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9. A historian and his tragic hero: a literary reading of Theophylact Simokatta's *Ecumenical History*

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The *Ecumenical History* of Theophylact Simokatta has ever since Photios been deplored as a work difficult in style, with successive shifts in narrative focus, few and not always reliable chronological indications, repetitive insertions of apophthegmatic sentences, rhetorical speeches and other devices.¹ In addition to severely testing its modern readers' patience, this rather rambling reconstruction of twenty years of Roman history cannot completely satisfy those seeking sound historical information and is a disappointment to those in search of deeper ideas and philosophical messages. By common scholarly consent, Theophylact largely failed to be a reliable reporter of the reign of Maurice and moreover, for all his high-minded pretensions, he hardly succeeded in endowing his account with the profundity and breadth of classical historiography.²

¹ *Theophylacti Simocattae, Historiae*, ed. C. de Boor; repr. P. Wirth; English trans. by Michael and Mary Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford, 1986). Unless otherwise stated, passages cited in English translation are the Whitbys'. It should also be noted that, in accordance with the manuscript tradition, I adopt *Ecumenical History* (henceforth *EH*) as the title of Theophylact's work, being, however, conscious that *Historiae* (as in Photios' *Bibliotheca*) may have been the original one. For critical comments on this paper I thank Anthony Kaldellis.

² Derogatory comments on Theophylact's arrangement of historical material and style start with Photios' *Bibliotheca*, cod. 65, I. 79–80, and culminate in modern times with N. Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium* (London, 1982), 59–60; Whitby and Whitby, *The History of Theophylact*, xxv–xxviii; repeated by Michael Whitby, in the chapter entitled 'Historiographer vs. historian' of his monograph *The Emperor Maurice and his Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford, 1988), 49–50: 'Granted these limitations, as well as the fact that Th. seems to have had no geographical knowledge or experience of military matters which could help him to make sense of the available source information, his significance

However, a different evaluation emerges if we adopt a literary perspective. Writing from a distance in time about events that could have reached him only by hearsay, the last classicizing historian of antiquity followed in full the method of literary re-adaptation of his sources, and supplemented them in several identifiable cases with 'literary invention'. Paradoxically, all criticisms that have heavily shaken his value as a historian-reporter can serve as counter-arguments and enhance his evaluation as a writer.³

The last in a long tradition, Simokatta's *History* is unquestionably a good candidate for a literary study. To begin with, this is a narrative in which, for the first time, a Christian interpretation of historical events merges with the principles and rhetorical means of classical historiography. Hagiography and apocalyptic literature alternate with rhetorical speeches and descriptions of battles.⁴ In introducing these novelties in his literary reconstruction of historical reality, Theophylact clearly deviates from Procopius and Agathias, but, as will be shown below, he somehow joins them in choosing to be allusive with regard to political, religious and military developments both in the reign of Maurice (582–602) and the reign of his own contemporary Heraclius (610–41). By embedding a

as a historian might be questioned'; and *idem*, 'Greek historical writing after Procopius: variety and vitality', in A. Cameron and L. I. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, v. I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), 46: 'Th. was basically a secondhand compiler who created a historical narrative by reworking, integrating, and sometimes interpreting the narratives of earlier writers'; similar characterizations are found in W. Treadgold, *The Early Byzantine Historians* (Hampshire and New York, 2007), 337–40. More balanced are the comments of Karpozilos, *Βυζαντινοί Ιστορικοί*, I, 475–81. The modest evaluation of Simokatta as a historian, especially if compared to Procopius and Agathias, has also been underscored by D. Brodka, *Die Geschichtsphilosophie in der spätantiken Historiographie. Studien zu Prokopios von Kaisareia, Agathias von Myrina und Theophylaktos Simokattes*, Studien und Texte zur Byzantinistik 5 (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), 235–6.

³ Despite being fully conscious that Th. proceeded to a free literary re-adaptation of his sources, Michael and Mary Whitby prefer to treat him as a second-rate historiographer; see *The History of Theophylact*, xxvii: 'as a classicizing historiographer, Th. was undoubtedly more interested in the artistic packaging than in the factual content of his narrative'; Michael Whitby reprimands him for his 'feebleness of ideas' and absence of a strong personal interpretation: see *The Emperor Maurice*, 322–3. Conversely, closer to a literary reading of Th. are the studies by I.V. Krivushin, 'Theophylact Simocatta's conception of political conflicts', *BF* 19 (1993), 171–82; and 'Théophylacte Simocatta peintre du chaos', *Études Balcaniques* 1 (1994), 115–33.

⁴ In this belief in *omina* and miracles of any kind Hunger saw the mark of a change in historical writing; see Hunger, *Literatur*, I, 319.

variety of literary genres into his narrative, modifying his style in several instances and introducing secondary characters, he creates the effect of both a polyphonically voiced but also well-hidden truth about political and other developments occurring in his own time. In writing about the days and deeds of the ill-fated Maurice and in denouncing the tyranny of Phocas (602–10), who was overthrown by the reigning emperor Heraclius, Simokatta was in an advantageous position compared to his predecessors Procopius and Agathias, who chose to write about a reigning emperor. Nonetheless, in contrast to the epic and encomiastic discourse of the court poet George Pisides, his was a sad, not to say depressing, story.

