

CONGIST 2026 - INTERDISCIPLINARY  
PERSPECTIVES ON CRISIS

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# Making Sense of Crises

*Identity markers in Niketas Choniates' **De Signis**  
**Constantinopolitanis***

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CONSTANTINOPLE, 1204

# 1204

Armies of Franks (*Φραγγίτικοι*) and Venetians (*Βενετικοί*) conquered the city and vandalised it.

**Niketas Choniates** was a witness.

The Fourth Crusade. The city's direst crisis in an already long and troubled history.

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THE TEXT

# *De Signis Constantinopolitanis*

An appendix to the **Χρονική διήγησις** (Chronological Narration) describing **eighteen statues** destroyed by Westerners.

A sequence of *ekphraseis* threaded through with *an undercurrent*: an abstract theme that slowly surfaces.

A study of how a culture in collapse **narrates itself back into being**.

“ *a dirge (...) a curious, a deeply mediaeval document.*”

Cyril Mango, *Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder*, 1963

CRISIS

κρίσις  
*krísis*

· *judgement, discernment, distinction*

The *De Signis*: a direct testimony of an ancient crisis, and a text centered on the concept of distinction itself.

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HYPOTHESIS · THE DEEP SEMANTIC OPPOSITION

distinct

*krisis · tàxis · lògos*

discernment, order, the  
capacity to read with reason.

indistinct

*adiaforía · chrysomanés · aphasìa*

indifference, gold-madness,  
the collapse of speech.



“

*...the Western nations spared neither **the living nor the dead**,  
but beginning with God and his servants, they displayed **complete  
indifference and irreverence to all.***

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ἀδιαφορία  
*adiaphoria* · literally, the absence of difference.

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“

*...they covetously eyed the bronze statues and consigned these to **the fire**. The brazen Hera standing in the Forum of Constantine was minted into staters and **consigned to fusion***

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παράδωμι

*paradìdomi*

· to give up, to surrender to the enemy.

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“

*And **on top of it** (i.e. of Hera's statue) was thrown down from the pedestal **Paris Alexander**, standing with Aphrodite and handing to her the golden apple of Discord.*

κρίνω  
*krino* · to judge, to distinguish.

“

*Who, having laid his eyes on the four-sided bronze mechanical device rising up to a height nearly equal to that of the tallest columns which have been set up in many places throughout the City, did not wonder at the intricacy of its ornamentation? Every melodious bird, warbling its springtime tunes, was carved upon it; the tasks of husbandmen, the pipes and milk pails, and the bleating sheep and bounding lambs were depicted. The wide-spread sea and schools of fish were to be seen, some caught and others shown breaking out of the nets to swim free again in the deep. There were the Erotes, shown in pairs and groups of three; innocent of clothing but armed with apples, they shook with sweet laughter as they threw these or were pelted by them. This four-sided monument terminated in a point like a pyramid, and above was suspended a female figure which turned with the first blowings of the wind, whence it was called Anemodoulion.*

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*...four-sided bronze monument that rose high above the ground (...)  
on which were represented nude Erotes pelting one another with  
apples...*

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“

*They **who separated** manliness from its companion virtues and claimed it for themselves and took it into the highest regard, did not leave such a Herakles invincible.*



“ This eagle's likeness was remarkable, not only because of what we have said but also because **the twelve segments marked off in lines** along the wings most clearly showed the hour of the day **to those who looked upon it with understanding** when the sun's rays were not obscured by clouds.

σὺν λόγῳ  
**sìn lògo** · with understanding.

“ It was said that **these Aeneadae** condemned you to the flames as retribution for Troy's having been laid waste by the firebrand because of your scandalous amour...

But the gold-madness of these men does not allow me to conceive and utter such a thing, for that madness was the reason why **rare and excellent works of art everywhere were given over to total destruction.**

Nor can I speak of their frequent **selling and sending away of their women for a few coins** (...) set up as the prize of victory all their belongings, even their wedded wives," because of whom they heard themselves called fathers of children, and even that great treasure which others find difficult to sacrifice—the soul, for whose salvation men are eager to do anything.

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*Small blame that Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans  
should for such a woman long time suffer woes;  
wondrously like is she to the immortal goddesses to look upon.*

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“

*...the two beasts contended against one another, each suffering terribly from the wounds inflicted by the other, **killing and being killed, holding fast and being held fast**, winning and being overthrown by the other.*

(...)

***Common to both was the contest**, common the defense, **co-equal the victory**, and death the fellow contestant. This mutual destruction and killing has persuaded me to say that these death-dealing evils, ruinous to men, not only are portrayed in images and not only happen to the bravest of beasts but frequently occur among the nations, such as those which have marched against us Romans, killing and being killed...*



THE CRISIS OF KRÍSIS

There are no winners outside the boundaries,  
the distinctions, the signs, the negotiations, the  
inquiries that make up **cultures**.

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A message that resonates today more than ever,  
in our own time of crises.

THANK YOU

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