

# THE GREAT LORD OF ATHENS

SELWYN P. GRIFFIN

TO rule as a prince over the beloved homeland of Aeschylus and Pheidias and Socrates; to dominate with one's irresponsible word the city where Pericles swayed the Assembly by the power of his oratory and the force of his political genius; to reign as a feudal monarch over the fountain of European civilization, incomparable Athens—this to a modern would carry an overwhelming romantic appeal, but to the Burgundian lord who actually did it in the thirteenth century the appeal was material. The adventure of the conquest carried for him far more thrill than the subsequent possession of so glorious a heritage.

It is not common to see associated the mediaeval lords of the west and the classical lands of the eastern part of Europe. Indeed, to many people the history of Greece ceases abruptly in the fourth century before Christ. What the Greeks have been doing all these twenty-three centuries few have been interested enough to enquire, and, truly, it would be difficult enough to find out were it not for the tireless researches of such men as William Miller, the greatest authority in English on Mediaeval Greece. "The great cemeteries of mediaeval Greece", he says, "—I mean the Archives of Venice, Naples, Palermo, and Barcelona—have given up their dead." With several Greek and some French scholars he has dug there for long years, and the result of their labours provides us a brilliant colourful picture of a stirring period.

Othon de la Roche was the son of the noble Ponce de la Rochesur-Ognon, whose rugged keep still stands where it used to command the sunlit vineyards of the Haute-Saône. He followed the great Count Baldwin of Flanders, and Boniface, Marquis of Montferrat, to the fourth Crusade—that Crusade on which Christian fought Christian and never a sword was crossed with the infidel. The intention had originally been to strike at the Mohammedan power in Egypt, for only by conquest there could the Holy Land be made secure to Christian sovereignty. But some of the leaders had long previously harboured a bitterness against that remnant of the mighty Roman Empire which had still persisted over Greece and much of Asia Minor ever since the fall of Rome eight centuries before. With its capital at Constantinople, the former Byzantium,

it called itself the Empire of Romania and has been known to western readers as the Eastern or Byzantine Empire. There the successors of the Caesars still held rule, though their names, their language and their culture were now Greek. The impression had grown up in western Europe that preceding Crusades had been hindered by the treachery of the Byzantine emperors, and it is certain that individual crusaders had suffered at their hands. There is thus some background for the strange events which followed.

In 1202, when, arrived at Venice, the leaders of the Fourth Crusade found themselves unable to raise the sum of money they had agreed to pay the Venetians for transportation of the host by sea to Egypt, a compromise was reached. The lords of Venice were willing to proceed with all arrangements as planned, provided that the crusaders would reconquer for them en route the Christian city of Zara on the shores of the Adriatic, which had been taken by the King of Hungary. An agreement was made, the city of Zara taken, and the host lay there over the winter.

Then came young Prince Alexius of Constantinople to petition the host to help him. His father, the Emperor Isaac, had been deformed, cruelly blinded and imprisoned by his own brother, also named Alexius. The young Alexius, however, had escaped from the prison into which his uncle had thrown him and had made his way to Germany, to Philip of Swabia, who was married to his sister. Now, with Philip's support, he made an attractive offer to the Crusaders. If they would restore him to his inheritance, he undertook first of all to make the whole of the Eastern Empire obedient to Rome. This was to obtain the Pope's support, for there was nothing that Innocent III, mightiest of the Popes, desired more than to extend the authority of Rome over the eastern church, whose ritual and doctrine had differed for so many centuries from those of Rome, but the final separation of which had occurred only a century and a half before.

Secondly he promised to supply the host with 200,000 marks in silver, and with food for the expedition into Egypt, and to augment this expedition with 10,000 men-at-arms. These last he would maintain for a year.

Thirdly, if Egypt were conquered, he undertook to provide during his lifetime five hundred knights towards the permanent garrison.

Though there was bitter argument and the host was sharply divided on the question, it is no wonder that the main body under the leadership of the Marquis of Montferrat accepted the terms. Apart from any hostility which any of the lords may have harboured

against the Eastern Empire, the solid basis for future effort against the Saracen in Egypt, which was provided in these terms, made it seem to them all that the hand of God pointed them in this direction. The Republic of Venice has been accused of engineering the whole attack upon the Eastern Empire. Although the Republic in its agreement with the Crusaders made sure of a half share of any eventual conquests, nevertheless the charge remains, to say the least, unproven. The blind old Doge of Venice, Henry Dandolo, bearing gallantly his ninety years, sailed with the Crusaders, shared all their dangers, led his troops himself, and, incapacitated as he was, turned the tide of battle before the walls of Constantinople when both Crusaders and Venetians had been repulsed, by plunging into the very thick of the enemy and shaming his followers into success. The Venetians fulfilled their side of the bargain with regard to transportation and in other respects to the letter, and the chronicler of the Crusade, the Frenchman Geoffroy de Villehardouin, is emphatic in his praise of their good faith and efficiency.

