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The public intellectual according to Choricus of Gaza or how to circumvent the totalizing Christian discourse*

In the funeral oration for his teacher Procopius (Or. 8), the rhetorician Choricus of Gaza pretends to respond to critics among the audience who find fault with the devotion of the deceased sophist to classical scholarship and insist on the precedence of Scripture and Christian faith. Addressing these misgivings Choricus underscores Procopius's theological studies as well as charitable activities, to the extent that his teacher even compares to priests and holy men. At first glance, this image seems to be evidence that Choricus felt the need to comply with the totalizing Christian discourse at the time. Yet numerous classical echoes, in particular references to Aelius Aristides's portrayal of Pericles and Demosthenes, demonstrate that the orator's ideal of the scholar as a public intellectual is largely based on traditional paideia. This article, thus, argues that Choricus aims to maintain in the Christian polis a central place for a secular education that, not opposed to religion, fulfills vital functions for the individual and society as a whole.

Introduction

When the teacher of rhetoric and head of school Choricus of Gaza at some point around 530 CE delivered the funeral oration for his predecessor Procopius he drew on a long-standing and

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venerable tradition of rhetorical epitaphs and, thus, knew which qualities of the deceased to praise and how to present them according to the handbooks.¹ Funeral orations always intended to fulfill two basic functions, to console the mourning relatives and to hold up the person who had passed away as an exemplar for the living to emulate.² That is precisely what Choricus in the proem to his oration proposes to do, as well as suggesting that with his speech he aims to put an image of Procopius before the audience's eyes in order to encourage imitation.³ However, after a sketch of Procopius's upbringing and general conduct, and well into the first half of the oration, a heretical doubt seems to intrude upon the pious commemoration. As if his exuberant praise had elicited indignation, an anonymous listener is supposed to be wondering:

Perhaps hearing of such a plethora of accomplishments one will get the idea, "This man, I mean the deceased [Procopius], as it seems, never touched the divine scriptures. What leisure did he have, dividing his energy among so many virtues?" If someone was ignorant of him he might form such an opinion. But in fact he had such a great share also in this kind of erudition that, apart from the ordination alone, he was a priest in every respect.⁴

¹ For the probable date of Procopius's death (after 526) and the oration see Greco 2010, 25 and Amato 2014, XXVIII-XXX.

² See Men. Rhet. 2.418-22, in particular 420 on encomiastic topics in the funeral oration.

³ Chor. Or. 8.3, further 20 and 32 (ed. Foerster-Richtsteig, *Teubner*).

⁴ Chor. Or. 8.21: Τάχα τοίνυν τις τοσοῦτον πλῆθος κατορθωμάτων ἀκούσας τοιαύτην πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ἔννοιαν λήψεται ἄνθρωπος οὗτος, τὸν τελευτήσαντα λέγων, οὐ πάποτε θείων, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἤψατο συγγραμμάτων. ποίαν γὰρ ἤγε σχολὴν τοσαύταις μεριζόμενος ἀρεταῖς; ταῦτα μὲν ἐκείνον ἂν τις ἀγνοῶν ὑπολάβοι· τῷ δὲ τοσοῦτον καὶ ταύτης προσῆν τῆς παιδείας, ὥστε πλὴν τοῦ σχήματος μόνου πάντα ἦν ἱερεύς. Greco 2010, 167 has argued that the term σχῆμα here refers, not to the habit of a priest, but to his ordination.

Choricus then proceeds to explain that his teacher was well versed in theological doctrine so that he could engage in controversies and, in addition, translated his theological expertise into charitable practice. From then on, a rather defensive tone permeates the portrait of the deceased sophist. Putting aside the question of whether Procopius actually faced such critical scrutiny of his studies in his lifetime, it is apparent that his eulogist wants the audience to take it for granted that in Gaza there is suspicion against the sophistic profession. The main point of the ignorant critics seems to be that classical learning consumed too much of Procopius's time (σχολή), while theological studies should have had precedence. We may also surmise that the misgivings about traditional schooling have to do with the social functions of *paideia*, for Choricus then deals mainly with Procopius's activities for the benefit of deprived people at the fringes of society, such as orphans and widows, as if to counter the argument that higher education only served to reproduce a closed group of elite men.⁵ No matter whether or not Choricus's *praemunitio* took up some real uneasiness, we will not go too far if we take his remarks as support of the hypothesis, put forward by Averil Cameron and others, that at the end of antiquity an ever spreading Christian discourse superseded the classical discourse until it gained total domination.⁶

There is indeed sufficient evidence from this period that secular learning, though still cultivated, lost its grip on the imperial society and that under Justinian, despite some classicizing

⁵ For criticism from a Christian viewpoint of the social functions of formal education see e.g. Chrysostom's *On Vainglory or the Education of Children* (SCh 188).

⁶ Cameron 1991. Further Young 1997, 219 and 292, and with reference to Gaza, ter Haar Romeny 2007, 173. For these tendencies in the Latin West at the end of the sixth century see Markus 2006, 84-87.

tendencies, the room for traditional *paideia* was narrowing.⁷ Considering that Choricus with his eulogy aims to cast favorable light not only on Procopius as an individual, but also on his own profession, we may wonder how he confronts this issue. Can his speech pass as witness of a growing religious pressure on the cultivation of classical learning? Or does he find a satisfactory solution to the problem so that teaching in the rhetorical school can maintain its position in the Christianized polis? His answer might be more complicated and subtle than it seems because, while he defends Procopius as a distinguished expert in Christian doctrine, Choricus never claims for himself any deeper knowledge of Scripture or Christological questions nor does he boast of any virtues of piety.⁸

Although the passage from the funeral oration apparently has great significance for Choricus's views on education and the relationship between secular and sacred, scholars have failed to grasp its wider implications.⁹ Despite rising interest in the so-called school of Gaza over recent years, the eulogy of Procopius has been largely neglected as regards its significance for

⁷ Cameron 1991, 195 criticizes the label of a classical revival that has been attached to the age of Justinian and argues that then even secular works written by members of the traditional elite were permeated by Christian ideas and values. See Bell 2013, 219-22 for some observations on the combination of classical elements and Christian ideology in the literature during Justinian's reign.

