PART ONE

IN THE HEAT OF EVENTS: SOURCES IMMEDIATE TO THE FOURTH CRUSADE

Fifteen years ago, Charles M. Brand opined that the best historical sources are those composed closest to events, and given that criterion, he judged the three letters to the West by the leaders of the Fourth Crusade army to be the starting point for our study of that crusade.¹ This judgment exaggerates the worth of these three after-action reports (and works of propaganda), but there is a good deal of truth in the view that sources immediate to events deserve especially close and careful study by historians. Unfortunately, so far as Fourth Crusade studies are concerned, these three letters, as well as the correspondence of Pope Innocent III, have not received the systematic attention they deserve and have not been made available in English translation. As for the March Pact of 1204, although it has been carefully and systematically studied by legions of experts on the crusade, it has not been made available in English translation. This first section of the book aims to redress these oversights.

Our task is made easier by virtue of the fact that the official collected correspondence of Innocent III contains not only letters sent out from the papal court but letters received in the course of this crusade. Among those letters are two of the three baronial letters to the West—the letter of August 1203 in the name of all of the crusade’s Frankish leaders that described the army’s first capture of Constantinople and the letter of Baldwin of Flanders of May 1204 describing the crusaders’ second capture of the city. It also contains a copy of the March Pact, which the crusade princes sent the pope for ratification. This means that only the report of Count Hugh of Saint Pol describing the events of the summer of 1203, which he apparently sent in at least four versions to friends in Europe, must be treated separately.

Beginning at least as early as the fourth century, popes and their functionaries preserved copies of important letters and other documents, but it was only in the pontificate of Innocent III (r. 1198-1216), the pope of the Fourth Crusade, that a consistent archival policy was set in place to preserve in a systematic manner papal correspondence. Letters deemed especially significant (and these probably constituted only a small percentage of the many documents that emanated from or flowed into the papal chancery, or secretariat) were copied into bound volumes known as registers and were arranged by pontifical year. In Innocent’s case, except for his first and last years as pope, the pontifical year ran from 22 February through 21 February because he had been crowned and officially installed as pope on 22 February 1198. His first year began on 8 January 1198, the day of his election, and his nineteenth year ended with his death on 16 July 1216.

Needless to say, Innocent’s papal registers provide historians with an invaluable body of evidence, but they are also flawed in several ways. First of all, for reasons beyond our understanding, not all letters and other documents that we would consider significant were enregistered. Also, there is good reason to conclude that some documents appearing in the registers were based on drafts that might have been reworked before being dispatched. The opposite also seems likely. There is reason to infer that some papal legal decisions – known as decretals – which appear in the registers might be reworked versions of the original texts. Then there is the issue of whether or not a letter that appears in the registers actually was dispatched. Several of the letters that appear in the present collection have fallen under such suspicion, and due notice will be made of these suspicions in the introductions accompanying those letters. Then there is the issue of dating letters. Although letters were largely enregistered in the sequence of their composition or reception, this was not an inflexible practice. Some letters were arranged in a