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John Capistran's Prophecy

NIKOLAOS VEIS (1883–1958) briefly described the first page of Greek manuscript 407 [Diktyon 41817] in the library of the Great Meteoron as containing ‘certain oracles’ (χρησμοί τινες).¹

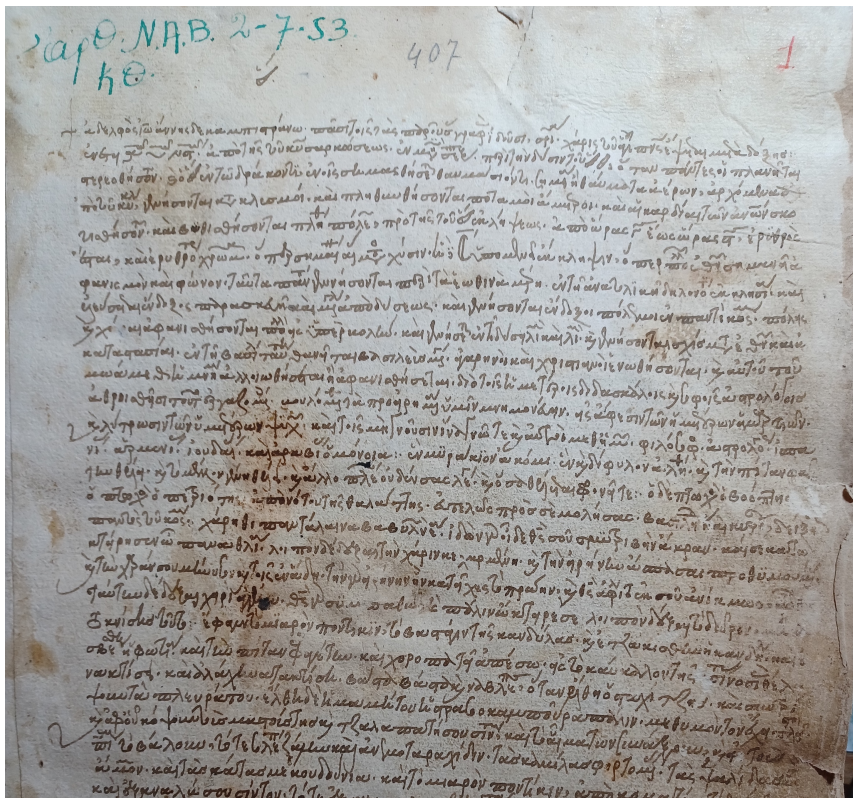


Fig. 1. Meteora, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, MS 407, part of f. 1r. Photo: author.

Upon inspection (Fig. 1), these turn out to comprise four poems known from other sources² and a short prose text evidently unattested elsewhere. The likeliest reason for the prose passage not to have been copied more often is that its predictions are patently wrong: neither a solar nor a lunar

1. ΝΙΚΟΣ Α. ΒΕΪΣ, *Τὰ Χειρόγραφα τῶν Μετεώρων: Κατάλογος περιγραφικῶς τῶν χειρογράφων κωδίκων τῶν ἀποκειμένων εἰς τὰς μονὰς τῶν Μετεώρων*, I. Athens 1967,



Fig. 2. Olomouc, Church of the Immaculate Conception, wall-painting (dated 1468) of the Siege of Belgrade in 1456, detail showing John Capistran inside the city walls. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

eclipse occurred over Europe in September 1456,³ and the events which these putative eclipses were supposed to herald did not come to pass. Just a few months earlier, however, a celestial sign did mark a great battle: ‘July 22. Emperor Mehmed was defeated at Belgrade by Janko, and two tailed stars appeared – one from the east, the other from the west’.⁴ ‘Janko’ is General John Hunyadi (1406?–1456), his adversary was Sultan Mehmed II (1432–1481), and Belgrade, held at the time by Hungary, was a key fortress

p. 427.

