

# Why Do We Have a Positive Description of the Byzantine Court Ceremonial at William of Tyre in Comparison to the Latin Sources Written in Western Europe?

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*The visual perception of the Byzantine court ceremonial also reveals the different aspirations and interests the two Catholic societies had during the 12<sup>th</sup> century.*

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**T**HIS STUDY analyses the manner in which the Byzantine court ceremonial was perceived by William of Tyre, a Latin chronicler from the Christian Orient at the time when the Latins possessed these regions, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The main objective of this paper is to find an answer to the question in the title and to explain the reasons why we have a positive description in William of Tyre's work, in contradiction to the Latin chroniclers in the West.

For the Byzantines, the court ceremonial was one of the main poles of their imperial ideology, an affirmation

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of their role in the cosmic and universal order created by God. The imperial power relied on the religious and symbolic value given to it by the court ceremonial. This ritual underlined the divine character of the emperor. The ceremonial determined even the functioning of the imperial court and of the Byzantine society as a whole, because all the emperor's subjects had their different roles and were obliged to participate in this ritual, sometimes within a complex system of procedures or through the acclamations which were expected of the people.

The Western clergy did not hesitate to show negative reactions towards the Byzantine practices when the Latins were forced to humiliate themselves in front of the basileus or to discuss the necessity of a bribe while negotiating diplomatic agreements.<sup>1</sup> For the crusaders, the imperial ceremonial was difficult to observe, because it had no equivalent in the main kingdoms of Western Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The suspicions towards this reception ritual also fed on the famous characterizations of the Greeks, as the verbal clichés which characterized the political behavior of the Byzantines were now taken up by the Latin chroniclers when referring to the imperial ceremonial. The negative characterizations of the ceremonial became even worse during the conflicts between Greeks and Latins, which shows that the Western writers reacted when the collaboration between the two parties failed.<sup>2</sup> So, epithets like treacherous, duplicitous, effeminate Greeks are also spotted in these depictions of the court ceremonial, so different when compared to the Western ones.

The court ceremonial and the Byzantine diplomacy were seen as perfidious, arrogant and decadent. The Latins saw in the great receptions organized at Constantinople, in the honors and the gifts they received from the basileus, only the dubious and the treacherous nature of the Greeks.<sup>3</sup> The imperial ceremonial helped enhance the crusaders' prejudices: the abundance of wealth exhibited in front of the Latin lords, the excessive refinement of the Byzantine civilization, the comfort, the pomp, the doubtful manners were, in the eyes of the Western knights, the hallmarks of a morally decadent world. The eunuchs and the effeminate clothing worn during the ceremonial contributed to this impression that the Latins created for themselves. Many elements of the Byzantine ceremonial, such as umbrellas, fly whisks, the horse mounting chairs, the pearls, the excessive jewelry worn by men, the eunuchs, all gave the Latins the impression of a world dominated by softness and lack of virility.<sup>4</sup>

This clash of civilizations generated negative descriptions with the Western chroniclers. They were influenced by the obscure ritual of the ceremonial, considered as a proof of the treacherous nature of the Greeks. The Westerners were influenced in their thinking by the rituals they witnessed in Byzantium and by the then political situation of the Latin world.

The Western chroniclers of the first crusade did not present the positive reaction the court ceremonial might have stirred among the lords. They just say that there were honorable protocols. The description made by Albert of Aachen of the reception of Godefroy of Bouillon is far more realistic than the one made in other sources. Even if Albert is a secondary source, his description is very realistic and a little more objective than the ones made by the *Gesta Francorum*, Raoul of Caen, Raymond of Aguilers or Guibert of Nogent. Albert's opinion is that the nobility of the basileus was reflected in the prestige, consideration and appreciation he showed to Godefroy during the ceremonial. The chronicler underlines the fact that the crusade leader was shown the honors and hospitality expected for a Christian sovereign.<sup>5</sup> Albert continues his description by mentioning that Godefroy had been warned of the controversial rituals of the ceremonial, so the duke knew what to expect. Godefroy was reticent towards the ceremonial because he was influenced by the opinions of the other crusading lords regarding the duplicity of the Byzantines.<sup>6</sup> Many barons tried to persuade the duke to avoid meeting Alexios, given the humiliating ceremonial and his treacherous plans.<sup>7</sup> Probably Godefroy did not initially want to become a vassal of the emperor, rather than being frightened by the specific rituals of the ceremonial.

