

## REVIEW-DISCUSSION

### CAMERON AND BEYOND

Averil Cameron: *Procopius and the Sixth century*. Pp. xiii + 297. Routledge, 1996. £15.99.

*Procopius and the Sixth century* was first published by Duckworth just over a decade ago. The cover has changed from an equestrian Justinian I to a rather murky photograph of the interior of the church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, but the contents remain the same. Nevertheless, the republication of this seminal work affords a welcome opportunity for the reappraisal of Cameron's interpretation in the light of more recent contributions as well as for a more general survey of sixth-century scholarship.

The objective of Cameron's book was deceptively simple: to understand Procopius, who seemed such a puzzle because of the apparently diverse and contrasting nature of his three surviving works: the *Wars* classicising historiography, the *Secret History* a blistering attack on Justinian and his reign, the *Buildings* an imperial panegyric, focusing on the emperor's building activity. Cameron argued that the puzzle was an illusion fostered by persistent misconceptions of Procopius as a rational throwback to the classical world, that the *Wars* has in fact much in common with the other two works and is intimately entwined with them and that the primacy accorded the *Wars* and the bland acceptance of its classicism are equally mistaken.

To this end she approached the *Secret History* and the *Buildings* before the *Wars*. In the course of her examination she characterises the *Secret History* as an 'angry pamphlet, finished in parts, but without much that was new to contribute to opposition literature over and above its scandal value'; she maintains that the *Buildings* 'represents Procopius' "real" views about emperor and empire'; and she views the *Wars* as cast in the tradition of classicising historiography but by an author whose talents were limited.

More significant than these individual verdicts is her formulation of a theory for the unitary interpretation of the three works: 'they represent different sides of the reality of Justinian and of Procopius' perception of it' and 'Procopius had to write three apparently very different works to find his full expression'. For Cameron the distinctions in genre between Procopius' works are superficial: the three texts form part of a unified and continuous discourse.

In the past scholars had sought to explain Procopius' apparently conflicting views about Justinian by recourse to arguments concerning authorship and the writer's psychological state, and while Cameron's main aim is to reconcile the three works, she does also allow for personal development

on the part of Procopius, from excitement at Belisarius' early successes and hero-worship of the general to disillusionment with the faltering reconquest and an increasing dislike of Justinian. (One may feel that she herself takes this approach too far, for she accounts for the odd end to Book 7 of the *Wars* by the assertion that 'Procopius was tired and depressed'; one also wonders if the repeated pattern of peak and decline in the narratives of the fortunes of the reconquest in its various theatres is intentional, rather than a case of Procopius merely subconsciously letting the cat of the bag.) Concomitant with Cameron's hypothesis of Procopius' changing attitudes is her dating of *Wars* 1-7 and the *Secret History* to 550, *Wars* 8 to 554 and the *Buildings* to 554/5.

Cameron was also deeply concerned with the question of the use of Procopius as evidence, for that evidence dominates interpretations of the sixth century and justifies our speaking of an age of Procopius rather than an age of Justinian. There had been a tendency to assume Procopius' testimonies to be either completely trustworthy or completely untrustworthy, but Cameron asserts not only that each passage must be taken on its own terms but also that it must be understood in its own context within Procopius' oeuvre.

In her estimation, Procopius rates not as a great historian, but as a talented reporter who saw history in terms of personality, and whose forte was not analysing but describing events, as in set pieces such as the Nika riot, Belisarius' triumph in Constantinople after his initial success in Africa and the siege of Rome. His vision is characterised very much as black and white, and primarily informed by the prejudices of the senatorial elite with whom he identified (though *Wars* 8 is distinguished by the sympathy that Procopius expresses for both Byzantines and Goths, and the *Secret History* is surely not merely concerned with the sufferings of the elite but with the sufferings of all members of society at Justinian's hands). Procopius emerges ultimately as a recognisable product of sixth-century Byzantium, not as some classical aberration. Where he was unusual in comparison to his contemporaries, argues Cameron, was in the limits he had set himself in the organising of his work; he could thus only find full expression by breaking out of the self-imposed confines of the classicising *Wars* and producing the *Secret History* and the *Buildings*. One major gap still felt in his work by Cameron is his screening of ecclesiastical politics and theological debate, an area which she rightly asserts to be essential for a rounded picture of sixth-century affairs. However, presumably Procopius' picture would have been complete if his avowed intention to write an ecclesiastical history is to be believed, which Cameron seems hesitant to do. Overall, Cameron's objective was essentially limited. She aimed primarily 'to lay down the foundation for a different and more realistic way of interpreting Procopius'. Her theme is constant and involves repetition of arguments, episodes and ideas, and, like that of Procopius him-

self, her work is one that should ideally be read in its entirety, not dipped into out of context.

