

History of the Crusades.
Episode 46
The Rise of Saladin.

Hello again. Last week we discussed the ramifications for the Latin Christians of the death of King Amalric. We saw the leper King, young Baldwin IV, rise to the throne and saw the political situation in the Kingdom of Jerusalem and the Crusader states deteriorate into factionalism and conflict. What happened in the Muslim world after the death of its leader, Nur ad-Din? We're about to find out.

As you will probably recall, Nur ad-Din died unexpectedly in May 1174, possibly as a result of a heart attack. At the time of his death he ruled most of Syria, from Aleppo in the north to Damascus in the south. Saladin ruled Egypt, and the conflict between the two leaders had risen to a crescendo, with Nur ad-Din planning to invade Egypt and teach his former underling a lesson. But Nur ad-Din died before the invasion took place. Nur ad-Din's successor was his eleven year old son, al-Salih. As they were about to discover in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the fact that a successor to power was still a child meant that the child required a protector, or a powerful figure who would look after his interests, until he came of age and could rule in his own right. This, of course, meant that young al-Salih became a political pawn, with various factions and men of ambition all vying to become al-Salih's protector.

To complicate matters further, two of Nur ad-Din's nephews, Saif ad-Din, the ruler of Mosul and Imad ad-Din from Sinjar, decided that this would be a perfect opportunity to extend their power base, and they began pushing the borders of their territory westwards towards the Euphrates River. King Amalric, unaware of course that he had only weeks to live himself, decided to follow the example of Nur ad-Din's nephews and expand Latin Christian territory. He moved his army to Banias, a frontier town which had been taken over by Damascus ten years ago.

Saladin watched these developments with interest. Fate had been kind to him, and the death of Nur ad-Din meant that he no longer faced a Syrian invasion. He, of course, had no legitimate claim to succeed Nur ad-Din. He wasn't even remotely related to the recently deceased leader. He was of Kurdish descent, and was merely the son of a Kurdish mercenary fighter. Nur ad-Din's entourage and political advisers had ceased calling Saladin by his proper name. They didn't call him Yusef. Instead, they called him "the upstart", "the disloyal", or "the insolent". He was viewed as a lowly servant of Nur ad-Din, who, by a series of quirks of fate, had somehow managed to find himself the ruler of Egypt.

It was certainly true that, unlike many rulers, Saladin didn't seem possessed of any driving personal ambition. Like his uncle Shirkuh before him, he mixed freely with soldiers of any rank and eschewed luxury. When the Caliph's luxurious palaces became vacant, Saladin let his Emirs live in them, preferring himself the more practical residence of the vizier. Yet for all his humility and lack of personal ambition, a few months after Nur ad-Din's death, Saladin made an extraordinary decision. He decided to invade Syria.

How did this decision come about and why? Well, unfortunately, it's difficult to know exactly why Saladin chose this path. For a decision that would change the landscape of Islamic rule in the Middle East and have a massive impact on the history of the Crusades,

the reason why Saladin decided to extend his power base from Egypt to Syria is by no means clear. Immediately after Nur ad-Din's death, there is no indication at all that he was going to do anything of the sort. Saladin's first move was to write to Nur ad-Din's young son, declaring his loyalty and advising that the young ruler's name had replaced his father's during Friday prayer services in Egypt. Soon after, Saladin wrote another letter to al-Salih, saying that he would fight as a sword against the young ruler's enemies, and warning him that Syria was surrounded by foes such as the Franj, who needed to be fought.

Then Saladin became caught up in events in Egypt. In July 1174 a fleet of 284 ships appeared off Alexandria, laden with knights, foot soldiers, horses, and provisions from Sicily. However, young King William of Sicily had recently quarreled with the Byzantine Emperor Manuel, and with no support from that quarter and with no sign of the army of Jerusalem on the horizon, the ships quickly dispersed and sailed for home when Saladin and his army marched into Alexandria. At the same time, some disaffected Shia Emirs in upper Egypt attempted an uprising, which Saladin was quick to quash. But after these threats were dealt with, Saladin seems to have turned his mind to invading his former homeland, Syria.

Again, we need to ask why? If it wasn't personal ambition which motivated him, what did? The traditional Islamic view is that Saladin was motivated by the notion of jihad, or holy war. The presence of the Latin Christians in the Middle East posed a threat to Islam, and perceiving that a united Islamic front was the best way to counter that threat, he pursued the goal of uniting the region surrounding the Crusader states under one ruler, himself.

