

History of the Crusades.
Episode 63
The Third Crusade XI.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Richard and the members of the Third Crusade arrived safely at Jaffa, after successfully beating Saladin's army in the Battle of Arsuf.

Now, once he's in Jaffa, King Richard has a decision to make. It's quite an important decision. With momentum clearly on his side, he has to decide where to go next. There are two options available, Jerusalem and Ascalon. Jerusalem is only forty miles away, and at the moment is poorly fortified. Trouble is, Jerusalem is inland, and this is a problem. King Richard has been relying on naval support for his supplies, and clearly he won't be able to do this if he marches inland towards Jerusalem. And then there's Ascalon, a major port town to the south. With Ascalon still in Muslim hands, Jaffa would be at risk of attack if the Crusaders marched inland to Jerusalem. Strategically, then King Richard's next move should be to march further south and take Ascalon, but with Jerusalem, the city which is the focus of the Crusade being so close, Richard knows that he will have trouble convincing his army to ignore the Holy City for the moment, and instead concentrate on a port town that none of the European crusaders have ever heard of.

Back in the Muslim camp, Saladin is pondering the same question. To say that things haven't been going Saladin's way recently is an understatement. He had already lost Acre, and now Richards forces have managed to take Jaffa. Saladin was depressed, anxious, and was not eating properly, but he knew that it was vital that he think ahead and try to counter Richard's next move. Saladin needed to ask himself, what would he do in Richard's position? Saladin, for all his mistakes of recent times, was a brilliant military strategist, and he knew exactly what he would do if he were Richard. He would waste no time at all in the port of Jaffa, but would immediately march southwards and attack Ascalon.

Ascalon was the best naval port in the Holy Land, and at the moment was the linchpin holding Saladin's two empires, Egypt and Syria, together. Everyone knew how vital Ascalon was as a military and naval base, and as a result, it had changed hands a number of times during the Crusades. It was captured originally by the Latin Christians during the First Crusade in 1100, but was re-taken by the Muslims. The Latin Christians regained it in 1154, only to lose it again to Saladin in 1187.

If Saladin were Richard, he would immediately move to capture Ascalon intact, and then use the city as a base for attacking Egypt. With Egypt safely in Latin Christian hands, King Richard could then slowly win back the Holy Land, including the city of Jerusalem. This clearly was a nightmare scenario for Saladin, and there was only one sure way he could prevent this from happening. He was going to have to destroy Ascalon.

Now I should just emphasize here that Saladin wasn't relying on any actual evidence that Richard was going to attack Ascalon, then move south towards Egypt. None at all. But the mere chance that this was a possibility was enough to spark Saladin into action.

Ascalon was a city revered by the Muslims. It contained a 400 year old mosque, called the Mosque of Omar, and outside the city was the Valley of the Ant, which was mentioned in the Koran. It was a well-fortified place, surrounded by a double wall dotted with 53 towers,

and it was renowned for its silkworms, olive and sycamore trees, and its beautiful marble plaza, which played host to a vibrant market. It was also a place that many Muslims called home. Saladin's popularity amongst his fellow Muslims was on the wane, and now he was going to make himself considerably more unpopular by destroying a city that they all loved. Saladin himself is said to have stated, and I quote "I would rather lose all my children than cast down a single stone from its walls" end quote.

But four days after his defeat at the Battle of Arsuf, leaving a small force with his son al-Malak al-Afdal to keep an eye on Richard at Jaffa, he marched his army southwards towards Ascalon. Once outside the city he set up camp, and set about informing the unfortunate inhabitants that their city was about to be dismantled. Men were angry, women and children wept, but in the end there was nothing they could do to change Saladin's mind. They sold what goods they could at fire-sale prices, loaded whatever they could onto carts and pack animals, and set out towards Syria or Egypt to find themselves a new home.

Then the destruction began. It was difficult work. The walls were ancient, strong, and well built. Dismantling them was a challenging task for the already tired and battle-weary soldiers. There was one tower in particular, the Hospitallers Tower, which was especially resistant to their efforts to destroy it. In the end, the Muslims filled it with logs and set them alight. The fire burned for two full days, until eventually the mortar was weakened to the degree required to make it vulnerable to the pick-axes of the soldiers.

It was while Saladin was in Ascalon that his son sent him a message. King Richard had requested a meeting. He wanted to open peace negotiations.

Saladin would have been relieved to know that attacking Ascalon and then moving south to invade Egypt wasn't a realistic option for Richard at this stage. In fact, despite the victory of Acre and at the Battle of Arsuf, Richard was having some problems. Actually, everywhere he looked, things were just plain difficult. Conrad of Montferrat had not accompanied the army southwards from Acre, but had instead elected to remain behind in Tyre with Isabella. Perhaps envious of the military successes that Richard and King Guy were experiencing, rumors reached Richard that Conrad had initiated negotiations with Saladin, and was clearly up to something. Worrying reports were also reaching Richard that the Knights Templar weren't doing a very good job of administering Cyprus, and Richard was concerned that he would need to intervene to prevent the island rising up against its Latin Christian occupiers. To add to his woes, King Richard was concerned about his lands back home, now that King Philip had left the Crusade.

