

The Debate on the Fourth Crusade

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Abstract

This article examines attempts over the past two hundred years to account for the diversion of the Fourth Crusade to Constantinople and its sack of the city in 1204. While nineteenth-century scholars dreamed up far-fetched conspiracy theories, their successors often put the whole thing down to a series of unforeseen accidents. The debate now seems to have reached a stage where historians set the episode in a much wider context and consider a multitude of factors, though the element of chance will probably always have to feature.

The Fourth Crusade and its diversion to Constantinople have generated endless debate and controversy, and there is no sign of it abating at the present time, especially as 2004 marks the eight-hundredth anniversary of the crusade's capture of Constantinople on 12 and 13 April 1204. Part of the fascination with the Fourth Crusade undoubtedly lies in the extraordinary reversal of its original intention. It was launched by Pope Innocent III in August 1198 with the aim of retaking Jerusalem from the Muslim Ayyubids whose leader Saladin had captured the city in 1187. The leaders of the crusade formed a plan whereby a Venetian fleet would carry a large army of French knights to Egypt. Having conquered the country and thus neutralised the centre of Ayyubid power, the army would then march on Jerusalem. In the event, the expedition did quite the reverse. It never went to Egypt, and rather than capturing Jerusalem it stormed Constantinople, the largest and wealthiest city in the Christian world and capital of the Byzantine empire. Having done so, its troops, apparently forgetful of their vow as crusaders to fight for the Christian faith, mercilessly looted the city's churches and monasteries, prompting the embittered comment of one eye-witness, the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates, that even the Saracens were more humane than 'those who had raised the cross to their shoulders'.¹

The irony was not lost on contemporaries and a number of explanations were offered in the immediate aftermath of the event. From the Byzantine point of view, Niketas Choniates not surprisingly denounced the whole thing as deliberately planned aggression. He laid most of the blame on the Venetian doge, Enrico Dandolo, whom Choniates believed harboured a grudge for earlier Byzantine moves to restrict Venetian trading privileges in Constantinople. In Choniates' view, Dandolo entered into a conspiracy with Boniface, marquis of Montferrat and the other leaders of the crusade, to sail to Constantinople, using the proposed expedition to Egypt as a pretext for gathering the fleet. This attribution of a sinister role to the Venetians was by no

means restricted to the victims of 1204. An anonymous laudatory biography of Innocent III written in about 1208, the *Deeds of Pope Innocent III*, says much the same, clearly with a view to diverting any charge that the pope himself was to blame, since he, after all, had originally launched the expedition.²

Those involved with the crusade, however, had a spokesman and champion in Geoffrey of Villehardouin, himself a participant in the expedition and a confidant of some of its leaders. In a clear and concise account, written in his native French rather than in Latin, Villehardouin presented the progress of the crusade as a series of unfortunate accidents which all turned out to the good by the grace of God. Far from being a conspirator, Dandolo was 'a wise and able man'. The villains of the piece were those crusaders who failed to show up at Venice in the summer of 1202 and to pay their passage money to the Venetians, thus leaving the expedition hopelessly under-financed. The crusade leaders therefore had no option but to accept the proposal of the Byzantine prince, Alexios Angelos, that they should accompany him to Constantinople to help restore his father, the emperor Isaac II, to his rightful throne, since Alexios promised to defray all the expenses of the expedition.³ Once Isaac and Alexios were placed back on the throne by the crusaders in August 1203, however, they proved slow in paying their debts. When, in January 1204, a new and uncooperative emperor, Alexios V Mourtzouphlos, seized power, the crusaders, in Villehardouin's view, had no choice but to attack. This viewpoint was broadly followed, with differing emphasis, in accounts by other western participants or by those connected with them.⁴

