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# WHERE THE LINE IS DRAWN: TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE IN THE *HISTORIES* OF AGATHIAS[1]

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***Abstract***

*This paper proposes a radical departure from previous studies of Agathias, an under-studied Late Antique author who offers us a unique perspective of the 6th century when we consider the milieu in which he wrote his* Histories. *Agathias, this paper argues, exhibited signs of trauma from the news of constant warfare in Italy and the Caucasus and the barbarian raids on Constantinople, all of which he tried to process and resolve by creating a narrative, which was filled with inconsistencies and moralizing tangents. Agathias'* Histories *is more than his impartial and accurate retelling of events; it is his attempt to make sense of his trauma with the written word.*

***Keywords: Agathias, Khosrow I, Justinian, Trauma, Narrative, Memory***

In the preface of his *Histories*, the poet and advocate Agathias of Myrma laid bare the aim and purpose of his work:

> Seeing that in my own lifetime it has come to pass that great wars have broken out unexpectedly in many parts of the world, that wholesale migrations of barbarian peoples have taken place, that bewildering vicissitudes of fortune have occurred and unforeseeable and incredible events which in their outcome have upset all calculation, that nations have been wiped out, cities enslaved, populations uprooted and displaced so that all mankind has been involved in the upheaval; seeing therefore that these and similar things had taken place I was seized with vague misgivings and felt that it might be altogether reprehensible if I, for my part, were to pass over in silence and fail to record such staggering and

[1] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *The Independent Scholar* for their positive feedback, as well my students, Lucca Ogushi and Ian Armijo-Gay, for their most helpful suggestions on earlier versions of this article, and my colleague, Jessie Poggi, for expanding my understanding of trauma and narrative.



> momentous occurrences, occurrences which might well have a positive value for posterity. I decided therefore that it was not out of place for me to try my hand at history.[2]

On the surface, Agathias' aim is simple: Events of enormous magnitude happened in his lifetime with negative consequences affecting all humanity, and he sought to better the world by documenting the events of his time for posterity. More importantly, however, in his preface, we can detect that the calamities of which Agathias spoke had left a mark upon him and how he viewed the world.

This paper argues that the events documented in Agathias' *Histories* shed light on the trauma he faced during the 6th century CE, which is a radical departure from previous studies of Agathias. Constant warfare between the Roman Empire and its enemies in Italy, North Africa, the Iberian peninsula, and *Ērānšahr* (the Sasanian Empire) characterized this era, events that could have negatively affected some people who lived through it. Therefore, Agathias' narrative is not just a document of events, but a testament to how he processed his trauma with the written word. As Nigel C. Hunt explains, "A common way for many people to deal with their traumatic memories is to write them down as a story; this, for some, is an effective way of dealing with memories."[3] In other words, creating a narrative of one's experiences allows one to deal with what happened and why. The key to understanding Agathias is to realize that the events of his time affected him profoundly and negatively affected his life, which bled into his work with his inconsistencies, moralizing observations, and judgments. Before we proceed, this paper uses Ron Eyerman's definition of trauma: "The impact of shocking occurrences which profoundly affect an individual's life," an emotional shock so powerful that it breaches "the mind's experience of time, self and the world."[4] What is more, Peter A. Levine, in his groundbreaking *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*, notes that shock trauma "occurs when we experience potentially life-threatening events that overwhelm our capacities to respond effectively."[5] Levine continues that "traumatic symptoms are not caused by the 'triggering' event itself. They stem from the frozen residue of energy that has not been resolved and discharged; this residue remains trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirits."[6] It is this stagnant psychic "energy" that Agathias had to work out of his system by creating a narrative to resolve his trauma.

A paper such as this is essential because Procopius of Caesaria, Agathias' immediate predecessor, has received significant attention from scholars throughout the years, while Agathias has gotten comparable little. 1970 saw the publication of *Agathias* by Averil Cameron, in which she argued that Agathias was Christian and a poor historian.[7] Cameron then continued her work on Agathias in her seminal paper, "Agathias on the Sasanians," in which she attempted to sort out fact from fiction in Agathias' portrayal of Iranian history.[8] Anthony Kaldellis wrote "Agathias on History and Poetry" in 1997, arguing that Agathias constructed "highly nuanced images in the course of [his] narratives, and of cleverly using classical allusions to make innovative philosophical arguments."[9] Then, in 1999, Kaldellis wrote an article in response to Cameron's book, "The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias: A Reinterpretation," in which he argues that Agathias is not, in fact, Christian[10] and deftly illuminates the complexity of Agathias as a human being.[11] In 2003, Kaldellis published his article, "Things are Not What They Are: Agathias 'Mythistoricus' and the Last Laugh of Classical Culture," in which he examines the influence of the classical past, tinged with allusions of mythical characters, on Agathias and his work.[12]

