

## THE LIVES AND TIMES OF JUSTINIAN'S POWER COUPLE

David Alan Parnell: *Belisarius and Antonina. Love and War in the Age of Justinian*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2023. IX, 260 p., 19 ill., 5 maps. £ 19.99/\$ 29.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-757470-6.

David Parnell is well respected for his 2017 study of Justinian's generals which used their social networks to investigate the underpinnings of military events of that reign, how at times a campaign functioned efficiently as its various commanders co-operated whereas at others, for example in Italy in 538/539, disagreements led to setbacks and disasters such as the sack of Milan.<sup>1</sup> Thus he is well-prepared for this next venture, a biographical study of Belisarius and Antonina, the leading non-imperial power couple of the sixth century, indeed arguably of the whole of Roman history. In nine chapters, he traces the pair from their obscure and, for Antonina, humble beginnings *circa* 500 to their deaths in the 560s (admittedly uncertain for Antonina), and their cultural and popular afterlives through to the present day. The main narrative is supported by three appendices that list the leading participants, provide a timeline, and attempt to assess Belisarius' wealth; these are followed by Endnotes, a Bibliography with nine pages on key modern works, and an Index.

The gold standard for this sort of biographical study, in which rich social analysis is used to supplement deficiencies in direct evidence, has been established by David Potter's masterly investigation of Empress Theodora.<sup>2</sup> That Parnell is unable to match this very high bar is not his fault, since there is simply not the range and variety of material relating to Antonina that is available for Theodora. It is clear that she was an extremely important individual in her male-dominated world, since when on campaign with Belisarius she was entrusted with important missions, was closely involved in the depo-

1 D. Parnell: *Justinian's Men. Careers and Relationships of Byzantine Army Officers*, ca. 518–610. London 2017 (New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture).

2 D. Potter: *Theodora. Actress, Empress, Saint*. Oxford/New York 2015 (Women in Antiquity). See the reviews by Michael Whitby: *AHR* 122, pp. 226–227 (URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26576632>) and U. Lambrecht: *Plekos* 19, 2017, pp. 135–144 (URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2017/r-potter.pdf>).

sition of Pope Silverius at Rome in 537, and engineered the entrapment and downfall of John the Cappadocian in 541. Our knowledge of her, however, is dominated by Procopius and the familiar problem of the contradictory portrayals in his *Wars* and *Secret History*. The only event for which there is independent attestation is Silverius' arrest, and that does not significantly alter what we already know about the incident from Procopius.

Parnell does his best with this challenging evidence. This frequently involves the offering of alternative reconstructions, for example about Antonina's family background and early life (pp. 9–14) and her first marriage (pp. 17–19), speculation about the emotional context of events such as the 'gloomy time' for the family after the disgrace of 542 (p. 151) and the 'bittersweet' meeting at Otranto in 548 (p. 171), or the admission that we simply do not know. His handling of Procopius is judicious, with the vitriolic accusations of the *Secret History* regularly being unpicked. The explanation for the family disputes about Belisarius' and Antonina's adopted son Theodosius (pp. 136–144) is especially illuminating; in particular, the accusations of adultery, which have been accepted by numerous scholars, are explained as rhetorical exaggeration of arguments that, less sensationally, may well have related to the inheritance of the family's considerable wealth, with Belisarius supporting the interests of Antonina's natural son Photius whereas she favoured Theodosius. Some may regret the loss of a salacious story of incest in high circles,<sup>3</sup> but if Procopius in the *Secret History* just told the plain truth without distortion he would have been failing to make the most of the opportunities offered by the diatribe. My one doubt about Parnell's use of the *Secret History* is his assumption, following a suggestion by Henning Börm,<sup>4</sup> that there is likely to be a grain of truth underlying its slanders (pp. 214, n. 9; 228, n. 12): this might be the case, but experience of contemporary political rhetoric in both the United Kingdom and the United States indicates that outright lies, if articulated with sufficient conviction, can gain considerable credence. Whatever audience Procopius envisaged for the *Secret History* will have

3 For example, reviewer 'Robert B', commenting on the book on Amazon Books UK, regards this as "a major defect".

4 H. Börm: Procopius, his Predecessors, and the Genesis of the *Anecdota*: Antimonarchic Discourse in Late Antique Historiography. In: H. Börm (ed.): *Antimonarchic Discourse in Antiquity*. Stuttgart 2015 (Studies in Ancient Monarchies 3), pp. 305–346, at p. 330.

shared his prejudices to the full and relished a good smear campaign in preference to actual facts.

