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The Serpent Column and the talismanic ecologies of Byzantine Constantinople

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This study examines how the Serpent Column in Constantinople came to be recognized as a talisman against snakes and snakebites in the 1390s. It first gives a working definition of what a talisman was in Byzantium. It shows that, despite the co-existence of different ideas of what talismans were, they share the basic principle that the talisman acts within a broader network of non-human forces and entities. Second, it shows how contemporaries used this understanding of talismans when they began to recognize the Serpent Column as a talisman.

Keywords: Serpent Column; hippodrome; talismans; occult science; Constantinople

A monumental bronze coil stands amid what remains of the old hippodrome in Istanbul (fig. 1).[1] Now approximately five-and-a-third metres tall, it was once two metres taller and surmounted by three outward-facing serpent heads (fig. 2). A fragment of one

1 This article is based on a paper that was presented at the 103rd Annual Conference of the College Arts Association, New York, 14 February 2015. It has benefited from the advice and suggestions of many friends and colleagues. I am especially grateful to Benjamin Anderson, Diliana Angelova, Francesca Dell'Aqua, Beate Fricke, Anneka Lenssen, Ruth Macrides, Yael Rice, Paul Stephenson and the anonymous reviewer. When I began this project, I held a pre-doctoral Institutional Fellowship from the Kress Foundation at the Kunsthistorisches Institute in Florence. At the time of submission, I held a David E. Finley fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery, in Washington, DC. At publication, I was a postdoctoral fellow at the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at the University of Southern California.

On the Serpent Column, see P. Stephenson, *The Serpent Column: A Cultural Biography* (Oxford 2016); ibid., 'The Serpent Column fountain', in B. Shilling and P. Stephenson (eds.), *Fountains and Water Culture in Byzantium* (Cambridge 2016); R. Strootman, 'The Serpent Column: The persistent meanings of a pagan relic in Christian and Islamic Constantinople', *Material Religion* 10, n. 4 (2014) 432–51; F. Dell'Acqua Boyvadaoğlu, 'Constantinople 1453: The Patriarch Gennadios, Mehmet the II and the Serpent Column in the hippodrome', in M. de Giorgi, A. Hoffmann and N. Suthor (eds.), *Synergies in Visual Culture - Bildkulturen im Dialog* (Munich 2013) 325–38; R. H. W. Stichel, 'Die "Schlangensäule" im Hippodrom von Istanbul. Zum spät- und nachantiken Schicksal des Delphischen Votivs der Schlacht von Plataiai', *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 47 (1997) 315–48; T. F. Madden, 'The Serpent Column of Delphi in

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Fig. 1. Istanbul, Serpent Column. **Credit: Author**

Fig. 2. Cambridge, Wren Library, Trinity College, O.17.2 (*Freshfield Album*), dated 1574, folio 6 recto. The Serpent Column as depicted in the Freshfield Album. **Credit: © Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge**

head is in the archaeological museum nearby (fig. 3). The headless stump is today called the Serpent Column. It began its long history at the sanctuary of Apollo in Delphi, where it served as the monumental base for a tripod dedicated to Apollo in commemoration of

Constantinople: Placement, purposes, and mutilations', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 16 (1992) 111–45; and R. M. Dawkins, 'Ancient statues in medieval Constantinople', *Folklore* 35, n. 3 (1924) 209–48.

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Fig. 3. Istanbul, Archaeological Museum. Upper mandible of a surviving head from the Serpent Column. **Credit: © Diliana Angelova.**

the Greek victory over the Persians at Plataia in 479 BCE.[2] About eight hundred years later, in the fourth century CE, the Roman emperor Constantine (r. 324–37) had the column moved to its current location in Constantinople.[3] Another thousand years later, by the 1390s, the monument's original association with a specific military victory was largely forgotten. Many contemporaries instead saw it as a talisman against snakes and a remedy for snakebites (Table 1).[4] Three Russian visitors to Constantinople—Ignatius of Smolensk, Zosima the Deacon, and Alexander the Clerk—claim that the column was in fact filled with venom. Alexander the Clerk, the

2 Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 29–96.

3 Scholars have debated when the Serpent Column was moved to the hippodrome. Stichel and Stephenson note that while early sources are ambiguous, the column was in all likelihood moved to Constantinople by the emperor Constantine. See Stichel, 'Schlangensäule', 316–319; Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 111–5. Albrecht Berger suggests it may have been moved to its present location only after 1261, see A. Berger, 'The hippodrome of Constantinople in popular belief and folklore', in B. Pitarakis (ed.), *Hippodrom / Atmeydanı. İstanbul'un Tarih Sahnesi – A Stage for Istanbul's history* (Istanbul 2010) 194–205, here 203.

4 See G. Majeska, *Russian Travelers in Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Washington, D.C. 1984): for the Anonymous Description, dated to 1389–91, see 142–5; for Ignatius of Smolensk, dated to 1389–92, see 92–3; for Alexander the Clerk, dated 1391–97, see 164–5; for Zosima the Deacon, dated 1419–22, see 184–5; see also Majeska's commentary, 254–6; for the account by Ruy González de Clavijo, dated 1403, see F. López Estrada (ed.), *Embajada a Tamorlán* (Madrid 1999) 127; for an English translation, see Guy le Strange (trans.), *Embassy to Tamerlane, 1403–1406* (London 1928) 70–1; see also, A. A. Vasiliev, 'Pero Tafur, a Spanish traveller of the fifteenth century and his visit to Constantinople, Trebizond, Italy', *Byzantion* 7 (1932) 108–9; for the account by Cristoforo Buondelmonti, dated 1420, see G. Gerola, 'Le vedute di Costantinopoli di Cristoforo Buondelmonti', *Studi Bizantini e Neoelenici* 3 (1931) 274–5; for the account of Pero Tafur, dated 1437, see P. Tafur, *Andanças é viajes de Pero Tafur por diversas partes del mundo avidos* (Madrid 1874); for an English translation, see M. Letts (ed. and trans.), *Travels and Adventures, 1435–1439* (New York 1926) 143.

Hārūn Ibn Yaḥyā, in Constantinople 911–3, mentions a talisman against snakes consisting of four brass serpents biting their own tails. Scholars generally agree that this passage probably does not describe the Serpent Column, see Dawkins, 'Ancient statues', 234, n. 51, Madden, 'Serpent Column', 113, and Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 123.

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Table 1. Accounts of the Serpent Column as Talisman

Account	Date	Summary
Ignatius of Smolensk[1]	1389–1392	Column is filled with venom
Anonymous Description[2]	1389–1391	Rotates three times a year, enchanted by Leo the Wise
Alexander the Clerk[3]	1391–1397	Filled with venom by Leo the Wise
Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo[4]	1403	Enchanted by an emperor to end a plague of serpents
Zosima the Deacon[5]	1419–1422	Filled with venom and heals those bitten by snakes within the city
Cristoforo Buondelmonti[6]	1420	Fountain dispensing water, wine and milk
Pero Tafur[7]	1437	Fountain dispensing wine and milk

[1]Majeska, *Russian Travelers*, 92-3.
[2]Majeska, *Russian Travelers*, 142-5.
[3]Majeska, *Russian Travelers*, 164-5.
[4]Estrada, *Embajada a Tamorlán*; Strange (trans.), *Embassy to Tamerlane*, 71.
[5]Majeska, *Russian Travelers*, 184-5.
[6]Gerola, "Le Vedute."
[7]Tafur, *Andanças é viajes*; Malcolm Letts (ed. and trans.), *Travels and Adventures*, 143.