Now I should make it clear from the outset that Saladin did not declare an intention to usurp Nur ad-Din's young son al-Salih. He made it clear that his actions were governed by two principles. Firstly, that he was at all times acting in al-Salih's interests and not for his own personal reward, and secondly, that Islamic unity was needed in order to achieve jihad and defeat the Franj.

By this time, King Amalric had followed Nur ad-Din's example, by dying unexpectedly of an illness, so really the French weren't posing the threat that they had previously. In fact, the Franj too were now ruled by a boy, a boy who was rumored to have leprosy, and may not turn out to be a strong and aggressive leader like his father, King Amalric. This lessens Saladin's argument that the threat posed by the Franj necessitated the unification of Islamic rule in the Middle East, and may well add weight to the argument that it was in fact personal ambition that motivated him, veiled in the excuse of jihad. But I guess we'll never know exactly what drove Saladin to make his fateful decision.

What we do know is that Saladin marched his army into Syria in October 1174 and occupied the city of Damascus. His entry into Damascus was peaceful and was in fact invited by the city's ruler. Saladin had recently written to the Damascan ruler, Ibn al-Muqaddam, accusing him of failing to fight for Islam due to the fact that he had signed a peace treaty with Jerusalem following the Latin Christian attack on the city of Banias. The Damascan ruler denied the allegation, but probably swayed by the fear of a potential alliance between the cities of Aleppo and Mosul, he agreed to let Saladin come to the city's aid. Wisely, Saladin bought a pile of Egyptian gold coins with him, which he freely distributed to the people of Damascus, who of course loved him for it. He installed himself in the citadel at Damascus unopposed, and planned his next move.

Leaving his brother in charge of the garrison at Damascus, Saladin then focused on central Syria, seizing the cities of Homs and Hamah. Throughout these largely bloodless conquests, Saladin claimed to be acting on behalf of Nur ad-Din's son and heir, stating that the boy couldn't govern alone and needed a Regent such as Saladin to defend the country against the Franj. However, young al-Salih himself was not convinced. Saladin arrived at Aleppo in December 1174. Al-Salih was in Aleppo with his advisers, which included the governor of Aleppo, Gumushtigin. As Saladin approached the city, Gumushtigin ordered the gates be closed, and Saladin began a siege. Many of the citizens of Aleppo were sympathetic to Saladin, but young al-Salih swayed the people to his cause with a rousing speech. In the speech, he stated, and I quote "behold this unjust and ungrateful man who wishes to take my country from me without regard to God or man. I am an orphan, and I rely on you to defend me, in memory of my father, who so loved you". End of quote.

So, the battle lines are now clearly drawn. Saladin has been conquering cities in al-Salih's name, but it's clear that al-Salih wants none of it. The city of Aleppo is now prepared to defend Nur ad-Din's son against Saladin, and Saladin for his part doesn't wish to clash swords with the boy he's been claiming to protect. Saladin lifts the siege, and al-Salih remains in Aleppo. Leaving no one to doubt his intentions, Saladin now starts calling himself the King of Egypt and Syria.

Holed up inside Aleppo's formidable citadel and protected by its loyal garrison, Gumushtigin decided to call for assistance from the ruler of Mosul, the Franj and the Assassins. The Assassins jumped at the opportunity to assassinate the man who had destroyed Shia Islam in Egypt, but Saladin proved to be a hard man to kill. The first attempt on his life occurred at the beginning of 1175. A group of thirteen armed and heavily disguised Assassins managed to infiltrate Saladin's camp outside Aleppo. They made it as far as the entrance to Saladin's personal tent. There they were recognized and cut down by Saladin's bodyguards. After this incident, Saladin was in a heightened state of alert and was constantly on the lookout for assassins. He soon developed the practice of placing his personal tent within a fortified and heavily guarded enclosure, isolated from the rest of the camp, but impervious to the knife-wielding assassins.

The second attempt on his life occurred in May 1176, again while Saladin was camped near Aleppo. Saladin was inside the camp, visiting the tent of one of his Emirs, when four Assassins burst into the tent. This time, they came very close to carrying out their mission. One of the assassins struck Saladin's head with his dagger. Luckily for Saladin, he was wearing chain-mail under his clothes. The headdress of chain-mail deflected the knife point, so the attacker then lunged at Saladin's neck. Saladin was wearing a long tunic made of thick material, and the high neck of the tunic was reinforced with chain-mail. The mail and the thick fabric meant that the knife didn't pierce Saladin's skin. By this time, Saladin's guards had entered the tent and a fight ensued, during which the Assassins were all killed.

