

2005

## A Calculated Crusade: Venice, Commerce, and the Fourth Crusade

James B. Hooper

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hooper, James B. (2005) "A Calculated Crusade: Venice, Commerce, and the Fourth Crusade," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 10, Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol10/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

## A Calculated Crusade: Venice, Commerce, and the Fourth Crusade

James B. Hooper

When Urban II preached the First Crusade to the Council of Clermont at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, he urged a pre-emptive strike against the Muslims whose military advances continually threatened the eastern boundaries of the Byzantine Empire. Exhorting his spiritual subjects to “destroy that vile race from the lands of our friends,” Urban inspired an emotional response from western Christians based on the fact that their Muslim opponents differed so greatly from them in culture, religion, and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> The popular polarization of light versus dark, Christ versus Mohammed, west versus east, and good versus evil filled many Europeans with hatred and ignited the flames of crusade that would not be extinguished for hundreds of years. However, closer examination of the Crusades and the relationships developed therein reveal that a diametric reduction of the conflict is grossly inaccurate. In fact, the intimate trade relationships that the Venetians developed as a result of the early Crusades gave them specific knowledge which proved paramount in the redirection of the Fourth Crusade through Constantinople.

As the First Crusade took form and the Holy Land erupted in religious conflict, the Christians occupied

---

<sup>1</sup>Fulcher of Chartres, “Urban II’s Call for a Crusade,” in S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt, eds., *The Crusades: a Reader* (Broadview, 2003), 40.

a number of territories—including Jerusalem—known as the Crusader States. After stabilizing the region as much as possible, a practical problem emerged. Since all the Muslims had not been expelled from the Levant, the two sides would be forced to live in peace together. While the war had been founded on cultural incompatibility and religious opposition, neither side could justify genocide. When Christians had gained firm control of the Holy Land and had established the Crusader States, they allowed Muslims and Jews to live under their jurisdiction with relative freedom, adopting “an attitude of relative tolerance towards other creeds.”<sup>2</sup> According to Jonathan Phillips, the Christians lived side-by-side with Muslims not necessarily out of any religious concession, but simply because “it was impractical for the Franks to drive out or persecute all those who did not observe the Latin rite.”<sup>3</sup>

The interfaith communities that developed as a result of the First Crusade led to a dramatic rise in cross-cultural contact. Although there was no love lost between Christians and Muslims, out of necessity and comparative advantage, they began trading with one another. The Muslims could obtain goods from the East that were not available in great quantities in Europe, while in exchange, the westerners could offer raw materials from the countryside as well as finished goods from the more specialized urban centers of the medieval west. In addition, the Crusaders who settled

---

<sup>2</sup>Jonathan Phillips, “The Latin East,” in Jonathan Riley-Smith, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (Oxford, 1999), 115.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

in the Levant harvested such cash crops as sugar and cotton, as well as millet, maize, grapes and olives for export, making the East a thriving commercial center.<sup>4</sup> Most of this economic activity took shape in the form of the Islamic *kharaj*, a tax system where the indigenous subjects of the Crusader States paid their Christian rulers from their crops.<sup>5</sup>

Before the Crusades, the Mediterranean was already the scene of a robust inter-cultural economy. The merchant city-states of Southern Italy, especially Amalfi, dominated trade in the Southeast Mediterranean in places such as Jerusalem and Alexandria. The Amalfitans were mostly involved in the import of luxury items from the East for the wealthy courts and monasteries throughout Southern Europe and the Byzantine Empire. These southern Italian merchants maintained a level of maritime dominance throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries, and it was only later that the Venetians, the Pisans and the Genoese surpassed their southern rivals in the control of the Levant microeconomy.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Northern Italians did have an eastern Mediterranean presence in the pre-Crusading years. A huge collection of correspondence and contracts found in Old Cairo contains hundreds of letters pertaining to Egyptian and Mediterranean trade during the period from 900-1300. One letter written in approximately 1060 by an Egyptian merchant named Nahray ben Nissim mentions the Italians present in

---

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>6</sup>David Abulafia, "Trade and Crusade," in Michael Goodich, Sophia Menache and Sylvia Schein, eds., *Cross Cultural Convergences in the Crusader Period*, (Peter Lang, 1995), 3.

