



THEOPHYLACT SIMOCATTA

THEOPHYLACT SIMOCATTA (fl. 620s), Greek historian and author of *Histories*, a work mainly concerned with late sixth-century [Byzantine](#) warfare in the Balkans and against Persia.

Theophylact is the last in the long line of Greek historians stretching back over a millennium to Herodotus who composed grand narratives of military and other major state events. Theophylact originated in Egypt, but the pursuit of a legal education took him to Constantinople, where he came to the notice of the Patriarch Sergius, who seems to have been responsible for encouraging him to produce a history which continued the imperial narrative from the accession of Maurice (582), the point at which his predecessor Menander Protector's account terminated. Theophylact was certainly writing his history in the late 620s, since there is an oblique reference to Emperor Heraclius's victory over the Persians (Theophylact, 5.15.5-7) and it is quite possible that his commission was an expression of the renewed confidence in the conduct of Roman affairs which this event brought about. In view of this context, it is not surprising that Theophylact displayed a very positive, though not entirely uncritical, view of Emperor Maurice, the victim of the usurpation of Phocas (r. 602-10), who was in turn overthrown by Heraclius (r. 610-41).

The main topic of the *Histories* is warfare in the Balkans and against Persia. His legal education was not good preparation for this, and there are various instances where unfamiliarity with diplomatic and military practice or ignorance of geography has caused confusion. In addition, granted that he was writing at least a generation after the events being described, he was



heavily dependent upon what previous written accounts he could find. Fortunately for his knowledge of eastern events, he followed the narrative of John of Epiphania, who had produced a full account of the war of 572-91 at some point in the late 590s; John had served on at least one embassy to Persia and also had access to reports which had passed through [Antioch](#). We can be certain that Theophylact followed John, since the first five chapters of his account survive, recording events from the outbreak of war in 572 to the diplomacy of 575. Theophylact's narrative is a close paraphrase of John, with some linguistic embellishment and not without a few errors. It appears that John's own narrative became considerably fuller as it approached the climax of the flight and restoration of [Kosrow II](#), and in this section Theophylact preserves a number of royal letters as well as the text of [Kosrow's](#) two dedications to Saint Sergius, which he claims, with reasonable plausibility, to be quoting exactly (Theophylact, 5.13.3; 14.1). These documents present a valuable insight into the diplomatic arguments and propaganda statements of [Kosrow](#) at a crucial point in his reign.

Theophylact's account of eastern affairs is interspersed into his narrative of Balkan events, not always to the benefit of clarity. He began from Maurice's accession and narrated, in three separate chunks, the campaigns of 583-89, when the Romans largely had the better of exchanges in spite of a serious mutiny in 588. At the key turning-point in this account, the revolt of [Bahrām Čōbin](#), which triggers the flight and restoration of [Kosrow](#) that constitute the climax of the eastern narrative, Theophylact digressed in order to go back to the outbreak of the war in 572. The explanation—that narrative completeness demanded this—is somewhat unconvincing, and it is more probably the case that Theophylact was unwilling not to exploit to the full the information offered by John. After this diversion, Theophylact provides a detailed account of the upheaval in Persia and the re-establishment of legitimate rule with Roman support.

Following [Kosrow's](#) restoration in 591, Theophylact has very little to say about dealings with Persia in the second half of Maurice's reign. There were clearly some tensions which required diplomatic exchanges, but there was no open conflict between the empires to command attention, and Theophylact probably knew nothing about the various Persian internal conflicts as [Kosrow](#) consolidated his authority. Instead, Theophylact's military narrative of the 590s focuses on the Roman struggle to re-impose imperial control over the Balkans after two decades during which eastern warfare had usurped



attention and resources. Only at the end of Maurice's reign does Ḳosrow re-enter the narrative, when Maurice, ousted from Constantinople by Phocas, initially chose in this crisis to appeal to his former protégé for assistance: he first sent his eldest son Theodosius as emissary, but then, supposedly, instructed him to return. Theophylact insists that Theodosius was among the victims of Phocas's elimination of Maurice's family and denies rumors of the appearance of Maurice's son in the east as the beneficiary of a reciprocal restoration attempt by Ḳosrow. Theophylact did not continue his narrative through Phocas's reign to tackle the vicissitudes of Heraclius's great struggle against the Persians; indeed his account was not to be continued for another 150 years, and then in a very different style by Nicephorus. Explanations for this hiatus abound: the decline of traditional education which compounded the challenge of producing a highly literary account is certainly relevant, but the state of the empire is probably also relevant, since the increasingly desperate struggle for survival against Arab attacks from the 630s did not offer material for celebration.

The most distinctive aspect of Theophylact's *Histories*, in comparison with earlier histories, is his willingness to incorporate more frequent and distinct references to Christianity as well as his acceptance of the vocabulary and style of Christian works extending from the Septuagint through to contemporary sermons.

In addition to his *Histories*, three slighter works by Theophylact survive, which display his mastery of different literary genres, but also reveal attitudes to character and to fate and religious debate which can be connected to the views displayed in the *Histories*. There is nothing particularly unusual about his views, and, with regard to the Persians, he displays the common classical belief in their duplicity, instability, and arrogance. Of greater significance is the interest he displays in the qualities of rulers, with the Persian kings and Avar khagan used to demonstrate negative aspects, in particular the dangers of overconfidence and the inability to respond to sudden change.

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