

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 42  
Egypt, Part 3.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Amalric and Nur ad-Din's Kurdish commander Shirkuh face off once again in the country of Egypt, but they really needn't have bothered. After a lengthy military campaign, they returned home with the situation in Egypt unchanged.

To reward his commanders, and perhaps keep their minds and interests on affairs closer to home, Nur ad-Din gave Shirkuh the governance of the city of Homs, while granting lands around Aleppo to Saladin. Then they all settled into their new roles, content that Egypt was off the action list for the foreseeable future.

However, back in the kingdom of Jerusalem, the item "invade Egypt and take control of it" was still firmly on King Amalric's list of things to do. King Amalric had left a Latin Christian garrison behind in Cairo to keep an eye on the Egyptian vizier Shawar, and to ensure the annual tribute was sent back to the Holy Land. The first installment of the tribute was now overdue, and it was clear that Shawar was having trouble collecting it. The citizens of Cairo were increasingly resentful of the foreign garrison and weren't too keen on seeing a large portion of their taxes leave Egypt for Latin Christian coffers. Shawar's position and authority in Egypt was becoming more precarious by the day. Rumours also reached King Amalric that Shawar's son was openly negotiating with Shirkuh, and was seeking the hand of Saladin's sister in marriage. Despite the presence of his treaty with Egypt, all these developments were making King Amalric more than a little anxious.

Then, in the summer of 1168, a company of knights arrived from Europe under the command of Count William IV of Nevers. The Count and his men were eager for action, and to them invading Egypt seemed to like a brilliant idea. King Amalric decided to call a meeting to gauge support for a new Egyptian campaign. Count William and his knights, of course, voiced their support, as did the Grand Master of the Hospitallers and most of the local nobility. The Knights Templar, however, opposed the idea and made it clear that even if there was an expedition to Egypt, they would not be taking part in it. Most likely this was due to the fact that the Templars at the time had strong financial ties to the Muslims and to Italian merchants, who did not wish to see their lucrative markets in Egypt affected by the military ambitions of the King of Jerusalem. While he was ambitious, King Amalric was also a pragmatist. At the meeting, the King suggested that they wait until he had the support of the Byzantine Emperor before making any definite plans. But this idea was vigorously opposed by both the Hospitallers and the Frankish nobles, who wished to avoid further delay and had no desire to share the spoils of victory in Egypt with their Byzantine counterparts.

So it was decided. Despite having signed a treaty with the country, the King ordered that a new expedition to Egypt be planned for October. October soon arrived, and the army, under the command of King Amalric, marched from Ascalon on the 20th of October, arriving in Bilbeis ten days later. Unfortunately, Count William wasn't accompanying the expedition. He had died unexpectedly in the Holy Land. His knights, however, threw in their lot with the Franks and marched under King Amalric.

Shawar was astonished that King Amalric had invaded his country, contrary to the terms of the treaty he had signed. He sent an ambassador to meet with the King. King Amalric told the ambassador that his invasion was justified because of the overtones Shavar's son had made to Shirkuh. He also mentioned that the newly arrived European knights were intent on attacking Egypt regardless, and it was for the best if he, King Amalric, was there to control them. Shavar's son commanded the garrison at Bilbeis, and acting on his father's orders he refused to open the gates to the Latin Christians. The Franks attacked the city, and after three days of intense fighting, they overran the Muslim defenders and entered the town. What followed was a massacre of an appalling extent and degree. The residents of Bilbeis were systematically slaughtered by the Latin Christians: men, women, children, Muslim, and Coptic Christians alike. It's likely that the murderous rampage was initiated by the knights from Europe, whom King Amalric was finding difficult to control. King Amalric eventually managed to stop the slaughter, but the damage was already done, and quite considerable damage it was, too.

The Massacre of the Innocents had massive ramifications. The people of Egypt were not happy under Shavar's rule, and many commentators have observed that King Amalric may have found little resistance from the Egyptian people, and that in fact noblemen from Cairo were considering surrendering the city to him. But not anymore. After they heard about the massacre at Bilbeis, the people of Egypt vowed to resist the Latin Christians with everything they had. The massacre also had an adverse effect on the relationship between the Latin Christians and the Coptic Christians of Egypt. Coptic communities had previously assisted King Amalric in his Egyptian campaigns. But not any longer. All of Egypt was united in its rage against, and hatred of, the invading Franks.

Everyone knew that after Bilbeis, King Amalric's next port of call would be the city of Cairo. As the invaders approached, Shavar evacuated all the citizens from the oldest section of the city, and moved them to the newer administrative areas. Then he gathered together 20,000 jars of Greek fire, and ordered them to be poured onto the houses, markets, mosques, and meeting places in the Old City. Then he set it alight. It burned spectacularly for 54 days. Shavar sent his ambassador to King Amalric, with the message that he would rather set fire to the entire city of Cairo than see it fall to the Franks.

