THE WESTERN PLANS TO CAPTURE BYZANTIUM
FROM THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CRUSADES TO 1204*

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With the beginning of the crusades, the envy of Europe towards
Byzantium which had lasted since centuries, has come to the surface of their
policy. As it is known, the crusades were a military action organised with the
political motive of driving the Turks who have advanced towards the West since
the XI. Century, out of Asia Minor. This action had also included however, the
desire of the Roman Church to overcome the Patriarchy of Constantinople
(Istanbul) and establish its power over the East thus becoming the only power in
the Christian World1.

Undoubtedly, the Popes played a greater part in nourishing this idea that
moved Europe of those times. The Popes aimed at strengthening their power in
the West and establishing it in the East as well. They needed to unite the
Western and Eastern Churches for this purpose. This would increase their
influence in greater parts of the World. But they knew that this would be
impossible with the Byzantine Empire on their way and wanted to eliminate it
in the first place. This could not be done in a straightforward manner and they
have chosen to hide their intentions behind the unification of the churches.

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Gregorius VII. who has been the Pope between the years of 1073-1085
was one of the most enthusiastic defenders of this idea. He has always shown
Constantinople as a target in all his letters, wrote to the kings, dukes and counts
in Europe. A letter he has written to the duke of Burgundy, he stated his
intention to move towards Constantinople, as soon as it was captured by the
Normans, because he had Christian brethren there, who were awaiting his aid.
In another letter he claimed that the heart of Christianity was destroyed by the
pagans, and he was not in accord with the church of Constantinople over the
issue of the Holy Spirit and there had to be a final solution to these issues. The
Pope had even planned to engage personally in a Crusade under his command,
in the year of 1074. With this crusade, he marvelled about driving the Turks
finally out of Anatolia and assemble a Council in Constantinople, after
succeeding in this war. In this council the Christians of the East would offer him
their thankfulness and accept the power of Rome, with great eagerness. The
Pope could not realise this dream. Because he had other problems in the West
to care about. Strange as it is, the Pope took Byzantium still as a target, even
when he was handling these problems. Pope Gregorius VII. was caught in a
struggle with the German King Heinrich IV (1056-1106) and needed allies to
overcome him. And he tried to convince the Norman Robert Guiscard who had
an eye on the throne and the lands of Byzantium. Robert Guiscard had, as Anna
Kommene had written later: “Aiming to swallow the Byzantine Empire with
great appetite, had started to grind his teeth already”. Robert Guiscard has
approached this offer by the Pope positively and has promised to aid him,
however this was never the case. Because Robert had let know, that his first and
most important duty was to prepare for a war towards Byzantium.

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2 A.A. Vasiliev, History of the Byzantine Empire (324-1453), Madison-Milwaukee 1964, II, pp. 395-
396.
3 Steven Runciman, A History of the Crusades, London 1951-54, Turkish Trans. Fikret Işitan, Haşı
51.
5 Anna Kommene, op.cit., Book I, XIII, p. 65; Turkish Trans. pp. 52-53. See Sibyll Kollmann, Die
Eroberung von Konstantinopel als politische Forderung des Westens im Hochmittelalter, Zurich
1969, pp. 31 ff.
Robert Guiscard has first conquered the lands of the Eastern Roman Empire in Southern Italy and in the Summer months of 1081, he aimed to occupy one of the most important cities of the Byzantines, namely Dyrrhakion, after laying a siege from the sea and on land. Eastern Roman Emperor Alexios has asked the Pope for helping him against the Normans, but could not even receive a reply to this pledge. Because the Pope was on the side of the Normans and the defeat and surrender of Byzantium would be of a great advantage for him. Against all resistance, the city of Dyrrhakion was conquered by Robert. Robert Guiscard was encouraged by this successful war attempt and he instantly laid siege on the lands of Epirus, Macedonia, Tessaalia, and Larissa that belonged to the East Romans. But he had to leave this region by various reasons and inherited his son Bohemund with this struggle. Bohemund has won some struggles against Alexios, but lost a decisive battle at Larissa and could never forget this defeat. Anna Komnena writes that he had always felt great hatred towards Alexios because of this defeat and has expected to revenge it all the time.

Pope Urbanus II. (1088-1099) as one of the successors of Gregorius VII, also felt thought that it was necessary to erase Byzantium from the Earth. According to Fulcherius, Urbanus II has invited the Western World to struggle to drive the Turks away from the Byzantine lands he called “our lands” (regionibus nostrum), during the Council of Clairmont. This means, Also Urbanus had the aim of uniting the Churches in faith and ruling over a united Christian World. But, this could only be realized by moving towards the East with a war campaign.

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8 Anna Komnena, op. cit., Book X, p. 319; Turkish Trans., p. 313.
In consequence, their Lord was given presents by and has apologised from the Emperor and they were finally transferred to the Asian shores.  

This hostile attitude of the West towards Byzance was also obvious during the Second Crusades. Byzantine historian Kinnamos relates that their intention to free Jerusalem was only an excuse for the conquest of the Byzantine lands. This shows us that the West still pursued the idea of the conquest of Byzantium and Byzantines were fully aware of this situation. The news that the German armies under the command of Konrad were approaching the city filled Emperor Manuel with horror. He did not trust these Germans and feared that they would incur great losses to his lands and his people. He instantly sent emisaries to the German King Konrad and asked him to take an oath for not harming anyone or anything in his land or otherwise they would not be allowed for a free passage through the Byzantine lands. Manuel informed them of every possible assistance if they have not come with treachery plans and without good will. The treachery plans as he mentioned were nothing but their intention to conquer Byzantium.

