

History of the Crusades.
Episode 68
Life In The Crusader States.

Hello again. Last week we took a closer look at the different forms of Christianity present in the Holy Land at the time of the Crusades. This week we will look at life in general in the Crusader states.

Basically, I've approached this topic as follows. If a European Latin Christian traveled to the Holy Land during the time of the Crusades, how would the newly arrived traveler view life in the Crusader states? Would it be very different to life back in Europe? The short answer to this question is Yes. To answer the question more fully, we are going to need to examine the life of a Latin Christian who was born and raised in the Crusader states. What did they eat? What sort of houses did they live in? What did they wear? How did they interact with the Muslims who also called this region home? What did they do in their spare time? What language did they speak? If you would like to know the answers to these questions and more, keep listening.

I'll start with the last question first because it's actually very interesting, and that is: what language did a native-born Latin Christian speak? Now, some time back, a listener contacted me and posed an interesting question. When the armies of Europe left on Crusade, what language did they use for command? This question is made even more interesting by the fact that, at the time of the Crusades, there were many more separate languages spoken in Europe than there are today. In particular, the languages of French and Italian, as uniform, homogeneous languages, didn't exist. The countries of France and Italy that we know today were divided into self-governing regions, each with its own distinct language. A Norman French man speaking a particular form of the language of the French royal family, "Langue d'oïl", meeting up with a man from the southern Provençal region of France, speaking a version of "Languedoc", which was the language spoken by King Richard the Lionheart, would not have a clue what he was saying. There were hundreds of separate dialects spoken across the region of France, some varying markedly from village to village. In the 1500s the version of French spoken in Paris became the language of official documents, but at the time this took place, Graham Robb, in his book "The Discovery of France", estimates that six million French citizens were utterly ignorant of their official language, while another six million could barely hold a conversation in it. Only 11% of the population could confidently speak the language that would eventually evolve into French.

You can see that this may be a problem if you're commanding an army of French Crusaders. If you wanted to give them an order, what language did you use? You can, of course, take the question further. If you were trying to give an order to the combined Crusader armies, containing people from England, France, Italy, Germany, and just about every region in Europe, what language did you use then? Luckily, at the time of the Crusades, educated men from the upper classes spoke Latin. Latin was also the language used in official documents, and the commanders of the different armies would have been able to communicate in Latin.

The same question arose in the Holy Land once the Crusaders had settled down in the Crusader states and made the place their home. While there were also many different languages spoken by the Arabs, Turks and Christians already living in the Holy Land, they

had a central language they all spoke in common, and that language was Arabic. Did the Latin Christians living in the Holy Land, who had come from regions across Europe, also develop a common language they all used to communicate? The answer is Yes. According to Thomas Asbridge in his book "The Crusades", the common language they adopted was old French, or the dialect of French spoken by the royal family and the people in Paris, which would eventually evolve into the French language we know, and in my case mispronounce, today. As was the case back in Europe, Latin was used for official documentation. Some Latin Christians did learn Arabic, particularly those who had been captured by the Muslims and spent lengthy periods of time in Muslim prisons, while others are documented as having learnt other local languages, such as Greek, Armenian, Syriac and Hebrew. This was particularly common amongst those who intermarried with local Middle Eastern Christian women.

But most of the Latin Christian population of the Holy Land were happy to stick to French, and that's one thing a newcomer from Europe would have noticed upon arriving in the Crusader states. Everyone was speaking French.

Of course, the climate, the food, and the landscape of the Middle East was markedly different to that of Europe, and Latin Christians who made the Crusader states their home eventually evolved ways of dealing with these differences, meaning that their way of life became rather different from those Latin Christians living in Europe. Take their houses. Most Latin Christians arriving from Europe settled in cities and towns when they arrived in the Holy Land. The conquered cities already contained houses, which the Latin Christians occupied. These houses were completely different to those they were used to in Europe. To start with wood, the material most commonly used for building in Europe, was an extremely rare commodity in the Middle East. Consequently, houses weren't made of timber; they were constructed of stone. The houses were usually two or three stories high, with a flat roof, which was sometimes decorated with potted palms, and made a useful place to sit during a summer's evening, as the cool breezes wafted over the town. The thick stone walls acted as an effective insulator, keeping the interior of the dwelling cool in summer, and trapping the heat inside during winter.

