

Mark Roosien: *Ritual and Earthquakes in Constantinople. Liturgy, Ecology, and Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2024. XI, 204 S., 1 ill., 1 map, 8 tables. £ 85.00/\$ 110.00. ISBN 978-1-009-42728-9.

The core of this publication of a Notre Dame doctoral thesis is an investigation of the evolution of liturgical responses in Constantinople to earthquakes between the beginning of the fifth century and the tenth century, charting how these changed from demonstrations of mass repentance for the sins that had occasioned the disaster to intercessions for the support of heavenly intermediaries in securing God's mercy. There is also comment on how liturgy can illuminate aspects of contemporary attitudes to the natural world and more substantial consideration of how religious responses to disasters relate to conceptions of the Roman empire and its place in the natural world.

The book opens with an Introduction (pp. 1–20) that frames subsequent discussions within the triangular relationship at Constantinople between the human, the divine, and the environment. Unlike 'old' Rome, Constantinople the New Rome had the misfortune to be located on a geological fault and so was prone to devastating earthquakes. As a result, since it was a predominantly Christian city from the early fifth century, ways had to be found to explain these destructive incidents in terms of God's activity in the world, and if possible contain them. The evidence for these responses is found in a range of sources, especially liturgical calendars, but also homilies, hymns, saints' lives, and secular texts; in particular the elements of commemorations recorded in the calendars identify the theological focus of a ritual event, and it is possible to chart how these changed over the centuries as new commemorations were constructed.

The first chapter ("Earthquakes and Liturgy: Rituals of Sin, Repentance, and Restoration", pp. 21–51) sets out to identify the earliest form of the liturgical rite for commemorating earthquakes, one that was instituted in the wake of the quake of 25th September 438. The rite followed the evacuation route recently taken by the city's inhabitants, who had fled to the open parade ground at the Hebdomon in a penitential procession that demonstrated collective repentance in order to restore stability to the earth. The theology of natural disasters as manifestations of divine wrath is set out ("Theologies of Natural Disaster in Late Antique Christianity", pp. 37–44), with one tradi-

tion, which can be traced back to the book of Amos (8.4), identifying the rich and powerful as being especially to blame, though the biblical reprieve for the people of Nineveh as the result of Jonah's warning demonstrated that repentance would restore the natural order. Antecedents to the 438 rite are identified in three undateable homilies of John Chrysostom relating to an earthquake, probably but not certainly that of 400; John blamed social inequalities for the misfortune, while a temporary abolition of these distinctions led to its cessation ("Earthquakes, Ritual, and Society in John Chrysostom's Constantinople", pp. 44–50).

In chapter two ("Earthquakes and Emperors: Humility and Power", pp. 52–74) the focus is on two earthquakes in 396 and 447 after each of which the emperor, Arcadius and Theodosius II respectively, led the populace in a display of repentance and humility that is at odds with the normal contemporary elevation of the imperial person. On each occasion the emperor seems to have benefited from his unusual action, a response that may have been facilitated by the fact that at some point earth tremors were bound to stop and so could be attributed to the emperor's intervention on behalf of this people. The earliest evidence for the first quake and Arcadius' response to it comes in a homily *On the Incarnation* delivered by Severianus of Gabala in 401, in which the emperor's penitent display is highlighted ("Severian of Gabala on Arcadius and the Earthquake", pp. 61–66); granted the date, it would have been interesting to consider to what extent Severianus was reacting to John Chrysostom's rather different response to a contemporary quake. The earthquake of 26th January 447 is better attested, with Theodosius' barefoot procession to the Hebdomon being recorded in Malalas 14.22, though whether he would have had bleeding feet and a "forehead glistening with sweat" (p. 67) on a January day, as Mark Roosien cites from an impressionistic but possibly fanciful reconstruction by Christopher Kelly (pp. 67–68), is another matter. It might have been noted that Malalas wrongly refers to this quake as the first time the capital had been struck, and that the misfortune was said to have been predicted by Saint Domnica (*Life of Domnica* 11.3–4) and probably Hypatius (*Life of Hypatius* 52.3). Also of interest is the report that ten years later Emperor Marcian died one day after the ceremony from gangrene in his feet, possibly initiated by injuries suffered during his participation in the annual commemoration (Theodore Lector 367, p. 103.16–20; Theophanes 109.27–30); this report notes that the patriarch was normally carried in a litter during the ceremony, a useful reminder

that rites may not always have been performed exactly as they are recorded in liturgical calendars. A question that is not explored, perhaps because the quakes are not treated in chronological order, is why Theodosius seems to have acted differently in 447 as opposed to 438, even though a particular rite had been introduced, with apparent success, on the earlier occasion; one explanation might be that the recurrence of an earthquake, and a particularly devastating one at that, might have suggested that an even more powerful response was now needed.

