

## **Reasons and Response of Pope Innocent III to the Ransack of Zara and Constantinople**

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**Abstract:** *The fourth crusaders' aim was to recover Jerusalem, yet the belief paled facing the needs of survival. As the crusaders couldn't afford all the expenses of the expedition to the Venetians, the doge suggested an attack on the city of Zara south-east of Venice which will permit the crusaders to win money and pay their due. Zara being a Christian city, opened up a serious split among the crusaders as well as disobedience to the papacy. However, Zara was attacked and Innocent III stated fury and sadness at the turn of events. The reasons for the ransack of Constantinople comprised helping Prince Alexius to restore the throne and in exchange he will place his empire under the authority of Rome. Yet, the Greek churchmen expressed hostility towards his return. The ransack of Constantinople had and still has devastating effects in spite of the visit of John Paul II to Greece apologizing for centuries of grievances.*

**Key words:** *weapons, liberate, Holy Land, ransack, reasons, response, belief, crusaders, pope, infidel.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Twice the crusaders turned their weapons against Christians. Twice they turned their weapons against people of their own faith although their purpose was to liberate the Holy Land from the infidel.

Carrying on with the belief encrusted on the crusaders' mind by Pope Innocent III and Cardinal Peter Capuano among other religious believers to recover Jerusalem, the belief paled when set against day-to-day needs of survival. Although Cardinal P. Capuano granted letters releasing the sick women and destitute from their vows, which allowed them to return home without the penalty of excommunication, fees were still missing to pay the Venetians expenses of the journey. With insufficient money to pay, the nobles were disturb over the injury to their honor. Some were ready to abandon continuing to Jerusalem, others were determined to persist.

Bridging the gap between what they owed to doge Dandolo, the sum raised was still a difficult task. The doge would not accept to leave a legacy of bankruptcy to the mother city, Venice. As a cunning politician, he made an offer. He suggested that the Venetians and the crusaders attack the city of Zara, 165 miles south-east of Venice.

Control of Zara had long been an aim of the Venetians and here was an excellent opportunity for them to assert their authority, and God permitting the crusaders would be able to win the money they owed by right of conquest.

Yet, there was an obstacle: Zara was a Christian city and under the jurisdiction of King Emico of Hungary (1196 – 1204) committed to the same cause. A number of crusaders found themselves unable to bear that initiative. But the plan to invade Zara became known, and it began to open up a serious split among the crusaders and provoke disobedience to the papacy.

The Zarans had learned of the Venetians intentions through omnipresent spies, and prepared to defend themselves. However, Pope Innocent was aware of the disturbing development from his representative, Cardinal P. Capuano. The latter had sympathy with the crusaders and comprehended their dilemma. Yet, Bishop Conrad of Halberstadt stated, *The Lord pope would prefer to overlook whatever was unbecoming rather than have this pilgrimage campaign disintegrate.* In fact, he endorsed to move on Zara. The pope was deeply troubled by the turn of these events, and he wrote a letter in which he utterly forbade the attack on the city under pain of excommunication, the strongest weapon in a pope's spiritual endeavor to medieval people. However, he gave his approval under the condition that no attack on any Christian cities was allowed unless they impede their journey. The pope's letter was conveyed to Zara, but it arrived as the crusaders encamped outside the city walls. The Zarans realizing that they had no chance of holding out against the crusaders sent an embassy of leading men to doge Dandolo offering to surrender the city and all their possessions if their lives were spared.

A split took place between nobles, headed by Simon de Monfort, who were hostile to the entire siege and Dandolo's objectives to solve the financial question. Although the Cistercian abbot of Vaux-Cernay read Pope Innocent's letter forbidding the attack on the city of Christians and those wearing the sign of the cross, Dandolo apart from the financial question, had a personal grudge against the Zarans who, in the past, had done great harm to his people and deserved to lay siege on. The French nobles headed by Simon de Monfort faced a dreadful dilemma: *disobeying the pope and face excommunication, or refusing Dandolo's request and risk the collapse of the crusade* (p.112). Arguments broke out among the doge, Simon de Monfort and Peter of Vaux-Cerney, the nephew of Abbot Guy, and those arguments enraged and alienated the Venetians. The leaders of the crusaders chose to conceal the papal letter from the bulk of the army, and so the attack on Zara began. The defenders hung crosses from the walls in the hope of awakening collective conscience of the crusaders, but in vain. Zara was besieged from land and sea. For five days the crusaders tried to climb into the city walls unsuccessfully. Then they recur to medieval siege weapons: the mine. The Zarans, recognizing the lethal nature of mining, offered to surrender.

