

# *Count Belisarius and Procopius's Wars*

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## **1. Introduction**

*Count Belisarius* (1938) is somewhat different from Robert Graves's earlier Claudius novels in that it was written as a response to a puzzle and controversy about its main source. Except for a few pages by Agathias on Belisarius's defence of Byzantium from the Huns and a few pages here and there in several other contemporary and near-contemporary accounts, the only sources we have for the life and military career of Belisarius are two works by his assistant Procopius, the *Wars*, which covers the Persian, Gothic, and Roman Wars in eight volumes, and the *Anekdotia*, or so-called *Secret History*. Yet Graves has his narrator, Eugenius the Eunuch, explain at the end of the long novel filled with details of military campaigns that Procopius lied and he is setting the record straight in this account. Well, if Procopius lied, and he is the one source to mention Eugenius, to whom he makes one brief allusion, from whom can we gain an account that is truthful and not just speculation? In 1938 as today there is no agreement among scholars as to Procopius's reliability, religious views, political views, or attitude toward Belisarius. Indeed, it took a long time to come to a consensus that Procopius had probably finished his books by 553 AD (about twelve years before Belisarius died).

Since 1938 research on Procopius has increased dramatically, but research on Belisarius had gone almost nowhere, since studies on Belisarius can only be a subset of studies on Procopius, our main source. Today because of Procopius Belisarius still interests military historians professional and amateur. In articles such as those of Gary K. Shepherd (1998) and Eric Hildinger (1999) in *Military History*,<sup>1</sup> we see an admiration similar to Graves's for Belisarius as commander with useful strategies, and in a 1995 master's thesis for the Army Command and General Staff College,

Anthony Brogna praises Belisarius for reducing friction and the fog of war and wisely making initial contact with the smallest possible force.<sup>2</sup> However, the unique status of the vituperative *Secret History* among Byzantine texts, its far more critical view of Belisarius than the one offered in the *Wars*, and the hermeneutical problems of interpreting a text that to many readers has seemed ‘over the top’ in its purveying of true or false gossip, have caused major disagreements on how we should judge Justinian’s wars, among such Byzantine scholars as E. Kaegi, Geoffrey Greatrex, Averil Cameron and Anthony Kaldellis, to name historians writing only since the 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Given the great controversy surrounding Procopius and his view of Belisarius, Graves, undaunted, vouched for the historical accuracy of his portrait of Belisarius and his relationship with Justinian in a letter he wrote on 17 April 1938 to the *Sunday Times*, when a reviewer suggested that he had created for his novel a Belisarius too good to be believed. Graves responded that it was ‘. . . a shocking comment on twentieth century literary taste that when [...] a really good man is shown [...] it must be said that he does not come to life’.<sup>4</sup> Since the *Secret History* castigates Belisarius for mismanagement of the second Parthian campaign and for being the pathetic sexual slave of his wife Antonina, the reviewer’s objection clearly deserved a serious hearing. Trying to find out about Belisarius leads to chasing one’s tale, as one tries to figure out what it means if one or another of the minor sources matches the clearly partial historian. We simply do not have enough materials on which to construct a solid history of Belisarius’s life. We know next to nothing of his early years, and so we know nothing of the development of his personality.

Thus Graves’s claim is misleading on a historical level and unfair to dead, defenceless Procopius, whom he has his narrator malign shamelessly at the end of the novel, after he himself has given this narrator hundreds of pages derived directly from Procopius. Nor does Graves indicate to the *Sunday Times* that he used highly suspect material about Belisarius being blinded on the order of the cruel and thankless Justinian, material which comes

from a much later and discredited tradition. Strongly suspected as false in Graves's day, this 'romance' tradition seems to have no defenders at all now. Graves presents a good and generous Belisarius to stand out in stark contrast to the despicable Justinian. The main outlines for this evil Justinian are taken by Graves from the *Secret History*, a work which also vilifies Belisarius. Yet Graves in effect denies the vilifications of Belisarius in the *Secret History* and agrees wholeheartedly with its contempt for Justinian. Graves's approach is dramatically appealing although historically suspect. His use of contrast would seem less significant if he had made no claims to be true. It is Graves's stress on the truth factor that makes his defensive comment interesting. Actually, the novel is likely to be far more gripping to a reader who has a knowledge of the Byzantine sources than to one who has none. In this particular case not to know how Graves used history conceals much of what is interesting about the novel, since a gripping style and deep characterisations are not the novel's chief merits.

I believe that Graves exaggerated the historical conflict between Belisarius and Justinian in order to present the idea that soldiers should perform their military duty even if the government back home is mishandling the war. This idea of duty was topical for Graves given his own experiences. In *Good-bye to All That*, where we see the immense losses on the Western Front and the sense that nothing was gained after so much fighting, Graves resists both attacking specific generals and their campaign strategies and the presentation of himself as an alternative strategist. In his autobiography he is a dutiful soldier, willing to return to the lines despite his injuries and disillusionment with the war. Writing *Count Belisarius* enabled Graves to change ranks and become the General-in-Chief, issuing the military commands, not carrying out the ones given by generals unnamed in his autobiography.

## **2. Background**

Graves studied Edward Gibbon's section on the reign of Justinian in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Indeed, Gibbon's

work set the tone for all evaluations of Belisarius for years to come. In fact, Graves has Eugenius ask in the manner of Gibbon, what should we think of Belisarius? Graves also consulted Admiral Mahon's (Lord Stanhope's) account of Belisarius from the 1820s, as R. P. Graves points out.<sup>5</sup> He read relevant materials not or not yet translated into English, which in 1938 could have meant just about all the minor sources on Belisarius' life. Today almost all of these have been translated into English. Paul O'Prey indicates that Graves consulted Liddell Hart for his expertise, since Hart had resigned from a position as personal adviser to the Minister of War.<sup>6</sup> According to Martin Seymour-Smith, Graves consulted his niece Sally Graves, who had specialised in this period of history at Somerville College, Oxford.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Jean-Paul Forster reminds us, about this time Graves was working on other military projects: his book on T. E. Lawrence and edited versions of *Old Soldiers Never Die* (1933) and *Old Soldier Sahib* (1936) by Frank Richards.<sup>8</sup> He had the help of Laura Riding, who at the time was writing *Lives of Wives*. Her project fitted very well with a novel about the famous pairs of Belisarius and Antonina and of Justinian and Theodora. Riding had him shift the narrative point of view to Eugenius from Antonina, according to Seymour-Smith.<sup>9</sup>

*Count Belisarius* won the Prix Femina in April 1938, shortly after it was published, and although some consider it among his best novels,<sup>10</sup> others do not.<sup>11</sup> Richard Perceval Graves finds the book to be overloaded with historical details, and (echoing the reviewer of 1938 mentioned above) the hero to be wooden.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, since its publication, some readers have felt that there is too much war and not enough characterisation of Belisarius to make the novel a complete success.

Seymour-Smith notes two interesting ways in which *Count Belisarius* can make us think about World War II. Graves sent a copy to Winston Churchill, who enjoyed the novel, and on 28 December 1942 Graves wrote to Churchill, trying to get him to write a preface for a reprint.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Belisarius's North African Campaign was followed by his taking of southern Italy

and then Rome, and as such, oddly prefigures the Allied invasion of Italy during World War II.<sup>14</sup> Graves said in *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* that it ‘was voted the most popular novel read by American prisoners in Japanese war camps’.<sup>15</sup>

It would be hard to find any allegorical level appropriate to the dictators of 1938 in *Count Belisarius*, since one major point of the book is that Justinian is a bigoted, intolerant puritanical Christian dictator, who, having once sown some wild oats, is now all set to conquer lost parts of the Roman Empire to which he does not want to send enough troops for the conquest. The element of Christianity may make one think of Franco and Salazar, but there is really no close connection, and the novel instead must seem topical for Americans today. Given American media coverage of the sex-scandals of the rich and powerful, any work derived from Procopius’s *Secret History* will have a built-in audience in the U.S. today. Witness the recent spate of historical novels about Theodora and Justinian.

At one time there had been a vogue for literary works on Belisarius. Jakob Bidermann published a tragedy in Latin in the 1660s, and William Philips in English in 1724. In the late 1700s came the plays of Moissy, d’Ozicourt, Hugh Dowman, and Margareta Faugères. Friedrich de la Motte-Fouqué wrote a play on Belisarius not published until 1985. In the nineteenth century Madame de Genlis’s novel on Belisarius went through many editions, Donizetti composed a Belisarius opera in the 1840s, and Sarah Bernhardt performed a very popular Belisarius play by Victorien Sardou in the 1890s.

