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Magical Constantinople: statues, legends, and the end of time

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When emperor Constantine the Great laid the first stone of Constantinople in 324, he did this at a place which had not been empty before. Instead, his foundation superseded and replaced the old Greek city of Byzantion. Constantinople was therefore a newly founded city with a long history, though not a history of the importance which was required for a new seat of government which, after a few decades, also became the new capital.[1] The result was that this missing history had to be constructed subsequently, that is, that the missing imperial traditions had to be invented.

The cometlike rise of Constantinople must have been watched by its own inhabitants and by the inhabitants of other cities with a mixture of admiration and astonishment. How was it possible that this ancient, but small and run-down place rose so suddenly to be the capital of the whole eastern empire? The volition of emperor Constantine alone could not suffice as an explanation for this – with the result that emperor Septimius Severus, who had actually destroyed Byzantion in the year 196 after a civil war in which the city had joined the side of his opponent Pescennius Niger, was credited with its rebuilding, which in fact took place long after his death.[2] In this way, the imperial history of Constantinople had become longer by more than a century. And if Severus rebuilt the city, as it was claimed, he must also have left visible traces in it. This is the origin of the legend which says that the Hippodrome and the imperial

[1] Dagron 1974: 13–76.

[2] Dagron 1974: 15–19.

palace were begun already by Septimius Severus, when he rebuilt Byzantion, but were left unfinished after his death, and completed only more than hundred years later by Constantine.[3] In addition to Constantine and Severus, also Byzas was finally introduced into the urban legend, the legendary king and founder of Byzantion in the seventh century BC. In this way, a ideological concept was formed which Gilbert Dagron once called a "trinity of founders".[4]

But the alleged rebuilding of Byzantion by a Roman emperor was not enough to explain its rise to a capital. Ways had to be found to make it equal in rank with Rome itself, and this was achieved by various legends. The first of them claims that Constantine, coming from Rome, brought a group of Roman senators with him to colonize his new city. This story actually supports the idea of Roman imperial continuity, but soon it is also told that the Romans, being descendants of the Trojans, returned to the East to take possession again of their old empire.[5] By the sixth century, another detail was added, namely that Constantine secretly removed the Palladium from the Temple of Vesta in Rome, brought it to Constantinople, and buried it under the forum near his triumphal column. The Palladium is the wooden figure of Pallas Athena allegedly fallen from the sky before time immemorial, which the Greeks had stolen before Troy, and which later, in Italy, returned to the possession of the emigrant Trojans, that is of the Romans.[6] The whole pagan legend of the Palladion, however, was by no means uncontroversial, and there was also a Christian legend which claimed that the empress Helena had brought some relics of the true cross from Jerusalem which were hidden by her son Constantine in his statue on top of the large porphyry column on the Forum,[7] or other relics of Christ under it.[8] Both traditions, the

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[3] The construction of both may actually have been started by Licinius, Constantine's brother-in-law and last opponent, who had resided in Byzantion before his final defeat at Chrysopolis in 324.

[4] Dagron 1984: 61–97.

[5] Dagron 1974: 29–31.

[6] Prokopios, *Wars* 1.15.9–14; Ioannes Malalas 13.7 (246.83–6 ed. Thurn); see Dagron 1974: 39.

[7] Sokrates, *Church history* 1.17.7–8.

[8] Parastaseis, in Cameron and Herrin 1984: ch. 9 and 23.

Trojan or Roman on the one hand and the Christian one on the other, coexisted unconnected for centuries, until they were finally merged into one, with the result that the Palladium and Christ's relics lay buried, in the imagination of the Constantinopolitans, side by side under the Forum.

Then, in the mid-sixth century, a heavy crisis set in which soon threatened the empire and its capital severely. Constantinople was besieged several times, though never taken; its population declined rapidly, perhaps to a tenth of its previous number, and building activities ceased almost completely for about 150 years.[9] We do not know what happened to the old urban elites during the Dark Ages, as this period is often called, but it is obvious that the cultural tradition of the city suffered a major break. Constantinople, it seems, became a place unknown to its own inhabitants, and its history, both real and imagined, fell into oblivion and into the darkness of legend. Life among the ruins of the own great past, and between pagan statues whose real meaning was forgotten, seems to have been a threatening experience, and the way used to cope with this situation was, not surprisingly, the invention of new and very different legends.

