

Theophanes, a great chronographer

The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor
translated by CYRIL MANGO and ROGER SCOTT
(Oxford University Press 1997)

MICHAEL WHITBY

Translating a complete Byzantine chronicle is a monumental labour, for which Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (hereafter M. & S.) deserve the heartfelt thanks of all late Romanists and Byzantinists. Malalas had involved three main editors and seven further collaborators in a determined six-year effort (E.M. Jeffreys, M.J. Jeffreys, R.D. Scott, *The Chronicle of John Malalas, a translation*, Melbourne 1986). M. was running translation classes in Oxford at least as early as the mid-1970s, so Theophanes has been ticking over for about twenty years; the task was divided roughly in half, with S. responsible for the part down to the death of Maurice (AD 602) and M. for the rest. For both chronicles the results are impressive, testimony to the value of persevering with such projects in spite of distractions and contrary to the snappier production encouraged by research assessments. Comparison with the two partial translations of Theophanes (H. Turtledove, Philadelphia 1982, and A.R. Santoro, Gorham 1982) is ample proof of the benefits of careful reflection (cf. *CR* 33, 1983, 372-3). The combination of translations of Malalas and Theophanes, plus those of Marcellinus Comes (B. Croke, Sydney 1995, though note reservations in *Early Medieval Europe* 5 [1996] 222-5), Hydatius (R. Burgess, *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana*, Oxford 1993) and the latter part of the *Chronicon Paschale* (Michael and Mary Whitby, *The Chronicon Paschale: an annotated translation of A.D. 285-628*, TTH, Liverpool 1989), provide reasonable coverage of the chronicle sources for late antique and early Byzantine history, and also offer a diversity of approaches. There is every incentive for some of the massive middle and late Byzantine universal histories to be tackled, and it is good news that a translation of Theophanes

Continuatus is in progress (Mark Vermes, with input from I. Ševčenko, *Byzantina Australiensia*, perhaps 2000).

Some general points can be made about this range of publications. Of the utmost importance is the precision of the translation. Many students will not have the capacity to verify the rendering, and scholars may not have the original text to hand or the time to look it up: no translation is going to be perfect, but Turtledove's Theophanes and Croke's Marcellinus fall down badly in this respect. Elegant diction is not a regular feature of chronography, and translations that have a somewhat cumbersome feel are unlikely to distort greatly the impact of the original, whereas a smooth style may. On obscure passages it is worth offering alternatives in the notes, as M. & S. do. Complete coverage of a text is important, at least for the literary study of the author: this is clear from both Theophanes and Malalas, since these authors' attitudes to narrative, sources and chronology are revealed more plainly in the earlier parts of their work. In some cases the focus on the historically 'useful' parts of a text will lead to an abridged translation, as of the *Chronicon Paschale*, but this is regrettable and should be resisted when possible, especially with middle Byzantine texts, where there may now be a temptation to believe that the 'Theophanes-based' sections, for example, can be omitted. The level of annotation will depend on the individual text and the intended audience. The Australian Malalas has no formal notes, but a formidable sub-text which tabulates for each entry the various representatives of the Malalas tradition and translates those parts which help in the reconstruction of the complete original text. In this case the production of a parallel volume (E. Jeffreys, with B. Croke and R. Scott, *Studies in John Malalas*, Sydney 1990) provides a valuable historiographical complement to the translation. By contrast, thorough annotation of a long and diverse text such as the *Chronicon Paschale* will inevitably lead to substantial notes which may overwhelm the translation.

M. & S. have adopted a prudent middle course: over fifty pages of historiographical introduction, an apparatus with source passages and parallels, and then brief historical notes. A similar sparseness is the practice in Mango's Nicephorus (*Nikephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople, Short History*, Washington 1990). S.'s notes tend to be fuller than M.'s, though readers might have preferred to receive greater help with the intricacies of the Byzantine Dark Age, where a compromise could have been achieved between the brief guidance, often on matters of geography or Arab nomenclature, and the full

history of the period which is rightly eschewed (Preface, p. v). As for other scholarly aids, M. & S. provide no maps: a plan of Constantinople and maps of the eastern provinces and Bulgaria would have been most useful. There is a glossary of titles and other technical terms, a general index of names, places and titles, an index of Constantinopolitan places, and an index of Greek words. These indexes are, unfortunately, very patchy: for example, in the general index, only about a quarter of the references to Evagrius are included, and there are comparable omissions in the entries for other sources such as Joshua the Stylite, Malchus, Zachariah and the *Chronicon Paschale*. It is unclear why some aspects of these sources are indexed and others not; there is no attempt to make the index more helpful by introducing sub-headings for substantial entries. The Greek index, also is not comprehensive: e.g. ἐπέκεινα at 576 n.1 is ignored.