This is the abundant but contradictory source material on which, along with the letters of Innocent III and others,⁵ modern scholars have had to base their assessment of the Fourth Crusade. Given the clarity and coherence of Villehardouin's account, historical works written

before the mid-nineteenth century tended to take a his line on the diversion, accepting his version of events at face value. The French historian, Joseph Michaud (1767-1839), for example, gave little more than a summary of Villehardouin in his *Histoire des Croisades* and presented the whole episode as a series of accidents.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, historians adopted a more ‘scientific’ approach to history, which involved a more critical use of their sources. As far as the Fourth Crusade was concerned, this frequently took the form of uncovering a supposed plot to make a diversion to Constantinople. Boniface of Montferrat, Enrico Dandolo, Innocent III and the claimant to the German imperial crown, Philip of Swabia, were all accused, with Villehardouin denounced either as either their co-conspirator or their dupe. It is very noticeable too that in the prevalent nationalistic atmosphere of the time, historians tended to exonerate what they saw as their own national group and blame someone else.⁶

Count Louis de Mas Latrie (1815-1897), for example, put forward the idea that his fellow Frenchmen were the victims of Venetian duplicity. Instead of relying on Villehardouin, he made greater use of Niketas Choniates and of Ernoul, who was writing in the Holy Land in the early thirteenth-century. Ernoul charged the Venetians with concluding a treacherous treaty with the Ayyubid sultan of Egypt, and Mas Latrie took this as the basis for his claim that the Venetians agreed to divert the crusade away from Egypt in return for lucrative trading agreements in Alexandria. This theory seemed proved beyond doubt in 1868 when Karl Hopf (1832-1873) published his claim that he had discovered the text of the very treaty mentioned by Ernoul between Venice and the sultan of Egypt, dated 13 May 1202.⁷

In 1877, however, the Venetian treason theory received a severe blow from an article published by Gabriel Hanotaux (1853-1944). Hanotaux showed conclusively that the treaty

referred to by Hopf could not have been concluded in 1202, and was much later, perhaps 1208 or 1212.⁸ So well worked out was Hanotaux's argument that it put an end to the Venetian treason theory in that form among serious scholars. Nevertheless, it has survived up to the present in a number of popular works and, surprisingly, in Donald Nicol's *Byzantium and Venice*.⁹ So pervasive and persistent has it been that Donald Queller's 1977 account of the Fourth Crusade was largely written to refute it.¹⁰

Another strand in the web of treason theories dreamed up in the nineteenth century was to blame Philip of Swabia and the Germans. Count Paul Riant (1836-1888) made much of the claim in the *Deeds of Innocent III* and the *Chronicle of Novgorod* that Boniface of Montferrat had planned the diversion of the crusade to Constantinople as early as 1201, in concert with Philip. The plot was therefore simply a continuation of the aggressive policies of earlier German emperors, Philip's father, Frederick I Barbarossa (1152-1190) and his brother, Henry VI (1190-1197), towards the Byzantine empire.¹¹

Finally, Pope Innocent III came in for his share of the blame. Achille Luchaire (1846-1908) accepted Villehardouin's claim that Innocent welcomed the treaty with Venice, and set aside the assertion of the *Deeds of Innocent III* that the pope had his reservations, as being something written with hindsight to protect Innocent's reputation. Innocent, Luchaire argued was prepared to accept anything to keep the army together. In support of his thesis Luchaire cited Gunther of Pairis who says that the papal legate with the crusade, Peter of Capuano, refused to let Abbot Martin of Pairis abandon the crusade when he had doubts about the legitimacy of shedding Christian blood. The pope was therefore anxious publicly to discountenance the deed but was in fact eager to let it run its course, to profit from its consequences and to establish papal primacy over Constantinople.¹²

As the twentieth century dawned, however, historians began to move away from the conspiracy theories and sought to explain the diversion in more impersonal terms. The debate entered a new phase with the publication of the work of Walter Norden. Norden advanced what might be called a modified theory of accidents, which was something of a synthesis of the theory of accidents and the treason theories. Rather than look at the crusade in isolation, Norden placed it in the context of Byzantine relations with the Latin West, starting with the Norman conquest of Southern Italy in 1071. The course of those relations meant that the idea of an attack on Constantinople was by no means startling and many western leaders had reasons for desiring it. No such attack was planned during the Fourth Crusade, however. It was merely that once the army was at Constantinople with an opportunity and provocation, the leaders naturally seized their chance. Thus the notion of accidents was kept without a facile reliance on Villehardouin.¹³

