

ROLAND BETANCOURT, *The Secrets We Keep: Hidden Histories of the Byzantine Empire*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute 2024. 90 pp., 23 ill., incl. 1 map. – ISBN 978-1-60606-908-0

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This slim volume, handsomely designed and produced, contains the revised text of a lecture delivered at the Getty in 2022. BETANCOURT develops three variations on the theme of secrecy. The first is conspiracy theory, embracing both modern examples (e.g., QAnon) and a Roman parallel (Prokopios's *Anekdotai*). Second is the state secret, which includes reliquaries, automata, and Greek fire. Third is the personal secret, represented by the hagiographic topos of the sight of the saint's genitals after death.

State secrets are discussed at greatest length, forming the core of the study (pp. 18–60). BETANCOURT begins with the tenth-century recovery of the Mandylion, contemporary rumors that it did not in fact show a face, and the box that it was ultimately stored in. He then turns to the Limburg Stau-rotheke, its many layers, and its possible uses on the battlefield. Shorter accounts address automata (via Liudprand and *Le Voyage de Charlemagne*) and Greek fire. BETANCOURT concludes that the Roman ruling class advertised its possession of secrets in order to awe its citizens and cow its adversaries.¹

Personal secrets are addressed more briefly, since 'scholars including myself and others' have considered them elsewhere (p. 62). BETANCOURT devotes a nuanced and sensitive discussion to the hagiographic topos in which a saint's genitals do not conform with the expectations of those who prepare the body for burial.

The comparison between contemporary and Roman conspiracy theories, which BETANCOURT pursues in the Prologue and Epilogue, is the most original line of argument. It is also the least convincing. In the Prologue, BETANCOURT notes two elements shared by QAnon and the *Anekdotai*: both describe their villains as demons,² and both are misogynist. True, the

1. 'Here is where the state of marveling – between familiarity and unknowing – is shown as crucial to empire: philosophical, religious, and military secrets encourage marveling and ultimately sustain political structures of power' (p. 54).

2. 'Much like the blood-drinking, Satan-worshipping cabal of QAnon's theories, the Procopian antecedent demonstrates a political critique interwoven with the demonic and the supernatural' (p. 8).

narratives of QAnon spread at lightning speed via fiber optic cables. BETANCOURT suggests that the *Anekdotia* may have been more widely read than we think, noting their prominence in the *Suda*.³ The real point of the comparison, however, is different: both QAnon and Prokopios ‘seek to parrot the language of revelation [in order] to oppress’ (p. 64).

BETANCOURT develops the theme of oppressors and oppressed in the Epilogue. He begins by noting that VLADIMIR PUTIN’s 2021 essay ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’ claims a basis in published fact. ‘In postulating himself against conspiracies and revealed secrets, PUTIN is reaffirming a commitment to a certain positivist history that serves as a newfound hallmark of the reasonable and the fact-driven’ (p. 78). This leads BETANCOURT to sketch a case ‘Against Fact-Checking’ (p. 81). ‘The greatest intellectual danger to scholarship becomes a space where the fact-checking impulse becomes a normative affirmation that history is what we already know and that only litanies of line-by-line evidence can change this’ (p. 82).

This is dangerous, BETANCOURT believes, because it impedes the recovery of histories of the oppressed. ‘My concern is that the spread of conspiracy theories today and our reactive responses to them have cultivated a dually hostile environment standing in the way of undertaking meaningful work in intellectual spaces that have often needed to pierce through veils of secrecy and erasure to articulate their subjects’ (p. 82).

It follows, thus BETANCOURT’s argument, that imaginative leaps beyond the strictly factual are bad when made by oppressors, good when made by (or on behalf of?) the oppressed. The last sentence of the Epilogue reads: ‘It is these power differentials that are so deeply critical to understanding how we approach secrecy in the past and in our present and that ultimately determine how we handle the secrets we keep and how we emancipate from the bonds of erasure those who have had to keep secrets to survive’ (p. 85).

These are consequential matters, and BETANCOURT merits praise for treating them in a format aimed at a wide public. The visitor to the Getty who buys *The Secrets We Keep* in the book shop will find it an engaging introduction to a range of medieval Roman ideologies and objects, the latter splendidly illustrated with high-quality color photographs. BETANCOURT is good at bringing across the interest of the material without exoticizing

3. One should rather take this as evidence of the astonishing range of texts available to the compilers. See ANDRÁS NÉMETH, *The Excerpta Constantiniana and the Byzantine Appropriation of the Past*. Cambridge 2018, pp. 241–244.

it. Readers who already know the sources will also find much to admire; I was especially intrigued by BETANCOURT's discussion of 'Unknowing as a Method' (pp. 52–54).

