# *Introduction*

Procopius' *Persian Wars*, a work that was first published in A.D. 550/1, is one of the most important sources on both the eastern Roman empire and Persia in the sixth century. This is the first free-standing English translation of the work. The aim of this short Introduction is to place the work in its context – that is, both the historical context, i.e. the sixth-century world, and the place of the work in the tradition of writing history (historiography). This survey will be only cursory: there are many resources now available for those wanting more detailed information. The reader can find further details on them in the Further Reading section at the end of the Introduction.

## Procopius

What little is known of Procopius' life emerges from his own writings. As he tells us at the very start of *The Persian Wars*, he was born in Caesarea, Palestine. A prosperous port city with a sizeable, diverse population, it was also the seat of the governor of Palaestina Prima, parts of whose *praetorium* (headquarters) have been uncovered by archaeologists. The nearby city of Gaza was renowned as a centre of learning, both pagan and Christian, and several of its citizens produced works that still survive – Choricius (of Gaza) and Procopius (of Gaza), to name but two. It is worth noting here that the works of Thucydides were particularly prized at Gaza. Whether our Procopius studied in Gaza, however, is uncertain.

Having trained in the law, perhaps at Berytus (Beirut), he was appointed as the legal adviser or *assessor* (Greek *symboulos*) of the *dux* Belisarius in 527. He remained in the general's entourage for at least the following thirteen years, serving with him first in the East, where he witnessed his commander's victory at Dara in 530 and defeat at Callinicum in 531, then for his remarkable triumphs in the West, first in North Africa

against the Vandals (in 533–4), then in Italy against the Ostrogoths (535–40). He may well have accompanied the general subsequently when he returned to the East in 541–2, but he was back in Constantinople later that year, where he witnessed the ravages wrought by the plague, described at *Persian Wars* 2.22–3. For the most part, it is believed that he remained in Constantinople thereafter, working on the (first seven books of the) *Wars* and the *Anecdota* (or *Secret History*), both of which were completed by 550/1. As he composed his history he grew increasingly disenchanted with the way in which the Emperor Justinian conducted his wars, which had led to uprisings and setbacks in Italy and North Africa and to the sacking of Antioch, the most important city near the eastern frontier, in 540. A change of tone is perceptible in later passages, e.g. at 2.30.17, but it does not seem as though he attempted to rewrite sections written earlier; it is therefore difficult to pinpoint Procopius' views, which evidently varied over time.

While the *Anecdota*, Procopius' blazing indictment of the misdeeds of Justinian, Theodora and their ministers, naturally remained concealed, the first seven books of the *Wars*, so the historian tells us, enjoyed considerable success. He therefore produced an eighth book in 552/3 that extended his narrative of events in the East, in Lazica in particular, and in Italy, where he reported Narses' final defeat of the Ostrogothic leaders Totila and Teias. At some point in the 550s, more probably towards the middle of the decade, the *De Aedificiis* or *Buildings* was also published, a work that relates, in glowing terms, the various building projects initiated by the Emperor Justinian throughout the empire (apart from Italy).

Nothing further is known of the historian. A certain Procopius rose to the post of city prefect in 562 and in this role was called upon to investigate a supposed plot by Belisarius against the emperor; but there are no grounds for identifying him with our author.

## The Eastern Roman Empire in the Sixth Century

When people talk of the 'decline and fall of the Roman empire' they usually have in mind the collapse of the western empire in the fifth century. The causes of the relentless shrinking of the western empire, which continued steadily from 395 through to the deposition of the last emperor, Romulus, known as 'Augustulus', the little Augustus, in 476, remain a matter of fierce debate. For our purposes, it is best simply to underline that the pensioning off of the last emperor was by no means as dramatic

