

Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 32 (2022)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 32



Divine protection of Constantinople: the role of the Theotokos in the Ottoman sieges of the City

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doi: [10.12681/byzsym.28549](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.28549)

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To cite this article:

ATHANASOPOULOS, A. . (2022). Divine protection of Constantinople: the role of the Theotokos in the Ottoman sieges of the City. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 32, 229–240. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.28549>

INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH
SECTION OF BYZANTINE RESEARCH
NATIONAL HELLENIC RESEARCH FOUNDATION



ΙΝΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ
ΤΟΜΕΑΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ
ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ



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ΤΟΜΟΣ 32 VOLUME

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DIVINE PROTECTION OF CONSTANTINOPLE: THE ROLE OF THE THEOTOKOS
IN THE OTTOMAN SIEGES OF THE CITY

ΑΘΗΝΑ • 2022 • ATHENS

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DIVINE PROTECTION OF CONSTANTINOPLE: THE ROLE OF THE THEOTOKOS
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By the late 14th century, the conflict between Byzantium and the Ottoman Turks had arrived at the very gates of Constantinople. The Ottomans, who had appeared within the Byzantine eastern border a century previously, had expanded through Asia Minor rapidly, conquering city after city, and by the 1350s they had already obtained a foothold on European soil¹.

A comparison of the two adversaries –Byzantines and Ottomans– reveals a rather lopsided situation. It had already become apparent that in the period immediately following the re-conquest of Constantinople (1261) Byzantium was only nominally an “empire”; presiding over diminished domains, as large swaths of central Greece and the Peloponnese in addition to many of the Aegean islands remained under Frankish control, and financially ruined especially after Michael VIII Palaiologos’ expenditures for the refurbishment of the city walls and his wider attempts at reconstruction², while the dynastic strife of the 14th century over the throne finally wiped away any remaining chances of recovery.

1. G. GEORGIADIS ARNAKIS, *Οί πρώτοι Όθωμανοί. Συμβολή στο πρόβλημα της πτώσεως του έλληνισμού της Μικράς Ασίας (1282-1337)*, Athens 1947; R. P. LINDNER, *Nomads and Ottomans in Medieval Anatolia*, Bloomington 1983; S. VRYONIS, The decline of byzantine civilization in Asia Minor, eleventh-fifteenth century, *DOP* 29 (1975), 351-356.

2. Pachymeres, *Relations historiques*, ed. A. FAILLER, v. I-V (CFHB 24/1-5), Paris 1984-2000, I, 251-255. Cf. A. M. TALBOT, The Restoration of Constantinople under Michael VIII, *DOP* 47 (1993), 241-256; V. KYDONOPOULOS, *Bauten in Konstantinopel 1204-1328. Verfall und Zerstörung, Restaurierung, Umbau und Neubau von Profan- und Sakralbauten*, Wiesbaden 1994.

The Ottomans, by contrast, exhibited dynamism and exploited to the fullest extent all opportunities available to them (close proximity to Constantinople, concept of “jihad”, involvement in Byzantine internal crisis³), eventually surpassing and outclassing the other emirates of Asia Minor and subsequently expanding into the Balkan peninsula. Constantinople was the logical next prize in their conquests. It is quite likely that the Byzantine capital had been spared until then due to its strong landward fortifications and naturally defensible coastal position.

The Ottoman army surrounded for the first time the land walls of Constantinople in 1394, setting a blockade to prevent shipments of food and supplies. The whole operation was ultimately unsuccessful, being called off eight years later in the summer of 1402, while further attempts against the City were mounted in the summer of 1422 and in the spring of 1453⁴. The besieged experienced significant difficulties in all three of the aforementioned cases. In the first one, the inhabitants of Constantinople were stretched to their limits, as the eight-year blockade made supplies and staple goods incredibly scarce within the city. Moreover, in the next two sieges the small number of defenders, the limited available military means, and promises of Western help that never materialized left little room for hope of prevailing against the enemy.

