

EXCERPTS FROM  
THE PALACE REVOLUTION OF JOHN COMNENUS

NICHOLAS MESARITES

Nicholas Mesarites was deacon and auxiliary in the chancery of Constantinople, and custodian of the treasury of the Grand Palace. In 1201, on the occasion of the palace revolt by John Comnenus, Mesarites defended the treasure at the risk of his life, and was grievously wounded several times. As he tells us in this account, the burial linens and sudarium of Jesus were conserved in the treasury. In 1207, he left Byzantium to live in Nicea, where he was appointed auxiliary to the metropolitan, Michele Autoeiano. About 1212, he was elected archbishop of Ephesus.

Before leaving Constantinople in 1207, he made an inventory of the items still in the treasury, and among them he again listed the sepulchral linens and the sudarium: *οθωναί και τα σουδαρια*, a fact ignored by modern authors who, misunderstanding the passage from Robert de Clari, repeat that the Shroud "disappeared" in the Sack of the City in 1204, conjecturing that one of the crusaders got possession of it. Mesarites' 1207 mention of the Shroud is confirmed by a list compiled in the same year by Nicholas Idruntino.

Mesarites' long account recreates the excitement of that savage sedition. His text rushes forward, lively and immediate. His colorful expressions brook no restraint. One has the distinct impression that he is reliving those terrible events and telling the truth about them.

The Greek text was published by August Heisenberg (*Die Palastrevolution des Johannes Komnenos*, Würzburg, 1907). There is an Italian translation of the original Greek in the Wuenschel Collection: forty-four 12" hand-written pages, divided into 31 sections. Sections 1 & 2, and 12 through 15, presented here, were translated from the Italian version. We are grateful to Fr. Adam Otterbein, C.S.S.R., custodian of the Wuenschel Collection, for making it possible to present these excerpts to *Spectrum* readers.

This is the account of Nicholas Mesarites, custodian of the holy things in the churches of the Grand Palace, concerning the crisis of our most holy great church and a certain person who, by revolution, reigned over the empire and then was killed.

To be sure, most men with profound and able mind, oh reader, add to the truth of their narrative also inventions of their intellect. They abuse the evidence and form their account with charm and twittering. In spite of that, a tiny impulse at the right time convinces the reader that, rather than being a true narrative by a friend of the truth, the account is shaky. It is the same for listeners; it is not very easy to retell something that one has heard, just as it is not easy for a man who wants to draw from a model to trace the object exactly as it is in the prototype. Because of the great number of dialects and great array of colors, both the narrator and the artist are at a distance from their prototype.

I will tell you immediately why I have put the above before my narrative. Many of my acquaintances, and even strangers, knowing that I am the custodian of the holy things of the beautiful church of the Mother of God, whose epithet is Mistress of the House—and this church is located near the Royal Palace, near to the Pharo [beacon]—often ask me—and besides, others come up to me in the churches, in the neighborhoods, in the squares, in the avenues and in the little narrow streets—to get me to tell them every detail about everything which I was asked right from the beginning: how John took the palaces by a thievish attack, what he did until he got worn out and finally how his crazy head got cut off. And I refused to answer all the questions. Because my voice became raucous from screaming all that day—and already the 31st of July has passed—and my breath almost failed me and my phonetic organs refused to function as I ran around the holy temple confronting everybody who had in mind to invade the impenetrable [places] like dogs ferreting with sharp teeth in search of prey. Considering the impairment of my voice and the bad condition of my larynges, therefore I am disposed to write down all that I saw so that, for all who ask and who listen, it will be clear. I will tell, then, everything that that agitator, together with his followers, wickedly did, during the night, against our Lord Christ and our noble King, so that they will know about those savage men who find pleasure in blood. And furthermore I will tell all that these men, together with a stupid populace, had in mind, leaping like thieves into the temple of Divine Wisdom [St. Sophia]. We therefore commit to writing, the best we can, what we have seen and we hasten to do this so that it will not be lost with the passing of time, destroyer of our memory.

Mesarites launches immediately into John's eruption into the palace, the indescribable confusion of the insurgents, the disgusting sight of the usurper on the royal throne, the terror of the loyalists. Fearing that "those agitators might even arrive to the church of the Mother of God", Mesarites ignores the pleas of his friends and hurriedly starts out for the Grand Palace, "careless of the safety of body and soul".

