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Isibol of Three Rivers, Stephanie N. Campbell

Justinian and Theodora as seen through the eyes of Procopius.

We do not have many varied sources to study the personal lives of Justinian and Theodora but by far the most intriguing and wildly disparate accounts all start with one man, Procopius of Caesarea. Nothing he says has been found to be directly, factually inaccurate but as they say the devil is in the details. The writings of Procopius on these two could be an entire course on the implications and ramifications of bias in writing.

History doesn't know how to place Justinian and Theodora. Are they some of the best examples that humanity has ever had to give? The Eastern Orthodox Church who still regards them as saints and the Procopius who authored *Buildings* certainly agree. Procopius writes, ¹"In our own age there has been born the Emperor Justinian, who, taking over the State when it was harassed by disorder, has not only made it greater in extent, but also much more illustrious, by expelling from it those

¹ Buildings, edited and translated into English by H[enry] B[ronson] Dewing, as printed in Vol. VII of the Loeb Classical Library edition of Procopius, published in 1940 , Book 1 [Chapter 1: Introduction; the church of S. Sophia in Constantinople](#) <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>

barbarians who had from of old pressed hard upon it, as I have made clear in detail in the Books on the Wars. Indeed they say that Themistocles, the son of Neocles, once boastfully said that he did not lack the ability to make a small state large. But this Sovereign does not lack the skill to produce completely transformed states — witness the way he has already added to the Roman domain many states which in his own times had belonged to others, and has created countless cities which did not exist before. And finding that the belief in God was, before his time, straying into errors and being forced to go in many directions, he completely destroyed all the paths leading to such errors, and brought it about that it stood on the firm foundation of a single faith. Moreover, finding the laws obscure because they had become far more numerous than they should be, and in obvious confusion because they disagreed with each other, he preserved them by cleansing them of the mass of their verbal trickery, and by controlling their discrepancies with the greatest firmness; as for those who plotted against him, he of his own volition dismissed the charges against them, causing those who were in want to have a surfeit of wealth, and crushing the spiteful fortune that oppressed them, he wedded the whole State to a life of prosperity. Furthermore, he strengthened the Roman domain, which everywhere lay exposed to the

barbarians, by a multitude of soldiers, and by constructing strongholds he built a wall along all its remote frontiers.”

In other words, this one man expelled the Barbarians from all the Roman lands, was a man of god who united all the peoples under one true religion, fortified all strongholds while simultaneously expanding the empire boardly, increased the wealth and prosperity of the entire realm and organized and codified all the law code plainly. What a man! Can you imagine a ruler who is that effective today? How well loved he would be!

Procopius reintroduces us to Justinian later in *The Secret History of the Court of Justinian*. ²“But the Emperor cared not at all for what was going on, although he daily beheld what took place in the hippodrome, for he was exceedingly stupid, very much like a dull-witted ass, which follows whoever holds its bridle, shaking its ears the while. This behaviour on the part of Justinian ruined everything.”..... ³ “It will not be out of place, I think, to describe his personal appearance. He was neither tall nor too short, but of a medium height, not thin, but inclined to be fat. His face was round and not ill-favoured, and showed colour, even

² The Secret History of the Court of Justinian by Procopius, published and translated March 1, 2018, B&R Samizdat Express, ISBN 9781455407705, Chapter VIII Paragraph 1

³ The Secret History of the Court of Justinian by Procopius, published and translated March 1, 2018, B&R Samizdat Express, ISBN 9781455407705, Chapter VIII Paragraph 3

after a two days' fast. In a word, he greatly resembled Domitian, Vespasian's son, more than anybody else. This was the Emperor whom the Romans detested so much that they could not slake their hatred for him, even when they had torn him to pieces,". So the magnificent paladin of the buildings is as stupid as a chained ass, fat, and as ugly as the most hated Emperor Rome has ever known. What? Surely no dullard codified and published all of the laws in the land into one succinct, logical document. Surely no milquetoast, impotent, careless man could be the great leader who vanquished all of the Barbarians from Roman lands. This is the quite confusing picture Procopius has painted for historians to decipher.

