

History of the Crusades.
Episode 83
The Fifth Crusade II.

Hello again. Last week we saw Pope Innocent do his best to whip up support for a massive new European Crusade. Unfortunately for Pope Innocent, he died unexpectedly, before the Crusade was launched. A new Pope, Honorius III, was quickly elected, and he was more than happy to take the Crusading banner and run with it.

Pope Honorius was an elderly man who was an expert in managing ecclesiastical finances. Pope Honorius threw himself into his new role, with one of his main priorities being the arrangements for the forthcoming Crusade. A few days after his accession, he wrote to King John at Acre to tell him that a new Crusade would shortly be heading his way. While Pope Honorius might have expected King John to be jubilant about this news, he actually wasn't.

Since the death of Saladin, peace had come to the Crusader states, and with peace came prosperity. Acre was doing nicely as a centre of trade, and its warehouses were full to the brim with goods from the Middle East waiting to be shipped off to Europe. The local Latin Christians were profiting nicely from all this commerce, and fancy new dwellings were being erected by the noblemen of the trading centers as an indication of their rising wealth. But all this prosperity depended on peace, and peace would definitely be under threat if an army of battle-hungry Europeans set foot on their shore.

The new Bishop of Acre, James of Vitry, was also coming to this realization. At the end of last week's episode, we saw James of Vitry sail to Acre to take up his new role as Bishop and then begin a tour of the Kingdom of Acre, seeking support for the new Crusade. He found little such support, and sent a scathing report of his new flock back to Pope Honorius. In his report, he described the local Latin Christians in the Holy Land as being lazy, materialistic, and immoral. He found them to be despised by the native Christians, who would prefer Muslim rule if given the choice. He was also appalled by the local Latin Christian clergy, whom he described as corrupt and greedy. Only the military Orders seemed to be maintaining discipline, and they were the only Latin Christians worthy of James of Vitry's praise.

All in all, James reported to the Pope that the Latin Christians of the Crusader states had no desire for a Crusade. Did this news change Pope Honorius' mind about the need for a Crusade? No, of course not. If anything, it seemed to have spurred him into a new frenzy of activity. Deciding that the expedition needed more Kings, Pope Honorius wrote to the Kings of Europe who were yet to take the Cross, urging them to do so. Only a handful responded, among them King Andrew II of Hungary, who agreed to have a Crusading army ready by the following summer.

You might remember from last week's episode that, prior to his death, Pope Innocent had set the departure date for the Crusade as June 1217. Pope Honorius stuck to this plan, and sat back in his Papal seat, fully expecting a large army of Crusaders to set sail from across Europe in the summer of 1217. Trouble was, there was no one really coordinating the expedition. Each separate Crusading army was seemingly left to its own devices, and was expected to make its own way to the Holy Land. All the armies planned to sail to the

Middle East, but as we've seen in previous Crusades, procuring ships for such a large contingent of men would not be easy.

And that's what happened. Armies from across Europe marched to various ports across the Mediterranean on only to find that there were no ships available to transport them or only enough ships to carry part of their army. King Andrew of Hungary's forces made their way to Split in Dalmatia, along with the forces of Duke Leopold VI of Austria. Both armies arrived at Split in August, but were disappointed to discover that there weren't enough ships at the port to transport them.

Meanwhile, a massive fleet was assembling at Dartmouth in England. Ships carrying Crusaders from their home ports in Frisia, the Netherlands, and the Rhineland arrived at Dartmouth in June 1217, and the total number of ships is estimated to have been between 250 and 300, carrying tens of thousands of Crusaders. While the fleet was impressive in size, it lacked in overall command structure, and a combination of infighting between the various leaders, and some nasty storms in the Bay of Biscay, resulted in the fleet separating in Portugal. Most of the fleet elected to stay in Portugal and help the local Christians in their fight against the local Muslims. By this time, winter was setting in, and the remaining ships were forced to delay their passage to the Middle East.

Back in Split, Duke Leopold managed to procure enough ships for his army and, leaving King Andrew behind, set sail for the Holy Land in early September, arriving in Acre an impressive sixteen days later. King Andrew set sail a fortnight later, but he was only able to secure the services of two ships, so the bulk of his army was left behind in Dalmatia. Around the same time as King Andrew sailed into the harbor at Acre, the King of Cyprus, King Hugh, also arrived with a small army.

