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## The Rivalry of Procopius of Caesarea and Antonina the Patrician<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** Procopius of Caesarea traveled with the household of the general Belisarius for many years. If his *Secret History* is any indication, the historian gained a rich acquaintance with Belisarius's formidable wife, Antonina. It is possible that the negative treatment of Antonina in the *Secret History* reflects a rivalry between her and Procopius. This competition becomes most clear when examining the moments in which Procopius becomes a participant in his own narrative of the *History of the Wars*, and especially in the attempt to resupply Rome (under siege by the Goths) from Naples in 537 AD. Although the historian portrays this moment, when Belisarius entrusted him with fetching reinforcements and supplies for the beleaguered Roman army, as his time to shine, Procopius was upstaged by Antonina. If there was a competition for influence with Belisarius, it seems to have been one that Antonina won handily. It is worth therefore examining the outrageous critiques of Antonina in the *Secret History* through the lens of a disappointed or even revengeful Procopius.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to the memory of Dariusz Brodka, a historian of the highest skill as well as a kind and generous person. The arguments here were first presented at the 'Procopius and his Justinianic World: Workshop' in Barcelona (May 2023), and I am grateful to organizers Montserrat Camps-Gaset and Christopher Lillington-Martin for the invitation to speak there and to the participants for invaluable feedback. Thank you also to Michael Edward Stewart for his suggestions on an earlier draft, which have considerably enriched this work.

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The sixth-century Roman historian Procopius of Caesarea has been a subject of intense scholarly interest for many decades.<sup>2</sup> Procopius worked for the famous general Belisarius for at least thirteen years (527–540 AD), traveling with Belisarius to Mesopotamia, North Africa, and Italy. In these travels, Procopius certainly became acquainted with Belisarius’ formidable wife, the patrician Antonina, who also traveled with her husband on his military campaigns.<sup>3</sup> They both traveled in the general’s flagship while at sea and with his household while on land. At one critical point in 537, Antonina and Procopius worked together on assembling reinforcements and supplies for Belisarius’ army in Italy. It is therefore impossible that the two did not have some kind of working relationship, developed over the course of years. However, despite the close connection between the historian and the patrician, few modern scholars have considered what the relationship between Procopius and Antonina might have been, and how that relationship might have impacted the way he wrote about her.<sup>4</sup> In his *Secret History* (or *Anecdota*), a scurrilous invective he wrote in the late 540s, Procopius is extremely critical of the woman, painting her as the antithesis of a good wife. For instance, Procopius introduces the reader to Antonina thusly:

[Antonina] had every intention of cheating on [Belisarius] from the start but took precautions to practice her adultery in secret, not because she felt any qualms about her habits, and certainly not because she had any fear of the man with whom she now lived given that, firstly, she never felt

<sup>2</sup> The foundational works on Procopius remain Cameron 1985 and Kaldellis 2004. For a good overall summary of more recent Procopian scholarship, see Greatrex 2014 and Cristini 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Until recently, Antonina has been the subject of surprisingly few studies, given her power and influence in the period. On Antonina, see Evert-Kappesowa 1964; Fisher 1978, and, more recently, Parnell 2023 and Lillington-Martin 2024.

<sup>4</sup> As one example, Antonina is scarcely mentioned in the recent Meier, Montinaro 2022. The index to the 474-page volume indicates she is considered less (9 mentions) in relation to Procopius’ career and writings than John the Cappadocian (17 mentions) or Herodotus (26 mentions), despite the fact that Procopius probably lived in closer proximity to her than either of them. Cameron 1985: 162 mentions Procopius’ ‘later resentment against Antonina’ without explaining the nature or cause of that resentment.

shame for anything that she did and, secondly, she had quite overpowered her husband with her many tricks of magic (*Anec.* I 13).<sup>5</sup>

The historian's destruction of Antonina's reputation is both long and salacious, covering the first five books of the *Secret History* and accusing her of having an incestuous, pedophilic affair with her teenage adopted son Theodosios, and concealing it with lies and murder. Procopius could scarcely have imagined a more vitriolic attack on Antonina than the one he furiously wrote out for this libelous pamphlet.<sup>6</sup> These two facets of Procopius' relationship with Antonina – his relatively close working relationship with her in the 530s while on campaign with Belisarius and his salacious attack on her in the *Secret History* – are rather incongruous when considered together. However, there does appear to be a link between them, which can be determined by first reviewing some of Procopius' achievements during his tenure working for Belisarius, second by analyzing the intersection of Antonina with those achievements, and third by considering whether the way Antonina and Procopius intersected in these activities caused the historian to be especially resentful of Antonina. The evidence suggests that Procopius and Antonina had an active rivalry while the former worked for Belisarius, and that bitter recollection of this rivalry inspired Procopius' later slander of the powerful woman in the *Secret History*.

