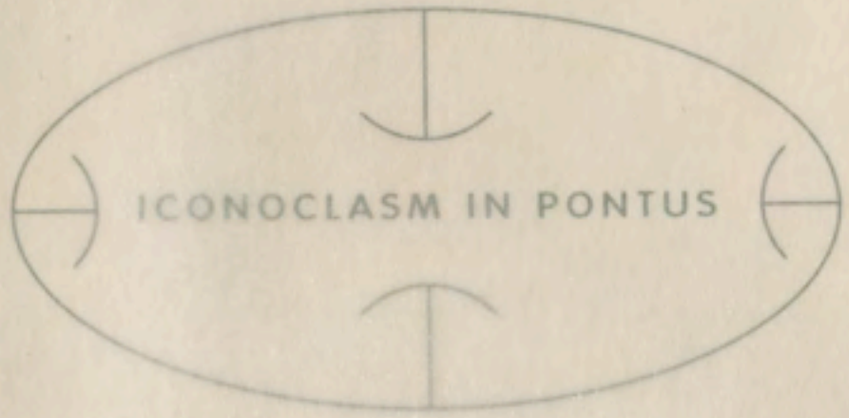
ICONOCLASM IN PONTUS



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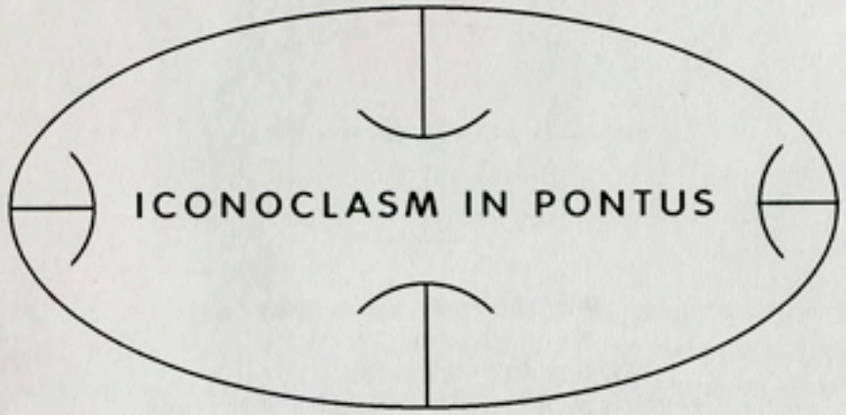
by M. Kasper

WSW
WOMEN'S STUDIO WORKSHOP
Rosendale, New York
1999



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*The North American Review*
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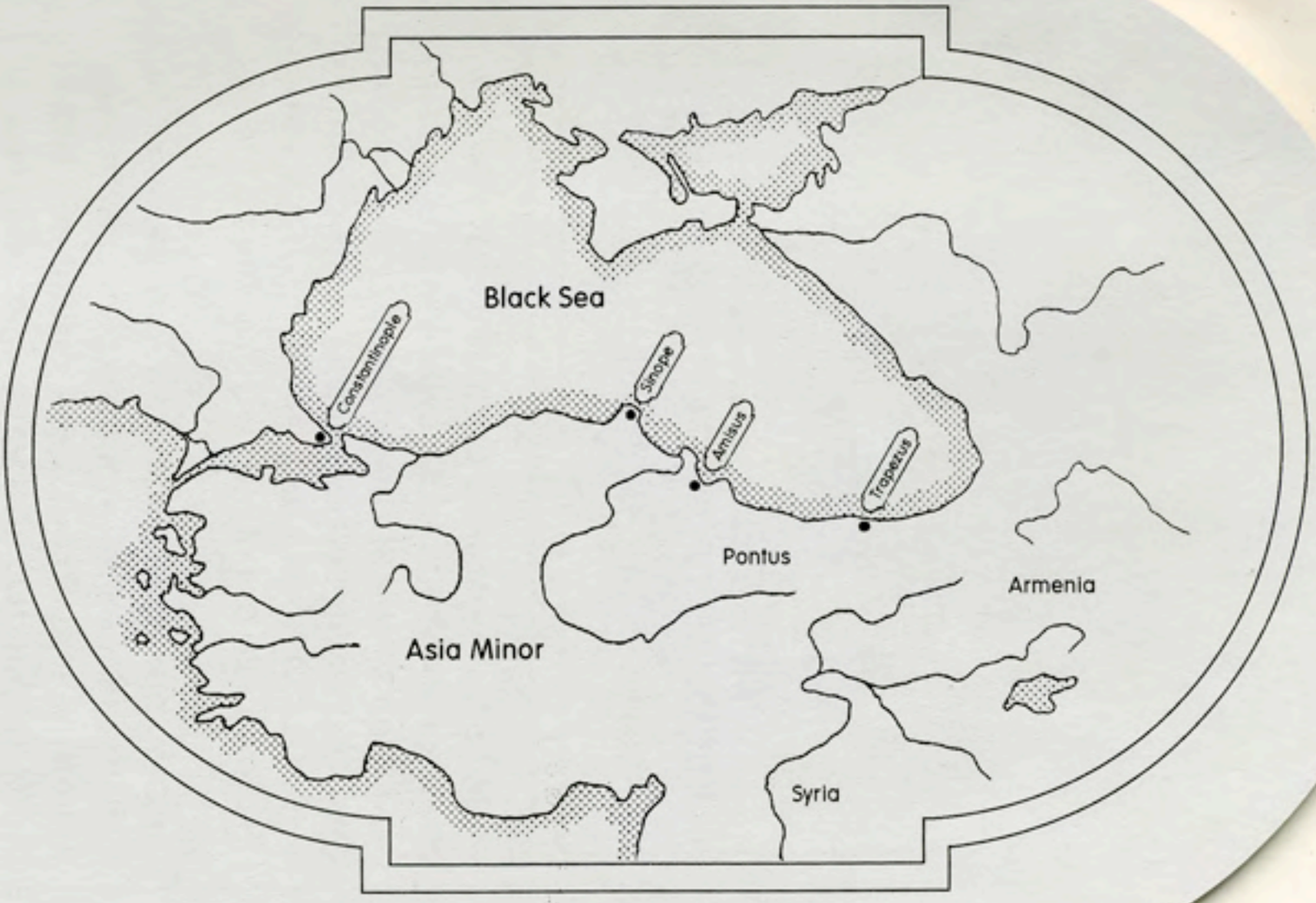
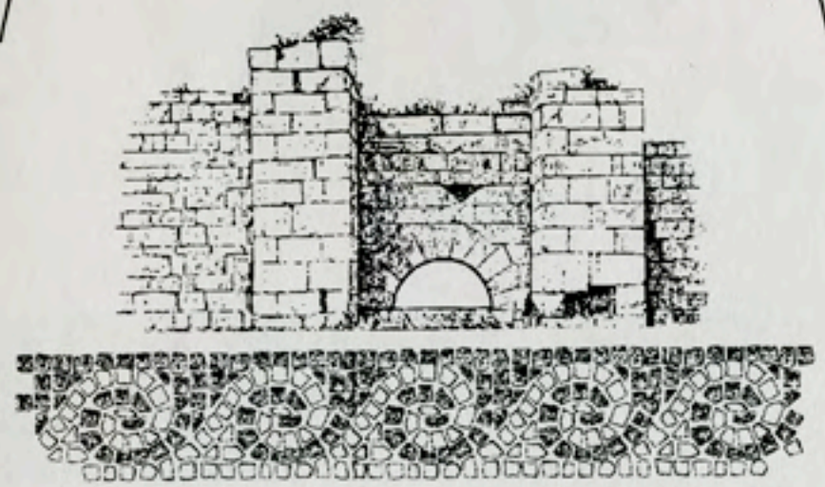
Other books by M. Kasper
The Shapes and Spacing of the Letters (1995)
All Cotton Briefs, Expanded Edition (1992)
Plans for the Night (1987)
Verbo-Visuals (1985)
Billy! Turn Down That TV! (1983)
Chinese English Sentence Cards (1979)
Border Crossing (1973)