Critical assessment must start with acknowledgement of the magnitude of M. & S.'s achievement in producing an excellent translation; regrets and disagreements may be voiced, but only on the basis of that prior recognition. One area of doubt concerns the nature of the author. Here a serious drawback is the lack of a historiographical index, which could have collected references to Theophanes' authorial, editorial or chronological practices; as it is, readers have to combine limited comments in the introduction with scattered remarks in the commentary, particularly in S.'s notes. This is a major missed opportunity, which may reflect a divergence between M. and S. about the interest and nature of Theophanes' historiographical contribution. Both see Theophanes as a 'scissors-and-paste' compiler, but S. is interested in detecting a fairly interventionist writer, while M. is inclined towards a more passive or negative assessment of the writer's capacity, a view consistent with his thesis that George Syncellus deserves the major credit for Theophanes' *Chronographia* ('Who Wrote the Chronicle of Theophanes?', *ZRVI* 18, 1978, 9-17). What emerges from S.'s part of the *Chronographia* is that the author held strong views on religious matters, and was prepared to adapt his source material to attack all who diverged from orthodoxy. Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia (AM 5818 n.3, p. 45, confusingly introduces Eusebius of Caesarea), Julian, Valens, Nestorius, Dioscorus, Chrysaphius, Basiliscus, Peter Mongus, the Emperor Anastasius, Philoxenus of Mabbug, Severus of Antioch, Gelimer, are among those indicted as the narrative is tweaked to underline their various errors. Conversely, favoured individuals receive extra praise, for

example Constantine, Theodosius II, Yazdgard I, Marcian. The reputation of emperors may be shielded: Constantine's Arian connections are strongly denied, Constantius' hostility to the orthodox champion Athanasius of Alexandria is attributed to evil advisers, while Theodosius II is said to have been duped by the villainous Chrysaphius into opposing Flavian. The Romans, too, tend to benefit, with the major Persian victories of Justinian's reign, which Theophanes should have known about from Procopius *Wars* II, being but briefly noted (AM 6031; cf. 6107, 6110, for the omission or minimization of other Roman humiliations), or with Roman responsibility for military confrontations being downplayed (e.g. AM 6064, 6092). M., indeed, accepts that Theophanes will have improved the anti-iconoclast presentation of his sources, but does not recognise the possible extent of Theophanes' dogmatic reformulation of the narrative: an anti-iconoclast harangue has to be 'mechanically copied' rather than deliberately introduced by Theophanes himself (574 n.11).

Such reworking in fact aptly fits the description of Theophanes in the panegyric by Theodore the Studite as someone who possessed the gift of doctrine, *dogmatikos* (quoted at p. xlv). This raises the fundamental question of authorship, of who should be regarded as responsible for such a compilation as the *Chronographia*. In his preface Theophanes acknowledges his debt to George Syncellus, whose original intention to record from the Creation to the present day was cut short by death when his narrative had reached Diocletian; George 'provided materials with a view to completing what was missing', and overcame Theophanes' doubts about his capabilities; Theophanes then 'expended an uncommon amount of labour' and did his best to seek out and examine many books. Theophanes admits that the *Chronographia* is, to an extent, a joint effort, though the relative contributions are not specified; M.'s theory minimizes that of Theophanes while maximizing George's. A precise division of labour is not possible, and M.'s thesis has usefully clarified the likely input of George, in particular with regard to Theophanes' 'eastern source' for seventh and eighth-century affairs. It is also plausible that George contributed some of the contemporary narrative on the early ninth century, since it would only be sensible for a compiler embarking on a grand historical project stretching back over six thousand years to have maintained a record of current events, to exploit when he came nearer the end of his mammoth task. It is, however, difficult to distinguish the views of a patriarchal *syncellus* at

Constantinople with monastic connections from those of the leader of a monastery on the Sea of Marmara with regular links to the capital, especially in the absence of secure corroboration. M. at least properly reminds us that Theophanes' contemporary evidence has to be treated cautiously.

