The Sack of Constantinople (1204)

The Sack of Constantinople in 1204 is largely known to us through the writings of historian Nicetas Choniates[1] (c.1140-c.1213).[2] Writing from a Byzantine Christian perspective, he provides a contemporary eyewitness account of the Latin west's violent attack on the capital of Eastern Christianity. Constantinople was the unintended target of the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204) called by Innocent III in 1198 to again journey to the Holy Land.[3] A diversion to Constantinople had not been part of the original papal plan[4] and its actions appalled even the pope, with the devastation of an ancient Christian city by a Christian army profoundly shocking him as a Christian,[5] as well as many others on both sides of Christendom.

The factors leading to this unsanctioned operation lay much with the crusaders debt to the Venetians for transportation contracts[6] and the promise of military and financial help by the son of the deposed Byzantine Emperor[7] with an end to the long-standing fracture between the eastern and western churches if they helped restore his family to the throne.[8] Western monarchs had been reluctant to participate in the fourth crusade, and it fell to barons and nobles to help fund and lead the campaign. Jean Richard concludes that it was 'the absence of a leader able to impose a unified direction',[9] which contributed to crusaders defying original obejectives.

Controversy regarding the Fourth Crusade and Constantinople is perhaps understandable. Nicetas' account illustrates the shock, despair and violence which amounts to murderous barbarism. Even with East-West relations fragmented since the Great Schism (c.1054) hope of reunification had not been lost by some and Innocent III explicitly 'forbade any attack on Constantinople'.[10] Not only must a Christian army raging devastation on an ancient Christian capital have been shocking, but that it was carried out by those supposedly acting in God's name was deeply distressing. We must ask if The Sack of Constantinople can truly be seen in light of crusading or whether it needs to be isolated from militarised pilgrimages called by the Latin Church for God, but carried out by those who happen to be involved in both

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[1] Alicia Simpson, *Niketas Choniates: A Historiographical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199670710.003.0001 [Accessed 27th February 2025] pp. 1-9.
[2] Online Medieval Sources Bibliography, *Author Details, Chroniates, Nicetas Nicetas Akominatos*, (n.d) https://medievalsourcesbibliography.org/authors.php?id=235 [Accessed 1st March 2025].
[3] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War A New History Of The Crusades*, First Pub. By Allan Lane, 2006 (London: Penguin Books, 2007) p. 495.
[4] Ibid. p. 496.
[5] Steven Runciman, *A History Of The Crusades Volume III The Kingdom Of Acre And The Later Crusades*, First Pub. 1951, Reprinted 1951, 1953, 1954, 1957, 1962, 1968, 1975, 1980, 1987 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 128.
[6] Jonathan Phillips, 'The Crusades: A Complete History', *History Today*, Vol. 65 Issue 5 (2015) pp. 1-23 (p.14) https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/crusades-complete-history [Accessed 1st March 2025].
[7] Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church,* New Edition. First Pub. By Pelican Books, 1963, Reprinted With Revisions, 1964, Reprinted In Penguin Books, 1991, Reprinted With Revisions 1993 And 1997 (London: Penguin Books, 1997) p. 60.
[8] R. W. Southern, *The Making Of The Middle Ages*, First Pub. 1953 (London: Pimlico, 1993) pp. 57-58.
[9] Jean Richard, *The Crusades, c.1071-c.1291*, Originally Pub. In French As *Histoire Des Crosisades* By Librairie Artheme Fayad, 1996, First Pub. By Cambridge University Press, 1999 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 252.
[10] Christopher Tyerman, *God's War A New History Of The Crusades*, First Pub. By Allan Lane, 2006 (London: Penguin Books, 2007) p. 510.

objectives. Nicetas's account gives an eyewitness Byzantine viewpoint that appears to portray the attacking western army differently to how we often understand the crusaders treatment of others within Christendom and as less than Christian themselves. Although Christian against Christian clashes were not unknown, for example, The Battle of Grunwald (1410),[11] enemies were usually identified as non-Christian.

