



The Plate of Perm (6th c.), now in The Hermitage, St Petersburg

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Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre
Chronicle
(known also as the Chronicle of Zuqnin)
Part III

Translated with notes and introduction by
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The year 855 (A.D. 543/4) of Alexander.³⁴⁶ there was a great and mighty plague in the whole world in the days of the emperor Justinian.³⁴⁷

Now, for the beginning of this narrative the blessed prophet Jeremiah has proved most helpful to us, being versed in raising songs of lamentation amid groans over the afflictions and the ruin of his people. Thus he would be a model for the present writer—or lamenter—in (putting down) the story of this terrible and mighty scourge with which the whole world was lashed in our days; though this time not over the afflictions of one city, Jerusalem, or of one people only, the Jews, would he have to weep and lament, but over (those of) many cities [p. 80] which (God's) wrath turned into, as it were; a wine-press and pitilessly trampled and squeezed all their inhabitants within them like fine grapes.

(He would have to weep and lament) over the whole earth (upon) which the command went out like a reaper upon standing corn and mowed and laid down innumerable people of all ages,³⁴⁸ all sizes and all ranks, all together;

—over corpses which split open and rotted on the streets with nobody to bury (them);

—over houses large and small, beautiful and desirable which suddenly became tombs for their inhabitants and in which servants and masters at the same time suddenly fell (dead), mingling their rottenness together in their bedrooms, and not one of them escaped who might remove their corpses out from within the house;

—over others who perished falling in the streets to become a terrible and shocking spectacle for those who saw them, as their bellies were swollen and their mouths wide open, throwing up pus like torrents, their eyes inflamed and their hands stretched out upward, and (over) the

³⁴⁶ Another term for the Seleucid era.

³⁴⁷ The Great Plague under Justinian, 541–544; see P. Allen, 'The "Justinianic" Plague', *Byzantion* 49 (1979), p. 5–20; and J.-N. Biraben & J. Le Goff, 'La peste dans le Haut Moyen Age', *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 24 (1969), p. 1484–1510. This, the longest known account of the Great Plague, although less informative (but much more replete with Biblical quotations) than the accounts of Procopius (*Wars*, II, 22), Evagrius (IV, 29) and Agathias (V, 10), comes from John of Ephesus, who devoted to it a separate work, subsequently incorporated into his *Church History*; D'yakonov, *Ioann Yefesskiy*, p. 168f; from this source it was also copied by Michael the Syrian (305b&c, 1–308 end/II, 235–240).

³⁴⁸ A pun on the words *qāymātā*, "standing corn" and *qawmān*, "man's ages".

corpses rotting and lying on corners and streets and in the porches of courtyards and in churches and martyria and everywhere, with nobody to bury (them);

—over ships in the midst of the sea whose sailors were suddenly attacked by (God's) wrath and (the ships) became tombs for their captains and they continued adrift on the waves carrying the corpses of their owners;

—over other (ships) which arrived in harbours, were moored by their owners, and remained (so), never to be untied by them again;

—over palaces which groaned one to the other;

—over bridal chambers where the brides were adorned (in finery), but all of a sudden there were just lifeless and fearsome corpses;

—over virgins which (had been) guarded in bedchambers and (now) there was nobody to carry them from (these) bedchambers [p. 81] to the tombs;

—over highways which became deserted;

—over roads (on) which (the traffic) was interrupted;

—over villages whose inhabitants perished all together;

—over many things of this kind, which defeat all who have the power of speech in (their skill with) words and stories.

Thus over these things the prophet might weep and say, "Woe upon me not 'because of the destruction of the daughter of my people,'³⁴⁹ but because of the desolation of the entire habitable earth of humanity, which has been corrupted by its sins; and because the world in its entirety has already been made desolate for some time and has become empty of its inhabitants". He might, I imagine, use the words of the prophecies of his fellow prophets to bring forward and say to the remnant among humanity who had survived, "Lament, wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God, not only 'because the cereal offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of your God',³⁵⁰ but because (God's) wrath, due to sins, has suddenly turned the holy house of God into a tomb for dead corpses and it reeked of dead bodies instead of living worshippers". Again he might also repeat these words, "The earth shall sit in sorrow and all its inhabitants mourn".³⁵¹ Also not very remote (from the case)

³⁴⁹ Lam. 2, 11.

³⁵⁰ Cp. Joel I, 13 and I, 9.

³⁵¹ Is. 24, 6 (Peshitta).

is this, "Call for the mourning and lamenting women,"³⁵² that together they may make lamentation, not over one corpse, or over one people, or over an only-begotten son, or over a young man who was snatched away by death, but over (whole) peoples and kingdoms, over territories and regions and over powerful cities which were seized (by the plague) and their dwellings groaned over the rotten corpses (lying) in them.