The decoration with statues was an important element of all ancient cities. When Constantinople was founded, a sufficient quantity of them was not available, and so many statues and other objects of art were brought, in the hundred years after the inauguration of Constantinople in the year 330, to the city from the whole empire, especially from the East, and set up as a decoration in palaces, on public squares and streets, and in the Hippodrome.[10] Many of them were destroyed in the course of time, and only few survive as spoils of war in western Europe where they were brought after the crusader's conquest of Constantinople in 1204.[11] Among them, to name just a few examples, was a statue of

[9] Mango 1990: 51.

[10] Mango 1963: 55–7; Bassett 2004: 37–49.

[11] Such as the so-called Colossus of Barletta, probably a statue of emperor Leon I, or the four brazen horses at Saint Mark's in Venice, a work of the Hellenistic age which originally belonged to a quadriga; on which see Mango 1963: 68.

Athena in front of the Senate in the Forum and a Zeus from Dodone in the new Senate. Famous were the statue collections of the eunuch Lausos from the 420s, which had, however, already been destroyed by fire in 476;[12] or the collection in the courtyard of the Zeuxippos baths which included over seventy pieces and perished in the fire of 532;[13] and especially the statues in the Hippodrome, where many of them survived until the Fourth Crusade in 1204.[14]

In the early days of Constantinople these statues may still have been perceived simply as a fitting decoration for a big city; statues of emperors and dignitaries were still sporadically set up, though mostly originating from the reworking of older statues.[15] But during the heavy political crisis in the seventh century the production of marble and bronze statues ended completely, while the style of the contemporaneous art production changed dramatically. And as already mentioned, it was often forgotten whom these statues actually represented. The naturalistic, often life-sized marble and bronze statues must have made a strange and frightening impression on a simple resident of the city without a classical cultural background. However, it is surprising to see how rarely they were openly rejected because of their nudity or their being half-dressed. It is a remarkable exception, therefore, if the *Life of Saint Andrew the Fool*, a text from the tenth century, once edited by the late Lennart Rydén, tells us the episode of a woman who suffered from disturbing dreams, and in one such dream saw herself standing in the Hippodrome, embracing the statues there, and was urged by an impure desire to have intercourse with them.[16] In any case, the ancient Greek religion was now mostly considered as idolatry which included also magical practices.

[12] Mango–Vickers–Francis 1992; Bassett 2004: 98–120.

[13] On which see Stupperich 1965; Bassett 2004: 51–8; Kaldellis 2007; Martins de Jesus 2014.

[14] Their destruction after the conquest by the crusaders is described by Niketas Choniates in his well-known *Book of the statues*; on which see now Papamastorakis 2009; cf. also Bassett 2004: 58–67.

[15] The most prominent case being the equestrian statue of Justinian on his column near Hagia Sophia, which was in fact a reworked statue of Arkadios from the Forum Tauri; see Mango 1993; Effenberger 2008.

[16] Rydén 1995: line 2492 with p. 332 n. 10.

Many ancient works of art, which represented pagans and pagan gods, were now perceived as a demonic threat.[17] Many of them, on the other hand, were also believed to be talismans, that is, a means of a protective spell or a carrier of an apocalyptic prophecy.

An important source for such interpretations of ancient statuary is the so-called *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai*, the "short chronistic presentations", a work of the late eighth or ninth century on the local history of Constantinople[18] – although it must be admitted that many of the explanations given were probably not taken seriously by the anonymous author himself, but were introduced as a sort of play or as a slightly reserved digression into the beliefs of an uneducated mass. This reception of ancient statues in the city, however, began already long before the *Parastaseis*, namely in the sixth century, when the political catastrophe still lay in the future. In the chronicle of John Malalas, it is the philosopher Apollonios of Tyana who made these magic statues, by which all sorts of mischief is kept away from Constantinople.[19] Although Apollonios lived in the first century AD, he is transposed by later Byzantine sources to the time of Constantine the Great, in order to make his works in Constantinople more plausible.[20] Among the talismans, which Apollonios of Tyana reportedly set up in the city, John Malalas enumerates the figures of storks and horses, the river Lykos, and a turtle. All of them can be located from later sources in the city: the figures of three storks stood on a street at Hagia Sophia and supposedly kept storks away from the city;[21] the horses stood at the Imperial Palace, and tamed the horses in the city;[22] the representation of the personified river Lykos can probably be identified with the lying river god of marble at the square of the Ox near *ta Amastrianou*, of which some fragments still exist;[23] and the turtle is probably the sculpture near the church of Saint Prokopios which

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[17] Mango 1963; James 1996.

