The Danger at Midday: Death Threats in the Apocalypse (*)

The word μεσοφύλακα is used three times in the Apocalypse: the zenith, the point where the sun reaches its highest point; the midday: in 8,13 the seer hears an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew in mid-heaven, “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth”; in 14,6 he sees an angel flying in mid-heaven with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth...saying with a loud voice: “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water”(1); and in 19,17 he sees an angel standing in the sun which with a loud voice calls to all the birds that fly in mid-heaven: “Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great”. The word is thus an indication of time as well as of place and is evidently not insignificant in the scheme of the book. It is the place from where the last and the greatest plagues begin. It is the point in time at which the confession of God as creator of heaven and earth must resound and it is the place from where the birds are summoned from the sky to begin their last meal, the end of the beast and all its followers.

In the study of the Apocalypse there is a discussion about the inquiry into the social setting of the book: are there real death threats or do these exist only in the mind and imagination of the author? L.L. Thompson(2) describes this as a contrast between the position of E. Schüssler Fiorenza and A. Yarbo Collins. While A. Yarbo Collins writes that

(*) Prof. Sjef van Tilborg passed away on the 22nd of May 2003. The proofs of this article were corrected by his assistant Dr. Patrick Chatelion Counet.
(1) The confession of God as maker of everything often comes back in all sorts of martyria: see 4 Macc 11,5; Mart. Carpi, Papyri et Agathonicea 9; Mart. Justini 1.15; recensio B 2.12; recensio C 2.3; Mart. Apollonii 2; Mart. Pionii 8.3 and others, see H. Musurillo, The Acts of the Christian Martyrs (Oxford 1972) 91 n. 3; L. Robert, Le martyre de Pionios, prêtre de Smyrne (Washington 1994) 70.
(2) The Book of Revelation. Apocalypse and Empire (Oxford 1990) 202-210; see also St.J. Friesen, Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John. Reading Revelation in the Ruins (Oxford 2001) 144-151 who quotes these same authors.
Revelation was indeed written in response to a crisis, but one that resulted from the clash between the expectations of John and like-minded Christians and the social reality within which they had to live(3).

E. Schüssler Fiorenza thinks that

Like John, Christians of Asia Minor suffered a deep tension between their faith and their experience. They believed in the ultimate power of God and Christ, but at the same time they experienced daily their powerlessness in the face of harassment, oppression, and persecution(4).

I don’t think it is possible to reconstruct from a fictional text — and the Apocalypse is in the NT a fictional text par excellence — the historico-sociological setting in which the book would have arisen. The social reality has influenced the thinking and the imagination of the author but in my opinion it is not possible to retrieve this from the text. What is very well possible is to show parallel lines: to make a reconstruction of a historico-sociological reality and parallel to it to show that (parts of) the text of the Apocalypse reflect this reality; that they refer to it within this particular historico-sociological context; that the same type of language is used.

There has always been a big interest in the relationship between the cult of the emperor and the persecution. In the study of the Apocalypse the role of Nero and Domitian in particular has then been examined. Meanwhile it is clear that, aside from the incidental actions against some Christians in Rome, there was no question of State persecution. The actions in Rome had no — or in any case no demonstrable — consequences in the provinces, in Asia Minor in this case(5).

This may all be true but according to P. Prigent it should not lead to the conclusion that there would not have been any real danger to the life of Christians in the Asia Minor area covered by the Apocalypse:

(3) A. YARBO COLLINS, Crisis and Catharsis (Philadelphia 1984) 165.
one should note that, while it is true that the book’s revelation is a
prophetic denunciation of the fundamental incompatibility that exists
between the pagan religion on which the Roman empire is based on
the one hand and the Christian faith on the other, this does not in any
way imply the absence of all risks entailed by faithfulness to the Lord
Jesus Christ, risks which are mentioned many times in the book of
Revelation, in terms that are barely veiled(6).

I would like to concur with this grandmaster in the exegesis of the
Apocalypse. By making a comparison between what happens at the
munera, the games which are organized by the rich as φιλοτιμία (7) and
the text of the Apocalypse, I want to show where P. Prigent is right in
talking about the risks which in the Apocalypse are mentioned in terms
which are barely veiled.

1. The munera

The gladiatorial games which are a part of the munera enjoy great
scholarly interest (8). Originally these games were connected with the
death of an important public figure as tribute to the deceased. At the
end of the Republic (through Sulla, Pompey, Caesar and Anthony) they
are also put into service in the internal political struggle to win popular

(6) P. PRIGENT, Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John (Tübingen 2001)

(7) According to L. ROBERT, Les gladiateurs dans l’Orient Grec (Amsterdam
1971) 277-280 the words manus and φιλοτιμία become fully synonymous in the
course of the second-third century.

(8) See e.g. A. ROLAND, Cruelty and Civilization. The Roman Games (London
– New York 1972); A. CAMERON, Circus Factions. Blues and Greens at Rome
and Byzantium (Oxford 1976); K.M. COLEMAN, “Fatal Charades: Roman
Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments”, Journal of Roman Studies 80
(1990) 44-73; Th. WIEDMANN, Emperors and Gladiators (London – New York
1992); M. CARTMILL, A View to Death in the Morning. Hunting and Nature
through History (Cambridge, MA 1993); C.A. BARTON, The Sorrows of the
Ancient Romans. The Gladiators and the Monster (Princeton, NJ 1993); P. PLASS,
The Game of Death in Ancient Rome. Arena Sport and Political Suicide
(Wisconsin – London 1995); D.G. KYLE, Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome
(London – New York 1998); F. MEIJER, Gladiatoren. Volksvermaak in het
Colosseum (Amsterdam 2003). For this paper the book of L. ROBERT, Les
gladiateurs dans l’Orient Grec is obviously the most important. In citing the
inscriptions I write ROBERT + number (= the number that Robert gave to the
inscription in his study). When I refer to the pages, I write ROBERT, Gladiateurs +
number. With the cities from the Apocalypse I have also indicated always the
most up-to-date or the first publication. I have completed and corrected the
inscriptions of Robert by the texts from the Supplementum Epigraphicum
favor. For this reason they become so important politically that hereafter — starting from and under Augustus — the emperor appropriates the exclusive right to hold these games. No games then are organized which have not been in one way or another approved by the authorities: in Rome by the emperor himself and in the provinces by the local authorities.

