

History of the Crusades.
Episode 87
Emperor Frederick's Crusade I.

Hello again. Now, before we start, I just need to tell you that I have a cold this week. Don't panic, I'm not contagious, but if I sound a bit funny, that's why. Last week we took a closer look at the King of Sicily and German Emperor Frederick II.

Frederick made his Crusading vow way back in 1215 at his coronation ceremony, but as yet had failed to set out on Crusade. The fact that he had neglected to fulfill his vows contributed to the failure of the Fifth Crusade, and the new Pope, Gregory IX, wanted to put this upstart Emperor back in his place. Frederick had been on good terms with the two previous Popes, Pope Innocent and Pope Honorius. Pope Honorius had even been Frederick's childhood tutor for a while. But Pope Gregory was different. Pope Gregory was Pope Innocent's nephew and shared his uncle's interest in the law and diplomacy. In so far as Frederick was concerned, well, it seemed that Pope Gregory disliked him personally and mistrusted him politically.

You might remember from last week's episode that shortly after Emperor Frederick's marriage to the unfortunate Yolanda, Pope Honorius managed to get Frederick to agree in writing to embark on his long-promised Crusade by the 15th of August 1227, on pain of excommunication. Specifically the agreement stipulated that Frederick was to lead an army of 1000 knights to the Holy Land, and make available 150 ships to transport European Crusaders to the Middle East. Well, by the time the summer of 1227 rolled around, it appeared that Emperor Frederick intended to honor the agreement. Thousands of European Crusaders mustered at Brindisi in Italy, ready to board the ships supplied by Emperor Frederick and set sail for the Holy Land. Included in the muster were 1000 knights on the Imperial payroll, in accordance with the agreement Frederick made with Pope Honorius. Most of the Crusaders were German, but there was also a sizable contingent from England.

Unfortunately, prior to the departure of the Crusaders, a serious illness tore through the Crusader camp, possibly the plague or cholera. The illness was likely caused by unsanitary conditions within the camp, and was exacerbated by the summer heat. As the death toll rose, some Crusaders abandoned their vows and returned home, but the main German fleet set sail in mid August. Frederick himself set sail a couple of weeks later. However, within days of the ship leaving Brindisi, disaster struck. Emperor Frederick's traveling companion, the German nobleman Ludwig IV of Thuringia, was struck down by the illness, and Frederick himself was beginning to feel a little queasy. Ludwig died, and the ship pulled into the Italian port of Otranto, which handily contained a health spa. Frederick disembarked, intending to recuperate at the spa before rejoining his Crusade.

Now, it's clear at this stage that Frederick has fulfilled most of the terms of his Crusading agreement. His 1000 German knights are on their way to the Holy Land, as are many more ships bearing European Crusaders. But Pope Gregory didn't see it that way. All he saw was the fact that yet again, Emperor Frederick had managed to wriggle out of the commitment he had made to take up the Cross. So he declared their agreement breached and excommunicated him.

If Pope Gregory thought that this drastic punishment would result in Emperor Frederick cowering in submission before the might of the Church, well he was wrong. After a relaxing and recuperating stay at the health spa, instead of traveling to Rome to seek absolution and beg the Pope's forgiveness, Frederick made his way back to Sicily to consider his next move. Despite being advised by the Pope that to set out on Crusade now would be unlawful due to the fact that he'd been expelled from the Church, Frederick ignored this advice and instead sent a manifesto to the rulers of Europe denouncing the Pope's actions, and continued with his preparations to set out on Crusade. He set the month for his departure as May 1228 and raised taxes in the Kingdom of Sicily, intending to provide enough funds to pay for the passage of a few 1000 Crusaders from Germany and Italy.

Before the month of May in the year 1228 rolled around, two deaths would throw a spanner into Emperor Frederick's Crusading plans. As we saw in last week's episode, for the past year or so, the ruler of Egypt, al-Kamil, had been corresponding with Emperor Frederick and had gone so far as to indicate that he would be happy to see Emperor Frederick gain possession of Jerusalem. Al-Kamil's aim in making these somewhat surprising overtures to Frederick was to curb the rising ambitions and power of his younger brother and ruler of Syria, al-Mu'assam. However, in November 1227 al-Mu'assam died unexpectedly, leaving his son, the young and inexperienced al-Nasir, in charge of Syria.

This shock event drastically altered the Muslim political landscape in the Middle East. With a young and inexperienced ruler in charge of Syria, al-Kamil no longer held concerns about his territory. In fact, it was suddenly feasible that he, al-Kamil, could push his territory eastwards and perhaps even take the city of Damascus. He no longer needed Emperor Frederick to take Jerusalem and parts of Syria to provide Egypt with a protective buffer against his brother's ambitions. In fact, having Frederick take Jerusalem now would be a hindrance to al-Kamil's plans for the region.

