

Byzantium and the Crusades

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On 13 April 1204 the western or Latin armies participating in the Fourth Crusade conquered Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium. The approaching 800th anniversary of that event has generated renewed interest in the background, context and impact of that crusade, expressed in several new studies and in conferences. The initial goal of the Fourth Crusade was the re-establishment of Christian rule over Jerusalem, lost to Sultan Saladin of Egypt in 1187. Instead, it ended with the capture of the capital of a Christian state that had withstood all previous sieges and assaults.

The deviation of the crusade has been the subject of an ongoing and intense debate for the last 150 years or so. The same arguments have been used time and again, yet in the absence of new evidence, no convincing new explanations have been offered. Speculation has centred on a conspiracy theory and a search for those guilty of having masterminded the deviation. In a broader context, the Fourth Crusade has been viewed as a clash between two civilizations, Byzantium and the Latin West, and has raised more fundamental questions regarding their respective nature and the relations between them. It has been argued that the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204 was the culmination of mounting cultural estrangement, intolerance and hostility between Orthodox and Catholic Christians, partly fuelled by differences in theology, liturgical practices and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Others have viewed that conquest as the outcome of a random and unpredictable chain of events.

Jonathan Harris rejects these explanations and provides his own reconstruction of the developments leading to the conquest of 1204. His book deals with the relations between Byzantium and the West in the period extending from the death of Emperor Basil II in 1025 to the reign of Andronicus II (1282-1328). It focuses on the connections of these relations with the first four crusades launched by the Latin West before 1204, and briefly considers Byzantium's recovery in the following eighty years.

Harris argues that a key to the understanding of the interaction between Byzantium and the Latin West lies in the nature of the Byzantine imperial ideology. The Byzantines considered Constantinople both the political centre of the Christian world and a holy city, a new Rome and second Jerusalem. This standing was illustrated by the city's strength, size and wealth, imperial and ecclesiastical buildings, as well as relics (Chapter 1). The emperor's standing in the family of rulers, as leader of the Oikoumene or world order was the second basic element of the Byzantine ideology. The principles upon which the emperors based their

dealings with foreign powers and the crusaders were expressed by a small and influential group of civil servants with classical education, who served as their advisers on domestic and foreign policy and as their ambassadors. Despite the classical ring of their treaties, letters, manuals, panegyrics and writings of history, they had a good knowledge of contemporary realities. The traditional display of wealth, magnificence and pomp to impress foreigners, generous grants of imperial honorific titles and subventions in coins and silks, cunning diplomacy to divide opposing forces and military force were all used in order to preserve the security of the empire and the emperor's standing (Chapter 2).

Harris recounts the often-told story of the relations of Byzantium with the West from the mid-eleventh century to 1204, with an emphasis on specific developments and a thematic treatment of certain issues (Chapters 3-9). He considers the rise of Leo IX to the papacy in 1049 as a major turning point in Byzantine-western relations. Byzantium misunderstood the changed nature of the papacy, which in the following period laid increasing stress on the doctrine of papal supremacy and its claim to universal leadership within Christendom. It was unavoidable, therefore, that the traditional Byzantine policies would lead to a clash between the two. The Pecheneg invasion of Byzantium, which began in 1046-47, the Byzantine defeat by the Seljuks at the battle of Mantzikert in 1171, and internal political instability after 1025 opened the way for the occupation of Asia Minor by Turkish warlords and the Norman invasion of the empire in 1081. The defence of the empire was ensured in the eleventh century by traditional methods, yet the hiring of western mercenaries was a new development that led to Byzantine requests for large-scale military assistance from the West in the 1090s. The worsening security situation of Byzantium thus generated the latter's interaction with the crusading movement (Chapter 3).

