

Theodora, a (not so) Holy Harlot: Procopius' *Secret History* and the Hagiographic Narrative

Sergi Grau

AROUND 550,¹ shortly after Theodora's death, Procopius of Caesarea wrote a controversial work, the interpretation of which has strongly influenced the modern view of Theodora herself, of emperor Justinian, of their empire, and of their entire era: the *Anekdotia* or *Secret History* (*Historia arcana*), as it is commonly called among scholars.² The author ruthlessly attacks Justinian and Belisarius, his celebrated general, along with their wives, Theodora and Antonina. The elements that make up this critique, however, and especially the motivations behind it, have been and still are the subject of debate among scholars. The most conspicuous problem is that Procopius constructed, in the *Anekdotia*, a portrait of Theodora very different from the image of her conveyed in the *Wars*. Although

¹ The dating possibilities for the *Anekdotia* are 550/1, according to J. Haury, *Procopiana* (Augsburg 1991), B. Rubin, *Prokopios von Kaisareia* (Stuttgart 1954) = *RE* 23 (1957) 273–599, Av. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London 1985), G. Greatrex, “The Dates of Procopius’ Works,” *BMGS* 18 (1994) 101–114, J. A. S. Evans, “The Dates of Procopius’ Works: A Recapitulation of the Evidence,” *GRBS* 37 (1996) 301–313, J. Signes Codoñer, “Prokopios Anekdotia und Justinians Nachfolge,” *JÖB* 53 (2003) 47–82, and A. Kaldellis, “The Date and Structure of Prokopios’ *Secret History* and His Projected Work on Church History,” *GRBS* 49 (2009) 585–616; or 558/9, according to B. Croke, “Procopius’ *Secret History*: Rethinking the Date,” *GRBS* 25 (2005) 405–431, of which I consider the former more plausible.

² For a good summary of the issues see G. Greatrex, “Perceptions of Procopius in Recent Scholarship,” *Histos* 8 (2014) 77–82.

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 63 (2023) 447–465

ISSN 2159-3159

Article copyright held by the author(s) and made available under the
Creative Commons Attribution License

CC-BY <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

discussions about the historicity of these images have been going on for decades, a consensus now seems to have been reached about Theodora's historical involvement in political and ecclesiastical affairs, thanks largely to consultation of other sources, particularly epigraphic: Theodora, as expected of women at the imperial court, appeared alongside her husband in aulic rituals, and financed hospitals, monasteries, and churches; likewise, her role in the rescue of poor girls sold by parents to brothels seems credible.³

The portrayal of Theodora in the *Secret History* has been interpreted—I believe rightly—as a very traditional attempt to undermine the husband's reputation by attacking the wife's character and manners.⁴ The sources of this literary construction of Theodora have been highlighted in several studies:⁵ it is clear that Procopius used all his classical background to sharpen his pen in portraying Theodora in the most acerbic way possible. In this paper, however, I would like to focus on an aspect which,

³ See A. McClanan, *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses. Image and Empire* (New York 2002) 93–110.

⁴ See E. A. Fisher, “Theodora and Antonina in the *Historia Arcana*: History and/or Fiction?” *Arethusa* 11 (1978) 253–279; P. Allen, “Contemporary Portrayals of the Byzantine Empress Theodora,” in B. Garlick et al. (eds.), *Stereotypes of Women in Power: Historical Perspectives and Revisionist Views* (New York 1992) 93–104; and McClanan, *Representations* 107–117.

⁵ See notably Rubin, *Prokopios* 310–324; F. Bornmann, “Su alcuni passi di Procopio,” *Silt* 20 (1978) 27–37; Cameron, *Procopius* 37–46; M. Vinson, “The Christianization of Slander: Some Preliminary Observations,” in C. Sode et al. (eds.), *Novum Millennium. Studies on Byzantine History and Culture dedicated to Paul Speck* (London 2001) 415–424; J. Signes Codoñer, *Procopio de Cesarea, Historia secreta* (Madrid 2000) 110–111; L. Brubaker, “Sex, Lies and Textuality: the *Secret History* of Prokopios and the Rhetoric of Gender in Sixth-Century Byzantium,” in L. Brubaker et al. (eds.), *Gender in the Early Medieval World. East and West, 300–900* (Cambridge 2004) 83–101, at 86–87; A. Kaldellis, *Prokopios. The Secret History with Related Texts* (Indianapolis 2010) xxxv–xl; G. Greatrex, “L'historien Procope et la vie à Césarée au vie siècle,” in *Le monde de Procope/ The World of Procopius* (Paris 2018) 15–38; S. Grau and O. Febrer, “Procopius on Theodora: Ancient and New Biographical Patterns,” *ByzZeit* 113 (2020) 769–788.

I believe, has not yet been studied to its full extent and which constitutes a new rhetorical element, not taken, this time, from the classical παιδεία, but related, instead, to a contemporary genre: the hagiographic narrative.

