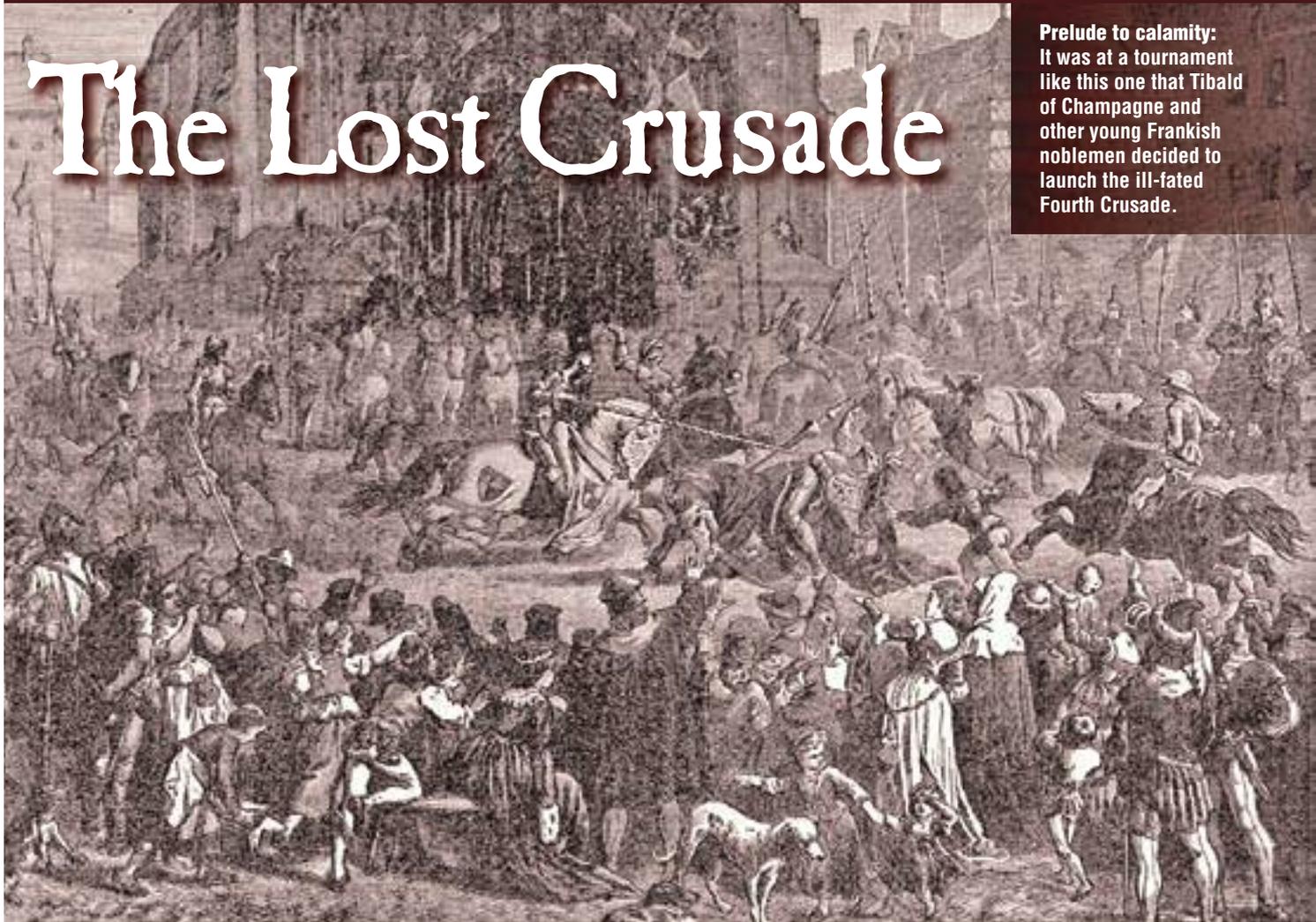


# The Lost Crusade

**Prelude to calamity:** It was at a tournament like this one that Tibald of Champagne and other young Frankish noblemen decided to launch the ill-fated Fourth Crusade.



In the 13th century, Christian crusaders who took up the cross to liberate the Holy Land from Islam were misdirected into serving very different ends.

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*by Charles Scaliger*

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**O**n the morning of June 24, 1204 A.D., the walls of Constantinople were thronged with curious spectators. Over the blue waters of the Bosphorus, their sails full-bellied in the early summer wind, a vast and colorful armada was passing before the city. At its head was a vermilion-colored galley appointed for the transport of dignitaries. Behind the vermilion ship came the rest of the fleet, 480 warships in all: superbly-constructed vessels from the shipworks of Venice, full of tens of thousands of well-armed men and provisioned with horses, foodstuffs, and vast stockpiles of weapons, including fearsome siege engines

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like mangonels and petraries.

