

History of the Crusades.
Episode 93
King Louis' Crusade III.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Louis' Crusade take the key Egyptian town of Damietta. The victory didn't come about as the result of any military skill on the part of the Latin Christians, but occurred when the Egyptian army abandoned the town, their leader Fakhr al-Din having had a brain snap which led him to believe that he needed to contest the Egyptian leadership rather than fight the invading Latin Christians.

So it's June 1249. The Latin Christians are settling in to their new accommodation at Damietta, while the gravely ill Egyptian leader, al-Salih Ayyub and his disgraced battle commander Fakhr al-Din are in the nearby town of Mansurah.

The Latin Christians now have to decide on their next move. There are two options available to them. The majority of the leaders of the Crusade support the idea of proceeding to Alexandria on the coast. If Alexandria was taken, the Latin Christians would control the two main trading centers through which all of Egypt's vast imports and exports needed to pass. It was high in the minds of those in command of the expedition that the swamps the armies would need to traverse on their way to Cairo were partly to blame for the defeat of the Fifth Crusade. King Louis had enough ships to sail to Alexandria and mount an attack on the city, and a victory over Alexandria might force the Egyptian ruler to make favorable terms with the Latin Christians, meaning the Crusade could succeed without the men having to face the swamps. It was a sound plan, and it enjoyed widespread support.

But King Louis wasn't convinced. To him, moving inland up the River Nile and attacking Cairo seemed the more honorable of the two options. He was supported in his opinion by his brother, Robert of Artois, who declared, and I quote "If you wish to kill the serpent, you must first crush its head" end quote. Since King Louis was the undisputed leader of the expedition, the decision was his to make, and he decided to tackle the swamps and proceed to Cairo.

But not just at the moment. It was the start of summer, and the heat was intense. In addition, the River Nile was only a couple of months away from its annual flood, and King Louis' other brother, Alphonse of Poitou, still hadn't shown up with his army. The Nile was due to start receding in October, so King Louis decided the Franks would stay put in their newly acquired town of Damietta until then. As an indication of how secure King Louis felt in Damietta and how confident he was of a French victory, he sent for Queen Margaret, who sailed to Damietta from Acre with the ladies of the expedition.

Further down south on the Nile, in the city of Mansurah, the Egyptians weren't feeling so confident. The dying Egyptian leader had set up camp on some dry level ground outside the fortified town. Mansurah was protected by the River Nile and its many channels, and the Latin Christians would need to take the city if they intended to sail further up the river to Cairo.

Unsurprisingly, tensions within Mansurah were high. Though clearly entering his final days, the Egyptian Sultan hadn't put in place any concrete plans for his succession. His eldest son, al-Muazzam Turanshah, was currently far away in Mesopotamia, a massive Latin

Christian army was holding the key town of Damietta, and the disgraced Fakhr al-Din was still hovering around the Sultan's court. All in all, it was a very unsettling state of affairs.

Amongst the most unsettled of those in Mansurah were the Mamluks. Who were the Mamluks? Well, they were a very interesting bunch of people. Essentially, they were slave soldiers. For centuries, the astute slave traders would select boys between the ages of eight and twelve, who were sold to buyers who would indoctrinate them into the Muslim faith, if they weren't Muslim already, and subject them to intense military training. They would then be sold for a high price to Muslim leaders across the Middle East for inclusion in their armies or as bodyguards. The most popular stock from which to create these soldiers were the Turkish people from the Russian steppes near the Black Sea. In their loyalty, their dedication to their religion, and their practice of the arts of war, they were equivalent to the Latin Christian military Orders.

Al-Salih Ayyub was a big fan of the Mamluks. Perhaps due to the fact that his mother was a Sudanese slave, the Egyptian Sultan didn't entirely trust elements of the Egyptian army, so he made extensive use of Mamluk soldiers. The most promising and the most loyal Mamluks were placed into an elite division of 1,000 soldiers, who were garrisoned on an island in the River Nile near Cairo. The soldiers were incredibly effective warriors and were incredibly loyal to the Sultan. Unlike other slaves, the Mamluks enjoyed many privileges under the Sultan's rule, and unsurprisingly they weren't looking forward to a regime change. Maybe after Ayyub's death, his successor wouldn't rely on the Mamluks as much. Maybe their privileges would be reduced. Maybe they would be disbanded. Some of the Mamluks even began considering whether they should take matters into their own hands and seize power for themselves after the Sultan's death. All I can say about that is "Watch this space". For the moment though, the elite division of Mamluks are stationed outside the city of Mansurah, intent on protecting their dying Sultan and on preventing any Latin Christians from passing by Mansurah on their way up the river to Cairo.

