

## REVIEW

### PROCOPIUS AND PERSIA

Geoffrey Greatrex, ed., *Procopius of Caesarea: The Persian Wars. Translation, with Introduction and Notes*, with acknowledgements to Averil Cameron. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xxviii + 251, figs. 30. Hardback £75.00. ISBN 978-1-107-16570-0.

Geoffrey Greatrex, *Procopius of Caesarea: The Persian Wars. A Historical Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xxxiii + 851, figs. 30. Hardback £140.00. ISBN 978-1-107-05322-9.

The two works under review here represent the latest milestone in research about the sixth-century Constantinopolitan historiographer Procopius. With the sixth century in general being a period that has been receiving immense academic attention since at least the early 1990s, Procopius is the pillar of a whole generation of modern scholarship. It is therefore somewhat unfortunate that this vital source has only recently received a critical infrastructure, including modern translations and commentaries. There has been a trusted critical edition of all his works since the 1960s (a revision by Wirth of Haury's Teubner from 1905–13), but scholarship on Procopius certainly took its time.<sup>1</sup> Now, however, research is in full force, with new books appearing on a yearly basis and commentaries to all parts of Procopius' *oeuvre* in the making.

Geoffrey Greatrex has been on the forefront of this steady growth of Procopiana since its inception. While Averil Cameron and Anthony Kaldellis earned a lot of deserved attention with their respective monographs,<sup>2</sup> Greatrex monitored the international debate with regular bibliographical essays, and shaped the field with many valuable articles. His scholarly work provided the scaffolding for all analyses and greatly improved the visibility of otherwise neglected scholars in languages other than English. With his new translation

<sup>1</sup> That is to say, modern scholarship from the second half of the twentieth century took its time. For a deep discussion of Procopian scholarship since its inception in Renaissance Italy cf. B. Croke, 'Procopius: From Manuscripts to Books: 1400–1850', in G. Greatrex, ed., *Work on Procopius outside the English-speaking World: A Survey* (*Histos* Supplement 9; 2019) 1–173.

<sup>2</sup> A. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London, 1985); A. Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2004).

and commentary, a *magnum opus* if there ever was one, he makes sure to remain a staple in the field.

The new translation of the *Persian Wars* reworks and completes an earlier translation by Averil Cameron, who had translated large parts of Procopius' historical work for a long-gone publisher.<sup>3</sup> This is actually very fitting for Procopian scholarship, as Kaldellis' recent translation of Procopius' entire historiographical work is also a substantial revision of Dewing's earlier translation.<sup>4</sup> Because Cameron's translation is very hard to come by, and because it lacks a number of relevant passages, Greatrex produces a very welcome update. The main purpose of the new translation is to complement the commentary, and it should be seen in that light. Greatrex himself points out the differences between Kaldellis' and his own approach (see his remarks on pp. xxiv and 14), but in themselves they would probably not justify a whole new translation. Instead, the new English text is meant to be used as a compass, lying next to the vast apparatus of interpretations, summaries, and bibliography that makes up the commentary. Both also refer to each other, even in their respective introductions.

It is no surprise, then, that the translation's introductory chapter limits itself to the necessary fundamentals. It gives a short sketch of the period and the author and, importantly, highlights a couple of recurring key words, regions, and conflicts. A student stepping onto the territory of the sixth century for the first time with this book is probably well advised to consult the 'Further Reading' section before diving into the text. The translation itself reads very well and sticks to the usual standards of English translations of Greek texts with personal names and office titles given in the Latin form. Procopius' text is not always a pleasurable read. The first sentence in Greek, for example, spans eight lines with multiple syntactic breaks. Kaldellis in his translation intervened here to form two separate sentences, which helps a little but does not alter the difficult nature of the text. Greatrex sticks with Cameron's literal translation in one complex sentence. But generally, Greatrex puts emphasis on clear, understandable phrasing. For the most part, he is sticking to Cameron's words and sentence structures, only changing terms or phrases when it seemed necessary. Normally, he then goes closer to the Greek original. The sections about the Caucasus passes (1.19), about Roman–Persian negotiations and the introduction of Arab allies (1.16–17), about the Red Sea (1.19–20), as well as several other chapters throughout are new translations, as they were missing altogether in Cameron's translation.

