THE BYZANTINE REVIEW

ByzRev 02.2020.017
doi: 10.17879/byzrev-2020-2912

The Chronicle of the Logothete. Translated with introduction, commentary and indices by STAFFAN WAHLGREN (Translated Texts for Byzantinists 7). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2019. 298 pp. – ISBN: 978-1-78694-207-4 (£ 90.00)

• JUAN SIGNES CODOÑER, Universidad de Valladolid (juansignes54@gmail.com)

A printed translation of a Byzantine text, especially a long one, is always welcome, not only because the online reading of learned literature is not easy, but because of the rarity of such enterprises. However, in this case the translation of the 10th-century Logothete Chronicle which begins with the Creation of the world and ends in the year 948, a text scarcely known outside the small circles of Byzantinists and a key source for the golden age of Byzantium, is a major event for which one cannot but congratulate its author.

STAFFAN WAHLGREN (=W.) starts his introduction with a short definition of the Byzantine chronicle (pp. 1–2) based on the two principles of synchronisation (Biblical history with that of the Eastern empires including Rome) and unification (as there is only one Universal history at the end). He then briefly reviews the milestones in the Greek literary tradition from the times of its first inventor, Sextus Iulius Africanus, and mentions in a chain Eusebius of Caesarea, John Malalas, the *Chronicon Paschale*, the *Chronographia syntomos* attributed to Nikephoros (also his *Historia syntomos* which is obviously not a chronicle, as the title itself betrays), the world chronicles of Synkellos, Theophanes and George the Monk, and finally 'the complex of texts associated with the name of Symeon the Logothete' (p. 3), of which he mentions as variants the chronicle of Pseudo-Julius Pollux (for the period from the Creation down to Julius Caesar), as well as Book Six of *Theophanes Continuatus* and the *Pseudo-Symeon* (for the events of the Macedonian emperors).

In pp. 4–8 W. introduces the text and its author. The chronicle was very popular and transmitted in dozens of manuscripts, but its author, Symeon *magistros* and *logothetes*, cannot with certainty be identified with the Symeon Metaphrastes who compiled and rewrote an important collection of saints' lives at the end of the tenth century. The original version of the

chronicle ends in 948 with the death of Romanos I, some years after his dethronement in 944 by his own children. This is the *terminus post quem*, although W. adds that its author must have written the text after 959 for he refers in ch. 135.1 to the total duration of the reign emperor Constantine VII, who died in this year. This reference in the text could however be an interpolation, but there is another interesting passage in the chronicle, not referred to here by W., which is perhaps more conclusive for the dating. The text mentions in ch. 137.3 the purpose of the author to recount πλατύτερον τε καὶ ἐπεξεργατικώτερον ἐν τῇ προηγουμένῃ ἐπεξηγήσει (translated by W. as 'in more detail in the following')[1] the subsequent deaths of Basil Peteinos, Marianos Argyros and Manuel Kourtikes, who helped Constantine VII in 945 to dethrone the children of Romanos I. The promise, as W. remarks in a note (p. 252, n. 1) 'is not fulfilled in this text', as these deaths took place later. We do not know exactly when, but according to John Scylitzes (260.62–261.78 in the ed. of IOANNES THURN) at least one of them, Basil Peteinos, died pitifully in exile in the second year of the reign of Romanos II (959–963), against whom he had conspired. This makes the year 960 a sure terminus post quem, especially because Skylitzes did not consider the death of Peteinos as a deserved penalty for his previous conspiracy against the children of Romanos I. Moreover, the story of the deaths of the three conspirators is told with some detail in the so-called version B of the Logothete, which contained a continuation until the year 962 as transmitted by Vat. gr. 163 and 167 (this latter in the 6th book of Theophanes Continuatus, ed. by IMMANUEL BEKKER; three conspirators on p. 438.10–19). If this version is a reworking of the original version translated here by W., it could have been written later by the same author, as already suggested by ATHANASIOS MARKOPOULOS more than forty years ago.[2] The common authorship of both versions would explain this exact wording on another occasion in version B when the author promises to speak πλατύτερον τε καὶ ἐπεξεργατικώτερον ἐν τῇ προηγουμένῃ ἐπεξηγήσει (442.16–17 ed. BEKKER) about Sisinios, presented here as a robber and corrupt servant of

1. MICHAEL FEATHERSTONE suggests to me to translate the passage as 'more fully and in further detail in the proceeding narrative', for, contrary to what appears at first sight, the term προηγουμένῃ does not refer here to the 'previous' narrative, but rather to the following, that is, to the narrative that lies ahead, in front of the reader.

