

## **AGATHIAS ON ITALY, ITALIANS AND THE GOTHIC WAR**

**DALLAS DeFOREST**

*Department of History  
California State University, Chico  
400 West 1st St.  
Chico, CA 95929  
ddeforest@csuchico.edu*

### ***Abstract***

This article examines Agathias of Myrina's presentation of Italy, Italians, and the Gothic War. His presentation of these subjects is framed around the historical methodology outlined in his preface, which is centered on truth and edification. I argue that he presents the civilian population of Italy as a category distinct from both Romans and barbarians. He does so in order to advance an argument about the devastating consequences of warfare throughout the peninsula during the Gothic War. He also provides moral instruction to his readers about the negative effects of unjust wars, and he offers a veiled critique of Justinian's wars of conquest in this context. I position Agathias as a valuable, insightful source for sixth-century Italian history and cultural change at the time.

**Keywords:** Agathias, Gothic War, Ostrogothic Italy, Justinian

### ***Resumen***

El presente artículo analiza la imagen que de Italia y sus habitantes, así como de la Guerra Gótica, ofrece la obra de Agatías de Myrina. Su presentación de estos temas se articula a partir de la metodología histórica delineada en su prefacio, centrada en los temas de la verdad y la edificación. Se argumenta que Agatías presenta a la población civil de Italia como una categoría distinta tanto de los romanos como de los bárbaros, a fin y objeto de construir un discurso sobre las consecuencias devastadoras de la guerra en la península italiana. Agatías también ofrece a sus lectores una enseñanza moral sobre los efectos negativos de los conflictos bélicos injustos, así como una crítica velada a las campañas justinianeas de conquista. El artículo defiende que Agatías es una valiosa y esclarecedora fuente para el conocimiento de la historia de la península italiana durante el siglo VI y del cambio cultural acaecido durante este período.

**Metadata:** Agatías, Guerra Gótica, Italia ostrogoda, Justiniano

# AGATHIAS ON ITALY, ITALIANS AND THE GOTHIC WAR

DALLAS DEFORREST

In her important study of Agathias, Averil Cameron makes several interesting observations about Agathias' presentation of Italy. She notes that he gives us the "curious impression that Italy was populated entirely by Goths; he nowhere identifies himself with the Roman population, and the whole effect is a war of conquest, not, as it was officially described, a war of liberation." Cameron also notes that he never mentions the Pope, despite his presence in Constantinople during the years of the war he describes, and that he did not "appreciate the emotional or political significance of Rome itself." But Cameron fails to provide any analysis of these peculiarities, noting merely that Agathias simply did not understand events in the West well enough or was not interested much in them.<sup>1</sup> Anthony Kaldellis has not discussed Agathias' presentation of Italy or the Italians in his more recent work (discussed below) either.

This article addresses directly the "curious impression" Agathias leaves for his readers. I argue that Agathias presents the civilian population of Italy as a category distinct from both Romans and barbarians, one defined primarily by area locale and civic affiliation. He also conveys an accurate impression of the consequences of warfare throughout the Italian peninsula during the Gothic War while advancing an argument centered on the negative effects of unjust wars. He pursues these claims in a complex and subtle way, which ultimately aligns with his stated historical methodology. Agathias emerges in this analysis as a valuable, insightful source for sixth-century Italian history and cultural change at the time.

## *1. Agathias and his Historical Methodology*

Most of what we know about Agathias is derived from his *Histories*. He was born in Myrina in Asia Minor not later than 532, studied rhetoric in Alexandria for a number of years and, finally, law in Constantinople from 551-555. He worked for a majority of his adult life as a lawyer in the capital, save for a brief stint as *pater civitatis* in Smyrna, during which time he remodeled several public latrines. He was, it seems, a successful lawyer, prominent even, according to John Epiphanius, and his office was located in the

<sup>1</sup> A. Cameron, *Agathias*, Oxford 1970, 117-119 (44 for the Pope).

Basileios Stoa, the legal heart of the city and empire. His life as a sixth-century lawyer sounds all-too-modern: inundated with paperwork and clients, he had little free time to write. But his devotion to literary pursuits was strong enough that he produced, when still a young man, a body of erotic poetry, the *Daphniaca*, which unfortunately has not survived. Sometime late in the reign of Justinian or early in the reign of Justin II, he edited the *Cycle*, and then wrote his *Histories* during the 570s. It is likely that he died between 579-582. His home was in Plate, on the city side of the Golden Horn.<sup>2</sup>

Until quite recently, Cameron's interpretations framed our understanding of Agathias. Her Agathias was a "conventional Christian" whose knowledge of classical literature was derived solely from lexica and handbooks floating around Constantinople during the sixth century. He wrote history only because it was very similar to poetry, differing only in meter, and he was concerned primarily with literary "affectation" and "adornment." His purpose in writing was to advance conventional, Christian morality, and his historical causation betrays this: sinners are punished throughout the *Histories*. Cameron's Agathias was, therefore, just a typical early Byzantine literary figure, in whom "we can see...the beginnings of Byzantine sterility."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This information is summarized in Cameron, *Agathias* (cit. n. 1), 1-11. The relevant passages in Agathias are as follows: 3.1.4-5 for his profession, the location of his office and being overworked; Preface 14 for his place of birth and family; Preface 7-8 for composition of *Daphniaca* and editing the *Cycle*; 2.15.7 for rhetorical studies in Alexandria. For the date of the publication of the *Cycle* see: R. C. McCail, "The *Cycle* of Agathias: New Identifications Scrutinized", *JHS* 89 (1969), 87-96, who favors the last years of Justinian's reign; Barry Baldwin concurs with him in B. Baldwin, "Four Problems in Agathias", *BZ* 70 (1977), 295-305, and Id., "The Date of the *Cycle* of Agathias", *BZ* 73 (1980), 334-340. Averil and Alan Cameron maintain that it belongs to the early years of the reign of Justin II in Av. and Al. Cameron, "The *Cycle* of Agathias", *JHS* 86 (1966), 6-25. All interpretations depend ultimately on deciphering which emperor is being honored in the preface. For the date of Agathias' birth, see R. C. McCail, "The Earthquake of A.D. 551 and the Birth-Date of Agathias", *GRBS* 9 (1967), 241-247; for Agathias' time in law school, as *pater civitatis* in Smyrna and his early career, see R. C. McCail, "On the Early Career of Agathias Scholasticus", *Revue des études byzantines* 28 (1970), 141-151; for the social background of Agathias and his circle, see G. Greatrex, "Lawyers and Historians in Late Antiquity", in R. Mathisen (ed.), *Law, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2001, 148-161.