So I arrived at the outer door of the temple [of the Immaculate], breathing hard. And looking around, I saw murderous men armed with swords, with every sort of knife in their hands, with which they were digging the double doors, reducing them to a sort of lattice. Then bending down in front of the lattice, they peered inside. Then they all looked at those beautiful silver doors and decided to raise them and put them under their heels. But they were hindered by my sudden appearance and by the will of the Madonna—armed men frightened by me, unarmed. Then I spoke words as bitter as they were convincing.

"Oh you!" I said, "wicked men! oh you, who have come to the point of profaning sacred things! oh you, who do not fear God nor are you mindful of the anger of men! oh you, who have outraged Christianity! oh you, who trample upon the divine laws: Why do you do all this? Leave the divine inviolable temple, preserve it intact! Your hands

are wicked and impious, they cooperate with injustice, they do things contrary to the law. Go away from the sacred temple! How you have become wicked, how you have disobeyed the laws! Go far away! This is the Door to Eden, and here there is a fiery sabre which will leap upon anyone who wants ferociously to attack, and will burn him. I pray you, brothers, — because we are all reborn in the Holy Spirit and the sacred baptism—do not come any closer, take another road, walk along another way, because I am afraid that you will be subjected to the same things that happened to the devil, that happens to whoever comes close to the bed of the Madonna assumed into heaven. Here is found another air, a new Salem, an ark which holds within itself, in a different way, a decalogue. And it is my desire, wild people, just now transformed into civil people,\* to lay before you everything in this church, to change your vileness, your ugly ingratitude, into love and respect, and lead you to benevolence. Learn therefore, what are the commands of the decalogue which is found in this treasury, and afterwards tell the coming generation this account which you are hearing from my lips.

"First, then, we venerate the holy crown of thorns, which is still verdant and flowering, and remains intact because it took on incorruptibility from touching the sacred head of the Lord Jesus. This happened so that all those who do not believe in Christ, would believe. There are no thorns to be seen, and to the touch it is not injurious, but it is flowering and when one touches it, it is smooth. Its bloom does not at all resemble that which grows on the vine-bushes, which gathers on the hems of long garments the way thieves put the things they steal, but it looks rather like the flowers of Lebanon, a kind with very tiny balls along the branches.

"The holy nail, which is not attacked by rust or time but is preserved today just as it was because, with three other nails, during the time of the passion it penetrated the most holy and merciful flesh, devoid of every offense, of Jesus. This nail was forged in the fire of the Deity and was wet with the blood of the Lord. This nail penetrated the bowels of the murderer who is the source of death.

"The flagellum, also of iron, with a chain at the neck which can be opened little by little when one holds it in his hands, and which can be folded to keep it in a sheath; this flagellum bowed down the proud neck of Satan and put him under the feet not only of men but even of tender girls.

"The burial shrouds of Jesus; these are of linen, an inexpensive fabric, which still smell of myrrh; they are not subject to alteration because they covered the Dead One, clearly nude, and were full of myrrh after the passion.

"The outer garment, that nappy, as many call it, miraculously conserved to our times, bathed in sweat, which hung to those beautiful

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\* The Italian translator explains that in another text there is the example of a wild olive tree which bears good fruit after cultivation.

apostolic feet when they announced peace to the world.

"The lance, which transpierced the Lord's side, tipped with a kind of double-edged blade made in the sign of the cross. If someone is very intelligent and has sharp vision, he will see that this is all suffused with blood, tinted with the blood and the water which marvelously gushed from the side of the Savior.

"That garment of purple with which those criminals dressed the Lord of glory, mocking him as the king of the Jews and putting the Immortal to a dismal death.

"The cane, which was put in the right hand of Christ Savior, with which the head of Satan was broken, he the origin of every evil, who pretended to be a serpent when he presented himself to Adam and Eve. Then the Lord, with this cane, drove him out of Paradise. The cane of the Lord is not like those which one finds hereabouts, thin, cylindrical and fragile with many knots; but it is thick and long, without knots, thick as the arm of a strong man. In fact, the warriors of Palestine used this type of cane during the wars and conflicts with their enemies, instead of using staves and lances of pine.

