

## **The Role of Christian Spirituality in 13<sup>th</sup> Century Interpretations of the Fall of Constantinople: Relics and Icons as Interpretive Lenses**

Donna Reinhard

Thomas Madden states the question regarding the fourth crusade well: “what happened to transform an effective and limited intervention in Byzantine politics into mass slaughter at Constantinople?”<sup>1</sup> Madden argues that historians have spent too much energy on deterministic thinking when, in fact, Constantinople’s fall was not inevitable; it was a shock to the world.<sup>2</sup> He proposes that the key to understanding the tragedy of 1204 is not in the tensions between East and West but in “the treaties that had governed the crusaders’ actions since 1201.”<sup>3</sup> While broken treaties provide critical insight into the impetus for the tragedy of 1204, is it possible to understand why the 13<sup>th</sup> century chroniclers presented deterministic thinking in their historical narratives?<sup>4</sup> While Jonathan Harris proposes that the deterministic underpinning of Byzantine historian Nicetas Choniates account was due to his dependence upon classical models,<sup>5</sup> I propose that theological aspects may also have been at work in Choniates’ interpretation of the events, especially since the same theological presuppositions can be seen in the Western church’s interpretation of the fall of Constantinople. In this essay I will explore how the importance of relics in medieval Christian spirituality, combined with the pilgrimage nature of the crusade, led some in the Western church to interpret the sacking of Constantinople as the partial fulfillment of crusader vows. In addition, I will

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Madden, “Vows and Contracts in the Fourth Crusade,” *International History Review* 15, no. 3 (1993): 443.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 443, 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Jonathan Harris, “Distortion, Divine Providence and Genre in Niketas Choniates’s Account of the Collapse of Byzantium, 1180-1204,” *Journal of Medieval History* 26, no. 1 (2000).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

investigate how theological presuppositions about icons, specifically Marian icons, in Constantinople may provide insight into the Eastern analysis of this crusade.

**The role of relics in the fourth crusade: a means of exploring the Western church's interpretation of the events of 1204**

Madden argues that the nullification of the secular contracts ended the secular wars by which the crusaders were obtaining transportation to the Holy Lands and marked the beginning of "a spiritual and ecclesiastical" war.<sup>6</sup> This new conceptualization of the war was demonstrated by the clergy's promotion of the crusade: they considered that "all Byzantines were schismatics and abettors of murder,"<sup>7</sup> and thus they presented a crusade against Byzantium as "the equivalent of Jerusalem for Christendom."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the clergy reasoned that the papal indulgence also applied to those who would lose their lives in the attack on Constantinople.<sup>9</sup> This placed the promise of papal indulgence, a major factor in the pilgrimage dimension of a crusade, as part of the rationale in attacking Constantinople.<sup>10</sup> While the capture of Constantinople would not free the crusaders from their vow to the church, this subtle distinction was lost on many of the crusaders.<sup>11</sup>

Since the focus of the conflict between the crusaders and Constantinople changed from obtaining transportation to Jerusalem to a religious war against the people of Constantinople, it is critical to understand the role of relics in pilgrimage and the concept of how relics were understood to be translated from one owner to another, i.e., *furtum sacrum*.<sup>12</sup> In order to understand the role of relics in the fourth crusade, I will provide a general description of the role of relics in medieval Christian spirituality, then I will look at how relics were an integral part of medieval pilgrimages, and I will explore the role of the concept of *furtum sacrum* in the Western historiography of the events in 1204.

<sup>6</sup> Madden, "Vows and Contracts in the Fourth Crusade," 461.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 463. The murderers that "all Byzantines" were abetting were the murders of emperors Alexius IV and Nicholas Canabus at the hand of (or instigation of) Alexius Ducas Mourtzouphlus who declared himself emperor (Alexius V) (Madden, "Vows and Contracts in the Fourth Crusade," 453-5, 59).

<sup>8</sup> Madden, "Vows and Contracts in the Fourth Crusade," 463-4.

<sup>9</sup> This was expressly against Innocent III's wishes, but this information was withheld from the masses. (Ibid.).

<sup>10</sup> It must be noted that not every crusader "who assumed the cross at Ecry" was motivated only by religious concerns. "The feudal noble's position in society, his code of honor, and his chivalric self-esteem urged him to the crusade" (Donald E. Queller, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople 1201-1204* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 4).

<sup>11</sup> Madden, "Vows and Contracts in the Fourth Crusade," 463.

