The Near-Death of Eastern Rome (610–626): A Problem of Interpretation

The Eastern Roman Military Disaster of the 610s: A Problem of Interpretation

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The last Roman-Persian War of 603–628 AD—initially a small-scale conflict in the border regions— escalated into a world war, rocking the entire *oikoumene* in late antiquity. Underscoring its Eurasian scale and global repercussions, James Howard-Johnston describes this conflict as a pivotal turning point in Eastern Roman history.[[1]](#footnote-1) As the Persian Shah was determined to continue fighting until the Roman Empire was annihilated, it became a war of survival for the latter.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Most of the war, save its final years, did not go well for the Romans. Over the course of a few years, the Empire suffered numerous military debacles, including the fall of the holy city of Jerusalem in 614. These defeats led to a more than decade-long occupation of most of the Roman East by the Persians.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Military disasters of this magnitude were inherently dangerous for the late Roman *politeia* because they stood in stark contradiction to the ideological concept of victory on which this political community had been founded. Its supreme leader, the *imperator*, initially a military commander, had to win battles and triumph over opponents; otherwise, his right to rule could be questioned.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Emperor Heraclius, who usurped the throne in 610,[[5]](#footnote-5) faced both the challenges of the ongoing Persian war and domestic military unrest.[[6]](#footnote-6) Operating within the conceptual framework of his times, he needed to tilt the balance of the war in his favor in order to be considered a legitimate ruler. The fact that he did not manage to do so until his final Persian campaign in 627 posed a major interpretative challenge for his contemporaries.

This chapter examines the Eastern Roman reception of the most difficult period of the war, from approximately 610 to 626, when it appeared likely that the Empire would fall. It delves into how people from the Roman East perceived the military and sociopolitical disaster resulting from the Persian conquest of their region, the explanatory models they employed to interpret them, and the way in which perspectives on this difficult period shifted in later times.

The primary sources for this study are Eastern Roman texts of various genres composed primarily in Greek by Chalcedonian authors between the early seventh and late twelfth centuries.

# Strategies of Interpretation

## Public Sentiment In Troubled Times

Searching for immediate reactions to the troubled times of the 610s and early 620s, we first turn our attention to non-intentional accounts, that is, to those that describe the times in which they were written, but make no attempt to explain them.

Our first source is the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*. Based in Galatia (central Asia Minor), Theodore was initially a hermit but then became the abbot of the monastery of Sykeon, and finally the bishop of Anastasioupolis. He had a long life, witnessing the reign of six emperors, from Justinian I to Heraclius I, and died in 613.

The *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* was written by one of his disciples, the monk Georgios.[[7]](#footnote-7) The text was composed over roughly three decades. Begun during Theodore’s lifetime,[[8]](#footnote-8) it was completed only after 641 as it contains Theodore’s prophecy that Heraclius would reign for 30 years.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This text stands out primarily for its description of the everyday life of ordinary people outside the capital in the transitional period between the economically and politically stable dynasty of Justinian, and the unstable and tumultuous times following the overthrow of Emperor Maurice in 602. It is also an unusual source in that we lack other contemporary hagiographical accounts from Anatolia.

The *Life of Theodore* contains references to the well-developed economy and financial system of Asia Minor under Justinian’s successors at a time when harvests were rich, the monetary economy stable, and urban life flourishing.[[10]](#footnote-10)

However, as the narrative progresses through time, it contains ever more sections that reflect social anxiety, fear, spiritual tension, and intermittent panic.[[11]](#footnote-11) According to the norms of the times, such feelings were often expressed in a theological manner, namely, with the belief in the omnipresence of demons eager to harm Christians in every possible way. It is therefore unsurprising that St. Theodore’s primary activity was performing exorcisms.[[12]](#footnote-12) Demons are everywhere, the text claims; they possess not only humans but even animals, including a she-camel.[[13]](#footnote-13) According to the *Life*, St. Theodore was a successful exorcist, always victorious in his battle against evil.

Theodore’s reaction to the events of Heraclius’ earliest regnal years is clear. The saint was deeply concerned about the future. He had enjoyed good relations with Emperor Phocas, openly disapproved of Heraclius's overthrow of Phocas in 610,[[14]](#footnote-14) and foresaw subsequent years filled with misery, widespread bloodshed, the tribulations of war, foreign rule, apostasy among Christians, the “Empire’s fall” (τῆς βασιλείας πτῶσιν), and the specter of the Antichrist.[[15]](#footnote-15) Among his deep concerns were the calamities of the ongoing Persian war. When, in 611, the monks of his monastery learned of the Persian capture of Caesarea in neighboring Cappadocia and feared a potential assault on their region, Abbot Theodore apparently “reassured” them that neither such an invasion nor the miseries associated with it would occur before his death.[[16]](#footnote-16) He passed away shortly afterwards, on April 22, 613. Until that point, his homeland remained at peace. Nonetheless, the large-scale Persian invasion of Anatolia took place just two years later.

The perspective of the *Life of Theodore*’s author on recent history is that of an observer, who recalls the peace and stability associated with the reigns of the pious emperors of the past while witnessing the steadily deteriorating sociopolitical situation of the present and harboring only the gloomiest expectations about the future. Noteworthy is his deep conviction that the starting point of all the disasters destined to befall the Christian Romans was Heraclius’ violent ascent to power. It is this event that paved the way for a never-ending stream of disasters that was expected to culminate in the Apocalypse. The calamities of the Persian war were only a link in the chain of events leading to this gloomiest of ends.

Another contemporary hagiographic source is the *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*,which encompasses a substantial assortment of texts by various, often anonymous authors from the late sixth to the late seventh century that were preserved by St. Demetrios. All the texts discuss the fate of the city of Thessaloniki. Pertinent to our discussion here are the three accounts in the second narrative in Paul Lemerle's edition of the text. These consist of eyewitness accounts of the two Avar-Slavic sieges of Thessaloniki and the fire at the city’s Basilica of St. Demetrios. Although their authorship is unclear, they were most likely composed between 615 and 620 by an ecclesiastical author in the entourage of John, the archbishop of Thessaloniki.[[17]](#footnote-17) As Lemerle notes, the author must have relied not only on his memory but also on written sources.[[18]](#footnote-18) The events described in the accounts took place roughly in this period.

What is important here is that the city of Thessaloniki—as is clear from these accounts—had to rely exclusively on its own resources to defend itself from external foes. The three accounts refer to Emperor Heraclius only once. The context of this reference is noteworthy, however, as the author tells us that the Emperor knew nothing about the Avars’ preparation for the great siege of Thessaloniki in 618, and that even the Eparch, whom he had sent to Thessaloniki, only learned of the siege after arriving at the port in the middle of the battle.[[19]](#footnote-19) We do not know of any military reinforcements sent by central authorities to help the city withstand either the Slav attack of 614 or the joint Avar-Slav assault of 618.[[20]](#footnote-20) Thessaloniki was totally on its own in this battle, obedient to its Archbishop John and relying, according to our pious author, exclusively on the help of Demetrios, the city’s patron saint.

The absence of any central authority at major events such as the two sieges of Thessaloniki may strike us as astonishing.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, the failure of Roman intelligence to alert the Emperor of the impending attacks on Thessaloniki, as well as the crushing failure of the Roman military to repel the Persian assault in the East in 610–619, probably led to a deadlock in which Heraclius lost control over the situation within the Empire. This forced local authorities, such as Archbishop John, to take charge.

