

History of the Crusades.

Episode 78 The Fourth Crusade IX.

Hello again. Last week we saw the Crusaders and Venetians achieve something that had eluded invaders for centuries. They launched an attack on the city of Constantinople and were able to force their way through the city's defenses.

Once the bulk of the Crusading army was inside Constantinople, a group of mounted knights headed for Murtzuphlus' fortified camp, strategically placed on top of a hill. At the sight of the charging horsemen the Imperial soldiers guarding the camp fled, and Murtzuphlus had no option other than to follow their example. He abandoned his tent and belongings and raced to the relative safety of the Great Palace, facing the Sea of Marmara. If the Crusaders were expecting a counterattack, or at least a degree of resistance from the residents of Constantinople, they found little. Shocked to the core by the fact that their city's defenses had been breached, residents and soldiers alike scattered and ran, as the invaders spread out through the city streets. Believing that resistance was futile, the Greek residents of the city really only had two options available to them. They could gather all they could and flee the city, or they could surrender, and place themselves at the mercy of the Latin Christians.

As the citizens of the city began streaming out of its gates, the leaders of the Crusade staked their claim over different parts of the city. Baldwin of Flanders occupied the Imperial tent in the camp abandoned by Murtzuphlus, while his brother Henri placed troops in front of the Blachernae Palace. Boniface of Montferrat's men spread out through the densely populated area near the Imperial camp. By this time, the day was drawing to a close. Despite the fact that only part of the city was under their control, and fearing a counter attack by Murtzuphlus, the Crusaders and Venetians settled down for the night.

On the other side of the city, Murtzuphlus had come to a decision. His Varangian Guard were willing to fight on to the end, but Murtzuphlus believed the odds were stacked against them. Determined not to fall into Western hands as a prisoner, Murtzuphlus commandeered a small fishing boat, and in the boat he placed the wife of the former Emperor Alexius III, along with her daughters, one of whom, Eudocia, he would later marry. Around midnight, the boat set off from the Sea of Marmara and carried the fleeing Emperor and his female entourage into exile.

Constantinople woke to the news that, yet again, it had been abandoned by its Emperor. The leading noblemen and clergy of the city met in the early hours of the day to try and work out what to do. These were men who had a lot to lose if Constantinople fell to the foreigners. In a desperate move to save themselves and their city, they elected a seasoned warrior, Constantine Laskaris, as Emperor, and the new Emperor was given the task of driving the invaders out of the city. The new Emperor made an impassioned plea to the citizens of Constantinople to fight and resist the foreigners. The nobility, having of course the most to lose, were prepared to fight, as were the Varangian Guard, who took the opportunity to negotiate a pay rise to secure their services. The bulk of the citizens, however, were not convinced.

As the sun rose on the morning of the 13th of April, and the Crusader army began mobilizing and gathering their troops in an open region of the city, a fresh wave of citizens

fled the city. Even the Varangian Guard, fortified by their newly-secured pay rise, had trouble maintaining a stance, with many deciding to abandon their posts in favor of joining the exodus from the city. The newly-crowned Emperor Laskaris caught the mood and, deciding that it was inevitable that the city would fall, decided to flee as well, becoming the third Emperor in ten months to flee Constantinople. The Crusaders assembled themselves into position, ready to fight, but it soon became apparent that there was no one to oppose them. Word eventually surfaced of the fact that Murtzuphlus had fled, and when the chief clergy from the Orthodox Church, dressed in their ecclesiastical robes, came over to the Westerners to formally surrender, along with handful of members of the Varangian Guard, who hoped to be able to change their allegiance, it started to sink in. Constantinople was theirs.

As was the custom at the time, once it was clear that the city was in their hands, the leaders of the Crusade rewarded their troops with the news that they were entitled to loot the city for three full days. A cheer rose up from the rank-and-file members of the army, and they began to spread out over the city, searching for booty. The sack of Constantinople had begun.

The leaders of the Crusade behaved in a relatively orderly and predictable manner, by racing off to secure for themselves the central buildings and palaces. Boniface of Montferrat rode to the Great Palace in the southern quarter of the city. The gates of the building were opened to him on the condition that he spare the lives of those inside. Many notable figures had sought refuge in the palace, among them Agnes, sister of King Philip of France, and Margaret, the widow of Emperor Isaac and sister to the King of Hungary. Boniface kept his word and spared them, while setting his soldiers in place to garrison the building. In a similar manner, Henri of Flanders secured for himself the Blachernae Palace.

Elsewhere in the city, however, things were markedly less orderly, as the rank-and-file members of the expedition commenced three days of appalling destruction and desecration.

Now, I'm going to start my coverage of this notorious event by reading Stephen Runciman's description of what happened, which will provide us with an overview. Then I'll go to a report of an eyewitness who was in the city at the time, to give you a feel for what it would have been like to live through the sack of Constantinople.

