



Bizans'ın Gizli Tarihi

Prokopios, Çev. Orhan Duru

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Melik Yahya AFŞARI*

In the VI. century, a new era begun for the Eastern Roman Empire with Justinian I's period (527-565). The territory of the Eastern Roman Empire, also known as Byzantium, was expanded during this period in line with the idea of claiming the legacy of Ancient Rome. Although the symbolic name of this period was Justinian (482-565), the most important name of the conquests was the Roman general named Flavius Belisarius (d. 565). Procopios (500-565), who was with Belisarius during these wars, wrote the *De bellis* (Wars), in eight books and produced important works on this whole process. Also, another important work of Procopios is *Historia Arcana*, known as the Secret History. In this study, an analysis of Procopios' the Secret History will be presented, and some criticisms will be given on two different editions of the book.

Firstly, it would be appropriate to give information about the identity of Procopios. He was born in ancient city of Caesarea, in today's Israel on 500 C.E. On 527, Procopios was commissioned as the legal adviser and privet secretary of Roman General Belisarius.¹ With Belisarius, he visited all of the empire's territory, and he wrote the wars against Persians, Vandals, and Goths in Persia, North Africa, and Italy. His detailed narratives in the Wars give essential information about the expansions of Belisarius. After

* Lisans Öğrencisi, 29 Mayıs Üniversitesi, İstanbul, ORCID: 0009-0007-4123-4902, afsarimy21@29mayis.edu.tr

¹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Procopius", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Procopius-Byzantine-historian> (access 21.04.2024).

his mission, he came back to Constantinople in 542, and he witnessed the Justinian Plague which was written in one of his books (s. x).

Procopios, who had established a close relationship with Justinian during his years in Constantinople, may also have been informed about the events and intrigues within the palace. In this way, he provided important information about the palace tensions of Justinian's reign in the Secret History. In 560, he even received the title of *illustres*, which was given to the Roman elite and intellectuals. Considering that this title was given to a small number of people, it is possible to understand that Procopios had an important position in the Byzantine court. Not only that, but Procopios, who became *praefectur* as Byzantine city administrator in 562, also took over the administration of the capital (p. x). In this way, it is possible to understand the extent to which Justinian trusted Procopios. It follows that what Procopios wrote in the Secret History is true if the Secret History was written by him.

Although there are some claims that the Secret History was not written by Procopios, recent studies show otherwise. Based on the language structure and some idioms used by Procopios in his other works, it is accepted that the Secret History was also written by him.² However, it is not yet known what he called this book. When it was discovered and published by the Vatican archivist Niccolò Alamanni (1583-1626) in 1623, it was published with the double title *Anecdota*, meaning "unpublished" in Greek, and *Historia Arcana*, meaning "secret history" in Latin. In the encyclopaedia Souda, written in Eastern Rome in the X. century, this work of Procopios is referred to as *Ἀνέκδοτα* (Anecdota). The name Secret History, which is used today, originates from the Latin name *Historia Arcana* in terms of the subjects it contains.³ The name, which is a combination of the Latin *historia*, meaning history, and *arcana*, the plural of the word *arcanum*, meaning mystery, is the term commonly used today for this work of Procopios.

It can be said that the book is based around four main characters: Justinian I, Theodora (d. 548), Belisarius, and Antonina (495-565). When Justinian ascended to the throne in 527, the long war between the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanids had been going on. Although peace was made from time to time, these wars continued during Justinian's reign. Looking at the reign of Justinian, unlike the previous Eastern Roman emperors, a policy aimed at expanding the borders of the country was followed instead of protecting the country from external attacks. The empire, especially in the west, was trying to claim the legacy of Ancient Rome. During this period, Italy, and the ancient capital Rome, which had been under the invasion of the barbarian Gothic tribes, were once again in the hands of the Romans. Nevertheless, this expansion during Justinian's reign was a hollow expansion, even though it extended as far as Spain. George Ostrogorsky says that,

"Justinian had meant his reign to inaugurate a new era, but it really marked the close of a great age. He did not succeed in rebuilding the empire. He had managed to expand its frontiers, but only for a short time, and to breath fresh life into the worn-out state of the late Roman period was beyond his power. His territorial

² Hüseyin Salikoğlu, "Procopios: Bir Tarihi, Üç Farklı Anlatı", *Journal of Historiography*, issue: 5, vol: 1, 2023, s. 180.

³ Prokopios, *The Secret History with Related Texts* (trans. Anthony Kaldellis), Hackett Publishing: Cambridge, 2010, s. ix.

reconquests therefore could not be established on any sound foundations and the consequences of the sudden collapse of his work were doubly disastrous."⁴

According to him, the expanding Eastern Roman Empire was weak against the attacks from the east and north, and on the other hand, it did not pay due attention to internal affairs.

