Theoderic’s ἀγνωμοσύνη and Herodotus’ Getae (Procop. Goth. 2.6.24)

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Procopius gives a detailed account of the negotiations between Belisarius and three envoys of Vitigis during the first Gothic siege of Rome, in late 537. According to Goth. 2.6, the Goths delivered a long speech aimed at justifying their rule over Italy and said that emperor Zeno had sent Theoderic to the West in order to defeat Odoacer; after that, “he and the Goths would hold sway over the land as its legitimate and rightful rulers,” καὶ τῆς χώρας αὐτὸν τε καὶ Γότθους τὸ λοιπὸν κρατεῖν ὁρθῶς καὶ δικαίως (2.6.16).¹

Belisarius replied that the emperor had sent Theoderic in order to wage war against a tyrant, not to conquer the country for himself. He then told the envoys that, while their king dealt well with Odoacer, “in everything else he showed an excessive lack of modesty, for he never thought of restoring the land to its rightful owner” (2.6.24, ἀγνωμοσύνη ἐς τὰ λαλὰ ὅπερ ἐν μετρίοις ἐχρήσατο. ἀποδιδόναι γὰρ τῷ κυρίῳ τὴν γῆν οὐδαμὴ ἐγνω).²

Kaldellis’ translation of ἀγνωμοσύνη (“lack of modesty”) implies an idea of arrogance/presumption and at first sight could be questioned, since all other occurrences of ἀγνωμοσύνη in the Wars but one are rendered by him as “ingratitude,”³ an inter-

³ Pers. 2.7.28 (Megas’ speech to Chosroes); Vand. 1.10.29 (Goda’s letter to Justinian); Vand. 2.16.16 (Germanus’ speech to the Roman army); Goth. 2.25.6

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pretation which is preferable to “bad faith” (Kaldellis’ choice) also in Pers. 2.15.18, a dialogue between Chosroes and the Lazi, who were subject to the Romans but decided to go over to the Persians because the Roman army and governor had been harassing them. The Lazi explained their desire to hand over their land to the Persians by saying that if they “have suffered nothing outrageous at the hands of the Romans, but are coming to you out of ingratitude, then immediately reject this plea of ours” (εἰ μὲν οὐδὲν πρὸς Ῥωμαίων πεπονθότες δεινόν, ἀλλὰ ἀγνωμοσύνη έχόμενοι κεκωρήκαμεν εἰς ύμᾶς, τὴν δὲ ήμῶν εὐθὺς ἀποσείσασθε τὴν ἰκετείαν). The envoys underlined the oppressive rule of the Romans, since otherwise their behavior could have been considered an act of ἀγνωμοσύνη, which means “in gratitude” in this context, as the Romans had previously become allies of the Lazi after the barbarians had been neglected by the Persians (see Pers. 2.15.16).

Therefore, Goth. 2.6.24 would be the only occurrence of ἀγνωμοσύνη in the whole Wars which should be translated as “lack of modesty” and not as “ingratitude.”


5 In the other Procopian works, the only occurrence of ἀγνωμοσύνη in the Historia Arcana (5.24) has been rendered by most translators as “ingratitude,” e.g. Procopio di Cesarea, Storia Inedita, transl. F. Ceruti (Milan 1977) 77; Procopio de Cesarea, Historia Secreta, transl. J. Signes Codoñer (Madrid 2000) 179; Prokopios, The Secret History with Related Texts, transl. A. Kaldellis (Indianapolis/Cambridge 2010) 25; Procopio di Cesarea, Storie segrete, transl. P. Cesaretti (Milan 2015) 95. However, there is an occurrence of ἀγνωμοσύνη with another meaning in Aed. 5.2.3, which has been usually rendered as “inappropriate behavior”: Procopius, On Buildings, transl. H. B. Dewing (Cambridge [Mass.]/London 1940) 323 (“want of propriety”); Prokop, Bauten, transl. O. Veh (Munich 1977) 251 (“das unschickliche Verhalten”); Procope de Césarée, Constructions de Justinien I°, transl. D. Roques (Alessandria 2011) 356–357.
could be challenged also because the majority of translators render ἀγνωστὴν at Goth. 2.6.24 as either “folly” or “ingratitude.”

However, these objections do not stand up to a close examination of Procopius’ passage. First, Theoderic’s behavior could have been labeled as ingratitude if the sentence had been uttered by the envoys of the Goths, who reminded Belisarius of the honors which their former king had received by the hand of the emperor. Yet, the Roman general did not mention them in his speech; he only said that Theoderic had been sent to Italy in order to fight against Odoacer. Thus, the Amal king had no reason to be grateful to the emperor; actually, it was Zeno who should have been grateful to Theoderic. Second, the fact that the Gothic king did not give Italy back to Constantinople was not an act of folly: Belisarius in the following sentence equates robbing a man by violence with refusing to restore one’s neighbor’s property, behavior which in both cases could be considered morally reprehensible but which could hardly be defined as folly, especially if the perpetrator stood a fair chance of escaping punishment, as Theoderic did. Furthermore, Procopius describes the king as a righteous and just sovereign, who was an emperor in all but name, not as a foolish tyrant (see Goth. 1.1.26–31). Finally, Vitigis’ envoys are criticized by Belisarius because of their arrogance (ἀλαζονεία, 2.6.22), shortly before the passage about Theoderic. The motif of the “lack of modesty” of the


discussion.


