

History of the Crusades.
Episode 48
The Decline of Byzantium.

Hello again. Last week we looked at the year 1180, in which Sibylla married and Emperor Manuel died. This week, we will examine the ramifications of Manuel's death for the Byzantine Empire.

Now, upon his death, Manuel's eleven year old son became the new Emperor. We've seen what happened in the Muslim world when the strong leader Nur ad-Din died, leaving his young son to rule, and we've seen what happened in the Kingdom of Jerusalem when the strong ruler King Amalric, died, leaving his young son to rule. Well, the chaos and discord which arose in those two situations pales in comparison to what occurred in the Byzantine Empire when young Emperor Alexius II took the purple.

Now, as was mentioned last week, because of the trust he placed in the prediction of the court astrologers, who told him that he would rule for another fourteen years, Manuel hadn't done a lot of planning for his son's succession. The eleven year old Emperor Alexius II was diplomatically described by John Julius Norwich in his book "Byzantium, The Decline and Fall" as, and I quote "an unimpressive child" end of quote. The young Emperor's contemporaries however, were not so kind, describing him as vain and full of pride, yet so lacking in ability and insight that he was incapable of performing the simplest tasks. He was also fast developing a reputation for viciousness.

Luckily, he wasn't required to rule on his own. Following an age-old Imperial tradition, his mother, Mary of Antioch, was installed as Regent to rule on his behalf until he came of age. As you can tell from her name, Mary was a Latin Christian from the Crusader states, and was in fact the first Latin Christian to rule the Byzantine Empire. The citizens of Constantinople had been disquietened by Emperor Manuel's western leanings, and now, to their great consternation, they had a Western ruler.

Their concerns were heightened when Empress Mary appointed a man confusingly named Alexius Comnenus as her adviser. This Alexius was also western, and was in fact the uncle of Queen Maria of Jerusalem. Unfortunately, he was not a terribly good adviser. He was unpopular and unwise. Together, they realized the fears of their Imperial subjects by favoring Italian merchants and making no effort whatsoever to address the concerns of the citizens of Constantinople.

In an attempt to remedy the situation, Empress Mary's step-daughter Maria plotted to murder her step-mother's adviser. However, the plot was discovered before the murder could be carried out, and Maria and her co-conspirators fled to the Church of Saint Sophia and took sanctuary there. Empress Mary then further enraged the people of Constantinople by attempting to defy the sanctity of the church. She ordered the Imperial Guards to storm the church and seize the conspirators, and the situation was only saved by the intervention of the Patriarch. For his troubles, the Empress exiled the Patriarch to a monastery, and by this stage, outrage amongst the Imperial subjects had risen to such a crescendo that the Empress realized that she had no option other than to pardon her step-daughter and her co-conspirators.

Meanwhile, the population was desperately looking for a savior, someone who could overthrow the ghastly Latins and rule their Empire like it ought to be ruled. Enter Andronicus Comnenus. Andronicus was a dashing, gallant figure who has popped up from time to time previously in the History of the Crusades Podcast. He was incredibly popular with the people. John Julius Norwich provides a superb description of him in his book "Byzantium, The Decline and Fall", and I quote "In 1182 he was already 64 years old but looked nearer 40. Over six feet tall and in magnificent physical condition, he had preserved the good looks, the intellect, the conversational charm and wit, the elegance and the sheer panache that, together with the fame of his almost legendary exploits in the bed and on the battlefield, had won him an unrivaled reputation. The list of his conquests seemed endless, and that of the scandals in which he had been involved very little shorter". End quote.

