Raised Up as if to Reach Heaven:

Views of the Theodosian Walls in Arabic and Byzantine Literature

I. Abstract

Past scholarship on the Theodosian Walls has primarily focused on the physical development of the Theodosian Walls and the walls' role in major sieges. However, like many modern walls, such as the Berlin Wall, Israel-Gaza Wall, or Donald Trump's border wall, the Theodosian Walls had immense political and symbolic importance,[1] and unlike such modern walls, this political and symbolic importance has gone unexamined. While limited scholarship on artistic and literary depictions of the Theodosian Walls has been produced, this scholarship is buried in works focused on other topics, generally long-form discussions of the works that these depictions appear in, such as Christopher Buondelmonti's *Liber Insularum Archipelagi* or the Molodovita Monastery Frescos, and consequently the political and symbolic importance of the Theodosian Walls have never been analyzed in a unified or explicit way. Based on my analysis of a diverse body of literary references (i.e., travelogues, histories, and poetry) to the Theodosian Walls before 1453 in Byzantine and Arabic literature, I argue that the Byzantines viewed the Theodosian Walls as a religious monument and strongly associated it with the *Theotokos* while the Arabic-speaking Middle East viewed the Theodosian Walls primarily as an imperial monument which was nigh-impenetrable. A brief discussion on avenues for further research after 1453, especially through visual sources, such as maps, paintings, and frescos, is provided.

[1] See Sztompka, *From East Europeans to Europeans: shifting collective identities and symbolic boundaries in the New Europe*, for a more in-depth discussion of all of these walls.

II. Understanding the Theodosian Walls: Design, History, and Context

> "On the top of the hill there is a small citadel and the Emperor's palace. Round this hill runs the city-wall, which is very strong and cannot be taken by assault from the sea front. Within its circuit there are about thirteen inhabited villages. The principal church is in the midst of this part of the city."
>
> —Ibn Battuta's *Travels* (c. 1354)[2]

The Walls of Constantinople, as we know them today, were built over the course of a century[3] after Constantine designated the city as Rome's new imperial capital in 330 CE.[4] As shown in figure 1, Constantinople's walls consisted of three sections in the late imperial period: the Wall of Constantine, the land walls, and the sea walls. Confusingly, *the Theodosian Walls* is used in the literature to refer to both the land walls specifically, and the sea and land walls jointly. This confusion may be historically justified, since some sections of the sea walls may have been originally constructed by Constantine,[5] but the full circuit is undoubtedly the work of Theodosius II. Consequently, I will refer to the land and sea walls jointly as *the Theodosian Walls*, especially because I do not think there is a strong differentiation between the land and sea walls in the Byzantine or foreign popular consciousness. Notably, the Wall of Constantine eventually

[2] Ibn Battuta, *Travels*, pp. 159-164.
[3] The Byzantine Legacy, *The Theodosian Walls*.
[4] Tumbell, *The Walls of Constantinople AD 324-1453,* pp. 5.
[5] According to Mango, the first known reference to the sea walls is in 439, when Cyrus of Panopolis was ordered to complete the sea walls. However, this does not imply that Constantine, or any other emperor between Constantine and Theodosius II, had not built any sea walls. The only gates uncontroversially identified from the wall of Constantine, The Gate of Saint Aemilianus, stood at a junction with the sea walls (see Jain pp. 264 and van Milligen pp. 18), which suggests Constantine constructed at least partial sea walls.

fell into disrepair, probably around the 9th century.[6] As a result, only a few gates survive today, and only the Theodosian Walls seem to have been considered important by Byzantine or Arabic sources.

Figure 1. A strategic map of Constantinople, Tumbell pp. 6.

Unlike the walls of Constantine, the Theodosian Walls were continuously maintained for over a millennium and a half, only falling into disrepair during the late Ottoman period (approx.

[6] The wall of Constantine mostly falls out of the historical record, and archeology has been limited since it is within the city limits of Istanbul. According to Jain (pp. 263), Kedrenos reports that the wall collapsed during an earthquake in 867, although some gates may have survived into the Ottoman period.