The citizens of Constantinople, along with its leadership, had known for months of the coming of the armada, the greatest Europe had seen since Octavian defeated Marc Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in the waning days of the Roman Republic. Yet its coming aroused little concern. The city of Constantine had, in its nine centuries of pre-eminence, seen armies and navies outside its walls before, and had bid defiance to every one. Avar and Russian, Bulgar and Saracen, all had invaded the domain of Byzantium at one time or another and ravaged the unprotected villages and countryside, only to be frustrated by the immensity of the walls surrounding the capital of eastern Christendom.

The armada sailing past the city walls on that June morning had come, as the

other invaders had, on a mission of conquest, although few on the walls or in the boats had any inkling of the tragic events soon to unfold. What followed was one of the greatest acts of folly in the history of Christian civilization, one that reset the entire course of Western history and whose after-effects continue to reverberate in the present day. It was a lesson in the unintended consequences of war — and in the perils of allowing moneyed interests to dictate the terms of military conflict.

## **Noble Intent**

The misnamed Fourth Crusade began innocuously enough at a tournament hosted in November of 1199 A.D. by 22-year-old Count Tibald of Champagne at his castle at Ecri, France. Medieval tournaments always attracted large numbers of young,

energetic, idealistic spirits, and at Ecri conversation among the young nobles turned, as it so often did in that era, to crusades. The catastrophic defeat of the Christian forces at Hattin was 12 years in the past, and the Third Crusade that resulted, pitting the kings of France and England against the Muslim general Saladin, had failed to retake the Holy City. Outremer, the Frankish crusader kingdom, clung to tenuous life along the coast of Palestine, but without a new infusion of forces from the West, could not hope to endure very long.

Richard the Lionhearted, the English king who rolled back Saladin's forces in the Third Crusade, was dead, however, and so was Henry VI, the capable German emperor who had vowed to undertake another crusade. The other crowned heads of Europe were not interested in such a venture. If another crusade took place, it would be at the behest of noblemen such as those assembled at Ecri on that fateful November day.

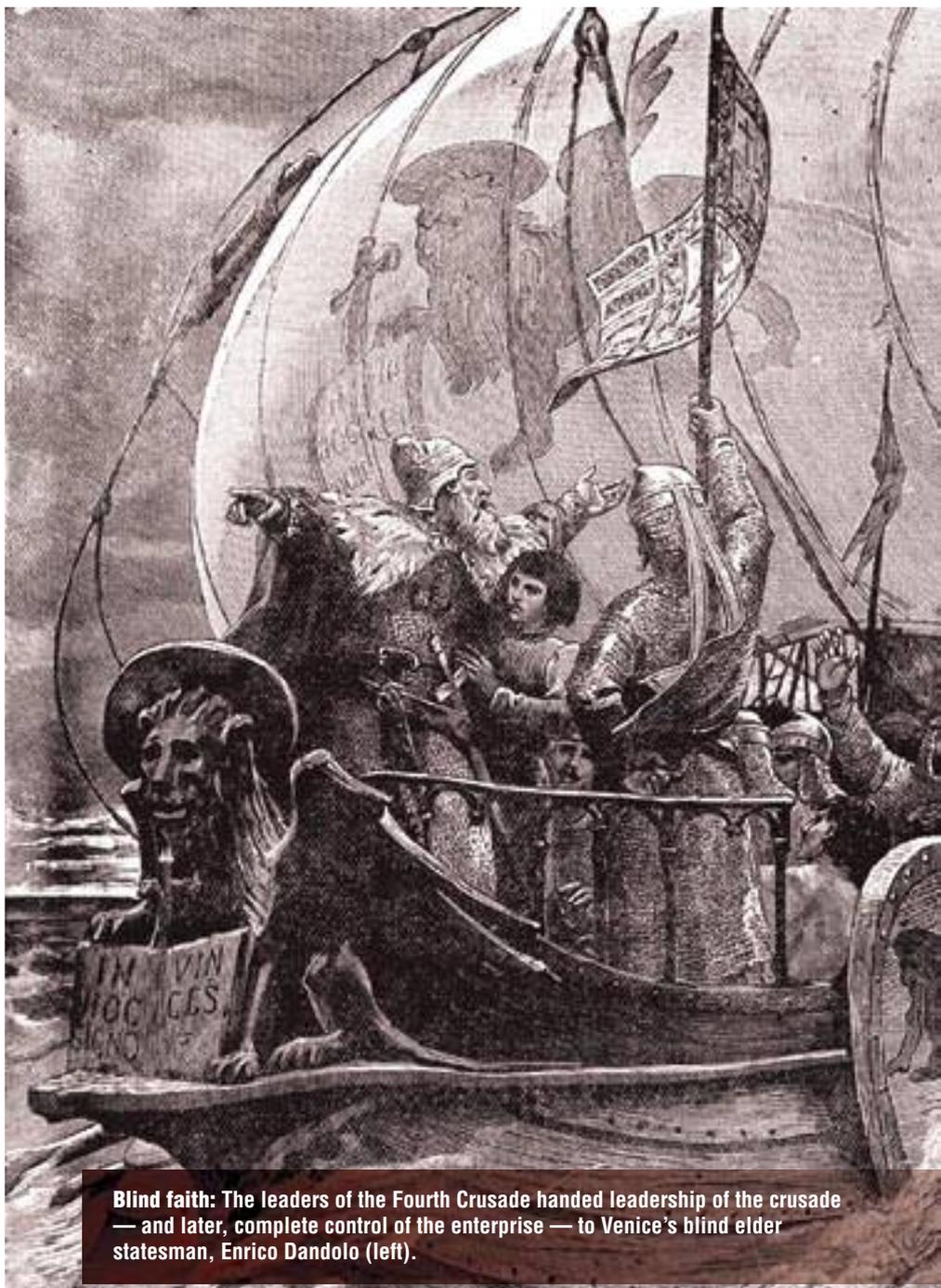
Amid the pennants, lances, and caparisoned horsemen of the tournament, one man stood out for the austerity of his dress. This was Fulk of Neuilly, a celebrated itinerant preacher and agent of Pope Innocent III, who for some time, at the pope's behest, had been preaching crusade all over northern France. In the fervent young nobles at the tournament, he found an enthusiastic audience, and by the tournament's end, Tibald and others had decided to take up the cross and prepare for another crusade. Pope Innocent soon gave the enterprise his blessing, and preparations for the crusade were officially launched.

