

Procopius

The Secret History of the Court of Justinian



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Description

Procopius, the most important of the Byzantine historians, was born at Caesarea in Palestine towards the beginning of the sixth century of the Christian era. After having for some time practised as a "Rhetorician," that is, advocate or jurist, in his native land, he seems to have migrated early to Byzantium or Constantinople. There he gave lessons in elocution, and acted as counsel in several law-cases. His talents soon attracted attention, and he was promoted to official duties in the service of the State. He was commissioned to accompany the famous Belisarius during his command of the army in the East, in the capacity of Counsellor or Assessor: it is not easy to define exactly the meaning of the Greek term, and the functions it embraced. The term "Judge-Advocate" has been suggested, a legal adviser who had a measure of judicial as well as administrative power. From his vivid description of the early years of Justinian's reign, we may conclude that he spent some considerable time at the Byzantine court before setting out for the East, at any rate, until the year 532, when Belisarius returned to the capital: he would thus have been an eye-witness of the "Nika" sedition, which, had it not been for the courage and firmness displayed by Theodora, would probably have resulted in the flight of Justinian, and a change of dynasty.

In 533 he accompanied Belisarius on his expedition to Africa. On the way, he was intrusted with an important mission to Sicily. He appears to have returned to Byzantium with Belisarius in 535. He is heard of again, in 536, as charged with another mission in the neighbourhood of Rome, which shows that, at the end of 535, he had accompanied Belisarius, who had been despatched to Italy and Sicily to conquer the territory in the occupation of the Goths. This expedition terminated successfully by the surrender of Vitiges and his captivity at Byzantium in 540.

As the reward of his services, Justinian bestowed upon him the title of "Illustrious" (\iillustris\i), given to the highest class of public officials, raised him to the rank of a Senator, and, finally, appointed him Praefect of Byzantium in 562. He does not, however, seem to have been altogether satisfied: he complains of having been ill-paid for his labours; for several years he was even without employment. This is all that is known of his life. He died shortly before or after the end of the reign of Justinian (565), when he would have been over sixty years of age.

His career seems to have been as satisfactory as could be reasonably expected, all things being taken into consideration; but the violent hatred displayed by him against Justinian in the "Anecdota" or "Secret History" - if the work be really his - appears to show that he must have had some real or imaginary grounds of complaint; but history throws no light upon these incidents of his political career.

Insightful reviews

Jan-Maat: I'm a bit puzzled by the allegation that the same Procopius of Caesarea wrote this as wrote [History of the Wars](#) because the tone is so different. The one gossipy and imprecise with millions of Ethiopians (ie inhabitants of North Africa) dying as a result of the reconquest of Vandal occupied North Africa the other careful and sober.

The Secret History is a dirt dishing account of the reign of Justinian. The validity of argument was for me undercut by its hyperbole, it's rather like reading [The Lives of the Later Caesars](#). It has that same sense of something scurrilous that catered for the reader who loved their share of scandal. Very readable and entertaining though and your go to source for scurrilous stories about the Empress Theodora.

Garrett: "... they were bitterly hostile to the astrologers. Accordingly the official appointed to deal with burglaries made a point of ill-treating them simply because they were astrologers, flogging the backs of many of them and setting them on camels to be shown to jeering crowds all over the city, although they were old men and respectable in every way. Yet he had nothing against them except that they wished to be authorities on the stars in such a place as this."

Chris: I've never yet been to Istanbul — formerly Constantinople and before that Byzantium — but I have been to Ravenna on Italy's east coast. Here the visitor can glimpse some of the glory that was Byzantium of old in the form of the magnificent mosaics, located in various surviving structures such as the Arian Baptistry, the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo and the Basilica of San Vitale. Amidst splendid religious mosaics of Christ's baptism and the Adoration of the Magi are more secular images, in particular of the 6th-century Emperor Justinian I, his Empress Theodora and possibly the general Belisarius. These are icons meant to impress, and it's noteworthy that the heads of the two imperial figures are each surrounded by a nimbus — what we recognise as the halo associated with Christ and the saints but which was also, as here, applied to rulers or heroes. To see these figures so bedecked with jewels and crowns and aureoles one would be rightly suspect a measure of self-glorification; but in truth, if their contemporary the writer Procopius is to be believed, no two individuals were less suited to being portrayed thus in a Christian context.