[18] Cameron and Herrin 1984; Odorico 2014.

[19] John Malalas, book X ch. 51; cf. Georgios Kedrenos, Chronicle I 346.19–347.2; see Dagron 1984: 107–14.

[20] *Patria,* in Preger 1907: book II ch. 79 and 103. Dagron 1984: 103–15.

[21] Pseudo-Hesychios, in Preger 1901: ch. 25.

[22] *Patria,* in Preger 1907: book II, ch. 28; see also Vasiliev 1932: 160–61.

[23] Mango 1990: 70.

gave this nickname to the church.[24] Later sources also add the figures of snakes in the Hippodrome[25] and the so-called *konopion* on the square of the Bull, a magic sofa with a mosquito net, which served to ward off flies and mosquitos.[26] The river god probably should prevent flooding, although this is nowhere said explicitly. About the stone turtle we hear, though only centuries later, that in old times it went through the streets at night and ate up the garbage in order to keep the city clean.[27]

Incidentally, the reports of such talismans usually contain a remark stating which ruler had destroyed them – either out of ignorance as in the case of Leo III, or of carelessness as in the case of Basil I.[28] In the late period, however, the destruction of these miracle cures is attributed, as we should expect, to the Franks, that is the crusaders and Italians after the Fourth Crusade.[29] The medieval inhabitants of Constantinople were surrounded by all these magical objects and respected their power, but not under all circumstances and not unconditionally: several times we hear that such magical figures were mutilated or destroyed in order to break their harmful power,[30] or that foolish people destroyed a statue representing a good spell.[31] Not all such attempts of destruction were successful, for it is also occasionally mentioned that a wicked statue fought the attacker and killed him, for example by lunging at him from above.[32] On the other hand, not every antique statue in Constantinople was regarded as magical. Many statues were reinterpreted, without any belief in a magic power, in order to make them appear less threatening to the viewer, either as persons of Roman history, such as the Emperor Constantine and his sons, or as biblical figures.[33]

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[24] *Patria*, in Preger 1907: book II, ch. 23; see Berger 1988: 460–62.

[25] I.e. the Serpent Column, which is not mentioned in the Hippodrome in earlier times; see Majeska 1984: 254–56.

[26] *Patria*, in Preger 1907: book III, ch. 24.

[27] Mango 1960: 75; Majeska 1984: 295–96.

[28] Patria, in Preger 1907: book II, ch. 90; book III, ch. 24 and 200.

[29] Majeska 1984: 246, 274–75.

[30] Mango 1963: 60–61.

[31] Ibid., 61–63.

[32] *Parastaseis*, in Cameron and Herrin 1984: ch. 28; James 1996.

[33] For example, the statue of a three-headed deity was explained as the sons of Constan-

A result of the deep crisis in the seventh and early eighth centuries was also the increasing popularity of apocalyptical texts about the end of time.[34] These texts were based on the concept of Chiliasm, according to which the world, which had been created within seven days, will also last seven days, that is, seven thousand years. Christ, it was believed, had come in the middle of the sixth millennium, and the Antichrist would come at its end. Then, the present world would come to an end, before the beginning of the seventh and last millennium which would be God's eternal kingdom. If this was true and the end of the world was predestined, it followed not only that it could be calculated by the chronicle writers (in fact, numerous attempts have been made to do this), but also that there had to be old prophecies about it. In these texts, where the end of time is expected after the impending downfall of the Roman or Byzantine Empire, Constantinople as the capital of it plays a very distinct, if not always central role. And a natural consequence of this is that the prophecies about the future end of Constantinople were soon linked to specific locations in the city.

