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

**1. Introduction**

The story of the Adoration of the True Cross constitutes one of the oldest traditions in the history of Christian faith, common for Catholics, Orthodox, Armenians and for all Christian denominations, even if with different nuances. The definition of this tradition dates back to the 4th century, when the liberation of cults promoted by Constantine with edict for tolerance paved the way for a progressive Christianization of the Roman Empire.

The Gospels, in fact, maintained a relatively low tone regarding the cross (in the Septuagint the term σταυρός is actually absent, which we can however, find subtituted as ξύλον): the first to make the cross a central element of his salvific journey was Paul.[[1]](#footnote-1) In fact, the cross is present in all 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 it assumed an increasingly central role not only in general patristics but especially in homiletics, to which Enrico Cattaneo has given ample reason with his list of sources illustrating the cross theme.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Com’è noto, secondo la tradizione un ruolo centrale nel rinvenimento della croce fu svolto da Elena, madre dell’imperatore Costantino: i riferimenti più antichi si trovano in Cirillo di Gerusalemme[[3]](#footnote-3) e Gelasio[[4]](#footnote-4).

**2. The True Cross between Persians and Byzantines**

A moment in the history of the relic that played a fundamental role for the cult is its subtraction and reconquest in the 7th century. 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 Christians and represents the beginning of more than twenty years of war now marked by a religious caliber, then greeted as crusades *avant la lettre*.

Christian sources report that it was the Jews of Jerusalem who opened the city gates for the Persians.[[5]](#footnote-5) Apparently, when they arrived under Jerusalem walls, the troupes of Khosrow II were welcomed without resistance. In another moment, taking advantage of the fact that the conquerors had only left a small garrison guarding the city, the residents rose, destroyed the Jews who were blamed for having favored the Persians, and organized themselves for the resistance. Therefore, the following May, a second siege, was concluded with a horrid massacre. For many days, the occupied city was devastated by fire and slaughter, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built by order of Constantine, was burnt. According to the tradition, only the Bethlehemite Church of the Nativity was spared, as tribute to the mosaic depicting wise men in their national costumes adoring the Child.[[6]](#footnote-6)

By reading the sources (Theophanes, Nikephoros, *Chronicon Paschale,* Antiochus Strategos, the Armenian bishop Sebeos), it seems that during the short and harsh Persian occupation, patriarch Zacharias and a lot of Christians were deported to Ctesiphon, capital of the Saxon Empire, where the relic of the True Cross was deported as a triumphal prey.[[7]](#footnote-7) Other relics, like the chalice of the Last Supper, were dispersed. The Persians, guided by the King of Kings Khosrow II, burnt down the whole Eastern empire, reaching all the way to Egypt and Chalcedon, to Constantinople's doors (616).

The poetic work of George of Pisidia dates back to this period. Probably native of Antiochia in Pisidia,[[8]](#footnote-8) he was deacon and first *skeuophylax* ‘sacristan’, then legal secretary. i.e. ‘patriarchal nuncio’ to the emperor at S. Sophia Church in Constantinople. He had patriarch Sergius as his patron, his spiritual master and friend, and he had to be a part of the court entourage, as legal secretary, friend and close confidante of the emperor, who on more than one occasion narrated to him the journey of his life.[[9]](#footnote-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 Costantantinopolitans to the imperial dispatch referring the restitution of the True Cross. At the basis of everything was the definitive success of Heraclius over the Persians of Khosrow, who arrived in Nineveh only on 12 December 627, after six years of military campaigns and the dramatic page of the joint siege of Constantinople by the Avars and Persians on August 626.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The reconquest 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 crowning of the Heraclius campaign. It seems that the *basileus* freed also Christian deportees, at the front of whom he would enter Jerusalem barefoot, bearing the cross on his shoulders like a new Christ. According to tradition, he penetrated the walls from the central door of the east side, the *Golden Gate*, which in the second Temple was called *Shushan* Gate and was identified with the *Porta Speciosa* from which Jesus would have passed entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**3. The θεηδόχος Golgotha**

The triumphalistic tone that characterized Eraclius’ return was 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