However, when Graves wrote his novel, Belisarius was out of the limelight in fiction and drama and only living on through the recent Loeb translations. Clara Underhill had published a novel *Theodora, the Courtesan of Constantinople* in 1932, but there was room for a novel entirely on Belisarius. John Masefield followed Graves with a novel on Theodora in 1940, Harold Lamb with one in 1952, and Paul Iselin Wellman in 1953. Granville Downey wrote a children’s novel on the young Belisarius in 1960. Since the late 1950s more novels have been set in the Age of Justinian

by such authors as Pierson Dixon, Klaus Hermann, Noel Bertram Gerson, Guy Rachet, Prince Michael of Greece, Basil E. Eleftheriou, and Guy Gavriel Kay. Recently, this period of Byzantine history, once primarily known through either the figures of Belisarius or Theodora has been the subject of mystery stories with a eunuch detective by Mary Reed and alternative histories involving aliens by Eric Flint and David Drake.

### 3. Previous Criticism

Since there is no consensus about what Procopius is ‘really about’, it is not at all surprising that there is almost no agreement among the critics of *Count Belisarius* as to what its overall theme is or why it was written. The disagreement among the critics also shows that in a book of specific military details, it has been very difficult to see the big picture. First, for James S. Mehoke the main point of *Count Belisarius* is this: Belisarius is wiser than those around him because he does not get involved in abstract philosophical debates about religion.<sup>16</sup> Mehoke finds in Belisarius Graves’s personal belief that both fanaticism and its opposite, pacifism, are to be avoided. Mehoke writes:

The fanaticism at home was only as hateful as the pacifism, and both were, as with Justinian, offered in the name of religion. Is it ‘turn the other cheek’, or ‘For God and King George’? The ambivalence in Justinian Graves found in his own England of World War One. (p. 56)

This view is strange, since Justinian is presented as a horrible dictator, not as a limited monarch like George V. Mehoke sees in the novel a hint of Graves’s turning to Goddess worship, since Christianity fosters asceticism and libertinism just as it fosters in Graves’s view pacifism and fanaticism (p. 57). This view is also odd, since Christians are primarily criticised by Eugenius for their obsession with theological debate rather than devotion to humane living.

Robert H. Canary approaches religion in another way. He states that Graves follows Procopius in playing down the ‘religious motivations of his characters’, an idea which is certainly open to question, since the *Secret History* is obsessed with the way Justinian used Christianity in state policy, and Graves carries over this concern. Canary wonders why, ‘given a Justinian such as Graves depicts, [Belisarius] bore himself with such forbearance’ He feels the novel is lacking in insights to this key question.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Graves could benefit from more characterisation of Belisarius, and the problem appears to be grounded in the decision to make Antonina’s eunuch servant and not Antonina the narrator. Canary feels that some characteristics of Belisarius may be taken from T. E. Lawrence, an interesting suggestion that deserves more investigation, considering the way that Lawrence was treated by the British government.

Similarly, Ian Firla believes that ‘Graves depicts soldiers like Siegfried Sassoon in *Goodbye to All That* as valiant warriors who were, in turn, exploited by profiteers and vote-scrounging politicians who saw only the “horrors” of the front while on gentrified “Cook’s Tours”’.<sup>18</sup> This raises an interesting question as to whether Count Belisarius is more closely related to the Great War or the world war on the horizon, since there are no clear equivalents of such politicians under Justinian’s autocracy and the palace politics of Theodora, although John the Cappadocian is depicted, following Procopius, as enriching himself on the war effort. Neither John the Cappadocian nor Justinian went to the war fronts.

In a different view of the little man overrun by historical forces, Katherine Snipes notes that the heroes of Graves’s non-mythological historical novels tend to have impermanent achievements. She asks:

How much did the exploits of a Belisarius or a Sergeant Lamb or a Don Alvaro or a Claudius change the structure or destiny of their world? It was as though they have never been. Belisarius, for all his brilliance, could not preserve the

Byzantine Empire for long, nor could Claudius reactivate the Roman Republic.<sup>19</sup>

This is another puzzling view of the novel, since it sees history itself in terms of abstract Empires, not in terms of people who suffered or caused suffering, killed or were killed. Snipes also finds a second key theme in the futility of war, stating of Belisarius, 'Though the Christian hero offers an example of humaneness to the defeated foe, the men he kills are just as dead'. She thinks that Graves's experience in World War I left him with a 'half-admiring, half-ironic view of the military hero'. For her the irony is in the situation, not the tone, and one has to ask what it means to be good in a world given over to so much evil (p. 170). This comment is also off-base since Belisarius is treated kindly, not ironically, and since at the end of the novel Eugenius, following Gibbon, asks us how we can evaluate a man who followed Justinian's orders. However, Snipes is correct in suggesting that the novel is not an in-depth treatment of a soldier's moral responsibility when he finds himself a combatant in wars that can be interpreted as wars of conquest. Graves does not adequately assess whether Justinian's wars against the Goths and Vandals are justified or even whether they are wars of conquest or reconquest of lost territories. In fact, Graves cleverly skips over the issue of whether the Vandal War was justified by using *style indirect libre* in the point of view of the villainous John of Cappadocia to present the position against the war and then have the war begun as Justinian's positive response to the dream of an Egyptian, who promoted the war to subdue Arian Vandal heretics. Graves thus avoids any dialogical conversation that would adequately address the pros and cons of the issue.

Jean-Paul Forster thinks Graves clearly prefers the Goths and the Vandals. He finds that as the world changes, the mentality of Belisarius (like that of Claudius) becomes more and more like the non-civilised enemy against which he is fighting and which is soon to disappear. Belisarius retains the chivalry of the barbarians he defeats in service to a perfidious Christian 'civilised'

Emperor.<sup>20</sup> Although not all the barbarian leaders are chivalrous, Graves does, as Forster suggests, level out the moral playing field between ‘civilised’ and ‘barbarian.’ Forster claims that there is a turning point in the series of non-mythical historical novels from 1933 to 1943 which places Claudius and Belisarius on one side of the line from Sergeant Lamb and Marie Milton. The heroes of the first two novels are caught in a passivity before history from which the later heroes escape (p. 187). Whereas Claudius’s actions in regard to Nero and Agripinilla do show this passivity, Belisarius is not so much passive as above the fray.

#### 4. Source material

Since so much research went into making *Count Belisarius* an important addition to the canon of great historical novels, we should investigate its origins. Graves could have consulted, in addition to Gibbon and Mahon, Charles Diehl’s *Justinien et la civilization Byzantine* (1901) and *Theodora, Impératrice de Byzance* (1904), William Gordon Holmes’s *The Age of Justinian and Theodora* (1905–1907), and J. B. Bury’s *History of the Late Roman Empire* (1923).<sup>21</sup> In 1927 Richard Atwater’s translation of the *Secret History* appeared. Meanwhile, the Loeb Classical Library was almost finished with its edition of Procopius, using J. Haury’s Greek edition in three volumes, published in Leipzig, 1905–1913. Having completed issuing the five volumes of *Wars* (1914–1928) the Loeb Library published Vol. 6, the *Secret History*, in 1935, and only in 1940 the last volume, *The Monuments*. Thus Graves’s novel appeared when an English reader could have consulted two translations of the *Secret History* and the dual-language Loeb Library for all of the *Wars*. After Graves wrote his novel, G. A. Williamson retranslated the *Secret History* in 1966 and a year later Averil Cameron translated selections from Procopius in one volume.<sup>22</sup> Considering the length of the *Wars*, Graves deserves credit in keeping this work of eight hundred pages in the consciousness of the general reader.

The *Wars* of Procopius are short on characterisation, whereas the

*Secret History* is feverish in its lurid characterisations of the four principals: Belisarius, Antonina, Justinian, and Theodora. The integration of these sources into *Count Belisarius* is entirely different from the integration of Suetonius and Tacitus into the Claudius novels, since these are both lurid. Graves in part used a long tradition of a Belisarius romance that had developed in the days of the Paleologian emperors and had become part of Western European literature through such famous works as Marmontel's novel, *Bélisaire, a cause célèbre* of 1767. Using the blinding of Belisarius and his begging, it was a veiled attack on Louis XV, and it stirred up a controversy to which Voltaire contributed. Belisarius has already been blinded when Marmontel's novel starts, and much of the novel is philosophical dialogue in which he reveals his noble nature to Justinian and others.

When Graves was writing, the romance tradition about Belisarius may have seemed particularly attractive, since at this time there was very little available in English translation of the supporting material about the reign of Justinian. A fine overview of these sources for the age of Justinian was available at the opening of Diehl's book on Justinian, and more recent ones in English are available at the conclusions of Robert Browning's *Justinian and Theodora* (1971) and John Moorhead's *Justinian* (1994).<sup>23</sup> Good discussions of the sources about Theodora can be found in Lynda Garland's *Byzantine Empresses* (1999) and James Allan Evans's *The Empress Theodora* (2002), both especially helpful for keeping track of materials dealing with Theodora and the Asiatic churches newly translated into English.<sup>24</sup>

Back in the 1820s Lord Mahon had devoted a chapter of his book on Belisarius to defend the story of the blinding of Belisarius and his reduction to begging by Justinian, even though the story comes from sources considerably later than the period of Justinian. However, in 1901 Diehl found no reason at all to believe this story. In 1960 Börje Knös in *La Légende de Bélisaire dans les pays grecs* showed in great detail that this plot motif is just one part of the complex of narremes in the legend of Belisarius developed at a later date.<sup>25</sup> In his Foreword Graves says

nothing about this controversial use of the romance material. He could have been convinced of its truth, but he is not altogether honest in one of his other statements in the Preface.

