Origins of the Lost Cavaliers of Mercy

The Lost Cavaliers of Mercy, originally known as the “Fideles Milites Misericordia” (roughly translated as “Faithful Knights of Mercy”), is a secret society founded July 26, 1202 to undermine the proposed attack at the beginning of the Fourth Crusade, on the Adriatic port city of Zara in Dalmatia (now Zadar, Croatia), which was under the protection of King Emeric of Hungary.

The Siege of Zara (November 10–24, 1202) was the first major action of the Fourth Crusade and the first attack against a Catholic city by Catholic crusaders. The Fourth Crusade sacked the town of Zara, a rival of Venice, despite letters from Pope Innocent III forbidding such an action and threatening excommunication.

Shortly after his election as pope in 1198, Pope Innocent III (1161–1216) published several papal encyclicals calling for the invasion and recapture of the Holy Land from the Muslims. His plan to accomplish this differed from the earlier ultimately unsuccessful Second and Third crusades in several ways. Instead of the secular nobles who led the earlier crusades, this one would be, in theory, completely under papal control. Innocent's plan also called for the invading armies to travel to Egypt (because they controlled Jerusalem at this time) by sea and seize the Nile Delta, which would then be used as a base from which to invade Palestine. His call was at first poorly received among the ruling families of Europe, but by 1200, an army of approximately 35,000 was formed.

Innocent III negotiated an agreement with the Republic of Venice, Europe's dominant sea power at the time, involving the construction of a fleet of warships and transports. The deal stipulated that about 35,000 crusaders would need transport and the Venetians would be paid 94,000 marks of silver, to be paid in installments. A council held at Soissons in June 1201 chose Boniface of Montferrat to lead the expedition.

The agreement between the Venetians and the crusaders had set the date for the arrival of the host in Venice before the end of April 1202, in order to provide for a departure in time for a summer crossing at the end of June. The crusade leaders had counted on raising the money still owed to the Venetians through the collection of passage money from the individual crusaders. However, the first crusader groups did not leave France until April and May, others straggled along throughout the summer and some of the French nobles chose to sail instead from Marseilles and other ports. Therefore, after the Venetians had suspended their regular commercial operations for a year to build and crew the ships, only about 12,000 crusaders showed up at Venice to man and pay for them. Boniface and the nobles added what money they could spare, and pledged their gold and silver plate to the Venetian moneylenders. Still the crusaders found themselves only able to pay 51,000 marks to the Venetians. In response, the Venetians indicated that they would accept the invasion of Zara (now Zadar, Croatia), a Catholic city on the coast of the Adriatic, as well as nearby Trieste, in lieu of payment for the time being; the crusaders were then to pay the rest owed to the Venetians out of their initial gains in the crusade. Zara had rebelled against the Venetian Republic in 1183, and placed itself under the dual protection of the Papacy and King Emeric of Hungary (who had recently agreed to join the Crusade). Though a large group of Crusaders found the scheme repulsive and refused to participate, the majority agreed (despite the written protests of Innocent III), citing it as necessary to attain the larger goal of taking Jerusalem.

Among the leaders of the rebels was Simon de Montfort the elder, Lord of Montfort-l'Amaury (in France), and the 5th earl of Leicester (in England). Simon is described as a man of extreme religious orthodoxy, deeply committed to the Dominican order and the suppression of heresy. Simon argued that it was immoral, illegal and against the wishes of Pope Innocent to attack another Christian town in the name of Holy Pilgrimage (the guise of the crusades). Simon was unable to win the argument with the majority and returned to France bringing with him loyal troops (mostly French), but leaving behind his English guard from Leicester (the “Faithful Knights of Mercy” or Lost Cavaliers), in order to make good his escape. The Cavaliers held off troops seeking to block the escape of Simon Montfort, and while Montfort successfully left, the Cavaliers were ultimately captured and imprisoned on the Venetian transports for fear that they would otherwise reveal or try and block the pending action on Zara.

The attack on Zara took the form of an amphibious landing followed by a brief siege. The crusaders used the 50 amphibious transports, 100 horse carriers and 60 warships designed and built for them by the Venetians. Their transports were approximately 30 m long, 9 m wide and 12 m high, with a crew of 100. Each one could carry up to 600 infantry. The horse carriers featured specially designed slings to carry their cargo of horses, and featured a fold-out ramp below the waterline that could be opened to allow mounted knights to charge directly onto shore. The Venetian warships were powered by 100 oarsmen each and featured a metal-tipped ram just above the waterline as their primary weapon.[10] Also, during the siege, 150 siege engines were used to bombard the city's walls. Chains and booms were laid across the mouth of Zara's harbor as a defense, but the crusaders burst through them in their Venetian ships and landed their troops and equipment without harassment. Zara fell on 23 November 1202, and the incident foreshadowed the Siege of Constantinople later in the campaign.

In 1203, Innocent excommunicated the entire crusading army, along with the Venetians, for taking part in the attack. "Behold," the pope wrote, "your gold has turned into base metal and your silver has almost completely rusted since, departing from the purity of your plan and turning aside from the path onto the impassable road, you have, so to speak, withdrawn your hand from the plough [...] for when [...] you should have hastened to the land flowing with milk and honey, you turned away, going astray in the direction of the desert." He would later grant an absolution to the entire army.

While is it unknown if the Cavaliers were Catholic or even Christian (though knighthood generally required it, and they were knights), for being present (in chains in the bottom of a boat) at the Siege of Zara they were officially excommunicated. This change in status meant that their captures had no qualms about executing them and following the Siege, set about to do just that.

Informed of their fate and asked if they had any last requests, the Cavaliers requested a preacher named Joseph to administer their last rites. Their execution was witnessed and recorded by the Venetians in Zara, but there were several accounts claiming they were seen leaving the city after the supposed execution.

It is believed that “the Joseph” who administered the last rites was in fact Joseph of Arimathea, who according to all four canonical Gospels, was the man who donated his own prepared tomb for the burial of Jesus after Jesus' crucifixion. A number of stories that developed during the Middle Ages connect him with both Glastonbury, where he is supposed to have founded the earliest Christian oratory, and also with the Grail legend. The Holy Grail is a goblet from the Last Supper that Joseph used to catch Christ's blood while interring him. Those who are worthy are said to be blessed (or cursed) with everlasting life and healed if they drink from the cup.

It is suspected that Joseph (who may also be “the Wandering Jew”) had the Cavaliers drink from the cup immediately after their “execution” and saved their lives, however while the Cavaliers’ acts were pure, they themselves were not completely pure so rather than gaining everlasting life, they were healed and age at a greatly reduced rate estimated to be a physical aging of one year for every thirty years that pass. Should this account be correct the Cavaliers would appear today in their 50’s, but actually be more than 830 years old.