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Through the Eyes of a Crusader:
An Intensive Study Into the Personal Involvement
of Two Men in the Fourth Crusade

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History 492

Dr. Dotson
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Outline

Thesis: A man's personal experiences are very important in informing us about aspects of the Fourth Crusade.

- I. To begin, the study is based on the events of the Fourth Crusade.
 - A. In the past, there have not been many in-depth studies comparing the personal experiences of men who fought in the Fourth Crusade.
 - B. There are many questions that arise from a discussion of personal experiences.
- II. The Fourth Crusade began in the late twelfth century.
 - A. The background of the Crusade is very helpful in understanding personal accounts.
 - B. The Fourth Crusade ended with the sack of Constantinople.
- III. An overview of the life of Robert de Clari and that of Geoffrey de Villehardouin helps to set the framework for a more specific discussion.
 - A. A short background on the life of Clari sets the stage.
 - B. The background of Villehardouin also adds to the discussion.
- IV. The events faced by the crusaders were different for everyone.
 - A. To begin, both men beheld the negotiations with the doge of Venice differently.
 - B. Then, the crusaders in Venice are greeted according to rank.
 - C. Clari and Villehardouin do not agree about the character of the doge of Venice.
 - D. It is decided to attack the city of Zara so that the crusaders can pay their debt to the Venetians.
 - E. The siege of Zara occurs in the fall of 1202.
 - F. The crusaders enter the fallen city.
- V. To conclude, the personal experiences of Clari and Villehardouin give us an important perspective on the Fourth Crusade.
 - A. Many conclusions can be drawn from my research about personal experiences during the Fourth Crusade.
 - B. However, further research could give answers to other questions that have arisen.

Abstract

On November 28, 1199, the Fourth Crusade began with the enlistment of an army of knights in northern France. It was fifteen months after Pope Innocent III had asked for men to join another crusade. The Fourth Crusade was fought with the express purpose to get possession of Jerusalem according to the pope. However, it never reached its intended goal. Both men that I have chosen to study saw these events with their own eyes, but they both give a different point of view to the events. Robert de Clari and Geoffrey de Villehardouin left accounts of the crusade written from very different points of view. All of the crusaders faced many trials including the siege of Zara, the decision to attack Constantinople, the taking of the Tower of Galata, and most importantly the sack of Constantinople. The following paper investigates the different points of view that Clari and Villehardouin held, and shows how they are equally important to our understanding of the events of the Fourth Crusade. In researching the subject, I assert that an individual's personal involvement during the crusades should be considered a vital source of information. As I will indicate in this paper, the personal accounts of the crusades are a very important part of our history because they give us another view of the battles.

The Fourth Crusade has been typically viewed only from a large-scale perspective. However, I believe that there is much more to the Crusade if one could view the personal accounts of the crusaders individually. The Fourth Crusade was fought with the purpose of regaining control of the Holy Land for the papacy and Christianity, however it went way off course and ended in the city of Constantinople instead of Jerusalem. The crusaders had gone off track and attacked a Christian city, which had never happened on a crusade before, and would not ever happen again thereafter.

What was going through the minds of these men who were fighting for the cross when they attacked a Christian city, which was one of their allies? Does this new information change our perception of the Fourth Crusade and the men who fought in it? Has limiting ourselves to considering the Crusade only on the large scale made us miss the importance of the individual experiences that lie beneath? In this paper, I assert that the personal accounts of men such as Robert de Clari and Geoffrey de Villehardouin are a vital aspect to the study of the Fourth Crusade. Utilizing a collection of translated and compiled documents, I will indicate how the studies of the Fourth Crusade prior to date are incomplete because they do not consider the personal experiences of the crusaders. This study shows that even though the two men's accounts may not agree on some points, they are still essential in helping to inform the public on vital aspects of the crusade.

To begin, the background of the Fourth Crusade according to today's historians is very important in understanding the accounts of Robert de Clari and Geoffrey de Villehardouin. It helps to show where the large-scale perspective is missing important points that only the individual can give. It also aids us in understanding how their perspectives relate to everything else that was occurring at the time.

