

CHAPTER THREE

In 1291 al-Ashraf, Qalawūn's son, completed his father's work (Qalawūn died while preparations for the campaign against Acre were in progress) and the work of all his predecessors in the struggle against the Christian invader. The bloody conquest of Acre after a strenuous resistance is described here by Abu l-Fidā', who took part in it as one of the Sultan's vassals. His account is consistent with that of the 'Templar of Tyre', the best known Western source for the episode that marked the end of Christian rule in the Holy Land. The treacherous slaughter of the heroic defenders after the surrender is shown by a later Egyptian chronicler, Abu l-Mahasin, to reflect a similar massacre of Muslim prisoners under treaty committed a hundred years before by Richard Coeur de Lion, also at Acre. This harsh application of the old law closes the last act of the drama of the Crusaders.

THE FALL OF ACRE (ABU L-FIDĀ', 163-5)

In 690/1291 the Sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf marched on Acre with his Egyptian troops and sent word to the Syrian army to join up with him and to bring the siege-engines. The ruler of Hamān, al-Malik al-Muzaffar, set out with his uncle al-Malik al-Afdal¹ and the whole of Hamān's army for Hīsn al-Akrād, where we collected a huge catapult called 'the Victorious'; a hundred wagons were needed to transport it. (It was dismantled and the pieces) distributed through the army. The part consigned to me was only one wagon-load, since at the time I was an 'amir of ten'.² It was the end of the winter when we

¹ The author's cousin and father respectively. Abu l-Fidā' was to become in his turn ruler of Hamān.

² One of the lowest ranks in the feudal hierarchy.

marched off with the wagons; rain and snowstorms struck us between Hīsn al-Akrād and Damascus, causing great hardship, for the wagons were heavy and the oxen weak and dying of cold. Because of the wagons it took us a month to march from Hīsn al-Akrād to Acre, usually an eight-day ride. The Sultan ordered all the other fortresses to send catapults and siege-engines to Acre, and in this way a great number of large and small artillery concentrated under its walls, more than had ever before been assembled in one place.

The Muslim troops mustered at Acre in the first days of jumada I 690/beginning of May 1291, and the battle raged furiously. The Franks did not close most of the gates; in fact they left them wide open and fought in front of them in their defence. The Hamāt army was in its usual position on the extreme right wing. This meant that we were on the seashore, with the sea on our right when we faced Acre. We were attacked by troops landing from boats protected by wood-faced frames covered with buffalo-hides, from which they shot at us with bows and ballistas. Thus we found ourselves fighting on two fronts, the city and the sea. A ship came up with a catapult mounted on it that battered us and our tents from the sea. We were severely hindered by it, but one night when a fierce wind blew up the ship was buffeted on the waves and the catapult broke up and was not rebuilt.

One night during the siege the Franks made a sortie, put the outposts to flight and reached the tents, where they became tangled up in the guy-ropes. One knight fell into the latrine-trench of one of the amir's detachments and was killed. Our troops turned out in overwhelming numbers and the Franks turned tail and fled back to the city, leaving a number of dead accounted for by the Hamāt army. The next morning al-Malik al-Muzaffar, Lord of Hamān, had a number of Frankish heads attached to the necks of horses we had captured and presented them to the Sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf.

The blockade was continually reinforced, until God granted to the attackers victory over the city on Friday 10 jumada II/17 June 1291. As the Muslims stormed the city some of the citizens took to the sea in boats. Within the city was a number of well-fortified towers, and some Franks shut themselves inside them and defended them. The Muslims killed vast numbers of people and gathered immense booty. The Sultan forced all those in the towers to surrender, and they submitted to the last man, and to the last man were decapitated outside the city walls.¹ At the Sultan's command the city was razed to the ground.

An amazing coincidence occurred; the Franks seized Acre from Saladin at midday on 17 jumada II 587, and captured and then killed all the Muslims therein; and God in His prescience destined that this year it should be reconquered at the hand of another Saladin, the Sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf.²

After the conquest of Acre God put despair into the hearts of the other Franks left in Palestine; they abandoned Sidon and Beirut, which (the amir) ash-Shuja'i took over at the end of rajab/end of July. The population of Tyre also abandoned the city and the Sultan sent troops to occupy it. He received the surrender of 'Athlith on the first of sha'bān/30 July, and that of Tortosa on 5 sha'bān of the same year. So this Sultan had the good fortune, granted to none other, to conquer without effort and without striking a blow these great, well-fortified cities, all of which were at his command demolished.

With these conquests the whole of Palestine was now in Muslim hands, a result that no one would have dared to hope for or to desire. Thus the whole of Syria and the coastal zones were purified of the Franks, who had once been on the point of conquering Egypt and subduing Damascus and other cities. Praise be to God!

¹ Abu l-Fida' says nothing about the guarantee of safety given by the Sultan and later violated by this massacre. But see below for Abu l-Mahasin's account.

² He also bore, like his illustrious predecessor, the title *Salah ad-Din*.

(ABU l-MAHASIN, FO. 24V-25r)

At the beginning of 600 al-Malik al-Ashraf began preparations for his departure for Syria. He called up his troops, assembled siege-engines and employed craftsmen to put them all in order. Then on 3 rabi' I/6 March 1291 he left Egypt, and began his siege of Acre, on 4 rabi' II, which corresponds to 5 April. A vast army concentrated at Acre, of which more soldiers were volunteers than were regular troops or members of the Sultan's private army. There were also fifteen great 'Frankish' catapults, capable of throwing a load weighing a Damascene quintal or more, and other, lighter machines as well as a good number of 'devils' and the like. Some tunnels were dug for mines. The King of Cyprus himself came to help the people of Acre, who on the night of his arrival lit great fires, greater than were ever seen before, as a sign of their joy. But he stayed only three days before returning home, for he realized their desperate position and the disaster looming over them.

The city was besieged and vigorously attacked until the defenders' morale began to crumble and weakness destroyed their unity. There was fighting every day and a certain number of Muslims fell as martyrs for the Faith. At dawn on Friday 17 jumada II the Sultan and his troops, mounted on their horses, moved in to attack before sunrise. They beat their drums, creating a terrible, terrifying noise, and the army massed under the walls. The Franks fled and the city was taken by storm. Not three hours of the day had passed before the Muslims entered Acre and made themselves masters of it, while the Franks cast themselves into the sea, trampled on by the Muslim troops who killed and captured them. Only a few escaped.

¹ The dates given in the text in the following pages are Professor Gabrieli's emendation of the text from which he was obliged to work (see his note on Abu l-Mahasin in the section on the authors). The Cairo edition offers the emendations given in the notes.