2. E.g. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. graec. 154 [Diktyon 44600], ff. 345v–346v, 348r; Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 145 [Diktyon 47432], ff. 240r, 243r-v, 244r (both sixteenth-century). See also ANDRÁS KRAFT, *An Inventory of Medieval Greek Apocalyptic Sources (c. 500–1500 AD): Naming and Dating, Editions and Manuscripts*. Millennium 15 (2018) pp. 69–143, at 117–118.

3. NASA Goddard Space Flight Center Eclipse [Website](#). A penumbral lunar eclipse on 14 September 1456 could not have made a strong impression.

4. LJUBOMIR STOJANOVIĆ, *Стари српски родослови и летописи*. Sremski Karlovci 1927, p. 239. For other records of the comet(s) see JAMES D. MIXSON, *The Crusade of 1456: Texts and Documentation in Translation*. Toronto 2022, pp. 134, 138–139, 237.

which the Ottomans strove to take. When the siege began, the Franciscan friar John Capistran (1386–1456) arrived on the scene with reinforcements: ‘numerous Crusaders were then with Janko’.⁵ Capistran’s fiery preaching raised the defenders’ spirits (Fig. 2), so that their ensuing victory was in no small measure due to him.⁶ Letters written in Capistran’s name were then circulated by way of announcing the battle’s outcome. None of these ephemeral newsheets survives as such, but the recopied text of one is known in both Latin and German.⁷ A somewhat similar missive has now come to light in the Meteora manuscript.⁸ It is of interest not, of course, as a report from the battlefield, but as a piece of high-flying political propaganda addressed to the Christians living under Ottoman rule. The Sultan’s failure to take Belgrade clearly raised great hopes in the pamphlet’s anonymous author: the West would bring deliverance to the Eastern Church, the Muslim faith would sink into oblivion, the grace of the Holy Spirit would descend upon the world... The Ottomans did succeed in capturing Belgrade on 24 August 1521.⁹

5. STOJANOVIĆ, *Стари српски родослови и летописи*, p. 239.

6. For a recent biography of Capistran, see HÉLÈNE ANGIOLINI, *Giovanni da Capistrano*. In: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, LV. Rome 2001, pp. 744–759.

7. MIXSON, *Crusade of 1456*, pp. 133–137.

8. BEĒS dated the codex to the sixteenth century, but it is copied on paper with watermarks known from the 1460s and 1470s: very similar examples are found in GERHARD PICCARD, *Wasserzeichen Werkzeug und Waffen*, I. Stuttgart 1980, nos. III.736–743 (*Schere*), attested in 1458–1480. The leaf with the prophecies is a secondary addition; the script there (Fig. 1) suggests a fifteenth or sixteenth-century date (there is no extant watermark).

9. I have regularised the spelling and introduced modern punctuation in the text that follows. The accompanying photograph (Fig. 1) makes it unnecessary to record scribal idiosyncrasies in an apparatus.

