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

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Classics

by

Vicky Hioureas

Thesis Committee:
Associate Professor Andromache Karanika, Chair
Professor Maria Pantelia
Professor Edward Watts

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“Ὁ κρατῶν Περσοκράτης ὁ πυρσολάτρης ἐξοφώθη Χοσρόης”: The Portrayal of Chosroes II in

George Pisides’ *Herakleias*

By

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University of California, Irvine, 2014

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Between 602 and 628, the Byzantine Empire was at war with the Sasanian Empire. Following the defeat of Chosroes II, Emperor Herakleios commissioned George Pisides to write an account of his triumph. A court poet, Pisides wrote numerous works chronicling Herakleios’ victory over the Persian enemy. In this paper, I focus primarily on the *Herakleias*, Pisides’ last major poem on the Persian campaigns, to examine the depiction of Chosroes II, Persia, and Zoroastrianism. I begin by providing a brief context for the poem, then follow with a background on the author, and finally conclude by providing the original text with English translation of the passages that concern Chosroes II, with my accompanying analysis. As I argue, Pisides’ poetry by focusing on the figure of Chosroes and a certain representation of the Persian Empire refracted through the Sasanian king engages at a deeper level with Zoroastrianism. His literary style is informed by several Zoroastrian themes and tropes, as I show in my thesis, and presents a refreshed approach towards the ‘foreign’ which, in its turn, enriches the linguistic threads of Pisides’ poetic style.

INTRODUCTION

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: first between Chosroes I and Justinian; then between Chosroes I and Justin II; and thirdly between Chosroes II and Herakleios. This final war, lasting 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.¹ Phokas' actions created an environment of instability, and nearly five years later, Herakleios staged a revolt and Phokas was overthrown. 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.² After years of fighting and defeat, Herakleios brought his empire victory against the Sasanian Empire in 624; taking command of the operations himself, he invaded Atropatene and forced Chosroes II to flee.³ 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.⁴ The importance of the emperor's successes is reflected in the

¹ Howard-Johnston 2006: IV.57

² Whitby 1998: 249

³ Howard-Johnston 2006: IV.58

⁴ Howard-Johnston 2006: IV.58

poetry of George Pisides.

A court poet, Pisides wrote numerous works chronicling Herakleios' victory against the Persian enemy. In this paper, I focus primarily on the *Herakleias*, Pisides' last major poem on the Persian campaigns, to examine the depiction of Chosroes II, the representation of Persia, and the infiltration of Zoroastrianism in imperial poetry of this time. 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.⁵ 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.

⁵ 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.

CHAPTER I: Contextualizing George Pisides

In Constantinople, Pisides played both secular and religious functions: he served in the patriarchal administration as he held the official title of *chartophylax*, an office associated with imperial archival work, 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.⁶ Although typically categorized as a panegyric work, the *Herakleias* combines theological, mythological, and political elements that inform the aesthetics of seventh-century Byzantine poetry. 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 Persia, comparing him to biblical and classical figures. Earlier mythological paradigms are received in order to enhance the figure of Emperor Herakleios, the very name of whom brings mythological associations of heroic stature. Pisides' writing is complex, with use of an extensive, elevated vocabulary, and was not easily understood, presumably even by 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.⁷ At the roots of the writing is the idea of *impressing* an audience, which is in accordance with the aesthetics of the time. Just as a church was built to create an imposing structure, Pisides' poetry is a literary structure conceived as such: to elevate, and through elevation, to impose. From the structure of his poetry, it has been argued that it was intended to be read aloud (ἀκροάσεις), which might further bolster the argument that it was an encomiastic work to be

⁶ 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 *Herakleias* 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.