But all these problems paled into insignificance compared to the main problem he was facing, and that problem was the nature of his army. King Richard was accustomed to being in charge of a small force back in France, made up of his own men, men he knew and trusted, and men who would obey his every command. But this Crusader army was a different beast entirely. Firstly, it was made up of men from different nationalities, some of them comprising people who, ordinarily, Richard wouldn't have trusted at all. The French forces loyal to King Philip had stayed behind after their King gave up his Crusading vows and headed back home. Back in Europe, they were King Richard's traditional enemies, yet here, in the Holy Land, they were under his command. How loyal they would be to Richard remained to be seen. Really, loyalty and a willingness to obey commands was an issue for the entire Crusading army. This wasn't an ordinary army. This was a group of men from

diverse backgrounds who had made an oath to retake Jerusalem. All they wanted to do was march inland, retake Jerusalem, celebrate in style, and then return home to Europe.

And this was the crux of the problem. King Richard had a sound grasp of military strategy. He had heard rumors that Saladin was destroying Ascalon, and he sent King Guy's brother Geoffrey, to investigate. Geoffrey had sailed south and had been shocked by what he saw. Smoke was rising above the city. Muslim soldiers were everywhere, attacking the walls and pulling down the defenses, while citizens were fleeing with whatever they could carry. Richard must have realized that he needed to mobilize his army quickly, march south, and seize Ascalon before it was destroyed entirely. Trouble was, his army and many of its commanders disagreed. They had come a long way and endured unspeakable hardship to take Jerusalem, and there was no way that they were going to march right past the Holy City and attack something else. It was Jerusalem or nothing.

King Richard should have been able to convince them that to take Jerusalem without first taking Ascalon would be absolute folly. The Crusading army was relatively small. If it marched inland towards Jerusalem, then Saladin, using Ascalon as a base, could pretty easily cut them off from the coast, and the coast, with its fleets of supply ships and its links to Jaffa, Acre, and Tyre, was essential for both supplies and communications. Should the Crusading force be isolated inland it would not last long.

There was also the problem of holding Jerusalem in the event that the Latin Christians managed to conquer it. King Richard knew that the majority of his soldiers would consider the retaking of Jerusalem as "mission accomplished", and would waste no time in heading back home to Europe. How then would he defend the city from further attacks by Saladin's forces? It was really all just one big headache for King Richard.

And things really weren't helped by the behavior of the army in Jaffa. Gone was the disciplined fighting force which made its way down the coast in perfect formation. Instead, the men had reverted back to party mode. Taking full advantage of the abundance of food and wine in Jaffa, they had managed to get the ladies from Acre to sail down the coast and join them in Jaffa, and were celebrating their recent victory in style: gambling, drinking, and whoring like there was no tomorrow. A bunch of them had returned to Acre and King Guy was ordered to go find them and bring them back. When King Guy returned empty-handed, King Richard himself was forced to make the journey. He rounded up with the drunken rabble and personally herded them back down the coast.

Things really weren't going at all how Richard would have wished. So instead of making a decision and mobilizing the Crusaders, in a move that smacked of desperation, King Richard requested that he meet with Saladin to negotiate a peace treaty. It had only been a couple of months since Richard had ordered the execution of the Muslim prisoners outside Acre, and Saladin was in no mood to meet with Richard personally, so he sent in his place his brother al-Adil.

Now, everyone loved al-Adil. To Saladin, he was his brother and loyal military commander. To the Crusaders, he was the go-to man for peace negotiations, and during the time they had spent negotiating with him on previous occasions, they had established a friendly rapport with him.

Perhaps it was because they were on such friendly terms; perhaps it was the fact that Richard wanted a distraction while he decided on his next move; perhaps it was the hot

weather. Whatever the reason, the peace negotiations can only be described by one word. They were bizarre.

To start with, everyone knew how the negotiations were going to pan out. They were going to go along the same lines as the negotiations that took place last month, just prior to the Battle of Arsuf. Richard would ask for Jerusalem and for the Muslims to withdraw from the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Al-Adil would refuse, and that would be that.

However, there were a couple of extra factors at play now that would affect the nature of the negotiations. Firstly, it was absolutely crucial from Saladin's point of view that al-Adil draw out the negotiations for as long as possible. Saladin was unaware of the problems that Richard was facing. To Saladin's mind, Richard was clearly in a commanding position, and it was just a matter of time before he mobilized his army and continued on his victorious way. Saladin needed as much time as possible to both destroy Ascalon and shore up the defenses around Jerusalem, before Richard made his next move.

That brings us to the second factor. Richard just didn't know what to do next. Should he march inland towards Jerusalem or head down the coast to Ascalon? No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't make a decision. So Richard was probably hoping that something concrete would come out of the peace negotiations, something that would help him decide what to do next.

