

THE TERRITORIAL AMBITIONS OF CHOSROES II, AN ARMENIAN VIEW?

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The Armenian historical work commonly attributed to Sebeos records a remarkable letter purporting to have been sent by the Persian Emperor Chosroes II during the 34th year of his reign to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. This letter together with its immediately surrounding narrative context may be rendered approximately as follows:

"And it came to pass in the thirty-fourth year of king Chosroes that he wrote to Heraclius an official communication in the following terms: Chosroes, esteemed by the gods and lord and king of all the earth and descendant of the great Aramazd, to our witless and worthless slave, Heraclius.

"You have not wished to submit yourself to serving us, but instead you call yourself lord and king. And my treasures which are in your possession, you squander and my slaves you corrupt and, having assembled an army of brigands, you do not let me rest. Have I not indeed annihilated the Greeks? And you say that you put your trust in your God! Why did they not save Caesarea and Jerusalem and great Alexandria from my hands? Is it possible that you even now do not know that I have subjected land and sea to my sway? Can it be that Constantinople alone I shall not be able to reduce by siegecraft? But now I remit all your transgressions: arise, take your wife and your sons and come hither. And I shall give

you estates, vineyards and olive-groves, whereby you may live, and we shall look upon you with affection. Let not the empty hope you jointly entertain deceive you: for that Christ who could not save himself from the Jews, but they killed him by fastening him to a tree, how can he save you from my hands? For, if you descend into the very depths of the sea, I shall stretch out my hand and seize you, and then you shall see me in a manner that you will not wish for.

"And the Emperor Heraclius, on receipt of the king's letter, gave orders for it to be read out in the presence of the Patriarch and the nobles. And, entering the house of God, they spread out the royal dispatch in front of the holy altar, prostrated themselves on the ground before the Lord, and wept bitterly, that he might see the insults which his enemies had heaped upon him.

"Heraclius and all the Senators decided to place on the throne of the kingdom Heraclius' son, Constantine, who was a small child. And Heraclius equipped himself to take his wife and set off for the East."¹

Before attempting to analyze the contents of this letter in any detail, however, I should like to draw attention to the seemingly weighty objections to its authenticity put forward in 1906 by E.W. Brooks in a review of Angelo Pernice's work *L'Imperatore Eraclio*.² The reason for doing this, apart from the obvious consideration that, unless such objections are in some way disposed of, further discussion within all but the most limited terms of reference must prove futile, is that the only way in which they can be disposed of raises questions of historical method of an extremely important and far-reaching nature. Brooks's actual words run as follows: "Again, in accepting the letter of Khosrau as genuine he (i.e., Pernice) has failed to notice that it is an imitation of Sennacherib's letter to Hezekiah, and that in chapter 36 Sebeos relates a similar story of the Caliph 'Uthman and the grandson of Heraclius."³

First of all, let us examine the contention that "it is an imitation of Sennacherib's letter to Hezekiah." The biblical context on which this statement is based was supplied by Macler in 1904 in a footnote to his French translation of Sebeos, where he refers the reader to Isaiah 36-37,⁴ which passage is itself a repetition of II Kings 18:13 ff.⁵ Now, if every instance where a writer or his source explicitly or implicitly assimilates, accommodates, or adapts his narrative account to some well-known biblical parallel

were taken as conclusive evidence for impugning the veracity of the substance of what is actually said, then we should be left with next to nothing, not just from Armenian writers but even from the surviving contemporary Greek record, upon which to base most of the little that we do know and can hope to infer about the reign of Heraclius. Such extremes of scepticism are perhaps an accidental by-product of the excessive literal-mindedness which occasionally characterizes the nineteenth- and twentieth-century western critical intelligence. What Sebeos has done, in fact, is to accommodate his narrative and his letter to selected similarities in the Hezekiah story which admit of such a treatment, whilst passing over in silence whole sections of material, which are omitted for the very good reason that they have no bearing whatsoever on the actual import of what he is recording.

Moreover, the process also works the other way. A few examples should suffice to make my meaning clear. In the first place the rôle of the prophet Isaiah, who figures so prominently in the biblical narrative, has no counterpart in Sebeos. Secondly, the list of Byzantine cities which have fallen to Chosroes forms only a partial parallel to the list of peoples under the protection of their tribal gods who have succumbed to the onslaught of the Assyrian king. That has happened, as Hezekiah himself is not slow to point out, because "these were not gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone."⁶ Still less is the curious claim made on behalf of Sennacherib in the account of the embassy leading up to the letter to Hezekiah, namely that the invasion has been undertaken at the suggestion of Yahweh, even remotely echoed or taken up.⁷ On the other hand, Chosroes' offer to Heraclius of a privileged existence under the protection and patronage of the King of Kings in exchange for submission has no parallel in Sennacherib's letter and, whilst reminiscent of, is substantially different from the call, made in the embassy preceding the letter, for the resignation and submission of an entire nation to the prospect of imminent deportation. Again, the threat of what will happen to Heraclius in the case of non-compliance, with which Chosroes' letter ends, has no parallel in either Sennacherib's letter or in its surrounding context. Likewise, Hezekiah reads alone the letter which he receives and his ministers are concerned that the similar contents of the earlier embassy should not be proclaimed in public; Heraclius has his letter read aloud to a distinguished audience. Finally, Chosroes' titles with which the letter opens have an authentic contemporary ring about them and correspond to nothing in Sennacherib's letter. Examples could be multiplied, but it should by now be apparent that we are dealing here with a sophisticated literary technique, which by a drastically selective use of parallel material seeks to

