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## **When You Praise the Ruler, Do Not Hesitate to Boast Your Own Talent – Analysis of the Poem *Heraclias*, Book I, Verses: 1–139 of George of Pisidia<sup>1</sup>**

**ABSTRACT:** The poems of George of Pisidia – the court poet of the Emperor Heraclius – are not only an important historical source for the reign of this Byzantine ruler, but also an expression of the extraordinary erudition and talent of their author. The subject of this article is an analysis concerning a fragment of one of them – *Heraclias*. In this epic, which is a praise of the emperor's reign, the poet with true virtuosity weaves references to the traditions and culture of pagan and Christian antiquity into the historical narrative. Based on rhetorical recommendations, he gives his poem a laudatory character. Pisides creates an extraordinary, surprisingly coherent work. The poet's erudition is revealed not only by the content but also by the compositional devices of his works.

**KEYWORDS:** *Heraclias*, George of Pisidia, Heraclius, Byzantine epic, praise, rhetoric, Aristotle, Menander Rhetor, laudatory speech

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a corrected and supplemented fragment of my doctoral thesis entitled 'Tradition and innovation in the historical epics of Pisides from the angle of creating the image of Emperor Heraclius', written under the supervision of Prof. Dariusz Brodka and defended after his death, in February 2024. Once again, I would like to express my gratitude to him for making me interested in the poetry of Pisides and for all his help in writing my dissertation.

The history and culture of the Byzantine Empire, perceived not only by its inhabitants, but also by many scholars of later eras as the heir of ancient Greece and Rome, remain to this day an almost inexhaustible source of new research in various fields. Among them, the rule of Emperor Heraclius seems to have enjoyed some popularity, especially due to administrative and military reforms related to the creation of themes which this emperor was said to have authored. However, one should notice that these changes, although significant, belonged to many transformations that the Empire experienced in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, forced by its extremely difficult situation, internal and external.<sup>2</sup> It seems reasonable, therefore, to precede the analysis of the poetic presentation of Heraclius's rule by George of Pisidia, which is the subject of this article, with at least a general outline of those difficulties and the emperor's actions in response to them. In many cases, Heraclius's actions were considered controversial, which did not allow either his contemporaries or scholars of later centuries to assess him unequivocally.<sup>3</sup> Awareness of these issues allows a better understanding of Pisides' poetry which responded, with its characteristic erudition, to the needs of imperial propaganda.

The turn of the 7<sup>th</sup> century was a very turbulent period in the history of the Byzantine Empire. For several decades after the death of Justinian the Great, the Empire built by him was on the verge of collapse. The time of economic prosperity passed, and it was impossible to permanently maintain territorial gains of the country. The Lombards gradually took over Italy, the Visigoths – southern Spain, in the Balkans the Empire was plagued with Slavic invasions reaching even the Peloponnese, and the Avars, despite a tribute they were paid, began to occupy territories in the north of the Empire<sup>4</sup>. In addition, in 572 the conflict with Persia flared up again. The help provided to Khosrow by the Byzantine emperor Maurice a dozen or so years later did not, however, bring lasting peace, and the bloody coup carried out in

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<sup>2</sup> Kaegi 2003: 109 claims that challenges that Heraclius had to face were unprecedented in the history of the Empire of that time; he points out a certain similarity to a situation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, but notes that it may not have been fully understood by the Byzantines of the 7<sup>th</sup> century to give them any solution.

<sup>3</sup> Kaegi 2003: 3–4.

<sup>4</sup> Morrison 2007: 50.

Constantinople by Phocas became a pretext for the Persian ruler to resume war. The brutal reign of Phocas did not bring any solutions to the military conflicts mentioned above, but instead deepened long-standing internal conflicts.

The armed expedition of Heraclius, son of the Exarch of Africa, to Constantinople in the autumn of 610 was an expression of opposition to the actions of Phocas. On 5 October 610, Phocas was killed and Heraclius was crowned the emperor.<sup>5</sup> In this situation, another civil war broke out – between the supporters of the new ruler and these of the previous one, among whom were even high-ranking military commanders. The unrest lasted for at least two years.<sup>6</sup> Thus, initially, Heraclius' efforts had to focus on the internal situation and stabilising his rule.

The overthrow of Phocas did not end the war with Persia. On the contrary, Chosroes took advantage of the confusion in the Empire and continued the conquest of Asia Minor. His armies captured cities: Antioch, Apamea, Emesa, and Caesarea in Cappadocia. An offensive undertaken by Byzantium did not bring the expected results – it was not possible to liberate Antioch. The defeat of the imperial troops at Antioch opened a way for the Persians to further conquests:<sup>7</sup> Damascus was occupied, among others, but the capture of Jerusalem in 614 was particularly painful. After a siege of about three weeks, the city fell, its population was massacred, and the invaders not only destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulcher built by Constantine the Great, but also took away the priceless relics of the Holy Cross.<sup>8</sup> In the following years, Egypt fell prey to the Persians. The fall of Alexandria and the conquest of other cities, lasting until 621,<sup>9</sup> meant they took over the territories that were, in a way, the granaries of the Empire. To make matters worse, at the end of the second decade a large part of the country was struck by a plague, indirectly related to the Persian invasion.<sup>10</sup> Given many misfortunes

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<sup>5</sup> Morrison 2007: 52–54.

<sup>6</sup> Haldon 2002: 2.

<sup>7</sup> Howard-Johnston 1994: 58.

<sup>8</sup> Morrison 2007: 54–55.

<sup>9</sup> Howard-Johnston 1999: 3.

<sup>10</sup> Kaegi 2003: 102–103.

that befell the Empire, they were increasingly interpreted through the prism of God's wrath.

In order to stop the complete conquest of the Empire by the Persians, Heraclius decided to launch an extremely bold counter-offensive against them, which he began in 622. Its organisation entailed further, not very popular decisions. The emperor decided to personally direct military operations. Not only did he act against the practice of rulers that was accepted for decades.<sup>11</sup> Leading the campaign meant the ruler's long absence from the capital and exposing himself to direct danger. In addition, military and financial situation of the Empire was very bad. The imposition of further taxes or the seizure of church property to obtain money to pay soldiers also did not meet with approval of the public, exhausted by bearing the costs of many years of war. However, before any serious clashes could take place, the Empire was threatened by another Avar invasion. Long peace negotiations, interrupted by an assassination attempt on Heraclius and an attack on the capital, ultimately concluded with agreements that were unfavourable for the Empire but necessary to think about continuing the war with Persia.<sup>12</sup>

Probably at that time Heraclius also decides to marry his niece Martina. Although justified by the concern to ensure the succession of power, certainly as a blatant sin this act did not win the emperor the sympathy of his subjects, but created a real scandal. Probably for some people it was also seen as a cause of the divine wrath mentioned above.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the birth of children from this marriage in later years resulted in competition for power and new internal conflicts.

The Persians continued to conquer more territories in Asia Minor and islands in the Mediterranean Sea. Heraclius, laboriously rebuilding the morale of an army that suffered so many defeats (especially in the 610s), managed to resume the campaign against the Persians in the spring of 624, and it lasted until the end of the following year.<sup>14</sup> The choice of the imperial army's march route, the conquest of the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pertusi 1959: 140–141, n. 112.