an event as has sometimes been imagined: the Senate in Rome continued to sit, while a series of non-Roman rulers, first Odoacer, then Theoderic the Ostrogoth, ruled in Italy and even somewhat beyond the peninsula. In the East, meanwhile, thanks in part to the massive city walls of Constantinople built in the early fifth century, imperial power survived. There were, to be sure, serious challenges to the stability of the East Roman state – which we call the (remaining) Roman empire, but which is also often referred to now as the Byzantine empire – such as Attila's Huns in the 440s, Gothic peoples in the Balkans in the 460s and 470s, and significant disputes about church doctrine that divided much of the East. The Emperor Zeno was even ousted from power briefly in 475–6, and, despite recovering his throne, struggled to re-establish control. Only under his successor, Anastasius (491–518), did the empire enjoy a period of relative calm, although it took a lengthy war in the 490s to secure Roman control of the highland province of Isauria, which was followed by a conflict with Persia. Nonetheless, notwithstanding continuing doctrinal disputes, Anastasius was able to put the empire on a sound financial footing and to bequeath to his successor, Justin I (518–27), a healthy treasury.

By this point, the contours of the eastern empire were well established (fig.1). The empire itself had been partitioned from 395, having been divided between the two sons of Theodosius I, Arcadius in the East and Honorius in the West. No one had necessarily thought that the division would become permanent, and the empire remained, at least in theory, a unified state, in which legislation passed in one half of the empire applied equally in the other. Eastern emperors made efforts to prop up their western counterparts, but in the end they proved inadequate. So while the Ostrogoths took over Italy – in this case, however, with the sanction of the East – the Vandals overran North Africa, the Franks and others established themselves in Gaul and the Visigoths in Spain, in the East the Balkans, Cyrenaica, Egypt, the Near East and Anatolia remained under Roman control. By the sixth century Constantinople had grown to become one of the largest cities in the eastern Mediterranean. Estimates of its population vary, but it certainly was between half a million and a million; only Antioch and Alexandria could rival it. From the capital, the emperors ruled the provinces and directed the empire's generals: Theodosius I had been the last ruler to take the field in person. The emperor was assisted by an extensive bureaucracy, situated mainly in Constantinople, but also in the provinces, each of which was in the