transform the recital of great and stirring events of recent and contemporary history into a dramatic re-enactment of equally great and stirring events of past history, without seriously impinging on the contemporary reality which it also sets out to describe. All this is a very far cry from mere fabrication. Indeed, the only thing that has all the appearance of having been invented by the author in order to reproduce an episode from the Bible is the scene in the church where Chosroes' letter is spread out in front of the altar.

Brooks's second objection, that "in chapter 36 Sebeos relates a similar story of the Caliph 'Uthman and the grandson of Heraclius," carries the implication that one story is a doublet of the other without, however, specifying in which direction the dependency is thought to lie. It would also appear to follow from his first objection that the reduplication in question is one not of real but of fictitious events, which last point carries the further implication that our author has somehow managed to combine fondness for invention with poverty of imagination. How much substance there is in any of this can best be seen from a quick glance in translation at the relevant passage. It runs as follows:

"If you wish," he said, "to live out your life in peace, abandon that vain religion of yours, which you have been taught from childhood. Renounce that Jesus and return to the great God, whom I worship, the God of our father Abraham. And send away from you the multitude of your forces, each one to his own place. And I shall make you a great ruler in your own territory and I shall send out assessors to your city, and I shall seek out all treasures and give orders to divide them up into four parts: three for me and one for you. And I am going to give you as many troops as you wish and to take from you as much tribute as you can give. And if you do not (comply), that Jesus, whom you call Christ, seeing that he was not able to save himself from the Jews, how can he save you from my hands?"⁸

In striking contrast to Chosroes' letter to Heraclius, this document is devoid of introductory formula and makes an abrupt and unheralded appearance in the text. About a page later, however, and in this respect too the contrast is no less marked, we are told that it is a letter, by whom it was sent, for whom it was intended, and how it was delivered.⁹ Yet the actual letter, brief and inconsequential though it is, is an eloquent testimony not

only to the historian's efforts, amounting in two cases to what looks like deliberate falsification, to transform both its contents and attendant circumstances into a re-enactment of those of the earlier letter, but also to just how profoundly altered was the historical reality towards which his literary endeavour was by force of chronological sequence inescapably directed.

First, the instances of falsification. The advice to a Christian Emperor to convert to Islam, coming as it does from the third Caliph and son-in-law of the prophet, would appear to belong to the realm of fantasy. The mention of "living in peace," however, with which the letter opens might perhaps suggest an offer of *ṣulḥ*, i.e., a peace treaty resulting from capitulation, which might constitute an original core of genuine historical fact. Also the reference to the crucifixion, with which the letter ends, apart from being a much abbreviated version of the concluding words of Chosroes' letter, is at variance with the Koran, Sura IV, verse 157: "Yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them."¹⁰ The first fabrication is designed to create an impression of religious confrontation which in the altered historical circumstances would otherwise lack artistic verisimilitude, and the second piece of invention makes it possible to portray the new oppressor in an identical light to the old one and to fit him into an ideal framework of blasphemous challenge to divine authority and protection meeting with swift retribution and condign punishment. On the side of awareness to historical reality, however, it is interesting to note that the reference to "the God of our father Abraham" shows a nice appreciation of one of the basic tenets of Islam.

It seems appropriate at this point to return to our original letter in order to analyze its contents in some detail against the background of Byzantine-Iranian relations over a period of more than thirty years and of the career throughout a similar length of time of the Sasanian monarch, Chosroes II. First of all, let me state clearly my own position in regard to just how original this letter is. I have no doubt whatsoever that in some way underlying Sebeos' version, in which due allowance must be made for the sort of literary adaptation already exemplified and discussed, there was an original document written in Persian, drafted in accordance with the principles of the Royal Persian Chancery, and subsequently translated into Greek. Whether or not there was in the course of transmission a further stage or stages of literary mediation on the part of some lost Greek history or histories it is futile, in the present state of our knowledge, to speculate. What is important, however, is that we have a piece of independent contemporary Greek evidence for the existence of just such an original document. The

