Defining Thirteenth-Century Chivalry: Crusader Justification for the Fourth Crusade, 1198-1204

Dominic Sheehan

During the Middle Ages, there were many Crusades, but none were as complex and puzzling as the Fourth Crusade. While the mission of the Fourth Crusade was to recapture Jerusalem, instead, Constantinople was destroyed and never returned to its former glory as the jewel of the Christian world. In 1198, Pope Innocent III called for the Fourth Crusade to recapture the Holy Land.[1] Innocent III's preachings gave the Fourth Crusade a higher purpose. This paper argues that the crusaders had to rely on their chivalric ideology as a guide throughout the Fourth Crusade because it lost its higher purpose thanks to betrayal by the pope, fellow crusaders, and leadership. Innocent III wanted his campaign to mirror the outcome and standard of the First Crusade called by Pope Urban II in 1095.[2] Urban wanted to unify the Latin and Orthodox churches through the First Crusade, and in return, he would assist the kingdom of Byzantines emperor Alexios I Komnenos.[3] Christendom recaptured Jerusalem from the Muslims in a turn of events, but failed in unifying the two churches. The success led to crusading becoming a cornerstone of medieval life, but it had changed in the one hundred years following the recapture of the Holy Land in 1099. Innocent III was the primary catalyst for the reformation of the crusading enterprise. These reforms revolved around Christian mortality and the acts of crusading, which pushed the ideals of *vita apostolica* and *imitatio*

[1] Holy Land and Jerusalem are interchangeable and reference the same area. This is consistent with all scholarships.

[2] Edward Peters, "Innocent III and the Beginning of the Fourth Crusade," In *Papacy, Crusade, and Christian-Muslim Relations*, ed Jessalynn L. Bird, 124.

[3] The word Byzantine is a by-product of modern historiography. In reality, Byzantines saw themselves as Romans and occupied parts of Greece and modern-day Turkey. When I reference Byzantine, I mean the Greeks because that is how Latins recognized them, who represented anyone coming from modern-day Western Europe. The Greeks were Orthodox Christians, and the Latins were Roman Catholic, thus dividing Christianity.

Christi.[4] Christian warriors utilized these two ideologies, which meant "like an apostle" and "imitation of Christ." Ultimately, the crusaders went against their vow by attacking Latin Christian Zara and Orthodox Christian Constantinople. The idea of chivalry was so embedded in crusader culture that it was the primary justification used by chroniclers for attacking the Christian cities of Zara and Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade. My goal for this paper is two-fold, the first is giving a tangible definition for thirteenth century chivalry and using it to justify the actions of the crusaders during the Fourth Crusade. The definition of thirteenth-century chivalry is a warrior ideology that can have a higher purpose but revolves around camaraderie amongst warriors and the bloodshed of one's enemy and self. Stepping away from the thirteenth century and looking at the twenty-first century, medieval chivalry is a masculine ideology that is a part of the US military. Even though the US military is integrated to include women and LGBTQIA+ people they still have to prove their masculine worth to be accepted into the US military ethos. This comes from the fact that medieval chivalry still holds weight among modern-day warriors.

Medieval Terminology

Before continuing, I must clarify some terminology used throughout the paper. Firstly, for this paper, the concept of chivalry is an ideology that began when preaching of the First Crusade commenced. The backbones of the uses of chivalry are religiosity and warfare. Since this paper explores the concept and practice of chivalry before it is defined, its primary purpose is an ideology that crusaders carried out to be better Christians. My definition arises because, ultimately, chivalry is just an ideology. However, a powerful ideology that dominated the minds of warriors who participated in any Crusades. This paper documents the concept and practice of chivalry. When primary sources talk about honor, pride, violence, vows, and suffering while on Crusade, this is chivalric language.

Next, exploring Christianity as a religion is complicated, and this paper explores it from two sides. The first is Roman

[4] Peters, "Innocent III and the Beginning of the Fourth Crusade," 121.

Catholicism, also known as Latin Christianity or Western Christianity; this was the version of Christianity responsible for calling the Crusades. The other side is Orthodox Christianity, also known as Greek Christianity or Eastern Christianity; this was the predominant version in Byzantine and Russia around the Middle Ages. During this period, duality hindered the relationship between these two sects of Christianity, and it came to a head during the Fourth Crusade.

The last topic I need to cover is the use of Christian warriors and crusaders instead of knights. In primary and contemporary sources, they use the word knight to describe a warrior who went on a crusade. For my paper, I choose not to use knights as a descriptor of the crusaders because of the connotations involved; knights save the woman in the tower or sit with King Arthur at a round table. These would be all correct assertions if I were talking about knights in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. Since the word knight conjures up said assumptions, I chose to call them warriors or crusaders, which is accurate.

