

History of the Crusades.
Episode 58
The Third Crusade VI.

Hello again. Last week we saw the first battle in the military campaign known as the Siege of Acre. While the Muslims won the day on the battlefield, it was not a decisive victory, and neither side was able to force the other from the field. Both sides have now settled in for a long campaign.

The week following the battle of October 1189 was a bad one for Saladin. He became ill, and the Muslim army was ordered to move their camp further away from the Latin Christian semi-circle, perhaps as a precaution against disease. While he was recovering from his illness he received the news he had been dreading. His spies confirmed that Emperor Frederick Barbarossa was on his way with a massive army. Saladin was told it contained upwards of 200,000 men. We, of course, know that Saladin has nothing to worry about. We know that Barbarossa will drown before reaching the Holy Land, and his Crusade will only result in a few thousand men reaching Acre, but Saladin doesn't know this. The news for him is a worst-case scenario.

The Muslims inside the city of Acre are besieged by tens of thousands of Franks, whose numbers are growing daily with the arrival of new ships. Saladin is, in turn, partly besieging the Latin Christians. He doesn't have enough men to surround them entirely, but he has set up camp in a loose semi-circle some distance away, leaving quite a large patch of no-man's-land between the two camps. An army of 200,000 German Christians would be sufficient to besiege the Muslims, who would be crushed against the new arrivals and the besieging Latin Christians. It was time to call for reinforcements. The Egyptian navy was already on its way, and Saladin now writes to his vassals in Egypt and across Syria, requesting that any man who could be spared be sent to Acre.

Back in the Latin Christian camp, the army is digging in. As we discussed last week, the large semi-circle they have formed around Acre resembles a small temporary city, and the most experienced European knights in Acre, James of Avesnes and the Landgrave of Thuringia, take charge of the camp defenses. An enormous trench is dug all around the outside of the semi-circle, complemented by an equally impressive rampart constructed out of the soil excavated from the trench. In addition, men are put to work out in no-man's-land, digging pits into which spikes were placed, after which the whole contraption was cleverly concealed. This was designed to slow down any Muslim cavalry charge.

But the siege of Acre wasn't just about the land battlements. It was also about the sea. To date, the Latin Christians had dominated the sea port of Acre, and their ships had been able to block supplies to the besieged Muslims inside the city of Acre. But by the end of October 1189 things started to change. A fleet of ships arrived from Egypt, and 50 of them were able to break through the Latin Christian blockade, entering the harbor and bringing much-needed food, equipment, and weaponry to their fellow Muslims.

A couple of months later an even bigger Egyptian fleet arrived. This was a game changer so far as the naval situation was concerned. The Muslim and the Latin Christian fleets were now a match for each other. This meant that for Saladin's forces, communications could be maintained with the Muslims inside Acre, and they could be relieved of men when

required. It also meant that Latin Christian supply ships had to fight their way through the Muslim fleet to get to shore, with the result that the food and equipment coming by sea to the Latin Christian besiegers was much reduced.

And that was unfortunate because winter was coming. It's never much fun spending winter in a tent, and it's even less fun when that tent is surrounded by thousands of other tents in a large, muddy semi-circle. The winter was a largely miserable one for the Latin Christians. The recently excavated defenses turned into a quagmire, and the reduced food supplies meant that for much of the time they were hungry.

Still, life went on. In the lull in fighting that winter tends to bring, various forms of entertainment were rolled out for the benefit of the bored, restless, and hungry fighters. A variety of performances including singing, music, and dancing were put on display, and there are some recorded instances of men from the Muslim camp being invited to watch, and in some cases participate in, the singing and dancing. Perhaps less surprisingly, children from both camps apparently started playing together, staging mock battles and engaging in other similar activities.

As winter turned to spring and spring to summer, the issue of the lack of adequate drainage and adequate water within the Latin Christian camp became a problem. As the weather warmed, diseases began to spread and the unsanitary conditions weren't helped by the constant stream of new fighters arriving at the camp. Having battled their way through Saladin's naval blockade to reach Acre, their presence was welcomed, but it placed an even greater strain on the camp's infrastructure.

As the weather warmed, the frosty relationship between King Guy and Conrad of Montferrat also began to thaw. They ended up coming to an agreement. Conrad could hold on to the city of Tyre if he agreed to recognize King Guy as his monarch and overlord. As a sign of his good faith, Conrad sailed back to Tyre in March 1190, and returned at the head of a fleet of well-stocked ships containing food and military supplies. Saladin's ships sailed out of the harbor at Acre and made a desperate attempt to prevent Conrad's ships from reaching the Latin Christian camp. Despite employing the dreaded Greek fire, the Muslim ships were unable to prevail, and Conrad's ships fought their way through.

