

“The Great Emperor”: A Motif in Procopius of Caesarea’s *Wars*

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AFTER HIS DECISIVE VICTORIES over the Vandals and occupation of Carthage in 533 CE, Belisarius moved quickly to consolidate his position by winning the surrender of the cities of Libya and the Mediterranean islands. Imperial forces encountered serious resistance only at Lilybaeum in Ostrogothic Sicily, where Belisarius alleged that Theoderic had ceded the fortress to the Vandals, notwithstanding the fact that it was presently occupied by a Gothic garrison.¹ As Procopius presents the matter, Belisarius wrote a letter to the Gothic commanders there, upbraiding them for depriving him of property belonging, as he put it, to slaves (*douloi*) of the emperor—among whom he included, notably, Gelimer, the defeated Vandal king. Belisarius’ demand is remarkable not simply for its menacing tone—a foreshadowing of Justinian’s designs against Gothic Sicily and Italy—but also for the manner in which it adopts an avowedly despotic voice (*Wars* 4.5.12–13, 16–17, transl. Dewing/Kaldellis):

Λιλύβαιον τὸ Βανδίλων φρούριον τῶν βασιλέως δούλων ἀποστερεῖτε ἡμᾶς, οὐ δίκαια ποιοῦντες οὐδὲ ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς ξύμφορα, καὶ ἄρχοντι τῷ ὑμετέρῳ οὔτι ἐκόντι καὶ μακρὰν ἀπολελειμμένῳ

¹ *Wars* 4.5.1–11; see also 3.8.11–13, 5.3.15–28. On the respective claims of Vandals and Ostrogoths upon Sicily see Frank M. Clover, “A Game of Bluff: The Fate of Sicily after A.D. 476,” *Historia* 48 (1999) 235–244, esp. 242–243; also R. J. A. Wilson, *Sicily under the Roman Empire: The Archaeology of a Roman Province* (Warminster 1990) 336–337; Jonathan Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439–700* (Cambridge 2012) 38–39.

τῶν πρασσομένων ἐκπολεμῶσαι βούλεσθε βασιλέα τὸν μέγαν, οὗ τὴν εὐνοίαν πόνῳ πολλῷ κτησάμενος ἔχει. καίτοι πῶς οὐκ ἂν ἄπο τοῦ ἀνθρωπείου τρόπου ποιεῖν δόξαίτε, εἰ Γελίμερα μὲν ἔναγχος ἔχειν ξυνεχωρεῖτε τὸ φρούριον, βασιλέα δὲ τὸν τοῦ Γελίμερος κύριον ἀφαιρεῖσθαι τὰ τοῦ δούλου κτήματα ἔγνωτε; μὴ ὑμεῖς γε, ὧ βέλτιστοι ... ὑμεῖς οὖν μήτε δράσητε ἡμᾶς μηδὲν περαιτέρω κακὸν μήτε αὐτοὶ πάθητε, μήτε πολέμιον κατεργάσησθε τῷ Γότθων γένει βασιλέα τὸν μέγαν, ὃν ὑμῖν ἴλεων εἶναι ἐν εὐχῇ ἐστίν. εὐ γὰρ ἴστε ὡς τοῦδε μεταποιουμένοις ὑμῖν τοῦ φρουρίου ὁ πόλεμος ἐν ποσὶν ἔσται οὐχ ὑπὲρ τοῦ Λιλυβαίου μόνον, ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ ἀπάντων, ὧν οὐδὲν προσήκον ὑμῖν εἶτα ἀντέχεσθε.

You are depriving us of Lilybaeum, a fortress of the Vandals, the slaves of the emperor, and are not acting justly nor in a way to benefit yourselves. You wish to bring upon your ruler, against his will and far as he is from the scene of these actions, the hostility of *the great emperor* [b],² whose goodwill he has won with great effort. Yet how could you not seem to be acting contrary to established practice, if you recently allowed Gelimer to hold the fortress but have decided to withhold from the emperor, Gelimer's master, the possessions of the slave? You, at least, good men, should not act thus ... See to it, then, that you neither do us further harm nor suffer harm yourselves, nor make *the great emperor* [b] an enemy to the Gothic nation, when it is your prayer that he be propitious toward you. For be well assured that, if you lay claim to this fortress, war will be upon you immediately, not for Lilybaeum alone but for all possessions you claim as yours, although not one of them belongs to you.

The Goths, on the instructions of Amalasantha, who at the time was ruling as regent during the minority of her son Athalaric,³ replied with a conciliatory letter (4.5.19–24) and

² References are to Table 1 below. This investigation is based upon a TLG lemmatized proximity search of the corpora of Procopius, Agathias, John Lydus, and Menander Protector for βασιλεύς within fifteen words of μέγας.

³ See now Kate Cooper, "The Heroine and the Historian: Procopius of Caesarea on the Troubled Reign of Queen Amalasuētha," in J. J. Arnold et al. (eds.), *A Companion to Ostrogothic Italy* (Leiden 2016) 296–315.

defused the crisis for the moment by appealing directly to Justinian for arbitration. What is noteworthy about the exchange, however, is Belisarius’ characterization of Justinian as “the great emperor” (*basileus ho megas*), whose will the Goths would thwart at their peril.

