Geffroi de Villehardouin Biography

Geffroi de Villehardouin

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Biography

The French historian and soldier Geffroi de Villehardouin (ca. 1150-1213) was the first French chronicler who wrote in the vernacular and whose writings deserve literary recognition.

Geffroi de Villehardouin was born in the château of Villehardouin near Troyes, Champagne. Marshal of Champagne after 1185, he had close political connections with Count Thibaut III of Champagne. Villehardouin was sent with the Canon de Béthune and four others to Venice to negotiate for ships for the Fourth Crusade. Shortly after their return Thibaut died. But Villehardouin, an excellent diplomat, persuasive orator, and prudent negotiator, continued his labors, and soon Boniface de Montferrat was appointed supreme commander of the crusade. Throughout the crusade Villehardouin was an eyewitness to the events he recorded. After the fall of Constantinople in 1204, he stayed in the East, receiving the title of Marshal of Romania (name then given to Thrace). The title passed to his son in 1213, presumably at the time of Villehardouin's death.

De la conquête de Constantinople (*The Conquest of Constantinople*) is Villehardouin's only known work. Written in clear prose, it stresses the overall campaigns of the Fourth Crusade rather than individual exploits. The author never knowingly lied in his chronicle, but he attempted to justify the crusade's deviations from its original objectives in Egypt and Jerusalem.

The first of its nine books explains the origins of the crusade, and the second relates the negotiations at Venice. The third part reveals worries about insufficient funds, bargaining, the initial propositions of Prince Alexis of Constantinople, and the embarkation of the Franco-Venetian army in August 1202. The fourth book tells of the taking of Zara and of the displeasure of Pope Innocent III, who was deeply involved in the crusade. The fifth gives an account of a side mission in Greece. The sixth book, which contains some of the chronicle's finest pages, describes the arrival of the crusaders at Constantinople. After a siege of only seven days, the city capitulated on July 18, 1203, and the usurper Alexis II fled. Alexis IV was crowned on August 1. The last three books tell of the rupture of the crusaders with Alexis IV and of the second taking of the city; the systematic, rankwise distribution of the booty; the coronation of Baldwin of Flanders; and the conquest of surrounding territories. The long narration, sometimes stimulating, sometimes disgusting, is told with a candid simplicity rarely equaled by later historians.