Alexandria at the time. Indiscriminately referred to as *Rumi*, the Italians are mentioned in a number of other documents buying indigo and brazilwood, a material grown in India and used as a red dye for textiles. In another letter, the Italians are involved in the purchase of large quantities of flax. The author of the letters is under the impression that the *Rumi* will pay excessive prices for these commodities, and will pay the same for poor quality flax as high quality flax. This assessment seems to indicate either the value and scarcity of these products in the west, or the incompetence of the Italians. One letter specifically identifies Genoese merchants in Alexandria, so we know that the Amalfitans did not operate a maritime monopoly.<sup>7</sup> But, prior to the crusades, the involvement of northern Italian merchants in Egyptian commerce was neither regular nor widespread.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly enough, the advent of the crusading era undermined the Amalfitans' commercial superiority. Tied up in the politics of the turbulent region of southern Italy, the Amalfitans could not coordinate a fleet for the First Crusade, and their northern counterparts managed to obtain the privilege of the crusaders for their naval assistance and religious devotion. In exchange for their commitment to the crusading cause by 1104, the Genoese received the first honors, receiving total exemption from commercial duties at a

---

<sup>7</sup>A.L. Udovitch, "A Tale of Two Cities: Commercial Relations between Cairo and Alexandria during the Second Half of the Eleventh Century," in Harry A. Miskimin, David Herlihy, and A.L. Udovitch, eds., *The Medieval City*, (Yale University Press, 1977), 150-7.

<sup>8</sup>Abulafia, "Trade," 7.

number of Holy Land ports.<sup>9</sup> The Venetians profited considerably from their crusade to assist King Baldwin in the defense of the Kingdom of Jerusalem from 1122-1124. They were given various rights in all the major cities of the Kingdom, and were promised one third of Tyre and Ascalon if they helped the Christians capture them.<sup>10</sup> In the process, the Venetians encountered and destroyed Egypt's most effective naval fleet as the Muslims attempted to regain a foothold in the Levant.<sup>11</sup> Beyond that, the Venetians managed to ravage enough Byzantine holdings to scare emperor John II Comnenus into issuing a new chrysobull to Venice, renewing their inordinately advantageous commercial privileges in Eastern Europe. So, for the Northern Italian merchant states, the Crusades proved to be beneficial in more than just a spiritual dimension.

The early Crusades gave rise to Acre as a major port of the eastern Mediterranean, and the subsequent control of the coastline of the Levant achieved by the conquest of Tyre (with the exception of Ascalon) ensured the presence of western merchants in the east for years to come. The popular trade route that emerged in the mid-1100s took merchants from northern Italy with finished goods to deliver to Acre,

---

<sup>9</sup>Christopher Marshall, "The Crusading Motivation of the Italian City Republics in the Latin East, 1096-1104," in Peter Edbury and Jonathan Phillips, eds., *The Experience of Crusading*, (Cambridge, 2003), 60.

<sup>10</sup>John Julius Norwich, *Venice* (Allen Lane, 1981), 113.

<sup>11</sup>Jonathan Riley-Smith, "King Fulk of Jerusalem and the Sultan of Babylon," in Benjamin Z. Kedar, Jonathan Riley-Smith and Rudolph Hiestand, eds., *Montjoie: Studies in Crusade History in Honour of Hans Eberhard Mayor*, (Variorum, 1997), 58.

and then on to Alexandria, the more profitable market, with luxury goods and more attractive investments. In this system, Acre is merely a link point between the Frankish settlers and the Egyptians, an excuse to connect the worlds of Islam and Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Adolf Schaube contends that by 1150, a sophisticated monetary system had developed that transferred silver from the west into gold that was coined in Jerusalem and used to purchase goods in Alexandria. By this time, Alexandria had established itself as a major hub of economic prosperity, and both Italians and Crusaders had taken a significant interest in it.<sup>13</sup>

Alexandria gained such a distinct advantage over the Christian port of Acre by the 1150s, primarily because of its geographic advantage. As the main trading locus of the Egyptian region, merchants in Alexandria were able to gain access to the world of the west through the Mediterranean, and had access to the vast resources of India and the east by virtue of its proximity to the Red Sea. According to David Abulafia, "Alexandria was the interchange point between [two] otherwise largely self-contained trading systems."<sup>14</sup> Although operating on favorable terms with easterners, the Christians of Acre could never hope to enjoy that kind of connection because of their location on the comparatively static Levant coast, and the Egyptians had control of the Red Sea.

