George of Pisidia, the recovery of the True Cross and the Golgotha *θεοδόχος*

1. Introduction

The story of the Adoration of the Cross constitutes one of the oldest traditions in the history of Christian faith, shared by Catholics, Orthodox, Armenians and all Christian denominations, even if with different nuances. The definition of this tradition dates back to the 4th century, when the freedom of worship established by Constantine through the Edict of Milan promoted religious tolerance and paved the way for a progressive Christianization of the Roman Empire.

The Gospels, in fact, maintained a relatively low profile regarding the cross (in the *Septuagint* the term σταυρός is actually absent, and one finds ξύλον in its stead): the first to make the cross a central element of his salvific journey was Paul.[1] Actually, the cross is present in ancient Christian literature, from the second half of the 2nd century until the end of the Patristic age, but it is certainly after the 4th century that the motif of the cross assumed an increasingly central role not only in general patristics but especially in homiletics, as amply supported by Enrico Cattaneo's list of sources.[2]

It is well-known that, according to tradition, Emperor Constantine's mother Helena played a central role in promoting the importance of the cross motif: the oldest references are to be found in Cyril of Jerusalem[3] and Gelasius[4].

2. The True Cross between Persians and Byzantines

Seizing back the relic in the 7th century was a crucial moment in the history of its veneration. In May 614, after three weeks of siege, the holy city of Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Persians: this event was a blow to the morale of the Christians and marks the beginning of more than twenty years of a war with the religious undertone of a crusade *avant la lettre*.

Christian sources report that it was the Jews of Jerusalem who opened the city gates for the Persians.[5] Apparently, when Khosrau II's army arrived under the walls of Jerusalem, it was welcomed without resistance. At another moment, taking advantage of the fact that the conquerors had only left a small garrison guarding the city, the residents rebelled, annihilated the Jews who were blamed for having helped the Persians, and organized themselves for the resistance. In the following month of May, the second siege ended with a terrible massacre. For many days, the occupied city was devastated by fire and slaughter: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which had been commissioned by Constantine, was burned to the ground. According to the tradition, only the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was spared, as a tribute to the mosaic depicting the Wise Men in their exotic costumes adoring the Child.[6]

Sources such as Theophanes, Nikephoros, *Chronicon Paschale,* Antiochus Strategos, and the Armenian Bishop Sebeos mention that during the short and harsh Persian occupation, patriarch Zacharias and many Christians were taken as prisoners and brought to Ctesiphon, the capital of the Parthian Empire, along with the relic of the True Cross that was taken as a trophy.[7] Other relics, like the chalice of the Last Supper, were lost. The Persians, guided by the King of Kings

---

[1] Ὁ λόγος γὰρ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν, τοῖς δὲ σῳζομένοις ἡμῖν δύναμις θεοῦ ὑστιν (*1 Cor.* 1.18).

[2] Cattaneo 2007. On the legend of the Holy Wood, see also Baert 2004.

[3] *PG* 87/3, cc. 4015-4088.

[4] The oldest mention of Empress Helena finding the True Cross is however to be found in the writings of Cyril's nephew, Gelasius, bishop of Caesarea (who died ca. 395). He supposedly even mentions Helena's finding of the *titulus* and the nails, which were then forged into the bite and bridles of the emperor's horse. 'Supposedly' because Gelasius's writings are now lost, but their content can be reconstructed from Photios's quotes in his *Bibliotheca*, as well as from the passages cited by Rufinus in his *Ecclesiastical History* (*PL* 21, cc. 475-478, specifically fragment 20; cf. Winkelmann 1966). On finding the Holy Cross, see also Borgehammer 1991.

[5] Sebeos 24.95.

[6] Sebeos 24.95-96. A short reconstruction of the events can be found in Cardini 2012, 89; Breccia 2016, 177-178. On the conquest of Jerusalem and on the figures, almost certainly exaggerated, provided by Christian sources, see Avi-Yonah 1976, 261-265.

[7] τὰ τίμια καὶ ζωοποιὰ ξύλα λαβόντες σὺν αἰχμαλωσίᾳ πολλῇ ἐν Περσίδι ἀπήγαγον (Theoph. 301).

Khosrau II, burned down cities and ravaged the whole Eastern empire, overrunning Egypt and Chalcedon, and reaching as far as the walls of Constantinople (616).

