Crusader attitudes towards Byzantium between 1204 and 1453

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The Lost Empire: Byzantium and the Slavs

How did crusader attitudes change towards Byzantium between 1204 and 1453?

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When the Holy Roman Emperor Constantine I decided to transfer his capital from Rome to Constantinople in 330 AD, the world witnessed a shift in power that would cause a political and religious schism in Europe. The consecration of Constantinople was followed by 11 centuries of diplomatic back and forth in Byzantium that saw the Empire under numerous attacks and sieges. The capital however, through diplomatic means, avoided capture until the Fourth Crusade in 1204, where Frankish crusaders sacked the city and subjected it to Latin Crusader Rule for the best part of 60 years. This divided the Byzantine Empire into the weak successor states of Nicaea, Epirus and Trebizond. 1261 saw the retaking of Constantinople by Michael VIII Palaiologus and the rebirth of Byzantium, fuelling hopes for the eastern empire to rise once again. These hopes were never fully realised as Byzantium failed to regain the power, wealth and influence it once held, having a major impact on its relations with the West. This essay intends to analyse how and why the western crusaders’ attitude toward Byzantium changed between 1204 and the eventual fall of the Empire in 1453. In order to do this, one must focus on the importance of Byzantine power in modelling the Empire’s relations with its neighbours, especially the crusaders to the West.

Before the Sack of Constantinople in 1204, the Byzantine Empire had much wealth and influence over its neighbours¹. The Empire was prosperous and incredibly powerful; Byzantines’ use of wealth and their approach to diplomacy were unique and provided the Empire with security and stability.

¹ Vryonis, S. (1967) Byzantium and Europe, pp. 69-70
Throughout its history, the crusaders’ attitude towards Byzantium was formed by the extent of their interest in gaining support from Europe’s political and religious centre\(^2\).

While the Byzantine army was quite small, the Emperors of Byzantium used their immense wealth and their image of power to persuade their neighbours to fight for them and keep them safe, be it through bribes, awards or other Machiavellian means\(^3\).

Being a large power, the Empire was respected by western Europeans, especially the crusaders, who knew that it was smart to cooperate with such an influential European actor. Though relations were often tense and many despised Byzantine ‘greed and pomp’, it was in everyone’s interest to have an ally in Byzantium\(^4\). The First Crusade from 1096 to 1099 is a perfect illustration of crusaders’ attitude toward the Byzantine Empire. A main cause of the Crusade was the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Konenos’ request for western aid in repelling the Seljuq Turks\(^5\). Before 1204, Byzantium served as an important ally and a stopover for crusaders moving towards the East\(^6\). Byzantium’s location was ideal for crusaders to stop on their way to the Middle East, making the Byzantine Empire useful and therefore interesting for the crusaders.

All of this would change in 1204, when the Fourth Crusade ended with the Franks’ sacking of Constantinople. From the First through to the Fourth Crusade, Byzantium proved to be more of a distraction and a tool for crusaders rather than an ally. Byzantine influence managed to keep the crusaders ‘in check’ for years, but as religious differences continued and Byzantium began accumulating debt to support its

\(^{2}\)ibid, pp. 90-93  
\(^{3}\)ibid, pp. 70-72 & 92-95  
\(^{6}\)ibid, p. 17.
extravagant foreign policy, tensions with the West escalated and the crusaders became a proper threat to the Empire. In 1204, the Frankish crusaders turned their attention away from the Holy Land and towards Constantinople. The Franks sacked the city, pillaging most of its treasures and wealth. The Fourth Crusade ended with the establishment of the Latin kingdom of Constantinople.

1204 completely changed the crusaders views of the Byzantine Empire. Latin Rule of Constantinople lasted almost 60 years in which relics and treasures streamed out of the city, stripping it of all its wealth. The great Empire was reduced to small successor states known as Nicaea, Epirus and Trebizond. Nicaea being the most powerful of the successor states, presented the biggest threat to the Crusader rule over Constantinople, however it wasn’t until 1261, under Michael VIII Palaiologus, that the Byzantines succeeded in retaking the city and re-establishing the Empire.

During the 60 years of Latin rule, the remainder of the Byzantine Empire was too weak to be of any interest to the crusaders. Minor incidences aside, crusader-Byzantine interactions were lacking as the former had no interest and the latter no influence.

