

The Marian Relics at Constantinople

John Wortley

CONSTANTINOPLE in its hey-day housed many churches and chapels dedicated in the name of the Mother of God.¹ Of these three were preeminent in age, size, and distinction: the shrines of Chalcostrateia, Blachernae, and Hodegêtria. Legend associates all three of these with the name of the “Blessed” Pulcheria, sister of Theodosius II, wife of Marcian, and co-ruler with both. Whether the sainted Augusta was the founder, or even the benefactor, of any of the three² is by no means certain; legend here may owe more to her championing of the title *Theotokos* for the Blessed Virgin Mary against Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and again (together with Cyril of Alexandria) at Chalcedon in 451.³ It is alleged that she requested Marian relics for the capital (see below), but it is not at all certain that she was successful in her request. There is a late tradition, corroborated by no source earlier than 1204,⁴ which claims that she did obtain certain relics of the

¹ See also J. Wortley, “The Byzantine Component of the Relic-hoard of Constantinople,” *GRBS* 40 (1999) 307–332, and “Icons and Relics: A Comparison,” *GRBS* 43 (2002/3) 161–174.

² Thus Theodore the Lector: G. C. Hansen, *Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte* (Berlin 1971) 102.21–23 (PG 86.167C).

³ “By the bestowal of her hand [Pulcheria] raised Marcian to the throne (in 450) and thus familiarized the Romans with the idea of a hereditary right to the purple conveyed through females”: Thomas Hodgkin, *Italy and her Invaders*² III (London 1896) 26 (italics added). From the age of fifteen, when she effectively seized the reins of power, Pulcheria demonstrated remarkable competence as a ruler, the first female to do so at Constantinople; see Kenneth Holm, *Theodosian Empresses* (Berkeley 1982) 79–111, 147–228. This, together with the emerging legend of the Mother of Constantine the Great, must significantly have enhanced the status of women at the capital.

⁴ Nicephorus Callistus *HE* 15.14 (PG 147.44A).

Virgin Mary by the good offices of her sister-in-law, Athenais-Eudocia, who sent them from Jerusalem, but this may be a variant of the stories of that Empress and the relics of Stephen.⁵ The objects said to have arrived at the capital included: some of the Virgin's milk; her spindle; the swaddling-bands [*spargana*] of the infant Jesus. But, most important of all, they were said to have been accompanied by a portrait of the Holy Mother believed to have been painted from the living model by no less a person than Luke the Evangelist. This was the famous icon *Hodegêtria*, "she who leads in the way"; it was duly deposited (together with the other Marian relics) in that Marian shrine which took its name from the icon: *Hodegêtria*.

There are various reasons for rejecting most of this as fictitious, e.g. exactly when the swaddling bands of Christ arrived at Constantinople may be open to doubt, but what passed for them could be seen there by 888. They lay, however, not at *Hodegêtria*, but at *Chalcoprateia*, for in that year Euthymius, the future patriarch, delivered an oration on the "invention" (i.e. finding) of the Girdle [*zônê*] at *Chalcoprateia* in which he referred to the *spargana* as being there too.⁶ It is not of course impossible that they had migrated, for they were seen in the sacristy [*gazophilacium*] of the Great Church in the twelfth century by Anthony of Novgorod and by Anon. *Mercati* (*panni ubi fuit ligatus Christus in nativitate sua*).⁷

Yet, whatever the truth of the legend, the icon *Hodegêtria* ranks with the sacred *Mandyllion* of Edessa (maybe also with the icons "not made with hands," *acheiropoietai*) as the most important icons of all. Being painted (or imprinted) from life or

⁵ Marcellinus Comes says that Athenais returned from Jerusalem in 439 *beatissimi Stephani primi martyris reliquias quae in basilica sancti Laurentii positae venerantur secum deferens* (p.80 Mommsen). For the sequel see Theophanes *Chron.* A.M. 5920.

⁶ Euthymius *Encomium in conceptionem S. Annae* 2.6 (*PO* 16.512.20–22). The *spargana* were revered in the sanctuary of the Great Church by the emperors on 25 December each year: *De caerim.* 1.23 (*PG* 112.368A).

