

History of the Crusades.
Episode 7.
The First Crusade III.

Hello again. Firstly, before we start this week's episode I'd like to apologize to all the iTunes listeners who had trouble downloading Episode 6. My daughter uploaded the episode successfully to our host site and our website after school last Friday, but then a glitch occurred while iTunes was accessing the episode from the host site. By the time you are listening to this I hope the glitch has been fixed, and apologies to all those who experienced a delay in getting the episode from iTunes, or who received it twice. I'm crossing my fingers that this doesn't happen again.

Right. By the end of last week's episode, the leaders of the Crusading armies had sworn oaths of allegiance to the Emperor Alexius, promising to hand back any conquered cities or territory formerly belonging to the Byzantine Empire, while in return Alexius promised to assist the Crusaders by providing them with supplies and advice. Alexius was able to provide a lot of useful information about the enemy they would be facing. As we discovered back in Episode 2, the Islamic states at this time were deeply divided between the Sunni and the Shia sects. The Sunni sect had its power-base in Baghdad and controlled territory across Iran, Iraq, Syria and Asia Minor. The Shia sect revolved around Cairo and ruled Egypt. They were constantly battling each other for supremacy, and the extent of their division was such that it was considered more likely for the Shia Muslims to join with the Crusaders against the Sunni, than for both the Sunni and Shia sects to unite against the Christian invaders.

The Muslim states had been ethnically comprised of Arab and Persian people, but in the mid-1000's a game-changer occurred. Nomadic Turkoman tribesmen from the Russian steppes converted to Sunni Islam and overran the entire region from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean. These Seljuk Turks, with their long braided hair, were formidable warriors. Lightly armored and mounted on swift, agile ponies, they were skilled archers using a composite bow. They could let fly a swarm of arrows from horseback while their pony darted around the enemy. They had two main battle tactics, and Alexius was able to advise the Crusaders about them.

The first was encirclement. Using vast numbers of mounted warriors travelling at speed, the Turks on their zippy little ponies would surround an opposing army, then release a hail of arrows. They also carried a light sword, spear, or dagger with which they could finish the job. The second tactic was feigned retreat, in which a section of the Turkish cavalry would break away and flee as if in retreat, enticing the enemy to follow. This would break the formation of the opposing army, enabling a counter attack by the Turks. They had also begun picking up the fundamental principles of siege warfare, adapting their methods to the traditional practices of Arab and Persian forces.

The Seljuk Turks had enjoyed extensive military success in the Middle East, as mentioned previously. They had even defeated Byzantine forces and had conquered Anatolia. They established a sultanate in southern and western Anatolia and called it Rum, which was the name they gave to the Byzantines. It meant "Rome" or "Romans", as the Byzantines believed the territory to be the eastern part of the Roman Empire.

At the time the Crusaders are crossing the Bosphorus into Muslim territory, the Sultanate of Rum was ruled by a skilled and experienced Turkish warrior, Kilij Arslan. Similar to the situation back in Latin Christendom, where neighboring aristocrats and rulers were constantly attacking each other's castles and trying to gain territory through local skirmishes, the different families of Seljuk Turks who ruled different regions were constantly battling each other for territory. In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf writes that, when Godfrey's army crossed the Bosphorus, Kilij Arslan's forces were occupied to the east, attempting to prevent a rival Emir from seizing an Armenian city southeast of Ankara. An exhausted horseman arrived at the Sultan's tent and told Kilij Arslan that the Franj were back and had crossed the Bosphorus in greater numbers than the previous year.

Just a note here. The Crusaders tended to call the Persian and Arab people "Saracens" or "Arabs", and the Seljuk Turks simply "the Turks", while the Muslims called the Crusaders "Franks" or "the Franj", believing most of them to have come from France. There's also a complex mix of Greek- and Arab-speaking Christians living in Muslim territory at this time, from different communities, comprising mostly Greek Orthodox, Jacobite, and Maronite Christians, just to make things complicated.