⁸ Choricus, however, does employ his eloquence to praise Marcianus, the local bishop, and his mother Mary (*Or.* 1, 2 and 7). In these epideictic speeches he also describes two church buildings and their images, and makes references to New Testament stories. Photius criticizes him for introducing myths and "Hellenic stories" into his otherwise pious speeches (Phot. *Bibl. cod.* 160, 102b, ed. Henry, *Budé*). Barnes 1996, 178 has even called Choricus's Christian faith into question, though on insufficient grounds.

⁹ On the applicability of the sacred-secular divide to late antiquity see Markus 2006, 4-6. The term "secular" is appropriate in this context because it does not, as "pagan", entail religious opposition.

sixth-century culture and intellectual history. Studies still tend to examine it as a historical document of Procopius's biography and the history of Gaza.¹⁰ In addition, translations with comments and some articles have elucidated textual problems and pointed to literary models, thereby enhancing the image that the speech deserves interest mainly for its literary values.¹¹ Meanwhile, our understanding of the local culture has been advanced thanks to recent editions and monographs on the literary output of Aeneas, Procopius and Choricus.¹² However, the image of Gaza's cultural fingerprint is still suffering from some simplistic, and harmonizing, misconceptions about the unproblematic blend of Hellenic *paideia* and Christian faith.¹³ It is, therefore, time to undertake an in-depth examination of a text that promises to give insight into what religious expectations Gazans had of education and assess the extent to which education was a religious matter in the first place. This article intends to shed fresh light on these questions by showing that Choricus outlined in the funeral speech a model of the teacher adapted for his

¹⁰ See the notes on the speech by Litsas 1980 and the account of Procopius's career in Amato 2014.

¹¹ Greco 2010; Corcella 2010. Corcella (508-10) also discusses the social role of the sophist as it is represented in the speech. Other scholars have argued, unconvincingly, that Choricus in his speeches promotes the view of literature as primarily innocent entertainment and a realm of pure beauty without any bearing on reality. See Webb 2006, especially 121-22 on his *Apology of the Mimes*, Greco 2007, 117 and Greco 2011, 103.

¹² E.g. Champion 2014, Amato 2014, Amato, Thévenet and Ventrella 2014.

¹³ Ashkenazi 2004; Sivan 2008, 346-47. Downey 1958, in contrast, argued that in Gaza the classical tradition was kept so far divorced from Christian faith that no real tensions arose between them. Ter Haar Romeny 2007, 175-76, although considering Choricus's reference to the anonymous critic, still believes that the dominant discourse in Gaza belonged to the pagan tradition and that the content of the classical models was not a matter of concern for Christians. Champion 2014 gives a more nuanced picture, though focuses on the Christian engagement with Neoplatonism. See also Stenger 2010 for a critical view of the harmonizing image.

own times. More precisely, it aims to demonstrate that, fully aware that his own profession was at stake, he conceived a role or identity that would ensure the place of *paideia* in late antique society.

Procopius the priest

That the rhetorical epitaph is meant as a programmatic piece to set out the speaker's understanding of his own role in public is already made explicit immediately after the proem, when Choricus moves on from Procopius's studies in school to his performance in the job in adult years. After having compared his master's moderating influence on the students to that of Pericles, he defines the excellence of the sophist in an authoritative, and convoluted, manner:

For there are two ways through which the excellence of a sophist is put to the test: by astounding the theaters through the skill and beauty of his speeches, and by initiating the young into the mysteries of the ancients; for they, either observing the ancient saying—it says the beautiful is difficult—or because they do not want a large audience to become initiated in their own writings, or because they know that human nature does not admire that which is accomplished with ease, but pays honor only to that which is completed with some toil—so they, since they paid attention to one of the reasons mentioned or even to all of them, neither presented their own crafts accessible to everyone, nor, as the saying goes, is that sailing for every man. But as he, with the strength of his nature and the diligence of his toils, examined with each of them all that each had composed, so he brought the writings of all to light with precision.¹⁴

¹⁴ Chor. Or. 8.7: δύο γὰρ ὄντων, οἷς ἀρετὴ βασανίζεται σοφιστοῦ, τοῦ τε καταπλήττειν τὰ θέατρα συνέσει λόγων καὶ κάλλει τοῦ τε τοὺς νέους μυσταγωγεῖν τοῖς τῶν ἀρχαίων ὀργίοις,—ἐκεῖνοι γὰρ εἴτε τὴν παλαιὰν διασώζοντες

The accomplished sophist, according to this claim, succeeds both in swaying large audiences in public performances through his rhetorical skill and in making young men familiar with his art.¹⁵ Choricus combines here the two main tasks of sophists in late antiquity: on the one hand, the sophist regularly appeared in public to deliver official addresses at festive events as well as declamations to entertain the crowd with his artistic creativity. On the other hand, to put it in an entrenched metaphorical way, it was his job in the rhetorical school to initiate the students into the mysteries of Hermes, that is, to impart the techniques of invention, style and delivery according to a rigid curriculum.¹⁶ Choricus's own works, consisting of epideictic pieces and school texts, reflect this profile very well. Interestingly enough, the definition of the sophist gives Choricus the opportunity to highlight that Procopius's and his own business is fundamentally shaped by an engagement, a dialogue as it were, with classical authorities. While in general the rhetorician teaches the mysteries of 'the ancients', Procopius in particular sought

