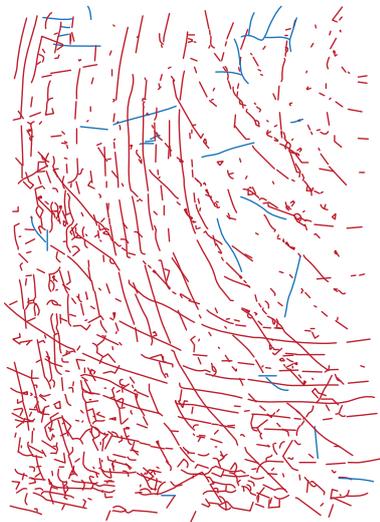


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Hartmut Leppin

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Discourses on Warfare in Late Antiquity

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## George Pisides' *Expeditio Persica* and Discourses on Warfare in Late Antiquity\*

Hartmut Leppin (Frankfurt am Main)

In contrast with philologists, historians are allowed to deal with literary texts in a way that might seem barbarous, as I will do in the following in order to show how poetry of the early seventh century can yield insights into the perception of politics amongst the educated elites of the Eastern Roman Empire at this time. While not dwelling on aesthetical issues for their own sake, I will discuss narrative strategies only as a means of source criticism. To put it more precisely: I would like to discuss the question of how the transformation of warfare during the sixth and seventh centuries was reflected in a poem, i.e. George Pisides' *Expeditio Persica*.

Let me start with some notes on the historical background. The main focus is on emperor Heraclius who ruled from 610–641. He is perhaps best known among classicists for being the emperor who made Greek the primary language of the empire of the Rhomaioi. In terms of warfare, his reign was shaped by extreme defeats and losses in war on the one hand but also by astounding victories on the other.

The emperor grabbed the throne as a usurper in 610 amidst a time of war in which the Persians had made significant military advances. During the following years they overran the eastern provinces advancing as far as Egypt. The loss of Jerusalem and the True Cross in 614 left a deep impression on contemporaries. The Romans faced more conflicts in the Balkans where Avars and Slavs were formidable enemies. In a few years, Heraclius managed to reorganize the army and extract new economic resources from his subjects by for example devaluating the coinage and melting down church treasures. In doing so, he relied on Sergius, the patriarch of Constantinople, a most influential figure at this time. In 622, Heraclius started to fight back effectively. Nevertheless, Constantinople was besieged in 626 and nearly captured by the Avars and the Persians. Finally, the Romans managed to fend off the Avars and to turn the tables on the Persians. In 627 Heraclius triumphantly won a battle near Niniveh in the Persian heartland, where he annihilated their army. The Persians overthrew their king and his successor accepted a peace treaty that restored the eastern territories to the Roman Empire in their entirety. Heraclius was at the height of his power. None of his predecessors had achieved similar success – however a few years later Arabic troops united under the banner of Islam inflicted disastrous losses on the exhausted empire. The Romans suffered a decisive defeat at the river Yarmouk in 636. When Heraclius died five years later, he left a weakened empire behind.<sup>1</sup>

Two changes in warfare occurred during his time, the first being a major involvement of the emperor in actual fighting. From the time of Arcadius (395–408) onwards most of the eastern Roman emperors spent their whole life in Constantinople and did not take to the field even in times of war. The emperor was bound to the city. This has been called *urbanes Kaisertum* in German scholarship, a term that does not

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\* I am grateful to Charlotte Hamway and Christian Scheidler for their comments.

<sup>1</sup> For Heraclius' reign Haldon 1997; Reinink and Stolte 2002; Kaegi 2003; Booth 2014. Speck 1988 is a strange mixture of acute observations and arbitrary judgements.

translate easily into English; urban imperial rule might give an idea of its meaning.<sup>2</sup> Heraclius, however, left the city behind in order to personally lead the fight against the Persians, thus fundamentally changing the role of the emperor. This also meant that he put both his own person and the empire at considerable risk. The emperor's involvement in warfare relied on certain immaterial resources, which are highlighted by some literary texts. This led to a second major development of warfare: wars gained a sacred and even religious dimension.

Contemporary poetry such as the *Expeditio Persica* composed by George of Pisidia echoes and in part even debates these developments. The *Expeditio* describes Heraclius' first successful campaign: After some futile attempts, Heraclius launched a new attack against the Persians probably in April 622.