Albert's account presents the meeting between the emperor and the crusading lord. The basileus welcomed the crusaders and gave every one of them the "kiss of peace." But the emperor did not stand up to give this "kiss" to the crusaders, he just sat on his throne during the procession. This ritual angered not only the lords but also the chroniclers, and many negative reactions followed. Albert's opinion is that Godefroy did not kneel in front of the basileus for the ritual. He just bended his knee and then received the "kiss of peace" from the emperor. After that, Alexios embraced every noble from the crusader's retinue. The details offered by Albert present the precise stages of this imperial protocol. The emperor sat during the procession and the "kisses of peace" were given to every Western noble according to hierarchy and importance. Albert fails to present the *proskynesis* ritual. He mentions that Godefroy only bended his knee, but this could not have happened.<sup>8</sup> This procedure required one to kneel before the emperor and to prostrate himself three times in front of the basileus. Albert did not want to ruin Godefroy's prestige and that is why he omitted this aspect and did not insist too much on it. Like every other Western chronicler, Albert could not miss the opportunity to describe and to speak about the amazing gifts offered to the crusaders by Alexios. This shows that the wealth of the Byzantine Empire had always fascinated the Western Christians. Albert enthusiastically lists the gold, silver or purple items and the horses and donkeys received by the crusaders.<sup>9</sup> The imperial audience is presented in a rather positive light by Albert, but only in order to underline the prestige and the honor of the Latin princes.

In fact, everything in his work is centered on the crusaders. Every aspect of the ceremonial has as its main characters the Latins. So, even if his presentation is less radical or negative than the presentation of other chroniclers, it was written only to praise the crusaders and their leaders.

In his chronicle Albert insists on the fact that Alexios was overwhelmed by Godefroy's precious and splendid clothes. All this praise is meant to underline Godefroy's greatness. In Albert's opinion the costumes of Godefroy and his retinue were far superior in refinement and splendor to the ones the Byzantines wore. The Byzantines' clothes are considered superficial and frivolous by Albert, probably because they clashed with those worn in Western Europe.<sup>10</sup> Albert considers that the purpose of the Byzantine clothes was to divert the attention of the guest and to mask the treacherous intentions of the emperor.<sup>11</sup> Because the chroniclers of the first crusade were mostly members of the clergy, it should not surprise us that they are so critical of the Byzantine ceremonial clothes. These costumes were considered far too bulky and far removed from the Christian morals, which rejected the display of richness and luxury. The references to the imperial costume are pretty rare because most of the chroniclers did not attend the imperial audiences.<sup>12</sup>

Albert surely introduced fictional elements in his narrative because he did not directly participate in this expedition. For example, the humiliating elements of the ceremonial like the *proskynesis* ritual are deliberately not mentioned by the chronicler or are adapted in order not to defame or prejudice, in any way, the image of the Latin princes. Albert tried in his whole work to increase the prestige of the crusaders. This can be seen in the way in which he paid attention to the gestures and reactions of the Western lords and presented, in detail, all the feelings they experienced throughout the Byzantine imperial ceremonial.

The author of the *Gesta Francorum* criticizes very sharply the imperial ceremonial, which is seen as shameful and humiliating for the crusaders. The whole procession was meant to diminish the honor and the prestige of the barons.<sup>13</sup> The misunderstandings at Antioch made the anonymous author of the *Gesta Francorum* underline the perfidy of the Byzantines, who had allegedly misled the crusaders by way of the imperial ceremonial.<sup>14</sup> When tension was high, the diplomacy and the ceremonial were harshly criticized by the Western chroniclers. The glory and the honor of the crusaders were defended with the excuse that they had been forced to humiliate themselves in front of the Byzantine emperor. All the actions of the basileus were labeled as insincere or exaggerated, and this supposed hostility was seen as a betrayal of Christendom itself. The Latin chroniclers interpreted Alexios's favors and gifts as a perfect sign of the much feared Byzantine perfidy.<sup>15</sup> In the imperial ideology, exchanging gifts meant creating a bond between the two parties, consecrated by way of this procedure. The com-

