

Constructing Belisarius: His Life in Context

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By:
Jon Holtgreffe

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Abstract

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The Eastern Roman(Byzantine) General Belisarius(c. 505-565) holds the distinction of being the last man to receive a Roman Triumph and during his military career won victories on three continents, while usually fighting at a disadvantage. Our main source of information concerning Belisarius comes from the writings of his legal secretary, Procopius(c.500-c.565), whose *Wars of Justinian* recounts many of the deeds of Belisarius' career. It is interesting to note, however, that the image that has become most associated with Belisarius, that of an old man, falsely accused of treason, found guilty, blinded, and made to live as a beggar, appears no where in this work, or in the work of any other contemporary historian. Its first known appearance is in the work of the 12th century Byzantine writer John Tzetzes. Nevertheless, it is this image that various authors and artists in the last 400 years have used to craft stories and images of Belisarius, and it is this image with which modern historians must contend while writing about Belisarius.

This brings up the question of characterization, which is the focus of this thesis. Belisarius is the character which appears most frequently within Procopius' *Wars* but there is almost nothing in the way of clear characterization of the man. There is only one passage, of any notable length, which gives the reader a clear characterization of Belisarius. To delve further into Procopius' characterization of the man one must analyze the actions of Belisarius in order to ascertain them. After the text has been carefully analyzed to determine, as much as is possible, Procopius' intended characterization of Belisarius, this thesis will turn to analyzing Procopius himself, in order to determine why he might have chosen to characterize Belisarius in that way. Finally this thesis will analyze a number of the literary, artistic, and scholarly characterizations of Belisarius in order to get some sense as to how this characterization has changed over time and in what manner the context of each author's life changed that characterization.

Thus the purpose of this work is to study the ways in which the context affects characterization. Belisarius therefore serves as an ideal focus for this thesis because the main historical account of his life gives a characterization that is very open to individual interpretation. Not only that, but there is also the fact that so many author's, seemingly with very different life contexts, have used the same apocryphal story to center their different accounts. Despite the similarity these characterizations have certainly changed throughout history, and will likely continue to do so into the next century, as the context of our lives is every changing.

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By Jon Holtgreffe

Approved by:

_____ Advisor
Dr. Kevin Osterloh

_____ Reader
Dr. Allan Winkler

_____ Reader
Dr. Steven Tuck

Accepted by:

_____, Director,
University Honors Program

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Introduction

Everything that we see and hear, write and speak is filtered through the lens of our own life and personality, which is in turn formed by the events and actions of the world in which we live. Because of this, one of the most challenging aspects of analyzing any past author's writings on a particular historical event, or person, requires that we understand something about their context and lives. The fact that this analysis must be filtered through our own lens makes any kind of 'truth', in an objective sense, impossible to determine.

This problem is noticeable when dealing with events and persons about whom there is a great deal written, but what about those individuals about whom we have limited documentation at best? And, given how society and cultures change over the years, how do perceptions of events and persons change throughout history?

An interesting example with which to study these questions is that of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) General Belisarius (c.505-565). The primary source regarding Belisarius is the writings of his own legal secretary Procopius (c.500-c.565). Despite working with the man for 13 years, Procopius provides his readers with only one passage of any appreciable length (and even then not particularly long), in which he explicitly outlines Belisarius' character.¹ To gain more information about Belisarius, then, one must go beyond this explicit assessment by undertaking a careful reading of the various actions in which Procopius depicts Belisarius participating, in the rest of his narrative. It is

¹ For the purposes of this thesis, character and characterization refer to a combination of the thoughts, motivations, feelings, opinions, etc. of the person in question. Ultimately this is a subjective judgment but a historian can still provide some insight into how different people react and respond in certain situations, as well as recording what that person's thoughts on the matter are. Such information can also be gained by looking at the actions that person has taken and analyzing them carefully to see in what ways those actions reflect back on the person who made them.

perhaps the innate ambiguities of Procopius' characterization that has given rise to such diverse a body of fictional literature, ultimately based on Procopius' account, which has Belisarius as the main character.

Since this work is almost exclusively one of analysis, it might help the reader to have a brief overview of the major events in Belisarius' life. Belisarius played an important role in the reign of the emperor Justinian I (r. 527-565), specifically in the reconquest of North Africa and Italy.² Belisarius began his career as a member of the palace guard under the Emperor Justin I (r. 518-527) and, on the ascension of Justinian to the throne, he was dispatched to the Eastern Frontier soon after being assigned Procopius (himself recently come to Constantinople) as his legal secretary. Promoted to Commander of the East in 530, Belisarius successfully repelled a Sassanid (Persian) invasion at the Siege of Dara, the first large scale victory the Romans had won against the Sassanids for some years.³

Later, after being defeated (largely do to the poor morale of his army) at the Battle of Callinicum, Belisarius was recalled to Constantinople in 531 which meant he was present for the Nike revolts in the following year where he, as ranking military commander in the city, led the forces which slaughtered as many as 30,000 in the Hippodrome.⁴ Then, in 533 he was dispatched to North Africa to wage war against the Vandals under King Gelimer and return the province to the Empire.⁵ His swift victory

² John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (London: Penguin, 1990), 205-206

³ Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N.C. Lieu *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 88-90.

⁴ Ibid 90-94

⁵ Norwich, 206-211

earned him the last Roman-style triumph ever given and the title of Consul.⁶ Next, he was dispatched to Italy in 535 to fight the Goths, a struggle which took him until 540 before Belisarius was finally successful, a period of time which included the year long Siege of Rome.⁷ In 540 he was recalled to the East because the Sassanid King Khosroes broke the Eternal Peace, signed 9 years earlier, and conducted a devastating invasion into Byzantine territory which Belisarius attempted to do in return but was forced to withdraw due to insufficient supplies and men. The advent of plague in the following year ended the war on that front for a time.⁸

It was in 540 that, for reasons unknown, Procopius was replaced as Belisarius' private secretary. Belisarius' renewed expedition to Italy, having once again fallen under Gothic control due to poor Byzantine governance, he failed due to lack of supplies and man-power causing him to retire from the army and public life in 548.⁹ Belisarius was called back from retirement to fend off, successfully, a Hun invasion in 559, and in 562 he was implicated in a plot against the Emperor, was tried, and had his lands and titles stripped from him. He was restored to honor, however, several months later. Belisarius died on his estates in 565.¹⁰

One of the main points of fascination which Historians have always had with Belisarius is the fact that, while besieging the last Gothic stronghold of Ravenna in 540 he was given the opportunity to become Western Emperor by the Goths.¹¹ He feigned

⁶ Ibid 211-212.

⁷ Ibid 212-227

⁸ Greatrex, 115-118/

⁹ Norwich 234-244

¹⁰ Ibid 260-261

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of this c.f.

acceptance and once inside Ravenna he captured Vittigis, the Gothic King, and the entire Gothic leadership. It has long been a topic of speculation why Belisarius behaved as he did, as well as why he did not decide to take up the Goths on their offer. Whatever the reason for his choice, and whether or not he was justified in performing such trickery, one effect was clear: the emperor Justinian never seemed to trust his most successful commander again, which has led many to speculate that this was the reason why Belisarius' later expeditions to Italy were under-manned and under-supplied.¹²

Very little can be gleaned about Belisarius from the bare facts given here and aside from the one passage, mentioned above, there is not much more than that to rely on in trying to construct a characterization. To do so one needs to not only undertake a careful reading of the text, as well as a careful study of the context of the writer of these sources, Procopius. Less still is known about Procopius, other than that he was born in Caesarea and seems to have been from the wealthy land-owning, or 'senatorial' class. His main work, *The History of the Wars*, is often seen as the last chapter in a long tradition of historical writing stretching back to Herodotus. His other works, *The Anecdota* and *The Buildings*, are within the genre of invective and panegyric respectively.

The image of Belisarius which has attracted the most attention from writers of fiction, however, does not appear in any of Procopius' works. Most fictional works dealing with Belisarius portray him as a blind old man, forced to beg for food at the gates of Constantinople, having been blinded by the Emperor in 562. This incident, however, never happened, the exact origin of the tale is unknown but it is not recorded until the

¹² Ibid 224-227

twelfth-century, when it was recorded in the *Chiliades* of the Byzantine scholar John Tzetzes.¹³ For the past 400 years various artists and authors, such as Jacques-Louis David, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Robert Graves, have been constantly reusing and reinterpreting this image based upon the circumstances of their own lives. Thereby creating a new set (or rather a progression) of different contexts within which the life of Belisarius has been re-evaluated.¹⁴

To fully analyze the character of Belisarius, I will pursue a careful reading and analysis of the texts of Procopius. This will, by necessity, be followed by a careful look at Procopius the author and the context of his life in order to determine the various ways in which Procopius' life story might have influenced his portrayal of Belisarius. Finally, in order to get some ideas about how Belisarius has been perceived throughout history, I will then undertake a careful study of both artistic and historical works, with an eye to the contexts of the author and the age within which the work was produced, in order to determine how the construction of Belisarius' life has changed over time.

The most logical place to begin is with Procopius writings themselves. In order to study the contexts of Procopius and the effect that that has on his characterization of Belisarius one must first have some idea what that characterization is. And to understand the changing ways in which Belisarius has been characterized down through the years one must understand the original characterization, from which the later ones stem. While some acknowledgements of Procopius' style need to be made in order to understand said

¹³ Ed. William Robertson Smith, "Belisarius", *Encyclopedia Britannica* 9th edition, 1902.

¹⁴ Avril Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 261-262

characterization, the first chapter will deal almost exclusively with the ways Procopius deals with Belisarius within the body of his texts.

Chapter One: The Character of Belisarius

As much as we would like it to be, Procopius's *History of the Wars* is not a biography of Belisarius. Neither does it contain a narrative of the life of Belisarius, although the general does serve, in parts at least, as the works' main character. Procopius, in fact, tells us exactly what the work is about in the title he gives it. The *Wars* is an account of the wars of the Emperor Justinian I.

Establishing a narrative for any of the characters within the *Wars* is made difficult by the fact that the work is divided by theater of war, with the Persian, Vandal, and Gothic campaigns dealt with separately.¹⁵ Thus despite the fact that Belisarius appears in all three theaters of war, the overlapping chronologies add a layer of difficulty in providing an effective outline of the ways in which he character changed over time.

A second difficulty which arises in the establishment of Belisarius's character is the fact that Procopius tended to be episodic in his writing, jumping from event to event with little detail given to what people were doing in the intervening time. It is rare for Procopius to give a continuous narrative from one sequence of events to another. The difficulty in this arises from the fact that Procopius is only interested in aspects of Belisarius's life which had a direct bearing on the military and the wars he was fighting,

¹⁵ Book I gives historical information on the Persian conflict and details the campaigns of 527-532. Book II deals with the Persian campaigns of 540-548. Book III gives historical information on the Vandals and details the planning, initial sailing, and Belisarius' landing in North Africa in 533 and the subsequent capture of Carthage. Book IV details the end of Belisarius' Vandal campaign, his triumph, and the various problems and conflicts in North Africa from 534-548. Book V details historical information on the Goths in Italy and Belisarius' initial conquests from 535 through the siege of Rome in 537. Book VI begins with the siege and proceeds through the capture of Ravenna in 540. Book VII details affairs of Italy from 540-548. Book VIII gives updates on all three theaters of War from 548 into the early 550's. As can be seen from this, there is considerable overlap in the chronology.

which was in keeping with Procopius' stated subject matter.¹⁶ More specifically, we see only the incidents which Procopius considered important.¹⁷

Another problem is that Procopius deals largely with events and actions, rarely delving into descriptions of the personalities and thought processes of the people involved with said events. When it comes to the causes of specific actions and events he frequently puts it down to either luck or the will of God.¹⁸ Procopius gives less direct information than we would like him to, for the events which are recorded, about human causation and when he does, it is frequently stated indirectly.¹⁹ As a result we are forced to guess what the motivations and personalities of these people were by studying the effects of their actions. It is puzzling, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say disappointing, if you want to know more about Belisarius, that Procopius gives us only

¹⁶ In the Ancient world there was a clear distinction between the genre of Biography, meant to discern the vices, virtues, and character of a person, and History, meant to record a given sequence of events. While certainly not mutually exclusive, since you can get historical information out of a biography and vice versa, that delineation should be kept in mind while reading this chapter. This delineation is clearly explained in Plutarch *Alexander* i. Plutarch explains that great deeds may well reflect far less on a person's character than a chance joke to a friend, and he insists that biography and history are two different genres.

¹⁷ To be fair, it is by no means Procopius alone who only includes information that he finds important, most historians, and writers, only include things they consider important, in fact they have to. In any historical writing there can always be more details and more information given so therefore to make the work even remotely manageable, the author at some point has to make a decision of what to leave in and what to cut out.

¹⁸ Rather than luck, it would be more appropriate to use say Tyche, a greek diety which is the embodiment and personification of luck, but it goes beyond merely that. It represents the amorphous idea of the effect of random chance on human events and actions and stands in for whatever unnamed force the Greeks believed governed things that were beyond rational explanation. Being a Christian, Procopius would likely call this force the 'will of God' and he often does, it is likely that the reason he sometimes uses Tyche is in conscious emulation of Polybius' (ca. 200-120) who uses the term frequently in exactly the same circumstances. For more information on this topic, c.f.: chapter 2 of this work (pg. 39). Anthony Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.) 173-176; 216-221.