Wherever surviving records are meagre I have been obliged to fill in the gaps of the story with fiction, but have usually had a historical equivalent in mind; so that if exactly this or that did not happen, something similar probably did.<sup>26</sup>

There is, however, a difference between imaginatively filling in details and completely reinterpreting your source material.

A few words should be said about the minor sources. Agathias was a classicising historian who admired Procopius and wrote his own *History* to continue the account of Justinian's reign.<sup>27</sup> John Lydus in Book 3 of *On Magistrates* offers a picture of the monstrous John the Cappadocian, which Graves seems to have used whole-heartedly.<sup>28</sup> John Malalas, who sympathised with Justinian, offers versions of the defeat at Callinicum in Belisarius's first Persian campaign and of the Nika riots which vary in some details from those in Procopius's *Wars*.<sup>29</sup> Evagrius Scholasticus modifies the view of Procopius, endorsed by Graves, that Justinian and Theodora pretended to be more at odds religiously than they actually were in order to manipulate their subjects.<sup>30</sup> Evagrius is not sure what their motivations actually were. Evagrius also derives from Procopius accounts of the Persian campaign, the Vandals, the Goths, the second Persian campaign, the plague, and Justinian's cupidity, adding his own information on Justinian's final veering into extreme Monophysitism after a life of Orthodoxy (Book 4. 39), a change of heart disparaged by Graves. The *Liber Pontificalis* tells of the deposition of Pope Silverius by Belisarius and Antonina.<sup>31</sup> Theophanes, the *Liber Paschalius* and Marcellinus Comes all have some information on the Nika riots, the sources for which are covered in depth in Bury's magisterial article of 1897 and the more recent evaluation by Geoffrey Greatrex (1997).<sup>32</sup>

It would have been useful if Graves had mentioned his minor sources, especially since here he could have here impressed his audience with his knowledge as he did in many other works. According to Evans,<sup>33</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mehre quotes from the lost part of John of Ephesus's *Ecclesiastical History* the description of the plague of 541–542. John's *Lives of the Eastern Saints* has a Greek phrase that Theodora came from a brothel in the Syriac text, and Evans does not think it is an interpellation as some others do.<sup>34</sup> It lends credibility to Graves's depiction of Theodora as a Megaraean Sphinx. The Syriac *Chronicle* of Zachariah of Mytilene says that Theodora insisted that the nephews of Emperor Anastasius, Hypatius and Pompeius, be executed after the Nika riots.<sup>35</sup> Graves has her send Belisarius to rescue them and has Justinian kill them (pp. 202, 205). Cassiodorus's *Variae* makes a brief reference that gives the 'fleeting impression of Theodora carrying on an obscure negotiation with the Ostrogothic king Theohad and his queen, Gudeliva'.<sup>36</sup>

Graves mentions Agathias as the source for the 'final military chapter' (p. vi), but he only mentions two additional sources, both in references to the deposition of Pope Silverius. Graves claims that the African historian Liberatus 'insists that the charge against Silverius of betraying Rome to the Goths was framed by Antonina under orders from the Empress', although he himself prefers Procopius's account of Silverius as conspirator because another historian, Athanasius, had already presented Silverius as deceitful (p. vii). I don't know who these two sources are (as they are never mentioned in the reviews of sources), but the general view is that Pope St Silverius I was framed, and this is the view taken by James Allan Evans in *The Empress Theodora*.

From Gibbon, Graves takes the question of whether Belisarius was more or less a of man for his unshakeable loyalty to Justinian. Graves seems strongly indebted to Gibbon for the long section on the silk trade and its relationship to the Persian War of 502 to 507, and to a lesser extent to Gibbon's famous account of the Blues and the Greens. Gibbon was a strong champion of Belisarius, and

Bury also presents a favourable picture. Diehl in his later book on Theodora (1904) paints a picture derived from the *Secret History* of Belisarius as a slave to his wife and through her to Theodora and through Theodora to Justinian, but in his earlier, longer work on the age of Justinian (1901) he is kinder to Belisarius, although admitting that he prefers Narses to him.<sup>37</sup> Lord Stanhope in his heavily annotated biography of Belisarius from the 1820s felt that many serious accusations against Belisarius in the *Secret History* were probably true, and that Belisarius showed rapacity in his later career.<sup>38</sup> It is conceivable that Graves's novel is written in opposition to the view of Belisarius given by Mahon, who like Diehl in 1904 painted a picture of a corrupt Belisarius derived from the *Secret History*. If so, few readers would have had Mahon and Diehl near at hand to consult for contrastive purposes. However, they could have had much easier access to the *Secret History*.

William Gordon Holmes in his comprehensive *Age of Justinian and Theodora* is very impressed by the picture of Belisarius which he feels Procopius gives us in the *Wars*.<sup>39</sup> For him, Procopius is not writing negative things between the lines on Procopius, and he stresses the praise that Procopius gives the general at the beginning of the third book, of the Gothic War. Holmes writes, 'In war he was determined and resourceful, but never oblivious to humanity, and always mindful of the interests of those dependent on him' (p. 583). Holmes, like Diehl, Bury and Gibbon in the annotated edition by Oliphant Smeaton (1910), helps his readers with extensive footnotes to sources that they would have to take much effort to find and correlate.<sup>40</sup>

Thus it would not have been necessary for Graves to hunt down many shorter sources that could be easily summarised.<sup>41</sup>

## 5. Adapting Procopius

One would consider Procopius an author suited to Graves's sensibility. He decried Justinian's absolutism, protested against religious persecution, and does not seem to have been a Christian

(although this is disputed by some critics). He was the author of his period most interested in other peoples of the world and most willing to understand differences in customs. Some of these characteristics are given to Eugenius, such as his hatred of Justinian's reign, his interest in other ethnic groups and his indifference to Christianity and its dogmatic controversies.

The overall goal of Graves's reworking of Procopius is to present Belisarius as an admirable person and commander. We will look first at the *Secret History* in general and then move on to episodes from the *Wars* such as the first Persian campaign, the victory riots, and the Vandal and Gothic Wars. Then we will also look at the incident that Graves takes directly from Agathias, the reunion of the old soldiers to fight the invader just outside Byzantium.

Graves had to have his narrator attack Procopius as a person and historian to gain credibility for his very subjective view of Belisarius, and he saves the attack for the very end of the novel. Only in these closing pages does the reader see something not revealed in the Preface – that Graves has been trying to figure out what is true or perhaps just novelistically useful from the *Secret History*. Although Graves takes the *Secret History*'s view of Justinian as monster, he rejects the portraits of the other three characters. Belisarius is a very good person, Antonina is basically good, and Theodora has loyalty, strength of will, and other virtues that often make her admirable. It stretches credibility to believe with Graves that Procopius wrote an exposé that told the truth about one of its four characters and lied about the others. So Graves, who had already decided that the basically good person presented in the *Wars* is the true Belisarius, had to create a narrative to exculpate his hero from the accusations of emotional slavery and enchantment to his wife. Such a strategy entails rejecting the *Secret History*'s view that Antonina was in Theodora's power for the view that they were friends, in fact very old friends. Thus Graves created one of his most brilliant strokes, the association of Antonina and Theodora in their early days at the Hippodrome, on the burlesque circuit, and in the world of

courtesans. To generate further sympathy for the trio of Belisarius, Antonina, and Theodora, he needed to stretch the tentacles of John the Cappadocian back into events in the novel in the twenty years before Justinian becomes Emperor. As the picture of John provided by Procopius and John Lydus is of such a rotten man, Graves could legitimately extend the prehistory of this character to include earlier crimes.

In the six chapters at the beginning of the novel before Belisarius's campaigns started, Graves could have taken material from many general historical works. For his four main characters he relied on the first half of the *Secret History*, and on *Wars*, I. 1 and I. 10 – I. 11. Chapters 7 through 22 (pp. 136–519), covering the years 526 to 548, were based on the *Wars*, with the subplots concerning Antonina's love for her stepson Theodosius and the marriage of Joanina (daughter of Antonina and Belisarius) to Theodora's grandson mixed in, reinterpreted but derived from the first section of the *Secret History*. The early life of Theodora as bearkeeper's daughter was taken from the *Secret History* and connected to Antonina's early life, of which we know next to nothing except her low social class. For Chapter 23, 'Three Hundred Veterans', Graves turned to the description of the battle against the Huns in Agathias's continuation of Procopius's *Wars*, and in the final chapter, Chapter 24, 'The Last Ingratitude,' he grafted on the romance tradition of Belisarius as blinded beggar, scorned by his Emperor.