2. ATHANASIOS MARKOPOULOS, Le témoignage du Vaticanus gr. 163 poru la période entre 945–963. Byzantina Symmeikta 3 (1978) pp. 83–119, here pp. 89–90 and Η χρονογραφία του Ψευδοσυμεών και οι πηγές της. Ioannina 1979, p. 24–26. See also STAFFAN WAHLGREN, Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae chronicon (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae – Series Berolinensis 44). Berlin 2006, pp. 6*–7* and 110*.

the emperor Constantine VII (442.1–16 of BEKKER's edition, where the name of Sisinios, copied in the manuscript in abbreviated form, was mistaken by the editor for the preposition σύν). Indeed, this Sisinios is again mentioned in the reign of Romanos II, where he is presented, surprisingly, in very laudatory terms (470.1–10 ed. BEKKER).

It would appear that the author of the original version had certain ideas in mind for the later text which he did not follow up, or had perhaps written them down but did not include them in the final publication. In fact, the chronicle originally ended, as we have said, in the year 948 with the death of Romanos I Lekapenos, a very peculiar date, for Romanos had already lost power at the end of 944. As W. rightly stresses, the text of the chronicle has clearly both a pro-Lekapenid and anti-Macedonian bias (pp. 5–6 of the introduction), so that it would seem odd – at the least – that its author intended to publish it during the reigns of the Macedonians Constantine VII and Romanos II (945–963), since, as W. puts it, 'tenth century Byzantium was a dangerous place with censorship and repression'. Accordingly, W. suggests a publication date later during the reign of Nikephoros II Phokas, between 963–969. In fact, the circumstance that the continuation with the promised references has a clearly pro-Macedonian approach but respects the previous pro-Lekapenid stance, needs to be explained and could indicate a hasty publication, as suggested by MICHAEL FEATHERSTONE, who points to Basil Nothos as the person responsible. A bastard son of Romanos I Lekapenos and a supporter of the Macedonians, Basil had reasons to speak well of both dynasties.[3] The introduction next focuses (pp. 6–8) on the problem of composition and structure. W. is not sure about the extent of intervention of the author in the final part of the chronicle (842–948) where the text is less dependent on previous sources. He tends to believe that the use of rulers as a structuring principle of the chronicle goes back to his sources.

Finally, there are brief remarks on the translation of the text and the commentary (pp. 8–11). The English translation is the first into a modern language, with the exception of the Russian translation of ANDREY VINOGRADOV (Hronika Simeona Magistra i Logofeta. Moscow 2014) which

3. MICHAEL FEATHERSTONE, Basileios Nothos as compiler: The De cerimoniis and Theophanes Continuatus. In: JUAN SIGNES CODOÑER – INMACULADA PÉREZ MARTÍN (eds), Textual Transmission in Byzantium: between Textual Criticism and Quellenforschung (Lectio. Studies in the transmission of texts and ideas 2). Turnhout 2014, pp. 353–372.

combines the testimony of the Greek manuscripts (in the edition of W.) with that of the Old Slavonic translations and appears not to be reliable. With his translation W. aims at readability and intends also to preserve the simple flavour of the original text. As for the commentary, that is, the footnotes to the translation (usually very short, but numerous), the author identifies names and places, explains obscure passages and refers occasionally to textual problems he knows very well as editor of the only critical edition of the text. The introduction ends with a summary of the contents of the 137 chapters of the chronicle (pp. 11–12) and a select bibliography (pp. 13–14).

It is obvious that this short presentation does not amount to a study of the work and leaves most questions unsolved, but the Byzantine translations published in the series of 'Translated Texts for Historians', and 'Translated Texts for Byzantinists' are intended only to introduce the works in the most simple and direct way in order to attract readers, and W's introduction follows this model. Most important for the user is the quality of the translation that follows (pp. 15–253) and the detailed indices of names (pp. 254–291) and of terms and concepts (pp. 292–298) at the end of the volume.

