

Byzantine Occult Sciences

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Introduction

Medieval Europe was a dynamic place that witnessed the rise and fall of countless cultures, ruling families, and empires. Byzantium, the continuation of the Roman Empire centered in Constantinople, stood from late antiquity, through the Middle Ages, and fell at the start of the Renaissance. Despite its prominence during the medieval period, it is nevertheless overlooked and outright misunderstood by historians. From the general disregard of it truly being the Roman Empire to authors both of the Middle Ages and beyond perpetuating a biased narrative of its culture and people, Byzantium's influence and importance in the medieval world still remains to be fully recognized and understood. One of the most notable characteristics of the empire, besides it being synonymous with Orthodox Christianity, is its occult sciences. Byzantine occult sciences were a variety of traditions that fell between science and magic including alchemy, astrology, astronomy, botany, dream interpretation, geomancy, medicine, magic, numerology, and Christian apocrypha.

These sciences were woven into the fabric of Byzantine society, with its members both being familiar with the occult and utilizing them regularly. For rulers of Byzantium, the occult sciences were an especially valuable tool, which they held a complicated relationship with. The sciences additionally held a tense relationship with the Christian church, as they defied the laws of God through their use of predictions. These sciences developed through Byzantium's cultural traditions, as well as through the influences and relationships with the other empires in Europe and the Middle East during Antiquity and the Middle Ages. While on the surface Byzantium's occult sciences may seem like a footnote of Byzantine culture, they were deeply engrained into the foundations of

Byzantine society and rulership alongside Christianity. This research paper therefore seeks to further explore what the Byzantine occult sciences were and how the specific sciences of astrology, dream interpretation, and omens were utilized in daily life.

Background

Byzantium, as established in the introduction, was the Roman Empire at its core. The people identified themselves as Romans and, while the empire was no longer located in Rome, it nonetheless remained Roman in its political ideology.¹ Furthermore, the term Byzantium itself was coined in the sixteenth century by German historians in order to differentiate the western and eastern half of the Roman Empire, as they would later come to distinguish it. The people themselves who lived in Byzantium during the empire's existence called it Romanía.² Culturally, Byzantium held many Greek influences, which can be seen through their use of the Greek language, art and statuary, and various cultural customs which, while being a Roman nation, were all overwhelmingly Greek in nature. Their Greek cultural ties were so strong that later historians have gone to the length of outright denying their claims to being Roman and identifying them solely as Greek.³

Religiously, Byzantium was a Christian Empire. Not only was this religion the most widely practiced, but it effectively became the official religion of Byzantium. The emperor or empress themselves was regarded as "God's representative on earth," and therefore a divinely chosen ruler.⁴ However, given the

¹ Peter Sarris, *Byzantium: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 5, 18.

² Anthony Kaldellis, *Byzantium Unbound* (Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 78.

³ Sarris, *Byzantium*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

empires Greek ethnicity, its religious beginnings were Pagan. All throughout the empire Greek mythology remained present through its classical texts, statues, and temples. Rather than eliminating these links to its Pagan past, the people of Byzantium simply removed their religious associations and created the new categories of art and literature in order to preserve this element of their society.⁵ Additionally, legislation was created to further protect the art and literature for its beauty, educational purposes, and cultural significance opposed to the divinity it once represented. Beyond religion, Byzantium's location also played a role in its culture. Byzantium resides in the middle of a highly culturally diverse area, given its location between the medieval spheres of influence to its west, the kingdom of Rus' to its north, and the Islamic world to its east. This position allowed for an inherent blending of ideas, literature, and traditions into Byzantine culture.⁶ These influences, however, were not always met kindly depending on whether they threatened the religious structures and beliefs of Byzantium but were nonetheless a critical element of the empire's development.

