Fyodor Wheeler

Title: “A Questioned History: Procopius’ Secret History and its Contents”
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Fyodor Wheeler is a senior history major and English minor with a completed religion minor. He has tutored American history post-1877, Western civilization to 1500, and writing for three years and has gained the reputation of the “guy with purple hair who knows a lot about history.” In the future, he plans on researching the history portrayed in Shakespeare’s Richard II and editing a volume of Middle English poetry. This is his third time presenting at this conference and hopefully he will not leave his coat behind this time.

Abstract

Procopius of Caesarea gives a bleak and sordid description of the Byzantine Empire under Justinian in the sixth century AD. His Secret History is not only an exposé of the Byzantine elite, but an indictment of its corruption and cruelty. In it he attacks everything from the offices held by unqualified and greedy individuals and Theodora’s scandalous background to the divisions in Christendom created by the Emperor and Empress, and makes the rather wild claim that Justinian was not human at all, but in fact a demon. The claims Procopius makes appear to be nothing but rumors and slander and a complete contradiction of his earlier writings in the Wars, in which Justinian is depicted as a good, upright leader.

What made Procopius change his portrayal of Justinian, and did he honestly believe what he recorded? How reliable a source is The Secret History? Using Anthony Kaldellis’s 2010 translation, this paper evaluates Procopius’s claims and his motives in writing this history to determine its trustworthiness. To do this, I have examined the religious situation of sixth century Byzantium to evaluate the book’s religious claims as well as the author himself as a Christian. While the accusations of demonic power are questionable, Procopius’s Christian convictions are genuine, and his objection to the contemporary religious controversies suggest he truly believed there was something wrong with the court. Procopius openly suggests the reader verify his claims by consulting his sources and other contemporary histories. I have cross-referenced his claims about politics and the corruption of the legal system with Justinian’s own laws, and found that many of these are indeed true, such as Novella 147, which proves Procopius’s claim that Justinian did not cancel tax arrears, and Novella 105, an attempt to modify the office of consul.

Bibliographical Note

The author is indebted to Anthony Kaldellis’s translation of Prokopios The Secret History with Related Texts (2010), the edition used in this paper.