In looking at chivalry in its infantry, one finds that all that matters to warriors is showing military prowess through violence in a way that was *imitatio Christi*. Post-thirteenth-century writers romanticized chivalry and took the focus off its true nature, which was violence. The primary sources are first-hand account narratives of the Fourth Crusades. The Fourth Crusade sources are multiple perspectives ranging from crusaders to a nobleman in Byzantine. Geoffrey of Villenhardouin was a leader of the Fourth Crusade, and Robert of Clari was a poor crusader whose accounts have a different vantage point. For most Crusades, there are not multiple known chroniclers from different ranks in the army, making their perspective unique. *The Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade* is a collection of letters to and from Innocent III while also holding anonymous accounts from crusaders. Niketus Choriate's account of the Crusade is the Byzantine perspective of how the events unfolded. The evidence from these primary sources helps craft narratives of how chivalry was explored and used in practice during the Fourth Crusade.

Chivalry and Fourth Crusade Historiography

The concept of chivalry is complex and difficult to grasp, even with all the historical research on it today. It is easy to get caught up in romantic poetry and its beautification in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. What differentiates this research paper from others is that it explores the concept and practice of chivalry in a period when it was undefined and gives it a definition. Chivalry was established in the eleventh century alongside the First Crusade and was inseparable from Christian warriors during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[5] Crusading was holy warfare conducted by Latin Christians to recapture the Holy Land, convert pagans, eliminate the Muslim threat in Iberia (Spain and Portugal), or eradicate heretics/schismatics. According to leading historians, chivalry was an essential part of crusader ideology. For centuries, violence was the foundation for a warrior's existence, and thanks to the preaching of the Crusades, that same violence also had a religious purpose. The concept of chivalry was essential to how warriors carried themselves on the battlefield and in day-to-day life. Peter Coss summarizes medieval chivalry as an ethos, way of life, and code of values used by crusaders.[6]

Coss' argument partially sums up this paper's exploration of the concept of crusader chivalry. However, his definition makes chivalry seem easy to understand when in reality, it is still being explored and understood by contemporaries. To Coss' credit, he also says chivalry is void of a singular definition.[7] His basis for creating a definition was to help people understand the concept of chivalry generally and where he misses the mark is what it looks like in practice. Richard W. Kaeuper's definition of chivalry also aligns with this paper's definition but plays into individual warrior aestheticism when the Fourth Crusade does not have that. Individual aestheticism draws from how a single warrior acts to be closer to Christ. Camaraderie is not the main feature of Kaeuper's definition of chivalry when it is a crucial part, especially during the Fourth Crusade. Each warrior had to trust

[5] Robert W. Jones and Peter Coss, *A Companion to Chivalry* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 38.
[6] Jones, A Companion to Chivalry, 7.
[7] Jones, 7.

one and other during the Fourth Crusade because circumstances shaped the outcome in 1204. One other major conclusion drawn by historians Peter Sposato and Samuel Claussen is that medieval chivalry's most important two pillars were "prowess and honor," which "produced an identity and lifestyle centered in violence."[8] What Sposato and Claussen argue is only partially correct because they forget how vital *vita apostolica* and *imitatio Christi* are to chivalry. Chivalry is not strictly about a warrior in battle or religion; it is an equal part of both. The Fourth Crusade's warriors lend their success to the chivalric violence carried out in the name of crusading. By doing this, crusaders see what they are doing as a just deed for Latin Christendom and their warrior virtue.

The creation of a new class of warriors, unique to Christianity, also came from the calling of the First Crusade. The Latin Church invented *milities Christi* (militia of Christ)[9], a group dedicated to the service of Christ and practiced chivalry in battle. The only comparable military force during the Middle Ages was the Seljuk Turks, Muslim warriors who followed *jihad*[10] (holy war carried out to protect Islam). One could argue that the Crusades were Christianity's version of jihad. Chivalry to Christian warriors was grounded in four main ideas, violence, military prowess, honor, and servitude to Christ. For the crusaders, the utilization of linking religion and violence as a sense of purpose was dangerous. In its earliest form, chivalry was a "cult" of warriors.[11] For Christian warriors, the concept of chivalry and Christianity were equally important. Warriors were devout and knew that they were better Christians by following the ideology of chivalry. The creation of a cult of chivalric warriors helped strengthen camaraderie, which resulted in the formation of a

---

[8] Peter Sposato and Samuel Claussen, "Chivalric Violence," in A Companion to Chivalry, ed. Robert W. Jones and Peter Coss (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 100.

