

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 84  
The Fifth Crusade III.

Hello again. Last week we saw the members of the Fifth Crusade arrive in Egypt. By the end of the episode, the Crusaders had managed to take the Tower of Chains, a fortification in the middle of the river outside the city of Damietta.

Having taken the Tower, the Latin Christians severed the chain that blocked the entrance to the river. The Crusaders' ships were now free to sail right up to the walls of Damietta and onwards, upstream to Cairo. If this was a setback for the Muslims, well, it was nothing compared to what happened next. A message was sent by carrier pigeon to al-Adil, advising him that the Crusaders had broken the chain and that their way to Cairo was now unimpeded. As we heard from last week's episode, al-Adil was busy in Syria, trying to prevent an uprising by his nephew and Saladin's son and heir, al-Afdal.

Al-Adil was an elderly man at this point in time. He was in his seventies. He had been suffering from ill health, and a few days after he received the bad news about Damietta, he died. Fortunately, he had made plans for his succession. Al-Kamil, his eldest son, who was the governor of Egypt, would inherit Egypt, while his youngest son, al-Mu'azzam, would inherit Syria.

The death of his father came as a massive blow to al-Kamil. He had been waiting for his father's army to arrive from Syria, and for his father to take care of the situation with the Latin Christian invaders. Al-Adil's knowledge of the Franks and their ways, and his ability to negotiate with them, was now lost. Al-Kamil was on his own. He was unsure whether his younger brother and new ruler of Syria al-Mu'azzam would be able to spare men to come to his aid, or whether succession problems, and al-Afdal in particular, would prevent him from doing so. For the moment, at least, al-Kamil was going to have to defend his new territory Egypt on his own.

Luckily for al-Kamil, he didn't have much to worry about on the invading Christian front. The Crusaders were unable to take advantage of the fact that they had broken the chain across the river, as the Nile was now in flood and was un-navigable. This meant that they had to stay put in the camp opposite Damietta, in the swamp. No one likes living in a swamp. There was mud, there was sand, there was silt, there were flies, and unpleasant biting insects, and all the while the fortified city of Damietta on the opposite bank of the river, with its thousands of residents comfortably housed inside its sturdy walls, taunted them.

It was all too much for some Crusaders. At the end of summer in the year 1218, large numbers of Frisians and Germans decided to return home. Unlike previous Crusades, returning home was a straightforward matter. Damietta was near the coast, and the Crusaders had all arrived by boat. It was just a matter of getting on board those boats and sailing back across the Mediterranean. The ease at which fighters could come and go from this Crusade will be an important factor as events progress.

While the Crusade lost a bunch of Germans and Frisians, they gained a bunch of Italians, Englishmen and Frenchmen. A large Italian army had been waiting at the port of Brindisi in Italy for almost a year, while Pope Honorius struggled to find and equip enough ships to

transport them to Egypt. Finally, at the end of summer, the Papal expedition was ready to depart.

Included in the Italian line-up was the Papal Legate, Cardinal Pelagius of St Lucia. Cardinal Pelagius was Spanish and had a reputation for being energetic and for being a sound administrator. Tact, however, was not one of his strong points. Neither was diplomacy. As the Pope's representative, Cardinal Pelagius saw himself as the leader of the Crusade, despite his obvious lack of military experience. Cardinal Pelagius and the Italian army arrived at the Crusader camp opposite Damietta in September 1218. Also arriving around this time were ships carrying some French noblemen and a contingent of French Crusaders, along with some English noblemen including the Earls of Chester, Derby and Winchester, and a contingent of English Crusaders.

The arrivals of Cardinal Pelagius provided a morale boost to the Crusaders in their uncomfortable camp in the swamp. While tensions started to appear between the confident Cardinal and the current leader of the Crusade, King John of Acre, the Cardinal was able to soothe the Crusaders with comforting words concerning the divine nature of their mission.

