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Heraclius as a demented ruler? A note on the significance of medical knowledge in patriarch Nicephorus' I *breviarium*[*]

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The reign of the emperor Heraclius (610–641) is receiving much attention in current scholarship.[1] The end of his eventful rule in particular has recently been subjected to convincing in-depth analysis.[2] Inspired by these results, this contribution deals with the literary depiction of the emperor as an allegedly sick and despaired old man after his military defeat against Muslim Arabs and his subsequent return to Constantinople in 638 according to the historiographer Nicephorus I (c. 758–828). This note's aim is to situate the ruler's supposed mental and physical ailments within a framework of late antique medical knowledge. In doing so it will expose Nicephorus' characterizations as indirect criticisms of Heraclius' perceived failed rule. Additionally, the study will provide insight into the named patriarch's practices as a historiographer to purposefully damage and ridicule the emperor's memory around 800 CE. It will finally emphasize that for the interpretation of Nicephorus' historiography contemporary medical knowledge is significant, which has not yet been addressed by current scholarship.[3]

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[1] See, for instance, Kaegi 2003; Raum 2021; Viermann 2021a; Howard-Johnston 2021.

[2] Viermann 2021b, 241–266.

[3] Note that this paper will not attempt to put forward a potential differential diagnosis

Nicephorus took a critical and sometimes even defamatory stance towards Heraclius' reign.[4] The ruler is frequently portrayed as a powerless pawn of the Sasanians, the Avars and the Muslims. Even military triumphs around 630 were attributed primarily to the internal weakness of the Persian Empire and not to Heraclius' personal achievements. Nicephorus thus presents us with a clear reversal of the radiant depiction of the ruler as a Christ-like saviour as depicted, for instance, in the panegyrics by George of Pisidia.[5] Furthermore, he sometimes contradicts the historiographer Theophanes Confessor (c. 760–818).[6]

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of Heraclius' health towards his life's end. Based on the few symptoms Nicephorus puts forward as a non-medical writer when portraying the emperor's ailments, such an approach would run the risk of being anachronistic. On retrospective diagnosis and the problems of using historical texts for investigating past diseases, see Leven 2004, 369–386; Mitchell 2011, 81–88.

[4] Criticism of the emperor is repeatedly found in Nicephorus' *breviarum*: Heraclius, like his predecessor Phocas, rose to power as a violent usurper (Niceph. *Brev*. 1). He lured his political opponent Priscus to Constantinople under the pretext to attend the baptism of his eldest son Heraclius Constantine III in order to get rid of them (Niceph. *Brev*. 2). In his dealings with the Persians and Avars he is depicted as a gullible and naïve decision-maker (Niceph. *Brev*. 7; 10). When it seemed impossible to stay in Constantinople due to several pressing problems, he attempted to escape to North Africa (Niceph. *Brev*. 8). Despite repeated objections from his friends and powerful representatives of the imperial elites, he married his niece Martina (Niceph. *Brev*. 11). He also planned to marry his daughter Eudocia to a Turk leader to receive military support in the fight against the Sasanians (Niceph. *Brev*. 12). Finally, he is to blame for confessional divisions in the empire (Niceph. *Brev*. 37). Regarding the scholarship on Nicephorus as a historiographer see Hunger 1978, I 344–347; Speck 1988; Hoyland 1997, 432–434; Howard-Johnston 2010, 238–267; Treadgold 2013, 26–31; Neville 2018, 72–77.

[5] For Heraclius' depiction in the panegyrics by George of Pisidia and the poet's literary strategies in general see Frendo 1984, 159–187; Whitby 1994, 197–225; Whitby 1995, 115–129; Whitby 1998, 247–273; Whitby 2002, 157–173; Whitby 2003, 173–186; Meier 2015, 167–192; Viermann 2020, 379–402.

[6] Proudfoot 1974, 367–439; Hoyland 1997, 400–403; Howard-Johnston 2010, 197–236. Note that Theophanes sometimes used George of Pisidia as a template for his own historiographical depictions.

