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Rain from God(s)?

How can the reliefs depicting the 'Rain Miracle' from the Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome illuminate the conflicting Christian and pagan textual accounts of this event?

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Introduction

In the midst of the Marcomannic Wars, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a band of Roman legionaries were blockaded by rebellious Quadi tribes on the German frontier. With dry throats gasping for water and too exhausted to offer a fight, pleas to the gods were lifted up to the heavens. Thankfully for the legionaries, an ominous dark mass of clouds gathered above and swept towards the battleground, catching the advancing Quadi in a thundering downpour and clash of lightning that killed hundreds and saved the Romans from peril.

This event in the late second century AD is known as the 'Rain Miracle' and held great significance during Marcus Aurelius' reign and beyond. Some hailed Eastern cults, others the piety of the emperor and later Christian writers from whom the stories have come down to us assumed their God was involved in this 'miracle' too. One piece of archaeological evidence vital for an understanding of the 'Rain Miracle' is the marble Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. Standing at 100 Roman feet (29.9m) tall in what was once the Campus Martius, the Column has a detailed continuous spiral narrative frieze of the Marcomannic Wars along its shaft and remains a monument that continues to immortalise the deified emperor's achievements in stone. But on the panel depicting this event, a non-canonical deity is shown that has caused much speculation. Who is this god and why would such ambiguity have been employed by the artists?

This article will examine the textual sources in relation to the reliefs on the Column

and see what we can learn from the conflicting information they offer.

The 'Rain Miracle' on the Column

The Column of Marcus Aurelius (see Fig 1) remains in situ in the ancient Campus Martius, (modern Piazza Colonna), west of the Via Flaminia, south of the Ara Pacis, north of the Temple of Divine Hadrian and perhaps stood in front of a Temple to the Divine Marcus (see map Fig. 2). It is therefore located in an important area of Rome particularly as it is along the military triumphal route to the Capitoline.

The 'Rain Miracle' is shown on Scene XVI¹ (see Fig 3) and is carefully placed facing the viewer in the Via Flaminia low down on the third spiral making it easy to identify, which would of course also have been intensified by coloured paint, which is no longer visible. It was therefore an important and prominent scene which emphasises its importance in the overall narrative of the Marcomannic Wars.

The relief shows groups of Roman legionaries marching from the camp, one general with his arm raised to the skies and then the haunting image of a bearded deity; mouth open, eyes looking upwards with a creased brow of exertion. His arms are outstretched, pouring down the rain as he sweeps by - beard, body and wings all merging into waves of rain. The destruction is shown below with the twisted dead bodies of the 'barbarians' and their horses and the next scene shows the *deditio* – one barbarian kneeling in surrender to Marcus Aurelius and captives below.

As the Column was constructed at some point between AD 176 and AD 180² it is the earliest piece of contemporaneous evidence that survives and makes this graphic representation extremely important to analyse the 'Rain Miracle' in relation to the many later literary sources that have come down to us.

The 'Rain Miracle' in the Texts

1 According to the 116 scenes divided in Roman numerals by Petersen 1896, though we must remember that in many ways these scene divisions are artificial for the practical purposes of casting and photographing - on the Column they run together with no breaks.

2 The dating of the monument has been of concern to several historians who believe it affects its purpose and function. See the opposing arguments of Beckmann 2011: 22-52 (honorific purpose for Marcus' triumph in AD 176) and Coarelli 2008: 32 (built by Commodus as a funerary monument for his father).

No less than thirty-six sources³ spanning the second to the fourteenth centuries mention the 'Rain Miracle' and they can be grouped according to whether the source supports a pagan or Christian interpretation of the occurrence. They can also be reduced to some key examples as many of the later versions either copy or embellish the accounts of Cassius Dio or Eusebius who wrote the fullest early interpretations of the story. The variety of sources means that the legend must have some basis as none of the sources question the veracity of the event. Rather the debate lies in the different interpretations of the same story and what this means for our understanding of the 'Rain Miracle'.

The Pagan Sources

There are two main traditions in the pagan sources which speak of who was the cause of the 'Rain Miracle': Harnouphis the Egyptian priest invoking Hermes Aerios; and the piety of Marcus himself based on his personal relationship with Jupiter and the gods. Interestingly it is only Tertullian, a Christian source, who names Jupiter as the deity that most pagans hailed in thanks for the miracle.

Harnouphis and Hermes Aerios

Cassius Dio is the closest contemporary pagan source, writing in the 220s AD around forty years after the event. Although his histories for this period only survive in the epitomes recorded by Xiphilinus in the eleventh century, Dio's version of the 'Rain Miracle' was well-known in antiquity as the Christian tradition often follows his description whilst refuting the influence of the pagan gods:

...The Romans...were in a terrible plight from fatigue, wounds, the heat of the sun, and thirst, and so could neither fight nor retreat, but were standing at the line and at their several posts, scorched by the heat, when suddenly many clouds gathered and a mighty rain, not without divine interposition, burst upon them. Indeed, there is a story to the effect that Harnouphis, an Egyptian magician, who was a companion of Marcus, had invoked by means of enchantments various deities and in particular Mercury, the god of the air (Hermes Aerios), and by this means attracted the rain.....So intent were most of them on drinking that they would have suffered from the enemy's onset had not a violent hail storm and numerous thunderbolts fallen upon the ranks of the foe.....[Marcus] was

3 See the collated sources in Kovács 2009: 23-92.

saluted Imperator by the soldiers for the seventh time. (Dio Roman History, LXXII.8-10)

The specific details which Dio gives here relating to Harnouphis and Hermes Aerios seem unlikely to have been invented by the author. We know that Harnouphis was a real Egyptian priest who travelled with the Roman army during the Marcomannic campaign as an altar bearing his name as ‘the sacred scribe of Egypt’ was found during excavations at Aquileia (Fig. 4). However, the altar is not dedicated to Hermes Aerios but to a female goddess, most probably Isis, so this altar may date from before the ‘Rain Miracle’ occurrence. We know from the *Scriptores Historia Augustae* that Marcus summoned foreign cults to Rome during the plague of the late 160s AD.⁴ The appearance of an Egyptian priest travelling with the army therefore adheres to the ‘*peregrini ritus*’ description of Marcus’ attentiveness to religious issues during this time. There is also numismatic evidence to suggest that ‘Hermes Aerios’ was integrated into state cult by the building of a temple to him in Rome. These coins (Fig. 5) with the legend RELIG[io] AUG[usti] and dating to late AD 173 show on their obverse an Egyptian style *aedicula* with a figure of Mercury inside, distinguished by his *caduceus*.⁵ The coinage shows that the god invoked by Harnouphis (probably Thoth-Shou, god of the air⁶) had to be elevated into the Roman pantheon if he was to be recognised as a *religio* rather than *superstitio*.⁷ This was not unusual, as this occurred with Isis and Serapis in the first century BC and Israelowich suggests that the Egyptian deity was promoted by the emperor and Senate in response to the uprisings in the east under Avidius Cassius to show that a native Egyptian deity supported his reign.⁸ However, it is important to note that Dio uses the caveat ‘*there is a story*’⁹ suggesting that the majority of the populace would have simply assumed Jupiter was responsible as king of the gods and master of lightning.

