

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 95  
King Louis' Crusade V.

Hello again. Last week we left King Louis and his Crusaders in a precarious position. Camped on the banks of the River Tanis outside the city of Mansurah, the Crusaders need to take Mansurah if they are to have any hope of proceeding down the River Nile to their next objective, Cairo. Trouble is, with their ranks depleted by fighting and disease, they really don't have enough manpower to make a serious assault on the heavily fortified city. To make matters worse, the Egyptians now have also cut their supply line, meaning that no food or equipment can reach them from Damietta.

It's now March 1250, and the situation at the Crusader camp has become untenable. Weeks with no new supplies of food has taken its toll on the Latin Christian army. The camp is being ravaged by disease and famine. King Louis, the meticulous planner who was so sure that his Crusade would succeed, doesn't know what to do. He was hoping that the Muslims would face some internal strife with the arrival of their new Sultan, al-Salih Ayyub's son al-Muazzam Turanshah, but this doesn't seem to have happened. Instead, King Louis is stuck on a riverbank outside a fortified city which he has no hope of taking, with the men all around him sickening and dying of dysentery, typhoid and scurvy.

In a desperate move to try and salvage his Crusade, King Louis sent a message to the new Sultan Turanshah with an offer of peace. King Louis would withdraw his forces from Egypt if Turanshah agreed to swap the Holy City of Jerusalem for the town of Damietta. Of course, with his army weakened and with defeat looking him squarely in the eye, it wasn't the best time to try and strike a deal. It must have come as no surprise to King Louis that Turanshah quickly rejected the offer.

In late March 1250 the final nail was driven into the Crusaders' coffin. Muslim cavalymen from Mansurah staged a number of raids on the Christian camp, and the weakened Latin Christian fighters could barely repel them. To make matters worse, around the same time, Muslim sailors launched an attack on the small Latin Christian fleet of ships. Amin Maalouf, in his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", reports that nearly 100 Crusading ships were captured or destroyed.

Finally, in early April, the inevitable moment came. King Louis gave the order to retreat. King Louis decided that the Crusaders should attempt to retrace their steps forty miles back down the river to the safety of Damietta. There weren't enough ships left for all the Crusaders to enjoy sailing to Damietta, so only those who were too ill to walk would be allowed passage on a ship. Everyone else was going to have to make their own way down the river as best they could. King Louis, who himself was weakened and suffering from dysentery, told his men that they would be leaving that night. The plan was to leave the tents standing in the camp to give the impression that the Crusaders were still outside Mansurah, then they would sneak off under cover of darkness. King Louis' engineer, Joscelin of Cornaut, was ordered to dismantle the bridge of boats once the Crusaders had crossed the River Tanis. The wounded would then be loaded onto boats with the hope that they would somehow be able to sail past the Muslim blockade unnoticed, while the able-bodied Crusaders would quickly and quietly make their way overland to Damietta.

The plan started going wrong almost immediately. The Latin Christians did manage to sneak over their bridge of boats to their old camp on the River Tanis, but observant Mamluk warriors, keeping watch from high on the walls of Mansurah, saw them retreating and decided to give chase. This seems to have spooked Joscelin of Cornaut, who failed to cut the ropes binding the bridge of boats together, enabling the Muslim soldiers to cross the river and give chase to the retreating Crusaders. Chaotic scenes followed. It was night time, it was difficult to see what was going on, and the Crusaders were under attack.

By this time, John of Joinville and some of the other wounded Crusaders had been carried on board the ships that they hoped would take them to Damietta. John had been bed-ridden for some time with a fever, his arrow wounds having become infected. John's ship was getting ready to depart, and he watched with horror as the Mamluk warriors fell on the retreating Latin Christians. Wounded men waiting to be carried on board the ships were killed where they lay, and the Muslim attackers were merciless in their rout of the fleeing army. John observed, and I quote "As I was urging the sailors to let us get away, the Saracens entered the camp, and I saw by the light of the fires that they were slaughtering the poor fellows on the bank." End quote. John's ship made its way into the relative safety of the river and began its journey downstream.

As the sun started to rise the next morning, the extent of the disaster was becoming apparent and it was far from over. The Crusading army, or what was left of it, had scattered during the night. Disheveled bands of men were doing their best to struggle through the swamps, all the while being attacked by the pursuing Egyptians.