A good beginning point is to consider Procopius' curriculum vitae while working for Belisarius. As the general's legal adviser (*assessor*)

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<sup>5</sup> Translations of this text, unless otherwise noted, are from Kaldellis 2010, here Kaldellis 2010: 5, modified.

<sup>6</sup> I say 'libelous' because the accusations against Antonina cannot be proven and are likely to be an invention of Procopius. See Parnell 2023: 136–144 for more complete argument. See also Brodka 2023: 326, who reminds us that 'it must be kept in mind that the *Secret History* is a pamphlet intended to present the characters in the worst possible light'. Nevertheless, most modern historians reading the *Secret History* have been inclined to take its accusations against Antonina at face value: as examples see Stanhope (Lord Mahon) 1848: 320–322, 426–427; Stein 1949b: 286; Treadgold 2007: 182; Evans 2011: 82ff. It is worth mentioning that Procopius' treatment of Antonina in the *History of the Wars* is much more positive, and this probably has to do with the fact that he fully expected her and her husband to be aware of, if not to read, that text: see Parnell 2022: 367–372.

and personal secretary, most of Procopius' work for Belisarius involved managing his correspondence and other writing tasks.<sup>7</sup> However, in his sweeping *History of the Wars* (or *Bella*), Procopius occasionally set the pen aside and became more directly involved in helping Belisarius to manage his army and coordinate his campaigns. In these key moments, the narrator turns into a participant in his own narrative. Procopius likely included these episodes of autopsy to claim literary authority: a historian who could demonstrate his own participation in the events he records has additional credibility.<sup>8</sup> That said, we should not exclude the possibility that he also simply enjoyed getting out from behind his writing desk to have some kind of direct involvement in the war. His excursions could serve more than one purpose, and perhaps had very different purposes in the moments in which they occurred than they did years later when he began to write about them. There are four episodes of Procopius as participant which together might hint at the rivalry he had with Antonina.

In summer 533, Belisarius, Antonina, Procopius, and the Roman expeditionary force arrived in Catania, Sicily, en route to North Africa, to wage war against the Vandals (533–534). Belisarius sought intelligence on the strategic situation and sent Procopius to Syracuse. He ordered the future historian to find out the location of the Vandal fleet and army, whether the Vandals suspected a Roman attack, and whether they had prepared an ambush at any point along the African coast. One might doubt the ability of Procopius to accomplish all this wandering through the streets of Syracuse on his own. It is possible that in writing this way Procopius was concealing the existence of a complicated intelligence-gathering operation, planned in advance by imperial authorities, of which Procopius was merely charged with executing the last phase: collecting the final report.<sup>9</sup> According to the author at least, he succeeded entirely by chance in accomplishing his mission beyond the general's wildest dreams. Procopius explains that he happened unexpectedly upon a childhood friend, who had a shipping business in Syracuse, and the friend told Procopius that one of his servants had been in

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<sup>7</sup> Procop. *Wars* I 12, 24 and see Treadgold 2007: 179.

<sup>8</sup> 'Autopsy is among Procopius' greatest claims to authority' (Ross 2017: 77).

<sup>9</sup> Cristini 2023: 329–331.

Carthage just three days before.<sup>10</sup> According to this servant, the Vandals did not suspect any attack from the Romans and had not organized an ambush. Moreover, not long before the Vandal fleet had taken a significant portion of the army to Sardinia, to suppress a revolt there. Finally, Gelimer, the Vandal king, was not even on the coast, but was in the interior of what is today Tunisia, a four-day journey from the sea. In other words, the timing for an attack on North Africa could not be better. The news was so good and so propitious for the Roman expeditionary force that Procopius could scarcely believe it. In his exuberance, he abducted his friend's servant, eager to bring him before Belisarius to report this news in person. Procopius caught up with Belisarius and the fleet at Caucana in southern Sicily. When Belisarius heard the news, Procopius reports that his boss was 'overjoyed and heaped many praises upon Procopius' (*Wars* III 14, 15).<sup>11</sup> One gets the sense that Procopius included this last detail rather intentionally, to make a point to his readers that the great general approved of the historian's important contribution to the conduct of the campaign.