Given such adverse conditions, the Christian faith was one of the primary pillars supporting the morale of the besieged, as most of them looked to divine intervention for their salvation. This religious need was expressed in various ways, from supplications by priests and laypeople

3. Byzantium's dynastic disputes was the main reason for the Ottoman presence in European territories in the mid -14th century, Kantakouzenos, *Historiae*, ed. L. SCHOPEN, v. I-III (CSHB), Bonn 1828-1832, III, 32; Ducas, *Chronographia, Byzantiner und Osmanen im Kampf um die Macht und das Überleben (1341-1462)*, ed. D.R. REINSCH, Berlin 2020, 94.14-19 [hereafter: Ducas, *Chronographia*]. Cf. D. NICOL, *The Byzantine family of Kantakouzenos ca. 1100-1460: A Genealogical and Prosopographical Study*, Washington D.C. 1968, 57-60; K. TODT, *Kaiser Johannes VI Kantakuzenos und der Islam. Politische Realität und theologische Polemik im palaiologenzeitlichen Byzanz*, Altenberge 1991, 52-55; A. BRYER, Greek historians on the Turks. The case of the first Byzantine-ottoman marriage, in: *The writing of history in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. DAVIES - J. WALLACE, Oxford 1981, 471-493.

4. For a detailed analysis of the Ottoman attempts to conquer Constantinople, A. ATHANASOPOULOS, *Η Κωνσταντινούπολη σε οθωμανικό κλοιό (1394-1453)*, Athens 2022.

for the salvation of the City to litanies with icon of the Theotokos on the ramparts of the city walls, with the mass attendance of the population. Numerous litanies were documented taking place during the eight-year blockade (1394-1402), as well as at critical moments before the final fall of the Byzantine capital to the Ottomans in 1453. Indeed, during the final siege, when the Ottoman artillery had caused irreparable damage to the walls, litanies at the monastery of Chora were carried out on such a regular basis that the icon of the Theotokos ultimately remained there until the end⁵. After all, it was widely believed that, just like in previous cases in which Constantinople had been beset by similar threats, the city would be spared conquest by the infidels through the miraculous intervention of the Theotokos. Dukas records the words of the emperor: *Θήσωμεν εἰς Θεὸν τὰς ἐλπίδας ἡμῶν ἔτι μικρόν ὑπομείνωμεν καὶ τίς οἶδεν, εἰ ἄρα ὁ Θεὸς παριδῶν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν ...*, while for the citizens he writes: *Οἱ δὲ πτωχοὶ Πολῖται σὺν τῷ βασιλεῖ χεῖρας πρὸς Θεὸν αἴροντες, σὺν δάκρυσι πλείστοις ἰκέτευον λέγοντες Θεὲ καὶ Κύριε τοῦ ἐλέους, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀχρεῖους δούλους σου καὶ δὸς τὸν ἐπαπειλοῦντα ἡμᾶς καὶ τὸν σὸν οἶκον τοῦτον καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ ἅγια ἄλλην μέριμναν, ἄλλην φροντίδα, ἄλλον λογιισμόν, ἵνα ἐλευθερωθῆντες τῆς αὐτοῦ τυραννίδος δοξάσωμέν σε τὸν πατέρα καὶ υἱὸν καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα, τὸν ἕνα Θεὸν εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας ἀμήν⁶. (*We place our hopes in God. We must persevere for a but a little while longer and, who knows, perhaps God will overlook our sins ...*, *And the poor Citizenry, together with the king, raised their hands to God, tearfully begging and saying: O God, Lord of Mercy, have mercy on us, your miserable servants, and take care of him who menaces us and this house**

5. Dukas, *Chronographia*, XXXVIII.10:476. 1-5. Cf. also Leonardo di Chio, Account of the Fall of Constantinople to pope Nicholas V, in: *La Caduta di Costantinopoli*, v. I, ed. A. PERTUSI, Milan 1976, 158. 389-399: *Nos tantam religionem admirati Deum propitiatorem perfusis lacrimis precabamur sacras imagines processionaliter compuncti per vallum urbemque transferentes, nudis pedibus mulierum virorumque turbis consequetibus deprecabamur ...* (*We had been overcome by such religious fervor, that we tearfully begged God, carrying icons, followed throughout the city or on the ramparts by barefooted men and women praying...*); Nestor Iskander, *Η Πολιορκία και η Άλωση της Πόλης (Το Ρωσικό Χρονικό του Νέστορα Ισκαντέρη)*, (Greek translation of the Russian chronicle by M. ALEXANDROPOULOS), Athens 1978, 39, 50.

6. Ducas, *Chronographia*, XIV.1:126. 10-11, XV.7: 138. 1-8.

of Yours and all those holy relics stored within, that being freed from his tyranny, we may glorify You the Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit, the one God forever, amen).