⁷ Lauxtermann 2003: 39

presented before the emperor.⁸

There are two main recurring themes in Pisides' poetry: Chosroes II as an insult to God and Christendom, and Herakleios as being under God's protection.⁹ The two emperors are juxtaposed to each other in an antithetical structure that seeks first to present Chosroes II as the negative, and then restore through the positive. In this way, 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."¹⁰ 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 therefore, would help create support for the emperor's campaigns. The war had been going on for over twenty years, with countless deaths, and Herakleios was desperately fighting off invasions on all sides of the empire. This is why he presumably needed Pisides to engender support for his actions.

In this work, 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.¹¹ By comparing Herakleios to Herakles, beyond the obvious onomastic similarity, Pisides transformed the emperor's war against Persia into a noble one: one in which Herakleios civilized the otherwise uncivilized Persians.¹² A basic structuralist approach of nature versus culture and darkness versus lightness is evident throughout Pisides' poetry, and especially in the *Herakleias*.

⁸ Lauxtermann 2003: 56

⁹ Howard-Johnston 2006: IV.82; Lauxtermann 2003: 236

¹⁰ Howard-Johnston 2006: IX.103

¹¹ Whitby 1994: 208

¹² Pisides: 1.65-70

In itself, mythological reception becomes a subtext that, through the association of names, is reshuffled to create new meanings in new context.

CHAPTER II: Zoroastrian Cosmogonical Interpretations

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 Sasanians was a religious one.¹³ Pisides developed this idea throughout the *Herakleias*, incorporating biblical allusions into his poem, 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' reign has come to an end:

Αγαλλιᾶσθω πᾶς χορὸς τῶν ἀστέρων
τὸν ἀστρόδουλον δεικνύων πεπτωκότα
καὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πτώσιν ἠγνοηκότα·
οὐκ ἔστεγεν γὰρ ἢ κτίσις τιμωμένη
κἂν δυσσεβηθεῖς ὁ Κτίσας ἠνείχετο.
νῦν πανσέληνος ἢ 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,
βοᾶ, λαλεῖ σοι τὴν σφαγὴν τοῦ Χοσρόου,
θεοῦ βεβήλους ἐκφυγῶν 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.¹⁴

¹³ Howard-Johnston 2006: IX.107

¹⁴ Pisides: 1.1-12; All translations are my own.

It has been proposed that this opening section of the poem echoes the Psalms, but I would rather argue that Pisides uses Zoroastrian imagery to further undermine its existence.¹⁵ Pisides depicts the end of Chosroes by using Persian religious and political imagery. The poem opens with the words: “Ἀγαλλιᾶσθω πᾶς χορὸς τῶν ἀστέρων τὸν ἀστρόδουλον δεικνύων πεπτωκότα” (“Let all the chorus of stars rejoice showing the slave to the stars having fallen”). These lines can be interpreted simply to mean that the stars, which Zoroastrians worshiped, are rejoicing that their devotees have finally fallen. Through these words, the audience witnesses the embarrassment of these Zoroastrian worshippers who are not just *abandoned* by their gods, but are joyfully *rejected* by them.

Pisides continues in this vein with the imagery of the moon: instead of upholding its former master, “νῦν πανσέληνος ἡ σελήνη λαμπέτω... Πέρσας τὸ λοιπὸν μὴ θεουργεῖν τὴν κτίσιν” (“Now let the all-shining moon shine... The moon is pledging that the Persians no longer serve the earth”). The moon, or Mah, is predominant in Zoroastrian cosmogony and religious practices, so for Pisides to write that she has now declared that the Persians are no longer her servants is a powerful image to create. By adopting a Zoroastrian goddess and making her a mouthpiece for these insults against Persia, Pisides further emphasizes this religion’s destruction: it is not only in the eyes of the Byzantines that the Sasanian Empire has ended, but in the eyes of Mah as well. The poem begins with an impressive circumscribing of Zoroastrian religious space, but also a nuanced presentation of light and shades of light as important aspects of ritual practice. Earth and Moon, though Zoroastrian symbols, are combined and bring forth strong poetic material for Pisides’ poetry.

Additionally, the Persian royal epithets may also have a place within this context. In 529,

¹⁵ 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.

