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A Defence of the Traditional Chronology of 542–545, Again

ABSTRACT: The chronology of the campaigns of the years 542–545 has been the subject of debate, with Michael Whitby defending the traditional interpretation that Procopius’ long account of the bubonic plague concealed the end of the year 542, whereas Geoffrey Greatrex has championed the chronology of Kislinger and Stathakopoulos, which locates Khusro’s march to Adarbiganon and the Roman defeat at Anglon in late 542 and the siege of Edessa in 543, with Procopius failing to note the end of a year during peace negotiations in 544–545. Considerations of the progress of Khusro I’s invasion in 542 in light of his probable speed of march, and the distances he had to cover, coupled with the relatively slow advance of bubonic plague over large land masses and Procopius’ practice in arranging his material, point to the missing year-end, being that of 542/543. While the new chronology cannot absolutely be ruled out, the assumptions on which it is based are shaky.

KEYWORDS: Procopius, chronology, *cursus publicus*, marching speeds, bubonic plague

Procopius fails to record the end of one year in his account of the Persian war in the period 542–545, and the question of which year he omitted has recently been the subject of an exchange between myself and Geoffrey Greatrex. I have defended the traditional view that the long

account of the plague (2.22–3) effectively masks a year end, with the following events in Adarbiganon and Persarmenia occurring in 543 and the siege of Edessa in 544. Greatrex, on the other hand, has supported the earlier chronology proposed in 1999 by Kislinger and Stathakopoulos, who argued that these dates should be late 542 and 543, with the missing year end being located during the negotiations for a truce that followed Khusro's failure at Edessa.¹ The disagreement revolves around probabilities and assumptions, so any decision is a matter of balance and judgement. To my mind it is not possible to disprove either chronology. While that also appeared to be Greatrex's stance in his article responding to my arguments,² in his monumental commentary on Procopius' *Wars* 1–2 his position has hardened, since he now asserts that he has provided a 'detailed refutation' of my case.³ In response, the current article sets out to highlight what I regard as the problematic assumptions that underpin Greatrex's views and therefore restate, again, the merits of the traditional chronology, though without claiming that the new alternative is definitively excluded.

Greatrex states that the underlying issue is the speed of communication between Constantinople and the frontier, the time taken for both information and individuals to travel in each direction. This is not the case, since there is no significant disagreement between us over this. If the *cursus publicus* was functioning efficiently,⁴ the calculations of Ramsay, on whose work Greatrex relies, suggest that an urgent message could probably have travelled this distance of between 1200 and 1500 km., depending on which part of the frontier was involved, in 16 to 20 days at an average rate of 50 Roman miles, or 74 km., per day.⁵ Undoubtedly, a critical message could have travelled more quickly,

¹ Whitby 2021; Greatrex 2021; Kislinger, Stathakopoulos 1999.

² Greatrex 2021: 570: 'either interpretation is possible, given the limits of the evidence'.

³ Greatrex 2022: 589.

⁴ Inevitably, this was not always the case. The *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* (148, 27–34) records an occasion when Domnitziolus, *curopalatus* and nephew of Emperor Phocas, arrived at Sykeon, which was located on the so-called Pilgrim's Road, the main route from the capital to Syria, to find that replacement horses were not available, with potentially dire consequences for the individual responsible.

⁵ Ramsay 1925.

especially over shorter distances, though this would have probably entailed changing messengers as well as horses, which was not normal practice. A more distinguished person, travelling swiftly but not at uncomfortable extremes, is likely to have taken about a month for the journey from the frontier to the capital,⁶ proceeding at roughly 30–35 miles per day (42–50 km). This is supported by the evidence of the ‘dossier’ of Theophanes, in the records of a journey on the *cursus publicus* from Egypt to Antioch and back in circa 320. On the outward journey Theophanes’ party averaged 32 (Roman) miles per day, 45 km., over flat terrain with normal daily lengths being between 16 and 45 miles; on the last day, Theophanes hurried to Antioch with a special escort but without the rest of his party, covering 64 miles; on the return the average was 34 miles, with a range of 14 to 50.⁷ These considerations of travel on the *cursus publicus* are important, but they are only significant for the current discussion within the context of two other speeds, the rate of progress of a royal Persian army and, in particular, that of Khusro during his 542 campaign, and the speed of the advance of bubonic plague overland. Neither of these two crucial speeds has been given serious treatment by Greatrex, and indeed his approach to the latter is dismissive.

