The Composition of Procopius' *Persian Wars* and John the Cappadocian

The dating of Procopius' works remains a subject of considerable controversy. Opinion is still divided as to whether the *Buildings* was published c.560 or c.554, and the case for dating the *Secret History* to 558 rather than 550 has recently been revived.\(^1\) No such doubt surrounds the appearance of the first seven books of Procopius' *Wars*, which, it is clear, were brought out in 551, to be followed by Book VIII in 554.\(^2\)

Questions arise, however, as to when Procopius composed the various books of the *Wars* and how he went about it. While these cannot be answered conclusively, it is possible to see in the work various phases of composition. Crucial to a discussion of when Procopius was working is the section concerning John the Cappadocian (I.25), in which an extremely hostile account of this

---


\(^2\) Cameron, *Procopius*, 8, puts the appearance of I-VII in 550, whereas J.A.S. Evans, *Procopius* (New York, 1972), 37 puts it in 551. The latter must be correct (as *PLRE* III< s.v. Procopius 2, realises), since *Wars* VII.40 contains information on events in 551 (such as the defeat of a Roman army under Scholasticus near Adrianople in that year, on which cf. E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, vol.2 [Amsterdam, 1949], 524 (henceforth Stein II) and *PLRE* III, s.v. Aratius). On the date of *Wars* VIII, cf. Greatrex, 'The dates of Procopius' works', 105-7.
official’s career, and that of the lawyer Tribonian, is offered. It will be argued here that three phases of composition can be distinguished in the Wars. First, there was a narrative of the wars witnessed by the author, which was then followed by the division of the events into different theatres of war (Persian, Vandalic and Gothic) and the addition of introductory chapters concerning the area and adversaries in question. Finally, and at a later stage still, the chapter concerning John the Cappadocian was actually incorporated into the Persian Wars, having originally been destined for the Secret History.

(a) The first phase of composition.

It is generally believed that Procopius set about writing up his account of the ἔργα ὑπερμεγέθη (‘deeds of singular importance’) he had witnessed when he returned to Constantinople before 542. It is further supposed that during this time he ‘wrote up’ his account of these events, crafting it into ‘classicising history’, replete with speeches, digressions and the other trappings of the genre.

Despite this process, traces of the original account of Belisarius’ campaigns may be detected; for instance, J.B. Bury believed that chapters 12-22 of Wars I represent an early phase of composition, on account of their brevity and incompleteness. A further trace of this earlier version—which predates the geographical division of the work—is detectable in the opening words of the Vandalic

---

3 As Haury realised, Procopiana I (Programm des Königlichen Realgymnasiums Augsburg, 1890/1), 4-5.

4 PLRE III, s.v. Procopius 3 (p.1062), Evans Procopius, 37 on his presence in Constantinople in 542, where he witnessed the plague (Wars II.29). Also Haury, Procopiana I, 7 and Cameron, Procopius, 8.


Wars: ‘such, then, was the final outcome of the Persian War for the Emperor Justinian...’.\(^7\) Now this sentence reads much more naturally following from (Persian) Wars I.22 rather than the end of Book II of the Persian Wars. For at the end of Book II there has been no ‘final outcome’: the last chapter contains an account of continuing fighting in Lazica in 549, despite the existence of a truce between Rome and Persia.\(^8\) Hence the reader can only be perplexed upon reading those words, if he or she should turn to the Vandalic Wars immediately after the Persian Wars. If, however, the reader should turn to these words having just finished (Persian) Wars I.22—the conclusion of an ‘Eternal’ Peace between Rome and Persia—then he or she would find them perfectly appropriate. Moreover, Justinian’s expedition against the Vandals actually took place only one year after the Eternal Peace, so that, chronologically speaking, Wars III.1 follows I.22 directly.\(^9\)

It may be suggested therefore that Procopius’ decision to divide his work geographically rather than chronologically caused him some difficulty, and led—even after revision—to some inconsistencies. The unusualness of Procopius’ choice in arranging his material geographically should be underlined: only one precedent (of which we know) was available to him—that of Appian in the second century A.D.\(^10\) But while the major

---

\(^7\) Ο μὲν οὖν Μηδικός πόλεμος Ἰουστινιανός βασιλεῖ ἐς τὸ τέλος τετελεύτα (my translation).


