

History of the Crusades.
Episode 76
The Fourth Crusade VII.

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Now, for those who don't follow the podcast on Facebook or Twitter and have been wondering why there hasn't been an episode for the past few weeks, well, my laptop died unexpectedly just before I was due to post Episode 76, taking the episode with it. I had to purchase a replacement laptop, and decided to take the plunge and upgrade my recording equipment at the same time. Hopefully, you can detect some improvement. I also took some time to ponder the future of the podcast, and I'll let you know more about that when I finish the Fourth Crusade. Right, with no further ado, let's get onto Episode 76.

Hello again. Last time we saw the Crusaders and Venetians attack the northwestern point of the city of Constantinople in a military campaign known as the First Siege of Constantinople. By the end of the last episode, the Crusaders hadn't managed to breach the formidable walls of the city, but the Blachernae Quarter of the town had been burnt, and Emperor Alexius III had fled, abandoning Constantinople to her fate.

As dawn broke on the 18th of July 1203, the unthinkable situation began to reveal itself to the officials in the Imperial bureaucracy inside Constantinople. They were in a tight spot. The Empire was without an Emperor, and a force of foreign invaders were clamoring at the city gates. They needed two things and they needed them quickly. They needed an Emperor, and they needed to make peace with the invaders, otherwise there was a real possibility that Constantinople would fall into foreign hands.

The officials made their way to the Blachernae Palace, where the blinded ex-Emperor Isaac had been held on the orders of his brother, the recently departed ex-Emperor Alexius III. Yes, Isaac was blind, and there was a long held prohibition on the appointment of blind Emperors. And, yes, Isaac had been an incompetent and corrupt Emperor before being deposed by his brother, but he was all they had. Servants dressed Isaac in the Imperial robes, and he was led away from the Blachernae Palace, a free man and the latest leader of the Byzantine Empire.

A message was quickly dispatched to his son, Alexius, who was camped with the Crusaders outside the city walls. A jubilant Alexius informed Boniface of Montferrat that his uncle had fled and that his father was to be crowned Emperor. Boniface convened a meeting of the leaders of the Crusade inside Alexius' tent and broke the happy news. Cheers erupted, and the Crusaders and Venetians alike gave thanks to God for delivering them from defeat.

But the Doge, and likely Boniface and the leaders of the Crusade as well, quickly realized that the day was far from won. Uppermost in the minds of the Venetians and the Crusaders was the importance of Constantinople honoring the agreement made between

Prince Alexius and themselves. However, Alexius wasn't Emperor, so the Venetians and Crusaders hadn't actually complied with their part of the agreement, and Emperor Isaac wasn't a party to the contract, and might not be keen to honor it. So two Venetians and two Crusaders, one of whom, luckily for us, was our keen recorder of events Geoffrey de Villehardouin, were chosen to meet with the new Emperor to try and get him to confirm the agreement made by his son Alexius. As Geoffrey was keen to record everything that happened of note, we have a unique insight into what took place at this meeting. So, with thanks to Geoffrey de Villehardouin, this is what happened.

The four members of the embassy rode out of the Crusader camp on the 18th of July 1203 and were met by escorts at the city walls. Escorts directed them through the city gates, where they were greeted by the astonishing sight of the members of the Varangian Guard lining the road on both sides from the gate, right up to the main doors of the Blachernae Palace. Shouldering their battle axes, the Varangian Guard formed a menacing corridor, down which the members of the embassy were forced to walk. It was clear that Emperor Isaac had the support of these powerful fighters, and that they were determined to ensure the members of the envoy didn't stray from the path on their way to the Palace.

Once inside the Palace, a building which, ironically, they had been attacking the day before, they were escorted into one of the ceremonial halls. If they were awed by the magnificence of the building, the scene that met them inside this hall was breathtaking. The room was packed with the nobility of the Empire, all dressed in their most expensive garments. Colorful robes, silk dresses, and flashy jewelry were on display, and the embassy were left in no doubt about the wealth of the city and its inhabitants. The room was so tightly packed with people that it was difficult to move, but a way was cleared for the embassy to move towards the end of the hall, where Isaac and his wife Margaret were seated on the Imperial thrones. Margaret, awkwardly, was the sister of the King of Hungary, whose town Zara the expedition had attacked prior to their journey to Constantinople. Geoffrey described the Emperor as being dressed in the most costly robes imaginable, and stated that his wife Margaret was, and I quote "a very beautiful woman" end quote.

The Emperor acknowledged the embassy, and Geoffrey was chosen to speak on their behalf. His first move was a prudent one. He requested that the embassy meet with the Emperor in private. It was pretty obvious to Geoffrey that the nobility of the Empire would probably not react favorably to what he had to say. The Emperor agreed, and Margaret led him into a smaller chamber, accompanied only by his chancellor and an interpreter, together with the four envoys. In the privacy of this inner chamber, Geoffrey advised the Emperor that they had made an agreement with his son Alexius, whom they had brought to Constantinople. He then stated, and I quote, "We cannot, however, allow him to come here until he has given us a guarantee for the covenant that he has made with us. He therefore, as your son, asks you to ratify this covenant in the same terms and the same manner as he himself has done." End quote.