Richard the Lionhearted, the uncle of Tibald, had come to believe that Egypt was the most logical spot to begin the reconquest of the Holy Land. It was weak and underdefended, he opined, and an army arriving there could easily march to Jerusalem from the south. Accordingly, Tibald and the others decided to plan a maritime crusade rather than a long overland march. But such a venture would require a fleet, and the Frankish noblemen had none of their own. In order to carry out the crusade, they would have to commission someone to build an armada capable of transporting tens of thousands of knights, squires, horses, weapons, and food all the way across the Mediterranean. And at the turn of the 13th century, only

one European power had the resources to build such a fleet: Venice.

It was to this diminutive Mediterranean superpower that a delegation of six knights, led by Geoffrey of Villehardouin and representing Tibald and the other crusaders, arrived during Lent in the year 1201. They were cordially received by

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**Blind faith: The leaders of the Fourth Crusade handed leadership of the crusade — and later, complete control of the enterprise — to Venice's blind elder statesman, Enrico Dandolo (left).**

**Unfortunately for the naïve young French noblemen, Enrico Dandolo, the ruler of Venice, saw an opportunity to turn the expedition to his country's advantage. He feigned enthusiasm for an invasion of Egypt even as his envoys were in Cairo secretly concluding a lucrative trade agreement.**

the Doge of Venice, Enrico Dandolo, a “very wise and able man,” according to Villehardouin’s record. Had Villehardouin and his comrades-in-arms had any inkling of what the aged statesman Dandolo had in store for them, they might have departed Venice at once and sought help elsewhere. But, dazzled as the aspiring soldiers of the Cross were by the wonders of Venice and the apparent sympathy of her leader, they humbly asked Dandolo and the Venetian Grand Council to build them a fleet.

### **Subtle Subterfuge**

Unfortunately for the naïve young French noblemen, Enrico Dandolo, although roughly 90 years old, possessed more energy and subtlety than 10 men half his age. A seasoned diplomat as well as a politician, Dandolo had spent time in Constantinople decades earlier where, it was rumored, he had lost his eyesight in a fight. But neither blindness nor the infirmities of age kept Dandolo from perceiving immediately in the crusaders’ proposal an opportunity to turn the expedition to the political and economic advantage of Venice. He and his council listened with feigned enthusiasm to the plan for an invasion of Egypt — even as Venetian envoys were in Cairo se-

cretly concluding a lucrative trade agreement.