In this article I shall number the books of the Wars consecutively, rather than refer to Wars III-IV as Vandalic Wars I-II. For the sake of clarity, however, I shall indicate which part of the Wars is being referred to in brackets, e.g. (Persian) Wars II.


\(^{10}\) There is no similar problem about the ending of the Vandalic Wars and the opening of the Gothic Wars, for Procopius merely refers at V.1.1 to the ‘affairs’ of the Romans in Africa.

Appian was used by Evagrius, Ecclesiastical History ed. J. Bidez and L. Parmentier (London, 1898), V.24; cf. also Appian’s preface, ch.15, in
campaigns could be separated geographically quite successfully, there remained the problem of events in the capital as well as affairs in the Balkans; in the end these had to be incorporated somewhere, usually into the Persian Wars, by far the most composite of the three sections of the Wars. Hence at Wars II.4.1-12 there is an account of an incursion by Huns in Illyricum in 539; and at Wars VII.11.1-20 various events are recorded for the year 548, such as a Slavic invasion of Illyricum, which bear little relevance to the war against the Goths. Clearly the pull of a chronologically arranged account was strong for Procopius, and he abandoned the geographical division entirely in the final book of the Wars. 11

(b) The revision in the 540s

The 540s witnessed notable changes among the leading advisers of Justinian—changes probably witnessed by Procopius in the capital. John the Cappadocian fell from favour in 541, and Tribonian was probably carried off by the plague in the following year. Even Belisarius, whose career had reached its apogee in 540, was disgraced in 542, never to regain such prominence again. 12 These developments were important to writers such as Procopius, for they meant that those who had lost imperial favour could be vilified openly as much as desired. Thus Procopius and his contemporary John the Lydian were able to pin much of the blame

---


for the Nika riots of 532 on John and Tribonian, whereas earlier writers (Marcellinus comes at any rate) could only hold Anastasius’ nephews Hypatius and Pompey responsible.\textsuperscript{13}

It is not difficult to argue that the chapters which follow the conclusion of the Eternal Peace (\textit{Wars} I.23-26) represent a later addition to the narrative of I.12-22. Apart from the open criticism of John in I.24 and I.25, there are clear references to King Khusro’s campaign of 541 in the account of Persian events provided in I.23, whereas in the earlier narrative there are no such references to subsequent events.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, the account of the Nika riot sits uneasily following the Eternal Peace—since the riot took place in January 532 and the Peace was agreed in summer 532, and Procopius presents the riot as occurring after the Peace; and while Procopius’ accuracy in some matters can be called into question, he is generally correct in his ordering of events.\textsuperscript{15}

Is it possible to date when these chapters were added? \textit{Termini} are available. It will be argued below that I.25 represents a further addition, inserted in 546, which implies a date before 546 for I.23-24 and 26. And as has been noted above, there are references to events in 541 in I.23, which therefore means that these three final chapters can be dated to between 541 and 546. This congrues with two other passages in the \textit{Gothic Wars} (\textit{Wars} V.24.32,


\textsuperscript{14} I.19-20 may well also represent a later insertion, designed perhaps to distract attention from Belisarius’ defeat at Callinicum, and dealing with affairs extending up to the 530s and possibly the 540s, cf. Greatrex, \textit{Procopius and the Persian Wars} 255-6 and I. Shahid, \textit{Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century} (2 vols.), forthcoming. \textit{Wars} I.26, concerning a Persian attempt to seize Dara in 537, was probably added at the same time as I.23-4.

\textsuperscript{15} So (e.g.) S. Smith, ‘Events in Arabia in the sixth century A.D.’, \textit{Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies} 16 (1954), 429.
VI.5.26-7), which are explicitly dated to 545; it follows then that Procopius was updating sections of his narrative in the mid-540s.16

(c) John the Cappadocian and the Secret History

So far the notion of a two-fold process of writing for Procopius has been advanced, and this represents the orthodox modern view. According to this view, from 545 Procopius left off revising his early work and concentrated instead on updating his accounts of developments on the three fronts year by year. Hence there are no more references forward to events after this year, it is argued.17