pletion of the agreement between the negotiators should have been finalized with the exchange of gifts.<sup>16</sup> Many Western chroniclers perceived them as a way to achieve a compromise and to divert the attention of the Latin barons. The cliché of the Trojan horse which appeared in Virgil was taken up by all the chroniclers of the first crusade. The Byzantine gifts were seen as a bribe and a clear attempt to corrupt the Latins. The Trojan horse is present almost as a stereotype in the works of the Latin clergy.<sup>17</sup>

The generosity and the goodwill of the Byzantine emperors was interpreted as perfidy in Western Europe. Orderic Vitalis offered a tendentious interpretation, saying that Alexios gave money to every crusader in order to find out their number and to inform the Turks about the enemy they were going to face.<sup>18</sup> Raymond of Aguilers condemned Alexios because he had tried to sign peace treaties with his neighbors and his mercenaries had attacked the crusading army.<sup>19</sup> The emperor's gestures, during the court ceremonial, were seen as suspect and duplicitous by the crusade leaders. Robert the Monk and Guibert de Nogent are very critical in regard to Alexios's flattery of the crusaders. They claimed it was a false attitude and that he was only trying to mislead and betray the Latin princes.<sup>20</sup>

**T**HE FAILURE to understand the Byzantine culture and the Byzantine court ceremonial made the Western chroniclers react in this fashion to the emperor's gestures. The oath made to Alexios by the leaders of the first crusade dealt a severe blow to the pride of the Western chroniclers. Guibert of Nogent condemned this oath and considered it an eternal disgrace for the Latin people. His main complaint was that this oath had been made in front of the Greeks, famous for being the laziest people in the world.<sup>21</sup> This oath was considered so humiliating that the crusaders explained it as an emergency measure, as they could not have continued their expedition without it. Raoul of Caen and the *Gesta Francorum* criticized the lack of honor showed by Alexios, because he cheated the crusaders after they had made the oath of vassalage to him.<sup>22</sup> The negative reactions of the Western chroniclers and of the barons of the first crusade are essential for understanding the cultural differences between the two worlds, as well as the military and political actions taken by the Latin world against Byzantium during the century that followed. The Western chroniclers made a connection between the custom of welcoming the Latins at the imperial court and the political actions taken by the basileus in relation to them. All the political accusations against the Byzantines find their correspondent in the interpretations given by the chroniclers to the Byzantine court rituals.

For the Byzantines the "kisses of peace" were an act of peace and an honorable gesture between the two parties. The crusaders found it insulting and

perfidious. Standing up in the presence of the emperor was also normal practice in the Byzantine world. Not so in the Latin one, and the lords saw it as an act of defiance from the part of the emperor. Another problem appeared in the interpretation of the ritual of gift-giving. For the Byzantines, the gifts represented the wealth, power and authority of the emperor. For the Latins it was a treacherous act, and they feared the possible hidden intentions of the Greeks. Raoul of Caen condemned Bohemund because he had been fooled by the Byzantines and by the speeches of their emperor. In Raoul's opinion, Bohemund and the Norman lords had lost their honor by accepting Alexios's poisoned favors and gifts.<sup>23</sup> The Byzantine clothes were another element which created misunderstandings between the Greeks and the Latins. The crusaders were shocked when they saw the Byzantine costumes during the ceremonial. They made a connection between the womanish clothes of the Byzantines and their behavior on the battlefield. They were considered cowards because they had lost their virility, as plainly indicated by the way they were dressed.<sup>24</sup>

