

MAGDALENA GARNCZARSKA
UJ

“PROCOPIUS OF CAESAREA’S DESCRIPTION OF THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY WISDOM IN CONSTANTINOPLE – BETWEEN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND RHETORIC”

Procopius of Caesarea’s description of the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople – in the work entitled *On Buildings* is a valuable source to learn about the history of building the main church in the capital of the Byzantine Empire. Bearing in mind the reservations of Henry Maguire: *The Byzantine ekphrasis copied ancient models not only in their general standard of judgment, but also in their specific language. There was a constant repetition of clichés, paraphrases, and quotations, some of which were of considerable length. These topoi cast further doubt on the accuracy of the ekphrasis*¹ with regard to Prokopius’ ekphrasis it is worth asking for him: *how often Byzantine writers looked at the works which they described, and how far their descriptions were purely literary exercises, based on written models*². This is all the more justified when we notice that the the Church of the Holy Wisdom has survived to our times, and the changes it has undergone for centuries have not fundamentally changed the concept of Justinian I times. Proclus had to see the temple with his own eyes. Therefore, you can compare the text with the existing building.

Procopius of Caesarea and his work *On buildings*

Procopius of Caesarea (*Προκόπιος ὁ Καισαρεύς*, 490/507 – c. 560) is undoubtedly the most important historiographer of the early Byzantine era³. Researchers usually recognise that his hometown was Caesarea in Palestine First (*Palestina Prima*)⁴. Procopius became associated with the court of Emperor Justinian I (527-565), who in 527 appointed him personal secretary

¹ H. Maguire, *Truth and Convention in Byzantine Descriptions of Works of Art*, „Dumbarton Oaks Papers”, 28/1974, p 114.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Good insight into the latest findings regarding the historiographer is given by: G. Greatrex, *Perceptions of Procopius in Recent Scholarship*, „Histos”, 8/2014, pp. 71–121.

⁴ In the beginning of his *History of the Wars* he introduces himself in the following manner *Procopius of Caesarea has written the history of the wars which Justinian, Emperor of the Romans, waged against the barbarians of the East and of the West, relating separately the events of each one* (Bell. 1.1.1) (*Προκόπιος Καισαρεύς τοὺς πολέμους ζυνέγραψε, οὗς Ἰουστινιανὸς ὁ Ῥωμαίων βασιλεὺς πρὸς βαρβάρους διήνεγκε τοὺς τε ἐφ’ οὗς καὶ ἐσπερίους ὡς πη αὐτῶν ἐκάστω ζυνηγέθη γενέσθαι*); [TN: source of the quote in English: *Procopius. History of the Wars*, Volume I: Books 1-2. (Persian War). Translated by H.B. Dewing. Loeb Classical Library 48. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914.]; Procopius, *De bellis libri 1-4*, in: *Procopii Caesarensis opera omnia*, ed. J. Haury, add. et corr. G. Wirth, Leipzig 1962, vol. 1 (4), 1.1.1.

and legal adviser to Belisarius (c. 505-565), a military commander of the Byzantine army⁵. He also participated in many war expeditions with him. Procopius' contacts with Belisarius were limited when the commander fell out of favour in 542. After this date, Procopius' further fate becomes unclear, perhaps he settled permanently in Constantinople⁶. There, he was to obtain the title of *ἰλλούστρις* and *πατρίκιος* and hold some office⁷.

After leaving the army, he devoted the rest of his life to literary activity. We know his three works: *History of the Wars* (*Υπὲρ τῶν πολέμων λόγοι; De bellis*), *Secret History* (*Ἀπόκρυφη Ἱστορία*) and *On Buildings* (*Περὶ κτισμάτων; De aedificiis*)⁸. They represent three different genres: war history, pamphlet and panegyric. The chronology of the creation of individual texts is still the subject of research disputes⁹. It is assumed, however, that around the 540s, Procopius was already working on the *History of Wars*, and in 551 there was a ready edition of Books I-VII (VIII c. 554). The *Secret History* can also come from a similar period. On the other hand, the *On buildings*, as the latest work, is usually dated either at 554/555 or the years of 558-560¹⁰.

In *History of the Wars*, Procopius described the struggles with the Persians, Vandals and Goths, and also included a review of events up to 554. In turn, the *Secret History*, conceived as a kind of supplement to the work on the wars, is a sharp criticism of Emperor Justinian I and Empress Theodora and Belisarius and his wife Antonina. In the *On buildings*, the author praises Justinian as the founder of a huge number of buildings.

Recognition of construction activities as a reason for glory, as noted by Piotr Ł. Grotowski, is a part of the panegyric changes that took place at the beginning of the 4th century. Then, in praise speeches, imperial achievements in the field of architecture were also taken into account, in which care for the good of the state was seen. A model example of this approach is the *Life of Constantine the Great* (*Εἰς τὸν βίον Κωνσταντίνου*) by Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260 /265-339). The author discussed there both the main political and military achievements, as well as architectural foundations. Thus, Procopius' work does not deviate from the era standards and is a good example of a late-antique panegyric¹¹. It seems that by writing this praise, the author wanted to gain imperial favour or thank for something, and because the adopted literary convention does not involve honesty, his negative attitude towards Justinian could remain unchanged¹². On the other hand, as pointed out by Oktawiusz Jurewicz, *On*

⁵ O. Jurewicz, *Historia literatury bizantyńskiej*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 2007, pp. 32-33.