But in fact this view is open to refinement. For the chronological indicators in I.25, if correctly interpreted, point to a date of 546 for the composition of this chapter. Next, however, it is necessary to put forward the case for I.25 being a later addition. In the first place, the τότε (‘then’) which opens 26.1 simply cannot refer to the time at which I.25 closes—the mid-540s—since the events it describes took place in 537 and before. It is more plausibly to be connected either to the end of I.24 or I.22, since it provides a brief account of events in the 530s and refers to Belisarius’ restoration to the post of magister militum per Orientem.18 Second, although Procopius offers a character assessment of John and Tribonian at 24.11-16, many of his criticisms are (unnecessarily) repeated at 25.1-3. It should also be noted that the chapter is complete in itself, providing an edifying tale of the downfall of an oppressive official—more in the manner of something from the Secret History than a topic suited to the Wars.19

16 On the datable passages, cf. Cameron, Procopius, 236 and n.66 and Haury, Procopiana 1, 5-6.

17 Cf. Cameron, Procopius, 236-7, Haury, Procopiana 1, 6-7 and idem. Zur Beurteilung des Geschichtschreibers Procopius von Cäsarea (Munich, 1896), 37.

18 Cf. PLRE III, s.v. Belisarius 1 (p.187) for the re-appointment of Belisarius to this position probably early in 533.

It seems likely therefore that I.25 has been inserted here. It remains to attempt to date the chapter. Procopius recounts that, following his dismissal from office (in May 541), John was ordained a priest in Artace, a suburb of Cyzicus. There he remained, still possessed of some wealth, until he was accused of the murder of the bishop Eusebius (25.37-40) and haled off to Egypt. Procopius further states at 25.43 that the year in which he was writing was the third year since John had been held at Antinous in Egypt, which provides the key chronological indicator as to when he was writing up this chapter.

The orthodox view concerning John’s career regards his stay in Artace as but a brief one. For Malalas has a whole entry on John’s career, and appears to date his fall from power to August 541, whereupon he was deported to Artace. Since it is known that he must have been dismissed as praetorian prefect before June 541, it has therefore been supposed that the mention of August actually refers to his banishment to Antinous, also reported in Malalas. Were no other evidence available, this might be a convincing hypothesis; since, however, several other sources can be brought to bear on this question, their evidence must be taken into account.

A more satisfactory interpretation of all the evidence would give John some three years in Artace. Several grounds for such a


21 This is the view of PLRE III, s.v. Ioannes 11 and cf. Bury, HLRE II, 59 n.1. As noted by S.J.B. Barnish, ‘Late Roman Prosopography reassessed’, JRS 84 (1994), 172, this is in conflict with PLRE II, s.v. Phocas 5, which places John’s exile in 542/3.
view may be advanced. First, the continuator of Marcellinus *comes* explicitly assigns the banishment of John to 544 (a.544.3), which remains inexplicable if we suppose that in this year he had already spent three years in Egypt. Further chronological indicators are available. The murder of the bishop of Cyzicus, Eusebius, attracted the notice of several sources. According to Procopius, in the *Secret History*, the empress Theodora attempted to suborn members of the Green faction to accuse John of the murder. Her efforts proved vain, however, and the two faction members were themselves punished by having their right hand severed. Malalas, who even names these two individuals as Andreas and John Dandax, places their punishment in 547. Procopius states that Theodora’s machinations and the punishment of the two factionists took place four years after John’s exile to Egypt. Combining these two pieces of evidence, we may see that John’s banishment to Antinous should be placed in 544 (assuming that Procopius is counting inclusively). Furthermore, Procopius’ description of John’s luxurious life at 25.34-36 would also seem inappropriate, if he had spent less than three months in Cyzicus, and he would scarcely have had an opportunity to have incurred the wrath of Eusebius in such a short time.

---

22 Marcellini *comitis* Additamentum, ed. Th. Mommsen, *MGH AA XI.1* (Berlin, 1893), a. 544.3, p.107. Stein II, 483 n.1, argues that Marcellinus’ continuator (or someone else) has swapped round two entries, so that a.541.3 should be placed at a.544.3 and vice versa, thus making the chronicler conform to Malalas and Procopius. While the mistake at 541.3 is undeniable (Solomon’s death in Africa occurred in 544, not 541, cf. *PLRE* III, s.v. Solomon 1), such an ingenious solution is unnecessary.