Among the most important reasons for Nicephorus' often pejorative depictions is the emperor's ultimately failed religious policy. After the condemnation of patriarch Sergius and pope Honorius I at the Third Synod of Constantinople in 681 due to their proposal of a monenergetic-monotheletic program to unite the orthodox and the miaphysite churches,[7] Heraclius was associated with their now heretical propositions, since he had actively supported their respective endeavours.[8] Moreover, the emperor was criticized for his marriage with his niece Martina, which was perceived as an incestuous connection.[9] She was also accused of indecent meddling in public affairs by Nicephorus, when she supported her own son Heraclonas against Heraclius' eldest male offspring Heraclius Constantine III in 641.[10] Constantin Zuckerman furthermore suggests that Nicephorus' historiographical work was based on pamphlet-like testimonies that patriarch Pyrrhus (638–641 and 654) may have written *pro domo suo* around 650 to justify his return to the capital.[11] This would explain inadequate chronological information, the omission of theological disputes around 630 and the general hostility towards Heraclius and especially towards Martina and her eldest son Heraclonas.[12] Although Pyrrhus was her supporter in 641, the pamphlet's author was primarily interested in concealing this fact to be accepted back at the court of Constans II (641–668) after his previous banishment due to Martina's fall.[13] For this purpose, past events and the people

[7] For the life of patriarch Sergius see van Dieten 1972, 1–56. For the life of pope Honorius I see Tilly 1990, 1028–30. For the theological debates of the 7th century see Winkelmann 2001; Lange 2012; Ohme 2022.

[8] See Niceph. *Brev*. 37. On the memory of Heraclius in medieval sources see Sirotenko 2020.

[9] Niceph. *Brev*. 11; 28. See Olster 1994, 37.

[10] Niceph. *Brev*. 28. The historiographer probably presented her as a negative example to find fault with the contemporary rule of the powerful empress Irene (797–802), see Garland 1999, 61–72.

[11] For the life of patriarch Pyrrhus see van Dieten 1972, 57–75; 104–105.

[12] Zuckerman 2013, 197–218, here 208–209. See also Booth 2016, 509–662, here 518–519.

[13] See also Booth 2016, 509–662, here 518–519.

participating in them were presented in a simplified and often distorted manner from today's perspective.

Against this backdrop, Nicephorus alone presents us with an astonishing story about the emperor returning to Constantinople in 638 after his lost battles with the Muslims:

> At this time Heraclius returned home and resided in the palace called Hieria; for he was afraid of embarking on the sea and remained unmoved by the noblemen and citizens who repeatedly begged him to enter the City. On feast days he would dispatch only his sons who, after attending holy liturgy in the church, immediately returned to him. And likewise, when they watched the hippodrome games, they went back to their father. […]. After a considerable lapse of time the noblemen of the court caused the prefect to collect a great many ships and tie them one next to the other so as to bridge the straits called Stenon, and to make on either side a hedge of branches and foliage so that <the emperor>, as he went by, would not even catch sight of the sea. Indeed, this work went ahead speedily, and the emperor crossed the sea on horseback, as if it were dry land, to the shore of the bay of Phidaleia (as it is called). Avoiding the coastal area, he reached Byzantium by the bridge of the river Barbysses. After this he crowned emperor the Caesar Heracleius (i.e. Heraclonas).[14] (trans. Mango 1990, 73–75).

According to Nicephorus, the emperor was devastated after the critical military and territorial losses in Syria and Palestine. Old, ill and apparently

