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ON THE PERSIAN SOURCES USED BY
THE BYZANTINE HISTORIAN
AGATHIAS

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BY

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The ancient world of the Roman Empire forming a closed whole where only Greek and Latin were used officially and as the languages of civilization, the knowledge of other languages was to be very rare in literary circles. Historical writers too, even when describing other countries and relations to them, were contented with Greek and Latin sources only. It is true that the neighbours of the Empire in the north and in the south were tribes and peoples living on a low standard of civilization, but in the east the adjacent country was Persia, a great country with very old culture and its history written down already in ancient times. Some information of the events was received through merchants and travellers, but for the description of older times one had to resort, in addition to some classics like Herodotos, to tradition and myths which were often unreliable. This caused naturally a certain one-sidedness in valuation and representations, even though the pragmatic history writing of antiquity was not fully conscious of its defects. However, when the Roman Empire had been divided, the interest in Persia, the dangerous adversary, was continually increasing in the Byzantine Empire, and Procopius' writing of history shows how far one had advanced in the writing of the history of one's own time in spite of one-sided sources. As an evidence of the same interest can be considered a description of the older history of Persia (about 226—577 A. D) written by a lawyer Agathias, from Myrina, a poet and historian who lived about 536—581 A. D. This description is included in his

representation of the history of his own time (552—558 A. D.). The fact that it is based on Persian sources makes it especially interesting and valuable. It has also aroused the attention of later historians who have not hesitated to admit its great value as a source of the history of Persia.¹ When using it one has, however, to consider certain facts in connection with Agathias' writing of history in general and the way he used his Persian sources, so that the character of it and the value of it as a source would be revealed. Historians have pointed at many of these facts², but for the present there is no summary of them. My representation aims to supply this need to some extent.

Agathias was fully conscious of the value of the Persian sources he used and he explains proudly and rather extensively how he had obtained them.³ (To keep oneself in the background, like Procopius, was quite unknown to him.) On the repeated requests of Agathias an interpreter Sergius⁴, probably belonging to the same circle of Agathias' acquaintances as Florius and the secretary Eutychedios, (pp. 7: 19—8: 3, cf. pp. 296: 20—297: 5) which was formed by lower officials of the imperial government and which Agathias had perhaps

¹ N. Iorga: *Medaillons d'histoire littéraire byzantine* (Byzantion II, Paris-Liège 1925, p. 243).

Karl Otfried Müller: *Sandon und Sardanapal* (in his: *Kleine deutsche Schriften . . . II*, Breslau 1848, p. 100).

Fr. Spiegel: *Eranische Alterthumskunde III*, Leipzig 1878, p. 236.

² M. Ites: *Zur Bewertung des Agathias* (*Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 26, Leipzig 1926, pp. 273—285).

H. von Schubert: *Die Unterwerfung der Alamannen unter die Franken*, Diss. Strassburg 1884, pp. 93—100.

Tabari: *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sassaniden*, übersetzt von Th. Nöldeke, Leyden 1879, pp. 400, 404.

W. S. Teuffel: *Agathias aus Myrine* (in his: *Studien und Charakteristiken . . .* Leipzig 1871, pp. 237—254).

³ Agathias: *Historiarum I. V.*, ed. B. G. Niebuhr, Bonn 1828 (*Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*), IV 30 pp. 273: 10—274: 10.

⁴ Unknown Syrian, not Sergius Resainensis. Cf. A. Baumstark: *Lucubrationes Syro-Graecae* (*Jahrbücher für classische Philologie, Supplementband 21*, Leipzig 1894, p. 369).

acquired during his supposed former official career¹, asked when staying at the Persian court probably with some East Roman delegation, that the guards and keepers of the royal annuals would permit him to get acquainted with those annuals, so that the leading events which they considered worth remembering would be known also in Byzant. Sergius then made a summary of them and gave it to Agathias in a Greek translation.

The source used by Sergius, the official court chronicle, has evidently been edited in the reign of Chosroes I. It is a book of kings, very likely based on older models and notes.² Some Persian-Arabian sources which are 300—400 years younger are also based on it, their account being in many respects supported by Agathias' historical work, as Firdousi, Hamza Isbahani, the anonymous »Mujmal attavarikh», Mas'udi.³ But this common original source was by no means a reliable historical treatise, but a presentation of the history of Iran from the beginning of the world until that time like the annuals of Middle Ages and likely to be based, at least regarding its older parts, on rather untrustworthy tradition.⁴ And it was, being an official court chronicle, rather one-sidedly embellished and did by no means avoid oriental exaggeration, as shows the description of the cruelty of Sapore I and the great havoc made by him in Mesopotamia, Cilicia, Syria and Cappadocia, which description Agathias took from the chronicle (IV 24 p. 259: 10—20).