Jonathan Harris argues that the Fourth Crusade was the beginning of the end of the Byzantine Empire, putting the final nail in the coffin for Byzantine’s relations with the West and the religious Schism between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. When Michael VIII Palaiologus of Nicaea retook Constantinople through efficient territorial

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8 ibid, pp. 186-189
9 ibid, pp. 200-201
10 ibid, pp. 231-232
12 Harris, J. (2006) *Byzantium and the Crusades*, pp. 183-184
expansion and diplomatic moves, he found it in a desolate state; the city had been completely stripped of it wealth and needed much work. In addition to this, the Empire’s previous unity was damaged by the separation between the successor states; while Epirus was reabsorbed by the Empire, Trebizond remained independent. Byzantium could no longer pursue its policy of “deceptive glory”, having lost its territory in Asia Minor\textsuperscript{13}.

Michael’s establishment of the Palaiologan Dynasty allowed Byzantium to regain some of its former power and wealth. While the Empire regained a little of its old influence, many grudges remained and instead of being an engine that drove crusader success, it became just another obstacle, a standard actor amongst neighbouring states\textsuperscript{14}. Crusaders viewed Byzantium as little more than a front line that separated the Ottoman Empire from the rest of Europe\textsuperscript{15}.

After Michael VIII triumph over the crusader rulers of Constantinople in 1261, he re-established all the Greek churches and converted the city back to Orthodoxy. Apart from expanding the Venetian and Genovese Empire, the Latin Rule of Constantinople did very little to further the cause of the crusaders and reunited the western and eastern churches\textsuperscript{16}. The retaking of Constantinople by the Nicaeans left a considerable mark on the relations between Byzantium and the crusader States\textsuperscript{17}. Mongol invasions in the 1240’s pushed back the contemporary Turkish threat of the Sultanate of Rum, making the Latin powers the only menace to Byzantium\textsuperscript{18}. Harry Hazard claims that

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\textsuperscript{13} Vryonis, S. (1967) Byzantium and Europe, p. 167.\
\textsuperscript{14} ibid, pp. 167-169\
\textsuperscript{15} Crowley, R. (2005) Constantinople: The Last Great Siege, pp. 46-48\
\textsuperscript{17} ibid, p. 29\
\textsuperscript{18} Vryonis, S. (1967) Byzantium and Europe, pp. 170-171
\end{flushright}
the term ‘crusade’ received a new meaning after 1261, beginning to also refer to missions aiming at reconquering Constantinople\textsuperscript{19}. The crusader threat almost became reality in 1267, when Pope Clement IV arranged a pact with Charles of Anjou, the brother of the French King and ruler of Sicily, in which Charles received papal support for a crusade against Constantinople. By 1274 however, Michael VIII succeeded in negotiating a unity between the two churches, stopping Charles of Anjou’s attack\textsuperscript{20}. When the new Pope, Martin IV declared the unity of the eastern and western Churches void, Charles once again prepared to launch a crusade on Byzantium. Due to the Empire’s military weakness, Michael VIII had to find an alternative solution to stopping Charles of Anjou and financed the outbreak of the Sicilian Vespers, a revolt that forced Charles to return to Sicily\textsuperscript{21}.

In the late 13\textsuperscript{th} century, direct tensions between East and West settled as the threat of Ottoman invasion had returned. Despite lacking power, Byzantium still presented a form of protection to the West from the Ottomans\textsuperscript{22}. By 1291, the nature of crusading had changed from a desire to conquer the Holy Land, to keeping Catholic territory free from Turkish rule. While Michael VIII worked on restoring the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire presented an increasing threat that would change the relationship between Byzantium and the crusaders. The West viewed Byzantium as a bulwark against the Turks, one that would need crusader support in repelling the Ottoman threat\textsuperscript{23}. The ever-present threat from the East kept crusaders’ interest in Byzantium alive.

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\textsuperscript{19} Setton, K.M. ed. (1969-1989), \textit{A History of the Crusades vol. 2}, p. 29
\textsuperscript{20} Barber, M. (1995) \textit{Crusaders and Heretics, 12\textsuperscript{th}-14\textsuperscript{th} Centuries}, pp. 118-120
\textsuperscript{21} ibid, p. 121
\textsuperscript{22} Vryonis, S. (1967) \textit{Byzantium and Europe}, pp. 171-173
\end{flushleft}
The two last real crusades of the Middle Ages, to Nicopolis in 1396 and Varna in 1443, embody this new crusader mentality. Both military advances had the intention of solidifying the strongholds that separated Europe from the Turks, who had recently celebrated a great victory at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 and were expanding towards the West under Bayezid I Yilidrim, the Thunderbolt, reducing Byzantium to little more than Constantinople and surrounding areas.

