**Mischa Meier**

**A HISTORY OF THE MIGRATION PERIOD**

**Europe, Asia and Africa from the 3rd to the 8th Century CE**

**1.2.2 The Religious Factor**

Constantinople’s miraculous deliverance from the clutches of the barbarians through the personal intervention of the Mother of God not only left a deep impression on those who had lived through it; it also shaped generations of Byzantines to come. In principle, divine assistance in the struggle against barbarians was not new to the Romans. In 396, for example, a few years before his sacking of Rome, Alaric had aborted his advance on Athens at the walls of the city upon witnessing the intervention by its patron goddess Athena and the mythical hero Achilles. A few decades before, the Sasanian king Šābuhr II (♰ 379) had been forced to abandon his siege of the Roman stronghold of Nisibis (today Nusaybin in south-east Turkey) by the miraculous powers of Jacob, the ascetic bishop of the city (♰ 338). In 540, a relic of the Cross in Apamea in Syria was such a deterrent to the invading Persians that they spared the population; in 542, the martyr Sergius saved the city of Resafa—later his eponymous city and home to his relics—from Persian conquest; and similarly, in 544, a miraculous icon of Christ protected Edessa (today Urfa in Turkey) from the Persians. In addition, Marsas, as it is known today (in the Gironde in France), was saved by a “heavenly legion” (*militia caelestis*) during a Saxon siege.

Miracles of this kind were not specific to late antiquity, as attested, for instance, by the reports on the “rain miracle” that saved Marcus Aurelius’s army from the Quadi, probably in 173 AD (reports that were also given a Christian slant later on). In terms of Constantinople, however, the events of the year 626 marked the culmination of a very specific development. It began to take shape in the 5th century, picked up a phenomenal pace around the middle of the 6th century, and then hurtled directly towards those dramatic days in the summer of 626. From then on, it was there for all to see: Constantinople was the city of the Mother of God.

Marian devotion at the Bosphorus had been growing steadily since the 5th century. It was the controversies surrounding the question of the relation between Christ’s divinity and humanity – which had reached an initial peak at the Council of Ephesus in 431 with the codification of the Virgin’s role as the Theotokos (“God-bearer”) – that first drew special attention to Mary; the saintly ambitions of the emperor’s sister Pulcheria had also played their part in this. The emperors now began to establish more churches dedicated to St Mary; relics of the Mother of God started to appear; and when the 541/42 plague ripped through the *Imperium Romanum* to a horrifying degree, Mary rose to become one of the great patron saints of the afflicted population. The emperors were keen to associate themselves with the widespread Marian devotion, and from this period onwards, the written records present an increasing number of Marian miracles and legends. Furthermore, the poet Romanos Melodos—himself regarded as a singer inspired by Mary—boosted the popularity of Marian devotion with the *kontakia* (a particular form of hymn) he composed to be sung in church services. Then there were the Marian feast days that were added to the calendar, and finally, in 626, the Theotokos cemented her status when she personally intervened to save “her” city.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Yet despite all the focus on the Mother of God, the miraculous event itself was primarily also the expression of an overarching, all-encompassing piety. The practical corollaries of this piety—processions, common public prayers, the erection of further church buildings, the increase in theological as well as predominantly Christian-influenced literature, the sacred exaltation of the emperor and the ceremonial surrounding him, the religious imbuement of warfare, the development of the cult of images, etc.—had governed everyday Byzantine life for a long time. The profound pervasion of religion in all areas of life (a process called “liturgization”) had begun in the mid-6th century. It provided a new stability and a new point of orientation for a populace that, afflicted by severe disasters (earthquakes, floods, plague, hunger), ravaged by wars, and disappointed in its expectations of the Second Coming of Christ, was losing the ground under its feet. It also lent a fresh cohesiveness to a society that had found itself on the brink of collapse, enabling it not only to valiantly overcome the enormous challenge of a persistent assault on the collective mentality but at the same time consolidate its position. This laid the foundations for overcoming subsequent threats too—not least the Siege of Constantinople by the Avars and the Persians during one of the most dangerous military crises the Byzantine Empire had ever faced.