King Amalric could sense that his whole military campaign was taking a turn for the worse, and he set up camp a few miles to the north of the city. He spent the next few days trying to decide how to turn the situation back to his advantage, while also negotiating with Shavar over the ransom to be paid for Shavar's son, whom they had captured at Bilbeis.

Meanwhile, the Caliph of Egypt had decided to take matters into his own hands. Without informing Shavar, the Caliph sent a heartfelt letter to Nur ad-Din, begging him to come to Egypt's aid. With the letter the Caliph enclosed locks of hair taken from his wives, who, he said, beseeched Nur ad-Din to come and save them from the ravages of the Franj.

Saladin was enjoying his new lands in Aleppo when the message arrived. He was haunted by the memory of the siege of Alexandria and had no desire whatsoever to experience anything like that ever again. Unfortunately for Saladin, he had shown real talent and potential as a military leader, and any further campaign in Egypt was likely to require his presence, whether he welcomed that or not. In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Mallouf notes Saladin's reaction to these new events, as recorded by a Muslim chronicler at the time. He records Saladin as saying, and I quote "when the appeals from the Caliph al-Adid arrived, Nur ad-Din summoned me and told me what was

happening. Then he said, Go and see your Uncle Shirkuh in Homs and urge him to come to me at once, for there must be no delay. I left Aleppo, and a mile from the city I encountered my uncle, who was already on his way. Nur ad-Din ordered him to prepare to leave for Egypt". End of quote.

Shirkuh then asked his nephew to accompany him, but like the previous campaign, Saladin was reluctant, and I quote again. "I answered that I was not prepared to forget the sufferings endured in Alexandria. My uncle then said to Nur ad-Din 'It is absolutely necessary that Yusef go with me', and Nur ad-Din thus repeated his orders. I tried to explain the state of financial embarrassment in which I found myself. He ordered that money be given to me, and I had to go, like a man being led off to his death." End of quote.

So Shirkuh, the reluctant Saladin, and 8,000 horsemen set off once again for Egypt. This time, however, there was to be no confrontation with King Amalric. Things were going from bad to worse for the Latin Christian King. First there was the appalling massacre at Bilbeis, and then he was dismayed by the strength of feeling against the Franks in Cairo. Then, just when he thought things couldn't get any worse, King Amalric heard that the Syrian army had once again assembled under Shirkuh and was heading his way. Not wanting to be caught between the hostile population of Cairo and the approaching Muslim forces, King Amalric hurriedly moved his army eastwards into the Sinai desert, hoping to cut Shirkuh's army off before it could join up with Shawar's forces in Egypt. It was an admirable tactic, but it didn't work. He had underestimated the speed of the Syrian cavalry and by the time King Amalric reached the desert, reports were filtering in that Shirkuh had already arrived in Egypt and had crossed the Nile. Realizing the game was lost, King Amalric ordered both his army and the garrison he left at Bilbeis to retreat back to the Crusader states.

Shirkuh entered Cairo a few days later, on the 8th of January 1169. Despite representing the Sunni Muslims, who are traditionally opposed to the Shi'ite Muslims of Egypt, the Egyptian population viewed Shirkuh as an infinitely preferable savior than the Latin Christians, and he was warmly welcomed by the people and the Egyptian nobility. Shawar also did his best to appear pleased to see the victorious Syrians, but he knew he was on shaky ground. He had betrayed Shirkuh once before, and had placed all his eggs in the Latin Christian basket. That basket had now vanished, and all he had left was a pile of broken eggs.

Shawar must have known his days were numbered. While he was graciously doing everything asked of him by Shirkuh and doing his best to somehow resurrect the situation, behind the scenes Shirkuh and the Egyptian Caliph were trying to work out what to do with Shawar. In the end, the decision was made by the Caliph. Shawar was to be killed. The task fell to Saladin. On a foggy morning, Shawar was invited to spend the day with Shirkuh. As he set out, Saladin and another Syrian attacked and unhorsed him. He was taken into a tent and beheaded, and his head was taken to the Caliph.

The way was now cleared for Shirkuh to be appointed ruler of Egypt. However, as he was riding through Cairo on his way to formalizing his rule, he was cornered by a mob of angry citizens. He was able to divert them by encouraging them to loot Shawar's residence. The mob raced off to do just that, leaving Shirkuh free to make his way to the Caliph's palace. When Shirkuh went to move into Shawar's residence a short time later, he found the luxurious mansion had been stripped bare. Not even a cushion remained for him to sit on.

