

**John Given, trans., *The Fragmentary History of Priscus. Attila, the Huns and the Roman Empire, AD 430–476*. Merchantville, NJ: Evolution Publishing, 2014. Pp. xlviii, 194. ISBN: 9781935228141.**

In the past decade or two we have witnessed a significant increase in the amount of scholarship devoted to the fifth century (AD/CE), long one of the muddiest periods in Roman and late antique history, with a number of books on the fifth century as a whole, Roman law and imperial communications, late Roman warlords, Theodosius II, and Attila and the Huns appearing in the past five to ten years alone.<sup>1</sup> One of the problems that has bedevilled scholars interested in this century is the fragmentary state of its secular or classicizing historians, with the most notable in this regard, arguably, Priscus of Panium. Priscus' claim to fame is that he is one of our most important sources for Attila and the Huns. The book under review here is the first standalone<sup>2</sup> English translation of Priscus. Given is to be commended for producing such a fine and affordable translation (with some commentary) of Priscus' *History*, which, in turn, should help bring this fragmentary fifth century historian to a larger audience.

The body of the book is, unsurprisingly, devoted to the translation, with some commentary and discussion. The introduction covers a host of topics, from what we know about Priscus' biography to some suggestions for further reading. Although no more than about twenty pages in length, it provides a sensible introduction to Priscus the historian, the text as we have it, the source of the fragments, and Given's approach to the translation. Given, for instance, discusses Priscus' legal training, and some of the ambiguity around the term *rhetor* (pp. xiii–xiv). He delves into the possible title of the work (pp. xiv–xv), the work's structure – eight books says the *Suda* (p. xv), and its chronological coverage and scope (pp. xv–xvii). Given also explains what it meant to write a secular history in late antiquity, and so explores the nuances of classicizing historiography – with an emphasis on Priscus of course – from the use of out-dated Greek and a classicizing history's ready allusions to the works of historians like Thucydides and Herodotus, to the old-fashioned names used for the late antique world's barbarian peoples, such as using “Scythian” to refer to “Goth”

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<sup>1</sup> G. Traina, *428 AD: An Ordinary Year at the End of the Roman Empire* (Princeton, 2009); M. Maas (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila* (Cambridge, 2015); F. Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire* (California, 2006); J. Wijnendaele, *The Last of the Romans: Bonifatius, Warlord and comes Africae* (Bloomsbury, 2014); C. Kelly (ed.), *Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2013); C. Kelly, *Attila the Hun. Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire* (Bodley Head, 2008); and H. J. Kim, *The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Cambridge, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Priscus' *History* has appeared in English in whole and in part in two other works worth noting: R. Blockley's edition and translation, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire. Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus II* (Francis Cairns, 1983); and C. D. Gordon's, *The Age of Attila: Fifth-Century Byzantium and the Barbarians. Revised edition, with a new introduction and notes by David S. Potter* (Michigan, 2013).

(pp. xvii–xx). The majority of the rest of the introduction is devoted to the sources for the fragments, and this includes authors such as Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (undoubtedly the most important source), especially his *On Embassies of Romans to Barbarians* and his *On Embassies of Barbarians to Romans* (pp. xxi–xv), Procopius, Jordanes, and the author/s of the *Suda*, among others, eleven in total.

When it comes to the text itself, Given has not simply translated the fragments as we find them in Carolla’s (2008) now standard edition,<sup>3</sup> but has engaged in some manipulation. He has, for instance, moved fragments as he sees fit, and usually when the content of a fragment would better fit the context of another group of fragments. So, fragment 60 is placed after fragment 3A (p. 27) because of their shared focus on the praetorian prefect Kyros. In the case of the more conjectural fragments, those numbered 50–83 (as well as 11), they are marked out with an asterisk (like Carolla). Even with the relocation of some fragments, however, Given sticks to Carolla’s numbering. The fragments are arranged by theme, with the result that we have sections entitled “Ancient Testimonia”, “The Arrival of the Huns”, “Two Young Emperors”, “Negotiating with Attila”, “Attila in the West”, “The Death of Attila”, “Diplomacy in the East”, “Turmoil in the West”, “Huns, Persians, Goths and Vandals”, “The End of the West”, and “Miscellaneous Fragments”. Besides the inclusion of some commentary in the form of endnotes, Given has included transition paragraphs between fragments which set the stage for the following fragment. There is also a bibliography and index.

