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Emperor Divine: The Portrait of Heraclius in the Poems of George of Pisidia

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Often described as the last representative of pagan poetry in antiquity,[1] George of Pisidia (before 600–after 635 AD) at the beginning of the 7th century AD could look back on a long tradition of Greek literature that already spanned more than 1,300 years. In this period of transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages, Pisides held various ecclesiastical offices in Constantinople and was in close association with the patriarchate under Sergius I. of Constantinople (r. 610–638).[2] George also served as the official court poet of emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641),[3] who, on the eve of the Arab conquest of the Near East, was able to concentrate Roman central power in Constantinople and secure Byzantine territory for a brief period.[4]

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1 PERTUSI 1959, 11: "questo poeta, ultimo dei classici."

2 For George's close relation to patriarch Sergius as it appears prominently in his poems see VIERMANN 2020, 382 and WHITBY 2020 as well as COSME-THOMAS 2025, 71–85 with an analysis of Sergius' eminent role in the *Bellum Avaricum*.

3 For biographical information on George of Pisidia, see PERTUSI 1959, 12–14; TARTAGLIA 1998, 39; MEIER 2015, 172; ESPEJO JÁIMEZ 2021, 49–53; COSME-THOMAS 2025, 15–18. – Analyses of the work of George of Pisidia have so far been carried out mainly by historians, cf. BAYNES 1912; OLSTER 1986; OLSTER 1991; LUDWIG 1991; HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2010, 16–35. Leo Sternbach is considered to be the initiator of literary studies of the works of George. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, he is the author of the first critical editions, cf. STERNBACH 1891, 1892 and 1899. The standard edition of part of George's poetry is PERTUSI 1959 which also offers a concise commentary and an Italian translation. The 1998 edition by TARTAGLIA reproduces Pertusi's text and adds an Italian translation. The *Hexaemeron* was edited by GONNELLI 1998, the *Laudatio sancti Anastasii Persae* by FLUSIN 1992, and *In Sanctam Resurrectionem* by BIRD 2022. Mary Whitby's work marks the start of a broader philological interest in Pisides' work, cf. WHITBY 1994, 1995, 1998, 2002, 2003 and 2022, which is further elaborated upon in the monographs by ESPEJO JÁIMEZ 2021 and COSME-THOMAS 2025. For an overview of the history of research on Pisides, see KRÖLL 2020a.

4 For a summary of the Persian wars of Heraclius, see HOWARD-JOHNSTON 1994, 57–59; TREADGOLD 1997, 250–264; MITCHELL 2007, 410–416.

Heraclius only managed to ascend the throne as a consequence of a coup against his predecessor Phocas (r. 602–610). Since he himself carried out the coup (with the help of his father Heraclius the Elder,[5] who was the Byzantine exarch of the province of Africa), a comprehensive rehabilitation of his persona was necessary. Heraclius consistently persecuted Phocas' supporters and resorted to various instruments of political propaganda.[6] In addition to the depictions of the emperor's portrait on coins, Heraclius pushed direct publicity for his persona at the imperial court in Constantinople, also in order to confront opposing groups within the Byzantine state. He promoted court historians and poets who delivered texts that conformed to the regime and glorified the emperor.[7] These included, for example, the historian Theophylact Simokatta, whose eight-book *Histories* are considered the last ancient work of historiography.

Praising the emperor is also the main theme of George's work.[8] In this paper, I will look at how the emperor Heraclius is portrayed by Pisides with both the qualities of a pagan hero in traditional epic style and of a Christian emperor. The subject of my study are the seven poems by George of Pisidia that are primarily dedicated to the emperor Heraclius and his secular and religious politics:[9]

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5 On the coup against emperor Phocas initiated by Heraclius the Elder, see HALDON 1990, 41f.; SARRIS 2011, 243–245; VIERMANN 2021, 93–104.

6 On Pisides' propaganda for emperor Heraclius, see HUBER 2008, 185.

7 On the performativity of the poems of George of Pisidia, see KALDELLIS 2019, 694 and VIERMANN 2021, 188–191. On the *communis opinion* that George performed his laudatory poems in front of a learned audience at the imperial court in Constantinople, see TARTAGLIA 1998, 15, 22; WHITBY 1998, 251; WHITBY 2002, 162; HÖRANDNER 2003, 76; LAUXTERMANN 2003, 56; BROGGINI 2008; KALDELLIS 2019, 698; COSME 2020, 353f.; VIERMANN 2020, 382. On the function of Pisides' poems as rhetorical devices to restore public morale and the idea of political unity in Constantinople under Heraclius, see WHITBY 1998, 263.

8 On the characterization of Pisides' poetry as panegyric, cf. NISSEN 1940, and for a summary on the problematic classification of George's works as either panegyric or religious, see ESPEJO JÁIMEZ 2021, 63–67.

9 In addition to the encomiastic poems on emperor Heraclius and his deputies, we find in Pisides' oeuvre also invectives against representatives of other religious groups than the Chalcedonian orthodoxy (*Contra Severum*, ed. TARTAGLIA 1998, 22–25, 261–307 [against miaphysitism] and *In Alypium*, ed. TARTAGLIA 1998, 31f., 457–465). Furthermore, Christian topics such as the six-day work (ed. GONNELLI 1998; see also TARTAGLIA 1998, 25–30, 309–425) and the resurrection of Christ (*In Christi resurrectionem*, ed. TARTAGLIA 1998, 21f., 249–259) as well as Christian ideas of life are covered (*De vanitate vitae*, ed. TARTAGLIA 1998, 30, 427–445; GONNELLI 1991, 118–138). Moreover, there are over 100 iambic and hexametric epigrams that have survived in the collection of poems in the *Anthologia Palatina* (see TARTAGLIA 1998, 32–38, 467–505), also a piece of prose panegyrics on Anastasius, a Persian who converted to Christianity and suffered Christian martyrdom (*Laudatio sancti Anastasii Persae*, ed. FLUSIN 1992). Of the individual poems, which range from under 90 (*In Heracl.*) to more than 1,800 verses (*Hexaemeron*), eleven are written in iambic verse and only one in hexameter (*De vita humana*, see TARTAGLIA 1998, 30f., 447–455). – For an overview of George's works, see ESPEJO JÁIMEZ 2021, 55–62.

1. *In Heraclium ex Africa redeuntem* (*In Heracl.*) on Heraclius' entry into Constantinople after his coup against Phocas (89 iambs, dating 610/611).[10]

2. The *Expeditio Persica* (*Exp. Pers.*, 1,088 iambs, dating 623), the poem on Heraclius' first military campaign against the Sasanians.[11]

3 and 4. The two works on the siege of Constantinople by the Avars and Slavs in 626, *In Bonum patricium* (*In Bon.*, 168 iambs, dating 626)[12] and *Bellum Avaricum* (*Bell. Avar.*, 541 iambs, dating perhaps 626).[13]

5. The panegyric epic *Heraclias* that celebrates the military victory over the Sasanian king Khusro II and Heraclius' triumphant return (471 iambs in 2 *akroaseis* and 57 fragments, dating approx. 628).[14]

6. *In restitutionem Sanctae Crucis* (*In rest.*, 116 iambs, dating 630), a poem of praise for the recovery of the relic of the Holy Cross from the hands of the Persians and its return to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.[15]

7. And *In Christi resurrectionem* (*In Chr. res.*, 130 iambs, dating approx. 626), an encomium to the emperor and his son and successor Heraclius Constantine.[16]

The aim of my paper is to demonstrate the literary intention pursued by Pisides in his role as Heraclius' official court poet and as advocate of the imperial and patriarchal religious agenda. It is the hypothesis of the paper that, by portraying the emperor as a holy man, the author seeks to justify and consolidate Heraclius' rule and political program. Furthermore, I investigate the extent to which the poet transcends the matrix of pagan heroes, emphasises the Christian qualities of the emperor, and presents him as the ultimate Christian ruler. Finally, the literary analysis of Heraclius' role as the new political ruler and Christian emperor promises to point to the contemporary audience of George's poetry in the imperial city of Constantinople, which – after the coup Heraclius undertook against his predecessor Phocas – had to be assured of the current ruler's legitimacy.