But this was a minor disappointment. Shirkuh had realized his long held ambition. Within a few weeks, the crusty old Kurdish soldier was the undisputed ruler of Egypt.

But he didn't get a chance to bask in his new found glory for long. On the 23rd of March, only two months after becoming the Egyptian ruler, Shirkuh was taken ill after an excessively sumptuous meal. Having overeaten to a fatal degree, he was overcome by a feeling of suffocation and died.

Shirkuh's death left an obvious power vacuum. The position of vizier of the country of Egypt was clearly a very powerful and highly sought-after role. There were three contenders: two senior commanders from Shirkuh's army, and Shirkuh's nephew Saladin. Days of debate, argument and intrigue followed, with Saladin emerging as the unlikely victor. He played the other two contenders off against each other, painting them both as inept, and leaving himself as the default victor. To the Caliph, he presented himself as ineffectual and weak, leading the Caliph to throw his support behind his rise to power, with the intention that he could be easily manipulated and later overthrown, and Shi'ite rule restored.

So in the year 1169 Saladin is officially given the title of Vizier of Egypt by the Caliph. In a ceremony at the Caliph's palace, he is provided with the official garments of the ruler of Egypt: a white turban stitched in gold; a scarlet-lined robe; a jewel-encrusted sword; and a horse, complete with a saddle and bridle engraved with gold and decorated with precious jewels and pearls. The new vizier left the Caliph's palace and installed himself in the official residence of the ruler of Egypt. Saladin, a Sunni Muslim Kurd and close ally of his patron Nur ad-Din, began his rule of Egypt.

This is pretty much King Amalric's worst-case scenario. He had hoped to take Egypt himself, and had been only a hair's breadth away from doing so. But now the Crusader states were surrounded on all sides by Nur ad-Din and his allies. What did King Amalric do? The only option available to him was to throw the dice one more time and launch another invasion into Egypt.

While King Amalric is busying himself planning his new military campaign, let's go back to Egypt for a moment to see how Saladin is settling into his new role. To start with, it must be stated from the outset that no one expected him to succeed or to stay vizier for very long. During the past fifteen years, there had been eight different viziers, and none of these had been able to consolidate their rule to the extent necessary to secure their hold on power. Most viziers in recent times had been murdered by their rivals. The country of Egypt itself was in a state of disarray and turmoil, as a result of years of ineffective leadership. And yet here was Saladin, a young man with no experience in governing a country, a Sunni Muslim in a land dominated by the Shi'ite faith, far from home, with only a relatively small Syrian army to back him up. As I said, no one expected him to last very long.

But from the outset, Saladin seemed to instinctively know exactly what he needed to do. His first move was to request Nur ad-Din to send him a group of trusted family members so he could surround himself with administrators whom he knew intimately, and more importantly, whom he could trust. Within a few months he was joined by his older brother and his nephew. Later, his father and his younger brother would join his administrative team. Slowly, he won over his uncle Shirkuh's trusted lieutenants, and even began to win some supporters within the Caliph's circle of advisers. He began his rule with a style that

would persist over the remainder of his career. He was willing and able to engage in diplomacy and negotiation to resolve a conflict, but if diplomacy failed, or when he deemed it necessary, he could act with a ruthlessness that was breathtaking.

Take, for example, one of the first challenges he was faced with. Shortly after he came to power, Cairo's military garrison rose up against him in revolt. The main protagonists were a group of Sudanese troops. There were around 50,000 Sudanese soldiers stationed in Cairo. They were fiercely loyal to the Caliph, and they didn't much like the notion of a foreign vizier taking the reins of power, so they rioted. For two days, they ran rampant through the streets of the city. Saladin knew that he didn't have the manpower to confront them directly, and when they started to march on towards his residence, he decided to act. The Sudanese soldiers lived with their families in the Al Mansurah quarter of Cairo. Saladin ordered that the entire suburb be set alight. His orders were obeyed and the Sudanese found not only their homes and possessions destroyed, but their wives and children burned to death. Shocked by the severity of Saladin's response to their insurrection, the Sudanese negotiated a truce, and were granted free passage up the Nile, back to their homeland.

Saladin's ability to deal effectively with a crisis was tested again a few months into his rule, when the Franj once again invaded Egypt. This time, King Amalric knew that the stakes were high. Every other Frankish invasion of Egypt had failed, but this one must succeed, otherwise the Crusader states would be surrounded on all sides by territory controlled by Nur ad-Din. To succeed, King Amalric knew he needed more manpower. It was time to call for another Crusade. In early 1169 he sent an embassy to Europe led by the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Archbishop of Caesarea.

