

Procopius, De aedificiis I 2, 9-10

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Procopius, *De aedificiis* I 2, 9–10

By J. A. S. Evans, Vancouver

... αἴγλη τέ τις ἐνθένδε αὐτοῦ ἀπαστρέπτει. Φαίη τις ἂν ποιητικῶς εἶναι τὸν ὀπωρινὸν ἐκεῖνον ἀστέρα. βλέπει δὲ πρὸς ἀνίσχοντά που τὸν ἥλιον, τὴν ἠμιόχησιν ἐπὶ Πέρσας, οἶμαι, ποιούμενος.

This passage occurs in Procopius' description of Justinian's equestrian statue in the Augustaeum, and K. Gantar¹ has already called attention to the peculiarity of the comparison, wherein Procopius equates Justinian with Sirius, a star coupled in the ancient authors with thirst, heat and pestilence. He notes, correctly, that there is an implied reference (hence the word *ποιητικῶς*) to Iliad 22, 25–31, where Priam sees Achilles advancing, gleaming like Sirius. The equestrian statue showed Justinian in the *schema* of Achilles², and since Procopius imagines the emperor advancing against the Persians, the implied comparison with Achilles approaching Troy, bent on the destruction of Hector is apt enough. The equation of the Trojans with Asiatics and hence with the Persians was an ancient one; it can be found in Herodotus³, and Alexander the Great found the Achillean rôle an attractive one as he set out against the Achaemenid empire. Nevertheless, Gantar sees this metaphor as an example of secret irony. The comparison with Sirius is double-edged; the secondary meaning which Procopius intended was that Justinian, like Sirius, brought destruction on his people, and this can be taken as evidence that the 'Buildings', flattering as it is, does not show any real change of heart towards the emperor. Procopius' inner feelings were still hostile.

It can scarcely be doubted that the cool praises of the 'Buildings' are no evidence for Procopius' true feelings towards Justinian's regime. Sincerity has no place in panegyrics, and the 'Buildings' is not merely a panegyric, but almost certainly a commissioned one at that⁴. It presents the official concept of the emperor and the imperial post, which is the diametric opposite of that delineated by the 'Anekdotia'⁵. Nevertheless, it should be noted, first, that the passage in the Iliad to which Procopius almost certainly refers, has Achilles advancing against Troy, and in Aed. I 2, 10, Justinian in Achilles' costume is directing his course against the Persians. It is the glitter of Achilles' armour which is likened to Sirius in the Homeric simile; Sirius as an omen of evil and a bringer of pestilence, potentially

¹ Kajetan Gantar, *Kaiser Iustinian «jenem Herbststern gleich»*, Mus. Helv. 19 (1962) 194–196.

² Aed. I 2, 7. On the concept of the emperor as Achilles, see G. Downey, *Justinian as Achilles*, TAPA 71 (1940) 68–78.

³ I 1–5.

⁴ Cf. J. A. S. Evans, *Procopius* (New York 1972) 77.

⁵ Ibid. 99.

destructive to all mortals and not merely Trojans, is secondary to the main thrust of the figure of speech. Hence it would be pressing Procopius too hard to take his reference as a covert suggestion that Justinian was responsible for the plague which struck Constantinople in 542, even though in the 'Anekdotia' Procopius does hold Justinian responsible, not only for the plague but for other natural catastrophes⁶. Second, it is the glitter of Justinian's helmet which Procopius likens to Sirius. One can hardly fail to connect this glitter with the supernatural light glowing around the emperor's head, the *lux divinum verticem claro orbe complectens*⁷. An author searching his Homer for a parallel to this supernatural light crowning Achilles would be hard put to find one, but the simile of Iliad 22, 26–31 is close enough for comparison.

There is another passage in ancient literature which has some bearing on Aed. I 2, 9–10. In Aen. 8, 680–681, Vergil describes Augustus at Actium as:

*stans celsa in puppi; geminas cui tempora flammās
laeta vomunt, patriumque aperitur vertice sidus.*

The *geminæ flammæ* have provoked various interpretations; Servius takes the words as a reference to Augustus' gaze from his two eyes. But the *patrium sidus* is easy to identify; it is the *sidus Caesaris*, which Servius says Augustus had depicted on his helmet. So Servius' interpretation of Aen. 8, 681 is *apparet sidus in vertice, hoc est super galeam*. Vergil has here made a contribution to the imperial iconography, which was eventually to allow Procopius quite naturally to couple the glitter of an emperor's helmet with the brightness of a star, and hence the simile of Iliad 22, 26–31 comparing Achilles and the star Sirius seemed apt for Justinian who appeared in the *schema* of Achilles, and whose head should be surrounded by a supernatural light in any case. It is unlikely that any irony was intended. Rather, Aed. I 2, 10 is only a recondite, but carefully chosen allusion to Homer's Achilles.

⁶ Ibid. 97.

⁷ Mamert. *Paneg. Maximiano* 3.