

## THE VARIED ROLES OF PROCOPIAN DIGRESSIONS

Albrecht Ziebuhr: *Die Exkurse im Geschichtswerk des Prokopios von Kaisareia. Literarische Tradition und spätantike Gegenwart in klassizistischer Historiographie*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2024 (Hermes-Einzelschriften 126). 258 p., 8 tables. € 58.00. ISBN: 978-3-515-13670-9.

This publication of a recent Munich dissertation (2021/22) provides a careful and thorough investigation of excursuses in the *Wars* of Procopius with the overall aim of demonstrating that both Christian and Herodotean elements play a greater role in the construction of his history than has been acknowledged in previous studies. After a brief introduction (pp. 11–23) that covers Procopius and his ‘problems’ – specifically his three very different works, the inclusion of Christian content, and the influence of the Classical tradition, in particular Herodotus and Thucydides – as well as surveys the overall contents can, the main study comprises six chapters.

Chapter 1 (“Was ist ein Exkurs?”, pp. 24–59) defines *excursus*, παρέκβασις, ἐκβολή, or ἐκτροπή in Greek. They range from a single sentence that provides supplementary information about a place or person to long ones that may occupy between several sections and one or more chapters; these longer ones are the focus of the volume. There is a useful survey of ancient literary theory, Latin as well as Greek, on excursuses, and then consideration of the characteristics of their use in historiography. Longer excursuses had formulaic aspects, and their presence in Procopius’ *Wars* is considered in detail in chapter 2 (“Die Exkurse im Geschichtswerk des Prokopios von Kaisareia. Das Material der Untersuchung”, pp. 60–76): lists are provided of the different approaches to opening and closing an excursus (pp. 61–66), which in some cases involved ring-composition, while the longest (the Justinianic plague, *Wars* 2.22–23; the Black Sea, 8.1.7–8.5) have their own prologue. There follows a tabular presentation of the excursuses in the eight books of *Wars* (pp. 69–76).

Chapter 3 (“Der Exkurs als *ornamentum*. ‘Schmückende’ Exkurse in Prokops Kriegsgeschichte”, pp. 77–86) considers the role of the excursuses as decoration in the *Wars*, in the light of the identification by ancient theorists of

this as one of the purposes of historical digressions. A case in point is the collection of five distinct excursuses in the chapters leading up to Wittigis' siege of Rome (*Wars* 5.11–15) – on Monte Circeo, the Franks in Gaul, the Via Appia, Beneventum, and Italian geography: while contributing to the transition from the siege of Naples to that of Rome, they also mark off these two substantial military narratives, offer the reader diversification, and create some tension before the climax to this part of the Gothic narrative. Book 8, where Procopius combined the narratives of different military theatres, has a comparable sequence in chapters 22–24, as well as the exceptionally long introductory survey of the Black Sea. Although the latter is introduced as a necessary guide for readers to the geography of Lazica (8.1.7), it ranges far more widely to include mythical history and general ancient discussions of geography where the main function appears to be to demonstrate the author's learning: if utility had been its main purpose, it would have been better placed in Book 2, either when Khusro invaded Transcaucasia in 541 (2.17) or when fighting was focused there by the partial armistice of 545 (2.28).

The next three chapters focus on specific excursuses and their particular roles. Chapter 4 (“Der Exkurs als *adiutorium*. Prokops herodoteische Deutung für den Untergang des Vandalenreichs und die Funktion der Exkurse Proc. *Bel.* 3,22 und 4,7,18”, pp. 87–105) deals with two excursuses in the books on the Vandal Wars, first a foreshadowing of the Vandal defeat by reference to incidents under Geiseric (*Wars* 3.22), and then reflections on the scale of Belisarius' achievement (*Wars* 4.7.18–21). Albrecht Ziebuhr defines these as examples of support, *adiutoria*, for the main narrative, in that they help to illuminate Procopius' views on the inscrutability of human affairs; they also illustrate his connections with Herodotus since the downfall of the Vandals when at the very height of their power has overtones of Herodotus' account of the overthrow of the Lydian kingdom at a comparable moment of prosperity, with both their rulers, Gelimer and Croesus, having a moment of enlightenment, Croesus when he recalls the words of Solon (Herodotus 1.86) and Gelimer when quoting Ecclesiastes on the vanity of human affairs (*Wars* 4.9.11).

Chapter 5 (“Exkurs und spätantike Welt. Jüdisch-christliche Thematiken in Prokops Exkursen”, pp. 106–163) deals with Jewish-Christian themes, with particular reference to two more excursuses: the presentation of the Moors as refugees from Joshua's biblical conquest of the land of Canaan (*Wars* 4.10.12–19), and the Abgar legend at Edessa (2.12.7–30). The latter is the

simpler and less contentious case, since Khusro's desire to capture the city is made explicit before his attacks in both 540 and 544 (2.12.7; 26.2), and the earlier attack is also decorated with a version of a Christian miracle of aimless wandering (cf. *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* 34.29–31). The city's inhabitants are under Christ's protection and, not surprisingly, Procopius' narrative provides proof of the success of their efforts to deserve that benefit – the Lord helps those who help themselves. Ziebuhr's discussion of the Moorish digression is more interesting and innovative, since this passage has been criticised for irrelevance and inaccuracy for claiming that their language was Punic (“Problematik”, pp. 110–112). However, through consideration of the religion of the Moors, their treatment in Corippus as well as Procopius, and the question of languages in North Africa, he identifies plausible explanations for its contents and placing: their Old Testament forebears, whose character Procopius expects his audience to know, indicate that he wants contemporary Moors to be seen as violent, uncivilised heathens.

