Two Epigrams by George of Pisidia in the Greek Anthology

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The first book of the *Greek Anthology* offers the text of two verse inscriptions from the church of Blachernai: AP 1.120 ἐν Βλαχέρναις ἴαμβοι and AP 1.121 εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν ναόν[1]. These inscriptions celebrate the miraculous delivery of Constantinople in 626 when the city was besieged by the Avars and the Slavs (with the military aid of their allies, the Persians, from across the Bosporus): in contemporary sources, such as the homily *De obsidione avarica* by Theodore Synkellos, the *Bellum Avaricum* by George of Pisidia, and the *Chronicon Paschale*, this unexpected victory was unanimously attributed to the divine guardian of the city, the Theotokos, who was even said to have appeared on the city-walls and to have taken part in the naval battle in the Golden Horn, near her sanctuary at Blachernai[2].

RECONSTRUCTING THE TEXT

The provenance of most inscriptions in the *Greek Anthology* is the epigraphic sylloge that Gregory of Kampsa, headmaster at the school of the New Church in the later ninth century, put together. This sylloge was used by Constantine Kephalas, the scholar to whom we owe the *Greek*

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1. For the texts, see H. Beckby, *Anthologia Graeca*, Munich 1957-58, v. I, 178-79. For detailed commentaries, see P. Waltz, Notes sur les épigrammes chrétiennes de l'Anthologie Grecque (*Anth. Pal.*, I, 9, 48, 94, 106, 120-121), *Byz* 2 (1925), 317-328, at 323-328, and M. Whitby, The Patriarch Sergius and the Theotokos, *JÖB* 70 (2020), 403-425, at 409-414.

2. See M. Hurbanič, *The Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626: History and Legend*, Basingstoke 2019.

Anthology[3]. In order to assess whether a text in the *Greek Anthology* derives from this epigraphic sylloge or from a literary source, it needs to meet four requirements: (i) it must resemble inscriptions that are still to be found in situ; (ii) it must be anonymous; (iii) it must be equipped with a lemma noting its provenance; and (iv) it cannot be isolated, but must be part of a series of epigrams that qualify as verse inscriptions[4]. Given that the two epigrams, AP 1.120 and 121, fulfill all four requirements (they look inscriptional, they are anonymous, they mention their provenance, and they belong to a series of similar inscriptions at AP 1.103-122), it is reasonable to assume that they derive from the sylloge of verse inscriptions copied in situ by Gregory of Kampsa[5].

This is important because these two epigrams can also be found among the literary works of George of Pisidia. Pisides' epigrams and shorter poems have come down to us in numerous manuscripts, including Par. Suppl. gr. 690 (early 12th c.) and Par. gr. 1630 (14th c.): the former offers the main collection, but with omissions; the latter, some parts of it[6]. Par. Suppl. gr. 690 has only the first of these two epigrams; Par. gr. 1630 has both[7]. The titles of *AP* 1.120 and 121 in Par. gr. 1630 are quite similar to what we find in the

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3. See M.D. LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres: Texts and Contexts*, Vienna 2003-19, v. I, 73-74 and 86.

4. See LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry*, v. I, 73.

5. B. BALDWIN, Notes on Christian epigrams in book One of the Greek Anthology, in: *The Sixth Century: End or Beginning?*, ed. P. ALLEN – E.M. JEFFREYS, Brisbane 1996, 92-104, at 103, assumes that Kephalas made 'a conscious decision' to include only two of the many epigrams of Pisides. If that were the case (but why should it be?), then one would expect him to attribute these two epigrams to their author. The truth of the matter is that neither Gregory of Kampsa nor Constantine Kephalas appear to have known that the two verse inscriptions were the work of George of Pisidia.

6. For the manuscripts, see LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry*, v. I, 334-37.

7. CH. DU CANGE, *Ioannis Zonarae Annales*, Paris 1686, vol. II, *Notae*, 68, published the two epigrams on the basis of Par. gr. 1630. This edition was used, with a few noteable changes, by G. QUERCI in *Corporis Historiae Byzantinae appendix nova Opera Georgii Pisidae, Theodosii Diaconi et Corippi Africani Grammatici complectens*, Rome 1777, 334 and 341-342; repr. in *PG* 92, 1736-1739. L. STERNBACH, Georgii Pisidae carmina inedita, *WSt* 14 (1892), 51-68, at 58 (no. LIXb), published the first epigram on the basis of Par. Suppl. gr. 690. L. TARTAGLIA, *Carmi di Giorgio di Pisidia*, Turin 1998, 496-499 (nos. 95-96), reprinted the two epigrams on the basis of Querci and Sternbach, with facing translation in Italian.

