

History of the Crusades.
Episode 92
King Louis' Crusade II.

Hello again. Last week we saw King Louis IX of France leave Europe on Crusade, with a sizable and predominantly French Crusading army. The army spent the winter in Cyprus before setting out for Damietta in Egypt.

Prior to setting out, King Louis and the Muslim leader al-Salih Ayyub exchanged a threatening series of letters. Their correspondence was documented by Amin Maalouf in his book "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes". King Louis went first, penning a declaration of war which he sent to Ayyub. This is an extract from his letter, and I quote "I will assault your territory and even were you to swear allegiance to the Cross, my mind would not be changed. The armies that obey me cover the mountains and plains. They are as numerous as the pebbles of the earth, and they march upon you, grasping the swords of fate." End quote.

This is part of Ayyub's reply, and I quote "Foolish as you are, have you forgotten the lands you occupied which we have re-conquered, even quite recently? Have you forgotten the damage which we have inflicted upon you?" End quote. Ayyub finished his letter with an ominous prediction, and I quote "Your defeat is inevitable. Soon you will bitterly regret the adventure on which you have embarked." End quote.

Despite this threat, King Louis' Crusade set out from Cyprus in May 1249. With the addition of stragglers who had joined the expedition over the winter, the Crusading force numbered around 15,000 men. King Louis' brother, Alphonse of Poitiers, still hadn't shown up with his army, but Louis decided he couldn't wait any longer. Queen Margaret and the ladies of the expedition were dispatched to the relative safety of Acre, and the Crusaders set sail. The fleet was rather impressive. It consisted of around 120 large galleys and more than 1000 smaller ships. John of Joinville wrote, and I quote "It seemed as if all the sea, as far as the eye could behold, was covered with the canvas of the ship's sails" end quote. Unfortunately, the fleet met with bad weather on their way to Egypt. Storms and unfavourable winds scattered the ships, but on the 4th of June 1249, the royal squadron arrived at the Egyptian coast and anchored offshore from Damietta.

Now, unfortunately for the Egyptians their leader, al-Salih Ayyub, is currently a very sick man. He's in the last stages of tuberculosis and is prone to coughing fits which leave him severely weakened. Put simply, al-Salih Ayyub is in no fit state to personally oversee the defense of his territory. So he delegates this responsibility. The man he places in charge of the Egyptian army is none other than Emperor Frederick's buddy, the wily old diplomat Fakhr al-Din. Figuring correctly that the invading Crusaders will be at their most vulnerable when disembarking from their ships, Fakhr orders the army to man the coastline around Damietta, with a view to nipping the Crusade in the bud and defeating the Latin Christians before they even gain a foothold in Egypt.

This, of course, was bad news for the Crusaders. The members of the Fifth Crusade had been able to disembark at a leisurely pace from their ships, and had wandered around the swamps, choosing a place to set up camp, without even seeing a Muslim defender. This time, however, things were very different. From the decks of their ships, the Latin Christians could see the Muslim defenders lining the coast, thousands upon thousands of

them. Wherever they chose to land, it was clear the Crusaders were going to encounter stiff resistance. King Louis convened a war council on board his ship, and the decision was made to attempt to land on shore the next morning.

Now, for the following account of the most ambitious amphibious landing in the history of the Crusades, I'm indebted to two people: John of Joinville, and the modern historian Thomas Asbridge, who paints a vivid picture of the event in his book "The Crusades". As the day drew to a close, the men were informed that they would be storming the beaches the following morning, the men could see thousands of Muslim defenders lining the shore, and the prospect of throwing themselves against this massive army must have been a daunting one. The priests on board the ships heard confessions, and the Crusaders settled down to grab whatever sleep they could.

At dawn the next morning, the fleet echoed with the prayers of thousands of Crusaders. King Louis attended Mass on board his ship, then everyone was good to go. The large transport ships which had carried the Crusaders to Egypt, were too big to get close enough to shore to disembark the Latin Christians, so the first task was to get the men from the ships into smaller, shallower landing boats. This in itself was no easy matter. John of Joinville climbed down into a longboat with his men, which became so overloaded with their combined weight that it was in danger of sinking. At least they made it into a boat. John saw one knight misjudge his leap into a boat as it drew away from the ship. He plunged into the sea and, weighed down by his armour, drowned.