Just days later, the Roman fleet and army made landfall at Caput Vada (modern Chebba, Tunisia), roughly 150 miles south of Carthage. As the soldiers began to dig a trench to encircle the army camp, they struck water, which spouted from the earth in great quantities. Procopius took this to be a good omen and decided at this point to once again insert himself as a participant in the narrative. In the third person, he described himself going to Belisarius to flatter him on this sign: 'In congratulating the general, Procopius said that he rejoiced at the abundance

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<sup>10</sup> Or perhaps Procopius fully expected to run into this friend and was in fact dispatched to Syracuse to meet him. Merchants were common sources of intelligence in this period: Cristini 2023: 330. Cristini's sarcastic description of this 'chance' meeting is too good to overlook: he describes it as a 'singolare colpo di fortuna.' Whether this mission was the final stage of a carefully planned intelligence-gathering operation, or truly a singular stroke of luck, ultimately does not matter for the purposes of this argument, which focuses on the active role of Procopius in the event and the end result: praise by Belisarius.

<sup>11</sup> περιχαρής γενόμενος καὶ Προκόπιον πολλὰ ἐπαινέσας. Translations of this text, unless otherwise noted, are from Kaldellis 2014, here Kaldellis 2014: 175, modified. That Procopius uses the third person here to describe himself is an intentional choice deflecting accusations of self-promotion (Ross 2017: 77–78). See also Gengler, Turquois 2022: 406–407.

of water, not so much because of its usefulness, as because it seemed to him the sign of an easy victory, and that God was foretelling a victory to them' (*Wars* III 15, 35).<sup>12</sup> In marked contrast to Procopius' previous intervention in Syracuse, in this case Belisarius has no response to the historian's somewhat obsequious observations about the discovery of the water. Procopius has spun the discovery into a positive omen for the campaign, but apparently earns no gratitude or praise for it. The main reason the author included his own observation on the omen is no doubt to show his readers how clever he is, and a secondary reason must be to foreshadow the actual forthcoming quick victory of Belisarius and the Roman army. However, if this event did indeed occur this way historically and not just as a later literary flourish by Procopius, then it is also possible that the then-secretary was fishing for a compliment from his boss, but failed to achieve this goal. Procopius had received such compliments for his intelligence-gathering work in Syracuse and might have been looking for a repeat of that effusiveness here in *Caput Vada*.

Six years later, in 539, Belisarius was in Italy besieging Osimo as part of his first campaign against the Ostrogoths (535–540). Procopius was again by his side. A skirmish began when some Roman soldiers engaging in a raid became cut off by an ambush of Gothic warriors. Other Roman soldiers in the camp shouted to their compatriots to warn them, but could not be heard over the din created by the Gothic attack. According to Procopius, Belisarius was 'in perplexity' (ἀπορουμένῳ) about this problem, although one has to be suspicious that Belisarius, a seasoned general well versed in military tactics, was actually confused by this issue (*Wars* VI 23, 23). Procopius inserts himself into the narrative again to explain that he was able to make a suggestion: the sounding of the cavalry trumpet should indicate that Roman soldiers continue fighting, but the sounding of the infantry trumpet should indicate that they retreat. The soldiers would be able to hear these trumpet signals over the din of battle. It is not at all certain that Procopius was really the only one to suggest that the army use trumpet signals instead of oral commands, which had already been doing so for centuries by this point. Not only Belisarius but many of his own officers would have been aware of this tradition. Whether this anecdote reflects reality or

<sup>12</sup> Translation from Kaldellis 2014: 178.

not, here Procopius claims credit for the suggestion and injects himself into the story in a direct way, once again claiming the literary authority to be writing this history and showing that he was more than just an armchair historian. The author concludes the episode by noting proudly that ‘Belisarius was delighted by the suggestion’ (*Wars* VI 23, 29).<sup>13</sup> So just like the tale of Procopius’ intelligence mission in Syracuse, this story ends with Procopius reporting Belisarius’ appreciation for his work. The praise of Procopius by Belisarius serves as a means of reinforcing the historian’s claims of authority to be able to write his history: not only was he an eyewitness, he was a participant, and not only was he a participant, but he was a participant recognized and praised by the protagonist of the story, Belisarius.

