Historians and the economy:
Zosimus and Procopius on fifth and sixth century economic development

Hartmut G. Ziche

I) Introduction

The economy as an autonomous category of historiographical discourse is largely absent from the production of Greek and Roman writers. Works which specifically focus on the economy, like for example Xenophon's *Poroi*, stand out as oddities. This does not mean that ancient histories of various genres are completely devoid of economic information, but elements which we perceive as economic history have, for the most part, different functions for contemporary writers and readers.[1] Information on the development of taxation under different reigns for example is to a large extent an element of political and biographical narrative which separates "good" from "bad" emperors. Remarks on the economies of cities in the Roman empire are not foremost examples of economic history, but rather elements of panegyric praise – or lack thereof – for the vitality of urban civilisation. The mention of a vibrant market in this context has precisely the same value as the description of baths and aqueducts – or theatres and city walls –, it is an element of urban culture, not of urban economics.

The "embeddedness" of economic narrative in ancient authors reflects Karl Polanyi's observation that the ancient economy as a whole is "embedded" in the sense that economic interactions and development are part of overriding social and political developments.[2] In terms of the presentation of subject matter by ancient historians this means that their economic remarks, observations and interpretations are subordinate to their political or panegyric narrative. Economic developments are not seen as the driving force of historical events, but rather as a function of other types of determining historical forces. Taxation is a concrete example of this practice. "Good" emperors, according to the judgement of ancient writers, are defined by a complex set of non-economic, political and personal characteristics, and thus *necessarily* design and implement moderate tax policies.

The important economic transformations which the Empire undergoes in the period from Constantine to Justinian – the expansion of ecclesiastical property and a quite radical reduction of the Empire's taxable area, to name just two examples – might suggest to a modern observer that elements of economic narrative should play a comparatively more prominent role in late Roman and early Byzantine historians. However this is not the case. Ammianus deals in quite some detail with the fiscal policies of Constantius, and even provides quantitative data for the reforms carried out by Julian in Gaul, but still his economic history argument serves a political history purpose.[3] There is no reason to doubt Ammianus' figures on the tax reduction per *caput* by Julian in Gaul, but what he is mainly interested in are not the economic motivations or consequences of this policy, but rather the illustration of the personal differences between Julian and Constantius. Julian is Ammianus' "good" emperor, and fiscal moderation is one of the iconic qualities which distinguishes the "good" from the "not so good" emperor.

Another example for the failure of the economy to emerge as an autonomous category of historical development is the early fifth century historian Olympiodorus. He is credited by Jones with

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[1] The status of the "economy" and more specifically the use of "economic" information by ancient historians is discussed in the introductory chapter of Finley's (1985) *Ancient Economy*. To this discussion of ancient practice can be usefully added Morley's (forthcoming) analysis of the complexities of economic narrative in modern historians of the ancient world.

The question of the status of economic information in ancient historians is also, in some sense, a sub-category of the more general problem concerning the treatment of "historical facts" by ancient writers. This particular question has been re-examined recently - with an emphasis on Q. Curtius - by Bosworth (2003) who argues for a very respectful treatment of facts by ancient historians. An argument which, to some extent, would seem to challenge Finley's basic thesis about the rhetorical use of historical and especially economic facts by ancient writers; a thesis which has received considerable statistical support from Scheidel (1996).

This paper, to a large extent, avoids the complex question of the veracity of ancient historians by concentrating on the narrative purpose economic information, true or fictitious, is put to.

[2] See Polanyi (1957).

[3] For examples see Ammianus 16.5.14-15 and 17.3.5-6 for Julian, as well as 21.16.17 for Constantius.

an "uncommon interest in economic history and a welcome taste for precise facts and figures",[4] but that Olympiodorus uses economic history not just as an embedded narrative in his general account of political history seems a doubtful assumption. His famous analysis of senatorial wealth – fragment 41 – probably serves a non-economic history purpose. His claim of enormous incomes in gold and produce of even modest Roman senators, as well as his list of staggering expenditure for Praetorian Games in Rome, is less a commentary on the development of the senatorial economy in the West than a rhetorical device to impress his senatorial readership in Constantinople. By highlighting the economic differences between the senatorial classes in East and West, Olympiodorus is making a moral point.

