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The Evolution of Pope Innocent III's Representation of the Greek Christian Church from 1198 to 1205¹

Abstract

Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) was active in supporting the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), recovering the Great Schism between Eastern and Western Christianity, and reforming the Roman Catholic Church during his pontificate. In April 1204, the crusade ended in the Sack of Constantinople instead of the original aim of conquering Egypt and Jerusalem. This paper investigates Innocent III's politics towards the Greek Church by analyzing how he portrayed the Greek Christians and the deeds of the Latin crusaders in his public and private letters. The paper argues that the papal rhetoric changed considerably in the course of the Fourth Crusade as a consequence of Innocent's efforts to keep the events under his control or at least to maintain his role as the leader of the crusade. Nonetheless, the paper demonstrates that the language used by the pope was different according to the addressed audience – Innocent expressed his concerns regarding the ramifications of the divergence to his legates, while depicting the military actions committed against Greeks in his encyclical letters as a divine punishment for their disobedience to and separation from Rome.

Keywords

Innocent III, papal politics, papal rhetoric, Greek Christian Church, Fourth Crusade, Sack of Constantinople

In the High Middle Ages, popes strived to strengthen their position as the political and spiritual leaders of Christendom. The Great Schism of 1054 created a deep denominational division between the Latin and Greek Churches. Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) aimed at carrying out three large-scale projects

during his pontificate: supporting the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204) in order to recover the Holy Land, strengthening his Church by re-establishing Roman authority over the Greek Christians, and reforming the Roman Catholic Church by convening the Fourth Council of the Lateran (1205).²

The objective of this essay is to analyze the shift in the pope's description of the Greek Church as well as to explain the diversions of the Fourth Crusade and the ways the pope justified them. It maps the alteration of Innocent's portrayal of the Byzantines, or the "Greeks" as he called them, by comparing documents from the time of his accession to the papal throne in 1198 with those from the time of the Latins' conquest of Constantinople, the religious and political centre of Eastern Christianity, and its aftermath in 1204 and 1205. Methodologically, the research has selected papal letters issued by Innocent III during the Fourth Crusade concerning the most decisive turning points of the military operations – with a special focus on the depiction of Greek Christians by the Holy See. This official correspondence, qualitative and descriptive in its nature, is examined in a chronological order. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to the historiography on Innocent III's role and activity in the Fourth Crusade by conducting an investigation of his behavior towards the crusading army and the Greek Christian Church.³

In the early years of Innocent III's pontificate, the schism between Rome and Constantinople was already deep but still not irrevocable. Innocent III regarded Byzantines mostly as "errant" Christians whose break away disturbed the union of faith and who had to be brought back under the suzerainty of Rome. According to Innocent III, the schism of the Church was an unpleasant temporary condition that would be changed during his reign. Innocent's

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Jan Vandeburie (School of History, Politics and International Relations – University of Leicester) for his valuable advice in the autumn of 2018 in the course of writing the essay which served as the basis of this article.

² James M. Powell, ed. and tr., *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), xiii-xv. On the Fourth Crusade, see: Michael Angold, *The Fourth Crusade* (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2003); Laiou Angeliki, ed., *Urbs Capta: The Fourth Crusade and Its Consequences* (Paris: Lethielleux, 2005).

³ On Innocent III's role in the Fourth Crusade, see: Donald E. Queller and Thomas F. Madden, ed., *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople*, 2nd edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Aphrodite Papayianni, "The Papacy and the Fourth Crusade in the Correspondence of the Nicaean Emperors with the Popes," in *La Papauté et les croisades / The Papacy and the Crusade*, ed. Michael Balard (London: Routledge, 2011), 157-163; David M. Perry, *Sacred Plunder: Venice and the Aftermath of the Fourth Crusade* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 46-74; Edward Peters, "Innocent III and the Beginning of the Fourth Crusade," in *Papacy, Crusade, and Christian-Muslim Relations*, ed. Jessalynn Bird (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 117-130; Savvas Neocleous, *Heretics, schismatics, or Catholics? Latin attitudes to the Greeks in the long twelfth century* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2019), 132-195.

