

# “ὁ κρατῶν Περσοκράτης ὁ πυρσολάτρης ἐξοφώθη Χοσρόης.”: The Portrayal of Chosroes II in George Pisides' *Herakleias*

Vicky Hioureas

Department of Classics, University of California, Irvine



e-Sasanika  
Graduate paper 5  
2013

As the two greatest powers in the region, Sasanian Persia and Byzantium were often at odds with each other. In 528, after much fighting and loss, a peace was negotiated, but was soon broken on three separate occasions: between Chosroes I and Justinian; Chosroes I and Justin II; and finally, Chosroes II and Herakleios. This last war, enduring nearly 26 years, decimated both empires irreparably. Prior to this, however, a standing alliance was established between Emperor Maurice and Chosroes II, after the former restored the latter to the Sasanian throne. Once Phokas usurped Maurice's throne and killed him and his family, Chosroes II revived the hostility between the two empires, using the murder of Maurice and the restoration of his fugitive son to the throne as justification for invasion.<sup>1</sup> Chosroes II took advantage of the brewing civil war in Byzantium, and advanced in Syria and Cappadocia, as Herakleios entered Constantinople to take the throne from Phokas.

Arguably one of the biggest blows to Byzantine morale was the sack of Jerusalem and the capture of the True Cross.<sup>2</sup> After years of fighting and defeat, Herakleios brought his empire victory against the Sasanian empire in 624, when, taking command of the operations himself, he invaded Atropatene and forced Chosroes II to flee.<sup>3</sup> It was here where Herakleios vindicated the sacking of Jerusalem by destroying Adur-Gushnasp. By 628, Herakleios had achieved his final victory, as Chosroes II was deposed and replaced by his eldest son Kavadh Shiroe, who appealed for peace with the Byzantines.<sup>4</sup> The importance of the emperor's successes is reflected in the poetry of George Pisides. A court poet, Pisides wrote numerous works chronicling Herakleios' victory against the Persian enemy. In this paper, I will focus primarily on the *Herakleias*, Pisides' last major poem on the Persian campaigns, to examine the depiction of Chosroes II, Persia, and Zoroastrianism. Composed around 628, the *Herakleias* is separated into three cantos and celebrates Herakleios' overthrow of Phokas, his victory over the Persians, and culminates with the death of Chosroes II.<sup>5</sup> I began by providing a brief context for the poem, I will follow with a background on the author, and will conclude by providing the original text with English translation of the passages that concern Chosroes II, with my accompanying analysis.

In Constantinople, Pisides played both secular and religious functions: he served in the

<sup>1</sup> Howard-Johnston 2006: IV.57

<sup>2</sup> Whitby 1998: 249

<sup>3</sup> Howard-Johnston 2006: IV.58

<sup>4</sup> Howard-Johnston 2006: IV.58

<sup>5</sup> Whitby 2002: 166, though separated in three cantos, only two are extant. Many believe that Theophanes uses material from Pisides' third canto in his *Chronographia*. The poem breaks off with an account of the destruction of Adur-Gushnasp in 624.



patriarchal administration and was a deacon in the Hagia Sophia, in addition to being commissioned by Herakleios to write works ranging from epigrams commemorating buildings to war poetry and encomia.<sup>6</sup> Although typically categorized as a panegyric work, the *Herakleias* combines theological, mythological, and political elements. Pisides wrote campaign narratives, which show the mechanics of war, but also express the common conception of Chosroes II and Persia. Most of the *Herakleias* depicts Herakleios as God's champion against Zoroastrian Iran, comparing him to biblical and classical figures. Pisides' writing is complex, with use of an extensive, elevated vocabulary, and is not easily understood, presumably even for his contemporaries. The images and writing style are often so obscure that it is unlikely that anyone besides the highly-educated men of the court understood it.<sup>7</sup> From the structure of his poetry, it is argued that it was intended to be read aloud (ἀκροάσεις), which might further bolster the argument that it was an encomiastic work to be presented before the emperor.<sup>8</sup>