In other words, if, as is believed, he indeed wrote in the early 630s, i.e. soon after the final defeat of the Persians and Heraclius' triumphal return to the Byzantine capital, he would have been in marked contrast to the spirit of an otherwise heroic age.⁵ This 'heroic spirit' is discernible only in the Dialogue between Philosophy and History that introduces us to the main text of the *Ecumenical History*. Therein words of praise and panegyric are reserved for the 'descendants of Heraclius' (Ηρακλειῖδαι) who expelled the repudiated Calydonian tyrant Phocas from the palace. Whether this Dialogue, unparalleled in classical and post-classical historiography, was an integral part of Theophylact's initial composition or a separate text (earlier or later, by his own hand or that of a scribe) inserted in Vaticanus gr. 977 – in essence the *codex unicus* to the History – is debatable.⁶ For our present purposes, we must underscore that it is only in this Dialogue and

⁵ For such an early dating of *EH* see Whitby, *Emperor Maurice*, 39–40; and Treadgold, *The Early Byzantine Historians*, 333–4.

⁶ That the Dialogue was not an integral part of the History was first suggested by T. Olajos, 'Contributions à une analyse de la genèse de l'Histoire Universelle de Théophylacte Simocatta', *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 29 (1981), 417–18. Whitby (*The Emperor Maurice*, 40–41) objected to this view. P. Schreiner also endorsed the idea that the dialogue was not an inherent part of Theophylact's initial composition, 'Photios und Theophylaktos Simokates. Das Problem des "Inhaltsverzeichnisses" im Geschichtswerk', in Constantinides, *et al.*, eds., *ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝ*, 391–8. For a description of the manuscript preserving *EH* and its possible association with the *Excerpta* of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos see P. Schreiner, 'Die Historikerhandschrift Vaticanus graecus 977: ein Handexemplar zur Vorbereitung des konstantinischen Exzerptenwerkes?', *JÖB* 37 (1987), 1–29. Cf. also *Theophylaktos Simokattes. Geschichte*, trans. and intro. by P. Schreiner (Stuttgart, 1985), 22–4; and T. Olajos, 'Remarques sur la tradition manuscrite de l'*Histoire Universelle* de Théophylacte Simocatta', *Revue d'Histoire des Textes* 9 (1979), 261–6. P. Speck also argued in favour of the Dialogue's early date and autonomy; see 'Eine Gedächtnisfeier am Grabe des Maurikios. Die *Historiai* des Theophylaktos Simokates: der Auftrag; die Fertigstellung; der Grundgedanke', *Varia IV*, *Poikila Byzantina* 12 (Bonn, 1993), 212–17.

not in the History itself that words of praise and panegyric are pronounced in favour of the 'dynasty of Heraclius'.

Be that as it may, the proem of the History proper, which follows the Dialogue, contains a different encounter, that between History and Poetry.⁷ Theophylact picks up the introductory scene of the *Odyssey* and brings his listeners/readers into the palace of Alcinous. It was at the court of the king of the Phaeacians that the stranger Odysseus 'with his body bruised after the shipwreck' was granted freedom of speech and storytelling.⁸ No doubt Theophylact saw himself in the guise of that foreigner who made Phaeacians cease drinking and prick up their ears to what, in his words, was 'a long and gloomy account'. Unlike the Homeric hero, however, who contrived false stories, he opted for the teaching of History that 'advises what should be undertaken and what should be ignored as disadvantageous'. History, we are told, can make generals wiser; not only can it instruct them how to arrange their forces in battle, but also 'through the disasters of others make them more provident, guiding them by means of the earlier mistakes of others'.⁹ In sum, then, it was at a friendly court that this foreign servant of History came to follow the example of the *Odyssey* and relate stories about the disasters of the past. From this proem it is legitimate to infer, therefore, that the court of Alcinous was none other than that of Heraclius, but also that the tone of the *Ecumenical History* was not expected to be panegyric, but didactic. Conforming to Thucydidean tradition, Simokatta presents himself as a constant adviser and reminder for all who wish to know about the past and the recurrence of similar situations in the future.¹⁰

It was Joseph Frendo who first interpreted Theophylact's History as a work fulfilling a threefold function; it was couched in a panegyric tone and was meant for recitation performed by an author personified as

⁷ The discussion concerning the relationship between History and Poetry occurs in Aristotle's *Poetics* (ch. 9) and recurs in Theophylact's predecessor Agathias; see A. Kaldellis, 'Agathias on History and Poetry', *GRBS* 38 (1997), 295–305.

⁸ Proem 8:37; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 17–18. On the Homeric allusions of this proem see T. Olajos, 'Quelques remarques sur les réminiscences homériques chez Théophylacte Simocatta historien', in I. Tar, ed., *Epik durch die Jahrhunderte. Internationale Konferenz Szeged 2–4. Oktober 1997*, *Acta antiqua et archaeologica XXVII* (Szeged, 1998), 207–8.

⁹ Proem 13–14:38; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 18. This is a borrowing from Diodoros Siculus' *Bibliotheca historica*, I 1.1–5; cf. H. Lieberich, *Studien zu den Proömien in der griechischen und byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung*, II. Program des Kgl. Realgymnasiums München für das Schuljahr 1899/1900 (Munich, 1900), 16–18, and Th. Nissen, 'Das Prooemium zu Theophylakts Historien und die Sophistik', *BNJ* 15 (1939), 4–6.

¹⁰ Nissen, 'Das Prooemium', 12, regards Theophylact's text as a work combining the flattery to Heraclius and the invective against Phocas.