This incident was really a bit much for Saladin, so he decided to take the fight to the Assassins. He made plans to attack the stronghold of the Assassins in central Syria, where Rashid al-Din Sinan, the Old Man of the Mountains, controlled ten or so fortresses. Saladin traveled to the stronghold and laid siege to the most impressive of the fortresses, a fortification which was perched on the summit of a cliff. What happened next is steeped in legend and myth, and it's difficult if not impossible, from a historical point of view, to separate fact from fiction. What we know for sure happened is this. After less than a week,

Saladin abruptly lifted the siege and took his men back to Hamah. He never again threatened the Assassins nor made any more attempts to attack their property. For their part, the Assassins left Saladin alone, and there were no more attempts on his life.

The big question is, how did Saladin and the assassins, who were sworn enemies, come to this truce, and why? There are many theories. One of the more likely ones is that the Old Man of the Mountains sent a letter to Saladin's uncle advising him that their policy of assassination now extended to Saladin's entire family. Faced with such a dire threat, Saladin lifted the siege and signed a truce. Another version has an Assassin convincing Saladin that even his personal bodyguards were Assassin agents, and were just awaiting the order to kill him. This seems unlikely, as the bodyguards had saved Saladin's life twice before and had killed the Assassins who had attacked him.

My favorite explanation comes from the Assassins themselves. Not many of the writings and chronicles of the Assassins survive, but one of the few surviving texts is an account written by one of the Isma'ili adherents, a man called Abu Firas. He states that when Saladin besieged the fortress, Rashid al-Din Sinan, the Old Man of the Mountain, made his way to a neighboring hill from which he could observe the siege. Saladin discovered Sinan's whereabouts and ordered a large contingent of his men to go to the hill and capture him. As the men approached the Old Man of the Mountain, they were paralyzed by a mysterious force. As much as they tried to approach the leader of the Assassins, they found that they couldn't move their arms and legs. Sinan then ordered the men to return to Saladin with a message that he wished to meet with him in private. The terrified men raced back to Saladin and advised him of the strange encounter.

That night, Saladin took extra precautions to ensure his safety. He sprinkled lime and ashes right around the outside of his tent so that anyone trying to enter the tent would leave their footprints, and he posted extra guards outside the entrance to his tent. In the middle of the night, he woke with a start, and glimpsed the shadow of a man, whom he believed to be the leader of the Assassins, leaving his tent. On his bed was a poisoned cake, and a note which said, "You are in our power". Saladin cried out, and his guards rushed in. The guards swore that they didn't see anyone enter the tent, and the circle of lime and ash which surrounded the tent was undisturbed. Seriously rattled by this encounter, the next day Saladin lifted the siege and returned to Damascus.

Now, fanciful as some of these explanations are, they all go some way towards providing a reason why Saladin abandoned his fight with the Assassins. But none of them explain why the Assassins also suddenly decided not to pursue Saladin. Remember, not only had they been contracted to kill him, they wanted to see him dead. To the Assassins, Saladin was the man who broke Shia Islam in Egypt, and was now ruling their former homeland in the name of Sunni Islam. So, what on earth could have occurred in the mountains to make the two sworn enemies create a mutually binding non-aggression pact? Unfortunately, we'll probably never know. What we do know is that after Saladin left the Assassin stronghold, he never again fought against their interests, while the Assassins for their part never again made an attempt on Saladin's life.

Now, to say that Saladin was busy during this period of his life is an understatement. Not only was he dodging the knives of the Assassins, Aleppo was continuing to hold out against him, and he was having to keep one eye on Egypt and race back there every so often to ensure the country remained peaceful. He also had to deal with attacks by the

Franj and Nur ad-Din's relatives from Mosul, and also had to ensure that Damascus and the other Syrian cities he had conquered remained under his control. Busy times.