With regard to Khusro’s invasion, it is necessary to establish the plausibility of Khusro marching his army after the unsuccessful advance to Europus to reach Takht-i Suleiman in Adarbiganon (to the southeast of Lake Urmiah) in July or August 542, as postulated in the new chronology.⁸ The *Martyrdom of Grigor* records that the king set out from Mahoze (Seleucia-Ctesiphon) to march towards Perozshapur (Anbar), advancing to the village of Dana and then on to the village of Nahrit, the location of a royal fort near Ctesiphon, where Grigor was martyred on 18 April.⁹ The *Martyrdom* indicates that Khusro had begun

⁶ This is inferred from the case of the ambassador Rufinus who was allowed 70 days to make the round trip between the frontier and capital, allowing some time for consultations in Constantinople: Procopius, *Wars* I 22, 7–8.

⁷ Matthews 2006: 50, 131–132; cf. Belke 2017, for the average day’s journey on the *cursus publicus* being between 20 and 30 miles.

⁸ Greatrex 2021: 576 for a chronological table.

⁹ *Martyrdom of Mar Grigor* 19 (transl. p. 62); 24 (transl. p. 68). Jullien 2015: 68, n. 150, cited Hoffmann 1880: 110–111 for the location of Nahrit near Ctesiphon. See also Fiey 1998.

his march in 542, much later than Azarethes in 531: in that year the battle of Callinicum during the Persian withdrawal was fought on Easter Saturday, 19 April, whereas on the same day in 542 Khusro had not yet reached Perozshapur, still well within Persian territory. According to the *Martyrdom* the king was advancing slowly, with protracted deliberations about Mar Grigor's fate. After leaving Dana the king may have advanced only one parasang, a distance of no more than 6 km. in a day, though the text is uncertain.¹⁰ At this stage of his campaign Khusro was not in a hurry, and it is possible that he was waiting for the contingents of his expedition to assemble at Perozshapur, a traditional mustering point for Persian campaigns up the Euphrates.

With regard to the speed of a royal campaign, two possible comparative figures are available. First, in the context of Khusro II's terrified flight from Heraclius' advance on Ctesiphon in late 627, Theophanes comments that the king managed to move 25 miles in one day as opposed to his normal rate of progress, which was 5 miles (just over 7 km). The comment may relate to the royal entourage rather than an army, though the two groups might have been fairly similar, since the king on campaign would have been accompanied by the royal fire, and possibly elements of his harem as well.¹¹ Second, when Kavadh invaded Armenia in 502, he crossed into Roman territory on Thursday, 22 August, and arrived outside Amida (Diyarbakir) on Saturday, 5 October.¹² In those 45 days he overawed Theodosiopolis (Erzerum) into surrender and accepted the submission of Martyropolis (Silvan) without opposition, while travelling a total distance of about 400 km. Procopius described this as 'a rapid/lightning campaign,'¹³ and he is surely right that Kavadh was keen to advance as quickly as possible to catch Roman defences by surprise. It is obviously impossible to say how long Kavadh spent at Theodosiopolis and Martyropolis, but, since neither place offered resistance, he is unlikely to have stayed many days at

¹⁰ Peeters (1925: 192 n. 7) emended the text from one to four parasangs; Jullien (2015: 62) translated the text as plural but with no specific number.

¹¹ Narses in 298: Festus, *Breviarium* 25; Eutropius, *Breviarium* 9, 25; Theophanes 9, 1–16. Khusro I in 576: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 6, 8; Theophylact III. 14, 10.

¹² *Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* 47–48, 50 (transl. pp. 49–50, 53).

¹³ Greatrex 2022: 101, comment on ἐξ ἐπιδρομῆς, *Wars* I 7, 3.

either.¹⁴ Therefore, allowing two weeks for the time spent in these cities, on this rapid advance the royal army perhaps managed to average no more than 12 km. each day, though this figure will include some days when the army paused to rest and reorganize.¹⁵

If this daily average seems low, the practicalities of moving a large army need to be borne in mind – it is easy to forget quite how cumbersome a royal army was. Even Alexander the Great’s highly-trained Macedonian army only averaged 24 km. per day, and he was known for his speed of movement.¹⁶ The size of Khusro’s invasion force is not given by Procopius, but is likely to have contained at least 20,000 soldiers, of whom most would have been mounted; there would also have been several thousand servants and numerous pack animals. A conservative estimate would place its total size at 25,000 men plus 50,000 animals, since most cavalymen would have had a spare horse, moving, like a convoy, at the pace of its slowest element, which in this case was probably the royal paraphernalia. As this mass advanced in column it would have stretched out for 20 km. if arranged 10 abreast,¹⁷ so the advance guard often would have reached the next night’s halt before the rear guard had left the previous camp. The logistical demands of feeding and watering men and animals were considerable, especially after the army left Persian territory, where supplies might have been prepared in advance. The transport and protection of booty would also

¹⁴ Cf. Greatrex 1998: 80–81.

