

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 60  
The Third Crusade VIII.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Philip of France and King Richard of England finally arrive in the Holy Land. King Richard arrived in Acre to much fanfare on the 8th of June 1191, while King Philip had come some six weeks earlier, landing at Acre on the 20th of April.

When King Philip arrived, he was accompanied by only six ships, which must have been a disappointment to those who believed that the arrival of the Kings would turn the tide of the war. However, the ships were well stocked, and King Philip assured the Latin Christians that more ships were on their way. King Philip and his men disembarked and immediately made themselves useful, using the equipment on board the ships to assemble no less than seven giant catapult machines, and working to reduce the effectiveness of the formidable defenses surrounding the city of Acre.

Now, Muslim sources tell of an interesting event happening not long after King Philip arrived at Acre. Apparently King Philip was inspecting the defenses around the city, accompanied by his favorite falcon. The hunting bird was pure white and of a much larger breed than those found in the Middle East. The magnificent bird took off as King Philip was doing his rounds and flew up to the city, landing on one of its walls. Attempts to call it back failed, and the bird was captured by the Muslims and presented to Saladin as a gift. King Philip was devastated by its loss and offered to pay the enormous sum of 1,000 gold pieces for its return. However, Saladin took a liking to the bird and decided to keep it. The Muslims took the capture of the white falcon to be an omen. However, the event doesn't appear in any of the Latin Christian chronicles and may have been a later embellishment.

Anyway, the newly arrived French troops busied themselves constructing their siege engines and catapult machines, and they were proud of the end result. So proud, in fact, that they gave their favorite machines names. The biggest and most impressive catapult machine was called "Evil Neighbor". Evil Neighbor was installed in a prominent location and immediately began a ceaseless bombardment of the city's defenses. Not to be outdone, the Muslim defenders moved their biggest catapult machine so that it was opposite Evil Neighbor. The Muslims called their catapult machine "Evil Kinsman". So Evil Neighbor and Evil Kinsman began hurling boulders at each other, which resulted in frequent repairs being needed to fix the Evil machines, when its counterpart scored a direct hit. The Franks named another one of their catapult machines "God's Own Sling", and they named another contraption "The Cat". The Cat was a covered galley on wheels, to which there was attached, from what I can gather, a scaling ladder. The Cat would creep up to the walls on its wheels, then dig its claws, in the shape of the ladder, into the walls, allowing the men inside the contraption to scale the walls.

In addition to these and other, unnamed, siege engines, the French oversaw other operations designed to weaken the Muslim defenses. They concentrated their efforts on filling in the sections of the city's dry moat, which would enable them to gain access to the walls more easily. Finding things to throw into the moat proved tricky, so the Franks resorted to filling them with the corpses of horses and people.

As quickly as the French filled the moats, the Muslim defenders worked to clear them. Apparently the Muslim defenders inside the city were split into three groups. By far the best group to be in was the one working on the general defense of the city. The other two groups weren't so nice. One group went down into the dry moat and chopped the corpses into manageable pieces. The pieces were then thrown to the members of the remaining group, whose job it was to carry the remains to the sea and throw them in. Bad jobs, really bad.

Anyway, with all these preparations either underway or completed, the French launched a major assault on Acre on the 30th of May, and you would have to say the attack was pretty successful, and on two occasions at least, where the walls near the Cursed Tower were breached, it looked like succeeding. But the Muslim defenders stood firm, plugging breaches as soon as they occurred, and doing their best to shore up the defenses whilst also attacking the Latin Christians and their newly constructed siege engines. Strangely, just when victory seemed possible, the French attack faltered and then stopped. The English chroniclers write that the French became tired and couldn't continue, and that their commanders weren't really up to the job of actually taking the city. The French chroniclers write that the French could easily have taken the city, but since King Richard hadn't yet sailed to Acre, they decided it would be polite to stand down and await his arrival, so that the victory could be a joint one.

Whichever version you prefer, the result was the same. To the disbelief and huge relief of the Muslims, the French attack stopped and everyone had a bit of a rest and caught up on a few games of dice, while they waited for the English to sail over the horizon. They didn't have long to wait.

Just over a week later, on the 8th of June 1191, King Richard arrived in Acre. Whereas King Philip had arrived with a little fuss and only six ships, King Richard made a grand entrance with heaps of fuss and 25 fully-laden ships. Bonfires were lit on the beaches around Acre to celebrate his arrival, and the entire Crusader camp launched into party mode to welcome the English King and his fresh troops and supplies. King Richard decided to set up camp to the north of the city, with King Philip already occupying a position to the east. He went straight to work, ordering the construction of siege engines and sending an envoy to Saladin to request a meeting. King Richard was keen to meet Saladin in person, but this sentiment wasn't shared by Saladin. He sent back a diplomatic response rejecting Richard's offer to meet, saying that they could meet in the future if a truce was signed.

However, before the English attack could get underway, disaster struck. Only days after arriving in the Holy Land, King Richard became ill with the disease that the Crusaders called "arnaldia". King Philip and countless others in the camp had also been struck down by this illness. Symptoms included hair- and nail-loss, and it may have been a type of scurvy. King Philip had a mild dose of the infection, although there were reports that for the rest of his life, which was another 30 or so years, he suffered symptoms of the disease.