It would be unwise to belittle Theophanes' contribution unduly. The *Chronographia* was created by the man who made the selection from the source material, divided it into its annual chunks, adapted these in line with his personal views, and fitted them into his own chronological scheme. The chronological practices of the *Chronographia* are somewhat different from those of George (pp. lxvi-lxvii), and responsibility for this change should lie with Theophanes, for better or worse. The timescale of the compilation, another postulated difficulty for Theophanes' authorship, also need not have been too long; as M. observes (p. lv), the *Chronographia* was probably based on about twenty sources, fewer if some of M.'s distinctions are not accepted. Theophanes perhaps devoted some effort to discovering sources, but there should also have been sufficient time in the years 812-14 for the construction of his narrative, even though he was plagued by kidney trouble (and the evidence for his afflictions at the end of his life is provided by sources keen to sustain his reputation as an opponent of iconoclasts). As a comparison, Cassius Dio spent ten years collecting material for his history from the foundation of Rome to AD 211 and then twelve years writing this up (73.23), a far more massive undertaking and conducted at a much more elevated literary level than Theophanes attempted. In neither case, of course, do we know what proportion of the individual's time was devoted to historiography.

Sources are a crucial aspect of the *Chronographia*. Here S.'s part is more rewarding than M.'s, since two significant sources, Procopius and Theophylact are extant, while versions or fragments of other major contributors such as Malalas and Theodore Lector also survive. S.'s record of parallels will provide the basis, in due course, for a clearer understanding of individuals such as Eustathius of Epiphania – though a more comprehensive index would make this easier, and attention to parallels in Evagrius would have elucidated the role of Eustathius (e.g. in AM 5943, 5946, 5950, or 5966, where Pauline Allen, *Evagrius*, Louvain 1981, 121, had noted links which are not picked up).

The position is more obscure after 602, though M.'s discussion is less convincing than it might have been because of his failure to build upon S.'s historiographical observations on the earlier part. The 'eastern source' is not a

particular problem, thanks to the exhaustive researches of Lawrence Conrad into the Syriac and Arabic elements of this nexus (e.g. 'The conquest of Arwad' in Averil Cameron and L. Conrad, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the Literary Source Material*). But there was a Byzantine parallel to this, a text which Theophanes shared with Nicephorus. M. divides this into two separate chronicles, the first covering the events from 668 (the accession of Constantine IV) to c.720, and a second one with an iconophile tendency which ran from c.720 at least to the terminal point of Nicephorus in 769, or possibly further. The reason for this separation seems to be the iconophile emphasis in Theophanes' treatment of iconoclast emperors after 720, but this is precisely the sort of interpretation which Theophanes' anti-Arian or anti-Monophysite glosses show that he was liable to impose on his source; Nicephorus, writing from the same dogmatic position but with higher literary aims, would have been quite capable of doing the same. It is thus plausible to unite these two sources; further, since Byzantine chronicles usually have a universal scope, it is likely that this text stretched back beyond 668 and already contained the black hole for Constans' reign which is evident in both Theophanes and Nicephorus.

This consideration raises the chestnut of the Great Chronographer, of which fifteen extracts were added by an eleventh-century hand to the Vatican manuscript of the *Chronicon Paschale*. M.'s partial discussion (xc-xci), which attempts to show that the Great Chronographer was derived from Theophanes rather than vice versa, is unfortunate. He chooses to analyse only one extract (no. 14, relating to the earthquake of 740), with the dismissive 'but if we take the trouble to make a textual comparison, it becomes at once apparent ...', reaching the conclusion that the Great Chronographer 'is nothing more than a colourless abbreviation of Theophanes ... and cannot be the source of Theophanes'. The difference between the two passages is that Theophanes (412.16-21) includes a snatch of direct speech to record the emperor's orders about financing reconstruction of the city walls; the sentences in Theophanes immediately before and after the *oratio recta* are sufficiently close to the Great Chronographer to indicate a close link between the two texts, while there are limited overlaps of vocabulary between the *oratio recta* and the Great Chronographer. It is possible that the Great Chronographer replaced the direct speech with a bland paraphrase, but where Theophanes' narrative can be compared with an extant source, Theophylact Simocatta, it is apparent that he

sometimes transposed this into *oratio recta*, keeping much of the basic vocabulary but constructing a more varied and livelier narrative (examples at Whitby, *Byzantion* 1983, 315 n.9). On M.'s view of Theophanes such enterprise is disregarded, but it is compatible with the more energetic historiographical practice which S. identifies.