Palatine manuscript of the *Greek Anthology*: εἰς τὸν ἐν Βλαχέρναις ναόν τοῦ αὐτοῦ (i.e. Pisides) and ἄλλοι. But the title of *AP* 1.120 in Par. Suppl. gr. 690 specifies where exactly in the Blachernai complex the inscription was located: εἰς τὸν νάρθηκα ἁγίας σοροῦ τῶν Βλαχερνῶν, 'in the narthex of the Holy Soros of Blachernai'. The Holy Soros was the name given to the chapel where the relic of the Theotokos, her *maphorion* (robe), was kept.

Before explaining why it is important to note that the texts have come down to us via two entirely different routes –as inscriptions copied *in situ* and as literary epigrams–, let us first look at the Greek[8].

P = Heidelberg, Palat. gr. 23, p. 63, M = Par. Suppl. gr. 690, fol. 116ʳ, B = Par. gr. 1630, fol. 166ʳ

> Εἰ φρικτὸν ἐν γῇ τοῦ Θεοῦ ζητεῖς θρόνον,
> ἰδὼν τὸν οἶκον θαύμασον τῆς Παρθένου·
> ἡ γὰρ φέρουσα τὸν Θεὸν ταῖς ἀγκάλαις
> φέρει τὸν αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ τοῦ τόπου σέβας.
> Ἐνταῦθα τῆς γῆς οἱ κρατεῖν τεταγμένοι   5
> τὰ σκῆπτρα πιστεύουσι τῆς νίκης ἔχειν.
> Ἐνταῦθα πολλὰς κοσμικὰς περιστάσεις
> ὁ πατριάρχης ἀγρυπνῶν ἀνατρέπει.
> Οἱ βάρβαροι δὲ περιλαβόντες τὴν πόλιν,
> αὐτὴν στρατηγήσασαν ὡς εἶδον μόνην,   10
> ἔκαμψαν εὐθὺς τοὺς ἀκαμπεῖς αὐχένας.

PMB **3** αὐτὴ γὰρ ἡ φέρουσα τὸν Θεὸν ἐν ἀγκάλαις P **9** παραλαβόντες τὴν πόλιν M προσβαλόντες τῇ πόλει B

'If you wish to see the frightful throne of God here on earth, look and marvel at the house of the Virgin, where she, bearing God in her arms, bears the same to the holiness of the place. Here those appointed to rule the earth trust that they hold the

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sceptres of victory. Here the Patriarch averts many worldly threats by keeping vigil. And it is here that the barbarians, laying siege to the city from all sides, bent at once their unbending necks when they saw that she alone was in command.'

> Ἔδει γενέσθαι δευτέραν Θεοῦ πύλην
> τῆς Παρθένου τὸν οἶκον ὡς καὶ τὸν τόκον
> κιβωτὸς ὤφθη τῆς πρὶν ἐνθεεστέρα,
> οὐ τὰς πλάκας φέρουσα τὰς θεογράφους,
> ἀλλ᾽ αὐτὸν ἔνδον τὸν Θεὸν δεδεγμένη.   5
> Ἐνταῦθα κρουνοὶ σαρκικῶν καθαρσίων
> καὶ ψυχικῶν λύτρωσις ἀγνοημάτων
> ὅσαι γάρ εἰσι τῶν παθῶν περιστάσεις,
> βλύζει τοσαύτας δωρεὰς τῶν θαυμάτων.
> Ἐνταῦθα νικήσασα τοὺς ἐναντίους   10
> ἀνεῖλεν αὐτοὺς ἀντὶ λόγχης εἰς ὕδωρ
> τροπῆς γὰρ ἀλλοίωσιν οὐκ ἔχει μόνη,
> Χριστὸν τεκοῦσα καὶ κλονοῦσα βαρβάρους.

PB **7** λύτρωσις B βλύζουσιν P **8** τῶν παθῶν περιστάσεις P προσβολαὶ παθημάτων B **10** τοὺς ἐναντίους BP (in marg.): τῶν ἐναντίων P (in textu) **12** μόνην P **13** Θεὸν τεκοῦσα B

'It was right that the house of the Virgin, like her child-bearing before, should become a gate for God. She showed herself an Ark more divine than that of old, not carrying the tablets written by God, but having received God himself. Here are springs for fleshly purification, here is redemption for the errors of the soul: however many are the perilous passions, so many gifts of miracles spring forth from her. It is here that she defeated the enemy and destroyed them by water, not by arms. For she alone knows neither change nor swerve, both in giving birth to Christ and in putting barbarians to flight.'