1850) due to becoming a restraint to Istanbul's growing urban sprawl and interfering with the flow of maritime trade.[7] Despite the Theodosian Walls' antiquity, the sections standing today (see figure 2 and figure 3 as examples) look much the same as they did when they were first constructed.[8]

Figure 2. "View of Belgrade Gate," Shutterstock, April 16, 2009. https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/istanbul-turkey-april-16-2009-view-1180441129.

[7] The Byzantine Legacy, *The Sea Walls*.
[8] Thumbell, pp. 10.

Figure 3. "Walls of Constantinople in Istanbul Turkey," Adobe Stock. ND.

The full circuit of the Theodosian Walls spanned roughly 14 kilometers, around 5 kilometers of which was composed of land wall and the other 9 kilometers of which was composed of sea wall. As shown in figure 4, the land walls consisted of three layers, earning them the moniker "triple walls". The first line of defense was a 20-meter-long moat which was filled in during the Ottoman period (and corresponds, roughly, to the space between the first wall and the modern highway in figure 3), followed by a low wall no higher than two meters. Behind that was the "outer" wall, raised 12 meters, and an inner wall, raised around 15 meters. The inner wall is

dotted with 96 towers, each 20 meters in height.[9]

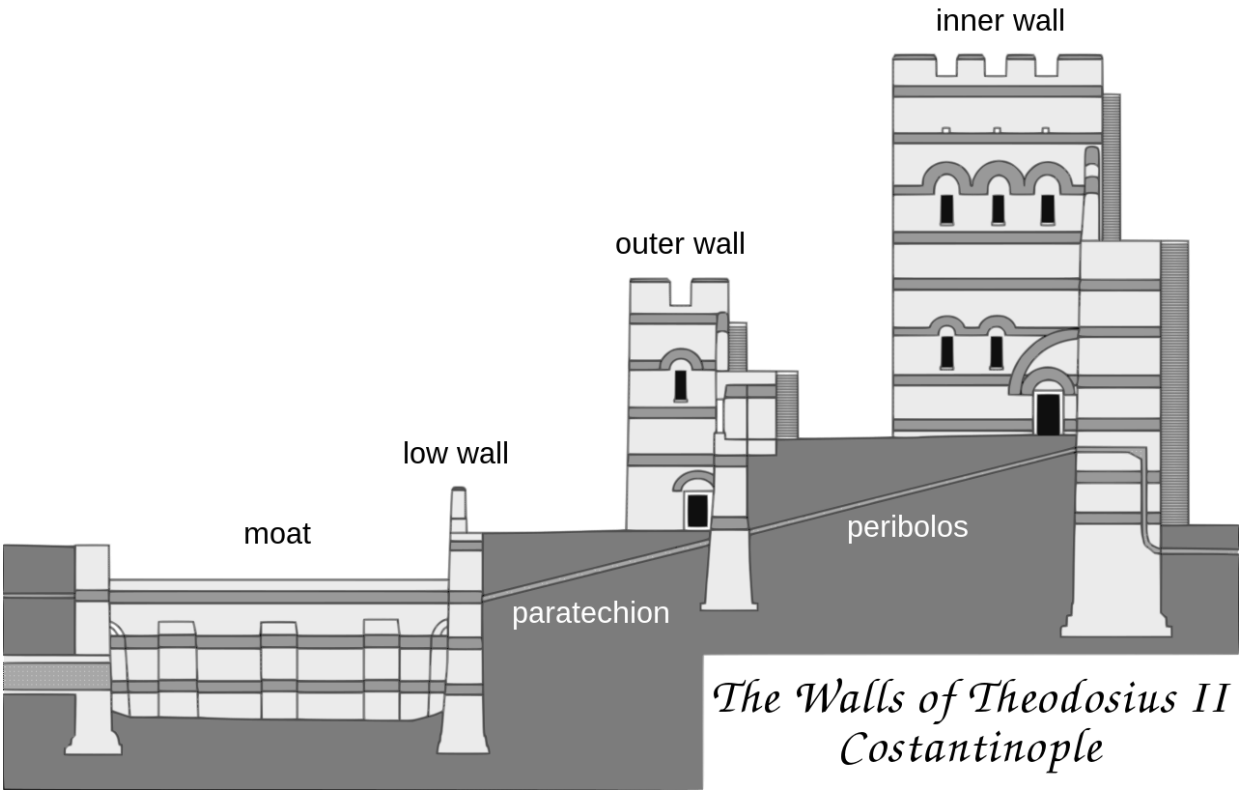

Figure 4. "The Walls of Theodosius II of Constantinople," Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Walls_of_Teodosio_II_scheme_en.svg

From Constantinople's designation as the Roman capital in 330, to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Constantinople suffered roughly 28 sieges, only 4 of which were successful.[10] Two of these successful sieges were the result of civil wars and were ended by partisans throwing open the gates, rather than the Theodosian Walls being seized by force.[11] This means, on average, there was a siege of Constantinople once every 40 years. Of course, sieges are not spread evenly throughout time. Sieges tended to arrive in batches during periods of imperial weakness

[9] The Byzantine Legacy, *The Theodosian Walls*.
[10] Wikipedia. *List of Sieges of Constantinople*. For purists still concerned about my direct citation of Wikiepedia in 2023, I have personally verified this list and agree with it, and no other such lists exist.
[11] The first such siege occurred in 715 and ended when Anastasios II surrendered to Theodosius III. The second such siege occurred in 1376, and ended when Andronikos IV Palaiologos, one of 5 claimants of the imperial throne, was let in to Constantinople.

