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Magic and the Warding-off of Barbarians in Constantinople, 9th–12th Centuries

In the Middle Ages, magic was the crossing point at which popular beliefs and those of the educated classes intersected¹. It was the recognition by the higher religions of the existence of spirits, or demons, that furnished a basis for the belief in magic. Despite the negative attitude assumed by Judaism, Christianity and Islam towards everything not sanctioned by their own monotheistic teachings, the belief in magic was widely spread in medieval societies. The elite writers in most countries seemed to share the same negative attitude toward magic. Yet it was admitted, not only into the tales of wonder and delight, but also into the works of serious writers, who described various spells as well as the practices against which these spells were directed².

In Christian societies, the clergy shared the masses' belief in demons, the latter being perceived as servants of the Devil³. However, while making a sustained effort to fight the demons, the clergy engaged in certain practices, such as the recital of formulae and the performance of rituals of exorcism, that practically erased the thin dividing line between religion and magic⁴.

Magic is said to have stemmed from the belief in certain "animistic principles". Thus, people believed that things throughout nature had spirits or personalities dwelling in them and that, through practising magic, one could exert influence on those spirits⁵. Further, the so-called sympathetic magic was based on the assumption that things act on one another through a secret link⁶. An enemy could, therefore, be destroyed or injured by destroying or injuring an image of them. This was magic in one of its most popular forms in the Middle Ages. While, in modern scholarship, the making of talismans, charms and amulets is attributed to witchcraft whereas the mutilation of effigies is attributed to magic, medieval people did not distinguish sharply between witchcraft and magic. What mattered was that they needed to do something in order to ward off evil⁷.

In Constantinople, the practice of sympathetic magic led to the mutilation or destruction of antique statues commonly believed to be inhabited by unclean spirits. While, in early Byzantium, emperors brought pagan art from the four corners of the Roman Empire for the purpose of decorating and legitimizing the new capital, in the following centuries the populace "endowed" some of the antique statuary with "magical" qualities⁸.

¹ R. KIECKHEFER, *Magic in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge – New York 1990, 1–18.

² *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. HASTINGS, vol. VIII. Edinburgh – New York 1967, 245–52. See also *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed.-in-chief M. ELIADE, vol. IX. New York – London 1987, 81–115.

³ J. B. RUSSELL, *Lucifer. The Devil in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca – London 1984. On the phylacteria, which the Byzantines used in order to protect themselves against the Devil and his demons, see Th. M. PROVATAKIS, *Ο διάβολος εις την βυζαντινήν τέχνην*. Thessalonica 1980, 287–306.

⁴ A. GOUREVITCH, *Narodnaja magija i cerkovnyi ritual*, in: *Mekhanizmy kul'tury*, ed. B. A. USPENSKY. Moscow 1990, 3–27. At least in theory, there was a contrast in attitude toward the supernatural. According to the religious concept, the seat of power rests outside the sphere of man's control. Magic, on the other hand, is said to be present wherever power over the unseen is believed to be within the control of the person who performs the ritual. See *Reader in Comparative Religion: an Anthropological Approach*, eds. W. A. LESSA – E. Z. VOGT. New York 1979, 332–62.

⁵ KIECKHEFER, *Magic* 13.

⁶ This kind of magic is supposed to work by a "secret sympathy", or symbolic likeness, between the cause and the effect. See J. G. FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*. London 1913, 54.

⁷ On the definitions of, and distinctions between, amulets, guardian statues, phylacteria, talismans, and apotropaia, see C. A. FARAONE, *Talismans and Trojan Horses. Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual*. New York – Oxford 1992, 3–7.

⁸ C. MANGO, *Antique Statuary Art and the Byzantine Beholder*. *DOP* 17 (1963) 55–75 (reprinted in: *Idem, Byzantium and Its Image*. London, 1984, X): Byzantine attitudes toward pagan statuary art should normally be considered at two levels: the popular and the intellectual; patriarchs and emperors, however, often shared the popular beliefs in the sympathetic properties of certain pagan statues. See also *Constantinople in the Early Eighth Century. The Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*. Introduction, Translation and Commentary by A. CAMERON and J. HERRIN (*Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition* 10). Leiden 1984, 31–4.

As time went on, a rich folklore grew up around the pagan statues, especially the ones that were believed to be bewitched.