<sup>3</sup> For Cameron on Agathias' historical methodology, see *Agathias*, 30-37; for historical causation, see *Agathias*, 53-56; for stylistic affectation, see *Agathias*, 89-111 and Av. and Al. Cameron, "Christianity and Tradition in the Historiography of the Late Empire", *CQ* 14 (1964), 316-328; for intellectual horizons, see Cameron, *Agathias*, 112-123; for Agathias' knowledge of the classics, specifically Herodotus and Thucydides, see Av. Cameron, "Herodotus and Thucydides in Agathias", *BZ* 57 (1964), 33-52; R. C. McCail, "The Erotic and Ascetic Poetry of Agathias Scholasticus", *Byzantion* 41 (1971), 205-267, uses Cameron's assumptions and conclusions to reach his own regarding Agathias' poetry: it reflects the stricter morality of the age of Justinian.

But we now benefit from a more nuanced understanding of Agathias, which is part of a broader shift in the study of Byzantine literature and historiography.<sup>4</sup> Anthony Kaldellis has argued that Agathias was far from a conventional Christian, and, in fact, sympathized deeply with the outlawed Neoplatonic philosophers of his time. In this reconstruction, Agathias knew his classics well, used them strategically, and may have even adopted the methods as well as style and vocabulary of Thucydides. He did not write history merely because it was similar to poetry, but for far more intricate reasons. Thus, his *Histories* utilizes a complex historical methodology, and even contains political and philosophical concerns. Affectation and style are here reevaluated as harbingers of meaning, embedded in the text for discerning readers to interpret. Far from representing the beginnings of Byzantine sterility, Agathias is presented as part of a dynamic Byzantine historiographical tradition.<sup>5</sup>

This article builds on recent advances in the study of Byzantine literature and operates within the newer framework established by Kaldellis for the study of Agathias. As such, we must begin with an overview of his historical methodology, since it structures the content and meaning of the work.<sup>6</sup> Central to Agathias' historical methodology is his theory of human motivation, in which the writing of history is complicit as an instrumental force. For Agathias, men are incited to perform great deeds specifically because they will receive glory for them in the future, and they will perform even greater deeds if they know that the memory of their exploits will be recorded by historians. Thus, men are fundamentally selfish, but their deeds are recognized by Agathias as beneficial and necessary for society when harnessed properly. History and historians are therefore necessary to elicit good deeds from men for the betterment of society. As an historian Agathias is directly complicit in this process by praising those who performed great feats in the past. History is thus a powerful social and moral instrument.

<sup>4</sup> A. Littlewood, "Literature", in J. Harris, (ed.), *Palgrave Advances in Byzantine History*, Palgrave 2005, ch. 9, provides a good summary of the recent changes in the study of Byzantine literature. One key realization is that it is often through the use of classical allusions and other stylistic features that Byzantine authors convey their arguments and deeper meanings –be they historical, philosophical, or poetic.

<sup>5</sup> A. Kaldellis, "The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias: A Reinterpretation", *Byzantion* 69 (1999), 206-252, contains these arguments. See esp. 207-211 for Agathias' historical methodology and views of history; and 236-248 for Agathias and Christianity. See also A. Kaldellis, "Agathias on History and Poetry", *GRBS* 38 (1997), 295-305, for a strong refutation of Cameron's argument that Agathias' wrote history only because it was so similar to poetry. For a reappraisal of Thucydides in Agathias, see K. Adshead, "Thucydides and Agathias", in B. Croke – A. M. Emmett (eds.), *History and Historians in Late Antiquity*, Sydney 1983, 82-87.

<sup>6</sup> Kaldellis, "The Historical and Religious Views" (cit. n. 5), 211.

But who and what should the historian praise? Is history to be nothing more than panegyric? Agathias first answers this question by recourse to political philosophy, which distances his *Histories* from panegyric. History is here presented as an ancillary tool of political philosophy, whose goals (most importantly, the promotion of virtue) can be better accomplished through the more pleasurable medium of history. History can show that just men prosper, while the opposite occurs for the unjust. Yet Agathias adds later in his preface that truth, not the promotion of virtue, is his primary goal and that he will pursue it as his “supreme object.” Thus, Agathias wishes to praise men to promote virtue, but also asserts that praise must accord with the facts.<sup>7</sup>

These, then, are the two poles of Agathias’ *Histories* –truth and edification (the promotion of virtue and justice). This methodology is complex and philosophical concerns are present throughout the text. We must be cognizant of this fact, for it colors many episodes in the *Histories* and Agathias’ interpretations of them, especially when moral lessons are presented. It is also an intellectually compelling yet utilitarian vision of history, and it is therefore not surprising that Agathias held interesting opinions on identity, war and empire.

## ***2. Romans, Italians, and Barbarians: Agathias’ Presentation of the Peoples in Italy***

### **2.a. Barbarians and Romans**

It has long been recognized that Agathias’ *Histories* contains valuable ethnographic material pertaining to many of the Empire’s neighbors. Because of the loss of almost all Sassanian literature, his digression on Sassanid Persian culture has been treated as the most valuable part of this material for historians. But his presentation of the myriad peoples in (and outside of) Italy during 552-554 is quite valuable as well and furnishes important historical information. These digressions on western barbarians allow us to reconstruct Agathias’ view of who lived in Italy, who the invading powers were, and who simply was not there.

Barbarians are plentiful. Goths are the first people introduced in the *Histories*. As the continuator of Procopius, Agathias begins his narrative with the defeat of Teïas at

<sup>7</sup> Kaldellis, “The Historical and Religious Views”, 207-211, contains the arguments of the previous two paragraphs. The relevant passages in Agathias are all found in the preface: Preface 1-3 for his theory of human motivation and history as an instrument of social and moral good; preface 4-5 for political philosophy; preface 16-20 for truth as a goal of the *Histories*. Greek text: Ed. R. Keydell, *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum Libri Quinque*, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 2, Berlin 1967; English trans.: J. D. Frendo, *Agathias: The Histories*, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 2A, Berlin 1975.



Mons Lactarius in October 552 and tells us that the Goths became the “subjects of the emperor” after this battle. We also glimpse Gothic ambassadors in Frankish lands, attempting to form an alliance for a new offensive against the Romans. The last Gothic strongman we see is Aligern, who was besieged with several thousand Goths in Cumae, which he eventually surrendered to Narses.<sup>8</sup> Franks are also present, and Agathias gives us more information about them than any other barbarian people. He provides a long discussion of their place of origin, mores, religion, and mode of warfare, all of which were standard parts of the Greek ethnographic tradition. Agathias also, interestingly, notes that they “are practically the same as ourselves [Romans] except for their uncouth style of dress and peculiar language.”<sup>9</sup> Heruls make several appearances, both their leaders, Filimuth and Fulcaris, who served in the Roman army, and the rank and file, an unknown number of whom seem to have defected shortly before Narses’ final victory over Leutheris and Butilinus.<sup>10</sup> The latter two are presented as Alamanni by Agathias, with important power bases in the Frankish court. It was on their initiative that the Franks invaded Italy. Agathias provides an ethnographic description here as well, detailing the Alamanni’s pagan nature worship. He then depicts them as a destructive force, because they destroyed churches and pillaged liturgical vessels.<sup>11</sup> Gepids, Lombards and Burgundians even warrant brief mention, though in the context of events outside of

<sup>8</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.1.1 for Teïas and Mons Lactarius; 1.5.4-10 for the speech of Gothic ambassadors to the Franks, to which we will return; 1.8.6 for Aligern at Cumae; 1.20.4 for Aligern’s surrender of Cumae to Narses.

