

History of the Crusades.
Episode 96
King Louis' Crusade VI.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Louis' Crusade fail spectacularly, with most of the Latin Christian army, including King Louis himself, being taken into captivity by the Muslims. As we saw at the end of last week's episode, a peace treaty involving the exchange of the Latin Christian prisoners for Damietta and a vast sum of money was negotiated between the new Egyptian Sultan Turanshah and the Crusaders. However, before the terms of the treaty could be carried out, Turanshah was murdered. This event will have a massive impact on both the history of the Middle East and the presence of the Latin Christians in the Holy Land, so we need to take a closer look at it.

When Turanshah arrived in Egypt in 1250 to take over the reins of power, the country was in a pretty good way, all things considering. This was due mostly to the actions of the Sultana Shajar al-Durr, who concealed the death of her husband al-Salih Ayyub for as long as possible and who had continued to rule Egypt by subterfuge and guile, with the assistance of the elderly diplomat Fakhr al-Din, who became commander of the Egyptian army. With the support of the Mamluks, she was able to place Egypt into a holding pattern pending the arrival from Mesopotamia of her late husband's son and heir Turanshah. The Mamluks were also primarily responsible for holding back, then repelling the invasion of the Franks.

The soldier-slave Mamluks had been held in high regard by the late Sultan Ayyub. He had used them effectively, and they had enjoyed a raft of privileges and benefits.

Fakhr al-Din had died during the Latin Christian attack on the army camp outside Mansurah, but both Shajar and the Mamluks were present when the new Sultan Turanshah arrived to assume control of Egypt. It's safe to say they didn't like what they saw. Rightly seeing both his stepmother Shajar and the elite Mamluk fighting force as a threat to his power, Turanshah made no effort whatsoever to appease them. Instead of attempting to work with them to rule Egypt, Turanshah decided to alienate them as much as he could, placing his own men from Mesopotamia in key government and military posts, confiscating property from his stepmother, and doing the best he could to exclude both the Mamluks and Shajar from any positions of influence. This didn't have the effect Turanshah had hoped for. Instead of both Shajar and the Mamluks fading into obscurity, they united and decided to try and seek for themselves the rewards they had been denied by Turanshah.

There are differing accounts about how exactly Turanshah met his death. There appears to have been an initial assassination attempt that failed. The Mamluks attempted to lay the blame for this act at the feet of the Isma'ilis, the Assassins of Syria, but Turanshah wasn't so easily fooled. Turanshah was a relatively young man and seemed to take every opportunity to celebrate becoming the ruler of Egypt by imbibing large volumes of alcohol. But despite his frequent bouts of drunkenness, Turanshah saw behind the plot. He was pretty certain that the Mamluks had been behind the attack. This, of course, was bad news for the Mamluks. They knew that the Sultan wasn't just going to forgive and forget about an attempt on his life, so they decided they'd better finish the job, and quickly.

That night, when Turanshah rose to leave a banquet he had held for his Emirs, the Mamluk commander Baibars struck. Supported by the elite Mamluk regiment, Baibars attacked the Sultan with his sword. Turanshah fled to a wooden tower beside the Nile River. The Mamluks set the tower alight, forcing Turanshah to jump into the river. Once in the river, he begged for mercy, offering to abdicate and leave Egypt permanently in return for his life. His plea was rejected. Baibars entered the river and killed the Sultan, cutting out his heart, which he intended to show to King Louis, and leaving the rest of his body on the bank of the river.

Turanshah's body lay untouched on the river bank for three days. No one dared to take the body of the Sultan and bury it, until a representative of the Caliph in Baghdad was given permission to remove the corpse and inter it in a simple tomb. There ended the Ayyubid dynasty, which had ruled Egypt and much of the Middle East since it was established by Saladin way back in the 1190s.

This, of course, created a power vacuum. Somewhat surprisingly, the person chosen to fill this vacuum was Shajar al-Durr, the widow of al-Salih Ayyub. To say that appointing a woman as a ruler was rare in the Muslim world at this time was an understatement. It had never actually happened before. Shajar had proven herself a competent and resourceful ruler when she took over the reins of power following her husband's death, and the Mamluks no doubt saw Shajar as possessing a legitimacy for rule, by virtue of her marriage, that they themselves didn't have.