¹⁹ For example, Procopius is fond of saying that God willed that someone should do or think x, which often, although not always, assigns causation to that person. For example, in II, viii, 14 of the *Wars* Procopius states that the Romans at Antioch(besieged by Khosroes in 540) did not see an easy way to defend their city because "it was fated that Antioch be destroyed by this army of the Medes". In the same section of the *Wars*(II, viii, 7) Procopius says that a Persian diplomat avoided assassination saying "if he had not seen their purpose in time and guarded against it."

brief glimpses at Belisarius's character. One would expect, after serving as Belisarius's legal secretary for about 15 years, and Procopius hints that they worked closely together, that Procopius would have detailed information about Belisarius's personality.²⁰ Regardless of whether this information is absent because Procopius never truly understood Belisarius, or that he simply felt that such information was not the purpose of the work, the fact remains that one is left primarily with the actions Belisarius took from which to construct his character.²¹

The way in which Procopius presents the episodes of Belisarius's life makes it almost difficult for a continuous narrative to be established. The best that one can do is to analyze the various episodes from Belisarius's life in order to construct a characterization of the man. Belisarius' actions are featured in far too much of Procopius' work to analyze, in any practical way in a paper of this length, all of the passages in which he appears. As such, several of the most notable and famous passages have been selected for analysis highlighting various aspects of Belisarius's character.²²

²⁰ Although such a detailed discussion of the man would, of course, be from Procopius's point of view which would present a whole new series of questions. It should also be noted that there is no evidence, aside from Procopius's own claims, that he worked closely with Belisarius. Passages where Procopius claims to have been present at military briefings are among the primary evidence for such a close association. It is perhaps a mistake, however, to assume that just because Belisarius had his secretary at such briefings that they had a close association with each other. Additionally, it is entirely possible that Belisarius was simply an extremely private man who rarely let others know what he was thinking or feeling. *Wars* III xiv 3 – xv, this passage relates how Procopius was sent on an important fact finding mission by Belisarius and then seems to be present at a staff meeting (his accounts of staff meetings throughout the wars further indicates his presence at these). Procopius refers to himself as an advisor to Belisarius and that he receives great praise from him when he completes his mission.

²¹ While it is entirely possible that Procopius really never attempted to understand Belisarius, it really wasn't the purpose of Procopius's work to give an extensive characterization of Belisarius. The following chapter will contain a more detailed discussion of this issue.

²² As this chapter is far more interested in divining Belisarius's character, rather than charting his life story, these episodes will not be presented in chronological order.

The most effective place to start is with a passage that has sometimes been referred to as the 'Eulogy of Belisarius' by modern scholars.²³ This passage, which occurs early in Book VII of the *Wars* is the only time where Procopius clearly, and concisely, speaks of Belisarius's characteristics and mannerisms. It is placed shortly after Belisarius has led Vitigis, the Gothic King, back to Constantinople as his prisoner:²⁴

However, the name of Belisarius was on the lips of all: to him were ascribed two victories, such as had never before fallen to the lot of any one man to achieve; he had brought two kings captive to Byzantium. . . Furthermore, he had a fine figure and was tall and remarkably handsome. But his conduct was so meek and his attitude toward those who met him so affable that he seemed like a very poor man and one of no repute. As a commander the love ever felt for him both by soldiers and peasants was irresistible, seeing that, in his treatment of his soldiers on the one hand, he was surpassed by none in generosity; and in his treatment of peasants. . . he won their affection because he shewed so much restraint and such consideration for them that it never fell to their lot to suffer any violence when Belisarius was general. . . Furthermore, he possessed the virtue of self-restraint in a marvelous degree; and hence it was that he never would touch any woman other than his wedded wife. . . In addition to all his other qualities, he was also remarkably shrewd, and in difficult situations he was able with unerring judgment to decide upon the best course of action. Furthermore, in the dangers of war he was both courageous without incurring unnecessary risks and daring to a degree without losing his cool judgment, either striking quickly or holding back his attack upon the enemy according to the requirements of the situation. Nay more, in desperate situations, on the one hand he showed a spirit which was both full of confidence and unruffled by excitement, and in the fullness of success, on the other hand, he neither gave way to vanity nor rushed into indulgence; at any rate no man ever saw Belisarius intoxicated.²⁵

Belisarius's victories in Italy and the cold reception he received from Justinian when he returned to Constantinople were both the height of Belisarius's career and a sign of things that were to come. It seems likely that Procopius, who did not publish the *Wars* until

²³ J.A.S. Evans. *Procopius*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972) 73

²⁴ *Wars* VII i 1-3

²⁵ Procopius, *The History of the Wars* VII.i.4, 7, 8, 12-15

nearly a decade after these events²⁶, added this segment in recognition of the failures which Belisarius would have to endure in the following years.²⁷

From this passage can be gleaned a number of character traits on Belisarius, all of which will be dealt with in the course of this chapter. These traits are restraint, an excellent tactical sense, bravery, resourcefulness, discipline over himself and his soldiers, and intelligence. Overall Belisarius appears here as a man in full control of himself who, as a result, displayed excellence throughout his life. In addition to analyzing passages which support specific statements within the ‘eulogy’, this chapter will examine passages which in some cases reinforce, in others call into question, this general characterization of Belisarius.²⁸

Not only does this passage give us a rare bit of characterization of Belisarius, it also provides us with the most concise physical description of the man found in the entire work. There is, however, something that seems to be contrived in both the physical and character descriptions given of Belisarius. While it is reasonable to assume that he had a “fine figure”, being that he was a soldier and therefore likely to have pursued a course of physical exercise, the description of him as being “tall and remarkably handsome” seems questionable. While there is, of course, no evidence to disprove this statement, it fits in

²⁶ Books I-VII of the *Wars* were published c. 551, Evans pg 41-46

²⁷ Chronologically between this passage Belisarius would engage in an unsuccessful campaign into Persian territory in 541 and in 543 he would be sent back, undersupplied, to Italy where he would be able to accomplish nothing and would spend much of this campaign traveling between fortified cities before finally be recalled to Constantinople in 548, in disgrace.

²⁸ It is a common literary trope for the central player in a history. Polybius describes both Scipiones in such a manner and Plutarch describes Alexander thus.

well with the heroic archetype often used by other ancient historians such as Polybius and Plutarch.²⁹

When someone speaks of a ‘heroic’ archetype in ancient historical writings they are not referring to a fictional character or accusing the author of deliberate falsehood. Instead, what they are referring to is what that specific author considers the ideal person.³⁰ For many Greek authors, such as Polybius or Plutarch, this ideal person is one who displays a wide range of different virtues and skills and succeeds in keeping these virtues in balance so that one does not overwhelm the others.³¹ By ideal this is not to say that these men were perfect, Plutarch recounts Alexander’s destruction of Thebes which he clearly portrays as being overly violent, but rather that they were, in the author’s opinion, the best that any man could achieve.³² It is quite clear that the description within the “eulogy of Belisarius” fits in with this construction of the ideal man and seems to indicate that Procopius viewed Belisarius in the same way.

As to the “love” with which Procopius states that “soldiers and peasants” felt for Belisarius, this makes sense given the various actions of Belisarius which Procopius relates throughout the *Wars*. To be an effective battlefield commander (and if Procopius’s accounts of the battles Belisarius fought are accurate, he was quite effective in this

²⁹ While the following paragraphs, and the rest of the chapter, will deal with how Belisarius fits in with the heroic stereotype and several exempla of it, chapter 2 will deal with the ways in which Procopius emulated previous historians.(pg. 37)

³⁰ It is an open, and perhaps un-resolvable, question as to whether this ‘ideal’ man comes from the author deliberately manipulating their description, or that the author’s pre-existing view that this person is ‘ideal’ clouds their perception and therefore causes them to, subconsciously, change the characterization.

³¹ For Polybius this ideal person(or rather people) were Scipio Africanus and Scipio Aemilianus and for Plutarch it is Alexander the Great. Both writers describe these men as being brave and skillful at war, and merciful in peace, intelligent, bold, as well as humble, and most importantly possessing excellent self-control. Plutarch, *Alexander* 4-5, 9, 11. Polybius X 1-3; XXXI 22-30.

³² Plutarch, *Alexander* 12-13. It should be noted that in chapter 13 that Alexander acknowledged that he had been too harsh with the Thebans and that it taught him to be milder in the future.

capacity) one has to possess a commanding presence, largely so that one can gain the attention of his soldiers in the chaos of battle. It stands to reason that if one possesses such a presence that there is some form of natural magnetism to the person which could very well make soldiers and peasants admire such a man.³³ More importantly, however, is the fact the Procopius records numerous incidents in which Belisarius was very generous to his soldiers and that he attempted to spare, whenever he could, peasants from the ruin that is often wrought by a marching army.³⁴ Given this evidence it seems quite possible that Belisarius was indeed loved by both soldiers and peasants. Now that the general description of Belisarius in the ‘eulogy’ has been discussed, to some small extent, it is now useful to proceed on to dealing with individual traits which the passage cites Belisarius as possessing.

Since Belisarius was a military commander it is perhaps best to start with several episodes from his military career. The first one presented is from the siege of Dara, Belisarius first success as a commanding officer and demonstrates Belisarius’ personal restraint as well as his tactical sense. Already, at only 25 years of age, Belisarius showed what Procopius would attribute to him many years later, namely that he was “in the fullness of success. . . he neither gave way to vanity nor rushed into indulgence.”

³³ This supposition is largely based on the fact that it is not uncommon for generals to be(or become) successful politicians. Some examples of this tendency include Alexander the Great, Cato the Elder, Sulla, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Diocletian, George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, and Dwight Eisenhower to name just a few prominent examples from Roman, and our own, history.

³⁴ In this case the support for this claim in the ‘eulogy’ is in the eulogy itself, although there are outside sources to confirm this. Book III details Belisarius’ orders not to disturb the peasants of North Africa and there is an incident, which will be discussed in great detail later, where Belisarius got into a large, and eventually lethal, fight with one of his subordinates while trying to persuade him to return a pair of ornate daggers. *Wars* III xvi 1-11; VI viii 1-13.

For Belisarius and Hermogenes refused absolutely to let them go farther, fearing lest the Persians through some necessity should turn about and rout them while pursuing recklessly, and it seemed to them sufficient to preserve the victory unmarred.³⁵

Belisarius had just exceeded expectations³⁶ in that he not only prevented the Persians from taking Dara, he actually routed their army. Rather than pursue the defeated enemy in an attempt to destroy them utterly, or loot their camp, he stopped his soldiers from engaging in such a dangerous pursuit. This demonstrates that not only did Belisarius have the tactical sense to realize that pursuing a routed enemy can be extremely dangerous, especially if the enemy still outnumbers you, and the self control not to go chasing spoils or glory but that he also, from this early age, had such excellent control over his soldiers so that he was able to stop them from seeking spoils themselves.

One thing that should be discussed about this section of the text is that Procopius gives joint credit for the success at the battle of Dara to both Belisarius and Hermogenes.³⁷ The presence of another commander at Dara, one who was both older and more experienced than Belisarius, could be Procopius's way of indicating that it was actually not Belisarius who won the battle. Hermogenes presence, however, need not detract from Belisarius' accomplishment as Procopius makes it clear that Belisarius, despite his age and relative inexperience, was the ranking commander at Dara and therefore, had he been of a different mind than Hermogenes, he could have overruled

³⁵ *Wars*. I.xiv.53

³⁶ The Romans own expectations, in previous years the Roman army had seen limited success against the Persian army, and according to the speech which Procopius puts in Belisarius' mouth during this sequence, there was a very real fear that the Romans would not be able to stop the Persians from taking Dara, let alone so soundly defeating them in battle.

³⁷ Evans 56-57, Throughout the entire description of the siege of Dara Procopius gives joint credit for everything, especially good decisions, to both Belisarius and Hermogenes together, making no attempt to differentiate the two men.

him.³⁸ It is also possible that Hermogenes was the brains behind the success at Dara but that also does not detract from Belisarius' character as it indicates that he was willing to follow the advice of subordinate officers if they came up with a good idea and was willing to take advice from a commander more experienced than himself. It can also be seen as positive that Belisarius was in fact of the same mind as his older and more experienced adviser.

The next excerpt to be presented deals, once more, with Belisarius' tactical skills, specifically in his ability to judge the strength and disposition of enemy forces. This comes from the passage of the 'eulogy' which states that Belisarius was adept at "either striking quickly or holding back his attack upon the enemy according to the requirements of the situation" which is well illustrated at the Battle of Carthage, where Belisarius routed a much larger Vandal force coming to retake Carthage.³⁹

John chose out a few of those under him by the advice of Belisarius and crossing the river made an attack on the center. . . And once more John, leading out more of the guardsmen of Belisarius, made a dash against the forces of Tzazon. . . And a third time with almost all the guards and spearmen of Belisarius he took the general's standard and made his attack with much shouting and a great noise. . . Then at last the whole Roman army was set in motion, and crossing the river they advanced upon the enemy, and the rout, beginning at the center, became complete;⁴⁰

³⁸ *Wars* I xiii 9-10 tells how Justinian appointed Belisarius General of the East and Hermogenes was sent to help him put the army in order.

³⁹ With the death of his brother at the Battle of the Tenth Milestone (from Carthage) Gelimer froze which allowed the Romans to defeat the Vandal army sent to intercept them. As a result Gelimer was forced to flee to gather his forces and Belisarius took Carthage without a struggle. After gathering the full Vandal army Gelimer moved against Carthage to retake it, even though outnumbered Belisarius decided to mobilize his army outside of Carthage as he knew the walls could not withstand a siege. Despite being outnumbered Belisarius achieved so complete a victory here that Vandal power in North Africa was destroyed. *Wars* IV i.