The notion of having another crusade was started by Pope Innocent III. He believed that Christianity needed to regain control of the Holy Land, both for God and for Christians everywhere. On August 15, 1198, Pope Innocent III wrote a letter appealing for crusaders and had it spread throughout Western Christendom. In it he said, "Let all and each make themselves ready so that next March, each and every city by itself, likewise counts and barons, in accordance with their respective means, might send forth a certain number of warriors at their own expense for the defense of the land of the Lord's birth, and there they are to remain at least two years."¹ However, they would not follow his wishes immediately. The Fourth Crusade would not actually begin until November 28, 1199, in Northern France. A tournament was being held at the castle of Ecri, which is where the Count of Champagne resided. A large group of nobles was present for the events. During the festivities the Count decided that he would take up the cross and fight.² This was a very important decision because then other nobles followed his lead and brought their support.

The next step in the crusade was to find a way to get the crusaders to Jerusalem. To accomplish this the nobles appointed six envoys, including Geoffrey de Villehardouin, to go to the major Mediterranean maritime cities asking for assistance.³ The crusaders could not use their own French ports because they were too small and they did not have sufficient shipping either. They would find what they were seeking in Venice with the doge, Enrico [Henry] Dandolo.⁴ Although, they would get more than they had bargained for in the treaty signed in Venice. The envoys had reported having many more men than they actually did, so when the day came to pay for the crusaders passage on the Venetian ships they did not have enough money.⁵ This is how it is

believed that the Fourth Crusade got off course in the first place because the crusaders had to make a deal with the Venetian doge to pay the rest of the debt they owed.⁶

It was decided that they would attack the city of Zara to pay off the debt to the Venetians. On November 24, 1202, the city surrendered to the invasion.⁷ However, it was not to be the end of the crusade. Once again the crusaders would be led off track, but this time it would be by a young prince named Alexius. He had a claim to the throne in Constantinople. He told the leaders of the crusade that if they helped him get the throne, then he would give them food and money to continue to the Holy Land. It was an offer that they could not pass up because they did not have the funds to continue on their own.⁸

In July of 1203, the crusaders assaulted another Christian city, Constantinople.⁹ It would be the final destination for the Fourth Crusade. After the city surrendered there would be many problems for the new young leader, Alexius, and for the crusaders. In the end, Constantinople would be devastated in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade.¹⁰ The crusaders would never make it to the Holy Land, and the crusade would be considered a failure in the eyes of the papacy.¹¹

An overview of the life of Robert de Clari and that of Geoffrey de Villehardouin helps to set the framework for a more specific discussion. Both men were present during the Fourth Crusade and wrote about their experiences. They were of different ranks, thus they had different points of view. Despite this obvious difference, the thoughts of Clari and those of Villehardouin are both equally important to our perception of the Fourth Crusade today.

Robert de Clari was a common knight of Picardy. Recently his exact identity has been confirmed by some legal deeds that were uncovered. Robert's family name was

“taken from Clari, now Clery-lez-Prenois, in the commune of Pernois. This with other small holdings made up the little fief which Robert, like his father Gilo before him, held as a vassal of Pierre of Amiens.”¹² Clari had made mention of his lord, Pierre, many times in his chronicle, but it was not supported by evidence until now.

Due to Robert’s position he was not privy to information that men such as Villehardouin had been, but he is more open to give his view on issues that Villehardouin could not or would not. His account is also not as accurate as Geoffrey de Villehardouin’s because he was among the common ranks. “He provides, however, even more color and human interest than Villehardouin, trumpets and banners, the splendor of Constantinople, closeups of deeds of valor, the feelings of the men, their resentment toward their leaders, the rumors which infest an army.”¹³ Therefore, while his facts may not be perfect, Clari gives information we would not have otherwise had about the crusade. In addition, “Villehardouin discussed only the military aspects of the attack upon Constantinople, not the political situation, which he astutely concealed.”¹⁴ This in itself makes Robert’s account invaluable because he was open to discussing what Villehardouin so fervently had concealed.

