

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 90  
Disaster Strikes.

Hello again. Last week, following the Barons' Crusade, we saw the territory of the Kingdom of Acre expand to levels not seen since the Battle of Hattin. The expansion of territory on paper, however, masked internal disunity within the Crusader states, as the military Orders clashed with each other, and the factions of local noblemen fought for supremacy. Across the Muslim world too, things were in a state of flux, as various Muslim leaders jostled for position following the death of al-Kamil.

Panning out even further, the wider region of Asia was experiencing instability as the invading Mongol armies pushed out of the steppe region, conquering territory and displacing local people. One of the many people displaced by the all-conquering Mongols were the Khwarezmians. A Muslim Turkish people, the Khwarezmians had originally themselves displaced the Seljuk Turks, and had settled on land extending from India to Iraq. Fleeing before the Mongol invasion, the Khwarezmians found themselves being pushed westwards towards the Holy Land. Surviving for the moment as mercenaries, but hoping to conquer enough territory to establish a new homeland, the Khwarezmians were approached by al-Kamil's eldest son, al-Salih Ayyub, who wished to secure their services. In exchange for money and land, al-Salih engaged the Khwarezmians to attack Syria, hoping to use them to crush the ambitions of both his uncle Ismail of Damascus and his cousin al-Nasir of Kerak. In June 1244, an army of over 10,000 Khwarezmian horsemen galloped westwards into the territory controlled by Ismail of Damascus, killing indiscriminately, burning villages, looting, and pillaging. They swept past Damascus, deciding it would be too difficult to take the city, and continued their westward push into Galilee, capturing the town of Tiberias before turning towards Jerusalem.

Now, as the Khwarezmian army stormed towards Jerusalem, the Kingdom of Acre reacted in much the same way as a deer caught in the headlights of an approaching car. It froze. Only three people seemed to be able to take any action: the newly-elected Patriarch of Jerusalem; the Grand Master of the Temple; and the Grand Master of the Hospital. These three men raced to Jerusalem and did their best to protect the Latin Christian garrison, by moving them to fortifications within the city, recently rebuilt by the Templars. But, perhaps sensing impending disaster, the three men departed from Jerusalem well before the arrival of the Khwarezmians, leaving the garrison in the nearly indefensible town to their fate. Following their example, thousands of Latin Christians fled Jerusalem, leaving behind only the pious. Nuns and monks remained within the Armenian convent of St James, while a few priests decided to seek refuge within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

On the 11th of July 1244 the Khwarezmian army broke into Jerusalem. With the garrison holed up in their fortified base and all but powerless to act, the Khwarezmians went on a slaughtering rampage. Breaking into the convent, they massacred the nuns and monks, before finding the priests within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. They either beheaded or disembowelled the priests, then proceeded to vandalize and loot the tombs within the church. The bones of Godfrey de Bouillon and King Baldwin I were thrown from their resting place, then the rest of the church was pillaged and set on fire.

Meanwhile, the garrison was able to hold out in their fortified building, but with no assistance coming from the Kingdom of Acre their future looked bleak. According to

Steven Runciman in the third volume of his series on the Crusades, in desperation, the garrison sent word to al-Nasir at Kerak, who was able to send some troops, which eventually resulted in the garrison securing safe conduct out of the city.

The citizens who had fled the approach of the Khwarezmians were not so fortunate. According to Steven Runciman, as they hurried down the road towards the coast, they noticed Frankish flags waving over the walls of Jerusalem. Falsely believing that the garrison must have defeated the invaders, many of them turned back towards the city, only to be ambushed and killed outside its walls. The remainder fared little better. Set upon by Muslim bandits in the Judean Hills, and attacked by Khwarezmian horsemen near Ramla, most historians agree that thousands of fleeing Latin Christians perished, with only 300 or so arriving safely in Jaffa.

So, yet again, Jerusalem had fallen out of Latin Christian hands. The next westerner to enter the city as a conqueror would be General Edmund Allenby, who paraded through the Jaffa Gate on the 11th of December 1917, as part of the British Empire's operations against the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Walking with the British victors through the Jaffa Gate was none other than Lawrence of Arabia who, possessing an encyclopedic knowledge of the Crusades, would have fully appreciated the significance of the moment.

The fall of Jerusalem galvanized the Latin Christians into action. Appreciating the fact that the all-conquering Khwarezmian army posed a threat to the entire region of Syria, not just the Kingdom of Acre, the Latin Christians joined forces with the three eminent Muslim leaders in the region. Ismail of Damascus joined his army to that of the Franks, as did al-Mansur Ibrahim of Homs, while al-Nasir brought a contingent of Bedouin fighters up from Kerak. As a sign of how seriously it took the threat, the Kingdom of Acre deployed every fighting man it had. With the military Orders supplying all their available knights, and with all the available lay knights joining their cause, the Latin Christian army totaled around 2,000 knights and around 10,000 foot soldiers, the largest Christian army mustered since the Third Crusade.