⁴⁰ IV.iii.10-15

At first glance, making a charging cavalry attack at the center of one's enemies lines, especially if that enemy outnumbered you, seems an unwise course of action.⁴¹ Belisarius, however, in this battle seems to have had a keen insight into the disposition of the Vandal forces, namely that they had poor discipline and if they could be put in disarray, his army could rout them with little difficulty. This is exactly what happened at the battle, the Vandal army was destroyed and the Vandals would never again seriously trouble the Romans in North Africa.

Once more, with this passage, the presence of another military commander needs to be addressed. More even than Hermogenes at the Battle of Dara, John is very clearly indicated in this passage to be a junior officer to Belisarius. John was no doubt extremely capable and brave to three times undertake such a daring attack on the Vandal center but the passage clearly states that he did so at the orders of Belisarius. Given that John was not disciplined for these attacks, and also was given, and carried, Belisarius' standards into battle, indicates that John was not acting on his own volition. Additionally, the fact that John's third attack was coordinated with an attack by the main body of the army indicates an overall strategic decision, rather than a cavalry commander acting on his own.⁴²

⁴¹ At least to any reader who has a limited knowledge of military tactics since, at a glance, such an attack seems like a suicide mission.

⁴² If John had been acting on his own it would have greatly reduced the chances of a successful general attack to rout the Vandals. Given how well coordinated the infantry assault was with this final cavalry charge and the devastating effect it had would seem to indicate that there was an overall tactical plan of battle at work here. Given Procopius's tendency to use Tyche and the will of God to explain luck playing a part in events would also seem to indicate that if it had been by luck that the Vandals had been routed Procopius would have credited it as such.

It should be noted that Belisarius was also an extremely capable soldier who was not afraid to enter into battle personally.⁴³ Judging by the previous two excerpts one could easily get the impression that Belisarius was a general who led from the rear. Procopius cites Belisarius as participating in a number of battles personally, most notable many of the battles which were involved in the year long siege of Rome. On one occasion he even managed to save his entire scouting force from being destroyed, an event which would have greatly reduced Rome's chances of enduring the siege. "Then a daring thought came to Belisarius, which unexpectedly saved the day for the Romans. For urging on all his men he suddenly fell upon the enemy."⁴⁴ This also demonstrates Belisarius ability to seemingly read what other men would do in a given situation since he realized that the best way for him to stop a pursuing enemy from destroying him would be to surprise them with a counter-attack, which is exactly what Belisarius feared would happen to his own forces at the Battle of Dara.

Belisarius' intelligence, namely his resourcefulness seems to have stretched beyond simply military matters. This resourcefulness is indicated in the 'eulogy' by the passage "he was also remarkably shrewd, and in difficult situations he was able with unerring judgment to decide upon the best course of action." While his demonstrations of

⁴³ While maybe not always fighting personally in battle Belisarius was always at least on the battlefield. This was necessary both because only by seeing a battle progress for himself could a general make accurate decision regarding tactics and strategy. A general being present on the battlefield was also necessary because Belisarius still lived in an age of "heroic" generalship to use John Keegan's term. Fighting mainly in masses with melee weapons meant that the majority of casualties in a pitched battle came if one side fled. This meant that morale was everything, because if your soldiers broke and were routed first, you not only lost the battle but probably a sizeable chunk of your army. Therefore, to be a truly successful general one needed to make one's presence known on the battlefield and at times fight personally. John Keegan, *The Mask of Command*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) 23-32.

⁴⁴ V.xviii.27; This passage is also of particular note as it is one of the few that very much attributes what happened to Belisarius intelligence, rather than his luck.

this on the battlefield have already been discussed, he also displayed a great degree of resourcefulness off the battlefield as well. Procopius credits Belisarius for saving Rome from starvation during the siege when Vitigis had destroyed the grain mills which the Romans used to make flour.

And so Belisarius hit upon the following device. Just below the bridge which I lately mentioned as being connected with the Circuit-wall, he fastened ropes from the two banks of the river and stretched them as tight as he could, and then attached to them two boats side by side and two feet apart, where the flow of the water comes down from the arch of the bridge with the great force, and placing two mills on either boat, he hung between them the mechanism by which mills are customarily turned. . . So by the force of the flowing water all the wheels, one after the other, were made to revolve independently, and thus they worked the mills with which they were connected and ground sufficient flour for the city.⁴⁵

If Belisarius really was responsible for this solution to the problem of grinding flour he really was resourceful man, regardless of whether the idea was purely his or not. For if it was his idea alone he can be credited for a rather impressive invention, or perhaps reapplication of technology. If the idea was not his it still demonstrates his intelligence, namely that he not only knew of such an apparatus elsewhere but that he also knew enough about it to build one. Either way, this resourcefulness also fits in well with Belisarius' skills as a military commander, namely that he seemed to have an excellent grasp of what tools he had at his disposal and the best way to maximize their effectiveness.⁴⁶

While Procopius gives Belisarius ample credit for many military accomplishments, it is not Belisarius' talents on the battlefield which drew Procopius's

⁴⁵ V.xix.20-22

⁴⁶ While there is absolutely no way to prove that this idea was Belisarius', there is also no way to prove that it was not, and it is unclear whether we should give Procopius, despite his being there at the time the benefit of the doubt.

highest praise. That is reserved for the degree of control Belisarius seemed to exercise over his men, especially when it came to reining them in from pursuing a fleeing enemy and maintaining good order when entering a city. This is also mentioned with the ‘eulogy’ when Procopius is talking about how Belisarius earned the love of peasants. “He won their affection because he showed so much restraint and such consideration for them[the peasants] that it never fell to their lot to suffer any violence when Belisarius was general.” The most famous example of this control over his soldiers is the orderly way in which the Roman army entered into Carthage and did not loot anything, something which often happened when armies seized an enemy city.⁴⁷

For though the Roman soldiers were not accustomed to enter a subject city without confusion, even if they numbered only five hundred, and especially if they made the entry unexpectedly, all the soldiers under the command of this general showed themselves so orderly that there was not a single act of insolence nor a threat, and indeed nothing happened to hinder the business of the city.⁴⁸

There are a number of references through Procopius’s *Wars* that indicate the poor discipline and self control of much of the Roman army during this time period.⁴⁹ Given these incidents of poor discipline and looting it is indeed remarkable that Belisarius was

⁴⁷ It had long been Roman military practice to loot cities after they had been captured. Even in the hey-day of the republic it was still a common practice, although writers such as Polybius record that it took place in an orderly manner. The looting of the city, which was divided among the army, served as the main supplement to the base pay of a Roman soldier. Procopius himself records that Belisarius’ army was unable to capture Darius after the Battle of Carthage because they stopped to loot his camp and how his own soldiers looted Naples after it was taken, which are just a few of a large number of examples. Polybius VI 19-40. *Wars* IV 1-15; V x 24-33.

⁴⁸ III.xxi.9

⁴⁹ *Wars* I xviii 34-50, recounts Belisarius’ defeat at the Battle of the Euphrates in 531 in which much of his army was routed; I xiv 21-27, details a speech Belisarius and Hermogenes give to their soldiers before the Battle of Dara in which they acknowledge that recent Roman military performance had been poor but they had it in them to do better; III xii 6-22, after two Massagetes kill another (allied soldiers), while waiting to sail for North Africa, Belisarius executes them and when the entire army protests, fearing a similar punishment, Belisarius speaks to them and exhorts them to live a more moderate and disciplined life.; John Haldon. *Warfare, State, and society in the Byzantine World: 565-1204*. (London: UCL Press, 1999) 193-195.

able to control his soldiers so thoroughly. Perhaps Belisarius' speeches to his soldiers, exhorting them to live better lives actually had an effect. Regardless of whether or not it did have an effect, the fact that he gave such speeches to his soldiers indicates that his order to be kind to civilians came from more than simply military necessity. Belisarius' decision to forbid his soldiers from looting was an important part of his overall plan to wrest control of North Africa from the Vandals.

It was an important part of Belisarius' strategy in North Africa because North Africa was Vandal controlled, not completely Vandal. A century previously the Vandals had invaded North Africa, destroyed the Roman government there and taken control of the entire region.⁵⁰ They changed very few of the Roman systems and served as the ruling party but were definitely outnumbered by both lower-class Romans as well as Moors.⁵¹ Despite nearly a century of occupation the Vandals never integrated into the culture, due in large part to the fact that the Vandals were Arian Christian whereas the majority of the population of North Africa was Catholic.⁵² While the Arians did not oppress the Catholics, the religious difference hindered their integration. Therefore, by directing his re-conquest solely at the Vandals, and by moderating his soldiers' treatments towards the peasants, meant that he could be seen as a liberator, rather than a conqueror.⁵³ Italy developed a rather similar situation except it was the Goths that were in control, although some of the Italian populace, such as the population of Naples, seemed to be more

⁵⁰ Susan Raven, *Rome in Africa*. (New York: Routledge, 1993) 196-198.

⁵¹ Ibid 205-308.

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid 209-213

accepting of Gothic rule.⁵⁴ Belisarius' strategy was extremely effective; the majority of the common populace of both North Africa and Italy supported him during his campaigns.

Procopius' depiction of Belisarius is not all so positive, however, but that does not mean that such negative episodes are not important to Belisarius' characterization.

Despite Belisarius's obvious talents as a general and the bravery which he routinely showed on the Battlefield, he could not win every engagement. Perhaps Belisarius' most infamous defeat came in 541 after Belisarius was dispatched, under supplied and under manned, to the Eastern Frontier to take command of the army, hastily formed, to counter the imminent invasion. Khosroes, deciding to invade Colchis, was in no position to counter the Roman Army so Belisarius was ordered to invade Persian territory. With minor loss of life Belisarius only succeeded in capturing a lesser fortification and with the force he sent ahead to scout failing to return he decided that he did not have the forces to successfully face the Persians in battle. .

But Belisarius and the Roman army, hearing nothing concerning this force, were disturbed, and they were filled with fear and an intolerable and exaggerated suspicion. And since much time had been consumed by them in this siege, it came about that many of the soldiers were taken there with a troublesome fever;⁵⁵

As a result of these things Belisarius was forced to turn back after spending only a short time in enemy territory and capturing one minor fortress. It seems quite evident there that the situation was beyond Belisarius's control and he would not have been able to achieve anything meaningful with the small force under his command.

⁵⁴ That might have been because, despite cultural differences with the Goths, return to Imperial Rule meant higher taxes. *Wars* V viii 12-18.

⁵⁵ II.xxi.28

While Belisarius seems blameless in the description of this retreat in the *Wars*, perhaps even fully justified, Procopius depicts a very different reason for the retreat in his *Anecdota*.

it was reported to him by someone that she[Antonina] was on the way. Whereupon he, counting all other things as of no importance, led his army back. For it so happened that certain things too, as related by me previously, had occurred in the army which influence him to this retreat. This information, however, led him much more quickly to the decision. . . And yet if he had been willing in the first place to cross the Tigris River with his whole army, I believe that he would have plundered the whole land of Assyria and would have reached the city of Ctesiphon without encountering any opposition whatever, and would have rescued the prisoners from Antioch. . . Furthermore, he was chiefly responsible for the fact that Chosroes returned home from Colchis in comparative security.⁵⁶

Very little is said about Antonina in the *Wars* but she features quite heavily in the *Anecdota*. In the latter work Antonina is depicted as being unfaithful to Belisarius and as a result of her infelicities he was anxious to keep her as close to him as possible. While this passage is not an open denial of the existence of the military issues, lack of troops and supplies, which Procopius cites as being the cause of Belisarius' retreat in the *Wars*, there is an emphasis here that his desire to see his wife is what led to his decision to retreat.⁵⁷

Perhaps more interesting is the latter half of this excerpt in which Procopius postulates that Belisarius could have won another astounding victory for himself by plundering Assyria, taking Ctesiphon, releasing the Romans captured by Antioch, and possibly even seize Khosroes himself.⁵⁸ This, more so than the specific reasons for his

⁵⁶ Procopius, *Anecdota*.ii.24-25

⁵⁷ It should be noted that the *Anecdota* is written in the style of invective which is, by its very nature, slanderous in nature. Cameron, 58-60.

⁵⁸ That sounds implausible considering how small Procopius says that Belisarius' army was at the time. Belisarius barely was able to take the lesser garrison he did and there would certainly have been more

retreat, is what is contradictory about the *Anecdota*. Procopius makes it quite clear, or at least seems to, in the *Wars* that Belisarius did not have enough soldiers to take any cities of note, and he certainly could not have taken on the very large army which Procopius describes as that returning from Colchis. Added to this is acknowledgment, both here and in the *Wars*, that many of Belisarius's soldiers were falling ill, which would have greatly reduced the strength of his forces.

Another possibility is the fact that it is entirely possible that both explanations for Belisarius's retreat are true.⁵⁹ They are not mutually exclusive anymore, and Procopius himself indicates in the *Anecdota* that there were other reasons for Belisarius's retreat, besides desire to see his wife.⁶⁰ It may simply be that Procopius chose, deliberately, to emphasize one reason over the other in each of his works. This fits in with the purposes of each of Procopius's works. As a work primarily focusing on military history, and by extension political history, the reasons which pertain to the strength and disposition of Belisarius army would be of far greater importance in the *Wars*. While the invective style of writing of the *Anecdota* would call for a more personal reason for Belisarius's retreat, especially if there was one. This would also explain Procopius's speculation as to what Belisarius could have accomplished had he stayed in Persian territory. By doing so Procopius does not take away from Belisarius's skills as a general but very effectively shows how blinded he was by his relationship with his wife. Belisarius' relationship with his wife is an example of an attribute that does not fit in with the image painted by the

heavily fortified cities that he would have run across while raiding. Especially since Ctesiphon was the Persian capital, located on the east bank of the Tigris.