Unlike the houses of Europe, the houses occupied by the Latin Christians in the Crusader states often had windows instead of wooden shutters. The windows weren't made of clear glass like the windows of today, but of a thick, greeny-blue colored glass, which often contained bubbles within it. The Middle East had been a center for glass manufacture during Roman times, and it seems this tradition was still continuing at the time of the Crusades.

Another wonderful Roman invention, plumbing, was also in use. Most houses were designed around a central courtyard, and in the center of this courtyard was generally a water source, either a pit or well connected to an aqueduct, or a large stone receptacle for collecting rainwater. Some of the more elaborate houses boasted a fountain in the center of their courtyard, the spray from the cascading water cooling the hot air in the summer heat.

The interior of the wealthier houses were decorated with mosaics in the traditional Byzantine style. The tiles were set in elaborate designs that may have included geometric patterns, flowers or animals. Rugs or tapestries were also hung from the walls of wealthier households. Food was generally cooked in large earthenware pots suspended over fire-pits or in open ovens. Food was eaten with a wooden spoon and steel knife or dagger,

although the new-fangled invention the “fork” was beginning to catch on. Generally, meat or stew was served on a thick slice of bread, which served to soak up the juices, and the meal was then placed on a glazed earthenware plate. Drinks were served in metal cups and goblets, and occasionally in glassware, which was unheard of in Europe but commonly in use in the Middle East.

The food itself was quite different to that the Crusaders would have been used to back home. Spices, rare in Europe but abundant in the Middle East, were used to enhance the flavor of meat, fish and vegetable dishes, while pomegranates, figs, olives, and other exotic fruits and nuts found their way into the cuisine.

Clothing was one thing that didn't change all that much. The clothing worn by people in the Middle East reflected the climate, and included flowing robes and the like. The Latin Christians retained their European style of clothing, regardless of the impracticalities. Clothing was a mark of identity to the Latin Christian residents of the Crusader states. Occasionally, an item of Middle Eastern style clothing would be adopted as a concession to the heat. Sometimes a knight might wind a short shawl or mantle around his metal helmet to protect it from the heat, or a surcoat may be placed over his armor, but that was as far as it would go. There was also a prohibition on non-Frank's wearing European style clothing, so residents of the Crusader states could easily and quickly be identified as Latin Christian or non-Latin Christian by the way they dressed.

However, their European style clothing didn't prohibit the local Latin Christians from using the sumptuous fabrics readily available to them in the Middle East. Back in Europe, textiles such as silk and taffeta would be restricted to the royal or exceptionally noble households, and even then tended only to be used on ceremonial occasions. However, in the Crusader states, even Latin Christians of relatively modest means could afford to purchase the full range of silks, taffeta, brocade, cotton, wool and gossamer muslins. These were styled into European clothes, reflecting the changing fashions of their homeland back in the West.

While the Franks failed to adopt the Middle Eastern style of clothing, they did take on board some of the local customs involving personal hygiene. Bathing for purposes of personal cleanliness was almost unheard of in Europe in the Middle Ages. Those who did indulge in the odd bath were viewed as eccentric and strange. Residents of the Middle East, however, carried on the Roman tradition of meeting frequently at public bath houses, an activity that was largely adopted by the Latin Christians who settled there. Soap was also in use and was probably produced locally. Latin Christians found bathing so pleasant that some men and women would attend three or four times a week. This, of course, was viewed with astonishment and derision by newly arrived Latin Christians.

European Latin Christians thought themselves superior to their counterparts who had taken up residence in the Crusader states, and it was this partiality to bathing, more than anything else, which attracted the ire of newcomers. Joshua Prawer, in his book “The World of the Crusaders”, describes the reaction of one newly arrived Latin Christian, James of Vitry, who said of the Latin Christians living in the Levant and I quote, “they were brought up in luxury, soft and effeminate, more used to baths than battles” end of quote.

The newly arrived Europeans, tired from the long journey from the West, used to hardship, austerity, and a cold climate, often viewed the Latin Christians living in the Crusader states, with their exotic food, their beautiful and unusual houses, the sumptuous fabrics

used in their clothing, and above all their predilection for bathing, as a corrupted, lesser being than themselves.

Another factor a newcomer would have noticed was the explosion of trade and commerce in the cities of the Crusader states. After the creation of the Latin Christian outpost in the Holy Land, many Europeans settled in the region not to fight the Muslims but to engage in commercial activities. Italian merchants, the Venetians, the Genoese, the Pisans and those from other regions, set up quarters in the coastal towns. They provided services to pilgrims, often at exorbitant rates, and traded goods to new markets in Europe.