<sup>9</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.2.4 for the quote; 1.2.1-8 for his description of the Franks; 1.5.2-9 for Frankish arms and armor. Why Agathias chose to present the Franks in such a positive way is a contentious issue. See Av. Cameron, “Agathias on the Early Merovingians,” *Annali della Scuola Normale di Pisa* 37 (1968), 95-140, 134-135 for Agathias sticking to standard ethnographic material. She argued that he portrayed them positively because they were Catholic (i.e., not Arian), he had a Frankish source that was biased, and he interpreted them through the “eyes of the 570s,” when diplomatic contact between the eastern court and the Frankish kingdom was heightened. But Kaldellis, “The Historical and Religious Views,” 242-243, points out that Agathias praises the Franks primarily (though not exclusively) for their internal harmony and condemns them for their outwardly aggressive behavior (i.e., invading Italy). See A. Kaldellis, *Ethnography after Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*, Philadelphia 2013, 1-25, for ethnography in late antique historiography.

<sup>10</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.11.3 for Filimuth and the appointment of Fulcaris to lead the *foederati* Herul contingent; 2.7.2-6 for Narses’ killing of a Herulian chief and the subsequent defection of some of the soldiers to the Frankish side.

<sup>11</sup> Agathias *Histories* 1.6.2 for background of Leutharis and Butilinus; 1.6.2-7.2 for ethnographic background of the Alamanni; 2.1.7-8 for destruction of churches throughout Italy. Cameron, “Agathias on the Early Merovingians” (cit. n. 9), 136-139, thinks that the distinction between the Alamanni and the Franks that Agathias draws is purely theoretical and that the two were quite close culturally.

Italy.<sup>12</sup> Chanaranges, a commander in the Roman army, who intercepted some Frankish supply wagons and torched a Frankish keep with the hay he had confiscated from the wagons, is the only Armenian introduced.<sup>13</sup>

We meet Romans as well. But according to Agathias, the only Romans in Italy were those in the army or administration. Few Romans are mentioned by name –we are given far more information about barbarians. Narses is, of course, a Roman, and in many ways he is Agathias' example of what every Roman should aspire to be: just, deliberative, rational, and full of foresight.<sup>14</sup> Other Roman commanders are mentioned as well: Valerian and John, the latter a nephew of Vitalian, all high ranking officers; Stephanus, who marched to Faventia to castigate the troops there for their failure to contain the Frankish army in the region; Antiochus, the Prefect of Italy, who failed to pay the troops in John's army and had to be forced to do so by Stephanus; and Palladius, a valiant Roman who was killed by Aligern during the siege of Cumae.<sup>15</sup> Other references to Romans refer only to the army's rank and file soldiers or the army as an institution. In no instance does Agathias identify any individual or group from the Italian civilian population as a Roman. Here we have a potential answer for Cameron: if Agathias leaves the impression that Italy was populated "entirely by Goths" and "never identifies himself with the Roman population," perhaps he does so because he does not think there are any Romans in Italy with whom he can identify, except those in the army and administration –all sent from the East.

## **2.b. The Civilian Population of Italy**

Where, then, is the civilian element of the Italian population in Agathias' text? Is it present anywhere, even briefly? If so how does Agathias define and portray it? Are Italian civilians presented as Romans? If not Romans, are they barbarians? Or do they fall into a different category due to the unique historical circumstances of the sixth century?

Agathias provides a clue about his views regarding the West early in his narrative. In the course of describing the Frankish nation, the status of the city of Massilia comes up. Agathias tells us that it was once colonized by Phocaeans, who had been forced to leave Asia Minor because of the advance of the Persians into the region. He continues by

<sup>12</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.4.2 for Gepids and Lombards and the attempts of Theudebert to recruit them for an attack on Constantinople; 1.3.3 for Burgundians and their killing of Chlodomer in battle.

<sup>13</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 2.6.4.

<sup>14</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.8.2; 1.13.1-2. Many more qualities could be cited.

<sup>15</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.11.3 for Valerian, John and Vitalian; 1.9.4 for Palladius; 1.17.5 for Stephanus marching to Faventia; 1.18.1-2 for Antiochus.

stating that, although it was “once a Greek city, it has now become barbarian in character, having abandoned its ancestral constitution (πάτριον...πολιτείαν) and embraced the ways of its conquerors (τοῖς τῶν κρατούντων χρήται νομίμοις).<sup>16</sup> Here, Agathias provides an important insight into his views of identity and historical causation: even a city as old and famous as Massilia, colonized during the archaic age of Greek history, could become barbarian through the abandonment of its “ancestral constitution.” Custom prevails in this understanding of change, since the Massilians became barbarian by embracing the “ways of [their] conquerors.”<sup>17</sup>

What, then, of Italy? Had it not suffered the same fate –conquered and reconquered by barbarians? Did it, too, lose its “ancestral constitution,” or devolve into the habits of barbarians? Unfortunately, Agathias does not provide any comparable, explicit analysis of Italian cities. But his presentation of the civilian population of the peninsula reveals that the Italians had suffered a similar but slightly different fate as the Massilians, due to the unique historical place of Italy (and therefore of Italians) in the Roman world, coupled with the nature of Justinian’s Gothic wars.

Several cities are mentioned throughout his narrative of the Italian campaign of 552-554. Cumae figures prominently, since it was a Gothic capital, first for Totila and then Teïas. Agathias narrates a siege of the city. Cumae was heavily fortified, atop a steep hill, with a commanding view of the Tyrrhenian Sea. The former Gothic kings Totila and Teïas had stored their valuable possessions there, including the royal insignia. The younger brother of Teïas, Aligern, had taken command of the forces inside the city by the time of the siege. Narses initially mounted a frontal assault against it, in which Palladius was killed and the Romans repulsed. Next, he attempted to burrow under one of the city’s walls and in so doing remove the foundations for that portion of the wall. But the debris created from the collapse of the wall limited the Romans’ ability to penetrate the city. After some time, Narses decided it was best to leave for other more easily accessible towns.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, though, Aligern realized the true intent of his Frankish allies –to take Italy for themselves. Reasoning that the Goths would be deprived of their “traditional way of life” (ἀφαιρήσονται τῶν πατρίων νομίμων αὐτοῦς)

<sup>16</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.2.2. His positive appraisal of the Franks (see above) conditioned his overall conclusion, for the city, he concludes, was “even now in no way inferior to the excellence of its original inhabitants.”