¹⁵ In Whitby 1988: 257 n. 11, I speculated that a comment in John of Epiphania, §4, that Circesium was five days’ journey from Ambar, a distance of about 300 km., might relate to Khusro’s campaign in 573. This does not mean that the whole army advanced at that speed, just that a small flying column carrying its own supplies could have been sent ahead and made the journey in that time. Alternatively, John’s remark could be interpreted in the same way as Procopius’ comments about the distance ‘an active man’, εὐζώνῳ ἀνδρὶ, could travel (e.g. *Wars* I 19, 4; II 5,4), which represent a standard theoretical speed rather than the progress of a particular individual or army. The most rapid march in antiquity was that of Antigonos Monphthalmus in 319 BC when he surprised his rival Alcetas after leading his army of over 20,000 men over 500 km in seven days (Diodorus 18.44); that feat was exceptional and was performed by battle-hardened troops.

¹⁶ Engels 1978: 6; cf. Avramea (2002: 61) for Byzantine armies marching about 24 km per day on a highway where support facilities were available.

¹⁷ Extrapolating from the calculations at Engels 1978: 19–20.

have hindered rapid movement. In the discussion below, I assume a daily average march of 15 km., recognizing that figure may be on the high side.

In 542 Khusro proceeded up the Euphrates from Perozshapur, eventually halting near Europus (Jerablus), since he was afraid that Belisarius, by taking up position there, would cut his line of retreat.¹⁸ En route, he had detached troops to extract booty from Sergiopolis and then attempted to capture it, a process that would have required a few days.¹⁹ Khusro probably set off on 19 April immediately after witnessing the death of Grigor, and the whole journey of over 700 km., from Nahrit to Europus, might have taken almost two months, allowing for a short delay near Sergiopolis. It would therefore be imprudent to assume that Khusro began to contemplate a withdrawal, and so opened discussions with Belisarius about crossing the Euphrates, before the middle of June.²⁰ At this point he only decided to depart ‘after long consideration’ (*Wars* II 21, 17), probably in late June, and bridged the Euphrates quickly in order to reach areas where supplies should have been available, and crossed immediately (*Wars* II 2, 16 & 21–22).²¹

¹⁸ Although Procopius asserts that Khusro’s objective was Palestine and the wealth of Jerusalem, the fact that his army reached the vicinity of Europus demonstrates either that this had never been his intention, or that he changed his mind and perhaps planned to plunder the untouched wealth of Cilicia, as he is said to have threatened in 540 (*Wars* II 5, 4; II 6, 21). Concern about plague in Palestine might have been a factor in any change of plan.

¹⁹ Procopius, *Wars* II 20, 2–15; first Bishop Candidus came to Khusro’s camp to apologise for not being able to provide the ransom he had promised, then a body of Persians was sent to the city to receive all its valuables, and finally, when these were deemed insufficient, 6,000 troops were sent to capture the city; they failed in this since their supply of water ran out after a few days. All this will have occupied at least a week, and more probably a fortnight.

²⁰ Justinian sent Belisarius to the eastern frontier after learning of Khusro’s invasion; Khusro had probably crossed into Roman territory at the end of April or early May, the news will have been sent to Constantinople as quickly as possible, and Belisarius, who was travelling without an army, is said to have gone to the east at great speed on the official post-horses (Procopius, *Wars* II 20, 20). He could easily have arrived before the end of May.

²¹ At this specific moment, speed was important for Khusro, in case Belisarius changed his mind and attacked the Persians while their forces were divided on either side of the Euphrates.