[9] Peter Coss, "The Origin and Diffusion of Chivalry," in *A Companion to Chivalry*, ed. Robert W. Jones and Peter Coss (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 16.

[10] There is lesser jihad and greater jihad. Lesser involves holy warfare, and higher is an internal struggle with sin.

[11] Matthew Bennett, "The Manuals of Warfare and Chivalry," in *A Companion to Chivalry*, ed. Robert W. Jones and Peter Coss (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 268-269.

brotherhood that played a pivotal role in the decision-making of the Fourth Crusade. The new chivalric cult created an ideology of higher power amongst warriors. Warriors soon saw their suffering as an *imitatio Christi*, meaning that their pious behavior granted them atonement for what would be considered sins.[12] Warriors could commit acts of violence against their enemy and still make it to heaven. With the help of Crusade preachings, chivalric warriors also believed that all "good fighting" was worthy of salvation.[13] Warriors understood their role in crusading efforts better thanks to crusade preachers who acted as a proxy for how to be chivalric.

Origins of Crusading Movement

To understand why the Fourth Crusade happened, we must again look back to the preaching of the First Crusade in 1095. Urban II preached the expulsion of enemies of Christendom from all rightful lands of Christ. The open-ended nature of Urban's preachings led to misinterpretations in the future, but warriors never faced any real consequences. The first group slaughtered by Christians were Jews in the Rhineland in the winter of 1095-96.[14] The attack of the Jews as an enemy of Christ was the first instance of said misinterpretation, but this would not be the last time it happened.

The outcome of the First Crusade had Christians controlling the Holy Land from 1099-1144 until the Fields of Blood incident in Edessa, which saw the slaughtering of crusaders at the hands of Muslims.[15] The outcome of the Fields of Blood resulted in the calling of the Second Crusade. Overall, the Second Crusade was notable for being a "failure" and demoralized Christians to the point that they did not take up crusading for another forty years.[16] The people of Western Christendom thought Jerusalem would never be recaptured by the Muslims, but the

---

[12] Richard W. Kaepuer, *Holy Warriors: The Religious Ideology of Chivalry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 61.
[13] Coss, "The Origin and Diffusion of Chivalry," 31.
[14] Christopher Tyerman, *Chronicles of the First Crusade*, 1096-1099 (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 31-32.
[15] Johnathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 121.
[16] Riley-Smith, *The Crusades*, 131.

Second Crusade proved otherwise. Finally, in 1187 the Third Crusade was called by Pope Gregory VIII in response to the catastrophe at the Battle of Hattin, which saw the Holy Land fully controlled by Muslims.[17] The Second and Third Crusade's main objective was to gain revenge for fallen comrades, and recapturing the Holy Land became a secondary goal. The theme of revenge stuck with the enterprise of crusading and percolated into the practice of chivalry. By the time the Fourth Crusade rolled around, the crusaders had seen more failures than successes in the Holy Land.

The Fourth Crusade: Background

Warrior understanding of the Crusades differed, especially during the Fourth Crusade. Carl Erdmann sums up Christian holy warfare with three distinct possibilities, "a war against heavens, a war between Christians for reasons of ecclesiastical mortality, and a hierarchical war for the rights of the papacy."[18] The Fourth Crusade covers the first two of those possibilities. When it comes to research on the Fourth Crusade, it disappears following the early 2000s. In looking at the Fourth Crusade through the lens of chivalry, this paper aims to recontextualize and reestablish interest. There are a select bunch of historians[19] who have researched the Fourth Crusade. Donald E. Queller and Thomas F. Madden agree that the Venetians played as essential of a role as the crusader did since they provided a massive fleet led by Doge Enrico Dandolo.[20] The Venetians are vital to the story of the Fourth Crusade but are portrayed negatively by chroniclers. Historians have made a concerted effort to change the Venetian's image surrounding their involvement in the Fourth Crusade. Historians did this because the Venetians did not write down their experiences during the Fourth Crusade. Stolen artifacts from Constantinople, still on display to this day,

---

[17] Riley-Smith, 137.

[18] Carl Erdmann, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), 156.

[19] They are Michael Angold, Thomas F. Madden, Donald E. Queller, and Alfred J. Andrea.