There are several recurring themes in Pisides' poetry: Chosroes II as an insult to God and Christendom, and Herakleios as being under God's protection.<sup>9</sup> His works served as a powerful tool of propaganda for Herakleios' campaigns and conquests. Pisides eloquently denounced Chosroes II and the Zoroastrian "worship of created things rather than the Creator."<sup>10</sup> This kind of propaganda no doubt struck a chord with the Christian populace that had seen their Christian symbol—the True Cross—stolen by blasphemous hands. Creating poetry that emphasized the barbarian nature of the Sasanian Empire would weaken common Byzantine loyalties to Persia, and in this way, would function to create support for the emperor's campaigns. The war had been going on for over twenty years, with countless deaths; Herakleios was desperately fighting off invasions on all sides of the empire. This is why the emperor presumably needed Pisides to engender support for his actions. In this work, the Herakleios is compared to biblical and classical figures alike: Herakles, Perseus, Noah, and Moses. The Herakles comparison is most interesting because in classical mythology, he was a civilizing character who defeated and subjugated the sub-human and base.<sup>11</sup> By comparing Herakleios to Herakles, Pisides transformed the emperor's war against Persia into a noble one, in which Herakleios civilized the otherwise uncivilized Persians.<sup>12</sup>

Herakleios retaliated for the sacking of Jerusalem and the theft of the True Cross when he polluted the sacred fire temple by throwing corpses into the waters of the sacred lake, among other things. He destroyed the Zoroastrian temple, and in this way demonstrated, at least for the eyes of his Empire, that the war against the Sassanian was a religious one.<sup>13</sup> Pisides developed this idea throughout the *Herakleias*, incorporating biblical allusions into his poem,

<sup>6</sup> Howard-Johnston 2010: 16. He states that a mention of a patriarch or emperor in a poem does not ensure that the poem was a commissioned work. I believe that the panegyric quality of the *Herakleia* and the official information that Pisides includes prove that this poem was indeed an imperial commission. Whitby 1998: 247, the author records that Pisides was patriarchal *referndarius*, which made him responsible for communications with the emperor.

<sup>7</sup> Lauxtermann 2003: 39

<sup>8</sup> Lauxtermann 2003: 56

<sup>9</sup> Howard-Johnston 2006: IV.82; Lauxtermann 2003: 236

<sup>10</sup> Howard-Johnston 2006: IX.103

<sup>11</sup> Whitby 1994: 208

<sup>12</sup> Pisides: 1.65-70

<sup>13</sup> Howard-Johnston 2006: IX.107

which will be discussed below.

Pisides opens the *Herakleias* with a cosmological description of the fall of Chosroes—the embodiment of earthly evil. Through the help of God, Chosroes's reign has come to an end:

Ἀγαλλιᾶσθω πᾶς χορὸς τῶν ἀστέρων  
τὸν ἀστρόδουλον δεικνύων πεπτωκότα  
καὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πτῶσιν ἡγνοηκότα·  
οὐκ ἔστεγεν γὰρ ἡ κτίσις τιμωμένη  
κἂν δυσσεβηθεὶς ὁ Κτίσας ἡνείχετο.  
νῦν πανσέληνος ἡ σελήνη λαμπέτω  
τοῦ Χοσρόου λήγοντος ἐγγυωμένη  
Πέρσας τὸ λοιπὸν μὴ θεουργεῖν τὴν κτίσιν.  
καὶ νῦν ὁ τρισμέγιστος ἡλίου πόλος,  
λούσας ἑαυτὸν τῇ καθάρσει τῶν φόνων,  
βοᾷ, λαλεῖ σοι τὴν σφαγὴν τοῦ Χοσρόου,  
θεοῦ βεβήλους ἐκφυγὼν ὑποψίας.