I have two objections to BETANCOURT's discussion of conspiracy theories. The first involves the hard distinction between oppressors and oppressed. Consider Prokopios. For BETANCOURT, the *Anekdotai* are firmly on the side of the oppressors, because of their author's misogyny and snobbery. 'It speaks to a class differential where the established elite, like the wealthy Procopius himself, sought to belittle and attack Justinian and Theodora' (pp. 8–9).⁴

By maintaining a one-sided view of Prokopios, BETANCOURT misses his value as a contemporary witness to the imperial couple's crimes, one who furthermore sought to understand and record their motives. Take, for example, Justinian's use of sodomy laws to persecute his enemies, which Prokopios describes as follows:

Afterwards he also prohibited sodomy (τὸ παιδεραστεῖν) by law, not examining closely into offences committed subsequently to the law but concerning himself only with those persons who long before had been caught by this malady. And the prosecution of these cases was carried out in reckless fashion, since the penalty was exacted even without an accuser, for the word of a single man or boy, and even, if it so happened, of a slave compelled against his will to give evidence against his owner, was considered definite proof. Those who were thus convicted had their privates removed and were paraded through the streets. Not in all cases, however, was this punishment inflicted in the beginning, but only upon those reputed to be Greens or to be possessed of great wealth or those who in some other way chanced to have offended the rulers (*Anekdotai* XI.34–36, trans. DEWING).

Here is BETANCOURT's analysis (p. 14 fn. 27):

4. BETANCOURT's dismissal of Prokopios's critique as the byproduct of class animus recalls no one so much as BERTHOLD RUBIN, *Das Zeitalter Justinians*. Berlin 1960, pp. 197–226; e.g. p. 214, 'Hier legt der eingeschworene Feudalherr Prokop den Finger in die Wunden, die Iustinian seinem Stande beigebracht hat'. Contrast ANTHONY KALDELLIS, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*. Philadelphia 2004, p. 46: 'Attempts to trace his views to his social class are problematic', because 'his social rank is unclear. It is unlikely that he was a senator, and the little that we know about his career does not require him to have come from an especially wealthy background'.

In its salacious and defamatory treatment of figures and peoples, the *Secret History* is also a tragic preservation of lives often purged from the historical record, as when it recounts Justinian's politically motivated persecution of men suggested to have had sexual relations with other men. Through these screeds of misogyny and homophobia, the text provides evidence for the treatment of people and identities excluded from the official records and only preserved through hatred. See Procopius, *Secret History*, 11.34-36.

It is true that Prokopios does not object to the law itself, rather the manner of the prosecution and the choice of whom to prosecute. However, to characterize the passage as a 'screed of homophobia' is to miss its broader import. Prokopios places this incident in a longer list of Justinian's persecutions (against various Christians, Samaritans, pagans, and astrologers), concluding that all were driven by greed:

So a great throng of persons were fleeing constantly, not only to the barbarians, but also to those Romans who lived at a great distance, and it was possible to see both in the country and in every city great numbers of strangers. For in order to escape detection they readily exchanged their respective native lands for foreign soil, just as if their home-country had been captured by an enemy. So, then, the wealth of those reputed to be prosperous, both in Byzantium and in every other city, that is, after the members of the Senate, was plundered and seized by Justinian and Theodora in the manner which has been described. But how they succeeded in depriving the Senators also of all their property, I shall now proceed to make known (*Anekdotai*, XI.38-41, trans. DEWING).

This is not a conspiracy theory. Rather, Prokopios supplies a plausible account of the imperial couple's motivations. The persecution of minorities served as a pretext for the confiscation of wealth, and was followed by the impoverishment of those senatorial elites who initially thought themselves immune. To this we might only add that Justinian knew well how to scapegoat minorities for perceived social ills and catastrophes, while simultaneously advertising his own piety.⁵

This persecution was not 'excluded from the official records'. The relevant

5. MISCHA MEIER, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians: Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Hypomnemata 147). Göttingen 2003, p. 598.

laws are preserved, and the persecution is described also in the chronicle of Malalas.⁶ ‘Hatred’, in sum, does not seem to be Prokopios’s motivation in composing this passage. His aim was rather to convey an insight into the nature of Justinian’s reign, and more broadly into the nature of tyranny.