[20] Queller, *The Fourth Crusade*, 44. Michal Angold shares this sentiment in his book *The Fourth Crusade: Events and Context*. Doge Dandolo was also blind and in his late eighties or early nineties.

tell the history of the Fourth Crusade. Madden is a stout defender of the Venetians and has tried to craft a narrative of their version of the Fourth Crusade. The importance of the Venetians in this paper is that they did not influence or hinder the crusader's ability to carry out their chivalric duties. The Venetians only wanted commercial benefits from the Byzantines because they were a sea trading people.[21] Madden also explored the idea of the Fourth Crusade being "governed by vows and contracts and the length to which men went to fulfill them."[22] Crusaders needed to fulfill these contracts linked back to honor and pride, which led the Fourth Crusade to kill fellow Christians. Putting medieval chivalry at the forefront of why crusaders carried out their actions in the Fourth Crusade changes how one should think about it. This paper aims to propel people's understanding of how warriors understood their roles during the Crusades by exploring the ideological nuance of chivalry during the Fourth Crusade.

Pope Innocent III's Influence

Leading up to the Fourth Crusade, Pope Innocent III created many reforms that would affect its outcome.[23] He began by reforming the church and redefining what crusading meant.[24] The main reforms were created because of what crusading had become when he gained the papal throne. Innocent's first encounter with crusading came before he was pope. During the Third Crusade, he learned of the failures of royalty, and in Iberia because European kings hindered "crusade management."[25] Innocent wanted to completely control his crusading venture without the distraction of royal authority. Hence, no Latin kings were leading the Fourth Crusade. The Franks (Latins in France)

---

[21] Michael Angold, *The Fourth Crusade: Event and Context* (New York: Longman, 2003), 54.
[22] Thomas F. Madden, "Vows and Contracts in the Fourth Crusade: The Treaty of Zara and the Attack on Constantinople in 1204," *The International History Review* 15, vol 3 (August 1993), 441.
[23] Peters, "Innocent III and the Beginning of the Fourth Crusade," 118.
[24] Phillipa Hardman and Marianne Alies, "Crusading, Chivalry and the Saracen World in Insular Romance," In *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed Rosalinda Field, Phillipa Hardman and Michelle Sweeney, 45-66, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 45.
[25] Peters, "Innocent III and the Beginning of the Fourth Crusade," 120.

and Venetians, led by Doge Dandolo, were the main ethnic groups who took on the venture of the Fourth Crusade. Unknown to Dandolo, the crusaders did not have enough money to pay for the vessel, so they became obligated to assist the Venetians.[26] Thanks to the lack of money promised by the crusaders, the Fourth Crusade morphed into a journey not involving a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and one where chivalry was more important than Innocent's mission. Betrayal and circumstance shaped why the crusaders acted as they did. Chivalry never betrayed the warriors and became the only possible reason for the success of the Fourth Crusade.

Pope Innocent III was one of the unique popes in the Middle Ages. As the primary catalyst for the Fourth Crusade, he contributed more than just a call to arms. He saw himself as the one who ushered in a new crusading era.[27] He thought very highly of himself and needed the Fourth Crusade to be successful at any cost. In a series of letters, Innocent was in contact with the crusade leadership, reacting to the events unfolding. The legates and cardinals Innocent assigned to act in his stead gave him knowledge of the crusader's actions. The legates were religious officials with the power to make decisions in the pope's name. While looking through these documents, one must understand that when Innocent gave his opinion on the crusader's actions, they had already gone forward unknowingly to the pope. With this in mind, the pope's word still held immense weight to the crusaders even though they would go against him numerous times throughout the Fourth Crusade. Before helping Alexios IV take the Byzantine throne, he approached Innocent in November 1202 to gain papal help against his uncle Alexios III, but Innocent refused.[28] Innocent wanted nothing to do with the troubles in Byzantine. He knew that Byzantine was a distraction from the higher purpose of the Fourth Crusade, which had already been delayed longer than he wanted. Once December 1202 rolled

---

[26] Angold, *The Fourth Crusade: Event and Context*, 56.
[27] Thomas W. Smith, "Preambles to Crusading: The Arengae of Crusade Letters Issued by Innocent III and Honorius III," In *Papacy, Crusade, and Christian-Muslim Relations*, ed Jessalynn L. Bird, 67.
[28] Alfred J. Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000), 35.

around, the crusaders attacked the Christian city of Zara to the dismay of the pope, who compared them to barbarians thirsting "after the blood" of their "brothers."[29] The crusaders followed their chivalric code when accepting the Doge's request to attack Zara. Innocent's attempt to regain control of his Crusade began by stating that he would overlook the crusaders attack on fellow Christians if it meant the Crusade would continue.[30] With Innocent's decree, he justified the crusader's use of violence in Zara, which impacted the remainder of the Crusade. Following Zara, The Fourth Crusade lost its higher purpose; no matter what Innocent said, the crusaders would follow their chivalric instincts. Innocent knew his Crusade was heading in a direction he feared, so he excommunicated the crusaders for sacking Zara.[31] The crusaders were confused by the pope's contradiction and felt betrayed. Following their attack on Zara, all the crusaders could rely on was each other. These same crusaders gave detailed accounts of how the events unfolded and told the story differently.