Although the crusaders promised to spare the lives of those within, the city was ransacked. As winter dawned, it was impossible to continue further. Zara was a wealthy city, so the Doge took half the city near the harbor and the French the other part. Yet, the crusaders' anxiety was the reaction of Pope Innocent when he knew of the fall of Zara. The leaders' concern sent a mission to the pope in the hope of securing absolutism from excommunication. The fact that the crusade leaders were on crusade to demonstrate their religious sincerity, they tried to reconcile piety with the debts requested for the reconquest of the Holy Land. Reconciling these antithesis was beyond the abilities of the leaders. The Venetians, on the other hand, did not send a representative, feeling they had done nothing wrong, and that the Zarans had deserved to be attacked because they had broken their feudal oaths to the Venetians.

Abbot Martin, whose preaching and exhortation to join the crusades' aim of the Fourth Crusade, was so troubled that he tried to remove himself and return to the cloister. Cardinal P. Capuano forbade him to return home before completing the pilgrimage.

Back in Zara, trouble erupted among the crusaders as they settled down for winter and as enmity was more over the division of booty. Yet, the fact that Zara was a Christian city was a real concern to some, but it had been captured, whether morally right or wrong, the invaders would fight to hold on their winnings. On 27 November 1202, arguments between the Frenchmen and the Venetians broke out, conflict became wild and forest fire on one area sprang into another. The riot carried out on until the combatants wore themselves out and finally calm prevailed.

A letter from the papacy arrived at Zara, stating the fury and sadness at the turn of events. Innocent blamed the devil. Aside from Satan, the Pope also revealed his view as to the culprits to whom the crusaders had fallen i.e. the Venetians. He also accused the crusaders of showing no mercy to people whose city walls were decorated with the cross and compelled them to surrender. The letter also mentioned that the granting of forgiveness of sins was withdrawn from the excommunicate army. One sees in that event the limited Papal authority although there was scarcely a country in Europe over which Innocent III did not assert his supremacy. It is as if the Pope had the power to call a crusade and to direct its preaching and its fundraising, but he could not exert direct control. As to the Venetians, they had a different agenda from the papacy. Their faith was coupled with the interest of Venice. They had already engaged in commercial relations with the Muslims in common with the Pisans and the Genoese. (If one compares the interest of Venice with the sanctions of the European Union towards Russia due to the war waged against Ukraine, 2022, one can judge more comprehensively.)

Coming to the ransack of Constantinople, reasons seemed different. Envoys represented Philip of Sivabia, Prince Alexius, who claimed the Byzantian throne, Index and Boniface de Montferrat presented the following message: If the crusaders could help Prince Alexius to restore the throne, Alexius will place his empire under the authority of Rome, besides other givings. On the surface, these were attractive incentives that answered the aspirations of the parties involved. Recognizing the authority of Rome was a primary aim of the pope who was a zealous protector of the Catholic Church. Again the crusaders had to turn their weapons against people of their own beliefs, rather than the infidel.

The Fourth Crusade had already endured a series of crises: the death of Thibaut of Champagne, one of the senior figures behind the king of France, the deficit of men and money, although Innocent III chose to raise funds with a new approach: requiring the clergy to donate  $\frac{1}{4}$  of their income. Other difficulties were faced too: corruption and the collection of taxes. Also an agreement was made with the Venetians to supply vessels and

supplies and in return the crusaders would pay 85000 marks. With the above crises, attacking Constantinople was tempting.

However, there was a great divergence of opinion among the assembly. Some of the Abbots exhorted the crusaders to accept the agreement because it was the best chance of winning back the Holy Land, but others did not agree. Yet, the crusaders' elite were determined to accept Prince Alexius's offer and attack Constantinople.

In February 1203, the Pope sent a letter to the crusaders, expressing anger for they already turned their arms against those who bore the Cross rather than attacking the land of the Saracens. Although Innocent noted that the crusaders' were compelled to act out of necessity, he did not excuse their cruelty and told them to return all the spoils gained at Zara. He also demanded that in the future the crusaders would neither invade nor violate the lands of Christians. The Pope himself faced a difficult time as the city of Rome underwent civil unrest as it frequently happened. Once again, one can observe the Pope's limited influence over the situation.

In spring, the crusaders prepared to leave Zara, but the Venetians not forgetting Zarans' repeated efforts to escape their over lordship, razed the city to the ground, sparing only the churches. As marquis Boniface (one of the crusade leaders) and the doge prepared to depart, Prince Alexius arrived. The crusader's fleet passed the city of Durazzo, on the north-western edge of the Byzantine Empire, and the citizens swore allegiance to the dethroned Prince Alexius. Welcoming his appearance, Alexius assumed that Constantinople would embrace him too.

