

“The Blame Game”: Assessing the Role of The Venetians in the Fourth Crusade

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ABSTRACT: This essay critically assesses the role of the Venetians in the diversion of the Fourth Crusade, examining both conspiracy and accident theories. It explores the accusations against Doge Enrico Dandolo, whose actions allegedly stemmed from personal and political grudges against Byzantium and analyses Venetian chronicles highlighting Dandolo's pivotal role in decision-making. The essay argues that long-term commercial and political factors, coupled with the precarious financial situation of the crusaders, contributed to the diversion to Constantinople. However, it rejects the notion of a premeditated Venetian plan to conquer the city, attributing the crusade's outcome to a chain of events influenced by other key figures, including Boniface of Montferrat, Philip of Swabia, and the Byzantine internal divisions. The essay concludes that while Venetian influence was significant, it was opportunistic rather than preplanned, and the fall of Constantinople was the result of a complex interplay of ambitions, financial pressures, and diplomatic failures.

The Venetians were partially responsible for the Fourth Crusade's diversion, causing the conversion of the crusade into a mission of conquest. Venetian role constitutes of reactionary choices made in consideration of the circumstances without premeditation. This essay will critically assess Venetians' role in line with the conspiracy theory's view of the crusade in four distinct ways. Firstly, Niketas Choniates' accusations of the Doge's pivotal role in diverting the crusade due to a long-held grudge against the Greeks will be considered. Secondly, Venetian chronicles present the corroborating material of the Doge's substantial role in the crusade. Thirdly, commercial and political factors will demonstrate that Venetians lacked security in Byzantium since 1171, influencing the diversion to take place once the opportunity presented itself. Lastly, an enquiry into the precarious financial situation and the solutions offered by young Alexius at Zara will reveal that Venetians were not alone in causing the downfall of Constantinople. A discussion of the pope, Boniface of Montferrat, and Phillip of Swabia's significant role in the Fourth Crusade warrant a reassessment of Venetian involvement.

This paper will then offer a balanced assessment of the accident theory. Proponents of this view rely on Villehardouin's testimony of the crusade as a chain of unfortunate events guided by fate. In this theory, the Venetians are not blamed for the failures of the crusade. However,

accident theorists fail to account for personal ambition and Greek hatred among crusaders in instigating the assaults. Lastly, this paper will consider J. Harris and M. Angold's view that diplomatic mistakes and internal divisions inevitably caused the outcome of the Fourth Crusade.¹ This essay will conclude that Venetian influence was pivotal in causing the diversion to Constantinople, while establishing the absence of a preconceived plan. Financial factors guided the Venetian's initial role in diverting the crusade. However, the Doge did not plan the conquest of Constantinople. A chain of events coupled with Phillip and Boniface's ambitions led to the fall of Byzantium.²

Doge Dandolo orchestrated the diversion of the Fourth Crusade to Constantinople. Niketas Choniates' account of the crusade has compelled conspiracy theorists to investigate and scrutinise Dandolo's manipulation of the crusading ethos to benefit the Republic. Choniates blames the Doge for the diversion to Constantinople, who consciously manipulated the army to execute revenge for Byzantium's ill-treatment of Venice (Choniates, *Historia*, 538). A study of the tubulous Byzantine-Venetian relations offers a satisfactory explanation for the Doge's predisposition to divert the expedition. Escalating hostilities between east and west in the 12th century were caused by the growing anti-Latin feeling while the Venetian community in Constantinople experienced its golden age. Mutual repugnance was the cause of an incident during the siege of Corfu in 1149 when Venetians stole the imperial ship and declared a black-skinned emperor of the Romans (Choniates, *Historia*, 85-87). Manuel Komnenos never forgave the audacity of Venetians, later exacting his revenge in 1171 by imprisoning all Venetians in the empire and seizing their assets. A letter from Manuel to the Doge, sent after the 1171 events, accuses the Venetians of "having a great ambition to betray them [the Romans] to their enemies" (Kinnamos, *Epitome*, 285). D.M. Nicol rightly assesses the 1149 incident as a "symptom" rather than a cause for the growing estrangement, recognising the significance of 1171 as a turning point in the relations between Venice and Byzantium.³ Enrico Dandolo was blinded during the Venetian reactionary expedition to Byzantium (1171-72). Although sources differ on how it happened, it is accepted that it collaborated towards the Greek hatred of the future Doge. Though generally refuted, the Novgorod Chronicle blames the blindness on Manuel, who personally ordered the act (Unknown, *Chronicle of Novgorod*, 48 [A.D 1204,

¹ Harris (2004), 6-7; Angold (1999), 271; Angold (2014), 28-47

² For a discussion and definition of the schools of thought on the Fourth Crusade see Neocleous, S. (2012), 183-186

³ Nicol (1989), 88

A.M 6712]). The Doge's hatred for the Byzantines can be explained in terms of crimes against Venice and his personal experience in the empire, effectively predisposing him to attack when the chance arose.