Even otherwise Agathias was not to any noteworthy degree able to judge the value and the reliableness of his sources, and in this case it would have been impossible already because of the fact that he had them, as he says himself, only as an extract. When compiling it Sergius had proceeded in the same manner as those who have to abridge have always done, so that he had taken in it all the names and years, but only the most »suitable» i. e. the leading events (IV 30 p. 274: 2—4). Because the book of kings was divided into the reigns

¹ Teuffel, p. 238.

² Tabari-Nöldeke, pp. 402—403.

³ Spiegel, III, p. 235.

⁴ Spiegel, I, pp. 486—487.

of different monarchs, a list of rulers was thus produced, in which chronology had a leading part. It is of course impossible to judge any more how carefully Sergius did his work. But even if no matter-of-fact errors would have been made, the method of abridging in itself already implied a certain subjective moment. The mutual relations of the facts are liable to have been changed, and much what is essential and important may have been left out even if that danger was diminished in this respect by the loose and chronicle-like construction of the original source. On the other hand it is not likely that a person like Sergius would have wanted to change his source on purpose, already because of his own security in Persia.

Sergius then translated his extract very carefully, as Agathias says ¹ praising him to be the best interpreter of his time being admired even by Chosroes (IV 30 p. 274: 5—7). There is hardly reason to doubt the reliability of the translation, even if Agathias, unversed in languages as he was, could not judge it. Whether he always construed Sergius' representation rightly, is a matter apart. It is likely however that Sergius' part in Agathias' historical work was not limited only to written notes, but that he completed and explained them orally. Agathias had evidently heard from him much more about the Persian circumstances than what he presents of the older history, even though he of course had other sources, too. As such items can with good reason be considered the description of the Persian funeral customs (II 23 pp. 113: 16—116: 3), the doctrine of Zoroaster (II 24 pp. 117: 2—118: 16), the cult of fire (II 25 pp. 118: 19—119: 3), which all presume the first part of the oldest history, further the description of the increasing power of the Magians (II 26 pp. 122: 12—123: 12), and of the philosophers invited by Chosroes, and of Uranios, (II 29—32 pp. 127: 15—136: 7), even if these last ones are based on some Byzantine market gossip. It is possible that the description of Mermerois' death is based on the information obtained from Sergius (II 22 pp. 112: 16—113: 15).

¹ IV 30 p. 274: 4—5. The chronicle was perhaps written in Syrian language, cf. Baumstark, p. 369.

So the source on which Agathias based his representation of the oldest history of Persia had already the possibilities of fault in itself, even if they cannot be any more clearly analysed. But even greater weaknesses, though rather easy to be noticed, are caused by the way Agathias used his sources, as his whole work of history shows. He was not a great historian in Procopius' style, so that he could have seen the reality behind the sources with the aid of his talents and his experience of political life. He only was a limited lawyer who had no more ability to look deeper than an average inhabitant of the capital. He certainly thought highly of his task and strove honestly for truth, but there was no corresponding ability, and so he often came to twist the truth against his will for lack of judgment or of competence.¹ Furthermore he had a very rhetorical style which covered the scanty contents with a flow of words², if it did not rightout distort it, and besides he was seeking to be a learned man. But naturally the original source had its influence on the style too, which in this part of his work, in spite of all endeavours to vary, is much simpler and gives the impression of a list with many repeats.

All these features are also to be found in the representation of the oldest history of Persia which Agathias drew up just as the other parts of his work. As a skeleton he follows only one source, in this case the extract made by Sergius, but he puts in it all kinds of information he had got from elsewhere, so that his representation on the whole is growing rather long.

In general he only very seldom approximately mentions, when he differs from the representation of the chronicle, so that one has to decide it on the ground of the contents in every case separately.

¹ Teuffel, pp. 242—243.

K. Krumbacher: *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur* ... 2. Aufl., München 1897, p. 241.

² Ites, pp. 273.

Teuffel, p. 241. Cf. e. g. the description of Huns, given by Agathias (V 11—24 pp. 299: 15—333: 18) and by Theophanes: *Chronographia*, ed. J. Classen, Bonn 1839 (*Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*), I pp. 361: 9—362: 12, 366: 7—12; 370: 19—21.

Thus the value of the sources in the representation is reduced to some degree. It is however in general comparatively easy to separate from each other the various parts based on different sources, even though Agathias tried as much as he could to write them in a consistent style.

Here I will shortly analyse the representation of the oldest history of Persia based on Agathias' sources. His excursion forms two parts which are relatively apart from each other and almost loose from the remaining presentment. The former (II 25—27 pp. 119: 6—125: 15) contains a short summary of the foundation of the house of Sassanids and the times preceding it. This part is formed by some chapters describing the Persian habits.