Odysseus and 'addressing an audience'.¹¹ In response, Michael Whitby considered this theory to be 'based on an excessively literary interpretation of Theophylactean imagery'.¹² More recently, Anna-Maria Taragna explored all references and allusions in the *Ecumenical History* to the concept of the *theatron* and analyzed how this performance of History shaped the act of writing. Expanding further this approach, she made a good case for the theory that the various kinds of theatrically staged scenes were inserted in the narrative and orchestrated by an author who, as 'le nouvel Ulysse', was, in fact, a 'metteur en scène'.¹³ Indeed, far from being informative in a strict sense, Theophylact's work was chiefly performative, inscribing historical truth within a dramatic context. Unlike Procopius and Agathias, he does not introduce himself in the opening lines but has we Phaeacians, i.e. his listeners/readers, wait until the end of Book VII before he briefly alludes to himself; nonetheless, he is an omnipresent author conducting the audience from intense emotions to whispered truths and from thematic rotations to recurrent themes. Signs of his endeavour to guide his audience are spread throughout his narrative, be they apophthegmatic statements or phrases introducing a shift in focus. To be sure, with his self-identification as a foreigner (ἔπηλυς) Theophylact inserted the first autobiographical allusion in his narrative, hinting both at his Egyptian (i.e. non-Constantinopolitan) origins and independence from the imperial court.¹⁴ Simokatta is not an objective observer from a distance but an author who frequently adopts the view endorsed by his positive heroes, intentionally introduced in his narrative, such as the ideal ruler Tiberius in Book I, an anonymous war veteran on the Persian front in Book II, and Domitianus, bishop of Melitene, in Book V. Their speeches – this critical weapon that grants narrative advantages to any historian who follows the classicizing tradition – enshrine political ideas shared by the 'playwright' and author.¹⁵ Their main function is to dramatize a situation, not to depict a personality. Yet

¹¹ See J. D. C. Frendo, 'History and panegyric in the age of Heraclius: the literary background to the composition of the *Histories* of Theophylact Simocatta', *DOP* 42 (1988), 143–56 (esp. 147–51). Speck drew similar conclusions holding that *EH* is a work of propaganda for Heraclius in 'Gedächtnisfeier am Grabe des Maurikios', 182–5 and 244–52.

¹² Whitby, 'Greek historical writing', 49, n. 104.

¹³ A. M. Taragna, 'Il me revêtit d'un habit resplendissant: l'écriture de l'histoire chez Théophylacte Symocatta', in Odorico, *et al.*, eds., *L'écriture de la mémoire*, 67–84.

¹⁴ This possible double hint at his Egyptian origins and independence from the imperial court, which passed unnoticed by Frendo and Taragna, is in fact the first autobiographical allusion that Th. inserts in his narrative.

¹⁵ *EH* includes twenty-two orations and seven letters; see A. M. Taragna, *Logoi historias: discorsi e lettere nella prima storiografia retorica bizantina*, Hellenica 7

what were these ideas? And by what rhetorical means were they literarily achieved? It is worth noting them, keeping these questions in mind as we proceed through a brief but sequential reading of Theophylact's text.

Mostly devoted to a sole emperor, Maurice, the *Ecumenical History* was by no means meant to be his biography or eulogy. He is no doubt the central figure of the drama, without, however, steadily attracting narrative focus. The author never feels sanguine about him, and the few positive portraits of Maurice are immediately followed by negative ones.¹⁶ Thus, rather pompously introduced right after the proem, Maurice is cautiously reminded right afterwards by the dying Tiberius that those 'who possess abundance of power are likely also to be attended by more numerous faults' (I.1.6); and his end was envisioned in a dream that his predecessor saw as he lay dying. A critical reader of this section, Photios was fairly right in seeing in this a foretelling (προαγόρευσις) of a tragedy.¹⁷ Tiberius' death caused a deep mourning among the population, for, in the words of the author, 'subjects are accustomed to suffer upon the untimely decease of those who have ascended to power, at any rate if they began their rule in a winning and popular manner'.¹⁸ Things were thus left at an ideal standpoint, but dramatic developments were about to ensue.

In Book I we receive a clear view of what troubles lay in store. We first hear that on the Balkan front peace was disrupted by the Avars and an attempt was made by Maurice to restore it by dispatching to the khagan all kinds of gifts: but neither an elephant, whom the barbarian either feared or scorned, nor a golden bed, nor a generous amount of tribute, sufficed to prevent barbaric aggression. Singidunum was lost, and at this point Theophylact's criticism is targeted against the sluggishness of the Thracian army that was occasioned by the long-lasting peace. Sent as an ambassador on a peace mission, the *scribon* Comentiolus delivers a long

(Alessandria, 2000), 185–7 and 239–41 (where a table with their distribution by book and a more detailed one with orators and addressees).

¹⁶ Contra P. Allen, *Evagrius Scholasticus the Church Historian* (Louvain, 1981), 14–15 (who speaks of Th.'s encomiastic exaggeration towards Maurice); and A. M. Taragna, 'Osservazioni sul προοίμιον delle *Historiae* di Teofilatto Simocatta', *Quaderni del Dipartimento di Filologia, Linguistica e Tradizione classica dell'Università degli Studi di Torino* 11 (1998), 264, who considers that *EH* is a text much concerned with the *Bios* of the emperor; cf. *eadem*, *Logoi historias*, 198. By contrast, I. V. Krivushin cautiously speaks of a multicoloured portrayal of Maurice: 'Les personnages dans les *Histoires* de Théophylacte Simocatta', *BSI* 55 (1994), 12.

¹⁷ Photios' full citation as in his *Bibliothēke*, cod. 65, I, 80.34–6: 'ἦν δ' ἄρα ταῦτα ἐκεῖνα τραγωδίας τινὸς προαγόρευσις τῆς ἀνὰ τὸν παλαμναῖον Φωκᾶν ἀνοσιουργοῦ τυραννίδος.'

¹⁸ Whitby and Whitby (p. 23) wrongly translate δεινοπαθεῖν as 'to show great grief'; for a similar meaning of the word but in a different context see *EH* 3.1.15:112,13.

speech defending the rights of the Romans. Like other orators who will be introduced in the narrative, be they Byzantines, Persians or Avars, Comentiolus will gain his point not in the short- but in the long run. What Simokatta parenthetically states in Book VI, namely that 'the might of the tongue can rule nature, impose laws on necessity, re-channel processes of thought, change fortune, and transform, mould, and fashion everything in obedience',¹⁹ is mostly justified in the hortatory harangues pronounced by generals, lower-ranking officers, or bishops addressing the troops. In many instances in Theophylact's account the course of events is redirected, reoriented or subverted through this kind of speech.