If we now turn to the differences between the two text traditions, it is reasonable to assume that some of these resulted from the difficulties Gregory of Kampsa must have had in deciphering the inscriptions. Let us not forget that even an experienced epigrapher nowadays may struggle to read an inscription with the naked eye from ground level, standing in a dimly

lit church and looking at fading letters. Things will not have been much different in the later ninth century when Gregory collected his epigraphic materials because by that time the inscriptions in the Blachernai complex were already some 250 years old. It is highly likely that the image of the Holy Virgin and the accompanying inscriptions were placed on one of the walls of the narthex, probably the wall with the doorway that led to the sanctuary[9]. This finds further corroboration in lines 3-4 of AP 1.120, saying that the Holy Virgin bears her child εἰς τὸ τοῦ τόπου σέβας. The word σέβας means 'awe, respect, veneration', and then, by extension, the object of veneration or the holy site that inspires awe: i.e. the sanctuary where the relic of the Theotokos was kept. *The Life of Stephen the Younger* recounts how the saint's mother, having given birth after years of barrenness, thanked the Theotokos by taking her little child to the Blachernai church, kneeling in front of an image of Mary with child, and raising him up to touch the feet of Mary[10]. This too strongly suggests that the image of the Holy Virgin holding her child was situated low enough for the faithful to touch her feet, that is, on one of the walls[11].

Like the mother of St Stephen the Younger, Gregory of Kampsa is likely to have been able to touch the lower part of the image, but anything above eye level may have been difficult to decipher. Some of the misreadings of the Palatine manuscript, such as μόνην instead of μόνη (AP 1.121, 12), are likely to be the fault of the scribe who, misled by ἀλλοίωσιν in the same line, thought he needed an accusative. The same scribe erroneously wrote down τῶν ἐναντίων instead of τοὺς ἐναντίους (AP 1.121, 10), but then corrected his own mistake. I do not know what went wrong at AP 1.120, 3 with the reading αὐτὴ γὰρ ἡ (probably influenced by αὐτὸν in the next line): was this the scribe, or the epigrapher nodding off like the proverbial Homer? The same line has a prosodic mistake: Θεὸν ἐν ἀγκάλαις instead of Θεὸν ταῖς ἀγκάλαις: this could be a mistake made in haste by the epigrapher, given that ἐν ἀγκάλαις is more common than ταῖς ἀγκάλαις; but it could equally

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9. See A. Effenberger, Marienbilder im Blachernenheiligtum, *Millennium* 13 (2016), 275-325, at 290.

10. Ed. M.-F. Auzépy, *La vie d'Étienne le Jeune par Étienne le Diacre*, Aldershot 1997, 92-93.

11. See Effenberger, Marienbilder, 291.

be the scribe jumping to conclusions[12]. However, there is one reading that definitely looks like a mistake by Gregory of Kampsa: *βλύζουσιν* at AP 1.121, 7. Seeing how similar *λύτρωσις* and *βλύζουσιν* are, it is easy to guess what went wrong: namely, that Gregory could make out with great difficulty the letters *λυ* and *σι* and then inferred that the word had to be *βλύζουσιν* because of *κρουνοὶ* in the preceding line – because that is what 'springs' do, they 'gush forth'.

Turning now to the other avenue of transmission, that of Pisides' collection of epigrams, there too we may find understandable mistakes, such as *Θεὸν* instead of *Χριστὸν* at AP 1.121, 13. Since the Mother of God is called *Θεοτόκος* ever since the council of Ephesus, practically all Byzantine texts will say that she gave birth to God (*Θεὸν τεκοῦσα*). As *Χριστὸν τεκοῦσα* is clearly the lectio difficilior, I think it is preferable. In line 9 of AP 1.120, M reads *παραλαβόντες* instead of *περιλαβόντες τὴν πόλιν*, which is clearly wrong: the Avars encircled the city, they did not capture it[13]. The reading of B, *προσβαλόντες τῇ πόλει* ('they attacked the city') is a classic example of *vitium byzantinum*: the tendency to avoid metrical resolution at all costs, even in the case of a poet such as Pisides who occasionally has lines of thirteen syllables[14].

This leaves us with the textual problem at *AP* 1.121, 8: *τῶν παθῶν περιστάσεις* P vs *προσβολαὶ παθημάτων* B. It is impossible to choose between the two readings because they are equally good and look Pisidian to me. The most likely solution is that both readings go back to the author himself, who slightly modified the text when he included it in his collection

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12. As rightly pointed out by one of the peer reviewers, the line *αὐτὴ γὰρ ἡ φέρουσα τὸν Θεὸν ἐν ἀγκάλαις* would be prosodically correct if we deleted *τὸν* (with metrical resolution in *Θεὸν*). But the emphatic use of *αὐτὴ* makes little sense: 'she *herself* bearing God in her arms, ...'– who else?

13. G. PAPAGIANNIS, Παρατηρήσεις εἰς τὰ ἐπιγράμματα τοῦ Γεωργίου Πισίδη, *ΕΕΒΣ* 53 (2003), 5-49, at 27-28, suggests to read *παραβαλόντες τῇ πόλει*, 'they approached the city', which seems a somewhat bland description for what the Avars were doing: laying siege to Constantinople using catapults and other engines and trying to invade it from the Golden Horn.

