

History of the Crusades.
Episode 74
The Fourth Crusade V.

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. Last week we saw the leaders of the Fourth Crusade accept an offer from the ambitious Prince Alexius Angelus to install him on the Imperial throne in Constantinople, in return for a vast sum of money and a promise by Alexius to bring the Orthodox Church under the authority of the Pope in Rome. While many of the rank-and-file Crusaders had misgivings about this plan, and decided to abandon the expedition, the leaders of the Crusade saw it as a way to pay back the debt they owed to the Venetians, and to get the Fourth Crusade back on track. So, in late April 1203, accompanied by Young Alexius himself, the fleet set sail for Constantinople.

On their way to Constantinople, the fleet stopped at the city of Durazzo, on the northwestern edge of the Byzantine Empire. This was their first foray into Byzantine territory, and the first opportunity for the Crusaders to test the water, and gauge the reaction of Imperial subjects to the idea of installing young Alexius as Emperor. The leaders of the Crusade must have been relieved when the citizens of the town opened its gates to Prince Alexius, and quickly swore allegiance to him. Heartened by this response and hopeful that the people of Constantinople would react in the same way, the fleet sailed on to Corfu.

However, on the beautiful island of Corfu, things didn't go quite so well. The city of Corfu refused to open its gates to Alexius and the Crusaders. Not only did they refuse to admit them into the city, they attacked the fleet of Venetian ships using catapults, forcing them to withdraw from the harbor. Instead of laying siege to the city, the army decided to set up camp outside the city walls. Faced for the first time with the prospect that the citizens of the Byzantine Empire might not be happy to accept young Alexius as Emperor after all, some senior French Crusaders began to have second thoughts about the whole expedition. Several high ranking and influential French noblemen made it known that they intended to remain on the island after the fleet departed for Constantinople. They would send for ships to collect them and then presumably set sail for the Holy Land. Word quickly spread around the camp, and many of the rank-and-file Crusaders supported the plan. In fact, our faithful chronicler, Geoffrey de Villehardouin, reports that more than half the army were of the same mind as the defectors.

Fearing, understandably, that the expedition to Constantinople would fail if half the army defected, Boniface, Count Baldwin, Count Louis, Prince Alexius, and a group of Abbots and Bishops who supported them, met with the French noblemen to try and convince them to change their minds. In fact, it was less of a meeting than a desperate and emotional begging session. In his book "The Fourth Crusade", Jonathan Phillips states that Boniface, Alexius, and their group approached the French noblemen on horseback, but then, as they neared the group, they dismounted as a sign of humility. They approached the would-be

defectors on foot, and then literally threw themselves at their feet. According to Jonathan Phillips, Boniface, Count Baldwin, and Count Louis groveled on the ground in front of the defectors, weeping, sobbing, and pleading for them to change their minds.

The desperate ploy worked. Reduced to tears themselves by this unexpected event, the group of French noblemen weepingly agreed to sit down with Boniface and the Counts to discuss their concerns. After a no doubt emotional meeting, the French noblemen agreed to continue to Constantinople, and remain with the Crusade until Christmas 1203, on the condition that any time after Christmas the leaders of the Crusade must provide them with ships to take them to the Holy Land within two weeks of such a demand being made. Everyone swore an oath to abide with the agreement, and the mass defection was averted.

There was one further incident on the island of Corfu that must have caused some moments of disquiet for the leaders of the Crusade. While the army was camped outside the city of Corfu, the Orthodox Archbishop of Corfu visited the camp and invited some senior Latin Christian Abbots and Bishops into the city for lunch. As was to be expected, one of the subjects discussed over lunch was the Crusaders plan to bring the Orthodox Church under the authority of the Pope in Rome. The Orthodox Archbishop made it clear that he found this idea outrageous, stating eloquently that he, and I quote "knew no basis for the Roman See's primacy other than the fact that Roman soldiers had crucified Christ" end of quote. So while the army had to face the fact that the refusal of the city of Corfu to open its gates to young Alexius may mean that the city of Constantinople might react in the same way, the clergy also had to face the fact that the Orthodox Church may resist Alexius' orders for them to submit to Rome.

All in all, the stay at Corfu must have been quite a sobering one for the Crusaders. As a sign of their displeasure, the Crusading army was given permission to pillage the island prior to their departure.

The fleet sailed from Corfu on the 24th of May 1203 and made its way through Byzantine waters in a largely uneventful manner. There was a good reason why the fleet's passage was unimpeded. Despite its vast size, the Byzantine Empire didn't possess a functional navy. Some sixteen years earlier, Emperor Isaac Angelus had decided to outsource the building of ships for the Byzantine Empire to the Venetians. Since that time, the dockyards in Constantinople had lain idle, and apparently the Emperor had allowed his brother-in-law, who also happened to be the Admiral of the Navy, to sell off the anchors, sails and rigging of the remaining ships in the Byzantine fleet. As a consequence, the remains of what had been the ships of the Imperial Navy were bobbing around in the inner harbor at Constantinople, un-rigged, useless, and slowly rotting in the water.

