

AN APHORISM IN PROCOPIUS

According to Procopius (*BP* 1.24.37), Theodora's speech of encouragement to her husband in the crisis of the Nika revolt was rounded off with a *παλαιὸς λόγος* to the effect that *καλὸν ἐντάφιον ἢ βασιλεία ἐστί*.

Bury (*LRE* 2, 45, n. 4) flatly states that the phrase comes from Isocrates, *Archidamos* 45: *καλὸν ἐστὶν ἐντάφιον ἢ τυραννίς*. We do not really know enough about the education and reading habits of Procopius to be so dogmatic. Bury could of course be right. It is self-evident that Isocrates was read and preserved over the Byzantine period. He is included, for notable example, in the *Bibliotheca* of Photius (cod. 159; cf. cod. 260), where the *Archidamos* is referred to by title.

However, the cumulative evidence may suggest that Isocrates was not one of the classics commonly read in the early Byzantine period. There is, for instance, only one papyrus fragment of him that is datable to the sixth century, and a mere three more that have been assigned to the fifth¹). A recent, detailed study²) of the literary world of that erudite bureaucrat, John Lydus, shows no sign of Isocrates. On the Latin side, the investigations of Courcelle have disclosed that references to Isocrates usually come through intermediary sources, with little or no genuine knowledge of his speeches³).

It was not necessary to have read Isocrates to know the aphorism. Memories of one's schooling would not have to be unduly retentive to preserve such a quotable "old saying". More to the point, perhaps, it is adduced by later writers. Diodorus Siculus has it twice (14.8.5; 20.78.1), Aelian once (*VH* 4.8). And it is to be found twice in Plutarch (*An seni res publica gerenda sit* 783D; *Cato maior* 24.8).

This range of occurrence has not been made clear by editors and commentators. Haury's Teubner edition of Procopius cites

1) See R.A.Pack, *The Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Graeco-Roman Egypt* (2nd edit., Ann Arbor, 1965), nos. 1249, 1259, 1269, 1275.

2) T.F.Carney, *Bureaucracy in Traditional Society* (Coronado Press, 1971), 1, 47f.

3) P.Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers and their Greek Sources* (English version by H. Wedeck, Harvard, 1969), 63, 68, 326.

only Isocrates and the first Diodorus passage; the Budé Isocrates of Mathieu-Bremont does not go beyond Diodorus and the *Moralia* item; and so on. Such incompleteness is one justification for the present note⁴).

Procopius, then, could owe the epigram to a source other than Isocrates. Diodorus and Plutarch are the best bets. The former was much exploited by Byzantine historians as a model for prefaces⁵). One hardly needs to document the abiding popularity of Plutarch, for pagan and Christian alike⁶). If he is the source, the passage from the *Cato* will be the more likely inspiration, since in the *Moralia* Plutarch disagrees with the truth of the sentiment.

So far, it has been assumed that we owe the aphorism to Procopius. This does not have to be the case. It could be that Theodora herself actually quoted the words in a speech of which the historian obtained direct knowledge from Belisarius⁷).

In the Procopian version, *βασιλεία* is substituted for *τυραννίς*. A mere slip of memory? If so, albeit this is not to say that historians cannot get quotations wrong, one might be tempted to ascribe the mistake to Theodora; we do not have to believe all the libels of the *Secret History* to appreciate that the empress was not a well-educated person.

However, the alteration is probably deliberate. For tyranny in the language of the sixth century had two precise connotations: usurpers and barbarian kings⁸). The reign of

4) The discrepancies in the sources as to who coined the phrase may here be conveniently noted. Isocrates simply says it was one of Dionysus' companions; Diodorus ascribes it to Heloris, friend and adopted father of the tyrant; Plutarch follows the anonymous version of Isocrates; Aelian credits it to a friend called Hellopides.

5) Cf. Averil Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford, 1970), 57-8, for this use of Diodorus. It may also be worth noting that Diodorus is listed in the bibliography of Evagrius (*HE* 5,24).

6) It is sufficient to recall the pagan Eunapius' definition of the "divine" Plutarch as the "charm and lyre of all philosophy" (*VS* 454) along with (e.g.) Himerius, *Or.* 7.4 ("Plutarch, through whom you educate all men") or the epigram addressed by Agathias (*AP* 16.331) to "the unparalleled author of the parallel lives". Cf. R. Hirzel, *Plutarchos* (Leipzig, 1912), 74-206; D. A. Russell, *Plutarch* (London, 1973), 143-5, for the abundance of references.

7) Cf. Bury, *loc. cit.*

8) Cf. Averil Cameron's Commentary on the *In laudem Justini Augusti minoris* (London, 1976), 120; in such contemporary poems as *AP* 9.656 and 9.779, when an emperor suppresses rivals, it is a case of the *βασιλεύς* putting down a tyrant.

Justinian could only be described as a *βασιλεία* by his empress or his official historian. The best witness to that is Procopius himself, for one of the many allegations of the *Secret History* is that Justinian and Theodora insisted on the appellations *δεσπότης/δέσποινα* rather than *βασιλεύς/βασιλίς* (*Anecd.* 30.26)⁹.

Slip or deliberate alteration, by empress or historian, the change is worth pointing to as an object lesson for editors and commentators as to what can happen to a *παλαιὸς λόγος* in Byzantine texts.

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9) In spite of Procopius, the offending titles do, of course, become standard for the emperor and his consort. The historian may be influenced by his earlier effort (*Anecd.* 8.13–21) at making Justinian a latter-day Domitian.