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**FROM "MILITES CHRISTI" TO "MALI CHRISTIANI".**  
**THE ITALIAN COMMUNES**  
**IN WESTERN HISTORICAL LITERATURE**

It is by now generally agreed among the historians of the Crusading Kingdom that as its fortunes declined during the thirteenth century it became increasingly criticized for its inadequacies<sup>1</sup>. Europe, frustrated by the failure of the attempts to recover Jerusalem, tended more and more to put the blame on the inhabitants of Outremer. Among the various groups in the kingdom the most criticized were the Military Orders and the maritime communes. The two major Military Orders of the kingdom, the Temple and the Hospital, were blamed for undermining the existence of the crusader state by their constant quarrels and jealousies<sup>2</sup>. The criticism levelled at the communes was far more complex. During the first decades of the kingdom the image of the communes was a positive one, a fact which has been hitherto overlooked by historians. This image had undergone some transformation for the worse even before the Battle of Hattin and by the 1270s it acquired an ominous character. Thus the communes, regarded in the period of conquest as a powerful, loyal and indispensable ally of the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, S. Runciam, *A History of the Crusades*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1951-54), 3: 404 ff. G. B. Flahiff, «*Deus Non Vult: A Critic of the Third Crusade*,» *Mediaeval Studies* 4 (1947), 169 n. 32. E. Stickel, *Der Fall von Akkon. Untersuchungen zum Abklingen des Kreuzzugsgedankens am Ende des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt/M., 1975), *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> J. Riley-Smith, *The Knights of St. John in Jerusalem and Cyprus 1050-1310* (London, 1967), pp. 201-202, 385-389. J. Prawer, «*Military Orders and Crusader Politics in the Second Half of the XIIIth Century*,» *Die geistlichen Ritterorden Europas*, ed. J. Fleckenstein and H. Hellmann (Sigmaringen, 1890), pp. 217-229. A. J. Forey, «*The Military Orders in the Crusading Proposals of the Late-Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries*,» *Traditio* 36 (1980), 317-345.

Crusading Kingdom, gradually became viewed as its most dangerous enemy, sometimes even worse than the Saracens.

The early references to the Italian communes are highly positive. A Venetian chronicler, the so-called Monk of Lido, boasts in his account of the First Crusade, written some twenty years after the event, that the Venetians use their ships as others, namely knights, use their horses. This was an excellent simile to capture the imagination of the horse-riding warriors of the Crusades<sup>3</sup>. Other chronicles also emphasize, though in a matter-of-fact way, the role of the Italian fleets in the conquest of the Holy Land<sup>4</sup>. Even William of Tyre, a keen observer but rather inclined to criticism, praises their bravery in battles on land and at sea and lauds their "everlasting glory and wordly recompense won by fighting for Christ."<sup>5</sup>

This basically positive image changed in the last years of the first Crusading Kingdom. An anonymous author who composed a description of the kingdom sometime before the battle of Hattin, writes that the Pisans, Genoese and Venetians are most advantageous for the kingdom due to their outstanding skillfulness as seamen and as sea-warriors. But he also points out, perhaps with some resentment, that they are exempted within the kingdom from all tribute and all local jurisdiction. Moreover, he squarely condemns them as being "amongst themselves as inimical as they are at variance, [a fact] which gives greater security to the Saracens."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Monachus Littorensis, *Historia de translatione Magni Nicolai* . . . , RHC Oc. 5 : 255. J. Prawer, *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. European Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (London, 1972), p. 488.

<sup>4</sup> Fulcher of Chartres, *Historia Hierosolymitana*, ed. H. Hagenmeyer (Heidelberg, 1913), pp. 393-400, 526-530. Ekkhehard, *Hierosolymita*, RHC Oc. 5 : 58-59, 60-61, 64-65. Albert of Aachen, *Historia Hierosolymitana*, RHC Oc. 5 : 542-43, 605-09.

<sup>5</sup> William of Tyre, *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, RHC Oc. 1 : 442-443, 547-548, 1121-1124.