and the later Byzantines suffered far more sieges than the early. The most important consequence of this trend is that after the year 600 there was no point where a siege of Constantinople was not in living memory of the city's population, and with the notable exception of the 4th Crusade in 1204, Constantinople always won the siege.[12] This loss, and another close call to an Avar-Persian Coalition in 626,[13] would weigh the heaviest on Byzantine consciousnesses since they constituted the only exceptions to the Theodosian Walls' otherwise impeccable track record.[14] The final failure of the Theodosian Walls came in 1453 to the well-known Ottoman conquest, and although this siege fundamentally changed both Arab and Byzantine views on the Theodosian Walls, that discussion is outside of the scope of this paper.

While this historical section is highly abbreviated, it is important to highlight that you already know more about the history of the Theodosian Walls than any citizen of Constantinople would have, bar possibly the most educated. Constantinople has a long and complex history, and even among those with a formal education, it was difficult to remember urban planning decisions made almost a millennium prior. Consequently, the average citizen of Constantinople would have known at most a digest of important sieges and a few vague facts which most likely were urban myths.[15] Consequently, it is the small digest of sieges that occupied the public consciousness, such as the 626 Persian-Avar siege, along with the physical appearance of the

[12] Wikipedia, *List of Sieges of Constantinople*.
[13] While no previous scholarship has been done on the particular question of what sieges weigh the most on the Byzantine consciousness, Hurbanic is successful at making the case the 626 Persian-Avar siege played a large role, and references to this siege came up over and over in my research, such as in the frescos at Molodovita Monastery or in the *Akathist*, both discussed below. My contrast, no other siege was ever references in any primary sources not directly tied to reporting on the siege itself.
[14] Giarenis, *The Crisis of the Fourth Crusade in Byzantium (1203-1204) and the Emergence of Networks for Anti-Latin Reaction and Political Action*.
[15] Kaldellis, Anthony and Robin Pierson. "Episode 265 – The 10 Greatest Emperors with Anthony Kaldellis," *The History of Byzantium Podcast*.

walls, that shaped Byzantine views of the Theodosian Walls, and it is doubtful foreigners knew even this much. Thus, counterintuitively, additional background may ultimately be *misleading* since such background did not substantially play into Byzantine views on the Theodosian Walls. In this vein, in order to understand the Arabic sources, it is sufficient only to know that the Rashidun Caliphate was repelled once and the Umayyad Caliphate was repelled twice.[16]