Cameron herself identified aspects of Procopian scholarship that needed further attention, such as a ‘full linguistic study’—as well as a critical study—of his work, the study of other sixth-century writers and their work in a social context and a competent study of Theodora (the lack of which she described as ‘one of the major deficiencies in Procopian scholarship’). She also asserted the need for a major treatment of the reign of Justinian (her vision of the objectives of the reign, though brief, is both compelling and illuminating).

Since the publication of her book the interest in late antiquity which gave rise to its production in the first place has hardly abated, as witnessed by Cameron’s own recent handbooks for the period, *The Later Roman Empire AD 284-430* (London 1993) and *The Mediterranean World in late antiquity AD 395-600* (London 1993). Sixth-century literature has also been the focus of much attention, either in translation or in critical comment. For instance, we now have Brian Croke’s translation of, and commentary on, *The Chronicle of Marcellinus* (Sydney 1995), Peter Heather’s critical exploration of the *Getica* of Jordanes in his *Goths and Romans 332-489* (Oxford 1991), Alan Cameron’s *The Greek anthology from Meleager to Planudes* (Oxford 1993) and in the Liverpool *Translated Texts for Historians* series S. Barnish’s *Cassiodorus: Variae* (1992), as well as Michael and Mary Whitby’s *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 AD* (1989), which has light to cast on sixth-century history. Of particular note is the combination of the translation of the chronicle of *John Malalas* (Melbourne 1986) and a volume of *Studies in John Malalas* (Sydney 1990), both published in the *Byzantina Australiensia* series. These connected volumes begin to take us in the direction of seriously detailed study of authors, their texts and their contemporary environment. Michael Maas’ *John Lydus and the Roman past* (London and New York 1992) is also commendable in this respect.

In general, then, important material relating to Procopius’ contemporaries has emerged, which contributes to the further investigation of sixth-century literature as a whole. Indeed, Roger Scott’s ‘Malalas and his contemporaries’ in *Studies in John Malalas* reinforces Cameron’s view of Procopius as a product of his time. The most recent volume from the *Byzantina Australiensia* series, *The Sixth Century—Beginning or End?*, promises to place the debate concerning the transition from the antique to the medieval world at the centre of the stage. Justinian and his reign have come into specific focus in John Moorhead’s *Justinian* (London and New York 1994) and J. A. S. Evans’ *The Age of Justinian* (London and New York 1996). Moorhead’s is a modest and well-balanced work. He sees the emperor as ‘the victim of his own successes’ and the reign as ambitious but flawed. As regards Procopius, he relies primarily on Cameron’s judgements, describing her work as ‘outstand-

ingly the best work on the subject'. Evans opines that 'the time is not ripe for a "definitive history" of Justinian' and offers instead a reassessment of the reign in the light of our improved understanding of the context of late antiquity. His intended readership is less clear, for his work seems designed to provide both an introduction to the early Byzantine empire and a familiar narrative of Justinian's life and reign. Like Moorhead, Evans bows to Cameron's treatment of Procopius, though he is not bound by all her judgements. Ultimately, neither of these books is the major study that Cameron called for nor did they claim to be; that major study remains to be written.

In recent years, despite Cameron's groundbreaking work, it is noteworthy that attention has returned to familiar problems of Procopian scholarship. Prompted by Roger Scott's 'Justinian's coinage and Easter reforms, and the date of the *Secret History*', *BMGS* 11 (1987) 215-221, which placed the *Secret History* thirty-two years from Justinian's accession, and Michael Whitby's 'Justinian's bridge over the Sangarius and the date of Procopius' *De Aedificiis*', *JHS* 105 (1985) 129-48, which put the *Buildings* c. 560, Geoffrey Greatrex returned to the debate over chronology in 'The date of Procopius' works', *BMGS* 18 (1994) 101-14. Whilst Cameron had had a sneak preview of Whitby's argument and remained unconvinced, Scott's theory was more recent. Greatrex effectively reargues the traditional dating and presents a scheme for the relative dating of all of Procopius' works which is commendable but does not take us much further, despite his allusions to the debate over the state of literature in the latter half of Justinian's reign.

