Procopius of Caesarea and Historiography in the Sixth Century

Objectives

My primary aim with this project is to produce a definitive historical and literary commentary on the Persian Wars of the sixth-century historian Procopius of Caesarea. This involves a detailed analysis of the Greek text and its narrative of events of the fifth and sixth centuries on the eastern frontier of the eastern Roman (or Byzantine) empire. The project will also give rise incidentally to papers on various aspects of history-writing in the sixth century and to Procopius’ place in this context.

Context

In any modern book on the reign of Justinian, or indeed on the sixth century generally, reference is constantly made to Procopius. For, as Edward Gibbon (1896, vol.4, 224) expressed it: ‘According to the vicissitudes of courage or servitude, of favour or disgrace, Procopius successively composed the history, the panegyric, and the satire, of his own times’. Gibbon thus alludes to the three very different works that the historian has bequeathed to us, viz. the Wars, the Buildings or De Aedificiis and the Anecdota or Secret History. All modern analyses of the multi-faceted reign of Justinian, with its many apparent contradictions, reflect to some degree the very different assessments of the emperor and his reign produced by Procopius. What is more, modern works tend to rely on Procopius to a large extent in order to build up their picture of Justinian’s reign and to follow his narration of events. This is as true of the still valuable account of Stein (1949) as of more recent treatments by Browning (1970), Moorhead (1994), Evans (1996) and Tate (2004). There can thus be no doubt of his enduring influence. Of course, from a historiographical point of view, this is somewhat unsatisfactory, since it tends to result in a strict segregation of secular and ecclesiastical history: because Procopius never produced an ecclesiastical history - although in the Anecdota he alludes to plans to produce one (cf. Kaldellis 2009, 606-16, on this point) - modern scholars must rely on other sources for their analyses of church matters in the sixth century.

My commentary on the Persian Wars naturally cannot in itself correct this tendency. But it is worth emphasising that I come to the project after having spent six years scrutinising another sixth-century source that does offer considerable detail on both military and ecclesiastical affairs, Pseudo-Zachariah of Mytilene. I believe therefore that my familiarity with the wider field of sixth-century history will be of considerable benefit to my research for the commentary: to some extent the task of a commentator is not only to explain what his chosen source says, but also to analyse why he chooses to omit certain things. Thus Gomme (vol.1, 1945, 365-89) devotes a whole section to important events that Thucydides apparently decided not to include in his account of the Pentekontaetia. In the same way, it will be necessary for me to account for the extremely selective narrative that Procopius offers of the period leading up to Justinian’s reign, taking into account (e.g.) Kaldellis’ theory that it reflects the historian’s programme of casting the reign of Justinian in the worst possible light. Already in Bardill and Greatrex 1996 and Greatrex 2008b I have sought to investigate his sources for his report concerning the guardianship of the Persian king Yazdgerd I of the young emperor Theodosius II. Having now worked on Procopius for twenty years, I believe that I am in a good position to
undertake this daunting task. I have published a number of papers on Procopius and his works, as well as on his treatment of various events, e.g. the Nika riot (Greatrex 1997), the fall of John the Cappadocian (Greatrex 1995) and the siege of Amida (Greatrex 2010). More general treatments of the historian may be found in Greatrex 1994 and 2003, which both concentrate on the dating of his works, in particular the Anecdota, while Greatrex 2000 seeks to account for the apparent difference in tone and style between the Wars and the Anecdota without recourse to the unhelpful notion of ‘genre’; finally, Greatrex 2008a looks at the reign of Justinian and Procopius’ description of it while seeking to defend the credibility of the Anecdota, which has recently been called into question by Brubaker (2004 and 2005). My commentary will naturally also require a good grasp of Sasanian Persian history, since Procopius devotes a considerable amount of attention to Rome’s powerful eastern neighbour. Here again I have experience of the field, having published a monograph on the confrontation between Rome and Persia that lasted from 502 to 532 (Greatrex 1998), which was followed by a more general source book a few years later (Greatrex and Lieu 2002). I have continued to be active in this field since then: Greatrex 2008b returns to issues of Romano-Persian relations and the frontier region raised originally in Bardill and Greatrex 1996, while Greatrex 2005 offers a general survey. I have also brought out a number of reviews of relevant publications (Greatrex 2008c, 2008d, 2008e, 2009, forthcoming) and, at the invitation of the Turkish Historical Society, addressed an international conference on ‘L’influence byzantine sur les Perses’ in Istanbul in May 2010. I shall also be able to benefit from assistance from Dr Henning Börm of Konstanz University, with whom I am in contact, and whose excellent monograph of 2007 is of fundamental relevance to the project.

