

USING LITERATURE TO RECONSTRUCT HISTORY – THE CASE OF JOHN TROGLÍTA

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Sommario

Le attività del generale romano, John Troglita, il magister militum per Africam intorno al 546, sono oggetto di questo articolo. Il De Bello Vandalico di Procopio è la nostra unica fonte storiografica. Oltre a questo testo abbiamo un resoconto delle attività di John contro i Mauri africani negli Iohannis, un poema epico di Corippo. Quest'ultima opera è stata spesso vista con scetticismo dagli storici in quanto prende in prestito liberamente dalla tradizione epica e contiene molti elementi propagandistici. D'altra parte, Corippo aveva il vantaggio della conoscenza indigena, mentre è in dubbio che Procopio fosse ancora in Africa al momento di queste battaglie.

Sia Procopio che Corippo, in particolare, si concentrano su tre grandi battaglie nella campagna di Troglita, ma dove Procopio dedica pochissima attenzione a John e non gli dà molto credito, né per quanto riguarda la sua abilità di stratega né quella di comandante, il poema epico di Corippus rende in pieno il ritratto drammatico ed eroico di questo capo militare.

Il racconto di Corippo è essenziale per ricostruire il ritratto storico di questo generale e, di conseguenza, come può essere utilizzato al meglio dagli storici? C'è qualcosa dell'eroico in questo capo descritto da Corippo, o era semplicemente un nome da ridurre a nota in calce alle campagne romane di Giustiniano in Africa, come avrebbe voluto Procopio?

Lo scopo di questo articolo è di arrivare a una valutazione più ampia delle abilità di comando di John e, tramite queste interrogazioni accademiche, di capire sia i suoi fallimenti sia i suoi successi basati su queste due fonti.

Keywords: Troglita; historical epic; Corippus; Iohannis; Africa; Byzantine; Procopius; De Bello Vandalico; generalship; Christianity

Epic poetry and historiography

It is generally known that the earliest attempts at the writing of history in the West had their roots in epic poetry and, like the latter, aimed to record something that “deserved to be remembered” (Raaflaub, 2005:70)¹. The close relationship between history and literature was also recognised in antiquity (Miller & Woodman, 2010:1) – Quintilian, for one, points out that historiography was *proxima poetis* (“very close to the poets”) (*Institutio Oratoria*, 10.1.31). But there is something of an “uneasy kinship” in this close relationship for historians today since, in the study of the ancient past, it creates difficulties in reconstructing some semblance of an historical account (Potter, 1999:150-151; Barrera, 2005:182). Given the very literary nature of ancient historiography itself, and the dearth of historical source material (when compared with later periods of Mediterranean history), we have relatively little to go on to reconstruct such an account (Raaflaub, 2005:55). We have the archaeological record on the one hand (which includes all discovered material evidence), and the historical writing by ancient authors (historiography). And then we have a vast body of other literature of all types, from purely fictional writing such as plays and novels to compositions which deal with everyday events, like letters and technical or philosophical treatises. Epic poems in antiquity fit in somewhere in between, since they can have a mythological but also an historical theme as their subject.

The theme of historical epic poetry, like that of historiography, is almost without exception war, since military contexts were an excellent arena to display male achievement. There are also a few shared literary conventions used by both epic and historiography, since both usually model themselves, sometimes self-consciously, on predecessors in their genre, and both feature long and formal speeches². But the tone of historiography is purportedly dispassionate while the latter revels in evocation (Barrera, 2005:185-189); and the former often makes (sometimes spurious) claims to veracity and reliability, whereas the

¹ With the earliest historiographer in the European tradition, Herodotus, there are for example clear traces of Homeric characterisation, structure and narrative techniques (Grant, 1995:23-27).

² For an overview of the formal “building blocks” of epic poetry, see discussion in Pollmann (2017:37-75).

latter does not. Lastly, historiography is written in prose, while the medium of epic is poetic hexameters. Given these similarities and dissimilarities, the question I intend to examine here is whether a Latin historical epic on contemporary events, the *Iohannis* by Corippus³, can enhance our reconstruction of a 6th century historical general, John Troglita, of whom we are also told in a very brief account by the ancient historiographer, Procopius⁴, at the conclusion of his *De Bello Vandalico*⁵.

The sources on John Troglita

Many historians have made passing comments on John's abilities as a general, based on how these have been conveyed by either one or both of these two texts. While Bury (1958:147), for example, placed John alongside Belisarius and Solomon as "the third hero of the imperial reoccupation of Africa", others like Alan Cameron (2001:28) comment that Corippus' epic concerned the "able but not especially distinguished general John Troglita"⁶. By examining these two texts as they relate to John and his role in the African campaign, I am aiming to arrive at a more definitive conclusion on John's contribution to the historical record. In order to do this a brief overview of the two authors within their respective genres will follow, against which I hope to demonstrate which aspects of the epic are useful as relates to our assessment of John as a general⁷.

Procopius of Caesarea's contemporary account of John's activities is a very brief narrative at the very end of his account of Justinian's

³ Tommasi Moreschini (2002:161-185) deals with particular historically useful comments on the Vandals, Romans and Berbers but does not discuss John as an individual; Schindler (2007, 181-1921) deals with the influence of the *Iohannis* as a historical epic on medieval literature.

⁴ Procopius' works on the wars of Justinian have been abbreviated as follows in this article: *De Bello Persica* = BP; *De Bello Vandalico* = BV; *De Bello Gothico* = BG. His other works: *De Aedificiis* (On Buildings) = Aedif.; *Anekdotia* (Secret History) = Anek.

⁵ Procopius refers to John Troglita only as Ἰωάννην τὸν Πάππου ἀδελφὸν ('John, the brother of Pappus'). The name Troglita is noted by Jordanes (*Romana* 385), another 6th century historian. Further discussion on his origins in Modéran (2003:3866-3870); Tret'yakova (2019:38). He will be referred to in this text as 'John'.

⁶ See also assessments by Raven (1969:219); Lee (2005:122); Whitby (2007:336); Conant (2012:224).