The second death occurred in April, the month prior to the proposed departure date. Emperor Frederick's neglected Empress Yolanda died, following the birth of their son Conrad. While her death didn't appear to affect him personally, it did make his claim to the Kingdom of Acre less secure. His right to rule the Kingdom came through Yolanda's position as Queen of the Kingdom of Acre. Now the inheritance passed to baby Conrad, technically reducing Frederick's position from King to Regent. There was also sympathy for Yolanda's plight in Europe, and disquiet about the manner in which she had been treated by Frederick. In his book "Holy Warriors", Jonathan Phillips writes that rumors began to spread that Frederick was responsible for Yolanda's death. While the rumors were baseless, they contributed to Frederick's desire to both secure his claim to the Kingdom in the Holy Land, and clear his name and conscience by finally embarking on his long-promised Crusade.

In April, Frederick's Imperial Marshall set sail for Acre along with 500 knights. At this time around 800 German knights were already in the Kingdom, having traveled there the year before, when Frederick originally arranged his Crusade. The knights have been making themselves useful in the Kingdom of Acre over the past year. Unsurprisingly, they had allied themselves with the German-based military Order, the Teutonic Knights, and had been assisting the Teutonic Knights to build their new fortress, the Castle of Montfort near Acre, and had also helped to strengthen the fortifications at Jaffa and Caesarea. Then, on the 28th of June 1228, some thirteen years after he had first made his Crusading vow, Frederick finally sailed from Brindisi, his ultimate destination being the Holy Land.

Firstly, though he was going to call in to Cyprus. Frederick's dealings in Cyprus would pretty much set the tone for the rest of his stay in the Middle East. As the German Emperor, Frederick was overlord of Cyprus, and he was going to make sure that everyone was clear about that. The current King of Cyprus, King Henry I, was only eight years of age, and the official Regent for the island Kingdom was his mother, Alice of Jerusalem. However, Alice had married Prince Bohemond of Antioch's eldest son and heir, the future Bohemond V, and was living with him in Tripoli. In her absence, John of Ibelin, the powerful and well respected Lord of Beirut, had been appointed Regent and was ruling Cyprus on the young King's behalf.

Frederick arrived in Cyprus on the 21st of July 1228. He summoned John of Ibelin, John's sons, and the young King to his presence, and was polite and courteous to them. Frederick then invited John of Ibelin to attend a feast. John accepted the invitation. At the feast, Frederick's mask of friendship and cordiality dropped, and he revealed his true nature and intentions. He demanded that John of Ibelin serve the wine, and personally slice and serve the Imperial meat. Using this Imperial custom to its full advantage, Frederick did his best to humiliate John and reinforce Imperial superiority over the Regent.

Once the feast was underway, things went from bad to worse for John. A group of Frederick's soldiers entered the hall, and a German soldier then stood behind each of the guests, with their swords drawn. Then Frederick made his demands. He commanded John to surrender the city of Beirut to him and also demanded the entire income from Cyprus which had been generated since the death of King Hugh many years before. John of Ibelin, far from being intimidated by this show of Imperial bullying, stood firm, stating that he was prepared to defend his right to the Lordship of Beirut in the High Court in the Kingdom of Acre, and that no, he couldn't hand over the income for the Kingdom of Cyprus backdated to King Hugh's death, as it had all been spent in defence of the realm. A furious Emperor Frederic decided not to press the matter further, which was a sound decision, considering he only had a few thousand troops with him.

After five long weeks of Emperor Frederick doing his best to intimidate the local nobility and assert direct control over the island, a compromise was reached. John of Ibelin, the boy King, and the nobility formally recognized Emperor Frederick as their overlord but refused to accept him as Regent. Frederick ensured that all future revenue from the island Kingdom would make its way into German Imperial coffers, then commanded the boy King, John of Ibelin, and the cream of local nobility to accompany him to the Kingdom of Acre.

In the third book of his series on the history of the Crusades, Steven Runciman writes that Emperor Frederick summoned Prince Bohemond to his presence in Cyprus and demanded that he pay him homage for the Crusader states of Tripoli and Antioch. In response to this demand, Bohemond promptly had a nervous breakdown. He then secretly made his way back to Tripoli, where he made a remarkable recovery.

