

GEOFFREY GREATREX, *Procopius of Caesarea: the Persian Wars*. Translation, with introduction and notes. Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press 2022. 300 pp. – ISBN 978-1-10-716570-0

GEOFFREY GREATREX, *Procopius of Caesarea: the Persian Wars*. A historical commentary. Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press 2022. 800 pp. – ISBN 978-1-107-05322-9

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While Procopius of Caesarea has been quite popular in modern scholarship on late antiquity, until recently no modern commentary of his text had been produced. This is finally remedied with the present book, a magnum opus of GEOFFREY GREATREX on the *Persian Wars*, heralding a new era of Procopian studies.¹ It would be hard to find someone better suited to write such a commentary than GREATREX, who has been researching and publishing on Procopius and sixth-century history for many years. His expertise is undeniable and, as one expects from the usual standard of his scholarship, his reading across modern languages and varied disciplines is impressively broad.

The commentary is enriched with an in-depth introduction, which should be recommended reading for anyone interested in Procopius and his works, as well as many additions completing it and making its use easier, such as the 30 maps appearing in the appropriate location in the text, the list of abbreviations and table of names rendered in various languages, three appendices (on Perso-Arabic sources, on the length of a stade, and on Nonnosus), as well as five indices. To single just one out, the prosopographical index is very well-designed as it helpfully provides basic information on each named character. While these are welcome additions, the sheer size of the book is such that it is easier to navigate in e-book format than on paper. Both Greek lemmata and English translations are provided in the commentary, which is a great gesture towards accessibility, but does add to the word count, especially as the author frequently offers several possibilities for the translation: the one he uses in the accompanying volume containing the translation, and a more literal one closely following the Greek.

1. With more coming soon: one commentary of the *Secret History* by RENÉ PFEIL-SCHIFFTER and JOHANN THESZ and another on the first book of the *Buildings* by MAX RITTER, MARLENA WHITING and myself. That GEOFFREY GREATREX produced such a commentary on his own is an even more impressive feat.

The separate volume which contains the English translation of the *Persian Wars* is designed to function somewhat independently, as it features some annotations to help with understanding the text without going into the full details of the commentary. The translation aims to render Procopius's text in more modern English than the existing translation by DEWING, allowing more readers to enjoy it, which is commendable.² It is fluid and pleasant to read, accomplishing what it sets out to do. For its purpose, GREATREX partially based himself on AVERIL CAMERON's 1967 translation of extracts which is now out of print and also consulted translations in other modern languages. In the end, there are a few inaccuracies, which have been noted elsewhere.³ KALDELLIS' revision of DEWING's translation will likely remain popular for the convenience of having the entirety of the Wars in one volume.⁴ However, the presence of the same maps and a good portion of the useful appendices from the commentary mentioned above do make it a useful self-contained volume, especially if one does not already own the commentary.

To get to the main course in the feast GREATREX offers us, that is, the commentary itself, it is hard to wrap one's head around the amount of work it represents. Each section of the commentary is first introduced by two summaries written from both a historical perspective and one from a more literary one, before going into detail with the lemmata. The text is covered very exhaustively, and the bibliographical information given is dizzying (the bibliography itself covers 85 pages). One of the strengths of the commentary, from both a historical and literary standpoint, is the breadth of the textual references the author provides, from classical allusions to contemporary texts and even later Byzantine ones where relevant. This chronological scope is further complemented by the variety of ancient languages included which, while a desideratum for any commentary on such an author as Procopius, is not an easy feat.

The presentation of modern scholarship is, on the whole, balanced and judicious, with multiple points of view and possible interpretations set out clearly for the reader to assess. As is inevitable in a work of this scope, per-

2. HENRY BRONSON DEWING (tr.), *Procopius: History of the Wars*, 5 vols. (Loeb Classical Library 48, 81, 107, 173, 217). Cambridge MA 1914–1928.

3. MICHAEL WHITBY, *Procopius Meets His Gomme? Greatrex on the Persian Wars*. *Plekos* 25 (2023) 89–125.

4. HENRY BRONSON DEWING (tr.) – ANTHONY KALDELLIS (rev.), *Prokopios: The Wars of Justinian*. Revised and Modernized, with an Introduction and Notes. Indianapolis 2014.

fect neutrality is unattainable, and there are moments where certain modern approaches are treated with greater scepticism than others. In a small number of cases, proposed literary or linguistic parallels are dismissed as tenuous (e.g. p. 70), even where the verbal correspondence might invite further discussion. This does not substantially detract from the usefulness of the commentary, but it does highlight the subjective element inherent in evaluating such material.

One of the most laudable aims of the commentary is the sustained attention paid to the language and style of Procopius, an aspect of his work that has often been subordinated to historical concerns. It is genuinely refreshing to see Procopius treated so consistently as a writer, and the commentary abounds in observations on diction, phrasing, and verbal parallels, drawn from an impressively wide range of Greek literature across periods. The systematic identification of such parallels, even when briefly noted, constitutes a valuable resource and provides future scholars with a rich body of material for further literary and philological investigation.

At the same time, this philological engagement can prove something of a double-edged sword. Observations on language and style are frequently limited to the identification of recurrence or similarity, without being pursued further in terms of distribution, rhetorical function, or narrative effect. In some cases, features that might invite interpretation are instead explained in reductive terms. For example, on p. 62 the repetition of a phrase is characterised as ‘careless’, where it might equally be read as deliberate or meaningful. More generally, literary phenomena are often approached at face value, without sustained reflection on authorial strategy or readerly effect.

These limitations should not obscure the significance of the attempt itself. That a historically oriented commentary of this scale makes such a concerted effort to incorporate philological and stylistic observations is, in itself, an important and welcome development. Even where the analysis remains underdeveloped, the groundwork has been laid for more nuanced approaches to Procopius’ language and literary technique in future scholarship.

More broadly, the commentary occasionally evaluates Procopius’ narrative choices against modern expectations of historiographical practice. Thus, on p. 44, his account of events preceding the contemporary narrative is characterised as ‘superficial and anecdotal’ and criticised for devoting ‘more attention to anecdotes about pearl-fishing and imprisoned Armenians than

to actual history'. Such assessments implicitly privilege modern criteria of historical relevance, and risk obscuring the interpretative potential of anecdotal material, which in Procopius may function in a more Herodotean mode, inviting symbolic or exemplary readings. Rather than measuring the text against present-day historiographical norms, fuller discussion of the author's narrative strategies and their possible meanings might further enrich our understanding of his work.

In sum, GEOFFREY GREATREX's commentary on the *Persian Wars* represents a monumental achievement and will undoubtedly become an indispensable point of reference for all future work on Procopius. Its exhaustive coverage, extraordinary command of both primary sources and modern scholarship, and wealth of supporting material make it an invaluable tool for historians of the sixth century and beyond. While some aspects of the literary and philological analysis invite further development, and certain interpretative choices reflect modern historiographical assumptions, these do little to diminish the overall significance of the project. Taken together with the accompanying translation, the commentary provides an exceptionally rich framework within which Procopius' text can be read, contextualised, and debated, and it sets a new benchmark for the study of the *Persian Wars*.

Keywords

Byzantine historiography; Justinianic age; Procopius