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**THEODORE SYNCELLUS, *The Homilies ‘On the Robe’ and ‘On the Siege’*,  
trans. with introduction and notes by MICHAEL WHITBY, Liverpool University  
Press, Liverpool 2024 [= Translated Texts for Historians, 86], pp. 156**

Michael Whitby, Emeritus Professor at the University of Birmingham, has recently published two small-scale homiletic texts dating from the 620s, which pertain to turbulent events in Constantinople and its vicinity in the third decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century – specifically the increasing military threat posed by the Persians, Avars, and Slavs and culminating in the siege of the imperial capital in July/August, 626. The publication is volume 86 of a well-known series founded to introduce professional historians, history teachers, and history-lovers to the English translation of important sources from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. The series is enhanced with a synthetic scholarly commentary. The texts in question are also a unique testimony to changes in the evolution of Byzantium’s spiritual culture and mentality. They testify, for example, to the growing popularity of the cult of the Virgin Mary, whose relics (robes) were kept – beginning around 470 – in the church in Blachernae<sup>1</sup>; and to the emerging view of Constantinople as not only the most significant centre of the Empire and the entire Christian ecumene, but also a city enjoying a special

providential status, namely – the constant care of divine powers: God himself and the Virgin Mary.

The first of these homilies, entitled *On the Deposition at Blachernae of the Honoured Robe of the Mother of God* (for convenience’s sake, it is referred to in Michael Whitby’s commentary as *On the Robe*), was probably first delivered on 2 July 624, during the ceremonial redeposition of the Virgin Mary’s robes in the church in Blachernae. Since on the eve of the Avar invasion in June 623, the church was located beyond the main line of Constantinople’s fortifications, the robes had been removed from it for safety reasons. Alternatively, the text may have been created in 625 to mark the celebration of the anniversary of the relic’s restoration. The second and more extensive work, *Concerning the Insane Move of the Godless Avars and Persians against This God-Guarded City and Their Shameful Withdrawal by the Mercy of God through the Theotokos* (referred to in the commentary as *On the Siege*) was created shortly after the siege of Constantinople in August 626 (not later than May 627) and delivered during thanksgiving ceremonies organised at the Church of the Mother of God in Blachernae and celebrated by Patriarch Sergius I (610–638) and co-emperor Heraclius Constantine (613–641) to honour the rescue of the city and its people from the foreign invader.

Both texts are believed to have been written by Theodore Syncellus, an ecclesiastical dignitary from Constantinople who most likely

<sup>1</sup> M.B. LESZKA, M.J. LESZKA, *Zarys dziejów Konstantynopola w latach 337–602*, [in:] *Konstantynopol – Nowy Rzym. Miasto i ludzie w okresie wczesnobizantyjskim*, ed. M.J. LESZKA, T. WOLIŃSKA, Warszawa 2011, p. 70, 76; S. BRALEWSKI, *Konstantynopolitańskie kościoły*, [in:] *Konstantynopol...*, p. 140–143 (the volume contains further references to secondary literature).



belonged to Patriarch Sergius's inner circle of associates and advisors. A clergyman of broad intellectual horizons, Theodore also engaged in diplomatic activity. *Chronicon Paschale* mentions him as a member of the legation sent to the Avar Khagan during the 626 siege of the Byzantine capital<sup>2</sup>. It means, that he was both an eyewitness to and participant in the events from the third decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. This is crucial to determining the analysed texts' factual reliability. It is worth noting that his name, as explains Whitby, appears in only a few Greek copies of the homily *On the Robe*, while the authorship of *On the Siege* – whose surviving manuscripts present it as anonymous – is ascribed to him by contemporary scholars based on a number of linguistic, stylistic and ideological analogies it bears with *On the Robe* (p. 1–2).