After having related the death and the burial of Mermerois (II 22 pp. 112: 16—113: 15) he proceeds to describe widely and with authority the burial rites and the religious life of the Persians (II 23—25 pp. 113: 16—119: 3). As mentioned before he probably took advantage of Sergius' knowledge on the subject. He consults, however, several older historians too, like Berossos, Simakos and Athenokles (II 24 p. 117: 20—21). But he is misled here by his own lack of knowledge to such an extent that he mentions as the oldest gods of the Persians Baal, Anaitis, and Sardes which are purely Syrian.¹ This error was no doubt partly caused by the fact that he had no clear idea about the nationality of the ancient Babylonians, Assyrians, and Persians or about the difference between them. This reflects clearly the possibility of making mistakes which such an uncritical use of the sources implies, for it is known especially of Berossos that he said it was not until Artaxerxes II that the statues of Anaitis were erected in Babylon, Susa, and Ekbatana.²

The describing of the origin of the cult of fire leads Agathias to speak of the former events and conquerors of the eventful Persia. His concise account (II 25—27 pp. 119: 6—125: 15) is based again on older historians, like Bion, Alexander (Polyhistoricus) of Milet,

¹ Müller, p. 100.

² Clemens Alexandrinus: *Protreptikos*, ch. 34.

Ctesias, and Diodorus Siculus. When counting the duration of different reigns he extends, basing himself on Alexander Polyhistoricus who according to Agathias had lived already in the time of Sulla, the period of the successors of Alexander until 44 B. C. It looks almost as if Agathias had not directly used all sources he mentions, but some later presentment in which they are referred to. After having passed over the former periods paying them but little attention Agathias proceeds to expatiate upon the succession to the throne of Artaxerxes and the house of the Sassanids. He declares that his statements are true because they are contained in the royal chronicles (II 27 pp. 124: 12—14). The description of the extraction of Artaxerxes (123: 13—124: 14) is however so malicious and so contrary to the testimony of inscriptions and coins, that this is not possible.¹ Because Sergius no more than Agathias hardly falsified the description on purpose, one must assume that he based it on one of the numerous fables connected with Artaxerxes' extraction.² After that Agathias proudly promises to fill up the gap and to mention the name, the reign, and the most important acts of every Sassanid until Chosroes (124: 14—19).

Agathias did not, however, fulfill his promise immediately, but after having told of the education of Chosroes and of his interest in public education (II 28—32 pp. 126: 1—136: 7), he resumed description of the history of his own time since the death of Mermerois, where he had left it. It is not until having started the second book that he continues the description of the older history of Persia. The juncture (IV 23—24 pp. 256: 8—258: 19) is if possible still looser than before. When Agathias had related how Chosroes let skin his commander alive, he mentions that the way Nachoragan was punished was invented by Sapoires. The founders of the dynasty of Sassanids, Artaxerxes and Sapoires were both cruel and unjust. Because Artaxerxes is mentioned again, Agathias wants to fulfill at last the promise to give an account of the phases of the reigning

¹ Spiegel, III, p. 237.

² F. Justi: *Iranisches Namenbuch*, Marburg 1895, p. 119.

house of Persia. It is evident that the episode is not related for quite an arbitrary reason, but that it was careful consideration which caused Agathias to place it here: he used to place episodes as points of rest in the culminations of his story, such as undoubtedly are the deaths of the commanders Mermerois and Nachoragan. This is actually revealed at the end of the description when he expresses his surprise about having wandered off of the events of his own time and finds here a cause for giving an account of the value of his description and his sources (IV 30 pp. 273: 1—274: 17).

After remarking at first (IV 24 pp. 258: 19—259: 2) that he has already described how Artaxerxes came to power, Agathias mentions, evidently on the basis of Sergius' extract, how long Artaxerxes' rule was, and how many years had gone since the time of Alexander the Great and the time Alexander Severus had come to power (259: 2—8). The latter information originates in some Roman sources, the former perhaps in the extract which Agathias misconstrued. It is the so called *Aera Alexandri*, beginning at 311 B. C., not, as Agathias supposed, at Alexander's death.

The following description of Saporess is taken chiefly from the extract. At first there is, except the duration of his reign based on the extract, a very subjective criticism of him by Agathias (IV 24 p. 259: 8—10), but then follows a description, obtained from the extract, of conquests and havocs (259: 10—20). At last the defeat of Saporess caused by Odenathus is described (259: 20—260: 5). The spirit of this description is fully Roman. It is obtained from earlier Roman historians as Agathias plainly says (260: 4—5) The description of the following rulers: Hormisdates (260: 5—9), Varanes (260: 10—11), Varanes II (260: 11—12), Varanes III (260: 12—15) is directly from the extract which had nothing but the length of their reign to tell of them. The following statement as to the origin of the epithet »segansaa» of Varanes III, (260: 15—261: 7), is naturally chiefly based on the information of the chronicle, that Varanes II had subdued the Segestans, but perhaps also on Sergius' explanation how princes got their epithets after conquered nations. He had at least explained what »segansaa» means (261: 6—7). As to the scanty

