

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 94  
King Louis' Crusade IV.

Hello again. We ended last week's episode on a cliff-hanger. After Damietta fell into their hands, King Louis and his Crusaders decided to attack Cairo. Heading southwards up the River Nile, they took four weeks to reach the city of Mansurah, and spent another six weeks fruitlessly trying to build a causeway across the Tanis River, a waterway they needed to cross to gain access to the city. Luckily for the Crusaders, a local peasant showed them a crossing point further down the river. King Louis mobilized his army and they prepared to cross the river and attack Mansurah.

King Louis' brother Robert of Artois led the vanguard, and his section of the army crossed the river first. Robert had received strict instructions to wait for the rest of the army to cross the river before mounting an attack, however he decided to disobey this order. He attacked the Egyptian army, which was camped outside the city. The dawn raid took the Egyptians totally by surprise, giving Robert of Artois an easy victory. Fakhr al-Din was one of the many Egyptians killed in the attack. We left last week's episode with Robert deciding to keep ignoring his King's orders and press his advantage further by attacking the city of Mansurah itself.

Now, remember at this time that Robert has around 600 knights under his command. The rest of the army is still laboriously making its way across the river, the unexpectedly deep and difficult fording point slowing the army's crossing down to a crawl. Buoyed by his overwhelming victory and seeing the remnants of the Muslim army flee to the relative safety of Mansurah, Robert threw caution to the wind and decided to use the knights under his command to attack the city. The knights were predominantly Templars, with an additional contingent of English knights led by William Longsword. Both the Templars and William Longsword apparently did their best to talk Robert out of this rash move, but he wouldn't be swayed, mocking them all for cowards. According to one account, the leader of the Templars responded to Robert's taunts with the words, and I quote "Neither I nor my brothers are afraid, but let me tell you that none of us expect to come back, neither you nor ourselves." End quote.

The Templars were right to be cautious. Not only was Mansurah a well-fortified town, but the recently deceased Sultan al-Salih Ayyub's crack Mamluk forces, his chosen 1,000, are inside the city, having been garrisoned there instead of in the camp outside the city with the rest of the army. In the absence of the usual commander who was in the process of fetching Ayyub's son and heir from Mesopotamia, the Mamluks were being led by Rukn al-Din Baibars. We've met Baibars before, back in Episode 90, when he led the combined Mamluk and Khwarezmian armies to a decisive victory over the Latin Christians in the Battle of La Forbie in 1244. Now here he is again in 1250. In fact, it's worth remembering his name as we will be coming across him quite a bit before the end of this podcast series, so place a mental sticky note over him right now: Baibars.

Right, so Baibars is at the head of a garrison of around 1,000 elite Mamluk forces in a well-fortified town with which he is intimately familiar, and 600 fully armored Latin Christian knights are thundering towards the city. Does he take the usual defensive position and shut the city's gates, protecting it against the invading horsemen? No, he doesn't. He does the opposite. He opens the gates and lures the Latin Christians inside.

It's a smart move. Cavalry aren't designed to be used in confined spaces and are largely ineffective in Mansurah's narrow streets. The knights are forced to separate, and some streets are so narrow that the horses have difficulty turning around. Unable to fight in groups, the Latin Christian knights find themselves in all sorts of trouble. The Mamluk fighters streamed through the alleyways and side streets with which they were so familiar, and attacked the isolated knights with arrows, spears and swords. Some knights, trapped in the maze of narrow streets, leapt from their horses and raced into nearby buildings, only to be hunted down and killed. It was an overwhelming victory for the Egyptians. Of the 600 knights who entered Mansurah, only a handful escaped alive. Both Robert of Artois and William Longsword were killed.

King Louis was now in a precarious position. The bulk of his army was finally across the river. It had taken all morning, but he had achieved his objective. Unfortunately for King Louis, from here on in, the day was only going to get worse. King Louis was a meticulous planner, and he planned to regroup his army after he had crossed the Tanis and, reunited with his vanguard, mount an attack on the Egyptians. However, this plan had to be quickly abandoned. Not only was there no sign of his brother, Robert of Artois, and the vanguard he was leading, but groups of mounted Mamluks were streaming out of Mansurah in full battle-cry, heading straight for the Latin Christians. With his back to the river and with no way to retreat other than the slow and perilous river crossing, King Louis had no choice. He had to stand and fight.