Thus when I, a wretch, wanted to include these matters in a record of history, my thoughts were seized many times by stupor, and for many reasons I planned to omit [p. 82] it, firstly because all mouths and tongues are insufficient to relate it, and moreover because even if there could be found such that would record (at least) a little from among the multitude (of matters), what use would it be, when the entire world was tottering and reaching its dissolution and the length of generations was cut short? And for whom would he who wrote be writing?

(But) then I thought that it was right that through our writings we should inform our successors and transmit to them (at least) a little from among the multitude (of matters) concerning our chastisement. Even if together with us they are knocking on the gate of the consummation, perhaps (during) this remainder of the world which will come after us they will fear and shake because of the terrible scourge with which we were lashed through our transgressions and become wiser through the chastisement of us wretches and be saved from (God's) wrath here (in this world) and from future torment.

It was upon us that (the chastisement) came at that time (and so now) it is time that we should weep together with the prophet saying, "Death has come up into our windows, it has entered our gates, and made our palaces desolate".³⁵³ Perhaps the eye of the prophecy watched these present events and prophesied concerning us, especially since in very deed it has appeared that, "My sword will be drawn forth out of its sheath and will destroy both righteous and sinners",³⁵⁴ so that it also happened that at a single sign they became a single wine-press, and corpses which were split open, were eaten by dogs and exposed, having been cast about in great terror.

³⁵² Cp. Jer. 9, 17; PD has added, "and lamenting".

³⁵³ Cp. Jer. 9, 21.

³⁵⁴ Cp. Ezek. 21, 3.

Now when the chastisement had been fulfilled³⁵⁵ it began to cross the sea to Palestine and the region of Jerusalem; furthermore some terrible shapes also appeared to people at sea.

When this plague was passing from one land to another, many people saw shapes of bronze boats and (figures) sitting in them resembling people [p. 83] with their heads cut off. Holding staves, also of bronze, they moved along on the sea and could be seen going whithersoever they headed. These figures were seen everywhere in a frightening fashion, especially at night. Like flashing bronze and like fire did they appear, black people without heads sitting in a glistening boat and travelling swiftly on the sea, so that this sight almost caused the souls of the people who saw it to expire.

In this way they were seen proceeding to Gaza, Ashkelon and Palestine and simultaneously with their appearance the beginning (of the plague) took place there. Also (horrors) exceeding by far those previously narrated about the city of Alexandria³⁵⁶ took place from now on in the whole of Palestine, with the effect that villages and cities were left totally without inhabitants.

Now (we shall speak about) another sign of menace and of God's just sentence. Since in this way the riches of many people were left unguarded, gold, silver and other things,—the pearls of the world—gates standing open and treasures abandoned, houses full of all (kinds of) objects and everything one could desire in the world, so if it happened that somebody wished to take and gather something in order to take possession (of it), thinking that he would escape, on the very same day the sentence would come upon him.

Thus it was told about one city on the Egyptian border (that) it perished totally and completely with (only) seven men and one little boy ten years old remaining in it. The (men) having made common cause with each other went around the whole city and saw [p. 84] that there was nobody alive in it but themselves, the corpses of the rest (of the people) being mixed together in a decaying state. And when after one, two, and as much as five days, these (seven) were (still) alive, they took counsel among them(selves) and said:

³⁵⁵ In Alexandria; we know this from Michael the Syrian (305b-306/II, 235-238), who retains the beginning of John of Ephesus' account of the plague, omitted by PD.

³⁵⁶ PD has forgotten that he omitted the beginning of John of Ephesus' account of the plague, cp. previous note.

"Perhaps we shall escape (from death), but since now it is easy for us—come, let us enter the large houses and gather for ourselves gold, silver and whatever (of other riches) is in them (so that) we shall (be able to) fill one house. Perhaps we will survive and so it will be ours."

In fact as they had said so it was. They dared to enter the houses which were rich and empty of inhabitants. For three days they gathered only gold and silver and with it filled one large house. On the third day (when) they were carrying (the booty) and entering the house, there, inside the house, (God's) wrath came upon them. Immediately they fell and all of them except that little boy within one hour perished on top of (the booty) they had gathered.

And so that boy alone survived. Seeing that all of them had died and from that time on there were no living persons in the whole city he intended to go and leave the city. He went, but when he reached the gate of the city something in the shape of a man seized him, brought him back and set him in the doorway of the house filled with what the (seven men) had gathered. Many times it treated him in this way.

A certain rich man who had previously left his property (in that) city on hearing that it had become desolate, took fright and stayed away from (the city) saying:

"Perhaps God will have mercy upon me and let me live."

When he was persevering in prayer, repentance and supplications he heard news that the entire city had perished totally. A few days later he (could) not restrain himself (any longer) from sending to find out about his household and about the whole city. He sent an agent³⁵⁷ together with other servants saying:

"Come, go [p. 85] and find out the truth about what has happened to my household and to the whole city."

So these people went to the city, entered it and went around in it, but they found nobody alive at all except that boy sitting and weeping, his soul (being) close to expiring from weeping. On finding him they asked him:

"Why are you sitting here and have not fled?"