Yet, another section of the army threatened to break up and Alexius' hope of gaining his empire would be weakened. Important crusader, Walter of Brienne, was asked to facilitate shipping, so they could continue to the Holy Land. Nevertheless, Villehardouin mentioned that his men's feelings were against an attack on Constantinople (p. 139). Boniface, Baldwin, Louis and Hugh beseeched their friends for help and fight alongside them. Otherwise, the expedition to reconquer the Holy Land would be a fiasco. A further flaw in the expedition was that the Greek churchmen expressed hostility and dislike toward the return of Prince Alexius. The orthodox archbishop of Corfu observed that *he knew of no basis for the Romans other than their soldiers crucified Christ*.

Yet, the army set sailed for Constantinople on the eve of Pentecost, May 24 1203. With the full fleet assembled, the crusade force looked impressive. The galleys, transports and warships were accompanied by many merchant vessels to supply the crusaders with food and goods and hoping to secure trading privileges. The galleys, transports and warships were accompanied by many merchant vessels to supply the crusaders with food, goods and hoping to secure trading privileges although the Venetians were in the prime position to secure trading privileges. The skill of the Venetian sailors saw them safely as they sailed up towards Constantinople. For the Byzantines, the crusaders' ships were a terrible threat. On June 23, the eve of St. John the Baptist's Day, the fleet arrived at the abbey of St. Stephen, south-west of its target.

Constantinople was the greatest metropolis in the Christian world. Its population was estimated at 375-400,000, in comparison to Paris or Venice, which had probably about 60 000 inhabitants. Protected by its formidable walls, Constantinople, aroused admiration and awe. Villehardouin (chronicle of the crusaders) provided a vivid image of the city. *I can assure you that all those who had never seen Constantinople before gazed very intently upon the city, having never imagined there could be so fine a place in all the world.* The inhabitants of Constantinople took great pride in their city. They called it 'New Rome' or 'the Queen of Cities'. Of all cities known to Christians at that time, only Baghdad was greater in size, although by reason of faith and distance only few merchants and travelers had seen it.

Constantinople was founded in the IV century when Emperor Constantine established his control over both the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire. He ordered the Greek settlement of Byzantium to be renamed Constantinople in his honor. When the crusaders reached the harbor, they saw before them a true marvel: formidable defenses, splendid churches and five sumptuous palaces. Fortifications, more than 3.5 miles long, formed a mighty impediment to potential aggressors. Passing the Forum of Constantine, was the mighty complex of buildings that lay at the very heart of Constantinople, namely the Hippodrome, with the magnificent representation of four horses, plundered, taken to Venice and installed at St. Mark Square after the sack of Constantinople (1204), the Imperial Palace and the awesome church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom). The fundamentals of government: finance, justice, treasuries, barracks, prisons, religion and spectacle flourished. William of Tyre (chronicle) described the visit to Manuel Comnenus by King Amalric in 1171 to the Great Palace as a special honor. The Franks were allowed to dock at the sea gate where they followed a magnificent marble pavement. The palace possessed countless corridors and hallways. In the audience chamber two golden

thrones were placed, one lower than the other to demonstrate the lesser rank. There were 500 halls all connected with each other and made with gold mosaic. According to Robert of Clari (chronicle) there were more than 30 chapels in the Great Palace, including the church of the Blessed Virgin of the Pharos where what was made of iron was made of silver, columns were made of jasper or other rich precious stones. The Great Palace also contained massive gilded hall. A remarkable archeological discovery yielded a stunning impression of the opulence of the palace. Hagia Sophia and the Abbey of Cluny were one of the great buildings of medieval Christendom. A French monk, Ode de Deuil, who visited Constantinople during the Second Crusade in 1147, stated that many churches equaled Hagia Sophia in size and beauty. The church of the Holy Apostles was even richer and nobler than Hagia Sophia. In fact, it was the model for St. Mark's in Venice. Another church of note was the church of the Holy Apostles which survived as the monastery of Christ Pantocrater and known now as Zeyrek Camii. The former was a multi-purpose site containing a monastic community, a large body of clergy to minister the laymen and a hospital. A further marvel was the palace of Blachernae visited by Ode de Deuil in 1147 who stated that the exterior was of almost matchless beauty, but the interior surpassed anything he could say. William of Tyre (a chronicle) visited it 20 years later and saw valuable draperies, numerous servants, royal robes adorned with profusion of precious stones. Yet, there were large districts of crowded impoverished communities relying on charity or finding work in the institution of the city. Ode de Deuil wrote that some district were miserable and fetid, harmed by darkness.

As the crusaders stared across the Sea of Marmara, they must have realized the scale of commitment they had made to Prince Alexius. The powerful *Queen of Cities* laid before them supported by centuries of imperial rule and in the knowledge that it had never fallen to a conqueror.