<sup>17</sup> M. Maas, “Delivered from their Ancient Customs: Christianity and the Question of Cultural Change in Early Byzantine Historiography”, in K. Mills – A. Grafton (eds.), *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing*, Rochester 2003, 152-188, 171-174, presents a convincing case that Agathias used traditional Greek ethnographic models to understand and explain cultural change.

<sup>18</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.8.1-10.8.



if the Franks were to prevail, he traveled to Ravenna, handed Cumae to Narses, and secured his safety in the process.<sup>19</sup>

This entire episode is interesting on several counts. First, there are only Goths in Cumae; no Italians seem to be inside the city, according to Agathias. And, once again, the only Romans present are those in Narses' army. Agathias also provides a connection to his treatment of Massilia here: even the Goths have a traditional way of life that can be ruined and removed by way of conquest. Agathias recognizes that politico-military events can have drastic effects upon the cultural norms of any society.<sup>20</sup> Just as the Massilians once enjoyed their "ancestral constitution" but lost it, so too the Goths must worry about the same happening to them. Cumae emerges here as a totally Gothic city, with no Italians or Romans anywhere inside, and a place that is ultimately to be nothing more than a trophy for the eventual victor in the war. Aligern dictates its eventual outcome by surrendering to Narses and becoming a "subject of the Empire."<sup>21</sup>

This analysis does not get us very far toward understanding Agathias' views of Italians, though it does move us closer to his views of Italy. For this, we must turn to Agathias' most telling description of an Italian city – Lucca.<sup>22</sup> Here he provides a glimpse of the civilian population inside the walls of the city, which is differentiated from Romans, Goths, and Franks. This narrative occurs immediately after Narses' "lightning campaign" against the cities of Tuscany, which he annexed peacefully. The Florentines (Φλωρέντιοι), inhabitants of Centumcellae (Κεντουκελλαῖοι), and the inhabitants of Volaterrae (Βουλοτερραῖοι), Luna (Λουνναῖοι), and Pisa (Πισαῖοι) all voluntarily handed their cities to Narses in exchange for guarantees of security and safety.<sup>23</sup> But the "people of Lucca (οἱ ἐν Λούκᾳ τῇ πόλει)" resisted. Agathias tells us that in so doing, they repudiated a treaty signed between the city and the Romans (understood as Narses and his representatives), which was secured through hostages taken by the Romans. Agathias notes that the Luccans only concluded the treaty with Narses because they assumed that a Frankish force would arrive quickly and excuse them from their obligations. But this force never arrived, and Narses became angry when he learned that the Luccans had negotiated in bad faith. So he devised a ruse to compel the Luccans to open their gates. He paraded several of the hostages in front of the city walls, with hands tied, in front of "their fellow countrymen (τοῖς ὁμοφύλοις)," threatening to kill them if Lucca did not

<sup>19</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.20.1-7.

<sup>20</sup> See Maas, "Delivered from their Ancient Customs" (cit. n. 17), 152-188, for examples from many sixth-century authors; 171-174 for Agathias.

<sup>21</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.20.3.

<sup>22</sup> The Lucca narrative is contained in two sections of the text: 1.12.1-13.7 and 1.18.4-8.

<sup>23</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.11.6.

uphold the terms of the agreement. But they would not obey Narses, so he faked an execution of the hostages, which produced cries of lamentation from the “inhabitants of the city (οἱ ἐν τῷ ἄστει).” After a brief lecture to the Luccans about the importance of honoring contracts, and a promise to restore the recently executed to life, at which the “people of Lucca (οἱ Λουκανοί)” laughed, Narses revealed that the hostages were not dead. At this moment the “citizens of Lucca (θαυμαζόντων τῶν Λουκανῶν)” rejoiced and Narses released the hostages –with no strings attached– to their “fellow countrymen (τοῖς ὁμοφύλοις).” Once inside the gates of the city, they spoke in favor of a pro-Roman policy vociferously.<sup>24</sup> The narrative breaks off here. But when Agathias picks it up again, it is some three months later, and the city had still not opened its gates, despite Narses’ magnanimity. By this time the siege had intensified and Narses had brought siege engines to aid his efforts against the Luccans. These allowed him to breach the city walls, at which time the former hostages pleaded strenuously with their fellow Luccans to support the Roman cause. But something stood in their way –a Frankish garrison was inside the city directing military operations! It was pressuring the Luccans to resist the Romans and so ordered a “sortie” against them. But Agathias notes that “the majority of Luccans (οἱ πλεῖστοι γὰρ δὴ τῶν Λουκανῶν)” had already been “won over by the pro-Roman element operating within the city” and so fought only half-heartedly. After this ineffective skirmish, all inside Lucca agreed to surrender to Narses and his Romans and so were “once more subjects of the emperor of the Romans (καὶ ἦσαν βασιλέως τοῦ Ῥωμαίων κατήκοοι).”<sup>25</sup>

The siege of Lucca sequence allows us to understand, somewhat, Agathias’ views of the Italian population. It is obvious from the above summary that he distinguishes the Luccan hostages and their “fellow countrymen,” i.e. the “people of Lucca,” from the Romans and the Frankish garrison inside the city. It is noteworthy that no Goths are mentioned in this narrative. If any had been present, Agathias surely would have noted it, since he does so consistently at other points in his text. We have what appears to be a city that was, broadly speaking, initially pro-Frankish, then won over to the Roman cause because of the magnanimity of Narses, who freed the hostages, apparently, without demanding concessions (perhaps an attempt to win hearts and minds). At least this is how Agathias presents the situation. The hostages, all aristocrats, certainly favored Roman control over Frankish, and that the locals who participated in the “sortie” deliberately fought poorly is telling. These, presumably, were the very people who were initially pro-Frankish, but had by this time been worn down by three months of siege warfare and

<sup>24</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.12.1-13.7.

<sup>25</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.18.4-8. The theme of reincorporation into the Empire is an interesting and complex one in Agathias’ text, though beyond the scope of this study.

the proselytizing of the aristocratic element in the city. Agathias' chosen terminology is important here as well. He never calls the Luccans Romans, nor does he present them as barbarians (nor are the other people of Tuscany). They are distinguished specifically by their civic identity, as those who dwell in Lucca. Agathias earlier in his *Histories* shows amply that he is quite knowledgeable about the geographical distribution of the Frankish people (and, more generally, about western barbarians), so it is impossible that he has conflated the two here. Thus, if we accept that these people are in fact Italians (and I see no reason not to), then Agathias has placed them in a separate category from barbarians and Romans. They are different from both, yet not defined very well. They are given no words to speak nor any defining characteristics for that matter. And when the city was eventually taken by Narses and his troops *all* those inside became subjects of the Empire, Franks and Italian alike.<sup>26</sup> It seems then that the Italian cities have moved into a category of their own, one defined by area locale and civic identities.

