

History of the Crusades.
Episode 44
The Fall of Giants.

Hello again. Last week we examined the Crusader castle Crac de Chevaliers. The week before that, we concluded our series on Egypt, with Saladin emerging as the Egyptian ruler. This week we return to our chronology of the Crusades, and examine what happens in the Middle East after Saladin's rise to power. In fact, this is going to be quite an episode. By its end, we will have seen the end of a 200 year old dynasty, and two unexpected deaths will change the course of history, and sound the death knell for the presence of the Latin Christians in the Holy Land.

Right. Well, at the start of this episode, both Nur ad-Din and King Amalric are facing problems. Nur ad-Din's problem can be summed up in one word: Saladin. As I stated a couple of weeks ago, no one expected Saladin to remain ruler of Egypt for very long. Most of his predecessors had been killed by their rivals, and besides, he was a foreigner, a Syrian Sunni Muslim ruling over a country dominated by the Shia religion, with a Shia Caliph as its spiritual head. Egypt itself had been destabilized and impoverished by its never-ending changes in leadership, while Saladin only had a small Syrian force to support him and no allies within the Egyptian army. As I said, no one expected him to last very long.

But the funny thing was, he did seem to be lasting. Days, weeks, and months went by, and slowly but surely Saladin, a young commander with limited military experience and no experience whatsoever in running a country, seemed to be consolidating his tenuous grip on power. Nur ad-Din watched with initial delight, and then increasing disquiet, as Saladin adeptly repelled King Amalric's final Egyptian invasion, and put down an insurrection by Sudanese forces loyal to the Egyptian Caliph. Saladin was telling anyone who cared to listen that he was loyal to Nur ad-Din, and considered himself subordinate to Nur ad-Din's rule, but Nur ad-Din wasn't so sure. Saladin didn't seem to be requesting his assistance, or seeking his advice about matters of state, and it appeared to Nur ad-Din that Saladin was not just an underling, but a potential rival for power in the Muslim world.

After Saladin had been vizier of Egypt for two years, Nur ad-Din decided to see whether Saladin would still obey his orders. The young Egyptian Shia Caliph, al-Adid, remained in power. To Nur ad-Din, this made no sense at all. One of the reasons why Nur ad-Din had been persuaded to mount an invasion of Egypt was to extend the influence of Sunni Islam, and yet, two years after he rose to power, Saladin seemed happy to leave the current Shia Caliph in place. Nur ad-Din wrote to Saladin in 1171, demanding that the prayers in the Egyptian mosques no longer mention the name of the Egyptian Caliph and instead refer to the Sunni Caliph of Baghdad. To Nur ad-Din, this was a reasonable order. He didn't go so far as to order the Egyptian Caliph be deposed or killed, he merely wanted the removal of his name in prayers. Nur ad-Din issued his order and then sat back to see what would happen.

Saladin received the order but was reluctant to act. He had only been ruling for two years, and he believed that the legitimacy of his reign had much to do with the support he had received from the young Egyptian Caliph and his advisers. Saladin was concerned that if he enforced Nur ad-Din's order and removed the Caliph's name from the prayers, he may well lose the support of the Egyptian people. Also, it was quite likely that he had become

friends with al-Adid, and did not wish to upset him. And it's likely that Saladin saw the order for what it was, an attempt by Nur ad-Din to exert his influence over the country. So he failed to act on the order. He didn't go so far as to tell Nur ad-Din that he wouldn't follow the order. He just delayed making any moves to obey. After some months, Nur ad-Din decided to push the matter further, threatening to travel to Egypt himself if the order wasn't obeyed. Still, Saladin delayed, until one day his hand was unexpectedly forced.

On September the 10th 1171, a traveler from Mosul who was visiting Cairo climbed into the pulpit of the Great Mosque ahead of the preacher and said the prayer in the name of the Sunni Caliph of Baghdad. Curiously, there was no general outcry, and the example was soon followed in other mosques throughout Cairo. Saladin knew he couldn't delay any longer. Despite being only 20 years of age, the Caliph of Egypt was gravely ill. He was confined to his bed within the palace, and was drifting in and out of consciousness. Saladin forbade anyone to tell the Caliph about the new prayer policy, stating that, if he recovers he can find out then, but if he is to die, let him die in peace. And he did die, and along with him died the Fatimid dynasty.

Contrary to expectations, Saladin didn't order the deaths of the Caliph's relatives after his demise, but he did round them up and had them confined to the Caliph's palace. He made sure they were completely isolated from the outside world and forbade them to have children, thereby ensuring the end of the dynasty without further bloodshed.