correspondence with the Byzantine Emperor Alexios III Angelos in 1199 suggests that the pope would have forgiven the “obstinacy“ of Eastern Christians had they dedicated themselves to the crusade of Latin Christians and shared their sacrifices for the sake of the Holy Land, stating that: “It is, therefore, as a result of the necessity of the Christian people or rather of Jesus Christ, that both you and all washed in the waters of holy Baptism should use free will to aid the Crucified exile. If you wish to await the time unknown to men for the redemption of that land and do nothing by yourself, but leave everything to divine disposition, without your help the Lord’s sepulchre cannot be freed from the hands of the Saracens. Therefore, through negligence, your Imperial Magnificence would incur a Divine offense, and as a result you would not win the favor of the Lord by your assistance.”⁴ Clearly, this document conveyed that the Byzantines’ sin of disowning papal supremacy would be compounded if they refused to take part in the holy war. It revealed the pope’s plan to unite the Eastern Church with Rome through a common fight for the Holy Land. Nevertheless, despite being vaguely threatening, the pope also tried to be diplomatic. He addressed the Byzantine Emperor with great respect and caution. In his effort to ameliorate the adversarial tone, the pope wrote that he was merely advising the Emperor: “Although you might believe we reproved your Magnificence for your lack of support for the Holy Land, we have not, however, written to criticise but to advise. (...) But we wonder why your Imperial Prudence has apparently not yet given a sign of a commitment to the recovery of the Holy Land in your letters...”⁵ To sum up, the pope was questioning the Emperor’s dedication to Christendom. His intention was to enhance the Emperor’s sense of responsibility for the entire “Christian world”. Innocent addressed a letter to the Patriarch of Constantinople as well with the aim of demonstrating the primacy of Rome with a number of theological principles and biblical quotes: “And I say to thee: That thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”⁶ Saint Peter, the man directly entrusted to lead the Church by Jesus Christ, the founding father of the Church in Rome, served as an incontestable reference for Roman Catholic teaching and as a powerful source of authority for the pope in his correspondence with the Patriarch.

The crusades had both ideological and political aspects which formed an obvious coherence in the policy of Innocent III. In his 1198 papal bull *Post Miserabile*, he called upon Christians to participate in the holy enterprise of the Fourth Crusade and promised remission of sins for those who fought in the name of the cross. Thus, he took the responsibility for the crusaders’ spiritual guidance and encouragement throughout their journey.⁷ However, when Constantinople replaced Egypt and the Holy Land as the target of the crusade,

⁴ Gesta LX, Powell, *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III*, 78.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Matthew 16:18, *Douay-Rheims Bible* (1582), accessed 6 December 2018, <http://www.drbo.org/>.

⁷ Alfred J. Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 9-19.

