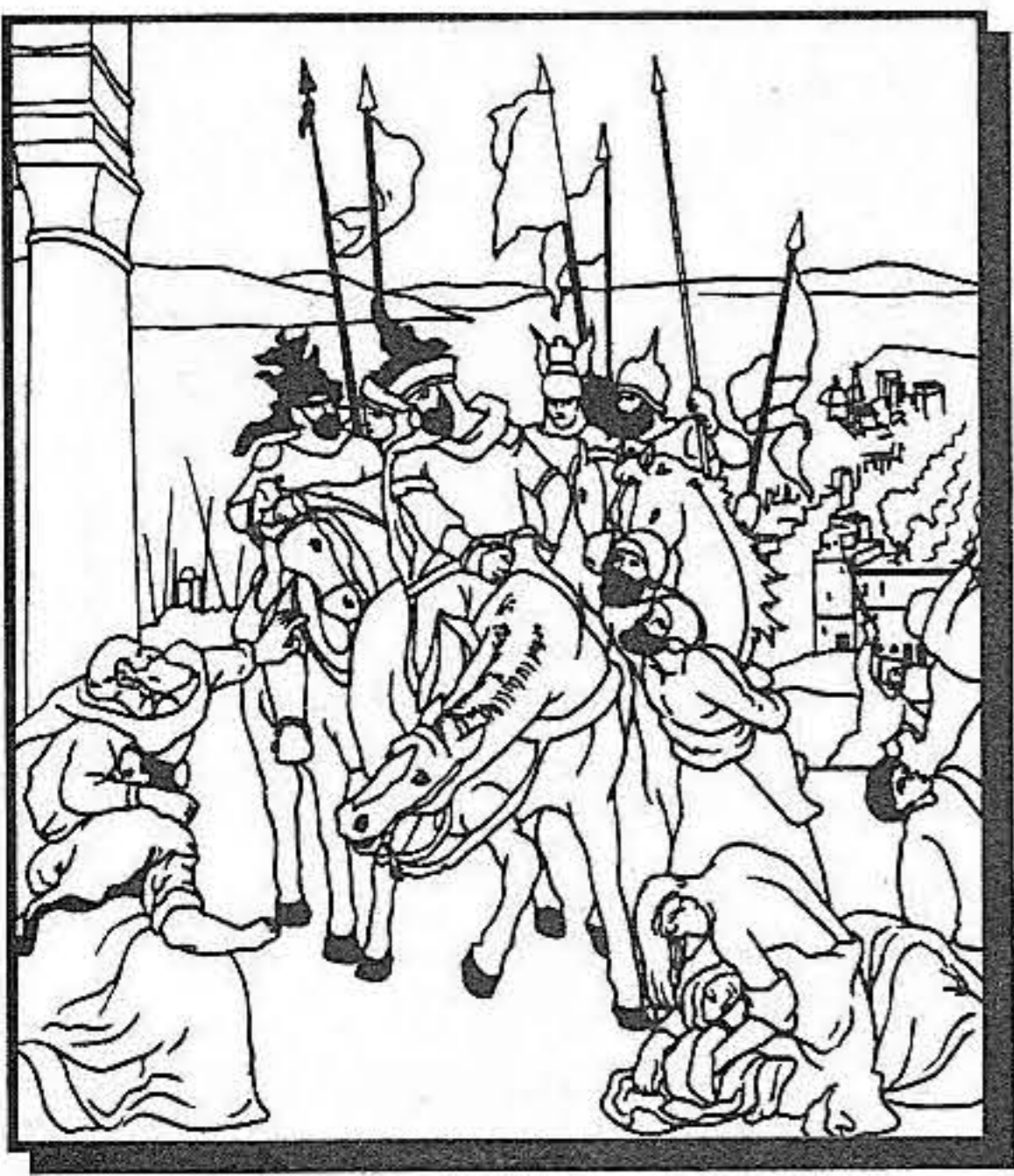


Transparency 4.1D: The Fourth Crusade: The Sack of Constantinople

What do you see here? Who are the men on horseback? What are they doing? Describe the people they are attacking? How do the people seem to feel? What city might this be? Why would crusaders attack a Christian city like Constantinople?