By the same token, stories (δηγήσεις, ἀφηγήσεις or ἀφηγήματα) fulfil a symbolic purpose. Until his eighth and last book, Theophylact favours contrasting imagery in which negative situations alternate with positive counterpoints. Thus, in Book I, we are transferred from the Persian war front to the wedding of Maurice, then to the fire that broke out in the Forum in Constantinople, then to the episode of Paulinus. This was a magician who put a silver basin in the service of his abominable practices, but whose act of treachery was unveiled after some time. Brought to the palace to be judged by the emperor, he almost managed to win a pardon. Nonetheless, succumbing to the persistent demands of the patriarch John the Faster (Νηστευτής), Maurice condemned the man to capital punishment. Before suffering impalement, we are told, Paulinus was forced to witness the cruel execution of his son, who had joined his father in evil practices. Now, the same episode is recorded in the *Coptic Chronicle* of John of Nikiu, with the patriarch appearing strongly intransigent and criticism directed against 'those who followed Paulinus in his evil practices' and 'sought to save him'; as the same chapter has it, even Maurice himself was said to have followed 'heathen practices'.²⁰

Commenting on this passage on two different occasions, Joseph Frendo drew attention to the role of the patriarch and the emperor as well as to the attitude of Simokatta towards both of them.²¹ There is no doubt that,

¹⁹ See EH 6.8.2:234; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 170.

²⁰ See ch. 98, ed. E. H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John (c. 690AD) Coptic bishop of Nikiu, being a history of Egypt before and during the Arab conquest*, trans. H. Zotenberg's edition of the Ethiopic versions (London, 1916; repr. Amsterdam, 1982), 161–2. The story resembles one narrated in ch. 42 of the *Life of St Theodore of Sykeon*; see A. J. Festugière, ed. and trans., *Vie de Théodore de Sykéon*, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 48 (Brussels, 1970), 36–8.

²¹ Frendo, 'History and panegyric' (as in note 11), 155; and, more extensively, *idem*, 'Three authors in search of a reader: an approach to the analysis of direct discourse in Procopius, Agathias and Theophylact Simocatta', in Sode and Takács, eds., *Novum Millennium*, 123–35. For a discussion of the device of execution see P. Speck, 'Eine Quelle zum Tod an der Furca', *JÖB* 42 (1992), 83–5.

embedding as he did this story in his main narrative, Simokatta's primary purpose was not just edifying and entertaining; nor did he aim at redeeming the posthumous reputation of Maurice, as Frendo suggests.²² Notably, in the *Coptic Chronicle* the detail about the son who was executed before his father's eyes is missing, thereby raising suspicion. Why has Theophylact rounded off his narration by adding this particular detail? The answer could be sought further down in his account, where we encounter two similar events. First, in Book IV, the Persian Hormisdas (Hormizd, Hurmazd), the son of Chosroes I (Khusro, Khusrau), witnessed both the slaughter of his son and the more cruel execution of his wife; Theophylact comments, 'such destruction of his wife's life before a public audience, together with his wretched son's, constituted the material of tragedy'.²³ As it happens, Hormisdas is absolutely denigrated in Theophylact's account, being the first in the *Ecumenical History's* narrative upon whom the attribute *τύραννος* is bestowed, regardless of the fact that he was the legitimate successor to the Persian throne. It was the inescapable culmination of this tragedy that the tyrant met a violent death that, in turn, was followed by the establishment of another *τύραννος*, his son Chosroes II. More interestingly, the culmination of what happened at the barbarians' court and, before that, to the magician Paulinus, emerges in Book VIII: a touching description of Maurice's own execution by the tyrant Phocas also has him witness to the cruel death of his two sons. It is thus not accidental that he introduces the episode of the execution of Paulinus and his sons in Book I, where a historiographer sets forth his basic ideas and ultimate goals. Apart from a tinge of tragic irony, it must have conveyed a broader message that we cannot fully grasp. Did this somehow carry an implicit criticism of Maurice for being submissive to the patriarch?

In Book II we lose sight of Maurice. The stage is occupied by his generals Philippicus, Comentiolus and, most notably, the elder Heraclius or 'Heraclius the father of the emperor Heraclius', as he is repetitively styled.²⁴ Moving away from the Persian to the Avar battlefield, Theophylact inserts a pair of speeches in opposition addressed to the Roman troops by his favourite 'secondary characters': the first is by a *χιλίαρχος* of Comentiolus

²² Frendo surmises that this source is likely to have been the *vita*, now almost completely lost, of the patriarch John the Faster by Photeinos; see 'History and panegyric', 156. For arguments against this hypothesis and in favour of the possible dependence of Th. on the Copt chronicler see Whitby, 'Greek historical writing', 51, n. 111.

²³ See *EH* 6. 6.2–4:160; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 111.

