

History of the Crusades.
Episode 6.
The First Crusade II.

Hello again. It's autumn 1096, and the moment has finally arrived. It's time to set off on the First Crusade. As I mentioned last week, four main armies departed from different regions of Europe with the aim of meeting up in Constantinople.

The first army to depart was that of Hugh, Count de Vermandois. Hugh was the younger brother of King Philip I of France, who had recently been excommunicated by Pope Urban II. Surprisingly, for a leader with such close royal connections, Hugh's Army was only small, comprising some of his brother's leading vassals, mainly from Paris and the Ile-de-France. Hugh sent a message to the Emperor Alexius in Constantinople to let him know he was on his way, then he led his small band of followers down through France and over the Alps to the port of Bari on the southern eastern coast of Italy. On the way, he was joined by some knights who had survived Count Emich's disastrous anti-Semitic crusade. In southern Italy, they encountered Bohemond of Taranto and his southern Italian Normans, who were busy preparing for their departure.

Hugh had decided to cross the Adriatic using a fleet of boats. He would then march overland across northern Greece to Constantinople. He sailed from Bari in October, taking with him Bohemond's nephew and a smattering of other Norman knights, who were impatient to set out and did not want to wait for Bohemond's army. The Adriatic Sea can be fickle at that time of year, and Hugh's small flotilla of ships was hit by a storm. Some boats sank with all their passengers, and Hugh's boat foundered on the Dalmatian coast. He was rescued by the Greeks, and he and the remainder of his men were fed and re-equipped, but kept under close surveillance at Durazzo. An Imperial escort eventually arrived, and Hugh and his bedraggled band of survivors were accompanied, under close guard, to Constantinople. They arrived there in November, only a few weeks after the army of Peter the Hermit was massacred at Kibitos.

The next army we shall follow left northern France in September 1096. It was jointly led by three noblemen: Robert of Normandy, who was the eldest son of William the Conqueror; his brother in law, Stephen Count de Blois, whose wife Adela was the daughter of William the Conqueror and reportedly urged the reluctant Stephen to embark on the crusade; and Stephen's cousin Robert II, Count of Flanders, whose father Robert, the first Count of Flanders, had undertaken a pilgrimage to Jerusalem ten years ago, and had served for a while under the Emperor Alexius. These were three very wealthy and influential men, and their army comprised the cream of Anglo-Norman aristocracy, with knights and infantrymen from England, Scotland, Brittany, and Normandy joining their cause.

The united army under the three leaders made its way from northern France across the Alps into Italy. The three leaders met briefly with Pope Urban at this stage, and went to visit the tomb of St Peter in Rome. From there, they made their way down to Norman territory in the south. Stephen of Blois and Robert of Normandy, decided to spend the winter in southern Italy, determining that crossing the Adriatic at this time of year was too risky. Robert of Flanders threw caution to the wind and led his army over the Adriatic without incident, making his way to Constantinople.

Stephen of Blois and Robert of Normandy lingered in southern Italy, and lingered, and lingered. They finally made preparations to embark across the Adriatic in April 1097. By this time, quite a few of their less affluent followers, fed up with waiting, hungry and penniless after spending all their funds wintering in Italy, decided to make their way back home, but a still considerable force made their way onto ships in the spring of 1097, and prepared to cross the Adriatic Sea. The first ship to set sail was shipwrecked, with the resulting loss of 400 crusaders, as well as horses, mules and a number of chests of money. After a rough crossing, the rest of the fleet arrived at Durazzo and were escorted to Constantinople, where they were the last army to arrive in May 1097.

Now we move on to the poster-boy of the first crusade, Godfrey de Bouillon. Godfrey departed for Constantinople in August 1096, with a large, well-equipped army drawn largely from Germany, which isn't surprising since Godfrey was a vassal to King Henry IV of Germany. His army contained around 100 knights, including his ambitious brother Baldwin, who was traveling with his wife and children. Godfrey decided to travel to Constantinople along the same pilgrimage route recently used by the Peasants' Crusade. He marched his army up the Rhine and down the Danube to the Hungarian frontier.