⁷ Anthony of Novgorod, transl. Marcelle Ehrhard, "Le Livre du Pèlerin d'Antoine de Novgorod," *Romania* 58 (1932) 44–65, at 49; *Anon. Mercati* 3, ed. Krijnie N. Cigtaar, "Une description de Constantinople traduite par un pèlerin anglais," *REB* 34 (1976) 211–267, at 246.

limned by supernatural hands, these were, in a sense, both pictures and relics; they both represented and *were* what they represented. These enjoyed enormous prestige, validating all other icons copied from them. Thus, as the sacred *mandyllion* is the prototype of all bearded Christs, hence of every Pantocrator icon, so is the *Hodegêtria* of most Virgins.⁸

It would be good to have some reliable evidence about how and when the icon *Hodegêtria* came to the capital, but the earliest testimony is that of Theodore the Lector (early sixth century): “[Athenais-]Eudocia sent from Jerusalem the icon of the Mother of God [τῆς Θεομήτορος] which Luke depicted [καθιστόρησεν].”⁹ No matter when it arrived, this icon appears to have been in high favour in the early eighth century, for, in the liturgy appointed for the vigil on the Saturday of the fifth week of Lent, it is said to have been paraded around the ramparts of the city during the siege of 717, together with the most sacred of all relics, the Wood of the True Cross.¹⁰ For a long time it is rarely mentioned, but the emperor John Comnenos (1118–1143) was especially attached to the icon *Hodegêtria*; he adopted it as his personal Palladium, keeping it in the palace and taking reproductions of it into battle with him. There was a ceremony every Friday in honour of this icon at the Pantokrator monastery which he founded. A procession of monks from that monastery and of clergy from the Elêousa together with the faithful would go to the palace to receive the icon. This they would then conduct with suitable chants to the Pan-

⁸ Thus Bernard Besançon, *L'Image interdite: une histoire intellectuelle de l'Iconoclasme* (Paris 1994) 152–153; see also 210, “Certes l'image se forme spontanément autour de la relique, mais c'est celle-ci qui communique sa vertu ... La pouvoir magique de la relique est passé à l'image par contagion; le fondement demeure la relique, même si elle est oubliée.”

⁹ *HE* 100.9–10 Hansen (*PG* 86.165A).

¹⁰ *Τριώδιον* (Athens 1915) 314, cf. R. Janin, *La Géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin* I.3 *Les Églises et monastères*² (Paris 1969) 209 n.6. This day was especially devoted to the Theotokos from the tenth century onwards, with an all-night vigil at Blachernae in thanksgiving for the deliverance of the city “against all hope” from the besieging “Persians and barbarians”: *Le Typicon de la Grande Église*, ed. Juan Mateos (*OrientalChristAnal* 165–166 [Rome 1962–63]), II 52.20–54.24.

tokrator where it was set up in the *herôon*, a funerary chapel dedicated to Saint Michael. An all-night vigil was terminated with the Eucharist, followed by a distribution of bread, wine, and even money, after which the icon was returned to the palace. A similar ceremony took place on other occasions too.¹¹ Two twelfth-century visitors confirm the presence of this icon *Hodegêtria*, “celle que l’apôtre Luc a peinte,” at the church of the same name.¹²

The question of the other principal Marian relics at Constantinople is complicated. It turns upon the acquisition and location of the girdle (*zônê*) of the Theotokos and of a piece of her clothing, eventually identified as a shawl (*maphorion*). The girdle was particularly associated with the Chalcostrateia church, the robe with Blachernae. It is almost impossible to disentangle the legends surrounding the one relic from those adhering to the other. In fact these have so many points in common that it is difficult not to suspect that the two relics might originally have been one and the same piece of fabric, divided at some time between the two of the three great Marian shrines of the capital by having a strip (*zônê*) shorn or torn from it. But this is not of course what legend says:

When our most glorious Lady the Virgin and Theotokos was about to migrate to the Lord who had been constituted from her, she ordered her two pieces of clothing [ἑσθητάς] to be given to two poor widow women. After her demise they each took one of them and reverently kept it with her, secretly passing it on to other virgins from generation to generation. One item of clothing having been recovered (by the providence of God) from Capernaum by Galbius and Candidus in the reign of Leo the Great and deposited at Blachernae [see below], the girdle [ζώνη], then being found in the diocese of Zêla, was brought and deposited at Chalcostrateia. So both [relics] were awarded as divine gifts and a sure defence to this illustrious great city which

¹¹ Janin, *Eglises* 203. Nicephorus Callistus’ claim (15.14) that Pulcheria instituted this tradition is of course worthless.