²⁴ Although it is true that the elder Heraclius is the only general directly praised by Th. (III 6.2:120.6–9), Frendo's contention ('History and panegyric', 151) that these references to Heraclius Senior's exploits imply a kind of 'panegyric by indirection' is hardly convincing.

and aims both at discouraging the soldiers from fighting in a risky cause and at persuading them to retreat; the second is by a war veteran who, echoing the Periclean Funeral Oration, defends the greatness of Rome and the courage of its soldiers. Maurice is nowhere named yet implied and implicated by both. 'These relatively small successes', says the first, 'delude the emperor, and he will not dispense additional allied assistance for us, since he has not yet learned of the more recent ill fortunes'; 'I am amazed if the barbarians are rushing around near the Long Walls', says the other, 'and the emperor has not been aroused, when such great confusion is surging in the city'.²⁵

In Book III, entirely set on the eastern frontier, we first detect the emergence of a Christian element. The bishops of Damascus and Edessa were needed to encourage and appease an army on the verge of rebellion. The scene is characterized by feelings of disharmony among the Roman army and rivalry among its generals. Philippicus, *magister militum per Orientem*, is blamed by Priscus as Maurice's adviser for reducing the soldiers' stipends (III 2–3) and is finally replaced (III 5.16). The situation at the Persian court, which Theophylact relates immediately after, is not pleasant either: the death of Chosroes I raises sentiments of defection and the question of tyranny comes to the fore. This context of general chaos and instability offers a pretext for Theophylact to insert a long excursus, his own 'Archaeology' (III 9–18), and refer to the outbreak of the war and its causes. He offers his readers/listeners a brief chronicle from Justinian to Justin II and from Tiberius to Maurice, but the historian's eye is not so much turned to the past as to the future. Once again, we hear the voice of the emperor in a 'mirror-of-princes'-like speech now pronounced in a brief moment of lucidity by the mentally ill Justin II. At variance with Procopius and Agathias, Simokatta grants the 'privilege' of speech to emperors, yet not to the reigning emperor, namely Maurice, but to his predecessors; their words are words of advice to their successors.²⁶

Indeed, in his short speech, composed in short sentences reminiscent of the Psalms, Justin warns his successor Tiberius 'not to delight in bloodshed', 'not to be party of murders', 'not to repay evil with evil', and concludes with such words of advice as 'pay attention to your army', 'do not entertain slanderers', 'do not let men say to you that your predecessor behaved thus'.²⁷ Contrasting the long speeches of a *chiliarchos* or a war

²⁵ EH 2.13.12 and 14.9: 96 and 98; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 62–3.

²⁶ On this issue see Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea*, 48: 'one could even say that Justinian is relatively absent from the work, despite being its alleged protagonist'. On the speeches of Justin II to Tiberius and of the latter to Maurice as 'mirrors of princes' integrated in the historical narrative see G. Prinzing, 'Beobachtungen zu "integrierten" Fürstenspiegeln der Byzantiner', *JÖB* 38 (1988), 6–12.

²⁷ EH 3.11.9–11: 133; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 89–90.

veteran that are fully adjusted to the requirements of *Kunstprosa*, the naked exposition of the emperor's words, as the historian explains, was prompted by the need for veracity. What mattered was not only a naked exposition of an emperor whom Theophylact consistently portrays in negative terms, but immediacy and foresight of the danger generated by a policy lacking in prudence. The 'Archaeology' is rounded off with a long speech of genuine crusading inspiration where personal heroism is praised and Persian religion is reprimanded. Delivered by the general Justinian, a distant cousin of Justin II, it is again given in a succession of short sentences, some in metre, yet cast in a higher style than that of Justin.²⁸

Book IV is devoted to regime change in Persia and the ensuing contacts with Constantinople. Implicit words of advice and prophecy are now put in the mouth of the enemy. Following the Herodotean tradition, Theophylact sets his second antithetical pair of speeches by bringing the internal affairs and problems of the Romans into the Persian palace;²⁹ yet, in fact, the oppositional speeches of the fallen tyrant Hormisdas and the Persian noble Bindoes have an accumulative rather than a dialectical effect, for they both converge on how the problem of tyranny can be treated. Taken from prison, Hormisdas warns his spectators about the fall of the Persian kingdom that might be caused 'because of tyranny' (διὰ τὸ τυραννόν). 'Unless you winnow out the tyrants, you will lead the kingdom into servitude and be a plaything for the nations (ἔθνη) when you have acquired vulnerability through the discordant conduct of life'.³⁰ In the place of his son Chosroes, a 'belligerent warmonger', Hormisdas in vain proposes his other son as his successor. In his antilogy the Persian Bindoes derogatorily denies him the rights of counselling and admonition, concluding his speech with the words: 'let the destruction of one man be a lesson in prudence and let this be a most equitable law, a salvation for those to come'. Together with his son and his wife, Hormisdas is driven to a most violent death hinted at above, and the empire passes to another tyrant, Chosroes. To be sure, Hormisdas' aversion towards his son Chosroes is also that of Theophylact

²⁸ Notably, some clauses of this speech are in a twelve-syllable metre; see *EH* 3.13.11–12:137.8–14.

²⁹ Herodotus in his *Historia* III 80–82 was the first to have presented the case for democracy, oligarchy and monarchy, a debate purely Greek in conception, in a trilogy of speeches exchanged between Persian nobles. For the representation or misrepresentation of the Persian events in question in the *EH* see D. Frendo, 'Theophylact Simocatta on the revolt of Bahram Chobin and the early career of Khusrau II', *Bulletin of the Asian Institute*, n.s. 3 (1989), 77–88.

³⁰ *EH* 4. 4.13: 157; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 108.

and his times, but this contemporary echo does more than merely generate a hostile attitude.³¹

In what comes next, the words of the speakers delve into much more significant issues. Confronted with the difficulties derived from his conflict with the usurper Bahram and seeking assistance from Constantinople, Chosroes sends to Maurice first a letter, then an embassy to the Great Palace to restate and reinforce the previous arguments about the 'two eyes', i.e. the greatest powers by which 'the disobedient and bellicose tribes are winnowed'.³² It is from the most distinguished of the ambassadors who, as a means of *captatio benevolentiae*, mixed words with tears that we hear about the impossibility of a single nation coping with the innumerable cares of the organization of the universe. 'Even though the Persians were to be deprived of power, power would immediately transfer to other men', Theophylact warns us, and adduces such conspicuous examples of the past as the Medes being taken over by the Persians and the latter succumbing to the Parthians; or the ambitious Alexander who yearned for Indian power and threatened to subjugate Libya, but, instead of becoming a single unitary rule, his kingdom was divided up into a leadership of multiple tyranny (τὴν πολυτύραννον ... ἡγεμονίαν). And through the Persian ambassador, Simokatta exclaims: 'what prosperity would events devolve upon Romans if the Persians are deprived of power and transmit mastery to another tribe?'³³

This mention of successive empires and rules that subvert one another harks back to the Archaeology of Book III (chs. 9–10) and the root of all contemporary evil. Yet which tribe is this that might overthrow Persian

³¹ T. Olajos, *Les sources de Théophylacte Simocatta historien* (Budapest and Leiden, 1988), 61.

