**The Fourth Crusades**

The Fourth Crusade took place between 1201 and 1204, eight years after the end of the Third Crusade. The Pope ordered the Crusade in 1199, but was largely ignored by European monarchs, partly due to the failure of the previous Crusade and to the fact that England and France were at war with each other. Eventually, however, recruits responded to his sanction and decided to march first to Venice, a rising power in the trade across the Mediterranean. From there they would head to Cairo.

As the soldering pilgrims could not afford to pay Venice for its provision of boats to transport 4,000 knights, 9,000 squires and 20,000 foot soldiers, plus horses, to Cairo, the Crusaders agreed to help the Venetians to capture a Byzantine port, Zara, as payment. A 15,000-­strong army of Crusaders and thousands of Venetians travelled to the port, easily capturing it.

Prince Alexius IV, the son of the imprisoned ruler of Byzantine, Isaac II Angelus, then begged the Crusaders to help him drive out the usurper Alexius III and put him on the Constantinople throne. He offered the Crusaders money, ships and extra men if they agreed to help him, and it was agreed.

The Crusaders sailed to the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, capturing the island of Corfu on the way. The Crusaders finally captured Constantinople in April 1204, after fighting off the city’s garrison of 30,000 men, weakened through lack of leadership and Civil War.

Following the successful capture of the city, thousands of valuable art works, statues and other treasures were either destroyed or stolen, something from which the Byzantine Empire never really recovered. While the named destination of the Fourth Crusade had always been Jerusalem, from the outset it seemed as though the real goal for the Crusaders was in fact the conquest of Egypt.

The Fourth Crusade angered Pope Innocent III as the Crusaders had attacked their own fellow Christians, paying no attention to the Pope’s pleas to desist. The Crusaders were by now deeply unpopular and had yet to achieve their initial goal –­ that of regaining control of Jerusalem.

**The Children’s Crusade**

The story begins with a boy called Stephen of Cloyes, who was a shepherd born around 1200. This would make him just 12 years old at the time of the Children’s Crusade.

However, in May 1212 it is said that he made his way to the court of the King Philip of France and demanded an audience with the king. Appearing in front of Philip, Stephen is said to have presented him with a letter reportedly given to him by Christ in a guise as a poor pilgrim, which ordered the boy to organize a crusade and capture Jerusalem. Unsurprisingly, the king was unimpressed by his plight and ordered him to leave.

Stephen was undeterred by the response, taking to the streets and preaching to children about the message from Jesus and stating that they should fulfil their duty and accompany him to the Holy Land. As a result, it’s believed that a large group of boys and girls marched through castles, villages, towns and cities carrying crosses, banners and candles. When asked how he would cross the Mediterranean, Stephen replied that it would be simple as they would walk across with the help of God, who would be protecting them.

By June 1212, the narrative suggested that Stephen had 30,000 followers, all of them children or youths. The crusade was never sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, who purportedly believed it was doomed to failure. However, this seemingly did not deter the children. Questions have since been asked about why the Church did not stop the event, but some argue that the Church believed the actions may shame the kings and emperors into launching another crusade themselves.

Sadly, the Children’s Crusade was as much of a failure as had been predicted. The distances walked were too far for the children, and many failed to even make it halfway before dropping out or dying. Additionally, Stephen’s prophecy regarding the Mediterranean Sea also did not come to pass, and the remaining children were forced to cross by boats from Marseille. Sadly, that was the last time the children were ever seen.

However, many years later a priest returning from travel around northern Africa claimed to have met some of the surviving children as adults, and claimed that two of the seven ships had sunk, while the other five had been captured by pirates and the children sold into slavery - they would have been particularly valuable in Algeria and Egypt being from Europe.

**Nicolas's Crusade**

There have also been accounts of a German Children’s Crusade taking place in 1212as well. This was purportedly led by a child called Nicolas, who said he had 20,000 followers. He was thought to have the same dream as Stephen and planned to take Jerusalem back from the Muslims.

Nicolas’ crusade also included religious men and unmarried women, so it was not fully considered a Children’s Crusade. Despite that, their dangerous journey across the Alps led to many dying from cold, including the adults. However, those who made it across pushed onto Italy.

Having arrived in Rome, the remaining crusaders met with the pope who praised their bravery. However, he told them that they were too young to be successful in such a venture and sent them back to Germany. Sadly, many of them did not survive the journey back, while a group who boarded a ship in the Italian port of Pisa bound for the Hold Land were never heard from again.