<sup>12</sup> Holy theft of a relic, permitted by the saint associated with the relic. See Alfred J. Andrea, "Holy War, Holy Relics, Holy Theft: The Anonymous of Soissons's *De Terra Iherosolimitana*: An Analysis, Edition, and Translation," *Historical Reflections* 18, no. 1 (1992): 152, 48.

*The role of relics in medieval spirituality*

For a typical early medieval Western Christian, relics had long been sanctioned by the church.<sup>13</sup> Alfred Andrea summarizes the power of relics for the medieval Christian:

The remains of saints possessed a powerful attraction for the medieval mind. Relics were not seen as inanimate objects. Rather, sacred relics mediated the power of God through the holy person whose remains were enclosed in a reliquary.<sup>14</sup>

For some, the eyes of faith needed something tangible beyond a portrayal to gaze upon and touch in order to make this leap of faith. Thus, E. D. Hunt proposes that the spiritual underpinnings for relics may be

a species of devotion which hankered after physical objects and remains which could be seen to embody, for individual and community, the saint and his powers. That there were many whose piety had this concrete, visual propensity may be established from the evidence of pilgrims' reactions to the holy places, and the evident

<sup>13</sup> Both primary (portions of sacred human bodies) and secondary (things "associated with a sacred body") relics are in view here. This practice can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Cyril of Jerusalem (ca 315-386) was possibly the first bishop to "enunciate the idea of an inherent (and communicable) power emanating from the physical remains of the holy dead." John Wortley purports that since the word for relic, *leidyana*, is found in neither the Septuagint nor New Testament, the views upon the use of relics had to be determined through reason. Two fourth century commentaries (Palestinian and Syrian) discuss the incident of a dead man resuscitated through contact with the bones of Elisha (2 Kings 13:20-21). Cyril of Jerusalem argues from this passage that "in the absence of the soul, a kind of power resides within the bodies of the saints by virtue of the righteous soul which [formerly] dwelt within them for so many years and whose service they were." Cyril also comments on the efficaciousness of secondary relics such as handkerchiefs and aprons (Acts 19:11-12). Wortley also notes that John Chrysostom was even more emphatic: "O how great is the virtue of the saints! Not only their words; not only their bodies, but even their very garments are always esteemed venerable by the whole creation." (John Wortley, "Icons and Relics: A Comparison," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 43, no. 2 (2003): 169-74, quoting Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* 18.16 and 17:30-31, and John Chrysostom, *Hom* 8.3).

<sup>14</sup> Andrea, "Holy War, Holy Relics, Holy Theft," 152.

reality, for them, of the biblical past which they commemorated.<sup>15</sup>

With the increased importance of relics as a means of coming in contact with the holy, trafficking in relics became more prevalent. Hunt notes that the typical belief was that the saint, and even Christ himself, “watched over his relics, traveled with them, and protected those persons who legitimately possessed them.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, this means of engaging the holy through special material objects, combined with the understanding that the translation of even primary relics could be sanctioned, led to the relocation of relics. So, while there were laws against disturbing the remains of the saints, western Christians traveled to the east in order to bring back relics, with relics from the Holy Lands especially prized.<sup>17</sup> By the early fifth century, saints’ tombs were being opened in order to obtain relics and the western church had instituted practices to safeguard the faithful from unscrupulous claims.<sup>18</sup>

Relics were more than simply objects for personal use or for binding oaths;<sup>19</sup> they were also a means of acquiring ecclesiastical power. Churches without a connection to a saint or martyr could increase their prestige and authority through the acquisition of relics.<sup>20</sup> Constantinople was an example of a church which had done just that. Without connection to an apostle yet striving

<sup>15</sup> E. D. Hunt, “The Traffic in Relics: Some Late Roman Evidence,” in *The Byzantine Saint*, ed. Sergei Hackel (London: the Fellowship of Saint Alban and St. Sergius, 1981), 179. It is interesting to note that the evaluations of Hunt and Andrea on the use of relics fall under very different elements of von Hügel’s evaluation of spirituality. Andrea’s evaluation is that the spirituality was mature while Hunt’s evaluation is that the spirituality was a form of unhealthy child possibly bordering on superstition. (See Friedrich von Hügel, “The Three Elements of Religion,” in *The Mystical Element of Religion* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1923), 50-58).

<sup>16</sup> Andrea, “Holy War, Holy Relics, Holy Theft,” 152.

<sup>17</sup> Hunt, “The Traffic in Relics: Some Late Roman Evidence,” 174, 76.

