

Theodore Syncellus: The Homilies “On the Robe” and “On the Siege”. Translated with Introduction and Notes by Michael Whitby. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2024 (Translated Texts for Historians 86). XIII, 156 pp. £ 100.00. ISBN: 978-1-80207-465-9.

The attacks of the Avars on Constantinople during the first quarter of the seventh century received considerable attention from contemporary writers – some of whom, including Theodore Syncellus, were close to powerful figures such as the patriarch and imperial officials surrounding the emperor Heraclius. Much damage was done to the suburbs and hinterland of Constantinople, but the Avars failed to storm Constantinople itself. Byzantine eye-witnesses attributed their deliverance from defeat not only to the robust Theodosian walls that surrounded the imperial city, but also to the protection of the Virgin Mary. Theodore Syncellus, who was the patriarch Sergius’s assistant (literally “cell-mate”), delivered one homily a year or two after an attack by the Avars (which took place in 623) and another after the more famous siege of 626. The first of these texts is entitled “On the Robe” because it deals with the temporary removal of an important relic of the Virgin Mary, her robe, from the shrine at Blachernai just outside the north-eastern walls of Constantinople; the second provides a narrative of the defeat of the Avars in 626 when they presented an even greater threat to the city. Both homilies provide significant information about the two sieges from the Eastern Roman point of view. They are also important witnesses to the development of the Marian cult in Constantinople, revealing that the Virgin was viewed as the main protector and intercessor for the rulers and citizens of the imperial city at the beginning of the seventh century. These are vital sources which, thanks to Michael Whitby, are finally accessible in English translations that are accompanied by detailed introductions and notes.

It is surprising that the only complete edition of the homily “On the Robe” appears in the 1648 volume, *Historia Haeresis Monothelitarum*, by François Combefis.¹ This is a publication which will be accessible only to those readers who have access to well-stocked or copyright libraries. Chrisanth Loparev published another edition of the text in 1895, which consisted only of

1 *Historia Haeresis Monothelitarum, sanctaeque in eam sextae synodi actorum, vindiciae. Diversorum item antiqua, ac medii aevi, tum historiae sacrae, tum dogmatica, Graeca opuscula.* Ed. F. Combefis. Paris 1648.

the concluding section that deals with the translation of the robe back to Blachernai after the siege; this was translated into English in Averil Cameron's seminal article on the robe in 1979.² Whitby's new translation of the complete text thus renders the homily accessible to a much wider audience than before. As for the homily on the siege of Constantinople in 626, this was edited by Leo Sternbach in 1900 and reprinted with a French translation by Ferenc Makk in 1975.³ Whitby's translation of the text is the first reliable English version to appear, although at least one other translation is accessible on the internet.⁴ In short, these new translations, along with their commentaries, help to fill a significant gap in our understanding of the events that led up to the final defeat of the Avars in 626.

The first homily, "On the Robe", deals not only with the return of the Virgin Mary's garment to Blachernai after the Avar siege of 623 but also with its original translation to Constantinople towards the end of the fifth century. The latter is a complicated tradition which is first attested in a text which Antoine Wenger dates to the sixth century. The narrative, which is further elaborated in Theodore's homily, describes how two patricians named Galbuis and Candidus set off on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Jerusalem after being converted from the Arian heresy to the Nicene faith of mainstream orthodoxy. They stopped on the way at a house in Palestine where an elderly woman allowed local people to venerate – and be healed by – the precious robe that she had inherited from a female ancestor who had received it as a gift from the Virgin Mary herself. Galbuis and Candidus proceeded to steal the robe and bring it to Constantinople, where they housed it in a shrine on their own property. They soon revealed its presence and

2 C. Loparev: Старое свидетельство о положении Ризы Богородицы во Влахернах в новом истолковании применительно к нашествию русских на Византию в 860 году. In: *Vizantijskij Vremennik* 2, 1895, pp. 581–628; A. Cameron: The Virgin's Robe: An Episode in the History of Early Seventh-Century Constantinople. In: *Byzantion* 49, 1979, pp. 42–56.

3 Theodore Syncellus: De obsidione Constantinopolitana sub Heraclio imperatore. In: L. Sternbach (ed.): *Analecta Avarica*. Kraków 1900 (*Rozprawy Akademii Umiejętności, Wydział Filologiczny Ser.2,15,4*), pp. 2–24; F. Makk (ed.): *Traduction et commentaire de l'homélie écrite probablement par Théodore le Syncelle sur le siège de Constantinople en 626. Avec une préface de S. Szádeczky-Kardoss*. Szeged 1975 (*Opuscula Byzantina* 3 = *Acta antiqua et archaeologica* 19).