Leading up to the capture of the city western troops agreed it should be taken in a 'manner appropriate to the occupation of a Christian city'.[12] However, Nicetas makes it clear the agreement was not obeyed. The devastation, looting and disrespect of holy places and holy items is painfully described with the 'nefarious' attackers actions deemed as 'precursors of the anti-Christ'.[13] We read that the attackers are robbing and insulting Christ. Taken alone it would be difficult, even now, to comprehend that this is describing the behaviour of Christians towards Christians. We can only imagine the horror, fear and disbelief that the occupants of Constantinople must have experienced. The description of the attacks might be more fitting for more commonly assumed crusader enemies such as Muslims. Steven Runciman notes Nicetas stated 'even the Saracens would have been more merciful',[14] a true indicator of the severity of this attack. Nicetas writes that 'one shudders to hear' some of the deeds of these men with the 'most heinous sins and crimes [were] committed'.[15] He uses strong, striking language, particularly evident in the description of one individual he calls a 'harlot', 'a minister of the furies' and 'a servant of the demons',[16] who insults Christ by acting obscenely whilst sitting on the throne of the Patriarch. Runicman highlights 'ghastly scenes of pillage and bloodshed'.[17] The greatest wrongs against God being committed by sinners within Christian Constantinople is illustrated. We cannot ignore how great the terror must have been by the Byzantine victims.

We are told the altar of the Great Church (Hagia Sophia) was violated and vandalised and the spoils were distributed between soldiers. These actions set those responsible apart from crusading doctrine. We see no selfless, humble pilgrims within this atrocity; only greed for their own individual reward. We can suggest that we should not place the Latin westerner's actions during the sack of Constantinople within the expected acts and crusade objectives of taking the Cross. The brutality was not unique within the crusading world, yet the victims were not the usual 'heathen' enemies. The savagery at Constantinople sits on the periphery of the crusading narrative, yet helps to define the Fourth Crusade and its abject failure.

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[11] Richard Cavendish, The Battle Of Grunwald, History Today, Vol. 60, Issue 7 (2010) https://www.historytoday.com/archive/battle-grunwald [Accessed 3rd March 2025].

[12] Jean Richard, *The Crusades, c.1071-c.1291*, Originally Pub. In French As *Histoire Des Crosisades* By Librairie Artheme Fayad, 1996, First Pub. By Cambridge University Press, 1999 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 250-251.

[13] Internet Medieval Sourcebooks, *Medieval Sourcebook: Nicetas Choniates: The Sack Of Constantinople (1204),* (2025) https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/choniates1.asp [Accessed 1st March 2025].

[14] Steven Runciman, *A History Of The Crusades Volume III The Kingdom Of Acre And The Later Crusades*, First. Pub 1951, Reprinted 1951, 1953, 1954, 1957, 1962, 1968, 1975, 1980, 1987 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 123.

[15] Internet Medieval Sourcebooks, *Medieval Sourcebook: Nicetas Choniates: The Sack Of Constantinople (1204),* (2025) https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/choniates1.asp [Accessed 1st March 2025].

[16] Ibid. [Accessed 3rd March 2025].

[17] Steven Runciman, *A History Of The Crusades Volume III The Kingdom Of Acre And The Later Crusades*, First. Pub 1951, Reprinted 1951, 1953, 1954, 1957, 1962, 1968, 1975, 1980, 1987 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 123.

The Byzantines attempted to calm the Latins, but it was too difficult. Can we read meaning in Nicetas's words that God did not assist in calming the attacking sinners as they were not worth saving by Him? Perhaps their heinous actions were too immense for even God's salvation. But God allowed the suffering of the Byzantines. In these times of extreme religious conviction, both sides may have felt what was happening was God's intention. This would be a deeply saddening feeling for the faithful Byzantines, with not only the wrath of the enemy upon them, but also the wrath of God for an unknown reason.

We are offered further extreme imagery of the attackers as 'wrathful barbarians' and are informed of much savagery including rape and captivity. Finally, the grief of Constantinople residents is expressed firmly, felt all over the city, by all. We gain an image of mass terror mixed with weeping, forced poverty, pillage and assault, all of which was condemned by many.

Nicetas Choniates' account shows us that the Byzantium perspective of the Sack of Constantinople was one of shock and fear. Attacks and sieges were not unknown, but a Christian army attacking a fellow Christian community, even if the two had drifted apart, must have been unexpected. Crusading objectives were manipulated away from their true goal of the 'Just War' of the Papacy to meet participants' own secular concerns. Nicetas shows us the horror and distress caused by crusaders deviating from their pilgrimage. The Latin and Orthodox Christian Churches may have separated, but they were still united under the same God. The sack of Constantinople sealed the spilt between Eastern and Western Christendom. It also promoted the idea that crusaders had secular and material motives in which anyone could become an enemy.

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