



## ***THE MILITARY USE OF THE ICON OF THE THEOTOKOS AND ITS MORAL LOGIC IN THE HISTORIANS OF THE NINTH-TWELFTH CENTURIES***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Starting at least by the late tenth century, Byzantine emperors took icons of the Mother of God with them on campaign. This article examines the appearances of such icons in the narratives of historical texts. It argues that the intercessory role of the icon in these episodes adhered distantly to the moral logic that determined the Virgin's salvation of the City in the siege of 626, but was turned by each historian to serve the critical or panegyric goals of his own work, often with an ironic effect. The emperor and the Virgin could not share the same stage as equal protagonists.

*Metadata:* Byzantine icons, Theotokos (or Mother of God), Byzantine Historiography, Imperial ideology

### **RESUMEN**

A partir al menos de finales del siglo X, los emperadores bizantinos llevaron consigo en las campañas militares iconos de la Virgen María (la Theotokos o Madre de Dios). Este artículo examina la presencia de tales iconos en las narraciones históricas. Propone que el papel mediador del icono en estos episodios estaba vagamente conectado con la lógica moral que determinó la salvación de la ciudad por parte de la Virgen en el asedio de 626, pero fue convertido por cada historiador en un instrumento al servicio de los objetivos críticos o encomiásticos de su propia obra, a menudo con un efecto irónico. El emperador y la Virgen podían no compartir el mismo escenario como protagonistas paritarios.

*Metadata:* Iconos bizantinos, Theotokos (Madre de Dios), Historiografía bizantina, ideología imperial

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In the Byzantine historians of the ninth-twelfth centuries we encounter a set of stories about the military role of icons of the Theotokos. The set is small, but the stories are striking. The presence of the icon often frames events within a moral narrative, and the human protagonists are often defined by how they interact with the icon. Now, in real life most Byzantines, whether in peacetime or in war, would have prayed before such icons. By the eleventh century, their armies too were accompanied by a host of religious accoutrements, and the emperors, when they led military expeditions in person, would often take icons of the Mother of God with them and treat them as part of the army's defensive arsenal. But the historians did not mention the icons simply because they were there, any more than they mentioned anything for that banal reason. The appearance of icons in these works was meant to promote in specific ways the thematic trajectories of the text at specific moments in the narrative. Those appearances also drew their power from the Byzantines' general assumptions about the military-moral role of the Theotokos, though the historians tended to modulate those assumptions in paradoxical or ironic ways, usually in order to comment on the character of the emperor in question. The goal of this paper is to examine the moral and narrative logic that informs the appearance of such icons in the historians of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

In Byzantine tradition, the military role of the Theotokos bursts on the scene in the Avar siege of Constantinople in 626. We have little evidence for the next two centuries. Then, the Rus' attack on Constantinople in 860 also elicited from the patriarch Photios a strong narrative of her personal intervention to save the Romans. In a previous study, I argued that the primary logic informing these accounts, especially those of 626, was derived from the paradoxical definitions of the Theotokos' role in the Akathistos Hymn of the fifth century. In the Hymn, the Theotokos is the vehicle by which God circumvented metaphysical hierarchies in order to paradoxically make himself a man and thereby enable mortal humanity to partake of immortal nature.<sup>1</sup> The military role of the Theotokos elaborated in the seventh century was an extension of the same paradox: the most unmilitary figure imaginable becomes the cause of military salvation. The moral narrative works as follows: God sends an enemy to chastise the Romans for their sins, the Romans repent, pray for forgiveness to the Mother of God, and she then pleads with her Son to spare the penitent Romans, whom she pities. Such a narrative highlighted Christian virtues and Christian dramatic relationships, and it generally reflected the supreme power of faith and prayer. There was, however, an alternative logic at work within the texts generated in 626 according to which the Theotokos personally took part in the fighting itself. These images drew upon the pagan image of Athena in battle but created a jarring contrast when coupled with the "penitent" version. There were two rival moral logics at work here.

There was a reason, I propose, why these two sieges and not any others generated accounts that stressed the intervention of the Theotokos: in both cases the emperor (Herakleios and Michael III respectively) was absent from the City, leaving the patriarch (i.e., Sergios and Photios) to stage-manage

<sup>1</sup> A. Kaldellis, "A Union of Opposites?: The Moral Logic and Corporeal Presence of the Theotokos on the Field of Battle", in C. Gastgeber et al. (eds.), *Pour l'amour de Byzance: Hommage à Paolo Odorico*, Frankfurt am Main 2013, 131-144.

the theatrics of the resistance and fashion the corresponding narrative. It would not have been possible, or at least not easy, to project such a narrative had the emperor been present and (inevitably) claimed credit for the victory. Even when the emperors piously ascribed the victory to divine help, that was meant to enhance their own power. This is a crucial point: the extension of the “anti-logic” of the Akathistos to the sphere of warfare, and its betrayal by the combat-logic of “Athena,” was made possible because the emperor happened at a crucial moment to be absent from the capital.