By 626, when the Avars and Slavs felt confident enough to attack the imperial capital, things were better. By now Heraclius commanded a strong military force, a significant part of which he was able to send to Constantinople to aid the defenders. As for himself, he decided to stay in the South Caucasus, where he was in the process of forming a coalition against the Persians. This was a tough decision that eventually proved to be immensely beneficial to the Empire but was met with dissatisfaction from broad segments of the capital's population—a fact not concealed even by Heraclius’ encomiast, George of Pisidia.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Although the capital was well-defended, all eyewitnesses of the Avar-Slav attack on Constantinople in the summer of 626 insist in their accounts that the capital was saved solely by the intervention of the Virgin Mary, who sank the Slavic boats in the Golden Horn.[[23]](#footnote-23)

To sum up, public sentiment was largely pessimistic throughout the difficult period of 610–626. It ranged from disappointment at the incompetence of central authorities, including Heraclius, to the firm belief that the task of protecting the Empire from external enemies had now shifted to the locals. One might add that in some cases the shock and trauma resulting from the misfortunes of the *politeia* led to the anticipation of the imminent fall of the Empire and the end of the world. For many contemporaries, the sole glimmer of hope lay in their belief in divine power, which they felt would assist the Empire in its most bitter need. And in their view, these did assist.

All other accounts of the troubled years between 610 and 626, which we cover in this chapter, are what we call intentional, that is, they deal with the subject consciously and try to explain it in some way. Let us first turn our attention to the discourse on divine punishment.

## Divine Punishment For Sins

For Eastern Roman observers, divine punishment presented an easy and convenient way to explain uncomfortable or problematic events, past or present. As a historical-theological interpretation, it read the tremendous Persian success of the 610s as God's punishment for the sins committed by the inhabitants of the Empire.

This form of explanation goes back to Old Testament models and could be regarded as typical of monotheistic thinkers who sought evidence of God's impact on the lives of individuals and communities throughout history. A crucial aspect of this perspective is that the responsibility for the military debacles befalling any community is not shifted to some outside figure or externalized, but rather is accepted or internalized.[[24]](#footnote-24) In the case of the Eastern Romans, this line of reasoning proceeds as follows: We Christian Romans have sinned as a community and thus invoked the wrath of God on our society, as is manifest in our military defeats and subsequent domination by a foreign power.

This mode of interpretation is typical primarily of Eastern Roman texts that date to the difficult period in question, the 610s and early 620s. “Because of our sins”, “due to our sinfulness (ἁμαρτία),” the fall of Jerusalem occurred in 614[[25]](#footnote-25) and Alexandria in 619.[[26]](#footnote-26) Such was the prevalent opinion among Eastern Romans of the time. A preacher who witnessed the Avar-Slav siege of Constantinople in 626 declared shortly afterward that “due to the multitude of our sins,” we could have been the reason for the destruction of “this great city.” God, however, had mercy on us and saved us from the hands of non-believers.[[27]](#footnote-27) Another witness of the siege, the court poet George of Pisidia, explicitly states that it was not “ barbaric deceit” that “attacked” us, but rather “our inherent sinfulness.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

According to Greek contemporaries, in all these cases the military debacles suffered by the Empire could not be credited to the strength of its “barbaric” enemies, but rather to the sins committed by all the citizens of the Empire. The Persians, Avars, and Slavs were merely instruments of divine wrath invoked upon the Empire.

However, none of the contemporaries mentioned here specify what were the sins that warranted such severe punishment. The discourse refers to these mostly in the general sense, laying blame, for example, on the “great variety and multiplicity of our sins” (τῶν ἡμετέρων ἁμαρτημάτων τὸ πολυμερὲς καὶ πολύτροπον), “evil deeds” (κακίας), and unworthy public behavior,[[29]](#footnote-29) without, however, clarifying the precise nature of this unworthiness.

I know of no instances in which this interpretative model was employed in Byzantine historiographical works of later times. Middle Byzantine historiographers seem reluctant to reflect on the “sins” of their community, especially if these had occurred centuries earlier and were thus no longer relevant. Moreover, when viewed from the perspective of later centuries, the military and sociopolitical disasters of the first decades of Heraclius' reign are entirely overshadowed by his rapid military success in 627–628. Therefore, it made little sense for the historiographers of these later periods to delve into accounts of difficult-to-explain defeats of the distant past, all the more so as the war in question eventually culminated in what they saw as a victory.

## Divine Punishment For Internal Strife

With the assassination of Emperor Maurice in 602, a long peaceful epoch of Eastern Roman history came to a close. At this point, the Empire had enjoyed 130 years of internal tranquility with no violent transitions of power or internecine warfare since the late fifth century.[[30]](#footnote-30) Citizens perceived the peaceful transfer of power as a standard component of social order (τάξις), an indication of special divine favor, and associated this stability with the ongoing Christianization of the Empire.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The following decade (602–613), which included the reign of Phocas and the rise of Heraclius—both of whom began their reigns as usurpers—stands in stark contrast to the preceding era. At least six revolts or conspiracies took place over these ten years, along with an outright civil war between Phocas and Heraclius in 608–610.[[32]](#footnote-32)

It is clear that most Eastern Romans of the time did not perceive these conflicts as symptoms of some kind of disturbance of the social order, and even fewer drew a causal connection between them and the subsequent military catastrophe that befell the Empire. An explicitly historical-theological connection between the bloodshed within the Empire and the devastating Persian conquest—a connection we might expect from the theologically-driven Eastern Roman interpreters of the time—can be found in only one contemporary source, a homiletic text on the fall of Jerusalem in 614 and commonly attributed to Antiochos Strategios, a monk of the first half of the seventh century who lived in the Lavra of St. Sabbas in Palestine. However, as Howard-Johnston convincingly demonstrates, the text actually consists of a collection of homiletic reports written by various authors between 614 and 630.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Recounting the fall of Jerusalem and the suffering of its Christian inhabitants, these homilies attempt to provide a historical-theological explanation for the calamities. In doing so, they fall back on the common trope of generic “human sins,” but also mention specific ones that called down divine retribution so severe that it destroyed the Holy City.

One homily, for example, claims that “It is for this reason that God inflicted devastation upon us and delivered us into the hands of our enemies: because the wickedness of the Greens and Blues multiplied, and their impurities, licentiousness, and adultery exceeded all bounds.”[[34]](#footnote-34) This unknown homilist provides more specific information on the wickedness of these two factions (the Blues and the Greens), which, he states, came “from outside,” settled in Jerusalem, and “indulged in bloodshed and killings,” with “constant strife and murder prevailing among them.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

Speaking of mutual bloodshed, the Strategios collection recounts the state-led repression of the insurgent Greens in Antioch, which, it claims, far exceeded the limits of reason. Bonosos, the *comes Orientis* who led the military punitive expedition to Antioch in 609,[[36]](#footnote-36) was, according to the author, the epitome of evil. “Filled with all forms of impiety,” he took the lives of “tens of thousands” of innocent people, destroyed cities, desecrated holy churches, and, in return for these acts, earned eternal punishment in the darkest depths of hell.[[37]](#footnote-37)

What seems important to emphasize here is that the said homilist, while characteristically seeking theological explanations for history to make sense of the deeply distressing events of his time, did not simply repeat the conventional tropes about “human sins.” Instead, he genuinely tried to identify the problems within his society. He also did not shy away from pinpointing the failures of the Empire.