Venetian chronicles place the Doge at the centre of decision-making in every crucial moment of the crusade. Dandolo's decisions shaped the course of the crusade, starting from his proposal to conquer Zara, concession to divert to Constantinople, and his leading role in negotiating with the Byzantine emperors. Serban Marin argues that Venetian chronicles are comparable to Choniates, who often emphasise the Doge's importance as being "beyond the entire enterprise."⁴ Furthermore, the absence of any Venetian eyewitness account of the Fourth Crusade facilitates the allocation of blame, for it seems that Venice has "pleaded the fifth amendment."⁵ Venetians were excommunicated for attacking Zara, a Christian city under papal protection, and later seized Constantinople against papal authority. Hence, apologist accounts of the enterprise only appeared once Venice could represent the events that took place under the guise of religious duty and justice. The Doge produced the first Venetian account of the crusade in a letter to Innocent III from June 1204, which attributes the victory to "divine inspiration" instead of human planning, and the objectives of the crusade are portrayed as purely religious (Innocent III, *Register*, 7:202). In this way, Dandolo established a general Venetian perspective of the Fourth Crusade as a victory for Christianity over heretics for the papacy, guided by the Doge.⁶

Commercial and political ambitions contributed to the role of the Venetians in diverting the crusade to Constantinople. Over the decades preceding the crusade, R. J. Lillie argues that Byzantium and Venice operated by different principles and interests.⁷ While Venetians prioritised trade, Byzantium retained its focus on naval support for warfare. Conflicts over privileges and political favour culminated in the Venetian realisation that the destruction of the Byzantine empire was the only way to obtain security.⁸ The 1171 attack on Venetians allowed the prosperity of the Pisan and Genoese communities of Constantinople. Only to be halted by the 1182 Massacre of the Latins. Emperors played on the rivalry between the three maritime republics to maintain a balanced commercial ecosystem preventive of monopolistic strategies.

⁴ Marin S., in Madden, T.F. (Ed.) (2008), 117

⁵ Angold (2014), 19

⁶ Madden (2012), 316-317

⁷ Lillie (1984) in Angold. M (1999), 273

⁸ Ostrogorsky (1968), 413

Manuel and Andronicus's antithetical policies exacerbated Byzantium's relationship with Venice and other allies. Manuel's foreign administration was characterised by a web of alliances, while Andronicus' featured a few powerful allies.⁹ The effect of Byzantine's shifting foreign policy on Venice was, as argued by C. Brand, uncertainty while theoretically being a "loyal servant".¹⁰ Foreign policy miscalculations worked to alienate Venetian trust, justifying their involvement in the diversion of the crusade to Constantinople to secure their commercial ambitions. However, the conquest of Constantinople, on the other hand, was a commercial failure for Venice. The combination of a decline in real estate transactions and large-scale borrowing led L.B Robbert to conclude that Constantinople was a "financial drain on Venice in the 1250s".¹¹ Venice's mismanagement of its domain in Byzantium reveals a lack of a plan to maintain a profitable colony.

Alternatively, Venice had no plan to divert the crusade, and its role was only substantiated once the finance of the crusade became dire. Venice was on favourable terms with the empire by 1198 despite the political rivalry, so its role was not part of an orchestrated vengeful plan. Long-term commercial factors do not account for Venice's participation as Venetians were exempt from the *kommerkion*, a sale tax accounting for ten per cent of a product's value. In comparison, Pisans and Genoese were never able to reduce it below four per cent.¹² Nicetas' account then must be called into question for its partiality, as M. Meschini is correct to assert that Choniates was incapable of understanding the diversion of the crusaders, for he was not a part of the enterprise.¹³ Venice's role was motivated by short-term factors. Only one-third of the expected 33,500 crusaders assembled in Venice by August of 1202, leaving the crusaders in debt of 34,000 marks with the Venetians (Villehardouin, *Conquest*, 58-61). In seeking to exact the debt owned by the Crusaders, Venice planned a diversion to Zara and Constantinople. A chain of events born from Venetian greed and financial factors rapidly shaped into a conquering movement. It was the secularisation of the crusade's objectives, according to Ostrogorsky, that allowed Venice to use it as a tool of conquest.¹⁴ At the same time, financial requisites for maintaining the crusade encouraged the Frankish leaders to compromise.

⁹ Brand (1968), 232

¹⁰ Brand (1968), 206

¹¹ Robbert (1995), 46-58 (esp. 57).