Procopius probably finished the *Secret History* in 550, about the same time he was finishing the first seven books of the *Wars*. At that point Theodora had been dead two years. Victor Tonnennensis reports that she died of cancer. Procopius may have died just before Belisarius. The Emperor died in March 565 and Belisarius in November 565. We do not know when Antonina died, and Graves has her dying shortly after the two men. Graves had to find a way of ending Belisarius's life since Procopius did not provide it. He has Eugenius the Eunuch write the story in 571 as a very old man. Eugenius has been loyal to his mistress Antonina for fifty years, and the choice of him as narrator serves

to give the positive view of Antonina needed for the plot.

There is only one mention of Eugenius in the *Secret History*, and it is in reference to the love affair between Antonina and Theodosius which Procopius reports as true. Here Belisarius has agreed to hand over the maid Macedonia and the boys in charge of the bedroom to Antonina. We continue in G. A. Williamson's Penguin translation:

[Antonina] first cut out the tongues of all three, we are told, and then carved them up into little bits, which she dropped into sacks and threw into the sea without turning a hair, assisted in all this unholy business by one of the menservants called Eugenius, the man who had been instrumental in the monstrous treatment of [Pope] Silverius.<sup>42</sup>

A few pages before, at the very beginning of the *Secret History*, Procopius promised to tell us about the deposition of Silverius, but he never takes it up again. Graves uses the description of the deposition from the *Liber Pontificalis* and makes Eugenius an agent in that episode.

Procopius presented Belisarius in the *Secret History* as a slave to his overbearing wife, who manipulated him sexually. He accuses Procopius of allowing the Empire's chief enemy, the Persian Emperor Chosroes, to escape because of his own inability to escape from his domestic problems. He shows Belisarius to be a puppet of the Emperor, unable to stand on his own two feet and oppose his horrendous rule. Not so for Graves, who was fond of unusual interpretations of historical figures. If his Claudius was not odd enough, he topped it with his picture of Christ in *King Jesus*. Belisarius lands somewhere in the middle. Graves reads against the grain of his chief source.

In the Foreword Graves writes, 'The Belisarius-Antonina-Theodosius love-triangle, however fictional it may seem, has been adopted with very little editing from the *Secret History*' (p. vi), but this is not true, because Eugenius is made to know more than

Procopius. Graves not only presented Eugenius as unconvinced that Antonina actually had a torrid, adulterous love affair and not a flirtation, but he also made Eugenius in general far more sympathetic to Belisarius and Antonina than Procopius is in the *Secret History*. Eugenius attacks Procopius for saying that Antonina ruthlessly killed Macedonia when he shows Antonina sparing Macedonia's life although she is a liar. Eugenius then waits to the last chapter of the novel to issue a fierce condemnation of Procopius as a person and a denial of the veracity of the *Secret History*. As the novel does not ask us to think of Eugenius as an unreliable narrator, we have to accept his account:

The page-boys were also whipped and branded, and sent to work in the silver-mines. That my mistress with my help pulled out Macedonia's tongue, cut her in pieces, and threw the pieces into the sea is a lie told many years later by the secretary Procopius to discredit her. I do not say that Macedonia was undeserving of this punishment, or that my mistress did not threaten it in her anger. (p. 297)

Only at the end of the novel does Eugenius explain that Procopius was furious when Justinian stopped his pension and then wrote 'a book of libels' in which '[s]ometimes he told the truth, sometimes he distorted the facts, sometimes he lied – according to his vindictive purposes' (p. 546), and here Eugenius again mentions that he himself was said to have helped in the murder of Macedonia.

Graves through Eugenius makes a completely unprecedented accusation against Procopius in order to justify his own story:

At [General Herodian's] suggestion Apion the Public Prosecutor sent his agents to break into Procopius's house in search of documents incriminating Belisarius. Here, locked in a chest, they found the revengeful book of anecdotes. Apion read it, and thereupon threatened that Procopius

would be strangled for his insults to the Emperor's Majesty – unless he consented to give such evidence as would secure Belisarius's conviction as a traitor. Procopius consented, and the book was returned to him. Now it will be understood why I name him the infamous Procopius.

Indeed, the *Secret History* was not published in Procopius's lifetime, and it was only brought back to light by the *Suidas* in the twelfth century. Bury, who was no fan of Procopius as a person either, had suggested that Procopius was filled with hysterical spite caused by personal reasons: 'We hardly run much risk of doing an injustice to Procopius if we assume that he was a disappointed man', someone 'passed over' for 'preferment to some administrative post'.<sup>43</sup> Graves carried Bury's suggestion even farther.<sup>44</sup>

Graves shows great skill in reassembling material from Procopius in new contexts, so that no one can accuse him of being a slavish imitator. For example, in the second chapter, 'The Banquet of Modestus', Graves takes the controversy about contemporary warfare versus classical methods, particularly on the value of archery and cavalry, and integrates it into the symposium setting (*Wars*, I. 1). In the next few chapters Graves took from the *Secret History* Justinian's murder of Vitalian, Justinian's championship of the Blues, Theodora as the bearkeeper's daughter, Theodora's trip with Hecebolus to the Pentapolis, Justinian's creation of the new marriage law allowing him to marry Theodora, and the collusion of the imperial couple in religious matters. In short, he is very successful in providing material for the early years of Belisarius, Antonina, and Theodora, and he is less skilful with doing the same for Justinian.

To show the verve with which Graves take less than a page in the *Secret History* on Theodora's early life and develops it into an episode involving Antonina and John the Cappadocian, let us look at the original passage from Procopius:

In Byzantium there was a man named Acacius, a keeper of

the circus animals, belonging to the Green faction and entitled the Bearward. The man died of sickness while Anastasius reigned upon the imperial throne, leaving three daughters Comito, Theodora and Anastasia, of whom the eldest had not yet completed her seventh year. The widow married again, hoping that her new husband would room there or share with her the management of her house and the care of the animals. But the Green's Dancing Master, a man called Asterius, was offered a bribe to remove these two from their office, in which he installed his Paymaster without any difficulty, for the Dancing-Masters were allowed to arrange such matters as they chose. But when the wife saw the whole populace congregated in the circus, she put wreaths on the heads of the little girls and in both their hands, and made them sit down as suppliants. The Greens refused absolutely to admit the supplication; but the Blues gave them a similar office, as their Bearward too had died. (p. 82)

Elaborated by Graves over ten pages (pp. 53–63), John of Cappadocia is made the initiator of the bribe, and Antonina's father Damocles is the charioteer who had obtained for Theodora's father the job as Bearkeeper. We are treated to a thrilling chariot race, an unintentional killing by a bear, and a prophetic dream to flesh out the story in this chapter about the 'Megaraean Sphinxes'. Furthermore, John of Cappadocia drove Antonina's father to suicide, and Antonina and Theodora decide at this point to get even with him, thus providing a still earlier cause for their revenge against him presented in the *Secret History*.

Graves's first chapter had already introduced John as an offstage villain to the seven-year-old Belisarius. The youth is on his way to school in Adrianople with his tutor Paleologus, his friend John the Armenian, and slave Andreas, when they rescue Simeon, a tax-collector, from the clutches of John's henchmen. This incident placed in 507 comes about twenty-three years before we learn of John through Procopius and John Lydus, so Graves helps enliven

the plot with a villain from the start. In that chapter he also introduces the recurring characters of Andreas, John the Armenian, and three boys at school, Uliaris, Rufinus, and Apion. It will turn out that a drunken Uliaris accidentally kills John of Armenia on the North African campaign (p. 250), Rufinus is killed by Moors (p. 267), and Apion as Public Prosecutor suddenly comes back on stage over fifty years later to torture Belisarius (p. 547). Graves needed to forge linking characters to connect so many military incidents. The incident of the accidental drunken homicide is taken from *Wars*, IV. 4. 16–25, where these characters (Uliaris and John) have not been introduced before. Graves makes them school comrades of Belisarius, but whether he adds to the pathos because we have seen these characters before or only needlessly complicates the plot by having dropped these minor characters so long before the accidental homicide is a question that must be left to each reader to decide.

Dealing with the Nike victory riots represented a different challenge for Graves than creating the cast of main characters and supporting characters. It is the event from Justinian's reign for which we have the greatest amount of extant writing. Belisarius is never indicted in any of the sources for leading the military in crushing the riot by killing thousands of people in the Hippodrome, but Graves anticipated that this event would need some explaining away to a twentieth-century audience. Graves's description of the Nike riots puts Belisarius in the best light possible. To a large extent Graves follows the description of Procopius, who seems to be writing from a position within the palace. He is mostly in accord with the chronology established by Bury in his famous article on the Nike riots. Bury weighed all the other sources and gives quotations from them in Greek, thus making available some of the more obscure materials. Graves (1) makes John of Cappadocia responsible for the execution of the Blue and Green criminals at the beginning of the riot, even though it has been attributed to Eudaemon; (2) concentrates on the riot as fratricidal slaughter between Greens and Blues (a contentious view), at the expense of a presentation of the final slaughter in the

Hippodrome as a massacre of about 30,000 people conducted by Belisarius and Mundus; (3) creates from whole cloth an episode in which Theodora commissions Belisarius to bring back Hypatius to the Palace in safety; and 4) offers a possible but probably unduly negative view of Justinian's indecisiveness.