¹² Anthony of Novgorod p.58, *Anon. Mercati* 4.

is devoted to the Theotokos. Thus [the city] celebrates their arrival [here] with magnificent and celebratory feast-days.¹³

The days in question were 31 August (the Girdle) and 2 July (the *maphorion*). So far as the girdle is concerned, the legends contradict each other by alleging two importation-dates: one in the time of Justinian the Great, the other under Arcadius. In the former case there is no more than a simple statement that the Girdle was “recovered from the diocese of Zêla under the pious emperor Justinian” and deposited at Chalcopeateia,¹⁴ but considerably more is said about the earlier date. As neither statement is to be found in a source which pre-dates the tenth century, neither is preferable by virtue of age. This, for what it is worth, is what the Metaphrast (tenth century) reports:

Arcadius, the son of Theodosius the Great, caused the holy girdle of the all-holy Theotokos to be brought from Jerusalem to Constantinople where a godly maiden had kept it until then, together with the *maphorion* of the virgin. He set the relic in a magnificent casket. Four hundred and ten years later the emperor Leo VI opened the casket on account of his wife Zôê who was tormented by an impure spirit. It had been made known to her by divine revelation that she should obtain her cure by the imposition of the holy girdle on her. The holy girdle was now found to be as new and bright as if it had just been made. It was sealed with a golden *chrysobul* with a document indicating the precise year, indiction, and day when it was brought to Constantinople, describing how the emperor had laid it in the casket and sealed that with his own hands. The emperor [Leo VI] piously venerated the relic and ordered the then Patriarch to place it on the head of the Empress, whereupon she was delivered of her malady.¹⁵

This is certainly an impressive testimony; the imperial *chrysobul* was not lightly given, but the value of the supposed authenticating document is somewhat reduced by the statement that the casket was opened “four hundred and ten years”

¹³ *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, ed. Hippolyte Delehaye (Brussels 1902) 935.9–19.

¹⁴ *SynaxCP* 935.2–936.4.

¹⁵ Paraphrasing *Menologium Basilii Porphyrogeniti*, at 31 August (*PG* 117.613); cf. *SynaxCP* 935.19–33.

after it was sealed. The years separating the reigns of Arcadius and Leo VI amount to considerably more than that. It might however be that the account is mistaken in its arithmetic rather than in its information. Supposing the figure ought to be *five* hundred and ten (somebody having made an understandably slip in deducting A.M. 5909 from A.M. 6419 in Greek numerals) making the date in the casket correspond to something between A.D. 397 and 402, then things fit neatly into place.¹⁶ The lady “tormented with an unclean spirit” would have been Zôê-of-the-coal-black-eyes (Carbonopsina), the fourth wife of Leo VI and the mother of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. The “then patriarch” would have been Euthymius (907–912). Unfortunately there is lacuna in the *Life of Euthymius* covering most of his patriarchate so no help is available there. But there is extant a sermon composed for the feast of the veneration of the Virgin’s girdle by the same Euthymius. In this sermon he speaks of having been present in person at the opening of the casket in which the girdle had been placed by Arcadius, and also of it having survived in pristine condition “nine hundred years and more.”¹⁷

Thus there appears to be no difficulty about the opening of the casket of the girdle at the beginning of the tenth century; can one be equally confident about what is alleged of it at the end of the fourth? It is extremely rare to read of relic-authenticating documents as early as this in the east. Indeed, it is precisely because it is unusual that it is mentioned at all, although there might have been the ulterior motive of conferring greater distinction on the girdle than that enjoyed by the *maphorion* at

¹⁶ Neatly—to a point; this is about three decades earlier than the next known reference to Marian relics, and seems to pre-date general interest in them by about the same length of time.

¹⁷ *PO* 16.510.43, 44; 511.8. This homily is in honour both of the girdle and of the encaenia of the church in which it lay, Chalcostrateia. It is ascribed to Euthymius *the monk*, which has led some to deny its patriarchal authorship. But a monk Euthymius undoubtedly was before his elevation; he remained a monk during his episcopate and returned to his monastery when he was extruded.

Blachernae: *its* casket, already opened in 860, had not been found to contain any such distinguished diploma.¹⁸

Just as the great Marian shrine at Chalcoptatcia housed the girdle of the Theotokos, her temple at Blachernae (also allegedly founded by the Blessed Pulcheria) subsequently acquired her robe; or rather, to use the less precise terminology employed prior to 860, an item of her clothing. If the legend concerning that relic is to be taken at face value, its acquisition by the capital would have taken place in the reign of Leo I.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the legend of the robe bears such close resemblance to the tales of the girdle and also includes so many features bizarre (even by relic-story standards) that one is reluctant to place much confidence in its veracity. It may be the most blatant example of pious larceny in the history of Byzantine relics, yet it was widely received and often retold without apparently arousing any adverse criticisms of the protagonists, Galbuis and Candidus. The legend exists in a number of slightly different versions all of which resemble each other so closely that a common narrative is easily discerned. It goes something like this:²⁰

In the time of the emperor Leo I two Constantinopolitan brothers of patrician rank named Galbuis and Candidus (who were of the Arian persuasion) set off to visit the Holy Land. Taking the inland road they stayed one night in a village where a Jewess received them into her home. Their attention was arrested by a light shining from an inner room; a room which, they discovered, was occupied by several

¹⁸ See J. Wortley, "The Oration of Theodore Syncellus (*BHG* 1058) and the Siege of 860," *Byzantine Studies / Etudes Byzantines* 4 (1977) 111–126.