III. Methods and Sources

Despite the historical significance of the Theodosian Walls, there are surprisingly few references to them in any primary sources, as observed by other scholars.[17] Consequently, I have cast a large net, and have attempted to use every primary source available in English translation. All sources I found from before 1453 were literary, although such literary sources were available in many genres. The most common genres of sources, histories and travelogues, were difficult to use, since their references to the Theodosian Walls are generally brief, and simply observe that the Theodosian Walls encircle Constantinople and are quite daunting. In almost all cases, such references are not useful, although travelogues occasionally include brief editorialization which is of use. I speculate that the general brevity of descriptions of the Theodosian Walls is due to non-Byzantine histories relying on second-hand accounts of the walls while Byzantine histories assume basic information about the Theodosian Walls is common knowledge. Travelogues, for their part, usually focus on the imperial palaces and the Hagia Sophia. This is most likely because the writers of travelogues often were allowed to stay in

[16] El-Azhari argues that Muslim chroniclers paid limited attention to any European conflicts and struggled to tell most Europeans apart, which is apparent in the primary sources. Common people, of course, would have known even less. I speculate that chroniclers were probably aware of other high-profile Byzantine-Muslim conflicts, such as the battle of Manzikert, but the vision of Constantinople was undoubtable a vision of repelling Arab and Persian armies.

[17] Tomadaki*, Literary Depictions of the Constantinopolitan Walls in Byzantium*.

imperial palaces,[18] and because the Hagia Sophia was the most iconic element of Constantinople in the eyes of their medieval readers.[19] Despite the brevity of references to the Theodosian Walls in histories and travelogues, there are two primary methods of textual criticism which allow us to infer what narratives about the Theodosian Walls influenced these texts. First, editorialization, even if brief, can be telling if it can be placed in a wider historical context such that we can be certain it is not due to the eccentricities of one particular author. Second, factual errors, especially if they are egregious, are very useful. Such factual errors must have emerged from somewhere, so in cases where the most likely source is popular narratives,[20] which thereby tells us much about how different societies viewed the Theodosian Walls. Notably, my access to Arabic language sources was severely limited since much of the corpus remains untranslated, and what sources are available in English are due to the particular interests of a small number of scholars. Consequently, much more evidence on this question may be available in the future as translation continues.

The two literary sources of greatest use to me were two Koine Greek poems. The first poem, by the 10th century poet John Geometres, is an exaltation of a tower on the south end of the

[18] This is a slightly peculiar historical coincidence, since travelogues were usually written by high-profile pilgrims, crusaders, or, of course, Ibn Battuta. Ibn Battuta was allowed to stay in an imperial palace since he was associated with a diplomatic mission from the Golden Horde. Crusaders and important pilgrims were allowed to stay imperial palaces as a Byzantine diplomatic strategy. There are accounts from merchants (the most thorough such account is Pero Tafur, which is reproduced and translated by *Ross and Power*) and non-Christians, such as the Ladino rabbi, Moses Almosnino (discussed by *Borovaya*), which do not include references to the imperial palaces, so I attribute this to an explicit diplomatic success by the Byzantines.

[19] Atchison has done an impressive job of collecting references to the Hagia Sophia in travelogues on his website and is a great starting resource for researching travelogues to Constantinople in general.

[20] You flagged this as needing more extrapolation or perhaps a citation justifying this method. Unfortunately, this is ultimately an extension of the historical method, so I can't find any theory sources that would make sense to cite here, and will just appeal to the fact that my reasoning makes sense.

Theodosian Wall, near the sea.[21] This source is uniquely valuable, because it is the only source where any author explicitly discusses their views on the symbolic value of the Theodosian Walls. The second poem is the *Akathist*, an extended lyric poem incorporated into the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church.[22] The poem was written as an exaltation of the *Theotokos* after Constantinople successfully repelled the Avar-Sassanian coalition in 626,[23] since the Byzantine victory was credited to divine intercession by the *Theotokos* after the emperor paraded her icon on the Theodosian Walls. The *Akathist* makes extensive use of metaphors, comparing the *Theotokos* to a great variety of things, and read in this context, many metaphors connect the *Theotokos* and the Theodosian Walls directly.