M.'s theory could have been presented more convincingly through examination of Great Chronographer extract 12, which, while similar to passages in both Theophanes and Nicephorus, cannot as it stands have been their common source; the location of the extract near the bottom of folio 242r of the *Chronicon Paschale* manuscript may have led the scribe to abbreviate his exemplar (see Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale* 192), but that is no more than a possible explanation for the discrepancies. Extract 13 might also have been discussed, though M.'s belief that the Great Chronographer copied this from Nicephorus explains the omission (see 'The Breviarium of the Patriarch Nicephorus', in N.A. Stratos [ed.], *Byzantium: Tribute to Andreas N. Stratos* II, Athens 1986, 539-52, at 546-7); the piecemeal nature of M.'s discussion, however, obscures the implausibility in his view of the Great Chronographer as a compiler who flitted from Theophanes to Nicephorus even at points where Theophanes offered a detailed account.

A more serious deficiency is M.'s failure to analyse the single passage where the relationship between Theophanes and the Great Chronographer can be studied with the help of an independent source, the section in AM 6092 (de Boor, pp. 278-80) where Theophanes' paraphrase of Theophylact Simocatta 8.13-15 was interspersed with material from another source; strictly, this passage falls in S.'s part, but it is vital to M.'s discussion of sources. Here the additional material has a close correlation with the longest of the Great Chronographer extracts, so that a combination of Theophylact plus Great Chronographer produces Theophanes; by contrast the Great Chronographer does not display significant verbal overlaps with Theophanes' extracts from Theophylact, so that if one accepts M.'s thesis that the Great Chronographer was copied from Theophanes, one has to believe that the compiler was capable of identifying and discarding Theophylactean material with surprising and inexplicable accuracy (Whitby, *BMGS* 8, 1982-3, 1-20). Further, John of Antioch, who is cited (406 n.19) as the likely source for some of the non-Theophylactean material, presented events in a different sequence from Theophanes, at least as far as the brief fr. 218 b reveals. M.'s rigorous approach to the comparison of *Chronicon Paschale* and

the Syriac *Chron.* 724 when discussing Theophanes' eastern source (lxxxiv-lxxxv) could have been applied here.

This analysis will affect our conception of Theophanes' task in constructing his chronicle, and even perhaps our sense of the historiographical project which George Syncellus initiated and Theophanes completed: for the first two centuries of the *Chronographia*, works of Theodore Lector appear to have provided a basic frame; for most of Justinian's reign Malalas was of some use in this respect; if there was an analogous anchor for much of the seventh and eighth centuries, then Theophanes' labours would have been that much lighter. A further speculation might be ventured. Links can be drawn between Theophanes' attacks on Arian heretics in the first part of the *Chronographia* and on iconoclasts in the eighth century; in each case Theophanes was adapting his source material to highlight his views of orthodoxy. The importance of Theophanes' rewriting would be given extra point if there existed a major eighth-century chronicle which had presented matters differently, with fourth-century Arian rulers praised as antecedents to Leo III and Constantine V.

With reference to Malalas, Barry Baldwin once sneered that he had neither enough learning nor historical imagination to invent any ideas (*Liverpool Classical Monthly* 9.2, 30). Such hostility to chronicles is quite out of place and this splendid volume will help to ensure that these 'scissors-and-paste' men receive the sympathetic attention which their constructive labours deserve. Theophanes was willing to record youthful escapades on the icebergs which battered the walls of Constantinople and the death of various pet animals (AM 6255: AD 763); he may even have permitted himself one joke (365 n.4). More important than the possibility that the reminiscences were borrowed from George Syncellus, or that the joke was copied from a source, is that Theophanes presents us with a narrative of historiographical interest as well as historical importance. Mango and Scott have made this much more accessible to the scholarly community, and if closer study leads to adaptations of some of their views, the credit for such advances will have to be shared with them for laying the groundwork.

APPENDIX

Here I give a selection of specific points. The quality of the translation does not reduce the need for vigilance.

AM 5855: ‘means of excavation’ for ‘in the course of excavation’ (Th. 52.1). The contents of 83 nn. 5 & 6 have been inverted. 83 n.11: Theophanes clearly did not know what month Daisios was, which contributes to his error. 148 n.11: Theophanes’ chronology for Gothic settlement may not be an unfortunate deduction; Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans* 262 n.53, notes that Theoderic Strabo’s followers had been located in the Balkans since the early fifth century, and may have remained there for 68 years (correcting Theophanes’ 58). Theophanes’ *annus mundi* date need not be wrong. 162 n.5: Evagrius 2.1 has a second prediction of Marcian’s elevation.

