Interpretations of the Wall-Paintings of the
Siege of Constantinople in the Bucovina

by

O t t o F. A. M e i n a r d u s

A. *Introduction*

The XVIth century neo-Byzantine wall-paintings of the Rumanian Ortho-
dox churches in the Bucovina have attracted the attention of scholars in
iconography, art and history for some considerable time[1]. The purpose of
the following investigation is to examine critically one particular iconogra-
phical theme, which adorns or adorned the exterior walls of several of these
churches, namely, the Siege of Constantinople. Several interpretations as to
the historical event in question have been advanced. In the course of our
presentation we hope to demonstrate that some of the conclusions may have
been reached by an overemphasis of purely external criteria, which in turn
may have led to some rather unwarranted interpretations. Following a brief
survey of the four churches under discussion, we shall examine the various
interpretations, which have been advanced with respect to the theme of
the Siege of Constantinople.

We know of at least seven churches in the Bucovina which included among
their exterior mural paintings the iconographical representation of the Aka-

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[1] Balş, G. and Iorga, N., *L'art rumain.* Paris, 1922. *Idem, Bisericile şi mănăstirile moldo-
veneşti in veacurile al XVII-la şi al XVIII-lea.* Bucharest, 1933. Grabar, A., 'Les croisades
de l'Europe Orientale dans l'art', *Mélanges Charles Diehl,* II, Paris, 1935. pp. 19-22. *Idem,*
'L'origine des façades peintes des églises moldaves', *Mélanges offerts à M. N. Iorga,* Paris,
1935, pp. 365-382. Grecu, Vasile, 'Eine Belagerung Konstantinopels in der rumänischen
Kirchenmalerei', *Byzantion* I, 1924, pp. 273-289. *Idem, Influente sîrbesti in vechea iconografie
bisericească a Moldovei.* Czernovitz, 1935, pp. 235-242. Henry, Paul, *Les églises de la Moldavie
du Nord des origines à la fin du XVIe siècle. Architecture et Peinture.* Paris, 1930. *Idem,* 'De
originalité des peintures bucoviniennes dans l'application des principes byzantines', *Byzantion*
I, 1924, pp. 291-303. Nandris, Grigore, *Christian Humanism in the Neo-Byzantine Mural-
Painting of Eastern Europe.* Wiesbaden, 1970. Stefănescu, I. D., *L'Evolution de la peinture
religieuse en Bucovine et en Moldavie.* Paris, 1928. Tafrali, O., 'Le Siège de Constantinople
dans les fresques des églises de Bucovine', *Mélanges offerts à M. Gustave Schlumberger,* Paris,
1924, pp. 456-461. Ulea, Sorin, 'L'origine et la signification idéologique de la peinture extérieure
moldave', *Revue roumaine d'histoire,* II, 1, 1963, pp. 29-71, especially pp. 29-51.

thistos Hymn together with the Siege of Constantinople. The exterior wall-paintings of all these churches were executed during the second quarter of the XVIth century, *i.e.* during the reign of the voevode Petru Rareş, the son of Stephan the Great, who occupied the throne of Moldova twice, namely from 1527-1538 and again from 1541-1546[2]. Unfortunately, the wall-paintings of the Siege of Constantinople of three churches are so severely damaged, that they cannot be considered for any serious iconographical examination. For the sake of completion, however, we shall list them : the Church of St. Nicholas in Bălineşti on the river Seret[3], the Church of St. George at Suceava[4] and the Church of St. Demetrius at Suceava[5].

In the case of the other four churches, the wall-paintings of the Siege of Constantinople are in a sufficiently well preserved state to enable us to discuss the representations of the Siege of Constantinople. They are shown at the walls of the churches of Humor[6], Baia[7], Moldovitsa[8] and Arbure[9]. With respect to the location of the wall-painting of the Siege of Constanti-nople, we notice that in all seven instances this theme is portrayed on the exterior southern wall below the painting of the Akathistos Hymn. In fact, as we shall discuss later, the theme of the Siege of Constantinople ought to be seen as an integral part of the Akathistos Hymn.

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B. *The Four Churches with Paintings of the Siege of Constantinople*

1. *Humor*

The first monastic Church of Humor, mentioned in 1415 as "the monastery of Pan Ivan Vornicul which is situated in Humor", was destroyed in 1527. According to an inscription on the southern exterior wall next to the entrance, the present church was constructed and completed by the voevode Petru,

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    2 During the reign of Petru Rareş the arts flourished in Moldova as they had during the reign of his father. In addition to the churches in the Bucovina, several Mt. Athos monasteries profited from his generosity. The Catholicon of the Monastery of Dionysiou was rebuilt, the monasteries of Dochaiariou and Karakallou were significantly aided, by the financial assistance of Petru Rareş. H u b e r, Paul, *Athos, Leben, Kunst.* Zürich, 1969, pp. 75, 99, 102, 381-383.

    3 H e n r y, P., *Les églises de la Moldavie du Nord, etc.,* pp. 230-231.

    4 For a bibliography of this church, cf. C a p r o ş u, I., *Die Georgskirche in Suceava,* Bucharest, 1969. Wall-paintings : 1534.