³² EH 4.11.2–3:169; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 117 and n. 40 (for a parallel in Peter the Patrician's lost History, fr. 12). Note that, later on, in the patriarch Nicholas Mystikos' correspondence, the polity of the Abbasids was, like that of the Sassanians, paired with the Roman empire as 'constituting the two eyes of the universe': see L. G. Westerink and R. J. H. Jenkins, eds. and trans., *Nicholas I Patriarch of Constantinople: Letters*, CFHB 6, Series Washingtonensis (Washington, DC, 1973), 2–3. On the question of the authenticity of the letters exchanged between Chosroes II and Maurice see Cl. A. Ciancaglini, 'Le "lettere persiane" nelle Storie di Teofilatto Simocatta', in *La Persia e Bisanzio*, Atti dei convegni Lincei 201 (Rome, 2004), 639–49; for a presentation of the ideas prevailing in the letter of Chosroes see Brodka, *Die Geschichtsphilosophie*, 196–8 and 203–9.

³³ EH 4. 13.13: 175. Unlike Whitby and Whitby (p. 122), I translate φῶλον as 'tribe' and not as 'nation'. Schreiner translates it as 'Stamm' [*Theophylaktos* (note 6 above), 132]. This passage was interpreted as ironic rather than a prophecy to the expansion of the Arabs by R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 54–5.

rule, and, like Alexander, reach as far as India and threaten Libya? What is the chronological scope of the prophecies enshrined in these speeches, which are undoubtedly Theophylact's own literary inventions and personal concerns? Being clear allusions to the expansion of the Arabs, as I believe, and pointers to a dating of the *Ecumenical History* in the period from c. 638 to 642, these words of the Persian ambassador can account for the dramatic change in the narrative that we observe from the end of Book IV onwards.³⁴

When in Book V war against the usurper Bahram is brought to a glorious conclusion, Simokatta returns, once again, to the idea of the 'succession and end of empires', highlighted here by mutual and intersecting prophecies: as he was well-versed in the 'vain wisdom' of the Chaldean astrologers, Chosroes predicted that the gods would send troubles back to the Romans and that the Babylonian race would get hold of the Roman empire for *a threefold cyclic hebdomad of years* and that the Romans would enslave the Persians on the *fifth hebdomad of years*.³⁵ This astrological type of prophecy

³⁴ In a casual aside T. Olajos implies a later date of composition: 'que son activité ait duré jusqu'au début de la conquête arabe et que cet événement d'une importance historique universelle ait influencé son opinion, reste encore à prouver bien que d'après quelques passages (par exemple 3.9,11; 17,7; 4.11,2-3; 13,6-13) on puisse le supposer'; see *Les sources de Théophylacte*, 11. In a similar vein, Schreiner is inclined to endorse the same view: see *Theophylaktos*, 2-3 and esp. n. 591: 'Die prophetischen Worte dieser Rede haben sich als wahr erwiesen, und es bleibt die Frage, ob sie nur "prophetisch" waren oder *post festum*, d.h. nach 636 niedergeschrieben wurden. Ich möchte letzteres für wahrscheinlicher halten. Dies würde bedeuten, daß Th. seine Geschichte endgültig erst kurz vor dem Tod des Herakleios redigiert hat'. Cf. also W. Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2003), 84.

³⁵ *EH* 5.15.6-7: 216-7. Different interpretations have been put forward as to the exact calculation and meaning of these puzzling expressions; Whitby and Whitby, 153, n. 80 reckon that the *threefold cyclic hebdomad of years* points to the years before 622, whereas the *fifth hebdomad of years* hints at the years of Heraclius' campaign (622-28). The hebdomad missing from this calculation must both have been one of peace and have preceded the Persian conquest. For Schreiner the starting year was 591, i.e. when peace was interrupted, and the *fifth hebdomad* coincided again with the years of Heraclius' Persian campaign: *Theophylaktos*, 160 and 320 n. 784. While rejecting the interpretation of M. and M. Whitby, G. J. Reinink suggested that Chosroes' prophecy intended to show the relativity and the short-term impact of both Persian and Roman military successes; see 'Heraclius, the new Alexander: Apocalyptic prophecies during the reign of Heraclius', in Reinink and B. H. Stolte, eds., *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, Groningen Studies in Cultural Change II (Louvain, 2002), 86-9. Yet, as Th. clearly speaks of enslavement of the Persians, the *fifth hebdomad* could be no other than the one following 628; cf. Treadgold, *The Early Byzantine Historians*, 332. On the whole prophecy and its relationship to contemporary belief in the imminence of world's

found response to the episode that is related immediately afterwards: dispatched as an ambassador to the Persian king, the bishop of Chalcedon, Probus, was asked to show to him an image of the Mother of God; once he venerated it, Chosroes said that its archetype appeared to him and revealed that the victories of Alexander of Macedon would be granted to him. Simokatta comments that the prophecy was already fulfilled because Chosroes had returned to his palace and overpowered the tyrants 'through the strength and the power of the emperor' (meaning Maurice).³⁶

The cycle of Persian events thus concluded, Theophylact turns attention back to Europe and, at long last, to the Roman emperor. How is Maurice presented in the three last books, which correspond to the second half of his reign and ten years of Byzantine history (592–602)? The overall impression is that the emperor is simply a passive actor, unable to embark on righteous initiatives or proceed to justified decisions. The attempts of the senate, the patriarch and the empress to dissuade him from campaigning against the Avars in Anchialos are altogether fruitless. Having been discouraged by the human representatives of power, he is then averted from launching his Thracian expedition by the elements of nature: a great eclipse of the sun, violent gusts of wind, and a boar threatening to throw him from his horse's seat. Omens further militate against his presence in Thrace, as a woman in Herakleia is reported to have given birth to a monster, and a herd of deer attack him while he is marching.