παροιμίαν—χ α λ ε π à γάρ φησι τ à κ α λ á— εἴτε τὴν πολλὴν ἀκοὴν ἀμύητον εἶναι τῶν οἰκείων βουλόμενοι συγγραμμάτων εἴτε τὴν ἀνθρωπεῖαν ἐπιστάμενοι φύσιν τὸ μὲν εὐκόλως ἀνυόμενον οὐ θαυμάζουσιν, τιμῶσιν δὲ τὸ πόνῳ τινὶ κατορθούμενον ἐκεῖνοι τοῖνυν ἔν τι τῶν εἰρημένων ἢ καὶ σύμπαντα ταῦτα σκοπήσαντες οὐ πᾶσι βασίμους τὰς οἰκείας προὔθηκιν τέχνας οὐδὲ παντὸς ἀνδρός, τὸ λεγόμενον, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ πλοῦς, ὁ δὲ φύσεώς τε ῥώμη καὶ πόνων ἐπιμελεία καθάπερ ἐκάστῳ συνεσκευμένος ὅσα πεποίηκεν ἕκαστος, οὕτω σὺν ἀκριβείᾳ τὰ πάντων ἤγεν εἰς φῶς. For the proverb 'the beautiful is difficult' see Pl. *Resp.* 4.435c (ed. Slings, *OCT*) and *Hp. mai.* 304e (ed. Burnet, *OCT*).

¹⁵ Procopius himself in various letters, sometimes jokingly, discusses his identity as a sophist, mainly against the backdrop of the quarrel between rhetoric and philosophy. See Proc. *Gaz. Ep.* 7, 18, 37, 46, 126 (ed. Garzya, Loenertz 1963, 7-8, 14, 23, 28, 65). In *Ep.* 131 (ed. Garzya, Loenertz 1963, 67) he stylizes himself as a moral philosopher and anti-sophist.

¹⁶ See Kaster 1988 on the types and social status of teachers, and Szabat 2007, 189-92 on sophists in late antiquity. The imagery of the mysteries can be also found in, for instance, *Or.* 8.5.

to adapt, and surpass, the tradition by stripping it of its high-brow profile or exclusivity, disseminating classical learning instead to a wider audience, as the metaphor of the light suggests.¹⁷ This also stands out in the following paragraphs which extol Procopius's excellence in public performances and liken him to the classical orators Isocrates and Demosthenes.¹⁸

Accordingly, what the funeral oration in the first part of his portrait has to say on Procopius's strengths is completely in keeping with genre expectations.¹⁹ That he was a powerful public speaker so that even Rhetoric herself is deeply mourning his loss (11-12), that he devoted all his time to reading books (16), that he incessantly worked very hard (17), further that he was modest and exuded an awe-inspiring sense of decency (18-19), and that he excelled in unpretentious friendliness (ἐπιείκεια) and dignity (σεμνότης, 18): nothing of this is out of the ordinary.²⁰ Yet, with the critical interjection which opened the article a different discourse seems to blend into the traditional funeral eulogy, a discourse that resonates with particularly late antique preoccupations. First, Choricius insists that Procopius was imbued also with that type of *paideia* that deals with the divine scriptures (21). As a matter of fact, this claim is perfectly brought out by what we know of Procopius's biblical scholarship.²¹ He not only wrote a number of commentaries on the books of the Old Testament, of which substantial parts have survived, but has even been credited as the inventor of the so-called catena, a verse by verse commentary

¹⁷ Litsas 1980, 215 mistranslates the metaphor ("illuminated [these writings]"). Greco 2010, 149 notes parallels to this image.

¹⁸ Chor. *Or.* 8.9-10 with reference to Aristid. *Or.* 3.663 (ed. Lenz, Behr 1976-1980, fasc. 3: 511).

¹⁹ [Dion. Hal.] *Rhet.* 6.277-83 (ed. Usener, Radermacher, *Teubner*); Men. *Rhet.* 2.413-14 (consolatory speech), 418-22 (funeral oration), 434-37 (monody). On the conventions of the ancient *epitaphioi logoi* see Soffel 1974, 50-78.

²⁰ The notion of dignity is also central to Choricius's understanding of his own rhetoric. See Corcella 2008, 449-50.

²¹ See ter Haar Romeny 2007 on Procopius's use of exegetical sources in his biblical studies.

made up of excerpts of earlier commentators.²² Certainly, Procopius in his commentary activities benefited from the thoroughgoing study of the Homeric epics and other poets in the secular schools, which is why his successor can subsume both the exegesis of classical texts and that of the Bible under the label of *paideia*.²³ That theological reasoning can make effective use of classical learning was also demonstrated by Procopius's refutation of Neoplatonic accounts of creation in the prologue to his *Commentary on Genesis*. There he employed philosophical arguments to prove the truth of Christian axioms against the mutually inconsistent principles of the Neoplatonists.²⁴ However, Choricius's defense may have more serious implications when he adds that the deceased sophist made himself familiar with "the doctrines of piety and those that dare to contradict them". Since he emphasizes that Procopius studied the latter only to refute them, it seems that he wants to rebut criticism that his teacher joined the wrong side in the fierce Christological quarrels of his time.²⁵

²² Ter Haar Romeny 2007, 178-83; Amato 2014; Metzler 2015. Metzler 2015, XIV however points out that the belief that Procopius invented the catena is incorrect.

²³ Metzler 2015, XVI-XVIII. Litsas's (1980, 15) speculation, however, that exegesis of Scripture and Christian morality formed part of the curriculum in the school of Gaza is completely unfounded, given what we know about rhetorical schooling in the sixth century. Renaut 2007, 173 sees as the two main characteristics of the school of Gaza being a Christian school and a school of rhetoric, but she nowhere makes clear how she understands the label of a "Christian school".

²⁴ Proc. Gaz. *Gen.*, prologue (ed. Metzler 2015, 1-10), further the *Refutatio Procli* attributed to Procopius (*PG* 87.2: 2792e-h, fragments VII.1-2 and VIII, ed. Amato, *Budé*). See Amato 2014, XLV-LII and Champion 2014, 105-35, 165-68 for a detailed discussion of Procopius's critique of Neoplatonic claims about creation.

