

History of the Crusades.
Episode 91
King Louis' Crusade I.

Hello again. Last week we saw the fortunes of the Kingdom of Acre take a turn for the worse in the form of a massive military defeat at the hands of the Egyptians and Khwarezmians at the Battle of La Forbie. With its army virtually annihilated, the fate of the Kingdom lies in the ability of the Latin Christians of Europe to mount another Crusade. As we saw at the end of last week's episode, the only European King to answer the Crusading call was King Louis IX of France.

So who was King Louis? Let's take a closer look at him. In 1244 King Louis was around 30 years old, tall, slim, and of pale complexion with blond hair. He had been King since he was 12 years old, thrust into the limelight after the untimely death of his older brother, King Louis VIII. His formidable mother Blanche of Castile ruled as a Regent while he was young. Blanche was an extremely competent ruler and Regent, who seemed to take to governance and administration like a duck to water. Trouble was, when King Louis came of age she wasn't at all keen to give up the reins of power. Unusually, she managed to keep ruling way after King Louis came of age. She didn't cede formal control of the Kingdom back to Louis until he was 21. Even after King Louis was ruling in his own right, Blanche was always hovering in the background, giving unwanted advice, looking over his shoulder and second-guessing his decisions. She clashed monumentally with King Louis' young wife, Queen Margaret, and appears to have been the mother-in-law from hell. According to Jonathan Phillips in his book "Holy Warriors", when Blanche of Castile died, the news was delivered to Queen Margaret with the words, and I quote "The woman who hated you most is dead" end quote.

Despite his overbearing mother, King Louis was very much his own person. He was pious in the true sense of the word. Perhaps uniquely amongst the royal figures of his time, King Louis didn't use his faith as a means to an end. He was truly devout, honest, humble, and infused with an overriding sense of honor. He always kept his word. He was able to generate feelings of loyalty and trust from his subjects and his soldiers. He led by example, keeping his word, and ensuring that the people under his command were treated well. The age of chivalry had been on the rise for some time in Europe, and in King Louis IX it seemed to reach its zenith.

In 1231 he purchased the Crown of Thorns from the cash-strapped Latin Christian ruler of the Empire of Romania. This was reputedly the actual crown worn by Christ on the Cross. Over-awed by the sanctity of his new possession, King Louis commissioned the building of a special chapel to house the relic, the astonishingly beautiful Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Eager to fulfill his duties as a Latin Christian ruler, Crusading was always on King Louis' to-do list. As we mentioned last week, King Louis became seriously ill with malaria. In the winter of 1244, at a time when he was so ill with the affliction that one of his servants believed he had died, King Louis vowed to go on Crusade should he recover. He did recover and immediately began preparations for his expedition. King Louis always kept his word.

Conveniently, a Crusade was actually required. A few months earlier, the Latin Christians of the Kingdom of Acre had been defeated at La Forbie, and during the following year, the

Bishop of Beirut will travel to Europe and convince Pope Innocent IV to proclaim a new Crusade.

King Louis will spend nearly four years preparing for his Crusade. He had an eye for detail, and his Crusade was meticulously planned. He used the island of Cyprus as a staging post. Not wishing to leave anything to chance, King Louis ordered supplies of food, weaponry, and equipment to be stored on Cyprus, so the Crusaders could easily access the goods once in the Holy Land. After a couple of years of ferrying supplies to the island, mountainous piles of wheat and barley competed with stacks of wine barrels to see which could rise higher than the other.

Of course, stocking a food depot to this degree costs money, and like all Crusading leaders before him, King Louis left no stone unturned raising money for his expedition. Raising taxes was an obvious, if unpopular, method of raising revenue. He also introduced administrative reforms, which generated some income, but the vast majority of the funds he required were raised through the Church, either via donations or via taxation of the clerics. Other, less honorable means were resorted to as well. Between the years of 1248 and 1249, Jewish moneylenders were expelled from the Kingdom of France, their property confiscated, and added to the King's Crusading coffers. All in all, by the time King Louis paid for supplies, transport, and the wages of his knights, it's estimated that nearly two million gold pounds were needed to fund the Crusade. This was around six times the annual revenue of the Kingdom of France, which gives an indication of just how much money King Louis needed to raise.

Not only did King Louis need to raise funds prior to his departure, he also needed to make sure that his Kingdom was administered adequately while he was away. He contacted his fellow European rulers, King Henry III of England and Emperor Frederick, and did his best to ensure that they would keep the peace and not take advantage of his absence. Now he just needed to appoint someone to rule his Kingdom while he was away. Hmm. Who would it be? Of course, the choice was obvious. His mother, Blanche of Castile. Jonathan Phillips, in his book "Holy Warriors", writes that there were rumors doing the rounds at the time, that King Louis went on Crusade just to get away from his mother.