In short, Andronicus was a superstar. He was the poster-boy of his age, and he was exactly the sort of person the Byzantines believed they needed to put the Empire back on track. During this time, Andronicus was living in retirement in a castle in Pontus on the coast of the Black Sea, along with his mistress, Theodora, who, you might be interested to know was a former Queen of Jerusalem, being the widow of King Amalric's brother, King Baldwin III. When reports reached him of the growing dissatisfaction with the Empress Regent, and the peoples' desire to be ruled by someone homegrown instead of a westerner, Andronicus made the most of the opportunity. He gathered his supporters and marched on Constantinople. As he marched, he drew more supporters, and the few troops who failed to rally to his cause were easily defeated. As he drew closer and closer to Constantinople, Empress Mary found herself more and more isolated. The troops she sent to block Andronicus' passage surrendered and joined him, and eventually the Empress found herself with only a handful of Latin supporters. The people left their houses and cheered Andronicus as he made his way to the capital, and as he approached the Bosphorus, the people of Constantinople rose up against the Latin Christians in their city.

What followed was a massacre. Virtually every Latin Christian in Constantinople was killed: men, women, children, the old, and the infirm; and then the Latin Christian quarter of the city was burned to the ground. Only a handful of Italian merchants survived, escaping to their ships and sailing back to the west. Andronicus entered a city cleansed of Latins.

The young Emperor, the Empress Regent, and their immediate family, nervously awaited their fate, and they had every right to be nervous. Empress Mary's Latin adviser was imprisoned and then blinded, on Andronicus' orders. Then Andronicus set about eliminating everyone who stood between himself and the Imperial throne. Empress Mary's step-daughter Maria and her husband were first on the list. They both died mysterious deaths, most likely from poison. The thirteen year old Emperor Alexius, II was then forced to sign a death warrant for his own mother, the Empress Regent. The warrant was quickly carried out, and Empress Mary was strangled to death. In September 1183 Andronicus was crowned co-emperor, and no one was at all surprised when young Emperor Alexius II was mysteriously murdered two months later. To complete his victory, the elderly Andronicus married the young Emperor's widow, the twelve year old Princess Agnes of France.

After such a bloodthirsty start to his reign, how did Andronicus fare as Emperor? Well, he actually started off quite well. He worked tirelessly to eliminate corruption, and for the first time in ages ensured that the rich paid their fair share of taxes. He ruled the bureaucracy with a strong hand, protected the poor against exploitation, and made sure that justice was fairly administered.

But unfortunately, it wasn't to last. Andronicus' strong hand, which was initially welcomed, gradually became a fist, and over time that fist began destroying everything in sight in its paranoia and fear. In short, the savior of the Byzantine Empire gradually became a despotic monster. He started off by ordering the deaths of those whom he believed were plotting against him. Ironically, whilst weeding out corruption from the civil service, Andronicus himself became more and more corrupt. He began to see traitors everywhere. Not only were the aristocracy victims of his paranoia, but merchants and lowly workers also began to attract suspicion. Those who were arrested were often tortured to death, frequently by Andronicus himself, blinded, or executed. In letting his fears dominate him to this extent, Andronicus made them manifest. His despotic actions created unrest and revolt, and people began looking for ways to overthrow him.

While Andronicus was creating a mess for himself on the domestic front, things were also hotting up in the area of foreign affairs. Now, ruling a territory as large as the Byzantine Empire is no easy matter. Its borders stretched from Europe to the Middle East, and having already dispatched most of the people who knew the intimate workings of Byzantine foreign policy, and having deep suspicions about anyone who appeared competent or took an active interest in foreign affairs, Andronicus was forced to handle the whole thing himself. The only way to keep everything in hand was to make peace treaties with as many foreign powers as possible, and that's exactly what Andronicus set about doing. He made a treaty with the powerful Italian trading center of Venice, in which he promised to pay the city an annual indemnity. He attempted to appease the Pope by building a Catholic church in Constantinople. And, reversing a long-held Byzantine policy, he made a treaty with Saladin which in effect allowed Saladin to freely attack the Latin Christians without fear of Byzantine intervention, in return for him suppressing the Seljuk Turks in Anatolia.

But not every threat could be negotiated away. The King of Hungary, whose ambitions had been kept in check by his strong friendship with Emperor Manuel, won back territory he had recently ceded to the Empire. And in 1183 the King invaded a number of nearby Byzantine cities, including Belgrade and Nis, sacking them so completely that the members of the Third Crusade, who would pass through the cities six years later, found them desolate, abandoned, and in ruins. The island of Cyprus also declared its independence from the Byzantine Empire under the leadership of Emperor Manuel's great nephew Isaac Comnenus.