1. *Theodora's portrait as a frustrated hagiographic story*

Theodora, as is well known, is a saint, commemorated with (and after) Justinian, in the Orthodox tradition—celebrated on 14 November—and her life would fit well within the conventions of a hagiographic sub-genre that flourished precisely in Procopius' time: that of the repentance and conversion of prostitutes, called usually “holy harlots” by recent scholars.⁶ The outlines of these hagiographic accounts are usually quite similar, although with notable narrative variations: a girl, after a life of lust and sexual depravity of varying length, is converted through the intervention of some minister of God—or by the divinity without intermediaries, as happens to Saint Mary of Egypt—and radically changes her life, through repentance and sharp penitence, to attain sainthood. All cases—which are basically four lives: Mary of Egypt, Pelagia of Antioch, Mary of Syria, and Thaïs—are texts that can be dated to the fifth century, with Syriac, Greek, and Latin traditions.

The clearest comparison for Theodora is with Saint Pelagia, a

⁶ See B. Ward, *Harlots of the Desert* (Kalamazoo 1987), which adds English translations of the Latin versions of the lives. The phrase has become popular among scholars and in the most important studies, such as those of R. Mazo Karras, “Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend,” *JHSex* 1 (1990) 3–32; L. L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia 1997) ch. 4 (“God’s Holy Harlots: The Redemptive Lives of Pelagia of Antioch and Mary of Egypt”); V. Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints. An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia 2004) ch. 4 (“The Secrets of Seduction: The Lives of the Holy Harlots”). It is also worth bearing in mind the objections of P. Cox Miller, “Is there a Harlot in this Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003) 419–435, who prefers to consider this hagiographic sub-genre as a grotesque element that manifests the problems of early Christianity in constructing a representation of female sanctity.

famous mime actress from Antioch who undergoes a sudden conversion when she hears a homily by Bishop Nonnus and then decides to give all her wealth to the Church, to be baptized, and to retire to a cell, disguised as a eunuch monk. The author of this life—who participates in the plot and explains it in the first person as a direct witness—is a certain James, a deacon of Bishop Nonnus himself, who cannot be identified and therefore cannot be dated with any certainty. In fact, there is a considerable consensus among critics that this account of Pelagia is pure fiction constructed from several elements:⁷ St. John Chrysostom, in his *Homily* 67 on the passage from Mt 21:12–32⁸ (*PG* 58 636–637), refers to an actress famous in Phoenicia, Cilicia, and Cappadocia who had many lovers and even romanced the brother of the empress, but, in the midst of her success, converted to Christianity, entered a monastic community, and refused to see her lovers ever again. It is plausible that the author of St. Pelagia’s life took advantage of this edifying account to construct his story and gave the protagonist the name of a virgin martyr, Pelagia of Antioch, of whom Ambrose explained that, at the age of fifteen, she proclaimed that she never wanted any man to touch her in life, or even to defile her with his eyes (*Epist.* 37). In any case, the original text of this *Life of Saint Pelagia* must have been written in Greek, but the oldest surviving version is a Syriac translation that can be dated to about the fifth century.⁹

At the beginning of the story, Pelagia—with the artistic name

⁷ See still H. Delehaye, *Les légendes hagiographiques* (Brussels 1905) 223–230. H. Usener, *Legenden der heiligen Pelagia* (Bonn 1879) XX–XXIV, even saw a transposition of Aphrodite herself, since Pelagia, literally “seafaring/of the sea,” is one of the usual epithets of the goddess. The relationship to the ancient Greek novel was also highlighted by Z. Pavlovskis, “The Life of St. Pelagia the Harlot: Hagiographic Adaptation of Pagan Romance,” *ClassFol* 30 (1976) 138–149.

⁸ αἱ πόρνοι προάγουσιν ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν, prostitutes “lead” or “teach” the way to the kingdom of God—it depends on our interpretation of the verb προάγω.

⁹ See S. P. Brock and S. A. Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley 1987) 40–41.

Margarita, in Syriac Marganito, “pearl”—walks in all her splendor before a group of assembled bishops who are struck by her beauty and must turn their faces away so as not to sin in thought (James the Deacon, *Life and Behavior of Our Holy Mother Pelagia* 4–5):¹⁰

Τοῦ δὲ ἁγίου πνεύματος λαλοῦντος διὰ τῶν χειλέων αὐτοῦ πρὸς ὠφέλειαν καὶ σωτηρίαν πάντων τῶν ἀκουόντων, ἰδοὺ ἄφνω παρέρχεται δι’ ἡμῶν ἡ πρώτη τῶν μιμάδων Ἀντιοχείας· αὕτη δὲ ἦν καὶ ἡ πρώτη τῶν χορευτριῶν τοῦ ὀρχηστοῦ. Καὶ διέβη καθημένη εἰς βαδιστὴν μετὰ πολλῆς φαντασίας κεκαλλωπισμένη ὥστε μὴ φαίνεσθαι ἐπ’ αὐτῇ πλὴν χρυσοῦ καὶ μαργαριτῶν καὶ λίθων τιμίων· τὰ δὲ γυμνά τῶν ποδῶν αὐτῆς διὰ χρυσοῦ καὶ μαργαριτῶν περικεκόσμητο· καὶ πολλὴ φαντασία τῶν παίδων καὶ τῶν κορασίων τῶν μετ’ αὐτῆς, φορούντων ἱματισμὸν πολυτελῆ καὶ μαριάκια χρυσᾶ, καὶ τοὺς μὲν αὐτῆς προτρέχοντας, τοὺς δὲ ἐπακολουθοῦντας. Τοῦ δὲ περικειμένου αὐτῇ κόσμου καὶ τοῦ ὠραϊσμοῦ οὐκ ἦν κόρος μάλιστα τοῖς δημοχαρέσιν ἀνθρώποις. Αὕτη διεληθοῦσα δι’ ἡμῶν τὸν ἀέρα ὅλον ἐπλήρωσε τῆς εὐωδίας τοῦ μόσχου καὶ τῶν μύρων τῶν ἐπ’ αὐτῇ.