So if the Italians occupy their own category of identity, what defines the territory in which they live (Italy)? Agathias provides just enough information to answer this question. There are a few other glimpses of the ambiguous Italian population in his narrative. In each case they are presented in a similar way: as something different from the Romans, Franks and Goths (or any barbarians for that matter) and ultimately powerless to affect the situation at hand. The rural peasantry is seen, very briefly, during Stephanus' march to Faventia on Narses' orders. Franks were pillaging the surrounding countryside and the "anguished cries of the peasantry could be heard" throughout Tuscany.<sup>27</sup> And, near the end of the campaign against the Franks, Agathias notes that the "cities of Italy (τὰ δὲ τῆς Ἰταλίας πόλεις) were in a state of feverish excitement and suspense, wondering into whose hands they would fall."<sup>28</sup> His mentions of Rome and Ravenna are pertinent as well – the treatment of both is incredibly terse.<sup>29</sup> Rome receives several brief mentions, but no effort is made to narrate the events that occurred in the city or to provide a description of the place. At one point in the text, immediately after Narses' final defeat of the Franks, it seems that he returned to Rome for a triumph, yet Agathias does not provide even a rhetorical account of this. Other than this, we are told only that Narses wintered there

<sup>26</sup> Although the siege of Lucca is our fullest account of Agathias' views of the Italian population, other, briefer mentions of regions in Italy are notable for the *complete* absence of any people, save Goths or Franks. Emilia and Liguria seem to be populated exclusively by Goths, who ally with the Franks once they arrive (1.15.6-7). Leutharis and his men meet their death in Ceneta, a town near Venice that was "subject to them" at the time (2.3.3). There is no mention in any of these places of the Italian element of the population.

<sup>27</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.17.5.

<sup>28</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 2.6.2.

<sup>29</sup> Noted by Cameron, *Agathias*, 117.

(553-554) and performed spring drills in 554.<sup>30</sup> Unlike his contemporaries, Agathias did not hold Rome in high regard, at least that is the impression in the text. Ravenna, notably, suffers the same fate as Rome –relegated to the sidelines.<sup>31</sup> Nor is Pope Vigilius, despite his presence in Constantinople during the period of Agathias' narrative, mentioned.

In sum, Agathias presents the civilian population as a category distinct from Romans and barbarians. But it is not a happy place to be. They are ultimately powerless, hopeless and nothing more than pawns in the imperial power politics of the sixth century, caught between East Rome and the barbarian successor kingdoms of the West. Is it, therefore, their silence, powerlessness, and hopelessness that defines them –these are their characteristics and they are emblematic of their state of affairs by the 550s. Even the major cultural symbol of the Italians –Rome– is made to be silent, a non-entity in the events that transpire all around it (and even within it). No Italians speak, nor are any introduced by name. Agathias conveys this state of affairs through a subtle and unique narrative strategy of silence, which allows him to show his readers, in a powerful way, the ultimate fate of Italy in the sixth century.

That Agathias ignores Rome –and other symbolically important nodes of Italian culture– and does not introduce any Italians directly into his narrative, becomes more poignant when we consider Procopius' approach, which was much different. Agathias was, after all, Procopius' successor, and he knew the author's work well. Procopius narrates a great deal of military action, and this (of course) accounts for the attention he gives to Rome, in part. Still, Agathias could have done the same in certain contexts, but chose not to (as above, p. 71). Procopius, in fact, provides a range of information well beyond what is necessary for the military narrative alone when discussing Rome and Italy. He digresses into discussions of topography, monuments, infrastructure, and works of art. His presentation of these features of the Roman and Italian landscape is certainly due, in part, to the fact that he was present in the city and Italy during the war. Still, they are not (strictly speaking) necessary for his military narrative and therefore serve other purposes in the text.

Procopius discusses important Italians who were directly involved in the events in his narrative, including Silverius, Vigilius, and Pelagius. He positions Silverius as the ring-leader in the effort to surrender the city to Belisarius early in the war, while Vigilius' narrative trajectory is detailed as well. This includes the context of his appointment, including

<sup>30</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.19.3 for Narses telling troops to assemble in Rome after winter; 1.22.8 for Narses passing the winter in Rome; 2.1.1 for spring training in 554; 2.4.2 for Narses and troops stationed there; 2.10.7 for what seems to be a return to Rome for a triumph after the defeat of the Franks.

<sup>31</sup> For some events: Agathias, *Histories* 1.18.2 for Stephanus going to Ravenna to fetch Antiochus; 1.19.4 for Narses retiring there before wintering in Rome.

the (politicized) dismissal of Silverius; his recall to Constantinople and his lengthy delay on Sicily; and his activities in the eastern capital after his arrival. Indeed, Procopius mentions explicitly that “there were very many notable men there [in the City]” who were beseeching Justinian to focus on restoring the peninsula to the Empire.<sup>32</sup> Pelagius is introduced as well (as a deacon), and Procopius takes care to note that he had resided in Constantinople and befriended Justinian. The people of Rome sent him out to negotiate with Totila during his brutal siege of the city late in the war.<sup>33</sup> Certain senators feature in the narrative as well, including Bergantinus and Reparatus, who managed to escape from Ravenna before Vittigis’ order to execute senatorial hostages was carried out.<sup>34</sup>

At certain points he also reflects on the symbolic value of the city, or at least conveys that he is aware of its broader importance. He describes Rome as the primary city of the west when he compares it as such against Milan, noting for his readers that Milan was “the first of the cities of the west after Rome, in size, population, and prosperity.”<sup>35</sup> Late in the war, Totila deposited a group of senators in the city and directed them to look after the place. After noting their poverty at this stage of the war and (general) lack of capacity to do so, he notes that “the Romans love their city above all men we know, and are eager to protect all their ancestral legacy and preserve it, so that nothing of the ancient glory of Rome may be obliterated.” Thereafter, he provides a detailed overview of the ship of Aeneas, which was on display in a ship shed along the Tiber, taking care to emphasize its good condition.<sup>36</sup> Procopius also notes that Totila was on the verge of destroying Rome

<sup>32</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 5.14.4: Silverius advises surrendering the city to Belisarius; 5.25.13: Belisarius dismisses Silverius on suspicion of treason (for, ostensibly, negotiating with the Goths). He also mentions Flavius Maximus here, a senator banished and then restored (an Anicii); 7.15.9: Vigilius sends grain ships to Rome, from Sicily, which are intercepted. Procopius also notes a bishop, Valentinus, was captured, interrogated, and Totila cut off both his hands; 7.16.1: Vigilius summoned to Constantinople for failure to support emperors’ condemnation of the Three Chapters controversy; 7.35.9-11: Vigilius and the other exiled Italians in Constantinople. Procopius also notes that Cethegus (a patrician and ex-consul) was particularly influential here. Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, trans. by H. B. Dewing, revised and modernized by A. Kaldellis, Indianapolis – Cambridge 2014. See M. Kouroumali, “The Justinianic Reconquest of Italy: Imperial Campaigns and Local Responses”, in A. Sarantis – N. Christie (eds.), *War and Warfare in Late Antiquity: Current Perspectives*, Leiden 2013, 986-994, for a full discussion of this material.