<sup>3</sup> A. Cameron, trans., *Procopius: History of the Wars, Secret History, and Buildings* (New York, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> H. B. Dewing, trans., *Prokopios: The Wars of Justinian*, rev. with intro. and notes by A. Kaldellis (Indianapolis, 2014).

I will not go into too much detailed comparison between Greek and English here. Michael Whitby has done that with meticulous care in his 37-page-strong review of the two books, and I cannot hope to achieve this level of scrutiny.<sup>5</sup> However, at a few points I personally missed a bit of nuance that Procopius tried to convey, for example when he tells us about the inhabitants of Sura who sent τὸν τῆς πόλεως ἐπίσκοπον, the bishop of their city, to Khusro, and then reduces Sura to a mere town, τὸ χωρίον, later in the same sentence (2.5.12–13). *Greatrex* simply gives ‘town’ in both instances. It is only a small, missed opportunity translation-wise but a slightly bigger affront to that proud bishop.

Taken alone, *Greatrex*’ translation would have needed to offer more obvious advantages to Kaldellis’ recent revision of Dewing in order to be wholly justified. It is, after all, only a translation of two out of eight books, and costs considerably more than Kaldellis’ complete translation, while coming with less practical footnotes (even though the inclusion of the page numbers to Haury’s edition certainly is a useful perk here). It really is the commentary that elevates the two books combined.

The commentary is, like most historical commentaries to ancient historiographers, massive. Almost 900 pages of text indicate the breadth of the undertaking, as does the list of eighty-one international scholars *Greatrex* personally thanks in the introduction. The introduction itself is shorter than one might imagine, with twenty-eight pages in seven short chapters that introduce the author, the work, and Roman–Persian relations in late antiquity. That is an understandable choice given that the other three books on Procopius that have appeared immediately prior also each contain at least an introductory section.<sup>6</sup> To compensate for the brevity, its dictionary-like subsections are easy to screen, with entries explaining the specific style, composition, language of the work, as well as its digressions, its speeches, its relation to Christian thought, and its sources and transmission. This is clearly not meant to be the be-all-and-end-all of interpretations of Procopius, but an easy-to-use guide to all facets of author and text. It also situates Procopius nicely in his environment and highlights the almost symbiotic relationship between Constantinople and the Persian Empire which led to exchange of goods and ideas, as well as mutual interests. In this context one could have elaborated on the difficult position many communities found themselves in once hostilities flared up—be it autonomous kingdoms, merchants, or Christian communities.

<sup>5</sup> M. Whitby, ‘Procopius Meets His Gomme? *Greatrex* on the Persian Wars’, *Plekos* 25 (2023) 89–125.

<sup>6</sup> D. Brodka, *Prokop von Caesarea* (Hildesheim, 2022); M. E. Stewart, (2020) *Masculinity, Identity, and Power Politics in the Age of Justinian: A Study of Procopius* (Amsterdam, 2020); C. Whately, *Procopius on Soldiers and Military Institutions in the Sixth-Century Roman Empire* (Leiden, 2021).

However, going into detail and specifics would have been possible at every point, and to refrain from doing that was clearly a deliberate choice.

The book also comes with a range of useful tools: 1. a list with all relevant persons with their Greek, Procopian names, their standard-use latinised names, and a modern transliteration of their Middle-Persian names, when necessary; 2. an appendix with an introduction to Perso-Arabic Sources on the Sasanian polity; 3. an appendix on the specificities of Procopius' *stadion* and distances; 4. an appendix with a translation of Photius' excerpt of Nonnosus (with a direct comparison to the relevant passages in Procopius and Malalas); 5. the complete biography on the subject that we have come to expect from Greatrex; 6. eighty pages' worth of indices. Taken together, these make up a substantial kit for venturing into Procopius, and they will surely be appreciated by students everywhere.