AM 5971: ‘into confinement in the palace’ for ‘into prison in the palace’ (Th. 127.1). 229 n.8: 505 not 503. 237 n.2: Evagrius 3.31 says that Macedonius avoided mention of Chalcedon, not that he publicly condemned it (the Monophysite position which he was under pressure to adopt). 255 n.5: Procopius, *Wars* 1.11.1-2, dated discussions of Khusro’s adoption by Justin to early in the latter’s reign; Theophanes followed this indication, but had to chose a specific year. In defence of Theophanes’ chronological problems in the early sixth century, it should be noted that the first version of Malalas (which probably terminated in 532) offered little help and the *Chronicon Paschale* had experienced similar problems to Theophanes (Whitby, *Chronicon* xviii).

AM 6018: ‘indescribable’ (with the translation in the Malalas apparatus) for ‘inexplicable’ (Th. 172.13). 281 n.8: discussion of the *Akta dia Kalopodion* surprisingly ignores the suggestion of Michael Jeffreys (in *Studies in Malalas*, 268-76; adapted in ‘Bury, Malalas and the Nika Riot’ in Pauline Allen [ed.] *The Sixth Century, End or Beginning*, Brisbane 1996, 42-51) that the text of Malalas used by Theophanes had suffered damage in the pages covering Justinian’s early years. S.’s observation that Theophanes rarely combined more than two sources at once is valid, but the suggestion that the *Akta* originated in Theophanes’ ecclesiastical source is unconvincing, granted that his other source, Malalas, was interested in factional activity and chanting. Jeffreys rightly ascribed the long dialogue to Malalas (which the independent evidence of the *Chronicon Paschale* also supports; see Whitby, *Chronicon* 112-14), while accepting that Theophanes has probably associated it too closely with the Nika Riot. Jeffreys’ hypothesis is also relevant to the relocation of Malalas’ material in the next few years. 321 n.1: Theophanes’ calculation of four invasions is probably derived from the Persian attacks recorded under 6020, 6021 and 6031 (only the last was led by Khusro, though the others occurred during his reign, on Theophanes’ incorrect chronology). The figure is wrong, but it is not a senseless change from Procopius’ three (AD 540, 541, 542). 363 n.13: the Armenians killed the Persian marzban, not a king.

AM 6066: Theophanes has emended Theophylact’s name for the Persian king to accord with his distorted regnal list, and attributes the capture of Dara to Adarmanes, not the king. 384 n.28: it is Evagrius who specifies that Germanus was commander of Phoenice Libanensis; Theophanes (commander at Edessa) is in error, though differently from Theophylact (bishop at Damascus), and this may just be the product of a confused reading of Theophylact. 390 n.2 (AM 6081): Domitian’s exact relationship to Maurice is uncertain. 416 n.32: Constantine Lardys was former praetorian prefect. 419: references to Theophylact unaccountably switch from book/chapter/section number to the pagination of de Boor’s edition.

AM 6102: 'fortified' ships (Th. 298.18) gives the wrong impression for ships which probably had castles fore and aft.

AM 6103: recognition that the account of the overthrow of Phocas is distinct from that in John of Antioch (428 n.4) does not lend conviction to the suggestion that material in AM 6092 was derived from him (406 n.19).

AM 6113: 'as if into a game' for 'as if it were a game' (which requires the supplement of 'real' with reference to war earlier in the sentence: Th. 303.17); 'that with them he would fight to the death and be closely attached to them as to his own children' instead of 'that he would struggle with them unto death and would be united with them as with his own children' (Th. 303.22-23). 441 n.8: the implication is simply that Persian fire religion was false; the suggested allusion to the ashless fire is too subtle.

AM 6117: 'foreigners' for 'strangers', ξένοι (Th. 315.3), recruited into the army. 460 n.3: the message from Jerusalem need not have gone by sea to reach Constantinople in 10 days; indeed, in early April dispatch by land seems more likely.

AM 6121: 'essential' for 'natural' of the divine will (Th. 330.1) might be clearer.

AM 6123: the plural ὀρέλοντες (Th. 335.15) indicates that Arabs, not Theodore, were intending to attack the worshippers of idols.

AM 6194: 'without guard or any suspicion' introduces a zeugma which is not in Theophanes (376.18); better 'without guard and free from every suspicion'. 537 n.6: the alternative translation suggested in the note seems preferable.