²⁵ Amato 2014, XXV-XXVIII.

While we can only speculate on Procopius's involvement in doctrinal controversy,²⁶ the following paragraphs make clear that the speech is shifting the perspective from traditional schooling to "hard evidence" of Procopius's religious devotion. His interest in religious matters, the speech points out in a defensive manner, did not stop with dry scholarship, but went deeper, in fact so deep that Procopius demonstrated his expertise in Scripture through his deeds (22). What follows is a list of facts that highlight that the sophist had fully absorbed the values of Christian ethics: he provided relief for many orphans and suffering widows; he observed a frugal diet, keeping his meals to the minimum need. Not enough, he also cared for the sick and provided support to the poor. His practical charities are further accompanied and enhanced by the psychological therapy that he offers to those who are suffering mental pain.²⁷ Right in the middle of this section on Procopius's charitable activities, Choricus, as if it had just occurred to him, interrupts himself to underline that his teacher differed from other intellectuals in that he had a very practical streak.²⁸

In the context of the late antique polis, such an idealized portrait of a sophist must have struck a chord with the wider audience. What Choricus recounts here is reminiscent of the activities and accomplishments that hagiographic biographies and theoretical treatises ascribed to

²⁶ In any case, it may be significant that Procopius in his *Commentary on Genesis* presents the excerpts of earlier commentators without identifying them and in such a way that he seems to reproduce one single author. This technique obviously minimizes dogmatic differences. See Metzler 2015, XIII.

²⁷ Procopius himself puts much emphasis on philanthropy in his letters, for instance *Ep.* 2, 8 and 164 (ed. Garzya, Loenertz 1963, 3-4, 8, 79).

²⁸ *Chor. Or.* 8.24: Μικροῦ μέ τι διέδραμε τῶν ἐκείνου κατορθωμάτων. εἰωθότων γὰρ ὅσοι τὴν ὄλην σπουδὴν ἀπονέμουσι λόγοις, εἴ ποτε πράγμασιν ὀμιλεῖν ἀναγκάζονται, λίαν ἀρχαίως φέρεσθαι καὶ γέλωτα κινεῖν τοῖς τὰ τοιαῦτα δεινοῖς, οὐδενὸς ὄφθη δεύτερος τῶν ταύτην μόνον ἡσκημένων τὴν τέχνην.

church leaders and other saintly figures. Practical support for marginalized groups and providing comfort to the desolate usually fell into the domain of priests and bishops, who through this engagement also built their clientele and established their patronage in the Mediterranean poleis.²⁹ In addition, hagiographic narratives such as Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina* promoted the ideal of the holy man or woman distinguished by unsurpassable love for their neighbors, sometimes as Macrina adding to this intellectual rigor. Choricus himself, as his eulogies for the local bishop and his mother demonstrate, was fully aware of these key motifs and knew how to employ them to great effect.³⁰ It is, thus, no coincidence that Procopius emerges from this passage as a priestly figure, an energetic practitioner of Christian philanthropy, instead of a lofty intellectual in the ivory tower. Fittingly, the churches are bewailing his death (31).

The hagiographic echoes in the funeral oration go even deeper. Peter Brown and others have shown that the holy man in late antiquity not only possessed such virtues and ethical qualities that he qualified for a saintly figure and was recognized as such by others. Above all, this type of individual performed an important social function as Christian ascetics mediated between humans and the divine as well as exercising patronage in the social system of the Empire.³¹ Procopius, as depicted in the speech, does, to be sure, not figure as a conduit to heaven; that might have stretched the audience's imagination too far. But what he does for the benefit of orphans, widows, the sick and the poor clearly fits the bill. No surprise then that

²⁹ See Sterk 2004 on the monk-bishop in the Christian East and Rapp 2005.

³⁰ E.g. Chor. *Or.* 1.78; 7.18-23, 27, 32. Interestingly, Choricus in *Or.* 1.10 seems to claim that his own eulogy of Marcianus fulfills the same functions as hagiographic accounts of god-loving men in celebrations.

³¹ Brown 1971; Brown 2001.

Choricus towards the end of his oration suggests that the bishop of Gaza now has inherited Procopius's position, continuing the sophist's work on behalf of the civic community.³² Thus, it seems logical for the passage quoted above to present Procopius as a priest in all but name. Further features fit this image well, for instance the almost ascetic lifestyle that the sophist displays, in particular in satisfying the demands of his body. Not only does he refrain from anything that may go down as objectionable luxury, but he also triumphs over shameful pleasures and passions.³³ Choricus does not fail to notice that Procopius's control of his emotions, his moderate conduct, inspired other people to follow his path. Finally, all the qualities that render him a saintly man culminate in a death and burial that, as the speech points out, priests receive (47). That this image was anything but off the mark is demonstrated by a number of letters in which Procopius presents himself as a philosopher promoting a frugal lifestyle and encouraging his friends to follow his lead.³⁴ Apparently, the sophists of Gaza wanted to be recognized as models of a common-sense way of life.

With the reference to possible critics of his admired teacher, Choricus strikingly shifts the perspective of his funeral praise. While Procopius is initially presented as a sophist largely according to the pattern of the rhetorical handbooks, the speaker then feels urged to address

³² Chor. *Or.* 8.50. It is however wrong to infer from that remark that the bishop administrated the rhetorical school for some time or that the Church even exercised oversight over the school, as Litsas 1980, 12 and Ashkenazi 2004, 206-7 postulate.

³³ Chor. *Or.* 8.23, further 19. The concern with gluttony has a contemporary parallel in the monasticism of Gaza. See Dorotheus, *Doct.* 15.161 (*SCh* 92: 450). Considering that this was also a topic in pagan philosophy, it is however unlikely that, as Greco 2011, 106-7 suggests, Choricus paraphrases here a specific Christian model.

