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The Emperor Majorian's Secret Embassy to the Court of the Vandal Gaiseric

In his *Bellum Vandalicum*, the sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius records how, shortly before his ill-fated campaign against the Vandals in Africa, the West Roman Emperor Majorian (457-61), alone and incognito, visited the court of the Vandal King Gaiseric in Carthage.[1] His aim was reportedly twofold: first, to gather intelligence about the strength of the Vandals and the character of Gaiseric; and, second, to determine the loyalties of the neighboring Moors and Libyans.[2] Aware of the risks, the emperor, who "never showed the least hesitation before any task and least of all before the dangers of war,"[3] prudently darkened his far-famed naturally golden hair, then met with Gaiseric pretending to be an envoy sent from the emperor.[4] Mission accomplished, he quickly returned to his troops with great hopes of conquering Libya.[5]

Edward Gibbon, without explaining why, dismissed the embassy as "an anecdote" and "an improbable fiction," but one "which would not have been imagined unless in the life of a hero."[6] More recently, Berthold Rubin called it "ein Flüchtligkeitsfehler," a carelessness or slip of the pen.[7] In style and method Procopius's model was Thucydides, but "in his fondness of digression into strange incidents," commented James Westfall Thompson, Herodotus was clearly his model.[8] When he wrote about Majorian's embassy, however, who was his model? More importantly, was he recounting history or simply preserving a legend? Did he compose it originally or was it taken from another source and inserted merely as a diversion from his main narrative?

No other extant ancient source mentions the embassy and Propocius does not expand the several details he gives regarding its context which other sources

1. *Procopius*, trans. H. B. Dewing, 7 vols., Loeb Classical Library (London: W. Heinemann, 1962-), III. vii, 4-14.

2. *Ibid.*, vii. 6.

3. *Ibid.*, The translation is that of Dewing.

4. *Ibid.*, vii. 7-8.

5. *Ibid.*, vii. 13.

6. E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1932), II, 318.

7. B. Rubin, s.v. *Procopios von Kaisereia*, in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Supp. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1903-), XXIII (1957), at 423.

8. J. W. Thompson, *A History of Historical Writiing*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1942), I, 299-300.

do verify. Though he does mention Majorian's recruitment of an army and its initial encampment in northern Italy, for instance, he says nothing about its composition—in the main Ostrogoths and Huns—and nothing about the hardships the emperor endured consolidating it.[9] One mutiny did, in fact, occur; yet it is to this time, roughly, that Procopius dates the embassy.[10] Under the circumstances, the risks of such an undertaking may seem hardly worth the prize.

Regardless, the account of Majorian's embassy is a singular historiographical oddity, one not without its parallels, however, in classical literature. Despite repeated variations in detail, the main elements are ever present and easy to identify. While these parallels may all together constitute an historiographical tradition, none, in any case, are offered here as actual sources for the embassy Procopius attributes to Majorian.

The most famous are the minute episodes of espionage and counter-espionage found in the *Iliad* known as the "Doloneia" which supposedly inspired the *Rhesus* of Euripides.[11] About to engage in an intelligence mission themselves, Diomedes and Odysseus capture the Trojan spy Dolon and, after interrogating him, they kill him. None of the information they receive will later serve any specific military need, but it lifts troop morale when it is at its lowest. Also in the *Iliad* there is the example of King Priam riding off in his chariot to the tent of his enemy Achilles to plead for the body of his son Hector whom Achilles has recently killed.[12] Elsewhere, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, discovered washed ashore in the land of the Phaeacians following shipwreck, is brought to the court of the Phaeacian King Alcinoos and keeps his legendary name a secret until he is sure he is among friends.[13] Later, returning to his native Ithaca, he disguises himself as a beggar to learn undercover how memory of him has been served during the twenty years of his absence.[14] A parallel from Vergil's *Aeneid* is probably not as familiar as these. While Aenas and Achates are in Carthage, the goddess Venus wraps them in a mist so they

9. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmen* V. 470-509. The current edition is that of A. Loyen, *Sidoine Apollinaire*, Collection des Universités de France (Paris: Société d'édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1970-). Sidonius, incidently, makes no mention of Majorian's embassy anywhere in his works.

10. *Ibid.*, V. 484-509. O. Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns: Studies in their History and Culture* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973), pp. 161-162, believes the insurgents were Huns. It is arguable that the mutiny occurred in the emperor's absence which might explain why its leaders were punished without his knowing it. Afterwards, Majorian is always to be seen at the head of his army—or so his panegyrist says—as a symbol of unity and strength. See *Carmen* V. 416-549.

11. Homer, *Iliad*, X. 147-579.

12. *Ibid.*, XXIV. 226-875.

