

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 41  
Egypt, Part 2.

Hello again. Last week we saw the conflict between the Latin Christians and the Muslims spill over into a new arena, the neighboring country of Egypt. At the conclusion of last week's episode, we saw the ex-vizier Shawar restored to power. Having reneged on his agreement with Nur ad-Din's Kurdish general, Shirkuh, Shawar allied himself with King Amalric of Jerusalem, who was keen to bag Egypt as a prize. Both Shirkuh and King Amalric left Egypt at the end of last week's episode and returned back home.

Egypt remained the hot topic of the day, and it wasn't long before rumors reached Egypt that Nur ad-Din's General Shirkuh was once again getting ready to invade the country. The rumors weren't exactly true. Two years had passed since Shirkuh had been besieged in the Egyptian town of Bilbeis, and during this time Shawar had kept himself busy consolidating his position as vizier in Egypt. Shirkuh had spent much of the intervening two years trying to convince Nur ad-Din to allow him to invade Egypt again, but Nur ad-Din was reluctant to do so. On the whole, he was satisfied with the situation as it stood. The Franj had not been able to gain a foothold in Egypt and for Nur ad-Din that was enough.

For Shirkuh, however, that wasn't enough. He had been humiliated by Shawar's betrayal and was itching for revenge. When the false rumors of Shirkuh's imminent invasion reached Egypt, Shawar reacted by formalizing an alliance with King Amalric. When news of this treaty reached Nur ad-Din he decided it might be time to act after all. He certainly didn't want the Franj to quietly move in on Egypt right under his nose. He authorized Shirkuh to mount a new campaign in Egypt. Shirkuh gathered his army, and his nephew Yusef, and headed back towards Egypt.

When King Amalric heard of the invasion, he quickly prepared his forces as well. Wanting to prevent Shirkuh from destroying his cozy arrangement with Shawar, King Amalric also gathered his army and headed west. Both forces arrived in Egypt around the same time. King Amalric's army headed straight to Cairo, where they joined forces with Shawar's troops. They then sat back and awaited the arrival of Shirkuh's army.

But Shirkuh was a talented military strategist. He knew the French and Egyptian forces were waiting for him to come in from the east. He also knew that one of his army's strengths was their ability to move quickly and tirelessly across long distances. So what did he do? He made a large detour around Cairo and headed south, following the banks of the Nile until he reached a point where the river could be crossed. He achieved the river crossing by laboriously ferrying his army across the Nile using a fleet of small boats. Once they had all reached the other side, he didn't let them stop and rest, but instead drove them back north towards Cairo.

To say that King Amalric and Shawar were shocked to find Shirkuh's army arrive on the western side of Cairo is an understatement. They couldn't immediately attack Shirkuh's forces as the River Nile separated the two armies. Shirkuh set up camp near Giza and sent a letter to Shawar suggesting that the two Muslim armies unite to drive the Franj out of Egypt. Shawar rejected the proposal. Not only did he reject it, he had the unfortunate messenger executed and showed the letter to King Amalric to prove his loyalty.

But King Amalric was far from convinced about Shawar's loyalty. He suspected that as soon as Shawar no longer had any need for him he would betray the Latin Christians. So King Amalric decided to press for a formal treaty, not just between himself and Shawar, but between the Kingdom of Jerusalem and Egypt itself. The treaty stipulated that the Latin Christians would be paid the enormous sum of 400,000 gold coins, half to be paid at once and the rest on completion, on the condition that the army of the Kingdom of Jerusalem not leave Egypt until Shirkuh had been driven out. The treaty needed to be formalised by the Caliph of Egypt, the young Adid. Consequently, King Amalric sent two representatives who both spoke Arabic, Hugh Lord of Caesarea and a Templar knight called Geoffrey, to accompany Shawar to the Caliph's palace.

The two Latin Christian knights were impressed by what they saw. In fact, just about anyone would have been impressed by what they saw. Shawar led them to an impressive palace. They were admitted inside and, accompanied by armed guards, they were escorted through the massive complex. They walked down a hallway which seemed to go on forever, then were led through a pair of massive sculptured gates into a chamber, which in turn led to another gate. After passing through a maze of highly decorated rooms, the party arrived at a courtyard paved with marble and ringed by gilded colonnades. In the center of the courtyard was a fountain, which spouted water from pipes made of gold and silver. Contained within this garden were a selection of exotic birds from different regions of Africa.

