

Dariusz Brodka 

Jagiellonian University, Kraków

Persian Wars in Focus: Procopius of Caesarea

Geoffrey Greatrex, *Procopius of Caesarea, The Persian Wars: A Historical Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022. XXXIII, 851 p. £140.00/\$180.00. ISBN: 978-1-107-05322-9

Procopius of Caesarea, *The Persian Wars*. Translation, with an introduction and notes. Edited by Geoffrey Greatrex. With acknowledgements to Averil Cameron. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022. XXVIII, 251 p. £75.00/\$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-107-16570-0

This monumental work by G. Greatrex provides the first actual historical commentary of one part of Procopius of Caesarea's *Wars*. In fact, one could say more: this is the first extensive commentary on a work of Procopius in any language for over a century (p. XII).¹ Only the translation and commentary by Denis Roques on *Buildings* can be pointed out here.² However, the scale of his endeavour is incomparable to the achievement of Greatrex, who analysed in detail the first two books of Procopius' *Wars*, the so-called *Persian Wars*, covering the period from the time of Anastasius to the year 549. So far, modern scholarship has had at its disposal a rather general and by now outdated commentary

¹ Both volumes have already been extremely finely reviewed by Whitby (2023: 89–125), who compared them to the monumental commentaries of Thucydides and Polybius (Gomme et al. 1945–1981; Walbank 1957–1979; Hornblower 1991–2008).

² Roques 2011.

by B. Rubin,³ and above all the extremely valuable monograph by H. Börm on Roman-Persian relations,⁴ which to a large extent can be regarded as preparation for such an ambitious task as that undertaken by G. Greatrex.

Undoubtedly Greatrex is the person most qualified to write this type of commentary – his many publications on Persian-Roman relations, the works of Procopius of Caesarea or parallel sources⁵ guarantee that we are getting an extremely competent, meticulous, insightful work which, to paraphrase Thucydides, will provide us with a work of enduring value (*ktema es aei*). It is worth noting that the work is deliberately titled *Historical Commentary* because, as the author explains, its focus is squarely on the events narrated by Procopius and seeks to clarify them and to put them into context (p. XIII). Purely literary, stylistic issues are covered relatively little, usually going so far as to indicate that a particular expression has its parallel in Herodotus, Thucydides or other classical authors. On the other hand, the extremely useful *index locorum* of passages from other authors shows the great extent of Procopius' reading, with particular attention paid to the fact that we find a lot of parallels to the language of Septuagint and ecclesiastical authors, and not just classical authors, where Herodotus and Thucydides obviously come to the fore.

The whole begins with an introduction, where the assumptions of the commentary and its structure are mentioned. Then we have a list of abbreviations and an extremely useful table of names (*Names of Places and Peoples*) (pp. XI–XXXIII). The *Commentary* translates the entire Greek text into English, of course – a separate translation of *Wars I–II* constitutes the second of two volumes of Procopius' *Persian Wars*. In it, Greatrex uses Averil Cameron's translation, published in 1967, which contained extracts from all of Procopius' works. He used her translation as the basis for his own (cf. p. XIII). In doing so, he also took into account other existing translations, such as Dewing's and Kaldellis', which is a revision of Dewing's text, and, notably, German, Spanish and Polish.

³ Rubin 1957: 273–599.

⁴ Börm 2007.

⁵ E.g. Greatrex 1995: 1–13; Greatrex 1997: 60–86; Greatrex 1998; Greatrex 2014: 76–121; Greatrex 2011.