Robert of Clari's Perspective

First, let us explore Robert of Clari's account, a common warrior's perspective of a soldier taking orders. Before the attack on Zara, one of the Fourth Crusade's biggest issues was Venice's unrealistic treaty.[32] Expectations involving the Venetian treaty hindered the crusaders from completing their original vow. According to Robert of Clari, the Doge took advantage of the crusaders, who lacked money and no way to get to their destinations.[33] The Doge exploited the fact that the crusaders had already abandoned their vow by attacking Zara, which made it easier to convince them to assist Alexios IV. They accepted Constantinople as the new target of the Fourth Crusade making the recapturing of the Holy Land a distant memory. The warriors who helped Alexios IV saw him as the rightful heir and took the journey because of the treasonous capture of Constantinople.[34]

---

[29] Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade*, 41.
[30] Queller, *The Fourth Crusade*, 63.
[31] Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade,* 45.
[32] Queller, *The Fourth Crusade*, 48.
[33] Robert of Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, trans. by Edgar Holmes McNeal (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 45.
[34] Robert of Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, 46.

Crusaders attacked the Orthodox Christians in Constantinople for supporting the heir they thought was not rightful. With this diversion, it solidified that the recapturing of the Holy Land was not going to happen. To make things even more complicated, the crusaders asked the bishops on the expedition if attacking Constantinople was just, and they responded by saying it was "a righteous deed."[35] Crusade leadership, in a letter to Innocent in August of 1203, quantified their fighting in Constantinople to that of fighting Muslims in the Holy Land because it bore the same burden, and they experienced extreme poverty.[36] The crusade leadership knew that the pope would be irate by them helping Alexios IV and attacking Constantinople, so they played into the chivalric nature Innocent preached in his crusade reforms. Betrayal did not escape the crusaders after successfully putting Alexios IV on the Byzantine throne.

Reinstating the rightful heir to the Byzantine throne backfired on the crusaders because, over time, Alexios IV did not pay them fully as he intended.[37] The betrayal by Alexios IV finally freed the warriors from the higher purpose of the Fourth Crusade. Alexios IV had the tough task of trying to please the warriors who helped him to gain the throne and his people who despised him for getting assistance from the Latins. Innocent had warned the crusaders that they would face major repercussions if Alexios IV did not hold up his oath.[38] These repercussions came in the form of Alexios IV being strangled to death by Alexios V Doukas, known as Mourtzouphlos in Latin texts, who took up the mantle of Emperor of Byzantine.[39] Constantinople had now become hostile territory filled with heretics. The legates framed the Greek Church as in schism with the Latin church, stating that the Greek's actions were no better than the Jews.[40] The comparison fired up the crusaders and reinvigorated them to keep the fight going, leading to Latin control in Constantinople from 1204-1261. Clari's main justification for the crusaders sacking Constantinople

---

[35] Robert of Clari, 66.
[36] Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade*, 81.
[37] Robert of Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, 83.
[38] Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade*, 89.
[39] Robert of Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, 86.
[40] Robert of Clari, 94.

was that the Greeks were corrupt and became enemies of the Latin Church.[41] For chivalric Christian warriors, all enemies of the Latin Church had to be eradicated because that was the original purpose of the Crusades. Also, in Clari's explanation, he specifies the Greeks as "enemies of God."[42] Crusaders were justified in killing if it was an enemy of God.

This paper focuses heavily on Clari's version of the events surrounding the Fourth Crusade because of his status as a common warrior. Clari's version of events is not as explored by historians because of his status and its less detailed nature. His version illustrates how common warriors grappled with the understanding of chivalry. Each chronicler's understanding of the events varies, but their uses of chivalry are not different. Most warriors during the Fourth Crusade were commoners and not nobility. Clari was not writing to please the pope; instead, he wrote his own unconcerned interpretation of the events. Though he vilifies the Venetians in his version, he also shifts focus to the Greeks as the real enemy and eventually sees the Venetians as an ally. Villenhardouin keeps the narrative of the Venetians as instigators throughout his whole account. He does this so that the Venetians could be the scapegoat if the pope is displeased. Both chroniclers use chivalric language to justify their actions.