But, there were some encouraging signs to overcome the Queen of Cities. The violence, disorder and usurpations over the past 20 years might work to the crusaders' advantage. Some of the military strength of Constantinople were not kept in perfect repair and the formidable Byzantine navy had practically disappeared, although Alexius III had been aware of the crusaders' movement for a long time. Phillips (2004) assumed that the emperor may have placed some reliance on a letter from the pope in late 1202. This might have reassured Alexius III that the pope would reject any suggestion of turning the crusaders towards Constantinople to help Prince Alexius. Further, after the reign of Manuel Comnenus the Greeks came to rely on mercenaries to fight for them. Over the centuries, the Greeks had acquired the reputation for being unwarlike and effeminate. With the actual situation of Constantinople, the doge and the nobles had to decide on their next move. And the decision to attack was taken. The nobles pitched their tents, the knights and the foot-soldiers set up camp while the horses were brought ashore and carefully reacquainted with 'terra firma' after weeks at sea. The corn harvest of the Greeks had been reaped but lay piled up, and the crusaders were fortunate to gather as much as they wanted. Alexius III, meanwhile, had begun to react to the danger and moved his army out of Constantinople, establishing them on the European shore, opposite the crusaders in order to resist a landing. The two armies faced each other across the Bosphorus, poised for war. It was late June 1203.

The ransack of Constantinople had and still has devastating effects mainly among orthodox ecclesiastics and communities. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a monk from the holy mountain in Greece asked a journalist, *Are you an orthodox or a heretic?* In a tour undertaken by a priest to acquaint the orthodox community about the various monasteries in the North region of Lebanon, a catholic friend accompanying me was addressed by the community, "We allowed the Muslims to enter Constantinople." My friend looked at me and said, "*Je me sens comme un cheveu dans une assiette de soupe*" i.e. out of place.

In 2001 John Paul II was first to visit Greece in nearly 13 centuries and apologized to the Greek Orthodox Christians for centuries-old grievances. Although the Greek Orthodox leader had opposed the Pope's visit, after hearing the apology, *May the Lord grant us the forgiveness we beg him*, Archbishop Christodoulos applauded, other Greek Orthodox bishops remained silent. On the streets of Athens, monks, nuns and priests paraded in the city with the sign, *Pope go home*.

What happened besides the ransack of Constantinople that made the Orthodox and Catholic communities so bitter? Was the schism of 1054 a further reason? The Great Schism of 1054 was caused mainly by the excommunication of patriarch Michael Cerularius of Constantinople by the Roman Christian Church. The Orthodox Church retaliated by excommunicating Leo III. Beside this incident, there are many religious political conflicts.

Going back to Constantinople, one is to acknowledge that Byzantium contributed to the death of many Christian Nestorians on the bases of the belief that Christ nature existed as two persons, the man Jesus and the

divine Son of God or Logos rather than a unified person. This view was identified with Nestorius (386-451) patriarch of Constantinople, but condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Hence, the massacre of Christian Nestorians.

On the other hand, many massacres were also perpetrated by Catholics in French towns such as Béziers where 20 000 residents known as Albigensians were killed with the approval of Pope Innocent III and papal legate Abbot of Cîteaux who declared, *slaughter them all* as they were declared heretics in 1176. Hence, one views that massacres were perpetrated by both: Orthodox and Catholics.

And yet, one wonders at the aim of the crusaders. Was it Jerusalem or Constantinople? In a letter to Baldwin who became Emperor Baldwin of Byzantium in 1204; Pope Innocent III expressed his joy at the capture of Constantinople and described it *as a magnificent miracle*. He portrayed the campaign as God transferring the Byzantine Empire from schismatics to Catholics. In other words, he harnessed a fundamental element of the crusading concept of Jerusalem from the infidel to the obedience of the Orthodox Church to Catholics. No wonder Orthodox Greeks have viewed the Vatican with suspicion! The Pope seemed to lose track of the main aim of the crusaders. And yet, from the start, Innocent made plain his opposition to any attacks on Christian lands, but clauses such as ‘provided they did not impede their journey,’ left ambiguous feeling to his pronouncements. To compound this mess, the papal legate, Peter Capuano, had left the Holy Land against the Pope’s wishes, travelled to Constantinople and released westerners from their crusading vows, bringing the Fourth Crusade to a close, reclaiming Christ’s patrimony to an end.

As months went by, rumors carried by traders, travelers and crusaders, such as Bishop Conrad of Halberstadt, Bishop Martin of Paris exposed full horrors during the sack of Constantinople and made Innocent realize that what had seemed a glorious success was in reality greed and violence. The Pope then questioned why the Greek Church should express its devotion to the papacy. Byzantium saw in the Latins’ *nothing except examples of affliction, the works of Hell and it detested them more than dogs*.

But, one could question the fundamental bases of Christian beliefs: Love and Forgiveness. Regardless of all discrepancies between both churches, some Christian communities in villages such as Dhour Choueir and Choueir in the Metn region of Lebanon have set their differences aside and decided to celebrate Easter together according to the Orthodox Church i.e. the Julian calendar.

Acknowledging the history of one’s community serves judgment, for history has a selective memory.

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