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10 Pertusi 1959, 77–83; Tartaglia 1998, 13f., 61–69; on the poetry of *In Heracl.*, see Frendo 1984, 166f. and 171–179.

11 Tartaglia 1998, 15f., 71–139.

12 Tartaglia 1998, 16, 141–153.

13 Tartaglia 1998, 16f., 155–191; on *Bell. Avar.*, see Kröll 2020b; Whitby 2022; Cosme-Thomas 2025.

14 Tartaglia 1998, 17–20, 193–237; on the *Heraclias*, see Frendo 1986.

15 Tartaglia 1998, 20f., 239–247; on *In rest.*, Frolow 1953.

16 There are two recently published new editions of this poem: Bird 2022 and Rossi 2022; see also Lauxtermann II 2019, 30–35; for the date of *In Chr. Res.*, see Lauxtermann II 2019, 32; Bird 2022, 98.

More than an epic hero

Let us first look at the presentation of Heraclius as a secular military leader.[17] In depicting the emperor's military performance, Pisides takes the genre of Homeric epic as a starting point: Heraclius is shown as a fully authorised commander, a literary representation that closely reminds of the traditional epic heroes, the Greek army commanders in Homer's *Iliad* as they were standing before Troy. Equipped with the insignia of the wreath and the sceptre,[18] he appears in the poem *In restitutionem Sanctae Crucis* like a referee in a wrestling match who has full control over the battle in all situations and,[19] although himself involved in the wrestling,[20] is able to arbitrate and end the fight.[21] All participants in the fight are guided by his instructions and depend on his decisions.[22] At the beginning of the second part of the *Expeditio Persica*, Heraclius is also portrayed as a sovereign military tactician with great intellectual capacities: "with manifold and wise judgement"[23] he had entered directly into the battlefield himself.[24] Thus, he appears not only as a military strategist who is able to keep track and make tactical decisions, but also as a common soldier who physically participates in the battle against the Persian army.

The emperor appears again as an epic hero of classical times in *Exp. Pers.* 1.196–199. There, Heraclius in person lends a hand during a devastating sea storm to save his ship from imminent shipwreck.[25] Through his personal commitment and his effort on the ship,[26] he is able to motivate his crew to work together to save the day.[27] Several times in the *Expeditio Persica*, George focuses on the emperor's physical effort in the battle against the enemies and thus seeks to positively emphasise his direct involvement in the fighting. This practice had fallen out of fashion since the times of Theodosios I (r. 379–394), who was the last Roman emperor until Heraclius to personally take part in war campaigns.[28] In the passages contained in the *Expeditio Persica*, Heraclius' physical exertions are denoted by

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17 Leppin 2020, 299f.

18 *In rest.* 82: στέμμα καὶ σκῆπτρον φέρων.

19 *In rest.* 83: ὥσπερ βραβευτὴς τῶν παλαιστῶν.

20 *In rest.* 84: πολλοῖς παλαίσας.

21 *In rest.* 84: νῦν δὲ λύσας τὴν μάχην; 87: ὅπου δὲ νεῦσις, ἡ πάλη δίκην ἔχει.

22 *In rest.* 85f.: τῷ σῷ δὲ λοιπὸν προσβλέπουσι νεύματι / ἐξ ἀντιλόξου τῶν ἀγώνων οἱ μέσοι.

23 *Exp. Pers.* 2.17: τῇ ποικίλῃ σου καὶ σοφῇ διαιρέσει.

24 *Exp. Pers.* 2.18: σαυτὸν μερίζεις ταῖς νομαῖς τῶν πραγμάτων ("you assign yourself to the pastures of the deeds"). The metaphor used here is typical of the poetic language of Pisides. The explicit imagery is intended to engage the reader or listener in the panegyric being presented.

25 For the sea storm scene, see Broggini 2008, 24–28 and Leppin 2020, 298.

26 *Exp. Pers.* 1.196f.: καὶ δὴ πρὸς αὐτὴν ἐκδραμὼν τὴν ὁλκάδα, / κάμνων; 1.199: ἐν τῇ τοσαύτῃ τῶν καλῶν αὐτουργίᾳ.

27 *Exp. Pers.* 1.197: ἐφείλκου πάντας.

28 Olster 1994, 54f.; Meier 2009, 260; Raum 2019, 134; Viermann 2021, 150–160.

the words πόνος and πονέω, as in the phrases δεσπότου πονουμένου (*Exp. Pers.* 1.198) and πανταχοῦ πονούμενος (*Exp. Pers.* 3.332).[29] His outstanding physical achievements also serve as a blueprint for his son and successor Heraclius Constantine, who should take his father as an example in enduring all kinds of hardships.[30] Moreover, the words πόνος and πονέω already seem to have Christian connotations in one particular passage in the *Expeditio Persica* (3.93–128): In his conversation with a colleague, an anonymous soldier is full of admiration for the emperor's military achievements in the war.[31] The perception of the physical "sufferings" as a pleasant feeling of "joy"[32] recalls the concept of Christian martyrdom, which, after physical suffering of the human body, promises salvation and resurrection. Just as the suffering of a Christian martyr is always followed by joy, the physical hardships Heraclius takes upon himself will lead to a conclusive military victory.[33] Thus, Heraclius' joy in a life-threatening situation points ahead to his final victory over the Persian king. Like a martyr, he is always directed towards the divine sphere. Furthermore, the sovereignty that he displays in the sea storm scene in the *Expeditio Persica* also places him in the immediate vicinity of Christ, who, in the tradition of late antique Christian literature, is considered to have the ability to calm sea storms.[34]

A passage that is specifically dense with Christian meaning occurs in *In restitutionem Sanctae Crucis*.[35] Here, Heraclius is presented as a Christian hero for recovering the Holy Cross by military means. The passage juxtaposes his deed to that of the pagan hero Jason, who recovered the Golden Fleece, and stresses the superiority of Heraclius' achievement: unlike Jason, Heraclius did not need any

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[29] For the use of πόνος and πονέω in connection with Heraclius see also *Exp. Pers.* 2.65: ὅπως τὸ κοινὸν μὴ μετάσχοι τοῦ πόνου; 3.87f.: τοῦ δεσπότου / πονοῦντος; 3.307f.: σὺ μέν, κράτιστε, καὶ γὰρ ἤθελες μένειν / τῶν σῶν λογισμῶν πρὸς πόνους πυρουμένων; *In Bon.* 57: δι' οὓς τοσούτους ἔσχες ὠδίνων πόνους (Heraclius' birth pains at the removal of Phocas); 90: ὁ τῶν πονούντων τοὺς πόνους ἔχων πλέον; *In Heracl.* 48: καὶ πρὸς τοσούτους ἡδέως δραμὼν πόνους. – Heraclius' supporters also take on the physical labour: Bonos, the military leader in Constantinople during the siege of the city by the Avars and Slavs in 626, toiled in battle and thus proved to be the ideal representative of the absent Heraclius (*Bell. Avar.* 315f.: ἀεὶ γὰρ ὑμῖν εἰς τὸ πᾶν συνημμένοι / τὰ κοινὰ σὺν σοὶ τῶν πόνων ἐβάστασαν). For a discussion of the terms πόνος, "toil", and ἱδρώς, "sweat", as indications for the qualities of Heraclius as a holy man, see VIERMANN 2020, 389.

[30] *In Chr. res.* 114–116: φράζων ἐκείνους τοῦ πατρός σου τοὺς πόνους, / οὓς ἀντὶ πάντων ἐκτελῶν καθημέραν / κάμνει, μεριμνᾷ, δυσφορεῖ, τοξεύεται.

[31] For the passage, see VIERMANN 2021, 195f. In the conception of the two soldiers' speeches, Pisides draws on the epic device of the τίς-speech, frequently used in the Homeric epics.