As his narrative unfolds, Parnell offers some plausible explanations for the actions of the main participants. Thus Procopius may just have been hostile to Antonina because of her influence in a world that the historian believed should be run by men, but Parnell suggests (p. 110) that he could also have been irritated by her interference in what might have been his big moment, the organization of relief supplies for Rome in autumn 537. He also proposes that Antonina's hostility to John the Cappadocian might date back to the praetorian prefect's opposition to the Vandal expedition, whose success had cemented Belisarius' eminence and ensured the family's wealth: John could therefore have appeared hostile to their good fortune, and his provision of undercooked *bucellatum* for the armada resulted in several deaths whereas food supply was an area in which Antonina seems to have taken an interest (pp. 131–132). In contrast to other recent treatments, Parnell focuses on the significance of Belisarius' illness after his failure to relieve Rome in 546, suggesting that he might have suffered a stroke that left him incapacitated for a time (pp. 166–167). This is certainly possible, if unprovable.

One issue that might have been probed further is the probability that it was relatively easy to influence Belisarius, so that he could be swayed by the opinions of associates or followers. This clearly happened both before the battle of Callinicum in 531, when Belisarius succumbed to demands from his army to fight, and at Rome in 537 when the inhabitants wanted him to act more aggressively outside the city walls: on each occasion Belisarius gave in to public pressure, and as a result, against his better judgement, launched engagements that resulted in Roman defeats. Parnell does note this weakness (pp. 235, n. 29; 239, n. 2), but might have pursued it to consider if this was a factor in Antonina's frequent presence at her husband's side: she knew his character well and wanted to ensure that she was there to exert influence or at least prevent others from taking advantage of her husband's weakness.

There are suggestions that I find less convincing. The idea that Belisarius might have favoured a milder approach to dealing with the rioters in the Hippodrome on the last day of the Nika Riot and so urged his fellow leaders to practise restraint (pp. 53–54) is not proved by the evidence cited for his sympathy for peasants in Mesopotamia and North Africa. On each occasion there were sound military reasons for not antagonizing these rural dwellers, and they were also the stratum of society from which the bulk of military

recruits was drawn, whereas urban rioters might easily be dismissed as riff-raff whose violent disorder justified their bloody fate. It is suggested that the Persian and Roman armies in Syria in 542 might have been experiencing a first impact of the plague before Khusro's withdrawal (p. 148 with 234, n. 25). Procopius says nothing about such an outbreak, although it would have been to Belisarius' credit if he had managed to persuade Khusro to abandon his invasion when the Roman army was already weakened by disease; with regard to the Persian army the supposition is contradicted by the fact that, in his next campaign, Khusro's return to Assyria is said to have been determined by the fact that the plague had not yet reached there (Procopius, *Wars* 2.24.12) – if his army had caught the plague in 542, it would have already brought it back to the regions east of the Tigris and then taken it with them to Adrabiganon.<sup>5</sup> I am also unconvinced by the assertion that Ioannina, the daughter of Belisarius and Antonina, was born in 531 at the earliest (pp. 14, 34–35), on the grounds that it is assumed that she was too young to marry Theodora's grandson Anastasius when they were betrothed in 543: simply because the age of consent was twelve does not mean that Ioannina might not have been a few years older than the legal minimum at the engagement and hence born in 530 or 529.

Where there are divergences of scholarly views, Parnell usually reports in the notes the alternative to what he has presented in the text; since these are placed at the end rather than as footnotes, the unwary reader may overlook the different perspective. He does not, however, record the alternative chronology that has been argued, I believe incorrectly, for the eastern events of 542–545 (pp. 149–150),<sup>6</sup> and misleadingly states that there is a consensus that Procopius died in the mid-550s (p. 187).<sup>7</sup> Actual errors are very few.

5 Michael Whitby: Procopius Meets his Gomme? *Greatrex on the Persian Wars*. In: *Plekos* 25, 2023, pp. 89–125, at pp. 98–99 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2023/r-procopius.pdf>); id.: A Defence of the Traditional Chronology of 542–545, Again. In: *Classica Cracoviensia* 26, 2023, pp. 219–238 (URL: <https://journals.akademicka.pl/cc/article/view/5507>).

6 E. Kislinger/D. Stathakopoulos: Pest und Perserkriege bei Prokop. Chronologische Überlegungen zum Geschehen 540–545. In: *Byzantion* 69, 1999, pp. 76–98.

