

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 99  
Egyptian Resistance.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Mongols under the leadership of the warlord Hulagu move out of Persia and take the city of Baghdad. The Caliph was killed, as were most of the residents of the city, and the city itself was sacked, with centuries of Islamic culture going up in smoke.

In the year 1259 Hulagu's Mongol army left Baghdad behind, crossed the Euphrates River, and began its push into Syria. Now the Muslims and the Latin Christians viewed the approaching Mongol army in quite different ways. The Muslims of Syria quite rightly were terrified, having just seen the mighty city of Baghdad fall to the Mongol sword. The Latin Christians, however, adopted an approach of cautious neutrality. They had been fighting the Muslims of Syria for more than 150 years, and the Mongols, while not Christian, definitely showed some Christian leanings. The warlord Hulagu's favorite wife was a Nestorian Christian, as was his mother. The general that Hulagu is about to place in charge of his Syrian campaign, Kitbuqa, is also a Nestorian Christian. So, keeping in mind the saying that my enemy's enemy is my friend, most of the Latin Christians of the Crusader states sat back to see what would happen next.

Most of the Latin Christians, that is, except Prince Bohemond of Antioch. As we saw back in Episode 96, during the four years in which King Louis had been effectively ruling the Kingdom of Acre, King Louis had taken the fifteen year old Prince Bohemond VI of Antioch under his wing, and had helped him form a strong alliance with the nearby Kingdom of Armenia. Well, the Kingdom of Armenia had surrendered to the Mongols way back in 1246, and King Hethum of Armenia had been allowed to retain his crown in return for paying an annual tribute to the Mongols. Prince Bohemond was also King Hethum's son-in-law, King Louis having managed to secure an advantageous marriage between young Prince Bohemond and one of King Hethum's daughters,

King Hethum now convinces Prince Bohemond, who is currently aged in his early twenties, to follow his example and ally himself with the Mongols. Currently, the Mongols are rapidly advancing towards the ancient city of Aleppo, ruled at this stage by al-Nasir from his capital in Damascus. Aleppo was also not far from the border of the Principality of Antioch. Al-Nasir had been paying an annual tribute to the Mongols since 1251, and he was probably hoping that this would prevent his cities from becoming targets for the invaders. He was about to be disappointed.

At the beginning of the year 1260, Hulagu laid siege to the city of Aleppo, aided by King Hethum of Armenia and Prince Bohemond of Antioch. Like Baghdad, the defenses of Aleppo were no match for the firepower of the invaders, and after six days of bombardment Aleppo's ancient walls crumbled and the attackers poured into the city. What followed was six days of destruction and violence. Prince Bohemond himself reportedly set fire to the main mosque in the city, and was rewarded handsomely by Hulagu for his assistance. He was allocated some of the spoils from the sack of Aleppo and, more importantly, the Khan gave back to the Principality some of the territory around Aleppo that had been in Muslim hands since the time of Saladin, including the coastal town of Latakia. In return, Bohemond agreed to install a Greek Patriarch in Antioch, a move which horrified his Latin Christian counterparts in the other Crusader states.

With the Mongols now at their doorstep and with the Mongol army now turning its attention southwards towards the city of Damascus, the Latin Christians in the Kingdom of Acre started assessing their options. Unlike Bohemond, they had no desire to ally themselves with the invading army, but realistically, if the Mongols chose to attack, the Latin Christians knew they would be all but powerless to stop them. In a slightly desperate move, a letter was dispatched to King Louis' ambitious brother Charles of Anjou, who was rumored to be trying to secure for himself the Kingdom of Sicily, warning him of the dangers the Mongol army posed for the Latin Christians in the Middle East and urging his immediate assistance.