The importance of Procopius’ work and the reliance of modern historians on his accounts not only of Justinian’s wars of reconquest, but also of the plague (or Early Medieval Pandemic, described in the Persian Wars and therefore a subject that will be covered by my commentary) and of the Nika riot in Constantinople (likewise described in the Persian Wars) is not in doubt. Yet despite this his work has been slow to attract the attention that has long been lavished on other ancient historians such as Thucydides, Herodotus, Polybius or indeed Ammianus Marcellinus. Averil Cameron’s excellent work of 1985 began to popularise Procopius, while Antony Kaldellis’ 2004 monograph has done much to stir up debate: some of the problems that had seemed solved by Cameron’s work have been thrown into doubt, e.g. the idea that he was a conventional Christian, rather than a pagan, were challenged by Kaldellis’ arguments (but see now Whitby 2007). In the same way, even the date of publication of Procopius’ works, especially the Anecdota, remains subject to dispute: Croke 2005 disputes some of the conclusions I reached in Greatrex 1994 and 2003. In general, scholarship is growing, as the issue of the French journal Antiquité Tardive in 2000 devoted to Procopius’ Buildings illustrates, as too the useful articles on Procopius’ debt to his literary predecessors by Pazdernik (2000, 2006) and recent doctoral theses by Maria Kouroumalis (2006) and the Canadian scholar Conor Whately (2009), and a new translation of the Anecdota by Kaldellis (2010). More recent general treatments of sixth-century history writing by Brodka (2004) and Treadgold (2007, more general) likewise deserve mention alongside the classic treatment of Michael Whitby (1995). There is furthermore the valuable thesaurus of Procopius’ works that appeared in 2000 (Coulie et al. 2000), which allows one to check immediately how often and in what context the author uses any particular Greek word.

As this secondary literature on Procopius expands, and as the sixth century grows ever more
popular among scholars and students, the need for a commentary becomes ever more patent. There are, it is true, two German commentaries on Procopius’ works, both of which, however, are limited in scope. On the one hand, there is that by Berthold Rubin (1957) in Pauly’s Realencyclopaedie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft, which, as an encyclopaedia entry, albeit one largely reproduced from a book, is necessarily brief. On the other, there is the commentary that accompanies the German translations of Otto Veh (1961-77), but again, he offers only the most basic information (although a better commentary was added to his translation of the Anecdota in 2005). Mention should also be made of the Russian commentary that accompanies the translation by G. Destunis (1876-80). There is thus no authoritative and reliable commentary to which the reader of Procopius may turn of the type that exists for other ancient historians. My aim is to provide a commentary that will be of enduring value, to which any reader - scholar or student - may turn for information and orientation.

Methodology

In order to put together the commentary it will be necessary on the one hand to examine thoroughly the two books that comprise Procopius’ Persian Wars, not to mention his other works that bear on the same material. Likewise, parallel sources will need to be brought to bear, many of which I have dealt with earlier when preparing the source book on The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, A.D. 363-630 (London, 2002). On the other hand, it will be crucial to sift through the secondary literature on the Persian Wars, both recent and (e.g.) from the nineteenth century: much German scholarship in particular remains very useful, and so it will be important to conduct a thorough search for relevant material in a variety of libraries.

I am in talks with Cambridge University Press to publish the commentary; one other English press is also interested. The work will form part of a wider project to bring out a commentary on all Procopius’ works; I am involved in discussions with various colleagues to organise this. My volume is likely to be the first in the series to appear. As I mentioned right at the start, however, the project will also give rise to various articles on sixth-century history and historiography: I shall be giving papers in this field at the International Congress of Patristic Studies in Oxford and at the Internation Congress of Byzantine Studies in Sofia (both in August 2011), which will lead to publications. Furthermore, because I believe that it is important to communicate one’s research to the wider public, I have over the years given public lectures on Procopius, e.g. while visiting New Zealand in 2003, or more recently to students at the Université de Montréal and Bishop’s University; I also delivered a general lecture at the World Esperanto Congress in Rotterdam in July 2008, which is now freely available to the public on the web. In addition, I contributed an article to a popular Spanish magazine in 2005 (‘El paganismo en el siglo VI’ [‘Paganism in the sixth century’] Debats 90 [autumn 2005], 79-85) as well as appearing in four episodes of a 13-part television series Rome: Rise and Fall of an Empire that has been broadcast throughout Europe and beyond.
Research Team etc.

A. Not applicable.

B. Proposed student training strategies

I foresee two ways in which students can productively take part in this project. On the one hand, there is the bibliographic aspect: as mentioned in the description of the project, it is important for a commentary to take into account all the relevant scholarship in the field. Now that early issues of many periodicals like Byzantinische Zeitschrift are available on the web, as well as library catalogues, of course, it will be possible for graduate students to seek out relevant material. For this they will of course require training in how to search effectively, where to look, how to transcribe ancient authors’ names into other languages (e.g. Procope, Prokop) and so forth. This might seem like a rather sterile procedure, but it is one that is necessary for any serious graduate student in ancient history in his/her own future research. On the other hand, any good commentary will require clear maps to put events and battles in context. Here I have experience in working with a graduate student in another department (Geography) which has shown me just how useful such an exercise can be: in this case it is a matter of training the student in bringing out the important features of the landscape and of explaining how the terrain may have changed since antiquity, taking into account (e.g.) the Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World (Princeton, 2000).

