The Social Crisis in Byzantium after the Fourth Crusade, 1203-1204

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La crise sociale à Byzance après la quatrième croisade

Notre contribution porte sur la crise sociale qui a suivi la quatrième croisade. En 1203-1204 les chrétiens d’occident attaquent la capitale de l’empire byzantin qui est en même temps la capitale de la chrétienté orthodoxe. Cette expédition a détruit et dépecé l’empire byzantin en quatre entités politiques qu’on peut qualifier d’Empires byzantins. Issus de l’éclatement de l’Empire mais opposés les uns aux autres:

– D’abord l’Empire latin fondé par les croisés et qui va lutter pour s’enraciner dans les Balkans.

– Le despotat d’Epire, l’empire de Nicée et l’empire de Trébizonde qui aspirent tous à restaurer l’empire et bien évidemment diriger ce qui sera l’empire Byzantin.

Mais le plus important de tous les résultats est le choc psychologique qu’ont subi les Byzantins. Ils ne pensaient pas que ceux la étaient des chrétiens comme eux. Aux yeux des Byzantins le attaquants de Constantinople – la Stein Polin – ne pouvaient être des Chrétiens: Ils sont des barbares. Nicétas Choniates a exprimé ce sentiment en faisant des comparaisons avec les sarrasins (arabo musulmans) qui a ses yeux se sont comportés avec humanité quand ils ont repris Jérusalem en 1187. Il dit que les sarrasins n’ont pas tué n’ont pas violé les femmes et n’ont pas remplis le cénotaphe du christ avec des morts.

En dépit des détails qu’on peut trouver dans les textes, la quatrième croisade a contribué à creuser réellement un fossé entre les deux chrétientés: le catholicisme et l’Orthodoxie.

En définitive la quatrième croisade a poussé Byzance à se rapprocher plus de l’Orient ce qui a d’une manière indirecte facilité l’installation progressive des Turcs sur les terres byzantines pour finir par engloutir tout l’empire le 29 mai 1453.
I. The Crusades

On 27th November 1095, Pope Urban II gave one of his most important speeches, the results of which are still with us. His speech engaged western Christians in general, especially those in the western part of Europe, to go and liberate their fellow Christians living in the Muslim world.\(^1\)

The Pope’s speech used religion to legitimize his call to arms against Europe’s oriental neighbors under the banner of Christ. The Pope’s aim was clear when, speaking to Christians in front of Clermont Ferrand church, he said that “the land between the sea and mountains can not contain you while land of orient was of flowing milk and honey”.\(^2\)

II. The Fourth Crusade

In July 1203, the crusaders settled in Galati and captured its suburbs; they attacked the city by breaking the chain-link closing the harbor of the Golden Horn and occupying part of the sea walls. The Venetians tried to seize the fortified towers by bringing their ships near the sea walls to safely place many armed men on the top of the walls. Their attack finished with the capture of the city. This event created the First “Crusade” inside the Christian world called the Fourth Crusade.

The capture of Constantinople was one of the most important in the history of Christianity during the Middle Ages. It allowed Christians from across Europe to see and evaluate each other, but it revealed that Christianity was not the unifying force they proclaimed it to be, that economic and political agendas took priority when interests conflicted. It witnessed not only Christians fighting Christians and Muslims, but also Christians fighting alongside Muslims against other Christians under the same flag, the banner of Christ.\(^3\)

European historians writing on the Fourth Crusade, they often focus on the mutual incomprehension between the different protagonists as the main reason for the conflict between them.

But this explanation is unconvincing, as the Fourth Crusade was more destructive for the Byzantines than any other war or any other military action engaged against the setein polin. Prior to the Fourth Crusade, Constantinople had withstood forty-four sieges – the first to capture it were not Muslims, they were the crusaders off the Fourth Crusade, Christians who had supposedly come to defend Constantinople, not sake it. The Byzantines of Constantinople regarded the crusaders not as Christians, but as barbarians.