13. Homer, *Odyssey*, VIII. 461-90.

14. *Ibid.*, XIX-XXIII.

might learn under her protection how the Carthaginians will receive the far-famed Trojan remnant.[15]

Other parallels are found in classical history. Fearful of plots against his life from the newly recruited Celtic units in his army, Hannibal, Polybius notes, wore various disguises and even false hair on his march over the Alps into Italy.[16] Later, in 206 B.C., after defeating the Carthaginians at Baecula, Scipio, Livy says, undertook a mission to Mauretania to secure the allegiance of the dubiously allied King Syphax and obtain from King Massinissa his Numidian cavalry in Rome's continuing struggle with Hannibal.[17] Still later, about 107 B.C., at the request of a certain Bocchus, the young Sulla, Sallust writes, entered the camp of his notorious archenemy Jugurtha to boast afterward of the deed.[18] Towards the close of the fourth century–nearer the period under construction–Theodosius I's Praetorian Prefect Rufinus, the poet Claudian briefly mentions, stole into the camp of Rome's eventual conqueror the Visigoth Alaric masquerading as a Goth himself.[19]

Some especially notable parallels are from the so-called "Alexander romances." Extant in three Greek versions, these pseudo-historical narratives may date from as early as 300 B.C., even though the oldest surviving text dates to about 300 A.D.[20] During one episode, at any rate, Alexander forces Darius, the Persian king, to move his camp to the River Estrange, then moves his own camp to the place where Darius has just camped. At this point the Macedonian general has an escapade. Pretending he is a messenger, he comes to Darius' court. After he is richly entertained by Darius, he takes the king's drinking cup, but, leaving, he is recognized and flees to his camp with Persian cavalry in hot pursuit.[21] Later, while in India, he again gambles with his life. There King Porus spreads word that he is curious to know what Alexander looks like. As soon as he receives the news, Alexander rushes off to a place called Baudes where he impersonates a Greek chamberlain come to buy some wax. Meeting Porus, he tells him that Alexander is old and ailing. Encouraged by the report, Porus sends Alexander a letter offering him battle at once.

15. Vergil, *Aeneid*, I. 535-765.

16. Polybius, III. 78. 1-5.

17. Livy, XXVIII. 18-21; cf. Polybius, XI. 24a. Livy, who sometimes paraphrases Polybius for pages (compare, for instance, Livy XIX. 12 with Polybius XXIX. 27, or Livy XXIV. 34 with Polybius VIII.5), may also have used him as a source for Scipio's embassy. Also see F. W. Walbank, *An Historical Commentary on Polybius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967-), II, 242 and 305-06.

18. Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum*, CII. 1-5.

19. Claudian, *In Rufinum Liber Secundus*, IV. 72-85.

20. Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni*, ed. G. Kroll (Berlin: Weidmann, 1958). This is the version used here.

21. *Ibid.*, at 176-82.

When the armies clash, however, Alexander is victorious and Porus becomes his subject.[22]

The resemblance of Alexander's two embassies–or intrigues–to Majorian's embassy, perhaps coincidental, is, at very least, interesting. All three have the same *modus operandi*; a general, incognito, slips into the camp of an enemy, hoodwinks him, and is discovered, but not before he returns to his men with confidence of victory in an ensuing battle. Whether Procopius was himself familiar with the Alexander romances is not known. In the ancient and medieval worlds they enjoyed a great vogue, however; indeed, versions existed then as now in Persian, Syrian, Latin and Greek. That they reached the attention of the learned Procopius is thus a good possibility.[23]

In any event, the amount of historical data the Alexander romances contain cannot gauge, in verifiable sum, the amount the Majorian account contains. Some elements in the romances are true and others are patently false. While the writings of Arrian, notably, and those of others survive, moreover, to question the historicity of the Alexander romances at every point, no such work or works survive to question Procopius' account of Majorian's secret embassy. Even his statement that the emperor died of dysentery may be interpreted as the historian's credulous acceptance of the official version of his death released by the true sponsor of his death, his former ally Flavius Ricimer.[24] Seismological investigation, too, can neither prove nor disprove, date or locate the earthquake Gaiseric thought shook the weapons in the armory he proudly shows his mysterious guest, a seemingly fanciful touch added solely for dramatic effect.[25] Procopius's calling Majorian "Majorinus" throughout, finally, may only be an orthographical error. In all, if the account is examined at its face value alone, whatever is false in it still clings undetectedly to what is true in it; indeed, at some time during his reign it is quite possible Majorian visited Gaiseric's court exactly as Procopius claims he did. Though the emperor's various edicts may argue where he was at such and such a time, it was not necessary that he be present on the date they were issued; on the contrary, were he on a secret mission, having a law issued in absentia might provide the perfect cover.[26]

22. *Ibid.*, at 215.

