

History of the Crusades.
Episode 89
The Barons' Crusade.

Hello Again. Last week we saw Emperor Frederick II returned to Europe after the conclusion of his Crusade. As we stated in last week's episode, what followed for the Crusader states and Cyprus was a lengthy period of instability. From his Imperial seat in Sicily, Emperor Frederick wanted to rule over his territories both in the Kingdom of Cyprus and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, but this was easier said than done. The noble families of both Kingdoms had long been accustomed to ruling themselves, and the desire to do so again emerged as soon as Frederick departed from the Holy Land.

In a move designed to wrest control back from these pesky nobles, Emperor Frederick sent a small army, comprising some 600 knights, 100 sergeants, 700 foot soldiers and 3,000 marines, to Acre in 1231 under the leadership of his Imperial Legate Richard Filangieri. What followed was a chaotic Civil War. Filangieri's attempts to impose German Imperial rule by force were resisted by the local nobility, headed by John of Ibelin from the Kingdom of Acre and young King Henry of Cyprus. Battles and sieges raged across the Kingdom of Acre.

The conflict finally simmered to a close in 1236 with the death of John Ibelin following a riding accident. Around the same time, Emperor Frederick seemed to be coming to terms with the fact that he couldn't extend his autocratic style of rule to his Kingdoms in the Middle East, and Pope Gregory IX suggested that in the absence of their rightful sovereign, Emperor Frederick's son Conrad, the Kingdom of Acre should be administered by the Kingdom of Cyprus.

The period of instability endured by the Latin Christians in the Holy Land extended to the Muslims, when al-Kamil died in 1238. The previously stable regions of Egypt and Syria descended into civil war, as al-Kamil's eldest son, al-Salih Ayyub, whose mother was a Sudanese slave, faced off against his uncle al-Salih Ismail for control of al-Kamil's vast territory. By the mid 1240s, the dispute looked to have been decided with al-Salih Ayyub controlling Egypt while Ismail ruled Syria from Damascus.

In the midst of all this chaos in the year 1239 the ten year truce, agreed between Emperor Frederick and al-Kamil as part of the negotiations to return Jerusalem to Latin Christian rule, expired, and Pope Gregory decided to call for another Crusade. Trouble was, it wasn't a really good time for the Church to be initiating a massive military campaign in the Middle East. The troubled times being experienced by those in the Holy Land were also being felt in Europe, and most western monarchs were too caught up in their own domestic problems to even think about embarking on a Crusade.

In Germany, the Pope's call for a Crusade coincided with another big falling out between the Pope and Emperor Frederick, predominantly over Imperial policy in Italy. This was a major split between these two very strong personalities, and this time there will be no reconciliation. The Pope excommunicated Emperor Frederick for a second time, and in 1244 called for a Crusade against him, resulting in all-out war between the two, which only ended with Frederick's death in 1250. So the upshot of all that was, Pope Gregory's call for another Crusade to the Holy land following the expiration of the ten year truce fell on deaf ears in Emperor Frederick's territories: Germany, Italy and Sicily.

Over in England, things weren't much better. Richard the Lionheart's annoying little brother John had died back in 1216 after a disastrous reign. His inept rule resulted in the English lords diluting royal power when they managed to get King John to sign the Magna Carta, a document which placed a limit on royal power and gave the English aristocracy a say in government. Following King John's death, his son Henry was crowned, becoming King Henry III. However, the English lords had had a whiff of power during King John's reign, and King Henry had his hands full trying to placate them and avoid a civil war breaking out. It was safe to say that leaving England to embark on a Crusade was not on King Henry's list of things to do right now.

For his brother though, Richard Earl of Cornwall, it was a different story. A fabulously wealthy man whose revenues from the tin industry made him one of the richest individuals in Europe, he was also Emperor Frederick's brother-in-law, as his sister was Frederick's current Empress. He will lead a sizable army to the Holy Land in response to the Pope's call.

The French barons were also responding to the call. After King Philip died in 1223 during a visit by his old friend King John of Acre, his son, King Louis VIII took to crusading like a duck to water, throwing himself with relish into the Crusade against the Cathars until his death from dysentery only three years into his reign. His son, also called Louis, was crowned King Louis IX, and he will inherit his father's crusading zeal. But not at the moment. At the time Pope Gregory called for the Crusade, King Louis was only twenty years old. Earlier in his reign, the English King Henry III had invaded France, intending to try and win back his ancestral lands in Poitou. The attempt hadn't succeeded, but to young King Louis, departing on a Crusade while King Henry stayed behind in Europe seemed like not such a good idea, so he fully supported the French aristocracy, taking up the Cross without, on this occasion at least, taking the vow himself.