The structure of the present volume follows the traditional pattern. A short introduction (pp. 1–30) discusses key issues in the study of Procopius. It deals with, among other things, the composition and structure of the *Wars* and Procopius' style, which is a relatively under-researched topic. Here Greatrex focuses on speeches, digressions and lexical preferences. The issues of the presence of Christianity and historical analysis, on the other hand, go beyond the problem of style but give good insight into Procopius' method. It is strongly emphasised that Procopius writes in a version of Attic Greek, emulating Thucydides but incorporating certain elements that had already appeared in historical genre in Hellenistic times (p. 9). It could also be added that Procopius writes in a matter-of-fact and fluent style and takes care to make the narrative clear, vivid and descriptive. Wherever possible, he strives to achieve dramatic effect. To this end, he selects the available material and structures it accordingly, omitting or shortening the material he considers less important, focusing on the issues that are important for understanding the events in question. Notwithstanding the fact that Procopius endeavours to write in the Attic dialect, late influences are evident, especially in terms of semantics and syntax, and at this point a number of deviations from the classical language can be discerned. His sentence structure tends towards the Hellenistic practice of accumulating participles rather than using elaborate subordinate clauses. The historian is very fond of using all kinds of participial constructions; sometimes a whole chain of genitive-absolutus constructions replaces several subordinate clauses. Procopius often does not use an article correctly, and there is some freedom in the use of personal and demonstrative pronouns as well as some prepositions. In final clauses, the conjunction ὅπως is used instead of ἵνα. Regularly and more often than the rules of classical style would suggest, the dual appears. In the use of modes, Procopius does not follow the classical rules. Especially in the use of the optative and the conjunctive, there is a high degree of arbitrariness.⁶

Excellent and extremely useful is the argument about the sources Procopius relied on for *Persian Wars* – Greatrex shows convincingly that we are dealing here with four types of sources: written historical, oral, reports from the front and, finally, autopsy. Finally, the

⁶ Brodka 2022.

transmission of *Persian Wars* and Persian-Roman relations in the sixth century are briefly discussed.

The *Commentary* proper begins next, proceeding according to the sections of the work. Then follow the subsections, which are also provided with their own introduction, and finally the commentary proper begins, which goes by chapter. Each lemma quotes a Greek text which is supplemented by a translation; e.g. *Wars* I 1 is discussed first, then *Wars* I 2–6 in general (Persian History and Romano-Persian Relations in the Fifth Century). Within this theme, *Wars* II 1–10 – The Guardianship of Yazdgerd I over Theodosius II, *Wars* II 11–15 – still have separate introductions. Each part is introduced by a short summary of its content and analysis of its structure. At this point it is worth noting that the individual introductions are essentially concerned with history and historiography and are so generally titled. A detailed analysis of every line within its text then follows, with special attention paid to historical questions. Almost all contemporary scholarship is included – if you look at the range of citations you have to realise how broad the coverage is, with scholars from all the major European languages and some lesser ones being cited. The bibliography is impressive (pp. 687–772), and there are basically no shortcomings – it covers older stuff, already somewhat outdated, as well as everything recent. As a result, it is clear that all the analyses are fully complete and no issues of detail are overlooked.

The commentary text is followed by three useful appendices (*Perso-Arabic Sources on Sassanian History*, *The Length of Procopius' Stade* and *Nonnosus and Roman Missions to Southern Arabia and Ethiopia*). Eventually, a set of five comprehensive indices concludes this monumental volume. The entire volume is enriched by 30 maps, which are placed next to individual passages, which I believe is a much better move than if all the maps had been placed in one place. The maps are accurate and clear so that one can understand how geographical conditions might have impacted the course of events described by Procopius within books 1 and 2.

It should also be stressed that books 1 and 2, although focusing on military events (culminating certainly in the Battle of Dara) and diplomatic, also describe other important events, such as the Nika revolt, the great plague and the fall of John the Cappadocian. The narrative

