



AUTHOR NOTE

I think any reader will be able to see the immense pleasure I have had in writing this book, which has given me the chance to imagine the characters of a wholly fictional story against an historical background. Luca, Freize, Isolde and Ishraq seem to be growing, almost of their own accord, into the people they will be later in the series. In this novel we see Freize's courage and sense of humour coming to the fore, and also the complexity of Luca's feelings: about his childhood, about his vocation, about the two young women.

These two are becoming clearly differentiated individuals; I am getting more and more interested in where Ishraq's questioning mind and Eastern background will take her, and the way Isolde's sense of privilege and nobility is being tested by being endangered and frightened in the hard world she encounters. The discussion between the two young women about whether it is better to be free or to restrict your own behaviour in accordance with the conventions, is one that medieval people discussed, as have subsequent generations. The debate about appropriate behaviour for women continues to this day.

This novel also sees the emergence of characters who are going to matter a lot in future episodes. Luca's shadowy master is even more ominous in this story, though we see for the first time what his battle against the Ottoman Empire has cost him. We are going to see more of Milord and understand the deep enmity which will rob him of his compassion. His arch-enemy, and mirror image, is Radu Bey, a glamorous, powerful and thrilling character who is going to return in later stories and dazzles Luca and Ishraq with his learning and good looks.

The legend of a children's crusade is one that persisted throughout the medieval period and had its roots in the many short-lived musterings of young people and poor working people who were known as 'boys' or 'girls' regardless of their ages. There were many instances of small armies of the poor and powerless who marched to a nearby town, attacked a ghetto, or besieged a church, and were soon disbanded or paid off. Historians now think that there was no major crusade by children to the Holy Land, but legends persist of such an expedition, and some people continue to believe that there were at least two significant attempts by children and young people to go to the Holy Land on crusade – and I draw on those here.

The tidal wave that swept these children away is also fictional, but there was a tremendous earthquake, as Father Benito reports in this story, which was centred on Friuli in 1348, and indeed there has been another earthquake in that area in recent years. The philosophers of the period did not understand how an earthquake could cause a flood, but they did believe that it might cause the plague: the earthquake of 1348 released foul odours, and was followed by a terrible plague, as Father Benito tells Luca.

People did indeed believe that storms could be called up by stormbringers, and that they went to secluded lakes and pools and splashed the water to summon storms. It is easy for us, who have the resources of scientific research and global communication, to wonder that people should believe in such fantasies; but for people whose lives were in danger almost all the time, it was easy to believe in unseen and threatening powers.

At the end of this novel Milord gives the five travellers a new commission: they are to go to Venice, the great trading centre of the medieval world and try to trace a new currency. The story of this inquiry, *Fools' Gold*, will be the next book in the Order of Darkness series.