Norden's ideas proved immensely influential, with subsequent commentators emphasising different aspects of his analysis. Following his placing of the Fourth Crusade in the wider context of East-West relations, many authors saw its outcome as the culmination of mounting incomprehension, intolerance and hostility between the two halves of the Christian world. This approach was central to the works of Sir Steven Runciman, who argued that the crusades had the unfortunate effect of bringing the two societies, which had had little to do with each other in the past, into much closer contact. It was this very contact which opened the way for mutual misunderstanding and mistrust, and ultimately for the sack of Constantinople in 1204. Runciman's vision of mounting hostility also appears in the work of his pupil, Donald Nicol, yet while both authors laid stress on a clash of cultures, Runciman genuinely believed in Byzantine superiority and therefore regarded the sack of Constantinople as one of the greatest crimes

against humanity in history. Nicol, on the other hand, was scathing about what he regarded as the 'snobbery' of the Byzantines and considered them to be at least partly to blame for their own fate because of their pig-headed refusal to come to terms with the reality of western military superiority.¹⁴

So convincing was the clash of civilisations theory that for a long time it seemed as if all there was left to discuss was when the tension had begun. Some historians saw the process as starting as far back as 1054, when some papal legates had excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople and opened up the schism between the Byzantine and western churches. Others, including Runciman and Nicol, saw the arrival of the First Crusade at Constantinople in 1096 as the beginning of the trouble, as thousands of western knights descended on the Byzantine empire on their way to conquer Jerusalem, raising apprehensions among the Byzantines that these armies might in fact be aiming to conquer Constantinople or other parts of imperial territory. Still others claimed that the accession of the supposedly anti-Latin Andronicus I as Byzantine emperor in 1183 marked the starting point of mutual antagonism.¹⁵

The notion of escalating hostility between mutually estranged societies has not attracted everyone, however, and a number of flaws in the theory have been pointed out. In the first place, in spite of the frequent harsh words and occasional ugly incidents, Byzantium and western Europe were by no means completely estranged in the years before 1204. Not only did Byzantine emperors of the period of the crusades regularly intermarry with their counterparts in western Europe and the Latin states of Syria but their empire depended on western European manpower. As the Byzantines themselves were quite prepared to admit, Latins made up the most effective and loyal part of the imperial army, and they also served the emperor as ambassadors, translators and counsellors. Thus when the soldiers of the Fourth Crusade first

attacked the walls of Constantinople in the summer of 1203, they did so at the behest of the Byzantine prince, Alexios Angelos, while the stiffest resistance that they encountered came not from the Byzantines themselves but from the western European troops in imperial service.

A second flaw in the clash of civilisations theory is that it assumes not only that a complete East-West hostility had developed at some point during the twelfth century, but also that there was a causal link between that hostility and the sack of Constantinople. Yet when the western strike against Constantinople came, in the shape of the Fourth Crusade, there was no enthusiastic backing for the change of objective as one might expect. While individual leaders of the army might have welcomed the change of objective, most of the rank and file were bitterly opposed to it. A sizeable proportion left the army and made their own way to the Holy Land. Those who remained only agreed very reluctantly to the diversion when subjected to a mixture of financial and emotional blackmail. Even then, many hesitated before the final attack in April 1204, and had serious doubts as to whether it was legitimate to attack a Christian city in this way.¹⁶

The third weakness in the clash of civilisations theory is what happened after 1204. If the mutual antagonism was as sharp as supposed, why was it that so few westerners were prepared to heed the pope's summons and to fight to maintain Constantinople under Latin rule? Because only small numbers of volunteers went out to help Baldwin of Flanders and his successors to defend the city, the Latin emperors suffered from a constant shortage of manpower and that their hold on Constantinople lasted only fifty-seven years. By 1261 the Byzantines had recaptured Constantinople and recovered a sizeable part of their empire, as it had been before 1204.¹⁷