And that was a good thing, because the Crusaders were going to need all the soothing words they could get. If they thought living in the swamp in summer was bad, well that was a walk in the park compared to winter in the swamp. As the weather turned colder, life in the swamp became more and more miserable. Everything was constantly damp, and fresh food in particular was affected, with much of it spoiling in the wet. There was nothing harvestable growing in the swamp, and once the Crusaders' supply of fresh food ran out, diseases like scurvy started to settle in. On the night of the 29th of November 1218, a fierce storm caused the sea to wash over the swamp, and the Crusaders awoke to find their camp awash, with some reportedly even finding fish in their tents. All in all, life in the swamp was utterly miserable. To make things worse, the approaching winter was unusually severe, and the Crusaders suffered terribly from both illness and the freezing weather.

Things weren't much better downstream in the Muslim camp. The cold, miserable weather was also making life unpleasant for al-Kamil and his men. Adding to their woes was the fact that al-Kamil was desperately waiting for reinforcements from his brother in Syria, al-Mu'azzam. Al-Kamil had made a couple of attempts to attack the Christian camp, but both attacks had been repelled by the Crusaders. Al-Kamil knew that to make an effective stand against the invaders and push them out of his territory, he needed more men, and he desperately hoped that al-Mu'azzam would be able to supply him with those men. It turns out that the Crusaders weren't al-Kamil's only problem at this stage.

Back in the Christian camp, Cardinal Pelagius was doing his best to keep the Latin Christians busy. They had built rough walls around their camp in an attempt to prevent another wave of sea water rushing in from the coast. Everything to hand was used to build this protective barrier: the carcasses of horses who were drowned or succumbed to disease; torn sails; anything. Early in February, Cardinal Pelagius decided to organize a raid on the Muslim camp. The Latin Christians had set out towards the Muslim position but were driven back by a fierce rainstorm.

A few days later, the Latin Christians received some surprising news. The Muslims had abandoned their camp, and retreated. Scarcely able to believe their luck, the Crusaders

sent scouts over to investigate. They found the Muslim camp completely deserted, with piles of tents, supplies and other equipment just lying there for the taking.

The sudden abandonment of the camp had been caused by al-Kamil's domestic problems. News had reached him that conspirators in Cairo had taken advantage of his absence and were plotting to overthrow him. It was night-time when al-Kamil received this news, and he decided to act immediately. Taking only a few close advisers, he left the camp in darkness and began to make his way back to Cairo. Left to its own devices, his army was unsure what to do. In the end, the Egyptians decided to follow their leader. Taking only what they could carry, they abandoned the camp and followed al-Kamil back to the capital.

Unsurprisingly, the Crusaders made the most of this shock development. They moved over to the Muslim camp and occupied it, taking supplies and even some abandoned horses for themselves. Now unopposed and able to control both banks of the river, they surrounded Damietta. Still unwilling to attack the formidably fortified city, they at least could now prevent any supplies or reinforcements reaching the town.

While things were definitely looking up for the Latin Christians, al-Kamil was also faring better. While heading southwards back to his capital, he was met with the very welcome sight of his brother, al-Mu'azzam and his Syrian army. The conspirators, appearing to lose heart once al-Kamil was reinforced by his brother's troops, were arrested, and the ringleader sent to Castle Kerak, where he was detained, far out of harm's way. With his capital now secure, al-Kamil could once again turn his attention to the Latin Christian invaders. With his army strengthened by the presence of his brother's men, al-Kamil made his way back to Damietta and set up camp six miles downstream from his old camp, which was now a Latin Christian position.

What followed was nine months of stalemate. The Latin Christian army at this time was at its peak, containing perhaps 30,000 men. An army of this size, however, was proving insufficient, either to break Damietta's formidable defenses or to defeat the combined Egyptian and Syrian forces. If the Crusade was going to succeed in its aim of taking Cairo, it was going to need many, many more men. Young Emperor Frederick II had indicated to Cardinal Pelagius before he left Europe that he would bring the German Imperial Army to Egypt. That would certainly turn the tide in the Crusaders' favor, but as yet there was no sign of Emperor Frederick and his army.