<sup>18</sup> Not all who engaged in growing economy of relics were pious. Due to unscrupulous people feeding on the religious piety of others, Augustine of Hippo began the practice of “publicly authenticating and documenting the martyr’s achievements” in order to prevent fraudulent claims and to provide publicly declared support to miracles (Ibid., 171). Further, the 401 council at Carthage “urged congregations against shrines and relics which were not authentic but merely the result of ‘dreams and empty revelations.’” (Hunt, “The Traffic in Relics: Some Late Roman Evidence,” 175, emphasis his). This last phrase is important, since the means by which relics were discovered was typically through visions and dreams. For example, the discovery of the remains of Stephen the Proto-martyr in December of 415 was found through dreams in which rabbi Gamaliel directed presbyter Lucianus to the sites of his own grave, that of rabbi Nicodemus as well as the grave of Stephen. (Hunt, “The Traffic in Relics: Some Late Roman Evidence,” 171).

<sup>19</sup> Prior to the attack on Constantinople, “each man was required to swear with his hands on holy relics that with some minor exceptions he would bring all booty to the common hoard and that he would not use force upon any woman or despoil her of any garment she was wearing” under penalty of death (Queller, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople 1201-1204*, 139).

<sup>20</sup> Hunt, “The Traffic in Relics: Some Late Roman Evidence,” 172.

for ecclesiastical power, the possession of relics was the only avenue open for the city to “make up for its lack of Christian history.”<sup>21</sup>

While the traffic of relics was typically from east to west,<sup>22</sup> there are notable exceptions; most important to the fourth crusade was the early entry of Constantinople in the collecting of relics. Emperor Theodosius arranged for a portion of the Proto-martyr Stephen’s right hand in exchange for the “gift of a gilded cross for Golgotha.”<sup>23</sup> The translation of important secondary relics from Jerusalem to Constantinople are reported to have occurred as early as 451: according to the *Euthymiac History*, Empress Pulcheria, Emperor Theodosius’s sister, received the Theotokos’s robe (the maphorion) from Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem at the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>24</sup> At least as early as the eighth century, “Constantinople had been known as a holy city, sanctified by its relics, a great center of pilgrimage.”<sup>25</sup> In the mid-ninth through the mid-tenth century the Constantinopolitan public interest in relics increased, which is

attested to by a number of translations of these precious objects to Constantinople; by the liturgical and historical texts commemorating the events; and by the development of new ceremonies intended to integrate these relics into the imperial cult.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, by the time of the fourth crusade, Constantinople was a major depository of sacred objects and a pilgrimage center. In the next section, the connection between relics and pilgrimages will be explored.

#### *The role of relics in pilgrimages*

In terms of pilgrimage, the goal of the pilgrim at a holy site was “to recreate the biblical past as a present reality” through the ‘eyes of faith’ and to bring a relic back from the holy site so that this connection with the past could be made wherever the relic was located.<sup>27</sup> Relics had been an important part of the crusades from the first crusade, and increasingly so after the finding of the

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Vasiliki Limberis, “The Council of Ephesos: The Demise of the See of Ephesos and the Rise of the Cult of the Theotokos,” in *Ephesos Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Helmut Koester (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 321-4, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Queller, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople 1201-1204*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Bissera V. Pentcheva, “The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople: The Virgin and Her Icons in the Tradition of the Avar Siege,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 26 (2002): 28.

<sup>27</sup> Hunt, “The Traffic in Relics: Some Late Roman Evidence,” 178.

centurion's lance used to pierce the heart of Christ at a critical point in 1098.<sup>28</sup> However, it is important to note that even though many of the men who undertook a crusade were not motivated solely by religious reasons, "they were ..., in the eyes of the Church, legally and spiritually pilgrims."<sup>29</sup> Also, while many of the crusaders held to the original concept that the idea of the crusade was to win back the Holy Land for Christ, Donald Queller notes that it became increasingly important to fight against the enemies of Christendom.<sup>30</sup>

While this background information helps the modern reader to understand how, ultimately, many of the crusaders could justify not continuing their journey to the Holy Land, to assume that the crusaders were willing to give up forging ahead to Jerusalem after the conquest of Zara would underestimate their resolve to fulfill their vows. Evidence for this conclusion is found in the terms of the treaty with Alexius IV brokered by the Germans at Zara: the crusaders would help prince Alexius regain access to the throne and Alexius would 1) "place the Greek church in obedience to Rome," and thus resolve the issue of schism; 2) provide supplies for the crusaders and give them two hundred thousand marks; 3) provide a crusading army of ten thousand for one year; and 4) maintain "five hundred knights in the Holy Land" for the remainder of his life.<sup>31</sup> But, while Constantinople had long been a pilgrimage destination, it is not known whether "an open appeal was made to the attractiveness of Constantinople as a center for sacred relics."<sup>32</sup> The most urgent matter in the treaty was the acquisition of the means required to journey toward Jerusalem. However, the violation of Pope Innocent III's explicit instructions to go to Jerusalem and not to attack Christian cities had to be justified. According to Andrea, the anonymous chronicler of Soissons provides just this explanation:

[t]he Anonymous of Soissons is remarkably successful at justifying the Fourth Crusade by imaginatively suggesting that the entire adventure was sanctioned by God, was undertaken by the crusaders in a Christian spirit of penance, and resulted in a partial

<sup>28</sup> Marcus Bull, "The Roots of Lay Enthusiasm for the First Crusade," *History* 78, no. 254 (1993): 366.

<sup>29</sup> Andrea, "Holy War, Holy Relics, Holy Theft," 154.

<sup>30</sup> Queller notes that "[i]n the course of a century of crusading the Holy Land had ceased to be the specific and unique objective of some of those who bore the cross. The concept of the crusade had become less specifically associated with the places consecrated by the life of Christ. A Christian who made war at the behest of the Church against the enemies of Christendom in Spain or elsewhere was conceived to be fighting for the heavenly Jerusalem and to be entitled to the privileges of a crusader. For those who saw the crusade in these broader terms, therefore, it was no less sacred a task to attack Egypt than Palestine." (Queller, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople 1201-1204*, 14).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

but substantial victory for Christendom. Jerusalem had not yet been recovered, but genuine gains were made, and Christendom had been blessed for its efforts. The relics brought back by Nevelon were tokens of divine favor and a continuing source of blessing for those who served the Lord.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the role of relics in pilgrimages coupled with the role of pilgrimage in the crusades helps to understand how some could view the translation of relics as partial fulfillment of crusader vows.

*The Western church's mixed evaluation of the events of 1204*

John Godfrey takes the "enthusiastic reception given to the relics brought back after the great pillage" as an indication that the reaction of the Western church to the fourth crusade was generally favorable.<sup>34</sup>

Numerous relics were brought home to the West by the proud victors. Their trophies were solemnly received, many a procession winding its way through the streets of cathedral cities with the ringing of bells, sounding of trumpets, and preaching of sermons. Annual holidays were proclaimed, and during the years following the sack feasts were established for the anniversary of the reception of relics, most of them for churches in France or Venice. Such feasts had their liturgical offices, with appropriate lections and prayers, and the feeling of hostility toward Byzantium behind them can be sensed from the hymn composed for the feast of welcome to the relics at Angers cathedral, in which Constantinople is called 'the long unholy city.'<sup>35</sup>

However, the approval was not universal; Andrea notes the uncertainty and ambiguity of the evaluations of Innocent III and canon Burchard of Ursberg. While Innocent III wrote in November of 1204 that the Lord himself "transferred the empire of Constantinople from the proud to the humble, from

<sup>33</sup> Andrea, "Holy War, Holy Relics, Holy Theft," 156.

<sup>34</sup> John Godfrey, *1204 the Unholy Crusade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 149.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

the disobedient to the devout, from schismatics to Catholics,” in August of 1206 he rebuked the Venetians for “the many iniquities which [they] perpetrated at Constantinople, despoiling ecclesiastical treasures and sacking church possessions ...”<sup>36</sup> Burchard of Ursberg questioned whether or not the pope should “clearly justify such thievery made on Christian people ...”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the responses of Innocent III and Burchard of Ursberg provides examples of the Western church’s mixed evaluation of the results of the Fourth Crusade: while pleased with the influx of relics, some of which were considered to be extremely important,<sup>38</sup> the iniquity perpetrated by the Latins in translocating the relics could not overlooked. However, the theological presuppositions regarding relics and *furtum sacrum* were clearly present and provided an important aspect of Pope Innocent III’s November 1204 response regarding the translocation of relics in 1204.

**The role of icons in the fourth crusade: a potential means of understanding the fall of Constantinople from the Byzantine perspective**

As noted above, both the Eastern and Western Christians used relics as a means of connecting with the holy. However, for a typical early medieval Western Christian, icons were not an important aspect of their spirituality.<sup>39</sup> It is helpful to explore the distinctively Eastern use of icons in their spirituality in order to better understand their deterministic narrative of the events of 1204.