Finally, it has been pointed out that although it was the western crusaders who sacked Constantinople and dismembered the empire, the process of disintegration had begun long

before, and had become particularly marked after the death of Emperor Manuel I in 1180. In the Balkans a rebellion had broken out among the Vlachs and Bulgars in 1185-6 and their leaders Peter and Asen ultimately established an independent realm based on Preslav and Trnovo. In other areas such as Cyprus, local magnates were seizing power and defying the authority of the emperor in Constantinople. These factors have been closely studied by Michael Angold and Paul Stephenson and their work needs to be considered very carefully before any assertion is made that Byzantium fell victim to western aggression: the empire may well have broken up of its own accord.¹⁸

In view of these flaws in the clash of civilisations theory, it is hardly surprising that many scholars have discarded the idea that the Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople was the culmination of mounting hostility and have come to the conclusion that it came about as a kind of accident, taking up another strand in Norden's theory. Proponents of this view lay stress on the unforeseen events which prevented the crusade from going on to Egypt as planned: the massive debt which was owed to the Venetians because not enough crusaders came forward to fill the ships that had been hired, the attack on Zara which the crusade undertook to secure a postponement of that debt, and the proposal made by Alexios Angelos that the crusade should accompany him to Constantinople. The sweeping notion of mounting hostility or indeed any overall thesis as to why relations broke down so completely is largely ignored by this school of thought.¹⁹

During 2003, two books appeared which offered alternatives both to the clash of civilisations and the series of accidents theories. Jonathan Harris has presented the sack of Constantinople as the outcome of an attempt on the part of the Byzantine ruling elite to implement and sustain their traditional ideology and foreign policy in circumstances which

left their actions open to misinterpretation in the eyes of western Europeans. By pursuing very different ends to those of the reformed papacy and the leaders of crusade armies, and by employing methods that were often considered by western Europeans to be dishonourable, the Byzantines succeeded in giving the impression that the empire was failing to participate in the pious cause of defending Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the common Muslim foe. During the twelfth century, as the enormity of the resources required to hold Jerusalem for Christianity became clear, voices were raised in the West for Byzantium to be made to contribute part of its enormous wealth to the defence of the Holy Land. Thus while there was no grand plan to conquer Constantinople, western attempts after 1187 to extort what they considered to be the rightful Byzantine financial contribution to the crusade enterprise, led directly to aggression against Byzantium, the first occasion being the annexation of Cyprus by Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade in 1191. The diversion of the Fourth Crusade to Constantinople in 1203 came after Alexios Angelos promised just such a financial contribution and the city was stormed and sacked when the crusaders feared that it would not be forthcoming.²⁰

Secondly, Michael Angold has offered a thesis which attempts to reconcile some of the ideas of his predecessors. For Angold, the sack of Constantinople was the result both of long-term factors and short-term accidents. On the one hand, the period leading up to 1204 was 'a struggle between two civilisations in the course of which each acquired a clearer sense of identity'. The Byzantines had, during the twelfth century, failed to come to terms with the paradox that their empire was dependent on the very westerners who were often denounced as the greatest threat to its existence. The story of the crusade itself, on the other hand, was one of 'a thousand or more decisions, often at cross-purposes' made by the leadership of the crusade, often

on the spur of the moment and on the basis of little useful information.²¹

Finally, during the Fourth Crusade's anniversary year, Jonathan Phillips' *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople* provided a new narrative account based on the latest research. The second half of the book is largely given over to dramatic and readable descriptions of battles, but the earlier chapters place the Fourth Crusade in the context of the crusade ethos as a whole as it had developed over the previous century. Whatever the excesses committed during the sack of Constantinople, Phillips sees the crusaders of 1204 as acting within a closely defined and deeply felt code of honour which prompted them to resent very deeply what they considered to be the betrayal of his solemn promises by Alexios Angelos.²²