The episodes from eleventh- and twelfth-century historiography to be discussed below represent later stages in the evolution of this tradition, but we must note at the outset that important aspects of their narrative context are different. First, the emperor and the Virgin have to share the stage, though the focus is always on the former. Second, the Virgin’s place has been assumed by her icon, which shifted the dynamic of corporeality and indirect agency. Third, the events usually do not take place at Constantinople and do not always involve a defensive war: these could be quasi-offensive or even civil wars.

In the siege of 626, the patriarch Sergios placed icons of the Mother of God on the city gates to bring her wrath down on anyone who attacked them, a form of talismanic thinking with clear ancient precedents. He also staged processions along the walls that carried her robe (later called the *maphorion*, a holy relic) as well as an acheiropoietos icon of Christ (also basically a relic). In the attack of 860, Photios again brought out the *maphorion* in a procession, allowing the citizens to focalize their prayers to her and it was this that precipitated her intercession (and God’s intervention).<sup>2</sup> But how was the Mother of

<sup>2</sup> For 626, see Theodoros Synkellos, *On the Attack* 15, 17: L. Sternbach’s original (but inaccessible) edition was reprinted by F. Makk, *Traduction et commentaire de l’homélie écrite probablement par Théodore le Syncelle sur le siège de Constantinople en 626*, Szeged 1975; for 860, Photios, *Homily 4.4*, tr. C. Mango, *The Homilies of Photius Patriarch of Constantinople*, Cambridge, MA 1958, 102. B. V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power: The Mother*

God's agency represented when the emperor was present? How did these two power-houses interact and share the credit or, troublingly, the blame? I would like to trace the gradual evolution of their interaction between the ninth and the eleventh centuries before turning to the accounts in the later historians.

For one thing, changes in the narrative framework required adjustments to the moral dynamic: in 626 the Theotokos was established as the protectress of Constantinople against barbarian attacks, whereas emperors often campaigned away from there. The theology of the Theotokos' intervention (as outlined above) would be difficult to apply to a campaign away from the capital. Its narrative logic of sin, punishment, penitance, and salvation was not so easy to use when the emperor set out to teach the Bulgars a lesson. This was especially true after Iconoclasm when the empire went on the offensive. How could the Mother of God reach out to those theaters of war? And,

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*of God in Byzantium*, University Park, PA 2006, ch. 2, has ably sorted through all the traditions regarding the icons and relics used in the siege (see 41 and n. 24 on pagan antecedents); cf. C. A. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual*, Oxford 1992. The sermon on the Akathistos attributed to Andreas of Crete features a zonê as the game-changing relic rather than the *maphorion*: T. P. Themelis, "Ο Ἀκάθιστος Ὕμνος", *Nea Sion* 6 (1907) 826-833, here 828, and later traditions featured processions with icons of the Theotokos. For a survey of emperors and relics, albeit with little analysis, see S. Mergiali-Sahas, "Byzantine Emperors and Holy Relics", *JÖB* 51 (2001) 41-60. The first emperor who campaigned with an image of the Mother of God was Herakleios in 610, against the tyrant Phokas: Georgios of Pisidia, *Herakleias* 2.15, ed. A. Pertusi, *Giorgio di Pisidia: Poemi*, vol. 1, *Panegirici epici*, Ettal 1960, 252. The text is ambiguous and may be a poetic elaboration: B. V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power* (cit. *supra*), 44-46; at any rate, it is caught up in a mythological allusion. The *Chronicle* of Theophanes says that his "ships had on their masts reliquaries and icons of the Mother of God (as Georgios the Pisidian relates)" (AM 6102; p. 298), though that is not what Georgios relates; tr. C. Mango – R. Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813*, Oxford 1997, 427; P. Speck, "The Virgin's Help for Constantinople", *BMGS* 27 (2003) 266-271, here 266-267. For Theophanes' use of Georgios, see J. Howard-Johnson, "The Official History of Heraclius' Persian Campaigns", in E. Dabrowa (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East*, Krakow 1994, 57-87, here 60-67. For the broader question of icons in this earlier period, see now L. Brubaker, "Icons before Iconoclasm?", in *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto Medioevo*, Spoleto, Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 1998, 2:1215-1254, here 1229.

finally, how could she be present on the battlefield without detracting from the emperor's glory? The answer to that last question is that the Theotokos generally does not intervene as a personal agent in military narratives in which the emperor is present.<sup>3</sup> This is not because she ceased to be imagined as a personal agent;<sup>4</sup> rather, she was just kept off the battlefield. Her presence there was to be restricted to relics and icons, which thereby become weapons in an arsenal wielded by the emperors. The shift from personal intervention to only iconic surrogates enabled the narrative to remain focused on the emperor. As we will also see, relics and icons were not precisely surrogates for the Theotokos, as they were not equivalent in terms of "presence." The martial Theotokos depicted in the sources for the siege of 626 was invincible, but her icons, it turns out, provided no guarantee of victory, at least not in the view of the later historians. Ultimately, the emperor bore all the blame (or reaped the credit) whenever he was present.