In Asia Minor these games — they are called μονομαχία in Greek — are organized specifically by the asiarchs. Many inscriptions have been preserved: inscriptions of honor for the people who have organized them once or several times; reliefs with depictions of what has happened and memorials for the gladiators themselves. Just only for the cities of the Apocalypse some 94 inscriptions are involved. The dating is roughly first to third century; a small minority of these is demonstrably first century; the greater majority is second/third century. A more precise indication is not possible.

What is interesting to note is the fact that in a number of cities of the Apocalypse there was even standard talk of the presence of a school for gladiators (a familia gladiatorum; or in Greek a φαμίλια μονομάχων), which implies that there were also barracks, training fields, instructors and attendants.

As usual we find most of the inscriptions in Ephesus. In these texts also the connection between being the asiarch and the organizing of the games is most clearly expressed. At the time of Trajan the phamilia monomachon erects a statue for their asiarch Ti. Kl. Tatianos (9). This becomes a tradition. In the middle of the second century it is the famous and rich Vedii family which owns a school for gladiators: see the inscription of the phamilia monomachon on the tomb of the Vedii (10); the relief of the gladiator on the tomb of the Vedii (11); the mention of the philoploi philobédiot (12) with next to this the competing group of the philoplia hierou makellou (13); the monomachoi of the asiarch Loukios Aufidios Euphèmos (14); and the phamilia monomachon of the asiarch Tib. Ioulios Rhègeinos (15); the asiarch Klaudios Kleoboulos (16) and the asiarch Tib. Klaudios Pankratidès

(9) Inscr Eph IV-1182; V-1620; Robert, 204.
(10) Robert, 208.
(11) Robert, 203.
(12) Inscr Eph VII-1-3055; Robert, 201 and 202.
(13) Inscr Eph VI-2226; Robert, 202.
(14) Inscr Eph IV-1171; see also IV-1172; 1173.
(15) Inscr Eph V-1621; Robert, 205.
(16) SEG 1992 nr 1031.
Attikos (17). In Pergamon there is the very early inscription of Romanus Montanus (from the time of Tiberius) who is *procurator Augusti familiae gladiatorum*, that is to say, the procurator of a gladiatorial school of the emperor (18). And in Smyrna the aristarch Kl. Timoon is honored by his *phamilia monomachôn* (19).

It should be clear that the gladiatorial games were also strongly present in the so-called Apocalypse area. The following is important: from the time of Augustus (but actually already earlier) these gladiatorial games are often connected with two other forms of amusement which originally had nothing to do with the *munera*, namely 1) in the morning the *venationes ad matutinum* which consisted of showing all sorts of wild and exotic animals; and of the ἀνθρωπομαχία: the fights of animals among themselves and the fight of human beings with animals; and 2) in the midday intermission, the public execution of criminals of low social status (the *noxii, cruciarii*) who had been condemned *ad bestias or ad flammamas*.

It is particularly these two forms of amusement as parts of the *munera* which are relevant to this paper. So I go into it more explicitly.

2. Ad *matutinum*

a) Description

The competition between the emperor and his predecessor(s) provided the needed variation. At the first part of the *venationes* one could vary the number and sort of animals. Pompey organized games, for example, with 20 elephants, 600 lions, 410 leopards, monkeys, lynxes and the first rhinoceros. Caesar surprised his public with giraffes. And in the *Res Gestae*, Augustus boasts of the cumulative total of 3,500 animals slaughtered in the various *venationes* for the Roman people (20).

Two types of fights are organized: fights between the animals themselves: lions, leopards, wild boars, bears, crocodiles and rhinoceros against bulls, deer, sea lions, dolphins, elephants and giraffes; and the fight between human beings and animals: bullfighting was an old custom but now combined with the fight between the *bestiarius*, an armed man, and a bear, leopard and lion.

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17. *Inscr Eph* VII-2-4346.
18. *CIL* III 14192; *ROBERT*, 258.
19. *Inscr Smyrna* 842; *ROBERT*, 225.
What goings-on there were is beautiful to read in a poem from the *Anthologia Graeca*:

A man fixed a pole on the ground,  
And throwing himself into the air made a somersault,  
And with his nimble feet passed over the back of the beast  
That was rushing at him.  
It failed to catch him;  
The people applauded loudly  
And the man escaped (IX. 53).

If it is correct, it is about trained people who have a good chance of surviving at the risk of their own lives. Different terms are used: προκυνηγία (the show of the animals before they are slaughtered); κυνηγία or κυνηγεσία (the hunt after the animals by trained animal hunters), ταυρομαχία (the bullfight), ταυροβολία (the ritual sacrifice of a bull) and θηριομαχία the collective name for all sorts of fights: those between animal and human being (trained or not; armed or not) and those between animal and animal.

There are all sorts of combinations made: In Ancyra from the time of Tiberius a long list of benefactors has been preserved who besides other benefactions for the city have also taken care of the gladiatorial games: the son of Brigatos took care of a feast with 30 pairs of gladiators and a hunting party after bulls and wild beasts; Rufus, of a κυνηγίαν; […]llios, of a gladiatorial fight with 25 pairs of gladiators; Pylaimenès is mentioned three times: as organizer of a bullfight and a κυνηγίαν; later once more as organizer of a bullfight combined with 50 pairs of gladiators; and a couple of years later once again as organizer of a gladiatorial fight with 30 pairs of gladiators (21); In Pinara a man is honored who organized just about everything in different cities of Lycia: θηριομαχία, ταυρομαχία, κυνηγεσία, προκυνηγία, and ταυροβολία (22). In Xanthos someone has organized προκυνηγία, ταυρομαχία and θηριομαχία in the temple of Leto (ROBERT, 105); in Telmessos: μονομαχία and θηριομαχία (ROBERT, 108); in Oinoanda: κυνηγεσία, θηριομαχία and μονομαχία (ROBERT, 113; 113a) etc.

