

History of the Crusades.
Episode 64
The Third Crusade XII.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Richard lead the victorious Crusading army into Jaffa, only to lose momentum as he spent days, then weeks, trying to decide what to do next. His men wanted to march inland and take Jerusalem, but Richard knew that this would mean almost certain defeat, as his access to the coast would be cut off by Saladin. The obvious choice on paper would be to move the army further down the coast, by-passing Jerusalem, and attack Ascalon, but his men would have none of it. In a desperate move, Richard commenced peace negotiations with Saladin. Although these negotiations were highly entertaining, they didn't produce any tangible outcome for the Latin Christians.

Richard wasn't the only Latin Christian negotiating with Saladin at this time. Conrad of Montferrat, who was still safely in Tyre, sent Reynald of Sidon to negotiate on his behalf. Reynald was an excellent choice for negotiator. He had spent some time in captivity after the battle at the Horns of Hattin, and was fluent in Arabic. Saladin had spent many months besieging Reynald's castle at Beaufort prior to the Siege of Acre, and Reynald had taken the opportunity to hold lengthy and detailed discussions with the Muslim leader on subjects as varied as music, religion, and the like, so the two men already knew each other quite well.

Reynald also represented the type of Latin Christian who was gravitating towards Conrad of Montferrat. Increasingly, local Latin Christians, who called the Kingdom of Jerusalem "home", were becoming concerned that their interests weren't being adequately protected. While they had no issue at all with the European Latin Christians breezing in and attempting to defeat Saladin, they were worried about what would happen when the European Crusaders returned home. For them, King Richard and his Crusaders were focusing too much on the short-term goal of retaking Jerusalem, whereas the locals wanted to look to the future, namely how they were going to be able to re-create a stable homeland for themselves after the battles were over.

Reynald of Sidon arrived at Saladin's camp on the 5th of November 1191. He had an astonishing proposal for Saladin. He stated that Conrad of Montferrat was prepared to split with the European Latin Christians, and in return was merely requesting that the Muslims hand over the northern cities of Sidon and Beirut. Conrad also offered to assist Saladin to remove the European Crusaders from Acre, although when pressed, Reynald of Sidon failed to give a straight answer to the question of whether Conrad and his allies would be willing to take up arms against King Richard and his Crusaders. Looking at this proposal, it's likely that in the absence of his ally and protector King Philip of France, Conrad was moving to create for himself a small, independent state in what was formerly the northernmost part of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, a state which would be ruled by Conrad from his stronghold at Tyre, and would encompass the main cities in the north.

Saladin set Reynald of Sidon up with his own tent, which was lavishly appointed with soft cushions and carpets. He was wined and dined and was even taken on a tour of the Muslim camp by none other than Saladin's brother al-Adil, who had also been busy negotiating with Richard. Then Saladin called a meeting of his council, and his Emirs sat down to discuss the two offers before them: the competing claims of King Richard and Conrad of Montferrat.

By this time, King Richard's bizarre offer of marrying his sister to al-Adil had run its course, but he was still taking every opportunity to negotiate a diplomatic solution to the war. Like Reynald of Sidon, Richard and his envoy, Humphrey of Toron, were experiencing the full force of Muslim hospitality, attending banquets and exchanging gifts, which included seven camels and a luxurious tent. Oddly though, Saladin continued his policy of ensuring that he never personally met with Richard. King Richard's approach to the negotiations, now that his sister's volcanic outburst had ensured that he could no longer use her as a pawn, was similar to that of Conrad of Montferrat. He concentrated his negotiations around the central coastal towns, but unlike Conrad, King Richard also wished to ensure that the Latin Christians at least had access to Jerusalem.

After much debate, Saladin's council decided to support King Richard's claims over those of Conrad. The Muslims had had a bad track record of being deceived by the local Latin Christians, and Reynald of Sidon was given the news that Conrad's proposals weren't acceptable to Saladin. Ironically, the negotiations with King Richard didn't result in anything concrete, either. Throughout the latter days of the negotiating process, in between attending banquets and receiving gifts, both Saladin and King Richard were busy behind the scenes, getting their men and supplies ready for the next stage of the conflict.