Chapter 6 (“‘Katastrophenexkurse’. Der ‘Katastrophen Diskurs’ des 6. Jh. n. Chr. in Prokops Exkursen”, pp. 164–232) deals with “Katastrophenexkurse[n]” with an extended treatment of Procopius' account of the onset of plague in 542 (*Wars* 2.22–23) and consideration of his shorter survey of various natural disasters in 547/548 (*Wars* 7.29.1–20). The plague narrative has been much studied, both for its information on the disease and its impact and for the debt to the famous account in Thucydides of the plague at Athens in 430 BC (*History* 2.47–55). Contrary to old interpretations that saw Procopius as enslaved to his historiographical model but in line with the current consensus,<sup>1</sup> Ziebuhr demonstrates how Procopius manages to combine classical influences, Herodotus as well as Thucydides, with accurate information about the contemporary disaster: Procopius could work with and through the genre of disease-narrative to create a valid and valuable account that includes distinctive elements of the Christian response to the catastrophe.

The passage on natural disasters in 547/548 covers severe earthquakes, albeit without specific details of places affected, an exceptional Nile flood that lasted so long in Lower Egypt that crops were affected, and Porphyrius the whale that had disrupted shipping until it became stranded near the mouth

1 E. g. G. Greatrex: Procopius of Caesarea, *The Persian Wars*. A Historical Commentary. Cambridge 2022, pp. 566–568.

of the Sangarius river; the accumulation of disasters and wonders prompted doom-sayers to predict misfortunes. Ziebuhr links this presentation with Sibylline prophecies, Biblical views of sea-monsters, and contemporary apocalyptic fears, to suggest that the excursus was intended to create a context for Procopius' treatment of Belisarius' unsuccessful campaigns in Italy in the years 544–548, where it was fated that affairs would go badly for the Romans; this is an interesting idea, but ultimately beyond proof. It might have been worth noting that Procopius missed a chance to describe the serious damage caused to cities in Phoenicia and elsewhere by the earthquake of July 551, events well within his chronological frame, a failure that permitted Agathias to provide an account with first-hand experience of the disaster's aftermath on Cos (*Histories* 2.15–16). This could have reinforced the perception of contemporary doom, if that was Procopius' intention.

Overall Ziebuhr makes a valuable contribution to the construction of more nuanced interpretations of Procopius as a writer and historian, an author with a considerable knowledge of the Bible and Christianity as well as of the classical tradition of historiography, with both these influences contributing to the creation and purpose of his excursuses. Ziebuhr's two main objectives are solidly underpinned by his analysis. The significance of the Herodotean element in Procopius causes less surprise now than it did forty or fifty years ago, though detailed exposition of the connections is still worth making. The identification of Christianity's wider impact on the narrative is an important advance, and a further blow to those who argue that Procopius was a closet pagan writing primarily for a small like-minded coterie. A strength of Ziebuhr's approach is that it does not require Procopius' audience to be able to identify the passages from earlier literature that might have inspired him: it does not matter if a reader recognises the Herodotean parallel in the presentation of the extraordinary downfall of the Vandals, since the message is clearly contained in the text, but a well-educated reader would enjoy the thought. This is much superior to speculations that an allusion to a passage in a classical author would be sufficiently obvious to contemporaries, most of whom would have been less well-read than Procopius, to ensure that his text would be read as a subtle critique of Justinian.

If I have a regret about the volume, it is that it does not cover more – in itself a tribute to the quality and stimulus of what is there. It would have been possible to set these excursuses in a wider context: possibilities are investigation of how digressions are used in Procopius' *Buildings*, for example

to diversify descriptions of specific constructions, distinguish elements of text, and highlight Justinian's Christian mission; comparison with the practice of Agathias and Theophylact, whose signalling of digressions is similar to that of Procopius though in the former they occupy a significantly greater part of the text than in Procopius; or consideration of Procopius' digressions alongside other forms of literary decoration that were expected of a classicising historian, for example speeches.<sup>2</sup> I also wonder if it is time for us to be less surprised about the importance of Christian elements in classicising historians. Setting aside Theophylact, whose receptiveness to Christian material had never been in doubt, Agathias provides an interesting study of how a writer who was very careful about his classical pedigree, for example regularly referring to the Christian God by neutral expressions such as 'higher power' or 'divinity', was also conversant with and prepared to refer to key aspects of contemporary doctrinal discussion, such as the divinity's "capacity to suffer, lack of fusion, and other such things" (*Histories* 2.29.2), and reveal that he understood the theory of how icons helped worshippers to channel their devotions (*Greek Anthology* 1.34.7–8). These are very minor reservations about a volume which will be a considerable help to all who work on Procopius and classicising historiography.

- 2 Cf. P. Rance: Wars. In: M. Meier/F. Montinaro (eds.): *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea*. Leiden/Boston 2022 (Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World 11), pp. 70–120, at p. 112.

---

Michael Whitby, University of Birmingham  
 Professor emeritus  
 m.whitby@bham.ac.uk

**www.plekos.de**

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Michael Whitby: Rezension zu: Albrecht Ziebuhr: *Die Exkurse im Geschichtswerk des Prokopios von Kaisareia. Literarische Tradition und spätantike Gegenwart in klassizistischer Historiographie*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2024 (Hermes-Einzelschriften 126). In: Plekos 26, 2024, S. 631–635 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2024/r-ziebuhr.pdf>).

Lizenz: Creative Commons BY-NC-ND

---