The Germans arrived in Constantinople on 10th of September 1147. The King was given quarter in the Pirkidion Palace on the opposite shore of the Golden Horn. Konrad had asked Emperor Manuel for ships to pass through the Golden Horn or otherwise he would arrive next year with a greater army and conquer Constantinople, he had threatened.

King Louis of France who also had participated at the Second Crusade was met with real warmth and sympathy by Emperor Manuel and was quartered at the Palace of Philopation. But others in the army of King Louis such as Bishop Godefroi of Langres and a group around him, have advised to Louis VII to conquer the cities and castles of Byzantine lands and to assault Constantinople by forming an alliance with the Roger, King of Sicily who was a sworn enemy of the Emperor Manuel.

The unsuccessful outcome of the Second Crusade has affected Louis VII, the King of France, very negatively. According to Louis, Emperor Manuel was fault in this defeat and he felt great resentment against him. He planned an alliance with his enemy Roger, the King of Sicily. Roger proposed a crusade towards Byzantium in order to revenge for the failed one and Louise and his men were incredibly delighted at this occasion. As usual, they were greatly supported by the clerics. Pope Eugenius III, Head Priest Suger and Bernhard de Clairvaux have supported them. But the outcome was in vain and a new Crusade could not be organized. Thus, the idea of conquering Byzantium had to be postponed for the future.

Finally this idea came to the agenda, together with the third Crusade. Selahattin Eyyubi had destroyed a Crusader’s Army in Hattin on 4th of July 1187 and had re-conquered Jerusalem on 2nd of October 1187. This caused great turmoil in the West. And a new Crusade towards the East was instantly decided. The third crusade would be joined by Kings as the Second one. Fredrick Barbarossa the German King, Philippe II Auguste, the King of France and Richard the Lion Heart as the King of England were the most popular personalities in this Crusade. The hostile attitude towards Byzantium especially from the German King Fredrick Barbarossa was quite interesting. Friedrich saw a concurrent in Byzantium because he claimed to be the only Emperor in world. The Kings of England and France had preferred to travel by sea to the Holy Lands. Friedrich had chosen the passage of land and he had to pass through the

Albertus as one of the crusaders historians relates of this assault and means that the Lombards could enter the palace in two parts by using force and first they killed a young boy, a relative and one of the domesticated lions of the Emperor. See. Albertus Aquensis. Libri Christiani Expeditionis pro Repugnatione, Emundatione et Restitutione Sanctae Hierosolimitanae Ecclesiae. RHC, occ., IV, vii, 4-5, p. 564 f. German Trans. H. Hefele, Albert von Aachen, Geschichte des ersten Kreuzzuges, Jena 1923, II, pp. 75-77; Kindlimann, pp. 98 f.; Runciman, op. cit., II, p. 16; Janies Lee Cate “The Crusade of 1101”, A History of the Crusades, Publisher. K. Seton, Madison-Milwaukee-London 1969, I, pp. 353-354; Demirkent, "1101 Yılı ile ..", p. 27.


Odo de Deuil, op. cit., p. 59; Altan, op. cit., p. 40.

Byzantine lands in its consequence. Byzantine Emperor Isaakos Angelos (1185-1195) did not want such a great army to pass through his lands. Friedrich sent to Angelos a letter with a very heavy content. In that letter he claimed to be able to conquer Byzantium with his great army in an easy manner. He asked his son Heinrich VI to come before the city walls of Constantinople with a fleet and he asked the Pope to open a new Crusade against Byzantium. The Emperor and the King were very near to engage in a war but they eventually decided to settle their dispute. The King was given passage across the Straits of Dardanelles and the attempt to conquer Constantinople thus came to an end.

Heinrich VI (1190-1197) was the son of Fredrick Barbarossa and he also had his own plans for conquering Byzantium. He was wed to Konstanze, the daughter of Norman King Guillaume II and had got the Norman heritage by marriage.

According to Niketas, Heinrich was waiting for an opportunity to attack Byzantium, but he had doubts as well. Still, he sent some emissaries for insulting the Byzantine Emperor Isaakos and complained for various needless reasons. (February-March 1196). As the heir of Guillaume II, he claimed the lands between Dyrrhakion and Saloniki, that were once conquered, but then lost by the Normans. He asked for the withdrawal of Byzantium from this region as well as a great sum of money. Then, he further claimed that he should be declared as the King of Kings and the Lord of all Lords and a fleet should be sent by Byzantium for the service of the German people in Palastin.

Emperor Aleksios Angelos III, who ascended to the throne for Emperor Isaakos has started to search new ways for a settlement with Heinrich. He was ready to pay 50 Kenenare (1600 kg) of gold per year. But Heinrich died suddenly, before the money was sent (September 1197) and thus Byzantium was once again saved from a catastrophe.

The non ending attempts of the West towards Byzantium were at least successful during the Fourth Crusade and Constantinople became subject to an occupation and plunder, unknown in its history.

Even this conquest of Constantinople by the Western powers has not ended their endless hostility towards Byzantium. When Constantinople came under Byzantine rule in 1261, the West became agitated again. Particularly the objective of the King of Sicily and Naples, Charles d’Anjou who was the brother of the Franch King Louis IX, was to destroy Byzantium and establish another Latin empire in Constantinople. Under such a danger, Byzantium has sought the help of the Pope Gregorius X (1271-1276) against its brethren in faith. The Pope made again the condition of unification of the churches of Rome and of Constantinople. Only the plans made by VIII. Mihail Paleologos could save Byzantium from the hostility of Charles d’Anjou. But the Crusader mentality could not be stopped. Later, after the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in the middle of the XV. Century (1453), Europeans have tried to reconquer Istanbul from the Ottomans. The various Crusades against the State of the Ottomans over the Balkan peninsula were the consequences.

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