23 Procopius, *Secret History*, 17.40-45 for the details of Theodora’s attempts, §41 for the period of four years. Malalas, 483, on the punishment of the factionists. Stein II, 483 nn.1 and 3, is aware of this dating, but prefers to put John’s exile to Egypt in 541 (emending the text of Marcellinus, as noted above n.22). Haury, *Procopiana* 1, 5, agrees with the chronology here advocated, but places the banishment to Antinopolis in 543, not taking into account Marcellinus’ continuator.

On Andreas and John Dandax, cf. *PLRE* III, s.v. Andreas 5 and Iohannes 41 (*qui et Dandax*).
Thus the view being proposed here would place the exile of John to Egypt in 544, which in turn has repercussions for when Procopius was writing up his works. Before these repercussions are examined, it is necessary to consider the last chapter in John’s career. In 548 he was able to return to the capital, following the death of Theodora, but failed to recover his previous position.24 Again it is Procopius who furnishes most information on his return, recounting how he came to fulfil a prophecy that he would wear royal clothes: he was lent a cloak by a certain priest called Augustus. The positioning of this episode is instructive. It comes at the very end of \textit{(Persian) Wars II}, after events of 549. After concluding the campaign of 549 in Lazica, Procopius tells of John’s return, specifically placing it ‘in the previous year’. Evidently in 549/50, when Procopius was working on his final draft of the \textit{Wars}, he wished to conclude the story of John the Cappadocian. He could not include it in I.25, since he already had dated this section to 546, and hence had to find somewhere else to insert it. Rather than break up the narrative of the Lazic campaigns therefore, he chose to include the tale at the most convenient place—right at the end of the book, similar to the positioning of his earlier digression on John in Book I.25

(d) Conclusion

The redating of John’s career proposed here gives some insight into the composition of both the \textit{Wars} and the \textit{Secret History}. In 546 Procopius updated \textit{Wars I} with an account of John’s career up to this point, and then three or four years later he brought his account up to date by the addition of a digression at the end of Book II. And at some stage between 547 and 550 Procopius wrote up the role of Theodora in trying to suborn the Green factionists against John; but while criticism of an ex-minister might be permissible in the \textit{Wars}, the empress could hardly be subjected to the same treatment.

24 Malalas, frg.47 and 481 (tr. Jeffreys-Scott, 285-6).

The close relationship between the *Wars* and the *Secret History* also emerges very clearly from this consideration of John's career. As has been noted above, *Wars* I. 25 reads very much like an excerpt from the *Secret History*, so harsh and exaggerated is its attack on John. With this passage in mind, it is difficult to see how there can ever have been any difficulty in regarding Procopius as the author of the *Secret History*.\(^{26}\) Whether *Wars* I.25 was originally destined for the *Secret History*, only to be rescued from it when it became clear that John would never recover his position, must remain a hypothesis.

It is possible, however, to observe just how close the accounts of the two works are in dealing with John; two instances may be offered. First, at I.25.4 Procopius describes Theodora's hatred for John, which was inspired by his opposition to her and his slanders of her to her husband: ἐς τὸ βασιλέα διεβαλλεν. He was unsuccessful in this, Procopius reports here, because of Justinian's love for Theodora. At *S.H.* 17.38 John is said αὐτὴν [Θεοδώραν] ἐς τὸν βασιλέα διεβαλλεν—and he almost succeeded, Procopius states, in causing a rift between the imperial couple. Indeed in the *Secret History* (17.38) Procopius refers to his treatment of John in the *Wars*, and does not go over the same ground again. Rather, he expands on the story, tying in details which would not have been acceptable in a published work. The account of the empress's efforts to suborn two Green factionists given in the *Secret History* can be viewed as a counter to the bland official entry of Malalas.\(^{27}\)

---

\(^{26}\) Noted by Cameron, *Procopius*, ix and 49. It also calls into question the idea of a radical divide between the genres of work to which the *Wars* and *Secret History* are usually assigned, cf. *ibid.*, 50-3. Procopius evidently did not feel constrained from including such a passage in a 'classicising' work, despite the views of Cameron, *op. cit.*, 17.

It is also, I think, significant that in the opening chapter of the *Wars* (I.1.5) Procopius states that he has also written up the disgraceful acts—the μοχθηρά—of even his closest associates, surely an allusion to the *Secret Histories*, where at 1.10 he explains that he intends to deal with the μοχθηρά first of Belisarius, and then of Justinian and Theodora.