Here he discovered the disadvantage of following in the footsteps of Peter the Hermit. Whereas King Coloman of Hungary had extended every courtesy to the armies of Peter and Walter, he had been rudely rewarded, and he wasn't going to be making the same mistake. Upon arriving at the border, Godfrey sent an envoy to King Coloman, asking for permission to pass through his domain. King Coloman kept the delegates waiting for eight days, then sent a message that he would be willing to meet with Godfrey in person. Godfrey and a few of his knights arrived at the Hungarian court and, after days of negotiations, King Coloman agreed to let the army pass through Hungary, on the condition that Godfrey's brother Baldwin, along with his wife and children, remain with the King as hostages. A reluctant Baldwin eventually agreed, and Godfrey's army was granted passage through the Kingdom. King Coloman undertook to provide provisions to the army at reasonable price, and Godfrey commanded his troops that any act of violence or pillaging would be punished by death. The army passed through Hungary without incidents. Baldwin and his family were returned to Godfrey at the Byzantine border.

The city of Belgrade, adjacent to the border, lay deserted, having never recovered from Peter's marauding troops. Frontier guards alerted Governor Niketas at Nis of the army's arrival, and an escort was sent. The army travelled without incident across the Balkan peninsula to Philippopolis. There, Godfrey heard rumors about the treatment of Hugh at Constantinople. Some rumors had Hugh being showered with gifts at the Byzantine court. Other rumours said that he was virtually being kept a prisoner in the city. The army continued its march. Alexius had prepared the route well. There were ample stores of provisions, and apart from one incident where the army pillaged the countryside at Selymbria on the Sea of Marmara, they arrived in Constantinople on 23rd of December 1096. As requested by Alexius, Godfrey set up camp for his army outside the city walls.

Meanwhile, Bohemond of Taranto, who, you will remember from last week, is the experienced military campaigner from southern Italy and who is also a Norman, sailed from the port of Bari in southern Italy, along with a small but experienced and well-equipped army of around 4,000 men. They landed on the coast in Epirus and made their way through the Balkans. This must have been a tricky exercise for Bohemond. Only fifteen years ago, he had fought campaigns here against the local people. Yet here he was with his army, asking for provisions, and generally wanting the locals to come to the party

and accommodate his army. Perhaps not surprisingly, there were a few incidents where the local steadfastly refused to trade with their former ruthless enemies, and when that happened, Bohemond's troops just went right ahead and helped themselves to stored provisions, horses, cattle and pack animals.

The other thing to note about the progress of Bohemond's army through the Balkans is that it took its time. It went slowly, really slowly. It took the best part of six months to dawdle to Constantinople, averaging a measly three miles per day. Now Bohemond was a seasoned campaigner, well capable of leading his army through the Balkans at a cracking pace, "So," we should ask ourselves, "Why did he take so long?" Well, we don't know the exact route his army took. It would have crossed the Pindus mountain range in northern Greece. This would have involved him leading horses and pack animals across land more than 4,000 feet above sea level. This would have slowed the army's progress for a while, but it really can't account for the extent of the slow progress.

Perhaps the delay occurred while Bohemond sent spies onwards to Constantinople to report on events there. There is some evidence to suggest the Bohemond attempted to communicate with Godfrey, who at this stage was already camped outside Constantinople. Perhaps he was testing the waters, to see whether the other leaders were interested in joining forces against the Emperor Alexius. Unfortunately, we'll never know for sure.

Once he was in Byzantine territory and was joined by Imperial mercenaries who provided his escort, the pace of the army picked up, and Bohemond seems to have gone out of his way to behave impeccably towards the Emperor. Food was provided to the army and Bohemond promised not to enter any towns on his way to Constantinople. He also undertook to return all horses and pack animals taken by his army during their journey through Imperial territory. The army reached Thrace without incident on the 1st of April 1097.

Bohemond then decided to leave his army in charge of his nephew Tancred, while he hurried on to Constantinople. It was likely he had heard of negotiations taking place between the leaders of the armies and the Emperor, and he wanted in on the action. He arrived in Constantinople on the 9th of April and was admitted to the presence of the Emperor the next day.

The last army we shall follow is that of Raymond IV, Count of Toulouse. If you remember last week's episode, Raymond is the one-eyed senior statesmen of the expedition, who owns most of southern France. His army was probably the largest and the best prepared. It included nobles from southern France as well as Papal Legate Bishop Adhemar and the Bishop's Brothers. Planning had been thorough and the army was ready to leave in October 1096. Raymond led his forces across the Alps to Italy but, due perhaps to the lateness of the season, he decided against a sea crossing. Instead, he led his men around the head of the Adriatic, then followed the Dalmatian coast down to the Byzantine border. It was tough going. The roads were terrible, and they were constantly harassed by wild Slavic tribesmen. By the time they reached Imperial territory their food had run out and the army was becoming restless and unruly.