John described the coast they were heading towards as follows, and I quote "The full array of the Sultan's forces were drawn up along the shore. It was a sight to enchant the eye, for the Sultan's standards were all of gold, and where the sun caught them they shone, resplendent. The din this army made with its kettle drums and Saracen horns, was terrifying to hear." End quote.

Hundreds of boats were now making their way towards the shore, the rowers straining to drive their overloaded craft forwards. The longboat containing John of Joinville and his men was one of the first to reach the shore. They disembarked right in front of a group of Muslim horsemen who wasted no time in charging towards them. John and his men leapt out of their boat, wading as fast as they could through the water. When they reached the shore, they immediately formed a circle, digging the pointed ends of their shields into the sand to form a protective barrier, and jamming their lances firmly into the ground with the sharpened tips pointed towards the attackers. The ploy worked. John states, and I quote "The moment the charging enemy saw the lances about to pierce their bellies. They wheeled around and fled." End quote.

John and his men kept up their defensive formation as they watched thousands of other Crusaders attempt to reach the shore unscathed. The scene must have been utterly chaotic. Above the noise made by the Muslim drums and horns, the longboats were all trying to disembark their passengers, with mixed success. Muslim arrows and spears were doing their best to find targets, as the heavily armored Franks struggled out of the boats and waded ashore. Some knights misjudged the depth of the water. They jumped out of their boats too soon, and weighed down by their armor, sank and drowned. Others found themselves in water up to their armpits, and faced a battle struggling through the waves with all of their gear to the beach. Even more challenging was the task of trying to land the horses on the beach.

While the Latin Christians came under heavy fire during their landing. They weren't defenseless. Their cross-bowmen, with their long-ranged weapons, were able to provide effective cover fire as the thousands of Franks struggled onto the shore. Once onshore, they faced immediate attack. Skirmishes were breaking out all over the coast, but the heavily armored Franks, on the whole, were able to order themselves into defensive formations, and once in these formations could start to strike back against the defenders.

King Louis was watching all this action from the safety of his own landing boat, which was filled with other important personages, including the Papal Legate. The plan was for the monarch to wait until the coast was securely in Crusader hands before disembarking on shore, but it all got a little bit too much for King Louis. When he saw his royal standard flying over the sands of Egypt, he leapt overboard, much to the horror of those around him. Finding himself chest-deep in water, he forged his way forward to the beach, with his shield hanging around his neck, with his helmet securely on his head, and his lance at the ready. He made it safely to the beach, and once there had to be held back from throwing himself into the fray. All around him, the Crusaders were doing a fine job against the defenders.

Things weren't going so well in the Muslim camp. Some talented diplomats are also talented military commanders, But Fakhr al-Din wasn't one of them. His defense of the beach lacked overall coordination, and once the Crusaders made it to shore, the Muslims were largely left to their own devices, some fighting bravely and others making only halfhearted attempts to drive the attackers back into the sea. As more and more Franks formed themselves into defensive fighting positions, it was becoming clear that the day was against the Muslims. Having lost around 500 men, three Emirs, and a significant number of horses, Fakhr al-Din made the decision to withdraw.

Now when I say he made the decision to withdraw, he didn't just withdraw from the beach back to Damietta. He withdrew completely. From the entire area. Now, Damietta was a city which was easy to defend, as shown by the fact that it took the members of the Fifth Crusade eighteen months of hard-fought besieging to defeat it. Everyone expected Fakhr al-Din to withdraw to Damietta, man the city's defenses, and do his best to prevent the city from falling into Christian hands. But, utterly inexplicably, he didn't do this. Turning his army southwards, he marched right past Damietta and headed inland. The horrified garrison at Damietta watched the Muslim army retreating and quickly followed suit. The Muslim population of Damietta, with the horrific experiences of the last time the Latin Christians entered the city fresh in their minds, gathered what they could and evacuated the town.

Now, when I say that Fakhr al-Din's decision to abandon Damietta was inexplicable, well, that's not entirely accurate. It was totally unjustified from a military point of view, but taken from a political standpoint, the reasons behind his actions start to become clear. The Egyptian leader al-Salih Ayyub is dying. Sultan Ayyub had set himself up at the sight of his father's camp during the Fifth Crusade. His father, al-Kamil, had viewed the campsite as the position from which the Fifth Crusade had been defeated, and to celebrate his victory, he built a city on the site. He named the city Mansurah, which means "the victorious". Sultan Ayyub was in the city of Mansurah, awaiting news of the outcome of the invasion by these new Crusaders.

