

Bruno Bleckmann, *Die letzte Generation der griechischen Geschichtsschreiber. Studien zur Historiographie im ausgehenden 6. Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021. € 48. Pp. 186. ISBN: 978-3-515-13085-1.

Late antique historiography has attracted much interest in recent years, with scholars' preoccupation so far focusing on Procopius of Caesarea,¹ while his successors, especially Menander Protector have received much less attention. The monograph by B. Bleckmann fills this gap to a certain extent by providing an in-depth analysis of the works of historians writing after Procopius in the second half of the sixth century and the first decades of the seventh century. This concerns both authors whose works have survived in their complete form (Agathias of Myrina, Theophylact Simocatta) and, more importantly, those whose works remain only in fragments or extracts (Menander Protector, John of Epiphany, Theophanes of Byzantium). It is also worth noting that the church histories of Evagrius Scholasticus and John of Ephesus offer numerous narratives on profane and military matters. An analysis of all these texts, their sources, interrelationships and interdependencies leads Bleckmann to provide an extremely colourful and suggestive, and it must be said in advance, highly successful picture of the historiography produced during the reign of Maurice (582–602). However, it should be stressed that this is not a fully systematic presentation of individual authors, but an analytical study that focuses on important aspects of their historical narrative as well as the facts and figures described by them. In doing so, the work concentrates on the historical work of Menander Protector, various aspects of which are analysed in chapters 2–6. This is related to the fact that B. Bleckmann, together with M. Stein, is preparing a new edition with commentary of the extant fragments of Menander together with a German translation.

Chapter one addresses the problem of continuity, change and the end of ancient historiography. Bleckmann rightly emphasises that secular (classicizing) historiography after Procopius was capable of creativity and innovation. Not surprisingly, he agrees with M. Whitby, who sees variety and vitality in it.² The classicizing historians increasingly take into account Christian realities, sometimes applying theological explanatory patterns, but this does not mean a break with traditional historiographical standards. It is pointed out here that secular history remained conceptually different from church history despite some overlaps and proximities. Despite this, many historians (Procopius, Agathias, Menander, Theophylact) were able to include religious material in their accounts of political and military events without entering into

¹ Cf. S. Janniard S. and G. Greatrex (eds.), *Le monde de Procope. The World of Procopius*, Paris 2018; Ch. Lillington-Martin and E. Turquois, *Procopius of Caesarea: Literary and Historical Interpretations*, Abingdon 2018; M.E. Stewart, *Masculinity, Identity, and Power Politics in the Age of Justinian. A Study of Procopius*, Amsterdam 2020; C. Whately, *Procopius on Soldiers and Military Institutions in the Sixth Century Roman Empire*, Brill: Leiden–Boston 2021; M. Meier and F. Montinaro (eds.), *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea*, Brill: Leiden–Boston 2022.

² Michael Whitby, "Greek Historical Writing after Procopius: Variety and Vitality," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, Vol. I. Princeton 1992, 25–80.

dogmatic issues. These remained the domain of ecclesiastical history. The idea that there was a fusion of these two literary genres in the seventh century is therefore rejected. It is rightly noted, however, that the presence of theological patterns of explanation of historical events in sixth- and seventh-century historians should not be overestimated, for unlike Thukydides, theological aspects were present in many ancient historians, notwithstanding the fact that they generally explained historical processes in inner-worldly terms (political, military, moral, etc.). One must therefore agree with the conventional conclusion that secular historiography flourished until the late sixth century and the end of historiography coincides with the otherwise observable decline of literary activity in the dark ages.

The next chapter deals with Procopius' continuators—first briefly Agathias of Myrina and then in detail Menander Protector. Menander's history begins in 558 at the point where Agathias leaves off. It covers the period from the last years of Justinian until the death of Emperor Tiberius II in 582. It is pointed out that the *Wars* by Procopius were treated as a model which inspired attempts at imitation and emulation. By continuing Procopius and Agathias, Menander seeks to imitate both. However, while Procopius is treated by Menander as an unsurpassed model, he strives not only to be equal and to match Agathias but to surpass him and to show himself to be a better continuator of Procopius. It should be added here that in this way Menander is part of an old literary tradition: *imitatio* and *aemulatio* were principles to which many ancient authors adhered in their literary activities, and this does not apply only to historiography. Menander thus appears to have authored an ambitious historical work, containing in-depth political analyses and critically examining the source material. It is also correctly indicated that the surviving fragments of Menander's work produce a distorted picture of the whole. Although most passages deal with diplomacy, the original also contained detailed accounts of warfare. There were extensive accounts of the battles of the Romans against the Persians, Slavs, Avars as well as the Franks.