    5 U l e a, S., *loc. cit.,* Wall-paintings : 1537-1538.

    6 B a l ş, Stephan, *Das Kloster Humor.* Bucharest, 1967.

    7 U l e a, S., *loc. cit.*

    8 N i c o l e s c u, Corina, *The Moldovita Monastery.* Bucharest, 1965.

    9 C a p r o ş u, I., *Die Kirche Arbure.* Bucharest, 1967.

the son of Stephen, in the year 7038[10], on the 15th of August, while the wall-paintings were completed in 1535. On the south wall of the church, the artist portrayed the Akathistos Hymn and below the Siege of Constantinople. In the centre of this painting there is the City of Constantinople surrounded by a wall with two large, three medium and four small towers. Within the walls there are two large churches, both of which have the architectural appearance of typical XVth-XVIth century churches of the Bucovina, as well as five smaller churches identifiable by small crosses surmounting the church steeples. Within the lower part of the City, the artist painted a procession which includes an emperor and an empress and other members of the court, six Byzantine church fathers with nimbus and clothed in the phelonion, priests and deacons. A bishop (?) carries the icon of the Panagia Hodigitria. The city is defended by soldiers who have occupied the two large towers and employ bows and arrows against the attacking enemy. Towards the left of the City there is a smaller city complex enclosed by a wall with four towers. A church and a few houses are seen inside the walls. This smaller city, which is separated from the City by water, is Galata. The five ships, which are engaged in a sea-battle, are typical XVIth century round ships or carracks. They are wide at the prow and the poop and quite short for their width. This type of vessel rode high out of the water and was as deep as it was wide[11]. Two of these ships are shown sinking. To the right of the City, the enemy is portrayed. A large cannon pointed at the gate of the City is seen in the foreground. The cavalry is divided into two groups, those wearing high white fezzes and those wearing white sashes around their dark caps (turbans) on their heads. According to S. Ulea the artist of this wall-painting has portrayed himself as a soldier on horseback piercing with his lance the commanding officer of the attacking cavalry. A very small inscription of the name "Toma" was painted above the head of the horseman. Although Tafrali was the first scholar to notice this inscription, Ulea points out that this horseman wears the typical "bonnet" of the Moldovan dignitaries of the XVth and XVIth century. Moreover, we learn that this Toma is known through a document written in Suceava in 1541, in which we read of "Thomas zograph de Chochavia spectabilis et magnifici domini moldaviensis Petri wajwode familiaris". Without question, S. Ulea concludes, this Toma was the painter of the Siege of Constantinople at Humor[12].

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[10] The dates in the churches of the Bucovina follow the Byzantine world-era, 7038 = 1530 A.D.

[11] Cf. Brehier, L., 'Le Marine de Byzance', *Byzantion*, XIX, p. 12. Lane, F. C., *Venetian Ships and Shipbuilders of the Renaissance*. Baltimore, 1934.

[12] Ulea, S., *op. cit.*, p. 48. Balş, St., *op. cit.*, p. 23.

2. *Baia*

The Church of the Koimesis of the Holy Virgin in Baia was built by Petru Rareş in 1532. Most of the exterior wall-paintings, which were executed between 1535 and 1538, have faded away. Again, as in the case of the Church of Humor, the Akathistos Hymn with the Siege of Constantinople appear on the western end of the south wall. Although faded and damaged, there are sufficient traces to include this painting for our study. The numerous similarities between this painting and that on the south wall of the Church at Humor would lead one to assign this work to the same artist or to one of his students. Again, the theme is divided into three parts. In the centre, we see the City of Constantinople with two large and ten small towers. Within the walls there are two large churches, of which one in enclosed by a wall. Within the lower part of the City numerous people are assembled. Unfortunately, it is impossible to identify any persons beyond several church fathers in their ceremonial vestments. The frame of an icon which is carried in the procession can be seen, probably the icon of the Panagia Hodigitria. Next to the large tower on the left there is a soldier with a bow and arrow. To the left of the City one merely sees a few lines of Galata. The walls of Galata as well as the sea-battle are no longer discernible. To the right of the City, there is the attacking cavalry. Details, however, cannot be identified.

3. *Moldovitsa*

In 1532, during the reign of Petru Rareş, the old monastery of Moldovitsa was abandoned, and a new one was built. The inscription on the southern facade of the porch informs us that the construction of the church was completed on September 8, 1532, and that the wall-paintings were finished in 1537. Beneath the iconographical representation of the Akathistos Hymn we find the best preserved wall-painting of the Siege of Constantinople, again divided into three parts. The centre section depicts the City with two large and four medium sized towers. Within the walls there are four churches with bell-towers which show typical Bucovinian architectural characteristics. Moreover, the artist included several hills, shown in a stylized manner, since Constantinople like Rome was built on seven hills. Along the walls inside the City there is a solemn procession led by deacons, priests and bishops clothed in their ceremonial vestments, followed by an emperor and the officials of the imperial court, and the empress with four ladies-in-waiting. On the left wall members of the clergy carry an icon of the Panagia Hodigitria while others show the Mandelion. The City is defended by several cannons and soldiers with bows and arrows. To the left, situated on a hill, there is Galata enclosed by walls and surrounded on three sides by the sea. Several buildings are visible inside the walls. Between Galata and the City the artist depicted a sea-battle. Of the four ships, three are sinking and only one carrack is afloat.

To the right of the City, the artist portrayed the advancing enemy with four guns, a small detachment of infantry and a larger unit of cavalry. The former wear high white fezzes, the latter turbans. To the right of the cannons, we notice a duel between two horsemen, undoubtedly copied from the painting of the Siege at Humor. Three large hills are symbolically depicted.

As in the case of the other paintings of the Siege of Constantinople, the fire from heaven descends from a fiery ball upon the attacking troops.

4. *Arbure*

The Church of St. John the Baptist in Arbure was built in 1502 by the boyar Pan Luca Arbure, count of Suceava. According to an inscription above the door of the nave, the exterior wall-paintings were executed by the Zographos Gragosîn, the son of the priest Coman of Jassy, in the year 1541, and were paid by Anna, the daughter of Arbure the Elder. The painting of the Siege of Constantinople on the south wall of the church in Arbure thus represents the last endeavour to portray this theme on the walls of the churches of the Bucovina.

Whereas the paintings of the Siege of Constantinople on the walls of the churches in Humor, Baia and Moldovitsa consist of three parts, this painting includes the City, Galata and the advancing enemy in only one scene. The centre is occupied by the City of Constantinople which is enclosed by a high wall with six towers and twenty-five pinnacles. Within the walls there are two large churches with the characteristic steeples of the Bucovinian churches of the XVIth century, as well as two smaller churches. The artist of this representation has omitted the procession of the state and ecclesiastical dignitaries, although at least the frame of an icon, presumably that of the Panagia Hodigitria, is visible in the left section of the City. To the left of the City is Galata, also enclosed by high walls with two large and two medium sized towers. Several buildings are seen within the walls. Immediately to the right of the City there is an inscription with the following text[13] :

"In the year 6035 [sic][14] the Emperor Chosroes with the Persians and ... and Scythes (?) and Libyans (?) and idolaters besieged Constantinople with armies in the days of Emperor Heraclius. The Saints and the Theotokos showered their wrath upon them and God sent upon them thunder and rain and fire and caused them all to be drowned in the sea"[15].