The poetic work of George of Pisidia dates back to this period. He was probably a native of Antioch in Pisidia,[8] deacon and first *skeuophylax* 'sacristan', then legal secretary, i.e. 'patriarchal nuncio' to the emperor at Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople. He had patriarch Sergius as his patron, his spiritual master and friend, and was probably part of the court entourage, as a legal secretary, friend and close confidante of the emperor, who narrated to him the journey of his life on more than one occasion.[9]

Compared to other panegyric texts, it is surprising that his poem *In restitutionem sanctae Crucis* (Αὐτοσχέδιοι πρὸς τὴν γενομένην ἀνάγνωσιν τῶν κελεύσεων χάριν τῆς ἀποκαταστάσεως τῶν τιμίων ξύλων) has received such limited interest in later Byzantine literature. In this composition, the epic dimension, in fact, was successfully combined with the religious dimension in describing the warm welcome given by the denizens of Constantinople to the imperial messenger bringing the news of the recovery of the True Cross. The leitmotif of the work was Heraclius's definitive success over Khosrau's Persians, who arrived in Nineveh only on 12 December 627, after six years of military campaigns and the dramatic joint siege of Constantinople with the Avars in August 626.[10]

The seizing of the relics of the True Cross, found in Persia and brought back to Jerusalem on March 21, 630, was presented by imperial propaganda as the crowning glory of Heraclius's campaign. The *basileus* apparently also freed Christian prisoners, and would then enter Jerusalem barefoot in front of them, bearing the cross on his shoulders like a new Christ. According to tradition, he entered the walls from the central east side portal, the *Golden Gate*, which was called the *Shushan Gate* in the second Temple and was identified with the *Porta Speciosa*, through which Jesus was said to have entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.[11]

3. The Golgotha θεηδόχος

The triumphalist tone that characterized Heraclius's return is clearly evident from the opening words of George of Pisidia's poem:

Ὦ Γολγοθὰ σκίρτησον· ἡ κτίσις πάλιν
Ὅλη σε τιμᾷ καὶ καλεῖ θεηδόχον·
Ἐκ Περσίδος γὰρ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἀφιγμένος
Τὸν σταυρὸν ἐν σοὶ δεικνύει πεπηγμένον·
Κρότησον αὐτὸν τοῖς ἀοιδίμοις λόγοις

Agostino Pertusi brilliantly analyses this poem in his edition of epic panegyrics by George of Pisidia (*Panegirici epici*). I wish, however, to highlight a small, stylistic, but not altogether irrelevant issue, as it pertains to the geography of the holy places in Jerusalem in the VII century CE. The learned Byzantine poet, in fact, calls the Golgotha θεηδόχον 'receiver of divinity', with the use of an adjective that in this form probably constitutes a *dis legomenon* in the author's

---

[8] According to Michael Psellos (Dick 1985, 48). Psellos wrote a famous pamphlet *De Euripides et Georgio Piside iudicium*. On Psellos's final verdict, see also Frendo 1984, 159-160, n. 3.

[9] E.g. in *Exp. Pers*. III 343. George's poetic activity could be divided into two periods: (a) one from 610/611 or 619/620 until approximately 630, during which he dedicated himself to epic-encomiastic poetry; b) another from 630 until his death, during which he dedicated himself to theological-moral poetry. If the entire production of the first period can be read in close relation to the political and military events during Heraclius's reign, the manuscript tradition clearly tips the scales in favor of the theological production: one poem such as the *Hexaemeron* is preserved in 44 Greek MSS and two translations, one into Slavic, and one into Armenian. The epic-encomiastic poems, on the other hand, known as "epic panegyrics" (Pertusi), are preserved by only five manuscripts (Tartaglia 1998, 55-56). The reasons for the lack of interest in the encomiastic production can be found in the prevalence of theological-ascetic themes in later Byzantine literature, reader of the *Hexaemeron*, and in the classical meter of panegyrics (iambic trimeter).

[10] For an accurate reconstruction of Heraclius's military campaign, see also Kaegi 2003, 156-191 and Breccia 2016, 189-221.

[11] It is more likely, however, that the gate, with its famous and elegant two arches, was actually *built* in honor of Heraclius and his triumphal return (Cardini 2012, 90).

writings, but that is also a rarity in all of Greek and Byzantine literature (13x), as an alternative to the more common θεοδόχος (170x approximately).[12] In fact, George of Pisidia uses it also in *Hexaemeron* (l. 1755).[13]

The coinage of the adjective, apparently inspired by the older θεοτόκος, a descriptor attributed to the Virgin Mary by the Council of Ephesus in 431, seems to date back to the Church Fathers of the fourth century: in particular to Gregory of Nyssa (7x).[14] The religious literature of the IV and V century would have perpetuated the use, especially in reference to the Virgin Mary, receiver of God, as controversial alternative to θεοτόκος, Mother of God, Cyril's formula officially accepted at the Council of Ephesus.[15] The sermon *In nativitatem Christi* by Athanasius of Alexandria (*PG* 28.960-972)[16] is particularly clear as to the semantic boundaries of these two concepts.[17]