Beyond its purpose in establishing a pretext for further aggression in the West, Belisarius’ letter to the Goths serves notice about Justinian’s insuperable place in the order of things, communicated in a way that finds scant precedents in diplomatic or other official documents in the sixth century.⁴ It was of course routine to refer to the emperor as *basileus*, and Eusebius, for example, was calling Constantine “the great emperor” already in the fourth century,⁵ but Procopius employs the expression in an altogether different register. The usages discussed here fall outside the scope of Schreiner’s authoritative study of the expression *megas basileus* in imperial titulature,⁶ while Zuckerman,

⁴ Cf. Berthold Rubin, *Prokopios von Kaisareia* (Stuttgart 1954) 144 (= *RE* 23 418): “Der Briefwechsel dürfte unter Benutzung der Hauptargumente des tatsächlich erfolgten stilisiert sein, wobei die Erfordernisse des historischen Stils wichtiger als diplomatische Gepflogenheiten waren.” See also Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1985) 148–149.

⁵ *Vit. Const.* 1.1.1, 1.56.1, 3.55.4, 4.68.2. The same expression refers to God (3.43.4, 4.29.4) and, remarkably, to Diocletian (1.14.4). See H.-U. Wiemer, “Libanius on Constantine,” *CQ* 44 (1994) 511–524, at 513 n.20, who argues that Libanius’ panegyric on Constantius and Constans (*Or.* 59.29, 72) follows Eusebius in this and other respects. On the Near Eastern and Hellenistic background see Rolf Strootman, “Hellenistic Imperialism and the Idea of World Unity,” in Claudia Rapp and H. A. Drake (eds.), *The City in the Classical and Post-Classical World* (Cambridge 2014) 38–61; on the Hellenistic royal title *basileus megas* see John Ma, *Antiochos III and the Cities of Western Asia Minor* (Oxford 2000) 271–276; Federicomaria Muccioli, *Gli epiteti ufficiali dei re ellenistici* (Stuttgart 2013) 395–417.

⁶ Peter Schreiner, “Zur Bezeichnung ‘*megas*’ und ‘*megas basileus*’ in der byzantinischen Kaisertitulatur,” *Byzantina* 3 (1971) 173–192; followed by Gerhard Rösch, *ONOMA ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΑΣ. Studien zum offiziellen Gebrauch der Kaisertitel in spätantiker und frühbyzantinischer Zeit* (Vienna 1978) 38, 47. Evangelos K. Chrysos, “The Title Βασιλεύς in Early Byzantine International Relations,”

on the basis of an examination of the documentary sources, finds that Justinian is described as *basileus ho megas* only in the Acts of the Council of Jerusalem of 536 (*ACO* III 108–109, 179): “The title *ho megas basileus*, however—or, to put it more neutrally, this way to describe an emperor—enters in use under the reign of Heraclius” (imp. 610–641).⁷ Not only have appearances of the expression in Procopius’ *Wars* escaped the notice of these investigations, but studies of Procopius have overlooked them as well. Yet they form a distinctive motif at key moments in Procopius’ narrative when assertions of Justinian’s imperial preeminence are especially blustering and unsubtle.⁸ In contrast with later practice, then, when the invocation of “the great emperor” becomes conventional, manifestations of the practice in the *Wars* stand out as departures from contemporary etiquette and customary modes of written and oral communication.⁹

DOP 32 (1978) 29–75, at 55 with nn.167–168, considers Justinian’s letters to Gelimer in *Wars* 3 (discussed below) only with reference to the terms with which the emperor characterizes the Vandal monarchy.

⁷ Constantin Zuckerman, “On the Titles and Office of the Byzantine Βασιλεύς,” *Mélanges Cécile Morrisson, Trav.Mém* 16 (2010) 865–890, at 879 with n.42. See also Alexander Angelov, “In Search of God’s Only Emperor: *basileus* in Byzantine and Modern Historiography,” *Journal of Medieval History* 40 (2014) 123–141, esp. 130–134.

⁸ This impression is reinforced by the sole appearance of the expression in Agathias, *Hist.* 4.9.3, the speech of Rusticus justifying the assassination of the Laz king Gubaz II/Gubazês: τὴν γὰρ ὑπὲρ βασιλέως τοῦ μεγίστου παρὰ τοῖς ἔθνεσι νικήσασαν δόξαν, ὡς ἄρα δυνάμει τε κράτιστος καὶ πλήθει τροπαίων κεκοσμημένος, διαλύειν τὸ μέρος ἐγίνωσκε χρῆναι ... “[Gubazês’] intention was to undermine as best he could the widespread belief among foreign peoples concerning the triumphant and invincible might of the great emperor...” (transl. Frendo, modified). On the context see David Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity: A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia* (Oxford 1994), esp. 308–309; George A. Kennedy, *Greek Rhetoric under Christian Emperors* (Princeton 1983) 13–17.

