

History of the Crusades.
Episode 85
The Fifth Crusade IV.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Fifth Crusade grind to a halt in the swamp outside Damietta, as the military campaign reached a stalemate. The Latin Christians occupied their own camp and the former Muslim camp, and had effectively surrounded the city of Damietta, but they didn't have enough men to take the city or to defeat the Muslims and proceed upstream to Cairo. The combined Egyptian and Syrian armies had enough men to stymie any Latin Christian advance, but not enough to attack and overrun the Christian positions. So unless one of the army's was joined by reinforcements, the Latin Christians by the German Imperial forces under Emperor Frederick II, which they were hoping would arrive soon, or the Muslim army promised by the Caliph in Baghdad, then the stalemate would continue indefinitely.

Something had to give, and in September 1219 something did. The Muslims approached the Latin Christians with a proposal for peace. By this time, the stalemate had dragged on for nine months, and while al-Kamil knew that the garrison inside Damietta and the citizens of Damietta could not hold out much longer, he also knew he was powerless to rescue them. Then, in the late summer of 1219 he received some bad news. The River Nile had failed to flood adequately that year, and as a result the Egyptian harvest was poor and prices in the coming months for grain would be high. Al-Kamil decided he needed to end this invasion, and he needed to do it quickly. Having received word from his younger brother that work on dismantling the fortifications around Jerusalem was complete, he came up with a generous offer for the Latin Christians, one that he didn't think they would be able to refuse. He summoned two captive Latin Christian Crusaders into his presence and told them to take his offer to the Christian leaders.

The offer was remarkable. If the Latin Christians withdrew from Egypt, the Muslims would return the Holy City of Jerusalem to them, along with most of Palestine and Galilee. He also offered to return the True Cross. The Muslims would retain the strongholds of Kerak and Montreal in Transjordan, but would be prepared to pay an annual tribute to the Kingdom of Acre in compensation.

Unsurprisingly, King John of Acre urged immediate acceptance of the deal. He was supported by the Teutonic Knights and the noblemen of England, France and Germany. For King John, this was an offer the Latin Christians could not refuse. In one move, with no further bloodshed, not only would Jerusalem fall back into Latin Christian hands, but most of the former Kingdom of Jerusalem would be restored, leaving King John to reign over a revived and expanded Kingdom.

But Cardinal Pelagius was opposed to the deal and standing with him in the we-do-not-make-deals-with-Muslims side of the fence were some powerful players: the Knights Templar; the Knights Hospitaller; and the Venetians.

This begs the question. Why did the Papal Legate, the two most powerful military Orders, and the Venetians oppose the making of a truce which would see Jerusalem and most of the Holy Land restored to let in Christendom? Well, there are a few reasons. Firstly, while it was true that the whole point of the Crusade that they were embarking on was to retake Jerusalem, the military Orders were concerned that the resulting Latin Christian Kingdom

might not be viable from a defensive point of view. It's unclear whether the Latin Christians realized at this point that Jerusalem's defensive walls had been dismantled, leaving the city vulnerable and open to attack. What they were most concerned about were the two castles in Transjordan which would be retained by the Muslims, Kerak and Montreal. These castles had played a vital role in the defense of the former Kingdom of Jerusalem, forming a buffer between the Kingdom and Muslim territory. From al-Kamil's point of view, the castles were not negotiable. He needed them to secure his lines of supply and communication between Muslim territory in Egypt and Syria.

Secondly, the Italian members of the Crusade saw great potential in the city of Damietta as a trading center under Western control. From a purely commercial point of view, Jerusalem held no interest for them, but a trading city on the Egyptian coast downstream from Cairo, well that sounded like money in the bank, so they supported Cardinal Pelagius' bid to reject the peace offer. The final reason why Cardinal Pelagius and his supporters wished to reject the peace offer and continue with their bid to retake Egypt was that they were convinced they were going to win, and if you're going to win the war, well, there's little point in negotiating for peace, no matter how favorable the terms.

But hang on a minute. The Latin Christians have just spent nine months in a swamp, unable to take Damietta and unable to drive the Egyptian army from their position. What on earth made them so sure of victory? Well, for one thing, according to Jonathan Phillips in his book "Holy Warriors", the clergy from the Fifth Crusade had opened up communications with the local Egyptian Coptic Christians, and in mid-1219 the Copts had handed Cardinal Pelagius a copy of a prophecy written in Arabic. Once the document was translated, Cardinal Pelagius was intrigued to find out that it contained a prediction that an army from Europe, led by a tall man with a lean face, would take Damietta and conquer Egypt. A King would then come from over the mountains and conquer Damascus, while the Ethiopian Christians would destroy the Muslim Holy City of Mecca. Cardinal Pelagius was utterly convinced that he was the tall man with the lean face, and that his destiny was to fulfill the prophecy and conquer Egypt.