In the popular mind, some of those statues fulfilled useful purposes. They were believed to be able to detect unchaste wives and unfaithful husbands, or to pass sentences upon criminals; or they “acted” as pest-repellents; or, at night, they “swept” the streets and “ate” refuse, in an attempt to clean the city⁹. The superstitious re-interpretation of pagan sculpture was, in certain cases, paralleled by a Christian re-interpretation. As a result, in the middle Byzantine period, some pagan statues were identified as biblical personages (e.g., Solomon, Joshua the son of Nun, and others)¹⁰.

The statue-lore of Constantinople also bears testimony to the populace’s fears of foreign invasion as those fears were felt at all levels of Constantinopolitan society. Thus, some inscriptions on the pedestals of statues were believed to contain predictions about the fate of Constantinople¹¹. There were also statues that appeared as the magical doubles of prominent individuals, as well as of entire nations¹².

In earlier publications of mine, I have discussed certain statues that were regarded as being the city talismans of the middle-Byzantine Constantinople¹³. That statues may receive talismanic powers and thus become capable of averting “barbaric” invasion, was a belief, which the Byzantines had inherited from their Hellenistic-Roman predecessors. Thus, the fifth-century historian Olympiodoros of Thebes tells an interesting story, which shows that he and his contemporaries shared their Roman predecessors’ belief in the magical qualities of statues. In the days of Emperor Konstantios (337–361), three silver statues were excavated in some old pagan sanctuary in the province of Thrace. They had been buried there in a “barbaric fashion”, with their heads pointing to “the barbarians’ land”, their hands tied up at the back. All three figures had a “barbaric” dress and hairstyle. The emperor ordered that the statues be removed from their burial place. No sooner had the provincial governor removed them, than Goths, Huns, and Sarmatians invaded the Empire. “It seems – writes Olympiodoros – that each statue had been designated to avert an attack by one of these tribes”¹⁴. Emperor Konstantios should have known better than to deprive a frontier zone of its supernatural protection.

In the middle Byzantine period, we know of at least one statue that was seen as a talisman protecting Constantinople from “barbarians” and “schismatics”; presumably the Latins. This was a porphyry column with a bronze statue at its summit, that was erected in Constantine’s *forum*; it was one of the honorific columns of Constantine the Great. The bronze Constantine had a radiate crown consisting of seven rays, which were later re-interpreted as the “nails of the Crucifixion”. In 1106, the statue was smashed and replaced by a cross¹⁵. C. Mango points at the existence of two apocalyptic texts, a Daniel revelation (*ca.* 716/17) and the revelation of St. Andrew the Fool, which represent Constantine’s Column as the only monument of Constantinople that was destined to survive the ultimate destruction of that city. According to the *Apocalypse* of St Andrew the Fool, the reason why the column was to be preserved until the end of time was because it possessed the Holy Nails¹⁶.

Another monument, the famous Serpent Column standing in the Hippodrome may have been regarded as a talisman as well. It may have been “protecting” the city from the Satan Serpent (Rev 20:2), that is, the

⁹ G. DAGRON, Constantinople imaginaire. Études sur le recueil des «Patria» (*Bibliothèque byzantine, Études* 9). Paris 1984, 127–90.

¹⁰ MANGO, Statuary Art 63.

¹¹ See, for example, *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanum*, ed. T. PREGGER, vol. II. Leipzig 1907, 176. Cf. A. BERGER, Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinopoleos (*Poikila Byzantina* 8). Bonn 1988.

¹² MANGO, Statuary Art 59.

¹³ L. SIMEONOVA, Ta Patria: Talismanite na Konstantinopol prez X vek, in: *Srednovekovnite Balkani. Politika, Religija, Kultura*. Sofia 1999, 49–66. See also EADEM, Constantinopolitan Attitudes toward Aliens and Minorities, 860s – 1020s. Part One. *Études Balkaniques* 37 (2001) 91–112, esp. 105–7.

¹⁴ Olympiodorus Thebanus, *De Gothorum et Hunnorum irruptione*, in: L. DINDORF, *Historici graeci minores*. Leipzig 1870, vol. I, 461,1–25.

¹⁵ DAGRON, Constantinople imaginaire 44–6; C. MANGO, Constantine’s Column, in: IDEM, *Studies on Constantinople*. Aldershot 1993, III.