This widespread belief among the besieged was documented and reproduced in historiographical and laudatory texts written by numerous contemporary authors. And when the Ottomans failed to conquer Constantinople, the Theotokos was credited as decisively contributing to the salvation of the City even more than the strong city walls or the diplomatic efforts of Manuel II⁷.

Especially regarding the 1394-1402 blockade, the anonymous author informs the readers of his work already from its title that he will describe the *miraculous event* of the cessation of the blockade and the salvation of the City from the forces of Bayezid: ... Διήγησις περὶ τοῦ γεγονότος θαύματος παρὰ τῆς ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τοῦ εὐσεβεστάτου κῦρ Μανουὴλ τοῦ Παλαιολόγου, ἡνίκα τῆς μεγαλοπόλεως ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν ἀλῶναι κινδυνευούσης ... ἐλευθερίας ἔτυχε παντελοῦς καὶ τῶν ἐπηρητημένων αὐτῇ φόβων ἀπηλλάγη προνοία τῆς ὑπεραγίας καὶ ἀειπαρθένου Μαριάς⁸. (... *A narrative of this miracle by the Holy Theotokos during the reign of the most pious ruler Manuel Palaiologos, when the great City was threatened with conquest by the Hagarenes ... the City was completely freed and the widespread fear of those within was alleviated by the providence of the Holy and Immaculate Mary*).

As for the content of the text, following a brief reference to the appearance of the Ottomans in Asia Minor and their rapid advance into Thrace, there is an –equally brief– description of Bayezid’s attempt to conquer Constantinople by blockade in addition to the deprivations suffered by the population due to the long presence of the Ottoman army outside the walls. As the situation for the besieged grew ever more dire, the Theotokos, according to the author, provided the decisive contribution to the salvation of the city: She spurred the Mongol lord Timur to move west and seek battle against the Sultan Bayezid I. The crushing Ottoman defeat in the battle

7. Ducas, *Chronographia*, XXVIII.7: 338-340. Πρβ. J. BARKER, *Manuel II Palaeologus, 1391-1425. A Study in late Byzantine Statesmanship*, New Jersey 1969, appendix XVIII, 504.

8. Un recit inedit du siége de Constantinople par les Turks (1394-1402), ed. P. GAUTIER, *REB* 23 (1965), 104.

of Ankara (28 July 1402) and Bayezid's resultant captivity were the way through which ... ἡ τοῦ Θεοῦ φιλανθρωπία τὴν τῆς ἡμετέρας πόλεως ὀκονόμησεν ἐλευθερίαν⁹.

Demetrius Chrysoloras, in an encomiastic mood befitting an *oration of gratitude to the Holy Theotokos*, refers to the divine intervention that led to the end of the blockade and the retreat of the Ottoman forces: Ὡς θαυμαστὰ τὰ ἔργα σου δέσποινα. Ἐταπείνωσας ἡμᾶς, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐξέτριψας, ἡσθενήσαμεν ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀπεθάνομεν ... Ἐχθρὸς ἡμῖν ἐψηφίσαστο κάκιστα καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ ψῆφον αὐτῇ ῥαδίως ἀπέτεμες ... βουλευεται καθ' ἡμῶν ὁ μέγας δράκων καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ βουλὴν ὡς ἰστὸν ἀράχνης διέλυσας ... γυμνώσαι τὸ σὸν ἠθέλησε γένος καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ πρώτην ἐκκληρώσαστο γύμνωσιν ... Συμπλακέντος γὰρ τοῦ πολέμου, ἠττᾶται παντάπασιν ὁ τῆς πόλεως τύραννος, διώκεται, νικᾶται, κατέχεται. Ὡ ξένον καὶ θαῦμα καὶ θέαμα. Ὁ παντελεύθερος δέσμιος, δοῦλος ὁ πρὸ ὀλίγου δεσπότης μέγας¹⁰. (*Our Lady, you truly work miracles. You have humbled us, but not annihilated us; we were weakened, but not destroyed ... Our enemy sought to cause us the worst of harms, yet you averted him brilliantly ... the great dragon machinated against us and his plans, laid meticulously like a spider's web, were torn apart by ... he wished to strip your people of everything, yet you stripped everything from him instead ... Having been caught up in battle, he who had caused the City such great suffering was utterly vanquished, defeated, hounded, and captured. What a rare sight, what a miracle! To see him who had once enjoyed boundless freedom shackled, to see the once proud lord a slave!*).