He told them of all that had happened and of those seven men and of everything they had gathered and of what had happened to them. He also showed them their corpses and what they had collected. When the

³⁵⁷ The Syriac uses here the Greek loanword ἐπίτροπος, 'guardian', 'overseer'.

agent saw that great amount of gold, its sight excited him too, and he said to the assistants accompanying him:

"Let us take some of this gold."

They, however, being frightened said:

"We shall not approach it. But you do as you wish."

Thus he entered and carried out as much of that gold as he was able (to load) on his pack animals. Then he also took along that boy and tried to leave, but when he reached the gate of the city (something) resembling a man rushed after him, caught him, bound both him and the boy and brought them back. Being seized, he took thought that (all) this was happening because of that gold, while the others called out to him:

"Come back and put it in its place and perhaps you will be released."

Then he and that boy came back to the house and when they entered (it) both of them perished. The rest of them fled and thus they were saved.

³⁵⁸ Ps. 107, 27.

³⁵⁹ For the Jewish origin of this term for 'Judgement Day', see S. P. Brock, 'Jewish traditions in Syriac sources', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979), p. 220f (repr. in idem, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, London 1992, ch. 4).

Chapter three

*(On) when this plague of pestilence arrived at the capital, Constantinople.*³⁷⁵

Thus returning to the story and to the series [p. 92] of afflictions, which because of our sins came upon us, we shall now, omitting other matters, tell with sighs and in bitter lamentations about what happened to the city of the emperors, because these (events) are more than anything worthy of lament. Not only we, the miserable, should make lamentation for them, but if it be possible (also) the heavens and the earth.

³⁷⁵ The ms. here use singular when referring to the Persians; on the Persian king who led the expedition, see n. 304.

³⁷⁶ Lacuna of two words.

³⁷⁷ Lacuna of two words.

³⁷⁸ If *darrāh* is read; or perhaps 'cycle' (of the story), if *dārāh* is read.

³⁷⁹ Based on Gen. 41, 18-21.

³⁸⁰ The ms. adds here "not" which does not seem to make sense.

³⁸¹ From Land's text, p. 312, 11f; this caption is omitted in the Vatican ms.

(The signs of plague) were still too few for the measure of sorrow (meted) against (the people) to be judged to be fulfilled.

Who then, O brothers, would describe this hideous and cruel sight! From whose heart, on hearing of these things which happened there, would not sighs break out, and (whose) limbs would not melt as wax melts in front of fire? Leave then those who with their (own) eyes watched that spectacle of misery, destruction and groans, those about whom there is nothing else to say except the word of the prophet whose question should be asked by everyone who saw these things, "Who gave water to my head, and to my eyes—fountains of tears? I wept day and night³⁸² and did not cease, over the destruction and ruin of Babel the great, which up to now has been roaring in the kingdom, but now, behold, her kingdom is humbled and defeated and it is only an angel of wrath who has been made king and destroyer over all her inhabitants."

Now when the chastisement came upon that city, in truth the abundance of the benignity and grace of God appeared in it. Although this (chastisement) was very frightening, grievous and severe, it would be right for us to call it not only a sign of threat and of wrath but also a sign of grace and a call to repentance. For the scourge used patience and moderation until it should arrive at the place. [p. 93]

Just as when a king prepares to go to battle and gives orders to the commanders of his army saying, "Prepare yourself, make your arms ready and take care of your provisions, for, behold, you will proceed with me to war on such and such a day", and likewise he sends a message in writing to the neighbouring cities, "Now I am coming; be prepared, for when I have come there will be no lingering", so this scourge of the benign grace of God by its silence sent as it were numerous messengers from one country to another,³⁸³ and from city to city and to every place, just as if somebody were to say, "Turn back and repent and beg for (forgiveness of) your wrongdoings, and make ready for yourself provisions of alms from your possessions, for behold I am coming, and I am going to make your possessions superfluous."

God's providence informed (us) about it in such a way that (news) was sent to every place in advance, and then the scourge arrived there, coming to a city or a village and falling upon it as a reaper, eagerly and swiftly, as well as upon other (settlements) in its vicinity, up to one, two

³⁸² Jer. 9, 1, Peshitta. The source of the rest of the quotation is unclear.

³⁸³ Read *lhrbh* for *lhrbh*.

or three miles (from it). And until what has been ordered against (one city) had been accomplished, (the scourge) did not pass on to enter the next. In this way it laid hold on (cities and villages) moving slowly.

This is what (also) happened to this city: the visitation came upon it after (the city) had been perceiving the movement³⁸⁴ of the visitation by hearsay from all over the place for one or two years; (only) then did it reach (the city). But (God's) grace towards it was both eager and encouraging and in some people here it was truly active.