The piety of Marcus and relationship with Jupiter

The tradition that Marcus’ prayers were answered by Jupiter to bring about the Rain Miracle is unsurprising as the emperor was often considered the representative of the

4 *SHA Marcus Antoninus*, 13.

5 *BMC* No. 1441, 1442, 1443, 1461, 1462, 1463.

6 *CAH* 2000: 174.

7 Rubin 1979: 376.

8 Israelowich 2008: 97.

9 *Dio Roman History*, LXXII.8.

gods on earth. To show Roman superiority in battle it was natural to emphasise that the gods favoured their leader. There are five sources which follow this pagan description. In chronological order the first is Themistius' oration from the late fourth century AD:

Antoninus, the emperor of the Romans, who was also called Pius, when his army was suffering from thirst, lifted his hands up toward heaven and said "I call you with my hand, Giver of Life, with which I have not killed anyone and I pray to you". With this prayer he implored the deity; clouds gathered in the clear sky and brought water to the soldiers. I myself saw this event painted in a picture, where the emperor is praying in the battle line and his soldiers are holding up their helmets for the rain and filling them with the divine water. (Themistius Oratio, XV.191b)

Themistius was a pagan orator but held favour with Christian emperors of the fourth century, being the tutor of the young Arcadius. It is therefore interesting that he chooses the piety of the emperor as an explanation for the miracle rather than the Christian story or the Dio account of an Egyptian deity. The reference to Antoninus Pius may be confusing for the modern reader but Marcus held this name in his imperial titlature. What is most interesting in this account is the picture (*graphe*) that Themistius says he had seen. Although this cannot have been the Column as Marcus is not seen in the 'Rain Miracle' here (unless he believed the rain deity to be an abstract representation of Aurelius) the image of soldiers holding their helmets and shields up to catch the rain does correspond. Perhaps there were paintings of the miracle displayed in other contexts such as the landscapes and placards carried during the triumph or sent back to Rome from the front line.¹⁰ Nonetheless it reveals that the Column was not the only pictorial representation of the event to be seen by the public.

As expected from one of our main sources of information for the second century AD, the *Scriptores Historia Augustae*, written at the turn of the fourth century, mentions the 'Rain Miracle':

By his prayers he summoned a thunderbolt from heaven against a war-engine of the enemy and successfully brought rain for his men when they

10 Kovács 2009: 138.

were suffering from thirst. (SHA Marcus Antoninus 24.4)

Although the brevity of the account is striking, these histories are quite short in themselves. The 'Lightning Miracle' mentioned first is shown in Scene XI of the Column (Fig. 6) with Marcus on the right shown praying whilst a siege engine is set alight. However, the *SHA* has a tendency towards flattery and gossip and so the invocation of Marcus as the saviour may play into this and affect its reliability as a source.

The 'Rain Miracle' is also mentioned in the mysterious *Oracula Sibyllina*. The oracles that have survived are not the original prophetic scrolls kept on the Capitoline as these were destroyed by fire in 83 BC and the copies lost after AD 405. This source should therefore be termed the 'pseudo-Sibylline oracles' as they were written between the second and sixth centuries AD:

*And he shall sack the whole land of the Germans/When a great sign of
God shall be displayed/From heaven, and shall for the king's piety/Save
men in brazen armor and distress;/For God who is in heaven and hears
all things/ Shall wet him with unseasonable rain/ When he prays.*

(Oracula Sibyllina, XII 255-60)

These oracles were written by various Jewish and Christian authors mixing pagan mythology with their monotheistic beliefs. Therefore we must remember that the stories recounted here are not prophecies for they were already history, or at least mythological history, by the time the books were composed. Nevertheless, this makes the 'oracles' useful as a historical source as they tell what became the now canonical account of these historical/mythological stories. Therefore what is most interesting here is that it is Marcus' prayers which summon the rain rather than those of the Christians, despite the fact that the Christian version of the story would have been known and widespread by this time.

Due to its late composition, one of the most interesting sources which recounts the pagan version is the *Historia Syntomos* of Psellus written before AD 1078:

*His relation to God was of a devout nature considering his paganism: he
once prayed the rain out of heaven for his thirsty soldiers and he kept off
the enemies with sudden lightnings.*

(Psellus *Historia Syntomos*, 1117.482)

Here we have a very late source which uses Themisitus' pagan version of the story despite the fact that by the eleventh century the Christian tradition would have been entrenched through Eusebius' and Orosius' accounts.

Finally, it is of note that only in one of Tertullian's writings from AD 212 is Jupiter explicitly mentioned:

*Marcus Aurelius also, in his expedition to Germany, by the prayers his Christian soldiers offered to God, got rain in that well known thirst. When, indeed, have not droughts been put away by our kneelings and our fastings? At times like these, moreover, the people crying to 'the God of gods, the alone Omnipotent' under the name of Jupiter, have borne witness to our God. (Tertullian *Ad Scapulam*, 4)*

Although he dismisses the pagan deity in favour of the Christian God, it gives us evidence that Jupiter was being honoured in relation to the miracle at this time.

The Christian Sources

With several Christians talking of the 'Rain Miracle' in antiquity, we have a great many texts preserved as the story continued in the Christian tradition, independent of the pagan accounts. Some of the Christian authors such as Gregory of Nyssa embroidered the story with many rhetorical flourishes and it was the inclusion of the miracle in the histories of Orosius whose popularity in the Middle Ages has ensured that the 'Rain Miracle' has continued to be known today.¹¹ However, the apologetic nature of the Christian writings leaves questions for the historian about the reliability of the account being represented, especially on religious matters where reports are so subjective.

