

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 98  
The Mongol Invasion.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Crusader states descend into chaos following the departure of King Louis IX. A fight between the Venetian and Genoese residents of Acre over the ownership of a monastery on a hill spiraled out of control, leading to a civil war in the Crusader states and the downfall of the doomed Latin Christian Empire of Romania, which was established after the Fourth Crusade.

So, while all this was taking place in the Latin Christian areas of the Middle East, was it a scene of peace and tranquility in the Muslim regions? No, it was not. A couple of episodes ago, we saw the last of the Ayyubid Sultans Turanshah, assassinated by the Mamluk warrior Baibars. The Sultan's stepmother, the very capable Shajar al-Durr then took charge of the country becoming Queen and Sultana. However, this move was a bit radical for its time, and Shajar was forced to give up her rule. She married the head of the Mamluk army, Aybak, and he took over the reins of power. Aybak wasn't universally popular as a ruler and some Mamluks, including Baibars, left Egypt when he assumed power.

It turned out that he soon lost popularity with his wife also. In fact, that was an understatement. Shajar not only quarreled with her husband, she arranged to have him killed. The assassination was carried out on the 15th of April 1257, by the Egyptian leader's own eunuch personal attendants, who murdered him while he was taking his bath. This left Egypt split in its loyalties, with some people supporting a return to power by Shajar, while others looked to find a legitimate male leader.

In the end, Shajar didn't stage a comeback. Why? Because she herself was murdered only a couple of weeks after her husband, apparently beaten to death by her late husband's concubines. Aybak's son, a fifteen year old boy, was made Sultan, but he was eventually deposed by the powerful Mamluk warlord Saif ad-Din Qutuz, who gradually asserted control over all of Egypt. Preferring Qutuz to the previous Mamluk leaders, Baibars, and many other disaffected Mamluk warriors, returned to Egypt from Syria.

It was fortunate for the Egyptians that at this stage in their history, they had both a strong leader and a strong army. Why? Because the Mongols were coming.

Years of infighting between the descendants of Genghis Khan had put a stop to Mongol expansion in the Middle East, but all this ended in 1251, when the great Mongol Prince Mongke was elected as Supreme Khan. Mongke had a collection of competent and talented brothers, and he immediately sent them to the four corners of Mongol territory to put things in order. One brother was sent to China, one brother was sent to Russia, one remained in Mongolia, and one, a man called Hulagu, was dispatched to Persia. Hulagu's orders were to expand out of Persia to the west. Specifically, his goal was an ambitious one. He was to attack the cities of Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, destroy the Muslim Caliphate, and absorb Muslim territory into that controlled by the Mongols.

His first objective was the city of Baghdad, but in order to secure the passage of his army through Mesopotamia to Baghdad, Hulagu first had to turn his attention to a group of people whose strongholds of mountain fortresses stretched from Afghanistan to Syria, the Isma'ili Assassins. Now, some decades earlier, the Assassins had sworn allegiance to

Genghis Khan, and had flourished under the protection of their Mongol overlord. But eventually relations between the Mongols and the Assassins soured, culminating, according to some sources, in an attempt by the Assassins to assassinate the current supreme Khan, Mongke. So the Assassins were now firmly on the bad list so far as the Mongols were concerned, and needed to be cleared out of their mountain fortresses, making the way clear to take Baghdad.

Now, as you know, the Assassins had a formidable reputation, and their fortresses were considered all but impregnable. But they were no match for the Mongols. Realizing it would take an inordinate amount of time to attack each stronghold one by one, the Mongols instead concentrated their efforts on taking just one stronghold, the stronghold that housed the current Grand Master of the Assassins.

The Mongols were phenomenally successful conquerors. They had managed to annex vast amounts of territory through a mixture of assimilation and annihilation. If a territory surrendered to an approaching Mongol army, and agreed to pay the required taxes and tributes, then its people would be spared and the territory absorbed into the Mongol Empire, with all the advantages that entailed. But if you defied the Mongols and attempted to resist the invaders, the Mongols would simply annihilate every last one of you: men, women, and children, with an efficiency that was utterly merciless. Pretty soon, people started to learn that, so far as the Mongols were concerned, resistance was futile. This was what the Assassins were faced with.