Neither of the works in the volume under review is extensive. Probably for this reason, Michael Whitby initially planned – which he states in the preface (p. XII) – to publish *On the Siege* as an annex to the collection of hagiographical texts dedicated to St. Demetrius of Thessalonica and issued in a series *Translated Texts for Historians*; and *On the Robe* as part of the completed re-edition of *Chronicon Paschale*. The publication of both homilies in one volume enabled Whitby to add a scholarly commentary that was exceptionally extensive, at least by *TTH* editorial standards (it is worth mentioning that the introductory parts and bibliography in the other series's publications usually run no more than a dozen or so pages). Both homilies are preceded by a preface and general introduction (p. XII–XIII, 1–18), two separate introductions to the specificity of both sources (p. 19–30, 55–82), and extensive footnotes containing an explanation of the translation strategies applied to convey various meanings of Greek terms, other variants of the texts, as well as a comprehensive historical commentary with references to other sources. Whitby also specifies the corrections he introduced to the existing editions of the Greek original when working on the translation (p. 133). In addition, the reviewed

volume contains the list of biblical citations and allusions (p. 135–139), a selected bibliography (p. 141–149), a personal index, a geographical index, a subject index, the index of sources (p. 151–156) and five maps (p. VIII, IX, X, 64, 66). What the work lacks is a clear indication of which manuscripts and existing Greek text editions served as the basis for the English translation of both sources (although successive parts of the English translation refer to the manuscript's or its printed editions' respective columns and pages).

Michael Whitby opens the general introduction to both of the volume's works by sketching the portrait of the author (p. 1–6). He meticulously draws on the scant information found in the aforementioned passage of *Chronicon Paschale* and those fragments of *On the Robe* and *On the Siege* that either directly refer to Theodore or help us determine the scope of his education and identify works, from which he may have drawn inspiration (the latter include, for example, the Bible, ancient mythology, Homer's epic poems, and texts of Neoplatonic authors). The pages that follow outline the circumstances in which Theodore Syncellus created both homilies, namely the Empire's struggle against the Persians, the Avars, and the Slavs from the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century to 623 (p. 7–10) and the beginnings of the cult of the Mother of God in the Eastern Church from the 431 Council of Ephesus to the author's days. This includes the most important texts (apocryphal, homiletic, hymnographic) dedicated to the Virgin Mary as well as holidays and churches established in her honour (p. 10–16). For obvious reasons, Whitby devotes most of his attention to the role of the cult of the Mother of God in the spiritual life of the people of Constantinople, focusing especially upon the relics kept – beginning in the 5<sup>th</sup> century – in Blachernae and in the church of the Mother of God in Chalcostrateia (robes and the belt).

The introduction to *On the Robe* first addresses how the text should be dated (p. 19–22). Based on his primary source analyses, Whitby provides multiple arguments supporting the view that the homily may have been first delivered on 2 July 624 or 2 July 625. After recounting past scholarly proposals on text dating, the scholar turns to various codicological issues

<sup>2</sup> *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. W. DINDORF, Bonnæ 1832, p. 721; *Chronicon Paschale 284–628 AD*, trans. M. WHITBY, M. WHITBY, Liverpool 1989, p. 175.

(p. 22–23). It should be noted that this aspect of the sources' history receives the least attention. There is no discussion of the surviving Greek copies of the work (we are only told that there are 21 of them). Whitby only references the most representative of them (BNF, Grec. 1177)<sup>3</sup> and overviews the source's existing editions and translations (the translation of the whole work into Latin and of parts of it into Russian and English).