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[2] Agathias, 1975, pp. 4–5.
[3] Hunt, 2010, p. 161.
[4] Eyerman, 2013, pp. 41–42.
[5] Levine, 1997, p. 37.
[6] Levine, 1997, pp. 51, 255.
[7] Eyerman, 2013, p. 101.
[8] Cameron, 1969/1970, p. 69.
[9] Kaldellis, 1997, pp. 295–296.
[10] Kaldellis, 1999, p. 249.
[11] Kaldellis, 1999, pp. 207, 252.
[12] Kaldellis, 2003, pp. 295–300.



Michael Maas, also in 2003, wrote "'Delivered from their Ancient Customs:' Christianity and the Question of Cultural Change in Early Byzantine Ethnography," in which he proved that Agathias considered the barbarians were becoming "civilized" by adapting Roman cultural practices.[13] Warren Treadgold's 2007 monograph, *The Early Byzantine Historians*, offers a biography of Agathias and criticizes his skills as a historian.[14] In 2010, Begoña Ortega Villaro published "Some Characteristics of the Works of Agathias: Morality and Satire." She examined how Agathias mixed poetry and history to demonstrate his complex point of view.[15] Scott McDonough's 2011 article, "Were the Sasanians Barbarians? Roman

z Writers on the 'Empire of the Persians'" examines why Agathias hated the Iranians with such a passion, as he is one of the most important sources we have on ancient Iranian history.[16] In 2013, Anthony Kaldellis published his book, *Ethnography After Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*, in which he examines Agathais' efforts to be an "objective" ethnographer, especially of the Iranians.[17] Finally, in 2020, Marco Cristini performed a philological study of Agathias' work in the article, "Frankish ἁρμοσταί in Lucca? Reading Agathias Hist. 1.18.5."[18] This paper seeks to illuminate further Agathias and his importance as a source for Late Antique studies by studying him through a trauma-informed lens to understand why there are inconsistencies and moralizing judgments in his work.

Reservations about this methodology are understandable. Agathias is not alive to tell us his thoughts and feelings as he wrote his historical narrative; nor does this paper seek to understand the truth of Agathias' *Histories*. This paper attempts to illuminate an under-studied area of Late Antique research: the emotions of people who lived in eras of such historical importance. Researchers in the past have shunned areas of inquiry like this to focus on uncovering the truth, a truly noble endeavor. This paper, however, seeks to bring Agathias and his potential emotional state into the limelight to underscore how complex and terrifying the events of Late Antiquity could have been to those who lived through them. As such, this paper examines events and attempts to understand how Agathias may have interpreted the truth as he saw it, which may contradict the established historical narrative. This paper does not seek to undermine or challenge what other historians have written about Agathias; instead, it studies Agathias himself as a human being and what he may have experienced and the emotions he may have felt. Agathias was not an abstraction; he was flesh and blood and had thoughts and fears and desires and complexities that influenced how he viewed the world and he wrote about it. The fact that the events of his time may have traumatized Agathias shows us how human beings throughout time have been intimately connected to the wider zeitgeist much like you and me, which makes the past more alive. We as historians should focus more on these potential areas of research.

Agathias is the prime candidate to study Late Antiquity through a trauma-informed lens; while he was a trained lawyer and poet in sixth-century Constantinople, he was not part of the literary elite;[19] nor did he personally witness many of the events he described.[20] Agathias was an ordinary person reacting to the news of his time—and the network to share news and information was extensive through eyewitness reports, imperial *communiqués* and propaganda, and rumors[21]—and it is the constant news of those events that traumatized Agathias. What is more, as a civilian during a time of constant warfare, Agathias had little to no control over his situation, unlike a soldier in combat,[22] and he was inundated with a stream of horrific news from abroad without recourse. According to Hunt, the lack of control in stressful situations, as in the case of Agathias, triggers an individual's traumatic response, which supports Levine's hypothesis

