

# The Varangian Guard and the fall of Constantinople in 1204



Figure 1 - An image from the Chronicle of Ioannis Skylitzis. The Varangian Guard are located along the top of the image bearing axes and spears. Image retrieved from <http://hodegon.nvg.org.au/skylitz/skylmilitary.htm>.

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Figure 2- A depiction of the Varangian Guard by Darren Tan. Image retrieved from <http://warriorsofhistory.com/research/Byzantine/>.

## Thesis

*The Varangian Guard contributed to the fall of Constantinople in 1204.*

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## Limitations:

General: Due to our narrow topic, there were few primary sources containing relevant information. In a similar fashion, most secondary sources contained who, what and where of the Varangian Guard, with little attention to their contributions (or lack of) to the Byzantine Empire.

Primary sources: The two main primary sources (The memoirs of Geoffry of Villehardouin, and a letter from Pope Innocent III) are from the point of view of the crusaders. Therefore, information from these sources could be biased.

Secondary sources: The secondary sources provided us with a wide variety of information about the Varangian guard. Because the sources were varied, we came across conflicting information and questioned the reliability of certain information found.

### Argument/Discussion/Evidence:

*What was the Varangian Guard?*

The Varangian Guard – or the ‘Axe-bearing Guard’ as it was often called, was created by Basil II because of his distrust in native Byzantine guardsmen. He had heard, likely from Arab travellers, of the Vikings, and that they had such loyalty to their own king that they would die for him. These stories of loyalty gave Basil II confidence in their honour. “Viking troops are recorded fighting Arabs in 955 and taking part in a campaign in Sicily in 968. Twenty years later, in 988, Vladimir of Kiev sent as many as 6000 Vikings to the assistance of Emperor Basil II, and it was from these that the celebrated Varangian Guard was subsequently established.

(Magnusson & Harris, 2008, 54).” That the Varangians became the bodyguard unit was the result of two things. The first was the sense of loyalty at the core of Viking culture. But more importantly, the Emperor did not have to worry about revolt- the recruits came from faraway lands and had no desire to permanently stay. Thus they were indifferent to the political intrigues that swirled around the throne (Bacon, 2003). As a result, the emperor felt that he had

a fierce force of personal protection that would not interfere or threaten his leadership as they had no vested interest in the empire.

### *A Famous Varangian*



Figure 3- A painting by Peter Nicolai Arbo (1831-1892) depicting the defeat and death of King Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. Image retrieved from <http://www.davidgibbins.com/HAROLD%20PAGE.htm>.

The Varangian Guard were made famous by the *Heimskringla*- which chronicled the life of Harold Godwinson. Harold arrived in Constantinople around 1030AD with 500 soldiers during the reign of Empress Zoe and Emperor Michael Catalactus. These men were immediately enlisted in the Varangian Guard. The chronicles, written by Snorre Sturlason, document the many successful sieges led by Harold and his men, and the wealth they amassed along the way (Online Medieval and Classical Library).

The Chronicles of Harold offer an interesting example of Varangian betrayal. After years of service for the Byzantine Empire, Harold wanted to return to his homeland (Norway). The Emperor had him thrown in jail, and upon his escape from prison, he and his men captured the Emperor and blinded him in both eyes. They then took the Empress Zoe's niece (Maria) hostage until they were safely aboard a ship, then set sail for Norway. Harold gave instructions to Maria to tell the Empress that she never controlled him (Online Medieval and Classical Library).