¹⁹ The thirteenth-century writer Joel, alone among the chroniclers, asserts (42) that the relic was sealed in a *Soros* by Leo I (*PG* 139.264A; also *Cronografia compendiaría*, ed. F. Iadevaia [Messina 1979], not available to me), all of which he could have learnt from *BHG* 1058 (see below).

²⁰ For full details of the versions (which contain much interesting detail, perforce omitted here) see *BHG* items nos. 1058a (the oldest version), 1058, 1068e, and 1048, the Metaphrastic version. See also N. H. Baynes, "The Finding of the Virgin's Robe," in his *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London 1955) 240–247, for a commentary on the development of the legend. Essential material is contained in A Wenger, *L'assomption de la T. S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du VI^e au X^e siècle* (*ArchOrientChrét* 5 [Paris 1955]).

sick persons. When pressed to explain the presence of those persons, the Jewess finally admitted to the brothers that some clothing of the Theotokos was conserved in that room. They begged, and received, permission to sleep in the room with the relic, intending (they alleged) to spend most of the night in prayer. However, once all the other people in the room were asleep, they carefully noted the precise dimensions and specification of the casket containing the Virgin's clothing. The following morning they took their leave of their hostess, offering to obtain some provisions for her when they came to Jerusalem. Once there, they sought out a carpenter whom they engaged to make an accurate reproduction of the casket containing the relic; they also obtained a covering in which this replica could be dissimulated. Armed with these acquisitions and with the goods they had obtained for the Jewess, they returned to her house, asking her permission to spend yet another night in the presence of the relic, which she granted. When they bade her farewell the following morning, concealed in their baggage was the casket containing the Virgin's clothing, in place of which the counterfeit (and empty) casket had been substituted. They made their way back to Constantinople where they attempted to keep their acquisition secret at first, no doubt regarding it as their personal property. But their efforts were of no avail; miracles seemed to be inevitable, with the result that the fame of the relic quickly spread until it reached the ears of the sovereigns. They (Leo and Verina) promptly expropriated the treasure and housed it in the church of the Theotokos at Blachernae.

Note that no excuses are made for the brothers' theft or for their abuse of the Jewess' hospitality, although the later versions do advance the rather lame pretext (often used again in the future) that the relic was simply being taken back to where it ought to have been all along; witness this prayer to the Theotokos:

[Your robe] is being taken to your own city which is the queen of all other cities, a city which always knew how to honour that which is yours in a becoming way. We are making haste to

present that city with this divine gift, for its unfading safety and glory.²¹

So much for the legend; the facts are rather harder to find. It is clear that by the beginning of the tenth century none of the several festivals celebrated at Blachernae was of greater importance than the commemoration of the deposition of the Robe which took place there on 2 July. The emperors and the patriarch were to process from the church of Saint Laurence, no doubt tracing the path which the Robe had taken from its temporary to its permanent resting-place many years earlier²²—but how many years earlier? There is a tradition going back no further than ca. 800 that it was Leo I Makellês who built the chapel of the *soros* of the Virgin's Robe onto Pulcheria's church at Blachernae,²³ but this detail could be dependent on the legend, not vice-versa.

For the earliest datable reference to the presence of the Robe at Blachernae we are indebted to Theophylact of Simocatta. Writing at the beginning of the seventh century, i.e. already almost a century and a half after the alleged date of the relic's acquisition, he says that the emperor Maurice, in the twentieth year of his reign,

went to the church of the Mother of God which the Byzantines, who hold it in awe, call Blachernae. This shrine stands in high honour with the faithful and is the object of great devotion on the part of the city. It is said that the clothing [*peristolia*] of the Virgin Mary (whom we Romans correctly—and alone—call

²¹ Basil Latyšev, *Menologii anonymi Byzantini saeculi x quae supersunt* (Saint Petersburg 1902) II 130.26ff. In the Metaphrastic version of the legend the Theotokos herself is made responsible for the theft by implication: it was she who "wished to bestow upon her own city the unsullied treasure of her garment" (II 377.17ff.).