Taking a leaf out of his father's playbook, Ayyub offered peace terms to the Crusaders. He dangled the prize of the Holy City of Jerusalem in front of King Louis, and offered a straight swap: Damietta for Jerusalem. King Louis, unsurprisingly, wasn't interested. Safely ensconced in Damietta, awaiting both the fall of the Nile River and the arrival of reinforcements, he was confident his army would succeed where the armies of the Fifth Crusade had failed.

By the end of October 1249 things were looking good for King Louis. The dreadful summer heat was beginning to recede, as were the waters of the River Nile. Even more welcome was the sight of King Louis' brother, Alfonso of Poitou, who finally showed up with fresh troops from France. Preparations could now begin for the march on Cairo.

Things weren't going so well in the Muslim camp. While King Louis was preparing his men to travel up the River Nile, the Egyptian Sultan died. As you might expect, Fakhr al-Din had a plan ready to launch for exactly this contingency. He had formed an alliance with Ayyub's widow, the Armenian-born Sultana Shajar al-Durr. Also named "The Tree of Pearls", Shajar was Ayyub's favorite wife. Not only beautiful, she was also an astute political player. Ayyub slipped into a coma three days before his death. With the assistance of Fakhr al-Din, Shajar managed to conceal the fact that her husband was close to death. Food was sent into his tent, empty platters were seen leaving, and proclamations were issued in the Sultan's name.

After his death the charade continued. Shajar forged a document purporting to be from Ayyub, appointing Fakhr al-Din as commander of the Egyptian army. She called a clandestine meeting of her immediate family members and broke the news of her husband's death. Impressing upon them the need for secrecy during these troubled times, she implored them to reveal nothing of Ayyub's death until his eldest son could be summoned from Mesopotamia.

Now, Shajar's actions at this time make quite a lot of sense. Clearly, the Egyptians are in a tight spot. The invading Latin Christian army is about to deploy in their direction, yet suddenly the country finds itself leaderless. The obvious choice for the next leader will not even hear of his father's death for a few weeks, as even the fastest couriers will take weeks to ride from Egypt to Iraq. It will be months before the new leader will be able to wrap up his affairs in Mesopotamia, travel to Egypt, and assume control. So Shajar is determined to set the country into some sort of safe holding pattern, pending the arrival of Ayyub's son and heir Turanshah to Egypt. So Shajar kept up her charade. She ordered a place to be set at the table for the Sultan's dinner each night, telling anyone who would listen that her husband was still sick, but might recover at any moment and demand his dinner. She had his body carefully concealed in a shroud, then placed it in a coffin, which was dispatched in secret to Cairo.

She even managed to issue a call for Jihad to the Egyptian people, which was endorsed with a stamp almost identical to that of her husband. The document called on the Muslims of Egypt to rise up against the invading Franks, who were intent on conquering all of Egypt. The document commenced with the words "Come out heavily or lightly armed and fight for God's cause with your money and your life", and was read out to a large crowd from the pulpit of the Great Mosque in Cairo.

Now, although Fakhr al-Din was assisting Shajar in her endeavors, it's likely that he still sees himself as the future overall leader of the country. At least one Muslim chronicler noted at the time that Fakhr was, and I quote "aiming at sole and arbitrary rule" end quote. Perhaps as a first step in his plan, Fakhr, as the new head of the army, ordered his only other rival for power currently in Egypt, Aktai, the commander of the sultan's elite 1,000 strong band of Mamluks, to travel personally to Mesopotamia to deliver the news of the sultan's death to Turanshah. In his book "The Crusades", Thomas Asbridge states that Fakhr's move meant that the powerful leader of the Mamluks would be out of the country for some time, and that Fakhr may have been hoping that Aktai would come to a disastrous end during his dangerous journey, and that Turanshah would never receive the message, leaving Fakhr as the only other obvious choice for leader in Egypt.

Despite Shajar's best efforts, the news of her husband's death eventually leaked out, but by that time Fakhr was firmly established as the leader of the army and Turanshah, having been successfully informed of his father's death by Aktai, was preparing to leave for Egypt.

When King Louis heard the news that, in King Louis's words, and I quote "the Sultan of Egypt had just ended his wretched life" end quote, he was pleased. With a woman and an elderly, militarily-challenged general in charge of the country, it seemed to King Louis to be a very good time indeed to start on his march towards Cairo. So on the 20th of November 1249, leaving Queen Margaret, who at this stage was five months pregnant at Damietta, King Louis led the Latin Christians southwards towards the capital.

