

History of the Crusades.
Episode 57
The Third Crusade V.

Hello again. Last week we saw the recently released King Guy come up with a crazy plan to take a small army and attack the fortified city of Acre. This week, we will see how his plan played out, as we continue our look at the military campaign known as the Siege of Acre.

Right, well as we heard last week, King Guy and his few thousand strong army arrived in Acre on the 28th of August 1189, and set up camp on a hill outside the city known as Mount Thoron. Now, we heard last week that there were a couple of problems facing King Guy at this stage. To start with, he didn't have enough men to effectively attack Acre, and even if he did manage to storm the city, his army would be outnumbered by the Muslims inside the city and would most likely be defeated. Then there was the fact that the only Latin Christian fighters available in the vicinity, at the city of Tyre, were hostile to his cause. And finally there was the very real likelihood that Saladin would move in with his massive army and King Guy's forces will be crushed between Saladin's forces approaching from the inland and the Muslim forces inside Acre.

Yet this didn't seem to faze Guy. Three days after he arrived outside Acre, with support from the Italian ships whose men had disembarked and had made camp on a beach near the city, King Guy launched his attack. King Guy hadn't bought any catapults or siege engines with him, so the only way to attack the city was to place ladders against the city walls, climb them, and attempt to fight their way in. Unsurprisingly, this didn't work. Neither did his attempt to properly besiege the city, as he didn't have enough men to effectively encircle the walls. Again, this didn't seem to concern the perpetually optimistic King Guy. Instead of retreating before Saladin's forces arrived, which would have been the most sensible course to take, King Guy settled in to await reinforcements.

Now, at this stage, King Guy seems confident that reinforcements from Europe will arrive at any moment, and that they will flock to his side and not fall in with Conrad of Montferrat in Tyre. Unfortunately, despite my best efforts, I haven't been able to ascertain why he was so sure about this. To date, all Latin Christian fighters arriving from Europe have headed to Tyre. Did King Guy have allies inside Tyre who would inform new arrivals that the King of Jerusalem was outside Acre, and that they should leave Tyre and go to his aid? Or was he somehow able to get word to the ships before they docked at Tyre? Certainly Conrad of Montferrat will be doing his level best to ensure that any reinforcements from Europe stayed with him in Tyre. But perhaps the newly arrived knights and foot soldiers would hear rumors in Tyre of the events at Acre and, itching for a fight, they might just have decided to head to Acre to see for themselves what was going on.

However it happened, King Guy was right to be confident. Less than two weeks later, a fleet of 50 ships arrived from Scandinavia carrying 12,000 men and some much needed horses. By the end of September, King Guy's small army will be bolstered by forces from Denmark, Germany, Flanders, and England. A significant contingent of northern Frenchmen will also arrive, led by the experienced military commander James of Avesnes.

What is Saladin doing as these arrivals begin to make their way to Acre from Europe? Well, uncharacteristically, he is dithering. Clearly, as soon as King Guy arrived at Acre,

Saladin ought to have mobilized his forces and attacked the Latin Christian besiegers, before reinforcements arrived. But, possibly confused by the unlikely move King Guy had just made, and concerned that it may be a trap, he spent vital days continuing to negotiate for the surrender of Castle Beaufort. When he finally did decide to move to Acre, he did so in a measured and cautious way. He wrote to commanders across the territory he had conquered, urging them to send troops to Acre. Then he decided he should proceed to Acre himself. Leaving a contingent of men behind to wrap up the surrender of Beaufort, he set out for Acre. But instead of marching down the coast directly to the city, he took the long way around, heading inland as far south as the Sea of Galilee before turning west and eventually making his way to Acre.

When he reached the city in early September, reinforcements were already beginning to arrive to bolster the Latin Christian forces. Despite this, Saladin at this stage had a slight numerical advantage. With his slightly bigger army, clearly Saladin ought to have surrounded the Latin Christian besiegers, and met them head-on in battle. However, he didn't do this. Again opting for a cautious approach, he followed King Guy's example and found a convenient hill about six miles to the southeast of Acre, from which he could make camp and observe the goings on across the plain of Acre and in the city under siege. There he decided to dig in and wait for the reinforcements he had requested to arrive.