23. On Procopius' education and learning, see Rubin, at cols. 310-18; and 403-06.

24. S. I. Oost speaks of "various excuses" promulgated, in his opinion, by Ricimer regarding the emperor's fate of which his death by dysentery may be considered one. See "D. N. Libius Severus P. F. Aug.," *Classical Philology*, 65 (1970), 230.

25. Procopius, III. vii. 10. Seismologists do not consider occurences of this sort rare–especially along mountain ranges and coastlines. Perhaps Gaiseric felt "earth tremors."

26. Of the twelve known edicts Majorian issued–one is actually an address to the Senate–nine are dated and the texts of three have not survived. See *Codex Theodosianus*, eds. T. Mommsen and P. M. Meyer, 2 vols. in 3 (Berlin: Apud Weidmannos, 1962), II, 155-78. Also see F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World, 31 BC-AD 337* (Ithaca: N.Y. Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 252-59; also see pp. 28-40 and 61-66.

Apart from a description of the intended land route the emperor and his troops would traverse through Spain and Africa to arrive in Carthage, the most plausible contribution the "story" offers to the history of Majorian's reign is the motive Procopius attaches to the embassy itself. He says that Majorian undertook it to sound the loyalties of the Moors and Libyans toward Gaiseric, a motive similar to Scipio's earlier when he embarked for Africa to sound the loyalties of Carthage's neighbors toward Hannibal.[27] Though Polybius advises that a capable general must "make careful inquiries and not rely on chance informants," scholars differ in their opinion of the importance of Scipio's particular embassy.[28] Mommsen unhesitatingly called it a "foolhardy venture," Liddell-Hart considered it "a mission of diplomatic importance"; and Scullard said that, through it, if nothing else, Scipio "gained great moral advantage."[29] Such advantage Procopius himself says Majorian himself gained. Evidently forgetful of the elements he has previously introduced into his narrative, however, he does not show him with representatives of the Moors and Libyans–whose loyalties he has come to sound, but with Gaiseric.

Modern scholarship can do no more, perhaps, than suggest a possible origin of the embassy account when all is said, namely the history of Priscus of Panium, a contemporary of Majorian and a prime source for Procopius. Only fragments of his work survive–preserved largely in the *De Legationibus* of the tenth-century Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus–but, in one of these, an embassy sent by Aiseric to a very confident Majorian, who had just concluded a treaty with the Visigothic King Theodoric, is mentioned without elaboration.[30] "When the Emperor was not persuaded [to make peace]," it reads, "he [Gaiseric] laid waste all the lands of the Moors to which Majorian and his troops had to cross from Spain and harassed the surrounding waters."[31] The fragment and the passage from Procopius may be mutually illuminating.

From 435 to 476 there were ten (known) embassies between the Vandals and the Romans. Whether the Romans or Vandals took the initiative in 460

27. Procopius, III. vii. 6.

28. Polybius, IX. 14. 1-4.

29. T. Mommsen, *The History of Rome*, 4 vols. (New York: C. Scribners' Sons, 1894), II, 331; H. B. Liddell-Hart, *A Greater Than Napoleon: Scipio Africanus* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1927), p. 137; H. H. Scullard, *Scipio Africanus in the Second Punic War* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1930), p. 56.

30. Priscus, frg. 27, *FHG*, v. V. As a digest of accounts "on embassies" from late antiquity to his own day, the *De Legationibus'* omission of Majorian's embassy–if indeed the lost portion of Priscus' history described it exactly as Procopius does, is noteworthy. On Procopius using Priscus as a source, see *Procopii Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Haury, 3 vols. in 4 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1905), VII-XI. Also see Rubin, at 407.

31. Priscus, frg. 27. The translation is that of C. D. Gordon, *The Age of Attila: Fifth-Century Byzantium and the Barbarians* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1960).

and 470 is not clear. Of the remaining embassies, however, the Romans took the initiative in 435, 442, 454-55, 455-56, 462, and 476; the Vandals took the initiative in 459 and 468.[32] In every instance of Roman initiative, the Romans were at some disadvantage; in both instances of Vandal initiative, the Vandals were at some disadvantage–they were about to be attacked. Thus Procopius, it is reasonable, merely romanticized Pricus's account of Gaiseric–at a disadvantage–making diplomatic overtures to Majorian who, confidently refusing them, angers the Vandal king into laying waste the lands of the Moors, the very people, along with the Libyans, whose allegiance to Carthage was suspect.[33]

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32. See C. Courtois, *Les Vandales et l'Afrique* (Paris: Arts et métiers graphiques, 1955).

33. Procopius, III. vii. 6.