[13] Maas, 2003, pp. 171–174.
[14] Treadgold, 2007a, pp. 279–290.
[15] Ortega Villaro, 2010, p. 287.
[16] McDonough, 2011b, p. 55.
[17] Kaldellis, 2013, p. 29.
[18] Cristini, 2020, pp. 163–164.
[19] McDonough, 2011b, p. 59.
[20] Cameron, 1970, pp. 39–44.
[21] For the modes of communication in the ancient world, see Graham, 2006, pp. 79–101; Ando, 2000, pp. 73–130, 207, 253–256.
[22] For more on this nexus in trauma studies, see Hunt, 2010, pp. 114, 125.



of stagnant psychic energy affecting traumatized people.[23] The only way to process this trauma and pain was for Agathias to create a narrative to make sense of what traumatized him, a drive that all human beings share. As Levine states, "The drive to complete and heal trauma is as powerful and tenacious as the symptoms it creates. The urge to resolve trauma through re-enactment can be severe and compulsive. We are inextricably drawn into situations that replicate the original trauma in both obvious and unobvious ways."[24]

Because Agathias had created his narrative to pass on the pain[25] onto the pages of his work, he did not shy away from nakedly inserting his personal opinions and moral judgments in his *Histories*.[26] He was able to moralize and judge the events of his time because he was not attempting to be impartial; he was trying to make sense of his world and his trauma. This context has been missing in previous studies of Agathias because previous scholars have found him lacking as a historian, which colored how they interpreted Agathias' use as a primary source. These inconsistencies and moralizing tendencies can be explained by examining how the events of Agathias' era affected him as he wrote his *Histories*. At least one scholar, Thomas Sizgorich, has brilliantly described Agathias' narrative "as much as confession as imperialist fantasy."[27] This observation is the foundation for the argument of this present article: Agathias' work is unique among Late Antique historians; his narrative of events, which may or may not present the absolute truth of what happened, demonstrates how the events of his time could affect his psyche and mental health.

Agathias began his *Histories* by examining the situation in Italy. Emperor Justinian I's (r. 527 –565) twenty year-effort to restore Italy to the Roman Empire and to impose orthodox Christianity in Europe was seemingly successful. The last Ostrogothic king of Italy, Teïas, was killed in the Battle of Mons Lactarius in 552 in his last attempt to drive the Romans back to the sea. According to Procopius, the war in Italy was over.[28] Agathias, however, had a different opinion on the matter and offered his reader the following observation that things are not all well in the world:

> This turn of events led everyone to suppose that the fighting in Italy had been brought to a successful conclusion: in reality it had scarcely begun. I am convinced, for my part, that our generation shall see no end to such ills, since, human nature, being what it is, they are a permanent and ever increasing phenomenon and, indeed, one which is practically old as man himself… I do not think it is right… to hold the Divinity responsible for fighting and bloodshed. No, I could never put forward or accept the view that a benevolent being, which is the negation of all evil, could delight in wholesale slaughter. **It is the souls of men that lapse voluntarily into greed and violence and fill every land with wars and dissensions, giving rise thereby to widespread destruction, to the uprooting of whole nations and to countless other horrors**.[29]

The effect of Agathias' language is striking. Here, Agathias is reacting to events that had a long history before he wrote those words. The war in Italy, at this point, had been raging for almost twenty years, and people paid the price of that war in blood, as other Late Antique authors have also observed. Theophanes Confessor wrote that during this time, "neither war nor death stopped weighing on men"[30] and that Justinian's armies brought "horror and ruin" to Italy.[31] Procopius, in his *Anecdota*, wrote, "a myriad myriads of myriads perished"[32] because of Justinian's actions and "during his reign the whole earth was constantly drenched with human blood shed by both the Romans and practically all the barbarians."[33] The effects of Justinian's efforts in Italy left their mark upon later authors, and, most immediately, Agathias. For instance, when the Goths captured Milan from the Romans and razed it to the ground in 539, they also

