

History of the Crusades.
Episode 77
The Fourth Crusade VIII.

Hello again. Last week we saw tensions rise in the city of Constantinople. The citizens of Constantinople, wanting the Crusaders and Venetians to leave their city, started rioting. The co-Emperors began bickering, and the Crusaders and Venetians met with the Emperors demanding to be paid what they were owed in full.

In a last-ditch attempt to redeem the situation, wily Doge Dandolo requested a personal meeting with young Emperor Alexius. The Venetians conveyed their leader to the rendezvous point on a fully armed ship, with three others sailing closely nearby. Emperor Alexius rode down to the shoreline, and the two men held a frank discussion. The Doge pointed out that it was through their actions that Alexius was now Emperor, so why didn't he give them the money still outstanding from the debt? The young Emperor responded by stating, and I quote "I will not do any more than I have done" end quote. At this point, the Doge lost his temper and reportedly stated, and I quote "Wretched boy, we dragged you out of the filth, and into the filth we will cast you again" end quote.

It was now official. The Crusaders and Venetians were at war with the Byzantine Empire.

Open conflict between the two sides started slowly. The first act of aggression came on the 1st of January 1204. The Greeks took seventeen of their ships and filled them with wood and other flammable material. In the dead of night, when the wind was favorable, the Greeks hoisted their sails, set the vessels alight and watched them drift into the fleet of Venetian ships anchored in the sheltered harbor of the Golden Horn. Latin Christian sentries sounded the alarm, and the Venetians scrambled to get their ships out of harm's way. Rowers were called to man longboats and galleys, and the Venetians used grappling hooks to capture the burning Greek vessels, which they laboriously dragged out towards the Bosphorus, where the current took them out to sea.

Word of the attack spread around Constantinople. Thousands of Greek residents lined the Golden Horn, hurling abuse at the Venetian sailors, while others jumped into small boats and did all they could to prevent the Venetian rowers towing the burning ships away. The Crusaders, fearing that this attack on the Venetian fleet was a prelude to a land-based assault, readied themselves for battle, but no attack came. One by one, the Greek ships were towed away. Then they burnt themselves out harmlessly at sea. Miraculously, only one Venetian ship was lost. Had the Greek attack been successful, the result for the Crusaders and Venetians would have been devastating.

The next act of aggression occurred less than a week later, on the 7th of January. The mono-browed nobleman Murtzuphlus led a body of Byzantine cavalymen out of the city to confront the Crusaders. They were met by Boniface of Montferrat and a group of knights, who managed to beat back the Greek attack, killing and capturing a number of Byzantine noblemen before the attackers retreated. Murtzuphlus himself was nearly taken when his horse stumbled to its knees, but some quick thinking archers rallied to their leader's defense and protected him while his horse regained its footing. While the attack was ultimately unsuccessful, it had the effect of boosting both the profile and popularity of Murtzuphlus.

As you've probably noticed, both Emperors are conspicuously absent at this point. While it's understandable that blind, old Emperor Isaac isn't out on the field leading the attacks against the invaders (although Doge Dandolo has shown that it's not impossible for an elderly, blind leader to actively engage in warfare), his son, the young, healthy Emperor Alexius has no such excuse. Yet, while the Crusaders and Venetians are doing their best to pillage and cause strife and are sending small raiding parties over the Golden Horn to wreak havoc and take whatever they can, the young Emperor has remained safely within his palace, leaving others to take the initiative and mount attacks against the foreigners. Unsurprisingly, this did not sit well with the people of Constantinople, and by the end of January, they had had enough.

On the 25th of January 1204 a meeting was convened in the Hagia Sophia. A huge body of officials, clergy and Bishops gathered, along with a large contingent of citizens, and they were all in agreement. Emperor Alexius and his father had to go. A new Emperor was needed. The question was, who would be this new Emperor? Unsurprisingly, no one wanted the job. Name after name of men from the ranks of the nobility was put forward, but the nominee was always quick to decline. The meeting dragged on for three days, by which time they had exhausted all the noble-born men, and were putting forward names of administrators as possible Emperors. These nominations were also being declined. In the end, one unfortunate nobleman, Nicolas Kannavos, was chosen, and against his will he was appointed Emperor.