⁷ Potter (1999:21) on the essential question of epic poetry and its usefulness to the historian: "will the text help to reconstruct a specific incident in the past?".

campaign in Africa⁸. We are told by the author that he was appointed as a legal advisor (ζυμβούλος) to Justinian's general, Belisarius (*BP* 1.12.24), but scholars comment positively on Procopius' understanding of military matters and engagement⁹. He seems to have left Africa in 536¹⁰, well before the African wars were concluded. His narrative nevertheless covers Justinian's entire campaign in Africa, firstly the driving out the Vandals by Belisarius and then the defence of the Roman African cities against the Berber tribes by a number of generals, chief among them (in Procopius' account, at least) the eunuch general, Solomon. The historiographer's description of John's campaign, however, is not nearly as detailed as his account of the earlier struggles against the Berbers. And while the didactic role of his work (stated at *BP* 1.1.2) leads him to divide his leading figures into examples of both good and bad generalship (Whately, 2015:4), John is not included in this binary¹¹. In fact, Procopius devotes very little of his narrative to John's activities and says nothing of his abilities as a general. Nevertheless, there is enough detail to know that there were three main conflicts in John's campaign of 547/8. In the essential historical account of these encounters – where the Romans won the first battle, lost the second and were finally victorious in the last conflict – it is also useful to know that Procopius and Corippus correspond.

Although most historians rate the objectivity of Procopius highly, it must be remembered that, firstly, his career was to a certain extent

⁸ There are only three brief mentions of John in other ancient texts: Jordanes (*Romana* 385) mentions that he was “working successfully” (*feliciter degens*) in the African province. Since his short account is inserted after the story of the preceding general in Africa, Artabanes, and the latter's political decline following his grab for power, it is perhaps not surprising that John reflects positively by comparison. Marcellinus Comes simply notes that John was appointed: *Post aliquantos dies mittitur in Africam Joannes, et Artabanes evocatus praesentale accepit magisterium* (*Chronicon*, Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 51). And Paulus Diaconus (*Historia Langobardorum* 1.25) briefly praises John in the 8th century, summing up Justinian's entire African campaign only through a reference to John, “a man of wonderful courage” (*per Iohannem exconsulem mirabili virtute*).

⁹ On military intelligence, supplies, tactics, Howard-Johnson (2001:19-30); on technical issues, Turquois (2015:225-231).

¹⁰ Procopius was probably still in Africa when he recorded extreme weather in 535 and 536, but we know that after this he joined Belisarius in Sicily. It seems highly unlikely that Procopius returned to Africa afterwards (Evans, 1970:221).

¹¹ There seem to be few narrative strategies in Procopius' account of John's struggle against the Lagouatan (a coalition of Berber tribes), and the description of John does not have any of the elements of either the “good general” model, like Belisarius or Solomon (Cameron, 1985:230; Wood, 2011:424), or of the “bad general”, like Sergius.

dependent on his relationships within the imperial structure (as demonstrated in his alternative version of Justinian's reign in the *Anekdotia* or *Secret History*)¹². In addition, we know that Procopius' work was a carefully crafted piece of literature, not a collection of historical data¹³. As one of the classicising historians who mainly took Thucydides as his model, his work is strongly influenced by traditions in the historiographical genre which may affect the reliability of the historical narrative, as will be discussed more fully below. Procopius also claimed to have witnessed most of the events he describes (*BP* 1.1.4), but since he departed from Africa before John arrived, this does affect our evaluation of this part of his narrative.

Our second author, Flavius Cresconius Corippus, the author of the *Iohannis* or the *De Bellis Libycis*, was a teacher in the Roman province of Africa¹⁴. We know very little about him, except that he went on to receive a court appointment in Constantinople and is also the author of a panegyric praising the Roman emperor Justin. It is therefore possible, even likely, that his epic poem on John's struggle in Africa was aimed to please those who could advance his career (Cameron, 1980:536-537). The epic certainly idealises the benefits of Roman rule and the moral superiority of Christianity (Trout, 2005:550).

The *Iohannis* presents far more detail on the three main battles undertaken by John Troglita against the Berber tribes¹⁵, but the

¹² Both Procopius (*Aedif.* 1.1.4-5) and Corippus (*In laudem Iustini minores*, Praef.41-48) voice some expectancy of reward, but we have no information on whether this was ever received. See also Potter's discussion (1999:22) "At no point should it be assumed that one variety of text is a priori more objective in intent than another". See also Colvin (2013:571-598) on Procopius' use of documentary sources to supplement his own eye-witness accounts.

¹³ Procopius' *De Aedificiis* is, for example, clearly propagandistic, depicting Justinian as some sort of redeemer of souls through the building of fortifications and churches (e.g. *De Aed.* 6.2:18-21). In this general aim Procopius is then not far removed from Corippus, whose work is pro-Christian and overtly eulogistic (Schindler, 2009:227-309); on the literary topoi within the narrative of the wars against the Vandals in particular, see Whately (2015:115-157) and a variety of literary and historical perspectives in the volume edited by Lillington-Martin (2017).

¹⁴ Corippus is described as a *grammaticus Afer* in the *Matritensis* 10029 (9th-11th centuries) and lived in the vicinity of Carthage (Cameron, 1980:534-535).

¹⁵ To distinguish the Berber allies from the enemy tribes, Corippus refers to former as "Maures", whereas the enemy are the "Syrtes" (6.104); see discussion in Tommasi Moreschini (2002:172-173). In the area to the east of Carthage the tribes are collectively referred to as the Lagouatan, Leuathae or Lawata in Greek, Roman and Arabic sources (Mattingly, 1994:25-29). There were more than 80 chieftains in Tripolitania alone (Procop. *BV* 2.21.2-11).

narrative is embedded within the traditional elements of the epic style. As an epic, the poem has a substantial literary genealogy, and particularly echoes the works of Vergil and Claudian, as has been demonstrated by various modern scholars¹⁶. Corippus was working in a genre which employed many specific literary techniques and mythological topoi¹⁷, and the poem abounds with allusions, used either routinely or with ideological intentions (Tommasi Moreschini, 2007:175). From the outset, for example, the poet self-consciously casts himself as Justinian's Vergil (*Ioh. Praef.11-16*), and John as a Christianised *pius* Aeneas¹⁸. In this vein Corippus often extravagantly extols John's skill as a general, while this is not always borne out by his account of events, as will be discussed more fully below.