Although introspective interpretations, such as those found in the Strategios collection, were not widespread at the time, they outlived this unstable and challenging period by several decades. As late as the early eighth century, memories of the bloody internal conflicts of 602-613 remained vivid. In the parables of the Sinai monk Anastasios, for example, all the sins of the Empire’s citizens in the previous century are personified in the Demote. Anastasios constructs his parable as follows: In a morally degenerate city lived a wicked and corrupt Demote who joined a monastery, but continued to engage in nefarious activities. Eventually, he was elected the city's bishop. This happened, however—as an angel sent by God notes in Anastasios' account—because “this city [was] worthy of such a bishop.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Anastasios thus implies that the sinful citizens of the Empire deserved their rulers, particularly the “tyrant” Phocas, at the time. According to Anastasios, however, Bonosos exceeded all conceivable limits of repression and therefore came to be called “executioner” (ὁ δήμιος).[[39]](#footnote-39) In other words, neither the civil unrest nor the state’s excessive suppression of fellow citizens was forgotten a century later.

## Silence

Omission was a tactic used primarily by authors who had been closely aligned with Emperor Heraclius and had personally experienced the catastrophic period of the 610s. Unable to hold their ruling patron accountable for the military disaster, many, at least in their writings, seemed to resort to the only other option: omitting all mention of these unsettling events.

So, for example, when recounting Persian successes, the Paschal Chronicle only mentions the fall of Jerusalem in 614 and the advance of the Persian general Shahen to Chalcedon[[40]](#footnote-40) without acknowledging the loss and roughly fifteen-year-long Persian occupation of Roman Syria, Egypt, Northern Mesopotamia, and significant parts of Asia Minor. One could argue that this source is more of a city chronicle whose primary aim is to document events directly affecting Constantinople.[[41]](#footnote-41) However, since it reports the halt in public bread distribution in Constantinople in 618, one might expect a contextual explanation for this highly distressing action, which certainly affected the capital's inhabitants. Yet, none is provided.[[42]](#footnote-42) The reason behind it—the loss of nearly all of Egypt by that year (save Alexandria, which capitulated only in 619)—was apparently deeply painful for a loyal citizen of the Empire.

The Constantinopolitan deacon, poet, and panegyrist George of Pisidia was a master of omission. A cleric and court poet, he lived and worked in the capital throughout this entire tumultuous period. Yet, between 613 and 622, he wrote nothing about contemporary military or political events.[[43]](#footnote-43) In this period, he did not dedicate a single poem to Heraclius, as he often had before and would afterward. We may thus conclude that due to the absence of any current reason to praise the reigning, George chose not to invent one and focused instead on other subjects.

## Distortion

The panegyrics written by George of Pisidia in 613 and after 622 effectively reinterpret some recent events so that they glorify the reigning emperor, as befits the genre. To cite just a few examples, the author significantly transforms the bloody overthrow of one usurper by another in 610, Heraclius' largely unsuccessful second Persian campaign of 622, and the Avar and Slav attack on the capital in 626. More specifically, he turns the upheaval of 610 into Heraclius’ “liberation” of the Empire from the “tyranny” of Phocas,[[44]](#footnote-45) portrays the 622 campaign, largely a retreat by the imperial army from the Persians, as a highly victorious endeavor by Heraclius,[[45]](#footnote-46) and presents the unsuccessful Avar and Slav assault on Constantinople as the utter annihilation of these barbarians by the power of the Virgin Mary, who, in the guise of an unseen warrior, comes to defend her city.[[46]](#footnote-47)

## Refraining From Judgment

One common trait of Middle Byzantine chronographic writing is that it is quite concise and largely unjudgmental when it comes to describing the military defeats that occurred under the rule of pious emperors.

Such is the case with the *Chronographia* of Theophanes, written in Constantinople in the early ninth century, and later a highly influential historiographical text.

Theophanes’ typical schema for portraying the Empire's defeats in 610-622 lies in presenting a laconic list of the cities and territories captured by the Persians. It usually follows the formula: “In this year, the Persians captured…” (Τούτῳ τῷ ἔτει παρέλαβον οἱ Πέρσαι…) followed by a direct object indicating the specific region or city lost.[[47]](#footnote-49) The reasons behind the Persians’ significant successes are usually not included. It is in this laconic manner that Theophanes covers year after year of Heraclius’ reign until reaching the *Annus Mundi* 6113 (AD 622), which opens another thematic section of his historiographical narrative, namely, the one devoted to Heraclius’ military campaigns against Persia, which is totally different in style. Its sole hero is Heraclius, whose military exploits the author seeks to glorify.[[48]](#footnote-50)

Theophanes’ text set the trend for how Heraclius's reign would be depicted in historiographical records thereafter. His treatment of the Empire’s military defeats was likewise influential. Theophanes’ restraint from passing judgment while offering only laconic remarks on the Empire’s defeats was adopted by subsequent chroniclers. Indeed, the accounts by Georgios Monachos, John Zonaras, and others repeat his view on the events in question with minimal variation.[[49]](#footnote-51)

# Search for Culprits: Heraclius, Phocas, or the Jews?

## Heraclius

To explicitly hold Emperor Heraclius accountable for the military and sociopolitical disaster of his early reign required considerable courage from his contemporaries, and intellectual honesty as well as access to diverse sources from later historians.

Our earliest evidence of this stance lies in the *Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon*, which contains an intriguing account that subtly reveals its monastic author's disapproval of Heraclius. It also recounts Emperor Heraclius' personal participation in the 613 campaign and his personal encounter with St. Theodore.[[50]](#footnote-52)

The *Life* tells us that in March 613, while en route to Antioch with his army, Emperor Heraclius passed by the monastery in which St. Theodore resided and sought the saint's blessing.[[51]](#footnote-53) St. Theodore prayed for Heraclius and offered him blessed apples, bread, and wine. “As if he was in great haste” (ὡς διὰ πολλὴν σπουδὴν), Heraclius declined the gifts, suggesting that he would pick them up on his return from the East. Hinting at his imminent departure for another world, the saint warned the emperor that he might not find them on his return. All the same, Heraclius departed without accepting the offerings. The *Life* then cites St. Theodore's words:

Had [Heraclius] accepted [the gifts], it would have been a testament to his victory, and he would have returned joyfully. But the fact that he left them behind is a sign of our defeat.[[52]](#footnote-54)

Contemporary observers could only have perceived an episode in which the Christian Emperor declines the blessing of the saint as a sharp critique of the ruler. Not only does the *Life* present Heraclius as acting impiously—the gravest accusation its author could levy against the legitimacy of his reign[[53]](#footnote-55)—but it also implies that his transgression had profound consequences on the entire Empire. Heraclius did not suffer merely one defeat near Antioch in spring 613, as the saint had effectively predicted, but over the next nine years, until 622, had to watch the Persians occupy virtually the entire Roman East without the ability to launch even a minor counterattack.[[54]](#footnote-56) In other words, Georgios, St. Theodore’s disciple and the author of his *Life*, was accusing Emperor Heraclius of bringing God's wrath upon the Empire through his irreverent act, as was manifest in the Persian conquest.