At this point, the Muslims were regaining a significant level of military power and political control over

---

<sup>12</sup>Abulafia, "Trade," 2-3.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>14</sup>David Abulafia, "The Role of Trade in Muslim/Christian Contact," in D. Agius and R. Hitchcock, eds., *Arab Influence in Medieval Europe*, (Ithaca Press, 1994), 6-7.

the regions they had lost to the Christians during the first quarter-century of the crusading era. After their devastation at the hands of westerners during the First Crusade, the Muslims lacked the ability to organize a cohesive political union strong enough to combat their Christian occupiers until around 1139. Around this time, the emir of Aleppo, a Muslim town just to the east of the major crusader city of Antioch (the seat of a Christian principality) began to gain control and command some military authority. His name was Zengi, and he set the stage for a dramatic re-unification of the Muslim empire when he recaptured the northeastern crusader city of Edessa in 1144.<sup>15</sup> Under Zengi and his son Nur al-Din, the unifying message of *jihād* enabled the Muslims to take advantage of Frankish politicians who were primarily involved in internal squabbles. In addition to Christian rulers, even Muslim leaders of the northeastern portion of the Holy Land were indiscriminately swept under the control of Zengi and Nur al-Din. The rise of the Zangids was less a divinely inspired reclamation than an attempt at expanding political sway.<sup>16</sup> This rising threat sparked a new crusade from the west, preached primarily by Bernard of Clairvaux, which met little success.<sup>17</sup>

After the conquest of Damascus by Nur al-Din in 1154 and the acquisition of Ascalon by the Frankish King Baldwin III, a period of stability followed. But, the focus of the political conflicts moved to the south-

---

<sup>15</sup>Ibn al-Athir, "Ibn al-Athir on the Fall of Edessa," in Allen and Amt, eds., *The Crusades*, 133.

<sup>16</sup>P.M. Holt, *The Age of Crusades: The Near East from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century to 1517*, (Longman, 1986), 38.

<sup>17</sup>Ibn al-Athir, 134.

ern region of the Levant, and Egypt came to the foreground. By mid-century, the authority of the Fatimids who controlled the Muslims in North Africa was beginning to wane.<sup>18</sup> Around 1163 Baldwin was able to “place Egypt under tribute,”<sup>19</sup> at least to some extent. Soon after his death, Baldwin’s successor, Amalric, mismanaged his holdings in Egypt and jeopardized his truce with Nur al-Din in Damascus by leading a number of sorties into Egypt and Alexandria over the next 4 years.<sup>20</sup> The Christian king intervened in the intra-territorial dispute between the Fatimid viziers fighting for political control, but could not make any advances because he was thwarted by the intervention of Nur al-Din’s head commander, Shirkuh, who hoped to secure the valuable Egyptian cities for his own interests.<sup>21</sup> In 1167 and 1168, Amalric again attempted to take over Egypt. This time, he was completely expelled and his army was obliterated.

Amalric’s attempts at strengthening his own holdings proved to be disastrous and fatal for his future as a Levant monarch. In the process, Shirkuh took the leading role in the Egyptian government. Within weeks he would die, and his nephew Saladin, who had assisted him throughout the past years of military upheaval, would be appointed leader.<sup>22</sup> Saladin subsequently initiated the most widespread unification of the Holy Land in history. He continued

---

<sup>18</sup>Holt, 46.

<sup>19</sup>Mahmoud Omran, “King Amalric and the Siege of Alexandria,” in Peter W. Edbury, ed., *Crusade and Settlement*, (Cardiff, 1985), 191.

<sup>20</sup>Holt, 46.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

to preach the message of *jihad* and aggressively sought to reclaim the Near East for Islam and his political regime. This platform reached its height with the conquest of Jerusalem in 1187, and the subsequent defense of the Holy Land against the Third Crusade led by Richard of England, Philip of France, and Frederick Barbarossa. The Levant was almost completely retaken by Muslims in this period, and the only major city in Christian hands after 1193 was the port of Acre. Upon Saladin's death in 1195, however, the empire he united quickly disintegrated. As so often happens after the unexpected death of a strong authoritarian leader, the Muslim empire suffered from a lack of organization, and factional leaders sought to use their military power to wrest control of government functions. Clan struggles followed Saladin's death, mainly initiated by his family members. Under this disorganized Ayyubid confederacy, major regions were partitioned off and given to Saladin's relatives. Eventually, in 1200, As-Adil Sayf Al-Din took some semblance of control, but the Ayyubid leaders were "frequently at odds" with one another.<sup>23</sup>

In Rome at this time, a new, young and headstrong Pope had come into power advocating a new crusade to reclaim Jerusalem, attempting to resurrect the same religious fervor that Urban had elicited from the knights and commoners of Europe more than a century before. Innocent III called his followers to win back Christ's city, and by 1201, a treaty had been signed in Venice, officially organizing what would become the Fourth Crusade. By the turn of the century, knights and nobility interested in the military

---

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 60-1.