The epic therefore includes material which is purely fictional, such as the epic topos of the storm at sea in which the hero finds himself, the prophetic dream, and so on (Cameron, 1984; 1985). At the same time, since Corippus lived in or near Carthage and must have been involved when the city was besieged, he was an eyewitness and had access to eyewitness accounts for most of the events that he writes about (Shea, 1998:3). His use of locations and names of individuals and tribes also clearly indicate that the terrain, its peoples and tribal affiliations were

Procopius refers to the Africans generally as "Mauri", and to the tribes in the eastern part as "Leuathae".

¹⁶ See, *inter alios*, Burck (1979); Ehlers (1980); Cameron (1984); Nagy (2001); Riedlberger (2010). Although his models seem to be mainly Vergil and Claudian, in the epic tradition the *Iohannis* displays many instances of direct reference and intertextuality which consciously link with all the preceding poets within that genre.

¹⁷ Shea (1973:118), for example, points to the harping on the concepts of *fides* and *imperium* in the *Iohannis*, and the distinction between *subiecti* and *superbi*, adopted from the *Aeneid*. The quality of the *Iohannis* has been debated. It is rated as not being a pedestrian regurgitation of epic techniques by Cameron (2001:24), with qualified praise, calls the epic "a very creditable production for a sixth-century small-town African schoolmaster". Likewise, the opinion of Burck (1979:397) who commends Corippus' style for its "*Flüssigkeit, Klarheit und leichte Lesbarkeit*", supported by Cameron (1984:68) and Shea (1998:43-44). Nevertheless, see also Zarini (2000:3): "*D'un seul mot chez Homère (ménin, andra), on passe à des compléments de plus en plus nombreux, chez Lucain ou Corippe par exemple [...]*".

¹⁸ In the *Iohannis* (1.148-9) the character of the emperor speaks of John's *pietas* in taming the proud and sparing the vanquished, *parcere subiectis, gentes domitare superbas* (Ure, 1951:195-6). The poet makes liberal use of *renovatio* or *chresis*, the merging of Biblical imagery with that taken from the Classical epic tradition, although this is not always consistently employed: detailed discussion in Shea (1973:124), Hofmann (1989:361-367), Von Albrecht (1999:338), Gärtner (2008:9-25, 41-51), and Tommasi Moreschini (2007:173-179).

well known to him (Merrills, 2019:1-11). Corippus' work is therefore also utilised by historians, who take up points in his epic to point to the nature of the turmoil in Africa during this time¹⁹.

But the poem contains many pitfalls for the historian. The author displays, for example, a simple bias against what he sees as the "barbaric", impious Berbers against the morally superior, Christian Romans²⁰, which must always be borne in mind. Information on strategy and tactics is also conveyed erratically. On the one hand, many of the tactics described by Corippus correspond with advice in the military treatises by Vegetius and Maurice²¹, but at the same time descriptions of combat also tend to veer into heroic stereotypes, including long descriptions of armour or individual military encounters.

It is therefore worth exploring, since Procopius' account is so succinct, whether this epic poem can be useful in assessing John's military role in the African conflict. The following sections are therefore devoted to aspects of his command in Africa, and a discussion on how our two texts speak to these characteristics.

The background to John's arrival in Africa

In 533 Belisarius was sent to Africa by Justinian to drive out the Vandals and form peaceful alliances with the different Berber tribes (*BV* 1.25.7), and the general managed the former in less than a year. But in 534 he left Africa and the African command fell to Solomon (under whom John served (*Ioh.* 3.291-304)). When Solomon was killed at Tebestia in 544 (*BV* 2.21-24; *Ioh.* 3.391-4.218), the commanders who succeeded him all failed to control the tribal insurrections as well as their own mutinying soldiers.

¹⁹ For example, Cameron (1982:38-39; 1985:183); Merrills (2004:129; 228; 253-4); Mattingly (1994:38-9); De Marre (2018:145-169). Also a lucid assessment by Shea (1998:20) on which aspects may be more trustworthy than others.

²⁰ That Corippus polarises the pagan Lagouatan and the Christians – black and white, evil and good, confusion and order, irrational and rational – has been amply demonstrated (Shea, 1973:122-123; 1998:27; Cameron, 1984:173). To some extent this corresponds with Procopius' theme in the *Aedificia*, where the Romans are seen as the bringers of enlightenment (Cameron, 1985:113-133), see further n.13 above. This aspect of course also subsumes the idea of the *bellum iustum*, discussed by Tommasi Moreschini (2002:166-169).

²¹ As noted by Riedlberger (2010:248), especially with regard to military nomenclature and praxis. Maurice's *Strategikon* is thought to have been compiled around 600 but is largely a compendium of practices already in use by the Roman army in the East (Rance, 2017:218).

Finally, the emperor's choice alighted on John, a man experienced in warfare and already familiar with enemy (*BV* 2.28.45; *Ioh.* 1.55-124), and John became the new *magister militum per Africam* (*BV* 2.28.45; Jordanes, *Romana* 385)²². He was briefed at Constantinople and set sail for Africa.

The nature of military command

In assessing John's role as commander of the Roman forces, both his professional and his personal character come into play (Rance, 2017:218-219)²³. As far as the latter is concerned – his physical, moral and intellectual qualities – Corippus presents us with stereotypical heroic attributes and his text is of minimal use here (Cameron, 1984:167-184). But where the aspects of generalship involve his professional capacity – experience, knowledge, tactical decisions on deployment or military movements, and so on – Corippus is broadly corroborated by Procopius and can, with cautious use, be considered to be more useful to us (Raaflaub, 2005:56).