However impressive this garden was, it was only the start of the Caliph's domain. The armed guards handed their charges over to the Caliph's eunuchs, who were to escort them for the remainder of the way. They left the courtyard and were taken through a dizzying number of ornate chambers decorated with wall hangings of silk and golden thread, before emerging once again into a garden. This one was much larger than the first and contained the Caliph's menagerie, a collection of deer, lions, bears, and panthers.

Finally, they reached the Caliph's inner chamber. They entered an enormous room, one wall of which was covered with a silk curtain which had been studded with gold, rubies, and emeralds. Shawar bowed three times before the curtain and laid his sword on the ground. The curtain parted to reveal the sixteen year old Caliph, his body draped in silk and his face veiled, sitting on a golden throne.

Shawar approached the Caliph and sat at his feet. He explained the terms of the proposed treaty with the Franj. The Caliph murmured his ascent to the agreement, and the meeting was about to conclude when the two knights requested that the Caliph swear an oath to honor the agreement. The Caliph's courtiers were scandalized and Shawar was forced to hastily intervene, telling the Caliph that the Franj meant no disrespect, but were ignorant of Egyptian customs. To humor the knights, the Caliph made his oath. The knights then went a little further, saying that they needed to shake the Caliph's un-gloved hand to seal the pact. Again, the request caused outrage and there were whispers amongst the courtiers that the knights needed to be punished for their insults. Again, Shawar intervened, and again the Caliph deigned to honor the quaint foreign customs. He removed his glove and extended his naked hand to shake on the deal. With the formalities concluded, the knights were led back through the massive palace, and lost no time regaling King Amalric with stories of the incredible wealth of Egypt.

Following the formalization of the treaty between the Latin Christians and the Egyptians, attentions turned once again to the arena of conflict. A contingent of men from Jerusalem,

predominantly infantrymen accompanied by a few hundred knights, crossed the River Nile by using an island at the head of the delta, a little to the north of Shirkuh's forces. They were hoping to descend down on top of Shirkuh's men and annihilate them. But Shirkuh had other ideas. He knew one of the strengths of his cavalry-based force was its ability to move quickly, and he decided to lure Amalric as far south as possible, well away from his base at Cairo where the remainder of the Latin Christian forces were garrisoned. Shirkuh sped southwards at breakneck speed, followed by King Amalric and Shawar. On the 18th of March 1167, after a week of southerly travel, Shirkuh decided the time had come to confront the Latin Christian and Egyptian armies. He assembled his men near the town of Al-Babein on the west bank of the Nile, and awaited the arrival of the other army. His nephew Yusef had proven rather useful, and he decided to give Yusef the command of the center.

Actually, just as an aside here, I'm going to stop calling him Yusef now and call him by the name he became known as much later on, "Saladin". It's probably not chronologically accurate, but I think it will save some confusion later on. So, Yusef is now officially known as Saladin, for the purpose of this podcast. Okay, everyone got that? Right.

So Saladin has command of the center of the army. Shirkuh instructs his nephew to lure the Franj into a trap, using the tactic of ... hands up if anyone knows. Anyone, anyone? Yes, that's right. Feigned retreat. The army moved into position, and soon after the combined Egyptian and Latin Christian forces came into view. Now, initially, King Amalric hesitated to confront Shirkuh's forces. The combined Egyptian and Latin Christian forces outnumbered Shirkuh's men, but whereas Shirkuh's army was cavalry-based, the Latin Christians only had a few hundred knights. The majority were foot soldiers. King Amalric was pondering and assessing his options, when who should appear to him in a vision, but St Bernard of Clairvaux.

Now the advice of the actual St Bernard to date in matters concerning the Crusades hasn't been that helpful. So what did St Bernard in vision form have to say? Well, he taunted King Amalric for being unworthy of the fragment of the True Cross which he wore around his neck. Then yes, just as the real Bernard had encouraged the European Christians to embark on the disastrous Second Crusade, the vision Bernard then encourages King Amalric to attack Shirkuh's forces. The vision St. Bernard makes King Amalric vow to be a better Christian, blesses the relic, then disappears, leaving King Amalric certain of his next move.