His panegyrist George Pisides was a well-educated cleric who served in various functions in the patriarchal administration.<sup>3</sup> In addition to his so-called panegyric poems he also composed religious poetry displaying his theological education. In Byzantine tradition, his epigrams were regarded as exemplary. The *Hexaemeron* on the creation was most famous in Byzantium, much more so than the epics discussed here.<sup>4</sup> George claims to know emperor Heraclius personally (3.343-6) and gives the impression of having joined him on the campaign.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this seems to be a rare relationship between ruler and poet. The *Expeditio* is only one in a whole series of epic poems about the achievements of emperor Heraclius and his advisers. But given this contribution's limited length, I will only be able to focus on this one. Although it is an epic poem, the metre is not the dactylic hexameter, but the iambic trimeter, which is already *on the road to the Byzantine dodecasyllable*.<sup>6</sup>

How does George perceive the campaign, which went well but was by no means decisive?<sup>7</sup> From the very beginning of the poem he stages the expedition as a holy war. With the first lines of his poem he invokes the Trinity instead of the Muses. He asks the trinity, which aligns the immaterial (*ἀνόλογος*) armies of heaven (1,1 f), to teach him to move *his* sword, the tongue, to describe its miracles (*θαύματα*) (1.13-16). Following the order of the trinity, the emperor wages war against the barbarians who worship things created (*κτισματα*) instead of the creator (*κτίσας*, 1.19 f.) – this is a Christian argument based on the old *topos* that barbarians adhere an inferior religion. The enemies believe that right is wrong and vice versa (1,21 f.). Thus, George does not define the war as a conflict of political interests, of territorial claims or of honour.

<sup>2</sup> Pfeilschifter 2013.

<sup>3</sup> For George Pisides Howard-Johnston 2010, 16–35; Meier 2015, especially 170–174 (with bibliography). His panegyrics have been edited, translated and commented by Agostino Pertusi 1959, with a useful introduction (*Introduzione*) 9–67. Whitby 1998, 250 footnote 21 (only tenuous evidence that George accompanied Heraclius); Whitby 2002, underlining differences between the various poems; 162–167 for the *Expeditio Persica*; Whitby 2003.

<sup>4</sup> On the respective manuscripts see Lauxtermann 2003, 57 f.; 334–337 for the epigrams. For the *Hexaemeron* see Gonnelli 1998; for its political significance Ludwig 1991, 104-128.

<sup>5</sup> 2.122–126; 3.131–136.

<sup>6</sup> Agosti 2012, 361–404, 386 n 6; compare Rhoby 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Theoph. Conf., AM 6113 (302.32–306.8) describes the war as a prose historian who was influenced by imperial representation. But he also mentions the economic resources 302.34–303.3 and his helpers Sergius and Bonus (303.3–6). Regarding the *acheiropietas* he has some allusions to George's text (303.17–214), but he confounds the two passages in George. More allusions are noted in de Boor's edition. The difficulties of using Theophanes are notorious, see for example Howard-Johnston, 2010, 268–312, especially 275; 277; 283 on Theophanes' use of George's *Expeditio Persica*, compare Speck 1988.

Rather, he describes it as a combat between right and wrong, between true and false religion and at the same time as a war against lawless barbarians.<sup>8</sup>

Hereby, George seems to invoke the so-called Mosaic distinction between true and false religion, a distinction that has been regarded as crucial for a tendency towards religious violence characteristic of monotheistic religions.<sup>9</sup> Fittingly, George Pisides goes as far as to praise a Christian emperor who is stained with the blood of the enemy (3.121 f.; cf. 405).<sup>10</sup> This is a very unusual depiction in late antique Christian texts. Earlier Christian accounts of war had praised military successes while advocating bloodless victories in war.<sup>11</sup>

In the poem's opening lines, George unabashedly admits the Persians' successes thus far. Dark night covers the whole world, as he says (1.104–111). After some debate, the emperor decides to lead a military expedition in person with the campaign starting immediately after Easter; it is thus embedded in the liturgical calendar of the year. Heraclius takes with him the most famous holy image, the *Acheiropoietos*, the icon of Christ not painted by human hands.<sup>12</sup> George explains the theology behind it at length: Since the image represents the all informing *λόγος*, it is impossible for a human to have painted it. The emperor relies on this holy object, as the war is defined here as a religious act.