Of heroes, God, and war

In the wars against the Vandals, Procopius focuses on Belisarius, whom he clearly admires, and in the subsequent wars against the Berbers, he praises Solomon, whom he compares directly to Thucydides' Pericles (Kaldellis, 2004:189). Nevertheless, there is no overt attempt to heroise these figures. Procopius' attention to John, as stated above, is cursory, and his account of the conclusion of Justinian's African campaign is detached, awarding neither praise nor criticism of John's role in the conflict.

In general, human intelligence and foresight are seen as of paramount importance in Procopius' work, and a general's preparedness is key to his success. When, in the introduction to the Wars, he says that his work will be of use to others (a theme taken from one of the founders of the historiographical genre, Thucydides), he

²² A more detailed overview of these events in Evans (1996:133-6, 151-3, 169-71); Modéran (2003).

²³ These aspects are also the essential focus of the *Strategikon* of Maurice. Both ancient and modern writers see *strategica* as an essential part of generalship (Whately, 2015:251).

refers specifically to his view that those who plan have better chance of success, since in this way the outcome may be more certain (*BP* 1.1.2). Thus, proper preparation for as many contingencies as possible meant that Tyche – the ancient Greek personification of chance or Fortune – might be given less of a free rein²⁴. Procopius was inclined to use the latter as a hermeneutical device for when it seemed that events had spiralled beyond human control²⁵. In his brief account of John's campaign, Procopius says at the end of the final battle that John "unexpectedly" (παραδόξου) routed the Berbers, which, in the light of the above, could be interpreted as an implicit criticism of John as a general.

As is to be expected, in the *Iohannis*, John and, to some extent, Ricinarius, his lieutenant, are painted in heroic terms as men who exemplify the ideals of their society. John is the brave, pious and god-fearing general²⁶, and much of the focus is on his actions and character. The main anti-heroes are the leaders of the Berber tribes, Antalas and Carcasan, and the latter is epically killed by John in the final battle. We have corroboration that Carcasan died in this battle, but he need not necessarily have died at John's hand (Modéran, 2003:401). The poet thus allocates the role of Turnus (the anti-hero in Vergil's *Aeneid*) to Carcasan.

The Christian God also takes a hand in the action, more often than not when the poet is uncomfortable with his hero's performance, or when the Romans do not sweep all before them. For example, in their final battle, John makes unsuccessful attempts to bring their standards together in order to join battle. Corippus explains his failure to do so by saying:

²⁴ On Tyche in Procopius see Kaldellis (2004:188), who notes the similarity in Procopius' conscious reception of Thucydides: "many events that seemed beyond expectation in the past have actually occurred and will always continue to occur, so long as the *tychai* if mankind remain the same" (4.7.18; see also 8.33.25) and the same phrasing in Thucydides (3.82.2) in the context of revolutions: "which have happened in the past and will always happen in the future, so long as the nature (*physis*) of mankind remains the same", see also 1.22.4.

²⁵ Occasionally the influence of God also features in Procopius' account, but to a far lesser extent, for example when Procopius sees the Vandal Gelimer as "blinded by God" at 1.19.25, to explain the catastrophic error of the Vandal lord who "voluntarily left the war decision to his enemies" (*BV* 1.19.25).

²⁶ Whether this poem is an epic, panegyric or even hagiographical has been discussed at length in the work of Zarini (2003).

God had not, however, yet granted our general his hour of victory and so kept his army off, deeming it worthy in time of even better triumphs. (*Ioh.* 7.311-313)

The poet's attempts to gloss over deficiencies in John's generalship are, therefore, fairly transparent.

More generally, where the Romans are victorious the poet's conclusion is a simplistic one, for example that John's forces were victorious because of their Christian faith and their military discipline (*ordine*) (6.36-37).

Persuasion, inspiration and command

A large part of leadership is the ability to interact with others, in John's case senior lieutenants and the soldiery in general, which is conveyed in the *Iohannis* by means of speeches²⁷. The speeches Corippus attributes to John are usually hortative and designed to spur his soldiers on to battle. At 1.447-451, for example, Corippus mentions how the commander stirred the battle spirit of his men: before the battle at Antonia Castra with tales of old battles, "praising the work of war" (*Martis laudaret opus*), and "rousing their excited minds to battle, which set them afire and made them staunch (*firmit*)" (4.404-406). Much of this encouragement is given in direct speech. The speeches in the poem are of course a generic type of motivation rather than a literal reflection of what was said²⁸. Nevertheless, no doubt historically there were speeches, and these literary versions bear some relation to historical reality in that they take up issues which were, according to military and other historical works, important to soldiers at the time. Common themes are the righteousness of their cause, the support of God, and their resolution in combat before battle (4.407-456), while in conflict John appeals to the soldiers' patriotism and honour (5.90-98), and also the promise of spoils (5.408-413). These seem to be routine motivations for soldiers. Following the high losses and low morale after

²⁷ In Procopius speeches are contrived to educate readers and future generals, and they contain indicators as to what determined the result of the battle that is about to unfold. But we see nothing of this in his account of John's campaign.

²⁸ In form many of them are set pieces which bear a close resemblance to similar speeches attributed to Caesar in Lucan's *Pharsalia*.

their defeat in the second battle, John's speech (*Ioh.* 7.262-280) displays the entire battery of motivational *topoi*, but this time he also gives them encouraging news about their allies, an important addition in view of the depletion of their forces in the previous encounter (7.118-128). John's final advice in Book 8 is also much more pragmatic, since he gives his soldiers sound guidance on the most important avenues to safety.