strength of the Levant generally agreed that Jerusalem could only fall to the Christians if an army traveled first through Egypt. Once they took Egypt, the rest should fall into place. In the century since Jerusalem's first capitulation, Egypt's political strength constantly threatened the safety of the crusaders settled in the Levant. Although its leaders were not consistently hostile, Egypt remained Muslim-controlled for the duration of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a fact that did not sit well with Europeans in the Levant. According to Mahmoud Omran, the Egyptians (especially under the Fatimid caliphate) posed "persistent opposition" that threatened the continued existence of the Crusader States.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, the crusaders of 1201 had learned from the catastrophic Third Crusade of Richard Coeur de Lion in the previous decade. That King gave his opinion that Egypt was the weakest part of the Muslim empire, and that any subsequent assaults on Jerusalem must go through Alexandria in order to succeed.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the previous position held by Alexandria before Muslim conquest still had to be fresh in the minds of those with an interest in the strength of the Roman Church. Alexandria, along with Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch and Constantinople, had been one of the original five patriarchates of the Church. When the First Crusade was called, the prospect of reuniting the Church Empire only increased the fervor with which Europeans set out for the Levant. At that time, only two of the original five patriarchates were in "Christian" hands. The establishment of the Crusader States

---

<sup>24</sup>Omran, 191.

<sup>25</sup>Norwich, *Venice*, 151.

temporarily reunited most of the original Mediterranean Church. If the crusaders could regain Alexandria in 1204 and move north, all the patriarchates could at last be restored, along with the domination of the Christian church throughout the Mediterranean.

The chronicler Gunther of Paris, who participated in the Fourth Crusade, offered a number of explanations for the selection of Egypt as the initial target of the Jerusalem expedition. "At this time a truce between our people and the Barbarians was in effect in the regions beyond the sea. Our people could not violate what they had pledged in good faith." The contract he mentions with the Muslims in Syria would stand from 1198 to 1203, and had been negotiated in the interest of protecting the Latins who lived there. Those Europeans still living in the Levant had negotiated peace with their Islamic neighbors and hoped to keep conflict to a minimum.<sup>26</sup> Gunther also cited the unanimous agreement of the Crusade leaders Baldwin of Flanders and Boniface of Montferrat on Alexandria as the target. They firmly agreed with Coeur de Lion's military assessment of the Muslim East. Richard's statement proved to be even more pertinent due to the current economic situation in Egypt, at least as it was perceived by Gunther. The Nile had been dry for a period longer than normal, and word had spread to the west that the formerly lush harvests of the Egyptians were nonexistent because the land had become infertile. In an exaggerated estimation of the state of Egypt's citizens, Gunther remarked that "almost the

---

<sup>26</sup>Gunther of Paris, *The Capture of Constantinople*, Alfred J. Anrea ed. and trans., (University of Pennsylvania, 1997), 77, 152.

entire population had either perished, the victim of famine, or was barely eking out a poor living.”<sup>27</sup>

Although the situation was not likely this dire, the Egyptians certainly appeared to be in a vulnerable position. Donald Queller seems to agree with Gunther’s analysis, at least to some extent. The Nile could then—and still does today—weigh heavily on the physical well-being of the Egyptian people, and subsequently on their political stability. Queller also cites hints from earlier crusaders like Amalric in the 1160s and Reynaud of Châtillon, who led an expedition against the Egyptians in 1183.<sup>28</sup> For a short time Reynaud’s presence threatened the most important trade and pilgrimage routes of the Muslims. In his Ayyubid history, al-Maqrizi recognized Reynaud’s intent to take the holy city of Medina.<sup>29</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> century Muslim scholar al-Safadi referred to Reynaud as “the most malicious, evil, and treacherous of the Franks.”<sup>30</sup> While ultimately unsuccessful, Reynaud and Amalric managed to sufficiently threaten the Egyptian Muslims and highlight the military reality that if Egypt fell, Christians would be able to live comfortably and freely in the Holy Land. Moreover, control of Egypt would split the Muslim world in two sections, divorcing the Middle East and North Africa, most likely rendering it powerless.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>Queller, *The Fourth Crusade*, (University of Pennsylvania, 1977), 13.

<sup>29</sup>al-Maqrizi, *A History of the Ayyubid Sultans*, R.J.C. Broadhurst, ed. and trans., (Twayne, 1980), 70.

<sup>30</sup>Holt, 56-7.

<sup>31</sup>Queller, 13.

The assessment of the crusade leaders about Egypt seems to have been pretty accurate. One major implication of their decision to go to Alexandria was the necessity for sea travel. The plan involved a coastal assault on the great port city, and the crusaders needed to commission an enormous fleet to carry the proposed 33,500 crusaders necessary to sack the city. Therefore, the crusaders negotiated the Treaty of 1201 with the Venetians, who halted a majority of their commercial activities over the subsequent year in order to construct the requisite armada. The decision to involve the commercially proficient Venetians—the historically debated fatal flaw of the doomed Fourth Crusade—had many (mostly negative) implications.