There are similar references regarding the siege of 1422; Ioannis Kananos informs the reader of what is to follow in his work already from the title: Διήγησις περὶ τοῦ ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει γεγονότος πολέμου ... ὅτε ὁ Ἄμουρατ Πεις παρέπεσε ταύτη μετὰ δυνάμεως βαρείας καὶ παρολίγον ταύτην ἐκράτει, εἰ μὴ ἡ ὑπέραγνος Μήτηρ τοῦ Κυρίου ταύτην ἐφύλαξε, συγγραφεῖσα παρὰ κυρίου Ἰωάννου τοῦ Κανανοῦ¹¹. (*Narrative*

9. Un recit inedit, 112. 22-23.

10. Actions de Grâces de Démétrius Chrysoloras à la Theotokos pour l'anniversaire de la bataille d'Ankara (28 Juillet 1403), ed. P. GAUTIER, *REB* 19 (1961), 350. 30-55.

11. Kananos, *Ioannis Canani de Constantinopolitana obsidione relatio. A Critical Edition, with English Translation, Introduction, and Notes of John Kananos' Account of the siege of Constantinople in 1422*, ed. A. CUOMO, Berlin 2016, 2, vv. 1-5.

on the siege of Constantinople, when Murad Bey fell upon the city with a formidable host and would surely have conquered it had the immaculate Mother of the Lord not safeguarded it, written by Ioannes Kananos), while he also stresses as much in the proem: ... ὅπως τὸ πανθαύμαστον θαῦμα τῆς Παναγίας μου διηγῆσομαι ... καὶ τὸ πολυθρύλητον θαῦμα τῆς Παναγίας καὶ τὴν καθ' ἡμῶν τῶν Ἀγαρηῶν ἐπιδρομὴν καὶ τὴν πολιορκίαν τῆς πόλεως¹².

It is clear that the aforementioned authors documented the events that took place during the Ottoman assaults against Constantinople spurred by their wish to demonstrate the contribution of the Theotokos, who stood with the Byzantines at exceptionally critical moments, safeguarding the Byzantine capital and protecting its population.

The motif of the Theotokos who intervenes on the Byzantines' behalf, guarding and rescuing Constantinople, had long preceded the Ottoman threat¹³. In 626, when the allied Avar and Slavic forces laid

12. Kananos, 2, vv. 7 and 16-17 (*The wondrous miracle of the Theotokos I will relate ... as well as the legendary miracle of the Theotokos and the Hagarene raid against us and siege of the City*).

13. Un recit inedit, 11-14: Οὐ ταῦτα δὲ μόνον τὰ παράδοξα γεγονάσι θαύματα κατὰ διαφόρους καιρούς τε καὶ χρόνους ὑπὸ τῆς πανάγνου καὶ θεομήτορος, ἀλλὰ καὶ νῦν ἐπὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ Παλαιολόγων γένους... (*These strange miracles not only occurred at various previous times through the immaculate mother of God, but also now during the reign of the Palaiologan dynasty*); Ducas, *Chronographia*, XXXVI.4: 448. 9-13: πίνοντες εἰς πρεσβείαν τῆς εἰκόνης τῆς Θεομήτορος καὶ παρακαλοῦντες αὐτὴν τοῦ γενέσθαι προστάτης καὶ ἀρωγῆς τῆς πόλεως ὥς ποτε κατὰ τοῦ Χοσροῦ καὶ τοῦ Χαγάνου καὶ κατὰ Ἀράβων, οὔτω καὶ νῦν κατὰ τοῦ Μεχμέτ (*drinking in supplication to the icon of the Mother of God and beseeching her to become the protector and bulwark of the City against Mehmed, as she had been against Khosrow, the Khagan, and the Arabs*). After all, the Byzantines considered Constantinople to be the “divine-protected city”, which could never be taken by the forces of the infidel. Joseph Bryennios [(Δημηγορία περὶ τοῦ τῆς πόλεως ἀνακτίσματος, ed. N. ΤΩΜΑΔΑΚΗΣ, *ΕΕΒΣ* 36 (1968)], 1-15 [(repr. in *Id.*, *Περὶ ἀλώσεως τῆς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, Thessaloniki 1993², 239-252)] describes Constantinople as *παλλάδιον Θεοῦ*, (*a palladium of God*), *Θεοτόκου τέμενος*, (*a temple of the Theotokos*), and *πόλις ἁγία* (*a holy city*), while also affirming that the City had been *ἐκ πρώτης ἀνατεθεῖσα καταβολῆς* (*dedicated at foundation*) to the Theotokos, ...οἶδα γὰρ καὶ ὡς ἡ Ὁδηγήτρια σκέπει ταύτην τὴν Πόλιν ἐπίσταμαι (...and I know that the Hodegetria protects this City). At any rate, the perception that Constantinople had been religiously dedicated to the Theotokos which eventually came to dominate the Byzantine tradition seems to have been developed significantly later than