To Nur ad-Din's horror, the enforcement of his prayer policy didn't result in Saladin feeling insecure and coming further into the Syrian fold. The Shia population didn't rise up against him in outrage. Instead, it quickly became apparent that they now accepted Saladin as the undisputed and sole ruler of their country. It was looking more and more like Saladin was the sovereign ruler of Egypt in his own right, and not in Nur ad-Din's name. He was acting like Nur ad-Din's equal and not his servant.

Fortunately for Saladin, Nur ad-Din was too distracted by events in Syria to immediately confront the issue. A series of earthquakes in 1170 caused massive structural damage which needed to be repaired. The death of both his brother and the Caliph in Baghdad meant that Iraq was taking up a fair bit of his time, and in 1172 Nur ad-Din instituted a series of attacks against Antioch and the County of Tripoli, as a result of a dispute with the Franj over trading rights. However, the showdown between the two leaders was, I guess, inevitable, and that showdown happened in the early 1170s over the territory known as Transjordan.

Transjordan was a desert region controlled by the Franj, to the east of the river Jordan. It roughly equates with the modern country of Jordan. By dominating this area, the Latin Christians were able to control the main road between Damascus and Egypt, but really what it was, was a Frankish buffer between Saladin's Egypt and Nur ad-Din's Syria.

Nur ad-Din knew that if he were ever to invade Egypt, then it would be very useful to have this area under Syrian control. It would mean that he would not have to fight the Franj on his way to Egypt. Saladin knew that it would be useful to have the area under Egyptian control.

So in 1171 Saladin invaded Transjordan and laid siege to a major Latin Christian fortress, the castle of Montreal. This was an audacious move which caught the Kingdom of Jerusalem totally by surprise. They scrambled to send reinforcements, but Saladin had the

castle in a stranglehold. The garrison at the castle were on the verge of capitulating and opening the gates to Saladin, when a very strange thing happened. Nur ad-Din appeared on the horizon with his men. Did Saladin do what any good underling should and hand the castle to his overlord? No, he didn't. Nur ad-Din's worst suspicions were realized. Saladin did not want the Syrians getting a toe-hold in Transjordan, but neither was he ready for a military confrontation with Nur ad-Din. As Nur ad-Din arrived, Saladin raised the siege, ensuring the castle remained under the control of the Franj. He then muttered something to Nur ad-Din about needing to return to Egypt urgently to deal with unrest, and took off back to the west, leaving Nur ad-Din in no doubt that his former loyal servant was no longer working to further Syrian interests.

It was ironic, really. Saladin had never wanted to go to Egypt in the first place. In the first expedition, he was dragged there against his will by his uncle Shirkuh, and in the next campaign he had to be specifically ordered by Nur ad-Din to go back to Egypt. Without that order, Saladin would happily have remained living on his land near Aleppo, and would not be the current Egyptian ruler. There was only one thing for it. Saladin needed to be put back in his place, and Nur ad-Din needed to be seen as the Egyptian overlord. But Nur ad-Din was alarmed at Saladin's success as a ruler and his military prowess. He knew that he needed to choose his moment very carefully.

Back in Egypt, Saladin called a council of his family members and his top generals to discuss this new turn of events. Some of those present urged him to openly defy Nur ad-Din, but Saladin was swayed by the counsel of his father. His father scolded Saladin for being so ambitious and urged him to reaffirm his loyalty to Nur ad-Din. Saladin heeded his father's advice and sent a formal apology to Nur ad-Din. Nur ad-Din accepted the apology, but knew that a confrontation with Saladin was increasingly likely.

Nur ad-Din was kept busy for the next couple of years, planning raids into Christian territory and trying unsuccessfully to form an alliance with the Seljuk Turks. He also found time to negotiate the release of Raymond of Tripoli, who was ransomed for a hefty sum after a lengthy stay in captivity.

And then came the inevitable showdown. In 1173, Nur ad-Din decided to invade Transjordan, and ordered Saladin to provide military assistance. Surprisingly, Saladin complied. He led an army out from Egypt into Transjordan and laid siege to a Latin Christian castle. Nur ad-Din moved down from Damascus with his army, but as he approached the siege, Saladin repeated the moves he made two years previously. Using the excuse that his father was gravely ill, Saladin raised the siege as Nur ad-Din approached, and moved his army back to Egypt. Saladin was in fact telling the truth. His father had fallen from a horse and was in a coma, but both Saladin and Nur ad-Din knew the real reason why Saladin had departed. He did not want to see Transjordan fall into Syrian hands. The territory was a handy buffer between Egypt and Syria, and would be a road hump on the path of any future Syrian invasion into Saladin's country.