[32] *Exp. Pers.* 3.111: καὶ τέρψιν εἶναι τοὺς πόνους λογίζεται.

[33] On Heraclius' military hardships seen as martyrdom, cf. OLSTER 1994, 63.

[34] Cf. LEPPIN 2020, 298. For further interpretations of sea storm episodes in Christian context and late antique Latin poetry see CHARLET 1989; MADDEN 1997; PASCHALIS 2020.

[35] *In rest.* 21–24: ἥρως ἐδείχθης τῷ Θεῷ χρυσοῦν δέρας / ἐκ τοῦ δράκοντος τοῦ σφαγέντος ἁρπάσας· / οὐ φαρμάκοις γὰρ Μηδικοῖς τὸ θηρίον / ἀνεῖλες αὐτός, ἀλλὰ πήξας τῷ ξύλῳ.

support from others, whereas Jason only made it with the help of Medea. By means of this rhetorical syncrisis, the author implies that the Christian ruler outshines the pagan hero just as much as Christianity outshines pagan mythology.

Christian emperorship

Another device that George uses to present the Roman emperor as a legitimate ruler is referring to his purple clothing. Instead of the usual imperial purple, Heraclius wears a brazen suit of armour in the war against the Persians, which emphasises his readiness and personal commitment to fight.[36] The emperor renounces his usual insignia of status in order to be able to participate in the battles. Here, George presents Heraclius as a ruler who is physically involved in carrying out his own military plans.

The colour purple is also used by George several times as a poetic means of legitimising Heraclius' reign: In *Heraclias* 1.195–201, the imperial purple has a special Christian connotation. Here, the reddish colour is attributed to Heraclius' sweat of blood-red colour (ἡμαγμένη) and at the same time is connected with a bright white (λευκή), so that a contrasting mixture of red and white is created (*Heraclias* 1.195–201):[37]

> Ὦ νῦν ἀληθῆ δεικνύων τὴν πορφύραν
> – πορφύρεται γὰρ εἰς βαφὴν αἰωνίαν
> ἱδρῶσι τοῖς σοῖς εὐσεβῶς ἡμαγμένη·
> μένει δὲ λευκή, καίπερ οὖσα πορφύρα,
> καὶ τῇ νέᾳ στίλβουσα καλλιεργίᾳ,
> ὅσον φορεῖται, μειζόνως λαμπρύνεται –
> χαῖρε, στρατηγὲ[38] κοσμικοῦ γενεθλίου.
>
> "O you who now display the true purple, – because it is dyed in purple colour that will last forever, piously reddened by your sweat. Yet it remains white, though it is purple, and it shines in new beauty, the more it is worn by you, it shines even more – hail, general of the cosmic birth!"

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[36] *Exp. Pers.* 3.96f.: καὶ νῦν σιδηροῦς ἀντὶ πορφύρας χιτὼν / σφίγγει τὰ νῶτα καὶ βαρεῖ τὸν αὐχένα.

[37] For the passage, see Whitby 1994, 215f.; Whitby 1995, 121f.; Viermann 2021, 236–238. – The Greek texts are taken from the editions of Pertusi 1959 and Tartaglia 1998, the English translations are my own.

[38] Heraclius is called στρατηγός, βασιλεύς, αὐτοκράτωρ, δεσπότης, ἡγεμών and εὐεργέτης by Pisides, cf. *Exp. Pers.* 2.99–102: οὗτος δὲ κοινὸς καὶ βασιλεὺς καὶ δεσπότης / καὶ τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς ἡγεμὼν στρατευμάτων, / μεθ' οὗ στρατηγεῖν ἐστιν ἀσφαλέστερον, / δι' οὗ τὸ νικᾶν ἐστιν εὐσεβέστερον; *Exp. Pers.* 2.84f.: κοινὸν δὲ πάντες ἐκτενῶς εὐεργέτην / (85) ἀνηγόρευον καὶ κρατοῦντα δεσπότην; *In rest.* 65: πρὸ τῶν βασιλέων εὐσεβὴς αὐτοκράτωρ. – On the adoption of the title βασιλεύς by the Byzantine emperor in 629, cf. Chrysos 1978; Haldon 2002, 15; Viermann 2021, 234f. On Heraclius as στρατηγός, see Viermann 2021, 193f.

This combination of imperial purple and brilliant white is also to be found once in reference to Heraclius himself: In *Contra Severum* 447f. he is "clothed in purple letting the robe of his heart shine white".[39] Also in *Heraclias*, the emperor is associated with a white glow coming from his heart. Due to his many worries, his hair, which was once the colour of gold, has become snow-white and his complexion is no longer as fair as it used to be. However, the fair complexion he has lost on the outside has moved into his heart (*Heraclias* 1.140–147):[40]

Πόθεν μετῆλθεν εἰς βαφὴν ἐναντίαν
ἡ τῶν τριχῶν σου χρυσομίμητος κόμη;
Ἔβαψεν αὐτὴν ἡ χιὼν τῶν φροντίδων.
Καὶ ποῦ μετέστη τῶν μελῶν ἡ λευκότης;
Πύρωσις αὐτὴν ἀντανεῖλεν ἡλίου;
Ἀπεικὸς οὐδέν, ἀλλ᾽ ὅμως στοχάζομαι,
ἐν τῷ διαχεῖσθαι τοὺς ἱδρῶτας τῶν πόνων
ἡ λευκότης μετῆλθεν εἰς τὴν καρδίαν.

"Why has your golden shining hair changed into the opposite colour? It was dyed by the snowy white of sorrow. And where did the white splendour of your limbs disappear? Did the burning flame of the sun consume it? It is not improbable, but I believe that in pouring out the sweat of your labours the whiteness has turned to your heart."

In the *Heraclias*, George of Pisidia presents Heraclius as a shining Christian hero using the themes of splendour and light. Likewise, in *In Christi resurrectionem* 1–8 George addresses the contrast between darkness and light. The "grace of white light"[41] symbolises the successful reign of the two Christian emperors Heraclius and Heraclius Constantine. In verses 41 to 44, Heraclius is described as "bright-hearted" and is juxtaposed to the black-dressed "highwayman" who ambushes the divine order (ὁδοστάτης; *In Chr. res.* 41–44):[42]

Λευκὴν δὲ καὶ σὺ νῦν φορεῖς τὴν πορφύραν,[43]

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39 *Contra Severum* 447f.: ὁ τὴν ἁλουργὸν πορφύραν ἐνειμένος, / ποιῶν δὲ λευκὴν τὴν στολὴν τῆς καρδίας.

40 The passage is characterised by a powerful rhetoric of questions and answers. In verse 145, the narrator appears in the first-person singular and uses words that are typical of rhetorical literature, cf. the phrase ἀπεικὸς οὐδέν in Aelius Aristides, *Panathenaikos* 380, ed. DINDORF 1829/1964, vol. 1, 266.

41 *In Chr. res.* 3: λευκὴν δὲ φωτὸς … χάριν.

42 For the meaning of ὁδοστάτης as "Satan", see TARTAGLIA 1998, 253 n. 15.

43 For the reading πορφύραν instead of καρδίαν, see BIRD 2022 and ROSSI 2022 *ad locum*; cf. also LAUXTERMANN 2019, 31 n. 40.

τὰς γὰρ ζοφώδεις οὐκ ἔχεις ἁμαρτίας.[44]
Μόνος δὲ θρηνεῖ καὶ μελαγχίτων μένει
ὁ τῆς ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς ἐντολῆς ὁδοστάτης.

"Now you, too, wear the white purple shining, because you do not commit dark transgressions. Yet as the only one he laments and remains all dressed in black, he who from the beginning ambushed the divine commandment."

The Christian ruler is imbued with light and overcomes darkness and dark forces. George uses this juxtaposition of light and darkness as a powerful instrument of his propaganda aimed at rehabilitating Heraclius, who, after his coup against Phocas, needed to be legitimised as the new emperor.[45] On a religious level, the two characters praised in the poem – the father Heraclius and the son Heraclius Constantine – both appear, through their association with brightness and light, as ultimate Christian rulers. Like the light of Christian creation, their splendorous reign marks the beginning of human existence.