Anyway, back to Kilij Arslan. He's told that an army of Frank's have just landed in his territory, but he's not concerned. He easily defeated the army of the Peasants' Crusade the year before, and he assumes this is just more of the same. Just to be on the safe side, he sends a few cavalry detachments to reinforce the garrison at his capital Nicaea, where his pregnant wife, the Sultana, is about to give birth. He decides to finish his business in the east, and then he will make his way back to deal with this new threat.

So Godfrey's army has set up camp in Kilij Arslan's territory at Pelecanum, and nothing's happening. Imagine their surprise. They have just landed the first wave of a massive army in territory which they mean to conquer, and no one's opposing them. They must have been scratching their beards and wondering what on earth was going on. Where were the famed Seljuk Turk warriors? Why weren't they defending their land?

To be fair to Kilij Arslan, if he had been aware of the actual situation, that a well-equipped, large army, intent on conquering land all the way to Jerusalem, had just landed on his doorstep, you can be sure that he would have bumped dealing with the French to the top of his list of priorities, and ridden straightaway to confront them. But the intelligence he received was that an army of Franks had arrived. He assumed it was just more of those pesky French peasants, and he could easily deal with them after he'd settled the minor territorial dispute with which he was currently occupied. So he stayed where he was.

Godfrey took full advantage of the situation. The general strategy for the Crusade had already been decided. In order to conquer and hold Jerusalem, it was agreed that a path to the city must be cleared and key towns on the route to Jerusalem must be taken. To leave these cities in the hands of the Saracens or the Turks would make communication all but impossible, would cause difficulties with supply, and would leave the armies vulnerable to counterattack.

The first main city on the road to Jerusalem which needed to be taken was Nicaea. This city had risen to importance in the latter days of the Roman Empire. The Roman Emperor Constantine the Great held the famous Council of Nicaea in the city in 325 AD. At this Council, 300 bishops from across the Roman Empire settled some issues confronting the

Catholic religion, including such matters as the nature of the Holy Trinity. These decisions shaped the religion as it is today.

The town had been re-fortified and carefully maintained under Byzantine rule. It lay on the eastern shore of a large lake surrounded by hills. The entire city was encircled by massive walls. The western wall rose straight out of the lake. The walls on the remaining three sides of the city could only be entered through heavily fortified gates. The walls were up to ten meters in height, were a total of four miles long in length, were protected by 240 towers, and surrounded by a double ditch. Interestingly, the city is now in Turkey and is called Izmit. You can plug "Izmit", "I.Z.M.I.T" into your Google Earth search box, and you can see the city as it is today. It's not a large place now, and a lot of the old fortifications have crumbled away, although a couple of the main gates are still standing.

Anyway, back in 1097, Nicaea was Kilij Arslan's capital. He had captured it from the Byzantines and it was now home to his wife, his children and his treasury.

Nicaea was not far from Constantinople, and having it in Turkish hands posed a threat to the capital. Emperor Alexius alone didn't have sufficient forces to take the heavily fortified city, but he hoped that the combined army of the Crusaders might prevail. For their part, the Crusaders could see that taking the capital would benefit their objective to conquer the Holy Land, and so everyone was in agreement. Step one was going to be "Take Nicaea".

Towards the end of April 1097, Godfrey's army prepared to strike the camp at Pelecanum, and start on the road to Nicaea. They were joined by the armies of Robert of Flanders, Hugh of Vermandois, and the southern Italian Normans, who were currently being led by Tancred as Bohemond was back in Constantinople negotiating with the Emperor. They made their way to Nicomedia, where they were joined by Peter the Hermit and some survivors of the disastrous Peasants' Crusade. Peter the Hermit. See, I told you we'd meet him again, and here he is. Peter and his peasants have spent the last six months or so languishing in Constantinople, no doubt hoping for a chance to join the main crusading force and fulfill their dreams of marching on Jerusalem.

From Nicomedia, the armies made their way to Nicaea. Still un-molested by any opposing force, they took their time. The old Roman road between Nicomedia and Nicaea, had become overgrown under Turkish rule, so a contingent of men set about clearing and widening it to provide easy access back to Constantinople. The army also had time to fashion wooden crosses to act as sign-posts on the road, for future pilgrims.

