

History of the Crusades.
Episode 104
Troubled Times.

Hello again. Last week we saw the last of the Crusades as the French, Spanish, and English royal families each made a final and ultimately fruitless attempt to assist the Crusader states.

Meanwhile, as these European rescue operations were underway, Baibars continued to pummel away at Latin Christian territory in the Holy Land. In 1271, shortly prior to the arrival of Lord Edward of England, Baibars enjoyed a massive strategic and psychological victory when he defeated a castle which had always been viewed as impregnable. That's right. In March 1271, Baibars achieved the impossible. He succeeded in taking the mighty fortress Crac des Chevaliers. How did it happen? Well, it went a little something like this.

Having heard about the death of King Louis IX of France in Tunis, and being vastly relieved that he didn't have to march his army westwards into northern Africa, Sultan Baibars instead turned his attention back to the Crusader states. Deciding to concentrate on eliminating the Frankish defenses protecting the County of Tripoli, Baibars and his forces easily took the Templar Castle of Safita. The region, however, was dominated by one massive castle, a castle which no Muslim attacker had ever seriously tried to take. Baibars seemed undeterred by the legendary defenses of Crac des Chevaliers, and marched to the castle in early March 1271.

As we saw a way back in Episode 43, Crac des Chevaliers stands on a ridge and can only really be approached from one direction, the south. At this time in its history, the castle was in excellent shape. It had undergone a refurbishment earlier in the 13th century, and everyone assumed it could hold out against any attack.

The southern approach to the castle, not surprisingly, was heavily fortified. The first obstacle faced by Baibars would have been the outer walls, a set of double walls made of thick stone, protected by a series of circular towers. Inside these walls was a moat, and beyond the moat, the castle walls itself were smooth and sloping, designed to evade any attempt at either undermining or scaling.

When Baibars and his army arrived at the southern section of the fortress, it was pouring with rain. He was forced to wait a few days for the rain to ease up. He ordered the construction of a number of siege engines, then the bombardment began. The Mamluk siege engines bombarded the southern outer walls relentlessly for weeks on end. Finally, after more than a month, a section of the mighty outer walls gave way, and the Egyptians were able to pour into the section of the fortress previously protected by the outer walls. Baibars then began bombarding the next set of walls. The defenders at this stage had retreated into the inner citadel of the castle.

Baibars knew that battering his way into the inner sanctums of the castle could take months, and many of his men may be lost, so he came up with a cunning plan. In early April, he forged a letter and presented it to the head of the garrison at the castle. The letter purported to be from the Master of the Order of the Hospital, and it ordered the garrison at Crac des Chevaliers to come to terms with the attackers and surrender the castle. In his book "The Crusades", Thomas Asbridge writes that either the garrison were tricked by the

letter, or realized it was a fake but decided to use it as an opportunity to surrender with a degree of honor. Regardless of the reason, the mighty fortress Crac des Chevaliers surrendered to Sultan Baibars on the 8th of April 1271, and the garrison were provided with safe passage to Tripoli. Baibars ordered the castle to be repaired, then garrisoned it with Muslim men. He now controlled the vital main pass into the County of Tripoli.

With Baibars now controlling much of the territory that had previously been under Latin Christian control and some strategically important castles, it was fortunate for the Latin Christians that, a year later, a ten year truce was signed between the Kingdom of Acre and the Sultan.

Now you would think that the remaining Franks in the Middle East would take full advantage of this period of peace, rally behind their King, all pull together to consolidate what territory they had left, and do their best to prepare for future attacks by the Muslims. But that's not what happened. Instead, King Hugh had his hands full dealing with internal strife.

In the year following the signing of the truce, the vital city of Beirut fell under Baibars' control. This was not due to a conquest by Baibars, but because of some very weird internal Frankish politics. Back in 1267 the Lord of Beirut John of Ibelin died, leaving the city to his eldest daughter, Isabella. Five years later, Isabella married an Englishman known to the Franks as Hamo le Strange, or "the Foreigner". The Foreigner was likely one of Lord Edward's knights who had remained behind when the English Crusaders returned to Europe. For reasons unknown, the Foreigner distrusted King Hugh. In fact, to say he distrusted King Hugh was an understatement. So worried was he about the future of Beirut under King Hugh that on his deathbed, a year later, he made a formal pact, placing his wife and the city of Beirut under the protection of Sultan Baibars.