But things were about to get worse. Unfortunately for Raymond, Bohemond and his army had passed through this territory only a few weeks previously, and most of the locals had no food left to trade. Raymond's men began marauding and pillaging the countryside to obtain the food they needed, which brought them into conflict with the mercenaries

Emperor Alexius had hired to escort the army to Constantinople. A couple of barons from the army were killed in skirmishes. Bishop Adhemar himself was thrown from his mule, stripped of his valuables and beaten around the head by mercenaries when he strayed from the road. Once they realized who he was, the mercenaries allowed him to return to the army. Although wounded, Bishop Adhemar seems to have taken the attack in his stride, and he did his best to soothe the growing tensions between Raymond's army and their escort.

Bishop Adhemar left the army at Thessalonica to get treatment for his wounds. Without his influence, tensions between the two sides increased, and the discipline in Raymond's army worsened. They attacked the town of Roussa in Thrace, breaching the town's walls, then began pillaging all the houses. Shortly after this incident, an envoy from Constantinople reached the army. The envoy contained a message from the Emperor urging Raymond to hasten to Constantinople, where negotiations were taking place between the Emperor and the leaders of the Crusading armies. Raymond left his army and hurried to the capital.

With Raymond's departure, any remaining discipline in his army seems to have vanished completely. His forces began raiding the countryside at will, while the mercenary troops sought reinforcements from regiments of the Byzantine army which were stationed nearby. In the battle that followed, Raymond's army was thoroughly routed. Many of his men fled, leaving their weapons and possessions in Byzantine hands. News of the event reached Raymond just prior to his audience with the Emperor in Constantinople. The remainder of his army eventually made their way to the capital.

Right, so here we all are. The main leaders and their armies have journeyed across Europe to Constantinople. The majority of the Crusaders who set out on the journey managed to make it to Constantinople, but there were many, perhaps a great many, who didn't. The chronicles of the time do not record the number of deaths and desertions on the road, but you can be sure there would have been quite a few. Day after grueling day on the road, combined with a lack of food, would itself have resulted in the illness and perhaps death of many weaker members of the expedition, such as women, children and the elderly. Add to this the number of men wounded or killed in skirmishes with locals or mercenaries, those drowned in shipwrecks, and those who, along with a significant number of horses and mules, were defeated by the mountainous terrain present on some routes, and you can see that the rate of deaths and desertions would have been significant.

But for those who managed to complete the journey to Constantinople, they were in for a treat. They would get to see one of the great cities of the world, if they were allowed in the gates, that is. Constantinople was a very well defended city. Occupying a triangle isthmus of land where the Golden Horn empties into the Bosphorus, the city was bordered by water on two of its three sides. The remaining side was protected by twin walls, massive walls. The Theodosian Walls were seven kilometres long, up to five metres thick and twenty metres high. They formed an impenetrable barrier to protect the city. Alexius, learning his lesson from the unruly army of the Peasants' Crusade, decreed that the Crusading armies were to remain outside the city walls, with only small, escorted parties allowed to pass through the gates into the city itself.

And what sights they would have seen. Constantinople, an ancient city of around 500,000 inhabitants, was nothing like the small and relatively humble cities of Latin Christendom. I have described in the previous episode the magnificence of the city. I guess I don't need to

repeat descriptions of the sprawling palaces, the generous courtyards paved with marble, the statues, the lavish public gardens, and the ornate buildings decorated with gold. You get the picture. Sightseers would have visited the Basilica of Saint Sophia, the largest and most ornate Christian church in the world. Topped by an enormous dome and decorated lavishly with frescoes and mosaics, it was nothing like the churches of the West. They may also have toured the Hippodrome, an ancient stadium, capable of seating 100,000 people and perhaps also the Forum of Constantine, with its centerpiece a 50 metre high column upon which stood a statue of the city's founder. The city was exotic and cosmopolitan. The Crusaders would have been astonished to see richly-dressed noble women passing through the streets, followed by trains of slaves and eunuchs, and the thriving markets would have sold goods from as far away as Egypt.