This critical passage can be explained in several ways. First, the friendly relations between St. Theodore and Phocas, as well as between him and the latter’s nephew, the *patricius* and *curapalates* Domentziolus, are known, thanks to some passages in the *Life*.[[55]](#footnote-57) St. Theodore even saved Domentziolus’ life by petitioning Heraclius on his behalf shortly after the coup d’état of 610.[[56]](#footnote-58) The hagiographical passage about Heraclius’ refusal of the blessed gifts could thus be regarded as an expression of St. Theodore’s disapproval of his violent overthrow of Phocas.

Second, one could presume that this particular critical passage was written early in the reign of Heraclius before he dismissed Phocas as the “mythical source of all evil.”[[57]](#footnote-59) Third, the view presented here could be attributed to the fact that the *Life of Theodore* was composed in a monastic community far from the capital that was scarcely touched by the dominant propaganda and that it was completed only after Heraclius' death.

Hints of Heraclius's responsibility for the Empire's misfortunes in 610–626 can also be discerned in the panegyric poems of George of Pisidia. For instance, in his *Expeditio Persica*, devoted to glorifying the emperor’s second Persian campaign of 622 and penned shortly thereafter, George refers to “our most grave situation,” expressing hope for significant improvement.[[58]](#footnote-60) This can be interpreted as a call to Heraclius to take greater initiative in military and political affairs. In another poem, addressed to *patricius* Bonus and written on the eve of the Avar-Slav siege of Constantinople in the summer of 626, George of Pisidia refers to certain “missteps” (σφαλμάτων) by Heraclius, suggesting that he deserves leniency and understanding since, having fought in person against the Persians, he has sweated “for everybody.” [[59]](#footnote-61)

Criticism of Heraclius for the military debacles of his early reign is even less common in Middle Byzantine historiography. Nicephorus, the Patriarch of Constantinople (806–815) and a historiographer, occasionally levels harsh criticism at Heraclius,[[60]](#footnote-63) most likely drawn from an earlier source critical of the emperor. Nonetheless, his general tone towards the emperor remains largely amiable.[[61]](#footnote-64) He does not lay responsibility for the defeats of 610–622 on Heraclius alone but splits it somewhat equally between the latter and the “tyrant” Phocas, whom he blames for damaging and weakening the Christian-Roman polityinternally. He holds Heraclius accountable simply for not rectifying the deteriorating situation quickly enough.[[62]](#footnote-65)

All in all, however, the contemporary as well as later evidence of Eastern Romans’ holding Heraclius accountable for the military and sociopolitical disaster of his early reign is quite meager. Something was always missing—be it courage, intellectual honesty, or access to a variety of sources.

## Phocas

By contrast, it was far more common for Eastern Roman texts, especially later ones, to attribute the responsibility for the military and sociopolitical disaster of the first decade and a half of Heraclius's reign to his predecessor Phocas.

Holding Phocas accountable for Heraclius’ failures reveals the desire to externalize guilt and responsibility by searching for a scapegoat.[[63]](#footnote-66) Historically speaking, Phocas had little to do with the catastrophe of the 610s, except in one respect: the war against Persia, which Heraclius had been unable to manage in his early years in power, began under his reign. Nonetheless, as a contemporary Syrian chronicle testifies, the Euphrates marked the boundary between the two superpowers until 610, the final year of Phocas’ rule.[[64]](#footnote-67) This means that until the internal war against the rebel Heraclius began depleting his military resources, Emperor Phocas managed to keep the situation at the Persian front under control. However, once the Persians realized that this internecine conflict had sufficiently weakened the Roman Empire, they seized the moment, rapidly crossed the Euphrates, and launched a major offensive in Roman Syria.[[65]](#footnote-68)

The Empire lost only a few important cities during Phocas's reign: Dara,[[66]](#footnote-69) Amida,[[67]](#footnote-70) and Edessa.[[68]](#footnote-71) Antioch, Apamea, and Emesa fell to the Persians only in October 610, shortly after Phocas was overthrown and Heraclius had already ascended to the throne. It was not his contemporaries, but much later authors who began blaming Phocas for the loss of the Roman East to Persia. To make this claim convincing, they manipulated chronology.

In the early ninth century, for example, the chronicler Theophanes wrote that in the final two years of Phocas' reign, the Persians not only crossed the Euphrates (which does align with historical reality), but also captured “all of Syria, Palestine, Phoenicia” (πᾶσαν τὴν Συρίαν καὶ Παλαιστίνην καὶ Φοινίκην ᾐχμαλώτευσαν), Galatia and Paphlagonia, and even “advanced as far as Chalcedon”![[69]](#footnote-72)

Moreover, when writing about the second year of Heraclius's reign, i.e., 611/612 AD, Theophanes records that:

the Avars devastated Europe, and the Persians conquered all of Asia, captured several cities, and annihilated the Roman army in battles. [Heraclius], upon witnessing all this, did not know what to do.[[70]](#footnote-73)

This presents a picture of a ruler's utter powerlessness in the face of an empire-wide catastrophe. Strangely, in Theophanes's account, it is not the powerless Heraclius, but rather his predecessor Phocas who is depicted as responsible for the aforementioned disaster. Theophanes achieves this impression by deliberately altering chronology and claiming that the Persians had already conquered all of the Roman East by 612, not 620 when this finally came to pass.[[71]](#footnote-74) Theophanes positions this remark early in his text to suggest that the catastrophe was more a consequence of Phocas's policies than a result of the incompetence of the early Heraclius.

One of the most striking examples of such deliberate chronological distortion can be found in the following passage from Theophanes' *Chronographia*. In this case, we can confidently identify the source and the changes made to it:

And [Heraclius] conducted a census of the army to find out if anyone was still alive who had revolted with Phocas against Maurice for his tyranny, and found only two in the entire army.[[72]](#footnote-75)

Theophanes places this information on the census of the army in the second regnal year of Heraclius (611/612 AD), immediately after the just discussed passage about Heraclius' confusion. As a result, the unprepared reader will perceive the entire episode as the innocent emperor’s direct response to the messy military-political situation left by his predecessor.

Theophanes took the above passage from an older historiographical work, namely, that of the Theophylact Simocatta. Simocatta composed his *History* in Constantinople in the 620s and early 630s, focusing mostly on the reign of Emperor Maurice (582–602), but with occasional references to later events.[[73]](#footnote-76)

Simocatta’s passage on the army census contains a different time reference. According to him, the census took place “when Emperor Heraclius marched against Rhahzadh.”[[74]](#footnote-77) Heraclius’ march against the Persian General Rahzadh (Ῥαζάτης in Greek sources) is securely dated to late autumn 627. The census of the troops would have been taken shortly before that. The Emperor’s march against Rahzadh marked the final stage of his invasion of Mesopotamia, which culminated in the Battle of Nineveh on December 12th, 627, in which the Persian army was defeated and Rahzadh himself fell.[[75]](#footnote-78) This, in turn, led to the flight of the Persian Shah Khusro II, his overthrow by his son Kavad Shiroe in February 628, and eventually, to the end of the war and the Romans’ advantage.