The background of Geoffrey de Villehardouin, a lord and noble, also adds to the discussion of the Fourth Crusade. “He was not only a participant in the expedition but stood in the second rank of the leaders behind the Marquis of Montferrat and the Counts of Flanders and Blois.”¹⁵ Villehardouin was the marshal of Champagne and very instrumental in the course of the crusade. “He would be one of those given responsibility for arranging transportation for the crusade, the negotiations of which would be

fundamental to the way in which the adventure evolved.”¹⁶ In other words, he was one of the six envoys chosen to negotiate with the maritime cities for transportation.

He was not one of the leaders, but he was close to the leadership and knew intimately what was occurring throughout the crusade. “In his role as marshal, Villehardouin was tasked with assembling armies in preparation for warfare; he was an experienced administrator, a fact that should be noted in light of the events that followed.”¹⁷ Since he had such close personal involvement with the crusade, unlike Clari, his account must be looked at carefully. He is very strong in preciseness and accuracy, but he lacks the enthusiasm and feeling that Robert seems to convey. Furthermore, it can be noted that many historians believe that he was trying to conceal the plots that led the army to Constantinople. Regardless, his account is still considered to be the starting point for anyone who is researching the Fourth Crusade.¹⁸

The crusaders faced many events leading up to the conquest of Constantinople. These events included the negotiations with the doge of Venice, the arrival in Venice the following year, the decision to attack the city of Zara, and the actual siege of the city on the feast of St. Martin. The personal experiences of men such as Villehardouin and Clari are the key to unlocking previously unknown information about the history of the Fourth Crusade. I used their accounts to show how important the individual is in the large-scale perspective.

From the very beginning of the crusade, the experiences of Clari and Villehardouin were very different. Villehardouin was involved with the planning of the expedition whereas Clari had not yet joined the crusade. Therefore, the few things that Clari has to say on this matter are in hindsight and based on what he heard from other

people.¹⁹ However, that does not make his account any less valuable. On the other hand, Villehardouin's explanation for what happened at this point is very accurate and detailed. If it was not for his being one of the six envoys sent to the Italian maritime cities, we might not know what happened on that trip. Although, as I mentioned before he is suspect for covering plots that he was immersed in. Therefore, his account must be looked at as both a personal and a political one.

Robert de Clari was aware of the envoys that were sent to the Italian cities of Genoa, Pisa, and Venice. Although, he did not know the specifics of who all of the envoys were or what occurred while they were in those cities. In his account, he claims that the envoys first went to Genoa. When they arrived, the Genoese claimed that they could not help them. Then, the envoys continued on to Pisa where they were told that there would not be enough vessels to support them. Only after visiting these two cities did the six envoys consider going to Venice.²⁰ Historians have a different view though. According to them, the envoys did not go to all three cities; they just went to Venice.²¹ Villehardouin's account agrees with this stating that the envoys spoke amongst themselves and decided, "in Venice they might expect to find a greater number of vessels than in any other port."²² There is a lot of speculation as to why Robert de Clari believed that they had traveled to all three of the Italian cities, but it is a noticeable inconsistency in his account.

Clari's view on what occurred in Venice during the negotiations is very brief. He was just a knight so he did not know much about it, or simply did not think it was important to elaborate on the subject. It is important to point this out because it shows that most of the common people [like him] were probably not aware of what was

happening in Venice at the time either, which in turn shows that the society was likely not very politically conscious. Villehardouin is very detailed in this section though because it would have been one of the more important aspects to a man in his position. He even goes so far as to give the dialogue between the envoys and the Venetian doge. It shows that while the common people may not have been interested in politics, the nobles were very aware.

The two men do not agree on how many men the ships would carry or how much the fee would be to carry them. Villehardouin claimed that the fee would be 85,000 marks to carry “four thousand five hundred horses, and nine thousand squires, and ship for four thousand five hundred knights, and twenty thousand sergeants of foot.”²³ Clari, on the other hand, gave an exaggerated amount for both things. He asserted that the crusaders would pay 87,000 marks to have ships carry “four thousand knights and their harness and for one hundred thousand men on foot.”²⁴ Historians tend to agree more with Villehardouin than Clari on this subject.²⁵ Moreover, it shows that what the common people did know was subject to inconsistencies due to oral communication being their most frequent method of getting news about political matters.

