

History of the Crusades.
Episode 86
Emperor Frederick II.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Fifth Crusade fail in the swamps of the Nile delta. Once Damietta had been formally handed over to al-Kamil, the Crusaders dispersed. Some sailed on to Acre, but most made their way back to Europe.

So why did the Fifth Crusade fail? Well, the finger of blame pointed at a couple of factors. First and most obvious was the fact that leadership of the Crusade had been shared between Cardinal Pelagius and King John of Acre. Cardinal Pelagius saw himself as having supreme authority over the Crusade due to his position as Papal Legate. However, he had no experience of military command, and when placed in the field made some pretty poor decisions. His decision making was also impaired by the fact that he was utterly convinced by local prophecies, which he believed foretold that the Crusade would succeed. Placing blind faith in the prophecies, he neglected the hard work which usually forms the basis of military success.

King John of Acre also shared the blame. The fact that he failed to take overall control of the campaign meant that many decisions were left to Cardinal Pelagius, who really didn't have the requisite experience to make them. The fact that King John kept returning back to the Crusader states to look after affairs back home also didn't help matters. So the Crusade ended in failure.

Al-Kamil celebrated his victory with a splendid feast, which was attended by King John. As a gesture of goodwill, al-Kamil undertook to return the True Cross to the Latin Christians, so at least they wouldn't return empty handed. However, according to Stephen Runciman in the third volume of his series on the Crusades, when it came time to return the True Cross, it couldn't be found.

The people who bore the main brunt of the failure of the Crusade were the local Christians and European traders in Egypt. There was a backlash against the local Coptic Christians. They found themselves subject to exorbitant taxes. Many churches were closed and some were ransacked by angry Muslim soldiers. Likewise, the Italian merchants found their lucrative Egyptian markets were suddenly not as friendly, nor as open as they had been.

While Cardinal Pelagius and King John shouldered their fair share of the blame for the failure of the Fifth Crusade, fingers were also firmly pointed at another individual, and that was Emperor Frederick II. Right from the start of the Crusade, Frederick was expected to show up with the German Imperial forces, but he never arrived. People quite rightly pointed out that had Frederick fulfilled his Crusading vow and added his army to those at Damietta, the Crusade may well have succeeded, and the whole of Egypt might have fallen into western hands. So let's take a closer look at the man who's not exactly Crusading monarch of the month at this time.

As we've heard from previous episodes, Frederick was Frederick Barbarossa's grandson, and had been raised in the royal court in Sicily. Sicily was a multicultural melting pot, and as a result, by the time he reached adulthood, he was fluent in six languages: French, German, Italian, Latin, Greek and Arabic. He was well educated, having been tutored by eminent personages, including the man who would later become Pope Honorius III, in

subjects such as philosophy, the sciences, and medicine. He had also been exposed to Islamic influences. Some of his bodyguards were local Sicilian Muslims, and he adopted the Middle Eastern practice of keeping a harem. But, for all his intellectual brilliance, he was not a terribly attractive man, neither physically nor personally. At the end of the Fifth Crusade, Emperor Frederick was 27 years old and was Christendom's most powerful leader, holding the dual titles of King of Sicily and Emperor of Germany. He was prone to chubbiness, and his red hair was already starting to recede. He was short sighted and had piercing green eyes. In fact, a Muslim chronicler from Damascus who met Emperor Frederick in the Holy Land commented that, because of his strange red hair, his baldness, and his short sightedness, Emperor Frederick wouldn't have fetched much money at all had he been sold in the slave markets. As for his personality, while he certainly was intellectually brilliant, he was also not terribly likable. Uncompromisingly arrogant, he was selfish, cunning, and at times cruel. To his supporters, he was no less than "Stupor Mundi", the wonder of the world, a visionary genius and mastermind of his time. To those who weren't such great fans, he was a tyrannical despot and the Beast of the Apocalypse, a heretic, and a false Crusader.

In 1222, the year following the end of the Fifth Crusade, King John of Acre decided to travel to the West. One of his reasons for doing so was that he needed to start looking for a suitable husband for his daughter Yolanda. Yolanda was only eleven years old, but King John was in his seventies and he decided that he should waste no time in ensuring the succession of his Kingdom. As soon as he arrived in Europe, King John headed straight to Rome, where he managed to secure an undertaking from Pope Honorius that in future any land conquered during a Crusade would be given to the Kingdom of Acre, not the Church. King John then journeyed northwards, intending to visit his previous employer and friend, King Philip of France.