Chapter 3 (“Beyond Divine Chastisement: Constantinople as a Site of Blessing”, pp. 75–107) claims that an alternative to the nexus of sin and punishment was devised for the quakes of 438 and 557 to demonstrate that the events were in fact occasions of divine blessing. In 438 this was achieved through the story of the miraculous introduction of the Trisagion chant: during penitential rituals at the Hebdomon a young boy was supposedly transported to heaven, where he heard this new chant, and after his return to earth it was adopted to ward off further misfortunes. The gift of the chant to Constantinople was used to prove the orthodoxy of the capital during disputes about the legitimacy of the Council of Chalcedon. With regard to the quake of 557, which led to the collapse of the first dome of Hagia Sophia, Justinian’s energetic reconstruction of the church and elaborate inauguration ceremony were intended to overshadow the negative connotations of the initial destruction. Roosien’s assertion, however, that “the theology of divine chastisement was eschewed altogether” (p. 79), goes too far: as he in fact notes, the homily of Leontius, which was preached two days after the earthquake in December 557, presented events in terms of punishment, in particular for those in power (pp. 93–94), and Justinian’s subsequent actions were designed to counteract this negative interpretation, to “bury pangs of gloom in streams of Lethe” as Paul the Silentary wrote (*Ephrasis* 181).¹

Chapter 4 (“Earthquakes and the Saints: Heavenly Intercessors for Earthly Problems”, pp. 108–134) advances to the seventh and eighth centuries, in particular the quakes of 740 and another at an unknown date between 780 and 797, but first considers at some length the *Life* of Symeon Stylites the Younger (“Earthquakes and the *Life* of St. Symeon Stylites the Younger”,

1 P. Friedländer (ed.): Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentarius. Kunstbeschreibungen justinianischer Zeit. Leipzig/Berlin 1912 (Sammlung wissenschaftlicher Kommentare zu griechischen und römischen Schriftstellern 8).

pp. 110–118). This *Life*, which was composed in about 600, devotes five of its 259 chapters (*Life* 78; 104–107), admittedly quite long chapters, to discussing Symeon's actions in connection with the quakes at Antioch of 551 and 557:² in the first Antioch was said to have been spared the destruction that hit many cities in Phoenicia because Symeon had predicted that the people would be saved if they fasted and prayed; in 557 Symeon is miraculously transported to the north of Constantinople six days before the quake, and sorrowfully predicts its destruction. The liturgical commemoration of the eighth-century quakes differs from those for events in the fifth and sixth centuries, since it promotes the role of the Theotokos as intercessor for the city. This development is rightly connected with the presentation of the Theotokos in accounts of the Avar threats to the capital in 623 and the siege of 626 and the Arab siege of 717–718 (pp. 121–130).

It is a pity that Roosien was not able to consult Lucy Parker's excellent study of Symeon the Younger,³ which contains a relevant discussion of "Theodicy and the Problem of Intercession" (pp. 151–162). It is also regrettable that he did not consider responses to other natural disasters such as fires, famine, droughts, and extreme weather. This would have permitted a more serious investigation of Byzantine attitudes to the environment, in line with the volume's claim to look at ecological issues, and might also have altered his belief that it was only in the seventh and eighth centuries that the status of saints and the Theotokos increased (p. 108). Consideration of hagiographies composed in the late fifth and throughout the sixth century would have revealed that saints were expected to be able to influence natural events. Daniel the Stylite is said to have predicted the great fire of September 465 six months in advance, but his warning to Patriarch Gennadius and Emperor Leo was ignored because they were focused on Easter celebrations; after it broke out fugitives begged the saint to intercede to end the disaster, but he pointed out that his warning that should have alerted the inhabitants to propitiate God, like the people of Nineveh had been ignored and so just predicted that the

