Part Four:
Jerusalem, Constantinople and the End of Antiquity
The overwhelming presence of Justinian’s Hagia Sophia in the literature and landscape of Constantinople has tended to overshadow the significance of the church buildings that came before it, and, more especially, of those that came after it, during the long sixth century. While certain predecessors of the rebuilt Great Church, notably Juliana Anicia’s St Polyeuktos and Justinian’s own SS Sergios and Bacchos, have received much scholarly discussion, largely because of their surviving remains, the numerous church foundations that are recorded from the century after 537 have been virtually ignored by modern scholarship outside the topographical studies based largely on textual evidence. Yet it is abundantly clear from this evidence that the new Hagia Sophia, though no doubt meant to be the church to end all churches, actually gave new impetus to the trend of which it marked the culmination. Justinian himself did not feel deterred from making new foundations, just as, in the legislative sphere, he added his Novels to his supposedly conclusive Corpus of Roman law. Neither were his successors inhibited by his achievement: every one, from Justin II to Heraclius, made at least one major ecclesiastical construction or renovation, and this is not to mention the often substantial contributions of imperial relatives, imperial officials, and the occasional patriarch.¹ None of these constructions was on the outsize scale of Hagia Sophia, but some were evidently big by normal standards,² and all were public buildings in prominent urban locations. Seen in the context of this building program, Hagia Sophia appears as just one part, albeit the most spectacular, of a sustained official effort to sanctify the urban landscape. That the program and the major investments it required added up to a conscious policy rather than an accidental series of haphazard initiatives is suggested by the reference, in Tiberius II’s Novel of c. 580 dealing with the domus divinae of the crown domain, to “the department in charge of the new churches”.³ This can only have been a financial unit set up by Justinian or Justin II in order to manage estates and revenues that were dedicated to financing the construction and the maintenance of recent and, perhaps, projected imperial church foundations.

What was the rationale behind this massive, collective investment in church building, which was a huge strain on the budget of a state whose military expendi-

¹ See below; for Justin II, see Cameron 1980, 62–84.
² See for example Anna Komnene and Nikephoros Gregoras on Justin II’s church of St Paul at the Orphanage: Annae Comnenae Alexias 15,7,4, ed. D.R. Reinsch and A. Kamylis, CFHB 40/1 (Berlin – New York 2001), 482 (ναὸν ... μεγαθῆς μέγιστων); Nicephori Gregorae Byzantina Historia, I, ed. L. Schopen, I (Bonn 1829), (μέγιστος νεώς τοῦ μεγάλου Παύλου).
ture was steadily rising, even as its resources stagnated or declined? I would like to approach this question by looking at the foundation that seems, from the available evidence, to have been the last in the series, and therefore the last major new church to be built in Constantinople before the late ninth century. This was the church of St John the Apostle, situated between the Hippodrome and Hagia Sophia, close to the starting gates of the races, and across the road from the Milion. ⁴ It is referred to as being “at the Diippion”, ⁵ “at the Million”, ⁶ and “near Hagia Sophia/the Great Church”. ⁷ According to the Patria, it was started by the emperor Phokas, (602–610), who dedicated it to his patron saint; it was then finished by Heraclius (602–610), Phokas’ successor, who put a roof on the building and rededicated it to the Apostle John. ⁸ Although the Patria is not the most reliable of sources, its account gains some credibility in this instance from the Acts of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (681), which mention a scribe’s workshop near the church of “Ioannophokas”. ⁹ Further confirmation is provided by the festal calendar of tenth-century Constantinople, from which it is clear that the church of St John the Apostle “near the Great Church” was not only the principal urban venue for the synaxis of the apostle on 26 September, but also contained oratories where eight martyr saints, including St Phokas, were celebrated. ¹⁰ One manuscript of the Patria says that the building was roofed by Romanos I Lekapenos (920–944), which probably means that he restored it. In 1181 the church was the scene of fighting between the regency government of Alexios II and the faction loyal to Alexios’ half-sister Maria: from their position on the roof, the government’s soldiers were able to shoot down on their opponents who occupied the top of the Milion. ¹¹ The church was visited by Anthony of Novgorod in 1200, ¹² and in 1403 by Clavijo, who describes it as dedicated to St John Prodromos; ¹³ it is described as functioning, though in need of upkeep, in a patriarchal document of 1402. ¹⁴ After