Emperor Alexius, of course, was appalled by this turn of events. He asked Murtzuphlus to act as his envoy and go to the Crusader camp and ask for their assistance in overthrowing Nicolas Kanavos. Apparently, as payment for their services, Alexius was willing to offer the Latin Christians ownership of the Blachernae Palace. This seems to have been the last straw for Murtzuphlus. He decided that Emperor Alexius needed to be removed from Imperial office before he opened the city gates to his western friends and started giving away Imperial palaces. Murtzuphlus was a competent organizer and administrator, and his skills were now put to use. He approached the eunuch in charge of the Treasury and offered him a title in the new administration in return for his support. He called a meeting of the Varangian Guard, and advised them of Alexius' plan to bring the foreign invaders back inside the city.

Satisfied that he had their support, on the night of the 27th of January Murtzuphlus put his plan into action. He burst into Alexis's sleeping chamber and, on the pretext that he was assisting Alexius to flee the city, he wrapped him in a large cloak and led him out of the palace using a side door. Once out of the palace, the true nature of the plot was revealed. Alexius was clapped into irons and led away to the dungeon. After two attempts to poison him failed, Alexius was eventually dispatched with an arrow shot. Geoffrey de Villehardouin reports that Alexius' father, Emperor Isaac, died of a broken heart a couple of days after hearing of his son's death. However modern historians, chiding Geoffrey for his naivety, have concluded that it was likely that Isaac was murdered on Murtzuphlus' orders.

Murtzuphlus was crowned Emperor at the Hagia Sophia, and took the name Alexis V. To avoid confusion due to an excess number of Alexiuses in our narrative, I'll keep calling him Murtzuphlus. Just keep in mind that his official title isn't Murtzuphlus, but Emperor Alexis V.

There was one problem remaining for Murtzuphlus. The sitting Emperor, the reluctant Nicolas Kannavos. According to some sources, Murtzuphlus had Nicholas arrested and then had him executed. According to others, Nicolas happily ceded the crown to Murtzuphlus and faded back into obscurity. Let's hope, for Nicholas' sake, it was the latter.

Right, so now we have Murtzuphlus on the throne. This is an absolute game-changer for the Crusaders and Venetians. It is now absolutely certain that they won't be paid their outstanding money. Not only that, the city will now be closed to them and hostile. There will be no more access to food markets and no opportunities for pillaging. Yet again, the Latin Christians were faced with a stark choice. Leave Constantinople without their debt being paid was one clear option. The other option was risky, ambitious and brazen.

A proposal now emerged to enter Constantinople by force, kill Murtzuphlus, and place one of themselves, a Westerner, on the Imperial throne. Debate raged amongst them as to who would be the best candidate, and in the end it was decided that a delegation of six Crusaders and six Venetians would choose an Emperor from their ranks. If they decided on a Crusader, then a Venetian would be elected Patriarch, and vice versa. The Emperor would receive a quarter of the city, a quarter of the Empire, and would assume control of the two main palaces, the residential Palace of Blachernae and the old Imperial Palace on the Sea of Marmara. The remaining three quarters of the city and Empire was to be divided equally between the Venetians and Crusaders.

Now, this decision marks a change in direction for the Crusade. Absent from these discussions is any talk of traveling on to Egypt, or fighting to liberate the Holy Land. That seems to have been lost in the desire to conquer the mighty city of Constantinople and reap the spoils of the Byzantine Empire. Despite this, the leaders still did their best to convince themselves, and the rank-and-file fighters and sailors, that their cause was just. According to Geoffrey de Villehardouin, the leaders of the Crusade and the Venetian hierarchy spoke to the gathered rank-and-file Westerners, telling the assembly that the case for war against Constantinople was justified and legitimate. The highly ranked members of the clergy also spoke out, telling the gathering that Murtzuphlus was a usurper, who had killed or deposed a legitimately elected Emperor. The clergy also reminded the Westerners that the Greek Orthodox Church needed to be brought under the control of the Roman Church, and that it was just to fight a war which would be a means to this end. The cleric stated, and I quote "If you fight to conquer this land with the right intention of bringing it under the authority of Rome, all of those of you who die after making confession shall benefit from the indulgence granted by the Pope." End of quote.

So the stage was set. As they had done nine months previously, the Crusaders and Venetians were to attempt another Siege of Constantinople.