Spaniard Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, and an anonymous Russian author further noted that a previous Byzantine emperor had enchanted the Serpent Column as a talisman. Even after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Serpent Column continued to be a talisman against snakes and snakebites well into the Ottoman period.[5]

Technical aspects involved in the making of talismans—the introduction of efficacious substances, the performance of arcane consecrating rites, the presence of a sage ritual expert—play a prominent role in these brief accounts of the Serpent Column as a talisman. For medieval people, talismans were a technology created through the practical application of scientific knowledge—knowledge about the properties of things and images that arise from their relationships with natural forces and entities, including stars, planets, plants, animals, and elements, as well as demons, symbols, and efficacious words.[6] Seeing something as being a talisman often involved embedding it within an ecology by imagining its relationship with non-human forces. In this article, I examine how the Serpent Column as talisman is a product of such imagined ecologies.

While previous researchers have already addressed the history of the talismanic Serpent Column, few have approached it according to medieval understandings of what constituted a talisman. Earlier studies tend to regard it through the lens of folklore and the anthropology of religion and magic, whereby the monument's talismanic aspect is aligned with broad, often trans-historical, notions of magic and superstition.[7] In reaction, some recent studies have sought to view the monument

5 See Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 183–184, and 205–239. Strootman, 'Serpent Column', 432–51, Dell'Acqua, 'Constantinople 1453', 325–38 and Madden, 'Serpent Column', 123–42.

6 On occult science and its difference from magic, see P. Magdalino and M. Mavroudi, 'Introduction', in P. Magdalino and M. Mavroudi (eds.), *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium* (Geneva 2006) 11–15.

7 E.g., C. Mango, 'Antique statuary and the Byzantine beholder', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963) 53, 55–75, and Dawkins, 'Ancient Statues', 244–5. More recent scholars have taken this approach more tactfully, e.g., Madden, 'Serpent Column', esp. 111, 120–3; and Berger, 'Hippodrome', esp. 205; idem, 'Magical

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within the context of local belief systems, but tend, in the process, to conflate the Serpent Column with other types of efficacious objects, particularly *apotropaia* and religious objects. I argue here that a talisman is in fact a different kind of object.

Although many talismans can be *apotropaia*, the two categories are distinct.[8] An *apotropaion*—literally, something that averts—need not be a talisman, and *vice versa*.[9] The *apotropaion* is a purely functional category: it averts. Talismans are instead etiologically and ontologically defined. They have a more complex relation to the wider world due to their special origins and properties.[10] For example, Christian symbols, such as crosses, are often supposed to be apotropaic, but they need not be talismanic. A cross repels evil because it is sacred, and not because of its special properties or its relation to natural forces and entities. While talismans such as the Serpent Column often have aversive properties—and often function as *apotropaia*—, they do not have to be apotropaic in order to be talismans. For example, two Russian accounts noted that the Serpent Column rotated three times a year.[11] A turtle talisman was said to go through the streets of Constantinople eating garbage at night.[12] A talismanic column in Damascus reportedly made donkeys and horses urinate if they circumambulated it three times.[13] A talisman clearly need not be apotropaic. Collapsing the distinction between *apotropaia* and talismans risks losing sight of what makes a talisman.

Other studies of the Serpent Column as talisman have emphasized its similarity to religious objects and relics, particularly the brazen serpent.[14] Nevertheless, existing textual sources from the Byzantine period do not explicitly compare the Serpent Column to the brazen serpent, nor do they describe it as a relic or religious object.

Constantinople: Statues, legends, and the end of time', *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 2 (2016) 9–29.

8 Cf. Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 185. While Finbarr Barry Flood's study of apotropaia maintains differences between apotropaia and talismans, it does not attend to those differences, as 'boundaries between these categories are rather fluid,' see F. B. Flood, 'Image against nature: Spolia as apotropaia in Byzantium and the dār al-Islām', *The Medieval History Journal* 9, n. 1 (2006) 143–66, here, n.32, 151.

9 Christopher Faraone makes this distinction for ancient Greece, see C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual* (New York 1992) 3–12. Faraone notes that while the adjective *apotropaios* appears in ancient Greek texts, it typically describes deities and sacrifices, and *not* stationary objects.

10 Some suggest that to be effective *apotropaia* must be seen, whereas talismans do not, e.g., Flood, 'Image', 151; Faraone, *Talismans,* 4. However, a cross or phylactery worn close to the body effectively retains its apotropaic, non-talismanic function, even if it remains completely hidden.

11 Majeska, *Russian Travelers*, 255. See also Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 149–50.

12 Berger, 'Magical Constantinople', 14; Mango, 'Antique statuary', 75; Majeska, *Russian Travelers*, 295–6.

13 Abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Abī Bakr al-Harawī, *Kitāb al-Ishārāt ilā ma'rifat al-ziyārāt*, J. Sourdel-Thomine (trans.), *Guide des lieux de pèlerinage* (Damascus 1957) 56.

14 Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 183–204; Strootman, 'Serpent Column', 439–46; Dell'Acqua, 'Constantinople 1453', 325–38; and B. Fricke, *Ecce Fides: die Statue von Conques, Götzendienst und Bildkultur im Westen* (Munich 2007) 136–41.

However, even if unstated, such associations may have influenced contemporaries' understanding of the monument. As in medieval medicine, religious symbols, texts, and rituals often played a prominent role in the creation and use of medieval talismans. Contemporaries may have often blurred the boundaries between religion, magic and science in everyday life. Indeed, a number of surviving religious and magical objects clearly conflate these different categories, and this article does not seek to dismiss similarities between the talismanic Serpent Column and religious objects.[15] Nevertheless, exclusive attention to the monument's religious potentialities downplays the technical aspects of the Serpent Column that connect it to other talismans (i.e., its enchantment by an expert and the idea that it was filled with venom). While the sacred might license, enhance, complement, or justify the use of medicines and talismans, it was essential for neither a medicine to be a medicine, nor a talisman to be a talisman.

In taking up the question of how contemporaries might have understood the Serpent Column as being a talisman, I pursue two inter-related lines of inquiry: first, what characteristics defined what a talisman was, and second, how might those characteristics apply to the monument. The first question deals with the main features of Byzantine talisman science. The second attends to the open-ended, associative thinking that might underlie contemporaries' recognition of talismans.