[23] Hunt, 2010, p. 11.
[24] Levine, 1997, p 305; Kraemer, 2015, p. 59.
[25] For the "Law of Pain," see Dawes, 2013, p. 153.
[26] Cameron, 1970, pp. 33, 39 44–49, 53–56; Kaldellis, 1999, p. 208; Kaldellis, 1997, p. 305; Kaldellis, 2013, pp. 23, 71.
[27] Sizgorich, 2006, p. 176.
[28] Procopius, 2006b, 8.35.7–38.
[29] Agathias, 1975, 1.1.2,4–5.
[30] Theophanes Confessor, 1997, AM 6026.
[31] Sizgorich, 2006, p. 170.
[32] Procopius, 2006a, 18.4.
[33] Procopius, 2006a, 18.30.



massacred over three hundred thousand males and enslaved all the women in the city.[34] The Romans, in turn, committed the same atrocities in Naples in 536, when they, too, slaughtered and enslaved indiscriminately[35] after having captured the city. Rome itself had been reduced to rubble due to the intense fighting.[36] These are the events to which Agathias alluded in his preface and the events with which he mentally grappled. For Agathias, one seemingly successful battle could not end the bloodshed in Italy.

Based on his evocative imagery, Agathias may not have found inspiration in the Roman Empire's actions in Italy, even after the Romans soundly defeated the Ostrogoths in 554; he may have had the opposite reaction due to the protracted nature of this seemingly endless war. This phenomenon is common. In their respective studies on Procopius, Michael Stewart and Anthony Kaldellis have proven that Procopius, too, had let emotion bleed into his work as he became frustrated with the bungling of Justinian's war to reconquer Italy.[37] As for Agathias, after Roman forces annihilated the barbarians at the Battle of the Volturnus, he wrote that the Romans buried their dead, plundered the enemy's camp, and returned to Rome, singing of their victory. At Capua, Agathias noted, "as far as the outlying districts presented the spectacle of fields running with blood and the riverside flooded with an overflow of corpses."[38]

It is crucial to consider the *milieu* in which Agathias wrote his narrative. By the time Agathias wrote his *Histories*, the Roman military had been fighting not only in Italy but also in North Africa, Spain, Asia Minor, and the Caucasus,[39] all of which harmed Agathias emotionally and colored how he approached his work; especially one of the worst disasters in Roman history, which occurred in Agathias' lifetime. In 540, the armies of Xusrō I (r. 531–579), *šahanšah* of the Iranians, destroyed Antioch and captured its residents, sending shockwaves throughout the Roman Empire.[40] The spread of rumors and graphic stories of victories, defeats, death, and ruin overseas, circulating the Roman world, had left a horrible mark upon Agathias' psyche. The images of the traumatic events around him would have been indelibly etched upon his memory, which would color his narrative when he wrote it. Let us consider the Iranians, the Romans' greatest threat and rivals, and turn our gaze to Lazica and the Roman-Iranian war over it, as it takes up considerable space in Agathias' *Histories*.

Lazica was located in modern-day Georgia in the Caucasus, the rugged, mountainous region between eastern Europe and the Middle East. The Romans and Iranians had both spent time, money, and blood to control the region and its access points to vast trade networks,[41] gold and silver deposits,[42] and to prevent invasions by the other side.[43] Whoever controlled the Caucasus could control the entire ancient Mediterranean world. Before the *Histories* the Romans and Iranians negotiated the so-called "Endless Peace" in 532 after the Iberian War (526–531), a conflict over the Caucasus and Mesopotamia. At the very least, the "Endless Peace" stipulated that the Romans and Iranians would view each other as partners in the Caucasus. This truce was broken in 541 with the outbreak of the Lazic War.[44]

Lazica had been a client state of the Romans at least two decades before the war and had practiced Christian orthodoxy with the Romans; that, however, changed due to Roman pressure,[45] mismanagement,[46] and mistreatment of the local populace,[47] all of which led to elements of the Lazi to defect to the Iranians. Xusrō I was overjoyed at the prospect of