An incident from the reign of Romanos I Lakapenos reveals how the basic narrative of the Theotokos' intervention could be modified so as to be invoked in different circumstances. The incident is an interesting transitional moment in the development of the underlying logic of the Theotokos' military role. In 924, Symeon of Bulgaria marched his army to the walls of the City and requested to meet with the emperor. Romanos agreed, but while he was arranging for security Symeon burned "the church of the most holy Theotokos at Pege, the one that the emperor Justinian had built." Before tr-

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<sup>3</sup> For a case of indirect intervention, revealed only in a dream, see the battle of Dostolon waged by Ioannes Tzimiskes against the Rus' in 971: Leon the Deacon, *History* 9.9, ed. C. B. Hase, *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, Bonn 1828, and the translation with detailed notes by A.-M. Talbot – D. F. Sullivan, *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, Washington D.C. 2005; see A. Kaldellis, "The Original Source for Tzimiskes' Balkan Campaign (971) and the Emperor's Classicizing Propaganda", *BMGS* 37 (2013) 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in accounts of the afterworld: J. Baun, *Tales from Another Byzantium: Celestial Journey and Local Community in the Medieval Greek Apocrypha*, Cambridge 2007.



ying to persuade a fellow Christian king to desist from war, Romanos and the patriarch Nikolaos went to a similar such church, the one at Blachernai, where Romanos fell to the ground and, “drenching it with his tears,” begged the Theotokos to soften Symeon’s proud heart. Then, under heavy guard, he actually took her robe with him to the meeting, which had a happy conclusion (after a loaded speech by the emperor stressing Christian harmony).<sup>5</sup> We can see in this narrative a modification of the siege narratives of 626 and 860. It has in common the barbarians at the gates, the Romans’ tearful pleas before the Theotokos, the bringing out of the *maphorion*, and the Theotokos’ intervention, only now the latter is implied rather than stated, far less depicted. The narrative spotlight is on the emperor. Moreover, and this is crucial, her role is not to obtain from God pardon for the Romans’ well-earned punishments but rather to help them against their enemies. We can only imagine what her motives were. Was she angered by Symeon’s burning of the church? Her personal agency is not present. Instead, the narrative creates an image of impious Bulgarians and a pious Roman leadership, which is sufficient to “explain” the course of events. Thus, the basic narrative was sufficiently adjusted and could be applied to new dramatic circumstances, even offensive wars.

A precedent for the accounts in the historians of the middle period was established by Andreas the Skythian, a general of Basileios I, who fought against the emir of Tarsos. In 878, he received a letter from the emir that insulted Jesus and his mother. Andreas, “with many tears,” placed this letter before an icon of the Mother of God – presumably this was on the frontier, not in Constantinople – and he asked for her help against this “arrogant barbarian.” Andreas did in fact defeat him in the ensuing battle.<sup>6</sup> This version,

<sup>5</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, Book 6: *Romanos I* § 15, ed. I. Bekker, Bonn 1838, 406-407.

<sup>6</sup> *The Life of Basileios I (Vita Basilii)* 50, ed. and tr. I. Ševčenko, *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur liber quo Vita Basilii imperatoris amplectitur*, Berlin – Boston 2011. For a theory about the possible hagiographic origins of the infor-

while preserving the same basic narrative, is more flexible, as it is not set near the capital and does not require a holy relic. The barbarian is again cast as the aggressor, in fact he personally insults the Theotokos, and there are no sins of which the Romans must repent. Her intervention is not depicted; it is, rather, implied by the moral terms of the dramatic contrast itself (impious barbarian and tearful Roman leading to Roman victory).

We see in these two episodes (Andreas and Romanos) how the basic siege narratives of 626 and 860, their underlying theology, and accompanying rituals (including tearful entreaties and use of relics and icons), were being modified to suit new circumstances. Primary agency, however, was retained now by human agents, while the Mother of God was being relegated to a background position in terms of narrative representation. Also, her motivation has subtly shifted from compassion with the Romans, who have been (with some justice) attacked and are about to be utterly destroyed, to her support for the struggles of the Romans against barbarians. In 626 and 860 the dramatic tension that precipitates her involvement is the imminent destruction of Constantinople, but in the stories about Andreas the Skythian and Romanos I its place is taken by insults directed at her by the impious barbarian foe of the Romans. The narratives do not depict the Theotokos as angry at these insults – she is not a wrathful warrior – but it is necessary for the Romans to be moved to pious tears by these outrages. Thus, the underlying moral logic has shifted while retaining many elements of continuity.