Constantinople was taken in July 1203. The blind old emperor Isaac was restored to his throne and his son, the Prince Alexius, set up with him as co-regent. Then it became necessary for the Prince to make good his promises. His position among his own people was precarious on account of the presence of the Crusaders and Venetians and of his alliance with them. He found himself unable or he was unwilling to fulfil his engagements, and begged the Crusaders to wait over the winter until March 1204. They waited in their camp at Galata. Before the time set, however, it became apparent that Alexius, feeling himself more secure, had become quite careless about his undertakings. He grew distant, even arrogant. After full discussion, the Crusaders called upon him to honour his pledged word. Receiving a very unsatisfactory answer, they defied him and besieged the city.

Then came a revolution within. In January 1204, a courtier named Mourzouphles, bosom friend of the young Alexius, seized the throne, and imprisoned both Isaac and Alexius. Isaac died of the shock, and Alexius was strangled to death. The Crusaders had a new enemy, an emperor unbound by the promises of his predecessors. They decided now to overthrow the empire and to dispose it in worthier hands. In parliament assembled they made a covenant with the Venetians. Six of the Crusaders, after the capture, with six of the Venetians, should elect from among the leaders of the Crusade an emperor, who should receive as his personal domain a quarter of the dominions conquered. The remaining three quarters should be halved between the Venetians and the

Crossing host, each receiving "a quarter and a half of a quarter".

The empire thus partitioned, the host began in earnest the attack on the mighty city. They were twenty thousand in number and Constantinople had a population of four hundred thousand, defended by the Imperial guards, among whom, it is interesting to note, was a small contingent of English adventurers. The temperamental Greeks were no match for the iron-nerved Franks. It took the Crusaders and Venetians just four days. The assault began on April 8th, 1204, and on April 12th the Crusaders encamped within the city. That night the regicide Mourzouphles fled. The city was sacked, and a fire, lighted perhaps by accident, perhaps on purpose, gutted the place.

The committee of twelve elected Count Baldwin of Flanders as Emperor, probably on the principle that, as the Marquis of Montferrat had been titular general of the host so far, it was his great rival's turn to have something. The Marquis, whose ambitions were thus frustrated, acted like a sportsman, and was solaced by the gift of the Kingdom of Salonika, which included Greece, to be held as a fief from the Emperor. Later there was an ugly misunderstanding between the two great men, which threatened to disrupt the host and jeopardise the recent conquest. This was patched up by the lords of the host, and the Marquis Boniface rode away to conquer his kingdom. With him rode Othon de la Roche.

What part this Burgundian had taken in the stirring events of the two years previous we hardly know. It appears, however, that he had become the close and trusted friend of the Marquis, whom he had served in many ways as warrior and as envoy. He was not alone. There were a number of lords who were his peers, whose names were world-famous then, but which sound strangely in modern ears—Guillaume de Champlitte who was Vicomte de Dijon, Jacques d'Avesnes, Jacques and Nicholas de Saint Omer, the German Berthold von Katzenellenbogen, and the Italian Marquis Guido Pallavicini. Most of these were younger sons of the great nobility, and their fortunes depended on their swords.

The progress of the new King of Salonika was a triumph. The Greek, Léon Sgourós, the Archon of Argos, of Nauplia and of Corinth, who had been busily looking out for himself while the capital of the empire had been in peril, by attacking Athens unsuccessfully and Thebes successfully, opposed the Frankish invasion at the pass of Thermopylae. But the deathless example of Leonidas with his 300 Spartans, 700 Thespians and 400 Thebans of nearly seventeen hundred years before failed to impress Léon Sgourós. The sight of the serried ranks of mail-clad knights, the sun gleaming

on their armour, shields and lances, on their gay, flaunting pennants and the brilliant caparisons of their thoroughbred horses, impressed him far more. He remembered the very just reputation they had won for perfect fearlessness, together with their reputation, exaggerated but not entirely unwarranted, for barbarian ferocity, and he stayed not upon the order of his going. Straight he fled to the citadel at Corinth, that vast and lofty rock, and there he held out for four years, until in 1208, in despair, all panoplied in armour, he drove the rowels into his horse's flanks and dashed from the heights to oblivion below.