the pope started to lose his influence over events. Papal correspondence reflected this fact when it started simply following and explaining events, instead of dictating them. As part of the war preparations, Innocent III discussed and established a deal with the Venetian Republic in which, in exchange for money, the Venetians would provide the ships needed for the transport of the army. The first considerable challenge of the endeavour was the crusading army's difficulties to pay for this agreement with Venice. Enrico Dandolo, the Doge, used this opportunity to capture the Dalmatian city of Zara which had been a valued target in the state competition between the Serenissima and the Kingdom of Hungary. Venice proposed to waive the crusaders' debt if they conquered Zara. Interestingly, Zara was the possession of Emeric of Hungary, a Christian king and a prospective crusader himself. Although only a fraction of the army agreed to take part in the battle, the Venetians' success in modifying the direction of the campaign was the first sign of the limited influence Innocent III wielded over the crusading army. The Siege of Zara in November 1202 can be regarded as a watershed moment that altered the course of the crusade and consequently, the papal propaganda as well.⁸ The occupation of the city was the first significant military action of the Fourth Crusade as well as the first step that provoked Innocent III's disapproval. The pope despised the event because attacking fellow Christians was not allowed. His letter sent in December 1202 to the crusading army still residing in Zara testified to his rage and disappointment along with a commitment to regain control over the crusaders: "Heeding further the ancient enemy who is the devil and Satan, who seduces the whole world, that no one has greater love than that someone lays down his life for his friends [John 15:13], that he might deprive you of the affection and mercy of such love, he has caused you to make war on your brethren and to deploy your banners first against peoples of the faith so that you will pay him the first fruits of the pilgrimage and shed your blood and that of your brethren. (...) The sinner values little when he arrives in the depth of vices [Proverbs 18:3], we admonish your whole group and we exhort you more energetically and we command by Apostolic letter, and under the terms of the anathema, we strictly order that you should neither destroy Zara further than it has been destroyed up to this point nor cause it to be destroyed, or as much as you can control, but arrange to restore all that has been taken to the ambassadors of the same king. Otherwise you should know that you will be subject to the sentence of excommunication and deprived of the grant of remission promised to you."⁹ The biblical references emphasized the evil nature of the Venetian exploits in Zara and were meant to discourage the crusaders from disobeying the pope in the future.

The crusading army was approaching Constantinople in the summer of 1203. This news made Alexios III flee and leave the crown to Isaac II and his son Alexios IV, who enjoyed the support of the pope. Nonetheless, their

⁸ Queller and Madden, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople*, 55-78.

⁹ Gesta LXXXVI, Powell, *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III*, 140-142.

co-reign did not last long as Alexios Doukas Mourtzouphlos seized power and ruled the empire as Alexios V from February 1204.¹⁰ His unwillingness to cooperate with the crusaders, and to pay the amount that Alexios IV had owed to them, led the army to destroy the imperial city. The capture of the city was executed in less than a week in the middle of April. During the attack various crimes were committed by Latins – a series of homicides, the defilement of Greek churches, despoilment of Byzantine buildings, and sexual abuse. The sheer brutality of the open armed clash between Christians aroused the indignation of Orthodox believers and Innocent III as well.¹¹ Shortly after the Latin army conquered and sacked Constantinople, as head of the Latin Church, Innocent needed to justify why the crusading army ruined a Christian capital and its people instead of fighting the Muslims. At the end of the summer of 1205, he wrote a letter to bishops and archbishops, expressing his views on the righteousness of the attack: “But after the Greeks broke the chain of peace and departed from unity, they also grew weak, refusing to confess the faith, that the Holy Spirit, who is the binding force of unity and equality, proceeds from the Son as from the Father. Because, therefore, they refused to profess the truth about the procession of the Holy Spirit, they merited to incur darkness of mind since the Spirit teaches all truth, as the Son sets forth in the Gospel.”¹² In this letter, warfare against schismatics and heretics was excused as a divinely sanctioned punishment for denying the superiority of Rome, the pope and his Curia. Innocent III did not only depict the Greek Church as a sort of “prodigal son” that needed to return to its origins, the authority of Rome, but also directly rebuked it for breaking the unity of the one and only Church that the Holy Spirit created on Pentecost by descending from the Son and the Father upon Christ’s apostles, and concluded that this way, the Byzantines drifted away from the true knowledge of God’s Word.¹³ The pope went on to explain the conquest as a divine sign that God had finally rewarded loyal Christians: “But blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who, having desired to console his church, so that Ephraim might be converted to Juda and Samaria returned to Jerusalem [Isaiah 11:13], has deigned wonderfully to raise a sign over the same people like a hill covered with mist and those sanctified to God have entered his gates, transferring the empire of the Greeks from the proud to the humble, from the superstitious to the religious, from schismatics to Catholics, from the disobedient to the devout.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, it is essential to highlight that this was an encyclical letter addressed to the public audience that aimed to convey

¹⁰ Raymond H. Schmandt, “The Fourth Crusade and the Just-War Theory,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 61/2 (1975): 214.