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4 Janin 1969, 264–267; Mango 1950, 152–161
5 Patria of Constantinople, ed. Th. Preger, Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum (Leipzig 1901, 1907), 168–170; see also Niketas Choniates, n. 11 below
6 Patria ed. Preger, Scriptores, loc.cit.
7 Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae, ed. H. Delehaye, AASS ad Propylaeum Novembris (Brussels 1902), cols. 82, 150–151.
9 ACO II/2, 652.
10 Synaxarium, ed. Delehaye, Acta Sanctorum, cols 69–70 (St Phokas), 79–82 (St John), 150–151 (St Tryphon), 305–306 (SS. Eustratios, Auxenties, Eugenios, Mardarios, Orestes), 437 (St Tryphon), 596–598 (St Antipas), 810 (St Orestes), 835–836 (St Phokas), 855–856 (St John Stratiotes), 866 (encaenia of the church).
13 de Clavijo (ed. López Estrada 1943, 40–41). I follow the identification suggested by Grélois 2007, challenging the earlier assumption that Clavijo was referring to St John Stoudios, which affected the English translation by G. Le Strange, Clavijo, Embassy to Tamerlane, 1403–1406 (London, 1928), 68.
14 F. Miklosich and J. Mueller, Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevi sacra et profana, II (Vienna 1862), 495–496.
1453, it was transformed into a menagerie, and as such features in the accounts of many travellers to the Ottoman capital in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. According to a Greek notice in an Athonite manuscript, the building was destroyed by an earthquake in 1510, but even in its ruined state it continued for another century to serve as the sultan’s ‘lion house’ and to make an impression on visitors through its distinctive architecture.\(^{15}\) It has recently been shown, from the unpublished travelogue of Julien Bordier, who accompanied the French ambassador to Constantinople from 1605 to 1610, that the church was finally demolished at this time and its building materials used in the construction of the Sultan Ahmed mosque.\(^{16}\)

Thanks to the accounts, and the sketches, of the European travellers, we are unusually well informed about the appearance of this building.\(^{17}\) According to Clavijo, it was very tall, with a completely round nave, seven altars, twenty-four *vert-gris* marble columns, and fine mosaic decoration that completely covered the walls. Its round, domed form is emphasised by later writers, as well as in the drawings of Cristoforo Buondelmonti,\(^{18}\) Hartmann Schedel,\(^{19}\) Melchior Lorich,\(^{20}\) and Pieter Coeck van Aelst. The Englishman John Sanderson, in 1594, even mistook its remains for those of a theatre.\(^{21}\) The Hapsburg envoy Reinhold Lubenau, who saw it in 1587, refers to it as a “large, old Christian church, right by the Atmeidan square,” and gives a detailed description of the menagerie that it housed, which yields valuable information about its architecture. Eight lions were kept there, each of them tethered to a pillar, and a variety of other wild beasts were penned up in a series of chapels – between four and ten, depending on how one reads the description.\(^{22}\) When Julien Bordier visited the site some twenty years later, the building had been pulled down, and “the entire square” of the Hippodrome was “filled with a wondrous quantity of dressed stone originating from the ... demolition” of the church. This had a circular plan ... I can reckon what it had been in its entirety on the basis of its ruins. For it is true that this temple was wondrous, its interior entirely covered, from top to bottom, on the vaults as well as on the walls and other areas, with very fine and rich mosaics, on which were represented all the figures of the Apocalypse ... One would scarcely believe how much fine worked stone was pulled from this church; those that composed round pillars had a diameter of eight or ten feet and a height of three or four. Those from the portals or other areas measured a *toise* [1.95 m.] or a *toise* and a half in length, and a thickness of half a toise.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{15}\) Mango 1950, 158–159.


\(^{17}\) See, in addition to the studies by Mango 1950; Grélois 2007 and 2010; Asutay-Effenberger/Effenberger 2004, 51–93.


\(^{19}\) Kafesçioglu 2009, 165.


\(^{21}\) Cited by Mango 1950, 158, who suggests an identification with the Carceres of the Hippodrome.


We may wonder about these measurements, and about the subject matter of the mosaics, but we need not doubt the overall reliability of Bordier’s account, which was evidently based on his own observations and conversations with people who had seen the church before its recent demolition.

Putting this information together, we can envisage the church of St John Diippion as a large, tall structure with a centralised plan, consisting of a circular nave off which there opened a concentric ring of adjoining rooms. On the main liturgical axis there would have been the main apse of the sanctuary to the east, and the narthex, which according to the Synaxarion housed the tomb of a recent, tenth-century saint. On the north and south sides were a series of apsidal side-chapels, the Cappellen of Lubenau’s description, which in his day were reserved to different species of wild beasts, and in Byzantine times had surely been dedicated to the various saints whose cults were celebrated in the church. From the tenth-century Synaxarion, it is clear that six saints and one group of martyrs were commemorated in the church, making a total of seven “cults”. This matches Clavijo’s reference to seven altars, which together with Lubenau’s mention of eight pillars, suggest an octagonal plan, with the entrance door and the main apse on the east-west axis, and six apses on the remaining sides of the octagon, three to the north and three to the south. The church apparently had two types of columnar support: the vert-gris marble columns seen by Clavijo, and the composite cylindrical stone piers whose dismantled sections Bordier saw in the Hippodrome. Clavijo and Bordier both mention the mosaic decoration, and another sixteenth-century visitor, Stefan Gerlach, confirms Bordier’s information that the church was built of dressed stone. The images of the church in the fifteenth and sixteenth-century panoramas further suggest that the building had a gallery and was surrounded by a circular colonnade. Finally, a reference to the church’s ‘stoas’ in the patriarchal document of 1402 would seem to indicate the existence of a peristyle atrium.