From the ninth century (at least), emperors would pray at churches of the Theotokos before leaving on campaign and give thanks there when returning in triumph (though their routes included other stops too).<sup>7</sup> A prayer

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mation about Andreas, see A. Kazhdan, “Saint Andrew the Stratelates and Andrew the Stratelates, the Scythian”, in M. V. Anastos et al. (eds.), *To Ellenikon: Studies in Honour of Speros Vyronis, Jr.*, vol. 1, *Hellenic Antiquity and Byzantium*, New York 1993, 145-152.

<sup>7</sup> The Caesar Bardas in Theophanes Continuatus, Book 4: *Michael III* § 41 (p. 204); Basileios I in the Book of Ceremonies, app. to Book 1 (pp. 499, 501), ed. J. J. Reiske, *De*



was chanted at the court on the feast of the Ascension, at least in the tenth century, addressing her as the “source of life for the Romans” and imploring her thusly: “you alone must command the armies along with our lords... for in you they have a trophy-giving strength against the enemies.”<sup>8</sup> Συστρατήγησον can also mean to “march out along with someone,” though it is not clear in which form she would do that in this century. The Byzantine army, of course, was increasingly drenched with Christian piety. Every effort was made to strengthen its morale with prayers, liturgies, symbols (crosses and later icons), and rites of purification.<sup>9</sup> In his *Taktika* (ca. 900), Leon VI commanded that soldiers “constantly” pray to God, the Theotokos, and the saints.<sup>10</sup> A military service from that same era prays for the defeat of the barbarians who blaspheme against Christ and his Mother (which exactly mirrors the logic of Andreas, who fought against the emir of Tarsos).<sup>11</sup> It is not

*Cerimoniis aulae byzantinae*, 2 vols., Bonn 1829-1830; Ioannes Tzimiskes in Leon the Deacon, *History* 8.1; see M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West*, Cambridge – Paris 1986, 155-156, 213, 249. Again, Herakleios may have preceeded them in this: C. Angelidi – T. Papamastorakis, “Picturing the Spiritual Protector: From Blachernai to Hodegetria; Images of the Mother of God”, in M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, Milan – London – New York 2000, 209-217, here 210, for the evidence.

<sup>8</sup> *Book of Ceremonies* 1.8 (p. 55); see J. Shepard, “Information, Disinformation and Delay in Byzantine Diplomacy”, *ByzF* 10 (1985) 233-293, here 239-240; B. V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power* (cit. n. 2), 29.

<sup>9</sup> J.-R. Viellefond, “Les pratiques religieuses dans l’armée byzantine d’après les traités militaires”, *Revue des études anciennes* 37 (1935) 322-330; M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory* (cit. n. 7), 244-252; G. T. Dennis, “Religious Services in the Byzantine Army”, in E. Carr et al. (eds.), *EYΛOΓHMA: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft, S.J.*, Rome 1993, 107-117. There are many recent discussions of this theme, e.g., J. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, London 1999, ch. 1, but they are caught up in the debate regarding the concept of Holy War, which I want to avoid here.

<sup>10</sup> Leon VI, *Taktika*, epilogue 66, in *PG* 107, 1089; also ed. and tr. G. T. Dennis, *The Taktika of Leo VI*, Washington, D.C. 2010.

<sup>11</sup> A. Pertusi, “Una acolouthia militare inedita del X secolo”, *Aevum* 22 (1948) 145-168, here 156.

impossible that the Theotokos was depicted on military standards, but we do not hear anything about icons yet.<sup>12</sup> While she first appears on coins in the reign of Leon VI, these do not have overtly military connotations.<sup>13</sup> She was not prominently featured in the coinage for a while after that, but the campaigning emperors Nikephoros Phokas and Ioannes Tzimiskes placed her on their coins holding the labaron with the emperor.<sup>14</sup> It is right after their reigns that emperors and icons of the Theotokos appear together on the battlefield.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Theotokos' presence on the battlefield was largely confined to her icon. This development coincided with the expansion of the emperor's own battlefield presence, including his personal heroism. This development was foreshadowed in the later tenth century and would reappear dynamically in the late eleventh in the military values of the Komnenoi dynasty.<sup>15</sup> While the military context was henceforth utterly unlike that of 626, we can still see how the icons were situated and manipulated so as to evoke the same religious modes of that definitive moment in Byzantine history. The first such icon that we know of was present at the battle of Abydos in 989 between Basileios II and the rebel Bardas Phokas, a significantly different setting than the siege of 626. With the two armies facing each other, Basileios "stood out alone in front of his line holding a sword and clasping, with his other arm, an icon of the Mother of the Word, treating

<sup>12</sup> For military standards in this period, see J. F. Haldon, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus: Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, Vienna 1990, 270-274; also A. W. Carr, "The Mother of God in Public", in M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Mother of God* (cit. n. 7), 324-337, here 330.

