

## Zitierhinweis

Whately, Conor: review of: Mischa Meier / Federico Montinaro (eds.), *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022, in: *Plekos. Elektronische Zeitschrift für Rezensionen und Berichte zur Erforschung der Spätantike*, 24 (2022), p. 325-336, downloaded from Website



## copyright

Dieser Beitrag kann vom Nutzer zu eigenen nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken heruntergeladen und/oder ausgedruckt werden. Darüber hinausgehende Nutzungen sind ohne weitere Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber nur im Rahmen der gesetzlichen Schrankenbestimmungen (§§ 44a-63a UrhG) zulässig.

Mischa Meier/Federico Montinaro (eds.): *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea*. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2022 (Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World 11). VIII, 474 p. € 224.00/\$ 269.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-49876-1.

During my undergraduate degree, my exercise routine would often include sitting on a stationary bike at McMaster University's athletic centre reading a book or article relevant to my courses. One such book was Averil Cameron's *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*,<sup>1</sup> which regularly referred to the work of Procopius. This piqued my interest enough that when it came to picking a topic for a course on Greek historians, I opted for Procopius and the vexed issue of Tyche. Years later, Procopius became the topic of my PhD thesis, and when I researched that dissertation between the years 2005 and 2009, it was well within the realm of possibility to be familiar with all of the publications directly connected to the historian. Thirteen years later, this is a far more difficult proposition. As others have noted, research on Procopius has exploded, and we are in the golden age of Procopian studies. It is fitting, then, for the golden age of Procopius to coalesce with the golden age of handbooks and companions in the volume under review here, the first companion to Procopius. Over the course of several chapters, a range of contributors cover most of the central issues connected to the historian and his world. Although the publication delay led to some unevenness in terms of the book's bibliographic record, this book should be on the reading list for anyone new to Procopius in particular, and late antique and Byzantine historiography in general, as well as those much more familiar with the historian from Caesarea and the age of Justinian.

The book is composed of seventeen chapters (none of which are numbered), which are divided into five parts: "Approaching Procopius", "Reading Procopius", "Procopius as a Historian", "Imperial Themes", and "Procopius as a Writer".<sup>2</sup> The chapters within every section are loosely connected to each chapter contained therein. While some of the chapters focus on providing overviews of their chosen topics, others provide novel analyses of aspects

1 Av. Cameron: *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395–600*. London/New York 1993 (Routledge History of the Ancient World).

2 For the table of contents, readers are referred to the end of this review.

of Procopius' oeuvre. Hartmut Leppin opens Part One with a wide-ranging chapter that provides an overview of the sixth-century Roman state and its neighbours (pp. 9–27). In looking at Rome's complex relationship with Persia, Leppin argues that the war waged between the two left them exposed to problems elsewhere. This is a very good, easily digestible, survey of the empire and its neighbours, which does well to bring in the broader Eurasian context. In the next chapter, Brian Croke searches for harmony in Procopius' works (pp. 28–58) in a chapter that evokes some of his encyclopaedic discussion in *Histos* of Procopius' early modern manuscript history.<sup>3</sup> The basic premise is how do we reconcile Procopius' works and get a picture Justinian through those texts. He provides background to some of the key research, like the books by Averil Cameron and Anthony Kaldellis.<sup>4</sup> Croke argues that we should pay more attention to questions of genre. Although there has been a lot of work on genre, not much of it has been applied to Byzantine literature, which he sees as a desideratum. It was the different literary forms that determined the different presentations in Procopius.

Part two opens with Geoffrey Greatrex's short chapter on Procopius' life and works (pp. 61–69), in which he concludes that the historian remains an enigma. He argues that readers should bear the various conflicting currents in mind when approaching the works. Where Croke argued for the importance of genre, Greatrex is concerned much more with Procopius the man. Philip Rance follows with an extensive study of *Wars* (pp. 70–120). Rance highlights the increasing literary attention turned to the historian as well as the increasing gulf between history and historiography among his readers. He strikes a nice balance between the summary of events and *Wars* scholarship with his own views sprinkled in. Language features prominently, from Procopius' Thucydidean borrowings to his self-imposed stylistic constraints. With respect to content, Rance says that some parts of Procopian combat have few parallels. At the end, he concludes that the *Wars* did find a ready audience and met its expectations, despite the exceptionality and eccentricity of his literary and stylistic ambitions. The next chapter, by Rene

3 B. Croke: Procopius, from Manuscripts to Books: 1400–1850. In: *Histos* Supplement 9, 2019, 1, pp. 1–173, available online at URL: <https://histos.org/documents/SV09.01.CrokeProcopiusFromManuscriptstoBooks.pdf>.

