



THE TRAGI-COMIC 4th CRUSADE AND THE LONG, UNLAMENTED FRANGOKRATIA

Anthony Kaldellis,

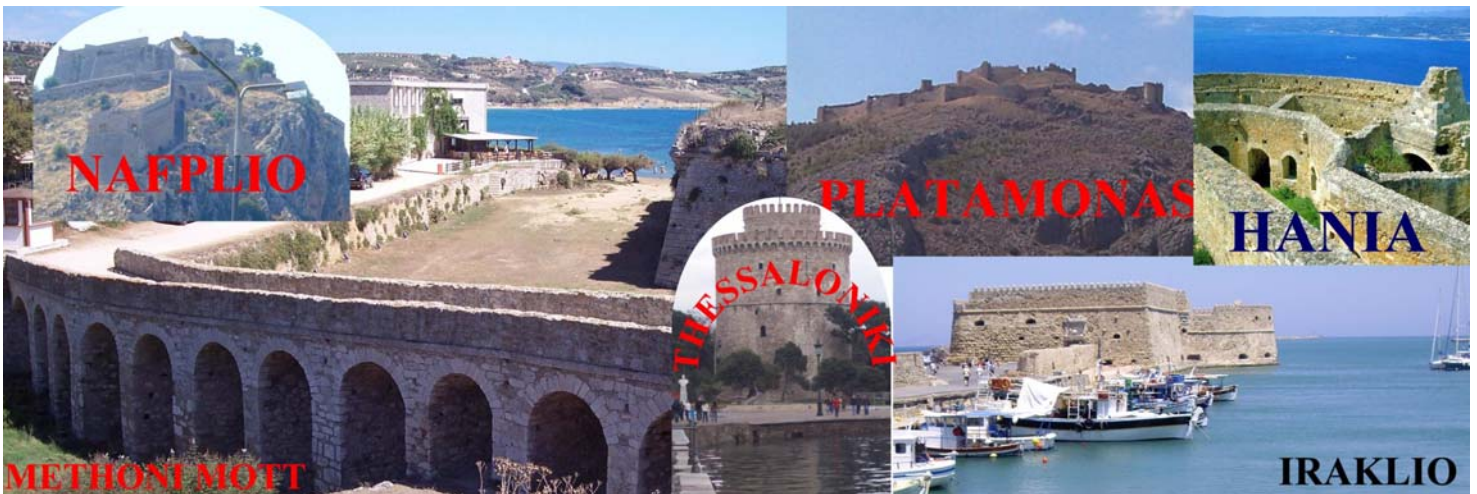
Professor Byzantine History, OSU,

Greece has a long history, with many “periods,” “phases,” and “ages.” It is sometimes difficult to remember them all, and some have fallen through the cracks. After all, only 2 “**Independence Days**” are commemorated in Greece today, chosen from among a very long list, if one wants to look back far enough. One of these largely forgotten eras, an ambiguous, awkward, and disgraceful one, was inaugurated by the warriors of the 4th Crusade, diverted from their pious objective by the riches of **Constantinople**. This happened in 1203-1204, and opened a period of direct “Latin” (*i.e.*, *Roman Catholic*) rule over Greece that lasted in some places into the 19th century. The **Frangokratia** was a bridge between Byzantium and modern Greece, parallel to the one that crossed the **Tourkokratia**. It left powerful and negative memories of foreign rule that still influence the way many Greeks feel about western expansion today.

In 1204, the Byzantine Empire fell victim to one of the first **capitalist-colonial ventures** in western history. In making their plans, the leaders of the 4th Crusade contracted with the **Venetians** for a large fleet to transport the army to the **Levant**. The Venetians invested an enormous sum in the construction of a transport fleet, but only a fraction of the expected Crusaders turned up. This posed a dilemma. The Venetian investment had to be recouped, or else the city would go broke, and it was quickly realized that the only thing that the Crusaders had to offer was their services. Here then was a military force that *had* to **conquer and plunder** in order to pay back the investment of its financiers. Capitalist logic overrode the crusading spirit. The Venetians first demanded that the **holy army** subdue the Dalmatian coastal town of Zara, a former possession of theirs, which was duly captured and destroyed **despite being a Christian city**.

The opportunity then presented itself to restore a young prince to the **throne of Byzantium**, from whose bottomless coffers the Crusaders expected to receive the money to pay for their fleet (*plus something for their own services*). To make a complicated story short, in **April 1204** the Crusaders broke through the defenses of Constantinople with the intention of establishing a **Latin empire** in the place of Byzantium. As business partners, which is essentially what they were, they had already drawn up a contract specifying who would receive what part of the empire. Even before the City was taken, for instance, it was famously agreed that the **doge of Venice** would henceforth be entitled as the lord of one fourth and one half of one fourth (*i.e.*, *one eighth*) of **Romania** (*what the Byzantines called their empire*).

Few of the Crusaders went on to the **Holy Lands**. Most settled in Greece, divided up the spoils, and tried to devise ways to govern their new and unruly dominions. They built fortifications throughout the Greek coastlines [**pic collage**] to protect their merchant shipping fleets that plied the Mediterranean for centuries. Almost all their attempts were dismal failures, and so the era of Latin rule has attracted little attention. In most history textbooks, Byzantium yields to the Ottomans, one empire succeeding another. “*Latin Greece*” was a fleeting mirage, and has



been relegated to the margins. Hardly any Greeks today know that Athens was ruled for centuries by **Burgundians**, **Catalans** from Spain, and **Florentine** bankers. A few know that the **Ionian Islands** never fell to the Turks and were retained by the West until 1861.

Matters never went well for the Crusaders in Greece. The destruction of the intended capital of their new empire was bad enough. What followed was sheer chaos. The leaders of the Crusade, trained in **western feudalism**, had no conception and no desire for the kind of centralized leadership required to keep a state such as **Romania** together. Each wanted to carve out his own principality and minimize his obligations to the new Latin emperor. Additional adventurers quickly appeared from the West and seized what lands and islands they could. The **Venetians**, on the other hand, pursued their own commercial-colonial plans, which did not interface well with the feudal model of the other knights. **Venice**, after all, was not a feudal society.

Meanwhile, remnants of the Byzantine order regrouped in **Epirus**, **Nikaia**, and **Trebizond** [*Τραπεζούντα*]. They quickly began to expand at the expense of the Latins (and of each other), and were assisted in this by the vast majority of the native population, which rejected western rule. In the lands that they held, the knights were conquerors with a different language, Church, dress, and social customs from the majority of their subjects. The Byzantines eventually retook the capital in 1261 and abolished many of the smaller Latin principalities in Greece and the islands. **But the experience sowed the seeds of doubt regarding all western Crusading movements, whether medieval or modern.**

kaldellis.1@osu.edu



“One of the many sacrileges of the 4th Crusade was stealing the relics [*λειψανα*] of St John the Chrysostom from Agia Sophia to the Vatican in Rome. The relics were returned to Constantinople by Pope John Paul in 2004, 800 years later to the day”!
editor@greekethos.com