When the army started arriving in Constantinople, Alexius knew he had to act quickly. He had ensured, as much as possible, the peaceful passage of the armies through Byzantine territory, by leaving depots of food and by paying mercenaries to keep the armies in check. Now they had arrived, the problems had changed. The armies posed a threat to his city. Yes, they had been sent, sort of at his request, and there was certainly no intention by the Pope or Bishop Adhemar to secure Constantinople for Latin Christendom, but the reality was, having tens of thousands of restless, hungry, armed warriors camping outside your gates was not ideal. They needed to be moved on as soon as possible.

And Alexius had every reason to be concerned about the intentions of some of the leaders. It was likely that the strange delays experienced by Bohemond's army during its passage through the Balkans took place to enable Bohemond to attempt to contact leaders of the other armies before his own army entered Byzantine territory. And you can be sure, as a former enemy of the Emperor, that his intentions towards Constantinople may not have been entirely friendly. The Emperor Alexius was a seasoned politician and wily diplomat, and he knew he would need all of the skills he possessed to turn things to his advantage.

So what did Alexius want at this stage? First and foremost, he needed to maintain the security of Constantinople and his position as Emperor. The court of Constantinople was complicated and full of intrigue, family politics and shifting alliances. The threat of assassination or rebellion was never far away. Alexius himself had come to power by leading an army against the sitting emperor. He knew, if he left Constantinople to accompany the Latin Christian army on their crusade, it would leave the door wide open for his political enemies to take advantage of his absence and move against him. So it was settled. As far as Alexius was concerned, he was remaining in Constantinople.

But that would make the realization of his next goal difficult. He was all for the Latin Christian armies capturing territory all the way to Jerusalem. Having Christian territory adjacent to Byzantine territory would make an excellent buffer against the Islamic states. But, if the Crusaders conquered territory which had recently been part of the Byzantine Empire, Anatolia for example, he wanted them to hand it over. How is he going to make sure this happened? If he wasn't even going to be present when the land was taken, what would stop the Latin leaders keeping the land for themselves? Alexius came up with a plan. He would meet separately with each leader and convince them to take an oath of allegiance. The oath would involve a promise to hand any cities or forts which had previously belonged to the Empire over to an officer appointed by Alexius. The oath also contained a general customary oath of allegiance.

Alexius knew that the Latin Christians would need some convincing to take such an oath. He would need to use every diplomatic weapon in his arsenal to procure their sworn loyalty. Bribery, gifts, promises of advice, and military assistance, each leader would need a different combination of rewards and inducements. As each leader was summoned to an audience with the Emperor, they would be escorted, together with their entourage, to the magnificent Blachernae Palace. They would be led through lavish courtyards and halls displaying the accumulated wealth of the Imperial family, before being ushered into a large audience chamber. A heavy curtain will be drawn back, revealing the Emperor Alexius seated on the Imperial throne. Clad in a sumptuous gem-encrusted gown of Imperial purple and crowned with either the formal Imperial Crown, or a less formal circular close-fitting cap which was adorned with pearls and jewels, with a pendant of jewels and pearls hanging down either side over the emperor's cheeks, he must have made an awe-inspiring sight. He was flanked on either side by his advisers and high officials, many of them eunuchs, and all of them sumptuously dressed.

Hugh Count of Vermandois was the first leader to be called into the presence of the Emperor, and he was quickly persuaded to take the oath. The next leader to arrive in Constantinople was Godfrey, and he was not so easily persuaded. Emperor Alexius sent Hugh to talk to Godfrey, who was camped outside the city walls with his men, to convince him to meet with the Emperor. Godfrey refused, and this stalemate persisted for quite a while.

The Emperor would request Godfrey's presence at the palace, and Godfrey would refuse to come. The Emperor in retaliation would reduce supplies to his army. Godfrey would then let his men pillage the outer suburbs of the city. The Emperor would restore supplies and request Godfrey's presence. Godfrey would refuse, and so on and so on. It seems likely that Godfrey was waiting for the arrival of the other armies before committing himself to the Emperor.

