

D. G. Pleshak
(St. Petersburg State University)

REVISING THE GENRE AND THE DATE OF *IN HERACLIIUM* BY GEORGE OF PISIDIA

In Heraclium is the earliest extant poem by George of Pisidia. The poem does not contain reference to the date of its composition, nor is any external evidence present. Overall, the main assumption has been that it was written to celebrate Heraclius' ascent to the throne, after his victory in a revolt against the usurper Phocas. The two main datings are late 610 – early 611 CE, or 618 CE.

The present study shows discrepancies between the rules for the panegyric genre, which the poem is usually ascribed to, and its actual content. The main differences are absence of any reference to Heraclius' background and lack of proper treatment of Heraclius as an emperor. The article shows that all these features are present in the majority of survived verse and prose panegyrics to the emperors, whether they are in Greek or in Latin. Moreover, the poem digresses from the rules set out for an imperial panegyric by the Greek rhetorician Menander, whose recommendation George of Pisidia normally follows, as it has been shown in previous studies. Therefore, *In Heraclium* does not follow panegyric tradition of the Late Antiquity.

The article shows that *In Heraclium* is closer in its content and structure to Menander's rules for *ἐπιβατήριος λόγος*, a welcoming speech for a new governor. Therefore, it is suggested that the poem was written according to this model and treats Heraclius as an official of non-imperial rank and for this reason he is never portrayed as a supreme ruler. This image fits historical circumstances of Heraclius' raise to power. During his revolt Heraclius did not have claims for the throne and reportedly refused to be crowned as an emperor. Therefore, the poem must have been presented between his capture of the city on the 3 October 610 and his crowning two days later.

Keywords: Byzantine poetry; George of Pisidia; Heraclius.

Д. Г. Плешак
(Санкт-Петербургский гос. университет)

Пересмотр жанра и даты написания поэмы Георгия Писиды «К Ираклию»

Статья анализирует жанровые особенности поэмы Георгия Писиды «К Ираклию» и уточняет трактовку образа адресата. Выдвигается предположение, что поэма была написана по случаю свержения Фоки Ираклием, но до его коронации.

Ключевые слова: Византийская поэзия; Георгий Писида; Ираклий.

In early October 610 CE, Constantinople was in disarray. The young general Heraclius, the son of the exarch of Africa, led a fleet of military ships from Africa and took the capital on the 3rd of October. The next day the usurper Phocas, who had previously overthrown Maurice and ordered him to be killed, was deposed and decapitated. Phocas' hand was put on a stake and paraded around the Mese. On the 5th, Heraclius was crowned emperor by patriarch Sergius, who immediately conducted a marriage ceremony between the newly proclaimed emperor and his fiancée, Eudokia. These days could possibly be the time when George of Pisidia, the most notable Greek poet of the 7th century, wrote and presented his first extant poem.

To date, it has been suggested that George of Pisidia's *In Heraclium* was written as a panegyric for ruling Heraclius some time after his enthronement (Pertusi 1959: 19; Frenzo 1984: 177–178; Tartaglia 1998: 13–14; Whitby 2002: 159–161; Whitby 2003: 175). This article presents a reevaluation of the poem and suggests that it could have been written and presented as a welcoming piece for Heraclius on his arrival in Constantinople. The structure of the poem digresses significantly from the rules prescribed for panegyrics for the emperor and the main text does not in fact refer to him as a ruler. This might indicate that it should have been written at the moment when Heraclius' status was not yet clear.