For the fourth example of Procopius’ appearance as participant in the narrative, and this time with direct involvement in the running of the army, we turn back a couple of years to fall 537. During this period, Belisarius and the Roman army were defending Rome from an Ostrogothic siege, which had been going for six months or so. Both the soldiers and inhabitants of the city were beginning to suffer from hunger. Due to these conditions, Belisarius commanded Procopius to go to Naples in order to collect food, supplies, and any additional troops that might have arrived from Constantinople, and then to bring them back by ship to Rome. This was a big moment for Procopius, who perhaps saw it as a chance to step out of his usual roles as writer, omen-interpreter, and adviser and play a more active part in the conduct of the war. He had not done something so momentous since the intelligence-gathering operation in Syracuse, four years earlier. It seems the travel to Naples itself was somewhat risky, because Procopius explains that he left Rome by night, accompanied by several mounted guardsmen of Belisarius, and that the group had to elude a Gothic army camp that was stationed near the Via Appia. When Procopius’ mounted guards returned to Rome with the news that Procopius had made it safely to Naples, the historian reports ‘everybody became hopeful, and Belisarius

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<sup>13</sup> Βελισάριος δὲ ἦσθη τε τῇ ὑποθήκῃ. Translation from Kaldellis 2014: 366, modified. In both this example and the one in Sicily, Procopius ‘dwells particularly on the positive effect of the character’s actions upon Belisarius’ state of mind’ (Ross 2017: 78).

was emboldened' (*Wars* VI 4, 4).<sup>14</sup> While this is not quite the unrestrained praise Belisarius offered Procopius for his intelligence work in Syracuse, this comment is in line with the positive reaction Belisarius had to Procopius' suggestion regarding the trumpets in Osimo. Therefore, this anecdote seems to be moving in the same direction: Procopius becomes the participant in his own narrative, dramatically succeeds at his assigned task, earns praise from Belisarius, and gains another successful claim to reinforce his credentials as the man best suited to write the history of the war.

This anecdote, however, ended very differently from the others that have been highlighted so far. At about the same time as Procopius' departure, Antonina also started a journey from Rome. As far as can be determined, she had not left her husband's side for the entire first campaign in Italy (535–540) up to this point, and she had shared in the deprivations of the siege of Rome since its beginning in March 537. And yet now (fall 537), she left the city. Antonina also had a dramatic departure: she left in the company of a thousand soldiers and they accompanied her to Terracina. From here, with a guard of only 'a few men,' she proceeded on to Naples. Perhaps to contrast her journey with his own dashing night-time exodus, Procopius attempts to paint Antonina's departure as an issue of safety. He states that she went to Naples 'to await in safety the fortune that would befall them' (*Wars* VI 4, 6).<sup>15</sup> Try as he might to make Antonina a damsel in distress, awaiting the outcome of manly wars, Procopius cannot hide that she was really nothing of the sort. In fact, Antonina had left Rome with a purpose that was not related to hiding from combat or waiting passively for the Romans' fate, and she ended up crashing the author's big moment. Procopius had been sent by Belisarius to Naples to secure supplies and reinforcements. He proudly relates that in the time since he had 'collected not fewer than 500 soldiers there, loaded a great number of ships with grain, and held them in readiness' (*Wars* VI 4, 19).<sup>16</sup> And yet the

<sup>14</sup> εὐέλπιδες μὲν γεγέννηται πάντες, Βελισάριος δὲ θαρσήςας. Translation from Kaldellis 2014: 326, modified. Cf. Ross 2017: 78.

<sup>15</sup> τύχην ἐκ τοῦ ἀσφαλοῦς τὴν σφίσι ξυμβησομένην караδοκεῖν. Translation from Kaldellis 2014: 327, modified.

<sup>16</sup> Translation from Kaldellis 2014: 328.