⁹ But cf. John Lydus *De mag.* 3.30, the official citation celebrating the author’s retirement from the staff of the Praetorian Prefecture in 552: τούτοις τοῖνον ἅπασιν ἐνευδοκιμηκῶς Ἰωάννης ὁ λαμπρότατος, τοὺς ἐν τοῖς

In a comparable vein, but on a smaller scale, we can observe how recurring patterns of distinctive expressions shape Procopius’ narrative. The Persian shah Khusrau I, Procopius’ Chosroês, is three times addressed in Book 2 of the *Wars* as “most mighty king” (ὁ κράτιστε βασιλεῦ), a formulation that occurs only in the vocative.¹⁰ On the only other occasion on which it appears, Belisarius employs the same expression in a letter to Justinian, pleading for reinforcements, that is otherwise notable for its hyperbolic and sardonic tone (7.12.3): ἀφίγμεθα εἰς τὴν Ἰταλίαν, ὁ βασιλεῦ κράτιστε, ἀνδρῶν τε καὶ ἵππων καὶ ὄπλων καὶ χρημάτων χωρίς. ὧν οὐδ’ ἄν τις μὴ διαρκῶς ἔχων πόλεμον, οἶμαι, διενεγκεῖν οὐ μὴ ποτε ἰκανὸς εἴη, “We have arrived in Italy, most mighty emperor, without men, horses, arms, or money, and no man, I think, would ever be able to carry on a war without a plentiful supply of these things.” Addressing Justinian in a manner otherwise reserved for Chosroês, Justinian’s nemesis and ironic mirror image,¹¹ functions overtly as a signal of Belisarius’ sarcasm and frustration and covertly as a way of underscoring the resemblances Procopius constructs between the two rulers.

Invocations of *basileus ho megas* likewise seem characteristic of stereotyped language about barbarian rulers and their subjects

ἡμετέροις δικαστηρίοις βαθμούς τε καὶ πόνους διανύσας, ἐπὶ τὰ τοῦ μεγάλου βασιλέως δραμεῖται ἵχνη καὶ μειζόνων ἐκεῖθεν ἀπολαύσει δωρεῶν, “For this reason, John, holding the rank of *clarissimus*, has earned a good reputation in all these things, and since he has reached the end both of his duties and of the succession of posts in our courts of justice he will hasten in the footsteps of our great emperor and will henceforward enjoy greater rewards” (transl. Bandy/Kelly, in Christopher Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* [Cambridge [Mass.] 2004] 18).

¹⁰ *Wars* 2.3.47 (a speech of the Armenians), 2.11.29 (a speech of Thomas, bishop of Apamea), 2.26.33 (a speech of Stephanus, a physician, on behalf of Edessa). See also 2.15.15, where ambassadors of the Lazi address Chosroês as “greatest king” (ὁ μέγιστε βασιλεῦ).

¹¹ See Anthony Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia 2004) 119–128, with 257 n.4.

in traditional Greco-Roman political discourse.¹² Such moments establish an unbridgeable gulf between the figure of the great emperor and various lesser beings, among whom are included not only the Vandals and the Goths but also, inescapably, Belisarius himself, functioning as a simple appendage of the imperial will.

Procopius drives this point home in his treatment of Gelimer. In the run-up to the Vandal War, after Gelimer deposed his kinsman Hilderic, but well in advance of deliberations in Constantinople over whether to mount an invasion (3.10.1–21), the *Wars* presents Justinian making two successive diplomatic overtures, in the form of letters delivered by ambassadors, urging Gelimer to preserve the appearance of legitimacy by restoring Hilderic, who was elderly, in the expectation of replacing him in the regular order of succession upon his death.

In the first of these letters (3.9.10–13), Justinian addresses Gelimer in a remarkably confidential and candid spirit, chiding him for deposing and imprisoning Hilderic, “an old man who is [your] kinsman and the king of the Vandals” (γέροντά τε καὶ ξυγγενῆ καὶ βασιλέα Βανδύλων), and warning him “do no further wrong and do not exchange the name of king for the appellation of tyrant” (μήτε οὖν ἐργάση περαιτέρω κακὸν μήτε τοῦ βασιλέως ὀνόματος ἀνταλλάξῃ τὴν τοῦ τυράννου προσηγορίαν, 3.9.10–11).¹³ Gelimer pointedly ignored this advice,

¹² A *locus classicus* is Aesch. *Pers.* 24–25, transl. Rosenbloom: ταγοὶ Περσῶν, / βασιλῆς βασιλέως ὑποχοὶ μέγαλον, “chieftains of the Persians, / kings subject to the Great King”; cf. Hdt. 1.188, etc. See also Zuckerman, *TravMém* 16 (2010) 879: “The Byzantine title *megas basileus* has the same antecedents as βασιλεύς *tout court*. It was common in Greek as the title of Persian kings and as a Hellenistic royal title; it also has Biblical connotations.”