³⁴ Proc. *Gaz. Ep.* 2, 75, 106, 131, further 159, a meditation on human fate (ed. Garzya, Loenertz 1963, 3-4, 41, 55-56, 67, 76-77). See Ciccolella 2010, 132-34.

potential misgivings about the scholastic pursuits of the deceased by talking in detail about biblical scholarship and charitable activities. This move not only affects the image of the sophist, so that he resembles churchmen and ascetics, but also transforms the eulogistic discourse. Choricus incorporates in his classical oration Christian motifs and norms, though without using religious terminology, in order to appease those who might judge Procopius from a religious viewpoint. We may, thus wonder whether Choricus could not help but bow to the totalizing Christian discourse.

Procopius as Pericles's alter ego

Yet we should not too eagerly jump to conclusions. That the orator refrains from employing unmistakably Christian terms and phrases should not cause surprise, nor that he does not reference Scripture. As a sophist trained in classical rhetoric and aspiring to pure Atticism it was inconceivable for him to make far-reaching linguistic concessions to Christianity.³⁵ Still, the way in which Choricus describes Procopius's charitable activities is revealing for a number of reasons. First, although he plays off practice against words to the disadvantage of the latter, the speaker suggests that it was precisely through words that the sophist exerted his greatest influence. When Procopius engaged in medico-philosophical therapy, easing the hardship of orphans and widows, he was doing so mainly through discourse.³⁶ Orphans, the speech says, had

³⁵ For his Atticist ideal see Chor. *Or.* 1 *dial.* 4; *Or.* 6.26; 8.1, 8; 26.4; 32.77. Corcella 2008, 447. The Athenian ideal features prominently also in Procopius's own letters, for instance in *Ep.* 33, 38, 101 (ed. Garzya, Loenertz 1963, 21, 24, 53-54) and the letter exchange with Megethius (ed. Amato, *Teubner*).

³⁶ Aeneas in his letter to the iatrosophist Gessius also holds the view that medicine and rhetoric form a unity (*Aen. Gaz. Ep.* 19, ed. Massa Positano 1962, 49).

no “perception” of their miserable state³⁷ and widowhood “seemed” light because the sophist “alleviated their passions” (22, ψυχαγωγούντος ἐκείνου τὰ πάθη). Further, he “persuaded” many people who pursued unnatural desires to become restrained. The image of the therapist curing through skillful persuasion is completed by Procopius’s treatment of the sick and poor: again, we hear nothing precise about any practical measures, for instance providing food to the needy. Instead, his success in care for the sick is due to his persuasion, which imitates Gorgias’s famous healing rhetoric.³⁸ Strikingly, when attending a banquet Procopius seems to divert the feasters from indulgence and eating too much by replacing the food with “witty and pleasant stories” so that the banquet is nevertheless sweet.³⁹ Of course, churchmen in late antiquity also employed rhetorical techniques and the art of persuasion very efficiently to fulfill their duties, but it is still striking that Choricus’s praise of Procopius’s charities is interwoven with references to the sophist’s education and civilized manner.⁴⁰ The speech evokes the impression that Procopius’s support of people in need is just the flipside of his expertise as a scholar. In the same way as he contributes to the formation of young men in his school, the ideal sophist as rhetorical therapist rebuilds with his eloquence the mental health of the civic community.

³⁷ A similar expression is used by Procopius himself in his second monody, devoted to a man who had held offices in the local and imperial administration (Proc. Gaz. *Op.* 15 = *Or.* 5.6, ed. Amato, *Budé*).

³⁸ Chor. *Or.* 8.25, paraphrasing Pl. *Grg.* 456b (ed. Burnet, *OCT*).

³⁹ The imagery of meal and banquet for the orator’s art is abundant in Choricus’s speeches, e.g. Chor. *Or.* 13.16; 16.1; *Or.* 1 *dial.* 5; *Or.* 3 *dial.* 4. See Greco 2014, 248-49 on the Platonic model of the metaphor.

⁴⁰ Cf. Chrysostom’s discussion of the priest’s need for rhetorical skill in book four of *De sacerdotio* (*SCh* 272). See also Greg. Naz. *Or.* 43.12 (*SCh* 384: 140-42). See Greco 2011, 100.

Second, the notion of therapy, which pervades the funeral eulogy and is also prominent in the rest of Choricus's works, can lend further shape to Procopius's intellectual profile.⁴¹ We already had opportunity to mention that the sophist is compared to the Athenian general and politician Pericles in respect to his psychological influence on others. Although the political conditions had changed fundamentally from the classical era to the end of antiquity, the speech advocates the idea that the accomplished orator exerts tight control over the mind and emotions of the crowd. Procopius emerges from the speech as an adroit psychologist who is able to keep a firm grip on the masses so that the citizens of Gaza behave in an orderly manner, maintaining decent composure and self-control even when the sophist is not present.⁴² This image is enhanced when Choricus deals with his teacher's care for others: we have seen that his main activity is to cure them from harmful passions and desires, whether they are in danger of surrendering to bodily temptations or are suffering from distress and bereavement. Overall, Procopius is depicted as an excellent philosophical therapist who employs his vocal brilliance in the service of a regime of affects.⁴³ That is an idea which, though adopted by many Christian writers and also prominent in the monastic circles of Gaza, stood firmly in the tradition of the

⁴¹ Choricus refers to passions as mental illness and philosophical therapy for instance in *Or.* 3.15-16; 7.28; 32.101-2; 42.91.

⁴² *Chor. Or.* 8.6. Although this passage refers to Procopius as the head of school, the comparison with Pericles and then further episodes of Procopius's influence on people in Gaza strongly indicate that Choricus sees him as a powerful public speaker. See further *Or.* 8.19, drawing a parallel to Xenocrates converting Polemon from a dissolute life to philosophy.