In other words, Theophanes’ shift of the moment of the army census from 627 to 611/612 changes not only the context but also the meaning of the passage. Simocatta’s intent, arising from his high regard for Emperor Maurice, was to demonstrate that the entire “treacherous” army that had rejected this Emperor and supported the usurper Phocas, had perished as time passed. This is not at all surprising, as a quarter of a century, that is, an entire generation, separated 602, the year of the army’s revolt, and 627, the year of this census.

By changing the time reference and integrating the altered fragment into his entry on the second regnal year of Heraclius (611/612 AD) in the *Chronographia*, Theophanes generated new meaning, implying that after assuming power, the emperor could not find a single experienced soldier in his army. The military and political situation had deteriorated to such an extent under his predecessor that Heraclius simply “did not know what to do.” Thus Theophanes turns Simocatta’s condemnation of disloyalty towards Maurice into a justification of Heraclius' weakness, thereby erasing the latter’s responsibility for the catastrophe and shifting the blame onto his predecessor Phocas.

Although the passage on the army census had little impact on Middle Byzantine chronicles (it was repeated only by John Zonaras),[[76]](#footnote-79) a less sophisticated allegation that blamed Phocas for the Empire’s defeats under Heraclius remained widespread. This was achieved primarily through compositional means, that is, by placing most of the information about the loss of the Roman East at the very beginning of the account of Heraclius’ reign or even within the account of Phocas’ reign.[[77]](#footnote-80)

Western medieval chroniclers were particularly inventive in this respect, going so far as to explicitly re-date the most painful defeat of Heraclius's era—the fall of Jerusalem in 614—to the reign of Phocas.[[78]](#footnote-81) Such revision is unknown in Eastern Roman texts, even in those most hostile to Phocas. Moreover, Western chronicles’ attitude to Phocas is more balanced than that of Middle Byzantine ones, perhaps because the Roman Church owed so much to him.[[79]](#footnote-82) It is likely that this detail, namely, the re-dating of the fall of Jerusalem to Phocas's reign, which is unique to Western sources, is related to Heraclius's growing popularity as a positive hero and pious defender of the True Cross in the West—a trend already noticeable in the seventh century.[[80]](#footnote-83)

## The Jews

When addressing the question of the role of the Jews in the military disaster suffered by the Eastern Roman Empire in the 610s, we must distinguish between what can be relatively reliably reconstructed from contemporary sources, and the picture painted by later Byzantine historiographers.

We begin with the former. The so-called *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*—an anti-Jewish treatise written in the mid-630s and dealing primarily with theological issues—also contains a historically significant account of the youth of the book’s protagonist, a Jewish merchant named Jacob who had recently converted to Christianity. As Jacob recounts, as a “strong” and “reckless” young man (roughly 25 years earlier), he had gotten involved in every brawl possible.[[81]](#footnote-84) Despite being Jewish and thus not a member of the demes, he would disguise himself sometimes as a Blue, sometimes as a Green, and secretly infiltrate the factions' riots under Phocas, and, alongside other like-minded Jews, provoke clashes in Constantinople and other cities.[[82]](#footnote-85) During the internal war between Emperor Phocas and the rebel Heraclius, in which the Blues supported the former and the Greens the latter, Jakob claims to have alternated between sides so that as many Christians as possible would get killed in the process (though he insists that he, personally, never killed anyone).[[83]](#footnote-86) Now a Christian, he attributes these actions to his former “hatred” of Christians and the firm belief that by engaging in these activities, he had been serving the “God of Israel.”[[84]](#footnote-87)

While texts of a polemical nature and the claims they make should be approached with great caution,[[85]](#footnote-88) the highly specific details provided by the *Doctrina Jacobi* on clashes involving Jewish participation in the mentioned locations can be deemed historically credible. There is other evidence scattered among contemporary and later sources of the activities of Jews hostile to the Empire in 608–614. This includes references to the Jews’ defection to the Persian side during the Persian sieges of Antioch[[86]](#footnote-89) and Jerusalem,[[87]](#footnote-90) as well as attacks by Jews on Christians and Christian churches during the violent capture of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614.[[88]](#footnote-91)

Historically speaking, however, the Jews were certainly not the main actors in the dramatic events of the 610s. Even the aforementioned Christian polemicist with his strong anti-Jewish bias—the author of the *Doctrina Jacobi* —does not portray the Jews as the primary enemies of the Christians during this period. He presents their main crime as their “covert involvement” in the intra-Christian conflict. We do not know of any cases of autonomous uprisings by Jews against Roman power in the East, that is, ones that relied entirely on their means as opposed to cooperation with, or aid from the Persians.

It is precisely this point—that the Jews never acted independently during the period in question– that was gradually forgotten in the Eastern Roman Empire. Both Theophanes, writing in the early ninth century, and later, the Greek chroniclers who generally followed him, attributed an independent role to the Jews in the events of the reigns of Phocas and Heraclius.[[89]](#footnote-92) According to these Middle Byzantine chroniclers, the Jews were the primary enemies of the Christians, always seeking to cause harm, be it through organized uprisings or everyday violence. This view reaches its apex in the Middle Byzantine accounts of the fall of Jerusalem, which assign the responsibility for the massacre of the city's Christian population not to the Persians, but to the Jews. Indeed, these chroniclers claim that the Jews of Jerusalem purchased Christians captured by the Persians, only to kill them with their own hands.[[90]](#footnote-93)

It is no coincidence that the exaggeration of the Jews’ role and the diminution of the Persian role in the dramatic events of the 610s emerged as an interpretive strategy among Byzantines only in the ninth century. A considerable amount of time had to pass before the violent Persian conquest and rule could appear “less relevant” to Byzantine authors than did the ”ever-relevant” Christian confrontation with the Jews. The relatively insignificant anti-imperial activities of the Jews in 608–614 could be seen as a significant cause of the defeats by Persia only in much later times when the Persian conquest lay in the distant past, but the perceived threat from Judaism remained relevant.

Moreover, the Jews, being the “foreign element” in a Christian state, were ideally suited to serve as scapegoats. This is also why Middle Byzantine historiographers so often resorted to blaming them for the Empire’s military failures, which, in our case, occurred in the first decade of Heraclius’ reign.

# Concluding Remarks

Explaining the military and sociopolitical disaster suffered by the Eastern Roman Empire in the early reign of Heraclius proved to be a highly challenging task for contemporary and later Byzantine scholars.

In what concerns their attitude towards the recent as well as distant past, these authors were primarily theologiansof history. The chief obstacle in their reading of history lay in the specific religious-political notion that seems to have characterized the Empire for the entire period under discussion, namely, that major military defeats could neither be associated with nor reconciled with the figure of a pious Roman emperor.

Such a “triumphalist theology of Empire and history,” as Ohme terms it, assumed that at the side of the Christian Empire was a guiding God, who rewarded orthodoxy with military victory and punished heresy with military defeat.[[91]](#footnote-94) Hence, an emperor’s orthodoxy could culminate solely in military victories, while his heresy or impiety could lead only to military defeats. In short, an orthodox emperor was only allowed to triumph.[[92]](#footnote-95) If he failed to triumph and lost as catastrophically as Heraclius had in the 610s, this could only imply—from the traditional Eastern Roman perspective—that he was unorthodox, i.e., “heretical” or “impious.”