The text

The full title of the poem is *On Heraclius the Emperor Who Returned from Africa and Enthroned, and against the emperor Phocas* (Πρὸς Ἡράκλειον τὸν βασιλέα ἐπανελθόντα ἀπὸ Ἀφρικῆς καὶ βασιλεύσαντα καὶ κατὰ Φωκᾶ βασιλέως), modern scholarship usually referring to it as *In Heraclium*. The relatively short text comprising 89 lines survived in a single manuscript¹. There is no external evidence of the date of its composition. The name and contents suggest that it was probably written shortly after Heraclius' takeover. This view was expressed as early as 1891 by the poem's first editor, Leo Sternbach (Sternbach 1891: 34), who placed the poem between Heraclius' takeover and spring 611. The reason for the latter are lines 21–23:

¹ *Cod. Paris. Suppl. Gr. 690*, 11th century, <https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/notices/cote/53425/>.

Μῆδοι δὲ τούτων εἰκόνες καὶ βάρβαροι,
οἳ πολλάκις ζέσαντες ἀγρίῳ τρόπῳ
τῷ σῶ κατεσβέσθησαν ἡμέρῳ λόγῳ.

‘The Medians and barbarians resembling them (the wild animals pacified by Heraclius’ eloquence) raged like wild beasts and were quenched by thine gentle word’.

Sternbach stated that it could not have been written after the Persian campaign in Syria in May 611. Later, Pertusi raised some objections to this position and dated the poem to around 618–9 (Pertusi 1959: 19), during a truce with both Persians and Avars.² Finally, Tartaglia (Tartaglia 1998: 14) gives an additional argument for earlier dating; he notes that the imperfect metre of *On Heraclius* contrasts with George’s later poems and supposes that the poet needed considerable time to improve his versification skills before composing his *Expedition persica* in the year 622.

In Heraclium and Menander the Rhetor

It has been noted that George of Pisidia was under considerable influence of Menander the rhetor (Whitby 1994: 202; Sirotenko 2014; Pleshak 2018). Scholars had mostly focused their attention on comparing George’s poems with Menander’s treatise *βασιλικὸς λόγος* (3rd century CE), which outlines the rules for composing a panegyric for an emperor. According to Menander, such a text must consist of the following parts (Men. Rh. 368–377):

I Prooimion, in which the author expresses their humility and grandeur of the topic

II The home country or the city of the emperor (*πατρίς*)

III His family (*γένος*)

IV His birth (*γένεσις*) and related miracles

V Nurture (*ἀνατροφή*) and education (*παιδεία*)

VI Accomplishments and personal qualities

VII Deeds

VII Wars and trophies

VIII Justice and lawmaking

IX Temperance

X Wisdom

XI Good fortune

XII Comparison

XIII Epilogue with description of prosperity of the cities

² For the discussion of both positions cf. (Frendo 1984:167–171).

In Heraclium can be broken down as following³:

- 1) Impossibility to express Heraclius' grandeur (1–2)
- 2) Only the narrator can handle this task (3–13)
- 3) Heraclius' pacificity (13–23)
- 4) Heraclius' all-concerning intellect and φιλανθρωπία (23–32)
- 5) Peace brought about by Heraclius (33–38)
- 6) Phocas' reign of terror (38–51)
- 7) Heraclius' accomplishments and sacrifice for the common good (51–71)
- 8) Heraclius' benevolence and expected peace (71–85)
- 9) Epilogue: the narrator suffers the defeat not being able to reach his goal (86–89)

It can be seen that the first thirteen lines of the poem follow Menander's rules for the *prooimion* of an imperial *encomion*⁴. Nevertheless, the following text digresses from the scheme and does not recount Heraclius' family and personal background (II–V of *βασιλικὸς λόγος*), but immediately starts discussing his qualities and actions (VI–VII). The only reference to his family is made in the lines 51–52:

οὐ γὰρ θαλάττης μακρὸν ἔτρεμες πόρον,
οὐδὲ πρὸς οἶκτον μητρὸς ἀνθείλκου τότε

'You did not tremble at a great sea journey,
nor were you distracted by mother's love'⁵

According to Menander, the background may be omitted if the addressee is of humble origin (*Men. Rh.* 370.12–1), but Heraclius in fact came from a very elevated family. His father, Heraclius the Elder, held the position of exarch of Africa prior to the revolt, and during Mauricius' reign he served as a general in the war with Persia⁶. Moreover, such silence is even more suspicious as it was Heraclius the Elder who initiated the revolt against Phocas.