In the poet's narration it is the emperor himself who carries the image and although the story unfolds during a Christian holiday, there is no mention of priests or bishops. The poem focuses on the emperor and the *λόγος*. In addition, the poet completely disregards patriarch Sergius' financial support of the campaign, which is well known from other sources.<sup>13</sup>

George mentions the icon again in the second book of the poem. The poet sets the scene of troops having successfully crossed the sea and assembling in order to praise the emperor's power, strengthened by God (78).<sup>14</sup> The soldiers bow their necks to the ground hailing the emperor benefactor (*εὐεργέτης*) and powerful ruler (*κρατῶν δεσπότης* 2,84 f.) in a classical way. The emperor again reaches for the god-made image and explains that he sees his soldiers as brothers, an evidently Christian concept. Thus, the poet evokes the picture of the army as a Christian community. In the following, Heraclius proceeds along the same line. His power is not based on fear, but on love, so he says. Consequently, he contrasts the law of love to the tyrant's law of violence.<sup>15</sup> Not fear, but love with its benevolent violence (*φιλόανθρωπος βία*) should shape the relationship between the emperor and his soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, what is the point of these remarks? The soldiers behave as if they were subjects of the Persian rulers, performing an act of reverence that strongly reminds the reader of Persian adoration, the *proskynesis*. But

<sup>8</sup> For parallels, see 2.240; 3.305; 410.

<sup>9</sup> However, for the complex debate, see Assmann 2003; Thonhauser 2008.

<sup>10</sup> George does obviously not see any contradiction to the ascription of mildness, which the emperor shows towards enemies and future allies from small tribes, who compare with wild beasts in the view of George (2.213–234). For blood connected with piety see also Heracl. 1.195–198.

<sup>11</sup> Leppin 2012; Leppin 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Probably the Kamuliana according to Pertusi 1959, 142 f.; Whitby 1998, 253, number 33; compare Her. 1.218. Kaegi 2003, 113 identifies it erroneously a depiction of Mary.

<sup>13</sup> Theoph. Conf., AM 6113 (p.302 f.).

<sup>14</sup> I do not think that George sees this as part of the hymn since the following episode would become pointless if this were the case.

<sup>15</sup> According to Pertusi 1959, 151 this refers to Phocas.

<sup>16</sup> 2.86–106. See for his mildness 1.82–99.

Heraclius wants to leave no doubt about his role as emperor. He is not a Persian ruler who expects submissiveness, but rather the well-meaning, loving emperor of his Christian brethren.<sup>17</sup>

In the second part of the speech he spurs his soldiers to march against the infidels who have defiled Christian altars and churches in order to eliminate the true faith. This speech ends (115) with a brutal quote from psalm 137: *Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!* (137.9).<sup>18</sup> For George and Heraclius this psalm represents the work of another important ruler, King David: The psalmist directed this blessing against the Babylonians. George, however, turns it against the Persians (2.88-115). The poem again evokes the religious dimension of war and suggests how this concept of war might have contributed to brutalizing warfare in Late Antiquity.

The *acheiropoietos* is characterised by the word *φρικτός* (86), which means something causing shudder, a holy thrill.<sup>19</sup> It is not the first time Romans used Christian sacred objects in war; Philippicus, a commander under Maurice (582 – 602), had asked for relics and had taken the *acheiropoietos* on campaign before.<sup>20</sup> However, the holy icon did not so much serve as an instrument of military victory but rather as an aid for restoring the troops to proper behaviour and to remind them of their religious obligations.

In terms of power, George does not seem to doubt that Heraclius is entitled to use the icon freely. The emperor does not allow any religious institution to interfere with the military exploits of the Roman army. The whole idea of victory is centred on Heraclius despite its religious impact.

The emperor's piety, although rarely mentioned explicitly (but see 1.164), is crucial for his success. This is illustrated repeatedly by his behaviour: The perhaps most salient feature is his prayer at night (1.110 f.). Sleeplessness had become an important trait in imperial representation in late antiquity. Justinian – obviously wanting to impress his subjects - boasted about his sleeplessness and how he was filling his time musing on laws and theological issues.<sup>21</sup> Procopius, however, paints a damning picture of the emperor in his *Anekdota* by insinuating how sleeplessness was an expression of the emperor's demonic character. Evidently, this practice stood for habits going beyond normal human behaviour.

From his depiction of Heraclius it becomes clear that George understood this behaviour to be a point of strength. The emperor's sleeplessness represents his concern for the empire. At the same time the poet understands piety to be intimately connected with the imperial office when the emperor fulfils his religious obligations at night. Another example of George's strong Christian faith is the fact that he cannot bear the pagan sounding name of Heraea (1,156-161).