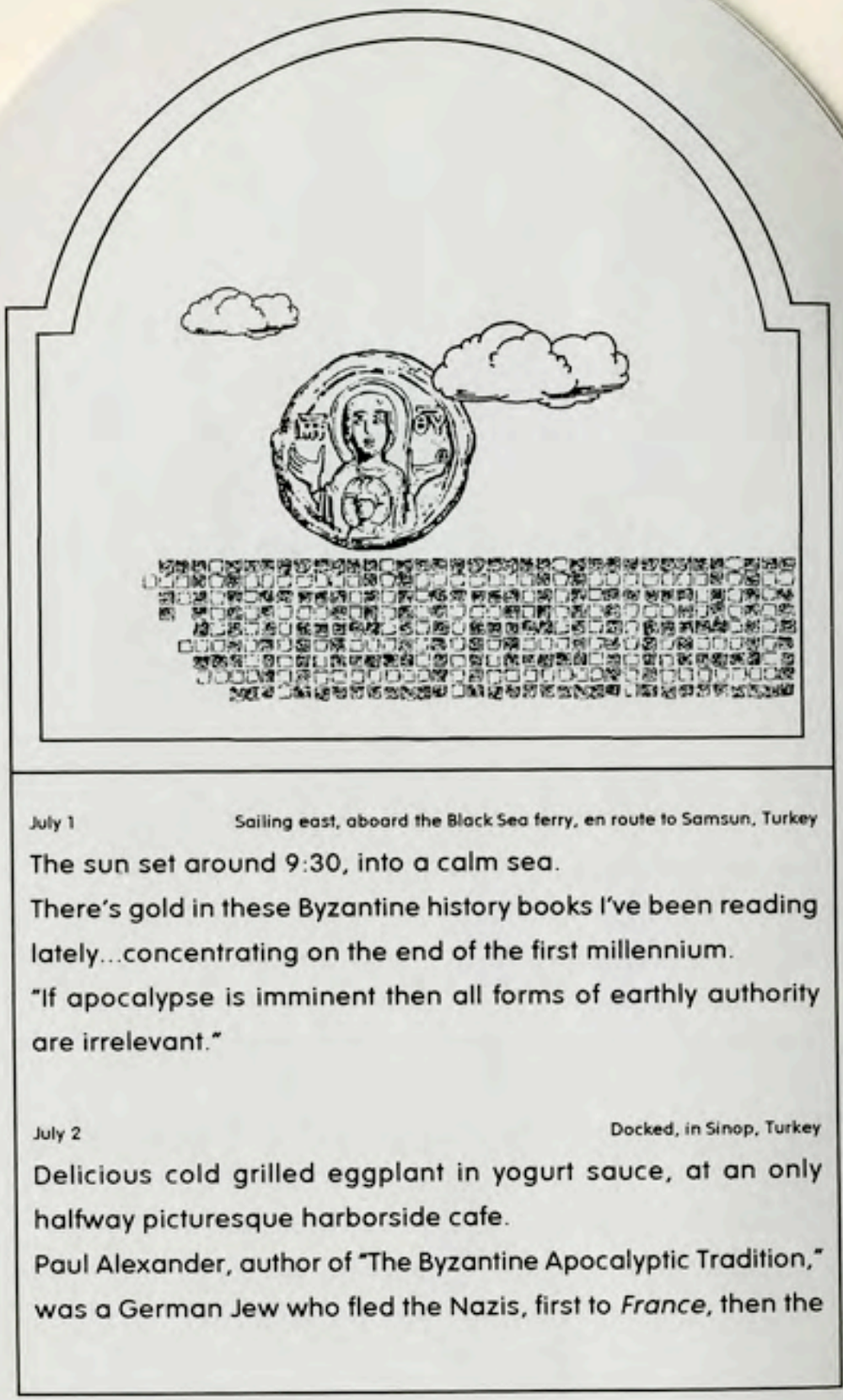
THE USE OF "BYZANTINE" AS A PERJORATIVE MEANING OVER-COMPLICATED AND CONSERVATIVE, INCLINED TO INTRIGUE AND CORRUPT, APPEARS TO HAVE ORIGINATED IN FRANCE, IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, AMONG THOSE OPPOSED TO ABSOLUTIST GOVERNMENT AND ORTHODOX RELIGION.


