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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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April 12th, 1204: Constantinople under siege

Francesco Ripanti

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 f.ripanti@archeostoriejpa.eu**Keywords** *Constantinople, 4th crusade, Byzantine Empire*

Puppet emperors, soldiers avid for riches, destroyed art-works. The story of the decisive attack on the Christian capital of the Byzantine Empire during the Fourth Crusade.

Monday, April 12th, 1204. The decisive day.

Either they would be able to penetrate into the city in the coming hours, or else their failure would be definitive.

Such were the thoughts of Peter of Amiens — a member of Hugh of Saint Pol's party — as he navigated up the tranquil waters of the Golden Horn aboard a Venetian ship. The closer he came to the seaward walls of Constantinople, the more his gaze became focused, and a certain greed arose in his eyes. The red cross of the crusaders shone on his chest. To hell with the cross: Peter was not there to resolve theological or political conflicts; Peter was there to grow wealthy, and the Byzantines possessed unimaginable quantities of gold.

Three days earlier, their assault had resulted in a decisive defeat: the ships, though equipped with ladders, had been pushed back, and the stones thrown by the besieged had caused innumerable casualties. As if that were not enough, they had also been forced to suffer the cries of derision and the mooning of the Greeks, standing in the wind. The Latin army's morale would not be able to withstand another defeat — that much Peter knew for certain. It must not happen, it could not happen. The crusading army had been in Constantinople for almost a year and Peter had seen precious little gold. Since their arrival, three Byzantine emperors had succeeded each other on the throne: the crusaders had deposed Alexis III, the traitor, and placed his old and blind brother, Isaac II, on the throne, along with his son, Alexis IV. It was precisely Alexis who made the crusaders change course: Peter had left France to go to Egypt but instead found himself in Constantinople. Venice didn't at all mind this new destination, and with the military help of the crusader troops in exchange for its ships, the trick had worked.

Christianity aside, the Serenissima would never have an absolutely secure monopoly in the eastern Mediterranean as long as Constantinople was ruled by a Byzantine emperor. In truth, the machinations of the Doge Enrico Dandolo and of the crusade's leader, Boniface of Montferrat, only interested Peter up to a certain point. Peter's only motive for entering Constantinople was to loot it. Alexis IV had promised the crusaders an enormous amount of money in return for having placed him on

the throne, but the soldiers never even laid eyes on that money. What's more, when at the beginning of the year the inhabitants of Constantinople were no longer able to pay their taxes, they proclaimed another Alexis emperor, one who belonged to the imperial Ducas family. The latter killed Alexis IV and Isaac II, seized the throne, and refused to continue paying the leaders of the Crusade.

Puppets — that's what those last two emperors of the Angelos family had been in their hands. They had only remained on the throne thanks to the support of the Crusade leaders, thought Peter. And this patronage had lasted too long. Alexis Ducas, on the other hand, was an entirely different sort. He had challenged and even defeated them in several skirmishes: he was shrewd and prideful. The Greeks had given him the nickname *Murtzuphlus*, 'the one with bushy eyebrows.' When Doge Enrico Dandolo held peace talks on the beach of Cosmidium, Peter saw with his own eyes how appropriate the sobriquet was. But shrewd is one thing *Murtzuphlus* hadn't been on that occasion: he should have guessed that the talks were a trap set up by Dandolo in order to capture him. A Byzantine could not trust a Venetian. But *Murtzuphlus* miraculously succeeded in fleeing and organised the city's defences.

Peter could see the Byzantines. He could see them sheltered behind those walls which, in eight hundred years, had never been conquered by enemies, and that *Murtzuphlus* had elevated even more using beams. Entrenched in their towers, they were certain that they would be able to repel the Crusaders yet again that day. Peter had no qualms whatsoever about killing them. He vividly remembered the words that the bishops had uttered in their last sermon before the assault. The war was just; the Greeks were to be attacked because they refused to submit to the Roman Catholic faith and were even impious enough to call the Catholics 'dogs.' The Greeks were murderers and traitors, seeing as they had killed their own emperor. The conquest could begin; the Pope would absolve their sins.

The attack of the crusader army occurred

simultaneously on many sides of what was the largest city in the world. Dandolo and Boniface had identified the seaward walls of the Golden Horn as the city's Achilles heel. An attack by land was unlikely to succeed: the walls of Theodosius, with their moat and their external as well as internal ramparts, were not only a marvel to behold but also an insuperable obstacle. It was not by chance that the city had remained untouched for eight hundred years. The battle began, and the clamour was such that the Byzantines thought the earth itself was shaking. Around midday, two ships, the Pilgrim and the Paradise, approached a tower, each on either side. Only the tranquil waters of the Golden Horn allowed one to draw so near; the currents of the Sea of Marmara would have driven the ships away. Beneath a hail of various projectiles, the crusaders raised their ladders and two knights, one Venetian and one Frenchman, were miraculously able to leap onto the tower. This multifaceted attack caught the Byzantines by surprise: the flaw of the attempt three days earlier had been to attack each tower with a single ship, thereby rendering the defenders' task easier. After much debate, the captains of the crusader force decided to change strategy and this time the Byzantines were unable to repel the assault; their numbers were too small to oppose such a massive attack. With an ably-orchestrated move, the Crusaders had taken the tower.

While the assault on the tower was getting underway, Peter disembarked with a company of selected men, ten knights and sixty soldiers. They had to reach a postern at the base of the seaward walls which the Byzantines had recently walled up, and try to pierce a passage through it. Peter knew it was an extremely dangerous undertaking, but he would find himself in an advantageous position if he were one of the first to enter the city. As soon as the Byzantines noticed their action from the ramparts, they immediately understood what was happening. Immediately, they hurled down a volley of stones, followed by boiling pitch and Greek fire. Screams, roars, blood. In the general confusion, Peter had lost control of the situation and could not understand what

exactly was happening. He could only see that some of his men were successfully taking apart the wall while the rest of his soldiers were miraculously succeeding in protecting them. After a lapse of time that seemed endless, they pierced a passage through the postern; the chips were down. Or almost. Peter had no intention of going in first. It is one thing to be a courageous and fearless knight, it is quite another to face certain death. On the other side, the Byzantines were waiting and the first to appear before them would almost inevitably be struck down.

No one seemed prepared to go in first, but a cleric who was with them, by the name of Aleamo of Clari, took the initiative, despite the incredulity of Peter and the protestations of his brother Robert. Aleamo had already given many proofs of his courage during the siege of the Great Tower in Galata, the area of the city

situated on the opposite end from the Golden Horn which had been under the crusaders' control since the preceding year. On this occasion, he once again succeeded in carrying the flag of the crusaders into Constantinople. Full of fervour as they burst into the city with Aleamo in the lead, the crusaders frightened the defenders, who abandoned a vast section of the ramparts as soon as they saw them, concerned only with flight and reaching safety. Peter had penetrated into Constantinople, the queen of cities, the heir of Rome and antiquity's civilisation, the Christian city that in eight hundred years had never been conquered and had repelled the onslaughts of Avars, Persians, Arabs and Bulgarians.

Constantinople had fallen at the hands of a Christian army. And Peter was ready to let the looting begin.

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