<sup>33</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 7.16.5-8: Pelagius, later pope, 556-561. 7.21.18: After he had captured the city, Totila sent Pelagius as an envoy to Justinian to ask for peace.

<sup>34</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 5.26.1-2: Reparatus was the brother of Vigilius.

<sup>35</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 6.7.38.

<sup>36</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 8.22.5. And he continues (8.22.6): “Even though they lived long under barbarian sway, they preserved the buildings of the city and most of its adornments, those which could withstand so long a lapse of time and such neglect through the sheer excellence of workmanship.” 8.22.9-16 for the ship of Aeneas.



early in 547, of “turning it into a sheep pasture.” However, Belisarius learned of this, and he sent an envoy with a letter to dissuade him from the act. He notes that Rome is “agreed to be the greatest and most noteworthy” of cities, and that it became so due to the efforts of numerous individuals (emperors, skilled craftsmen and others) over a (very) long period of time. This process, which brought “together [in Rome] all other things that are in the whole world,” created the city’s magnificent built environment. It would be, according to Procopius, a “great crime against the whole of humanity” to harm the city’s monumental landscape, for it served, ultimately, as a repository for memories of past generations.<sup>37</sup> The letter is noteworthy because the words are placed in Belisarius’ mouth, and this allows Procopius to issue an ideological statement about the city, its monuments, and broader place in Roman history.

Beyond this, Procopius offers his readers a denser, richer picture of the Eternal City, and he dwells on it in a way that Agathias simply does not. It seems likely that he recognized that his readers would be interested in these subjects and topics, and so took care to include them, which implies, of course, that he recognized their value. For example, he provides a detailed overview of the Appian Way. He notes the overall length of the road (from Rome to Capua); its date of construction under Appius during the Republican period; its method of construction using hard millstones quarried elsewhere; and its good condition in his own day despite hundreds of years of continuous use.<sup>38</sup> He details Rome’s fourteen aqueducts, noting their construction method and size (it was “possible for man of horseback to ride in them”), while also taking care to note certain other features of the city, including the Milvian Bridge and the stadium on the Plain of Nero.<sup>39</sup> He also provides a thorough description of Portus, the harbor in use at the time, and the road that connected it to the city. He details the use of oxen, tied to barges, to bring supplies into the city, and he discusses Ostia, which had fallen into disuse, and the road to the city from there, which tracked much further from the river and was in a state of disrepair at the time.<sup>40</sup> Finally, he comments on bronze statues in the city crafted by various classical sculptors, including Pheidias, Myron, and Lysippus, noting that the “Romans went to great lengths to adorn Rome with the most beautiful works of Greece.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 7.22.7; 7.22.8-16, for Belisarius’ letter.

<sup>38</sup> Procopius, *Wars*, 5.14.6-11.

<sup>39</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 5.19.13: number and size; 5.19.8: water from one used to operate the city’s mills; 5.19.3: Milvian Bridge; 5.19.3, 6.1.5: stadium on Plain of Nero. “There has been in that place since ancient times a great stadium where the gladiators of the city used to fight, and the men of old built many structures around this stadium.”

<sup>40</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 5.26.3-13.

<sup>41</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 8.21.12-14.

These distinctions, then, point toward confirmation that Agathias is engaged in a purposeful act, and that his presentation is not simply the result of ignorance or disinterest. It is not that we should expect Agathias to provide as much detail as Procopius –that would be unreasonable– rather it is his total silence on these matters that warrants attention. It remains only to understand why he chose to portray Italy in this way, for it serves an important purpose in the *Histories*, one to which we will turn below.

### **3. Truth and Edification: Agathias' Interpretation of Italy, Italians, and the Gothic War**

I have argued that Agathias portrays the Italians as distinct from both Romans and barbarians. Additionally, they occupy a nebulous and ultimately hopeless position in the affairs of Italy during the years 552-554. Peasants are robbed, cities wonder helplessly with whom their fortunes will lie, and those inside besieged cities are powerless to act until whatever military power inside allows them to do so, as the case of Lucca demonstrates. Why, then, did Agathias depict Italians in these terms? It seems decidedly bleak and it is curious that he, a Roman, disowns many who would have considered him their fellow countryman, especially aristocrats, some of whom were living in Constantinople during this war's conclusion. Cassiodorus and Pope Vigilius are only the two most well-known of the myriad Italians who left Italy because of the insecurity prevailing at the time. Some went back; others did not.<sup>42</sup>

We must turn to the preface to answer this question. Earlier I noted that we would have to pay particular attention to the historical methodology that Agathias develops in his preface because it structures the content and meaning of the work.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Agathias' portrayal of Italy, Italians, and the Gothic War confirms this point. His presentation of these topics revolves around the two poles of the *Histories*: truth and edification.

#### **3. a. Truth**

Agathias' presentation of Italy is selective but also accurate. After all, his narrative is about Italy and the Italians during the final two years of the Gothic Wars, which began with Belisarius' invasion of Sicily in 535. By 552 the peninsula had suffered from nearly twenty years of (often) brutal warfare. Scholars have long recognized the toll it took on Italy's socio-economic well being. The wars caused a demographic collapse throughout Italy, ultimately the result of the disruption of the rural economy, on which Italian

<sup>42</sup> See M. Shane Bjornlie, *Politics and Tradition between Rome, Ravenna, and Constantinople: A Study of Cassiodorus and the Variae 527-554*, Cambridge 2013, 124-162, for a wider discussion of Italian emigres in Constantinople during the war.