The commentary takes as its *exemplum* the great commentaries to Thucydides and Polybius. That is clearly a tall order, but Greatrex puts a lot of effort into forging a lasting work that is supposed to stay relevant for the foreseeable future. He gives a historical introduction of up to two pages for each section of the narrative, with the most relevant literature added for further inquiry. To this, he adds a discussion of the other surviving historiographical sources that pertain to the events described, also with the relevant literature. Only after these does the actual commenting start. Here, life is made easy by providing first the Greek sentence and then its English translation, so as to facilitate both quick comprehension for those unable to read Greek, and philological depth for everybody else.

Because even though Greatrex does call it a 'historical commentary', there is quite a lot of philological analysis going on. Procopius' choice of words is usually taken very seriously when discussing the historical value of the text, but there are also instances where it is the words themselves that are at the core of the analysis. Be it standard phrases like 'Since this is so' (256) or 'for the following reason' (261), or peculiarities such as the occasional use of a dual (for example on 236), Greatrex keeps a steady eye on the characteristics of the language. The range of such philological contextualisations is remarkable, and encompasses classical authors and historians, but also works of church history as well as patristic sources. This must have been painstaking work, but it is much appreciated. It goes to show how embedded Procopius was in all kinds of genres, and how much late antique texts in general were building on familiar archetypes. A similar conclusion presents itself on the level of intertextuality. Greatrex goes to great lengths to point out Procopius' management of epic and tragic material in his account of Orestes' adventures in Tauris, and how it relates to other adaptations and the archaeological findings on the ground. This is an important perspective for evaluating Procopius as an author. It is all the more worthy of acknowledgment because this particular digression in the

text has little to no bearing on the more prominent events most modern historians will focus on.

When it comes to these more prominent events, such as the battle of Dara, or the conclusion and breaking of the Eternal Peace, Greatrex is a treasure trove of past interpretations. He regularly goes as far back as Felix Dahn's monograph from 1865 and reports viewpoints from many different academic cultures, including German dissertations and French studies on Arab epigraphy. At the same time, he is constantly cross-referencing parallel traditions, from Greek historiography to Armenian epic and Syriac monastic chronography. The breadth of the spectrum is impressive, but it is also eye-opening for scholars who focus more on the traditional Mediterranean sources. The sixth century simply is a uniquely rich tapestry once one incorporates more of the 'uncommon' languages, genres, and regions.

As for Greatrex' own interpretations, they stay on the more cautious side, and consistently come after his reports on the relevant literature. He is usually emphasising Procopius' *ἀντοψία* and the historicity of the events described, while being relatively cautious about possible political messaging, hidden meanings, and/or subtexts. This general stance never comes across as one-sided, though, and the possibility of more subtle interpretations is regularly discussed. The careful weighing of interpretive options fits into the overall ambition of the volume: to facilitate research, to open the text and the depths of its intellectual environment, and to offer an easy-to-access baseline.

Overall, the commentary is a remarkable scholarly achievement. It required meticulous monitoring of academic progress in a very active field, while never neglecting the fundamental studies that are by now many decades old. It also required apprehension of a range of languages, disciplines, and literatures, carefully presented in a way that students and experts will appreciate. Scholars may not invariably and forever agree with Greatrex' interpretations, but that would also be missing the point. For this part of Procopius, they will find here everything they need to know to get started—even if their goal is to refute the commentary itself. It is also understandable that Greatrex accompanies his commentary with a fitting translation, but it is also no wonder that the translation is not significantly altering the playing field. The two books certainly look attractive next to each other and are laid out in a way that you study them together. While the commentary is something that the field desperately needed and wanted, the translation will at all events be of use.

JAKOB RIEMENSCHNEIDER

*Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen* jakob.riemenschneider@geschichte.uni-giessen.de