

REVIEW

MENANDROS *PROTECTOR* AND THE END OF
CLASSICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

Bruno Bleckmann, *Die letzte Generation der griechischen Geschichtsschreiber: Studien zur Historiographie im ausgehenden 6. Jahrhundert*. Historia Einzelschriften 267. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021. Pp. 186. Hardback, €48.00. ISBN 978-3-515-13085-1.

Bruno Bleckmann's latest monograph emerges from his work, with Markus Stein, on a translation and commentary on the fragments of Menandros *Protector* for Brill's *Kleine und fragmentarische Historiker der Spätantike*.¹ The book is presented as a study of the final phases of classical Greco-Roman historiography and the reasons for its sudden disappearance in the seventh century. While these topics are the focus of the first and seventh chapters (effectively the introduction and conclusion as the eighth chapter is a *Zusammenfassung*), the bulk of the book is given over to two arguments. The first of these attempts to reconstruct the central features of Menandros' fragmentary history and situate it within the trajectory of classical historiography in the late sixth century, which Bleckmann, following Michael Whitby, understands as defined by the increasing integration of Christian politics and worldviews into the traditions of secular history (*Profansgeschichte*).² The second argument concerns the context of the production of classical historiography in late antiquity and maintains that authors in the second half of the sixth century were dependent upon military and, to a lesser extent, ecclesiastical patrons whose political interests dictated their historical agendas. Bleckmann builds upon these conclusions to argue for the vitality of classical historiography in the late sixth and early seventh centuries and to attribute the sudden end of that tradition to the inability of the elite class that produced and consumed classical historiography to reproduce itself during the crises of the seventh century.

In the first chapter, Bleckmann advances his definition of classical historiography as a genre primarily interested in presenting military and political

¹ The current standard edition of Menandros is R. C. Blockley, ed. and tr., *The History of Menander the Guardsman* (Liverpool, 1985), which I will cite here.

² M. Whitby, 'Greek Historical Writing after Procopius: Variety and Vitality', in A. Cameron and L. I. Conrad, edd., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, Volume 1: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, 1992) 25–80.

decisions in a (roughly) chronological sequence and enabling an analysis of the causes of historical events, especially with respect to the psychology and motivations of key groups and decision-makers. He locates the origins of this genre in the works of Herodotus and Thucydides and provides a brief outline of classical historiography to argue that, despite gaps in our surviving record during, *inter alia*, the Hellenistic and Antonine periods, we have ample evidence that works continued to be produced in this genre with regularity from the fifth century BC through the sixth century AD. Moreover, the genre evolved continuously during this period, incorporating elements of other genres, such as panegyric under the Roman empire, but did not lose its essential features. From here, Bleckmann turns to the question of the end of classical historiography and uses the arguments of Eduard Schwartz—who thought that historiography began its decline after Thucydides and that Roman imperial historiography was an empty shell—to illustrate the difficulties of identifying this endpoint on the basis of subjective considerations of quality. Instead, Bleckmann proposes to use a more objective criterion, namely the gap in extant or attested classical histories that begins in the early seventh century.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the development of classical historiography in late antiquity and its increasing involvement with Church history. After surveying a number of different models for the end of classical historiography, Bleckmann ultimately adopts a synthesis of the models advanced by Mischa Meier and Michael Whitby, according to which there was a meaningful shift in the religious orientation of the Roman empire in the 540s, but, rather than resulting in the annihilation of classical historiography (as per Meier), the genre evinced ‘variety and vitality’, most notably in the increasing integration of Christian ideas and worldviews.³

Chapter 2 is dedicated to Agathias and Menandros. The former is quickly dismissed as overly rhetorical and inferior. Menandros is the hero of both this chapter and the book as a whole. Bleckmann concedes that it is difficult to make definitive statements about Menandros’ history because of its fragmentary nature and the fact that the vast majority of our extant fragments derive from the tenth-century *Constantinian Excerpta*, specifically the *de Legationibus* and *de Sententiis*, resulting in a skewed view of the original work and its focus. Nonetheless, Bleckmann builds a (necessarily circumstantial) case for viewing Menandros as a genuinely Thucydidean author. The argument here is based primarily on structural details rather than literary and intellectual criteria and some of the arguments are tenuous. For instance, Bleckmann argues that Menandros must have used a Thucydidean year-by-year chronology based on

³ M. Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians: Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Göttingen, 2004).

the evidence of a single fragment that refers to fighting breaking out ‘at the beginning of spring’ (44; F 18.4 Blockley).