With no time to mount a cavalry charge, the battle was mostly chaotic hand-to-hand fighting. The Latin Christians' exposed position made them targets for the arrows and spears of the Mamluks, and much of the fighting descended into desperate struggles between groups of Latin Christians and the attacking Mamluks.

With his best and most loyal knights forming a protective cordon around him, King Louis kept his head. A contingent of archers were still on the other side of the Tanis River waiting to cross, and Louis knew that it was vital they joined the battle as soon as possible. He sent engineers to the crossing point to see whether they could build a temporary bridge to assist the archers to cross. As the hours wore on, despite wave upon wave of attacks, the Latin Christians held their ground. There was really nothing else they could do. They had no means of retreat, save for the deep and fast-flowing river behind them. A few Crusaders tried to flee the battle via the river, but they drowned.

John of Joinville provided a vivid account of the battle, stating that he himself was hit by five arrows, while his horse was hit by fifteen. Fortunately for John, although the arrows did find their target and caused some damage, his armor prevented him from sustaining any serious injuries. Others were not so lucky. John reported that one of his knights copped a lance between his shoulders which, according to John, and I quote "made so large a wound that blood poured from his body as if from a bung-hole in a barrel." End quote.

Thankfully for King Louis, around three o'clock in the afternoon the archers finally made it across the river and joined in a counter-attack. The Muslims had used all their arrows in their previous attacks, and the onslaught from the Latin Christians seemed to slow the Muslim advance. Under covering fire from their archers, The Latin Christians slowly drove the Mamluks from the field. As night fell, the Mamluks retreated into the safety of Mansurah. The Latin Christians held the field.

Strangely, both the Muslims and the Latin Christians claimed victory at the Battle of Mansurah. The Muslims celebrated their rout of the cream of the Crusading army cavalry with a victory feast inside Mansurah, while King Louis, although mourning the death of his brother Robert of Artois, saw his army as having won the day. It was true that the Latin Christians had managed to cross the River Tanis and had repelled a Muslim attack, but the so-called victory came at a great cost. The loss of Robert of Artois and most of the vanguard was a major blow, and the Crusading army was left in a vulnerable position, camped on a riverbed, with their retreat blocked by the river, and with a fortified hostile city in front of them.

King Louis needed to make a decision. Probably the most sensible course of action would be to cross back over the River Tanis to their former camp on the other side. This would enable them to regroup and recover from their battle wounds, protected by the river from any Muslim attack. But psychologically, it would seem to the Latin Christians like a retreat. They had lost a lot of men to gain their position on this side of the river, and morale would likely plunge if they gave away the advantage they had gained. To achieve their goal of taking Cairo, they first needed to take Mansurah, and mounting another attack on the city while first having to cross the river again was going to be all but impossible after the losses sustained in the first battle. So King Louis decided to dig in and make camp on the Mansurah side of the Tanis.

Scavenging materials from the abandoned Egyptian army camp and bringing as many supplies as possible across the river from their old camp, the Latin Christians hastily erected some wooden walls around the camp. The wood was obtained by dismantling abandoned Muslim catapult machines. They then dug a shallow defensive ditch around the perimeter of their wooden wall. King Louis also ordered a line of small boats to be lashed together, forming a rudimentary bridge across the Tanis, linking their old camp with their new.

It was fortunate that the Latin Christians took these defensive measures. Three days after the Battle of Mansurah, the Muslims mounted another attack. Spearheaded by the thousand-strong elite Mamluk unit, Muslim fighters poured out of Mansurah and surrounded the Latin Christian camp, attacking with a ferocity which seemed to take the Latin Christians by surprise. Many Latin Christians were nursing wounds from the battle three days before. John of Joinville's arrow wounds made it impossible for him to wear his armor, but he fought anyway. Cross-bowmen, whose long range bolts were able to reach the attacking Muslims from the safety of the old camp on the other side of the Tanis, peppered the Egyptians with arrows, and the battle raged from dawn to dusk.