4 See, for example:
https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/theodore_syncellus_01_homily.htm.

holiness to the reigning emperor Leo I and his consort Verina, however, who built and decorated a new oratory for the relic at Blachernai. There exists a puzzling reference not only in Theodore's homily but also in a contemporary oration on the Dormition of the Virgin by John of Thessalonica to not just one, but *two* garments that the Virgin bequeathed to her female attendants. Whitby suggests that the second of these items might have been the belt or girdle (ζώνη) that was venerated at the shrine belonging to the church of the Chalkoprateia in Constantinople. However, both John of Thessalonica and Theodore Syncellus refer to both garments as tunics or cloaks (χιτώνας or ἱμάτια), respectively. There is no record of another garment being translated to Constantinople, although some later sources, such as the *Patria*, mention a second robe that was kept at the church of the Chalkoprateia. Whitby also asserts confidently that the belt had been placed in its shrine at Chalkoprateia at least by the sixth century. In fact the earliest literary source that celebrates its presence there is Germanos I's homily, composed in the early eighth century; legends about its translation only survive from the late ninth century onward.

The second and final section of the homily "On the Robe" celebrates the return of this holy relic to the shrine at Blachernai after the siege of the Avars in 623. This part of the homily contains important historical and cultural information about the siege and growing devotion to the Virgin Mary at this time. Blachernai, which was situated just outside the city walls, was deemed to be vulnerable to attack – hence the removal of the precious Marian relic to a safer sanctuary in the Great Church of Hagia Sophia. When the siege had finished, the patriarch himself led a procession back to Blachernai, carrying the relic in its two containers, an inner and an outer casket. The two caskets, which had already been broken into in the course of their removal to Hagia Sophia, were once again opened and on this occasion the garment of the Virgin itself was revealed. It is striking in this section of the narrative that Theodore emphasises the emotional reaction of the patriarch to the holy relic. He throws himself on the ground, weeps, and cries for mercy from Christ. The garment itself, like the Virgin Mary, is declared to be "completely whole and uncorrupted" since it touched and enveloped the infant Christ when Mary suckled him. It could thus heal "every disease and every weakness from the diseased", according to Theodore (p. 51). There is no mention in the homily, however, of the robe possessing the apotropaic power to ward off enemies as later texts described (for example, Photius' homilies on the

attack of the Rus' on Constantinople in 860). Nevertheless, this homily represents an important witness not only to the events of 623 in Constantinople, but also to the healing power of Mary's most important relic.

The second homily that Whitby translates, on the siege of the Avars in the summer of 626, belongs to a group of important literary witnesses that also includes the *Chronicon Paschale* and George of Pisidia's panegyric poem, *Bellum Avaricum*. Together, these three sources provide comprehensive coverage from different perspectives of this terrifying event. According to all three, the Virgin Mary or Theotokos ("God-bearer") played a significant role in defeating the mighty army of the Avars. Whitby joins the majority of scholars in accepting the authenticity of Theodore's text. It thus provides an informed and detailed account of the events that occurred between 29 July and 7 August when the Avar khagan decided to withdraw, following a series of unsuccessful assaults on the walls of Constantinople, the sinking of Avar boats, and a failure to join forces with the Persians who were encamped on the other side of the Bosphorus. As Whitby notes, Theodore possessed inside information concerning the siege: for example, he may himself have been one of the envoys who was sent to negotiate with the khagan – a fact that is corroborated by the *Chronicon Paschale*. He also describes how the patriarch processed along the walls of Constantinople, carrying an icon of Christ in order to ward off the enemy and boost the morale of the citizens. The emperor Heraclius was notably absent throughout the siege since he was waging a campaign against the Persians in the East. Thus it fell to a patrician named Bonus and the patriarch Sergius, along with Heraclius's young son, to defend the city. Theodore Syncellus stresses both the biblical (Old Testament) precedent for the victory of a chosen people and the role that the Theotokos played throughout the siege as direct causes for the eventual lifting of the siege. Unlike the *Chronicon Paschale* and the *Bellum Avaricum*, however, Theodore does not picture her playing a direct role in the defence of the city. Her power is nevertheless evident throughout the homily as she indirectly overcomes those who were attacking her shrine at Pege, outside the walls of Constantinople, prompts defensive action by Bonus, and provides a "saving anchorage and tranquil harbour" in her shrine at Blachernai (p. 115). She is thus closely involved in the salvation of Constantinople, demonstrating her enduring role as its patron and defender.

Michael Whitby has done a great service to scholars in providing these excellent translations, commentaries, and introductions to two important

homilies by the early seventh-century syncellus and preacher, Theodore. The translations are fluent and accurate while the notes provide useful background for every aspect of each text. This is an important addition to the “Translated Texts for Historians” series, which will complement Whitby’s forthcoming volumes, including a revised version of the *Chronicon Paschale* and a translation of the miracles of St Demetrius. Scholars, students and general readers will benefit from this book, which reflects Whitby’s wide-ranging historical and literary background in the field of early Byzantine history.

Mary B. Cunningham, University of Nottingham
Honorary Associate Professor of Historical Theology
Mary.Cunningham@nottingham.ac.uk

www.plekos.de

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