Following the Foreigner's death, King Hugh attempted to wrestle Beirut back into the Latin Christian fold by abducting Isabella and taking her to Cyprus, where he was sure he could convince her to marry a nice local Latin Christian man, who would bring Beirut back to the Kingdom. But it wasn't to be. Baibars protested, and the High Court had no choice but to support Baibars' claim. Isabella was delivered back to Beirut, where Baibars supplied her with a Mamluk guard for her protection.

The next major problem King Hugh had to face concerned the County of Tripoli. The last Prince of Antioch, Bohemond VI, died in 1275, leaving his fourteen year old son, unsurprisingly also named Bohemond, as his heir. Young Bohemond of course needed a Regent to rule the County of Tripoli on his behalf. Before he became King Hugh, Hugh was known as Hugh of Antioch, and was in fact the next adult heir to the former Principality of Antioch. So King Hugh rode northwards to claim the Regency of the County on that basis.

Trouble was, by the time he got there someone else was in charge, Bartholomew, the Bishop of Tortosa. Why was Bishop Bartholomew ruling the County of Tripoli? Well, Bohemond VI's widow, the Armenian Princess Sibylla, had already assumed the title of Regent and had sent her son to the court of his uncle, the new King Leo III of Armenia.

The last time we mentioned Leo, back in Episode 101, he had been taken prisoner by Sultan Baibars. Well, he was released a couple of years later as part of a prisoner exchange. After completing a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he returned to Armenia in early

1269. His father King Hethum immediately abdicated in his favor, and retired to a monastery where he died a year later.

King Leo was happy to take young Bohemond under his wing, and Sibylla, well, she was happy to pass her administrative duties on to the very popular Bishop Bartholomew. Bishop Bartholomew had the support of both the nobility of Tripoli and the people of the County. King Hugh was forced to withdraw empty-handed back to Acre, and the Bishop ruled Tripoli until Bohemond came of age and returned from Armenia in 1277 to rule as Bohemond VII.

Even worse than all of these problems though, was the trouble King Hugh faced in Acre. In Acre, the Templars and their allies the Venetians were currently at loggerheads with the Hospitallers, Teutonic Knights and the Genoese. Unfortunately for the Hospitallers, their order was on the decline. They had been hit hard by the loss of their headquarters, Crac des Chevaliers, and in 1268 the Grand Master of the Hospital declared that he could currently only muster 300 knights, a far cry from when the Order was at its peak and had 10,000 knights under its control.

In contrast, the order of the Temple was thriving. It still had its headquarters intact, the great castle at Tortosa, and two other castles besides: one at Sidon and the massive fortress Athlit. It was also profiting handsomely from its banking and financial businesses in the Middle East and in Europe. In 1273 a new Grand Master of the Temple, William of Beaujeu, was elected. William of Beaujeu had close ties with Charles of Anjou, the current king of Sicily, and was determined to advance Charles' interests in the Holy Land at the expense of King Hugh.

King Hugh was spending more and more time in his other, friendlier Kingdom of Cyprus, and things in Acre were getting more and more unsettled. Not only were hostilities building between the military Orders, the Genoese and Venetians were also at each other's throats, culminating in riots breaking out in the streets of Acre between Muslim merchants from Bethlehem, who were backed by the Templars, and Venetians and Nestorian merchants from Mosul, who enjoyed the support of the Hospitallers and the Genoese.

Just when it looked like things couldn't get much worse, in 1277 Maria of Antioch decided to sell her right to the Kingdom of Acre to Charles of Anjou. You might remember that back in Episode 102, Maria argued that she had a stronger claim to the throne than Hugh of Antioch. Her argument was rejected by the High Court at Acre, and Maria stormed off to Europe. Well, now she has sold her claim to Charles, King of Sicily, and Charles has just declared himself the rightful King of Acre. To secure his claim to the throne, Charles sent one Roger of Serevino, the Count of Marsico, to Acre, to assume control of the Kingdom on Charles' behalf. In case the citizens of Acre questioned this move, Charles sent an armed force to accompany Roger.