²² *Typicon* 1 328.13–330.9; *SynaxCP* 793.6–794.9 (and cf. *SynaxCP* 348.45). Thus in *BHG* 1058 (see below) an *agrypnia* is prescribed at Saint Laurence's prior to the return of the relic.

²³ George the Monk *Chron.* II 617 de Boor; Joel 42; Zonaras *Epit.* 14.1.31; *Patria Const.* 3.75 (II 242 Preger); Janin, *Eglises* 161–171.

“the God-bearer”) is deposited there in a gold-encrusted casket [sēkos].²⁴

Theophylact’s “it is said” is hardly reassuring; it is also very odd that he does not use the usual words for “clothing” and “casket,” especially the second. The legends, the *synaxaria*, and all the other texts pertinent to this matter invariably speak of the *soros* of the Robe. They also (at least by the tenth century) name *soros* that chapel at Blachernae in which the *soros* of the robe was located. It is tempting to suggest that no such chapel existed yet when Theophylact wrote and that the relic, only recently arrived, had not yet aroused much interest. This would be hardly surprising for as late as ca. 570 one pilgrim to Jerusalem (Antoninus, and he is the only one who mentions this) notes the presence of both the girdle and the “headband” of the Theotokos in the *cubiculum* of the Holy Cross in the church of Sion, the *Basilica Constantini*.²⁵ The “headband” bears a certain resemblance to what the “robe” was identified as after its exposition in 860: *maphorion* (a shawl covering head and shoulders); might this eventually have found its way to the capital and into the *soros* at Blachernae? This is of course not by any means the only possibility; the promiscuous proliferation of relics was by no means unknown (e.g. those of Saints Stephen and John the Baptist) and something similar could have happened in this case too.²⁶

²⁴ Theophyl. Sim. *Hist.* 8.5 (291.23–292.3 de Boor).

²⁵ *Nam et ibi est illa spongia et canna, de quibus legitur in euangelio, de qua spongia bibimus, et calyx onychinus quem benedixit in cena, et aliae multae virtutes, species beatae Mariae in superiore loco et zona ipsius et ligamentum quo utebatur in capite: Antonini Placentini Itinerarium*, in Paul Geyer, *Itinera Hierosolymitana saeculi IIII–VIII* (CSEL 39 [1898]) 173.3–9. Note that the girdle was supposed to have been in Constantinople since the early fifth century.

²⁶ This proliferation may also explain the reference to κράσπεδον ἐκ τοῦ μαφορίου τῆς Θεοτόκου (*V. Sancti Theodori Syceotis* 128, ed. A. J. Festugière, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 48 [1970] I 103; cf. II 216–217 and 250) in a work by the contemporary of a saint who died in 613. The Patriarch Thomas I is here said to have inserted into a gold processional cross fragments of the True Cross, of the stone of Golgotha, of the Holy Sepulchre, and of the “hem of the Holy Virgin’s tippet” (transl. E. Dawes and N. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints* [Oxford

The very nature of the Legend of Galbius and Candidus casts serious doubts upon its credibility; it gives the impression of having been written by somebody who lived at a remote distance from the events in question. In common with many other hagiographers, he held the emperor Leo I in high esteem. He knew too that in Leo's time there were Arians at Constantinople who sometimes actually did good things for the Orthodox, but he could have learnt that very easily, e.g. from the *Life of Saint Marcian the Oikonomos*. He made a palpable error though in giving his Arians impeccably Roman names whereas, had he been aware of the true state of affairs at the capital in those days, he would have known that most of the Arians were Goths—and given them barbarous names like Aspar and Ardabourios. It may seem odd to us that he has imputed to his heroes behaviour which decency should have forbidden, but perhaps this is projecting the standards of a later age into a less scrupulous past. Even so, his is a most unlikely story. It is not by any means the only unlikely story in hagiography, and here (as in other cases) it may be possible to see how this unlikely story came into existence.

In 451 the emperors Marcian and Pulcheria asked Juvenal of Jerusalem to surrender the coffin and winding-sheet of the Theotokos to the capital. Their attempted appropriation of Marian relics is narrated in the sole remaining fragment of the *Euthymiac History*, happily preserved by Mansur, John of Damascus. This text has achieved great notoriety for being the earliest known assertion of what later came to be known in the west as the doctrine of the corporeal assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven.²⁷ At the time of the Fourth Ecumenical Council held at Chalcedon in 451, says the *Euthymiac History*,

1948] 174). As this is the only known use of the word *maphorion* for that relic prior to 860 when (it seems) the *soros* in which it was sealed was first opened, it can be assumed that this fragment, like the others, came independently from Jerusalem.