While King Philip had a mild dose, King Richard became seriously ill and nearly died. He was confined to his bed, his teeth and nails began to loosen, and his hair fell out in clumps. Not only was he physically ill, the fact that he had been struck down with the illness only days after arriving in Acre was also rather embarrassing. Instead of cutting a fine figure and directing the Latin Christians to victory, King Richard was lying in his tent, moaning, with his hair falling out. More disturbingly, illness back in the Middle Ages was

generally viewed as a sign of divine displeasure, and the last thing a King wanted upon his arrival in the Holy Land was a sign that God wasn't happy.

But despite this serious setback to the start of his campaign to win back the Holy Land for Christianity, King Richard bounced back. He was attended to by the finest physicians available, and he slowly recovered, either due to the work of the physicians or more likely despite of it. He was carried out on a litter to the walls of the city, where he oversaw the building and placement of his siege engines, and eventually he was able to resume the full responsibilities associated with his command.

Now, pretty much from this time onwards, there was tension between King Philip and King Richard, and this really wasn't surprising. Their relationship back in Europe had been quite turbulent, and there were quite a few pressure points added to the mix in the Holy Land, which ensured that the relations between the two men weren't about to improve. Firstly, King Philip was still smarting from King Richard's rejection of his sister Alice, and the fact that King Richard was now married to someone else and had brought his new wife with him just rubbed salt into the wounds.

Also, it didn't help that Richard was throwing money around like there was no tomorrow. Flushed with funds from his defeat of Cyprus, he learned that King Philip was paying his troops three gold pieces a month, so he immediately offered four gold pieces a month to anyone who served in his army. To top it all off, King Richard was a born showman, and with his arrival at Acre, King Philip seemed to just fade into the background. One English chronicler wrote, and I quote, "When Richard came, the King of the French was extinguished and made nameless, even as the moon loses its light at sunrise" end of quote.

King Richard started out on Crusade with an elaborate sword, and he told everyone that it was the sword known as Excalibur, from the days of King Arthur. He traded the sword for some ships at Sicily, but he kept the other props that helped make him a legend in his own lifetime: a highly ornate and glittering saddle; his beautiful and highly-strung horse, which was probably the medieval equivalent of a Ferrari or other high-end sports car; and various richly decorated bits of apparel which were designed to dazzle and impress those around him.

Finally, of course, the two Kings had backed two different contenders for the throne of Jerusalem, so conflict and tension between the two monarchs was pretty much guaranteed.

With the arrival of King Richard's forces, there were around 25,000 active Latin Christian combatants in the field around Acre. All these men were put to good use. There were already a number of catapult machines at Acre, pummeling the city walls with endless rounds of projectiles, but King Richard ordered more to be built. One Muslim source estimates that at one stage there were 300 catapult machines employed at Acre. While this may well be an exaggeration, it's pretty clear that there were a lot of catapults.

In fact, Thomas Asbridge, in his excellent book "The Crusades", postulates that the type of catapult machine used at Acre marked a shift in the practice of siege warfare. The machines that were built at Acre were larger, sturdier, and more accurate than anything that had preceded them. They could throw bigger rocks, they could throw them further, and with greater accuracy. King Richard had brought with him some granite boulders from

Sicily, and these were a lot harder and more lethal than the local soft limestone, which the French and local Latin Christians had been using. There were enough men to man the catapult machines around the clock, and the walls of Acre were subjected to an almost ceaseless bombardment.

But the catapult machines were just one part of the Latin Christian arsenal. Great towers were constructed, covered with skins soaked in vinegar to defend them against attacks of Greek fire. From these towers, Latin Christian archers could fire at defenders on the walls. Other Latin Christians were employed undermining the walls. King Richard made undermining and deconstructing the Cursed Tower a priority, and made it known that he would pay up to four gold pieces for every brick removed from the tower. With this equating to a month's pay for every stone removed from the tower, it's not surprising that it was quickly dismantled.

Anyone not employed in attacking the city put themselves to work, shoring up the defenses around the Latin Christian camp. Over time, the ditches and ramparts around the camp were strengthened and perfected, making the Latin Christian semi-circle almost impregnable.

All this doesn't sound good for Saladin's forces, and it wasn't. The defenders inside Acre were hungry and exhausted. Latin Christian ships had once again blockaded Acre's harbor, and no supplies were getting through. The garrison inside Acre were on their own. With many of them suffering serious sleep deprivation, they endured a constant battering of their walls from the catapult machines and worked ceaselessly to counter any breaches in the walls caused by the Latin Christian under-miners or the projectiles from the catapults. Saladin received reinforcements in the form of troops from Egypt and Syria, but there was little he could do but watch on in dismay, and attempt to divert the Latin Christians by attacking their camp whenever a breakthrough occurred in their assault on the city walls. Getting any men into Acre to relieve the defenders was impossible, as was the thought of an all-out attack on the Latin Christian camp. There were simply too many Latin Christians now, and their camp was too well defended. Saladin knew the seriousness of the situation he was in, and it hit him hard. He stopped eating, had difficulty sleeping, and began exhibiting the symptoms of depression.