also goes beyond military matters in numerous digressions (e.g. on Hephthalites, Auxumites). It is noteworthy that in his arguments about the Nika revolt Greatrex tends to follow the views of R. Pfeilschifter,⁷ while rejecting M. Meier's idea that Justinian controlled events from the very beginning in order to bring the opposition into the light. In the analysis of the plague, however, it must be appreciated that all the latest research, including genetic research, has been taken into account, which makes the analysis fully up-to-date. Of course many issues remain controversial – e.g. the chronology of 542–545. Greatrex dates the second siege of Edessa to 543, while I am rather inclined to favour the traditional dating of 544. It is worth adding a few comments here on the first mention of the eunuch Narses, who appears in *Wars* I 15, 31. Procopius refers to his position at the time as *tamias*, and it is this term that causes much confusion. Greatrex seems to have adopted the traditional identification with the function *sacellarius* (“Procopius probably refers to his position as *sacellarius*”, p. 219). However, the issue is not at all clear. The terms ταμίας and ταμιεῖον are technical terms that usually refer to a wide variety of financial fields. In the Byzantine sources of the eighth and ninth centuries the term τῶν βασιλικῶν χρημάτων ταμίας, which Procopius applies to Narses, appears very frequently and refers, indeed, to the *sacellarius*-office. Therefore, modern research, following Stein's view, holds that in Procopius ταμίας is to be equated with *sacellarius*.⁸ E. Stein was of the opinion that from the beginning of Justinian's reign Narses had held the position of *sacellarius*, which was also identical with the *primicerius sacri cubiculi*. However, it must be stressed that no one designated the eunuch Narses directly as σακελλάριος/*sacellarius*. The equation of the Procopian ταμίας with σακελλάριος/*sacellarius* results in large measure from the fact that the later Byzantine authors, especially those in the eighth century, applied the classicist term τῶν βασιλικῶν χρημάτων ταμίας precisely to the σακελλάριος.⁹ On the basis of the information of Procopius and Agathias on ταμίαι between 531 and 556, the following conclusions can be reached. The ταμίας function was given to those who had the firm

⁷ Pfeilschifter 2013; Meier 2003: 273–300.

⁸ Stein 1949: 357.

⁹ Brodka 2018: 32.

confidence of the emperor. It is about the persons from different social groups, not only about the imperial *cubiculum*. Of the three examples mentioned by Procopius and Agathias (Narses, Rusticus and Johannes Daknas), only Narses was an eunuch and a member of the *sacrum cubiculum*. The ταμίαι were imperial commissioners who were sent to the areas where warfare was being intensively waged in order to reward the deserving soldiers with monetary gifts from the imperial private treasury and to inform the emperor in detail about the actual situation. The ταμίαι could also be responsible for other special payments from the imperial private treasury. In Justinian's time they could also exercise a control function by providing the emperor with detailed reports on the actions of the individual commanders. It thus leaves open whether the ταμίαις in Procopius is identical with the *sacellarius*.

Without a doubt, the author succeeded in achieving his goal and creating an excellent historical commentary based on modern research. One of the greatest strengths of this commentary is that it re-examines old assumptions and formulates many new ones. Greatrex's book is a profound synthetic study, written with erudition, which presents all text-critical aspects clearly and convincingly, as well as clearly explains all political and military events. It will certainly give many new important impulses to future research. As I said at the beginning, paraphrasing Thucydides' famous statement: Greatrex has written a timeless monument of scholarship for all posterity, which will serve researchers for decades to come.

Translation

In addition to his titanic work on the *Commentary*, Greatrex has decided to separately publish his translation of *Persian Wars*, which is included in the *Commentary*. In this way he provides an interested public with a completely new English translation that competes the entire translations by Dewing and Kaldellis.¹⁰As mentioned above, it is based on Averil Cameron's translation, published in 1967, which included extracts from all of Procopius' works. The whole is preceded by an

¹⁰ Procopius; Kaldellis 2014.

introduction, somewhat shorter than that in the *Commentary*. A *Tables of Names* (*Names of People, Names of Places and People*) also appears, identical, unsurprisingly, to that found in the *Commentary*. Greatrex also explains the rules for the use of proper names, which he uses – this practice, rightly applied, differs in particular from the translation made by Kaldellis, who uses names in the Greek version. Greatrex used the normal (Latin) version of Greek and Roman names, contrary to the opinion of A. Kaldellis that the use of either the Latin or English form is a distortion and a ‘redundant affectation’. He therefore rightly rejects this mannerism in favour of what was the norm not only in English but also in German and French (p. XXIV). For non-Roman people, he chose a simple version of their name in the appropriate language. For places, the normal English versions were preferred. As for Latin technical terms (few in total), they remained in full and were not translated into English, so we have, for example, *magister militum per Orientem* instead of General of the East. The Latin/Persian technical terms themselves are explained in the *Glossary* (p. XXVIII), which eminently facilitates understanding the relevant parts of the text. This edition is supplied with relatively short but numerous notes which, although they do not provide references on the subject to the literature, make the relevant passages easier to understand. The bibliography is short, limited to so-called further reading, but this is not a problem since this translation is only to some extent self-contained extracts from the *Commentary*. The whole is accompanied, like the *Commentary*, by 30 maps and battle plans. Also included are Nonnosus’ translation of the Roman mission to southern Arabia and two indices (*Person and Titles, Peoples and Places* – this overlaps with the *Commentary*). It is worth noting that Greatrex here makes use of other translations: German, French, Spanish and Polish.

