ROLE OF THE VIRGIN MARY AT THE SIEGE OF CONSTANTINOPLE IN 626*

According to an eyewitness, in the battle for Constantinople in August 626 the Virgin Mary “put flight with a single blow the military force of both enemies”, ¹ namely, Khagan, the king of Avars, and his Persian ally. The miracle of the Theotokos is the main point of the homily that was delivered after the liberation of the Constantinopolitans from the terror, caused by the siege and attacks by the troops tenfold superior in force. Bearing in mind, what Norman Baynes emphasized,² I will, neglecting the problem of how to understand Mary’s power, concentrate on her role as it is described in the text to be quoted. This approach offers by itself, for the the aim of the paper is to show that the famous prooemium of the Akathistos Hymn, Τῇ ύπερμάχῳ στρατηγῷ,³ is a product of “the ten days when the defenders of the

* This article is written in the framework of the project, “Origins of the Byzantine Cult of Mary”, financed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), No. P20242-G02.

(1)  L. Sternbach, Περὶ τῆς τῶν ἄθεων Βαρβάρων καὶ Περσῶν κατὰ τῆς θεοφυλάκτου ταύτης πόλεως μανιώδους καὶ ηἰδής καὶ τῆς φιλανθρωπία τοῦ Θεοῦ διὰ τῆς Θεοτόκου μετ’ αἰσχύνης ἐκείνων ἀναχωρήσεως [On the foolish attack of the godless barbars and Persians against this city, protected by God, and of their shameful retreat which the divine love brought about for mankind by the intervention of the Theotokos], in: idem (ed.), Analecta Avarica (Cracoviae, 1900) 298–320, here 314.1–3: αὐτόπται γὰρ καὶ θεωροί γεγόναμεν ἀπαντεῖς, ὡς μιᾷ ὁμιῇ τὴν ἀμφιτέτοις τῶν ἐχθρῶν ἡ παρθένῳ καὶ Θεοτόκος ἵσχυς ἐτροπώδατο.

(2) “Modern writers on East Rome, convinced that ‘miracles do not happen’, have quite banished miracles from their histories and have thereby falsified the picture, for there can be no doubt that the Byzantine lived in a world where miracle could happen and did happen, and that belief in miracle is itself a fact of history which the student ignores at his peril”, N. H. Baynes, The Supernatural Defenders of Constantinople, in: idem, Byzantine Studies and Other Essays (London, 1955, repr. 1960) 248–260, here 248.

(3) That is the second prooemium in the edition by C. A. Trypanis, The Akathistos Hymn, in: idem, Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantica (Wien, 1968)
city withstanded all that was thrown against them” — as it is called today — “in the last great war of antiquity”. The question of the original context, which the prooemium refers to, has long been an issue in research on the Akathistos Hymn. The homily, which will be examined


(5) A summary of the opposite viewpoints up to the end of the 1960’s is presented by J. L. van Dieten, Geschichte der Patriarchen von Sergios I. bis Johannes VI. (610–715), in: J. L. van Dieten, C. Mango, P. Wirth (eds.), Geschichte der griechischen Patriarchen von Konstantinopel, part 4 (Amsterdam, 1972) (Enzyklopädie der Byzantinistik, 24) 18–21. Obviously from the 1980’s onwards Paul Speck’s elaborate hypothesis, according to which it was the Patriarch Germanos himself who composed the prooemium, has been under discussion. The reasoning is found in P. Speck, Artabasdos, der rechtgläubige Vorkämpfer der göttlichen Lehren (Bonn, 1981) (Poikila Byzantina, 2), 169–171; idem, Kaiser Leon III., die Geschichtswerke des Nikephoros und des Theophanes und der Liber Pontificalis. Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung, Teil 1 (Bonn, 2002) (Poikila Byzantina, 19) 295–298. The status questionis seems to be so that, while the majority associates the prooemium with the siege of 626, the possibility that it could be from the time when Constantinople was saved from the siege by Arabs in 717–718 is still considered, see, e.g., the abstract of the article by M. Hurbanič, The so-called Feast of Akathistos and the tradition of the Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626, in: M. Kulhánková, K. Loudová (eds.), Epea pteroenta. Růženě Dostálově k narozeninám. (Epea pteroenta. Festschrift in Honour of Růžena Dostálová.) (Brno, 2009) 140–141.