Geoffrey of Villenhardouin and Gunther of Paris' Perspective

Villenhardouin, as a Crusade leader, had more exclusive access to the knowledge of why and how choices were made. The crusaders did not trust the Venetians even though they enlisted them to make their ships. During the Fourth Crusade, the Venetians were unaware of what was happening beyond potentially sailing the crusaders to the Holy Land. Their main focus was completing the contract because it was how they would get paid. Among crusaders, it was obvious that the Venetians did not care much for crusading.[43] Their lack of interest led to their portrayal in a villainous manner. To make matters worse, the Venetians had assumed that the pope had redirected the Crusade

---

[41] Michael Angold, *The Fourth Crusade: Events and Context* (New York: Longman, 2003), 15.
[42] Robert of Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, 94.
[43] Angold, *The Fourth Crusade*, 50.

to Constantinople following the attack on Zara.[44] All these factors put together a compelling argument against the Venetians being the bad guys. A big discrepancy between each account was whether it was Doge Dandolo's or Alexios IV's idea to go to Constantinople. Villenhardouin stated that Alexios IV came up with the idea and reached out to the crusaders to help him ascend the Byzantine throne.[45] Holy Roman Emperor Philip of Swabia was a bigger contributor to getting Alexios IV in touch with the crusaders. Following the assault on Zara, he sent Alexios IV to meet the crusaders to convince them to assist him, which the crusader leadership bought.[46] The attack on Zara displeased many of the crusaders, but the arrival and acceptance to help Alexios IV take Constantinople pushed most of the crusaders to their breaking points.

Counter-Argument

Most Christian warriors did not believe their actions were in good faith. Villenhardouin admits in his chronicle that the warriors that followed crusade leadership in the sacking of Zara and Constantinople were not the majority.[47] Villenhardouin spotlights the radical nature of the crusaders who abandoned the venture. For the warriors who did not abandon the Fourth Crusade, they felt their decisions made in Venice, Zara, and before Constantinople fit "their crusading vow."[48] Simon of Motfort and Abbot Guy Vaux de Cernay disagreed with this sentiment and were the main leaders of the biggest group of Fourth Crusade defectors. Before the attack on Zara, they gained a letter from the pope that told the crusaders that if they shed Christian blood, they would be excommunicated.[49] The crusaders did not fear

---

[44] Thomas F. Madden, "The Venetian Version of the Fourth Crusade: Memory and the Conquest of Constantinople in Medieval Venice," *Speculum* 87, no. 2 (April 2012), 326.
[45] Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, 21.
[46] Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, 26.
[47] Donald E. Queller, Thomas K. Compton, and Donald A. Campbell, "The Fourth Crusade: The Neglected Majority," *Speculum* 49, no 3 (July 1974), 441.
[48] Raymond H. Schmandt, "The Fourth Crusade and the Just-War Theory," *Catholic Historical Review* 61, vol 2 (April, 1975), 193.
[49] Queller, *The Fourth Crusade*, 75. This letter angers Doge Dandolo to the point that he argues its validity and makes the crusaders attack Zara.

excommunication because they felt obligated to help the Venetians since they could not pay for the voyage. Following the attack on Zara, many warriors left the Fourth Crusade because they saw the slaughter of "fellow Christians" as "detestable and unlawful."[50] Following Zara, an irate Simon and Guy heavily opposed helping Alexios IV because their men did not leave home to attack "Christians but to go to Syria" to recapture the Holy Land.[51] Abbot Guy also saw helping Alexios IV as "a wicked idea."[52] The understanding of what crusading was had finally created a divide between crusaders. Simon and his men understood crusading as taking a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to kill Muslims and retake Jerusalem. In contrast, the warriors who followed Villenhardouin and other Crusade leaders understood crusading as a venture that was more than just a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Crusading to the minority group of crusaders encompassed more than just the Holy Land, converting pagans in the Baltic and dispelling the Moors in the Iberian. Crusading was an ideology used to spread Christianity worldwide and was justified by the concept of chivalry. Ultimately, even if what the crusaders did was impious, it was done by "divine will, which is always and everywhere just."[53] Thinking that one's actions were justified because of divine will was dangerous because anything could be justified. Chivalry had blurred the lines for the crusaders, who stayed and fought because they saw it necessary to complete their vow while also completing their contract with the Venetians. Crusaders defecting was a major issue but many left "in disgust," but the Fourth Crusade is still categorized as "over-chivalrous."[54] The nature of the crusaders to be too chivalrous would be a deciding factor for why the Fourth Crusade played out the way it did. All of the drama surrounding Zara paled in comparison to how the events of Constantinople, as described by Villenhardouin, would test the crusader's trust in leadership and their chivalric ideology.