The translations are accurate, lucid, and readable. Greatrex has an excellent understanding of individual words in their context and is not afraid to render the precise meaning of words. A perfect example of this is his flexible translation of the word *doryphoros*, usually rendered as ‘spearman’. However, this is too narrow a meaning. Namely, in this case Procopius does not use the term *bucellarius/bukellarios* proper but instead uses *doryphoroi* and *hypaspistai*, by means of which he

distinguished between *bucellarii* of higher and lower rank. It is reasonable, therefore, to translate *doryphoroi* as '(appendant) officers', because in many passages they are precisely fulfilling commanding roles. Clearly, Greatrex's translation differs from Kaldellis' and Dewing's on many points, and in my opinion Greatrex is generally right – his translation seems to be somewhat more precise.¹¹

Indeed, the translation is a subsidiary work, relying entirely on the *Commentary* and being to some extent an extract from it. As such, it is aimed not at specialists but rather at a wider audience and students, making it easier for anyone to read the first two books of *The Wars* without having to refer to the monumental *Commentary*.

References

- Börm H., 2007, *Prokop und die Perser. Untersuchungen zu den römisch-sasanidischen Kontakten in der ausgehenden Spätantike*, Stuttgart.
- Brodka D., 2018, *Narses. Politik, Krieg und Historiographie*, Berlin, <https://doi.org/10.3726/b14557>.
- Brodka D., 2022, *Prokop von Caesarea*, Hildesheim – Zürich – New York.
- Gomme A.W. et al., 1945–1981, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 1–5, Oxford.
- Greatrex G., 1995, 'The Composition of Procopius' Persian Wars and John the Cappadocian', *Prudentia* 27, pp. 1–13.
- Greatrex G., 1997, 'The Nika Riot: A Reappraisal', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 117, pp. 60–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/632550>.
- Greatrex G., 1998, *Rome and Persia at War: 502–532*, Leeds.
- Greatrex G., 2011, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah. Church and War in Late Antiquity*, G. Greatrex (ed.), transl. R.R. Phenix, C.B. Horn, *Translated Texts for Historians* 55, Liverpool.
- Greatrex G., 2014, 'Perceptions of Procopius in Recent Scholarship', *Histos* 8, pp. 76–121.
- Hornblower S., 1991–2008, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 1–3, Oxford.
- Kaldellis A., 2014, *The Wars of Justinian. Prokopios*, transl. H.B. Dewing, Indianapolis.
- Meier M., 2003, 'Die Inszenierung einer Katastrophe: Justinian und der Nika-Aufstand', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 142, pp. 273–300.

¹¹ Cf. the extensive list of differences that analyzes Whitby (2023: 111–124).

- Pfeilschifter R., 2013, *Der Kaiser und Konstantinopel: Kommunikation und Konfliktaustrag in einer spätantiken Metropole*, Berlin – Boston, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110266887>.
- Procopius, *History of the Wars. The Anecdota or Secret History: On Buildings*, transl. H.B. Dewing, vol. 1–7, Cambridge 1914–1940.
- Roques D., 2011, *Constructions de Justinien I^{er}*, Alessandria.
- Rubin B., 1957, ‘Procopius von Kaisareia’, [in:] *Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft* 45, Stuttgart, col. 273–599.
- Stein E., 1949, *Histoire du Bas-Empire. Tome II, De la disparition de l’Empire d’Occident à la mort de Justinien (476–565)*, J.-R. Palanqu (ed.), Paris – Bruxelles – Amsterdam.
- Walbank F.W., 1957–1979, *Historical Commentary on Polybius*, vol. 1–3, Oxford.
- Whitby M., 2023, ‘Procopius Meets His Gomme? Greatrex on *Persian Wars*’, *Plekos* 25, pp. 89–125.