The Venetians' relationship with Alexandria and the Egyptian government has fallen under great scrutiny by historians hoping to find evidence that the Venetians deliberately steered the Fourth Crusade not to Egypt, but to Constantinople, which the Christians ended up conquering by the end of their journey. In order to analyze this relationship, we must first look deeper into the commercial history of Alexandria and its involvement with the Italians. Earlier, we discussed the geographic advantage of Alexandria as the central link of the commercial chain connecting east and west. Under this advantage, Alexandria became a "major clearing-house for spices from India and the southern seas, providing in return a ready market for European timber and metal."<sup>32</sup> In this environment merchants could exchange goods to the great economic gain of the Egyptian government. For example, cotton, pepper, and ginger were not even produced in Egypt, yet they

---

<sup>32</sup>Norwich, *Venice*, 101.

would pass through the commercial registry of the Sultan and be heavily taxed.<sup>33</sup>

The Sultan had a significant control over the trade that occurred in Egypt. In 1183, Ibn Jubayr traveled from his hometown in North Africa through the Muslim Empire, keeping a detailed itinerary the whole way. Upon arriving in Alexandria, he made note of the immediacy with which the Sultan's agents boarded his vessel in order to record all the luggage items and food stores that came with the ship. In addition, they temporarily confiscated all of the travelers' personal belongings for inspection. Jubayr was particularly upset when some of his companions' possessions were "lost" in this process, most likely stolen by the customs agents.<sup>34</sup>

Some variation of this procedure occurred with every vessel that entered an Alexandrian harbor. According to Aziz Atiya, an expert on medieval commerce, the Alexandrian agents would remove the sails and rudders of any ship coming into port. They also used the common restraint of a giant chain across the breakwater, in order to keep merchants from leaving in the night without paying the fee of one gold piece to dock at Alexandria. In addition to these constraints, more restrictions were imposed on foreigners. Merchants from abroad could not travel deep into the channels of the Nile delta or far inland at all, in order to protect the Red Sea from potential danger. The sultans "zealously guarded [the Red Sea] against alien infiltration," because it was such a crucial point in the

---

<sup>33</sup>Abulafia, *Arab Influence*, 7.

<sup>34</sup>Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, William Wright, ed., (AJ Brill, 1907), 31-2.

protection of Mecca and Medina, and was the site of an active eastern trade hub.<sup>35</sup> In addition to travel restrictions, foreigners were kept in a *funduq* (Italian *fondaco*), a small neighborhood or simple inn. The *funduq* had to keep its doors closed from nightfall until dawn, and during Friday prayers. Highly suspicious of infidels from the west, the Egyptians enacted these measures in order to protect their domestic security against sabotage.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to taxation, the state monopolized the sale and purchase of commodities that came through Alexandria, and had done so since 1052. For those raw materials imported and not marked for re-export, the *Matjar* (trade office) would purchase the whole shipment, and determine the price at which they would enter the market.<sup>37</sup> The *Matjar* was able to obtain this monopoly by charging lower duties on goods sold to the state than those purchased by private individuals. They would often resell these goods, even war materials, on the open market for a fair profit, after fulfilling state requirements. According to David Jacoby, an expert on Near Eastern commerce, the *Matjar* would offer to buy commodities such as timber, iron and pitch at prices that would attract foreign merchants. In a letter addressed to the Pisans, Saladin encourages Pisan investment trade by highlighting the potentially high profit levels.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>Aziz Atiya, *Crusade, Commerce and Culture*, (Indiana University, 1962), 194.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>37</sup>David Jacoby, "The Supply of War Materials to Egypt in the Crusader Period," in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (2001): 103.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

During the late Fatimid era, and especially after the first wave of crusaders took control of the Holy Land, Egypt became particularly dependent upon the west for the supply of the war materials. Before the fall of Syria to crusaders, Egyptians could simply sail up their coast to cut timber in the abundant Cilician forests.<sup>39</sup> This advantage was lost in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but they were able to draw western interest through the *Matjar's* monopoly, the eastern luxury items, and their own production of the minerals. Alum in particular was used abundantly in the textile and leather industries of the Europeans, and therefore in high demand. The Egyptians also secured the supply of timber, pitch and iron through contingent trade privileges granted on the condition that the merchants would supply timber and other wartime commodities.<sup>40</sup> Under these agreements, many records exist documenting the supply of timber to the Muslims in Alexandria from the Pisans and the Genoese during the height of crusading conflicts. The Italians rarely missed an opportunity to capitalize on a profitable opportunity.<sup>41</sup>

The Pisans seemed to have gained the upper hand in the Egyptian market in the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, receiving trade privileges and a *funduq* in Alexandria before 1153, and numerous advantages in subsequent agreements. According to comments made by the geographer Zuhri around 1150, it seems that the Pisans even supplied swords to Alexandria during the crusades. Conflicts emerged when the Crusader

---

<sup>39</sup>Abulafia, "Trade," 17.