14. See M. D. LAUXTERMANN, Some remarks on Pisides' epigrams and shorter poems, in: *L'épistolographie et la poésie épigrammatique* , ed. W. HÖRANDNER – M. GRÜNBART, Paris 2003, 177-189, at 179.

of epigrams[15]. Similar discrepancies between inscriptions and manuscript versions must have been fairly common; but since we do not have that many matches (inscriptions found both *in situ* and in manuscript), there is little to build on[16]. But a good example is an epitaph by George Bardanes, metropolitan of Corfu in the early thirteenth century, where the inscription offers συνθϱηνεῖτε and the manuscript version συνθϱοεῖτε[17]. Another example is the early fourteenth-century inscription on the *parekklesion* of the Church of Pammakaristos, which reads in line 14: ὡς ὄστϱεον δ᾽ οὖν ὀϱγανῶ σοι τὴν στέγην; but the text as transmitted in the literary oeuvre of Manuel Philes reads: ὡς ὄστϱεον γοῦν ὀϱγανῶ σοι τὸν τάφον[18]. A similar case is the paraenetic poem of John Nesteutes (late 11th c.), which used to be inscribed in the refectory of the Petra monastery: here too there are differences between the actual inscription and the literary source[19].

RECONSTRUCTING THE CONTEXT

Inscriptions entertain a dialogue both with their physical surroundings and with the passers-by who happen to see them. In the case of the Blachernai complex, however, this dialogue is muted because there is nothing left and the pilgrims are long gone. In the first two lines of AP 1.120, a dispassionate voice creating its own discursive space addresses the accidental passers-by: "if you wish to see ...", and then goes on by telling them to look no further. It is all there, right in front of them, in the house of the Virgin. There are many spatial references in these two inscriptions. It is particularly the insistent use of the adverb ἐνταῦθα (AP 1.120, 4 and 6; 121, 6 and 10) that draws in the passer-by and makes the textual space almost real and palpable.

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15. See Lauxtermann, Some remarks, 179. This means that the editor of the *Greek Anthology* should offer the reading that Gregory of Kampsa transcribed *in situ* and that the editor of Pisides' epigrams should offer the revised text.

16. For the very few matches to survive, see Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry*, v. I, 31-32.

17. Ed. A. Rhoby, *Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung: Byzantinische Epigramme auf Stein*, Vienna 2014, v. III.1, 257 (GR69.11).

18. Ed. Rhoby, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Stein*, v. III.1, 663 (TR76.14).

19. See M.D. Lauxtermann – G. M. Paoletti, Three verse inscriptions in the refectory of the Petra monastery, in: *Bisanzio nello spazio e nel tempo: Costantinopoli, la Siria: atti della XIV giornata di studi dell' AISB, Roma 109-11 Novembre 2017*, ed. S. Ronchey – F. Monticini [OCA 307], Rome 2019, 85-116, at 97.

The same goes for some of the colourful metaphors used for the Theotokos. She is called a *πύλη* at AP 1.121, 1. This is a common metaphor in Byzantine hymnography because the Theotokos is the gate through which Christ entered this world and saved mankind[20]. In the epigram of Pisides, however, the Theotokos is called a *πύλη* not only because she is the Mother of God and the spiritual gateway to redemption and heavenly bliss, but also because her image is actually close to the entrance to the sanctuary of the Holy Soros. It is both a metaphor and a spatial marker.

As I already explained, *τὸ τοῦ τόπου σέβας* (AP 1.120, 4) refers to the inner sanctum, the holy of holies, where the relic of the Theotokos was kept. In the *Bellum Avaricum* 457-461, Pisides uses a similar expression to refer to the Holy Soros: *ξένον γὰρ οὐδὲν εἰ <προ>πολεμεῖ Παρθένος, / δι' ἧς παρῆλθεν εἰς τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς σέβας /οὐκ οἶδα πῶς πεμφθεῖσα ῥομφαία πάλιν / ὅμως παρῆλθεν ἢ διῆλθεν ὀξέως /τρώσασα τὴν ἄτρωτον οὐδαμοῦ φύσιν,* 'it was nothing strange for the Virgin to fight in the front ranks, through whom, again, a sword passed into the sanctum of her soul, though I know not how it was aimed at her; nonetheless, it did pass into her, or rather, it quickly passed through her, without in the least harming her invulnerable nature'[21]. In this passage Pisides alludes to the prediction made to the Theotokos at Luke 2:35: 'a sword will pierce your soul', which patristic authors interpreted as referring to her sorrows at the passion of Christ[22]. Here it means that the Avar swords did manage to cut their way into the Theotokos' inner sanctum, the soul of the building, but without damaging it[23]. The equation of the Theotokos or her soul with the sanctuary

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20. For the metaphor, see M. D. Lauxtermann – P. Thonemann, A Byzantine Verse Inscription from Konya, in: *Inscribing Texts in Byzantium: Continuities and Transformations*, ed. M. D. Lauxtermann – I. Toth, Abingdon 2020, 337-346, at 343, and R. Franchi, La vergine Maria nella opera di Giorgio di Pisidia: tra realtà e teologia, *Marianum* 73 (2011), 329-356, at 351-352.

