



ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

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Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem

# The Fourth Crusade

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## INTRODUCTION



## Fourth Crusade

**T**he Fourth Crusade (1202-1204) was called by Pope Innocent III (r. 1198-1216) to retake Jerusalem from its current Muslim overlords. However, in a bizarre combination of financial constraints and Venetian trading ambitions, the target ended up being Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire and the greatest Christian city in the world. Sacked on April 12, 1204, Constantinople was stripped of its riches, relics, and artworks, and the Byzantine Empire was divided up between Venice and its allies. The Fourth Crusade thus gained its infamous reputation as the most cynical and profit-seeking of all the crusades.

The Fourth Crusade is considered to have solidified the East-West Schism, and dealt an irrevocable blow to the already weakened Byzantine Empire, paving the way for Muslim conquests in Anatolia and the Balkans in the coming centuries. The Byzantines saw themselves as the defenders of Christendom, the beacon which shone out across the Mediterranean and central Asia, hosts to the holiest city outside Jerusalem, and the rock which stood against the tide of Islam sweeping in from the east. By the western half of the old Roman Empire, though, the Byzantines were regarded as decadent, shifty, and untrustworthy; even their religious practices were suspect. This essential division between the east and west had caused constant problems in all the previous crusades, and it was to crop up again in this one.

There were also more concrete sources of division, the historical rivalry between popes and emperors, and the rising ambition of western states to wrest from Byzantium the remnants of its empire in Italy were fueled by the failures of the crusades in permanently securing the Holy Land for Christendom. Blame was apportioned to either side for the lack of success. The Byzantines were considered to lack the will to fight the common Muslim enemy while, from the other side, the Crusaders were seen as opportunists out to grab the choicest parts of the Byzantine Empire in the east. In a sense, both sides were right in their judgement.



## Templar Cyprus

By selling Cyprus to the Knights Templar for 100,000 gold bezants, Richard not only replenished his war-chest to ensure adequate resources for the task at hand (the war against Saladin for the Holy Land), he also ensured that the strategically critical island of Cyprus was in the hands of Christians fanatically devoted to the cause of securing and defending Christian control of Holy Land in the long run. It seemed like a perfect solution. This was an opportunity for the Order to “establish their own independent state,” something later achieved by the Teutonic Knights in Prussia and the Hospitallers on Rhodes/Malta. However, far from establishing a strong, independent state, the Knights Templar returned the island to Richard of England less than a year after they had purchased it.

# Historical Context

Between 1174 and 1187, the Ayyubid sultan Saladin conquered most of the Crusader states in the Levant. Jerusalem was captured in 1187. The Crusader states were reduced by Saladin to little more than three cities along the sea coast: Tyre, Tripoli and Antioch.

The Third Crusade (1189–1192) was launched in response to the fall of Jerusalem and with the goal of recovering it. It successfully reclaimed an extensive territory, effectively reestablishing the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Although Jerusalem itself was not recovered, the important coastal towns of Acre and Jaffa were. On September 2, 1192, a truce was signed with Saladin, bringing the crusade to an end. It was to last for three years and eight months.

The crusade had also been marked by a significant escalation in long standing tensions between the feudal states of western Europe and the Byzantine Empire. During the crusade, Frederick I, Holy Roman Emperor, had almost besieged Constantinople because of the failure of the Byzantines to provide him with safe passage across the Dardanelles. The Byzantines for their part suspected him of conspiring with the breakaway Byzantine provinces of Serbia and Bulgaria. King Richard I of England also seized the breakaway Byzantine province of Cyprus. Rather than return it to the Empire, he sold the island to the Knights Templar.

Saladin died on March 4, 1193 before its expiration and his empire was contested and divided between three of his sons and two of his brothers. The new ruler of Jerusalem, Henry of Champagne, signed an extension of the truce with Sultan al-Aziz of Egypt. In 1197, the peace was interrupted by the arrival of a German crusade. Without the permission of Henry, the Germans attacked the territory of al-Adil of Damascus, who responded by attacking Jaffa. The sudden death of Henry prevented the relief of the port and the city was taken by force. The Germans did, however, succeed in capturing Beirut in the north.