As in the days of Noah, when that blessed man together with his family heard the message of the threat and of perdition, he grew afraid and did not disregard (it) but took care to build [p. 94] the ark which became (a salvation) for him, for his own life and for all he had, so also in this time in like manner as did that blessed man, many people managed in a few days to build ships for themselves consisting of almsgiving, that these might transport them across that flood of flame; others in pain of tears (achieved it) by almsgiving and also by distributing their possessions to the needy; (still) others by lament and humility, vigils, abstinence and woeful calling upon God. In this way many people who feared and trembled were able to buy for themselves the kingdom.

Then the onslaught came upon them. Those, however, who neglected and refused to send their riches in advance, left them to others and themselves were snatched away from their possessions, whereas the possessions remained. Both (misfortunes) happened to many people in this city very often.

Chapter four

Again on the same matter, how, once the plague had arrived at the capital, Grace descended³⁸⁵ first upon the poor to gather together and to encompass them in honour not mixed with wrath.

When thus the scourge weighed heavy upon this city, first it eagerly began (to assault) the class of the poor, who lay in the streets. It happened that 5000 and 7000, or even 12,000 and as many as 16,000 of them departed (this world) in a single day. Since thus far it was (only) the beginning, men were standing by the harbours, at the crossroads and

³⁸⁴ Read *mardūteh*, instead of *mardūteh*, 'his punishment', or 'his revolt', Chabot, p. 93, n. 6.

³⁸⁵ Read 'aggnat instead of 'agg'al.

at the gates counting (the dead). Thus having perished they were shrouded with great diligence and buried; they departed (this life) being clothed and followed (to the grave) by everybody.

Thus [p. 95] the (people of Constantinople) reached the point of disappearing, only few remaining, whereas (of) those only who had died on the streets—if anybody wants us to name their number, for in fact they were counted—over 300,000 were taken off the streets. Those who counted, having reached (the number of) 230,000 and seeing that (the dead) were innumerable, gave up (reckoning) and from then on (the corpses) were brought out without being counted.

When those for whom the enshrouders and grave-diggers were (too) few had been removed and (put) in a large common grave, He stretched His destructive hand over the rulers of the world and the renowned in the realm of earthly men, the mighty in riches and those resplendent in their power. From now on the common people, together with the nobles could be seen to be smitten by a single great and harsh blow, and suddenly to fall, apart from a few. Not only those who died, but also those who escaped sudden death (were struck) with this plague of swellings in their groins, with this disease which they call *boubones*,³⁸⁶ and which in our Syriac language is translated as 'tumours'. Both servants and masters were smitten together, nobles and common people impartially. They were struck down one opposite another, groaning.

As to God's sentence, it was explained (as being decreed) so that the people should be astonished and remain in amazement about His righteous judgements which cannot be understood, nor comprehended, by human beings, as it is written, "Thy judgements are like the great deep".³⁸⁷

Also we saw that this great plague showed its effect on animals as well, not only on the domesticated but also on the wild, and even on the reptiles of the earth. One could see cattle, [p. 96] dogs and other animals, even rats, with swollen tumours, struck down and dying. Likewise wild animals could be found smitten by the same sentence, struck down and dying.

This terrible sign came upon the people of this city suddenly after removal of the poor.

³⁸⁶ PD transcribes here Greek *βουβῶνες*.

³⁸⁷ Ps. 36, 6.

Another sign would separate those to be snatched away from those who would survive and remain (waiting) for either death or life. It appeared in this way: three signs became visible in the middle of the palm of a man's hand in the form of black pocks which did not depart (from the skin) but (remained) deep (in it). They were like three drops of blood deep within. On whomsoever these appeared, the moment they did so the end would come within just one or two hours, or it might happen that (the person) had one day's delay. These (signs) were (to be found) on many (people).

To others however, neither this (happened) nor that, but as they were looking at each other and talking, they (began to) totter and fell either in the streets or at home, in harbours, on ships, in churches and everywhere. It might happen that (a person) was sitting at work on his craft, holding his tools in his hands and working, and he would totter to the side and his soul would escape. It might happen that (people) came to the bath to bathe as usual and they would not be able to take off their clothes, but would fall and expire. It might happen that (a person) went out to market to buy necessities and while he was standing and talking or counting his change suddenly the end would overcome the buyer here and the seller there, the merchandise remaining in the middle together with the payment for it, without there being either [p. 97] buyer or seller to pick it up.

And in all ways everything was brought to nought, was destroyed and turned into sorrow alone and funeral lamentations: everyone's hands were weakened, buying and selling ceased and the shops with all their worldly riches beyond description and moneylenders' large shops³⁸⁸ (closed). The entire city then came to a standstill as if it had perished, so that its food supply stopped. There was nobody to stand and do his job, with the result that food vanished from the markets and great tribulation ensued, especially for the people prostrate with exhaustion from illnesses. Only a few were strong (enough) to bring to any bazaar anything worth one obol, but if they wished they took a dinar for it. Thus everything ceased and stopped.