21. Ed. A. Pertusi, *Giorgio di Pisidia: Poemi. I. Panegirici epici*, Ettal 1959, 197. All further references to the *Bellum Avaricum* are to this edition. Translation (slightly adapted) by A. Kaldellis, A union of opposites: The moral logic and corporeal presence of the Theotokos on the field of battle, in: *Pour l'amour de Byzance: Hommage à Paolo Odorico*, ed. C. Gastgeber et al., Frankfurt-am-Main 2012, 131-144, at 140.

22. See Franchi, La vergine Maria nella opera di Giorgio di Pisidia, 336.

23. *Chronicon Paschale* , ed. L. Dindorf [CSHB], v.1, Bonn 1832, 725-726: *Εἰς μέντοι τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τῆς δεσποίνης ἡμῶν τῆς Θεοτόκου καὶ τὴν ἁγίαν σορὸν εἰσελθόντες οἱ*

built in her honour is a common metonymy in the Orthodox world where people refer to churches and monasteries by the name of the saint venerated there (*Αϊ-Γιώργης* is not only the saint, but also any sanctuary dedicated to him)[24]. The word *σέβας* also turns up in an inscription that Leo I and Verina had allegedly put on the reliquary casket of the maphorion: *τοῦτο τῇ Θεοτόκῳ προσκομίσαντες τὸ σέβας τῆς βασιλείας ἠσφαλίσαντο κράτος* ('By offering this sanctum to the Theotokos, they have secured the might of the empire')[25].

The word *κιβωτός* at AP 1.121, 3-5, is another very common metaphor for the Theotokos: she is compared to the ark because she carries the new covenant with her – her son, Jesus Christ[26]. But it implicitly refers, again, to the Holy Soros and its reliquary casket which, like the ark, contained the presence of the divine. In similar fashion, Theodore Synkellos compares the reliquary casket to the ark twice in the homily he wrote for the return of the holy robe to Blachernai in c. 628[27].

Thus we see that the poet, through a dense web of metaphors, situates the two inscriptions at a specific location: near the entrance to the inner

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ἐχθροὶ οὐδὲν ἠδυνήθησαν παντοίως τῶν ἐκεῖσε καταβλάψαι, τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ πρεσβείᾳ τῆς ἀχράντου αὐτοῦ μητρὸς οὕτω οἰκονομήσαντος. Cf. *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 AD*, tr. M. and M. WHITBY, Liverpool 1989, 180: 'However, after approaching the church of our Lady the Mother of God and the Holy Reliquary, the enemy were completely unable to damage any of the things there, since God showed favour, at the intercession of his undefiled Mother'. That the Avar vanguard had ensconced themselves in the Blachernai complex is also clear from Pisides' *Bellum Avaricum*, 404-408.

24. Both P. SPECK, *Zufälliges zum Bellum Avaricum des Georgios Pisides*, Munich 1980, 49-50, and J.-L. VAN DIETEN, Zum *Bellum Avaricum* des Georgios Pisides: Bemerkungen zu einer Studie von Paul Speck, *BF* 9 (1985), 149-178, at 177, failed to grasp the metonymy and, therefore, misinterpreted the passage.

25. Ed. A. WENGER, *L'assomption de la T.S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du VIe au Xe siècle*, Paris 1955, 300 (§12). Translation (slightly adapted) by C. MANGO, The origins of the Blachernae shrine at Constantinople, in: *Acta XIII congressus internationalis archaeologiae christianae*, ed. N. CAMBI – E. MARIN, Vatican–Split 1998, v. II, 61-76, at 73. Mango renders *σέβας* as 'honour', Wenger (on pp. 132 and 301) as 'sanctuaire'.

26. For the Theotokos as the ark of the covenant, see FRANCHI, La vergine Maria nella opera di Giorgio di Pisidia, 352-354.

27. Ed. F. COMBEFIS, *Historia haeresis monothelitarum* (=*Graecolatinorum patrum bibliothecae novum auctarium*, v. II), Paris 1648, 751-788, at 767CD and 771E.

sanctum, at the very threshold of the Holy Soros. In lines 6-9 of AP 1.121, he also signals the presence of another wondrous place nearby, the λοῦμα, the bathhouse in which a miraculous spring flowed that cured bodies and souls[28]. This, in its turn, forms an almost natural transition to the miracle the Theotokos performed in the Golden Horn when she sank the enemy canoes and drowned the Slavs who tried to enter the city from there: ἀνεῖλεν αὐτοὺς ἀντὶ λόγχης εἰς ὕδωρ (AP 1.121, 11)[29] – she cures with water, she kills in water[30]. Whereas the passers-by are initially asked to look and marvel at the sanctuary of the Holy Soros (AP 1.120, 1-2) and then implicitly invited to enter the sanctuary itself (AP 1.120, 3-4 and 121, 1-2) and venerate the reliquary (AP 1.121, 3-5), here they are guided in an opposite direction, from the inside to the outside: from the Theotokos' place of awe to the place where she demonstrated her military might.