¹² Brand (1968), 204

¹³ Meschini, M. in Madden, T.F. (Ed.) (2008), 39

¹⁴ Ostrogorsky (1968), 415

On the other hand, Venice's role in the Fourth Crusade was inconsequential. Boniface of Montferrat and Phillip of Swabia propelled the diversion of the crusade to Constantinople by disguising their intentions under the banner of chivalry. The Western notion of chivalry derived sovereignty from physical descent, also deeming the usurpation of the throne to be treacherous.¹⁵ Young Alexius' legitimacy was a cause of sympathy among Frankish crusaders, exceptionally motivating a venture to Constantinople in the service of God. Villehardouin records Phillip's message, which invoked the principles of "right and justice", instigating a diversion based on young Alexius' wrongful deposition (Villehardouin, *Conquest*, 92). However, Phillip and Boniface invoked chivalry to manipulate the rank and file of the crusade to realise their ambitions of conquering the Byzantines. According to Clari, crusaders were assured that helping young Alexius' cause was a righteous deed, absent from any sin (Clari, *conquête*, 84 [par. 92]). After the conquest of Constantinople, the leaders of the crusade installed Baldwin of Flanders as their new emperor, completely disregarding any notion of divine right. The *Gesta Innocentii III*, an apologetic account of the pope's reign, significantly connects Alexius, Boniface, and Phillip with the plan to invade Constantinople while reiterating papal disapproval.¹⁶ The *Gesta* records that Boniface attempted to renegotiate support for Alexius' cause after the pope had already expressed his disfavour to the latter, revealing early ambitions from the Normans to alter destinations (Anonymous, *Deeds*, LXXXII, 129-131). Boniface and Phillip were both aware of the papal prohibitions on conquering Constantinople before the crusade had even sailed to Zara. Therefore, the leadership's disregard for papal disfavour indicates the secularisation of the crusade, moulding religion to fit the ambitions of the individuals.

Innocent III suspiciously blamed Venetians for corrupting the crusade's purpose. Venetians were no more to blame than any other participant, who were constrained by a chain of unfortunate and unpredictable events. The pope, however, was not surprised by the outcome of the crusade. In November of 1202, Innocent warned Alexius III of the possibility of a diversion to Constantinople (Innocent III, *Register*, 5:121 [122]). Innocent decided to lift the excommunication of the Franks after the diversion to Constantinople. For Nicol, it signified that the crusaders sailed with "connivance if not the with the blessing of Innocent III".¹⁷ Despite Innocent's suspicion of Venetian corruption, preserving their excommunication was merely the

¹⁵ Neocleous (2012), 191-192

¹⁶ Folda (1965), 290

¹⁷ Nicol (1966) in Hussey (1966), 280.

pope's strategy of deflecting blame. Given the delicate state of the expedition by the time Constantinople became its destination, Innocent's strategy was a desperate attempt to unite crusaders. Young Alexius' vow to unite the Orthodox and Roman churches sympathised Innocent, who had patiently pursued the issue with Alexius III in 1198 with no success (Anonymous, *Deeds*, LX, 77-81). However, as argued by Neocleous, neither Clari nor Villehardouin's account record the prospect of church union featuring in the discussions of Alexius's proposal at Zara and Corfu.¹⁸ Religion, therefore, was not significant for the crusaders' decision to change their destination. The Fourth Crusade's long-term impact was to intensify the ecclesiastical schism between east and west, rendering Innocent's strategy worthless.

From the perspective of the chain of events theory, Venice had no villainous role in the Fourth Crusade. Proponents of this argument adopt Villehardouin's narrative of the crusade, blaming fate as the agent guiding the crusaders. A choice stemmed from the author's reliability as a participant and member of the leadership of the crusade. The 1198 ill-advised treaty between Venice overestimated personnel numbers, leading to an inability of the crusaders to pay their due. At this point, the crusaders faced an ultimatum between disbanding the expedition or accepting Venice's will, resulting in a diversion to Zara. Alexio's promises and financial factors compelled crusaders to sail to Byzantium (Clari, *conquête*, 18-21 [par. 16]). Once at Constantinople, Alexius IV could not fulfil his promises while relying on the crusaders to keep his power. Ultimately, Alexios V deposed the young emperor, and the attack on Constantinople was justified by condemning the actions of the usurper (Villehardouin, *Conquest*, 224-225). M. Angold's understanding of the venture as "problems faced and decisions made" is compatible with the experience of the crusaders.¹⁹ The chain of events corroborates an absence of Venetian predisposition to conquer Byzantium. Proponents of the accident theory discredit arguments revolving around Venetian commercial ambition causing the events of the crusade. Queller and Madden have ruled out any potential Venetian grudge, as Byzantium had diligently paid back approximately 85% of the amount owed to them from the 1171 incident.²⁰ Venice's beneficial relationship with the east by the eve of the Fourth Crusade was evident from

¹⁸ Neocleous (2012), 197

¹⁹ Angold (2014), 79

²⁰ Queller and Madden (1997), 84

Byzantine's recognition of Venetian's extraterritorial status in 1198.²¹ Hence, no precondition warranted a Venetian desire to divert the crusade to Constantinople.