It was John Lydus who presented the response of the people to John of Cappadocia as the initial cause of the riots. Lydus gives a picture of people being taxed off the land and heading en masse to Constantinople, where they formed an unemployed and unruly mob:

And the law, in view of the endless number of offences, was increasingly extended along with their multitude, so that even magistrates that had hitherto been inactive, *praetores* and *quaesitores*, were brought forth in accordance with the custom which had once prevailed among the Romans, as I have previously recounted. Since these officials, however, launched out rather vehemently against the crimes of the people, the multitude rebelled and, having united in one ill-starred design, burned almost the entire city. And the Cappadocian disappeared, but the fire got its start at the gates of the court. (Section 3. 70; p. 245)

Earlier, Lydus had claimed that John the Cappadocian did not allow bureaucratic documents to be filled out according to established customs but turned them over 'to the agency of his own men gaining himself authority over the expenditure-records which were wont to be handed over to their proper document completers' (Section 3. 68; p. 241).<sup>45</sup>

Although Graves does not use in contrast the *Akta dia Kalapodion* to establish a cause of the riot, he is influenced by its depiction of Justinian as a stalwart champion of the Blues, and through it to a presentation of the riot that stresses more the conflict between the two enemy groups than their joining forces throughout the early days of the week-long riot (Saturday 10 January to Monday 19 January, p. 532), according to the

calculation by Geoffrey Greatrex.<sup>46</sup> The *Akta dia Kalapodion* is the record of an altercation between the Greens and Justinian in the Hippodrome, which included a Green protest against an officer nicknamed Kalapodius, whom J. A. S. Evans suggests may have been Narses.<sup>47</sup> Graves underlines the anger of the Greens all through his account, a sentiment that is not obvious in Procopius's *Wars*.

In Graves's version the riot is integrated into the story of Theodora and the Senator Hippobates. After describing Theodora's joke on the stupid old man, who wanted her to help him out with his creditors, she sends him off. Then he tries to get money from his friend the Demarch of the Blues, '[w]ho sent a group of factionists to protect Hippobates's house' (pp. 193–94).

There ensued a riot, in which two of the creditors, who were Greens, were killed and a number of Blues wounded. News of the disturbances reached the Palace; and Cappadocian John, aware that Hippobates was out of favour with Theodora but not realizing that some of the men engaged had been sent from Blue military headquarters, thought that he would please Justinian by intervening in the name of public order. He sent a strong force of Guards to the scene of disturbance, who arrested Blues and Greens indiscriminately, several of each Colour. (p. 194)

After making John the Cappadocian responsible for this act attributed in the sources to Eudaemon, Graves continues with an account now tied more directly to the historical sources.

Once the riot has started, Graves minimises Belisarius's participation in the slaughter of the rioters in the Hippodrome and in the turning over of Hypatius, acclaimed by the crowd as the new Emperor. Hypatius did so against his will in the view of Procopius, although Marcellinus Comes provided the official view that the riot was a conspiracy organised by Hypatius and his brothers, the nephews of Emperor Anastasius.<sup>48</sup>

Theodora gives her big speech, culminating in Graves as in

Procopius with the claim, ‘Royalty is a fine burial-shroud’ (*kalon entaphion*) (*Wars*, I. 22. 37; *Works*, trans. by H. P. Dewing, I, p. 233).<sup>49</sup> Graves does not show any irony here, but Diodorus had said famously that tyranny (not royalty) was a fine burial-shroud. Graves creates a scene that shows Theodora’s wisdom at the expense of Justinian’s cowardice and dishonesty:

At this juncture an unexpected message came from Hypatius to Theodora: ‘Noblest of women, since the Emperor suspects me and will do nothing for me, I beg you to trust my loyalty and send soldiers to release me from this predicament.’ Theodora thereupon told Belisarius to place himself at the head of the Guards, rescue Hypatius, and bring him back to the Palace. (pp. 201–202)

Belisarius sets out on his difficult errand, and is successful on his second try. Unfortunately, Justinian sentences Hypatius and his brother Pompey to death, even though they are innocent.

Before the two are taken to the Palace, Graves inserts a few lines to mitigate Belisarius’s role as a slaughterer of the crowd in the Hippodrome:

But there was no holding back the Blues, who would now be satisfied only with a total extermination of the Greens. Belisarius and Mundus did not think it wise to interfere: they stood and grimly watched the fratricidal slaughter, as one might watch a battle between cranes and pigmies – with sympathies somewhat perhaps inclined to the side of the pigmies, who were almost as inhuman as the cranes, though not less grotesque in appearance. When it was clear that the Blues had won a handsome victory (in the names of the double-natured Son [Chalcedonians] and his Vice-regent, the double-dealing Emperor), Belisarius returned to the Palace for further orders, and Mundus with him. (p. 205)

Graves stresses fratricidal slaughter and religious controversy

more than we see it in the sources, and for Procopius the theme of Green versus Blue and Monophysite versus Chalcedonian plays no part in the description of the last days of the riot. Graves could have been in part working from the belief that there was a strong corollary between the chariot race fans and their religious views. (Only in 1976 was this correlation shown to be false or simplistic by Alan Cameron in his *Circus Factions*.) As there was no police force, how the riot should and could have been handled is not clear.

One could take a more charitable view than Graves does and suggest that Justinian wanted to avoid a slaughter until he felt completely at a loss to try any other course. Graves presents him as a coward who wants to leave the city, but Greatrex says it is just as reasonable to think that he had a ‘desire to distance himself from the carnage which would ensue’ no matter who won. After the slaughter, he could ‘claim that his troops had over-reacted and sack a few commanders to redeem his reputation’, a tactic that Greatrex labels in line with ‘his constant attempts to find a peaceful solution to the riot’.<sup>50</sup> Graves, however, is dedicated to a narrative of good Belisarius and bad Justinian inherited from the romance tradition. His Justinian is hardly the equal of Theodora in intelligence and willpower.

Theodora was a fascinating figure, and although it has been more standard to suggest that the monstrous Livia is one of Graves’s projections of Laura Riding, it is equally worth considering Graves’s sympathetic picture of the probably monstrous Theodora as a projection of a good Laura when part of him felt that she was a tyrant. The whitewashing of Theodora and Antonina from his source, the *Secret History*, which he claims not to have altered in its basics, is so bizarrely ingenuous that we can see seeds of his White Goddess fantasy here. There is plenty of ‘Byzantine intrigue’ in this novel of Byzantium, but the intrigues of Justinian are considered by Graves far worse than those of Theodora.

Anthony Kaldellis, who strongly maintains Procopius’s astuteness as historian, writes:

The *Secret History* depicts a sterile technocrat addicted to secrecy, murder, and greed who has replaced his emotions with doctrines and uses language to conceal rather than speak the truth. His tyranny was modern in that it was founded on ideology; Justinian was incapable of thinking or acting without theological principles. He was not exaggerating when he said that ‘we are accustomed to consider God in everything that we do’ (*Novel* 19, preface). For instance, he invoked Scripture to regulate the price of vegetables. He there revealed the extent of his totalitarian disposition, which he had in common with no other ancient monarch. (p. 157)

Graves minimises the totalitarian aspect of Justinian’s rule when he has us read,

There is in this to be noted: though Justinian treated Belisarius execrably, he never once ordered him to perform any act that was plainly against the laws of God; for Belisarius would not have obeyed, be sure, holding the laws of God as superior to any commands of man. (p. 563)

Since Belisarius as good soldier follows the commands he is given, an idea which also appears to be promoted in *Good-bye to All That*, we can see that Graves does not raise the issue of what a soldier is supposed to do when the commands that he receives strike him as immoral. Of course, this issue in retrospect has become even more important since Graves wrote in 1938.

Showing Belisarius as a strategist is what Graves does best. In the Battle of Daras Graves makes a wonderfully vivid addition to Procopius’s description to show his expertness in battle strategy. It is inserted after the visit of the Persian messenger. After the messenger had boasted that the Persian commander Firouz would be spending the next night in the city of Daras and thus a bath should be prepared for him, Procopius does not give any response from Belisarius. Graves provides one: ‘Belisarius of the Steel

Casque assures the Persian Generalissimo that the sweating chamber and the cold douche will both be ready for him' (p. 139). Then Graves creates two long paragraphs to show that in short order he could turn his troops into archers:

He provided them with long, stiff bows and regulated their pay according to their gradually increasing skill with these weapons; but it was only what he called 'random shooting'. He demanded no more than that each man should be able to send his whole quiverful of forty arrows a distance of at least a hundred yards, keeping them within an angle of not more than ten degrees. Against a massed enemy this would be sufficient aim. He had already manufactured an enormous quantity of arrows, and continued to keep his artificers busy at forging more arrow-heads and trimming and feathering more shafts. (pp. 139–40)

Graves attributes much of Belisarius's success to his creation of light and heavy cavalry units. He never mentions that there was another leading general at the battle as well, Hermogenes. At Daras we see Graves's Belisarius taking his own Household Cuirassiers and, instead of using them as formal instructors, making them appear as challengers to the less experienced troops in order to set in motion learning by copying the experts. Reliance on cavalry was an innovation for the Roman Empire, as we see in Procopius's discussion at the beginning of the *Wars*. In contrast, in Graves's own experience of World War I, as told in his autobiography, cavalry was old and poison gas and elaborate trench warfare were new.