Let all the chorus of stars rejoice  
showing the slave to the stars having fallen  
ignorant of his own fall.  
The One who created the world would not tolerate it,  
having received disrespect.  
Now let the all-shining moon shine  
As Chosroes is coming to an end  
The moon is pledging that  
The Persians no longer serve the earth  
And now the greatest sun  
Having washed itself in the catharsis of the murders  
Speaks out loud, and is telling you the slaughter of Chosroes  
Having escaped the sacrilegious views of the god.<sup>14</sup>

It is proposed that this opening section of the poem echoes the Psalms, but I would rather argue that Pisides used Zoroastrian imagery to further undermine its existence.<sup>15</sup> Pisides depicts the end of Chosroes by using Persian religious and political imagery. Instead of upholding its former master, the moon now pledges that the “Persians no longer serve the earth.” Additionally, the Persian royal epithets may also have a place within this context. In 529, Kavadh called himself “King of King's, of the rising sun,” and addressed a letter to Emperor Justinian as “Flavius Justinianus Caesar of the sinking moon.”<sup>16</sup> If Pisides had this in mind, the moon that Kavadh claimed was sinking is now full and ascending. The sun, which represented the Persian

<sup>14</sup> Pisides: 1.1-12; All translations are my own.

<sup>15</sup> Whitby 2002: 170, here the author writes that Psalms 94(95).1, 97(98).7f, 99.(100).1 are reflected in this section, though she does not address this any further.

<sup>16</sup> Whitby1994b: 233, the author writes that the the sun was the symbol of peace, and the moon of war. I do not necessarily agree with this interpretation, nor do I think that is what Pisides' intention was in including the images of the sun and moon.

Empire, has now been washed clean of its pollution. In 358, Shapur II called himself in a letter to Constantius II, “Shapur, King of kings, partner of the stars, brother of the sun and moon.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the Byzantine Empire had regained its strength and conquered Persia, both physically through war and symbolically by reversing these cosmological associations. This is a clear expression of both a Byzantine victory over Sasanian Persia, and also of Christianity over Zoroastrianism.

Pisides continues in his description of the fall of Persia by incorporating biblical references to Daniel:

σκίρτησον αἰθήρ· ὁ κρατῶν Περσοκράτης  
ὁ πυρσολάτρης ἐζοφώθη Χοσρόης.  
πάλιν κάμινος Περσική καὶ δευτέρα  
δροσίζεται φλόξ τῷ Δανιήλ τῷ δευτέρῳ,  
άνωφερῆς δὲ καίπερ οὔσα τὴν φύσιν  
χεῖται κατ’ αὐτῶν καὶ διώκει καὶ φλέγει  
τοὺς τὴν πονηράν ἐκπυρώσαντας φλόγα·  
πάλιν λεόντων ἡγριωμένων στόμα  
εἰς γῆν δι’ ὑμῶν Περσικὴν ἀνεφράγη·  
πάλιν παροινεῖ δυσσεβῶς ὁ Χοσρόης  
καὶ πῦρ θεουργεῖ καὶ θεὸς φαντάζεται,  
ἕως σὺν αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ πῦρ ὑπερβράσαν  
σὺν τῷ θεουργήσαντι συγκατεφθάρη·

Move, aether. The one ruling over the Persians  
The one worshipping the flame, Chosroes, has been put in darkness.  
Again the fire, and again the Persian furnace  
Is being put out by the second Daniel,  
The fire expanding upwards by its nature  
It pours out towards them and pursues them and burns  
Those who have been burning the evil fire.  
The mouth of the bewildered lions  
Has again been shut because of us  
Towards the Persian land.  
Again, Chosroes is getting drunk impiously  
And is making the divine fire, and imagining the fire  
Until the fire, having boiled over,  
Was completely destroyed together with him, its maker.<sup>18</sup>

This reference first to Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and then to Daniel and the lions reflects Herakleios' overthrow of the fire-worshipping Chosroes. In the first comparison, Herakleios is called “the second Daniel,” who puts out the Persian furnace, much like Shadrach,