Within the city, Murtzuphlus was bringing something to Constantinople which they hadn't seen for quite a while. Leadership. Deciding that the Crusaders and Venetians would attack the same part of the city walls that they had done during the First Siege of Constantinople, Murtzuphlus ordered that the walls around the Blachernae Palace be strengthened and repaired. He also oversaw the building of a number of wooden towers on the fortifications where the palace walls met the Theodosian land wall. These towers were huge, up to six or seven stories high in some cases, and the massive wooden beams supporting the structures extended over the edge of the existing walls, providing the defenders with an excellent position from which they could pour boiling water and oil onto

the attackers below. The height of the wooden towers also aimed to reduce the effectiveness of the catapult machines and siege engines on board the Venetian ships.

It turns out that Murtzuphlus was right to re-fortify this part of the wall. As the Greek defenders were busy constructing their defensive towers, the Crusaders and Venetians were preparing themselves to attack the city. Despite being clearly able to see the line of wooden towers being hastily erected around the Blachernae precinct, the Crusaders and Venetians decided that this was where they would launch their attack. Taking on board the knowledge which they gained from the first siege of the city, they decided to build even larger structures on their ships, and also concentrate their efforts on-shore on undermining and pummeling their way through the walls. Like the Byzantines, the Crusaders and Venetians went to work, constructing items to assist them in their assault. Structures were built high in the masts of the Venetian ships. Platforms linked the masts, and to try and counter the extra height of the new wooden defensive towers on the walls, these platforms were made to tower as high above the masts as possible. Gangways were constructed, covered in vinegar-doused skins. The plan was to bring the ships as close to the wall as possible, then ferry men onto the wall from their platforms high up in the masts using the gangways.

The Crusaders, whose task it was to attack the base of the wall, were busy constructing protective shelters known as cats, which could be brought to the base of the wall. The attackers could work within the confines of the cat, battering or undermining the adjacent wall, while the wooden structure, covered with hides, would hopefully protect them from the missiles and boiling substances raining down on them from above.

Finally, on the evening of the 8th of April, preparations were complete. The Crusaders and Venetians loaded their ships, and the Venetian sailors and the Crusading army of around 20,000 men prepared to attack the great city of Constantinople. At dawn the following morning, the attackers set sail from Galata towards their destination, the corner of the walls around the Blachernae Palace. The warships, galleys and transport vessels made their way up the Golden Horn to their destination. Facing heavy fire from archers and cross-bowmen on the walls, the transport ships disgorged the Crusaders and their huge wooden cats onto the shore, a narrow strip of land between the base of the wall and the water.

The Crusaders managed to maneuver the huge cats up to the wall, and began their work battering the base of the wall, looking for weak spots and places to undermine. Within the claustrophobic confines of the cats, the Crusaders pummeled away, no doubt hoping that they had made the roof of the structure strong enough to withstand the ceaseless bombardment of hot oil, boiling water, and stones being rained down on them from the wall above. To assist them, the Venetians concentrated their catapults on the area of the wall above the cats, trying to offer the Crusaders some respite from the bombardment.

In the end, the day belonged to the defenders.

The Byzantines had gathered together hundreds of boulders to use against the Crusaders. The destruction caused by the fire started by the Venetians during the first siege resulted in large piles of rubble throughout the area, and the Byzantine defenders were able to use this to their advantage. The huge boulders wreaked havoc on the cats below. The Crusaders' carefully built wooden structures were shattered one by one by the enormous rocks, and in the end the Crusaders were forced to abandon them and retreat. On the

water, the weather was conspiring against the Venetians. A strong offshore breeze was preventing Venetian ships from sailing close enough to the shore for the catapults to be effective. As the day wore on, the ships were only able to engage five of the towers on the wall, and weren't able to maneuver their vessels close enough to disembark any men onto the wall.

By mid-afternoon, it was clear that the attack had been unsuccessful. To the cheers of the Byzantine defenders, the Crusaders and Venetians withdrew and sailed their ships back to Galata. At Galata, the Crusaders and Venetians spent a few days repairing damage to their ships, and then regrouped for another assault. As has been the case so often before on this Crusade, many of the rank-and-file Crusaders were reluctant to continue, and expressed a desire to leave Constantinople, either continuing to the Holy Land or returning back home. As Geoffrey de Villehardouin reported, and I quote "certain people in the company would have been only too pleased if the current had borne them down the straits and away from Constantinople, and they did not care where they went, so long as they left that land behind". End of quote.