Notably, I could not find any visual resources before 1453. However, shortly after 1453, there is an explosion of visual sources,[24] which are especially useful since, unlike literary sources, the Theodosian Walls are necessarily interconnected with the whole work, which allows in-depth source criticism regarding the Theodosian Walls in most art. Possible avenues of research which use this art are discussed in the conclusion.

IV. Divine Walls which Cleave the Air: The Theodosian Walls in Byzantine Literature

[21] Maguire, *The Beauty of Castles: A Tenth Century Description of a Tower at Constantinople*.
[22] Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.
[23] While this story is oft repeated in the literature, it was quite difficult to track down. To the best of my searching, it appears to be from a synaxarion, but synaxaria were not composed until the tenth century according to Delehaye. Consequently, it is possible this is a Byzantine folk legend. However, it is possible earlier Synaxaria have been uncovered since Delehave's writing in 1911, but this is a niche issue, and I am not sure who to email to ask about this. Alternatively, I have seen the claim in EWTN, among other more dubious sources, that the Akathist was composed by St. Romanus (c. 530) and was incorporated into the liturgy after 626. I can find no evidence for this particular claim, although I speculate this may have genuinely circulated as a folk etymology. Luckily, I do not think that either of these origins weaken my argument, in fact, if anything, they strengthen it, but I am shocked that folk legends about the Akathist are so prominently presented as fact in the literature.
[24] This is attributable to three causes. First, Byzantine refugees in Latin Europe; second, the popularization of printed books due to the invention of the printing press in 1436; and third, the Italian Renaissance broadly.

> "You raised the walls up, as if you reach heaven, [but] the evil is inside, [so] the city can be easily conquered!"
>
> —Prophecy shouted by a Mysterious Fisherman[25]

Drawing heavily on three sources, a poem by John Geometres, the *Akathist,* and a prophecy of dubious origin reported by historian John Kedrenos, I argue that the Theodosian Walls and the divine will strongly associated in the Byzantine imagination. This association can be seen through three themes: First, that the Theodosian Walls' origin is divine, even if God used humans as the efficient cause; second, that the Theodosian Walls are the efficient cause by which the *Theotokos* protects the church; and, third, that the Theodosian Walls are so high as to reach towards heaven. Italics and bolds in all quotations are my own.

1. **On the Divine Origin of the Walls:**

> "***To us God gave a tower*** of strength, a tower of firmness, a tower of life not to be broken, ***overcoming*** all the sufferings of life and ***the assaults and machines of the barbarians***, full of all beauties and wonders."
>
> —John Geometres[26]

While Geometres does not mince words about the relationship between God and the Theodosian Walls, in isolation, it is unclear how literally he means that God *gave* Constantinople the tower. Geometres elaborates on this later, commanding the listener: "Do not talk to me

[25] According to Tomodaki, Kedronos reports that, during the reign of Nikephoros Phokas (r. 963-969) a fisherman sailed under a section of fortification under construction and yelled this prophecy. Given that Phokas was ultimately assassinated, this is almost certainly a folk legend, but is instructive nonetheless.
[26] Maguire, *The Beauty of Castles: A Tenth Century Description of a Tower at Constantinople*.

about ancient tower construction. That was not yet a tower, but its construction came to an end."[27] Admittedly, the exact meaning of the second line in this translation is unclear, but read all together, Geometres does seem to suggest that the fact human hands built the tower is not important to him, and by extension, that the God-givenness of the tower *is* important to him.

2. **On the Relationship between the *Theotokos*[28] and the Theodosian Walls:**

"Rejoice, **unshakable fortress** of the Church:

Rejoice, **inviolable wall** of the kingdom!