Procopius was the private secretary of Count Belisarius, long the emperor's most trusted general, and was present when Ravenna was captured for the Byzantine Empire in 540. A score or so years later he had risen to become — we surmise — Prefect of Constantinople as well as official imperial historian, whose job was to chronicle the Emperor's achievements in law, history and public works. Procopius did his job well, providing supporting evidence of Justinian's vast law codification for the Empire and the raising of edifices such as the simply astounding Hagia Sophia in the 530s, with its jaw-dropping dome: "marvellous in its grace, but by reason of the seeming insecurity of its composition altogether terrifying. For it seems somehow to float in the air with no firm basis but to be poised aloft to the peril of those inside..."

But this seeming imperial paragon of virtue was, to Procopius, no such thing. While he was writing and publishing *The Histories* and *Buildings* the historian was also putting together *The Secret History*, at no great danger to himself. We are all aware of the malign propensities of modern-day tyrants and dictators — no continent seems immune from them — and it is a brave individual who attempts to record their abuses and injustices, especially one in a position of trust and authority. "It was impossible either to avoid detection by swarms of spies, or if caught to escape death in its most agonizing form," he writes in a foreword from around 550, fifteen years before his and Justinian's deaths. Even now, he adds, "I envisage the probability that what I am now about to write will appear incredible and unconvincing to future generations." And, in a prescient comment, he tells the reader that he is "afraid that I shall be regarded as a mere teller

of fairy tales or listed among the tragic poets.”

But despite lingering fears of reprisals on his future descendants he dares to set down the facts of Justinian's reign secure in the knowledge that there have been ample enough witnesses to support his report, that such an account might cause future tyrants to rein back on their excesses from fear of divine retribution and, moreover, that future victims could take small comfort from knowing that they are not the only ones to suffer from misrule. With the words “This is my justification for first recounting the contemptible conduct of Belisarius, and then revealing the equally contemptible conduct of Justinian and Theodora,” Procopius embarks on a character assassination of his erstwhile employers that sickeningly outdoes any gossipy exposé by today's tabloids.

He structures his report into seven chapters: first outlines the weaknesses and failings of Count Belisarius and his scheming wife Antonina, then goes on to the less than salubrious family background of the emperor, the latter's uncle the Emperor Justin and, last but not least, the empress; these are followed by chapters on Justinian's misgovernment and the Theodora's crimes; then we're treated to the consequences of their misdeeds — needless destruction, wanton ruin, pointless sacrifice — with a last word on “The Arrogance of the Imperial Pair”. Frankly, I found it hard to read this account without breaks. In terms of the scandalous doings of these two of the original quartet the sheer piling of Pelion on Ossa is mind-numbing: ruthlessness, vindictiveness, rapaciousness, disloyalty, wastefulness, greed, depravity – of the seven deadly sins only sloth and gluttony seem alien to the monsters Procopius depicts, and the imperial pair seem to have invented as many variations on the remaining five as they could.

The Latin-speaking Justinian and his soldier uncle Justin were from a Balkan village but, moving to Byzantium, Justin was fortuitously placed as captain of the guard to become Emperor, and Justinian was equally well placed to slip into the role when his time came. The actress and prostitute Theodora caught his eye on his way to the throne in 527 and together the two very strong-minded individuals weathered riots in 532 and a devastating plague 540-2 until the reconquest of Italy by Belisarius led to the completed mosaics of San Vitale in 547, a year before Theodora's death at 48 from cancer. Orthodox historians call this a Golden Age of art and architecture and praise Justinian for his streamlining of bureaucracy and the law and his support of Catholic Christianity against heresy; Procopius had already chronicled his military and religious successes but in *The Secret History* more than balances this with an alternative and very disturbing view of a corrupt court aided and abetted by an equally corrupt state apparatus. Peter Brown suggests that Justinian “has been trapped in his own image. His astute manipulation of the resources of propaganda has been taken at face value. Hence he has gained the reputation of being a romantic idealist, haunted by the mirage of a renewal of the Roman empire...” Even if only a third or a quarter of what Procopius says is true, untainted by hyperbole, that romantic idealist image must be very far from the truth.