The medieval Slavic tradition is also absent from his remarks. As Ch.M. Loparev noted, the homily *On the Robe* was translated into Church Slavic, and there are at least two variants of the text, functioning in East Slavic copies as anonymous<sup>4</sup>. In East Slavic menaion readers from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> (РГБ, 304.I.678, fol. 9–25<sup>v</sup>; РГБ, 173.I.11, fol. 7<sup>v</sup>–22) there is one abridged version of it under 2 July: **СЛОВО ЯВЛЯЯ МѢСТО И ВРЕМЯ И ВИНУЮ. ВОИЖЕ ЯВИСА СѢЯЯ РИЗА БЦѢ. ЯЖЕ ЛЕЖИТЬ ВЪ ЧТНѢМЪ КОВЧЕЗѢ. ЕИЖЕ ВЛАХЕРНѢ ПОКЛАНАЮТСА** (*Sermon Indicating the Time, the Place, and the Cause of the Appearance of the Mother of God's Holy Robe, Now Placed in the Venerable Ark and Worshipped in Blachernae*. Incipit: **СѢЯЯ НѢККАЯ И ВЕЛИКАА ТАИНА...** / *A holy and great mystery...*). In the *Great Menaion Reader* of Metropolitan Macarius from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century (РНБ, 728.1323, fol. 9c–12d, 13a–16a; ГИМ, Син. 996, fol. 10d–15d, 16a–20c; ГИМ, Син. 182, fol. 15a–21a, 22a–27c), there are two variants under 2 July, the one mentioned above and another one: **СЛОВО ѿ ЯВЛЕНІИ МѢСТА. И ВРЕМЯ И ВИНУЮ. В НЕИЖЕ ЯВИСА СѢЯА РИЗА БЦѢ. ЯЖЕ ЛЕЖИТЬ ВЪ ЧТНѢМЪ КОВЧЕЗѢ. И ЕИЖЕ ВЛАХЕРНѢ ПОКЛАНАЮТСА** (*Sermon on Revealing the Place, the Time, and the Cause of the Appearance of the Mother of God's Holy Robe, Now Placed in the Venerable Ark and Worshipped in Blachernae*. Incipit: **БЖІА НѢКІА ТАИНЫ ВЕЛИКЫ...** / *Some great God's mysteries...*).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that this manuscript, dated by Michael Whitby to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, while listed in the catalog of the Bibliothèque nationale de France as an 11<sup>th</sup> century codex, has been digitized and is available online: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b107217347> [15 III 2025].

<sup>4</sup> Х.М. ЛОПАРЕВ, *Старое свидѣтельство о Положеніи ризы Богородицы во Влахернахъ въ новомъ истолкованіи примѣнительно къ нашествію Русскихъ на Византію въ 860 г.*, ВВ 2.4, 1895, p. 585–586.

In the following pages, Whitby discusses the church complex in Blachernae, including the relics kept in it (p. 23–24). Then he turns to a story about two brothers, Galbius and Candidus, who, around 470, found the Mother of God's robes in the Holy Land. This is the part that Theodore Syncellus must have compiled using hagiographical accounts created earlier, most likely after 500 (p. 24–28). Whitby ends this section by indicating changes and additions that the author probably introduced to the story (p. 28–30).

The introduction to *On the Siege* first tackles the problem of dating. Whitby argues that it must have been created shortly after the siege of Constantinople in August 626 and before patrician Bonus's death in May 627 (p. 55). An overview of primary sources and of the surviving Greek copies of the homily comes next (p. 55–58). It is worth noting that this introduction provides more codicological details than does the introduction to *On the Robe*. The author of the commentary references several manuscripts, indicating their age and genre affiliation<sup>5</sup>, and goes on to discuss the source's earlier editions and translations (Latin, French, and English, the last based on the French one). In the section that follows, Whitby points to the work's linguistic, stylistic, and ideological traits that allow us to regard Theodore Syncellus as its author (p. 58–61). Following this is an analysis of strictly historical issues. Based on all the available sources (*Chronicon Paschale*, George of Pisidia, among others) Whitby offers an account of the siege of Constantinople, specifying its phases and reconstructing military actions on all sides of the conflict lasting from 29 July to 7 August 626 (p. 61–67). The conclusion of this part states that the defeat of the Avars at the walls of the Byzantine capital marked the beginning of the disintegration of their khaganate, allowing those (the Slavs among others) under their control to throw off the yoke of dependency. It is noteworthy that in addition to paving the way for the rise of Samo's state in Central and Eastern Europe, this defeat also enabled the formation of the first independent statehood

<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the two of them are also mentioned in a footnote on page 17.

of the Bulgarians (Old Great Bulgaria on the Sea of Azov) as early as the 630s<sup>6</sup>.