Generally, the events of the Fourth Crusade were a chain of events; however, every event had a cause. The events that transpired were not a result of God's wishes, as Villahardouin claims (Villehardouin, *Conquest*, 231).²² Accepting his version of the Fourth Crusade is problematic, for Villahardouin's proximity to the leadership implies he was involved in decision-making. The counsellor's apologetic account can be interpreted as an attempt to exonerate himself and the leaders before the foreseen criticism they would face. A closer analysis reveals that an interplay of mistakes and ambitions played a significant role in the Fourth Crusade. M. Meschini convincingly argues that failures of the crusade's leadership allowed the Venetians to exert control over the expedition. By failing to offer a counterproposal of debt annulment or reduction to Venice's offer of a simple postponement, crusaders became "the agents of the Venetians".²³ Dandolo exploited the failures of the crusade's leadership to pursue his ambitions. Nevertheless, accusers of Venetian manipulation overlook the significance of the March 1204 treaty formed between the Crusaders and Venetians. It established the division of Constantinople and the Byzantine empire among the leaders, sealing the intentions of attacking the capital. Hence, the attack on Constantinople was not planned nor foreseen by the crusade's leadership, as a similar contract would exist as proof.²⁴

Some scholars have perceived the events of 1204 as the inevitable result of Byzantium's internal divisions and the empire's interaction with the west, limiting Venice's role in the Fourth Crusade. Provincial separatism impaired Byzantium from uniting against the Fourth Crusade. Local *archontes* in Philadelphia, Macedonia, and Trebizond had already broken ties with Constantinople, while Bulgaria and Serbia were both independent by 1202.²⁵ Constantinopolitan politics favoured the capital's ambitions and ultimately caused its downfall. The development of local interests in provinces diverged from Constantinople's and encouraged local *coups d'état*.²⁶ Meanwhile, Byzantium's questionable diplomacy, especially during the Third Crusade, deteriorated its reputation in Europe. In line with Harris' view,

²¹ Angold (2014), 58

²² Further examples of Villehardouin's belief in fate are available in 86, 228, and 253

²³ Meschini, M. in Madden, T.F. (Ed.) (2008), 33

²⁴ Meschini, M. in Madden, T.F. (Ed.) (2008), 34

²⁵ Harris. J (2014), 157-158

²⁶ Angold. M (1999), 271-272

Isaac's collusion with Saladin to halt Frederick Barbarossa from reaching the holy land "provided a justification for aggression" and "its weakness furnished an opportunity".²⁷ Hence, internal weakness and diplomatic betrayals contributed to the Fourth Crusade's decision to divert. Despite blaming the Fourth Crusade on the Venetians, Ostrogorsky concedes that the idea of conquering Constantinople was not new. In the Second Crusade, Louis VII's entourage cogitated the possibility. It was the probable outcome of Barbarossa's expedition, while Henry VI made it his priority once he was crowned king.²⁸ Constantinople's treacherous policies instigated west aggression, while internal weakness facilitated the execution. The Fourth Crusade offered an opportunity to conduct inevitable consequences of Byzantine transgressions, making it challenging to allocate blame onto its participants. While still convincing, a study of long-term decline cannot exonerate the leaders of the crusade, especially the Doge, from their crimes. The Venetians were pivotal in encouraging the diversion of the expedition, as ambition replaced religion in guiding the crusade.

In conclusion, Venetians were responsible for diverting the Fourth Crusade to Zara. Financial factors, namely the debt owed by the crusaders, forced them to accept Venetian commands and heed their requests. Contrary to Nicol's argument, the Doge did not orchestrate an attack on Constantinople. Despite their disagreements, Venice and Byzantium enjoyed a peaceful mutualistic relationship by the eve of the Fourth Crusade. Therefore, short-term factors account for the Venetian role in agreeing to the diversion to Constantinople and its subsequent conquest. The empty promises of young Alexius instigated a chain of events exploited by the crusade's leaders. Simultaneously, diplomatic failures and internal weakness facilitated the final conquest. Venetians had a limited role in the fall of Constantinople. Boniface and Phillip espoused Alexius' cause before the crusade set sail as a pretext to invade Byzantium. Regardless, Venetians were motivated by greed and were not opposed to delivering the final blow on Constantinople.

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²⁷ Harris. J (2014), 159

²⁸ Ostrogorsky (1968), 414

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