The following article is structured in four parts: I first consider the general outlines of Byzantine talisman science, where I show that Byzantines primarily understood talismans in terms of their active properties, and how those properties were configured in relation to non-human intermediaries. The second part examines the pre-talismanic history of the Serpent Column in Byzantium, while the third section discusses other Constantinopolitan monuments that acted as talismans. The final section considers how these various notions of talismans as well as the monument's physical properties, location, and appearance might relate to its recognition as a talisman.

What is a talisman?

What did it mean for something to be a talisman in Byzantium? The classical Greek terms for talismans, *telesmata* and *apotelesmata* (τελέσματα, ἀποτελέσματα), from which our modern word talisman is ultimately derived, come from the verbs *telein* and *apotelein* (τελεῖν or ἀποτελεῖν). Both refer to the ritual completion, consecration, or initiation of an object, especially cult objects or items intended for amuletic or magical use. While the term remained in usage in the Byzantine period, especially in classicizing or historical texts, it was overshadowed by *stoicheion* (στοιχεῖον), a word that designated a wide variety of things, such as physical elements, basic principles, demons, astral

15 For examples of overlap between talismanic objects, magical practices, and religion, see E. Dauterman Maguire, H. Maguire, and M. J. Duncan-Flowers, *Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* (Urbana 1989); also G. Peers, *Orthodox Magic in Trebizond and Beyond: A Fourteenth-Century Greco-Arabic Amulet Roll* (Geneva 2018).

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entities, talismanic statues, or letters of the alphabet.[16] Paul Magdalino has identified *stoicheiōsis* (στοιχείωσις) as the Byzantine name for talisman science.[17]

But what did it mean for Byzantine people to refer to a talisman as a *stoicheion*? Researchers have debated several possibilities. According to Claes Blum, the primary sense of the word referred to inscribing magical signs, letters, and characters in the process of enchanting the talisman.[18] Richard Greenfield, commenting on Blum's work, has instead favoured another interpretation—rejected by Blum—namely that *stoicheiōsis* relates to the 'fixing' of astral powers.[19] I see little reason to impose a strict meaning for *stoicheiōsis* against other potential meanings. *Stoicheiōsis* may have been suited to designate talisman science because of its ability to suggest multiple aspects related to the making of talismans. In addition to Blum's and Greenfield's understandings of the term, *stoicheiōsis* also connotes instruction and teaching, and might, therefore, have suggested specialized learning.[20] It may have also evoked the four physical elements, which linked the planets and stars above to the things on the earth below.[21] That many of these *stoicheiōtic* things—elements, demons, astral entities, and letters of the alphabet—were involved in linking or attaching natural forces to an object could indicate that *stoicheiōsis* was more broadly understood as being a way of linking objects to natural forces.

In the talisman sciences of the medieval Mediterranean, these linkages were supposed to endow an object with special properties.[22] Byzantine talisman science combined the theory of special properties, the idea that talismans and other materials had unseen properties arising from their hidden elemental composition and orientation, with two concepts: first, cosmic sympathy (συμπάθεια), the idea that secret affinities or resonances connect things in the universe; and second, natural antipathy (ἀντιπάθεια), the notion that some things naturally oppose or counteract each other.[23] Specialists and laypeople alike used both concepts to explain interactions in the natural world whenever temporal or spatial distance intervened between cause and effect.

16 C. Blum, 'The meaning of stoicheion and its derivatives in the Byzantine age', *Eranos* 44 (1946) 315–25.

17 P. Magdalino, 'Occult science and imperial power in Byzantine history and historiography (9th-12th centuries)', in Magdalino and Mavroudi (eds.), *Occult Sciences*, 119–62.

18 Blum, 'The meaning of stoicheion'.

19 R. Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology* (Amsterdam 1988) 194.

20 H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. Stuart Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* (New York 1996) 1647.

21 E.g., Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, bk 1, ch. 2, par. 1–3.

22 See, for example, N. Weill-Parot, 'Images corporéiformes et *similitudo* dans le *Picatrix* et dans le monde latin médiéval', in J.-P. Boudet, A. Caiozzo, N. Weill-Parot (eds.), *Images et magie: Picatrix entre Orient et Occident* (Paris 2011) 117–36; Ibn Waḥshiyya, *Al-filāḥah al-nabaṭīyah* (*Nabatean Agriculture*), 1283, trans. and cit. in J. Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq: Ibn Waḥshiyya and his Nabatean Agriculture* (Leiden 2006) 191; see also the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* in H. Ritter and M. Plessner (trans.), *'Picatrix' Das Ziel des Weisen von Pseudo-Mağrīṭī* (London 1962).

23 On sympathy, see below. Antipathy appears throughout the *Geoponica*, ed. H. Beckh (Leipzig 1895), translation in A. Dalby (trans. and ed.), *Geoponika* (Totnes, Devon 2011).

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Sympathy was an especially prevalent explanatory concept. The writer Nikephoros Gregoras (ca. 1295–1360) describes sympathy, in his commentary on Synesios of Cyrene's treatise on dreams, in terms of attraction: 'just as iron is [attracted] by a magnet, so also this or that is [attracted] by this or that material (ὕλης), this or that design (σχήματος), or this or that speech (φωνῆς).'[24] The idea of likeness, especially between an image and its prototype, was central to many Byzantines' conception of sympathy.[25] The scholar Michael Psellos (d. ca. 1081) noted, 'though substances (ὕλαις) are often separated, the distance between them does not prevent them from acting upon each other (…) an image (εἰκὼν) and an imprint (τύπος) convey the operation of magic (τὴν ἐνέργειαν τῆς μαγείας) to the archetype.'[26] Psellos' image and imprint can be understood in analogy to James Frazer's two broad categories of sympathetic magic: mimesis or resemblance and contact or contagion.[27] These two types of relationship were believed to enable sympathetic linkage between two things physically separated in space.

Different philosophical traditions furnished different explanations for the invisible links between sympathetic objects. In antiquity, Stoics argued that elemental forces, constituting a larger soul, linked different parts of the cosmos, while Neoplatonists emphasized non-physical linkages between the material and immaterial world, principally by way of demons and other minor divine beings.[28] These different explanatory models co-existed in Byzantium.[29] Moreover, as with other forms of occult knowledge, these different understandings of sympathy appear to have occurred across the social spectrum, not only in elite, learned circles, but also in humbler and less literate contexts.[30]

24 Cit. and trans. in Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief*, 177.

25 I. Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 2016) 121–131.

26 Michael Psellos, *Epistula* 188, ed. K. Sathas, *Μεσαιωνικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη*, V (Venice 1872–94) 477–80. Magdalino and Mavroudi, 'Introduction', 19. See also K. Ierodiakonou, 'The Greek concept of sympatheia and its Byzantine appropriation in Michael Psellos', in Magdalino and Mavroudi (eds.), *Occult Sciences*, 97–117.

27 J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed., part 1, vol. 1, *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings* (1906, repr., London 1926) 54. See also Weinryb, *Bronze Object*, 121–124. On associating Frazer's idea of sympathy with Byzantine thought, see Ierodiakonou, 'Greek concept', esp. 97–98.