Personal fighting and bravery on the battlefield were not required of a commander, and were even actively discouraged (Whitby, 2007:335). The chaos which ensued when an army lost its commander is described by Corippus in the case of John's predecessor, Solomon – "at that point, every semblance of order disappeared" (3.441). Nevertheless, John is described as riding among the troops (4.564-569) and fighting at their centre (4.477), but even when his armour bearers fell, and he was exposed, as at 6.670-673, he did not lose his life. The courage of a commander was a great inspiration to soldiers, as is claimed throughout the epic (for example at 5.421, where John says "each soldier may do in confidence and after my example what he sees me doing in combat" or at 6.630 "Let each man do as he sees me do"). A general's presence could check retreat and renew attack (*Ioh.* 5.277-280; 6.633). The motivational factor was stronger than the contribution a general could make on the battlefield with his sword (Richardot, 2009:154).

On a few occasions, however, John faces mutinies among the soldiers²⁹. Discipline of their motley armies was a recurring problem which beset many commanders in Late Antiquity³⁰. The first sedition is the result of pursuing the Berbers into the desert. John's army lost many of its horses and this disaster, on top of deprivations of water and food, gave impetus to a rising mutiny. John took his army to a water source, but when he tried to have sustenance procured by ship, a south wind prevented them from setting sail (6.386-388). Corippus describes (6.408-411) how the demoralised army broke into revolt, but John sent Ricinarius who was able to calm them.

²⁹ Maurice criticises the lack of training and military discipline of both generals and soldiers (*Strategikon Praefatio* 10-14), but as Rance (2017:224) points out, this was something of a *topos* for military treatises.

³⁰ The importance of imposing discipline on one's army is unsurprisingly emphasised by Maurice (*Strategikon* 8.A.3, 30, 8.B.19, 27, 99), but seems to have been difficult to maintain consistently (Whitby, 2011:523-524; Bury, 1958:142; Wood, 2011:424; Cameron, 1985:186-187).

Another mutiny arose (*Ioh.* 8.50-163) as a result of John's waiting tactics, which were interpreted as a reluctance to fight (Tret'yakova, 2019:42)³¹. When the mutiny was reported to John, Corippus says that he "was for a moment uncertain what to do" (8.110), but the description which follows is one of an angry general who speaks forthrightly to the rebels, and, Corippus says, "He had in fact no less power than Caesar had to terrify the Romans with his words of contempt when a rebellion threatened" (8.149-150)³². He threatens them with the Berber allied soldiers, until eventually the ringleaders are given up and put to death³³.

John's dealings with the mutinies are therefore projected as firm and authoritative, but without the cruelty or the concomitant men's fear of their general as portrayed in Lucan, *Pharsalia* 5, in the case of Caesar (Kaufmann, 2017:160).

Consultation and leadership

On several occasions in the epic John is seen to consult with his senior lieutenants, particularly Ricinarius, while in front of his soldiers we are told that he exercised self-control and "kept his cares pressed in his heart" (*Ioh.* 7.135). Indeed, this seems to be "the very model of a modern major-general"³⁴. However, John is not shown to be able to discern good advice from bad, or to apply self-restraint consistently. Before the first battle John discusses his concerns with Ricinarius and asks his advice, which he then follows to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. However, in the second battle, John allows himself to be overborne by his subordinates and to neglect his own strategic maxims of proceeding cautiously and evading capture by ambush (*Ioh.* 6.238-254; 478-481); moreover, he is shown to waver irresolutely before his soldiers, and the battle is lost.

³¹ The mutinies described by Corippus bear stylistic similarities to those in Lucan (Riedlberger, 2010:146-148).

³² Kaufmann (2017:160) discusses possible intertextuality here, but despite rhetorical strategies similar to Lucan's Caesar, the comparison with Caesar is otherwise not flattering to John and is not sustained in the poem.

³³ This also conforms to Procopius' figure of Belisarius as an *exemplum* of generalship, one who takes on advice and who treats his subordinates and soldiers with consideration, while yet maintaining discipline (Whatley, 2015:4).

³⁴ Lyrics from the first act of the comic opera, *The Pirates of Penzance* (Gilbert & Sullivan, 1879).

Corippus is no doubt trying, with the benefit of hindsight, to display John's foresight and wisdom in view of the subsequent defeat. Since John's overall strategy was one of swift attack and dogged pursuit, it is even possible that the defeat was actually due to his own eagerness to join battle, in which case John made a bad tactical decision which actually went counter to his overall strategy shown as revealed in his speeches and actions. Procopius is again not informative, simply remarking that John lost many of his men in the defeat (*BV* 2.28.48-49).

Fortune favours the – cautiously – bold

Although Corippus devotes a number of passages throughout the poem to John's frame of mind as he turns over various strategic plans (*Ioh.* 2.288-294; 3.1-7; 6.232-235; 7.20-21; 8.286-291), we are not really told how John thought that the Roman forces were going to overcome the enemy, which, admittedly, Corippus probably had little chance of knowing. Since Procopius is even less helpful on John's strategy, we are forced to deduce John's plans from the pattern established by his actions in the *Iohannis*. We already see an example of this, when, en route to Africa, John first landed at a different beach on the African shore, before entering the port at Carthage, thus taking the enemy (who immediately fled to the mountain regions) by surprise (Richardot, 2009:149). The poem is also our only indication that John was not content to simply react to the tactics of the Berbers but wanted to retain the initiative. When he landed in Carthage, John wasted no time and led his troops to Antonia Castra in Byzacium where they pitched their camp³⁵. No doubt this swift mobilisation of his forces was meant to be a show of strength, but also hoped to lure the enemy into a confrontation. Corippus uses a metaphor of bees in a hive to demonstrate that it was John's objective to 'taunt' or 'challenge' (*vocant*) the enemy (1.430-439).