The wily Venetians had no intention of jeopardizing such a commercial windfall as exclusive access to Egyptian ports, and began laying plans of their own to divert the entire enterprise to a different end. But Dandolo and the council kept the Venetian agenda to themselves, and offered to build

an armada for the crusaders sufficient to transport 4,500 knights and their horses, 9,000 squires, and 20,000 foot soldiers. Venice would also furnish food enough for nine months, and all for the princely sum of 85,000 silver marks. Dandolo further sweetened the deal with an offer of 50 free galleys, fully-equipped — if the crusaders agreed to cede to Venice one-half of all conquered territory. The bargain was sealed.

The crusading army began to assemble on Lido, the long, narrow barrier island separating the Venetian lagoon from the Adriatic, while in Venice itself the massive and efficient shipworks began building the crusaders’ armada. The supposed object of the crusade, Egypt, was to be kept a secret, in no small measure because the Frankish

leaders knew many men would rather take a more direct route to the Holy Land.

Before long, however, the Egyptian destination of the crusade had been bruited about, and many crusaders, disgusted with the prospect of taking such an indirect route, decided to travel on their own to the Holy Land or abandoned the cause altogether. To make matters worse, the original leader of the crusade, Tibald of Champagne, died unexpectedly, leaving Marquis Boniface of Montserrat the leader of the expedition.

By early 1202, it was obvious to Villehardouin and the other leaders that the crusade was in serious trouble. Thousands of men were now bivouacked on Lido, but less than a third of the originally anticipated force had shown up. As a result, the crusaders were unable to raise the full sum to pay the Venetians for the now-completed fleet. Even after the leaders stripped themselves of their possessions and urged their countrymen to do likewise, the expedition was still 34,000 marks in arrears.

Now Dandolo had the crusaders exactly where he wanted them. Conditions on Lido were crowded and unsanitary and many of the crusaders, who were forbidden to enter the city itself, were in debt to Venetian merchants happy to exploit their circumstances. Abandoning their



**A house divided: The siege and capture of Zara was universally condemned as an immoral act of war by Christians against Christians — and hinted of greater atrocities to come.**

solemn crusader's vows was unthinkable to pious men like Villehardouin and Boniface, but Venice would not release the armada without payment in full.

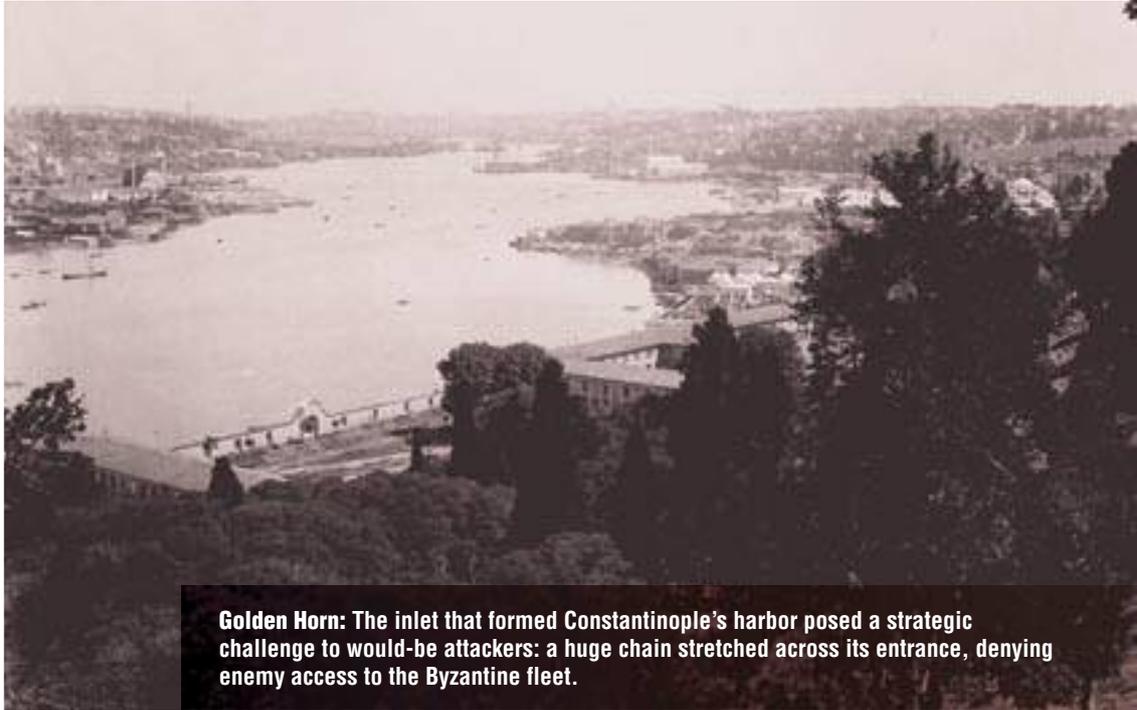
The "wise and able" Dandolo now stepped forward with a new proposal: across the Adriatic on the Dalmatian coast, a refractory former Venetian possession, the city of Zara, had recently been annexed by the king of Hungary. If the crusaders would agree to sail to Zara first and help the Venetians recapture Zara, Dandolo would agree to postpone settlement of their debt, at least until the crusaders had a chance to enrich themselves on the spoils of the east. Not only that, Dandolo, as well as enough Venetians to man all the extra vessels, would accompany them on their voyage. The old Doge even offered to take up the cross himself.