¹³ The letter continues (3.9.12): ἀλλὰ τοῦτον μὲν, ἄνδρα ὅσον οὕτω τεθνηξόμενον, ἕα φέρεσθαι τῷ λόγῳ τὴν τῆς βασιλείας εἰκόνα, σὺ δὲ ἅπαντα πρᾶττε ὅσα βασιλέα πρᾶττειν εἰκός, “But as for this man [Hilderic], whose death may be expected at any moment, allow him to bear in appearance the form of royal power while you do all the things that it is proper for a king to do.” Justinian himself, here writing as sole emperor, “having already received the imperial power” (ἤδη τὴν βασιλείαν παραλαβὼν,

earning a sharper epistolary rebuke from Justinian (3.9.15–19). Only then did Gelimer deign to offer a justification of his position (3.9.20–23), in which he had the temerity to address Justinian as one monarch to another: βασιλεὺς Γελίμερ Ἰουστινιανῶ βασιλεῖ, “*basileus* Gelimer to *basileus* Justinian” (3.9.20).

Procopius tells us that Justinian received Gelimer’s reply as a provocation,¹⁴ probably not least because Gelimer had presumed to address him as an equal.¹⁵ Although *basileus* would not become an official imperial title until the seventh century, as we have seen, and Gelimer’s formulation was impolitic, to say the least,¹⁶ it will be noticed that Justinian himself presented Gelimer with his opening, by referring in his first letter to Hilderic as a *basileus* and urging Gelimer himself to aspire to be a *basileus* and not a *turannos*. Justinian’s condescension in acknowledging the legitimate ruler of the Vandals as a *basileus*,

3.9.10), reportedly played a similar role during the reign of Justin I (3.9.5; cf. *Arc.* 6.19); see further Brian Croke, “Justinian under Justin: Reconfiguring a Reign,” *BZ* 100 (2007) 13–56.

¹⁴ *Wars* 3.9.24: ταῦτα λαβὼν Ἰουστινιανὸς βασιλεὺς τὰ γράμματα, ἔχων καὶ πρότερον δι’ ὀργῆς Γελίμερα, ἔτι μᾶλλον ἐς τὴν τιμωρίαν ἐπήρτο, “The emperor Justinian was angry with Gelimer even before then, but when he received this letter he was even more incited to punish him.”

¹⁵ Dewing/Kaldellis, following the usual practice of translating *basileus* as “monarch,” “king,” or “emperor” as the context demands, render the salutation: “King Gelimer to the emperor Justinian.” Gelimer is elsewhere (3.24.3) addressed as *basileus* by his brother Tzazo. On one occasion in the *Vandal War*, Procopius refers to Theoderic, apparently inadvertently, as “the *basileus* of the Goths” (3.8.11; contrast 5.1.26); he also imputes the title to rulers of various barbarian groups in the East. On the Vandal royal title see further Herwig Wolfram, *Intitulatio I Lateinische Königs- und Fürstentitel bis zum Ende des 8. Jahrhunderts* (Graz/Vienna/Cologne 1967) 81, 134–135, with Andrew Gillett, “Was Ethnicity Politicized in the Earliest Medieval Kingdoms?” in *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout 2002) 85–122, esp. 116–118.

¹⁶ Cf. Irfan Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* I.1 (Washington 1995) 115; Conant, *Staying Roman* 314; John Moorhead, *The Roman Empire Divided, 400–700* (London/New York 2013) 142 and n.6.

and Gelimer's presumption in assuming that title, accordingly, posits an equivalency between the two that is striking and pointedly at odds with Belisarius' representation of Justinian's position with respect to both the Vandals and the Goths in the dispute over Lilybaeum.¹⁷

Indeed, the *Wars* causes Belisarius, in his characterization of Justinian as "the great emperor" who has overmastered Gelimer, to foreshadow Justinian's own self-presentation in the pageantry accompanying Belisarius' return to Constantinople in 534 with the captive Gelimer in tow. Procopius describes the acclamations received by Belisarius on that occasion, as he paraded on foot from his house to the hippodrome, as the enactment of the first non-imperial Roman triumph celebrated in some six hundred years.¹⁸ The occasion afforded Justinian, however, the opportunity to stage a public spectacle of submission in which not only the conquered Vandal king (clad in royal purple) but also his conqueror were obliged to prostrate themselves before the emperor (4.9.12):

ἀφικόμενον δὲ αὐτὸν κατὰ τὸ βασιλέως βῆμα τὴν πορφυρίδα περιελόντες, πρηνῆ πεσόντα προσκυνεῖν Ἰουστινιανὸν βασιλέα κατηνάγκασαν. τοῦτο δὲ καὶ Βελισάριος ἐποίει ἅτε ἰκέτης βασιλέως σὺν αὐτῷ γεγονώς.

When [Gelimer] came before the emperor's box [in the hippodrome], they stripped off the purple garment and compelled him to fall prone on the ground and do obeisance to the em-

¹⁷ Instructive in this connection is Strootman's observation that "A Great King ... is basically someone who can legitimately assign royal status to others": in *The City in the Classical and Post-Classical World* 54.