⁶ D. Brodka, *Wstęp*, in: Prokopiusz z Cezarei, *Historia wojen*, vol. 1, pp. XX-XXI.

⁷ P.Ł. Grotowski, *Pochlebca czy oszczerca? Janusowe oblicze Prokopiusza*, in: Prokopiusz z Cezarei, *O budowlach*, translation, introduction, and comments by P.Ł. Grotowski, Warszawa 2006, „Biblioteka Antyczna”, p. 50.

⁸ W. Siwakowska, *Prokopios*, in: *Słownik pisarzy antycznych*, ed. A. Świderkówna, Warszawa 1982, pp. 390-391.

⁹ Summary of views regarding the dating of specific works of Procopius, cf. D. Brodka, op. cit., p. XXII. See also: P.Ł. Grotowski, op. cit., pp. 51, 62-64.

¹⁰ D. Brodka, op. cit., p. XXII. cf.: G. Greatrex, op. cit., pp. 101-103.

¹¹ P.Ł. Grotowski, op. cit., pp. 57-60. Procopius' work, however, also introduces a new quality, because the praise of construction achievements is a separate, extensive work, and not just an element of another text. Cf. J. Elsner, *The Rhetoric of Buildings in the "De Aedificiis" of Procopius*, in: *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture*, ed. L. James, Cambridge 2007, p. 35.

¹² D. Brodka, op. cit., pp. XXVII-XXVIII. It is worth noting that Procopius in his works, including the *On buildings*, often uses subtle irony. Thus, a lot of information has ambiguous overtones. The author mastered the writing technique so well that he was able to entwine – even into a text intended to be one great praise – bitter allusions, which probably corresponded more to his personal beliefs, but did not obscure the basic message of the work. Cf. also: P.Ł. Grotowski, op. cit., pp. 69-70.

Buildings could have been a rhetorical display in the form of rhetoric laudation, ἔπαινος (*laudatio*) complementing *the Secret History*, i.e. rhetoric vituperation, ψόγος (*reprehensio, vituperatio*)¹³. It is known that writing both praise and rebuke about the same person was one of the basic exercises of rhetorical education¹⁴. A certain innovation of the author is primarily based on the approach to the collected data. It can be seen that Procopius shows relatively little interest in aesthetic issues, and even – apart from the first book – the appearance of the described buildings, giving rather catalogs of buildings from particular areas, which may indicate the impact of chronicles from the 6th century containing lists of buildings¹⁵.

The work *On Buildings* was divided into six books, which were assigned to specific geographical areas: Constantinople (book I), Syria (book II), Armenia (book III), Balkan provinces (book IV), Asia Minor and Palestine (book V) and Africa (book VI). Procopius describes the following types of buildings in them: ecclesiastical (churches and monasteries), military (fortifications, fortresses), and hydrotechnical ones (ports, bridges, canals, dams). The analysis of the books shows that they are variously refined and accurate. The best impression is made by the part about Constantinople, in which the narrative is consistent and contains many references to the works of older authors. Against this background, books IV and V appear particularly vapid, written in a chaotic manner, and sometimes boiling down to a disordered list of localities. These types of observations prompted researchers to believe that the work remained unfinished. Interruption of the work could be the result of the death of the author, who managed to give the final shape only to the initial parts, while the rest was partly left in the form of unimproved notes. Another argument in favour of this thesis is the lack of mention of foundations in Italy, which Justinian once again included within the borders of the Empire¹⁶. It is therefore highly probable that the work preserved to our times shows the author's intentions only to some extent.

However, one may also consider whether the weaker style and a lack of more accurate data in some chapters is not the result of insufficient information about the region. It is known that many of the elaborately described places are areas where the author stayed personally during the war campaigns. So he had the opportunity to examine and draw on local sources, as well as to learn about various anecdotes that he likes to include in his story to revive and make it more interesting. Distinct style disproportions are also noticeable in the descriptions of various types of objects – quite accurate are those that relate to military infrastructure. Procopius writes them with some understanding of their function and mechanism while action while being scarce in professional vocabulary. Descriptions of other architecture are no longer so clear, he often has difficulties in discussing some structural elements with precision, he is rather limited to archaising language, avoiding contemporary terminology in the field of architecture, which was enriched with separate terms for architectural elements specific to Byzantine buildings at that time. At present, it is also pointed out that Procopius did not avoid errors in his descriptions and that he wrote as a layman (although posing as an expert on the subject) for a recipient who was not well versed in technical issues¹⁷. Perhaps,

¹³ O. Jurewicz, op. cit., p. 39.

¹⁴ On the species diversity used by Procopius in the *On buildings*, see: J. Elsner, op. cit., p. 35-39.

¹⁵ Av. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, London-New York 1996, p. 90.

¹⁶ Cf. P.Ł. Grotowski, op. cit., pp. 53-57, 60-62.

¹⁷ Cf. G. Greatrex, op. cit., p. 104.

therefore, the problem of stylistic heterogeneity of the *On Buildings* is the result of more factors than the death of the author who did not manage to refine his work.

Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople

The Church of the Holy Wisdom (*Ἁγία Σοφία, ἡ μεγάλη Ἐκκλησία*) in Constantinople was the most important church in the Byzantine Empire. The construction of the first church was started by Emperor Constantine the Great (306-337) or his son Constantius II (337-361)¹⁸. Consecration was made in 360. The church in its original form was a basilica with timber roofing – characteristic of early Christian churches¹⁹. In 404 it was destroyed by fire and then rebuilt. The foundation's end brought the Nika riots in January 532, when on January 13 the building burned down completely²⁰. Justinian, suppressing the revolt uprising, decided to build a new church – in a different form and exceeding the existing ones by the size and richness of decorations²¹.

Its construction was entrusted to Antemius of Tralles and Isidore the Elder of Miletus. The works lasted from 532 to 27 December 537, when the church was solemnly consecrated. The church is a central-dome building with elements of a basilical plan, built of brick and stone (in load-bearing parts). The main space is defined by four great pillars powerful pillars, there are arcades on them and pendentives, which allow for the transition to a circular form, crowned with a huge dome. It is supported by four lower semi-domes with exedrae from the east and west. The aisles are separated by columnar arcades, over which there are galleries. In the west, there is a rectangular narthex (double, i.e. inner and outer) and an atrium with a columnar porticoes was adjacent to it²².

The erection of such a bold building was a serious constructional challenge where some issues could not be solved the first time. This was the case with the original dome, which partially collapsed in 558, as it was weakened by the earthquakes of 553 and 557. It was rebuilt in 563 by Isidore the Younger (nephew or son of Isidore the Elder), applying a few changes that were to strengthen the structure: he raised it by 7 meters, raised buttresses that reach the base of the dome, as well as the buttresses to the height of the cornice²³. Later, the

¹⁸ R. Krautheimer, *The Constantinian Basilica*, „Dumbarton Oaks Papers”, 21/1967, pp. 133-138.

¹⁹ On the form of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople before the reconstruction of Justinian see v. R.J. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church*, London 1988, pp. 128-143.

²⁰ A. Rózycka Bryzek, *Hagia Sophia*, in: *Encyklopedia kultury bizantyńskiej*, ed. O. Jurewicz, Warszawa 2002, p. 193; S. Bralewski, *Konstantynopolikańskie kościoły*, in: *Konstantynopol Nowy Rzym. Miasto i ludzie w okresie wczesnobizantyńskim*, ed. M.J. Leszka, T. Wolińska, Warszawa 2011, pp. 145-147.

²¹ Procopius is of the opinion that God Himself allowed the insidious deed of the insurgents, so that Justinian could build a new, more magnificent church (*Aed. 1.1.21*): *God permitted them to accomplish this impiety, foreseeing into what an object of beauty this shrine (ἐπεχώρει δὲ αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς διαπράξασθαι τὸ ἀσέβημα, προειδὼς εἰς εὐάοιστος); Procopius, De aedificiis, in: Procopii Caesarensis opera omnia, ed. J. Haury, add. et corr. G. Wirth, Leipzig 1964, vol. 4 (4), 1.1.21. [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Vol. VII. N.p.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library.]*

²² For details on the structure and architectural form of the Justinian's Church of Hagia Sophia, see: R.J. Mainstone, op. cit., p. 184-217.

²³ V.K.J. Conant, *The First Dome of St. Sophia and Its Rebuilding*, „American Journal of Archaeology”, 43/1939, no. 4, p. 589-591; R.J. Mainstone, *Justinian's Church of St Sophia, Istanbul: Recent Studies of Its Construction and First Partial Reconstruction*, „Architectural History”, 12/1969, p. 39-49 i 102-107; R. Taylor, *A Literary and*

church was also damaged including in 989 and 1346. The current appearance of the temple – including its interior – is also the result of Turkish interference after 1453²⁴.

The original furnishings of the temple interior included: synthronon, cyborium altar, marble templon, and solea leading from the sacred door of the templon to the pulpit, located under the dome, as well as golden mosaics with aniconic motifs, covering all surfaces above the cornices²⁵. The richness of materials used for decoration was also astonishing. Merely point out: multicoloured marbles brought from different corners of the world²⁶, which were used to make the cladding and columns, as well as mosaics with ornamental and figural motifs, or completely golden, covering all surfaces above the cornice²⁷.

Description of the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople Procopius of Caesarea (*Aed.* 1.1.20-78)

Procopius described the first version (532) of the Church of Hagia Sophia founded by Justinian I, although there is a mention in his text that some scholars interpret as an allusion to the collapse of the dome in 558²⁸: *for it* [it refers to the eastern conch] *seems somehow to float in the air on no firm basis, but to be poised aloft to the peril of those inside it*²⁹. However, nowhere did the author explicitly comment on the subsequent catastrophe.

The description is extensive as it covers more than half of the first chapter of Book One (*Aed.* 1.1.20-78). The Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople was discussed by Procopius as first, which clearly emphasises the highest rank of this church in the entire Empire. The author also allowed himself a brief digression about the circumstances of the construction and the engineers responsible for it, as well as the contribution of the emperor, who helped solve some of the construction problems. Digressions are found at the beginning and end of the description, constituting a sort of a frame, which emphasizes the importance of the emperor in the entire undertaking – first he initiated the construction, and then helped in its successful completion. Therefore, he was presented as an exemplary founder who carefully watches over the construction.