To this proposal the crusade's desperate leadership speedily agreed and, in Villehardouin's words, "watched the Doge's taking of the cross with joy and deep emotion, greatly moved by the courage and wisdom shown by this old man."

Pope Innocent was appalled when he learned of the new turn of events and forbade the crusaders from embarking on a military expedition against fellow Christians. But the crusaders, hopelessly in debt, had no choice and Doge Dandolo, like the rest of the secular Venetian government, had little regard for the Vatican's opinion.

On the eighth of November 1202, the magnificent fleet at last set sail with an unforgettable display of Venetian pomp. Trumpets blared and the standard of St. Mark swirled in the breeze as the Doge of Venice solemnly boarded his specially appointed vermilion galley and the immense armada sailed out of the lagoon.

Two days later they reached Zara, and after a brief but violent assault, the Venetians retook the city and the crusaders settled in to enjoy their new surroundings. The Pope was furious when news of the assault reached his ears, and promptly excommunicated the entire expedition, cru-



**Golden Horn:** The inlet that formed Constantinople's harbor posed a strategic challenge to would-be attackers: a huge chain stretched across its entrance, denying enemy access to the Byzantine fleet.

saders and Venetians alike. Later, realizing that the crusaders were being held hostage by financial necessity, he rescinded the excommunication of the Franks, but upon Dandolo and his fellow Venetians, it remained in force.

Enrico Dandolo was completely unmoved. For some time, he had been in contact with another impious, excommunicated nobleman, Philip of Swabia, who had been harboring a young man named Alexius, a refugee from Constantinople. Alexius was the son of Isaac Angelus, the ineffectual former emperor of Byzantium who had been deposed, blinded, and imprisoned by his own brother, also named Alexius. Philip now offered Dandolo a solution to the problem of what to do with the crusaders now that Zara had been retaken.

Young Alexius saw in the crusaders' armada a chance to return to Constantinople in style and wrest the throne from his uncle. If the crusaders helped him, he assured them after his arrival in Zara on April 25 of the following spring, he would pay them 100,000 francs in compensation — enough to defray their debts to the Venetians and a good deal more besides. He would also furnish 10,000 Byzantine soldiers to accompany them to the Holy Land and see to it that 500 knights were given permanent financial support to settle in Palestine. He would even, he averred, patch up the schism between Constanti-

nople and Rome, and see to it that the East submitted to papal authority.

To this proposal the crusaders agreed, although more reluctantly. Some of them were beginning to perceive that the entire purpose of the crusade was being cleverly diverted to serve very different ends than they had been led to believe. These dissenters left for home or found their own way to the East. A very large majority, however, stuck with the campaign, lured by the prospect of booty from Constantinople, the queen of cities, or anxious to resolve the schism between Eastern and Western Christendom, by force if necessary.

The fleet set sail again on May 25 with the Byzantine princeling aboard, stopping along the way at Durazzo and Corfu, two of the remoter corners of the Byzantine world, where Prince Alexius was hailed as emperor. By the time the armada reached Constantinople a month later, everyone in the city knew why it was coming.

### **Attacking Constantinople**

The Emperor Alexius had done nothing to arrest the decline of the Byzantine state during his reign. Coffers that once overflowed with bezants, the currency of choice in Europe for centuries, were now empty. Constantinople's harbor was in disrepair, and the fabled Byzantine navy, whose fireboats once set entire enemy fleets ablaze with the mysterious concoction known as