But how was he going to do that? The Latin Christians needed more men. Well, Cardinal Pelagius pointed out that Emperor Frederick would eventually turn up with his Imperial forces, and before then, well, maybe Prester John would come to their aid.

Who was Prester John? Well, he was a very interesting man. By far the most interesting thing about him was that he didn't actually exist. The myth of Prester John persisted for hundreds of years. Prester John was apparently the ruler of an incredibly wealthy Christian Empire. Everyone was sure this Empire existed, it was just a matter of finding it. At this point in time, the clergy were convinced that Prester John's vast Christian territory lay somewhere in Africa, and that as soon as he heard of the plight of the Crusaders he would send a massive, well-equipped army to their aid. Prester John himself was a kind of human magic porridge pot.

Given that I've said that, I'll have to explain myself. When I was young, one of my favorite stories concerned a tale about a magic porridge pot. If you tapped the porridge pot, then it would fill up with whatever you most desired. If my five year old self had tapped the magic porridge pot, then it would have filled up with marshmallows and little yellow lolly bananas, my favorite sweets at the time. If a woman with a hungry family to feed tapped the pot, it would fill up with a wholesome and filling stew. If, on a cold winter's morning you tapped the porridge pot well, it might fill up with porridge. Prester John was just like that porridge

pot. To the traders of Europe he represented an unrivaled commercial opportunity. Prester John's empire contained untold riches, all of which he would be willing to part with at very reasonable prices. To the clergy, he provided an opportunity to link up with a distant and isolated Christian community, from which other people could be reached and converted to Latin Christianity. And to the Crusaders of course, he was the provider of a massive, well-equipped Christian army.

Confirming this belief, James of Vitry, from his post as Bishop of Acre, wrote a letter in 1217 which contained the following passage and I quote "The Christians of the Orient as far away as Prester John have many Kings who, when they hear that the Crusade has arrived, will come to its aid and wage war on the Saracens." End quote.

As I stated previously, the myth of Prester John persisted for hundreds of years. He wasn't found in Africa, so people thought maybe he was in India. Or maybe he was in an undiscovered land in the Southern Ocean. Even in the 16th century, Prester John's Kingdom was in the mind of explorers who were sailing in uncharted waters. Wait a minute, I hear you ask, if Prester John was alive in 1217 wouldn't he be dead by the 16th century? Well, no, because along with roads paved with gold, Prester John's Kingdom also contained the Fountain of Youth. Duh. Eventually, after Europeans had trampled over most of the known world and the eternally youthful Prester John never appeared, the myth died out. But who knows? He might still be hidden away somewhere out there.

Right, back to the Crusades. So al-Kamil presents what seems like a very favorable offer of peace to the invading Latin Christians, who reject it, deciding that they will prevail and will conquer Egypt. So the stalemate dragged on, with the people inside the besieged city of Damietta becoming more and more desperate. At the beginning of November 1219, al-Kamil launched an offensive against the Christian positions, but despite his best efforts, his army was unable to dislodge the invaders.

Then, on the 5th of November 1219, a breakthrough. An observant Italian Crusader noticed that one of the towers in Damietta appeared to have been left undefended. The Crusaders hurriedly placed a scaling ladder on the wall next to the abandoned tower. They reached the wall without incident, and more Latin Christians climbed the ladder to join them. They then banded together and made their way down into the city.

They were confronted with an appalling scene. The streets were strewn with corpses, the starving population unable to muster the energy to bury their dead. Entering houses unopposed, the Crusaders found weak and dying citizens, sometimes lying in bed next to the decomposing body of a loved one who had succumbed to starvation caused by the stranglehold the Latin Christians had placed around the city. Tens of thousands of people had died. Despite the tragedy, the Crusaders helped themselves to large piles of gold, silver and silks. After assisting those still alive within the town, James of Vitry supervised the baptism and conversion of the Muslim children inside Damietta who had managed to stay alive.

So now the Latin Christians had taken Damietta, their first stepping stone on their watery path to Cairo. King John claimed Damietta for the Kingdom of Acre. Cardinal Pelagius opposed this, preferring to see the town fall under the jurisdiction of the Church, but he relented when King John threatened to pull his army out from the Crusade and return home. So what should the Crusaders do now? Proceed to Cairo, or wait for Emperor

Frederick and his army to show up? In fact, it will be nearly two years before the Crusaders decide on their next move.

While the months in Damietta dragged on, a letter made its way to James of Vitry. The letter stated that Prester John's grandson, a man called David, had attacked and conquered three Muslim cities in Persia. The contents of the letter were verified by a group of Crusaders in Damietta, who had been taken prisoner by al-Kamil, then dispatched to the Caliph in Baghdad. The Caliph sent them to David, who ordered them to Antioch, and from there they had made their way back to Damietta. This, of course, was explosive news. If Prester John's grandson was advancing on Muslim positions back in Persia, then surely the two Christian armies could combine and joined forces to take Cairo and Jerusalem.