Goths recurs throughout this episode.

There is ample evidence therefore to suggest that ἀγνωμοσύνη refers here to a “lack of modesty,” as Kaldellis rightly indicated, not to ingratitude or folly. The arrogance of the Goths, then quite a common motif, was mentioned also by another Roman general, Narses, who restored a bridge near Rome after his victories over Totila and Teia and ordered to engrave an inscription claiming that he had been able to subject the rigid minds of the Goths, qui potuit rigidas Gothorum subdere mentes.⁷

In light of these points, we may reasonably conclude that Procopius used ἀγνωμοσύνη in Goth. 2.6.24 in the sense of “senseless pride, arrogance,” to quote LSJ. This meaning is unique in the Wars, but it is quite common in Herodotus. LSJ list four Herodotean occurrences (out of seven) under the heading “senseless pride, arrogance” (Hdt. 2.172, 4.93, 5.83, 9.3),⁸ to which 6.10

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⁷ CIL VI 1199 [ILS 832; CLE 899; ILCV 77 (add.); AE 2012, 16; AE 2013, 141]. The anonymous author of the inscription probably had in mind Paul. Nol. Carm. 17.197–204 when writing this hexameter. For other examples of the arrogance of the Goths see e.g. Procop. Goth. 4.28.4 (ἀλαζονεία) and Exc. Val. 88 (commented by Goltz, Barbar 510–513), as well as Cassiod. Var. 10.22.2: recolite, quantum decessores vestri studuerint de suo iure relinquere ut eis nostrorum foedera provenirent. a estimate, qua gratia debent oblata suscipi, quae consueverant postulari. non arroganter loquimur, qui veritatem fatemur. Here, Theodahad writes to Justinian after Amalasuintha’s murder and, like Vitigis’ ambassadors, reminds the emperor that Zeno had ceded Italy to Theodoric. This—he argues—is simply the truth and not an arrogant assumption.

⁸ The occurrences of ἀγνωμοσύνη in Herodotus are rendered as “Unüberlegtheit” by Passow’s Wörterbuch der griechischen Sprache I (Göttingen 1913) 49, but this interpretation is unconvincing. F. Montanari, Vocabolario della lingua greca (Turin 2013) 87, mostly follows LSJ, yet he prefers “sconsiderata severità” for the Herodotean occurrences (see also F. Montanari, The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek [Leiden/Boston 2015] 17, “senseless severity”), thus echoing Bailly’s Dictionnaire Grec-Français (Paris 1963) 14, “dureté inconsiderée, sévérité maladroite,” although this meaning is difficult to reconcile with the episodes related by Herodotus. See also I. Schweighaeuser, Lexicon Herodoteum I (Strasbourg 1824) 5–6, “praeertim stulta quaedam arrogantia … denique simpliciter superbia.” For Hdt. 2.172 see e.g. Herodotus I, transl. A. D. Godley (Cambridge [Mass.]/London 1920) 485 (“arrogant”); Erodoto, Le Storie. Libro II, transl. A. Fraschetti (Milan 1989) 199 (“non con arroganza”),
and 9.4 could also be added. 9

Interestingly, Hdt. 4.93 is about Darius’ battles with the Getae during his invasion of European Scythia:

πρὶν δὲ ἀπικέσθαι ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰστρον, πρῶτος αἱρέει Γέτας τοὺς ἀθανατίζοντας, οἱ μὲν γὰρ δὴ τὸν Σαλμυδησοῦν ἐχοντες Θρητικες καὶ ύπερ Ἀπολλονίης τε καὶ Μεσαμβρης πόλις οἰκημένοι, καλεύμενοι δὲ Σκυρμιάδαι καὶ Νιψαίοι, ἀμαχητι σφέας αὐτοὺς παρέδοσαν Δαρείῳ: οἱ δὲ Γέται πρὸς ἀγνωσίαν τραπόμενοι αὐτίκα ἐδουλώθησαν, Θρητικοὺς ἐόντες ἀνδρητατοι καὶ δικαιοτατοι.