- ❑ In this transparency we see a romantic painting of the crusaders entering Constantinople in 1204.
- When Pope Innocent III called for the Fourth Crusade in 1198, in all likelihood he genuinely wanted to unite Christians and free the Holy Land of the non-Christian infidel. However, the crusading spirit in Europe had dwindled with the failures of the previous two crusades. The Pope's call met with little response for some time. Then Fulk of Neuilly began preaching fiery sermons, and enthusiasm increased. Still, the crusade went slowly until November of 1199. At this time, a group of French knights who had gathered at Champagne for a tournament suddenly laid down their arms and took the cross, pledging to free Jerusalem.
- This group was not as heterogeneous as previous armies; most of the knights came from privileged noble backgrounds. Nevertheless, the army still lacked sufficient supplies, and Venice was chosen as a supply city. When the crusaders arrived in Venice in February of 1201, they were met by the elderly and nearly-blind Venetian leader, Doge Enrico Dandolo. He committed almost all of Venice's resources to help the crusaders, in exchange for the promise of half of the wealth the army acquired or stole by conquest during their journey. After this agreement was approved by the Venetian Great Council, a dramatic and emotional assembly was held at St. Mark's cathedral, during which the Venetian people and merchants committed themselves to the crusaders.
- This bargain was to prove fatal for the spiritual integrity of the crusades. With money as a necessary objective, the crusade became more secular. Pope Innocent's power over the armies he had called together was greatly diminished. A secret agreement was made between the Venetians and the crusade leaders that Egypt would be a focal point for the crusade. This resulted in the disillusionment of many religious crusaders. Many soldiers who had considered themselves to be pilgrims journeying towards the Holy Land abandoned the army and never sailed out of Venice. When the crusaders left Venice on the Venetian ships, the army was only one-third as large as it had been expected to be. Soon after the departure, in 1202, the Venetians asked the crusaders to attack Zara, a Catholic Hungarian city. The Pope attempted to protest—the crusade was not about Christians killing Christians. But the crusading army was in debt to the Venetians and had no other immediate means of paying off that debt. The Pope's protests were ignored and Zara was attacked.

- After Zara, the crusaders headed towards Constantinople. They intended to restore the would-be emperor Alexios to power in the Byzantine capital. When the crusaders arrived with Alexios, however, the Greeks, who saw Alexios largely as a pawn of the European crusaders, rejected him. Clearly, the Byzantines resented the crusading army. The crusaders became angry, and fighting broke out intermittently for months. Soon after their arrival, the crusaders looted and destroyed the Muslim quarter of the city. Then, they started a fire which resulted in vast damage to Constantinople. All during this time, the Venetians pressured the crusaders for payment.
- In 1204, a major battle broke out in Constantinople. In the morning, the crusaders made confessions and took communion. They then listened to inspiring preachers who reassured the army that the Byzantines were traitors to Christianity. Fighting the Byzantines was a holy act that would become the basis for the reconquest of Jerusalem. The Pope again protested vehemently that Christians should not attack other Christians. He was once again ignored. Inspired by the surrounding preachers, the crusading army attacked and looted Constantinople. A third fire made their conquest decisive. For three days, the crusaders invaded the city. They set fire to libraries, desecrated churches, stole paintings, sculptures, jewelry and gold, and raped Byzantine women. The crusaders then shipped some of the stolen wealth back to the Venetian bankers to pay off their debt.
- Greek historian Nicetas Choniates describes the Sack of Constantinople in 1204: “How shall I begin to tell of the deeds done by these wicked men? They trampled the images underfoot instead of adoring them. They threw the relics of the martyrs into filth . . . They broke into bits the sacred altar of Santa Sophia, and distributed it among the soldiers. When the sacred vessels and the silver and gold ornaments were to be carried off, they brought up mules and saddle horses inside the church itself” (Armento, et al., 301).
- The results of the Fourth Crusade were tragic for the Byzantine Empire. The beautiful, glittering city of Constantinople forever lost its splendor and glory. The crusaders who remained there established a weak empire comprised of fiefs with no strong central government. The leaders of the crusade died shortly after the conquest of Constantinople, and the soldiers who remained were hated by the Greek inhabitants of the city. The city’s new rulers were largely incompetent. They quickly exhausted the wealth and became poor. Some sold sacred religious relics and pulled the lead from roofs in order to meet essential expenses. When the Greeks regained their city in 1261, the once magnificent Byzantine capital was in ruins.