

An assessment of the schools of thought on the Fourth crusade.

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ABSTRACT: The Fourth Crusade has long puzzled scholars, particularly concerning its diversion to Constantinople. This essay examines the competing explanations for the diversion: conspiracy theory, accident theory, and the impact of long-term relations between Byzantium and the Latin West. Conspiracy theorists argue that the Doge of Venice, Boniface of Montferrat, and Phillip of Swabia orchestrated the diversion for political and financial gain. However, the essay refutes these claims, citing a lack of definitive evidence. Instead, it contends that accident theory — suggesting the diversion resulted from a series of unintended events driven by financial miscalculations and Prince Alexios' unfulfilled promises — provides the most convincing explanation. Additionally, the essay explores Byzantium's fragile internal state and its deteriorating relations with Venice and the Latin world, though it finds these factors secondary. While acknowledging the merits of conspiracy theories, the essay concludes that accident theory offers the most substantiated and logical account of the Fourth Crusade.

The Fourth Crusade presents an enigma to scholars. what caused the diversion to Constantinople? Was it planned? If so, who was responsible? If not, does Byzantium share any of the blame? In attempting to answer these questions, three schools of thought have been formed.¹ The conspiracy theory understands the crusade's diversion as an orchestrated plot, while internally disagreeing on the party responsible. Accident theorists subscribe to Villehardouin's version of the expedition guided by fate, suggesting that an inevitable and unfortunate chain of events culminated in Constantinople's doom. Recent scholarship has alternatively suggested that long-term relations between Byzantium and the Latins, combined with the proliferation of internal disputes, caused the empire's downfall. This essay will provide a historiographical discussion of the Fourth Crusade to find the most convincing school of thought.

This essay will begin by recognising the merits of conspiracists who connect the doge's grudge with Byzantium to the republic's manipulation of the crusader army. After refuting this view

¹ Savvas Neocleous, 'Financial, Chivalric or Religious? The Motives of the Fourth Crusaders Reconsidered', *Journal of Medieval History*, 38 (2012), 183-186; Jonathan Harris, 'The Debate on the Fourth Crusade', *History Compass*, 2 (2004), 1-10.

by offering short-term financial factors as the determiner of Venetian strategy, the accusations of Phillip of Swabia and Pope Innocent III will be evaluated. Convincing evidence will suggest the existence of a German plot to conquer Constantinople as early as 1202, while the pope's innocence will be demonstrated. The accident argument will be introduced as the most convincing view of the crusade. In recognising the limitations of both the conspiracist and chain of events argument, this paper will maintain the latter's superiority in explaining the Fourth Crusade. Lastly, this essay will divide the discussion of the third school of thought into three parts: Byzantium's relationship with Venice, Byzantium's relationship with the rest of the Latin world, and Byzantium's internal troubles. Overall, accident theory currently provides the most convincing and logical account of the crusades. However, conspiracists are not incorrect in asserting the existence of a plot. This essay encourages the reader to re-assess the possibility of German and Venetian involvement. Sadly, no incontrovertible evidence has been encountered by scholars, and perhaps it never will; however, the greatest crime against humanity deserves to have its perpetrator discovered, if one exists.²

Some conspiracy theorists convincingly affirm that the Doge ingeniously used the debt owed by the crusaders to divert the enterprise based on long-held beliefs. Dandolo's hatred of the Greeks inspired the diversion to Constantinople. Niketas Choniates, the Grand Logothete of the Byzantine Empire under the Angelus dynasty, recognises Byzantium's "insulting treatment of his nation" as the cause for Dandolo's predisposition to conquer Constantinople.³ In 1171, Emperor Manuel arrested all Venetians in his empire, confiscating their goods and impairing the Venetian monopoly. Venice promptly organised an expeditionary force to meet with Manuel, of which the future doge was a part. Aside from dealing with a plague and being rejected by the emperor, Dandolo was blinded. Although sources disagree as to what caused it, a fanciful contemporary chronicler claims Manuel personally ordered Enrico's eyes to be gouged out.⁴ The 1171 incident was instrumental in Venice's realisation that their interests were dependent on imperial favour, therefore, unsecured. Manuel's ignominious treatment of the Venetian diplomats sealed Dandolo's hatred of the Greeks. The Doge's personal experience with the Byzantines was unpleasant, provoking him to realise, as Ostrogorsky argues, that the

² Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, vol.3 (Cambridge, 1954) 130.

