

PROCOPIUS IN PORTUGUESE: THE CASE OF BRAZIL*

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In the Lusophone tradition early modern texts like *De antiquitatibus Lusitaniae* (1593), published in Évora, and *Africa portuguesa* (1681), published in Lisbon, used the writings of Procopius as a prime historical source. Despite this, no Portuguese translation of any of his works has appeared, and even to find research specifically on that Byzantine historian is a challenge. In Brazil, whose territory is so far from the places mentioned in the *History of the Wars*, there has been a growth in recent years in research that takes, as its main subject, the Procopian *œuvre*, spurred by interest in texts of ancient and medieval times. It is the Brazilian context to which I belong, and on which I shall reflect in the following pages.

Research into ancient and medieval history has grown significantly within Brazilian universities over the past several years, resulting in a high level of expertise. The last census conducted counted 2,391 higher education institutions in the country, in which there are more than 70 research groups whose main activity is producing material specifically related to Antiquity and the Middle Ages.¹

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¹ In the year 2015 the National Council platform for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), an agency of Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MCTI), registered over 70 research groups for Antiquity and the Middle Ages in Brazilian universities.

Despite the problem of accessing documentary sources and the precarious state of libraries in the country, our national production has developed with interesting features. The first is the diversity of interests and the multiplicity of influences. Without the commitment to particular historical schools of thought and without the weight of founders' references, students are able to explore a very wide range of possibilities, and are encouraged by professors with diverse training.² The second feature, perhaps a product of the first, is a strong vocation for theoretical discussion. Bachelor's, Master's and Ph.D. theses are heavily focused on historiographical debates and give much attention to the textual structure of the written document.

It is within this academic framework, marked by diversity and theoretical reflection, that research on the works of Procopius of Caesarea has developed in Brazil. As a document, the Procopian *corpus* offers much detailed information to be explored and compared; it is also a literary source, offering an extensive narrative rich with rhetorical elements requiring investigation.

History of the Wars

Two works exemplify the different ways that the *History of the Wars* has been treated in Brazilian academia. Professor Renato Viana Boy³ presented, in 2013, a doctoral thesis entitled 'Procopius and the struggle between Romans and barbarians in the *Gothic War*: "from the Fall of Rome" to the Justinianic period'. The material discusses the end of the Roman Empire and shows how Procopius interpreted the struggle for power in Italy between Romans and barbarians. According to the author, Procopius propounded arguments to justify the sending of imperial troops to recover power from the ancient Roman boundaries,

² What Neri Almeida (2013) 10 characterised as 'healthy diversity'.

³ Professor at the Federal University of Fronteira Sul (UFFS). Prior to the doctoral thesis, the author had published studies of Procopius' work, especially articles.

portraying the barbarians as a group responsible for the political power crisis in Italy (Boy (2013) 18).

In the thesis, Renato Boy first draws attention to Procopius' experiences on the battlefield, which would have prevented him from openly expressing himself about imperial policies. The influence of the classical style of history is invoked in order to discuss the options available to Procopius to record the events of the wars. According to Boy, Procopius recognises Christianity as one of the criteria for distinguishing Goths and Romans, although he does not adopt the 'ecclesiastical' style of historiography, prevalent during that period, in writing his history. Therefore, the Procopian narrative seeks also to present Justinian's wars in Italy as a defence of Christian worship, perceived as fair or just.

Boy criticizes the way in which research on the 'Fall of Rome' appropriated information disclosed by Procopius in the *Gothic War*. The works of Procopius and Jordanes (*Getica*), when analysed side by side, show how Jordanes makes explicit the idea that the overthrow of Romulus Augustulus by Odoacer represented the 'end of Empire', a different interpretation from Procopius', although much of modern historiography has indiscriminately used both authors.

Considering the first three books about the war against the Goths, Renato Boy raises a central question: how did Procopius understand and transmit the events in Italy from the time of Odoacer's kingdom to the Justinian wars? Both the struggle for political dominance on the Italian peninsula in 476, as well as the struggle involving the regent of the Ostrogoths in the 520s, were treated by the Byzantine historian as periods of crisis and instability in relations between the centre of imperial power, Constantinople, and the governments along the western borders (Boy (2013) 180). The perception of Procopius of the events in Italy appears to be linked to Justinian's determination to reorganise the power structures that were shattered by political changes, rather than an attempt to regain territories of the empire, as stated by other historians. Descriptions of Gothic groups

and leaders as disseminators of the Arian heresy, as militarily disorganised, poorly trained and equipped, served to justify the wars of the emperor.