¹⁸ *Wars* 4.9.1–3, cf. 4.9.15–16. See Sabine MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1981) 73–76; Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge 1986) 124–129; Mischa Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians. Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Göttingen 2003) 150–165; Henning Börm, "Justinians Triumph und Belisars Erniedrigung. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis zwischen Kaiser und Militär im späten Römischen Reich," *Chiron* 43 (2013) 63–91.

peror Justinian. Belisarius also did this, as being a suppliant of the emperor along with him.¹⁹

The reader of the *Wars* may detect in Justinian’s heavy-handed symbolism not only his final rejoinder to Gelimer’s presumption in making himself the emperor’s peer, but also the substantiation of Belisarius’ bellicose stance against the Goths over Lilybaeum, so different from Justinian’s earlier efforts to align Gelimer’s interests with his own. Belisarius bolsters his demands by aggrandizing Justinian, making clear to the Goths in the instant case the unambiguous character of imperial claims over the Vandal kingdom, and to potential or actual opponents more generally the unassailable authority and unlimited reach of the Roman emperor in Constantinople.

Belisarius employs a similar strategy in the *Persian War* (*Wars* 1–2), when appealing to his fellow officers (*xunarkhontes*) to give him their candid assessment of the situation on the eastern frontier upon his return from Italy in the summer of 541 (2.16.7–9):

πόλεμος γὰρ εὐβουλία πάντων μάλιστα κατορθοῦσθαι φιλεῖ.
δεῖ δὲ τοὺς ἐς βουλήν καθισταμένους αἰδοῦς τε καὶ φόβου
παντάπασιν ἐλευθέραν ποιεῖσθαι τὴν γνώμην ... εἴ τι τοίνυν ἢ
βασιλεῖ τῷ μεγάλῳ ἢ ἐμοὶ βεβουλεῦσθαι ὑπὲρ τῶν παρόντων
δοκεῖ, μηδὲν ὑμᾶς τοῦτο εἰσίτω.

For wars tend to be won through careful planning more than by anything else. And it is necessary that those who gather to deliberate should free their minds entirely of modesty and fear ... If, then, you think that either *the great emperor* [a] or I have already decided regarding the present situation, put it out of your mind.

The narrative has informed us that, in fact, Belisarius had

¹⁹ On this episode see further Charles Pazdernik, “Xenophon’s *Hellenica* in Procopius’ *Wars*: Pharnabazus and Belisarius,” *GRBS* 46 (2006) 175–206, esp. 200–202. The *Gothic War* meaningfully recapitulates this image when the Goths offer to stage a public spectacle of prostration before Belisarius, should he agree to be proclaimed *basileus* of the Goths and Romans (6.30.26).

already made up his mind to mount an invasion and that Justinian had authorized the operation in writing;²⁰ his address to his fellow officers, accordingly, is aimed at building consensus as well as eliciting useful information.²¹ Aligning himself with “the great emperor,” moreover, affords Belisarius the opportunity to claim proximity to power even as he isolates and mystifies its source. Justinian’s distance from the scene of the action is at the same time a debility to be overcome—the emperor cannot be aware of facts on the ground—and a point of leverage: Belisarius’ claim of privileged access to the emperor is aimed at keeping subordinates in line.

Resorting to a tactic otherwise employed in the *Wars* mainly to overawe opponents (see Table 1), Belisarius inadvertently discloses his comparative disadvantage in relation to commanders with more recent and relevant experience in the theater of operations. Owing to the organizational scheme of the *Wars*, this moment [a] in mid-541, which is chronologically subsequent to Belisarius’ letter to the Goths [b] in late 533, is prior in the narrative space-time of the work as a whole, falling in the second book of the *Persian War* (*Wars* 2) as opposed to the second book of the *Vandal War* (*Wars* 4). To the extent, then, that there is some historical basis to these invocations of “the great emperor,” Belisarius’ tactic in the Persian War of 541 [a] reflects habits already engrained in the western campaigns of

²⁰ *Wars* 2.16.4–5: Βελισάριος δὲ ... παντὶ τῷ στρατῷ αὐτίκα ἐσβάλλειν ἐς τῶν πολεμίων τὴν γῆν ἤθελε ... καὶ βασιλεὺς γράμματα γράψας ἐσβάλλειν κατὰ τάχος ἐς τὴν πολεμίων ἐπέστειλε γῆν, “And Belisarius ... wished to invade the land of the enemy immediately with his whole army ... And also the emperor wrote a letter instructing him to invade the enemy’s country with all speed.”

²¹ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* II (London 1923) 103 with n.72, remarks upon Belisarius’ deferential and consultative approach. See the overview of the campaign in Geoffrey Greatrex and S. N. C. Lieu (eds.), *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars II AD 363–630* (London/New York 2002) 108–109. Procopius provides alternative explanations for Belisarius’ limited success: *Wars* 2.19.26–46, cf. *Anec.* 2.18–22.

the 530s, not only at Lilybaeum [b] but subsequently in Libya and Italy [c]–[e], and recapitulated as the Gothic War dragged on [f]–[g].