The church of St John at the Diippion must have been one of the more imposing landmarks of medieval Constantinople, by virtue of its distinctive design, its expensive stone and mosaic fabric, and its central location in a monumental ensemble that comprised the Milion, Hagia Sophia, the Baths of Zeuxippos, not to mention the Hippodrome, the main entrance to which it dominated. It is of special interest for the modern historian because, if it was indeed the work of the emperors Phokas and Heraclius, it is the last recorded major religious construction in Constantinople before the ninth century, and the last ever new foundation of a major, free-standing public church: that is, a church that was not part of a palatine, monastic, or previously existing ecclesiastical complex. In more ways than one, therefore, it marks the end of late antiquity and early Christianity in Constantinople. As such, it raises many ques-

24 Delehaye, Synaxarium, 11 March.
25 See above, n. 10.
26 Tagebuch (Frankfurt 1674), 79.
tions. In the context of Constantinople and Jerusalem in late antiquity, what interests us is the question of motivation. Why did Phokas choose to build this church? Why did he build it round? Why did Heraclius complete the building and dedicate it to St John the Apostle, Evangelist and Theologian?

According to the Patria, Phokas built the church to commemorate an incident involving the horse relay station that had existed there before he became emperor. The army had sent him to demand payment of their wages, and he had escaped the wrath of the emperor Maurice by taking some horses from the stable and hobbling the rest to prevent pursuit. Whether or not there was more to this story than a rather fanciful etymology of the word Diippion, it does not preclude the more prosaic explanation that Phokas built a church because it was expected of him as emperor, that this was an important part of what emperors and their associates were supposed to do in the post-Justinianic age. If we look at the record of Phokas’ immediate predecessors, we can see that he was conforming to a pattern. The sources attribute no less than eight church constructions or renovations to Justin II and Sophia, including the great church of St Paul at the Orphanage and the church of St James at the Chalkoprateia. Justin’s praipositos Narses is reliably attested as the builder of the church of St Panteleemon attached to the hospital that bore his name. The reigns of Justin’s successors Tiberius II and Maurice were not so productive, but Tiberius is credited with starting and Maurice with finishing the church of the Forty Martyrs at a prominent central location. Maurice is further said to have restored the church of St Theodore at ta Sphorakiou, near Hagia Sophia, and to have added a church of St George to the same complex. Among the churches attributed to Maurice’s close associates, we may mention those of the Theotokos τῶν Αρεοβίνδου built by his brother Peter and the Theotokos τῆς Διακονίασθεις on the city’s central avenue, founded by the patriarch Kyriakos; the importance of the latter is reflected in the fact that it later served as the ‘home’ church of the Green faction. It is clear that Phokas could not ignore these precedents, especially since he had come to power in a violent coup d’état concluding with the systematic murder of Maurice and his whole family. This put Phokas under pressure to prove that he was at least as worthy to rule as the regime he had overthrown. His church foundation indeed suggests a determination to go one better than his predecessors, to make his contribution to the city’s landscape stand out from theirs. He erected the church of St Phokas at an even more central and prestigious location, as part of the city’s most imposing monumental ensemble. He also


31 See Dagron 2000, 84–85, 157–158.
gave it a distinctive form that did not, to my knowledge, correspond to any of the other major churches within the city, but did closely resemble two prominent Justinianic structures in the European suburbs. One was the church of the Archangel Michael at Anaplous on the Bosphoros, which Procopius describes in the *Buildings.*