¹¹ Filip Van Tricht, *The Latin Renovation of Byzantium: The Empire of Constantinople (1204-1228)* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), 23-24.

¹² Gesta XCIV, Powell, *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III*, 171.

¹³ Acts 2:1-13, *Douay-Rheims Bible* (1582), accessed 6 December 2018, <http://www.drbo.org/>.

¹⁴ Gesta XCIV, Powell, *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III*, 171.

the official standpoint of the Roman Catholic Church – namely, its moral and ecclesiastical superiority over the Greek Church. Consequently, the papal interpretation of the army's deeds in Constantinople aimed to reason the idea of the crusade and the endeavours of his Church. The letter dedicated the victory over the Byzantines entirely to the will and glory of God. It mentioned stories from the Old Testament, such as the reintegration of Samaria with Jerusalem, in order to draw a parallel with contemporary events and to prove the pope's "holy" support of the crusading army. Innocent III implied that the worthy goal of reunifying the Eastern and Western Churches was the ultimate consequence of the conquest of Constantinople, and in doing so, he justified the conflict. In addition, Innocent III stated that the recapture of Constantinople was the first major step towards an even greater triumph, the occupation of the Holy Land by a united and strengthened Christian force. Accordingly, the pope explained the diversion of the Fourth Crusade's original intentions as a divine miracle which would prove to be if not necessary, then at least beneficial for the attainment of the ultimate goal.

By 1204, he had regarded and interpreted the crusaders' invasion of Constantinople, and the establishment of the Latin Empire in 1204, as a justification of his political aims, a satisfactory conclusion of the Roman Catholic Church's decades-long struggles with schismatics and as a divine blessing on the new era of the unified Church.¹⁵ Heresy was defined as treason against God and his Word, and therefore, also as a crime. Heretics were marked as the new target of crusades. The papal policy designated the Eastern Orthodox Church as a new enemy who endangered the authority and integrity of the Apostolic See and who thus, in accordance with God's will, fell prey to the crusaders. As it is shown in his letters issued after the Sack of Constantinople, Innocent III did not regret the inhumanity against Greek Orthodox believers. He explained that their disloyalty to Rome provoked God's rightful judgement which then reached the city in the form of the crusading army. He admitted the fact that the crusaders acted in a savagely violent way against the conquered Byzantines, but he declared that their behavior was a legitimate punishment from God for the Byzantines' sins and intractability. Regarding the Lord's will as unquestionable and infallible, Innocent III stated that because the crusaders acted only to fulfill God's will their crimes could be forgiven. The pope concluded that the Byzantines should learn God's lesson and return to the "truth".¹⁶ Before the Latin attacks upon Constantinople happened, Innocent III opposed them because he doubted their success due to the wealth and military power of the Byzantine Empire.¹⁷ In spite of learning that the Byzantine army was completely unprepared for the assault and Emperor Alexios took no signifi-

¹⁵ Helene Tillmann, *Pope Innocent III* (Amsterdam, New York: North-Holland, 1980), 261.

¹⁶ Papayianni, "The Papacy and the Fourth Crusade in the Correspondence of the Nicaean Emperors with the Popes," 158-162.

¹⁷ Alfred J. Andrea, "Pope Innocent III as Crusader and Canonist: His Relations with the Greeks of Constantinople, 1198-1216," *Church History* 39/1 (1970): 133-134.

cant attempts to defend the city in July 1203, the pope still discouraged any armed conflict with the eastern capital. When in 1204 he became aware that the crusaders in Constantinople behaved brutally with their fellow Christians, he protested firmly against such behavior. Still, at that point he was unable to condemn the results of the war that he himself launched.