*The role of icons in medieval Eastern spirituality*

Unlike the Western church, Byzantine Christians had two categories of objects which were means of mediating between the mundane and the divine. With the exception of a “few curious objects which seem to hold the middle ground,” most Byzantine holy objects can easily be placed into either the category of relics (things) or icons (portrayals made by human hands).<sup>40</sup> In the Byzantine church, one finds miracle stories associated with sacred images that

<sup>36</sup> Andrea, “Holy War, Holy Relics, Holy Theft,” 148, quoting Pope Innocent III, PL 215:456 and 215:957-8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 148, quoting Berchard of Ursberg, *Chronicon*, MGH, SS 23:369.

<sup>38</sup> From Nevelon of Soissons’s cache: Protomartyr Stephen’s head, “the finger of the blessed Apostle Thomas which he placed in the side of the Lord,” the top of Mark the Evangelist’s skull, a single thorn from the crown of thorns, part of the maphorion and the Virgin’s belt, pieces of the true cross (Ibid.: 172-3.). The Abbott Martin’s hoard included some of Christ’s blood, the arm of St. James, and many unspecified relics (the saint, of course, is identified, but details as to the type of relic is little more than indication of whether it is primary or secondary), as noted in Gunther von Pairis, *The Capture of Constantinople: The 'Hystoria Constantinopolitana'*, trans. A. J. Andrea (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1997), 125-7.

<sup>39</sup> According to Wortley, the West’s reservation about the use of icons was not simply Deuteronomy 4:16 and Exodus 20:3, 5, but that man was made in the *eikona qeou* (Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:1) and Christ is the perfect icon of the Father. Thus, “the word *icon* refers to a unique act of creation and the exclusive prerogative of the Deity.” (Wortley, “Icons and Relics: A Comparison,” 163-8).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 161-2.



are typically not present in the early medieval Latin church.<sup>41</sup> As a result, not only does the West exhibit little in the way of literature regarding the use of icons, but “Greeks and Latins evaluated the relative merits of images, texts, and relics in disparate ways, and these distinctions both resulted in and emerged from disparate ways of structuring belief.”<sup>42</sup> However, both types of holy objects have the same function: they mediate between the mundane world and the divine realm for the believer, providing access to the saints as intercessors.<sup>43</sup> Further, relic and icon were both seen as means of protection as early as the fifth century.<sup>44</sup> It is the function of protector that brings us to the next aspect of the role of sacred objects in the Fourth Crusade.

*The role of relics and icons in the Theotokos cult of Constantinople*

The ancient Marian cult in Constantinople was based in the veneration of relics, not icons, with the maphorion, translated to Constantinople in 451, as the most important relic.<sup>45</sup> From the fifth century and especially throughout the seventh century, with the incessant invasions of the city, “the Theotokos gradually replaced the earlier pagan deity and emerged as the alleged supernatural defender of Constantinople.”<sup>46</sup> Specifically, during the Avar siege of 626, when the city was under attack by the Avars and Slavs as well as the Persians, outnumbered and outflanked, with the emperor away on another military campaign and the Constantinopolitan defense left to the patriarch Sergios and *patrikios* Bonos, the siege suddenly lifted after only seven days.<sup>47</sup> The abrupt end of the blockade was attributed to the appearance of the Theotokos who not only “walk[ed] on the city walls” but also fought hand-to-hand against the city’s enemies at a time that coincided with Sergios and Bonos taking the *acheiropoietos*<sup>48</sup> of Christ to the city walls.<sup>49</sup> This was not the first time that the breaking of a siege of the city was attributed to the appearance of a warrior-woman on the walls of the city: in 396, Alaric’s siege was broken by

<sup>41</sup> Leslie Brubaker, “Introduction: The Sacred Image,” in *The Sacred Image East and West*, ed. Robert Ousterhout and Leslie Brubaker (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 11.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 11.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Pentcheva, “The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople,” 20.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, fn 6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> This is one of the “mixed case” holy object. It is a secondary relic of Christ since it was not made by human hands, but it is a portrayal and thus an icon. “The concept of the *acheiropoietos* understood as an image appeared only around the middle of the sixth century. These special objects were perceived as a body imprint of Christ or the Virgin during their lifetime on a material surface. The resulting image had a double miraculous nature issued both from the way in which it was produced and from the close connection it preserved with the original divine presence” (*Ibid.*, 13).