The reality, though, was quite different. The military commander who had attacked and taken territory in Persia was not Christian at all. He certainly wasn't Prester John's grandson, and he wasn't called David. His name, in fact, was Genghis Khan, and he headed an army of Mongols, one of the fiercest and scariest fighting forces the world had ever seen. A few decades from now, the Mongols will have conquered a staggering amount of territory stretching from the China Sea all the way to Hungary, creating the largest empire in history. But all that is in the future.

At the moment, the Latin Christians are rubbing their hands together in glee at the news that Muslims are being attacked in Persia. News of the attacks quickly spread throughout Egypt, and the Egyptians were terrified. Ibn al-Athir, a contemporary Muslim writer, noted that the Tartars were attacking Muslim cities in Iraq, Persia, and Azerbaijan, while the Christians had taken Damietta. He stated, and I quote "All the rest of Egypt and Syria was on the point of collapse, and everyone was terrified of the invaders, and went in anticipation of disaster night and day. The population of Egypt was even ready to evacuate the country for fear of the enemy, but it was no time to escape, surrounded as they were on all sides by the enemy. If al-Kamil had allowed them, they would have abandoned the country altogether, but impeded as they were, they stood firm." End of quote.

Did the Latin Christians take advantage of the fact that the Egyptian army was terrified and on the verge of collapse? No. They waited in Damietta, while the months dragged on and on and on. Finally, in May 1221, Cardinal Pelagius decided it was time for action. King John had been absent from the Crusade for nearly a year, having left Egypt to pursue a claim to the Armenian crown following the death of King Leo II, and also to shore up his defenses in the Kingdom of Acre following some attacks on the Crusader states by al-Mu'azzam.

Some six months earlier, Frederick II had finally resolved his dispute with Pope Honorius, who had duly crowned him Emperor of Germany. The first wave of German Crusaders arrived from Bavaria in May, and Cardinal Pelagius decided it was time to press forward to Cairo. Unfortunately, Cardinal Pelagius had no experience in military command, and his total lack of knowledge and skill showed from the start. It took him two months to organize his troops, so the advance only began on the 6th of July 1221. King John rejoined the Crusade the following day, and a force of around 1200 knights, 4,000 archers, and many more foot soldiers and non combatants, prepared to press on to Cairo. Around the same number of men were left behind to guard Damietta.

Cardinal Pelagius' delay in setting out had doomed his expedition from the start. The River Nile was due to flood again in August, which would seriously impede their progress.

Al-Kamil realized this, and perhaps to try and delay the expedition even further, he renewed his earlier peace offer, this time offering the extra incentive of a thirty year truce. Cardinal Pelagius quickly waved the offer aside and, convinced that victory was within his grasp, led his army out of Damietta. Nearly two weeks later, they arrived at Sharamsah, a settlement upstream on the river. King John, realizing the river was starting to rise and would soon be in flood, urged Cardinal Pelagius to remain in Sharamsah, but the Cardinal ignored this advice and decided to press on.

He also ignored the fact that a canal entered the river just south of Sharamsah. Leaving the entrance to the canal unguarded, he moved his men further up the river. Once the Crusaders had passed the mouth of the canal, al-Kamil sprang his trap. The rising waters had made the canal navigable to ships, and al Kamil sailed a small fleet up the canal and into the river, sinking four ships to ensure the Crusaders' retreat was thoroughly blocked. The Crusaders were now unable to retrace their steps back to Damietta. At the same time, al-Mu'azzam and his Syrian army arrived in Egypt, moving up to block any land retreat by the Latin Christians. The Crusaders were trapped. The river was rising and they only had enough food to last twenty days.

Realizing the seriousness of the situation, on the 26th of August, Cardinal Pelagius ordered the army to retreat. The retreat itself was a shambles. Not wanting to leave their supplies of wine behind, many men decided to drink their entire supply before leaving. Others set fire to the possessions they had to abandon, which clearly indicated to the Muslims the fact they were retreating. Al-Kamil ordered some nearby sluice gates to be opened, and the Crusaders were inundated by water. With the low-lying lands providing no refuge from the water, vast sections of the army were left wading in water up to their waists. Reality finally hit home to Cardinal Pelagius, and he requested peace terms on the 28th of August. Al-Kamil demanded and was given Damietta, along with the release of all Muslim prisoners. An eight year truce was agreed between the parties, with the concession that the truce would not extend to Emperor Frederick of Germany.

So the Fifth Crusade ended with the Crusaders leaving Egypt empty-handed. Join me next week as Emperor Frederick finally decides to make his way to the Holy Land. Can he succeed where the Fifth Crusade failed? You'll have to listen in to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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