To the right of the City, there is a high mountain. The enemy cavalry is shown to the right of the City, the infantry in front of the walls and the navy,

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[13] An excellent reproduction of the text is found in Grecu, V., *op. cit.*, p. 287.

[14] 6035 should read 6135 Byzantine world-era, which is 626 A.D.

[15] Grecu, V., *loc. cit.*

consisting of three one-mast ships, between Galata and the City. Rain and
fire fall from heaven upon the ships.

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C. *The Siege of Constantinople in 1453*

The questions as to the event portrayed and the intention of the artist
or artists have led to several suggestions and hypotheses. Without going
into many details, we shall mention some of the theories which have been
advanced.

In his study "Eine Belagerung Konstantinopels in der rumänischen
Kirchenmalerei", Vasile Grecu argues that the artist of the wall-paintings
of Moldovitsa, Humor, Baia and Suceava intended to portray the Siege of
Constantinople by the Turks in May 1453. This is substantiated by the follow-
ing observations. The Turkish uniforms of the enemy troops and the em-
ployment of cannons are applicable to the siege in 1453. Furthermore, the
observation that Galata (Pera) is neither attacked by the Turks nor defended
by the Byzantines is considered sufficient proof that only the Siege of
Constantinople in 1453 could have been meant[16]. This view, based largely
upon the uniforms of the enemy and the use of cannons, was also held by
F. A. Winckenhauser[17], I. D. Stefănescu[18], and P. Henry[19].

Of course, the historical events of the siege and final fall of Constantinople
in 1453 were undoubtedly still uppermost in the minds of many orthodox
Christians. The impact that this event must have had can hardly be appre-
ciated by Westerners five hundred years later. After all, according to the
mediaeval Christian conception, the New Rome or Constantinople was to
exist down to the Second Advent of Christ, and the siege and the fall of the
City were interpreted to be more than merely a military or a political disaster.
It was understood as the fulfilment of prophecy and the beginning of a new
era, that of the Anti-Christ[20].

Grecu presumes that the artist of the wall-paintings of the Siege of Con-
stantinople was familiar with the historical details of the event. In addition
to the above mentioned characteristics which led him to place the event into

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[16] *Ibid.*

[17] W i n c k e n h a u s e r, F. A., *Molda*, Vol. I. *Geschichte der Klöster Humor, etc.* Czernovitz,
1881, p. 17.

[18] S t e f ă n e s c u, I. D., *op. cit.*, p. 109.

[19] H e n r y, P., *Les églises de la Moldavie, etc.*, p. 239.

[20] D i e h l, Ch., 'De quelques croyances byzantines sur la fin de Constantinople', *Byzantinische
Zeitschrift*, XXX, 1929-1930, pp. 192ff. A. V a s i l i e v, 'Medieval Ideas of the End of the World:
East and West', *Byzantion*, XVI, 1942-1943, pp. 462ff.

the days of May 1453, he points out that on all wall-paintings of the siege one clearly sees the "rain and the fire" descending upon the attackers. It is true, various natural and supernatural phenomena occurred during the siege of the City, especially between May 22 and 26. We read of a thick mist which completely covered the whole City, a miracle, which according to Critobulos of Imbros, indicated to the besieged that God had abandoned His City[21]. The inhabitants remembered the prophecy "that the city would fall in the days when the moon should give a sign", and true enough, violent thunder and lightening storm, followed by a torential downpour was followed by a strange phenomenon. A great light hovered over the dome of the Church of Haghia Sophia, which put panic into both sides. Flames ran round the dome, and streamed upward into a single oriflamme over it. It was during the night from May 28 to 29 that the clouds let loose, not ordinary rain, but large drops of water, almost as big as bull's eyes, says a witness, the sort of rain that comes from a cloud burst. Those in the City interpreted it as a shower of blood[22].

The same celestial manifestations were portrayed in all of the paintings of the siege, although the painting at Baia is damaged where we should expect the "signs from heaven". Grecu's argument, however, is somehow self-defeating. Whereas he assigns the sieges at the churches of Humor, Baia, Suceava and Moldovitsa to the Great Siege of 1453, he allows the siege at the church of Arbure also with the "signs of heaven" to represent the siege by the Avars and Persians in 626.

The belief in celestial signs in times of national trouble is deeply anchored in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. While at the Siege of Constantinople in 626 there was no particular supernatural sign from heaven to interfere with the outcome of the battle, nevertheless, we learn that when the Persian army under Sahin faced the Byzantine army under Theodore on the frontiers of Pontus and Armenia, hail fell towards the Persian front at the time of the battle, which blinded them so that they were defeated in 626[23]. It is most unlikely, however, that the artist of the siege at the church of Arbure would have incorporated this event into the scene.

Furthermore, it is argued in favour for the 1453 date that the artist included in the sieges at the churches of Humor, Baia, and Moldovitsa a solemn procession including the emperor, the empress, several church fathers, bishops

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[21] Critobulos was a Greek in the Turkish service who wrote *De rebus gestis Mechemetis II inde ab anno 1451 usque ad annum 1467.*

[22] Schlumberger, G., *Le siège, la prise et le sac de Constantinople par les Turcs en 1453.* Paris, 1922, pp. 223-224. Stacton, David *The World on the Last Day.* London, 1965, pp. 217-231.

[23] Stratos, Andreas N., *Byzantium in the Seventh Century.* (transl. Marc Ogilvie-Grant) Amsterdam, 1968, p. 178.

and deacons as well as the icon of the Holy Virgin. It is true, just prior to the final assault, a religious procession started out from Hagia Sophia, while the warning bells rang, to visit the more celebrated churches on its way to the city walls. We are informed that the priests wore full vestments of gold brocade, and carried icons, relics and jewelled crosses containing particles of the Holy Tree. The citizens, old men, women and children, turned out to follow them, most of them barefoot as a penance, weeping, sighing, and beating their breasts histrionically. The procession halted at each important or holy position, where the priests read special prayers asking God to strengthen the walls of the City and grant victory to His faithful people. The bishops raised their croziers and blessed the soldiers, sprinkling them with holy water from bunches of dried basil[24]. Among the icons, that were carried around the City, was the Panagia Hodigitria, which the faithful placed at the Church of St. Saviour in Chora, hoping that its presence near the danger point would safeguard the City.

