

THE LATIN CONQUEST OF CONSTANTINOPLE

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The contemporary Byzantine historian, Nicetas Choniates, who is reliable, but whose chronology is often difficult to unravel, declares that Alexius III Angelus had freed his nephew, the young Alexius, from prison and taken him along on his campaign against a rebellious official, Manuel Camytzes, in 1201. Early in the campaign (1201), Nicetas says, the young Alexius fled the imperial camp, boarded a Pisan vessel (which had put into the Marmara port of Athyra ostensibly for ballast), escaped his uncle's agents by cutting his hair in Western style and dressing in western clothes, and sailed away to the west, where, Nicetas knew, he turned to his sister Irene and her husband Philip of Swabia for help. The *Gesta Innocentii* reports that Boniface of Montferrat visited Innocent in Rome, at a time *after* Boniface "was said to have discussed" with Philip of Swabia a plan to restore the young Alexius; with him he brought a letter from Philip Augustus, to which we have the reply, dated March 26, 1202. This would push the alleged conversations between Boniface, Philip, and the young Alexius back to a date in 1201, certainly long before the summer of 1202, Villehardouin's date for the arrival of the young Alexius in the west.

Then too, Alexius III Angelus, who was of course fully conscious, once his nephew had escaped, of the danger that now threatened him, wrote to the pope, asking for assurances that he would not support Philip of Swabia and the young Alexius against him, and offering to negotiate for a union between the Greek and Latin churches, as the Byzantine experors usually did when danger threatened. Innocent answered somewhat reassuringly in a letter dated November 16, 1202.

He reminded Alexius III that papal policy opposed Philip of Swabia and supported his rival Otto IV for the German imperial throne. Innocent also referred, however, to a visit which the young Alexius had paid him in Rome; and in so doing used the word *olim* to describe the period elapsing since the visit had taken place. It has been cogently argued that the word *olim* could not refer to anything as recent as August 1202, but must refer to a considerably longer period, as far back as 1201. The *Annals* of Cologne also include a passage which may well date the young Alexius's arrival in the summer of 1201. Finally, Robert of Clari tells us that in mid-December 1202 at Zara, Boniface of Montferrat, in a speech to the crusaders, told them that "last year at Christmas," that is, Christmas 1201, he had seen the young Alexius at the court of Philip of Swabia.

When all these passages are taken together, they strongly suggest that Villehardouin was wrong about the date of the arrival of the young Alexius in the west, and that he had in fact been there since sometime in 1201, or long enough to have launched a plot with Boniface and Philip, and perhaps with the Venetians and the pope. But this is a long way from proving that such a plot was actually launched. Nor need we believe that Villehardouin deliberately lied about the time the young Alexius arrived. He may simply have erred. Moreover, he may be right, and the other evidence misleading. The problem of the diversion is still with us. Though scholars have not heeded a plea made half a century ago to give up trying to solve an insoluble problem, the plea itself makes excellent sense. We are unlikely to be able to go beyond the statement that the diversion which occurred suited the interests of the young Alexius and Isaac, Philip of Swabia and Boniface of Montferrat, and the Venetians, and that they may therefore have planned it. (Pp. 171-173.)