Occult Sciences

The occult sciences were a well-documented and highly utilized set of practices in Byzantine society. Conversely, the origins and history of these practices are not nearly as well known or documented. These occult sciences were a "distinct category of Byzantine intellectual culture."⁷ This cultural tradition could be categorized as existing between science and magic, while also holding a relationship with philosophy and religion.⁸ On the scientific and philosophical end were alchemy, astronomy, astrology, botany, and medicine, while geomancy, numerology, dream interpretation, and Christian apocrypha leaned closer towards the magical and religious. These categorizations, however, reflect how we differentiate these traditions in the modern world. In the medieval period, the distinction between these classifications was blurred, and depending on the

individual practitioner or culture, their associations to either science or magic varied. Therefore, the label occult sciences have been created to encapsulate these varying traditions. Additionally, while these were practiced individually, heavy overlap often occurred between the different sciences:

While many manuscripts are exclusively devoted to single disciplines – this is notably the case with astrology – other consist of wide-ranging miscellanies in which treatises on astrology, medicine, numerology, dream interpretation, alchemy, geomancy and lecanomancy rub shoulders with each other and quite different texts.⁹

The use of occult sciences has been recorded all across the medieval world, from western Europe, through Byzantium, Egypt, Persia, and into India.¹⁰ While each of these cultures have their own practices and methods, the traditions hold many similarities with one another, indicating cross cultural sharing of information.

Within Byzantium, occult science was utilized by all of the social classes. In particular, the occult sciences found a place in the imperial court and became a prominent tool of the emperor. For the ruling powers of Byzantium, the occult sciences were especially tempting as they "can promise the ruler access to extraterrestrial forces, fabulous wealth, and inside knowledge of the future."¹¹ Emperors and empresses throughout Byzantine history have been documented having occult practitioners as advisors, using them to take glimpses into the future and determining the best course of action in order to secure their success as rulers. This relationship between the ruler and occult scientist was a mutually beneficial one as well. The occult sciences were often at odds with the religious doctrines of Byzantium, which viewed them as blasphemous and a viable cause for religious persecution. Therefore, occult practitioners working for the rulers of Byzantium gave them safety, security, and monetary backing, "The ruler can offer the occult scientist research funding, job security, and protection from persecution in societies where, as everywhere in the Christian and Islamic Middle Ages, the occult is more or less outlawed by the dominant

⁵ Kaldellis, *Byzantium Unbound*, 68-70.

⁶ Sarris, *Byzantium*, 4.

⁷ Paul Magdalino and Maria Mavroudi, *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium* (La Pomme d'or, 2006), 11.

⁸ Joel T. Walker, "The Occult Sciences in Byzantium," *Aestimatio: Critical Reviews in the History of Science* 5 (2008), 246; Magdalino and Mavroudi, *The Occult Sciences*, 12.

⁹ Magdalino and Mavroudi, *The Occult Sciences*, 21.

¹⁰ Walker, "The Occult Sciences in Byzantium," 250.

¹¹ Magdalino and Mavroudi, *The Occult Sciences*, 119.

ideology.”¹² This relationship between the sciences and political regimes was common outside of Byzantium and was a notable feature of the many Christian and Islamic empires in the medieval world.

Moreover, occult scientists were keenly aware of the power they possessed in Byzantium, along with the rulers they served. Both those in command of the empire and those in opposition to them sought out their talents. This placed the occult practitioners in a position of constant suspicion by those they worked for, as it was assumed they could be actively aiding their enemies, “The ruler who lavishes trust and patronage on a matter of the occult risks not only being defrauded, betrayed or at least misled, but also incurring the resentment of his other courtiers, the censure of his clergy, and a general loss of the political credibility.”¹³ Despite the occult sciences being a well-known and widely used practice in Byzantium, they still faced heavy scrutiny given their defiance of the laws of the church, which was arguably the most important governing body in the empire. Additionally, the emperor or empress themselves as the extension of God, should be refraining from using methods marked as unholy. Yet, political histories and other royal documentation have provided evidence for the use of occult science in some of the most critical and important times throughout the empire.¹⁴ These sciences were a high-risk high-reward tool that seemingly was used time and time again even though it defied the very power that granted them their rule.

Due to their connection to the ruling class in Byzantium, records of the use of occult science by the imperial court and by the rulers themselves remain the most predominant form of documentation. While there is evidence of their use by all levels of society within the empire, these records have preserved their place in history and displayed the crucial role they held within society.¹⁵ It is also critical to note that one of the most well-known scholars of Byzantium, Michael Psellus, has been recognized as providing us with much of the information regarding occult sciences. Due to his work in the courts of Byzantium, he was able to save critical literature that has become the base knowledge for our

understanding of these practices, “The extraordinary thing about Psellus is that, singlehandedly, he was responsible for bringing back, almost from the dead, an entire group of occult authors and books whose existence had long been as good as forgotten.”¹⁶ Not only does his writing provide information over many of the rulers personal uses of the occult sciences, but his often unrecognized work through preserving these books has effectively left an even larger impact on this field and the materials historians have to work with today. Beyond the importance of Psellus, the occult sciences are a massive conglomerate of practices and individual traditions, which each have their own origins and specific uses. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, only three of these sciences, namely astrology, dream interpretation, and Christian apocrypha through omens, will be explored in order to provide a more thorough investigation of each.