It is after this last episode with the deer that a crime story unfolds in detail. Although it was a Gepid soldier who murdered an imperial attendant, the emperor imposed the death penalty upon a peasant who discovered the victim's dead body. Split into two sections that are placed at distant points in the narrative, this detective story has its mystery finally solved with an emblematic phrase: 'it is not beside the point to describe as well the causation of the active Providence which daily traverses the whole world, watches over mortal affairs with its untiring eye, and always administers to mankind retribution for acts of violence'.³⁷ To be sure, these words do not involve solely the infamous Gepid soldier but the emperor

end see P. Magdalino, 'The history of the future and its uses: prophecy, policy, and propaganda', in R. Beaton and C. Roueché, eds., *The Making of Byzantine History: Studies dedicated to Donald M. Nicol* (Aldershot, 1993), 18–19; and *idem*, *L'Orthodoxie des astrologues. La science entre le dogme et la divination à Byzance (VII^e–XIV^e siècle)*, *Réalités byzantines* 12 (Paris, 2006), 39. On the medieval idea of the succession of the four kingdoms echoing the biblical dream of Daniel as in *The Book of Daniel* ch. 7 see H. Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1980), 148–54.

³⁶ *EH* 5.15.9–11: 216–7; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 154.

³⁷ The story is first inserted in *EH* 6. 2, then resumed and rounded out in 6.10: 222–3 and 239–42; the saying is in 6.10.4: 239, trans. Whitby and Whitby, 174. For

himself who, once again after the episode of Paulinus, had, through his own judicial decisions, stained his hands with blood.

Kaiserkritik is intensified in the context of the Balkan campaign against the Avars. The reluctance of the army to fight comes gradually to the fore, and Simokatta undermines the justification of this war through various rhetorical means: speeches of the Avar ambassador Koch (VI 6.7–12) and of the Avar Khagan (VII 10 and 15), the narration about Sesostris by the ambassador Theodore (styled as a man with a free tongue), and the accusations of inertia brought by the emperor against his brother Peter, recently appointed general in the Balkan front and seriously wounded by a boar while hunting (VII 2.11–14). Notably, the picture of Maurice drawn up here is markedly different from the one in Evagrius.³⁸ The profile of a pious emperor, so conspicuously promoted in the last book of the ecclesiastical historian's work, is symbolically discarded in Simokatta's report on the death of John the Faster. In a clear flicker of irony the two roles are masterfully crossed by mutual transposition of vocabulary; for we are told that the patriarch owed his nickname to his ability to resist pleasure through his philosophy (καταφιλοσοφῆσαι τῶν ἡδονῶν), master passions as would a tyrant (τυραννῆσαι τῶν παθῶν), and become master of the belly (αὐτοκράτορά τε τῆς κοιλίας γενέσθαι), whereas the emperor passed his nights during Lent on the priest's wooden bedstead, 'as if he thought that he would partake of divine grace thereby'.³⁹ Notably, this is the second mention of the patriarch John the Faster in the whole narrative, and the obvious meaning of this passage is that the emperor failed to emulate him in virtue. Yet was Simokatta's irony directed towards something further? Did he insinuate, as in the case of Paulinus, that the patriarch did eventually win over the emperor?

As a land of trouble and the starting-point of the rising tyrant, Thrace is the next-to-last stage in the drama but, all of a sudden, Theophylact retreats, now by means of a geographical transposition, to Egypt. Coming from the other end of the empire and the author's place of origin, the epiphany of anthropomorphic and other animals of the Nile brings a last omen into the narrative (VII 16). Clearly, both the animals attacking humans in Thrace

the question as to where Th. may have borrowed this story from see Olajos, *Les sources de Théophylacte*, 138–9.

³⁸ Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, ch. VI, 222–41; for the panegyric way Maurice is treated by Evagrius see M. Whitby, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, Translated Texts for Historians 33 (Liverpool, 2000), xlvii–xlix.

³⁹ *EH* 7.6.1–5: 254–5. This example alone suffices to discard Michael and Mary Whitby's contention that 'Th.'s use of a similar ornate style for the most rhetorical passages of the *History* indicates that he was not parodying, but imitating, Christian rhetoric, which provided a stylistic ideal to be set alongside the Greek of classical writers'; see *The History of Theophylact*, xxviii.

and the awe-inspiring human monsters in Egypt function as omens. Yet prophecy cannot explain history and human political responsibility, as this derives from the acts of the men of power; first and foremost, animals and monsters emerge in the narrative in order to suggest how frail and vulnerable a king can be. The Christian Simokatta uses them throughout his narrative with an ironical and not an apocalyptic intention.