<sup>13</sup> V. Penna, "The Mother of God on Coins and Lead Seals", in M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Mother of God* (cit. n. 7), 208-217, here 210.

<sup>14</sup> A. W. Carr, "The Mother of God in Public" (cit. n. 12), 326; B. V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power* (cit. n. 2), 34-35.

<sup>15</sup> A. Kazhdan, "The Aristocracy and the Imperial Idea", in M. Angold (ed.), *The Byzantine Aristocracy IX to XII Centuries* (B.A.R. 221), Oxford 1984, 43-57.

it as a most potent shield against the other man's mad charge."<sup>16</sup> Depending on the precise meaning of διαγκαλίζομαι, it is possible that he was clasping the icon as a shield (to complement his sword in the other hand). This would be an extremely literal and physical interpretation of the hymns and sermons that called the Theotokos a "shield." The spiritual has here become absolutely material: the image of the Theotokos had literally become a shield. Moreover, Basileios' stance encoded two contradictory intentions: to ride out ahead of the line signaled an intention to engage in heroic single combat, and was so interpreted by Phokas, but Basileios held the icon in a fundamentally defensive way, as if he were Sergios on the walls of Constantinople in 626. Also, while the rebel Phokas fell dead off his horse during his charge, our main source, Psellos, undermines the narrative of the icon's efficacy by insinuating that poison may have also played a part in the emperor's victory.<sup>17</sup>

The first reference to an "icon of the Mother of God that the emperors habitually took with them in their wars as a kind of general and guardian of the entire army (ὡσπερ τινὰ στρατηγὸν καὶ τοῦ παντὸς στρατοπέδου φύλακα ἐν τοῖς πολέμοις συνήθως ἐπάγονται)" occurs in Psellos' sarcastic account of the disastrous campaign of Romanos III against Aleppo in 1030. Psellos notes, in the aftermath of the plundering of the Roman camp, that "this icon alone was not captured by the hands of the barbarians," which we can read as a sign of its power until we realize that it was supposed to do far

<sup>16</sup> Psellos, *Chronographia* 1.16, ed. S. Impellizzeri, *Michele Psello: Imperatori di Bisanzio (Cronografia)*, 2 vols., Milan 1984. The rise of the military use of icons has been discussed by Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*; see also A. W. Carr, "Court Culture and Cult Icons in Middle Byzantine Constantinople", in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, Washington, D.C. 1997, 81-99; the focus here will be on different aspects of that history. I will pass by here the icon of the Theotokos that Tzimiskes showcased at his triumph in 971 because we hear of it only after the emperor's return and because of the problems associated with the source the Leon the Deacon and Ioannes Skylitzes used for this episode (see above).

<sup>17</sup> A. Kaldellis, *The Argument of Psellos' Chronographia*, Leiden – Boston 1999, 62-66.

more than merely save itself. Psellos then mocks the way the emperor clasped it, wet it with his tears, and talked to it with affection, recalling all its past benefactions to the Romans.<sup>18</sup> He has here twisted the motif of crying before the icon of the Theotokos by placing it in the aftermath of a defeat following an offensive attack, rather than in the lead-up to a victory in a defensive battle, which fatally undermines the moral logic of Romanos' affective behavior. By stripping away from his account of events any hint of supernatural intervention, Psellos exposes purely human weaknesses: Romanos was deluded. The historian is not writing a narrative of supernatural power, but of mortal fallibility. In fact, this is the theme that dominates our sources from the eleventh and twelfth centuries in contrast to the narratives of 626 and 860. They reuse the same motifs associated with the Theotokos' martial power but turn them to different, in fact subversive, purposes. As a result of our sources' literary biases in this period (which we may not convert into a factual statistical table), the icons of the Theotokos appear to be singularly ineffective on the battlefield. Yet, in these sources, it is not so much that the icons cannot overcome the enemy; what the icons cannot cope with is the increasing incompetence and foolishness of the Romans themselves, especially of their emperors. Whereas in the narratives of 626 and 860, the emperor's absence highlighted the paradoxical prowess of the Theotokos, in the later narratives the presence of her icon often bodes ill for an emperor.

Michael Attaleiates claims, in an episode set under Romanos IV Diogenes, that emperors took an icon of the Blachernai Theotokos on campaign

<sup>18</sup> Psellos, *Chronographia* 3.10-11. For Psellos' depiction of Romanos III, see A. Kaldellis, *The Argument* (cit. n. 17), 28-30; for this episode, 63, 111; also S. Efthymiades, "Michael Psellos and the Death of Romanos III (*Chronographia* III 26): A Failed Bath of Regeneration and a Non-Ascent from Hades", in L. Hoffmann (ed.), *Zwischen Polis, Provinz und Peripherie: Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Kultur*, Wiesbaden 2005, 255-265.