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[34] Procopius, 2006b, 6.21.39–49; Pohl, 2006, pp. 16, 20.
[35] Procopius, 2006b, 5.10.29; Pohl, 2006, pp. 16–17; Stewart and Lillington-Martin, 2021, pp. 292–293.
[36] Stewart, 2020, pp. 20–21.
[37] Stewart, 2020, pp. 58–59 and Kaldellis, 2010, pp. 257–260.
[38] Agathias, 1975, 2.10.8.
[39] For Justinian's wars, see Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen, 2017, pp. 277–279; Evans, 2000, pp. 126–157.
[40] A point to which I shall return. See Count Marcellinus, 1995, 2; John Malalas, 1986, 18.87; Greatrex, 2005, p. 489; Dignas and Winter, 2007, p. 109; Treadgold, 2007b, pp. 193–194; Firdausí, 1915a, 13.
[41] Braund, 1991, pp. 222–224; Braund, 2004, pp. 40–42, 58, 65.
[42] Haldon, 2005, p. 33; Braund, 2004, p. 43.
[43] Braund, 2004, p. 273.
[44] Procopius, 2006b, 8.4.5. For an overview of the Lazic War, see Braund, 2004, pp. 268–314.
[45] Kruse, 2013, p. 871.
[46] Cameron, 1970, p. 128; Braund, 2004, p. 292.
[47] Theophanes Confessor, 1997, AM 6046; Procopius, 2006b, 2.15.6; Procopius, 2006b, 8.16.2–4; Braund, 1991, p. 223; Dignas and



annexing more territory in the strategic Caucasus,[48] for he, too, understood its importance as an invasion point of the Roman Empire,[49] and Emperor Justinian was terrified at the prospect of losing Lazica for that very reason.[50]

The Romans blundered their way through Lazica to retake it while the Iranians further entrenched themselves. Then, John and Rusticus, brothers who both held the rank of general, accused the Lazi king Gubazes II (r. 541–555) of personally betraying the Romans. John and Rusticus then murdered Gubazes II during a botched arrest attempt, further straining Roman-Lazic relations.[51] Any lingering feelings of affection among the Lazi evaporated, and the Roman war effort in Lazica halted after the disastrous Battle of Onoguris (c. 554). Amid this volatile situation, however, the Lazi buckled under life with their Zoroastrian allies, the Iranians, and then defected back to the Romans, their co-religionists.[52] In order to ameliorate the Lazis' feelings and to ensure that they would not switch sides again and endanger the Roman Empire to a potential Iranian invasion from Lazica,[53] Justinian named Gubazes' brother, Tzath II (r. 555),[54] as king of the Lazi and dispatched a senator named Athanasius to bring the murders of Gubazes to justice.[55]

How Agathias depicted the trial of John and Rusticus is of particular importance because he demonstrated subtle observations that betray how he interpreted this event. Imagine Athanasius, decked in Roman imperial regalia, bringing centuries of Roman legal tradition and *gravitas* to Lazica to try his compatriots for the murder of a vassal king.

Arranged before Athanasius is the prosecution and the defendants, John and Rusticus. Then the trial begins with the prosecution's opening statements. Agathias depicts the prosecutor, an unknown Lazi, as arguing before the court, "The Colchian state [Lazica] is in ruins, indeed it would be more accurate to say, "The Empire is in ruins…." The stability and integrity of your regime has been destroyed and your own power is sadly weakened as a result."[56] Here, Agathias, using the words of the Lazi prosecutor, critiques the state of the Roman Empire; his empire is in ruins because of the constant war and the actions of his compatriots when they assassinated a foreign king, which resulted in the prolonging of the Lazic War and more dead.

John and Rusticus gave their defense. Neither man denied murdering Gubazes but instead testified that they did kill the king and would "depart from this life comforted and fortified for our journey into the hereafter by the conscious certainty that we have left the Romans still in full possession of their Cochian [Lazic] domains."[57] The defendants continued: Gubazes' "intention was to undermine as best he could the widespread belief among foreign people concerning the triumphant and invincible might of the Emperor,"[58] and that what they did was for the common good of the Roman Empire.[59]

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Winter, 2007, p. 40.

[48] Braund, 2004, p. 295. The Sasanian dynasty lost a foothold in the Caucasus when many Armenians converted to Christianity in AD 301 and were eager to reestablish a foothold in that region. See McDonough, 2011, p. 301.

[49] Procopius, 2006b, 8.7.13, 8.12.17.

[50] Agathias, 1975, 2.18.7; Procopius, 2006b, 8.15.11–12; Kruse, 2013, p. 870. For Justinian's attempts at fortifying the Caucasus, see Procopius, 2006c, 3.3.9–14, 3.6.1–26, 3.6.5–9; Howard-Johnston, 1989, pp. 214–219; Greatrex, 2005, p. 487; Treadgold, 2007b, p. 193.

[51] Agathias, 1975, 3.4.1–6.