Rejoice, Thou through whom victories are obtained:

Rejoice, Thou through whom foes fall prostrate"

—The Akathist[29]

As discussed in the sources section, the *Akathist* was written in order to exalt the *Theotokos* after she, in the Byzantine view, interceded to save Constantinople from the Avars in 626. While the *Akathist* is quite long, there are at least half a dozen comparisons of the *Theotokos* to defensive fortifications, including other references to her a wall, like the quotation above. Many other martial exaltations are included in the *Akathist*, including that the *Theotokos* will "guard and protect me throughout the ages."[30] While it is unclear whether this association existed prior to 626, or was created along with the *Akathist* in 626, the *Theotokos* has a militant character in

[27] Ibid.
[28] Theotokos is the Greek Orthodox term for the mother of Jesus Christ, the same figure who is generally known as the Virgin Mary in English-language churches. The literature generally uses the Greek term, so I have elected to use it here.
[29] St. Nektarios Orthodox Church, *Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokos*. There are many translations of the *Akathist* with subtle differences, and I chose this one primarily for convenience since it is presented cleanly on a PDF, a curtesy most other translations do not provide. The differences between translations were not important for the purposes of my analysis, although there are substantial changes which matter for a more in-depth analysis, especially between the Old Church Slavonic and Koine Greek versions.
[30] Ibid.

the Greek Orthodox Church, especially via-a-via defending the church from barbarians and enemies.[31] In context, the Theodosian Walls are clearly a high profile candidate for defensive intercession, and as such this association likely permeated Byzantine society.

3. **On the Theodosian Walls Reaching Heaven:**

There are at least two surviving references to the Theodosian Walls reaching up into the heavens. Consider the following section from John Geometres' poem and the prophecy from the beginning of this section:

> "It is a bond of land and sea at their limits, although the limit thus (both) unites and separates their natures. A colossus in height, and cleaving the air, **it strives somehow to reach even the [heavens]**"
>
> —John Geometres[32]

Both quotations suggest the towers reach towards God, although the tone of the references is quite different. For Geometres, this is praise of the Theodosian Walls, but in the case of the prophecy, it strikes me as an ominous comparison to the Tower of Babel. The emperor, in his arrogance, believes that he can reach Heaven, and therefore to strike the emperor down, God has rescinded his protection via the Theodosian Walls, and they will fail to keep the emperor, and Constantinople, safe. Interestingly, these sources are both from the 10th century,[33] which

[31] Gabriel, *Power to do all that the Theotokos wills*.
[32] Maguire, *The Beauty of Castles: A Tenth Century Description of a Tower at Constantinople*.
[33] Even more interesting, if the theory that the Akathist is a 10th century folk history is to be believed, this would all suggest that the religious view of the Theodosian Walls took hold in the 10th century, although I feel this conclusion is highly speculative.

seems to suggest that the Theodosian Walls reaching into the heavens was a popular notion at the time, since the same motif was deployed independently, in two parallel lights.

Taken altogether, this suggests that, in the Byzantine popular consciousness, there was a strong religious association with the Theodosian Walls, and that while the precise formulation of this association surely changed over time, the credit for the Theodosian Walls' success belonged to God.

V. Conquerable Only Through Cunning? The Theodosian Walls in Arabic Literature

Ascertaining views on the Theodosian Walls in the Arab world is difficult, but I believe that repeated factual errors about the 4th Crusade indicate that Arab authors viewed the Theodosian Walls as nigh impregnable. Consider Ibn Battuta's quotation at the beginning of section II. Ibn Battuta specifically notes that the Theodosian Walls "cannot be taken by assault from the sea front".[34] However, approximately a century before Ibn Battuta wrote his *Travels*, the crusaders had taken Constantinople by the sea walls. In fact, the sea walls were the only way Constantinople had ever been taken by assault. Taken in isolation, this error might be overlooked, since Ibn Battuta made limited efforts to fact check his assertions,[35] but Ibn al-Athir, one of the most influential Muslim chroniclers, makes the same error in his *Universal History*. In fact, Ibn al-Athir offers two incorrect explanations of how the crusaders conquered Constantinople, both premised on the idea that the Theodosian Walls could not have been taken by force:

[34] Ibn Battuta, *The Travels.* pp. 159-164.
[35] In fact, large sections of *The Travels* seem to be plagiarized from earlier Travelogues.

