

History of the Crusades.
Episode 73
The Fourth Crusade IV.

As part of the HistoryPodcasters.com network, this episode is sponsored by Leatherman Data Services. Leatherman Data Services are providers of mapping and geographic data services for historians, archaeologists, and cultural resource management firms. So if you are looking for an experienced cartographer to create a map for your website, you can email them at LeathermanDataServices@gmail.com, or go to their website LeathermanDataServices.com.

Hello again. You can safely say that the Fourth Crusade isn't turning out anything like Pope Innocent envisaged. He had called on the European Christians to rise up and retake Jerusalem in the name of Christianity, and he had decided that the key to success was to keep the Crusade firmly under the control of the Church. Trouble was, the Venetians had thoroughly outplayed the leaders of the Crusade.

In last week's episode, we saw the Crusaders assist the Venetians to attack and seize the Christian city of Zara, in an attempt to clear the debt they had incurred when fewer men than expected showed up in Venice to embark on the Crusade. As a result, Pope Innocent had excommunicated everyone involved. At the end of last week's episode, a delegation of Crusaders had left Zara for Rome, hoping to change Pope Innocent's mind about the excommunication.

In the end, the Pope did reverse his decision. Persuaded that the Crusaders had been pressured into attacking the Christians by the Venetians, he reversed his decision to excommunicate the Crusaders. However, he maintained the excommunication of the Venetians, meaning that the Venetians' very souls were at risk of eternal damnation.

Now, as the Crusaders and Venetians settle down to spend winter in Zara in December 1202, there were a lot of unhappy people in the city, particularly the rank-and-file Crusaders. According to Christopher Tyerman in his book "God's War", during the winter of 1202 to 1203, and I quote "defection became endemic" end of quote. Many of the Crusading masses left Zara, either finding their way back home or continuing on under their own steam to the Holy Land.

However, defecting from the Crusade at this point was easier said than done. Leaving the protection of the main body of fighters at Zara and striking off overland in small groups left the deserters vulnerable to attacks by local bandits. To head overland to the Holy Land from Zara, which was on the shores of the Adriatic Sea, would have been a massive and ambitious undertaking. As the expeditions of the First and Second Crusade had shown, the overland route was fraught with danger, and those dangers would have been enhanced for those traveling in small groups.

Why not sail to the Holy Land then? Trouble with this idea was that it was winter, a dangerous season for sailing on the Mediterranean. Ships available for hire were few and were prohibitively expensive. Many Crusaders did manage to secure a sea berth from Zara. However, the dangers of such a voyage were demonstrated when a ship carrying 500 defectors foundered in the winter weather, resulting in the deaths of everyone on board.

Of course, for many of the rank-and-file, leaving the Crusade just wasn't an option. This was the case for the mercenary fighters, those who had been employed by a wealthy Crusader to accompany the expedition. Boniface of Montferrat and Baldwin of Flanders both employed professional soldiers to bolster their expedition, with Baldwin retaining large numbers of paid archers and cross-bowmen, and Boniface controlling a division of paid troops. For the poorer rank-and-file Crusaders as well, those for whom paying for a passage on a ship was out of their financial reach, and who could not afford to provision themselves for a lengthy overland journey, staying with the bulk of the Crusading forces in warm accommodation at Zara was really the only option. Still, by May 1203 desertions were so frequent that Christopher Tyerman, in "God's War", believes that it is possible that more Crusaders had deserted than remained with the Fourth Crusade. If this is true, over the coming few months, the Crusaders will lose more than half their number to desertions, and mercenaries or paid soldiers will make up the bulk of the remaining fighting force.

It was into this unhappy, disaffected mix that Boniface of Montferrat arrived at Zara in early December 1202. The spoils of the attack on Zara had not been enough to clear the debt owed to the Venetians, and everyone was pondering over the future of the Crusade. You might recall that, back in Episode 71, Boniface had been staying with his friend, cousin, and overlord, Philip of Swabia, at the German Imperial Court, shortly after he accepted the leadership of the Fourth Crusade. During his stay, he had been introduced to Philip's brother-in-law Alexius, who had escaped from prison in Constantinople. Alexius had made it pretty clear at this meeting that he was keen to obtain military assistance from the west to depose his uncle, the Byzantine Emperor Alexius III.

After his stay at the German Imperial Court, young Alexius had traveled to Rome to seek the support of Pope Innocent. The attendance of a contender to the Byzantine throne at the Papal Curia created quite a stir, but Pope Innocent wasn't supportive of Alexius' ambitious plans. He was suspicious of any scheme which had the backing of the German Imperial family, and according to Stephen Runciman in the third volume of his trilogy on "The History of the Crusades", after meeting young Alexius, Pope Innocent formed the opinion that he was a, and I quote "worthless youth" end of quote.

