

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Constantinople – the Sack of 1204

### The Sack of Constantinople – the Fourth Crusade

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Civilizations change when the paradigms that govern them change. Humans relate to themselves and to each other through transcendental values firmly imbedded in basic frameworks. These values define how a society looks upon itself, how it interacts with other societies and its place in history. For instance, in the Middle Ages, most people believed that the earth was flat. The paradigm of a flat earth defined the limits of geography, politics and history. When that paradigm changed and it was universally accepted that the earth was round, it fundamentally altered the way civilizations related to each other. America was discovered, the oceans were conquered, the patterns of trade changed, old empires fell and new ones emerged.

In the vast panorama of history, certain milestones stand out when a civilization fundamentally and noticeably altered its paradigm and charted its course in a different direction. The sack of Constantinople in 1204 by the Crusaders was one such milestone. Indeed, it was the year that the Latin West fundamentally changed its orientation. Prior to the year 1204, the focus of the Crusades was the Cross and the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. After that date, it was the glitter of gold. Before 1204, the energy of Europe expressed itself through imagination and monasticism. The continent was steeped in poverty and ignorance. Trade was at a standstill. The amulet and the talisman, magic and sorcery were the mechanisms for communication with the supernatural. The Church was the primary beneficiary of this ignorance because it was the one institution that claimed the privilege of dispensing the amulet and the talisman.

This changed after the Latins captured Constantinople in 1204, rampaged through its streets, destroyed its relics, danced on the altars of its churches and looted its immense wealth. The Crusaders were a motley group of French barons, German peasants, Italian merchants and Latin priests. The gold and silver that was carried off from the ancient Byzantine capital provided momentum for the prosperity of the Italian city-states of Venice, Genoa and Florence. Italy was launched on its way to the Renaissance that reached its zenith in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Europe was transformed. After 1204, the energy of Europe found its expression primarily through economics, trade and self-interest. The civilization that produced the Renaissance and later the Reformation and the Enlightenment was secular and bore little resemblance to the civilization that had produced the First Crusade in 1096. There were more “Crusades” after the Crusade of 1204, but these were either expressions of an economic thrust cloaked in religious terminology or a reaction to Turkish marches into southeastern Europe.

The prelude to the historic events of 1204 was the declaration of a Crusade by Pope Innocent III in 1199. The loss of Jerusalem to Salahuddin was unpalatable to the Latin Church, which was reeling from further defeats at the hands of the Al Muhaddithin in Spain. The initial response to this call to arms was lukewarm. Europe was a divided house towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Count Baldwin challenged the French throne. Germany had two claimants to the throne, Philip of Swabia and Otto of Brunswick. Venice had lost its hold on the western Adriatic. In Spain, the Muslims had driven the Crusaders back towards the borders of France. The Crusader toehold in Palestine and Lebanon was at the mercy of the powerful Ayyubids. By declaring a Crusade, Pope Innocent sought to direct the energies of the warring Europeans towards a transcendental goal and collect funds for the Church at the same time.

Europe was broke and could not muster the energy for a new war against a resurgent Islam. To raise funds, the Pope levied a tax on all believers. This was not a popular move and it generated little enthusiasm for another march on Palestine. The situation changed and a spark for the Crusade was lit, when two young barons, Thibaut and Louis, “took the Cross” (joined the Crusade) at the tournament of Ecrysur-Aisne in northern France in 1199. These two barons, grandsons of Louis VII, enjoyed enormous prestige and soon many other barons and knights from France also enlisted. At the Council of Compeigne in 1200, it was decided that the warriors would depart for Palestine by sea. Neither the potentates nor the church had a fleet. Therefore, they sought the help of Venice, the only city-state on the Italian coast, which had the resources to provide this help.