After the first digression (*Aed.* 1/20-26), the temple is firmly embedded in the city space and praises of the extraordinary beauty of the building are made (*Aed.* 1.1.27), after which the author enters the interior and gives some general information that introduces the unusual atmosphere of the temple (*Aed.* 1.1.28-30). After this introduction, Procopius proceeds to the proper, detailed description, which he begins from the east, housing the sanctuary (*Aed.*

Structural Analysis of the First Dome on Justinian's Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, „Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians”, 55/1996, no. 1, p. 66-78.

²⁴ R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, New Haven-London 1986, p. 206 (revised by S. Ćurčić).

²⁵ A. Różycka Bryzek, op. cit., p. 194.

²⁶ V.N. Schibille, *Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine Aesthetic Experience*, Farnham 2014, pp. 241-243.

²⁷ R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine...*, pp. 205-206; A. Różycka Bryzek, op. cit., p. 194.

²⁸ 3.7 V Procopius of Caesarea, *On Buildings*, 1.1.31, note 24, p. 85.

²⁹ *Aed.* 1.1.34: *δοκεῖ γάρ πη οὐκ ἐν βεβαίῳ ἐπηωρῆσθαι, ἀλλ' ἐπικινδύνως τοῖς ἐνθάδε ὄσι μετεωρίζεσθαι. All translations of quotes into Polish after: Prokopiusz z Cezarei, O budowlach translations, introduction, explanations and comments. P.L. Grotowski, Warszawa 2006, “Biblioteka Antyczna”. [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Vol. VII. N.p.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library.]*

1.1.31-34) – and thus respecting the principle of the hierarchy of the interior. Then he moves towards the west side, where the narthex and entrances are located (*Aed.* 1.1.35-36), and then returns to pay a lot of attention to the central part, covered with a huge dome (*Aed.* 1.1.37-49). He also tries to explain how stability was ensured by giving a short lecture on the main pillars (*Aed.* 1.1.50-54). After discussing the most important structures, he heads towards the aisles and galleries, paying attention to the aesthetic values of multicoloured and shiny decorations (*Aed.* 1.1.54-63). Procopius also mentions the costly donations of Justinian in the summary (*Aed.* 1.1.64-65), thanks to which the emperor appears as an extremely generous donor, also keeping in mind the appropriate setting of the cult. After a very concise summary (*Aed.* 1.1.66-67) the author allows himself a recent digression, which involves technical difficulties that Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore the Elder had to struggle at the construction site (*Aed.* 1.1.68-78).

The description of the Church of Holy Wisdom is therefore well thought out in its structure, the order of the discussed parts is logical: from location in the city landscape and external view³⁰, to the inside, maintaining the hierarchy of importance of individual parts, as well as with a separate explanation of the most important structural problems. It can therefore be said that the paragraph about the main church of Constantinople was composed by Procopius in a fairly transparent way, even if sometimes the author is not able to fully discuss some architectural elements, which is probably due to insufficient expertise.

In terms of genre, the text about the Church of the Holy Wisdom is a prose ekphrasis³¹ (*ἔκφρασις*, *descriptio*), i.e. a rhetorical description, in this case of the building, although it also concerned people, paintings, sculptures and various events³². Learning to write ekphrases – since they acquired the status of a separate species, which happened during the Second Sophistic³³ – belonged to preliminary rhetorical exercises – (*προγυμνάσματα*, *praeexercitamenta*)³⁴. It was no different in Byzantium³⁵.

Even after a cursory analysis of Procopius' description, it can be stated that the author tried to meet rhetorical recommendations related to the creation of the correct ekphrasis, for which the test was whether he described the subject, person or event in a sufficiently vivid way in

³⁰ Procopius devotes little space to the exterior of the church, focusing almost entirely on what is inside. This approach also testifies to the logic of the speech, as well as the understanding of Byzantine architecture, in which the most important was the interior of the temple, dazzling decoration and completely overshadowing the outer walls, whose decoration often boiled down to a simple differentiation of the colour thread of the wall (alternating stripes of brick and white stone). This attitude is completely different from the one applied to ancient pagan temples, the construction of which was focused on the outer layer. This was due to the fact that the center of gravity of religious rites was outside – so the temple created the appropriate setting for the victims. Change came with Christianity, centred on the Eucharistic mystery taking place in the sanctuary. The faithful are therefore allowed inside to take part in it – the most important moment of transformation, however, remains inaccessible to their eyes.

³¹ This ekphrasis can also be seen as a rhetorical praise (*ἐγκώμιον*, *laus*) of the emperor, in which the main reason for glory was the construction of the magnificent temple.

³² V.S. Bartsch, J. Elsner, *Eight Ways of Looking at an Ekphrasis*, „Classical Philology”, 102/2007, no. 1, p. I-VI.

³³ R. Popowski, *Starożytny przewodnik po neapolitańskiej pinakotece*, in: Filostrat Starszy, *Obrazy*, trans. commentary and footnotes R. Popowski, Warszawa 2004, „Biblioteka Antyczna”, p. 32.

³⁴ H. Cichońka, *Ekfrazja*, in: *Encyklopedia kultury bizantyńskiej*, p. 157; idem, *Progymnasmata*, in: op. cit., p. 411. V. also: W. Juszczyk, *Ekfrazja poetycka w antycznej Grecji (wybrane przykłady)*, Warszawa 2012, especially pp. 7-20.

