

History of the Crusades.
Episode 36.
The Second Crusade VIII.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Crusaders arrive in the Holy Land. King Louis and the remaining French Knights arrived in Antioch, while King Conrad sailed in from Constantinople, where he had been recuperating from an arrow wound to his head which he suffered in Anatolia. The southern French fleets, complete with fresh men, arrived in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, as did the ships containing the Latin Christians who had taken Lisbon in Portugal. At the conclusion of last week's episode, we learned that a decision had been made for the Crusaders to attack Damascus. We'll come to that decision in a minute.

But first I have a sad tale to tell you all. Remember Alfonso Jordan, Count of Toulouse? He's the son of Raymond, Count of Toulouse, founder of the Crusader state of Tripoli. Alfonso Jordan fled Tripoli as a baby after the death of his father, and went on to become Count of the wealthy region of Toulouse in France. Toulouse borders the Mediterranean Sea on the southern coast of France, and Alfonso Jordan and his contingent of knights very sensibly decided to sail to the Holy Land.

Alfonso Jordan sailed into Acre in April 1148. His arrival was heralded by the Christian citizens of the County of Tripoli, who were eager to welcome back into the fold the son of their founder, who had, after all, been born in the region. But there were people who were not so keen to welcome Alfonso Jordan, and they of course, were the current Count of Tripoli, Raymond and his wife, the Countess Hodierna. Count Raymond was the grandson of Count Raymond of Toulouse's illegitimate son Bertrand. Countess Hodierna is Queen Melisende's sister. It's pretty clear to anyone taking an interest that Alfonso Jordan, as the legitimate son of the County's founder, has a much stronger claim to the seat of power in Tripoli than its current ruler, who was descended from an illegitimate line. Did Alfonso Jordan put Count Raymond's mind at ease, by telling him that he wasn't interested in remaining in the Middle East and was happy to remain ruler of his County back in France? No, not at all. Alfonso Jordan brought his wife and children with him to the Middle East and all indications were that he intended to settle down in the region.

Anyway, Alfonso Jordan's ship arrived at Acre in April 1148 and, instead of journeying to Tripoli, Alfonso Jordan decided that he had better head straight to Jerusalem to join the other leaders of the Crusade. On his way to the Holy City, he stopped briefly at Caesarea, where he died a sudden and agonizing death. Now it's not uncommon for people in the Middle Ages to die sudden and agonizing deaths, and Alfonso Jordan could well have been struck down by appendicitis or some other illness, but rumors quickly spread that he had been poisoned, and the finger of blame, of course, was pointed squarely at Count Raymond of Tripoli. He denied the charge, as did Queen Melisende, who was the other suspect in the case, the Queen being suspected of poisoning Alfonso Jordan to protect the position of her sister Hodierna. In the end, nothing was proven either way, but the rumors were persistent enough for Count Raymond to remove himself from all further dealings regarding the Second Crusade. Right. Now we have finished with the sad end of Alfonso Jordan, back to the main game.

On the 24th of June 1148, on the Feast of St John the Baptist, all the important personages, power-brokers, and decision makers of the military campaign met near Acre.

Now this was a gathering the nature of which the Crusader states had never experienced before, and were never likely to experience again. It was a truly impressive lineup of individuals. In attendance were two European kings, King Louis and King Conrad, along with their noblemen. Queen Melisende and the young King Baldwin III were present, representing the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The top echelon of the military Orders of the Templars and Hospitallers were present, as were the senior clergy from the Holy Land, as well as bishops from France and Germany. Most of the local Frankish lords, with the exception of Count Raymond of Tripoli for reasons we have already discussed, were in attendance, including those from Caesarea, Transjordan and Beirut. As I said, this was a very impressive lineup, and they had gathered together to discuss a very important issue. The issue was this. What would be the next move for the men of the Second Crusade?

There were three options on the table and we will discuss each of them in turn. The first option was to gather the Crusading forces and local Frankish forces and head north to attack Aleppo. If the attack was successful, they could then proceed to Edessa. This option sounded pretty sensible. The greatest threat to the existence of the Latin Christian states in the Holy Land came from Nur ad-Din, and Aleppo was his capital. The original purpose of the Second Crusade was to retake Edessa from Nur ad-Din, and to attack Aleppo in addition to a Edessa might seriously reduce Nur ad-Din's influence in the region.