4 Av. Cameron: *Procopius and the Sixth Century*. London 1985 (Classical Life and Letters); A. Kaldellis: *Procopius of Caesarea. Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*. Philadelphia, PA 2004.

Pfeilschifter, turns to the *Secret History* (pp. 121–136). Pfeilschifter covers some standard issues, like the date of the work and its composition history, and how valuable the work is as a historical source. He argues that the work is novel, but poorly written and not terribly exciting, a view which goes against the views of most general readers today (there are far more translations of the *Secret History* in English available than anything else). On the other hand, he notes that it is a vital source for life at Justinian's court and sixth century mentalities. In the final chapter of this part, Michael Whitby looks at *Buildings* and the panegyrical character of the work (pp. 137–151). Whitby touches on the contentious issue of the work's date, the two versions/recensions, as well as its general reliability. He notes that the text is unusual for having no clear patron, and he praises Procopius' literary talent and erudition while suggesting that some readers of the *Buildings* might be looking for too much from the text.

Part three opens with Bruno Bleckmann's useful introductory chapter on historiography in the Roman Empire before Procopius (pp. 155–177). Bleckmann notes that the reputation of late antique historiography has improved considerably, and that the most distinctive phase of late antique historiography begins with the reign of Constantine. He touches on the problem with fragments and what they reveal about the works of many historians. Among the many authors that he includes are Dexippus, Eunapius, Eutropius, Socrates, Zosimus, and Victor of Vita, among others. Ammianus Marcellinus understandably gets a lot of attention. Bleckmann also spends a considerable amount of time speculating on the motives of the various historians. Laura Mecella follows this up with an insightful chapter on Procopius' sources (pp. 178–193). She touches on the various classical influences on Procopius and notes that Jakob Haury's comments<sup>5</sup> are still valuable. She ranges through oral sources, autopsy, access to imperial archives, and his use of authors like Priscus. She also gets into the correspondences between Procopius and Jordanes, both contemporaries in Constantinople, at least for a time. Next comes Dariusz Brodka's strong chapter on Procopius as historiographer (pp. 194–211), which draws on some of the important conclu-

5 J. Haury (ed.): *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*. 4 vols. Leipzig 1905–1913; J. Haury (ed.): *Procopii Caesariensis opera omnia*. 4 vols. *Addenda et corrigenda* adiecit G. Wirth. Leipzig 1962–1964.

sions of his book<sup>6</sup> and voluminous journal articles. Among the topics that he focuses on are God, Tyche, and free will. Brodka argues that Procopius believed that history was meant to be useful, and that his approach to the divine had a lot in common with the ecclesiastical historians. Besides the impact of God, Brodka also examines the impact of forces of evil on events in Procopius, and the historian's attempt to link God to the notion of fate. Ultimately, for Brodka, Procopius combined classical ideals with Christian thought. That conclusion sets up Timo Stickler's quite nicely, for he tackles the vexed issue of Procopius' Christian thinking (pp. 212–230). He provides a pretty thorough catalogue of all the Christian material in Procopius, which he argues reveals Procopius' familiarity with Christian protocol. Like other readers of *Wars*, Stickler argues that Procopius became increasingly negative over the course of the work. Stickler makes a strong case that Procopius was a Christian, who incorporated historiographic and hagiographic elements in his work. In addition, Procopius did not complete his ecclesiastical history because he had already incorporated the principal things God said about contemporary affairs into his existing texts. Marek Jankowiak, in the part's final chapter, looks at Procopius and his Byzantine successors (pp. 231–251), especially Agathias, Evagrius, and Theophanes. Jankowiak notes that while Agathias follows Procopius in several ways, he regularly corrects him, and is even downright negative on his output, a practice which Menander might have followed himself with Agathias. Evagrius, on the other hand, used Procopius as a source. The same is true of Theophanes, who sometimes updated Procopius' language, changed the order of events, or simplified his sentence structure. Ultimately, after the seventh century, Jankowiak argues that no Byzantine historian was able to ignore Procopius, and in quite varied ways.

Charles Pazdernik opens part four with a chapter on war in empire in Procopius' *Wars* (pp. 255–274). Both Rome and Persia struggled to maintain a strategic balance between themselves. Following from his previous work,<sup>7</sup> Pazdernik argues that pessimism permeates the first seven books of *Wars*, but is absent from book eight. He also tackles the complicated issue of the

6 D. Brodka: Die Geschichtsphilosophie in der spätantiken Historiographie. Studien zu Prokopios von Kaisareia, Agathias von Myrina und Theophylaktos Simokattes. Frankfurt am Main 2004 (Studien und Texte zur Byzantinistik 5).