The only late Roman writer who makes the economy one of the focal points of his work is the mid-fourth century author of the *De rebus bellicis*. The first five chapters of this treatise deal with what we might call the state economy: questions of taxation, expenditure and efficiency.[5] However this work is hardly indicative of an emergent autonomous interest in economic developments during the late Roman period. Even though the author devotes a lot of space to the discussion of economic matters, this does not denote an identification of the economy as an independent domain of analysis. What the author of the *De rebus bellicis* is interested in is the "commoditas rei publicae", the welfare of the Empire. A goal towards which a reform of the mint and ox-driven *liburnae* make a qualitatively equal contribution.

II) The use of economic narrative in Zosimus and Procopius

Having established no easily apparent trend for an increasing prominence or independence of economic narrative in late Roman historians, we can now turn to the two case studies which provide the main focus of this paper: the place and function of elements of economic history in the *Historia Nea* of Zosimus[6] and the *Anecdota* and *Peri Ktismaton* of Procopius.[7]

The two authors have been selected because, like the three examples briefly discussed in the introduction, they might at first sight seem likely to use economic narrative more extensively than most of their contemporaries and predecessors. Zosimus is part of the current of classicising historians of the late empire, but given his career as an *advocatus fisci*, it could be expected that he had a sophisticated understanding of macroeconomic developments in his time, and that this knowledge could be used to give the economy a more prominent, maybe even autonomous role in his general political narrative. A similar expectation can be formulated for Procopius who, after all, was the personal secretary of Belisarius during much of his campaigns both in the East and in the West, and as such was surely aware of the complex problems of supplying and paying the imperial army. This awareness, we could speculate, implies not only an interest in the state economy, but could lead to a narrative which gives the economy a more decisive function as a factor of historical development.

The *Anecdota* and *Peri Ktismaton* moreover are not part of the genre of classical history. They might be classified, respectively, as invective and panegyric, thus again falling into well established literary genres with their specific constraints on subject matter and presentation, but this genre classification is not imperative. Both in terms of their subject matter and their presentation the works of Procopius are quite innovative: the *Anecdota* are explicitly conceived as a companion volume to Procopius' more conventional *History of the Wars* and the *Peri Ktismaton* departs from classical panegyric not only in length, but also by the concentration on one particular feature of imperial achievement which is treated to the exclusion of all other aspects of the reign of Justinian. Thus the *Anecdota* and the *Peri Ktismaton* could be expected to be fairly free of genre constraints and therefore, given Procopius' probable knowledge of economic matters, open to an innovative use of economic narrative in a more "modern" and autonomous sense.

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[4] Jones (1964), p. 170.

[5] The relationship between the fiscal concerns and suggestions of the *De rebus bellicis* and the actual economic problems of the period is discussed in an article by Vanags (1979).

[6] For a general introduction to Zosimus as a historian see both the translation with introduction by Ridley (1982) and the commented edition and translation by Paschoud (2000).

[7] For a general treatment of Procopius see Averil Cameron (1985).

These *potentials* for an innovative role of economic narrative however need to be examined in practice, an examination which can be organised into four parts. Elements of economic information in both historians mainly occur in four contexts of historical narrative: the discussion of cities and Roman civilisation, the development of the Christian Church, the characterisation and evaluation of emperors and their policies, as well as the discussion of military history. And, different from what could be expected given the personal backgrounds of the writers and the format of their work, in all these contexts the economic narrative is subordinate to a non-economic main purpose which the historians try to convey to his readers.

The economics of cities and civilisation

Economic narrative concerning questions of prosperity or general levels of development and infrastructure is used by both Zosimus and Procopius to reinforce ideological arguments on varying degrees of civilisation. This is done both in general terms, comparing Romans and barbarians, and in the specific context of urban culture where the economic development of the cities serves to highlight the role of the *polis* as a centre of Roman civilisation in a less valued, rustic countryside.