King Richard had finally decided what to do. He would bow to the will of his men and make a move on Jerusalem. During the First Crusade, the Europeans had taken only a week to march from the coast to Jerusalem, but Richard was going to take much, much longer. By the time the peace negotiations concluded on the 11th of November, King Richard and his men had been in Jaffa for two months, and Richard felt no need to rush things. To guard against Saladin cutting him off from the coast as he moved inland towards Jerusalem, King Richard decided to establish a line of logistical support, seizing and repairing fortified towns on the road to Jerusalem, and using them as stepping stones, ensuring an unbroken chain of supplies and communication between Jerusalem and the coast. While the peace negotiations were still being concluded, Richard set his men to repairing two forts near the small town of Yazur, just to the east of Jaffa.

By early November, 1191 the work was complete, and Richard marched his men past this small town and onto the first stepping stone, an area between the ruins of two fortified towns Lydda and Ramla. While the Crusaders worked tirelessly to rebuild the defenses at Ramla, Saladin retreated to Jerusalem. It wasn't a total retreat. A small Muslim advanced guard stayed out in the field and reported on Richard's movements, while a group of Bedouins set about harrying the Crusaders and attacking small parties of them when the opportunity arose.

It was around this time that Saladin received some good news and some bad news. The good news came in the form of the Egyptian army. A contingent of fresh soldiers arrived from Egypt and immediately made themselves useful, shoring up the defenses around Jerusalem.

The bad news came in two parts. The first, and most devastating, came in a letter advising that his nephew Taqi al-Din had died in Syria. Personally, this was a huge blow. Saladin had been close to his nephew and had come to rely on his talents as a sound military commander. Politically, Taqi's death caused unrest in Syria, as others attempted to fill the power vacuum created by his demise, and Saladin was forced to divert resources to deal with the problem.

The second bit of bad news came in the form of a dispatch from the Caliph in Baghdad. It's safe to say that the Caliph was never a fan of Saladin, and the dispatch just brought this home all over again. Instead of providing words of encouragement to the warrior of Islam, the Caliph admonished Saladin for political action he had taken in the eastern part of the Empire. It was clear, yet again, that Saladin couldn't count on any support from the head of the Islamic religion, neither politically nor militarily.

As Saladin bunkered down in Jerusalem, Richard stayed busy in the field. In addition to rebuilding Ramla and fighting off attacks by small groups of Saladin's men, something which Richard occasionally personally involved himself in, to the grave consternation of his commanders who believed him to be placing himself in unnecessary danger, Richard had another factor to consider: the weather. As November passed into December, the weather worsened. The Crusaders were living in tents and began to be battered by fierce squalls of freezing rain, which turned the camp into a muddy swamp of freezing misery. Here's how one chronicler summed up the situation, and I quote, "It was cold and overcast. Rain and hail battered us, bringing down our tents. We lost so many horses at Christmas, both before and after; so many biscuits were wasted, soggy with water; so much salt pork went bad in the storms; hauberks rusted so that they could hardly be cleaned; clothes rotted; people suffered from mal-nourishment, so that they were in great distress." End of quote.

Yet, despite the foul conditions, morale was generally high. The Crusaders were slowly approaching their ultimate goal, Jerusalem. In a break in the weather in late December, Richard moved the camp forward to the next stepping-stone, the small, ruined fortress town of Beit Nuba at the foot of the Judean hills, just twelve miles from Jerusalem. Stockpiles of weapons and supplies had been deposited back in Ramla, ensuring a line of supply. However, the Crusaders had already taken nearly two months to advance just thirty miles towards Jerusalem, and their line of supply, while holding up for the moment, was under constant attack from the small raiding parties of Saladin's men.

With the European contingent of the Crusaders desperate to negotiate the final twelve miles of their journey and attack Jerusalem, Richard was having serious second thoughts. His doubts were shared by the local Latin Christians, the Templars, the Hospitallers, and members of local noble families. His scouts had reported that not only was a large contingent of Egyptian soldiers camped outside the walls of Jerusalem, but it seemed that Saladin had left Jerusalem and had moved his army out into the field. It was clear what this meant. If the Crusaders pushed through the hail, mud, and rain along the final twelve miles towards Jerusalem, Saladin would most likely attack them from behind, and the Latin Christian army would be crushed between Saladin's army and the Egyptians. Then there was the problem which had been troubling Richard since he arrived at Jaffa. Even if, like the First Crusaders, Richard's army defied the odds and took Jerusalem, he really didn't have enough men who would be willing to stay behind and defend the city against a Muslim counterattack.