King Louis himself was seriously ill at this stage and should really have joined the ranks of the wounded on board one of the ships. He had been suffering on and off from dysentery, and during the night his condition worsened to the extent that a hole was cut in his trousers so he could relieve himself more easily. He was so weak that he could barely stay on his horse, and he kept fainting. Determined, despite his illness, not to abandon his fleeing army, King Louis just became one figure among many, a desperate, weakened Latin Christian, no longer part of a cohesive army but just an individual doing the best he could to elude his pursuers and make it to the safety of Damietta. He didn't get very far. On the 6th of April, when he was surrounded and captured, King Louis had only made it to Sharamsah, less than halfway to Damietta.

A similar fate awaited John of Joinville. He had hoped that his ship might sail undetected past the Muslim fleet, but he wasn't that lucky. The vessel was spotted and as four Muslim ships sailed towards them, those on board had to make the decision whether to try and land and flee into the swamps or to stay and be captured. With most on board so wounded that the likelihood of them being able to make their way overland all the way to Damietta while fighting off pursuers was virtually non-existent, the choice was an easy one. They would surrender and allow themselves to be taken prisoner. John had with him a small box containing his most precious personal possessions: jewels and relics. Preferring them not to fall into Muslim hands, he threw the box into the river. Their boat was surrounded, then boarded. While some on board were slain, John managed to avoid this fate by pretending to be the King's cousin. With the King's cousin likely to fetch a sizable ransom, he was spared the sword. He was even allowed to keep a lined scarlet cloak that had been a gift from his mother, and was provided with some medicine to help reduce his fever. Others were not so lucky. Many boats were set on fire, or were ransacked prior to being scuttled and sunk, those on board drowning in the river.

On land, the Egyptian Army was hunting down and killing or capturing the fleeing Crusaders. In his book "God's War", Christopher Tyerman writes that, and I quote "within two days the Crusade army ceased to exist" end quote. It was the first time in any Crusade that a European King had been captured. King Louis' bodyguards led him into a dwelling house in a village just north of Sharamsah, and Philip of Montfort was sent out to negotiate terms of surrender for the King and the Crusaders, Louis being too ill to undertake the task himself. Philip did his best to negotiate a favorable settlement, and he believed he was on the verge of convincing the Egyptian commanders to accept the town of Damietta in return for the free passage of the army out of Egypt when, according to Steven Runciman in the third book of his trilogy on the Crusades, a Latin Christian sergeant, apparently bribed by the Egyptians, rode up and declared that King Louis had ordered the Latin Christians to surrender unconditionally. King Louis had done no such thing, but not wishing to disobey what they thought was a royal order, the Crusaders who were present at the negotiations laid down their weapons and were led into captivity.

The next task facing the Egyptians was to round up what was left of the Crusader army and take them into captivity. It was no easy matter. The amount of prisoners that they gathered was staggering. A Muslim chronicler at the time stated, and I quote, "A tally was made of the number of captives, and there were more than 20,000. Those who have drowned or been killed numbered 7,000. I saw the dead and they covered the face of the earth in their profusion. It was a day of the kind the Muslims had never seen, nor had they heard of its like." End quote.

Of course, feeding, housing, and controlling so many prisoners was going to present a logistical problem for the Egyptians. They alleviated this problem by holding mass executions of their Latin Christian captives. The prisoners were ordered to march to camps established on the Nile Delta. Those who couldn't march were executed immediately. Even those who could march weren't spared the sword. On the orders of the Sultan, on every evening for a week, 300 Latin Christians were taken from their ranks and beheaded. King Louis was taken in chains to the house of a lowly-ranked official in Mansurah, but he was guarded by a eunuch. As other important personages were captured (those who would attract a ransom) they joined other high ranking French noblemen in a larger establishment nearby.

Then negotiations began for the ransom of the thousands of Latin Christian prisoners held by the Sultan, including the one who, of course, would attract the highest price, King Louis himself. King Louis of course, was not in a strong position as far as the negotiations were concerned, but there was a strangely advantageous string in his negotiating bow, and that was Emperor Frederick. The German Emperor was still held in high regard amongst the Muslims and King Louis and other noblemen, including John of Joinville, were able to use their association with Emperor Frederick to their advantage.

