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THE COLUMN OF ARCADIUS – A DETAILED PRE-1700 DRAWING

Yesterday I posted about the column of Arcadius in Constantinople, designed like Trajan's column in Rome, but destroyed by an earthquake in 1719. In the process, I came across something rather remarkable – a very detailed drawing of the column, produced shortly before the column fell! Here it is:



LA COLONNE D'ARCADIUS À CONSTANTINOPLE

This, I hope you will agree, is remarkable.

The item was published by A. Geoffroy, “La colonne d’Arcadius à Constantinople, d’après un dessin inédit”, in: *Monuments et mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot*, vol. 2, 1895, pp. 99-130, and online [here](#). Thankfully the site digitised the drawing properly. His comments on the column may be summarised briefly, for those who don’t read French.

The first column with bas-reliefs like Trajan’s column was erected by Theodosius I in 386. The column of Arcadius was erected in 403, on the seventh hill, known as Xerolophos or “the dry hill”, part of the 12th region of the city. Geoffroy gives as sources Theophanes, *Chronography*^[1], Cedrenus^[2], and Codinus, *De signis*^[3].

Theophanes the confessor:^[4]

[AM 5895 / AD 402-3 (p.118)] ...

In the same year Arkadios set up the column of Xerolophos [12] and founded Arkadioupolis in Thrace. ...

[AM 6041 /AD 548-9 (p.330)]

In this year there was much terrifying thunder and lightning, so that many were struck by lightning while they slept. On St John’s day the thunder and lightning were so terrible that part of the column of the Xerolophos was sliced off, as was the carved capital of the same column. ...^[5]

[AM 6232 / AD 740 (p572)]

In the same year a violent and fearful earthquake occurred at Constantinople on 26 October, indiction 9, a Wednesday, in the 8th hour. Many churches and monasteries collapsed and many people died. There also fell down the statue of Constantine the Great that stood above the gate of Atalos as well as that of Atalos himself, the statue of Arkadios that stood on the column of the Xerolophos, and the statue of Theodosios the Great above the Golden Gate; furthermore, the land walls of the City, many towns and villages in Thrace, Nicomedia in Bithynia, Prainetos, and Nicaea, where only one church was spared. In some places the sea withdrew from its proper boundaries. The quakes continued for twelve months.

Cedrenus has the baffling comment (in the Latin translation):

Xerolophus Arcadii opus est, tauro per omnia simile.

The Xerolophus is the work of Arcadius, with the image of the bull throughout.

But in fact the Forum Tauri was the Forum of Theodosius, not Arcadius.

The “Codinus, *De signis*” I was unable to locate, but it may be the same as the *Patria* of Constantinople, which has the following information:^[6]

Book 2, 19 (p.63):

On the Xerolophos. -The Xerolophos was formerly called a spectacle. For sixteen spiral columns stood there, a composite statue of Artemis, one of the founder Severus, and a horoscope on three feet. Severus often sacrificed there, and many oracles happened at this place, where also a maiden was sacrificed. And there was an astronomical installation which encompasses thirty-six years. This same Xerolophos had, according to Diakrinomenos, a statue of Theodosios the Younger, and of Valentinian and Marcianos below the column, but they fell down during an earthquake.

Book 2, 47 (p.83):

On the Tauros. - A statue of Theodosios the Great, which was formerly silver, stands in the Tauros where he used to receive those who came from the foreigners. ... Similarly, both the huge, hollow column there and the Xerolophos have the story of the final days of the city and its conquests depicted as reliefs.

It's rather thin, but that's what we have.

A description of the column was made in the 16th century by Pierre Gilles, and published in 1561 by his nephew Antoine Gilles. Extraordinarily Geoffroy does not even give the titles of the two volumes - the description is in the second - instead referring vaguely to reprints. I looked at Banduri, *Imperium Orientale*, vol. 1, online [here](#). Inspecting the title page (p.49 of the PDF) reveals "Petri Gyllii de topographia Constantinopoleos et de illius antiquitatibus libri iv". The description appears to be in book 4, chapter 7, "De septimo colle & duodecima regione, & de columna Arcadii, 416" which is p.711 of the PDF, there being no continuous page numbering. Being two pages of Latin in archaic typeface, on this hot evening, I will not attempt to make a translation. But Geoffroy tells us that Gilles had to sneak into the column in order to measure it, because the Turks didn't want a foreigner to get access, and made his measurements in fear that his lead weight might bang into the sides and give him away! It had 56 windows, and the stair wound around 223°. He does not describe the exterior reliefs in any detail, however.

There is a large volume among the collections of Roger de Gaignieres, in the French National Library (BNF) in the prints department, number 6514 in the catalogue drawn up in 1891 by H. Bouchot, and it is headed *Topographie de pays etrangers*. In it is found our drawing of the column of Arcadius, on several pieces of 17th century paper. The original drawing is 2.42 metres long and 0.43m wide.

At the base of the drawing are the words *Dessein de la Colonne historique de coste de la Tramontane*. The sculptures seem damaged, especially where they are closer to the ground. It is clearly badly cracked, and has been reinforced with iron bands.

The drawing seems to belong to the last decades of the 17th century, as Gaignieres collected between 1680-1711, and the increased damage to the reliefs is noted by travellers after 1650, when the area had acquired shops and a market around and against it. The column of Theodosius had collapsed in the 16th century, and the Ottoman government, seeing the risk of collapse, had attempted to reinforce it with iron.

It is not clear what the reliefs represented, other than the military triumphs of Theodosius and his house, possibly from the campaigns of 386 against the Goths, which included naval

actions by river.

It is wonderful to see what remains of these now vanished monuments. Who knows what else slumbers, forgotten, in archives or in private hands?

1. ^[1]Bonn edition vol. 1, pp.110, 121.↩

2. ^[2]Bonn edition, vol. 1, pp.566-7.↩

3. ^[3]Bonn ed., p.38, 42.↩

4. ^[4]Cyril Mango & Roger Scott (tr.), *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, Oxford, 1997, p.118.↩

5. ^[5]This second part is apparently based on John Malalas, 483.22-484.3, p.289 of the Australian translation.↩

6. ^[6]A. Berger, *Accounts of medieval Constantinople: the Patria*, 2013. In the notes p.281 he says the *Patria* is known as pseudo-Codinus.↩