Tertullian is the earliest of all our sources (apart from the image on the Column) to describe the 'Rain Miracle'. He was the first Christian author to write in Latin and his *Apologeticum* was written in AD 197 in Carthage:

We can produce a protector if the letters of the most grave Emperor

11 Kovács 2009: 70.

Marcus Aurelius be searched, in which he testifies that the well-known Germanic drought was dispelled by the shower obtained through the prayers of the Christians who happened to be in the army. And although he did not openly abolish the penalty incurred by members of that sect, yet in another way he openly averted it by the addition of a condemnatory sentence on the accusers and that a more terrible one.

(Tertullian *Apologeticum*, V.25)

Despite the apologetic nature of the source, Tertullian actually uses the episode of the 'Rain Miracle' as a way to show Christian loyalty to the emperor. He does not use the episode to simply show the supremacy of Christianity over the pagan gods but tries to show that Christians wanted to be a part of the Roman Empire.¹² This is also where mention of a letter written by Marcus to the Senate enters the tradition. However, the lack of evidence for any condemnation of those who persecuted Christians apart from this letter that Tertullian mentions suggests that even by this point Tertullian had seen a forged version which aimed to present the Christians in a favourable light.

The next most important Christian source from which many others copy in later centuries is Eusebius. As Bishop of Caesarea from AD 314-340 he was a high profile figure among the early Church fathers, sitting at the right hand of Constantine at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. His first writing to mention the 'Rain Miracle' is the *Chronicon* written around AD 303 which listed the history of the world year by year:

The emperor Antoninus sometimes personally participated in many of the wars that arose against him, sometimes he appointed very noble commanders. Among them, a rainstorm of the Divinity once was sent for Pertinax and his army while he was fighting with the emperor in the land of the Quadi and was oppressed with thirst; while on the other hand, thunderbolts fell upon the Germans and Sarmatians and slew almost all of them. There is extant a letter of Marcus Aurelius, a most serious emperor, in which it is witnessed that a drought of Germany was finished, perhaps by the prayers of the Christian soldiers, rain having been obtained.

(Eusebius *Chronicon*, 222.1)

12 Helgeland 1979: 737.

It is interesting to see that Eusebius is more cautious in his recounting of the story, not saying that the Christians brought about the rain with certainty but references the elusive letter of Marcus mentioned by Tertullian. Also, he says that Pertinax was the commander of the fateful army - he could be the Roman legionary commander seen on the Column relief, though this is highly speculative. The 'Rain Miracle' is also mentioned in Eusebius' later writing history of the Church from AD 312:

It is reported that Marcus Aurelius Caesar, being about to engage in battle with the Germans and Sarmatians, was in great trouble on account of his army suffering from thirst. But the soldiers of the so-called Melitene legion, through the faith which has given strength from that time to the present, when they were drawn up before the enemy, kneeled on the ground as is our custom in prayer and engaged in supplications to God. This was indeed a strange sight to the enemy, but it is reported that a stranger thing immediately followed. The lightning drove the enemy to flight and destruction but a shower refreshed the army of those who had called on God, all of whom had been on the point of perishing with thirst. This story is related by non-Christian writers who have been pleased to treat the times referred to, and it has also been recorded by our own people. By those historians who were strangers to the faith, the marvel is mentioned, but it is not acknowledged as an answer to our prayers. But by our own people as friends of the truth, the occurrence is related in a simple and artless manner. Among these is Apollinarius who says that from that time the legion through whose prayers the wonder took place received from the emperor a title appropriate to the event, being called to the language of the Romans the Thundering Legion. Tertullian is a trustworthy witness of these things. In the Apology for the Faith, which he addressed to the Roman Senate, and which work we have already mentioned he confirms the history with greater and stronger proofs. He writes that there are still some extant letters of the most intelligent Emperor Marcus in which he testifies that his army, being on the point of perishing with thirst in Germany, was saved by the prayers of the Christians. And he says also that this emperor threatened death to those who brought accusation against us. He adds further: What kind of laws are those which impious, unjust and cruel persons use against

us alone? Which Vespasian, though he had conquered the Jews did not regard; which Trajan partially annulled, forbidding Christians to be sought after which neither Hadrian though inquisitive in all matters, nor he who was called Pius sanctioned. But let anyone treat these things as he chooses; we must pass onto what followed.

(Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, V.5.1-7)

The context of this extract is that it is used as an example of Christian loyalty to the emperor despite the recent persecutions of Christians by Roman governors in Lyon and Vienne. Marcus is not held responsible for this '*terrible rage of the heathen against the saints*'¹³ but rather just and temperate by offering thanks and pardons to the Christians for their saving grace in a letter to the Senate. As the existing 'letter' is clearly forged (see p10-11) and there are no surviving edicts relating to such Christian tolerance by the emperor, we can conclude that Marcus had already become known as an idealised philosopher-emperor and so the Christian authors believed his approval of Christian activities would add to their apologetic account. Equally, Kovács highlights that Christian authors came to believe that a righteous emperor must have been favoured by God.¹⁴ Eusebius also mentions Apollinarius who introduced the issue of the *fulminata* cognomen being awarded to the legion. We do know from an inscription¹⁵ that the *legio XII fulminata* did serve in a victory under Marcus but the story of the legion gaining its name '*fulminata*' as a result of the 'Rain Miracle' is quite clearly wrong for this legion from Cappadocia had been known by this name at least since the time of Octavian as other inscriptional records show.¹⁶ It also means 'thunderstruck' or 'bearer of thunder' rather than 'thundering' and therefore the name probably referred to the good omen of their camp being struck by lightning or the standards of the legion bearing the thunderbolts of Jupiter.¹⁷ Marcus did add cognomens to the *legio XII fulminata* at this time along with the *legio XV Apollinaris* as '*certa constans*' (always dependable) and '*pia fidelis*' (dutifully faithful) for being the only eastern legions not to join Avidius Cassius' uprising in AD 175.¹⁸ This may have been where the confusion arose with the attribution of a cognomen to the *legio XII*

13 Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, V.5.1.

14 Kovács 2009: 146.

15 *CIL Vol. VI*, 3492.

16 *CIL Vol. III*, 504, 507, 509, 6097, *Vol. V* 2520, *Vol. IX* 435.

17 Helgeland 1979: 770.

18 Helgeland 1979: 721.

fulminata. Nevertheless, from now on the forged letter and reference to the 'Thundering legion' were firmly entrenched in the retelling of the story in the Christian tradition.