³⁵ H. Maguire, op. cit., p. 113. See also: J. Elsner, op. cit., pp. 39-40. On the Procopius' dialogue with ancient authors, v. A. Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea. Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*, Philadelphia 2004, pp 24-45.

a viewer's mind. This assumption was important because the subject of the description was usually not seen by the listeners. Therefore, one had to reach for various rhetorical means – aided by appropriate facial expressions and gestures – to obtain a convincing effect³⁶. Procopius of Caesarea also faced such a task, inviting his recipients to a kind of periegesis around the Church of Hagia Sophia.

Having briefly discussed the place of description in the whole work, its structure and content, as well as genre belonging, it is appropriate to proceed to a detailed analysis of the text.

Procopius first recalls the dramatic circumstances in which the decision to build a new Church of Hagia Sophia was made: “*Some men of the common herd, all the rubbish of the city, once rose up against the Emperor Justinian in Byzantium, when they brought about the rising called the Nika [...] they had the hardihood to fire the Church of the Christians, which the people of Byzantium call “Sophia,” an epithet which they have most appropriately invented for God, by which they call His temple*³⁷ [...]”; *So the whole church at that time lay a charred mass of ruins*” (Aed. 1.1.20-22)³⁸. Other historians also provide information on this subject, so that they are generally not the cause of research disputes. It is interesting to note the further statement: “*But the Emperor Justinian built not long afterwards a church so finely shaped*” (Aed. 1.1.22 βασιλεὺς δὲ Ἰουστινιανὸς τοιαύτην ἀποτετόρνενται)³⁹, since the expression in such a circular shape is found in Phaedrus (Phaed 234e), when Socrates discusses the issue of Phaedrus’ understanding and provokingly asks him (assuming apparent acceptance – ἐπιτροπή; concessio – for the statement he did not agree with): “*Well, but are you and I expected to praise the sentiments of the author, or only the clearness, and roundness, and finish, and tournure of the language?*⁴⁰ Procopius, in his statements, boasts his erudition more than it reflects the actual condition of the building that was not built on a circular plan, although its plan is characterised by a clear desire for centralisation, emphasised especially by the central dome. After giving due honours to Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus, as well as to other builders (whom he judges in a different way in the *Secret History*; (21.7-25), he praises the beauty of the church (*So the church has become a spectacle of marvellous beauty, overwhelming to those who see it, but to those who know it by hearsay*

³⁶ R. Popowski, op. cit., p. 34.

³⁷ On the subject of Procopius’ explanation of the Church of the Holy Wisdom v. Av. Cameron, *Procopius and the Church of St. Sophia*, „The Harvard Theological Review”, 58/1965, no. 1, pp. 161-163.

³⁸ Aed. 1.1.20-22: Ἄνδρες ἀγελαῖοι ποτε καὶ ὁ συρφετός ὅλος Ἰουστινιανῶ βασιλεῖ ἐν Βυζαντίῳ ἐπαναστάντες τὴν Νίκα καλουμένην στάσιν εἰργάσαντο, ἐμπρήσαι τῶν Χριστιανῶν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ἐτόλμησαν (Σοφίαν καλοῦσιν οἱ Βυζάντιοι τὸν νεὼν ἐπικαιριώτατα τῷ θεῷ τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν ἀπεργασάμενοι). ἡ μὲν οὖν ἐκκλησία ἐξηθρακωμένη τότε ζύμπασα ἔκειτο. [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Vol. VII. N.p.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library.]

³⁹ Aed. 1.1.22: βασιλεὺς δὲ Ἰουστινιανὸς τοιαύτην ἀποτετόρνενται. [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Vol. VII. N.p.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library. Web. 20 July 2020. <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>]

⁴⁰ Plato, Phaedrus, in: idem, *Dialogues*, trans. W. Witwicki, edited by Chmielewski, trans. Lam, Warsaw 2007, 234e, p. 24 (τί δέ; καὶ ταύτη δεῖ ὑπ ἐμοῦ τε καὶ σοῦ τὸν λόγον ἐπαινεθῆναι, ὡς τὰ δέοντα εἰρηκότος τοῦ ποιητοῦ, ἀλλ οὐκ ἐκείνη μόνον, ὅτι σαφὴ καὶ στρογγύλα, καὶ ἀκριβῶς ἕκαστα τῶν ὀνομάτων ἀποτετόρνενται). [T/N English quote source: Plato. *Phaedrus*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. Oxford, 1892. Project Gutenberg. Ed. Michael Hart. Web. 20 July 2020. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1636>]

altogether incredible; Aed.1.1.27⁴¹), which – although it could also have been the author’s real belief – belongs to the standard rhetorical formulas that were intended to arouse the curiosity of the recipient and make him want to listen further. The next sentences, although marked by an exaggeration (*ὑπερβολή, superlatio*) and adorned with a poetic comparison to a vessel (the temple is also animated because it is to look at the rest of the city), undoubtedly also referred to the real situation, because the Church of Hagia Sophia due to its outstanding size was the compositional dominant in the architectural landscape of Constantinople: “*it stands on high and looks down upon the remainder of the city, adorning it, because it is a part of it, but glorying in its own beauty, because, though a part of the city and dominating it, it at the same time towers above it to such a height that the whole city is viewed from there as from a watch-tower. (Aed. 1.1.27)*⁴². In this paragraph Procopius shows a certain urban consciousness – the building is an unusual decoration of the city and despite its expressiveness does not spoil the cohesion of the urban tissue, because it was well inscribed in it, so that, together with other buildings, it shapes the space of Constantinople.