Corippus makes it clear that John was aware that his own forces were relatively small compared to the numbers of their enemy. At one

³⁵ Procopius 2.28.46: "And this John, upon arriving in Libya speedily [ἐπεὶ τάχιστα ἐν Λιβύῃ ἐγένετο] had an engagement with Antalas and the Moors in Byzacium". In Corippus, Book 1 (largely devoted to John's voyage from Constantinople), also indicates that the march of the army to Antonia Castra happened very soon after landing (1.417-465). Although Shea (1998:58 n.47) argues for two months passing before the first campaign, this is not supported by the two sources.

point in Corippus' narrative (1.482-483), the speaker for the Berber delegation actually points out their numerical advantage³⁶, and we are also told on another occasion of the intimidating noise made by the great numbers of the enemy, as the Romans approached in the valley below, to see "soldiers without horizon" above them (*Ioh.* 2.162-165)³⁷. The importance of winning and retaining the support of the Berber allies would therefore be of crucial importance in the coming struggle, not only in terms of military strength, but also to boost the morale of his men, which the poet implies as something the general held as very important for success (Różycki, 2018:705).

John's strategy therefore appears to have been firstly to intimidate the enemy tribes by a bold show of strength, both by the speed of his advance as well as the doggedness of his unrelenting pursuit, in which he would always base the Roman camp within close proximity of the enemy. It seems that initially he hoped by these threatening tactics to get the Berbers to agree to the terms he sent to Antalas, to either submit in exchange for amnesty or go into battle (*Ioh.* 2.342-416; 4.287-337). Nevertheless, John does not appear to have been surprised by Antalas' rejection of the conditions (which in poetic terms also neatly justifies their domination in the view of the poet) and gave the order to prepare for battle (*Ioh.* 4.304-392, 454-456)³⁸.

Corippus describes John's approach at 1.561-562 as bold but at the same time also cautious (*cautosque ...audacesque simul*). Our sources agree that John had previously spent time fighting in Africa under Solomon, so he had some knowledge of the enemy's fighting strengths. His familiarity with their fighting style was considered a great asset: where earlier works on Roman strategy provide advice against a generic enemy, the roughly contemporary *Strategikon* (6.1-5) is the first work of military strategy that takes different types of enemies into account; and knowledge of the enemy was also in line with the contemporary emphasis on controlling the costs of direct warfare (Whitby, 2007:313-314). Deception in outwitting the enemy would prove to be more important than brute force.

³⁶ Also *Ioh.* 8.384-385 and mentioned by Procopius, BV 2.10.7; 2.11.23; 2.12.13; 2.17.8.

³⁷ Aptly termed by Richardot (2009:150) "*la guerre psychologique*"; see also Różycki (2018: 705-719).

³⁸ Gärtner (2008:66-96) for Corippus' characterisation of Antalas.

Corippus conveys (1.518-578) how John demonstrated his knowledge of the enemy's fighting style in addressing his captains. The Berbers did not fight in formation, as the Romans were more accustomed to doing (*Ioh.* 2.179)³⁹, but in smaller units which had greater fluidity and unpredictability. Their ability to withdraw to inaccessible areas made them more difficult to control or conquer (Whitby, 2007:315)⁴⁰. Rather than straightforward conflict on open plains, the Berbers would favour a guerrilla-style warfare, particularly ambushes in mountainous areas, river valleys and groves (*Ioh.* 1.532-536)⁴¹.

For this reason, John also argued for alertness and readiness amongst his men, who had always to be prepared for action at a moment's notice, and, on a later occasion, that the soldiers should not to let their horses graze too far away from their encampment, since after their rituals they needed to move quickly on to battle⁴². Maurice's work on Roman strategy (*Strategikon* 9.3.106-117) imparts similar advice about grazing animals (Riedlberger, 2010:248; Zarini, 2003:282).

Most of the Berber troops were lightly armed cavalry, as were some of John's allies, while John had brought across heavily armed cavalry, which, we may assume, did not fare as well in the dusty heat. Although Corippus details the appearance of the different forces and sometimes their areas of military prowess, he does not indicate how this information influenced John's strategy, even though John's skill in deployment is mentioned and draws extravagant compliments from the poet (*Ioh.* 4.477). We are only informed about the positions of the

³⁹ It appears that John's soldiers were reluctant to fight a guerrilla war or engage in dense vegetation (*Ioh.* 2.191-195). Likewise, Corippus describes Antalas and his army as unwilling to engage John's forces "out in the field" (4.623-626).

⁴⁰ For contemporary tendencies and counterstrategies to guerrilla warfare, see Maurice, *Strategikon* 11.4.3-7; 51-68. After their first defeat, for example, the Lagoutan survivors withdrew to the mountains to regroup, and a few months after their first defeat, the forces of Carcasan and Bruten were joined by those of Antalas and they began to harass the cities west of Tripoli, even threatening Carthage: "But at a later time [χρόνῳ δὲ ὕστερον] the Leuathae came again with a great army [στρατῶν μεγάλῳ] from the country about Tripolis to Byzacium, and united with the forces of Antalas." (*BV* 2.28.47). See discussion in Shea (1998:58 n.47) on the interval.

⁴¹ Maurice dedicates Book 4 to ambushes in this period, since "well-planned ambushes are of the greatest value in warfare" (*Strategikon* 4.1.1), particularly when the enemy was superior in number.

⁴² On the need for being able to mobilise swiftly against a highly mobile enemy in Late Antiquity, Rance (2017:245).

various commanders and their units, with nothing about how they were to be utilised effectively⁴³.

Strategic utilisation of terrain

A general's anticipatory skills were undoubtedly enhanced by a knowledge of the terrain. This applied not only to terrain in which the danger of an ambush would be likely, such as densely wooded areas, but also in knowing how to gain advantages from the desert in exhausting their enemy, while equally avoiding its danger oneself. Here the Lagouatan initially outwitted John by fleeing into the desert and luring the imperial army through devastated territory and away from its supply bases, which exhausted and demoralised them (*Ioh.* 7.302-306; Tret'yakova, 2019:42). In his pursuit, Corippus says, John doubled the distance of their earlier march, but he describes how the soldiers suffered in the heat and the African desert wind. Nevertheless, the desert wind also affected the Berbers as for fifteen days they penetrated the desert⁴⁴. But here the Romans had some good fortune through the capture of four enemy soldiers by a scouting party. The captives revealed the Berber strategy – to exhaust his army by constantly retreating until John's reserves ran out (*Ioh.* 7.374-375, 524-530). John countered this by ceasing pursuit and setting up camp near Iunci on the open plains, which would give their forces the advantage (*Ioh.* 8.23-24). This location (otherwise unknown) also enabled him to receive fresh supplies brought to the nearby harbour of Lariscus (*Ioh.* 8.20-21; 41-47), and allowed his soldiers to regroup after their defeat.