[52] Agathias, 1975, 3.14.1. For the Lazi shifting alliances between the Romans and Iranians, see Heather, 2018, p. 226; Sizgorich, 2006, p. 168; Greatrex, 2005, pp. 496–498; Evans, 2000, pp. 91–94, 156–168; Braund, 2004, p. 271. For a brief history of Christianity in Georgia, see Rapp, 2014, pp. 3–6; for tensions between Christian Georgia, Lazica, and Zoroastrian *Ērānšahr*, see 83–85.

[53] Sizgorich, 2006, p. 169; Braund, 2004, p. 297.

[54] Agathias, 1975, 3.15.2.

[55] Agathias, 1975, 3.14.4.

[56] Agathias, 1975, 4.3.4.

[57] Agathias, 1975, 4.7.5.

[58] Agathias, 1975, 4.9.3

[59] Agathias, 1975, 4.10.5.



Because of the precarious situation in Lazica—Justinian could ill afford to lose the support of a Caucasian people when he had Italy to pacify, and the ever-present Iranian threat—Athanasius judged the evidence and ordered the beheadings of John and Rusticus. The following paragraph suggests that not all was well in Lazica and in Agathias' mind after the verdict's execution. John and Rusticus were paraded around on mules while a herald proclaimed their crimes, giving the Lazi the spectacle of the regicides' humiliation. Agathias noted taht the Lazi were impressed with the sight until John and Rusticus' decapitation, as "everyone was moved to pity and forgot his resentment."[60]

Agathias then moves his reader along with alacrity, without a chance to reflect because another crisis in the Caucasus awaits. The Misimians, another Caucasian tribe, observed the Roman and Iranian war for Lazica, and they decided to ally themselves with the Iranians to prevent their annexation into the Roman Empire.[61] Načoragān, the Iranian *spahbed* (general) in charge of the war effort in the Caucasus, gladly received the Misimians' offer of friendship. The Romans, however, sent envoys to the Misimians to entice them to their side. The Misimians murdered the envoys and started ambushing Roman patrols, acts that Agathias called "criminal folly,"[62] which the Romans could not let go unanswered. The degree of fervor, however, with which the Romans retaliated against the Misimians moved Agathias to pity.

The Romans raided the Misimians' fort, catching the barbarians by surprise in their sleep. Agathias describes the Romans cutting down waves and waves of Misimians as they tried to leave their houses during the commotion. Women were not spared, including one who took a spear in the belly, reaping "the reward of their menfolk's treachery."[63] During the slaughter, the Romans began setting torches to the fort, which lit it up like a beacon in the dead of night. Those who stayed indoors were burned alive, while the Romans killed those who escaped the flames.[64] It is not hard to imagine this scene: The burning fort, turning night into day, and the screams of the Misimians piercing the air as the Romans did their deadly work.

Agathias reports the raid clinically because, as he admits, Misimians did breach acceptable behavior by killing the envoys. War is messy, and sometimes innocent people die; Agathias is not a romantic idealist, and he knew that the Romans had to answer in kind the Misimians' provocations. Agathias continued with the following observation, suggesting that he disagreed with the Romans' behavior during the raid. The following shocked Agathias, provoking something within him that he had to process:

> Many children were seized sobbing and crying out for their mothers. Some they [the Romans] hurled down and mangled brutally against the rocks. Others they tossed in the air, as they were playing some sort of game, and caught them on the points of their spears. Now it was understandable that the Romans should have been enraged with the Misimians people… **Nevertheless their fury was disproportionate and they should not have acted with such wonton and monstrous brutality towards newborn babies who had no understanding of their parents' crimes**.[65]

As a result of the raid, 'the entire nation had come close to extinction.'[66]

The deaths of the Misimian children seem to have greatly troubled Agathias, and for a good reason. According to James Dawes,

> It is hard to contemplate the murder of children, especially for those who have raised them. The difficulty is, in part, emotional. Children are so vulnerable, everything animal in us rises up to protect them. Moreover, children represent a category of personhood that is, uniquely, both conceptually clear and universal. Not everyone understands what it means to be "a soldier," "Japanese," or "a woman," for

[60] Agathias, 1975, 4.11.4.
[61] Agathias, 1975, 4.12.4–7.
[62] Agathias, 1975, 4.16.1.
[63] Agathias, 1975, 4.19.1.
[64] Agathias, 1975, 4.19.1–5.
[65] Agathias, 1975, 4.19.5–6. Author's emphasis.
[66] Agathias, 1975, 4.20.7.



