How to Defeat the Goths in Combat

The *Gothic Wars* is one of the most contentious parts of the *Wars* as a whole. Firstly, either the Thucydidean parallels are most suspect here, or, the intertextual elements are most insightful. Secondly, the war that it describes is one of the most controversial aspects of the age of Justinian. Although this book is not explicitly focused on the historical reality, apart from the intellectual climate that emerges from a study of descriptions of combat in a traditional historical genre, with this section of the *Wars* more than any other we are confronted with reality head on. On the one hand, a look at Malalas’ *Chronograph*, or Evagrius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, seems to confirm the arguments put forth by Kouroumali¹ and Scott,² among others, that the wars with the Goths were peripheral to Justinian’s frontier policy, behind Persia,³ the Balkans,⁴ and even North Africa.⁵ On the other hand, Procopius devotes more pages to the war in Italy than he does to any other frontier.⁶ The textual reality is thus in stark contrast to the presumed historical reality. Even some of Procopius’ numbers seem to support the argument for unimportance, for the small number of troops quoted in relation to the overall Byzantine forces does suggest, at least if we take them at face value, that the importance of the campaign was minimized by Justinian.⁷ Yet, Roman expeditionary armies in the sixth century were never

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¹ Kouroumali 2005.
⁵ See Cameron 2000, esp. 559ff.
⁶ This might have much to do with his conscious imitation of Thucydides’ *History*, especially the Sicilian expedition. Cf. Adshead 1990.
⁷ See Hannestad (1960), Thompson (1982: 80), Cameron (1985: 148), Treadgold (1995: 61), Liebeschuetz (1996), Kouroumali (2005: 225–226) and Whately (forthcoming c) for a discussion of the use of numbers in the *Gothic Wars*. There is a great discrepancy between Procopius’ use of numbers for armies, for casualties, and for distances. Almost unfailingly Procopius will give a precise figure for a distance (accuracy is another question that I have no intention of addressing largely because I do not think that it is relevant for my discussion), even though in the same passage he may give a vague qualitative number (‘many men’ for example) for the troops. As an interesting contrast, Hornblower (1994a: 27) says that Thucydides is “less than precise about figures for distance”. Cf. Morpeth (2006) for the qualitative and quantitative numbers deployed by Thucydides.
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overly large, as scholars have pointed out. The army at its peak during the war in Italy, at least 20,000 strong, was not demonstrably smaller than the forces available for the preceding, and more often than not, concurrent wars in Africa, the Balkans, and the East. Indeed, while accepting that Justinian may have summoned Belisarius to Constantinople post Ravenna out of fear, the fact remains that he was widely regarded as the greatest Roman general for much of Justinian’s reign; moreover, it is significant that he was commander-in-chief over the Roman forces in Italy on two separate occasions. Though only a few points, they are pertinent, and they ultimately point to the importance of the Gothic War. This, in turn, had a significant impact on how Procopius described and explained combat in the Gothic Wars.

Thus, although this chapter, as with the previous two, will be divided into sections on describing combat, explaining combat, and generalship, this chapter marks something of a departure: a handful of Procopius’ descriptions of combat will be discussed, but much will be centred on the Siege of Rome, one of the most remarkable combat narratives in any text from antiquity.

1 The Gothic Wars

Hot on the heels of their success in Africa, the Romans launched an invasion of Gothic Italy, bolstered, no doubt, by Belisarius’ impressive early wins against the Vandals. Although the initial stages of the conflict were not as smooth as those in Africa for the Romans, within a few years the Goths had capitulated at Ravenna, and Belisarius was even offered the throne. The Roman forces had success at a number of locales – much of the conflict involved siege warfare – with some notable victories including those at Naples (536), Rome (537/538 – a defensive siege, with Belisarius and his troops ensconced inside the city of Rome), and Ravenna (540). On the other hand, much like the war in Africa, hostilities flared up again not long after Belisarius’ return to Constantinople at the point when the war seemed to be all but won, and war would drag on for many years yet, in the process devastating Italy. The process of consolidation would be long and drawn out. Indeed, Belisarius’ absence – the reasons why

8 Whitby 1995; Rance 2005; Elton 2007a.
9 As regards the silence of authors like Malalas and Evagrius, this can be explained through the consideration of the scope, focus, theme and overall character of their respective works. As regards Evagrius, for example, there were not many miracles that could figure in his work.
10 Note the comments of Adshead (1990: 103).
11 On Rome’s sixth century war against the Goths see Kouroumali (2005).