Invocations of “the Great Emperor” (βασιλεὺς ὁ μέγας) in Procopius of Caesarea				
<i>Wars</i>		<i>Dramatic date</i>	<i>Address</i>	<i>Expression</i>
2.16.9	[a]	mid 541	Belisarius, speech to imperial officers (ξυνάρχοντες) in Mesopotamia	βασιλεῖ τῷ μεγάλῳ
4.5.12, 16	[b]	late 533	Belisarius, letter to Goths in Lilybaeum	βασιλέα τὸν μέγαν <i>bis</i>
4.11.3	[c]	early 535	Solomon, letter to Mauri in Libya	βασιλεῖ τῷ μεγάλῳ
5.8.16	[d]	Oct. 536	Belisarius, speech to Stephanus, an envoy from Naples	ὕπὸ βασιλεῖ τῷ μεγάλῳ
6.25.22	[e]	mid 539	Belisarius, letter to Theudebert, near Fiesole	ἐς βασιλέα μέγαν
7.11.8	[f]	mid 544	Belisarius, speech to Romans and Goths at Ravenna	ἐκ τοῦ μεγάλου βασιλέως
8.30.2	[g]	June 552	Narses, speech to the imperial army at Busta Gallorum	βασιλέως τοῦ μεγάλου

TABLE 1

These instances are discussed below; inasmuch as there is evidently scant corroborating evidence for such a practice in the documentary record, as discussed above, we cannot exclude the possibility that much of this is Procopius’ invention. The fragments of Menander Protector, whose diplomatic speeches may reproduce details available in his archival sources,²² include, however, an address on behalf of Justin II

²² See R. C. Blockley, *The History of Menander the Guardsman* (Liverpool 1985), esp. 9–13; cf. Barry Baldwin, “Menander Protector,” *DOP* 32 (1978) 101–125, esp. 118. On record-keeping in the later empire see A. D. Lee, *Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge

(imp. 565–578) by the Roman ambassador Zemarchus to the Turkish qaghan İstemi/Sizabul (*Exc. de leg. Rom.* 8 = Blockley fr.10.3; transl. Blockley, modified):²³

σοὶ δῆτα, ἔφη, ὧ τοσούτων ἔθνῶν ἡγεμῶν, ὁ καθ' ἡμᾶς βασιλεὺς ὁ μέγας ἀγγελιαφόρῳ χρησάμενος ἐμοὶ ἐσήμηνεν εἶναι ἐς αἰεὶ τὴν τύχην αἰσίαν τε καὶ ἀγαθὴν, ἐν ἡδονῇ ποιουμένῳ σοι τὰ Ῥωμαίων καὶ πρὸς γε φιλοφρονουμένῳ ἡμᾶς.

To you, ruler of so many peoples, *our great emperor* says, through me, his messenger: “May your fortune always be good and success be with you, who are our friend and well-disposed toward the Roman state.”

Procopius’ fidelity toward his sources, accordingly, should not be dismissed out of hand. In the absence of additional instances of the practice, we must in any event content ourselves with evaluating its effect upon Procopius’ work as a whole.

Similar language appears elsewhere in the *Vandal War*, in the letter addressed by Belisarius’ successor in North Africa, Solomon, to the leaders of the Mauri (*Wars* 4.11.3):

ὕμεῖς δὲ, οἷς τὸ παράδειγμα ἐγγύθεν ἐκ τῶν συνοίκων ὑμῖν Βανδύλων ἐστὶ, τί ποτε ἄρα παθόντες χειρὰς τε ἀνταίρειν ἔγνωτε βασιλεῖ τῷ μεγάλῳ καὶ τὴν ὑμῶν αὐτῶν σωτηρίαν προέσθαι;

But as for you, who have an example near at hand in your neighbors, the Vandals, what in the world has come over you that you have decided to raise your hands against *the great emperor* [c] and throw away your own security?

In the *Gothic War* Belisarius offers terms to the Goths garrisoning Naples in 536 (*Wars* 5.8.16):

1993) 33–40; on the representation of diplomatic letters and speeches in historiography see Ekaterina Nechaeva, *Embassies, Negotiations, Gifts: Systems of East Roman Diplomacy in Late Antiquity* (Stuttgart 2014) 44–49.

²³ The occasion is datable to 570/1. On the context see *PLRE* III 1416–1417 s.v. Zemarchus 3; Greatrex and Lieu, *Roman Eastern Frontier* 136–137; James Howard-Johnston, “The Sasanians’ Strategic Dilemma,” in Henning Börm and Josef Wiesehöfer (eds.), *Commutatio et contentio. Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East in Honor of Zeev Rubin* (Düsseldorf 2010) 37–70.

Γότθοις δὲ τοῖσδε τοῖς παρούσιν αἵρεσιν δίδομεν, ἢ ζὺν ἡμῖν τοῦ λοιποῦ ὑπὸ βασιλεῖ τῷ μεγάλῳ τετάχθαι, ἢ κακῶν ἀπαθέσιν τὸ παράπαν οἴκαδε ἰέναι.

But as for the Goths who are present, we give them a choice, either to array themselves hereafter on our side *under the great emperor* [d], or to go to their homes entirely free from harm.