Henry was succeeded by Aimery of Cyprus, who signed a truce with al-Adil of five years and eight months on July 1, 1198. The truce preserved the status quo: Jaffa remained in Ayyubid hands, but its destroyed fortifications could not be rebuilt; Beirut was left to the Crusaders; and Sidon was placed under a revenue-sharing condominium. Before the expiration of the new truce on March 1, 1204, al-Adil succeeded in uniting the former empire of Saladin, acquiring Egypt in 1200 and Aleppo in 1202. As a result, his domains almost completely surrounded the diminished Crusader states.

Constantinople had been in existence for 874 years at the time of the Fourth Crusade and was the largest and most sophisticated city in Christendom. Almost alone amongst major medieval urban centers, it had retained the civic structures, public baths, forums, monuments, and aqueducts of classical Rome in working form. At its height, the city held an estimated population of about half a million people behind thirteen miles of triple walls. Its planned location made Constantinople not only the capital of the surviving eastern part of the Roman Empire but also a commercial centre that dominated trade routes from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, China, India and Persia. As a result, it was both a

rival and a tempting target for the aggressive new states of the west, notably the Republic of Venice.

In 1195, the Byzantine Emperor Isaac II Angelos was deposed in favor of his brother by a palace coup. Ascending as Alexios III Angelos, the new emperor had his brother blinded (a traditional punishment for treason, considered more humane than execution) and exiled. Ineffectual on the battlefield, Isaac had also proven to be an incompetent ruler who had let the treasury dwindle and outsourced the navy to the Venetians. His actions in wastefully distributing military weapons and supplies as gifts to his supporters had undermined the empire's defenses. The new emperor was to prove no better. Anxious to shore up his position, Alexios bankrupted the treasury. His attempts to secure the support of semi-autonomous border commanders undermined central authority. He neglected his crucial responsibilities for defense and diplomacy. The emperor's chief admiral (his wife's brother-in-law), Michael Stryphnos, reportedly sold the fleet's equipment down to the very nails to enrich himself.

## Rendezvous at Venice

The Third Crusade, although achieving some notable military successes, had failed completely in its original objective of recapturing Jerusalem from the Muslim Sultan of Egypt and Syria, Saladin. The celebrated Sultan was now dead, but the Holy City remained in Muslim hands. Yet another crusade was required. The Fourth Crusade was thus called for by Pope Innocent III (r. 1198-1216) in August 1198. As previously, those who went to the Holy Land and fought the infidels would receive a remission of their sins, but as an added incentive, Innocent III now extended this 'benefit' to those who gave the necessary money to fund a warrior to go in their stead.



Figure 1 Pope Innocent III

The Pope's timing was not the best, especially considering the Holy City had anyway been in Muslim hands since 1187. In the final years of the 12th century, all four monarchs of Europe's most powerful kingdoms, England, France, Germany, and Spain, were busy with internal affairs, and in the case of England and France, serious territorial squabbles with each other. Worse still, in April 1199, the great Crusader king Richard I of England, who had promised to return to the Holy Land and finish his undone work during the Third Crusade, died on campaign in France.

Unlike the previous Crusade, then, this was not to be a "Kings' Crusade". Still, a good number of second-tier nobles were inspired to join up or 'take the cross', as it was known, especially from northern France. There were the counts of Champagne and Blois (although the former would die before the expedition got underway), Geoffrey of Villehardouin (who would later write his *Conquest of Constantinople*, an important record of the Crusade), Count Baldwin of Flanders, and Simon de Montfort. In August 1201 the leader of the expedition, after the untimely death of



## Enrico Dandolo

Enrico Dandolo (1107 – May 1205) was a member of the socially and politically prominent Dandolo family. He was the son of the powerful jurist and member of the ducal court. Dandolo's first important political roles took place during the crisis years of 1171 and 1172, which were a tumultuous period between the Byzantine and Venetian empires. On June 1, 1192, after Orto Mastropietro abdicated the throne, Dandolo became the forty-first Doge of Venice. He was the second doge to be chosen by a council of forty electors. Already aged and blind, but deeply ambitious, he displayed tremendous energy and mental capacity. His remarkable deeds over the next eleven years have led some to hypothesize that he actually may have been in his mid-seventies when he became Venice's leader. None of the earlier chronicles and contemporary witnesses give his exact age, only mentioning that he was very old. Dandolo died in 1205 and was buried in June in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. He was the only person to be buried there.