Thus there is often the combination of the μονομαχία with another form of amusement, but not always. Sometimes only a θηριομαχία is organized.

(21) ROBERT, 86  
(22) ROBERT, 104
In the area that the Apocalypse covers, we find the same pattern. The following inscriptions are relevant:

In Pergamum:
– mention of bullfights over two days (Inscr. Perg., 523; ROBERT, 265);
– depiction of a man with a whip; a wild animal jumping up against him (Alt. Pergamon, Sculptures, 342; ROBERT, 264).

In Sardis:
– a relief with a horseman who hunts after animals (Buckler, Sardis, 162; ROBERT, 137);
– over three days there were κυνηγεσία: a number of animals depicted: a bull, deer, wolves(?) (Buckler, Sardis, 82; ROBERT, 138).

In Smyrna:
– over three days there were κυνηγεσία: on the depiction a bull is attacked by a bear; a beast on the ground with the legs up; a bull which gets round its neck a collar tied by a man (Inscr Smyrna, 863; ROBERT, 233);
– a bestiarius who is on a hunt with a pickaxe; there is an indication of how many beasts have been killed; the number itself has been lost (Inscr Smyrna, 837; ROBERT, 230);
– a bestiarius who attacks a bull with a knife; there is an indication of how many beasts have been killed; the number itself has been lost (Inscr Smyrna, 838; ROBERT, 229);
– a bullfight over two days; depiction of the bullfight (Inscr Smyrna, 835; ROBERT, 234);
– depiction of fights between animals (ROBERT, 236).

In Ephesus:
– in the time of Trajan Ti. Fl. Montanos is honored among other things because of his κυνηγεσία and μονομαχία (Inscr Eph VI-2061.2; ROBERT, 198);
– M. Aur. Mindos Mattidianos is honored among other things because he caused 25 wild animals from Libya to be killed (ζῴα Λιβυκά) (Inscr Eph III-627; VII-1-3056; ROBERT, 198);
– Aurelius [ ] in the course of 13 days made wild animals from Libya (ζῴα Λιβυκά) to be killed (Inscr Eph VII-1-3071; ROBERT, 199);
– Aurelius Dafnos in the course of 13 days made wild animals from Libya (ζῴα Λιβυκά) to be killed (Inscr Eph VII-1-3070; ROBERT, 200);
– depiction with four strips: limb of a human being; a lion roars over an armed man; lion eats his thigh; in the fourth block: ὀνηρέθη (= carried off to be buried) (ROBERT, 219).
In Philadelphia:
– combat between gladiator (here with a stick) and animal in which one of them has to die (ζυγόν ἀπόφθιμον) (IGR IV 1632; ROBERT, 139).

b) The parallel with the Apocalypse

Further on in this paper still a number of other aspects come up for discussion, but to begin with, there is the most obvious phenomenon — which in the exegesis of the Apocalypse, in so far as I can see it, actually never comes up. More than Ezekiel, and even more than Daniel — the great sources of inspiration of the author of the Apocalypse — the book of the Apocalypse has become a book about beasts. There are 17 different beasts mentioned. A distinction in three groups seems to me appropriate.

The first group involves animals which play a subordinate role within the plot of the narrative: grasshoppers (9,3.7), frogs (16,13), scorpions (9,3.5.10), the sheep of Babylon (18,13) and dogs (22,15); and a number of times when horses are mentioned (9,7.9.17.19; 14,20; 18,13; 19,18).

The second group of animals takes up a middle position. They are directly in the service of the four animals (the lamb, the dragon, the beast out of the sea and the beast out of the land) which determine the plot of the story:
– the four ζώα (usually translated with 'the living creatures' but against the background of the κυνηγεσία one can better translate with 'wild beasts'): a combination of four animals in which the first beast looks like a lion, the second like a young bull, the third like a human being and the fourth like an eagle. They are as a unity in the service of the lamb that is a lion (4,6-9; 5,6-14; 6,1-7; 7,11; 14,3; 15,7; 19,4);
– the eagle as messenger of the three-fold woe (8,13) and as help of the pregnant woman (12,14);
– the horses which carry the avenging angels (6,2-8; 19,14) but

(23) This has to do with the investigation of intertextuality. One assumes that once the relation with the texts of Ezekiel and Daniel has been shown, the text would have been explained. Up to a certain point that is of course true, but still I think that an intertextual relationship does not cancel or diminish the power of the word or the expression to refer to current events. Thus when in 13, 2 the beast out of the sea is described as a beast that looks like a leopard, a bear and a lion there is indeed an intertextual referrence to Dan 7, 4-6, but leopards, bears and lions continue to be naturally also the most exciting and dangerous beasts in the κυνηγεσία.
especially also the horse that carries the white rider who is the lamb, the word of God (19,11.19.21);
– and the birds which are invited to eat the flesh of the conquered (19,17-21).
The third and last group involves the four animals which carry the plot: the lamb which is a lion; the red dragon, the beast out of the sea and the beast out of the land. A few matters are important so as to be noted:

(1) Against the background of the curiosity about exotic animals which emerges from the lavish organization of the κυνηγετα (24), the composite character of these animals is interesting. The lamb has 7 horns and 7 eyes (5,6) and is equated with a lion (the lion of the tribe of Juda: 5,5); it is a heavenly figure which stands at the inception of the struggle against the dragon and its followers and for this reason gets heavenly praise and honor; in c. 14, after the introduction of the beasts in c.12 and 13, the vision is told of the lamb who stands together with his 144,000 followers on Mt. Zion; in 17,14 the battle is announced and the victory; in the last chapters the metaphor changes: the lamb changes into a rider on a white horse (19,11-16) and the lamb (21,9) gets a bride and is thus himself a sort of bridegroom. The dragon has 7 heads and 10 horns with a serpentine tail (12,3); he was thrown out of heaven and is now at war with the offspring of the woman (12,13-17). He is also called ‘serpent’ and ‘the ancient serpent’ (12,9.14.15; 20,2). He is the most powerful figure but in the end he also shall taste defeat (25). The beast out of the sea has also 7 heads and 10 horns; it is also different because it has the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion (13,1-2); perhaps this is also the beast that kills the two witnesses (11,7) and on which the whore of Babylon sits (17,3). The fourth beast is the beast out of the earth; it has 2 horns and the voice of a dragon (13,11); because of its 2 horns it looks like a lamb (13,11). It is the most active beast: it performs signs; it makes the other beast speak; it gives people a mark on the forehead or on the right hand, a mark that has positive and negative effects. Because of these activities he is called ‘false prophet’ (16,13; 19,20; 20,10).

(24) For a description of the fascination of the Romans for the monster, see the second part of C.A. Barton’s study, The Gladiator and the Monster, 85-189.
(25) Interesting still is also the fact that Δρόκουν is also a name of gladiators, see in Miletus (CIG 2898; Robert, 178) and in Ephesus, a relief with the depiction of two combatting gladiators among which the names Λασπιροποίος and Δρόκουν (Robert, 209).
All four are fantastic beings to see, dangerous, powerful, strong. Against the background of the hunting games as I have described them until now, the Apocalypse is the story of one big θηράματος, the fight of one animal against other animals, here in this case the fight of the Lamb that is a Lion against the Dragon and his Beasts. Eventually it ends up in a κυνηγεσία: the fight of the rider on the white horse against the Beast and the kings, ending in a banquet for the birds out of the sky which may feast on the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men (19,11-21).

Because it is about a war (19,19) perhaps we are supposed to think of the staged battles like those organized by many emperors: the naumachia which were played from the time of Caesar until Trajan: sea battles imitated in the amphitheatres in which thousands of dead fell (one time 6.000 soldiers under Julius Caesar; 3.000 under Augustus; 19.000 under Claudius; etc); or better still the re-enacted wars just like what Claudius did on the Campus Martius:

He (= Claudius) gave representations in the Campus Martius of the storming and sacking of a town in the manner of real warfare, as well as of the surrender of the kings of the Britons, and presided clad in a general’s cloak (Suetonius, Claudius 21.6)(26)

or what Josephus tells about Titus regarding the fate of the Jewish war prisoners after the fall of Jerusalem:

Titus passed to Caesarea Philippi where he remained for a considerable time, exhibiting all kinds of spectacles. Here many of the prisoners perished, some being thrown to wild beasts, others compelled in opposing masses to engage one another in combat (BJ VII. 23-25).

The final conflict in the book of the Apocalypse is a muddled combat between the beasts and the heavenly and earthly armies. The result is one great mass of corpses, killed by fire or with the sword. In the last case the corpses are food for the birds (27), the carnarium, an extraordinary punishment because then no proper burial is possible anymore.

(26) See COLEMAN, “Fatal Charades”, 70-73

(27) What happens here once again is that an intertextual cross-reference (to Ez 39,17-21) and a reference to actual reality go hand in hand. See KYLIE, Spectacles of Death, 130-132; 156-171 about the clearing away of the people who were killed in the arena: as feed for the beasts, birds and dogs; ad flammam and in the river.
3. You will face hardship for ten days (Rev 2,10)

As transition from the discussion of what happens ad matutinum and afterwards at the midday intermission, I would like to show that the paralleling of the Apocalypse text with the gladiatorial games can perhaps explain an expression which until now remains rather unexplained in the exegesis. It is about the expression ἐξῆτε θαυμάζοντες ἡμέραν δέκα in the letter to the angel of the church in Smyrna (2,10).

I would like to cite the three most recent commentaries. D. Aune writes about this part of the verse:

The phrase “ten days” is used for an undefined but relatively short period of time, perhaps it is the sum of the fingers of both hands (Gen 24:55; Num 11:19; Neh 5:18; Jer 42:7; Dan 1:12-15); m ‘Abot 5:1-6 contains a list of ten things of various kinds. Ten can also function as a number signifying completeness (28).

R.H. Mounce writes:

Believers at Smyrna (or at least some of them) are to suffer persecution for ten days (or “within ten days”). Opinions vary about the time intended. Most view the ten days as a round number indicating a short period of time, but others hold it to be a prolonged but definitively limited period. The latter interpretation is more in keeping with the seriousness of the impending crisis (29)

P. Prigent summarizes this and then expresses his own preference for an intertextual relationship with the text of Daniel:

The number is surprising. It is generally explained as an assertion that the persecution was limited by God. Ten would thus be a round number that is fitting for this intention. There are indeed several examples of a similar usage of this number in the OT, such as the following: “They tempted me ten times without obeying my voice”, says God in speaking of the rebellious Hebrews (Num 14:22). In this case ten signifies “many times”. And yet one should note, as does Kraft, that we possess in the OT a precise text which might have been present in the mind of the author when he spoke of ten days of tribulation, namely Dan 1: 12,14, which speaks of the days during which the Hebrew youth abstain from the impure food served at the table of King Nebuchadnezzar. The testing ends in a conclusive manner: God rewards their faithfulness and they endure the period of fasting with no ill effects (30).

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(28) D.A. AUNE, Revelation 1–5 (WBC; Dallas, TX 1997) 166.
(30) PRIGENT, Commentary, 168-169.
Because a really good intertextual reference is not possible, everyone is rather perplexed. The ten days in the Apocalypse have obviously nothing to do with the ten fingers of the hand or with the 10 days of fasting; and is ‘10 days’ now a short (Aune) or a long (Mounce) time? Apparently the text itself does not make this really clear.