“as an invincible weapon (ὡς ἀπροσμάχητον ὄπλον).”<sup>19</sup> His intention in revealing this detail here is possibly ironic, given the catastrophic defeat that the icon was incapable of averting, and also ominous, given that he places it in the lead-up to the battle of Mantzikert (1071), the major defeat of his age. He mentions the icon because a soldier accused of theft had invoked its protection as an “intercessor (μεσίτης)” before Romanos, who nevertheless still imposed a harsh punishment, disregarding the plea to the icon. It is possible that this episode functions as a symbolic presage of the emperor’s own defeat, though neither the icon nor the Theotokos as a personal agent are mentioned again. By emplotting the event onto the template of the moral narrative of 626, we see that Romanos was supposed to act more like God when a man guilty of a crime and expecting just punishment implored the Theotokos to act as a mediator and spare him. This was what the Romans themselves had collectively done to secure salvation from a foreign foe. But Romanos behaved in an unforgiving way and the icon, it seems, was just as unable to protect the soldier as the army in general. With Attaleiates we are not dealing with “theology” anyway or even necessarily Christian modes of thought.<sup>20</sup> The episode with the soldier is one of a series of omens and dramatic reversals that lead up to the defeat of Mantzikert. We are far from any sense that the Theotokos took an interest in what happened in battle. The focus, as with Psellos, is on the human protagonists of the drama of history: Romanos IV was found wanting in Christian virtues, which presages his fall, whereas his victor, the Seljuk sultan Alp Arslan, displayed eminently Christian virtues for all that he

<sup>19</sup> Michael Attaleiates, *History 153*, ed. and tr. I. Pérez Martín, *Miguel Atalicates: Historia*, Madrid 2002; tr. A. Kaldellis – D. Krallis, *Michael Attaleiates: The History*, Washington, D.C. 2012; see A. W. Carr, “Court Culture and Cult Icons” (cit. n. 16), 93.

<sup>20</sup> A. Kaldellis, “A Byzantine Argument for the Equivalence of All Religions: Michael Attaleiates on Ancient and Modern Romans”, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 14 (2007) 1-22.

was not even a Christian.<sup>21</sup> So where as victory and defeat follow the standard template, the icon is here used to subvert the emperor.

In her account of the Byzantine defeat by the “Skythians” (Pechenegs, probably in 1086), Anna reveals that her father Alexios had actually taken the *maphorion* with him to the battlefield. After his army fled, Alexios, holding a sword in one hand and the *maphorion* in the other, stood his ground with a few companions.<sup>22</sup> This evokes the heroic stand that Basileios II took between the two armies in 989, only with a relic this time rather than an icon; it also may evoke the defensive stand of the patriarch Sergios on the walls of the City, carrying the very same relic. But as with the incidents in Psellos and Attaleiates, this object too did not bring victory. Nor did Alexios do anything heroic after his stand: he was persuaded to flee the battle to fight another day, which is not to say that Anna was being ironic, for irony was not one of her strong points when writing about her father.

Niketas Choniates, however, the last historian we shall consider here, was a master of nuance and subversion. He reports the “wise plan” of Ioannes II Komnenos in battle with the Pechenegs in 1122: “whenever the Roman phalanxes were hard pressed by the enemy falling furiously upon them, he would look upon the icon of the Mother of God and, wailing loudly and gesturing pitifully, shed tears hotter than the sweat of battle. And it was not in vain that he acted thus.”<sup>23</sup> The emperor won this battle, but we observe how the behavior of wailing and crying before the Theotokos has gradually moved from the walls of Constantinople (626, 860), to just outside the walls (Romanos I), to a provincial church (as did Basileios I’s general Andreas), to the

<sup>21</sup> Attaleiates, *History* 164-165.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 7.3.9, ed. D. R. Reinsch – A. Kambylis, *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, Berlin – New York 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Niketas Choniates, *History* 15, ed. I. A. van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, Berlin – New York 1975; tr. from H. J. Magoulias, *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, Detroit 1984, 10.



battlefield itself. What was once a moment of profound repentance had now become somewhat cynical, a Pavlovian stimulus to be deployed independently of its moral context and more than once, apparently, during a single battle.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to know whether Choniates intended his readers to see the emperor's actions as mechanical rather than as properly pious. Tearful entreaties were deeply emotional responses to singular circumstances, not a "device" to which one could turn at will in response to tactical realities on the battlefield. The emperor's behavior still resonated with the grand narrative of 626, but the moral framework had by this point changed beyond recognition.