Black Sea
Constantinople
Sinope
Amisus
Trapezus
Pontus
Armenia
Asia Minor
Syria



▬ THE GREAT "BASILEUS" ( THE EMPEROR, THAT IS ) STOOD ON DECK AS HIS SHIP SAILED INTO PORT, PERHAPS, WATCHING SWALLOWS SWIRL AROUND THE ANCIENT RAMPARTS AT SUNSET. BY THEN, THE RAMPARTS OF *AMISUS* PROBABLY INCLUDED STONES CUT UNDER HITTITE, IONIAN, MITHRIDATIC, ROMAN, AND BYZANTINE RULE. "RULE" MAY BE TOO MILD A WORD.

▬ IN MIDSUMMER, A THOUSAND YEARS AGO, AFTER HIS ARMY'S AWFUL VICTORY OVER THE FATIMIDS IN *SYRIA* AND HAVING THEN SECURED *ARMENIA'S* VASSALAGE BY VIRTUE OF AN ASSASSINATION, THE BASILEUS COULD HAVE RETURNED WEST TO *CONSTANTINOPLE* FROM *TRAPEZUS* BY SEA.



July 1 — Sailing east, aboard the Black Sea ferry, en route to Samsun, Turkey

The sun set around 9:30, into a calm sea.

There's gold in these Byzantine history books I've been reading lately...concentrating on the end of the first millennium.

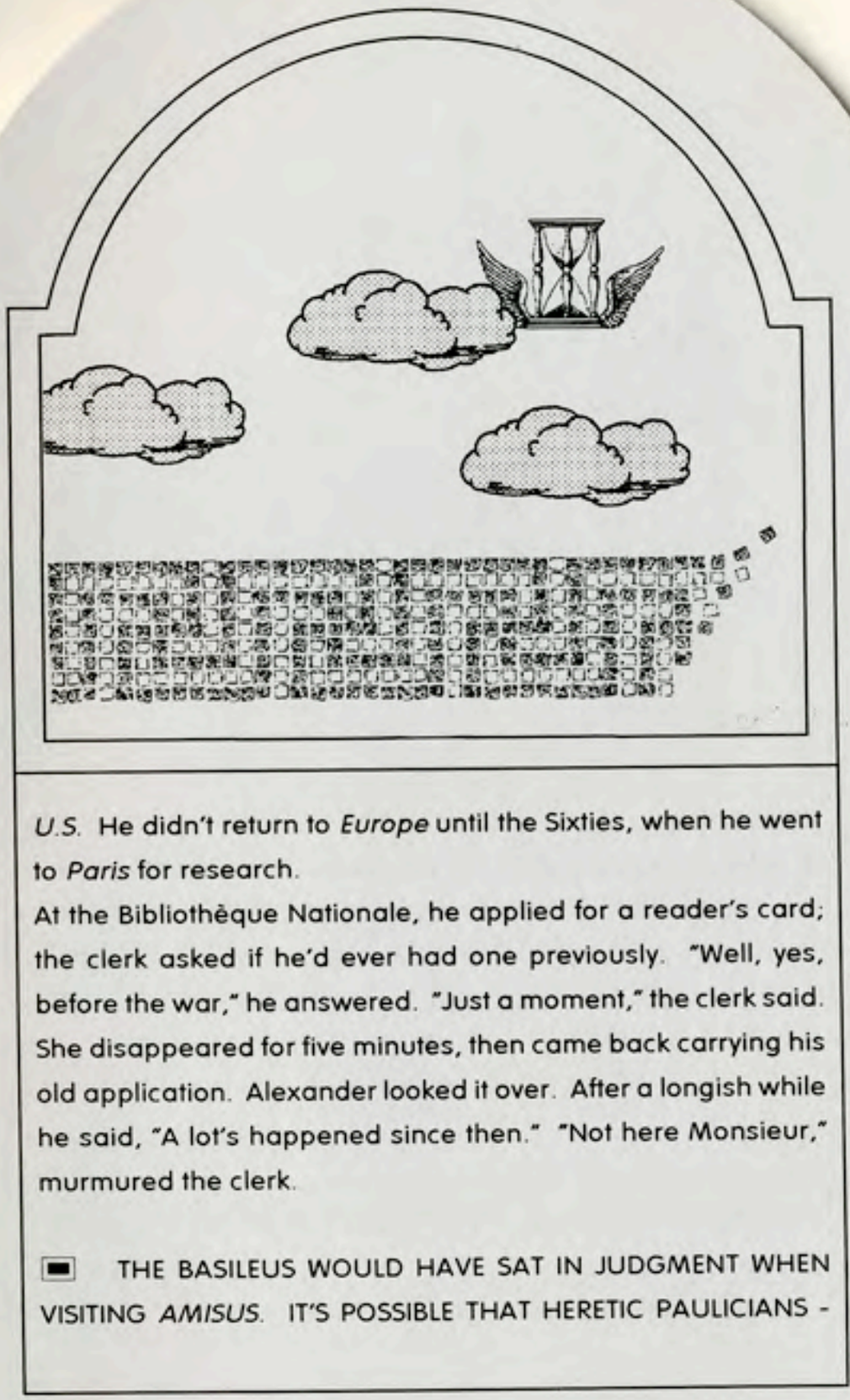
"If apocalypse is imminent then all forms of earthly authority are irrelevant."

July 2 — Docked, in Sinop, Turkey

Delicious cold grilled eggplant in yogurt sauce, at an only halfway picturesque harborside cafe.