A critical stance that blamed Heraclius for his ineffective command in the 610s, however, would have been deemed treasonous under his reign and therefore perilous for his subjects. It is for this reason that it occurs only in exceptional cases in contemporary texts.[[93]](#footnote-96) Among these is the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, the saint who knowingly disapproved of Heraclius’ ascent to power. Even so, the text expresses its critique in a veiled form without openly confronting Heraclius’ piety or legitimacy. As for later authors, they clearly preferred to keep silent or refrain from judgment to openly blaming Heraclius for the defeats in the Persian War as they apparently felt that these were completely overshadowed by his later military success.

Among other interpretative strategies, two predominate, both in contemporary and later texts. The first was to view the defeats of the Empire under Heraclius as the result of the destructive policies of his predecessor Phocas, an emperor who had been declared a “tyrant.” Contemporaries who resorted to this strategy generally limited themselves to vague rhetorical accusations. A century and a half after Heraclius’ death, however, the chronicler Theophanes deliberately altered the chronology of Heraclius’ reign in order to cast Phocas as the main culprit for the defeats suffered under his predecessor. Paradoxically, this tendency reached its peak among certain Western chroniclers, who redated the most painful catastrophe of Heraclius' time, namely, the fall of the holy city of Jerusalem, to the reign of Phocas. This likely served their purpose to exculpate Heraclius, who had already become a military hero in the popular view of the West.

The second frequently employed strategy used among Eastern Roman authors, especially of later date, was to attribute the intimidating success of the Persian armies in the 610s to the perennial adversary of the Christian Empire—the Jews. What needs to be underscored in this case is that while the Jews did indeed engage in some anti-imperial activities during this period, they were not decisive in shaping the war's outcome. Contemporary Eastern Roman authors were well aware of this, which is why even those with highly negative attitudes towards Jews could present only the latters’ “covert involvement” in intra-Christian conflicts as their main transgression. However, this nuance was lost on Byzantine chroniclers writing centuries later. As a result, Jews frequently serve as scapegoats in their accounts.

A common feature of most of the interpretative models discussed in this chapter is their dissociation and externalization of the traumatic subject of imperial defeats. That is, they attribute these defeats to an outside party rather than to their own religious-political community or its obvious head, Emperor Heraclius. The most convenient scapegoats are the long-deceased “tyrant” Phocas and the Jews, perceived as “eternal” adversaries of the Christian Empire.

Another tactic common to numerous Eastern Roman representations of the troubled period of 610-626 is the manipulation of chronology and sequence of historical events. This method was most frequently used by Middle Byzantine historiographers. While significantly diminishing the reliability of their historical accounts, it sheds light on the historical consciousness of their authors and indicates their reluctance to face the uncomfortable truth that for several decades the Christian Empire was unable to effectively defend itself against its inherently inferior “pagan” enemy.

