

History of the Crusades.
Episode 72
The Fourth Crusade III.

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Now, just before we start, we need to have a word about Episode 71. The first 700 or so people to download Episode 71 might have been a little bit surprised to find the intro music popping up in the middle of the episode. And then around the eighteen minute mark, there was that strange sentence, which sounded like it had been recorded in a wind tunnel. My personal favorite was when I kept on referring to the Fourth Crusade as occurring in the year 12,000, which, of course it didn't, it was the year 1200. Well, I guess everyone has a bad day at the office, and Episode 71 was my bad day at the office. So I think we should put Episode 71 firmly behind us and move forward into the rest of the Fourth Crusade, hopefully with no further bloopers. Okay, so here we go. Episode 72.

Hello again. Last week we saw Pope Innocent III increasingly lose control over the Crusade he had instigated. Boniface of Montferrat took over leadership of the expedition following the death of young Count Theobald of Champagne, and a delegation traveled to Venice, where they negotiated the passage for 33,500 Crusaders at a cost of 85,000 silver marks. However, only around 12,000 Crusaders showed up in Venice at the appointed time to take up their passage, with many deciding to find their own way to the Middle East. This meant that the leaders of the Crusade faced a massive shortfall in funds. Even after pooling all their available resources, they were still a staggering 34,000 silver marks short of the agreement.

At this moment, pretty much everyone involved in the expedition was in a bad place. On the little island of San Nicolo di Lido, where the Crusading force was camped, rumors about the future of the Crusade were running rife, and food was becoming more and more scarce. The rank-and-file Crusaders had heard that not enough Crusaders had arrived in Venice, and that there was a funding shortfall, but what they were unsure of, was what was going to happen next. There were rumors that they would all be asked to pay an exorbitant fee for their passage to cover the shortfall. This, of course, would be a problem. While most Crusaders had sold assets and were cash-ready for the expedition, the continued stay on the island of Lido was eating into their funds. They were at the mercy of the Venetian merchants regarding the purchase of food and other essential items, and of course the Venetians were taking full advantage of this by charging exorbitant rates.

The Papal Legate, Peter Capuano, arrived on the island in late July, and decided to absolve all the very poor, the sick, the elderly, and the women from their Crusading vows. This desperate move by Pope Innocent III to assert control over the expedition, meant that the Crusading army was enhanced in a military sense, but it meant that even less people were now seeking a passage on the ships.

The leaders of the Crusade, of course, were mortified. The miscalculation of the numbers of Crusaders requiring passage lay squarely at their feet. It was clear that the Venetians had fulfilled their side of the bargain. We'll put aside, for the moment, the issue of destination. While the leaders had booked passage to Egypt, it's highly unlikely that the Venetians would have taken them there, as they didn't want to jeopardize their lucrative trading relationship with Cairo. How exactly the Venetians were planning to break this news to the Crusaders is an interesting question, but one that will never arise. For the moment, as far as everyone is concerned, the Venetians, having spent a year doing nothing but building and outfitting ships for the expedition, have fulfilled their side of the agreement. A fleet of impressive-looking, brand-spanking-new ships are floating in the lagoon, waiting to be used. Trouble is, the leaders of the Crusade just don't have the money to pay for them.

In an act of desperation, their own personal possessions, gold and silver plates, jugs, serving-ware, and cutlery were transported to the Doge's palace to help pay the debt, while Count Baldwin of Flanders, and perhaps some other leaders as well, borrowed money, placing themselves in debt in a desperate move to clear the ledgers. But it was all in vain.

By the end of summer in the year 1202 they had to face the fact. There was no way that they were going to be able to pay the Venetians. They faced a stark choice. They were either going to have to abandon the expedition and go home, losing face and making an enemy of the powerful trading city, or come to some arrangement with the Doge.