Alexius returned to Germany after his fruitless expedition to Rome, and apparently he remained in contact with Boniface. At some stage during 1202, possibly during his absence from the Crusading army between October and December 1202, Boniface was persuaded to lend his support to Alexius' scheme. At the end of December, a delegation arrived in Zara from Philip of Swabia and young Alexius. The delegation had an offer to put to the Crusaders. If the Crusaders would escort young Alexius to Constantinople and place him on the Imperial throne, then the new Emperor Alexius would provide the Crusaders with 200,000 silver marks. This was a huge sum, enough to clear the debt with the Venetians and to finance the Egyptian campaign. In addition, Young Alexius promised to bolster the Crusade to Egypt with 10,000 Byzantine soldiers, and he also undertook to send a permanent garrison of 500 men to the Kingdom of Jerusalem, men that he would maintain at his own expense. As a final inducement, Alexius offered to submit the Greek Orthodox Church of Constantinople to the authority of the Pope in Rome.

This was an explosive offer, one which offered the leaders of the Crusade a chance to resurrect the Fourth Crusade from the debt-ridden pit into which it had fallen, and put it back on track to proceed to Egypt. The downside, of course, was the stipulation that they place young Alexius on the throne. Alexius' uncle, the current Byzantine Emperor, was

unlikely to take kindly to this, so the Crusaders may be required to use force. In effect, the Crusaders might be required to fight their way into Constantinople and then install Alexius as Emperor.

Now, at this time, Constantinople was still easily the largest, wealthiest, and most impressive Christian city in the world. Its population of around 400,000 people meant that it was six or seven times the size of Paris, and its position at the center of a large Empire meant that it was a grand and wealthy city. However, this grandeur masked some serious problems. The fate of the Byzantine Empire was to some degree dependent on the quality of its Emperor, and the last twenty or so years had seen some less than impressive personages on the Imperial throne. Factionalism, corruption, and political chaos had marred the Imperial court during this period. Between 1180 and 1204, no less than 58 coups, rebellions, and conspiracies had occurred against a sitting Emperor. Such political instability had to have negative consequences for the Byzantine Empire as a whole, and this certainly occurred. Some of the outer provinces of the large Empire began to rebel, and the resulting territorial losses reduced the tax base. This, combined with the extravagance of the Imperial Court, made financing the military a challenge, so surprisingly, by the beginning of the 1200s, the Byzantine Empire had virtually no navy to speak of.

The attitude of the average westerner, and therefore the average Crusader, to Constantinople would have been based upon the stories that circulated in the west, of the vast wealth of the Byzantine Empire and of the exotic nature of their central city. The average Crusader would also have been of the opinion that the Byzantines had contributed little to the previous Crusades. It was against this background that the Crusaders needed to make a decision. Would they take up the offer made by young Alexius?

When Boniface informed Doge Dandolo about the offer made by Alexius, the Doge was absolutely delighted. In fact, to say that he was absolutely delighted is an understatement. The wily old Doge had his finger firmly on the pulse of international relations, and it's likely that he knew all about the offer before the delegation had even arrived in Zara. It's also likely that, unlike the less experienced and less worldly leaders of the Crusade, the Doge knew of the pitfalls and challenges the Crusaders may face if they took up the offer. And it's also likely that he chose not to share any of these concerns with the Crusaders, because, to Doge Enrico Dandolo, this offer was just about as good as it could get. Not only did it mean that he could delay broaching the touchy subject of not transporting the Crusaders to Egypt, it would also provide a way for the Crusaders to repay their debt to the city of Venice. And above all, it presented an unprecedented opportunity for Venice to expand her wealth and her power-base.

The relationship between Venice and Constantinople, and the relationship between Doge Dandolo and Constantinople, had been volatile of late. The Venetians had been involved with the Byzantine Empire for centuries. The other two great trading cities of Italy, Genoa and Pisa, had also sought markets in the wealthy Empire, and over the years rivalries between the three cities developed as they competed for trade.