And, while the Spirit was speaking through his [Nonnus’] lips for the profit and salvation of all who heard him, there suddenly passed through our midst the chief of the mime actresses of Antioch: she was, in fact, the first dancer of the theatre. And she rode along on a donkey, dressed in a very showy manner, so much so that she seemed to have nothing on her but gold, pearls and precious stones;¹¹ the bare feet were also adorned with gold and pearls; and there came with her a great throng of boys and girls, wearing very luxurious clothes and gold necklaces, some running before her and some following her. Of the adornment and fresh-

¹⁰ Ed. B. Flusin, “Βίος καὶ πολιτεία τῆς ὁσίας μητρὸς ἡμῶν Πελαγίας,” in P. Petitmengin (ed.), *Pelagie la Pénitente: Métamorphoses d’une légende* I (Paris 1981) 76–93, 94–130.

¹¹ This appearance of Pelagia dressed only in jewels and gold is reminiscent of the presentation of Babylon as a great prostitute, which represents idolatry and lasciviousness, in Rev 17:4. However, the fact that she is shown riding on a donkey and acclaimed by a crowd of followers also recalls the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem riding on a donkey and acclaimed as king by the crowds (Mt 21:1–9). Pelagia is thus depicted here as a true figure of the Antichrist.

ness that surrounded her, men desirous of pleasure could never tire. She passed in our midst, filling the whole air with the melody of her youth and the perfumes that anointed her.

Before her conversion, Pelagia was a mime actress, which is exactly the theatrical genre practiced by Theodora, according to Procopius (*Arc.* 11.11–13). Throughout late antiquity, mime was a professional category usually associated with prostitution,¹² probably because mime actresses performed scenes of a rather pornographic nature, built on a traditional mythological image, such as the famous goose number practiced by Theodora in the theatres (*Arc.* 11.20–21), which seems to be an obscene version, as some scholars have pointed out,¹³ of the union of Leda with Zeus transformed into a swan. The story of Theodora's life, then, fits very well into a hagiographic story, typical of the sub-genre of the holy harlots: she is, indeed, a particularly illustrious example of an actress of mime who leaves behind her past of prostitution and pornography on stage to become a saint and, moreover, empress, the wife of her equally saintly husband Justinian.

The touchpoints with hagiographic narrative of the holy harlots are not exhausted in this one topic. Their protagonists are usually women who are superior, in all respects, to the men they shock. Pelagia and Mary of Egypt are not presented as prostitutes according to the legal code in force at the time and do not even demand money in exchange for sex: they are women

¹² For the social consideration of actresses at the time see C. Edwards, “Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome,” in J. P. Hallet et al. (eds.), *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton 1997) 66–95; D. R. French, “Maintaining Boundaries: The Status of Actresses in Early Christian Society,” *VigChr* 52 (1998) 293–318; Ch. Hugoniot et al. (eds.), *Le statut de l'acteur dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (Tours 2004); J. A. Jiménez, *Los juegos paganos en la Roma Cristiana* (Treviso 2010); particularly for mime actresses see R. Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2008).

¹³ B. Rubin, *Das Zeitalter Iustinians I* (Berlin 1960) 101. Indeed, it seems that Byzantine-era mime still staged the love affairs of the gods: see V. Cottas, *Le théâtre à Byzance* (Paris 1931) 39.

who enjoy sex and go beyond all the limits that their society imposed on women. After converting, they continue to talk to the priests from a position of clear superiority and practice their spirituality in solitude, outside of the ecclesiastical structures.¹⁴ Mary of Egypt is a free and wild spirit who gives peremptory orders, with unquestionable authority, to a priest of exalted virtue, named Zosimas, who wanted to perfect himself further in the practice of asceticism when he finds her naked in the middle of the Palestinian desert. In this respect Theodora is similar: she is therefore often criticized by Procopius because she in fact controls the actions of her husband, who is presented rather as a henpecked man.

As a woman at that time and in that cultural context—as in so many others—she was expected to be chaste, submissive, and dependent on her husband or any man around her, with no voice or will of her own in any matter.¹⁵ Quite the opposite of these conventions, Theodora is presented as an independent and active woman in all public and private facets, with an intense sexual life radically out of keeping with the conventions of the time—exactly in the way the respective lives describe the sexuality of Pelagia and Mary of Egypt—and, above all, dominant in all areas of her life. Already as a prostitute it was she who seduced the lovers and exhausted them sexually (*Arc.* 9.15):

ἐς δὲ τοὺς ἐραστὰς ἐχλεύαζε τε βλακεύουσα καὶ νεωτέρας αἰ
τῶν μίξεων ἐνδιαθρυπτομένη ἐπιτεχνήσεσι παραστήσασθαι τὰς
τῶν ἀκολάστων ψυχὰς ἐς αἰ ἴσχυεν, ἐπεὶ οὐδὲ πειρᾶσθαι πρὸς
τοῦ τῶν ἐντυγχανόντων ἡξίου, ἀλλ' ἀνάπαλιν αὐτὴ γελοιάζουσα
τε καὶ βωμολόχως ἰσχιάζουσα τοὺς παραπεπτωκότας ἅπαντας,
ἄλλως τε καὶ ἀγενεῖους ὄντας ἐπεῖρα.