The other was the church of St John the Baptist at the Hebdomon, which Procopius says was identical to the church at Anaplous in every way, and whose basic resemblance to the church built by Phokas is confirmed by the *Patria*, which describes it as “the round-roofed church with the apses”. We do not know whether Phokas visited the church of the Archangel Michael at Anaplous, but we know that he both knew and liked the church of St John Prodromos at the Hebdomon. For this was the church in which Phokas was crowned emperor by the patriarch Kyriakos on 25 November 602, and from which he made his ceremonial progress through the city to the Palace, riding in a chariot drawn by a quadriga of white horses. The church he built near the Milion thus commemorated, both geographically and symbolically, the end of the process by which he had taken possession of the city from Maurice. In this connection, we should also note that it commanded the space, the Diippion, through which the chariots and horses were led to the starting gates of the Hippodrome racetrack by the teams of the Blue and Green factions who had been so conspicuous in the transfer of authority. By marking the spot with a replica of his own coronation church, dedicated to his own patron saint, Phokas was erecting a very explicit monument to his personal imperial power. Only a triumphal column would have been more explicit. Yet here too, Phokas was not to be outdone by his predecessors. Justinian had erected a column with his statue outside Hagia Sophia. Justin II had planned a column in some other location; according to John of Ephesus, it had an interior staircase. No less than three columns were projected to honor Phokas during his short reign, two in Constantinople and one in Rome. A massive marble capital bearing his monogram, and evidently made for some other such monument, was found at Synada in western Anatolia. So it is clear that Phokas was motivated by a strong concern to impose, quite literally, his imperial image on the urban landscape of the empire, and to emulate his predecessors in his secular as in his religious patronage.

But churches were not just demonstrations of power. They were also expressions of piety, however insincere, and we have no reason to believe that Phokas was not

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33 Proc. Aed. 1,8,15–16; Patria, ed. Preger, Scriptores, 260. The octagonal form of the church is basically confirmed by its physical remains, see Mathews 1971, 56–61; Niewöhner 2009, 1431–1452.
34 Theophyl. Sim. Hist. 8,10, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1887), 303; Chron. Pasch. ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn, 1832), I, 693; Theoph. Chron., ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 289.
35 Cameron 1976, 251–253, 265–267. Phocas’ reliance on the Blue faction has recently been brought out by Booth 2011, 555–601.
36 C. Mango, Studies on Constantinople, supplement I.
sincerely concerned for the salvation of his soul, however much his paranoid cruelty and vanity may have got in the way. In a society that was obsessed by the cult of saints, the dedication of an expensive sanctuary to one’s patron saint was both an act of gratitude for past favor and a plea for continued intercession before the throne of God, in this life as in the next. In this sense, the church of St Phokas can be seen as a move to honor the great martyr from Sinope with due recognition of his proven and expected efficacy on behalf of his imperial namesake. Here too we may detect a sense of rivalry with previous emperors, notably Maurice. Maurice had not only completed a prominent public church in honor of the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia; he had also renovated a church dedicated to another Anatolian martyr, St Theodore, at a short distance from Hagia Sophia, and had added to this a church of St George, who was then in the process of becoming a local hero in Maurice’s native Cappadocia. Maurice’s devotion to these and other saints had not saved him from an humiliating fall from power and a grisly death. In these circumstances, it was only appropriate that the patron saint of the man who had replaced Maurice with the aid of Divine Providence should be honored with a splendid house in close proximity to the Great Church of the Holy Wisdom of God.

But a public church built by an emperor was not just an act of private devotion. An emperor’s piety was a public function that he performed on behalf of the state; he was himself an intercessor for the intercession for which he prayed, and a church that he dedicated to a saint was offered for the salvation of all orthodox Christians who worshipped in it. In this sense, it was an act of civic benefaction, and it was meant to complement, rather than compete with, earlier imperial foundations. However selfish Phokas’ motives for building a new church, he presumably justified the project on the grounds that it made a significant addition to the spiritual capital accumulated by previous emperors, that it attracted a significant increase in the divine favor bestowed on Constantinople and the empire. What is not clear is how this accumulation of spiritual credits was believed to translate into spiritual benefits. In other words, we return to the question we posed at the outset: what was the point of building new churches in post-Justinianic Constantinople? Why add to the ecclesiastical stock of a city that was already well stocked, if not overstocked? One can never be entirely sure, but access to services, sacraments, and sermons does not seem to have been a problem. I think it is appropriate to focus attention, not on the visiting earthly congregations, but on the heavenly proprietors to whom the churches were dedicated: Christ, the Theotokos, the angels and saints. The point was to multiply and enhance the sacred oikoi in which they were at home, and thereby to guarantee their increased and continued presence and availability. Their presence became particularly urgent in the late sixth century, in order to refute contemporary doubts about the power of the saints to act after the separation of their souls

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38 See above, n. 29.
39 Patria, ed. Preger, Scriptores, 225.
from their bodies.⁴⁰ In this, the accumulation of sacred space went hand in hand with the accumulation of relics, to which sixth-century emperors, like their predecessors, devoted much energy – here it is appropriate to recall the efforts by Maurice to obtain a body part of St Demetrius from Thessalonica,⁴¹ and by his wife, Constantia, to obtain the head of St Paul from Rome.⁴²