Another familiar issue that has recrudesced is the nature of the *Secret History*. In her article 'The *Secret History* and its genesis', *Byzantion* 63 (1993) 5-28, K. Adshead uncontroversially accepts Procopian authorship but argues that the three distinct sections of the text (1-5; 6-18; 19-30) were originally separate works, which were only stitched together in the tenth century, by Symeon the Logothete no less. Her argument rests heavily on the generic differences she identifies in the three sections (the Belisarius and Antonina section a satirical novel; the Justinian and Theodora section 'an aetiology, an identification of the underlying causes of events'; the final section an economic pamphlet) and certainly provides an explanation for Procopius' apparent wandering from his stated objective in his prooemium, which in Adstead's view is tacked on to this Frankenstein's monster mainly from *Wars* 8. Adshead's hypothesis, however, fails to convince, primarily because the three sections of the *Secret History* are not as distinct as she wishes to argue but exhibit a continuity of theme as well as a wealth of internal referencing and cross-referencing, the insertion of which it is impossible to credit to the supposed tenth-century compiler.

Indeed, Michael Angold, 'Procopius' portrait of Theodora', *Studies in Honour of Robert Browning* (Venice 1996) 21-34, a paper which is as much

about the *Secret History* as it is about the empress herself, has already rejected Adshead's theory and defended the unity of the work. However, whilst Ashead's flight of fancy concerning the genesis of the *Secret History* tends to distract attention from her comments on the genres within the work, this latter strand of her argument is surely worth pursuing, especially since Cameron herself stated that genre divisions were breaking down in sixth-century literature.

Theodora is of course a further recurrent concern. Angold's paper was inspired by Browning's treatment of Theodora's sexual antics as an actress in his *Justinian and Theodora* (London 1971). Angold in part addresses the question of the extent of the empress' power during the reign and argues strongly that she 'was enormously powerful and exercised great influence on many aspects of Justinian's formation of policy and conduct of his government'. However, his study has a broader interest and explores Procopius' attitudes and methods, being especially concerned to demonstrate that the *Secret History* is a serious history worthy of credit (thereby recalling Roger Scott's verdict in 'Malalas, the *Secret History* and Justinian's propaganda', *DOP* 39 [1985] 99-109: 'a serious work by a serious historian'). In the course of his argument he has cause to take issue with many of Cameron's views. For example, he finds Cameron's characterisation of the *Secret History* as an 'angry pamphlet' too harsh, argues that it was the product of a specific period of crisis and that the *Buildings* signifies Procopius' reconciliation with Justinian, sees Procopius' detailing of the early history of Theodora not as mere sensational invective but as key in that 'it introduces and partially explains the concrete themes of the *Secret History*, which are to do with the abuse of power', accepts that Theodora may not have spoken the winding-sheet speech attributed to her by Procopius at the time of the Nika riot but points out the significance of her very presence on that occasion and sees the demonology dimension of the *Secret History* as 'a superficial and rhetorical explanation'. In short, Angold accepts little of Cameron's unitary interpretation of Procopius' works. If the *Secret History* is characterised as propaganda rather than history, Angold sees this as not so much the intention of Procopius but 'the fate of historians who try to explain the past rather than merely record events'. It may be felt that Angold tends to undervalue many of Cameron's arguments and that he returns Procopian scholarship to a less evolved level, but he is surely right in maintaining that Cameron's verdict on the *Secret History* is overly negative. Moreover, that verdict makes an odd conclusion to her chapter, since she concurs with much of Scott's reading of the work in his excellent 'Malalas, the *Secret History* and Justinian propaganda'. Could it be that her judgement of the work has been unduly affected by Procopius' treatment of women in the text?

It emerges then that the major contribution of Cameron's *Procopius* has been in a better understanding of the *Wars*, a text that had been misread for so long and falsely seen as being in stark contrast to the *Secret History* and the *Buildings*. Her work was an essential first step. The study of the sixth century and its literature has continued apace, much of it indeed in response to the challenges posed by Cameron, but it is clear that much still remains to be done. Whilst one greatly welcomes the republication of *Procopius*, one hopes that Cameron herself will treat us to *Procopius 2*.

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