She would joke with her lovers lying around in bed with them, and, by toying with new sexual techniques, constantly managed to arouse the souls of those who were debauched. Nor did she

¹⁴ This is pointed out insightfully by Cox Miller, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003) 429.

¹⁵ See e.g. J. Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance (4^e-7^e siècle) I* (Paris 1990).

wait for her customers to make the first pass at her; quite the contrary, she herself tempted all who came along, flirting and suggestively shaking her hips, especially if they were beardless youths. (transl. A. Kaldellis)

Afterwards, as empress, no one could ever persuade her to do anything other than what she determined (15.2):

ἄλλω μὲν γὰρ ἀναπεισθεῖσα ἢ ἀναγκασθεῖσα εἰργάζετο οὐδὲν πώποτε, αὐτὴ δὲ τὰ δόξαντα ἐπετέλει αὐθαδιαζομένη δυνάμει τῆ πάσῃ, οὐδενὸς ἐξαιτῆσθαι τὸν παραπεπτωκότα τολμῶντος.

She never did anything because she had been persuaded or forced by another person; rather, she herself stubbornly executed her own plans with all the power at her command and no one dared even to intercede on behalf of those who had angered her.

And there are numerous passages which emphasize Justinian's submission, like Belisarius' submission to Antonina, precisely because of her influence.¹⁶

I argue that Procopius' presentation of Theodora's biography, therefore, has sought to construct an inversion of the hagiographic stories of holy harlots that circulated in Byzantium in the fifth and sixth centuries, precisely, with great success, in order to deny her any possibility of a redemptive story. This is why there is, in the *Secret History*, no trace of the repentance motif: Procopius is reversing this trope, as he does with so much of the regime's Christian propaganda.

2. Other anti-hagiographic reversals in the *Secret History*

In fact, one of the devices used most frequently and effectively by Procopius in this work is the inversion of the traits of sanctity that might halo the protagonists. Justinian's asceticism—to cite only the most obvious example—which takes the form of frugality and extraordinary vespers (*Arc.* 8.12, 12.27, 13.28–33,

¹⁶ See particularly Allen, in *Stereotypes of Women in Power* 93–104. Procopius in several passages stresses with great intensity the excessive influence of these two women at Justinian's court, to the point of making an essential motif, as noted by A. Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea. Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia 2004) 142–150, which refers to Justinian's reign under the title “the rule of women.”

14.11; *Buildings* 1.7.7), always respectful of the liturgical calendar—as when, in *Arc.* 13.29, it is said that he neither drank nor ate anything for a couple of days, especially before Easter—is of course an essential characteristic of the saints. But Procopius is careful that no one can make the usual inference: far from visibly evincing a life of holiness and devotion to God, as was usual in hagiographic narrative, his asceticism becomes a token of false εὐσέβεια, of feigned piety, and constitutes, in Procopius' eyes, nothing less than a proof of his demoniacal nature (*Arc.* 12.27):

Πῶς δὲ οὐκ ἔμελλεν ὅδε ὁ ἀνὴρ δαίμων τις ἀλιτήριος εἶναι, ὅς γε ποτοῦ ἢ σιτίων ἢ ὕπνου εἰς κόρον οὐδέποτε ἦλθεν, ἀλλ' ἀμηγέπη τῶν παρατεθέντων ἀπογευσάμενος ἄωρὶ νύκτωρ περιήρχετο τὰ βασίλεια, καίπερ ἐς τὰ ἀφροδίσια δαιμονίως ἐσπουδακῶς;

How, indeed, could this man not have been a loathsome demon when he never drank, ate, or slept enough to satisfy the needs of a human being? He would but occasionally taste a bit of what was set before him and then stalk the palace halls at odd hours of the night. And yet, despite all this, he was infernally addicted to the pleasures of sex.

Nor is Justinian's piety denied, but rather changed in Procopius' account: it is in fact a pretext for his greed, especially in his plans, shared with his wife, to annihilate mankind (*Arc.* 13.6–8). Similarly, the pious works of the empress, such as the foundation of a monastery—eloquently named Metanoia—to keep prostitutes away from brothels and from the streets, could be interpreted as a sign of Theodora's conversion from her former life and a desire to help the girls who were still in this sad situation, in line with the hagiographic stories of the holy harlots, which proclaim, fundamentally, the infinite possibilities of forgiveness, of divine mercy, on the sole condition of sincere repentance as a result of their conversion: what in Greek is known as μετάνοια, precisely. In fact, Procopius himself, in the *Buildings* (1.9.1–10), praises the imperial determination to close brothels and take girls into monasteries. In the *Secret History*, however, in this as in everything else, the empress is the subject of criticism (*Arc.* 17.5–6):

πόρνας ἀμέλει πλέον ἢ πεντακοσίας ἀγείρασα ἐν ἀγορᾷ μέση ἐς τριώβολον, ὅσον ἀποζῆν μισθαρνούσας, ἕς τε τὴν ἀντιπέρας ἤπειρον στείλασα ἐν τῷ καλουμένῳ Μετανοία μοναστηρίῳ καθεῖρξε τὸν βίον μεταμφιέσασθαι ἀναγκάζουσα. ὧν δὴ τινες ἐρρίπτουν αὐτὰς ἀφ' ὑψηλοῦ νύκτωρ, ταύτη τε τῆς ἀκουσίου μεταβολῆς ἀπηλλάσσοντο.