The central text of early Byzantine apocalypticism is the so-called Pseudo-Methodios which was originally written around the year 692 in Syria and in Syriac, but soon thereafter translated into Greek.[35] This translation contains a long interpolation which describes a violent attack by the wicked sons of Ismael, that is the Muslim Arabs, on Constantinople – an event which can easily be recognised as the historical siege of the city in the years 717 to 718. The relevant part of this interpolation on Constantinople is as follows:

> Woe to you, Byzas, because Ismael overtakes you. For every horse of Ismael will pass through and the first among them will pitch his tent before you, Byzas, and he will begin to make war and will break down the gate of Xylokerkos and will proceed as far as the Ox. Then

tine the Great: *Parastaseis*, in Cameron and Herrin 1984: ch. 43; a sitting female statue in the Hippodrome either as Athena or as the fifth-century empress Verina: ibid., ch. 61; the equestrian statue of Theodosios I on the *Tauros* square also as Joshuah in Patria, in Preger 1907: book II, ch. 47.

[34] Alexander 1985 and elsewhere.

[35] Garstad 2013; Heilo 2015: 57–58.

> the Ox will moo loudly and the Xerolophos will roar, since they were thrashed by the Ismaelites. Then a voice will come out of the heavens saying, 'This same punishment suffices for me'. And the Lord God will snatch the cowardice of the Romans and thrust it into the hearts of the Ismaelites and take the manliness of the Ismaelites and cast it into the hearts of the Romans; they will turn and drive them from their homes and crush them without mercy.[36]

The interpretation of this prophecy raises some questions. As we know from the reports about the better documented sieges of 626, 1203 and 1453, the walls were always attacked at their known weakest points, that is, either in the valley of the Lykos river or at the Blachernai at the northern end of the double land walls. Why then does the Greek Pseudo-Methodios claim that the Xylokerkos Gate was the place where the Arabs invaded the city? The Xylokerkos is the first major gate in the land walls north of the ceremonial main entry into the city, the Golden Gate. The Golden Gate was built on a road near the sea shore, which had had no greater importance before the new land walls were built between 408 and 413, and the Xylokerkos Gate lay on the ancient Roman highway from Thrace into the city.[37] In later apocalyptic texts, the Xylokerkos and the Golden Gate are often mentioned together when it comes to the future conquest of the city. This is, for example, still the case in the so-called *Oracula Leonis* to which we shall return below. The belief that the future conquerors of the city would one day invade the city through the Xylokerkos gate was also preserved for a very long time. As late as in the year 1189, when the crusaders of the Third Crusade approached Constantinople, Emperor Isaak Angelos let this gate be walled up, as the historian Niketas Choniates says, due to "an old and foolish prophecy"[38] – and it was thereafter closed, with brief interruptions, until 1886.[39]

The first place reached by the Arabs inside the city is, according to the interpolated Pseudo-Methodios, the Ox, that is the marketplace

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[36] Pseudo-Methodios, *Apocalypse* 13, 9–12; quoted from Garstad 2013: 57, with minor changes; Heilo 2015: 58–59.

[37] The straight course of this highway is still preserved today in the Kocamustafa Paşa and Cerrahpaşa Caddesi inside the walls.

[38] Niketas Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 404.4–7.

[39] Asutay-Effenberger 2007: 220.

usually called the *Bous*. The *Bous* lies, however, at a distance of almost 3 km from the walls, and a large number of monuments that would have been touched by the invading warriors is not mentioned, including the *Exakionion*, i.e. the main gate of the Constantinian walls which still existed at that time, and the forum of Arkadios on the hill called Xerolophos.[40] How can we explain this? As far as we know, a statue of an ox or bull stood on the square called Bous in the early Byzantine period, but had disappeared already in the early seventh century. The result was that a large number of legends, some of them already hundreds of years old, were attached to this statue. All these legends go back, in principle, to the cult of the bull-shaped god Baal on Mount Atabyrios in Palestine, which spread across the Mediterranean during Antiquity.[41] The cult of the bull-shaped Baal, now identified with Zeus, existed, for example, also in Agrigentum on the island of Sicily, where a mountain near the city bore the name *Atabyrion*. But already there the legend is known only in a rationalised form turned into the negative: it tells that the tyrant Phalaris of Agrigentum, who is in fact a historical person from the sixth century BC, gave order to a smith to make a bronze bull, in which he then tortured his unsuspecting guests to death by throwing them inside and heating the bull to redness. Death in a glowing bronze bull is later a common motif of Christian hagiography, and quite a number of saints allegedly found their end in that horrible way, including, as the most prominent of them, Saint Antipas of Pergamon.