What was most pressing of all was simply that everybody who was still alive should remove corpses from his house, and that also other (corpses) should disappear from the streets by being removed to the

seashore. There boats were filled with them and during each sailing they were thrown overboard and the ships returned to take other (corpses).

It would be seemly for the hearer of these things to shed tears for us rather than for the dead and to lament with sighs for what our eyes saw. Alas, my brothers, for this cruel sight! Alas for those corpses (worthy of) lamentations at that time!

Standing on the seashore one could see litters colliding with each other and coming back to carry and to throw upon the earth two or three (corpses), to go back again and to bring (further corpses). Others carried (the corpses) on boards and carrying poles, bringing and piling (them) up [p. 98] one upon another. For other (corpses), since they had rotted and putrefied, matting was sewn together. People bore them on carrying poles and coming (to the shore) threw them (down), with pus running out of them. And they would return bringing (corpses) again. Others who were standing on the seashore dragged them and threw them down upon boats, piling them up in heaps of two or three and (even) of five thousand (each). Innumerable (corpses) piled up on the entire seashore, like flotsam on great rivers, and the pus flowed, discharging itself down into the sea.

With what tears should I have wept at that time, O my beloved, when I stood observing those heaps, full of unspeakable horror and terror? What sighs would have sufficed me, what funeral laments? What heart-break, what lamentations, what hymns and dirges would suffice for the suffering of that time over the people thrown in great heaps torn open one upon another with their bellies putrefying and their intestines flowing like brooks down into the sea? How too could the heart of a person who saw these things, with which nothing could be compared, fail to rot within him, and the rest of his limbs fail to dissolve together with him (though still) alive, from pain, bitter wailing and sad funeral laments, having seen white hair of the old people who had rushed all their days after the vanity of the world and had been anxious for gathering (means) and waiting for a magnificent and honourable funeral (to be prepared) by their heirs, who (now were) struck down upon the earth, (this) white hair (now) being grievously defiled with the pus of their heirs.

³⁸⁸ Or 'silversmiths', ἀργυροπράτεια, the ms. reading is ῥγῳρpsys.

(With what tears should I have wept)³⁸⁹ for beautiful young girls and virgins who awaited a joyful bridal feast and preciously adorned (wedding) garments, (but were now) lying stripped naked, and defiled with the filth of other dead, making a miserable and bitter sight, not even inside a grave, but in the streets and harbours [p. 99], their corpses having been dragged (there) like those of dogs;

—(for) lovable babies being thrown in disorder, while those who were casting them onto boats seized and hurled them from a distance with great horror;

—(for) handsome and merry young men (now) turned gloomy, (who were) cast upside down one under another (in a) terrifying (manner);

—(for) noble and chaste women, dignified with honour, who sat in bedchambers, (now with) their mouths swollen, wide open and gaping, (who) were piled up in horrible heaps, all ages lying prostrate, all statures bowed down and overthrown, all ranks pressed one upon another, in a single wine-press of (God's) wrath, like beasts, not like human beings.

And what shall we say about (all) them (if not) to call out upon (God's) mercy with the words, "Right are Thy judgements, O Lord!³⁹⁰ Thou didst not wish that these things should befall Thy creation but through the abundance of iniquity and through our erring from Thy commandments and Thy wish, Thou hast delivered³⁹¹ us (to the cataclysm)".

And again in our same clamour we shall speak about and say together with the prophet, "O Lord, in Thy wrath remember Thy mercies".³⁹² "Have pity for Thy name's sake, O Lord, over Thy people and renounce not Thy inheritance."³⁹³

Thus when the bearers became few, the whole city, (once) rich in inhabitants, splendid with power, and opulent, suddenly became a gloomy and putrid tomb for its inhabitants, so that now also the graves were insufficient. And this was more painful than anything, for the (corpses) from the city collected together in tribulation were cast down on boats (and having been transported) from this side across (the bay),

³⁸⁹ The author seems to resume here the harangue which he began in the previous paragraph.

³⁹⁰ Ps. 119, 137.

³⁹¹ Read *'ašlem*, instead of *'ašlem*.

³⁹² Hab. 3, 2; for the opening words cp. Jer. 14, 7.

³⁹³ The quotation is unidentified.

were thrown there like dung on the earth and nobody would gather (them).

Also "the empire was sitting [p. 100] in sorrow", as it is written,³⁹⁴ for (the authorities) learned that the hands of the people who were bringing out the corpses grew weak because they also became fewer and (began to) disappear. The city stank with corpses as there were neither litters nor diggers and the corpses were heaped up in the streets.

