

Procopius and the Island of Ghosts

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Notes and Documents

*Procopius and the Island of Ghosts*¹

THE vagueness of Procopius's ideas on the subject of the British Isles is often quoted as evidence of the complete breakdown of communications, by the time of this contemporary of Gildas, between our island and the Mediterranean world. As Sir F. M. Stenton² points out, Procopius clearly had some genuine information, passed on by Frankish intermediaries; but, as he frankly confesses, he found it difficult at times to distinguish between fact and legend (*Wars*, viii [= *De Bello Gothico*, iv], xx, § 47).

His most startling piece of 'what looks like mythology' (as he himself says) about Britain is certainly the story about the ferrying over of ghosts, invisible but not weightless, to the island of 'Brittia' every night, by the fishermen inhabiting to adjacent coast of the mainland, in the territory of the Franks; the story to which the apology quoted above is his preface. To see it in its context, however, and to appreciate the difficulties which Procopius tackles with indifferent success, this story should be read with its context, that is the whole of Book VIII, chapter xx, of which the celebrated ghost story forms the concluding paragraph.

Procopius explicitly distinguishes the island of 'Brittia' from 'Brettania', which he has mentioned earlier as the largest of known islands (vi. vi. 28) and with reference to the Roman Government's having been unable to regain control of it after the usurpation of Constantine, since when it had remained in the hands of local dynasts—'tyrants' (iii. ii. 31, 38). 'Brettania', he tells us (viii. xx. 5), is further west, 'opposite the furthest parts of Spain, and 400 stades [45 miles] from the continent, while Brittia is on the far side of Gaul . . . that is to say north of Spain and of Brettania'. 'Brittia' is only about 200 stades from the continent, opposite the Rhine mouths (*ibid.* §§ 4, 5). There can be no doubt, however, that both 'Brittia' and 'Brettania' represent Britain; Procopius has been misled by hearing accounts of its position sometimes relative to the land of the Franks and the narrow seas, and sometimes relative to Spain and the western sea-route, which was still in use; the route by which Byzantine coins, from the sixth even to the eleventh century, could still reach Caerwent. Of 'Brittia' he tells us, what must be substantially true, that it was inhabited by

¹ The author is indebted to Mrs. N. K. Chadwick, who read the following Note in typescript, and made several valuable suggestions.

² *Anglo Saxon England*, pp. 4 ff.

three numerous nations, the Angiloi [*sic*], the Phrissones [i.e. Frisians; cf. the form of the name, Frisiavones, found on Roman soldiers' discharge-tablets] and Brittones.¹ Brittia is the source of considerable migration to the continent—from the English-held territory to the land of the Franks (*ibid.* § 8) and no doubt also from the still Celtic regions to Brittany; Procopius does not mention the latter, but the existence of this new 'Britain' between the British Isles and Spain may well, as others have suggested, have contributed to his imaginary distinction. Frankish kings aspire to overlordship over the Angles of 'Brittia' (§ 10)—the ghost of the imperial idea—and had even caused some of the migrants into their territory to accompany a Frankish embassy to Justinian in Constantinople, in order to give the impression that this overlordship was a reality. (The Byzantine intelligence, we are not surprised to note, soon penetrated this piece of deception.) This embassy was presumably the source of some at least of Procopius's detailed but garbled knowledge of British affairs.

Procopius also mentions the English method of fighting, entirely on foot, and their fleets of longboats, without sails and propelled entirely by oars (*ibid.* §§ 28–31); this, apropos of the romantic but perhaps basically historical saga of Radigis, son of the Frankish king Hermegisclus, and his warlike English bride, the story which provides the occasion and most of the subject-matter for Procopius's chapter on 'Brittia'.

The whole chapter, with its details about constant migration of Angles into Frankish territory and its story of a great English raid on the territory of the Warni, east of the North Sea, is thus, as Stenton maintains, a by no means useless historical source, and sheds some light on how the surplus mouths and energies of the English were occupied during the pause in the conquest of South Britain, which is attested also by Gildas. If, indeed, it is customarily treated with less respect than it deserves, this is probably due to the mist of doubt cast over all its statements by the false distinction between Brettania and Brittia with which it begins, and above all by the ghost story which forms its conclusion.

It may be worth while, therefore, to suggest a way in which Procopius, who explicitly says that he finds this story 'just like a fairy-tale', and wonders whether the tellers are not recounting dreams, is nevertheless induced to make Britain into an isle of the dead, to which ghosts are ferried across by fishermen living in the land of the Franks, apparently on the straits of Dover.

