A Byzantine prophecy from the second-half of the eighth century reads, “This people [the Saracens] expels the Byzantines from the whole of Syria..., conquers Cilicia, and totally devastates Cappadocia because of the position of Mars (Ares). However, they [the Saracens] will not shatter the kingdom of the Byzantines itself owing to the position of the Sun, and also because Mars stands highest in the sky. Yet, Mars itself is declining—i.e. it is in Cancer—and for that reason the people of Mars will be humiliated by the Saracens. And because it [Mars] appears in the middle of the sky, the kingdoms of the people influenced by it—that is, the Byzantines, the Turks, the Khazars, the Bulgars and the like—will last for ever.”

This “astrological forecast” attributed to the famous head of Theodosius’ school, Stephen of Alexandria, has three significant aspects. First, the text clearly marks a subsiding of the apocalyptical pathos and eschatological pressure instigated among the eastern Christians by the rise of Islam and the expansion of the Ummayad caliphate. On the other hand, the quoted prophecy might be considered the first premeditated Byzantine attempt to demarcate the new boundaries of the oikoumene imposed by the Arab conquest. Lastly, the words of Stephen of Alexandria bear an eloquent testimony to the flexibility and, in a sense, the radicalism of the Byzantine religious-political ideology, which was readily able to rearrange its priorities—that is, to reduce and reshape the pattern of the oikoumene so that the kingdom of the Byzantines might always remain in its sacred centre, being duly safeguarded by similar communities.

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2 The “subsiding” in question was very much due to the fact that the Abbasids moved their capital from Damascus to Baghdad.
In this particular case the criterion of similarity is clear enough: the kingdoms of the Byzantines, the Turks, the Khazars and the Bulgars will last, because they are all ruled by Mars. The Byzantines, the Turks, the Khazars, and the Bulgars were naturally expected to survive neither because their respective horoscopes were favorable (according to Claudius Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* the lands inhabited by these people were ruled by the Capricorn, the Virgo, and the Aquarius), nor by virtue of any climate-bound characteristics of temperament, national psychology, or racial type that they possibly shared. These particular peoples were destined to survive only because of the divine providence, which had predetermined their being ruled by Mars. The fact that all “kingdoms” mentioned in the prophecy, except the Byzantines themselves, were pagan seems to have been unimportant. Unimportant was also who exactly were “the Turks” referred to in the text. What really mattered was the survival of the kingdom of the Byzantines; that of the Bulgars, who were to protect the Danube frontier; and that of the Khazars, who were to be on alert at the Caspian gates. In other words, the Byzantine position, called by T. C. Loughis “theory of limited oikoumene”, had already been developed nearly two centuries before being clearly formulated in the writings of Constantine Porphyrogenitus and the Continuator of Theophanes, and later implemented in the policies of the emperors from the Macedonian dynasty. This conclusion should not surprise us if taking into account that Byzantium inherited both the Christian idea of ecumenical (in a broader sense “worldwide”) power of the basileus and the classical Hellenic concept of the oikoumene as a clearly outlined space which was regarded as sacred and, in this sense, in opposition to the rest of the profane world.

It is not the purpose of the present study to make an in-depth analysis of the idea of the universal power of the Byzantine Emperor, the dimensions of which remained basically unchanged after the establishment of the Islamic caliphates. Being purely theoretical, the Emperor’s authority was, as a rule, not affected by the concrete historical experiences: Isaac II Angelus and Constantine XI were, for instance, by no means less “universal” emperors than Constantine the Great and Justinian I. No less enduring was the ancient idea of the sacred space of the oikoumene.

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4 There could hardly be any doubt that the “kingdom of the Turks” mentioned here was actually the Avar Khaganate.