As he proceeded, the King of Salonika set up baronies, duchies, marquisates. At Thermopylae he installed the Marquis Guido Pallavicini in the famous marquisate of Boudonitza which was to last for two centuries. At Gravia he carved a fief for the brothers Jacques and Nicholas de Saint Omer. On the slopes of Parnassus he erected the barony of Salona, and there Thomas de Stromoncourt reared the great fortress whose ruins still dominate the modern village of Salona where long ago stood the classical town of Amphissa.

There was no opposition. The Greeks were either apathetic or they welcomed the change, for their condition could not be much worse than under the oppressive rule of the corrupt court of Constantinople, and there was an even chance that it might be better. In Boeotia King Boniface was received with open arms. The storied city of Thebes, at this time one of the most important commercially in Greece, opened her gates without reluctance. The Frankish army passed down to Athens. Here, too, there was no resistance. The archbishop of Athens, Akominátos, patriot and litterateur, the natural protector of Attica, judged the effort useless. The Crusaders quartered a garrison on the Acropolis.

In the year 1204 the glorious buildings on the Acropolis still stood unravaged by time and the vandal, and almost as fresh as when they had been so proudly erected sixteen centuries before. The Parthenon, to-day the world's most splendid ruin, was then whole and undamaged. The metopes and the frieze remained intact. The amazing sculptures of the pediments were not even chipped. Of course, the great gold and ivory statue of Athena which Pheidias had wrought for the sanctuary of the temple had vanished ages before, but apart from that the spell which the beauty of the wonderful building cast had saved it. For centuries it had been a Christian cathedral, the church of "Our Lady of Athens". The metropolitan Akominátos was very proud of his cathedral. Frescoes had been added to the inside walls two centuries before by the Emperor Basil II. The treasury contained a profusion

of priceless gifts left there by the great of all the eastern world, when they came to give thanks. Over the altar a golden dove, suggesting the Holy Spirit, hovered gently back and forward in never-ceasing flight. The appointments and the vessels were rich and beautiful.

The other buildings of the classic age on the rock had likewise been adapted. That gem, the temple of the Nike Apteros, was now a Christian chapel; the Erechtheion, with its porch of the Caryatids, was a church of the Saviour. The metropolitan himself lived in the Propylaea, the splendid entrance to the Acropolis left unfinished sixteen hundred and thirty-five years before when Pericles turned from his great building program to guide Athens through the Peloponnesian War.

Below in the city the Theseion was the church of St. George, but many of the prominent public buildings of antiquity had disappeared, and the limits of the city had shrunk. The city of 1204 was small and poor, yet the invaders found a certain amount of plunder. They looted the Parthenon, for to them the distinction between the Christians of the Greek Orthodox Church and the infidel was of the haziest. They melted down the magnificent vessels, appropriated the splendid vestments. The golden dove ceased at last to hover. The light in the lamp which burned with never-failing oil went out. The library of precious manuscripts which Akominátos had gathered from the ends of the Empire was scattered to the winds.

Here in Athens above the richest dust of the ages the King of Salinika invested his trusty knight Othon de la Roche with a vast fief which included the Megarid, Thebes with all Boeotia, Athens with all Attica; and this obscure Burgundian adventure leapt into the light of history as the ruler of the most famous lands in the world. His lordship was a hundred miles from north to south by forty miles in width. He styled himself in French *Sire d'Athines*, in Latin *Dominus Athenarum*, and in Greek *Megas Kyres*—the Great Lord. The French sometimes adapted this latter title as *Megastyr*.

So was founded the Duchy of Athens, for Othon's successor Guy, when he was in France in 1259, persuaded the King of France to confer upon him the western title of Duke. The Duchy lasted until it fell before the Turk in 1458, and it is no wonder that this title, which was familiar to Dante, Chaucer, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, should have been inaccurately applied by them to classical heroes such as Theseus.

The Great Lord held his court sometimes in Thebes, sometimes in Athens, but the Parthenon was his minster, and he appointed military governors over the Acropolis at Athens and over the Cadmeia at Thebes. The Pope appointed archbishops of the Latin Church in both cities, and on the metropolitan throne of the cultured Akominátos sat a Frenchman, Bérard, probably Othon's chaplain. The great Pope Innocent III took the cathedral and chapter of Our Lady of Athens under his special protection. "The renewal of the divine grace," he wrote, "suffereth not the ancient glory of the city of Athens to grow dim. The citadel of far-famed Pallas Athene hath been humbled to become the seat of the most glorious Mother of God".