In accordance with the customs of ancient historiography, Menander's work also contained lengthy speeches, discussed in chapter three. In the extant fragments, the pair of speeches delivered by Peter the Patrician and Iesdegusnaph (Men.Prot. fr.11) draws attention above all. Pairs of speeches probably appeared in the context of diplomatic negotiations. The speeches of military commanders and emperors must also have featured in the work. However, it must be borne in mind that the inclusion of speeches by emperors was not at all the rule: Procopius of Caesarea did not include any speech by Justinian, and the emperor speaks only in letters. The main part of this chapter, however, is devoted to an analysis of Justin II's speech at the elevation of Tiberius II to Caesar (574). This speech is not preserved in the fragments of Menander, but in the work of Theophylact Simocatta (Th. Sim. 3,11,5-3,12,1). Bleckmann assumes that Theophylact borrowed it directly from Menander, although he notes that Theophylact could also have relied on an official document, i.e. a speech protocol kept in the archives (p. 51). For it is known from John of Ephesus that the original speech which Justin II delivered on 7. December 574 was protocolized (cf. Ioh.Eph. HE 3,5).

So, although the attribution of the speech to Menander is very probable, it is not certain. Based on its analysis, it is accepted that Menander did not limit himself to reproducing the transcript of the speech actually delivered, but reshaped it stylistically and in content, as most historians did. However, as the attribution to Menander is uncertain and Theophylact himself may have made significant changes to the source material, the conclusions of the analysis must be treated with some caution as they do not necessarily apply to Menander.

In the next chapter (four), Bleckmann undertakes to answer the question of the extent to which Menander included Christian content and themes. It is aptly pointed out that Menander follows in this respect the path laid down by Procopius. On the one hand, he maintains the traditional historiographical model which focuses on political and military matters, on the other hand, he shows a high degree of flexibility and adaptability so that he is able to deal with issues unknown to classical historiography. This applies both to Christian institutions, which are mentioned on a number of occasions, and to ideological themes. Menander, unlike Procopius, did not shy away from using appropriate Christian terminology for Christian feasts and institutions, avoiding the circumlocutions resorted to by Procopius or Agathias. Through extremely careful analyses of especially those passages published by F. Halkin, Bleckmann has convincingly demonstrated that Christian themes were present in Menander's work to a much greater extent than has generally been thought. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that he included, for example, the concept of a holy war, which was thought to have emerged only in the time of Heraclius (pp.75–82). Menander did not describe dogmatic controversies, which was the main topic of ecclesiastical historiography. Bleckmann strongly emphasises at the same time that historical processes are by Menander essentially explained in human terms. Perhaps, however, this point should not be put so categorically: for Christian secular historians, God is a factor that must always be taken into account in explaining the historical process; he is a legitimate participant in the events. Although human activity is not replaced by God's will, it can be limited by it.³

In chapter five, Bleckmann does not merely define Menander's relation to his predecessors but, more interestingly, situates him in his literary and historical context. Through an in-depth comparative analysis of the surviving fragments of Menander, John of Epiphany, Theophanes of Byzantium, the relevant passages in Theophylact and in Church Histories of Evagrius and John of Ephesus, it is possible to show that in the second half of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh, the various accounts competed with each other in their portrayal of individual actors and the events in which they participated. The analysis of the causes of the outbreak of the Roman-Persian War in 572 is particularly instructive in this context, since the parallel accounts of Menander, John of Epiphany, Theophanes, Evagrius and John of Ephesus can be

³ Cf. D. Brodka, „Zum Geschichtsverständnis des Menander Protektor,“ in D. Brodka and M. Stachura (eds.), *Continuity and Change. Studies in Late Antique Historiography* [= *Electrum* 13], Cracow 2007, 96.

compared. Because there are many differences and different emphases, this may indicate that at the end of the sixth century the responsibility of Emperor Justin II for the catastrophic developments in the East was particularly debated. Of course, there is still the problem that it is not clear to what extent the individual authors knew the alternative versions of events, so it is probably not possible to speak of actual literary rivalry in every case.