Nur ad-Din was furious. He continued the siege of the castle but was forced to retreat when Frankish reinforcements were mobilized. To make matters worse, Saladin's father died of the injuries he'd received from his horse fall. Upon hearing of his death, Nur ad-Din knew that he had lost his last pillar of support within Saladin's camp. There was no reason to delay the matter any further. It was time for action. For this next turn of events, I'm going to quote a Muslim chronicler at the time, one Ibn al-Athir. This is what occurred, in his words, and I quote. "Nur ad-Din began preparations to invade Egypt and wrench it away

from Salah al-Din Yusef, for he had noted that the latter was shirking the fight against the Franj for fear of having to unite with him. Yusef preferred to see the Franj on his borders rather than be the direct neighbor of Nur ad-Din. The latter therefore wrote to Mosul and elsewhere, asking that he be sent troops. But as he was preparing to march to Egypt with his soldiers, God whispered to him the command that cannot be shunned." End of quote.

Yes, that's right. As Nur ad-Din was preparing to invade Egypt, he decided to take some time out and play a game of polo. In the middle of the game. He experienced some kind of fit and was taken to the citadel. He was clearly very unwell and had possibly suffered a heart attack. A physician was called and recommended that the leader be bled, but Nur ad-Din, with a voice that was barely audible, refused, saying "You do not bleed a man of 60". On the 15th of May 1174 Nur ad-Din died. The first of our giants had fallen.

Nur ad-Din, the man who ruled Syria from Aleppo all the way to Damascus, was one of the great Muslim leaders of the Crusades. His death was to have major ramifications for the Muslim resistance.

Like Nur ad-Din, King Amalric of Jerusalem was juggling a range of problems after Saladin rose to power in Egypt. There was the problem that he had failed to conquer Egypt, with the result that the Crusader states were now surrounded by territory controlled by the Sunni Muslims. Over the next few years, he was to experience the fruits of this problem, with both Saladin and Nur ad-Din staging separate forays into the Crusader states. The states were now open to attack from two fronts.

Luckily, to counter these problems somewhat, King Amalric formalized a treaty with Constantinople and was also promised naval assistance by the new King of Sicily, young William II. The exact terms of the treaty with Constantinople aren't known, but it is likely to have included a promise from the Emperor to provide military and financial assistance in the event of another Latin Christian invasion of Egypt.

King Amalric's attempt to call for a general Crusade had fallen on deaf ears in Europe, and he was having a hard time bringing the Knights Templar to heel. After their refusal to assist in the previous invasions of Egypt, it was clear where the priorities of the Templars lay. Their business interests were clearly much more important to them than any obligation to provide military assistance to the King of Jerusalem.

In 1173 King Amalric received diplomatic overtures from a very unexpected source. You'll never guess who, so I'll just come straight out and tell you: the Assassins. In 1173, the leader of the Assassins approached King Amalric and suggested they form an alliance. How did this extraordinary turn of events come about?

Well, to say that the Assassins were disappointed about events in Egypt was an understatement. As we learned back in Episode 24, the Assassins were part of a sect devoted to the Shia Islamic faith. While it was true that they had broken their ties with Egypt some time ago, they were still devastated to learn of Saladin's rise to power and of the fall of the Shi'ite Fatimid dynasty. They were so upset about the prevalence of Sunni Islam in Egypt that they apparently informed King Amalric that they were considering converting en-masse to Christianity. The leader of the Assassins, Rashid al-Din Sinan, who became known to the Latin Christians as "the Old Man of the Mountain", suggested that he and his followers throw their lot in with the Latin Christians, and assist them in their battles against the two Sunni Muslim leaders, Nur ad-Din and Saladin. In return, the

Assassins requested that the tribute being paid by the Assassin villages to the Knights Templar at Tortosa, be cancelled. King Amalric readily agreed, and the envoys representing the Assassins' leader made their way back towards the mountains with the news.

However, they never made it back to their base. As they traveled through the County of Tripoli, a Templar knight, Walter of Mesnil, probably acting on the instructions of the Grand Master of the Templars, confronted the entourage and killed them all. Understandably, King Amalric was furious. He ordered the Grand Master to hand Walter over so that he could be punished. The Grand Master refused, so King Amalric had Walter kidnapped, and then imprisoned him at Acre. King Amalric apologized profusely to the leader of the Assassins, then started making plans to approach the Pope, to ask that the Order of the Knights Templar be dissolved.

So as you can see, King Amalric had his fair share of problems at this time, but all these problems were overshadowed by a massive, horrible problem which reared its ugly head around the year 1170. This granddaddy of all problems involved King Amalric's young son and heir, Baldwin.