This transit was the danger point for Khusro, but once safely east of the river there is no indication that he moved rapidly. If Khusro had been in a hurry or was now planning an attack on Armenia, he might have been expected to continue due east, passing Edessa, Constantina, and Dara to reach Persian territory at Nisibis, as he had done in 540, but instead he turned south to march down the Euphrates. Belisarius now crossed the river with his troops, moved to Edessa, and agreed to provide a hostage to confirm that ambassadors would come promptly to finalise peace terms and an agreement that Khusro would not harm Roman property (*Wars* II 21, 26–27). On this journey south, a distance of 200 km., Khusro opportunistically captured Callinicum, where the defences were under repair, so part of the wall was demolished (*Wars* II 21, 30–33).²² This would have taken two weeks, and so the Persians were unlikely to have been in a position to move on with their captives before early July.²³

A key question is what route Khusro took. I previously accepted the assumption, which underpins the new chronology, that he would have marched north via Nisibis, probably travelling up the river Khabour rather than via Edessa, a distance of about 400 km., and then continued a further 100 km. to the Tigris, crossing at Fechkhabour. This was the quickest route for Khusro to proceed towards his alleged destination in Adarbiganon. I am now less certain that this assumption is plausible. At Callinicum, Khusro was joined ‘a little later’ by the hostage sent by Belisarius, a prominent citizen of Edessa named John (*Wars* II 21, 27 & 33). This demonstrates that Belisarius and his troops were now located north of the Persians, so that, if Khusro had headed towards Nisibis, he would have reopened the risk of a confrontation with the Romans that he had been keen to avoid when the opposing armies

²² Elias, *Life of John of Tella* 38 (transl. Ghanem 1970: 48), refers to the city being struck by the Assyrian’s rod because of the wickedness of the majority of its inhabitants; this must refer to Khusro’s capture in 542, rather than the battle on the opposite side of the Euphrates in 531, as stated by Parker 2022: 196–197.

²³ Greatrex (2021: 564) concluded from the presence of numerous farmers at Callinicum (*Proc. Wars* II 21, 32) that they must have been bringing their produce to market in May or early June, but this inference is not necessary: they might have been hoping to sell produce to the Roman construction workers, or even to the Persians, in the belief that Khusro would abide by his promise not to harm the Romans.

were in the vicinity of Europus. By contrast, after marching 200 km. to Circesium, at the junction of the Euphrates and the Khabour, Khusro had only to cross the Khabour to reach Persian territory, after which he could have continued south towards Ctesiphon, perhaps with river transport available to carry back the captives from Callinicum and other booty. This route was his safest escape from Roman territory, but is not compatible with the theory that in 542 he moved straight from the campaign along the Euphrates to march to Adarbiganon.

Even if the hypothesis that the Persians returned to Ctesiphon is not accepted, the chronology of a march to Adarbiganon in 542 is implausible. If Khusro had set off from Callinicum in early July he would not have reached the Tigris before the early part of August, at the very earliest, after which he would still have more than 400 km. to further travel, involving the slow passage through the tortuous Keli Shin Pass before reaching his destination. Perhaps he could have arrived by the end of September, but only at the expense of driving his army forwards in a way that would have severely reduced its combat effectiveness:²⁴ the troops would have marched about 1,800 km. since leaving Ctesiphon with very few significant breaks, and so would scarcely have been in condition to launch the invasion through Persarmenia that Khusro was contemplating (*Wars* II 24, 1). Furthermore, Greatrex accepts that not long after his arrival, Khusro ordered his army to set off back to the Tigris valley, a journey of at least 400 km., depending on what part of Mesopotamia he was aiming to reach.²⁵ Proponents of the new chronology do not consider the practicalities of moving a large army with a substantial baggage train these long distances over some challenging terrain. On this, the new chronology entails assumptions at every stage that Khusro moved his large army much more quickly than had been the case when it was marching towards Perozshapur in April, and also faster than is attested for Kavadh's army on a lightning campaign. Although it is not impossible, if one assumes a higher daily march rate,

²⁴ As Engels (1978: 129) noted, whereas men recover with sufficient rest, the condition of horses and mules cannot be restored; if they are allowed to become exhausted, they are no longer fit for service.

²⁵ Greatrex 2021: 574.

for Khusro to have been at Takht-i Suleiman by late September 542, as Greatrex postulates, it is implausible.²⁶

The second factor that makes Khusro's presence in the north in early autumn 542 unlikely is the speed with which bubonic plague travelled overland. Procopius says that rumours spread that the Persian army in Adarbiganon was being troubled by plague while Khusro is said to have been worried about its approach (*Wars* II 24, 8 & 12). According to the traditional chronology this was mid-543, but in the new chronology late summer or early autumn 542. At the outset it must be clear that there is no certain information about when plague arrived in this region, but I would urge that 543 is much more likely than 542. There is no doubt that plague arrived in the Mediterranean world in late summer 541, affecting Alexandria in Egypt and spreading from there to coastal cities in Palestine.²⁷ Graves of probable plague victims are attested in Gaza in August and September 541, and then at towns in the Negev between October and December. These epitaphs are not numerous, three in Gaza and six in the Negev, and there is no way of knowing how long it was before the first preserved inscription that the plague reached Negev towns, but on this basis the plague might have taken a couple of months to travel 80 km. This might seem slow progress, but in the face of this terrifying scourge individuals might well have chosen not to approach affected areas,²⁸ with the result that there was no mechanism for the plague to travel from one place to the next.