In terms of the translation, Given has avowedly sought a middle ground between Blockley and Gordon. In the process, he has managed to stick fairly closely to the Greek (and Latin), while rendering the fragments into very readable English. Given tends to transliterate the names of persons and places, unless a particular name is more widely known in its Latinised form. So we find the Balkan city of “Naissos” (rather than “Naissus”), but the emperor Theodosius the Younger (i.e. Theodosius I, and rather than “Theodosios”). The bulk of the fragments are in Greek, and so where non-Greek words creep into the passages, Given transliterates and italicizes, a sensible decision. Thus, when discussing a drink consumed by barbarians at 8.65 we find: “a drink made from barley, which the barbarians call *kamon*”, and at 13.1 we learn that the Nomos sent as ambassador to Attila “held the office of *magister*”. These foreign intrusions (as Priscus and his classicizing peers would see it) are comparably rare in the surviving fragments. For, as classicizing writers are wont to do, Priscus tends to “translate” Latin technical terms into non-technical Greek ones (p. xxxvi), and in a number of spots Given has rendered these terms into what could be called the technical English equivalents. For example, at 8.183 the Greek reads: τότε δὴ τῶν ἐν τῇ ἑφ στρατιωτικῶν ἀρχῶν ταγμάτων, which Given translates as “In fact, Zeno, the master of soldiers in the east”. The technical Latin name for that office is *Magister Militum per Orientem*, and Priscus’ Greek reads something along the lines of “one of

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<sup>3</sup> P. Carolla (ed.), *Priscus Panita Excerpta* (Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

the commanders of the military divisions in the east”. While Given’s rendering reads fairly well in English, it loses something of the classicizing evident in the Greek. A minor point, and not one likely to worry the members of the intended audience, but something worth paying attention to.

Although it might be a case of nitpicking, there is also the odd anachronism. At 8.64 we read “We crossed them in the canoes the local inhabitants used”. While “canoe” undoubtedly accurately conveys in English what the Greek word μονόξυλος means (and so says the *LSJ*, probably the real cause of my criticism), the word “canoe” has origins in the West Indies when the Spanish were rediscovering the Americas,<sup>4</sup> and to my mind tends to be associated with the water craft used by indigenous peoples in the Americas, and their modern descendants. Canoe then, to me, used here in a pre-contact context, misleads, even if the type of craft used probably amounts to the same thing. These two minor points – a glossing of classicizing Greek and the occasional anachronism – are just that, and ultimately what we have is a very smooth translation of Priscus’ fragments.

What should we take away from this book? Well, a work devoted specifically to the translation of Priscus has the distinct advantage of, well, directing attention exclusively to Priscus – that is, not our other sources for the Huns and the fifth century, or Priscus in the context of the other fragmentary late antique historians, as valuable as those sorts of works are. The fragments as we have them, neatly collected and presented as a whole in isolation (from other such works) raise a number of questions, many of which are, admittedly, unanswerable – or at least as satisfactorily as we might like them to be. But there are others that are answerable, at least in part. For instance, a number of Priscus’ fragments suggest that Priscus had a real awareness of the division between east and west in the Roman Empire, long a reality, for the fragments as we have them regularly show him using variations of the terms “east” and “west” – and Given has translated these instances. Is this a product of his experiences? Is it a common phenomenon? How often do other fifth century writers make this distinction between east and west Rome? Croke has drawn attention to the place of both east and west in Marcellinus’ sixth century chronicle;<sup>5</sup> perhaps someone ought to do the same for Priscus.<sup>6</sup>

One episode in the text that stands out is the embassy to Attila, which Priscus himself participated in. That embassy episode must go down as one of the finest historical narratives from late antiquity, ranking up there with Ammianus’ account of the 359 siege of Amida, and Procopius’ account of the 537/538 siege of Rome. Rather

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<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Accessed September 17, 2015:  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/27144?rskey=dyIwNB&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>5</sup> B. Croke, “A.D. 476: The Manufacture of a Turning Point,” *Chiron* 13: 81–119; B. Croke, *Count Marcellinus and His Chronicle* (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. Blockley (*The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire. Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus I* (Francis Cairns, 1981), 67–68).

significantly, all three of these episodes involve firsthand involvement, so far as we know, on the part of the author. The scene raises all sorts of questions, some answerable, others not. For instance, the embassy episode raises questions about the level of detail of Priscus' work: is the embassy scene an outlier in terms of its level of detail, or was the bulk of the text also similarly detailed? In other words, is his text more along the lines of Agathias' detailed and concentrated account of a few years unlike, say, Procopius', which covers more years, but which varies in terms of the level of detail Procopius employs? If it is the former, this would make for one very long work. And yet, the fragments, such as we have them, seem to imply the latter: some scenes are described in detail, others not, depending on Priscus' predilections. In this matter, then, Priscus would have a lot in common with the aforementioned Procopius, who is much more detailed in the first half of his *Wars* than he is in the latter half. Getting back specifically to the embassy episode, if it is an exception, does it serve some sort of literary purpose? Is it to show off Priscus' rhetorical prowess, to truly engage with his audience? Perhaps it provides a vehicle for Priscus to stress his authority including, notably, his use of autopsy?. Without a more complete account, however, we can never know how this passage fits into his larger narrative.

In the end, the volume is well produced, with just a handful of typos. Given is to be congratulated for what is, on the whole, a very valuable and useful work that one hopes will bring Priscus to a much wider audience. Ultimately, for isolating and drawing attention to Priscus' fragments, and, perhaps inadvertently, the many questions that Priscus' text raises, Given is to be praised; furthermore, it might now be time, thanks to Carolla's edition and Given's translation, for someone to undertake a lengthy study of this still poorly understood historian.

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