

History of the Crusades.
Episode 75
The Fourth Crusade VI.

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Hello again. Last week we saw the Crusaders and Venetians set sail to Constantinople with young Alexius, the nephew of the ruling Byzantine Emperor, who they intended to place on the throne. Instead of the warm welcome they were hoping for, the residents of Constantinople seemed utterly indifferent to the arrival of young Alexius outside their city, and the Crusaders and Venetians found the gates of the Imperial city closed to them. There were only two options open to them at this stage. Return home or attempt to enter the city by force. The expedition chose the latter, despite the fact that in its 900 year history, the walls of Constantinople had never before been breached. At the end of last week's episode, the Crusaders had seized the Tower in the city of Galata, and had unshackled the windlass inside the tower, lowering the protective chain, which stretched across the entrance to the Golden Horn, the narrow harbor which ran along the top side of the city.

Now, for those who are struggling to visualize the layout of Constantinople in the 13th century, I've placed a map on the website, so just go to HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com, and I've placed another one on the History of the Crusades Podcast Facebook page. If you can't access either of these sites, grab a copy of Christopher Tyerman's book "God's War". There's an excellent map of Constantinople on page 545.

Right, well once the chain was lowered, the Venetians sailed their fleet of a hundred ships into the protected waterway of the Golden Horn. Unopposed by the non-existent Imperial Navy, the Crusaders and Venetians were able to take their time, examining the defensive walls of the city and looking for weak points. Of the three-sided-triangle that formed the city of Constantinople, by far the strongest walls were the sea walls which formed the bottom of the triangle, and the land wall which ran along the western side of the triangle. The Theodosian land walls, which stretched the three and a half miles between the Golden Horn and the Sea of Marmara, were unmatched in the Western world. They were of a legendary height and strength, and given the size of the Crusading force, attempting to breach them was out of the question.

This left the wall running along the Golden Horn. The Crusaders gave it a thorough inspection and in the end decided that one of the corners of the triangle, the point at which the land wall met the Golden Horn wall, was their best bet. This was the site of the Blachernae Palace. The walls surrounding the palace lay close to the foot of a slope but were still impressively strong and around fifty feet high. The Venetian fleet dropped anchor in the part of the Golden Horn nearest the palace walls, and the Crusaders set up camp on a hill outside the wall nearest the palace.

There was a building near the Crusader camp, which the Crusaders called the Castle of Bohemond, as the Norman Prince Bohemond had stayed there during the First Crusade. The castle wasn't actually a castle at all, it was an abbey. Here, the leaders of the Crusade settled in and considered their next move. They decided to launch a combined sea and land attack on the walls surrounding the palace.

Now, this military engagement which is about to commence, is known to history as the First Siege of Constantinople. But it's not actually a siege, in the classic sense of the word. Constantinople was a massive, intensively fortified place, and there was no way the Crusaders and Venetians could surround the city entirely, so the siege is just taking place in this small corner of the city walls adjacent to the Blachernae Palace.

The Crusaders set up siege engines outside the walls, and the Venetians set up catapult machines and scaling ladders on their ships. On the 17th of July, 1203 the assault was launched.

Now, up until this time, resistance from the Byzantine military forces has been underwhelming. You would think that watching a hundred ships sail into your protected harbor and begin preparations to attack your city would be enough to spark a vigorous defense by the Byzantine forces, but that wasn't really the case. Perhaps Emperor Alexius had been lulled into a full sense of security by the fact that the walls of his city had never been breached, or perhaps he just wasn't taking the threat seriously. Whatever the reason, at the moment the only Byzantines actively engaged in the defense of their city are the Varangian Guard, the legendary fighting force made up of axe-wielding Western fighters, predominantly Englishmen and Danes.

The Varangian Guard has been harassing the Crusaders, but hasn't launched an outright attack on them. Six or seven times a day, members of the guard would dart out of the city gates and attack the Crusaders' camp. This meant that the Crusaders, who were busy constructing their catapult machines and scaling ladders, were diverted from their tasks and forced to fortify their camp and defend it from the raiders. It also meant that men couldn't stray far from the camp in search of food. The Byzantines were so effective in containing the Crusaders within their camp that there were serious concerns about their food supply, and the Crusaders were forced to eat any horses that had fallen to Byzantine arrows, to complement their supplies of flour and bacon.

At this stage, the leaders of the Crusade were concerned that if they left their camp to launch an assault on the walls, it would be attacked and overrun by the Varangian Guard. Consequently, they decided that three divisions of men, led by Boniface of Montferrat, would remain behind to guard the camp, and the remaining four divisions of Crusaders, led by Baldwin of Flanders, would attempt to scale the wall outside the Blachernae Palace. At the same time, the Venetians would attack the side of the palace walls facing the sea.

