Relics, Images, and Christian Apotropaic Devices in the Roman-Persian Wars (4th-7th Centuries)

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Abstract. This paper analyses the military use of holy relics, images, and other Christian apotropaic devices in the Roman-Persian wars. I examine a wide range of literary evidence from the 4th to the 7th century exploring where, why, and how different Christian objects were used in military contexts. Moreover, I consider different factors, as the local religious practices or the rivalry between the Christian Roman Empire and Zoroastrian Persia.

I argue that the earliest military uses of relics and holy images happened in the context of the Roman-Persian conflict and frontier region, and that, during the 4th-7th centuries, these uses were much more common there than anywhere else. Also, that some local practices of this region could have been adopted by military officers and the Imperial elite. I propose that three factors could explain this: First, the intensity of the cult of relics and images in Syria and the Near East. Second, the growing identification of the Roman Empire as a Christian power between the 4th and 7th centuries. Finally, the Roman-Persian conflict and the climate of religious confrontation that grew over the course of the Byzantine-Sassanian wars.

Keywords: Byzantium; Persia; Roman-Persian Wars; Relics; Images; Apotropaic Devices.

[es] Reliquias, imágenes y artefactos apotropaicos cristianos en las guerras romano-persas (siglos IV-VII)

Resumen. Este artículo analiza el uso militar de reliquias sagradas, imágenes y otros dispositivos apotropaicos cristianos en las guerras entre romanos y persas. Examino una amplia gama de evidencia literaria del siglo IV al VII explorando dónde, por qué y cómo se usaron diferentes objetos cristianos en contextos militares. Además, considero diferentes factores, como las prácticas religiosas locales o la rivalidad entre el Imperio Romano Cristiano y la Persia Zoroastriana.

Sostengo que los primeros usos militares de reliquias e imágenes sagradas ocurrieron en el contexto del conflicto romano-persa y la región fronteriza, y que, durante los siglos IV-VII, estos usos fueron mucho más comunes allí que en cualquier otro lugar. Además, que algunas prácticas locales de esta región podrían haber sido adoptadas por oficiales militares y la élite imperial. Propongo que tres factores podrían explicar esto. Primero, la intensidad del culto a las reliquias y las imágenes en Siria y el Cercano Oriente. En segundo lugar, la creciente identificación del Imperio Romano como potencia cristiana entre los siglos IV y VII. Por último, el conflicto romano-persa y el clima de enfrentamiento religioso que creció a lo largo de las guerras bizantino-sasánidas.

Palabras clave: Bizancio; Persia; Guerras romano-persas; Reliquias; Santas imágenes; Dispositivos apotropaicos.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. The firsts Christian symbols and objects in war. 3. Relics and other Christian devices in the Roman-Persian wars of the 5th century. 4. Relics as Christian Palladia. 5. From relics to holy images in the 6th century Persian wars. 6. Relics and images in the last Roman-Persian war (AD 602-628). 7. Conclusions. 8. Written sources and bibliographical references.

1. Introduction

Christian relics and images have been a subject of study and debate since the Reformation and continue to be so even today. In the last decades, new interdisciplinary perspectives and the notion of "popular" culture, images and objects, enriched this debate and made it more complex[2]. This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the cult of relics and images, from the specific issue of its military role in late antiquity. Thus, I examine a wide

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[2]   The bibliography about the is issue huge and impossible to summarize here, the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Art and Architecture* offers a god summary of both previous scholarship and recent approaches to relics and images: *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Art and Architecture* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 2-95, 497-537, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190277352.001.0001.

range of literary evidence from the 4th to the 7th century exploring where, why, and how different Christian objects were used in military contexts.

Based on that, I argue that the earliest military uses of relics and holy images happened in the context of the Roman-Persian conflict and frontier region, and that, between the 4th-7th centuries, these uses were much more common there than anywhere else. This paper shows how local and non-elite cultural practices and objects emerged, changed, and were adopted by the Roman Imperial elite in the Late Antique period.

2. The firsts Christian symbols and objects in war

The military use of Christian symbols dates back to Constantine the Great in the early-4th century and the introduction of the *labarum*. This was a *vexillium* standard presented by the Christian authors as a divine sign, crowned with a Christogram, that had apotropaic –i.e. protective– properties and granted victory in battle. This notion probably came from the Roman tradition of sacred banners, the cult of the standards among the army, and the Old Testament example of the Ark of the Covenant[3].

The Christian *labarum* continued to be used by Constantine successors and the House of Theodosius, which associated it closely with the symbol of the Cross[4]. However, the *labarum* started to disappear from the sources towards the mid-5th century, suggesting a decline in its use or relevance[5].

Nevertheless, in the late-4th century the first testimonies of other kind of Christian military devices emerged. The pilgrim Egeria, in a passage of her travel account, said that the Bishop of Edessa told her the story of a Persian siege in which king Abgar prayed with a letter written by Christ in his hands, and several miracles protected the city[6]. Eusebius of Caesarea mentioned this legendary letter earlier, but not in relation to any military use[7]. Egeria said that, every time that Edessa was besieged, the locals brought this letter to the gate and the enemies were expelled[8].

The siege mentioned by Egeria was probably a local legend, a distorted memory of some Parthian attack. However, Egeria's passage is the first reference to the belief in Christian relics acting as *palladia*.

The original *Palladium* was an idol of the goddess Athena that, according to the legend, granted safety to Troy; it was rescued by Aeneas and later moved to Rome. Modern scholarship uses the term *Palladium* for describing a broad category of objects that were believed to provide supernatural protection to cities. There are many testimonies of Pagan *palladia*, protective representations of gods, in the Mediterranean and the Near East, from the Greek archaic period to the 6th century AD[9].

Writing a few years after Egeria, the Pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus reproached the Christian Sabinianus, Roman commander in the East, for expending time among some tombs in Edessa during the war with Persia. Ammianus words suggest that this commander trusted in the power of relics, and this official may have performed some ritual among the tombs of martyrs before the campaign[10].

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3   Some of the main studies that address the issue of the *labarum*: M. Rostovtzeff, "Vexillum and Victory", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 32 (1942): 92-106; Charles Odahl, "An Eschatological Interpretation of Constantine's Labarum Coin, *Journal of the Society of Ancient Numismatics* 6 (1974): 47-51; "Christian Symbols in Military Motifs on Constantine's Coinage", *SAN: Journal of the Society for Ancient Numismatics* 13, no. 4 (1983): 64-72; *Constantine and the Christian Empire*. Taylor & Francis, 2010, pp. 106, 176-201; Patrick Bruun, "The Victorious Signs of Constantine: A Reappraisal", *The Numismatic Chronicle (1966–)* 157 (1997): 41-59; Peter Weiss, "The Vision of Constantine", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 16 (2003): 237-59; Jonathan Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge: University Press, 2015); John F. Shean, *Soldiering for God: Christianity and the Roman Army*, vol. 61, History of Warfare (Leiden: BRILL, Brill, 2010); Fernando López López Sánchez, "Under This Signs You Shall Be the Ruler! Eusebius, the Chi-Rho Letters and the Arche of Constantine", in *Beginning and End: From Ammianus Marcellinus to Eusebius of Cesarea, 2016, 137-158*, Universidad de Huelva, 2016), 137-58; Ildar Garipzanov, *Graphic Signs of Authority in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 300-900* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

4   Jean Gagé, "Σταυρὸς νικοποιός La victoire impériale dans l'empire chrétien", *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses* 13, no. 4 (1933): 370-400; Bruun, "The Victorious Signs of Constantine"; Garipzanov, *Graphic Signs of Authority*, 89-106.

