

2.4 Byzantine land walls (1995)

I am standing, Theodosius,
at the very seaward marble end
of your once-mighty walls:
I walked them down today
from where the gulf lay gleaming
at my feet, from citadel, acropolis –
the palace of Porphyrogenitus, -
to where they terminate
before me here, a modest octagon
deprived of purpose, set within
an unfrequented public park.

You weren't the first
to see just how this second Rome
could dominate the north
Aegean Sea, embrace the coast
across Khalkidhiki, and thence control
the fulcrum-point of all the ancient world.
But on these shoulders it was you
who built what we see now –
forbidding ramparts, towers and gates which
haltered all the seven hills, enclosed
the Holy Wisdom and the priceless seat of power.

Would you be proud, I wonder -
to see how they survive?
You probably thought little
of centuries ahead,
were just preoccupied to keep
the vandals out, the infidels at bay.
A thousand years might seem
too far ahead, but that's how long
your triple walls did duty – thrice breached in your
own life,
and not by Huns (Attila even did not dare)
but by the jealous forces of the earth:
you must have questioned
whether Rome's old gods
had better guarded you than this new faith.

Would you rejoice, I wonder -
to think there'd be an age
when structures such as these
would still be there
but long have lost their function,
would just be sights for idle
eyes to ponder on, with
little comprehension of
the awesome purpose they fulfilled?

Marmara – 1995