Kavadh called himself “King of Kings, of the rising sun,” and addressed a letter to Emperor Justinian as “Flavius Justinianus Caesar of the sinking moon.”¹⁶ If Pisides had this in mind, the moon that Kavadh claimed was sinking is now full and ascending. The sun, which represented the Persian 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.”¹⁷ Pisides specifically writes that “καὶ νῦν ὁ τρισμέγιστος ἡλίου πόλος, λούσας ἑαυτὸν τῆ καθάρσει τῶν φόνων, βοᾷ, λαλεῖ σοι τὴν σφαγὴν τοῦ Χοσρόου” (“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”). The sun, a Persian symbol of power and authority, is now washing itself of its former ties to this empire. In other words, Pisides’ description displays the Byzantine Empire as having 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. What is noteworthy is that the reference to the sun is actually in the genitive, referring to the “pole of the sun” (in Greek: ὁ τρισμέγιστος ἡλίου πόλος). This becomes not just a static image of the sun that has been of use for association with royal power, but rather creates the impression of a moving sun, that is being rerouted. Because it can be rerouted, it can change, and change comes through catharsis in language that brings the image of cleansing (λούσας).

¹⁶ Whitby1994b: 233, the author writes that 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.

¹⁷ Whitby 1994b: 234

CHAPTER III: Byzantine and Christian Perspectives

In addition to incorporating Zoroastrian imagery, Pisides uses biblical allusions to highlight the fall of the Persian Empire and the victory of Emperor Herakleias and the Byzantine Empire. One of the most developed and multi-layered biblical references in the *Herakleias* is the story of Daniel. Pisides begins by describing Chosroes' downfall and contrasts him to the biblical hero:

σκίρτησον αἰθήρ· ὁ κρατῶν Περσοκράτης
ὁ πυρσολάτρης ἐζοφώθη Χοσρόης.
πάλιν κάμινος Περσικῆ καὶ δευτέρα
δροσίζεται φλόξ τῷ Δανιήλ τῷ δευτέρῳ,
ἀνωφερῆς δὲ καίπερ οὔσα τὴν φύσιν
χεῖται κατ' αὐτῶν καὶ διώκει καὶ φλέγει
τοὺς τὴν πονηρὰν ἐκπυρώσαντας φλόγα·
πάλιν λεόντων ἠγριωμένων 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 worshiping 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.¹⁸

Pisides writes “καὶ δευτέρα δροσίζεται φλόξ τῷ Δανιήλ τῷ δευτέρῳ” (“Again the fire, and again the Persian furnace is being put out by the second Daniel”), which first refers to the story of

¹⁸ Pisides: 1.13-25

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednago in the book of Daniel. In this comparison, Herakleios is called “the second Daniel,” who puts out the Persian furnace, much like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednago withstand King Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace.¹⁹ In this way, Herakleios and all Christendom, through their faith, withstand and extinguish the furnaces of the fire-worshipping Persians.

The author then makes a second reference to Daniel when he writes, “πάλιν λεόντων ἡγριωμένων στόμα” (“The mouth of the bewildered lions has again been shut because of us”). Pisides writes about the shutting of the lions’ mouths, which is in reference to Daniel being thrown in the lions’ den.²⁰ The lion image becomes the perfect locus of fusion: the mythological reception of Herakles as associated with the lion (through the stories of twelve labors that were widely known) is transferred into biblical imagery of the lions through the figure of Daniel. In this biblical 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.²¹ 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. In this way, mythological, theological, and biblical allusions create a new poetic fabric.