The Emperor asked Geoffrey to spell out the terms of the agreement, and Geoffrey did so. What followed was described by Geoffrey as a shocked silence. The terms of the agreement were absolutely crippling, and Isaac must have known that they were all but impossible to deliver. The Imperial Treasury had been bled dry by his own and his brother's excesses, and there was no way he was going to be able to hand over the massive sums his son had promised. And as for the promise that the Greek Orthodox Church submit to Rome? Ha! How was that going to happen?

Isaac's own position was precarious. He had only just been elevated back to the throne, and must have had doubts about his power base and his legitimacy as ruler. He wasn't a popular nor a successful ruler before being deposed by his brother, and now he was surrounded by swarms of Byzantine noblemen who, only yesterday, were happy to see him imprisoned in this very palace. If he rejected the envoy's demands, he would need the support of his Byzantine subjects to defy the Venetian and Crusader forces, who would no doubt continue their attack on the city and attempt to overthrow him in favor of young Alexius. On the other hand, if he complied with the embassy's demands, at least he would have the support of a large force of Crusaders and Venetians, and the city would be safe from attack. He chose the latter option.

Geoffrey records his response as follows, and I quote "These are very hard conditions and I do not really see how we can put them into effect. All the same you have rendered both my son and me such outstanding services that if we were to give you the whole of our Empire, it would be no more than you deserve." End quote. Isaac undertook to ratify the agreement. He also agreed to raise young Alexius to the throne and rule alongside him as co-Emperor. A charter was drawn up to that effect, and the golden Imperial seal was fixed to it.

The envoys returned to their camp, where they advised a very relieved young Alexius of the good news. The camp erupted in celebration and the leaders of the Crusade were invited to the great Palace for a victory feast, to be presided over by Emperor Isaac and his son Alexius. History doesn't record what happened when Emperor Isaac and Prince Alexius were reunited, but I imagine that Isaac might have given his son a grateful hug for liberating him from prison, and then a cuff around the ears for making such ridiculously generous promises to his new allies.

On the 1st of August, young Alexius was formally crowned as co-Emperor in a lavish ceremony at the Hagia Sophia, becoming Emperor Alexius IV. Then the rule of Emperor Isaac II and Emperor Alexius IV began. One of the first decisions made by Isaac as ruler was to move the Crusader camp from outside the city walls to Galata, on the other side of the Golden Horn. Isaac may well have been a corrupt and incompetent ruler, but he seems at this point to have spotted a potential problem. No one liked the Crusaders, and no one liked the Venetians. They were members of an invading army. They had burnt a section of the city, leaving around 20,000 citizens of the Blachernae Quarter homeless, and now they were strutting around like they owned the place. At least ordering them to move to Galata meant that they were further away from the city, and the citizens were without a constant reminder of their presence.

Alexius' first move as ruler was to begin to honor the agreement with the Crusaders and Venetians. Despite the appalling state of the Imperial Treasury, he managed to find 50,000 marks which he handed to the Venetians, while 34,000 went to the Crusaders to enable them to pay off their debt. A further 16,000 was given to the Crusaders to pay their debt to the Venetian bankers, incurred when they borrowed extra money to cover their transport costs. Therefore, the entire amount of 100,000 silver marks ended up in the hands of the Venetians. While this no doubt made the Venetians very happy, it left the Crusaders feeling unrewarded for their efforts. No doubt when they were wandering around the city taking in the sights and gazing on the splendid buildings, they wondered when some of this wealth was going to make it into their hands.

While the young Emperor Alexius was using his Imperial power to appease the Venetians and Crusaders, Emperor Isaac was doing his best to endear himself to his subjects. As was usual for a new Emperor, he began receiving requests for clemency and Imperial favor. As a result of the granting of one of these requests, the Emperor released a man called Alexius Doukas from prison. Alexius, who was nicknamed "Murtzuphlus" due to the fact that he had a distinctive dark and very bushy mono-brow, had been imprisoned for the past seven years. He was the son-in-law of Emperor Alexius III, being married to his daughter, Eudocia. He was also a man of some talent, and upon his release he took over the role of Chamberlain, one of the highest positions in the court. It's safe to say that in time, the Crusaders will very much regret the fact that Murtzuphlus was released from prison.

Now, as the Crusaders are touring around the city, marveling at the beautiful gardens, opulent palaces, and splendid churches, tensions are rising. The Crusaders saw themselves as victors, but none of the spoils of victory seemed to be theirs. The vast wealth of Constantinople mocked them wherever they went. For their part, the citizens of Constantinople are becoming increasingly resentful at the presence of these upstart foreigners in their city. Taxes were being raised to cover the invaders' expenses, and Alexius enraged the Orthodox Church when he confiscated items of silver and gold from the Church, which he melted down to fill the large gap in the treasury left by the payment to the Venetians. Trade was being adversely affected, and large mobs of drunken Crusaders, celebrating their somewhat hollow victory, made the residents feel unsafe.