The chief French aristocrat to respond to the call was Count Theobald of Champagne. The French barons, under the loose leadership of Count Theobald, sailed from Marseilles to the Holy Land in 1239. Count Theobald had a sound Crusading pedigree. His father, Count Theobald III of Champagne, had been elected leader of the Fourth Crusade, before dying prematurely at the beginning of the campaign. His grandfather had accompanied the Second Crusade, and his uncle, Henri of Champagne, had ruled the Kingdom of Jerusalem before falling to his death out of a window with a dwarf. So in theory, Count Theobald of Champagne was the perfect person to lead the French contingent of the Barons' Crusade. In practice, not so much. He appeared to possess no natural talent as a leader, and his campaign will be marred by his constant struggle to assert his authority.

Count Theobald and the other French Barons arrived at Acre in September 1239 with an army of around 1,000 knights and a few thousand foot soldiers. The first item on the expedition's to-do list was to decide on a plan of attack. With the Muslim leadership across the region in disarray following the death of al-Kamil, there was ample scope for the French barons to play the competing Muslim rulers off against each other and negotiate a favorable diplomatic outcome. However, in contrast to Emperor Frederick, the French had come to fight, and gaining territory by diplomacy didn't seem to be the right way to go about things at all, so the decision was made to fight, not negotiate.

The next question was: Where should they concentrate their forces? The obvious targets were Egypt and Damascus. The local nobility recommended an attack against Egypt, while

others argued that Damascus was the better target. Count Theobald couldn't decide between the two options, so he chose to attack them both. The army would march southwards from Acre and attack the two Egyptian border towns of Ascalon and Gaza. Once this region was secure, the army would march inland and seize Damascus. Easy.

The army set out on the road to the south in early November, accompanied by some local noblemen and some fighters from the military Orders. On the way, one of the French Barons, Count Peter of Brittany, heard that a wealthy Muslim caravan was traveling up the Jordan Valley towards Damascus. Keen to be the first baron to chalk up a victory, Count Peter rode off in secret with 200 knights to intercept the caravan. His attack was successful, and he triumphantly drove his new flock of cattle and sheep to Jaffa. While the extra supplies were welcome, the raid caused feelings of resentment and competitiveness amongst his fellow barons and also insured the hostility of al-Nasir of Kerak.

The Egyptians, hearing of the march of the French Barons, hastily sent an army towards Gaza. Count Henri of Bar, hearing that the army only contained 1,000 or so men, and wanting to outdo the recent success of Count Peter of Brittany, decided to attack the Egyptians in secret. He told a few of his fellow barons about his plan, including the Duke of Burgundy and a handful of local noblemen, and on the night of the 12th of November, the expedition, comprising 500 knights and 1,000 foot soldiers, prepared to sneak off and head to Gaza. It's difficult for 1500 people to sneak off anywhere, and Count Theobald intercepted them. He pleaded with them not to go and then, attempting to assert his leadership, ordered them back to their tents. They ignored the order and marched out into the darkness.

They arrived at Gaza just before dawn and Count Henri of Bar ordered his men to rest a while in a hollow area surrounded by sand dunes. He was so confident of success against what he thought was a much smaller Egyptian army that he neglected to post sentries, and by the time the sun rose Egyptian archers, concealed by the sand dunes, had virtually surrounded the French camp. A local nobleman, Walter of Jaffa, sensed something wasn't right and ordered his men to retreat to the north. The Duke of Burgundy and the other knights from the Crusader states followed his example.

Count Henri of Bar remained behind, and when the Egyptians launched their attack it was largely a one sided affair. With their horses flailing in the collapsing sand dunes, and without cover in their hollow resting place, the French forces were quickly overwhelmed. Hundreds of men were killed, including Count Henri of Bar. The remaining 600 men were herded together and carried off to Egypt as hostages. This was a diplomatic as well as a military setback for the French Barons. The Egyptians now had the upper hand, and the chances of the French army negotiating any favorable diplomatic outcomes was significantly diminished. Abandoning his plan to attack Ascalon, Count Theobald retreated back to Acre.

Meanwhile, al-Nasir of Kerak, angered by the loss of the caravan, decided to attack Jerusalem. At that moment, Jerusalem was under the control of Emperor Frederick's Imperial forces. They had only managed to fortify a small part of the defensive wall and the Tower of David, and the city fell easily to the invading Muslims. Al-Nasir destroyed the fortifications, rendering the Holy City utterly defenseless, and returned to Kerak.