---

<sup>17</sup> Whitby 1994b: 234

<sup>18</sup> Pisides: 1.13-25



Meshach, and Abednago withstand King Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace.<sup>19</sup> In this way, Herakleios and all Christendom, through their faith, withstand and extinguish the furnaces of the fire-worshipping Persians. Pisides then writes about the shutting of the lions' mouths, which is in reference to Daniel being thrown in the lions' den.<sup>20</sup> In this passage, the Persian king Darius throws Daniel to the lions because Daniel refuses to stop praying to God. When he is thrown in the den, however, he is not eaten because, as Daniel says, God sent an angel who shut the lions' mouths. In this way, the lions, or Persians, have been trounced by the Christian faith. It has also been proposed that the lion was associated with the Zoroastrian evil spirit Ahriman, which was a display of Achaemenid and Assyrian kings as defenders of order and truth against chaos.<sup>21</sup> If this is indeed the case, then the reference to Daniel and the lions could have a deeper meaning, and Pisides could be further undermining the Persian religion by equating them to a despised Zoroastrian demon. Throughout the poem, Chosroes is depicted as "getting drunk impiously" and worshipping fire. This reflects the Byzantine perception of Persians, or at least Chosroes, as being excessive in their actions and lacking self-control. For much of the Byzantine populace, Zoroastrianism may have been simply understood as a fire-centered religion with its devotees incessantly drinking as part of their worship, and Pisides could have exploited this here. The first poetic censure of Chosroes comes to an end with a description of his vulgarities and violence against humanity:

πάλιν παροινεῖ καὶ μεταίρει τὴν κτίσιν  
Ξέρξη τε τῷ πρὶν ἀντερίζει καὶ θέλει  
πῇ μὲν πετρῶσαι τὸν βυθὸν τοῖς λειψάνοις,  
πῇ δ' αὖ γε τὴν γῆν κυματῶσαι τοῖς λύθροις·  
γιγαντιᾶ δὲ καὶ τυραννῆσαι θέλει  
καὶ τὸν πρὸ πάντων εἰκονίζει Βαλτάσαρ  
χραίνων τὰ θεῖα τῷ μολυσμῷ τῆς μέθης,  
ἔως κατ' αὐτοῦ δάκτυλος θεηγόρος  
τῇ δεξιᾷ σου χρώμενος χειρογράφῳ  
ψήφου μελαίνης ἐξεφώνησε κρίσιν.  
λήγουσι λοιπὸν αἱ βροχαὶ τῶν αἱμάτων,  
φεύγει τὸ ρεῦμα τῶν ἀειρρύτων φόνων,  
ἡ γῆ βιαίοις οὐκ ἐνοχλεῖται τάφοις,  
θάλαττα λύθρων οὐ μαιίνεται χύσει·  
τῶν αἰχμαλώτων οὐ βρύει τὸ δάκρυον,  
ἀργεῖ τὸ λοιπὸν ἡ πλοκὴ τῆς ἀγχόνης,  
οὐδεὶς μετ' ὄξους ἐκκενώσας αἰθάλην  
τὴν ῥῖνα ποιεῖν ἐκβιάζεται στόμα·  
τὰ δένδρα νεκροῖς οὐ βαρεῖται φορτίοις,  
ἄπους, ἄχειρος οὐ βαρεῖ τὸν αὐχένα·  
πλήρεις ἐκάστῳ τῶν μελῶν αἱ συνθέσεις·  
οὐδεὶς ἀμοιβὴν συμφορᾶς ἀντιστρόφου