<sup>6</sup> G. M. Thomas, « Ein Tractat über das heilige Land und den dritten

Jacques de Vitry, bishop of Acre in the years 1216-1228, elaborates at considerable length on the statements of the anonymous author, eulogizing the Italians of the age of the conquest and bitterly criticizing their present-day offsprings: "As for those men of the noble cities of Genoa, Pisa and Venice as well as from other parts of Italy, who dwell in Syria, whose fathers and predecessors won for themselves immortal renown and an eternal crown by their glorious triumphs over Christ's enemies, they would be a horror for the Saracens if they ceased from their jealousy (*invidia*) and their unsatiable avarice (*avaritia*) and their constant fights and quarrels one with another. But since they more often and more willingly join battle against one another than against the treacherous infidels and have more to do with trade and merchandise than with warring for Christ, they, whose bold and militant fathers were greatly dreaded by the infidels, now cause them [the Saracens] to be joyful and secure."<sup>7</sup>

The three accusation raised against the communes: their constant fratricidal wars, their devotion to profit rather than to the welfare of the kingdom, and their friendly attitude to the Saracens, were repeated time and time again at the end of the thirteenth century by Europeans when reflecting on the loss of the Holy Land. In their explanations and interpretations, many chroniclers and writers of treatises include the discord

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Kreuzzug, » *Sitzungsberichte der K. Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, philos. - philol. Classe*, 1865, 2, p. 147: "De Italia sunt in terra ierosolimitana tres populi. ipsi terre efficaces et utiles. Pisani, Januenses et Venetici. nauali exercicio predocti, in aquis inuicti et in omni bello exercitati. mercimoniorum ingenio sagaces, a cunctis tributis liberi, excepti ab omni [um iudicium] iurisdictione. sibimetipsis iura dictantes. inter se tam inuidi quam discordes, quod maiorem securitatem exhibet Sarracenis." See also A. Grabios, « From "Holy Geography" to "Palestnography": Changes in the Descriptions of Thirteenth Century Pilgrims, » *Cathedra* 31 (1984), 61 (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> *Jacobi de Vitriaco Historia Orientalis*, cap. 74, ed. F. Moschus (Douai, 1597), p. 136.

among the communes as one of the major causes of the disaster. It should be underlined that especially Italian ecclesiastical chroniclers do so<sup>8</sup>.

This transformation in the European attitude to the communes can be explained by a number of factors. First and foremost, the Venetians, more than any other participant in the Fourth Crusade, became the scapegoat for the diversion of that expedition to Constantinople. The Venetians were accused of lacking enthusiasm for the crusade and of placing their mercantile interests, namely their treaty of 1201 with Egypt, before the welfare of the Holy Land. Pope Innocent III excommunicated the Doge and the Venetians after the conquest of Zara. He reproached the leaders for their disobedience, commanding them to proceed at once to the Holy Land. He sanctioned the conquest of Constantinople only reluctantly and after the event<sup>9</sup>. A chronicler writing in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem went so far as to imply that the conquest of Constantinople was the outcome of an Egyptian-Venetian plot!<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, there were the frequent collisions among the communes inside Acre. These conflicts, and especially the War

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<sup>8</sup> Thaddeus Neapolitanus, *Hystoria de desolacione et conculcacione civitatis Acconensis et tocius Terre Sancte in A. D. MCCXCI*, ed. P. Riant (Geneva, 1873), pp. 27-28, 37-39. Bartholomaeus de Neocastro, *Historia Sicula*, RIS NS 13, 3 : 132. *Chronicon Estense*, RIS NS 15 : 50. Joannes Elemosina, *Liber Historiarum*, ed. G. Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente Franceseano*, 2 (Quaracchi, 1913), 108-109. Fidenzio of Padua, *Liber recuperationis Terrae Sanctae*, ed. G. Golubovich in *Biblioteca*, 2 : 13, 15. Giovanni Villani, *Cronica*, ed. F. Gherardi Dragomanni, 1 (Florence, 1844), 471-474.

<sup>9</sup> D. E. Queller, *The Fourth Crusade. The Conquest of Constantinople 1201-1204* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 64-84 et passim. D. E. Queller and G. W. Day, « Some Arguments in Defense of the Venetians on the Fourth Crusade, » *American Historical Review* 81 (1976), 717-737.

<sup>10</sup> *Chronique d'Ernoult et de Bernard le Trésorier*, ed. L. de Mas-Latrie (Paris, 1871), p. 345. For the same accusations see also *Chronique de Terre Sainte 1132-1224*, RHC Darm. 2 : 663.

of Saint Sabas between Genoa and Venice, won the communes the unenviable reputation of imperilling by their selfish behaviour the very existence of the kingdom. Some decades later, after the fall of Acre, a German pilgrim, Ludolph of Sudheim, passing by the ruins of the glory that was once crusader Acre, reflected: "It was once inhabited by Pisans, Genoese and Lombards, and it was due to their accursed discords that the city was destroyed." <sup>11</sup>