<sup>12</sup> Howard-Johnston 1999: 14–15.

<sup>13</sup> Kaegi 2003: 107.

<sup>14</sup> A detailed account of these events and a subsequent campaign is given by Howard-Johnston 1999: 1–45, especially 16–29.

next cities (including Dvin), and finally the attack on Atropatene was as a big surprise for the Persians. Khosrow managed to escape. Nevertheless, not only vast areas around the abode of the Persian ruler were destroyed, but also a fire temple in the area of today's Takht-e Soleymān.<sup>15</sup> The following year, 625, was filled with operations in Persian territories, where the emperor repeatedly surprised Persian armies and won several significant victories.

In 626, the Byzantine capital found itself in danger from the Avars. Despite fears that the Persians would want to attack Constantinople – Khosrow sent Shahrbaraz's army to help the Avars and certain groups of Slavs fighting on their side – Heraclius did not return to the city this time.<sup>16</sup> However, sending detailed instructions on the organisation of defence and a contingent of troops, he remained actively involved in the defensive actions. The victory won by the besieged, interpreted as an expression of help from God Himself and His Mother,<sup>17</sup> enabled the emperor to undertake, in 627, a final campaign against the Persian Empire. With the help of the Khazars, he occupied Iberia and Albania, and then marched south. He defeated the Persians at Nineveh and moved towards Ctesiphon. There, his final success was supported by opposition among Khosrow's Persian subjects – the ruler was overthrown as a result of a conspiracy, and the throne was taken over by his son Kavad who sought to make peace with Byzantium.<sup>18</sup> After the coup led by Shahrbaraz, new conditions were established, changed once again after his overthrow – the borders of 591 were finally restored at that time.<sup>19</sup> The return of the triumphant emperor to Constantinople was an event for which the Byzantines waited for many years. Furthermore, the recovery of the relics of the Holy Cross, which the emperor solemnly took back to Jerusalem, was of particular importance.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> As if in revenge for the destruction of Jerusalem, cf. Ostrogorski 2008: 133–134.

<sup>16</sup> As four years earlier (Howard-Johnston 1999: 19).

<sup>17</sup> The publication of Hurbanič 2019 about this siege is worthy of attention.

<sup>18</sup> Howard-Johnston 1994: 58.

<sup>19</sup> Howard-Johnston 1999: 29.

<sup>20</sup> Although the motive of recovering the stolen relics and religious justification were extremely important in the war propaganda, these struggles with Persia should not be treated as a crusade (as Ostrogorski 2008: 135 claims); cf. also Morrison 2007: 59.

The end of the war with Persia and the recovery of eastern provinces put the long-standing problem of schism in the Church back in the spotlight. Attempts undertaken by the ruler and Patriarch Sergius to reconcile the followers of Monophysitism with the followers of the dogmas adopted at the Council of Chalcedon, instead of reconciliation and strengthening unity, caused further disputes and divisions.

Heraclius' military successes were soon thwarted by the Arab invasion. Already in 633, some cities of Transjordan and Syria were captured. The great defeat of the Byzantine army at the Yarmuk River in 636 opened up the possibility of further conquests for the Arabs. Only two years later, Jerusalem fell, and in 639 they entered Egypt.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the Persian state was conquered, as well as its former lands recaptured by the Empire. It seems that after the defeat at Yarmuk, Heraclius withdrew from direct participation in the war.<sup>22</sup> He died in 641, and the instructions he left in his will concerning a successor to the throne led to further unrest in the capital.

The above, necessarily general and brief, outline of events taking place in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century allows us to understand that Heraclius, who took power in 610, faced a number of serious challenges, and each move could bring him either allies or enemies. He needed a court poet who would understand the gravity of the situation and, especially during the emperor's absence from the capital, would take care of creating and perpetuating the image of the ruler in line with court propaganda. He found a worthy bard for this position, namely George of Pisidia.

His poems, considered to be one of the most important historical sources relating to the reign of Heraclius, deserve special attention in this context – not only because real, relatively recent events are reported in a literary form, but also because of the shape of this form. What particularly attracts attention in Pisides' poetry is the supplementation of the historical account with numerous references in which the poet masterfully combines the heritage of pagan antiquity with the Christian worldview, creating surprisingly coherent works. This frequent referring to the treasury of both traditions is related to the laudatory nature

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<sup>21</sup> Morrison 2007: 61.

<sup>22</sup> Ostrogorski 2008: 141.

of these poems, which the author shapes based on recommendations contained in rhetorical treatises. The poet's erudition is revealed not only by the content, but also by the way he composes his works. The subject of this article is an analysis concerning the content of a fragment of one of Pisides' poems dedicated to Emperor Heraclius – *Heraclias*.<sup>23</sup> This work, composed in 628,<sup>24</sup> was intended to present the emperor's achievements from the time he took power until the creation of the work, as a kind of recapitulation of Heraclius' reign so far<sup>25</sup> and is clearly laudatory in its nature. It was probably personally presented to the emperor – the conqueror of Persia – shortly after his return to Constantinople.<sup>26</sup> The analysis includes the introduction of the work and the passage containing comparisons of the emperor to literary and historical heroes, in which the above-mentioned features of Pisides' poetry are very clear.

The title of the work itself requires a few words of commentary – in its Greek form: Ἡρακλείας,<sup>27</sup> built analogously to Ἰλιάς, it brings to mind Homer's first great epic. The choice of the topic, indicated by the title – the story of the deeds of Heracles – coincides with the leitmotif of

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<sup>23</sup> All of Pisides' works were composed in Greek, but in this article their Latin equivalents will be used. This choice results from the common – in the scientific world – practice of authors dealing with Pisides' works, who use only the Latin equivalents of their titles. Only the publishers provide the Greek version, but they are not consistent in this matter, using both versions without giving a reason for doing so – Quercius quotes both versions of titles at the beginning, later the Latin version appears in headings; Pertusi mentions their Greek forms only twice: in the list of all works of Pisides, and before every single work in the critical edition, but Latin equivalents appear in the headings of subsequent pages; Tartaglia, on the other hand, uses Italian versions in his compilation, giving the Latin version in brackets, while in the section devoted to individual works he uses Greek.

<sup>24</sup> Tartaglia 1998: 18, n. 28.

<sup>25</sup> The subject of the analysis concerns a fragment of the first song. I am omitting here the rather complicated issue of the completeness of this work in the two preserved songs, which brings various solutions proposed by scholars, and which is irrelevant for the present considerations (see: Pertusi 1959: 23–31; Frendo 1984: 57–58; Tartaglia 1998: 18–20; Howard-Johnston 1994: 74ff.; Howard-Johnston 2010: 23, n. 27; Whitby 2002: 157–174).

<sup>26</sup> Frendo 1986: 54.

