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## REVIEWS

***The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, trans. R. W. Thomson, historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston with Tim Greenwood, 2 vols. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1999) lxxvii + 355 pp., bibliography, 6 indices, 5 maps.**

In the space of six decades, from the beginning of the seventh century, the political order of ancient West Asia was irrevocably changed. Beginning with the bitter and exhausting conflict between Rome and Sasanid Iran (602–630 C.E.), and culminating in the permanent loss of the most economically productive regions of the Roman Empire to the nascent Arab Muslim polity (by 642 C.E.) and the complete destruction of the Sasanid state (651/2 C.E.), a strong case might be made for identifying this era with the “end” of the ancient world.

Unfortunately, the extant literary material from the seventh century is not entirely adequate to the task of documenting such a critical period. Once the accounts of Theophylact Simocattes and the *Chronicon Paschale* have been left behind, in the first third of the century, the reader is generally confronted with a scattered, and frequently unreliable, body of evidence.<sup>1</sup>

It is, therefore, a pleasure to see the great exception to this rule, the mid-seventh century “Armenian History” attributed to the bishop Sebeos, receive a new two-volume translation and commentary. Perhaps the most extensive contemporary account of the seventh century, the “Armenian History” of Sebeos is without peer in its chronological coverage and its author’s remarkably broad geographical interests. However, the Armenian context of the history (linguistic competency aside) and the peculiarities of Sebeos’s uneasy mix of narrative history and apocalyptic have conspired to make this a difficult text for non-specialists to use. The new edition quite effectively addresses these issues. Produced under the auspices of the Liverpool University Press’s “Translated Texts for Historians” series, this work should become essential reading for both specialists and non-specialists

<sup>1</sup>Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton 1997), gives some indication of the diversity, and corresponding interpretive problems, of this material. A controversial use of contemporary evidence to reconstruct the early Islamic period can be found in Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge 1977).

with an interest in the period.

*The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos* is conveniently split across two volumes, roughly corresponding to the division of labor between the two principal contributors: Robert Thomson and James Howard-Johnston. The first volume, "Translation and Notes," begins with Howard-Johnston's description of the historical background, comments on the literary characteristics of the text and manuscript tradition, and an examination of Sebeos as a historian. Thomson's English translation and notes comprise the remainder of the volume. The second volume, "Historical Commentary," consists of James Howard-Johnston's detailed discussion of the historical and historiographical problems of Sebeos's text.

Howard-Johnston's "Historical Background," the introduction to the first volume, contains a concise discussion of the socio-political situation of Armenia in Late Antiquity and a short outline of the history of West Asia, 387–663 C.E. Both are effective, if brief, introductions, and place Sebeos's work in its proper social and historical context. Quite correctly, Howard-Johnston stresses the cultural affinities between Armenia and Iran (xii–xvi), a point perhaps insufficiently appreciated in studies of the region.<sup>2</sup> Despite their conversion to Christianity, Armenians felt the pull of both Rome and Iran, a point made dramatically evident in the careers of figures like Smbat Bagratuni (38–40, 43–54) who served the monarchs of both polities. Howard-Johnston also effectively portrays the grand scope of Rome and Sasanian Iran's arena of competition, encompassing the peoples of the Eurasian steppe, Arab clients, and groups further abroad. However, his attribution of a grand strategic vision to both these empires is possibly overstated (xviii).<sup>3</sup> In similar fashion, he perhaps too strenuously asserts the importance of centralized planning in the Islamic conquests (xxix).<sup>4</sup> I would have preferred a less positivist

<sup>2</sup>See Nina Garsoïan, "The Two Voices of Armenian Historiography: The Iranian Index," *On Bilingualism: Travaux et Mémoire*, vol. 2 (1996) 7–44.

<sup>3</sup>A comparison of James Howard-Johnston, "The Two Great Powers of Late Antiquity: A Comparison" in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East III: States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton 1995) 157–226; and Zeev Rubin, "The Reforms of Khusro Anūshirwān" in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East III: States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton 1995) 227–298, is perhaps instructive with regard to Howard-Johnston's approach on the issue of centralization.

<sup>4</sup>For specific discussion with respect to the Arab conquest armies see Fred McGraw Donner, "Centralized Authority and Military Autonomy in the Early Islamic Conquests" in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East III: States, Resources and Armies*

approach on these points, lest the reader be lured into an overly modern view of the logistical and strategic capabilities of ancient polities. Perhaps of more concern is his depiction of the armies of the Arab conquests as mounted Bedouin tribesmen (xxvii). While this is a romantic image of long standing, it is at odds with current thinking about the social and strategic character of the conquests.<sup>5</sup>

Thomson's discussion of transmission and characteristics of Sebeos's history (in the second introductory discussion, "The Armenian Text") should be familiar to readers of his other translations of Armenian historical works.<sup>6</sup> This is hardly remarkable, since Armenian historical texts share a common set of interpretive issues. However, Thomson perhaps spends too much time discussing the generalities of the Armenian historical tradition, rather than the specifics of Sebeos's work. This is most evident in his section on "The Purpose of Historical Writing" (xliv–xlvii). To be fair, here Thomson must argue from the *lack* of explicit motivation in Sebeos's history. Nevertheless, I would have been interested in seeing a more strenuous effort by Thomson to link the question of the author's compositional motives with the issue of the text's authorship. These issues seem to be related, given the general tendency of Armenian authors to shape their histories to suit their patrons (xlix–xlv). In addition, Thomson's discussion of the literary characteristics of the texts might benefit from a more detailed examination of the apocalyptic character of the text, dealt with only briefly (l–lii) in a discussion of the borrowing of biblical imagery from the "Vision of Daniel."<sup>7</sup> A comparison of Sebeos's text with other contemporary apocalyptic works might have been particularly instructive. These reservations aside, this section is an effective introduction to the literary aspects of Sebeos's history and a general introduction to the Armenian historical genre.