As the totalising Christian discourse of Late Antiquity becomes apparent in George's writing, it does not come as a surprise that Heraclius' deeds are equated to miracles. A telling episode at the end of the first book is George's description of the passage to Bithynia. This episode seems to be all the more important since it is attested by George only. The noise of a ship's crew interrupts the emperor in his prayers. The ship had run aground on a high rock and the sailors are almost dead when they catch sight of the light emanating from the emperor, a light more glorious than sunlight as it does not burn. For the sailors this is

<sup>17</sup> For George's depiction of the Persians see Huber 2008.

<sup>18</sup> For a psalter epigram by Georgios Pisides see Lauxtermann 2003, 202–204

<sup>19</sup> LSJ 1955. The word appears again in 2.125 when he describes military training.

<sup>20</sup> Evagr. Schol. 1.13 (p. 23); Theophyl. 2.3.4–6; 3.1.11 f.

<sup>21</sup> Leppin 2011, 287.

a spark of hope. The emperor draws closer to the stranded ship and unassumingly lends his own hand to help (*ἀντοργία*). Instantly, everyone present - even the eunuchs - join in helping and they manage to salvage the ship (1.177-220). In the next verses George describes Heraclius' excellent abilities as a helmsman not only on this occasion, but in general (221-239).

Two elements of imperial representation concur in this episode. Just like Alexander the Great or Caesar, Heraclius is a good comrade to the soldiers under his command who does not hesitate to personally participate in physical work. However, he is also – and this is more important for my argument – a figure invested with a certain degree of holiness. The light emanating from Heraclius reminds Christian readers of the transfiguration of Jesus as described in the synoptic gospels.<sup>22</sup> But the emanation of light was also connected with ascetic practices. The emperor is likened to Jesus Christ as well as to holy men.<sup>23</sup>

Yet envy, as the poet says, cannot bear the salvific power of the emperor. In a scene of the poem, envy takes the form of a stone and strikes – the emperor's toe. The blood bathes the ground as a witness of his suffering and a sign of his piety. George describes this scene in religious semantics: *βάπτειν, μάρτυς, στήγματα* are words used in this context. Again, the emperor is assimilated to Jesus and to holy men<sup>24</sup>, but the same episode leaves no doubt about his human character – given the intense Christological debates of the time, the audience must have been extremely attentive in this regard.<sup>25</sup>

The poet is sensitive in regard to theological issues: He does not depict the emperor as a priest, as had been done with some of his predecessors.<sup>26</sup> And although there is holiness in Heraclius, he definitely remains a human being. George performs a balancing act. He extols the emperor's spiritual qualities and his religious impact without investing him with a religious role that could be regarded as the expression of heretical belief.

While the emperor spends his nights praying, he uses the daytime to organize the empire and especially the army, as George illustrates repeatedly. Early on in the first book, turning to the figure of the emperor himself, he calls him the general of wise advice. The poet does not feel himself to be strong enough to describe the emperor's *πόντοι* (hard work), his *γνώμαι* (ways of thinking), *διαρέσεις* (his analytical capacities) and his *ἐντολίμα* (courage 1,46 f.). He is an extremely circumspect general who looks after everything and is respected for his military competence (2.19–24). He attends to all strategic questions and even to the supply of the troops with food (esp. 2.39–49).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, he introduces new forms of military training that, in their intensity, remind the poet of real battles (2.120–149). The emperor had found the army in bad shape, but he is able to reform it completely (2.44–48). Filled with the Holy Spirit the emperor is able to move his soldiers with his speech (2,162–177).

Repeatedly, the poet highlights that the emperor acts alone (esp. 2.163) while never neglecting anything (2.206). The Roman army does not depend on any other military leaders. In short, the emperor holds

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 17:1–9, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36; Exp. Pers. 1.191–193 seems to evoke Matth 17.2; in general, Wallraff 2010, 100–137, especially 121 f. (imperial representation); 129–129 (holy men and Christ); see also Lauxtermann 2003, 181 f.

<sup>23</sup> For the association between Heraclius and Jesus s. Meier 2015, 186–189.

<sup>24</sup> 1.239–247; Trilling 1978, 259 (*a token martyrdom*); Meier 2015, 186, footnote 145.

<sup>25</sup> For the Christological debates: Lange 2012, 531–622; Booth 2014.

<sup>26</sup> George comes close to this when he calls the emperor a herdsman in chief (*ἀρχιπόμην* 3.322).