The next paragraph, however, is definitely rhetorical (*Aed. 1.1.28-29*). Despite many words, it does not actually provide specific information, although the author refers here to the dimensions of the church in it. General wording – such as emphasising ideally harmonious proportions twice – may be the result of a lack of accurate knowledge of the dimensions of the temple. On the other hand, the author was not yet sure if he had already managed to convince his audience of the greatness of Justinian’s work. It is possible that both factors take place here – would Procopius knowing the exact dimensions of the building, not want to share this knowledge? Evagrius Scholasticus, younger than Procopius by several decades (about 532/537-about 594) in his *Church History*, provides precise data on this subject (*Hist. Eccl. 4.31*)⁴³. More personal perception may be hidden in a remark about sunlight (*Aed.1.1.29-30*), which, flooding the interior, reflects from the marble and fills the church with great light, giving the impression that the light source does not come from the sun, but arises inside (*φωτὶ δὲ καὶ ἡλίου μαρμαρυγαῖς ὑπερφυῶς πλήθει. φαίης ἂν οὐκ ἔξωθεν καταλάμπεσθαι ἡλίῳ τὸν χῶρον, ἀλλὰ τὴν αἴγλην ἐν αὐτῷ φύεσθαι, τοσαύτη τις φωτέχι*). Therefore, if it is a personal remark, then it testifies to the aesthetic sensitivity of Procopius, who did not remain indifferent

⁴¹ *Aed. 1.1.27: Θέαμα τοίνυν ἡ ἐκκλησία κεκαλλιστευμένον γεγένηται, τοῖς μὲν ὀρώσιν ὑπερφυῆς, τοῖς δὲ ἀκούς [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Vol. VII. N.p.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library. Web. 20 July 2020. <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>]*

⁴² *Aed. 1.1.27: ἐπιρταί μὲν γὰρ ἐς ὕψος οὐράνιον ὄσον, καὶ ὡσπερ τῶν ἄλλων οἰκοδομημάτων ἀποσαλεύουσα ἐπινέουκεν ὑπερκειμένη τῇ ἄλλῃ πόλει, κοσμοῦσα μὲν αὐτήν, ὅτι αὐτῆς ἔστιν, ὠραιζομένη δὲ, ὅτι αὐτῆς οὐσα καὶ ἐπεμβαίνουσα τοσοῦτον ἀνέχει ὥστε διῆ ἐνθένδε ἡ πόλις ἐκ περιωπῆς ἀποσκοπεῖται . [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Vol. VII. E.g.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library. Web. 20 July 2020. <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>]*

⁴³ V. Evagrius Scholasticus *Historia Ecclesiastica* “*But in order to convey a more distinct idea of this wonderful fabric, I have thought proper to set down in feet, its length, breadth, and height, as well as the span and height of the arches, as follows:--The length from the door facing the sacred apse where are performed the rites of the bloodless sacrifice, to the apse, is one hundred and ninety feet: the breadth from north to south is one hundred and fifteen feet: the depth from the centre of the hemisphere to the floor is one hundred and eighty feet: the span of each of the arches is * * * feet: the length, however, from east to west is two hundred and sixty feet; and the range of the lights seventy-five feet*” [T/N quote source: Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* (AD431-594), translated by E. Walford (1846). Web 18 July 2020 http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/evagrius_4_book4.htm]

to the beauty of the play of light⁴⁴. This does not seem impossible as the church actually fills with an amazing glow, which in the time of Procopius was probably more intense because of the candles that lit the interior⁴⁵.

After a general introduction, the author proceeds to a detailed description of the building structure (*Aed.* 1.1.31-46). The information is so accurate that it should be assumed that he made the effort to look closely at the church and then describe in his own words. Thus, this paragraph has clear traces of familiarity with the interior in question from an examination. However, there are some difficulties in specifying the described architectural elements clearly and precisely. Nevertheless, reliable information can also be found. The author explains that the church is closed from the east by the apse of a semicircular plan (*ὑμικύλινδρος*), which is flanked by two half domes crowned with hemispheres that support the central dome. The description can also be quite complicated because of the circumlocution (*περίφρασις*, *circumitio* / *circumlocutio*) used, as when, for example, when instead of simply saying that it is a conch, it speaks of the “form of a crescent” (*μηνοειδές τι*) and “a quarter of the dome” (*σφαίρας τεταρτημόριον*). In this case, however, it could have been the result of care for the use of the classical Attic Greek. Therefore, Procopius did not decide to use the word “κόνχη” in its non-classical meaning, i.e. referring to the architectural element⁴⁶. Staying in the eastern part, he mentions the columns of exedra, which *do not stand in a straight line, but they retreat inward in the pattern of the semicircle (hēmikyklon) as if they were yielding to one another in a choral dance* (*Aed.* 1.1.35)⁴⁷ and once again he uses a poetic comparison. Then he leads us to the central part of the church and devotes a lot of space to discuss four huge supports (*λόλοι*) in the form of pillars (*πεσσοί*) – compared to steep, mountain peaks – carrying the dome. Between them – from both the south and the north – four columns (*τέσσαρας κίονας*) were placed, which separate the space of the nave from the aisles. He also noted that the pillars are also adjacent to the apses (*ἄψιδες*), two from the east and two from the west (*Aed.* 1.1.37-40). After discussing the pillars, he goes to the dome, but this time he does not use the word “σφαίρα”, but again reaches for the periphrase: *Upon the crowns of the arches rests a circular structure (kykloterês oikodomia), cylindrical (strongylon) in shape* (*Aed.* 1.1.41)⁴⁸. He also adds that through its numerous window openings, daylight flows into the interior, and – with a characteristic exaggeration – that it dominates the whole world. He correctly notes that the dome is supported by four pendentives (*τρίγωνα*), but the description of this construction is quite complicated. However, no one can deny him accuracy – the author