He writes to Theudebert as leader of the Franks in 539 (6.25.22):

νῦν δὲ οὐχ ὅσον ἀμφοτέροις ἐκποδὼν ἔστηκας, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅπλα οὕτως ἀνεπισκέπτως ἀράμενος ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς ἤκεις. μὴ σύ γε, ὦ βέλτιστε, καὶ ταῦτα ἐς βασιλέα μέγαν ὑβρίζων, ὃν δὴ πού τὴν ὕβριν μὴ λίαν ἐν τοῖς μεγίστοις ἀμείψεσθαι οὐκ εἰκὸς εἶη.

But now, far from standing aside for both sides [i.e. the Goths and the imperial forces], you have actually taken up arms in this reckless manner and attacked us. My excellent friend, please don’t do this, all the more so as it involves an insult *to the great emperor* [e], who would be likely to exact a huge retribution for the insult.

He addresses the Goths in Ravenna after the accession of Totila and Belisarius’ return to Italy in 544 (7.11.7–8):

ὅτω τε ὑμῶν ξυγγενεῖς ἢ φίλοι παρὰ Τουτίλα τῷ τυράννῳ τυγάνουσιν ὄντες, μεταπεμψάσθω τούτους ὅτι τάχιστα τὴν βασιλέως δηλώσας γνώμην. οὕτω γὰρ ἂν ὑμῖν τά τε ἐκ τῆς εἰρήνης καὶ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ μεγάλου βασιλέως ἀγαθὰ γένοιτο.

If any one of you [Goths] happens to have relatives or friends with the usurper (*turannos*) Totila, let him summon them as quickly as possible, explaining the emperor’s purpose. In this way you may gain the blessings that flow both from peace and *from the great emperor* [f].

In Book 8 of the *Wars* Narses hails Justinian in referring contemptuously to the Goths while addressing his own forces before the battle of Busta Gallorum in 552 (8.30.2):

οἱ γε δοῦλοι βασιλέως τοῦ μεγάλου τὸ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὄντες καὶ δραπέται γεγενημένοι τύραννόν τε αὐτοῖς ἀγελαῖόν τινα ἐκ τοῦ συρφετοῦ προσησάμενοι ἐπικλοπώτερον συνταράξαι τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν ἐπὶ καιροῦ τινος ἴσχυσαν.

[The Goths] were originally slaves of the great emperor [g] who ran away and, setting a tyrant over themselves who was a worthless fellow from the common rabble, have been able for some time to wreak havoc in the Roman empire by their thievery.

In every instance the message is clear: to be aligned with the great emperor is to enjoy access to peace, security, and prosperity, while to oppose or to obstruct his designs is to court disaster. Notable too is the characteristic way in which this figure is invoked with reference strictly to barbarians in the post-Roman West, especially in contexts in which the interlocutor is addressing himself to a composite audience, as when Belisarius is making a joint appeal to Neapolitans and Goths early in the Italian campaign [d]²⁴ and once again to Romans and Goths at Ravenna in 544 [f]. Indeed, apart from Belisarius' speech to his fellow officers in Mesopotamia [a], where his somewhat maladroit remarks seem symptomatic, as we have seen, of the unfamiliar position in which he finds himself, these speeches and letters make western barbarians exclusively and expressly the objects over which the great emperor exercises his sway.

It bears emphasizing, moreover, that nowhere in the *Wars* does Procopius echo or endorse this language in his own narratorial voice. Such language remains embedded, accordingly, in Procopius' narrative and features as a recurrent element of stylization—as a motif—in the spoken and written speech-acts in which it appears. Even while Belisarius resorts to this motif more often than anyone else, it is not uniquely his own. We should recognize it, therefore, as the hallmark of an almost ethnographically inscribed species of stereotyped 'big talk' aimed at and framed around barbarians, over whom Justinian's predominance might be asserted uncritically and hyperbolically,

²⁴ On this exchange see Patrick Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554* (Cambridge 1997) 172–173; Charles Pazdernik, "Procopius and Thucydides on the Labors of War: Belisarius and Brasidas in the Field," *TAPA* 130 (2000) 149–187, esp. 171–181.

but about whom, in the sixth century, there was particular urgency and anxiety. Procopius’ *Wars* traces the hardening of Justinian’s initial ambivalence about the emergence of peer polities among the post-Roman successor states in the West—an ambivalence of which his prospective recognition of Gelimer as *basileus* in Vandal North Africa is emblematic—into a grim determination to sweep them away under the banner of imperial reconquest. Belisarius’ invocation of the great emperor in the dispute with the Goths over Lilybaeum is a reflex of this larger geopolitical reorientation, and Narses’ at Busta Gallorum its appalling culmination.

Two moments in the *Wars* expose the vacuousness of all this absolutist rhetoric by turning it on its head. Already in the first book of the *Persian War*, the imperial envoy Rufinus declares to Kavadh I/Cabadês of Persia (*Wars* 1.16.2):²⁵

καίτοι βασιλεῖ μεγάλῳ τε καὶ ἐς τόσον ξυνέσεως ἤκοντι ἐκ πολέμου εἰρήνην πρυτανεύσαι μᾶλλον ἂν πρέποι ἢ τῶν πραγμάτων εὖ καθεστώτων ταραχὴν οὐ δέον αὐτῷ τε καὶ τοῖς πέλας προστρίβεσθαι.