<sup>27</sup> Pertusi 1959 as loc. interprets the *τράπεζα* mentioned in 40 as an altar, which is possible. But the context seems to invite to a more pragmatic meaning.

every virtue a general needs. Although George keeps underlining that the emperor puts his trust in God, he leaves no doubt about how the emperor's personal virtue and his intellectual capacities are decisive for the victory of the Roman troops. With all his spiritual glory the emperor is able to meet the practical needs of a ruler. The Persians, however, eschew battle (2.239–256). Their plan to make use of the night as an element of surprise is foiled by the moon, their own god, as George underlines a bit gloatingly (2.368–3.6). In consequence, Heraclius leads his troops through several brilliant tactical manoeuvres. His measures put the Roman troops in an excellent position before battle (2.257–375). The third book of the *Expeditio Persica* extensively describes the victory obtained by Heraclius against the fraudulent Persians. The emperor fights in person. He shows even more boldness than Alexander (3.48 f.)<sup>28</sup> and is covered in dust and sweat – this depiction of the imperial persona is in clear contrast to the conventional image of an emperor sitting in his palace, surrounded by splendour and aloof from anybody else.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Jesus lost sweat while praying in Gethsemane according to Luke (22.44), which again suggests closeness between the emperor and Christ. In contrast to other passages George does not mention any miracle or the icon, but praises the emperor's *νοῦς* and his *φύσις*. His strategy is the real miracle (*θαῦμα* again, 3.255). Fittingly, the troops glorify the emperor and God at the same time (3.279–281) for the victory that was unexpected and thus all the more miraculous (3.296 f.).

Everything seems to be set for the continuation of this campaign, but now the city needs the emperor and the soldiers encourage him in tears to return to Constantinople (3.314–321). In fact, the empire is under pressure by the Avars in the West. Having praised the emperor so extensively, the poet changes gear in the end: In a prayer he calls God the highest general of all (*στρατηγός*: 385) whereas Heraclius is the *ὑποστρατηγός* (401). The poet asks God to make Heraclius fearsome to his enemies. The sweat he sheds shall serve as a purification of former errors and he shall conquer passions and barbarians (3.405–410).<sup>30</sup> This passage seems to hint at his contested marriage to Martina, his own niece whom he had chosen as his second wife against the advice of clerics who reprimanded him for incest.

Christ is asked to protect the empire and to help the emperor against envy, especially against that of his descendants (3.456–461). This is an astonishingly blunt allusion to the patchwork family of the emperor who had sons from two (successive) wives.

With those verses the poem comes to an end. It is a splendid praise of the first Roman victory after a long series of defeats against the Persians and a dire warning against domestic infighting, which had unsettled the Roman Empire all too often. It is a document of an early stage of imperial representation: George does not express the desire to win back the True Cross abducted by the Persians, which was to become crucial for imperial representation later when George took the opportunity to compose a poem *In restitutionem Sanctae Crucis*.<sup>31</sup> The quote of a psalm ascribed to David (2.113–115) is not necessarily a hint at

<sup>28</sup> In other passages, the emperor is compared to Moses in his fight against the Pharaoh who is still outstripped by the Persian king when it comes to impiety (135–139; cf. 3.415–425). For a comparison with Elias compare 3.412–414.

<sup>29</sup> But see also Heracl. 1.195–206 and Hexaemeron 1853 with Ludwig 1991, 117 f.. The Dioscuri are sometimes characterised as soaked in sweat: Plut. Aem. 25.1 (the horses); Val. Max. 1.8.1 (they themselves and the horses).

<sup>30</sup> Howard-Johnston 2010, 33 f.

<sup>31</sup> Drijvers 2002, 182 f.

the emperor's depiction as a new David, which was central to his representation later on.<sup>32</sup> However, although the epos mirrors Heraclius' representation in his early years in many aspects, it is not merely part of his propaganda, as will be shown in the next paragraphs.

What is the context of this poetic description of war? One major theme is the importance of the emperor himself as a warrior. Another is the belief in the considerable relevance of immaterial resources for success in war. The emperor is the best fighter as well as the most holy man. One could ask whether one should expect anything else from a panegyric poem about the emperor. It is obvious that the *Expeditio Persica* could not but extol the virtues of the emperor, but Greco-Roman tradition offered various options for doing so. An emperor could be praised for the choosing his advisers wisely, he could be praised for his trust in priests or philosophers, he could be praised for his splendour, but Heraclius is, to put it casually, a do-it-yourself emperor.