Among the many supplies which were welcomed into the camp were all the materials needed to make siege engines. The Latin Christians were put to work building three mighty wooden towers, with which they hoped to be able to storm the city. The towers were very impressive. Around 90 feet tall, they were divided into five separate floors, each of which could hold a number of attackers. Unfortunately for the Latin Christians, their attempt to force their way into Acre using the siege towers was ultimately unsuccessful. Despite the fact that the towers were protected with skins soaked in vinegar, every single one of them was set on fire as it approached the walls, due to the Muslims' inventive use of Greek fire.

Now, during the main fighting season in 1190, from April until September, Saladin's approach was mainly a defensive one. At the beginning of the season, his focus was not on Acre at all, but on stopping, or at least delaying, the approach of the massive German Crusading army. He dispatched large numbers of men northwards to attack the Germans as they made their way towards Acre. He must have been relieved when the castle of Beaufort finally fell into his hands in July, which freed up a number of men. But really other than a couple of feeble attacks, he was unable to stage any major assault on the Latin

Christian camp at Acre. Their camp defenses by now were formidable, and the Muslim force was depleted by men being sent off to attack Barbarossa's approaching Crusaders.

During the summer, things were dire for the Muslims inside the besieged city of Acre. For a period of around six months the Latin Christians had the upper hand in the sea battle surrounding the city, and Muslim ships were unable to approach Acre's harbor. A couple of ships, disguised as Christian vessels with their sailors dressed in clothes imitating that of Christian soldiers, made their way through the blockade, and an intrepid Muslim swimmer named Isa, who was skilled at swimming and diving for long distances at night, made daily visits to the city, until he drowned, but otherwise the city's inhabitants endured many months without fresh supplies. While Saladin nervously awaited the arrival of the massive German army, Frankish reinforcements continually flowed into the Latin Christian camp.

By far the most distinguished of these was Henri of Blois, the Count of Champagne. Henri arrived in August 1190, along with around 10,000 men and some high-born French knights. Henri of Champagne had a very impressive bloodline. His mother was Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter from her marriage to the French King, which made him nephew to both the King of England and the King of France. The arrival of such a distinguished personage was a major event, and Henri was treated as a representative of the European Kings. James of Avesnes and the Landgrave of Thuringia handed over command to him, and Henri took control of the siege of Acre, pending the arrival of the Kings of England and France.

By this time, rumors started circulating of an event which was to send shock-waves of disappointment through the Latin Christian camp, and waves of relief through the Muslim camp. Word was spreading that Emperor Frederick Barbarossa had died, and that his Crusade had foundered. And of course, we know that those rumors were true. In October, 1190 young Frederick of Swabia arrived in Acre with the remnants of his father's German Crusaders. Young Frederick was eager to launch an attack on the Muslims in Acre, although his exhausted German soldiers may not have been quite so keen. Henri Count of Champagne had been busy directing the building of some impressive catapult machines. Young Frederick managed to scrounge a battering ram from somewhere, and together they launched an assault on the city, but Acre's formidable defenses held firm and the attack was unsuccessful.

Now, while the German Crusade was ultimately unsuccessful, it did have one redeeming feature: the fact of its approach alone had a significant impact on Saladin's military strategies. With a rumored 200,000 German crusaders approaching his army from the rear, Saladin was understandably distracted from events at Acre, and had to divert significant resources from the field at Acre to face the German threat. The approach of the German army meant that the entire summer season of fighting in the year 1190 was reactive, with Saladin expending as few resources as possible in Acre, just enough to defend his forces against attacks by the Franj. Had he been able to concentrate his efforts solely on Acre without the distraction of the German Crusade, he may well have been able to launch a major assault to break the Latin Christian stranglehold on the city. But that wasn't to be.

By the time the German threat was over, it was October 1190, and winter was coming. It was too late in the season to launch a major campaign and both armies dug in as the weather cooled. It is going to be a cruel winter for both armies. Food supplies will be

reduced to a trickle, famine will set in, and disease will rage. Over the winter, thousands will die, among them the visiting Archbishop of Canterbury and young Frederick of Swabia.

But the most significant deaths occurred before winter had even set in. In the autumn of 1190 the only two children of King Guy and Queen Sibylla died, followed a few days later by Queen Sibylla herself. Now this event was a devastating blow to King Guy on two fronts. Firstly, on a personal level, he is devastated by the death of his wife. Despite their faults, the royal couple were clearly devoted to each other, and the death of his Queen, during a military campaign of his own devising, must have been a terrible blow for Guy.

Secondly, on a political level, this could be a knockout punch. To say that King Guy was an unpopular monarch is, of course, an understatement. Putting aside his alleged water fairy ancestor, he has no bloodlines of any distinction, he wasn't raised to be a King, and he possesses absolutely none of the skills that a monarch requires. All of this may have been overlooked had he been a successful and popular King, but his reign was nothing short of disastrous. The one and only factor which enabled him to be accepted as King, the linchpin that held his tenuous reign together, was his marriage to Queen Sibylla and the fact that their children were legitimate heirs to the throne. Now they were gone. The linchpin was removed and everything was about to fall apart.