Meanwhile, the Mongol army was conquering its way through Syria. The cities of Harim and Homs, which had resisted the Latin Christians for so many years, fell easily into Mongol hands. The news that the entire region of northern Syria was now under Mongol control seems to have been the last straw for al-Nasir. He fled his capital, Damascus. He was later captured and sent to Hulagu as a hostage. Wisely, the now leaderless citizens of Damascus decided that surrendering to the Mongols was their best option, and Hulagu was offered the keys to the city in February 1260. In the third book of his trilogy on the Crusades, Steven Runciman writes that on the 1st of March 1260 the Mongol general Kitbuqa, who as I mentioned previously was a Nestorian Christian, entered Damascus in triumph, along with his Christian allies, King Hethum of Armenia and Prince Bohemond of Antioch. The citizens of the ancient Muslim stronghold of Damascus, which had held fast against invading Christians for the past six centuries, were forced to watch the three Christians parading victorious through the Damascan streets.

So Baghdad, Aleppo, and Damascus were now in Mongol hands. All of Muslim Syria was under their control, and still they advanced. Shortly after the capture of Damascus the Mongol armies moved even further to the west, and overtook the cities of Nablus and Gaza. The taking of Gaza in particular was a notable event. It meant that the land conquered by the Mongols now stretched all the way to the Mediterranean coast. It also meant that the Crusader states were effectively surrounded by Mongol territory. Of even more importance than these two facts, it meant that the Mongols had arrived at the Egyptian border, and it soon became clear that Egypt was their next target.

A spanner, however, was about to be thrown into the Mongol works, as regards their plans for further expansion. In August 1259 the great Khan Mongke died while on campaign with his brother Kublai in China. The first Mongol Empire was now leaderless, and there was no clear front-runner in the race to see who the next Great Khan would be. Hulagu was eventually forced to return to Mongolia to take part in the succession debate. Interestingly, he took most of his army with him. Historians have debated the reasons for this, but it may simply have been due to the fact that there just wasn't enough pasture in the deserts of Syria to support the thousands upon thousands of Mongol horses.

Hulagu left his trusted general Kitbuqa in charge of his Syrian campaign. Kitbuqa had two briefs: to hold the land already conquered, and to take Egypt on behalf of the Mongol Empire. A small part of the Mongol army, around 20,000 horsemen, remained with Kitbuqa to enable him to complete his mission. In the summer of 1260 a Mongol embassy arrived in Cairo demanding the immediate surrender of the city and of Egypt itself. The four members of the embassy carried with them a letter designed to intimidate the Egyptians into immediate capitulation.

Here's a rather lengthy extract from that letter, which will give you an idea of the mindset of the Mongols as they advanced towards the Egyptian border, and I quote "We are the army of God on his earth. He created us from his wrath and urged us against those who incurred his anger. Be warned by the fate of others. We do not pity those who weep, nor are we tender to those who complain. You have heard that we have conquered the lands and cleansed the earth of corruption and killed most of the people. Yours to flee, ours to pursue. And what land will shelter you? What roads save you? What country will protect you? You have no deliverance from our swords. No escape from the terror of our arms. Our horses are swift in pursuit, our arrows piercing, our swords like thunderbolts, our hearts, like rocks, our numbers, like sand. Fortresses cannot withstand us. Armies are of no avail in fighting us. Your prayers against us will not be heard. If you resist us, you will be destroyed." End quote.

Now, you might recall from last week's episode that the current ruler of Egypt is the powerful Mamluk warlord Saif ad-Din Qutuz. Qutuz has only been in this position for around six months, having deposed the son of the first Mamluk Sultan Aybak in December 1259 to become Sultan of Egypt. Right, so Qutuz now finds himself confronted with a massive question. Should Cairo submit to the Mongols and its people be spared, or should it rise up against the all-conquering invaders, hoping to prevail where the great cities of Baghdad, Damascus, and Aleppo had failed? Qutuz was a man of action, and his response to the letter carried by the four Mongol messengers was unequivocal. He ordered each of the four envoys to be sliced in half, then be beheaded. Their heads were placed on each of the main gates into Cairo. The Mamluks were now officially at war with the Mongols.