In 1133, Ioannes triumphed with the icon of the Theotokos in the chariot, which signaled that the victory was hers.<sup>25</sup> Many threads come together here. It had become standard practice to thank the Theotokos first for victory. Ioannes I Tzimiskes in 971 is the first attested as having placed the icon in a chariot for his triumph.<sup>26</sup> After his victory over the Bulgarians in 1018, Basileios II had thanked the Theotokos in Athens first (our account alludes here to the Akathistos Hymn) and only then had he thanked "God" (not the Theotokos) in Hagia Sophia before retiring to the palace.<sup>27</sup> So too now Ioannes II: after processing through the City behind the Theotokos' chariot he went to Hagia Sophia to thank God. Choniates' account of his triumph also alludes to the second prooimion of the Akathistos (τὰς νίκας ὡς συστρατηγέτιδι ἀμάχῳ ἐπιγραφόμενος) as well as to the prayer of the tenth-century court we saw above that called upon the Theotokos to be a "fellow general" of the emperors. His use of the term ἄμαχος is ambiguous: it means both "invincible" and "non-combatant," "without fighting," the basic antinomy of the Theotokos.

<sup>24</sup> Choniates interestingly cites *Exodus* 17.8-13 here.

<sup>25</sup> Niketas Choniates, *History* 19.

<sup>26</sup> Leon the Deacon, *History* 9.12; with M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory* (cit. n. 7), 171-174.

<sup>27</sup> A. Kaldellis, *The Christian Parthenon: Classicism and Pilgrimage in Byzantine Athens*, Cambridge 2009, ch. 3.

In 1167, Manuel I Komnenos also triumphed behind a chariot bearing an icon of the Theotokos, “the invincible ally and unconquerable fellow general of the emperor.”<sup>28</sup> Choniates adds a curious comparison here. He says that “the axle did not creak loudly,” a clear allusion to Iliad 5.838, where Athena steps onto Diomedes’ chariot, “for it did not carry the dreadful goddess, the pseudo-Virgin Athena, but the true Virgin, who, beyond human logos bore the Logos through logos.” It is noteworthy that the Virgin of the Christians still had not fully shaken off the anxiety of her likeness to Athena. Both were now figures who rode in chariots, bringing victory on the battlefield to the mortal heroes who rode beside them. It is all the more interesting that, in his narrative, their military roles would converge even further as the empire spiraled into decline and, in the end, defeat. In 1186, Isaakios II Angelos placed the icon of the Theotokos Hodegetria above the walls to ward off the rebel Ioannes Branas.<sup>29</sup> A siege mentality had returned as the empire contracted, and the emperors had reverted to the responses of 626. Eustathios of Thessalonike refers sarcastically to the belief held by many Constantinopolitans that “the Hodegetria, the protectress of the City (poliouchos), will be enough, all by itself, to secure our welfare.”<sup>30</sup> Like Choniates after 1204, he too was writing a narrative of defeat (the capture by the Normans of Thessalonike in 1185), in which the Romans’ supernatural protectors failed, or chose not to come to their aid. Later in the Capture of Thessalonike, he notes that the Mother of God “revealed an unfavorable sign, showing that she had turned away from us and did not wish to support us,”<sup>31</sup> namely her icon refused to enter its church at the end of a procession (this was in Thessalonike). Finally, in

<sup>28</sup> Niketas Choniates, *History* 158; tr. Magoulias, *O City of Byzantium*, 90, modified.

<sup>29</sup> Niketas Choniates, *History* 382.

<sup>30</sup> Eustathios of Thessalonike, *The Capture of Thessalonike* 37, ed. and tr. J. Melville-Jones, *Eustathios of Thessaloniki: The Capture of Thessaloniki*, Canberra 1988, 42-43 (modified).

<sup>31</sup> Eustathios of Thessalonike, *The Capture of Thessalonike* 130, ed. and tr. Melville-Jones, *Eustathios of Thessaloniki*, 142-143.

Choniates, we find an event that is clearly meant to foreshadow the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders: “the icon of the Mother of God, which the emperors of the Romans make their fellow general,” was captured in a skirmish by the Latins.<sup>32</sup> Supernatural signs (such as the icon refusing to enter the church), scoffing references to popular beliefs by bishops, and portentous events (the icon’s capture), were deployed by the writers to signal the ultimate failure of the narrative of 626 in 1204. The trajectory of the Theotokos had come full circle, from the City to the battlefield and back again.

The Latins’ capture of the Theotokos’ icon contrasts nicely with another episode recorded by the same writer, which reunites and dramatically closes the parallel history of Athena and the Theotokos. A few pages before the capture of her icon, Choniates relates how the Constantinopolitan mob destroyed a large bronze statue of Athena that stood in the forum of Constantine because it appeared to them to be beckoning on the Crusaders. Choniates gives a detailed description of the statue, dwelling lovingly on its details, and concludes: “so they took up arms against themselves, casting out the patron of manliness and prudence even if only in their image.”<sup>33</sup> The capture of Constantinople was, then, presaged by the capture or destruction of the images of both the Theotokos and Athena, those two palladia of empire, existing in a dialectical and asymmetrical relationship ever since they both “physically” strode the walls of their respective cities (Athens and Constantinople) in late antiquity.