⁴³ Corcella 2008 has shown that it is also with regard to truth that Choricus, in engagement with Plato's critique, advocates the ideal of a philosophical rhetoric.

Stoic-Epicurean mainstream.⁴⁴ Numerous philosophers had advocated philosophy as a specific care for the self and others, a way to the eradication of harmful passions and the tranquility of mind.

While Choricus's contemporary Dorotheus of Gaza claimed this care for the self as the distinctively monastic way of life, glossing over its classical roots, the funeral oration is fairly explicit that this concept of philosophy originated from a classical background.⁴⁵ It is characteristic of this speech that it not only depicts the deceased sophist as offering comfort to all who labor and are heavy laden, but at the same time makes plain in general terms that precisely this care is a core function of classical rhetoric and education. In the long section of consolation, which is addressed to Procopius's brothers, Choricus at once commends the addressees for their ability to cope with the loss and outlines his vision of tranquility of mind and moderation engendered by a sound classical upbringing. When the speaker deals with bereavement and pain he cites Isocrates for the exhortation to avoid excess in joy as well as in sadness.⁴⁶ Further, tragedy lends weight to Choricus's view that the noble man will bear whatever happens with steadfastness. Some lines later, he goes on to provide further evidence from Herodotus's *Histories* and the Trojan War.⁴⁷ The entire passage amounts to a florilegium of consolatory commonplaces drawn from classical literature and mythology so that Procopius's relatives feel

⁴⁴ Hadot's (1995) magisterial monograph shows how much the Christian notion of spiritual exercises owed to the philosophical tradition. He specifically deals with Dorotheus of Gaza and his philosophical instruction.

⁴⁵ Stenger (forthcoming) argues that Dorotheus in his *Doctrinae diversae* transferred methods and principles of the philosophical schools to his coenobium, though without acknowledging his debt to the classical tradition.

⁴⁶ Chor. *Or.* 8.34, probably alluding to Isoc. 1.41-42 (ed. Mandilaras, *Teubner*).

⁴⁷ Chor. *Or.* 8.37-40. See Hdt. 1.119 (Harpagus and Astyages), 1.31 (Cleobis and Biton) and Hom. *Il.* 17.33-42 (Euphorbus). For the use of the Cleobis and Biton episode in consolatory speeches see Men. *Rhet.* 2.414.1-2.

reassured in their self-control and appropriate composure because they have internalized the lesson that death is the greatest gift to mankind. It is then only natural that Choricus with his own speech aims to achieve the same goals that he ascribes to the literary education that Procopius's brothers have received. Right at the beginning of his eulogy he had admitted that he himself is in desperate need for consolation after the departure of his predecessor (1). While his own sadness might hamper him in consoling others, he towards the end of the speech displays confidence that his reflections on the human condition and death have cured him from his pain (49). With the plethora of references to the consolatory and restraining effects of *paideia* the orator demonstrates that he, the continuator of Procopius's pedagogic work (46), has grasped what his teacher's invaluable support for others was all about: this man, "full of wisdom and born to a good fate of eloquence", realized his beneficial impact on the polis through nothing else than a thorough training in classical culture.⁴⁸

The literary genre of the funeral oration required the orator to compare the deceased to famous figures from the past, either placing them on the same level or giving the laurels to the commemorated person. Choricus's speech is no exception to this rule as he makes mention of numerous characters from Agamemnon and Menelaus to Pericles and Demosthenes. However, his selection of figures from Athenian history seems to serve a particular purpose. Needless to say that all of them, Pericles, Alcibiades, Isocrates and Demosthenes, were political orators and writers, which is why they are suitable for a comparison with a late antique sophist. But the two men who feature most prominently, the fifth-century general and the fourth-century antagonist of King Philip, also indicate that Choricus wants his audience to remember Procopius as a public

⁴⁸ Chor. Or. 8.26: ἀνὴρ σοφίας μεστός, ἐπὶ καλῇ μοίρᾳ τῶν λόγων τεχθεὶς, δεινὸς τὰ δέοντα γινῶναι καὶ λαμπρὸς ἐρμηνεύσαι.

leader of Periclean format. Should anyone among the listeners be in doubt about this quality, the speech in its final part claims that while Demosthenes, who sought to protect Greece with his voice, left Athens shattered by storms and waves, Procopius handed over his hometown well anchored in a safe haven, that is, the bishop.⁴⁹ He achieved what Pericles and Demosthenes failed to deliver: to secure political stability and order in the long run. Choricus considers his master not only a churchman short of ordination, but first and foremost an unrivalled political leader of the city.⁵⁰

This is, however, not the whole story of the *synkrisis* with the two classical politicians. For those who are able to recognize some textual clues, the comparisons encompass another layer of meaning. Strikingly, in the two passages that pay tribute to Demosthenes' rhetorical excellence, the one at the beginning of the speech, the other at the end, Choricus twice employs the motif that an accomplished orator should be viewed as a replica of a famous precursor. First, with a flavor of a divine epiphany, Procopius is said to have come to mankind as the type, the exact image, of Demosthenes (10, ἔφης δ' ἄν εἰκότως αὐτὸν Δημοσθένους τύπον εἰς ἀνθρώπους ἔλθεῖν). This motif is later resumed when Choricus states that one of the sophists called the Athenian orator "a copy of Hermes Logios," the deity of rhetoric.⁵¹ By attributing the phrase to an authority the speech invites the audience to recall a passage from Aelius Aristides's *In defense*

⁴⁹ Chor. *Or.* 8.49-50. Choricus's phrase τὴν ἐνεγκοῦσαν refers to Procopius's hometown, not, as Litsas 1980, 68 and 308 and Ashkenazi 2004, 200-201 think, to the rhetorical school.