The visit of King Louis VII at the imperial palace in Constantinople is comprehensively presented by Odo of Deuil. Odo was a member of Louis's retinue and he is a credible witness to the court ceremonial. He is also a harsh critic of the imperial ceremonial. Odo was enthused by the banquets organized by Manuel, but he remained contemptuous of the real intentions the Byzantines might have had.<sup>25</sup> The French chronicler argued that these lavish banquets only indicated what a great sovereign Louis VII was, and that all these celebrations were in his honor. Odo continued his report by presenting the kisses of peace between the two sovereigns, who then entered the audience room where Louis VII was seated in a chair smaller than the imperial throne.<sup>26</sup> But Odo does not say too much about this episode, because it could have damaged the image and the pride of his king. On the contrary, Kinnamos narrates that Louis VII received a common chair to sit on, while Manuel was sitting on his big imperial throne.<sup>27</sup>

The status of the Byzantine emperor was considered excessive and rigid by Odo. The chronicler mostly criticizes the excessive adoration of the basileus, which was uncommon in the West. Odo's opinion is that Manuel was treated like a god.<sup>28</sup> The jewelry and the imperial clothes could have further strengthened Odo's opinion on this matter. Odo mentions that Louis VII had been well received with all the honors by Manuel. He criticizes Manuel's words and gestures because in his view they were false and insincere. Behind the flattering gestures and the friendship offered by Manuel, Odo feared the typical Byzantine hypocrisy and perfidy.<sup>29</sup>

Another aspect of the imperial ceremonial that shocked the French chronicler was the silence that had to be kept while standing in front of the emperor. Odo's opinion is that these rules made Manuel look like an ancient idol.<sup>30</sup> The chronicler criticizes the vanity of the Byzantine emperors, in his opinion a sin and

a sign of pride and moral decadence.<sup>31</sup> The protocol of gifts angered Odo and, like the other chroniclers from the Occident, he made the famous remark: *timeo Danaos et dona ferentes!*<sup>32</sup> These events show the inferiority complexes of the West and we clearly notice here the envy the Latins felt for the immense wealth of the Byzantines in Constantinople.

The only Western Christian chronicler who described in a positive way the Byzantine ceremonial was William of Tyre. He had grown up in Jerusalem and he spent twenty years studying the liberal arts and canon law at the universities of Europe. After his return to Jerusalem, King Amalric I made him ambassador to the Byzantine Empire. William presents two significant episodes where he describes the Byzantine ceremonial. The first one concerns Balduin III's visit to Constantinople in 1159. The archbishop had also written about a similar event during John II's triumphant entry into Antioch of 1138. At the beginning of Balduin's visit, he was immediately welcomed by some close relatives of the emperor. The embraces showed that the Byzantines were following all the steps of the imperial protocol.<sup>33</sup> Balduin received permission to sit on a chair which was set a little lower than the throne of the emperor. William sees in these rituals honorable gestures towards his king.<sup>34</sup> The chronicler did not present this ritual as unusual, and he is the only Latin chronicler who was not insulted by it. William was an admirer of the court ceremonial, even when it was not too favorable to the Latins. His only criticism regarding the ceremonial are concerns two specific elements of the ritual. The first one is the custom of the Byzantine sovereigns to hide certain parts of their body, for instance their hands. The emperors wore gloves in order to remain pure during the contact with the laymen who were present at the ceremony. The second ritual contested by William was the *proskynesis* procession, seen as a cult dedicated to a certain deity.<sup>35</sup>

William was also the only Latin chronicler who presented Reynald of Châtillon's humiliation in front of the Byzantine emperor. Manuel's action against Antioch, from the years 1158–1159, ended in a humiliating peace for Reynald. The episode is described only by William, because the other Latin chroniclers did not want to write about the shameful situation in which Reynald found himself. He came in front of the emperor accompanied by priests, all of them crying and asking Manuel for forgiveness. Reynald was wearing only a short tunic and was barefoot. He gave his sword to the basileus and threw himself on the ground, crying and begging for mercy. William was intrigued by Reynald's behavior and mentioned that the Latin pride was transformed into unimaginable shame by this gesture of the Latin prince.<sup>36</sup> Reynald's humiliation was unacceptable for the Latins, a total disgrace, and that is why we do not find this episode in any other Western source. His submission to Manuel is mentioned only by William of Tyre, who was deeply embarrassed by Reynald's attitude.

William presents the real facts and describes perfectly and very objectively the whole episode, something unthinkable for the Latin chroniclers, who had good reasons to avoid mentioning this episode.

