

History of the Crusades.
Episode 71
The Fourth Crusade II.

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Hello again. Last week we saw the newly-installed Pope Innocent III call for a Crusade. The three most enthusiastic and wealthy young noblemen to answer the call are Count Theobald of Champagne, Count Louis of Blois and Count Baldwin of Flanders. The three young Counts held a planning meeting in the spring of the year 1200 in which they decided to sail to the Holy Land.

Now, it seems at this stage that the young Counts decide to sail to Egypt instead of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Richard the Lionheart's campaign during the Third Crusade had shown that Egypt was central to Muslim interests, and it seems that the young Counts decided that Egypt should be the target of the Crusade. However, it's questionable whether Pope Innocent III sanctioned this new destination, and there are some indications that he may not even have known about this change.

Certainly, the fact that Egypt, and not the Holy Land, was the destination was not widely advertised. In his book "God's War", Christopher Tyerman points out that a Flemish fleet wishing to join the Crusade in 1201 sailed to the Mediterranean, but then had no idea where they were meant to be headed. With no firm direction or rendezvous point, they eventually sailed to Acre, and countless others did the same.

Anyway, before the planning meeting wrapped up, six men were chosen, two each from the households of Count Theobald, Count Louis, and Count Baldwin, to travel to Venice to negotiate a sea passage to Egypt on behalf of the Crusaders. During the early months of 1201, these six men crossed the Alps into northern Italy, then traveled on to the powerful merchant city of Venice. Now, the leader of the six-man delegation was Geoffrey de Villehardouin, the Marshal of Champagne. Fortunately for us, Geoffrey wrote down in some detail the negotiations and events which occurred after the delegation arrived in Venice.

Now, Venice at this time was one of the largest urban centres in Europe. It boasted a population of 60,000 people, and it was a wealthy powerhouse of a city. Venice had been settled by fishermen back in times of antiquity, and after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, it maintained strong ties with the Eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantines. Its location at the head of the Adriatic Sea and its population of experienced seafarers ensured that its economy grew and prospered as a trading center. The Venetians began by trading locally, but eventually began sailing further and further afield in search of new markets and goods. This expansion of seagoing trade, as well as an abundant supply of timber close at hand, meant that the Venetians also excelled at ship building. So when the members of the Fourth Crusade were after a fleet of ships to transport them across the Mediterranean, it was only natural that they asked the Venetians.

Early in the city's development, the Byzantine Emperor had decreed that Venice be ruled by a Duke, or "Doge". As the city gradually distanced itself from Constantinople over the centuries, and began asserting its independence, they retained the title of Doge as the appellation for their ruler. At the time the delegation of six approached the city, the Doge of Venice was one Enrico Dandolo. He was a very old man, probably aged over 90 years, which made him a rarity for the time, and was blind. There were differing accounts circulating in Venice regarding exactly how Enrico Dandolo lost his sight. The most dramatic story involved Enrico being imprisoned by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel in Constantinople, then being blinded on his orders. Other stories had Enrico losing his sight after a street brawl in Constantinople. Geoffrey de Villehardouin had his own version stating, and I quote "Although his eyes appeared normal, he could not see a hand in front of his face, having lost his sight after a head wound" end of quote.

Regardless of exactly how Doge Enrico Dandolo lost his sight, neither his blindness nor his advanced age seemed to slow him down. He was a man of seemingly boundless energy, and when the delegation arrived in Venice, the Doge threw himself into the discussions and negotiations with enthusiasm. The delegation formally presented their request to the Venetians at a special meeting of the Great Council during Lent in 1201. The meeting was held in the Doge's Palace, next to the Church of St Mark on the main Venetian island of Rio Alto. Eight days later, they received the official response.

The city of Venice would provide transport for 4,500 knights and their horses, 9,000 squires and 20,000 foot soldiers, along with enough food and supplies for nine months. Venice would provide 50 fully equipped ships at her own expense, on condition that the city receive half of all the territories conquered. The cost to the Crusaders of providing the remaining ships and transport was 84,000 silver marks. The scale of this undertaking was massive, and was unprecedented in the world of medieval commerce. To fulfill the agreement, just about the entire current fleet of Venetian ships would be needed, and so many additional ships would need to be built that it would require the city to suspend its entire commercial operations for a year. Just to man the fleet would require the services of 30,000 men, around half the adult population of the city at the time.