Thus Renato Boy analyses Procopius' writings as a narrative totally committed to the arguments that justified and legitimised the military actions of Justinian on the Italian peninsula. Taking a different approach, the thesis written by Professor Lyvia Vasconcelos Baptista⁴ analyses the *Persian War*, highlighting elements that go beyond imperial control. Her doctoral thesis, entitled 'The *logos* of the *Persian War*: an analysis of historical perspective in the work of Procopius Caesarea', was published in 2013 and discusses the conception of history in the *Persian Wars*. It examines four issues in particular: (1) how the author presents the subject in terms of magnitude and specificity; (2) how personal and biographical statements are displayed in the narrative and how subject and author are related; (3) what kind of methodological concerns related to the presentation of *logos* and treatment of data can be observed in the work; and (4) how the issue of religion appears in the narrative of events and in the perception of history.

The thesis first discusses the effects of narrative amplification, analysing the assertions of objective greatness made by the Byzantine author. The maximisation of events seems to have been designed to enhance the importance of the author's experiences, as Procopius claims to have been an eyewitness to many events, among those 'the largest and most notable' ever to have occurred. The combination of vague dating and hyperbolic statements might suggest that the author aspired to create an impression, rather than offering a chronological and linear reconstruction of events.

The authorial signature, flagged by the interpretative paths that Procopius seems to suggest for the reader, leads to a discussion of how the author reveals himself in the

⁴ Associate Professor of the History Department at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte. Prior to the doctoral thesis, the author published other texts. Her M.A. thesis considered the influence of Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague on Procopius' portrayal of the sixth-century plague (2008).

work. Procopius appears as a character in his *History* when he is appointed to Belisarius' staff (*Wars* 1.12.24) and when he is in Constantinople during the plague (*Wars* 2.22.9), but sometimes he appears as a narrator, for instance when he explains the aim of his narrative (*Wars* 1.1.5). The analysis of the *Persian Wars*' passages where the author presents himself directly or indirectly seems to indicate that Procopius would have sought to build a *persona*, whose main feature is the relationship (artificial or not) with the centre of imperial power. According to Baptista, it is from a personal desire to convince his audience and show the importance and value of his work that Procopius seems to forge the closest relation possible with the events. Thus history and rhetoric seem to have been much more similar than the historian intended to divulge.

Lastly, the thesis discusses an important issue for understanding the historical perspective of Procopius, the role of chance (Fortune) and divine providence in the *Persian War*. The thesis suggests that the religious element in the work of Procopius appear on two levels. First, in the Christian references and fatalistic narrative, sometimes used for criticising the Emperor Justinian, for example in the description of the plague (*Wars* 2.22.1-5). Second, when Procopius interprets individual events referring to God or Fortune. According to Lyvia Baptista, Procopius seems to talk about *tyché* as a cause of events that cannot be explained, presenting the unfolding of events as a distinct force of God, although they are perhaps linked (Baptista (2013) 197-9).

The two theses have very similar theoretical references and start from the same source, although they were prepared in very different academic institutions. They also share a concern with discussing how the *History of the Wars* has been interpreted over the years and they reflect on the concept of Late Antiquity, highlighting its influence in the study of Antiquity and the Middle Ages in Brazilian research.

In the wake of the publication of these theses, other contributions have been produced which analyse the *History of the Wars* as a historical document. Renato Boy, as a part

of his doctoral research, published a chapter, ‘History of the Wars: narratives of crises in power relations between Constantinople and Italy in the sixth century’ (2014) and ‘Procópio de Cesareia: um testemunho historiográfico do século VI em Bizâncio’ (2015). Lyvia Vasconcelos Baptista, published an article entitled ‘O elemento religioso na interpretação dos acontecimentos da *Guerra pérsica*’ (2015), discussing the use of Christian references (of the eschatological type) as a tool in order to criticise the emperor. In addition, she also contributed a chapter in English to the volume edited by Christopher Lillington-Martin and Elodie Turquois, *Procopius of Caesarea: Literary and Historical Interpretations* (2018). Entitled ‘Exploring the Structures of *Persian War*: Amplification in Procopius’ Narrative’, the chapter explores some aspects of Procopius’ manipulation of rhetoric, and in particular the trope of amplification.