On his way to the Danube, the first people he subdued were the Getae, who think themselves immortal. The Thracians of Salmydessus and those who live above Apollonia and Mesambria,


9 For Hdt. 6.10 (the exiled Ionian tyrants try to convince their fellow citizens not to fight against the Persians, but the rebels refuse out of foolish pride/arrogance) and 9.4 (Mardonius tries to persuade the Athenians to give up their arrogance/foolish pride and surrender), see Purvis, who translates ἀγνωσία respectively as “stubborn disdain” (429) and “foolish pride” (666). For a possible different meaning of ἀγνωσία in Herodotus see 7.9β: Mardonius advises Xerxes to invade Greece and says that the Greeks wage war senselessly “in their folly and stupidity” (ὑπὸ τε ἀγνωσίας καὶ σκαλιστης), since they fight on a level piece of land (instead of choosing a strong position) and both the victor and the vanquished suffer heavy losses. Here, ἀγνωσία is used mainly as a synonym of “folly/poor judgment,” but the behavior of the Greeks could also be defined as arrogant, because each side believes (in the opinion of Mardonius) itself able to overcome the enemy thanks only to bravery, disregarding the importance of the battlefield. On this episode see R. Konijnendijk, “Mardonius’ Senseless Greeks,” CQ 66 (2016) 1–12.
known as the Scyrmiadæ and Nipsaeans, surrendered without a struggle; but the Getae, who are the bravest and most just of the Thracians, indulged in senseless pride and were at once enslaved.\footnote{10}

The Getae are described as ἀνδρηιότατοι καὶ δικαιότατοι, but at the same time arrogant (since they resisted πρὸς ἀγνωμοσύνην), exactly like Theoderic, whom Procopius praises for his justice (δικαιοσύνη) and courage (ἀνδρεία) in Goth. 1.1.27,\footnote{11} but who is said to have shown an excessive arrogance (ἀγνωμοσύνη) when he did not give Italy back to the emperor.

It is generally known that Procopius was a keen reader of Herodotus,\footnote{12} and he mentions his predecessor openly by quoting from Hdt. 4.45.1–2 (about Darius’ campaign against the Scythians, just a few pages before the description of the Getae and their unfortunate struggle with the Persian king) at Goth. 4.6.12–15. The Getae were often considered the forefathers of the Goths by late-antique historians, who frequently used both ethnonyms when referring to the people of Theoderic, as is clearly shown by Iordanes’ De origine actibusque Getarum.\footnote{13} Procopius was not unaware of this pseudo-ethnography, since in


\footnote{11} Goth. 1.1.27: δικαιοσύνης τε γὰρ ὑπερφυῶς ἐπεμελήσατο καὶ τοὺς νόμους ἐν τῷ βεβαίῳ διεσώσατο, ἐκ τε βαρβάρων τῶν περιοίκων τὴν χώραν ἀσφαλῶς διεφύλαξε, ξυνέσεως τε καὶ ἀνδρίας ἐς ἄκρον ἐληλύθη ὡς μάλιστα.


\footnote{13} Darius’ campaign against the Scythians is reported by Iordanes at Get. 63, but he omits the defeat suffered by the Getae/Goths, since his aim was to extol the deeds of the Gothic people. On Iordanes see A. Grillone, Iordanes, Getica (Paris 2017); L. van Hoof and P. van Nuffelen, “The Historiography of
Vand. 1.2.2 he writes that “there were many Gothic nations in earlier times just as there are now, but the greatest and most important of all are the Goths, Vandals, Visigoths, and Gepids. In ancient times, however, they were named Sauromatai and Melanchlainoi; there were some too who called these nations Getic” (Γοτθικὰ ἔθνη πολλὰ μὲν καὶ ἄλλα πρὸτερῶν τε ἢν καὶ ταύν ἔστι, τὰ δὲ δὴ πάντων μέγιστά τε καὶ ἀξιολογώτατα Γότθοι τέ εἰσί καὶ Βανδίλοι καὶ Οὐισίγνθοι καὶ Γῆπαιδες, πάλαι μέντοι Σαυρομάται καὶ Μελάγχλαινοι ὠνομάζοντο· εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ καὶ Γετικὰ ἔθνη ταῦτ᾽ ἐκάλουν).

To sum up, ἀγνωσύνη in Goth. 2.6.24 has a meaning which is different from all other occurrences in the Wars and is reminiscent of (at least) six out of seven occurrences of the word in Herodotus (including Hdt. 4.93).Procopius’ depiction of Theoderic is strikingly similar to that of the Getae in Hdt. 4.93, and he was aware that the Goths were said to be a Getic race. Therefore, it is likely that he imitated Hdt. 4.93 when writing Goth. 2.6.24. He aimed to show that Theoderic’s arrogance, like the pride of the Getae, would have fateful consequences, since the emperor would eventually conquer Italy, as Darius had subjugated Thrace.


14 See also Goth. 1.24.29–30: χρῆναι γάρ τότε βασιλέα Ῥωμαίως καταστήναι τίνα, εξ οὗ δὴ Γετικῶν οὐδὲν Ῥώμη τὸ λοιπὸν δείσει. Γετικῶν γὰρ φασιν ἔθνος τοὺς Γότθους εἶναι.
implications: according to him, Vitigis, Theoderic’s successor, could not win the war, because his kingdom was founded on an act of ἀγνωμοσύνη and arrogance leads to defeat, a bitter lesson which Herodotus’ Getae could teach both the Goths and Justinian.

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16 See also S. Hornblower and Ch. Pelling, Herodotus, Histories. Book VI (Cambridge 2017) 96 (commentary on 6.10): “Things driven by ἀγνωμοσύνη do not end well.”