5   For example, the *labarum* disappears from the numismatic iconography, where it had been common since the mid-4th century. It is not clear if the *labarum* itself stopped being used, I think that over time it became a just a conventional banner, losing its apotropaic prestige.

6   Egeria, *Itinerarium*, Chap. 19, 8-12: *Et tunc retulit mihi de ipsa aqua sic sanctus episcopus dicens: «quodam tempore, posteaquam scripserat Aggarus rex ad Dominum et Dominus rescripserat Aggaro per Ananiam cursorem, sicut scriptum est in ipsa epistola: transacto ergo aliquanto tempore superveniunt Persi et girant civitatem istam. Sed statim Aggarus epistolam Domini ferens ad portam cum omni exercitu suo publice oravit. Et post dixit: «Domine Iesu, tu promiseras nobis, ne aliquis [h]ostium ingrederetur civitatem istam, et ecce nunc Persae inpugnant nos». Quod cum dixisset tenens manibus levatis epistolam ipsam apertam rex, ad subito tantae tenebrae factae sunt, foras civitatem tamen ante oculos Persarum, cum iam prope plicarent civitati, ita ut usque tertium miliarium de civitate essent: sed ita mox tenebris turbati sunt, ut vix castra ponerent et pergirarent in miliario tertio totam civitatem...*

7   Eusebius, *HE*, I, 13. Steven Runciman, "Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa", *Cambridge Historical Journal* 3, no. 3 (1931): 238-52; Averil Cameron, "The History of the Image of Edessa : The Telling of a Story", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 (1983): 80-94.

8   Egeria, *Itinerarium*, Chap. 19, 13-14: *Ac sic iubente Deo, qui hoc promiserat futurum, necesse fuit eos statim reverti ad sua, id est in Persida. Nam et postmodum quotienscumque voluerunt venire et expugnare hanc civitatem hostes, haec epistola prolata est et lecta est in porta, et statim nutu Dei expulsi sunt omnes hostes. Illud etiam retulit sanctus episcopus: «eo quod hii fontes ubi eruperunt, ante sic fuerit campus intra civitatem subiacens palatio Aggari. Quod palatium Aggari quasi in editiori loco positum erat, sicut et nunc paret, ut vides. Nam consuetudo talis erat in illo tempore, ut pabtia, quotiensque fabricabantur, semper in editioribus locis fierent.*

9   According to a 6th century legend, Constantine then moved the *Palladium* to Constantinople. Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954): 110; Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York University Press, 1992), 38-39; John T. Wortley, "The Legend of Constantine the Relic-Provider", 2009, 487-96; Robert Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 58-60.

10 Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, 18.7.7: *Dum haec celerantur, Sabinianus inter rapienda momenta periculorum communium lectissimus moderator belli internecivi, per Edessena sepulchra, quasi fundata cum mortuis pace, nihil formidans, more vitae remissioris fluxius agens, militari pyrrice 1 sonantibus modulis pro histrionicis gestibus, in silentio summo delectabatur, ominoso sane et incepto et loco, 2 cum*

It is noteworthy that two of the earliest references to the military use of Christian relics come from Edessa and relate to the wars with Persia. We cannot be sure of the accuracy of these references, as it is possible that they include some fictional elements related to the intentions of each text: promoting the holy places, in the case of Egeria, and scolding a Christian officer, in the case of Ammianus. However, these references correspond to the period in which the cult of relics was emerging[11]. It is significant that two quite different texts, a Christian travel account and a Pagan classic history, refer to a similar trend in the same period and place.

However, not all the late-4th century references to apotropaic relics came from Edessa or the frontier. Ambrose of Milan, in the obituary of Theodosius the Great (c. AD 395), mentioned that Saint Helena, ordered to make, from the nails of the crucifixion, a bridle and a diadem for Constantine, and that since then these items protected the Christian emperors[12]. This legend that can also be found in the 5th century histories of Socrates and Sozomen, but in both the diadem is a helmet used in military expeditions[13]. There is no material evidence of these objects, although the Ticinium Medallion (c. AD 315-321) depicts Constantine with a helmet crowned by a Chi-Rho and holding a horse by the bridle (Fig. 1). Thus, it is possible that there were certain Imperial treasures, inherited from the times of Constantine to which later legends attributed the status of apotropaic holy relics[14].

The use of relics in war was related to the general belief in the apotropaic properties of relics and holy signs: the belief in their capacity to give supernatural protection against spiritual and physical harm -demons, curses, evil eye, earthquakes, storms, diseases, and wounds–, a key feature in the emerging cult of relics of the mid-4th century[15]. This had precedents in pre-Christian practic-

es, as the use of amulets and talismans, and Christians had a model in the Old Testament: the Ark of the Covenant, a powerful talisman used in war by the Israelites[16].

Figure 1. Ticinum Medallion (AD c.315-319), The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Inventory N°: ON-A-DR-15266. Source: Photo by Vladimir Terebenin, ©The State Hermitage Museum.

Figure 2. Gold solidus of Theodosius II (AD c. 416), ANS 1977.158.988. Source: American Numismatic Society: Public Domain Mark.

3. Relics and other Christian devices in the Roman-Persian wars of the 5th century

A curious text of the mid-5th century, attributed to Quodvultdeus of Carthage, says that "he [the Emperor] went to war with the Persians, assured of victory in advance by a sign-bronze crosses which appeared on the cloaks of his soldiers as they went into battle"[17]. This text probably refers to the war fought during the reign of Theodoius

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haec et huius modi factu dictuque tristia, futuros praenuntiantia 3 motus, vitare optimum quemque debere saeculi progressione discamus.

11   Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*, 29-47.

12   Ambrose, *De Obitu Theodosii Oratio* 47-48: *Quaesivit clavos, quibus crucifixus est Dominus, et invenit. De uno clavo frenos fieri praecepit, de altero diadema intexuit: unum ad decorem, alterum ad devotionem vertit. Visitata est Maria, ut Evam liberaret: visitata est Helena, ut imperatores redimerentur. Misit itaque filio suo Constantino diadema gemmis insignitum, quas pretiosior ferro innexas crucis redemptionis divinae gemma connecteret. Misit et frenum. Utroque usus est Constantinus, et fidem transmisit ad posteros reges. Principium itaque credentium imperatorum sanctum est quod super frenum. ex illo fides, ut persecutio cessaret, devotio succederet. Sapienter Helena, quae crucem in capite regnum locavit; ut crux Christi in regibus adoretur. Non insolentia ista, sed pietas est; cum defertur sacrae redemptioni. Bonus itaque clavus Romani imperii, qui totum regit orbem, ac vestit principum frontem; ut sint praedicatores, qui persecutores esse consueverunt. Recte in capite clavus, ut ubi sensus est, ibi sit praesidium. In vertice corona in manibus habena. Corona de cruce, ut fides luceat: habena quoque de cruce, ut potestas regat: sitque justa moderatio non injusta praeceptio.*

13   Socrates, *HE*, 1. 17; Sozomen, *HE*, 2. Holger A Klein, "Sacred Relics and Imperial Ceremonies at the Great Palace of Constantinople", 2006, 81-82; Wortley, "The Legend of Constantine the Relic-Provider", 487-96.