Back in Rome, the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, who happened to be in the city, suggested that Emperor Frederick might be a suitable match for young Queen Yolanda. It was an ambitious proposal. Frederick's Empress had died four months ago, so he was free to remarry, but Frederick was the most powerful ruler in Europe, whereas Yolanda was heiress to an isolated outpost in the Holy Land. The Pope came to hear of the plan and gave it his approval. It suited the Church to tie Emperor Frederick to the Crusader states, as it might galvanize him to actually help out in future Crusades, rather than promising to help and then not showing up.

By the time King John arrived at his old stomping ground, the royal court in Paris, the proposal was gaining momentum. King John, of course, supported the plan. It was far beyond what he had imagined when he set out to find a suitable husband. When King Phillip of France was advised of the possible union, he was initially put out. He had expected that he would be the person who arranged a suitable match for Yolanda, but he couldn't help but agree that the idea had some merit.

Fortunately, King John had appointed a regent to govern his Kingdom in his absence, as he ended up staying in Europe for quite some time. He stayed in the Royal Court in Paris another six months or so, long enough to be present when his old friend King Philip died on the 14th of July 1223. In his will, King Philip granted King John the sum of 50,000 marks for the benefit of the Kingdom in the Holy Land. King John hung around for the coronation of King Philip's son, who was crowned King Louis VIII, and for the funeral of the departed King. Then King John decided to go on a pilgrimage to the famous Santiago de

Compostela in Spain. While he was in Spain, he ended up marrying King Ferdinand III of Spain's sister Berengaria. He returned with his new bride to Italy the following year.

Meanwhile, the marriage proposal between Yolanda and Emperor Frederick was finalized. Yolanda was now 14 years old and was considered old enough to marry. With her father still in Italy, Count Henry of Malta was sent to collect Queen Yolanda from the Holy Land, and bring her to Italy for her wedding. Somewhat strangely, she participated in a marriage ceremony before she left her home, in which an Italian Archbishop who had traveled to Acre with the Count married her to the absent Emperor. She then left behind her home and everything familiar to her and boarded a ship to sail to Italy. When her ship docked at Brindisi in Italy, waiting for her on shore was her father, King John of Acre, and her husband, or future husband, depending on how you rate the validity of the strange marriage ceremony that was held back in Acre, Emperor Frederick II. Yolanda and Frederick were married in a lavish second ceremony in the cathedral at Brindisi on the 9th of November 1225.

Now, history doesn't relate how Yolanda may have felt upon meeting her new husband. Was she a dewy-eyed teenager, overawed at the fact that she was marrying the most powerful man in Christendom, with dreams of the Emperor being an attentive and pleasant husband? Or did she inherit the practical nature of her grandmother Queen Isabella, and decide to make the best out of what could be a bad lot? Well, for this young girl, who had spent her whole life living under her father's protective wing in the small and friendly royal court at Acre, she was either about to have her illusions shattered or was about to have her worst fears confirmed. Her marriage was not going to be a happy one.

One day after the wedding ceremony, a weeping Yolanda confessed to her father that Frederick had already seduced one of her cousins. King John confronted Emperor Frederick, who not only dismissed him coldly but advised him that he would no longer be required to act as Regent, ruling the Kingdom of Acre in Yolanda's name, as he had done since the death of Yolanda's mother. King John had assumed his Regency would continue, but, perhaps naively, had not thought to secure a guarantee in writing prior to finalizing his daughter's marriage. Not only did King John suddenly find himself without a Kingdom and without a job, Frederick's soldiers forced him to hand over the 50,000 marks which King Philip had bequeathed to him after his death.

Fortunately for King John, he landed on his feet. Pope Honorius was sympathetic to his plight, and when the child Emperor Baldwin II of the Latin Christian Empire of Romania required a regent, John was offered the position. Although John was nearly 80 years old at this stage, he traveled to Constantinople and served as regent for the young Emperor, Baldwin until his death some ten years later.

Yolanda was not so lucky. She found herself banished to Emperor Frederick's harem in Palermo. She lived there, mostly in seclusion, until she died at the age of sixteen, due to complications following the birth of her son Conrad, in April. 1228.