As the Mongol army bore down on the mountain fortress containing the Grand Master of the Assassins, they no doubt hoped that the steep, rocky terrain and sheer cliff-face of their stronghold would deter the fighters from the grassy plains, but they hoped in vain. The Mongols subjected the stronghold to a massive bombardment, and some Mongol warriors even managed to scale the cliff-face and enter the fortress. When Hulagu made an offer of clemency to the Grand Master, should he give himself up, the Grand Master bowed to the inevitable. On November the 19<sup>th</sup>, 1256 he formally surrendered to the Mongols. Hulagu then took the captive Grand Master around to each one of the Assassins' strongholds. The Grand Master ordered the fortresses to surrender, and one by one, they all fell into Mongol hands. After the entire Assassin fighting force had been assimilated into the Mongol empire, the Grand Master sought, and was granted, permission to travel to Mongolia to meet with the supreme Khan. When he reached Mongolia however, the Khan refused to meet him. Instead, the Grand Master and his traveling companions were lured to a remote location, and then reportedly trampled to death.

After the Mongols took control of the Assassins' main stronghold of Alamut, they discovered an impressive library inside the fortress. Hulagu sent his Muslim Chamberlain to inspect the library. The Chamberlain removed copies of the Koran, as well as books he believed to be of historical or scientific value, then he set fire to the rest. Books outlining the beliefs and faith of the Isma'ili and those which concerned the occult sciences and philosophy were all burnt and lost to history. In the third book of his trilogy on the Crusades, Steven Runciman states that coincidentally, around the same time, a lightning strike caused a fire in the Great Library in the Muslim Holy City of Medina in what is now Saudi Arabia, and its vast collection of books on Muslim Orthodox philosophy was also destroyed. No one likes it when books are burnt and knowledge destroyed. Unfortunately, for the Muslims of the Middle East, the destruction of these two libraries was just an appetizer for the destruction which was to follow because, with the Assassins out of the way, the path was now clear for the Mongols to march on the city of Baghdad.

Baghdad at this time was the predominant city in the Muslim world. Home to the Caliph and a thriving center of trade and commerce, it had accrued vast amounts of wealth since its founding in the 700s. As a consequence, it was known as the Mother of Cities, and it covered both banks of the Tigris River. The two halves of the city were connected by a bridge, and the entire city was surrounded by defensive walls. Inside the walls, the city boasted palaces, mosques, private and public gardens, luxurious baths, thriving market places, and bazaars.

Before approaching the city with his armies, Hulagu sent a message to the Caliph inviting him to surrender and place the city under Mongol rule. The Caliph refused, stating that the armies of Islam would rise up to defend their city and their Caliph, and that neither Allah nor the Muslims of the Middle East would allow Baghdad to be ruled by the Mongols. So the stage was set.

In November 1257 Hulagu directed his armies to march towards Baghdad. In addition to his own army of Mongol warriors, Hulagu ordered the previously surrendered states of Armenia and Georgia to send armies to assist in the attack. As such, Hulagu had a considerable force under his control. In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf states that the cavalry forces alone numbered in the hundreds of thousands. While this may be an exaggeration, the combined army was certainly absolutely massive, so massive in fact, that Hulagu split it into sections, and the different parts of the army approached the city from the north, east and west. Traditionally, the deep and fast-flowing Tigris River had provided a measure of protection for the city, but it was no barrier to the Mongols. Whenever they wished to cross it, they quickly erected a bridge made of pontoons roped together.

The armies approached from three directions. Local Muslims fled before the advance, and by the time the Mongols arrived at the walls of Baghdad in January 1258, the city was filled to bursting point with refugees from surrounding areas. The Mongols used the latest in military technology in their attack on the city. Outside the walls were majestic date palms, which the Muslims had tended and cultivated for centuries. The Mongols cut the trees down and used them as missiles, firing them at the walls and into the city itself.