Heavenly beings needed to be present in order to hear prayers and work miracles. From the point of view of Constantinople as a whole, however, their most important function was to provide protection. The role of the Theotokos as supernatural defender of Constantinople against barbarian invasion was still to come at the time we are considering, but it had already been anticipated under Justinian, whenProcopius described the extramural shrines of the Virgin at the Blachernae and Pege as outer defences that guarded access to the city gates.⁴³ Even without barbarians, there was much that Constantinople needed protecting against: it is sufficient to readProcopius on the plague of 542,⁴⁴ Agathias on the earthquakes and plague of 557–558,⁴⁵ and Malalas on the almost annual occurrences of natural disorders and civil violence in the second half of Justinian’s reign.⁴⁶ The fact that a similar catalogue of woes is not recorded for the reigns of Justinian’s successors reflects the changed priorities of the historians who took over the narration of events. It cannot be assumed that disasters did not continue to happen. It certainly does not mean that they were not anticipated, and there is very eloquent evidence to the contrary in the Life of St Theodore of Sykeon. When Theodore visited Constantinople during the reign of Phokas, the patriarch urged the holy man to prolong his stay because of a popular scare that the city was about to sink beneath the sea.⁴⁷ It was not the first time the rumour had circulated; Malalas records a similar panic in 541.⁴⁸ Thus it was in a climate of recurrent anxiety about the future of the city that emperors from Justinian to Phokas adorned Constantinople with new churches. Since, presumably, they did not build those churches in order for them to perish in an imminent catastrophe, we may rather suppose that they built in the hope of preventing catastrophe, and the more catastrophe threatened, the more they continued to build. Thus

⁴⁰ Dal Santo 2012.
I would conclude that the church foundations that ended with the church of St Phokas and St John had one common function among the various motives of the individual founders: they were all basically apotropaic. The accumulation of sacred space, of churches dedicated to heavenly patrons, was designed to make Constantinople too holy for God to destroy. It can be seen in the same apotropaic light as the renaming of Antioch, which Justinian in 528 officially designated as Theoupolis, the city of God, after the city had been repeatedly flattened by earthquakes with great loss of life.\(^49\)

The case of Antioch reminds us that Constantinople was not unique, either in its natural disasters, or in its accumulation of churches that transformed the urban landscape during the fifth and sixth centuries.\(^50\) However, I have the impression that the evidence for church construction after the mid sixth century is more plentiful in Constantinople than elsewhere, with the exception of the Holy Land. Moreover, natural disasters had symbolic implications for Constantinople that they did not have for any other city. Being the New Rome, which by the sixth century had definitively succeeded Old Rome as the sole imperial capital and as the greatest city in the \textit{oikoumene}, Constantinople inherited the role that imperial pagan Rome had had in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thought: the role of Babylon the Great, the rich and arrogant sink of worldly corruption, which oppresses and murders the saints of God, and which in the End Times will be completely destroyed. The idea that Constantinople had assumed the function and would suffer the fate of the biblical Babylon was basically endorsed by Andrew of Caesarea, in his commentary on the Apocalypse of St John, written at the beginning of the seventh century.\(^51\) It was then taken up by the Byzantine apocalyptic tradition, along with two characteristic motifs. One was the epithet Heptalophos, which was derived from the Sibylline oracles, and which, as Wolfram Brandes has demonstrated, is the source of the entirely spurious modern notion that the site of Constantinople was planned in imitation of the seven hills of Rome.\(^52\) The other important motif was the prediction that Constantinople would be swallowed up by the sea, just like Babylon the Great in the Apocalypse of St John.\(^53\) In the light of this prediction, the recurrent fear of submersion recorded in Malalas and the \textit{Life of St Theodore of Sykeon} takes on new meaning, and suggests that the assimilation of Constantinople to Babylon was already well established in popular belief in the early sixth century. It also suggests that the apotropaic agenda of church building in sixth century Constantinople went well beyond the prevention

\(^{50}\) For Antioch, see now Mayer/Allen 2012.
\(^{52}\) Brandes 2003, 58–71.
of natural disasters: it aimed to refute the belief that Constantinople was Babylon the Great, by transforming the imperial capital into a holy city, where the saints were not persecuted but honored with magnificent dwellings, and sacred space predominated. In other words, the accumulation of churches was meant to change the apocalyptic identity of the New Rome from Babylon the Great to New Jerusalem.