Yolanda's death placed Emperor Frederick in a tricky position so far as the Kingdom of Acre was concerned. Following his marriage to Yolanda, after he dissolved King John's Regency, Frederick declared himself King of Acre by virtue of the inheritance of his wife, Empress Isabella. Remember, Yolanda was her nickname, so her actual title was Empress Isabella. However, when Yolanda died, the crown passed to baby Conrad, and the only power available to Emperor Frederick was that of Regent. However, the local nobility in the

Kingdom of Acre, led by John of Ibelin, opposed the claim of Emperor Frederick as absent Regent.

Meanwhile, pressure was building on Frederick to mount another Crusade. Pope Honorius had long been trying to force Frederick to fulfill the vow that he failed to honor during the Fifth Crusade, and lead another expedition to the Holy Land. Shortly after Frederick's marriage to Yolanda, the Pope managed to secure Frederick's agreement in writing to undertake the Crusade. The terms of the agreement were strict and unambiguous. Frederick was to send an army of 1,000 knights to the Holy Land and finance their stay in the Middle East for two years. He also had to make 150 ships available to transport European Crusaders to the Holy Land, and gift the Master of the Teutonic military Order with 100,000 ounces of gold. Importantly, the agreement contained a penalty. Should Emperor Frederick fail to fulfill the conditions of the agreement, and if by the 15th of August 1227 he failed to set out on his Crusade, then he would be excommunicated from the Church.

Diplomatic pressure was also being felt by Frederick from another position. In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf writes that upon learning that Emperor Frederick had married Yolanda and had assumed the title of King of Acre, al-Kamil, ruler of Egypt, decided to send an embassy to Sicily. The party was led by the talented diplomat, the Emir Fakhr al-Din. Shortly after arriving in Sicily, Fakhr al-Din sent a report back to Cairo. The report was favorable in its praise of Emperor Frederick and his Sicilian court. The Muslims of Sicily were allowed to practice their religion unimpeded. The Islamic call to prayer rang out throughout the towns and cities of Sicily, and even Emperor Frederick's Muslim bodyguard, were given leave to pray in the direction of Mecca.

But more importantly, Fakhr al-Din reported that Emperor Frederick was not only tolerant of Muslim practices, he actually admired the religion. While talking to Fakhr al-Din in fluent Arabic, Emperor Frederick expressed contempt for both the dull and barbaric west and the embodiment of the Latin Christian Church, the Pope, while extolling the virtues of Arabic advances in the sciences and medicine. Emperor Frederick and Fakhr al-Din developed a close friendship, and the Egyptian diplomat opened a direct line of communication between the German Emperor and al-Kamil. The two leaders discussed matters of philosophy such as the works of Aristotle, the immortality of the soul, and the origins of the universe. After Frederick revealed an interest in examining the behavior of animals, al-Kamil sent him a gift of some bears, apes and an elephant, which the Emperor added to the animals he had already collected for his private zoo. These friendly exchanges culminated in al-Kamil expressing his wish that Frederick journey to the Middle East.

Then a bombshell. According to Amin Maalouf, al-Kamil, the ruler of Egypt, indicated that he would be content to see Emperor Frederick gain possession of the Holy City of Jerusalem.

This somewhat surprising revelation requires an explanation. As we saw back in Episode 84, following the death of al-Adil, al-Kamil inherited Egypt, while another one of al-Adil's sons, al-Mu'assam, inherited most of Syria, including Jerusalem. Al-Mu'assam had come to al-Kamil's aid during the Fifth Crusade, but since the end of the Fifth Crusade, relations between the two brothers had soured. Al-Kamil was concerned about the ambitions of al-Mu'assam, and was also worried about the threat posed by the advancing Mongol army under the leadership of Genghis Khan. A reinvigorated Kingdom of Jerusalem, with his close buddy Emperor Frederick at the helm, would put a dampener on his brother's

activities and would also provide a handy buffer protecting Egypt from any Mongol invasion.

So all Emperor Frederick's Crusading ducks are lining up in a row. He has promised Pope Honorius that he will mount a Crusade before August 1227 on pain of excommunication. He now has the support of the ruler of Egypt for his bid to retake Jerusalem. Then in March 1227 another Crusading peg fell into place. Frederick's old tutor Pope Honorius died, and the new Pope, Gregory IX, wasn't going to be quite as tolerant of Emperor Frederick's attempts to wriggle out of his Crusading obligations.

So the stage was set. Emperor Frederick, at long last, was actually going to depart for the Middle East on Crusade, with one specific aim: to retake Jerusalem for the Latin Christian Church. Join me next week as we accompany Stupor Mundi himself, Emperor Frederick II, to the Holy Land. Until next week, bye for now,

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