²⁷ John of Damascus (ca. 675–ca. 749) *Hom. ii in Dormitionem B.V. Mariae*, PG 96.748–753; see especially Lequien's note 58 ad loc. The passage (ch. 40) is alleged to be an extract from a *Life* of Euthymius the Great (377–473), apparently now lost, for this is not the *Life* by Cyril of Scythopolis (BHG 647/648).

the emperors summoned Juvenal of Jerusalem and other Palestinian bishops to their presence and addressed them in these or similar words: "We hear that, in Jerusalem, at the first and laudable church of the all-holy Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary in a village called Gethsemane, her life-bearing body was deposited in a casket [*soros*]. It is our wish to bring that relic here now as a preservative [*phylactêrion*] for this imperial city." Clearly embarrassed by his sovereigns' demand, Juvenal carefully explained that no corpse of the Theotokos remained on earth; that the only relics of her were her grave-clothes [*entaphia*]. When the emperors heard this, they asked him to send the casket of the Holy Mother together with her clothing [*himatia*] which it contained, apparently the winding-sheet. Juvenal obliged; the *soros* arrived and was duly deposited in the new church at Blachernae. Thus the *Euthymiac History*, implying the "assumption" of the Theotokos, which some suspect of being an on-the-spot invention of Juvenal to preserve one of his church's most precious relics from imperial expropriation (although it has to be added that there is not so much as a whisper of any corporeal remains of the Virgin before or after 451).

The legend of the Robe says that there did subsequently arrive at Constantinople an unopened *soros* thought to contain unspecified clothing; this much may be factual. The request of emperors is tantamount to a command; maybe Juvenal or one of his successors did, in due course, send a sealed *soros*, said to contain a piece of the Virgin's clothing, which was deposited at Blachernae. Now, it is an hagiographical axiom that where a saint is concerned, the grave is the nucleus around which the cult forms, and the cult, once it develops, creates the demand for a *logos*, an explanation: usually a *vita* or maybe a collection of *miracula*. It would be less than surprising if the same process were to be observed in the case of a secondary relic, which indeed seems to be the case here. The relic appears; a cult forms about it and, eventually, somebody produces this preposterous tale of Galbuis and Candidus to account for its presence in the capital. It is nothing less than what happened in the case of many an otherwise unknown martyr. The two important differences in this case are that the relic in question is a secondary,

not a primary, relic; consequently, the *logos* provided a story about the relic itself, not about the saint whose relic it was.

Regardless of how its cult was engendered, the Robe of the Virgin went on to enjoy enormous popularity and, in due course, it usurped the role of the Girdle as Palladium of the city. This however was not so much due to a steadily expanding cult as to a dramatic and spectacular act of deliverance in which a besieging foe was put to flight from the Queen of Cities. The foe in question was almost certainly the Russians at the time of their devastating assault in 860;²⁸ but, unfortunately, the relevant *Oratio* in which most of the pertinent material lies is undated. In fact, it is an allocution so innocent of internal evidence (the orator assuming his audience knows what he is talking about) that some scholars have even taken it to refer to the siege of 626.²⁹ Close examination of its contents however demonstrates that they are mistaken.

The *Oratio* speaks of a terrible attack launched on an unsuspecting city. So severe was the onslaught that it was decided to remove all the gold- and silver-work from the church of the Theotokos at Blachernae (in its vulnerable position on the Horn) lest the enemy break in and plunder it. In their zeal to accomplish their task the workman responsible for this evacuation entered the chapel of the Robe of the Virgin. They appear to have opened the casket for they are said to have found a piece of imperial (purple) fabric which they naturally assumed to be the very Robe in question, so they took it to the patriarch

²⁸ Michael II and Theophilus are said to have processed around the ramparts with the Robe in 822 (Theophanes Cont. 14 [p.59 Bonn], Genesis 2.5 [p.28 Lesmueller-Werner/Thurn]) and a similar procession to have taken place in 717 (Cedrenus I 790 Bonn), putting a foe to flight in both instances. But since all the authorities for these events wrote well after 860, it is likely that their perception has been coloured by more recent events. There is great confusion concerning which relics went round the walls and when.