With regard to the Emperor Constantine XI Dragases (1449-1453), however, there is no evidence that he participated in this procession. For that matter, while the solemn procession passed through the streets of the City, he gathered round him the commanders and the chief citizens asking them not to spare themselves, and not to regret the shedding of their blood.

In the paintings of the siege at Humor and Moldovitsa we can clearly identify an empress. In the case of the former painting, she appears to the right of the emperor, in the Moldovitsa painting she is portrayed at the opposite side of the City and attended by four ladies-in-waiting. Interestingly enough, she is not being depicted with her imperial insignia, carrying three pomegranates, symbols of fertility, which were studded with precious stones. The tradition that the basilissa was in Constantinople at the time of the siege is based on a myth. For, in fact, there was no empress in the City. Magdalene, the first wife of Constantine XI had died in 1430 childless. About twenty years later, Constantine selected a Georgian princess and sent an embassy to Georgia to fix up the contract and to bring the bride to Constantinople. But there were delays. Before she could leave her home, she learnt that it was too late[25]. Moreover, the inclusion of the ecclesiastical dignitaries in the procession in the paintings at the churches of Humor, Baia and Moldovitsa raises serious questions for the 1453 date. In the case of the wall-painting at the church of Humor, the bishops are even portrayed with halos, indicating that they were saints. The halos are omitted in the other paintings. We must

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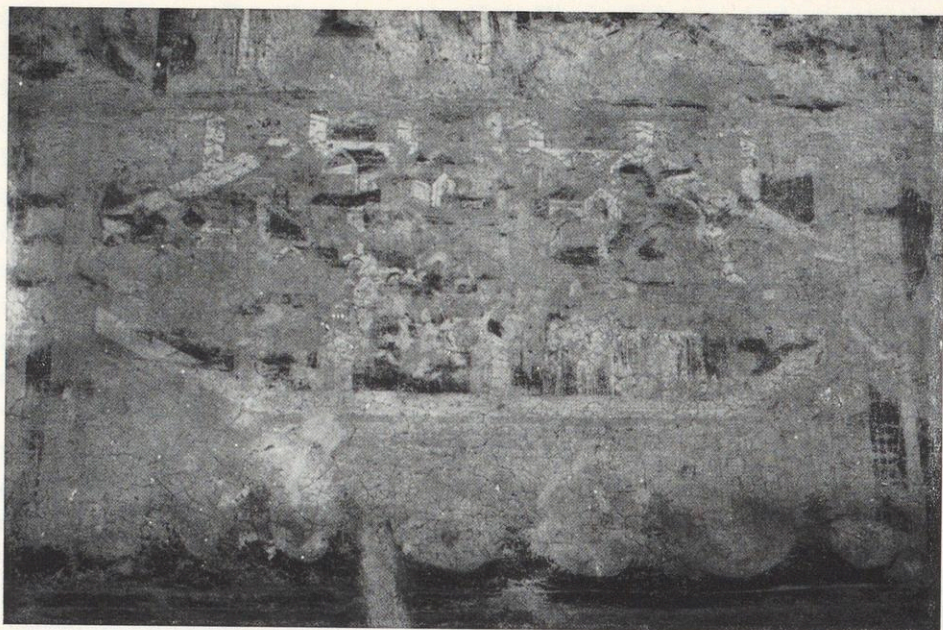[24] Stacton, D., *op. cit.*, p. 229. Schlumberger, G., *op. cit.*, p. 222.

