

PROCOPIUS, TWO VIEWS OF THE EMPEROR JUSTINIAN, FROM THE SECRET HISTORY, CA. 554 C.E.

Procopius (d. 565), as the emperor Justinian's official biographer, was in close proximity to the emperor and accompanied his general, Belisarius, on his campaigns to restore imperial authority over Italy and North Africa. His two authorized works, *Wars of Justinian* and *The Buildings of Justinian*, are seldom read by specialists. However, his unauthorized and anonymous *Secret History*, a work that has stirred controversy, has become famous. In it, Procopius unleashes a stream of pent-up hostility towards Justinian, his wife Theodora, the general Belisarius, and his wife Antonina. His claims about Theodora's sexual adventures are exaggerated and perhaps entirely fictional. The whole tenor of the *Secret History* is one of a perverse fantasia.

Such is how things stood in Constantinople and everywhere else, for as is the case with any disease, the evil that started there in the capital quickly spread throughout the entire empire. But the emperor [Justinian] hardly noticed anything wrong at all, for he could not see even what was happening in front of his own eyes in the Hippodrome. He was, in fact, a cretin with no more sense than an ass that follows, with a twitch of its ears, anyone who pulls on its reins. Behaving this way, he made a mess of everything. No sooner had he taken over the government from his uncle than he began to squander the public's money wildly once he got his hands on it. He wasted a lot of it on the Huns, time and again, for supposedly serving the empire, which resulted, predictably, in our provinces being constantly attacked for once. Once the savages had tasted imperial wealth, they were forever on the road to the capital. He was as quick to throw money into the sea, erecting a series of breakwaters at great expense to hold back the surging waves. These stretched far out into the sea as though he believed he could rival the roaring strength of the ocean with the power of cash.

He confiscated for himself the private estates of many Roman citizens throughout the land by accusing them of some crime they had never committed or by flattering them into thinking they were giving him a gift. Others, who had committed murders and other felonies, made over their estates to him and thus escaped prosecution, while still others, who were engaged in fraudulent suits to gain control of their neighbors' lands when they realized they couldn't win in the courts, simply transferred their claim to Justinian and left the whole matter. In this way, by means of empty gestures, they won the emperor's favor and gained access to him by handing over property they had no legal claim to all at their victims' expense.

This seems a fitting time to describe Justinian's personal appearance. In body, he was neither tall nor short, just average, not thin (in fact, slightly fat). He had a round and not unpleasant face. Even after a two-day fast, he had good color. To sum up his appearance quickly, he bore a

strong resemblance to [the emperor] Domitian, the son of Vespasian, whose behavior so outraged the Romans that they were not satisfied even with hacking him to pieces but appeased their wrath by a Senate decree that his name should be obliterated from all inscriptions and that no statue or portrait of him should be allowed to survive. Thus, his name was chiseled out of every inscription in the empire and everywhere else it appeared, leaving the rest intact; that is why no likeness of him exists anywhere except for a single bronze statue, which survived in the following way.

Domitian's wife was a respectable woman of good birth who had never done the slightest wrong to anyone and never assented to any of her husband's evil doing. Being held in such affectionate regard, the Senate sent for her, who invited her to ask any favor of it at all, to which she replied that she would only like to bury his body and put up a bronze statue of him somewhere.

The Senate agreed, and the widow, whose secret desire was to create a memorial of the savagery of those who had butchered her husband, devised a plan. Collecting the pieces of Domitian's corpse, she fitted them together, stitched the body up, then took it to the sculptors and ordered them to reproduce in bronze the form of the wretch. The artists quickly produced the statue which she subsequently took and set up in the street that leads to the Capitol, on the right-hand side as you approach from the Forum. It stands there to this day, a reminder to all both of Domitian himself and his tragic death. One can see clearly in this statue the very likeness of Justinian-his build, expression, and general appearance.

So much for his outward appearance, but it is beyond my ability to describe his inner character, for he was both a villain and a dupe. In plain language, an asshole. He was deceitful, never speaking a word of truth to anyone, but fell for any lie that anyone wanted to tell him. His character was an unnatural mixture of stupidity and wickedness-an example of a saying by one of the ancient Peripatetic philosophers, that sometimes opposite qualities can combine in a man's character, like the blending of colors.

But I will try to describe him as accurately and truly as I can, based on the facts.