Emperor Frederick and his entourage sailed to Acre in September 1228, his confrontational style of rule having won him few friends in Cyprus. Once in the Kingdom of Acre, John of Ibelin hurried off to Beirut, where he ensured that the city's defenses could hold out against an attack by the Emperor, and prepared to state his case before the High Court to defend his claim to the city.

By this time, however, Emperor Frederick had decided not to pursue court action against John. Some other, more pressing, issues had arisen. Shortly after his arrival in the Holy Land, news filtered in from Europe that Pope Gregory had excommunicated Emperor Frederick for a second time, in punishment for him for setting out on Crusade without having sought absolution for his first excommunication. Frederick had assumed that he would be able to rely on the support of the military Orders, and that their numbers would be added to the German troops already in the Kingdom of Acre. However, following the news about the second excommunication, the Templars and the Hospitallers weren't exactly forthcoming in their support. To make matters worse, a large contingent of the original Crusaders who had sailed to Acre in 1227 had already headed home, having tired of spending their days building castles and shoring up defenses in the Holy Land. So Frederick was forced to come to the realization that he really didn't have enough troops to mount a major military campaign against the Muslims.

So he turned to the other weapon available to him, diplomacy. Remember how the Egyptian ruler al-Kamil had promised to support Frederick's claim to the city of Jerusalem? Well, it was now time to remind al-Kamil of this fact. Frederick sent an envoy to al-Kamil to announce his arrival and to remind the Egyptian ruler of their previous correspondence. In response, al-Kamil sent the wily diplomat Fakhr al-Din back to Frederick, with instructions to open negotiations with Frederick and to drag the negotiations out for as long as possible.

At the time al-Kamil's army was laying siege to the city of Damascus, where his young nephew and new ruler of Syria, al-Nasir was holed up. Al-Kamil had already managed to annex Jerusalem and Nablus to his territory, and was very keen to secure the key city of Damascus. He hoped Fakhr al-Din could keep the negotiations going until Frederick became bored and headed home, or until Damascus fell into his hands. We saw in last week's episode that Fakhr al-Din had spent some time in Sicily and had struck up a friendship with the German Emperor a couple of years ago, so he was the perfect choice for negotiator. As al-Kamil had hoped, the negotiations between the parties became a rather drawn out affair. Emperor Frederick wanted to secure Jerusalem and hurry back home to look after affairs in Sicily, but he didn't have a large enough army to take the city by force. Al-Kamil didn't want to lose face by ceding Jerusalem to Frederick, but he also didn't want to provoke outright conflict with the Emperor, as all his men were needed in Damascus.

As the offers and counter-offers swung back and forth between the two parties, Emperor Frederick tried to assert intellectual superiority over al-Kamil by sending him a lengthy and detailed list of questions on philosophy, geometry, and mathematics. Frederick's Arabic tutor had accompanied him to the Holy Land, and they were apparently studying the works of Aristotle. The two leaders were evenly matched, both intellectually and in their need to prevail over one another. A poet who formed part of Frederick's entourage likened the negotiations to watching two misers trying to divide three gold pieces evenly between them.

In November 1228 Frederick tried to break the deadlock with a show of military force. He marched his men out of the Kingdom of Acre down the coast to the city of Jaffa. Men from the Orders of the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller marched a day behind Frederick's forces, not wanting to offend the Pope by coming under the command of an ex-communicate. They entered Jaffa unopposed and set about fortifying the city.

Meanwhile, al-Kamil's nephew, al-Nazir, managed to escape from Damascus and led an army to Nablus, hoping to destroy his uncle's lines of supply. Things really weren't going well for al-Kamil. As the months passed, Damascus still wasn't in his hands, and he still hadn't managed to defeat his nephew. In February 1229, when Frederick made overtures from his new base in Jaffa to launch an attack on Jerusalem, al-Kamil finally made the concessions Emperor Frederick had been seeking, and at the end of February an agreement was formalized between the parties.

The holy cities of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth would be handed over to the Latin Christians in return for a truce lasting ten years. The handing over of Jerusalem was conditional on a number of factors. The defensive walls around the city, which the Muslims had demolished, were not to be rebuilt. The al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock were to remain in Muslim hands, and no land around Jerusalem was to be held by the Crusaders, although a narrow corridor of land from the coast could be used by the Latin Christians to access the city. The whole of Sidon was to be given to the Franks, as was the castle of Toron, with a condition that it not be re-fortified. Prisoners of war from the Fifth Crusade were also exchanged.

So Stupor Mundi, Emperor Frederick II, has achieved his goal, and Jerusalem is now once again under Latin Christian control. Join me next week as Frederick bathes in the glory of his victory, then faces a backlash from the local Latin Christians. Until next week, bye for now.

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