But the plan received a lukewarm reception at the meeting. There were no representatives present from the Principality of Antioch or the County of Edessa, so no one was really there to champion their cause. King Louis had recently spent some time in Antioch and it's likely that the assembly looked to him for his views on the matter. But of course, King Louis had already been down this path with Raymond, the Prince of Antioch. Raymond had wanted Louis' assistance to attack Aleppo, and King Louis had refused, so really there was no way that King Louis was going to change tack now and argue for a march on Aleppo.

King Conrad as well had no interest in attacking Nur ad-Din's capital. He was now a staunch ally of Emperor Manuel after having spent time in Constantinople being cared for by the Emperor while he recovered from the head wound he received in Anatolia. He knew that the Byzantine Emperor was concerned that a Latin Christian attack on Aleppo would adversely affect Byzantine interests in the region, so King Conrad as well would have argued against the attack on Aleppo.

And, as I said before, there was no one present from the northern Crusader states to argue against this tide of opinion. The local Frankish nobility who were at the meeting were overwhelmingly from the southern states and their interests, of course, lay closer to home. It was almost inevitable, therefore that the decision to attack Aleppo was discounted.

The second option on the table was to attack the port of Ascalon. Ascalon was in the Kingdom of Jerusalem and was a short distance from the city of Jerusalem, but it was in Muslim hands. In fact, it was the only port on the entire coastline of Palestine and Syria still in Muslim hands. It had been a thorn in the side of the Latin Christians for many years, although in recent times its effectiveness had been largely neutralised by a series of castles built nearby. It would have been a sensible option for the Crusading army, but it was a small, unimpressive target, and it just didn't have the wow factor to sway the esteemed leaders gathered at the conference.

And that brings us to the third and final option, Damascus. Damascus certainly had the wow factor. It was well known to the European Crusaders as a biblical city, and they were keen from the outset to capture it, but really, they should have taken more notice of the politics of the region. Until recently, Damascus had been allied with the Kingdom of Jerusalem and had sought the assistance of the Kingdom in its attempts to keep Nur ad-Din from its city walls. While it was true that relations between Damascus and Jerusalem had broken down in recent times, Damascus remained one of the few seats of power in the Holy Land which might be persuaded to join the Latin Christians in their quest to neutralize the growing power of Nur ad-Din. If the Christians attacked Damascus and lost, it would be all but guaranteed that they would lose any support they had within the city, leaving it open to fall into Nur ad-Din's hands.

If they succeeded in taking Damascus, it would, of course, be a great prize. It was a major Muslim center, and if it fell under Christian control, it would form a barrier between the Muslims in Egypt and Africa and the Muslims in northern Syria. But the risks were high.

One vocal proponent of the plan to attack Damascus was King Baldwin III of Jerusalem. King Baldwin had ruled the Kingdom of Jerusalem in conjunction with his mother, Queen Melisende, for the past five years. He was now 18 years of age and was constantly seeking ways to reduce his mother's influence and gain a greater portion of royal power for himself. Leading an army and physically going into battle was one thing his mother couldn't do, and it's likely that the young and ambitious King saw a victory in Damascus as an effective way of gaining an edge in his power struggle with his mother.

Supporting young King Baldwin in his proposal to attack Damascus were King Conrad, Patriarch Fulk of Jerusalem, and the Knights Templar. We have already seen that King Conrad argued against attacking Aleppo, due mostly to his new alliance with the Byzantine Emperor. King Conrad was living with the Templars during his stay in Jerusalem, in their base on the Temple Mount. It's likely that he discussed attacking Damascus with them, and perhaps was able to sway them to his cause.

Anyway, after much debate between the leaders present at the conference near Acre, it was formally decided. The combined armies of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the military Orders, the newly-arrived southern French, and the remnants of the French and German forces who had traveled from Constantinople, would launch an attack on Damascus.