Since this would have a significant impact on the city and its finances, the Doge required the consent of the people of Venice, particularly the merchants and the ship builders. A public meeting was called and took place inside St Mark's Cathedral. Geoffrey de Villehardouin described the meeting. Talking of the Doge, he states, and I quote "He assembled at least 10,000 men in the church of Saint Mark, the most beautiful that there is, to hear the Mass and to pray to God for his guidance. And after the Mass, he summoned the envoys and besought them that they themselves should ask of the people the services they required. Geoffrey de Villehardouin, Marshal of Champagne, spoke by consent for the others. Then the Doge and people raised their hands and cried aloud with a simple voice, "We grant it, we grant it", and so great was the noise and tumult that the very earth seemed to tremble underfoot." End of quote.

The very next day, the agreement was formally concluded. The Crusaders would pay 84,000 silver marks, and in return the Venetians would supply enough ships to transport them on Crusade.

Now, there was no mention within the agreement itself that Egypt was the destination. It's not clear exactly why this was left out. Perhaps the envoys themselves asked that it be

omitted. It was not general knowledge back in France that the destination of the Crusade was Egypt, not the Holy Land, and perhaps they didn't want to upset the rank-and-file before they had an opportunity to explain to them what was going on.

As to the Venetians themselves, well, they were happy to leave Egypt out of the agreement. Why? Because it's likely, even at this very early stage in the Fourth Crusade, that they had absolutely no intention of transporting the Crusaders to Egypt.

Now, the Venetians were wily negotiators and traders. The Doge himself, elderly and blind though he was, had many years of experience negotiating on behalf of his city, and in ducking and weaving through the intricacies of international diplomacy. The city of Venice had spent years building up markets in the Middle East, establishing relationships with key political and commercial figures in the region, and generally ensuring that they were free to sail in and out of ports in the Middle East and ply their trade. The fact was, at the very moment that the people of Venice were cheering their approval of the agreement in St Mark's Cathedral, Venetian envoys were in Cairo in Egypt, discussing an extremely profitable trade agreement with the Sultan's representatives. John Julius Norwich, in his book "A History of Venice", states that at the conclusion of this meeting, it's almost certain that the Venetians gave a categorical assurance to the Egyptians that they had no intention of being involved in any attack on Egyptian territory.

So there you have it. In return for a gob-smackingly large sum of money, the Crusaders have agreed to assemble in Venice on St John's Day, the 24th of June 1202, when they expect to be transported by ship to Egypt. However, unbeknownst to the Crusaders, as far as the Venetians are concerned, Egypt is off the table as a destination. Back in May 1201, the Crusader envoys were unaware of this problem. With the agreement finalized, they borrowed 5,000 silver marks and gave it to the Venetians as a down-payment. Leaving the Venetians in a hive of activity, they departed for France.

However, before Geoffrey de Villehardouin arrived home, he received some devastating news. His overlord, and leader of the Crusade, Count Theobald of Champagne, had died of an illness on the 24th of May, despite being only 20 years of age. During his illness, Count Theobald made a will in which he bequeathed the money he had raised to the members of the Fourth Crusade, with half going to his own followers and half to help cover the overall cost of the Crusade.

Despite this injection of funds, Count Theobald's death was a major blow, and it meant that a new leader of the expedition would need to be appointed. In early summer, the senior figures of the Crusade met at Soissons to appoint a new leader. Strangely, neither of the two remaining young Counts seem to have been seriously considered for the position. Instead, after much deliberation, Boniface, the Marquis of Montferrat in northern Italy, was suggested as a possible replacement for Count Theobald, and the leaders of the Crusade agreed that he should be approached to take overall control of the Crusade.

Boniface was a man of impressive lineage, whose family had strong ties to the Holy Land. In contrast to the young French Counts, Boniface was aged in his mid-forties, and being Italian, possibly didn't even speak the *Langue d'oïl*, the language spoken by the senior French Crusade leaders. The Montferrat family was related to both the French royal family and the German imperial family. Boniface's brothers had both played influential roles in the politics of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. His eldest brother, William Longsword, had briefly been married to Sibylla of Jerusalem prior to her marriage to King Guy. William had died of

malaria not long into his marriage, but he fathered a son with Sibylla who would later become King Baldwin V. Conrad of Montferrat, was another one of Boniface's brothers, while, yet another brother, Rainier, married the Byzantine Emperor Manuel's sister Maria in 1179, before being murdered during the reign of Andronicus. Boniface's father had fought during the Second Crusade and was at the Battle of Hattin.

Despite his close family ties to the Holy Land and his impressive wealth, Boniface was a surprise choice for leader. His appointment took the sphere of influence for the Fourth Crusade outside France and outside the control of Pope Innocent. Still, the remaining leaders of the Crusade agreed to approach Boniface, and envoys were duly dispatched to travel to the Montferrat lands in northern Italy. In response, during the late summer of 1201, Boniface set out to cross the Alps, heading north to France, to the meeting place of the leaders at Soissons. On his way, he made a detour to meet with his cousin, King Philip of France.