That Constantinople aspired to be a New Jerusalem is almost a cliché, and that it claimed this status on the basis of its unrivalled concentration of churches and relics has become too self-evident to require demonstration. There is also a growing recognition that the time when the notion of Constantinople as a second Jerusalem first appears in literature, around the turn of the sixth century, was a time of widespread apprehension that the end of the world was imminent. But no-one, to my knowledge, has hitherto made the connection between the two, and recognised that the desire to identify Constantinople with Jerusalem had a profoundly eschatological dimension, because it involved the denial of a deeply disagreeable but widely expected alternative: if Constantinople was not the New Jerusalem, then it was the ancient Babylon, with all that this implied. This alternative scenario was not only alarming to the inhabitants of Constantinople; it was also potentially subversive of imperial authority, which in the sixth century identified with the urbs regia / βασιλεύουσα πόλις as never before, and it affected the loyalty not only of Christians but of Jews, who continued to hope for the restoration of the kingdom of Israel.

The transformation of Constantinople into a New Jerusalem was a broad and largely unstated ideal rather than a fully articulated program. It had to be; anything more systematic would have been considered presumptuous if not blasphemous interference in the workings of Divine Providence. In particular, official ideology carefully avoided any attempt to equate Constantinople with the heavenly Jerusalem, or to sanctify Constantinople at the expense of the terrestrial Jerusalem, which remained the official ἡγία πόλις of the Christian empire. However, official ideology undoubtedly encouraged the interpretation of apocalyptic texts in a sense that was supportive of imperial pretensions. The sixth century saw two new developments in Biblical exegesis that sanctified the providential role of the Christian empire, and thus, by extension, of the imperial capital. One was the reinterpretation of the Four Kingdoms prophecies in the Book of Daniel to distinguish between the Roman Empire before and after Constantine: while the pre-Constantinian, pagan empire corresponded to the fourth in the series of transitory world powers, the Christian Empire was one with the kingdom of Christ, the kingdom without end. This interpretation first appears in the Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes, written in the


mid sixth century. The other development was the rehabilitation of the Book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse of St John, which refined and elaborated the vision of Daniel. Since the third century, the Book of Revelation had been regarded with suspicion in the Christian East, largely because of its prophecy, in chapter 20, of a millennial reign of Christ and the saints on earth. But by the end of the sixth century, interest in the book had grown sufficiently to prompt the first Greek commentary, written by one Oikoumenios, who declared that it was the authentic work of St John the Apostle, and effectively defused its controversial prophecies, by explaining them as allegorical allusions to events that had already taken place. However, this historicist approach clearly failed to satisfy, because only a few years later a leading churchman, possibly the patriarch of Constantinople, asked Andrew, the archbishop of Caesarea, to write a new commentary. Andrew guaranteed a long shelf life for his work by explicating Revelation as a book of prophecy that was still in the process of being fulfilled. Most crucially, he provided an explanation of chapter 20 that was both safe and pertinent for the age in which he lived: the millennium is the present age, which has begun with the Incarnation and will end with the reign of Antichrist, the age in which the saints “exercise priesthood and reign with Christ,” “being venerated by pious rulers and faithful kings, manifesting God-given power against every bodily ailment and demonic activity”. This was essentially the interpretation of the millennium that had been given by St Augustine two hundred years earlier, and it is not impossible that Andrew derived it from a Latin source. Like Augustine, Andrew saw the millennial kingdom mainly in terms of the ministry of the Church, but he opened the way for equating it with the Christian empire, which the successors of St Constantine governed in co-rulership (συμβασιλεία) with Christ and the saints, whom the “pious rulers and faithful kings” venerated in the churches of Constantinople.

Similarly, while Andrew, as noted previously, was inclined to endorse the identification of Constantinople with Babylon the Great, he opened the way for identifying it with the New Jerusalem, by admitting the possibility that the prophecy of Gog and Magog, the savage tribes who are mobilised by Satan at the end of the millennium and besiege the holy city of the saints (Rev. 20, 7–9), refers to the Scythian nation, i.e. the Avars, who threatened Constantinople in the early seventh century. The logical conclusion was drawn after the Avar siege of Constantinople in 626. Theodore, Synkellos of the Great Church, celebrating the enemy’s defeat and withdrawal

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57 Ed. H.C. Hoskier, The Complete Commentary of Oecumenius on the Apocalypse (Ann Arbor 1928),
58 Ed. Schmid; for the context of the work relative to Oikoumenios, I follow Scarvelis Constantinou (above n. 51).
59 Ed. Schmid, 216, 218, 221.
due to the miraculous intervention of the Virgin, declared that the prophecy of Gog and Magog was thereby fulfilled. And since the Avars were Gog, “rightly have I interpreted the land of Israel to be this city, in which God and the Virgin are piously glorified and all mysteries of pious devotion are performed ... What else ... is this city, which one would not be wrong to call in its entirety a sanctuary of God?”  

