THE SECRET HISTORY AND THE ART OF PROCOPIUS.¹

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I shall start with a quotation. It comes from Averil Cameron's introduction to her translation and abridgement of Procopius which appears in the Great Histories series under the general editorship of H.R. Trevor-Roper. 'Gibbon called the Secret History a satire,' she wrote, 'and the tenth-century lexicon known as the Souda refers to it as a komodia — a burlesque. But it is more than a satire in our sense of the word. One of its main themes is that Justinian and Theodora were demons in human form. To an eighteenth-century rationalist like Gibbon, these were “diabolical stories” which Procopius could not seriously believe. When faced with these accusations against the imperial couple, contemporaries of Procopius would not easily accept the Secret History as a literary burlesque. But for all that, the chief theme of the Secret History is not religion but politics. There is more in it of invective than of satire. It is badly constructed and highly repetitive, possibly written hastily, or unrevised. . . .'²

So far, so good. Most students of Procopius must accept a great deal of what Mrs Cameron says. The Secret History is a product of Byzantine court circles, for we can assume that Procopius did move in the circles of the court. He held the rank of illustris, according to the same Souda which is our first source to name the Secret History, calling it the Anecdota or 'Unpublished Works', and to ascribe it to Procopius. He was adsessor of Belisarius, and he could have been appointed to this post by the emperor himself.³ He moved in an atmosphere of intrigue, where dissent brought with it penalties. The penalty would probably be disgrace: loss of social standing and property, possibly imprisonment, which could be followed after a period with reinstatement into imperial favour. In his eighth book of the Wars⁴ Procopius himself bears witness to the notorious leniency of Justinian towards his erring generals. Yet, it was an atmosphere in which a man who wanted to advance and maintain secure possession of his property — something that mattered to Procopius — was careful what he said.

And so, the Secret History is a puzzle. It purports to be a supplement to the Wars. It implies that the information it contains could not safely be published during the lifetime of Justinian and Theodora, but although Theodora was certainly dead, presumably of cancer, by the time it was composed, Justinian was not. We must infer almost all we know of the circumstances under which the

1. This paper was first given at the eighth annual conference of the Medieval Association of the Pacific, held at the University of Washington in Seattle in February, 1975. The paper profited greatly from the comments made at that time, particularly those of Mr Peter Brown, All Souls College, Oxford.
Secret History was written from internal evidence. The Souza mentions it, and treats it as the last book of the Wars. There were eight others. Seven were published all together, not before early 551. The model is generally Thucydides, but like the works of Appian, the divisions are by regions: two books on the Persian Wars, two on the Libyan war, and three on the war against the Ostrogoths. This plan made a sequel difficult. Nevertheless, a sequel soon became desirable, for shortly after Procopius published his seven books of the Wars, the Byzantine forces under Narses won a smashing victory over the Goths, and Italy, though ruined, became, for the moment, Byzantine. Sometime not earlier than 554, but quite possibly a little later, an eighth book appeared. There are two striking differences between this last book and the seven which preceded it. One is the lack of immediacy. Procopius no longer shared the inner counsels of the commander, and however he might try to disguise it by elaborate geographical descriptions, he was less well-informed. The second is the distinct lack of enthusiasm about the Byzantine victory in Italy. The tone is more outspoken and there is even the occasional criticism directed without attempt at concealment at the emperor himself.5

Then there is the Secret History, the manuscript of which turned up in the Vatican Library in the early seventeenth century.6 It starts with an introduction remarkably similar to that of Book 8 of the Wars: so much so that J.B. Bury7 who accepted 550 as the date of its composition, pointed out that no one could have written the opening lines of Book 8 who had not already read the Secret History. Procopius was at some pains to pinpoint the year when the Secret History was composed, for he dates it in four passages,8 and always in the same, ambiguous manner. Justinian has had control of the empire for thirty-two years. If we count thirty-two years from Justinian’s accession in 527, that would place the Secret History at 559. But the Secret History makes no dateable reference to any event after 550. It knows nothing of the eighth book of the Wars, and I think Haury’s9 view must be accepted that Procopius is counting thirty-two years not from Justinian’s accession in 527, but from his uncle Justin’s in 518. Procopius intends us to believe that his Secret History was put together just as the seven books of the Wars of Justinian were ready to appear, and that it contained supplementary material which could not safely be included in the

5. cf. Wars 8. 26. 7-10, where Procopius comments on the negligence with which Justinian had conducted the war in Italy.
8. SH 18.33; 23.1; 24.29 and 33.
Wars, but which Procopius wanted to make known to posterity. I have already argued elsewhere that the ‘date’ which Procopius gives with such deliberate ambiguity, four times repeated, may itself be a literary device. The *Souda* treated the *Secret History* as the final book of the *Wars*. The literary mask which Procopius has chosen to adopt is that of an historian who has written seven books in the tradition of Thucydides (tempered a little by Herodotus) and is left with material which was too dangerous to publish, and which, we may add privately, it would also have been un-Thucydidean to include. So we are asked to believe that, just as *Wars* 1-7 were ready for the public eye, Procopius wrote a concluding book, more in the style of Cassius Dio, with many anecdotes and amusing stories. And, of course, there was more bitterness than comedy, for Procopius hated and feared change, and Justinian was an innovator. But that is a different question.