28 Stoics refer principally to *pneuma* (πνεῦμα), a mixture of fire and air. Ierodiakonou, 'Greek concept', 99–106.

29 As is the case in Psellos' thinking, see Ierodiakonou, 'Greek concept', 107–111. The co-existence of different models for explaining talismanic efficacy in Byzantium is similar to that elsewhere in the medieval Mediterranean world. On the layering of models of talismanic efficacy in the Islamic world, see P. Berlekamp, 'Symmetry, sympathy, and sensation: Talismanic efficacy and slippery iconographies in early thirteenth-century Iraq, Syria, and Anatolia', *Representations* 133 (2016) 59–109.

30 Despite differences between 'high' and 'low' society, many of the same ideas circulated widely and in ways that do not readily conform to our present understandings of 'high' and 'low'. On this issue, see M. Mavroudi, 'Occult science and society in Byzantium: Considerations for future research', in Magdalino and Mavroudi (eds.), *Occult Sciences*, 39–95, esp. 83–5.

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Regardless of the differences between these conceptions of how talismans might work, they share the idea that talismans are linked to, and act within, a larger system involving non-human operators. The talisman's primary range of application is the non-human: While the human audience is often the talisman's beneficiary, or ultimate target, the talisman is believed to act on connections, through non-human intermediaries in configurations of various, often local, networks of interactions. Stated another way: talismans belong to a type of ecology. Humans cannot see the links within this ecology, but must instead imagine the talisman's action within its non-human domain of application.

The Serpent Column as fountain

From the time of the Column's arrival in Constantinople to its earliest-attested appearance as a talisman in the 1390s, it is largely absent from the textual record.[31] During this period, it seems to have been sitting in plain sight.[32] It probably initially retained its associations with the sun, Apollo, Delphi, and victory against the Persians.[33] It may have also been considered apotropaic, as snake imagery in the medieval Mediterranean often was.[34] It inherited such a role from the guardian serpents and dragons of the ancient world.[35] By the eighth century, if not earlier, locals began to give many of the monuments in the Hippodrome occult interpretations, especially as tools for telling the future.[36]

31 Stephenson has found references to the Serpent Column in a ninth-century scholion for Thucydides (Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 112), and in the thirteenth-century *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, ibid, 149.

32 On the monuments in the hippodrome, see J. Bardill, 'The monuments and decoration of the hippodrome in Constantinople', in *Hippodrom/ Atmeydanı*, 149–83; S. Bassett, *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge 2004) 24–25, 58–67, 212–32; eadem, 'Antiquities in the hippodrome of Constantinople', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991) 87–96; and W. Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls* (Tübingen 1977) 64–71.

33 See Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 97–126. See also, Strootman, 'Serpent Column', 432–51. Madden emphasizes the monument's Apollonian aspects (Madden, 'Serpent Column', 116); Stichel, the anti-Persian aspects (Stichel, 'Schlangensäule', 319). As Strootman notes, these aspects are not mutually exclusive, see Strootman, 'Serpent Column', 436.

34 On talismanic snake imagery in the Islamic world, see Berlekemp, 'Symmetry, sympathy, and sensation', esp. 72–83, see also S. Kuehn, *The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art* (Leiden 2011).

35 On snakes as guardians, see D. Ogden, *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Oxford 2013) e.g., 166–9, 343–50. On the Serpent Column as an *apotropaion*, see Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 183–204, for snake imagery and fountains, ibid., 150–82. On depictions of dragons on Byzantine fountains, see L. Bouras, 'Dragon representations on Byzantine phialae and their conduits', *Gesta* 16, n. 2 (1977) 65–8. On apotropaic imagery, see Flood, 'Image', and Faraone, *Talismans*, 18–39.

36 See A. Cameron and J. Herrin, *Constantinople in the Early Eighth Century: The Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* (Leiden 1984) ch. 60–65 on 136–47, and commentary, 248–60. On prophetic knowledge and the eighth-century socio-political context, see B. Anderson, 'Classified knowledge: The epistemology of statuary in the *Parastaseis Syntomi Chronikai*', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 35, n. 1 (2011) 1–19. More generally, see Berger, 'Magical Constantinople'.

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During this time, the Column was turned into a fountain.[37] It may have been already part of a string of fountains with its initial installation upon the hippodrome's central barrier, an area known as the *euripos* (εὔριπος), a term that otherwise designates a turbulent strait or narrow sea.[38] The *euripos* fountains further incorporated the Theodosian obelisk, the masonry obelisk, both still standing in the hippodrome, and the now-destroyed Skylla group, which portrayed a sea monster attacking Odysseus and his crew.[39] The fountains and statues, such as the Skylla group, would have given the *euripos* a marine ambience, perhaps ultimately due to an ancient association between the chariot races and Poseidon.[40] Poseidon, the earth-shaking god of deep oceans, was also a 'tamer' and a 'frightener of horses'.[41] Within this maritime setting, the Serpent Column as a fountain might have recalled the sea serpents believed to inhabit the earth's oceans.[42]

For much of its early history in Constantinople, the Serpent Column belonged to this wondrous fountain. Memory of its original role as a dedication to Apollo probably persisted for some time, especially given the traditional connection between hippodromes and the sun.[43] The tendency to give monuments in the hippodrome occult readings, especially on account of their pre-Christian origins, and to ascribe apotropaic force to threatening animal imagery in general, could also suggest that some of the elements that would have enabled contemporaries to identify the Serpent Column as a talisman were already in place. As it stands, however, direct evidence of such interpretations prior to the 1390s has not come down to us.

37 On the Serpent Column as a fountain, see Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 150–182, and idem, 'Serpent Column fountain', 103–29, especially 104–11. See also Stichel, 'Schlangensäule', 322–6; and Madden, 'Serpent Column', 117–20.

38 See C. Mango, 'L'euripe de l'hippodrome de Constantinople. Essai d'identification', *Revue des études byzantines* 7 (1949) 180–93. See also J. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (Berkeley 1986) 175.

39 On the Skylla group, see P. Stephenson, 'The Skylla group in Constantinople's hippodrome', *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 50, n. 1 (2013) 65–74. On the wider diffusion and reception of Skylla in the Middle Ages, see F. Dell'Acqua, 'Carlomagno, la conversione dei Sassoni e il Westwerk di Corvey', in R. Fiorillo and C. Lambert (eds.), *Medioevo letto, scavato, rivalutato. Studi in onore di Paolo Peduto* (Florence 2012) 157–72, esp. 157–62.

40 On Poseidon's connection to racecourses, see Humphrey, *Roman Circuses*, 11, 259, 262.

41 On Poseidon Hippios, see J. N. Bremmer and B. Bäbler, 'Poseidon', in H. Cancik and H. Schneider (eds.) *Brill's New Pauly*, consulted online on 06 April 2017 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e1006030>

42 On serpents and sea-monsters, see Ogden, *Drakōn,* 116–47, on serpents as guardians of water sources, see ibid., 165–74.