At the outset of the negotiations to secure his release, King Louis was told that the Sultan would require not only Damietta, but all the Crusader states in the Holy Land. King Louis, stretching the truth a little, said that the Crusader states belonged to Emperor Frederick's son. The Sultan immediately removed the states from the negotiating table without further argument. John of Joinville's cunning disguise as a cousin of the King was soon uncovered by the Egyptians, but when he was able, truthfully this time, to reveal that he was distantly related to Emperor Frederick, his worth increased markedly. When the negotiations had come to an end, King Louis agreed to ransom himself in exchange for the

city of Damietta, and pay the staggeringly huge sum of 800,000 gold pieces for the rest of the Crusading army.

Back in Damietta, Queen Margaret had been facing some challenges of her own. You might remember that I mentioned back in Episode 93 that when King Louis left Damietta to march to Mansurah, Queen Margaret was five months pregnant. Well, around four months has passed since then, and I imagine you can guess what's going to happen next. Shortly after news reached her that King Louis had been captured by the Egyptians, Queen Margaret went into labor.

Now, when you are alone in a foreign city and about to give birth, it's always a good idea to have an experienced midwife on hand. This is especially the case if you happen to be the Queen of France and your baby is set to become a possible contender for the French throne. Trouble was, there weren't any midwives in Damietta. They had left along with the rest of the Muslim population after the Franks landed in Egypt. The good news was Queen Margaret did find someone who was prepared to act as a midwife. The bad news was, this midwife was in fact, an elderly French knight who was in his eighties. But the story had a happy ending. Whether it was through the skills of the elderly French knight or just plain luck, Queen Margaret gave birth to a baby boy three days after King Louis' army surrendered, and both of them survived the experience. Queen Margaret named her baby Tristan, the child of sorrow.

But Queen Margaret's worries aren't over yet. On the same day as her son was born, news reached Queen Margaret that the Italians in the city, the Genoese and the Pisans, planned to leave Damietta and sail back to Europe. Food supplies were running low, and rather than wait around for Damietta to be ceded back to the Egyptians, the Italians decided to beat the rush and head back home now. For Queen Margaret, this posed a serious problem. Most of the French men of fighting age had left Damietta to go on Crusade. As a result, the city was predominantly populated with women, the very young, the sick, 80 year old knightly midwives, and merchants. Of these people, it was only really the merchants who could put up a fight if the city was attacked. If the Italian merchants left the city, then the Egyptians could virtually walk right in and retake the city, without having to pay for it with a King.

Put simply, if Damietta lay undefended and fell into Egyptian hands, it was no longer a bargaining chip which could pay King Louis' ransom. To get her husband back, Queen Margaret had to hold on to Damietta. To hold onto Damietta, she had to stop the Pisans and Genoese merchants from leaving. She asked them nicely to stay. That didn't work. She pleaded and begged. That didn't work. In the end, though, she was able to win them over with something that was dear to every merchant's heart, A commercial transaction. She agreed to purchase every single item of food within the city, then personally see to its distribution. The Italians were content with this arrangement and agreed to stay. The cost of this was absolutely massive, a staggering 360,000 gold pieces, nearly half the amount that the Egyptians had demanded for the entire Crusading army.

But Queen Margaret had achieved her objective. The city was secure and would be able to be ransomed in exchange for King Louis. As soon as she was well enough to travel the queen's attendants whisked her off to the safety of Acre with baby Tristan, and the Patriarch, a man called Robert, was delegated with the responsibility of traveling to meet with the Egyptian Sultan to formally hand over the city. Unfortunately, the Patriarch won't be able to fulfill his mission to hand Damietta over to the Sultan Turanshah. Why? Well,

because in the middle of settling the peace negotiations, Egyptian Sultan will be brutally assassinated, not by Assassins in the true sense of the word, but by the talented Mamluk military commander Baibars.

This event will send shock waves around the Muslim world and will eventually have massive ramifications for the future existence of the Crusader states in the Middle East. Join me next week as we examine the initial fallout from this surprise assassination, and also look at the aftermath of King Louis' disastrous Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

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