However, even when these forces joined with the Muslim armies, there weren't enough men to enjoy numerical superiority over the Khwarezmians. The Muslim and Latin Christian commanders debated the best strategy to use against the invaders. Ibrahim of Homs, who had fought the Khwarezmians in the field before, urged a defensive strategy. In his view, if the combined Muslim and Latin Christian armies bunkered down in a defensive position, the Khwarezmians didn't have the patience nor the technology for a prolonged siege. They would soon lose interest in the battle and disperse.

Unfortunately, the Latin Christians, who were eager to battle this new foe and seek revenge for the fall of Jerusalem, ignored this advice. The armies moved southwards towards Gaza, and at Gaza came across the Egyptian army under the command of a young Mamluk Emir, Rukn al-Din Baibars. The 5,000 hand-picked Egyptian fighters under Baibars command joined forces with the Khwarezmians, meaning that the Latin Christian forces were vastly outnumbered.

Despite this, the Latin Christians rashly raced into the battle, clashing with the Egyptian / Khwarezmian forces on the 17th of October 1244 near the village of La Forbie, a few miles north-east of Gaza. With the Latin Christians taking the right flank and with the Damascan and Homs armies in the center and with al-Nasir on the left, the armies came together. The Latin Christians and the forces from Homs held their ground, but the men from

Damascus lost their nerve and fled the field, closely followed by al-Nasir and his Bedouins. As a result, the Khwarezmians were able to surround the Latin Christians, and meted out to them and absolutely crushing defeat.

The losses suffered by both the Muslim army from Homs and the Latin Christian army were horrifying. Of the army from Homs, which comprised 2,000 fighters, 1720 were either killed or captured. If possible, the defeat of the Latin Christian forces was even more appalling. The military Orders in particular were virtually annihilated: of the 348 Knights Templar who entered the fray, only 36 survived; of the 351 Knights Hospitaller, only 21 escaped the battle; and worse still, of the 440 Teutonic Knights who donned their armor to enter the Battle of La Forbie, only three survived. The Grand Master of the Temple was killed on the battlefield, as was the Archbishop of Tyre, while the Count of Jaffa and the Grand Master of the Hospital were captured and taken prisoner. Thousands of Latin Christian knights, archers and foot soldiers perished, some 5,000 in total, while 800 Latin Christians were captured and taken back to Egypt. Similar to what had happened at the Horns of Hattin, in one single battle the cream of the nobility from the Kingdom of Acre and the core of the Latin Christian Army had been wiped out.

The survivors limped back to Acre to regroup. They had to face the grim reality. The unstoppable Khwarezmian army and its Egyptian ally now posed a threat to the very existence of the Crusader states, and at the same time, their army had been annihilated. They responded to this grave threat in the only way they knew how. The Bishop of Beirut, was sent on an urgent mission to Europe to plead with the Pope and the Kings of France and England to mount a Crusade to come to their assistance.

Now, the three years which have passed since the end of the Barons' Crusade have been eventful ones in Europe, particularly for the Papacy. In 1239 Pope Gregory IX excommunicated Emperor Frederick yet again, provoking all out war with him, which culminated in Frederick surrounding the city of Rome with his troops in 1240. At this stage, Pope Gregory was in his late eighties. Although age hadn't wearied his spirit, it had wearied his body, and the following summer he died. He was replaced by a man who warranted just five words in John Julius Norwich's entertaining book "The Popes", those five words being "the hopeless old Celestine IV". The hopeless old Celestine IV only lasted for seventeen days as Pope before dying himself.

The election of the next Pope was hotly contested. Emperor Frederick, whose position would be greatly enhanced by the election of a Pope of the calibre of the hopeless old Celestine IV, spent all of his spare time trying to get another hopeless person elevated to the Papacy, but all of his efforts were to be in vain. In 1243, Cardinal Sinibaldo Fieschi from Genoa became Pope Innocent IV.

Pope Innocent IV was Emperor Frederick's worst nightmare. Pope Innocent not only reconfirmed Frederick's excommunication, but later stripped him of his titles and his crown rights in Germany and Sicily. According to John Julius Norwich, Pope Innocent was even involved in a plot to assassinate Emperor Frederick.