2 It is something of an exaggeration to state that the *Life* is "[r]iddled with accounts of earthquakes" (p. 19).

3 L. Parker: *Symeon Stylites the Younger and Late Antique Antioch. From Hagiography to History*. Oxford/New York 2022 (Oxford Studies in Byzantium); even though this was published two years before Roosien's book, it would have come at a very late stage in composition.

fire would burn for seven days.⁴ Cyril of Scythopolis records that both Euthymius and Sabas responded to requests to intercede to bring droughts to an end.⁵ Symeon the Younger's contemporary Theodore of Sykeon was regularly asked to intervene to resolve the challenges of nature; unlike Symeon, Theodore visited Constantinople on three occasions between the late 590s and 612, each time meeting the current emperor and patriarch, in 609 he was kept in the city since Patriarch Thomas wanted him to intercede to avert the various disasters that Theodore had predicted.⁶ Emperor Heraclius was so convinced about his intercessory power that he appropriated his corpse, removing the relic from the monasteries at Sykeon and having it carted to Constantinople in order to safeguard the city from the Persians.⁷ The 620s are certainly important in consolidating the reputation of the Theotokos as the special protector of the capital, but this was after a much longer and more gradual evolution in the concept of intercessors.

The last chapter ("Beyond Commemoration: New Approaches to Earthquakes in the Middle Ages", pp. 135–161) reviews changes in liturgical commemoration and the composition of hymns relating to earthquakes between the eighth and tenth centuries; these resulted in the quake of 26th October 740 being elevated into the main annual act of remembrance while the quakes of 438 and 447 were fused into a single event. There is particular attention to the ninth-century compositions of Joseph the Hymnographer (pp. 139–148), and to the special prayer to be recited in the event of a quake, known as the Prayer of Manasses after the repentant biblical king, that was created in the eighth century ("The Occasional Prayer for Earthquakes in Byzantine *Euchologia*", pp. 155–160).

- 4 *Life of Daniel* 41, 45–46; H. Delehaye (ed.): *Les saints stylites*. Brussels/Paris 1923 (Subsidia hagiographica 14). Marcellus the Sleepless also predicted the extent of the fire, *Life of Marcellus* 31; G. Dagron (ed.): *La Vie ancienne de saint Marcel l'Acémète*. In: *AB* 86, 1968, pp. 271–321.
- 5 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymius* 25; *Life of Sabas* 67; E. Schwartz (ed.): *Kyrrillos von Skythopolis*. Leipzig 1939 (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur 49/2).
- 6 *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* 135; A.-J. Festugière (ed.): *Vie de Théodore de Sykéon*. 2 vols. Brussels 1970 (Subsidia hagiographica 48).
- 7 Nicephorus Sacellarius, *Encomium on Theodore of Sykeon* 44–45; translated in Michael Whitby with R. Price: *Theodore of Sykeon: The Life by George and the Encomium by Nicephorus*. Liverpool 2024 (Translated Texts for Historians 87).

Finally, after a brief Conclusion (pp. 162–169) there are two appendices, Appendix A (“Earthquake Commemorations from the Prophetologion and the Typikon of the Great Church”, pp. 170–175) that sets out the process for reconstructing the fifth-century version of the earthquake rite, as well as the case for dating its creation to the immediate aftermath of the quake of 25th September 438, and Appendix B (“The Authenticity of the Homily De Terrae Motu Ascribed to John Chrysostom”, pp. 176–177). These are followed by a Bibliography (pp. 178–200) and an Index (pp. 201–204). In the Bibliography several of the ancient sources are presented as editions and translations when they are in fact only translations.⁸ The edition and translation of Gregory of Nazianzus’ *Oration* 39 is omitted;⁹ Cassian and Chrysostom are included among the ‘Js’ but both lack the initial ‘John’, which is confusing; Socrates is credited with a French translation, but Sozomen is not.¹⁰ No edi-