In the middle Byzantine period, the city of Athens drew on the literature and symbolism of the Akathistos that had made Constantinople the City of the Theotokos in 626 and, by doing so, it managed to partially eclipse the

<sup>32</sup> Niketas Choniates, *History* 567.

<sup>33</sup> Niketas Choniates, *History* 558-559 (κὰν τοῖς τύποις αὐτοῖς is ambiguous); see now T. Papamastorakis, “Interpreting the De Signis of Niketas Choniates”, in A. Simpson – S. Efthymiades (eds.), *Niketas Choniates: A Historian and a Write*, Geneva 2009, 209-233, here 211-213, 218-219.

capital, at least insofar as Basileios II traveled there in order to give thanks to the Theotokos and not to Constantinople. Conversely, the functions and attributes of Athena were partially absorbed by the Theotokos at Constantinople, though it was not always possible to accommodate them within the theological antinomies that defined the Mother of God's soteriological role. Was she a fighter in physical, corporeal reality like Athena, or did her power stem from the direct subversion of the "logic of the world," being based on tearful intercession only? Moreover, as the empire became expansionist and as the emperors gradually acquired a greater battlefield presence, the Theotokos was relegated to the background, represented in battle by her icons and relics. These were paraded triumphantly after victories but, when the empire began to lose battles more often than it won them, writers of a more critical stamp, such as Psellos and Choniates, exposed the ironies of their battlefield promises by subverting the conventions of earlier literature and even of religious practice in order to expose human failings. At the end, the fall of the City was a defeat for both Athena and the Theotokos.

In the Byzantine world, tearful entreaties before icons of the Theotokos were not reserved only for grand dramatic narratives: they were part of everyday life and the dramas behind them were of a personal nature and operated on a small scale. But everyday life was not what historians from Psellos to Choniates set out to describe, and encounters with icons are exceptional in their narratives and reserved for dramatic historical moments. For most readers they would have resonated with familiar rituals of daily life, though in the historians encounters with icons were reoriented and made to serve other narrative goals. The grand narrative of 626, centered on repentance and humility, disintegrated as its elements were dispersed, lent their power to other agents (notably the emperors), and were appropriated for diminished and increasingly less theological aims, most prominently (in the historians) imperial critiques.

The Theotokos began her Byzantine career as a theological concept whose purpose was to embody the paradoxes of salvation.<sup>34</sup> She was meant to confute the logic of the world and overturn its values, but became embroiled in them when she was taken as the protector not only (on the theological level) of man against evil but of the imperial capital against its barbarian enemies (and later of many provincial cities, such as Athens and Thessalonike). Her presence on the field wavered between an indirect intercessory role compatible with her nature and lack of inherent power on the one hand and a direct interventionist role on the other that was more entangled in the logic of the world. The language of the Akathistos Hymn, which was meant to explore the paradox at the heart of her theological role,<sup>35</sup> was increasingly taken literally, but “salvation” for its original authors did not mean emperors defeating barbarians. By the eleventh century, she was present only in the form of her icon, which was treated with gestures and language genealogically derived from the grand narrative of 626. The presence of that icon in battle still signaled the transvaluation of the world that Christianity had hoped to effect. The Theotokos was not merely a more powerful figure than the gods of the heathen nations: she represented the rejection of the linear logic that saw “power” in those terms in the first place. Historians have generally been insufficiently perplexed by her military role, taking for granted what makes sense only on the basis of a specific theological view of the world. Her image was a proclamation of faith in a paradoxical message that could not be expressed in words, at least not without the risk of literal misunderstanding.

But the logic of the world has a way of prevailing in the realm of war. In the preface to the fifth book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebios stated that his theme eschewed the bloody wars of the nations, the conquests of generals,

<sup>34</sup> I. Kalavrezou, “Images of the Mother: When the Virgin Mary Became *Meter Theou*”, *DOP* 44 (1990) 165-172, here 166.

<sup>35</sup> L. M. Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn*, Leiden 2001.

and heroic feats of soldiers, and turned instead to the most peaceful wars of the soul. A century later, his continuer Sokrates explained (in the preface to the fifth book of his History) that it was no longer possible to separate ecclesiastical and military history as they had become too interlinked. It was through a similar process of partial adjustment and accommodation that the Theotokos became a martial figure, her image, accompanying Homeric emperors, an object to be captured by barbarians before the fall of the City that she and they were supposed to guard.