Chapter 3 continues the argument with a focus on Menandros’ speeches, an obvious hallmark of classical historiography. Unfortunately, only a few speeches survive in the extant fragments of Menandros and all of them occur in the contexts of embassies. The interpretation of these is fraught because Menandros is explicit about his source and approach for at least one of these embassies: his account is based on records left by the diplomat Petros the Patrician and he has not significantly altered the content or vocabulary aside from making them ‘more Attic’ (F 6.2 Blockley). Although we cannot be sure, it is possible that Menandros followed a similar approach in his other speeches.

Given the limits of the directly extant evidence, Bleckmann turns to *Quellenforschung* to argue that a speech in Theophylaktos Simokattes is drawn from the account of Menandros (other scholars have argued that its source was Ioannes of Epiphaneia, another late sixth-century historian of whose work only five chapters survive). Ultimately, Bleckmann’s argument for this attribution hinges on two features: the psychological portrayal of Justin II and the emphasis on a reversal of fortune, which he argues is a Herodotean influence that accords more closely with Menandros’ history than that of Ioannes. The argument seems tenuous, and the idea that Theophylaktos himself might have introduced these elements is not considered.

Unsurprisingly, given the fragmentary nature of the text, Bleckmann repeatedly turns to *Quellenforschung*-analysis of later sources to access Menandros’ history, and his arguments reproduce many of the traditional weaknesses of this methodology, in particular the tendency to assume that content from earlier historians is inherited by later historians largely without alteration or interpretation, allowing modern scholars to trace these inheritances in much the same way palaeographers establish the *stemma* of manuscripts. Scholars inclined to credit the originality of ancient historians, as indeed Bleckmann himself does when tracing Euagrius’ integration of miracles into Prokopios’ narrative in Chapter 1, are likely to find these arguments unconvincing.

In Chapter 4, Bleckmann turns to the question of Christianity in Menandros and argues that he incorporated meaningful discussion of Christian topics into his narrative but did not engage deeply with the internal politics of the Christian Church. The presence of Christian elements in Menandros’ narrative is both undeniable and expected; even Prokopios, whose works Bleckmann assigns to an earlier stage in the integration of Christian material, mentioned Christianity when it was relevant to his narrative (Prokop. *Pers.* 1.12.3, *Goth.* 2.14.12, *inter alia*). Therefore, in order to situate Menandros between Prokopios and Theophylaktos on his postulated historiographic trajectory, Bleckmann must make the case for a more direct and explicit integration of Christian material in Menandros than is found in earlier historians.

The challenge for Bleckmann is that Christianity is not much in evidence in the extant fragments of Menandros and, where it is present, that presence is difficult to generalise. For instance, some of the examples Bleckmann cites are found in the passages based on Petros, where Menandros' self-avowed faithfulness to his source material undermines any argument that the treatment of Christianity is characteristic of the larger work (65; F 6.1 Blockley). Other mentions, meanwhile, are attributed to specific characters and so cannot be easily generalised, such as the religious rhetoric of the negotiations that the generals Maurikios and Binganes conducted through a bishop prior to the siege of Chlomarion (79–80; F 23.7 Blockley).

In his attempts to overcome these difficulties Bleckmann engages in a series of subordinate arguments about the True Cross, holy war, the divine protection of cities, and a 'Christian tendency in the description of diplomatic controversies' (*christliche Tendenz in der Darstellung diplomatischer Kontroversen*). There is not space here to review all of these arguments in detail, but this reviewer consistently found them too speculative to be convincing, a problem made worse by the looseness of the argumentation and the author's tendency to overstate the definitiveness of his conclusions. Here is an illustrative example. Menandros F 17 contains an account of the True Cross and how it was transferred in two pieces to Constantinople from Apameia in the reign of Justin II (r. 565–78). This fragment derives not from the Constantinian *Excerpta* but from a manuscript found in the Vatican libraries. Although the fragment is explicitly attributed to Menandros, its language and somewhat garbled narrative have convinced some scholars that it was mediated by a later compiler, vitiating its ability to cast light on Menandros' methods and content.⁴ Bleckmann pushes back against this view through a detailed prosopographical argument designed to demonstrate that two figures mentioned in the narrative, a certain Zemarchos and Magnos, correspond to two senior officials who were active contemporaneously with the events described. Bleckmann repeatedly calls this the strongest evidence for the authenticity of the fragment (67, 71), but never lays out the logic that connects his prosopographical reconstruction with that authenticity. The most that can be said, even if one accepts Bleckmann's prosopographical arguments, is that the information contained in the fragment is reconcilable with the available prosopographical data for the period. But it does not necessarily bear on the text of Menandros.