It would be more seemly for a king (*basileus*) who is not only great (*meγas*) but also as wise as you are to lead matters out of war and into peace, rather than, when affairs were satisfactorily settled, to inflict unnecessary turmoil upon himself and his neighbors.

For more than a millennium, Greeks and Romans had been taught to know a Persian monarch as the Great King; Rufinus can play upon the title, even though Chosroês and his predecessors are never acknowledged as such in the *Wars*, a work that reserves the expression, as its readers come to discover, solely for Justinian. At this early point in the narrative, however, Rufinus’ assertion that a *meγas basileus* ought to behave in

²⁵ The embassy took place in August of 530, after Belisarius’ victory at Dara; for the context see Geoffrey Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War, 502–532* (Leeds 1998) 190–192. For Rufinus’ life and career see *PLRE* II 954–957 s.v. Rufinus 13. He and his family cultivated close contacts with the Persian court: Lee, *Information and Frontiers* 46–47.

an exemplary fashion rather than its opposite has a commonplace quality, and the sting of obloquy is mild.²⁶

The second appearance of substantially the same remark reveals its formulaic quality while coming across with considerably sharper bite. Procopius tells us that Amalasantha, conscious that her position was jeopardized by Athalaric's failing health, opened secret negotiations with Justinian, through his envoy Alexander,²⁷ over surrendering to him her kingdom; the ostensible purpose of Alexander's embassy, however, was to lodge the emperor's protests about a number of unsettled disputes, including notably the ongoing Ostrogothic occupation of the fortress at Lilybaeum.²⁸ The occasion afforded Amalasantha the opportunity to offer a pointed rebuttal of Belisarius' opening salvo on behalf of "the great emperor" (5.3.19; cf. 4.5.12, 16 [b]):

βασιλέα μέγαν τε καὶ ἀρετῆς μεταποιούμενον, ὀρφανῶ παιδί
καὶ ὡς ἥκιστα τῶν πρᾶσσομένων ἐπαισθανομένῳ μᾶλλον ξυλ-
λαβέσθαι εἰκὸς ἢ ἐξ οὐδεμιᾶς αἰτίας διάφορον εἶναι.

One would reasonably expect an emperor (*basileus*) who is great (*meγas*) and who lays claim to virtue to assist an orphan child [i.e. Athalaric] who does not in the least understand what is going on, rather than to quarrel with him for no cause at all.

²⁶ Rufinus prefaces his address to Cabadês by declaring, "O king, I have been sent by your brother [monarch, i.e. Justinian], who reproaches you with a just reproach" (ἔπεμψέ με, ὦ βασιλεῦ, ὁ σὸς ἀδελφὸς μέμψιν δικαίαν μεμφόμενος, 1.16.1). Cabadês responded constructively, 1.16.9–10; cf. John Malalas 453–456; Theophanes A.M. 6022–6023.

²⁷ See *PLRE* III 41–42 s.v. Alexander 1. Other sources indicate that he had accompanied Rufinus on his embassy to Kavadh in 530 (see nn.25–26 above), a detail unmentioned by Procopius.

²⁸ Justinian's letter (5.3.17–18) is curt; Procopius cross-references his treatment of the initial dispute (5.3.15; cf. 5.4.18–19): τῷ δὲ λόγῳ πρεσβευτὴν τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον βασιλεὺς ἐπέμψε, τοῖς τε ἀμφὶ τῷ Λιλυβαίῳ ξυνταραχθεῖς (ἅπερ μοι ἐν τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν λόγοις δεδήλωται), "The pretext was that the emperor had sent Alexander as an envoy because he was greatly disturbed by the events at Lilybaeum that I have explained in earlier books [3.8.13, 4.5.11–25]."

Amalasintha reproaches Justinian in terms taken straight out of the playbook, as the *Persian War* has shown us, of a polished Roman diplomat practicing his art at the court of the Great King. If she succeeds in puncturing Belisarius’ pretensions, her accomplishment is ironically self-subverting: Procopius’ narrative has informed us that her performance is itself merely an act, a display of false bravado calculated to distract attention from her imminent capitulation.

Figuring Justinian as *basileus ho megas* reveals itself, in Procopius’ *Wars*, as a conspicuously transparent pose, an over-compensating impulse by which the emperor’s subordinates attempt to win compliance through intimidation and inadvertently register insecurity or blithe indifference about geopolitical complexity and ambiguity. Ostensibly frank talk is anything but frank. Indeed, only after his own aspirations are shattered can Gelimer, would-be *basileus* and humbled *turannos*, speak frankly in puncturing the pretensions apparent in his own spectacle of submission before Justinian by repeatedly uttering, Procopius tells us, the verse from Ecclesiastes (1:2): ματαιότης ματαιότητων, τὰ πάντα ματαιότης, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”²⁹

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²⁹ *Wars* 4.9.11. See Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea* 141; Pazdernik, *GRBS* 46 (2006) 201–206.