Count Theobald marched the remaining French forces northwards to Tripoli, where he hoped to strike a deal with the current Emir of Hama. It was while he was in Tripoli that

al-Salih Ayyub achieved ascendancy in Egypt, causing a civil war to break out between himself and his uncle Ismail of Damascus. Concerned about being overrun by the combined Egyptian forces and al-Nasir of Kerak, Ismail of Damascus invited Count Theobald to form an alliance with him. In return for them guarding the Egyptian border region near the coast, Ismail gifted the fortresses of Beaufort and Safed to the French Barons. This caused tension within the Muslim camp, and also put the Hospitallers offside, as the Templars were given the fortress of Safed. Many of Ismail's men refused to cooperate with the Latin Christians and al-Salih Ayyub took advantage of the situation by coming to his own arrangement with Count Theobald, who jumped at the Egyptian leader's offer to release the French hostages in return for Theobald's neutrality.

With Count Theobald changing sides and alliances at a dizzying rate, things started to unravel. Trying to please everyone, Theobald ended up pleasing no one. With his popularity declining to the extent that he was concerned for his personal safety, Count Theobald sailed back to Europe at the end of September 1240, followed by most of the French Barons.

Less than two weeks after Count Theobald's departure, the English Barons sailed into Acre. Their leader, Richard Earl of Cornwall, was dismayed by the chaotic situation in Acre. The two main military Orders were now in open conflict. The local nobility on the whole supported the Templars, while the Imperialists, led by the Imperial Legate Filangieri, supported the Order of the Hospital. Richard found himself faced with the same dilemma that had brought Count Theobald undone. Support the Damascus Treaty, which was favored by the Templars, or fall into alliance with Egypt, which was supported by the Hospitallers. Richard marched south to Ascalon, then spent the next few months doing some high-powered diplomatic wrangling.

In the end, he acceded to the demands of the ambassadors from Egypt, and confirmed the Egyptian treaty. To placate the Templars, he insisted that Egypt recognized the territory gifted to the Franks by Ismail of Damascus, as well as extra land in Galilee. Ismail of Damascus had ceded most of this area to al-Nasir of Kerak, so he was powerless to prevent the region being handed over to the Latin Christians. The icing on Richard's diplomatic cake was the agreement to release the rest of the French prisoners captured at Gaza in exchange for just a handful of Muslim captives. This meant that the Kingdom of Acre's territory now covered all the land west of the river Jordan, save for Nablus and Samaria. Richard stayed in the Holy Land until May 1241. His diplomatic achievements were well received. In stark contrast to Count Theobald, everyone seemed happy with what he had done. Even Emperor Frederick apparently approved of his actions.

However, the momentary peace forged by Richard Earl of Cornwall was not to last. Not long after his departure for England, the military Orders resumed their stormy relationship. The Templars decided that they didn't want to be bound by the treaty with Egypt after all, and made their displeasure clear by invading the Muslim city of Hebron in 1242. Al-Nasir of Kerak responded by cutting access to Jerusalem and charging a road toll to all pilgrims who wished to journey to the Holy City. This in turn, prompted the Templars to attack the city of Nablus.

On the 5th of April 1243, Conrad of Hohenstauffen, the son of Yolanda and Emperor Frederick, turned fifteen and officially came of age. This meant that Frederick no longer had the right to act as Regent, so the people of the Kingdom of Acre eagerly awaited Conrad's arrival, hoping their new King would unite the squabbling Latin Christians and

finally brings some unity and stability to the Kingdom. Trouble was, Conrad never came. In his absence, his great aunt Alice, Queen Dowager of Cyprus, was appointed as the new Regent of the Kingdom.

Right, so just to recap. Territorially speaking, following the Barons' Crusade, the Kingdom of Acre is as extensive now as it has been since the Battle of Hattin, way back in 1187. So on paper, things are looking great. In reality, though, in-fighting within the Kingdom has reached epic proportions. Instead of taking advantage of the instability within the Muslim world which followed the death of al-Kamil, the Latin Christian nobles squabbled amongst each other. The Templars and Hospitallers were on such poor terms that fighting between them was breaking out in the streets.

But there's nothing like a serious external threat to put an end to internal divisions. Join me next week as a seriously scary bunch of people, the Khwarezmians are pushed out of their territory by the Mongols, and go on a slaughtering rampage through Latin Christian territory.

Now, just before I finish this week, the History Podcasters Collective has just released a new college of short podcasts from various history podcasters on the topic of World War One. I'm included, doing an episode on Lawrence of Arabia. What does Lawrence of Arabia have to do with the Crusades? Well, quite a bit, actually. He was an Oxford scholar before the war and his special topic of interest was, you guessed it, the Crusades. To see how his knowledge of the Crusades shaped his campaigns during World War One, visit HistoryPodcasters.com and download the World War One Collage. Until next week, bye for now.

End