The role of economic development as a marker of civilisation in the opposition between Romans and barbarians is especially apparent in Procopius' description of the Tzani as a people who live by robbery and who are unskilled in agriculture.[8] Even though Procopius does mention the climatic and topographical unsuitability of the settlement area of the Tzani for agriculture – something which could be taken as a straightforward point on the economics of their land – his ideological purpose is quite clear in the sense that he also insists heavily on the intrinsic inability of the Tzani to pursue civilised agricultural activities. Thus the Tzani do own cattle, but they do not breed them efficiently or use them for ploughing their fields. The cattle of the Tzani is solely exploited for milk and meat. This presentation of the Tzani economy underlines their inferior status as quasi-nomadic barbarians, and stresses the superiority of the Romans. Procopius' purpose in this comparably lengthy digression on the Tzani in his *Buildings* is to heighten the contrast with the new quality of Roman civilisation achieved through Justinian's efforts to improve the imperial infrastructure.

The digression on the economic situation of the Tzani is closely followed by an evocation of a group of civilised barbarians: the Goths of the Dory region.[9] Unlike the Tzani these Goths are allies of the Empire and their description as "good" barbarians is reinforced by Procopius' narrative concerning their economic situation and activities. Not only do the Dory Goths occupy fertile land, but they are skilled farmers producing good crops.

Whether the comparative economic situation of Tzani and Goths corresponds to an objective analysis on the part of Procopius is beyond the scope of the present discussion. What is important to realise is that comments on the economic situation of barbarian tribes do not occur at random in Procopius' narrative, but are closely linked to his presentation of barbarians as more or less friendly to the Romans – and therefore more or less civilised and thus ultimately more or less developed. This use of economic narrative to describe relations between Romans and barbarians is linked to Procopius' general panegyric frame of reference. If the *Peri Ktismaton* can be classified as a panegyric, it is not a straightforward panegyric of the qualities of the emperor, but rather of the qualities of the Empire. What Procopius tries to impress on his readers is the superiority of Roman civilisation, embodied in its urban culture and corresponding infrastructures. The spread of *romanitas* in the East not only justifies the Empire's right to dominate its internal barbarians, but also justifies the extension of this type of civilisation back to the western Mediterranean.

A very similar point on the comparative level of civilisation is made by Zosimus when he describes the plunder of Nicomedia by the Goths in the third century.[10] Nicomedia is described as a great and wealthy city, whereby right from the beginning of the episode a fundamental contrast between Roman civilisation and Gothic barbarism is set up. Even though the citizens of Nicomedia have managed to flee the city, taking their more valuable possessions with them, the barbarians are still impressed by the vast wealth they find in the abandoned city. After loading their plunder on ships and wagons the Goths then set fire to the city. Here again we are not dealing with a straightforward argument on the urban economy – even though perhaps Nicomedia really was an outstandingly rich

[8] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 3.6.2-6 and 21.

[9] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 3.7.13-15.

[10] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 1.35.1-2.

city – but with an opposition between the respective levels of civilisation, and hence superiority, of Romans and barbarians: the Goths may be militarily able to take a Roman city, but they are still awed by its superior civilisation and reveal their barbarian nature by burning it.

Economic narrative as a marker of ideologically determined perceptions of civilisation and superiority also operates in an exclusively Roman context: the exaltation of cities as the only true representatives of Roman, and more specifically Roman elite culture. Procopius on two occasions describes the elevation of villages to city status.[11] In the first instance, the case of Vellurus, the information Procopius provides seems quite straightforward economic: Vellurus has grown in wealth and population to a size comparable to a city, and thus Justinian grants it the status of a *polis* and provides it with fortifications. However also here the economic narrative is intertwined with an overriding ideological motive: Justinian confers city status on Vellurus to make the village "worthy of himself", an idea which clearly implies that economic prosperity in itself is not a sufficient marker of civilisation, unless it is backed up by the political concept of *polis* status.