⁵⁹ Evans 73, 87-92

⁶⁰ These other reasons are, as noted before, Belisarius' shortage on soldiers, supplies, the disappearance of his scouting force, and his army was beginning to come down the plague.

‘eulogy’ of Belisarius because it shows one instance where Belisarius is not in complete control over his own emotions. However, while giving blemish to the idea of Belisarius as an ideal commander this actually, in some ways, makes him more human. It shows that Belisarius is susceptible to love, just like the rest of us

Aside from the episodes in Procopius’s works which give definite snippets of characterization of Belisarius, there are several passages which are, for lack of a better word, rather bizarre in that it is extremely unclear what exactly Procopius was trying to portray in Belisarius’ character during these scenes. The following passage deals with one of Belisarius’ subordinates reaction to Belisarius’ insistence that he give an ornate dagger which he stole from a citizen of Rome back to the man.

But Constantinus, thinking that he was to die that very instant, wished to do some great deed before he should suffer anything himself. He accordingly drew the dagger which hung by his thigh and suddenly thrust it at the belly of Belisarius. . . At the moment they did him no harm, out of respect, I suppose, to the officer present, but led him away to another room at the command of Belisarius, and at a somewhat later time put him to death. This was the only unholy deed done by Belisarius, and it was in no way worthy of the character of the man; for he always showed great gentleness in his treatment of all others.⁶¹

This scene really does not make much sense in that, regardless of how angry Constantinus might have been at Belisarius’s insistence that he return the daggers, his reaction is certainly not proportional to the stimulus.⁶² Belisarius commanding this man to be put to death, on the other hand, seems reasonable, Constantinus had just tried to kill

⁶¹ VI.viii.14, 15, 17-18

⁶² It should be noted that, in response to Constantinus’s impassioned protests Belisarius had summoned his guards, fearing that the man might turn violent, Constantinus in turn misinterpreted this action which prompts his action. However, the summoning of his guards does not seem a logical reason to attempt to kill one’s commanding officer, not that I would know from experience.

him and, therefore, it seems a reasonable punishment for him to be put to death. Why then does Procopius refer to this as an “unholy deed.”

It is possible that Procopius is referring to Belisarius’s insistence that this commander return the dagger which he stole, but that also is inconsistent with the rest of this work. Procopius consistently praises Belisarius for his moderation towards the people he conquers and for his insistence that his soldiers not loot or pillage, regardless of where they are stationed. It makes no sense then that Procopius would condemn Belisarius for trying to get the man’s property returned to him. The only other possibility is that Procopius is condemning Belisarius’s action because he did not give enough weight to the fact that Constantinus was frightened by the sudden appearance of Belisarius’ guards and that fear is what drove him to take the action he did; but that does not really excuse his attempted to attack Belisarius.

There is another incident, which takes place on the Persian frontier, in which Procopius praises Belisarius for something that seems rather dubious. In 542 Khosroes launched a massive attack on the Roman frontier which Belisarius was dispatched to counter. While Belisarius was frequently outnumbered by his opponents, this time he had nowhere near the amount of men he would have needed to repel so large an enemy force. Belisarius devised a plan by which he makes a Persian envoy believe that his army was much larger than it actually was. He did this by treating most of his army as if it were the vanguard of a larger force and to further the illusion by making it appear that his soldiers were taking their leisure, hunting and doing other recreational activities, waiting for the

Persian army's arrival. To the surprise of all involved, the Persians turned around and returned to their territory.

And the Romans were loud in their praises of Belisarius and he seemed to have achieved greater glory in their eyes by this affair than when he brought Gelimer or Vitigis captive to Byzantium.⁶³

Throughout much of the *Wars* Belisarius is portrayed as a hero whose skill and bravery won him many battles so it therefore seems bizarre that Procopius would call this charade, clever though it was, Belisarius's greatest victory. If Procopius was trying to depict him as a military hero, why build this incident up so much, especially since it does not fit in well with the other depictions and images of Belisarius, the military genius?

In one sense this episode fits in perfectly well with Procopius's various other descriptions of Belisarius's deeds, as he is constantly shown to have been an extremely resourceful man who had keen insight into what his resources were and the best way to beat an enemy. On the other hand, this passage could be seen as a backhanded compliment on the part of Procopius. One could almost read an implicit message from Procopius here that Belisarius's great victories were not matters of military skill and bravery, but were really achieved by a combination of luck and trickery. This is certainly a plausible reading of the rest of Belisarius's great victories. At the Battle of Dara Belisarius had the advantage of defensive position and an excellent subordinate, The Battle of the Tenth Milestone was won because Gelimer was surprised by the Romans sudden appearance, and his army was caught off guard. This analysis, however, begs the

⁶³ II.xix.30

question, if Procopius really felt this way about Belisarius, why attempt to portray him as a heroic figure at all?⁶⁴

It should also be noted that it was in the year 542 that plague struck both the Roman and the Persian Empire. It has been speculated that this, much more so than any trickery on Belisarius's part, induced Khosroes to withdraw from Roman territory.⁶⁵ While it proves nothing conclusively, and this additional information opens up a new line of possibilities that can be discussed as to whether or not Belisarius really was a talented general.

Finally we come to what is perhaps the most debated passage in all of Procopius. While conducting the siege of Ravenna, in which Vitigis and the entire Gothic leadership was trapped, Belisarius was ordered, by Justinian, to come to a quick treaty in order so that his services could be rendered on the Eastern frontier, where Khosroes threatened to invade. Belisarius, seeing that a total victory was within his grasp and not wanting the Goths to escape or for another to take his glory he hesitated in fulfilling the Emperor's commands when a wonderful opportunity was presented to him by the Goths.⁶⁶

So after deliberating among themselves, all the best of the Goths decided to declare Belisarius Emperor of the West. And sending to him secretly, they begged him to assume the royal power; for upon this condition, they declared, they would follow him gladly. But Belisarius was quite unwilling to assume the ruling power against the will of the

⁶⁴ It should be noted that while this incident is drawn from Book II of the *Wars* that the events take place fairly late in the sequence of events in the *Wars* and by this point Procopius was no longer Belisarius's secretary and, if the *Anecdota* is any indication, he seems to have harbored some form of grudge against Belisarius, for reasons unknown. The *Anecdota* was a work, supplementary to the *Wars*, published a few years after it. Procopius claims that within its pages he will tell his readers the truth of what really happened, thereby claiming that the reasoning he gave in the *Wars* was not accurate. He sticks to this goal when talking of Belisarius and Antonina but drifts away when talking about Theodora and Justinian whom he venomously attacks throughout.

⁶⁵ Norwich 232-233.

⁶⁶ *Wars* VI xxix 1-6, "Belisarius. . . was moved with vexation, counting it a great calamity that any one should prevent him from winning the decisive victory of the whole war.

emperor; for he had an extraordinary loathing for the name of tyrant, and furthermore he had, in fact, been bound by the emperor previously by some solemn oaths never during his lifetime to organize a revolution; still, in order to turn the situation before him to the best advantage, he let it appear that he received the proposals of the barbarians gladly.⁶⁷ In some ways this ruined Belisarius's career for the Emperor Justinian would never fully trust him again, if he ever did to begin with, despite the fact the Belisarius never seems to have wavered in his loyalty to Justinian.⁶⁸ The question that arises from this passage is whether or not Belisarius's actions were treasonous and whether Justinian's reaction to Belisarius from then on was justified or an overreaction.

Procopius claims that Belisarius never considered taking the Goths' offer seriously, because of the oaths he had taken, but one wonders reading this passage if Belisarius was even for a moment tempted by the possibility of such power. On one hand, while Justinian was responsible⁶⁹ for Belisarius's quick rise through the ranks there is no indication that Justinian and Belisarius were ever particularly close and the entire Italian campaign shows that Justinian was reticent to give Belisarius the forces that he would have need to more quickly take the peninsula. On the other hand, it is questionable how much real power Belisarius would have actually had if he had taken the Western Empire as his own. He had devastated Italy while North Africa was in the middle of a Moorish uprising. Therefore, even if the military forces of those two provinces he sworn loyalty to

⁶⁷ VI.xxix.18-21

⁶⁸ There is no direct evidence which indicates that Belisarius and Justinian were ever anything more than associates, although how young Belisarius was when Justinian promoted him to General indicates that they at least at one time, were friends.

⁶⁹ Belisarius was originally one of the palace guards of Justin, Justinian's predecessor, who sent him to fight in the east on his ascension to emperor. He was promoted to General of the East despite never having won a battle, he lost the Battle of the Euphrates but after spending a year in Constantinople he is given overall command of the army being sent to North Africa. This definitely strongly indicates that his career, in his early years, was enhanced by Justinian.

him, along with the Goths, he would still have been low on supplies and hardly able to defend himself if Justinian had sent a sizable force to punish him.

This passage also raises the question of why Procopius included it in such detail. While it would have been common knowledge, at least among the court, that Belisarius had acted thus to take Ravenna it is interesting that Procopius puts so much effort in explaining the situation. On one hand it is another example of Belisarius being a pragmatist and using what he had at his disposal in order to get the job done. On the other hand this is another situation that could be seen as a backhanded compliment in that Belisarius, more so here than anywhere else in Procopius' works, appears to be a glory hungry manipulator who is willing to try any trick to get what he wants. This not only is not a very flattering depiction of Belisarius, but it also contradicts what Procopius has said about Belisarius at a number of other places, especially the "eulogy" which comes shortly after this incident.

When it comes down to it, it is rather hard to deny that Belisarius's actions were treasonous. He definitely ignored a direct order from Justinian and even feigning acceptance of the Goths' offer could be seen as treason. Even if Procopius is correct and Belisarius never intended to actually take the offer, that observation has the advantage of hindsight. While Justinian probably did hold his fear of Belisarius too long he probably would have been within his rights to have Justinian executed for this incident and it is entirely possible that only Belisarius's extreme utility and his enormous popularity saved him from such a fate.

In final assessment Belisarius, according to Procopius, seems to have been an extremely talented general with an excellent grasp on his own abilities. This resulted in remarkable prudence in dealing with the situations in which he found himself. His tactical planning was quite innovative and he could think quickly on his feet in a battle and he had great control over his own soldiers. He also seems to have been very resourceful, given some of his solutions to non-military problems. He comes off as very fair in justice but did not shy away from punishing harshly, when he needed to do so. He was not without his flaws as he seems to have been greedy for glory, although he is rare in the fact that he did not put others at risk to achieve this. His troubled relationship with his wife also cost him dearly on several occasions but his devotion to her is commendable, if rather foolish in hindsight. As presented here this soldier is by no means a perfect man but rather, from the point of view of Procopius, he is the ideal man.

Chapter 2: The Context of Procopius

Having now established a characterization of Belisarius by focusing on the content of Procopius' *History of the Wars* and *Anecdota* it is time to shift focus to Procopius himself. While some thought was given in the previous chapter to the style and intentions of Procopius when he was writing those works it is important now that we delve deeper. What has been presented thus far is an interpretation of the text which focuses on said text. What happens to that interpretation of Belisarius if one brings context of Procopius into the picture?

When using any source on historical events and characters it is always important to ask the question: what is the source of our information? The reason for this is the fact that everyone sees the world differently, based on upbringing, personality, and dozens of other factors, and this colors our interpretations of the events which we witness.⁷⁰ No matter how hard one tries it is impossible to completely escape these biases as they are a natural, sometimes not even consciously recognized, part of the context of our lives, meaning that it is vitally important for historians to carefully analyze their sources of information. Doing so will allow the historian to see, at least to some degree, the context of a given source. With that knowledge a historian can get some sense of what a source is and isn't telling us.

Such a commentary is especially important when studying Procopius as his works were always the most detailed and usually the only source on the events which he described.⁷¹ This makes understanding the context of Procopius vitally important in

⁷⁰ For example some people still refer to the American Civil War as the War of Northern Aggression

⁷¹ Evans 19; Cameron ix-x; Kaldellis 2.

understanding the presentation of Belisarius within his works. The fact that Procopius tells us next to nothing about himself does not help this situation.⁷² Just as we are left with the actions of Belisarius to deduce his character we are left mainly with the products of Procopius' pen to see his character. It is difficult to determine what exactly the biases of Procopius were, especially since there are several different voices which seem to make up the narration of Procopius' works.⁷³ In light of this multitude of Procopian voices this chapter shall treat each of them as individual contexts that each plays its own part in producing an overall context and specifically effect on the characterization of Belisarius.

The first of these contexts is that of Procopius as a writer. The literary genre of history was more than a thousand years old by the time Procopius was writing and Procopius' works are part of that tradition and that tradition informed the way Procopius wrote. There are a number of aspects of Procopius writing that demonstrate the various ways in which Procopius emulated previous authors. The second context is that of Procopius as a man. This will deal with the various ways in which Procopius' own thoughts and opinions on the events and people which he was witnessing found their way into his writings. This section will account for both personal feelings and more general feelings brought on by the part of society which Procopius was born into. After discussing each context in turn several examples dealing with Belisarius will be given to demonstrate the ways in which these conflicts influenced the portrayal of Belisarius.

⁷² Evans 16-17

⁷³ Evans 15-16; It should perhaps not be surprising that there are multiple different 'voices' speaking from Procopius works as everyone has different facets to their lives and personalities which are in dialogue(occasionally competition) with each other. If Procopius was indeed trying to write while keeping several different things in mind, as I will argue that he did, it is not at all surprising that the result has a multitude of different Procopii speaking from it.