The two authors jointly published another article entitled ‘A construção de uma narrativa: os olhares de Procópio de Cesareia sobre as guerras de Justiniano’ (2015), which considers the ways the Byzantine historians portrayed the wars of the Emperor Justinian. In this study, analysis of all the books of *History of the Wars* is undertaken in order to demonstrate the gradual change in the narrator’s mind in his presentation of conflicts and characters.

Researching the same works of Procopius, Stephanie Martins de Sousa produced an M.A. thesis in 2014 entitled ‘Guerra e autoridade em Procópio de Cesareia: um estudo comparado dos líderes político-militares na *História das Guerras*’, supervised by Prof. Fabio Duarte Joly (Federal University of Ouro Preto), and published an article ‘Procópio de Cesareia e a construção dos retratos imperiais na obra *História das Guerras*’ (2016). Martins de Sousa’s work aims to discuss the leadership models developed in the work of Procopius, and to promote a wider focus on authority and imperial power in Byzantium. The research challenges the standard images of Byzantine leaders, especially Justinian and Belisarius, along with the barbarian leaders presented throughout the *History of the Wars*.

Secret History

Another work of Procopius, the *Secret History*, is also receiving attention. Willibaldo Ruppenthal Neto published an article in 2012 concerning the centrality of ‘blue’ and ‘green’, and the absence of ‘red’ and ‘white’, in factions of the Byzantine hippodrome in Procopius’ narrative. In another article, dated 2014, Kelly Mamedes and Marcus Cruz used the *Secret History* to discuss traditions about Theodora, as part of a broader discussion about female power and the construction of recollection in Late Antiquity.

Victor Ribeiro Villon published his Ph.D. thesis in 2014, entitled ‘A História em Desconcerto: as *Anékdota* de Procópio de Cesareia e a Antiguidade Tardia’. In this research, the *Secret History* is analysed as the testimony of a period of important change, and as an intersection point between the values of Antiquity and the Christian faith, positioned between paganism and Christianity. Villon highlights the way in which the *Secret History* breaks with the standard presentation of the wars in the previous books of Procopius, which he calls ‘classical history’ ((2014) 18). Moreover, the presence of characters belonging to the lower classes, and descriptions of everyday scenes show a link between this book and the style adopted in Menippean satire; while at the same time Procopius displays a strong dependence on Christian morality.

The thesis combines the theory formulated by Erich Auerbach and concepts developed by Mikhail Bakhtin to discuss rhetorical elements in the work of Procopius; more precisely, Villon seeks to follow traces of Christian aesthetics within the document. The research appropriates the theory of Auerbach which opposes the Jewish tradition of the representation of reality to the Graeco-Roman tradition (the basis of Western culture). The thesis identifies the *Secret History* as a kind of Christian representation, but in an eminently classical genre of presentation, i.e., history. (Villon (2014) 144). According to Villon, another feature of the *Secret History* is the ‘serious-comic’ style, characterised by the presentation of day-to-day scenes, the importance of

authorial experience, and the use of historical characters of the past and mythical heroes. This hypothesis is based on the theory developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963).

Elizabeth Jeffreys, John Haldon and Robin Cormack ((2008) 17), in examining the exponential growth of content related to the early years of the Byzantine Empire, affirm the advantage of an international and multicultural institutional base, which is the product of a huge set of influences, different chains of events, varying approaches, problems and interpretive paths. Although Romilly Jenkins ((1940) 57) once claimed that the Byzantines produced hardly any erudite writings that could be read and judged by their literary merit, nowadays the growth of studies in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine Empire has taken the analysis of documentary sources, especially those produced in the fourth to seventh centuries, to a higher level and has allowed more attention to be given to elements that go beyond factual references. In Brazil, the situation has been similar and, at least within academic departments, the attention dedicated to this area has gradually expanded, characterised by a multi-faceted and collaborative institutional participation.

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