Theodore was referring to the Old Testament version of the prophecy, as it occurs in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, and his message was aimed at the Jews, but he and his audience would surely have had the Apocalypse of St John, and Andrew’s recent commentary, in mind.

Andrew of Caesarea was writing his commentary on Revelation close to the time when the new round church of the emperor Phokas was taking shape at the entrance to the Hippodrome. Let us now return to this building and to the question of motivation that remains unanswered: why, when Heraclius took Constantinople and overthrew Phokas in 610, did he complete the church of St Phokas with a new dedication to St John the Apostle? Clearly, he did not want to let a good building go to waste, and clearly he wanted to disassociate it from his hated predecessor, whom he subjected to a thorough damnatio memoriae. But why St John the Apostle? Unless Heraclius had a personal attachment to the Apostle that is not recorded, he is likely to have taken the advice of the recently elected patriarch Sergios, with whom he developed a close collaboration over the next twenty-eight years. As patriarch, Sergios would have been well aware that the Apostle John lacked a major sanctuary in the center of Constantinople where his annual synaxis could be celebrated at a convenient processional distance from the Great Church. The omission was all the more glaring in view of the fact that Justinian and Justin II had provided other leading apostles with centrally located churches: St Peter’s next to Hagia Sophia, St Paul’s at the Acropolis point, and St James’s at the Chalkoprateia. The re-dedication to St John of another church close to Hagia Sophia thus filled a conspicuous liturgical gap. At the same time, it coincided with two other developments that brought the figure of St John into sharp and unprecedented focus in Constantinople during Heraclius’ reign.

Heraclius came to power at a moment of unprecedented world crisis, when the Roman Empire was in the process of losing ground to Sassanian Persia in the “last world war of antiquity”. In the decade after 610, the Persians conquered Syria, Palestine and Egypt, and their armies ravaged Asia Minor as far as the Bosphorus. Christian sanctuaries throughout these areas faced desecration by the invaders. This happened most famously at Jerusalem, where the Persians, on taking the city in 614,

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63 Kaegi 2003, 60.
64 St Peter’s was located near the skeuophylakion of Hagia Sophia, that is near the north-east corner of the building: Preger, Scriptores, 78 apparatus; Janin 1969, III, 398 – 399. It must have been built together with or after the Great Church. For St James and St Paul, see above, nn. 2, 27.
sacked the churches and deported the relic of the True Cross to Ctesiphon. What happened in Jerusalem was to be anticipated elsewhere, as the emperor and patriarch clearly did anticipate it in the case of a recently deceased holy man, Theodore of Sykeon in Galatia: fearing that his relic would be despoiled by the Persians, but also desiring its protective presence for the capital city, they had it translated to Constantinople. The same concerns were surely raised with regard to other sacred sites in Asia Minor, and especially the most sacred and splendid of all: the shrine of St John the Apostle at Ephesus. Ephesus was partially destroyed in 614, and whether the destruction was caused by the Persians or by an earthquake, the security of the church and of pilgrim access to the site was clearly disrupted. It is therefore a reasonable hypothesis that at this point the authorities removed a part of the Apostle’s tomb – his only available ‘relic,’ together with the sacred dust or ‘manna’ that it gave off – to a newly completed church in Constantinople that was rededicated for the occasion. Anthony of Novgorod reported that the church in question contained “the stone that was placed under the head of St John the Theologian in his tomb”.

The same rationale of removing relics to Constantinople in the face of the Persian invasion may explain why the church of St John Diippion housed the cults of other important saints of Asia Minor, notably St Antipas of Pergamon, St Tryphon of Nicæa, and St Orestes of Tyana.

By causing death, destruction and desecration throughout the East, the Persian invasions, coupled with the Avar and Slav invasions and the internal violence that accompanied the overthrow of Maurice and Phocas, undoubtedly intensified the mood of apocalyptic anxiety about the future of the world and the eschatological identity of Constantinople. The end of the empire and of the world was anticipated as never before. In these circumstances, the officially prompted confirmation, by Andrew of Caesarea, that the Book of Revelation was not only the divinely inspired work of an apostle and evangelist but also highly relevant to the current situation could only increase the reverence for St John the Theologian in Constantinople and encourage the idea of honoring him with the new church that Heraclius was completing. Here it is worth recalling, too, that Andrew of Caesarea’s interpretation of the millennial prophecy in Revelation 20 repeated that of St Augustine. Heraclius came to Constantinople from North Africa, where Augustine had written and taught, and his legacy must have remained strong. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that the

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65 Kirch 1901, 252–272.
67 Like Christ and the Virgin Mary, it was believed that St John had left no corporeal remains on earth. According to the hagiographical tradition that came to prevail in Constantinople, his body was miraculously removed (μετετέθη) after its burial, and the manna was produced annually on 8 May: Synaxarium, ed. Delehaye, cols. 82, 8 May. This tradition of a bodily metastasis was clearly related to the belief that St John would remain alive on earth until the reign of Antichrist, see below.
emperor himself brought the Augustinian exegesis to Constantinople, although there were certainly other routes by which it could have arrived.