At the beginning of the Crusader period, so around a hundred years ago, the Venetians had been granted generous trading concessions across the Byzantine Empire, and as a result, a substantial community of Venetians lived and worked in Constantinople, while many more traveled and traded across the Empire. However, in more recent times,

tensions had arisen between the Venetians and their Byzantine benefactors. This came to a head in March 1171, when Emperor Manuel ordered the arrest of all the Venetians in the Empire, and decreed that their property be seized. The conflict was eventually resolved with the signing of a treaty which compensated the Venetians for their losses, but tensions had resurfaced under the pro-Pisan Emperor Alexius III. The Doge himself had a history of conflict with Constantinople, and he was rumored to have been imprisoned by Emperor Manuel in Constantinople and then blinded on his orders, although modern historians have questioned the veracity of this story. So being involved in a campaign to place a compliant Emperor on the Byzantine throne was something the Venetians would welcome with open arms.

Likewise, the leaders of the Crusade were in favor of Boniface's plan. Having placed themselves in debt to the Venetians, they saw the installation of young Alexius as Emperor as a sure-fire way of clearing the ledger and perhaps even making a profit. With the financial side of things under control, they could then proceed to Egypt.

However, convincing the rank-and-file members of the Crusade to divert to Constantinople didn't prove quite so easy. When the bulk of the Crusaders were informed that the Venetians, Boniface, and the leading noblemen of the Crusade had decided on this new plan, support for the proposal was underwhelming, to say the least. In fact, Geoffrey de Villehardouin stated, and I quote "I must tell you that only twelve persons in all took the oaths on behalf of the French. No more could be persuaded to come forward." End of quote.

So twelve Crusaders, out of the thousands gathered at Zara, supported the plan to travel to Constantinople. The objections of the rank-and-file to the plan were as follows. Firstly, they thought that attacking Christians was wrong, even if those Christians were of the Greek Orthodox faith. And secondly, they believed that the Crusade shouldn't be diverted or delayed from its main objective: attacking Egypt. The leaders of the Crusade and the Venetians argued strongly that the plan was just and would bring the Christians of the Byzantine Empire into the fold of the Latin Christian Church. They also argued that traveling to Constantinople and installing young Alexius as the new Emperor should be seen as just a step on the way to fulfilling the main goal of the Crusade, the assault on the Muslims in Egypt.

Still, many were left unpersuaded. However, those who disagreed with the direction the Crusade was taking were faced with a stark choice. They could either accompany the Crusade to Constantinople, despite their misgivings, or find their own way home, or proceed under their own steam and at their own expense to the Holy Land. As we've discussed previously, this last choice was easier said than done.

It was at this point that Simon of Montfort, who had opposed the attack on Zara, formally withdrew himself from the Crusade, and returned to France. There were other high profile desertions, including a contingent of several senior French knights, one of whom was the cousin of Count Louis of Blois. As we've discussed previously, many of the rank-and-file Crusaders also deserted at this stage, although those who had been paid to go on Crusade and those who didn't have the means to finance a passage back home or to the Middle East were obliged to remain with the expedition.

Having done their best to convince the Crusading army that diverting to Constantinople was a great idea, the leaders of the Crusade now had to persuade Pope Innocent of the

worthiness of their plan. His response to the proposal arrived at Zara by way of a letter in February 1203. Surprisingly, he failed to unequivocally prohibit the Crusade from going to Constantinople. Perhaps the idea of ending the schism between the Latin Christian and Orthodox Churches was tempting enough for him to hold back his concerns. He did, however, demand that the Crusaders take an oath to guarantee that, in the future, they would, and I quote “neither invade nor violate the lands of the Christians in any manner, unless perchance, they wickedly impede your journey or another just or a necessary cause should perhaps arise, on account of which you would be empowered to act otherwise, according to the guidance offered by the Apostolic See” end of quote.

So, instead of outright prohibiting any future attacks on Christians, Pope Innocent is giving the Crusaders effective permission to engage in such an attack, if there is a just or necessary cause. Of course, the Pope won't be with the Crusaders to interpret this clause for them. It will be up to the Crusaders themselves to apply this to the situation at hand. Stephen Runciman, in the final volume of his History of the Crusades, states the obvious when he says that the Pope would have been wiser to express his outright and unequivocal disapproval of any plan to attack Christians. Instead, his half-hearted condemnation of the plan to divert to Constantinople meant that many commentators, both at the time and through the ages, believed that the Pope supported the plan.

As winter turned to spring, the Crusaders who remained in Zara began to prepare themselves, their ships, and their horses for the journey to Constantinople. Wanting to teach the Zarans a lesson, the Venetians leveled the city before they left, taking apart its walls and defenses, and leaving no building untouched except the churches. In April, just as the fleet was ready to depart, they were joined by none other than young Alexius himself. They boarded their ships and, accompanied by the man they had promised to place on the Imperial throne, they set sail for Constantinople.

Join me next week as we travel with the members of the Fourth Crusade to their destination, the beautiful city of Constantinople. Until next week, bye for now.

End