<sup>19</sup> Daniel 3:11-30; Whitby 1994: 215

<sup>20</sup> Daniel 6:13-23

<sup>21</sup> Whitby 1994b: 238

τὴν χεῖρα κιχρᾶ τῶν ποδῶν ἀντεργάτιν·  
ἀλλ' οὐρανὸς γῆ πῦρ ὕδωρ ἀήρ νέφη  
καὶ πᾶς ὁ κόσμος τῶν ἄνω καὶ τῶν κάτω  
κροτεῖ σὺν ἡμῖν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὰ σκέμματα  
ἐνὸς πεσόντος καὶ σεσωσμένων ὅλων.  
νῦν τὸν πυραυγῆ Χοσρόης Ἐωσφόρον  
ἔγνω ζοφώδη, καὶ πλάνητας οὐκ ἔχειν  
τοὺς ἐπτά φησιν, ἀλλ' ὅλους τοὺς ἀστέρας·  
νῦν πάντας αὐτοὺς ἐμπεσὼν τῷ Ταρτάρῳ  
βλέπει σκοτεινοὺς ἐξ ἀνάγκης Ἑσπέρους  
καὶ τῆς ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ἀστοχήσας ἐλπίδος  
οὓς ζῶν ἐτίμα, δυσσεβεῖ τεθαμμένος.  
ποῦ νῦν ὁ λῆρος τῶν ἀεισφαλῶν μάγων;  
ποῦ τῶν ἐν ἄστροις ὀργίων τὰ σκέμματα;  
ποῖος πεσόντα Χοσρόην ὠροσκόπει;  
πάντως ἔδοξεν ἐμπεσεῖν τῷ τοῦ Κρόνου·  
τέκνου γὰρ ὀρμαῖς ὁ σφαγεὺς ἀνηρέθη.

He is excessive and takes out the earth  
And competes with Xerxes, of the former times,  
And seeks here to stir the world, make earth of ocean  
and fill with waves of mud the Earth.  
He becomes big and wants to rule,  
and above all he copies Belshazzar,  
staining the divine with the filth of drunkenness,  
until the finger, inspired by god,  
using the manuscript with your right hand,  
the finger proclaimed the judgment of the sentence in black ink.  
The rains of blood have finally come to an end,  
the flow of the ever-flowing murders leave,  
the earth is no longer bothered by violence on graves,  
the sea is not defiled by the flow of earth,  
the tears of hostages no longer pour fourth,  
the wreath of the noose is idle,  
no one forces to make nose a mouth, emptying smoke with vinegar.  
The trees no longer carry the dead,  
without feet, without hands, there is no longer a burden on the neck.  
Nobody lends as a reward of a misfortune which is returned.  
The hand as an opponent of the feet.  
But sky, earth, fire, water air, clouds,  
and all the universe of the upper and lower clashes  
the plans of God with us, because  
one fell and everyone was saved.  
Now Chosroes knows the fiery

bright morning star is dark and  
he says there are not seven planets.  
Now having fallen to Tartarus, he sees all  
of those dark evening stars, out of necessity  
and having missed hope for those things,  
which he honored while living, and while buried he defiled  
Now where is the nonsense of the always-envying magi?  
Where in the stars are the patterns of the Mysteries?  
Who will be in the ascendant while Chosroes is falling?  
Certainly he seems to have fallen to that of Kronos.  
The slaughterer was killed by the violence of his child.<sup>22</sup>

Chosroes is once again depicted as an indulgent drunk, and is compared to the excessive Xerxes and Belshazzar. In the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar sacked and defiled a temple in Jerusalem, and at a feast, his son, Belshazzar, requests to drink out of the sacred objects taken from that temple. Once drunk, Belshazzar sees a hand inscribe writing on the wall, which was later interpreted to prophecy his death and the destruction of his empire.<sup>23</sup> Pisides alludes to this story to show that like Belshazzar, Chosroes destroyed and defiled a sacred temple in Jerusalem, and has also met his death and the destruction of his empire. In the latter portion of this excerpt, Pisides writes that now that Chosroes has fallen, hostages are freed, murders have stopped, and the earth and trees are no longer heavy with the weight of corpses. Through the downfall of Chosroes, everyone is saved. Pisides further mocks Chosroes by asking why his magi had not foreseen his imminent death. He also makes an allusion to Zeus's slaying of his father Kronos, which mirrors Chosroes's own death and his son Kavadh II's succession to the Persian throne.