George certainly did not avoid mentioning patriarch Sergius in order to belittle his achievements.<sup>33</sup> Rather he praises him in other poems, for example in the *Bellum Avaricum*. As a member of the patriarchal administration, George must already have been close to Sergius during the composition of the *Expeditio Persica*. Perhaps he heaped lavish praise on Heraclius in order to be able to also allude to the criticism raised by the patriarch, especially concerning the marriage with Martina. Focussing on Heraclius was a feature of poetic stylisation: George makes it very clear that God grants military success, but the emperor alone is enough to guarantee divine help; he does not need the support of religious authorities, be they monks or bishops.

George also comments on a conflict prevailing in Constantinople at the time of war which is unusual for poems of this kind. Apparently, a debate had been raging about whether the emperor should actually take to the field or stay in the city or whether something in between was possible (1.111–123).<sup>34</sup> The poet underlines that the conflicting parties had the best intentions. The debate was not a power struggle or argument between the emperor's friend or foe, it was about finding the best solution to an existential challenge. Here, George clearly defends those who were critical of Heraclius. Nevertheless, the transformation of the concept of imperial rule becomes evident. Was the emperor expected to stay in the city quietly or should he venture outside in order to quell all the dangers the empire faced?

The debate reappears under another aspect in the third book in which George describes the great victory. Two soldiers discuss the role of the emperor during wartime. They are shocked, but also impressed by the fact that the emperor takes on the physical efforts of war. In the end, they see a hero in him. The poet himself declares to be oscillating between joy and tears at this image (3.93–136). It is obvious that George does not consider the personal involvement of the emperor in combat as normal, but that he still accepts it as necessary under extreme circumstances such as those in which his intervention proved successful.

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<sup>32</sup> Trilling 1978; Ludwig 1991, 93-104; Meier 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Rather he seems to have been close to him, see for example Pertusi 1959, 13.

<sup>34</sup> See also 3,93–125. Pertusi 1959 thinks it possible to connect those concepts with various circus parties. There had been an aborted attempt of Heraclius to join the siege of Caesarea and Antioch.

The *Expeditio Persica* is an assertion of imperial power and virtue. Heraclius proves to be an excellent military leader who acts on his own initiative. Like Justinian, the emperor mediates divine help through his piety and does not depend on clerics or monks. But Heraclius goes far beyond Justinian's model by being a competent military practitioner himself and also by employing a wide range of traditional and religious resources. George rarely takes economic issues such as food supply into account (but see 2.40) although Heraclius spent a lot of energy on these problems. Thus, the importance of the emperor's character for the well-being of the empire itself takes centre stage. Everything depends on his personality, on his piety.

Let us try to look at the bigger picture. The Christianisation of warfare was a major and powerful feature of the transformation of war that took place in Late Antiquity. However, it was not a linear process, but a complex development which allowed a broad range of interpretations; Christians lacked a uniform concept of war. Many emperors interpreted the role of the Christian emperor in war quite differently than Heraclius. As mentioned earlier, Eastern rulers such as Theodosius II or Justinian, in fact almost every ruler after Theodosius I, stayed in Constantinople during times of war, offering prayers for a victory which would then be ascribed to them. The idea that emperors do not fight in war was one feature of the *urbanes Kaisertum*. The city of Constantinople was the emperor's permanent base. No emperor had left the capital for a long time and thus Heraclius represents something new.

This change did not mean the end of the *urbanes Kaisertum*, but it demonstrated an alternative. Relying on the protection of mobile religious resources, the emperor could be present everywhere and was not confined within the walls of one city. Despite the risks of his personal involvement and of his absence from the centre of power, Heraclius' involvement in warfare seemed successful for some years until things changed completely with the Arab expansion – excepting the fact that immaterial resources again proved to be a major factor during these wars.

Another important element in the discourse of war in the *Expeditio Persica* is the question of the necessary resources for warfare, the most important of which are immaterial, as has been shown. Again, this is not so unusual: Late antique literary sources usually tend to focus on individuals and questions of virtue and piety and are not intended to be systematic treatises about strategies of war. Despite this tendency towards one-sidedness, various ideas about resources in war can be identified.

In classicising historiography, military leadership is the most important resource. Belisarius for example, Justinian's famous general, is a core figure in Procopius' *Wars*. His ruses and his influence over the troops contribute heavily to military victories. Nevertheless, the historian leaves no doubt that a lack of troops and food can severely restrict the general's options. He even insinuates that the emperor is responsible for human and material resources, thus possibly inserting a critical note.