They then detoured down to Kibitos, where they visited the site where the Peasants' Crusade had met its sticky end. Piles of bones and skulls were exposed to the elements and must have been a sobering reminder of what they might be in for, if the Turks ever showed up.

The Crusading armies reached Nicaea on the 6th of May, and set up camp outside its walls. Godfrey's army camped outside the northern wall and Tancred chose the eastern wall; that left the southern wall unguarded. It was intended that Raymond would guard this wall when he arrived with his men.

At this stage, the Latin Christian forces were working alongside Byzantine troops. The Emperor Alexius had set up camp for himself at Pelecanum, which meant that he was able to keep an eye on the progress of the armies, but was also close to Constantinople if he

was needed back there. He sent one of his trusted lieutenants, a man called Manuel Boutoumites, to accompany the Crusaders, along with a small detachment of Byzantine engineers and some siege engines. A couple of weeks down the track, he would send a larger force, perhaps numbering 2,000 men, to join the siege under the command of Tatikios, who would act as the Emperor's chief representative. Tatikios must have been a memorable character. A member of the Imperial household and experienced military campaigner, he was also a eunuch. His nose had been cut off during a battle earlier in his career, and he had it replaced with a metal one. As I said, I imagine you wouldn't forget him quickly once you had met him.

The Emperor and Bohemond set about organizing lines of supply. Merchant ships were sent to Kibitos to offload corn, meat, barley, wine, and oil, and the newly-cleared road to Nicaea must have seen quite a bit of traffic. The logistics of supplying the combined army must have posed quite a challenge. Contemporary sources cited the Crusader forces at this stage as numbering up to 600,000 people, of which one hundred thousand were knights or foot-soldiers, and the rest women, children, clerics and hangers-on. But sources back in those times were prone to exaggerate the numbers, particularly if they'd just been defeated by the large army. Historians today put the figure at around 75,000 people, of which around 7500 were knights and 5000 were foot soldiers. 75,000 is still an enormous number of people to cater for, particularly in a siege situation. Sieges, by their very nature, can last quite a long time, and during this time the army has to eat. With 75,000 mouths to feed, it's no wonder that the Emperor's time was taken up trying to organize lines of supply.

Now, back to the question which must have been playing on the minds of all those present at Nicaea in early May: Where on earth were the Turks? Well, Kilij Arslan was still in the east, trying to sort out the territorial dispute with his rival. In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf reports that in early May a second messenger arrived at Kilij Arslan's tent. Just as exhausted as the first horseman, trembling with fear and fatigue, he reported that the Franj were now camped at Nicaea, and had started a siege. And unlike the army they had faced last year, this force was bigger, and included thousands of well-equipped knights.

The sultan must have realised then that he might have made a miscalculation when he had received the first message, and history has shown us that that was correct. Kilij Arslan had indeed made a blunder. Had he heeded the first warning about the arrival of a new wave of Franks, and proceeded immediately to confront them at Pelecanum, there is a chance, albeit a small one, that his cavalry might have beaten Godfrey's troops. This would have made it easier to defeat the remainder of the Crusading forces, and who knows, he might have been able to force them to retreat to Constantinople and abandon their hope of taking Jerusalem. But that didn't happen.

In fact, upon receiving the second message, the Sultan, still not wanting to cede the town he had been attacking to his rival, stayed in the east for several more days, negotiating a truce. As soon as an agreement was reached, he gathered his forces and proceeded west, with all due haste, to his capital.

Meanwhile, back in Nicaea, the leaders of the armies were trying to work out a command structure for the combined Crusading forces. Nominally, Bishop Adhemar was in charge of the Crusade, with the metal-nosed Tatikios having commander-in-chief status over the combined Crusade and Byzantine forces. But the reality was quite different. It was clear

that each of the leaders of the regional Crusader armies knew their men and their capabilities intimately, and ought to be included in the decision-making process. To that end, a Council of Princes was formed, in which the leaders could outline possible strategies, discussed the difficulties confronting the forces, and then determine the best way forward.

