

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 αὐτόν τε καὶ Γότθους τὸ λοιπὸν κρατεῖν ὀρθῶς καὶ δικάϊως (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 τᾶλλα οὐκ ἐν μετρίοις ἐχρήσατο. ἀποδιδόναι γὰρ τῷ κυρίῳ τὴν γῆν οὐδαμῆ ἔγνω).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-

¹ Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, transl. H. B. Dewing, revised by A. Kaldellis (Indianapolis/Cambridge 2014). The same arguments are repeated by Agath. *Hist.* 1.5.7.

² On Belisarius' portrait of Theoderic see A. Goltz, *Barbar – König – Tyrann: Das Bild Theoderichs des Großen in der Überlieferung des 5. bis 9. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin/New York 2008) 241–244.

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

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, ἀλλ’ ἀγνωμοσύνη ἐχόμενοι κερωρήκαμεν εἰς ὑμᾶς, τήνδε ἡμῶν εὐθύς ἀποσείσασθε τὴν ἰκετείαν).⁴ The envoys underlined the oppressive rule of the Romans, since otherwise their behavior could have been considered an act of ἀγνωμοσύνη, which means “ingratitude” 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 This interpretation

(Theudebert ravages Italy in 539); *Goth.* 3.21.12 (Totila reproaches the senators after taking Rome in 546); *Goth.* 3.25.4 (Totila’s speech to the Goths); *Goth.* 3.34.9 (Lombard envoy’s speech to Justinian). This meaning was widespread in Patristic Greek, see Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* s.v. ἀγνωμοσύνη.

⁴ Transl. Kaldellis 106 (slightly modified). See also *Prokop, Perserkriege*, transl. O. Veh (Munich 1970) 307 (“Undank”); *Procopio di Cesarea, Le guerre*, transl. M. Craveri (Turin 1977) 133 (“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*⁶, 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^{er}*, transl. D. Roques (Alessandria 2011) 356–357

could be challenged also because the majority of translators render ἀγνωμοσύνη at *Goth.* 2.6.24 as either “folly” or “ingratitude.”⁶

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

(“mauvaise conduite”); *Procopio di Cesarea, Gli Edifici*, transl. C. dell’Osso (Vatican City 2018) 373 (“la [*scil. cattiva*] condotta”).

⁶ *Procopio di Cesarea, La Guerra Gotica II*, transl. D. Comparetti (Rome 1896) 44 (“ingrato”); *Prokop, Gotenkriege*, transl. O. Veh (Munich 1966) 265 (“rück-sichtslos”); *Procopius, History of the Wars, Secret History, and Buildings*, transl. Av. Cameron (New York 1967) 211 (“folly”); *Procopio di Cesarea, La Guerra Gotica*, transl. F. M. Pontani (Rome 1974) 133 (“ingrato”); Craveri 456 (“non ... con molta assennatezza”); *Procopio de Cesarea, Historia de las Guerras. Libros V–VI: Guerra Gótica*, transl. J. A. Flores Rubio (Madrid 2006) 254 (“no se condujo de manera comedida”); *Procopio di Cesarea, Le Guerre Gotiche. Libri V e VI*, transl. R. Masullo (Rome 2011) 111 (“assai poco assennato”); *Procope de Césarée, Histoire des Goths I*, transl. D. Roques (Paris 2015) 163 (“absence de jugement”).

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

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 parentum nostrorum foedera provenirent. aestimate, 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 Theoderic. 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*³ (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*²⁶ (Paris 1963) 14, “dureté inconsidérée, 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, “*praesertim 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, πρῶτους αἰρέει Γέτας τοὺς ἀθανατίζοντας. οἱ μὲν γὰρ δὴ τὸν Σαλμυδησὸν ἔχοντες Θρηϊκῆς καὶ ὑπὲρ Ἀπολλωνίης τε καὶ Μεσαμβρίας πόλιος οἰκημένοι, καλούμενοι δὲ Σκυρμιάδαι καὶ Νιψαῖοι, ἀμαχητὶ σφέας αὐτοὺς παρέδοσαν Δαρείῳ· οἱ δὲ Γέται πρὸς ἀγνωμοσύνην τραπόμενοι αὐτίκα ἐδουλώθησαν, Θρηϊκῶν ἔόντες ἀνδρηιότατοι καὶ δικαιοτάτοι.