But these two events were only minor headaches for Andronicus compared to the biggest storm cloud on the foreign policy horizon. This tempest came in the form of the Empire's arch enemy, the Normans of Sicily. Apparently one of Emperor Manuel's nephews had escaped to Sicily and was urging King William II of Sicily to march to Constantinople and overthrow Andronicus. King William didn't need a lot of encouragement. He had been watching events in the Byzantine Empire carefully and knew that the tumultuous reign of Andronicus presented the best opportunity yet for Sicily to achieve its long-held aim of conquering the massive Empire.

In secret, King William gathered together a navy and army of an unprecedented size. His navy comprised around 300 ships, carrying 80,000 men, 5,000 of which were knights. The navy was placed under the command of King William's cousin, Count Tancred of Lecce, and the land army was led by Tancred's brother-in-law Count Richard of Acerra, and a man called Baldwin. Of the co-commander Baldwin very little is known, not even his full

name. Strangely, the one thing that history does record about Baldwin is the fact that he had an unusually hairy stomach.

Anyway, it's difficult to gather together such a large navy and army in total secrecy, but King William did a pretty good job. In January 1185 he ordered every port in Sicily to be closed to outgoing traffic, stranding many foreign travelers and traders. The ports remained closed for six months until the huge fleet was ready to sail.

This seemed to do the trick. When the Sicilian army departed with its hundreds of ships, on the 11th of June 1185, Andronicus was caught completely by surprise. The Sicilians first target was the Byzantine port city of Durazzo. Durazzo was the largest port on the Adriatic Sea and, importantly, was positioned at the start of the main road to Constantinople, the Via Egnatia. Unfortunately, the city's fortifications were in need of repair, and it was not adequately provisioned for a lengthy siege. As soon as he realized what was happening, Andronicus sent his most senior general, John Branas, to the city, but he arrived there only a few days before the Sicilians, and didn't have time to adequately prepare the city's defenses. Even if he had all the time in the world, John Branas knew that the city would not have been able to hold out for long against such a large invading force. Branas surrendered almost as soon as the Sicilians arrived. The Sicilians secured the strategically important port, and the army disembarked, preparing to march to Constantinople. They proceeded across the Balkan peninsula, meeting very little resistance before arriving at the city of Thessalonica.

Now, at this time, Thessalonica was the largest city in the Byzantine Empire. As a commercial center, it was nearly as important as Constantinople and its port dominated the Aegean Sea. Unlike the situation which had occurred at Durazzo, the military commander at Thessalonica, David Comnenus, had plenty of time to organize his city's defenses. But for reasons only known to himself, he utterly failed to do so. Whether he realized that it would be futile to hold out against such a large invading army, whether he decided that he preferred to be ruled by the Sicilians than Andronicus, or whether plain incompetence was to blame, we'll never know. What we do know is that only a few days into the siege of the city, the Thessalonians ran out of arrows and soon after realized that all the rocks for the catapults seemed to have gone as well. To make matters worse, their water cisterns were in a state of disrepair and had begun to leak.

The city held out for as long as it was able, which in the end wasn't long at all. On the 24th of August 1185, its eastern defenses began to fail, and German mercenaries who were meant to be manning the eastern gates were bribed to open them. The Sicilians poured into the city from two sides, then proceeded to massacre the residents. Estimates at the number of civilian deaths range from 5,000 to 7,000 people. With a timeline stretching back to antiquity, this was one of the darkest days in Thessalonica's history. Baldwin of the hairy stomach struggled to control the 80,000 rampaging Sicilian soldiers, but control them he eventually did.