As the European population within the Crusader states expanded, a whole strata of society was created to service its needs. Craftsmen and merchants plied their trade and tailors, shoemakers, goldsmiths, carpenters, blacksmiths, millers, cooks, bakers, confectioners, and candle-makers were all in high demand. Other professions and trades were specifically created to meet local needs: camel drivers; water carriers; spice, incense and perfume vendors; guides for pilgrims; and sellers of holy relics and souvenirs, all found their occupations in the Crusader states.

The cities really were a hive of activity, and many local Latin Christians wiled away their leisure hours playing games of dice in the local taverns, drinking and cohabiting with prostitutes, much to the disgust of those newly arrived from Europe. Maybe it was the hot climate, or perhaps the temptation of the dice games were too great, but surprisingly few intellectual pursuits were carried out by Latin Christians in the Holy Land. While universities were springing up all over Europe and learning was gaining credence as a valuable way of spending your spare time, this didn't catch on in any wholesale way in the Holy Land. No universities were established during the period of Latin Christian occupation. There were some Latin Christians in the Crusader states who enjoyed scholarly pursuits (Humphrey of Toron was one; Reynald of Sidon learned Arabic and undertook a study of Arabic literature; and William of Tyre rose to become one of his era's most respected historians) but they were the exception rather than the rule.

One feature of life in the Crusader states that a newcomer from Europe would have found shocking was the degree of tolerance the Latin Christians in the Holy Land exhibited towards the local Muslim population. Most Crusaders leaving Europe did so with a certain amount of anti-Muslim zeal, understandable in those whose mission was to cleanse the Holy Land of the religion of Islam. So they were decidedly shocked when, upon arriving in the Crusader states, they found the practices of Islam were not only tolerated in many cases, but that genuine friendships were occasionally established between local Latin Christians and Muslim men. In some places, adherents of the different religions actually worshipped together. In Damascus, there was a holy image that was venerated by local Muslims, Jews and Christians, and was said to heal worshippers from all three religions, while there were other local shrines and saints that were worshipped by both Muslims and Christians.

A Muslim chronicler of the 12th century, Usama ibn Munqidh, wrote of the relationship between local Latin Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land. He states and I quote "There are some Franks who have become acclimatized and frequent the company of Muslims. These are better than those who have just arrived from their homelands, but they are the exception and cannot be taken as typical" end of quote. Usama was apparently on friendly terms with the Templars in Jerusalem. He writes, and I quote "When I went to visit the Holy sites in Jerusalem, I would go in and make my way up to the Aqsa Mosque, beside which

stood a small mosque that the Franks had converted into a church. When I went into the Aqsa Mosque, where the Templars who are my friends were, they would clear out that little mosque so that I could pray in it.” End of quote.

In his book “Saladin: Hero of Islam” Geoffrey Hindley points out that in the entire history of the Crusader states, William of Tyre was the only local Latin Christian to rise to the rank of Bishop. All the other Bishops practicing in the Holy Land were brought in from Europe. Geoffrey Hindley expresses the opinion that the reason for this is that the Church viewed the local Latin Christians as showing a disturbing willingness to live in peace with the local Muslims, and that the importation of Bishops from Europe was needed to keep the faith pure and fervent in its fight against the Islamic religion.

All in all, a newly arrived Crusader from Europe would have been quite startled at the way the local Latin Christians lived in the Crusader states, a way of life that it developed in response to local conditions and practicalities.

And that concludes our brief examination of life in the Crusader states. Next week we return to the narrative and take a look at how the Latin Christians are faring in their reduced Kingdom in the Holy Land, following the Third Crusade.

Now, before I go, I just want to correct something from last week's episode. At the beginning, I mentioned that the Persians forced the Jewish people into exile at Babylon. This had a lot of people scratching their heads, because it is of course incorrect. It was the Babylonians, not the Persians who drove the Jews into exile. In fact, it was the Persians who rescued the Jews from Babylon and led them back to Judea. So, sorry about that, Persians, and thank you to listeners Robert and Christopher for pointing this out.

And, just before we finish, on a brighter note I'd like to say a huge thank you to all of you who have donated money to the podcast. Your kind contributions mean that, for the moment at least, the podcast is self-funding, which is absolutely brilliant. So thank you, thank you, thank you. Your donations mean that I can keep bringing these episodes to you each week, and that people can keep downloading them for free from the internet. So, wonderful work, people. Thank you so much. Until next week, bye for now.

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