

*Crowning of Baldwin by Louis Gallait, 1847*

## THE AGE OF CHIVALRY

***Jonathan Harris***

*on the rise and fall of Baldwin, the first Latin Emperor of Constantinople*

**C**oronations of Byzantine emperors were elaborate affairs. The new incumbent would process across the main square of his capital city of Constantinople and into the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. There he would mount a wooden stage under the building's soaring dome and be draped in a cloak of imperial purple. He was then anointed and crowned by the patriarch, and acclaimed by the congregation. Just such a ceremony took place on 16 May 1204, but this time there was one

significant difference. The new emperor was not called Constantine, Leo or Alexios, but Baldwin. His first language was not Greek, but French. He had been born in the Low Countries, where he had been count of Flanders since 1194.

To many observers, it seemed only right that a western European should now be at the helm. This was the era of the crusades, when armoured knights from the West had astonished the world by travelling thousands of miles to capture Jerusalem against all odds. Their

head-on charges with lances couched under their arms had shattered the army of the Seljuk Turks at Dorylaion in 1097, that of the atabeg of Mosul at Antioch in 1098 and that of the Fatimid caliph of Egypt at Ascalon in 1099. The laurels had slipped a little since then: in 1187, Saladin had destroyed a Western army at Hattin and retaken Jerusalem. But in 1191 Richard I of England and his knights had smashed Saladin's army at Arsuf and purchased another century of existence for the kingdom of



Jerusalem. The military skills of those same westerners were well known and prized in the Byzantine Empire. For years, French, Norman, English and Scandinavian mercenaries, or 'Latins' as the Byzantines preferred to call them, had provided the mainstay of the emperor's armies and had saved the Empire time after time from its numerous enemies. So essential had they become that Emperor Manuel I (1143–1180) was even rumoured to have preferred them to his own people and to have given them the best posts in his service.

*'Lurid tales of his ultimate fate circulated for years afterwards: it was said that Kalojan had ordered his arms and legs to be lopped off and then had him thrown down a rocky ravine'*

While the Latins had gained an international reputation for integrity, valour and military prowess, the Byzantine Greeks often struck outsiders in this period as weak, effeminate and duplicitous. It is not difficult to see why. Unlike in western Europe, where prowess in battle was a mark of status and distinction, in Byzantium war was regarded as a distasteful necessity which should only be undertaken as a last resort. If there were any other way of ensuring the security of the empire, it was to be taken – whether it involved bribery, covert assassination or simply paying someone else to do the fighting. Turks, Russians, Armenians and, of course, Latins were all signed up as mercenaries to fight the Byzantine emperor's battles. To those imbued with the military ethos of the Latin West, such conduct seemed most distasteful. They poured scorn on 'the puny little Byzantines, the most wretched of men'. It was, opined one French abbot, all part of a protracted decline in the Greek character that had been going on since the end of

the Trojan War. It was the kind of distaste for an exotic but treacherous and decadent world that has been a feature of the Western construction of the East since Herodotus. The Byzantines were the objects of orientalism long before Edward Said invented the term.

So when, in April 1204, the Latin knights of the Fourth Crusade stormed and captured Constantinople, it must have seemed like the beginning of a new era. The feeble and unwarlike regime of the Byzantine Greeks had been replaced by that of the martial Latins and many believed that they discerned the hand of God in the process. The Pope, Innocent III, was one of them, until he discovered that on entering Constantinople the crusade army had robbed and desecrated churches, including Hagia Sophia. Nevertheless, the fall of the city did seem to promise the resolution of the schism that had existed between the Byzantine and Western Churches for some years, so Innocent declared that the conquest was all the work of the Lord and was a wondrous thing. But

those who rejoiced in the victory did not do so for long. For within a year, not only was Baldwin no longer emperor, but he was probably also dead.

Disaster struck when Baldwin marched west out of Constantinople in the spring of 1205 to bring the Balkan provinces of the Byzantine Empire under his control. Near Adrianople (modern Edirne), he encountered the army of the tsar of Bulgaria, Kalojan, who had designs on the same tract of territory. Like the Byzantines, Kalojan recruited his army not only from his own subjects but also from people beyond his borders, in this case from the Turkic people known as Cumans who had migrated west from the Steppes of Central Asia. They fought on horseback and were adept at loosing off volleys of arrows while galloping past at high speed. The Byzantines had appreciated their abilities and they too had often recruited them. When the two sides met, the armoured Western knights of Baldwin's army could not conceal their disdain at the sight of the Cumans who were clad in rough



*The cupola of Hagia Sophia.*

sheepskin jackets rather than in armour and whose bows looked pitifully small. Eager to show their mettle and to end the battle quickly, the knights lowered their lances and charged full pelt at Kalojan's army. That gave the Cumans the perfect opportunity to execute their favourite tactic of staging a feigned flight then unexpectedly wheeling around and unleashing a hail of arrows. Unnerved by the unexpected ruse, some knights beat a hasty retreat, but Emperor Baldwin and his companions stood their ground. With his horse shot from under him, Baldwin was taken prisoner. Many of his best knights were killed, picked off by those small but terrifyingly accurate bows.