The next event discussed by both Clari and Villehardouin is the arrival of the crusaders in Venice. To begin, the two men do not agree entirely on how the crusaders were greeted. They both point out how great the navy was that awaited them in the city, but Clari remarks that “when they saw that they could not all find quarters in the city, they decided among them to go and quarter themselves on the Isle of St. Nicholas...the best they could.”²⁶ He made it seem as if it was difficult for them to find lodging, whereas Villehardouin has a different opinion on this matter. He discusses a certain

count's arrival claiming "they were there received with feasting and joyfully, and took lodging in the Island of St. Nicholas with those who had come before. Goodly was the host, and right worthy were the men."²⁷ According to him, the crusaders were greeted warmly and had no problems at the start. Overall, this illustrates the two views to how things were for the crusaders. Clari would have been among the common knights, which had harsher conditions. Villehardouin was with the noblemen, which means he was unaware of the plight of the knights in Venice and had comfortable conditions. It is important that historians note both of these views because the same situation is not always the same for everyone.

Another curious thing to point out is how it was decided which Venetians would accompany the crusaders in the fleet. Villehardouin seems to pass over this subject in his account, however Clari describes it in detail. According to him many of the people in Venice did not want to go with them on the expedition, so it was decided that they would draw lots. "They made a drawing of lots in this way: balls of wax were made in pairs and in one of the two they put a slip of paper. Then they came to the priest and gave them to him and he made the sign of the cross over them and gave one of the two balls to each of two Venetians and the one who had the ball with the writing in it had to go with the fleet."²⁸ Without Robert de Clari's account of the Fourth Crusade we would not know of customs like this one. It shows how matters were settled in Venice during this time period. In addition, the occurrence illustrates the importance of the priest in decision-making.

It must also be noted that Robert de Clari and Geoffrey de Villehardouin had very different opinions about the doge of Venice. Throughout Villehardouin's account he

asserts that the doge is very wise and honorable, even after the attack on Zara. Clari contradicts this when he speaks of the doge after the crusaders could not get all of the money to pay the Venetians. He says that the doge told them “you shall not depart from this island before we are paid, nor shall you find anyone to bring you anything to eat or to drink.”²⁹ Clari puts the doge in a darker light through this statement, but he then says that the doge was a “right worthy man” and fed them anyway. It seems that although Clari did not really like the man, his code of chivalry made him point out the man’s good points along with the bad. This shows that the idea of knightly behavior still existed in society at this time.

The decision to attack the city of Zara was made in the fall of 1202. It had been agreed that the crusaders would pay their debt to the Venetians by helping them to siege the city that had, according to the doge, done them much harm. All did not greet the news with acceptance, as Villehardouin would have us believe. Clari claims that “the barons and the high men of the crusaders agreed to what the doge had said, but the host as a whole did not know anything of this plan, save only the highest men.”³⁰ According to him, the rest of the men followed because it was the order that was given to them by their lords and noblemen. The occurrence represents how strong the power of the lords over their vassals had been during the crusades. In addition, it also shows how honorable the men were because they were attacking a Christian city, which was against their beliefs, to pay back the Venetians the money that they owed because it was the only way that they knew how.

The descriptiveness of the account of Robert de Clari should also be remarked upon for its usefulness. Throughout his writing he makes sure to point out the aspects

such as the richness of Venice, or the dismay of the crusaders at finding themselves stuck in the city. It is important to note these things because it is what the common crusader would have noticed, but Villehardouin did not find important enough to include in his account. Due to the fact that Clari was just a knight, he found these descriptions to be of interest to those who would later read his writings. He helps to make the expedition come alive in the mind of the reader because it is more accessible to a larger audience. Moreover, it is more personal than the straightforward account of men like Geoffrey de Villehardouin. For example, when the crusaders leave the port for Zara it is a very big affair in the eyes of Robert de Clari. He described it saying:

“For there were fully a hundred pairs of trumpets, of silver and of brass, all sounding at the departure, and so many drums and tabors and other instruments that it was a fair marvel. When they were on that sea and had spread their sails and had their banners set high on the poops of the ships and their ensigns, it seemed indeed as if the sea were all a-tremble and all on fire with the ships they were sailing and the great joy they were making.”³¹

It is a description that only a man in his position could have given. Villehardouin, on the other hand, was more descriptive in diplomatic and political matters. Overall, Robert continues to be rich in description throughout the crusading expedition.