The relic of the Holy Cross

As the guarantor of a Christian empire, Heraclius is also prominently associated with the relic of the Holy Cross.[46] His poem *In restitutionem Sanctae Crucis* is dedicated to the recovery of the Cross, which had been looted by Persian troops invading Jerusalem in 614 and transferred to the Persian capital of Ctesiphon.[47] Even after his military advance into Persian land and on the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon, it was not until 629/630 that the Roman emperor succeeded in recovering the cross, which, according to legend, had been found in 325 by Helena, the mother of Constantine I the Great (r. 306–337). Much like for Constantine, for Heraclius, too, the Cross (σταυρός) became the symbol of the victorious Christian emperorship. The poem starts with an epiclesis on Golgotha,[48] the hill on which

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[44] The phrase τὰς ζοφώδεις ἁμαρτίας also has a Christian connotation, cf. Theodorus of Mopsuestia's commentary on Psalm 50.9b in his *Expositio in psalmos* edited by Devreesse 1939, 338: ζοφώδη με ὄντα ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις.

[45] In *Exp. Pers.* 3.223, Heraclius' mind radiates a brilliant glow in the whole surrounding world: ὁ σὸς δὲ νοῦς, κράτιστε, λευκαίνει τὸ πᾶν.

[46] The salvation of a city through the city deity or through the Christian symbol of the cross is not an uncommon theme in late antique authors. For example, Procopius reports in the *Persian Wars* 2.11.17–19 about the salvation of the city of Apameia from the Persians through a particle of the Holy Cross, cf. on this Meier 2009, 262f.

[47] For an overview of the historical events related to the restitution of the cross, see Drijvers 2002, 175–190, who also offers an analysis of the poem, furthermore Haldon 1990, 42f. as well as Howard-Johnston 2021, 346–353 and Stoyanov 2011, who analyses the relationship between the archaeological and historical reality of the conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and the narratives about the military opponents constructed by the Byzantines.

[48] *In rest.* 1: Ὦ Γολγοθὰ σκίρτησον, "Golgotha, rejoice!"

Jesus suffered his death on the cross and on which, according to biblical tradition, the Holy Cross was originally located. That is followed by words of praise for the recovered Cross and at the same time for the emperor himself. Verses 3f. explicitly address the recovery of the Cross by Heraclius. The word σοί, the second person personal pronoun, refers again to Golgotha (*In rest.* 3f.):

> ἐκ Περσίδος γὰρ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἀφιγμένος
> τὸν σταυρὸν ἐν σοὶ δεικνύει πεπηγμένον.
>
> "For from Persia the king has returned and shows that the cross is firmly fixed to you."

The focus here is on the merit of Heraclius, whose interest in the recovery of the Holy Cross is subsequently described as personally motivated. As stated in verses 27 to 31, the recovery of the cross from the hands of the Persian enemies was made possible solely through the emperor's pleas, prayers, tears, and sleeplessness.[49] The relic itself has already become a symbol of victory for the emperor (μέγα τρόπαιον τῷ βασιλεῖ), whose success continues to terrify his enemies.[50] The focus here is placed in particular on Heraclius' mental capabilities, which enabled him to recognise (ἔγνως) the outstanding significance of the cross.[51] Once again, the action against the Sasanians is presented as an immediate and personal concern of the emperor. Even though initially he was depressed and had a darkened mind,[52] Heraclius was able to take the cross from the hands of the Persians to return it to its legitimate place.[53] The relic of the cross finally appears in verses 73f. of the poem closely connected with Heraclius (*In rest.* 73f.):

> Ὁ σταυρὸς ἐν σοὶ τοῖς ἐναντίοις νέα
> κιβωτὸς[54] ὤφθη, τῆς δὲ κιβωτοῦ πλέον.
>
> "The cross in you appeared to the enemies as a new ark, indeed mightier than the Ark of the Covenant."

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[49] *In rest.* 27f.: ὁ σταυρὸς ἦλθε βασιλικῶς δεδεγμένος / λιταῖς, προσευχαῖς, δακρύοις, ἀγρυπνίαις.

[50] *In rest.* 30f.: μέγα τρόπαιον τῷ βασιλεῖ συναρμόσας, / ἐχθροὺς ποθοῦντας καὶ πλέον φοβουμένους.

[51] *In rest.* 55f.: ἕως παλινδρομοῦντα καὶ νικηφόρον / τὸν σταυρὸν ἔγνως.

[52] *In rest.* 54: στυγνὸν γὰρ εἶχες πνεῦμα καὶ τεθλιμμένον.

[53] *In rest.* 59f.: ἀλλ᾽ εἰς καμίνους Περσικὰς ἀφιγμένον / πρὸς τοὺς ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς ἀντανήγαγεν τόπους.

[54] The "new Ark of the Covenant" is seen typologically in connection with the new covenant with the Christian God, cf. in liturgical texts such as the Canons for the month of February in *Analecta Hymnica Graeca* day 2, can. 1.1, ode 9.108f.: ὑμνεῖσθω, ἡ νέα κιβωτός / τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης, ed. SCHIRÒ – TOMADAKIS 1974.

The cross is called the "new Ark of the Covenant" (νέα κιβωτός), which, like its *Old Testament* counterpart, is interpreted as a symbol of the believers' connection with God and a guarantor of God's presence in the world.[55] The adjective νέα placed next to the noun κιβωτός underlines the comparison that Pisides draws at this point: by writing "new Ark of the Covenant" he reminds of the biblical figure of King David, who renewed the old covenant with God and consolidated his own rule by retrieving the ark.[56] Thus, by comparing the Holy Cross with the Ark of the Covenant, George also parallels Heraclius and David: both are responsible for recovering the respective objects.[57] Just as the cross outshines the Ark of the Covenant (τῆς δὲ κιβωτοῦ πλέον), Heraclius appears superior to the biblical king David. The Roman emperor is thus seen here as the one who is able to find a connection with the old covenant and the Christian God and to ensure the continuation of the Christian community. He is thus crowned Saviour of Christianity and, following Constantine I the Great via the relic of the Holy Cross, is defined as the Christian emperor par excellence.

The blood of Christ

George of Pisidia seeks to further elaborate on the emperor's direct and even physical involvement in the campaign against the Persians. In verses 99 to 101 of the poem *In Bonum patricium* – an encomium to Heraclius' *magister militum* in the Avar siege of Constantinople in 626[58] – George depicts Heraclius as crucified (προσκαθήλωσας) and sacrificing himself for the community (τὸ κοινόν; *In Bon.* 99–101):

> ἁπλῶς τὸ σῶμα, τὰς φρένας, τὴν καρδίαν,
> ὅλον σεαυτὸν προσκαθήλωσας[59] πόνοις,
> ὅπως τὸ κοινὸν σῶμα μὴ φέρῃ πόνους.
>
> "In short: you nailed down your body, your mind, your heart, your entire self in your sufferings, so that the body of the community shall not have to bear sufferings."

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55 For the symbolic image of the *Old Testament* Ark of the Covenant, see Cameron 1992a, 29f. On the theme of the Ark of the Covenant in Pisides' epigrams, cf. Lauxtermann 2022, 51.

56 Cf. *Old Testament*, 2 *Sam* 6, where the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem is described.

57 For the interpretation of the passage, see Drijvers 2002, 184f. and Borgehammar 2009, 162f. On the function of the figure of David in Heraclius' imperial propaganda, cf. Sarris 2011, 258; Serrano del Pozo 2017; Viermann 2021, 275–279.

58 For the conflict between the Byzantines and the Avars and the siege of Constantinople in 626, see Haldon 1990, 43f.; Kardaras 2018, 82–87; Howard-Johnston 2021, 268–284.