Another factor which obviously contributed to the formation of a negative and censoring attitude to the communes evolved from a misconception of their interests in the crusading movement. As merchants, the members of the communes had almost by definition a different view of the movement and different vested interests. These men of the Mediterranean could rightly hold their own by comparison to the knights of Western Europe in crusader enthusiasm. They were hardly motivated by profit alone. But once the conquest began their interest was in moveable goods and merchandise rather than in fiefs and lordships. This difference in background and perspective shaped the attitude of those writers who represented feudal values and mentality. For these it was acceptable that a knight or nobleman desire a fief or a lordship, while a struggle for markets and trade privileges was beyond comprehension <sup>12</sup>. Compounded with the memory of the conquest of a Christian capital at the instigation of the rightly or wrongly accused Venetians and the fratricidal wars in Acre, this feudal outlook gave rise to an attitude of misgiving toward the communes.

This resentment took a new turn in the eight decade of the thirteenth century. The Second Council of Lyons of 1274 was a catalyst in the evolution of a new, professional view of the role of the communes in the history of the Latin Kingdom

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<sup>11</sup> *Ludolphi Rectoris Ecclesiae Parochialis in Suchem De Itinere Terrae Sanctae*, ed. F. Deycks (Stuttgart, 1851), pp. 41-42.

<sup>12</sup> On this topic see Queller, « Some Arguments », pp. 718-722.

in particular, and even of crusades to the Holy Land in general. This began in the circle of crusade experts patronized by Pope Gregory X, the main protagonist of the crusade after Innocent III. This transformation is connected with the simultaneous development of a new strategic approach to the crusade. A new type of crusading, the so-called "particular crusade" and the "perpetual crusade," that is, a permanent crusade realized by small, consecutive expeditions manned exclusively by professional soldiers and even mercenaries, was to replace the traditional "general crusade." In this new approach economic warfare conducted by naval forces acquired a new prominence. A major or general crusade, it was argued, should be launched only after the economy of the Mameluke enemy had been weakened to the point of collapse by a naval blockade of Egypt. Such a blockade, and this was spelled out clearly and loudly, meant a complete stop to the commune trade with the Mameluke Empire. As far back as the Third Lateran Council of 1179 the Papacy had attempted to stop the supply of war materials to the Saracens. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, as well as the Councils of Lyons in 1245 and 1274, pronounced sentences of excommunication against those supplying the Saracens with arms, iron, timber or slaves. The same sentence was pronounced against those who served the Saracens as pilots or shipbuilders. Moreover, after the Fourth Lateran Council the papacy tried to stop all traffic between the West and the lands of the Mamelukes. Thus it was forbidden for a period of four years to send vessels to the lands of the Saracens. The Second Council of Lyons extended the period to six years<sup>15</sup>.

In following years recognition grew that naval superiority of the West and an economic blockade of Egypt would play a

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<sup>15</sup> P. A. Throop, *Criticism of the Crusade. A Study of Public Opinion and Crusade Propaganda* (Amsterdam, 1940), *passim*. M. Purcell, *Papal Crusading Policy 1244-1291* (Leiden, 1975), pp. 23-31, 185-199. S. Schein, *The West and the Crusade. Attitudes and Attempts 1291-1312* (unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1979), pp. 14-27.

major role in the recovery of the Holy Land. On the eve of the fall of Acre Fidenzio of Padua wrote in his plan for a new crusade that the first preliminary step should be to intercept the Christians whom he calls *mali christiani*, who "in search of wordly gains and in defiance of the penalty of excommunication continue to trade with the enemy." The blockade, to be carried out by a fleet of no less than thirty galleys, should cut off Egypt. At the present, he argues, a third of a ship's cargo remains with the Saracens because of the customs duties they impose; the sultan derives daily 1,000 florins from the trade of Alexandria; a blockade would bring the Egyptian economy to the verge of collapse. Moreover, in Fidenzio's opinion the blockade would seriously weaken Egypt's army, as it would put an end to the import of recruits from the shores of the Black Sea<sup>14</sup>.

In the 1290's, Fidenzio's view of the decisive influence of the communes' trade with Egypt was shared without qualifications by all theorists of the crusade, including Charles II of Anjou and Ramon Lull<sup>15</sup>. It was defiance of this strategy of an economic blockade which won the communes — which payed little or no notice to ecclesiastical legislation and continued their trade with Egypt — the reputation of *mali christiani* who took advantage of their standing in the Latin Kingdom to promote their interests in Egypt. This was too conspicuous to be ever forgotten and after the loss of Acre the communes came under heavy attack from crusade experts familiar with the situation in the Levant, people like the merchant Taddeo of Naples<sup>16</sup>. The communes were censured not only because of their fratri-

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<sup>14</sup> Fidenzio of Padua, pp. 13-15, 27-60.

