminated. Those who were left really didn't have a clue what they were doing. The country itself began to stumble and falter.

When he fled Egypt, Shawar sought refuge in Syria. Despite his close call, he was still an ambitious man. He still wanted to rule Egypt, but he knew he needed help to rise again to power. So what did he do? He tried to convince Nur ad-Din to invade Egypt.

Meanwhile, back in the Crusader states, Egypt was also a hot topic. King Baldwin had threatened to invade Egypt in 1160. The Egyptians had promised to pay an annual tribute to the Kingdom of Jerusalem to prevent the invasion. Trouble was, it had never been paid. The new King Amalric, who was crowned in February 1162, decided that this provided him with the perfect excuse. He decided to invade Egypt. He gathered the army of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and they marched to the west, following the Mediterranean coastline, crossing the Sinai Peninsula and laying siege to the town of Bilbeis, in eastern

Egypt on the Nile delta. The people of Bilbeis, safe behind their city wall, looked on with amusement as King Amalric and his men busied themselves building siege engines and preparing for a lengthy assault on the town. They knew something that King Amalric didn't. It was flooding season, and the River Nile was rapidly rising. All the Egyptians had to do to mount an effective counter attack was to break a couple of dykes which were holding the floodwaters back. They duly did this, and King Amalric and his men found themselves surrounded by rapidly rising water. They barely had time to retreat with their lives, then withdrew back to the Crusader states.

While the King of Jerusalem and his army were away in Egypt, Nur ad-Din decided to take the opportunity to launch an attack on the County of Tripoli. He led his army to the Beqaa Valley near Mount Lebanon and set up camp. Luckily for the Latin Christians, two French knights from Aquitaine, who were returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem along with a significant entourage, joined up with Count Raymond III of Tripoli, Count Raymond III being the young son of Count Raymond II, who was assassinated back in Episode 38. Count Raymond sent an urgent message to the current Prince of Antioch, Bohemond III, son of Prince Raymond and Princess Constance. He quickly raised an army and was joined by a Byzantine general and his Greek troops, who came down from the north to assist.

So, in a very short period of time, despite the absence of the forces from the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Latin Christians were able to muster an impressive army to counter Nur ad-Din's invasion. The size of the army and the fact that it had been gathered so quickly took Nur ad-Din completely by surprise. The Latin Christians swamped the Muslim forces, and Nur ad-Din suffered a humiliating and disastrous defeat. He only just managed to flee the battle scene alive. Having lost his baggage and his sword, he escaped the massacre barefooted, riding a pack horse. He was one of only a handful of survivors. Stunned by the magnitude of his loss, Nur ad-Din spent the next few months regrouping, paying for the replacement of the weapons and horses lost in the defeat out of his own coffers, and seeking to build an alliance with Muslims to the north, from Mosul and Iraq.

For some time now, Shawar, the ex-vizier of Egypt had been pestering Nur ad-Din to raise an army, invade Egypt, and reinstall Shawar to his previous position of power in the country. Shawar even offered to pay all Nur ad-Din's expenses for the campaign, and if he succeeded in once again becoming the vizier of Egypt, Shawar stated that he would pay Nur ad-Din a massive yearly tribute, one third of the revenue from Egypt's coffers each year.

Nur ad-Din had, until now, hesitated to support Shawar's plan to invade Egypt. When the King of Jerusalem invaded Egypt, all he had to endure was a thirsty march across the Sinai Peninsula. If Nur ad-Din's forces invaded, they would have to endure the same march across the arid desert landscape, but they would also be using roads controlled by the Kingdom of Jerusalem. But by early 1164, Nur ad-Din was beginning to warm to the idea of mounting an invasion. A successful campaign in Egypt would restore the prestige lost to him by his massive defeat the year before, and would also prevent the Latin Christians from getting a toe-hold in the country.

There was one man in particular who influenced Nur ad-Din to change his mind. Shirkuh was an elderly but energetic and highly respected Kurdish commander in Nur ad-Din's army. He had fought under Nur ad-Din's father Zengi, and had remained loyal to his son. He was a very distinctive looking character. He was a gnarled old veteran who was short,

overweight and blind in one eye. He tended to regularly overindulge in both food and alcohol, and had a formidable temper. His soldiers, however, loved him. He was one of those leaders who regularly mixed with his men, sharing jokes and meals with them. He was the veteran of many campaigns and had proven himself an able commander of men. Nur ad-Din decided to reward Shirkuh's loyalty and abilities by entrusting to him the command of around 10,000 cavalry, with orders to accompany Shawar to Egypt and restore him to power. As Shirkuh and the sizable Muslim force headed westwards, Nur ad-Din would stage a diversion by attacking the Latin Christian town of Banias, which was situated in the Golan Heights, to the north of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Shirkuh, understandably, was very excited about leading such a significant campaign and urged his nephew, who was 27 years old, to accompany him. However, his nephew really wasn't keen at all. Here is a statement by the nephew, and I quote "My uncle Shirkuh turned to me and said, Yusef, pack, your things we're going. When I heard this order, I felt as if my heart had been pierced by a dagger and I answered in God's name, even were I granted the entire Kingdom of Egypt, I would not go." End of quote. In the end, Shirkuh did convince his nephew to accompany him to Egypt. Yusef's full name is Yusef Salah al-Din. This is the first time that the man later known as the great warrior Saladin makes an appearance in this podcast.

So Shirkuh, his nephew, the ex-vizier Shawar, and 10,000 mounted fighters head towards Egypt. They followed the course of the Jordan River, then proceeded to the southern tip of the Dead Sea. There they headed off at a full gallop across the Sinai desert, staying well inland to avoid detection. Their speed took everyone by surprise. Shirkuh was across the isthmus of Suez before the Franks had realized what was happening.