---

[50] Alfred J. Andrea, *The Capture of Constantinople: The "Hystoria Constantinopolitana" of Gunther of Paris* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 78.
[51] Queller, "The Fourth Crusade: The Neglected Majority," 425.
[52] Schmandt, "The Fourth Crusade and the Just-War Theory," 209.
[53] Andrea, *The "Hystoria Constantinopolitana" of Gunther of Paris*, 66.
[54] Madden, "Vows and Contracts," 442-444.

Villenhardouin and Gunther's Perspective Continued

Post attack on Zara, the crusaders knew they lost men but gained a new purpose, helping Alexios IV regain the throne stolen from him and his father, Isaak II. The tasks the Christian warriors had to complete had become recapturing the Holy Land, paying the Venetians what they were owed, and helping Alexios IV regain the throne at Constantinople. The reason the crusaders were allowing themselves to get sidetracked was chivalric pride. The crusaders did not want to return home with an unfinished vow because of "infamy along with sin."[55] Pride was a major factor in why the crusaders lost track of the higher purpose. For chivalric warriors being indebted to someone meant they had to complete that debt before they could complete their own goal. Pride was the biggest ideological weakness of chivalry, but it was essential to its existence.

According to Villenhardouin, the crusaders and Venetians were paid only a portion of the money owed by newly crowned emperor Alexios IV, but he wanted them to stay in Constantinople because he feared the Greeks would kill him.[56] When news of Alexios IV's murder arrived to the crusaders, they were angered because it meant everything they did to this point was for nothing.[57] The murder of the rightful heir left the crusaders at an impasse, Alexios IV's death freed the Christian warriors from their hired-hand role and turned them back to "soldiers of Christ."[58] Already knowing getting to the Holy Land was fully out of the question, the warriors had no choice but to battle their way out of a hostile foreign land. Getting revenge for Alexios IV and capturing Constantinople to claim the wealth the crusaders were owed had become the new higher purpose of the Fourth Crusade. The Venetians, Pope Innocent III, and Alexios IV all betrayed the Crusaders, meaning they could only rely on each other. Chivalry had to guide them through what had been an extremely confusing situation. In an act of chivalric pride, the crusader decided to

[55] Andrea, *The "Hystoria Constantinopolitana" of Gunther of Paris*, 78.
[56] Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, 52.
[57] Queller, *The Fourth Crusad*e, 170.
[58] Queller, 173.

attack Constantinople.[59] With the crusaders at their breaking point, nothing else mattered at this point in their journey. The whole purpose of the Fourth Crusade was lost, and the crusaders needed it to be a success on their terms. With the Crusaders backed into a corner, they turned to the only two things still relevant now: chivalry and Christianity. To make matters even more confusing, the clergy who was there saw the second attack on Constantinople as "right and just" so the crusaders would receive the pope's indulgences.[60] The clergy had also endured the same hardships that the crusader did, minus being in battle. The clergy blessed the second attack on Constantinople for two major reasons; the crimes committed by Mourtzophulus, whom the people of Byzantine supported, made the attack not a crusade but secondly, since the Greek Church returned to a schism by supporting Mourtzophulus, the attack became "a de facto crusade."[61] This is where herother historians and I disagree on the outcome of the Fourth Crusade. After a long time of not pilgrimaging to the Holy Land and doing the bidding of others who did not care for crusading, the Christian warriors had met their breaking point and knew the clergy had as well. With this in mind, the second attack on Constantinople was indeed part of what crusading was because they had to free Christian-held land from a group of heretics/schismatics who did not respect the gifts God gave them.[62] Even with all of this confusion surrounding the Fourth Crusade by 1204, Constantinople was sacked and held by Latin Christendom. To the Crusaders, the death of Alexios IV reaffirmed the crusader's spiritual vow, and the infidels they had to kill were Greeks and not Muslims.[63]

Niketus Choniates' Perspective

The final perspective explored for this paper is that of Niketus Choniates, a Byzantine historian. His perspective explored how non-warriors understood chivalry. In Choniates'

---

[59] Jared Gordon, "The Novgorod Account of the Fourth Crusade," *Byzantion* Vol. 43 (1973), 305.
[60] Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, 60.
[61] Queller, *The Fourth Crusade*, 174.
[62] Angold, *The Fourth Crusade*, 15.
[63] Madden, "Vows and Contracts," 468.

account, he tarnishes how the crusaders treated the city and people of Constantinople but still gives them credit when they act chivalrously. His account detested what happened to Constantinople, but in his writing, there is a sense of internal struggle because of the corruption in Byzantine. *O City of Byzantine, Annals of Niketus Choniates* is the most comprehensive history of Byzantine from the time of the reign of John II Komneos (1118) to the fall of Byzantine in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade. This paper focuses on Choniates' exploration of the sections entitled *The Second Reign of Issakios Angelos, Together With His Son Alexios* to *The Events Which Befell the Romans Following the Fall of Constantinople, by the Same Choniates* which cover the events during and after Fourth Crusade. Choniates lets his negative feelings about Byzantine rulers be known before, during, and after the crusaders sacked the city.