Despite his former misgivings, he would launch an attack, and the following morning he did exactly that. With their banners unfurled, the Latin Christians, with their Egyptian allies, charged headlong at the assembled cavalry commanded by Shirkuh. Saladin followed his orders. As soon as the charging Latin Christians were close enough, he led the center into retreat, pretending to flee in fright. Inexplicably unable to see this for the tactic that had tripped them up time and time again over the past fifty years, King Amalric and his men gave chase, and as they did, the left and right flanks of Shirkuh's army closed around them until they were surrounded. Yes, the vision St Bernard had led King Amalric astray.

The result was an overwhelming defeat for King Amalric. Losses amongst his knights were heavy, with many good men slain and others, including Hugh of Caesarea, one of the men who had met with the Caliph, taken captive. The King himself managed to escape back to Cairo, along with Shawar. The bulk of his troops had remained in Cairo, and King Amalric was determined to use them to avenge his loss.

While he was pondering his next move, he received some startling news. In fact, the news wasn't just startling, it was almost unbelievable. Shirkuh had taken the ancient and strategically vital port of Alexandria, Egypt's largest city. Alexandria was on the Mediterranean coast, far to the north of Cairo. But when King Amalric had last seen Shirkuh's forces only a few days ago, they were a week's march south of Cairo.

What had happened was this. Immediately after his victory at Al-Babein, without letting his troops rest, Shirkuh drove them northwards at breakneck speed. Before the Egyptians or the Latin Christians had even realized what was going on, Shirkuh and his men had traveled the entire length of the country, arriving before the gates of Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast. The Alexandrians intensely disliked the idea of their vizier allying himself with the Franj, and they welcomed the Syrians as liberators, opening the city's gates to Shirkuh and allowing him and his men inside.

King Amalric and Shawar reacted to this latest move by moving their troops northwards and laying siege to the city of Alexandria. The King of Jerusalem arranged for a fleet of Latin Christian ships to blockade the city by sea. Then they waited for the city to run out of food.

Now, while all the armies have converged on Alexandria, and while we endure the lengthy process of starving the city into submission, I thought I'd take the opportunity to discover a little more about the ancient city of Alexandria, as we've not come across it before, and it's a very interesting place. Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great, around 331 BC. Alexander the Great was from Greece, or more specifically from Macedonia, Greece's neighbor, and had conquered an impressive amount of territory, creating one of the largest Empires of the ancient world. He would have liked to have conquered even more territory, but he died in 323 BC, aged 33.

At the time of his death, one of his generals, a Macedonian named Ptolemy, was governing Egypt, and he claimed the country for himself. Ptolemy had himself crowned Pharaoh in the Egyptian city of Memphis, but decided to make Alexandria his capital. From the outset, Alexandria was more Greek than Egyptian, with a predominantly Greek population. Its position on the Mediterranean ensured its prosperity as a trading city, and it soon became one of the largest and most exciting cities of the ancient world. It was known across the region for its two main attractions, its impressive lighthouse called the Pharos, and its library.

The Pharos was built in the third century BC and was the world's first lighthouse. It was an impressive structure and was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Stories abound about its massive height and its abilities to direct light. Reportedly, a great bronze mirror at the top of the lighthouse could be used to direct the light of the sun onto enemy ships, causing them to catch alight. It's difficult to separate fact from myth with regards to the lighthouse, but there's no doubt it was an impressive building. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by an earthquake, and by the time of the Crusades there was no visible trace of it.

Ptolemy was keen for Alexandria to become an intellectual center as well as an economic powerhouse, and to that end he established a massive library in the city. The library aimed to contain a copy of every work of importance to Greek scholarship. It was an ambitious goal, as the works were written on papyrus scrolls, and many of them needed to be copied

out onto fresh scrolls to preserve them. There was also the tricky task of working out a system to catalogue the vast number of scrolls that were arriving daily from across the known world. During the reign of Ptolemy II there were 90,000 works catalogued in the palace library, 42,800 works catalogued in the outer library and 400,000 un-catalogued volumes.