[14] Niceph. *Brev*. 24, 1–8; 25, 1–11, ed. Mango 1990, 72–74: Τούτῳ τῷ χρόνῳ ἀνέζευξε πρὸς τὰ οἰκεῖα Ἡράκλειος καὶ ηὐλίζετο ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ τῷ καλουμένῳ τῆς Ἱερίας· ἐδεδίει γὰρ ἐπιβῆναι θαλάσσης, πολλά τε ἀξιοῦντες οἵ τε ἄρχοντες καὶ οἱ τῆς πόλεως ἐν τῇ πόλει εἰσελθεῖν ἔπειθον οὐδαμῶς. […]. Χρόνου δὲ ἱκανοῦ διελθόντος παρασκευάζουσιν οἱ τοῦ βασιλέως ἄρχοντες τὸν ἔπαρχον ὡς συναγαγεῖν πλεῖστα πλοῖα καὶ ἐχόμενα ἀλλήλοις ἐξάψας ὥσπερ γεφυρώσει τὸν πορθμὸν τοῦ καλουμένου Στενοῦ κλώνοις τε δένδρων καὶ φυλλάσιν ἑκατέρωθεν διατειχίσειεν, ὡς μηδὲ ὁρᾶσθαι παριόντι τὴν θάλασσαν. Καὶ δὴ τὸ ἔργον εἰς τάχος προυχώρει, καὶ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἱππεὺς διὰ θαλάττης ὥσπερ διὰ τῆς ἠπείρου κατὰ τὰς ἀκτὰς τοῦ λεγομένου κόλπου Φιδαλείας ἐπεραιοῦτο, οὗ τε τὸν παράκτιον χῶρον παραμείψας διὰ τῆς γεφύρας τοῦ Βαρβύσσου ποταμοῦ πρὸς τὸ Βυζάντιον εἰσῄει. Καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα Ἡράκλειον τὸν Καίσαρα στέφει βασιλέα.

out of his mind, he no longer could bear the sight of the sea (ἐδεδίει γὰρ ἐπιβῆναι θαλάσσης) and withdrew to the Hieria Palace outside of Constantinople, full of fear of the outside world and consequently only rarely visiting the capital despite pleas from the city's nobles.[15] His sons Heraclius Constantine III and Heraclonas allegedly saw the city more often, especially in the context of important public events and celebrations, such as circus games or liturgical festivities. However, they also swiftly returned to their father after they had performed their duties. Only a clever intervention by the city's senators (οἱ τοῦ βασιλέως ἄρχοντες) and the unnamed city prefect (ἔπαρχος) provided a solution to steer the fearful emperor over the sea towards the capital so that he could elevate his son Heraclonas to the rank of Augustus on June 4, 638. Thus, a boat bridge (πορθμός), reminding us of the famous bridge built by the Persian king Xerxes over the Hellespont in 480 BCE,[16] was constructed, over which the ruler could quickly ride away without ever seeing the sea to reach the capital, because the sides of the ships had been equipped with foliage and branches, which is said to have blocked the view of the sea.[17] This is supposed to have created the illusion as if the emperor was riding into town over dry land.

Several aspects of Nicephorus' story about the seemingly weak and ill emperor raise questions from today's perspective. As is known from other sources, Heraclius was in fact not devastated and politically paralyzed after his defeats against the Muslims. Instead, he continued to defend the empire, while residing in Constantinople. This is evident in his interactions with military leaders from Egypt, whom he urged to resist against invading Muslim forces.[18] His gradual and comparatively well-

[15] Heraclius' lack of confidence in people outside the circle of his most trusted family members and advisors may have been reinforced by an assassination attempt from within his own family and supported by parts of the senate in 637, see Ps.-Seb. 133; Niceph. *Brev*. 24.

[16] Hdt. 7, 21; 25; 33–34.

[17] On Xerxes' bridge over the Hellespont see Hammond 1996, 88–107. It was not uncommon for members of the Roman army to build bridges over the rivers Rhine, Danube and Euphrates to cross them with armed soldiers, see Le Bohec 2002, 139–140; Le Bohec 2006, 131.

[18] In 640, the *magister militum* and *cubicularius Marinus* (PLRE III 829, Marianus 5)

ordered repatriation of the remaining Byzantine armies from Syria and the scorched-earth strategy he employed in the region during that process represented an essential prerequisite for the defence of Asia Minor, since they contributed greatly to halt the Muslim advances on site.[19] In addition, he attempted to establish an empire-wide new fiscal registry (*census*), possibly also with regard to future military endeavours.[20] He was also present in the capital several times for important public events.[21] It becomes clear that Heraclius was by no means frail, ill and battle weary, with the sole aim of hiding in the imperial palace, when he returned to Constantinople. On the contrary, he was still ready to defend and lead the empire together with his sons Heraclius Constantine III and Heraclonas even after military catastrophes in the Levant. In fact, the construction of a boat bridge was not intended as a protective measure against the sight of the sea but was rather part of an impressive imperial *adventus* to the capital. As recently demonstrated, this procession was to stage the emperor's entry into Constantinople as a deliberate public performance for the capital's population to downplay the military defeats against the Muslims and at the same time to emphasize the stability of his own dynasty, thereby clearly demonstrating the stability of his government.[22] Note as well that the seemingly water-shy emperor did not show any sign of his alleged affliction, when he crossed the river Barbysses according to the historiographer.