siege to Constantinople from both land and sea, the Patriarch Sergius made concerted efforts to maintain the religious fervor and morale of the population by performing numerous litanies and sermons. In the decisive engagement, which took place on 10 August, Byzantine superiority at sea resulted in the destruction of the enemy naval forces and thus the failure of the siege. Following these developments, the population of the city, led by the Patriarch, *in gratitude, performed litanies to God in the church of the Mother of God, which had been founded at Blachernae*, while the salvation of the City from the Avars is also connected with the famous Akathistos hymn, which was written during this period in order to praise the intervention of the Theotokos and the salvation of Constantinople¹⁴. The situation was largely similar when the Arabs besieged Constantinople during the reign of Leo III, in 717; even though the fate of the empire was once again decided at sea, where the Byzantines crushed their foes, Byzantine authors once again ascribed the city's salvation to Divine Providence¹⁵.

Constantinople continued to be the “*Theotokos-protected city*” in the next centuries, though relevant references were generally confined mainly

the foundation of the city. On the religious dedication of Constantinople, A. FROLOW, La dédicace de Constantinople dans la tradition byzantine, *Revue de l'histoire des Religions* 127 (1944), 61-127. Cf. also C. MANGO, Constantinople as Theotokoupolis, in: *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art (exhibition catalogue)*, ed. M. VASSILAKI, Athens - Milan 2000, 16-25.

14. Cf. M. BAGHOS, Theotokoupoieis: The Mother of God as Protectress of the Two Romes, in: *Mariology at the Beginning of the Third Millenium*, ed. K. WAGNER - I. NAUMANN - P. J. MCGREGOR - P. MORRISSEY, Oregon 2017, 57-62; B. PENTCHEVA, The supernatural protector of Constantinople: the Virgin and her icons in the tradition of the Avar siege, *BMGS* 26 (2002), 2-41; K. ΚΑΡΑΠΛΙ, *Κατευόδωσις στρατού, η οργάνωση και η ψυχολογία του βυζαντινού στρατού πριν από τον πόλεμο (610-1081)*, I, Athens 2010, 75. Also, in a broader context, see A. KALDELLIS, The Military Use of the Icon of the Theotokos and its Moral Logic in the Historians of the Ninth-Twelfth Centuries, *Estudios bizantinos: Revista de la Sociedad Española de Bizantinística* 1 (2013) 56-75; Id., “A Union of Opposites”: The Moral Logic and Corporeal Presence of the Theotokos on the Field of Battle, in: *Pour l'amour de Byzance: Hommage à Paolo Odorico*, ed. C. GASTGEBER et al., Frankfurt am Main 2013, 131-144.

15. Theophanes the Confessor, ed. DE BOOR, I, Leipzig 1883, 397. Cf. the oration of the Patriarch Germanus, Homélie, de saint Germain sur la deliverance de Constantinople, ed. V. GRUMEL, *REB* 16 (1958), 183-205, in particular 193-196.

to texts of an hagiological nature¹⁶. Thus, when the City was once again threatened during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos, this time concurrently from the north by the Pechenegs and from the south by Tzachas, the emir of Smyrna, whose fleet blockaded Constantinople by sea, the City's salvation does not appear to have been attributed to divine intervention but rather to a strong counterattack by the Cumans, who soundly defeated the Pechenegs at Levounion in 1091. On the other hand, in the case of the Crusader conquest of the City of 1204, no absence of divine protection is mentioned in the contemporary sources, in all likelihood due to the fact that the conquerors were not people of a different faith but Christians.