With the death of King Guy's children, along with the death of Queen Sibylla, which ensured that Guy couldn't sire any more high-born babies, the next person in line for the throne was Isabella, Sibylla's half-sister and wife of Humphrey of Toron. Isabella's mother, Maria Comnina, was married to Guy's longstanding opponent Balian of Ibelin, and Balian, together with the ambitious Conrad of Montferrat, devised a cunning plan: Conrad would marry Isabella and then replace Guy as King of Jerusalem.

It was pretty obvious from the outset that there were a couple of problems with this plan. Firstly, Isabella and Conrad were both currently married to other people. Conrad apparently had two wives. He had an Italian wife in Europe, but during the years he spent in Constantinople, his Italian wife had been conveniently forgotten, and he had married one Theodora Angelos. He had abandoned both wives and had no idea whether either wife was still alive. Of course, if either wife was alive, then this was going to prove an obstacle to him marrying Isabella.

The other obstacle was, of course, the fact that Isabella herself was married quite happily to Humphrey of Toron. Humphrey and Conrad were polar opposites. Where Humphrey was quiet, scholarly and gentle, Conrad was brash, arrogant and violent. Conrad was a born fighter and leader of men. Humphrey liked nothing more than to be left alone with a book and his young and pretty wife. Conrad liked nothing more than to be out on a battlefield, wielding a sword and cutting down anyone who stood in his way. Isabella and Humphrey had been married when they were both very young. Isabella had been eight years old when they were betrothed and only 11 years old when they were married. Despite this, their marriage had been a happy one, and Isabella was dead against abandoning her sweet, gentle Humphrey for the crass, oafish Conrad.

But her personal wishes didn't count for much, and Isabella was either convinced to become Conrad's wife, or more likely was forced to do so. The Papal Legate in the camp at Acre, the Archbishop of Pisa, allegedly in exchange for trading concessions for his region back home, declared Isabella's marriage to Humphrey null and void, and then presided over a ceremony marrying the unfortunate Isabella to the smugly pleased

Conrad. The newly married couple then left Acre and traveled back to Conrad's stronghold at Tyre.

As for King Guy, well he's not ready to throw in the towel just yet. He does actually have some supporters. The aging Archbishop of Jerusalem Heraclius, is still firmly in his corner, and interestingly, so is Baldwin, the visiting Archbishop of Canterbury. Baldwin has threatened to excommunicate anyone involved in the marriage of Conrad and Isabella, but he dies before he can carry out any of his threats. His support, however, does signal that the English monarchy may be inclined to support King Guy over Conrad of Montferrat.

Now, I mentioned previously that the winter, which is just starting to set in as Conrad and Isabella traveled to Tyre, is going to be a rough one for everyone at Acre. Having already lost their Queen and her children to disease in the autumn, the situation at Acre grew increasingly desperate as the weather cooled. Supply ships were not getting through, and Italian merchants, who controlled what little food there was in the camp, charged exorbitant prices. A silver coin would only get you one egg or thirteen beans, and a sack of corn was selling for 100 gold pieces, which was a staggering amount of money. As a result, most of the Latin Christians simply could not afford to buy food. Horses were killed and eaten, and once they were gone, many soldiers were forced to eat grass or native plants. The hungry and weakened Latin Christians readily succumbed to disease. We've already mentioned that Barbarossa's son Frederick of Swabia died during the winter, and even the military commander of the siege, the dashing Henri of Champagne, sickened. For a couple of weeks Henri's life was in the balance, but luckily, he slowly recovered his health.

It's difficult to convey just how horrible life was in the Latin Christian camp that winter. Starvation, foul weather, and disease all conspired against the Crusaders, and thousands of them died. There were rumors that some soldiers resorted to cannibalism in an effort to stay alive.

Things weren't much better in Saladin's camp. He had released most of his army for the winter, and those lucky men were able to see out the winter season in their homes. For the men who were left, however, conditions were miserable. Like the Latin Christians, they experienced shortages of food and weapons, and as the weather worsened there weren't enough doctors to deal with the increasing cases of illness. It's safe to say that everyone was happy to see the back of that winter.

At the start of spring in March 1191, a fully-laden grain ship was finally able to offload its cargo at Acre, and as the weather improved other supply ships followed. The ships not only brought food to the Latin Christians at Acre, they brought news of the outside world. The most important piece of news to arrive at Acre was that the Kings of England and France were on their way. Join me next week as King Richard of England and King Philip of France arrive in the Holy Land. Until next week, bye for now.

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