Dragged off to Kalojan's capital of Trnovo, Baldwin was immured in the grim fortress of Tsarevets and never seen alive again. Lurid tales of his ultimate fate circulated for years afterwards: it was said that Kalojan had ordered his arms and legs to be lopped off and then had him thrown down a rocky ravine. There he had lain in agony for three long days, unable to move while birds pecked at his body. Only then did he finally expire. His brother Henry took over as regent in Constantinople. When it was clear that Baldwin was not coming back, he was crowned emperor in his stead. Henry was an able enough ruler, but the Latin regime in Constantinople never recovered from the blow to its manpower and to its prestige. It lingered on, impoverished and unloved, until 1261 when the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos recaptured Constantinople and sent the last Latin emperor, Baldwin II, scuttling back to the West.

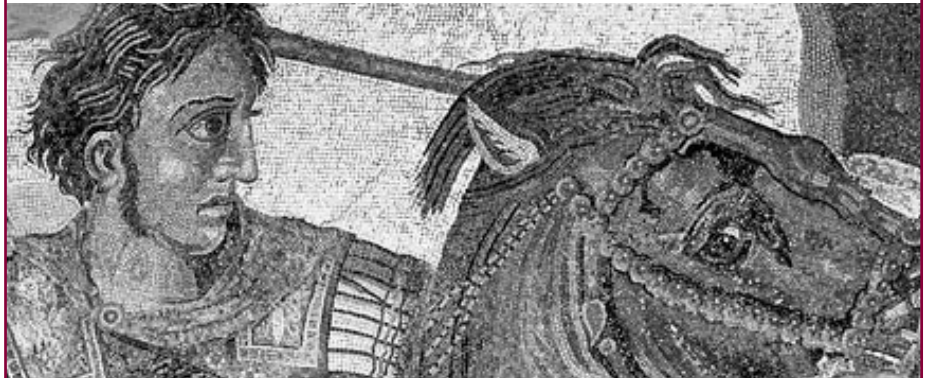
So what had gone wrong? Why did the undoubtedly formidable military skills of the Latins not usher in a new era of glory for a revived Byzantine Empire under their rule? The answer is perhaps that, while the Latins provided formidable military muscle, that in itself was not enough to defend and maintain the Empire. Placed as it was directly on

the migration route westwards from the steppes of Asia, Byzantium had to contend with waves of invaders colliding with its borders on the Danube and in Asia Minor, from the Huns to the Cumans, and from the Mongols to the Ottoman Turks. In these circumstances, military victory was meaningless: one defeated group would merely be replaced by another. Instead, the Byzantines had for centuries managed the waves of people by means other than direct conflict whenever they could. They integrated some, deflected others and paid still others to guard the frontiers on their behalf. Indeed, the Latins themselves had been managed in this way, recruited into

the imperial armies and then sent off to counter a threat that was looming elsewhere. For centuries it had worked and kept Byzantium in existence in some extraordinarily difficult situations, until the Byzantines encountered the one group that they could not manipulate to their advantage: the Latins themselves. It is hardly surprising, though that, once in command, the Latins proved incapable of defending the Empire. Management rather than confrontation and the avoidance of open war unless it was absolutely necessary were concepts that they could never understand. For them, the solution to everything was one headlong charge.

## CLASSICS FOR ALL

### Championing Classics in Schools



The charity Classics for All funds projects that bring Classics (Latin, Ancient Greek, Classical Civilisation and Ancient History) to children and young people in state schools who currently do not have the access to them. 'Classical studies offer young people of all backgrounds and ability levels an opportunity to broaden their perspectives, to think critically, to develop skills in research, analysis and interpretation and to gain access to great literature,' argues the Assistant Head Teacher at Greig City Academy, Haringey. In response to growing demand for our grants, we have also begun to encourage the development of regional 'classics hubs', often involving partnerships between primary and secondary schools, classics associations and universities. We rely on donations from individuals, Trusts and Foundations to support our work.

For more information about our grant programme or donating to the charity, please visit [www.classicsforall.org.uk](http://www.classicsforall.org.uk)

Classics for All is a Registered Charity (no. 1135379)  
51 Achilles Road, London NW6 1DZ