It was into this state of extreme conflict that the Bishop of Beirut reached Europe in 1245, with his dire news about the annihilation of the army of the Kingdom of Acre at La Forbie. Pope Innocent convened a Church Council in 1245 at Lyons in France. He felt unsafe holding the Council in Rome due to his conflict with Frederick. At the council, the calling of a new Crusade was discussed. It was pretty clear from the Council, however, that a new

Crusade to the Holy Land just wasn't high on the list of Papal priorities at this time. Pope Innocent was more concerned about knocking Emperor Frederick down to size and trying to keep the teetering Latin Christian Empire of Romania from collapse. However, he did rubber-stamp the idea, formally agreeing to proclaim a new Crusade to the Holy Land and appointing the French Cardinal Bishop Odo of Chateauroux as Papal Legate for the expedition.

It was now up to the Bishop of Beirut himself to drum up support for the Crusade from the monarchs of Europe. This wasn't going to be easy. Clearly, Emperor Frederick was in no position to join the expedition. King Henry III of England, was still experiencing the same domestic problems which prevented him from accompanying the Baron's Crusade. The pesky English noblemen, who had successfully grasped some power for themselves following King John's endorsement of the Magna Carta, were doing their best to grab that power and run with it, leaving King Henry III completely occupied trying to avoid a civil war breaking out.

That left the King of France, Louis IX. Luckily for the Bishop of Beirut and for the Latin Christians of the Kingdom of Acre, a Crusade to the Holy Land was exactly the sort of thing that King Louis currently saw himself doing. A year earlier, back in 1244, King Louis had fallen seriously ill with a bout of malaria. He made a vow to God that, should he be spared from the illness, he would set out on Crusade, and King Louis was the sort of person who always kept his promises. King Louis recovered, and in 1245 was already as busy as his health would allow, making preparations for his expedition.

King Louis will spend the next three years busily preparing for his Crusade. Three years can be a long time if you are a small, isolated Kingdom whose army has just been annihilated by a fearsome group of warmongering Turkish horsemen, so let's take a look at how the Kingdom of Acre fared while King Louis raises revenue and gathers men for the expedition which will become the cornerstone of his reign.

Well, actually, despite what you might think, the Latin Christians in the Crusader states fared okay. Yes, they had lost Jerusalem, and yes, they had lost most of their army, but as I just said, they were okay. Why? Because the spotlight of conflict in the Middle East now shone upon the wrestle for power and territory between the various Muslim leaders in the region, and the Khwarezmian army became caught up in the struggle.

Far from rewarding the victorious Khwarezmians with the land in Egypt, as they were promised, the ruler of Egypt blocked their passage into Egyptian territory, instead using them to besiege Damascus. The siege of the city lasted for six months, before Ismail yielded the city. With still no land or payment coming their way, the Khwarezmians decided to swap sides, and in 1246 offered their services to Ismail. Ismail happily accepted, and used the Khwarezmians to lay siege to Damascus again, trying to win his city back. At the request of the ruler of Egypt, the Regent of Aleppo and the Prince of Homs marched on Damascus, intent on keeping it in Egyptian hands. The two sides met in the field. The Khwarezmian army suffered a massive defeat and was virtually wiped out. The few survivors made their way back eastwards and joined the Mongol forces.

So, much to the relief of the Latin Christians, the Muslims and the Khwarezmians spent three years fighting each other, leaving the Crusader states to look after themselves. However, good times always come to an end, and in 1247 the Egyptians set their sights on Latin Christian territory. They took Tiberias, then Ascalon. Following these victories,

however, the ruler of Egypt, al-Salih Ayyub, seemed content with his success. He retired to Damascus, where he set up court and ordered all the Muslim rulers of Syria to visit him and pay homage.

At this stage, the Kingdom of Acre was being ruled by King Henry of Cyprus. We last saw King Henry when Emperor Frederick visited Cyprus back in 1228. At that time, King Henry was an eight year old child. Now he's in his late twenties. He's overweight, enjoys his leisure time and his food, and he's not terribly interested in the everyday tasks involved in governing a state. So he appointed Balian of Ibelin to govern the Kingdom on his behalf. Balian did so until his death in 1247, at which time his brother John of Arsuf took over.

Right, so let's just recap what has happened in this episode. When I first started talking around twenty minutes ago, the Latin Christians held Jerusalem and were enjoying ruling over a sizable territory. But further into the episode, disaster struck, in the form of a massive defeat at the Battle of La Forbie. As the Latin Christian Kingdom of Acre flounders and limps around in the Holy Land, King Louis of France is preparing his troops. If you think that this means it's time for a new Crusade, you would be right.

Join me next week as we start a series of Roman numeraled episodes on what will be the last major Crusade in this podcast series, the Crusade of King Louis IX. Until next week, bye for now.

End