Paul Alexander, author of "The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition," was a German Jew who fled the Nazis, first to *France*, then the

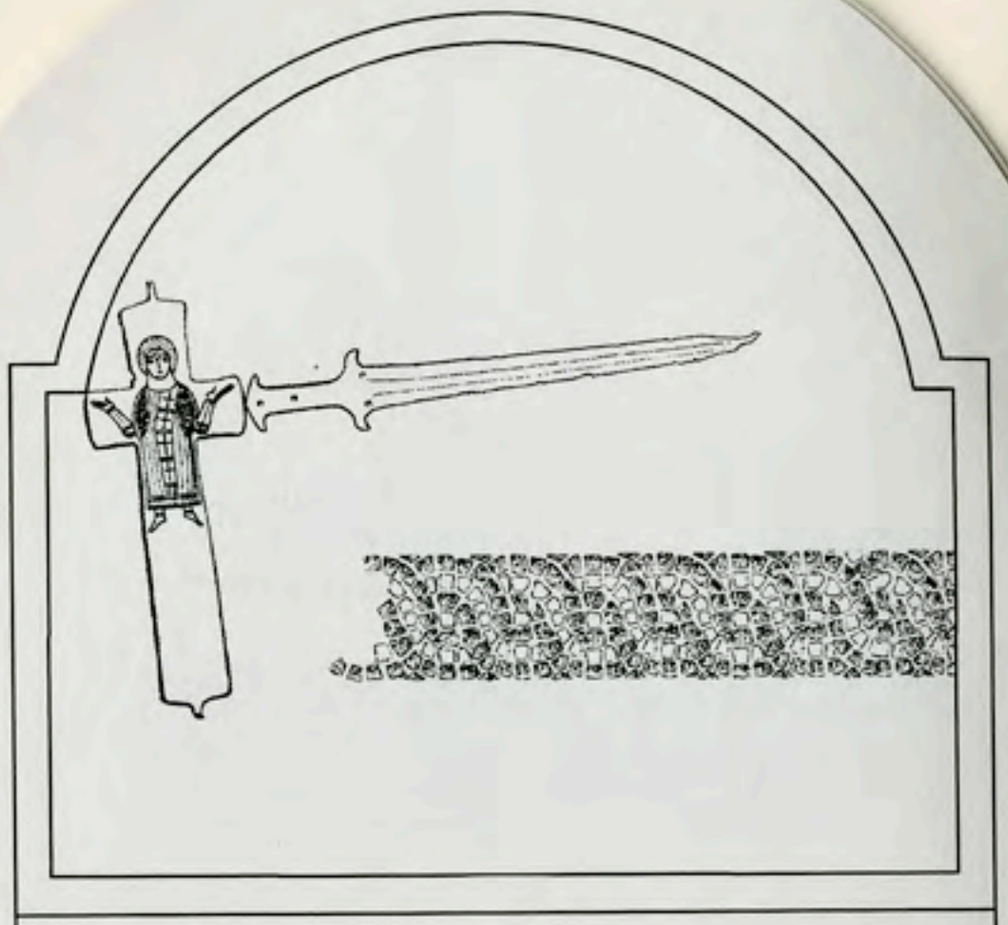




*U.S.* He didn't return to *Europe* until the Sixties, when he went to *Paris* for research.

At the Bibliothèque Nationale, he applied for a reader's card; the clerk asked if he'd ever had one previously. "Well, yes, before the war," he answered. "Just a moment," the clerk said. She disappeared for five minutes, then came back carrying his old application. Alexander looked it over. After a longish while he said, "A lot's happened since then." "Not here Monsieur," murmured the clerk.

▬ THE BASILEUS WOULD HAVE SAT IN JUDGMENT WHEN VISITING *AMISUS*. IT'S POSSIBLE THAT HERETIC PAULICIANS -



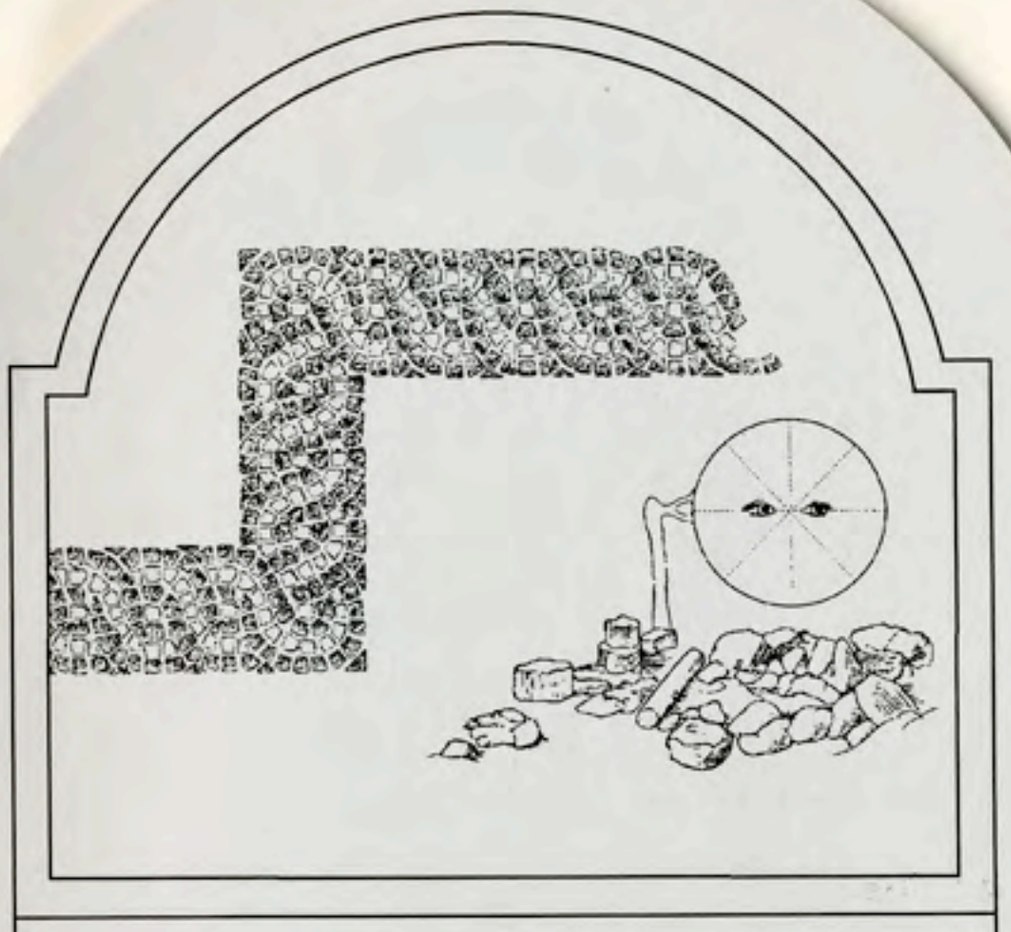
ICONOCLASTS - WERE STILL ACTIVE IN *PONTUS*, AND THAT THE BISHOPS DRAGGED SOME BEFORE THE BASILEUS SO HE WOULD MAKE EXAMPLES OF THEM. "THOSE WHO DESTROY THE SAINTS' IMAGES," THE BASILEUS MIGHT HAVE PRONOUNCED, "WHO SAY ONE SHOULDN'T GAZE AT THEM, SHALL BE GRANTED THEIR WISH, AFTER A FASHION, BY HAVING THEIR OWN EYES GOUGED OUT."

