EINE REMINISZENZ AUS PLATONS TIMAEUS IN DER VITA ANTONII


Diese Formulierung erinnert an eine Stelle aus Platons Timaeus (40 D), wo Timaeus behauptet, das Beschreiben und Erkennen der anderen Dämonen (= Gottheiten) sei eine Aufgabe, die seine Kräfte übersteige: ΠΕΡΙ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων δαμιόνων εἰςεῖ καὶ γνώναι τὴν γένεσιν μειζόν ἢ καθ᾽ ἡμῶς. Die Ähnlichkeit der Formulierungen, die sich beide in einer Abhandlung über die Dämonologie finden, wird wohl kaum auf einem Zufall beruhen. Dazu ist zu beachten, dass der Text Timaeus 40 D mehrmals in der christlichen Literatur, ausserdem in vielgelesenen Werken, zitiert wurde (z.B. Klemens von Alexandrien, Stromateis V 13,84; Eusebius von Caesarea, Praeparatio evangelica II 7,1; XIII 1 und 14,5).

SEXUAL RHETORIC IN PROCOPIUS

One of the very valuable points made by Averil Cameron in her recent and admirable book on Procopius is the debt owed by that historian to the conventions of classical invective, a realisation that rightly weakens the credibility of his tirades against Justinian and Theodora in the Secret History. In a generalising sentence (p. 59), Cameron suggests that this literary tradition was probably (her word) most marked in the pornographic section. I believe Cameron to be quite right, and offer the following analysis by way of buttressing her claim and pointing the way for any future commentator.

At SH 9. 16, in the course of his account of Theodora’s sex life, the narrative that provoked Gibbon’s famous “her murmurs, her pleasures, and her arts, must be veiled in the obscurity of a learned language,” Procopius asserts that she would go to dinner parties, have intercourse with ten exceptionally virile youths, exhaust them, proceed to do the same with their thirty attendants, yet still end up unsatisfied.

This mathematical pornography, so to speak, was part of a literary tradition, at least as applied to men. The *Historia Augusta*, for notable instance, has it. Elagabalus asks Maximinus (*Max*. 4. 7) if, having exhausted sixteen, twenty, and thirty soldiers, he can similarly excel thirty times with a woman, whilst Proculus (*Firm. Sat. Proc.* 12. 7) brags that, having acquired a hundred Sarmatian virgins, he slept with ten in one night and all of them in fifteen. This sort of stuff recalls Heracles deflowering the fifty daughters of Thestius in five days. Closest to Procopius, however, is Pliny, *NH* 10. 172, where Messalina defeated the most accomplished prostitute of her day in sexual competition by taking on twenty-five partners in twenty-four hours.

Similarly, in Juvenal's description of Messalina's indefatigable goings-on in the brothels of Rome, the empress is alleged to have returned to the palace weary but unsatisfied (6. 130: *et lassata viris necdum satiata recessit*). Procopius on Theodora reads like a conflation of Pliny and Juvenal on Messalina. I am certainly not suggesting that Procopius had read Pliny. But he might conceivably have known Juvenal. A Papyrus fragment from Antinoe confirms that the satirist was being read as a text in the sixth century. He was one of the Latin authors known to the contemporary author of the treatise *On Political Knowledge*. John Lydus twice (*De Mag.* 1. 20; 1. 41) drops his name. He is one of the few Latin poets to interest Malalas (*Chron.* 10, pp. 262-3 Bonn). In recent years several scholars have demonstrated an acquaintance with Latin literature on the part of early Byzantine littérateurs in Egypt.

Be that as it may, it seems beyond doubt that the sex life of Theodora owes more to male fantasy and literary tradition than reality. It is worth remembering that the main source for Roman brothels should be the highly literary one of Seneca, *Contro*. 1. 28. To add in two more details, Procopius goes on (*SH* 9. 17-19) to say that she made use of all three orifices, regretting only that nature did not provide more; simultaneous penetration is a motif of erotic epigram, Greek and Latin. And she got rid of many pregnancies by abortion, a topic returned to at *SH* 10. 3 and 17. 16; Pliny closed his account of Messalina by observing that abortion was an invention of woman. It is clear that, if Procopius ever gets the detailed commentary he deserves, consideration of the literary elements in his work should be a major feature.

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1) *Procopius* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1985).
2) Cf. *Athenaeus, Deip.* 556f, for this detail and the subject in general.
3) There are no such details in Dio Cassius' account of Messalina (60. 18), and not likely to have been in the missing section of Tacitus' *Annals*, though interestingly at 11. 31 Messalina's fateful garden frolic with Silius is called a *simulacrum vindemiae*, language that consorts with Theodora's dinner parties.