> instance, but everyone has experienced—from the inside—what it means to be "a child." The difficulty of contemplating the killing of children is more than emotional in these ways, however.[67]

If Dawes is correct, then the murder of Misimian children would have affected Agathias greatly due to the universal understanding of what it means to be a child. As such, the violent deaths of these children compelled Agathias to memorialize them and to judge and condemn those who violently and callously ended their lives. An impartial recapitulation of events was out of the question for Agathias because the murder of these children moved and affected him.

Perhaps the best quotation from the *Histories* that demonstrates how Agathias felt about the constant state of warfare that characterized his time alive, and the bloodshed that accompanies it, is from the following exchange between *Spahbed* Načoragān and the Roman general Martin during a parley at the height of the Lazic War:

> You are such a shrewd and able general… yet far from showing any inclination to stop the two monarchs [Justinian and Xusrō I] from engaging in mutually exhausting conflict you have allowed them to persist in the protracted ruination of their respective states.[68]

Agathias lays the blame for the constant fighting between the Romans and the Iranians at the feet of Emperor Justinian and *Šahanšah* Xusrō I. The actions, decisions, and constant machinations of these two men in the zero-sum game of empires—in which blood was the price to be paid for more territory, money, and prestige, always at the expense of someone else—were driving the actions of the Roman Empire and *Ērānšahr*. Recall that Agathias' aims, as admitted in his preface, were to accurately record the events of his time, including the annihilation of cities, the deaths of thousands, and the razing of entire cities. The murder of Misimian children is what Agathias alluded to in his preface, but to write about trauma to process is sometimes not enough, and someone has to take the blame for the deaths of those Misimian children and everyone else who suffered during this period.

It has been well documented that Agathias did not hold the Iranians in high regard; he was a citizen of the Roman Empire and was well aware of the centuries of conflict between it and *Ērānšahr*. Scott McDonough has deftly surmised that Agathias' hatred of the Iranians was a reaction to his contemporaries who were ambivalent about the Iranians or even admired them.[69] Agathias laser-focus on Xusrō I, however, suggests something more substantial exists to his hatred of the Iranians than simply criticizing his contemporaries.

Xusrō I was rumored to be a lover of literature and philosophy, a fact confirmed by other sources, both Iranian and Roman.[70] Agathias himself, however, could not allow himself to believe such a thing about Xusrō I and took the opportunity to mock him. A certain braggart and sophist by the name of Uranius, who would spend evenings debating with his friends in a glib, pseudo-intellectual fashion, managed to find himself in Xusrō I's court.[71] Urianus donned robes and a sober expression on his face, and then engaged Xusrō I in a question-and-answer session about the origin of the physical world, the nature of infinity, and other philosophical topics, which amazed Xusrō I because he had never met his "equal" in philosophical discourse.[72] Agathias used Urianus as a way to undermine Xusrō I's intelligence and insult him. Because Urianus, a charlatan and fast-talker, could dupe Xusrō I, the *šahanšah* was a fool for admiring him.[73]

Then, a group of Neo-Platonist philosophers arrived in Xusrō I's court after fleeing Justinian's attempts to suppress paganism in the Roman Empire.[74] Those philosophers were drawn to *Ērānšahr* by rumors of Xusrō I's erudition and

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[67] Dawes, 2013, pp. 102–103.

[68] Agathias, 1975, 3.19.2.

[69] McDonough, 2011b, pp. 55–65.

[70] Agathias, 1975, 2.28.1. For Xusrō I's love of philosophy, please see Daryaee, 2009, p. 29; Daryaee, 2008, pp. 74–76; Dignas and Winter, 2007, pp. 263–265.

[71] For Agathias' overall treatment of Urianus, see Cameron, 1970, pp. 104–105.

[72] Agathias, 1975, 2.29.9–11 and 2.30.1–3. The *Shahnameh*, the Iranian national epic poem, features numerous examples of philosophical debates in Xusrō I's court with the *šahanšah* actively participating; see Firdausí, 1915b, 1–8.

[73] Cameron, 1969/1970, p. 114.