The supposed letter of Marcus to the Senate which both Tertullian and Eusebius refer to has come down to us in a forged Christian manuscript from the fourth century AD:

The Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Germanicus, Parthicus, Sarmaticus, to the People of Rome, and to the sacred Senate greeting.....Having examined my own position, and my host, with respect to the vast mass of barbarians and of the enemy, I quickly betook myself to prayer to the gods of my country. But being disregarded by them, I summoned those who among us go by the name of Christians. And having made inquiry, I discovered a great number and vast host of them..... afterwards I learned their power.... For having cast themselves on the ground, they prayed not only for me, but also for the whole army as it stood, that they might be delivered from the present thirst and famine. For during five days we had got no water, because there was none; for we were in the heart of Germany, and in the enemy's territory. And simultaneously with their casting themselves on the ground, and praying to God (a God of whom I am ignorant), water poured from heaven, upon us most refreshingly cool, but upon the enemies of Rome a withering hail. And immediately we recognised the presence of God following on the prayer - a God unconquerable and indestructible. Founding upon this, then, let us pardon such as are Christians, lest they pray for and obtain such a weapon against ourselves. And I counsel that no such person be accused on the ground of his being a Christian. But if anyone be found lying to the charge of a Christian that he is a Christian, I desire that it be made manifest that he who is accused as a Christian, and acknowledges that he is one, is accused of nothing else than only this, that he is a Christian; but that he who arraigns him be burned alive. And I further desire, that he who is entrusted with the government of the province shall not compel the Christian, who confesses and certifies such a matter, to retract; neither shall he commit him. And I desire that these things be confirmed by a decree of the Senate. And I command

this edict to be published in the Forum of Trajan, in order that it may be read. The prefect Vitrasius Pollio will see that it be transmitted to all the provinces round about.

Although it can be assumed that Marcus did write a letter to the Senate after his seventh imperial acclamation in order to recount the events which led up to this award, what survives here is a clear Christian forgery due to its overt apologetic nature and given that Marcus was clearly non-Christian. Many details are included to enhance a sense of realism but it is simply impossible for this to resemble any 'official' version of events. If there was such favour shown towards the Christians during this period it would have been a major change in imperial policy and this in itself would have been an easy subject for apologetic Christian accounts to use as evidence for their piety. The supposed edicts sent to all the provinces would have created a wealth of epigraphic evidence which simply does not exist. The letter was forged in order to legitimise that Marcus was a 'good' emperor and therefore affirm the theological belief that God supports 'good' people.¹⁹ A 'god' might have been mentioned in Marcus' original letter but it was most certainly not named as otherwise there would be no debate as to the identification of the deity. Although there are details in the letter which seem realistic (such as camp information and names of officers and legions), the details of Marcus accepting the power of different gods and sending an edict out across the empire simply cannot be accepted as truth.

The texts are invaluable help in allowing us to understand the context of what is happening in the 'Rain Miracle' scene from the Column. However, the multiple different versions of the story means that conflicting arguments arise. As the Column representation is the only remaining version of the government's official report of events, analysing this pictorial scene can hope to clarify some of these issues.

The Texts and the Column

Dating the Miracle

The year in which the 'Rain Miracle' occurred has been a subject of much debate amongst scholars. It is clear the event happened in the summertime as Dio mentions

19 Sage 1987: 113.

'the heat of the sun'²⁰ as a factor exasperating the plight caused by the lack of water supply. Dio also mentions that Marcus was hailed as *imperator* for the seventh time as a result of the victory against the Quadi. This *salutatio imperatoria* is first seen on coinage dating to AD 174.²¹ However, the coins attributed as Dio's 'Hermes Aerios' (Fig. 5) are dated to AD 172 and Eusebius dated the miracle to AD 173 in his *Chronicon* supported by a medallion of Jupiter in a *quadriga* striking down 'barbarians' with a thunderbolt.²²

By looking at the position of the 'Rain Miracle' scene on the Column we potentially revise our opinion of the date. As it is positioned on the third spiral, we can assume that the event happened close to the beginning of the war in AD 171, if we read the frieze as a chronological narrative. Dio's date would therefore be wrong as three years of warfare would be shown in only three spirals, and the remaining 18 spirals showing only two years, if the Column was built for the triumph of AD 176. To reconcile the position of the 'Rain Miracle' scene on the Column with Dio's date and the absence of Commodus as evidence against a post AD 180 date for the building of the Column, some scholars have been prompted to argue that the frieze does not follow a chronological linear narrative, despite its spiral nature.²³ The fact Marcus was fighting disparate northern tribes could allow for out of sequence events to be shown and visibility from the Via Flaminia may have been considered an overriding factor over chronological continuity as the 'Rain Miracle' scene was so poignant.²⁴ However, the way in which the spiral frieze continues in a recognisable linear story means that most scholars reject this view.²⁵

The dating of the miracle is therefore an issue which shows that both the texts and the Column must be used in conjunction as the positioning of the scene on the Column has forced a new analysis of the dating given in the texts. It is worth noting that each year may not receive an equal amount of space on the monument as graphical representation would depend on the events that occurred. However, it is more

20 Dio, *Roman History*, LXXII.8.

21 *BMC* No. 604-621.

22 Gnechi 1912: 28, No. 11 (Plate 60, No. 1).

23 Stuart-Jones 1906: 255-6, Beckmann 2011: 26-8.

24 Stuart-Jones 1906: 257.

25 Kovács 2009: 266.

plausible that the Column represents events in a chronological linear narrative and that the Rain Miracle occurred towards the beginning of the Marcomannic campaign.