Procopius records that it reached Constantinople in the middle of spring in its second year (*Wars* II 23, 9), which is accepted as indicating April 542.²⁹ With regard to the eastern provinces, it is clear that plague had not reached the Roman and Persian armies in the vicinity of Europus and Hierapolis in late May or early June. It is not just an argument from silence, that Procopius says nothing about the presence of plague affecting the actions of Belisarius and Khusro, since he undoubtedly wished to give all credit for the Persian retreat to Belisarius' bluffing,

²⁶ Kislinger, Stathakopoulos (1999: 98) placed the march to the north-east in early summer 542, but this is simply not possible.

²⁷ Stathakopoulos 2002: 100–102; Kislinger, Stathakopoulos 1999: 97–98.

²⁸ *Life of Nicholas of Sion* 52 (transl. Sevckenko, Sevckenko 1984: 82–83).

²⁹ Kislinger, Stathakopoulos 1999: 90.

but the Persian army only came into danger from the plague after arriving in Adarbiganon: if the plague had begun to affect its soldiers in Syria in 542, they would have carried the disease with them back to the Tigris valley and further afield. The distance from Gaza to Europus is about 650 km., but much less from ports further north that would also have been affected early through maritime commerce, for example Laodicaea, which is less than 300 km. from Europus. Even discounting two or three months in the middle of winter when the plague was less virulent and so probably did not move significantly, it still took it at least seven or eight ‘active’ months to travel from the Mediterranean ports to the Euphrates. We do not know exactly when it eventually arrived at places such as Hierapolis, Edessa, or Dara, but this is likely to have been in the latter half of 542, with its ravages continuing throughout 543, since John of Ephesus stated that it persisted for three years, which would be from 541 to 543, inclusive.³⁰

Kislinger and Stathakopoulos asserted that Khusro was keen to withdraw across the Euphrates because he feared the approach of plague.³¹ At odds with this hypothesis, however, is the fact that Khusro did not march east with all speed. First, it was only after ‘long consideration’ (*Wars* II 21, 17) that he decided to cross the Euphrates, since he was uncertain about Belisarius’ guarantees that he would not challenge the Persian army when it was most vulnerable during the river crossing. Second, rather than heading promptly east away from areas threatened by plague and towards the safety of the highlands of Adarbiganon, by choosing to march south he committed his army to spending a further month or so near the Euphrates. Such behaviour seems unlikely if he was seriously concerned about the approach of the plague. In this context, Greatrex asserts that the plague had already reached Assyria, presumably to explain why Khusro felt it necessary to continue to Adarbiganon rather than return to Ctesiphon. This belief is based

³⁰ John of Ephesus, as preserved in the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* 109 (ed. and transl. Witakowski 1996: 98); see Morony 2012: 61–62.

³¹ Greatrex 2022: 561; Kislinger, Stathakopoulos 1999: 94; the explanation was suggested by Bury 1899: 434; cf. id. 1924: vol. 2 106. This is possible, but does not affect my argument about the speed of the plague’s spread, though it seems more likely that, if the plague had an impact on Khusro’s planning in 542, it would have been to change the target of his invasion from Palestine to places further north.

on the inference that Procopius' phrase to describe the situation in Assyria, ἔνθα δὴ οὐπω ἐνδεδημήκει, literally 'where it had not yet taken up residence' (*Wars* II 24, 12), entails that it 'had apparently penetrated to some degree.'³² The Greek need not imply this, and indeed the scenario that Greatrex postulates is illogical. If Khusro had continued to Adarbiganon because there were already signs of plague in the Tigris valley, granted the disease's rapid rate of reproduction in a densely populated region, plague would have been raging fiercely along the Tigris even before his army had wound its way through the Zagros to Takht-i Suleiman, but that would contradict the reason given by Procopius for Khusro's withdrawal.