The Muslims were in a similar position. Despite the extra assistance provided by the Syrian army, the Egyptians just didn't seem to be able to overrun either of the Crusader camps, or break their stranglehold over Damietta. Despite enjoying numerical superiority over the Crusading forces, the terrain (the marshlands, the swamps, the lagoons, and canals) made it impossible to launch an attack of the size needed to dislodge the Latin Christians. Both sides launched attacks on the other's positions, and some quite fierce battles were fought, but none were decisive. The Muslims attacked both Christian camps and were repelled, while the Christians bombarded the walls of Damietta to no effect.

As the months dragged on, al-Kamil's brother al-Mu'azzam m decided to take the drastic step of dismantling Jerusalem. Both the Egyptian and Syrian rulers knew that the retaking of Jerusalem was the ultimate aim of the Latin Christian invaders. Anticipating the day when the city itself may be overrun, or may be needed to be used as a bargaining chip to bring about peace, the Muslims decided that they would prefer to see the Christians in charge of a Jerusalem that was defenseless. To that end, they started demolishing the

defensive walls that surrounded the city. Deciding they were onto a good thing, they did the same to the formerly Christian fortresses of Galilee, Toron, Safed, and Banias. Satisfied that the Latin Christian strongholds were rendered ineffective, both the Egyptian and the Syrian leaders then appealed to the Caliph in Baghdad for assistance. The Caliph obligingly promised to send a massive army to aid them in their battles against the Latin Christians, but the promise was an empty one. The army never came.

It was into this frustrating mix of attack and counterattack, with no gains being made by either side, that St Francis of Assisi arrived. Now he wasn't actually a saint when he arrived at the Crusaders camp. He wouldn't be officially made a saint until after his death, but he was a revered and well known religious figure.

Born into a wealthy Italian family, young Francis lived the hedonistic life usual to those of his station, until he converted to his own form of Christianity, one which emphasized extreme poverty and evangelism. His horrified father tried to beat this new fad out of him, but Francis wouldn't be swayed. Abandoning his wealthy lifestyle, he lived as a beggar, wearing rags and going barefoot, preaching his message of poverty and redemption, while caring for society's outcasts: the lepers; the poor; and the disfigured. He gained a band of loyal followers, and around ten years before making his appearance at the Fifth Crusade, Francis was granted permission by Pope Innocent to found a new religious order. The Franciscan Order, or Orders, were hugely popular and became one of the principal monastic Orders of the Catholic Church. In modern times, the current Pope chose Francis as his Papal name in honor of Saint Francis of Assisi, so his legacy and influence continues to this day.

When he arrived at the Crusader camp, Francis was in his thirties and was an unassuming looking character. He was short and thin and clothed in his customary beggar's garb. Francis came to Egypt with a specific goal in mind, an idea which seemed to be gaining popularity in Europe. One of the Children's Crusades, in fact, intended to take Jerusalem for Latin Christianity not by force but by conversion. If the Muslims holding Jerusalem were converted to Christianity, well, then Jerusalem would be returned to the Church with no bloodshed or death. This was Francis's mission. He was here, not to broker peace between the warring Christians and Muslims, but to convert the Muslims to Christianity. It was an ambitious and daunting task, but Francis seemed confident that his persuasive form of preaching would do the trick.

He persuaded Cardinal Pelagius to let him approach the Muslim camp under a flag of truce, and the bewildered Egyptians allowed the small, thin beggar man to approach al-Kamil. Francis then did his level best to convert al-Kamil to Christianity. He offered to demonstrate the power of Christianity by walking through fire, but al-Kamil declined the offer. Al-Kamil listened politely to Francis' exhortations about the value of Christianity, and offered him some gifts, which Francis, unsurprisingly, given his vows of poverty, declined.

In the end, a disappointed Francis failed to make any impact whatsoever on al-Kamil or the Muslim leadership. He is not even mentioned in any of the contemporary Muslim chronicles, so his presence failed to generate even a tiny ripple within the Muslim camp. He returned to Europe with his plan to regain the Holy Land by means of conversion unfulfilled.

Meanwhile, the stalemate that was the Fifth Crusade continued. Long days spent in the swamp stretched into weeks, which in turn drifted into months. Join me next week in the

swamp, where we will see the Fifth Crusade come to its conclusion. Until next week, bye for now.

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