[25] Stacton, D., *op. cit.*, p. 219. Runciman, Steven, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*. Cambridge, 1965, p. 55.
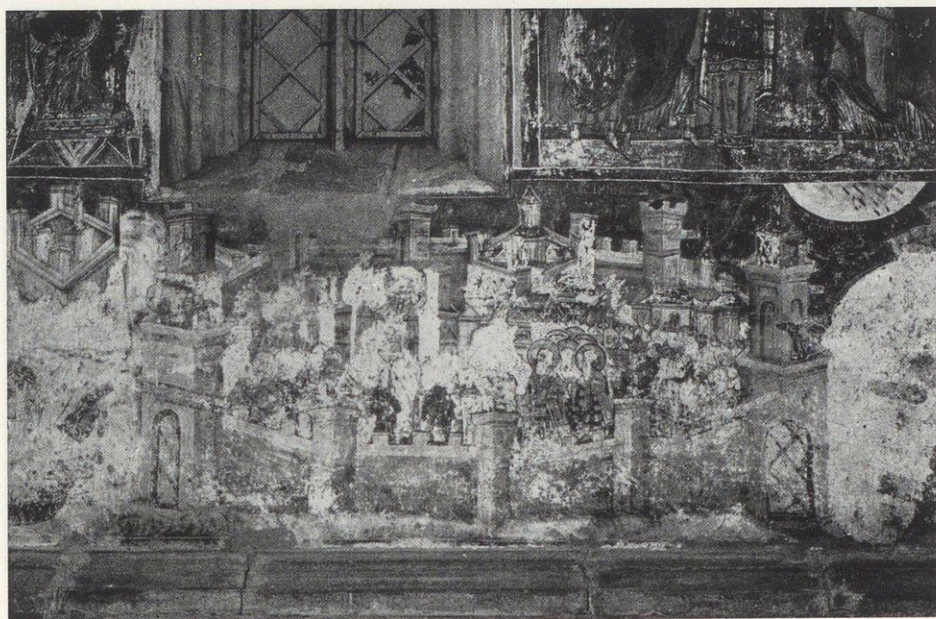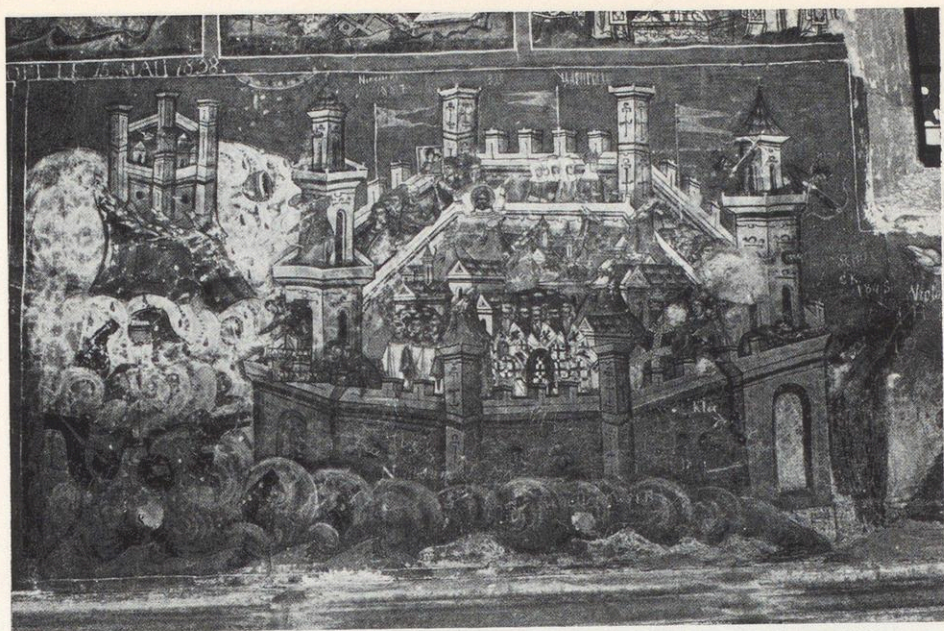
1. Humor : The City of Constantinople.
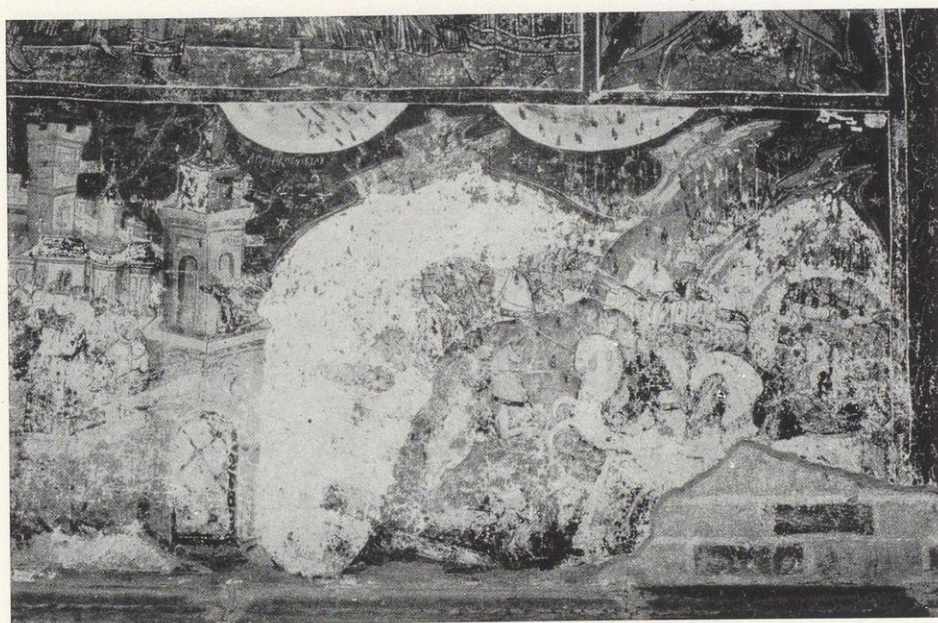
2. Humor : The Enemy besieging Constantinople.

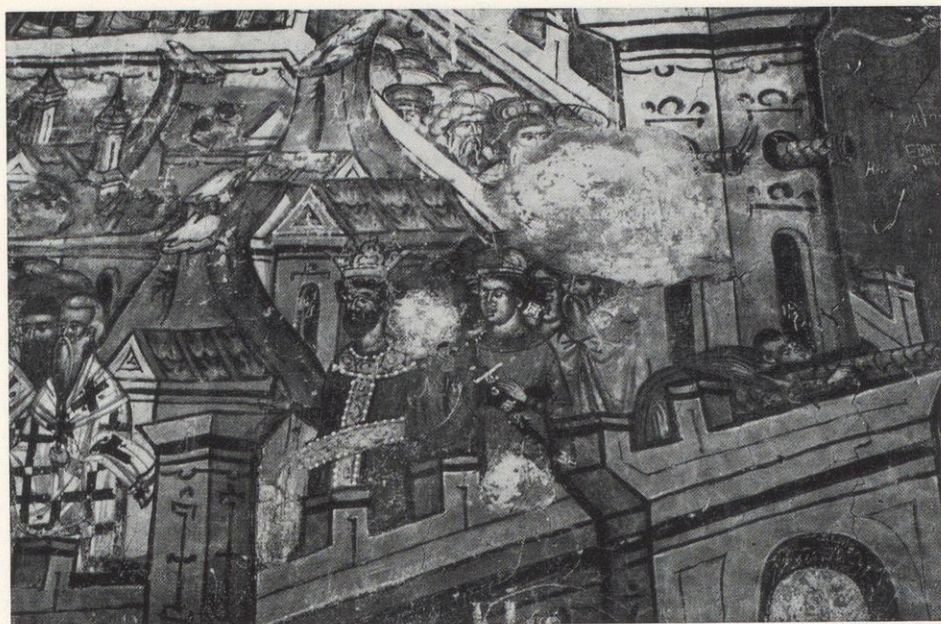3. Baia : The City of Constantinople.