43 On the possible persistence of the monument's original meanings, see Strootman, 'Serpent Column', 432–51. On Constantine's interest in Apollo and Sol Invictus, see P. Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London 2009) e.g., 127–40. On the connection between hippodromes and solar cults, see Humphrey, *Roman Circuses*, 269.

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Snakes, eagles, lions, and storks

While we do not have clear evidence that medieval spectators recognized the Serpent Column as a talisman until the 1390s, we do for other monuments nearby. A bronze statue of an eagle killing a snake, also in the hippodrome, was principle among them.[44] The statue established the precedent for a talisman against snakes in the hippodrome.[45] In his *De signis*, the writer Nicetas Choniates (1155–1217) described the statue after its destruction by crusaders in the thirteenth century.[46] Choniates first records how Apollonius of Tyana enchanted the statue with secret rites and demons and then described how snakes were so terrified of the statue that they were afraid to leave their burrows. While Choniates does not deny that the statue was ritually consecrated as a talisman, his lengthy ekphrasis tends to downplay that explanation for its efficacy.[47] Choniates in fact gives two explanations for its efficacy: first, its consecration, and second, its antipathetic visual impact. The text does not explicitly choose between them.

The poet Manuel Philes (ca. 1275–1345) also plays upon the idea of antipathetic statuary in his description of a fountain decorated with carvings of snakes and lions. The poet notes that the stone snakes desire to move, but are frozen in terror lest they slip from the rock to ravenous lions, who gape at their would-be meal from below.[48] Although bestowed with life through the sculptor's art, both the snakes and lions are immobilized: the snakes in anticipation of slipping and dying, the lions in readying themselves to catch their prey. Here, Philes deploys the idea of opposition or antipathy

44 The statue may have referred to the antipathy between eagles and serpents, as in Nicander, *Theriaca*, ll. 438–45; see A. S. F. Gow and A. F. Scholfield (eds. and trans.), *Nicander: The Poems and Poetical Fragments* (Cambridge 1953) 56–9. On the statue, Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 189; Madden, 'Serpent Column', 120; A. Cutler, 'The De Signis of Nicetas Choniates: A reappraisal', *American Journal of Archaeology* 72, n. 2 (1968) 113–8; Mango, 'Antique statuary', 68; and Dawkins, 'Ancient statues', 233–4.

45 Both Dawkins, 'Ancient statues', 233–4, and Madden, 'Serpent Column', 120, note this connection.

46 J. van Dieten, ed., *Nicetae Choniatae historia* (Berlin 1975) 651. See H. J. Magoulias (trans.), *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniatēs* (Detroit 1984) 359–60.

47 Scholars tend to see Choniates as distancing himself from the 'irrational' beliefs of his contemporaries, *contra* C. Mango, 'Antique statuary', 68. Anthony Cutler notes that Nicetas distinguishes between his own aesthetic appreciation and others' irrational beliefs, Cutler, 'De Signis', 117. See also T. Papamastorakis, 'Interpreting the De signis of Niketas Choniates', in *Niketas Choniates: A Historian and a Writer* (Geneva 2009) 209–224, here, 223.

48 Manuel Philes, Εἰς τὴν ἐν τῷ ἀσωμάτῳ τῆς Λαύρας φιάλην, *Carmina*, ch. 3, n. 38; see ed. E. Miller, *Manuelis Philae carmina*, vol. 2 (Paris 1857) 78: Φρενῶν ὄφις ἄντικρυς, ἢ τέχνης λέων | Ὁ φύσιν εὑρὼν ζῶσαν ἐκ λίθου τάχα·| Εἰ μὴ γὰρ ὑπῆν τῆς γλυφῆς ἡ γλισχρότης, | Ἕρποντας ἄν τις εἶδε τοὺς ὄφεις τέως. | Δοκοῦσιν οὖν ζῆν καὶ κινεῖσθαι μὲν θέλειν, | Ὅμως πτοεῖσθαι καὶ νεκρὰν πῆξιν φέρειν,| Μήπως ὀλισθήσωσιν ὑπὸ τοῦ τρέχειν. | Οἱ γὰρ θρασεῖς λέοντες ἑστῶτες κάτω | Κεχήνασι νῦν εἰς βορὰν ἠπειγμένοι. See also Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 152–3; B. Pitarakis, 'Light, waters, and wondrous creatures: Supernatural forces for healing', in *Life is Short, Art Long. The Art of Healing in Byzantium* (Istanbul 2015) 43–63, here, 63, as well as E. Braounou-Pietsch, *Beseelte Bilder: Epigramme des Manuel Philes auf bildliche Darstellungen* (Vienna 2010) 108–9, n. 49.

in the animal world in order to temper the *topos* of the enlivened work of art.[49] His playful description pertains to the fictive content of the work, and not to its actual place within a type of ecology. Philes' description of the fountain shows that contemporaries could imagine or entertain the antipathetic qualities of a work without necessarily supposing that it was a talisman or that it was actually efficacious against real animals. Nevertheless, it may have been easy enough for contemporaries to make that cognitive leap from first recognizing the theme of antipathy in a work to imagining that it had the actual ability to repel vermin.

Another talisman, mentioned in the *Patria*, a tenth-century description of Constantinople, as well as the *Chiliades* by the twelfth-century writer John Tzetzes (ca. 1110–80), complemented the eagle talisman in keeping the city free of snakes.[50] Both texts describe how snakes once infested the city. The swarming snakes attracted a mustering of ravenous storks. However, the storks, eventually growing tired of their food, proceeded to drop the snakes into the local water supply or onto people in the street. In desperation, the inhabitants appealed to Apollonius of Tyana who fashioned a statue of three storks facing each other that thereafter kept storks out of the city.[51]

Each of these authors evokes antipathy to describe an artwork's impact on animals. They principally see fear as the underlying cause for the snakes' avoidance or immobilization. Nevertheless, Philes does not describe his fountain as a talisman. His play upon the themes of antipathy and vivacity or liveliness is restricted to his elaboration on the work's content. The mere presence of snake imagery therefore did not make something a talisman, or even an *apotropaion*. An agonistic or antipathetic theme could be a sufficient source of diversion on its own. In contrast, Choniates, Tzetzes, and the *Patria* describe fully-fledged talismans, in which forces of nature are manipulated and plugged back into a larger ecology.

Serpent Column as *pharmakon*

The Fourth Crusade in 1204 drastically altered the urban landscape of Constantinople.[52] Almost two centuries later, the hippodrome was a grassy ruin, an ideal home for reptiles.

49 On enlivened works of art, see Braounou-Pietsch, *Beseelte Bilder,* 108–9, n. 49.

50 John Tzetzes, *Chiliades*, *Chilias* 2, *historia* 60, ll. 925–49, ed. P. L. M. Leone, *Ioannis Tzetzae historiae* (Naples 1968); Hesychius, *Origines Constantinopolitanae* (*Patria Kōnstantinoupoleōs*), sec. 23–5, see A. Berger (trans.), *Accounts of Medieval Constantinople: The Patria* (Cambridge, Mass. 2013) 12–15. See also the translation and commentary by Anthony Kaldellis in Brill's New Jacoby, available at http://brill.nl/bnjo/, and A. Kaldellis, 'The works and days of Hesychios the Illustrious of Miletos', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 45 (2005): 381–403.