Despite this act of betrayal, the Varangian Guard's reputation remained untarnished. Anna Comnena (a Byzantine princess who recorded her father's reign as emperor) says this about the Varangians in the *Alexiad*:

*"The Varangians, too, who carried their axes on their shoulders, regarded their loyalty to the*

*Emperors and their protection of the imperial persons as a pledge and ancestral tradition, handed down from father to son, which they keep inviolate and will certainly not listen to even the slightest word about*

*treachery."*(Medieval Sourcebook, Anna Comnena, 2006)

*A Recipe For Disaster*

The Fourth Crusade was set for the year 1202, but the crusaders amassed



Figure 4- A depiction of Emperor Alexius IV. Image retrieved from <http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/medieval/history/latemiddle/fourthcrusade.htm>.

a considerable debt to the Venetians, and were not yet in a position to pay them back. The Crusaders made a deal with the Venetians that they would capture the city of Zara for them if they extended their loan. Shortly after Alexius Angelus signed the Treaty of Zara with the crusaders promising 200,000 silver marks, 10 thousand troops to join their crusade, and to unify the Greek Church with that of Rome, in exchange for their help in securing his place as emperor (Madden, 1993). Problems arose when Alexius IV (Angelus) could not fulfill the treaty, and only paid the crusaders roughly half of what was promised. The frustrated crusaders (who already agreed to stay in Byzantium for an extra year to give the emperor sufficient time to pay off the debt) wanted their money and to be on their way. When it became obvious the emperor was not going to fulfill the terms outlined in the treaty, they began looting the empire to try and make up the difference (Madden, 1993).

### *The Disaster*

This looting and the Emperor's inaction caused unrest among the Byzantine people. A commander in the Byzantine army, Mourtzouphlus, struck a deal with the emperor's personal guard- to neglect their duties for one night. In Geoffrey of Villehardouin's memoirs of the fourth crusade he says that, *"with the advice and consent of the others, one night towards midnight, when the Emperor Alexius was asleep in his chamber, those who ought to have been guarding him and specially Mourzuphles-took him in his bed and threw him into a dungeon in prison."*(Medieval Sourcebook, Villehardouin, 2006)

Thomas Madden described the incident as follows,

*“With well-placed bribes and political skill, he convinced the Varangian Guard to neglect their duties to the emperor for one night. Very late, Mourtzouphlus rushed into the emperor’s chamber and woke him, saying that there was a large and angry crowd outside the palace. Alexius pleaded with his servant to save him. Mourtzouphlus obligingly covered the emperor with a blanket and spirited him away down a secret stairway- at the bottom of which was a jail cell.”(Madden, 2005)*

Shortly after, Mourtzouphlus became emperor.

### *The Result*



Figure 5- A painting by Eugène Delacroix (19<sup>th</sup> century) depicting the Fourth Crusade and the fall of Constantinople. Here we see the crusaders entering the city on horses. Image retrieved from [http://pages.usherbrooke.ca/croisades/big\\_images/images\\_en.htm](http://pages.usherbrooke.ca/croisades/big_images/images_en.htm).

The events following Mourtzouphlus' rise to power demonstrate the significance of the Varangian Guards' decision. The crusaders, still wanting compensation, continued to loot the Byzantine Empire. Now that Alexius was no longer in power the treaty of Zara became null, and the crusaders were free to do as they pleased to Byzantium. Mourtzouphlus came to the conclusion that killing Alexius IV would cause the crusaders to cut their losses and move on to Jerusalem. This simply was not true. After Mourtzouphlus strangled Alexius IV to death, the crusaders declared Mourtzouphlus a usurper and a murderer who should not rule Byzantium. They then launched a crusade against Constantinople, eventually capturing and controlling the city (Madden, 1993).

#### *Inevitable or Coincidental?*

In order to link the Varangian Guard to the fall of Constantinople it must be shown that the crusade was not an inevitable event, but caused by Alexius' IV death- which would not have happened without the involvement of the Guard. The first piece of evidence comes from Pope Innocent III in a letter he wrote to the Papal Legate leading the crusade against Constantinople. It is made clear in this letter that the attack on the city was not sanctioned by him (the pope) or the church, and that they did not have the authority to make the decisions they did.