Conflation with the 'Lightning Miracle'

The 'Rain Miracle' is often mentioned in conjunction with lightning '*driving the enemy to flight*'.²⁶ Of course these are two weather phenomena that do often occur simultaneously but on the Column they are represented as two separate scenes. The 'Lightning Miracle' (Scene XI – Fig. 6) shows Romans held up in a fortress whilst Marcus prays and a siege tower is set alight and burnt to the ground. This corresponds to a similar scene in Scene XXIV on the Column of Trajan (Fig. 7) which I shall discuss below. Marcus is present in the 'Lightning Miracle' scene with his arms raised as if in supplication to the gods, supporting some of the pagan accounts of Marcus' piety as the basis for the miracle. However, Marcus is absent in the 'Rain Miracle' scene. One can assume confusion arose in the transmitted histories as both 'miracles' involved 'the gods'. Also, the original letter Marcus may have written to the Senate about the campaign would have had more detailed accounts of the siege and 'Lightning Miracle' which Marcus was clearly an eye witness to. The 'Rain Miracle' scene does show the 'barbarians' dead on the battlefield though and this is more likely to be due to strikes of lightning and panic in the mud rather than simply falling rain. Though of course, the purpose of the scenes as symbols of Roman success and conquest would also require vanquished 'barbarian' foes to be depicted. Perhaps the two stories were also fused in the Christian tradition due to the similarity with the biblical tale of Moses and the seventh plague of thunder and lightning in Exodus 9.13-34.²⁷

Ambiguity of the Rain deity

The most intriguing aspect of the 'Rain Miracle' scene on the Column is the ambiguity of the Rain deity, which perhaps acts as a reflection of the variations in the story amongst the pagan and Christian textual sources. Although the *LIMC* lists the Rain deity as 'Jupiter Pluvius' ('rain giver') it is indisputably not a representation of Jupiter for it does not follow his traditional iconography.²⁸ Usually Jupiter *Tonans* ('thunderer') is a bare chested, virile bearded man with strong arms poised to hurl a thunderbolt as

26 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.5.1.

27 Kovács 2009: 142.

28 *LIMC Vol VIII/1* 1997: 451.

shown in the 'Lightning Miracle' on the Column of Trajan (Fig. 7). In contrast, on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, we have an elderly and morose deity whose outstretched arms and unkempt hair fall down into a cascade of rain upon the enemy. However, the most important feature of this Rain deity which means it cannot be associated with Jupiter is the fact that he has wings.

It is usually the eight wind gods who are shown with wings as the reliefs on the Horologion of Andronikos of Kyrrhos (commonly known as 'the Tower of the Winds') in Athens show (Fig. 8). Indeed, the mythological rape of Oreithyia by Boreas, the god of the North wind, is shown on vase painting from the fifth century BC and clearly depicts his beard and wings (Fig. 9). Ferris cites the Bocca della Verita 'Mouth of Truth' (Fig. 10) as a comparison to the Rain deity on the Column as this undated fountain slab shows an old bearded figure with long dishevelled hair who is also associated with water.²⁹ Although a bearded winged god does have a precedent in Greco-Roman art, Hamberg explains that although allegorical deities for elements had been long known, mentioned for example in both Homer and Ovid³⁰, the Rain deity on the Column offers a new form of representation which is not such an idealised figure like the winged humans gently carrying water pitchers on the Tower of the Winds.

Due to this departure from the standard iconography of deities in Roman art and the fact that Roman religion and politics were so inextricably intertwined in the ancient world, some scholars such as Israelowich, Rubin, Fowden and Coarelli are keen to see the ambiguity as an intentional 'compromise' policy of the Senate.³¹ With the instability and anxiety caused by the invasion of Italy by the Marcomanni earlier in this war, the Senate may have wished not to commit themselves to any one version of the events for fear of invoking the outrage of soldiers and citizens. By departing from the traditional iconography of Jupiter for the 'Rain Miracle', people could ascribe their own beliefs onto the image without the need for official sanction from the imperial house. The varying textual accounts are then used as evidence to show that there were differing beliefs in society which may have needed to be placated whilst Rome was in a 'weak position' during the war. The fact that the Column of Marcus Aurelius uses the

29 Ferris 2009: 84.

30 Hamberg 1945: 154, Hom. *Od.* V.291-295, Ov. *Met.* I.263-270.

31 Israelowich 2008: 101, Rubin 1979: 378, Fowden 1987: 93, Coarelli 2008: 56.

Column of Trajan as a model for both its form and composition and the transposing of the Danuvius and Victoria figures, yet does not follow the Jupiter *Tonans* example (Fig. 7) for a similar weather miracle is also used to support this argument.

However, I think it is unconvincing that a formal state monument would show such concern towards offending what were essentially minor sects at this time. The importance of the Christian sources has been anachronistically inflated and distorted. Within their apologetic context, we can see that the 'Rain Miracle' is used as an example of Christian loyalty to the emperor and a means of theologically accounting for the good reputation of the pagan Marcus Aurelius as a pious philosopher. It seems far more likely that the Senate simply declared that certain episodes from the war needed to be recounted on the Column and left the artists to interpret these as they wished. To depict 'Rain' in a visual manner is quite difficult and the deity we see with rain cascading from outstretched arms is more effective at portraying a terrible storm than the simple presence of Jupiter in the background as on the Column of Trajan. The figure does not resemble Jupiter or Hermes and there is no representation of Christian soldiers kneeling and praying in the manner Eusebius describes, neither is there the presence of Marcus or an Egyptian priest. Therefore, the image does not conform to any of the textual accounts. The lack of any recognisable deity or correlation with the texts seems to have sparked debate in itself whereas it may simply have been an artistic decision to improve upon the precedent set by Trajan. Often overlooked are the words of Marcus himself in *Meditations* where he explicitly says that you must '*pray to Zeus, the chief god, for rain*' and this would have been obvious and natural for most Romans.³² The Rain deity on the Column is simply an artistic allegory to represent 'Rain' borrowing the bearded and winged elements of traditional water and wind deities to create a new visually effective artistic style for this abstract concept, rather than a 'compromise god' produced by officials in order to reconcile any major religious changes in this period.

The Evolution of the 'Rain Miracle'

As soon as news spread that the legionaries on the German border were saved by a miraculous rain, anecdotes would have begun to emerge in order to explain what

32 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, V.7.

happened. We know that Harnouphis was a real historical figure from the altar inscription found at Aquileia (Fig. 4). He probably came to Rome under the '*peregrinarius*' Marcus declared during the outbreaks of plague in the late 160s and travelled with the army, winning over legionaries as believers.³³ The accounts from eye witness soldiers who followed him probably fuelled Dio's very specific information about Harnouphis and a new cult to 'Hermes Aerios' may indeed have been introduced at Rome as the numismatic evidence points to. However, the deity on the Column does not resemble Hermes in any form showing that this view was not widespread, at least for the audiences in Rome. No priest is seen in the relief and Marcus is also not present, but his appearance in many of the scenes along the long relief would have made it clear that the Column monument itself was, by its very nature, praising the virtues of the emperor.