While a very talented writer Procopius was not an innovator. He was writing in a long established genre and as such followed the conventions of said genre.⁷⁴ In fact, his writings not only were in the genre of History(*Wars*) but he also wrote in the genre of invective(*Anecdota*) and panegyric(*Buildings*).⁷⁵ While the genres in which he was writing undoubtedly had an effect on Procopius' writings it would be a mistake to think that they dominated his writings.⁷⁶ While there are certainly many areas of deliberate artifice on the part of Procopius that does not mean that he was deliberately changing his story but rather that he was molding this artifice with his story in order to achieve whatever aim or point he was attempting to make with a given passage.⁷⁷ There are many examples of this emulation within the corpus of Procopius' works, a few of which will now be presented to illustrate this tendency.

Since the purpose of the historian is to provide a narrative for a sequence of events which is, on some level, true one of the most important things which a historian must do at the beginning of his work is to establish his own credibility as someone who

⁷⁴ The origin of the genre of history is credited to Herodotus, writing in the 5th century BC John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 1.

⁷⁵ Invective is a literary piece which uses intentional exaggeration or misrepresentation of facts to attack someone. Panegyric is a work that unconditionally praises someone. Cameron 57-60.

⁷⁶ Kaldellis 26. It should be noted here that Procopius was not really a part of this classical tradition, per se, but rather was trying to be. His works deliberately attempt to create the classical style. Presumably if he had truly been a part of that tradition such force of effort would not have been required. This may explain the many very direct copies made by Procopius of his predecessors, most notably Thucydides. The fundamental difference between the classical tradition and Procopius' own tradition is the advent of Christianity and the changes that wrought within Mediterranean culture and literature, which are also evident in Procopius writings.

⁷⁷ And neither way of looking at invalidates the information given, on its own anyway. Kaldellis 5-7.

can accurately relay said events.⁷⁸ Like many ancient authors Procopius chose to put this defense of his own authority at the very beginning of book I of the *Wars*.

Furthermore he had assurance that he[Procopius] was especially competent to write the history of these events, if for not other reason, because it fell to his lot, when appointed adviser to the general Belisarius, to be an eye-witness of practically all the events to be described. It was his conviction that while cleverness is appropriate to rhetoric, and inventiveness to poetry, truth alone is appropriate to history. In accordance with this principle he has not concealed the failures of even his most intimate acquaintances, but has written down with complete accuracy everything which befell those concerned whether it happened to be done well or ill by them.⁷⁹

It is clear from this passage that Procopius viewed that he had two necessary qualifications to write the history he was about to present. The first is that he was an eye-witness to many of the event which he describes, being Belisarius' adviser and therefore traveling with him. The second perceived qualification is that Procopius clearly views himself, or at least would like the reader to believe that he is, an unbiased writer, only interested in the truth. He claims that he would write down exactly what happened regardless of whether it was good or bad and regardless of whether he knew the person or people in question. This is nice in theory, and Procopius probably did consider that he worked very hard on being unbiased about these events, but as has been discussed several times already, we all have biases that we don't really even realize which cloud our view on things.

⁷⁸ Marincola 1-3; By truth I mean that the events which are relayed in a history actually happened, i.e. Sassanid forces attacked the Byzantine Fortress of Dara, failed, and were forced to withdraw, motivations for the events, individual actions during the action, judgments concerning the effect, one way or another, of said actions, aftermath, etc. are all still open to each author's individual interpretation. This is also referring mainly to the ancient historical genre, although to some degree it still holds true today.

⁷⁹ I i. 3-5.

In many ways this opening by Procopius mirrors part of the introduction of *The Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides.⁸⁰

As to the events of the way, I have not written them down as I heard them from just anybody, not as I thought they must have occurred, but have consistently described what I myself saw or have been able to learn from others after going over each event in as much detail as possible. I have found this task to be extremely arduous, since those who are present at these actions gave varying reports on the same event, depending on their sympathies and their memories.⁸¹

The same two claims are made here as in Procopius' introduction. Thucydides claimed that his work was accurate because he witnessed many of the events in question and for the events he depicted he worked painstakingly to apply a critical eye to what had been told to him. Also, important for this paper as a whole as well as for the discussion within it, Thucydides acknowledged that what makes applying such critiques both difficult and crucial, was the varying contexts of peoples' lives and varying accounts of what happened at any given time. It should be noted that, while very similar, these two introductions are not identical. While Thucydides chose to emphasize the difficulty of the process in order to get readers trust, i.e. that he worked far too hard to be simply lying about what he is saying when he could have made something up much easier, whereas Procopius chooses to emphasize his willingness to even report bad things about his friends in order to demonstrate how unbiased he is. There are a number of such incidents throughout Procopius work in which he is clearly invoking the style of Thucydides, generally, as with these two passages, to make a similar, although certainly not identical, point within his own narrative.

⁸⁰ Kaldellis 17-19.

⁸¹ Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. Trans. Walter Blanco. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1998) Book I, chapter 22.

Another area in which Procopius can be seen to emulate previous historians, as has been discussed briefly in the previous chapter, is in his repeated use of the concept of Tyche. Tyche is the personification of luck and was often used by ancient authors as a general stand-in for causes and motivation which exist beyond human control and reasoning.⁸² Many ancient historians have made use of this concept and term before but before Procopius it was most heavily used by the Roman Historian Polybius and it has often been supposed that it is deliberate emulation of Polybius that Procopius uses the concept at all.⁸³

It should be noted, however, that Procopius is not merely copying off his predecessors or using an archaic way of saying the 'will of god'. First off, the idea that he was using the term Tyche for the God's Will, although he does at some points seem to use the idea interchangeably, is improbably because of the many times he does use the idea of God's Will.⁸⁴ The main reason for this is the fact that these two concepts are used almost in contradiction with each other which makes the idea that Procopius intended them to be synonyms unlikely.⁸⁵ There is also the fact that Procopius uses the term Tyche far more often than even Polybius does within his own writings.⁸⁶ Added to this is the

⁸² F.W. Walbank. *Polybius*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) 58-67

⁸³ Cameron 31, 117-119; Evans 118-126. Cameron also discusses here the idea that Tyche within Procopius is merely a classicizing way of saying the 'will of god'. The concept is first used in Thucydides works but he, and most other ancient historians, only used it in the most extreme of unpredicted situations.

⁸⁴ Kaldellis 173-175.

⁸⁵ Ibid, although Kaldellis notes that it is easy to see them that way considering he uses the same vocabulary when talking about either Tyche or God's Will. Another possible interpretation of this idea is that Tyche is an agent of God's will that operates on specific events while God's will controls big, and far reaching ideas, and Tyche then manipulate events accordingly. Evans 118-126.

⁸⁶ Kaldellis 218.

fact that, unlike God, fate is impartial and it is strongly implied could just as easily go one way as the other.⁸⁷

As these two examples have illustrated, while Procopius frequently emulated the style of previous historians it was neither purposeless nor mindless. Procopius deliberately took the style and tendencies of previous historians and made them work for him. He used them to create comparisons between his work and theirs in order to make whatever point he was going for and to do so he often expanded, sometimes greatly, upon what previous historians had done. There is also the fact that while he was certainly deliberately crafting his narrative around these classical elements he really was attempting, to the best of his own abilities, to follow the precepts which he espoused in his introduction, truth and impartiality. These two trends therefore played a role in the way in which Belisarius is presented throughout Procopius' writings.

The Procopius was Belisarius' legal adviser and that he was on hand to witness many of the events which are described is unchallenged.⁸⁸ In addition, Procopius recording accurately what he knew about the event which he witnessed is exemplified within the text as well as description of the Plague of 542, as well as of two soldiers still alive with a spear and an arrow, respectively, stuck in their heads, is extremely accurate and medically sound.⁸⁹ This creates something of a quandary for those wishing to add other analysis to Procopius and his writings. If some part of Procopius' work can be verified as accurate, how can the other events which he writes about be legitimately be

⁸⁷ Evans 118-126.

⁸⁸ Kaldellis 3-7.

⁸⁹ Kaldellis 3-7, 26-27; Evans 54. It should be noted that the description of the Plague mirrors Thucydides' description of the Plague which hit Athens during the Peloponnesian War.

discounted as false?⁹⁰ If one follows this line of thinking one should take the rest of what Procopius writes in the *Wars* at face value and in doing so one creates a ‘two edged sword’ for the characterization of Belisarius.⁹¹ On the one hand it gives credence to all the positive things which Procopius says of Belisarius. All those great, and rather improbably victories, really were his doing. On the other hand, it also proves all the negative things which are said about Belisarius within the *Wars*.⁹² His lack of motivation and aggression really were at fault in the string of defeats and setbacks he suffered after 540. It changes the overall view of Belisarius very little and even adds a little more characterization to him since, rather than the idealized portrayal in the “eulogy”, a Belisarius who did some things well and some things poorly seems somewhat more realistic.

There is also the matter of the emulations themselves. It is certainly a trend within the modern historical profession to view such emulation as completely invalidating what the emulator has written.⁹³ The reason being that the author either was paying far too much attention to literary affectations than actually telling the truth or was changing his story to fit said literary affectations. Neither of these really makes too much sense because specific style is something that can be added later while editing or if one writes slowly, the *Wars* were written over about 20 years, which would definitely mean that a specific kind of style would be addable slowly and carefully without damaging the

⁹⁰ To put it more succinctly, if there is only one eye-witness how can you discount what he says, even with taking context into account.

⁹¹ There are other reasons, to be accounted in the next part of this chapter, why one should not take EVERYTHING else he says at face value.

⁹² For the purpose of this particular discussion the *Anecdota* is being left out as it is not actually in the genre of history.

⁹³ Kaldellis 26-27.

story.⁹⁴ It is only recently that form and function have begun to be separated in the readings of ancient historians.⁹⁵ On the whole this has little effect on how one perceives Belisarius with in the *Wars* since it would largely depend on what a specific incident of emulation is trying to accomplish. On the other hand, it allows one to take the “eulogy” at something closer to street value since it is certainly a form of emulation, overall character descriptions in an idealized portrait were common among Ancient Historians, and specifically biographers.⁹⁶ If one can use this as proof that just because it is an emulation doesn’t mean that is false makes it harder for others to criticize the accuracy of the “eulogy.”

Finally we come to the issue of Tyche, which is also discussed in the previous chapter. On the one hand it casts a shadow over Belisarius, if so much in Procopius’ world view is dictated by luck, how then is Belisarius truly responsible for anything that he does? Looking at it less broadly though, if in some cases Belisarius managed to achieve a victory only by luck, how can any of the reports of Belisarius’ battles be trusted to be accurate? On the other hand, it also lets Belisarius off the hook with some issues. If Tyche is responsible for the failure of Belisarius in his 2nd Gothic campaign, and the success of Totila, the Gothic King, during that same war, it was therefore not Belisarius’ fault that he was able to accomplish so little during that time.⁹⁷ On the whole, while it removes some of the negative marks against Belisarius’ character, the presence of Tyche is ultimately detrimental to said characterization in that it removes a great deal of agency

⁹⁴ Ibid, there is evidence that Procopius did edit the *Wars* before it was published as it shows a degree of polish too it that his other to works do not.

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ As noted in the previous chapter (c.f. pg 11-12 in Chapter One).

⁹⁷ Kaldellis 183-187.

from men, which therefore takes something away from a successful general. If the classicizing elements of Procopius' work are mere tools which he used to make various points throughout his narrative, which is important to the context, what about the context of him as a man.

While as a historian Procopius tried his hardest to remove his own biases from this writing he was, in the end just like all of us, a human being. This meant that he had thoughts and feelings about the many things that were going on around him, which also happened to be what he was writing on. It is therefore entirely possible that, regardless of how hard he tried, Procopius' thoughts and feelings found their way into his writing. This can perhaps be seen quite clearly in the beginning of the *Wars*, in which he states "It will be evident that no more important or mightier deeds are to be found in history than those which have been enacted in these wars."⁹⁸ This is a very clear opinion for anyone to make, especially a professional historian, and may well be the first instance of Procopius' own character intruding in upon his writing.⁹⁹

This brings up the question of what exactly Procopius was like, what kind of a man was he, what were his interests, etc? Just like trying to characterize Belisarius' one must extrapolate from Procopius' writing in order to even begin to discern answers to this question, which is vitally important in understanding the context of those writings.

One of the few pieces of information which Procopius gives about himself is that he came from the city of Caesarea, in Palestine. Even this piece of information is not

⁹⁸ I i. 6

⁹⁹ Kaldellis, 17-18. It should be noted that many historians begin their works in this manner, notable among them are Thucydides and Polybius. However, nowhere in his opening pages, or anywhere in his work, does Procopius defend this claim. Thucydides and Polybius on the other hand both take great pains to meticulously defend their positions.

concrete as he does not expressly say that he was from there, he merely refers to Caesarea as “my Caesarea”¹⁰⁰ at one point in the course of his narrative. Being born in Caesarea would have made his native tongue Greek, although he clearly knew Latin very well, as it was still required to be part of the imperial bureaucracy and the legal profession. There is also good evidence that Procopius spoke, or was at least familiar with, Syriac. Given that his official posting was as legal secretary to Belisarius, it seems likely that he was trained in the legal profession.¹⁰¹

The aspect of Procopius’s origins which most clouds Procopius’s writings is the social class he came from. Procopius was born to the senatorial class, that is, he was of the wealthy and land-owning class.¹⁰² This is informative, especially with regard to Procopius’s eventual hatred of Justinian and his disillusionment with the wars. One of the hallmarks of all of Justinian’s policies is that they were expensive. Heavy taxation was needed to pay for the wars of re-conquest, as well as to defend the Persian frontier. The source for the majority of these taxes was the senatorial class of the empire. As a result, during Procopius’s lifetime he was forced to watch the people of his class, and probably his family, being drained of their wealth, which was the main source of their power.¹⁰³

Being loyal Roman Procopius was clearly enthusiastic about the re-conquests, at the beginning, and Belisarius’s swift victory in Africa must have reinforced this

¹⁰⁰ *Wars*, I, i, 1, in that this declaration is the first line of the work, and is immediately followed by a defense of his reliability as a witness, it seems likely that Procopius was trying to tell his readers where he was coming from to further establish that credibility for himself. Kaldellis, 17.