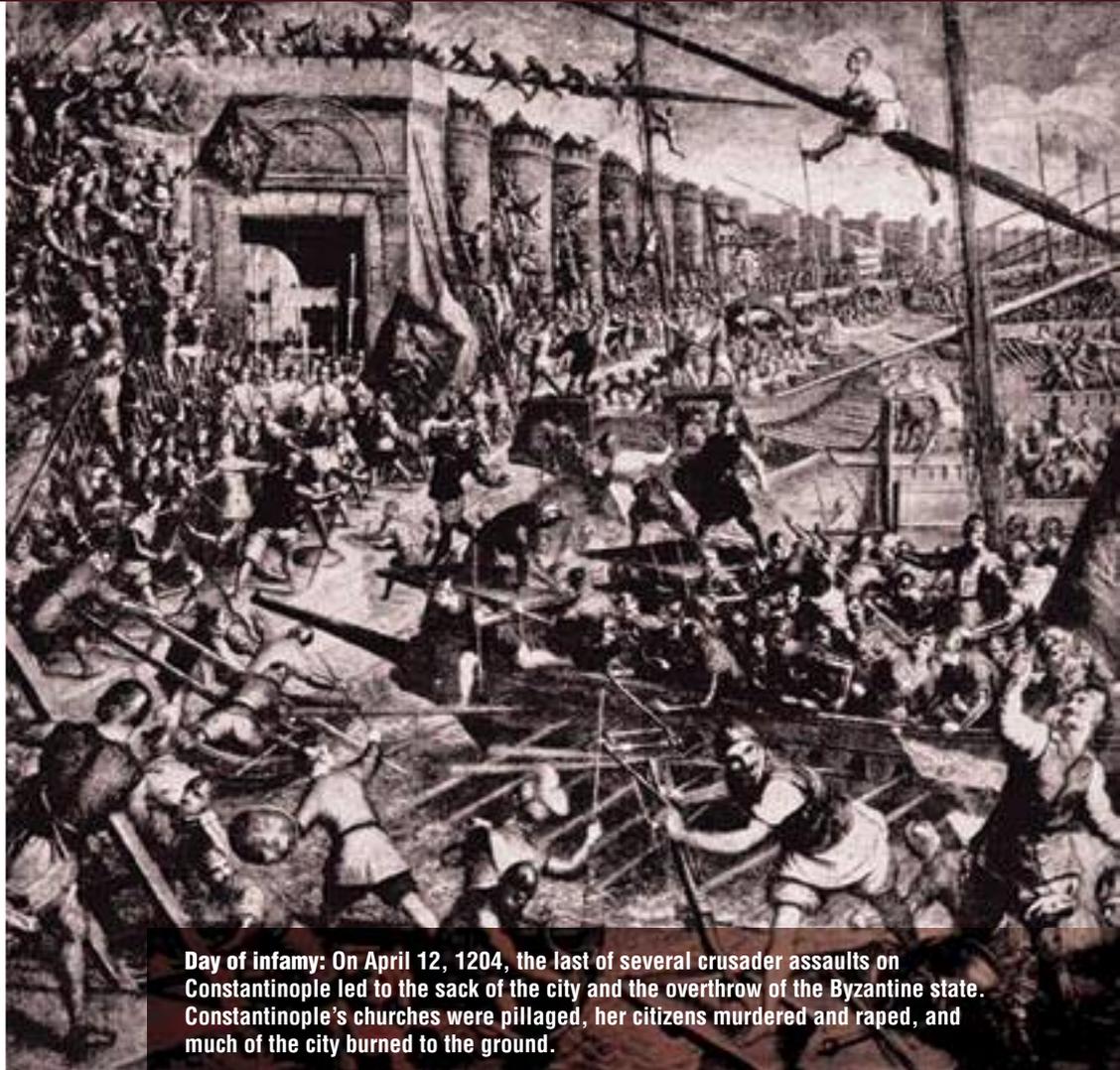
“Greek fire,” was virtually nonexistent. Only the impregnable walls of his capital, and the massive chain that stretched all the way across the inlet known as the Golden Horn to protect the harbor from enemy vessels, remained intact. These, the emperor and his advisors were confident, would be enough to protect the city from the Western barbarians.

They were wrong. It was soon obvious that Constantinople’s effete monarch had seriously underestimated the crusaders and their Venetian allies. The entire army disembarked on the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus to plan their next move, and bested with little effort every Byzantine force they engaged. Soon the Westerners crossed to Galata, a settlement directly across the Golden Horn from Constantinople, where the great harbor chain was secured to a windlass inside a heavily guarded tower. In spite of vigorous Byzantine resistance, led by the Emperor Alexius in person, the crusaders took the tower and released the chain. The entire armada sailed unopposed into the Golden Horn,

destroyed the few seaworthy Byzantine vessels at anchor, and prepared to assault the walls of Constantinople itself.

On July 17, the assault began. Venetian vessels bearing mangonels and other siege engines on their decks drew close to shore and began casting missiles at the walls. Other boats with scaling ladders suspended between the yard-arms tried to place soldiers atop the walls. Landing parties along the narrow shore were thwarted at first by a spirited defense led by the English and Danish mercenaries who made up Constantinople’s Varangian Guard.