With no Imperial fleet to oppose them, the Crusaders sailed around the coast of Greece before heading northeast across the Aegean towards the Hellespont. They sailed past the site of the ancient city of Troy, entered the Hellespont, and emerged in the Sea of Marmara, at the heart of the Byzantine Empire. They then continued to the end of the sea of Marmara and into the Bosphorus on the final leg of the journey. Impeded only by headwinds and adverse currents, which the Venetian sailors skillfully mastered, the fleet caught their first glimpse of the beautiful city of Constantinople.

Now, as I've mentioned previously, Constantinople was, at this stage in history, the greatest, largest, wealthiest, and most impressive city in the Christian world. Also called

"New Rome" or "The Queen of Cities", the city was surrounded by the massive and formidable Theodosian walls, while inside the walls buildings from late antiquity mixed with magnificent palaces, churches and gardens. The city was an awe-inspiring sight, and the vast majority of Crusaders were gazing on Constantinople for the first time. Geoffrey reported their feelings, stating, and I quote "I can assure you that all those who had never seen Constantinople before gazed very intently upon the city, having never imagined that there could be so fine a place in all the world. They noted the high walls and lofty towers encircling it, and its rich palaces and tall churches, of which there were so many that no one would have believed it to be true if he had not seen it with his own eyes, and viewed the length and breadth of that city which reigns supreme over all others. There was, indeed, no man so brave and daring that his flesh did not shudder at the sight. Nor was this to be wondered at, for never had so grand an enterprise been carried out by any people since the creation of the world." End of quote.

The city was not only magnificent, it was also daunting. The Crusaders were not arriving here as travelers or traders. They were here to engineer an Imperial coup.

The city of Constantinople sits on a triangular piece of land surrounded by three different waterways. The Sea of Marmara forms the base of the triangle to the south, while the Golden Horn, a natural harbor stretching six miles long, slopes up to the north. That's the tip of the triangle. The Bosphorus separates the city from the land mass which is Asia Minor. While the city of Istanbul today straddles both sides of the Bosphorus, the European and the Asian side, back when the city was Constantinople, at the time of the Crusades, it was confined to the European side. Formidable seawalls deterred attacks on the city from the water, and a giant chain was stretched across the mouth of the Golden Horn, preventing hostile ships from sailing up the northern side of the city.

The Crusader fleet pulled in at the harbor at Chalcedon, the site of the Imperial Summer Palace. Constantinople itself was around two miles further up the Bosphorus, on the other side of the strait. The leaders of the Crusade and other high-born members of the expedition took rooms in the palace, while the rank-and-file pitched tents outside. The horses were carefully loaded off the ships, and were no doubt pleased to be back on land after two weeks at sea. Happily for the Crusaders, vast quantities of corn had just been harvested, and ears of corn were piled up, just waiting for the Crusaders to gather them to replenish their food supplies. Two days later, they transferred their camp to another Imperial palace in the town of Scutari, which was directly opposite Constantinople, still on the eastern bank of the Bosphorus.

Within a couple of days, two salient facts became clear. Firstly, the sitting Emperor Alexius III was refusing to surrender, contrary to the hopes of young Prince Alexius and the Crusaders. The Emperor sent a small force to attack the camp at Scutari, however it was easily repulsed, with the Greek cavalry force fleeing after the first charge. The Emperor sent a messenger to the invaders, and the messenger was advised to tell the Emperor that if he surrendered his throne to his nephew, he would be rewarded financially and pardoned with his life. To the Crusaders' surprise, there was no positive response to this offer. The Emperor would not cede the throne peacefully, as they had hoped.

The second shock was that the citizens of Constantinople didn't seem at all enthusiastic about young Alexius. Far from rising up in support of him, as the Crusaders had hoped, when Alexius was paraded and presented in splendor on board a galley which sailed in front of the sea walls of Constantinople for all to see, they didn't seem to even know who

he was. Instead of cheering and opening the city gates to their new young Emperor, the citizens of Constantinople looked at young Alexius with blank indifference. To all the Crusaders who were hoping to be welcomed into Constantinople as liberators, saviors, and deliverers of a popular young Emperor, this must have come as quite a shock.

The Crusaders had come too far and were too deep in debt to turn back now. They had to face the stark reality. They were going to have to fight their way into this massive, magnificent, and heavily fortified city. It was a daunting thought. The defensive walls and fortifications surrounding Constantinople were legendary, but since it was now becoming clear that the gates weren't going to be opened to them, the only way the Crusaders and Venetians were going to get inside Constantinople is if they forced their way in.