⁵⁰ Choricus's portrayal apparently reflects Procopius's actual role in Gaza as documented by his letters. The letters show his attempts to influence on behalf of his hometown decision making at the imperial court in Constantinople (Proc. *Gaz. Ep.* 59, 84, ed. Garzya, Loenertz 1963, 34, 44-45). Ciccolella 2010, 131 hypothesizes that Procopius was member of the *proteuontes*, the notables, of Gaza (cf. *Ep.* 42, ed. Garzya, Loenertz 1963, 25-26).

⁵¹ Chor. *Or.* 8.49: ... ὃν Ἑρμοῦ λογίου παράδειγμα τῶν σοφιστῶν τις καλεῖ.

of the four against Plato, where Demosthenes is in fact characterized with exactly these words.⁵² More than that, the first instance of this motif in §10 is even an almost verbatim quotation of Aristides's phrase. If Choricus's educated listeners become aware of this allusion they realize that also the praise of Procopius as a Demosthenes *redivivus* is to be traced back to Aristides's image of the classical orator. The deceased sophist's public engagement and greatest success, the intertextual reference suggests, can, and should be, fully understood against the backdrop of the classical tradition. Only the eulogist who is imbued with the classics—like Procopius himself was—is able both to find the fitting points of comparison in the past and to present them in an appropriate literary form.

That the imitation and emulation of classical models also affects Procopius's portrait to the core becomes even clearer when Choricus turns to Pericles. We noted at the beginning of this article that the funeral oration goes to some length to bring the sophist close to a priest and even furnishes him with traits that are reminiscent of Christian holy men. While these features certainly enhance the resemblance between Procopius and the bishop of Gaza to elevate the former to the plane of church leaders, it is also true that the way in which the speech presents him allows for a different reading. Once those who had been trained in the rhetorical school noticed Choricus's allusion to Aristides's Demosthenes, they might have recognized another echo of the same model. For in his defense of the four Athenian politicians, Miltiades, Themistocles, Cimon and Pericles, against Socrates' criticism in the *Gorgias*, the Second Sophistic author had made a remarkable statement to give an accurate image of Pericles's

⁵² Aristid. *Or.* 3.663 (ed. Lenz, Behr 1976-1980, fasc. 3: 511): ... Δημοσθένους, ὃν ἐγὼ φαίην ἂν Ἑρμοῦ τινοῦ λογίου τύπον εἰς ἀνθρώπους κατελθεῖν. Choricus adopts this phrase also in *Or.* 3.5 and 13.15. On this motif see also Jul. *Or.* 7.237c (ed. Nesselrath, *Teubner*); Eun. *V. Soph.* 490 (ed. Goulet, *Budé*); Dam. *V. Isid.* fr. 13A3.

outstanding virtue:⁵³ “He is said to have lived with such dignity that his life differed not at all from that of the prophets and priests, and that he was so self-controlled that he walked in an orderly manner and kept the straight path, according to the proverb.”

Apparently, when Choricus too was engaging in an apology of an admired leader he considered Aristides’s portrayal of the Athenian general an extremely fortunate expression of the qualities in which Procopius distinguished himself. Moreover, Aristides’s defense of Pericles may have seemed to him very well suited because it was ultimately derived from an even more famous model, the favorable characterization in Thucydides’s *Histories*. The classical historian had already depicted his protagonist as a paragon of leadership, integrity and decent conduct, a model for every citizen, and stressed Pericles’s restraining influence over the masses in Athens. But while Pericles’s control over the people according to Choricus, and Aristides as well, lasted only as long as he was present, Procopius managed to implement in others self-restraint and orderly conduct for good.⁵⁴ Still more strikingly, Choricus with a paraphrase of Thucydides and a direct address to Pericles blames the Athenian leader for arrogance and pride in his qualities so that Procopius’s modesty can shine even brighter.⁵⁵ Rather than imitating the questionable aspects of Pericles’s personality, which are also present in Thucydides’s account, Procopius replicates only what is useful and appropriate, but never loses the connection with ordinary

⁵³ Aristid. *Or.* 3.12 (ed. Lenz, Behr 1976-1980, fasc. 2: 295-96): ἐκεῖνος τοίνυν λέγεται βιῶναι μὲν οὕτως σεμνῶς ὥστε μηδὲν τῶν προφητῶν καὶ τῶν ἱερέων τὸν ἐκείνου βίον διαφέρειν, οὕτω δὲ εἶναι σώφρων ὥστε καὶ βαδίζειν τεταγμένα καὶ τὴν ὀρθὴν ὁδὸν σώζειν κατὰ τὴν παροιμίαν.

⁵⁴ Chor. *Or.* 8.6. See Aristid. *Or.* 3.15 (ed. Lenz, Behr 1976-1980, fasc. 2: 297).

⁵⁵ Chor. *Or.* 8.18. See Thuc. 2.60 (ed. Stuart Jones, Powell, *OCT*) and also Aristid. *Or.* 3.13-14 (ed. Lenz, Behr 1976-1980, fasc. 2: 296-97).

people. In this respect, he resembles much more Aristides's sympathetic picture of Pericles: his conduct in public, characterized by modesty, affability and decent manners, deeply informs the behavior of others so that he emerges as an excellent pedagogue with every fiber of his personality.⁵⁶ These are precisely the features that Aristides in his rhetorical showpiece attributes to Pericles. It is, thus, safe to say that Choricus's engagement with earlier texts reorients the image of his master, adding to the seemingly hagiographic guise another layer that owes much to the classical tradition.