59 The verb προσκαθηλόω ("to nail down", "to strike down") used by George of Pisidia in this passage appears only six times in the whole of Greek literature, before Pisides only in Diod. Sic. 20.54.7, and in Clem. Al. *Protr.* 4.51.5 (ed. Marcovich 1995). The verb in the Pisidian passage alludes to the crucifixion of Christ and thus gives the text a Christian connotation.

The allusion to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross reappears in several other passages in George's poems, for example in *Bellum Avaricum*, where it is combined with the syncrisis of Heraclius and Moses (*Bell. Avar.* 490–497):

πῇ δ᾽ ἡ θάλαττα τῇ φορᾷ τῶν λειψάνων
ὀχλουμένη τε καὶ κατεστορεσμένη
ἐξ ἀλλοφύλων αἱμάτων φοινίσσεται·
καὶ νῦν ᾽Ερυθρὰ κυρίως ἀκούεται
καλῶς βαφεῖσα τῇ βαφῇ τῶν βαρβάρων.
Ἔδει γάρ, οἶμαι, τὸν Φαραὼ τὸν δεύτερον
βλέπουσαν αὐτὴν καὶ νέον σὲ Μωσέα
τὰς τῆς ᾽Ερυθρᾶς εἰκονίζειν ἐμφάσεις.

"To the other part, the sea, crammed and covered with the huge masses of mortal remains, was stained with the blood of the enemies. And now it is rightly called the Red Sea, for it was well dyed by the colour of the barbarians. It was necessary, I believe, that it (*sc*. the sea) should see the second Pharaoh and you as a new Moses and that it reproduces the image of the Red Sea."

In his poems, Pisides makes frequently use of the typological relationship between Heraclius and Moses.[60] The theme of the sea overflowing with the blood of enemies refers to Moses' parting of the Red Sea, his successful exodus from Egypt together with the people of Israel, and the doom of the hostile Egyptians drowning in the floods.[61] Like the Egyptians in the *Old Testament*, the Slavic and Avar enemies perish in large numbers in the waters of the Golden Horn during the siege of Constantinople in 626. The downfall and death of numerous military opponents in the Golden Horn serves, here, as *aition* for the name of the Red Sea. Thus, in a sense, the Golden Horn becomes the new Red Sea. With this typological assimilation of the Red Sea and the Golden Horn, as well as of Moses and Heraclius, George depicts the emperor as the defender of the Roman capital Constantinople and of Christianity in general. As the "new Moses," Heraclius is above all representative of the new covenant with God and guarantees a Christian future for his community.

In George's poetry, the theme of blood occurs several times within profane and Christian contexts.[62] In *Bell. Avar.* 141–144, the commander Heraclius is invoked

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60 Heraclius is also portrayed in *Exp. Pers.* 3.415–423 as a new Moses who – in his faithful struggle against the enemies – has a direct connection to the Christian God. On the comparison between Moses and patriarch Sergius, see WHITBY 1995, 125f. and WHITBY 2020, 404.

61 Cf. *Old Testament*, *Exodus* 14–15.

62 Blood in a non-specifically Christian context appears in two battle scenes: (1.) The barbarians (Persians) cause ever new bloody conflicts over several generations (*Heraclias* 2.181: ἐξ αἱμάτων ὤδινεν αἱμάτων γόνον, "out of blood was born the seed of blood"). (2.) Due to the external threats posed by the barbarians, the state – which is portrayed as a human body

as saviour in the military conflict against the Avars and Slavs, who are described as barbarians. In the bloody confrontations, he had used his tears as weapons (*Bell. Avar.* 141–144):

> Χαῖρε, στρατηγὲ τῶν ἐνόπλων δακρύων
> τῶν πυρπολούντων τὸ θράσος τὸ βάρβαρον·
> ὅσον γὰρ ἁπλοῖς τὰς ῥοὰς τῶν ὀμμάτων,
> τοσοῦτον εἴργεις τὰς ῥοὰς τῶν αἱμάτων.
>
> "Hail, o commander of weapon-like tears, which burn the insolence of the barbarians! The more you reveal the streams of tears in your eyes, the more you confine the streams of blood."

In *Exp. Pers.* 3.334f. Heraclius, now in full battle, promises to save a sacrificial animal and bring redemption from the rivers of blood.[63] The most obvious parallel with Christ occurs in another passage in the *Expeditio Persica*. There the emperor, trying to save his ship from a sea storm, injures his toe on a rock, causing a stream of blood to flow (*Exp. Pers.* 1.244–247):[64]

> Θερμὴ δ᾽ ἀνηκόντιζεν αἵματος χύσις
> βάπτουσα τὴν γῆν καὶ καλοῦσα μάρτυρα·
> ἐχρῆν γὰρ ὑμῖν εἰς ἀμείωτον χάριν
> τῆς εὐσεβείας προσμένειν τὰ στίγματα.
>
> "A warm stream of blood gushed out which dyed the earth calling it to witness. Since the stigmata of your true faith needed to remain in you to obtain undiminished grace."

In a sense, Heraclius here experiences his own martyrdom and bears witness to the work of God even in a seemingly hopeless situation. By shedding his own blood, the emperor becomes the new Christ. At no time, however, is the emperor's life in serious danger, as he loses only a few drops of blood.[65]

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filled with blood – fell into disorder and got sick (*Bell. Avar.* 61f.: καὶ τοῖς ἑαυτῶν αἵμασιν πεφυρμένον / ὅλον τὸ σῶμα τοῖς πόνοις ἐβόσκετο, "And confused in its blood flow, the whole body fed on pain.").

63 *Exp. Pers.* 3.334f.: εἴ πως ἑαυτὸν ἀντίλυτρον εἰσάγων / ἐλευθερώσεις αἱμάτων τὸ ποίμνιον, "when you will bring yourself as ransom and free the sacrificial animal from the streams of blood".

64 For the passage, see Trilling 1978, 259f.

65 The scene gains an additional meaning through its narrative context: Envy personified (*Exp. Pers.* 1.239: στενάξας ὁ Φθόνος) had brought Heraclius into the situation of shipwreck and, having been transformed into a rock, had become a physical obstacle which he was, however, able to overcome. For the passage, see Demoen – Verhelst 2019, 188 and Leppin 2020, 299.

By using blood as a narrative element in several battle scenes, George of Pisidia draws on well-known epic traditions and depicts Heraclius as a classical pagan hero physically involved in the warfare, suffering as did Jesus Christ. By doing this, George seeks to legitimate the fact that Heraclius was the first Roman emperor in over 200 years to personally take part in military campaigns. The emperor's blood ultimately becomes a Christian sign of victory and a literary topic for George's own poetry.[66]

On God's side

George of Pisidia brings Heraclius even closer to the Christian God. In *Exp. Pers.* 3.401, Heraclius is described as ὑποστράτηγος, as a military subordinate and representative of God on earth. In the following verses God is asked to make the emperor "a faithful shield-bearer" who always obeys his commands (*Exp. Pers.* 3.402f.):

> Ποίησον αὐτὸν πιστὸν ἀσπιδηφόρον
> τῶν εὐσεβῶν σου πανταχοῦ προσταγμάτων.
>
> "Make him a faithful shield-bearer of your all righteous commands!"

A direct connection between Heraclius' love of God and his political and military activities is drawn in the poem *In Heraclium ex Africa redeuntem*. There, his love of God had motivated him to "calm the storm" and to save "the community" (τὸ κοινόν) from danger (*In Heracl.* 53–55):

> Ἔρως δέ τίς σε πρὸς Θεὸν πυρούμενον
> κατεῖχεν ὥστε τὴν καταιγίδα σβέσαι,
> δι᾽ ἧς τὸ κοινὸν εἰς ὄλεθρον ἤρχετο.
>
> "A longing seized you for God ablaze: to calm the storm by which the community was doomed."

The main goal of the poem *In Heraclium ex Africa redeuntem* is to legitimise the military coup against Phocas, Heraclius' predecessor on the imperial throne. The image of the sea storm is to be read as a metaphor for Phocas' rule, which is described in an exclusively negative light as harmful for society. The "saviour Heraclius" is presented as an avenger sent by the Christian God and, therefore, as the rightful owner of the imperial throne and sole representative of Christian society.