The Byzantine fears for the safety of Constantinople in 1096-97 did not prevent Alexios I from taking advantage of the passing western armies of the First Crusade to regain lost territory in Asia Minor. The emperor's insistence on the safety of Constantinople as his first priority offers the background to his refusal to participate in the crusade, his tense relations with the crusading leaders, and strong animosity and propaganda against Byzantium in the West. The status of Antioch, over which he failed to restore Byzantine rule, was to affect Byzantine policies towards the crusading movement and the crusader states of the Levant in the following decades (Chapter 4). According to Harris, Alexios I and John II were solely concerned with the recognition of their supremacy with no intention of conquering Antioch, while the Latins were 'obsessed' with the physical possession of territories (Chapter 5). In his dealings with the leaders of the Second Crusade in 1147-49, Manuel I used tactics similar to those of Alexios I, yet was more successful than John II with respect to Antioch. By more subtle means than his predecessors, he managed between 1158 and 1171 to impose his tutelage on the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and the two other crusader states, in need of support against the Muslims of Syria and Egypt (Chapter 6). After the massacre of the Latins in Constantinople perpetrated in 1182, Andronicus I was accused by westerners of collusion with Saladin of Egypt against them (Chapter 7). The negotiations of Isaac II with the sultan following the fall of Jerusalem in 1187, aimed at ensuring the safety of the empire against a Latin attack, were perceived in the West as outright Byzantine treachery (Chapter 8).

According to Harris (Chapter 9), this perception and Byzantium's failure to make what the Latins considered to be the rightful financial contribution to the recovery of Jerusalem were the two factors leading directly to the Latin conquest of Constantinople. These same arguments were used by western writers to justify the first conquest of Byzantine territory, namely that of Cyprus by King Richard I of England in 1191.(pp. 141-42) In 1195 the western emperor Henry VI exerted strong pressure on Byzantium to provide financial assistance for a crusade, a precedent followed by Innocent III in 1199. In 1202 the pope issued a thinly-veiled threat to Alexios III that force could be used against Byzantium if it did not comply. Although he neither advocated nor condoned an attack on the empire, his pronouncements allowed the participants in the Fourth Crusade to believe that it was justified.(pp. 149-152)

After the fall of Constantinople, the three Greek successor states of Trebizond, Epirus and Nicaea competed for the imperial inheritance. The latter gained the upper hand by its successful territorial expansion and diplomatic moves, which led to its recovery of the imperial city in 1261. The ground had been prepared by

the military weakness of the Latin empire from within the city, and by the alienation of the Greek population resulting from the enforced submission of the Greek Church to the papacy (Chapter 10). Harris stresses that the Fourth Crusade was a major factor in the ultimate disappearance of the Byzantine empire in 1453, but which was however perpetuated in the Orthodox churches and in the cultural sphere (Chapter 11).

A few remarks about Harris' bibliography. It includes translations of sources to stimulate the reading of those unable to approach texts in their original language, yet this does not justify the omission of the latter. The following are new editions of sources, replacing those used by Harris: Michael Choniates, *Michaelis Choniatae Epistulae*, ed. Foteini Kolovou, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, XLI (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2001); for imperial charters delivered to Venice, *I trattati con Bisanzio, 992-1198*, eds. M. Pozza and G. Ravegnani, Pacta veneta 4 (Venice: il Cardo, 1993); for those delivered to Genoa, see *I Libri Iurium della Repubblica di Genova*, I/1, ed. A. Rovere, Fonti per la storia della Liguria, II/ Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato, Fonti XIII (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1992), pp. 262-64, no. 181, and the following volumes in the same series, published by other editors; Marino Sanudo Torsello, *Istoria di Romania*, ed. E. Papadopoulou, Institute for Byzantine Research Sources 4 (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2000). Harris has also overlooked several recent studies, some of which are cited below. In the list of secondary works, instead of 'Meyer', read 'Mayer'.