Nevertheless, the move raised more than a few eyebrows. This is how a Muslim chronicler at the time described the event, and I quote "After the assassination of Turanshah the Emirs and Mamluks met near the Sultan's pavilion and decided that Shajar al-Durr, a wife of Sultan Ayyub, would be placed in power, becoming Queen and Sultana. She took charge of the affairs of state, establishing a royal seal in her name, inscribed with the formula um-Khalil, mother of Khalil, a child of hers who had died at an early age. In all the mosques, the Friday sermon was delivered in the name of um-Khalil Sultana of Cairo and of all Egypt. This was unprecedented in the history of Islam." End quote.

Unfortunately for Shajar, the move was a little too radical. She reigned successfully for three months, but she didn't have the support of the Caliph in Baghdad, and murmurs of discontent about Egypt being ruled by a woman started to circulate. Bowing to the inevitable, Shajar abdicated in July 1250, marrying the Mamluk chief Aybak, who was now head of the army, and ceding power to him.

All of this political upheaval was very confusing for the Crusaders. They had negotiated a peace treaty with Sultan Turanshah, a ten year truce was to be put in place, King Louis was to be exchanged for the town of Damietta, and the vast number of Latin Christian prisoners were to be released in exchange for a vast sum of money. Now Turanshah was dead, and no one knew where anyone stood anymore. Fortunately for the Crusaders though, once the dust had settled, Egypt's new ruler confirmed the peace treaty, and the process of formally handing over Damietta and releasing King Louis began.

On the 6th of May 1250, Damietta was officially handed back and King Louis was released from custody. Muslim sources record an entertaining conversation between King Louis and one of his Egyptian captors, which reportedly took place prior to King Louis' release. I think it's worth sharing, so here we go and I quote "The Emir Husam al-Din told me, the King of France was an extremely wise and intelligent man. In one of our conversations, I said to

him, "How did Your Majesty ever conceive the idea, a man of your character and wisdom and good sense, of going on board a ship and riding the back of this sea, and coming to a land so full of Muslims and soldiers, thinking that you could conquer and become its ruler? This undertaking is the greatest risk to which you could possibly expose yourself and your subjects." The King laughed, but did not reply. "In our land", I added, "when a man travels by sea on several occasions, exposing himself and his possessions to such a risk, his testimony is not accepted as evidence by a court of law." "Why not?" asked the King. "Because such behavior suggests to us that he lacks sense, and a man who lacks sense is not fit to give evidence." The King laughed and said "By God, whoever said that was right and whoever made that ruling did not err." End quote.

After his release, King Louis immediately set about trying to find enough money to pay the first installment of the ransom, which needed to be paid to secure the release of the remaining prisoners. King Louis's coffers only held 170,000 gold pieces. He needed another 30,000 to comply with the agreement. For the remainder of the funds he turned to the Knights Templar. Some historians state that the Templars handed over the money without a fuss, while others say that they only released the funds after being threatened with violence. Regardless of exactly what happened, the money was gathered and paid. The sum required was so vast that it took two full days to be weighed and counted. Once it was handed over, the Egyptians released all the captives of noble birth, including Alfonso of Poitiers and John of Joinville. The majority of the prisoners, the ordinary Crusaders, would have to remain in captivity until the final installment was paid.

Following the release of the prisoners, King Louis and his noblemen set sail for Acre, to meet up with Queen Margaret and to arrange for the payment of the remainder of the ransom. The haste in which they left Egypt is reflected in the fact that King Louis' quarters on board the ship hadn't been prepared for him. He had neither fresh clothes nor clean bedding. He was forced to undertake the voyage, wearing the clothes, and sleeping on the mattress, that he had used in prison.

After a stormy passage at sea, King Louis arrived in Acre in mid-May 1250 and immediately called a council of his noblemen to decide what to do next. A letter was waiting for him in Acre from his mother, Blanche of Castile. Apparently the thrill of ruling France again was wearing thin for Blanche. She was concerned that King Henry of England was intending to invade France, and she listed a raft of other problems that required King Louis' immediate attention. The letter urged King Louis to return to France without delay. But King Louis had other ideas. His Crusade had left the Crusader states in the Holy Land short of fighting men. Most of the adult men of fighting age had either perished during the expedition or were being held captive in Egypt. Determined to salvage something positive from his failed Crusade, King Louis decided to remain in the Holy Land until the ransom was paid, and until the Kingdom of Acre could once again stand securely on its own two feet.

King Louis would remain in Acre for the next four years. Most of the French noblemen who had accompanied him to Acre decided not to follow their King's example. They returned to France. Only a handful of noblemen, including John of Joinville, decided to stay in the Holy Land. Queen Margaret stayed, as did around 1400 soldiers.

