

Andrew T. Fear (ed.), *Orosius: Seven Books of History against the Pagans* (Translated Texts for Historians; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010); 456 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1846314735. RRP £65.00.

The neat synchronisation of the publication of a new translation of Orosius's *Historia* with the 1600th anniversary of the Sack of Rome illustrates that orderly periodisation appeals to both ancient and modern historians alike; indeed it is a coincidence that Orosius himself would surely have approved. The *Historia* was written around AD 417 by Paulus Orosius, a presbyter whose *patria* is generally assumed to have been the Iberian peninsula.¹ Andrew Fear's much anticipated translation as part of the laudable *Translated Texts for Historians* series updates modern Orosian scholarship offering a welcome counterpart to the Arnaud-Lindet translation from the Latin to the French, published 1990-1991. The Latin text was first published in a modern critical edition by Zangemeister in 1882 (revised in 1889) and translated into English by I. W. Raymond in 1936.² A later translation by Roy J. Deferrari in 1964 was the penultimate contribution before Fear's own publication.³ Despite the existing modern translations there is most certainly room for Fear's contribution, which is admittedly building on the Arnaud-Lindet edition. In his introduction and notes Fear demonstrates an impressive depth of knowledge of the text and the topic, introducing the reader to a more updated perception of Orosius than that produced by the often unfavourable criticism that characterises much of twentieth century scholarship. This more nuanced view, which gives the text serious consideration, is the most significant achievement of the publication.

The text is divided into an Introduction, Synopsis, Translation, Bibliography, and Index. The twenty-five page long introduction is subdivided into ten parts: Life (of Orosius); The *Histories*; Intentions; Secular and Religious History; Sources; Structure; Chronological Systems and the Ordering of Time; Notes of Caution; Orosius's Clash with Augustine, and Legacy. Each subject is treated thoroughly but not ponderously and substantiated with extensive textual and bibliographic references. An examination of the manuscript tradition is absent. Fear presents and engages with current critical debates particularly on the biography of Orosius such as his name, place of origin, chronology of travel, and ultimate disappearance from the historical record. As is typical of the (modern) author's style, the discourse is swiftly curtailed where historical fact risks escalation into "mere speculation" and advice to "keep an open mind" is sensibly advocated.⁴ The structure of the text is broken down and the key themes identified in an accessible style, but, given the nature of the text as riddled with contradiction and obfuscation, the subdivision "Notes of Caution" could have been more prominent and lengthy. In consideration of the text advertising itself as an "annotated translation" and the

¹ A notable exception is Arnaud-Lindet who suggests that Orosius originated from Britain or was a Briton living in Hispania. Marie-Pierre Arnaud-Lindet, (trans.), *Histoires contre les païens*, vol. 1-3 (Paris: Belles Letres, 1990-1991).

² Irving Woodworth Raymond, (trans.), *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans: the Apology of Paulus Orosius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

³ Roy J. Deferrari, (trans.), *Paulus Orosius. The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1964).

⁴ Fear, p. 3 and p.3, n. 15.

usefulness of the scholarship at this point, the Introduction could have benefitted from being longer in itself. This is especially apparent when compared with the Arnaud-Lindet edition which has not only a longer introduction, but also short notes at the end of each page, longer notes at the end of the volume, and annexes with evidence for Orosius's biography, a chronological table, a table of Orosius's arguments, and a list of sources used. Fear rightly resists the urge to engage with overtly negative criticism in vitriol and achieves a clarity and comprehension seldom found in contemporary Orosian commentary. The importance of the text for an understanding of late antiquity and beyond is restated but not overstated, as can be the temptation.

It is perhaps with puzzlement that the reader will learn from the Introduction the seminal nature of the *Historia*. As the back cover advertises, Orosius's work provided the dominant template for the writing of history in the mediaeval period. The variety of languages into which the work was translated and the number of surviving manuscripts give evidence for the importance and popularity of the work from the early fifth century up until the early modern period. The *Historia* is an important text for scholars of a multitude of disciplines within History; specialists in historiography, ancient geography, universal history writing, the barbarian invasions, the end of the Roman empire in the west, Patristic studies, the Middle Ages, and the Mediaeval period will find it at least an interesting if not crucial text. The significant influence of the work and the example it provided for subsequent historiography is as important as its role in an understanding of early Christian approaches to history. If this reception-history is justification for the new edition, it is one that outstrips any ordinary expectation. Indeed, when considering the credentials which the *Historia* is able to boast the lack of attention it has received does seem undeserved. This new translation will hopefully reverse the current critical trend of neglect, a hope reinforced by Fear's own contention that the defiant spirit of Orosius is "not as dead as many would like to believe."⁵