<sup>27</sup> Some manuscripts record a slightly longer version that probably did not come from the author himself; cf. Frendo 1986: 54.

the mythological epics of Panyassis of Halicarnassus, Rhianus of Crete and Nicander of Colophon. Pisides somehow combined literary inspiration with propaganda goals. It is important that many rulers before Heraclius tried to prove their relationship with the mythical hero.<sup>28</sup> The cult of Heracles was practiced, among others, by Alexander the Great<sup>29</sup>, a figure who repeatedly served as a point of reference for rulers and their evaluation by posterity, certainly still important in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Undoubtedly, the desire to imitate the great Macedonian leader was one of the reasons that already in the Hellenistic era, as Appel<sup>30</sup> notes, the Heracleian myth became a “court myth” – the origin of the Ptolemaic, Seleucid, Attalid, and Antigonid dynasties was derived from this hero. Moreover, taking into account that in the times of the Tetrarchy it was conventionally assumed that two of the four co-rulers were to be patronised by the Roman equivalent of Heracles, i.e. Hercules, one can suppose that similarity in the sound of the names – of the emperor and the hero – was certainly neither the main nor the only reason for such a choice of the poet. It could only be an additional advantage.<sup>31</sup>

The first canto of *Heraclias* begins (vv. 1–13) with a paradoxical-sounding encouragement addressed to the entire choir of stars<sup>32</sup> to rejoice and announce the fall of their worshiper, unaware of his own defeat. It is about the death of Khosrow, indicated by the name in the following verses (vv. 7, 11), and this defeat probably should be understood as an incorrect choice of the object of worship. The joy is also to be shared by the Moon and the Sun, free from the idolatrous worship

<sup>28</sup> This issue is discussed in detail by Huttner 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Hammond 2000: 20.

<sup>30</sup> Appel 2002: 90.

<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that the comparison of the emperor with the mythical hero also appears in a work of the contemporary of the poet, the historian Theophylact Simocatta, who uses this comparison in the introduction to his *History*. He probably drew inspiration in this respect from the poetry of Pisides (cf. Whitby 1994: 216, n. 99; Hurbanič 2019: 9) – if so, this fact further emphasises the importance of the poet among the elites of the time and the appreciation of his talent and ingenuity; if not, then Simocatta’s work reflects the tastes of the era, to which Pisides responded in the most sophisticated way.

<sup>32</sup> It is possible that the poet took this term from Euripides’ *Electra* (v. 467), cf. Frendo 1984: 182.



with which they were bestowed, and the sky.<sup>33</sup> By anthropomorphising these heavenly bodies, the poet also makes them less patient towards the ruler of Persia than God himself, because they, as creatures, do not want to receive the glory to be given to the Creator.<sup>34</sup>

This is not a typical proemium – the poet does not ask any deity for inspiration, the heavenly bodies are invoked not as objects of worship, but recipients of encouragement to rejoice over the death of Khosrow. The Christian God is here the One from whom these heavenly bodies do not want to take away the glory. It is worth noting that this call to the joy of the entire universe due to the death of Khosrow, which opens the work, is a creative development of a motif known from panegyric literature – usually this enthusiasm (of listeners, inhabitants of a given city) is triggered by the accession of the praised person to the throne or the consulship position,<sup>35</sup> and not by the death of an enemy, although in earlier works using this motif as well as here the consequence of this event should be the advent of peace and prosperity.<sup>36</sup> To emphasise the contrast between Khosrow and Heraclius, in the following lines, the poet composes a whole series of *syncriseis* of the emperor with various mythological, literary and historical figures.

The poetic describing of the death of Khosrow as the deprivation of light of this fire worshiper (v. 14) is somehow a contribution to recalling

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<sup>33</sup> Frenzo 1986: 55 points out that the arrival of a new era is further emphasised by the fact that ether (translated here as sky), traditionally associated with fire, is called to rejoice at the fall of the fire worshiper.

The entire proemium resembles a psalm in its structure, which is partly due to the visible similarity, suggested by Pertusi 1959: 261–262, or even the dependence, as Frenzo 1984: 181, n. 79–80 implies, of this fragment on the initial verses of Heraclius' letter, read in Hagia Sophia on the Feast of Pentecost in 628, informing about the overthrow of Khosrow in a palace coup with words taken from psalms: 95, 99 and 100. The opening lines of *Heraclius*, however, show greater subtlety, coherence, independence, degree of artistry, and intellectual level.

<sup>34</sup> Tartaglia 1998: 194, n. 2 also believes that the solemn nature of this fragment resembles the beginning of the above-mentioned letter of Heraclius.

<sup>35</sup> See among others panegyrics of Sidonius Apollinaris. The motif of joy in the world, but resulting from the death of a wicked, according to the poet, person, also appears in Claudian's *In Rufinum*, not at the beginning, but at the end of the work (lines 454–456).

<sup>36</sup> In Roman literature it is often associated with the motif of the coming of the 'golden age', which is rather unusual in Greek; cf. Portmann 1988: 206.

another image related to fire. Referring to the story from the Book of Daniel,<sup>37</sup> in which Nebuchadnezzar ordered Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who refused to worship a golden image, to be thrown into a fiery furnace, Pisides talks (vv. 15–19) about the Persian furnace and the second flame sprinkled by the second Daniel,<sup>38</sup> i.e. Heraclius, adding that fire, usually rising towards the sky, spreads and (like in the biblical story) consumes those who kindle it. It is difficult to precisely determine what the poet wanted to present through this symbol of the furnace and flame. Perhaps it is about the temples of fire worshiped by the Persians, which were destroyed by the emperor,<sup>39</sup> or more generally – about the decline of Persia and the insatiable desire for conquest of its ruler, which led the country to ruin. The choice of such a metaphor seems to have at least twofold justification: firstly, it mentions Persian beliefs and the worship of fire, and secondly, the juxtaposition of Babylonia with Persia<sup>40</sup> somehow implies their identification – Khosrow is the second Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian dragon, and an idolater punished for his pride and impiety. Thereafter (vv. 20–21), the poet continues to compare the emperor to Daniel, recalling the episode of Darius throwing him into a den of lions that did not harm him<sup>41</sup> – again, the metaphor of danger in Persia, from which Heraclius emerges unscathed, is reinforced by the person of the Persian ruler. The behaviour of Khosrow, considering himself a god<sup>42</sup>, outlined (vv. 22–30) in general terms and related to plans to conquer Byzantium, reminds Pisides

<sup>37</sup> Dan 3:8–97.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel's name appears in the dativus – therefore it should be translated that the furnace was sprinkled by, or perhaps for him. The comparison of the emperor to this hero does not correspond exactly to the biblical story, because Daniel, although mentioned among the three young men in Dan 1:6, was not thrown into the furnace, nor did he extinguish it, as Frenzo 1986: 58 points out.

<sup>39</sup> See: Pertusi 1959: 163, n. 15; Tartaglia 1998: 195, n. 5.

<sup>40</sup> It is also worth adding that Babylonia was conquered by the Persians, which somehow strengthens this simple identification of countries and characters.

<sup>41</sup> Dan 6:17–25

<sup>42</sup> See: Pertusi 1959:263, n. 23. As Huber 2008:176 points out, Persian rulers did not consider themselves gods but rather human beings endowed with divine privileges. Apart from this brief mention, the poet does not pay attention to the cult surrounding the Persian ruler, although it shows some similarities to that which characterised the attitude of subjects towards the emperor in Byzantium (cf. Panaino 2004:555–594).