So why was this legend attached to the square called the Ox? The Bous often served as a place of executions in the seventh and eighth century, and when such events were recorded in chronicles, it is simply said that someone died *en tō Boï*, that is, "on the square of *Bous*" – which could easily be understood in the sense of "inside the *bous*", that is, the ox of bronze. We do not know when the legend was connected to the square of the Ox. In its complete form, with an explicit mention of a furnace in the shape of an ox, it appears first in the *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai*.[42] If the Ox roars together with the Xerolophos, this

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[40] On which see, for example, Berger 1988: 352–8.

[41] Berger 1988: 348–50.

[42] *Parastaseis*, in Cameron and Herrin 1984: 42.

must be explained by the fact that the square called the Ox actually lay, as already mentioned, on the way downtown before the Xerolophos. And as the word *bous* is used here in its double meaning, both in the sense of the animal ox and as a topographical designation, it is clear that also the Xerolophos must roar, so to speak, even if he is, simply for anatomical reasons, hardly able to do so. It would be more logical here if the *Tauros* or bull would roar, the next square from the Ox on the way downtown. But there is no indication that a statue of a bull did ever exist on this square, which could have served as a focal point for a tale such as the one told about the Ox. And above all, in the prophecy of Pseudo-Methodios the *Tauros* is not reached by the Arabs, and therefore cannot be mentioned there. Only in later texts does the Tauros replace the Xerolophos in this context, and so in the end the famous saying from Pseudo-Methodios – "Then the Ox will moo loudly and the Xerolophos will roar" – is changed to "The ox will moo and the bull will moan". In this form it is quoted, for example, in the twelfth century by Ioannes Tzetzes, and he also gives a new explanation for it: the ox is Constantinople, which has been built by the bull, that is the Italians or Romans, and it now sings a fight song against the bull, that is against the armies of the Second Crusade.[43]

Another central concept of Byzantine apocalyptic texts is that Constantinople, just like Rome, was built on seven hills.[44] Constantinople is first called the "city of seven hills" in some mid-seventh century texts, but is not yet mentioned as such in the prophecies of Pseudo-Methodios. It is, however, rather difficult to identify these seven hills of Constantinople in nature. Only in the mid-tenth century the several projections of the range of hills on the northern side of the city facing the Golden Horn are identified with six of these hills, and the so-called Xerolophos, far in the south-west beyond the valley of the river Lycus, with the seventh.[45] The fact that the Xerolophos was regarded as the seventh hill explains, in turn, the special role it plays in apocalyptic literature. The

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[43] Ioannes Tzetzes, *Chiliades*, see Leone 1968: 369–71.
[44] Berger 2008: 139–40.
[45] Ibid., 140–44.

scene of the expulsion of the Ismaelites, as described in the interpolated pseudo-Methodios, is expanded by later texts, such as the so-called last vision of Daniel, where we hear the following:[46]

The voice from heaven, which ends the slaughtering of the assailants, calls the inhabitants of the city to search, in the right part of the city, for a man who stands on two pillars, and make him emperor. He is crowned in Hagia Sophia, angels give him a sword, he defeats all the enemies and drives them far away from the city. Twelve years later, after his death, his son becomes the last emperor at the end of the day. He leaves Constantinople and goes to Jerusalem, where he hands over the reign to his sons which immediately begin a civil war. The city of seven hills is finally ruled by a vicious woman, before it sinks into the sea, and the part which is drowned last is the Xerolophos.

The belief that the Xerolophos is the last part of Constantinople, which sinks into the sea, is probably based on its name, which actually means the "dry hill", and on the fact that it was counted as the seventh and therefore the last hill of the city.[47] For this reason, it is the Xerolophos which has to sink into the sea last, although it is, in reality, not even the highest elevation of Constantinople. The column of Arkadios, which stood on its top, has stimulated the imagination of writers to a particular degree, far more than the column of Theodosios on the *Tauros*, although that column had the same enormous size as the column of Arkadios and was decorated with spirally arranged reliefs in a very similar way.