4. Baia : The Siege of Constantinople and the Akathistos Hymn.

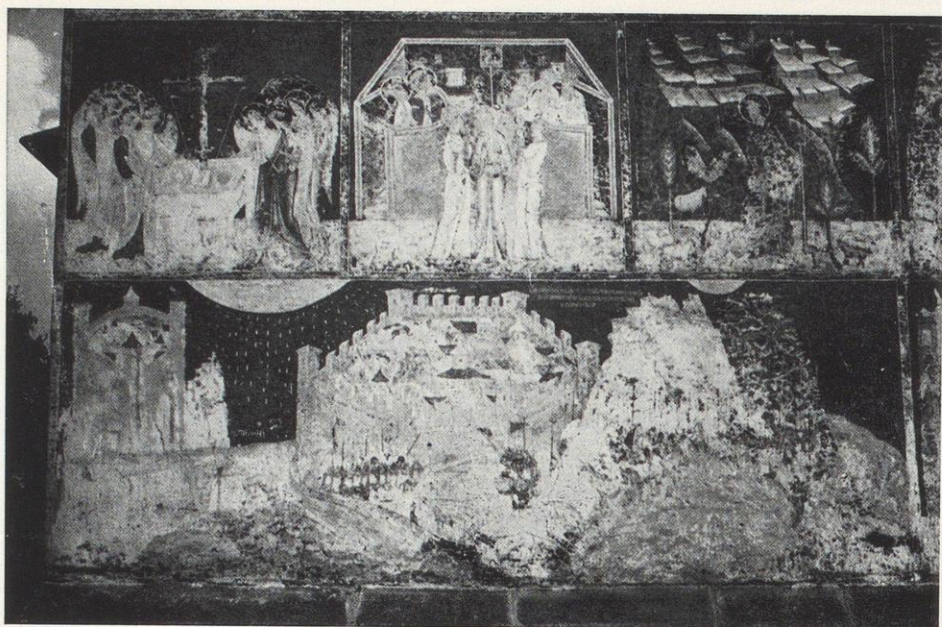5. Moldovitsa : The City of Constantinople.

6. Moldovitsa : The Solemn Procession and the Miraculous Icons.

7. Moldovitsa : The Emperor and his Court.

8. Moldovitsa : The Enemy besieging Constantinople.

9. Arbure : The Siege of Constantinople.

remember that the state of the Church was seriously undermined not only by the recent proclamation of the Union with the Latins (Dec. 12, 1452) but also by the fact that during the siege Gregory, the Patriarch of Constantinople, had resigned his office and no new patriarch had been appointed.It is very doubtful, that in view of these developments the artist would have depicted the members of the higher clergy in such a prominent position. No matter how we look at it, we recognize that the artists were unfamiliar with certain historical details.

Just as there was a religious procession in May 1453, there was a procession in 626, when Sergius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, at the head of the clergy, followed by the senate and a large number of citizens, carried the icon of the Holy Virgin through the City and round the walls. The icon, which is believed to be the palladium of Constantinople during the siege of the City in 626, was the Panagia Myrovlitissa, which belongs to the iconographical type of the glykophylousa. This icon is claimed to be in the possession of the Mount Athos Monastery of Dionysiou. The inclusion of the imperial couple in the wall-paintings causes as many difficulties for assigning the siege to 626 as to 1453. For, in fact, the Emperor Heraclius, fearing to be shut in the City, had left Constantinople, while Martina, his wife, was probably still at Trebizond, after having given birth to Heraclius II[26]. It is most unlikely, that the artists would have intended to depict the procession on August 7, *i.e.* after the victory, when the Patriarch Sergius at the head of the clergy, followed by the co-emperor Constantine and all the officials repaired to the Church of the Holy Virgin of Blachernae to offer thanks for the triumph over the barbarians.

It should be noted that whereas in the wall-paintings at the churches of Humor, Baia, and Arbure only the icon of the Panagia Hodigitria is portrayed, in the painting at the church of Moldovitsa we also see the Holy Mandelion, the acheiropoietos of Christ. However, at the time of the siege in 626, the Holy Mandelion had been taken by Heraclius when he set out on his campaigns against the Persians[27].

The inclusion of artillery in the paintings of the siege at the churches of Humor and Moldovitsa, perhaps also a Baia, has strengthened V. Grecu and others in their arguments to assign these representations to the events of 1453. There is no doubt, the besieging forces under Muhammad II were well supported by artillery, and in storming Constantinople the Turks used

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[26] Stratos, A. N., *op. cit.*, 176.

[27] A. Frolow also wrongly states that this icon was carried by the Patriarch Sergius around the walls. 'La Dédicace de Constantinople', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, vol. CXXVII, 1944, p. 95.

this new weapon to an extent undreamt before, and in the words of a Greek contemporary, "the cannons decided the whole issue"[28]. The small cannons which the defenders employed could hardly compete with the great Turkish ordnance.

And yet, we should remember that also during the siege of the City by the Avars and Persians in 626 heavy armament was employed. When on July 31 fighting broke out between the Polyandriou and the Pempton gates, Khagan ordered the erection of some *manganika*, heavy arms. They used stonethrowers projecting stones weighing 100 to 200 pounds a distance of two to three hundred yards. In addition, there were balisters or catapults which shot large arrows piercing the shields of the defenders. Finally, the Avars set up twelve large wooden siege towers of the same height or higher than the wall which was to be assaulted[29].

If the XVIth century artist was aware of the use of heavy armaments during the siege in 626, it is unlikely, that he would have portrayed the above mentioned equipment. Indeed, he would have shown the kind of heavy armament that was used in the XVIth century, namely cannons of the various sizes and types. The same argument should be used to explain the Turkish uniforms of the besiegers. It has been repeatedly stated that the besieging troops depicted in the siege at Arbure are shown as Persians, whereas those in the other paintings are shown as Turks[30]. It is true, the attacking forces especially in the Moldovitsa painting appear like Turks; at the same time, it seems extremely difficult to substantiate the claim that the soldiers in the Arbure painting are clothed in Persian uniforms. The only difference between the paintings of Humor, Baia and Moldovitsa on the one hand and Arbure on the other hand is the obvious absence of cannons. The fact that in the case of the Arbure painting the enemy forces attack the city from two sides is no argument for either the 626 or the 1453 date. In 1453, the Turkish forces were stationed from the Golden Horn almost to the Golden Gate, whereas in 626 the Persians and the Avar-Slavs attacked the city from both the East and the West!

Whereas several scholars have suggested that the siege of the paintings at Humor, Baia and Moldovitsa represented the events of May 1453, none of them explained why a Christian painter would portray the worst defeat of

[28] Müller, C.: *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*. Paris, 1883, V, p. 80. Ostrogorsky, G., *History of the Byzantine State*. Oxford, 1968, p. 570.

[29] Stratos, A., *op. cit.*, p. 182.

[30] Grecu, V., 'Eine Belagerung Konstantinopels, *etc.*' Henry, P. *Les églises de la Moldavie du Nord, etc.*, p. 239.

Byzantine Christendom ? The tragedy of 1453 was so immense that any representation of the siege and the ensuing battle must have seemed quite inappropriate.