So much for the spatial references; it is time now to turn to the temporal framework of the two inscriptions. Whereas the events of the Avar siege are firmly set in the past (εἶδον, ἔκαμψαν, ἀνεῖλεν), the present tense is used for the actions of the emperors and the patriarch at AP 1.120, 5-8, indicating that they are supposed to occur regularly. They are recurring events, and the emperors who 'trust that they hold the sceptres of victory' are therefore not only the reigning dynasty, but also include the emperors of the past, from Leo I who built the Holy Soros to Justin II and his successors[31]. As we have seen, the inscription that Leo I and Verina placed on the reliquary casket already associates the Blachernai sanctuary with

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28. See C. Mango, Constantinople as Theotokoupolis, in: *Mother of God: representations of the Virgin in Byzantine art*, ed. M. Vassilaki, Milan 2000, 17-25, at 22 and 25, n. 62, and B. V. Pentcheva, *Icons and power: the Mother of God in Byzantium*, University Park, PA, 2006, 62.

29. The suggestion by Whitby, The Patriarch Sergius and the Theotokos, 411, to read εἶσ' (<εἶσα) and translate 'sending forth water instead of a lance', is wrong because Pisides systematically avoids elision: see L. Sternbach, Observationes in Georgii Pisidae carmina historica. Appendix metrica, *Rozprawy Akademii Umiejętności, Wydział filologiczny*, ser. II, 15 (1900), 199-296, at 260-76. For a similar use of εἰς, see *Bellum Avaricum* 468 ἄλλος δὲ νεκρὸν εἰς ὕδωρ μιμούμενος, 'and another pretending to be drowned in the water'.

30. As Whitby, The Patriarch Sergius and the Theotokos', 412, rightly notes, 'the second part of *AP* I 121 is held together by the language of water'.

31. For the history of the Blachernai sanctuary, see Mango, The origins of the Blachernae shrine.

imperial victory: 'By offering this sanctum to the Theotokos, they have secured the *might* of the empire'[32]. In Procopius we read that the two Marian shrines of Blachernai and Pege πρὸ τοῦ τῆς πόλεως πεποίηται τείχους ... ὅπως δὴ ἄμφω ἀκαταγώνιστα φυλακτήρια τῷ περιβόλῳ τῆς πόλεως εἶεν ('were erected outside the city-wall ... in order that both of them may serve as invincible defences to the circuit-wall of the city')[33]. In his homily on the Avar siege, Theodore Synkellos reports that when the siege began, the children of emperor Herakleios prayed to the Holy Virgin and reminded her that their father had entrusted (ἐπίστευσε καὶ παρέθετο) the city and the imperial family to her[34]. Pisides uses the same verb πιστεύω at AP 1.120, 6 to underline that emperors have always put their trust in the victorious Theotokos. As for the patriarch 'keeping vigil' (AP 1.120, 7-8), though the immediate association obviously is with patriarch Sergios, Pisides also refers in general to all patriarchs taking part in the weekly liturgical ceremony (the πρεσβεία) held at the Blachernai shrine[35]. In the *Bellum Avaricum*, lines 137 and 141, however, Pisides is more specific. There he addresses Sergios as the 'general of efficacious vigils and weaponized tears': χαῖρε, στρατηγὲ πρακτικῆς ἀγρυπνίας ... χαῖρε, στρατηγὲ τῶν ἐνόπλων δακρύων. In other words, it is the piety that Sergios displays in holding vigils and tearful confessions to the Theotokos which saves the city from military disaster[36].

While the faith of emperors and the piety of patriarchs exist for all eternity, the Avar threat is a moment in time: they came, they saw the Theotokos, and they lost. The Avars are never called Avars by Pisides, but

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32. See Mango, The origins of the Blachernae shrine, 73, and Id., Constantinople as Theotokoupolis, 21-23.

33. Ed. J. Haury, *Procopius IV: De aedificiis libri VI*, Leipzig 1964, 21. Transl. H.B. Dewing, *Procopius VII: Buildings*, Cambridge, MA, 1940, 41 (§ I.iii.9).

34. Ed. L. Sternbach, Analecta Avarica, *Rozprawy Akademii Umiejętności, Wydział filologiczny*, ser. II, 15 (1900), 297-365, at 303, lines 7-14.