The subordination of economic development to political motivations is even more evident in the case of Caputvada, which Justinian elevates to *polis* status as a memorial to the landing of the Roman army in Africa. Once Justinian has created the basic features of urban infrastructure, the economy of Caputvada transforms itself and peasants become city dwellers, leading a civilised life around the *forum* and sitting in the *curia*. The point here is not to question the realism of Procopius' account of economic transformation, but rather to show how in the perception of his contemporaries urban economic development is subordinate to political factors. Cities are political entities whose status is confirmed by a certain set of urban amenities. The urban economy on the other hand is a feature of city life and not necessarily perceived as an essential basis of urban development.

Within the description of cities, economic narrative plays a similar role in both Zosimus and Procopius. Mention of economic prosperity and vitality stands beside, and is given qualitatively equal importance to other non-economic elements of the canon which defines urban civilisation. Zosimus is indeed very explicit in not assigning economic factors a crucial role for the development of urban culture. In keeping with the general deterministic outlook of his history, he answers his own question as to the origins of Constantinople's greatness and prosperity by pointing his readers to an ancient oracle which predicts the future of Byzantium.[12] His dismissal of any mundane factors of urban development does not imply however that Zosimus is unable to recognise economic activity as one of the intrinsic elements of urban culture. When treating the foundation of Constantinople Zosimus also talks about the growth of the city as conditioned by its ability to attract different and new groups of population: merchants are specifically included among these groups.[13]

The redevelopment of cities, as manifestations of Roman civilisation, is one of the main themes of Procopius' praise for Justinian in his *Buildings*. As in Zosimus, the economic prosperity and vitality of the cities is one of the intrinsic elements of urban culture, but it is neither the only nor the most important factor. The development of the harbour of Anaplus,[14] and its use by various merchants, thus can be read not only as a commentary on the economy of the city, but really as a part of the overall project of the emperor to strengthen Roman civilisation. Even more striking, perhaps, is Procopius' detailed description of the construction of granaries on Tenedos[15] and the use made of them by grain merchants operating between Alexandria and Constantinople. For a modern audience this might read like an account focused on the grain trade, destined for the market of Constantinople, but for Procopius this section is part of his narrative of the development of Constantinople as an imperial capital. His focus is not the development of Tenedos as a trans-shipment centre, but indeed the broader "welfare of the imperial city".

The numerous occurrences of imperial projects linked to the water supply of cities can be interpreted in the same way: of course, we are dealing at first sight with the improvement of an infrastructure relevant to the urban economy, but for Procopius the construction of aqueducts and reservoirs is on the one hand – mainly when he talks about the water supply for baths and fountains, at Ciberis[16] and Constantina[17] for example – something relevant to the development of

[11] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 4.11.7-8 for Vellurus and 6.6.13-16 for Caputvada.

[12] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 2.36.1 ff.

[13] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 2.35.1.

[14] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 1.8.6-10.

[15] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 5.1.7-16.

[16] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 4.10.20-21.

[17] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 2.5.9-11.

urban culture, and on the other hand an element of his narrative dealing with the military security of the empire – as in the case of the water works of the fortress city of Dara.[18] Reservoirs are not just features of the urban economy, but also, and probably more importantly, part of an overall imperial programme to increase the security of the Empire from the barbarian threat. The ideological importance of the urban economy is further underlined by Procopius' chapter on the cities of Africa. Here it is even more obvious than in the treatment of the cities of the imperial core that the spread of urban prosperity is part of an overall project of reimposing Roman civilisation on the reconquered provinces of the Empire. A good example for this function of economic narrative in Procopius is the city of Ptolemaïs where Justinian's building programme is explicitly presented as the reversal of the decline of a once prosperous city.[19]

Christian economies

The pagan historian Zosimus and the Christian Procopius evidently do not attribute the same value to the increasingly central social position of the Church in the Empire, but both use elements of economic argument to highlight this development. Zosimus describes the spread of unproductive monasticism and the acquisition of property by the Church as an economic trend of such importance that it reduces the rest of imperial society to poverty.[20] An observation closely echoed by Procopius who describes the wealth of the Arian Church as superior to the whole senatorial order or any other class of property owners in the Empire.[21] The purpose of this seemingly economic narrative is the same in both historians: Zosimus expresses politically motivated disapproval of Christianity, and supports his argument of danger for the state by stressing the economic importance of Church property. Procopius expresses his disapproval of Justinian, more specifically his policy of property confiscation, and highlights the significance of his argument by claiming that the emperor expropriated even the largest property owner of the Empire. Both historians are not interested in the ecclesiastical economy itself, but use economic information to underline the relevance of their respective expressions of political disapproval.