Constantinople had a special place in the minds of Byzantines: it was not only the capital

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1 De Chartres, 1925, p. 20.
2 Ibidem.
of their empire, it was also the center of the Eastern Orthodox Church. They occupied a central place in the Byzantine mind; all Byzantines had an intimate relationship with the city. They believed that their city was protected by God, evidenced by the dozens of sieges it had withstood against the Arabs, Turks, and Russians, and would continue to withstand until its final conquest in 1453. They were confident in its ability to resist all enemies. They were proud of being Romans – the term “Byzantine” (from Byzantium, the pre-Roman name of Constantinople) was not used by the Byzantines themselves, it was introduced by historians in the XVIIth century. In contemporary texts, we we find only Romaioi and its equivalent in different languages: Romaioi, Roum, etc. Many scholars do not have a clear picture of this history and, as a result, find themselves sometimes struggling to understand the development of Mediterranean history in the Middle Ages or even modern times. This is why we need Byzantine history to understand, contextualize, and explain some historical facts in the Mediterranean world.

III. Some political considerations and consequences of the Fourth Crusade

(a) By sacking Constantinople, the crusaders fragmented the Byzantine Empire into several polities: two in Asia Minor (the Empire of Nicaea and the Empire of Trebizond) and a third in Greece (the Despotate of Epiros), with the imperial capital of Constantinople standing only as a symbol of former unity. The different polities, or Byzantine empires, resulting from the Fourth Crusade nonetheless sought to expel the crusaders and rebuild a unified empire. Their political and military efforts continued for more than a half of century to before they finally realized their goal in 1261, under the leadership of Michael VIII Paleologus.

(b) The Fourth Crusades’ conquest and control of the Byzantine Empire was, in fact, an early phase of European colonization preceding the modern era of European imperialism in the Middle East.

(c) The Fourth Crusade shows us that the idea of “crusade” had evolved from a fight against just Muslims to a fight against schismatic or heretical Christians as well.

(d) The conquest of Constantinople had opened the door to allow for different kind of Christian wars. The concept of the “holy war” evolved after the Fourth Crusade: the papacy engaged in different expeditions against other Christians, such as the Albigensian Crusade or Cathar Crusade (1209-1229) in the south of France in the name of Jesus. The Fourth Crusade is important not only because of the impact it had on the Byzantine Empire, but also because of its impact Christian political thought. After the Fourth Crusade, Europeans began to legitimize their wars with their fellow Christian Europeans in religious terms as not only

4 Dujčev, 1975, pp. 24-25.
5 Ducellier, 1976, p. 110.
a “justifiable war” or “legitimate war”, but also a “just war” and a “holy war”. Modern historians of the Middle Ages must remember the famous expression of the First Crusaders: “God likes it”.

(e) The most important political consequence of the Fourth Crusade was the subsequent closer relations between the Byzantine and Muslim worlds, which had important effects on the relations between Christians and Muslims in general.8

IV. Some social consequences of the Fourth Crusade

(a) The expulsion of the Greek population from Constantinople, creating a refugee problem across the Byzantine Empire.

(b) Some families were divided into groups and exiled to different part of the empire. The best example is the family of the historian Nicetas Choniates, whose family was separated following the conquest of Constantinople in 1204: his brother Michael in Athens retired to the island of Ceos after the conquest, where he lived in poverty, and refused invitations to win Nicaea or Epirus. He eventually moved to Sélymbrie till 1206 when he went living at Nicaea in a modest life and he eventually died in c.1222 (although some chroniclers date his death to c.1214). The chronicles tell us mainly about the social elite, they well us less or little about the common folk, some of whom lost their freedom, becoming surfs in the feudal system the crusaders introduced.

(c) The feudal system – a social, political and economic way of life – was specific to Western Europe and, prior to the Fourth Crusade, had not existed east of the Loire and Rhone according to E. Perroy. One of the results of the Fourth Crusade is the introduction of the well-known oath, made by a vassals to his master (the king or the other noblemen): “Sire, I am your man”. This way of living and thinking was alien to the Byzantines.9 They byzantine did not recognize bondage, they believed that all people are free. In place of surfs, the Byzantines had parakoi, free peasants unattached to a nobleman. It was only after the Fourth Crusade the parakoi and the ancient pareques became serfs and vassals. With this change, we see the introduction of new terms and concepts obliging the common people to submit to the new feudal order.