Astrology

Astrology can be most simply understood as the measurement, tracking, and observation of the stars. These observations are then correlated to human activity and most commonly used for their ability to make predictions.¹⁷ Astrological traditions and usage have had a long history prior to their existence in the Roman Empire. The ninth century astrologer Abū Ma'shar from Balkh stated that the Chaldeans were the first group known to measure the stars and record observations of them, followed then by the Indians, Syrians, and the Arabs.¹⁸ This is a rather linear interpretation of the flow of information, as the actual diffusion of information moved circularly between these various groups and was further developed throughout this process.¹⁹ Traditional western astrology developed out of the Greek and Alexandrian culture, with many of its manuals being written in Alexandria. These Egyptian manuals were then introduced to Islamic scholars, notably Theophilus of Edessa and

12 Magdalino and Mavroudi, *The Occult Sciences*, 119.

13 Ibid., 119–120.

14 Ibid., 120.

15 Magdalino and Mavroudi, *The Occult Sciences*, 120.

16 John Duffy, “Reaction of Two Byzantine Intellectuals to the Theory and Practice of Magic: Michael Psellus and Michael Italikos,” *Byzantine Magic*, ed. Henry Maguire (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995), 83.

17 Efstratios Theodosiou, Vasilios Manimanis, and Milan Dimitrijevic, “Astrology in the Early Byzantine Empire and the Anti-Astrology Stance of the Church Fathers,” *European Journal of Science and Theology*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2012), 7–8.

18 David Pingree, “Classical and Byzantine Astrology in Sassanian Persia,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 43 (1989), 227.

19 Ibid.

Masha'allah ibn Athari, following the incorporation of Alexandria into the Islamic realm.²⁰ One of Theophilus's students, Stephanus the Philosopher, moved to Byzantium around 775 CE and introduced the empire to Theophilus's teachings, which were a "mixture of Greek, Persian, and Indian astrology."²¹ This was not the first introduction of astrology in Byzantium, as it was a tradition utilized by the Romans since their capital was located in Rome. However, Stephanus brought in a new wave of Arabic astrology which propelled Byzantine astrology forward.

In order to utilize astrology, Byzantine astrologers created books that acted as guides to interpret their observations of the stars. These books compiled horoscopes and were used primarily for predictions. Other astrological literature included seismologia (earthquake guides), selenodromia (moon-phase books), and vrrontologia (thunder guides), each of which interpreted their own specific natural occurrence and supplied the reader with information regarding what this event indicated.²² Outside of literature, astrology was used throughout various parts of daily life and astrologers became a sought out profession, "parents were asking for the advice of astrologers not only for the future of their children, but also for the appropriate dates for them to start courses. Even hunters were asking astrologers about the best days for hunting and the best method to use for a particular day or week."²³ Astrology was a trusted source of information for all those in Byzantium and provided the ability to see into the future, a power that was unmatched by pure faith alone in their Christian God.

Documentation of astrological advice being sought out by the emperor of Byzantium can be found in Psellus's *Chronographia*. In the fifth book regarding Michael V, Psellus provides a detailed account of Michael's attempt at exiling his adopted mother, Empress Zoe. To create an appropriate and successful plan, Michael brought in a series of counsellors to advise him, but ultimately rejected their arguments and turned to the astrologers of his court for their

predictions.²⁴ Following his inquiry "Observations were taken and the general position of the stars was carefully examined at the proper moment, and when the astrologers saw that everything portended blood and sorrow, they warned him to give up his enterprise."²⁵ Angry with this advice, Michael scrutinized the science of astrology and declared it fraudulent. Nevertheless, this prediction came true as Michael's attempt at deposing Zoe failed and he was effectively arrested and blinded for his betrayal.