She rounded up more than five hundred whores who sold themselves in the middle of the marketplace, the “three obol girls” (though one can barely live off this). She sent them to the opposite shore and locked them up in the monastery named Repentance, forcing them to put on and wear a different life and habit. But, during the night, some of them would throw themselves off the walls, escaping their involuntary conversion in that way.

This account subverts the end of the hagiography of one of the most famous holy harlots, Saint Thais, who ends up retiring to a monastery of virgins to do penitence for her former life, after she has been converted thanks to the intervention of a desert father—either Abba Serapion, Abba John the Dwarf, or the Paphnutius of the Latin tradition, depending on the version.

3. *Theodora's portrait in hagiographic narrative*

But it is important to focus on another significant aspect: the image of Theodora in the hagiographic narrative.¹⁷ As Susan Ashbrook Harvey has pointed out, “what made hagiography important was not its capacity to convey historical facts, but rather its ability to represent the tenor of its times as people felt and experienced them.”¹⁸ The image of Theodora that emerges from the hagiographic texts, therefore, allows us to approach in a privileged way the established perception of the empress in her historical context, beyond the always complex considerations regarding the historicity of the stories.

First of all, we must consider the sixth-century Monophysite

¹⁷ The main evidence from Syriac sources has been collected and presented by S. A. Harvey, “Theodora the ‘Believing Queen’: A Study in Syriac Historiographical Tradition,” *Journal of Syriac Studies* 4 (2001) 209–234.

¹⁸ “Martyr Passions and Hagiography,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford 2008) 603–627, at 612.

Yuhannan of Amida, known in the West as John of Ephesus, close to both Justinian and Theodora. He mentions her in passing in his biography, written in Syriac, of Stephen and Thomas, the two deacons of Bishop Mare of Amida at the time of the persecutions in 519. Theodora plays a secondary role when she helps the two saints to continue their ascetic life thanks to her influence on the emperor. But what is most remarkable is that John of Ephesus, a clear supporter of the anti-Chalcedonians with clear sympathies for Theodora,¹⁹ states bluntly that the empress “came from the brothel”:²⁰

[Arriving at Constantinople, Stephen found himself directed] to Theodora who came from the brothel (πορνείον), who was at that time a patrician, but eventually became queen also with king Justinian.

Similarly, in the so-called *Fredegarius' Chronicle*, an anonymous work from the seventh century, Justinian and Belisarius marry two sisters who came from a brothel (*lupanar*), although the empress is given the name Antonia instead of Theodora.²¹ Some six centuries later, on the other hand, in the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, Justinian, after the campaign against the Persians in the eastern empire (9.20),²²

came to Mabbug [Hierapolis], and there he took for his wife Theodora, daughter of an Orthodox [i.e. non-Chalcedonian] priest, who, because he was not pleased that she should mix with Chalcedonians, was not willing to give his daughter until Justinian

¹⁹ See, especially, S. A. Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and “The Lives of the Eastern Saints”* (Berkeley 1990). For the biographical information on John, see 28–42, 160–165; for discussion of John’s portrayal of Theodora, see 80–91, 177–183.

²⁰ E. W. Brooks, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (PO 17 [1923]) 189.

²¹ Fredegarius 2.62; B. Krusch, *MHG Scr.Rer.Merov.* II (Berlin 1888) 85. From a philological point of view, it is worth bearing in mind the research on the work and its manuscript tradition done by R. Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken* (Hanover 2007).

²² Ed. J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* (Paris 1899–1904); transl. S. A. Harvey, in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley 1987).

made a vow that he would not compel her to accept the synod [of Chalcedon].

Theodora has already become, in the later Syriac tradition, a saintly defender of the anti-Chalcedonians from her very childhood, the daughter of a Monophysite priest, and, moreover, in the *Chronicle of 1234*,²³ she is “a girl of lovely appearance” (44) and “adorned with modesty and bodily and spiritual beauty” (45). Her body is as pure and innocent as the faith she professes, free from Chalcedonian influences. However, in the older tradition, closer to the empress, as we have seen, her past as a prostitute is openly declared.

Theodora’s career as a prostitute, although some scholars have tried to reject it as a falsehood or misinterpretation,²⁴ appears in sources other than Procopius, and in sources, moreover, clearly favorable to the empress. It would have been easy, then, to fit Theodora’s life into the narrative scheme of the conversion of a former prostitute. In this regard, the late-seventh-century Coptic Bishop John of Nikiu recounts that Theodora considered the patriarch of Alexandria, Timothy, as her spiritual father (*Chronicle* 90.87).²⁵ It could be conceived that the stay in Alexandria in the company of Bishop Timothy would have determined a personal and spiritual evolution of Theodora, as did Bishop Nonnus in the story of Saint Pelagia, and she would then have left behind her life linked to the theatres and, perhaps, to the

²³ Ed. J.-B. Chabot, *Chronicon anonymum ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens* II (Louvain 1937); transl. Harvey.