- 8 This applies to the entries for *Chronicon Paschale*, 284–628 AD. Translated with Introduction and Notes by Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby. Liverpool 1989 (Translated Texts for Historians 7); *The Lives of Simeon Stylites*. Translated by R. Doran. Kalamazoo, MI 1992 (Cistercian Studies Series 112); *The Novels of Justinian. A Complete Annotated English Translation*. Edited and Translated by D. J. D. Miller and P. Sarris. 2 vols. Cambridge 2018; *Between City and School. Selected Orations of Libanius*. Edited and Translated by R. Cribiore. Liverpool 2015 (Translated Texts for Historians 65); J. Matthews: *The Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae*. In: L. Grig/G. Kelly (eds.): *Two Romes. Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity*. Oxford/New York 2012 (Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity), pp. 81–115; *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*. 3 vols. Translated with Introduction and Notes by R. Price and M. Gaddis. Liverpool 2005 (Translated Texts for Historians 45); *Prokopios: The Secret History, with Related Texts*. Edited and Translated, with an Introduction, by A. Kaldellis. Indianapolis, IN/Cambridge 2010.
- 9 Grégoire de Nazianze: *Discours* 38–41. Introduction, texte critique et notes par C. Moreschini. Traduction par P. Galloway. Paris 1990 (Sources chrétiennes 358).
- 10 Sozomène: *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Vol. 1: Livres I–II. Introduction par G. Sabbah et B. Grillet. Traduction par A.-J. Festugière. Paris 1983 (Sources chrétiennes 306); Sozomène: *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Vol. 2: Livres III–IV. Introduction et annotation par G. Sabbah. Traduction par A.-J. Festugière, revue par B. Grillet. Paris 1996 (Sources chrétiennes 418); Sozomène: *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Vol. 3: Livres V–VI. Introduction et annotation par G. Sabbah. Traduction par A.-J. Festugière et B. Grillet. Paris 2005 (Sources chrétiennes 495); Sozomène: *Histoire ecclésiastique*. Vol. 4: Livres VII–IX. Introduction par G. Sabbah. Annotation par L. Angliviel de la Beaumelle et G. Sabbah. Traduction par A.-J. Festugière et B. Grillet. Paris 2008 (Sources chrétiennes 516).

tion is provided for the homilies of Theodore Syncellus.¹¹ A copy editor might have been expected to pick up such things.

The signal strength of this book is the elucidation of the changes in liturgical response to the succession of earthquakes that struck the capital, but it is not without weaknesses, some of which arise from a failure to consult ancient sources, or even to check that they say what is asserted in the secondary literature, from which they are often cited:

The map (pp. 26–27) portrays the city's defences after they were expanded in 627 to include the suburb of Blachernae, whereas in 623 the church to the Virgin is rightly said to be unwalled (p. 122); this apparent contradiction should have been clarified.

John of Nikiu (p. 53) does not give a year for an earthquake that struck Egypt, but it was not that of 554 which affected Constantinople; from the comments of Agathias, *Histories* 2.15.5–7, it can in fact be identified as the massive quake that struck the south-east Mediterranean in 551 (cf. Malalas 18.112; Theophanes 227.21–228.4).

In 396 the fact that the Theodosian Walls had not yet been built might well have meant that the populace did not have to flee as far as Hebdomon (p. 57).

No source is cited for the account of Marcian's actions in 457 (p. 72), so the interesting fact is missed that, as mentioned above, the patriarch was currently accustomed to being carried in a litter when taking part in the procession (Theophanes 109.27–30).

It might have been noted (pp. 67–68) that the earthquake of 26th January 447 was predicted by Domnica.

11 Theodore, *On the Robe*. F. Combefis (ed.): *Historia Haeresis Monothelitarum sanctaeque in eam sextae synodi actorum, vindiciae. Diversorum item antiqua, ac medii aevi, tum historiae sacrae, tum dogmatica, Graeca opuscula*. Paris 1648 (*Bibliothecae Patrum Novum Auctuarium* 2); the partial and inferior edition of C. Loparev is included under secondary sources: *Staroe Svidetel'stvo o Poloznenii rizy Bogorodicy vo Vlachernach v novom istolkovanii primenitel'no k nasestviju Russkich na Vizantiju v 860 godu*. In: *Vizantijskij Vremennik* 2, 1895, pp. 581–628. Theodore Syncellus, *On the Siege*. L. Sternbach (ed.): *Analecta Avarica*. Cracow 1900 (*Rozprawy Akademii Umiejętności, Wydział Filologiczny Ser. 2,15,4*); reprinted with French translation in F. Makk: *Traduction et commentaire de l'homélie écrite probablement par Théodore de Syncelle sur le siege de Constantinople en 626. Avec une préface de S. Szádeczky-Kardoss*. Szeged 1975 (*Acta Universitatis de Attila József Nominatae. Acta Antiqua et Archaeologica* 19). The annotated English translation of both homilies by Whitby (note 7) is naturally too recent to be included.