²⁹ Theodore Syncellus *Oratio in depositionem pretiosae vestis Deiparae in Blachernis* (BHG 1058), ed. François Combefis, *Graecolat. Patrum Bibliothecae Novum Auctarium* II (Paris 1648), *Historia Haerisis Monothelitarum* 751–786 (n.b. the 23rd and 24th columns are incorrectly numbered and should be 773, 774). J. L. van Dieten, *Geschichte der griechischen Patriarchen von Konstantinopel* (Amsterdam 1972) 16ff.; and Wortley, *Byzantine Studies/Etudes byzantines* 4 (1977) 111–126.

who locked it up in the treasury of the Great Church (774B–778A). The *Oratio* now passes quickly on, without saying anything about the intervening events, to a time when the enemy had withdrawn and the danger was past. Once things were back to normal, patriarch and emperor appointed a solemn high festival for the replacement of the relic at Blachernae, now presumably restored to its pre-war glory. All night long it lay at Saint Laurence's church (which once again provides a station for a relic in course of translation); then, next morning, a solemn procession wound its way to Blachernae amid scenes of enthusiastic devotion. When the patriarch arrived in the sanctuary he opened the casket (in which presumably the workmen replaced it after making their discovery) only to find that the imperial purple fabric had crumbled away to dust, revealing the actual relic in pristine condition.³⁰ This the hierarch took up with fearful hands and held up for all to see (a solemn elevation and exhibition) after which he replaced it; the solemnities concluded with the Divine Liturgy and general communion (778A–784A).

There are several reasons for believing this event to have taken place shortly after the Russian siege of 860. First: Photius, who was patriarch in 860, says quite specifically in his homily on the Russian attack: "Immediately, as the Virgin's robe went round the walls, the barbarians abandoned the siege and broke camp," thus establishing a definite and unparalleled connection between the Robe and the deliverance of the city in 860.³¹ Secondly: after 860 there is unmistakable evidence that it was no longer the Girdle (as heretofore) but the Robe of the Virgin that was regarded as the Palladium of the city.³²

³⁰ There are numerous references to relics being wrapped in imperial purple silk. If this were exposed to the air after many years of being in an air-tight chamber, rapid disintegration might well have ensued, as archaeologists well know.

³¹ *The Homilies of Photius*, transl. Cyril Mango (Cambridge [Mass.] 1958) Homily IV (p.102, cf. p.109) (II 41–42 and 55–56 Aristarches). The testimony of the Logothete (Leo Grammaticus: p.241 Bonn) seems to corroborate the complementary statements of Photius and the *Oratio*.

³² This can be clearly appreciated by comparing the *Canons* of Joseph the Hymnographer on the Marian relics, one on the Girdle (V, PG 105.1009–

Thirdly: prior to 860 the references to the robe use indefinite terms for it: ἑσθήις, περιβόλαιον, περιβολή, φορεσία) whereas after 860 a very precise term comes into use: ὠμοφόριον, usually contracted into μαφόριον, a shawl-like vesture covering the head and shoulders.³³ It would appear that, unlike the Girdle at Chalcoprateia, the Robe at Blachernae was only known to be “an item of clothing” until the patriarch elevated it and revealed to all *which* item of clothing it was. The *Oratio* rather emphasises this by insisting that this was the revelation of a previously unseen mystery (τὸ μυστήριον ... τὸ τέως ἀθέατον).³⁴ Fourthly: after 860 references to this relic (which are few and far between before that date) begin to proliferate and the relic itself to assume great importance. For instance, it was at the shrine of the *maphorion* that Theophano, the first wife of Leo VI, chose to live out her days after being rejected.³⁵ The emperor Romanus I Lecapenos took this relic into battle with him,³⁶ and by some ironic coincidence this relic provided the imagery for the Russian feast of *Pokrov Bogoroditsi* which Byzantium either never knew, or abandoned it at an early date.³⁷ Fifthly: in the liturgy prescribed for the feast of the Deposition of the Robe in the tenth-century *Typicon* (I 328.13ff.) the Robe and the Girdle are not nearly so clearly distinguished from each other as they came to be before long; this could indicate that they were in the process of changing roles at that time.

1017) and one on the Robe (IV, 1003–1009), possibly written respectively before and after his period of exile which seems to have coincided with Photius’ first patriarchate (858–867). Euthymius’ homily on the Girdle (see above) contains no reference to the relic as civic Palladium, a role it had undoubtedly once enjoyed. It looks very suspiciously as though the Robe had eclipsed it.

³³ E.g. Joseph the Hymnographer *Canon V*; *Vita Sancti Andreae sali* 204 (PG 111.848–849).

³⁴ *Oratio* 775D, 778D, 780C–E, 782A–D.

³⁵ *Vita Euthymii*, ed. Patricia Karlin-Hayter (Brussels 1970) p.37: ἐν τῷ τῆς ἀγίας σοροῦ τεμένει τῷ ἐν Βλαχέρναις.