¹⁰¹ Evans, 30-41

¹⁰² Evan 18

¹⁰³ Evans 30-41, there is evidence that by the end of Justinian’s reign the senatorial class had been completely decimated in both numbers and wealth.

feeling.¹⁰⁴ But as the Gothic War grew longer and more expensive, with no end in sight, and the Persian menace reappeared, this optimism began to fade away.¹⁰⁵ By the end of the *Wars*, Procopius has become embittered to Justinian's policies, which he saw as ruinous. This feeling is best exemplified in the *Anecdota* in which Justinian is referred to as nothing less than the anti-Christ.¹⁰⁶

This is, however, not the only reason for Procopius's opposition to Justinian's policies. Book 7 of the Gothic Wars is heavily critical of Justinian for the lack of manpower and supplies which he committed to the re-conquest of Italy. He even recognizes that the reason for this is that more soldiers were needed to counter the Persian threat on the eastern border of the Empire. This shows that, even though by that point he was already unhappy about the war's cost and length, that he considered it winnable, if sufficient soldiers were sent Italy. On the other hand it shows that Procopius was familiar enough with the affairs of the empire to know that they insufficient manpower to hold the vast territories which were still under the control of Byzantium. This creates a contradiction on the part of Procopius, however, in that he criticizes Justinian for both not supporting the re-conquests sufficiently and for the expense that the re-conquests had already created.¹⁰⁷

Procopius seems to have possessed a genuine interest in the histories and cultures of other peoples. He begins Book I, III, and V of the *Wars* with a detailed description of the events which led up to the point where the war in question began. These fairly

¹⁰⁴ Kelly, 24

¹⁰⁵ Ostrogorsky, 72-73

¹⁰⁶ Cameron 49-51

¹⁰⁷ *Wars* I, III, V

balanced descriptions are considerably more detailed than was strictly necessary to establish the background for the narrative, indicating genuine interest on the part of the author.¹⁰⁸

One would think that the fact that Procopius was Belisarius's legal secretary for 15 years, and traveled with him during many of the events which he depicts would give a rare insight into the man. Procopius, however, gives very few intimate details of Belisarius's personality or life. We are forced to contend also with Procopius's shifting vision of Belisarius over the course of his work.

Procopius clearly thought the world of Belisarius, at the beginning of their association, and this idolization leaves a definite impression on Belisarius's characterization. In the early sections of the *Wars*, Procopius goes out of his way to give all credit for his success to Belisarius and shift blame to other people for failure. This is most clearly seen in Procopius's description of the Battle of Calinicum, which was a decisive Byzantine defeat but Procopius portrays it in such a way that Belisarius seems blameless. The aftermath of the Battle also displays one of the few instances where Procopius gives a hint that he was writing his history many years after the event. Procopius claims that Belisarius was recalled to Constantinople in preparation for the Vandal campaign, which would not be launched for nearly two years and it is unlikely the Justinian would put a relatively inexperienced general who had just lost a major battle in charge of so large an operation.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ *Wars* I, III, V. opening chapters of each describe the Persians, Vandals, and Goths, respectively.

¹⁰⁹ Evans, 33. Evans proposes as an alternative that Belisarius was given the North African command because of his loyalty in putting down the Nike revolts and because Justinian certainly did not expect it to be a resounding victory.

It is unclear where exactly this idolization came from. It is quite possible that Procopius idolized Belisarius because of his position as his legal secretary allowed him to travel much of the Mediterranean; he speaks at one point of loving to travel.¹¹⁰ It is also possible that he reveled in his presence at so many battles and great events. If Procopius had aspirations as a historian even before he sat to write the *Wars* it could be that he delighted in being able to provide so many intimate details of events. He certainly seemed enthusiastic about even minute events, which he often relates with exquisite detail, and when he can prove he was part of important events, such as council meetings or, in one instance, being able to provide vital information for the army, he seems almost ecstatic about the honor.

On the other hand, it could be that Procopius viewed Belisarius as some kind of hero or savior, either for his literary aspiration or for his concerns about Justinian's policies. If, and this is likely, Procopius was interested in writing a history of the events of his life from a very early age he would have seen in Belisarius the perfect hero for his story. On the other hand, with Procopius's concerns with Justinian's policies he might have seen in Belisarius a chance to ease, or perhaps even eliminate, the burden they put on his own class. For if Belisarius had been able to bring a swift end to the re-conquests, it would have increased, rather than weakened, the economic state of the empire and perhaps Procopius was hoping that Belisarius would eventually grow tired of Justinian and overthrow him. Someone with the interest in history Procopius shows would have known that generals had often rebelled against the emperor for less provocation that

¹¹⁰ Kaldellis notes that Procopius not only loved to travel but also loved to learn about far away lands. From him we get our earliest information about Saxon occupied Britain and the Scandinavian peoples.

Justinian gave him. The young, wealthy, charismatic, and talented Belisarius could certainly have posed a grave threat to the un-militaristic and often secluded Justinian.¹¹¹

Whatever visions or hopes Procopius had for Belisarius he seems to have not lived up to them. In the later parts of the *Wars* Procopius takes an increasingly negative view of Belisarius and in the *Anecdota*, written several years later, he is openly critical of him. This fading regard may have been caused by Belisarius's failure to bring the Gothic War to a swift conclusion. It also may have stemmed from the fact that Belisarius refused to accept the emperorship of the west or the fact that Belisarius surrendered his command and a large part of his fortune to Justinian without so much as a note of protest. It is also possible that this shift in opinion stems from the fact that, after the first Italian expedition, Procopius seems to have been replaced as Belisarius's secretary. There is no direct proof of this but the level of detail of the 2nd campaign is much lower and Procopius seems to have lost his passion for the events. His detailed depiction of the outbreak of Plague in 542 strongly indicates that he was in the city at the time, which means he was not with Belisarius, who was on campaign, at the time. If Procopius was indeed an avid traveler and fascinated with witnessing battle and other such events this change in position would have been a devastating blow to him and if Belisarius did not speak up to keep him on, this could have been what soured their relationship.¹¹²

This passive debasement of his former hero is followed up, in the *Anecdota*, with a harsh attack on Belisarius in which he calls him a love-sick fool who was too in love with his unfaithful wife. This is the most reasoned part of the *Anecdota* and the only part

¹¹¹ Cameron, 8-18

¹¹² Ibid

of the work where Procopius lives up to his promise that he would be providing the real motivations to the events he discusses in the *Wars*. The 'real' motivations he discusses are attribution of all of Belisarius failings to his desire to be with his wife, or his obsession with her infidelity. While the *Anecdota* is in the style of invective, which means that he is being deliberately pejorative, one should hesitate from dismissing this account as being false. It is entirely possible that concern for his wife's actions may have been a motivating factor in Belisarius's actions. That is not to say, however, that, as Procopius implies, this was the only motivation for action, or even the most important one.¹¹³

There is also the crucial fact the Procopius could not always say everything that he wanted to say. He was in the employ of the most successful general of the time and later, presumably, to Justinian, meaning that he was court commissioned writer and while they may not have been looking over his shoulder constantly, if he published something they did not like he could easily have ended up dead. This may be responsible for some of the sections of Procopius' writings in which Procopius makes veiled criticisms of important people. This may well have prompted the writing of the *Anecdota*, which is described as being the truth of what happened. It is entirely possible that the *Anecdota* was made deliberately scurrilous so as to act as a counterbalance to the somewhat sterilized *Wars*. However, Procopius does not shy away from making criticisms in the *Wars* either. Unsurprisingly, all of this likely had a huge effect on what Procopius says within his works.

¹¹³ Evans, 87-92

Belisarius was a soldier, and seems to be nothing more than that throughout most of the *Wars*. And if Procopius really was of the senatorial class and disillusioned with the wars Justinian was waging constantly it seems very possible that he would not have a positive view of a soldier. Especially if that soldier was a great general who had let several opportunities for victory seemingly slip through his fingers. Being hit hard by the war-economy Procopius probably, as noted before, had high hopes for Belisarius' success and when that failed to materialize it makes sense to blame him for failure on some level, regardless of what you state as being the reason for the failure. This would definitely tend to add negative element to the portrayal of Belisarius since he is portrayed, possibly for this reason, as a failure after his return from Italy in 540. This mutual dislike that had grown between them might well have been accentuated if Procopius was the avid travel lover that he seems to have been because his dismissal greatly reduced his ability to travel.

This increasingly negative portrayal of Belisarius can also be seen as being the main form of causation behind several of the backhanded compliments which Procopius seems to give to Belisarius, often after he has won some kind of victory. Added to that the fact that Procopius could not write whatever he felt like created the perfect excuse to use a variety of back-handed compliments as there was no other way of criticizing specific actions. And even if Belisarius and Procopius had continued to get along very well there would still have been some things for Procopius to disapprove of, since no one agrees with everything that someone else does.

While the events and nature of Procopius' life does not seem to add anything positive, quite the contrary in fact, to the portrayal of Belisarius it does give us some

interesting insights into possible reasons why Procopius seems to get more and more negative, and less detailed, as his works go on. There is also the fact that Procopius tried very hard to tell the truth in his writings and that cannot be so easily discounted, even if sometimes Procopius' own opinions shown through.¹¹⁴ With only a few exceptions Belisarius is the character within the Wars that Procopius criticizes the least and many of the negative aspects of the characterization are described as being either Tyche, and a great disparity in supplies and soldiers. With all that in mind it is possible that the depiction of Belisarius in the "eulogy" was how Procopius wanted to view the man, even after his string of failures in the 540's. It is possible, just possible, that Belisarius really was the ideal man. Considering that an ideal man is exactly how the various artists to depict Belisarius' chose to show him it is now important to address the ways in which alter authors have used Belisarius.

¹¹⁴ Despite that Procopius opinions often seemed Negative Kaldellis very succinctly described Procopius which gives another way he could be looked at, and influences my final description of Procopius' intent. "He treated Romans and barbarians impartially, condemning the former as often as he praised the latter. He did not glorify mere success, showing compassion for defeated kings and, especially, for civilians who suffered in the wars instigated by others. He condemned military aggression, though he was not immune to the charms of military glory. He dared to argue, writing under Justinian, that religion was not worth fighting over. He was the only subject of the Roman empire to write an impartial and even critical history of a reigning emperor; who publicly exposed the crimes, corruption, and incompetence of imperial officials; who glorified the official enemies of the state; and who risked his life to condemn the regime of Justinian and his wife." Kaldellis 221.

Chapter 3: Different Perspectives

Having now presented an analysis of the way in which Procopius depicted Belisarius, as well as looked at the reasons why he might have depicted him that way, it is worthwhile to look at the ways in which this depiction has been seen and used. Due to the way in which Procopius depicts Belisarius, there is fair room for interpretation in looking at his life. As a result, the life of Belisarius is one which provides us with some fascinating variation in the nature of interpretation.

When modern historians speak of Belisarius at all, it is usually brief and does not delve deeply into Procopius's depiction of the man.¹¹⁵ This scarcity of detailed discussion may well stem from the fact that, for many of these authors, regardless of what emphasis they put on Belisarius's skills, Belisarius's life and deeds do not fit within the context of their works.¹¹⁶ The only places where a discernable difference of opinion arises is in the analysis of Belisarius's refusal of the Western diadem and the overall role he played in the events of his lifetime.

There is, however, another story about Belisarius which has drawn speculation from modern historians. That story is the account that, when he was accused and convicted of treason in 562, the Emperor Justinian not only took his titles and wealth from him, he also took his eyes and forced him to be a beggar. The earliest known text in which this account appears is the *Chiliades* by John Tzetzes, a twelfth century Byzantine

¹¹⁵ e.g. John Barker, in his book *Justinian and the Later Roman Empire*, praises Belisarius as "the outstanding general of the age and one of the most remarkable in history"(pg. 75) but only devotes a handful of pages to him.

¹¹⁶ To continue with the Barker example, regardless of what Barker's opinion of Belisarius is, he is writing a book about Justinian and the Later Roman Empire as a whole, not about Belisarius.

grammarian.¹¹⁷ While modern historians have dismissed this story as apocryphal, likely a fabrication of Tzetzes, it has been widely used by writers and artists, who have long found fascination in Belisarius's character. They have made wide use of the dramatic appeal of the image of a blind man, begging for his food, having been wronged by the emperor.¹¹⁸

The variation of artistic mediums in which Belisarius has appeared ranges from poems to novels and paintings to operas. An interesting aspect of this is the fact that these artists, for the most part, tell practically the same story as the historians, save for the apocryphal blind-beggar episode, subject to their own interpretations. This begs the question, why has Belisarius' life story largely, or at least more frequently, been told by artists, rather than historians? As such this chapter will analyze various interpretations of Belisarius's life with an eye towards determining the affect the context of the author's lives and genre has on their presentations of his life.