On the morning of the 17th of July, trumpets heralded the start of the attack, and the assault began. The Venetian ships, sailing low in the water due to the weight of their siege engines, drew as close into the shore as they dared, and fired missiles at the walls. The Crusaders, protecting themselves as best as they could from the arrows and other objects being hurled at them by the Byzantine defenders, did their best to carry their massive scaling ladders to the wall. A small group of Crusaders succeeded in their task, and two scaling ladders were set in place. Four men climbed the ladders onto the wall and they were joined by eleven others. However, the Varangian Guard, wielding their axes to great

effect, forced them back down the ladders, save for two Crusaders who were captured and later paraded before the Emperor.

The Venetians too were heavily engaged. As well as firing catapults from machines constructed on the decks of their ships, cross-bowmen had been positioned on gangways constructed high above the decks between the masts. They fired bolts across the water, while archers who were positioned next to the cross-bowmen also fired at the walls, with their arrows flying higher and further than the crossbow bolts.

The battle raged throughout the day. Having failed to breach the wall with their scaling ladders, the Crusaders tried battering rams, and also attempted to undermine one part of the wall near a tower. Despite all their efforts, no real progress was being made. Then the blind, elderly Doge Dandolo decided to take matters into his own hands. Geoffrey de Villehardouin reports that the ship carrying the Doge had managed to maneuver so close to the shore that the sailors positioned in the bow of the vessel were engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with the Byzantines. The Venetians, however, seemed reluctant to take the next step. No one was prepared to take the initiative, leave the safety of the ship, and engage the Byzantines on the shore.

Enter Doge Dandolo. Standing proudly on the prow of his vessel, with the banner of Saint Mark waving behind him, the Doge ordered his men to run the ship ashore. His orders were obeyed and the galley ran aground. The Doge leapt from the ship into the shallow water and waded ashore, planting his banner in the ground. Other sailors, shamed into action by the feats of their blind and embarrassingly ancient leader, followed him ashore, while other ships followed his example. A few hours later, Doge Dandolo sent a message to the Crusaders that the Venetians had managed to take a significant section of the wall, and that no less than 25 towers were now in Venetian hands.

Emperor Alexius had made a significant error of judgment. Believing that the Crusaders posed the greater threat, he had placed the Varangian Guard, and his best fighters, on the side of the wall facing the Crusader camp. The troops left guarding the sea wall facing the Venetians were adept at defending their position from the safety of the wall by hurling missiles at the Venetian ships. However, when faced with the prospect of hand-to-hand fighting, they fled, leaving the Venetians to take control of a large section of the sea wall.

Realizing he had made a mistake, Emperor Alexius ordered the Varangians to leave the Crusaders for the moment, and drive the Venetians back from the wall. The arrival of the axe-wielding Varangian Guard turned the tide of the battle against the Venetians, and they were gradually pushed back. Prior to retreating, hoping to slow the progress of the Byzantine counterattack, the Venetians set fire to some buildings which were positioned between themselves and the Varangian Guard. The fire quickly took hold, and the breeze favored the Venetians, blowing dense smoke at the Varangians, and fanning the flames ever higher. The fire spread to homes and businesses inside the wall, and before it could be contained, the fire will have burnt a significant portion of the city. Around 120 acres of the city, the entire Quarter of Blachernae, will be destroyed, and over 20,000 Byzantines left homeless.

The sight of smoke billowing over the city seems to have galvanized the Emperor into action. Calling forth, at long last, the might of the Byzantine army, he marched his Greek troops out of St Romanus Gate, around a mile away from the Crusader camp, then turned his army around to face the attackers. The Crusaders were overawed by the size of the

Greek force. Geoffrey de Villehardouin stated, and I quote, "You would have thought that the whole world was there assembled" end of quote. Robert of Clari estimated that the Byzantine army contained as many as seventeen divisions, in contrast to the three divisions of Crusaders guarding the camp and the four divisions actively involved in the siege.

The Crusaders regrouped to face this new threat. They left one division guarding the siege engines, then assembled their remaining six divisions in front of the wall. They set themselves up in a long set of lines. At the front were the archers and cross-bowmen, whose job it would be to take out as many of the advancing Byzantines as possible. Behind them stood around 200 knights who had lost their horses and were fighting on foot. At the back, the remainder of the Crusading army assembled. The numbers were estimated by Hugh of Saint-Pol as being made up of 500 knights, 500 other mounted men, and 2,000 foot soldiers. Even the stable boys and cooks lined up with the foot soldiers, arming themselves with kitchen knives or whatever weapons they could find. But despite these extra numbers, the Crusading force was dwarfed by the much larger Byzantine army.