While that was likely not true of Louis himself (putting a goodly distance between himself and Blanche was probably just one advantage that the expedition presented) it may have explained Queen Margaret's decision to accompany her husband to the Holy Land. As the experience of Eleanor of Aquitaine had shown way back in the Second Crusade, a Crusading Queen had to endure discomfort and hardship and perhaps even place her life at risk. When weighed against staying in the luxurious surrounds of the Royal Palace in Paris with her mother-in-law, for Queen Margaret the choice was an easy one. Queen Margaret was going on Crusade.

The Crusading force accompanying King Louis consisted of between 20,000 and 25,000 men, including 2,800 knights, 5,600 mounted sergeants, 5,000 archers and 10,000 foot soldiers. The combatants were overwhelmingly French. While the Crusade was preached in Britain, Scandinavia, Flanders and Germany, it was in France that most of the recruitment took place. With the French King embarking on the expedition, a whole raft of French noblemen were obliged to join up. As we've seen on previous Crusades, the Crusaders all embarked on their own individual fundraising schemes: mortgaging their lands; selling assets; and taking out loans.

Luckily for us, along with a dizzying array of Counts, Dukes, and other exalted personages, one John of Joinville also decided to embark on the expedition. Why do we care about John of Joinville? Well, because after he returned home, he wrote a detailed and entertaining account of his experiences and recollections. So John is our eyewitness for this Crusade. At the time he set out on Crusade, John was just 23 years of age. He resided in the French County of Champagne, a region that had produced more than its fair share of famous Crusaders, and he was a vassal of the Count of Champagne. In addition to being Lord of Joinville, John was seneschal of Champagne. He was also a husband and father to two young children, one of whom was only a few weeks old when he departed for the Holy Land. Like countless other noblemen across France, John prepared for his Crusade by settling any outstanding debts within his household, and mortgaging a goodly part of his land. Shortly prior to his setting out, he celebrated with a couple of days of feasting and merrymaking. Then came the date of his departure. John writes, and I quote "I did not want to cast my eyes backwards towards Joinville at all, fearful that my heart would melt for the fine castle and the two children I was leaving behind" end quote.

John made a brief pilgrimage to his family shrine, which he approached barefoot wearing only a shirt, and then made his way to Marseilles with a retinue of nine knights. He met up with his cousin at Marseilles, who also had nine knights, meaning that their party would have totaled around 100 people. They then chartered a ship to sail them to Cyprus, the rendezvous point for the Crusaders. It was now accepted practice to sail to the Middle East on Crusade instead of taking the land route, but we can safely say that the sea voyage was not something that John was looking forward to. Ships of that era had very little deck space, perhaps around half the size of a modern tennis court, yet up to 500 passengers would be jammed into this tiny space for the duration of the voyage. The space below deck was reserved for the cargo, including the horses which were to accompany the knights.

John observed with interest how the horses were loaded onto the ship. They were led through a door onto the vessel, then taken down into the hold. The door through which they were taken was then carefully sealed in the same manner as corking in a wine barrel, as once the voyage was underway, the door would mostly be under water. As the ship's sails were unfurled ready for departure, all on board sang a hymn, then off they sailed towards the Holy Land.

John didn't enjoy the journey. He was seasick for much of the time and nervous about being shipwrecked. He observed that, and I quote "No one can tell when he goes to sleep at night, whether or not he may be lying at the bottom of the sea the next morning" end quote. Despite his misgivings, he reached Cyprus safely some three weeks later. Shortly after he arrived at Cypress, he was embarrassed to find himself worryingly short of money. The expedition was barely underway, but already he was struggling to pay the wages of his knights. Luckily for us, a solution quickly presented itself. He was received into the direct service of the King, meaning not only were his expenses taken care of, he was also in the perfect position to witness the Crusade of King Louis IX.

King Louis reached Cyprus before John of Joinville, arriving at the island Kingdom on the 17th of September 1248. As hundreds of ships pulled into the harbor, jettisoning their Crusader passengers, some ships also sailed in from Acre, transporting the Grand Masters of the Temple and the Hospital to Cyprus, along with representatives of the nobility in the Crusader states. King Henry of Cyprus did his best to make them all comfortable.

The first thing they needed to do was to plan their Crusade. The plan they settled on was simple. To take Jerusalem they first needed to take Egypt. Consequently, they would sail to the Egyptian coast, take the town of Damietta, make their way up the River Nile to Cairo, they would then conquer the city, move out of Egypt, and take Jerusalem. Sound familiar? Yes, that's right. King Louis settled on exactly the same strategy as that used in the Fifth Crusade.