The literary tradition of divine intervention on behalf of the Byzantines was far more pronounced in the late Byzantine period. Indeed, the reconquest of the City itself by Michael Palaiologos in 1261 was attributed by historians and court orators to divine intervention, and was partly utilized to bolster Michael's ideological pursuit of "legitimization" after seizing power from the underage John Laskaris: ... *καὶ ἡ Κωνσταντίνου προνοία Θεοῦ καὶ αὐθις ὑπὸ χεῖρα τοῦ βασιλέως τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἐγένετο κατὰ λόγον δίκαιόν τε καὶ προσήκοντα, ... ὁ γὰρ Χριστὸς ἀπεχαρίσατό σοι τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν (and by the providence of God, the City of Constantine was once again made Roman, in a most just and fitting manner, ... For Christ has gifted you Constantinople)*¹⁷, *θεία ὄντως παρεμβολῆ ... τὴν Κωνσταντινούπολιν ἐπέραξαν καὶ ταύτην ὡ θείας δυνάμεως, ὡ τεραστίου θαύματος τὴν σύλληψιν εὐμαρῶς παρεστήσατο (and indeed through divine intervention ... they even took Constantinople successfully through divine force and by a great miracle)*¹⁸.

It thus becomes evident that the works of the anonymous writer, Demetrios Chrysoloras, and John Kananos were continuing a literary tradition that had been introduced several centuries earlier. A particularly noteworthy incident is found in Kananos' account of the siege of 1422:

16. *The Life of St Andrew the Fool*, ed. L. RYDÉN, v. II, Uppsala 1995, 260. 3819-3820: ... *for it was dedicated to the Theotokos, and none could seize it from her Holy hands* Also, Photius, *Φωτίου, ὁμιλίαι* (ed. V. LAOURDAS, Thessaloniki 1959, 45. 14-31) for the case of Rus siege of Constantinople.

17. Acropolites, *Georgii Acropolitae Opera*, ed. A. HEISENBERG, Leipzig 1903 [reprint: P. WIRTH, Stuttgart 1978], 184. 5-21.

18. Holobolos, *Manuelis Holoboli Orationes*, ed. M. TREU, Potsdam 1907, 67. 20-25.

according to the author, who was an eyewitness to the events, the Theotokos “contributed”, not just by forcing the Ottomans to retreat and to abandon the siege, but also by directly affecting the morale of the defenders and their conduct in battle when the Ottomans launched their all-out assault against them. Thus, while the defenders initially cowered in fear behind the walls, they suddenly began fighting as if they had been *κεκραιπαληκοὶ καὶ βεβαπτισμένοι ἐξ οἴνου* (*seized by intemperance and baptized in wine*). According to the author, this was the reason that ... *Τὸ δὲ ἀκατάπληκτον τῶν ἀνδρικοτάτων καὶ γενναιοτάτων Ῥωμαίων δειλοὺς καὶ τρεπτοὺς τοὺς Μουσουλμάνους ἀπέδειξεν* (... *the audaciousness and bravery of the Romans proved the Muslims cowards and deserters*)¹⁹. According to Kananos, the Turks even reported seeing the Theotokos during their main attack against the City. It was a vision of a female figure, dressed in purple, standing atop the ramparts and fighting with inhuman, supernatural strength. The spectacle terrified the Ottomans, obliging them to retreat: ... *τότε εἶδον γυναῖκαν ὀξέα ῥοῦχα φοροῦσαν καὶ περιπατοῦσαν ἐπάνω τῶν προμαχιονίων τοῦ ἔξω κάστρου καὶ ταύτην ἰδόντες, σκότος καὶ ζάλη καὶ τρόμος καὶ φόβος ἄφνω εἰς τὰς ψυχὰς εἰσηλθε τῶν πάντων καὶ πρὸς φυγὴν ἔβλεψαν, καὶ εἰς πόλεμον οὐδὲ ὄλωσ καὶ ἀπὸ δυνάμεώς τε καὶ τέχνης τῆς γυναικὸς γὰρ ἐκείνης, ἔλαβον τὴν δειλίαν καὶ ἠλευθερώθη ἡ πόλις*²⁰.

However, the situation was far different in 1453; The majority of the population believed that they had lost the Divine favor due to their sins and their religious concessions for the union of the two churches in 1439²¹. The

19. Kananos, 34, v. 295 - 36, v. 1.

20. Kananos, 40, vv. 356-360. A similar description is delivered by *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. L. DINDORF, Bonn 1832, 725, 9-122; During the siege of Constantinople by the Avars in 626 the khagan saw a female figure being completely alone running on the ramparts of the walls. Kananos in the proem of his account places himself in the category of the unexperienced writers. The latest editor of his text, CUOMO (LIX - LXX), detected influences from several historical works. *Chronicon Paschale* is plausible to be one of them.