Both what the funeral oration highlights of Procopius's achievements and the way it presents his feats suggest that, other than the hagiographic elements seem to indicate, the eulogistic portrait is dominated by the classical value system of the educated elite: political leadership, euergetism, patronage, excellence and public recognition make the respectable man and sophist. Despite his nods to Christian expectations, Choricus demonstrates that it is above all a thorough classical training that enables the public intellectual to fulfill vital functions for the urban society. While classical references to, for instance, the Fates (27) or the Isles of the Blessed (48) are part and parcel of the literary form and may, therefore, be insignificant, the speech is completely clear that a successful and rewarding life rests on the foundation of Greek *paideia*. To silence Procopius's critics, Choricus points out, "May the passing time be a cure for pain to the layman, the man who has gone through the Muse and tasted divine lectures should not wait for such a therapy."⁵⁷ It is the combination of traditional learning and familiarity with

⁵⁶ Compare Chor. Or. 8.18-20 with Aristid. Or. 3.12-17, 29 (ed. Lenz, Behr 1976-1980, fasc. 2: 295-98, 301-2).

Aristides, too, emphasizes Pericles's pedagogic influence over the people and the restraint of passions.

⁵⁷ Chor. Or. 8.35: ἰδιώτη μὲν γὰρ φάρμακον ἔστω λύπης ὁ χρόνος, ὁ δὲ διὰ Μούσης ἐλθὼν καὶ θεῶν γευσάμενος ἀκουσμάτων μὴ μοι τὴν τοιαύτην θεραπείαν ἀναμενέτω.

Scripture that makes the educated man able to cope with the hardship of life.⁵⁸ However, some moments later, Choricus adds a further twist when he defines birth as misery and death as deliverance: “Since long poets have been proclaiming this, as well as those who practice philosophy and the rhetors and the historians, concurring in one point and all agreeing with each other to put forward one single view about the evils of human life.”⁵⁹

Regarding the human condition and the central questions of human existence, one needs nothing but a unity of poetry, philosophy, rhetoric and historiography to find the right answers. Whoever has gone through the curriculum of the classical schools, this passage claims, is well prepared to face any challenge in life and possesses “self-help” in any situation.⁶⁰ To drive home this point, Plato is then cited for the insight that philosophy is the pinnacle of human happiness.⁶¹ All in all, Procopius’s exemplary life proves that a wide range of current issues, from governing a city to the care for the marginalized, can be addressed by bringing *paideia* to bear.⁶²

Conclusion

In his funeral oration for his teacher Procopius, Choricus attempts to overcome the “quarrel” between secular and sacred, between the demands of civic engagement and Christian values. This was a topic that in sixth-century Gaza still caused some controversy, as not only the

⁵⁸ Choricus commends the same combination in his second eulogy of Marcianus (*Or.* 2.9).

⁵⁹ Chor. *Or.* 8.44: *πάλαι ταῦτα βοῶσι καὶ ποιηταὶ καὶ φιλοσοφίαν ἀσκήσαντες ῥήτορες τε καὶ συγγραφεῖς ὡς περ εἰς ἓν συνελθόντες καὶ πρὸς ἀλλήλους συνθέμενοι μίαν ἅπαντες γνώμην περὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπέων κακῶν ἀποφύνασθαι.*

⁶⁰ For education as “self-help” see Chor. *Or.* 8.36-37, 41.

⁶¹ Chor. *Or.* 8.45 with reference to Pl. *Epin.* 977d (ed. Burnet, *OCT*).

⁶² Choricus’s defense of classical education may also foreshadow the challenges that *paideia* faced, and the debate over its value, in the middle of the century. See Bell 2013, 249-52 on the decline of *paideia* under Justinian.

defensive tone of the speech indicates, but also other contemporary texts document.⁶³ To tackle this problem, Choricus's eulogy features an imaginary critic who finds fault with Procopius's classical scholarship. Seizing the opportunity created by himself, the orator outlines his ideal of a public intellectual who is very well placed to satisfy urgent needs arising from urban life in that time. Despite the overall traditional presentation form, Choricus finds a way to incorporate religious expectations and concepts, such as almsgiving and patronage of the deprived, so that the deceased sophist appears as a saint-like figure, though without any official position in the Church.

All the same, the oration primarily draws on the reservoir of topics which according to the value system of the educated elite made up the public leader and benefactor. Concomitantly, it presents Procopius as a public intellectual almost exclusively in the literary form established since centuries, that is, with phrases adopted from classical authors and numerous allusions to Plato, Thucydides, Aelius Aristides and others. In doing so, Choricus fits the religious norms into a classical framework; in a sense, Christian thought is "fenced in" or encircled by the classical code. At the same time, Choricus's ideal of the saintly sophist is underpinned by the belief that such a way of life can only come to fruition on the foundation of Greek *paideia*. Procopius's funeral was an excellent occasion to make this point because on the one hand it

⁶³ See e.g. Aeneas of Gaza's philosophical dialogue *Theophrastus*; Barsanuphius and John, *Ep.* 722, 809 (*SCh* 468); Choricus's *Apology for the Mimes* (*Or.* 32). *Proc. Gaz. Ep.* 77 (ed. Garzya, Loenertz 1963, 42) is evidence that Procopius himself occasionally had to deal with such competing demands. In this letter, addressed to his friend Diodorus, Procopius expresses his disappointment that the addressee had preferred not to join him at a martyrs' feast because of an omen, a dream vision of Maiuma. Thus, the letter seems to indicate an opposition between the Christian celebration and the profane Maiuma festival. Amato 2010, however, hypothesizes that the *panegyris* for the martyrs combined the religious celebration with the profane festivities of the Maiuma.

allowed Choricus to portrait his master as a man whose conduct and achievements flowed naturally from his classical upbringing and, on the other hand, the funeral oration itself could be stylized as a showpiece of classical learning as a way of life, a second nature that was fit for any conceivable challenge. To return to the hypothesis of a totalizing Christian discourse, we can say that Choricus's ideal of the sophist maintains a central place for classical *paideia* in the Christianized polis and, by giving precedence to the Hellenic heritage, deals in subterfuge with any attempts to raise the Christian discourse to total domination. He makes the case for an autonomous sphere of the secular, though a secular that is not neutral. Traditional literary culture, not incompatible with religious demands, fulfills vital functions for the individual as well as for communal life, and therefore it deserves support.

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