When the Frankish host was at last distributed among the new fiefs, Othon settled down to the work of introducing the feudal system into his principality. The Greeks were not entirely strangers to this, because for some time the archons of the Empire had done their best, many of them successfully, to act exactly as western barons did. He granted only two or three large fiefs, and these only to close relatives. His nephew Guy, who had shared his perils in the Crusade, he invested with half of the lordship of Thebes. The remainder of his followers were rank and file for whom, no doubt, he provided manors, but for whom he felt no necessity of providing baronies. Thus, unlike the princes of Achaia in the Morea, he was not *primus inter pares*, but almost solitary in his glory.

Othon sent to France, to Franche-Comté, for Isabelle, heiress of Guy de Ray. She journeyed to Greece and became his wife. Romance may here have fullest play as to whether Isabelle was the love of his youth, the damozel too high above him for youthful aspiration, but now given gladly by her relatives to this new arrival among the magnates of the earth, or whether the affair was a cold-blooded matter of business arrangement by proxy. Two sons were born to them in Attica.

Then began to arrive a stream of poor relatives and neighbours from Burgundy, seeking a share of Othon's amazing good fortune, and it would seem that he looked after those who came. In fact, the Duchy of Athens and the rest of Frankish Greece became for the younger sons of the French nobility what the British Empire has been during the last century for younger sons from the British Isles.

Othon and his fellow adventurers of the Frankish host were not religious enthusiasts when once they began to organize their fiefs. They gave lands, monasteries, churches to the Latin Church,

but they flatly refused to force the Greeks into that Church at the point of the sword, and the Greek population continued to worship according to the eastern rite as they have continued to this day. Othon, indeed, was not above seizing the revenues of the Latin Church when he felt any need for them, and for years he lived under excommunication.

The Great Lord's rule was not very oppressive. Though the peasant was reduced to the semi-slavery of the feudal serf in France, the remainder of the population were treated with consideration. Burgundians had the pick of the land, but prominent Greeks regained some influence and a certain standing.

That the Megaskyr was impressed by the classical fame of his principality does not appear. Few, indeed, of the Franks, although as rulers they treated the Greeks sympathetically, seem to have greatly cared for that past which hallowed every inch of soil over which they rode and fought, and on which there still remained such a wealth of the priceless relics of classical art. They regarded Greece and the Greeks much as modern Europeans have for several hundred years regarded "the lesser breeds without the law". Art, when it was pagan, and literature of any kind, meant nothing to them at all. They were not above building the loveliest of sculpture together with the drums and capitals of the columns of ancient temples into the walls of their feudal castles, as may still be seen at Patras. The glory of Athens, however, could never be quite forgotten, and the Athenians received special privileges on account of their illustrious ancestors, as they had under the rule of the Eastern Emperors and as they did afterward even under the rule of the Turk.

In 1209 the Emperor Henry, brother and successor of Baldwin of Flanders, visited Athens in the course of an Imperial progress. There Othon entertained his liege in princely fashion. The Emperor climbed the steep ascent to the Acropolis and attended mass in the cathedral of Our Lady of Athens, the first emperor to enter that majestic pile in nearly two centuries.

For twenty-one years the Megaskyr enjoyed his glory. Then it palled. As he grew older, more and more often there came stealing through his mind the fair visions of that land where he had spent his happy youth, the rolling plains of Burgundy, the sunlit vineyards of the Haute-Saône. The Parthenon and the Acropolis began to lose what charm they had for him, and he longed for that rugged little keep on his ancestral lands in France. So he called his vassals and his subjects together and with full ceremony handed over the lordship of Athens to his nephew Guy. Taking leave of those

whom he had ruled so long, with his lady and his two sons he left the land of his high adventure, where he had won distinction in battle and in diplomacy, and journeyed back to the little castle by the river Ognon in the valley of the Saône. There he lived some ten years more, and there he lies with his fathers; and there his descendants lived on for almost five hundred years. One can picture the homecoming of the Crusader after a quarter of a century, and one can easily imagine the refusal of his hard-headed fellow-barons of the countryside to credit the tales which would circulate of the fabulous splendour which he had worn a while and tossed aside.