July 4 Samsun

History-writing tends to be idolatrous; it loves illustration. Iconoclasts, on the other hand, held that the most important things are uncircumscribable.

In the meager Archæological Museum on Atatürk Bulvari,

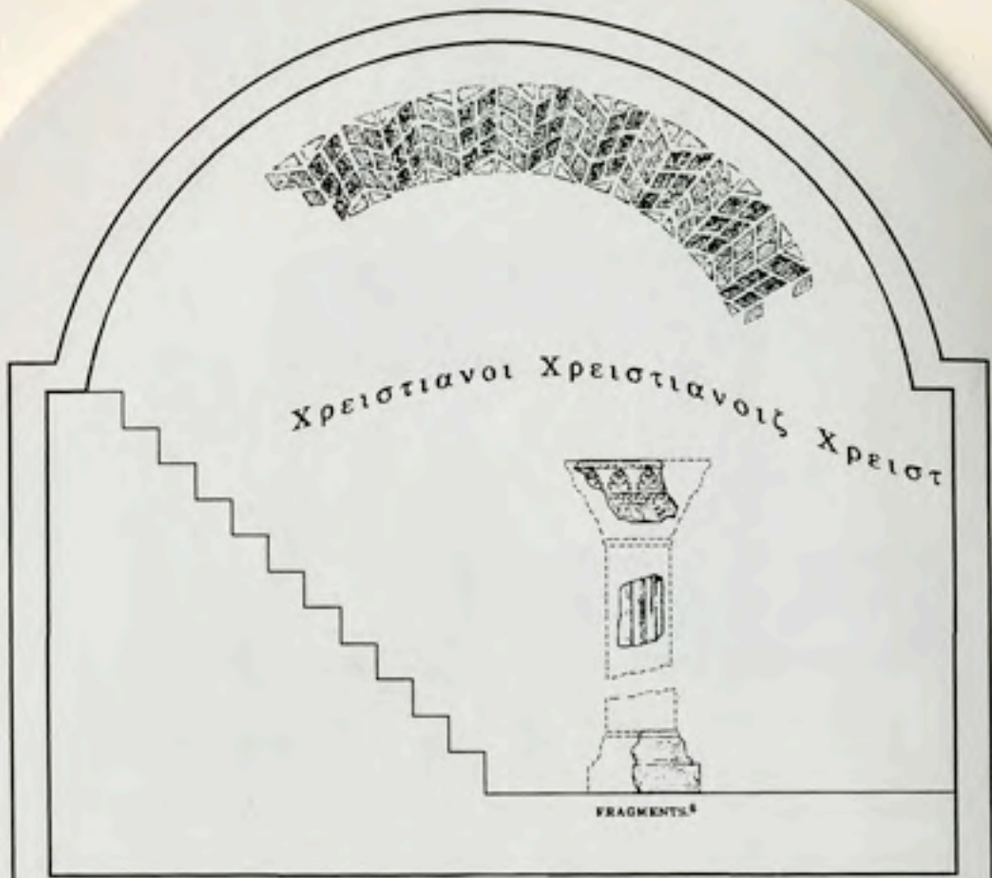




there's a large mosaic floor with vignettes from the myth of Thetis, each of which has its own gorgeous border. So far, not much of ancient *Amisus* (*Samsun*'s name in Greek, Roman, and Byzantine times) has been excavated. Anyway, little will have survived intact. It was sacked so often. Currently the site's inside a restricted military zone; one imagines a training ground for U.S.-armed Kurd-killers, littered with shards.

July 5 Samsun

History is most often most useful to those in power, obviously. Prophecy too: "Blessed are those servants whom the Master finds awake when He comes."




▬ TWO SNOBBISH ARISTOCRATS, THE GRAND CURATOR AND THE LOGOTHETE (WHO MAY HAVE BEEN THERE), HAD THEY NOT BEEN IN SUCH A RUSH TO RETURN TO THE CAPITAL TO PROTECT THEIR STATUS, MIGHT HAVE ENJOYED THE HERETICS' DEFENSE, WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN ELOQUENT.