The best description of the Byzantine court ceremonial was made by William on the occasion of Amalric's visit to Constantinople in the year 1171. The king of Jerusalem personally went to the Byzantine court in order to make his oath of vassalage to the emperor. The Byzantine historian Kinnamos wrote only three lines about Amalric's visit to Constantinople. He mentions that the king of Palestine came to Constantinople, where he accepted the suzerainty of the basileus.<sup>37</sup> Choniates fails to mention this episode at all. Runciman considers that Amalric was ignored because of his inferior rank, in comparison to the king of France or the German emperor, who had visited Constantinople some years ago. After the Byzantine historians had seen such famous guests, they did not pay attention to the lesser sovereigns who came only in order to make the oath of vassalage to Manuel, their emperor.<sup>38</sup>

As opposed to the Byzantine historians, William of Tyre was deeply impressed by the Byzantine reception and describes it in detail. The honors which were granted to Amalric showed, in William's opinion, the greatness of the Byzantine scene.<sup>39</sup> The description offered by William is similar from many points of view to the model presented by Constantine VII Porphyrogenetus in his 10<sup>th</sup> century work *De caeremoniis*. The archbishop from Tyre was familiar with the Byzantine traditions, so he pointed out the great honor that was given to Amalric by the emperor when John, a nephew of the basileus, welcomed the king of Jerusalem and escorted him to the imperial palace. When he arrived in Constantinople, Amalric had the great honor to put ashore on the very pier of *Boucoleon* palace. This pier was usually reserved for the emperor alone. William indicates that this privilege was a recognition of Amalric's rank.<sup>40</sup> The pomp and the magnificence displayed by the Byzantines in front of Amalric were a consequence of the great admiration Manuel had for the king of Jerusalem.<sup>41</sup> Amalric admired the wonders of the Byzantine palaces before reaching the throne room. This room had expensive tapestries and outstanding artworks were displayed for the foreign guests. The curtains also had an important role in the ceremonial. Their main purpose was to maintain the imperial mystery and, according to William, to hide the emperor from the audience. Amalric received the favor of being invited alone behind these curtains. William's opinion was that, behind these curtains, Manuel had risen from his throne and embraced Amalric.<sup>42</sup> It is certain that the things did not go as William describes them in this passage. The curtains concealed Amalric as he made his oath and performed the *proskynesis* ritual in front of the emperor. He was invited alone behind these curtains because the emperor did not want to humiliate him in front of his



retinue while he was paying homage. After the curtains were drawn, the emperor stood up and welcomed the king in a more familiar and friendly way. Amalric was invited to sit on a magnificent throne, set lower than the imposing Byzantine one. After the embraces and the kisses of peace were exchanged and the diplomatic formalities were completed, Amalric and his retinue received numerous gifts from the emperor and enjoyed his lavish hospitality. William saw all these ceremonial steps in a positive way.<sup>43</sup> During their stay in Constantinople, the Latins were allowed to use the private apartments of the emperor and were invited to numerous banquets, lavish feasts and entertaining races at the hippodrome.<sup>44</sup> Amalric spent the two months of his visit to Constantinople in the *Blacherne* palace, usually inhabited by Manuel. In William's opinion the court ceremonial confirmed the imperial glory of Byzantium but also the prestige and the honor of his king.<sup>45</sup>

Any Byzantine would have noticed, after seeing the whole ceremony, that Amalric was only a vassal king of the emperor. The imperial authority knew very well how to conceal certain elements of the ceremonial, so nobody in Amalric's retinue noticed that the king of Jerusalem might have been humiliated by participating in this meeting.<sup>46</sup> The pomp and the grandeur of the Byzantine ceremonial, as well as certain rituals connected to it, astonished William of Tyre. The Latin chronicler mentions that the whole pageant was so amazing and impressive that it was difficult for him to describe it in its whole splendor.<sup>47</sup>