(vv. 22–30) of the actions of Xerxes, mentioned earlier in another poem, *Expeditio Persica*,<sup>43</sup> and in the desire to rule the Persian king resembles a giant.<sup>44</sup> However, the poet returns (vv. 31–35) to the Book of Daniel, stating that the Khosrow is most similar to Belshazzar, who desecrated vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem, using them to drink wine during a feast.<sup>45</sup> He probably means the desecration of Christian temples committed by Khosrow in the conquered areas.<sup>46</sup> However, just as this Babylonian king saw the judgment written on a wall by God's hand (in which the Persians also appear as Belshazzar's successors),<sup>47</sup> through the hand of Heraclius, the finger of God sentenced the Persian king<sup>48</sup> The content of the judgment is symbolised by a black stone – the poet supplements the biblical analogy with a reference to the historical reality of voting in ancient Athens. The description of misfortunes that affected people and the created world as a result of Khosrow's war, occupying a few lines of the poem (vv. 36–48), ends (vv. 49–52) with another call to heaven, earth, fire, water, air, clouds and the entire

<sup>43</sup> *Exp. Pers.* II 303–305.

<sup>44</sup> The word used by Pisides: γγανρία, according to the Online Lidell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon (<https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=22901>), is equivalent to: γγαντομαχία; a similar meaning is given in *Suda* (according to the critical apparatus for verse 30 in Pertusi): γγαντιῦ· τὰ τῶν Γγάντων φρονεῖ; then it would suggest that Khosrow had such a desire for power that he would even be ready to fight with deities to keep it. Therefore, it seems that the poet uses the motif of Persian pride, which already appears in Herodotus – when in his work Xerxes announces the conquest of Greece, he says that after its conquest he will border with the ether of Zeus. In both cases, it is about the pride of the man who exceeds all human limits, challenges God and is ready to fight with Him like Satan.

Quercius 1865: 1300–1301, n. 30 sees in this word an allusion to Nimrod mentioned in Gen 10:8–12, a descendant of Ham, a powerful ruler and builder of several cities (but not the Tower of Babel, as Quercius wants in his note 22 p. 1299; in the story of the Tower of Babel in chapter 11 his name is not mentioned); the fact that in Gen 10:10 the name of Nimrod is associated with Babylon opens up an interesting possibility of interpretation – Khosrow would resemble not only Nebuchadnezzar but also the earlier ruler of Babylon recorded in the Bible.

<sup>45</sup> Dan 5:2–3.22–23

<sup>46</sup> Tartaglia 1998: 197, n. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Dan 5:5.24–27.

<sup>48</sup> Frenzo 1986: 60–61 sees here a similarity of the emperor to the biblical Daniel: just as he was an interpreter (literally: a judge) of dreams, so Heraclius becomes a judge (of Persia).

universe to praise God's plans, because the death of one (Khosrow) brought salvation to all.

Returning to the Persian ruler, Pisides reports (vv. 53–59) that he now realised that the Morning Star, shining with fire, was immersed in darkness. Here the poet uses the word Ἐωσφόρος<sup>49</sup>, which appears in Homer and Hesiod.<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that the poet, using the term φώσφορος, which is also an epithet of this star, in *Expeditio Persica* composed a little earlier, talks about the emperor.<sup>51</sup> Pisides imagines that Khosrow now admits that he does not respect not only the seven planets, but also all the stars. The word πλάνης, appearing in the text, as an adjective means ‘wandering, roaming’, but it can also be understood as part of the expression meaning planets: πλάνητες ἀστέρες, because the planets were formerly perceived as wandering stars. The poet, by using the term πλάνης, related to the verb πλανᾶω and its second meaning ‘mislead, deceive’, conducts a kind of word game with his listener, which is today difficult to capture and show in translation, to emphasise the mistake of the Persian ruler.<sup>52</sup> The latter, presented finally in the next lines of the poem as having been thrown into Tartarus (not the Christian Hell), must see all stars dark (as if) Evening Stars, and disappointed in hopes placed in them, now, being now buried, he curses those he worshiped during his life (vv. 56–59). The poet used a similar image at the end of the second canto of the above-mentioned poem, presenting Khosrow cursing the Moon.<sup>53</sup>

Apart from the above-mentioned mythological names of the deities personifying the stars: Morning Star and Evening Star, and the name of the place of eternal damnation, Pisides in a sense mocks (vv. 60–61) magicians and astrological prophecies for not announcing the death of Khosrow.<sup>54</sup> He also refers to Kronos (vv. 62–63), noting an analogy

<sup>49</sup> Although both contemporary editors translate this term by word: Lucifero, which has quite clear associations today, there is no reason to see it as the figure of Satan.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Hom. *Il.* XXIII 226, Hes. *Theog.* 381.

<sup>51</sup> *Exp. Pers.* I 192, III 365.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Quercius 1865: 1302–1303, n. 54.

<sup>53</sup> *Exp. Pers.* II 371–375.

<sup>54</sup> Pertusi 1959: 265, n. 62 believes that the poet is wrong in this matter, and he mentions a prediction revealed later, of which Pisides had no knowledge at the time of composing the poem.

between the fate of the Persian ruler and the events of the myth.<sup>55</sup> The similarity is in the death of the murderer at the hand of his own child – just as Kronos was murdered by Zeus, Khosrow was overthrown by his son Kavad II.

In the next passage (vv. 65–83), the poet somehow instructs Homer mentioned here, about whom he spoke with respect in *Expediatio Persica*,<sup>56</sup> not to consider it right to rashly call ancient Heracles a god,<sup>57</sup> because a slain boar or a strangled lion brought no benefit to humanity as a whole. He is, of course, referring to the killing of the Nemean lion and the capture of the Erymanthian Boar – two of the twelve famous works of the mythological hero. He should rather admire this Heracles who, being one of men, is rightly called the liberator of the world. This Heracles is Heraclius himself – a word game based on the similarity of names was used by the poet many times in his works.<sup>58</sup> The term κοσμορύστης describing the new Heracles is interesting – it was probably invented by the poet, as it appears only in four of his works.<sup>59</sup> The word ρύστης,<sup>60</sup> which is its second part, means ‘saviour’. In a Christian context, using this term to describe a ruler seems to be quite a bold move.

The poet recalls yet other achievements of the mythical hero (vv 71–79), giving the above-mentioned ‘accusation’ against Homer the character of a rhetorical *auxesis*.<sup>61</sup> Reading them anew in the perspective of the war with Persia (although he does not express it directly,

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<sup>55</sup> Both Pertusi (‘Sembra che egli sia caduto interamente sotto l’influsso (maligno della stella) di Cronos’) and Tartaglia (‘Pare ch’egli sia caduto completamente sotto il potere di Cronos’ with n. 15 p. 198) read verse 63 in the context of the influence that Saturn, dedicated to Cronus and considered a malicious star, was supposed to have on the ruler of Persia. The lack of a clear reference to planet or star and the meaning of the verb ἐπιπίπτω allow us to read this fragment as ‘it seemed that (the fate of) Cronus had happened to him (Khosrow)’.

