

# PROCOPIUS, ALBERTI, AND AN EGYPTIAN WOMAN

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What to suggest or introduce? What to comment on? Difficult to decide. So many things happening all over the world.

This morning, my original intention was to follow up on Egyptian mummies with another archeology and art history foray, this time into Eurocentric prejudices about Africa and African art, and how, at least when faced with “Benin bronzes,” so-called, they have come to be contradicted and at least partially abandoned over time. This would have been from my archives, though only three weeks old.

But then, I came up against something fresh from the oven, which furthermore seemed (seems) of much greater current, indeed burning significance [under “Recommended Readings,” see: 0003.(BBC 4.4.2021) Marwa Elselehdar – ‘I was blamed for blocking the Suez Canal’]. A young Egyptian woman (might it be Merve el-Silahdar in Turkish transcription?) turns out to have become her country’s first-ever female ship captain. It is an extraordinary story in itself, made even more extraordinary by all the fake rumors and slanderous attacks that have targeted Ms Elselehdar in the wake of the Ever Given accident. Believe it or not, she appears to have been held responsible for the blockage of the Suez Canal, though she was, as she says, “hundreds of miles away in Alexandria [İskenderiye]” at the time.

Why? Basically because she is a woman, I would say — a young woman who has dared to challenge existing taboos, and succeeded, against all odds, in what is a male-dominated profession and professional culture all over the world, thereby drawing masculine ire. It would be so much better if she had failed, or could be made out to have failed, purely in order to penalize her, and put her back where she belongs, so that she doesn’t become a bad example for others. What a coincidence! Just the other day, in one of my courses we were talking about Procopius, and in response to a question about Procopius’s misogyny, I pointed to Alberti by way of underlining the extent to which such hatred and deprecation of women is universal.

Notes for History students in particular. Procopius of Caesarea (in Palestine; c.500 – 565) was a Byzantine historian and a contemporary of Emperor Justinian. He wrote (a) History of the Wars, meaning Justinian’s Persian, Vandal, and Gothic wars (GR *Hypèr tōn Polémōn Lógoi*, LAT *De Bellis*;

(b) The Buildings (GR *Perì Ktismáton*, LAT *De Aedificiis*) to eulogize Justinian's public construction projects; and (c) his most famous Secret History (GR *Apókryphe Historía*, LAT *Historia Arcana*) — into which he poured a lot of disreputable gossip that he couldn't possibly put into his more official works. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) was one of the many geniuses of the Renaissance, a polymath who, in addition to his primary fame as an architect, was also a humanist, poet, priest, philosopher, linguist, mathematician, and cryptographer. He authored many books, too, including *Della famiglia* (On the Family) in 1432. As such, both Procopius's and Alberti's writings fit into the category of primary sources → narrative sources for their respective eras. (Indeed Procopius happens to be our major authority for the 527-565 reign of Justinian.)

Great and historically important as they are, 900 years apart one thing that they have in common is their contempt and distrust for women. In the Secret History Procopius portrays Justinian as inwardly a weak man dominated by his wife Theodora, and the famous general Belisarius (under whom Procopius served during the Ostrogothic Wars in Italy) as even more of a weak man similarly dominated by his wife Antonina. With all the venom of his embittered later years, he pours further abuse on these two women, portraying especially Theodora as vulgar, cold-blooded, self-interested, envious, mean, and insatiably lustful. He accuses Antonina of spying for Theodora against her husband, and also of having an affair with Belisarius's godson Theodosius. As for Alberti, in a key passage that I have been asking SPS 102 students to read over the years, this is what he says about his relationship with his own "beloved" wife (reflecting his staunch belief in how supposedly superior men should treat supposedly inferior women):

Only my books and records and those of my ancestors did I determine to keep well sealed... These my wife not only could not read, she could not even lay hands on them. I kept my records at all times... locked up and arranged in order in my study, almost like sacred and religious objects. I never gave my wife permission to enter that place, with me or alone. I also ordered her, if she ever came across any writing of mine, to give it over to my keeping at once. To take away any taste she might have for looking at my notes or prying into my private affairs, I often used to express my disapproval of bold and forward females who try too hard to know about things outside the house and about the concerns of their husband and of men in general...

[Husbands] who take counsel with their wives... are madmen if they think true prudence or good counsel lies in the female brain... For this very reason I have always tried carefully not to let any secret of mine be known to a woman. I did not doubt that my wife was most loving, and more discreet and modest in her ways than any, but I still considered it safer to have her unable, and not merely Unwilling, to harm me... Furthermore, I made it a rule never to speak with her of anything but household matters or questions of conduct, or of the children.

Please note Alberti's general warning against "bold and forward females who try too hard to know about things outside the house." Roughly fifteen centuries after Procopius and six centuries after Alberti, this is why Marwa Elselehdar's story stirred me so much early today. As for Benin bronzes, African art, colonialism, Eurocentrism, and even connections with the Holocaust — well, maybe tomorrow.