1. Howard-Johnston (2019); (2021), esp. 113–133, 293–304. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the transformation of Persian war plans, see Ibid., 103–120. For the Roman fight for survival and the threat discourse in the reign of Heraclius, see Raum (2016; 2019; 2021); Viermann (2021), 150–206. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the Roman East under Sassanian rule, see Howard-Johnston (2021), 153–173. For the archaeological and numismatic evidence of the Sassanian rule, see Booth (2022); Schick (1995), 20–49; Foss (1975); Russell (2001); cf. Foss (2003); Avni (2014), 302–311. For views of the conquer of Sassanian power, see Sirotenko (2020), 71-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On late Roman triumphal ideology in general and the deep intertwinement of military victory and the right to rule in particular, see McCormick (1986); Wiena nd (2012), esp. 13–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the circumstances of Heraclius’ ascent to power, see Meier (2014); Viermann (2021), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For general information on the military unrest and uprisings in the early reign of Heraclius, see: Kaegi 1973; 1981, 101–34; Janssens 1936; Cameron 1976, pp. 281–85; Booth 2012; 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On the Vita in general: Festugière (1970 b) V–X; Howard-Johnston (2010), 149–51; Rosenqvist (1993), 145–148. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. According to Georgios: *Vita Theod. Syk.* 165 (p. 152–53 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. 166 (p. 154 ed. Festugière). Recent research has attempted to interpret this information as a later insertion and to date the entire Vita to the 610s. However, in our opinion, this is not sufficiently substantiated: see van Ginkel (2002) 232. The lack of stylistic homogeneity in the text, such as the presence of a highly rhetorical prologue in contrast to the very simple Koine of the main text, can be explained by the possibility that Georgios revised his early work in his mature years, specifically after 641, adding parts such as the prologue or the prophecy about Heraclius's thirty-year reign. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For example, meat is mentioned as a common part of the diet of ordinary people, see *Vita Theod. Syk.* 69, 70 (p. 56–58 ed. Festugière). On the harvests, see Ibid. 114 (p. 89 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As already noticed by Rosenqvist (1993), 145–148. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Vita Theod. Syk.* 38; 40; 88; 91–93; 103; 108; 138; 140 (p. 33, 36, 73, 75–77, 82–83, 86–87, 109, 110 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. 160.17–48 (p. 137 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. 152.1–18 (p. 121–122 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. 134; 152–153 (p. 106, 121–123 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. 153.6–11 (p. 123 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lemerle (1981), 99–110. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Miracula s. Demetrii II, 2, 210 (p. 188 ed. Lemerle) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Miracula s. Demetrii II, 1–2 (169–190 ed. Lemerle). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Paul Lemerle, the editor, was the first to note the absence of any references to central authorities in the accounts in question, something that he found “très remarquable”: Lemerle (1981), 110. Given the huge credit that Heraclius enjoyed in the scholarship of the time, Lemerle cautiously concluded that “La signification historique du règne d’Héraclius doit probablement être reconsiderée” (Ibid.) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Georg. Pis. *Heraclias* 2.131 (p. 257 ed. Pertusi) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Chron. pasch. ad ann.* 636 (p. 724 ed. Dindorf, p. 178 trans. Whitby/Whitby); Georg. Pis. *Bell. Avar.* 451-474 (p. 196-197 ed. Pertusi); *Theod. Sync.* 33 (p. 15 ed. Sternbach = p. 311 ed. Makk). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For the externalization of guilt and responsibility as a frequent model of interpreting traumatic events, see Assmann 2006, 170–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ps.-Antioch. Strateg. 1.11 (p. 2–3 tr. Garitte). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Leont. Neap. *Vita Ioan. Eleem.* 44 b (p. 90–91 ed. Gelzer). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Theod. Sync. 50.15–17 (p. 23 ed. Sternbach = p. 319 ed. Makk). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. “μετῆλθεν ἡμᾶς οὐχ ὁ βάρβαρος δόλος / άλλ’ ἡ καθ’ ἡμᾶς συγγενὴς ἁμαρτία”. Georg. Pis. *Bell. Avar.* 121-122 (p. 181 ed. Pertusi). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Theod. Sync. 9 (p. 5 ed. Sternbach = p. 301 ed. Makk). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The last successful usurper was Basiliscus (475–467), who overthrew the legitimate Emperor Zeno (474–475, 476–491) and forced him to flee the capital. Basiliscus, in turn, was overthrown and killed by Zeno a year and a half later. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. On this concept, see, for example, Meier (2014), 152–153. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For more details on these events, see Kaegi 1973; 1981, 101–134; 2003, 45–51; Janssens 1936; Cameron 1976, 281–285; Booth 2012; 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Howard-Johnston (2010), 163–167. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ps.-Antioch. Strateg. 2.6 (p. 5 tr. Garitte). Although the Greek text of Ps.-Antiochos Strategios is lost, it was translated into Georgian and Arabic in the middle ages. Here and elsewhere, I have used the Latin translation of the Georgian version by the editor, Gérard Garitte. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. 2.3–4 (p. 4 tr. Garitte). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The accounts of events in Antioch in 608/609 (Ps.-Sebeos, John of Nikiu, Doctrina Jacobi, Theophanes, Michael the Syrian, Agapius of Manbij) are quite confusing. In modern research, these are typically seen as deme riots, in which one of the factions, namely the Blues, enjoyed imperial support and military means. The conflicts between the Chalcedonians and Miaphysites in the eastern part of the Empire, which played a role in the uprising, are also mentioned. For this, refer to the old but still relevant study by Kulakovskij (1914) and the more recent, largely concurring works of Olster (1993), 110–115; Booth (2012), 579–582. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ps.-Antioch. Strateg. 3.9–11; 4.1–8 (p. 6-7 tr. Garitte). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. "ὅτι ἡ πόλις αὕτη ἀξία τοιούτου ἐπισκόπου ἐστίν". Anast. Sin. *Quaest. Et Resp*. 65.3 (p. 116-117 ed. Munitiz, p. 177-178 tr. Munitiz). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid. 65.2 (p. 116 ed. Munitiz, p. 177 tr. Munitiz). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Chron. pasch. ad ann.* 614, 615 (p. 704-706 ed. Dindorf, p. 156, 159 trans. Whitby/Whitby). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. On the Chronicon Paschale, see Gastgeber 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Chron. pasch. ad ann*. 618 (p. 711 ed. Dindorf, p. 164 trans. Whitby/Whitby). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Some of epigrams, religious poetry, as well as a poem addressed to a friend, might date to this period. See Tartaglia, ed. (1998), 458–505, as well as Howard-Johnston (2010), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Georg. Pis. *In Heracl. ex Africa redeunt.* 60–66 (p. 79–80 ed. Pertusi). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. For example, the Persian General Shahrbaraz, who pursued Heraclius’ army in the course of the campaign, is presented as "dragging" behind Heraclius’ army "like a dog on a leash" ("κυνὸς δίκην σειραῖς δεθέντος"). Georg. Pis. *Exp. Pers.* 2.357–365 (p. 114 ed. Pertusi). This place of the *Expeditio Persica* has, as it seems, completely escaped the attention of scholars; see, for example Ludwig (1991), 86-87; Whitby (2002), 164-165. Cf. Sirotenko (2020), 109–111. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Georg. Pis. *Bell. Avar.* 450–461 (p. 196–197 ed. Pertusi). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Theoph. Conf. AM 6102-6112 (p. 299–302 ed. de Boor, p. 428–435 tr. Mango/Scott). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
48. On Theophanes’ presentation of Emperor Heraclius in general, as well as on the account of the *Chronographia* dealing with Heraclius’ Persian campaigns in particular, see Ferber 1981; Sirotenko 2018; Proudfoot 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
49. Georg. Mon. *Chron.* 22 (p. 667–670 ed. de Boor); Symeon. Logoth. *Chron*. 109.3–4 (p. 157–158 ed. Wahlgren); Georg. Cedr. *Hist. Comp.* 435.1–6 (p. 683–686 ed. Tartaglia); Ioan. Zonar. *Epit. hist.* 14.15 (p. 204–208 ed. Büttner-Wobst), Mich. Glyk. *Annales* 4 (p. 512 ed. Bekker). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
50. *Vita Theod. Syk.* 166 (p. 153–154 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
51. On the participation of saints in late Roman political life, see Brown (1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
52. „ἐὰν ἔλαβεν αὐτάς, τεκμήριον ἦν τῆς νίκης αὐτοῦ καὶ μετὰ χαρᾶς ὑπέστρεφεν· τὸ δὲ καταλιπεῖν αὐτὸν ταύτας σημεῖόν ἐστι τῆς ἥττας ἡμῶν“. *Vita Theod. Syk.* 166.24–30 (p. 154 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
53. On accusations of impiety as a way of challenging legitimacy of certain rulers, see Tinnefeld (1971), 84–85. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