My second objection involves BETANCOURT’s polemic against ‘new positivist approaches’ to history writing (p. 79). BETANCOURT acknowledges that the rhetoric of oppression can be cynically adopted by demagogues.⁷ The historian’s stock-in-trade, the presentation and analysis of the evidence, remains an effective technique to counter such rhetoric. Consider the work of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, whose ‘litanies of line-by-line evidence’, painstakingly assembled and organized, lay bare the truth about criminal regimes: who were the true perpetrators, and who the true victims. They arguably supply a more suitable parallel to the *Anekdotia* than QAnon; or rather, we can think of the *Anekdotia* as evidence submitted to just such an inquiry.

Tribunals investigating recent events can uphold higher evidentiary standards than historians sifting the *disiecta membra* of medieval states. Nevertheless, Byzantinists have successfully mustered litanies of line-by-line evidence to correct harmful lies. Consider PAUL SPECK’s dissection of the *Adversus Constantinum Cabalinum* (a true Roman conspiracy theory, not discussed by BETANCOURT), which begins with an explicit comparison to twentieth-century German history.⁸

Recognizing the value of such work need not entail rejecting more speculative approaches. I think immediately of UMBERTO ECO, whose novels engage similar themes to *The Secrets We Keep*: hermeticism, conspiracy theory, and their relation to historical research. ECO also provides a useful criterion by which to judge such fictions: ‘The historical novel for me is not so much a fictionalized version of real events as a fiction that will actually enable us to better understand the real history’.⁹

Despite his spirited defense of the role of imagination in history writing, BETANCOURT’s discussion of state secrets mostly sticks to the sources.

6. Novels 77 & 141; Malalas XVIII.18.

7. ‘The far right has compounded the labor of activists and scholars as it co-opts their methods and practices and uses them for oppressive agendas’ (p. 79).

8. PAUL SPECK, *Ich bin’s nicht, Kaiser Konstantin ist es gewesen. Die Legenden vom Einfluss des Teufels, des Juden und des Moslem auf den Ikonoklasmus* (Poikila Byzantina 10). Bonn 1990.

9. UMBERTO ECO interviewed by LILA AZAM ZANGANEH, *The Art of Fiction*, No. 197. *The Paris Review* 185 (2008) p. 90.

Only rarely does he wager an imaginative leap. Here is the most sustained example, on the Limburg Staurotheke (pp. 49–50):

As an object of war, this reliquary also existed in the most intimate spaces of the imperial entourage, meaning the troops could have only experienced and been galvanized by it at a distance. In its ability, for example, to perhaps produce on the battlefield an oily-relic tincture for the troops, the reliquary manifests its power through proxy and (certainly) through obfuscation of the mechanics of what this act of oil-drawing might have looked like. The intimate and elite process of this oil-drawing emphasized who was within the inner circle of the emperor and his chamberlains. Furthermore, it bound together those select few who had intimate access to the reliquary and knowledge of the tincture's production, details that a military leader might not necessarily wish to express in full to his troops. The troops themselves were instead bound by the mystical powers of this secret substance when it was rained down upon them in a communal act of military unity and divine validation by the emperor.

Does this passage help us to better understand the Byzantine army? My doubts are more about the execution than the technique. Of course, we have no proof that the Staurotheke was ever used 'on the battlefield' to produce 'an oily-relic tincture for the troops', but this image certainly has something *qua* image. The execution, however, is tentative, more a sketch than a full picture. The scene shifts from the battlefield to the emperor's bedchamber then back again. The mood changes from 'perhaps' to 'certainly' and back to 'might not necessarily', before landing on the declarative 'it was rained down'. The claim transforms completely from the first sentence (the troops are kept at a distance) to the last (they are anointed by the emperor).

A film director might be drawn to stage this scene of anointing, but they would still need a lot of help filling it out. Where is the emperor standing? By what mechanism does he spray the oily tincture on the troops? How do they react? What, in short, does a 'communal act of military unity and divine validation' look like? As to its political efficacy, a lot depends on the genre of the work as a whole. I can see it as Hollywood epic, à la Zack Snyder; as anti-establishment comedy, à la Monty Python; and perhaps even as tragedy, à la Schiller's *Demetrius*, if focused on the figure of the emperor (which emperor?).

Even as a sketch, this image remains noteworthy. The Roman state in the tenth century has not been the setting for much fiction, especially by con-

trast to the repeatedly re-narrated Age of Justinian. BETANCOURT is original in proposing it as a fitting stage for the politically progressive imagination; one can only hope that novelists and screenwriters will take up the challenge.

Keywords

historiography; conspiracy theories