\(^{27}\) Malalas, 483. On Procopius countering imperial propaganda, cf. Scott, 'Malalas, the *Secret History* and Justinian's propaganda', *DOP* 39 (1985), 101-4. The trial of the two factionists evidently took place in Constantinople, since they were tried by the *praetor plebis* Comitas (cf. *PLRE*
The second instance concerns Theodora’s plot to entrap John in 541. This she accomplished through John’s daughter Euphemia, who was persuaded to listen to the seditious suggestions of Belisarius’ wife Antonina. Thus John was persuaded to meet Antonina and was arrested for his plans to make himself emperor. In the *Wars* Procopius makes clear that Theodora and Antonina worked together against John—while in the *Secret History* their collaboration is also stressed, but in more sinister tones. In order to trap John, Antonina arranged to meet him at Belisarius’ palace at Rufinianae; and in order to allay any suspicions that he might have about the meeting, she explained the choice of venue by giving out that she was on her way to meet Belisarius in the East (I.25.20-21). Hence on the appointed day she crossed the Bosphorus to Rufinianae ‘as if to begin on the following day her journey to the East’. No more is heard of Antonina in this section of the *Wars*: if the *Secret History* had not survived, it would be presumed that she never actually left for the East. But here again Procopius complements his version of events in the *Wars* in the *Secret History*. Once more he alludes specifically to *Wars* I.25, and adds that he had left out one detail there for fear of the consequences—ἐνθά δή τούτο μοι τῷ δέει σεσώπηται μόνον. He then tells of the oaths by which Antonina bound herself to John, and which she therefore betrayed, before going on to describe her journey to the East.28

---

These two instances (among others) attest the overlap between the *Wars* and the *Secret History*. It seems most likely that one of the primary functions of the latter work was to provide an outlet for the criticisms which could not be made in the former; in which case it becomes difficult to dismiss the first five chapters of the *Secret History* as a 'farrago' or an attempt at a novel. As has been argued above, much of *S.H.* 2 congrues with the *Wars* very well, and few scholars have doubted the historicity of most of what is described in these chapters. A final comment may be offered. If it is accepted that *Wars* I.23-25 represent a later addition, and that *Wars* III was the next book to be written after *Wars* I, then it is interesting to note the positive tone of these two books—as contrasted, for instance with *Wars* II or the later parts of the *Gothic Wars*. This is illustrated best by the failure to mention any disputes between the Roman generals in *Wars* I and III, even if we know they occurred. From the late 530s it seems thatProcopius grew increasingly disenchanted with the bickering of Roman commanders, and this emerges strongly from the description of their defeats. Some criticisms, however, were not suitable for the *Wars*, and reserved for the *Secret History*—but these do not, on

29 Another example is the whole campaign of Belisarius in 541—cf. *S.H.* 2.20-26, where Procopius again alludes to his inability to give the full story in the *Wars*, Cameron, *Procopius*, 50 n.12, for further instances.

30 As Cameron notes, *Procopius* 50, but now disputed by Adshead, *The Secret History*, 7-10.

31 Note the judgement of Bury, *HLRE* II, 427-8, 'in no instance can we convict him of a statement which has no basis in fact'. And the one exception to this noted by Bury, *op. cit.* 428 n.1, on the reduction in value of the gold *nomisma*, has also been shown to be correct, cf. Greatrex, *The dates of Procopius' works*, 103-4.

32 The Callinicum campaign of 531 is the best example of this, where Malalas makes clear that there were serious divisions among the commanders, 462-5, but Procopius mentions none (I.18); cf. Greatrex, *Procopius and the Persian Wars*, 201-2 with 202 n.92.

33 E.g. *Wars* II.24.16-20, II.18.16-26, IV.14.30-36, VII.3.18-22. It may be that Belisarius' recall from North Africa, which resulted from rumours questioning his loyalty, inclined Procopius towards a more critical treatment of Justinian's generals.
the whole, go back to Belisarius' earlier career: Procopius offers no revised version of Belisarius' campaigns in the East between 527 and 531, nor of his expedition against the Vandals. The remarkable successes of Belisarius at the start of his career, which had perhaps inspired him to write history in the first place, still impressed Procopius when *Wars* I-VII were published and the *Secret History* composed.34

Geoffrey Greatrex
Open University, England.

---

34 On Procopius' decision to write history, cf. Cameron, *Procopius*, 151, where she dates it to 'the bright days of his service with Belisarius.'