51 On the idea of animals avoiding their own images, see Flood, 'Image', 153–4.

52 The fire of August 1203 burned down much in the vicinity of the hippodrome, but not the hippodrome itself. Crusaders stole or melted down much of the bronze statuary once there, as Niketas Choniates describes in his *De signis* (see above). Locals may have further dilapidated the hippodrome, see T. F. Madden, 'The fires of the Fourth Crusade in Constantinople. 1203–1204: A damage assessment', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 84/

The Serpent Column sat alongside obelisks and empty plinths as one of the last visible remnants of the bronze menagerie that had once existed there. The fountain had dried up; the Skylla group had vanished.[53] By the 1390s the Serpent Column reappears in the written record, first in a series of Russian accounts, and then in three reports written by Spanish and Italian observers in the fifteenth century (Table 1).[54] While none of these sources are written from the perspective of a local, the fact that visitors from different regions make similar statements suggests a common Byzantine source.[55]

As already noted, three Russian observers stated that the column was filled with venom. Zosima the Deacon added that if someone bitten by a snake within the city limits touched the monument, he or she would be cured. For those bitten outside of the city, there was no cure.[56] The Florentine Buondelmonti noted that it was once a fountain that dispensed water, wine and milk, while the Spaniard Pero Tafur mentioned only milk and wine.[57] The Russian Anonymous Description alone states that the column rotated three times a year, while another version of that text even gives the exact days on which it moved.[58] The Anonymous Description and that by Alexander the Clerk both state that the emperor Leo the Wise (r. 886–912) enchanted the Serpent Column. Leo supplanted Apollonius of Tyana's role as a talisman-maker in the Late Byzantine period.[59] By the thirteenth century, his name was connected to several magical texts and a series of prophecies penned a century or so earlier.[60] At

85, 1 (1991) 72–93, esp. 82. On the state of the city during and after the Latin occupation, see A.-M. Talbot, 'The restoration of Constantinople under Michael VIII', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993) 243–61. More recently, see I. Jevtić, 'Constantinople after 1261: Contextualizing the restoration of the city under Michael VIII Palaiologos', in *Proceedings of the 35th Symposium of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art and Archaeology of Christian Archaeological Society in Athens* (Athens 2015) 37–8. By the fifteenth century, much of the hippodrome appears to have been in ruins, see R. Guilland, 'Etudes sur l'hippodrome de Constantinople: La déchéance et la mine de l'hippodrome', *Byzantinoslavica* 30 (1969) 209–19, and C. Mango, 'A history of the hippodrome of Constantinople', in *Hippodrom /Atmeydanı,* 36–43, esp. 41–3.

53 Although Madden suggests that the fountain may have still been running at the time of the Fourth Crusade, he doubts that it would have continued in operation, adding that it had 'certainly run dry long before the fifteenth century', see Madden, 'Serpent Column', 120–2, here, 122. Many of the main long-distance water lines were non-functional. Some, such as the Valens line (or sections of it), apparently continued to flow with water, 'even if the supply was more limited and was primarily for agricultural use', see J. Crow, J. Bardill, and R. Bayliss, *The Water Supply of Byzantine Constantinople* (London 2008) 22.

54 See above, Majeska, *Russian Travelers*, 92–3, 142–5, 164–5, 184–5, 254–6; López Estrada, *Embajada a Tamorlán*, 127, Le Strange (trans.), *Embassy to Tamerlane*, 70–1; Vasiliev, 'Pero Tafur'; Gerola, 'Le vedute', 274–5; Tafur, *Andanças é viajes de Pero Tafur,* Letts (ed. and trans.), *Travels and Adventures*, 143.

55 On Crusader views of the statuary in the hippodrome, including their own conception of the statues' talismanic properties, see R. Macrides, 'Constantinople: The crusader's gaze', in R. Macrides (ed.), *Travel in the Byzantine World* (Burlington, Vt. 2002), 194–212, esp. 206–7.

56 Majeska, *Russian Travelers,* 184.

57 Tafur, *Andanças é viajes*, 177.

58 Majeska, *Russian Travelers*, 255. See also Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 149–50.

59 C. Mango, 'The legend of Leo the Wise', *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 6 (1960) 59–93.

60 Mango, 'Leo the Wise', 90–3.

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approximately the same time, he began to be credited with making talismans and other marvellous inventions.[61] The Spaniard Gonzalez de Clavijo also mentioned that an emperor (without specifying which one) enchanted the statue in response to a plague of serpents.[62] Clavijo's reference to a plague of serpents recalls not only earlier stories of other talismans in Byzantium, but also the fiery snakes that led Moses to erect the brazen serpent (Numbers 21:4–9). While no texts explicitly compare the Serpent Column with the brazen serpent, the biblical precedent might have underscored or justified its efficacy as a talisman.[63]

However, the Serpent Column and the brazen serpent differ crucially in their appearance and in how people were supposed to engage with them. In many Byzantine representations of the brazen serpent, we see the serpent raised up on a pole, as, for example, in illustrations from the much-copied Octateuch manuscripts (fig. 4).[64] Thus suspended, the brazen serpent withdraws from touch and heals through optical contact alone. In contrast, the Serpent Column was touchable.[65] The brazen serpent represents a single snake; the Serpent Column, three. Moreover, while the brazen serpent was biblically sanctioned, the same cannot be said for the Serpent Column. It is hard to know how significant these differences would have been to contemporaries. Other than the brazen serpent, the Serpent Column may have also recalled images from a variety of medical, pre-Christian, and occult contexts, such as the healing serpents of Asclepius or Hygeia, the protective serpents of ancient Roman *lararia*, as well as the entwined serpents on the caduceus, the wand carried by Hermes, and with it, broader hermetic associations.[66]

Despite their differences, the implicit rationale underlying the curative power of both the Serpent Column and the brazen serpent is essentially the same: the idea that like cures like, an extension of the principle of sympathy through mimesis.[67] Both objects allow snakebite victims to encounter an image and copy of the cause of their affliction. However, this second encounter is attenuated: It is with a copy and not the original, and it occurs through touch and vision and not through a second snakebite. Under these new conditions, the attraction between similar things enables reversal and

61 Mango, 'Leo the Wise', 71.

62 Clavijo, *Embajada a Tamorlán*, 127.

63 Fricke, *Ecce Fides*, 136–41; Dell'Acqua, 'Constantinople 1453', Strootman, 'Serpent Column', 444, and Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 194–8, on the brazen serpent, see Weinryb, *Bronze Object*, 109–24; Francisco López Estrada, the editor of Clavijo's text, also notes the connection to Numbers 21:4; see Clavijo, *Embajada a Tamorlán*, 127.

64 For examples where the brazen serpent is not suspended horizontally, see Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 74, f. 171r, and New York, Morgan Library, MS M 692, f. 222r.