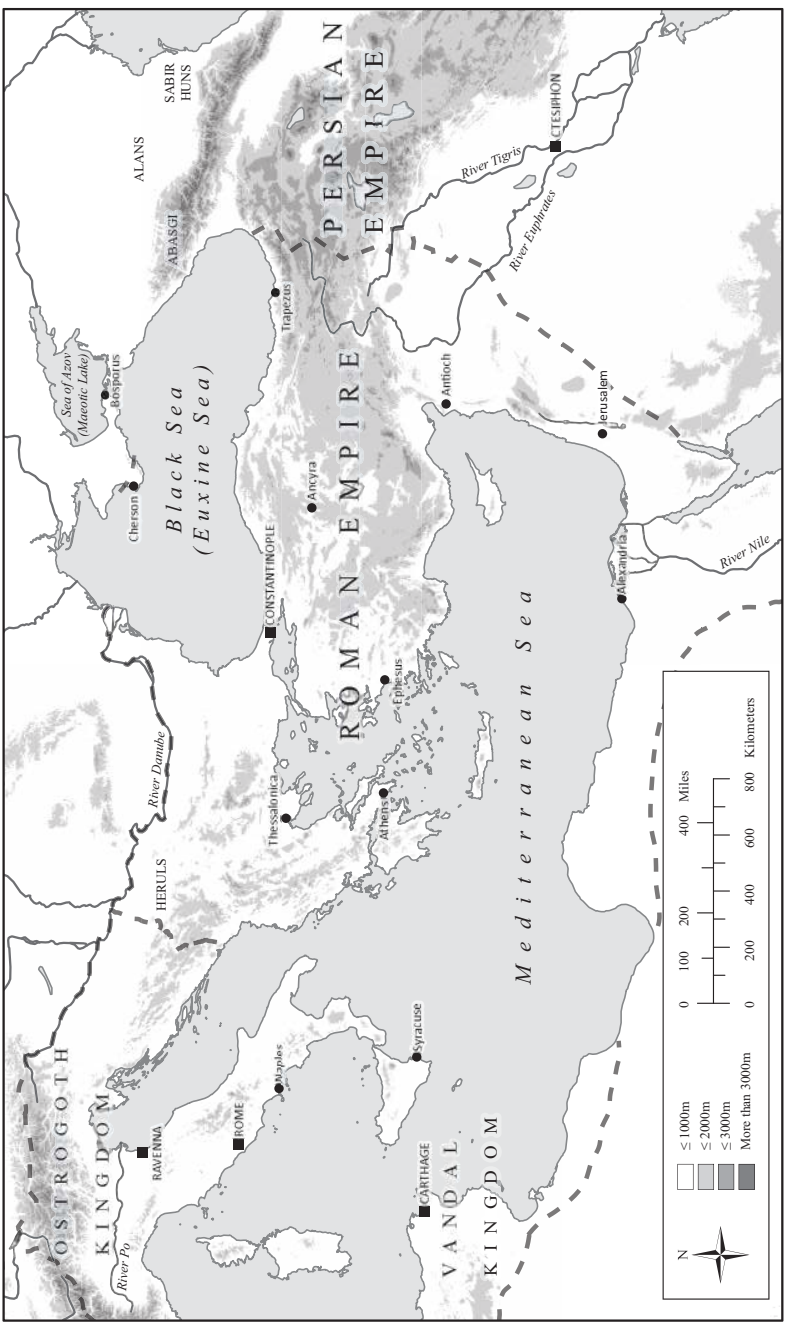


Figure 1 The Eastern Roman Empire in 527

hands of a governor; *duces* or dukes were responsible for military matters, while governors handled civil administration. In the senior bureaucracy *magistri militum*, i.e. 'masters of soldiers', were the highest-ranking generals, while on the civilian side – the two domains were generally kept separate – the praetorian prefect(s) were responsible for the administration of provinces and the raising of taxes from them. The *magister officiorum*, i.e. 'master of offices', straddled the two worlds, commanding troops in the palace and supervising protocol as well as engaging in diplomatic activity with foreign powers.

The reign of Justinian saw a remarkable expansion of the eastern empire: in the 530s eastern armies under Belisarius reconquered first North Africa from the Vandals, then Italy from the Ostrogoths. In both cases it proved difficult to maintain control as the newly conquered peoples resisted corrupt officials and often proved a match for incompetent and greedy Roman commanders. This was particularly true in Italy, where the Ostrogothic ruler Totila (541–52) rolled back nearly all east Roman gains over the 540s. Only with the despatch of substantial Roman reinforcements under Narses in the 550s was Italy finally definitively subdued. Roman forces also gained some footholds in Spain at this time; in the Balkans, meanwhile, they proved less effective at resisting invasions by Gepids, Lombards, Slavs and others.

An increasing proportion of the Roman empire was Christian. The process of Christianisation since the conversion of Constantine in the early fourth century was gradual, but over the fifth century the religion had taken firm root in the eastern Roman empire. Its impact was felt in all spheres of life, whether through the spread of churches and participation in religious rites or through the rhythm of the year's calendar, now punctuated by holy days and commemorations of saints and martyrs, or indeed through contact with monks and holy men. Of course, substantial swathes of the countryside remained pagan; many Romans might never see a holy man, bishop or monk, relying instead just on a local priest. In a Christian empire, the definition of faith took on a greater importance: it was essential that the empire and its ruler be orthodox, that the right faith prevail. Church councils were therefore summoned in order to establish orthodoxy. Over the fifth century controversy raged as to the precise nature of Christ: was he human, was he divine, or did he somehow combine these two natures? The Council of Chalcedon, held in 451, decreed that he was 'in two natures', human and divine. Many parts of the eastern empire were opposed to this definition, preferring to see him as combining the two natures in one: they are known today usually

as Miaphysites, though in older works they are called Monophysites. From 451 to 518 it was not clear, despite the Council's decisions, which interpretation would prevail. Under Justin and Justinian, however, the Council's decisions received imperial backing and were enforced through much of the empire (apart from Egypt). Channels of communication nonetheless remained open with anti-Chalcedonians, helped by the support of Justinian's wife Theodora, herself an opponent of the Council.