Religious resources, in the guise of divine support, are decisive on several occasions, too. They can be considered the main issue of debate about successful warfare during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to Procopius and other historiographers, divine intervention is decisive for the outcome of many battles and no military success is imaginable without divine support. But there are many differences to the depictions of Heraclius. Justinian, for example, who never actively took part in a military expedition, makes is very

clear that he does not rely on weapons, soldiers, generals or his own capacities when it comes to war, but only on God.<sup>35</sup> Although the emperor does show a certain degree of humility in that sense, he makes it unambiguously clear that he is the crucial figure on earth: He claims to be the mediator of divine help, thus relating all his successes to his possession of God's favour, and also presents himself accordingly. When Belisarius defeated the Vandals he was allowed to celebrate a triumph, but he had to walk on foot and to prostrate himself in front of the emperor. Although this kind of triumph was new, the fundamental idea goes back to the beginnings of the Principate when every victory was ascribed to the auspices of the emperor.<sup>36</sup>

Another stand of discourse on military victory had gained popularity in the periphery during the 540s; it is visible in the work of Procopius and still more in that of Evagrius Scholasticus. During those years the Persians attacked Syria forcefully while Justinian lent barely any military support. Several provincial cities that managed to fend off the Persians ascribed their success to holy icons or relics. As is well known, even pagan Romans used to carry holy objects with them during war, but they had never acquired the central position of being the explanation for military success. Whenever cities had to rely on holy objects, this highlighted the failures of the political and military elites of the Late Antique Roman Empire, which did not supply enough troops. Interestingly, holy objects that had been proved to be successful in the periphery were highly contested and were often appropriated by the centre. The icon of the Virgin Mary, another *acheiropoietos*, was regarded as decisive when Sergius and Bonus fended off the siege of Constantinople in 626. The emperor was not present during this siege, one of the dangerous results of his method of warfare. George thankfully praises Mary in the so-called *Bellum Avaricum*, which celebrates the failure of this siege (especially 1–9). He also sings to the glory of the general Bonus and the patriarch Sergius, which might be regarded as risky politically, however, the poem also acclaims the absent emperor, who gives his support by writing a letter and sending troops (246–307).

Finally, there was also a non-religious discourse on warfare. A text written during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the *Strategikon* of Pseudo-Mauricius, illustrates just how important knowledge about warfare was. It highlights the significance of military and especially strategic knowledge on how to best fight the enemies of Rome.<sup>37</sup> The text does not mention any religious resources. It is difficult to say whether this should be considered a counter discourse, but it is nevertheless possible to deduce that the question of necessary resources for war was highly contested and that our knowledge about the debates is restricted. The non-religious discourse on war must have been much more important in everyday life, especially among functional elites, than the religious discourses that dominate the literary texts.

The *Expeditio Persica* is one of the foremost sources for the discourses on warfare in Late Antiquity. The new military concept of personal imperial participation in war meant that the restriction of imperial presence to Constantinople was abandoned. If the emperor ventured outside his capital, it was in an extreme situation justified by the need to protect the empire and true faith and he was expected to return

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<sup>35</sup> *Constitutio Deo auctore Pr. ita nostros animos ad dei omnipotentis erigimus adiutorium, ut neque armie confidamus neque nostris militibus neque bellorum ducibus uel nostro ingenio, sed omnem spem ad solam referamus summae providentiam trinitatis: unde et mundi totius elementa processerunt et eorum dispositio in orbem terrarum producta est.*

<sup>36</sup> Goldbeck and Wienand 2016.

<sup>37</sup> See Koehn 2018, 121–133.

to the city, to his proper place, as soon as possible. George is aware of the ambivalences of personal engagement of the emperor in war and does not shy away from mentioning them.

The *Expeditio* assembles various ideas about the resources needed for war: The emperor as both an impressive warrior and a competent leader is the most important human resource. Religious resources, especially the icon, are also crucial for success. Weapons and economic resources are almost completely excluded from the picture. In doing so, the poet emphasises that nobody can replace the emperor or even come close to him.