³ Nicetas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniates*. Translated by Magoulias, Harry J. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 295.

⁴ Anonymous, *Chronicle of Novgorod, 1016-1471*. Translated by R. Michell and N. Forbes, Camden Society, 3rd series, xxv (London, 1914), 48.

security of Venetian interests in the east could only be achieved with Byzantium's destruction.⁵ Venetian chronicles place the Doge in the centre of decision-making during the crusade's crucial stages, leading S. Marin to compare them to Choniates' *Historia* in understanding Dandolo's role to be "beyond the enterprise".⁶ The Doge intended to have a Byzantine emperor personally indebted to Venice to secure the republic's stability in the east. Therefore, he promoted the diversion to Constantinople by endorsing Prince Alexios's cause.

Analysing the Fourth Crusade as 'accidents' that created opportunities for conspiracies to arise is distinctly convincing. Venice's favourable relationship with Byzantium by the eve of the crusade, notable through Alexios' 1198 chrysobul, contradicts the idea of an existing grudge. In the document, Alexios recognised the extraterritorial status of Venetians, significantly impairing imperial sovereignty.⁷ Although Venice did not plan an attack on Constantinople, short-term factors influenced their decision to redirect the crusade. Initially, Venice only took the cross once the crusaders had agreed to their proposition of conquering Zara, a vital trading post lost to Hungary in 1186. Driven by self-interest, Venetians accepted to aid in Prince Alexios' cause after he promised a substantial reward in exchange. Once at Constantinople, according to Nicol, Venetian interests could only be served by keeping Alexios IV in power or using the crusade to take what was promised.⁸ Once Alexios IV was deposed, the crusaders had only one choice. Understanding Venetian guilt in terms of financial factors and self-interest is credible. Robert of Clari, a knight part of the rank and file of the crusade, reports that Venice ceased commercial activities for eighteen months prior to the arrival of the crusaders to ensure the navy would be built.⁹ Venice used its leverage of transport to exact the 34,000 silver marks owed to them by the crusaders to divert to Constantinople.

Other conspiracy theorists have convincingly blamed Boniface of Montferrat and Phillip of Swabia for diverting the crusade to Constantinople and causing its demise. Phillip exploited

⁵ George Ostrogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*. Translated by Joan Hussey, (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1968). 413

⁶ Serban Marin, *Between Justification and Glory: The Venetian Chronicles' View of the Fourth Crusade* in Thomas F. Madden, "The Fourth Crusade: Event, Aftermath, and Perceptions: Papers from the Sixth Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East, Istanbul, Turkey, 25-29 August 2004 / Edited by Thomas F. Madden." (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Pub. Co., 2008), 117.

⁷ Michael Angold, *The Fourth Crusade: Event and Context*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014). 58

⁸ Donald M. Nicol, *Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 139.

⁹ Robert de Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, Translated by E. H. McNeal (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 37-39.

Prince Alexios' legitimacy to conceal his desire to rule Byzantium. For Latins, legitimacy was derived from physical descent and the act of usurpation was considered treachery.¹⁰ The *Gesta Innocentii III*, an apologetic chronicle of Innocent's papacy, significantly connects Alexios, Phillip, and Boniface to a premeditated plan to attack Constantinople while establishing papal disapproval.¹¹ It notes Boniface's visit to the pope after a mission at Phillip's court, where the duke attempted to renegotiate papal support for Alexios' cause to divert the crusade.¹² The presence of plans to interfere in Constantinople's monarchical disputes since 1202 is indicative that a chain of events facilitated the completion of the Germanic plan to conquer Byzantium. In 1203, the king disregarded papal prohibitions on attacking Constantinople by invoking the crusade's duty to restore Alexios' inheritance. Villehardouin, a counsel of the crusade's leadership, records Phillip's request to restore the inheritance of those "wrongfully dispossessed", shifting the guiding factor of the crusade from religion to morality.¹³ Phillip was not concerned with chivalrous considerations for reinstating Prince Alexios. In conquering Constantinople, the crusaders disregarded the concept of legitimacy, installing one of their own to serve as emperor.