Inside the Blachernae Palace, ladies and maidens were gathering at the windows which looked down over the battlefield. They awaited the spectacle eagerly, no doubt predicting a quick and emphatic win for the Byzantines. And really, that's exactly what any onlooker would have expected. The Crusading forces have their backs against the wall, and it looks as if they are about to be crushed by the well-fed, well-rested, much larger Byzantine army, which is also familiar with the terrain and is fighting in the defense of their home city.

But strangely, it doesn't happen that way at all. Despite being outnumbered by the Byzantine forces nearly three to one, it's the Crusaders, not the Byzantines, who take the initiative and begin advancing towards the opposing army. To get to the Emperor's forces, the Crusaders have to traverse a small hill, then cross the river Lycus. This is only a small river, but it's clear that they will be vulnerable while undertaking the crossing, as the Byzantine forces were waiting for them on the other side.

The Crusaders marched to the top of the hill, then paused. In his book of the Fourth Crusade, Jonathan Phillips states that the leaders of the Crusade discussed their options with Count Baldwin of Flanders pointing out that the river would inevitably slow the advance of the Crusaders, and that crossing the river would likely result in heavy losses. The Crusaders resolved to halt, and Jonathan Phillips states that at this point it's likely they were on the verge of retreating.

Then they noticed activity in the lines of the Byzantine army. Emperor Alexius III was in the field, at the head of his army. All his army needed to do was cross the river, which they could do with ease as long as the Crusaders remained on the top of the hill, then unleash their full might on these cheeky upstart invaders. With their overwhelming numerical advantage, they would likely crush the Crusading army and send them fleeing back to Western Europe, never to bother Constantinople again.

Astonishingly, Emperor Alexius didn't do this. As his army grew increasingly restless and eager to attack, Alexius failed to give the order to advance. Even more astoundingly, as the day wore on, Alexius gave an absolutely inexplicable order to his army. As the Crusaders looked on in amazement, Alexius ordered his army to retreat. He turned them around and marched them back towards the city. The Crusaders followed the retreating

army, no doubt yelling words of encouragement, until they had disappeared into the safety of their burning city.

No one could believe what just happened. Geoffrey de Villehardouin summed up the feelings of the Crusaders when he stated, and I quote, "I can assure you that God never delivered any people from greater peril than that from which he saved our troops that day. There was not a man in the army, however bold and courageous, whose heart was not filled with joy." End of quote.

The feelings of the citizens of Constantinople were markedly different. Word soon spread of the embarrassing retreat of the Byzantine forces. Disbelief turned to anger, and that anger was directed towards one person, Emperor Alexius. So why did the Emperor retreat? Well, historians have been scratching their heads about this for quite some time. Emperor Alexius had little experience as a military commander, and some historians are of the opinion that he went out into the field never intending to actually fight the Crusaders. He assumed the Crusaders would retreat when faced with the much larger Byzantine army, and the Emperor was rattled when they advanced. I guess we'll never know exactly why Alexius retreated, but considering what was to happen further down the track, his decision was one which had catastrophic consequences for his city and for the very survival of the Byzantine Empire.

All in all, it's safe to say that Emperor Alexius wasn't exactly the most popular bloke in Constantinople after the retreat. Unrest was building and Alexius, never popular nor particularly liked as an Emperor at the best of times, was heading for a new low in the popularity stakes. A group of noblemen met with Alexius in his palace and told him that if he continued to act in such a cowardly manner, then they would seek out his nephew, young Alexius, from among the ranks of the Crusaders and place him on the Imperial throne. Alexius agreed to man-up and lead the army against the Crusaders on the following day.

But in reality he had no intention of doing such a thing. Probably realizing that he had lost the support of his army and his people, Emperor Alexius III gathered together his closest and most trusted advisers and his favorite daughter, Irene. Together, the group collected 1,000 pounds of gold and as many jewels and precious objects as they could carry. Satisfied that he had enough loot to keep him in the manner to which he had become accustomed, the Emperor and his small band of supporters fled the city under cover of darkness, leaving behind his wife, his other children, and a burning city full of angry Imperial subjects.

So Constantinople is now in serious peril. The Venetians and their fleet of 100 ships look like a permanent fixture on the Golden Horn, and the Crusaders and Venetians are still clamoring at the gates, intent on breaching the walls. Part of the city is on fire, and the residents of Constantinople have just woken to the news that they have been abandoned by their Emperor. Oh dear. Join me next week as the fate of the magnificent city of Constantinople is sealed.

Now, just before I finish this week, I want to mention the Byzantium 1200 Project. This is an attempt to digitally recreate the city of Constantinople as it was in the year 1200. They've completed both the Blachernae Palace and the Theodosian walls, as well as a range of other buildings. I'll place a couple of pictures on the website and Facebook page, but the website itself is well worth checking out. It will give you a feel for what the city

would have looked like at the time the Venetians and Crusaders invaded. So look them up at www.byzantium1200.com. It's well worth the effort. Until next week, bye for now.

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