The construction and adornment of churches throughout the cities of the Empire plays a major role in Procopius' *Buildings*. The context of church construction however is not economic, the vast building programme of Justinian is presented, on the one hand, as part of the narrative of securing the Empire: churches are the spiritual counterpart to the reconstruction of city fortifications. On the other hand churches for Procopius are markers of Roman civilisation standing beside baths and theatres as essential elements of urban culture.

Given the frequency with which churches occur in Procopius' text, it is perhaps striking that in the *Peri Ktismaton* there is no mention of the economic implications of the ecclesiastical building programme. The only time expenditure is directly referred to is in the context of the Mother of God church in Jerusalem, where Procopius talks not only about the building itself, but also the very generous endowment.[22]

This may seem surprising, because in the *Anecdota*[23] Procopius is very critical of Justinian's waste of state funds on construction projects. However, even there, churches, and indeed expenditure for the improvement of the civic infrastructure, are not included in the charge of wasting state funds. The absence of a treatment of the economic consequence of church building thus again underlines the point that economic narrative in Procopius is firmly subordinate to both panegyric praise and invective criticism. His selectivity on the topic of imperial expenditure shows that Justinian's building programme is interpreted by Procopius more in ideological than in economic terms: expenditure is only a topic of discussion when the author does not approve of its purpose – payments to barbarians or constructions on the coast. Where Procopius agrees with construction projects they are praised for different political reasons and their economic implications are not considered.

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[18] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 2.2.17-19 and 2.3.24-35.

[19] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 6.2.9-11.

[20] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 5.23.4.

[21] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 11.16-20.

[22] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 5.6.26.

[23] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 19.5-8.

The economy: imperial policy, imperial morality

The largest number of examples of economic narrative in both Zosimus and Procopius is found in the context of the moral judgement of emperors – and to a lesser extent their policies. Given that both historians are writing for an audience composed of the members of the economic elite of the Empire, it is not surprising that most of this deals with questions of taxation. However the fundamental linkage between the character of an emperor and his economic policies is established by Zosimus in very general terms: he implies for example that the avarice of Severus Alexander is caused by his weak imperial authority[24] and that the obscure birth of Maximinus is directly responsible for his persecution of tax defaulters and his "plundering" of the cities.[25]

There is no intention in Zosimus to present an objective analysis of the economic impact of a given fiscal policy. The efficient collection of taxes is always a feature of tyrannical rule. The closest Zosimus gets to seemingly dissociating his fiscal narrative from polemical condemnation of an emperor's reign is perhaps in his summary evaluation of the reign of Valentinian where fiscal rigour is listed together with correcting the faults of the magistrates, the timely payment of the army and the prohibition of nocturnal sacrifice.[26] The last element of this list however shows that – for the pagan Zosimus – Valentinian is a "bad" emperor, and therefore that reading the account of his fiscal rigour as an example of an efficient economic policy, of which the historian approves, would be a misunderstanding. The point is reinforced in the following narrative[27] where Zosimus describes the levy of increasing taxes as a direct consequence of Valentinian's lack of military success against the barbarians.