The phrase 'isle of the dead' perhaps suggests an explanation. The placing of Happy Isles, often identified with the abode of the dead, in the sea out west is a feature both of Celtic and of Greek

¹ Had Procopius been further misled by the existence of the two forms of the name 'Britons' in Latin, Brittones and the more literary form, Britanni?

mythology, from the *Odyssey* onwards, too well known to need much emphasis. The legend existed among the Celts of Britain already in the Roman period, as can be seen from Plutarch's essay on 'The Cessation of Oracles', which gives literary form to a conversation held at Delphi in A.D. 83. The lecturer on Greek literature, Demetrius of Tarsus, had just come back from Britain, and while there he had actually been able to visit one of the nearer of the north-western isles. (He must have been taking part in Agricola's cultural conquest of Britain, and have been privileged, *βασιλέως πομπῆ*, as he says, to accompany, as an official observer, the Roman Irish Sea Fleet during Agricola's fifth campaign). However that may be, he had been told by members of a community of holy men—pre-Christian Culdees!—who lived in peace on this island, unmolested by the warlike tribes of the region, that some of the other islands were uninhabited by men and the abode of spirits, *δαιμόνων καὶ ἡρώων*. (Cf. also Plutarch's 'On the Face in the Moon', ch. 26.) Procopius, then, I suggest, had heard from the Anglian members of a Frankish embassy at Constantinople, probably through two interpreters, a similar account of an abode of the dead in a British isle, or isles; and trying later to confirm the geographical situation of this interesting place, he or his interpreter was misled through the fact that the chief landfall for voyagers from France to England was, as in Roman times, at Richborough, with anchorage under the lee of the Isle of Thanet. For the name of Thanet in Greek was variously given as *Tanatos*, *Tanathos*, or *Thanatos*.

That this name could be supposed by scholars, in Procopius's time, to be significant, in terms of a supposed Greek etymology, is shown by the fact that this precise view is taken by Isidore of Seville (*Etymologies*, xiv. 6, 1). The reason which he gives for its bearing what he assumes to be a name meaning 'Death' is equally derived from insular mythology, though it has nothing else in common with Procopius. *Tanatos* (*v. l.*, *Tanathos*), he notes, is a fertile island on the Gallic Straits, divided from Britain by a narrow tidal channel, 'aestuario tenui. *Dicta autem Tanatos*' (he continues) 'a morte serpentum, quos dum ipsa nescit, asportata inde terra quoquo gentium vecta sit, angues ilico perimit'. Isidore also, in short, appears to have transferred to Thanet a myth belonging to a more westerly island; a myth based, indeed, on the fact of the absence of snakes in Ireland, a fact which the Irish, with greater felicity of mythopoeia, were subsequently to utilize for the greater glory of St. Patrick.

The upshot of this argument, if accepted, is the conclusion that though for Procopius himself, as for Belisarius in his argument with the Goths,¹ Britain was a byword for inaccessibility, informa-

¹ Procop. vi. vi. 28.

tion about it was still available at second hand, through the Franks; and that we are in a position in this case, as sometimes when discussing Herodotus, to sort the grain from the tares with more success than the author who has, very soundly, preserved both for us. This done, we can use the rest of his chapter xx of Book VIII as a material addition to our sources on Britain in the mid-sixth century; a source which gives us one important fact—the considerable diversion of insular English activities toward the continent—and one excellent story (A Woman Scorned, or The Bride of Radigis), which may well rank as the earliest genuinely historical romance in English history.

A. R. BURN.

Judgement on the Younger Despenser, 1326

THE text of the final condemnation of Hugh le Despenser the Younger has hitherto been available in print in two full versions in French.¹ Of one of these versions the editor complained that it was 'so corrupt that it is not possible to give a literal translation which shall be grammatical and comprehensible'.² The other one is if anything worse. Since there are other manuscripts of the text it seems desirable to attempt to provide a more satisfactory version.

A few remarks about the nature of the document seem also to be necessary in presenting it. The occasion and date are perfectly well known.³ The chroniclers agree that the trial and execution took place at Hereford on 24 November 1326, immediately after the capture of the king and Despenser.⁴ This document is the judgement on the prisoner delivered on that date by William Trussel.⁵ It is not, however, so clear what was the nature of the procedure used. As M. V. Clarke and T. F. T. Plucknett have shown, one feature of the first half of the fourteenth century was the attempt to devise a peaceful and 'legal' procedure for dealing with political disputes.⁶ In most of the political condemnations of the reign of Edward II there had been a careful attempt to use recognized forms. In the first banishment of Gaveston in 1308

¹ *Litterae Cantuarienses*, ed., J. B. Sheppard (Rolls Series, 1889), iii. 404-12; *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, ed. J. R. Lumby (Rolls Series, 1889), i. 437-41.

² Sheppard, *op. cit.* p. 412.

³ For the chronology of Isabella's invasion and defeat of Despenser see W. Stubbs, Introduction to *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II* (Rolls Series, 1883), vol. ii, pp. xci-cii; T. F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England* (Manchester, 1928), iii. 1-3.

⁴ *Chronicles of Edward I and II*, i. 319; ii. 87; *Knighton*, i. 441.

⁵ *Knighton*, i. 437; *Chronicles of Edward I and II*, *loc. cit.*

⁶ M. V. Clarke, *Fourteenth Century Studies* (Oxford, 1937), pp. 126ff.; T. F. T. Plucknett, 'The Origin of Impeachment', *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 4th ser., xxiv (1942), 57-64.