The greatest collection of ancient art in Constantinople which survived into the Middle Ages was that in the Hippodrome, and many of the statues there were interpreted as bearers of prophecies about the end of the empire and of time. A distinctive case of how this was done were the legends about a bronze group of Skylla.[48] This work of art is now lost but, as many others, described in detail in Niketas Choniates' so-called *Book of the statues (De signis)*, at the occasion of its destruction by the

[46] Ibid., 142–43.

[47] Ibid., 143.

[48] Berger 2010: 197–8; Stephenson 2013.

crusaders in 1204.[49] This description suggests that the monument, probably a work of the late Hellenistic time, was very similar to the well-known Skylla group found at Sperlonga in Italy, which may actually be a copy of it.[50] According to Niketas,

> The ancient Skylla is depicted leaning forward as she leaped into Odysseus' ships and devoured many of his companions: in female form down to the waist, huge-breasted and full of savagery, and below the waist divided into beasts of prey.

The same Skylla group is described in the *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai* in the following words:

> Among the female statues, the one near the epigram of the Medes is of women giving birth to wild beasts and devouring men. One of them, Herodianos made clear to me, reveals the story of the godless Justinian. The other, which is accompanied also by a boat, has not been fulfilled, but remains.[51]

This clearly refers to the Skylla which is, however, not named as such, but instead explained as an oracle: the first part of it about the evil deeds of Emperor Justinian II, who reigned in the late seventh and early eighth century, is already fulfilled, the second part not. But what is the second part of this prophecy? In the tenth century this passage was taken over into the *Patria*, a description of Constantinople which can be described as something between a local history and a travel guide. There, the end of the text is changed to the following words:

> The other, which is accompanied also by a boat, is, according to the ones, Scylla who devours the men thrown out by Charybdis, and it is Odysseus whom she keeps with her hand by his head. Others say that this is earth, the sea and the seven ages of the world which are devoured by the floods, and the present age is the seventh one.[52]

As we see, the object of art is now correctly identified, but at the same time an apocalyptical interpretation of it is offered. For at the end of the

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[49] Niketas Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 651.27–31.
[50] Andreae-Conticello 1987: 25–26.
[51] *Parastaseis*, in Cameron and Herrin 1984: ch. 61.
[52] *Patria*, in Preger 1907: book II, ch. 77.

world, as the apocalyptical texts claim, Constantinople will be drowned in the sea.

At about the same time, another new motif was introduced into the apocalyptic folklore of Constantinople, namely the legend about the wise emperor Leon, a figure clearly based on the historical person of Leon VI, who reigned from 886 to 912.[53] As it is well known, Leon VI was a personality with many facets who distinguished himself, among other things, as a legislator and a man of letters. The designation as "the Wise" is attested already during his lifetime, and we can assume that also the formation of legends about him started at that time.[54] His later reputation as a magician, however, he probably owed to the confusion with two other persons of the same name. One of them is Leon the Philosopher, also called the Mathematician, a famous intellectual who lived about two generations before him;[55] the other is the diplomat and poet Leon Choirosphaktes, who lived in the time of Leon VI himself.[56]

Leon soon replaced Apollonios in the local legend of Constantinople as the creator of magic statues and talismans, and a collection of highly enigmatic oracles began to circulate under his name, the already mentioned *Oracula Leonis*.[57] In the last centuries of Byzantium, the folklore of Constantinople focused entirely on Leon, who mutates slowly from an emperor to a Constantinopolitan sage and philosopher. As such, he leads discussions with other philosophers and defeats them with his wisdom – something which is, by the way, another well-known motif of the local legend.[58]

All these legends about magical statues and wise men who foretell the future end of Constantinople were constantly in the mind of its popu-

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[53] Mango 1960.

[54] Ibid., 92–93.

[55] On whom see Lemerle 1971: 148–76.

[56] See, for example, his song for the inauguration of a bath built by Leon VI: Magdalino 1990.

[57] Rigo 1988; Brokkaar 2002.