As long ago as 1878, Paul Riant announced that the debate on the Fourth Crusade and its diversion to Constantinople had now reached a point where it was not worth pursuing further, unless new documentation was discovered.²³ His burial of the controversy proved to be premature, although there are still those who regard the whole thing as 'endless and pointless'.²⁴ Endless the discussion may be, pointless it is not. Human beings have always been fascinated by the question of the extent to which they create and mould events or whether they are trapped by impersonal force of circumstance. The diversion of the Fourth Crusade provides a fascinating case study of this question as it can be seen as the result either of cunning planning and manipulation or of forces over which the participants had no control. As long as human beings maintain an interest in their own ability to shape their historical destiny, therefore, the debate will continue.

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Footnotes

¹ Niketas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. H.J. Magoulias (Detroit, 1984), p. 316.

² Choniates, p. 295; *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III*, trans. J.M. Powell (Washington DC, 2004), pp. 129-31, 150-71.

³ Geoffrey of Villehardouin, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, in *Chronicles of the Crusades*, trans. M.R.B. Shaw (Harmondsworth, 1963), pp. 29-160, at 32, 42.

⁴ Robert of Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, trans. E.H. McNeal (Toronto, 1996); Gunther of Pairis, *The Capture of Constantinople*, trans. A.J. Andrea (Philadelphia, 1997). A number of short accounts of the crusade are to be found in Alfred J. Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade* (Leiden, 2000).

⁵ Also translated and published in Andrea.

⁶ Summaries of the views and extracts from the works of some of these historians can be found in Donald E. Queller, *The Latin Conquest of Constantinople* (New York, 1971); Donald E. Queller and S.J. Stratton, 'A century of controversy on the Fourth Crusade', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 6 (1969), pp. 235-77.

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¹⁰ Now in a second, revised edition: Donald E. Queller and T.F. Madden, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople* (2nd edn, Philadelphia, 1997).

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¹² Achille Luchaire, *Innocent III: la question de L'orient* (Paris, 1907); Gunther of Pairis, p. 79; Andrea, pp. 250-1.

¹³ Walter Norden, *Der vierte Kreuzzug im Rahmen der Beziehungen des Abenlandes zu Byzanz* (Berlin, 1898).

¹⁴ Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1951-4), iii. 130-1, 475-6; Donald M. Nicol, 'The Byzantine View of Western Europe', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 8 (1967), pp. 315-39, at 329-30.

¹⁵ On 1054 as the beginning of mutual hostility, see A.A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 324-1453* (2nd edn, Madison, Wisconsin, 1952), pp. 338-9; George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. J.M. Hussey (2nd edn, Oxford, 1968), pp. 334-7. On 1096, see

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¹⁶ Donald E. Queller, T.K. Compton, and D.A. Campbell, 'The Fourth Crusade: The Neglected Majority', *Speculum* 49 (1974), pp. 441-65.

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¹⁸ Michael Angold, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204: A Political History* (2nd edn, London and New York, 1997), pp. 276-378; Michael Angold, 'The road to 1204: the Byzantine background to the Fourth Crusade', *Journal of Medieval History*, 25 (1999), 257-78; Paul Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900-1204* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 275-315.

¹⁹ Among proponents of this theory are Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A Short History* (New Haven and London, 1987), p. 130; Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, California, 1997), p. 666; John Godfrey, *1204. The Unholy Crusade* (Oxford, 1980), p. vii; Queller and Madden, pp. ix-xi. In general, see Charles M. Brand, 'The Fourth Crusade: Some Recent Interpretations', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 12 (1984), pp. 33-45.

²⁰ Jonathan Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (London, 2003), pp. xiii-xvii.

²¹ Michael Angold, *The Fourth Crusade* (Harlow, 2003), pp. 23-4, 103-4.

²² Jonathan Phillips, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople* (London, 2004).

²³ Riant, 'Le changement', p. 114.

²⁴ Riley-Smith, pp.129-30.