<sup>56</sup> *Exp. Pers.* I 66–75.

<sup>57</sup> Quercius 1865: 1304, n. 67 mentions an interesting fragment of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* (V 22–28).

<sup>58</sup> *Exp. Pers.* III 354; *Bell. Avar.* 57.

<sup>59</sup> *In Bonum patr.* 7; *C. Sever.* 452; *Hexaem.* 1800; cf. Tartaglia 1998: 199, n. 19.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. headword: ρύστης in the Online Lidell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon (<https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=95518>).

<sup>61</sup> Nissen 1940: 303.

but the context allows such an interpretation), he attributes them to the emperor: descending to the gates of Hades, suppressing the rage of a voracious dog, bringing back to life Alcestis – the inhabited land, killing a bloodthirsty dragon, slaying of the hydra<sup>62</sup> – the many-headed doom, the cleansing of previously dirty life<sup>63</sup> from dung, the strangulation of the lion<sup>64</sup> – the destroyer of the world. Under the image of the world of the dead or the Augean stable there is probably Persia, under the image of the mentioned beasts – Khosrow, and the loving wife is the Empire. The multitude of works mentioned emphasises the importance of the emperor's achievements. Pisides literally (v. 78) expresses the belief that now the real Heracles has shown himself through his actions, having taken the golden apples, i.e. all the cities (of Persia). The poet's statements that a source of the evening's darkness passed, the light appeared and the darkness dissipated, now a new life, – a second world, new creation – is being created (vv. 80–83), constitute a sort of summary of this mythological passage, but at the same time they refer to God's work of creation,<sup>65</sup> in which the emperor seems to participate.

Noah is another figure who is associated with the renewal of the world and whose embodiment seems to be the emperor.<sup>66</sup> The poet

<sup>62</sup> This mythological motif already appeared in Pisides' earlier works, cf. *Exp. Pers.* III 351; *Bell. Avar.* 52.

<sup>63</sup> The allusion to one of Heracles' works, which was to cleanse the Augean stables, is expressed here in the most general terms and perhaps should not be interpreted as another reference to warfare in Persia, but as the transformation of the emperor's life, mentioned in *Exp. Pers.* III 341–346. If its place among remaining metaphors resulted not only from metrical assumptions (since it is not the order of works known from myth), but also from the chronology of events they represent, the proposed interpretation is supported by the fact that the resurrection of Alcestis and the removal of faeces are connected with, or they are, a consequence of subsequent victories over the troops of Khosrow.

<sup>64</sup> This is probably one of the twelve works mentioned above in the first lines of this part of the poem, addressed to Homer. In the myths about Heracles, another episode with a lion can be found. This beast, prowling on the slopes of Cithareon or at the foot of Helicon, threatened the flocks of his earthly father Amphitryon and king Thespius. According to some accounts, it was the skin of this lion, not the Nemean lion, that later became the hero's clothing.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Gen 1, especially verses 3–4.

<sup>66</sup> As Quercius 1865: 1306, n. 84 points out, Noah was considered by the Church Fathers to be a type of Christ, so the poet indirectly compares the emperor to Him.

uses here (vv. 84–93) the biblical story about the flood.<sup>67</sup> In his opinion, Heraclius, as the Noah of the new world, discovered that the ark was his heart, and having placed his whole self in it, he used it, kept ready for the time of the flood caused by Khosrow, against the Persian army. What flooded everyone (literally: every body), causing death, was all kinds of sin – again, the war with Persia is also interpreted by the poet in a religious context. Only after the emperor’s grasping of a forgotten olive branch<sup>68</sup> things still alive were saved. The adjective characterising the twig may refer to the peace of which it is a symbol, like the dove,<sup>69</sup> and which, due to numerous wars, the Empire did not experienced for a long time. In the Book of Genesis, a dove is an animal which brings a fresh leaf from an olive tree – evidence of the resumption of plant growth process. It is possible that in this way the poet wants to emphasise the gentleness of the emperor, with which the dove is associated. Replacing this bird with the person of the ruler may also be a way to emphasise the emperor’s involvement in the fight and concern for his subjects, since he does not help anyone else in identifying the situation, but checks it himself, or the dove may be an expression of the belief that Heraclius is the herald of the long-awaited peace.

In the next lines (93–96), the poet asks where Apelles and talkative Demosthenes are now, who would have created – one with a brush, the other with words – an effigy of the emperor so faithful that it would

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<sup>67</sup> See Gen 7. The motif of Noah in the ark was often used in catacomb art (it can be found, among others, in the catacombs of Priscilla and Domitilla), where his image was to symbolize a Christian awaiting eternal life; the announcement of the waters of Holy Baptism was seen in the water, and in the wooden ark – the symbol of the Cross of Christ (cf. Forstner 1990: 313–314).

<sup>68</sup> Quercius 1865: 1306, n. 91 chooses the version: ἠλεημέρος, interpreting the branch carried by the dove as a metaphor for the icon of Christ mentioned in *Exp. Pers.* I 139–141 and II 86, and translating the adjective itself as: ‘compassing, showing mercy’, through which the poet would emphasise once again that it was thanks to God’s help that the Byzantines won the victory.

<sup>69</sup> It is worth mentioning that for the ancient Greeks, the olive tree was also a symbol of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation – its branches were carried by priests, people seeking shelter and messengers of peace, they were placed in the grave of the dead or the bodies of the dead were placed on its leaves to find favor with the gods of the underworld. Olympic winners were crowned with branches of a wild olive tree. In the Holy Scriptures, however, like grain and wine, the olive tree signifies the fullness of blessing and fruitfulness of times of peace (cf. Forstner 1990: 172–174).

be as alive. The invocation of these two historical figures is another rhetorical auxesis. Nissen<sup>70</sup> interprets Apelles' presence here as an indirect allusion to Alexander the Great, whom Apelles was said to have painted; in the following lines (see below) there is a direct reference to this ruler. The person of the Athenian orator was mentioned earlier in *Expeditio Persica*<sup>71</sup>, where the poet encouraged him to speak before the emperor without fear. In this work, Pisides recalled the story about Demosthenes' silence before Philip, here he refers to the orator's eloquence.

Scipio Africanus is also added to this specific catalogue of significant personalities – the figure of this great Roman leader was mentioned many times in panegyrics of previous centuries.<sup>72</sup> In the text of the poem, Pisides orders him to be silent. He speaks of the written right to call Scipio's descendants the Heraclids and of the resolution adopted by all consent that subjects may safely make laws (νομοθετεῖν) against rulers (vv. 97–100). Scholars disagree to what the poet is alluding here. The assumption that this is a legally passed honouring, through some graphic form, of a ruler still involved in the war with Persia<sup>73</sup>, and an elogium with the new term 'new Scipio', accompanying other titles,<sup>74</sup> is not confirmed in sources. The interpretation that this is a title awarded to Heraclius and his sons after the victory over Persia: πιστοὶ ἐν Χριστῷ βασιλεῖς, thanks to which, through the Greek translation, the term 'rex' returned to the official nomenclature of the rulers of the Roman Empire, does not seem convincing, as it does not explain the allusion of the poet.<sup>75</sup> An attempt to explain this fragment through a paronomasia of the name Scipio and the Greek term σκῆπτρον meaning

<sup>70</sup> Nissen 1940: 304; as the scholar notes, Pacatus *Paneg.* II (XII) 44, 5 addresses artists in a similar way.