7 Numerous relevant papers by Pazdernik are listed in the bibliography of this volume (p. 453).

politics of Roman identity, especially in light of the conquests of the west. Because the work dealt with contemporary affairs, Pazdernik argues that readers expected to read against the grain, looking for hidden criticisms and the like. Hans-Ulrich Wiemer examines Procopius' views of the western barbarians including the Goths, Vandals, Heruls, Huns, Franks, Slavs and more (pp. 275–309). By adopting the approaches of Herodotus and Thucydides, Wiemer argues that he is inviting readers to judge Procopius' own comments against theirs. For Wiemer, Procopius' world was constantly changing, and though he was often unreliable because of his reliance on *topoi*, there was no difference between east and west when it came to barbarians. He notes that Procopius is conversant in classical ethnography, and, like other imperial and late antique writers, he sometimes conflates newer people with older ones. He concludes that Procopius had three sources for western barbarians, observation, the questioning of witnesses, and the reading of written accounts, and that he primarily viewed barbarians from a military and political viewpoint. Conversely, Henning Börm turns to Procopius and the east (pp. 310–336). Following from his important monograph,<sup>8</sup> he asks how well-informed Procopius was of eastern affairs. He notes that prior to the invasions of the 540s, the Sasanians were more of a blessing than a curse. Overall, Procopius' account was based on good information, and his account of dynastic squabbles in Iran can be reconciled with the later tradition. What is less clear is whether Procopius knew any Persian, though his use of the phrase 'king of kings' is suggestive. One area where Procopius does run into trouble is when it comes to Persian offices, which he sometimes confuses, in the process muddling names and ranks. Procopius' account of military matters involving Persia is, for Börm, remarkably reliable, even if problems persist, like the character and name of the unit of 'immortals'. Ultimately, Börm argues that four factors influenced Procopius' picture of the Persians: his desire to use them to criticize domestic politics; his belief in the 'idea of Rome'; the classical tradition which left him with *topoi* to work with; and the facts that he was able to get through his own endeavours.

The fifth and final part opens with Anthony Kaldellis' chapter on the classicism of Procopius (pp. 339–354), whose oeuvre is full of elements from earlier classical historians (and writers more generally). For Kaldellis, terms like classicizing are only useful insofar as they are used to distinguish the

8 H. Börm: *Prokop und die Perser. Untersuchungen zu den römisch-sasanidischen Kontakten in der ausgehenden Spätantike*. Stuttgart 2007 (*Oriens et Occidens* 16).

kind of history writing that Procopius engaged in with from the work of ecclesiastical historians. It should not be used as a straitjacket that limited the scope of Procopius' writing. Procopius was bold to take on the history of a reigning emperor, and an understanding of ancient rhetoric is key to understanding Procopius' writing, from his use of ekphrases to his subtle adoption of classical and rhetorical models. Many of the previous chapters have drawn on the impact of Thucydides; Kaldellis here highlights the impact of Homer, for instance in the Battle of Mons Lactarius in 552 serving as the setting for the Homeric ἀριστεία of Theia. In the end, he notes that Procopius had a strong affinity for ancient models, and he argues that it is his classicism that largely explains his enduring fascination. Umberto Roberto's chapter examines how Procopius characterizes some of his leading figures (pp. 355–373), like Justinian and Amalasantha in an attempt to get at how reliable an historian Procopius is. Procopius' views in the *Secret History*, albeit exaggerated, are in line with those of Zosimus and Priscus on imperial rulership and more. Interestingly too, Umberto argues that Justinian's officials serve as a mirror for his own actions and performance. He also sees Belisarius as the hero of the *Wars*. Conversely, Procopius' Amalasantha has all of the qualities that Theodora lacked. Roberto notes that Procopius is positive about Totila, without taking Kaldellis' Homeric line. For him, Totila also serves as a vehicle for Procopius' despair at the decadence and pessimism about the direction of the Roman Empire. In the final chapter to the volume, Olivier Gengler and Élodie Turquois provide a narratological reading of Procopius (pp. 374–416). The two rightly argue that an examination of Procopius' narrative techniques can enhance our understanding of his works and their interpretation. There is nothing like this out there, a few comments in the present reviewer's first book on Procopius, and the thesis on which it was based, aside. But where my discussions were much more limited, focusing on the narrator, time, and focalization in descriptions of combat, their chapter looks at these issues through all three works. The two note the difficulty in determining Procopius' sources, and like many previous chapters, comment on the abundance of Thucydidean elements. They comment on the various ways that Procopius, the narrator, intervenes in the text, and highlight the play between reliability and unreliability in the *Wars*. One of the particularly interesting ideas that they bring up is the so-called 'community of experience' between narrator and narratee, which has been alluded to in some chapters through the guise of Procopius' audience. They note the various signposts Procopius includes in the *Buildings* to highlight items of

significance, and the 'participative feel' to that same text. Collectively, the chapter is concerned with narrativization, but they note that it also speaks to reader-response theories. And with their chapter, the remarkable book comes to an end.