Bleckmann also sees elements of rivalry between individual authors in the differing assessments of individual commanders—Marcianus, Priscus or Philippicus, in chapter six. The large number of accounts of the warfare in the East in 573 (Menander, Theophanes, John of Epiphany, John of Ephesus, Evagrius) or the varied portrayal of the role of Priscus and Philippicus during the revolt at Monocarton in the work of Theophylact, resulting from the use of different sources, show that individual authors presented the actions, successes and failures of individual generals in a very biased way, which makes the individual accounts differ significantly. Bleckmann also discerns elements of this kind of discussion in the early seventh century, pointing out that some of Mauricius' generals were still active in the time of Heraclius—hence the supposition that certain aspects of the picture of their actions must not have emerged until after 610. This biased presentation of generals is, of course, nothing new in historiography—the Roman defeat at Callinicum in 531 is a prime example: the depiction of the battle and of the conduct of individual commanders (especially Belisarius) in Procopius and John Malalas differs remarkably.⁴ Bleckmann's analyses thus shed light on an important cultural and political phenomenon. Historiography in the sixth century was not just aimed at merely literary connoisseurs, lovers of literature and audiences of declamation halls, but took part in a lively political debate, discussing the responsibility of a whole range of important personalities for military successes and failures. One can agree with the thesis that the involvement of historians in this debate has to do with the fact that many of them construct or reinterpret history because they act in the interests of powerful military patrons: the competition between historians is linked to the rivalry of top military officials, some of whom may be patrons of particular authors.⁵ This fact, in turn, casts some light on the intended audience of late antique historians: among their addressees we can probably find not only representatives of the intellectual elite, but also, to some extent, of the political and military one, since historiography can be a tool for creating the image of important political actors, including those still active.

The final chapter (seven) turns briefly to the work of Theophylact Simocatta. Although the assessment of his creativity is not the highest—since he does not describe contemporary events, but presents the reign of Mauricius from the perspective of the 620s—Bleckmann takes the view that one should not be too critical of Theophylact's

⁴ D. Brodka, „Prokopios und Malalas über die Schlacht bei Callinicum,“ *Classica Cracoviensia* 14 (2011) 65-88.

⁵ Of course, this phenomenon is not limited to historiography: poets like Claudian or George of Pisidia also actively engage in current political affairs, acting in the interests of their patrons.

way of working: because he wrote about relatively remote events, he had to rely on written sources. This procedure is not fundamentally different from what was common in ancient historiography. Bleckmann supports the opinion that the patron of Theophylact, who is called *archiereus* in the dialogue between Philosophy and History, was the emperor Heraclius, not the patriarch Sergius.⁶ Also treated briefly in this chapter is the theory espoused by J. Howard-Johnston that George of Pisidia may have been the author of an innovative historical work, the hybrid prose-verse history, which presented the official version of Heraclius' campaign against the Persians, and of which traces are supposed to be found in Theophanes.⁷ Not included here, however, is John of Antioch (or his continuator), although the last surviving fragment of his work concerns the year 610 (Ioh.Ant. fr. 321 Roberto). A few remarks on his work and the nature of the fragments, concerning the early seventh century, would undoubtedly contribute to a fuller view of historiographic creativity in the age of Heraclius. A short summary completes the whole (pp.153–158).

In conclusion, Bruno Bleckmann's book is a highly successful erudite study, which convincingly presents and contextualises numerous essential aspects of late antique Greek historiography. This book fills an obvious gap in the study of ancient historiography by presenting the works of historians writing after Procopius. With this book, modern scholarship is provided with a valuable study that demonstrates that secular historiography up to the early seventh century was a vivid genre capable of describing and analysing many of the key aspects of the politics of the time, while also being involved in the current political discourse.

DARIUSZ BRODKA
JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY, KRAKÓW
dariusz.brodka@uj.edu.pl

⁶ Especially M. Whitby favours the identification of the *archiereus* with the patriarch Sergius (cf. for example, Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare*, Oxford 1988, 40ff.)

⁷ J.D. Howard-Johnston, "The official history of Heraclius' Persian campaigns," in E. Dąbrowa (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East*, Cracow, 1994 54-87, cf Leon Sternbach, *De Georgii Pisidae apud Theophanem aliosque historicos reliquiis*, Kraków 1899.