Nicopolis, situated on the Danube North of Constantinople, had been conquered along with much of the Balkans by the Ottoman army. The West started a crusade consisting of troops from Bulgaria, Hungary, Wallachia, Germany, Burgundy and France and laid siege to the fortress. The Ottoman presence was a huge risk for the Byzantine Empire as it posed the threat of being surrounded by Turkish forces. On the 25th of September 1396, began the Battle of Nicopolis, one that would end in the defeat of the crusaders and the Turks’ expansion into the Balkans. The crusader armies moved in their own interest and that of the Catholic Church to free Europe of Muslim rule. The West cared little for Byzantium on a personal level and only helped them to provide security for themselves as Turkish expansion into the Balkans presented a threat to Venetian and other lands over the Black Sea.

The same mentality is seen in the crusade of Varna; the situation in the Balkans was escalating and Western Europe’s ‘frontline’ was beginning to crumble. Once again Byzantium and its Slavonic neighbours were in danger of Turkish encirclement and in

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24 ibid, pp. 2-5
27 ibid, 539-540
28 ibid, pp. 544-545
much need of aid. This came in the form of Wallachian, Hungarian and Serbian troops in 1443\textsuperscript{30}. Byzantium’s proximity was important to the crusaders, as proven by the Catholic Church’s decision to launch the crusade after the civil wars in Hungary and Byzantium had ended\textsuperscript{31}. The whole region was falling to the Turks and Varna would be the last real attempt to save the Balkans. The crusade culminated in the devastating defeat at the Battle of Varna on the 10\textsuperscript{th} of November 1444\textsuperscript{32}, one that would ultimately lead to the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Despite seeing the merit in using Byzantium and the Balkans as a shield from the Turks, the crusaders were not prepared to become friendly with the Empire. Under Michael VIII’s follower, Andronikos II, the Byzantines were under constant pressure of having to choose between facing the Turks alone or committing to an undesired unity with the West\textsuperscript{33}. Later Emperors of the Palaiologan dynasty, John V and Manuel II, made many attempts to restore relations with the West. Enduring troubled reigns and struggles for succession, both Emperors wished to re-establish a connection through which they could benefit from crusader forces as the Empire had done from the First Crusade\textsuperscript{34}. John V and Manuel II’s pleas to the West however always ended in shame and failure as the people and church of the East refused to align with the Catholic Church. Despite countless attempts at negotiating unity, the Byzantines were unwilling to surrender their ancient customs and beliefs in order to gain crusader protection, preferring the idea of forming a “pan-Orthodox Balkan coalition” to fight the Turks\textsuperscript{35}.

\textsuperscript{30} ibid, pp. 15-17
\textsuperscript{31} ibid, pp. 11-13
\textsuperscript{32} ibid, p. 41
\textsuperscript{33} Barber, M. (1995) Crusaders and Heretics, 12\textsuperscript{th} -14\textsuperscript{th} Centuries, pp. 120-123
\textsuperscript{34} Setton, K.M. ed. (1969-1989), A History of the Crusades vol. 2, pp. 69-71
\textsuperscript{35} ibid, p. 72
Despite all attempts to expand the Empire and push back the Turks, the crusades to Nicopolis and Varna ended in devastating Christian defeats, allowing the Turks to gain a foothold in the Balkans\textsuperscript{36}. After the failure of these two Christian missions, crusade rhetoric turned away from the Balkans and towards Eastern and Central Europe. After 1444, crusaders moved their focus from Byzantium to Hungary and Austria in a desire to establish a new, stronger bulwark, a desire that would lead to the ultimate fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453\textsuperscript{37}.

As seen above, crusaders’ attitudes towards the Byzantine Empire was subject to much change between 1204 and 1453. After the sack of Constantinople in 1204, Byzantium could no longer enjoy the benefits of crusaders coming to their aid. The small remaining fragments of the Empire were powerless and thus uninteresting to the crusader rulers of Latin Constantinople. After Michael VIII Palaeologus retook Constantinople and began to rebuild the Empire, tensions worsened and the Empire faced constant Latin threat. By the end of the 13\textsuperscript{th} century however, the dynamics in Eastern Europe had changed in the face of the new Ottoman threat; being a neighbouring power to the Turks, Byzantium proved valuable in repressing the Turkish advances. This motivated crusaders to support Byzantium and its neighbouring lands as a bulwark with two notable crusades on Nicopolis in 1396 and Varna in 1444. The failure of these two crusades would make crusaders give up on the idea of Christian Balkans, moving their attention to Hungary and Austria, abandoning Byzantium and leaving it to its fall in 1453.

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