On November 10, 1202, the eve of the feast of St. Martin, the fleet came to Zara. Robert de Clari and Geoffrey de Villehardouin differ on their accounts almost from the beginning of the siege of the city. They both start by describing that the city was enclosed by high walls and high towers so as to keep intruders out.³² The people of Zara had known that the Venetians were coming to take the city so they were prepared for defending themselves. According to Clari, “the people of Zara knew right well that the Venetians hated them, so they had secured a letter from Rome, saying that anyone who

should make war on them or do them any harm would be excommunicated.”³³

Villehardouin, on the other hand, never mentions the possibility of the crusaders being excommunicated for attacking Zara. If it was not for Robert de Clari, we might not know of this matter at all because even the registers of the pope are vague about this.³⁴

What occurred next was also left out of Geoffrey’s writings about the crusade. After the letter from the pope had been read the doge of Venice declared that it did not matter to him “even for the excommunication of the apostolic”, as long as he got his revenge on Zara.³⁵ Villehardouin most likely left this out because it would have put him in a bad light because he was one of the men who decided to go along with the plan of attacking the city in the first place. Robert continues by discussing how most of the nobles agreed to still help the Venetians even with the likelihood that the pope would excommunicate them. However, he does point out that a couple of the men would not “go against the commandments of the apostolic, nor did they want to be excommunicated” so they left the crusade to go to Hungary.³⁶ It shows that not all of the men were content with the idea of attacking the city, as most accounts would have you believe. Once again it illustrates just how valuable the writing of Clari is to historians to piece together the events that led to the conquest of Constantinople.

After the decision to continue with the attack, Clari’s account is very brief. Villehardouin is there to fill in the gaps that he has left. “On the day following the feast of St. Martin, certain of the people of Zara came forth, and spoke to the Doge of Venice, who was in his pavilion, and said to him that they would yield up the city and all their goods-their lives being spared-to his mercy.”³⁷ Robert’s leaving this out may be due to the fact that he did not know that it occurred because the people then took back their offer

before the doge could give his answer. They were persuaded by some outsiders to keep up the fight instead of losing everything they had to the Venetians. The doge was going to agree to their request, but they would never come to know that unfortunately.

Next, the abbot of Vaux informed them, “I forbid you, on the part of the Pope of Rome, to attack this city; for those within it are Christians, and you are pilgrims.”³⁸ It is the only sign that Villehardouin gives that the pope did not agree with what the crusaders were about to do. He tries to reconcile the attack of Zara by saying that the men had already given their word that they would help the Venetians attack the city so they could not back out on the deal.³⁹ Villehardouin claims that the siege lasted for about five days before the people of the city gave in. “The host encamped before the gates of the city, and set up their petraries and mangonels, and other engines of war...and on the side of the sea they raised ladders from the ships. Then they began to throw stones at the walls of the city and at the towers.”⁴⁰ After the attack, an agreement similar to the earlier one with the doge was forged and the men entered the city.

Subsequently, the men entered the city at a rather inopportune time. It was nearing winter, and they could not travel anywhere else because there would not be any markets open. Therefore, the doge convinced the crusaders to stay in Zara, which was rich and had plenty of supplies.⁴¹ The crusaders would not be able to travel for a few months at least, so they heeded his request. “The city was divided into two halves so that the pilgrims had one half and the Venetians the other.”⁴² It was an arrangement that would lead to problems in the near future for both sides.

“Afterwards it happened that a great fray arose between the Venetians and the common people of the pilgrims, which lasted fully a night and half a day, and this fray

was so fierce that the knights were scarcely able to part them.”⁴³ According to Villehardouin, this occurred about three days after they had entered the city. He claimed, “the fray was so fierce that there were but few streets in which battle did not rage with swords and lances and cross-bows and darts; and many people were killed and wounded.”⁴⁴ Both men agree that the only way that the fighting finally stopped was because of the high knights and noblemen intervening throughout the city of Zara. “The Doge of Venice and the barons laboured much, during the whole of that week, to appease the fray, and they laboured so effectually that peace was made.”⁴⁵ It was a great loss for both the Venetians and the crusaders.