The peace negotiations formally commenced in late October, and Richard opened them with the offer that everyone was expecting. Using the disturbingly (to the Muslims at least) clean-shaven Humphrey of Toron as interpreter, Richard asked for Jerusalem, for the return of the True Cross, and for the entire region west of the River Jordan. Al-Adil was expecting this opening gambit, and he didn't storm out in disgust like he did the last time Richard commenced with such a proposal. Instead, he smiled politely, offered Richard some gifts, threw a banquet, and sent a messenger to Saladin with the proposal.

Saladin's response was predictable. He said no. He wanted the negotiations to continue. So he explained that Jerusalem was also sacred to Islam, and that he was therefore unwilling to give it up. He also explained that the territory demanded by Richard was, to Muslim eyes, not Christian territory at all, but was Muslim land which had only recently been occupied by the Crusaders. As for the True Cross, Saladin stated that he was aware of its importance to Christianity and therefore he would only trade it for something of equal value to Islam.

So the ball was back in Richard's court. On October the 20th, only a couple of days after Saladin rejected his original offer, Richard put a fresh proposal to al-Adil. It's safe to say that this offer was unexpected. The offer was this. Richard proposed that al-Adil marry Richard's sister Joanna, the former Queen of Sicily. They would live together in Jerusalem. Richard would give Joanna all the coastal areas conquered by the Latin Christians, and Saladin would cede the rest of the coast to al-Adil. The True Cross would be returned to the Church, and Christians would be guaranteed full access to Jerusalem. Prisoners on both sides would be released, and the Templars and Hospitallers would be given back their properties in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Once this peace treaty was concluded, Richard undertook to return to Europe, leaving his sister to rule Jerusalem and its surrounds with her new Muslim husband.

Now, this offer by Richard has confounded historians over the years, and it's likely that it was received with equal astonishment at the time it was made. Some historians believe that Richard's offer was a genuine bid to sow discord between al-Adil and Saladin, and others believe that Richard was just having a laugh with his buddy al-Adil, whom he called his brother and friend. Unfortunately, history doesn't record out al-Adil's reaction to the proposal, so we don't know whether he fell about laughing or whether he stroked his beard with a faraway look in his eyes, imagining himself married to the beautiful Joanna while he ruled Jerusalem. Fortunately, history does record Saladin's reaction. Al-Adil sent a messenger to Saladin outlying the proposal, and apparently Saladin thought it was hilarious. Convinced that Richard meant it as a joke, he decided to call Richard's bluff and agree to the proposal. The messenger was so shocked that he asked Saladin three separate times to confirm his agreement, and then, once he was convinced that the answer was actually yes, the messenger took the response back to al-Adil.

So there we have it. Peace in the Middle East. Richard has made a peace offer, Saladin has accepted it, so now all we need for the decades long conflict between Islam and the Latin Christians to cease is for Richard's sister Joanna to agree to marry a Muslim and stay behind in Jerusalem while everyone else returns to Europe.

Easy? I don't think so.

Now, at this time, we're really not sure how Richard sees the negotiations. Some historians believe that, like Saladin, Richard was having a bit of fun and never meant the offer to be taken seriously. Others believe that he may well have been serious and that the bizarre peace offer was the product of a desperate mind trying and failing to come up with a military strategy to win back Jerusalem and the former Christian Kingdom.

Either way, Joanna wasn't in on the joke. By all reports, Joanna was a beautiful, pleasant and competent woman who rarely lost her temper. However, on the rare occasions when she did lose her temper, she became downright scary. When Richard told her that the war had ended, everything was great, and that all she had to do was marry al-Adil and live in Jerusalem, she lost her temper. In an outburst of volcanic proportions, she told Richard in no uncertain terms that there was absolutely no way she was going to marry al-Adil and stay in the Holy Land, and that was that. King or no king, no brother of hers was going to make her do this.

So, now things have become a touch awkward. Richard was going to have to go back to al-Adil and somehow explain that his sister had defied the orders of her brother, the King, and had refused to even consider marrying al-Adil. To cushion the blow and to make the rejection a little less personal, Richard told al-Adil that, while Joanna thought very highly of al-Adil himself, her religion forbade her to marry a Muslim. So, Richard may have asked, raising an eyebrow, would al-Adil consider converting to Christianity? Stephen Runciman put it nicely when he stated that al-Adil, and I quote "politely refused the honor", end of quote. And just to show that there were no bad feelings, al-Adil invited Richard to a sumptuous banquet, at the conclusion of which both Richard and al-Adil exchanged gifts, and all was well.

So we're back to where we started. The days at Jaffa have turned into weeks and the weeks are turning into months, but Richard can't decide what to do with his army: take Ascalon or Jerusalem. The question had no doubt led to many a sleepless night.

Meanwhile, at the same time as Richard and al-Adil were enjoying their conclusion-of-wacky-peace-negotiations banquet, Saladin was entertaining Reynald of Sidon, who had been sent by Conrad of Montferrat from Tyre. Ever since King Phillip of France had departed, Conrad had felt rather anxious about his position in the scheme of things, a feeling not helped by Richard's military conquests. It was time for Conrad to play his hand. Join me next week as we see how this pans out for Conrad, and we see Richard finally move his army out from Jaffa. Until next week, bye for now.

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