<sup>43</sup> Kaldellis, "The Historical and Religious Views", 211.

prosperity rested. Additionally, the social fabric of Italy was torn apart. The senatorial aristocracy –the backbone of this social order– was displaced. They saw their fortunes confiscated and reconfiscated; their estates burned to the ground, plundered and eventually abandoned; their positions in the government of Italy disappeared as well, as civilian government gradually became a thing of the past, replaced by military commanders and the whims of warfare. Many fled to Constantinople during the second phase of the war (540-554), depriving Italy of leadership and wealth in the process. Only with the promulgation of the Pragmatic Sanction in 554 were they allowed to return (and in fact pressured to do so).<sup>44</sup>

It is in the longevity *and* the events of this war that we can best understand Agathias' presentation of the Italian civilian population as neither here nor there; that was, essentially, its lot during the wars. They were simply caught between imperial powers, to *both of which* they had some allegiances: the East Romans through long-standing imperial traditions and political community and the Goths through recent acts of intermarriage, settlement and de facto political sovereignty.<sup>45</sup> Totila's policies at this stage surely complicated matters even further for Italians during the latter stages of the war. He sought to disrupt the ability of the East Roman government to muster supplies for its wars by disrupting the social order. He confiscated senatorial estates, freed slaves and tenants from their drudgery, and even enrolled some in his army.<sup>46</sup> So how were Italians to respond to these competing imperial powers? How could they have done so? The events of the wars forced them to pick between the two constantly, often in very stark terms. Take Rome –only one example among many: how many times did this symbolically important city change hands? Belisarius took it in 536, Totila in 546, Belisarius again in 547, and Totila besieged it once more in 549. The people of Rome constantly found themselves forced to live under different masters, who pulled at their loyalties and identities. By the time Totila took the city in 546 it was a shell of its former self, with a population of barely a few thousand. One could cite the Gothic sack of Tivoli as well in 544, in which all the inhabitants were killed, or the desertion of the Illyrian contingent from Vitalius' army in the same year, because Bulgars were

<sup>44</sup> C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800*, Oxford 2005, 203-211 (the aristocracy) and 728-741 (network of exchange and socio-economic change), for a detailed discussion; see also M. Humphries, "Italy, A.D. 425-605", in A. Cameron – B. Ward-Perkins – M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 14, Cambridge 2001, 525-551, for a general overview.

<sup>45</sup> See P. Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554*, Cambridge 1997, discussed further below.

<sup>46</sup> J. A. S. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power*, London – New York 1996, 153-154.

raiding their homeland.<sup>47</sup> The Gothic sack of Milan in 539 was equally brutal: the male population was slaughtered and the women of the city were sold off as slaves to the Burgundians as repayment for their alliance. Reparatus, who was praetorian prefect at the time, was cut to pieces and his body devoured by dogs.<sup>48</sup> What protection and assurance could the latter offer the civilian population if its army was so prone to desertion? How many cities must have wondered daily, as Agathias states bluntly, into whose hands they would fall at any given time and what the consequences would be?

If we place Agathias' *Histories* into this context, then it is obvious why he chose to present Italy and Italians as he did: it was an accurate depiction of the place from 552-554 (and throughout the war, more broadly), which must have seemed even more apt given the Lombards' invasion after the fact. Agathias presents the civilian population as hopeless, silent, and powerless, because by the time of his narrative it was just that. And he places them in a category of identity between Romans and barbarians because that is precisely where the Gothic Wars placed them. By 554 the civilian population of Italy was psychologically, emotionally, and materially devastated by twenty years of warfare, in which its fate was ultimately out of its hands and control of political affairs was turned over to the battlefield and the whims of fortune.

Agathias' analysis of Italy and Italians, then, blends well with current scholarly opinion of this time and place. Scholars have emphasized that after the Gothic Wars, Italy was ruled more like a colonial possession of the East Roman state, which became more apparent as time went by and the (militarized) structures of the Exarchate gradually took shape.<sup>49</sup> Scholars have also argued recently for changes in identity among the population of Italy during this time. Past opinion, based overwhelmingly on J. Moorhead's influential study of Italian loyalties during the Gothic wars, focused too exclusively on aristocrats, many of whom did in fact support the East Roman cause for important social, political, and economic reasons.<sup>50</sup> But the majority of the population of Italy was faced with very different incentives and circumstances. They were the ones who faced constant harassment, uncertainty, and difficult, stark decisions involving their loyalties, as the case of Lucca

<sup>47</sup> See Evans, *The Age of Justinian* (cit. n. 46), 172, for Tivoli and Bologna and 174 for Bessas and Rome.

<sup>48</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 6.21.38-41.

<sup>49</sup> J. Moorhead, *Justinian*, Routledge 1994, 112, argues in favor of a "colonial" possession; see also the essential study of T. S. Brown, *Gentlemen and Officers: Imperial Administration and Aristocratic Power in Byzantine Italy, 554-800*. London 1984, esp. 8-19 and 46-60 on the decline of civilian offices and the rise of the military administration; and 21-37 on the decline of the senatorial aristocracy specifically.

<sup>50</sup> J. Moorhead, "Italian Loyalties during Justinian's Gothic Wars", *Byzantion* 53 (1983), 575-596, whose argument is based on prosopographical data.

demonstrates; nor could they flee to Constantinople to sit out the war until its conclusion. No, they stayed, suffered, and changed because of it. Thus, it has been maintained that the Gothic Wars actually caused the Italian population to look less favorably on the Empire. Conversely, the citizens of East Rome came to realize more and more that there were some profound differences between themselves and their former imperial counterparts in the West.<sup>51</sup> The war, rather than forging glorious imperial unity, did just the opposite. It forged new identities, based predominantly around locality, family, and local church, since these emerged as the most stable markers of stability and security during and after the Gothic Wars.<sup>52</sup> The Gothic Wars, then, rendered loyalty to a universal imperial identity difficult and in most cases impossible to maintain. And although the Pragmatic Sanction attempted to turn back the clock to a better and more unified time, it failed.<sup>53</sup> Italy and the Italians had become by 554 something quite different and Agathias recognized this. Moreover, he wrote in the 570s by which time the “parting of ways” between east and west would have seemed quite stark and obvious to him, indeed, pushed along by the Lombard invasion and other factors. His narrative strategy conveys this important historical development.

<sup>51</sup> Roman identity has not been studied sufficiently in its late antique, eastern context. See A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, Cambridge 2008, 42-119; G. Greatrex, “Roman Identity in the Sixth Century” and S. Mitchell, “Ethnicity, Acculturation, and Empire in Roman and Late Roman Asia Minor”, both in S. Mitchell – G. Greatrex (eds.), *Ethnicity and Identity in Late Antiquity*, London 2000, 267-292 and 117-150, though the former’s claim that the main feature of Roman identity at this time was loyalty to the emperor has been refuted. For an overview of the “complicated, consensus-less debates” surrounding Gothic identity in this period, see B. Swain, “Goths and Gothic Identity in the Ostrogothic Kingdom”, in J. Arnold – M. Shane Bjornlie – K. Sessa (eds.), *A Companion to Ostrogothic Italy*, Leiden – Boston 2016, 203-233.