65 Zosima the Deacon notes that it heals when touched. Majeska, *Russian Travelers*, 184–5.

66 See also Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 183–204.

67 See H. Kessler, 'Christ the magic dragon', *Gesta* 48 (2009) 119–34; Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 189; and Weinryb, *Bronze Object*, 121–4. Ancient and medieval medical authorities were careful to qualify, e.g., R. Leigh (trans. and ed.), *On Theriac to Piso, Attributed to Galen* (Leiden 2016) 106–19.

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Fig. 4. Smyrna, Library of the Evangelical School, A.1, 12th c., folio 168 verso, now destroyed. Moses raises the Brazen Serpent. **Credit: D.C. Hesseling, *Miniatures de l'Octateuque grec de Smyrne* (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1909), 72, pl. 238.**

opposition.[68] An image and copy imprinted in the victim counteract the prototype's venomous bite. Although vision and touch are different ways to effect a cure, they accomplish essentially the same objective: a second, and attenuated, contact. In the prevailing Aristotelian theory of perception, both vision and touch involve the impressing of a percept's form upon the percipient through a medium, that is to say, air in the case of vision, flesh for touch.[69] Analogous to the operation of sympathy, both forms of perception involve contact and copy. Both cures double the prototype as a copy in turning it against itself.

As this comparison to the brazen serpent suggests, the Serpent Column's perceptibility—its appearance and materiality—probably played a role in how contemporaries understood its talismanic action. At the basic level of visibility, the ruination of the Column's surroundings would have assisted contemporaries first in noticing it, and then in recognizing it as a talisman.[70] Without water, and in the midst of a ruin, the Serpent Column may have looked more like a talisman than it had previously. If, when water flowed through the fountain, the Serpent Column had once recalled water serpents, then without that water it may have now resembled an intertwining of vipers—monumental testimony to the old belief that water snakes transform into vipers when their ponds dry up.[71] With the fountain dry and the central barrier despoiled, viewers also had greater direct access to the monument. Some of the

68 On the general idea that like curing like is a corollary of sympathy, see M. Mauss and H. Hubert, *A General Theory of Magic*, R. Brain (trans.) (New York 1972; repr. 2001) 86–7. For a discussion of reversal that does not involve sympathy, see Berlekemp, 'Symmetry, sympathy and sensation', esp. 69, 72–83.

69 E.g., Aristotle, *De anima*, 423b, 424a-b.

70 Madden makes a similar point, see Madden, 'Serpent Column', 114.

71 See *Geoponica*, bk. 15, ch. 1, sec. 21, ed. Beckh (Leipzig 1895) 434. See Dalby (trans.), *Geoponika*, 298.

ancient inscriptions covering the Column's lower coils may have then been more visible.[72] If these inscriptions were at all discernable, even if illegible, they may have made the Column appear as though it had been enchanted as a talisman in the past. As noted earlier, the Byzantine word for talismans, *stoicheia*, also refers to letters of the alphabet.[73] Ancient inscriptions, however mundane, were often accorded special or talismanic properties in the medieval Mediterranean.[74] At the same time, metalworking itself had deep associations with magic and the occult going back to the ancient world.[75] The bronze material of the monument and the scale of the casting may have readily recalled such associations.

Contemporaries may have also seen the Column's intertwining serpents as a means of controlling actual serpents or counteracting their venom. For example, a twelfth-century so-called poison cup from Syria (fig. 5) shows two confronted, knotted serpents. An inscription on the outside of the bowl specifies, 'this blessed cup is useful against the sting of a serpent', among many other things.[76] A similar image, with only one instead of two knotted serpents, appears on a Byzantine plate from Cherson in Crimea (fig. 6). Although lacking an inscription, it may have had a similar role in counteracting poisons.[77] The knotting of the serpents' bodies on both vessels seems to suggest containment and self-defeat, which apparently make each vessel a type of antidote or guarantee against poisoning. Knotting and binding were a regular part of everyday magical practices.[78] Byzantine people for this reason may have ascribed

72 On the inscriptions, see Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 8–15.

73 See above, also, Blum, 'The meaning of stoicheion'.

74 On talismanic spoliated inscriptions from northern Syria, see J. Gonnella, 'Columns and hieroglyphs: Magic spolia in medieval Islamic architecture of Northern Syria', *Muqarnas* 27 (2010) 103–20, esp. 106–7. On inscriptions with special powers in Byzantium, see L. James, '"Pray not to fall into temptation and be on your guard": Antique statues in Christian Constantinople', *Gesta* 35, n. 1(1996) 12–20.

75 On ancient Greek associations between metalworking and the *daimones*, see S. Blakely, *Myth, Ritual, and Metallurgy in Ancient Greece and Recent Africa* (Cambridge 2006) 9–54. In the Middle Ages, metalworking could also be associated with alchemy. On alchemy in Byzantium, see M. K. Papathanassiou, 'Stephanus of Alexandria: A famous Byzantine scholar, alchemist and astrologer', in Magdalino and Mavroudi, (eds.), *Occult Sciences*, 165–170, and M. Mertens, 'Graeco-Egyptian alchemy in Byzantium', in Magdalino and Mavroudi, (eds.), *Occult Sciences*, 205–230.

76 E. Rehatsek, 'Explanations and facsimiles of eight Arabic talismanic medicine-cups', *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 10 (1873–4) 150–62, here, 153. This cup was sold at Christie's (*Art of the Islamic and Indian World*, London, King Street, 4 October 2012, Sale 5708, Lot 99). A similar cup is in The David Collection in Copenhagen (inv. 36/1995). On Islamicate magical bowls, see E. Savage-Smith, 'Magic-medicinal bowls', in F. Maddison and E. Savage-Smith (eds.), *Science, Tools and Magic* (London 1997).

77 See E. Dauterman Maguire and H. Maguire, *Other Icons: Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton 2007) 78.

78 F. Graf, 'Knoten', in H. Cancik, H. Schneider, M. Landfester (eds.), *Der Neue Pauly*, Consulted online 09 December 2016 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_dnp_e617560> See also C. L. Day, 'Knots and knot lore', *Western Folklore* 9, n. 3 (1950) 229–56, with relevant examples scattered throughout.

Fig. 5. Private Collection, fine Damascus poison cup, brass, Syrian School, 12th c., diameter: 11.1 cm. **Credit: Private Collection; Photo © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images.**

apotropaic powers to knotted, Solomonic, and spirally fluted columns.[79] The fact that Clavijo explicitly likened the Column's form to a rope with three intertwined elements may hint at such a reading for the Serpent Column.[80]

The Column's intertwining serpents might have also suggested viperid reproduction. Depictions of intertwined coupling vipers, such as in the late ninth- or early tenth-century Morgan Dioscorides (fig. 7), offer formal parallels for the Serpent Column.[81] In his *Theriaka,* Nicander describes how when vipers copulate, the female decapitates the male. The offspring eventually chew their way out of their mother.[82] Nicander adds

79 Stephenson, *Serpent Column,* 191–4; on knotted columns, see I. Kalavrezou, 'The Byzantine knotted column', in S. Vryonis (ed.), *Byzantina kai Metabyzantina. Byzantine Studies in Honor of Milton V. Anastos* (Malibu 1985) 95–103.