Still forgoing the aspect of the persecution — about which in a little while —, I would like first to concentrate on the time indication as such: ten days — it becomes suspenseful. I think namely that the expression can be related to the number of days that the *monomachia* lasts. In the preceding I have already cited different inscriptions where the number of days of the games had been reported. I am giving now the fuller list:

- 2 days in Antioch of Pisidia (31); Pergamum (32) and Smyrna (33);
- 3 days in Thessalonica (34); in a first century inscription in Magnesia-on-Meander (35); in Sardis (36); Smyrna (37) and Klaudiopolis (38);
- 4 days in Gortyne (ROBERT, 63) and Sagalassos (ROBERT, 97);
- 5 days in Miletus (SEG 1985 nr 1132) and in Ephesus (*Inscr Eph III*-627; VII-1-3056; ROBERT, 198);
- 6 days in Tomi (ROBERT, 43)
- 8 days in Antioch of Pisidia (ROBERT, 92)
- 12 days in Miletus (ROBERT, 192; in this same inscription it is also said that the man has organized θεοπίτα for 10 days).
- 13 days in Ephesus (*Inscr Eph VII*-1-3070; 3071; ROBERT, 199, 200) (39).

The 10 days from the Apocalypse-text fit beautifully in the list. Most exegetes also assume a connection with some kind of persecution. That seems correct, because the text says:

\(^{(31)}\) ROBERT, 94.
\(^{(32)}\) *Inscr Perg* 523; ROBERT, 265.
\(^{(33)}\) *Inscr Smyrna* 835, ROBERT, 234; I leave out ROBERT, 38 (Serdica) and 39 (Nikopolis), because the time determination is there only as corrections by Robert himself.
\(^{(34)}\) ROBERT, 11.
\(^{(35)}\) *Inscr Magn* 163; ROBERT, 152.
\(^{(36)}\) BUCKLER, *Sardes* 82; ROBERT, 138.
\(^{(37)}\) *Inscr Smyrna* 863; ROBERT, 233.
\(^{(38)}\) SEG 1989, nr 1339.
\(^{(39)}\) The 51 days which are mentioned in an inscription from Ancyra (ROBERT, 87) are probably the totality of his whole carrier and not one single munus.
Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life (3,10).

The text makes a combination of suffering, imprisonment, 10 days of hardship, death threat and crowning. It is a cluster of successive happenings which is to be understood from what happens at the midday intermission at the munera: namely the public execution of convicts of low social status who had been condemned *ad bestias, ad flammamas* (or *ad gladium*).

For this to be understood, I have first to go still more extensively into what we know of what happens during this midday break.

4. The *meridiani*

    a) Description

    I would like to begin with the expressive description of it which is to be found in Seneca, *Epistulæ Morales ad Lucilium* 7:

    By chance I attended a mid-day exhibition, expecting some fun, wit, and relaxation, — an exhibition at which men’s eyes have respite from the slaughter of their fellow-men. But it was quite the reverse. The previous combats were the essence of compassion; but now all trifling is put aside and it is pure murder. The men have no defensive armour. They are exposed to blows at all points, and no one ever strikes in vain. Many persons prefer this programme to the usual pairs and to the bouts “by requests”. Of course they do; there is no helmet or shield to deflect the weapon. What is the need of defensive armour, or of skill? All these mean delaying death. In the morning they throw men to the lions and the bears; at noon, they throw them to the spectators. The spectators demand that the slayer shall face the man who is to slay him in his turn; and they always reserve the latest conqueror for another butchering. The outcome of every fight is death, and the means are fire and sword. This sort of things goes on while the arena is empty. You may retort: “But he was a highway robber; he killed a man!” And what of it... In the morning they cried ‘Kill him! Lash him! Burn him…’and when the games stop for the intermission, they announce: ‘A little throat-cutting in the meantime, so that there may still be something going on!’(40)

    The description of Seneca is not quite typical. What it is about here is pretty well a man-to-man fight in which the condemned, because he is unarmed, does not have the ghost of a chance. From mosaics and a

number of reliefs it is clear that it is usually not a fight between human beings but a combat between a beast (lion, panther, bear, wild boar) and a human being, in this case the condemned (usually men but sometimes also a woman). There is a sort of transition between the last part of the *venationes* and what the midday intermission has to offer. In the Zliten mosaic from Libya that is part of the world heritage (41), all other sorts of fights are depicted beside the pairs of fighting gladiators: a naked man who is pushed forward on a cart towards a leopard which attacks him; a man who hunts deer; a man who is threatened by a bear; a man with a deer that is itself attacked by a wolf (?); a horse that lies wounded on the ground; a fight between a bear and a bull spurred on by a man with a long stick; a naked woman who is beaten with a whip towards a lion …

There are also a few reliefs that have been preserved from the area covered by the Apocalypse:

– from Smyrna a relief on which three strips stand one above the other: on the topmost and the middle two condemned are depicted with a rope around the neck; except for a pubic apron they are naked; they are ushered into the arena by a man wearing a tunic; on the undermost frame animals are depicted: a lion; and an ibex which is attacked by a wild boar (42).

– from Ephesus a relief on which a naked and a manacled woman is attacked by a wild animal; the man at the left is the bestiarius; on the background the contours of the arena are depicted (43).

Because it is about the condemned, the intention is to aggravate dying itself: *mors turpissima*. In the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius one can see how gruesome fantasy and reality are interchanged. A number of men want to take revenge on a girl who has cheated them:

One advised that the girl be burned alive; a second exhorted that she be thrown to the beasts; a third advocated that she be nailed to a cross; a fourth recommended that she be torn to pieces on the rack…A fifth


(43) For a depiction, see J. Keil, *Jahreshefte des Österreichischen Archäologischen Institutes* 11 (1908) 148, Beiblatt, fig. 100; for the description Robert, 222.
sees the possibility of a combination (of punishments). They would have to kill an ass and then clean out all the guts. Strip the girl… and sew her up inside his belly so that only her face protrudes…the ass will die, as he has long deserved; the girl will endure the bites of beasts when the worms lacerate her limbs, the scorching of fire when the sun scorches the ass’s belly with its excessive heat, and the agony of the cross when the dogs and vultures draw out her very guts (Met. 6.31-32).