²⁴ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* II (London 1923) 28 n.5, claimed, in effect, that Theodora’s connection with prostitution is, alternatively, an interpolation or a misunderstanding of the term πορνείον, which would actually refer to Πλόρναι, a street in Constantinople next to the theatre (*Novella* 105.1). D. Potter, *Theodora. Actress, Empress, Saint* (Oxford 2015) 39, is of the opinion that the word πορνείον “may actually be referring to her past as an actress,” although at 46 he presents a teenaged Theodora who had to supplement her income “with money she could make by taking lovers.” It seems rather better to understand πορνείον as a brothel: apart from being clearly simpler, it fits the narrative much better.

²⁵ Ed. H. Zotenberg, *La Chronique de Jean, évêque de Nikiou* (Paris 1883).

prostitution that was usually related to them, to become the future holy empress. Furthermore as empress: she rescued girls sold into prostitution by their poor parents, paying them off and closing the brothels (Malalas 18.23–25 Thurn); she founded a monastery for the former prostitutes (Procop. *Buildings* 1.9); according to the most favorable sources (John of Nikiu 93.3) she even eradicated prostitution throughout the whole world.

In fact, as has been often pointed out, not even Procopius, with all his hostility, accuses her of infidelity to her husband once she is married. His attack must therefore necessarily follow other rhetorical paths: as he cannot denigrate her in any other way, Procopius chooses to enhance and amplify her career as a prostitute and the domination of men that this past allows her to exercise even later at Justinian's court, constructing the details with classical parallels that the learned readership must have immediately identified. But, on the other hand, in order to avoid the easy association of Theodora's life story with the hagiographic genre of the holy harlots, he subverts the traditional narrative parameters to reveal—as is usual in all the *Secret History*—the real motives behind attitudes and deeds that might seem virtuous and typical of a saint.

4. *A very special case: the Life of Anastasia the Patrician*

However, not all contemporary hagiographic sources present this kind of portrait of the empress. I would like to conclude these reflections on the narrative construction of Theodora's image in contrast to the hagiographic accounts with a reference that has been neglected by scholars, at least to my knowledge, and which seems to me particularly significant. In the *Life of Saint Anastasia the Patrician* (Περὶ τῆς πατρικίας Ἀναστασίας, BHG 79–80E), attributed to Saint Daniel of Scetis,²⁶ it is explained that (BHG 79

²⁶ Ed. B. Dahlman, *Saint Daniel of Sketis: A Group of Hagiographic Texts* (Uppsala 2007), which clearly improves upon the edition of L. Clugnet, *Vie (et récits) de l'abbé Daniel le Scétiote* (Paris 1901). For discussion of textual transmission and manuscripts see Dahlman 42–46 and 90–110. All of Abba

= 62–69 Dahlman):

αὕτη πρώτη πατρικία ἦν τοῦ παλατίου, καὶ ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἰουστινιανὸς ἠθέλησε λαβεῖν αὐτὴν εἰς τὸ παλάτιον διὰ τὴν πολλὴν σύνεσιν αὐτῆς. μανθάνει οὖν ἡ Θεοδώρα καὶ ἀγανακτεῖ καὶ ἐβουλεύσατο ἐξορίσαι αὐτήν. γνωστὸν δὲ αὐτῇ γέγονε τὸ πρᾶγμα καὶ νυκτὸς μισθωσαμένη πλοῖον ἐπάρασα τινὰ τῶν πραγμάτων αὐτῆς καταλαμβάνει τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρειαν καὶ κατοικεῖ εἰς τὸ Πέμπτον. ἐν οἷς καὶ μοναστήριον συνεστήσατο καὶ λέγεται τῆς Πατρικίας ἕως τῆς σήμερον.

She [Anastasia] was a patrician lady of the highest rank of the royal court, and the emperor Justinian wanted to take her into the palace because of her great intelligence. But Theodora learnt of it and was annoyed and decided to exile her. But this matter became known to her and she hired a ship at night, took some of her possessions and reached Alexandria and settled at Pempton. There she also founded a monastery which is called the Monastery of the Patrician Lady to this day. (transl. Dahlman, slightly modified)

After Theodora died, in 548, the story continues (70–79):

πάλιν μανθάνει ὅτι βουλεύεται ὁ βασιλεὺς μεταστείλασθαι αὐτήν. αὐτὴ δὲ ἔφυγε νυκτὸς ἀπὸ Ἀλεξανδρείας καὶ ἦλθεν ἐνταῦθα πρὸς με καὶ ἀνέθετό μοι πάντα καὶ παρεκάλεσε δοῦναι αὐτῇ κελλίον ἔξω τῆς Σκήτεως. καὶ ἔδωκα αὐτῇ τὸ σπήλαιον τοῦτο. καὶ μετημφιάσατο τὸ ἀνδρικὸν σχῆμα. ἴδε οὖν ἔχει σήμερον εἰκοσιοκτῶ ἔτη ἐν τῇ Σκήτει, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἔγνω τὰ εἰς αὐτὴν εἰ μὴ σὺ καὶ ἄλλος εἷς. πόσους οὖν μαγιστριανοὺς ἔπεμψεν ὁ βασιλεὺς ἀναζητῶν αὐτήν, οὐ μόνον δὲ ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ πάπας καὶ πᾶσα ἡ Ἀλεξάνδρεια. καὶ οὐδεὶς ἔμαθεν ἐν ποίῳ τόπῳ ἐστὶν ἕως τῆς σήμερον ἡμέρας.