author had to admit that ‘Antonina was there with him not much later, and with him *she* now managed the fleet’ (*Wars* VI 4, 20).<sup>17</sup> Before discussing the significance of this brief sentence, a few words should be said about its translation. Procopius’ Greek for this passage is as follows: παρὴν δέ οἱ καὶ Ἀντωνίνα οὐ πολλῷ ὕστερον καὶ τοῦ στόλου ἤδη ξὺν αὐτῷ ἐπεμελεῖτο. In Anthony Kaldellis’ 2014 translation, he (following the original English translation of H.B. Dewing) renders this passage in English as: ‘He was joined not long afterward by Antonina, who immediately *assisted him* in making arrangements for the fleet.’<sup>18</sup> Christopher Lillington-Martin has correctly identified this version as a mistranslation, perhaps even influenced by some level of misogyny, because in Greek Antonina is the subject of the verb ἐπεμελεῖτο, and this means that the phrase ξὺν αὐτῷ refers to Procopius.<sup>19</sup> It is not impossible that Dewing, translating in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, might have read the original passage and imagined that Antonina, as the woman in the partnership, must have been playing the role of assistant, no matter what the grammatical structure of the sentence implied. A closer look at the original Greek of this passage reveals that the original sense of the passage is much more one of collaboration between Procopius and Antonina on the operation of the resupply fleet, or maybe even of Antonina taking command and Procopius working with her, rather than Antonina serving as Procopius’ assistant – as Kaldellis and Dewing had it in their translation.

Returning to the more accurate English translation, Procopius claims in the *History of the Wars* that in fall 537 Antonina appeared at Naples and ‘with him *she* now managed the fleet.’ How this situation must have vexed our author! This had been his chance to contribute to the conduct of the war in some way other than writing Belisarius’ correspondence or claiming he provided suggestions on sounding trumpets. It was, as far as we know, the closest Procopius ever came to some kind of command, and in his moment of power he found himself

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<sup>17</sup> Translation from Lillington-Martin (forthcoming), as explained in detail below. Emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> Kaldellis 2014: 328; Dewing 1916: 325. Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Lillington-Martin, personal communication. This translation and a more complete argument will appear in Lillington-Martin (forthcoming).

upstaged by Antonina. However, although Procopius asserts that Antonina managed the fleet ‘with him,’ it is not incompatible with the grammar of the sentence nor improbable that in reality Antonina assumed direction of the operation and Procopius assisted *her*. After all, this was a woman who held the senatorial rank of patrician and enjoyed the confidence of Empress Theodora.<sup>20</sup> Antonina had also recently played a significant part, perhaps even the leading role, in deposing Pope Silverius in Rome, an act of power virtually unheard of for a woman who was not an empress.<sup>21</sup> Antonina was at this moment probably the most powerful uncrowned woman in Italy, and possibly in the entire Mediterranean world. She was unlikely to lower herself to cooperatively manage an operation on a level of equality with her husband’s personal secretary. In fact, it is not impossible that Antonina would have viewed her husband’s personal secretary as quite at her disposal. Nevertheless, it seems that at least Procopius was still involved in the operation at this point, even if he was playing a supporting role to Antonina. While the reinforcing soldiers were sent marching to Rome, Antonina and Procopius boarded ships filled with food and supplies and sailed together from Naples to Ostia. When the fleet arrived in Ostia, Belisarius visited it under the cover of darkness and assured them that he would keep the road between Ostia and Rome clear as the supplies moved toward the Eternal City. Belisarius said: ‘I will ensure that the road is free from danger’ (*Wars* VI 7, 3).<sup>22</sup> He then returned to Rome. Procopius reports at this point that ‘Antonina, with the commanders, began at dawn to consider means of transporting

<sup>20</sup> Antonina had likely been granted patrician rank in 534, when she and Belisarius returned victorious from the Vandal War (Parnell 2023: 226, n. 32). By this point, she probably already enjoyed the confidence of Empress Theodora, as she is linked with Theodora repeatedly in the *Secret History* (e.g. I 13–14, III 6–12, IV 13–31), although the first direct evidence of them working together in the *Wars* comes in 541 (I 25, 11–43). Compare Cameron 1985: 73, who argues that the alliance between Antonina and Theodora ‘has probably been exaggerated.’

<sup>21</sup> Antonina’s involvement in the deposition of Pope Silverius is confirmed by Procop. *Anec.* I 14 and *Liber Pontificalis* 60, 7–8. See longer discussion in Parnell 2023: 100–104. While empresses might depose bishops, a non-imperial woman like Antonina deposing a bishop, let alone a pope, seems to be unprecedented. For imperial women’s involvement in clerical exile in late antiquity, see Hillner 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Translation from Kaldellis 2014: 333.