Fiscal policies and their disastrous economic impact figure prominently in Procopius' *Anecdota*. However, even though Procopius talks in some, in part technical detail about the various taxes imposed by Justinian,[28] and the ways in which they are collected, the purpose once again is not an economic analysis of fiscal policy. Taxes are just one element of the overall political charge against Justinian to be responsible for the decline of the Empire. As such taxes are subordinate to a general socio-political narrative and their contribution towards the alleged destruction of the Empire cannot be distinguished from other factors like the encouragement of the circus factions – or the fact that Justinian and Theodora are actually demons in human form. The moral wickedness of Justinian's fiscal policy is especially apparent in Procopius' account of how after the plague the taxes of the dead are imposed on the surviving landowners.[29] The moral, not economic emphasis of the analysis is made very clear by the fact that this form of redistribution of taxes is of course not a new feature of the reign of Justinian, something which both Procopius and his readers are aware of. However, given that Procopius' economic narrative is embedded in his moral charge against the emperor, the rational discussion of a fiscal principle which ultimately derives from the Hellenistic *epibole* is not the aim of the discussion.

A second type of economic narrative which figures prominently in the evaluation of emperors by the two historians concerns the complex of imperial expenditure. Generally speaking, given again that Procopius and Zosimus are writing for a literate audience which necessarily is part of the economic elite of the empire, and thus represents a class of substantial taxpayers, high expenditure, even though moderns historians might see this as having a positive economic impact, is normally presented within the context of the "bad" emperor theme. The themes of rigorous taxation and high expenditure are usually combined within the canon of characteristics which mark out emperors the historians disapprove of. The fact that this is a strong ideological link is underlined by the near absence of any mention of expenditure in Procopius' panegyric *Buildings*. Even though it is obvious that the sumptuous building programme of Justinian implies very important expenditure – a point stressed in the *Anecdota* – cost is mentioned only twice in the *Buildings*: once with the construction of the Hagia Sophia[30] and once with the construction of a road near Antioch.[31]

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[24] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 1.12.1-2.

[25] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 1.13.3.

[26] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 4.3.2.

[27] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 4.16.1-3.

[28] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 23.

[29] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 23.17-22.

[30] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 1.1.23.-24

[31] Procopius, *Peri Ktismaton*, 5.5.3.

A prototypical example of the linkage in economic narrative of excessive expenditure and excessive taxation is provided by Zosimus condemnation of Constantine.[32] Constantine, who for Zosimus is a "bad" emperor for political and ideological reasons, is depicted as wasting the Empire's budget for useless constructions which moreover are of low quality. This polemical device used by Zosimus, linking expenditure with low quality buildings, avoids the dilemma Procopius finds himself in where on the one hand the historian clearly takes pride in the revitalisation of urban culture by Justinian's building programme and where on the other hand he tries to paint the emperor as a stereotypical example for the waste of state funds. A dilemma which is solved by Procopius by spreading the condemnation of excessive expenditure and the pride taken in Roman civilisation over two books.

The political-polemical, not strictly rational-economic purpose of economic narrative concerning imperial expenditure is even more obvious in Procopius' *Anecdota.*[33] Justinian is depicted as expropriating private properties for the sole purpose of expending the funds collected for – in Procopius' view – useless purposes: "insane display or unnecessary bribes to barbarians".[34] Justinian's economic and fiscal policies are summarised as a cause for universal poverty. It seems quite clear to me that in this kind of historiographical caricature economic "information" is not used as a narrative which in itself has any intrinsic value of truth.

Neither the treatment of Constantine by Zosimus nor the treatment of Justinian by Procopius are meant to provide objective information on imperial spending policy. Nor are they meant to represent a proper analysis of the economic consequences. The alleged economic consequences always remain in the vague domain of the phantasmal and apocalyptic: cities forsaken by their inhabitants and fathers forced to prostitute their daughters. What both historians are trying to achieve through the elements of economic narrative which they use is a reinforcement of the political message of their work.

Economic warfare and the economics of war

If economic history, as we have seen, plays a subordinate and functional role in the historical narrative of Zosimus and Procopius, military history on the other hand is often prominent. Thus in this last section we are going to examine how some elements of seemingly economic narrative are used to enhance standard features of historical discourse in this domain. Two main models can be identified: on the one hand economic information is used as an element of military history narrative, underlining the historians' judgement of a given choice of strategy or tactics, and on the other hand it is used to help evaluate the outcomes of military action, a function in which economic narrative comes close to the role it plays in the evaluation of emperors.