However, the price of this tremendous feat of stabilization was undeniable. The liturgization of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire had exacted its toll: religion was now ubiquitous, and religious symbolism permeated all forms of expression at this society’s disposal. Constantinople, at the centre of this world, was indeed the city of the Mother of God; yet Mary was protecting a people that from henceforth conceived itself as a conglomerate of saints, an empire that, from this perspective,—at least in theory—no longer needed any earthly weapons, even though its inhabitants saw themselves surrounded on all fronts by hostile barbarians. It was an empire ruled by emperors whose sacrality had assumed unprecedented proportions: Justinian I (527–565) had cast himself in dangerous parallel to the figure of Christ, and after defeating the Persians, Heraclius made sure he himself was acclaimed as the new David and the new Constantine. Then, when in 630 Heraclius ordered celebrations marking the restitution of relics of the Cross that had been seized from Jerusalem by the Persians in 614, he endowed himself with eschatological and messianic attributes; he even went so far as to present himself as the *kosmorhýstes* (a term coined specifically in this context, meaning “redeemer of the world”), exceeding even Justinian’s posturings. In such an atmosphere, the act of overcoming the barbarian threat in 626 easily transmuted into a salvation event, reinforcing for the Byzantines their already intrinsic certainty: that as long as Constantinople endured, as long as it did not fall into the wrong hands or indeed succumb to destruction, i.e. as long as there was a divinely protected, Roman “inside” and a clearly segregated barbarian “outside”, the earthly world would continue to exist. The fate of the Christian world therefore hung on the integrity of the bulwark on the Bosphorus: this was the core of Byzantine “imperial eschatology.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

*Translated by Marielle Sutherland*

1. **Notes to pages 29–41**

   Zos. 5.6 (Athens); Theod. *Hist. rel.* 1 *PG* 82.1304D, in conjunction with PEETERS 1920 (Nisibis); Prok. *BP* 2 (2),11; Euagr. *HE* 4.26; MEIER 22004, 365–373 (Apamea); Euagr. *HE* 4.28 (Sergiopolis); Euagr. *HE* 4.27, in conjunction with MEIER 22004, 387–401 (Edessa) *VBib.* 7; cf. Greg. Tur. *Glor. Mart.* 59 (Marsas). —“Rain miracle”: BIRLEY 21977; 316 ff.; ISRAELOWICH 2008. —For literature on the history of Marian devotion in late antiquity: see below ch. 11.1.1, n.14. —There is an increasing focus (especially in current research) on the significance of religion in various aspects of the “migration of peoples”, in particular with regard to questions of ethnicity, cf. e.g. POHL 2009a, 446 ff.; 2012a; STEINACHER 2012, 106; POHL/HEYDEMANN 2013a; 2013b. HEYDEMANN 2013; 2016b highlights how processes of religious communitization were couched in ethnic terminology, i.e. ethnicity and religion were interwoven. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. On liturgization: see below ch. 11.1.1. —On the Eastern Roman Empire as a community of saints under the protection of God: Coripp. *Laud. Iust.* 3.333; Kosm. Ind. 2.66–76, esp. 66 and 74–75; cf. MACCORMACK 1982, 293–295; MEIER 2004a, 163 f. —On the sacralization of Justinian and Heraclius: MEIER 22004, 547 ff.; 2016b; DRIJVERS 2002, 184 ff.; KRESTEN 1991/92, 504, n. 13; 2000 (Heraclius). —On Heraclius as the *kosmorhýstes*: Georg. Pisid. *In Bonum* 7; Heracl. 1.70; *Sev.* 452; *Hex.* 1800 (ed. TARTAGLIA); cf. also below ch. 11.2.1 and MEIER 2015b. —On Byzantine “imperial eschatology”: PODSKALSKY 1972; ALEXANDER 1985; PERTUSI 1988, BRANDES 1997, 25; 2005a. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)