From this poem, brilliantly studied by Agostino Pertusi in his edition of *Panegirici epici* by George of Pisidia, I would like to highlight a small issue of style, which to me does not seem irrelevant in the definition of the geography of the holy places in Jerusalem in the VII century CE. The learned Byzantine poet, in fact, calls Golgotha θεηδόχον, 'receiver of divinity', with the use of an adjective that in this form probably constitutes a *dis legomenon* in the author's production, but also a rarity in all of Greek and Byzantine literature (13x), as an alternative to the more common θεοδόχος (170x approximately).[[12]](#footnote-12) In fact, George of Pisidia uses it also in *Hexaemeron* (l. 1755).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Il conio dell’aggettivo, evidentemente ispirato al più antico θεοτόκος, qualifica attribuita alla Vergine Maria dal Concilio di Efeso del 431, sembra risalire ai padri del IV sec.: in particolare a Gregorio di Nissa (7x).[[14]](#footnote-14) La letteratura religiosa di IV e V sec. ne avrebbe perpetuato l’uso, soprattutto in riferimento alla Vergine Maria, ricettrice di Dio, come dibattuta alternativa al θεοτόκος, genitrice di Dio, la formula cirilliana cοnsacrata dal Concilio efesino.[[15]](#footnote-15) Il sermone *In nativitatem Christi* dello pseudo-Atanasio (*PG* 28.960-972)[[16]](#footnote-16) è particolarmente chiaro nella delimitazione semantica dei due concetti.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Com’è noto, la definizione del ruolo della Vergine infervorò molto la letteratura cristiana di V sec., prima e dopo il Concilio efesino. Una soluzione linguistica originale e compromissoria è quella dell’*Homilia in sanctam Deiparam et in nativitatem Domini* attribuita a Teodoto di Ancira, in cui la Vergine è definita τῇ γαστρὶ θεοδόχος, τῷ ἔργῳ θεοτόκος.[[18]](#footnote-18) In quel torno di tempo, Teodoreto di Cirro nell’*Eranistes* ricorre a θεοδόχος due volte a proposito della controversia cristologica.[[19]](#footnote-19) Il fatto che il controverso aggettivo, riferito alla Vergine Maria, arrivi persino all’inno *Ἀκάθιστος* ne dimostra la riconosciuta caratura teologica e poetica.[[20]](#footnote-20)

A Gregorio di Nazianzo, known for his stylistic originality, invece, si deve probabilmente la forma con vocalismo /e/ θεηδόχος, metricamente più facilmente spendibile. 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 attestations, in Nonnus of Panopolis (4x, three of which in the *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John*),[[21]](#footnote-21) in John of Gaza[[22]](#footnote-22) and in the *Homilia in Nativitatem Christi* of Patriarch Sophronius, twice in reference to Bethlehem and one to the manger of Nativity (φάτνη).[[23]](#footnote-23) Nella stessa omelia, Sofronio impiega altrimenti in due casi θεοδόχος.[[24]](#footnote-24)

What I find noteworthy, is that George and Sophronius probably for the first time refer θεοδόχος so precisely to the Holy places: Giorgio lo fa in rapporto al Golgota, che l’intera creazione chiama θεηδόχος, Sofronio invece si rivolge ai luoghi della Natività di Betlemme.

Se l’uso in rapporto a luoghi visitati da dèi pagani è riconducibile a un solo passo delle *Dionisiache* di Nonno, tuttavia, anche in ambito cristiano si potrebbero ravvisare due precedenti, il primo nell’*Inventio crucis* del monaco cipriota Alessandro, datata probabilmente al VI sec.,[[25]](#footnote-25) il secondo nella *Vita Sabae* di Cirillo di Scitopoli, anch’essa di VI sec.[[26]](#footnote-26)

**4. Final remarks**

The recurrence of motive of the θεοδόχος Land at Sophronius’ and George’s time in reference to Bethlehem and Golgotha, is a microstylistic indicator of the attention that religious literature of the period gave to the topic of Incarnation and to the holy places of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, just at the moment when they ran the strong risk, which later became a reality, of it passing into the hands of the enemy and under the control of infidels. Moreover, with this adjectivation George and Sophronius were insisting on an identity reason of Christianity, during a time in which Jews and Persians of Zoroastrian faith, saw Incarnation and the mixture of human with divine as an abomination. In this context, the undisputed originality of Pisidia was to decline θεηδόχος/θεοδόχος in relation to Golgotha, just as Sophronius would have done for Bethlehem, another central and archetypal place of Incarnation.