³ Also cf. (Frendo 1984: 171–179).

⁴ On prologues in George of Pisidia cf. (Pleshak 2018).

⁵ Phocas imprisoned Heraclius' mother Epiphania in the monastery of Nea Metanoia in Constantinople (Kaegi 2003: 49). The verse may indicate that Heraclius was ready to risk his mother's life by waiting several months before the attack on the city (Pertusi 1959: 82–83).

⁶ On the portrayal of this period of his life in Theophylactos see (Whitby 1998: 231–233).

The emperor's background in panegyrics of the Late Antiquity

In order to understand whether this peculiar digression from the rules is specific only to George of Pisidia, I proceed to compare *In Heraclium* with other examples of the genre. Greek encomiastic poetry of the Late Antiquity survived in small quantities, so it will be more productive to compare it first with Latin works of the genre.

The first poet to be discussed here is Claudian, whose poem *On the Third Consulate of the Emperor Honorius* is similar to *On Heraclius* in format and size. The poem was performed on 1st January 396 for the eleven-year-old Honorius, who had been recently crowned emperor after the death of his father (Schindler 2009: 76). Due to Honorius' young age, most parts of the poem do not discuss his own deeds, but instead laud the emperor's family and the acts of his regal ancestors. Similarly, the lines 18–120 of his *On the Fourth Consulate of the Emperor Honorius* are dedicated to the recipient's γένος, while the first hundred lines of *On the Fourth Consulate of the Emperor Honorius* discuss his childhood on the Palatine and the acts of his father.

Unlike the aforementioned poems, Claudians' *On the Consulate of Stilicho* was dedicated to a person whose acts had much greater importance than his family. By the time the poem was composed, Stilicho had reached the status of the most powerful person in the empire despite his relatively modest background. Nevertheless, about sixty lines of the poem are dedicated to Stilicho's childhood and ancestors (Schindler 2009: 110–111). Another example of a poem dedicated to a general is Merobaudes' *Panegyric to Aetius*, who was a Roman general under Valentinianus. This text survived in fragments, but the extant excerpt is dedicated to the younger years and the family of the general (Schindler 2009: 173–6).

Sidonius Apollinaris gives examples of panegyrics to the emperors who did not inherit their power. This Gaulish poet of the late 5th century includes the tropes of γένος and παιδεία in his panegyrics to the emperors Maiorianus (lines 107–125), Anthemius (lines 35–207) and Avitus (lines 108–195). It must be noted that these emperors reigned in the last two turbulent decades of the Western Roman empire and none of them inherited power from their predecessors like Honorius, and Maiorianus even gained power as a result of a soldiers' revolt. Therefore, despite their issues with legitimacy and relatively low ranks of their families, Merobaudes still decided to include these topics in his poems, which is in stark contrast with *In Heraclium*.

Not all poems dedicate so much space to the emperor's background. For example, Priscian's *Laudatio Anastasii* provides a meager eight lines which refer to Anastasius' ancestral links to Pompey. It is so brief that Coyne does not see it as a mention of γένος and holds that it was a deliberate digression from Menander's prescriptions (Coyne 1988: 10–11). On the other hand, Schindler considers these lines as written in accordance with Menander's ideas (Schindler 2009: 217). Finally, Corippus does not mention any background of the emperor and describes the deeds of his protagonists right away. This can be explained by Corippus' more epic approach and therefore breaks away from the rules set for the *encomion* (Nissen 1940; Schindler 2009: 227–309).

A concern regarding Greek encomiastic poetry is that we possess only some fragments of poetry (Viljamaa 1968: 34–35), but not a single complete poem addressed to the emperor or a high official. Still, it is evident that the emperor's background was also an expected topic in such compositions. A fragmentary poem spuriously attributed to Pamperius provides some hints. It praises the Athenian official Theagenes and has a section on his γένος (Viljamaa 1968: 202).