Perhaps most interesting here is the role which plunder and the forceful requisitioning of military supplies play. According to the context, making the civilian population pay for warfare on its territory can be judged both positively and negatively. The requisitioning of supplies and the economic disruption this necessarily causes, problems of which both Zosimus and Procopius are aware, are presented as problematic only where the historian disapproves of a general for other, independent reasons.

In this sense Belisarius' attempts to raise funds in Italy, despite Procopius' own admission that this process is a necessity, given the shortage of imperial funds, is presented as the straightforward result of Belisarius' avarice which brings ruin to the population of Italy.[35] Zosimus on the other hand praises Auxonius, the praetorian prefect of Valens, for his handling of the tributes he imposes in preparing the emperor's Persian campaign. Auxonius not only collects all the supplies necessary,

[32] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 2.32.1 and 2.38.1-4. The observation that fiscal policy in Zosimus' narrative is used rather as a rhetorical device to mark Constantine as a "bad" emperor than as an objective and analytical comment on the economic implications of imperial taxation and expenditure is underlined by Chastagnol's (1966) observation of obvious parallels with the Life of Aurelian – a positive counter-image to Constantine as far as taxation and expenditure are concerned - in the *Historia Augusta*.

[33] For this reason Gordon's attempt (Gordon (1959)) to match "economic information" provided by Procopius to economic realities, seems to me at best to miss the principal point of the historian's argument, and at worst doomed to complete failure.

[34] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 8.31-33.

[35] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 5.4-6.

but does so without oppressing the taxpayers with overly heavy exactions.[36] Neither in the one nor in the other case however do the historians present a detailed economic argument analysing the forms the requisitions take and the precise economic impact they have. Whether requisitions are economically bearable or not solely depends on who imposes them. Military tributes thus are not an economic factor, but once again rather constitute an ideological point. What is important is not their actual economic impact, but in fact their compatibility with the general narrative. The fact that requisitions are not a feature of economic but of political narrative is even further underlined by their ambiguity: they can be markers for both the good and the bad general without requiring any form of technical analysis.

One might think that the evaluation of the economic impact of warfare depends primarily on who does the plundering, i.e. a modern observer would expect that only in the case of a Roman army plundering a town or the countryside this is seen as positive. This model should prevail if the narrative of economic warfare were part of a strictly rational discourse on the economy. However, once again, this is not really the case, "economic" warfare is as much a moral as an economic category. Admittedly, some examples of this type of narrative are very straightforward: during Julian's march into Persia, the Persians try to delay the advance of the Roman army by destroying both the infrastructure and the supplies stored in the cities. The Romans on the other hand seize as much produce as they can and destroy the rest.[37] In this example the economic and the political, moral function of Zosimus' narrative coincide. Each side acts economically rational and the historian approves of their choice of strategy.

More interesting already is Zosimus' narrative concerning the military officers who take advantage of the Goths trying to cross the Danube into imperial territory.[38] Even though on the face of it the situation is very much the same as with Julian's army in Persia - Romans exploiting barbarians under military pressure - the historian here roundly condemns the Roman officials in question. What we see once again is that the economic cannot be separated from the rest of the narrative. Even though the officers may be acting rationally in an economic sense, Zosimus castigates their "gratification of perverted desires", because this whole episode is part of the narrative leading up to the defeat of Adrianople. Seizing property from the barbarians is something Zosimus approves of only when it is adequately placed in an overall narrative context. As in the case of military requisitioning and its economic impact, plundering barbarians may be economically straightforward, but for Zosimus it is morally ambivalent depending on context and narrative outcomes.[39]