Innocent III has unconvincingly been accused of causing Constantinople's downfall by some conspiracy theorists. The hesitant and ambivalent policies employed by Innocent suggests a degree of support for Prince Alexios' promise of an ecclesiastical union. The pope only condemned the attack on Zara when the army was camped outside its walls.¹⁴ Innocent was not surprised by the course of events; as his *register* suggests, he had already informed Alexios III of the possibility of a diversion in 1202.¹⁵ D.M. Nicol believes that the promises made by Prince Alexios at Zara and Corfu presented a unique opportunity to the pontiff, who was already faced with the ultimatum of either sanctioning the expedition or losing control.¹⁶ The exchanged letters between Alexios III and the pontiff in 1198 reveal the importance of ecclesiastical union for Innocent III. In Innocent's letter to Alexios III, the Apostolic see is referred to as the "Divine

¹⁰ Neocleous, *Reconsiderations*, 191.

¹¹ Jaroslav Folda, 'The Fourth Crusade, 1201–1203: Some Reconsiderations', *Byzantinoslavica* 26 (1965): 290.

¹² Anonymous, *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III. Translated by James M. Powell*. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 129-139.

¹³ Joinville, & Geoffrey de Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*. Translated by Caroline Smith. (Penguin Books, 2008), 25-26.

¹⁴ Andrew Jotischky, *Crusading and the Crusader States* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2004), 168.

¹⁵ Alfred Andrea and Brett E. Whale, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade: Revised Edition*. (Leiden: BRILL, 2008), 32-39.

¹⁶ Donald M. Nicol, 'The Fourth Crusade and the Greek and Latin Empires, 1204–1261', in ed. J.M. Hussey, *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 4.i, *The Eastern Roman Empire (717–1453)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 280.

head and mother of all the churches”, as the emperor is reminded that the Orthodox Church should not differ on rites nor doctrine.¹⁷ The pope sympathised with Prince Alexios' promise to end the religious schism, as he had long engaged in negotiations with the east to ameliorate the issue. However, the *gesta* confirms that Alexios had already proposed ecclesiastical submission to Innocent in 1202, receiving an unfavourable answer.¹⁸ Conspiracy theoreticians incorrectly blame the pontiff, failing to consider his distance from the leadership. The corruption of the crusader army by Phillip and the Venetians rendered Innocent III unable to control any aspect of the crusade.

Accident theory provides the most convincing analysis of the Fourth Crusade's events. The participants' perseverance to keep the expedition together permitted financial factors to guide events. Villehardouin's apologetic chronicle repeatedly justified the choices made by the crusade's leadership on fate and God's wishes.¹⁹ The modern outlook on fate and God has been transformed, becoming what M. Angold refers to as “problems faced and decisions made”.²⁰ Debt was a pivotal factor in guiding the Fourth Crusade, caused by the miscalculations of the 1201 treaty between Venice and the Franks. The crusaders started the expedition owing Venetians 34,000 silver marks as only one-third of the estimated 33,500 combatants assembled at Venice.²¹ Venetians used the debt to leverage the crusaders into attacking Zara, turning the enterprise into a “tool of conquest”.²² Henceforth, Prince Alexios' promises of vast rewards guided the crusade to Constantinople, while his failure to honour them caused Byzantium's demise. The constant possibility of disbandment forced the Fourth Crusade to be guided by financial factors.

The appeal to allocate blame has clouded the mind of conspiracists, who, in discovering motives, have ambitiously crafted fanciful accusations. Accident theoreticians, such as N. Housley, have justifiably criticised the “circumstantial evidence” used by the conspiracist school of thought. Conspiracists incorrectly treat religious, political, and commercial rivalries between Byzantium and the west as irrefutable evidence of plot intentions. However, “Venetian

¹⁷ Powell, ‘Deeds’, 80.

¹⁸ Powell, ‘Deeds’, 131.

¹⁹ Smith, *Chronicles*, 61 (also in 24, 61, 68).

²⁰ Angold, *Fourth Crusade*, 79.

²¹ Neocleous, *Reconsiderations*, 187.

²² Ostrogorsky, *Byzantine State*, 414.

realpolitik and Frankish greed” or papal ambitions are insufficient to constitute a crime.²³ The 1201 treaty Venice ratified had established Egypt as the crusade’s destination; for Venetians, a diversion was unthinkable until 1203. There is no evidence that Venetians intended to assume control of the crusade indefinitely, as Zara’s conquest was strictly about settling a debt. Resuming the objective to attack Egypt was in Venice’s best interest, for Egyptian commerce presented an unexplored potential.²⁴ Venetian monopoly in Byzantium was not critically threatened as it had been in the previous decades, courtesy of the 1198 chrysobul that reaffirmed Venice’s privileges. Queller and Madden have also dismissed a Venetian attack motivated by a grudge. Aside from doge Enrico Dandolo and his father’s commitment to rebuilding Venice’s alliance with Byzantium, 85% of the reparations owed to Venice from the 1171 incident had been paid by 1203.²⁵ The diversion to Constantinople was not in Venice’s commercial or political best interest. Housley strongly opposes the accusations made against the pope and the Germans. Conspiracists mistakenly assume the degree of control that the leadership could exercise, as the crusade’s destination was a highly debated topic filled with disagreements.²⁶ The disregard for papal guidance and prohibitions epitomises the inexistence of central authority.