Acre at this time was under the rule of Balian of Ibelin, the son of John of Arsuf, King Hugh having thrown up his hands in disgust at the carryings-on and deciding to remain permanently in Cyprus. King Hugh, having left Acre to its own devices, has been pressured into appointing someone to administer the rebellious Kingdom and had eventually settled on Balian. But really King Hugh had pretty much wiped his hands of the Kingdom of Acre at this stage, and wanted nothing else to do with it.

So when Roger sailed into Acre, brandishing a document signed by Maria of Antioch and Charles of Anjou, and declaring himself ruler of the city, Balian really didn't know what to do. He knew he had the support of the Patriarch and the Order of the Hospital, but he also knew that Roger likely had the support of both the Templars and the Venetians, both more powerful allies than his own. The disinterested King Hugh remained in Cyprus, and in the end, to avoid igniting a civil war which he would likely lose, Balian reluctantly ceded the citadel at Acre to Roger, and declared Charles of Anjou to be the King of Acre.

Roger settled into his new lodging at Acre and ordered all the local noblemen to pay him homage. Many of the members of the nobility were understandably confused and didn't know what to do. Some of them wrote to King Hugh in Cyprus, telling him what had occurred and asking him for guidance. They didn't receive a response. When Roger then threatened to confiscate their lands unless they submitted to him, the barons gave in and acknowledged Charles of Anjou as the new King of Acre. Young Bohemond VII also threw his support behind Charles, and it became official. Charles of Anjou was King of Acre.

Meanwhile, back in the Muslim world, Baibars was busy conducting raids into territory controlled by both the Mongols and the Seljuk Turks. With the truce between himself and what remained of the Crusader states still in operation, he was able to concentrate on extending his frontiers into Anatolia and Cilicia. In 1277 however, all this came to an abrupt end. Returning to Damascus after a decisive victory in Anatolia against the Mongols, the Sultan suddenly fell ill whilst watching a polo match. Wracked by severe dysentery, he soon died. Rumors abounded about the cause of his death. Some said that the dysentery was caused by wounds he had received in Anatolia; others said that he had drunk too much fermented mare's milk, and that was the cause. Many people, of course, believed he had been poisoned. The true cause of his demise was never discovered, and Baibars was buried in Damascus, his tomb standing a couple of hundred meters away from that of Saladin.

Ruling Egypt and Syria for a period of seventeen years, Baibars left quite a legacy. When he rose to power the Crusader states stretched in a line on the Mediterranean coast, it's lucrative trading ports protected by massive fortresses guarding the hinterlands. In his book "The Crusades", Jonathan Phillips writes that during his years in power, Baibars traveled around 25,000 miles, and actively took part in 38 military campaigns. His energy, drive, and military brilliance saw the Crusader states reduced to a handful of coastal towns in the Kingdom of Acre and the County of Tripoli, the isolated outpost of Latakia, and a few castles. Baibars had reduced the Latin Christian presence in the Holy Land from three states controlling a struggling but viable section of coastal land, to two states consisting of a handful of vulnerable coastal towns utterly unprotected from the vast Muslim territory surrounding them.

Baibars himself, although clearly extraordinarily successful, never really reached the heights of popularity enjoyed by Saladin. Whereas Saladin could be compassionate and personable, Baibars was renowned for his cruelty, his treachery, and his utter ruthlessness. The last word about Sultan Baibars should perhaps go to Steven Runciman who, in the third volume of his trilogy on the Crusades states, and I quote "As a man, he was evil, but as a ruler, he was amongst the greatest of his time." End quote.

What effect does the demise of Sultan Baibars have on the Latin Christians of the Holy Land? You'll have to keep listening to find out. Join me next week to see some surprising

developments in the doomed, but still very lively, Crusader states. Until next week, bye for now.

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