¹⁶ C. MANGO, Constantine’s Porphyry Column and the Chapel of St. Constantine. *DChAE* Ser. 4, 10 (1981) 103–10 (reprinted in: IDEM, *Studies on Constantinople*, IV).

Muslim unbeliever¹⁷. Above all, however, its talismanic powers served to protect the city from snakes. As has been noted by Th. Madden, the column began to attract the attention of foreigners, both travellers and pilgrims, in the late Byzantine period¹⁸. Ignaty of Smolensk, a Russian pilgrim who visited Constantinople around 1390, says that the Serpent Column is full of venom¹⁹. Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, who visited Constantinople in October 1403, gives a clear picture of the statue's role as a talisman. "They say – writes de Clavijo – that these figures of serpents were set up here to serve for an enchantment, because in times past there was a plague of serpents and other noisome reptiles who killed many people by their venom. Then a certain emperor living at that age caused by means of this figure an enchantment to be effected, whereby forthwith and ever after in Constantinople no serpent could harm no one."²⁰ Another Russian traveller, Zosim the Deacon, who visited the city about twenty years later, says that "serpent venom is sealed in them [i. e., the three asps], and if anyone is stung by a snake inside the city and he touches this, he is cured. But if it is outside the city, there is no cure."²¹

What remains to be seen is how the populace of the middle-Byzantine Constantinople tried to ward off "barbarians" by resorting to the "magical properties" of bewitched statues. In the second quarter of the ninth century, the Iconoclast Patriarch John the Grammarian (834–843) is said to have saved the Empire from a "barbaric" invasion, by cutting off the heads of a tri-headed bronze statue, which was located in the Hippodrome. Each of the three heads personified a certain "barbaric" chieftain. As two of the statue's heads were completely severed from the body, and the third one was only partially cut off, two of the "barbaric" chiefs were later killed in battle while the third one, seriously wounded, managed to escape. The "barbaric" invasion was thus averted²².

In the year 927, as Simeon of Bulgaria (893–927) was preparing to launch his third attack on Constantinople, Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos (920–944) decided to take the advice of a certain astrologer and to have a statue standing on the *Xerolophos*, smashed. One night, the statue that was believed to be the effigy of Simeon, was beheaded. In this moment, the Bulgarian ruler, who was hundreds of miles away, was suddenly possessed by insanity and died of a heart attack. Constantinople was saved²³.

How Byzantines tried to destroy the enemy by exploiting the law of sympathy can also be seen from Emperor Manuel Komnenos' reaction to the unexpected fall of a statue. Niketas Choniates writes that, in the *forum* of Constantine, there were two statues: one was called *Ouggrissa* ("the Hungarian Woman"), the other *Rhomaia* ("the Roman Woman"). While Manuel I (1147–1180) was preparing to set out against the Hungarians, "the Roman woman" was overthrown from its upright position. "The Hungarian", however, remained erect. The emperor interpreted this as a bad omen and ordered that the "Roman" be raised up and the "Hungarian" be pulled down and overturned, thinking that by transposing the statues' positions, he could reverse the outcome of the events²⁴.

The Crusaders of the Fourth Crusade were not immune to the Greek beliefs in the magical powers of the city talismans. After capturing Constantinople, they took care to destroy the *palladia* of the city²⁵, and especially those, which they learned had been set up by the Greeks against their race²⁶. Among the statues, which they smashed and melted, there was a brazen equestrian statue. In the rider some Greeks identified Bellerophon, others Joshua, the son of Nun. But everybody believed that, under the horse's left hoof, there was

¹⁷ SIMEONOVA, *Patria* 57–8. See also EADEM, *Foreigners in Tenth-Century Byzantium: A Contribution to the History of Cultural Encounter*, in: *Strangers to Themselves. The Byzantine Outsider*, ed. D. C. SMYTHE (*SPBS Publications* 8). Aldershot 2000, 229–44, esp. 240–2.

¹⁸ Th. E. MADDEN, *The Serpent Column of Delphi in Constantinople: Placement, Purpose, and Mutilations*. *BMGS* 16 (1992) 111–45.

¹⁹ G. P. MAJESKA, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (*DOS* 19). Washington, D.C. 1984, 164.