Paschal Chronicle records a letter¹¹ from the Emperor Heraclius, which was read from the pulpit of St Sophia on May 15th, 628. In that letter, which opens with an exultant pastiche of biblical quotations selected to celebrate the overthrow and death of Chosroes, we are told how, "after Chosroes abominated by God had spent four days in chains and in torment, Sheroe had that same ungrateful, arrogant and blasphemous wretch, who made war against God, executed by a most cruel form of death, in order that he might learn that Jesus the son of Mary who as he had written, was crucified by the Jews, and against whom he had blasphemed, is Almighty God and has requited him in accordance with what we said in answer to his letter."¹²

Now to the analysis of the letter itself. In the form in which Sebeos has recorded it for us, it opens with a combination of high-sounding titles attached to the name of the sender and abusive epithets directed against the addressee: "Chosroes, esteemed by the gods and lord and king of all the earth and descendant of the great Aramazd, to our witless and worthless slave Heraclius." An equally grandiose and even more prolix opening sequence is to be found in the Greek translation, preserved by Menander protector, of the letter which Chosroes I sent to sanction the fifty-year peace treaty of 562. There the tone towards the addressee is courteous and conciliatory, whereas here it is threatening and insulting, but that marks no break with what we know of standard Sasanian practice.¹³ It merely reflects a profound difference of both circumstances and occasion. The letter does not read as from monarch to monarch but as from monarch to rebellious subject. What this means is nothing less than the official proclamation by the Sasanian King of Kings, as successor to the Achaemenians, of his historic right to sovereignty over the bulk of the then Byzantine Empire and state. The fact that such a claim had not been seriously pursued for well over three hundred years is an indication of just how abnormal relations between the two great empires of Byzantium and Sasanian Iran had become¹⁴ by the time of Heraclius' second campaign, before which date this letter must have been written, dispatched, and received. Incidentally and without entering here into disputed points of chronology, it seems a reasonable guess that the letter was sent in response to Heraclius' ultimatum to Chosroes, in which, according to Theophanes,¹⁵ he threatened the latter with an invasion of Persia unless he agreed promptly to come to terms and make peace.

Of great interest also is the so-called "blasphemous" part of this letter, and it has been frequently misunderstood. Angelo Pernice¹⁶ regarded it as further proof of the letter's authenticity because he felt, I think a trifle naively, that no Christian could have forged such stuff. As a matter

of fact, it reads in its present form very much like an adaptation and conflation of Acts 10:39: "They killed him by hanging him on a tree" and Mark 15:31: "He saved others. He cannot save himself." It is hard to decide whether the crude imputation of Jewish deicide is a product of Christian malice or Zoroastrian ignorance. It could be either. But however the original was phrased, and it might conceivably have contained a mocking adaptation of the Christian Scriptures, its motivation was probably political rather than religious. It was intended principally, that is, not as an attack on the Christian religion as such but on the notion of Constantinople as the God-guarded city, a notion first explicitly attested more than fifty years earlier by the poet Flavius Cresconius Corippus¹⁷ in his panegyric of Justin II with the words: "res Romana dei est, terrenis non eget armis" -- "The Roman state belongs to God, it needs no earthly weapons."

But, if Chosroes' letter to Heraclius was sent in answer to an ultimatum demanding a cessation of hostilities, it reads like a manifesto of total war in which no room is left for the continued existence of the Byzantine state. This brings us to what, historically speaking, is the most interesting question of all: how is it that two mighty empires which for over three centuries had established and maintained a *modus vivendi* of peaceful if unfriendly co-existence punctuated by sporadic but limited warfare, were suddenly in the course of the first half of the seventh century plunged into a life-and-death struggle lasting nearly two decades, which was to result in the transformation and permanent weakening of the one and the total collapse of the other? To the extent to which policies are the direct result of the activities of those who are in continuous control of the machinery of government and power, the chief policy-maker throughout this catastrophic period was undoubtedly Chosroes II. His public utterances on the subject of Byzantine-Iranian relations had once been very different and, since his subsequent decisions were to have such fateful consequences for both empires, it might prove instructive to trace briefly how his own viewpoint seems to have shifted in response to internal and external circumstances and to his own historic rôle and personal ambition.

In the year 590 Hormizd IV, the father of Chosroes II, lost his throne and his life, after his general, Vahram Chobin, whom he had dismissed and attempted to humiliate for the unsuccessful conduct of military operations against Byzantium, rose up in rebellion against him. When, in the same year, Vahram, refusing to recognize the authority of Chosroes II, who in the meantime had succeeded his father, Hormizd, to the throne of Persia, marched at the head of his troops on Ctesiphon and with his own hands assumed the diadem

of the King of Kings, Chosroes was forced to flee across the frontier and to seek refuge at the court of the Byzantine Emperor, Maurice. It is interesting to note here that the historian Theophylact Simocatta,¹⁸ puts into the mouths of the envoys sent by Chosroes to Maurice some remarkable reflections concerning the impossibility of uniting the two empires under the effective rule of a single sovereign and that Alexander the Great is roundly castigated for having attempted to do just that.