In the following sections, Whitby explains how Theodore Syncellus's account shaped our knowledge of the 626 siege of Constantinople and the Byzantines' collective memory of it (p. 67–68). The scholar also discusses the homily's references to the Bible (p. 68–74). A great deal of space is devoted to showing how the author of the homily characterizes particular *dramatis personae* and their roles in the events of the summer of 626 – beginning with the Mother of God – presented, along with the Creator, as the active defender of the capital against the external threat (p. 74–77), Patriarch Sergius, mentioned anonymously but always flatteringly (p. 77), and Emperors Heraclius (610–641) and Heraclius Constantine, through to patrician Bonus, the leader of the defence (p. 77–78), and finally, the enemies of the Empire (p. 78–79). The introduction concludes with an account of Theodore Syncellus's view of the situation in Byzantium after repelling the Persian-Avar invasion, and of the historiosophical meaning he attached to the events unfolding before his eyes (p. 79–82).

To sum up, volume 86 of the series *Translated Texts for Historians* adds two significant texts to the body of sources available in English translation. So far, neither of these texts has been translated in its entirety directly from the Greek original into English. *On the Siege* is particularly important for reconstructing what occurred in July and August 626. Offered by an active participant in – and eyewitness to – these events, it is full of significant details regarding, for example, military actions. Its importance is magnified by the fact that the *Chronicon Paschale*, the main source of knowledge about the 626 siege of Constantinople, has not been fully preserved. Moreover, both texts, *On the Robe* & *On the Siege*, are a unique testimony to the rise of two phenomena typifying Eastern Christianity's spiritual culture: believing Constantinople to be a city enjoying the special protection of God and the Virgin Mary (a belief linked to the relics kept in Blachernae) and participating in the

processional carrying of icons and relics around the city walls – a tradition meant to secure the support of divine powers in the event of direct military threat. The custom became widespread in different parts of the Byzantine Commonwealth – reaching places as distant from Constantinople as, for example, Novgorod the Great – and ultimately outliving the Empire itself<sup>7</sup>. In the end, it is worth noting that the volume is of a commemorative nature. Michael Whitby dedicated it to the memory of his sister-in-law and friend, Avril Ireland, who died in 2023.

Translated by Artur Mękariski

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<sup>7</sup> See: A. FROLOW, *Le "Znamenie" de Novgorod: évolution de la légende*, RES 24, 1948, p. 67–81; IDEM, *Le "Znamenie" de Novgorod: les origines de la légende*, RES 25, 1949, p. 45–72. The medieval literature of Orthodox Slavs contains many references to the siege of Constantinople in 626 and its rescue from foreign invaders as a result of the miraculous intervention of the Mother of God, who manifested herself through icons and relics. For example, in the second redaction of the Eastern Slavic *Hellenic and Roman Chronicle* from the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, we read: *О ризѣ. Етъ Владѣроуѣ риза святѣи Богородици и пояса коматѣ. Придоша нѣкогда ратниѣ посуху и по морю. Патрнархъ же Сергии омочи ризу святѣя Богородица в море, и ави вѣскыпѣ море, и потопоша ратнии, а инѣи ослаѣпоша и повѣгоша от страха. (On the robe. There is the holy Mother of God's robe and a piece of belt. Enemy troops once came by land and sea. Patriarch Sergius dipped the robe of the holy Mother of God in the sea and soon the sea boiled and the enemies drowned and others went blind and fled in fear).* *Летописецъ Еллинскій и Римскій*, vol. I, *Текст*, ed. O.B. ТВОРОГОВ, САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГ 1999, p. 511.

<sup>6</sup> F. CURTA, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1250*, Cambridge 2006, p. 77–79.

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