²⁰ G. LE STRANGE, *Embassy to Tamerlane 1403–1406*. London 1928, 71.

²¹ MAJESKA, *Travelers* 184.

²² Theophanes Continuatus, Pseudo-Symeon, both ed. by I. BEKKER. Bonn 1838, 155ff., 649ff.; George Kedrenos, ed. I. BEKKER. Bonn 1839, II 145ff. Cf. MANGO, *Statuary Art* 61.

²³ Theoph. Cont. 411.17–412.8 (BEKKER). On Simeon's conflict with the Empire, see J. SHEPARD, *Bulgaria: The Other Balkan 'Empire'*, in: *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. III., ed. Th. REUTER. Cambridge 2000, 566–87.

²⁴ Niketas Choniates, *Historia*. Ed. J.-L. van DIETEN (*CFHB* 11). Berlin 1975, 151.65–74. Cf. *O City of Byzantium*. *Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. by H. J. MAGOULIAS. Detroit 1984, 86.

²⁵ On the definition of guardian statues, and especially *palladia*, see FARAONE, *op. cit.*, 5–7.

²⁶ Choniates, *Hist.* 643 (VAN DIETEN); MAGOULIAS 353.

buried a figurine. According to some, it was the image of a certain Venetian while others claimed that it was of a member of some other Western nation, or a Bulgarian. When the Latins removed the sole of the horse's hoof with hammers, they found lying underneath the image of a man dressed in the kind of cloak that is woven from sheep's wool. The figurine was pierced through with a nail and wholly covered by lead. On seeing this, the majority conjectured that the image was of a Bulgarian.²⁷ Most likely, it had been buried there in a rite of black magic, which aimed to cause harm to a powerful Bulgarian ruler, who posed a threat to the Empire²⁸.

As we have seen, in order to neutralize the barbaric demoniacs threatening their lives, the populace of Constantinople mutilated or destroyed statues commonly believed to be inhabited by the evil spirit of one enemy or another. Or, they endowed statues with talismanic powers by the insertion of certain substances into their cavities, and by burning incense before them.

The belief that some statues were bewitched, seems to have existed at all levels of society, among the common people and the elite. Byzantine emperors and patriarchs shared the masses' beliefs in the supernatural. In as much as the danger of an enemy attack on the Empire could be averted through the destruction or mutilation of a statue, they did not hesitate to put the prescribed magical rites into practice.

The Church, no doubt, regarded sorcery and divination as dangerous. Yet the universally shared belief in the existence of demons led the ruling elite and the high-ranking clergy to condone the use of magic, especially in cases when the sorceries were to be exercised on the effigy of an enemy of the Roman people.

For the sake of comparison, it is worth mentioning that the same dichotomy was reflected in the Byzantines' attitude toward astrology. While unauthorized occultism was regarded as detestable to God and the Church condemned it as a "black art", the imperial court had its official astrologers and the city of Constantinople was believed to have had at least two horoscopes made at the request of emperors²⁹.

In short, the dividing line between the magical practices, which were condemned by the Church, and those, which it tacitly sanctioned, was very thin. What mattered was that the Well-Being and safety of the populace of Constantinople were guaranteed, whether through the protection of saints or through the agency of other supernatural forces.

²⁷ Choniates, *Hist.* 643, 649 (VAN DIETEN); MAGOULIAS 353, 358.

²⁸ P. ANGELOV, *Bălgarija i bălgarite v predstavite na vizantijskite, VII–XIV vek.* Sofia 1999, 59. ANGELOV believes that the effigy was most likely that of Tsar Kalojan (1197–1207). On the rite whereby a statue received magical powers, see MANGO, *Statuary Art* 61.

²⁹ G. DAGRON – J. PARAMELLE, *Un texte patriographique, le Récit merveilleux, très beau et profitable sur la colonne de Xèrolophos* (Vindob. suppl. gr. 171. fol. 43v–63v). *TM* 7 (1979) 491–523: a 16th-century legendary account of the horoscope of the city of Byzantium, which an astrologer made at the request of Emperor Septimius Severus. Cf. A. A. VASILIEV, *Medieval Ideas of the End of the World: East and West. Byz* 16 (1942/43) 462–502, see esp. 459: a 12th-century account of the horoscope, which was allegedly made at the request of Constantine the Great.