As it is well known, the reason for the reconquest of the Holy Land, the one that George and Sophronius, even with different nuances, had originally called θεηδόχος, and a modern thinker like Ernest Renan even called "the Fifth Gospel", would have been the basis of Western propaganda for the Crusades, but with the victory of Saladin at Hattin (1187) even the hierosolymitan relics of the True Cross would have been lost forever. Not those preserved in Constantinople and scattered in various Catholic and Orthodox places of worship. Christianity, western and eastern, resigned, after the fall of St. John of Acres in 1291, to reality, which saw Jerusalem, the Golgotha and the *Anastasi* Church, in Muslim hands, but continue to practice the adoration of the Cross, as evidenced by the many dedicated churches. A fregiarsi del titolo di Θεοδόχος, invece, sin dal Tardo Antico sarebbe stato anche Simeone il Vecchio, personaggio che funge da cerniera tra Antico e Nuovo Testamento, perché aveva atteso la presentazione al Tempio di Gesù, nato da una Vergine, per morire.[[27]](#footnote-27)

1. Ὁ λόγος γὰρ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν, τοῖς δὲ σῳζομένοις ἡμῖν δύναμις θεοῦ ύστιν (*1 Cor.* 1.18). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cattaneo 2007. On the legend of Holy Wood, see also Baert 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *PG* 87/3, cc. 4015-4088 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is in the work of Cyril's nephew Gelasius, bishop of Caesarea (died around 395), that one should find the oldest mention of Elena's finding of the cross, of *titulus* and of the nails with which the bite and bridles of the emperor's horse are made: one truly should, because the work of this author is now lost, yet can be reconstructed starting from its mention in the *Library* of Photios and, above all, of the fragments contained in *Ecclesiastical History* by Rufinus (*PL* 21, cc. 475-478, in particular fragment 20; cfr. Winkelmann 1966). On the founding of the Holy Cross, see also Borgehammer 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sebeos 24.95. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sebeos 24.95-96. A short reconstruction of the events can be read in Cardini 2012, 89; Breccia 2016, 177-178. Sulla conquista di Gerusalemme e sulle cifre quasi certamente eccessive fornite dalle fonti cristiane, cfr. Avi-Yonah 1976, 261-265. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. τὰ τίμια καὶ ζωοποιὰ ξύλα λαβόντες σὺν αἰχμαλωσίᾳ πολλῇ ἐν Περσίδι ἀπήγαγον (Theoph. 301). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. According to Michael Psellos (Dick 1985, 48). Psellos wrote a famous pamphlet *De Euripide et Georgio Piside iudicium*. On Psellos’ final verdict, see also Frendo 1984, 159-160, n. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. E.g. in *Exp. Pers*. III 343. George’ poetic activity could be distinguished by two periods: a) from 610/611 or 619/620 until approx. 630, during which he dedicated himself to epic-encomiastic poetry; b) from 630 until his death, during which he dedicated himself to teological-moral poetry. If the entire production of the first period can be read in close relation to political and military happenings from the Kingdom of Heraclius, the handwritten tradition is clearly off-balance in favor of the teological production: one poem such as *Hexaemeron* is written by 44 Greek codes and two translations, one Slavic, and one Armenian. The epic-encomiastic poems, on the other hand, known as “panegirici epici” (Pertusi), are preserved by only 5 manuscripts (Tartaglia 1998, 55-56). The reasons for the lack of interest in the encomiastic production can be found in the prevalence of the theological-ascetic dimension in later Byzantine literature, reader of the *Hexaemeron*, and in the classical metre of panegyrics (iambic trimeter). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For an accurate reconstruction of Heraclius’ military campaign, see also Kaegi 2003, 156-191 and Breccia 2016, 189-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. More likely, the door, with its famous elegant two-arched profile, was built in honor of Heraclius and his entrance (Cardini 2012, 90). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sull’alternanza tra le due forme, la formazione di θεηδόχος può essere stata facilitata anche dall’esistenza di θεηκόλος, forma dotta per ‘sacerdote’, che ebbe successo nella prosa tarda (Solmsen 1901, 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ἡ μυστικὴ κλεὶς τῆς θεηδόχου πύλης, “la mistica chiave della porta che ha accolto Dio” (transl. Tartaglia), cioè la Vergine Maria. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nell’omelia 15 (*in canticum canticorum)*, per esempio, a proposito dell’Incarnazione Gregorio scrive che la Vergine non sapeva ὅπως ἐν τῷ σώματι αὐτῆς τὸ θεοδόχον συνέστη σῶμα. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *ACO* 1.1.1, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Caro 1972, 380-88 ascribes the sermon, which Marx 1940, 52-56 assigned to Proclos, to a later Cappadocian or Antiochene writer, possibly Theodoret of Cyrrhus. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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). La Vergine non è semplicemente θεοδόχος, bensì θεοτόκος in quanto ebbe un ruolo attivo nella nascita del Figlio di Dio (*PG* 28. 968). On this aspect of the cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity, see also Constas 2003, 276 n. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jugie 1926, 330, l. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Il primo passo è relativo alla concezione di Gesù (Ettlinger 1975, 105, l. 29), il secondo alla natura di Gesù, uomo θεοδόχος: ἐπειδὴ γὰρ οὐκ ἄλλοθεν, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ ἡμετέρου φυράματος, ὁ θεοδόχος ἄνθρωπος ἦν, ὁ διὰ τῆς ἀναστάσεως συνεπαρθεὶς τῇ θεότητι (Ettlinger 1975, 241, l. 7). L’aggettivo è attestato, inevitabilmente, anche in Nestorio, purtroppo solo in un frammento del sermone 10 ed. Loofs (ll. 114-115-116). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ἔχουσα θεοδόχον ἡ παρθένος τὴν μήτραν / ἀνέδραμε πρὸς τὴν Ἐλισάβετ (section 5, l. 2, ed. Trypanis). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Nelle *Dionisiache* (13.96) è declinato in riferimento a οὖδας (οἵ θ’ Ὑρίην ἐνέμοντο, θεηδόχον οὖδας ἀρούρης). Iria è definita terra *che accolse gli dèi*, e poi assunse il nome dall’ospitale Irieo. Sembrerebbe la prima attestazione di un uso di θεοδόχος riferito a uno spazio geografico. Nella *Parafrasi del Vangelo di Giovanni* (11.4, 11.8, 21.47) il motivo si ripete, non senza preziosità letteraria: ἀκτῆς δ’ ἐγγὺς ἵκανε θεηδόχον ᾐόνα βαίνων, / Ἰησοῦς ὅθι μίμνε δεδεγμένος (21.48). Del resto, l’immagine della terra calpestata da Cristo dovette presto avere risonanza e la tradizione relativa a reliquie come la sua orma lo dimostra. Negli altri tre passaggi della *Parafrasi*, invece, come da tradizione tardoantica, è la Vergine a essere definita καλλιέθειρα θεηδόχος. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ἔκφρασις τοῦ κοσμικοῦ πίνακος* (1.22 ed. Friedländer). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Usener 1886, 505 (l. 21); 506 (l. 14); 507 (l. 21). Sophronius, dedicatee of *The Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschus, was patriarch of Jerusalem from 634 to 638, probable year of his death and of Khalifa Omar's Arabs' entrance to Jerusalem. For an overview of Sophronius’ life and work, see von Schönborn 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. εἰς τὴν θεοδόχον… Βηθλεὲμ (Usener 1886, 513, l. 6). Poco oltre, nella stessa omelia: καὶ τὸ θεοδόχον ἄντρον φιλήσομεν (Usener 1886, 515, l. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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* 87/3.4077). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. ἵνα μὴ οἱ σεβάσμιοι ἐκεῖνοι καὶ θεοδόχοι / τόποι τοῖς Νεστορίου δόγμασιν καταμιαίνωνται (Schwartz 1939, 144). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Nel Nuovo Testamento, compare fugacemente in *Lc*. 2, 29-35. Il primo testo nel quale è dato trovare l’attribuzione dell’epiteto di θεοδόχος a Simeone è nell’incipit della *homilia in occursum Domini*, attribuita a Cirillo di Gerusalemme. Nella tradizione ortodossa è noto anche come Симеон Богоприимец, traduzione russa di θεοδόχος. San Simeone il Vecchio sarebbe diventato il patrono di Zara, che vanta di conservarne le spoglie, ma secondo un’altra tradizione le sue reliquie dai tempi della Quarta Crociata sono conservate nell’omonima chiesa veneziana. Su Simeone il Vecchio, vedi anche Frenschkowski 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)