[58] See, for example, the seven philosophers discussing with Theodosios II: *Parastaseis,* in Cameron and Herrin 1984: ch. 62; Dagron 1984: 115–19.

lation. But as to be expected, they play only a minor role in times of political stability, and gained greater popularity and influence only in times of crisis. This becomes obvious at the end of the twelfth century, when the empire declined rapidly under the pressure of Turks, Bulgarians and crusaders. In fact, the belief in the magic power of ancient statues reached its peak in the last decades before the conquest of Constantinople by the crusaders in 1204, when most of them were either destroyed by one of the great fires which devastated the centre of the city, or robbed and brought to western Europe. The ancient statues of the Hippodrome, which had survived until now, were melted down by the crusaders, and all we know about them comes from their description by Niketas Choniates. A French chronicler of the fourth crusade, Robert de Clari, describes the Hippodrome in the following words:

> Lengthwise of this space ran a wall, full fifteen feet high and ten feet wide; and on the top of this wall were images of men and of women, of horses, and oxen, and camels, and bears, and lions, and all manner of other beasts, cast in copper, which were so cunningly wrought and so naturally shaped that there is not, in Heathendom or in Christendom, a master so skilled that he could portray or shape images so skilfully as these images were. And these images were wont erstwhile to play, by enchantment; but afterward they played no more at all.[59]

The Hippodrome is perceived here as a former place of pagan witchcraft. But now, after the end of the chariot races and the destruction of the statues, nothing remained of its former glory, and when the Byzantines regained Constantinople in 1261, the games were not resumed. Then, after a short political revival of the state, a steady decline began, which ended with the final extinction of the empire in 1453 by the Ottoman Turks. It is understandable that in this situation apocalyptical texts remained popular, the *Oracula Leonis* included, but the attacking people were no longer identified with the Arabs, nor with the Vikings from Russia as in some tenth-century texts, but with the Turks.

[59] Ch. 90; translation from Stone 1939.

That the old prophecies were still alive can be seen in the work of the historian Doukas, whose report about the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 contains numerous allusions to apocalyptical ideas. A well-known case is his story that, when the outer walls had already been destroyed by the Turkish artillery, the defenders asked the emperor for permission to re-open a small door called *Kerkoporta*, which had been walled up for a long time, and which led out into the trenches near the imperial palace in the Blachernai district. On their retreat behind the walls, the defenders forgot to close the *Kerkoporta* behind them, and so the Turks entered Constantinople unnoticed, and attacked the soldiers there from behind.[60] This event is not mentioned by any other source, so we should rather assume that it never took place – but it is, in fact, a literary allusion to the Xylokerkos gate where, according to the tradition, the enemies would enter the city.[61] Later in his report, Doukas tells us that, when the walls had finally fallen and the Turks came in, many people fled to the east, hoping to reach the church of Hagia Sophia.

> Why were they all seeking refuge in the Great church? Many years before they had heard from some false prophets that the City was fated to be surrendered to the Turks who would enter with great force, and that the Romans would be cut down by them as far as the Column of Constantine the Great. Afterwards, however, an angel, descending and holding a sword, would deliver the empire and the sword to an unknown man, extremely plain and poor, standing at the Column. "Take this sword," the angel would say, "and avenge the people of the Lord." Then the Turks would take flight and the Romans would follow hard upon them, cutting them down. They would drive them from the City and from the West, and from the East as far as the borders of Persia, to a place called Monodendrion. Because they fully expected these prophecies to be realized, some ran and advised others to run also. This was the conviction of the Romans who long ago had contemplated what their present action would be, contending, "If we leave the Column of the Cross behind us, we will avoid future wrath." This was the cause then of the flight into the Great Church. In one hour's time that enormous temple was filled with men and women. There was a throng too many to count, above and below, in the court-

[60] Magoulias 1975: 221.
[61] Asutay-Effenberger 2007: 86 with n. 349.

> yards and everywhere. They bolted the doors and waited, hoping to be rescued by the anonymous saviour.[62]

But, as we all know, there was no salvation and Constantinople fell into the hands of the Turks. Now, finally, the end of the city and the world should have come – but did not. In reality most of the inhabitants had survived, were resettled again where they had lived before, and had to come to an arrangement with their new lords. The apocalyptical beliefs also survived, but again changed their character, this time into a prophecy for a brighter future.