14   Wortley, "The Legend of Constantine the Relic-Provider"; Noel Lenski, "The Date of the Ticinum Medallion", *Numismatica e Antichità Classiche* 47 (2018).

15   André Grabar, *Martyrium: recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1972); Peter Brown,

The Cult of the Saints (London: SCM Press, 1981); Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*.

16   Christians continued the use of magic amulets and other apotropaic objects. Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*, 8-25; Maria J. Metzler, "The Ark of the Covenant and Divine Rage in the Hebrew Bible" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2016); Garipzanov, *Graphic Signs of Authority*, 29-30.

17   Quodvultdeus, *Liber de promissionibus et praedictionibus Dei*, Part. 3, Chap. 43: "…bellum eum Persis confecit. Eo signo, antequam potitus victoria, jam coeuntibus in prælium militibus, aeriæ cruces in vestibus paruere….".

II. These miraculous bronze crosses were not technically relics, they could be related to cross-shape *fibulae*, or brooches, of which some examples have survived. It is possible that some Christian soldiers started carrying these cross-brooches as talismans, like the apotropaic crosses inscribed in amulets, papyri, or buildings[18].

This text, as well as other sources, mention that one of the causes of this conflict were the persecutions of Christians in Persia[19]. Theodoret narrates that, when a Persian commander threated to burn the churches of Theodosiopolis, the bishop of the city himself commanded a stone-thrower, named Thomas the Apostle, and fired a stone that crushed the head of the Persian as divine punishment[20]. According to the 9th century *Chronicle* of Theophanes, before this war, Theodosius II sent to the Archbishop of Jerusalem a jewelled cross for the Golgotha. In response, the archbishop sent him the right arm of St. Stephanos[21]. Scholars have debated if the long crosses depicted in coins (Fig. 2) of the period represents the jewelled cross of the Golgotha, the miraculous bronze cross-brooches, or any other cross. Whatever the case, Theophanes' story and coin's iconography of the period are related to the Theodosian use of the cross as a symbol of Christian Imperial victory[22].

During the reign of Theodosius II, two frontier cities were refunded from relics. A Roman embassy in Persia received the remains from some Christian Iranians martyrs (c. AD 410). These relics were taken to the frontier settlement of Mayperqat (Silvan, South Turkey), that was furnished with churches, fortified, and refunded as Martyropolis[23]. Some years later, Rusafa, a fortress of the Syrian steppe, was refunded as Sergiopolis in honour of Saint Sergius, a Christian Roman soldier martyrized there during the persecutions of the 4th century. In the late-6th century, Evagrius told a story in which a mysterious army of "innumerable shields" appeared on the walls of Sergiopolis when the Persians wanted to take the city, which was considered a miracle from Saint Sergius[24]. E. K. Fowden argued that the cult of relics was key in the emergence of these frontier towns, conceived as physical and supernatural fortresses in the Roman-Persian frontier[25].

4. Relics as Christian Palladia

Although the emergence of these relic-fortified towns was particular of the Roman-Persian border, the belief in relics as *palladia* was becoming common in the 5th century and was not limited to this context. Paulinus of Nola said that the remains of Saints Peter and Paul protected Rome, and in AD 407 he praised the saints for saving Italy from the barbarians[26]. A sermon of Augustine suggest that after the sack of Rome, some Christians were disappointed because the bodies of the saints had not protected the city[27]. The poet Claudian, wrote an epigram (c. AD 403) where he mocked a certain *dux* Jacobus, for trusting in the protection of relics[28]. A scolding that resembles the one made by Ammianus a decade before.

18   Kenneth G. Holum, "Pulcheria's Crusade A.D. 421-22 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 18, no. 2 (1977): 156; Garipzanov, *Graphic Signs of Authority*, 94-106.

19   Socrates, *HE*, 7.18.2; Augustine, *De Civ. Dei,* 18.52. Kenneth G. Holum went so far that he proposed renaming this war as "Pulcheria's Crusade". This is clearly an exaggeration, but it seems that this was possibly one of the first Roman-Persian wars in which the religious identity played a significative role: Holum, "Pulcheria's Crusade A.D. 421-22".

20   Theodoret, *HE*, V, 36. p. 341, 2–20: πλείους γὰρ ἢ τριάκοντα ἡμέρας πανσυδὶ Γορορἀνου τὴν προειρημένην κυ κλώσαντος πόλιν, καὶ πολλὰς μὲν ἑλεπόλεις προσενεγκόντος, μηχαναῖς δὲ χρησαμένου μυρίαις, καὶ πύργους ἔξωθεν ὑψηλοὺς ἀντεγείραντος, μόνος ἀντέσχεν ὁ θεῖος ἀρχιερεὺς (Εὐνόμιος δὲ τούτῳ ὄνομα ἦν) καὶ τῶν προσφερομένων μηχανῶν τὴν ῥύμην διέλυσε. καὶ τῶν στρατηγῶν τῶν ἡμετέρων τὴν πρὸς τοὺς πολεμίους ἀπειρηκότων μάχην καὶ τοῖς πολιορκουμένοις ἐπαρκεῖν οὐ τολμώντων, οὗτος ἀντιπαραταττόμενος ἀπόρθητον τὴν πόλιν ἐφύλαξε. ἑνὸς δὲ τῶν ὑπὸ τῶν βαρβάρων τελούντων βασιλέων τὴν συνήθη βλασφημίαν τετολμηκότος καὶ τὰ Ῥαψάκου καὶ Σενναχηρεὶμ φθεγξαμένου καὶ μανικῶς ἀπειλήσαντος τὸν θεῖον πυρπολήσειν νεών, οὐκ ἐνεγκὼν τὴν λύτταν ὁ θεῖος ἐκεῖνος ἀνὴρ τὸ λιθοβόλον ὄργανον παρὰ τὴν ἔπαλξιν τεθῆναι κελεύσας, ὃ τοῦ ἀποστόλου Θωμᾶ ἐπώνυμον ἦν, καὶ λίθον μέγαν ἐπιτεθῆναι παρεγγυήσας, ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ βλασφημηθέντος μέγαν ἐπιτεθῆναι παρεγγυήσας, ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ βλασφημηθέντος ἀφεῖναι προσέταξεν. ὁ δὲ κατευθὺ τοῦ δυσσεβοῦς βασιλέως ἐκείνου κατενεχθεὶς καὶ τῷ στόματι πελάσας τῷ μυσαρῷ, τό τε πρόσωπον διέφθειρε καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν συνέτριψεν ἅπασαν καὶ τὸν ἐγκέφαλον διέρανε τῇ γῇ. τοῦτο θεασάμενος ὁ τὴν στρατιὰν ἀγείρας καὶ τὴν πόλιν αἱρήσειν ἐλπίσας ᾤχετο, τὴν ἧτταν διὰ τῶν πραγμάτων ὁμολογήσας, καὶ δείσας τὴν εἰρήνην ἐσπείσατο.

21   Theophanes, *Chronicle*, AM5920. No earlier source mentions this donation and the earlier textual evidence of this object is highly problematic, Egeria mention once cross in the Golgotha (*Itinerarium*, 37, 1), and the pilgrim Arculf, in the late-7th century, saw a great silver cross in the Golgotha (Adomnan, *De locis sanctis* I, v.l, 90). Christine Milner, "'Lignum Vitae' or 'Crux Gemmata'? The Cross of Golgotha in the Early Byzantine Period", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 20 (ed 1996): 79-90.