35. See Pentcheva, *Icons and power*, 62.

36. For the portrayal of Sergios in Pisides' poetry, see M. Whitby, Defender of the Cross: George of Pisidia on the Emperor Heraclius and his deputies, in: *The Propaganda of Power: The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. M. Whitby, Leiden–Boston 1998, 247-273, at 266-269; Eadem, Leo Sternbach, George of Pisidia, the Theotokos, and the Patriarch Sergius, in: *Byzantina et Slavica: Studies in Honour of Professor Maciej Salamon*, ed. S. Turlej et al., Krakow 2019, 423-434; and Eadem, The Patriarch Sergius and the Theotokos, 404-409 and 414-422.

'barbarians' because of the felicitous homophony between Ἄβαρος and βάρβαρος[37]. At AP 1.120, 9-11, Pisides alludes to the story that the Chagan of the Avars allegedly stated that he had seen 'a woman in stately dress rushing about on the wall all alone', and this is why they had lost[38]. But here it is not the Chagan himself, but the Avars who are said to have witnessed the Holy Virgin in action and then, confronted with such a formidable opponent, to 'have bent their unbending necks'[39]. At AP 1.121, 10-11, Pisides states with great confidence that the Holy Virgin 'defeated the enemy and destroyed them by water, not by arms'. In the *Bellum Avaricum* 448-456, however, Pisides is more cautious in his description of the 'invisible battle' in the Golden Horn by suggesting, but not stating categorically (οἶμαι is the verb he uses), that it was the Holy Virgin who engaged in single combat with the enemy[40].

The two combat scenes, one on land (*AP* 1.120, 9-11) and the other on sea (*AP* 1.121, 10-11), culminate in two majestic, but untranslatable lines:

τροπῆς γὰρ ἀλλοίωσιν οὐκ ἔχει μόνη,
Χριστὸν τεκοῦσα καὶ κλονοῦσα βαρβάρους.

As Waltz and others after him rightly observed[41], Pisides reverts here to a concept that he expressed with greater clarity in the opening passage of the *Bellum Avaricum* (lines 4-9): '... For she alone (μόνη) knows how to conquer nature always, first in childbirth and then in battle. For it was right that, as she once gave birth to our salvation without seed (ἀσπόρως), so now she should do so without weapons (ἀόπλως), so that she may in both be found a virgin, and unchanging in battle as in birth (ὅπως δι᾽ ἀμφοῖν

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37. See, for example, *Bellum Avaricum* 364: τὸ Περσικόν τε καὶ τὸ βάρβαρον γένος ('both the Persian and the barbarian [i.e. Avar] tribes').

38. Ἐγὼ θεωρῶ γυναῖκα σεμνοφοροῦσαν περιτρέχουσαν εἰς τὸ τεῖχος μόνην οὖσαν. *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. DINDORF, v. 1, 725. Transl. by M. and M. WHITBY, *Chronicon Paschale*, 180.

39. The 'unbending necks' (ἀκαμπεῖς αὐχένας) must be a literary allusion to a lost source: the expression can be found in a contemporary source (John Moschos' *Spiritual Meadow*, ch. 182: *PG* 87.3, 3053D) and many later texts, but nothing before c. 600. For the 'neck' as a symbol of insolence and arrogance, see *LSJ*, s.v. αὐχήν, I.2.

40. For an analysis of this passage and other sources that mention the presence of the Holy Virgin on the battle field in 626, see KALDELLIS, A union of opposites, 138-142.

41. WALTZ, Notes sur les épigrammes chrétiennes, 325-327; PAPAGIANNIS, Παρατηρήσεις εἰς τὰ ἐπιγράμματα, 47-48; WHITBY, The Patriarch Sergius and the Theotokos, 412.

εὑρεθῇ καὶ παρθένος / καὶ πρὸς μάχην ἄτρεπτος ὡς πρὸς τὸν τόκον)[42]. The Theotokos is ἄτρεπτος because, even after giving birth, she remains the same –a virgin– and because, even in man-to-man combat, she does not turn to flight[43]. The splendid pleonasm in Pisides' epigram, τροπῆς ἀλλοίωσιν (literally, 'alteration of change'), explores the same ambiguity of meaning through word play because τροπὴ also means 'rout'.

The references to the 'inner sanctum' where the *maphorion* was kept and to the 'ark' as a metaphor for the reliquary casket strongly suggest that the two inscriptions were placed in the narthex after the *maphorion* had been returned to the Holy Soros. The return of the relic and other precious objects, which had been removed for safekeeping after the Avar raid of 623, took place on 2 July, probably in 628[44]. It is in the same period, 628 or slightly later, that Pisides composed another verse inscription for another sanctuary of the Theotokos, that of the Pege, which, like Blachernai, lay outside the city walls and had had its fair share of fighting[45]. The three verse inscriptions, the two at Blachernai and the one at the Pege, bear witness to a programme of restoration and renewal of shrines and sanctuaries after the Avar devastations.

There is one final question: what did the image in the narthex of the Holy Soros look like? Whether it was a wall painting or a mosaic, we will never know; but I think the reference at AP 1.120, 1 to the 'throne of God' indicates beyond any reasonable doubt that the Holy Virgin was portrayed sitting on a throne – just as she was in the apse mosaic of the sanctuary itself[46].