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served under patriarch Cyrus of Alexandria, where he attempted to stop the Muslim invasion into North Africa by the emperor's orders, see Niceph. *Brev*. 24. Already in 639, Cyrus tried to deal with the attackers by negotiating a peace treaty that would have forced Byzantium to pay tribute to the attackers. However, these attempts were quickly put to a halt by Heraclius, when he learnt about the patriarch's plans, see Theoph. *Chron*. AM 6126, ed. de Boor 1883, I 388; Niceph. *Brev*. 23; 26. For additional sources see Beihammer 2000, 229–230; 240–241, Nr. 185–186; Nr. 201 and Dölger & Müller 2009, 90–91, Nr. 215a–b; d.

[19] Lilie 1976, 3; Haldon 1990, 223–243.

[20] Theodoros Skutariotes, *Synopsis Chronike*, ed. Sathas 1894, 110, 5–7.

[21] Members of the imperial family presented themselves on January 1, 639, see Const. Porph. *De Cer*. 2, 28. On January 4, 639, the dynasty showed itself also in the hippodrome, where it received acclamations by the inhabitants of the capital, see Const. Porph. *De Cer*. 2, 29.

[22] Viermann 2021b, 241–266.

Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that Nicephorus chose to portray the emperor as afraid of the sight of the sea in his account of events.[23] This is surprising since the ruler had not fought any naval battles during his campaigns. George of Pisidia only reports of a stormy crossing of the sea of Marmara in 622, which the emperor managed to survive together with his soldiers due to his true Christian faith.[24] Before that, Heraclius sailed from North Africa via Egypt to Constantinople to end the rule of Phocas,[25] without, however, fighting on the sea or being exposed to violent storms during his travels. In both instances, no fear on part of the ruler to sail across the waters is documented.

These findings strongly suggest to interpret Nicephorus' account in other ways: It might be possible, on the one hand, to read and understand the *breviarium*'s depiction as a metaphor. Some Christian authors interpreted the sea allegorically as a mirror of human life with all its vicissitudes, contingencies and unpredictabilities.[26] Heraclius' fear of the sea could thus be seen (in a figurative manner) as personal dread of his allegedly poorly led life in general as well as the decisions he made as emperor of Byzantium in particular and the ensuing devastating consequences for the empire. On the other hand, I would like to suggest that there is an additional level of meaning beyond the proposed allegorical interpretation, which can be analysed in the context of late Roman medical knowledge, as put forward, for instance, by John Lascaratos.[27]

Fear of water, so-called *hydrophobia* (ὑδροφοβία), was considered a disease of the soul in ancient medicine—it was also seen as a clear sign of the onset of rabies, which was usually transmitted by the bite of

[23] Heraclius' allegedly strange behavior after his return from Syria has been interpreted as a possible sign of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by Kaegi 2003, 183; 244.

[24] Georg. Pis. *Exp. Pers*. 1, 170–247.

[25] See, for instance, Georg. Pis. *Heracl*. 2, 15; Theophanes *Chron*. AM 6102, ed. de Boor, I, 298; Niceph. *Brev*. 1.

[26] See, for instance, Durst, Amedick & Enß 2012, 506–609, here 555–595.

[27] Lascaratos 1995, 157–159. The episode about Heraclius' fear of water attracted attention already from earlier scholarship, see, for instance, Jeanselme 1923, 330–333; Jeanselme 1927, 13.

a mad dog.[28] Building on earlier works, such as the medical manuals by Oribasius of Pergamon or Aëtius of Amida, the medical practitioner Paul of Aegina provides us with vivid descriptions of the disease in his medical manual titled *Pragmateia* from the first half of the 7th century:[29]