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D. *The Siege of Constantinople in 677*

We know that also after 626 whenever enemy forces threatened to capture Constantinople, the faithful inhabitants turned to the Holy Virgin for protection. Some scholars even maintain that the "Te Hypermacho" of the Akathistos Hymn was composed in gratitude for the deliverance of the city from the Arabs in 677, in the days of Constantine Pogonatus (668-685)[31]. It is M. O. Tafrali, who believes to be able to show that the paintings of the Siege of Constantinople pertain to the successful defense carried out by the Byzantine army in 677[32]. There is no doubt, in terms of historical gravity, the victory of Constantine IV can hardly be overemphasized, for his succcess not only saved his empire, but also the entire Western world from the Arabs[33]. At the same time, it is really quite improbable that the artists had the events of the latter half of the VIIth century in mind, especially if we remember that the major victory over the Saracens was achieved not so much by the land-forces than by the Byzantine navy on account of the recently invented "Greek Fire". In our wall-paintings of the siege, a navy battle is portrayed, but certainly not as the decisive event.

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E. *The Siege of Constantinople, a Lesson of Fidelity*

The idea that the artists of the wall-paintings of the churches of Humor, Baia and Moldovitsa were inspired by their contemporary political situation was already recognized by P. Henry[34] and A. Grabar[35]. Either Stephen the Great or his son Petru Rareş are identified with the defender of the Orthodox Faith against the infidel Turks, after the fall of Constantinople. It is this continuing battle against the Turks which the artists of the Bucovina

[31] Kokkinakis, Athenagoras, *The Akathist Hymn*. The Original Text with Translation. Los Angeles, 1954.

[32] Tafrali, O. M., 'Asediul Constantinopolui în frescele bucovinene', *Viitorul*, No. 4717 of Nov. 28, 1923, quoted by Ulea, S., *op. cit.*, p. 50.

[33] Vasiliev, A. A., *History of the Byzantine Empire*. Madison, 1928, vol. I, p. 262.

[34] Henry, P,. *Les églises de la Moldavie du Nord, etc.*, p. 241.

[35] Grabar, A., 'Les croisades de l'Europe Orientale dans l'art', *Mélanges Charles Diehl*, II, Paris, 1930, pp. 19-22.

attempted to portray. S. Ulea spells out this theory very clearly when he states : "Just as once upon a time the Holy Virgin aided the Byzantine forces in the battle against the Persians, so she can assist to-day the people of Moldova to triumph against the Turkish aggressors. The image of the city which is besieged under these conditions can have two meanings. On the one hand, she represents Constantinople, however, on the other hand, she stands for the glorious city of Suceava, and even 'par extension' for the entire region of Moldavia"[36]; and Zidărită writes : "The meaning of the composition is obvious. Wishing to point out the necessity of resisting the attacks of the Turkish invaders during the reign of Prince Petru Rareş, and the permanent threat of the Ottoman Empire to Moldova, the painters pictured a defeat of the Turks as if to say : nothing is impossible"[37]. C. Nicolescu is a little more cautious when she writes that "the battles fought against the Turks which still shook Moldova in the days of Petru Rareş, probably contributed to the dramatic force and vastness of this fesco[38]. The modification of the scene at the church of Arbure, S. Ulea interprets in view of the changing political situation. After the Ottoman invasion of 1538 Petru Rareş was deposed by the Porte. In 1541, a certain reconciliation with the Turks was brought about which in turn determined the omission of the Turks from the siege at the church of Arbure, painted in 1541.

The allegorical interpretation of the wall-paintings of the Siege of Constantinople can be justified, of course, by the historical circumstances of that period. After the fall of Constantinople, Stephen the Great reckoning with an attack of the Turks upon his country, sought to set up a wide anti-Turkish front by diplomatic means. In 1475, however, Muhammad II sent an army of 120.000 men under Sulaiman Pasha against Moldova. The decisive battle was fought in the hills south of Vaslui and the Moldovans won a resounding victory which surprised the whole world. One year later, Muhammad II himself led an army of 200.000 against Moldova, supported by the Tartars. The huge Turkish army advanced along the Siret Valley towards Suceava, which put up a heroic struggle. At the battle of Valea Albă and Războieni, the Moldovans at first had to retreat, later, however, with assistance arriving from Transylvania, Muhammad II had to withdraw his army hurriedly across the Danube. Stephen the Great, the most brilliant ruler of Moldova, died in July 1504, leaving a strong, centralized state with a high international standing and powerful popular traditions of struggle for

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[36] Ulea, S., op. cit., p. 47. Also Balş, St., Das Kloster Humor, p. 23.

[37] Zidărită, Ştefan, Suceava. Bucharest, 1967, p. 104.

[38] Nicolescu, Corina, The Moldovita Monastery, p. 21.

national freedom[39]. Under Petru Rareş, the last really independent prince, who continued the anti-Ottoman struggle of his father Suceava experienced another period of prosperity. Under his rule the arts lourished in Moldova, as they had done during the reign of his father, Stephen the Great. As mentioned before, all the wall-paintings of the Siege of Constantinople are to be assigned to this period. Nowadays, the allegorical interpretation of the Siege of Constantinople is widely accepted. The guides at the churches point out that the subject was painted to educate the people and to strengthen them in their struggle against the infidels. Commenting upon this theory, we should like to offer the following remarks.

Firstly, we have shown that any identification of this theme with the sieges of 1453 and 677, both of them by Muslims, is, of course, quite untenable. Secondly, to explain the use of cannons and Turkish soldiery in the paintings by pointing to Turkish threats at the time of the painting of the exterior walls seems highly hypothetical. On the contrary, the artists of the paintings of the Siege of Constantinople were just sadly uniformed of the historical criteria of the Siege of the City in 626 and must have worked from a mediaeval Byzantine model. The armaments, the uniforms, the types of ships, etc. merely reflect the period of the decoration of the walls. Not knowing, how Persians and Avars can be portrayed, they clothed these troops in the uniforms of the contemporary enemy, namely those of the Turks. Whether or not the artists intended to portray a contemporary educational lesson, we shall never know. At the same time, it is interesting to note that Byzantine scholars and Rumanian Christians of the XXth century should transfer the meaning of the Siege of Constantinople to Suceava. Are we entitled to question, whether this transfer might possibly be an expression of their feelings about the period when Moldova was a tributary to the Turks, from 1529[40] until the Treaty of Paris in 1856 ?