He leaves no clearer picture of Empress Theodora. In *History of the Wars* Procopius tells of a great and noble speech given by Theodora that stirs all the men to action at the moment they are at their lowest, ready to resign the crown and even the very city itself. ⁴"As to the belief that a woman ought not to be daring among men or to assert herself boldly among those who are holding back from fear, I consider that the present crisis most certainly does

⁴ History of the Wars, Books I and II (of 8) The Persian War, Author: Procopius, Translator: H. B. Dewing,

not permit us to discuss whether the matter should be regarded in this or in some other way. For in the case of those whose interests have come into the greatest danger nothing else seems best except to settle the issue immediately before them in the best possible way. My opinion then is that the present time, above all others, is inopportune for flight, even though it bring safety. For while it is impossible for a man who has seen the light not also to die, for one who has been an emperor it is unendurable to be a fugitive. May I never be separated from this purple, and may I not live that day on which those who meet me shall not address me as mistress. If, now, it is your wish to save yourself, O Emperor, there is no difficulty. For we have much money, and there is the sea, here the boats. However consider whether it will not come about after you have been saved that you would gladly exchange that safety for death. For as for myself, I approve a certain ancient saying that royalty is a good burial-shroud."

Just as for her husband, Procopius describes a much less illustrious women in *A Secret History*.⁵ "As for Justinian's wife, I shall now describe her birth, how she was brought up, how she married him, and how in conjunction with him

⁵ The Secret History of the Court of Justinian by Procopius, published and translated March 1, 2018, B&R Samizdat Express, ISBN 9781455407705, Chapter IX Paragraph 1

she utterly ruined the Roman Empire.”⁶”Theodora was still too young to have intercourse with a man after the manner of women, but she satisfied the unnatural passions of certain wretches, even the vilest slaves, who followed their masters to the theatre and amused their leisure by this infamy.”⁷”she straightway became a simple harlot, as old-fashioned people called it; for she was neither a musician nor a dancer, but merely prostituted herself to everyone whom she met, giving up every part of her body to debauchery.”⁸”She frequently became pregnant, but as she employed all known remedies without delay, she promptly procured abortion.”

To say such things of any woman would be to incur the wrath of her and all her kin be they true or not. To say it of an Empress of Rome would be social, financial and literal suicide.

Procopius chose to wait till both the Emperor and Empress were dead to spew his written venom. Did he print lies in the past to garner their adoration? Did he speak highly of

⁶ The Secret History of the Court of Justinian by Procopius, published and translated March 1, 2018, B&R Samizdat Express, ISBN 9781455407705, Chapter IX Paragraph 4

⁷ The Secret History of the Court of Justinian by Procopius, published and translated March 1, 2018, B&R Samizdat Express, ISBN 9781455407705, Chapter IX Paragraph 5

⁸ The Secret History of the Court of Justinian by Procopius, published and translated March 1, 2018, B&R Samizdat Express, ISBN 9781455407705, Chapter IX Paragraph 7

Justinian and Theodora for the salary he was paid? Was Procopius somehow massively dishonored by the saintly couple? Was Procopius desperately trying to make a bid to the good graces of the new Roman leadership? Did Procopius resent and hate them both for being more than he could be his whole life and lied in wait to give the world his tell all?

It is likely that we will never know the answers to these questions and many more. Instead, I suggest rather than taking Procopius' word the reader judge the couple by the many great feats we know for sure they committed such as the very real codification of ⁹law codes, the building of the Hagia Sophia, many assorted aqueducts, roads, castles, churches and so much more. Enjoy *A Secret History* as a piece of torrid, historical literature full of all the political intrigue, salaciousness, murder, greed and violence befitting a modern best selling novel.

⁹ Justinian Code or Corpus Juris Civilis (Corpus of Civil Law)