Throughout the *Chronographia*, Psellus interjects into the text on several occasions to include his own opinion regarding the practice of astrology. In the middle of his record of the account above he includes the following statement,

Certain predictions were then offered to persons who asked for advice and their questions were answered. In some cases, too, they did indeed hit on the correct answer. I say this, because I myself have some knowledge of the science, a knowledge acquired after long and diligent study, and I have been of some assistance to many of these men and helped them to understand the planetary aspects. Despite this, I am no believer in the theory that our human affairs are influenced by the movements of the stars.²⁶

This statement provides both the information that Psellus himself has a background in astrology, but also that he does not find any validity in the practice. His stance over astrology despite his apparent knowledge and utilization of the practice is highly contradictory, however, later historians have remarked that Psellus knew of the dangers of promoting the science as it was forbidden by the church.²⁷ By including statements of his studies in astronomy he legitimizes himself as a reliable source for information over the topic. Conversely, by then denying his belief in the science, Psellus effectively avoids being labeled as a heretic and receiving punishment by the church. Moreover, his word choice in the *Chronographia* by

20 Charles Burnett, "Astrological Translations in Byzantium," In *Actes du Symposium internationale. Le livre. La Roumanie. L'Europe*, vol. 3 (2012), 178.

21 Ibid., 179.

22 Theodosiou, Manimanis, and Dimitrijevic, "Astrology in the Early Byzantine Empire," 8.

23 Ibid., 21.

24 Michael Psellus, *Chronographia*, trans. E.R.A Sewter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

25 Ibid.

26 Psellus, *Chronographia*.

27 Andrew Vladimirov, "Michael Psellos and Byzantine Astrology in the Eleventh Century," *Culture and Cosmos*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2009), 45-46.

calling the astrologers “distinguished men” further indicates an underlying respect for astrology which he has to dismiss through his writing to retain his lively hood and avoid the persecution that some of his contemporaries faced.²⁸ While astrology retained a place in the imperial courts, it nonetheless faced a deviant label by the dominate religious powers.

Not all rulers of Byzantium were open to the use of astrology in their imperial matters. In the

Annals of Niketas Choniates it is recorded that “Emperor Manuel firmly regarded Skleros Seth and Michael Sikidites with a secret anger and justly moved to punish them, whence by his command they were blinded by the sizzling hot iron for their devotion to astrology and the practice of the demonic magical arts.”²⁹ This punishment of astrology was not a rare phenomenon in Byzantium, as the church itself promoted this penalty, and emperors or empresses that opposed the practiced utilized it as they saw fit. Furthermore, the name sake of this annal Niketas Choniates additionally scrutinized the practice of astrology and equvalated it with other medieval superstitions calling them “buffooneries and vulgarities.”³⁰ Despite the widespread knowledge of astrology in Byzantium, not all members of society regarded it with the same dignity and legitimacy.

Dream Interpretation

Dream interpretation is a long-held practice of analyzing one’s dreams in order to understand the symbols and messages it contains. It was understood in the ancient and medieval world that “the true dream is a communication from the heavenly realm concerning the unseen.”³¹ The origins of dream interpretation have been traced back to Egypt and the Near East around the first and second millennia before the common era.³² These traditions grew and became popular within Graeco-Roman society, later influencing larger Christian, Jewish, and Islamic dream interpretation traditions. The most common dream

literature was through dreambooks. These books acted as guides which contained predictive dream symbols, their meanings, and how to appropriately interpret them. Additionally, “Dream interpreters attempted to lend scientific credibility to the profession by laying out in detail the many factors that could influence the interpretation of a dream.”³³ Dreambooks were written originally for these dream interpreters, but overtime they became a common tool people could utilize independently from interpreters to find meaning and understand their own dreams.³⁴

There were nine dreambooks or *Oneirocritica* in Byzantine dream interpretation traditions. These books spanned from the second to the fifteenth century and contained information regarding everyday life, political implications, and the perceptions of men and women within society.³⁵ When analyzing these dreambooks it is important to be conscious of two factors:

The first factor is that the dreambooks’ texts are products of male writing and, therefore, convey a one-sided perspective. The second factor concerns the symbolic character of their writing, which hampers a more thorough study, and it often demands a hypothetical approach of interpretation and a great deal of imagination.³⁶

These texts contain models from the classical and late-antique period, which consequently perpetuates the gender roles and values of these eras. Through the Byzantine dreambooks it is evident that men were assumed dominate both socially and sexually.³⁷ Furthermore, “The fact that the dreambooks approach women ambiguously is a consequence of the social and religious perceptions that have their roots in antiquity and have influenced Byzantium.”³⁸ Dreambooks were highly influential literature that sought both to interpret the various symbols within dreams, along with a being tool used to maintain societal norms and patriarchal ideals.

