

The secret history essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Procopius is considered to be a historian, who lived in the 6th century. From his works we are able to visit back into the Byzantine Empire, when Emperor Justinian reigned. Through the three books he created: “ History of the Wars”, “ The Buildings of Justinian”, and “ The Secret History”, he is our primary source of information about the reign of Emperor Justinian. After reading “ The Secret History”, I found the tone of the book to be different than that of a classical historian’s book. Procopius tells us that he wants the true events of this time to be recorded, for all to know the misdeeds of the tyrants, so that “ those who in the future, if it so happens, are similarly ill-used at the hands of tyrants will not find this record altogether useless; for it is always comforting for those in distress to know that they are not the only ones on whom these blows have fallen”. Procopius had a great dislike for the Emperor Justinian and the Empress Theodora, and wanted his audience, which would have been the people of the Byzantine Empire, to know their true character. Perhaps Procopius found himself disillusioned by the regime he served, and voiced his outrage, and his true perspective, in his writings “ The Secret History”, wanting his audience to see them with this same perspective.

Procopius is a well-educated man, a well-travelled man. He held the position of assessor (military legal secretary) to General Belisarius, and accompanied him on his military campaigns. Procopius explains to his audience that for fear of his life he was unable to tell the truth about events that have happened in his previous writings. However with the passing of those involved in “ The Secret History” whom he feared, he feels “ it is my duty to reveal both the events hitherto passed over in silence” giving his audience

an insight into his own biased truth of events. Procopius starts his assassination of character right in the first chapter. He portrays Belisarius not as a great General, but as a weak man who is blinded by his love for his wife Antonina. A woman who “ never felt shame for any action whatever, and thanks to her regular use of magic she had her husband wrapped round her little finger”. Antonina is portrayed as an unfaithful wife, who indulges in a disgraceful relationship with Theodosius, whom was adopted by Belisarius and his wife, Antonina. Belisarius, realizing he had been played for a fool by his wife’s infidelity, he became outraged.

This once great general of the Byzantium Empire is reduced to “ A pitiful sight and an incredible spectacle” by the trickery, and manipulation of Antonina along with the help of the Empress Theodora. Procopius paints a picture for his audience of women and men who are far from what the social expectations of what an elite person of their time would resemble. In Antonina and Empress Theodora we see women who are controlling, vengeful, deceptive, and cruel. We see nothing of the properly feminine woman who would be expected to be an elite. In the great General Belisarius, we see a weak man, allowing a woman to control their relationship, very unlike the expectations of the strong muscular men of their day. Procopius continues his story with the assault on Justinian. He tells his audience that Justinian is a ruthless leader, “ who was far too ready to listen to false accusations and quick to inflict punishment”. Through Procopius’ biased opinion of Justinian, we see not the great Emperor, but an almost demonic character, one that comes from peasant parents of barbarian descent. However, Procopius describes Justinian as “ extremely simple with

no more sense than a donkey, ready to follow anyone who pulls its rein, waving its ears all the time”.

Definitely not the kind of character you would expect to find as an elite of the Byzantine Empire, let alone it's Emperor. He continues on to tell his audience that if you added up all the calamities which had happened to the Romans for all time, and you weighed them against those with which Justinian was responsible, you would find that “ a greater slaughter of human beings was brought about by this one man than took place in all the preceding centuries”. Procopius wanted his audience to know that Justinian was a corrupt tyrant. He committed many horrible evil deeds against humankind, from sweeping away established customs, looting households of wealthy people, to the murder of “ thousands of thousands of people”. Procopius must have had a terrible disdain for the Empress Theodora as he describes her character as that of a woman with no virtue. Her childhood is described by Procopius as having been that of a prostitute by choice, “ having sold her youth to passers-by, working with nearly her entire body”.

Justinian became “ overwhelmed with passion for her”, and made her his mistress; so once the talk of the town, she now is promoted to Patrician rank which gives her “ vast influence and very considerable wealth”. Justinian being prohibited to marry a “ harlot” forced his uncle the Emperor, to change the laws so he could marry Theodora. Now the Empress of the Byzantine Empire, her influence of ill-moral behavior became contagious to almost all women of that period; sinning against their husbands “ with complete impunity, since such behavior involved them in no danger or harm”.

Procopius wanted his audience to see these people with the same disdain and contempt that he saw them with. Far from the great Emperor who had a vision to recreate the Roman Empire, who rebuilt Constantinople, who built many beautiful churches and buildings, and whom Procopius would have served. We have no idea as to why, or when, Procopius became so disillusioned with the regime of the Byzantine Empire and its elites, but it is obvious by “The Secret History” that he felt the need to convey his opinions, his truth, to the people and future generations.