On the 10th of January Richard convened a council to decide on the future of the expedition. There were two options on the table: march the twelve miles to Jerusalem and attempt to take the city, risking the annihilation of the Crusading army; or retreat back to Ascalon. Once at Ascalon they could rebuild the city in the same way as they had rebuilt the small fortress towns on the road to Jerusalem, then perhaps in the summer they could try and take Jerusalem again. Debate raged at the council, with King Philip's French nobles in particular strongly pressing the case to march on Jerusalem. Richard took a few

days to make his decision. On the 13th of January 1192 he gave the order to move out from Beit Nuba and retreat to Ascalon.

Now, to say that this order was unpopular with the European Crusaders is an understatement. They had journeyed across a continent, suffered unspeakable hardships in the pursuit of just one goal, to retake Jerusalem on behalf of Christianity. Now, a mere twelve miles from their goal, they had been ordered to retreat back to the coast. The chronicler Ambroise, despite being a massive fan of Richard the Lionheart, summed up the feelings of the rank-and-file members of the Crusading army in the following way, and I quote "Not since God created time was there ever seen an army so dejected and so depressed. Everyone cursed the day he was born." End of quote.

The Crusaders turned their back on the Holy City and tramped out of Beit Nuba through the mud and slush, through the freezing wind and rain, with only soggy biscuits to comfort them. After the miserable mass of soldiers arrived back at Ramla, Richard began to experience the ramifications of his decision. Mass defections started occurring, particularly among King Philip's French Crusaders. Winter prevented ships from plying their trade, so the deserting Crusaders couldn't sail back home, but many left for the comforts of Jaffa and Acre. Even Hugh of Burgundy, a respected French commander, gave up in disgust and abandoned the Crusade. It was a severely depleted and sorry looking force that Richard led back to Ascalon.

For the next four months, Richard's men busied themselves rebuilding the strategically vital port city. While the army was busy in Ascalon, the different factions within the Latin Christian ranks were busy jostling for position in the political arena. With his series of military successes apparently at an end, and with his popularity having taken a nose-dive, Richard was quickly losing authority and control over events. King Guy's position as King of Jerusalem had only survived the death of Queen Sibylla and their children due to Richard's unflagging support. Without Richard's authority behind him, King Guy was just a talent-less, unpopular blow-in from France. Now, with Richard's star on the wane, things were looking decidedly dicey for King Guy. The Genoese and King Philip's French Crusaders, led by Hugh of Burgundy, had transferred their allegiance to Conrad of Montferrat. Local Latin Christians were also beginning to abandon King Guy, with Balian of Ibelin just one of many who declared for Conrad.

While Richard was laboring over the rebuilding of Ascalon, a task that was sapping the energy of his soldiers and bleeding his coffers dry, Conrad of Montferrat was plotting to take over the city of Acre and annex it to his base at Tyre. At Conrad's urging, a contingent of Genoese fighters tried to take over the city of Acre, but were repelled by Pisan Crusaders who supported King Richard and King Guy. The Pisan soldiers sent a messenger to Ascalon, advising Richard of the situation and requesting assistance.

On the 20th of February, Richard met with Conrad halfway between Acre and Tyre. Richard demanded that Conrad accompany him back to Ascalon and assist with the rebuilding of the city. Conrad refused. Richard advised Conrad that if he failed to come to Ascalon, all his land would be forfeited. This was a bluff, and Conrad knew it. Richard just didn't have the support or the authority to confiscate Conrad's property. Conrad refused, and the meeting ended with no agreement being reached. With a heavy heart, Richard returned to Ascalon. Once there, he called an assembly and had Conrad officially removed from the allocation of the Kingdom's revenue. But really, this was an empty gesture, and Richard knew it.

Things were really starting to unravel. And it wasn't only in the Holy Land that things were going bad for Richard. Back in England, Richard's annoying little brother John was intriguing with none other than King Philip of France. Richard's mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, was making her way tirelessly around England, doing her best to rein in the ambitions of her wayward youngest son and maintain support for the absent King Richard. But as Easter of 1192 approached, she had had enough. She sat down and penned a letter to her favorite son. Richard always listened to his mother's advice, and for good reason. She was wise and well schooled in the murky world of royal politics. Her letter to Richard made it clear. If he wanted to hold on to the English throne, he needed to abandon the Crusade and return to Europe, and he needed to do it now.

The letter was dispatched to a ship with orders to deliver it as quickly as possible to Richard the Lionheart. Communications back in the Middle Ages weren't what they are today, and by the time it reaches King Richard, an event will have occurred that will change everything. Join me next week as we find out what this event is. Okay, I'll give you a hint. It involves an assassination. Until next week, bye for now.

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