the cargo' (Αντωνίνα δὲ ξὺν τοῖς ἄρχουσιν ἅμα ἡμέρα τῶν φορτίων τὴν παρακομιδὴν ἐν βουλῇ ἐποιεῖτο) (*Wars* VI 7, 4).<sup>23</sup> The Greek grammar, once again, shows Antonina taking the lead: her name is in the nominative, she is the subject of the verb (ἐποιεῖτο), and she works 'with' the commanders (ξὺν τοῖς ἄρχουσιν). This is an extraordinary admission of the role played by Antonina in these events. Before, of course, Antonina and Procopius had been responsible for the supplies, at least according to his description of the situation, but now the author inexplicably disappears from the story completely and Antonina works on the problem herself, directly with the commanders of the army, either on a basis of equality or perhaps even as their superior. Procopius possibly had returned to Rome with Belisarius after the general's visit. But that Antonina would still be involved in this process and perhaps even in charge of it, even with plenty of experienced officers and commanders present in the area, is fascinating and speaks to the authority that her status as wife and partner of Belisarius gave her. She was a woman who was rapidly becoming comfortable with taking command. Antonina and the army commanders apparently decided that the best way to transport the supplies from Ostia to Rome was via small boats, which were rowed up the Tiber. Because there were many supplies and not enough boats, the process was repeated many times. By late December 537 the operation was complete (*Wars* VI 7, 5–12).

This episode was worth examining in detail because it differs so markedly from the first few anecdotes. In all four, Procopius laid aside the pen to become more actively involved in the conduct of the campaign, either as scout, omen interpreter, adviser, or supply organizer. However, in the first three, Procopius maintained his role throughout the episode and earned praise from Belisarius at the end in two of them. In this fourth example, by contrast, Procopius was supplanted by Antonina, and, not long after Antonina joined the story, he disappeared from it. Quite conspicuously, Procopius disappeared from the story without comment or explanation, and certainly without any praise from Belisarius. Needless to say, this is a notable difference compared to the

<sup>23</sup> Translation from Kaldellis 2014: 333. It is worth mentioning that this passage grammatically mirrors *Wars* VI 4, 20, analyzed above, in that Antonina is the subject of the sentence, the verb is third person singular, and a third party works with her.

ending of the other three anecdotes. Because Procopius does not offer any further commentary on this episode, either in the *History of the Wars* or in the *Secret History*, we are left to speculate how he might have felt about this incident. It is possible that Procopius was angry about being upstaged by Antonina and resented her for taking his role in this resupply operation. After all, the other examples indicate a trend of Procopius attempting to achieve something in the conduct of these military campaigns beyond keeping Belisarius' correspondence. His readers would have already known that he was Belisarius' personal secretary and legal adviser from earlier statements in the *History of the Wars*, so these four anecdotes represent Procopius' attempt to bur-nish his credentials as historian further by inserting himself directly into the action.<sup>24</sup> This last example, leading a major resupply operation from Naples to Rome, would have been a much bigger role than the other three examined earlier (intelligence gathering in Syracuse, interpretation of omens at Caput Vada, and advice about trumpet signals at Osimo). And yet here Procopius was overshadowed in the moment and denied the opportunity to later advertise his successes and credentials, not just by anyone, but by his employer's wife. In effect, Antonina dominated Procopius in this instance, just as the author pointedly accused her of dominating her husband, Belisarius, in the *Secret History*.<sup>25</sup> How much more personal it must have been for Procopius himself to experience the feeling of Antonina controlling him – which he would later accuse Belisarius of accepting on a habitual basis. This might have led to frustration and anger, which then could explain why the author did not comment on or explain his sudden disappearance from Ostia in his account of the resupply mission in the *History of the Wars*. In short, we might read Procopius' silence on the matter as sullenness.

Positing that Procopius was angry at Antonina about this is speculation, but it is not idle speculation. Somehow, when writing the *Secret History*, the author had to decide how to frame the hyperbolic criticism of Belisarius and Antonina that dominates the first five books of that

<sup>24</sup> Procopius reports his hiring in *Wars* I 12, 24: 'It was at that time that Procopius, who wrote this history, was chosen as his adviser.' See Ross 2017: 86 on burnishing credentials through participation.