Maps illustrate events and historical processes and further their understanding. Unfortunately, all five maps (pp. 3, 7, 77, 97, 167) in this book are seriously flawed. Numerous cities are misplaced, beginning with ports such as Constantinople that appear inland. Corinth, Gallipoli and Abydos are far removed from the isthmus, the peninsula and the access to the Dardanelles, respectively, where they should have been sited. Various stretches of political boundaries are unclear or inaccurate in the regional maps 1, 3 and 5. Map 3, 'The Latin states in Syria and Palestine', lacks a date, indispensable in view of the territorial changes that occurred in twelfth-century Levant. Map 5, 'The Latin empire and the successor states, c. 1215', contains anachronistic features; Mongol dominion in Anatolia began only in 1242, that of the Mamluks in Syria in 1250, and Euboea was not Venetian until 1390. Finally, in map 2 of Constantinople, the street pattern is partly incorrect; the church of the Forty Martyrs is grossly misplaced, the Genoese quarter is missing and, since there was no separate Amalfitan quarter, it should not have been mentioned.

Harris' book nevertheless makes pleasant reading. His narrative is fluent and enlivened by the frequent citation of contemporary sources or their paraphrase. It is all the more important, therefore, to be aware that it contains factual mistakes and questionable interpretations, only some of which are mentioned here for lack of space.

In 992 Venice obtained only a reduction of the tax paid by ships passing through the Dardanelles. Therefore, contrary to Harris, the Byzantine alliance with Venice in 1082, directed against the Normans, did not expand existing trading concessions. Nor did these concessions cripple the empire's revenue from the export-import trading tax, or enable the Venetians to monopolise trade between Constantinople and the West (pp. 39-40, 113-114). These sweeping generalisations have already been convincingly discarded.⁽¹⁾

Far more important in our context is the link between the policies of Alexios I and the passage of the crusader armies through Byzantium. The letter of Alexios I to Count Robert of Flanders, asking for troops and admitting the weakness of the Empire, has been decisively shown not just to be spurious in form, but also unlikely to have ever been sent. It is also highly doubtful that a Byzantine request for troops was submitted in 1095 at the Church Council of Piacenza (pp. 37, 47-50, 54), as there was no need for them at that time. The western sources reporting these events were all written several years later and coloured by the light of subsequent developments. They clearly reflect western, rather than Byzantine views.⁽²⁾ It is questionable, therefore, whether the armies of the First Crusade came to Constantinople in response to a Byzantine appeal. In any event, at that time the land route through Byzantium was the only possible one for a large crusading expedition, in the absence of adequate maritime transportation.

Harris' account of the negotiations of Isaac II with Saladin (p. 131) requires several corrections. The emperor agreed in 1188 to the sultan's request to build a new mosque (and not just use an existing one) in Constantinople. Its construction is mentioned by Pope Innocent III in a letter of 1210 to the Latin Patriarch of Constantinople, Tommaso Morosini.⁽³⁾ Isaac II presumably intended to further thereby the transfer of Latin ecclesiastical institutions in the territories recently conquered by Saladin and especially in Jerusalem to the jurisdiction of the Greek Church. Yet he made an explicit request to that effect only in the spring of 1192, which Saladin turned down.⁽⁴⁾ Moreover, no Orthodox Patriarch replaced the Latin one in Jerusalem until 1206/1207.⁽⁵⁾ In short, there was no de facto renewal of Byzantine protectorship over the Holy Sites, as claimed by the author.

Various developments following the Fourth Crusade are inaccurately described. A Venetian was elected Patriarch of Constantinople, yet the church of Hagia Sophia was not included in the enlarged Venetian quarter in the city.⁽⁶⁾ The exodus of many Greeks did not leave the city 'largely to the poor, the aged and the infirm' (p. 164), as high-ranking civil servants contributed Byzantine elements to the imperial ceremonial of the Latin court and ensured the continuity of the Byzantine administrative and fiscal systems under Latin rule.⁽⁷⁾ Large sections of the Empire were divided between the Latin emperor, his major vassals and Venice, yet the Roman Church was not the beneficiary of territories as claimed on page 164. Venice neither occupied Dyrrachion nor the island of Euboea, in which only a section of the city of Negroponte came under Venetian rule in 1211.⁽⁸⁾