Theobald of Champagne, was selected. The choice was an immensely rich and chivalrous Italian with an impressive Crusader pedigree in his family, Marquis Boniface of Montferrat. Perhaps significantly, given future events, Boniface also had family connections with the Byzantine Empire, one of his brothers marrying the daughter of Byzantine emperor Manuel I and another brother marrying the sister of the deposed Byzantine emperor Isaac II Angelos.

There was no binding agreement among the Crusaders that all should sail from Venice. Accordingly, many chose to sail from other ports, particularly Flanders, Marseille, and Genoa. By May 1202, the bulk of the Crusader army was collected at Venice, although with far smaller numbers than expected: about 12,000 (4–5,000 knights and 8,000 foot soldiers) instead of 33,500. The Venetians had performed their part of the agreement: there awaited 50 war galleys and 450 transports – enough for three times the assembled army. The Venetians, under their aged and blind Doge Dandolo, would not let the Crusaders leave without paying the full amount agreed to, originally 85,000 silver marks. The Crusaders could only initially pay 35,000 silver marks. The Doge threatened to keep them interned unless full payment was made so a further 14,000 marks was collected, and that only by reducing the Crusaders to extreme poverty. This was disastrous to the Venetians, who had halted their commerce for a great length of time to prepare this expedition. In addition, about 14,000 men or as many as 20–30,000 men (out of Venice's population of 60–100,000 people) were needed to man the entire fleet, placing further strain on the Venetian economy.

**DOGE** was an elected lord and chief of state in many of the Italian city-states during the medieval and renaissance periods. Such states are referred to as "crowned republics".

## Battle of Zara

Dandolo and the Venetians considered what to do with the crusade. It was too small to pay its fee, but disbanding the force gathered would harm Venetian prestige and cause significant financial and trading loss. Dandolo, who joined the crusade during a public ceremony in the church of San Marco di Venezia, proposed that the Crusaders pay their debts by intimidating many of the local ports and towns down the Adriatic, culminating in an attack on the port of Zara in Dalmatia. The city had been dominated economically by Venice throughout the 12th century but had rebelled in 1181 and allied itself with King Emeric of Hungary and Croatia. Subsequent Venetian attempts to recover control of Zara had been repulsed, and by 1202 the city was economically independent, under the protection of the King.

King Emeric was Catholic and had himself taken the cross in 1195 or 1196. Many of the Crusaders were opposed to attacking Zara, and some, including a force led by the elder Simon de Montfort, refused to participate altogether and returned home or went to the Holy Land on their own. While the Papal legate to the Crusade, Cardinal Peter of Capua, endorsed the move as necessary to prevent the crusade's complete failure, the Pope was alarmed at this development and wrote a letter to the crusading leadership threatening excommunication.



*Figure 2 Battle of Zara by Jacopo Robusti*

In 1202, Pope Innocent III, despite wanting to secure papal authority over Byzantium, forbade the crusaders of Western Christendom from committing any atrocious acts against their Christian neighbors. However, this letter was concealed from the bulk of the army who arrived at Zara on November 10-11, 1202, and the attack proceeded. The citizens of Zara made reference to the fact that they were fellow Catholics by hanging banners marked with crosses from their windows and the walls of the city, but nevertheless the city fell on November 24, 1202 after a brief siege. There was extensive pillaging, and the Venetians and other crusaders came to blows over the division of the spoils. Order was achieved, and the leaders of the expedition agreed to winter in Zara, while considering their next move. The fortifications of Zara were demolished by the Venetians.

When Innocent III heard of the sack, he sent a letter to the crusaders excommunicating them and ordering them to return to their holy vows and head for Jerusalem. Out of fear that this would dissolve the army, the leaders of the crusade decided not to inform their followers of this. Regarding the Crusaders as having been coerced by the Venetians, in February 1203 he rescinded the excommunications against all non-Venetians in the expedition.