The placid Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius was widely known and he gained the reputation of a pious philosopher-emperor as his book *Meditations* gained popularity after his death. This influenced the Christians whose apologetic writings needed to make this pagan emperor part of their tradition in order to legitimise God saving his army and to account for his well-known 'pious' nature. In the face of continued adversity they appropriated the 'Rain Miracle' as an example of Christian loyalty to Rome. Apollinarius made the wrong assumption that the *legio XII fulminata* gained its name from this campaign and a letter from the respected emperor was forged in order to further the idea of imperial support for Christians. Marcus almost certainly did write a letter to the Senate detailing the campaign but the lack of epigraphic evidence for favourable decrees towards the Christians shows the surviving copy is false. The fact that the Christians had to rely on such an elusive letter for the validity of their claims, rather than on solid decrees which should have survived, would have prompted the forgery of the letter in order for it to be used in Christian writings, even as early as Tertullian's works in AD 197.

From this perspective, we can see that the Christians were still a marginal sect in the Roman Empire at this time and the Rain deity on the Column would not have been made intentionally ambiguous to accommodate their beliefs. What actually happened

33 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*,

on the frontier does not really matter – in such a desperate situation, everyone probably prayed to their respective gods. What the Column bears witness to is contemporary mythology in the making from which the textual sources grew up independently. These differing accounts have since been used as evidence by some scholars to infer social unrest in Antonine Rome but I believe that this has been imposed upon the monument anachronistically by attaching undue significance to the Christian accounts and to Dio's passing mention of a historical Egyptian priest that some may have hailed but was still essentially a minor cult. The context of the Column in the centre of Rome means that the purpose of the monument was mainly to emphasise to the populace that a great victory had been won by the emperor with the gods on his side. As long as people understood that Rome was still powerful and defeating outside threats to her supremacy then the 'Rain Miracle' scene had achieved its purpose. The textual sources simply added to the story and used it as an example for their own respective writing agendas.

Conclusion

Through analysis of the textual sources alongside the depiction on the Column, we can start to see how the 'Rain Miracle' was recorded and transformed from a real time event to a legend.

Firstly, this has led to some interesting insights into Antonine Rome and the Imperial household's use of images not only to perpetuate the memory and achievements of an emperor but also to publicise events that occurred on the frontiers back to the people in Rome. The scenes on the Column showed that despite recent incursions into Italian territory, Rome was still firmly in control and its height and grandeur acted as a lavish statement of imperial power. The placement of the 'Rain Miracle' so low on the frieze has caused controversy over the chronology in the texts. Nevertheless, the event was of such historical and political importance that it was placed facing the Via Flaminia for maximum visibility and thus viewers could learn about the triumphs achieved on the frontiers with the favour of the gods.

Although some scholars have cited the plethora of deities hailed in the textual sources as evidence for dissidence and the need for a 'compromise god' to be depicted on the Column, I think it is more likely that the Rain deity is simply a new artistic

representation to show the abstract concept of 'Rain' in an effective manner. The general public in Rome, who were the principal audience of the Column's reliefs, were unlikely to have seen an eastern god in this depiction, indeed the wings and elderly face correspond to traditional Roman water and wind deities. We must also not forget that the Column was aligned with the traditional triumphal processional route where the spoils of war were paraded and dedicated to Jupiter on the Capitoline, the Column even perhaps built as a result of the triumph of AD 176. Therefore we cannot argue that other cults were growing in influence and that the Senate had a consequent need to placate other religious groups as the very existence of the monument is predicated on the supremacy of Jupiter supporting a victorious Roman army.

The overall historical significance of the 'Rain Miracle' lies in its value in shedding new light on the way history was recorded both by officials in Rome and how textual sources which grew independently alongside the monument had their own agendas in their writing. This is particularly true of the Christian tradition which sought to exemplify the loyalty of Christians to Rome by using the 'Rain Miracle' as evidence for their prayers averting peril to a legionary army. Equally, the reputation of Marcus Aurelius as a 'good' emperor in antiquity meant that the Christians had to reconcile his pagan piety with their own beliefs. The forged letter which was based upon rumours of real letters written by Marcus therefore achieved this aim by suggesting he was benevolent to them. However, the lack of epigraphic evidence for the decrees cited and the misinformation on the naming of the *legio XII fulminata* reveals its counterfeit nature.

The 'Rain Miracle' is a story based in fact but wrapped up in varying representations which have generated legends and mysteries. The key for the scholar is to see how far we can get unravelling it, and for that the use of both textual and archaeological evidence together is of paramount importance.

Figures



Fig. 1 The Column of Marcus Aurelius.