More importantly, there are serious flaws in Harris' basic argument, which hinges entirely on ideology, diplomacy and politics, without due consideration for other factors in Byzantine-western relations and long-term developments within the empire itself. His own account fails to provide evidence that the conflicting universal claims of the Byzantine emperors and the popes had any direct impact on the course of events leading to the conquest of 1204. While the first two crusades were conducted through Byzantium, the third one signalled a decisive shift towards direct maritime transportation from western Europe, although Frederick I Barbarossa still took the land route. The maritime option was also chosen for the Fourth Crusade. There was no reason, therefore, to cross Byzantium to obtain financial or other assistance. Harris has misread the letter addressed by Innocent III to Alexios III in 1202.(p. 150) It did not allude to the danger ultimately facing Byzantium from the Latins if it failed to offer assistance to the crusade, but the danger from the Muslims. Once we put aside this crucial link in Harris' argumentation, the moral justification the Pope supposedly provided for an attack on Byzantium is also removed. Moreover, in June 1203 the Pope explicitly prohibited the use of the crusade as a pretext for conquering Byzantium. On the other hand, it is not surprising that the letters addressed by the crusaders to the pope, or the arguments they invoked to persuade the crusader armies to attack a Christian state such as Byzantium were couched in idealistic terms, in order to provide the required moral justification for action. They assume a total and unflinching dedication of the western leaders to the crusading ideal, whose pronouncements cannot always be taken at face value.

Harris' linear approach leaves no room for flexibility in attitudes resulting from changing circumstances in the course of the crusade, nor for individual or collective interests or ambitions. It is hard to believe that Boniface of Montferrat and especially Venice had none. Harris' failure to acknowledge them goes far to explain why, in his account, Venice appears to be no more than a silent partner in the deviation of the Fourth Crusade, instead of the major factor it was. In sum, the book fails to deliver on the author's promise. It does not offer a new and convincing interpretation of the developments leading to the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204.

Notes

1. See for example D. Jacoby, 'Italian privileges and trade in Byzantium before the Fourth Crusade: a reconsideration', *Anuario de estudios medievales*, 24 (1994), 349-69, repr. in idem, *Trade, Commodities and Shipping in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), no. II.[Back to](#)

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2. See P. Schreiner, 'Der Brief des Alexios I. Komnenos an den Grafen Robert von Flandern and das Problem gefälschter byzantinischer Kaiserschreiben in den westlichen Quellen', in G. De Gregorio and O. Kresten, eds, *Documenti medievali, greci e latini. Studi comparativi* (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1998), pp. 124-40. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Patrologia Latina, CCXVI, col. 354. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See D. Jacoby, 'Diplomacy, Trade, Shipping and Espionage between Byzantium and Egypt in the Twelfth Century', in C. Scholz and G. Makris, eds, *Polupleuros Nous. Miscellanea für Peter Schreiner zu seinem 60. Geburtstag*, Byzantinisch Archiv, 19 (Munich and Leipzig: K. G. Sauer, 2000), pp. 94-99. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See J. Pahlitzsch, *Graeci et Suriani im Palästina der Kreuzfahrerzeit* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 2001), pp. 253-28. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See D. Jacoby, 'The Venetian Quarter of Constantinople from 1082 to 1261: Topographical Considerations', in C. Sode and S. Takács, eds, *Novum Millennium. Studies on Byzantine History and Culture Dedicated to Paul Speck* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 160-67. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. On the latter, see D. Jacoby, 'The Venetian presence in the Latin Empire of Constantinople (1204-1261): the challenge of feudalism and the Byzantine inheritance', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, 43 (1993), 141-201, repr. in idem, *Byzantium, Latin Romania and the Mediterranean* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), no. VI. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See D. Jacoby, 'La consolidation de la domination de Venise dans la ville de Negrepont (1205-1390): un aspect de sa politique coloniale', in Ch. A. Maltezou and P. Schreiner, eds, *Bisanzio, Venezia e il mondo franco-greco (XIII-XV secolo)* (Venice: Istituto ellenico di studi bizantini e postbizantini, 2002), pp. 155-60. [Back to \(8\)](#)

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