However, accepting the accident theory’s axiom that the chain of events was caused by the crusader’s response to Prince Alexios’ proposition in 1203, as encapsulated by Riley-Smith, is problematic.²⁷ Germanic plans directed at placing Prince Alexios on the Byzantine throne existed before the crusade set sail, while attacking Christians was not a problem for the Venetians if it was best for the economy. Self-interest was present in every corner of crusade leadership. The absence of any Venetian account of the Fourth Crusade facilitates the allocation of blame, for Venice “pleaded the fifth amendment”.²⁸ Martin Da Canal’s 1275 chronicle contains the first official Venetian version of events. It is dismissive of the papal protection of Zara, leading Madden to refer to its content as a “pack of transparent lies told to exonerate the Venetians”.²⁹ Conspiracists’ cynical perspective of the Fourth Crusade’s events is convincing,

²³ Norman Housley, ‘The Thirteenth-Century Crusades in the Mediterranean’, in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 5, ed. D. Abulafia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 572

²⁴ Jotischky, *Crusading*, 166.

²⁵ Donald E. Queller & Thomas J. Madden, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople*, with an essay on primary sources by Alfred J. Andrea. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1997), 84.

²⁶ Housley, *Crusades*, 572.

²⁷ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A Short History* (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 130

²⁸ Angold, *Fourth Crusade*, 19.

²⁹ Thomas F. Madden, “The Venetian Version of the Fourth Crusade: Memory and the Conquest of Constantinople in Medieval Venice.” *Speculum* 87.2 (2012): 325

as Venetians did not keep a record of their innocence. A letter sent by Dandolo to Innocent III from 1204, containing the first record of Venetian perspective on the Fourth Crusade, attributed their victory to “divine inspiration”.³⁰ The doge's pre-emptive intention to excuse the events using religious language established a Venetian story guided by faith in the pope's service, innately refuting claims of sabotage. Fate and religion were used as decoys to disguise ambition and self-interest.

Another group of scholars convincingly see the Fourth Crusade as the inevitable result of the growing political and commercial adversary between Venice and Byzantium. During the 12th Century, Venice's relationship with Byzantium reached a nadir, and the Fourth Crusade offered Venice an opportunity to protect and secure its interests in the east. Mutual repugnance was the cause of an incident during the siege of Corfu (1149) when Venetians stole the imperial ship and declared a black-skinned emperor of Byzantium.³¹ Emperor Manuel exacted his revenge in 1171 by imprisoning all Venetians in the empire and confiscating their goods. D.M. Nicol assesses the 1149 incident as a “symptom rather than a cause of the growing estrangement between Byzantium and Venice”, simultaneously recognising the relevance of 1149 and 1171 in creating a feeling of mutual mistrust.³² In a letter sent to the Doge to justify the actions of 1171, Manuel accuses the Venetians of “having a great ambition to betray them to their enemies”.³³ Venetian disrespect and Byzantine suspicion combined to create mutual hatred, expressed by Venice's manipulation of the crusader army to conquer Constantinople. The Venetian expulsion of 1171 was also the turning point for Venice's commercial dominance in the Byzantine empire. Henceforth, Venetian economic power was checked by the imperial favouring of the Pisans and Genoese communities, as emperors exploited the maritime republics' rivalries to prevent monopolistic tendencies. C. Brand is not satisfied with explaining the Fourth Crusade as an accident, claiming that Venice's desire for a monopoly justified Dandolo's support of a diversion.³⁴ Alexios' ascension to the throne in 1195 epitomised Venice's precarious position in Byzantium, as the emperor refused to pay the reparations owed for the 1171 incident and openly favoured the Pisans and the Genoese.

³⁰ Andrea, *Contemporary*, 128-131.

³¹ Magoulias, *Annals*, 50-51.

³² Nicol, *Byzantium*, 88 and 102.

³³ John Kinnamos, *Epitome*, translated by Ch. Brand, *Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus* (New York 1976), 285.