The Doge, Enrico Dandolo, was also in an awkward position. He had gone way out on a limb for the Crusaders, staking his own reputation and the fortunes of his city on this one massive contract. The commercial activities of Venice had ground to a halt for a year while the ship builders concentrated all their efforts on building a vast fleet of ships for the Crusaders. Now all those beautiful ships were floating, empty, in the lagoon, with not enough Crusaders to fill them.

Despite being elderly and blind, Doge Dandolo was a smart and resourceful man, trained in the cut-throat world of international trade and diplomacy. If anyone could negotiate the city out of this mess, it was Doge Dandolo. He was astute enough to realize it was pointless pressing the leaders of the Crusade for more money. It was clear that they just didn't have the means to pay. They were, however, desperate to negotiate their way out of their debt, and would rather do so than turn their backs on the arrangement. The Doge knew that he could use this to his advantage. There was also a ready army of 12,000 increasingly restless men at his disposal.

The Doge came up with a plan. The wealthy city of Zara on the Dalmatian coast, around 165 miles southeast of Venice, had been causing him some headaches. It was a rich trading center, and when it was under Venetian control all its trading goods had been directed through Venice, meaning that a raft of taxes flowed into the Doge's coffers. Its value was not only in its wealth as a trading city, it had access to the forests of Dalmatia, which provided an excellent source of oak for building ships. All in all, Zara was a city which the Venetians were very keen to have back under their control.

The feeling, however, wasn't mutual. The Zarans had resented their Venetian overlords. They didn't like to see their taxes siphoned off into the Doge's treasury, and they didn't like to see their forests felled of trees which were to be transported north to build Venetian

ships. So in 1181 the Zarans broke free from their Venetian controllers, and six years later attached themselves to the King of Hungary, who became the city's protector. A furious Venice had tried on three separate occasions to take Zara back by force, but the city was well fortified and they had failed on each occasion.

In September 1202, the Doge placed a proposal before the leaders of the Crusade. He would freeze their debt and the Crusaders could pay it off gradually, using the proceeds of future conquests. As it was too late in the sailing season to head to Egypt (the Doge may have said the word "Egypt" with a nervous cough, as he had no intention at any time of taking the fleet there), well he had another idea. The Crusading army could sail their brand new ships down the coast to Zara, and assist the Venetians to conquer the city. It was a wealthy place, he would have informed the Crusaders, and hopefully the Crusaders' share of the booty would be enough to clear the debt, and they could sail to Egypt in the spring.

Now, from a purely financial point of view, this offer looks feasible. The Crusaders owe the Venetians a massive debt that they can't pay, and joining with the Venetians to attack a city down the coast will placate the Doge while also possibly clearing the debt and giving the restless, bored army stuck on the island of Lido something to do. However, finances and balancing the books aren't the only considerations in play here. This is a Crusade. The combatants have signed up, taken the Cross, sold their assets, left their homes, and mortgaged themselves to the hilt, to go and liberate the Holy Land from Islam, in return for the eternal salvation of their souls. Zara is a Christian city. There are no Muslims anywhere in sight.

To make things even more awkward, Zara is under the protection of King Emeric of Hungary, who is not only a Christian but also a Crusader, and therefore entitled to the protection of the Church. To the leaders of the Crusade, attacking a Christian city under the protection of a Crusading King was hardly an ideal way to start the Fourth Crusade. But their options were limited. It was either do this and try and get the Crusade back on track, or abandon the expedition altogether, returning home in debt and disgrace. Acknowledging the sensitivity of the issue, the leaders decided not to tell the rank-and-file Crusaders of the plan.

To sweeten the bitter pill he was about to make them swallow, the Doge, in a lavish and theatrical ceremony at St Mark's Church, begged to be allowed to take up the Cross. When the congregation roared its approval, a sobbing Doge Dandolo wept his way through his Crusading vows, while the Cross was sewn onto his ceremonial headgear. Whether the leaders of the Crusade were moved by the Doge's performance is hard to say, but they were convinced by the practicality of the proposal. Even the Papal Legate, Peter Capuano, decided that assisting the Venetians to attack Zara was preferable to the entire Crusade collapsing in a big, debt-ridden heap. He stated, in fact, that the Pope, and I quote, "would prefer to overlook whatever was unbecoming of them, rather than have this pilgrimage campaign disintegrate" end of quote.