It is well-known that the definition of the role of the Virgin imbued and enlivened the Christian literature of the V century, before and after the Council of Ephesus. An original linguistic solution, by way of compromise, is found in the *Homilia in sanctam Deiparam et in nativitatem Domini* attributed to St. Theodotus of Ancyra, in which the Virgin is defined τῇ γαστρὶ θεοδόχος, τῷ ἔργῳ θεοτόκος.[18] At about the same time, Theodoret of Cyrus uses θεοδόχος twice in *Eranistes*, apropos of the Christological controversy.[19] The fact that the controversial adjective attributed to the Virgin Mary is used as late as the Ἀκάθιστος hymn demonstrates its unmistakable theological and poetic importance.[20]

On the other hand, Gregory of Nazianzus, who is well-known for his stylistic originality, is probably the source of the version with the vowel /e/ θεηδόχος, which is metrically easier to use. In the *Carmina moralia*, he introduces the *iunctura* θεηδόχος Τράπεζα, the table of the Last Supper (*PG* 37, 962). As regards θεηδόχος, there are very few other occurrences in Nonnus of Panopolis (4x, three of which in the *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John*),[21] in John of

---

[12] On the alternation between the two forms: the creation of θεηδόχος may have been facilitated by the existence of θεηκόλος, erudite form of 'priest', which was popular in the prose of the later period (Solmsen 1901, 24).

[13] ἡ μυστικὴ κλεὶς τῆς θεηδόχου πύλης, "the mystical key of the door that has taken God in" (transl. Tartaglia), i.e. the Virgin Mary.

[14] In homily 15 (*In canticum canticorum)*, for example, in regard to the Incarnation, Gregory writes that the Virgin Mary did not know ὅπως ἐν τῷ σώματι αὐτῆς τὸ θεοδόχον συνέστη σῶμα.

[15] *ACO* 1.1.1, p. 112.

[16] Marx (1940, 52-56) ascribed the sermon to Proclos, whereas Caro (1972, 380-88) ascribes the sermon to a later Cappadocian writer, or an author from Antiochia, possibly Theodoret of Cyrrhus.

[17] Εἰ δὲ Θεὸς ἰσχυρὸς, ἐξουσιαστὴς, καὶ ἄρχων εἰρήνης, καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος τὸ παιδίον τὸ ἐκ τῆς Παρθένου τεχθὲν, πῶς οὐ Θεοτόκος ἡ Παρθένος, ἀλλὰ Θεοδόχος, εἰ καὶ συνέλαβε, καὶ ἔτεκε, καὶ Θεὸς τὸ τεχθέν; (*PG* 28. 965). The Virgin Mary is not simply θεοδόχος, but rather θεοτόκος because she had an active role in the birth of the Son of God (*PG* 28. 968). On this aspect of the cult to the Virgin Mary in Late Antiquity, see also Constas 2003, 276 n. 7.

[18] Jugie 1926, 330 l. 9.

[19] The first passage refers to the conception of Jesus (Ettlinger 1975, 105 l. 29); the second to the nature of Jesus, who is a man θεοδόχος: ἐπειδὴ γὰρ οὐκ ἄλλοθεν, ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ ἡμετέρου φυράματος, ὁ θεοδόχος ἄνθρωπος ἦν, ὁ διὰ τῆς ἀναστάσεως συνεπαρθεὶς τῇ θεότητι (Ettlinger 1975, 241. 7). The adjective is attested, inevitably, also in Nestorius, but unfortunately only in a fragment of Sermon 10 ed. by Loofs (ll. 114-115-116).

[20] Ἔχουσα θεοδόχον ἡ παρθένος τὴν μήτραν / ἀνέδραμε πρὸς τὴν Ἐλισάβετ (section 5, 1. 2, ed. Trypanis).

[21] In *Dionysiaca* (13.96) the word is declined with reference to οὖδας (οἵ θ' Ὑρίην ἐνέμοντο, θεηδόχον οὖδας ἀρούρης). Iria is defined as the land *that welcomed the gods*, and then took the name from the hospitable Irieus. It would seem that this is the first occurrence of θεηδόχος referring to a geographical place. In Nonnus's *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John* (11.4, 11.8, 21.47) the motif is repeated, not without literary preciousness: ἀκτῆς δ' ἐγγὺς ἵκανε θεηδόχον ἠόνα βαίνων,/ Ἰησοῦς ὅθι μίμνε δεδεγμένος (21.48). After all, the image of the earth trampled upon by Christ must have soon resonated for Christians, as proved by the tradition of the relics of Christ's footprint. In the other three passages of the *Paraphrase*, on the other hand, as is typical for the tradition of the late antiquity, it is the Virgin Mary who is defined καλλιέθειρα θεηδόχος.