Right, so this is the current situation. Three Kings and their armies, although in King Andrew's case the army was very small, have arrived in the Kingdom of Acre, having answered the Pope's call for a Crusade. The bulk of the Crusading force, however, is still in Lisbon, and no one knows if or when they will be showing up. The harvest last season in the Middle East was poor, and King John of the Kingdom of Acre doesn't really know what to do with all these hungry, eager men who have shown up ready for a battle that King John really isn't keen on. There aren't enough men at the moment to wage a major military campaign like the retaking of Jerusalem, but it's clear that the Crusaders need something to do, so King John decides to take them on half-hearted campaign against the Damascan Muslims, which was really just a sightseeing tour of the Holy Land, flimsily disguised as a Crusade. King John led the forces at a leisurely pace across the River Jordan and did a circuit of the Sea of Galilee, being careful at all times to avoid engaging in any military activity which would result in a pitched battle with the local Ayyubid Muslims. They did make a couple of feeble and fruitless attempts at capturing a Muslim fortress on Mount Tabor, but really the expedition was more about getting the troops out of Acre and amusing them by letting them trample on the holy ground of places they had heard about from the Bible.

The Kings were also keen to procure souvenirs to take back to Europe with them, and what better souvenir to remind them of these fun and sunny days in the Holy Land than a religious relic? King Andrew was stoked to find himself the new owner of one of the water jugs used at the marriage feast at Cana, and the other leaders did the best they could to match King Andrew's success. Satisfied with their foray into Muslim territory, the armies turned round and headed back to Acre.

A band of around 500 Hungarians, apparently without King Andrew's knowledge or approval, decided they needed more action and took it upon themselves to leave the safety of Acre and cross the Lebanese mountains. By this time it was winter, and the small force was nearly annihilated when they encountered a snowstorm while crossing the mountains.

Eager to find ways to keep the restless Crusaders occupied, King John sent many of them to help the Knights Templar construct their enormous fortress, the castle of Pilgrims, while others assisted with rebuilding the fortifications at Caesarea. Not terribly keen to spend their days overseeing their laboring armies, King Andrew of Hungary and King Hugh of Cyprus decided to head to Tripoli in the neighboring County to attend the wedding of Bohemond IV, the recently ex-Prince of Antioch and current Count of Tripoli, to Hugh's half-sister Melisende. The trip was a disaster for King Hugh, who died unexpectedly, leaving his eight month old baby son Henry as heir to the throne of Cyprus. The trip was much more satisfactory for King Andrew, who was thrilled to find himself the owner of another relic, the head of Saint Stephen.

Content with his haul of relics and having no wish to hang around any longer waiting for the rest of the Crusaders to arrive from Lisbon, King Andrew decided to head back home. He gathered his troops from their various building sites and, turning a deaf ear to the pleas of the Patriarch of Jerusalem for him to stay and fulfill his Crusading vows, he marched his troops northwards through the County of Tripoli and the Principality of Antioch, apparently taking the opportunity to arrange marriages for his sons to Armenian and local Christian Princesses on the way. No doubt keen to visit what was left of the famed city of Constantinople before returning home, he requested and was granted safe passage through Seljuk Turk territory in Anatolia, and he and his troops arrived safely at Constantinople. They spent some time sightseeing and then all returned home.

So, of the three Kings who arrived in the Holy Land to answer the call to Crusade, only Leopold of Austria remained, and he was fast running out of money. He borrowed some from local noblemen, and sat back twiddling his thumbs, waiting for something to happen. A few months later, in the spring of 1218 something finally did happen. Nearly a year after they had set out from their home ports, the ships from Lisbon finally sailed into the harbor at Acre.

The arrival of a sizable army meant that a major military campaign could now be planned. Almost immediately after their arrival, the commanders of the fleet, Leopold of Austria, King John, the leading local clergy, and the heads of the military orders, all met to decide on a strategy. The outcome of the meeting was unanimous. They would not march on Jerusalem, but instead would board the huge fleets anchored at Acre and sail to Egypt. Once in Egyptian waters, they would seize the key port of Damietta at the mouth of the River Nile, then fight their way up the Nile delta, driving the Muslims out of the Nile Valley. Once the Crusaders had seized Egypt, then they could launch a two-pronged attack on Jerusalem, with troops coming at the Holy City from both Acre and from the west.

James of Vitry, who was present at the meeting, described the outcome as follows, and I quote "We planned to proceed to Egypt, which is a fertile land and the richest in the East, from which the Saracens draw their power and wealth to enable them to hold our land. And after we have captured that land, we can easily recover the whole Kingdom of Jerusalem." End quote.

Really, the decision to proceed straight to Egypt shouldn't have come as much of a surprise. Richard the Lionheart had suggested exactly that strategy during the Third Crusade, and it's likely that had the Fourth Crusade ever made it past Constantinople, they too, would have targeted the wealthy country of Egypt. Last but not least, it would have made King John happy. It meant that he wouldn't have to work out how to feed and house even more hungry, restless troops. So it was decided. The attendees at the meeting elected King John as overall leader of the Crusade, and the armies boarded the ships and set sail for Egypt, arriving on the North African coast in May 1218.