Procopius' comments about Khusro in Adarbiganon indicate that the plague reached Persian territory slightly later than the Roman Empire, a conclusion supported by Syriac sources,³³ but the key issue for current purposes is whether this occurred in 542 or 543. To my mind, the plague probably reached the Black Sea coastline of Lazica quite quickly by ship from Constantinople, possibly as early as April/May 542.³⁴ Then, however, it had to advance inland, cross the frontier from Roman Lazica to Persian Iberia, and travel down the valley of the river Kura before moving into the highlands of Adarbiganon, a distance of at least 1,000 km. In view of the speed at which it travelled inland in the Levant, this is more likely to have taken until the second half of 543. Greatrex accepts that this scenario is plausible, but comments that 'it could just as well have happened in the second half of 542 as in early 543'.³⁵ The only reason that he offers for this assertion is that communications in the region were difficult until late spring, which is true but does not justify his conclusion that the plague was already crossing into Persian territory in summer 542; even if it did reach the frontier between the Laz and the Iberians in mid-542, there was still a very considerable distance from there to the fire temple at Takht-i Suleiman,

³² Greatrex 2021: 574, 575 n. 24; strangely, there is no discussion of this understanding of ἐνδεδημήκει at id. 2022: 594.

³³ *Pseudo-Zachariah* 10.9a, 'eventually the territory of the Persians' (transl. Phenix, Horn 2011: 414–415); *Chronicle of Zuqin* (ed. and transl. Witakowski 1996: 109); Morony 2012: 64.

³⁴ Cf. Whitby 2021: 419.

³⁵ Greatrex 2021: 574.

where Khusro was staying in the palace attached to the shrine.³⁶ While it would be unwise to place much weight on the information in Pseudo-Zachariah and John of Ephesus about the timing of the plague's arrival in Persia, Greatrex's chronology implies that it reached there at the same time as, or before, it struck the eastern fringe of the Roman Empire and progressed very rapidly through Transcaucasia.

A further factor that favours locating the lost year-end after 542 is that Procopius' custom as historian was to insert material that was not directly connected to the main military narrative at the end of a campaign year, as Greatrex indeed acknowledges.³⁷ There is no cogent reason for Procopius to have departed from this practice when describing the plague's impact on Constantinople. In terms of timing, the onset of the plague in March or April preceded Khusro's arrival in Roman territory by a month, but historiographic practice dictated that it was inserted at the end of the account of the year's military activity. Granted the length of the account, which by implication covers the course of the plague in the empire beyond 542 (*Wars* II 23, 21), it is not surprising that the need for a formal notice of the end of one year and the start of the next was overlooked.

A supplementary argument for the early chronology offered by Greatrex is that Procopius' statement 'In the following year, Khusro, the son of Kavadh, invaded Roman territory for the fourth time' (*Wars* II 26, 1) must refer to consecutive invasions.³⁸ Greatrex accepts that this is not stated by Procopius, but asserts that this is 'the natural inference'. There is simply no basis for this assertion, and it perhaps not surprising that this unfounded claim is not discussed in his commentary *ad loc.*

Kislinger and Stathakopoulos, followed by Greatrex, place the missing year after the siege of Edessa, during the negotiations that led to the five-year truce that started in 545, most probably in April. As Greatrex has admitted, the transposition of the 544 attack on Edessa to

³⁶ Experience of the recent Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the role that regular movement of people plays in the dissemination of disease; in 542 the conflict in Transcaucasia is likely to have reduced long-distance movement, especially after plague arrived in the ports on the Black Sea.

³⁷ Greatrex (2022: 503) traces the practice back to Thucydides.

³⁸ Greatrex 2022: 575–576.

543 opened up ‘a rather awkward gap’, for which he has to account.³⁹ It also entails that Khusro was prepared to invade a region where the plague was still active in 543,⁴⁰ despite his efforts to avoid contact with the disease in the previous year. Greatrex’s explanation for the gap in events is that the deaths of the Roman commanders Justus and Peranius, which Procopius (*Wars* II 28, 1) dates to ‘at about this time’, ὑπὸ τὸν χρόνον τοῦτον, with reference to the siege of Edessa, actually occurred several months later in the year, so that their replacements were not in position until the end of 543 or early 544. The two other occurrences in the *Wars* of the phrase ὑπὸ τὸν χρόνον τοῦτον suggest that there is a reasonably close relationship with the events being connected. In *Wars* V 4, 4, Athalarich is said to have died ‘at about this time,’ with reference to Amalasuenta’s dispute with Theodahad, while at VII 26, 3 the Roman general John conceived a plan to rescue senatorial prisoners while ‘at about this time’ Totila became concerned that such an attempt would be made.⁴¹ The phrase is used rather differently in the *Secret History*, where the four occurrences do not connect two events, as the three passages in the *Wars* do, but relate to longer periods of time.⁴² However, the phrase is obviously not precise, so that, even if the usage in the *Wars* suggests a reasonably close connection, an exception to this cannot be ruled out. Whatever the exact date of the two generals’ deaths, Greatrex’s assumptions about the speed with which Justinian acted in 542, after dismissing Belisarius and Buzes⁴³, are at odds with the somewhat leisurely approach to appointing replacements that he postulates with regard to Justus and Peranius.