The Frankish army was unable to make any progress until the Venetians, led by their blind Doge, effected a landing in the midst of the fighting. Dandolo, says Villehardouin, “stood fully armed in the prow of his galley, with the banner of St. Mark before him, and cried out to his men to drive the ship ashore if they valued their



**Day of infamy: On April 12, 1204, the last of several crusader assaults on Constantinople led to the sack of the city and the overthrow of the Byzantine state. Constantinople’s churches were pillaged, her citizens murdered and raped, and much of the city burned to the ground.**

skins. And so they did, and ran the galley ashore, and he and they leapt down and planted the banner before him in the ground. And when the other Venetians saw the standard of St. Mark and the Doge’s galley beached before their own, they were ashamed, and followed him ashore.”

Before long, the Venetians had taken more than 20 towers along the wall, and were pouring into the city in the quarter dominated by the palace of Blachernae. Fires broke out, and a fierce blaze soon reduced much of that corner of Constantinople to ashes. By nightfall, with the outcome of the contest no longer in doubt, the Emperor Alexius absconded with a small party of intimates, a bagful of jewels, and 10,000 pounds of gold. The city of Constantinople, bereft of a ruler, lay prostrate before the Venetians and the crusaders.

Under such circumstances, the remaining political leadership hastily brought old

Isaac Angelus, the legitimate ruler, from his cell and proclaimed him emperor. By so doing, the citizens of Constantinople obviously hoped to deny the crusaders any further pretext for military action.

But Dandolo and the Venetians were after a good deal more than military victory. The prince Alexius, son of Isaac, now stepped forth and explained to his doddering father that he had made an agreement with the Venetians in return for their help in overthrowing the emperor. He insisted on being made co-emperor with his father, and promised the Venetians that he would fulfill his obligations under the terms of their original agreement.

However, the young emperor came to realize that the coffers of Constantinople were empty, and the citizenry was outraged at the prospect of a heavy tax that would be paid to the Western barbarians who had, after all, fired a part of their beloved city.

As for reconciliation with Rome, the Orthodox hierarchy would not hear of such a proposal. Alexius, understanding that he would not be able to pay the Venetians in full or honor the rest of the agreement, stalled for time.

In the meantime, the crusaders had the run of the city, riding arrogantly up and down the streets in full regalia, treating the Greeks, whom they regarded as effeminate and addicted to illicit luxuries, with open contempt. Constantinople was a city that had straddled East and West for centuries, and many of her customs — from her court eunuchs and her gift for political intrigue to her incurable love of bureaucracy — had a distinctly Oriental flavor that offended the sensibilities of Western Christians. “Between us and them [the Latins] is set the widest gulf,” wrote chronicler Niketas Choniates, the best Byzantine source on the Fourth Crusade. “We are poles apart. We have not a single thought in common. They are stiff-necked, with a proud affectation of an upright carriage and love to sneer at the modesty and smoothness of our manners.”

One ill-fated winter evening some months after the capture of the city, a group of Frankish knights decided to set fire to a mosque in the “Saracen quarter” of the city. In the brisk winter wind, the fire spread, and for the next two days, the worst conflagration in the history of Constantinople — and the second since the arrival of the crusaders — reduced much of the city to ruins.

Adding insult to injury, the crusaders and Venetians then sent a six-man delegation to the young emperor to demand payment in full of his debt. Alexius refused to pay, and the delegation barely escaped lynching at the hands of a furious Greek mob fed up with the arrogant Westerners.

But Dandolo and the Venetians had no intention of leaving Constantinople without their pound of flesh. By this time, they likely had in view the complete conquest of the Eastern Roman empire and the overthrow of the Byzantine monarchy. The smallest

pretext would provide the opportunity they needed.

The opportunity came with the overthrow and murder of young Alexius by an aristocrat named Murtzuphlus, who rallied the citizens to close the gates of the city against the Westerners and prepare for all-out war. By March of 1204, roughly two months after Murtzuphlus’ rise to power, the Westerners were planning another assault on the city. Murtzuphlus had strengthened fortifications and kept the walls and towers adequately manned, and had informed the crusaders that no further payments would be forthcoming. In the capture of the city lay the crusaders’ only hope for release from debt.

On April 9, the second assault on Constantinople began. The crusaders and Venetians attacked the same stretch of wall that had yielded to them before, but the higher rebuilt walls and towers proved a more difficult challenge. The Greeks’ engines hurled missiles on the Venetian ships and attacking forces to great effect, and the scalers could find no purchase. The attackers finally retreated in disarray across the Golden Horn and spent the next two days repairing their ships and engines and nursing their wounds.