Finally, still in the same context, we can discuss Zosimus' treatment of Alaric's siege of Rome.[40] Again we have something which looks like economic narrative: Alaric uses an economic blockade to force the Roman government to accede to his demands, demands which in turn are expressed in economic terms: payment, land and subsidies. In addition to this, Zosimus also gives us some information on the economic situation in Rome: *annonae* and senatorial wealth for example. However here, too, moral and economic arguments are combined. The demands made by Alaric are not listed by the historian to give the reader straightforward economic information, but they rather serve to highlight Alaric's moderation which compares favourably – in Zosimus' view – with the corruption of the imperial government. Likewise the payment by the senate is noteworthy to him not because it shows the wealth of Rome and its economic elites, but rather because it reveals the "wickedness" of the senators who use precious metal from the pagan cult statues to meet it. In fact, economic warfare even directed against the Roman state is not necessarily condemned by the historian as long as it is part of a moral equation where the barbarian plunderer is morally superior to the Roman defenders.

As these three examples show, the economic aspects of warfare do not stand in a separate, autonomous category of historical narrative, but they are fully integrated into a wider picture of moral and political motivations, actions and outcomes.

A second way in which economic narrative is introduced by Zosimus and Procopius into the context of military history sees economic statements used to underline value judgements on the

[36] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 4.10.4.

[37] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 3.27.2-28.1.

[38] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 4.20.6.

[39] The term "narrative outcomes" is chose deliberately because the actual outcome of both episodes is of course the same: a Roman defeat. The difference is purely narrative: Julian's campaign is presented as a victory, whereas the Adrianople episode is presented as the defeat which it actually is.

[40] Zosimus, *Historia Nea*, 5.39.1-2, 5.41.4-6, 5.50.3 and 6.6.1-3.

outcome of military campaigns. This is especially apparent in the *Anecdota* where Procopius tries to devalue the military achievements of Justinian, a task made very difficult by the conventions of traditional historiography where military success and the favourable assessment of a reign are almost invariably linked. Commentary on the economic consequences of Justinian's victories allows Procopius to change the impact which the description of victories and conquest would otherwise have on his readers. Procopius even in the *Anecdota* acknowledges the fact of the African reconquest, but he devalues it by claiming that the reconquered Africa has been emptied of its productive population.[41] The results which the African victory produce is in fact exactly the same as the outcome of the Saracen incursions in the East: an empty countryside.[42] In economic terms victory equals defeat.

Economic "information" in this context is rather economic rhetoric. It is possible that Procopius indeed did have a negative opinion on the future economic viability of the African provinces, but this is not the principal motivation which shapes his narrative. The Roman victory in the West must result in economic desolation, because only in this way can it be insinuated that the victory in fact is a defeat and not a positive achievement for which Justinian could take credit.

III) Conclusion

It may be possible to identify still further models for the use of economic narrative in Zosimus and Procopius, but the four points which we have discussed seem sufficient already to support a general conclusion. Elements of economic information and instances of economic narrative serve a variety of sophisticated purposes in the production of the two historians, but despite their political and administrative careers, which probably give them a comparatively sophisticated understanding of economic processes and developments, there is no example where the economy stands entirely on its own and where an economic development is discussed purely for its own sake. An account of economic developments does not generate the historical narrative in our two late Roman historians, but indeed their political and moral historical narrative is enhanced by economic narrative. Some elements of this narrative may be crucial to the overall storyline, in the re-evaluation of emperors for example, nevertheless the basic framework and the direction of the story is always predetermined, and economic narrative is only one of the tools the historians use to convince their audience of the veracity of their historical analysis.

For the modern reader of Zosimus and Procopius this constitutes an additional problem: economic information is not only sparse and selective, it is also subordinate to the political or moral purpose of the historian. This does not imply that it is a priori impossible for us to treat some of the economic narrative in these authors as economic information, usable for our own historical narratives of the period, but it makes this exploitation a lot more difficult. What we have to take into account when using economic information provided by these historians is not only the plausibility - surely Justinian did not kill a trillion people[43] - but also the finality of economic narrative.

[41] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 18.4-8.

[42] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 18.22-24.

[43] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 18.4. Even though the "myriad myriads of myriads" in this particular example are easily recognised as a mere rhetoric device, it cannot necessarily be assumed that other, apparently more plausible figures in the text do not have the same rhetorical status and indicate an approximation of "real" statistical data.

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