This, I think, explains the peculiar similarity between the opening lines of the eighth book and the *Secret History*. The *Secret History* is not the ninth book of the *Wars*, as the *Souda* takes it. It was an alternative eighth book, that is, an alternative conclusion. The models are no longer Thucydides and Herodotus, and in fact, Procopius soon drops his pretence that he is adding footnotes to the *Wars*. The cross-references soon cease, and the *Secret History* takes its own form, drawing on three familiar genres of literature: biography, fiction and panegyric. Examples of these three elements are not hard to find.

One element from biography, for instance, is the undated anecdote which is intended to throw light on character and perhaps to rouse our emotions in the process. Towards the end of the *Secret History*, there are a number of ‘horror stories’ related, which are intended to illustrate Justinian’s inhumanity, and, incidentally, to rouse our indignation. I take one example: the story of the daughter of a certain Anatolius. There was a certain Anatolius who had only one daughter. She married a man of excellent social standing from Caesarea in Palestine, which was Procopius’ native city. By ancient law, an heiress such as Anatolius’ daughter, lost one-quarter of her father’s estate as succession duties. Justinian, with his customary disregard for tradition, had increased the tariff to three-quarters. So Anatolius’ daughter was left with one-quarter of the estate. Then the said lady lost her husband, and since there was only one daughter, she inherited. Then the daughter, who had married a notable man, died in turn, and since she was without issue, her mother, now an old woman, was the heir. Thus Anatolius’ daughter was left in possession of the two estates. Justinian forthwith confiscated her property, stating that it was unholy that Anatolius’ daughter should be thus enriched by two estates. However, because he was, in his own eyes, a pious man, he assigned her a gold stater a day as an annuity. Procopius

concluded this woeful tale with Justinian's own remark on his iniquitous conduct. 'It is my custom,' he said, 'to do whatever is pious and righteous.' One need not look far among the biographers to find anecdotes of this sort.

One of the inventions of ancient fiction was the 'Milesian Tale': the salacious story intended to amuse. The *Secret History* presents one fine example.Procopius tells us that Theodora, in her misspent youth, often took ten lusty young men to her bedroom and exhausted them all, and then did the same for their thirty attendants, for the ten lusty young men each took with them three attendants for just such demanding occasions.\(^1\) Is that true history, or a Milesian tale? All secular historians claimed to tell the truth, and so did Procopius. It is not possible to check Procopius' accuracy on all points, and for most of his salacious stories about Theodora, he is our sole witness. But, as Charles Diehl pointed out, John of Ephesus, who approved of Theodora's religious tenets, refers to her casually it seems, as Theodora 'from the brothel'. But even if everything Procopius writes about Theodora were accurate, including the ten lusty young men and their thirty assistants, there is more of the Milesian tale to this anecdote than there is true history.

As for panegyric, we should remember that Procopius' final work, interrupted perhaps by his death, was the *Buildings*, an amazing composition to be written by the same man who wrote the *Secret History*. The Justinian of the *Buildings* is the chosen of God. Twice during the erection of the dome of Hagia Sophia, Justinian gave the architects sound technical advice which prevented the collapse of the structure.\(^1\) Since Justinian had no training in building techniques, Procopius supposes that he received divine inspiration: presumably the inspiration which was normally vouchsafed to a Byzantine emperor who was in good standing with Heaven. Justinian's buildings were the substantial evidence of his virtues as an emperor. In the *Secret History*,\(^1\) the same building programme is a waste of money. The emperor squandered his resources on useless projects such as trying to build over the sea, while at the same time, the capital's aqueduct remained in disrepair. A comparison of the *Secret History* and the *Buildings* will suggest that one intention of the former was to parody the concept of the idealized Byzantine emperor, and empress too, for that matter. They even look different. In the *Buildings*, Theodora is a thing of beauty, beyond description. In the *Secret History*\(^1\) she has a sallow complexion. The diatribe is only a panegyric turned inside out. In the *Secret History* witchcraft takes the place of divine inspiration. The lord of the demons takes the place of the viceregent of God. The emperor does not protect the empire, and its traditions, but by his innovations he destroys them.

13. *Bldgs*. 1, i, 67-73; 75-78; cf. also 2, iii, 2-14, where Procopius cites another story which demonstrates that Justinian was given special technical knowledge from a divine source.
13a. 8. 7-8; 24. 23-5.
14. *Bldgs*. 1, 11, 8; *SH* 10. 11.
My conclusions can be summed up rapidly. The *Secret History* was an alternative concluding book of the *Wars*, one which did not bring Justinian's wars to a successful conclusion but instead pointed out the shortcomings of the regime. Thucydides is abandoned as a model; instead the *Secret History* draws on other genres of literature, and although it is not a biography, it nevertheless invites comparison with biographical literature. One wishes we could compare it with the lost works of Marius Maximus, who, according to Ammianus, was, along with Juvenal, the favourite author of the Roman aristocrats of his day. It was intended to amuse as well as to shock, and although I think Procopius' primary purpose in writing it may have been to ventilate his own feelings, he wrote with an audience in mind. Above all, it was an artful composition. Unlike Mrs Cameron, I see few signs of hasty composition. On the contrary, the *Secret History* impresses me as a work which could have been written over a period of years, and in support of that view, I would point out that there are a number of verbal reminiscences of classical authors in the first part of the *Secret History* which seems to disappear in the latter part. Hasty composition, perhaps, but I think that, more likely, a measurable space of time intervened between the beginning of the *Secret History* and its conclusion. Finally, though the *Secret History* may tell us a good deal that is more or less true, at least within Procopius' bitter perspective, we should not approach it too seriously. It is not a call for revolution, and even if it had fallen into the hands of Justinian himself, it is not impossible that he might have found it more amusing than threatening.