28 Psellus, *Chronographia*; Vladimirou, “Michael Psellos and Byzantine Astrology,” 50.

29 O City of Byzantium, *Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. Harry J. Magoulas (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 84.

30 *Annals of Niketas Choniates*, xxvii.

31 Bronwen Neil, *Dreams and Divination from Byzantium to Baghdad, 400-1000 CE* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 1.

32 Ibid., 51.

33 Neil, *Dreams and Divination*, 50.

34 Ibid.

35 Vassiliki Kokkori, “Dream Symbols in the Mediterranean World: Woman’s position in the Byzantine Society,” *Symbols and Models in the Mediterranean: Perceiving through Cultures* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 190-191.

36 Ibid., 191.

37 Ibid., 209.

38 Ibid.

Dreambooks, as with other Byzantine occult sciences, were prominent within the imperial court. Literature, such as the *Oneirocriticon* which was a “Christian adaptation of Islamic dream interpretation probably based on more than one Arabic dreambook,” were compiled and used by interpreters specially for dream interpretation of imperial court members.³⁹ Dream interpretation and its value was also recognized by the Byzantine military. Leo Katakylas, a high-ranking military official, included dream interpretation literature in the list of books he advised emperor Constantine VII to take with him on campaign.⁴⁰ Leo VI, father of Constantine VII, also addressed the importance of dreams to his generals:

Nothing about dreams seems reliable to me. But, in time of war, it is useful and even necessary to fabricate <them> and to persuade the soldiers to believe your dreams that promise victory. For, thinking that the dream that you narrate is a portent from God, they will attack the enemy courageously and steadily, and their bravery will be doubled by their eagerness.⁴¹

While Leo himself did not believe in the science of dream interpretation, he nevertheless recognized its power and popularity among the people of his military and how it could influence their motivations and ability to fight.

Other records of Byzantine dream interpretations include John Moschus’s *The Spiritual Meadow*. Moschus was a Byzantine monk and ascetical writer, with his work having a specific monastic perspective. This book was written in the early seventh century during Moschus’s travels and contains “some colourful dream stories from the monks he met on his travels through Egypt.”⁴² One such interaction was with a robber-chief named Cyriacos who after being arrested on crimes he was not responsible for and held captive for ten years without an order of

execution by the emperor, remained optimistic of his eventual release. Cyriascos told Moschus “It is thanks to those babes that I escaped bitter death. I used to see them in my dreams, saying to me: ‘Do not be afraid; we are putting forward the case for your defense.’”⁴³ These dreams Cyriascos, Moschus, and other travel companions all attributed as divine messages from God meant to encourage his continue patience in his given circumstance.

Anna Komnene, daughter of Emperor Alexius I Komnenos, author of *The Alexiad*, and Medieval Europe’s only documented female historian, similarly includes dream interpretation throughout her text. A notable account involves the Sultan Soliman in a battle with the Byzantine forces against the Turkish armies. During this encounter, the Sultan dreamt that “while he was breakfasting swarms of mice encompassed him, and while he was eating, they snatched the bread out of his hands; and, as he was disdainful of them and tried to drive them away, they suddenly changed into lions and overpowered him.”⁴⁴ The following morning he inquired the meaning of this dream to one of the emperors’ soldiers, who interpreted the mice and lions as the Sultan’s enemies. The Sultan did not believe this dream to be a truthful prediction and carried on the campaign with little precaution. However, directly following this the Sultan was tricked into entering into the town of Tyrageion where he was surrounded, arrested, and blinded.⁴⁵ Similar to Cyriascos dream, the Sultan was given a warning of future events, however, he did not believe the dream held any meaning and was consequently met with the same fate his dream predicted. The occult science of dream interpretation was regarded with the same skepticism and hesitation as astrology, yet both remained a prominent fixture of Byzantine society.

Omens

Christian apocrypha, or non-canonical biblical literature, was prominent throughout Christian empires in the Middle Ages, especially Byzantium. This literature included many notable elements, none of which was as influential or prevalent as omens.

39 Maria Mavroudi, "The Oneirocriticon and Byzantine Intellectual Activity in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries," *A Byzantine Book on Dream Interpretation* (Brill, 2002), 392, 422.