When he arrived in Soissons in August, he met with the leaders of the Crusade in an apple orchard. Amongst the apple trees, heavy with fruit, the French Crusaders offered Boniface full control of the entire Crusading army, as well as half of the money from Count Theobald's will. Boniface knelt before the French Crusaders and solemnly pledged to take the Cross and lead the Crusading army.

The following day, Boniface left Soissons. Instead of heading straight home to settle his affairs and prepare for the Crusade, Boniface rode 175 miles southwards to the Abbey of Citeaux, the base of the Cistercian Order of monks. After seeing a number of nobles take up the Cross at Citeaux, he then rode more than 200 miles into German Imperial territory, where he met with his friend, cousin and overlord, Philip of Swabia. Boniface decided to spend winter at the German Imperial Court where, no doubt, he and Philip engaged in lengthy discussions about the politics of the region. There had been a degree of unrest after the death of Philip's brother, Emperor Henry VI, but Philip was confident that he would soon become the next German Emperor.

Philip was married to Irene Angelina, the daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Isaac Angelus. A few months into Phillips' marriage, his father-in-law, Emperor Isaac Angelus, lost his throne. He'd never been a terribly good leader. His officials were corrupt, and Isaac's extravagant tastes were playing havoc with the Imperial finances. Things had been going from bad to worse in the Byzantine Empire. The Seljuk Turks had been steadily encroaching on Byzantine territory in Anatolia, and trade concessions had been sold to the Italians to raise enough cash to fund the Emperor's lavish lifestyle. Eventually, Isaac's excesses became too much for his over-taxed subjects. His family saw the writing on the wall, and he began to lose their support. In 1195 it all came to a head when his brother Alexius successfully overthrew Isaac. Isaac was blinded and thrown into prison with his son, the young Alexius. Isaac's brother was crowned Emperor Alexius III, but despite some early diplomatic successes, Alexius III proved himself to be just as incompetent, extravagant, and corrupt as his brother.

At the end of 1201, young Alexius escaped from prison and made his way from Constantinople to his sister in Germany. While he was a guest of the German Imperial Court, young Alexius met with Philip of Swabia, who introduced him to his other guest, Boniface. The three men met together, and young Alexius expressed his desire to overthrow his uncle and become the next Emperor of Byzantium. Interested in extending

German influence into the east, Philip was keen to assist him. What they needed, however, was an army.

At this point, they both may have looked at Boniface with raised eyebrows. Didn't Boniface just become the leader of a massive Crusading force?

During the winter of 1201, and into the early months of 1202, intense preparations were taking place across Europe in preparation for the Crusade. We've seen it all before. Assets would have been sold, mortgages taken out, money borrowed, and goods purchased for the journey to the Middle East. Smoked meat and preserved goods, sacks of wheat, and barrels of wine were in high demand, and the Crusaders gathered together the coins, trading items, and equipment they needed to take with them. By the spring of 1202, Crusaders from across Europe were starting their journey south towards Venice.

Now, according to the terms of the agreement reached with the Venetians, the departure date for the transport of the Crusaders was St John's Day, the 24th of June 1202. However, as this date approached, it soon became clear that there was a major problem brewing. Just not enough Crusaders were showing up. The trickle of arriving Crusaders were welcomed into Venice and were housed on the island of San Nicolo di Lido, some seven miles from the city of Venice itself. St John's Day came and went, while the Venetians waited for the bulk of the Crusaders to arrive. Soon, rumors began to circulate that many Crusaders had negotiated alternative routes to the Middle East.

By August, the extent of the problem was apparent. Only around 12,000 of the estimated 33,500 Crusaders had shown up. The original agreement had been negotiated on the basis that the Crusaders would pay the Venetians 85,000 marks to transport 33,500 men and 4,500 horses. The leaders of the Crusade had expected to be able to meet the cost by charging the 33,500 men for the passage of themselves and their horses. The Venetians had fulfilled their side of the deal, and the money was now due, but with only 12,000 Crusaders ready to pay for their passage, there was a massive shortfall.

On the 15th of August, Boniface of Montferrat arrived in Venice, and he was forced to face the grim reality. Even after pooling all their available resources, the Crusaders were still a staggering 34,000 silver marks short of the 85,000 they owed the Venetians. The Fourth Crusade seemed likely to collapse and fail before even leaving Europe, and the Venetians, who had suspended their city's entire commercial activity for a year in expectation of receiving the full payment for the contract, were facing financial ruin.

What will happen next? Well, you'll just have to join me next week to find out. Until next week, bye for now.

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