Prosaic Greek *encomia* of Late antiquity are better represented, especially in the works of the Gaza School. Procopius of Gaza's *Encomium to Anastasius* shows adherence to Menander's rules and subsequently introduces the emperor's πατρίς and γένος (Procop. *Gaz. Enc.*, 2–3; Westberg 2010: 52–55). In the previous century, Libanius also included an account of Julian's childhood in his *encomion* (Liban. *Orat. XII* 19–41). The same topos is also found in Himerius' *Propemptic Oration to Proconsul Flavianus* (*Orat. 12*, 18; Penella 2007: 217–220). The final example is not a panegyric, but a προσφωνητικὸς λόγος (greeting speech) to the emperor Julian written for the occasion when he returned to Antioch in 362 (Ventura 2018: 403). Even in this situation, Libanius does not spare space and recounts Julian's brilliant education and philosophical studies before the enthronement (Liban. *Orat XIII*, 18–21; Pelizzari 2015: 73).

Therefore, the emperor's background was a highly expected, if not obligatory part of address to the regal person. However, this rule was not consistently applied in speeches to lesser officials. For example, Himerius' aforementioned *Orat. 12* is one of the rare speeches where he refers to the home country, family or childhood of the person.

We cannot say if omitting these *topoi* could be regarded as a sign of disrespect towards the emperor and his lowering to the rank of a common official, but it is unlikely to have passed unnoticed. If we consider Mary Whitby's suggestion that it must have been *In Heraclium* that gave a boost to George's career (Whitby 2003: 174), we can presume that the poem was received well and it did not contain any elements that might have troubled Heraclius. Subsequently, no breach of protocol, such as omitting essential *topoi*, must have occurred. These observations raise doubts if *In Heraclium* was written and recorded as an *encomion* for an emperor, or rather for a person or a lower rank.

Heraclius' portrayal and his status during the revolt

If we consider *In Heraclium* as an *encomion* to a state official, and not an emperor, we can see that there are no obvious references to the recipient's imperial status anywhere except for the title of the poem. George praises Heraclius as a person of outstanding personal qualities and as a hero who saved the Empire, but not as a ruler. The only hint at Heraclius' possible authority are the lines 76–79:

ὁ γὰρ πλάτος σοι καρδίας δωρούμενος,
ὡς πᾶσιν ἀρκεῖς μηδαμῶς στενούμενος,
δείξει κυβερνᾶν καὶ τὰ νῦν ἐκ τῆς ζάλης
πρὸς τὴν γαλήνην, ἣν ἔχεις, τὰ πράγματα

'The breadth of the heart that you were gifted
to enable you to accomplish everything without exhaustion
will show how to lead the affairs from the stormy sea
to the calm haven that you possess'

These rather elusive lines flatter Heraclius and his leading role in the revolt, but not directly name him a ruler. This is in contrast with, for instance, Priscian's treatment of Anastasius (37–39):

*Cladibus his tandem caeli rex liberat orbem,
Cum dominum (melius sed patrem dicere possum)
Praebet Anastasium tanta pietate vigintem*

'Thus the King of Heavens saved the world from such calamities
and gave the title of the lord (but I would better call him the father)
to Anastasius, who is full of piety'.

In these extracts both Heraclius and Anastasius come to save the day, but Anastasius is clearly named the lord and the father, while

Heraclius is a harbinger of change, and praised in this quality⁷. Later, George of Pisidia will not shy away from painting Heraclius as a father figure (Takács 2008: 128–134), but during the composition of this poem he deliberately abstained from it just as he abstained from speaking about Heraclius' family. Even in the much discussed beginning of the poem⁸ (“*you are above all things passing*”) he glorifies Heraclius but does not ascribe him any authority, and the degree of flattery is not superior to, say, Himerius' address to proconsul Cervonius (Himer. *Orat.* 38.9–10).