7 This depends on the date of Procopius' *Buildings*, for which the alternatives of *circa* 554/555 and 561/562 are still supported: G. Greatrex: Procopius. Life and Works. In: M. Meier/F. Montinaro (eds.): *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea*. Leiden/Boston 2022 (Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World 11), pp. 61–69, at pp. 68–

One concerns the tower that was constructed near the modern village of Kasriahmethayro to the south-east of the major fort of Dara,<sup>8</sup> which is said to have “straddled the road between Roman Dara and Persian Nisibis” (p. 31). It does not. The function of the structure was to serve as an advance observation post for Dara, which is set back in a re-entrant in the southern scarp of the Tur Abdin plateau, to oversee movement from the east along the road from Nisibis: this road in fact ran east-west a few miles further south than Kasriahmethayro, with a turning for Dara located at the village of Ammodius, where the attacking Persian army in 530 established its base before proceeding north towards the Roman city.<sup>9</sup> This might seem a minor detail, but it affects the location of the battle of Dara, Belisarius’ first and greatest victory. Once the direction of movement from Nisibis to Dara is understood, the location for the battle proposed by Christopher Lillington-Martin and accepted by Parnell becomes implausible, since the suggested site in the space between the village of Anbar and the Tur Abdin scarp would easily have been by-passed by an army marching north from Ammodius: a Roman army deployed there at the static defences constructed by Belisarius would quickly have been cut off from Dara:<sup>10</sup> the battle was fought not far from the main southern gate of Dara, as Procopius states (*Wars* 1.13.3). In general the discussion of the failure of Belisarius’ fortification at Mindouos and his defeat in a battle (pp. 31–32), which was probably unrelated to that initiative, does not fully recognize the quality of the information in Pseudo-Zachariah of Mytilene.<sup>11</sup>

A minor failing is to treat Procopius’ references to Massagetae Huns as though they were a particular contemporary tribal group (pp. 38, 62), where-

69; Michael Whitby: Procopius’ *Buildings* and Panegyric Effect. In: Meier/Montinaro, pp. 137–151, at pp. 137–138, 150–151.

8 For the remains, see C. Lillington-Martin: Hard and Soft Power on the Eastern Frontier: a Roman Fortlet between Dara and Nisibis, Mesopotamia, Turkey, Prokopios’ Mindouos? In: *The Byzantinist* 2, 2012, pp. 4–5 (URL: <https://oxfordbyzantinesociety.wordpress.com/newsletterthe-byzantinist>). Parnell does not in fact refer to the fort’s location by its modern name.

9 Michael Whitby: The Location of Mindouos and Roman Fortification Activity on the Eastern Frontier in the Years 527–529. In: *Byzantinoslavica* 81, 2023, pp. 7–20, at pp. 14–17.

10 Whitby: Procopius (note 5), pp. 94–98.

11 See also Whitby: Procopius (note 5), p. 94; id.: The Location (note 9).

as (e.g. *Wars* 3.11.9) the name ‘Massagetæ’ is a self-conscious classicizing allusion to a term used by Herodotus for northern tribes. Another is the description of the Vandals as ‘Arians’ (p. 59), whereas they were non-Nicene Homoian Christians. The statement that food supplies were rowed up the Tiber (p. 112) is unlikely; the standard method of moving bulk goods from Ostia was to have them hauled upstream against the strong current by teams of oxen on the tow path. The discussion of the impact on modern popular culture of Belisarius and Antonina does not refer to the presence of the former in Alessandro Saragosa’s and Leo Colovini’s board game ‘Justinian: Intrigue at the Emperor’s Court’, in which Belisarius, though not Antonina, is one of the main characters.<sup>12</sup>

Much of Parnell’s discussion concerns military events, but this is not another narrative of Justinian’s wars, not least because Belisarius was not involved in the war in Lazica in the 540s and 550s or the victories in Italy in the 550s, so that these events fall outside the scope of this biography. Nor can it be a detailed account of the private and public lives of its protagonists, since sufficient evidence just does not exist to reconstruct these over a period of 35 years. Instead, however, through a tangential approach it offers a new perspective on events of Justinian’s reign, and by careful assessment demonstrates both the value of and distortions in Procopius’ evidence that will be useful for everyone working on the period. It is also a reminder of the limits to what it is possible to study: it is difficult to imagine another scholar producing a better-balanced study of this pair.

12 Phalanx Games, PHA6020; I owe this information to my son Max. Arguably, if Saragosa and Colovini had known more about Justinian’s reign, or indeed had access to Parnell’s book, they would have included Antonina among the twelve main characters.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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