> In their rage these dogs abhor beverage and food, and although they are thirsty, they have no desire to drink. They gasp for air often, let their ears droop and give off much drool and foam. Overall, they are dumb and so confused that they do not recognize their home. Therefore, without barking, they attack all in the same way, animals and people, and bite them. When they bite, they at first cause no trouble except some pain from the wound, but later they provoke the affliction called *hydrophobia*, which is associated with trembling, redness, and anxiety, also they [the bitten] fear water when they see it or when they are brought to it, some also all liquids.[30]

According to this account, people bitten by a rabid dog soon suffered from rabies themselves. Like the afflicted animals, patients could not think rationally but attacked all close to them. In their suffering they took neither food nor drink and were plagued by various fears. Dread of water—or any liquid for that matter for some—appears as one of

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[28] The history of rabies in Byzantium has been studied by Theodorides 1984, 149–158. For earlier depictions of this malady during Late Antiquity see, for instance, Orib. *Syll. ad Eust.* 8, 13, 1–2) and Aet. Amid. *Lib. med*. 6, 24, which served as important foundations for later depictions of the affliction.

[29] For the life and writings of Paul of Aegina see Hunger 1978, II 285–320; Miller 2017, 252–268.

[30] Paul. Aeg. 5, 3, ed. Heiberg 1921–1924, 8, 1–12: Λυσσήσαντες δὲ καὶ βρῶσιν καὶ πόσιν ἀποστρέφονται καὶ διψώδεις μέν εἰσιν, οὐ ποτικοὶ δέ, καὶ ἀσθμαίνουσιν ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ καὶ τὰ ὦτα κλίνουσιν, σίελον δὲ καὶ δαψιλὲς καὶ ἀφρῶδες ἀφιᾶσιν καὶ ἄφωνοι τοὐπίπα εἰσὶν καὶ οἷα ἄφρονες, ὡς μηδὲ τοὺς οἰκείους γνωρίζειν· ἐφορμῶσι γοῦν χωρὶς ὑλαγμοῦ πᾶσιν ὁμοίως καὶ θηρίοις καὶ ἀνθρώποις καὶ δάκνουσιν, δάκνοντες δὲ παραχρῆμα μὲν οὐδὲν ὀχληρὸν φέρουσι πλὴν ὅσον ὀδύνην τὴν ἐκ τοῦ τραύματος, ὕστερον δὲ πάθος ἐμποιοῦσι τὸ καλούμενον ὑδροφοβικόν, ὃ συμπίπτει μετὰ σπασμῶν καὶ ἐρεύθεους ὅλου τοῦ σώματος, μάλιστα δὲ τοῦ προσώπου, καὶ μετὰ ἐφιδρώσεως καὶ ἀπορίας, καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ φεύγουσιν ὁρῶντές τε καὶ προσφερόμενοι, τινὲς δὲ καὶ πᾶν ὑγρόν. Compare this depiction with the modern analysis of rabies according to the International Classification of Diseases ICD–10, A82.

the most characteristic signs of the disease. The sickness seemed to be treatable if no symptoms were present yet. After a breakout, however, a patient's rescue was no longer possible.[31]

By portraying the emperor as water-fearing, Nicephorus positions Heraclius in the context of discussions about *hydrophobia*, rabies and madness in general. In doing so, the ruler's behaviour is examined within a critical framework of ancient medical theories and simultaneously ridiculed: As if the emperor had been afflicted by rabies, he is afraid of the sight of the sea water and must make use of a cunning plan devised by the city prefect and the nobles of Constantinople to reach the capital. A triumphal entry of the emperor is thereby transformed into its opposite in Nicephorus' historiography. This literary subversion could be noticed by the author's well-educated readership. Many of Nicephorus' addressees were learned individuals and thus potentially familiar with medical theories—there was an entire market with abbreviated texts (ἐπιτομαὶ) aimed at "friends of physicians" or "amateur physicians" (φιλίατροι) in Byzantium,[32] as can be seen when studying writings condensed in content for this very purpose by the physicians Oribasius or Paul of Aegina. Furthermore, there is a long-standing tradition of historiographers addressing diseases in their depictions of past events while referring to medical theories and thereby simultaneously providing quasi-causal explanations in context of their personal worldviews and —sometimes polemical—personal literary objectives.[33]

This is not the only passage in Nicephorus where a medical ailment is attributed to the emperor or members of his family. Heraclius Constantine III is shown as having some sort of lung disease, which forced him to seek out climates favourable to his frail health outside the

[31] Paul. Aeg. 5, 3, ed. Heiberg 1921–1924, 8, 13–17.