There were two types of strategies which could be employed in medieval siege warfare, and the Princes decided to use both of them. The first was called the close encirclement siege, and was pretty straightforward. It involved surrounding a fortified castle or city, thereby cutting off supplies and then waiting for the enemy to surrender. The disadvantage of this method was that, depending on how well stocked the city or fortification was, it might take some time to starve them into submission, and in the meanwhile the army carrying out the siege would be eating their way through their own supplies.

The second strategy was an assault siege, in which various siege machines, such as giant catapults and battering rams, could be used to try and bludgeon a hole in the defensive walls through which the army could pass, and the city be taken.

Then there was also undermining. This was a dangerous task, and here's some advice for you. In the unlikely event that you are ever involved in a siege and the commander asks for volunteers for the undermining team, do not put up your hand. The undermining team would approach the base of a defensive wall under the protection of a large shield covering the entire team. Whilst being shot at with arrows and having boiling water, hot oil, and anything else nasty which the defenders had to hand, poured down upon them, and of course, hoping that the shield would do its job and keep them safe from the barrage, the team would dig all the way under the foundations of the wall. Wooden beams would be used to prop up the foundations. The team would set fire to the beams and beat a hasty retreat. If done successfully, once the beams holding up the foundations had burned and collapsed, an entire section of the wall above would also destabilize and collapse, allowing the army to breach the wall.

All three of these tactics would be used in the siege of Nicaea. At this stage of the siege, Godfrey's army and the army of Robert of Flanders are manning the eastern wall, and are busy erecting masses of siege engines. Some have been bought from Constantinople and just need to be assembled with the help of engineers from the Byzantine forces, and others are being made from scratch. Bohemond and the southern Italian Normans are doing the same along the northern wall. This leaves only the western wall, which is in the lake and surrounded by water, and the southern wall, unguarded. Raymond, of Toulouse is on his way with his French knights and foot soldiers to man the southern wall. And, of course, don't forget that Kilij Arslan is racing towards the city, along with thousands of mounted warriors. The Emperor's envoy, Manuel Boutoumites is sent into the city to negotiate a surrender, but the negotiations fell through, so it's game-on. The siege of Nicaea begins.

The critical point of play at this stage revolves around the southern wall. If Kilij Arslan's warriors arrive while the wall is unguarded, his army could enter the city through the southern gate and mount an effective counter attack. But if Raymond's army arrives first and blocks access to the southern wall and gate, then Kilij Arslan's options are limited. So the race is on to get to the southern wall. It's a close call, but Raymond's men get there first. They're just setting up camp outside the southern wall when thousands of mounted

Turkish archers gallop down from the hills towards the city, but they soon realize they are hopelessly outnumbered.

Knights from Godfrey's army and Bohemond's army launched a cavalry attack, their huge mounts lumbering towards the Sultan's forces. Raymond and Godfrey's brother Baldwin also led their forces in attack, and Kilij Arslan, way outnumbered, realizes the situation is hopeless and flees with his cavalry to the south.

So the first battle between the combined Crusader armies and a Muslim force has been a resounding success for the Christians. But resounding success or not, most of Kilij Arslan's forces escaped to fight another day, and the city of Nicaea still hasn't surrendered.

Perhaps frustrated, the Latin Christian start behaving badly. They cut the heads off fallen Turkish warriors and display them on their saddles. They mount the heads on spears and parade them before the walls of the city, taunting the enemy. They even loaded some heads into the catapulting machines, and lobbed them over the walls into the city. Of course, none of this behavior served to change the views of the Byzantine forces, that the Latin Christians were a bunch of uncouth barbarians.

And still the city failed to surrender. Aggressive siege tactics were employed to try and breach the walls. An attempt to enter the city using giant ladders placed against the walls failed, so the Crusaders used siege engines to hurl obstacles at the walls. But this had little effect. Men from Raymond's army wasn't undermine a tower on the southern walls. They managed to bring down a small section of the tower late one evening, but the Turkish defenders worked through the night and re-fortified the tower, so by daybreak the Crusaders were back where they started. The northern French armies of Stephen of Blois and Robert of Flanders showed up, better late than never, and pitched in to help, but still the city failed to surrender.