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42. Translation and commentary by J. Trilling, Myth and metaphor at the Byzantine court: A literary approach to the David plates, *Byz* 48 (1978), 249-263, at 255-257.

43. For Mary's virginal motherhood as the key to understanding her paradoxical presence on the battle field, see Pentcheva, *Icons and power*, 63-69.

44. See J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the seventh century* (Oxford, 2010), 147-148. See also Effenberger, Marienbilder, 321-325.

45. Ed. Sternbach, Georgii Pisidae carmina inedita, 59-60 (no. LXIII); reprinted by Tartaglia, *Carmi di Giorgio di Pisidia*, 498-500 (no. 102). For a translation and commentary, see Whitby, The Patriarch Sergius and the Theotokos, 412-413. For military clashes near the church of the Zoodochos Pege, see I. Kimmelfield, The shrine of the Virgin at the Pege, in *Fountains and Water Culture in Byzantium*, ed. B. Shilling – P. Stephenson, Cambridge 2016, 299-313, at 304-305.

46. So also Whitby, The Patriarch Sergius and the Theotokos, 411. For this apse mosaic,

The expression *θρόνος τοῦ Θεοῦ* usually stands for 'heaven' because that is where God resides; but as the Theotokos is more spacious than the heavens because she carries in her womb the Creator of all, she too, metaphorically, can be called the throne of God. See, for example, Ps. Epiphanius: 'O blessed Virgin (...), you who are heaven and church and throne of God (*οὐρανὸς καὶ ναὸς καὶ θρόνος τῆς θεότητος*), because you hold Christ, the sun that shines in the heavens and shines upon earth'[47]. Pisides calls this 'throne of God' frightful (*φρικτόν*) because the altar space –another metaphorical meaning of *θρόνος τοῦ Θεοῦ*– inspires religious awe. For a similar text associating the Theotokos with the awe-inspiring altar space, see the canon on the Hypapante by Andrew of Crete: *ἡ Παρθένος σήμερον* φρικτὸν θυσιαστήριον* καὶ θρόνος καὶ ναὸς Θεοῦ* γινώσκεται* ('it is now that the Virgin is known as the dread altar and throne and church of God')[48].

What more can we say about the image? The enthroned and awe-inspiring Theotokos is holding her child: see *AP* 1.120, 3-4. The mural may have shown two angels standing behind the throne, as so often in images of the Theotokos, but the text does not tell us. Since the reference to the emperors and the patriarch at *AP* 1.120, 5-8 is of a generic nature and includes all emperors and patriarchs, it is highly unlikely that the image showed emperor Herakleios and patriarch Sergios. It is precisely because Mary and child are depicted without any humans present that the image inspires awe: the passer-by looking at the 'frightful throne of God' is in the presence of the inexplicable mystery of the Theotokos' supernatural power, 'both in giving birth to Christ and in putting barbarians to flight'.

The two inscriptions must have framed the image, the first to the right and the second to the left, with the last two lines of the second inscription possibly written underneath, so that there would be an equal number of lines on either side of the Theotokos and the key message of Pisides would immediately draw the attention of the passers-by addressed in these two texts:

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see EFFENBERGER, Marienbilder, 284-289; the same EFFENBERGER, pp. 290-291, thinks that Pisides describes a Hodegetria, but ignores the clear-cut reference to the 'throne of God'.

47. Ps. Epiphanius, *Homilia in laudes Mariae deiparae*, *PG* 43.492B; for similar expressions in the same homily, see *PG* 43.488D and 501A. See FRANCHI, La vergine Maria nella opera di Giorgio di Pisidia, 348.

48. Ed. E. TOMADAKIS – G. SCHIRÒ, *Analecta hymnica graeca e codicibus eruta Italiae inferioris, vol. 6. Canones Februarii,* Rome 1974, 3 (1.47-50).

τροπῆς γὰρ ἀλλοίωσιν οὐκ ἔχει μόνη,
Χριστὸν τεκοῦσα καὶ κλονοῦσα βαρβάρους.
But that, of course, is speculation.

Δυο Επιγραμματα του Γεωργιου Πισιδη στην *Παλατινη Ανθολογια*

Στο πρώτο βιβλίο της *Παλατινής Ανθολογίας* (1.120 και 1. 121) υπάρχουν δύο έμμετρες επιγραφές από την Παναγία των Βλαχερνών, που εξυμνούν την θαυματουργή επέμβαση της Θεοτόκου για την σωτηρία της Κωνσταντινούπολης το 626 από τους Αβάρους. Τα κείμενα απαντώνται επίσης μεταξύ των ποιημάτων του Γεωργίου Πισίδη. Στην εργασία επιχειρείται σύγκριση των κειμένων, συνοδευόμενη από φιλολογικοϊστορικό σχολιασμό.