For the remainder of June and for the first couple of weeks of July, the fighting went something like this. The Latin Christians bombarded the city walls with projectiles and worked to undermine them. When a breach occurred, the Muslim defenders would rush in to fill the breach, while Saladin would direct an attack on the Latin Christian camp, to try and draw the Frankish forces away from the walls. After the Muslims in Acre repaired the breach, Saladin's forces would retreat and the bombardment would start again.

To give you some idea of the challenges the Muslim garrison inside Acre faced at this time, here is a rundown of the action which took place at Acre on the 2nd of July, courtesy of James Reston Junior from his book "Warriors of God".

As the sun rose on the 2nd of July, it gave every indication of being a hot and sunny day. Shortly after daybreak, a small fleet of English ships arrived, bringing fighters from Normandy and England who were eager to join in the action at Acre. They didn't have long to wait. During the morning, Saladin's nephew Taqi ad-Din led a foray into the outer parts of the Latin Christian camp. The Muslims attempted to build a bridge over one of the Latin

Christian defensive ditches and the Latin Christian defenders were employed to drive them off.

Meanwhile, sappers from King Philip's army were making progress undermining the Cursed Tower. They were deep underground, tunneling their way forward, with the massive wall above them, held up only by beams of wood carefully placed inside the tunnel. They dug a little further forward and were shocked to emerge into a Muslim tunnel. The Muslim tunnel had been dug by the Muslim counter-tunnellers, and hand-to-hand fighting now took place between the two forces, in the semi darkness, in the claustrophobic confines of the tunnels. The Muslims managed to drive the Latin Christian under-miners back, although both forces were unnerved when a portion of the wall of the Cursed Tower above them collapsed, sending a thunderous boom through the tunnels below and shaking the timber posts which were preventing the tunnels from collapsing on the men.

King Richard was watching all the action from a litter which had been carried to the north gate. He was still too weak from his illness to walk, but despite his hair loss, his weakness, and his sore gums, he was still able to direct his men and even managed to fire off a few crossbow arrows, apparently hitting and killing a couple of Muslims manning the walls. He, too, had sappers working underground to undermine one of the city's gates. He had also ordered a ram be used to try and force a hole through one of the weaker points in the wall, and of course the many catapult machines he had ordered to be constructed were busy lobbing their missiles of granite boulders into the walls. Sometimes the bodies of horses or cows would be loaded into the catapult machines and be lobbed over the walls, and the Muslim defenders would have to work to dispose of them before their rotting corpses caused disease to spread.

Later in the day, Richard's sappers succeeded in undermining the gate they had been working on. The Latin Christians moved out of their tunnels, and twigs, wood, and anything even vaguely flammable was placed in the tunnels. After it was set alight, the fire burned through the supporting timber beams, and the gate and the wall around it collapsed. The Muslims, however, were quick to fill the breach, working tirelessly to reconstruct their defenses out of the ruin.

It's not really surprising that, a few days into July, the Muslim garrison decided they couldn't continue much longer. They were hungry and were absolutely exhausted. It's unclear exactly how many Muslims were active in defending Acre at this stage, but it's unlikely to be more than 7,000; 7,000 hungry and tired men against 25,000 well-armed, well-equipped, and well-fed Latin Christians. It was pretty clear to everyone that Acre couldn't hold out much longer.

On the 4th of July, the Muslim commanders inside Acre sent envoys into the Latin Christian camp asking for terms of peace. Their offer to surrender on this occasion was refused by Richard, although Richard did send his ambassadors to Saladin's camp to inquire about what terms he was willing to offer. Saladin was devastated to hear that the Muslims inside Acre were ready to surrender. At this stage, communications between Saladin and the Muslim garrison inside Acre were severely restricted, and only the odd brave swimmer was able to carry a message by undertaking a long and dangerous swim around the defensive sea walls under the cover of darkness.

Saladin ordered Acre not to surrender, and assured the garrison that help would be coming soon. He planned a massive, all-out assault on the Latin Christian camp for the 5th of July, but his men refused to take part. Eventually, his commanders convinced him that such an attack would be suicidal and would merely result in the loss of much of the Muslim army, so the plan was abandoned.

On the 7th of July, a swimmer brought Saladin the message that the garrison simply could not hold out any longer. Another grueling day of battle took place on the 11th of July, and the following day an envoy from the city met with the Latin Christians to discuss terms of surrender. This time, their offer was accepted.

Acre was to be surrendered, with its contents, its ships, and its military stores intact. 200,000 gold pieces were to be paid to the Latin Christians, with an extra 400 going to Conrad of Montferrat. The 1,500 Latin Christian prisoners being held by the Muslims were to be set free, and the True Cross returned. A message was sent to Saladin to advise him that a deal had been reached. Saladin was horrified and reportedly was in the middle of writing to the garrison, forbidding them to surrender, when he noticed Christian banners being raised over the city walls. He was too late. The deal had been finalized and Acre had fallen to the Latin Christians.

Join me next week as we take a look at what happened in the aftermath of the Siege of Acre. Until next week, bye for now.

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