54. At another point in the Vita, Theodore predicts that there will be no major Persian attack in Asia Minor before his death (which occurred on April 22, 613). Vita Theod. Syk. 153.8–11 (p. 123 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
55. Vita Theod. Syk. 120; 133 (p. 96–97; 105 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
56. Ibid., 152.1-18 (p. 121-122 ed. Festugière). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
57. van Ginkel (2002), 232; Meier (2014), 139–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
58. “... τῶν καθ’ ἡμᾶς πραγμάτων τὰ δυσχερῆ τραπεῖεν εἰς εύξίαν”. Georg. Pis. *Exp. Pers.* 1.55–56 (p. 86 ed. Pertusi). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
59. Georg. Pis. In Bonum patr. 160–161 (p. 170 ed. Pertusi). This passage is commonly interpreted as a reference to Heraclius's personal sins, particularly his incestuous marriage with his niece Martina, but a broader interpretation seems possible. It may also include the poet’s dissatisfaction with Heraclius’ absence in the capital during the siege as well as with his hitherto relatively modest success in warfare in the East. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
60. The most prominent of these concern Heraclius’ sexual morality; see, e.g., Nicephor. *Brev. Hist.* 20.4–7 (p. 68 ed. Mango, p. 69 tr. Mango). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
61. Not entirely, however, as In Nicephorus's portrayal, Heraclius is still not “a model of an emperor,” as Marjanović considers him to be: Marjanović (2018), 99–148. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
62. Cf. Niceph. *Brev. Hist*. 1.1–6 (p. 34 ed. Mango, p. 35 tr. Mango) and 11.1–5 (p. 52 ed. Mango, p. 53 tr. Mango). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
63. The term “externalization” (*Externalisierung*) as understood by Aleida Assmann, refers to one of the strategies of deflecting guilt, namely the practice of attributing guilt and responsibility for any unpleasant event to someone else, preferably to a person who is generally viewed in a negative light. See Assmann (2006), 170–174. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
64. Chron. anon. syr. AD 640 compos. AG 921 (p. 17 tr. Palmer, p. 113 tr. Chabot). [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
65. In August 610, when Phocas had already lost Egypt to the rebel Heraclius, and the latter was on his way to Constantinople with a fleet, the Persians crossed the Euphrates. For the most recent reconstruction of the final stages of the Roman civil war as well of the Persian offensive in autumn 610, see Howard-Johnston (2021), 78–79. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
66. For the fall of Dara, see the entry in the East Syrian Chronicle written in the 670s: Anon. Guidi 19.7–25 (p. 19 tr. Guidi). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
67. The fall of Amida is mentioned in the Canon of the Chronicle of Jacob of Edessa, and likely occurred in 609: Iac. Edes. Chron, AG 920 (p. 248 tr. Brooks, p. 38 tr. Palmer). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
68. The fall of Edessa is mentioned in the Paschal Chronicle, and likely occurred in 609: Chron. pasch. ad ann. 609 (p. 699 ed. Dindorf, p. 149 tr. Whitby / Whitby). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
69. Theoph. Conf. AM 6099–6100 (p. 295.14–16; 296.6–10 ed. de Boor; p. 424–425 tr. Mango/Scott) [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
70. „τήν τε γὰρ Εὐρώπην οἱ Ἄβαρεις ἠρήμωσαν, καὶ τὴν Ἀσίαν οἱ Πέρσαι πᾶσαν κατέστρεψαν καὶ τὰς πόλεις ᾐχμαλώτευσαν καὶ τὸν τῶν Ῥωμαίων στρατὸν ἐν τοῖς πολέμοις ἀνήλωσαν. καὶ ταῦτα ἰδὼν ἐν ἀπορίᾳ ἦν, τί δράσῃ“. Theoph. Conf. AM 6103 (p. 300 ed. de Boor, p. 429 tr. Mango/Scott). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
71. For an in-depth analysis of the Sassanian invasion and their subsequent domination of the Roman East, see Howard-Johnston (2021), 153-173; Booth (2022); Russell (2001); Schick (1995), 20-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
72. „ἐρευνήσας γὰρ τὸν στρατόν, εἰ ἄρα ἐσώζοντο ἐκ τῶν μετὰ Φωκᾶ κατὰ Μαυρικίου στρατευσάντων ἐπὶ τῆς τούτου τυραννίδος, δύο μόνους εὗρεν ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς θέμασιν“. Theoph. Conf. AM 6103 (p. 300 ed. de Boor, p. 429 tr. Mango/Scott). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
73. On the date of composition and structure of Simocatta’s work, see Whitby (1988), 39–51; Howard-Johnston (2010), 142–146. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
74. „ὁπηνίκα πρὸς τὸν Ῥαζάτην τὸν πόλεμον ἐποιήσατο ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ Ἡράκλειος, ἐξέτασιν τοῦ ὁπλιτικοῦ ἀνακρίνας δύο καὶ μόνους στρατιώτας τῆς φιλοτυράννου πληθύος ὑπολελειμμένους ἐξεῦρεν, καίτοι μὴ πολλῶν μεσολαβησάντων τῶν χρόνων“. Theoph. Sim. VIII, 12 (p. 308 ed. de Boor; p. 230 tr. Whitby/Whitby). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
75. For Heraclius’ invasion of Mesopotamia in autumn 627 – winter 628, see (2021), 305–314. For a reconstruction of the geographical course of this campaign, see Manandjan (1950), 148–153. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
76. Ioan. Zonar. 14.15 (p. 204 ed. Büttner-Wobst). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
77. See, for example, Georg. Mon. 22 (p. 668.12–15 ed. de Boor), Georg. Cedr. 435.1–2 (p. 683–684 ed. Tartaglia), Ioan. Zonar. 14.15 (p. 204 ed. Büttner-Wobst). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
78. The redating of the fall of Jerusalem to the time of Phocas is found in a surprising number of Western chronicles from the eighth to the twelfth centuries; see, for example, Beda Venerab. Chron. maiora 537 (p. 323 ed. Mommsen); Paul. Diac. Hist. Langob. 4.36 (p. 128 ed. Bethmann/Waitz); Otto Frising. Chron. 5.8 (p. 240 ed. Hofmeister). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
79. In 607, Phocas decreed that the *universalis* title sought by the Constantinopolitan patriarch belonged exclusively to the Roman Pope, which made the Roman Church the *caput omnium ecclesiarum*. Moreover, in 609, he handed the Pantheon over to the Roman Church, which was then transformed into a Christian church. See especially LP 1.68–69 (p. 316–317 ed. Duchesne) and Caspar (1933), 518–519. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
80. For more on the redating of the fall of Jerusalem, as well as on Heraclius’ increasing popularity in the West, see: Sirotenko (2020), 82–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
81. Doctrina Jacobi 40.16–18 (p. 131 ed. Déroche, p. 130 tr. Déroche). [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
82. Among other cities, 'Pylae, Cyzicus, Charax, Aegae, and Ptolemais' are mentioned in the text. Ibid. 41.8–11 (p. 131 ed. Déroche, p. 130 tr. Déroche). Almost all of the mentioned places are, according to Déroche’s note, located in the Propontis region. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
83. Ibid. 40.12–16 (p.131 ed. Déroche, p. 130 tr. Déroche). [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
84. Doctrina Jacobi 41.12–14 (p. 131 ed. Déroche, p. 130 tr. Déroche). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
85. Averil Cameron and Vincent Déroche have expressed a justified skepticism of texts of the Adversus-Iudaeos genre (Cameron 2002; 1996; Déroche 2011). Nonetheless, they do not dismiss the valuable historical information contained in these texts as mere later insertions or imaginative rhetoric by their Christian authors, as some other scholars have tended to do (Speck 1997, 290–305; Olster 1994, 182). [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
86. Mich. Syr. 10.25 (p. 379 tr. Chabot); Theoph. Conf. AM 6101 (p. 296 ed. de Boor, p. 425–426 tr. Mango/Scott). Theophanes places his chronographic account of the Jewish uprising in Antioch in the last year of Phocas' reign (609/610); however, historically, the uprising occurred in September 610, when the Persian army was approaching the city. The punitive expedition of Bonosos to Alexandria, which Theophanes places in the same year, is actually dated to 608; it was directed not against the Jews, but against the rebellious Greens. See the detailed and still relevant analysis of Theophanes' account by Kulakovskij (1914). [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
87. Ps.-Sebeos 115 (p. 68-69 tr. Thomson); Eutych. Alex. 268 (p. 98 – 99 tr. Breydy) [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
88. Ps.-Antioch. Strateg. 10 (p. 17-18 tr. Garitte); Eutych. Alex. 268 (p. 98–99 tr. Breydy). [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
89. See, for example, the chronicle reports on the “Jewish uprising” in Antioch: Theoph. Conf. AM 6101, 6106 (p. 296, 300–301 ed. de Boor, p. 425-426, 431 tr. Mango/Scott), Georg. Cedr. 434.10, 435.5 (p. 682, 684 ed. Tartaglia), Ioan. Zonar. 14.14–14.15 (p. 200–201, 208 ed. Büttner-Wobst). [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
90. Theoph. Conf. AM 6106 (p. 300–301 ed. de Boor), Georg. Cedr. 435.5 (p. 684 ed. Tartaglia), Ioan. Zonar. 14.15 (p. 208 ed. Büttner-Wobst). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
91. „Triumphalistische Reichs- und Geschichtstheologie“. Ohme (2015), 57–58. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
92. Regarding the concept of the Christian Emperor as a warrior and victor, especially concerning the figure of Constantine I, see Wienand (2015), 437–448. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
93. On the criticism of emperors in Middle Byzantine historiography, especially their accusations of impiety, see Tinnefeld (1971), 81–85, 192. However, as Tinnefeld points out, historiographers typically engaged in explicit criticism only of long-deceased emperors. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)