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66 *Heraclias* 1.109: τὸ σὸν γὰρ αἷμα τοῖς γραφεῦσιν ἀρκέσει.

The emperor's ultimate Christian apotheosis is staged in the poem *In sanctam resurrectionem*, where Heraclius and his son Heraclius Constantine appear to be detached from the earthly world and are described as belonging to the divine sphere of heaven (*In Chr. res.* 100–103):

> Σφαῖραν δὲ διττήν, τὴν μὲν εἰς τὸ γυμνάσαι
> τὸ σῶμα παίζεις, τὴν δὲ νουνεχῶς ἔχεις,
> ὅτε πρὸς ὕψος ἐκταθεὶς τὴν καρδίαν
> ζητεῖς τὸν εἱρμὸν τῶν ἄνω σφαιρωμάτων.
>
> "You have in use a twofold sphere: with one you play to exercise the body, with the other you train your mind, when, lifting up your heart to the heaven, you explore the succession of the spheres above."

Finally, in the poem *In restitutionem Sanctae Crucis*, Heraclius himself is shown as being part of the heavenly sphere when he dances with the angels (*In rest.* 71f.):

> Καὶ νῦν βαδίζεις ψυχικῶς ἡγνισμένος
> ὁδὸν γελῶσαν συγχορεύων Ἀγγέλοις.
>
> "And now you are striding happily, spiritually purified, along the joyful path, dancing together with the angels."

Orthodoxy

In George's poems, Heraclius is frequently presented as the ruler who follows the only true faith. As an essential element of his religious policy, the emperor sought to oppose Christian groups that departed from the orthodox doctrine – such as the miaphysites – by promoting the concept of monotheletism, which he sought to implement as the only valid Christian doctrine.[67] By repeatedly using the words εὐσεβής, εὐσέβεια, and εὐσεβεῖν in reference to Heraclius – especially in *Exp. Pers.* and *Heraclias* –, George strengthened the association of the emperor and his entourage with the concept of the only true Christian faith. In a passage of the *Expeditio Persica*, Heraclius, on his way out of Constantinople, sails his ship past the promontory of Heraia (also: Hieria or Heraion, today's Fenerbahçe) situated on the Asian side of the Bosporus in Bithynia (*Exp. Pers.* 1.157–164):[68]

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[67] On the concept of monotheletism and the politics of Heraclius, see Haldon 1990, 297–304; Kaegi 2010, 71–78; Adamiak 2016, 96–101; Viermann 2021, 285–300. Heraclius' anti-miaphysite policy culminated in the so-called *Ekthesis*, an edict published in 638 following the suggestion of the Constantinopolitan Patriarch Sergius, which sought to establish monotheletism as standard religion for the entire Byzantine territory, cf. MacCoull 1998, 76–78 and Reinink – Stolte 2002, x–xi.

[68] For the passage see Whitby 2002, 163 and Howard-Johnston 2010, 20.

Καὶ δὴ παρέπλεις εὐθὺς Ἡραίας τόπους·
οὕτω γὰρ αὐτὴν ὠνόμαζον ἐκ πλάνης
τῆς πρὶν κρατούσης διαδοχὴν δεδεγμένοι,
ἕως ἔτρεψας, εὐσεβῶς μεθαρμόσας,
τὸ τῆς πλάνης ἄδοξον εἰς εὐδοξίαν.

"And you sailed straight past the place of Heraia. So it was called, because of a former prevalent error, by those who had taken the succession, until you, piously harmonising it, turned the false faith of aberration to the true faith."

Heraia (Fenerbahçe), opposite Kadıköy (Chalcedon), had been the summer residence of the Byzantine emperors since Justinian I (r. 527–565) and contained a palace complex, a harbour, and the Church of St Mary.[69] Heraclius also regularly used the palace as his residence. By emphasising the religious significance of this place, Pisides portrays the emperor as the ultimate Christian ruler who pursues the right faith. Pagan and non-orthodox remnants from the past are no longer to be found at the time Heraclius sails past the cape. Orthodox faith, which is in accordance with the official imperial doctrine, seems to be already established at that point. The fact that the port of Heraia also served as a port of call for the triumphant entry of emperors after their military expeditions in the East casts a favourable light on Heraclius' campaign against the Persians from the very beginning. Heraia's proximity to Chalcedon – the meeting place of the fourth ecumenical council in 451 and symbol of a uniform Christian doctrine – should perhaps also be alluded to in this passage. This interpretation would once again foster Heraclius' true faith.

The idea of orthodoxy serves George in several passages of his works to legitimate Heraclius' campaigns against the "infidel" Persian king Khusro II.[70] Heraclius appears to exploit the concept of true faith as a military tactical tool to drive the Sasanian opponents from Byzantine territory and to carry the war into the Persian heartland itself (*Heraclias* 1.155–158):

Οὐκ ἤρκεσάν σοι τοῦ στρατοῦ τὰ πράγματα,
ἀλλ᾽ εἰς τοσαύτην εὐσεβοῦς ἀπληστίας
ὄρεξιν ἦλθες, ὥστε καὶ τῶν ἐγκάτων
ἐντὸς παρελθεῖν τῆς ἀθέσμου Περσίδος.

"The critical condition of the army was not enough for you. On the contrary, you developed such an insatiable appetite for the true faith that you pushed into the innermost regions of lawless Persia."

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69 Mango 1991, 929.

70 *Heraclias* 2.165f.: τὴν εὐσεβοῦντι δεσπότῃ πορθουμένην / ἢ δυσσεβοῦντι Χοσρόῃ σεσωσμένην, cf. also *Heraclias* 2.225: τῇ σῇ καθαρθὲν εὐσεβεῖ καθαιρέσει and *Heraclias* 2.69: τῷ σῷ κενώσας εὐσεβεῖ καθαρσίῳ.

According to George's poem, "the insatiable appetite for the true faith" prompted Heraclius to campaign in the land of the "lawless" Persians. The emphasis on the emperor's true faith is vividly illustrated by the phrase εἰς τοσαύτην εὐσεβοῦς ἀπληστίας ὄρεξιν. These words are intended to provide a religious justification for the Persian wars which he pursued between 624 and 628 and which took him as far as the Persian heartland with its capital Ctesiphon. After having successfully recovered the Holy Cross from the hands of the Persian king Khusro II, Heraclius is described as "pious emperor" (εὐσεβὴς αὐτοκράτωρ) in verse 65 of the poem *In restitutionem Sanctae Crucis*. At this point, the focus shifts on suppressing the non-Christian religion of the Persians: Heraclius had burnt the Zoroastrian fire temple in Takht-e Soleyman of the Persians to ashes and replaced pagan with Christian religion. Here, George plays with the symbolic meaning of fire in both religions. The Christian Holy Cross, animated by divine fire, had brought about the extinction of the Persian fire cult.[71] What Khusro II would have despised as mere wood[72] finally brought about his demise and pierced his heart like a spear.[73] Unlike his predecessor Phocas, who, in the poem *In Heraclium ex Africa redeuntem*, is blamed for the collapse of society, Heraclius had earned God's support through pursuing the true Christian faith, and is now proclaimed saviour of the entire Christian community. By means of parallel verse construction, Pisides once again creates a sharp contrast between the reign of Phocas and that of Heraclius (*In Heracl.* 35–38):[74]

> Εἰ γὰρ τὸ κοινὸν πολλάκις διώλετο
> ταῖς τῶν κρατούντων ἀπροσεξίαις πεσόν,
> καὶ νῦν τὸ κοινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ σωθήσεται
> ταῖς τοῦ κρατοῦντος εὐσεβῶς εὐπραξίαις.
>
> "Yet even though the community was often completely ruined and collapsed through the negligence of those in power, the community will now be saved by God through the pious and good actions of the ruler."

