

46 Gunther of Pairis describes Abbot Martin's part in the sack of Constantinople, 13 April 1204 (written August 1207–June 1208)

This famous description of Abbot Martin despoiling one of the churches in Constantinople of its relics during a sack which the Greeks have never forgotten or forgiven can only be understood in the context of *furta sacra*, thefts of relics which had been going on in the West for centuries and had in the course of time developed a literature of their own, in which a successful stealing was justified as expressing the will of the saint involved. Abbot Martin was not a bad man; indeed he had been shocked by the course the crusade had taken and had sought release from his vow. The sack of Constantinople, where everyone knew there was the greatest store of relics in the Christian world, was among other things a massive *furtum sacrum*. It has even been suggested that the diversion of the Fourth Crusade to Constantinople was at least partly caused by a desire for relics, especially the True Cross.

Source: Gunther of Pairis, 'Historia', pp. 104–6

When the victors were eagerly looting the conquered city they had made theirs by right of war, Abbot Martin began to think about what he himself could take as spoil and, so that he should not remain empty-handed while all the others became rich, he also planned to put his consecrated hands to plunder. But because he thought it unseemly for those same hands to touch worldly booty, he began to plan how to procure for himself some portion of the relics of the saints, of which he knew there was an enormous quantity in that place. So, taking with him one of his two chaplains and with high expectations of some great result, he made for a church which was held in great veneration because it contained a fine tomb of the mother of the most celebrated Emperor Manuel, a fact which, although it seemed an important matter to the Greeks, was considered by our men to be of no consequence. In it was stored a large amount of money, which had been deposited by the people of the surrounding area, not to mention precious relics, which in the vain hope of safety had been collected there from neighbouring churches and monasteries. Before the city was sacked this fact also had been made known to our men by those whom the Greeks had expelled. While many of the pilgrims were breaking into this church and some were greedily turning their attention to other objects such as gold and silver and other precious booty, Martin, thinking it unworthy to commit sacrilege except in a holy cause, looked for a more concealed place, the very holiness of

which would lead him to suppose that he could find the things he most desired.

He found there an old man with an agreeable face and a long white beard; definitely a priest, but very unlike our priests in his appearance. Because of this the abbot, supposing him to be a layman, shouted fiercely at him in a terrifying voice, although he was calm enough inwardly, 'Come now, you perfidious old man, show me where you keep the more potent relics you have or rest assured that you will be punished at once by the penalty of death'. The old man, terrified by the shouting, which indeed he heard, rather than by the content of the words, the meaning of which he could not comprehend, and knowing that he could not make him understand his Greek tongue, began to calm Martin down in the *lingua Romana*, of which he knew a little, and to soften his anger, which did not exist, with flattery. At this the abbot just managed with great effort to make the old man understand in a few words of the same language what he was asking of him. Then the old man, studying his face and dress and judging that it was more tolerable for a religious man to lay hands on holy relics with awe and reverence than for worldly men perhaps to pollute them with bloody hands, opened an iron chest for him and showed him the longed for treasure, which Abbot Martin considered to be more welcome and desirable than all the riches of Greece. When the abbot saw it he swiftly and avidly plunged in both his hands and he and the chaplain, briskly tucking up their habits, filled the folds with holy sacrilege. Wisely hiding the things he thought most important, he left at once. Exactly what and how worthy of veneration are these relics, which that holy plunderer snatched for himself, is more fully explained at the end of this little book. And so, as he hurried in this way to the ships, stuffed full, so to speak, he was seen by those who knew and loved him as they too were hurrying from the ships to the plunder. And they asked him joyfully whether he had carried anything off or with what he was so laden. He answered with a smiling face, as usual, and merry words, 'We have done well.' To which they replied, 'Thanks be to God!'

The Crusades

Idea and Reality, 1095-1274

Louise and Jonathan
Riley-Smith

First published 1981
by Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd
41 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DQ