When news of the proposed attack filtered through to the Muslim leaders in the region, they were aghast. They had been expecting the Crusaders to attack Edessa, or perhaps Aleppo, but they were astonished that Damascus was the chosen target. As Amin Mallouf stated in his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes" and I quote "Attack Damascus, the city of Mu'in ad-Din Unur, the only leader to have signed a treaty of alliance with Jerusalem? The Franj could have done the Arab resistance no greater service." End of quote.

As soon as he heard reports that his city was going to be attacked, the Emir of Damascus, Mu'in ad-Din Unur began preparations for the defense of his city. He fortified the walls and stationed soldiers in any points where an attack may occur. He replenished the water supplies and stocks of food within the city walls and set about destroying all the wells and supplies of water surrounding the city.

Now, Damascus lies on a plateau on the site of a natural oasis formed by the River Barada, flowing down from the Anti-Lebanon mountain range. It's one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on the planet, and by the time the Crusaders arrived, it had already seen its fair share of conquerors. The neo-Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar captured Damascus in 572 BC, and he was followed in turn by the Persians, Alexander the Great, and the Romans. Finally, in the AD 600's, the city fell under local Muslim rule, ending hundreds of years of Western occupation. As you would expect, the Old City of Damascus contains many reminders of its colorful history, and in its early years the city had a reputation for being a city of great beauty. It's said that when the Prophet Mohammed first looked down from the mountains onto Damascus, he refused to visit the city because he wanted to enter paradise only once, and that was to be when he died.

Damascus is also an important city for the Christian religion. God was meant to have revealed himself to Abraham on a mountain which overlooks the city, and a mosque at the foot of the mountain commemorates the reputed birthplace of Abraham. The city was also closely associated with the early spread of Christianity, with Saul of Tarsus, who later became Saint Paul, converting to Christianity on the road to Damascus.

At the time of the Crusades, the city of Damascus was surrounded by walls. The walls had been there since Roman times, but after the fall of Jerusalem to the Crusaders in 1099, the city's defenses were repaired and reconstructed. Outside the city walls, one of its dominant features were the extensive orchards which surrounded the city and extended nearly five miles to the west. The orchards were made up of citrus, walnut, pomegranate, apricot and fig trees, with under-plantings of wheat, barley and beans. The Romans had built an extensive irrigation system for the orchards, using the water from the adjacent river.

The crusaders decided to approach the city through the orchards, as the trees would provide food, and water could be taken from the irrigation channels. The trees could also be cut down to provide wood for siege engines.

So the combined Latin Christian armies set out in mid-July 1148. They marched to the north eastern edge of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and from there crossed Mount Lebanon and descended down towards Damascus. A few miles out from the city, the army arranged itself into battle formation. The combined army was led by young King Baldwin, with King Louis in the center and King Conrad guarding the rear of the forces. At the army's approach, the Emir of the city sent for reinforcements, sending a messenger all the way to Aleppo, to Nur ad-Din, as well as requesting help from closer Muslim governors.

When the army reached the orchards, things began to get interesting. The orchards were densely planted, and the only way to move through them was along narrow, designated paths. Some individual plots within the orchard were surrounded by walls, some of which even had towers to enable the owners to see over his plot of land. On Saturday the 24th of July, the army started to work its way along the narrow pathways through the orchards. The trees, the low walls and the towers were, of course, all ideal places for the Muslim defenders to conceal themselves and fire arrows at the Christians before retreating back into the cover provided by the trees. The Crusaders were powerless to stop these attacks, but they pressed doggedly onwards. The Muslims eventually realized that while they could pick the odd Christian off here and there with their arrows, they couldn't prevent the passage of the army through the orchards. They withdrew out of the orchards and across a plain, regrouping in front of the city walls. Mounted archers gathered, ready to attack the

approaching Christians, and small mobile catapult machines were set up, ready to fire at the invading army. King Baldwin's forces emerged from the orchards, and after a short pause to regroup, they engaged the Muslim defenders. Fighting ensued, and the Christians were making little progress.

But luckily for King Baldwin, while he was busy fighting, the remainder of the Christian forces were making their way through the orchards. With the arrival of King Conrad's rear forces, things started to turn in the Christians favor. Upon arriving at the battle, the German knights dismounted from their horses and chose to fight on foot, using their swords and shields. This proved rather effective, and the Muslim defenders were pushed back behind the city walls.