From the onset of Choniates' telling of events, the Greeks were "paralyzed by fear" when battling the Latin crusaders.[64] Choniates knew that the Greeks were far less superior warriors in comparison to the crusaders. The kingdom of Byzantine paid enemies to avoid military conflict because of its lack of a standing army. The immense wealth that Byzantine held allowed them to avoid being conquered by outsiders. By the time the crusaders had arrived, money was not going to sway them from their objective. Massive walls protected Constantinople, and Choniates called the crusaders courageous warriors for scaling the walls, putting fear into the Varangian guard's hearts.[65] The Varangians were the personal bodyguards to the emperor of Byzantine, and they comprised mainly Scandinavian Vikings who converted to Christianity. Their role was one much like the Pretorian guard for the Roman emperors. The crusaders were outsiders who had desolated the kingdom of Byzantine but were still celebrated for their chivalric courage by their enemy. Choniates celebrated the warfare of the crusaders but outside of that, he exposed the un-glorified side of chivalry. He details how crusaders raped women and showed themselves "as frauds" who took up the cross against

[64] Nicetas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium: The Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. by Harry Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1969), 312.
[65] Choniates, *O City of Byzantine*, 312-314.

enemies of Christ but instead killed fellow Christians.[66] The actions discussed in the Greek perspective of the Fourth Crusade illuminate the nature of warfare and where chivalry fits into that equation. Choniates continues by stating that the crusaders were "guiltless of any wrong against them," and their actions knew no "limits of wickedness and were impiously arrogant."[67] The Byzantine chronicler did not understand why the crusaders attacked the holy city of Constantinople and were puzzled by fellow Christians killing each other. Where his assessment of the crusaders falls short is his understanding of why these events occurred in Constantinople. Even though Choniates writes the crusaders as these wicked men who did not care about their Christian ties to Byzantine, his conclusion states that the crusader's attack was divine judgment for the sins of Byzantine.[68] Choniates' acknowledgment showed that an event like this was bound to happen and was all part of the divine plan. He believed that since Byzantine had been politically inept for so long, God would stop it in any way he suited. He is not justifying the cruel acts carried out by the crusaders. However, he unintentionally celebrated the conquest as divine, which, by the standards of chivalry, made what the crusader did righteous and just. Before Choniates finish up his history of Byzantine, he states that the first crusader emperor of Constantinople, Baldwin, count of Flanders, was a chivalrous man who respected his vow to Christ.[69] Interestingly enough, the crusaders that Choniates labeled wicked were the common warriors who pillaged the city and not the leaders of the Crusade. He knew the value of chivalry to these noble warriors but did not understand that it extended to all crusaders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Fourth Crusade changed the nature of crusading forever. What began as an armed pilgrimage to recapture the Holy Land morphed into the destruction of Greek Orthodoxy in Constantinople. The Crusades were always wars of

---

[66] Choniates, 315-316.
[67] Choniates, 317-319.
[68] Angold, *The Fourth Crusade*, 8.
[69] Choniates, *O City of Byzantine*, 328.

religious superiority, but the Fourth Crusade expanded who Latin Christendom needed to show superiority to. Making matters even more complex, Innocent allowed all of these things to happen under his watch, and he handed down no repercussions for the actions of the crusaders. The warriors went against the pope, leadership, and their Crusade vows and relied solely on their chivalric intuition to guide them, which was justified in the end. Historians of the Fourth Crusade have overlooked how fundamental chivalry was to the crusaders when justifying their attacks on Christian Zara and Constantinople. In one way or another, these historians have only slightly pieced together how and why the Fourth Crusade happened as it did. At the heart of it, the Fourth Crusade was a failure to recapture Jerusalem, but it was not a chivalric failure. What also needs to be said is that circumstance shapes outcomes no matter the goal. The goal of the Fourth Crusade was to take back the Holy Land, but that was not obtainable because of all the challenges the crusaders faced. Surrounded by different outside factors, the crusaders relied on each other and their chivalric instinct to get through what would come to be known as the most complex and confusing Crusade. It is easy, from a contemporary viewpoint, to see the Fourth Crusade as "unholy" or not a Crusade, but those notions do not take into account circumstances. Chivalry was the crusaders main justification for their actions during the Fourth Crusade.