JAN J. VAN GINKEL, UNIVERSITY OF UTRECHT

[1]   "Few texts in an oriental language can be of such interest to students of the Graeco-Roman world as the `Chronicle of Joshua [sic] the Stylite'" (vii).[1] Thus Trombley and Watt begin their preface to this easy to use translation and commentary of an extraordinary text. For their translation they have used the CSCO edition   by J.-B. Chabot,[2] but they have preserved the section numbers (§§) by William Wright,[3] as these are most commonly used for reference to this text. Some later text corrections have been used for the translation and are indicated in the footnotes. The Syriac text itself bears the following title: 'A Historical Narrative of the Period of Distress which occurred in Edessa, Amid, and all Mesopotamia'. This title immediately illustrates one particular aspect of this text. It focuses on a brief period—12 years—in history of a very limited geographical area—Mesopotamia. After a prooemium styled as a letter addressed to the abbot Sergius (§§ 1–6) the narrative starts with an account of the political situation in the Byzantine and Persian empires leading up to the outbreak of hostilities in 502 A.D. (§§ 7–24). Next the author 'interrupts' his narrative with a chronicle of events in Edessa during 494–502 A.D. describing portents, pestilence, famine and plague (§§ 25–46a). After this expose the chronicle continues with a detailed account of the war from 502–6 A.D. (§§ 46b–100) and ends with an epilogue once again addressed to Sergius (§ 101). The political situation is described in a continuous narrative, but the rest of the chronicle is

----

[1] Trombley and Watt use, with good reason (xxiv–xxvi), throughout the book the title `Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite'. I will refer to the introduction by (roman) page numbers, to the translation by section numbers.

[2] J.-B. Chabot, *Incerti auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum* (CSCO 91; Louvain, 1927).

[3] W. Wright, *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite, composed in Syriac, A.D. 507, with a translation into English and Notes* (Cambridge, 1882).

a chronological account on a year-by-year basis. Although it is structured year by year, the account is so extensive that the year lemmata could qualify as chapters of a narrative.

[2]   The text is preserved in one manuscript as part of a larger historiographical work, known as `the Chronicle of Zuqnin'.[4] The authorship of our chronicle and of the Zuqnin chronicle has been extensively discussed using a colophon in our chronicle added by a later copyist. Watt / Trombley (xxiv–xxvi) follow Harrak and others in naming Joshua the Stylite the copyist / author (?) of the Zuqnin chronicle.[5] Therefore the author of this particular text has to remain anonymous. He wrote the work almost immediately after the war (506 A.D.). A later copyist has added one sentence on the last years of the reign of Anastasius (xxviii–xxix).

[3]   This text is nearly completely independent of the known historiographical tradition. The author makes references to some 'old books' which he had used as sources, but it is impossible to identify them (xxx–xxxi). According to the author he relied on eye-witness accounts for the war and the preceding events (e.g. § 25, 34). Trombley argues strongly for the use of 'news sheets', official documents, which were read out load in the city announcing official news and edicts and which were then stored in the city archives (xxxii–xxxiv). In the text itself, however, these sheets are never mentioned. At least some of the material has been thoroughly reworked by the author into a continuous account of the war.

[4]   As to the reception of the text little can be said as well. The only chronicle containing references to this work is the Zuqnin chronicle, in which the work by Pseudo-Joshua is incorporated and preserved. Whether or not the author of the Zuqnin chronicle is

---

[4] The Zuqnin chronicle is also known as the 'Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius'. For an introduction and bibliography see W. Witakowski, *The Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre. A Study in the History of Historiography* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis Studia Semitica Upsaliensia 9; Uppsala, 1987) and A. Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin*, parts III and IV, A.D. 488–775 (Mediaeval sources in translation 36; Toronto, 1999).

[5] For a different conclusion see A. Luther, *Die syrische Chronik des Josua Stylites* (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte 49; Berlin, 1997) 12–16 and Witakowski (1987) and W. Witakowski, *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre Chronicle*, Part III (Translated Texts for Historians 22; Liverpool, 1996) xix–xxiii.

responsible for these references or his source (John of Ephesus ?) is not clear although most scholars opt for a direct link for the chronicler (xxii).

[5]   This chronicle is the only example of 'secular' or 'political' Syriac historiography, more or less disregarding ecclesiastical history and focusing on the 'causes of the war' (§ 6). Nevertheless, the chronicle is clearly a Christian text. The author is a Christian (xxvi–xxviii), addressing his work to an abbot named Sergius (xii–xiii), and describing the events as part of a greater Divine Plan by which God warns His people against un-Christian behaviour (xv–xvii, xix–xx). The account of this behaviour provides some unique insights into ordinary city life in the Sixth century and the development of a Christian culture filled with 'pagan' elements.

[6]   The text is also a 'Fundgrube' for historians of ancient economics. For several years the prices of wheat and other food products are mentioned. The reaction of the local administration to natural catastrophes like famine is documented. As a result the text is of interest for the study of the Byzantine administration as well. The detailed account of the war has enticed military and political historians for generations.[6] In comparison with other sources like Procopius and Pseudo-Zachariah seems to be a reliable source (xxxiv–xxxvii).

[7]   In the well-known tradition of Translated Texts for Historians Trombley and Watt have have opened up an important text to a larger audience of non-specialists. In the introduction content, structure and literary character, as well as authorship, transmission and date are discussed by Watt. Trombley gives his view on the historical value, sixth-century Mesopotamian society, especially during the war of 502–6, and the chronological systems. There is some unnecessary overlap between the two parts,[7] but on the whole the introduction is helpful for appreciating the chronicle.

[8]   The same is true about the maps and indexes. Although I would have preferred just one General Index in stead of an additional text index. Even more so since variants of names in 'the index of persons and places in text' are included in the General

---

[6] For a survey and new discussion see G.B. Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War, 502–532* (Leeds, 1998).

[7] Most notably on the Edessan festival of light, xvi–xvii and xxxix.

Index without indication in which index the main variant is to be found.[8]

[9]   The translation is accurate, but in a very readable English. The footnotes are on the whole to the point and focus on the direct understanding of the text.[9] Although William Wright and A. Luther among others (xxiii) have preceded this book with their rendering of the text, the combined knowledge of Trombley and Watt provide good access to this text with at times even refreshing new approaches.[10]

---

[8] E.g. "Bismideon, see Tell Beshmai" *General Index*, p. 157. "Tell Beshmai" *Index of Persons and Places*, p. 153.

[9] Trombley's interest in epigraphy is obvious in both introduction and footnotes.

[10] Wright is now outdated and Luther's commentary is not so pinpointed to specific elements in the text. In addition, the fact that Luther wrote in German will not endear his book to some students. However, using both books in combination will profit many a scholar wanting to use this text.