The San Vitale portraits, for all the drawbacks of mosaic techniques, present what seem to be very powerful individuals. It's difficult not to look into those eyes desperately seeking answers to the apparent conundrums of later judgements, and perhaps being a little frightened by what one sees there. And that reminds me: I must re-read Donna Tartt's novel of the same name...

Peter Brown *The World of Late Antiquity*, Thames & Hudson 1971
Speros Vryonis *Byzantium and Europe* Thames & Hudson 1967

<http://wp.me/s2oNj1-secret>

Sparrow: The time is 558 A.D., where Constantinople. Procopius is a courtroom historian, who, later in life, makes a decision to inform the genuine fact in regards to the royal family members he has documented: the Emperor Justinian and his spouse Theodora. Is that this the 1st example of book-as-revenge (with a wonderful title, to be ultimately stolen hundreds of thousands of times)? Justinian usually jogs my memory of George W. Bush, who continuously evoked the question: "Is he malevolent or spectacularly incompetent? Is malevolence a kind of incompetence? Is incompetence a species of malevolence?" As each empire is crumbling, a feckless tyrant arrives to push the carcass of presidency over the cliff, then wander away with a self-satisfied smile. The one distinction among Justinian and George W. is the former's uxoriousness. (I've been ready years to exploit this word.) He was once completely manipulated via his power-mad spouse Theodora, if Procopius is believable. Already Christianity had encouraged an obsession with perverse sexuality, and the key historical past excels in that department. Procopius' description of Theodora's ascension from all-purpose slut to Empress is inadvertently majestic: "One evening she went into the home of a unique citizen throughout the drinking, and, it really is said, sooner than the eyes of all of the site visitors she stood up at the finish of the sofa close to their feet, pulled up her costume within the such a lot disgusting demeanour as she stood there, and overtly displayed her lasciviousness. And notwithstanding she introduced 3 openings into service, she usually came across fault with Nature, grumbling simply because Nature had now not made the openings in her nipples wider than is normal, in order that she may devise one other number of sex in that region." With its unfamiliar, a bit of arbitrary Imperial jargon, one is reminded of technological know-how fiction. This passage may well check with the planet Klargon: "The squaddies on defend on the Palace used to put themselves along the arbitrators within the Royal Portico and via brute strength safe the verdicts they wanted. at the moment all with few exceptions had left their posts and have been jogging simply as they happy down methods hitherto barred to them and never to be trodden; issues have been all speeding alongside in utter affliction and had ceased to be referred to as through their right names, and the commonwealth used to be like childrens taking part in 'King of the Castle'." Hatred is repetitive. the key heritage does not upward thrust to a climax; it in basic terms lists the evils of this royal couple until eventually it truly is exhausted.

Maan Kawas: A wonderful, disturbing, and stunning ebook approximately tyranny within the past due Roman Empire in Byzantium, through the reign of Emperor Justinian! The booklet presents bright description of the court, characters, and mischievous deeds of the Emperor Justinian and his spouse Empress Theodora, beginning first with a bankruptcy approximately Basilarius and his spouse Antonina and their immoral deeds as well. The e-book indicates large immorality, greed, cruelty, adultery and unlawful relationships (even an incestuous relationship), bribe (even the Emperor used to obtain bribes), the strong position of authority and tyranny, the impression of authority, fear, and cash on legislation and judgment, the shortcoming of conscientiousness, oppression, the main of "Ends justifies means" in practice, and the insatiable greed for money, disloyalty, and meanness. i have not sooner than examine such bloodthirsty tyrants, and that i used to be even stunned to profit even a few ladies have been

tyrant as well. The booklet is fabulous in its depiction of that time, and you are feeling it choked with life.

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