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

and *Erodoto, Le Storie*, transl. F. Bevilacqua (Turin 1996) I 465 (“stupido orgoglio”). For Hdt. 4.93 see most recently *The Landmark Herodotus*, transl. A. L. Purvis (New York 2007) 320 (“foolish arrogance”), and *Herodotus, Histories*, transl. P. Mensch (Indianapolis/Cambridge 2014) 233 (“senseless pride”). For Hdt. 5.83 see *The History of Herodotus III*, transl. G. Rawlinson (New York 1860) 237 (“growing proud”); Bevilacqua II 97 (“arroganza insensata”); Purvis 403 (“disdain”); *Herodotus, Histories. Book V*, transl. S. Hornblower (Cambridge 2013) 237 (“foolish arrogance”); Mensch 295 (“arrogant”). For Hdt. 9.3 see Bevilacqua II 599 (“insensata arroganza”), Purvis 665 (“foolish pride”).

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 ἀγνωμοσύνη respectively as “stubborn disdain” (429) and “foolish pride” (666). For a possible different meaning of ἀγνωμοσύνη 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 ἀγνωμοσύνης καὶ σκαιότητος), 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, ἀγνωμοσύνη 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 Scyrmiaadae 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.¹⁰

The Getae are described as ἀνδρηιότατοι καὶ δικαιοτάτοι, 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.* 1.1.27,¹¹ 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,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*.¹³ Procopius was not unaware of this pseudo-ethnography, since in

¹⁰ Transl. Mensch 233. On the Getae see P. Delev, "Getae," *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (Malden 2013) 2911–2912.

¹¹ *Goth.* 1.1.27: δικαιοσύνης τε γὰρ ὑπερφῶς ἐπεμελήσατο καὶ τοὺς νόμους ἐν τῷ βεβαίῳ διεσώσατο, ἕκ τε βαρβάρων τῶν περιόικων τὴν χώραν ἀσφαλῶς διεφύλαξε, ξυνέσεώς τε καὶ ἀνδρίας ἐς ἄκρον ἐληλύθει ὡς μάλιστα.

¹² This is hardly surprising in Late Antiquity; see A. Gillett, "The Mirror of Jordanes: Concepts of the Barbarian, Then and Now," in P. Rousseau (ed.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Chichester 2009) 392–408, at 408. On Procopius' imitation of Herodotus the standard work is still H. Braun, *Die Nachahmung Herodots durch Prokop* (Nürnberg 1894); more recently see A. Nobbs, "Digressions in Procopius," in G. Greatrex et al. (eds.), *Le monde de Procope* (Paris 2018) 163–171, at 165–166.

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 πρότερόν τε ἦν καὶ τανῶν ἔστι, τὰ δὲ δὴ πάντων μέγιστα τε καὶ ἀξιολογώτατα Γότθοι τέ εἰσι καὶ Βανδίλοι καὶ Οὐισίγοτθοι καὶ Γήπαιδες. πάλαι μέντοι Σαυρομάται καὶ Μελάγγλαινοι ὀνομάζοντο· εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ καὶ Γετικὰ ἔθνη ταῦτ’ ἐκάλουν).¹⁴

To sum up, ἀγνωμοσύνη 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.

Procopius’ Herodotean allusion has pointed historiographical

Crisis: Jordanes, Cassiodorus and Justinian in Mid-sixth-century Constantinople,” *JRS* 107 (2017) 275–300 (a good *status quaestionis* about recent scholarship on Jordanes). See also Io. Lyd. *Mag.* 3.55.4, who calls Vitigis’ Goths Γέται. On the alleged Getic origins of the Goths see H. Wolfram, *Die Goten. Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des sechsten Jahrhunderts*⁵ (Munich 2009) 39, and more recently “Ostrogotha. Ein mythischer Amaler erhält zumindest einen historischen Namensvetter,” in J. Drauschke et al. (eds.), *Lebenswelte zwischen Archäologie und Geschichte. Festschrift für Falko Daim zu seinem 65. Geburtstag I* (Mainz 2018) 447–457, at 448, who sketches the evolution of the Getic/Gothic origins in classical and post-classical historiography, from Hdt. 4.93 to Cassiodorus.

¹⁴ See also *Goth.* 1.24.29–30: χρῆναι γὰρ τότε βασιλέα Ῥωμαίοις καταστήναι τινα, ἐξ οὗ δὴ Γετικὸν οὐδὲν Ῥώμη τὸ λοιπὸν δεῖσειε. Γετικὸν γὰρ φασιν ἔθνος τοὺς Γότθους εἶναι.

implications:¹⁵ 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,¹⁶ a bitter lesson which Herodotus' Getae could teach both the Goths and Justinian.

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¹⁵ For another case of intertextuality between Herodotus and Procopius with a significant ideological meaning see A. Kaldellis, "Procopius' Persian War: A Thematic and Literary Analysis," in R. Macrides (ed.), *History as Literature in Byzantium* (Farnham 2010) 253–273, at 258 (Hdt. 9.109.2 and Procop. *Pers.* 1.25.26).

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."