This is an imaginary description but one that probably describes precisely how people look at these spectacles. Usually it involves individual events, the death of a pair of men, but in Josephus we also find descriptions of mass annihilations, namely those of Jewish captives after the Jewish war. I have already cited the text where it is said that Titus makes the Jewish captives re-enact a battle as a spectacle. A bit further on in the story of Josephus he relates:

during his stay at Caesarea, Titus celebrated his brother’s birthday with great splendour, reserving in his honour for this festival much of the punishment of his Jewish captives. For the number of those destroyed in contests with wild beasts or with one another or in the flames exceeded two thousand five hundred. Yet to the Romans, notwithstanding the myriad forms in which their victims perished, all this seemed too light a penalty. After this Caesar passed to Berytus, a city of Phoenicia and a Roman colony. Here he made a longer sojourn, displaying still greater magnificence on the occasion of his father’s birthday, both in the costliness of the spectacles and in the ingenuity of the various other items of expenditure. Multitudes of captives perished in the same manner as before (BJ VII.37-40).

For the rest Trajan does the same thing with thousands of captive Daci. J. Bennett writes about the second Dacian games with reference to the victory in the second Dacian war and the death of Decebalus:

Trajan offered 332.5 gladiatorial pairs in 2 munera, the second of 12 days. A third munus, with 340 pairs lasted 13 days, and, 1 November 109, not less than 117 days were devoted to the main series of displays, involving 4,941.5 gladiatorial pairs and 11,000 animals displayed and killed. Finally, on 11 November 109, Trajan inaugurated a naumachia, a structure devoted to mock sea-battles, and exhibited a further 127.5 pairs over a period of 6 days, completing the celebrations for the conquest of Dacia on 24 November 109 (\textsuperscript{(*)}).

There is a social demand and so there arises even a form of trade in *noxii* who can be used as *meridiani* in the midday intermission. Among other things a copy was found in Sardis of a senate decree from 177 about these *damnati*. The State is prepared to deliver them cheap, but the buyers have to guarantee that they are killed within a certain deadline (*a*). It is a strange trade. It is also precisely the time in which the first Acts of the Christian martyrs are dated. Without any doubt these martyrs were, to the amazement of the spectators, in a strange way willing *meridiani*.

The last phase of the combat is death: dying or (otherwise) killing. The common words *άποθνήσκω* and *έπωκτείνω* are used, but also the special word *σφάζω*: to slaughter, to kill, to sacrifice. It is a special word because, like a few other words, it is open to a double meaning. It is a LXX word. There it is used 84 times (plus still 24 times the word *σφασθή* and 5 times the word *σφάζων*) (*b*) and is more properly dealt with in a twofold context: 1) in the sacrifice of the animal for slaughter, e.g. 30 times in Leviticus (see 1,5.11; 3,2.8.13; 4,4.15.24.29.33 etc.), but also with the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22,10). And 2) in a war context, in the massacre of people: Elijah who causes the prophets of Baal to be massacred (1 Kgs 18,40); the 70 princes of Ahab who are massacred at the throne succession (2 Kgs 10,7), the sword of God which is sharpened for the slaughter (Ez 1,15) etc. and especially in the context of the Maccabean wars (1 Macc 1,2; 2,24; 2 Macc 5,24; 8,24; 10,37; 12,26; 4 Macc 2,19).

The word *σφάζω*, however, is also used in a typical manner within the context of gladiators. I give a number of relevant texts:

– in an inscription from Hierapolis (*c*) in a fourfold strip four names at the right side are still legible. One must assume that still four other names would be at the left side. It is then about four gladiatorial pairs whose outcome was all the time written down:

– μόν Βικτωρ Ἀπεθνανόν
[Με]λέαγρος ἕσφ[άη]
– νος Ἰνγένης ἕσφ[άη]
’Ἀντιοχιανός ἕσφ[άη]
That is to say: with the first pair both died, but not during the competition. With the others one must assume that the one gladiator has won (those names have to be supplemented with ἐπικύρα) and the other has lost. For this last one the verb σφάζω is used.

– On a relief from Hierapolis there is a lying gladiator; next to his head is written: ἔσφαγη (48).

– In an inscription from Halicarnassus (49) in the reconstruction of Robert are inscribed on an architrave the names of a pair of gladiators who at the inauguration of the Nemeseion have engaged in combat in the amphitheatre:

Jason, the son of Nicanor, has inaugurated the Nemeseion. The murmillo (= a certain type of gladiator) Smaragdos of Asia who had won 5 times and who had received a crown 5 times, has won (ἐπικύρα); and the thrax (= a certain type of gladiator) Strênos of Asia who had won once and had received a crown once was killed off (ἔσφαγη).

– Of another inscription from Halicarnassus (Robert, 182) the following words still survive: ΗΣΦΑΓΕΝΤΩΝ ΗΣΣΑΡΩΝ, i.e., there are 4 gladiators killed.

Also within the Apocalypse area a pair of inscriptions have been preserved which also use this word:

– In Smyrna (50), a relief on which a bullfight was depicted: a bull in a fight with a bestiarius, with the word σφαξτά under it and a relief of a bestiarius (48) who is hunting with a pickaxe, and under it the words γιοι σφαξτά.

