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The Fourth Crusade: Event, Aftermath, and Perceptions

Papers from the Sixth Conference of the Society for the Study of the
Crusades and the Latin East, Istanbul, Turkey, 25-29 August 2004

Edited by

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Introduction¹

It is an irony that of the major "numbered" crusades the First and the Fourth have attracted significantly more scholarly attention than any others. Interest in the First Crusade is natural enough. It was the beginning of a movement that endured for centuries and fundamentally shaped Europe and its place in the Mediterranean world. But the Fourth Crusade cannot make that claim. Instead, it was an enterprise launched during the maturity of the movement that proceeded to go terribly wrong. Organized to restore Jerusalem to Christian control, the Fourth Crusade conquered and looted the greatest Christian city in the world. The story of how that came to be is a tangled web of conflicting agendas, passions, imperatives, and desires. It is the extraordinary outcome of the Fourth Crusade, which even contemporaries believed could only be an act of God, that draws curious investigators to attempt to unlock its secrets. Indeed, in that respect it is very like the First Crusade.²

Western scholars may approach the Fourth Crusade as a fascinating puzzle or an intriguing historical event, yet for others it remains an open wound. Steven Runciman famously wrote that "there was never a greater crime against humanity than the Fourth Crusade"³ and this view is still current today in parts of the world. For example, when the Greek government invited Pope John Paul II to Athens in 2001, large numbers of Orthodox monks, nuns, and priests protested the arrival of what some of them called "the two-horned monster of Rome." When the pope landed on May 4, not a single member of the Orthodox clergy came to the airport to greet him. Thousands of them, however, took to the streets, wrapped in Greek flags, demanding that the 80-year-old pontiff be expelled. The pope then paid a "courtesy visit" to Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens. The archbishop cataloged a list of Orthodox grievances against Rome, including such things as the expansion of eastern Catholic churches and the Vatican's attitude toward Cyprus. Pride of place, however, was given not to current events, but to the Fourth Crusade and its aftermath. In his "welcome" address to the pope, the archbishop said:

Understandably a large part of the Church of Greece opposes your presence here... These reactions express not only explicit censure of the unacceptable acts of violence perpetrated against concerned Orthodox peoples, but also the demand of Orthodox conscience for a formal condemnation of injustices committed against them by the Christian West... The Orthodox Greek people, more than other Orthodox peoples, sense more intensely in its religious consciousness and national memory the traumatic experiences, that remain as

¹ My thanks to David Parnell of Saint Louis University for his assistance with the editorial formatting of this volume.

² For discussions of recent Fourth Crusade historiography, see Norman Housley, *Contesting the Crusades* (Oxford, 2006), 64–68; Thomas F. Madden, "Outside and Inside the Fourth Crusade," *International History Review* 17 (1995): 726–43.

³ Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades* (Cambridge, 1953–57), 3: 123, 130.