22   Gagé, "Σταυρὸς νικοποιός La victoire impériale dans l'empire chrétien"; Anatole Frolow, *Numismatique byzantine et archéologie des lieux saints* (Bucarest: Institut français d'études byzantines, 1948), 78; André Grabar, *L'iconoclasme byzantin; dossier archéologique.* (Paris: Collège de France, 1957), 28; J. P. C. Kent, "Aueam Monetam…Cum Signo Crucis", *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society* 20 (1960): 129-32; Ericsson, Kyra,

"The Cross on Steps and the Silver Hexagram", *Yearbook of the Austrian Byzantine Society* 17 (1968): 149-64; Holum, "Pulcheria's Crusade A.D. 421-22"; Philip Grierson, *Byzantine Coins* (London; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 27-55; Garipzanov, *Graphic Signs of Authority*, 89-100; Milner, "'Lignum Vitae' or 'Crux Gemmata'?, 77-99.

23   Elizabeth Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 28 (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1999), 45-59.

24   Evagrius Scholasticus, *HE*, Book IV, chap. 176-177: Ἐπειδὴ δὲ τούτοις πεισθεὶς ὁ Χοσρόης τῇ πόλει τὸν ὅλον ἐπαφῆκε στρατόν, ἐξαπίνης ἀνὰ τὸν περίβολον ἀσπὶς ἀνεφάνη μυρία, ὑπερ μαχοῦσα τῆς πόλεως· ὅπερ οἱ πεμφθέντες πρὸς Χοσρόου θεασάμενοι ἐπανῆκον, τό τε πλῆθος θαυμάζοντες τήν τε ἐξόπλισιν διηγούμενοι. Ὡς δὲ καὶ πάλιν πυθόμενος ἔμαθεν ὁ Χοσρόης ὀλίγους τῇ πόλει κομιδῇ ἐναπομεῖναι, ἐξώρους τε καὶ ἀώρους, τῆς σφριγώσης ἡλικίας ἐκποδὼν ἐξώρους τε καὶ ἀώρους, τῆς σφριγώσης ἡλικίας ἐκποδὼν γενομένης, ἔγνω τοῦ μάρτυρος εἶναι τὸ θαῦμα· καὶ δείσας καὶ τὴν Χριστιανῶν πίστιν ἀγάμενος, ἀπῆρε πρὸς τὰ οἰκεῖα.

25   Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain*, 60-173.

26   Paulinus of Nola, *Carmen* 19, 21, 26; Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*, 48-49.

27   Augustine, Sermo 296.6; Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*, 48-49.

28   Claudian, *Carmina Minora* 50: *In Iacobum magistrum equitum.* J. Vanderspoel, "Claudian, Christ and the Cult of the Saints", *The Classical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1986): 244-55; Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 245.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus said, as a general statement, that the cities which possessed relics venerated them as "guardians and defenders". Thus, by the mid-5th century, this was a relatively extended belief[29]. A Syriac hagiography of the period, tells that, when the emperor requested the body of Saint Symeon, the people of Antioch replied that it was the wall of their city[30]. Antioch was threatened by the Persians many times, but as the previous references show, it seems that the idea of relics as *palladia*, was not restricted to the Roman-Persian frontier, although it was probably more common there.

Therefore, the belief was not restricted to the East, yet it is more frequently attested in Greek and Eastern sources than in the Latin ones. Maybe this was because, in the 5th century, the cities of the East endured their threats better; after all, the relics of Peter and Paul did not prevent the sack of Rome. Possibly since the mid-5th century, the Christian elite of the West venerated their relics thinking more in the "city of God" than in the "earthly ones". A problem of the literary sources is that they usually only mention Christian devices in war when these worked and lead to victory and can easily omit them when they failed.

5. From relics to holy images in the 6th century Persian wars

This trend continued during the 6th century. Procopius, in his narration of Justinian Persian war, told a story in which a miraculous fragment of the True Cross (AD 540) saved the city of Apamea[31]. Procopius also referred to the Christ' letter of Edessa, mentioning a tradition in which the city would never be taken by barbarians thanks to this letter, and that the citizens of Edessa inscribed it in the gates of the city. According to him, the Persian *shah* Khosrow ambitioned to take the city because of this and try to do so (AD 544), yet the Sassanian army wandered lost in the region and the *shah* fell severely ill, so he desisted and withdrew[32].

Evagrius Scholasticus, in the late-6th century, retold the story of this attack. In his version the city was protected not only by the letter, but by an image of Christ "not made by humans' hand". The tradition of a Christ' image in Edessa was older, attested for the first time in a Syriac *Doctrina Addai* (c. AD 400), yet Evagrius is the first to mention a miraculous image used in war. According to this text, the Persians besieged Edessa and built a siege structure. The people of Edessa took the image that Christ himself sent to Abgar, washed it with water, and then use that holy water as a combustible that lighted the structure in flames that could not being extinguished[33].

Evagrius' narration rises a problem: why Procopius, who wrote closely after the events, did not mention this image? While Runciman considered that Procopius omitted this story because it did not fit with his "rational" style, Cameron argued that the image did not exist in AD 544, it emerged in the following decades. A few scholars have considered the passage an interpolation from later centuries[34].

I think this image could had been an Edessan local tradition, unknown to Procopius, which only spread in the following decades. But of course, it is impossible to know when and how exactly the tradition originated. It is only clear that the idea of a Christ's image of Edessa is a later addition to the much older tradition of the Christ's letter. While the letter was used as a *palladium* since the late-4th century, the image emerged at some point after and was not used in war at least until the mid-6th century.

This object is described by Evagrius as an *acheiropoietai*, an image of miraculous origins not made by human hands. Scholarship has debated much about the origins and nature of *acheiropoietai*, sometimes considered a transitional object or middle ground between the cult of relics and the development of the cult of icons. These images emerged in Syria, Asia Minor, and the Near East around the middle or second half of the 6th century[35].

The emergence of apotropaic images in this region could be explained by the Persian conflict. As a frontier region, it was more exposed to military threats, hence its habitants felt the need of supernatural protection. Nevertheless, the general development of Christian images had also been linked with Syria through the pilgrim *eulogiai*. These were small, blessed objects, as clay tokens or flask with dust or oil, commonly printed with simple religious motifs, that functioned as souvenirs for pilgrims in the Holy Land and all the Near East. The *eulogiai* became popular in Syria around the cult of the stylite's saints during the 5th and 6th centuries. They were simultaneously minor indirect contact relics, amulets, and images, in some sense, a common and ordinary version of the miraculous *acheiropoietai*[36].