Gaza[22] and in the *Homilia in Nativitatem Christi* by Patriarch Sophronius, twice in reference to Bethlehem and one to the manger of Nativity (φάτνη).[23] In the same homily, Sophronius also uses θεοδόχος twice.[24]

What I find noteworthy, is that George and Sophronius attribute θεοδόχος so precisely to the Holy places, and probably for the first time: George does it in relation to the Golgotha, which is always referred to as θεηδόχος in the work, while Sophronius, on the other hand, attributes it to the places of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

If the use of the word in relation to places visited by pagan gods can be traced back to a single passage in the *Dionysiaca* by Nonnus, however, also within the Christian confines two precedents can be found: the first one is in the *Inventio crucis* of the Cypriot Alexander Monachus, which probably dates back to the VI century,[25] the second in the *Vita Sabae* by Cyril of Scythopolis, also from the VI century.[26]

4. Final remarks

The recurring motif of the θεοδόχος in the age of Sophronius and George referring to Bethlehem and Golgotha, is a microstylistic indicator of the attention that the religious literature of the period gave to the topic of the Incarnation of Christ and to the holy places of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. This happens exactly at the moment when these regions risked falling into the hands of the enemy and being under the control of infidels, events that actually occurred later.

Moreover, with the use of this adjective, George and Sophronius insisted on a fundamental pillar of Christian identity, during a time in which Jews and Persians of Zoroastrian faith, saw the Incarnation and the admixture of human and divine as an abomination. In this context, the undisputed originality of Pisidia was to apply θεηδόχος/θεοδόχος to Golgotha, just as later Sophronius would have done for Bethlehem, another central and archetypal place for the Incarnation.

As it is well known, the reconquest of the Holy Land, that land that George and Sophronius had originally called θεηδόχος even if with different nuances, and that a modern thinker like Ernest Renan even called "the Fifth Gospel", was to be the basis of Western propaganda for the Crusades. However, with the Saladin's victory at Hattin (1187) even the relics of the True Cross in Jerusalem would have been lost forever. But not those preserved in Constantinople and scattered in various Catholic and Orthodox places of worship. Both western and eastern Christianity resigned themselves to reality, after the fall of St. John of Acres in 1291. Jerusalem, the Golgotha and the *Anastasi* Church fell into Muslim hands, but the adoration of the Cross continued as a practice, as evidenced by the many churches dedicated to it. The title of Θεοδόχος, on the other hand, was attributed to Simeon the Old since late antiquity, a character that acts as a hinge between the Old and New Testament because he had witnessed the presentation of Jesus at the Temple, born of a Virgin, and destined to die as a man.[27]

---

[22] *Ἔκφρασις τοῦ κοσμικοῦ πίνακος* (1.22 ed. Friedländer).

[23] Usener 1886, 505 (l. 21); 506 (l. 14); 507 (l. 21). Sophronius, to whom *The Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschus is dedicated, was Patriarch of Jerusalem from 634 to 638, the probable year of his death and of the Arabs' entrance to Jerusalem led by Khalifa Omar. For an overview of Sophronius's life and work, see von Schönborn 1972.

[24] Εἰς τὴν θεοδόχον… Βηθλεὲμ Usener (1886, 513,. 6). A little further on, in the same homily: καὶ τὸ θεοδόχον ἄντρον φιλήσομεν Usener (1886, 515,. 12).

[25] Παρεκελεύσατο δὲ τῷ τῆς Αἰλίας ἐπισκόπῳ Μακαρίῳ παρόντι ἐν τῇ συνόδῳ, καὶ τῶν ἀποστολικῶν δογμάτων ὑπερμαχοῦντι ἀναζητῆσαι τὸν ζωοποιὸν σταυρόν, καὶ τὸ θεοδόχον μνῆμα, καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους τόπους, καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους δὲ ἐπισκόπους ὁμοίως (*PG* 87/3.4084).

[26] Ἵνα μὴ οἱ σεβάσμιοι ἐκεῖνοι καὶ θεοδόχοι / τόποι τοῖς Νεστορίου δόγμασιν καταμαίνωνται (Schwartz 1939, 144).

[27] In the New Testament, it occurs ephemerally in *Lc*. 2, 29-35. The first text, in which one finds the epithet of θεοδόχος attributed to Simeon is the incipit of the *Homilia in occursum Domini*, attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem. In the orthodox tradition, he is also known as Симеон Богоприимец, the Russian translation of θεοδόχος. San Simeon The Old was to become the patron saint of Zara, which claims to preserve his remains, but according to another tradition his remains are preserved in the homonymous Venetian church since the time of the Fourth Crusade. On Simeon the Old, see also Frenschkowski 1995.