21. Cf. Sphrantzes, *Georgii Sphrantzae Chronicon*, ed. R. MAISANO, Rome 1990, 318. 34-37: ...*Ὅτι καὶ αὐτὴ ἡ τῆς συνόδου ὑπόθεσις ἦν αἰτία πρώτη καὶ μεγάλη, ἵνα γένηται ἡ κατὰ τῆς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως τῶν ἀσεβῶν ἔφοδος, καὶ ἀπὸ ταύτης πάλιν ἡ πολιορκία καὶ αἰχμαλωσία καὶ τοιαύτη καὶ τοσαύτη συμφορὰ ἡμῶν.*- Nestor Iskander, 40. Cf. T. ΚΙΟΥΣΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, Η κοινωνική διάσταση της σύγκρουσης ανάμεσα στους ενωτικούς και τους ανθενωτικούς τον 15ο αιώνα, *Μνήμων* 23 (2001), 33-35.

security of the City was, after all, dependent upon the strength and purity of their faith²². According to a conception that was already widespread in the previous century, the Ottoman conquest of Asia Minor was a consequence and punishment for the sins of the Byzantines, and something similar was to happen to Constantinople itself²³.

The superstitious medieval person could easily interpret natural phenomena as omens of loss and disaster. One such phenomenon was documented on 24 May, when the dome of the Hagia Sophia was almost completely covered in a crimson glare²⁴. This was most likely a reflection from a lunar eclipse or one of the myriad campfires in the Ottoman lines. Most of the besieged interpreted it as a sign that the Holy Fire was abandoning both them and the City.

Many inhabitants associated their current predicament with older prophecies regarding the Fall of Constantinople. Already during the reign of Constantine the Great there was a widespread belief that Constantinople was not destined to be free forever. According to another such prophecy, the city was to fall during the reign of an emperor named Constantine, whose mother was named Helen. According to others, Constantine the Great himself had prophesized that Constantinople would fall in the days after a lunar eclipse²⁵. A portion of the population believed in the eschatological perception that the world would end in the year 7000 since its creation (1492), while others believed that social inequalities, civil wars, moral degradation, and the dwindling of Byzantine power, had all provoked Divine fury, which would find its ultimate expression in the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans.

22. N. BAYNES, The supernatural Defenders of Constantinople, *AnBoll* 67 (1949), 165-177 (repr. in: *Byzantine studies and other essays*, ed. N. BAYNES, London 1955, 248-260).

23. Cf. Leonardo di Chio, 128. 44; Nestor Iskander, 57; Patriarch Athanasius, *The Correspondence of Athanasius I, Patriarch of Constantinople. Letters to the Emperor Andronicus II, Members of the Imperial Family and Officials*, ed. A. M. TALBOT, Washington D.C 1975, 30. 5-7 and 160. 29-32. Also, I. ŠEVČENKO, Alexios Makrembolites and his dialogue between the rich and the poor, *ZRVI* 6 (1960), 196-197.

24. Ducas, *Chronographia*, XXXIX.3: 492. 5-20.

25. Cf. C. MANGO, The Legend of Leo the Wise, *ZRVI* 6 (1960), 59-93; D. M. NICOL, *The immortal emperor: the life and legend of Constantine Palaiologos, Last Emperor of the Romans*, Cambridge 1992, 101. For prophecies regarding the fall of Constantinople, *Les traditions apocalyptiques au tournant de la chute de Constantinople*, ed. B. LELLOUCH – ST. YERASSIMOS, Paris 1999.

As for the Theotokos, whose assistance had safeguarded Constantinople for centuries, prospects appeared equally bleak; during a litany that took place a few days before the final battle²⁶ and was attended by almost the entire population of the city, the icon of the Theotokos, which was being held by the priests at the head of the procession, fell to the ground. The frightened inhabitants tried to lift it, but this was impossible as it seemed to be overweight. It took quite some time, multiple attempts and several prayers before the priests managed to place it on the shoulders of those who carried it. This incident spread panic among the faithful, who viewed the fall as anything but an auspicious omen for the fate of the City. Heavy rains began to fall soon after, blocking the procession of the gathered crowd, while children found themselves in danger of being swept away by the forceful torrents of rainwater. The unusual intensity of the torrential downpour presaged ... *the rapid loss of everything, and that all would be swept away by the torrent*²⁷.