29   Theodoret, *Graecorum*, 8.10, 6-8.
30   *Syriac life of Simeon Stylites*, 197-198. Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*, 49-56.
31   Procopius, *Bella* II, 11, 14-30.
32   Procopius, *Bella* II, 12, 7-31.
33   Evagrius Scholasticus, *HE*, Book IV, chap. 27. Runciman, "Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa"; Cameron, "The History of the Image of Edessa"; Marc Guscin, *The Image of Edessa*, vol. 82, The Medieval Mediterranean (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

34   Runciman, "Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa", 244-45; Cameron, "The History of the Image of Edessa", 84-85. Marc Guscin made a summary of the different theories and arguments about the image and conclude that its origins cannot be established with any certainty. Guscin, *The Image of Edessa*, 82:166-76.
35   Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm", 112-15; Leslie Brubaker, "Icons before Iconoclasm?", *Morfologie Sociali e Culturali in Europa 2*, Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 45, no. 2 (1998): 1215ff.; Bissera V. Pentcheva, "The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople: The Virgin and Her Icons in the Tradition of the Avar Siege", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 26, no. 1 (2002): 11-12; Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 23-29; Gary Vikan, *Sacred Images and Sacred Power in Byzantium*, Collected Studies ; CS778 (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003), 1-16; Leslie Brubaker and John F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680-850: A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 32-66; Matej Gogola, "Prolegomena to the Christian Images Not Made by Human Hands", *Studia Ceranea. Journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe* 8 (2018): 121-37.
36   Gary Vikan, "Sacred Image, Sacred Power", in *Vikan, Sacred Images and Sacred Power in Byzantium*, 2003, 1-11; Gary Vikan, "Icons and Icon Piety in Early Byzantium", in *Vikan, Sacred Images and Sacred Power in Byzantium*, 2003, 1-16; Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 17.56; Max Ritter, "Do

Thus, it is possible that the emergence of Christian images in the 6th century, as well as relics in the late-4th century, started as a local phenomenon of Syria and the Near East. While the military use of such devices may relate to the conflict with Persia, their emergence is clearly part of a wider phenomenon in which Christian cult objects and apotropaic signs developed during the progressive Christianization of the Late Antique World.

Another case of an *acheiropoietai* used against the Persians in the 6th century is attested in the *History* written by Theophylact Simocatta. Simocatta mentions that, before the Battle of Solachon (AD 586) the general Philippikos used an image of Christ against the Persians. This device is described as "shaped by divine wisdom" and "highly venerated". The historian says that it was stripped of its coverings and paraded through the ranks by Philippikos, giving irresistible courage to the army[37]. Some scholars identified this image as the Camuliana, an *acheiropoietai* mentioned by Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor, and that according to the 11th century history of Cedrenus, was taken to Constantinople in AD 574[38]. Whether this is correct or not, it is clear that, by the late-6th century, acheiropoietic images were starting to be used in the Roman-Persian wars, considered as miraculous *palladia* or courage-inspiring emblems.

This new trend does not mean that relics stopped being used in war. On the contrary, in the late-6th century, while the use of images was probably a recent and uncommon practice, the military use of relics was well established. Emperor Maurice carried a fragment of the True Cross as part of a standard in a campaign against the Avars (c. AD 590-598)[39]. Pseudo-Sebeos mentioned a Cross' relic found in a battlefield in Iran, during the Persian civil wars, that was later acquired by the Armenians. Also, in the Syriac *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, written around AD 590-630, the Christian hero used a golden reliquary with a fragment of the Cross around his neck during a battle[40].

While most of the earlier examples of Christian apotropaic devices were *palladia* attached to cities, Philippikos' image and Maurice's relic were carried as emblems in campaigns, probably as an Imperial adaption of local practices.

6. Relics and images in the last Roman-Persian war (602-628 AD)

The religious aspect of the Roman-Persian rivalry was probably more evident in the last Roman-Persian war than in all the previous ones. The Persian capture of Jerusalem and of the True Cross (AD 614) marked this from the first decade of the war[41].

Frolow claimed that Heraclius carried a fragment of the True Cross in his campaign against Persia[42]. He based this assertion in the previous use of the relic by Maurice and in a verse of George of Pisidia's poem *De Expeditione Persica*:

> He was a worshipper of fire; you, O mighty [Heraclius], raised/exalted the wood [of the Cross]: when this rose high, it was clear that the fire of Persia had been lit in vain[43].

Frolow seems to have interpreted the Greek verb ὑψούμενον as the rising of a banner, which is one of its possible meanings, yet in the verse it follows the verb προσκυνούμενον applied to Khosrow II and the fire. As far as we know, the fire was not used by the Persian as an actual military standard. Hence, I consider that this verse is a contrast between the Persian *Sha* as a worshiper of fire, and Heraclius as someone who exalts -venerates– the Cross, between Persian Pagan idolatry and Roman Christian devotion. The fire and the Cross were symbols, but not necessarily physical banners[44]. It is possible that Pisides was also alluding indirectly to a Cross-banner, as combining literal and metaphorical meaning is a common resource in his poetry[45]. However, this is highly conjectural and cannot be considered solid evidence for Heraclius' military use of a Cross' relic.

Ut Des: The Function of Eulogiai in the Byzantine Pilgrimage Economy", *Pilgrimage and Economy in the Ancient Mediterranean*, 26, 2020, 254-84; Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, 15-23.

[37] Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, II, 3, 4-6: ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ πολέμιον παρεφαίνετο, καὶ ἦν κόνις πολλή, Φιλιππικὸς τὸ θεανδρικὸν ἐπεφέρετο εἴκασμα, ὃ λόγος ἔκαθεν καὶ εἰς τὰ νῦν διηχεῖ θείαν ἐπιστήμην μορφῶσαι, οὐχ ὑφάντου χεῖρας τεκτήνασθαι ἢ ζωγράφου μηλιάδα ποικίλαι. διά τοι τοῦτο καὶ ἀχειροποίητος παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις καθυμνεῖται καὶ τῶν θρησκεύουσι Ῥωμαῖοί τι ἄρρητον. ἰσοθέων πρεσβεῖον ἠξίωται· ἀρχέτυπον γὰρ ἐκείνου

[38] Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm", 111; Brubaker, "Icons before Iconoclasm?", 1229.

[39] Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, V, 16, 11-12. Joaquin Serrano del Pozo, "The Cross-Standard of Emperor Maurice (582-602 AD)", *Diogenes* 11 (2021): 1-17.

[40] Pseudo-Sebeos, *History*, Chap. 26-27, 46-47, 98-99; *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 44. Joel Thomas Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Richard Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*, *A State of Mixture* (University of California Press, 2016), 169.

[41] Mary Whitby, "Defender of the Cross: George of Pisidia on the Emperor Heraclius and His Deputies", *The Propaganda of Power*, 1998, 247-73; Jan Willem Drijvers, "Heraclius and the Restitutio Crucis: Notes on Symbolism and Ideology", in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002); Walter Emil Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003); Yuri Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross.* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011); Constantin Zuckerman, "Heraclius and the Return of the Holy Cross", *Travaux et Memoires* 17 (2013): 197-218; James Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[42] Anatole Frolow, "La Vraie Croix et les expéditions d'Héraclius en Perse", *Revue des études byzantines* 11, no. 1 (1953): 92; Anatole Frolow, *La relique de la Vraie Croix: recherches sur le développement d'un culte* (Paris: Inst. Français d'Études Byzantines, 1961), 79, 182.

[43] George of Pisidia, *De Expeditione Persica II*, v. 252-255: τὸ πῦρ ἐκεῖνος εἶχε προσκυνούμενον, ὑψούμενον δὲ σύ, κράτιστε, τὸ ξύλον. τούτου δὲ δῆλον ὡς πρὸς ὕψος ἠρμένου τὸ Περσικὸν πῦρ εἰς μάτην ἀνήπτετο. Personal translation to English based on the Greek-Italian version of Luigi Tartaglia.