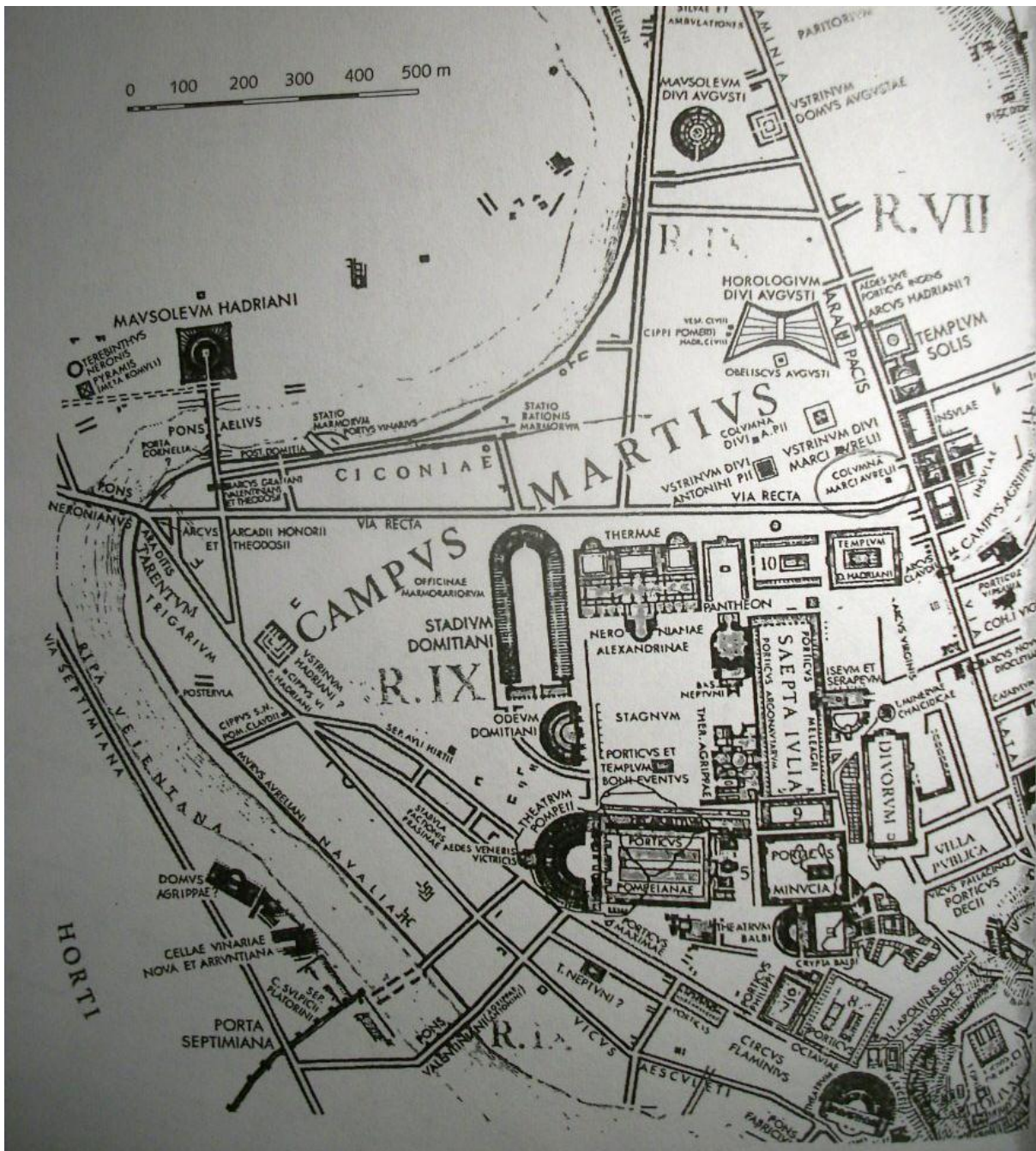


Fig. 2 Map of Rome – Column of Marcus Aurelius circled on the right.



Fig. 3 The 'Rain Miracle' on the third spiral.



Fig. 4 Harnouphis Aquileia Inscription.



Fig. 5 Hermes Aerios coins.

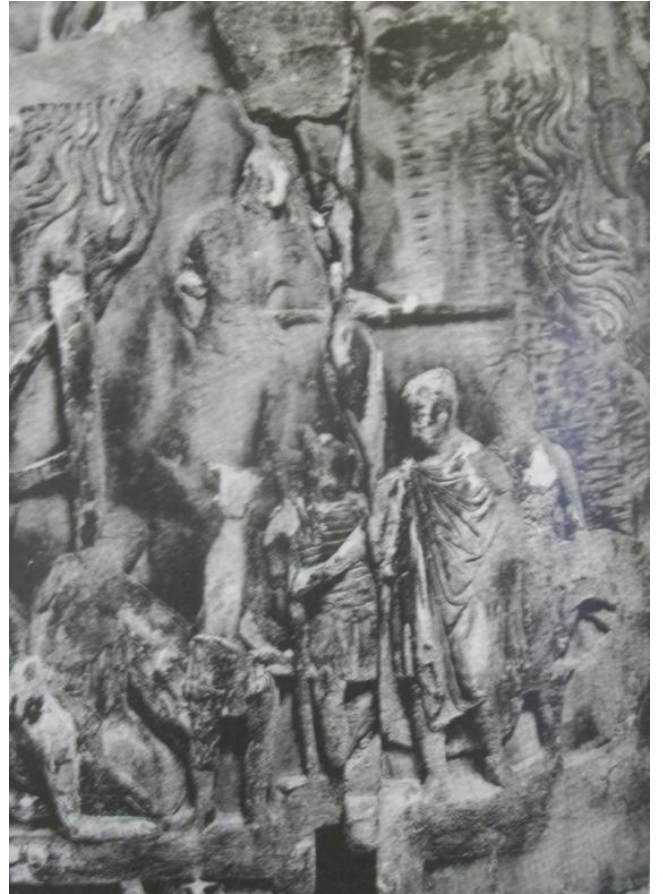


Fig. 6 'Lightning Miracle' (Scene XI) on the Column of Marcus Aurelius.



Fig. 7 Jupiter *Tonans* on the Column of Trajan, Scene XXIV.