> "When they arrived at Constantinople, his uncle **[Alexius III] came out with a Byzantine army to confront them**. The assault took place in Rajab 599 [July 1203] and **the Byzantines were defeated and retired back inside the city. The Franks entered with them [Explanation 1]**, so the king [Alexius III] fled to a remote area of the empire. It had been said that the king of Byzantium did not engage in battle with the Franks outside the city wall but that they besieged him inside. **Within the walls, there was a group of Byzantines who supported the prince.** They started fires in the city, which distracted the people. At that, **these supporters opened a gate to the city by which the Franks entered and the king fled. [Explanation 2]**"
>
> —Ibn al-Athir[36]

Much like Herodotus, Ibn al-Athir sourced much of his history through interviews with people who claimed to be knowledgeable on the subject matter.[37] This account seems to suggest that al-Athir received two separate incorrect accounts of the 4th Crusade, both of which assumed that seizing Constantinople in a siege was impossible. Most other accounts from Arab chroniclers omit an explanation of the crusader victory entirely.[38] Taken altogether, this seems to strongly suggest that the notion of seizing the Theodosian Walls was so unthinkable in the Arab world that even those interested in Byzantine politics brainstormed other ways Constantinople could have been seized, since such methods were more conceivable than Constantinople being taken by force.

[36] El-Azhari, *Muslim Chroniclers and the Fourth Crusade.* pp. 108-109
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

VI. Concluding Thoughts and Areas for Further Research

This paper has aimed to demonstrate that were diverse and nuanced perspectives on the Theodosian Walls and that these perspectives can be, at least in part, recovered through textual criticism. However, this investigation is limited by many factors, especially the fact I am not able to read Koine Greek or Arabic primary sources. Scholars who are fluent with these corpuses can surely expand or challenge my arguments. Even prior to 1453, there are sufficient Latin accounts of the Theodosian Walls that textual criticism is impossible. Most of these accounts, such as that of Odo De Deuil,[39] are from crusaders, which likely clouds their perspective since crusaders generally held negative views of Byzantium. Some scholars have argued that Latin popular culture held Constantinople in esteem, so the contradiction of holding a negative view on Constantinople while writing for an audience with a positive view may prove interesting.[40] Additionally, this research is much easier after 1453, as there is a large body of visual depiction of the Theodosian Walls from the 16th and 17th century, such as the maps of Christopher Buondelmonti,[41] paintings of the 4th crusade, and especially the depictions of the 626 siege of Constantinople in the Moldovita Monastery.[42] Additionally, the large body of folk poetry and preaching related to the Fall of Constantinople, especially in Germany,[43] would likely yield dividends if explored further, but these sources remain largely untranslated. Finally, the

[39] Mango, Cyril and John Parker, *A Twelfth Century Description of the Hagia Sophia.*
[40] Devereaux, *Constantinople and the West in Medieval French Literature: Renewal and Utopia*, pp. 21, 43-44.
[41] Manners, *Constructing the Image of a City: The Representation of Constantinople in Christopher Buondelmonti's* Liber Insularum Archipelagi.
[42] This subject is especially fascinating, see both works by Sullivan, *Visions of Byzantium: The Siege of Constantinople in Sixteenth-Century Moldavia* and *Divine Assistance in Byzantium and Beyond – Defending Constantinople*. For a discussion of this site intersecting with the *Akathist*, see Vicovan, *Theological significance of the Akathistos Hymn from Moldovita Monastery*.
[43] Bisaha, *European Reactions to the Fall of Constantinople*.

Travelogues[44] *Walls of Constantinople* subject collection is doubtless of some use in this endeaver.

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