³⁴ Charles M. Brand, *Byzantium Confronts the West, 1180-1204*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968) 195.

Therefore, the crusade generated an opportunity for Venice to secure its interests in Byzantium by placing an emperor indebted to the republic.

Within the same school of thought, other historians implausibly deduce that the growing schism between Byzantium and the Latin world caused the Fourth Crusade. A. Papayianni argues that Byzantium's uncommitted attitude to the crusades' objectives in the Holy Land was a cause for antipathy in the West.³⁵ Greek collusion with Saladin to impede Frederick Barbarossa's progress to the Holy Land during the Third Crusade crucially reveal the lack of synchrony between east and west. Latin resentment for Byzantium's questionable crusading actions dates back to the First Crusade when Alexios I Komnenos broke his vow to provide military support to the Frankish army, almost leading to the demise of the crusade at Antioch. At the moment of the Fourth Crusade, Clari's account reinforces the Greek hatred present among the crusader camp, as the knight describes the Greeks to be worse than Jews.³⁶ An element of Western desire to conquer Constantinople was present in Louis VII's entourage during the Second Crusade; the possibility of an assault seemed imminent under Barbarossa and Henry VI's rule.³⁷ However, the possibility of these issues causing the Fourth Crusade's diversion to Constantinople relies on the existence of said frictions by 1203. Accident theorist J. Phillips convincingly dismisses the presence of any antagonism in 1204. The Greeks had ended their alliance with the Muslims in 1192, the Latin communities of Constantinople were prospering, and the papal letters of 1202 to Alexios III showed no sign of hostility.³⁸ Therefore, Byzantium's relations with the Latin world did not cause the Fourth Crusade's diversion to Constantinople.

In analysing the empire's fragility, some scholars have unconvincingly explained the events of the Fourth Crusade in terms of internal frictions. Provincial separatism impeded the formation of collective resistance to defend Constantinople. The growth of local interests combined with Constantinopolitan streamlined focus on its own ambitions, as argued by Angold, was the cause for the alienation of provinces.³⁹ Philadelphia, Trebizond, Macedonia, and Cyprus are some of the provinces that defied central governance prior to the Fourth Crusade, while Bulgaria and

³⁵ Aphrodite Papayianni, 'Byzantine Empire', in *The Crusades: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A.V. Murray. 4 vols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 194

³⁶ Malcolm Barber, *The Two Cities: Medieval Europe, 1050–1320* (London: Routledge, 1992), 496.

³⁷ Ostrogorsky, *Byzantine State*, 414

³⁸ Jonathan Phillips, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 311.

³⁹ Michael Angold, 'The Road to 1204: the Byzantine Background to the Fourth Crusade', *Journal of Medieval History*, 25 (1999), 271.

Serbia were independent by 1203. For J. Harris, these signs of internal weakness provided the Latins with an excuse to intervene.⁴⁰ Cyprus was conquered by King Richard of England in 1191, who justified the act on his zeal to ensure the fulfilment of crusade's aims. Prince Alexios' plea for help reinforced the western notion of Byzantine weakness and dependency on Latins. Alexios' plea implicitly confirmed Byzantium's frailty. However, the long history of provincial separatism prevented the fall of the entire Byzantine empire.⁴¹ This school of thought convincingly analyses factors that facilitated the conquest of Constantinople while failing to provide a sound argument for the chain of events that led to the crusade's diversion.

In conclusion, all schools of thought present valuable perspectives on the Fourth Crusade. Conspiracists, dissatisfied with the simplistic acceptance of fate as the diversion's causing factor, find convincing connections between Phillip of Swabia and the Venetians with a plan to conquer Constantinople. However, their reliance on theoretical motives and circumstantial evidence affects the reliability of their account. Scholars that have studied the relationship between Byzantium and the west & internal conflicts credibly blame the Fourth Crusade on Greek hatred. Nevertheless, past grievances can only constitute motives for diverting, not causes. The accident school of thought is the most convincing scholarship on the Fourth Crusade, as it logically explains the chain of events that took place. It does not rely on theories and incoherent evidence and is substantiated by the chronicles of Villehardouin and Clari. It is not a perfect explanation of the Fourth Crusade, as it dismisses the roles of individuals in causing the diversion. Until more evidence is uncovered, accident theory will remain the most convincing school of thought on the Fourth Crusade.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades*, (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc: London, 2014), 158-159.

⁴¹ Angold, *Fourth Crusade*, 43

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