We must be grateful for the care and attention put into the translation of the text by its editor, and it is particularly important that the entire chronicle, beginning with Adam, has been translated, avoiding the extensive practice of translating (or even editing) only the final part of Byzantine world chronicles, where it is generally assumed that the modern historian will find more relevant material. It is only by reading these chronicles as a whole, from beginning to end, that we are able to grasp the sense of unity and continuity of world history conveyed in them and to understand certain emphasis and recurrences in the text of human actions. In fact, the supposedly boring medieval chronicles are sometimes more prone to display feelings (for instance emperor Philippikos 'having a siesta' in the bath in ch. 118.2 – thus W's translation of μεσημβρίζειν) than high-style historians.

The translation is sober and, as promised, readable. There are obviously here and there points where the text could be improved, particularly concerning realia, where our information turns out to be scanty or deficient and is not easily explained in a short footnote. But the overall result is very satisfactory: it excellently fills an important gap in the knowledge of Byzantine historical texts and will benefit both specialists (who can trust the translation) and average learned readers looking for entertainment, for the narrative is a long chain of episodes where monotony is sometimes un-

avoidable, but where there is also a whole array of human passions depicted in full colour.

The translation has followed the layout of the edition and divided the text in 137 chapters or sections which are preceded in most cases by a title, printed in bold in this volume. However, when the title is lacking, as for instance in ch. 22–44 and 47, there is not even a blank line or space to mark the division of the sections, whereas, for instance, a marginal note copied in ch. 46.10 is presented as a proper title in the text. Within each chapter no divisions are allowed except the numbers which indicate paragraphs in the edition, but which, as W. indicated in his edition (p. 121*), are of his own making and do not correspond to any divisions of the text, either according to changes of source or to narrative units. This is a hindrance for duly appreciating the narrative flow of the text, since different episodes within a reign are presented in succession without any typographical transition or pause, thus detracting from the reading of the longest chapters, particularly the last eight (nr. 130–137 from Theophilos to Romanos II, covering pp. 163–253, 38% of the chronicle). One cannot but understand the desire of the author to follow closely the criteria adopted in his edition, but perhaps, considering that there was no lack in chronicles of marks or side-headers made for or by readers, it would have been advisable to adopt a more reader-friendly presentation and introduce divisions and new paragraphs each time a new narrative starts inside a given chapter.

The combined used of participles and personal forms of the verb in the Greek original, though it may seem mechanical, does in fact prevent the boring succession of coordinated verbs; but this is frequently lost in W's translation which tends to convert participles into personal forms of the verb and to connect them with the unavoidable 'and'. Perhaps a more faithful approach to the original syntax of the Greek might have been adopted, for it would have benefited the flow of the reading. On the other hand, we must be grateful that the author does not translate many technical terms but only transliterates them in cursive. However, this would have been better accompanied not simply by a list at the end of the volume, but a glossary. Some of the terms are indeed occasionally explained, but others are not, and a few of them may puzzle the uninformed reader, for instance the simple word *thema* which is recurrent throughout the work.

Finally, concerning the footnotes in the text, one would have obviously welcomed some kind of bibliographical references on some points, but, as everyone knows, the best is the enemy of the good, and such a task would

have required much more time since the events involved cover thousands of years and many scenarios. On the other hand, the sources of our chronicler are occasionally referred to at the beginning of each chapter (especially for the last eight emperors) or when the chronicle changes from our major source to another (for instance in p. 58, n. 1, where the chronicle of Pseudo-Julius Pollux ceases to be used; in p. 80 n. 1, where the use of Theodorus Lector's Church history begins; or in p. 146 n. 7 where Nikephoros' Short History ends as a source), but perhaps a more systematic approach could have been attempted. This would not have cost W. much time, as he had already noted the sources of the text in the apparatus fontium of his edition. The most abundant references are to the Bible, Theophanes and the *Chronicon Paschale*, but considering that also other minor sources are mentioned (e.g. Suetonius, Cassius Dio or Pliny for the Roman imperial period), one would have appreciated a more detailed reference to the parallel sources.

These are however, minor aspects of a very careful and useful translation that will contribute to the knowledge of Byzantine historiography among medievalists and the general public.

Keywords

Byzantine literature; Chronicle of the Logothete; historiography