40 Ibid., 426–427.

41 Ibid., 428.

42 Bronwen Neil, "Apocalypse then: Dreams and visions in Byzantine apocalyptic in the context of conflict," *Materiality and text: Essays on the ancient world in honour of GW Clarke, Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology and Literature* (Uppsala: Astrom Editions, 2017), 353.

43 John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow*, trans. John Wortley (Cistercian Publications, 1992), 135–136.

44 Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, trans E. R. A. Sewter (Penguin Books, 1969), 489.

45 Ibid., 490.

Omens were a prophetic event that functioned based on the “popular belief that God communicated with man through natural events.”⁴⁶ That is, natural events were interpreted as a message from God regarding a specific person or event and indicated either a positive or negative reaction, which would be directly correlated to the future. The use of omens has existed in Byzantium since the introduction of Christian scripture, which features omens and other prophetic natural signs heavily throughout its books. Moreover, omens and their record throughout Christian and Byzantine texts established a “clear link between the natural world and the intervention of divinity.”⁴⁷ Their connection with one another became a commonly held understanding within Byzantine society and one that is present throughout many Byzantine texts. Omens are especially prominent in literature involving the rulers of Byzantium, given their role as God’s representative on Earth and therefore omens acted as an extension of God’s communication with them.

Similar to dreams, interpreters were often utilized to explain the meaning behind omens. In some cases, omens and their messages were ambiguous or hard to decipher, leading to an expert being sought out to properly interpret them.⁴⁸ In *The Alexiad*, Anna Komnene writes of an occurrence where a comet was present in the sky for forty days and nights. Emperor Alexius did not think much of it beyond a natural cause, however, those around him expressed concern that this comet was in fact an omen.⁴⁹ Due to their unease, Alexius sought out Basil the Eparch to decipher the comets meaning. Following his examinations and calculations of the sun and comet, Basil had a vision of St. John the Evangelist who stated, “It foretells an invasion of the Kelts [...] and its extinction prophesies their dismissal from here.”⁵⁰ In this record, the omen was a sizable natural occurrence and one that warned of a major event within an ongoing military conflict.

Other omens within Byzantine texts were much smaller in scale, however, they nevertheless foretold significant events. In the *Annals of Niketas*

Choniates, a hawk with white plumage and thong shackles on its feet flew back and forth between Hagia Sophia and the Great Palace three times over.⁵¹ This caused those spectating the event to debate what this omen was prophesying in reference to Emperor Andronikos I Komnenos:

The majority regarded this as a portent that Andronikos would be apprehended forthwith and subjected to violent punishment, for the omen of the bird's flight, they contended, clearly referred to Andronikos, since he had been frequently cast into prison, and the hair of his head was snow white. Others, more clever and discerning in their interpretation of the future, maintained that the threefold flight to the same destination augured that at the end of Andronikos's reign as emperor of the Romans he would once again be subjected to imprisonment and the stocks.⁵²

Similar to other occult sciences in Byzantium, the public was familiar with omens and understood the role they held within society. As evident by the excerpt above, they were capable of recognizing and interpreting omens without the use of an expert, guidebook, or other prophetic literature.

Michael Attaleiates, a predominate Byzantine chronicler and author of *The History*, also records several omens throughout his text. One of the omens involving the natural world is a thunder cloud which prophesizes the demise of the recently crowned Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos following his marriage to Empress Zoe. Attaleiates recounts, “But suddenly dark clouds appeared in the west crackling with doom, and they threatened both to ruin him and drive him from the throne.”⁵³ A second type of omen can be found in *The History*, which falls outside of the traditional classification of a natural event. This omen was a breach of ceremonial rituals. Attaleiates describes the divine festival celebrating the salvific Easter, which involved an imperial procession through the streets of Constantinople. Emperor Michael V, unknowingly, began this procession earlier than was customary, leaving many onlookers concerned, “They

46 Elizabeth A. Fisher, “Natural Omens in Byzantine Literature: An Unpublished Translator’s Preface to a Brontologion (Petrop. Bibl. Publ. 575),” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 59, no. 4 (2019), 714.

47 Ibid., 715.

48 Ibid.

49 Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 378.

50 Comnena, *The Alexiad*, 379.

51 *Annals of Niketas Choniates*, 252.