<sup>15</sup> For Charles II of Anjou's plan see G.J. Bratianu, «Le Conseil du Roi Charles. Essai sur l'Internationale chrétienne et les nationalités à la fin du Moyen Age,» *Revue historique du sud-est Européen* 19 (1942), 353-360. For Ramon Lull's opinions see, for example, his *Tractatus de modo convertendi infideles*, ed. J. Rambaud-Buhot, in *Beati Magistri R. Lulli Opera Latina* 3 (Palma de Mallorca, 1954), 93-112.

<sup>16</sup> Thaddeus Neapolitanus, pp. 27-28, 37-39.



cidal wars in Acre but also-and mainly-because of their alliances with the enemy and their commerce with Egypt. It seems that at the turn of the century this image of the communes as *mali christiani* caught the imagination of moralizers and preachers. Thus, writing at the end of the first half of the fourteenth century, Giovanni Villani presents the Italian inhabitants of Acre on the eve of its fall as people who sinned by trading with the Saracens and caused thereby the fall of this flourishing city<sup>17</sup>.

And yet there still existed a more balanced view of the role played by the communes in the history of the kingdom. Paradoxically, it was the crusade theorists who saw clearly not only the harm done to the kingdom by the communes as *mali christiani* but also their importance in the life of a kingdom which almost entirely lacked a fleet and depended for its existence on a constant influx of men and merchandise from the West. The Venetian Marino Sanudo, one of the most outspoken protagonists of the naval blockade of Egypt, wrote before 1321 a history of the crusading kingdom in which he lavishly borrowed from Jacques de Vitry. He omitted however the latter's references to the communes and described them as a most important factor which not only had contributed to naval security and the conquest of the Holy Land from Islam, but also carried merchandise and pilgrims to the kingdom<sup>18</sup>. He, as well as other crusade theorists such as Charles II of Anjou and Pierre Dubois, did not envisage the recovery of the Holy Land without the active participation of the communes. Moreover, their future colonies were destined to play an integral part in the future kingdom. Charles II of Anjou insisted upon granting legal and commercial privileges to the communes so as to attract

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<sup>17</sup> Giovanni Villani, pp. 473-474.

<sup>18</sup> Marino Sanudo, *Secreta Fidelium Crucis*, ed. J. Bongars, in *Gesta Dei per Francos*, 2 (Hanau, 1611; repr. Jerusalem, 1972), 186. For Jacques of Vitry see above n. 7.

them to the new state<sup>19</sup>. Pierre Dubois, who evidently knew the plan of King Charles, envisaged commerce as the most important branch of the economy of the kingdom-to-be. With some kind of perspicacity he insisted, however, that there should be control of commerce as well as of merchants. This should be exercised by the ruler, so that "the daily increasing greed of the merchants will be curbed."<sup>20</sup>

Thus, three phases and three different attitudes span the period of existence of the Latin states in the East. Modern historiography, though it has a better understanding of the importance of economic factors in history, often does not do justice to the contribution of the communes to the kingdom<sup>21</sup>. What lingers on is a dimly remembered appraisal by Dante. Considering trade with the Moslems as a sin, Dante writes in his indictment of Pope Boniface VIII, that:

« He, the Prince of modern Pharisees,  
Having war near the Lateran, — and  
Not with Jews nor with Saracens,  
For every of his enemies was Christian  
And not one of them had been to conquer Acre nor  
a merchant within the realm of the Sultan. »<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Charles II of Anjou, p. 360.

<sup>20</sup> Text edited in A. Diotti, *Pierre Dubois: « De Recuperatione Terre Sancte »*. Dalla « Repubblica Christiana » ai primi nazionalismi e alla politica antimediterranea (Florence, 1977), p. 158.

<sup>21</sup> See above n. 1. See also J. L. La Monte, *Feudal Monarchy in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem 1100 to 1291* (Cambridge, Mass., 1932), pp. 226-242, esp. pp. 241-242. R. Grousset, *Histoire des croisades et du royaume franc de Jérusalem*, 3 (Paris, 1936), 534-535. J. Prawer, *Histoire du royaume latin de Jérusalem*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1969-70), 1 : 500-03, 2 : 359-73.

<sup>22</sup> *Inferno*, canto XXVII, 85-90; *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Ch. E. Norton (Chicago - London - Toronto, 1952), p. 40.