What we have read so far in the seven books of the *Ecumenical History* are rather vague anticipations of the culmination of Simokatta's narrative. What was kept in store is brought to the surface in Book VIII, now set in Constantinople, with the tragic hero Maurice and all other major figures of the plot (Priscus, Peter, Comentiolus) coming to centre stage. Neither speeches nor stories can any longer be of any use, and the narrative unfolds in short sentences creating an atmosphere of suspense.⁴⁰

In spite of the army's reaction, Maurice urged his reluctant brother Peter to move ahead with his army and cross the Danube. The crowds disobeyed, and Phocas was proclaimed their leader. For once, as the messenger brought the bad news, we gain sight of the palace and its prominent dweller who, however, proved inferior to critical circumstances. There is no point in retelling the tragic conclusion of the story. One after another all the protagonists of the *Ecumenical History* meet a violent end and Simokatta for the first time casts a sympathetic eye upon his tragic hero: besides revealing to his murderers where his child was hiding, Maurice asked, by his letters to the most venerable churches of the inhabited world, that the Lord Christ would punish him in this and not the afterlife. This is part of the so-called hagiography of Maurice that developed soon after his death. It is inserted here to confirm the author's conviction that the emperor had a great deal of responsibility for meeting this tragic ending.⁴¹

But what was wrong with Maurice? Was he guilty of any sins? And, if so, which ones? With *Kaiserkritik* constantly creeping into his account, Simokatta blamed the ruler for lack of political shrewdness, inability to cope with or understand the shaken military morale, sluggishness, and consideration of military and political developments from a distance. By

⁴⁰ The only speech inserted here is Th.'s own funeral oration for Maurice (8.12.5), of which only a few sentences survive in Vaticanus gr. 977; Whitby held that by so doing 'Th. did not want to interrupt the narrative' (*The Emperor Maurice*, 49). On stylistic grounds, basically the use of I-person in the narrative, Speck suggested that the speech was an interpolation by a later redactor who, however, copied it down from an oration delivered by Th. after Phocas' fall in 610: see 'Gedächtnisfeier am Grabe des Maurikios', 199–212.

⁴¹ Judging from *EH*, the 'hagiography' must have developed not much after Maurice's death; see J. Wortley, 'The Legend of the Emperor Maurice', *Actes du XV^e Congrès international d'études byzantines. Athènes Septembre 1976*, IV. Histoire, Communications (Athens, 1980), 382–91.

contrast, private sins and vices were not serious grounds for criticism, since knowledge of them derived from the rumours of the anonymous mob.⁴² Maurice's faults were secular, not religious. However, having thus decided to conform to the classical tradition according to which the protagonists of history are responsible for their own acts, Theophylact had to further contribute his own Christian views on causation;⁴³ for him, predestination was another factor that might determine human life. In his extant short treatise on this particular subject, he set forth arguments both in favour and against those who maintain that human life is predestined by quoting relevant passages from the Bible. Taking a different stance himself from both parties, neither did he accept predestination, as this was a Greek concept typical of a tyrannical Deity, nor did he uphold indeterminacy since infinity may be attributed to God alone. He concluded that 'both length of life and its curtailment arising from death are of our own free choice' and that 'supplementation of life and bringing on of death are literally mortised to the human race through virtue or vice'.⁴⁴ By laying emphasis on prophecies, omens and rhetorical warnings in his *Ecumenical History*, Theophylact assigned to *tyche* a new, Christian meaning, making it contingent upon God's response to human virtue or vice.⁴⁵

The tragic end of Maurice in 602 may seem to us a remote event, but it was not so to the author Theophylact, although the time of composition of his *History* at least postdated the Persian defeat in 628. Paradoxically, in the concluding pages of his Book VIII and in an oft-quoted passage, we are told that a kind of prophecy had to be fulfilled before the Persians of Chosroes could be defeated. It was during the final battle against them on 12 December 627 that Heraclius found out that there were two soldiers alone left from the army that marched with Phocas to Constantinople, 'even though the intervening years had not been numerous'.⁴⁶ This

⁴² See the words inserted in defence of Maurice in 2.17.5 and 8.9.9:103–4 and 301. For a detailed account of the events see D. M. Olster, *The Politics of Usurpation in the Seventh Century: Rhetoric and Revolution in Byzantium* (Amsterdam, 1993), 52–60. However, I disagree with him when he states that for Maurice's fall Th. puts the blame on the demes and the mob's frenzy, *ibid.*, 53.

⁴³ Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice*, 323–4, prefers to consider it 'haphazard'.

⁴⁴ See *Theophylactus Simocates: On Predestined Terms of Life*, Greek text and English trans. by C. Garton and L. G. Westerink, *Arethusa Monographs VI* (Buffalo, NY, 1978), 24–5.

⁴⁵ The whole question requires further discussion, which cannot be undertaken here. For the function it acquires in Procopius' *Wars* see Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea*, 165–221.

⁴⁶ *EH* 8.12.12:308: '... δύο καὶ μόνους στρατιώτας τῆς φιλοτυράννου πληθούς ὑπολελειμμένους ἐξεῦρεν, καίτοι μὴ πολλῶν μεσολαβησάντων τῶν χρόνων'; trans. Whitby and Whitby, 230. Speck suggested that this sentence derived from

generation of murderers had to be exterminated to achieve a sort of *catharsis*. Significantly and contrary to what one might have expected, the twenty-five years that separated the death of his main hero from the victorious end of Heraclius' campaign were not seen by Theophylact as many, nor had they extinguished memories. Persons, stories, situations and ideas related to Maurice's gloomy story were not yet dead and buried. Writing thus not long after, as he thought, the years of tyranny, Simokatta wove a kind of protracted history with a clear projection into the future. Maurice's calamities were a serious and wise warning for the present emperor, namely Heraclius. The problem of tyranny and the idea that the ruler should provide happiness and not cause troubles to his subjects were too diachronic and universal to be confined to the reign of Maurice and his mongrel barbarian (μιξοβάρβαρος) successor.⁴⁷

the hand of a redactor that intervened after the death of Th.: 'Gedächtnisfeier am Grabe des Maurikios', 186–98.

⁴⁷ The expression μιξοβάρβαρος τύραννος referring to Phocas occurs in *EH* 8.10.4: 303.