**A**S A conclusion I might say that the Western chroniclers painted a negative, blasphemous, hateful and tendentious picture of the Byzantine court ceremonial. In their opinion, the rituals composing this ceremonial showed the duplicitous, treacherous, false, arrogant, immoral and shifty nature of the Greeks. The richness, the luxurious palaces, the expensive clothes the Byzantines were wearing only amplified the anger and the frustration of the Western historians. Under the denigrating epithets through which the Byzantines are characterized we recognize the inferiority complexes of the Western Christians, who were still living in rural and poor regions, far from the refined and sophisticated Byzantine Empire. Unlike the Western chroniclers, William of Tyre from the Orient presents us with a positive, favorable description of the East-Roman court ceremonial. William of Tyre, who was born in the Orient, was deeply impressed by this ritual and showed great understanding of Byzantine diplomacy. William was overwhelmed by the ceremonial and all his reports show his sincere appreciation of such rituals. The richness and strict order behind the rituals and all the other aspects left him in awe. This Latin chronicler knew the historical realities of the Orient better than the crusaders, who came into contact with this world for the first time during their military campaigns.

The kings of Jerusalem and the other Latin princes from the Orient were Manuel's guests at his court and took part in the rituals of his welcoming ceremony. The visual perception of the Byzantine court ceremonial also reveals the different aspirations and interests the two Catholic societies had during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand we have the refusal of the Western Catholic world to be integrated into the Byzantine "princely family" and their desperate attempts to create a distinct political and religious *orbis*, with its own identity. Conversely, the Latin historians from the Orient sought to integrate their small communities into the Byzantine *orbis* and into their "princely family." They knew that the main threat did not come from the Greeks but from the emerging Islam. The Byzantines and their emperor Manuel Comnenos were their only hope of protecting their possessions from the Islamic expansion. This is the reason why we have a positive description of the ceremonial in William's work. □

## Notes

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17. Guibert de Nogent, 148; *Gesta Francorum*, 132; Albert von Aachen, 331; Raymond de Aguilers, 204.

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22. Raoul de Caen, *Histoire de Tancrede* (Paris, 1935), 112; *Gesta Francorum*, 101–102.
23. Raoul de Caen, 54–55.
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25. Odo de Deuil, *De profectioe Ludovici VII in orientem/The Journey of Louis VII to the East* (New York, 1968), 57–60.
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27. Jean Kinnamos, *Chronique*, trans. J. Rosenblum (Paris, 1972), 114.
28. Odo de Deuil, 103–106.
29. *Ibid.*, 112–113.
30. *Ibid.*, 111.
31. *Ibid.*, 123–124.
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33. Guillaume de Tyr, *Chronique: Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum* (Brepols, 1986), 296–298.
34. *Ibid.*, 306–309.
35. *Ibid.*, 314.
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39. Guillaume de Tyr, 316.
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44. *Ibid.*, 319.
45. *Ibid.*, 321.
46. Runciman, 157.
47. Guillaume de Tyr, 323.

**Abstract****Why Do We Have a Positive Description of the Byzantine Court Ceremonial at William of Tyre in Comparison to the Latin Sources Written in Western Europe?**

The Western texts devoted to the Byzantine ceremonial usually featured a description on the ceremonial itself and did not try to explain the meaning of various political gestures. This ritual seemed to create only fear and confusion in the minds of the Latin historians, and the epithets applied to the Greeks reveal the jealousy and fear of the Western European society in regard to the Byzantine one. Furthermore, the Latin chroniclers of the Middle Ages drew on the literary works of the antiquity to underline the dubious, treacherous and evil nature of the Greeks. As opposed to the Western chroniclers, William of Tyre gives a positive, favorable description of the East-Roman court ceremonial. Born in the Orient, William was deeply impressed by this ritual showed great understanding for the Byzantine diplomacy. William was overwhelmed by this ritual and all his reports show his sincere appreciation of Byzantine ceremonies. In point of fact, the Latin historians from the Orient knew that the major threat did not come from the Greeks but from the emerging Islam. The Byzantines and their emperor Manuel Comnenos were their only hope of protecting their possessions from the Islamic expansion. This is the reason why we have a positive description of the Eastern ceremonial in William's work.

**Keywords**

William of Tyre, Byzantium, ceremonial, rituals, Constantinople, crusaders, Latin Orient