By an act of calculated generosity, Maurice not only offered sanctuary to the fugitive Emperor but also provided him with military assistance which enabled him to win back his throne. The quid pro quo for this help was, in fact, a prior undertaking by Chosroes to abandon all claims on Armenia and to cede to Byzantium the fortresses of Dara and Martyropolis, both of them under Persian military occupation at the time. Thus was an untried monarch restored to a weak throne by a traditionally hostile foreign power. But twelve years later Chosroes was afforded for the first and last time in his life the opportunity of combining self-interest with virtuous conduct: his friend and benefactor, Maurice, was put to death by the usurper Phocas, clearly pretext enough for an invasion of Byzantine territory. When in 610, Heraclius, the son of the Exarch of Africa, in Gibbon's words "punished a tyrant and ascended his throne,"¹⁹ Chosroes' position became more complicated. The embassy sent by Heraclius in 610 to the Persian court to announce his accession and to sue for peace was perfunctorily dismissed and its members were put to death; and the embassy sent five years later by the Byzantine Senate, possibly in the hope of legitimizing Heraclius' position in the eyes of the Sasanian monarch, fared even worse. A few more years of ever more dazzling victories proved sufficient to convert Chosroes' views of constitutional niceties from refusal to recognize Heraclius as the legitimate successor of Maurice to refusal to recognize the Byzantine state's continued right to exist.

Having started with a puzzle, it might not be inappropriate to conclude with a paradox. The great Armenian scholar, Abgarian, drew attention to the discrepancy between the title "History of Heraclius" and the fact that, in the work that has come down to us under that title, Heraclius figures in only ten out of fifty chapters. He decided, therefore, that what we actually have is "a general history of Armenia."²⁰ But, to put it the other way round, why should a Byzantine Emperor figure in ten out of fifty chapters of a general history of Armenia? Perhaps because it was during the reign of Heraclius that for the first time in its existence the hitherto invincible

empire faced and survived under the leadership of an Emperor of Armenian extraction²¹ what had been the age-old experience of the Armenian people -- the problem of how to live under the constant threat of annihilation.

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NOTES

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¹ S. Malxasian, *Sebeosi Episkoposi Patmut iwn* (Erevan 1939) p. 91, line 22 - p. 92, line 19.

² *EHR* 21 (1906) 141-43.

³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴ *Histoire D'Héraclius* par l'évêque Sébéos traduite de l'armenien et annotée par Frederic Macler (Paris 1905) 80, n. 3.

⁵ Cf. Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd (Oxford 1965) 328.

⁶ 2 Kings 19:18; Isaiah 37:19.

⁷ 2 Kings 18:25; Isaiah 36:10.

⁸ Armenian text, ed. Malxasian (at n. 1) 147, lines 11-24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 148, lines 12-13.

¹⁰ Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford 1964) 95; *The Quran: Arabic text with a new translation by Muhammad Zafrulla Khan* (London and Dublin 1971) 96.

¹¹ PG 92. 1017B-25B.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1020B-C.

¹³ Cf. Arthur Chistensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen 1944)

¹⁴ Chosroes' refusal (cf. Sebeos, ed. Malxasian [at n. 1] p. 80, lines 4-5) to recognize Heraclius as the legitimate successor of Maurice and insistence that "the kingdom is mine" and that he has placed on the throne "Theodosios the son of Maurice," suggest that already in 610 he was toying with the idea of turning Byzantium into a semi-autonomous dependency. If this interpretation is correct, the attainment of such an objective, as envisaged here, would mark a sort of half-way house to the full and final realization of Sasanian irredentist ambitions. If so, we also have here an instance of consistency as between the contents of Chosroes' later letter to Heraclius and Sebeos' overall historical narrative.

¹⁵ *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig 1883) 306, lines 23-24.

¹⁶ A. Pernice, *L'Imperatore Eraclio: Saggio di storia bizantina* (Florence 1905) intro., p. ix.

¹⁷ Flavius Cresconius Corippus: *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris, Liber III*, line 333. Ed. with trans. and commentary by Averil Cameron (London 1976).

¹⁸ *Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae*, ed. C. De Boor (Stuttgart 1972) 174-75.

¹⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J.B. Bury (London 1898) V, 174.

²⁰ G. Abgarian, "Remarques sur l'histoire de Sébéos," *Revue des Etudes arméniennes*, N.S. 1 (1964) 215.

²¹ Convincingly demonstrated from a contemporary Greek source (Theophylact Simocatta) by Pernice (at n. 16) 25.