Later, in the summer of 1205, the hopeful joy of the Latin victory over the Byzantines and of the establishment of the Latin Empire were overshadowed by Pope Innocent III's worries regarding the next steps of the crusade and the uncertain future of Latin power in Constantinople. This was revealed in a papal letter addressed to Peter, cardinal priest of St. Marcellus, legate of the Apostolic See: "For how will the Greek church, which has been afflicted to some degree by persecution, be returned to ecclesiastical unity and devotion to the Apostolic See? They look upon the Latins as nothing but an example of perdition and works of darkness, so that now they rightly abhor them more than dogs."¹⁸ Innocent III strongly condemned the actions of the invaders who abused and killed many inhabitants of Constantinople, robbed and desecrated churches, icons, books, vessels and relics and thus highly disrespected the Christian people and their holy places. Restoring Christian unity under his rule was the crown jewel of his reforming ambitions. Nevertheless, the cruel treatment of Orthodox believers and their relics by the Latins dramatically lessened the chances of a lasting peaceful unification. In addition, the pope was worried about a potential Muslim assault against the Kingdom of Jerusalem since the establishment of the Latin Empire represented an opportunity for Christians to return home and leave their mission in the Holy Land. Two notable legates of the Holy See, cardinal priests Peter and Soffredus, already left and took with them their cities' Christian natives. The pope called his legates to account for abandoning the Holy Land and for endangering the Apostolic See's chances to unite Christendom against the expansion of Islam: "Also, how could we in the future invite the peoples of the West to aid the Holy Land and defend the Empire of Constantinople when some will argue, even if it is not your fault but the result of your action, that the crusaders, having deserted their pilgrimage, are returning to their homes absolved, and those who despoiled the empire, having left it unfortified, desert it when they are stuffed with spoils?"¹⁹ This way, Innocent III made his papal legates responsible for the possible deterioration of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and continued to promote the goal of reconciliation within the Christian world and a joined fight against the common threat. The audience of this letter is worth considering as well. Importantly, in these lines, addressed directly and privately to his legates, Innocent III expressed his personal thoughts on the ramifications of the Sack of Constantinople. The tone and the message of the text reveal his concerns which were not voiced in his encyclical letter. Therefore, it can be stated that the pope's individual opinion regarding the diversion of the crusade was significantly more apprehensive than the opinion he phrased publicly as the head of the Roman Church.

¹⁸ Gesta XCV, Powell, *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III*, 174.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

Eventually, the Fourth Crusade did not result in the unification of the Latin and the Greek Churches and Constantinople did not return to the ecclesiastical obedience to Rome. The assault on the Byzantine capital represented the peak of hatred and hostility between Western and Eastern Christians, and the Latin army's inhumanity against Byzantines strengthened the estrangement of the two parts of Christendom. In spite of his protests against the cruelties, Pope Innocent III's jubilant reaction to the occupation of the centre of the Greek Church exacerbated the situation since he expressed his belief that it was all God's will. Nevertheless, Innocent III's dedication to church unity derived from his misjudgement of the depth of the schism and of the roots of the differences between the denominations of the East and West. It is interesting to analyze the failure of reunification in the light of the concessions that the pope provided for the Greek Church even years after the Sack of Constantinople.²⁰ Innocent III planned a slow Latinization in the Orthodox communities by demonstrating his liberal approach towards Orthodox priests, monks and nuns and their relics, customs and traditions. The price of this tolerance was obedience to the Apostolic See and the pope.²¹ Consequently, the fundamental reason for the shift in papal communication can be found in the pope's pragmatic adoption of and adaptation to unforeseen events. Although driven by ideals, Innocent III proved to be a realist who recognized when events became irreversible. Furthermore, considering his own leadership role in the crusade, he had to give reasons and explanations for the military diversions of his enterprise. Additionally, his esteem as the Christian spiritual leader in the eyes of his contemporaries as well as his posterity, largely depended upon his attitude and reaction to all the events that happened under his papal reign. Firstly, had he acknowledged the vices, atrocities and destruction carried out by the crusaders against the people, holy places and treasures of Constantinople, he would have taken indirect responsibility for them as well. Secondly, admitting that his will had limited influence on the development of the crusade would have meant the confession of his inability to rule his flock. The Sack of Constantinople and the establishment of the Latin Empire definitely did not reflect the intentions of the pope. Ironically, the holy crusade that he launched ultimately challenged his power and authority over the people and territories he nominally ruled. Innocent III lagged behind the progression of the crusade partly because, at the beginning, he thought purely in ideological terms instead of considering the pragmatic nature of the goals held by his allies.²² He misjudged his control over the crusading army not realising that his instructions, objections and prohibitions did not have exclusive influence on the events and consequences of the crusade.