[44] This is also the interpretation that L. Tartaglia seem to have followed his translation: Luigi Tartaglia, *Carmi / Giorgio di Pisidia*, Classici greci (Torino: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1998), 105: *Lui era adoratore del fuoco: tu, o potente sovrano, adoravi il legno sublime della Croce.*

[45] Mary Whitby, "A New Image for a New Age. George of Pisidia on the Emperor Heraclius", in *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East*, 1994, 197-225; Mary Whitby, "The Devil in Disguise: The End of George of Pisidia's: Hexaemeron Reconsidered", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995): 123; Whitby, "Defender of the Cross", 262.

There are other Pisidean verses that mention the power of the Cross, describing it as an armour, a spear or comparing it with the Ark of the Covenant[46]. However, these allegories express the notion of the victory-bringing Cross, an idea that dates to the late-4th century, when the Cross was established as a symbol of Imperial victory. In the 7th century, this was a common literary and artistic topic, clearly used by Heraclius' official propaganda, especially after the victory and the *Restitutio Crucis*[47]. The iconography of Heraclius' coinage displays the same image[48]. Moreover, it is curious that in the main Pisidean work, that commemorates Heraclius' victory over Persia, the *Heracliad*, there is no explicit reference to the Cross.

Thus, the evidence for Heraclius' military use of the Cross is problematic and inconclusive. Furthermore, while the Pisidean references to this use are rare and problematic, there are a few mentions in his poems to the use of holy images that are clearer. He mentions, in two different passages, the military use of an *acheiropoietos* of Christ in Heraclius' campaigns against Persia:

…You guided your army against the second Pharaoh […] Holding the divine and venerable image of that painted non-painted, that that no hands painted…

…Holding the venerable representation of God's image, you said briefly… [Heraclius' speech to the troops] …[49].

Theophanes also mentioned this *acheiropoietos* used by Heraclius[50]. The object has been identified by some scholars as the same one used in battle some decades before (AD 586) by Philippikos, and with the Camuliana or the image of Edessa[51].

Heraclius the Elder -the emperor's father– served many years under Philippikos in the East as his second in command[52]. Moreover, Heraclius the Elder was present -and leading a section of the army– in the battle of AD 586, in which, according to Simocatta' *History*, Philippikos used the *acheiropoietos*[53]. Thus, I consider possible that commanders as Philippikos adopted the military use of images from cities of Syria and Asia minor, and shared it with other officials, as Heraclius the Elder. This use was eventually adopted by emperor Heraclius, becoming later an official Imperial practice. In the process, images were adapted from fixed local *palladia* to portable emblems of the army.

There are also several testimonies of images being used in the Avar-Persian siege of Constantinople (AD 626). George of Pisidia mentions this in his poem devoted to the event, where an *acheiropoietos* of Christ used by the Patriarch during the siege is represented as an advocate and the battle as court trial[54].

This is also narrated on a homily written after the siege and attributed to Theodore Synkellos[55]. The sermon described how, in the absence of the Emperor, the patriarch Sergios had a relevant role in the defence of the city:

At the same time at all the western doors of the city, from where the offspring of darkness had come, the holy archpriest [Sergios], after having painted the holy features of the Virgin carrying in her arms that which she had given birth to, the Lord, -and these icons were like the most brilliant sun, driving out the darkness by its rays. – […] then he beseeched God and the Virgin to keep the city, the lighthouse of the law of the Christians, intact…[56].

Later, the homily said that the Patriarch raised and image of Christ:

… before whom even the demons tremble and that it is said was not created by human hands […] He passed, pouring tears, around all the ramparts of the city, and he showed the effigy, as an invincible weapon, towards the nebulous troops of darkness and the phalanxes of the West […] like the first

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[46] *De Exp. Persica III,* 415-417, *In Rest. S. Crucis,* 19-24, 65-68, 73-81.

[47] Gagé, "Σταυρὸς νικοποιός La victoire impériale dans l'empire chrétien"; Suzanne Spain Alexander, "Heraclius, Byzantine Imperial Ideology, and the David Plates", *Speculum* 52, no. 2 (1977): 217-37; Whitby, "Defender of the Cross'; Drijvers, 'Heraclius and the Restitutio Crucis: Notes on Symbolism and Ideology"; Zuckerman, "Heraclius and the Return of the Holy Cross"; Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross*; Garipzanov, *Graphic Signs of Authority*, 82-105.

[48] Ericsson, Kyra, "The Cross on Steps and the Silver Hexagram". The numismatic use of the Cross also dates back to the late-4th century, Heraclius introduced a new type of coinage with a Cross' motif previously used by Tiberius that could be related to the Persian Wars.

[49] George of Pisidia, *De Expeditione Persica I,* 135-144: "εὐθὺς μετ' αὐτὴν εἰκονίζων Μωσέα καταστρατηγεῖς <τοῦ> Φαραῶ τοῦ δευτέρου, εἰ δεύτερόν τις οὐχ ἁμαρτήσοι λέγων τὸν ὡς ἀληθῶς πρῶτον εἰς ἁμαρτίαν. λαβὼν δὲ τὴν θείαν τε καὶ σεβάσμιον μορφὴν ἐκείνην τῆς γραφῆς τῆς ἀγράφου, ἣν χεῖρες οὐκ ἔγραψαν–ἀλλ' ἐν εἰκόνι ὁ πάντα μορφῶν καὶ διαπλάττων Λόγος ἄνευ γραφῆς μόρφωσιν, ὡς ἄνευ σπορᾶς κύησιν αὐτὸς, ὡς ἐπίσταται, φέρει· George of Pisidia, *De De Expeditione Persica II,* 86-87: "τὸ φρικτὸν αὐτὸς τοῦ θεογράφου τύπου λαβὼν ἀπεικόνισμα συντόμως ἔφης·". Personal translation based on the Greek-Italian version of Tartaglia.

[50] Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronicle*, AM 6113 [AD 620/621], 303-304, 435-436.

[51] Tartaglia, *Carmi / Giorgio di Pisidia*, 81, n.30; Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm", 99-124; Brubaker, "Icons before Iconoclasm? ", 1229.

[52] Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*, 21-22.

[53] Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, II, 3, 1-4: "And so Philippicus arranged the Romans and marshalled the army in three divisions […] while the general, that is to say Heraclius, the father of the emperor Heraclius, took over the central section…"

[54] George of Pisidia, *Bellum Avaricum*, vv. 366-379; Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 38-39.

[55] Martin Hurbanič, *The Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626 History and Legend* (Cham: Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 8.