"The soles for the Lord's feet—also called sandals—cut from leather and well-adapted to those beautiful divine feet. The length and the breadth of the soles extend to a palm of a man with a big hand, but they are in proportion because he loved proportion and hated excess. With these sacred soles the Lord has helped us to trample on the serpents and scorpions and on all the forces of the devil.

"In this decalogue, the last item is the stone cut from the tomb, the rock which broke the altars of the idols and dashed them to the ground. This rock, like that of Jacob, witnesses the resurrection of Christ; this rock is the foundation of Christianity, it links all the nations which did not know God and unites them in a true faith. Rock used at the tomb of the Man-God; with this stone we lapidate the formidable Goliath and we kill death.

"Learn, oh pious people, this decalogue! Here now I present to you the prototype, imprinted on a towel and incised in soft clay, as if by some graphic skill and not made by the hand of man.' But why must I prolong this discourse? This temple, this place, is another Sinai, Bethlehem, Jordan; it is another Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethany, Galilee, Tiberias, it is another basin, another cenaculum, another Mount Tabor, another pretorium of Pilate and another place called the Skull, in Hebrew Golgotha. Here he is born, here receives the grace of baptism, walks on the sea, walks the earth, performs his magnificent miracles and humiliates himself even to the tomb. This tomb did not snatch only one or two Lazaruses from death and bring them back to life, but every day and every hour it saves from the tomb thousands of bodies of the dead and the dying. Thus it gives us the strength to weep and pray for our sins. Here he is crucified and whoever wants can see the foot-board. In this place he is buried and the rolling-stone of the tomb is in this temple to bear witness to what I

say. In this place he rises again and the sudarium and the holy sindons can prove it. Come, then, oh torturers of God—and that is what you are because you wanted to divide amongst you his garments and the sacred vessels and his arsenal [the Arma Christi] and furnishings—let us go with all respect, let's be dignified. Let us substitute those who were clustered around with daggers, puffed up with pride, and let us instead be the saviors of this holy house. How much gold and how much silver would you gain? What good are the pearls, the precious stones and rubies? Maybe for the enticement of gold, you others would lose both body and soul, and then what would be your gain? I can guarantee your end. Those who suffer for the church and who want to maintain it intact, come with me."

Having said this, I changed the wickedness of their savage ways and rendered them more meek and more religious. Giving me the upper hand, they agreed they would not leave me before they could show themselves saviors of the temple of the Pharo, and that they would risk their lives for it. Then with my own hands I knocked at the door and called one of the guards who, at that hour, kept watch at the temple. And he, with great joy, did not wait for another word, but opened the door very carefully and let me enter. Then all those who at first were acting like wolves, followed me and, trusting my word, became like pious sheep.

#### NOTE

1. We are all familiar with Robert de Clari's description of the Shroud in the ninety-second chapter of his Chronicle, *La Conquête de Constantinople* (1204). But nine chapters before this, he tells us about the towel and the tile.

In this palace, which was held by the Marquis de Monferrat, there were 500 mansions, all covered with mosaics. There were 30 chapels, some big, some small. There was one called Holy Chapel, so "rich" (de Clari's favorite word) that everything usually made of iron was here made of silver; even the hinges and bolts were of silver. The pavement was of white marble, so smooth and clear that it seemed to be crystal. There were many holy relics: two large pieces of the True Cross, the blade of the lance, two nails, the tunic, the crown of thorns ... Then, Chapter LXXXIII:

"There were also other holy relics in this chapel which I forgot to mention; because there were two rich urns of gold which hung in the middle of the chapel by two heavy silver chains. In one of these urns was a tile and in the other a towel; I will tell you how these relics came here."

Robert goes on to tell the legend of how a holy man of Constantinople was repairing some tiles, for the love of Our Lady, on the house of a widow when Our Lord appeared, asked for the towel which the man wore around him. Then the Lord "enveloped his face so that its form was imprinted there." The holy man took the towel, put it under a tile until vespers, and when he lifted up the tile, it too had the Lord's face imprinted on it.

This is but one of several variations on the legend concerning the miraculous reproduction of the Lord's face from a towel, by contact, onto a tile.