As John Tzetzes(1110-1180), was the first author we know of to record the story of Belisarius being blinded it makes sense to begin our timeline with him. The work in which this account appears, the *Chiliades*, which literally means "thousands", is a long work in which he gives the histories of a variety of historical and literary characters(mostly minor ones).¹¹⁹ The work began as a series of letters to a friend which

¹¹⁷ Tzetzes, Iohannes, *Chiliades* III.339-348; Ed. William Robertson Smith, "Belisarius", *Encyclopedia Britannica* 9th edition, 1902.

¹¹⁸ Norwich, 261

¹¹⁹ Browning, Robert, "Review: *Tzetzes' Historiae*" *The Classical Review* vol. 20 no. 2(June, 1970). Cambridge University Press: New York. Pg. 183-185; It should here be noted that the *Chiliades* have never been translated into English, and as I am unable to read Greek, I am unable to perform any kind of close reading myself into the text.

he later collected, edited, and made comments upon.¹²⁰ While it is entirely possible that Tzetzes had access to some source, or sources, which are no longer available to us the fact that none of the historians writing towards the end of Belisarius's life mention the incident, combined with the fact that, despite the scholarly detail within Tzetzes writing, he appears to have written much of this work from memory.¹²¹

The fact that Tzetzes includes Belisarius within this work indicates that he was still known in twelfth century Byzantium. To what extent is impossible to say, but the fact that the passage about Belisarius is brief, being 9 lines long, would lead one to assume that his life story was sufficiently well known that providing a narrative was unnecessary. It is also quite difficult to say, with any certainty, what prompted his inclusion in this text. Perhaps the slow disintegration of the Byzantine empire over the previous centuries was keeping generals such as Belisarius in the public consciousness. Perhaps, as one work has suggested, Tzetzes saw Belisarius as “an instance of the moral that Greek writers never seem to have tired of telling: the instability of good fortune.”¹²²

On the other hand, perhaps Tzetzes' account is disregarded too quickly by modern historians. While it is possible that he, at times, wrote from memory, his scholarship is often incredibly detailed, and we know he had access to sources which no longer exist.¹²³

The historian Philip Henry Stanhope notes that simply because there is no written

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Ibid, the assertion, made by the author of this text, that Tzetzes wrote much of this from memory comes from the fact that while Tzetzes meticulously cites hundreds of sources throughout the *Chiliades* there are long stretches without any form of citation at all, leading scholars to judge that these passages were written from memory.

¹²² Egmond, Florike and Peter Mason, “A Horse Called Belisarius” *History Workshop Journal* No. 47(spring 1999) Oxford University Press: Oxford. Pg. 241

¹²³ Stanhope, Philip Henry. *The Life of Belisarius*. Carey and Lea: Philadelphia, 1832. pg. 300-302; Stanhope notes that Tzetzes used well over 200 hundred different sources over the course of the *Chiliades*.

evidence does not mean that something did not occur, and that blinding was a common punishment to convicted traitors, and political rivals, in the Byzantium.¹²⁴ While these are all good points, the fact that historians contemporary to these events make no mention of that fact means that Tzetzes story must be counted as fictitious.

Jacob Bidermann(1578-1627), a German-born Jesuit priest, professor of theology and rhetoric at Munich, and playwright, was the first author to realize the dramatic potential of the story, who used the story of Belisarius to create a parable concerning the whims of Fortune and Providence in his *Belisarius*, first performed in 1607.¹²⁵ Within the play a number of concepts, such as Fortune, Calamity, Envy, and Rumor, among others, are personified on stage and used to make commentary on the action.¹²⁶ Blinding is featured here as a part of Belisarius's punishment on a trumped up treason charge, and is depicted as both tragic, in the contrast of his great success and his destitution at the plays end, and fully justified.¹²⁷ The reason being that Belisarius loses his virtue when, fearing for his mortal possessions, he follows Theodora's orders to depose Pope Sylvestres.¹²⁸ Because of this transgression he loses the protection of providence, so therefore he is justly punished, just for the wrong crime.¹²⁹

Thus, for Bidermann, his status as a Jesuit Roman Catholic combined with his aim of created an educational parable forms the context with which he constructs

¹²⁴ Ibid, 286-291

¹²⁵ Best, Thomas W. *Jacob Bidermann*, Twayne Publishers: Virginia, 1975. 12, 72-73. Bidermann held various academic postings over the course of his career, Munich is listed here as he was a professor of rhetoric at that University when he wrote *Belisarius*.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 72-89

¹²⁷ Ibid, 25-26

¹²⁸ Ibid, 83-85; It should be noted that, as a Jesuit, Bidermann was a Roman Catholic, which makes Belisarius's actions particularly damnable in his eyes. It is also quite likely that Bidermann's opinion of the incident would also be colored by the ongoing Protestant Reformation.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 25-26

Belisarius's life. Although it is believed that Bidermann primarily followed other sources besides Procopius, due to the fact that the full text of the *History of the Wars* did not become available in Western Europe until the year this play was first performed, in many areas his narrative follows that of Procopius quite closely.¹³⁰ Given this context it makes perfect sense that Belisarius was blinded, given that it is a very fitting punishment for someone who could not see beyond his own wealth and position to the possibility of divine retribution. It also makes sense with this context that Belisarius is depicted as being vulnerable to calamity once fortune had abandoned him, while Bidermann attributes this to his deposition of the Pope, this makes sense in historical context that once Belisarius stopped being wildly successful he became vulnerable. Lastly, it is important to note that, despite Bidermann's assertion that Belisarius deserved what he got because of his actions, he is still depicted as a tragic figure.

The use of the story of Belisarius among artists took a dramatic upswing in the latter half of the eighteenth century, especially in France. That century, country, saw both the publication of a novel, by Jean Francoise Marmontel(1723-1799), and a painting by Jacques-Louise David(1748-1825), both titled *Belisarius*. Both works make heavy use of the image of Belisarius as a blind beggar, wronged by the emperor he so faithfully served. Marmontel even acknowledges the absence of any proof for this story but states that the name Belisarius is so associated with that image that he has no choice but to use it.¹³¹ He not only uses it, in fact, but he even modifies the history of Belisarius so that he saves Constantinople from the Bulgar invasion after being blinded by Justinian, over a

¹³⁰ Ibid, 72-73.

¹³¹ Marmontel, Jean Francoise, London: Garland Publishing, 1975. Originally published in 1767, Preface

senseless disagreement.¹³² The painting shows a blind Belisarius, holding a young girl, begging alms from a woman and a soldier.¹³³ He is shown still in his armor, using his helmet to beg, and despite the look of anguish on his face he still seems quite powerful and the soldier is shown as being hesitant to approach him. It is easy to see the appeal the story a man who spent his life in loyal servitude to the state but is ultimately ruined by a petty and ungrateful monarch would be appealing to artists in late eighteenth century France.

Not only does the idea of a successful general make sense, in abstract terms, to the writers and artists of late eighteenth century France, there was also a specific incident which they could draw upon. Thomas Arthur, Comte de Lally(1702-1766) was a successful general who was tried and executed for cowardly behavior and treason after an unsuccessful campaign in the French East Indies, only to be reinstated to full honors in 1781.¹³⁴ This extremely popular general may well have served as the motivation for both Marmontel and David. Throughout much of the French Revolution Belisarius served as a useful symbol, of a staunch and selfless defender of the state, despite being at odds with the nobility in the government.¹³⁵ This can best be seen by the fact that Belisarius appears in no less than 40 different artistic depictions, almost all from France, by the end of the eighteenth century.¹³⁶ While the great frequency of depictions of Belisarius in the eighteenth century was unusual, the topic of Belisarius has continually been popular ever since.

¹³² Ibid, 202-240

¹³³ commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:109David.jpg

¹³⁴ Egmond and Mason, 242-243

¹³⁵ Ibid, 243

¹³⁶ Ibid, 249

The nineteenth century also saw several major works on Belisarius, namely a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow(1807-1882) and an Opera by Gaetano Donizetti(1797-1848). Longfellow's poem takes the form of a lament by the blind and begging Belisarius about his services to the Justinian and the way in which the ungrateful Justinian repaid him. The poem recounts all of the deeds of Belisarius and makes comment upon the irony of him being forced to beg beneath an arch which he once marched under in triumph.¹³⁷ The poem concludes with a note of defiance.¹³⁸ The overall depiction is that of a tragic and beaten, but unbreakable, hero. Donizetti's Opera largely deals with Belisarius's defense of Constantinople against the Bulgars, and like Marmontel, Donizetti places this after he had been blinded.¹³⁹ Here the blinding occurs because of the machination of his wife, Antonina, for having her son exposed.¹⁴⁰ Cleared of this charge and reconciled with his wife, Belisarius dies from wounds suffered in the battle. While much of this Opera's plot is peculiar to Donizetti it does, nevertheless, draw on a number of the themes which are present as early as Procopius' *Anecdota*. Those being the strained relationship with his wife which caused him many of his hardships, his selfless devotion to the state, and the unjust nature of his blinding which therefore characterized his life as a tragedy.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, *Belisarius*. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/belisarius/>; Beneath the very arch, Of my triumphal march, I stand and beg my bread!

¹³⁸ Ibid, The unconquerable will, This, too, can bear;--I still Am Belisarius!

¹³⁹ Baxter, Robert. "Belisario(review)" *The Opera Quarterly* vol. 22, no. 1, Winter 2006, 182-184

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ While the poor relationship between Belisarius and Antonina plays a major part of the *Anecdota*, and is shown there as having caused Belisarius many hardships, Donizetti's Opera is the only version which credits Antonina having anything to do with blinding him.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a well educated scholar, who showed a great interest in classical scholarship and many of his poems depict the lives of famous persons of the past. As an American born not long after the Revolution contextualizing Belisarius as being wronged by the king how went through so much hardship for makes perfect sense as the colonists, before the revolution, viewed themselves as loyal subjects, pushed to rebellion by the ingratitude shown them by their monarch.¹⁴² There is also the fact that Belisarius's deeds are characterized as keeping the barbarians at bay and restoring the glory of the Roman Empire. During the nineteenth century the United States was slowly expanding westward, and it was a common feeling among Americans that the United States represented civilization slowly pushing back the wild.¹⁴³ Finally, there is also the fact that Longfellow was interested in epics, and a common aspect of epic literature is the vicissitudes of fortune, a common theme throughout various depictions of Belisarius, as well as the great strength of will, and devotion, of the hero, both of which are displayed here.¹⁴⁴ Thus Longfellow can be seen as constructing Belisarius into a context which combines the American idea which would become known as "manifest destiny" and the common themes of epic poetry.

¹⁴² Longfellow does not refer to Justinian as an Emperor, rather, one of the most famous lines from the poem is "the vainest of all things, is the gratitude of Kings" which indicates that an association between this ancient Emperor and the monarchs of his own era can be reasonably implied.

¹⁴³ It may be reading too much into the poem, but "And all the land was mine, From the summits of Apennine, To the shores of either sea" can be read as making an illusion to North America, although the poem is specifically referring to Italy.

¹⁴⁴ Aside from the end stanza concerning unconquered will, the idea of fortune comes up both in the lines, "The plaudits of the crowd, Are but the clatter of feet, At midnight in the street, Hollow and restless and loud" which brings forth the idea of fleeting glory. Much like Bidermann does, the poem also draws a comparison between Gelimer, whose defeat gave Belisarius his moment of greatest popularity, who is seen, like Belisarius, to have been favored then abandoned by fortune.

For Gaetano Donizetti(1797-1848), on the other hand, the context within which he viewed Belisarius is possibly more one defined by the nature, and limitations, of the medium. By its very nature Tragic Operas(the story of Belisarius would hardly fit in well with a Comic Opera) are almost always defined by personal tragedies, and misunderstandings, which leads to the death of the main character, just after the mistake which lead to their demise has been discovered. This is exactly the course which this Opera takes, Belisarius's downfall is caused not by imperial jealousy, or due to the machinations of a rival, as the historical sources indicate was the case, but instead because of his wife being told that he murdered their son. Therefore, in the context of the operatic medium, the way in which Donizetti presents Belisarius makes perfect sense.

The nineteenth century also saw the first, and to date only, exhaustive historical biography of Belisarius. This work, entitled *The Life of Belisarius*(1829), was written by Philip Henry Stanhope(1805-1875), an Oxford educated historian and politician, who wrote this work to address what he believed to be an area of shortcoming within Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.¹⁴⁵ Stanhope gives a detailed history of Belisarius's entire life based primarily on Procopius, with other relevant, contemporary, historians employed when available.¹⁴⁶ This work is primarily a narrative of Belisarius's life with relatively few authorial interjections; generally to clarify or rationalize areas where the available information is vague.¹⁴⁷ The only area where Stanhope goes beyond

¹⁴⁵ This reasoning is clearly stated by Stanhope in the preface to his work.

¹⁴⁶ Stanhope, preface

¹⁴⁷ It should be noted that, while Stanhope does, at times, discuss his sources, he does not do this with any particular frequency, and he never cites the specific passage he is employing, making tracking his research extremely difficult, he should not be faulted for this, however, as the historical profession, as we know it today, was only just coming into being during this time.

the sources which are accepted by modern audiences is in his assertion that Belisarius really was blinded.¹⁴⁸ He provides an imminently plausible rationale for this episode of Belisarius's life, which has ultimately been rejected by modern historians due to lack of definitive proof.