– In Ephesus (51) Aurelius made over a period of 13 days 39 gladiators to fight to the death and he let wild animals from Libya (ξόα Λιβυκά) be killed (ἀποσφάξαντος) and Aurelius Dafnos (52) made over a period of 13 days 39 gladiators fight to the death and he let wild animals from Libya (ξόα Λιβυκά) be killed (ἀποσφάξαντα).

b) Ten days of hardship and the crown of life (Rev 2,10)

Coming back to the letter to the angel from Smyrna, the sentences about suffering, captivity, the ten days of hardship and the crown of life are perhaps now better to understood. They are all motifs that play

(48) SEG 1996 nr 1664.
(49) CIG 2662; ROBERT, 180.
(50) Inscr Smyrna 838; ROBERT, 229
(51) Inscr Smyrna 837; ROBERT, 230
(52) Inscr Eph VII-1-3071; ROBERT, 199
(53) Inscr Eph VII-1-3072; ROBERT, 200.
a role in the days-long gladiatorial games in which also the *damnati* are ‘cleared away’ — they who have been condemned to death and who sit in prison until a good occasion comes up to execute them in public. The ten days for which the feast lasts are for this reason a θαλάς, the real possibility to be killed: be faithful unto death. Then you shall receive the ‘crown of life’. Opposite death stands life. The crown at issue here is not ‘the crown’ that people receive in a competition — as victors in games — as is often said in commentaries\(^{(54)}\), but, parallel to other motifs from the gladiators’ world, the crown which a gladiator gets, if he wins, i.e. stays alive. A gladiator gets a crown on the occasion of a special victory. It is an extraordinary honor and on a number of gravestones this is also reported with pride: see, for example, the depiction of 12 crowns, on the gravestone of the *primuspalus* Dionysios in Philadelphia\(^{(55)}\); the epigram of Stephanos in Hierapolis who says about himself that he is δέκα τριικοτοις\(^{(56)}\); the 8 crowns on the gravestone of the gladiator Stephanos in Philadelphia\(^{(57)}\); the 6 crowns on a gravestone in Hierapolis\(^{(58)}\); and the 5 crowns on a gravestone of the gladiator in Pergamum\(^{(59)}\): the crown of life is the crown which guarantees life.

c) Being slaughtered and the victory

In a pair of curious places the author of the Apocalypse uses the word σφαρέομαι (in the passive sense) in combination with the word νικάω, namely with the Lamb, with the souls under the altar and with the beast out of the sea.

It is said about the Lamb that it is ὁ ἐσφαγμένον (5,6); τὸ ἐσφαγμένον (5,12; 13,8) or ὅτι ἐσφάγης (5,9). From the context it is shown that with this addition the Lamb is described as an animal that was sacrificed. In itself it is outside the context of the gladiatorial games. Still this is not absent, because a couple of times there is also a combination made with ‘triumphing’: in 5,5 (in connection with 5,6): “Lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah has triumphed” (ἔνικησεν) and in 17,14: “they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer (νικήσει) them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings”. Being

\(^{(54)}\) See ALLO, 25-27; CHARLES, 58; WETE, 33; HEMER, 70-76; AUNE, 166-167; MOUNCE, 76.
\(^{(55)}\) ROBERT, 145.
\(^{(56)}\) Altertümer von Hierapolis, 205; ROBERT, 124.
\(^{(57)}\) ROBERT, 141
\(^{(58)}\) SEG 1996 nr 1668.
\(^{(59)}\) ROBERT, 261
slaughtered is undergoing death; winning is inflicting death on the other party and oneself staying alive.

The followers of the Lamb undergo what has happened to the Lamb and do what he has done. With them too is at play this same combination of ‘being slaughtered’ and ‘conquering’. At the opening of the fifth seal it is said there: “I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain (τῶν ἐσφαγμένων) for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (6,9) — who must wait until the number of their brothers who like them (= in the same manner as they?) will be killed is complete. These are presumably the same people as those who are spoken about in the downfall of Babylon: “And in her (= Babylon) was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of all who have been slain (τῶν ἐσφαγμένων) on earth” (18,24). The ‘victory’ which these people have achieved, is put into words in two other texts: in the ode to the heavenly victory over the red dragon, in 12,11: “And they have conquered (ἐνίκησαν) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony for they loved not their lives even unto death”; and just before the appearance of the 7 angels with the last 7 plagues: the victors, as witnesses of these plagues, are present beside the sea of glass mingled with fire to sing the victory song of Moses because they, like Moses and his people, have been saved from destruction: “Those who had conquered (τοὺς νικῶντας) the beast and its image and the number of its name” (15,2). In a complete reversal of values which are current within the gladiatorial fight, the death which is inflicted with violence is the victory over the killers.

Still for the third time the pair σφαγματισμός and νικάω is used, but this time more directly in connection with what happens there in the θηριομαχία. It is about the beast out of the sea that has seven heads and ten horns. “One of it heads seemed to have a mortal wound (ὡς ἐσφαγμένον εἰς θάνατον), but its mortal wound was healed” (15,3,12). It looks just like what happens during a fight between human being and animal or between one animal and another animal. In view of 15,14 the first is more probably the case: “the beast which was wounded by the sword and yet lived”. Combat has already been engaged in, and with a sword, but the fight is not yet decided. The beast is, in spite of the wound, at first a winner: it conquers (νικήσει) and kills the two witnesses (11,7); and it is allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer (νικήσατι) them (13,7); but in the end it goes to perdition (17,8); the lamb shall conquer the ten heads which are ten kings (νικήσετι) (17,14); and in the final combat, the beast itself shall
now be caught by the rider on the white horse (ἐπτύλχσθη) and together with the beast out of the earth thrown still alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur (19,20).

It is clear that this entire motif runs parallel with the world of the munera in which one fights to win, because otherwise death is the consequence. Victory is life; defeat is death. It is realistic language only with ‘the people who are slaughtered’. The rest is figurative-imaginary. But with the ἐφανεμένοι it is about real, existing people: about presumably small groups of people who are executed individually in public ad bestias or ad flammæ in the midday intermission of the big, festive city munera, in order to be ‘finished off’ afterwards with a sword, to be carried off with iron hooks in order to be burned or thrown away as feed for the birds and the dogs. For the spectators of the spectacles these people were the losers, perhaps the victims. The Apocalypse is a book that in imitation of the Jewish martyria\(^{(60)}\) has assisted in ideologically changing into a victory that which is for the affected people a painful death. That is necessary, because the author foresees that the threat with such sort of death will continue to apply also for the future: “until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be completed, who were to be killed as they themselves had been” (6,11).

d) Two other imaginary fights

Beside the final θηριαναχια in 19,11-21 which I have already pointed out at different times, there are, finally, still two other imaginary descriptions of θηριαναχια: one with a fatal outcome and one where the fight remains still undecided.