On this point, the Papal Legate couldn't have been more wrong. When Pope Innocent III heard that the military force he had created was about to go and attack a Christian city that was under Papal protection due to the Crusader status of its overlord, the King of Hungary, he was beyond furious. He sent letters to the Crusaders in Venice prohibiting the attack and threatening to excommunicate anyone involved in it.

Despite the Papal prohibition, the leaders of the Crusade decided to proceed with the plan to attack Zara. They did, however, have misgivings, and were worried how the rank-and-file Crusaders would feel about attacking a Christian city in direct defiance of the wishes of the Pope. So they decided not to tell them about these details. Instead, they announced that payment of the debt to the Venetians was to be deferred, and that the expedition would finally be leaving on Crusade.

The army, of course, was delighted by this news, and celebrated by parading around their island with lit torches. In early October 1202, the Crusaders boarded their beautiful new ships, loaded them with provisions and siege equipment, and set sail. The ships flew banners and flags indicating the allegiance of the men on board, and the resulting colorful display made a dazzling scene, although Robert of Clari, who witnessed the departure, was probably getting a bit carried away when he described it as, and I quote “the finest thing to see that has ever been since the beginning of the world” end quote.

There was one notable absentee from this memorable display. Boniface of Montferrat declared that he had urgent matters he needed to attend to, back in Italy. Conveniently excusing himself from sailing to Zara in defiance of the wishes of the Pope, he stated that he would catch up with the expedition later.

The ships sailed down the northern Adriatic Sea, and the fleet arrived at Zara on the 11th of November 1202, having lost only one ship en route, a large transport vessel named "Viola". Zara was a well-fortified city and had managed to successfully defend itself against the Venetians on previous occasions, but the large size of the army and the fact that they had with them a significant amount of siege equipment, including siege engines and catapults, meant that this time was different. The citizens of Zara closed their city gates and armed themselves as best they could. Then, the day after the ships arrived, they sent a delegation out to meet with Doge Dandolo to negotiate a surrender.

Unfortunately, before the meeting took place, they were approached by a group of dissident Crusaders led by Simon of Montfort and Robert of Boves. They told the Zarans that the Crusaders did not intend to assist the Venetians to attack Zara. Accordingly, the city had nothing to fear and should not surrender. The city's representatives had offered to cede the city to Venice in return for sparing the lives of its inhabitants, and the Doge was keen to accept their offer. Having received this false bit of intelligence from the renegade Crusaders, however, the Zarans withdrew their offer and retreated back behind their walls. The Venetians and Crusaders erected scores of siege engines around the city walls and the assault on the city began.

Now to be fair to Simon of Montfort and Robert of Boves, they were not purely making mischief when they told the embassy that the Crusaders wouldn't attack the city. Their stance was indicative of a split which had occurred in the Crusading ranks. Unsurprisingly really, there was a splinter group of men who weren't that keen to defy the Pope and risk excommunication, and perhaps they believed that, with some persuasion, the rest of the Crusaders would also eventually take their side. One of their supporters, a Cistercian Abbott, read a letter from the Pope to the assembled Crusade hierarchy, a letter which was short and to the point, leaving no doubt about its message. The letter stated, and I quote. “My lords, in the name of the Pope of Rome, I forbid you to attack this city, for the people in it are Christian and you wear the sign of the Cross.” End of quote.