The events of Zara would not be the end of the trip for the crusaders. At the urging of the doge of Venice they would continue on to attack another Christian city, Constantinople. They did this even though they had been absolved of the siege of Zara by the pope. Pope Innocent III had declared that if they attacked another Christian city they would be excommunicated permanently by the papacy, but the crusaders went regardless of this.

It is at this juncture that I must point out the extensiveness to which Villehardouin gives the involvement of certain men. For instance, he tells that the high lord of Flanders died in the fray between the Venetians and the pilgrims at Zara due to a strike in the eye. Robert de Clari also does this by mentioning the names of many men who went on the expedition in the opening of his account of the Fourth Crusade.⁴⁶ Information such as this is priceless to historians and genealogists, and it is very likely that it could not be found anywhere else.

To conclude, the Fourth Crusade is a very important part of our history. The personal accounts of men such as Robert de Clari and Geoffrey de Villehardouin can give us a different perception of the events as they occurred. These perceptions can help to give us a more in-depth and personal view of what happened. I think that this shows the importance of individual accounts in our history. It also shows that there were different views on what happened during the Fourth Crusade, and that it is not as “cut and dried” as the history books would have us to believe. At the very least, hopefully this paper raises new interest in and questions about the personal experiences of crusaders in -the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The writings of Clari and Villehardouin are far from being outdated documents. They are vital to our understanding of the Fourth Crusade and the feelings of the crusaders involved in it.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Alfred J. Andrea, *Contemporary Sources for the Fourth Crusade* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2000), 14-15.
- ² W.B. Bartlett, *An Ungodly War: The Sack of Constantinople & The Fourth Crusade* (Surrey, Great Britain: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000), 54.
- ³ Geoffrey de Villehardouin, *Memoirs of the Crusades* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1958), 4-10. [Also in Clari 36-39 and Queller & Madden 6-7.]
- ⁴ Donald E. Queller and Thomas F. Madden, *The Fourth Crusade*. 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 9. [This can be found in Bartlett 57, Clari 37-38, and Villehardouin 4-10 also.]
- ⁵ Robert de Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople*. (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 39-42. [This is also in Villehardouin 14-16.]
- ⁶ Bartlett, 75.
- ⁷ Queller and Madden, 77.
- ⁸ Bartlett, 81.
- ⁹ Villehardouin, 41.
- ¹⁰ Queller and Madden, 193-203.
- ¹¹ Bartlett, 196.
- ¹² Clari, 4.
- ¹³ Donald E. Queller, *The Latin Conquest of Constantinople*. (New York City: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1971), 13.
- ¹⁴ Donald E. Queller, *Medieval Diplomacy and the Fourth Crusade*. (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980), 260.
- ¹⁵ Queller, *Latin Conquest*, 3.
- ¹⁶ Bartlett, 55.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.
- ¹⁸ Queller and Madden, 18.
- ¹⁹ Clari, 12-13.
- ²⁰ Clari, 37.
- ²¹ Queller and Madden, 7.
- ²² Villehardouin, 4.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ²⁴ Clari, 37.
- ²⁵ Bartlett for instance mentions that the two do not agree in his footnotes for page 59, but he contends that since Villehardouin was there he must be correct.
- ²⁶ Clari, 39.
- ²⁷ Villehardouin, 14.
- ²⁸ Clari, 39-40.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

³² Clari, 43, and Villehardouin, 19.

³³ Clari, 43.

³⁴ I did not find any evidence of the possible excommunication of the crusaders or the Venetians for attacking Zara in the papal registers of Innocent III.

³⁵ Ibid., 44.

³⁶ Ibid., 44.

³⁷ Villehardouin, 20.

³⁸ Ibid., 20-21.

³⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁴¹ Ibid., 21.

⁴² Clari, 44.

⁴³ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁴ Villehardouin, 22.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁶ Clari, 31-34.

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