<sup>49</sup> Pentcheva lists three extant accounts from the seventh century which contain details of this vision: George of Pisidia’s poem, a sermon which has been attributed to Theodore Synkellos, as well as the *Chronicon Paschale* (*Ibid.*, 5).

the appearance of the virgin goddess of war, Athena.<sup>50</sup> Bissera Pencheva notes that “[t]he Byzantine Virgin thus appeared to have acted in a manner similar to the pagan goddesses of war. Her help was perceived to have been manifested in her physical presence, not through her icon.”<sup>51</sup>

While the use of *archeipoiotos* had been used in civic processions, sieges and battles in other cities, the use of the relic-icon of Christ in a procession did not appear to be a typical practice in Constantinople at that time since the seventh century sources for this event spent time explaining Sergio’s practice.<sup>52</sup> In the *Chronicon Paschale*, however, no mention was made of the *archeipoiotos* of Christ: “the text only says that in the crucial moment of the siege the godless Chagan saw a figure of a woman, dressed in a dignified manner, running along the ramparts of the city walls.”<sup>53</sup> The poet linked this woman to the Virgin of the Blachernai.<sup>54</sup> This icon of the Blessed Virgin, the Blachernitissa, was associated with the maphorion.<sup>55</sup> The maphorion had been assumed to be the guarantee for the Byzantine empire’s safety since its installment in the church of the Blachernai in the fifth century; by the seventh century the icon of the Virgin Blachernitissa was associated with both the maphorion and the protection of the empire.<sup>56</sup>

During the seventh or eighth century, the hymn to the *Akathistos*<sup>57</sup> was given a new introduction which “extol[ed] the role of the Virgin in rescuing her city.”<sup>58</sup> The procession of the maphorion on the walls of the city was attributed with breaking the 860 Russian siege and the 926 Bulgarian siege.<sup>59</sup> The association of divine protection through an icon was established by the eleventh century when the tradition of the Hodegetria, the icon attributed to the hand of St. Luke, can be documented.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Pentcheva’s source is Zosimos’s 501 account of the siege.

<sup>51</sup> Pentcheva, “The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople,” 5.

<sup>52</sup> Pentcheva mentions the 544 siege of Edessa, and specifically instances in 586 and prior to 641 when *archeipoiotos* were carried into battle (Ibid., 14.).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>54</sup> Christine Angelidi and Titos Papamastorakis, “Picturing the Spiritual Protector: From Blachernitissa to Hodegetria,” in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005), 209.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Ousterhout, “The Virgin of the Chora: An Image and Its Contexts,” in *The Sacred Image East and West*, ed. Robert Ousterhout and Leslie Brubaker (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 95.

<sup>56</sup> Angelidi and Papamastorakis, “Picturing the Spiritual Protector: From Blachernitissa to Hodegetria,” 209. Ousterhout, “The Virgin of the Chora: An Image and Its Contexts,” 95.

<sup>57</sup> Scholars debate when this hymn was used within the liturgical calendar, which siege was referenced in the introduction, and when the introduction was added (Pentcheva, “The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople,” 18).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 21, 27.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 20, fn 20. It appears that the acceptance of this icon to be a secondary relic of St. Luke’s was intertwined with it becoming “the true *palladium* of Constantinople and of the Empire itself”

While earlier Byzantine emperors are known to have carried *archeipoiotos* into battle for protection, in the tenth century the protective holy object was an icon of the Virgin.<sup>61</sup> The account of Romanos III indicated that this was the normal practice of the emperors.<sup>62</sup> Thus, according to Pentcheva,

relics of the Virgin continued to function as the sole means of expression of the Virgin's protection of Constantinople in the period immediately after Iconoclasm. Only starting with the mid-tenth century ... did Marian icons begin to acquire a public role in triumphal processions and battles. ... By the second half of the eleventh century, Psellos and Attaleiates record the tradition of the Byzantine emperors to carry a special Marian icon on military campaigns: the *Blachernitissa*.<sup>63</sup>

Not only were icons of the Theotokos used for the personal protection of the emperor or general of the Byzantine army,<sup>64</sup> but they were also given the place of honor in the triumphal procession of the emperor. The first instance of this was in 971.<sup>65</sup> John I Tzimiskes (969-976) placed the captured icon<sup>66</sup> of the Virgin in what would have been his place of honor, the golden throne of the golden chariot pulled by a white horse, in the procession following the triumph over the Bulgarians.<sup>67</sup> The crowns of the Bulgarian rulers and a purple garment were placed under the icon while John rode behind the chariot, "crowned with a

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(Michele Bacci, "The Legacy of the Hodegetria: Holy Icons and Legends between East and West," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005), 322).

<sup>61</sup> Byzantine emperors Basil II and Romanos III Argyros were both recorded as having taken icons into battle: Basil II (976-1025) against Bardas Phokas at Abydos in 989 and Romanos III Argyros (1028-1034) against the Saracens in 1030. (Pentcheva, "The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople," 31-2).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. Ousterhout, "The Virgin of the Chora: An Image and Its Contexts," 96. Without reference to which icon, see also Angelidi and Papamastorakis, "Picturing the Spiritual Protector: From Blachernitissa to Hodegetria," 213.