Not much of this aspect of Roman society is visible in Procopius' work, which is why it is worth mentioning it here. But the attentive reader will notice holy men (such as Jacob, 1.7.5–11), monks (1.7.22) and bishops (such as Megas, bishop of Beroea, 2.6.17, or Baradotus, bishop of Constantia, 2.13.13) in the narrative. Some of his descriptions of these people give the impression that a sixth-century reader would have been unfamiliar with them: Procopius goes out of his way to explain what a monk is, for instance. This is in fact an aspect of the historian's style: he is imitating Thucydides in particular, a writer of the fifth century B.C., in whose time Christianity was unheard of. As a consequence, in order to maintain the style of his predecessor, he explains new features that existed in the sixth century A.D. Some modern scholars have inferred that Procopius, like Thucydides, was a pagan, who was deliberately distancing himself from Christianity. Most, however, see the issue as a stylistic one: Procopius, despite these oblique allusions to Christianity and references to 'fate' and 'destiny', was a conventional Christian, as (e.g.) his interest in the legend of Abgar of Edessa (2.12) indicates.

Two further aspects of urban life in the Roman empire of the sixth century deserve mention. First, the circus factions. By the sixth century gladiatorial games had long been abandoned; beast hunts were also falling out of favour. Interest focused instead on chariot-racing, carried out in huge hippodromes: the one in Constantinople, parts of which are visible today, could accommodate some 100,000 people. At the races various teams competed, each of which represented a colour, whether White, Red, Blue or Green. The last two factions were the largest and most powerful; they were represented in every city of the East. They were involved not just in fielding teams for the horse-races but also in other entertainments. Between the Blues and the Greens there existed a fierce rivalry, which on occasion erupted into all-out violence: the Emperor Anastasius took a tough line in suppressing the periodic riots that broke out. Justinian, an ardent supporter of the Blues before he ascended the throne, had more difficulty in imposing his will. When he did try to

impose a crackdown, however, it backfired spectacularly: the result was the 'Nika' riot (the cry 'Nika', 'Win!', was a circus acclamation) in January 532 (1.24) that was only quelled by the intervention of troops after a week of rioting.

Factional strife was not the only scourge of the cities of the eastern empire. In the 520s two earthquakes inflicted extensive damage on cities in the Near East, especially Antioch. Far more devastating was the outbreak of bubonic plague from 541, which started in Egypt but swiftly spread to all parts of the empire and beyond. Procopius witnessed the ravages of the 'Early Medieval Pandemic' in Constantinople (2.22–3) and paints a vivid picture of the situation. Periodic resurgences of the plague would continue to strike the empire for two centuries.