Indeed, Heraclius did not style himself as a claimant to the throne during the revolt. Instead, he was leading troops in order to depose a usurper, install legitimate rule and stop political terror (Kaegi 2003: 52). Nor was he the only candidate for the emperorship. Coins minted in the rebelling provinces portrayed him with his father, both bearing the rank of a consul. Heraclius' naval force was supported by a land army led by his cousin Niketas, who could also be seen as a potential emperor (Kaegi 2003: 42–45). This led to a situation where all three persons were confused in the later times, as evidenced by *The Armenian History* of Sebeos not distinguishing between Heraclius the Elder, his son and Niketas (Kaegi 2003: 46).

The same ambiguity followed Heraclius in Constantinople. According to a range of sources, Heraclius initially refused power and intended to return to his father to Carthage. Reportedly, he first tried to give the crown to the general Priscos, and accepted it himself only after the senate and the people elected him to the throne, but this could also be viewed as an expected sign of the emperor's humility (Kaegi 2003: 50). Regardless, the fate of Heraclius was not certain until the evening of 5th October 610, and the poem could be expressing this ambiguity of his status.

The genre of the poem

The situation of early October 610, i.e. the arrival of a non-imperial figure and coincidental change of power, roughly matches the circumstances that require reading an *ἐπιβατήριος λόγος*. It is supposed to be delivered for a newly appointed governor coming to the city (Menander 381.23–26). The layout is the following (Menander 378–381):

⁷ Heraclius is also called *δέσποτα*, but this is usual address to a general. Cf. *Procop. Bell.* 1.9.8

⁸ Cf. Frendo 1984: 171–173.

- I) The new governor's arrival causes universal happiness
- II) Citizens' misfortune under the old governor
- III) Important actions or, if there are none, his origins
- VI) Peace brought by him
- VII) Virtues
- VIII) Wisdom
- IX) Comparison with previous governors
- X) Epilogue with greetings

Overall, the structure of *ἐπιβατήριος λόγος* resembles that of the imperial panegyric, but has two main differences. First, mentioning the background of the addressee is optional, and a study by Slootjes shows that it is not present in a number of extant speeches (Slootjes 2006: 113). Menander also strongly recommends the topos of misfortunes under the previous ruler. Both these features are present in *In Heraclium* along with all other topics required for *ἐπιβατήριος λόγος*. Therefore, the poem could have been written with this model in mind. Also, if *In Heraclium* is a finished work in the genre of *ἐπιβατήριος λόγος*, we can dismiss Frenndo's suggestion that the poem is not an independent piece but was composed as a prologue to a large hexametrical poem and later restyled as a separate work.

Conclusion

Digressions in the form and content of *In Heraclium* from a typical panegyric for an emperor may suggest that the poem could have been written as a speech on arrival in the time when it was not yet clear that Heraclius would be crowned emperor. This allows one to date the poem between Heraclius' landing on the 3rd October and the crowning ceremony on the 5th. It seems even more plausible considering George of Pisidia's improvisation skills (Whitby 2003: 176 n. 18). Alternatively, the poem could have been written in the month before the final assault, when Phocas was losing popularity, and Heraclius was gathering support in his camp on the coast of the Sea of Marmara. The title that suggests the imperial status of Heraclius could have been added later. Nevertheless, this theory does not provide a definite solution to the problem of the lines 51–52, as we know nothing of Heraclius' talks with Persians during his rebellion (Kaegi 2003: 41).