Now apparently, King Louis was keen to set off straight away, but he was counseled against it. Winter was coming, and it would be dangerous to cross the Mediterranean during the winter storms. The campaign in Egypt would be best started in spring. So King Louis decided the Crusading army best winter in Cyprus, then head to Egypt the following year, when the weather had improved. Now there were some advantages to this strategy. Firstly, as King Louis's advisers pointed out, the Crusade was more likely to succeed in better weather. Secondly, it allowed stragglers from Europe to join the Crusade. Alphonse of Poitiers, for some reason, hadn't yet left France, and the Duke of Burgundy had popped in to visit a friend in Greece on the way to Cyprus and had decided to spend the winter there. So the delay would allow these men to get their act together and join the rest of the army.

The delay also enabled King Louis to receive embassies from local personages, and cement his ties and alliances in the region. The Latin Christian Empress of Romania, Maria of Brienne, traveled from Constantinople to Cyprus to meet with King Louis and beg his assistance in her battle against the Greek Emperor in Nicaea. King Louis was polite and sympathetic to her plight, but told her that the Crusade against the Muslims took precedence over her troubles. Prince Bohemond of Antioch was more successful. He requested and was granted 600 archers to help protect the Principality of Antioch against local invaders.

Finally, the delay provided King Louis with an opportunity to try his hand at diplomacy. The Knights Templar tried to convince King Louis to attempt to negotiate a settlement with al-Kamil's eldest son, al-Salih Ayyub, the current ruler of Egypt and Syria. Using Emperor Frederick's successes in this field as an example, they urged King Louis to attempt to retake Jerusalem by diplomacy. But King Louis wasn't interested. His Crusade was going to be fought with swords not pens.

However, King Louis was interested in extending the hand of diplomacy to another force in the region, the Mongols. Pope Innocent had already sent a couple of embassies to Genghis Khan's successors, and King Louis decided to do the same. The Mongol armies at this time were pushing through Russia, Mesopotamia, and Persia. A few years previously, it seemed that the Mongols were going to conquer their way into Central Europe, but instead they retreated to Russia, much to the relief of the European Latin Christians.

Pope Innocent's embassies had attempted to convert the Mongol rulers to Christianity. They had not been successful. King Louis had a different plan. If he could convince the Mongols to form an alliance with him against the Muslims of Egypt and Syria, then the success of his Crusade would be virtually guaranteed. As chance would have it, two Nestorians arrived in Cyprus in December 1248. Stating that they had been sent by a Mongol general from Mesopotamia, they carried with them a letter describing the Mongols' sympathy for Christianity. Seizing the bull by the horns, King Louis dispatched an embassy

to Mesopotamia, bearing an impressive array of gifts, including a portable chapel. The embassy ended up traveling to Mongolia, where they met with the Khan's widow, who was acting as Regent.

Unfortunately for King Louis, the Mongols didn't see the Latin Christians as equals or potential allies. The all-conquering Mongol fighters were interested in conquest, not diplomacy. The Regent sent a letter back to King Louis acknowledging his submission to her as a conquered people. Even worse, the Regent thanked King Louis for the gifts, and stated that she expected to receive the same amount of gifts every year from now on. It's safe to say that King Louis' attempt to form an alliance with the Mongols was not successful.

Now, we've discussed the advantages of wintering in Cyprus, but there were of course some disadvantages. You know that huge stockpile of grain and wine that King Louis had created on Cyprus, which was meant to supply the army for the entire period of the Crusade? Well, they pretty much ate and drank their way through most of it while they wintered on Cyprus. 25,000 men can consume a lot of food and drink over a six month period, and King Louis was forced to watch his mountains of supplies get smaller and smaller and smaller. Also, disease broke out within the camp. Around 250 knights died, possibly of malaria, which was a sizable blow for the army.

But by far the worst disadvantage of delaying the expedition was that the Crusaders lost the element of surprise. Had the Crusade embarked from Cyprus in the autumn of 1248 they would have found Egypt leaderless, as at that time, al-Salih Ayyub was in Syria at his base in Damascus. But the six month delay gave Ayyub plenty of time to discover the Crusaders' intentions, travel back to Egypt and, at a leisurely pace, fortify the Crusaders' intended target, Damietta.

So, by May 1249, the stage was set. King Louis and his army are ready to set sail from Cyprus, and al-Salih Ayyub is in Egypt, ready to defend his territory from the invading Crusaders. Join me next week as we embark on King Louis' Crusade, and sail with his fleet to Damietta. Until next week, bye for now.

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