Chapter 5 expands the focus beyond Menandros to two contemporary fragmentary authors, Ioannes of Epiphaneia and Theophanes of Byzantium. As mentioned above, we have only five chapters of the former, while the latter survives only as a summary in Photios' *Bibliothēke* (Phot. *Bibl.* 64). The chapter

⁴ Blockley (1985) 157 n. 189.

is largely devoted to assessing, as far as possible, the genre and content of these histories. According to Bleckmann, both Ioannes and Theophanes were writing classical histories in the mould of Thucydides and their narratives overlapped, and in some cases contradicted, that of Menandros, especially their military narratives. Bleckmann interprets this overlap as evidence for a rivalry amongst the elite on analogy to other periods of dense historical or literary production such as the generation after the death of Alexander the Great or the Second Sophistic.

Chapter 6 attempts to link the rivalries described in Chapter 5 to a system of military patronage and relies heavily on arguments about the sources Theophylaktos used for his history. Bleckmann argues that the frequent disagreements between different authors (or passages in Theophylaktos that he attributes to these authors) as well as supposed inconsistencies in Theophylaktos' narrative reveal a profound interest in attributing blame and credit amongst members of the Roman high command in the late sixth century, a phenomenon that fits with the broader picture of military disagreement and insubordination found in sixth-century historians, especially Prokopios. He goes on to argue that the eroding financial status of city elites, the same elites who largely produced and consumed classical historiography in the late Roman period, made them uniquely dependent upon patronage during the sixth century. Finally, he argues that the partisan military politics he detects in Menandros, Ioannes, Theophanes, and Theophylaktos reflects the identity of their patrons: the same high-ranking military officers whose actions their accounts describe.

Some elements of Bleckmann's argument here are compelling. One cannot deny the clear evidence of dissension and insubordination, up to and including open mutiny, that characterises the military history of the sixth century. It is hard to imagine that these problems, along with the military disasters and court intrigues they gave rise to, did not influence historians of the period. However, Bleckmann's reconstruction of the partisan allegiances of the four major historians is both reductive and speculative. Too little of Ioannes survives to make definitive statements about his biases, while our understanding of Theophanes is necessarily mediated by the interpretation and agenda of Photios. Bleckmann attempts to sidestep these limitations by mining Theophylaktos for material drawn from earlier historians. In the process, he once again evinces some of the most reductive habits of the *Quellenforscher*, arguing for instance that Theophylaktos' positive portrayal of the general Philippikos' invasion of Persia and negative portrayal of his handling of the mutiny at Chlomaron reflect different sources (133–5; Theoph. 1.14.2 and 2.8.12). The possibility that Theophylaktos believed that Philippikos had performed well in the first instance but poorly in the second is not considered.

Bleckmann argues that Theophylaktos, along with all of the authors of the

later sixth century, lacked the financial means to achieve editorial independence; regardless of what they thought, what they wrote reflected the agendas of their patrons. However, this logic is circular: these authors' judgements are used to establish the identity of their patrons, which are then used to constrain their possible judgements. Even leaving this aside, the idea that an author's work directly and straightforwardly reflects the political agenda of his patron reduces cultural production to a function of economic structures. While no one can seriously doubt that economic systems influence both the media and content of cultural production, such a mechanistic model leaves no room for authorial agency and harkens back to scholarly approaches that treated Vergil's *Aeneid* and Prokopios' *Wars* as straightforward propaganda.

Chapter 7 returns to Bleckmann's framing argument, leaving Menandros behind to focus on Theophylaktos and the end of classical historiography. Building on his arguments about the economic precarity of classical historiography, Bleckmann argues that the Persian and Arab invasions of the seventh century effectively annihilated the economic basis of city elites, while the concentration of military authority under Herakleios wiped out the military patrons. As a result, support for literary production was concentrated on Constantinople and derived primarily from the patriarch and emperor. The end of classical historiography was not the result of decay and degeneration, but rather of exogenous shocks that disrupted the social and economic bases for the production and consumption of this elite literary genre. To prove this final point, Bleckmann turns to Theophylaktos, whom he identifies as the last true classical historian (though some consideration is given to Georgios Pisides). He makes his argument on two fronts, first by establishing Theophylaktos' classical *bona fides* and then by demonstrating that we know of no other classical historians, not even as sources, for the period beginning with the reign of Herakleios. He also argues that Theophylaktos represents the culmination of the broader trend he has been tracing, namely the integration of Christian ideas into classical historiography.

Bleckmann admirably presents a coherent model for the end of classical historiography that does not depend on a narrative of decadence or a broad cultural retreat from the challenges of a century that, between 540 and 640, witnessed plague, invasion, occupation, and ultimately the permanent loss of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. If his argument is not completely convincing, it nonetheless points in a productive direction, specifically towards the monumental reconfiguration of Roman politics, economy, and society in response to one of the eastern empire's most challenging centuries. Precisely how and to what extent this reconfiguration caused the abandonment of classical historiography remains an open question.