Howard-Johnston effectively makes the case for the work's general

(Princeton 1995) 337–360.

<sup>5</sup>Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton 1981) 222–223, has made a convincing case that the conquest armies were initially drawn from the more sedentary Arab population and were dominated by infantry. The primary differences between the armies of the conquerors and the conquered thus lay in motivation, morale, and training (and, admittedly, mobility).

<sup>6</sup>In particular: Robert W. Thomson, trans. and commentary, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* (Cambridge, MA 1982); and Robert W. Thomson, trans. and commentary, *History of the Armenians* (Cambridge, MA 1978).

<sup>7</sup>I thank Tim Greenwood for a stimulating discussion of this issue. His article on the topic is forthcoming.

reliability as a historical source, in “Sebeos as a Historian,” the final introductory section. This said, he appears overly critical of Sebeos’s occasional chronological lapses. Specifically, Howard-Johnston singles out the historian’s apparent conflation of the 626 siege of Constantinople with an earlier Sasanid incursion into Anatolia as a, “... terrible, inexcusable mistake” (lxxiii). A “mistake,” yes, but hardly an “inexcusable” one. Certainly here Sebeos was no worse than his contemporaries. Howard-Johnston’s explanation of this specific error as a deliberate editorial decision on Sebeos’s part is plausible, but by no means self-evident. However, I find Howard-Johnston’s claim that the Armenian bishop was unable to conceive of Persian armies reaching Constantinople twice in such a brief period a less than convincing rationalization of Sebeos’s lapse (lxxiii). Perhaps Howard-Johnston expects too much of the subject of his study?

Following the tripartite introduction is Thomson’s translation of the 1979 critical edition of the Armenian text.<sup>8</sup> Although Sebeos has not lacked modern translations, Thomson’s rendering of the text is clear and effective, and measures up well to the standard set by his editions of other Armenian histories.<sup>9</sup> Although at points the English text evinces some awkward constructions, particularly at the introduction of chapters, these never impede the reader’s understanding, and accurately reflect the usage of the Armenian text. The text is copiously annotated with explanation of Thomson’s translation choices, discussion of toponyms, and prosopographical information. The footnotes are almost always timely and illuminating.

The second volume of this edition, “Historical Commentary,” presents Howard-Johnston’s notes in three sections, corresponding to his topical and chronological division of Sebeos’ text (the late sixth century, 572–602; the Roman-Sasanian war, 602–632; the Arab conquests, 632–661). Each of these three sections is introduced with an extensive and informative historiographical commentary, featuring a critique of the primary sources available for each period and a précis of relevant secondary literature.

In his introduction to the “Historical Commentary” (156–158), Howard-Johnston sets himself a five-fold task: 1) to confront philological issues, 2) to examine and establish chronology, 3) to

<sup>8</sup>G. V. Abgaryan, ed. *Patmut’ iwn Sebeosi* (Erevan, Armenia 1979).

<sup>9</sup>See n. 6 above.

explain specific points in the text, 4) to assess the quality of the text as a historical source (with reference to parallel sources), and 5) to assess the importance of Sebeos's account in understanding the "end of antiquity." Judged by his own standards, Howard-Johnston succeeds quite well, particularly in his fourth point. It should be noted, however, that Howard-Johnston avoids discussion of the domestic history of Armenia in this commentary, a point he admits himself (155). While the omission is regrettable, most prospective readers will certainly be more interested in Sebeos's discussion of the end of Antiquity and the rise of Islam. Howard-Johnston's commentary admirably illuminates these topics.

The second volume also includes extensive indices of biblical references, "technical terms," Armenian family names, personal names, geographical locations in the text, and Howard-Johnston's historical notes. In particular the index of technical terms, by Greenwood, is of great value to the reader unfamiliar with the terminology of Armenian society, religion and politics. I would have appreciated a general index for Thomson and Howard-Johnston's text, but this is hardly vital. The volume is completed with a selection of maps that nicely serve to place the toponyms and geographic features mentioned in the text.

This edition of Sebeos certainly serves to confirm the text's position as a source of paramount importance in the study of Late Antiquity and the first decades of the Muslim era. Minor criticisms aside, Thomson, Howard-Johnston and Greenwood have made a vital contribution to the study of this complex era. Their translation and commentary on the text both enriches our understanding of Sebeos and the Armenian historiographical tradition in general, and makes Sebeos's history readily

accessible to the broad audience it deserves.

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