<sup>64</sup> As noted in several sources, it was the function of a religious to carry the icon near the emperor. Cf Jonathan Phillips, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 230.

<sup>65</sup> Angelidi and Papamastorakis, "Picturing the Spiritual Protector: From Blachernitissa to Hodegetria," 213.

<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, the secondary source used does not give details regarding from whom this icon was captured.

<sup>67</sup> Pentcheva, "The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople," 29. Cf Niketas Choniates, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. H. J. Magoulias (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 12.

crown on his head, and carrying wreaths and staffs.”<sup>68</sup> “Thus, the Byzantine victory appeared to have been sanctioned and legitimized by the power of the Virgin. Her icon, mounted on the chariot, took the place of the emperor.”<sup>69</sup> Pentcheva notes that the captured icon “was probably perceived as a sign of divine right for the victory; otherwise, God would not have permitted the holy icon to be taken from its home.”<sup>70</sup> However, an eleventh century account of this same event changed the historiography: “instead of a captured icon, the panel of the Virgin is described as the protectress of Constantinople,” indicating the increased association of the Theotokos with the protection of the city that occurred between the tenth and eleventh century.<sup>71</sup> By the time Choniates wrote his history of Constantinople, the Virgin was the emperor’s “unconquerable fellow general” when placed in the victory chariot.<sup>72</sup>

#### *Crusader responses to icons*

When the crusaders captured this “fellow general,”<sup>73</sup> Robert of Clari offered this insightful commentary in which he applied the concept of *furtum sacrum* to the icon:

When Murzuplus heard of [Henry’s raid of Philea with thirty knights and some mounted sergeants], he got together a good thousand mounted men at arms, and he took with him the icon, an image of Our Lady which the Greeks call by this name and which the emperors carry with them when they go to battle. They have so great faith in this icon that they fully believe that no one who carries it in battle can be defeated, and we believe that it was because Murzuplus had no right to carry it that he was defeated.<sup>74</sup>

Robert of Clari’s report went on to state that the men returning to camp with the captured icon were met by a procession of bishops and clerks who “received the

<sup>68</sup> Pentcheva, “The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople,” 29, quoting from Leo the Deacon, *Leonis Diaconi Calonoësis Historiae*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 30, fn 113. Here Pentcheva’s evaluation assumes that the Byzantines would have applied the concept of *furtum sacrum* to icons. Robert of Clari also makes this same assumption, as will be seen in the next section of this essay.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Choniates, *O City of Byzantium*, 12, 90.

<sup>73</sup> This event occurred when Alexius V made an attempt to ambush Henry of Flanders’ raiding party and French crusaders took the icon from the emperor.

<sup>74</sup> Robert of Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, trans. Edgar Holmes McNeal (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 89.

icon with great joy and rejoicing.... the bishop carried it into the camp, to a church to which they all repaired, and the bishop chanted a service, and they made great rejoicing over it.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, while the Western church’s spirituality did not typically have a significant role for icons, the crusaders did appreciate the significance of the icon’s capture.

However, not all icons fared so well. Some of the icons that earlier had been spared the ax and fire were used as seats and footstools when the city was sacked.<sup>76</sup> This is not surprising, considering the desecration of the sacred space housing the holy objects during this time of madness and greed.<sup>77</sup> But, while many of the crusaders were indiscriminant in their treatment of the booty, whether a holy item or not, there were those among the crusaders who intentionally sought holy items, like the three “pious thieves:” Abbott Martin, Bishop Conrad of Habersstadt, and Nevelon Soissons.<sup>78</sup> Further, while icons were not included in the lists of booty recorded by Anonymous of Soissons, or in the marvels of Constantinople recorded by Robert of Clari, the beauty of the icon captured on the battlefield did not go unnoticed.<sup>79</sup> Is it possible that some of the icons were salvaged as sacred art? The records of the crusaders do not provide an answer to this question, but that is to be expected. In the end, the relics were what was important to the Latins.

*A Byzantine evaluation of the events of 1204*

It is important to also consider the record of Byzantine historian and citizen of Constantinople, Niketas Choniates. He recorded the capture of the icon, even if briefly:

As the Romans<sup>80</sup> were moving out and the enemy troops returning from their battle array, they met in close combat. The Romans were paralyzed by fear and took to impetuous flight; the emperor, left all alone, very nearly perished, and the icon of the Mother of God, which the Roman emperors reckon as their fellow general, was taken by

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 90. Further, either the beauty or the spiritual value of icons in the city was not lost to the doge of Venice: when the Venetians realized that Henry of Flanders was to be crowned emperor, they protested until they were given the Marion icon painted by St. Luke, the Hodegetria. (Robert of Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, 126, fn 32).