It all came to a head when a couple of overly pious Frenchmen decided to set fire to a mosque which had been built for the benefit of visiting Muslim merchants. The fire quickly spread, and ended up burning for 34 days, leaving a trail of destruction from the Golden Horn right down through the center of the city to the Sea of Marmara. The fire whipped up anti-Western sentiment to such a degree that all the Latin Christian residents of the city were forced to abandon their homes and move to the relative safety of the Crusader camp at Galata, putting pressure on the Crusaders' accommodation and food supplies.

Young Emperor Alexius attempted to defuse the situation by employing the Crusaders to assist him in a military campaign against his uncle, the former Emperor Alexius III, in Thrace. While this did give the Crusaders something to do, it did nothing to ease the overall tensions. While the expedition itself was brief and showy (the party returned to Constantinople to celebrate their victory after only one brief skirmish), the Crusaders were paid handsomely by Emperor Alexius, way too handsomely in the opinion of the citizens of Constantinople. Alexius seemed to be spending more and more time in the company of his allies, neglecting his Imperial duties, while partying hard with his new friends.

As tensions rose between the residents of Constantinople and the foreign invaders, things were also getting a little testy between the two Emperors. Isaac's blindness was making it difficult for him to play an active role in the government of the Empire, and he was spending an increasing amount of time closeted away with his astrological advisers. Unfortunately, the predictions of the astrologers weren't bringing him any peace of mind whatsoever. He started to berate his son for his indulgent, drunken ways, first behind closed doors, and then within public hearing, pointing out loudly the flaws in his son's weak character and criticizing the appalling way he was carrying on with his new foreign friends.

By November 1203 things were seriously spiraling out of control. The Crusaders were well aware of the ill feeling against them, and the bulk of the Crusading force just wanted to

take the money owed to them and continue on to Egypt. But there were a few problems with this plan. It was too late in the season to set sail to the Middle East. Winter was coming and it was just too dangerous to put to sea. Secondly, the leaders of the crusade had promised their drinking buddy and dice-playing companion, young Emperor Alexius IV, that they would stay in Constantinople until Christmas 1204, so for another year. This would give Alexius more time to come up with the 100,000 silver marks he still owed the Crusaders, and would help him consolidate his power base. Alexius was astute enough to realize that without the backing of the Crusader army, he wouldn't last long as Emperor. He hoped that over the course of the following year, he could turn things around and gain the respect and love of his Imperial subjects, so that when the Crusaders departed, he would be assured of remaining in power. Alexius had been doing his best to placate the Crusaders by paying them regular sums of money, but by November these payments had slowed to a trickle. Then they stopped altogether.

The citizens of Constantinople were also reaching boiling point. They had had just about all they could take of the blind old Emperor Isaac, who did nothing but closet himself away with his astrologers, and his incompetent party-boy son. Their Treasury had been bled dry by their new Emperors and their Latin Christian friends. Their city had been damaged, not once but twice, by fire. And by November 1203 they had had enough. They wanted the foreigners to leave, not in a year's time, but now.

A central figure in the anti-Latin Christian movement was the Imperial Chamberlain, the mono-browed Murtzuphlus. Murtzuphlus urged young Emperor Alexius to cease paying the Crusaders, and to then force his foreign friends to leave Constantinople. When this failed to occur, riots broke out over the city, as the Greek residents of Constantinople expressed their outrage against both the foreigners and their Emperors.

With tensions rising by the minute in the very discontented winter of 1203, a delegation of Crusaders and Venetians requested an audience with the two Emperors. Our intrepid reporter-on-the-ground, Geoffrey de Villehardouin, was fortunately one of the delegates who attended the meeting. The six Crusaders and three Venetians entered one of the great halls of the Blachernae Palace and approached the two Emperors, who were seated on thrones at the end of the hall. The hall was also filled with senior Byzantine noblemen, who were interested to hear what the despised foreigners had to say. The Crusaders outlined their situation, saying that they had performed a great service for both Emperors, whereas the Emperors had not fulfilled their side of the agreement, they then placed an ultimatum before the Imperial throne. If they weren't paid what they were due, then they would take what they were owed by force.

The Crusaders' speech provoked outrage amongst the gathered nobility of the Empire. As Geoffrey de Villehardouin pointed out, the nobility were unused to people dictating terms to their Emperor. Realizing that the ill feeling against them might turn violent, the delegation hastened to leave. They hurried back down through the corridors into the courtyard and mounted their waiting horses. Relieved to have escaped with their lives, they rode at high speed back over the bridge that spanned the Golden Horn, to the relative safety of Galata. Thus, stated Geoffrey, the war began.

Join me next week as open conflict between the two sides breaks out, and Constantinople becomes a battleground. Until next week, bye for now.

End