Now, this would have been a prudent move in an ordinary siege situation. King Guy's army was besieging the Muslims who were inside the city of Acre, and now Saladin's forces had blocked King Guy's lines of retreat and supply, by setting up camp and effectively besieging the besiegers. But Saladin had ignored one crucial factor. This wasn't a siege of an inland city. While the Muslim troops may have been able to besiege the besiegers on land, King Guy was still able to get supplies and reinforcements from the sea.

And not long after Saladin set up camp, those supplies and reinforcements began flooding in. Muslim commentators at the time described seeing an almost constant line of ships coming in towards Acre, and said that there were so many Latin Christian ships anchored along the coastline surrounding the city that their masts resembled tangled thickets. In response to Muslim unease at this sight, Saladin is said to have started a rumor that a portion of the ships would lift anchor at night and sail away from Acre under the cover of darkness, to return in daylight under the guise of being new arrivals. If this was meant to fool the Muslims into believing that the same ships were arriving and leaving in a constant circle, it wouldn't have worked for long. It was pretty clear that the number of ships moored outside Acre was growing and growing and growing. And still Saladin didn't make his move. Some commentators have speculated that he was waiting for the Franks to take the initiative and attack, but most likely he was just being cautious and waiting for the rest of his army to arrive.

By this time, minor skirmishes were breaking out between individual Muslims and Latin Christians, but nothing really of note occurred until mid-September. By this time, the bulk of the Muslim forces had arrived, and Saladin decided to launch an attack on the Latin Christians to coincide with Friday prayers on the 14th of September. Whether the Franj had managed to get wind of this plan, or whether it was pure coincidence, on the 13th of September, the day before the planned Muslim attack, the Latin Christian Army moved from its camp on Mount Thoron and formed a rough semi-circle around the land-based side of Acre. The following day Saladin moved his camp, making a loose semi-circle around the Latin Christian semi-circle.

Then he gave orders to attack. The Latin Christian forces had been bolstered by the new arrivals, and they dug in and stood firm. Saladin's army was unable to break through, so they waited until the next day and tried again. At midday, there was a breakthrough. Saladin's nephew, Taqi ad-Din, led a charge against the right wing of the Latin Christian semi-circle and was successful. The Latin Christian line broke and the men holding that part of the semi-circle scattered and fled, allowing Taqi ad-Din to move in with his men and occupy the area. This meant, of course, that the Muslims finally had access to their besieged counterparts inside Acre. They were able to establish communications, and a camel load of supplies was escorted into the city via St Anthony's Gate. Saladin himself entered Acre and would have stood on the battlements, observing the massed armies of the Muslims and the Latin Christians stretched out across the plain below the city.

Now, if Saladin had returned to battle for the rest of that day and pressed his advantage, it's quite possible that he could have scored a decisive victory. But he didn't. In his book "Arab Historians of the Crusades", Francesco Gabrieli observes the following, and I quote "If the Muslims had kept up the attack until nightfall, they would have gained their objective, for it is the first attack that is the most terrifying. But having gained this success, they wanted to rest and stop fighting. They said 'We will attack them tomorrow morning and exterminate them'". End of quote. I think this shows the extent to which Saladin was having trouble controlling his army. The Muslim forces were tired, and as we have discussed previously, many of them were resenting the relentless demands made by their Kurdish commander. So they rested and delayed their next assault until the following day.

The Latin Christians took full advantage of the delay. They worked tirelessly, digging ditches and doing their best to fortify their semi-circle against further attacks. Seeing all this activity, the Muslims decided not to attack after all, but to wait for the Franj to attack them. Two weeks later, the Latin Christians did exactly that. By this time, their Latin Christian army had been bolstered by many new arrivals. So many, in fact, that the Muslims claimed their army now included 100,000 men, although this was clearly an exaggeration and the actual size was probably more like 30,000 men.

By this time, many high profile Christians had joined the army, including some, luckily for King Guy, who knew what they were doing. One high profile new arrival was Conrad of Montferrat. Yes, Conrad had been persuaded that all the action was now happening at Acre, so he left Tyre to join the army, on the proviso that he didn't have to serve directly under King Guy.