Throughout the poem, Chosroes is depicted as “getting drunk impiously” and worshipping fire. This reflects the Byzantine perception of Persians, or at least of Chosroes, as being

¹⁹ Daniel 3:11-30; Whitby 1994: 215

²⁰ Daniel 6:13-23

²¹ Whitby 1994b: 238

excessive in their actions and lacking self-control. Once again, Pisides is rewriting earlier mythological associations, as Herakles was also associated with drinking, as shown in a number of late antique mosaics presenting the heroic figure in context with Dionysus. But, as is typical for poetry of this time, Pisides is transferring that carefully to Chosroes as an outsider barbarian king by means of what the Byzantines believed Zoroastrian practices to have been. It has to be made clear, he is not creating a historical record, but rather using poetic record which allows for huge flexibility for rebuilding through the ancient Greek mythological references. Through this, Pisides crosses the boundaries between biblical and Zoroastrian material. 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.

He also plays with the theme of reversals throughout the poem with images like the worshipped stars and moon rejecting their worshippers and the ruling king being overthrown. In this excerpt, Pisides writes, “ὁ πυρσολάτρης ἔξοφώθη Χοσρόης” (“the fire-worshipper Chosroes is endarkened”). The image of fire has been employed heavily in this passage to progress the biblical allusions of Persian destruction and blasphemy, but in this instance, I believe Pisides uses it to create a linguistic tenebrism: the sun, stars, moon, and fire, which previously illuminated Chosroes, have now extinguished themselves from him; what once provided light for him and his empire is now a source of darkness. Pisides employs a similar reversal of fortune when he describes how Chosroes, who was formerly the maker of divine fire is now destroyed by it: “ἕως σὺν αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ πῦρ ὑπερβράσαν σὺν τῷ θεουργήσαντι συγκατεφθάρη” (“until the fire, having boiled over, was completely destroyed together with him, its maker”). Like the light that stopped shining for Chosroes, this fire retaliates against its maker by burning him. The series

of reversal imagery that Pisides drenches his poem in graphically illustrates the end of the Sasanian Empire, which the Byzantines must have perceived as deserved and inevitable.

Before the second canto of the poem, Pisides creates an extended poetic censure of Chosroes, with a description of his vulgarities and violence against humanity:

πάλιν παροινεῖ καὶ μεταίρει τὴν κτίσιν
Ξέρξη τε τῷ πρὶν ἀντερίζει καὶ θέλει
πῆ μὲν πετρῶσαι τὸν βυθὸν τοῖς λειψάνοις,
πῆ 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,
ἕως κατ' αὐτοῦ δάκτυλος θεηγόρος
τῆ δεξιᾶ σου χρώμενος χειρογράφῳ
ψήφου μελαίνης ἔξεφώνησε κρίσιν.

λήγουσι λοιπὸν αἱ βροχαὶ τῶν αἱμάτων,
φεύγει τὸ ρεῦμα τῶν ἀειρρῦτων φόνων,
ἡ γῆ βιαίοις οὐκ ἐνοχλεῖται τάφοις,
θάλαττα λύθρων οὐ μαιίνεται χύσει·
τῶν αἰχμαλώτων οὐ βρῦει τὸ δάκρυον,
ἀργεῖ τὸ λοιπὸν ἡ πλοκὴ τῆς ἀγχόνης,
οὐδεὶς μετ' ὄξους ἐκκενώσας αἰθάλην
τὴν ῥίνα ποιεῖν ἐκβιάζεται στόμα·
τὰ δένδρα νεκροῖς οὐ βαρεῖται φορτίοις,
ἄπους, ἄχειρος οὐ βαρεῖ τὸν ἀύχένα·
πλήρεις ἐκάστω τῶν μελῶν αἱ συνθέσεις·
οὐδεὶς ἀμοιβὴν συμφορᾶς ἀντιστρόφου
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 ὄλων.