The subject of imperial orthodoxy comes to a climax in the scene in *Exp. Pers.* 1.246f. where Heraclius' bleeding toe has become the στίγμα, i.e. the symbol of his true faith.[75] Moreover, Heraclius' whole army is sacralised, for example in

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71 *In rest.* 66: τὸ πῦρ ἀπηθάλωσεν ἐμπύρῳ ξύλῳ. For the burning of the temple by Heraclius, see HUFF 2002 and HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2021, 226f.

72 *In rest.* 67: ὃ Χοσρόης μὲν ὡς ξύλον κατεφρόνει.

73 *In rest.* 68: εὗρεν δὲ λόγχην τῆς ἑαυτοῦ καρδίας.

74 For the passage, cf. VIERMANN 2021, 131f.

75 *Exp. Pers.* 1.246f.: ἐχρῆν γὰρ ὑμῖν εἰς ἀμείωτον χάριν / τῆς εὐσεβείας προσμένειν τὰ στίγματα. – Further passages on Heraclius' orthodoxy are to be found: *Exp. Pers.* 1.194f. (ὁ μὲν γὰρ οἶδεν ἐκπυροῦν τὰ σώματα, / σὺ δὲ δροσίζεις εὐσεβῶς τὰς καρδίας), where the relentless glow of the sun is tempered by Herakleios' orthodoxy; in *Exp. Pers.* 1.237, the

Exp. Pers. 1.177f. where the true Christian faith of Heraclius' crew is emphasised through their fighting against the sea storm.[76] Highlighting the emperor's religious authority and the orthodox faith of those around him, is an integral part of George's poetic programme by which he aims, ultimately, at legitimising Heraclius' place on the imperial throne.

The genealogy of Heraclius

The connection between Heraclius' imperial rule and Christian ideology represents a core element of George's poetic. In the epilogue of *Bellum Avaricum,* he depicts the Christian devotion of Heraclius and his son Heraclius Constantine by using a garden metaphor. There, Heraclius appears in the full bloom of his power, which shall be carried on by his son (*Bell. Avar.* 531f.):

> (…) αὔξοι δὲ τὴν σὴν εὐσεβῆ φυτουργίαν,
> τὸν δεσπότην θάλλοντα τοῖς θείοις κλάδοις.
>
> "(…) and that he may multiply your pious cultivation, the flourishing ruler with his divine offspring."

Heraclius Constantine becomes the central subject of the panegyric in the poem *In sanctam resurrectionem*. Like his father, he is endowed with shiny white purple[77] and, with the rhetorical effect of an oxymoron, is called "wise offspring and aged child" (*In Chr. res.* 64). Already at birth, he had received imperial legitimacy through his father, as he was wrapped in purple swaddling clothes and given the imperial sceptre (*In Chr. res.* 64–66):

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emperor once again appears as mastering the forces of nature when he withstands all adversities in the sea storm precisely because of his Christian faith (πῇ δὲ πρὸς ὕψος εὐσεβῶς ἀνατρέχων); in *Heraclias* 1.197, the porphyra in the imperial palace turns blood-red through Heraclius' sweat and orthodoxy (ἱδρῶσι τοῖς σοῖς εὐσεβῶς ἡμαγμένη); and in *Heraclias* 1.182–185, Christ forms the foundation for the works of the emperor (ἦ δῆλον ὡς ἡ χεὶρ μὲν ἐκ τῶν ἰκμάδων / τῆς εὐσεβείας εὐκόλως ἐτείνετο, / πέτρα δέ σοί τις οὐρανῶν ὑπερτέρα / ὁ Χριστὸς ἐγγὺς εἰς βάσιν παρίστατο).

[76] *Exp. Pers.* 1.177f.: φωνὴ δ' ἄπωθεν ὀξέων θρηνημάτων / τὰς σὰς κατεβρόντησεν εὐσεβεῖς φρένας. – True faith is attributed to the Byzantine army on several occasions: in *Exp. Pers.* 2.188–190, "pious affection" is the motivation for the soldiers to engage in military action (ἔρως γὰρ ἡμᾶς εὐσεβὴς περιτρέχων / εἰς τὰς ἀνάγκας καὶ περιστάσεις πλέον / νευρῶν συνιστᾷ τοὺς τόνους τοῦ σαρκίου); in *Exp. Pers.* 2.201f. Heraclius succeeds in establishing military order and orthodoxy in the army (κρατεῖν γὰρ ἔγνως ῥᾷστα τῶν ἐναντίων / ἐν εὐσεβείᾳ τὸν στρατόν σου ῥυθμίσας).

[77] *In Chr. res.* 41: λευκὴν δὲ καὶ σὺ νῦν φορεῖς τὴν πορφύραν.

Ἀλλ᾽ ὦ σοφὸν γέννημα καὶ τέκνον γέρον·
ὁ σπαργανωθεὶς τῇ νοητῇ πορφύρᾳ,
καὶ σκῆπτρα δείξας τοὺς βιωφελεῖς λόγους.

"O wise offspring and aged son! You who were wrapped in the purple bands of wisdom and who held the words useful for life like a sceptre."

George clearly endorses Heraclius Constantine (612–641) – Heraclius' son from his first marriage to Eudocia – against Heraclonas (626–641) – Heraclius' younger son from his second marriage to Martina.[78] To Heraclius Constantine, who ruled for only a few months in 641 as Constantine III, succeeded Heraclonas, who, however, was overthrown in a palace coup together with his mother Martina in September 641 and died in exile on the island of Rhodes. The line of rulers that started with Heraclius was eventually continued with Constans II (r. 641–668), a son of Constantine III who finally managed to ascend to the throne.

George of Pisidia brings both Heraclius and his eldest son Heraclius Constantine close together in his eulogies, particularly in the poem *In sanctam resurrectionem*: Like the father, the son shall take up arms and go into battle,[79] and both shall walk side by side.[80] The poet achieves an ultimate closeness of father Heraclius and son Heraclius Constantine to God through the invocation of Christ in *Exp. Pers.* 3.456–458:

Φύλαττε, Χριστέ, τοῦ βασιλέως κλάδους
ἐκ τῆς τοσαύτης τοῦ φθόνου κακουργίας,
φρούρησον αὐτοὺς τῇ μετ᾽ εἰρήνης σκέπῃ.

"Protect, o Christ, the king's offsprings from the great harm of evil envy! Strengthen them with the shelter of peace!"

Christ, who is hardly ever mentioned by name in Georges' poems, appears here as an advocate of Heraclius and his son, granting unchallengeable authority to both of them.[81] A direct line to the Heraclides is drawn not only from Christ but also

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78 The emperor's son Heraclius Constantine is well integrated in Heraclius' propaganda, see Booth 2019 and Hächler 2022, 69–116.

79 *In Chr. res.* 119: Δέον σε λοιπὸν καὶ πρὸς ὅπλα καὶ μάχας.

80 *In Chr. res.* 121: ὡς Ἡρακλείδην τῷ τεκόντι συντρέχειν.

81 With the exception of *Exp. Pers.* 3.455, Christ himself is mentioned by name only once more in the poems discussed in this paper, namely in *Heraclias* 1.185 (ὁ Χριστὸς ἐγγὺς εἰς βάσιν παρίστατο) and, furthermore, twice in the *Hexaemeron* (verses 1841 and 1897) as well as several times in *Contra Severum*, in the epigrams by Pisides in the *Anthologia Palatina*, and in the *Laudatio on Anastasius the Persian*. Christ also echoes in *Bell. Avar.* 517f.

from the first Christian and Byzantine emperor Constantine I the Great (r. 306–337), whose biography had already been turned into legend by the beginning of the 7th century.[82] Constantine is mentioned by name three times in the poem on the return of the Holy Cross (*In rest.* 47, 49, 62).[83] In this context, he is repeatedly called upon to support Heraclius as "his son."[84] By alluding to this fictitious genealogy that begins with Constantine I and continues with Heraclius' descendants Constantine III and Constans II in the middle of the 7th century, George reinforces the reign of Heraclius and consolidates its Christian nature.