The sea walls to the south, stretching along the Sea of Marmara, were the most formidable. Less formidable, but still impressive, were the sea walls on the northern face of the triangle, the ones running along the Golden Horn. The defenders of the city were aware of this, and to guard against an attack by sea along the northern walls, a gigantic chain swung across the entrance to the Golden Horn. Unless the chain was lowered, no ships could pass.

Ships were the ace in the Crusaders' pack of defensive cards. The Byzantine Empire had no navy to speak of, leaving the Crusaders unopposed on the water. It was pretty clear what they needed to do to force their way into the city. They were going to need to sail up the Golden Horn and find a weak spot in the northern walls. To do this, they were going to have to find a way to lower the chain. The chain ran from the walls of Constantinople across the mouth of the Golden Horn, and connected to the Tower of Galata on the other side. It was from this Tower that the chain could be lowered, by turning a huge windlass. So step number one on the how-to-enter-Constantinople-by-force action list was taking Galata and, most importantly, its Tower.

Now, Galata itself was not fortified. It was a commercial settlement and was mainly populated by foreign traders. The Imperial army, having figured that the Crusaders and Venetians would try to lower the chain, were massing along the shoreline of Galata, determined to protect the tower and the chain. The Emperor himself, was at the head of the army. The Crusaders had around 100 ships at their disposal, together with a fighting force which was still of a significant size, despite the number of desertions which had occurred to date. Despite the ships and the number of men, they faced a daunting task. In the 900 years of its existence, Constantinople had never fallen to a foreign invader. History, at least, was on the Emperor's side.

The Crusaders and Venetians prepared their battle plan. It was decided that the Venetians would man the ships, while the Crusaders organized themselves into seven fighting divisions. Overall control of the Crusading army was given to Count Baldwin of Flanders, who would also be leading the vanguard. In early July 1203, the Crusaders and Venetians alike prepared themselves to stage the largest amphibian invasion yet attempted in medieval Europe. The sun rose on the 5th of July, to a bright and clear day. The Crusaders and their horses boarded their ships and prepared to sail across the Bosphorus to Galata. Silver trumpets and drums were used to sound the attack, and the Crusaders and Venetians went to war. The Emperor and his army were waiting for them on the shore.

Now, generally in situations involving an amphibious attack, the defenders on the shore hold the advantage in the initial stages. An army disembarking from a ship or transport

vessel onto a hostile shore is vulnerable, until it can regroup and consolidate its position on land. The Crusaders knew this, and as the ships approached the shores of Galata, archers and cross-bowmen were positioned at the front of the ships, in the hope that they might reduce the advantage enjoyed by the Greek forces. As the Venetians maneuvered the ships close to the shore, the transport vessels containing the horses were the first to disembark. Bridges were lowered from the ships and fully armored knights atop their horses clattered off the vessels down the bridges and into the water, where they waded ashore and sorted themselves into lines, ready to commence a cavalry charge. Archers and cross-bowmen were also filing out of their boats.

The massed knights and horses must have presented a terrifying sight. The first wave of Crusader cavalymen had just been given the order to lower their lances in preparation for their first charge, when the Greek army scattered and fled. Utterly failing to take advantage of the vulnerability of the disembarking Crusaders, the Imperial army, with the Emperor in its midst, retreated in panic. The Crusaders happily took possession of the Imperial camp, which had been hastily abandoned and contained much booty.

The city of Galata was theirs, but the Tower, the object of their attack, was still in Greek hands. Unlike the town, the Tower was well fortified and designed to withstand an attack, and the garrison within the Tower were prepared to stand and fight. Content to leave attacking the Tower to another day, the Crusaders set up camp around the Tower, and prepared to settle down for the night.

Early the next morning they came under attack. The Emperor had ordered a contingent of soldiers to cross over to Galata on a fleet of barges. The soldiers joined with the garrison from the Tower and launched a surprise early morning assault on the Crusader camp. The Crusaders were taken totally unawares, and most knights were forced to fight on foot, having had no time to saddle and mount their horses. The fighting was fierce, but once the Crusaders regrouped and organized a counterattack, the Imperial forces realized that defeat was imminent. Some soldiers fled back to the barges, while others raced for the safety of the Tower.

The Crusaders were hot on the heels of the retreating Greeks, and were particularly keen to ensure that the soldiers running for the Tower didn't reach their destination. Once the Tower was manned, it was easily defended, and the Crusaders were eager to ensure that this didn't happen. The Greek soldiers reached the Tower gate, but were unable to close it in time. Swarms of Crusaders surrounded the Tower, and the Greek soldiers, realizing the situation was hopeless, surrendered. The victorious Crusaders and Venetian sailors unshackled the windlass inside the Tower, and the great protective chain stretching across the Golden Horn crashed into the water.

The way was now clear. Join me next week, as the Crusader and Venetian forces prepared to attack the massive, the magnificent, the never-before-breached city of Constantinople. Until next week, bye for now.

End