⁴⁴ Cf. Paweł Silencjariusz, *Iluminacja kopuły kościoła Mądrości Bożej*, translation A. Szastyńska-Siemion, in: *Muza chrześcijańska. Poezja grecka od II do XV wieku*, introduction and selection, ed. M. Starowiejski, Kraków 2014, pp. 177-178.

⁴⁵ Currently, intensive research is conducted on the original impact of Byzantine art, including architectural interiors. On this topic in the context of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, v. n. Schibille, op. cit.; B. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics*, *Gesta*, 50/2/2011, p. 93-114.

⁴⁶ V.P.L. Grotowski, op. cit., p. 56

⁴⁷ *Aed.* 1.1.35: οὐδὲ αὐτοὶ κατ' εὐθὴ ἐστῶτες, ἀλλ' εἴσω κατὰ σχῆμα τὸ ἡμικυκλον ὅσπερ ἐν χορῶ ἀλλήλοις ὑπεξιστάμενοι. [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Vol. VII. E.g.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library. Web. 18 July 2020 <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>]

⁴⁸ *Aed.* 1.1.41: ὑπερθεν δὲ αὐτῶν κυκλωτερῆς οἰκοδομία ἐν στρογγύλῳ ἐπήρται. [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H. B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Vol. VII. E.g.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library. Web. 18 July 2020 <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>]

made efforts to express himself as precisely as possible. He also emphasises the beauty of the dome – recognising it as the main decoration of the church: *upon this circle rests the huge spherical dome (sphaeroeidês tholos) which makes the structure exceptionally beautiful. Yet it seems not to rest upon solid masonry, but to cover the space with its golden dome (sphaira) suspended from Heaven*⁴⁹ (*Aed.* 1.1.45-46)⁵⁰. Recognising that the dome has been properly described, it extensively summarises the uniqueness and beauty of this part of the Church of the Holy Wisdom: once again he mentions the harmony of all elements, and also – perhaps referring to his own feeling – he adds that when you look at the dome, everything swirls in front of your eyes so that you do not know which way to look (*Aed.* 1.1.47-49).

Before proceeding to discuss the remaining parts of the church, Procopius allows himself a longer remark on how to erect pillars (*Aed.* 1.1.50-54). Although at the beginning he modestly emphasises that his mind is not able to comprehend all the intricacies of difficult architectural art – which is a standard rhetorical trick – after a while he gives a display of his erudition, accurately explaining the construction method by which the pillars are strong enough that they can bear the weight of the dome and provide the entire structure with adequate stability. Despite the precision and use of professional terminology, you can also catch some inaccuracies (e.g. that he speaks of a rectangular plan of pillars, when it is actually irregular), which show that Procopius did not have sufficiently accurate knowledge on architecture. Therefore, this description – although at first glance extremely precise – is the subject of discussion as some researchers find it unreliable⁵¹.

The author devotes less attention to the rest of the church. He notes, however, the most important parts (*Aed.* 1.1.54-59), i.e. colonnades (*στοαί*) separating the main nave from the side naves (in which one was for women and the other for men) and galleries (*ύπερώα*). He also adds that the vaults are covered with gold, whose glow, however, outshines the light reflected from the marble. The paragraph only at the beginning provides relatively accurate information about the architectural form, because it quickly turns into an extremely rhetorised passage, starting with a few rhetorical questions, in which the author suggests that the beauty of the temple is so incredible that no one will be able to convey it in words. He compares the mass of colours associated with colourful marbles and gold to a meadow full of blooming flowers⁵²: *that he had come upon a meadow with its flowers in full bloom. For he would surely marvel at the purple of some, the green tint of others, and at those on which the crimson glows and those from which the white flashes, and again at those which Nature, like some painter, varies with the most contrasting colours.* (*Aed.* 1.1.60)⁵³. Despite the clear rhetorical exaggeration of the above quotation, it cannot be presumed that Procopius was not really

⁴⁹ Cf. *Linę na szczycie Olimpu zawieście zlotą (σειρήν χρυσεῖην ἐξ οὐρανόθεν κρεμάσαντες)*. Homer, *Iliad*, trans. K. Jeżewska, compiled by J. Łanowski, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1972, 8.18.

⁵⁰ *Aed.* 1.1.45-46: *τούτον δὲ τοῦ κυκλωτεροῦς παμμεγέθους ἐπανεστηκυῖα τις σφαιροειδῆς θόλος ποιεῖται αὐτὸ διαόεε. δοκεῖ δὲ οὐκ ἐπὶ στερρᾶς τῆς οἰκοδομίας ἐστάναι, ἀλλὰ τῆ σφαίρα τῆ χρυσεῖ ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἐξημέενο.* [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey. Vol. VII. E.g.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library. Web. 18 July 2020 <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>]

⁵¹ V. Prokopiusz z Cezarei, *O budowlach*, p. 88, footnote 32.