Thus when the merciful emperor, in whose days these things took place, learned of it, he stirred himself up with zeal and showed diligence, giving orders for 600 litters to be produced. He appointed a man, his *referendarius*,³⁹⁵ whose name was Theodore,³⁹⁶ who was also zealous in good deeds, and gave him instructions to take and spend as much gold as should be necessary for supervising these matters and for encouraging people with great gifts not to be negligent but to dig large ditches and to fill them by piling up the corpses. This man proceeded with application. He crossed (the bay) northward to the other shore called Sykai³⁹⁷ and climbed the mountain which was above the city. He took along many people, gave them much gold and had very large pits dug, in every one of which 70, 000 (corpses) were put. He placed there (some) men who brought down and turned over (corpses), piled them up and pressed the layers one upon another as a man might heap up hay in a stack.³⁹⁸ Also he placed by the pits men holding gold and encouraging the workmen and the common people with gifts to carry and to bring up (corpses), giving five, six and even seven and ten dinars for each load. So also he walked around in the city urging (people) to bring out (the corpses). He himself was ordered to fill every grave he could find, to whomsoever it might belong. Thus by his application the city [p. 101] was gradually rid of the corpses. Everyone who had many

³⁹⁴ The quotation is unidentified.

³⁹⁵ *Referendarius*: the emperor's secretary for transmitting orders to the *magistri* and receiving petitions from the people; Guiland, *Institutions* II, p. 91-98.

³⁹⁶ *PLRE* III, p. 1248 (Theodorus 10).

³⁹⁷ Sykai: the modern Galata on the other side of the Golden Horn.

³⁹⁸ According to Procopius, *Wars* II, 23, 9-11, Theodore used the towers of the fortifications in Sykai as graves.

corpses (to be buried) went to inform him and he would have them removed.³⁹⁹

When this man was walking around in the city, a deacon from our (people) appeared who also was very zealous in these matters. (The *referendarius*) became aware of him and took him up and now appointed him in charge of the matter of the gifts and (general) custody together with himself.

When they went about they came and found a house all closed up and stinking, while people trembled at its smell. They entered and found in it about twenty people dead and rotten, with worms creeping all over them. Although terror seized them, they brought people, who having received large payments, picked them up in cloaks and removed them bearing them on carrying poles.

Others were found all dead but with babies alive and crying; other women were dead in their beds⁴⁰⁰ but the babies, their children, were alive sleeping beside them, holding and sucking their breasts although (the mothers) were dead.

In (some) palaces life expired totally, in others, one remained out of a hundred (nobles), each of whom had been attended by many servants, but (now) had remained alone, or perhaps with few (servants only). But sometimes neither he nor any of his people (remained). Also those who (once) had been served by a multitude of servants, (now) stood and served themselves and the diseased in their homes.⁴⁰¹

The (imperial) palace was overwhelmed and overcome by sorrow. The emperor and the empress to whom myriads and thousands [p. 102] of commanders and the whole great senate had bowed and paid honour every day, (now) were miserable, and like everybody sank into grief, being served only by few.⁴⁰²

(We omit) the rest of these matters which cannot be reported by people at all, (which took place) when devastation and destruction befell this (city), coming upon innumerable people of all kinds, upon many times as many as anywhere else, including the great city of Alexandria. Only now the hearts of people were numb and therefore there was no

³⁹⁹ Burials *intra muros* were forbidden; C. Mango, *Le développement urbain de Constantinople (IVe-VIIe siècles)*, (Travaux et mémoires du Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance: Monographies 2), Paris 1985, p. 48, 58.

⁴⁰⁰ Read *'arsāthēn*.

⁴⁰¹ Cp. Procopius, *Wars* II, 23, 4f.

⁴⁰² According to Procopius, *Wars* II, 23, 20, Justinian was also ill.

more weeping or funeral laments, but people were stunned as if giddy with wine. They were smitten in their hearts and had become numb.

What however was painful was that corpses should be dragged out and thrown down, people dealing with other people—with (their) dead—as with dead beasts: they dragged and threw, dazed and upset, (fulfilling) thus what was called in the Scripture "the burial of an ass".⁴⁰³ It befell everybody here. From now on, as in Alexandria,⁴⁰⁴ nobody would go out of doors without a tag (upon which his name was) written and which hung on his neck or his arm.⁴⁰⁵

Chapter five

Again on a lamentable matter—on wills and inheritances.

There was nobody to tell about wills and inheritances, and if it happened that somebody required it according to the secular (law), or appointed heirs, these might quickly precede (their) benefactors (in death). Whoever they may have been, no matter whether poor or rich, or (whatever) open treasure (was involved), or large shop, or whatever [p. 103] one might desire, (the moment that), in hope that perhaps he would escape (death) and come into possession, he put his hands upon it to take (it), immediately the angel of death would appear, as if standing behind the man, and he would faint and be struck down. Therefore the needy did not give heed to⁴⁰⁶ any gifts which someone might wish to grant them, and they would not accept (them) from him. Those who did accept, perished.

There were, however, (some) needy people (who) having survived until then thought:

"Perhaps we shall escape (death), so if a man (is willing to) give, let us ask and accept the gift. Without having to enter someone's house and take something from those who have died, let us just ask for a favour."

And they came to one big shop belonging to a moneylender. They found an old man sitting on his door(step) in whose family everybody had perished. They approached him and said:

⁴⁰³ Jer. 22, 19.