The Berber encampments themselves were fortified by walls and trenches, within which barriers of animals were tied together, that made a direct assault problematic (*Ioh.* 4.597-602, *BV* 1.8.25-26), as terrified animals added to the confusion of the offensive. Nevertheless, already in their first conflict, John succeeds in penetrating these defences. Conversely, Procopius (*BV* 2.22.20) did not have much confidence in

⁴³ Corippus is clearly well informed about the different fighting strengths of the various tribal contingents, e.g. the Frexes fought with infantry and swift light cavalry (2.45-47), while the Silcadinet were efficient in ambushing their enemy (*Ioh.* 2.52-53). See also Goldlust's commentary on Book 4 (2017) for this aspect.

⁴⁴ Richardot (2009:157) mentions that they may have been too numerous for the oases to cope with.

the Lagouatan's poliorcetics and likewise John does not seem to have been particularly concerned about the possibility of being besieged, but more worried about conflict terrain. John did, however, on two occasions use the tactic of preventing the enemy from gaining access to adequate food and water by blockading their camp (*Ioh.* 6.437-492; 8.164-179).

There is some further incidental information in the poem which also gives an indication of John's abilities to use his knowledge of the terrain to his advantage. For example, his attention to supplying his men with provisions seems in most cases to have been meticulous and successful, and we may take this to be reliable since Corippus does not disguise cases where the provisions prove to be insufficient. In the latter case this is firstly the result of the Berber strategy to weaken and exhaust John's forces by laying waste the countryside and luring John's forces into the desert, where the Romans' water and food prove to be inadequate (*Ioh.* 2.1-3; 6.279-295; 7.304-309). On another occasion, when John attempted to send ships to bring provisions and reinforcements by sea, he was frustrated by adverse winds (*Ioh.* 6.282-288), and his failure was the source of much discontent.

John's overall strategy seems to have been aimed at minimising risk, and when this was neglected it led to failure. If the maxim for any general was that nothing should be left to chance, as Maurice (*Strategikon* 8.2.63) and Procopius (*BP* 1.1.2) would have it, John for the greater part subscribed to this ideal.

Recovery after defeat

After their defeat, John and his remaining forces retreated to a small city of Iunci. In the epic, John informs Ricinarius that he means to make a swift counter-attack, while the enemy believes him to be in retreat (7.44-47), but Ricinarius advises him to first gather his scattered forces, build up their strength by providing food and making further treaties with other tribes, and John decides to follow this sensible course of action. John's own strategy is shown to be inferior to that of his lieutenant, and while this may be a poetic technique (since it is unlikely that Corippus would have been privy to this information), from a historical point of view it does not position John in the best light. Nevertheless, Corippus tells us that:

no commander was ever able to resume fierce combat after being forced to make a tactical retreat with the speed of John. (*Ioh.* 7.75-77)

The swiftness of these events is confirmed in Procopius:

not long afterward John collected those soldiers who had survived and drew into alliance with him many Moors. (*BV* 2.28.50-51)

The Berber tribes under Ifisdaias and Coutzinas had previously allied themselves with the Byzantine empire (*BV* 2.28.50; *Ioh.* 4.472-563), and they also pledged to support John. In the first two battles the majority of the commanders listed under John's leadership were therefore part of the imperial army⁴⁵. But in the final battle, John had increased his allies to include also the troops of Iaudas and Bezina (7.262-280; 8.370-377)⁴⁶. The figures Corippus gives for the allies in the final battle may be inflated, but they probably reflect the reality that by this time the allies formed a larger portion of John's army than his own troops⁴⁷.

Maintaining good relations with and between the allies was vital, since unstable alliances between the tribes and the provincial or rebel leaders were recorded for the period just before John's arrival (*BV* 2.25-27). John also successfully arranged for the reconciliation of two quarrelling confederates, Coutzinas and Ifisdaias. In the account of Corippus, the constancy of the allies is much praised, and John is described as being reciprocally loyal to them⁴⁸. John's interaction with the tribes with whom they were not at war is likewise revealed as

⁴⁵ Most of the commanders under John seem to have been men of Balkan, eastern and Italic origin, and three (Pudentius, John the Elder and Liberatus Caecilides) were probably of Romano-African extraction (Conant, 2012:258).

⁴⁶ African numbers in the final battle: 30,000 for Coutzinas, 100,000 for Ifisdaias, and 12,000 for Iaudas, but probably exaggerated by the poet (Richardot, 2009:157).

⁴⁷ Many of the other captains, with names such as Putzintulus or Sinduit, have been onomastically identified as non-African (Riedlberger, 2010:343).

⁴⁸ For example, in the final battle in Book 8, the Lagouatan launched two surprise attacks, one directly against John's troops (which was successfully driven off), and the second against Coutzinas and his forces, where John came to their aid (8.457-478).

politically astute and leaving little to chance, as can be seen when he negotiates a safe passage for his troops through the land of the Astrices (*Ioh.* 6.391-436) by dissimulation, taking hostages and paying bribes.

The art of deception

John's recovery after defeat has won some praise among modern scholars. It has been noted (Lee, 2013:289; Richardot, 2009:156) that, after Solomon's death, it was only through the "energetic efforts" of the new general, John Troglita, that the imperial forces managed to contain the Berber insurrections. Of course, energy is a desirable trait in a general, but, as has already been mentioned, Late Antique warfare manuals laid great emphasis on saving manpower, and consequently on the importance of cunning and deception in a general's arsenal. Both John and the Berbers alternately made good use of the latter technique to outwit their enemy⁴⁹. The Lagouatan used their local knowledge of the terrain to lure the imperial forces away from their supply bases by pretending to flee into the desert (*Ioh.* 7.302-306; Tret'yakova, 2019:42). John initially fell into this trap, which demoralised and exhausted his soldiers and contributed to mutinies in the ranks, but the capture of four enemy soldiers revealed their plan, as discussed above, and John adjusted his own strategy accordingly.