She again learnt that the emperor was planning to send for her. But she fled from Alexandria at night and came here to me [Abba Daniel] and confided everything to me and asked me to give her a cell outside Scetis. I gave her this cave and she changed her clothes for a man's. Now, today she has been in Scetis for twenty-eight years [576?] and nobody has learnt about her except for you and one other. How many officials the emperor sent in search of

Daniel's dossier, with translations from all versions, is in T. Vivian, *Witness to Holiness. Abba Daniel of Scetis* (Kalamazoo 2008).

her, and not only him, but the patriarch too of the whole of Alexandria! Yet nobody learnt where she was until today.

This account of Anastasia the Patrician belongs to a set of short narratives that are usually included in most manuscripts of the life of Abba Daniel of Scetis. In this case, all the tale about Anastasia is explained by Daniel to his disciple after he notices, at the very moment of preparing her corpse for the burial, that she is a woman, not a eunuch as she was supposed to be.

It is commonly accepted that Abba Daniel was a sixth-century priest and monastic superior (ἡγούμενος) of Scetis, modern Wadi al-Natrum, to the northwest of Cairo. The materials about him, written originally in Greek, can be dated to as early as the seventh century, although many translations survive, with multiple changes and rewritings—as is usual in this kind of hagiographic narrative—in Coptic, Ethiopic, Syriac, Armenian, Latin, Arabic, Georgian, and Old Church Slavonic. Of course, as has been pointed out by many scholars, the Daniel dossier must be considered rather a collection of edifying fables, all of them sharing the theme of secret holiness,²⁷ rather than a narrative with any historical element.²⁸ Anastasia has been explicitly identified as a deaconess connected to Bishop Severus of Antioch (ca. 465–540) at the end of the Syriac version of her

²⁷ That is, “early stories about persons, who are called ‘secret (or hidden) servants’ (κρυπτοὶ δοῦλοι),” in the sense that they are secret servants of God who conceal their sanctity in foolishness, drunkenness, or simply they live apart from the world, and nobody could discern their holiness, except Abba Daniel himself: see Dahlman, *Saint Daniel of Sketis* 71–74.

²⁸ See particularly M. Bonnet, review of Clugnet, *Vie (et récits) de l'abbé Daniel*, *ByzZeit* 13 (1904) 166–171, at 166; D. J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford 1966) 146; T. Orlandi, “Daniel of Scetis,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* III (New York 1991) 692; Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women* 142. Vivian, *Witness to Holiness* 17–25, is more optimistic about the historicity of at least some characters and events of these stories, but it is simply impossible to assert anything in this sense. About Anastasia, H. Delehaye, “Quelques saints du propre de Naples,” *AnalBoll* 59 (1941) 1–33, at 32, considered that her story is clearly created by the imagination of Greek hagiographers.

Life,²⁹ and some letters from Severus to a deaconess Anastasia certainly survive in Syriac and Coptic.³⁰ Van Cauwenbergh even suggested that the story simply derived from the very name of the monastery called The Patrikia's, as an etiological account, or, alternatively, from the name of the deaconess Anastasia in the letters by the patriarch Severus.³¹

It is in fact very difficult, as it is usual with hagiographic narrative, to clearly demonstrate any historicity about the character. But, of course, our interest is in the image of Theodora in this story. And, regardless whether they are attributed to Daniel himself or to a disciple of his,³² what is interesting is that they are texts that are practically contemporary with Procopius' *Secret History*, on the one hand, and, on the other, that Daniel is, like John of Ephesus, a clear opponent of the Council of Chalcedon. It is, therefore, very significant that this story has striking parallels, for once, with Theodora's characterization by Procopius' *Secret History*. Firstly, it corresponds perfectly with the fear of the power of the empress to undermine the careers of her political and religious opponents, omnipresent in the *Secret History*.³³ It is, indeed, a variant of the episode in which Procopius tells the truth about the death of Queen Amalasueta, daughter of Theodoric, instigated by Theodora's jealousy, which he had not dared to explain in the *Wars* for fear of the anger of the empress (16.1–7). Further to this, the description of the sexual appetites of Justinian himself are unnoticed in any text other

²⁹ F. Nau, "Vies et récits d'anachorètes (IV^e–VII^e siècles)," *ROrChr* 7 (1902) 604–617, 8 (1903) 91–100; transl. Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women* 148–149.

³⁰ Letters 69, 71, 72: E. W. Brooks, *A Collection of Letters of Severus of Antioch* (*PO* 14.1 [1920]) 75–103, 107–117, 117–127.

³¹ P. Van Cauwenbergh, *Études sur les moines d'Égypte depuis le concile de Chalcedoine (451) jusqu'à l'invasion arabe (640)* (Paris 1914) 26.

³² As argued by Bonnet, *ByzZeit* 13 (1904) 167, and Vivian, *Witness to Holiness* 17–25.

³³ See particularly *Arc.* 5.8–9, 5.26–27, 16.13.

than the *Secret History* (12.27),³⁴ where, as we have seen, Procopius describes the emperor's nocturnal rages in this way, though without going into detail.