⁵² V.N. Schibille, op. cit., pp. 99-109.

⁵³ *Aed.* 1.1.60: *λειμῶνι τις ἂν ἐντετυχηκέναι δόξειεν ὥραϊο τὸ ἄνθος. θαυμάσειε γὰρ ἂν εἰκότως τῶν μὲν ἀλουργόν, τῶν δὲ τὸ λευκὸν ἀπαστράπτει, ἔτι μέντοι καὶ οὓς ταῖς ἐναντιωτάταις ποικίλλει χροιαῖς ὥσπερ τις ζωγράφος ἢ φύσις.* [T/N source of the quote in English: Procopius. *Procopius: Buildings*. Trans. H.B. Dewing and Glanville Downey.

delighted with the interior colours, the more that he had already let him know that he was not indifferent to aesthetic values⁵⁴. Perhaps, however, he did not want to deviate from certain patterns and dressed his personal sensations in fairly conventional words, understandable to his circle of late-antique audiences. The author also believes that such a great architectural form and decoration help the faithful raise their thoughts to God, who must be close in such an interior. He also emphasises that the temple always makes a dazzling impression, not just during the first visit. Its beauty pleases those who pray, and even makes them better, because after leaving they indulge in lofty conversations about the building (*Aed.* 1.1.61-63). Certainly, this paragraph of the text is a full of exaggeration, but thanks to it it emphatically emphasises the extraordinary nature of the Church of the Holy Wisdom – it is difficult for anyone after such a description to remain unperturbed and not eager to see it with their own eyes. In addition, in this way, Procopius expressed his writing skill, because the use of various figures was to give the recipients pleasure, and it seems that in the description of this church he managed to achieve it in a very successful way. It must not be forgotten that the Byzantine historian did not write that today it could be – inch by inch – reproduced the work of Justinian, but to praise the founder⁵⁵ and give a description that will appeal to the imagination of the recipients (although the information purpose is certainly not insignificant). This passage actually ends the description of the church. Procopius also mentions – likewise exaggerating – the gifts of Justinian (*Aed.* 1.1.64-66), and in the end he gives another anecdote that emphasises the commitment and wisdom of the emperor (*Aed.* 1.1.67-78). Although the presentation of Justinian as a providential man can be considered the writer's total creative invention, certainly another mention of technical difficulties emphasises how amazing and innovative the work the architects managed to make.

Conclusions

Procopius of Caesarea left us a valuable description of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The fact that the church still exists is not without significance, which facilitates the understanding of some passages – without it they would seem quite vague. Although after more scrutinised examination, it is evident that the author lacks specific knowledge on architecture, he did not make the description of the structure badly. Care for precision and accuracy can also be seen – though not always as successful.

The description does not lack rhetorical figures – especially hyperboles, extensive and poetic comparisons, as well as periphrases and rhetorical questions – as well as conventional phrases and allusions to classical literature. It is hard to resist the impression that the author tried very hard to make his style give pleasure to readers. Hence parts on technical issues are usually intertwined with rhetorical passages that both decorate the text and make it more accessible.

It can therefore be concluded that Procopius in his description fulfilled both the requirements of reliable historiography and rhetorical recommendations regarding ekphrasis.

Vol. VII. E.g.: Harvard UP, 1940. Print. Loeb Classical Library. Web. 18 July 2020 <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>]

⁵⁴ V.A. Cutler, *Structure and Aesthetic at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople*, „The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 25/1966, no. 1, pp. 27-35.

⁵⁵ V.J. Elsner, op. cit., p. 43-49.

It also both teaches (*docere*) and delights (*delectare*), but also moves (*movere*) thanks to anecdotes that bind the whole text together. Naturally, you can make a lot of reservations – especially when it comes to the precision of the description of architecture – but do not forget that the goal was primarily to praise Justinian as a tireless builder. In addition, contemporary expectations, especially of architectural researchers, are different and much more rigorous, however, Procopius did not promise a professional treatise, but a text that will not let you forget about the achievements of Emperor Justinian I. In fact, he fully achieved this goal.

**“Procopius of Caesarea’s description of the Church of the Holy Wisdom
in Constantinople – between historiography and rhetoric”**

Summary

The sixth-century historian Procopius of Caesarea described the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople in his treatise “Περὶ κτισμάτων” (“On Buildings”). The text about the Church of the Holy Wisdom is the only surviving historical source for the original Justinianic edifice before the collapse of its first dome in 558. This detailed and elaborate description of the church is an example of ekphrasis. Ekphrasis is a rhetorical technique which makes the described object visible. In this paper I will attempt to analyse how far Procopius’ description is a rhetorical exercise, and how far it is a trustworthy historical source.

Keywords: Procopius of Caesarea, ekphrasis, Hagia Sophia, “On Buildings”

Note about the Author: Magdalena Garnczarska is currently a doctoral student at the Faculty of History of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and studies in classical philology. Her main research interests include Byzantine art, especially its iconography, as well as Byzantine texts on artistic issues.