52 Ibid.

53 Michael Attaleiates, *The History*, trans. Anthony Kaldellis and Dimitris Krallis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 31.

noticed that the emperor gave the signal to start before the scene was fully set and the streets were full, and this untimeliness was not regarded as a good omen.”⁵⁴ In both of these instances the warnings the omens foretold came to pass with Constantine killed in battle and Michael being deposed and blinded.⁵⁵ Omens were a prominent fixture of Byzantine literature, with the excerpts above displaying how common they were in society and suggesting that they were more expected than other occult sciences due to their ties with Christianity.

Intersections of Occult Sciences

The occult sciences were all individually developed and transmitted into Byzantium, with each of them possessing unique characteristics that defined them as a truly separate discipline. Despite this, the occult sciences as a whole were often times used in conjunction with one another. This overlap can be attributed to both the shared prediction or divination abilities that many of the sciences utilized, as well as a combined literary tradition.⁵⁶ Compilers of occult literature would often combine texts together based on their own understanding or classification of the various sciences.⁵⁷ The ways in which these individual practitioners and writers interpreted and categorized the occult sciences sought only to increase the variety of texts:

Magdalino and Mavroudi contend that the Byzantines possessed ‘a clear notion of the occult sciences as distinct from, but consistently associated with, other types of learning, both practical and theoretical.’ But the assertion of this distinction by Michael Psellus and other Byzantine writers only underscores how fluid such definitions could be in practice. The editors themselves emphasize the variability of the manuscript tradition, in which one encounters a bewildering mixture of treatises on alchemy, astronomy and astrology, botany, dream interpretation, geomancy, medicine, magic, numerology, and Christian apocrypha.⁵⁸

Through their use of individualistic understandings and logic in organizing the texts and sciences with one another, many of the prominent and influential texts in Byzantium possessed a combination and heavy interwovenness of occult traditions.

Throughout Byzantine texts, records of the use of multiple occult sciences with one another is nearly as common as the use of single occult practices on their own. One instance of this can be seen in Psellus’s *Chronographia* in the first book during the revolt of Bardas Phocas. Emperor Basil II and his brother Constantine were at war with Phocas, who at the turning point of their conflict sought out a fortune of his future:

So he committed his cause to fortune. It was contrary to the advice of the astrologers in his retinue, for they would have dissuaded him from fighting. Their sacrifices clearly showed the folly of it, but he gave rein to his horse and obstinately refused to listen. It is said that signs of ill-omen appeared to him, as well as to the astrologers, for no sooner had he mounted his horse than the charger slipped under him, and when he seated himself on a second, that too, a few paces further on, suffered the same fate.⁵⁹

In this account, astrologers were advised for their predictions over his future, along with the appearance of an omen, whose message aligned with the astrologers warning over Phocas’s fate. As with other accounts of the occult used for predictions in Psellus’s work, both the astrologer’s prediction and the omens caution proved to be true as Phocas died due to a poisoning by Basil soon after his ill-fated fortune was given.⁶⁰ This event displayed the combined utilization of both astrology and omens, as well as astrologers themselves using omens in their practices. Together the overlap of multiple sciences is a reflection of the intersections of these traditions and a further mark of Byzantium’s distinct occult practices.

Conclusion

Despite the heavy influence of the Orthodox church in Byzantium, the occult sciences nevertheless

54 Ibid., 19.

55 Ibid., 27, 29, 33.

56 Magdalino and Mavroudi, *The Occult Sciences*, 20-21.

57 Mavroudi, "The Oneirocriticon and Byzantine Intellectual Activity," 394.

58 Walker, "The Occult Sciences in Byzantium," 246-247.

59 Psellus, *Chronographia*.

60 Psellus, *Chronographia*.

remained a prominent feature of society. Their documentation, while limited, provides various examples of the use of these sciences within the empire. Through these sources it is evident that the occult practices were highly valued for their ability of prediction, which the ruling powers of Byzantium especially treasured as it provided them access to military and imperial knowledge. Astrology, dream interpretation, and omens all presented their own unique virtues, which all levels of society found uses for in their daily life. They each held a rich history that often dated back to before the empire's existence, as well as developing from influences derived from the surrounding empires and spheres of influence. Interpreters trained in each of the sciences were a respected profession and one that was cherished in the imperial court. Nonetheless, practitioners of the occult remained at odds with the church and vulnerable to persecution. While not all those within Byzantium believed in the power of the occult sciences, they still remained a central fixture of everyday life.

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