Then, for reasons of which we are unaware, Godfrey caved in. On Easter Sunday, Godfrey, Baldwin, and their leading knights, swore an oath of allegiance to the Emperor and promised to hand over to the Emperor's officials any recaptured land that had previously been part of Byzantine territory. In return, Godfrey was given a mound of gold and silver, as well as purple silks and fine horses. The next day, as part of the agreement, Godfrey and his army crossed the Bosphorus and waited for the remainder of the crusading forces at Pelecanum, on the road to Nicomedia.

The next to arrive was Alexius' former enemy Bohemond. Bohemond arrived before his army and was lodged at a monastery outside the city walls. He readily agreed to meet the Emperor, and was called into his presence the next day. Perhaps wanting to swing things to his favor, the Emperor invited Godfrey and Baldwin to be present at the negotiations. Bohemond was friendly and helpful in his dealings with the Emperor, and it soon became clear why. He took the oath of allegiance, then suggested that he be appointed commander in chief of the combined crusading forces. This request made for an awkward moment. Alexius distrusted his former enemy and had no wish to elevate him to leader. In the end, Alexius made a vague statement to the effect that it was not the right time to make such an appointment, but that Bohemond would no doubt win the position on his own, through his loyalty and energy. He was then reportedly shown a room so packed with riches that it was impossible for anyone to walk in it, and was told that the contents were his. He awaited the arrival of his army, then crossed the Bosphorus, to join Godfrey's forces at Pelecanum.

Interestingly, Tancred, Bohemond's nephew, went out of his way to avoid taking the oath. He passed through the city at night, as a deliberate ploy to avoid the Emperor, and crossed the Bosphorus without meeting with Alexius.

The next leader to arrive was Raymond of Toulouse. The Emperor requested his presence at the Palace to take the oath of allegiance, but Raymond was reluctant to do so. Like Bohemond, he had an underlying ambition to be recognized as leader of the Crusade. Unlike Bohemond, he had the advantage of having the Pope's representative, Bishop Adhemar, in his army. Unfortunately, Bishop Adhemar was not yet in Constantinople. He was still getting treatment for his injuries, and Raymond had no way of contacting him. Without Bishop Adhemar's advice, Raymond was very reluctant to swear an oath of allegiance to the Emperor. Eventually, Raymond stated that God was his leader, but that if the Emperor Alexius were to personally lead the united Crusader armies, then Raymond would serve under him. This, of course, was something to which the Emperor would not agree. He had already decided to remain in Constantinople while the armies moved towards Jerusalem.

Fearing that the entire campaign was in jeopardy, the other leaders urged Raymond to take the oath. Eventually, Raymond agreed to swear a modified oath, promising to respect the life and honor of the Emperor, and promising that neither he nor his army would do anything to harm the Emperor's interests. Unlike the other leaders, Raymond didn't receive any Imperial gifts.

Raymond's army eventually arrived in Constantinople, as did Bishop Adhemar. Unfortunately, there are no records of Bishop Adhemar's activities in Constantinople, although it's likely that he met with the Emperor. The army crossed the Bosphorus and joined the rest of the forces.

The last to arrive were the combined armies of Robert of Normandy, Stephen of Blois and Robert of Flanders. They arrived in May and were admitted to the palace, where they all readily swore the oath of allegiance and were rewarded with gifts.

So the armies all now assembled at Pelecanum, and are ready to depart. Join me next week as we follow them on the long, long road to Jerusalem.

Further reading this week isn't so much reading, as listening. If you want more of an idea of what Constantinople was really like back in the day, I recommend you go to iTunes and download Episode 10 of Robin Pearson's historical podcast "The History of Byzantium". Episode 10 is entitled "Constantinople", and effectively takes you on an audio tour of Constantinople when it was in its prime. It's well worth a listen.

You can also go to my website at "HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com", where you will see a map showing the routes taken across Europe by the four main armies. Unfortunately, the map is rather small. We're a low-budget affair here at the History of the Crusades, and while I have employed a technical assistant to manage my website, the assistant is actually my 11-year-old daughter. Every Friday after school, she uploads my recorded podcast episode to the hosting site and iTunes. She then adds the appropriate links and references to the website, and for that she gets pocket money. But she can't for the life of her work out how to make the maps bigger. So if you want to take a closer look at the map, you will either need to find a magnifying glass, or you will need to click on the link

provided, which will take you to the original Wikipedia map in its zoomable form. Until next week, goodbye for now.

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