<sup>40</sup>Jacoby, 105.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 105-6.

State leaders began to realize that a fair amount of double-dealing had occurred. In 1156 King Baldwin III of Jerusalem offered commercial exemptions to Pisans, but only to those who did not get involved in the arms and war commodity trading in Egypt. Some responded by cutting off the Egyptians, some continued a secret trading relationship, and some decided to stay with the Egyptians after the sultan offered more incentives to keep their business.<sup>42</sup>

Although the Pisans had the strongest presence in Alexandria through the opening years of crusading, the Genoese and the Venetians were certainly not excluded. A Byzantine edict shows that the Venetians may have supplied war materials to the Muslims in Alexandria as far back as 971. With abundant timber and iron resources in the region surrounding the lagoon, the Venetians were well equipped to supply Egypt with the tools of war. However, their trade focus and political allegiance lay, for the most part, with the Byzantines in Constantinople, where they had received very generous customs considerations since the chrysobull of 992. But, this relationship changed dramatically after Emperor Manuel expelled the Venetians from Constantinople in 1171, imprisoning the thousands of merchants who conducted business in his empire, and confiscating their property. As a result, trade between Venice and Egypt immediately increased. In fact, Saladin granted the Venetians a *funduq* in Alexandria in 1172 at the request of the Doge himself. In addition, large shipments of timber were regularly scheduled for Alexandrian delivery. Finally, the Venetian diplomatic embassy sent in 1174

---

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 106.

to patch up the misunderstanding with Byzantium made a winter-long stop with Saladin in Alexandria. Coincidentally, the main ambassador on that mission was the same man who would lead the Venetians in the expedition against Constantinople 30 years later, the future doge Enrico Dandolo.<sup>43</sup>

Regarding the events of 1201-1204, it is the contention of this paper that the Venetians had ultimately decided that they should try to steer the crusaders away from Egypt, and towards Constantinople or any other region where they might find economic gains. Many scholars have supported the claim that the Sultan of Egypt sent gifts and bribes to the Venetians in 1202. These scholars contend that a formal treaty assured the cooperation of the two powers in diverting the crusaders, but I see no reason to believe that this treaty was ever concluded. It did not need to be. The Venetians were smart enough to recognize that their interests would be better served if they could gain the favor of the Egyptians and secure Constantinople for the future. Even if the Crusade were successful, the Venetians could not have hoped to take the economy of Alexandria under their control, and this was made evident by their actions. Their actions also proved that their motives were driven primarily by profits and not piety. Venetian ascent to commercial dominance after the conclusion of the Crusade indicates the nature of their privileged status within the Muslim kingdom as a result of their hand in the Crusade's diversion.

In order to more fully understand the motivations of Venice with regards to Egypt, we must first address the council at Montpellier in 1162 and Third Lateran

---

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 107-110.

Council of 1179, both called by Pope Alexander III. These councils outlawed the sale of arms, iron or lumber to Muslims, and even banned the ferrying of Muslims on Christian vessels. The punishment for breaking either of these laws was excommunication. Based on the persistence of trading activity, the Italians seemed to pay no heed to these papal threats.<sup>44</sup> When Innocent came to power at the end of the century, he chose to implement these policies with more authority than had his predecessors. Clearly, the Venetians in particular would have been economically devastated by these restrictions, as evidenced by their dependence on the Egyptians. When he was informed by two envoys from Venice that the Venetians could not observe the decree, Innocent wrote a letter addressed to the city itself. His letter acknowledged its dependence on trade since they did not “engage in agriculture,” and he allowed them to participate in trade with Egypt as long as only non-war materials were exchanged. He still forbade the sale of “iron, flax, pitch, sharp instruments, rope, weapons, galleys, ships, and timbers, whether hewn or in the rough.” According to this letter, Innocent simply reasserts the provisions of the Third Lateran Council, and expects the Venetians to offer their naval assistance to Jerusalem in return for his “favor.”<sup>45</sup>

This letter is a testimony to the prevalence of the exchange in war commodities between Venice and Egypt, very late into the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly enough, the Cairo Genizah documents contained a

---

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>45</sup>Innocent III, “To Venice,” in Allen and Amt, eds., *The Crusades*.

letter from 1200 reporting the unconfirmed arrival in Alexandria of two Venetian ships loaded with timber. This anticipated shipment shows that the Venetians had no intention of honoring the prohibition of Innocent III.<sup>46</sup> Under risk of “divine condemnation,”<sup>47</sup> the Venetians continued to pursue profits. Claude Cahen puts it directly in his assessment of Venetian intentions: “In order to strengthen their right to trade in Egypt, the Italians succumbed to the requests of the Fatimids and the Ayyubids for armaments.”<sup>48</sup> It is also apropos to note that, by 1200, the impending Crusade was well known throughout the west. Many prominent nobles began to take up the cross as early as 1199.<sup>49</sup> That the Venetians (as they had done many times before) would supply the enemy in direct defiance of their spiritual ruler shows that they acted primarily for the advancement of their commercial benefit.