C. Description of previous & ongoing research results

Over two years ago I reported briefly on progress on my last SSHRC-funded project (2004-7) on the Syriac historian Pseudo-Zachariah of Mytilene. I am happy to update this now and to state that I am in the process of correcting the proofs for the final work, due to appear in December 2010 with Liverpool University Press. The project proved to be even larger in scope than I had foreseen and it was fortunate that I had two periods of sabbatical and the help of the Humboldt foundation, in addition to that of SSHRC, for otherwise it might have taken even longer to complete; the efficiency of my collaborators who undertook the translation, Robert Phenix and Cornelia Horn, also played an important role. The project has thus resulted in the first translation of the work of Pseudo-Zachariah into a modern language since 1899 and has equipped it with an up-to-date commentary that should hold the field for a long time; I also provided the work with an extensive introduction, explaining what parts of the work may be attributed to the historical Zachariah and which were added by his continuator (Pseudo-Zachariah).

The project has naturally yielded other publications, e.g. an article on the historian, ‘Le pseudo-Zacharie de Mytilène et l’historiographie syriaque au Vle s.’ that appeared in M. Debié, ed., L’historiographie syriaque (Paris, 2009), 33-55, and another forthcoming one to which I have alluded earlier (Greatrex 2010), as well as a communication on a hitherto unnoticed passage in Greek from a work of the patriarch Severus that I intend to offer at the International Patristic Studies conference in Oxford in August 2011 (a separate contribution from the one mentioned in my project description above).

It is perhaps worth mentioning one other research project that is approaching completion now,
the preparation of the late antique section of the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of the Roman Army* under the overall editorship of Yann Le Bohec. There are four or five sub-editors for this three-volume work, and it has required a considerable investment of time and energy to commission, correct and edit the entries that continue to arrive. The work itself should appear in 2011, published by Wiley-Blackwell’s.
My research contributions

1. Research contributions, 2004-2010

(1) Refereed contributions: books/chapters/articles in refereed journals


(2) Other refereed contributions


(3) Non-refereed contributions


(4) Forthcoming contributions


*Encyclopedia of the Roman Army*, ed. Y. Le Bohec with sub-editors among whom I am responsible for Late Antiquity. Status: accepted.

R ‘Les Jafnides et la défense de l’empire au VIe s.’, accepted for publication in the proceedings of a conference held in Paris (November 2008), edited by D. Genequand and C. Robin.

R ‘The Romano-Persian frontier and the context of the Book of Steps’, accepted for publication in a volume edited by R. Kitchen et al., to be published by Catholic University of America Press.

2. Other Research Contributions


Interviews for four episodes of the documentary series *Rome: Rise and Fall of an Empire* (Gardnerfilms, 2008).

3. Most Significant Career Research Contributions

(1) ‘The Nika riot: a reappraisal’, *JHS* 117 (1997), 60-86, a thorough re-examination of one of the key episodes in Justinian’s reign, which will soon be republished in a German collection of articles.
(2) *Rome and Persia at War, 502-532* (Leeds: Francis Cairns Publications, 1998), a detailed analysis of this war between the two great powers of Late Antiquity which originated in my doctoral thesis. It has in the meantime become the standard work on the subject and been reprinted.

(3) *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, A.D. 363-630*, with Sam Lieu (London, 2002), a work that was selected by *Choice* magazine as an outstanding academic title in 2003. This is used as a textbook in some universities and provides detailed coverage of two and half centuries of diplomatic and military relations on the Romano-Persian frontier. It has an accompanying website which lists reviews and adds some bibliographical information.

(4) ‘Roman frontiers and foreign policy in the East’ in R. Alston and S. Lieu, eds, *Aspects of the Roman East. Papers in Honour of Professor Fergus Millar FBA* (Turnhout, 2007), 103-73, a wide-ranging essay covering the period from the first to the seventh centuries and arguing that, contrary to what is becoming something of an orthodoxy, the Romans operated a largely reactive and defensive policy on their frontiers from as early as the start of the principate.

(5) ‘Roman Identity in the sixth century’ in G. Greatrex and S. Mitchell, eds, *Ethnicity and Identity in Late Antiquity* (London, 2000), 267-92, an attempt to focus on the nature of what constituted Roman identity when the scholarly debate has tended to concentrate rather on barbarian identity.

4. Not applicable.

5. Contributions to Training

(1) I have supervised the M.A. memoirs of four students since 2004 as part of our one-year M.A. programme in Late Antiquity. All successfully completed the M.A.; two have gone on to doctoral programmes.

(2) Over the years I have involved students in various aspects of my research, such as comparing Syriac texts (for the Pseudo-Zachariah project), in which case I employed a doctoral student at the University of Toronto, since there are none with the required linguistic training in Ottawa. Others have undertaken tasks such as writing brief biographies of ancient authors (for the introduction of my source book), proof-reading texts (helping to bring to my attention a good number of inconsistencies or lacunae), preparing indices, providing an initial translation of a text in Greek, or designing maps suitable for articles or books (in which case I turned to a doctoral student in our Geography department). Most recently I commissioned an article from one of my former students, now a doctoral student, on the topic of ‘barbarisation’ for the *Encyclopedia of the Roman Army*, since it was on this very topic that he wrote his memoir. As is clear from my remarks, it is sometimes necessary to turn to other institutions or departments to find suitable students, but this has not prevented me from involving students in my projects.