In amongst all this, he managed to find time to get married. Who did he marry? Well, he actually married Nur ad-Din's widow, Ismat, who was the daughter of a previous ruler of Damascus. This, of course, was primarily a political marriage. It gave Saladin extra legitimacy in his rule over both Damascus and the wider region of Nur ad-Din's Syria. But it also seemed that the newlyweds genuinely enjoyed each other's company. When Ismat died, ten years later, the news was kept from Saladin, who himself was seriously ill, due to the fact that the shock and grief he experienced upon hearing the news may worsen his illness.

Now, prior to Saladin's marriage, Gumushtigin the governor of Aleppo had appealed to both the assassins and the Franj to assist him to hold Aleppo against Saladin. The Assassins had responded by doing what they did best, and attempting to kill Saladin, while the French, under the leadership of the young King's regent, Raymond of Tripoli, decided to attack Homs, one of the cities that has been conquered by Saladin. Raymond besieged the castle at Homs, which resulted in Saladin having to hurry south to liberate Homs. Meanwhile, Nur ad-Din's nephew, Saif ad-Din of Mosul sent an army into Syria to join Gumushtigin. In the end, Saladin prevailed, but this gives you an idea of what Saladin was facing at this time.

Ironically, to reward the French for coming to Aleppo's aid, Gumushtigin released all the French prisoners who had been languishing in the dungeons of Aleppo, including Raynald of Chatillon and Joscelin of Courtenay, not realizing of course, that he would have been doing them more of a favor had he kept them in confinement.

Now, around the time of Saladin's marriage, young King Baldwin came of age, and the Regency of Raymond of Tripoli came to an end. This signaled a change of policy in the Latin Christian camp. The largely diplomatic and non-aggressive stance taken by Raymond against the Muslims was replaced with the more proactive policy favoured by King Baldwin. Under the influence of his mother Agnes and her allies, the recently released Raynald of Chatillon and Joscelin of Courtenay, the Latin Christians tried and failed to take Hamah and Harim from Saladin, and in 1177 Saladin responded to the new Frankish aggression by marching to Ascalon at the head of an army of 20,000 horsemen. King Baldwin was at Ascalon and was ill with the effects of leprosy, so ill in fact, that a commentator at the time described him as being half dead. With him was Raynald of Chatillon and Joscelin of Courtenay, and around 600 knights and a few thousand foot soldiers.

Assuming that the Latin Christians were in no position to attack his forces, Saladin made a rare tactical error. He allowed his men some time off and encouraged them to raid and pillage nearby Latin Christian settlements. King Baldwin made contact with 80 Templar knights who were stationed at Gaza and made the courageous decision to attack Saladin. Saladin was taken totally by surprise. Much of his army was scattered over a wide area. He himself was in the process of crossing a small river when he was confronted with a Latin Christian cavalry charge led by Raynald of Chatillon. While in theory he had the larger army, most of his forces were nowhere to be seen. Saladin scrambled to muster an effective defense, and failed. The Muslims were resoundingly defeated, with Saladin only just managing to escape with his life. The survivors of the defeat limped back to Egypt,

their miseries compounded by the fact that they were attacked by Bedouins while crossing the Sinai Peninsula.

With his reputation tarnished by the defeat, for the next few years Saladin seemed to take a more cautious approach to the Latin Christians. King Baldwin, for his part, was unable to take advantage of his victory, and didn't pursue the fleeing Saladin or attack the city of Damascus. In fact, in the year 1180 King Baldwin and Saladin agreed to a two year truce.

Saladin took advantage of the cessation of hostilities with the Franj to concentrate on taking Aleppo and subduing threats from Mosul. In the end, he was assisted by two deaths. Saif ad-Din of Mosul died on the 29th of June 1180, leaving only children as his heirs. Eighteen months later, Nur ad-Din's son, al-Salih, died suddenly, aged only eighteen. It was widely rumored, although never confirmed, that he had been poisoned. In the absence of these key figures, Syrian resistance to Saladin weakened. He gradually expanded his territory, taking towns near the Euphrates River, including Edessa, and on the 12th of June, 1183 he realized a long-term goal by taking the city of Aleppo.

He now controlled territory from Egypt all the way to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The great Syrian cities of Damascus and Aleppo were directly under his control, backed by the immense wealth of Egypt. Saladin's rise to power was complete. He was the most powerful Muslim ruler for more than two centuries.

And of course, this wasn't good news for the Latin Christians. Join me next week as we take a closer look at the year 1180, a year in which two important events occurred: the marriage of King Baldwin's sister Sibylla, and the death of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel. Until next week, bye for now.

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