This observation is within our expectations for a poem of this kind. But George goes a step further: He also reveals that there were debates on the role of the emperor and that he himself saw risks in the emperor's absence from his capital – his poem on Bonus, probably written shortly before the Perso-Avarian siege of Constantinople, is for the most part an open appeal for the emperor to return to his capital (esp. 111–113).<sup>38</sup> And he stresses that the emperor performs seemingly miraculous deeds and is favoured by God, that he is a valiant warrior and a provident general, that he is even close to Jesus in some aspects, but still remains a vulnerable human being.

In doing so, the poet, writing at a time when the Roman-Sasanian war was by no means decided, imbues his praise of the emperor's military achievements with a notable dose of scepticism which must have been widespread among the elites in Constantinople. This panegyric poem is not the work of a mere adulator, but the product of a prudent advisor. George's epos is not simply a mouthpiece of imperial propaganda, it is not a version of the official history of Heraclius' campaign<sup>39</sup>, but a contribution to the on-going debate about warfare during his reign.

It is therefore not pure coincidence that the poet seems to have received no imperial commission during the following years (and it is by no means clear that the Expedition was an imperial commission). It would be wrong to call him a court poet, as has often been done; he is but one voice in the debates on the emperor's role in war.<sup>40</sup> No doubt, a poem featuring the emperor during this time had to include some praise and glorification. However, it has become clear how George's praise of the emperor is highly nuanced. George assimilates Heraclius to Christ, but at the same time underlines the emperor's human persona. He duly praises the emperor's military achievements, but does not ignore the risks involved.

Six years after the campaign described in the *Expeditio Persica*, Sasanian king Chosroes II (590 – 628) was dead (having been overthrown and killed) after lengthy, daring, but in the end impressively successful military operations led by the emperor himself. George commemorates this event in his *Heraclius*, which arguably was comprised of three books, two of which have been preserved completely. This poem is characterised by unabated joy and relief and is in that sense a kind of tacit palinody of the *Expeditio*.

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<sup>38</sup> See Howard-Johnston 2010, 21.

<sup>39</sup> For diverging standpoints see Howard-Johnston 1994. He thinks that George wrote a history that incorporated verses as the official history. On 71 f. he suggests that there was an estrangement between emperor and poet after the composition of the *Expeditio Persica* (but see his footnote 31); Ludwig 1991, 128 calls him a *Hoffpoet*; Huber 2008 defines George as *eine Art Hofpropagandist* (163) although she is aware that his position is much more nuanced (175).

<sup>40</sup> According to Howard-Johnston 2010, 32 f. he even lost imperial favour, which is an educated guess. In contrast, Lauxtermann 2003, 38 f. believes that George served Heraclius faithfully throughout his career. 42 he calls Pisides a *court poet*, 58 even a *poet laureate at the court of Herakleios*, compare Speck 1988, 360 (*Hofdichter*).

George compares Chosroes II to the brutal oriental kings from both the classical and Hebrew tradition whereas Heraclius is obviously another, even stronger Heracles, and also represents the tradition of great Greek and Roman generals. George admonishes no one less than Plutarch to keep quiet, claiming that it does not make sense to write parallel lives of Greek and Roman generals as a biography of Heraclius would include and surpass all of them (1.110). The lengthy absence of the emperor earns him respect because he does not listen to the entreaties of his family, instead displaying a body of bronze and a heart of iron which are praiseworthy (1,173; compare. 2.144–166). The depiction of the absence of the emperor ends with an allusion to the icon from heaven, which is the real foundation of victory (1.218).<sup>41</sup> The fundamental change to warfare is beyond doubt by now. But George also writes that Heraclius is willing to dedicate some of his time to learning the theory of warfare (2.118–121; 135–42): As in the *Expediitio* the emperor possesses every virtue a general needs. The criticism George had previously taken seriously in the *Expediitio* is now no more than idle talk (2.122–126). The concept of war is the same as it was in the *Expediitio*, but by now the emperor's method of warfare seems to be vindicated.

The relief of the eastern elites about this success pervades this poem. The personal participation of the emperor and the support of God, materialised in the icon of Christ, seem to establish the Roman Empire as the effective ruler of the world.

Eight years later, a new enemy would humiliate the Roman army. We would love to know how George would have commented this change. Perhaps he was lucky enough not to see it. The generations to come were forced to experience the gruesome consequences of the idea that war could be about true religion.

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<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, George now even mentions that the icon of the Virgin Mary was crucial for Heraclius' success against Phocas, which is not mentioned in his poem on the return of Heraclius to Constantinople, again characterised with *phrikátos* (2.14).

<sup>42</sup> His ascetic behaviour at this time is compared to Elias: 2.133 f.

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