When John next set up camp on a plain called the Fields of Cato, Corippus presents his best demonstration of the art of patience and guile. John soon became aware that the enemy tribes were experiencing water and food shortages. He therefore blockaded their camp and restrained his men from venturing forth into terrain favourable for ambushes⁵⁰. The hungry enemy, also misunderstanding the Roman's inaction as a reluctance to attack, eventually risked battle on the open plain (*Ioh.* 8.164-179). They struck on a holy day (presumably a Sunday), hoping to catch John's forces unawares while they were engaged in religious rituals (*Ioh.* 8.254-255). But John and his second-in-command, Ricinarius, anticipated this thinking and performed their devotions at dawn, complying with the ideal expressed in the

⁴⁹ Blunt off-the-field tactics such as hostages and bribery were also effectively employed, such as John's arrest of the Lagouatan emissaries (*Ioh.* 1.498-500) at Antonia Castra, and the taking of hostages and paying of bribes in John's treaty with the Astrices (*Ioh.* 6.430-432).

⁵⁰ Also advocated in Maurice, *Strategikon* 8.2.28.

Strategikon (8.1.39), that generals should ensure readiness for battle on all days, including holy days (Riedlberger, 2010:242)⁵¹. In this game of move and countermove, therefore, John fared well and was rewarded by final success.

Pius Iohannis: the concerned general

Finally, an able general would also take care to minimise the loss of life, firstly among his own soldiers but also among civilians. We are told by Corippus of John's desire to "aid the wretched land" (*Ioh.* 1.441-443) laid waste by the enemy, and his concern for "the very captive people for whom he had taken up arms" (2.295). Although this is likely to be part and parcel of the characterisation of John as *pius*, John remained in Africa rebuilding the provinces afterwards, so it is likely that his concern may have been real and purely pragmatic.

Procopius praises Belisarius who restrained his troops from plundering because this did not prepare the way for governing a territory afterwards (*BV* 1.16.2-8)⁵². John likewise limited looting to the defeated enemy camp. His attitude to the enemy was merciless, and Corippus does not disguise that John's army in conquest did not spare the enemies' women and children (5.477-492).

Victory and aftermath

The Romans were victorious over the Berber coalition in the summer of 548 (Stephenson, 2012:27)⁵³, and the war drew to a close when the territories of Numidia, Byzacena and Tripolitania were once again under Roman control. John became a patricius, and he remained in command in Africa for at least another four years⁵⁴.

⁵¹ Discussion in Rance (2017:245) on the necessity of mobilising swiftly against a highly mobile enemy in Late Antiquity.

⁵² Nevertheless, large scale military action was a strain on the Roman empire's financial resources and also on the ability of commanders to move their forces without resorting to looting surrounding countryside and villages (Whitby, 2011:524).

⁵³ Marcellinus Comes (*Chron. Migne, PL* 51, AC 551) implies that John was only finally victorious in 551, but Procopius and Corippus have the earlier date of 549. Discussion in Shea (1998:16).

⁵⁴ Patricius, Jordanes (*Romana* 384-385); Marcellinus Comes (*Chronicon* AC 551). John was still in charge of Africa at the end of 551, and possibly early 552 (Procopius, *BG* 4.24-37).

Although Wood (2011:424) speaks of the “unsuccessful aftermath of Belisarius’ campaign” which he ascribes to the recurring problems from mutinying troops and incursions from the hinterland, this view is probably due to Procopius’ pessimism already commented on by Cameron (1985:186-187). John was able to secure peace for the region for some fifteen years, and despite Procopius’ glum outlook for Africa⁵⁵, relative economic prosperity returned during the second half of the 6th century (Evans, 1996:171).

Conclusion

Treadgold and others have commented on the fact that John Troglita’s campaigns were “appended as an afterthought” (2007:199; Cameron, 1985:179.). So why does Procopius write so little about John? The main reason is surely that he had already left Africa by then, and the lack of detail is due to the fact that he was not an eyewitness to the conclusion of the conquest of the region. Moreover, Belisarius had been his Pericles against the Vandals, and Solomon against the Berbers. Despite John’s success in bringing the campaign to its conclusion, he was not a protagonist in Procopius’ account of Justinian’s wars. Thus Procopius’ terse account of John should not be seen as a slur on his generalship as such.

Apart from this literary disadvantage, which hampers Procopius’ account of John’s campaign by its brevity, the historiographer’s account of John employs no *topoi* or any other literary conventions of the genre (Whately, 2015:4-5). Corippus, on the other hand, is hampered both by the conventions of the epic genre, and the knowledge that he most probably owed his eventual court appointment to John. Nevertheless, the epic, once shorn of its more obvious genre characteristics, can be used to assess the generalship of John Troglita, and considerable useful information is conveyed – often inadvertently – by the poet, who seems to have understood little about military strategy and tactics himself. Thus our two sources can be complementary, even though they are so different, particularly as the shorter account does not differ in any way from the more elaborate version by the poet.

⁵⁵ “Thus it came to pass that those of the Libyans who survived, few as they were in number and exceedingly poor [ὀλίγοις τε καὶ λίαν πτωχοῖς οὖσιν], at last and after great toil [μόλις ἤσυχάν] found some peace.” (BV 2.28.52); see also discussion in Ure (1951:32).

What I have tried to do here is to reconcile the uncomfortable affinity between the historiographical and the epic perspectives on John's generalship, between the heroic commander that Corippus describes, or as a mere footnote to Justinian's African campaigns, as Procopius would have it. Large portions of the epic are undoubtedly fictional and tendentious at best, whereas the historical account clearly underplays the role of John Troglita as a general. But while John Troglita may not necessarily have been heroic, he was clearly capable and ultimately, successful, which is what counts in the end.

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