Graves also tones down the controversy over Belisarius's responsibility for the major setback after Daras at Callinicum. According to Geoffrey Greatrex in *Rome and Persia at War*:

Right from the start, the battle of Callinicum aroused controversy, even the campaign leading up to it witnessed divisions among the Roman leaders. The defeat of Belisarius

was bound to have repercussions, coming so soon after the string of Roman successes in the preceding year. Some regarded the *magister militum* as having failed to protect the provinces adequately and accused him of abandoning the field of battle precipitately. Others, such as Procopius, endeavoured to defend his reputation, arguing that he was forced to fight against his will by the ill-discipline of his own men. Once Hermogenes had reported the defeat to Justinian, the emperor set up a commission of inquiry to investigate what had happened.<sup>51</sup>

Greatrex says that one should not necessarily believe that the commission led by Constantiolus was fair, and that Belisarius, who was removed of his command, may have been the victim of rivalry. We learn about Belisarius's dismissal from Malalas (Sections 461–64), but he may be giving a biased official account (pp. 194–95). All that Procopius says is this: 'And Belisarius came to Byzantium at the summons of the emperor, in order to be sent again to Italy, since the situation was already full of difficulties for the Romans' (*Wars* II. 21. 34; *Works*, I, p. 451). Graves, also making no mention of the inquiry, offers another reason: 'for Theodora now persuaded Justinian to recall Belisarius, on the ground that a capable soldier was needed in the City as a protection against the increasing mob-violence of the Blue and Green factions' (p. 179).

In the second Persian campaign, Procopius in the *Secret History* says that Belisarius let Chosroes get away after the sack of Antioch, perhaps the most devastating military blow against Justinian in the whole period of the wars.

And yet if he had been prepared from the first to cross the Tigris with his entire army, I have no doubt that he would have despoiled the whole Assyrian region, gone right to the city of Ctesiphon without meeting any resistance at all, freed the prisoners from Antioch and any other Roman who happened to be there, and then returned safely to his

fatherland. Then again it was mainly his fault that Chosroes met no real opposition on the way back from Colchis. (p. 49)

In contrast, Graves makes it sound as if Chosroes decided to head toward Jerusalem, that Belisarius did not make any unfortunate delays related to the estranged Antonina's visit or otherwise, and that the frightened Boutzes did a bad job of replacing Belisarius (pp. 441–44).

Moving to the Western front, and noting that Justinian wanted to avoid a two-front war, we see that Procopius and Graves give such a detailed account of the Vandal and Gothic Wars that we will have to skip over them for lack of time. In general, Procopius is more concerned with chance than Graves. Whereas both commentary and speeches allow Procopius to suggest that chance often determines the outcome of a battle, Graves presents Belisarius as someone who can justly be considered responsible for his victories. On the other hand, Procopius exaggerated the number of enemy troops in the West, a technique that favoured a high evaluation of Belisarius,<sup>52</sup> and Graves often gives the numbers of troops he found in the *Wars*.

Anthony Kaldellis feels that underneath the various terms that Procopius has for God and fate and chance, his position is ultimately this one:

First, Procopius believed that the fall of the Vandals was due to chance and not the virtue of Belisarius. Gelimer's defeat was caused by a series of accidents from which the Romans only happened to benefit. This thesis is stated explicitly, if not helpfully, in the *Secret History*: 'tyche delivered Gelimer and Vittigis over to Belisarius as captives of war'. It is also alluded to in the *Gothic War*, where the verbal form of *tyche* is used in connection with Belisarius's victory over the Vandals (5. 5. 1). This persistent association of *tyche* with the victory in Libya is not accidental and explains why Procopius never praises Belisarius for the reconquest. This

in turn, refutes the pervasive belief that the historian set out to glorify the general in the Vandal War. (pp. 176–77)

Kaldellis demonstrates that Procopius from time to time praises Belisarius for those events in which his virtue was apparent, such as the entry of the troops into Carthage and some early victories over the Goths, but he also says negative things at various points (*Wars*, III. 14. 1–2 and IV. 41–48).

Since Procopius was not in a position to speak openly under Justinian's tyranny but had to write between the lines, and since the method of classical historiography was to state opinions indirectly through literary allusions and created speeches, Kaldellis feels that when the Gothic envoys take a dim view of Belisarius that Procopius does so also:

When Ildibadus had thus spoken, the Goths decided that he had counselled well, and he sent envoys to Ravenna with all speed. So these envoys, upon coming before Belisarius, reminded him of the agreement made with them and reproached him as a breaker of promises, calling him a slave [to Justinian] by his own choice, and chiding him because, they said, he did not blush at choosing servitude in place of kingship; and with many other speeches of a similar sort they kept urging him to accept the rule. (*Wars*, VI. 30. 25; *Works*, IV, p. 145)

Whereas Graves presents a Belisarius who deserves praise for not betraying Justinian, Kaldellis feels that Belisarius is presented by Procopius as betraying the Goths by his pathetic loyalty to the autocratic Emperor.

The climax of the novel comes when the retired Belisarius is called back into action by the desperate Justinian. Belisarius, his reassembled Household Guard, and able-bodied Thracian peasants fight off the Huns threatening Byzantium. Graves turns this set piece from Agathias's *Histories* into a different kind of set piece by pruning almost all of the long speech that Agathias gives to

Belisarius, replacing it with the greetings exchanged among the old soldiers who have not seen each other in years. Bringing back to mind various minor plotlines, Graves assembles Sisifried, Unigatus, Andreas, Uliaris, Trajan, and Thurimuth (pp. 534–35). All of these are minor characters whom the reader may easily forget on a first reading. Still, the scene movingly presents Belisarius as a great man because he inspired his men to great deeds and secured their loyalty. Eugenius tells us that fortune had attended to all these men differently: ‘Some were well-clothed and stout, some in rags and pale, some limped, some strutted’ (p. 534). As we do not have surviving memoirs of the rank-and-file of Roman army men, Eugenius’s description is particularly touching:

There were many reunions between former comrades-in-arms who had not met for a number of years, the city being so large. It was: ‘You still alive, old Sisifried? I thought you died with Diogenes on the retreat from Rome,’ and ‘Why, comrade Unigatus, I saw you last at the siege of Osimo, when the javelin pierced your hand’, and ‘Hey, comrade, do you not know me? We bivouacked together in the Paradise of Grasse under a quincunx of fruit-trees, four and twenty years ago, a few days before the Battle of the Tenth Milestone.’ I was there with my mistress Antonina, and had many affectionate greetings from old associates, which warmed my heart. (p. 534)

This scene is also effective because this time, in fighting off the Cham Zabergan at the village of Chettos, Graves gives Belisarius only a moving, short speech: ‘Comrades, in remembering the glorious battles of long ago do not forget how they were won. They were won not only by courage and skill with arms but by prudence’ (p. 536).<sup>53</sup>

Agathias in contrast accords Belisarius a speech of almost a hundred lines. This source speech is about prudence, but the effect is very different. Belisarius has to calm down the troops, who are over-enthusiastic and over-excited to the point of exhibiting a

dangerous optimism, especially given the superior numbers of the enemy (p. 150–57). In the middle of the speech Agathias's Belisarius tells the troops:

But, even so, let each of you bear in mind that unreflecting endeavour is not to be attributed to the generous impulses of courage but to foolhardy and wrong-headed audacity. May your bravery and enthusiasm find permanent and ever-increasing expression, but may all excessive daring and any tendency towards arrogance and obstinacy be tempered by the observance of reason and moderation. (V. 18. 2; Agathias, *The Histories*, p. 153)

We can see that Graves does not want this extreme emphasis on prudence because we have already seen him in the entire novel training his soldiers to fight appropriately. In contrast, Agathias, an admirer and continuator of Procopius, has not had Belisarius in his narrative until this point, and he needs to create more of a character for him.

Here Belisarius is defending his country rather than defending the far-away Eastern frontier or fighting for the reconquest of North Africa and Italy. Whether we should see Justinian's desire to reconquer areas of the former Roman Empire in the West as a legitimate hope or as an example of militaristic imperialism is never raised by Graves as an issue for the reader to decide on since the questions in the foreground are whether Justinian will properly fund the campaigns and whether Belisarius will overcome the various people working to thwart his plans, often other soldiers embittered by jealousy. Once we get to the last chapter, Belisarius, blind and begging, is not given any scene where he looks back over his life and evaluates what has happened as a result of his campaigns. When he is finally pardoned by Justinian in 565, just a few months before he dies, we share his happiness, and it is no appropriate time to make the hostile comment on the war on the Western front, given by Procopius, who saw it all happen.