information about Narses (261: 8—9) and Hormisdates II (261: 10—12), it is based on the extract. After these descriptions Agathias inserted his surprise at the equal length of the reigns of the two rulers. The following descriptions how Sapoires II was declared ruler already in his mothers womb (261: 14—262: 18) is surely in the first hand based on the extract which is much coloured by Agathias' own opinions. The information on the length of his reign (262: 18—20) is from the extract, but the description of the battle against Iulianus and Iovianus (262: 20—263: 17) originates in Roman historians as Agathias says himself.

The following short references to Artaxerxes II (IV 26 p. 263: 18—20), Sapoires III (263: 20—21), and Varanes IV (263: 21—264: 1) are from the extract. A short reference to Isdigerdes (264: 7—9) is certainly based on the series of rulers in the extract, but the following representation of him as Theodosius' guardian is taken from Roman tradition, as Agathias says himself (264: 13—19). From now on Agathias had at his disposal Procopius' account which he used for completing his extract, but his attitude was critical toward it, too. It is often difficult to say for certain, if such information as Procopius already had, was also in the chronicle. Then follows Agathias' criticism of the way Procopius acted in reprehending Arcadius (265: 1—17).¹ The description of Isdigerdes' reign (265: 17—266: 2) is based on the extract.

The description of the campaign led by Varanes V (IV 27 p. 266: 3—8) is from Procopius², but the account of his reign and of his follower Isdigerdes II (266: 8—11) from the extract again. The description of Perozes (266: 11—267: 2) is chiefly from Procopius.³ The description of Balas (267: 2—8) is from the extract, as the contradiction to Procopius shows. The description of Cabades is partly from the extract (267: 8—20), partly from Procopius.⁴ The

¹ Cf. Procopius, ex rec. G. Dindorfii, Bonn 1833 (*Corpu sscriptorum historiae Byzantinae*), I ch. 2, pp. 13: 5—14: 9.

² I ch. 2, pp. 14: 20—15: 15.

³ I ch. 3—4, pp. 15: 16—24: 23.

⁴ I ch. 5, pp. 25: 1—26: 10.

description of his dethronement is partly from the chronicle (268: 1—7), partly from Procopius (*passim*). The description of Zamasphes is from the chronicle (268: 7—9) and is followed by Agathias' own reflection (268: 10—12).

The description of Cabades' escape (IV 28 pp. 268: 12—269: 21) is partly from Procopius¹, partly from some other source, but hardly from the extract which Agathias would no doubt have preferred to Procopius' account (cf. IV 30 p. 274: 10—14). The information about the reign (IV 28 pp. 269: 21—270: 3) is from the extract. Here evidently ends the extract used by Agathias, even though he adds some meditations of his own on the philosophy of history as to the similarity of the events of Persia and Byzant (270: 4—271: 8). The end, the description of Chosroes' death is very likely based on the description of his contemporaries.

As the analyse shows, Agathias used Sergius' extract as a skeleton from which he took all the information concerning genealogy and chronology as well as the short references to the most important deeds of different rulers, but only a few more extensive descriptions. But because he had made it his express task to represent these matters (IV 30 p. 273: 7—9) the contents of his work are to a great extent based on it. Therefore his chronology of Sassanids is fundamental.² He had a clear idea how valuable the sources of the Persian chronicles were. When they were in contradiction to Procopius whom he otherwise greatly admired he preferred them to him (IV 30 p. 274: 10—13).

Agathias, obviously for that reason, kept the information obtained from the extract unchanged. Accordingly those parts of his representation which are based on it, form a first class source. This is proved by the fact that they are not in contradiction to the later Persian sources based on the book of kings (chronicle) as well as by the Persian forms of names. Agathias has indeed, in order to gain variation, used Persian and Greek forms by turns in those cases when the same name occurs often.

¹ I ch. 6, pp. 31: 1—32: 5.

² Tabari-Nöldeke, p. 402.

Agathias' description is however to be used with caution for he often filled the skeleton he received from the extract with his own reflections and descriptions which take a much larger space and which are based on other sources. Such sources were above all the former historians including Procopius, the information obtained from Sergius personally and other oral tradition. The various sources are then uncritically and carelessly amalgamated and covered with pompous rhetorical style.

Fortunately the different elements can be clearly seen, notably in this part of Agathias' historical treatise. This being the case, he value of the sources is to be estimated separately in every item according to what was likely the original source. There are faults in the representation but they are unintentional, caused only by Agathias' lacking qualifications and they are to be estimated as such.