In the vision of the two witnesses appears the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit as the great opponent (11,7-10). The beast is presumably the same as the beast that is described in 13,1-8. It bears then the characteristics of the beasts which are used as θηρια in the munera: the leopard, the bear and the lion\(^{(61)}\). In spite of their great magical talents, the two witnesses are really no match for the beast.


\(^{(61)}\) At one time a combination of precisely these animals appears in the inscriptions, namely in an inscription from Sagalossos, Robert, 98; separately the beasts appear constantly in all sorts of inscriptions, reliefs and other depictions. See also note 23 about the going hand in hand of the reference to Dan 7,4-6 and the reference to the munera.
There is even no talk of any form of resistance. In a fast succession of verbs, it states there: “he will make war upon them and conquer them and kill them” (11,7). The fate of the bodies prefigures or predicts the fate that befalls the bodies of the people who are killed in the midday intermission of the *munera*. There is no burial. On the contrary, the burial is denied. The people are even happy when they see the bodies lying. After this the possible comparison between what happens with the bodies of the two witnesses and with the bodies of the ordinary *damnati* stops. The two witnesses, like Elijah and Moses, and like Jesus, accompanied by cosmic happenings are taken into heaven. With the (Christian) *damnati* one can hope for and believe in this, but in any case cannot see.

With chapter 12 (vv. 13-17) we find ourselves totally in the land of myths: a dragon, a fight in heaven between angels, a woman with cosmic attributes. The last part of the story is told in the form of a *θηριομαχία*: the animal fighting with the human being, the dragon fighting with the woman. What maybe are to be considered most enlightening are those representations which K.M. Coleman so charmingly called ‘fatal charades’: the executions staged as mythological enactments. That was a special form of amusement. The story of the myths is re-enacted, sometimes until death ensues. That is not the case here. The dragon begins his fight, but the woman gets the two wings of the big eagle with which she can fly. The dragon spits water like a river, but the earth comes to the rescue of the woman and swallows all the water. The fight ends undecided, but the rage of the dragon is not satisfied. He continues the fight: “to make war on the rest of the offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus” (12,17). Thus also here, in spite of all

(62) This past or present is dependent on whether one places the two witnesses in the past or the future of the narrative.


(64) K.M. COLEMAN, “Fatal Charades”, 44-73.
mythological applications, once again a relationship is made with the horrible reality of the mutilation and death which the author of the book foresees for his readers.

* * *

“Maturus, Sanctus, Blandina, and Attalus were led into the amphitheatre to be exposed to the beasts and to give a public spectacle of the pagans’ inhumanity, for a day of fighting wild beasts (θηριομαζίας) was expressly arranged for our sake” (Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. V.1.37 about the martyrs of Lyons). Starting from the very first Christian literature until far into the 3rd century a relationship is made between the persecution of Christians and the munera (65). Clement gives presumably a description of a fatal charade when he writes: “Through jealousy women were persecuted as Danaids and Dircae, suffering terrible and unholy dignities” (1 Clement 6.2) (66). Ignatius writes in different letters that he is on his way πρὸς θηρία (in the letter to the Trallians 10,1 and the Smyrnaeans 4,2) in the simple terms that he shall go to fight with the wild beasts; in the letter to the Romans (67) 4,1.2; 5,1.2.3 in the more strange formulations that he hopes to be eaten by the wild animals; that the wild animals may become his grave). According to the martyrium of Carpus, Papylus of Thyatira and Agathonice of Pergamum the martyrs, after having first been tortured (23.24), are finally brought to death in the amphitheater (37.40.44). In the martyrium of Polycarp something similar happens. In the beginning of the text the story is about anonymous martyrs who after having been tortured are led (2,4) to the wild beasts (ἐπὶ τὰ θηρία),


(66) Coleman, “Fatal Charades”, 66 writes about this text: “Since the mythological Dirce was bound to the horns of a bull..., it is easy to imagine how realistically her fate could be re-enacted in the arena...And, a group of female prisoners furnished with jugs would immediately remind the audience of the Danaids, and they might then be executed in a manner not necessarily corresponding to any known variant of the story”.

about the courage of Germanicus in his fight with the wild animals (ἡσαμερίζομαι 3,1) and the cowardice of Quintus who indeed recoils (4,1); and then in the second part of the text about Polycarp himself: his predictions that he shall be killed by fire (5,2); his discussion with the proconsul in the arena (6,2; 9,2); the reaction of the people who demands from the asiarch Philip that he unleash a lion on Polycarp and his answer that the time of the κυνηγεσία was finished (12,2); the death of Polycarp in the fire and with the dagger (13,1-15,2) and, finally, the refusal to hand over the body and the public burning (17,1-18,3).

Still more other texts could have been mentioned. The point is clear. The author of the Apocalypse, presumably indeed on the basis of what he has experienced, with his prophecies about the death of the witnesses of Jesus by the dragon and the beast out of the sea, has in any case foreseen rather precisely what would happen in the future.

Theologische Faculteit, † Sjef van Tilborg
Universiteit Nijmegen
Postbus 9103,
6500HD Nijmegen, Netherlands

SUMMARY

This paper proposes a new suggestion in the discussion regarding possible death threats in the Apocalypse. It makes a comparison between relevant texts from the Apocalypse and what happens during festival days when rich civilians entertain their co-citizens with (gladiatorial) games. At the end of the morning and during the break special fights are organized. Condemned persons are forced to fight against wild animals or against each other to be killed by the animals or by fire. The paper shows that a number of texts from the Apocalypse are better understood, when they are read against this background.