Right. So first, this is a rather long passage from Steven Runciman's third volume of his series on the history of the Crusades, and I quote. "The sack of Constantinople is unparalleled in history. For nine centuries, the great city had been the capital of Christian civilization. It was filled with works of art that had survived from ancient Greece and with the masterpieces of its own exquisite craftsman. The Venetians indeed knew the value of such things. Wherever they could, they seized treasures and carried them off to adorn the squares and churches and palaces of their town. But the Frenchmen and Flemings were filled with a lust for destruction. They rushed in a howling mob down the streets and through the houses, snatching up everything that glittered and destroying whatever they could not carry, pausing only to murder or to rape, or to break open the wine cellars for their refreshment. Neither monasteries nor churches nor libraries were spared. In St Sophia itself, drunken soldiers could be seen tearing down the silken hangings and pulling the great silver iconostasis to pieces, while sacred books and icons were trampled underfoot. While they drank merrily from the altar vessels, a prostitute set herself on the Patriarch's throne and began to sing a ribald French song. Nuns were ravished in the

convents. Palaces and hovels alike were entered and wrecked. Wounded women and children lay dying in the streets. For three days, the ghastly scenes of pillage and bloodshed continued, till the huge and beautiful city was a shambles. "Even the Saracens would have been more merciful", cried the historian Niketas, and with truth." End quote

That lengthy passage gives an overview of what occurred during the sack of Constantinople. The Venetians, realizing the immense cultural value of the treasures which had adorned the city since times of antiquity, were more keen to steal and take their treasures back to Venice, but the Crusaders, well, they were less cultured and more bent on destruction than theft.

Now to our eyewitness report. Geoffrey de Villehardouin and Robert of Clari, both of whom have provided us with superb accounts up until now, are silent on the sack of Constantinople. They simply chose to ignore the event, perhaps preempting the wise advice of the young rabbit Thumper in the 1942 Disney film Bambi, by determining "if you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all", a moral which, according to Wikipedia, is apparently known as "The Thumperian Principle".

One person who was present at the sack of Constantinople and was able to write a description of what happened was our eyewitness, the esteemed Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates. Niketas had lost his house in the fire which had started when the Westerners set a mosque alight in late 1203. As a consequence, he, his heavily pregnant wife, and his young children were sharing a house which was located near the Hagia Sophia. As the pillaging Crusaders advanced towards his section of the city, Niketas observed how they operated. They grabbed at people, demanding money and goods, and if they weren't pleased with the response they tended to become violent. Luckily for Niketas, one of the people with whom he was sharing a house was a man named Dominic, a wine merchant who had been born in Venice. Even more fortunate, Dominic owned a suit of armor and a couple of weapons. He put these to good use. Donning the suit of armor and brandishing a sword, when the invaders arrived to ransack the house, Dominic was able to curse at them in their own language and pretend that he had already taken the house for himself.

Pretending to be an invader worked for a while, but as the hours passed and more and more Crusaders and Venetians arrived on the doorstep, Dominic was concerned that he wouldn't be able to keep up the pretense indefinitely. After he had repulsed yet another wave of Latin Christians, Dominic decided to help the members of the household to escape to the house of another local Venetian, no doubt believing that they would be safer with two ex-Venetians to assist them instead of just one.

With a heavily pregnant woman and some very young children in the group, walking the dangerous streets of Constantinople was not going to be easy. The household's servants were ordered to carry the smallest children, and Dominic tied the hands of the adult men in the group and pulled them behind him, as if they were his prisoners. In the chaos of the streets, the servants decided to leave the group and make their own way out of the city. The remaining adults shared the children out between them, so that Niketas was left carrying a baby, and even Dominic carried a young child on his shoulders, which wouldn't have done much for his disguise.

It seems that the house of Dominic's Venetian friend did not provide the sanctuary they were looking for, and Niketas ended up leading the increasingly desperate group around

the city for five days, seeking places in which they could shelter and hoping that the crisis would blow over.

After witnessing five days of violence, desecration, looting, pillage, assault, and rape, Niketas finally determined that things weren't going to improve. They were going to have to leave their beloved city and home. On the 17th of April 1204 the household began heading for the Golden Gate, the main exit point for refugees leaving the city. The group was regularly being stopped by groups of Crusaders, who would frisk them for valuables and eye off the young women in the party. Some days earlier, Niketas had instructed the women in his group to smear dirt on their faces in order to appear less attractive, and to walk in the center of the group away from the prying eyes of the invaders. Wherever he could, he led them to places where the crowds were thickest, hoping to find safety in numbers.