<sup>71</sup> *Exp. Pers.* II 1–5.

<sup>72</sup> Among others: Themistius, Claudian, Sidonius Apollinaris, Symmachus; cf. Portmann 1988: 338.

<sup>73</sup> Or a monument, as Pertusi 1959: 266–267, n. 97 interprets Quercius' remark (see next footnote).

<sup>74</sup> Quercius 1865: 1306–1307, n. 97–98; as he himself notes, the existence of such an image or inscription is not confirmed by any sources.

<sup>75</sup> Pertusi 1959: 266–267, n. 97; it does not seem that the defeat of Persia influenced the change of the title (cf. Ostrogorski 2008: 138, n. 56). Under Heraclius, the title was Hellenised, but rulers avoided the term 'rex'.



‘a sceptre’ and to read it in such a way that the symbol of power took its name from Scipio’s name, but his glory passed, and a greater commander has just arisen whose name could be given to the sceptre,<sup>76</sup> is also not convincing enough. Taking into account the way in which the poet composed the previous comparisons to Heracles (first mentioning the mythical figure and then the emperor under the same name), and Noah (immediately under the name of the biblical hero mentioning the emperor), perhaps this fragment should be interpreted in this way that the historical Scipio has to remain silent because the offspring of the new Scipio, i.e. Heraclius, was called the Heraclids due to his greatness.<sup>77</sup> Then this couplet about laws against rulers should be combined with the next verse (line 101), in which the poet addresses the emperor with the word *κράτιστος*<sup>78</sup> to confirm the law with his seal. As if he want to say that Heraclius should not be afraid – no law will be made against him. The poet lists a number of arguments in Heraclius’ favour (vv. 102–108): he has a clear conscience, he is free from suspicion, countless missiles (ejected in battles in which he took part) testify in his favour, wounds (sustained in battles) were his companions from the very beginning, as well as duels – like eloquent defenders and excellent reporters<sup>79</sup> who will write down (laws against rulers or related to the conduct of wars) law with ink of not poor quality (or even counterfeit), but in red, as befits letters. Purple was the imperial colour, also for the ink used to sign official documents. From the sentence (line 109) in which the poet adds that the emperor’s blood is enough for writers, it can be concluded that the ink to write down the law, perhaps also the one that can be used against the ruler, is to be his own blood from

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<sup>76</sup> Shahid 1980: 225–237.

<sup>77</sup> The poet himself addresses the son of Heraclius with this term in the work *In Chr. Resurr.* 120.

<sup>78</sup> The poet had already addressed the emperor with this term many times in the first poem concerning the war with Persia – *Exp. Pers.* I 174, II 253, 263, 327 and III 49, 131, 208, 307.

<sup>79</sup> The poet uses here the word *ταχυγράφος*. This means a person who has the ability to write shorthand quickly. The proposed translation ‘reporter’ does not reflect the literal meaning, but is an attempt to capture Pisides’ thought that duels are perfect recorders of the emperor’s actions, decisions, and skills. The term ‘scribe’, probably more appropriate to the realities of the era, is today associated with a monk in a scriptorium, not with a court scribe.

wounds suffered for the state. In the same way in which the reading of the couplet about Scipio was proposed above, the entire passage about making laws against rulers or ordering them to do something in accordance with the law<sup>80</sup> can be interpreted as follows: it should not be understood literally and referred to the historically attested laws of the Byzantine Empire, but – similarly as in the case of Noah – as a metaphorical transfer of the situation from the past to the present, which the poet talks about.<sup>81</sup> A great leader like Scipio, despite all successes he achieved, also had many opponents in Rome who were afraid of his authority and position, and at the autumn of his life he was accused of corruption and there were several repeated attempts to bring charges against him. During the reign of Heraclius, however, subjects could take legal action against the emperor (for example by ordering him to report on his military expedition) – it should be remembered that dissatisfaction was aroused not only by his prolonged absence from the capital, but also by his other political moves. As if in spite of this, the poet expresses the belief that the emperor can still feel confident and safe, because his military achievements are not associated with even the slightest guilt.

Pisides also induces Plutarch (vv. 110–112), the author of *Parallel Lives*, to remain silent. The poet wonders why he bothers so much and collects information about leaders, because by describing the ruler he would describe everyone. Pisides notes (v. 113–119) that the author, in order to emphasise in his description<sup>82</sup> the magnificence of Alexander the Great (whom the poet does not mention by name, but calls him

<sup>80</sup> Verb νομοθετεῖν means not only to make laws, but also to command by law; adopting this second meaning allows us to understand the reference to Scipio – that it is not about passing new laws against him, but about the fact that he was issued a legal order to clarify the corruption case

<sup>81</sup> It remains an unanswerable question to what extent such extremely erudite references and allusions were clear to the listeners, although due to the probable place of presentation of the work – the imperial palace – they were the emperor and the surrounding, well-educated elite, for whom the motifs used by the poet were very well known, and it is precisely this oral way of presenting a text which is only heard, running at its own rhythm, that limits the possibility of reflective reception and noticing all subtle allusions; cf. Lauxtermann 2003: 58.

<sup>82</sup> As the publishers note, here the poet probably thinks about another work of Plutarch: *De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut uirtute*.

Philip's son), presented a number of adversities with which he had to struggle. This way of creating the great hero (Alexander) had to be a result of the author's awareness that the presentation of a series of successful events would be interpreted as a lucky fate, and not the result of Alexander's abilities and skills. According to the poet, however, he was very lucky, fighting in the company of good warriors (vv. 120–121). Pisides mentioned the superiority of Heraclius over Alexander in terms of courage in an earlier poem,<sup>83</sup> and here he develops this idea more broadly, precisely in the context of brothers in arms (vv. 122–130). The emperor, setting out on a campaign against Persia, had to face the relaxation and impunity of his troops, which the poet also described<sup>84</sup>. Here, emphasising the hopeless situation in the army, Pisides states that the tendency to retreat instead of fighting became a natural reaction of soldiers. He argues that no other leader<sup>85</sup> was able to persuade them with his speeches and pieces of advice to take up arms and turn their cowardice into courage – only the mind and strength of Heraclius (to whom the poet addresses himself here directly) managed to do it. These speeches and advice woke up the soldiers, who were compared to immovable stones weighing down the earth fruitlessly with their weight.