Rather than wait for the Mongols to come to him, Qutuz decided to take the initiative, and take his army out of Egypt to meet the Mongol army at a place of his choosing. Wanting to take full advantage of the fact that the bulk of Hulagu's army had followed him back to Mongolia, Qutuz wanted to mobilize as soon as possible. He gathered the Egyptian army, together with the remnants of the Khwarezmian forces and some Muslim fighters from Kerak, and on the 26th of July these Egyptian forces marched out of Egypt into Gaza, with Baibars leading the vanguard, which was comprised mostly of the elite Mamluk unit formed under Sultan Ayyub.

Now, according to Thomas Asbridge in his book "The Crusades", at this stage an intense mutual dislike existed between Qutuz and Baibars, and currents of suspicion and distrust swirled around them. But they were forced to set aside their animosity and unite against a formidable enemy.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Egyptians seem to have made some attempt to form an alliance against the Mongols with the Latin Christians in the Kingdom of Acre. Despite being surrounded by territory conquered by the Mongols, Hulagu had not yet directly threatened Latin Christian territory, and the Principality of Antioch was actively supporting the Mongols. Also, with their defeat by the Mamluks in King Louis' Crusade fresh in their minds, it was probably not a surprise to anyone when the Latin Christians rejected the Mamluk invitation. They did however, agree not to attack the Mamluks, and granted permission for the Mamluk army to move unhindered through territory controlled by the Kingdom of Acre.

When the Mamluks arrived at Gaza, they were confronted by a small Mongol force, which had been given the task of holding the city. They were no match for the might of the

Egyptian army and were quickly overrun, not even managing to send word to Kitbuqa about the attack. Kitbuqa at this time was in Baalbek, near the border of the County of Tripoli. Following their victory, the Mamluks marched northwards towards the Kingdom of Acre. Having received permission to enter the Kingdom, they continued their advance all the way to the city of Acre. News of this event reached Kitbuqa, and he mobilized his force, gathering men from Armenia and Homs to join his Mongol horsemen. He moved his army southwards to confront the invading Egyptians.

Meanwhile, the Egyptians were camped in an orchard outside Acre. According to Steven Runciman, Baibars suggested to Qutuz that he attack the city of Acre, and take the Franks by surprise. Qutuz, understandably not wanting to fight both the Mongols and the Latin Christians at the same time, ignored Baibars' suggestion. News then reached Qutuz that the Mongol army was on the march, had crossed the river Jordan, and was approaching Galilee. Qutuz immediately gathered the Egyptian forces and headed in a southwesterly direction towards Nazareth. On the 2nd of September, he reached Ain Jalut, the Pools of Goliath in Galilee, where Saladin had sought to confront the Latin Christians back in 1183. He then waited for the Mongol army to arrive.

What is about to occur is a battle of immense historical importance, a battle essentially for the Middle East itself. Both sides were roughly equal in terms of numbers. Each army contained between 10,000 and 12,000 men. Qutuz however, had chosen the battleground, and he was about to take full advantage of that fact. He hid the bulk of the Egyptian forces in the hills surrounding the area, leaving only Baibars and the vanguard exposed.

Kitbuqa fell right into the trap. Seeing only 1,000 or so Egyptian men in the field, the Mongols raced straight into attack. Baibars retreated into the hills with the Mongols hot on his heels. Then Qutuz and the bulk of the Egyptian army poured out from the hills and surrounded the Mongol forces. Despite being surrounded, the forces under Kitbuqa fought superbly, and for a few hours it looked like the Mongols may eventually prevail. But at a decisive moment in the battle, the Muslim component of the Mongol army, from Homs, fled the field, turning the tide in favor of the Egyptians. The Mongols fought on, refusing to admit defeat. Kitbuqa himself was unhorsed, but still fought on, refusing to surrender. Eventually he was captured and beheaded.

The unthinkable had occurred. The Mongols had been defeated in battle. Not only had Qutuz saved Egypt from a Mongol invasion, he is about to take the opportunity to extend Egyptian territory across Syria, and will take control of the key cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

But Qutuz won't be able to revel in his victory for long, because on the way back to Cairo he will be assassinated. Join me next week for our 100th episode (woohoo!), where we see the rise to power of the Mamluk commander Baibars. Until next week, bye for now.

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