²⁰ Tillmann, *Pope Innocent III*, 264-266.

²¹ Alfred J. Andrea, "Innocent III and the Byzantine Rite, 1198-1216," in *Urbs Capta. The Fourth Crusade and its consequences. La IVe Croisade et ses conséquences*, ed. Angeliki Laiou (Paris: Lethielleux, 2005), 111-122.

²² Jonathan Harris, "The Debate on the Fourth Crusade," *History Compass* 2/1 (2004): 1-10.

In addition, it is important to examine Innocent III's rhetoric regarding the Greek Christians in the context of the reform movement within the Roman Catholic Church and the relationship between the ecclesiastical and secular power. Innocent intended to undertake a renewal in a number of areas during his pontificate – these included dealing with Jewish-Christian relations and heresy, as well as improving papal authority in political issues.²³ Innocent III can be considered the first pope who aimed to lead the crusade personally instead of leaving this responsibility to kings and princes. From Innocent's point of view, disobedience to his orders not only endangered the papal aspiration to take the Holy Land, but also his authority as the head of the crusading endeavour against the influence of secular rulers over the events. In this aspect, both his objection to the occupation of Constantinople and his efforts to depict it as a divine punishment for "Greek sins" can be placed in the broader context of ecclesiastical and secular power struggles – which culminated in the Fourth Lateran Council in November 1215.

In conclusion, the analysis of the language of pope Innocent III's communication reveals a significant shift in the representation of the Greek Christian Church between 1198 and 1204 that can be considered as his attempt to control the events or at least to pose as the actual political and spiritual leader of the crusade. The Supreme Pontiff was tirelessly striving to maintain papal supervision over the development and actual events of the Fourth Crusade, however, his power was challenged by various external political interests. While Innocent III applied a clearly condemnatory attitude towards the crusaders who, despite his prohibition, carried out an attack on the Latin Christian city of Zara in 1202, his approach to the further diversion of the "holy" war completely changed by 1204. The approving language that he used to interpret the Sack of Constantinople, the eventual outcome of the Fourth Crusade, was supposed to serve as the exoneration of the crusaders from their sinful deeds against their Christian brethren. Nevertheless, this paper has pointed out a certain difference between the tone and language that Innocent III used to explain the Sack of Constantinople and the diversion of the Fourth Crusade in public encyclical letters and the anxious notes regarding the impact of the pillage and the future of the crusade that he sent to papal legates. This shift in Innocent's attitude represented in his messages to his flock was needed to confirm his own role as the spiritual leader of the crusade and to warn the Byzantines of the Latin Christendom's military superiority – which Innocent III considered as a divine sign that was calling all Eastern Christians back to the reverence of Rome.

²³ John C. Moore, *Pope Innocent III (1160/61-1216): To Root up and to Plant* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003), 132-133. On Innocent III's theological, reform and political activities, see: James M. Powell, *Innocent III: Vicar of Christ or Lord of the World?* 2nd edition (Washington: Catholic University of American Press, 1994).

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