Again, as in the case of Apelles and Demosthenes, the poet further wonders (vv. 131–134) where are the Athenian painters who depicted the general Timotheus sleeping between battles, while the goddess of the fate Tyche gave him the cities she had taken.<sup>86</sup> This is about an Athenian general from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, who repeatedly took command in battles between Athens (allied with other Greek poleis) and Sparta. His person aroused various emotions – according to Isocrates, he was superior to other commanders of his time and presented all the good features required for this position.<sup>87</sup> The poet also respects him to some extent since he compares the emperor to him, but refers here, interestingly, to

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<sup>83</sup> *Exp. Pers.* III 48–49.

<sup>84</sup> *Exp. Pers.* II 44–48.

<sup>85</sup> Pisides uses an easily noticeable exaggeration here – the feature of every good leader was the ability to raise morale in the army, so it was not a skill unique to Heraclius.

<sup>86</sup> Nissen 1940: 304, n. 4 lists panegyrists dealing with the issue of the relationship between achievement and fate – τύχη.

<sup>87</sup> Isoc. *Antidosis* 116–117.

not very flattering opinions about him – that he simply had luck, not ‘skills’, which were expressed in one painting mentioned by Plutarch or Aelian.<sup>88</sup> Through contrast, the poet wants to highlight the emperor’s abilities. Turning to Heraclius (v. 135–139), Pisides states that these painters should now paint something completely opposite: Tyche sleeping in front of Heraclius, wherever he is, rather hampering his efforts<sup>89</sup> and the ruler – as the leader of a doubly dangerous fight: against fate and against barbarians. Although Pisides invokes the mythical goddess of fate, he only remind a painting in which she is also presented – he does not make her an active heroine of the epic, he uses her name in noun form to describe various events that the emperor must face.

The comparison to Timotheus ends this rather long part of the first song. The remaining lines are devoted to the poet’s reflection on the victory over Khosrow just won by Heraclius, also of a laudatory nature. Although Pisides’ poem is considered an epic of a historical character, the poet included relatively little historical information in the first song – it clearly gives way to laudatory elements.<sup>90</sup> The series of *syncriseis* (preceded by the above-mentioned proemium) comprises almost half of 241 lines, up to verse 139. Why did Pisides devote so much space to them? Their presence and selection are not accidental. Since the work was to be, as already mentioned, a kind of recapitulation of Heraclius’s reign, the poet consciously wanted to give the epic a panegyric character. This was also required to some extent by the aforementioned circumstances of its presentation. It had to meet the expectations of both the emperor and the elites gathered around him. The poet was perfectly aware that this was not the time and place to even allude to difficult or sensitive issues, but that his role was to present Heraclius returning to the capital after several years of absence as a true triumphant and

<sup>88</sup> Plut. *Sulla* 6.3, *De Herodoti malignitate* 856c, Ael. *Varia Historia* XII 43.

<sup>89</sup> Thus, Pisides takes up the topic repeatedly raised by Plutarch, which is more important: fate – τύχη, or virtue – ἀρετή, and espouses the virtues thanks to which Heraclius succeeds.

<sup>90</sup> The fact that the entire first song is of a laudatory nature, and the resulting disproportion in length between this part and the more narrative second song, appears in the discussion about the completeness of the preserved version of the poem; see also note 25 above.

magnificent ruler.<sup>91</sup> The panegyric is not a separate genre, but a special form of the eulogy in an epideictic style, so to better understand the poet's idea it is worth to read some rhetorical works, first dealing with the epideictic speech itself and then with the composing of praise<sup>92</sup>.

The first of them is Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. At the beginning (book I, chapter 3)<sup>93</sup> he divides speeches into three types, differing primarily in their purpose and the role of the listener related to it. These are: forensic, deliberative and epideictic types. After making general remarks on the aspect of time and specifying the main goals of these speeches, Aristotle devotes a chapter to each type. For the analysis of a fragment of Pisides' work, the third type of speech is important (chapter 9)<sup>94</sup>, i.e. epideictic, because it contains praise and blame. Their purpose is to demonstrate, respectively, the nobility and wickedness of the subject of speech. The decisive factor here is the question of virtue and moral beauty.

Therefore, considerations about beauty and virtue occupy a large part of the chapter. Aristotle lists the virtues associated with them: justice, courage, self-control, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, practical and speculative wisdom, giving priority to those that serve the benefit of other people. The philosopher emphasises the beauty of actions aimed at achieving virtue and resulting from it, again drawing attention to the value of those actions that are undertaken for the good of other people. From the point of view of this analysis, it is also important that Aristotle specifies as beautiful and desirable: revenge, victory and the honour associated with it, as well as deeds worthy of memory.

This passage also contains comments on the considered choice of a term for the name of the feature presented by the person praised or reprimanded. In addition, Aristotle advises that when constructing, one

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. Kaegi 2003: 4: "One had to represent him as both full of guile and stratagems yet legitimate and a representative of and guarantor of order."

<sup>92</sup> Of course, between the creation of the rhetorical treatises included here and the works of Pisides, many authors composed laudatory works, often dedicated to a reigning ruler, but detailed analysis of their content and their possible influence on the poet, which cannot always be identified, would require a separate publication.

<sup>93</sup> Arist. *Rhet.* 1358b.

<sup>94</sup> Arist. *Rhet.* 1366a–1368a.

should have in mind the listener's point of view, his value system, and appreciate what he concerns as particularly valuable. It is also important to know what is appropriate for the person being praised, what befits him. Furthermore, a very interesting point is the recommendation that the author should make an effort to prove that all the noble deeds of the praised person are the result of his will, even if some of them were a coincidence.

In the final part, there are some instructions on taking into account the circumstances (especially unfavourable) of the time and situation of a given act, the use of comparisons, particularly with outstanding people, and the use of amplification (*auxesis*), which Aristotle considers to be the most appropriate for epideictic speeches among rhetorical means common to the three types of speech.<sup>95</sup>

Both types of epideictic speech mentioned above have been included in the canon of exercises at the level of education in the field of rhetoric, and therefore recommendations regarding them can be found in textbooks. Here, for example, *Προγυμνάσματα* of Hermogenes could be mentioned – in its seventh chapter, *Περὶ ἐγκωμίου*, the author recommends taking into account such issues as miraculous signs accompanying the hero's birth, a special way of eating (if he experienced one), a method of his upbringing and education, good features characterising the soul and body, his profession. Moreover, achievements are particularly important, but worth mentioning are also external goods *sensu largo*, including, apart from material goods, also relatives and friends. The length of life and the circumstances of death, possibly also events following it, deserve attention, too. Recommendations regarding praising a person end with a sentence that is important from the perspective of these considerations: “The best source of argument in encomia is derived from comparisons, which you will utilize as the occasion may suggest.”<sup>96</sup> The question of comparisons is developed separately in the eighth chapter of the discussed textbook.

<sup>95</sup> Arist. *Rhet.*: I 9, 40: (1368a) ὅλως δὲ τῶν κοινῶν εἰδῶν ἅπανσι τοῖς λόγοις ἢ μὲν αὐξήσις ἐπιτηδειοτάτη τοῖς ἐπιδεικτικοῖς (τάς γὰρ πράξεις ὁμολογουμένας λαμβάνουσιν, ὥστε λοιπὸν μέγεθος περιθεῖναι καὶ κάλλος).