July 6 Samsun

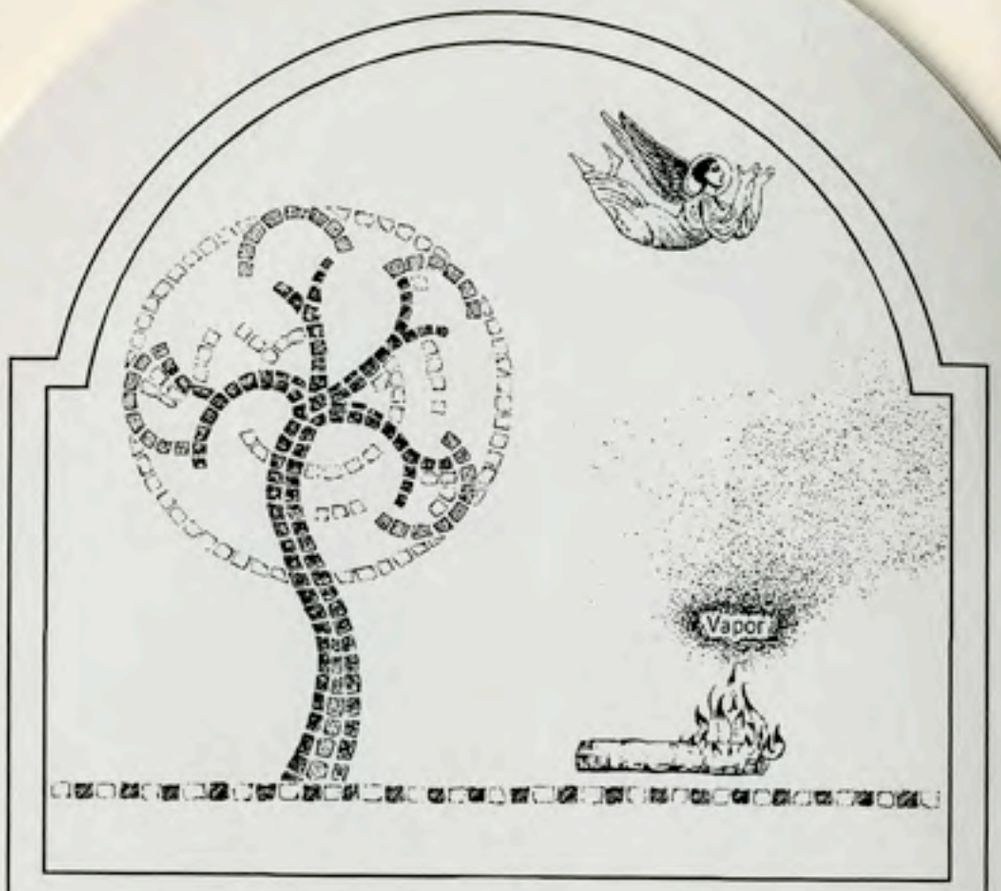
Unlike philosophers like Heraclitus, Thucydides and other historians proposed that things recur.

For instance: in *Byzantium* in the year 1000 the political situation could be said to have been a bit like ours, with church fanatics, techno-functionaries, and rich families vying for control, forming

and breaking alliances in a dizzy round of corruption, while most people lived short, fraught lives.

▬ FOR ALL WE KNOW, THERE WAS EVEN TOPICAL SATIRE: "HEARD THE ONE ABOUT THE KIDS WHO TRIED TO STEAL A MONK'S HOLY PICTURE?

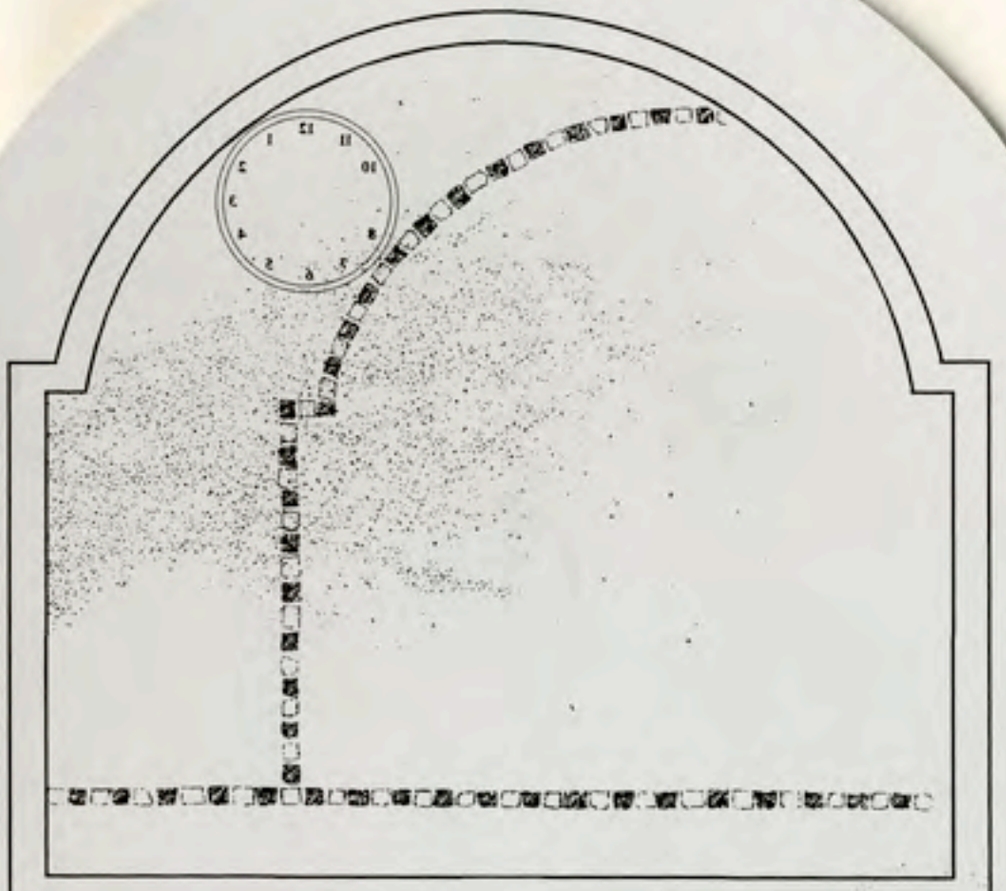
"THEY DARED HIM TO CLIMB A TREE, HOPING HE'D LEAVE THE ICON ON THE GROUND, BUT HE TUCKED IT INTO HIS BELT AND SHIMMIED ALL THE WAY TO THE TOP. 'NICE WORK, FATHER, BUT HOW COME YOU TOOK YOUR ICON WITH YOU?' THEY CALLED UP. 'WELL,' SAID HE, 'YOU NEVER KNOW WHERE YOU'LL FIND A PICTURE HOOK.'"




MEANWHILE, SUPERSTITIOUS ASSOCIATES OF THE SENTENCED ICONOCLASTS CONCEIVABLY DELIVERED FIERY SPEECHES IN THE LOCAL ACROPOLIS, SAYING, "BEWARE IDOLATORS, THIS IS THE YEAR, THIS IS THE APPOINTED YEAR, WHEN THE LORD GOD WILL RAISE UP FROM POVERTY A NEW EMPRESS WHO WILL WALK IN GREAT RIGHTEOUSNESS YET USHER IN THE EVENTS OF THE END. THEN WOE TO THE CITY OF SEVEN HILLS FOR THE TWENTIETH LETTER WILL BE ACCLAIMED ALONG ITS WALLS AND AN UNCLEAN EMPEROR WILL ISSUE FORTH, FROM HERE, FROM *PONTUS*, TO OVERTURN THE ALTAR IN THE CHURCH OF HOLY WISDOM."