The bad omens for Constantinople's future continued the following day when a dense cloud covered the whole city. The phenomenon lasted from dawn to dusk and was, of course, noticed by the entire population. According to the inhabitants, this meant the total abandonment of the City by the Holy Providence²⁸. Taxidis rightly notices that in order to support his view about signs, which foretold the Fall of Constantinople, Critobulus, invokes the testimonies of other people, who also saw them and confirmed that there were obvious omens of loss²⁹. Similar natural phenomena, though, are differently interpreted by the same writer, when he refers to the birth of Mehmed II and his glorious future or his successful military actions³⁰. In any case, the reference to such phenomena is used to denote the disappointment, the low morale and the fear of the citizens about their lives and their City³¹.

26. St. IMELLOS, Θεοσημίες πρὸ τῆς Ἀλώσεως τῆς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως ὑπὸ τῶν Τούρκων κατὰ τὸν ἱστορικὸν Κριτόβουλον, *ΕΕΒΣ* 52 (2004-2006), 463.

27. Critobulus, *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, ed. D. R. REINSCH, Berlin 1983, 58; IMELLOS, Θεοσημίες, 462-464.

28. Critobulus, 59.

29. I. TAXIDIS, *Όνειρα, οράματα και προφητικές διηγήσεις στα ιστορικά έργα της Ὑστερης Βυζαντινῆς Εποχῆς*, Athens 2012, 261.

30. St. IMELLOS, Θεοσημίες, 451-452, 457-459.

31. Cf. St. LAMPAKIS, Υπερφυσικὲς δυνάμεις, φυσικὰ φαινόμενα και δεισιδαιμονίες στην ιστορία του Γεωργίου Παχυμέρη, *Σύμμεικτα* 7 (1987), 93-100.

That fear was confirmed a few short days later; the heavy ottoman artillery targeting the walls of Constantinople for almost two months caused the breaches through which the numerous ottoman army entered the City on 29 May 1453. The conquest of the Byzantine capital was after all the logical conclusion to a struggle between a city that had been experiencing over 150 years of decline and a stronger, better-equipped adversary.

Η ΘΕΪΚΗ ΠΡΟΣΤΑΣΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥΠΟΛΗΣ: Ο ΡΟΛΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΥ
ΚΑΤΑ ΤΙΣ ΠΟΛΙΟΡΚΙΕΣ ΤΗΣ ΠΟΛΗΣ ΑΠΟ ΤΟΥΣ ΟΘΩΜΑΝΟΥΣ

Οι κάτοικοι της Κωνσταντινούπολης εναπέθεταν τις ελπίδες τους για σωτηρία από την οθωμανική απειλή στην Θεοτόκο. Είχε, άλλωστε, προστατεύσει και κατά το παρελθόν τη βυζαντινή πρωτεύουσα από εξωτερικούς εχθρούς. Η διάχυτη αυτή αντίληψη ήταν ευρύτατα διαδεδομένη στον πληθυσμό. Συντηρούνταν, μάλιστα, διαχρονικά μέσα από τα ιστοριογραφικά, ρητορικά και αγιολογικά κείμενα. Έτσι, η απόσυρση των οθωμανικών στρατευμάτων από την περίμετρο της Κωνσταντινούπολης το 1402 αποδόθηκε στη βοήθεια της Θεοτόκου, όπως συνέβη και το 1422, όταν η δική της παρέμβαση ήταν αυτή που μετέτρεψε τους προηγούμενως δειλούς υπερασπιστές της Κωνσταντινούπολης σε γενναίους μαχητές, με αποτέλεσμα να αποκρούσουν αποτελεσματικά τις επιθέσεις των αντιπάλων στρατιωτών. Το 1453 η κατάσταση ήταν διαφορετική. Η παρατεινόμενη οθωμανική απειλή και η απουσία εξωτερικής βοήθειας είχαν δημιουργήσει κλίμα απογοήτευσης και απαισιοδοξίας. Η αντίληψη ότι η θεϊκή εύνοια είχε εγκαταλείψει την πόλη του Κωνσταντίνου ήταν κυρίαρχη στους κόλπους της κοινωνίας. Η οθωμανική απειλή ήταν η τιμωρία των Βυζαντινών για τις αμαρτίες τους, ενώ φυσικά και καιρικά φαινόμενα ερμηνεύονταν ως οιωνοί που προμήνυαν την πτώση.