<sup>96</sup> μεγίστη δὲ ἐν τοῖς ἐγκωμίοις ἀφορμὴ ἢ ἀπὸ τῶν συγκρίσεων, ἃς τάξεις, ὡς ἂν ὁ καιρὸς ὑφηγῆται.

On the basis of this type of textbooks by various authors,<sup>97</sup> a specific canon of information was developed that should be included in the praise – in addition to those factors mentioned above also: country, nation, family, parents, talents and acquired skills.

One more important text which should be mentioned here is the treatise Περὶ Ἐπιδεικτικῶν of Menander the Rhetor. Its beginning<sup>98</sup> is devoted to the praise of the ruler, the so-called βασιλικὸς λόγος. The recommendations contained here coincide largely with those in the above-mentioned textbooks. Menander recommends that – after presenting the topic in the proemium – the praise should concern the origin of the praised person from a defined city or country, some information about family and ancestors, and it should include a description of birth and appearance, then it is good to deal with youth, activities undertaken, and finally – deeds committed in war and during peace. There should be a comparison to some historical figure, and the epilogue is a place to express wishes for the future of the praised person and pray for his or her prosperity.

While the popularity of Aristotle's works allows us to assume that *Rhetoric* was known to Pisides, this cannot be certain in the case of the other rhetorical texts mentioned here.<sup>99</sup> However, both their popularity and the school program including rhetorical exercises allow us to suppose that, directly or indirectly, through the literature referring to them, the poet must have had contact with them. Composing the emperor's praise, Pisides treats the above recommendations seriously and creatively.

After comparing the fragment of Pisides' poem analysed here with Aristotle's recommendations, it can be concluded that the poet was aware of them and fulfilled them to a large extent. He knows what befits a ruler, and he knows what his subjects (and at the same time listeners) expect from a ruler. Pisides praises such features of Heraclius as courage, justice, prudence, wisdom, and emphasises his concern for subjects and difficulties he endures for them. His actions, conducted

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<sup>97</sup> For example: Aelius Theon, Aphthonius of Antioch, Nicolaus the Sophist, Libanius.

<sup>98</sup> Men. Rhet. 368–377.

<sup>99</sup> On Pisides' knowledge of Menander's works, see Sirotenko 2014: 65.

in a difficult war situation, are a manifestation of virtue, lead him to victory and deserve to be remembered. A series of comparisons with outstanding people of past times is a kind of framework for all these praises; the poet also repeatedly uses the amplifications recommended by Aristotle.

The *syncriseis* used with such pleasure by the poet create a coherent form, reflecting to some extent the order recommended by rhetoricians, especially Menander. Pisides completely ignores the origin of Heraclius, his ancestors and the description of his birth as well as real or imaginary miraculous phenomena accompanying them – perhaps in this way he is silent about the delicate issue of Heraclius’s lack of a relationship with the previously ruling dynasty (although the poet’s lack of knowledge on this subject cannot be ruled out). The reference to the ruler’s appearance is presented in the poem a little later, not in a series of comparisons, while the references to young men from biblical stories at the beginning of the poem may be a kind of equivalent of praising the childhood or youth<sup>100</sup> of the emperor, who was no longer a young man during his expedition to Persia.<sup>101</sup> Subsequent comparisons concern actions taken by the emperor. The metaphors of the labours of Heracles fulfil the recommendation to give priority to acts of war over those of peacetime. Due to unrest and external threats accompanying the entire reign of Heraclius, which was to be completed by the end of the war with Persia, the poet – using the *syncrisis* with Noah – praises not yet experienced but already anticipated prosperity and peace achieved due to the emperor’s actions. As Whitby<sup>102</sup> notes, the comparison with Noah additionally strengthens the image of the emperor as a saviour outlined in this *syncrisis*, supplementing it with the suggestion that Heraclius is able to stop even the worst disasters through loyalty to God.

<sup>100</sup> Nissen 1940: 303 considers the comparison with Heracles to be the first in the series of the mentioned *syncriseis*, composed in accordance with the basilikos logos of Menander the Rhetor, including the juxtaposition of Heraclius with Daniel and the three young men from the biblical history, in the ‘triumphant song about the fall of Khosrow’. Nevertheless, these first comparisons should not be ignored – at least because they are, as the first in a series of references to the ancient literature and culture, taken from the Bible, what could discreetly indicate the poet’s Christian worldview.

<sup>101</sup> Heraclius was then about 50 years old; cf. Tartaglia 1998: 203, n. 36.

<sup>102</sup> Whitby 1994: 214.



The mention of subsequent figures – Apelles, Demosthenes, Plutarch, and through them indirectly Alexander the Great, also Scipio and Timotheus – is admittedly connected with military activities, but without their strict specification and connection with any campaign conducted by the emperor it is rather related to various ways of celebrating the achievements of the emperor's wars, which should take place after peace is obtained.

Despite, as demonstrated here, Pisides' adherence to the principles of composing works of praise and propaganda goals that guided him, the poet also finds space to express his talent.<sup>103</sup> The combination of the eulogy with the historical epic and a particular saturation of the laudatory elements in his first song<sup>104</sup> make the poem extremely interesting and intriguing, also in terms of completeness in its preserved form. What is additionally worth emphasising is the fact that Pisides expands the catalogue of people to whom he compares the protagonist, adding to the mythological or historical heroes the biblical figures, whom the ruler also surpasses.<sup>105</sup> Not only such a recommendation but even the possibility of introducing Christian examples or at least allusions into the text was probably not included in rhetorical textbooks until the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>106</sup> This solution is not only an expression of the poet's

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<sup>103</sup> On the subject of such a creative freedom that characterises the poet in composing the ruler's panegyric, see Viermann 2021: 190.

<sup>104</sup> Pertusi 1959: 261 calls this first song 'a noteworthy panegyric work of the Byzantine style, or rather of a more refined court style'. It should be noted here that the very idea of giving panegyric features to an epic is not Pisides' achievement; the works of Claudian, Merobaudes, Sidonius Apollinaris, written in the West, or composed in Constantinople, but in the then official Latin language, works of Priscian and Corippus are particularly noteworthy here, even if it is difficult to determine their actual influence on Pisides' work.

<sup>105</sup> The issue related to the poet's use of Noah in the series of *syncretisis*, which also makes his poetry unique, is the conscious and purposeful comparison of the emperor to God. It is not expressed directly – such an approach, even literary, could not be allowed in the 7<sup>th</sup> century – but in several fragments of Pisides' poems these allusions are so clear that they must have been recognisable to his listeners; in the fragment analysed here this comparison to God is alluded in the verses 82–83 are relevant, when the poet talks about the emperor's participation in the creation of the new world, and directly expressed by comparison with Noah, considered a type of Christ.

<sup>106</sup> Sirotenko 2014: 66; not so much the concept of juxtaposing Christian and mythological motifs is Pisides' creative innovation (as it was used in literature since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), but its use for rhetorical purposes.

personal beliefs, it not only serves to present Heraclius as a Christian ruler, fighting to defend his subjects, but also, like the other creative uses of the heritage of pagan and Christian antiquity mentioned above, is the proof of Pisides' extraordinary erudition.

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