<sup>25</sup> See Procop. *Anec.* V 27 and Kaldellis 2004: 148–149.

text. There are many different modern interpretations of the reasons why the *Secret History* was written and whether its criticisms of the described antagonists represent reality, fiction, Procopius's own opinions, or merely what he wanted a potential readership to think were his own opinions.<sup>26</sup> But no matter which of these interpretations are correct, Procopius had to choose how to frame his criticisms of the general and his wife, and he chose to go with a framework in which a hyper-sexualized Antonina dominated a weak and submissive Belisarius. About her alleged incestuous, pedophilic affair with their adopted son Theodosios, Procopius wrote that she was 'smitten with desire and obviously driven by erotic passion' (*Anec.* I 18). Belisarius, meanwhile, 'was so infatuated with this person, his wife, that he could not bring himself to believe the evidence of his own eyes' (*Anec.* I 20).<sup>27</sup> It is impossible to exaggerate the degree to which Procopius caricatured Antonina as a lusty, adulterous dominator, and this was a choice: he chose to write the *Secret History* in a way that placed Antonina as a central villain.<sup>28</sup> So we return to the suggestion that Procopius resented Antonina for upstaging him at Naples and Ostia in fall 537. Could this moment have contributed to the author's dislike for Antonina and his decision to make her a major antagonist in the *Secret History*? Recall one of the many critiques that Procopius made of Antonina in that scandalous pamphlet: 'They say that his wife used magic to subdue him and that she could break his will in but a moment' (*Anec.* III 2).<sup>29</sup> This accusation is typically taken to relate primarily to the sexual relationship between Belisarius and Antonina, and especially to the accusation that Antonina

<sup>26</sup> For a recent overview, see Pfeilschifter 2022. But compare Signes Codoñer 2005 and Börm 2015, whose arguments I prefer, although – as I note above – the issue of determining why Procopius chose to highlight Antonina as the chief antagonist of the first five books of the *Secret History* remains no matter which interpretation one prefers.

<sup>27</sup> Translations from Kaldellis 2010: 7.

<sup>28</sup> Another potential piece of evidence that Procopius disliked Antonina by the time he wrote the *Secret History* is that he appears to have not consulted her as a source for his histories, even for events that she was uniquely qualified to describe, such as her own plot to bring down the powerful Praetorian Prefect John the Cappadocian in 541. See Brodka 2016: 113–114.

<sup>29</sup> Translation from Kaldellis 2010: 14. See also Procop. *Anec.* I 13, quoted above, for similar insinuations: the two passages are grammatically linked by their use of the term *μαγανείας* (magic).

was able to prevent Belisarius from punishing her for her alleged affair with Theodosios. But it is a general accusation that might also apply in other situations, including the episode of the resupply mission we have just examined. For example, perhaps Procopius believed that Antonina used her magic to convince Belisarius that she should lead the resupply operation from Naples to Ostia and Rome instead of Procopius.<sup>30</sup> This resulted in Procopius losing the opportunity to claim this operation as one of his big qualifications for writing his history, and probably cost him some degree of reputation with careful readers who noticed that he was upstaged by Belisarius' wife. However, the resentment might have gone beyond literary claims and been a part of Procopius' real experience of living alongside Antonina in Belisarius' household in the 530s. Perhaps in Procopius' mind during this time there was in fact a competition between himself and Antonina for Belisarius' praise and for influence with the general on the conduct of the war. In this hypothetical rivalry, Procopius would have been trying to assert, in his role as personal secretary and legal adviser to the general, that it was appropriate for *him* to carry out special missions for Belisarius, and that it was inappropriate for the general's wife to do so. And if Belisarius did not agree with Procopius on this, well then what other explanation could there be than that Antonina was controlling her husband with magic? The feelings of resentment that would follow would then end up being aimed not only at Antonina, for upstaging and dominating Procopius, but at Belisarius as well for allowing it to happen. Such resentment would then perfectly map onto the roles Procopius attributed to Belisarius and Antonina in the *Secret History*.

If this scenario seems overly speculative, we do not have to go very far to find a similar situation that provides enough precedent to perhaps make it seem a little more plausible. In both the *History of the Wars* and the *Secret History*, Procopius informs us that the Praetorian Prefect John the Cappadocian played a very similar role by interfering in the partnership of Justinian and Theodora. In terms of the scale of their influence and power, the empress and the praetorian prefect performed

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<sup>30</sup> On the literary trope of powerful women using magic to get their way, see Stewart 2021: 258–259 for Procopius' uses specifically, and Graf 1997: 46–47, 189–190 for uses in the ancient world more generally.