The Egyptians too were totally unprepared for the invasion. The brother of the current vizier, Dirgham, hastily gathered some men and vainly tried to defend the town of Bilbeis, but was defeated. Seven days later, on the 1st of May 1164 Shirkuh took the key town of Fustat and then camped outside the walls of Cairo. Dirgham found himself scrambling to mount an effective resistance, but it was too little, too late. Dirgham was killed by a stray arrow from one of his own men, and Shawar was officially reinstated as vizier in a ceremony presided over by the current caliph, a 13 year old boy.

Shirkuh is pretty pleased with himself and justifiably so. He had achieved his objective in record time, with little loss of life, and had really shown his nephew how an effective campaign should be run. But he didn't have much of a chance to bask in his glory. No sooner was Shawar restored to power than he reneged on his agreement. He offered Shirkuh a bribe of 30,000 gold coins to take his forces out of Egypt, but Shirkuh refused. Shawar realized that the only way he was going to get Shirkuh to leave Egypt was by force. He had little confidence in the depleted Egyptian forces to do the job, so he decided to appeal to King Amalric for assistance, promising him 27,000 gold coins for his trouble, together with a gift to the Knight's Hospitaller, who were to accompany him

King Amalric jumped at the chance. He reached Egypt and joined up with Shawar's forces in mid-summer 1164. The combined forces then besieged Shirkuh's army, who had taken shelter within the town of Bilbeis. Bilbeis was not well fortified, being surrounded by only a low wall, but Shirkuh managed to successfully defend his position for three months.

During those three months, events of interest were taking place back in the Crusader states. Nur ad-Din had become aware of Shirkuh's situation, and of the fact that with the

poor state of the town's defenses, Shirkuh could not hold out for very long. Nur ad-Din came up with a plan. He would launch a massive attack on Latin Christian interests in the Holy Land, an attack so devastating that King Amalric would be forced to leave Egypt and return home. Nur ad-Din sent messages to Emirs from across his territory and beyond, asking them to participate in a jihad against the Franj. Once the forces had gathered, Nur ad-Din led them to the principality of Antioch, where they laid siege to the impressive and strategically important fortress of Harim. The knight holding the fortress, Reynald of Saint Valery put up a gallant defense against the Muslim bombardment, but it was obvious that the Latin Christians needed to launch a significant counterattack to dislodge the Muslim army. Bohemond III of Antioch called for a response, and in early August 1164 an army of more than 10,000 men, including some 600 knights, left Antioch under the combined command of Prince Bohemond of Antioch, Count Raymond III of Tripoli, Thoros of Armenia and Constantine Coloman, the Byzantine governor of Cilicia.

When he heard of their approach, Nur ad-Din raised the siege and took his army to the nearby Christian settlement of Artah, which was located on a plain, as he preferred to confront the Latin Christian army on open ground. As the two armies engaged, Nur ad-Din's right flank appeared to retreat. Prince Bohemond raced after them, ignoring a warning from Thoros of Armenia. Prince Bohemond and hundreds of knights from Antioch were led into a trap. Yes, yet again, the Christians had fallen for the well-known and incredibly successful Muslim tactic of feigned retreat. Prince Bohemond and his knights were quickly surrounded by the Muslim army, leaving the remainder of the army, which mostly consisted of foot soldiers, exposed. The combined Muslim army was larger than the Christian forces, and it wasn't long before the foot soldiers and the remainder of the Latin Christian contingent were also surrounded.

It was an overwhelming victory for the Muslims. Virtually the entire Latin Christian army was either captured or slain. The only person to escape was Thoros of Armenia and his men. Thoros, alone out of the commanders, had seen the feigned retreat tactic coming, and had cautiously remained away from the center of the action. Thousands of Latin Christians lay dead on the battlefield, while Prince Bohemond, Count Raymond, and Constantine Coloman were chained together and led to Aleppo, where they were thrown into prison.

Nur ad-Din's advisers were keen for him to ride the wave of success further and attack the city of Antioch itself. However, Nur ad-Din was a talented strategist. He knew that if he attacked the vulnerable and largely undefended city, the Byzantine Empire would come to its aid. He would much prefer to have a weakened and defenseless Latin Christian state as his neighbor, than be living next to territory that was part of a mighty Empire, so he left Antioch alone. Not only did he spare Antioch from attack, he also released Constantine Coloman from detention, exchanging him for 150 silk robes. Not long after, he ransomed Prince Bohemond for a hefty price, allowing him to return to Antioch, thereby ensuring that the Byzantine Empire had no excuse to attack the Muslims and take Antioch.

Nur ad-Din also collected some blonde and obviously Christian heads, along with the banners of the fallen Franj, and put them in a sack. He ordered them to be taken to Egypt, where Shirkuh exhibited them on the ramparts of the besieged town of Bilbeis. The display had the desired effect. The morale of the Muslims within the town soared, and King Amalric was forced to withdraw back to Jerusalem. It wasn't just the sight of the heads and captured banners that moved him, but the accompanying news of the massive defeat and the capture of the leaders of the Crusader states. As King Amalric made his way back to

his Kingdom along the coastal route, Shirkuh also headed back home, taking only two weeks to cross the Sinai Peninsula and travel to Damascus.

The real winner of all this activity was, of course, Shawar. By manipulating both the Muslim and the Latin Christian forces, he had managed to achieve his objective. He had been reinstalled as vizier of Egypt, and the departure of the foreign armies made his victory complete.

But that's not going to be the end of the story, not by a long shot. Join me next week, as King Amalric and Nur ad-Din clash once more in battleground Egypt. Until next week, bye for now.

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