Morale was low. Having failed to breach the walls of Constantinople, the rank-and-file members of the army were ready to turn their backs on the great city and leave. But this was contrary to what the leaders of the Crusade and Doge Dandolo wanted. To them, the glittering prize of Constantinople was still within reach. What they needed was a change in battle tactics and someone to boost the confidence and morale of their men. Enter the clergy. The senior Bishops and Abbots who were present took it upon themselves to preach to the masses. Their message was clear. The failure of the Latin Christians to take Constantinople was merely a minor setback, a test by God of the determination and resolve of the army. The clergy persuaded their listeners that the attack on Constantinople was righteous, and would succeed so long as the attackers were pure of heart. They preached of the perfidy of the Greeks who had risen up and killed their rightful Emperor, young Alexius IV. They emphasized the schism between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Pope in Rome, and they labeled the Greeks as the enemies of God. They persuaded their audience that any attack on Constantinople would attract divine approval. To ensure that the army was of the correct degree of purity required for success, the clergy ordered all prostitutes to leave the camp. Then they ordered everyone to confess and take Communion. Spiritually fortified and convinced that their attack was approved by the Church, the army was now in the right frame of mind to stage another attack.

After the ships were repaired, the leaders of the campaign set about planning a second offensive. All were agreed that the unfortunate offshore winds were largely to blame for the failure of the ships to disgorge men onto the wall. The winds needed to come from the other direction, which would drive the ships onto the shore. The leaders also decided to lash two ships together. The advantage of a pair of ships attacking in tandem was that their combined weight would run them further up the shore and closer to the walls, and the use of gangways on both ships meant that twice the number of men could disembark onto the wall, making it more likely that the defenders would be overpowered.

On the morning of Monday the 12th of April, the winds were declared to be favorable, and the fleet once again set sail up the Golden Horn towards the Blachernae Palace. The battle proceeded pretty much as it had three days before. The Venetian ships, hurling missiles at the walls from their onboard catapult machines, attempted to get close to the wall, while the Greek defenders bombarded the vessels with missiles from their machines.

The Crusaders attempted to breach the wall from the ground, while trying as best they could to avoid the rocks and hot oil raining down on them from above.

No real progress was being made by the Crusaders and Venetians, until fate intervened in the early afternoon. The breeze, this time coming from the north and blowing the ships towards the shore, picked up and started to blow strongly. The Venetians adjusted their sails accordingly, and the attacking vessels, lashed together in pairs, were propelled close to the shore. Then a breakthrough. The vessels "Paradise" and "The Lady Pilgrim" were driven forward with such force that they touched the wall next to the Petrian Gate.

Their fear tempered by the news that 100 silver marks would be given to the first man to reach the wall, the Venetians threw their gangways onto the wall and scrambled from the rickety platforms high above the deck, across the gangway, and onto the wall. The first man onto the wall was a Venetian, and he didn't have long to celebrate the fact that he was 100 silver marks richer, as he was cut down and killed almost immediately. The next attacker to make the wall however, was a heavily armored Frenchman. The defenders' attacks on him failed to do him any serious injury, and when he drew his sword ready to attack, the Greek defenders retreated. As more and more attackers climbed onto the wall, the assault gained momentum.

The Venetians hoisted their flag above the tower, but to ensure a complete victory, the attackers needed more men to breach the wall. Off-loading Crusaders and Venetians from the ships onto the wall was a slow and dangerous task. They needed to breach the wall from below.

The Crusaders were attacking the base of the wall in two locations. A man called Peter of Bracieux, along with ten knights and 60 foot soldiers, was working on a small bricked-up gate at the base of the wall. Working frantically to loosen the brickwork while missiles rained down on their screen of shields, they finally succeeded. A small hole as big as a fireplace was created, and one of the Latin Christian clerics, armed with a sword, was the first to brave the breach.

Once through to the other side, the cleric drew his sword and rushed at the waiting Greeks, who scattered and fled. The other 70 Crusaders entered the hole in the wall and emerged into the city. They raced to the nearest gate and, using their axes and swords, smashed the eye and bolts and bars that held the gate shut. They threw open the gate, allowing the Crusaders to pour into the city. Transport ships, noticing the open gate, drew up alongside and knights on horseback disembarked and rode through the gate. Soon other gates were opened, and the entire Crusading army made its way into the city. They had succeeded in their attack.

Join me next week to see the results of this incursion, as we examine one of the most infamous events in the history of the Crusades, and indeed, in the history of Western civilization, the sack of Constantinople. Until next week, bye for now.

End