[56] Theodore Synkellos, *Homily on the siege of Constantinople in 626 AD*, section XV, pp. 80-81: "ὁ δὲ ἱεράρχης ὁ ὅσιος πάσαις ταῖς πρὸς δύσιν πύλαις τῆς πόλεως, ὅθεν καὶ τὸ τοῦ σκότους ἤρχετο γέννημα, οἷα ἥλιον ἀπλανέστατον ταῖς ἀκτῖσι τὸ σκότος διώκοντα τοὺς τῆς παρθένου ἱεροὺς τύπους ἐν εἰκόσιν ἐνέγραψεν, φερούσης ἐν ἀγκάλαις ὃν τέτοκε κύριον, μονονουχὶ βοῶν νοερᾷ τῇ φωνῇ τοῖς τῶν βαρβάρων πλήθεσι καὶ τοῖς ἐκείνων ἄγουσι δαίμοσιν· 'πρὸς τούτους ὑμῖν, ὦ ἔθνη ἀλλόφυλα καὶ φῦλα δαιμόνια ὁ πᾶς ἐξήρτυται πόλεμος· ἅπαν ὑμῶν τὸ θράσος καὶ τὰ φρυάγματα γυνὴ Θεοτόκος μόνῳ διώξει κελεύσματι, μήτηρ ὑπάρχουσα κατ' ἀλή φράγματα γυνὴ Θεοτόκος μόνῳ διώξει κελεύσματι, μήτηρ ὑπάρχουσα κατ' ἀλήθειαν τοῦ τὸν Φαραὼ πανστρατιᾷ ἐν Ἐρυθρᾷ θαλάσσῃ βυθίσαντος καὶ τὸ πᾶν δαιμόνιον φῦλον δείξαντος ἀδρανὲς καὶ ἀνίσχυρον'. Καὶ ταῦτα μὲν ὁ ἱεράρχης ἔδρα καὶ ἔλεγεν, καὶ Θεὸν καὶ τὴν παρθένον ἱκέτευε φυλάξαι πόλιν ἀπόρθητον τῆς Χριστιανῶν ὀφθαλμὸν ὑπάρχουσαν πίστεως, ἢ συνσαλευθῆναι κίνδυνος εἰς πάντα τὰ πέρατα τοῦ κατὰ Χριστὸν μυστηρίου τὸ κήρυγμα." Personal translation to English based on the Greek French version of F. Makk.

Moses, when he had the Ark of the Covenant carried before of the people, said to the Lord: "Arise, Lord! let your enemies be scattered! Let those who hate you flee before you!"[57].

The comparison with the Ark of the Covenant is noteworthy. This device was an apotropaic model acceptable for Christians, probably it was also a way of justifying a new practice showing it as traditional and sanctioned by Holy Scripture[58].

Therefore, during the siege of AD 626, images of the Virgin and an *acheiropoietos* of Christ were used as apotropaic *palladia*. The reference to paintings of the Virgin is the first mention of apotropaic war-images that were not acheiropoietic, explicitly painted for the siege and not of miraculous origin[59]. Also, it is not clear if the Christ's image used by the Patriarch was the Camuliana, the Edessa's image, the same used by Heraclius or another one. Probably, by that time, there were two or more miraculous images in the Empire.

However, if we consider the traditional relevance of the Cross and its relics, then why were holy images preferred over these in this war? I think the most likely explanation is related to the Persian capture of Jerusalem and the True Cross. While there were other minor Cross' relics in the Empire, these were either not used in this war or their use was not highlighted by the surviving sources. Not used, because the Romans were afraid of also losing them to the enemy, or because they stop trusting in its apotropaic properties; or not highlighted, because the mention of the Cross'

relics reminded them of a recent painful disaster. The holy sponge and lance, rescued from the sack of Jerusalem and brought to Constantinople, were kept in the capital, venerated but not use in the war, probably for similar reasons[60].

Heraclius' ideology and propaganda widely used the symbol of the cross, but mainly after his victory and the *Restitutio Crucis* (c. AD 628-630)[61]. Most Greek sources written during the war mention the looting of the relic very briefly, because it was cause of great shame and sorrow[62]. In the earlier Pisidean works, the Cross is barely mentioned, yet, after the *Restitutio*, he wrote a poem entirely devoted to the relic. The feast of the Exaltation of the Cross only spread and became popular after the recovery of the Holy Wood[63]. Consequently, Cross' relics could hardly have helped morale of the Romans during the war. After the victory, the Cross started to be presented by Heraclius' propaganda as one of the causes of the war and reasons of the Roman triumph. This propaganda aimed to strengthen the emperor's authority and prestige in a context of internal religious controversy[64].

Therefore, while the cross was problematic between AD 614-628, acheiropoietic images were already popular. They could inspire courage, without evoking the loss of the True Cross, and some of them had an excellent record as successful *palladia* against the pagan Persians. The military use of holy images probably started in some cities of the Near East, as Camuliana and Edessa, then it was adopted by some Roman commanders –Philippikos, Heraclius the Elder– in the late-6th century, and finally by Heraclius during his wars.

57   Theodore Synkellos, *Homily on the siege of Constantinople in 626 AD*, section XVII, pp. 81. "Μωσῆς τοῦ μονογενοῦς Θεοῦ τὸν τύπον, ὃν καὶ δαίμονες φρίττουσι (φασὶ δὲ τοῦτον τὸν ἀχειροποίητον) ἀθῴοις ἄρας χερσὶν (οὐ γὰρ ἐδεῖτο τοῦ ὑπερείδοντος, ὅλον ἑαυτὸν σταυρώσας κόσμῳ, κατὰ τὸ Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ εὐαγγέλιον). ὥσπερ ὅπλον ἀκαταμάχητον διὰ παντὸς τοῦ τείχους τῆς πόλεως διῆλθε σὺν δάκρυσι τοῦτον παραδεικνὺς ταῖς ἀερίοις τοῦ σκότους δυνάμεσι καὶ ταῖς ἐκ δύσεως φάλαγξι· σιωπώσῃ δὲ τῇ φωνῇ καθὰ Μωσῆς ὁ πρῶτος ἐβόα πρὸς κύριον, ἡνίκα τὴν κιβωτὸν ἐποίει τοῦ λαοῦ προπορεύεσθαι· ʽἐξεγέρθητι κύριε καὶ διασκορπισθήτωσαν οἱ ἐχθροί σου καὶ φυγέτωσαν πάντες οἱ μισοῦντές σε·ʼ" Personal translation to English based on the Greek-French version of F. Makk.

58   The comparison of apotropaic devices with objects from the Old Testament became common in Byzantine literature after AD 626. Hurbanič, *The Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626 History and Legend*, 247-339.

59   The events of the siege had been widely discussed by scholarship. E. Kitzinger and A. Cameron maintained that Marian icons had a role in the defence of the city, Van Dieten and P. Speck argued against it. B. Pentcheva argued that only the *acheiropoietos* was carried in procession, denying a procession with icons. More recently, M. Hurbanič analysed the "spiritual arsenal" of the siege, saying that while the use of icons -established cult objects consistent in wooden painted panels– is probably a later tradition, the use of an *acheiropoietos* and other images as *palladia* is clearly attested. It is possible that the images of the Virgin are a later interpolation, but I do not think there is enough evidence to assure it. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm"; Jan Louis van Dieten, *Geschichte der griechischen Patriarchen von Konstantinopel / Vol.4, Geschichte der Patriarchen von Sergios I bis Johannes VI, 610-715.*, Enzyklopadie der Byzantinistik ; Bd. 24 (Amsterdam: AMHakkert, 1972); Paul Speck, *Zufälliges zum Bellum Avaricum des Georgios Pisides: in Zusammenarbeit mit Studenten des Münchener Instituts* (München: Institut für Byzantinistik, 1980); Averil Cameron, "The Theotokos in Sixth-Century Constantinople", *Journal of Theological Studies* 29 (1978): 79-80; Averil Cameron, "The Virgin's Robe: An Episode in the History of the Early Seventh-Century Constantinople", *Byzantion* 49 (1979): 42-56; Averil Cameron, "Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in the Late Sixth–Century Byzantium", *Past and Present*, no. 84 (1979): 3; Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*, 38-42; Martin Hurbanič, *The Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626 History and Legend*, 315-27.

60   *Chronicon Paschale*, AD 614.