## **On to Constantinople**

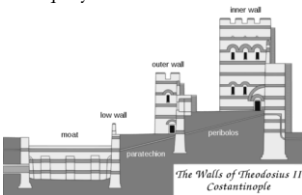
Historians continue to debate the exact reason why the Crusaders then turned on Constantinople instead of Jerusalem, but one crucial ingredient in the troublesome mix of mutual suspicions between the western powers and Byzantium was the Republic of Venice and one man, in particular, the Doge Enrico Dandolo. Intent on winning Venetian domination of the trade in the east, Dandolo well remembered his undignified expulsion from Constantinople when he had served there as an ambassador. This seemed as good an opportunity as ever to install a new sympathetic emperor. Alexios IV Angelos (r. 1203-1204 CE), whose father Isaac II Angelos had been deposed as emperor seven years earlier, had been touting for





## Theodosian Walls

The Theodosian Walls are the fortifications of Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, which were first built during the reign of Theodosius II (408-450). Sometimes known as the Theodosian Long Walls, they built upon and extended earlier fortifications so that the city became impregnable to enemy sieges for 800 years. The fortifications were the largest and strongest ever built in either the ancient or medieval worlds. Resisting attacks and earthquakes over the centuries, the walls were particularly tested by Bulgar and Arab forces who sometimes laid siege to the city for years at a time. Sections of the walls can still be seen today in modern Istanbul and are the city's most impressive surviving monuments from Late Antiquity.



The walls were built on a rising embankment so that the defenders could easily fire down on the structures in front of them if necessary. The plan of the fortifications ensured that the enemy could not place their siege engines anywhere near the all-important inner wall, and even artillery fire from a distance was presented with a much more limited target than in more traditional, single-wall fortifications.

western support for some time. This would permit Venice to get several steps ahead of long-time trade rivals Pisa and Genoa in cornering the trade market within the Byzantine Empire. It may, then, have been the goal of Dandolo and the Crusaders to merely pass through Constantinople, put a new emperor on the throne and then carry on to Jerusalem with their ships resupplied and their coffers refilled. Given the recent history of rebellions and takeovers in Byzantium, this was perhaps a rather simplified view of possible events. Certainly, things turned out to be a whole lot more difficult for everyone involved.

In addition to material gains for Venice, another possible motivation for targeting Constantinople is that the Pope might achieve the supremacy of the western Church once and for all over the eastern Church. Meanwhile, the Crusader knights would not only gain revenge on the duplicitous Byzantines for their unhelpful support of previous Crusades but also surely pick up some glory and handsome booty in the process. It may not, as some conspiracy-theory historians have claimed, have all been so cynically planned beforehand by all parties, but in the end, it is exactly what happened with the exception that the Fourth Crusade ended with the fall of the Byzantine capital and Jerusalem was left for a later date.

**VARANGIANS** was the name given by Greeks, Rus' people, and others to Vikings, who between the 9th and 11th centuries ruled the medieval state of Kievan Rus', settled among many territories of modern Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, and formed the Byzantine Varangian Guard.

When the Fourth Crusade arrived at Constantinople in June 1203, the city had a population of approximately 500,000 people, a garrison of 15,000 men (including 5,000 Varangians), and a fleet of 20 galleys. For both political and financial

reasons, the permanent garrison of Constantinople had been limited to a relatively small force, made up of elite guard and other specialist units.

The first target was the Byzantine garrison at nearby Galata on the other shore of the Golden Horn. Thus, the massive chain which blocked the harbor of the Golden Horn could be lowered and the Crusader fleet could directly attack Constantinople's sea walls if required. At the same time, siege engines were built in readiness to attack the city's formidable fortifications on the land side, the Theodosian Walls. The incumbent emperor Alexios III Angelos (r. 1195-1203), caught completely unprepared by the arrival of the Crusaders, fled the city on July 17, 1203.

## Siege of Constantinople

The Crusaders first move was an attempt to put their own supporter on the throne, Alexios IV Angelos along with his father, the former emperor Isaac II Angelos. It was now, though, that the westerners realised that Alexios' promises had all been false. The pair were deeply unpopular with the Byzantines, largely thanks to sustained propaganda against them by their successor, the departed Alexios III, and the obvious threatening presence of the Crusader army camped outside the capital. Consequently, with the throne now effectively empty and with the support of both the people and the army, a usurper stepped in, one Alexios V Doukas, nicknamed 'Murtzurphlus' for his bushy eyebrows. Doukas promised to defend the city at all



*Figure 3 Venetians attacking the sea walls of Constantinople by Domenico Tintoretto*

costs against the Crusaders and he seized the throne after executing his predecessors, father and son together, in January 1204. Constantinople's walls were strengthened, towers were heightened, and several raids made against the Crusader camps.