When Louis first arrived in Acre, the Kingdom was being ruled by the overweight, self-indulgent King Henry of Cyprus. Well, "ruled" probably isn't the right term to use. King Henry had no interest in the dull day-to-day mechanisms of administration and had

appointed John of Arsuf to do the actual ruling on his behalf. John was more than happy to hand this job over to King Louis, and King Louis set about getting the Kingdom back into order.

Meanwhile, back in the Muslim world, Cairo and Damascus came into conflict, as the ruler of Syria decided to test the defensive abilities of the new ruler of Egypt by invading Egyptian territory. Both sides requested assistance from King Louis, but he was happy to sit on the fence, not wanting to endanger the lives of the thousands of prisoners in Egypt by forming an unwise alliance. The Mamluks beat off the Syrian attack. King Louis then advised Cairo that unless the issue of the return of the prisoners was settled soon, he would join forces with Damascus against Egypt. This seemed to spur the Egyptians into action. In return for the payment of some of the remaining ransom, 3,000 prisoners were released, including the Grand Master of the Hospital, who had been in Egyptian custody since the Battle of La Forbie way back in 1244. As a sweetener to the deal, the Egyptian leader sent King Louis the gift of an elephant and a zebra with the batch of prisoners. King Louis then decided to seize the moment and demand the return of the rest of the prisoners without payment. Surprisingly, the Egyptian ruler agreed, providing King Louis joined in an alliance with Egypt against Damascus. King Louis agreed, and the prisoners were released.

King Louis not only achieved his goal of securing the release of the prisoners during his years in the Kingdom of Acre. He spent a great deal of time and money re-fortifying and improving the defenses of the cities of Jaffa, Caesarea, and Sidon. Some of the work he ordered to be carried out remains visible today. He steered the Crusader states through some turbulent times. In 1252, Bohemond V of Antioch died, and King Louis assisted Bohemond's fifteen year old son to rule the Principality despite the fact that he was underage. With Louis' assistance, young Bohemond VI married an Armenian Princess two years later, cementing an important alliance between the Principality of Antioch and Armenia. King Henry of Cyprus died in 1253 and his widowed Queen, Queen Plaisance, who was King Henry's third wife, took over the regency of Cyprus and Acre on behalf of her infant son. King Louis however, continued to rule the Kingdom of Acre with her blessing. King Louis also tried his hand at diplomacy, attempting to form alliances with both the Isma'ili Assassins and the Mongols.

After four years in the Holy Land however, events conspired to call King Louis back to France. At the end of 1250 the most powerful ruler in Europe, and perpetual thorn in the Papacy's side, Emperor Frederick II died, leaving his son Conrad as his successor. In 1252 King Louis' mother, Blanche of Castile, died and things really started to unravel. By 1254 King Louis could delay his return no longer. King Henry of England looked like he was getting ready to invade France. There were succession troubles brewing in Flanders, and the French nobility were urging his return. Reluctantly, King Louis did so, sailing back to Europe with Queen Margaret in April 1254.

Of course, on his return, King Louis would have to cope with the reaction of his subjects to his failed Crusade. The failure of this Crusade seemed to affect the Latin Christians of Europe more acutely than was the case with previous failed expeditions. Perhaps it was because this Crusade had initially looked so promising. It had had a lot of things in its favor. King Louis himself was a picture of piety and seemed to possess all the requisite abilities of a successful Crusading monarch. The expedition was well funded and meticulously planned. It even enjoyed the benefit of treading over old ground traversed in

a recent Crusade, so the landscape, with all its pitfalls and idiosyncrasies, was known to the expedition. Yet it failed.

Thomas Asbridge in his book "The Crusades" writes that the failure of King Louis' Crusade led to an outpouring of doubt and despair in Europe, with some disillusioned Europeans even abandoning their faith. To some people, it seemed possible that God was no longer on their side. Christopher Tyerman, in his book "God's War", provides a nice end note to King Louis' Crusade in the form of a few sentences. I'm going to read them out to you now. Here goes, and I quote "When Louis departed for home in 1254 he left a small garrison and committed himself to continued financial and military aid for the Holy Land. However, his vast expenditure of life and treasure had failed in almost every respect except, as contemporaries tried to see it, spiritual. Souls had been saved, but in death and defeat, not triumph. Louis IX's Crusade had proved the most spectacular of failures." End quote.

And with those solemn words, we fall across the finishing line of what is the final major Crusade of this podcast. But don't panic. It's not quite over yet. There are still a few more episodes to go before we finish up completely. Join me next week as we see how the Crusader states fare after King Louis returns to France. Until next week, bye for now.

End