CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MEN OF FRANCE? BOUNDARY CROSSING IN CONSTANTINOPLE IN THE 1240s

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In the early 1240s, Baudouin II de Courtenay, the Latin Emperor of Constantinople, wrote to his relative, Blanche of Castile, the Queen Mother of France. He had an astonishing request: that she help arrange a marriage between his French niece and the Turkish sultan. Providing an abundance of detail, Baudouin II explained to Blanche that interfaith alliances were common “in these parts” (in partibus illis), the eastern environs where he had been born and built his career. This letter is one of four that survives from Baudouin II to his Capetian relatives, Blanche and Louis IX. These letters, all from the early 1240s, reflect the complexity that almost forty years in Constantinople created for the Franks. In these documents, Baudouin II pivoted between two identities: emperor of Constantinople and neighbor, enemy, and ally of Bulgarians, Cumans, Greeks, and Turks, on the one hand, and Flemish noble, landowner, and relative of European nobility and royalty, on the other. Drawing on bonds of kinship, lordship, and affection, and addressing questions of land, governance, diplomacy, and religion, Baudouin II navigated the distance between western expectations and eastern priorities. His communications show the periphery of medieval Christendom speaking back to the center—educating, negotiating, pleading.

Established by the crusader conquest of Constantinople in 1204 and based there until 1261, the Latin Empire existed in a distinctly non-western environment, but depended on westerners to provide armies, funds, and diplomatic support. That aid (as irregular as it was) was recruited in large

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1 I thank William Chester Jordan for, among other things, his support as I followed trails from thirteenth-century Burgundy and Champagne to Constantinople, Greece, and Anatolia. That that journey brought me back, in this volume, to the world of Louis IX and Blanche of Castile in the critical years before Louis IX’s crusading venture (and, briefly, to the crusade itself) is only fitting.

part through appeals to the crusading ideology that underpinned the empire’s foundation and to the need to defend Latin Christians (and the Holy Land) against the threat of schismatic Greeks, pagan Cumans, and infidel Turks. Yet the military weakness of the Latin Empire necessitated accommodation and compromise with those very schismatics, pagans, and infidels. These pressures created a community defined by ties to the West and permanent settlement in the East, a community that was neither western nor eastern, neither French nor Greek.3

The Latin Empire, located in Constantinople but uncoupled from Byzantine history by the conquest, has no natural scholarly home. This historiography of the empire, especially of the later years, has long been underdeveloped, although Filip van Tricht’s new monograph and a collection of articles considering the aftermath of 1204 are welcome signs of increasing interest.4 Historians, including Michael Angold, Peter Lock, Jean Longnon, and Robert Wolff, tend to dismiss the Latin Empire and its principals, particularly after the death of the second emperor in 1216. In these accounts, the Franks of the later empire are weak, unimaginative, and resistant to compromise and transformation. Citing Baudouin II’s letters to Blanche, Robert Wolff offered damning criticism: “[S]ince Henry’s [Baudouin II’s uncle’s] death there had been no successor with the vision or wisdom to conciliate the Greeks.”5 This dismissal is applied even more broadly: Michael Angold claimed that “the Latins in the Levant failed to evolve any clear identity. Increasingly, they saw themselves as an offshoot in France.”6

A detailed consideration of the sources, however, reveals the Franks in the 1240s adapting to their surroundings in a complex and contingent

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3 Studies of ethnic identity have influenced my understanding of how communities are bounded and defined. See, especially, Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference, ed. Fredrik Barth (Boston, 1969); and idem, “Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity,” in The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries,” ed. Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 11–32. In a Byzantine context see Gill Page, Being Byzantine: Greek Identity Before the Ottomans (Cambridge, 2008).