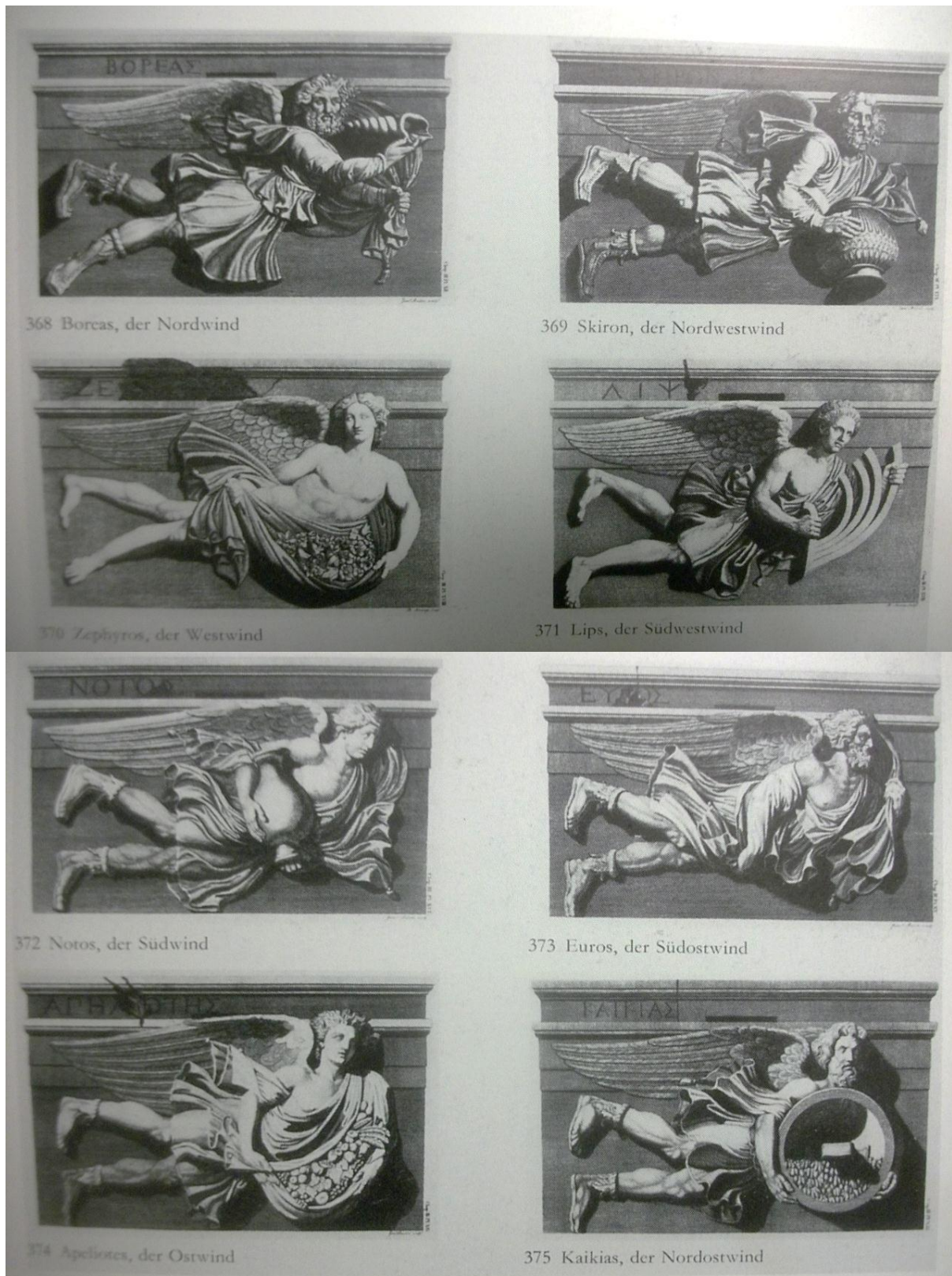


Fig. 8 Wind gods from the Tower of the Winds.

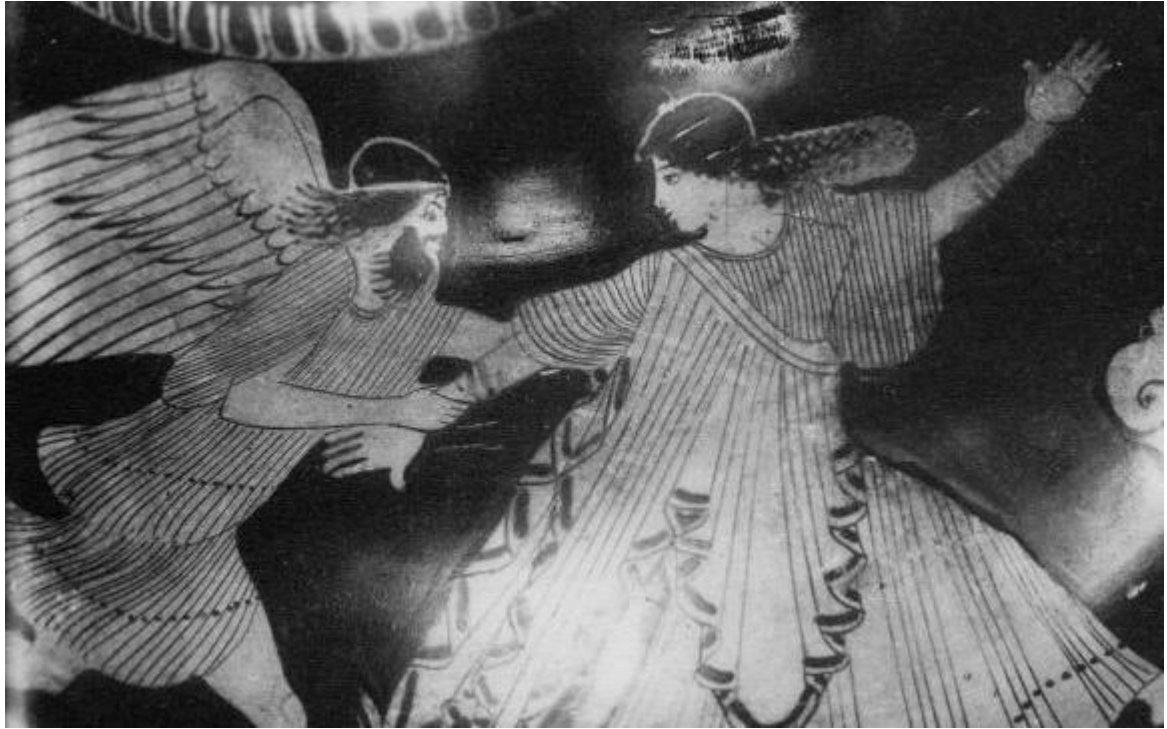


Fig. 9 Boreas and the Rape of Oreithyia, Athenian Red Figure hydria, Athens National Museum (© Beazley archive).



Fig. 10 La Bocca della Verita – 'The Mouth of Truth'.

List of Images

Fig. 1 The Column of Marcus Aurelius (photo by author)

Fig. 2 Map of Rome (Coarelli, 2008: 43)

Fig. 3 The 'Rain Miracle' on the third spiral (photo by author)

Fig. 4 Harnouphis Aquileia Inscription (Brusin, 1934: 166)

Fig. 5 Hermes Aerios coins (BMC, Plate 83)

Fig. 6 'Lightning Miracle' (Scene XI) on the Column of Marcus Aurelius (Coarelli, 2008: 132)

Fig. 7 Jupiter *Tonans* on the Column of Trajan, Scene XXIV (Coarelli, 2000: Plate 24)

Fig. 8 Wind gods from the Tower of the Winds (LIMC, Vol VIII.2, 1997: Plate 12)

Fig. 9 Boreas and the Rape of Oreithyia, Athenian Red Figure hydria, Athens National Museum (University of Oxford Classical Art Research Centre Pottery Search in the online copyright Beazley archive <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/recordDetails.asp?recordCount=19&start=0>; accessed 20/03/13)

Fig. 10 La Bocca della Verita – 'The Mouth of Truth' (<http://blog.best-bookings.com/en/rome-the-mouth-of-truth/>; accessed 10/04/13)

Abbreviations Used

BMC = *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum, Vol. IV: Antoninus Pius to Commodus*

CAH = *Cambridge Ancient History, 2nd edition*

CIL = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*

LIMC = *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*

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