Making another biblical allusion to belittle Chosroes and to extol Herakleios, Pisides equates the emperor to Noah:

καὶ νῦν ὁ Νῶε τῆς νέας οἰκουμένης  
κιβωτὸν εὔρε τὴν ἑαυτοῦ καρδίαν,  
καὶ πᾶσαν ἔνδον ἐντεθεικῶς τὴν φύσιν  
ἀφῆκεν αὐτὴν εἰς ἔνοπλα τάγματα  
ἐπὶ τῷ κατακλυσμῷ Χοσρόου φρουρουμένην·

And now Noah, of the new creation, he found  
in his heart the ark, and having placed all of  
nature inside, he left nature to the armed  
order, being guarded for the flood of Chosroes.<sup>24</sup>

In this context, Chosroes represents a flood of sins that would have destroyed all civilization,

---

<sup>22</sup> Pisides: 1.26-64

<sup>23</sup> Daniel: 5.1-31

<sup>24</sup> Pisides: 1.84-88



had Herakleios not saved it. In another passage, Pisides writes about the destruction of the city of Doubios (Dwin):

πλὴν ταῦτα σιγῶ καὶ τὸν Εὐφράτου πόρον,  
δι' οὗ τρέχων παρήλθες Εὐφράτου πλέον,  
τὴν δραστικὴν τε καὶ μετ' ἔργων ἐμπόνων  
ὥς ἐν παρέργῳ συμφορὰν τοῦ Δούβιος,  
εἶγε προσήκει συμφορᾷ παρεικάσαι  
τὴν εὐσεβοῦντι δεσπότη πορθουμένην  
ἢ δυσσεβοῦντι Χοσρόῃ σεσωσμένην.

Excluding these, through which you passed the Euphrates, running,  
I am silent about the drastic and painful works  
as that misfortune of the city Doubios.  
Come now, it befits the misfortune to  
make similar if the humble despot destroyed the city  
or the impious Chosroes saved it.<sup>25</sup>

Here, Pisides seems to gloss over what happened to this Armenian city, but instead declares that it is better that the city was destroyed by Herakleios, than remaining intact under Chosroes. The poet is clearly trying to paint the most destructive actions of Herakleios as more beneficial than the best actions of Chosroes. It would be better for a Christian ruler to raze a city than it would be to let it thrive under a barbarian one.

In the final passage of the second canto, Pisides details Herakleios' capture of the sacred fire-temple of Adur-Gushnasp:

ἐκεῖνος οὖν ἔκτιζε τήνδε τὴν πόλιν  
εἰς πύργον ἄκρον, εἰς ἀπόρθητον τόπον,  
εἰς τεῖχος, ὡς ἔδειξε, τῆς ἀμαρτίας·  
ἐκεῖ γὰρ εἶχε Χοσρόης καὶ τοὺς μάγους (200)  
καὶ τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ προστάτας τοὺς ἄνθρακας,  
δεινῇ κρατηθεὶς εἰκότως ὑποψία  
μὴ τοὺς σεβαστοὺς αἰχμαλώτους ἀρπάσῃς.

And so he (Ardashir) built this city  
on the top of a bulwark, at the impregnable place,  
on the wall of sin, as he showed.  
For there, Chosroes had his magis and his chiefs of coal (fire),  
holding in fear, similarly in suspicion,  
that you might take hostage the devoted ones.<sup>26</sup>

The fire-temple is described as a place of sin, housing Chosroes' magis and fire-worshippers. Pisides addresses Herakleios and writes that Chosroes held himself in this seemingly

---

<sup>25</sup> Pisides: 2.160-166

<sup>26</sup> Pisides: 2.197-203





impregnable temple, fearing that he would be captured. Pisides continues by writing about how Herakleios then broke through this impregnable wall and reluctantly massacred everyone there. The second canto comes to a close with the following words:

πρῶτον μὲν οὖν, κράτιστε, τῶν σκύλων ὅλων  
ἀπηνθράκωσας τοὺς θεοὺς τῆς Περσίδος,  
δεκτὰς ἀπαρχὰς τῷ Θεῷ σου προσφέρων  
τὰ τῶν προπάππων Χοσρόου κειμήλια·  
σβεννὺς γὰρ αὐτοὺς ἔφλεγες τὸν Χοσρόην,  
οὐχ ὥσπερ ἐχθρὸς τοῦ πυρὸς τῆς οὐσίας  
—ὄλος γὰρ εἶ πῦρ τῷ Θεῷ συνημμένος—,  
ἀλλ’ ὡς ἐλευθέραν τε καὶ σεσωσμένην  
θέλων προσάξει τῷ Θεῷ καὶ τὴν κτίσιν.  
ἀπηλλάγη γὰρ καὶ τὸ πῦρ μολυσμάτων  
τῇ προσκυνήσει μᾶλλον ἐξυβρισμένον,  
ἔχει δὲ τιμὴν τὴν καλὴν ἀτιμίαν,  
τῇ σῇ καθαρθὲν εὐσεβεῖ καθαιρέσει  
καὶ συμφερόντως δυστυχεῖν ἡνέσχετο  
καλῶς τεφρωθὲν ἢ κακῶς ἀνημμένον.  
οὕτως ἐκεῖνο πᾶν τὸ πῦρ κατασβέσας  
ἀφῆκας οὐδέν, πλὴν ὅσον λαλεῖν ἔδει,  
σπινθῆρα μικρὸν εἰς τὸ φλέξει Χοσρόην.

And so first, most noble one, you burned to cinder the Persian gods,  
accepting the first-fruits, you offer  
all the spoils of the ancestors of Chosroes to God,  
For extinguishing those, you burned Chosroes,  
not just as an enemy of the element of fire  
—for truly you are all fire united with God—  
but as freed and saved  
wanting to break that creation for God.  
The fire, being set free of defilement,  
by their acts of worship, was called even more insolently,  
and considers it an honor to be dishonored,  
purified from your pious destruction  
and with advantage, bears the misfortune  
and being burned to ashes is good and being lit, bad.  
So putting out all that fire,  
you left nothing, excluding that as is said  
a small spark to burn Chosroes.<sup>27</sup>

Herakleios offers the spoils of war to God, but most importantly, he destroys the fire that the Zoroastrians worship. Pisides realizes, however, that fire is still an element of God, and for this

---

<sup>27</sup> Pisides: 2.213-230

reason, reverts the meaning of fire back to a Christian one as “all fire united with God.” In defeating Chosroes, Herakleios saves all men, but he also saves fire, which had been dishonored by Zoroastrian worship for so long.

George Pisides was a renowned poet with a great legacy, which kept his words and images in the Byzantine literary memory for centuries.<sup>28</sup> However, poems serve as reflections of their time and should be analyzed within their historical contexts.<sup>29</sup> Aside from providing information about Herakleios' march to Persia, this poem offers a basic level of understanding about how the imperial court wanted to portray their Sasanian enemy. It is worth noting that during this time, a series of changes took place to court ceremony and politics, which placed a greater emphasis on the divine source of imperial authority. This is evidenced in Herakleios crowning his infant son Constans II in the Hagia Sophia.<sup>30</sup> There was also a noticeable change in the revival and production of culture, as Herakleios and Patriarch Sergios patronized philosophy and literature.<sup>31</sup> This is exemplified in Pisides' poems, which are indicative of Herakleios' hands-on method as emperor.

It has also been argued that the Roman-Persian war brought about apocalyptic sentiments among Christians who took its length as a sign that the world was coming to an end.<sup>32</sup> This might also have been reason for Herakleios to commission Pisides' work on his successful expeditions, which would restore the ideology of the emperor. By comparing Herakleios to figures like Moses and Herakles, Pisides placed the emperor's universal importance in a positive eschatological context. In this way, his poetry pushed forth imperial rhetoric that the empire was not coming to an end, but rather that Herakleios brought victory and a new beginning to Byzantium.