As the members of the Fifth Crusade had discovered, leading thousands of men through the swamps of Egypt is no easy matter. For King Louis, the going was particularly slow. Being a meticulous planner, he had decided to take a staggering amount of equipment and supplies with him. This meant that a fleet of ships needed to follow the army up the Nile. Unfortunately, the ships were sailing against the current and against the prevailing winds, which impeded their passage. This wasn't too much of a problem though, as the army was having trouble making progress up the river as well. Swamps are difficult to march through at any speed, and the Nile River was criss-crossed with a truly inconvenient number of small canals, all of which had to be forded and crossed by the army. Slowing their progress even further was the Egyptian army, whose archers harassed the Latin Christians whenever they could.

Eventually though, King Louis arrived at his destination, the Tanis River opposite the city of Mansurah. The Franks had taken a full month to reach this point, a feat which had been achieved in just seven days by the members of the Fifth Crusade. Now King Louis was faced with a problem. To progress further down the Nile he needed to take the city of Mansurah, but to take the city of Mansurah he first needed to gain access to the city of Mansurah, and to do that meant crossing the Tanis River, a fast-flowing major tributary of the Nile, which was currently situated between the Latin Christians and the town.

Luckily, King Louis had planned for this moment. He had decided to build a causeway across the river. He ordered a number of large cats to be constructed from the supplies of timber on board the ships. We've come across cats before. They are large protective wooden structures under which workmen can perform their tasks, shielded from arrows and other missiles. Working inside the cats, the Latin Christians would pile earth and timber into the river, and gradually build a solid causeway across the Tanis, enabling the army to march across the river to Mansurah.

It sounded great in theory, but the reality was much different. Working inside one of the cats was a truly terrifying experience. The Egyptian army on the other side of the river constructed sixteen catapult machines, which they used to hurl missiles and, much much worse, Greek fire at the cats. Remember Greek fire? It burns whatever it touches and is almost impossible to extinguish. No one wanted to be inside a cat when it was hit by Greek fire. To make matters worse, the fast-flowing river was eroding the Crusaders causeway as fast as they could build it. The Franks spent the next six weeks making futile attempts to build their causeway.

Then in February 1250, a stroke of luck. A local peasant, some sources say he was a Muslim, others say he was a Coptic Christian, came into the Crusaders' camp and for the sum of 500 coins offered to reveal a crossing point further down the river. The ford was revealed, the peasant was paid, and on the 8th of February the Crusaders set out towards the ford, leaving the Duke of Burgundy behind with a contingent of men to guard the camp. King Louis ordered his brother, Robert of Artois, to lead the vanguard, which contained the Knights Templar and the English contingent. King Louis would lead the bulk of the army.

King Louis' orders were clear. Robert of Artois would lead the van across the river, then would wait on the opposite bank for King Louis and the rest of his army to cross. It was imperative that the entire army was across the river before any attack was mounted. Robert of Artois and his forces crossed the river just before dawn. The ford was deeper than expected, so deep, in fact, that the horses had to swim for part of the crossing.

Nevertheless, slowly but surely, hundreds of knights made the crossing and gathered on the shore.

Now, as for King Louis's strict order for Robert of Artois to wait for the bulk of the army to cross before mounting an attack, well, Robert decides to ignore the order. Ignoring also the advice of the Templars, he decides the element of surprise would be lost if he waited the many, many hours required for the rest of the army to negotiate the ford, so he ordered the vanguard to attack the Egyptian camp.

To say the Egyptians were surprised by this attack is an understatement. They had no idea that the Latin Christians had managed to cross the river, and when around 600 Crusaders charged into the camp at dawn, the Egyptians were taken totally unawares. The ensuing battle was a largely one-sided affair. The Latin Christian knights rode amongst the tents, slashing at anything that moved and killing indiscriminately. Fakhr al-Din was in the camp. He had just finished having a bath and one of his attendants was dyeing his beard with henna, when he heard the commotion caused by the Latin Christian attack. Without even waiting to don his armor, he raced outside into the fray. It's not a good idea to face attacking knights without armor, and Fakhr learned this the hard way. He was quickly cut down and killed.

The Crusader victory was complete. The Egyptians who hadn't been killed fled to the safety of nearby Mansurah, leaving the Crusaders in control of the camp. Still unworried about defying his King's orders, Robert of Artois wanted to press the advantage. With the rest of the army still occupied trying to cross the river, he ordered his contingent to proceed further, and attack Mansurah itself.

Hmm. Attacking a camp of unsuspecting Egyptians was one thing, but attacking a fortified town with only 600 men? What could go wrong? Join me next week to discover exactly what could go wrong. Until next week, bye for now.

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