The translation of the text itself differs somewhat in style from the most recent English translation by Deferrari. Fear avoids an over-simplification of meaning and syntax by using a more archaic style of language. For example, where Deferrari has, "Therefore, too, according to the mystic revelation in the gospels, the woman of Canaan was not ashamed to say that little dogs were eating crumbs under their master's table nor did our Lord disdain to listen,"⁶ Fear has, "Whence, in the mystic allegory found in the evangelists, the Canaanite woman did not blush to say that whelps eat the crumbs from beneath their masters' table and that the Lord did not disdain to hear her."⁷ As a result Fear's text is perhaps slightly more demanding and less accessible than previous translations, but it is accurate and that is not the least what can be expected in a translation published within the series *Translated Texts for Historians*. Numerous and reasonably extensive footnotes are provided to aid the reader's understanding of the text, for example the universal geography of the first chapter of the *Historia* is supplemented with modern alternatives of place and name. It is not uncommon that the references occupy half if not more of

⁵ Fear, p. 25.

⁶ Deferrari, pp. 3-4.

⁷ Fear, 1.6, pp. 31-2.

the page, taking up more space than the text itself.⁸ Unfortunately, this level of commentary is not consistently maintained throughout the work and on occasion the text is accompanied by only limited information.⁹ Nevertheless, on balance the translation, self-described as “annotated”, compares favourably with the quantity and quality of references supplementing the Raymond and Deferrari translations. Only the Arnaud-Lindet edition, which Fear proclaims to follow, has more to offer in that regard.

Frequently Fear identifies the source from which Orosius took his information and directs the reader to it. Errors in the original text are generally highlighted and the correct information is given. The effort this part of the work must have taken, beyond the mere translation of the text, can hardly be overestimated. However, inaccuracies are not always preserved in the translation, especially chronological ones. For example where Deferrari translates Gratian’s epithet *quadragessimus* as “the fortieth” (i. e. ruler after Augustus),¹⁰ Fear has “thirty-ninth”.¹¹ (Raymond, too, has “fortieth”.¹²) The discrepancy is emended in the actual text rather than referred to in a note. An extensive knowledge of other sources of Roman and Greek history would have been necessary for the *Quellenforschung* that accompanies the text in the references, which provide invaluable pointers for further research. The level of detail gives the impression of a translation that demanded an extensive and broad knowledge, as well as much labour. The translation is accompanied by a lengthy index and a rather limited bibliography. The latter seems to be compiled from the works consulted in the process of translation rather than an exhaustive list of secondary works. This could be an opportunity missed to update current Orosian scholarship. Among the works that are missing are Fabrizio Fabbrini’s *Paolo Orosio. Uno Storico*, Hans-Werner Goetz’s *Die Geschichtstheologie des Orosius*, and Koch-Peters’ *Ansichten des Orosius zur Geschichte seiner Zeit*.

However, this new edition does an excellent job in introducing the world of Orosius to those who are inclined to read him. Through the introduction Fear is able to illustrate the importance of the text and the unique contribution it makes to an understanding of early Christian historiography, without overstating the case. A fresh perspective is brought to the text and much deserved attention is directed to Orosius and the early fifth century, a critical time for the survival (or not) of the Roman Empire in the west. Fear’s unpretentious translation joins the growing discourse of re-appreciation and rehabilitation of the *Historia*, and catches up English language scholarship to match its French equivalent. However there is still much remaining scope in the study of Orosius and the *Historia*, such as a commentary to accompany the text, or a complete edition of Orosius’s writings. It is hoped that Fear’s translation forms part of a continuing amelioration in Orosian scholarship and progression towards these goals.

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⁸ For example, Fear, p. 79.

⁹ For example, Fear, pp. 264 and 318.

¹⁰ Deferrari, 7.34, p. 384.

¹¹ Fear, 7.34.1, p. 384

¹² Raymond, 7.34, p. 375