Considering that the Western lands had been lost to the Empire years before except through nominal allegiance of the Gothic rulers, the reader is inclined to agree with the judgment of Procopius in the *Secret History* that the campaigns did not have good consequences.

Before the war began, the Gothic Empire stretched from Gaul to the boundaries of Dacia [. . .] but all this region, roughly speaking, is completely depopulated. For some died in the war, others succumbed to disease and starvation, which war inevitably brings in its train. Illyricum and the whole of Thrace [. . .] were overrun almost every year by Huns, Slavs, and Antae, from the day that Justinian took charge of the Roman Empire. I believe that in every incursion more than two hundred thousand of the Romans residing there were killed or enslaved, so that the whole region was turned into a second Scythian desert. (18. 15; p. 132)

Not only does Procopius present the Gothic War as leaving Italy vulnerable to invasions from the North, he makes it clear that for him the army should have been doing more to guard the frontier against the Persian tyrant Chosroes. Unfortunately, Justinian provided Chosroes with inducement to go to war (18. 29; p. 133).

By making the novel a story of the Emperor's outrageous ingratitude toward his most capable and devoted general, and by including the legend about Belisarius being blinded as the final straw, Graves takes our attention away the issue of the morality of the Western campaigns. How much comparison we should make here with Graves's attitudes toward World War I in his autobiography and elsewhere is hard to determine because the wars involved were quite different. However, in *Good-bye to All That*, the ideal soldier seems to be the one who follows his orders, not the one who judges his superiors. This view is reflected in Eugenius's overall concluding comment on Belisarius's conduct:

Now what must be said of Belisarius's patient submission to the cruelty and caprice of Justinian, his Emperor? Some have held, because of this, that his character stands far higher than an ordinary man's; others that it falls far below, being equal to that of a poltroon. The matter could be disputed endlessly. What holds more weight with me than any idle philosophical argument is my knowledge of Belisarius's own views. For, just as he did not hold with the Donatists of Africa, who refused to accept the Sacraments from the hands of an evil-living priest but only from one of unblemished reputation; so he did not hold with political Donatists, who constituted themselves critics of those set in authority over them, and ruined all by their disobedience and ignorance. (p. 562)

Through Eugenius we are reminded of Gibbon's last word on Belisarius: 'the unconquerable patience and loyalty of Belisarius appear either *below* or *above* the character of a MAN'.<sup>54</sup> Eugenius, as a domestic, claims that we can read a man's character by the way that he treats his servants, as this is the mirror side of the way he acts toward his superiors. Eugenius knows that he could never have had a better master (pp. 562–63). Although this kind of reasoning from analogy still begs the question of whether it would have been better for a rich man like Belisarius to retire and not fight a questionable war, Graves probably felt that analogies between Belisarius's behaviour and a modern soldiers are not easy to make, since the ideologies of World War I are nothing like the attitudes leading to Justinian's campaigns. While Averil Cameron thinks that Procopius accepted the validity of the war of conquest, Anthony Kaldellis thinks just the opposite is true, and based on the passage given above, I would agree with him.

## 6. Conclusion

We have noted that *Count Belisarius*, once contextualised, is more interesting than it may at first appear. We can also consider it in

terms of Graves's poetry and his interest in military strategy. Graves's 'The Cuirassiers of the Frontier' in *Collected Poems* (1938) is related to it.<sup>55</sup> As Paul O'Prey writes, in this poem we see some of the 'close parallels between soldier and poet [that] were spelled out clearly by Graves in a lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1965'.<sup>56</sup> 'The Cuirassiers of the Frontier' manifests a viewpoint nowhere taken up in *Count Belisarius*, that of the average soldiers recruited from the so-called barbarians. In a poem of four powerful stanzas of seven lines each, we get to see how 'We', that is, these soldiers, despise the Empire, Christianity, and the effeminate Byzantines. The poem demonstrates a masculine, warrior ethos in which war is better than Christianity. The poem ends, 'We, not the City, are the Empire's soul: / A rotten tree lives only in its rind.'<sup>57</sup> As this is a dramatic monologue, albeit a collective one, one should be wary of attributing any of the attitudes to Graves himself. One can hardly expect Graves to sympathise, given that these soldiers are nothing like the members of his beloved Household Guard who in the penultimate chapter of the novel rise to the occasion to defend the City.

These cuirassiers know and care little for 'The eunuchs of her draped saloons' (st. 1, l. 7). Not only is *Count Belisarius* told by a eunuch, the faithful and resourceful Eugenius, who as a child was a noble Britain, but in addition Eugenius defends his fellow eunuchs: 'Eunuchs on the whole make milder and more loyal and more industrious officials than their unstoned colleagues, and their pettiness in routine matters [. . .] is a strong conservative force' (p. 159). He adds, 'Thus, to be a eunuch is, in the worldly sense at least, more of an advantage than a disadvantage, as may also be seen by a comparison of slave-market prices.' The eunuch is only of slightly less value economically than the house-physician or trained artisan. The point of view in the novel is not that of the poem, where we see a decadent civilisation defended by the mercenaries who despise her.

We should probably evaluate Belisarius and his troops with reference to an issue in nineteenth and twentieth century warfare,

the conflict of opinions on whether war was ‘an extension of politics by other means’. Whereas in *On War* Clausewitz had ‘argued that war was merely an extension of politics by other means and that military considerations and men must be subordinate to political factions and leaders’, later in the 1860s and 1870s Helmuth von Moltke wrote that when war had begun, political advisors and their considerations should play no role in military strategy and the conduct of operations. Since von Moltke did not believe in Clausewitz’s dictum of subordinating military means to political ends, he ran into trouble with Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.<sup>58</sup> Had Belisarius lived today, he would have supported Clausewitz over von Moltke.

In an excellent article, ‘Procopius the Military Historian’, filled with too many astute observations to summarise, W. E. Kaegi points out that Procopius described a type of warfare that the Byzantine Empire would use for the next five hundred years.

Instead of decisive combat or battles or wars of annihilation, he primarily described, and this was especially true of the warfare with the Ostrogoths in Italy, warfare of attrition (that is, as the military historian Hans Delbrück put it, *Ermattungskrieg* instead of *Niederwerfungskrieg*). Procopius identified Belisarius with warfare of trickery and attrition when he stated that the Ostrogothic King Totila ‘wanted to come to a straightforward decision by battle with them on a plain rather than to have a protracted struggle, by means of wiles and clever contrivances.’<sup>59</sup>

In addition, as Kaegi remarks, Procopius seems to endorse Belisarius’s conviction (*Wars*, VI. 23. 29–33) that the Byzantine army should not always insist on battle and stand to fight. There were times when fleeing could be a good strategy even if it looked cowardly (p. 65). Belisarius’s message in the *Wars* that one should be careful, that enthusiasm in war must be moderate and reasonable, is paralleled by Belisarius’s strategy as told by Agathias when Agathias attributes to him the long speech on

curbing wild enthusiasm, which Graves used but shortened for the passage on the defence of the city.

Kaegi suggests that Procopius was read by a Byzantine audience because he conveyed such a good sense of the battle stratagems by Belisarius, seen as worth studying for their applicability (p. 66). In World War I the battle strategy of the Germans, influenced by Clausewitz, was that of the annihilating push to destroy the enemy's army. We see how that tactic led to the trench warfare that devastated European civilisation. By bringing back to mind Belisarius's alternative strategy, Graves may have been trying to come to terms with his own experiences as a soldier obeying orders in the trench warfare of World War I.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gary K. Shepherd, 'While Emperor Justinian I Revived Byzantine

Splendor at Home, Count Belisarius Revived Its Power Abroad', *Military History*, 14, 7 (March 1998), 3 pp.; Eric Hildinger, 'Belisarius' Bid for Rome', *Military History*, 16, 4 (October 1999), 6 pp.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Brogna, 'The Generalship of Belisarius' (unpublished master's thesis (M.M.A.S.), U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995, 42034580), pp. 94–95.

<sup>3</sup> For other historical studies of Belisarius see Bruno Lavagnini, *Belisario in Italia: istoria di un anno (535–536)* (Palermo: Presso la Libreria Gino, 1948); Lionel Max Chassin, *Bélisaire, généralissime byzantin, 504–565* (Paris: Payot, 1957); Piotr Krupczynski, *Trudnosci zachodnich wypraw Belizariusza* (Lodz: Uniwersytet Łódzki, 1981); and for Belisarius in literature see Naphtali Lebermann, *Belisar in der litteratur der romanischen und germanischen nationen* (Nürnberg: Gutmann, 1899) and Börje Knös, *La légende de Bélisaire dans les pays grecs* (Uppsala: Eranos, 1960).

<sup>4</sup> Graves quoted in Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 306; see also Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura, 1926–1940* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), pp. 279, 361.

<sup>5</sup> *The Years with Laura*, p. 278.

<sup>6</sup> Paul O'Prey, ed., In *Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves, 1914–1946* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 287.

<sup>7</sup> *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Forster, *Robert Graves et la dualité du réel* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1975), p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, p. 301.

