CHAPTER 6

Procopius’ Worldview and the Wider Intellectual Context

Throughout this book, while explaining the literary qualities and explanations of Procopian combat we have, where warranted, delved into the broader cultural, intellectual, and sixth century context. This book draws to a close by delving deeper into Procopius’ milieu and the wider implications of his approach to combat. Firstly, we set out Procopius’ audience for the Wars. One of the primary assumptions here is that an awareness of his contemporary audience should go some way towards explaining the choices that he made when composing the work, and importantly for our purposes his descriptions of combat. In other words, the Wars was written for someone, and this someone or some ones likely had an impact on Procopius’ descriptions. The success of the text suggests that it did: if he could not reach his intended audience, it seems unlikely we would be reading the Wars today. Thus, Procopius’ descriptions very likely reflect the values and culture of his readers. This leads us to the next section of this chapter: didacticism, combat, and culture. Here we explore the values reflected in his descriptions, and the wider impact of his discussion of combat on the military thinking of the age of Justinian. It is here that we effectively situate the military mind of Procopius, at least as it pertains to combat, in the wider military-cum-intellectual context of his age. Finally, we end by taking stock of Procopian combat and providing the final estimation of its character and quality. We begin with Procopius’ audience.

1 Procopius’ Audience

In the introduction we discussed, if briefly, the truthfulness of Procopius’ account, and we saw in chapter one that he was in a position to gain the necessary information to create a reliable account of the wars of Justinian. Indeed, there seems little reason to doubt the historicity of Procopius’ Wars. What value, then, might the text have for its readers, and what does it tell us about them? Fortunately, the personal and professional background of an author can tell us about a good deal more than just those details: it can tell us about an author’s audience as well. In turn, an exploration of the identity of that audience, coupled with an analysis of Procopius’ combat descriptions, should tell
us something of the culture of that audience at least insofar as it pertains to military thinking. Indeed, Rance has argued that historical literature had an influence on the military mind in late antiquity, and it is worth considering Procopius’ place in this development.¹ But first, who might that audience have been?

The audience for historiography in late antiquity has attracted limited attention, with the notable exception of an insightful and wide-ranging overview by Brian Croke.² He opens with a few comments about the later Byzantine historian Niketas Khoniates, though Croke asks important questions pertinent to the wider Byzantine historiographical tradition to which Procopius has been attached. The first, “What did he think he was doing as he put pen to paper?”, is a difficult one to address given the diversity of Procopius’ literary output. It seems likely that Procopius sought praise, position, and esteem when he wrote the panegyric Buildings, though we could say this about the Wars too given the competitive literary environment of sixth century Constantinople.³ With respect to the Secret History, the apparent invective in which Procopius takes shots at four of the most powerful persons of his day, Justinian, Theodora, Belisarius, and Antonina, among others, Procopius seems to have felt the need to set things straight about some of the details in the Wars – he says as much from the beginning (Procop. SH 1.1–3).⁴ As noted in Procopius’ own introduction, the Wars was to inform, instruct, and entertain, as we have argued above with respect to combat.

The next question is “Who did he think he was writing for?”. The use of the first person in the earlier shorter recension of the Buildings suggests that Procopius had initially intended the Buildings for a select audience, perhaps his friends alone (those who read the Secret History come to mind – Kaldellis’ sixth century political dissidents).⁵ When he decided to expand that text, whether or not Justinian commissioned the Buildings, the emperor, or at least those close to the emperor’s ear, was likely its final audience.⁶ Beyond that it is harder to say who might have read it, though the same sorts of people who

¹ Rance 1993: 145.
³ Kaldellis 2014: 2.
⁴ Cf. Börm (forthcoming) for a different interpretation of the Secret History’s purpose and intended audience.
⁵ Kaldellis 2004c.
⁶ Montinaro 2011.