The Hebdomon was not the regular location for imperial coronations in the fifth and sixth centuries as is implied (p. 78), since that of Leo I in 457, which was held there, was the exception and all others occurred in the centre of the city.

The terminology “Greek and Latin churches” as opposed to “Syrian and Egyptian churches” (p. 79) is inappropriate. There was no monoglot Greek church since leading Miaphysites such as Severus of Antioch were Greek speakers by birth and education, while in Syria the province of Syria Secunda was primarily Chalcedonian in contrast to the Miaphysites in other areas.

Justinian did not go into seclusion as a result of the 557 quake’s damage (pp. 96–97); rather the rumour that he had died sprang up on 9th September 560, after he had returned from several months in Thrace supervising repairs to the Long Walls (Malalas 18.131; Theophanes 234.20–22).

It is wrong to describe the replacement for Hagia Sophia’s dome after the 557 quake as “more resplendent” (p. 98) than its predecessor, since Agathias observed, “As a result, it naturally became straighter, beautifully curved, and from all sides symmetrical in outline, but it is narrower, sharply-edged, and not so capable of astounding viewers as before, though still much more safely positioned” (*Histories* 5.9.5). Also, the claim that the first dome did not have windows around its base flies in the face of the considerable debate about the differences between the first and second domes: one of the points of agreement in this discussion is that the famed luminosity of the first dome was achieved through the windows which pierced its lower courses, whether or not these were located in a formal drum.

Symeon Stylites did not actually see the destruction of Constantinople in 557 (p. 115), since his miraculous visit occurred six days before the quake (*Life of Symeon* 106).

It is not recognised that the text discussed in connection with the Avar surprise (pp. 122–123) was a homily by Theodore Syncellus, the same person as responsible for the homily on the 626 siege introduced immediately afterwards, or that this earlier homily, *On the Robe*, was delivered at a commemoration for the restoration of the relic to Blachernae.

The Avars certainly did not enter Constantinople in 623 (p. 122), when their extensive ravaging was confined to the suburbs.

George of Pisidia is described as a homilist rather than a panegyric poet (p. 125).

Theodore Syncellus' metaphorical comparison of the Avar khagan to a destructive locust is transformed into an actual plague of the insects that affects the city in the same year as the Avar ravaging (p. 123, n. 68).

Heraclius is said to return the relic of the cross to Jerusalem in 634 rather than 630 (p. 129, n. 87).

These slips, though irritating, are minor and do not relate to the liturgical evidence to which Roosien has importantly drawn attention or affect his central thesis about the evolution of liturgical commemoration. His analysis would have been enriched if he had considered whether there was a single understanding of earthquakes or a single response to imperial actions. Although "history gives us only rare glimpses of alternative views" (p. 74) there is sufficient information about contemporary explanations for earthquakes (e.g. Agathias, *Histories* 2.15.9–13; 5.6–8) to indicate that some participants in the intercessionary liturgies during the fifth and sixth centuries may have held conflicting views about the basis for, and efficacy of, their prayers. Such consideration could have expanded the relatively brief treatment of Byzantine views of the environment ("Natural Disasters, Liturgy, and Byzantine Views on the Environment", pp. 11–17), especially if combined with a review of responses to other forms of natural disaster, as suggested above. A list of earthquakes at Constantinople with the relevant evidence would also have been helpful, since Emanuela Guidoboni's 1994 "Catalogue" is not the most accessible of works.¹²

To end on a positive note. Roosien's expertise lies in liturgy and his presentation of the evidence of the *Typicon* of Hagia Sophia has drawn the attention of outsiders to its importance and will contribute to ensuring that its information will inform future discussion of disasters and other events that merited commemoration. I for one would have benefited from reading his analysis of the liturgical rites for events of the 620s when working on Theodore Syncellus.

12 E. Guidoboni: *Catalogue of Ancient Earthquakes in the Mediterranean Area up to the 10th Century*. With the Collaboration of A. Comastri and G. Traina. Rome/Bologna 1994. Within the United Kingdom, copies are available in the Earth Sciences Library in Cambridge and the Institute of Classical Studies in London; the catalogue of Oxford libraries does list a copy in the Archaeology and Ancient World library, but, unfortunately, the entry is incorrect.

Michael Whitby, University of Birmingham
Professor emeritus
m.whitby@bham.ac.uk

www.plekos.de

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