Iconic emperor

An essential feature of George's poems is the metaphorical and visual language he uses.[85] Icons appear in several of his poems, e.g. in the *Expeditio Persica*, where Heraclius on his campaign against the Sasanians carries an icon of Christ (*Exp. Pers.* 1.139–149),[86] or at the beginning of the *Bellum Avaricum*, when the icon of Mary from the Church of Blachernae serves as an emblem for the Byzantine victory over the Avars and their allies in the siege of Constantinople in 626 (*Bell. Avar.* 1–9).[87] Also the labelling of the relic of the Holy Cross as a sign of victory and the iconic representation of the emperor are both part of this literary technique. In the poem *In Heraclium ex Africa redeuntem*, the image of the emperor becomes an essential part of the poetic narration: Presented as an image (ὡς ἐν εἰκόνι), Heraclius is sacralised and even deified and praised for his spiritual beauty (*In Heracl.* 80–85):[88]

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in the compound Χριστάδελφα ("brotherly in Christ"). Christ as the almighty ruler and master of human existence is paraphrased several times in *Bell. Avar.*: "the builder of all being" (ὁ πάσης ἀρχιτέκτων οὐσίας, 519), "the almighty foundation of the visible" (τὸ πανσθενὲς στήριγμα τῶν ὁρωμένων, 529), "the firmly established basis of the invisible" (τῶν ἀδήλων ἡ πεπηγμένη βάσις, 521). As the ultimate supporter of the two Heraclides in their war against Persians, Avars, and Slavs, Christ appears in *Bell. Avar.* 525f. (καὶ νῦν στρατεύσας τοὺς πυραυγεῖς συμμάχους / κατὰ σκοτεινῶν ἀντιτάξοι βαρβάρων, "and who now leads the fiery allies into the field and sets them up against the grim barbarians").

82 Cameron 1992b, 257 and 262f.

83 On the function of Constantine in the poem *In restitutionem Sanctae Crucis* see Drijvers 2002, 181–184; on the character of Constantine I in the political propaganda of Heraclius see Ferber 1981, 36.

84 *In rest.* 50: κρότει τὸ τέκνον ("cheer on your son"); 58: τὸ σὸν δὲ τέκνον ("your child"); 61: τέκνον ἐκ Θεοῦ προμηθίας ("a child by providence of God").

85 On the literary technique of imagery in the works of George of Pisidia, see Cresci 2017.

86 On the function of the icon in *Exp. Pers.*, cf. Leppin 2020, 296 and 304.

87 For the passage, see Espejo Jáimez 2015, 253–256. – On the Theotokos in *Bell. Avar.*, see Whitby 2020, 406–409, and Viermann 2021, 219–221.

88 On Heraclius as an icon, cf. Viermann 2021, 238f.

ὅπως μερίμνης λοιπὸν ἐστερημένοι
τὸ ψυχικόν σου κάλλος ὡς ἐν εἰκόνι
ἐν ταῖς ἑαυτῶν ἐκτυποῦντες καρδίαις

ἀνεξάλειπτον ἱστορήσωμεν χάριν
δεικνύντες οἷον ἄνθος εὐλογημένον
ταῖς τῶν ἀκανθῶν συμπλοκαῖς ἐκρύπτετο.

"(…) so that we – who are now free from trouble and engrave the beauty of your soul like a picture in our hearts – may depict its indelible grace, showing what a praised blossom is hidden amidst the tangle of thorns."

The subjunctive form ἱστορήσωμεν in the first-person plural explicitly addresses the recipients of the poem, who are encouraged to bring the emperor's iconic image right before their eyes and become aware of its perfect beauty. In addition, the literary genre of panegyric is echoed in the phrase "praised flower" (ἄνθος εὐλογημένον).

In this passage, George of Pisidia portrays the emperor as a holy image, as if he was a Christian icon that may be worshipped by those present in his place. Closely related to this imperial imagery is the question of the setting of George's poetic recitations. As Alice Cosme-Thomas argues with regard to *Bellum Avaricum*, it can be safely assumed that this poem was not recited in the emperor's presence, as this would otherwise pose a chronological problem.[89] Therefore, it is plausible that the emperor, who was on campaign abroad and thus absent from Constantinople, could have been represented by his portrait, before which George recited his panegyric. Thus, the audience, which probably consisted of Patriarch Sergius and an educated court elite, could imagine the absent emperor as being present. This poetic imagery of an iconic-like emperor thus fulfils an essential function in the audience's reception of Heraclius and his political agenda. By emphasising visual elements in *Bellum Avaricum* as well as in his other encomiastic poems, George of Pisidia reinforces his panegyric intention of depicting the emperor as the only legitimate ruler in the Roman Empire.

Conclusion

The closeness to God, almost deification of the emperor and his son is one of the main goals of George's panegyrics and fits well into Heraclius' own political and religious programme. Heraclius is depicted as a ruler who by far surpasses all pagan heroes, and he acquires even greater authority through his Christian attitude. George particularly highlights the emperor's achievements and military actions as well as his relentlessness towards the "infidel barbarians", his will for peace,

89 Cf. Cosme-Thomas 2025, 116.

and his commitment to the Christian community. His physical and spiritual achievements are attributed to his "true faith" and to his closeness to the Christian God. Heraclius is elevated into higher spheres of Christian existence and, ultimately, enthroned like Christ in heaven by means of a number of literary strategies, such as his comparison with characters from the Old and New Testament and the description of his heroic feat of rescuing and returning the Holy Cross. George of Pisidia links themes of pagan literary tradition with Christian wording and images and thus creates panegyrics that have at the same time a strong secular and religious meaning.[90]

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Abstracts

Emperor Divine:
The Portrait of Heraclius in the Poems of George of Pisidia

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The fact that the poems by George of Pisidia (before 600–after 635 AD) do not tend to provide a narrative continuum but rather deal in an associative way with a set of different themes probably has made a narrative analysis of this work so far quite unattractive. Since the academic studies by Leo Sternbach (1864–1940) at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and the partial edition by Agostino Pertusi in 1959, it was not until the 1990s that he received greater attention. The present article aims to provide an insight into the poetic techniques that Pisides uses in his panegyric poems on the emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641). In discussing selected passages from George's poetic oeuvre, it is shown that Heraclius is portrayed as a pagan hero in traditional epic style, a Christian holy man, and a legitimate Christian emperor. The focus of the study lies on the analysis of selected themes and images (the relic of the Holy Cross, the blood of Christ, the legend of the Christian emperor Constantine and the emperor as iconic character), by means of which Pisides seeks to legitimise the emperor to his recipients, the officials at the imperial court in Constantinople.

[Cisár božského pôvodu: Portrét Hérakleia v básňach Georgia Pisida]

Skutočnosť, že básne Georgia Pisida (pred rokom 600 – po roku 635 n. l.) nemajú tendenciu poskytovať naratívne kontinuum, ale skôr sa asociatívnym spôsobom zaoberajú súborom rôznych tém, pravdepodobne spôsobila, že naratívna analýza tejto časti jeho diela doteraz nevzbudila záujem u bádateľov. Od akademických štúdií Lea Sternbacha (1864 – 1940) na prelome 19. a 20. storočia a čiastočného vydania Agostina Pertusiho z roku 1959 sa mu až v 90. rokoch 20. storočia venovala väčšia pozor-

nosť. Cieľom článku je priblížiť básnické techniky, ktoré Pisidés používa vo svojich panegyrických básňach o cisárovi Hérakleiovi (vládol v rokoch 610 – 641). V diskusii o vybraných pasážach z básnického diela Georgia Pisida autorka ukazuje, že sa tu Hérakleios zobrazuje ako pohanský hrdina v tradičnom epickom štýle, ako kresťanský svätý muž a ako legitímny kresťanský cisár. Štúdia sa zameriava na analýzu vybraných tém a obrazov (relikvia Svätého kríža, Kristova krv, legenda o kresťanskom cisárovi Konštantínovi a cisár ako ikonická postava), prostredníctvom ktorých sa Pisidés snaží legitimizovať cisára pred jeho recipientmi, úradníkmi na cisárskom dvore v Konštantínopole.