After the Treaty of 1201 was signed, the Venetians began to prepare for the supposed attack on Jerusalem. Scholars such as John H. Pryor and John Julius Norwich contend that the Sultan sent envoys and bribes to Venice at this time in order to sway the entourage away from the shores of Alexandria. Norwich bases his argument on a treaty signed by the Sultan As-Adil Sayf Al-Din granting numerous privileges to the Venetians, including tax considerations,

---

<sup>46</sup>SD Goiten, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jews of the Arab World as Portrayed by the Documents of the Cairo Geniza 1*, (UC Berkeley, 1967): 301.

<sup>47</sup>Innocent III in Allen and Amt.

<sup>48</sup>quoted. in Abulafia, “Trade,” 17.

<sup>49</sup>Geoffrey of Villehardouin, *Villehardouin and De Joinville: Memoirs of the Crusades*, Frank Marzials, trans., (JM Dent & Sons, 1955), 2.

their own quarter, and the safe passage of any pilgrims aboard Venetian ships bound for the Holy Sepulchre. The agreement also involved an envoy exchange, with each side sending an ambassador to their respective capitals. Norwich's argument is based on Karl Hopf's analysis which dates the treaty to 13 May 1202. Six western sources exist that address the treaty between the Venetians and the Sultan of Egypt. One is clearly from after 1204; another date is unintelligible, and the remaining four give the date as the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the Islamic month of Saben, but not the year. The critical element of these sources is that in them the Sultan refers to himself as "king of kings and Commander of the Faithful," a title which was not bestowed upon him until 1207-1208. In addition, the Sultan's pledge to protect Christian pilgrims would not likely have been made at a time when the westerners were organizing a crusade. The Sultan would be unlikely to make any concessions outside of the commercial sphere to Christians in such a potentially hostile climate. M. Hanotaux and Ludwig Streit convincingly discredited Hopf's analysis in a series of works published around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their apparently correct date of 9 March 1208 places this treaty far enough past the Fourth Crusade to render its direct implications for the Fourth Crusade meaningless.<sup>50</sup>

Pryor's argument, based on the *Chronicle of Flanders*, presents a slightly different angle. The *Chronicle* states that the Sultan sent 1,000 gold marks to Dandolo upon hearing that Egypt was under threat of invasion. Although Pryor ultimately admits that "there

---

<sup>50</sup>Norwich, 152. See also FC Hodgson, *The Early History of Venice*, (Ballantine, Hanson & Co., 1901), 428-34.

is no reason whatsoever to give any credence to [these reports],” the fact of the matter remains that these rumors did exist in the crusader camps.<sup>51</sup> There may not be a smoking gun, but the lack of conclusive evidence does not mean that it did not exist at one point. In fact, based on the string of chance encounters that led the crusaders to Constantinople, it seems that such a rumor is suspiciously creative. Ultimately, however, it seems that the rumor was more than likely inserted into the *Chronicle* after the conclusion of the Crusade as a way of placing more blame on the Venetians, to lighten the guilt of the crusading host.

Nevertheless, the treaty cannot be so easily dismissed in this discussion. Following the Fourth Crusade, the Venetians did enjoy significant growth in the rights they enjoyed in Alexandria. The existing treaty mentioned earlier was indeed signed in 1208, and it is probable that this treaty was a reward for the actions undertaken from 1201-1204 to deflect the Fourth Crusade. Furthermore, by 1238 a royal decree from the Sultan Abu Bakr guaranteed the general security of all Venetians in Egyptian lands, exemption from any new duties, complete freedom of trade, two factories, a bathhouse and a chapel all under their own jurisdiction, the freedom to import wine, and various legal privileges including trial by their peers. In addition, the Venetians were safeguarded against any Muslim corsairs or pirates raiding Egyptian waters.<sup>52</sup> Compared to the restrictions that weighed

---

<sup>51</sup>John H. Pryor, “The Venetian Fleet for the Fourth Crusade and the Diversion of the Crusade to Constantinople,” in Kedar, Riley-Smith and Hiestand, *Montjoie*, 113-4.