ONLY A FEW TOWNSPEOPLE WOULD HAVE BEEN FULLY



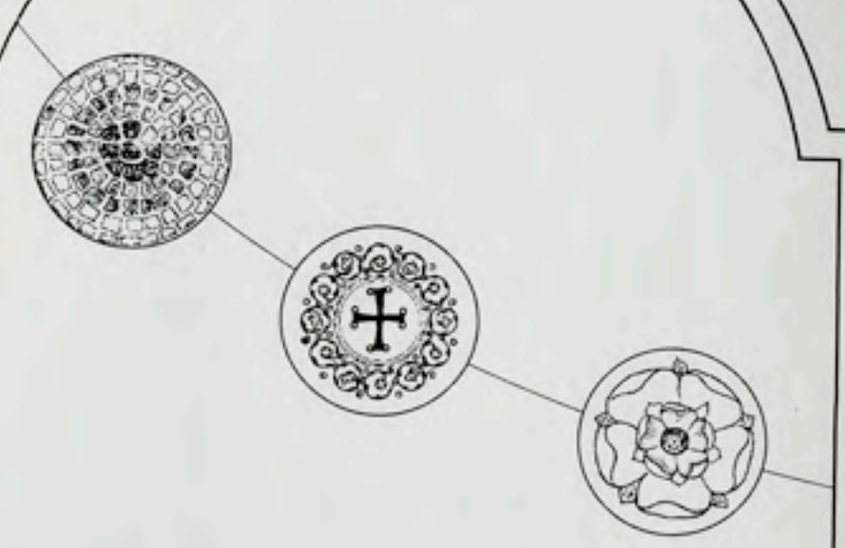


PERSUADED, I'M SURE, BUT CALENDRICAL THREATS PROBABLY MADE MANY NERVOUS, IF SUCH A FEELING CAN BE ASCRIBED.

July 9 Samsun

So much in these history books – new ones as well as old – seems nostalgic: sentimental, nervous about the future, self-serving.

Is it nostalgia that's brought me back, thirty years after my brief stint teaching here? I hadn't thought so, but what else could it be? Maybe not nostalgia for the place, maybe nostalgia for how avid I was. Now I'm merely one of the city's rare tourists, it being over-crowded and unattractive.



Also, at the bank this morning, I learned that my one-time fellow-teacher Carl Tobey died, recently, who'd been a poet (published in "Zero" magazine) and musician in postwar *Paris* before escaping to *Samsun* all alone in the mid-Fifties.
A climate just right for tending roses, he found.
A finicky man, and sullen. A heretic. I wish I'd known him better.
May he rest in peace.

July 10 Samsun

From the hotel window I can see the breakwater I used to walk out along, to sit with what I imagined were waves rolling all the way from *Russia* and get my head together. "Kafan nasıl?"

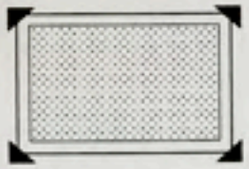
(Turkish for "How's your head?") was how dope smokers there greeted one another then.
I'd left home, like others, like some Byzantine warrior, pledging to return with the head of an enemy. "I'll be just as happy," my father may have replied, "to see you return without a head."

▬ POSSIBLY THE BASILEUS AND HIS COURT, HEARING WILD PROPHECIES, FEARED THE NATIVES OF *AMISUS* WOULD STONE THEM. MAYBE, MISLED BY THE GRAND CURATOR AND THE LOGOTHETE, THE IMPERIAL COHORT LOST THEIR HEADS AND FLED, SETTING FIRES AS THEY WENT. OR MAYBE THE ICONOCLASTS SET THEM. IN ANY CASE, THE WOODEN BUILDINGS WOULD'VE

BURNED EASILY. MANY COMMONFOLK, WHO'D NO DOUBT HOPED SIMPLY TO STAY OUT OF IT, WOULD'VE BEEN INSIDE.

July 11 Samsun

By the way, not only is this sketchy episode from Byzantine history mostly made up, one of its main premises, one which adds both incident and authority, is false: in *Amisus*, a millennium ago, it wouldn't have been the fateful year 1000; they counted differently. It could have been any of several sorts of dates in use, "annus mundi," "indictions," etc., all, however, unremarkable numbers, psycho-chronologically speaking. (Never trust snapshots, Iconoclasts would have argued.)

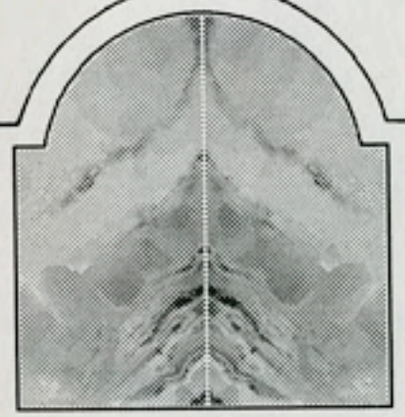


July 13 Samsun

My last day here, my first photo session, shooting plastic trash scattered near a housewall between Fuar Jaddesi and the railroad tracks, built of recycled bricks, limestone, and marble, the wall that is, some stones look like they were cut centuries ago, many centuries, mortar crumbling, no trace of lacing left, no nostalgia, leaning a little, but who knows? it might stay up.

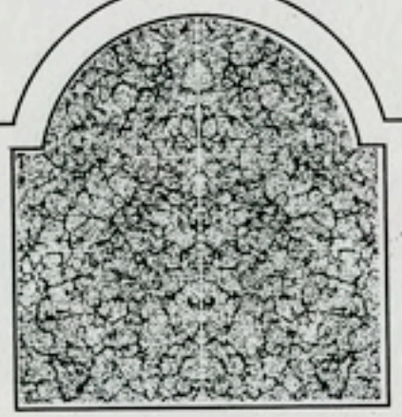
July 14 Istanbul

As I dozed aboard the overnight bus from *Samsun*, it dawned on me - for what it's worth - that since the past's a lot about what's dead, the Epitaph's perhaps the truest kind of history-writing.