To a British author during this period the appeal of the story makes perfect sense. It was extremely common for the British to invoke comparisons between themselves and the Roman Empire as they thought themselves to be the successors to the Roman Empire. Therefore, the life of a man who gave his life to expanding and defending the empire would be interesting to writers of this time, who would see the kind of selfless devotion which was needed to preserve the Empire. This would have been especially notable in the early nineteenth century in which, while Britain still controlled the greatest empire of the age, Britain had recently lost sizable amounts of territory in the American Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. This field of interest can also be seen in Stanhope's other works, in which he gives the histories of not only nineteenth century England (and therefore the rise of empire) but also of William Pitt and the Duke of Wellington, two famous men who gave their lives in service to the state. In the conclusion of his *Life of Belisarius* Stanhope directly states that Belisarius resembled the Duke of Marlborough (an English general in the War of the Spanish Succession, which was waged from 1701-1713) both in his martial brilliance, and in his uxorious nature and his love of money.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, Stanhope's own stated reason for undertaking this work, that he found Gibbon's discussion of Belisarius lacking, should not be discounted as Gibbon's work was hugely

¹⁴⁸ Stanhope, 286-306

¹⁴⁹ Stanhope, 281-285

popular and it is entirely possible that Stanhope read it at Oxford, and was struck by that particular section and had the idea that he could do better. From the most complete historical biography of the man we proceed to the most detailed work of literature concerning his life.

The twentieth century brought the most detailed of all the artistic interpretations of Belisarius life. This interpretation is the novel *Count Belisarius*(1938) by Robert Graves(1895-1985). This work is presented as an alternative biography of Belisarius through the eyes of Eugenius, the slave of Belisarius's wife Antonina, who is here depicted as a good person.¹⁵⁰ Robert Graves' historical novels have always been something of a puzzlement to scholars because of the contradiction between the detailed scholarship he performed before setting about to write and his willingness to modify events to depict the story he wished to tell. Rather than merely placing the tragedy of Belisarius at the end of his life, he chooses to depict his life as a constant string of tragedies, culminating in the final indignity of losing his eyes. He is depicted as being a brilliant general and, like most of Graves's protagonists, he is the sole honest man in a horribly corrupt world. He spends his life being used and abused by the jealous, petty, and foolish Justinian, who was once his friend, and the final, framed, charge of treason which resulted in Justinian having Belisarius's eyes put out is simply "the last

¹⁵⁰ Graves, Robert, *Count Belisarius*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004(originally 1938); In this work, all of the marital problems between Belisarius and Antonina are a result of rumors planted by Belisarius's enemies. In some ways this departure from Procopius is rather bizarre, although as will be discussed later Graves did not seem to have had a particularly high opinion of Procopius, as Graves certainly was not afraid to portray, or even exaggerate, female characters as evil, best seen by Livia and Messilina in Graves' most famous work *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. However, Graves' attitudes and treatment of women in his work(and in his life) were extremely complex, books have been written on the subject, some of them by Graves himself, and it is far too complex, and off topic, to be speculated upon here.

ingratitude.” A final dramatic scene, perhaps the most effective use of the image of Belisarius as a blind beggar, shows that, despite all his hardships, Belisarius is still incredibly popular with the people and, rather than humbling him, his personal gravitas is still such that he has mobs of people donating money to him which leads a fearful Justinian to restore his estates. Perhaps most interestingly the final thoughts of this work are of Eugenius vilifying Procopius as being so vindictive towards Belisarius that he deliberately altered his histories to make him look bad. This is interesting because not only is Graves’ consciously ignoring parts of Procopius to tell his story, he is actually stating that he believes that Procopius deliberately distorted Belisarius’s character because of some grudge which he held against his former employer.¹⁵¹

Many of Graves’ choices for how he depicted Belisarius likely came from Graves’ own experiences as a soldier in WWI.¹⁵² The war was a terrible experience for Robert Graves, and they did much to shape his opinion of the British government whom he saw as horribly mistreating and disgracing its soldiers in order to keep up its own, fading, imperial façade.¹⁵³ It therefore makes sense that Graves’ would find a great deal of familiarity with the character of a soldier who loyally did his duty despite being mistreated by his government, more concerned with its own image than his well-being. In fact, Graves became so disillusioned with what he saw as the corrupted imperial ideology, which had caused WWI, that he left England in 1929 and never resided there

¹⁵¹ It is interesting that Graves depicts Procopius in this way as much of this work is based on Procopius’s writings, especially the *Anecdota*.

¹⁵² Firla, Ian. “Epics are Out of Fashion” *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*. Ed. Patrick J. Quinn. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999. 124-125

¹⁵³ Ibid

again, save during WWII.¹⁵⁴ The idea of a single, uncorrupted and virtuous, person, surrounded by a sea of degenerate corruption is a common theme in Robert Graves' novels, although their success in resisting those vast forces varies to some degree.¹⁵⁵ It is also quite obvious, based on the similarities between these characters and his own stated views of the world that these characters served as ciphers for himself and his opinions on the world around him. All together it is very easy to see reasons why Robert Graves choose to present the story of Belisarius in this manner.

Many modern historians have found interest in sixth century Byzantium because this century was very much one of change and transition in the Mediterranean world. While this period as a whole has gotten a large amount of attention from historians, Belisarius is talked about very little attention in these histories. To be fair, Belisarius is usually classified as a military figure and therefore cannot be easily contextualized into other sub-disciplines of history. For example, Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* mentions Belisarius only twice, in passing, but as this is a cultural, rather than a political or military work, Belisarius would have little to no impact on Brown's field of interest, at least according to the idea that the boundaries between the different specialization within history are definite and immovable.¹⁵⁶

The longest and most detailed treatment of Belisarius by a historian in recent years comes in John Julius Norwich's work, *Byzantium: The early centuries*. In this work

¹⁵⁴ For a considerably more detailed, fascinating, and subtle description of this I would recommend to anyone that they read Graves' autobiography, which he wrote right before leaving England in which he expresses his discontents, called *Goodbye to All That*.

¹⁵⁵ *I, Claudius*, *Claudius the God*, *Hercules My Shipmate*, and *Homer's Daughter* are all largely centered around this theme.

¹⁵⁶ Brown, Peter, *The World of Late Antiquity*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1971. 132, 139

Norwich devotes an entire chapter to Belisarius, and he features heavily in the other three chapters on Justinian's reign. He calls Belisarius one of the most brilliant generals of all Byzantine history and takes Procopius's depiction of Belisarius without question, even to the point where he does not challenge Procopius's insistence that Belisarius had been recalled to Constantinople after the defeat at Callinicum so he could be sent on the re-conquests. He also features Belisarius's marital problems and, like Procopius, blames them for Belisarius's uncharacteristically poor performance in the 540's. Although he does not judge Belisarius as harshly as Procopius he makes some attempt to justify Belisarius's actions during these years. Norwich also does not fault Belisarius's decision to feign acceptance of the Western diadem in order to take Ravenna, excusing the action as a purely military decision and even reasoning that Belisarius would see the order to make a deal with the Goths as a betrayal of all his hard work. His final assessment of Belisarius is incredibly sympathetic, he references Justinian's jealousy several times, and his praise of Belisarius skills are glowing. He also gives a lot of emphasis to Justinian's wars and Belisarius's role in them. Not all historians place so great an emphasis on the re-conquests, however, or have so high an opinion of Belisarius.¹⁵⁷

Stephen Mitchell, in his book *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, speaks much less of Belisarius, and what he does say is far more critical. This is partially because Mitchell is trying to deal with all of the various changes, not solely political ones, which took place in the Roman Empire during the time frame of his book.¹⁵⁸ Also for him, Belisarius was merely the most successful of a number of talented generals which

¹⁵⁷ Norwich, 205-261

¹⁵⁸ 284-461

Justinian had at his disposal. The biggest difference in Mitchell's depiction of Belisarius, however, is in dealing with the Ravenna incident. Mitchell sees Belisarius's feigned acceptance of the Western Empire as being "mutinous" and "arbitrary" and calls the reasoning that he was doing so to win a complete victory a "vain belief". He sees Belisarius as undermining all that he had accomplished in Italy by this decision since it made Justinian mistrust his most successful general, which Mitchell describes as huge mistake. Mitchell, in fact, states that the blame for the failure of the Italian campaign, as a whole, is best attributed to Belisarius.¹⁵⁹

Of the many different depictions of Belisarius by modern historians these two are perhaps the furthest apart. Both of them bring up good points about Belisarius's career and Procopius's depiction of him. They both have their problems, however, which likely stem from their own different worldviews. Where Norwich is not critical enough of Belisarius's career and choices, Mitchell seems too critical. To hold Belisarius blameless for Justinian's reaction to his actions at Ravenna misses the fact the Belisarius directly disobeyed an imperial order in doing so, as well as the fact that Justinian had logical, if unfounded, concerns about Belisarius which this incident only served to intensify. Assigning all the blame for the failure of the Italian campaign to Belisarius misses the fact that the victory might have already been won had Belisarius's subordinates followed orders and the fact that, had Italy been better governed after the capture of Ravenna, the victory Belisarius won might have been more lasting.

¹⁵⁹ Mitchell, 143-148, 381-382

Even works that primarily deal with Procopius have some things to say about Belisarius, as he was the main character in much of Procopius's work. In *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, Avril Cameron has little to say on Belisarius independently and only deals with him when he relates specifically to Procopius and his works. This is one of the weak points of Cameron's argument because she misses the fact that, although it is impossible to check Procopius's information, her depictions of Belisarius can be seen as a dialogue between his biases and a real person. Cameron has no interest in Belisarius or his talents and only speaks of his abilities when dealing with how Procopius alternatively inflates and depresses them within his writing. Here to, however, the Ravenna incident takes on an important role as Cameron speculates that Belisarius's decisions at the battle caused, or at least contributed to, Procopius's reassignment and thus began the souring of his relationship with his former patron.

Evans, in his work *Procopius*, on the other hand makes some attempt to separate Belisarius from Procopius's narrative. He calls Belisarius a brilliant general and engages with the Procopius's work and provides some discussion as to when and where Procopius was being honest or distorting his depiction of the general. More importantly is the fact that Evans refers to Belisarius as a character in Procopius's works, which recognizes the degree of our dependence on Procopius for any characterization of Belisarius.^{160\}

Ultimately, the reason why Belisarius has always, and continues to be, more popular with 'lay' writers than historians is the fact that his life story fits in very well within the context of many artistic mediums. Historians can study his life, speculate

¹⁶⁰ Cameron, 188-189; Evans, 55-76

about his decisions, and debate his importance but artists can make use of, and even emphasize, the sympathetic and tragic elements of his life to create moving stories. The devotion and self-sacrifice which Belisarius displayed during the course of his life speaks to many people, from many different walks of life, who in some way feel akin and connected to him. The fact of his repeated mistreatment at the hands of Justinian adds another layer of sympathy, especially to people who have themselves lived under oppressive governments. History is full of examples of men like Belisarius, who are willing to give their lives in favor of a government that mistreats them, and it seems that when such men arise, so with it appears artistic representations of Belisarius. Additionally the great success Belisarius had early in his career followed by disappointment and disgrace has long been a story of interest and it is a feature among some of the earliest recorded human stories.¹⁶¹ As a result of the universal appeal of certain aspects of Belisarius's story there is simply far more ways in which an artist is capable of utilizing and telling his story than a historian has at his disposal.

¹⁶¹ An excellent example of this is the story of Oedipus, a man who is brought down at the height of his success for a terrible sins that fate conspired against him that he should commit.

Conclusion

There is a surprising deal of uniformity between Belisarius within the text of *The History of the Wars*, the context of Procopius, and the context of various later writers, both in the historical and more artistic disciplines. Looking solely at the work a very idealized pictures comes forth which shows Belisarius as being an careful and balanced man of considerable mental and physical abilities. While this certainly follows the pattern of many previous histories, many of whom contain one person whom the author seems to consider ideal, or at least better than all the rest, and Procopius was very keen on emulating the style of previous histories, the text itself, for the most part supports this idealized image of the man.

If one takes into account Procopius' own life and all that he had to deal with it is easy to see why, early in their association, Procopius thought the world of Belisarius. However, Procopius dismissal and the interminable nature of the war seemed to wear heavily upon Procopius opinion. However, this does not mean that the failures of Belisarius in the 540's were inventions of Procopius, which he does not actively blame him from. It also explains why Procopius praises Belisarius so highly for winning a battle without fighting. While it seems clear that Procopius did not like everything Belisarius did, it also seems quite possible that Belisarius really was the 'best' person that Procopius knew which was why Belisarius ends up as the ideal character within the *Wars*.

It is as an ideal character as well that all of the various artistic depictions of Belisarius show the general. He is shown as being an uncorrupted man in a corrupt world or as being a loyal man wrongly harmed by his Emperor, or some combination of the

two. The individual contexts of the authors' lives create much of the differentiation but it is ironic that the majority of the artists who have used Belisarius as their main character have some reason to be against the government, especially monarchical ones.¹⁶²

From what little information we can concretely say about his life and personality, Belisarius seems to have been a very interesting and dynamic man. The same can be said for the corpus of artistic representations of him, which are individually very impressive and often dynamic. It is rather a shame that Belisarius has not gotten more attention from profession historians but that might change eventually, especially since he has not gotten any less popular with fiction writers. It shall be interesting to see where the characterization of Belisarius goes from here, as our lives and societies are always shifting, and our perceptions shift right along with it.

¹⁶² Ironic because Belisarius' life stood for constant devotion to the state, but then again revolutionaries often feel as if their loyalty to the state in which they live has been betrayed.

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