The Christians had achieved their objective, and they set up camp on the plain next to the river, in front of the city walls. This was an ideal position to be in. The river and the irrigation channels provided plentiful supplies of water, which was sorely needed in the summer heat, while the nearby orchards provided fruit, nuts, shade and wood.

The citizens of Damascus were now deeply concerned for their city. They watched from the walls as the vast Christian army busied itself chopping down trees and building siege engines. In preparation for what they believe to be an imminent invasion, the Muslims barricaded the streets within the city itself, intending to slow the advance of the army once the walls were breached.

But then a strange thing happened, a very strange thing. The Muslims looked on in disbelief as the Christian army abandoned its ideally situated camp and started to move around to the opposite side of the city. There were no orchards in their new camp, and no river. There was one advantage. The defensive wall surrounding the city was lower and weaker at this point, but chroniclers at the time and historians over the ages have pondered what on earth could have led the Christians to make this strategic blunder. And a blunder it was. They hadn't bought supplies of food with them as they assumed they could just eat fruit and nuts from the orchards. But in the new location, there were no orchards. They couldn't go back to the site of their previous camp to forage for food because the Muslim defenders barred the way with barriers of logs and rocks, defended by archers. They started to get hungry. With no shade in the mid summer heat, they started to get thirsty. And to top it all off the wall, which certainly appeared lower and weaker than the wall near the orchard, was proving impervious to their assaults.

So what led the Crusaders to make the fateful decision to move camp? Well, William of Tyre, a chronicler of the Second Crusade, is adamant that treachery was to blame. He was utterly convinced that some of the noblemen from the Kingdom of Jerusalem had been bribed by Unur to suggest to the King that their position should be moved. William was a student in Europe at the time of the Second Crusade, and he wrote his account 25 years after the events took place. He did, however, rely on the accounts of people who had experienced the event, so he may have been right. However, it might also have been a simple strategic error. Whatever the cause, it was an error which was to have huge ramifications.

But as yet the Crusaders aren't aware of the extent of their blunder. Yes, the wall isn't coming down as easily as they thought, and yes, the food has run out, but they were still optimistic that within a short time, the city will be taken. So they started debating who would rule the city once it fell into Christian hands. The noblemen from the Kingdom of

Jerusalem had assumed that Damascus would form part of the Kingdom of Jerusalem upon its fall, and they had a man lined up ready to govern it, the current Lord of Beirut. But Thierry of Flanders, one of the Crusaders from Europe, coveted the city and had been doing some campaigning behind the scenes. He wished to place Damascus in the center of a new Crusader state, with himself as leader. He had the support of King Conrad and King Louis, then also managed to gain the support of King Baldwin, who's half sister was Thierry's wife. Upon learning this, the nobility of the Kingdom of Jerusalem were furious, and suddenly found themselves less enthusiastic about taking Damascus.

Well, they needn't have worried too much. The Christian army was just about to receive some devastating news. Not only had the Muslim defenders stepped up their attacks on the Christian force, word was being spread around that a massive army, led by Nur ad-Din himself, was on its way. This was a disaster for two reasons. Firstly, once Nur ad-Din's army arrived at Damascus, the Christians will be trapped between the advancing army and the city walls, and would likely be annihilated. Secondly, it was pretty clear that if Nur ad-Din saved Damascus, the city which had for so long held out against him would fall under his control. The nobility from the Crusader states quickly realized the ramifications of this and urged King Baldwin to retreat.

The European Christians didn't really have a firm grasp on local politics and took some convincing to be persuaded to leave, but at dawn on Wednesday the 28th of July, a mere five days after arriving at Damascus, the Muslims watched on as the Christians packed up their camp and retreated towards Galilee. The Muslims weren't content just to watch them leave. They harassed them every step of the way, wheeling in to the retreating columns of men and letting fly volleys of arrows, before retreating, reloading, and doing it all again. Consequently, the road back to Jerusalem was littered with the bodies of Christian men and horses. The stench of their rotting corpses is said to have polluted the countryside for months.

And so ends the Second Crusade. The ramifications of its epic failure were huge. Join me next week as we discussed these ramifications and take a look at what happened to the main players. Until next week, bye for now.

End