Plekos, rather dangerously, gave me no fixed word count for this review, and while I was tempted to highlight each and every note that I made in the course of reading the book, to keep this manageable I want to draw attention to a few small points. A disclaimer, though: an absence of discussion does not mean I found any of the other chapters disappointing. Indeed, it is hard to know where to start with such a wonderful book. Meier and Montinaro deserve full credit for compiling a great companion. There are faults: not enough women (a glaring issue), and despite the delay in publication, a lot of recent research has been left out. I think too that there are some points that could have been left aside so that new material sees the light of day. For instance, one common theme that came up in discussions of all three of Procopius' works was whether any one of his texts was unfinished. Edited books like this one regularly end without conclusions, even epilogues, though we do not doubt that they are finished. I wonder if obsessions with whether Procopius had finished a text reflects our desire for real conclusions, which earlier writers might not have shared. Additionally, Thucydides figures regularly, and perhaps rightfully so, but I think it is time for more consideration of some of the other work that Procopius engaged with, whether that is other classical authors like Homer or Polybius, or later ones, like all those writing during the second sophistic. To some degree though, I am grasping at straws, for this book is aimed, in part, at those readers less familiar with Procopius and so they likely are worth including.

I want to stress how much new material this book includes. If I had had this even a few years earlier, I likely would have revised, or at least modified, many of my published Procopian takes, whether it comes to Procopius' engagement with Homer, his use of sources, how to make sense of the three works, the impact of genre, the vitality of his descriptions of combat, or how he characterizes leading figures. Moving on to the new, there have been few analyses of Procopius that have engaged so deeply with contemporary, or somewhat contemporary, literary theories like Gengler and Turquois' chapter on narratology. I remember getting pushback when I tried to do in my

*Battles and Generals* book<sup>9</sup> what Gengler and Turquois did here – leave out Procopius the man and focus on Procopius the narrator. Instead, I reluctantly included a chapter that introduced some of the standard background material on Procopius, even though I wanted attention focused on Procopius the narrator rather than the man, for the reasons they outline in their chapter, and so had initially left out this material. If this chapter had been available when I finished that book, I would have been emboldened to stick to my guns. Along those lines, I think comparisons to other authors in light of narratological readings would be great, which Gengler and Turquois themselves advocate. There has been an astonishing variety of theoretical research on pre-modern and modern literature, very little of which has been applied to Procopius (though see some of Turquois' work as well as Michael Stewart's on gender<sup>10</sup> and Jessica Moore's on historical memory<sup>11</sup>). More work like this would go a long way to better integrating Procopian scholarship into the vast body of work on classical literature, for example.

As I have said, there are a good mix of overviews, but also a number of new, really insightful, chapters. Even those chapters on familiar topics, like Stickler on Procopius' religious' thinking, are able to introduce new material, on some level or other. Some of the chapters are deliberately provocative. Indeed, the relative leniency of the editors was a sensible decision – the contributors do not always agree, and I think presenting such different approaches to, and disagreements over, the material will benefit future work. Some minimize the impact of genre, others emphasize it. Some take a more traditional/positivist approach to Procopius' work, others look at the subtle ways he approaches his varied subject matter. A couple of the contributors brought up the question of the rhythm and accent of Procopius' prose, a

9 C. Whately: *Battles and Generals: Combat, Culture, and Didacticism in Procopius' Wars*. Leiden/Boston 2016 (*History of Warfare* 111)

10 M.E. Stewart: *The Soldier's Life: Martial Virtues and Manly Romanitas in the Early Byzantine Empire*. Leeds 2016 (*Romanitas* 1); M.E. Stewart: *Masculinity, Identity, and Power Politics in the Age of Justinian. A Study of Procopius*. Amsterdam 2020 (*Social Worlds of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*).