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F. *The Siege of Constantinople as Part of the Akathistos Hymn*

In conclusion, it seems that there is little doubt that the artists who adorned the churches of the Bucovina with the iconography of the Akathistos Hymn together with the Siege of Constantinople could not have had any other event in mind than the siege of 626. The supernatural assistance in

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[39] Zidărită, Şt., *op. cit.*, p. 32.

[40] Already in 1513 Moldova was forced to pay an annual tribute to the Sultan, in turn for guarantees preserving the national religion and constitution. These terms were further regulated by a firman of 1529, when Moldova was forced to supply a contingent to the Turkish forces.

the victory of the Byzantines is sufficiently established[41]. In the *Chronicon Paschale* we read of the City that was saved through the intervention of the Mother of God, and how the Khan maintained that he saw a soberly dressed woman walking around the walls alone[42]. Theodore Synkellos reports how the Holy Virgin fought with the Byzantines, that she was always present, striking fear into the enemy and giving strength to her faithful soldiers[43], while George Pisides in the *Bellum Avaricum* states that the Holy Virgin struck the foe and protected the Byzantines[44].

No city was more closely identified with the Holy Virgin than Constantinople. The Byzantines were certain that the Holy Virgin dwelt in their City, for where else should she dwell? It was in her church at Blachernae that her robe remained for many centuries[45]. In addition, the City possessed the Holy Virgin's shroud, her girdle as well as the swaddling-clothes in which her Divine Son had rested against His mother's breast, and which still bore the marks of the Virgin's milk[46]. This conviction of the celestial blessings of the Holy Virgin was merely enforced by the victory of 626, when the outnumbered defenders of Constantinople dispersed the besieging forces and forced them to retreat in great disorder.

After the victory, the people thronged the ancient Church of the Holy Virgin at Blachernae on the Golden Horn, and standing, they joined in the Hairetismos as a thanksgiving to the "Invincible Champion". From this time onwards, this hymn became known as the Akathistos[47].

    Τῇ ὑπερμάχῳ στρατηγῷ τὰ νικητήρια,
    Ὡς λυτρωθεῖσα τῶν δεινῶν εὐχαριστήρια,
    Ἀναγράφω σοι ἡ Πόλις σου Θεοτόκε.
    Ἀλλ ὡς ἔχουσα τὸ κράτος ἀπρομάχητον,
    Ἐκ παντοίων με κινδύνων ἐλευθέρωσον
    Ἵνα κράζω σοι, Χαῖρε Νύμφη ἀνύμφευτε.

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[41] Barišic, F., 'Le siège de Constantinople par les Avares et les Slaves in 626', *Byzantion*, XXIV, 1954, pp. 371ff.

[42] *Chronicon Paschale* (ed. L. Dindorf), Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae. Bonn, 1832, 2 vols. The *Chronicon*, a contemporary source. describes the siege with great clarity and detail.

[43] Theodore Synkellos in *Novum Patrum Bibliothecae*, Rome, 1853.

[44] Quoted by Stratos, A., *loc. cit.*

[45] Ebersolt, Jean, *Sanctuaires de Byzance*. Paris, 1921, pp. 44-53.

[46] Baynes, N. H., 'The Supernatural Defenders of Constantinople', *Analecta Bollandiana*, LXVII, 1949, pp. 165-177.

[47] The author of this hymn, composed of 24 stanzas, is unknown. Romanus the priest (491-518), the Patriarch Sergius (610-673), the Deacon Georges Pisides, a contemporary of the former, and the Patriarch Photius (810-898) have been suggested.

Unto thee, O Theotokos — The invincible Champion
Thy City, in thanksgiving — Inscribes the victory
For the deliverance of my sufferings.
As thy might is unconquerable — Free me from all dangers
Unto thee crying : Hail, thou Ever-Virgin and Bride[48].

Whereas there is uncertainty as to the date of the composition of the hymn
as such, there are, nevertheless, many scholars who maintain that at least
the "Te hypermacho" was written on the day after the lifting of the siege
by the Persians[49].

In mediaeval Byzantine art the Akathistos Hymnos was often iconogra-
phically portrayed[50], for example, in the narthex of the Monastery of St.
Sabas, Palestine, in the trapeza of the Grand Lavra, Mt. Athos, the narthex
of Dochaiariou, Mt. Athos, or the trapeza of Chilandari Monastery, Mt. Athos.
And yet, the iconography of the Akathistos Hymn on the exterior walls
of the Bucovinian churches is quite different both from the model prescribed
in the Hermeneia as well as from the paintings of this theme in the above
mentioned monasteries[51]. Moreover, apart from the wall-painting of the
Akathistos Hymns at the exonarthex of the Church of St. Peter at Lake
Prespa, where we also have a scene of the Siege of Constantinople[52], the com-
bination of the Siege of Constantinople with the Akathistos Hymn appears
only in the paintings of the churches of the Bucovina. In fact, it is the com-
bination of those two themes which leaves no doubt as to the event which
the Moldovan artists had in mind. Interesting as the various interpretations
of the paintings of the siege may be, we feel, that the artists tried their very
best to portray the great victory of 626 upon which the Church has fallen
back in every age, a victory to inspire successive generations and to grant
them comfort in the knowledge of the power of the protectress of the City.

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[48] The kontakion 'Tē hypermacho', transl. by K o k k i n a k i s, Athenagoras, *The Akathist
Hymn*. The original text with translation. Los Angeles, 1954, p. 42.

[49] W e l l e s z, E., 'The Akathistos', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, nos. IX & X, 1956, pp. 141ff.

[50] 'Byzantine Guide to Painting' in D i d r o n, A.N., *Christian Iconography. The History of
Christian Art in the Middle Ages*. New York, 1965, vol. II, pp. 352-358.

[51] H e n r y, P., *Les églises de la Moldavie du Nord, etc.*, pp. 236-237.

[52] G r e c u, V., *Influenţe sîrbeşti în vechea iconografie bisericească a Moldovei*. Czernovitz,
1935, pp. 235-242. S. Ulea points out that the Serbian representation of Constantinople offers
an altogether phantastic image of the City. U l e a, S., *op. cit.*, p. 31.