The Ptolemy dynasty ruled Egypt, with Alexandria as its capital, until its final pharaoh, Queen Cleopatra VII. Cleopatra was famously linked with the Romans Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. At her death, Egypt was turned into a Roman province and remained so for the next 700 years. At some stage during Roman rule, or possibly during the later Muslim conquest of the city, the library was destroyed, and the consequential loss of knowledge which vanished along with its papyrus scrolls was devastating.\* The city itself, however, continued to thrive despite the loss of its lighthouse and its library, and it remained an important center after the country fell under Muslim rule in the 600's. At the time of the Crusades, Alexandria was Egypt's largest city. Even today, it is an impressive metropolis, and with four million inhabitants it is currently Egypt's second largest city.

Right enough about Alexandria, back to the Crusades. Where were we? Right, Shirkuh, his nephew Saladin, and his army are in Alexandria, which is under siege. No food can get through the blockade, and the city is beginning to starve. After a month or so, everyone in Alexandria has had enough. They are seriously regretting opening their gates to the Syrians, and death by starvation is starting to look like a real possibility. Mindful of the rising public sentiment against him, and also mindful of the fact that he doesn't want to lose any of his men to starvation, Shirkuh decides it's time for action. Late one night, he slips out of the town, along with most of his army. They sneak past Amalric's camp without being noticed, and head south. Left behind in Alexandria are Saladin and 1,000 men who will assist him to hold the city.

Shirkuh and his army went on a rampage through upper Egypt, inciting local peasants to rise up against their vizier and pillaging towns, hoping to entice the Frankish and Egyptian armies away from Alexandria. It didn't work. King Amalric was keen to race after Shirkuh, but Shawar convinced him that maintaining the siege at Alexandria was more important. If the price of recovering Alexandria was the ransacking of a few towns in Upper Egypt, then so be it.

Meanwhile, back inside Alexandria things were looking grim. In addition to the famine, diseases were spreading throughout the city, and catapult attacks were occurring daily. Holding the starving, unhappy citizens in check and defending the city against attack with only 1,000 men was a weighty responsibility for the 29 year old Saladin. After a month, he sent word to Shirkuh that the position within the city was desperate and he begged his uncle to return.

Shirkuh was running out of options. As he approached Alexandria, he played his last card. He selected one of his Latin Christian prisoners. If you're curious to know exactly who it was, it was Arnulf of Terbessel. Hugh of Caesarea had been approached first, but he refused to cooperate with Shirkuh. Anyway, the prisoner was ordered to approach King Amalric with a message. The gist of the message was that both the Syrians and the Latin Christians were wasting their time in Egypt, and the only real winner out of all of this was Shawar. Shirkuh suggested to King Amalric that both armies leave Egypt and return home, on the condition that Shawar undertake not to harm any Egyptians who had supported the

invaders. King Amalric had been concerned for some time about events happening in his absence in his Kingdom, and in the County of Tripoli, so he readily accepted the terms.

The siege of Alexandria was lifted, and on the 4th of August 1167 the Latin Christian Army entered the city, led by King Amalric. Saladin was escorted from the city, and was given a guard of honor as he made his way on the streets of Alexandria. Saladin had not only proved popular with the Alexandrians, he made quite an impression on the Latin Christian forces as well, so much so that it was even rumored that he was afforded the honor of being knighted, as a sign of their respect for him, with Constable Humphrey of Toron reportedly carrying out the task.

King Amalric and his army left Alexandria and made their way back to Cairo. They made Shawar sign a treaty to pay a yearly tribute of 100,000 pieces of gold to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. He also agreed to allow a small Latin Christian garrison to remain in Cairo. Then both armies left Egypt, with King Amalric arriving back in Ascalon on the 20th of August 1167.

So there we have it. After another lengthy campaign, nothing much has changed in Egypt. Surely that's the end of the forays into Egypt by the Latin Christians and the Syrian Muslims? No, it's not. Join me next week for the third and final installment of our episodes on Egypt, where we see Shirkuh and King Amalric throw themselves, one last time, into the arena of battlefield Egypt. Until next week, bye for now.

End

\* Note: This episode contains the following statement : "At some stage during Roman rule, or possibly during the later Muslim conquest of the city, the library was destroyed, and the consequential loss of knowledge which vanished along with its papyrus scrolls was devastating." A listener has since (correctly) pointed out to me that current historians are almost universally of the view that Muslims played no role in the destruction of the library at Alexandria and that the finger of blame should solely be pointed at the Romans. So - while I couldn't make a correction to the audio of the episode, please consider this to be a correction to the transcript.