The heavily fortified city of Damietta was situated a short distance inland from the coast, on the east bank of a major branch of the River Nile. To the east of the city lay a large saltwater lake, Lake Manzala. The terrain around the city consisted mostly of lagoons, sandbars, mudflats, and marshland. Damietta itself was a busy port city, an oasis of stone and walls amongst all the sand, silt, and mud. At the time the Crusaders arrived, it was home to around 60,000 people, much smaller in size than Alexandria, which was further down the coast to the west, and Cairo, which was around 100 miles inland to the south.

Damietta was important though, not due to its size but due to the fact that it guarded one of the main points of access to Cairo. Ships wanting to travel to Egypt's main city would need to sail past Damietta on their way up-river. To prevent any unwelcome ships from accessing the great metropolis of Cairo, the Egyptians had erected an enormous chain which ran between Damietta and a fortified island in the middle of the river. The river on the other side of the island was impassable due to the buildup of silt, so the only way a ship could gain access to the river was for the chain to be lowered. For this reason, both the city of Damietta and the island to which the chain was attached, which was aptly named the Tower of Chains, were heavily fortified.

In addition to being surrounded by canals and river channels, Damietta itself was protected by three lines of walls. Anyone who managed to scale the first wall was confronted by a wide and deep moat. Once across the moat, you then faced the formidable second wall, which was protected by no less than 28 towers. In the unlikely event you managed to get across this wall unscathed, you still had to negotiate the final wall, the city's last line of defense. It's safe to say taking the city of Damietta was not going to be easy.

Fortunately for the Crusaders, it wasn't vital in a strategic sense for them to take the city at this time. Their main goal was to create an easy route to Cairo down the river, and to achieve this all they had to do was sever the chain which crossed the river. To sever the chain they didn't need to take Damietta itself, they could just take the Tower of Chains in the middle of the river and sever the chain from there.

The Crusaders set up camp on the west bank of the river, opposite the city. They settled back and tried to work out ways to attack the Tower and break the chain. They might as well make themselves comfortable in their camp, as they will be there for the entire summer. Yes, it will be three months before the Crusaders come up with an effective strategy to take the Tower. They tried everything. They bombarded the Tower with missiles from their siege engines. They tried using fire ships to burn it down, all to no avail.

Well, while the Crusaders are scratching their heads trying to work out how to take the pesky Tower, let's see what's happening in the Muslim camp. It's safe to say, at the moment al-Adil is not a happy man. He had been on friendly terms with the local Latin

Christians for many years, and right up to the last minute he hoped that peaceful relations between the Latin Christians and the Muslims would continue. Al-Adil was a touch put out when the Latin Christians went on their strange sightseeing march through his territory around the Sea of Galilee the year before, but their feeble attempts at taking Muslim positions had been easily repelled and no harm had been done. Now, however, he was hearing rumors that a large contingent of Latin Christians had sailed for Egypt, intending to attack the country. He hoped the rumors weren't true.

Al-Adil's son, al-Kamil, also hoped the rumors weren't true. Al-Kamil was the governor of Egypt and had been on excellent terms with his European trading partners, particularly the Venetians. By the year 1215, no less than 3,000 European merchants were present in Egypt, and in 1217 a new Venetian embassy had been formally received by al-Kamil. A new Crusade with Egypt as its target would put this prosperous relationship at risk.

Back in Syria, al-Adil had his hands full. His nephew al-Afdal, never having quite recovered from his being usurped by al-Adil when he, al-Afdal, had been Saladin's chosen successor, had allied himself with the Seljuk Turks, of all people, and was trying to take the city of Aleppo. Al-Afdal's younger brother al-Zahir had ruled the lands around Aleppo since the death of their father Saladin, but in 1216 al-Zahir died, leaving a child, al-Aziz, as his successor. The Seljuk Turks, with no Byzantine Empire to keep them in check, were at the height of their power, and were advancing on Aleppo with al-Afdal in tow. Hoping that Egypt could take care of itself for a while, the elderly al-Adil rode to northern Syria to address the problem.

Al-Kamil, hearing that the rumors about the new Crusade were true, headed towards the invading Crusaders. He marched the Egyptian army out of Cairo and headed northwards, making camp a few miles south of Damietta. Deciding he had too few men to attack the Latin Christians, he contented himself with reinforcing the Tower of Chains. He sent word to his father al-Adil, in northern Syria, that the Latin Christians had in fact invaded Egypt, and a weary al-Adil prepared to march to Egypt to reinforce his son's army.

On the 24th of August 1218 the Latin Christians finally took the Tower of Chains. One Oliver of Paderborn came up with the ingenious idea of building a tall structure by lashing two ships together. The structure was fitted with scaling ladders and meant that the Tower of Chains could be attacked from the river as well as the shore. Using their new device, the Crusaders managed to establish themselves on the ramparts, and, after a fierce struggle, took the Tower. The first step of their plan to invade Egypt had succeeded.

Join me next week, when St Francis of Assisi joins the Crusade. Yes, you heard me correctly. Next week, St Francis of Assisi will make an appearance in this podcast. Until next week, bye for now.

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