Unfortunately, at Mansurah, his health took a turn for the worst. Ambitious men were gathering in Mansurah, positioning themselves to take advantage of the power vacuum

which would present itself upon the Sultan's death. Fakhr al-Din was such an ambitious man. Viewing himself as a contender for the leadership of Egypt, Fakir ad-Din was content to see the Egyptian coast fall to the Latin Christians. He was headed to Mansurah.

Back on the beach, the Latin Christians were utterly unaware of this turn of events. Assuming that the Muslim forces had fallen back to Damietta, they bunkered down for the night on the beach, intending to march to Damietta the next day to start what they fully expected to be a lengthy siege of the city.

Now the city of Damietta hadn't been left entirely devoid of people. While the majority of the town's population, all of its Muslim residents, had departed, there were a smattering of Christian residents who didn't flee. Apparently, 53 Latin Christians remained locked up within the city, having been imprisoned there since the Fifth Crusade. There were also a handful of Coptic Christians, and there may have been some Latin Christians who had chosen to stay in Egypt after the last Crusade, and who had married local women, converted to Islam, and had had children.

Anyway, at dawn the following day, some of the Christians of Damietta made their way down to the beach and informed the Crusaders that Damietta had been left unguarded. Scouts were sent to confirm the news, and the startled and delighted Crusader army broke camp on the beach, then marched triumphantly into Damietta. To say that the Latin Christians were pleased at this turn of events is an understatement. They had been expecting to have to win the city the hard way, with a prolonged siege. Now, with no effort at all, Damietta was theirs. The Muslim population of the city had also expected a siege and had stockpiled enough food and supplies to sustain them for the next two years. All these supplies now fell into Latin Christian hands.

King Louis immediately began transforming Damietta from an Egyptian Muslim city into a French Latin Christian one. As had occurred during the Fifth Crusade, the Great Mosque in the city was turned into a cathedral and a Bishop was installed. The new church was decorated with chalices, crucifixes, wall hangings, and altar cloths, all of which had been transported from France specifically for this purpose. King Louis allocated property within the city to the different military Orders. Then everyone settled back and pondered what to do next.

Meanwhile, things weren't going at all well for Fakhr al-Din. He made his way to Mansurah, where he expected to find Sultan Ayyub either dead, or at the very least unconscious on his deathbed. Instead, although still critically ill, al-Salih Ayyub was quite conscious, and conscious men are able to ask questions, questions like "Fakhr al-Din, what are you doing here?" And "You must have defeated the Franks in an astonishingly quick time. Sit down and tell me all about it." And "You did what?" To put it simply, Fakhr al-Din's play for power backfired spectacularly. The dying sultan was appalled that his father's elderly adviser had virtually handed Damietta to the Crusaders on a silver plate, and instead of driving the invaders from the Egyptian shores had allowed them to entrench themselves in a strategically vital, well-fortified, and well-stocked Egyptian town.

Fakhr al-Din had been an important man. A high-end diplomat, friend to the most powerful man in Europe, and adviser to the most powerful man in the Middle East, he clearly saw his star as still being on the rise, and viewed his taking over of the leadership of Egypt and Syria as the obvious next step in his stellar career. Now all that came crashing down around him. Although endowed with the silver tongue of an experienced diplomat, there

was no tongue silver enough to be able to talk its way out of the mess that Fakhr al-Din now found himself in. He had clearly placed his own ambitions over the interests of his country and its people. Perhaps out of deference to his late father, al-Salih Ayyub didn't mete out to the elderly diplomat the treasonous death he likely deserved. Instead, he was publicly disgraced. The garrison of Damietta weren't so lucky. The Sultan viewed them as having abandoned their posts, and he executed every single one of them.

So the Muslims are now in a tight spot. Their leader is dying and uncertainty surrounds the issue of his succession. Damietta, the vital Egyptian port city, is in Latin Christian hands, and the way is now open for the Crusaders to make their way down the River Nile to the capital, Cairo. What will happen next? Well, you'll have to join me next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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