Well, then. He was a fraud and a cheat. Hypocritical, cruelly two-faced, secretive, a practiced con artist who never showed any genuine emotion but could shed tears either of joy or sorrow, depending on the situation, whenever he perceived the need. A liar in every word, not just haphazardly, but with real determination, affirming his schemes in writing and with the most solemn oaths, even in dealings with the public. But he regularly broke every agreement and pledge he ever made, like a contemptible slave who stands by his lies until only the threat of torture can drive him to confess the truth. A faithless friend and a treacherous enemy, with a crazed lust for murder and plunder; quarrelsome, extremely unruly, easily led to anything evil but stubbornly refusing any suggestion to do good. Quick to plot mischief and carry it out, but averse even to

hearing a word of any noble action. How could anyone describe his character in words? He had all the vices described above and more, to an inhuman degree, as though Nature herself had withheld every inclination to evil from the rest of mankind solely to implant them in the soul of this one man. On top of everything else, he was overeager to hear accusations against anyone and overeager to inflict punishment, for he never bothered to listen to the facts of any case and simply issued his verdict as soon as he had heard the accuser's side of any story. He gave orders to seize towns, pillage cities, and enslave entire countries without a moment's hesitation, without any provocation at all. Suppose one wanted to tally up all the calamities that have befallen Rome from the very beginning of history and compare them with this man's crimes. In that case, I am confident that Justinian would be reckoned to have murdered more people than anyone ever.

As for other people's money, he had no scruples at all and never even bothered to offer an excuse, justifiable or not, for confiscating what was not his. But once money was in his hands, he was more than ready to squander it in wasteful expenditure or by throwing unnecessary bribes at the barbarians. In short, he saved none and allowed no one else to save any either, apparently driven not by avarice but simply envy of anyone who had money. Thus, he drove all wealth from the Roman realm and became the cause of near-universal poverty. Such, then, was the outline of Justinian's character, so far as I am able to describe it. He married a woman who nearly destroyed Roman society from top to bottom and whose character and upbringing I must now try to explain.

There was a fellow here in Constantinople named Acacius; he was a member of the Green faction and worked as a keeper of the Circus animals; specifically, he was the bear warden. He became ill and died during Anastasius' reign, leaving behind three daughters named Comito, Theodora, and Anastasia. (Comito was the eldest, shy of seven years old.) His widow remarried and hoped her new husband would share in the job of managing her family and the Circus animals - but an official in the Green party, a dance instructor named Asterius, was bribed to remove the newlyweds from their position. He was able to do so because the dancing masters had authority over such offices, and he used his power to install his own chief accountant on the job. One day, when the Circus was packed with people, the wife placed wreaths on her daughters' heads and bands on their arms and made a show of them in public as beggars. The Greens would not lift a finger for them, but the Blues, whose own bear warden had recently died, awarded their open position to the family.

As soon as each girl had grown to a suitable age and seemed mature enough, their mother put her on the stage since they were all attractive girls. In no time at all, Comito, the eldest, was one of the most popular whores in the city. Theodora, the second-born, went about dressed like a slave-girl in a short tunic with long sleeves and acted as her sister's servant, following her everywhere and carrying a small bench on which she sat whenever appearing in public. Theodora was at that time not quite ready to give anyone a true woman's fuck, and so she offered instead the vile service rendered by male prostitutes. She was not choosy and made herself available to the lowest sort of

customer, even to slaves, who, after accompanying their masters to the theater, rushed to her in order to divert themselves in this revolting way. She worked in a brothel for quite some time and specialized in this unnatural type of sex. Once she had grown and developed a woman's body, however, she joined the other whores on stage and quickly became known as the type of slut our ancestors used to call "soldiers' slop." She had no musical talent for either the flute or the harp and was not even skilled enough to join a company of dancers; her only attraction was her body, every part of which she placed at any customer's disposal. ... Being a tease, Theodora loved to keep her customers waiting, but by constantly finding new ways to fuck she always kept horny men coming to her. She also never waited to be solicited and used lewd talk and gestures to entice men, especially teens, to come to her, and so it seemed that she was more wholeheartedly devoted to lust than anyone yet born. Sometimes she would attend "potluck dinner parties" with no fewer than ten young studs in tow, all at the peak of their powers and with no other thought in their minds than fucking, and she would spend the entire night screwing every single one of them. Even after she had exhausted every one of them, she would then turn her attention to the servants-as many as thirty of them !-and screw them all. But even then, she was not satisfied

Justinian was mad with passion for her. At first, he kept her merely as a mistress, although he promoted her to patrician status, which opened the door to her acquiring influence and a large fortune. Now as it often happens to men who are sexually enslaved to a particular woman, Justinian had no greater delight than in showering Theodora with every favor and treasure at his disposal-and he had the entire Empire at his disposal. With Theodora's help, he impoverished the people more than ever before, not only in the capital but throughout the realm

And that is how Theodora, reared and "educated" as she was, against all the odds ascended to the imperial throne. It never even occurred to Justinian that his choice was a shocking one. Given his position, he had the pick of every high-born noble woman in the world, of the most impeccable character and the most unimpeachable reputation for modesty But no, he had to select the lowest woman in the world! Ignoring everything known about her, as recorded here, he preferred to marry a diseased whore who was guilty, through abortion, of countless child-murders!

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does Procopius describe Justinian? Theodora?
2. In Procopius's description of Justinian, he resembled him to which Roman Emperor?
3. How truthful is Procopius's biographical sketch?
4. What motives could have influenced the way he describes Justinian and Theodora?