Also, in a Coptic panegyric entitled *The Forty-Nine Elders of Scetis* (2.27),³⁵ clearly dependent on this story about Anastasia, Justinian is presented in exactly the same terms of Procopius' *Secret History*:

When the impious Justinian—who persecuted the holy Patriarch Severus up to the time that he went to Egypt and fell asleep there so that this country came to enjoy all his benedictions—wanted to arrange a royal marriage for her, she fled from the tyrant, that bloody emperor. She went to the great city of Alexandria and from Alexandria she went to Scetis, and she prayed over the bodies of the saints whose feast day we celebrate today. (transl. Vivian)

If these references to the *Life of Saint Anastasia the Patrician* can be taken into consideration in the sense I propose and the usual dating of the text is correct, it would be no more and no less than the first reference to a knowledge of Procopius' *Secret History* that is prior to the well-known quotation in the *Suda*,³⁶ which plausibly depended on the excerptors of Procopius' books working under the patronage of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus.³⁷ This reference would help to confirm that, with the exception of

³⁴ Of course, they are in stark contrast to the imperial propaganda, as found in *Novella* 74.4, where Justinian claimed: “we know, though we are lovers of chastity [...] that nothing is more vehement than erotic mania.”

³⁵ Ed. S. de Ricci and E. O. Winstedt, “Les quarante-neuf viellards de Scété,” *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale* 39.2 (Paris 1910–1911); French transl. van Cauwenbergh, *Études sur les moines* 14–15.

³⁶ π 2479: [Προκόπιος] ἔγραψε καὶ ἕτερον βιβλίον, τὰ καλούμενα Ἀνέκδοτα, τῶν αὐτῶν πράξεων ὡς εἶναι ἀμφοτέρω βιβλία θ'. ὅτι τὸ βιβλίον Προκοπίου τὸ καλούμενον Ἀνέκδοτα ψόγους καὶ κωμωδίαν Ἰουστινιανοῦ βασιλέως περιέχει καὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ γυναικὸς Θεοδώρας, ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ αὐτοῦ Βελισσαρίου καὶ τῆς γαμετῆς αὐτοῦ.

³⁷ Following the classic and persuasive arguments of C. De Boor, “Suidas und die Konstantinische Exzerptensammlung,” *ByzZeit* 21 (1912) 381–424, and 23 (1914–1920) 1–127.

the *Buildings*, all Procopius' works were widely read from the seventh century onward, and not only in learned circles. As Marek Jankowiak has recently argued, against the usual opinion stated by Bertold Rubin,³⁸ “none of this supports the idea of its [sc. the *Secret History*] clandestine circulation until the fortuitous rediscovery of the manuscript in the 10th century.”³⁹

5. *Some concluding remarks*

Procopius, thus, consciously constructed a kind of anti-hagiography of Theodora, who can no longer be, through his rhetoric, a prostitute turned saint, as in conventional hagiographies of holy harlots or penitents, but an inverted saint, similar to her demonic husband Justinian. This is of course one more point among the various elements, ancient and modern, that Procopius used in his work, but the hagiographic references constitute, in an author like him, so classicizing in all respects, a particularly new and effective reference, in his context, for the absolute discrediting of Theodora. In fact, there is no lack of evidence of such a process in the hagiographic accounts closest chronologically to the empress, which do not deny Theodora's origin as a prostitute, without this being an obstacle to her sanctity—just as is the case in the accounts of repentant prostitutes. Moreover, even some of the characteristics of her personality, such as her unsubmissive and domineering character, especially by the standards that the society of the time allowed for women, also correspond to those of the holy harlots in the hagiographic tradition.

But most shockingly, a contemporary hagiographic account, the *Life of Anastasia the Patrician*, reveals that Procopius' *Secret History* is not, as is usually considered, the only text that portrays Theodora as a cruel and envious ruler, capable of exiling anyone at her whim, and her subjugated husband Justinian as a de-

³⁸ Rubin, *Prokopios* 528–529.

³⁹ M. Jankowiak, “Procopius of Caesarea and His Byzantine Successors,” in M. Meier et al. (eds.), *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea* (Leiden 2022) 231–251, at 250.

praved man greedy for sex with women of his court.

This evidence, indeed, should make us consider that the *Secret History* was definitely intended to be published, in whatever manner it might have been, and that its title must rather refer to what the term ἀνέκδοτον usually meant in antiquity: a work limited to a sole private copy.⁴⁰ This might be seen as the equivalent to being left unpublished, because the author did not consider it appropriate for the larger public—sometimes because it contained indiscreet or dangerous stories, which is how the term *anecdote* has come to its present meaning for us. The text, however, must have circulated, somehow, until it reached the circles of Constantine VII, the redactors of the *Suda* who registered its existence, and the Vatican manuscript which preserved it until its discovery and publication in Lyon by Niccolò Alamanni in 1623.

In any case, it is quite evident that the relationship between the *Secret History* and the hagiographic narrative is more interesting than might at first sight be imagined.⁴¹

November, 2023

Dept. of Classical,
Romanic and Semitic Philology
University of Barcelona /
Institut Català d'Arqueologia Clàssica
Tarragona
s.grau@ub.edu

⁴⁰ See T. Dorandi, *Nell'officina dei classici. Come lavoravano gli autori antichi* (Rome 2007) 83–84.

⁴¹ This work is part of the research of the project *La construcción del pasado en la Grecia arcaica y clásica: mecanismos compositivos, genealogías y catálogos*, directed by Jesús Carrusco and Xavier Riu, and financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (PID2019-110908GB-I00). I would also like to thank Dr. Carmen Sánchez Mañas for bringing the text of Anastasia the Patrician to my attention for the first time.