

## 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