In the end, the exhausted Muslim fighters gave up trying to dislodge the Latin Christians from their position. As darkness began to fall, they withdrew back into their fortified city. The Latin Christians claimed to have killed 4,000 Muslims in this fight, but even if that figure was correct, the Egyptians still maintained numerical superiority over the Latin Christians. The Egyptians were able to easily obtain reinforcements of men and supplies from Cairo. The Egyptians were able to recover from their wounds in the comfortable surroundings of their city, and above all, the Egyptians didn't look like they were going to be easily dislodged from Mansurah.

As days turned into weeks, morale began to plummet within the Latin Christian camp. Many men died from the injuries they sustained in the second attack. The Grand Master of the Temple lost an eye in the first battle, and lost the other eye in the second, dying later

from his injuries. In the unsanitary conditions of the camp, disease began to spread, and to make matters worse, the food started to run out. John of Joinville described seeing corpses piled up against the bridge of boats which the Latin Christians had constructed across the river. Bodies that had appeared in the river after both battles had been carried downstream by the current, only to find their passage blocked by the bridge of boats. John stated, and I quote "all the river was full of corpses from one bank to another and as far upstream as one could cast a small stone" end of quote. Crossing the river from one camp to another on the precarious bridge next to piles of floating corpses must have been a gruesome experience.

If King Louis was going to maintain his position, he needed to set up a supply line between the Latin Christian army and Damietta. Transport vessels were ordered to sail back down the river and collect vital supplies of food from the city, then make their slow and laborious way back up the river to the Latin Christian camp.

As the weakened Latin Christian Army was doing its best to consolidate and strengthen its position outside Mansurah, an event of note had occurred in Egypt. The new Sultan al-Muazzam Turanshah arrived in Egypt. He had been formally proclaimed Sultan in Damascus and had then traveled to Cairo, reaching the Egyptian capital in February 1250. Hearing of the Latin Christian invasion, he wasted no time in traveling to Mansurah to see the situation for himself.

His arrival sparked a new wave of activity from the Muslim defenders. They had been making the odd half-hearted attack on the Latin Christian camp every now and again, but with the arrival of Turanshah, they embarked on a new strategy, one which they hoped would cripple the Latin Christian line of supply.

Realizing that the free passage of ships between Damietta and the Latin Christian camp was vital for the Crusaders, the Egyptians decided to use their ships to block this supply. This was not going to be easy. Any ships leaving from the port in Mansurah could easily access Cairo to the south of the city, but the way to the north to Damietta was blocked by the Crusaders' bridge of boats. To overcome this difficulty, the Egyptians came up with a cunning plan. They built a fleet of small, light boats inside Mansurah. Turanshah then ordered fifty of these boats to be carried out of Mansurah on carts and ported across the land to a canal which linked up to the river Tanis upstream from the Crusaders' bridge. Once dragged to the canal, the boats were able to sail out of the canal into the river Tanis, and patrol the river looking for supply ships.

This surprise move, in the words of John of Joinville, came as a great shock to the Latin Christians. Over the next few weeks, the fleet of fifty Egyptian ships were able to intercept two separate supply convoys from Damietta. The desperately needed cargo of bread, wine, and salted meat was unable to break through the Egyptian blockade, and the Latin Christian ships were forced to sail back down the river to Damietta.

This, of course, came as a terrible blow to the Latin Christians. Marooned in their precarious camp outside Mansurah, with no real hope of taking the city by force, and now with their supply line cut, their only hope was to hold on until the Egyptians became entangled in a civil war of some kind. It was a tiny ray of hope, but it was one which the Latin Christians clung on to because really, it was all they had.

Can King Louis' army snatch victory from the jaws of defeat? Join me next week, on the banks of the River Tanis outside the city of Mansurah, to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

End