The Latin Christian army continued fortifying their positions, and on the 3rd of October 1189 they took the fight to the Muslims, attacking the area now controlled by Taqi ad-Din. Taqi responded by doing a watered-down version of the feigned retreat. He initially advanced towards the Latin Christian attackers, then stopped quite still, not exactly retreating, but not advancing either. Unfortunately, this ploy fooled not only the Latin Christians but also Saladin himself. The maneuver was designed to draw the Latin Christians in, but Saladin thought that Taqi's right wing must be weakening, so he sent a contingent of men from his forces, who were fighting in the center of the semi-circle, over to help him. This, of course, weakened the Muslim center. The Latin Christians, seeing this, took full advantage and concentrated their attack on the Muslim center, which broke and scattered. A contingent of Latin Christians, then slashed their way through the Muslim lines, making it nearly as far as Saladin's personal tent, before retreating, concerned that they may be cut off and isolated from the rest of the Latin Christian forces

The Muslims regrouped and rallied around their left wing, which had not been broken. They launched a counterattack and managed to encircle a large group of Franks who were fighting on the left wing. These men were all knights, including a large contingent of Templar knights, as the foot soldiers had not yet caught up with this part of the battle. The knights who were not killed were taken prisoner. One, the Grand Master of the Templars, Gerard of Ridefort, who had been captured at the Battle of Hattin and later ransomed, was executed. One Muslim source reported that three of the knights who were captured were later found to be women, who had been fighting disguised as men. But that's not mentioned in any other sources and may well be a later embellishment.

Now, at this stage of the battle, Saladin wants to rally his army and press his advantage against the Franks, but unfortunately for him, it's at this part of the day that utter chaos breaks out. Earlier, when the Franj had pushed forward as far as Saladin's tent, the Muslim staff and slaves had been ordered to gather the important possessions from the camp and load them onto pack horses, in case the day was lost and they needed to flee. Well now, apparently some more enterprising individuals had decided to take the pack horses and flee with their masters' possessions, regardless of the outcome. Rumors of this reached Saladin's soldiers, and many of them immediately raced back to their tents to check on their hordes of booty and, if they found them, gone, mounted up and left the battlefield to track down the thieving servants and retrieve their possessions.

Similar scenes were happening in the Latin Christian ranks. A small group of German knights were pillaging near Saladin's tent when one of them lost control of their horse. The horse galloped off, and the other knights gave chase. Nearby Latin Christian fighters thought that this was part of a retreat, panicked, and retreated as well. Then others saw them, and also retreated, until the whole battlefield was full of panicked, confused men who were running this way and that, not really knowing at all what was going on. At this stage it was late in the day, and it was clear that the commanders on both sides of the battle had lost control of the situation. So the first major battle of the Siege of Acre just kind of fizzled out.

While it was by no means a decisive victory, the day went to the Muslims. They suffered fewer losses than the estimated 7,000 Latin Christians who had been killed, and had managed to hold up against the attacking Latin Christian contingent. To punish the Franj, they pitched thousands of corpses into the river from which the Latin Christians were obtaining their drinking water.

So the situation at Acre in early October 1189 was as follows. The Muslim garrison inside Acre were besieged. Surrounding the city, in an enormous semi-circle which stretched from one side of the peninsula to the other, were the Latin Christians. Surrounding them, in a loose semi-circle, were the Muslims. It was pretty clear to everyone, after this first battle, that the Siege of Acre wasn't going to be wrapping up anytime soon, so everyone dug in and prepared for a long stay.

Now, when I mean they were preparing for a long stay, the Latin Christians set up a mini city in their semi-circle, complete with streets, marketplaces, tradesmen, and everything a city usually needs. They planted crops. A group of enterprising German knights constructed a horse-powered mill, from which grains could be ground and then bread made. The semi-circle city contained tens of thousands of Latin Christian residents, a number that was constantly increasing with the arrival of fresh ships. The only thing that the Latin Christian semi-circle city at Acre lacked was an adequate drainage and plumbing

system. Tens of thousands of people produce quite a bit of waste, and their failure to adequately deal with this waste from the outset was going to have ramifications later.

The Muslims also settled in for a long wait. They too established a marketplace and cook-houses, and there were even reports that they constructed 1,000 baths, which were built by digging out bath-sized holes in the ground and lining them with clay, which then set and dried hard in the sun. Hot water could be then poured in, and the Muslim soldiers could have a relaxing bath after a hard day's work at the Siege of Acre.

But no one should get too comfortable. Storm clouds are on the horizon. The French and English armies are still a long way off, but Conrad is plotting to replace King Guy as the monarch of Jerusalem, and Saladin is about to receive some bad news, in the form of the massive German Crusading army, which he learns has just crossed into Anatolia. Join me next week as we continue our look at the Siege of Acre. Until next week, bye for now.

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