Text

Ἀδελφὸς Ἰωάννης δε Καμπιστράνω πᾶσι τοῖς τὰς παροῦσας γραφὰς ἰδοῦσι σωτηρία· χάρις τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος ἔψεται μετὰ δόξης. Ἐν ἔτει ,α^ω υ^ω νς^ω ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ Κυρίου σαρκώσεως, ἐν μηνὶ Σεπτεμβρίῳ, περὶ τὴν δύσιν τοῦ ἡλίου, ὅταν πάντες οἱ πλανῆται στερεωθήσονται καὶ ὁ ἥλιος ἐν τῷ Δράκοντι, ἐν οἷς σημανθήσεται θαυμάσιόν τι· σημεῖα ἢ θαύματα ἀέρων, ἀρχόμενα ἀπὸ τοῦ κύκλου. Γενήσονται κατακλυσμοὶ καὶ πληθυνθήσονται ποταμοὶ ἄμετροι, καὶ αἱ καρδίαι τῶν ἀνθρώπων σκοτισθήσονται, καὶ βυθισθήσονται πλήθη πόλεων. Πρὸ τῆς τοῦ ἡλίου ἐκλείψεως ἀπὸ ὥρας γ' ἕως ὥρας ζ' ἐρυθρὸς ἔσται καὶ ἐρυθρότερον χροῶμα, ὅπερ σημαίνει αἵματος χύσιν· ἡ δὲ σελήνη ὑπομενεῖ ἔκλειψιν, ὅπερ πολλῶν ἐθνῶν σημανεῖ ἀφανισμόν καὶ φόνον. Ταῦτα πάντα γενήσονται περὶ τὰ ἐωθηνὰ μέρη, ἐν τῇ ἀνατολικῇ δηλονότι ἐκκλησίᾳ. Καὶ ἐλεύσεται ἔνδοξος Παρασκευὴ καὶ μεγάλη ἀπὸ δύσεως. Καὶ γενήσονται ἔνδοξοι πόλεμοι ἐν παντὶ κόσμῳ· πόλεις καὶ χῶραι ἀφανισθήσονται πολλαὶ εἰς ὑπερβολὴν. Καὶ γενήσεται ἐν τῇ δύσει λιμὸς καὶ λοιμὸς. Καὶ γενήσονται σχίσματα ἐθνῶν καὶ ἀκαταστασίαι. Ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ ταύτῃ θανεῖται βασιλεὺς μέγας. Ἀγαρηνοὶ καὶ χριστιανοὶ ἐνωθήσονται, καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ Μωάμεθ ἡ μνήμη ἀλλοιωθήσεται ἢ ἀφανισθήσεται. Διὸ τοῖς ἡμετέροις διδασκάλοις καὶ σοφοῖς ἀστρολόγοις ἀθροισθεῖσι τοῦτο ἐργαζομένοις βουλόμεθα τὰ προειρημένα ὑμῖν μνημονεύειν εἰς ἄφεςιν τῶν ἡμετέρων ἀμαρτίων καὶ λύτρωσιν τῶν ὑμετέρων ψυχῶν. Καὶ τοῖς μὴ γνοῦσιν, ἵνα γνῶτε καὶ αὐτοὶ μεθ' ἡμῶν, φιλόσοφοι ἀστρολόγοι Ἰσπανίας, Ἀρμενίας, Ἰουδαίας καὶ Ἀραβίας ὁμόνοια.¹⁰

10. This last phrase Φιλόσοφοι ἀστρολόγοι etc. is found independently, as a title, in [Diktyon 44600], f. 348r and [Diktyon 47432], f. 244r (see note 2 above).

Translation

Brother John de Capistrano [wishes] all who see this letter salvation; [the] grace of the Holy Spirit will follow with glory. In the year 1456 from the incarnation of the Lord, in the month of September, around sunset, when all the planets will be stable and the sun, in Draco – by these things something wondrous will be signalled: signs and wonders of the air, beginning in sequence. There will be floods, rivers will increase beyond measure, the hearts of men will be darkened,¹¹ and plenty of cities will sink.¹² Before the sun's eclipse, from the third to the sixth hour, [its] colour will grow red and redder, which signals bloodshed; the moon will undergo an eclipse, which signals the disappearance and killing of many nations. All these things will take place in the lands of the East, that is, in the Eastern Church, and a glorious and great Friday¹³ will come from the West. There will be glorious wars in all the world: exceedingly many cities and countries will disappear. There will be famine and pestilence¹⁴ in the West. There will be division of nations and disorder. A great emperor will die in this empire. Hagarenes and Christians will unite, and the memory of Mohammed himself will wane or disappear. Therefore, I want you, our teachers and wise astrologers [who] gathered to work on this, to remember the aforesaid for the remission of our sins and for the redemption of your souls. And those who did not know, let you also know together with us – philosophers [and] astrologers of Spain, Armenia, Judea, and Arabia [in] concord.¹⁵

Keywords

Crusades; Siege of Belgrade (1456); millennialism

11. Cf. Rom 1:21.

12. Cf. Rev 18:21.

13. The Greek word for 'Friday', Παρασκευή, literally means 'preparation (for the Sabbath)'.

14. Cf. Lk 21:11.

15. I thank the anonymous reviewer of this note for a number of very helpful comments.