νῦν τὸν πυραυγῆ Χοσρόης Ἐωσφόρον
ἔγνω ζοφώδη, καὶ πλάνητας οὐκ ἔχειν
τοὺς ἑπτὰ φησιν, ἀλλ' ὄλους τοὺς ἀστέρας·
νῦν πάντας αὐτοὺς ἐμπεσὼν τῷ Ταρτάρῳ
βλέπει σκοτεινοὺς ἐξ ἀνάγκης Ἐσπέρους
καὶ τῆς ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ἀστοχῆσας ἐλπίδος
οὐς 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 blabber of the always-erring 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.²²

The theme of reversal is apparent in this excerpt as well, as Pisides writes about how “καὶ θέλει πῆ μὲν πετρῶσαι τὸν βυθὸν τοῖς λειψάνοις, πῆ δ’ αὖ γε τὴν γῆν κυματῶσαι τοῖς λύθοις” (“he wants to make earth of ocean and fill with waves of mud the Earth”). Chosroes’ rule is entirely

²² Pisides: 1.26-64

backwards: he wants to turn oceans into earth, and earth into waves. This imagery further shows the unnatural character of his reign, one that nature itself and his own gods are against. However, once Pisides describes the fall of Chosroes, nature once again regains its intended form, as the sea is purified of earth, the dead no longer hang on trees, and hostages stop crying. Chosroes had set a perverted chain of events in motion, but God and Herakleios have now put this to an end, and returned the world to normalcy.

Chosroes is once again depicted as an indulgent drunk, and is compared to the excessive Xerxes and Belshazzar. Biblical subtext is utilized once again: 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.²³ 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 one (Chosroes), everyone is saved. Pisides further mocks Chosroes and Zoroastrianism by asking why Chosroes' magi had not foreseen his imminent death. He also makes a Greek mythological allusion, which mirrors Chosroes' own death and his son Kavadh II's succession to the Persian throne. Chosroes had Kavadh with Maria, daughter of the Byzantine emperor Maurice. Chosroes, however, favored his other son to succeed him, and therefore, imprisoned Kavadh so he would not overthrow him. After Herakleios conquered the Sasanians, Kavadh imprisoned his own father and ordered his execution. Mythological allusion is mobilized as this story very closely resembles the myth of

²³ Daniel: 5.1-31

the father-son power struggle between Zeus and Kronos.

Pisides makes another biblical allusion to belittle Chosroes and to extol Herakleios by equating the emperor to Noah:

καὶ νῦν ὁ Νῶε τῆς νέας οἰκουμένης
κιβωτὸν εὗρε 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.²⁴

In this context, Chosroes represents a flood of sins that would have destroyed all civilization, had Herakleios not saved it. In another passage, Pisides writes about the destruction of the city of Doubios (Dwin):

πλὴν ταῦτα σιγῷ καὶ τὸν Εὐφράτου πόρον,
δι' οὗ τρέχων παρήλθεσ Εὐφράτου πλέον,
τὴν δραστηκὴν τε καὶ μετ' ἔργων ἐμπόνων
ὡς ἐν παρέργῳ συμφορὰν τοῦ Δούβιος,
εἶγε προσήκει συμφορᾷ παρεικάσαι
τὴν εὐσεβοῦντι δεσπότη πορθουμένην
ἢ δυσσεβοῦντι Χοσρόη 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.²⁵

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 remain intact under Chosroes. The poet is clearly trying to paint the most destructive actions of Herakleios as more beneficial than the

²⁴ Pisides: 1.84-88

²⁵ Pisides: 2.160-166

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,
δεινῆ κρατηθεὶς εἰκότως ὑποψία
μὴ τοὺς σεβαστοὺς αἰχμαλώτους ἀρπάσης.

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.²⁶

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 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 ὄλων
ἀπηνθράκωσας τοὺς θεοὺς τῆς Περσίδος,
δεκτὰς ἀπαρχὰς τῷ Θεῷ σου προσφέρων
τὰ τῶν προπάππων Χοσρόου κειμήλια·
σβεννύς γὰρ αὐτοὺς ἔφλεγες τὸν Χοσρόην,
οὐχ ὡσπερ ἔχθρὸς τοῦ πυρὸς τῆς οὐσίας
—ὄλος γὰρ εἰ 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,