[32] See, for instance, Temkin 1973; Luchner 2004; Bouras-Vallianatos & Xenophontoes 2018; Bouras-Vallianatos 2020, 105–138. Georg. Pis. *Exp. Pers*. 2, 189–205; *In Bonum* 76–110; *Heracl*. 2, 34–54 compares Heraclius to the famous physicians Hippocrates and Galen in order to emphasize the emperor's role as healer of the sick empire due to Phocas' reign and attacks by the Sasanians.

[33] For the 6th century CE there are relevant depictions of the so-called Plague of Justinian in Agath. 5, 10; Paul., *Hist. Lang*. 2, 4.

capital.[34] Additionally, Heraclius himself seems to have been afflicted with dropsy (νόσος ὑδερικὴ) towards the end of his life according to Nicephorus' testimony. It becomes clear that the historiographer was well-aware of medical terminology when he depicts the emperor's ailment:

> Sometime later [Heraclius] fell ill with the dropsy and realized that his disease was difficult to cure, for it grew to such an extent that when he was about to urinate, he would place a board against his abdomen: <otherwise> his private parts turned round and discharged the urine in his face. This was in reproof of his transgression (namely, his marriage to his own niece) on account of which he suffered this ultimate punishment.[35] (tr. Mango 1990, 77)

Note, however that the characterization of Heraclius' malady does not correspond to traditional accounts. The already mentioned physician Paul of Aegina, for instance, informs his readership that dropsy (ὕδερος) results from an inability of the liver to convert food into blood.[36] As a result, there is an excess of moisture that accumulates in the intestines. This can cause the abdomen to swell while the extremities wither. It is not uncommon for patients to exhibit marked pallor of the body and suffer from fever. The disease is difficult to cure and even requires surgical interventions in some cases. Nicephorus' portrayal of Heraclius' suffering might instead be reminiscent of medical descriptions of *hypospadias* (ὑποσπαδίας) as proposed by John Lascaratos,[37] i.e., a maldevelopment of the urethra in men, which according to ancient understanding could

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[34] Niceph. *Brev*. 29. Note that Nicephorus alone mentions this affliction of Heraclius Constantine III among all preserved source texts. Other medical observations are preserved in the text, such as additional mentions of dropsy as well as portrayals of the plague in Constantinople from 747/748, see Niceph. *Brev*. 64; 67.

[35] Niceph. *Brev*. 27, 1–10, ed. Mango 76: Χρόνου δὲ διελθόντος νόσῳ ὑδερικῇ περιπίπτει, καὶ ὀρῶν τὸ πάθος δυσίατον – ἐπὶ τοσοῦτο γὰρ ἐπετείνετο ὡς καὶ ἡνίκα ἀπουρεῖν ἤμελλε σανίδα κατὰ τοῦ ἤτρου ἐπετίθει· ἐστρέφετο γὰρ αὐτοῦ τὸ αἰδοῖον καὶ κατὰ τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ τὰ οὖρα ἔπεμπεν. Ἔλεγχος δὲ ἦν τοῦτο τῆς παρανομίας τῆς ἑαυτοῦ, ὑπὲρ ἧς ταύτην δίκην ὑστάτην ἐξέτισε τοῦ εἰς τὴν ἀνεψιὰν τὴν οἰκείαν γάμου.

[36] Paul. Aeg. 3, 48; 6, 50.

[37] See Lascaratos et al. 1995, 380–283.

be congenital or acquired and sometimes even treated, as depicted by the famous physician Oribasius of Pergamon in the middle of the 4th century CE, who also served as a later reference for Paul of Aegina:[38]

> On *hypospadias*: In some individuals, the glans, due to a congenital defect, is not pierced in accordance with nature. Instead, the hole is found below what is called [in Greek] the "dog", which is found at the termination of the glans. For this reason, they can neither urinate forward, unless they raise the penis high towards the pelvis, nor beget children, because the semen cannot be thrown straight into the womb but flows sideways into the vagina. […] Sometimes the hole is placed far from the dog, in the middle of the urethra, near the base of the glans. These cases are incurable. Other times the hole exists at the level of the so-called dog, and then the condition can be cured.[39]