⁴⁰⁴ The author (John of Ephesus) refers here to an earlier fragment of his account of the plague, which was omitted by Ps.-Dionysius, but is preserved by Michael the Syrian in his *Chronicle*, tr. II, 237; see above n. 355.

⁴⁰⁵ Presumably for identification of the person in case of sudden death.

⁴⁰⁶ Read *hāyṛūn*.

"Grant us a gift. Perhaps we shall live and (so) we will be able to commemorate you."

And he said to them:

"My sons, behold, the whole shop (is) before you. Enter and carry off whatever your soul desires and go, and do not fear. Take as much as your hands are able to carry, and go in peace."

If somebody said that in that shop there were only 1000 pounds of gold and silver, it would still be (as if) nothing. So these people entered and took freely. They looked and were astonished. They cast their eyes on many things, especially on gold, and took (it) and wished to leave. When (one of them) crossed the threshold and the other came along to go out, (it was) as if a sword came between them and cut both of them, one here and the other there. They fainted and fell and their souls fled and their load was scattered. Thus [p. 104] great terror fell upon the rest of them; from now on gold, silver and also all material goods were despised in everybody's eyes. A frightful and zealous power laid hold of everything and therefore from now on nobody relied on either gold or other riches, but the faces of all were turned toward and prepared for the grave.

Those who remained healthy lifted and carried the corpses, some for more pay than others, some for little (remuneration) as they scorned it; some, on the other hand, did not accept any payment at all. Whoever was strong and desired gold was able to collect up to a pound of gold a day and up to 100 dinars, because having no fear for God they took as it pleased them.

There were two strong young men who carried stoutly and demanded greedily, without fear. In the end they requested from the emperor's *referendarius* (payment for) one, two and three days (more). When he realized how much they took from him alone he said to them:

"Go, my sons, it is enough for you. For how much are you arguing? Go, keep what you have earned. Do not be a bad example for others."

But they said to him:

"We shall not be idle."

He did not press them to, but said to them:

"You know."

Then those wretches rushed off to carry (corpses) and reached those ditches into which the corpses were cast. When they arrived there both of them suddenly fainted, fell [p. 105] and died. Then the man seeing (it) wept over them and said:

"Woe to thee, covetousness of Adam, whose mouth is stopped this hour!"

Then he ordered one of his servants:

"Come near, and see if there is upon them anything which they have collected. Take it and give to others (who) come bringing (corpses). And as for those (two), throw them in, to go down together with the rest."

Again three others gathered 450 dinars and finally said to each other:

"It is enough for us. Let us take this and leave this city."

They went off taking (the money) along to divide (it) between themselves. Sitting on a marble slab they counted 150 dinars for each of them, but when they had divided their shares and each was about to stretch out his hand to take his portion, each twisted round to his side, fell and died. Thus their shares were found before them, divided up and placed there with their owners prostrate in front of them.

Such was the message of that angel who was ordered to fight people with this scourge until they should spurn all matters of this world—if not of their own will, then against it—so that everybody who might incite his mind to revolt, and still covet things of this world, was by him quickly deprived of life.

Thus now in this city, once mighty in (the number) of its inhabitants, desolation and emptiness increased from one day to another.

What more is there to say?—also on those pits into which people were thrown and trodden upon, while men stood below, deep as in an abyss, and others above: the latter dragged and threw down (the corpses), like stones being thrown from a sling,⁴⁰⁷ and the former grabbed and threw them [p. 106] one on top of another, arranging the rows in alternative directions. Because of scarcity (of room) both men and women were trodden upon, young people and children were pressed together, trodden upon by feet and trampled like spoiled grapes. Then again from above (other corpses) were thrown head downwards and went down and split asunder beneath, noble men and women, old men and women, youths and virgins, young girls and babies.

How can anyone speak of or recount (such) a hideous sight, and who can watch this burial, even though his soul should remain in his body and not waste away from bitter lamentations over so much iniquity

⁴⁰⁷ Read *qāla'tā* as in Land's text, p. 323, 25; the Vatican ms. has *bāla'tā*, 'throat'; 'one who devours'.

which would suffice to destroy the children of Adam? How and with what utterances, with what hymns, with what funeral laments and groanings should somebody mourn who has survived and witnessed this "wine-press of the fury of the wrath (of God)"?⁴⁰⁸

Those who trampled stood (below) and when a man or a woman or a young man or a child was put (down) they would tread (them) with their feet to press them down and to make place for others. The (corpse) which was trampled sank and was immersed in the pus of those below it, since it was after five or as much as ten days that (the corpses) reached (this place of) pernicious prostration.