<sup>76</sup> Charles M. Brand, *Byzantium Confronts the West, 1180-1204* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 260.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 261. Cf. Choniates, *O City of Byzantium*, 315.

<sup>78</sup> Brand, *Byzantium Confronts the West, 1180-1204*, 261. Andrea, “Holy War, Holy Relics, Holy Theft,” 152.

<sup>79</sup> Robert of Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, 101-14, 90.

<sup>80</sup> Choniates refers to the Byzantines as the “Romans” and the crusaders as the “Latins” or “enemy.”

the enemy. Not only were these events dreadful,  
but those that followed were much worse  
than expected and more calamitous.<sup>81</sup>

Choniates provides no further commentary on the loss of the emperor's protective icon. However, his comments earlier in his chronicles on the apparent disregard of Alexius IV for the spiritual value of the icons and the lack of protest of the Greeks may provide an insight into his thoughts. When Alexius IV burned some of the icons to retrieve the precious metal as payment to the crusaders, Choniates reports that "no one protested out of reverence. In our silence, not to say callousness, we differed in no way from those madmen, and because we were responsible, we both suffered and beheld the most calamitous of evils."<sup>82</sup> Thus, while Jonathan Harris notes that Choniates correlates God's favor to the quality of the Byzantine emperor's rule,<sup>83</sup> it appears that Choniates also places some of the responsibility on the nobility of Constantinople.

**Conclusion: using *furtum sacrum* as an interpretive lens to understand how some 13<sup>th</sup> century Christians interpreted the outcome of the Fourth Crusade**

Thomas Madden has laid down the challenge for scholars to reconsider our presuppositions when we look at the Fourth Crusade. In this essay, by exploring the differences in spirituality between the two communities, specifically how they approach the holy through sacred objects, I have attempted to elucidate presuppositions based in the spirituality of the 13<sup>th</sup> century that can provide insights into the deterministic historiography of the Fourth Crusade.

On the part of the West, the concept of *furtum sacrum* can be seen in Pope Innocent III's response to the translation of the relics. The acceptance and use of the relics with only some concern for the actions through which the relics were obtained gives credence to Anonymous of Soissons's claim that the crusade was, in part, fulfilled. This chronicler's analysis of the actions of his fellow Westerners may be less creative and more truthful than we might first expect. The use of *furtum sacrum* to explain the major translocation of relics from East to West, with its focus on piety and impiety as the reason for the movement of the relics, provides a reason for a deterministic historiography from the Western perspective.

<sup>81</sup> Choniates, *O City of Byzantium*, 312.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 302. Brand, *Byzantium Confronts the West, 1180-1204*, 246

<sup>83</sup> Harris notes that Choniates "made clear throughout the *History*, the emperor was entrusted with the care of the common good of all Christians. His failure was ultimately the withdrawal of God's favor from his people." (Harris, "Distortion, Divine Providence and Genre in Niketas Choniates's Account of the Collapse of Byzantium, 1180-1204," 30).

The role of the icons is a little more difficult to elucidate, especially given the single 13<sup>th</sup> century historiographical source from the East. While Westerner Robert of Clari uses the concept of *furtum sacrum* when describing the capture of the Marion icon, the record from the East is not as clear. When recording the burning of the icons by Alexius IV, Choniates foreshadows the coming disaster as a result of the citizens' lack of action. Perhaps it was not surprising to Choniates that the Virgin's icon no longer protected a murdering emperor of a people who did not prevent icon destruction. But, in his account, culpability was not pronounced for the loss of the Theotokos icon—the empire was already on the path to destruction. It is possible that Choniates may have been working from the concept of *furtum sacrum*: given the theological presuppositions contained within the concept of *furtum sacrum*, one could easily account for how the destruction of icons could lead to the capture of the Theotokos icon and, ultimately, to the sacking of the city and the capture of the maphorion itself, the long trusted secondary relic that was supposed to protect the city. If this theological presupposition was at play, then the Byzantine chronicler would also write a deterministic historiography. Thus, the role of presuppositions in medieval Christian spirituality, especially the concept of *furtum sacrum*, may be a valuable interpretive lens through which to evaluate the ways that many Latins and at least one Greek may have understood the outcome of the Fourth Crusade.