61   Drijvers, "Heraclius and the Restitutio Crucis: Notes on Symbolism and Ideology".

62   The *Chronicon Paschale* mentions the sack of Jerusalem and the looting of the Cross very briefly, George of Pisidia did not mention this at all. The most detailed account is a sermon by the monk Antiochus Strategus. Some later sources claimed a causal connection between the looting of the Cross and Heraclius' expedition, a possible echo of Imperial propaganda that started to circulate after the war. James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 31-32; Barbara Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood* (Brill, 2004), 140. first contemporary and near-contemporary non-Muslims, then later writers with access to good sources of information, and finally the canonical Islamic accounts. As information is extracted from each successive witness, the extraordinary history of the seventh century in the Middle East–the human equivalent of the Big Bang–is gradually pieced together. Key events are securely dated for the first time–the surrender of Jerusalem (late in 634 or early 635

63   Louis van Tongeren, *Exaltation of the Cross* (Leuven; Sterling, Va.: Peeters, 2000).. S. Borgehammar argued that the Exaltation started the be celebrated in Constantinople as a supplication after the loss of the Cross, yet its spread through the Christian world and popularity were hastened by the restauration of the relic after the war. Stephan Borgehammar, "Heraclius Learns Humility", *Millennium: Jahrbuch Zu Kultur Und Geschichte Des Ersten Jahrtausends n. Chr.* 6 (2009): 151-52. In the Latin West, the feast of the Exaltation was interpreted as a commemoration of the Heraclius' victory over Persia and restauration of the Cross, as it is showed by the homilies of this feast and many other textual and iconographic sources.

64   If any Cross-standard or relics were used during the war, their role was exalted after the restauration of the True Cross, but this was a propagandistic reconstruction of the historical memory after the facts. During the war, when the recovery of the True Cross was not sure, any Cross-device could only have a secondary role as apotropaic talisman or standard. Regarding Heraclius' propaganda and the internal controversies after the war: Alexander, "Heraclius, Byzantine Imperial Ideology, and the David Plates"; Drijvers, "Heraclius and the Restitutio Crucis: Notes on Symbolism and Ideology".

When the Christian Empire was in great risk, with its capital threatened, the Holy City sacked and the True Cross looted, when the ancient relics seemed to have failed, the use of holy images was one of the last resources that Heraclius and his court could use to obtain divine help and rebuild the Romans' broken morale.

7. Conclusions

The military use of relics, images and Christian apotropaic devices is well attested in the Roman-Persian wars, yet it is not restricted to this context. During the 5th century, cities trusted in their relics against different barbarians, and Emperor Maurice carried a relic of the Cross in an expedition against the Avars[65]. In fact, this use was not even restricted to wars with Pagan enemies: Heraclius carried an image of the Virgin in his rebellion against Phocas, who was a usurper and a tyrant but a Christian[66].

Therefore, although scholars have used these practices as evidence of a mentality or ideology of "holy war", I do not think the one necessary entail the other[67]. Christian devices could be used in various military contexts and conflicts of different nature, including civil wars and wars among Christians. What their use shows is a complex process of Christianization and transformation of sociocultural practices between the 4th and 7th centuries that requires further research. The use of literary sources is problematic because they can highlight or omit the use of apotropaic devices for propagandistic, rhetorical, and ideological reasons.

However, a critical examination of several sources provides some insights of the process. From this review it follows that some of the earliest examples of the military use of Christian relics and images happened in the context of the Roman-Persian conflict and frontier region. Moreover, that, during the 4th-7th these practices were much more common there than in any other context. This is particularly evident for the case of acheiropoietic images; they originated around Syria and Asia Minor, were used several times against the Persians, and were uncommon in the Christian West[68].

Three factors, at least, could explain this. First, the strength and intensity of the cult of relics, and later images, in Syria and the Near East. Second, the growing identification of the Roman Empire as a Christian power between the 4th and 7th centuries. Finally, the Roman-Persian conflict and the climate of religious confrontation of Byzantine-Sassanian wars. These three factors certainly influenced each other in many ways. For example, the conflict with Persia only started acquiring religious connotations after the intense Christianization of Theodosius the Great. The religious practices of the frontier region were transformed by the conflict, and as the Roman-Persian confrontation grew over the centuries, the Imperial elites adopted some of these local practices.

The military use of holy relics and images continued in the Byzantine Empire after the Arab conquests and the fall of Persia. The evidence of it is scarce in the mid-7th and 8th centuries, but abundant from the 9th century onwards (Fig. 3). Therefore, as in many other facets of Byzantine culture, the 4th-7th centuries could be considered the formative years, when some local and non-official practices emerged and were slowly adopted and sanctioned by the Imperial and ecclesiastic elite.

The Christian Empire trusted in the supernatural protection of its relics and holy images, the late-7th century *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius claimed that: "There is not, therefore, a nation or kingdom under the heavens that could overcome the kingdom of the Christians, as long as it takes refuge in the living Cross"[69]. But they were not always successful, the relics that were supposed to protect Constantinople were among the treasures sacked by the crusaders in AD 1204. After that, relics were disseminated through the West, while the Slavic countries continued the tradition of the military holy icons. Yet, by then, the "kingdom of the Christians" was not one ruled from Constantinople anymore.

Figure 3. 12th century representation of an icon of the Virgin returning from a miltiary camping and taking part in the triumph of Tzimiskes (AD 971). Madrid Skylitzes, Vitr/26/2, Folio 172v, BNE. Source: Biblioteca Nacional de España [25-01-2022], http://bdh.bne.es/bnesearch/detalle/bdh0000022766

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65   Note 39.
66   George of Pisidia, *Heracliad* II, 9-18; Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronicle*, AM 6102. Heraclius' official propaganda justified his rebellion presenting Phocas as an impious barbarian, but we know that he held good relations with the Roman Church. G. B. Hicks, "St. Gregory and the Emperor Phocas", *The Downside Review* 23, no. 1 (1904): 59-72; David Olster, "The Politics of Usurpation in the Seventh Century» (Ph.D., United States -– Illinois, The University of Chicago, 1986)
67   Athina Kolia-Dermitzaki, "Ο Βυζαντινός "ιερός πόλεμος" η έννοια και η προβολή του θρησκευτικού πολέμου στο Βυζάντιο" (Αθήνα, Ιστορικες εκδόσεις Στ. Δ. Βασιλόπουλος, 1991); Sophia Mergiali-Sahas, "Byzantine Emperors and Holy Relics: Use, and Misuse, of Sanctity and Authority'", *Jahrbuch Der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 51 (2001): 50; Athina Kolia-Dermitzaki, "Holy War In Byzantium Twenty Years Later: A Question of Term Definition and Interpretation", in *Byzantine War Ideology between Roman Imperial Concept and Christian Religion*, ed. Johannes Koder and Ioannis Stouraitis, 2012, 121-23.
68   Pope Stephen II (AD 752-757) carried an image against a Lombard attack, but Rome was still very connected with the Empire and the Greek East of the Mediterranean in the 8th century. As far as I know, there are no examples of apotropaic images on other places of the Medieval West before the crusades. *Liber Pontificalis*, 94, 10, p. 56. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm", 115; Brenda M. Bolton, "Advertise the Message: Images in Rome at the Turn of the Twelfth Century1",

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Studies in Church History 28 (1992): 126; Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, 23-29.
69   Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, Chapter IX (fol. 126r, 126v). English translation of F. J. Martinez: Francisco Javier Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius* (1985), 176-177.

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