Pisides was an acute observer and interpreter of the political and cultural sphere of the Byzantine elite, so it is natural that his poetry helps color in our conception of the period. The political climate during Herakleios' reign required help in downplaying the severe loss and attacks in the Empire, while highlighting the successes of the campaign against Persia. The populace might have been angered that Herakleios was choosing to fight Chosroes instead of defending the Empire against Avar and other barbarian threats. Therefore, as the intermediary between the populace and the emperor, Pisides' role was to mold and promote a specific image of Herakleios and his war with Chosroes II.<sup>33</sup> However, it is difficult to discern what of his account was actually his own view, Herakleios's, or society's prevailing views. In other words, was Pisides asked to entirely create this image of the Sasanian Empire on his own, or was he merely perpetuating common opinion in his poem?<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Wilson 1983: 61

<sup>29</sup> Lauxtermann 2003: 59

<sup>30</sup> Haldon 2002: 14-5

<sup>31</sup> Whitby 1994: 199

<sup>32</sup> Reinink 2002: 82-4

<sup>33</sup> Whitby 1998: 251

<sup>34</sup> Howard-Johnston 2010: 31, here the author makes an interesting point that though the *Herakleias* portrays the war with Persia as a conflict between Christianity and Zoroastrianism, Pisides does not place the recovery of the True Cross centrally in the poem, despite that this was a prominent theme in official propaganda. Whitby 2003: 175, Conversely, the author maintains that Pisides acted as Herakleios' publicist and was the “official spokesman for Herakleios' regime, and that his public poetry was composed to present to the people of the capital a positive profile of the emperor's leadership.”

## Bibliography

### Primary Literature

George Pisides, A. Pertusi, *Giorgio di Pisidia. Poemi. I. Panegirici epici* [Studia patristica et Byzantina 7. Ettal: Buch-Kunstverlag, 1959]: 240-261.

### Secondary Literature

Frendo, J.D.C., "Classical and Christian influences in the *Herakliad* of the George of Pisida," *Classical Bulletin* 62, pp. 53-62. 1986.

\_\_\_\_\_, "The Poetic Achievement of George of Pisidia" in *Maistor: Classical, Byzantine and Renaissance studies for Robert Browning*, ed. Ann Moffatt, *Byzantina Australiensia* 5, pp. 159- 87. 1984

Haldon, John, "The Reign of Heraclius: A Context for Change?" in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, eds. Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte, pp. 1-16. Paris: 2002.

Howard-Johnston, James, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century*. Oxford: 2010.

\_\_\_\_\_, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia, and the End of Antiquity*. Surrey: 2006.

Lautermann, Marc, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres*. Wien: 2003.

Olster, David M., "The Date of George of Pisidia's *Hexaemeron*" *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 45 (1991), pp. 159-172. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1291700>> accessed: 31/05/2013.

Reinink, Gerrit J., "Heraclius, the New Alexander: Apocalyptic Prophecies During the Reign of Heraclius" in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, eds. Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte, pp. 81-94. Paris: 2002.

Wilson, N.G., *Scholars of Byzantium*. London: 1983.

Whitby, Mary, "George of Pisidia and the Persuasive Word: Words, Words, Words..." in E.Jeffreys (ed.), *Rhetoric in Byzantium*, pp. 173–86. Aldershot: 2003.

\_\_\_\_\_, "George of Pisidia's Presentation of the Emperor Heraclius and His Campaigns: Variety and Development" in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, eds. Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte, pp. 157-73. Paris: 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_, "Defender of the Cross: George of Pisidia on the Emperor Heraclius and His Deputies" in *The Propaganda of Power: The Role of the Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. Mary Whitby, pp. 247-273. Boston:1998.

\_\_\_\_\_, "A New Image for a New Age. George of Pisidia on the Emperor Heraclius" in *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East*, ed. E. Dabrowa, pp. 197-225. Krakow: 1994.

Whitby, Michael. "The Persian King at War" in *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East*, ed. E. Dabrowa, pp. 227-263. Krakow: 1994b.