<sup>52</sup> One of the main points in Amory, *People and Identity* (cit. n. 45), esp. 165-193; see also 165, “The Italian civilian population suffered continuously from the demands on their allegiance by the armies of Justinian and the Gothic kings.” His book provides a much more nuanced understanding of loyalty and regionalism in Italy during the Ostrogothic era. See, however, P. Heather, “Merely an Ideology? Gothic Identity in Ostrogothic Italy”, in S. Barnish – F. Marazzi (eds.), *The Ostrogoths from the Migration Period to the Sixth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, Woodbridge 2007, 31-79, for a counter argument to Amory’s contention that Gothic identity was ephemeral. Kouroumali, “The Justinianic Reconquest” (cit. n. 32), argues that Italian allegiances during the war were conditioned primarily by concerns over security and safety rather than any overarching ideological preferences.

<sup>53</sup> This settlement is a testament to the devastation these wars unleashed on Italy. It was designed specifically to restore the social order that had existed in Italy before the Gothic Wars. It nullified Totila’s donations; confirmed all privileges granted to the senate and Roman people by Amalasuntha, Athalaric, and Theodahad; restored confiscated senatorial property; returned slaves to their owners and tenants to their lands; and granted free travel between Rome and Constantinople for the first time in quite a while, which was a sign for the numerous Italian magnates in Constantinople to return to Italy. See Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, 181, for a summary.



### 3. b. Edification

If the presentation of Italy and Italians satisfies one pole of Agathias' historical methodology, does it also serve the other, edification? To answer this question, we must explore one more issue: Agathias' view of the Italian war. Cameron noted that he gives the impression of a war of conquest rather than liberation but does not explore how or why he does so.<sup>54</sup> In fact, Agathias presents war in generally negative terms throughout his text. His analysis of the effects of war upon peoples, landscapes and nations leaves the impression that he was fully aware of the realities of warfare in antiquity, despite never participating in one.

We are given our first glimpse of Agathias' views of war, as we would expect, in his preface. Here he briefly mentions the effects of war in his day: displacement of peoples, enslavement of cities and the destruction of entire nations.<sup>55</sup> Since this is contained within the preface, we have reason to be suspicious of Agathias' motives, for the statement could be rhetorical embellishment to promote his *Histories*. But here, again, the preface serves not only this function but also prepares us for the form and content of the rest of the *Histories*, in this case the theme of war.

While in the process of discussing the effects of the battle of Mons Lactarius (October 552) and the hopes it raised for an end to the conflict in Italy among all people, Agathias opines that it was, in fact, not to be so. For, in his opinion, battles and war were constant and ultimately destructive forces in human history, which is why history and literature are full of battles and fighting, "almost to the exclusion of everything else." He concludes by noting that men who voluntarily descend into "greed" (πλεονεξίαν) and "injustice" (ἀδικίαν) are chiefly to blame for wars, which give "rise...to widespread destruction, to the uprooting of whole nations (γέννη) and to countless other horrors."<sup>56</sup>

Later in the text, when Agathias is discussing the invasion of Italy by Leutharis and Butilinus and their destruction of churches, he inserts another interesting digression

<sup>54</sup> Much was made in official pronouncements of the return of the Carthaginians' "ancient freedom" and their supposed desire to live within a centralized Roman political system. The tropes were identical for repatriated Italians. They, too, were returned to an ancient way of life that restored their freedom and the universal pretensions of the Roman state. *Novellae* I, Preface, states this explicitly; see also C. Pazdernik, "Justinianic Ideology and the Power of the Past", in M. Maas (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Age of Justinian*, Cambridge 2005, 185-212, on the (important) relationship between ideology and law in the Age of Justinian.

<sup>55</sup> Agathias, *Histories* Preface 10; cf. also 3.24.5: "[...] in war nothing happens on a small scale, that its repercussions are truly immense, involving as they do...the disruption of countless peoples and numerous cities and shaking the very pillars of human society to their foundations."

<sup>56</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 1.1.2-5.

on the war. He notes that it is a “sacred and noble duty to fight for the preservation of one’s country...and to do one’s utmost to repel all those who seek to destroy [it].” Then he adds that those who invade countries without “just cause” (μηδέν ἐπὶ κλημα ἔνδικον) and harm “those who have done them no wrong” are operating beyond civilized norms of behavior. Agathias reinforces this point later in the text, immediately after narrating Narses’ crushing defeat of Leutharis and Butilinus. Here he mentions several historical cases of defeated powers and offers some reasons for their defeats: Datis was defeated at Marathon because his attack was “unjustifiable” (οὐδε δίκαιον), motivated as it was *solely* by the territorial ambitions of Darius; Xerxes was defeated by the Greeks because he attacked a people who had committed no wrongs against him and relied on numbers rather than planning, while the Greeks fought for their freedom and planned accordingly; the Athenians sailed to disaster at Syracuse because of “wickedness” (ἀδικίας) and “folly” (ἐξ ἀνοίας).<sup>57</sup> These are all examples of eastern powers (conceptually and geographically) going west for reasons Agathias did not consider just. Agathias also asks what possible reason the Athenians could have for “neglecting the war on their doorstep and sailing away to ravage distant Sicily?” He then notes cryptically that many more examples of this kind, “born of stupidity and wickedness” and resulting in harmful consequences, could be cited. The reader cannot help but see an allusion to Justinian and his western wars in these words and examples.

Although his digressions on warfare are not entirely original –i.e., other authors of the time expressed similar sentiments toward the destructive capacity of war– Agathias presents an interesting and potentially unique argument of just war. He couches the argument in terms of offensive and defensive wars. The latter are perfectly justified, especially when one’s national security is at stake, while the former seem to be out of bounds entirely. At no point in his text does he offer the reader an argument in favor of offensive warfare –i.e., imperial warfare. In fact, his major criticism of the Franks is based on their outwardly aggressive behavior.<sup>58</sup>

Since Agathias specifically couches just war within a defensive framework, there is no possibility that the western wars of Justinian, especially Italy, were just in his eyes. Whether viewed as conquest or reconquest –and this point is not clear in the text– it was not a defensive war undertaken by the east Roman state to protect its national security, such as might have been desirable in 540 when the Persians sacked Antioch. Here is where our lesson may be found and where narrative meets philosophy. In his narrative of Italy Agathias could combine the two poles of his *Histories* seamlessly, something which

<sup>57</sup> Agathias, *Histories* 2.1.10 for Leutharis and Butilinus; 2.10.1-6 for historical examples.

<sup>58</sup> Kaldellis, “The Historical and Religious Views,” 242-244.

he was not always able to do throughout the work. But in this case, he was able to write truthfully about the devastating effects of the Gothic War upon Italy, Italians, and the East Roman state, while simultaneously providing moral instruction about the negative effects of unjust wars. Far from failing to understand the “complexity” of the Italian situation then, Agathias emerges here as a savvy narrator, whose *Histories* deftly captures the intricacies and complexities of a pivotal moment in Italian history.