Greatrex places considerable weight on Procopius’ statement that Persian commanders outside Edessa say to Martin, who was attempting to negotiate an end to the siege, that Belisarius had ‘recently’, ἔναγχος,

³⁹ Greatrex 2003: 53–54.

⁴⁰ The year 543 is clearly within the three years given for the duration of the plague in Syriac sources.

⁴¹ *TLG*, consulted on 12th January 2023.

⁴² *SH* XI 10, when barbarians are ravaging Roman territory; XII 17, the destruction wrought by various natural disasters; XXI 6, holders of the office of praetorian prefect during Justinian’s reign; XXVII 12, the period when Arsenius was excluded from the palace.

⁴³ Greatrex 2021: 571–573.

persuaded Khusro to withdraw from Roman territory with a promise of ambassadors (*Wars* II 26, 46), a reference to a promise made in mid-542 (II 21, 25). Even in his early chronology, as Greatrex admits, this promise had been made about 10 months previously, which was not ‘recently’ on a strict application of the word;⁴⁴ therefore, the question is just how imprecise Procopius was being. In fact, his use of the word is not always tight: thus, at I 16, 7. he has Kavadh refer to a recent demand about the Caspian Gates and Dara, which in terms of what is recorded in the *Wars*, harkens back to exchanges over a decade earlier during the reign of Anastasius (I 10, 16; I 11, 7), while Justinian in a letter to Khusro in early 540 complained about recent raids by al-Mundhir that had probably occurred at least a year previously (II 4, 21).⁴⁵ It might also be relevant that at the start of the Persians’ comments to Martin, Procopius observed that they were being deceitful, so he may have made them misrepresent the timing of Belisarius’ promise. The use of ἔναγχοϛ does not demonstrate that the exchange outside Edessa must have occurred in 543 rather than 544.

It was only after replacing the two dead commanders that Justinian dispatched an embassy to Khusro (*Wars* II 28, 3), which Greatrex places in autumn 544 after a period of stasis when Justinian was distracted by the need to replace the two dead generals. I would agree that Roman envoys probably reached Ctesiphon towards the end of 544, and that it was possible to wrap matters up for a truce to begin in April 545; in late 544 the king would have returned from his annual retreat from the summer heat of Mesopotamia to higher ground, but the envoys will have set out shortly after events at Edessa had been reported to the capital rather than after a delay of a year. The speed of these negotiations in late 544 and early 545 is testimony to my contention that, in the aftermath of the Persian failure at Edessa, both sides were keen on a settlement and there were few differences between the two over what the terms should be.⁴⁶ Greatrex disputes this analysis, asserting

⁴⁴ Greatrex 2021: 574–575.

⁴⁵ These two instances are within a message. Perhaps in such contexts, including the exchanges outside Edessa, Procopius intended ἔναγχοϛ to be a less precise marker than in the main narrative.

⁴⁶ Whitby 2021: 420.

that after Edessa Khusro had reason to keep his options open, whether to invade Mesopotamia again or attack Lazica, while Justinian might have wanted to gain revenge for Persian invasions, including the attack on Edessa, and to reverse the humiliating defeat at Anglon in the previous year.⁴⁷ These assertions, however, are unconvincing. From Khusro's perspective, with regard to Mesopotamia, his stunning triumphs in early 540 had not continued: in the latter part of that invasion both Edessa and Dara had withstood his sieges. In 542 his advance to Europus had produced the limited rewards of some booty from Sergiopolis and the capture of the undefended Callinicum, while most recently Edessa, for a second time, had thwarted his attempt to demonstrate his superiority to the God of the Christians. Mesopotamia was no longer a fertile hunting ground for Khusro, while the terms of the truce did not prevent him from operating in the disputed territory of Lazica. Outside Edessa, he had demanded that talks about peace begin without delay (*Wars* II 27, 27). As for Justinian, avenging Anglon does not seem to have been a major consideration, since Rechinarius had been sent on an embassy in the year after that encounter. This mission might have been sent after news of Khusro's latest invasion had reached the emperor, since Rechinarius arrived at Edessa during the siege (*Wars* II 27, 24–26), in which case the attack had spurred Justinian into renewed efforts at peace rather than created a reason for delay. Khusro had demanded prompt negotiations, and I would suggest that Justinian responded.