on an entirely different stage than did the patrician and the secretary, but the personal dynamics at play in the two situations seem analogous. In the context of trying to explain why Theodora wanted John out of office, Procopius tells us: '[John] openly set himself up as her enemy and slandered her to the emperor, neither respecting her station nor feeling any shame before the amazing affection that the emperor had for her' (*Wars* I 25, 4).<sup>31</sup> The accusation is mirrored in the *Secret History*, where Procopius adds just one detail: that John almost succeeded. '[John] dared to oppose that woman in various matters and especially because he slandered her to the emperor, bringing her almost to the point of having to wage war with her own husband' (*Anec.* XVII 38).<sup>32</sup> Moreover, we know that this rivalry was not simply one sided, and that Theodora equally fought back against John's machinations. John Lydus, in his tome *On Magistracies*, explains that the empress at one point assembled a list of grievances against John, and presented it to Justinian in an attempt to get the praetorian prefect fired (*De Mag.* III 69).<sup>33</sup> Although it seems that this particular scheme went nowhere, we also know via Procopius that Theodora eventually won this dispute, thanks to the clever work of Antonina. In spring 541, Antonina skillfully engaged John in a false conspiracy against Justinian. Antonina managed to get to John by befriending his daughter, a ruse that was so clever that it earned her rare praise from Procopius, who described Antonina in this moment as 'the most competent of all people when it came to devising means by which to accomplish the impossible' (*Wars* I 25, 13).<sup>34</sup> In conniving to dismiss John, Antonina was likely acting on the empress' orders, and certainly had her approval. Theodora used this entrapment scheme to present John as untrustworthy and disloyal, and convinced Justinian to fire and disgrace the praetorian prefect. John's property was confiscated, and he was forcibly ordained a priest. He never again held an important position in the government. This was an

<sup>31</sup> Translation from Kaldellis 2014: 68.

<sup>32</sup> Translation from Kaldellis 2010: 80.

<sup>33</sup> On Lydus confirming the rivalry between Theodora and John the Cappadocian, see Potter 2015: 139–140.

<sup>34</sup> Translation from Kaldellis 2014: 69, modified. On Antonina's role in this conspiracy and an explanation for modifying Kaldellis' translation of *ικανωτάτη* to 'competent' instead of 'crafty,' see Parnell 2023: 126–132.



immediate collapse in fortunes for a man who had been the most powerful civilian official in the empire for many years, and it reveals the power of both Antonina and Theodora.

John the Cappadocian seems to have tried to define himself as a rival to Theodora for Justinian's favor. To return to our historian, perhaps in Italy in the 530s, Procopius was similarly trying to set himself up as a rival to Antonina for Belisarius' favor. In fact, the words Procopius used to describe John the Cappadocian's actions might have equally applied to Procopius himself during this time. Perhaps Procopius openly defined himself as Antonina's enemy and slandered her to the general, neither respecting her station nor feeling any shame before the amazing affection that Belisarius had for her.<sup>35</sup> While Procopius never wrote these words, it is not hard to imagine how they might accurately describe his relationship with the couple. Antonina was powerful, successful, and had the support of Belisarius which Procopius evidently desired. Whether Procopius craved the approval and praise of Belisarius solely to burnish his credentials as historian, or whether it went deeper than that into a personal desire to be recognized by his boss as being more important than a woman cannot, of course, be determined with any certainty.<sup>36</sup> In any case, both the John the Cappadocian vs. Theodora and Procopius vs. Antonina rivalries seem to have had the same resolution: the emperor and the general both chose their wives over their male subordinates. It is impossible to prove that resentment of Antonina's rapport with her husband in general, or umbrage that Antonina upstaged Procopius at Naples in particular, inspired the author to present Antonina as an arch villain and dominator of Belisarius in the *Secret History*. However, it certainly is worth considering that such resentments at the very least contributed to the historian's colorful criticism of Antonina. Procopius might have chosen to write the *Secret*

<sup>35</sup> Just to be clear, this is a fanciful modification of Procop. *Wars* I 25, 4 to fit the Procopius, Antonina, and Belisarius triangle.

<sup>36</sup> Kaldellis 2004: 144–145 argued that Procopius wrote the first five books of the *Secret History* as he did to illustrate that Belisarius' 'place has been usurped by women, who dominate the narrative because they dominate him.' See also Cameron 1985: 71–74. The relative power dynamics of men and women might have been important to Procopius in the case of his own relationship with Antonina as well, not just that of his employer.



*History* in a variety of ways, but he made the decision to begin the invective with a savage denunciation of Antonina in particular. Perhaps he did so while seething with rage at the way she supplanted him in one of his most dramatic interventions into the conduct of the wars of Belisarius.

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