In 1170, Baldwin was around nine years of age, and he was showing great potential as a future leader: intelligent, quick-witted, an excellent horse rider, and possessing a great love of learning, King Amalric was content that the royal dynasty was in safe hands. Baldwin was being tutored by one of the future chroniclers of the Crusades, William of Tyre. He was living in William's household and was receiving daily lessons, along with a group of other noble boys. As children are wont to do between lessons, they would play a game, pinching each other's arms and digging their fingernails into each other, to see who was the bravest. They were all heartily impressed at the fortitude of young Baldwin. Unlike the others, he never cried out in pain and, particularly when his right arm was pinched, he didn't even flinch. The boys believed that Baldwin's royal blood and superior breeding accounted for this, and it became a popular topic of conversation, which eventually made its way back to the ears of William of Tyre.

Unlike the schoolboys, William wasn't impressed by Baldwin's fortitude. He was concerned. He watched the antics closely and observed that Baldwin didn't appear to have any feeling at all in half of his right arm. He quietly consulted physicians who administered various poultices, ointments, and charms, but nothing changed. The devastating news was passed on to King Amalric. His heir, young Baldwin, was believed to be experiencing the first signs of leprosy.

Leprosy was the most feared illness of the Middle Ages. It was a disfiguring, debilitating, progressive disease for which there was no cure. Concerns about the contagious nature of the condition meant that sufferers were often shunned from society and forced to live in secluded colonies. In Europe, during the Middle Ages, if a leper was entering a populated area, they had to continuously ring a bell, to enable people to flee before their approach.

For King Amalric, news that his son and heir may be suffering from this disease was shattering. From a purely pragmatic point of view, King Amalric now had to face the possibility that his son may not succeed him to the throne. He may be too ill, or the people of Jerusalem may not accept a leper as their king. Also, even if he were to be crowned King, his reign was likely to be short, and he would be unable to have children. So King Amalric had to formulate a Plan B.

Plan B concerned, Baldwin's older sister, Sibylla. Would she be able to rule in her own right, like her grandmother, Queen Melisende? Now, King Amalric had a total of three children: Sibylla and Baldwin by his first wife, Agnes; and an infant daughter Isabella with his second wife, the Byzantine Princess Maria Comnena. Unfortunately, in the absence of her mother, who had remarried almost immediately after the annulment of her marriage to King Amalric, Sibylla was brought up in a convent. She was a meek and mild character who quite understandably didn't have a grasp of, nor an interest in, politics or worldly matters. Realistically, she wouldn't be a good contender for the throne.

Plan B was scrapped, and Plan C emerged. If Sibylla could be married off to a suitably noble European man with experience in governing a territory, then perhaps he could act as regent for Baldwin, or perhaps even become King in his own right. Europe was scoured for suitable candidates, and at the end of 1170 King Amalric wrote to Stephen of Champagne, the Count of Sancerre, to invite him to travel to the Kingdom of Jerusalem and marry his daughter. Stephen accepted the invitation and arrived in the Holy Land with a contingent of knights in the summer of 1171. But it didn't appeal to him. Whether it was the hot climate, the treeless landscape, the food, or Sibylla herself, we'll never know. We do know that he abruptly broke off all marriage negotiations and departed with his knights, intending to travel to Constantinople on his way back home. As he was traveling through Cilicia, he was attacked by some Armenians and was robbed of all he carried, which didn't do much to improve his opinion of the Holy Land. So much for Plan C.

Later, in 1173, King Amalric marched his army to Cilicia to punish the Armenians for their treatment of Stephen of Champagne. Nur ad-Din took advantage of the King's absence by moving his forces to Transjordan, where Saladin had already marched from Egypt and laid siege to a castle. Saladin would shortly be departing back to Egypt, using the excuse that his father was ill.

The next year, 1174, was a major one in the history of the Crusades. On the 15th of May 1174, Nur ad-Din died unexpectedly of an illness. King Amalric raced to take advantage of the resulting uncertainty in Muslim affairs, and marched to the town of Banias, which lay to the southwest of Damascus in the Golan Heights, laying siege to it. However, King Amalric was forced to raise the siege when he came down with a nasty attack of dysentery. He bravely rode back to Jerusalem, rejecting offers to travel using a litter, and by the time he arrived there, he was gravely ill. Greek, Syrian and Frankish physicians were sent to treat him, but a few days later, on the 11th of July 1174, he died, aged just 38. Stephen Runciman, in the second volume of his series on the "History of the Crusades", states that, and I quote "Amalric was the last King of Christian Jerusalem worthy of his throne", end of quote. His early and unexpected demise would sound the death knell for the Latin Christian presence in the Middle East.

Our giants have fallen. Join me next week as we examine the next monarch in Jerusalem, the Leper King, King Baldwin IV. Until next week, bye for now.

End