Almost immediately after the conquest, the legends concentrated on the person of the last emperor, Constantine Palaiologos, who had fallen while fighting against the Ottoman forces. As an advocate of church union, Constantine had been highly controversial during his lifetime, and many Orthodox Greeks believed that his religious policy was the reason for the fall of the city and the end of the empire.[63] But posthumously, within only about hundred years after his death, he made an amazing career, turning from a heretic into a champion of orthodoxy. Moreover, it was believed that he was not really dead, but preserved by God for the Greeks to free them one day from their slavery. Constantine Palaiologos became a sort of national hero, something which he had definitely not been during his lifetime, and was therefore claimed in modern Greece either as a national leader and a precursor of the modern Greek state, or, alternatively, as a saint and martyr who had fallen for the true orthodox faith.[64]

The most recent prophecies of the *Oracula Leonis*, which were added to the corpus only after the end of the Byzantine empire, tell a new story about the emperor of the end of times, namely that he would appear after having been concealed for a long time in the west of the city in a rock, naked and like a dead.[65] Both ideas eventually were combined into one legend, according to which the last emperor sits dormant and frozen into marble in a cave at the Golden Gate, undiscoverable for the Turks, and

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[62] Quoted from Magoulias 1975: 225–26.

[63] Nicol 1992: 57–60.

[64] Nicol 1992: 95–108.

[65] Rigo 1988: 88; Brokkaar 2002: 23–31.

awaits his re-awakening.[66] Also the legend about the Xerolophos reached its final form only in the post-Byzantine period, in the so-called "wonderful story of the column of Xerolophos".[67] In this text, the column is dated back before the refounding of the city by Constantine, namely into the time of Septimius Severus, the emperor who had destroyed ancient Byzantion in 196 and withdrawn its city rights.[68] Here it is not claimed, as in older texts, that he himself rebuilt the city; instead the story is told in a remarkably different way. The Byzantines are tributary to the Romans, and when they dare to revolt under the Emperor Severus, he besieges them for three years. His camp is located on the Xerolophos, which is the only dry place in the area as the streets are full of water. As the siege goes on, Severus asks his astrologer Ioannes and receives the reply that Byzantion will be abandoned after the conquest for a long time, but later will become the capital of the Roman Empire, and that the names of all emperors are predetermined by the stars until the coming of the Antichrist. Severus, then, gives order to build the column and to represent on it everything that he learned from his astrologers. Byzantion is then actually taken, the population massacred, and the city lies empty until its refounding by emperor Constantine. In the new city the Xerolophos is now the seventh hill, and its reliefs will become a mystery to later emperors, many of which try in vain to solve them. It is only Emperor Leon the Wise who finally succeeds in doing this: when he is still the crown prince, he calls the philosophers of Constantinople together, and as they find no explanation, he threatens them with death. Therefore they start a more detailed investigation, together with Patriarch Photios,[69] and finally find out the meaning of the reliefs. So the story ends with the words:

> And they explained the different images, which you can see below, you most eager one; above is written their meaning in iambic verses,

[66] Nicol 1992: 101–18.

[67] Dagron–Paramelle 1979.

[68] Dagron 1984: 79–84.

[69] Photios, the well-known intellectual and Patriarch of Constantinople from 858 to 867 and from 878 to 886, was highly controversial in the Byzantine age because of his strict anti-Latin church policy, and apparently became a generally respected historical figure only in the Ottoman age.

and below the image, and such is the truth.[70]

This refers to an illustrated collection of the *Oracula Leonis*, to which, in fact, this "wonderful story of the column of Xerolophos" serves as a pseudo-historical introduction. Needless to say, these images and the accompanying texts have nothing to do with the reliefs on the Xerolophos column. But we should acknowledge that only in this story an attempt is made to integrate all known older apocalyptic constructs, which had existed unconnectedly for such a long time, in a common system: here the column on the Xerolophos acquires its special role by its alleged existence already before Constantinople was founded, and its prophetic reliefs are identified with the *Oracula Leonis*, which are interpreted in Leon's time by the philosophers.

Here, finally, the imaginary history of Constantinople has reached the ending point of its development, and here ends also this paper.

[70] Dagron–Paramelle 1979: 523.

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