As becomes clear, though, when comparing this medical analysis with Nicephorus' portrayal, Heraclius' alleged malaise at the end of his life is not comparable to the traditional medical account of *hypospadias*.[40] The historiographer's goal was apparently not an accurate depiction of Heraclius' illness but to illustrate the consequences of the emperor's earlier sinful behaviour (Niceph. *Brev*. 27: ἔλεγχος δὲ ἦν τοῦτο τῆς παρανομίας τῆς ἑαυτοῦ), for which he was punished by God towards the end of his life. Criticizing emperors in such a way has a long tradition especially in Christian historiography, as can be seen, for instance, in

[38] Paul. Aeg. 6, 54.

[39] Oreib. *Coll. med.* 50, 3, ed, Raeder 1933 IV, 57, 2–7; 10–13: Περὶ ὑποσπαδιαίων: Ἐκ γενετῆς ἐνίοις ἡ βάλανος οὐ τέτρηται κατὰ φύσιν, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ τῷ κυνὶ καλουμένῳ καὶ κατὰ τὸν ἀπαρτισμὸν τῆς βαλάνου τὸ τρῆμά ἐστιν. Ἐντεῦθεν οὔτε οὐρεῖν εἰς τὰ ἔμπροσθεν δύνανται, ἂν μὴ πάνυ ἀνακλάσωσι τὸ μόριον ὡς πρὸς τὸ ἦτρον, οὔτε τεκνοποιεῖν, τοῦ σπέρματος ἐπὶ εὐθείας εἰς τὴν μήτραν ἐξακοντίζεσθαι μὴ δυναμένου, ἀλλὰ παραρρέοντος εἰς τὸ γυναικεῖον αἰδοῖον. […]. Ποτὲ μὲν οὖν πόρρω τοὺ κυνὸς εὑρίσκεται τὸ τρῆμα κατὰ μέσην τὴν οὐρήθραν πρὸς τῇ τοῦ καυλοῦ βάσει, ὅτε δὴ ἀθεράπευτοί εἰσιν· ποτὲ δὲ κατὰ τὸν λεγόμενον κύνα, καὶ ἔστι θεραπευτὸν τὸ πάθος.

[40] Compare Lascaratos 1995, 155–156, who argues that an anatomical failure connected with urination may cause severe kidney failure which could lead to dropsy.

De mortibus persecutorum, often attributed to Lactantius.[41] Heraclius' end is not only marked by horror and pain but was also intended, once again, to deliberately ridicule and criticize the ruler. No man could (and should) govern an empire when he apparently could not even control his own elementary bodily functions.

In conclusion, patriarch Nicephorus wrote against the backdrop of late antique medical knowledge for a readership that was familiar with relevant notions. He selectively wove descriptions of (degrading) diseases into his narrative on the reign of the emperor Heraclius to deliberately ridicule the already battered memory of the latter during the 8th century. The ruler's painful end could also serve as a possible reminder for Nicephorus' contemporaries that even emperors should be aware that all their deeds would be judged by God, either already in this life or in the hereafter at the latest. In addition to the extensive concealment and passing over of entire reigns, as can be observed in the case of the reigns of Phocas or Constans II, this approach represents another rhetorical strategy of Nicephorus when writing historiography to retrospectively evaluate the government of earlier regents. As a result, the corresponding staging of imperial sufferings after 638 should be treated with caution when dealing with the *breviarium*. Nicephorus' depictions were inspired by medical writings but were deliberately taken further as part of a consciously shaped literary critique of Heraclius' rule and its consequences for the Byzantine Empire. To study the use of medical knowledge in historiographical works for the interpretative weighting of past events may finally be content of systematic analysis in the future.

[41] See, for instance, the gruesome deaths of Galerius and Diocletian in Lact. *Mort pers*. 33; 43. In Nicephorus' depictions, good emperors are rewarded for adhering to orthodox faith. According to Niceph. *Brev*. 37, for instance, Constantine IV lived a long and peaceful life after he distanced himself from the heretical movements that became strong due to Heraclius' reign during the Third Council of Constantinople in 681.

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