In his book "Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World", Jack Weatherford writes that the Mongols used a new innovation in their attacks on the city walls, one which the Muslims hadn't witnessed before: gunpowder. Smoke bombs, proto-grenades, simple mortars, and incendiary rockets were all directed at the city and its walls. Jack Weatherford writes that the Mongols had also developed explosive devices able to hurl missiles with such force that their effect was similar to that of a cannon.

The ancient walls of Baghdad were no match for this type of weaponry. On the 5th of February 1258 the eastern wall of the city collapsed, and the Mongol army swarmed into Baghdad. What followed was seventeen days of looting, destruction, pillaging, rape, and murder.

The Caliph surrendered as soon as the Mongols took the city. He agreed to show Hulagu where his most precious items of treasure were hidden. As soon as the Caliph had completed this task, he was put to death. The Mongols were merciless in their attacks on the citizens of Baghdad and the refugees who had fled there: men, women, children,

babies, the elderly, the sick; the Mongols treated them all in an identical fashion. They were all slain.

All except the Christian residents of the city. Hulagu's wife and mother were both Nestorian Christians, and Steven Runciman writes that the Christians who took refuge in the churches within the city were spared, via a special order emanating from the wife of the Khan. Jack Weatherford in his book goes further, stating that the Christians of Baghdad were not only spared from the massacre, but actively took part in the slaying of the Muslim residents of the city, while also defiling and destroying mosques. To complete the destruction, the city of Baghdad was set on fire.

Accounts differ as to how many people died in the sacking of Baghdad. Thomas Asbridge, in his book "The Crusades", lists the number of dead as exceeding 30,000. However, the Mongols at the time listed the number of dead as 200,000, while some Persian historians claim as many as 800,000 people died.

Whatever the exact figure, the Mongols had achieved the unthinkable, from a Muslim point of view. They had sacked and destroyed Baghdad and killed the Muslim Caliph. It was a momentous historical event. The next time non-Muslims would conquer Baghdad would be in the year 2003, when American and British forces invaded the city.

It wasn't only the cost to human lives which so devastated the Muslim population of the Middle East. Similar to the fall of Constantinople some fifty years earlier, it was the destruction of items of priceless cultural value which hit the hardest. Not only had the people of Baghdad been slain, the cultural center of the Muslim Middle East was now a smoldering ruin.

The coming of the Mongols and the sacking of Baghdad was a devastating event for Muslims of the time. The Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir describes the awful act of these events in a passage in his book "Perfect History". It's a rather lengthy passage, but I think it's worth reading out in full, so here we go, and I quote "The events I'm about to describe are so horrible that for years I avoided all mention of them. It is not easy to announce that death has fallen upon Islam and the Muslims. Alas, I would have preferred my mother never to have given birth to me, or to have died without witnessing all these evils. If one day you were told that the Earth has never known such calamity since God created Adam, do not hesitate to believe it, for such is the strict truth. Nebuchadnezzar's massacre of the children of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem are generally cited as among the most infamous tragedies of history, but these were as nothing compared to what has happened now. No, probably not until the end of time will a catastrophe of such magnitude be seen again." End quote.

In his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes", Amin Maalouf writes that following the destruction of Baghdad and the murder of the Caliph, the Muslims of the Middle East realized that the Mongol invasion wasn't just about a war over a city or some territory. What was occurring now was a struggle for the very survival of Islam itself.

By the end of March, the stench of corpses inside Baghdad was so overpowering that Hulagu ordered his army to leave the city, worried that the un-buried corpses might spread disease. Weighed down by the treasure of five centuries of rule by the Abassid Caliphs, Hulagu left Baghdad and turned his army westwards towards Syria, the cities of Aleppo and Damascus firmly in his sights.

Join me next week to see the cities of Aleppo and Damascus fall to the all-conquering Mongols, who then turn their attention towards the Egyptian capital Cairo. Until next week, bye for now.

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