²⁶ Pisides: 2.197-203

τῆ σῆ καθαρθὲν εὐσεβεῖ καθαιρέσει
καὶ συμφερόντως δυστυχεῖν ἠνέσχετο
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 what should have been told
a small spark to burn Chosroes.²⁷

Herakleios offers the spoils of war (the destruction of Zoroastrianism) 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 reason, he reverts the meaning of fire back to a Christian one as “ὅλος γὰρ εἶ πῦρ τῷ Θεῷ συνημμένος” (“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. The fire is “ἔχει δὲ τιμὴν τὴν καλὴν ἀτιμίαν, τῆ σῆ καθαρθὲν εὐσεβεῖ καθαιρέσει” (“honored to be dishonored, purified from your pious destruction”), which is yet another reversal that Pisides employs to demonstrate the Zoroastrian perversion of the world. When Herakleios storms the temple and dishonors the fire, he is actually honoring it by restoring fire to its proper use, and relinquishing it from Persian abuse. In his final reversal in the

²⁷ Pisides: 2.213-230

Herakleias, Pisides writes “καλῶς τεφρωθὲν ἢ κακῶς ἀνημμένον. Οὕτως ἐκεῖνο πᾶν τὸ πῦρ κατασβέσας ἀφῆκας οὐδέν, πλὴν ὅσον λαλεῖν ἔδει, σπινθῆρα μικρὸν εἰς τὸ φλέξει Χοσρόην” (“better to be burned to ashes than to be badly lit. So putting out all that fire, you left nothing, excluding that as is said a small spark to burn Chosroes”). That Herakleios burned the temple to the ground with fire is a good thing, but lighting the fire as a form of Zoroastrian worship is bad. As a twist, the only good thing that can be lit (as opposed to being incinerated) is Chosroes; by throwing a spark on Chosroes, Herakleios is conducting a form of Christian reverence to God for putting an end to the Sasanian Empire.

CHAPTER IV: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

George Pisides was a renowned poet with a great legacy, whose words and images remained in the Byzantine literary memory for centuries.²⁸ However, poems serve as reflections of their time and should be analyzed within their historical contexts.²⁹ 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.³⁰ There was also a noticeable change in the revival and production of culture, as Herakleios and Patriarch Sergios patronized philosophy and literature.³¹ 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.³² 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

²⁸ Wilson 1983: 61

²⁹ Lauxtermann 2003: 59

³⁰ Haldon 2002: 14-5

³¹ Whitby 1994: 199

³² Reinink 2002: 82-4

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.³³ However, it is difficult to discern what of his account was actually his own view, the words of Herakleios, or society's prevailing outlook. 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?³⁴

The final image of fire presents a new kind of fire: the fire which has cathartic power. The Byzantines have a fascination with fire: it can be a weapon, but also a protective device. Although it is not quite the time of the *υγρόν πυρ* yet, which is recorded later in the seventh century, the use of fire as a weapon is well attested already: the fleet of the Byzantine Emperor Anastasios I (491–518) is recorded by the chronicler John Malalas as having utilized a sulphur-based mixture to defeat the revolt of Vitalian in AD 515. That Pisides appropriates the Zoroastrian pyre, translates into a tense Byzantine entity with cathartic power, and ultimately translates that into his own poetics. He wants his poetry to have 'caustic' powers, and to be able to 'burn' someone. Chosroes II becomes, though a scapegoat representation, the figure who is 'burned' in order not just to praise Herakleios, but possibly defend himself from public fire for his choice to pursue Chosroes II and the Sasanians. Just as Herakles was made a god through

³³ Whitby 1998: 251

³⁴ 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."

fire, in ancient Greek mythology—as the Heraklian apotheosis came through a pyre—the final image of Pisidian fire puts one image down by burning it, namely that of Chosroes, and through its ashes extols another, that of Herakleios, who, like another Herakles has been now made into a godlike figure against anyone who might want to speak out against him. The final act is one of apotheosis through a mix of different ingredients by alluding to different literary, theological and mythological traditions.

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