Since *The Persian Wars* deals above all with military affairs, a few words on the sixth-century Roman army would be useful. As already noted, the most senior commanders were the *magistri militum*, of which two were based at Constantinople, another in Mesopotamia and another (from 528) in Armenia. Under them were the *duces* or dukes, generally attached to provinces, although increasingly associated rather with fortresses. The Roman army comprised *limitanei* or 'frontier soldiers', who were the backbone of the provincial forces, and *comitatenses*, mobile forces under the *magistri militum* – although *duces* could also command them. A typical Roman army numbered from 15,000 to 25,000, at least when the *duces*' forces had been mustered and combined with those under one or more *magistri militum*. In the 540s, when Khusro invaded the eastern provinces, it seems as though the Romans struggled to field an army to oppose him, probably because contingents had been shifted to the West for the wars against the Vandals and Goths. Procopius, it is true, does mention a force of 30,000 that invaded Persian Armenia in 542 (2.24.16), although this may be exaggerated, especially since it was decisively defeated by a much smaller Persian army. An important element among the Roman forces was made up of *bucellarii*, 'biscuit-boys', a term used for the personal bodyguards of generals, who might number in the hundreds, or, more rarely, thousands. Procopius refers to them by the Greek terms *doryphoroi* ('spearmen') and *hypaspistai* ('shield-bearers'); we have translated these terms as 'spearmen' and 'guards' for the most part (e.g. at 1.25.7). Cavalry had come to play an increasingly large role on the battlefield, even if infantry units remained in the majority: as noted below, Procopius was particularly impressed by the skill of the Hunnic-style Roman horse-archers.

## The Persian Kingdom in the Sixth Century

Just as the Roman empire had struggled to survive in the fifth century, so also had the Persian kingdom. For the most part the Persian state was less bureaucratised than the Roman one, relying more on seven leading families to exercise the great offices of state, which were linked by tradition to these noble houses. Although the rule of the Sasanian dynasty was never challenged until the end of the sixth century, kings could be unseated by rivals from within the royal family, so that the nobility could in such cases wield great power. Procopius, like other Graeco-Roman writers, sometimes confuses names and titles, not surprisingly given the association of certain houses with certain offices. On the whole, he appears to be well-informed on Persian matters and, unlike some other historians of his period, such as Agathias, generally free of prejudice; he does, however, harbour a particular dislike of Justinian's great rival, King Khusro I, known as Anushirvan ('of the immortal soul', 531–79).

In the fifth century the Persians faced continuous threats from the steppes of Central Asia. In order to contain this menace they built a long and imposing wall, stretching eastwards from the Caspian Sea, known as the Gorgan wall. It is only recently that the sheer extent and complexity of this enterprise has become clear. While the precise date of its construction is uncertain, it appears that major work was conducted in the fifth century in order to ward off nomadic invaders. At the same time, the Sasanian kings associated themselves with the mythical Kayanid rulers of ancient Iran, who had similarly engaged in combat with enemies from the steppe. The Roman sources are aware of two groups with whom the Persians fought, first the Kidarite Huns, then the more powerful Hephthalite Huns; coin evidence points to the presence of other groups east of Iran, in modern Afghanistan. King Peroz (459–84), having vanquished the Kidarites, enjoyed much less success against the Hephthalites. Despite several defeats, he continued to campaign against them only to be roundly defeated in 484, perishing in the battle himself. His brother and successor, Balash (484–8), found himself faced with an empty treasury and was swiftly ousted by Peroz's son Kavadh (488–96/7, 498/9–531). He appears to have struggled to master the situation, failing to obtain financial support from the Romans. He may have associated himself with a socially radical group, the Mazdakites, who challenged the nobility's grip on power, but the whole issue is very unclear. He was at any rate expelled from the throne by a discontented nobility and sought refuge with the Hephthalites; with their backing he was able to return and overthrow his brother Jamasp.

Kavadh and his son Khusro I, both strong monarchs, managed to tighten the dynasty's grip on power. Khusro in particular introduced reforms that diminished the influence of the nobles and accorded greater rights to the numerous peasantry of Persia. He likewise made changes to the military structures of the empire, creating a four-fold command for the four sectors of the empire, i.e. in the north, south, east and west. Despite the defeats at the hands of the Hephthalites, the Persian army remained a powerful instrument, being particularly skilled at siege warfare, for instance: Procopius' account describes numerous Persian sieges of Roman cities, many of them successful. The sixth-century military manual the *Strategikon*, attributed to the Emperor Maurice (582–602), notes this skill as well as the discipline of the Persian forces.

