

The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople by Jonathan Phillips.
Jonathan Cape 2004.

The Fourth Crusade was unique in the annals of crusader conquest in that it was easily diverted from its initial purpose of freeing Jerusalem to attacking a city, Zara, that was under the protection of the very Pope who had initiated the Crusade itself and then proceeding to besiege and capture the great city of Constantinople, the largest metropolis of its day and a devoutly Christian city.

Jonathan Phillips expresses superbly the swirling political and religious tensions of the thirteenth century, the clash between spiritual concerns and worldly ones, between the demands of cold realpolitik and the logic of shared faith and belief. He also brings to life a whole host of key players in the drama of the Fourth Crusade: the Pope, the Christian Kings, nobles and knights who rallied to the Cross at his behest, the Emperors of Constantinople, and the host of bit part players, Christian, Jewish and Muslim who have a part in this sorry tale.

Phillips expresses well the contrast between the brutish coarseness of the Crusaders and the style of the Byzantines they conquered, and the concluding chapters, detailing the rape and pillage and general sack of the city, have a power and quality that stays in the mind.

This is a valuable contribution to the existing corpus of literature about the Crusades, and deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in history, and especially by those who seek to understand why so many tensions bedevil modern relations between the West and the Middle East.

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