Then someone worked out why: the city was being resupplied by water. The large lake, which lapped at the western walls, was being used as a line of supply. Turkish boats were sneaking across the lake to bring food and other essential materials into the city. No wonder it hadn't surrendered! With food and supplies coming in, they could hold out indefinitely, so long as the walls weren't breached.

The Council of Princes met to discuss the problem. The lake was much too large for its shores to be effectively patrolled, but the Council eventually came up with a plan. They approached Alexius with the ambitious proposal, and he readily agreed.

The proposal was this. The Crusaders would launch a combined land and lake assault on Nicaea, intimidating the city into surrender. There was just a small problem. They had no boats. In an exercise which must have been a logistical nightmare, Alexius arranged for a small flotilla of boats to sail for Kibitos. The boats were then beached, and teams of oxen hauled them overland to the lake. Once afloat, they were decorated with Byzantine standards, while drums and trumpets were placed on board to ensure the boats made as much of a racket as possible as they crossed the lake. A dawn attack was launched the following day, and not long after, having held out for five weeks, the city began negotiations to surrender.

The politics of the negotiations were important. While the soldiers and chief administrators in the capital were Turkish, the majority of the population were Christian. They had been under Byzantine rule previously, and they wanted to surrender to the Emperor Alexius, not to the Latin Christian Crusaders. The Emperor Alexius was keen on this plan too, but he suspected the Council of Princes would be less enthusiastic. Nicaea was the first city to fall under the might of the Crusading armies, and you could bet that the Latin Christians wanted their share of plunder, and would pillage the town ruthlessly to that end. But Alexius didn't want to welcome a ruined city back into the Imperial fold. He also had no interest in antagonizing the Seljuk Turks more than was necessary. The sultan's wife and children were within the city walls, and the Emperor wanted to ensure they came to no harm. The Turks may be his enemy, but they were also his neighbours. Having a furious bunch of armed and mounted warriors living adjacent to Imperial territory, intent on revenge, was something Alexius would rather avoid.

So he instructed Manuel Boutoumites to negotiate the city's surrender in secret. When dawn broke on the 19th of June 1097, the Crusaders were surprised to find the Emperor's standard flying over the city towers. Alexius sent Imperial troops to guard the Sultan's treasury, and the rank and file of the Crusading army were only allowed into the city in small, supervised groups. To mollify the Latin Christians, Alexius ordered gifts of food to be provided to each person. The leaders of the army were then awarded gifts of gold and other precious items as a token of Imperial gratitude. But the gift cut both ways. Tancred was requested to swear the oath of allegiance to the Emperor, which he eventually did, with some reluctance. The Sultana and her children were escorted to Constantinople, where they were received with royal honors. A message was sent to Kilij Arslan, then his wife and children were delivered to him safely, with no ransom demand.

And what of Kilij Arslan? Amin Maalouf, in "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", writes that, while ruing the loss of his capital, the Sultan didn't see it as a fatal blow. He was descended from nomadic tribesmen and his power lay in his people, not within the walls of a city. So he regrouped, gathered his army and set about planning a counterattack. We shall learn all about that counterattack next week, and I hope you'll join me then.

There's no further reading this week, but I'd like to take the opportunity to give Cary Lewincamp a bit of a plug. Cary composes and performs ambient guitar music, and kindly provided me with the theme music for this podcast. His music is relaxing and beautiful. He lives just over the hill from me, with his seven children, including three triplets. Yep, that's right, he supports seven children on an artist's income. So if you're scratching your head and wondering what on earth to give Grandpa this Christmas, head over to Cary's website at cary.com.au. That's C A R Y dot com dot A U, where you can sample his music and order a CD. His music is also available on iTunes, just plug "Cary Lewincamp" into the search box. Until next week, bye for now.

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