(d) The Byzantines saw those who attacked Constantinople as barbarians, not as fellow Christians. Anne Comnene expressed this idea clearly at the time: “My father [Alexis the First] knew that they always have their mouths open and hands tended”. She compared them to crickets that eat both dry and green trees, that destruction and violence was an inherent part of their character.

(e) The Byzantines could not understand how Christians could be so violent – they must not

8 Mansouri, 2009.
be Christian therefore. Supporting this view, we have an eyewitness account by Nicetas Choniates:

How shall I begin to tell of the deeds wrought by these nefarious men! Alas, the images, which ought to have been adored, were trodden under foot! Alas, the relics of the holy martyrs were thrown into unclean places! Then was seen what one shudders to hear, namely, the divine body and blood of Christ was spilled upon the ground or thrown about. They snatched the precious reliquaries, thrust into their bosoms the ornaments which these contained, and used the broken remnants for pans and drinking cups, precursors of the anti-Christ, authors and heralds of his nefarious deeds which we momentarily expect. Manifestly, indeed, by that race then, just as formerly, Christ was robbed and insulted and His garments were divided by lot; only one thing was lacking, that His side, pierced by a spear, should pour rivers of divine blood on the ground.¹⁰

(f) Choniates made a comparison with the Saracens (Muslims), the traditional enemy of Byzantium since the seventh century: “the Sarakinoi, when they took Jerusalem [in 1187 under Saladin], did not kill; they did fill Jesus’ tomb with corpses; and they did not rape ladies – but the Westerners did”.¹¹

(g) The Byzantines were proud of being Romans and democratic, proud of their city as the city of God, and proud of their emperor as the representative of God on earth. The sack of Constantinople left them feeling deeply humiliated, resentful, and bewildered. Why did God not project them from the barbarians? How could God’s elected people be captured, enslaved, and humiliated? Two explanations were advanced by Byzantines:

○ That God had abandoned them for committing sins. The fall of Constantinople was therefore a lesson for those who had disregarded God’s law. This belief caused some Byzantines to favor the idea of union between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, or even to convert to Catholicism themselves. We can also see in this explanation the position of those who were favorable to the Catholic Pope before the Fourth Crusade that the Fourth Crusade was proof of their belief.

○ The second explanation was developed by Nicetas Choniates who famously wrote, “the relics are no longer beneficial and there are no miracles, we toast to the memory of the empire”.¹² For Choniates and other like-minded Byzantine writers, the capture of Constantinople and the fall of their empire meant the end of the world. It was an idea central to Byzantine ideology, that the empire was the world with Constantinople at its center, their the empire’s neighbors were barbarians and the world beyond Byzantium was uncivilized wilderness. The fall of Constantinople therefore meant the end of the world; after the fall, a great change took place in

¹⁰ Choniates, The Sack of Constantinople (1204).
¹¹ Choniates, 1840, p. 425.
¹² Choniates, 1828, pp. 323-338.
Byzantine mentality. They viewed their neighbors and themselves differently after the fall, Constantinople became a city like any other. It lost its sacred status. Many Byzantine exiles in Nicaea and Trebizond began to build new lives and new polities, with new aims. Certainly the reconquest of Constantinople for Byzantium was goal shared by all Byzantines, but the city no longer had the same sanctity it once possessed, it was a tarnished city.

(h) One of Choniates’ texts describes the loss of Constantinople’s monuments, robbing it of its beauty, how the crusaders took many columns and statues made of copper and bronze and shipped them to Venice to decorate its city square and the church of St Marco.

V. Conclusion

Perhaps the most significant result of the Fourth Crusade was the psychological shock it delivered to the Orthodox East, polarizing relations between it and the Christian West in the XIIIth Century, causing a sharp break between the two – a break deeper than the schism of 1054, one that is still felt today.

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