In 629 CE, the Emperor Herakleios, finally at peace after decades of war with Khusrow II, grew out his beard. Where he had previously worn a close cut beard, his new whiskers were significantly more imposing.\(^1\) They reached down to the middle of his chest and were topped by a handlebar moustache that seems to have been helped along with a good deal of wax. This appearance of the emperor is idiosyncratic for a Roman ruler, to say the least, and represents a dramatic departure from the previous centuries of imperial representation. However, scholarly analysis of Heraclius’ post-629 imperial image has mostly ignored the potential ramifications of this change. There have been a few explanations that focus on a new tendency in the seventh century towards portraiture on coinage. For example, Phillip Grierson, in *Byzantine Coins*, suggested that the image was either Herakleios reverting to a more youthful hairstyle that he had worn before he became emperor or that the hair had grown out on campaign and he “preferred it that way.”\(^2\) Taking an almost polar opposite position, Walter Kaegi read the new appearance on the coinage as “reflecting aging and fatigue.”\(^3\) This latter description may be accurate enough, Herakleios was getting older, but why did he choose to show the entire empire his age with an image so different from prior Roman images? None of the explanations explain why Herakleios would decide to change his appearance in such a revolutionary way. In an attempt to argue why the handlebar happened, I will begin with an analysis of comparable depictions of facial hair and from this analysis argue that the change in appearance may have been directly related to his

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1 See figure one for Herakleios’ prior appearance, and figure two for his post 629 CE appearance.
diplomatic relations with the Armenian and northern Sassanian dynasts who were involved in the coup to overthrow Khusrow II.

I should begin by going into more detail as to why I reject any explanation that argues for the appearance being on account of a change towards portraiture. This is supposed to have happened beginning with Phokas, who for the first time in over a century, appears on coinage with a beard. This addition of a beard to the imperial imagery by Phokas seems unlikely to simply be a desire for a more accurate image. Rather, he was most likely placing an emphasis on his origin in the army. In the sixth century, soldiers were associated with being bearded. A literary illustration of this phenomenon appears in Prokopios’ Wars 4.8.15-19. In this episode, at the end of the Vandal War, Prokopios tells of a prophecy about the moors being destroyed by a Roman army that would be led by a beardless man. As the Moors wanted to know whether Belisarios would be that man, they made a point of checking whether or not any of the officials in his army lacked beards, only to find that every last Roman official was hirsute. Given this, it seems reasonable to suggest that Phokas’ beard was not simply the result of a turn towards portraiture on the part of the coin designer, but rather a statement of military origins.

Herakleios certainly realized the need to modify his appearance on coinage to fit an established imperial form. When we first see Herakleios on a coin, in the insurrection coins of 608-610, Herakleios appears with quite different facial hair than he would wear during the first decades of his reign. This change towards an image that was closer to that of Phokas suggests that Herakleios, or at least whoever made these images, was fully aware of a need for continuity between Emperors. Given this, it seems unreasonable to suggest that Herakeios did not realize how radical a departure his 629 CE appearance was from the imperial imagery of the sixth century.

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4 See figure 3.
5 Prokopios, Wars, IV.8.15-19.
6 See figure 4 for insurrection era coinage, and figure 1 for first decades of reign.
century and it seems simplistic, at best, to attribute the 629 CE change to personal preference alone. I should also note here that the 629 CE hairdo was not a return to the appearance of 608 CE. While the younger Herakleios was certainly mustachioed, the most prominent parts of the 629 CE image, namely the waxed mustache and large beard, are not present in this image. Therefore, the earlier image does not support the personal preference argument.

Given that the 629 CE Handlebar mustache is such a complete break with past imagery, it seems reasonable to suggest that the change has something to do with the end of the Persian war and Khusrow II's demise. Reading these coins in light of the Persian war’s end produces several questions. What message did Herakleios want to send? Who was the audience for this message? And so forth.

A tempting initial explanation that I have come around to rejecting is that the image represented a return to either biblical imagery or Old Testament kingship. This would have made a good deal of sense, given that scholarship has long associated Herakleian imagery from this period with Old Testament figures, and particularly David. Unfortunately, the evidence does not support this interpretation. If we look at the David Plates from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection, which are dated to exactly this timeframe, and usually associated with the victory of Herakleios, none of the figures are comparable to Herakleios. Bearded figures appear in several of these plates, but these beards are nothing like the Herakleian moustache and beard from the same period.

This lack of similarity goes for all Christian imagery. The Christian image that has the most in common with Herakleios’ post 629 appearance is that of Christ himself, as seen in this

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7 This argument that the David plates are associated with Herakleios dates back to Steven H. Wander, "The Cyprus Plates and the "Chronicle" of Fredegar," Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Vol. 29, (1975), pp. 345-346
8 See figure 5.
mid-sixth century diptych.⁹ Here we have a similarly sized mustache and beard, but stylistically they have little in common. This version of Jesus spent far less time grooming his mustache.