³⁶ Theophanes Cont. 6.15, Symeon Magister *Const.Porph.* 29 (pp.407, 736 Bonn).

³⁷ See J. Wortley, “Hagia Skepê and Pokrov Bogoroditsi: A Curious Coincidence,” *AnalBoll* 89 (1971) 149–154.

The later history of the *maphorion* is somewhat confused. Presumably it survived the fire which devastated the Blachernae church in 1070, for in 1087 Alexios I Comnenos used it as a battle-standard when he went to war against the Patzinaks. He was holding it aloft with his own hand before Dristra (says Anna) but there was a strong wind blowing. Under the shock of a severe blow the emperor was forced to lower the relic-standard, which he hid in some bushes. Anna says nothing of its recovery, so maybe it was lost (as Chalandon supposed); but probably the standard contained no more than a mere fragment of the relic.³⁸

Two twelfth-century visitors to the capital knew of both the Girdle and the Robe, but they give conflicting accounts as to where each lay. According to Anthony of Novgorod both relics lay at Blachernae, while Anon. Mercati reverses them, locating the Robe at Chalcostrateia, the Girdle at Blachernae. In the *Patria*, *zônê* and *maphorion* are said to lie at Chalcostrateia and Blachernae respectively, as one would expect, but Chalcostrateia is said also to house another vestment [*esthês*] of the Virgin.³⁹ The interesting thing about this is that both our twelfth-century visitors also note a *third* Marian relic, also textile, curiously reminiscent of what Antoninus reported in the Sion Basilica at Jerusalem ca. 570: "le bandeau frontal," *velamen eius*.⁴⁰

Blachernae was certainly in possession of a *soros* believed to contain clothing of the Virgin, clothing which, as we saw, turned out in fact to be her shawl (*maphorion*) when the *soros* was opened in 860. There is however another and quite different explanation of how that relic came to be at Blachernae in the first place. Ebersolt tried to resolve this embarrassment by

³⁸ *Alexiad* 7.3; F. Chalandon, *Essai sur le règne d'Alexis Comnène* (Paris 1900) 116.

³⁹ *Patria Const.* 3.147 (II 263 Preger).

⁴⁰ Anthony of Novgorod pp.57, 58. Anon. Mercati 1, 11 (*supra autem altare ipsius ecclesiae* [one of the three at Chalcostrateia, see 10] *est posita argentea archa et iacet intus vestimentum sanctae Mariae Dei genitricis*; while of Blachernae (49), *in altari ipsius ecclesiae est posita argentea archa et iacet intus cinctura sancte Dei genitricis*. He appears to have got his notes confused.

distinguishing two separate Marian vestments (in addition to the girdle at Chalcostrateia), the *maphorion* and the shroud; for Robert de Clari noted what he identified as the shroud of *Christ* at Blachernae in 1203. As *that* relic was well known to be at the Lighthouse church in the Great Palace (Anon. Mercati 1), “Il a pu confondre le linceul de la Vierge avec celui du Christ,” concludes Ebersolt.⁴¹ There is in fact some very late testimony that Juvenal did send the winding-sheet,⁴² but it is so late and the evidence of Robert de Clari so feeble that it is difficult to take either very seriously. One possibility which might be worth considering is that *Euthymiac History* was deliberately contrived to displace the very disreputable legend of Galbuis and Candidus, but, alas, as the proverb says: “He who comes from afar can lie with impunity.” The truth of the matter may be irretrievably lost in the mists of time.

August, 2004

Department of History
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
wortley@cc.umanitoba.ca

⁴¹J. Ebersolt, *Sanctuaires de Byzance* (Paris 1923) 45 n.4; Robert de Clari, *Conquête de Constantinople* c.92: “There was ... [a church] called My lady Saint Mary of Blachernae where was kept the *syndoine* in which Our Lord had been wrapped, which stood up straight every Friday so that the features of Our Lord could be plainly seen there. And no-one, either Greek or French, ever knew what became of this *syndoine* after the city was taken,” transl. E. H. McNeal, *The Conquest of Constantinople* (New York 1936) 112. As Ebersolt comments: “Son témoignage n’est pas clair; il ne semble pas qu’il ait vu la relique lui-même.” He certainly seems to have confused it with the “customary miracle”: see Vincent Grumel, “Le ‘miracle habituel’ de Notre-Dame des Blachernes,” *EchOr* 30 (1931) 129–146.

⁴²*SynaxCP* p.794.33–34 (a reprise of the *Euthymiac History*); Nicephorus Call. *HE* 14.2 (PG 146.1061).