The Persian empire, known as Eranshahr ('Empire of the Aryans', i.e. of the Iranian people), comprised, at its core, Iran (Persia) itself, and certain adjoining regions. But at various points it also incorporated a larger territory, including (e.g.) large parts of Armenia (known as Persarmenia), and some parts of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan. It naturally therefore contained adherents of various religions, including the state-sponsored Zoroastrianism, whose priests also played an important role in the administration of justice, Christians, Jews and others. While some persecution of Christians did occur sporadically, the Persian church, established with the support of Yazdgerd I (399–420) in 410, generally managed to collaborate with the court. The strategic location of Persia meant that it was well placed to act as an intermediary in trade between the Mediterranean and the Far East, notably for the import of silk: it was for this reason that Justinian sought, albeit unsuccessfully, to bypass Persia with Ethiopian collaboration (1.20).

## Romano-Persian Relations in Late Antiquity

Parthia or Persia had always been Rome's great rival in the East. Once the Sasanian dynasty overthrew the Parthians in the 220s, its first kings launched repeated attacks on Roman territory, sacking Antioch and deporting large numbers of prisoners. The situation stabilised in the fourth century and, after Julian's disastrous invasion of Persia in 363, a durable frontier was established. The Persians took over the important Roman border fortress of Nisibis; a couple of decades later they obtained by far the larger part of Armenia, which became Persarmenia, while the remainder fell under Roman control. Given the troubled situation of both empires in the fifth century, it is not surprising that there was little strife

between them during this period. A devastating Hunnic raid at the end of the fourth century, passing through the Caucasus, may also have encouraged them to work together. Thus it was that Yazdgerd I agreed to act as the guardian of the young Theodosius II (408–50), a remarkable development that Procopius is the first source to report (1.2.1–10). Tensions did flare at certain points during the century, most notably in 421–2, when all-out war occurred, but in general the frontier remained peaceful.

It was therefore all the more of a shock when Kavadh crossed the frontier and invaded Roman territory late in 502; Roman fortifications and troops were ill-prepared to withstand him. Eager for plunder to reward his Hephthalite backers and other local allies, Kavadh sacked the city of Amida (1.7) and tried to make further gains. Massive Roman reinforcements thwarted him, so that he preferred to abandon hostilities, selling the city back to the Romans (1.8–9). The Emperor Anastasius, in order to deter future invasions, therefore built a major base close to the frontier, at the city of Dara (1.10). In the early 520s the Caucasian kingdom of Lazica (Colchis) defected from Persia to the Romans, renewing its earlier allegiance. Despite this setback, the aged King Kavadh approached the Emperor Justin to adopt his son Khusro, thereby securing his position against his brothers and potential rivals. When the negotiations broke down (1.12), hostilities began soon afterwards; by this point, in 527, Justinian had inherited the throne from his uncle. The defection of the Iberian kingdom (modern Georgia) to the Romans at just this time inflamed the situation further; both the Lazi and the Iberians were Christian and thus more naturally aligned with Rome. Although negotiations continued, by 530 the Persians decided to launch an all-out offensive into Roman Mesopotamia. At the battle of Dara in June that year the young *magister militum* Belisarius and the *magister officiorum* Hermogenes inflicted a decisive defeat on the Persians, while their colleagues Sittas and Dorotheus also beat off a Persian army at Satala in Roman Armenia (1.13–15). Undeterred, Kavadh ordered a further offensive the following year, which threatened the city of Antioch. Belisarius intercepted the invasion force and shadowed it during its retreat along the Euphrates. Just as it was about to reach Persian territory, the Roman soldiers insisted on giving battle and sustained an embarrassing defeat in April 531 (1.17–18); in the case of this battle, we are fortunate to have a detailed alternative description of the course of events provided by the chronicler John Malalas (18.60), far more critical of Belisarius, which may well have been produced by an enquiry held to investigate the causes of the defeat. Kavadh died later the same year and negotiations between his