The Doge publicly responded to the letter, angrily stating that the views of the Pope took second place to the agreement made between the leaders of the Crusade and the Venetians. The Crusaders were again faced with a choice. Proceed with the attack on Zara and risk excommunication from the Church, or return home in debt, with their reputation in tatters, leaving behind a failed Crusade. In the end, material considerations overrode the spiritual ones, and the vast majority of the Crusading leaders decided to proceed with the attack. Simon and his supporters withdrew from the camp and took no part in the siege, with Simon stating, and I quote, "I have not come here to destroy Christians" end of quote. The Crusading hierarchy decided not to share the Pope's letter with the Crusading masses, and the attack on Zara proceeded.

On the 13th of November 1202, the siege began. The fleet destroyed a chain that stretched across the harbor, meaning they could sail their ships into the harbor and right up to the walls. Catapult machines and wooden towers were assembled all around the land walls, and scaling ladders were placed against both the land and sea walls. Soon the city was under attack from all sides. The city's defenses held fast.

After five days of constant bombardment, it was clear that a change of tactics was needed, so the attackers decided to undermine the walls. The Zarans realized that their walls would fall, and wishing to avoid further destruction, opened the gates to the Crusaders and Venetians. The invaders were careful to spare Christian lives, but that didn't prevent them from ransacking the town. The spoils of victory were shared between the Crusaders and Venetians, and there were serious cases of fighting between the two groups over how the riches were to be divided. The victors settled down in the city, the Venetians taking the half nearest the harbor and the Crusaders occupying the rest, with the leaders reserving the finest houses for themselves.

By this time it was late November, and winter was nearly upon them. The Doge pointed out the dangers of sailing to the Middle East during the winter storms, and it was decided that the expedition would spend the winter in their newly acquired accommodation in Zara.

While the rest of the army were making themselves at home in Zara, an embassy of four men was chosen to travel to Rome to try and convince Pope Innocent not to carry out his threat of excommunication. The rank-and-file was still not aware that the Pope had decreed that anyone who attacked Zara would be expelled from the Church, and the leaders perhaps hoped to reverse the decision before it became public knowledge. Bishop Nivelon of Soissons, John of Noyen, who was Count Baldwin's chancellor, Robert of Boves, and John of Friaise, set out in December to make the journey to Rome. The Venetians, declaring they had done nothing wrong, decided not to send a representative.

Before the men reached Rome, a letter arrived in Zara from Pope Innocent. The letter revealed the extent of the Pope's sadness, anger and disappointment over the attack on Zara. One passage stated, and I quote "Behold, your gold has turned into base metal and your silver has almost completely rusted since, departing from the purity of your plan and turning aside from the path onto the impassable road, you have, so to speak, withdrawn your hand from the plow, for when you should have hastened to the land flowing with milk and honey, you turned away, going astray in the direction of the desert." End of quote. The letter closed with a reminder that all the members of the army were excommunicated from the Church and that the granting of the remission of sins was withdrawn from the group.

Pope Innocent had every reason to feel disappointed. He had initiated the Crusade with high hopes that his Crusade would succeed where others had failed. To him, the keys for success were to place the expedition firmly under the control of the Church, have it financed by the Church, and have it peopled by Crusaders for whom the overriding concern was the salvation of their souls, and not the accumulation of wealth or power. Unfortunately, as the Pope pointed out in his letter, the Crusaders had deviated a long way from this path. The Papal Legate Peter Capuano had returned to Rome prior to the attack on Zara, and in his absence there was no strong clerical voice amongst the leaders of the Crusade. This was clearly demonstrated by the failure of Simon of Montfort to sway the Crusaders from attacking their fellow Christians. It was clear that spiritual concerns, far from being the primary driver of the Crusade, were overridden by monetary ones. The Crusade had indeed turned from the path of salvation and, in an attempt to clear debts and salvage reputations, had started down a road dominated by material and worldly concerns.

Join me next week as Boniface of Montferrat arrives in Zara and sets the Crusade off on an even darker path, a path that will seal the Fourth Crusade's infamous reputation. Until next week, bye for now.

End