Another option, which according to Grierson’s book “has been suggested,” though he neglected to mention a source, is that the beard represents Persian Kingship and the defeat of Khusrow.¹⁰ There is a certain similarity between Herakleios image and that of his Sassanian counterpart Khusrow II.¹¹ Both feature large waxed moustaches and groomed beards, but the resemblance ends there. Where Herakleios’ facial hair is sticking straight out all over the place, Khusrow’s moustache seems to have been waxed into a wave, and his beard is close cropped. That said, out of the contemporary images of beards and mustaches, the Sassanian images were the only ones to feature a waxed mustache at all.

The biggest problem with an argument that Herakleios adopted the hairstyle as a sign of his defeat of Persia is that there is no evidence that the Romans would have understood Herakleios’ hair as Persian. The depictions of the Persians that are available in the art of the Byzantine Empire do not have any real consistency in the appearance of beards.¹² When Persians do appear bearded in Roman art they are much more close-cropped than the Herakleian appearance. If Herakleios was using the image as a victory symbol, why would he pick one that his subjects would not understand? I would argue that Persia is part of the answer, but that Herakleios’ audience must not have been Romans.

If we widen the chronological scope for finding comparisons by about five hundred years in either direction and look to Parthia, Early Sassanid kings, and the later Armenian kingdom, we find the most comparable imagery to the Herakleian coinage. While this evidence is problematic

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⁹ See figure 6.
¹⁰ Grierson, 94.
¹¹ See figure 7.
¹² See figure 8.
to use, to say the least, these bodies of imagery are the closest to Herakleios’ 629 CE appearance, and their geographic positioning has the potential to explain the change in Herakleios' image. They suggest the possibility of reading Herakleios' mustache as a very personal form of foreign relations with the dynasts of the northern Sassanian Empire.

First, the imagery of the early Sassanians is closer than that of their descendants to the Herakleian image and these early Sassanians appear in a manner very similar to the Parthians before them. In these images a large beard and head of hair have joined the elaborate mustache of Khusrow. While the images are certainly not identical to Herakleios’, they are far closer than anything from Herakleios’ own time period. Now this is a stretch, but one element I found striking about both Herakleios’ image and this image of Vologazes the fourth, from the early third century, is the hair protruding from either side of the head. Admittedly, Vologazes’ version of this is a great deal more impressive than Herakleios’ and I would not have even thought there might be a parallel if it were not for the later coinage of Konstans II. In the coinage of Konstans II, which copies the portrait in the later coinage of Herakleios almost exactly, the extra hair becomes increasingly ball shaped, which matches the Parthian hairstyle much more closely. I am not sure that I can make too much of this, but I can say that Herakleios’ and especially Konstans’ appearances are closer to the Parthian imagery than they are either prior imperial imagery or contemporary Sassanian imagery.

The second set of non-contemporary material is from the 10th century imagery of the Bagratuni kings of Armenia. This image of a now lost statue of Gagik I Bagratuni features a similar mustache and similarly scaled beard to that of Herakleios,’ and is one of the only images from any period that does so. While I am loathe to use evidence from so much later than the

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13 See figures 9 and 10.
14 See figure 12.
15 See figure
seventh century, the similarity between Herakleios’ image and this particular piece is noteworthy because of the position the Bagratuni family held in the seventh century.

If we dive into the internal politics of the Sassanian Empire, the connection I note here between the Parthians and the later Armenians in art was also matched by a political alliance in the seventh century. Parvaneh Pourshariati, in her book *The Decline and Fall of the Sassanian Empire*, argues that there was an alliance between the Parthian Ispahbudhan family under the general Farrukh Hormozd and the Bagratuni family under Varaztirots Bagratuni. This alliance was for the immediate purpose of furthering the conspiracy with the general Shahrvazarz, also a Parthian dynast, for the removal of Khusrow the second. By Pourshariati’s argument, therefore, the faction that resulted in the defeat of Khusrow II was effectively a Parthian-Armenian faction that came to terms with Herakleios in the mid 620s and then actively turned against Khusrow.

I would argue that Herakleios, in the course of his time campaigning in Armenia and Azerbaijan grew out his beard, not because he felt like it, but because it allowed him to interact more effectively with both the local dynasts who were his source of support in the region and the Parthian generals whose armies were the most powerful in the Sassanian empire. By changing his appearance to one that might have been understood as Parthian or Armenian, he may have made himself into less of a foreign ruler and made himself seem to be just another dynast.