**In a sack lasting three terrible days, crusaders and Venetians rampaged through Constantinople, pillaging, raping, killing, and desecrating as they went. Priceless treasures of art — Byzantium’s entire cultural heritage — were destroyed or carried off as trophies of war.**

The attack was renewed on April 12. This time the Venetians, working with pairs of ships lashed together, managed quickly to seize two towers. The Franks, meanwhile, forced their way through a gate and poured into the city. The fighting raged from street to street, taking an appalling toll of life. By nightfall, the two sides occupied different quarters of Constantinople, determined to renew the contest the next day. But that night, the crusaders fired the city a third time, and this time “there were more houses burnt than there are to be found in the three greatest cities of the Kingdom of France,” according to Villehardouin.

The fire was the final straw. The Greeks despaired of further resistance, and the next day the crusaders took the city without further struggle. The citizens of Constantinople were then treated to the horror of



**Unintended consequences:** The magnificent basilica of St. Sophia still stands in modern Istanbul — as a reconditioned mosque. After the Fourth Crusade, Constantinople was no longer able to defend Christian Europe against invaders from the East, leading to the Ottoman Turkish conquest of most of Eastern Europe — including, eventually, Constantinople itself.

**The Fourth Crusade was one of history's greatest ironies. None of its pious warriors could have imagined that this misbegotten adventure, ostensibly carried out in the name of Christendom, would pave the way for the utter victory of the very forces she claimed to oppose.**

a three-day sack. Crusaders and Venetians rampaged through Constantinople, pillaging, raping, killing, and desecrating as they went. Choniates describes acts of appalling barbarity and sacrilege as churches and monasteries were looted and nuns brutalized and murdered. Vast troves of priceless treasures of art — Byzantium's entire cultural heritage — were destroyed or carried off as trophies of war. The magnificent church of St. Sophia, the crowning emblem of Byzantine architecture, was looted thoroughly, its sacred vessels stolen, its altars smashed, and its magnificent artwork wantonly destroyed.

After three terrible days, the violence subsided. The booty was divvied up according to prior arrangement, and the prostrate Byzantine Empire was placed under the rule of a Frankish emperor, Baldwin of Flanders and Hainault.

## Aftermath

The Venetians wound up with the best part of the bargain, receiving three-eighths of the city and three-eighths of the entire empire, as well as unfettered access to her trade. Thanks to the maneuvering of Dandolo, Venice acquired an unbroken chain of cities all the way from Constantinople to the Black Sea, as well as the island of Crete, guaranteeing the city-state a stranglehold on trade in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Dandolo himself did not long outlive the fall of Constantinople and, in a supreme twist of irony, was interred in St. Sophia, where his tomb is

visible to this day.

As for the rest of the crusaders, the Fourth Crusade was at an end. The armada never reached the Holy Land, and the crusaders soon found themselves fighting one another over rival fiefdoms. The Emperor Baldwin lived only a few months before being captured in a great battle outside the city of Adrianople by the Bulgarians. He was imprisoned and died in captivity.

The fugitive Byzantine nobility set up three kingdoms in exile, one of which, Nicaea, became the base for the eventual recapture of Constantinople by Michael Paleologus more than 60 years later. Under the Paleologi, the much-diminished Byzantine state lasted less than 200 years before finally succumbing to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

The sole immediate beneficiaries of the Fourth Crusade were the Venetians. The capture of Constantinople propelled Venice to new heights of wealth and prestige, and the Venetian Republic would endure until its reduction by Napoleon in 1797.

The rest of Europe and greater Christendom, however, paid a bitter price for the annihilation of the one state that had held at bay would-be aggressors from the east. The

aggressive Ottoman Turks swept from Asia Minor into Eastern Europe, conquering all but Constantinople in the span of a few generations. With the capture of Constantinople itself by Mehmet II, the victory of the Ottomans over the Christian East was complete (except for Russia), and coming centuries would see Ottoman power challenge the West all over the Mediterranean and at the very gates of Vienna.

The Fourth Crusade was one of history's greatest ironies. None of its pious warriors could have imagined that this misbegotten adventure, ostensibly carried out in the name of Christendom, would pave the way for the utter victory of the very forces she claimed to oppose.

An object lesson in the pitfalls of war, the Fourth Crusade, more than any other event in the last millennium, set the dials for the course that Western Civilization was to take. It guaranteed that the scepter of Christendom would pass from the East to the West, and that the East — the Holy Land, Asia Minor, Egypt, and much of Eastern Europe — would be the dominion of Islam for centuries untold. The consequences of this single act are still working themselves out in the renewed conflict between East and West in our day, and, more tragically still, many of the same follies are endlessly being repeated by the Dandolos and Alexiuses of a latter age. ■



**Prostrate empire:** Count Baldwin of Flanders and Hainault, shown here conducting an execution, became the new ruler of the prostrate Byzantine Empire at the end of the Fourth Crusade.