Finally, we should recall one detail from the travel account of Julien Bordier, who saw the church of St John just before its demolition at the beginning of the seventeenth century. He says that it was decorated with mosaics depicting scenes from the Apocalypse. It would be unwise to place too much weight on this short statement, which neither tells us exactly what iconography Bordier saw, or how he identified it. Nevertheless, it is perhaps significant that he mistakenly thought the church was dedicated to St John the Baptist: in other words, he did not interpret the iconography on the basis of the church’s real dedication to St John the Apostle. The possibility therefore remains that this was a rare, if not unique, cycle of images from the Revelation of St John, commissioned by Heraclius on his completion of the church, although a substantial input by Romanos I, who restored the building in the tenth century, cannot be ruled out. Mosaics or no mosaics, however, Heraclius’ completion and rededication of the church added St John the Apostle to the supernatural defenders of Constantinople, and gave him an interest in ensuring that he would recognize it as the city of the saints, the New Jerusalem, and not the other city he had seen in his vision.

The apotropaic function of church building was never explicitly articulated, which may occasion some doubt as to whether it actually existed. One later text, indeed, explicitly denied any hope that Constantinople would be saved because its churches and relics made it too holy for God to destroy. In the Life of St Andrew the Fool (10th c., set in the 5th c.), the saint delivers a long apocalyptic prophecy in response to a certain Epiphanios who asks him, “How will this our city, the New Jerusalem, pass away? What will become of the holy churches which are here, and the crosses and the precious icons and the books and the relics of the saints?” Andrew replies that the city will remain safe under the protection of the Theotokos until the end. Eventually, however, it will be desecrated and defiled by the rule of a wicked woman who will burn icons, crosses and sacred books, and will seek to destroy the relics of the saints, although God will spirit them away. After that, God will uproot the city and hurl it into the sea like a millstone. But Epiphanios has a problem: “Some people say that the Great Church of God will not be submerged with the city but will be suspended in the air by an invisible power”. To which Andrew replies, “When the whole city sinks into the sea, how can the Great Church remain? Who will need her? Do you think God dwells in temples made with hands?” Only the column of Constantine in the Forum would remain above water, because it contained the “precious nails” with which Christ had been fixed to the Cross.

69 Just like Babylon the Great in Revelation 18, 21.
The apocalyptic section in the *Life of Andrew the Fool* thus offers, through the mouth of the fictitious saint, an orthodox view of the end of Constantinople, the Empire, and the world, which is ultimately pessimistic. It corresponds to the idea, which we find in other contemporary texts, that Constantinople was both Jerusalem and Babylon⁷¹—literally the city to end all cities. Along with these texts, it shows that the apotropaic battle to canonize an optimistic vision of the fate of Constantinople was lost as the millennium loomed. Yet insofar as Andrew is made to disappoint the wishful thinking of the inquirer, the *Life* reflects that such wishful thinking still lingered. A similar concern to refute a persistent alternative viewpoint can be seen in another passage, where the saint denounces what is clearly a messianic prophecy about the ultimate salvation of the Jews and their return to Jerusalem.⁷² His narrative of the fate of Constantinople may similarly be read as a refutation of a more optimistic scenario that is implied in the questions posed by Epiphanius. In these questions, we can read the pious hopes of the generations of emperors and other Constantinopolitans who invested in the building of churches, the collection of relics, and the production of icons and precious liturgical books. And in Andrew’s responses we can read the nightmare scenario that all this investment was meant to avoid, and which made all of it redundant: the mutation of the New Jerusalem into Babylon the Great. It was not a mutation that St John the Theologian had foreseen in Revelation. However, it was one that the biographer of Andrew the Fool expected him to live through, for elsewhere in the text, he has Andrew state that St John “is alive and in the world”.⁷³ This controversial but widely accepted belief, that Christ’s beloved Apostle would not see death until the reign of Antichrist,⁷⁴ had huge unstated implications for the churches dedicated to St John, in Constantinople, Ephesus and elsewhere. Those implications are interesting to contemplate but, unfortunately, impossible to document.

**Bibliography**


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⁷¹Mahé 2018, 503; Flusin/Detoraki 2018, 520.


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