11 J. Moore: *Procopius of Caesarea and Historical Memory in the Sixth Century*. Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison 2014; J.L.M. Moore: *Constructing 'Roman' in the Sixth Century*. In: G. Greatrex/S. Janniard (eds.): *Le monde de Procope/The World of Procopius*. Paris 2018 (*Orient et Méditerranée* 28), pp. 115–140.

subject that has not really received attention since Henry Dewing.<sup>12</sup> An interesting contrast emerges too between the third century crisis and the flourishing of historiography versus the apparent decline of history that came with the Arab conquest in the seventh century. All this talk of narrator and autopsy in Procopius, as well as topics like classicism, ancient allusions, and whether this mode of writing restricted his approach to history, brings to mind the efforts of other historians who faced similar issues, like Agathias. Agathias could not engage in the same sort of autopsy for his accounts of war as Procopius. He included more of the mythical material and classical allusions more familiar to book eight of Procopius' *Wars* than to the rest of the work. This could serve as a mask for his inability to analyse the source material firsthand, a problem which plagued Procopius when he went to update the *Wars* (book 8). In other words, all the great points the contributors make on Procopius should elicit research on other classicizing historians like Agathias and Theophylact Simocatta.

Work on Procopius continues apace, and I dare say we have reached critical mass with Procopius scholarship. Greatrex's commentary on the *Persian War* is due later this year, along with a new translation of the same part of the *Wars*.<sup>13</sup> Two separate groups continue work on their commentaries on the *Buildings* and *Secret History*, which have also led to much supplementary research. What we need are commentaries on the rest of Procopius' *Wars*. Perhaps, even more importantly, an introduction to the author and his work would be an invaluable means of bringing in new readers. The contributors to this volume have made it clear that there is so much more to do, even just by looking at what is not in this book. With this fantastic entry in Brill's *Companions to the Byzantine World* series, I hope that more readers are inspired to engage with Procopius and introduce new approaches to his study.

- 12 H. B. Dewing: *The Accentual Cursus in Byzantine Greek Prose, with Especial Reference to Procopius of Caesarea*. In: *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 14, 1910, pp. 415–466.
- 13 G. Greatrex: *Procopius of Caesarea. The Persian Wars. A Historical Commentary*. Cambridge 2022; *Procopius of Caesarea: The Persian Wars. Translation, with Introduction and Notes by G. Greatrex*. Cambridge 2022. Both books are scheduled for publication in autumn 2022.

---

Conor Whately, University of Winnipeg  
Associate Professor of Classics  
c.whately@uwinnipeg.ca

**www.plekos.de**

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Conor Whately: Rezension zu: Mischa Meier/Federico Montinaro (eds.): A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2022 (Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World 11). In: Plekos 24, 2022, S. 325–336 (URL: [https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2022/r-meier\\_montinaro.pdf](https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2022/r-meier_montinaro.pdf)).

---

## Contents

Contributors	VII
Introduction	1
<i>Federico Montinaro and Mischa Meier</i>	
<b>PART 1: <i>Approaching Procopius</i></b>	
The Eastern Roman Empire and Its Neighbours in the “Age of Justinian” – An Overview	9
<i>Hartmut Leppin</i>	
The Search for Harmony in Procopius’ Literary Works	28
<i>Brian Croke</i>	
<b>PART 2: <i>Reading Procopius</i></b>	
Procopius: Life and Works	61
<i>Geoffrey Greatrex</i>	
<i>Wars</i>	70
<i>Philip Rance</i>	
The <i>Secret History</i>	121
<i>Rene Pfeilschifter</i>	
Procopius’ <i>Buildings</i> and Panegyric Effect	137
<i>Michael Whitby</i>	
<b>PART 3: <i>Procopius as a Historian</i></b>	
Historiography in Late Antiquity before Procopius	155
<i>Bruno Bleckmann</i>	
Procopius’ Sources	178
<i>Laura Mecella</i>	
Procopius as a Historiographer	194
<i>Dariusz Brodka</i>	
Procopius and Christian Historical Thought	212
<i>Timo Stickler</i>	

Procopius of Caesarea and His Byzantine Successors <i>Marek Jankowiak</i>	231
<b>PART 4: <i>Imperial Themes</i></b>	
War and Empire in Procopius' <i>Wars</i> <i>Charles Pazdernik</i>	255
Procopius and the Barbarians in the West <i>Hans-Ulrich Wiemer</i>	275
Procopius and the East <i>Henning Börm</i>	310
<b>PART 5: <i>Procopius as a Writer</i></b>	
The Classicism of Procopius <i>Anthony Kaldellis</i>	339
Procopius and His Protagonists <i>Umberto Roberto</i>	355
A Narratological Reading of Procopius <i>Olivier Gengler and Élodie Turquois</i>	374
General Bibliography	417
Index	467