The Bagratuni in particular would have been a key for any such diplomatic strategy. They had long straddled the line between the Sassanians and Byzantines. In the account by pseudo-Sebeos, Smbat, the father of the Varaztirots who helped kill Khusrow, appears serving both factions. Also, during the reign of Maurice, Smbat was a primary supporter of the restoration of

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Khusrow II, and he attained high rank in the early years of Khusrow’s rule. This means that when Herakleios the elder was active as the governor of Armenia, he almost certainly had to deal with the Bagratuni in the daily operation of the region. Also, since Herakleios was born in Armenia, it might even be possible to argue that Herakleios would have had childhood ties with this particular family. If so, then he would have had to find ways to remind them that he was not just another Roman, and adopting their facial hair may have accomplished this.

Now, the campaign in Armenia and the plot against Khusrow might explain wearing such a beard on campaign, but it does not explain maintaining the image for the rest of his reign, or why his successor Konstans II also maintained that image. The beginnings of an answer for this may lie in the non-resolved nature of the conflict after the death of Khusrow II. Herakleios had not really won his war in 629 CE. As James Howard-Johnston has pointed out, the peace treaty terms offered by Kavad Shiroe, Khusrow II’s successor, were not in the Byzantines favor. The general Shahrvaraz remained in Palestine until 632 CE. Shahrvaraz only left Byzantine territory after Herakleios had agreed to even more punitive peace terms and had offered his support for an attempt on the Persian throne. Until Sharvaraz’s death in 632 CE, only eight months after Sharvaraz gained the Persian throne, Herakleios was still making up lost ground, and was relying on diplomacy with a Parthian general for his peace treaty. This would have been no time to drop the appearance of a Parthian, if that is what his mustache and beard represented.

Herakleios only gained his peace on equal terms after Shahrvaraz was assassinated, and the Ispahbudhan family had replaced him with their candidate for the throne. At this point, the

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18 Pseudo-Sebesos, 49. Varaztirots himself also seems to have led a double life, as can be seen in his involvement and exile to Africa in 637. Kaegi, 260.
19 Walter Kaegi has a discussion of the evidence for and the effects of Herakleios’ Armenian origins in his biography. Kaegi, 21.
21 Howard-Johnson, 28.
answer as to why Herakleios kept his hirsute appearance may be simply that he did not wish to change the imperial image yet another time in his reign. That said, from pseudo-Sebeos’s narrative, at least, a picture appears of the Byzantines remaining active in Armenia and involved with the Bagratuni family there well into the Arab invasions and the reign of Konstans II, so it might be possible to suggest that his maintenance of Herakleios’ appearance was not simply a dynastic decision but also due to an active need to work closely with the same families that Herakleios had needed to work with.  

While my argument that Herakleios’ mustache had a role to play in the death of Khusrow the second might be reading a bit too much into a mustache, the change in imperial imagery that happened in 629 still represents a dramatic and unprecedented change of an emperor’s appearance. This change would have been obvious to the citizens of the Eastern Roman Empire, and it would not have met any of their expectations as to what an emperor should look like. As such, it requires a better explanation than a stylistic turn to portraiture and an emperor’s whim.

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22 As was pointed out in the Q&A by David Olster, the army may be the primary audience of the coinage, as they received the majority of it. Given that the army had been recruited in Armenia this may have as much to do with the change of imagery as the specific nobles that Herakleios was working with in Armenia.
Figure 1: Solidus of Heraclius, 610-613

Figure 2: Solidus of Heraclius, 629-632
Figure 3: Solidus of Phokas, 607 – 609

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Figure 4: Insurrection era coin, 608-610 CE.

Figure 5: David before Saul, 628-630 CE.

Image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 6: Christ, Peter and Paul. Sixth Century Diptych.


Figure 7: Dirhem of Khusrow II, 622-623

http://www.ancientresource.com/lots/persian/sassanian.html
Figure 8: Obelisk of Theodosius, supplicant barbarians.

Photo taken by author.

Figure 9: Firuzabad: Victory of Ardashir I

Figure 10: Parthian Royal Coins

135-155 - PARTHIAN COINS WITH ROYAL EFFIGIES (2nd CENTURY B.C. TO 3rd CENTURY A.D.)

CABINET DES MÉDAILLES, BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE, PARIS

DATING BY M. LEHRER, CHIEF CURATOR

Figure 11: Statue of King Gagik I Bagratuni (989 – 1020 CE)

Statue is now lost, photo was taken by Nicholas Marr in 1906.
Figure 12: Solidus of Konstans II, 661-663

Image Credit:
http://www.coinarchives.com/a/lotviewer.php?LotID=410979&AuclID=734&Lot=1266&Val=3c6f6d9e7ed6dd921cdfba7e3de4b948