However, as they were passing the Church of the Martyr Mokios on their way to the Golden Gate, their luck ran out. A Crusader thrust his way into the center of their group and grabbed a young woman, then pulled her away screaming, to the side of the road. Her father, an elderly judge, tried to intervene but was knocked to the ground. A very brave Niketas ran after the Crusader, who was dragging the terrified girl towards some houses. Niketas accosted a group of passing Crusaders and pleaded with them to intervene. They followed Niketas to the house to which the Crusader had taken the girl. Niketas appealed to the feelings of those who had wives and daughters of their own, then tried a different tack, pointing out that the Crusader was violating oaths concerning the sanctity of women. He must have been very persuasive, as the group of Crusaders ended up taking his side. They bashed at the locked door and demanded the Crusader release his captive. Outnumbered, the Crusader eventually opened the door and reluctantly gave up his prize. Niketas guided the sobbing girl back to the group, and they hurried towards the exit point from the city.

Niketas ended up settling in Thrace with his family. Having left all their valuables behind in Constantinople, they were forced to forge a new life as best they could, along with other refugees from the fallen city.

It's difficult today to fully comprehend the sack of Constantinople. Compared to other atrocities coming by the Crusaders, such as the mass slaughter that followed the fall of Jerusalem in 1099, there was no full scale killing. In his book "God's War", Christopher Tyerman estimates that a couple of thousand residents were killed during the sack of Constantinople, around half of one percent (0.5%) of the city's population. But the damage done to the city's cultural heritage was quite simply catastrophic. In their desperation to get their hands on as much loot as possible, nothing was spared from the pillaging hands of the Crusaders and Venetians. The homes of individual citizens were plundered, and those fleeing the destruction were searched and any items of value seized. Churches were ransacked. Treasures within churches made of precious metal were taken and melted down, while sacred relics were placed in the hands of Latin Christian clerics who took them back to Europe.

Magnificent statues and monuments, items of exquisite craftsmanship which had adorned Constantinople since times of antiquity, were pulled down and taken away to be melted down. These included the magnificent bronze statue of the Roman goddess Hera, which was of such an enormous size that the head alone required a team of four yokes of oxen

to carry it away. An extraordinary wind vane in the shape of a huge horse, which adorned the Forum of the Bull, was melted down, as were countless other statues and monuments.

One statue to escape this fate was the four bronze horses which had dominated the great hippodrome of Constantinople since the days of its founder, the Emperor Constantine. The horses were transported back to Venice and for centuries stood on a platform above the main door of St Mark's, although apparently the horses you can see there today are fiberglass replicas. The originals have been taken indoors and are now stored inside the basilica to protect them from pollution.

Within the city, nothing was spared. Precious metals were ripped off the facade of buildings. Libraries were plundered. Palaces, monasteries and public buildings were stripped of anything of wealth. Even the tombs of the great Byzantine Emperors were opened and plundered. Apparently, the Latin Christians were surprised to discover that the corpse of the great Byzantine Emperor Justinian was remarkably well preserved. His body had lain undisturbed in its crypt for over 600 years. The Westerners stripped the corpse of gold, jewels, and pearls, and moved on to their next target.

At the end of the sack, beautiful, ancient Constantinople, the repository of the wealth and cultural inheritance of the Roman Empire, which had lain un-violated by invaders for the past 900 years, had been brought to her knees. Stripped bare, desecrated, plundered, and with her spirit broken, the Queen of Cities would never fully recover from these dark days in 1204.

The wealth amassed by the Crusaders and Venetians was staggering. In theory at least, all the plunder was to be placed in a common pool. Three churches were set aside in which the seized items were to be placed. While there were a few hangings to deter those who had tried to keep some treasures for themselves, it's likely that quite a few of the smaller items were concealed by individual plunderers and taken back to Europe in secret. In his book "God's War", Christopher Tyerman estimates that the total value of the items plundered, including those kept by individual looters, was in excess of 500,000 marks, enough to fund a European country for a decade.

The piles of precious metals, jewels, silks, garments of fur, and coins were divided according to the treaty made previously. Three eighths went to the Crusaders, three eighths to the Venetians, and the remaining quarter was set aside for the new Emperor. The bronze from the melted statues was used to mint coins to pay the wages of the soldiers.

With a full quarter of the massive pile of wealth going to the new Emperor, you can bet that this role was one highly sought after. To increase his chances of being elected to the position Boniface of Montferrat married Empress Margaret, the wife of the recently deceased blind Emperor Isaac, who he had found sheltering in the Great Palace. Unfortunately for Boniface, and most probably for Margaret as well, it was a pointless exercise. He failed to secure the support of Doge Dandolo, and since the Venetians voted as a block following the lead of their Doge, the votes fell the way of the candidate favored by the Doge, the easy-going and far more compliant Count Baldwin of Flanders.

On the 16th of May 1204 Baldwin was escorted to the Hagia Sophia and was crowned Emperor Baldwin. Following the ceremony, Baldwin sat on a high throne, garbed in the heavy and bejeweled Imperial robes, holding a sceptre in one hand and a golden orb in

the other. In his lap was placed one of the treasures seized from an Imperial palace, a ruby the size of an apple.

The conquest of Constantinople was complete. The mighty Byzantine Empire was now ruled by a Latin Christian Crusader. Join me next week as we examine the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

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