Envoys were sent to Venice. The Venetians were a breed different from the Crusaders from northern Europe. They were merchants, motivated by profit, even when the goal was a super-ordinate one, such as the conquest of Jerusalem. They had maintained a brisk trade with Egypt and Syria throughout the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Venice was ruled by an elected council, the *doge* and its head in the year 1201 was Enrico Dondolo. Savvy, politically astute, eloquent, ruthless and unscrupulous beyond compare, Dondolo was an old man, between eighty and ninety five years of age. He personified the archetype of a business culture, which had survived and prospered for centuries through piracy and trade in the eastern Mediterranean. Dondolo drove a hard bargain with the Crusader barons. In return for ferrying 20,000 foot soldiers and 4,500 knights and their horses, he demanded a payment of 85,000 silver marks, a demand that was agreed to by the Pope. A contract was signed and the warriors began to assemble in Venice.

But all the silver plates and tablespoons of the knights and barons of Europe could produce only 29,000 silver marks. Dondolo saw his golden opportunity and moved for the kill. He had built and delivered four hundred ships as per the contract. As compensation for his already completed efforts, Dondolo proposed that the Crusaders assist him in capturing the city of Zara located on the eastern Adriatic (today’s Croatia). Zara had long been coveted by Venice as a harbor for the supply of much needed hardwood from Croatia and Bosnia. In 1201, Zara was a Christian city under the protection of the Hungarian monarch, a fellow Christian and a Crusader under the jurisdiction of the Pope. The Pope was furious at the suggestion and objected to this enterprise. But his bishops and prelates in charge of the Crusade agreed to go along with Dondolo, “in the interest of a higher cause”, so that money could be raised by plunder of Zara and the Crusade could continue on to Jerusalem. Zara was stormed, captured and looted. The Church made some noises but not a single silver candlestick stolen from Zara was returned, either by the invading Venetians or by the representatives of the Pope who accompanied them.

At this time, an historic opportunity presented itself to the shrewd Dondolo who had the instincts of a predator. In 1185, the Byzantine Emperor Isaac had been dethroned by his own brother Alexius, blinded and locked up in a dungeon. Isaac’s son, also named Alexius, escaped to Germany where his sister Irene was the queen and then on to Rome to appeal to the Pope for help against his uncle. The Pope sensed at

once an opportunity to bring the Church of Constantinople under the Church of Rome. The prospect of opening a land route to Palestine through Constantinople ruled by a pliant king did not escape him either. With the acquiescence of the Pope, Dondolo's fleet proceeded towards Constantinople, accompanied by 20,000 French, Italian and German Crusaders, who were motivated more by lust and the power of wealth than by the love of Christ.

The European archetype had changed, from a man of imagination titillated by magic and the talisman to a man of this world motivated by the promise of plunder. The minds of men were now fired by the glitter of gold, not the vision of the cross. The defenses of Constantinople were formidable. The walls of its ramparts were the tallest in all of Europe. The entrance to the Golden Horne was blocked by a chain of steel anchored to piers on either side of the narrow straits. Dondolo knew the city and its defenses well, having served as the Venetian ambassador there for a long time. He knew that the weakest defenses were along the Golden Horne. A Venetian ship was loaded with steel shears and ordered to cut the steel chain. The city was assaulted by sea, led by the old man himself and taken by storm on April 12, 1204. Young Alexius was installed on the throne, under the tutelage of Rome and a demand for an exorbitant sum of 400,000 silver marks was placed before him. Alexius could not raise this sum and late that year attempted to expel the invaders. He was defeated and the city was sacked.

The rampage of the city was beyond description. Men were killed by the thousands and women raped. The treasures of the Byzantine court, accumulated over a thousand years, were looted. The horses of the Crusaders rode into the churches, defiling the hallowed grounds with their refuse. The Church of Santa Sophia became a dancing hall. At the height of the carnage, a prostitute stood on the seat of the Patriarch and sang a lewd song, entertaining the demented invaders. The glory of Byzantium was trampled under the feet of the Latin mules. Treasures of the Byzantine Empire traveled west, to Venice and Rome. Upon the ashes of Byzantium rose the pirate states of eastern Italy. Economic consolidation had begun, cemented by the gold of Constantinople. In due course, this would give birth to the Renaissance. A civilization died and a new civilization was born, destined to dominate the globe. History had taken a turn and the world would not be the same again.

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