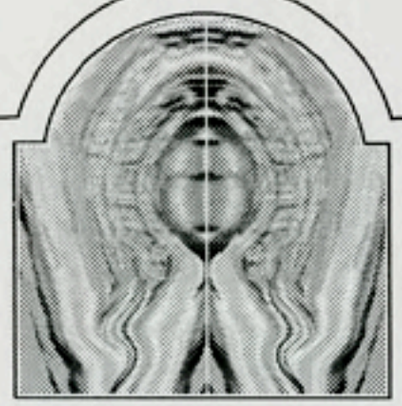
HERE LIES DIOGENES
THE KOMMERKIARIOS
OF AMISUS
WHO SUFFOCATED
IN THE FLAMES IN THE
THIRTEENTH INDICTION

A CURSE BE ON
THE BASILEUS
WHO BURNT OUR CITY
AND ALSO ON ANY WHO DARE
DISTURB THESE BONES



HELENA SPOUDASIS
LIES BURIED HERE

HER SIX CHILDREN
WANT THEIR DESCENDANTS
TO REMEMBER WELL
HER SAINTLY GENEROSITY
YES
SHE POSSESSED OTHER TRAITS
LESS ATTRACTIVE
BUT THAT GOOD ONE
WAS PARAMOUNT



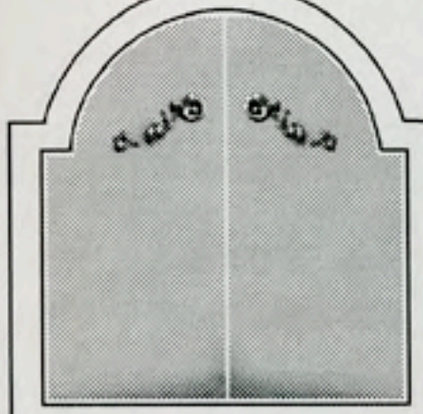
YEAR 397
10TH DAY OF PEREITOS

IN MEMORY OF
ALEXANDROS
DISCIPLE OF
THE HOLY SHEPHERD
WHO
HAVING PAUL
FOLLOWED AFTER

ARRIA MY TWIN
LIES BURIED
HERE

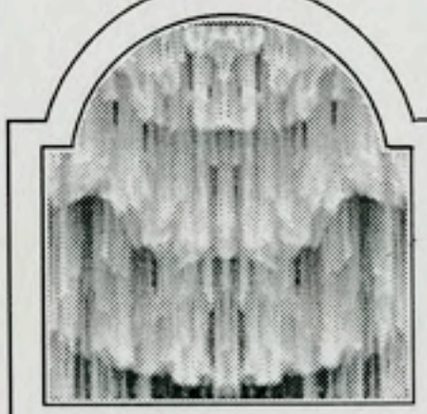
GELLUS THAT DOLT
JUST THE OTHER DAY
ASKED ME
WAS IT YOU
OR YOUR SISTER
WHO DIED





PSELLOS

REMEMBERED FONDLY
BY FEW



HEREIN
YOUR FRAGILE REMAINS
DEAR BABY MARCELLA

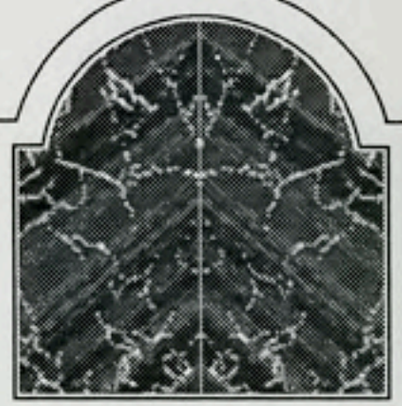
MAY GOD FORGIVE
THE INEPT SURGEON
ALEXANDER ZOTIKOS

WE CANNOT

I AURELIA IOULIAS
WHILE STILL LIVING
CONSTRUCTED
THIS KOIMETERION

LAY NONE OTHER
THAN MY DAUGHTER
HERE WITH ME

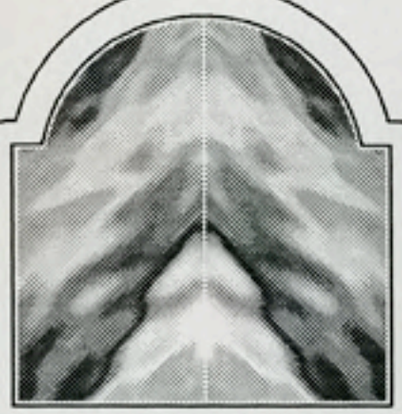
BLESSING TO ALL



HERE LIES LEON
THE HAZELNUT TRADER
FROM TRAPEZUS
WHO WAS TOSSED
FROM HIS CART
AND CRACKED HIS SKULL

UNEVEN AND UNREPAIRED
ALAS
AFTER DECADES
OF SEISMIC SHIFT
THIS COBBLED COAST ROAD
MAKES FOR BUMPY RIDES

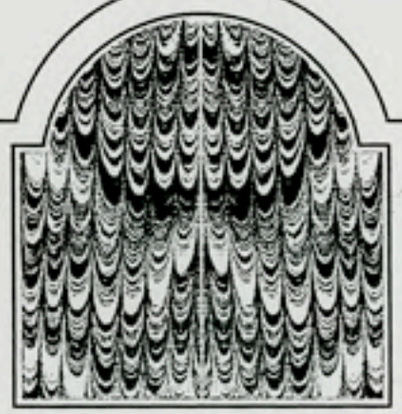




ZOE XANTHOPOULOS
DRANK A POTION
OF POWDER SCRAPED
FROM HOLY IMAGES
AND WAS CURED

AS ALWAYS

BUT TEMPORARILY



ANNUS MUNDI
6508

— CLIO MEIROS —

THE EMPEROR BLINDED HER

THE LORD THOUGH
LOVED HER ZEAL

WSW

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