<sup>10</sup> Katherine Snipes, *Robert Graves* (New York: Ungar, 1979), p. 151.

<sup>11</sup> *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, p. 301.

<sup>12</sup> *The Years with Laura*, p. 279.

<sup>13</sup> *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, p. 364.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>15</sup> *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* (London: Cassell, 1972), p. 169, quoted in Robert H. Canary, *Robert Graves* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> James S. Mehoke, *Robert Graves: Peace-Weaver* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 55–57.

<sup>17</sup> Canary, *Robert Graves*, p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (Toronto: Penguin, 1960), p. 205, quoted in Ian Firla, “‘Epics Are out of Fashion’: Graves’s Short Story as a Model for His Longer Fiction’s Narrative Techniques”, in *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. by Patrick J. Quinn (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1999), pp. 107–127 (p. 125).

<sup>19</sup> Snipes, *Robert Graves*, p. 197.

<sup>20</sup> Forster, *Robert Graves et la dualité du réel*, p. 169.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Diehl, *Justinien et la civilisation byzantine au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 2 vols (Paris: Leroux, 1901; repr. New York: Franklin, 1969), *Théodora, Impératrice de Byzance*, 3rd edn (Paris: Boccard, 1904), *Theodora, Empress of Byzantium*, trans. by Samuel R. Rosenbaum (New York: Ungar, 1972); William Gordon Holmes, *The Age of Justinian and Theodora: A History of the Sixth Century A.D.*, 2 vols (London: Bell, 1905–1907; J. B. Bury, *History of the Late Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian*, 2 vols, rev. edn (London: Macmillan, 1923; repr. New York: Dover, 1958).

<sup>22</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars, Secret History, and Buildings*, abridged and trans. by Averil Cameron (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), *The Secret History*, trans. by G. A. Williamson (London: Penguin, 1966; 2nd edn with new bibliography, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Robert Browning, *Justinian and Theodora* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), John Moorhead, *Justinian* (London: Longman, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses* (London: Routledge, 1999), James Allan Evans, *The Empress Theodora, Partner of Justinian* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> See note 21 (Diehl) and note 3 (Knös).

<sup>26</sup> Robert Graves, *Count Belisarius* (New York: Random House, 1938; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986), p. vi.

<sup>27</sup> Agathias, *The Histories*, trans. by Joseph D. Frendo (New York: De Gruyter, 1975).

<sup>28</sup> Ioannes Lydus, *On Powers, or The Magistracies of the Roman State*, ed. and trans. by Anastasius C. Bandy (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> John Malalas, *The Chronicle*, trans. by Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys, and Roger Scott (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986).

<sup>30</sup> Evagrius Scholasticus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. by Michael Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis)*, trans. by Raymond Davis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> Theophanes, *Chronographica*, trans. by Cyril Mango, Roger Scott, and Geoffrey Greatrex (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Marcellinus, *The Chronicle*, trans. by Brian Croke (Sydney: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1995); J. B. Bury, 'The Nika Riot', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 17 (1897), 92–119; Geoffrey Greatrex, 'The Nika Riot: A Reappraisal' *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 117 (1997), 60–86.

<sup>33</sup> *The Empress Theodora*, p. xiii.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Cassiodorus, *Variae*, ed. and trans. by S. J. B. Barnish (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992), p. xiv.

<sup>37</sup> See note 21.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Henry Stanhope [Lord Mahon], *The Life of Belisarius* (London: Murray, 1829), pp. 32, 438.

<sup>39</sup> See note 21.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, notes by Oliphant Smeaton, 6 vols (London: Dent, 1910; repr. New York: Dutton, 1954).

<sup>41</sup> For translated minor sources on the Age of Justinian, see:

Agathias, *The Histories* (see note 27).

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John Malalas (see note 29).

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Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-mahre, *Chronicle*, Part III, trans. by Witold Witakowski (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996).

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We should also mention here George T. Dennis's translation of *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), and of another sixth-century military treatise in his *Three Byzantine Military Treatises: Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy; Skirmishing; Campaign Organization and Tactics* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 1985).

Before Graves wrote *Count Belisarius*, there were already English translations of religious writings such as John of Ephesus, *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History*, trans. by R. Payne Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1860), *The Chronicle of John (c. 690 A.D.)*, *Coptic Bishop of Nikiu*, trans. by Robert Henry Charles (London: William & Norgate, 1916; repr. Amsterdam: APA-Philo Press, 1981), and Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk*, trans. by J. W. McCrindle (London: Hakluyt Society, 1897; repr. New York: Burt Franklin, 1967). Cyril of Scythopolis's 'Vie de Saint Sabas' is available in French in A.-J. Festugière's edition of *Les Moines d'Orient*, 3 vols (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1962–1963).

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<sup>42</sup> Procopius, *The Secret History*, trans. by G. A. Williamson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; 2nd edn with new bibliography, 1981), p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Bury, *History of the Late Roman Empire*, II, pp. 421–22.

<sup>44</sup> James Allan Evans in three books on Procopius, Justinian and Theodora feels that the Emperor and Empress had some significant virtues, whereas Kaldellis believes that they were monstrous people and that Procopius presented them for exactly what they were. For other assessments of Theodora, see Charles Pazdernik, 'Our Most Pious Consort Given us by God: Dissident Reactions to the Partnership of

Justinian and Theodora', *Classical Antiquity*, 13 (1994), 256–81, and C. Foss, 'The Empress Theodora', *Byzantion*, 72 (2002), 141–76; and of Justinian, see Ernst Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, II (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949), Percy Neville Ure, *Justinian and his Age* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), Robert Browning (see note 23), Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750*, 2nd edn (New York: Norton, 1989), and John Moorhead (see note 23).

Graves does not show much interest in the one area where Justinian can legitimately be offered praise. In his legislation there were several important measures to improve the status of women, such as creating severe penalties for rape, making it possible for women to reclaim dowries, providing for the legitimacy of children born to unmarried women, and outlawing procurers (Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 16; see note 24). We do see this last piece of legislation, but it is presented with the cynicism of the *Secret History* in regard to prostitutes having little desire to change their careers for a convent life.

<sup>45</sup> Greatrex reminds us that Procopius 'was by no means a lone voice or outsider inveighing against the emperor's policies' (*Rome and Persia at War*, p. 227). John Lydus had similar criticisms, and in the twelfth century Zonaras appears to have had access to an earlier unknown source critical of the Emperor (p. 223). Greatrex believes that there was a significant group of officials and senators willing to unseat Justinian, and that they were thwarted by Belisarius's loyalty to Justinian and to Antonina (p. 223).

<sup>46</sup> 'The Nika Riot: A Reappraisal', p. 82 (see note 32).

<sup>47</sup> *The Empress Theodora*, p. 41.

<sup>48</sup> 'The Nika Riot', p. 93 (see note 32).

<sup>49</sup> Procopius, *Works*, trans. by H. B. Dewing, 7 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914–1940; repr. 1960).

<sup>50</sup> 'The Nika Riot: A Reappraisal', p. 78.

<sup>51</sup> Geoffrey Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War, 502–532* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1998), p. 194.

<sup>52</sup> K. Hannestad, 'Les Forces militaires d'après la *Guerre gothique* de Procope', *Classica et Medievalia*, 21 (1960), 136–83 (pp. 181–83).

<sup>53</sup> For a comparison of Graves's rendition of Belisarius's use of cavalry to that in the *Strategikon* attributed to the Emperor Maurice, probably written between 592 and 610, one can juxtapose the section in 'An Improved Cavalry' (pp. 79–94) with the Byzantine manual's section on

the armament of cavalymen (Book 1. 2; *Maurice's Strategikon*, pp. 12–14 (see note 41)). Maurice says that '[a]part from the foreigners, all the younger Romans up to the age of forty must definitely be required to possess bow and quiver, whether they be expert archers or just average. They should possess two lances so as to have a spare in hand in case the first one misses' (p. 12). Graves's Belisarius, making his strategy in the 520s, does not ask for two lances, but he also stresses the importance of cavalry archers.

<sup>54</sup> Chapter 41; Smeaton, *op. cit.*, IV, p. 278.

<sup>55</sup> D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>56</sup> Paul O'Prey, 'The White Goddess: A Proselytizing Text', in Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop, eds, *Graves and the Goddess: Essays on Robert Graves's 'The White Goddess'* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2003), pp. 125–33 (pp. 128–29); see Robert Graves, *Collected Writings on Poetry*, ed. by Paul O'Prey (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 468.

<sup>57</sup> 'The Cuirassiers of the Frontier', ll. 27–28, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, vol. 2 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 81.

<sup>58</sup> Daniel J. Hughes, 'Introduction' to Helmuth von Moltke, *On the Art of War*, ed. by Daniel J. Hughes, trans. by Daniel J. Hughes and Harry Bell, foreword by Gunther E. Rothenberg (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), pp. 1–19 (pp. 7, 8).

<sup>59</sup> W. E. Kaegi, 'Procopius the Military Historian', *Byzantinische Forschungen* 15 (1990), 53–85 (p. 64).