In order to create space for the lost year-end, Greatrex speculates that there was a period of relative inactivity on the eastern frontier, which he dates to late 543 and most of 544. That there was a pause in operations at some point is plausible, but I would suggest that this was probably located in the latter part of 542 and the first half of 543, a time when the region was badly affected by plague. Procopius does not comment in the *Wars* on what impact the disease may have had on Roman military operations, but this has not stopped some scholars from regarding its effect as very significant; even though I do not accept the more extreme conclusions, I recognise that disruption to military life must have been caused.⁴⁸ The plague must have

⁴⁷ Greatrex 2021: 575.

⁴⁸ Major impact: e.g. Teall 1965: 321–322; Fotiou 1988: 67; Doubts: Whitby 1995: 92–103.

reached the eastern Roman armies at some point in 542: concentrations of soldiers entailed large stores of food and extensive supply chains to keep them stocked, so there would have been plenty of rats to host fleas and a regular movement of people to deliver the disease to new locations. Soldiers possibly survived better than civilians through better diet and medical care, but even a relatively low level of mortality would have disrupted combat operations, since the plague could have a serious impact on survivors.⁴⁹ Other factors conducive to inactivity in the latter part of 542 may have been uncertainties about the emperor and the removal of Belisarius as general. It is not known when Justinian contracted plague, but it is unlikely to have been at its very outset, since he was capable of directing some of the response and appointing individuals with specific responsibilities.⁵⁰ Once he fell ill, as in modern autocracies, attempts were probably made to avoid difficult information from leaking out, but rumours would have spread. How quickly they arrived in the east is a different matter, since they were not an official communication.⁵¹ It is possible that the palace would have waited until it could communicate the good news that Justinian had survived the disease before releasing any information, but that is just surmise. The chronology of Belisarius' replacement is also uncertain. Granted that he was definitely active in the east at least until Khusro left Callinicum, which is probably to be dated to the end of June at the earliest, as argued above, even if Peter and John immediately reported their allegations of treasonable talk against Belisarius and Buzes to Constantinople, the order for his recall is unlikely to have arrived before the end of

⁴⁹ Morony 2012: 70.

⁵⁰ Procopius, *Wars* II 23, 5–6; Greatrex's note on II 23, 5 (2022: 582) implicitly accepts that he was not among the earliest casualties. On the basis of somewhat different numismatic representations of the emperor, Pottier 2010 suggested that Justinian was affected from roughly May to early autumn. Meier (2016: 216 n. 111) rejected Pottier's speculations, though his reasons, the fact that only half the coins display this image, the lack of confirmation from other evidence, and the absence of reference to facial swelling in Procopius' description of the plague's effects at *Wars* II 22, 17, are not conclusive. Pottier's thesis is more vulnerable to numismatic challenge, with the different coins perhaps originating in a specific mint from a limited number of aberrant dies, but the period he suggests for Justinian's affliction by and recovery from the plague is plausible.

⁵¹ Greatrex 2021: 573 assumes that they would have reached the army quickly.

July, quite possibly later.⁵² The relevant individuals might have reached the capital in mid-August and, even if the allegations were only investigated superficially with no rebuttal by the accused, Martin, the new commander, was probably not in place before the end of August. How quickly Roman troops could thereafter have been ready for a major campaign is unknown, especially if the plague had now reached the military bases, but Peter and John also had to return from Constantinople, and commanders of all units would have had to assess the combat-effectiveness of their men. It is conceivable, as Greatrex asserts, that all this could have taken place in time for the campaign to Anglon to be launched in the autumn of 542, but it is more likely that these actions all took much longer and that Roman forces were not ready for substantive coordinated action until 543.

To sum up, although there is no decisive argument to disprove the new chronology for these years, considerations of the speed of Khusro's campaign in 542, the timing of the arrival of plague in Persian territory, and Procopius' practice in handling non-military information all suggest that the traditional dates are to be preferred. No conclusive argument against it has yet been advanced. It is therefore most prudent to recognise that for these years two alternative chronologies are available.

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⁵² Allowing at least fortnight for a trusted messenger to carry the dangerous report in person, a few days for an audience and decision in Constantinople, and then a rapid summons to Belisarius.

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