<sup>52</sup>Holt, 163.

heavily on the freedom of the Venetians through the 12<sup>th</sup> century (they were held captive in Alexandria in 1195), they were now practically part of the family. Although an explicit treaty does not exist, it seems that a policy of back-scratching was certainly initiated after the Treaty of 1201. The Venetians were given more favorable treatment after the Crusade than were rival Italians from Pisa and Genoa. (It is also imperative to comment on the lack of a physical treaty. Since any agreement between Venice and Egypt would have been kept very secret, the discovery of a physical document outlining their commercial collusion is highly unlikely. Consider the Treaty of 1201—it makes no mention of Egypt either!)

Attempting to approach the decision to go to Egypt from the Venetian perspective, at first glance it would seem that conquering Egypt would serve them better than Constantinople. For example, the Venetians had just renegotiated their chrysobull of commercial privileges with Byzantium in 1198. They had a significant advantage over the Pisans and Genoese in Constantinople, and trailed behind their two main rivals in Alexandria. Taking over the Alexandrian market would have given the Venetians a monopoly on the eastern connection. However, a closer inspection into the structure of the Egyptian and Muslim society will shed some new light on the realities of a Christian assault on Alexandria.

The Venetians would have been familiar with the bureaucratic organization of the Egyptian government, primarily through their dealings in the harbors of Alexandria with the *Matjar*. With the rise to ascendancy of Islam in the Near East, Arabic metropolises would develop in stark contrast to the major cities of

the west. The primary difference between the Islamic cities and those of Western Europe lies in geography. The rise of the Islamic urban center occurred inland, primarily because the main contingent of Muslims—Arabs and North Africans—were desert dwellers. So when major cities began popping up, they were naturally distant from the coastline of the Mediterranean and Red Seas, as well as the Persian Gulf. According to A.L. Udovitch, “the sea was a menacing frontier to Muslim rulers.”<sup>53</sup> The sea was not feared for the inherent dangers it presented to all men—storms, waves, etc.—but it was a threat because it threatened the strategic unity of Islamic domination. The sea was the “one vulnerable frontier” where Muslims could potentially be conquered from the West. A perfect example is the ease with which Reynaud ravaged the coasts of the Red Sea once he was able to launch a fleet there. The Muslims’ fear grew so potent that the Caliph Umar went so far as to outlaw sea travel for his subjects, punishing anyone who traveled or conquered by water.<sup>54</sup>

Saladin maintained Umar’s attitude of negativity toward the sea. By the time the Mamluks took control of Egypt in 1250, they set out to destroy coastal fortifications so that enterprising crusade outfits could not occupy them and threaten Islamic stability. The coastal centers in Islamic nations took the role of “frontier outposts,” and were not the focus of military or political strength. In Egypt, Alexandria was the main port, but it was still referred to as a frontier town. Cairo was the main hub of naval and military

---

<sup>53</sup>Udovitch, 144.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 145.

activity. It also served as the financial, commercial, and economic center of the Egyptian caliphate, while Alexandria was its very distant “suburb.”<sup>55</sup> Based on previous encounters with the Egyptian navy (1123), the Venetians would have been confident in their ability to dominate them on the coast, but they would have also known that the heart of Egyptian power lay in waiting many miles to the south in Cairo.

The Muslims’ history of negativity toward sea-travel also meant that the Venetians knew that the Egyptians needed allies for trade in the Mediterranean. If an Alexandrian assault proved unsuccessful, as the Venetians must have believed it would, they risked losing their diplomatic ties to Egypt. Although the Crusaders could have taken Alexandria with ease, the rest of Egypt would be much more unmanageable. And, without the support of the Muslims who controlled the trade routes connecting the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf with Alexandria, those vital connections to the east would most certainly be lost as well. As a privileged client-state of the Caliphate, the Venetians could surpass their North Italian rivals and reap the benefits of an inside connection with the *Matjar*. Ultimately, this is precisely what happened.

In line with their plan to keep the coast of Egypt free from invasion, it is my contention that the Venetians did not expect to conquer Constantinople. The alliance with Alexius IV did not necessarily mean that Constantinople had to be sacked, but it would mean that the Crusaders could pass through the Byzantine Empire on their way to Jerusalem, and avoid going to Egypt at all. As it turned out, the events of the Fourth

---

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 146-8, 158.

Crusade played to the Venetians' immense advantage, no matter what their initial intentions. But it seems clear that the Venetians had no intention of going to Egypt, with or without an extant treaty of collusion. As a city founded on the principles of mercantilism, the Venetians dealt with all contemporary political groups as clientele, from the Pope in Rome to the Sultan in Cairo. This attitude sparked their rise to the top of the Mediterranean world, and the events of the Fourth Crusade proved paramount in this unprecedented ascension.