Thessalonica was not equipped to handle an unexpected influx of 80,000 hungry and thirsty men. Few cities would be, and a few days later an epidemic broke out, caused by the rapid decay of corpses of the massacre victims in the August heat, and the consumption of new wine, which was unwisely opened before its time when the current vintage had all been consumed. Thankfully for the remaining citizens of Thessalonica, the army pressed on. Leaving behind a small garrison, the army left Thessalonica and marched onwards towards Constantinople.

By this time, Andronicus had finally organized the defense of the Empire. In his paranoid state, he didn't want to risk placing the vast Imperial army under the control of one man. Instead, he divided the Imperial forces into five separate armies, under five different commanders, and sent them into the field. Now the combined army may have been a match for the 80,000 strong Sicilian force, but the five small armies, well, they didn't stand a chance, and they knew it. The five armies retreated to the hills to the north of the road, and did little more than watch, mesmerized, as the massive Sicilian army marched past unimpeded on their way to the Imperial capital. But then something happened which changed everything, and that event was the murder of Andronicus.

Back in Constantinople Andronicus had reached new heights of unpopularity. The people of the capital, quite rightly, were in a panic about the invading army marching their way. Andronicus did take some defensive measures. He ordered the walls to be checked and strengthened, but his paranoia was reaching a crescendo. The last straw for the long-suffering people of the Imperial capital came in September 1185, when Andronicus ordered that all the prisoners being held in the capital be executed, along with their entire families, on the absolutely astonishing charge of conspiring with the Sicilians. A revolution broke out, sparked by the escape from prison of the Emperor's cousin Isaac Angelos, an inoffensive and forgettable nobleman who was originally imprisoned when a soothsayer named him as successor to the throne. Isaac Angelos fled from prison to the sanctuary of the Church of Saint Sophia, and appealed for aid.

It was the spark needed to ignite the dissatisfaction of the people. A crowd gathered and the people rose up. Breaking open the prisons and arming themselves with whatever they could, they shook off the rule of Andronicus and proclaimed Isaac Angelos the new Emperor.

At this time Andronicus was at his country estate. He returned to the capital, confident that he could reassert control. However, when he ordered his bodyguards to fire on an angry mob of citizens, they refused to obey. Finally, the penny dropped. Andronicus realized that the throne was no longer his and that his life was in danger. He disguised himself as a peasant and fled the city.

The angry crowds burst into the Imperial Palace and ransacked it. A mind-boggling amount of treasure and items of historical value were removed and lost to history. I think it's worth quoting John Julius Norwich again here, and I quote "1200 pounds of gold bullion alone, and 3000 of silver, were carried off, and jewels and works of art without number. Not even the Imperial chapel was spared. Icons were stripped from the walls, chalices snatched from the altar. Even the most venerable treasure of all, the reliquary containing the letter written by Jesus Christ in his own hand to King Abgar of Edessa disappeared, never to be seen again". End quote.

Andronicus was captured and brought back to the capital. He was paraded around the city on a scrawny camel, to face the hatred and fury of his subjects. Eventually he was dragged from the camel, tortured, and after enduring an unspeakable amount of physical punishment, he died.

Isaac Angelos, the new Emperor, immediately turned his attention to the invading Sicilian army, which was now only 200 miles from Constantinople. He did what Andronicus ought to have done in the first place. He chose the Emperor's most able general and placed the

entire Byzantine army under his command. United, instead of in five separate parts, the army attacked the overconfident Sicilians and defeated them, driving them back to one of their main camps.

Winter was approaching and it looked to the Sicilians that they wouldn't be able to easily take Constantinople after all. Demoralized by their defeat, the Sicilians signed a peace treaty with Emperor Isaac Angelos. Despite this successful start to his position as Emperor, Isaac Angelos was largely ineffectual as a ruler.

At the start of this episode the Byzantine Empire was a world superpower. The end of the episode finds it a shadow of its former self, a power fast in decline, with little influence on world politics. And, of course, the decline of Byzantium was to have major ramifications for the Latin Christian presence in the Holy Land.

Join me next week as we revert back to events in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, where tensions between the Latin Christians and Saladin are on the rise. Until next week, bye for now.

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