Another weakness of Justinian was his love for Empress Theodora. When Justinian's period is analysed, it is seen that he was a leader with ideals but without the power. This lack of power was provided by the people around him, the most important of whom were Empress Theodora and General Belisarius. In the administrative structure of this period, it is seen that Emperor Justinian provided the intellectual background, and Empress Theodora administratively and General Belisarius militarily carried out these ideas. In the Secret History, Theodora, who worked as an actress and prostitute before meeting Justinian, is criticised by Procopios for these aspects (s. 5). Although it is seen that Procopios was a conservative, it is debatable to what extent this is a correct claim. Because the fact that she was one of Justinian's most important advisors after becoming empress and a more powerful administrator than Justinian may have been opposed to Procopios' conservative ideas. In the Secret History, Theodora, a powerful woman who played an important role in many political events during Justinian's reign, especially the Nika Revolt, and who rescued Justinian when he gave up, is portrayed as a devil.⁵ The reason for that will be discussed in the following sections of this study.

Another important person of the Justinian period is General Belisarius. This great warrior, who fought in all over the empire, is also called the last Roman general by some historians. Although he had a brave personality, as seen in The Secret History, he was not like this in his private life. According to Procopios, Belisarius' marriage to Antonina, one of the friends of Empress Theodora, was disastrous for him. While Antonina's manipulative personality is clearly seen in the Secret History, it is noteworthy that she played an important role in some of the turning points of this period. Despite the problematic relationship between them, Belisarius could not give up his wife Antonina and even followed her in order to lose the military advantage he had gained against the Persians (s. 12).

Procopios, who harshly criticises Belisarius and Justinian's weaknesses in front of their wives, explains why he wrote this book in the first chapter of the Secret History as follows:

*"...I was moved to write the history of these deeds by the following consideration, namely that it would also be made perfectly clear to future tyrants that punishment was almost certainly going to befall them on account of their wickedness, just as it did those by my narrative. In addition, their deeds and characters would be publicized in writing for all time, which might give some pause to their illegalities."*⁶

As Procopios states, the main purpose of this book is to produce a moral work that will be an example for future generations. Although it is interesting that he gives this ethical advice through the important personalities of the period, it should not be forgotten that this work was prepared within the framework of Procopios' ethical values. For this reason, it is also possible that he exaggerated the points that seemed

⁴ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (transl. Joan Hussey), Rutgers University Press: New Jersey, 1969, s.78.

⁵ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Theodora", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodora-Byzantine-empress-died-548> (access 21.04.2024).

⁶ Procopios, *the Secret History*, s. 4.

contrary to him. For example, the fact that Theodora became the emperor's chief adviser after her marriage to Justinian may have led Procopios to make slanders about Theodora's past. Based on Procopios' conservative personality, it may have annoyed him that a woman was so active in the administration.

On the other hand, the fact that Justinian's reforms disturbed Procopios may have led him to make statements against Justinian. Since the campaigns all over the Mediterranean had also affected the Eastern Roman finances, Justinian introduced some administrative reforms. These reforms were aimed at securing tax revenues while preventing the growth of aristocrats with large landholdings.⁷ Justinian's reforms, according to Procopios, not only led to corruption in high positions, but also forced landowners to meet military needs, causing them to become bankrupt (s. 109, 114). Procopios, who criticises this situation especially in the last chapters of the Secret History, does not hesitate to use harsh expressions against the emperor and clearly describes the effect of the reforms on the people. At this point, Procopios, who provides important information on social and economic history, also analysed the situation of the Byzantine people. In this context, it should be noted that the Secret History is an important source of social history. In conclusion, it can be said that the purpose of writing the Secret History, according to Procopios, was to enlighten future generations about the problems of Justinian's reign and to prevent them from falling into the same mistakes.

Procopios, who began his book by describing the events between Belisarius and Antonina before sharing his thoughts against Justinian, divided his work into thirty chapters. Nevertheless, when we make a thematic categorisation, chapters I to V are devoted to Belisarius and the events surrounding him. Chapters VI-XIII are devoted to the personalities and relations of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora, while chapters XIV and onwards describe the events of Justinian's reign in Byzantine social and political life.

While working on this study, two different editions of Procopios' Secret History were utilised. One of them is the Turkish edition published by Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür publishing and translated by Orhan Duru. The other is Anthony Kaldellis' English translation published by Hackett Publishing. The Turkish translation made by Duru has some problems as well as some anachronisms. Kaldellis' English translation is more successful than Duru's. In addition, the last chapter of the English version of the book includes some chapters from Procopios' other works. These chapters, chosen to be related to the topics covered in the Secret History, provide an opportunity for comparative reading between Procopios' works.

As a result, this work, which shows Procopios' reaction to those in the government with the influence of his conservative attitude, is a kind of complaint. Although this work is shown to serve a pragmatic purpose by Procopios, when the situation is evaluated, it is seen that the tension between Procopios and

⁷ Georg Ostrogorsky, *Bizans Devleti Tarihi*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Pub., 2019, s. 67.

Justinian's reign is the reason for the writing of the work. In addition, the book can be thematically divided into four main sections, and for this reason a suggestion has been made above. Finally, it can be said that comparative studies on the period with other sources will enable the Secret History to be added to the literature as an important source for Byzantine social history of the sixth century.