*"It was your duty to attend to the business of your legation and to give careful consideration, not to the capture of the Empire of Constantinople, but rather to the defense of what is left of the Holy Land and, with the Lord's leave, the restoration of what has been lost. We made you our representative and we sent you to gain, not temporal, but rather eternal riches. And for this purpose, our brethren provided adequately for your needs.*

*We have just beard and discovered from your letters that you have absolved from their pilgrimage vows and their crusading obligations all the Crusaders who have remained to defend Constantinople from last March to the present. It is impossible not to be moved against you, for you neither should nor could give any such absolution. ”* (Medieval Sourcebook, Pope Innocent III, 2006)

By this letter, we know the Crusade was not sanctioned by the pope (or God for that matter), so the Papal Legate must have had other reasons for attacking the city.

It would appear that Alexius IV had a personal relationship with the Latin crusaders. Nicetas (a Byzantine politician close to the Emperor) wrote that “He [Alexius IV] crossed over to the tents of the barbarians [crusaders, Nicetas did not hold them in a favourable light], where he engaged in drinking bouts and passed the day playing at dice. His playfellows, removing the gold-inlaid and bejewelled diadem from his head, put it on their own, and placed on Alexius a shaggy woollen headdress of Latin wool-spinning provenance” (Madden, 1993, 452). When the crusader began looting the Empire, it was simply over money. Villehardouin recounts a conversation between the Latin representative and the Emperor; “

*“Thou hast swom, thou and thy father, to fulfil the promised covenants, and they have your charters in hand. But you have not fulfilled those covenants well, as you should have done. Many times have they called upon you to do so, and now again we call upon you, in the presence of all your barons, to fulfil the covenants that are between you and them.”*Medieval Sourcebook, Villehardouin, 2006)

## Conclusion:

It would appear that the attack on Constantinople was not inevitable, and that the murder of Alexius IV was the deciding factor. When Alexius was in power he fulfilled his promises best he could. He united the churches and paid half the debt, and the rest was going to be made up from pillaging- not from conquering. The Emperor's meeting with the Latin Representative made the problem clear- money. Thomas Madden (1993) noted that before the Fourth Crusade, those involved did so for financial gain; not for religious reasons. As long as the Treaty of Zara was in place, the crusaders knew they would get their money, as well as 10,000 troops when they set sail for Jerusalem. When Mourtzouphlus came to power the treaty became void- no money, the churches were no longer united, and no troops. Not only that, but Mourtzouphlus murdered a friend. Alexius and the crusaders had a relationship- he owed them for his position as Emperor and he was grateful for it. He sympathized with them, and even avoided military confrontation when they pillaged the empire.

The Varangian Guard was created because of the rumoured loyalty of the Northerners that comprised it, and they proved their loyalty time and again throughout the history of Byzantium. They were the emperor's private guard, sworn to protect him with their lives. When they purposely allowed Mourtzouphlus to capture the Emperor, they set in a motion a series of events that led to the city's capture. For these reasons, the Varangian Guard contributed to the fall of Constantinople.

### Relation/ Significance for Contemporary Society or Education:

Up until 1204, Byzantium was the world-centre, the ultimate key to the whole European development. It was in this year, during the fourth crusade, that Byzantium was lead to its eventual downfall. Successor states surrounding Byzantium competed for the emperor title of ``Roman Emperor``. One of these successor states was Greece, with the Greek people still proud to be known at Romans. By 1400, the Greek culture began to spread across Western Europe, while what was left of Byzantium was shrunken to a collection of small towns scattered in newly named states.

The dominance of these new states, and the wide-spread Greek culture set up Europe for what we know today as the Renaissance. As a cultural movement, the renaissance encompassed a resurgence of learning based on classical sources, and gradual but widespread educational reform. Educational reform was a result of the renaissance, which has resulted due to the formation of Europe after the fall of Constantinople. Therefore, without the fourth crusade setting off the European situation in 1204, the renaissance may have affected educational reform in a drastically different context.