The Crusaders, with diplomatic avenues exhausted, their supplies dangerously low, and their ships in need of vital repairs and maintenance, had now little option but to try and take the city. They launched an all-out attack on the morning of April 9, 1204, but the Byzantines repelled it. Then, on April 12, the Crusaders attacked the weaker sea walls of the harbor and targeted two towers in particular by lashing their ships together and ramming them repeatedly. Initially, the defenders held on, but eventually, the attackers forced their way through on both the sea side and the land side, the attackers smashing through the city's gates.

The Crusaders sacked Constantinople for three days, during which many ancient Greco-Roman and medieval Byzantine works of art were stolen or ruined; a slaughter of the defenders and the city's some 400,000 inhabitants followed. Many of the civilian population of the city were killed and their property looted. Despite the threat of excommunication, the Crusaders destroyed, defiled and looted the city's churches and monasteries. It was said that the total amount looted from Constantinople was about 900,000 silver marks. The Venetians received 150,000 silver marks that was their due, while the Crusaders received 50,000 silver marks. A further 100,000 silver marks were divided evenly up between the Crusaders and Venetians. The remaining 500,000 silver marks were secretly kept back by many crusader knights.

When Innocent III heard of the conduct of his pilgrims he was filled with shame and rage, and he strongly rebuked them.

## **Crusade in the Holy Land**

Perhaps understandably, the shocking fall of Constantinople has grabbed almost all the attention of the Fourth Crusade, but there was a small contingent of western Crusaders, led by Renard II of Dampierre, which did fulfil the original purpose of the expedition and reach the Middle East, better late than never, in April 1203. The 300 knights were too few to ever consider attacking well-fortified Jerusalem, or any

other important city for that matter, but they did manage to assist the Latin states in perpetuating their precarious existence in the Muslim-dominated Middle East.

In September 1203, in coalition with the now tiny Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Crusaders attacked a few minor targets in Muslim-held Galilee. A plague at Acre then wiped out half of the Crusader force, but as the ruler of Damascus, Al Malik al-‘Adil, seemed intent on avoiding a direct confrontation, certain territories were conceded to the Kingdom of Jerusalem including Nazareth, Jaffa, Ramla, and a strip of land near Sidon. Then, in August 1204, the Crusaders twice successfully attacked forces from Hama in central Syria. It was, though, all rather insignificant given the original lofty ambitions of Pope Innocent III. With the Fifth Crusade (1217-1221 CE) concentrating on North Africa and Egypt, it would not be until the Sixth Crusade (1228-1229 CE) that Christian ambitions in the Middle East were revived.

## Aftermath

After the looting finally ended, the *Partitio Romaniae* treaty, already decided on beforehand, carved up the Byzantine Empire amongst Venice and its allies. The Venetians took three-eighths of Constantinople, the Ionian islands, Crete, Euboea, Andros, Naxos, and a few strategic points along the coast of the Sea of Marmara. Thus, Venetian control of Mediterranean trade was now almost total. On May 9, 1204, Count Baldwin of Flanders was made the first Latin Emperor of Constantinople (r. 1204-1205) and crowned in the Hagia Sophia, receiving five-eighths of Constantinople and one-quarter of the Empire which included Thrace, northwest Asia Minor, and several Aegean islands. Boniface of Montferrat took over Thessalonica and formed a new kingdom there, which also included Athens and Macedonia. In 1205, following Baldwin's capture after a battle with the Bulgars defending his territory in Thrace and subsequent death in a Bulgarian prison, William I Champlitte and Geoffrey I Villehardouin (nephew of the historian of the same name) founded a Latin principality in the Peloponnese while the French duke Othon de la Roche grabbed Attica and Boeotia.



Figure 4 Byzantine Empire ca 1204

The Byzantine Empire would be re-established in 1261, albeit a shadow of its former self, when forces from the Empire of Nicaea, the centre of the Byzantines-in-exile, retook Constantinople. Emperor Michael VIII (r. 1259-1282) was then able to place his throne back in the palace of his Byzantine predecessors.



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