The plan was for the Patriarch and the Archbishop to present letters to the Pope and to the current European leaders, Emperor Frederick of Germany, King Louis VII of France, and King Henry II of England. But only two days into their sea journey, the ships transporting the party were hit by a massive storm, which blew them all the way back to Acre. Amazed to have escaped with their lives, all the passengers on board the ships refused to undertake such a perilous journey again, so a few months later a different party was assembled, led by the Archbishop of Tyre.

This time, the travelers made it safely to Europe, where they gained an audience with the Pope, who issued them with letters of support. For the next two years, the party toured around Europe, meeting with various leaders, trying desperately and hopelessly to drum up support for another Crusade. In the end, they gave up. The leaders were all focused on domestic troubles, and none of them wished to embark on a costly and risky campaign in Egypt. There was to be no Crusade.

King Amalric did have some success, however, a little closer to home. Emperor Manuel had been watching the unfolding events in northern Africa with concern, and he knew that the balance of power in the Middle East had shifted dangerously in Nur ad-Din's favor. He wanted to support King Amalric's invasion of Egypt, and offered him the services of the Great Imperial Navy for the duration of the military campaign. King Amalric wanted to strike quickly, before Saladin had a chance to consolidate his hold on power. On the 10th of July 1169 the Imperial fleet set sail from the Hellespont under the command of the impressively named Grand Duke Andronicus Contostephanus, and headed for Cyprus, where they waited for orders from King Amalric.

Trouble is, the orders didn't come. Although King Amalric had impressed upon Emperor Manuel the need for haste, he himself was nowhere near ready. The Templars were still refusing to take part in any invasion of Egypt for financial reasons, and the ranks of the Hospitallers had been depleted by losses sustained in the last campaign. By the time King Amalric had managed to scrape together an army, nearly three months had passed, three months in which the huge Byzantine fleet had been stationed at Cyprus, eating and drinking their way through their supplies. Unfortunately, they had only been provisioned with three months worth of supplies. Emperor Manuel had been assured that this would be a short campaign and had provisioned his ships accordingly. But now the provisions were almost gone and the campaign hadn't even started.

The lengthy delay also gave Saladin plenty of time to prepare his defense. He spent the time constructively, weeding out disloyal troops from the Egyptian army, and ensuring his own men were placed in positions of command.

The army from the Kingdom of Jerusalem finally set out on the 16th of October 1169. While the army marched overland to Egypt, the Byzantine ships sailed along the coast. Saladin expected the Franj to attack Bilbeis and had garrisoned the town accordingly. However, the Latin Christians chose a different target, the town of Damietta on the Nile delta. It was a clever choice. The town was protected by an impressive fortress, but if it could be taken, the Byzantine ships could sail to the town via the main branch of the Nile River, and from there sail towards Cairo. Saladin was taken completely by surprise at this move. He ordered reinforcements to be sent to Damietta, and from his base in Cairo he sent an urgent message to Nur ad-Din requesting assistance.

Meanwhile, back at Damietta, things weren't quite going to plan. The city's defenders had ordered a thick chain be strung across the river just upstream from the town. The chain prevented the Byzantine ships from sailing up past the town. Andronicus Contostephanus, the Byzantine commander, urged King Amalric to take Damietta quickly, as his men were on reduced rations and were getting restless. King Amalric concentrated his efforts on building one single enormous siege tower, from which he hoped he could breach the walls and enter the town. However, in a strange quirk of fate, it was only after the tower had been completed that the Latin Christians discovered they had not only positioned it next to the strongest section of the city wall, but that it was outside the Christian quarter of the town, which contained a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. This meant that their bombardment of the wall was ineffective, and any missiles which rained down from the siege tower into the town hit Christian targets, not Muslim ones. In short, the tower was a disaster. There was nothing for it. More siege towers would need to be built along different sections of the wall. All this work, of course, was going to take a long time, and time was something the Byzantine fleet didn't have.

By early December it was clear that the campaign was over. The Byzantine sailors had run out of food completely, and were starving. To make matters worse, the Egyptians had sent a fire boat into the congested Byzantine fleet, causing major losses. King Amalric was no closer to taking the town, and he had just heard that Nur ad-Din was sending reinforcements to the town from Syria. Then the rains came, turning the Latin Christian camp into a mud bath. It was time to go. The Franks burned their siege towers, lifted the siege and made their way back to their Kingdom. The Byzantine fleet too set sail for home, but they were hit by a ferocious storm as they crossed the Mediterranean. The starving sailors struggled to control their ships, and many sank. For days afterwards, the bodies of Greek sailors washed onto the shores of the Holy Lands. Andronicus Contostephanus

managed to sail to Cilicia, and then traveled overland back to Constantinople. The battle for Egypt was officially over, with Saladin the undisputed victor.

Join me next week as we change the pace a little and take a look at castles built during the Crusades, in particular the magnificent Crac de Chevaliers. Until next week, bye for now.

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