

Arab Historians of the Crusades

Selected and translated
from the Arabic sources
by

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY AND LOS ANGELES 1969

*Translated from the Italian
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CHAPTER SEVEN

The most significant episode of the inconclusive Second Crusade, which was begun under the shadow of the loss of Edessa, was the short and ineffective siege of Damascus (1148). Ibn al-Qalānisi was an eye-witness, and his account completes and complements that of Ibn al-Athīr. Sibṭ Ibn al-Jauzi adds some picturesque details. The heroic death for his Faith and his country of the old *faqīh* al-Findalawi could be taken as a symbol of the most noble and austere aspects of the Muslim resistance.

THE SECOND CRUSADE. THE SIEGE OF DAMASCUS

(IBN AL-QALĀNISI, 297-300)

At the beginning of 543/1148 news was brought from several sources of the arrival of a Frankish fleet on the Syrian coast. Troops disembarked at the ports of Tyre and Acre to link up with the Franks already there. These were estimated at 100,000 men, allowing for the depredations of war, plague and famine. After the new arrivals had completed the obligatory pilgrimage to Jerusalem and returned, some by land and some by sea, they assembled in the camps of the King of Germany,¹ the leading Frankish noble there, and of other, lesser princes. They had not decided which of the Muslim cities of Syria to attack. In the end they decided to besiege Damascus, for in their evil hearts they deluded themselves that they could take it, since the town and country districts merge into one another. The amīr of Damascus, Muʿīn ad-Din Unur, received several warnings of the invasion and made preparations to defend his realm and

¹ The Emperor Conrad III. The part played by Louis VII of France is almost entirely ignored by Muslim writers.

repulse the enemy. He fortified the more exposed positions, manned the communication trenches and the loopholes, cut off supplies to enemy bases and blocked up water-holes and springs. Meanwhile about 50,000 infantry and cavalry, with trains of camel and oxen, were marching on Damascus. As they approached the city they made for the district known as *Manazil al-'Askar* (Military Encampment) but found that the water supply had been cut off. So they moved on to al-Mizza and encamped there, in order to be near water. They besieged the city with cavalry and infantry. On Saturday 6 rabi' I 543/24 July 1148 the Muslims challenged them to fight, and the battle began. The army from Damascus had large numbers of auxiliaries; experienced Turkish storm-troopers, the citizen militia and volunteers fighting for the Faith. After a fierce struggle the Franks, superior in numbers and equipment, overwhelmed the Muslims, seized the water supplies and encamped in the gardens surrounding the city. They closed in on the city walls, coming up closer than any army in ancient or modern times had ever been. On this day the Malikite lawyer and scholar, the imām Yusuf al-Findalawi—God have mercy on him!—fell in battle, a martyr for the Faith, by the river at ar-Rabwa. He was facing the enemy and refusing to withdraw, in obedience to the precepts of God Almighty in His noble Book.¹ The devout 'Abd ar-Rahmān al-Halhuli met the same fate.

The Franks set to work to cut down the trees and build fortifications with them, and to destroy the bridges. This occupied them for the whole of the night. The population of Damascus, after the experiences of the last hours, were disheartened and uncertain what to do. But at dawn on the Sunday the Muslim army made a sortie, attacked the Franks, and defeated them, killing and wounding large numbers. The amir

¹ I.e. the Qur'anic teaching about the Holy War; no particular passage is referred to here.

Mu'in ad-Din performed prodigious feats in this battle, showing unparalleled valour, tenacity and indefatigable prowess in his onslaught on the enemy. The battle raged long and furiously. The infidel cavalry waited to make the charges, for which it is famous, until a favourable opportunity presented itself. Fighting was still going on at sunset. Night fell, the battle had to cease for a while, and the troops retired to their billets. The regular soldiers spent the night facing the enemy, while the population mounted guard on the walls as a security measure against an enemy so close at hand.

Meanwhile letters had been sent to the provincial governor to ask his help. Turcoman cavalry and infantry from the province poured into the area. In the morning, reinforced and heartened, the Muslims returned to the battle. They stood firm and sent clouds of arrows from long-bows and cross-bows to rain down on the enemy's cavalry and infantry, horses and camels.

That day a large detachment of archers arrived on foot from the Biqā', increasing the number of defenders and doubling their supply of arms. That day both sides stood firm, but on the Tuesday our army attacked like eagles on mountain partridges, or sparrow-hawks on the quails' nest. They surrounded the Frankish camp, which had been barricaded with tree-trunks from the orchards, and broke down the defences with arrows and stones. The Franks, frightened and disheartened, dared not come out. When not one showed himself the Muslims began to think that some plot or ambush was afoot. The only troops to appear were cavalry and infantry patrols on raiding missions. They dared not take the initiative until they could see an opportunity to charge the Muslims, or an avenue of escape. Anyone bold enough to come within range of the Muslims was struck down by an arrow, stone or lance. Men of the Damascus militia and from the surrounding regions lay in wait for the Franks along paths they thought safe and killed anyone

who used them. The heads were taken to Damascus to be exchanged for a reward; in this way a large number of heads was collected.

News reached the Franks from many sources that the Muslims were bearing down on them to attack them and wipe them out, and they felt that their defeat was certain. They consulted among themselves, and decided that the only escape from the trap or abyss that loomed ahead of them was to take flight. At dawn on the following Wednesday they retreated in miserable confusion and disorder.

When the Muslims saw that they had gone, and observed the traces that they left in their flight, they set off the same morning to pursue them. They showered them with arrows and killed many of their rearguard in this way, and horses and pack animals as well. Innumerable corpses of men and their splendid mounts were found in their bivouacs and along the route of their flight,¹ the bodies stinking so powerfully that the birds almost fell out of the sky. That very night they set fire to ar-Rabwa and al-Qubba al-Mamduda.

This gracious sign of God's favour brought rejoicing to Muslim hearts, and they gave thanks to the Most High for hearing the prayers raised unceasingly to Him in the days of their distress. For which let God be praised and blessed!