What mind could bear and endure this suffering of white hairs of old age which were not even, as is written, buried "by the burial of an ass"?⁴⁰⁹ Whom would compunction of heart, terror and sadness not seize as he stood (there) and in great terror and bitter sadness disconsolately watched lovely young men like flowers being seized by their hair, dragged and cast from above into the depths of lowest Sheol: as they fell their bellies were split asunder, and the sight of their youthfulness was laid bare down there: (it was a matter) of great horror, shattering and bitter, with no (hope of) comfort. [p. 107] How can any eye endure seeing these heaps of little children and babies piled up in mounds like dung on the earth? Who would not weep more over us, who behold the sight to which our sins have brought us, rather than over the dead? Even if we shall later be blamed for deficiency of mind by the wise, it becomes us, confronting this sight, O brothers, to raise wailing and lamentations for ourselves and not for those (dead) and say:

"Woe to you, our eyes, for what you see! Woe to you, our bitter life, for the destruction you have encountered, which has come upon the kindred of your body, while your eyes look on."

It would be much better for us who saw (it) to be mingled with those who drank the cup of wrath,⁴¹⁰ who ended their journey and did not experience that destruction; or with those whose heart is darkened together with their eyes, mind and thought.

What words or what mouth, tongue, voice and word would suffice a man to tell about (all this)? How can I, miserable, who have wanted to recount (it), not resemble someone who has fallen into the depths of the

⁴⁰⁸ Based on Rev. 19, 15.

⁴⁰⁹ See n. 403.

⁴¹⁰ Cp. Is. 51, 17 & 22.

sea and, being buffeted hither and thither by⁴¹¹ waves, can neither touch the bottom, nor is close to reaching the shore, but (instead) is battered and dashed by the heavy and powerful waves and therefore is close to perishing by drowning?

And what more is there to say or tell about the unspeakable things which befell this city more than any other, to the extent that even the wise lost their mind and "the stratagems of the crafty",⁴¹² as it is written, were dissolved and brought to nought? Therefore it was not easy to find anyone who was firm in mind, but, as it is [p. 108] written, "they reeled and staggered like drunken men, and were at their wits' end".⁴¹³ It happened in this way: being stupefied and confused each talked to his friend like men drunk as a result of liquor, thus through drunkenness resulting from the chastisement people were easily led to madness of mind.

(The latter) happened indeed in this city: the demons wanted to lead people astray and to laugh at their madness. A rumour from somebody spread among those who had survived, that if they threw pitchers from the windows of their upper storeys on to the streets and they burst below, death would flee from the city. When foolish women, [out of their]⁴¹⁴ minds, succumbed to this folly in one neighbourhood and threw pitchers out ...⁴¹⁵ The rumour spread from this quarter to another, and over the whole city, and everybody succumbed to this foolishness, so that for three days people could not show themselves on the streets since those who had escaped death (in the plague) were assiduously (occupied), alone or in groups, in their houses with chasing away death by breaking pitchers.

Again it was effected by demons who deceive people that when those who had acted so foolishly by breaking pitchers (started) to lament that they had failed in what they imagined their deception (would achieve, but instead) were drawing closer each day to utter perdition, (the demons then) appeared to them, wishing to mock the garb of piety, that is the (monastic) habit of the "shorn"—of the monks and of the clerics. Therefore [p. 109] when either a monk or a cleric appeared the (people)

⁴¹¹ Land's text adds "heavy and powerful" here, instead of at the end of the sentence.

⁴¹² Suggested perhaps by Job 5, 13; cp. also Is. 29, 14; I Cor. 1, 19.

⁴¹³ Ps. 107, 27.

⁴¹⁴ Chabot's suggestion, p. 108, n. 3.

⁴¹⁵ Two words missing.

gave a yell and fled before him, supposing that he was death (in person) who would destroy them. Thus this foolishness was manifested in (the idea) that death would come in the likeness of the "shorn" ones. It befell simple people especially and the populace of the city, so that hardly anybody wearing the monastic habit would appear on the streets, for on seeing him they fell upon each other, fled and huddled together crying:

"Where are you going? We belong to God's Mother! We belong to such and such a martyr (patron)! We belong to such and such an apostle!"

This foolishness persisted with some even longer, for as long as two years: on seeing a monk or a cleric they cried, "We belong to God's Mother!"

(All in all) not many (people) but (only) few in number could now be seen in this great city, the queen of the world, out of (once) innumerable (inhabitants), thousands and tens of thousands.

Although at the beginning we desisted from recording the memory of these events, three years later, arranging in a story the lamentations one after another, we recorded those matters for the remembrance of the sorrow and afflictions which happened before our eyes.

Also the eastern regions were overwhelmed by the same (horrors) which have not yet come to an end.

We have left these matters for the remembrance of other (people) who will come after (us), in order that when they hear about the chastising of us, fools and provokers, and about the sentence for our sins, they may "become wise", as it is written,⁴¹⁶ and that they may cease to anger that One for whom everything is easy to do, and that they may repent and ask mercy continually, lest this chastisement also be thrown upon them.

The story of the violent plague as was written by the holy John, bishop of Asia, is finished. [p. 110]