Bibliography

- Claudianus, C. 1922: *Claudian, with an English translation by Maurice Platnauer*. London: W. Heinemann.
- Coyne, P. 1988: *Priscian's hymn to Atasthasias*. PhD dissertation. Hamilton: McMaster University.
- Frendo, J. D. C. 1984: The Poetic Achievement of George of Pisidia. A Literary and Historical Study. In: A. Moffatt (Ed.), *Maistor. Classical, Byzantine and Renaissance Studies for Robert Browning*. Canberra.
- Kaegi, W. 2003: *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*. Cambridge.
- Menander. 1981: *Menander Rhetor*. Ed. Russel D. A., Wilson N. G. Oxford.
- Nissen, Th. 1940: Historisches Epos und Panegyrikos in der Spätantike. *Hermes*, 75(3), 298–325.
- Omissi A. 2018: *Emperors and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire. Civil War, Panegyric, and the Construction of Legitimacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pantelia, M. C. (Ed.). *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*© Digital Library. University of California, Irvine. <http://www.stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>
- Pelizzari, A. 2015: Testimonianze di un'amicizia: il carteggio fra Libanio e Giuliano. In: Marcone, A. (ed.). *L'imperatore Giuliano: realtà storica e rappresentazione*. Milano: Mondadori, 65–86.
- Penella, R. J. 2007: *Man and the Word. The Orations of Himerius*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pertusi, A. 1959. *Poemi di Giorgio di Pisidia, Panegirici Epici: ed. critica, traduzione e commento a cura di Agostino Pertusi*. Ettal: Buch-Kunstverlag.
- Pleshak, D. G. 2018: Prologues in the works by George of Pisidia. *Indoevropskoe yazykoznanie i klassicheskaya filologiya* [Indo-European linguistics and classical philology], 22, 1021–1031.
- Плешак Д. Г. 2018: Зачины в поэмах Георгия Писиды. *Индоевропейское языкознание и классическая филология* 22, 1021–1031.
- Schindler, C. 2009: *Per carmina laudes: Untersuchungen zur spätantiken Verspanegyrik von Claudian bis Coripp*. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde. Berlin, New-York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Sidonius. 1936: Ed. W. B. Anderson, Cambridge/Mass.-London.
- Sirotenko, A. D. 2014: [Menander and Pisida: on the question of the image of emperor Herclius]. *Vizantiyskiy vremennik*. Сиротенко, А. Д. 2014: Менандр и Писиды: к вопросу об изображении императора Ираклия. *Византийский Временник* 73, 62–72.
- Slootjes, D. 2006: *The Governor and his Subjects in the Later Roman Empire, History and Archaeology of Classical Antiquity*. Leiden; Boston: Brill.
- Sternbach, L. 1891: Georgii Pisidiae carmina ineditae. *Wiener Studium* XIII, 51–68.
- Takács, S. 2008. *The Construction of Authority in Ancient Rome and Byzantium. The Rhetoric of Empire*. Cambridge.

- Tartaglia, L. 1998: *Carmi di Giorgio Pisida*. A cura di Luigi Tartaglia. Torino.
- Ventura, G. 2018. «Is it possible to control the crowd»? Libanius in defense of Julian and against the population of Antioch in the 4th century. *Heródoto*, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v. 3, n. 1, 394–412.
- Viljamaa, K. 1968: *Studies in Greek Encomiastic Poetry of the Early Byzantine Period*. Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum. Vol. 41.
- Westberg, D. 2010: *Celebrating with Words: Studies in the Rhetorical Work of the Gaza School*. PhD Dissertation. Uppsala.
- Whitby, M. 1994: A New Image for a New Age: George of Pisidia on the Emperor. Heraclius. In: Dabrowa, E. (ed.). *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East*. Cracow, 197–226
- Whitby, M. 2002: George of Pisidia's Presentation of the Emperor Heraclius and his Campaigns: Variety and Development. In: G. J. Reinink, B. H. Stolte (eds.). *The reign of Heraclius (610–641): crisis and confrontation*. Leuven: Peters.
- Whitby, M. 2003: George of Pisidia and the persuasive word: words, words, words... In E. Jeffreys (ed.), *Rhetoric in Byzantium*. Ashgate, 173–186.
- Whitby, M. 1988: *The Emperor Maurice and his Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.