80 Clavijo, *Embajada a Tamorlán*, 127: '…e eran tan gruesas como dos muslos de omne cada una, torcidas en uno como soga…' See also Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 149–50.

81 For other pictures of copulating vipers: Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. med. gr. 1, s. VI, ff. 398v and 399v; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, cod. suppl. gr. 1294, s. X, f. 7r; Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, gr. 479, f. 14v and f. 33v; see also Z. Kádár, *Survivals of Greek Zoological Illumination in Byzantine Manuscripts* (Budapest 1978) 37–51.

82 Nicander, *Theriaca*, ll. 128–139, Gow and Scholfield, *Nicander*, 36–7. See also Leigh, *On Theriac*, 106–9.

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Fig. 6. Red clay bowl with knotted dragon motif from Byzantine Cherson, 13th c, diameter: 18.9 cm. **Credit: I.S. Chichurov, *Byzantine Cherson* (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), no. 250.**

Fig. 7. New York, Morgan Library, MS M 652, folio 343 recto. Male and female vipers copulate in an illustration accompanying a paraphrase of Nicander's *Theriaka*. **Credit: © Morgan Library, New York.**

that a viper-repellent salve could be concocted from the ashes of vipers that had been caught coupling at crossroads.[83] The intertwined serpents of the Serpent Column may have suggested anti-viper properties, by alluding to their dramatic reproductive destiny, or to the material basis of a salve purported to keep them at bay.

Whatever the monument's form suggested to viewers, the claim that venom filled its cavities meant that its efficacy was not only a result of what it seemed to portray, but also what was purported to be inside it. The venom inside the monument recalls the ancient practice of placing *pharmaka*, powerful substances, inside statues usually so as to cast spells or to animate them.[84] Nevertheless, this venom also exemplifies the Column's talismanic nature. According to Galen, just as a magnet spreads through iron and transforms its qualities with the force of its own special qualities, so too do poisons

83 Nicander, *Theriaca*, ll. 98–114, Gow and Scholfield, *Nicander*, 34–5.

84 In the eleventh century, Psellos mentioned placing substances inside statues, see Faraone, *Talismans*, 21. The eleventh-century Arabic grimoire the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* also describes inserting substances into statues, see Ritter and Plessner, '*Picatrix*'.

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alter the nature of the human body by changing its humours.[85] The special properties and sympathetic qualities of talismans were similarly said to result from changes to its nature.[86]

Through the attraction and opposition of similar things under the principle of sympathy, the venom inside the Column was supposed to counteract the venom in the snakebite victim's body. However, by touching the Column, the beneficiary does not make direct contact with the venom inside it; instead, the Column and the venom together enable the cure. The fact that the cure requires both Column and venom suggests that it works like a compound drug made of multiple components. The bronze alloy of the statue is an admixture of different metals and other materials, which were together understood to contribute to a unique final product.[87] On a more basic level, the ancient word for the Column's patina was identical to a word for poison, *ios* (ἰός).[88] Although the Column's envenomed bronze cavities, its dark, patinated surfaces, the noxious form of three intertwined serpents, and the barely legible ancient inscriptions covering their coils might be individually dangerous, the talisman had been compounded in the right way, with the right words, at the right time, by the right ritual expert.

In comparison to the earlier talismans set up by Apollonius of Tyana, the Serpent Column appears to be notably more medicalised, which could hint at shifts in how talismans were conceived of in the Late Byzantine period. This medical quality is still, however, effectively an extension of the Byzantine talisman's broadly ecological nature. As venom upset the regular balance of the body's humours, the Serpent Column healed by intervening within a local system, the beneficiary's body, either by drawing out the venom, or by counteracting it and restoring balance through sympathy.[89] The specificity of place in the action of the Serpent Column, either in

85 Galen, *De locis affectis libri vi*, ed. C.G. Kühn, VIII (Leipzig 1824; repr. Hildesheim 1965) 422–23. See J. Scarborough, 'Nicander's toxicology I: Snakes', *Pharmacy in History* 19, n. 1 (1977) 3–23, here 10.

86 See, for example, Ritter and Plessner, '*Picatrix*', 7–9 and 91–4; the explanation here is similar to that in Ibn Waḥshiyya, *Al-filāḥah al-nabaṭīyah* (*Nabatean Agriculture*), 1283, trans. in Hämeen-Anttila, *Last Pagans*, 191. As noted above, a talismanic object's attractive force could also be explained in terms of magnetism, see Synesios of Cyrene, cit. and trans. in Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief*, 177.

87 Different alloys of bronze existed in the ancient world. Pliny notes that the ancient Greeks favoured alloys invented on Delos and Aegina and the bronze of Corinth, see Pliny, *Historia naturalis* 34.8–10. Lead was added to Roman bronzes to lower the melting point. See the discussion in H. Andreopoulou-Mangou, 'Appendix: Chemical analysis and metallographic examination', in S. Hemingway, *The Horse and Jockey from Artemision: A Bronze Equestrian Monument of the Hellenistic Period* (Berkeley 2004) 149–53. On the casting and bronze of the Serpent Column in ancient Greece, see Stephenson, *Serpent Column*, 67–79, and, more generally, Hemingway, *Horse and Jockey*, 3–16. On medieval ideas about casting, see Weinryb, *Bronze Object*, 27–30, 33–7. On metal-casting in Byzantium, see M. K. Papathanassiou, 'Metallurgy and metalworking techniques', in A. E. Laiou (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium, Seventh Through the Fifteenth Centuries* (Washington DC 2002) 121–7.

88 Liddell, Scott, Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 832.

89 Scarborough, 'Nicander's toxicology', n. 114, 22.

keeping snakes out of the city or by protecting only those within it, likewise speaks to its particular place within a local ecology.

Conclusion

This study examines how contemporaries may have understood the Serpent Column as a talisman. The Serpent Column first appears in the textual record as a talisman in the 1390s. While it may have been regarded as a talisman prior, the Fourth Crusade and centuries of hardship probably gave the Serpent Column a more prominent position in the urban landscape than it had previously. Exactly when—and over what period of time—the Serpent Column became a talisman remains unknown. Nevertheless, as contemporaries began to attribute talismanic properties to the monument, they imagined it within a wider system of interactions between various non-human operators—snakes, demons, potent substances, as well as astral and elemental forces. The Serpent Column was bound to this network sympathetically and antipathetically by way of the venom inside it, as well as the monument's shape and the inscriptions on it. Looking at the hollow bronze coil with its three terrible heads, contemporaries might imagine snakes fleeing from it, the venom said to be inside it, a victim of snakebite miraculously healed, Moses and the brazen serpent, Leo the Wise performing arcane rituals with efficacious words calling upon demons, planets, and stars. In doing so, the medieval beholder envisions a world where the talisman actively mediates between the human and non-human.