[74] For Justinian's pagan persecution, see Wildberg, 2005, pp. 330–333; Evans, 2000, pp. 67–70; Treadgold, 2007b, p. 180.



sense of justice with his rule.[75] When these men finally reached *Ērānšahr*, however, according to Agathias, they were dumbfounded at the supposed lawlessness, oppressive rule, and sexual promiscuity among the Iranians; these philosophers immediately regretted leaving the Roman Empire.[76] Agathias again further emphasizes Xusrō I's lack of intelligence when he wrote that the philosophers found conversing with the *šahanšah* disappointing due to his superficial knowledge. It was apparently so bad in Xusrō I's court that the philosophers returned home to the Roman Empire to face almost certain death at the hands of zealous Christians rather than engage in intellectual discourse with Xusrō I.[77]

On one level, Agathias' Xusrō I is a comical buffoon. Agathias put these details of Xusrō I's lack of awareness as comic relief for the reader of his *Histories* to counterbalance the details of death and destruction that pepper his narrative.[78] It is perhaps one of the few ways Agathias could bring justice to a man responsible for so much of his trauma.

Agathias, however, wanted to do more than just mock Xusrō I; he had to remind his reader that the *šahanšah* was himself prone to acts of cruelty. Recall Načoragān, the commander-in-chief of Iranian forces in the Caucasus. During the Lazic War, the Romans defeated the Iranians at the Battle of Phasis (566), and Načoragān fled with his army to Iberia in humiliation.[79] Upon hearing the news, Xusrō I summoned Načoragān to Ctesiphon, the Iranian imperial capital, so that he could punish the general for his cowardice. Načoragān was supposedly skinned alive, in one piece, from his neck to feet; the skin was inflated like a wineskin and hung on display,[80] a practice that originated with *Šahanšah* Šābūhr I (r. AD 240–AD 270), according to Agathias.[81] Here, Agathias is again bringing his reader's attention to the violence that Xusrō I was capable of committing, highlighting the barbarian nature of the *šahanšah* to undercut his legacy.

Other authors in Late Antiquity have noted Xusrō I's alleged cruelty. For instance, Xusrō I ordered one of his generals in Armenia to "extirpate the men… to root out, dig out, exterminate and mercilessly destroy the land."[82] Also, during the Sasanian-Axumite wars over Yemen, Xusrō I ordered another general "not to leave alive in Yemen a single black, nor the child of an Arab woman by a black, whether young or old, nor to leave alive a single man with crisp and curly hair in whose generation the blacks had been involved," an order the general executed.[83] The Baluchi, too, suffered the same fate when Xusrō I ordered his army to exterminate the tribe in retaliation for raiding *Ērānšahr*. According to the poet Ferdowsī, "So mighty was the slaughter in the land that all the region's face was bathed in blood."[84] Other incidents, too, suggest that Xusrō I's temper led to the deaths of several of his subordinates. For example, Xusrō I had reformed the Iranian land tax system; according to al-Ṭabarī, a secretary objected to his reforms, and Xusrō I ordered his fellows to beat him to death with their ink holders. After the secretary's murder, there were no other objections.[85]

Writing about Načoragān's death allowed Agathias to process this grisly story and an attempt to banish it from his psyche. Agathias here highlights that the foreign monarch, who was locked in a bitter struggle with the Romans for territory and prestige, who "freed Iran from fear" through his victories over Iran's enemies,[86] was also personally

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[75] Agathias, 1975, 2.30.3. For Xusrō I's sense of justice, see Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, 1999, pp. 154–157; Firdausí, 1915a, 3, 8, and 12.

[76] Agathias, 1975, 2.30.5–7.

[77] Agathias, 1975, 2.31.1–2.

[78] Hilarity at the cost of accuracy is typical amongst the works of Justinian's age. The point has also been raised concerning Procopius' similar treatment of the empress Theodora, the wife of Justinian. See Stewart, 2020, pp 67.

[79] Agathias, 1975, 3.19.–28.10.

[80] Agathias, 1975, 4.23.2–3.

[81] Šābūhr I, it should be noted, allegedly had Emperor Valerian (r. AD 253–AD 260) executed and displayed similarly. It is debated if Valerian died in such a way or if Lactantius was propagandizing Iranian malevolence. See Lactantius, 1899, 5; Agathias, 1975, 4.23.7.

[82] Sebeos, 1999, p. 9.

[83] Al-Ṭabarī, 1999, p. 251.

[84] Firdausí, 1915a, 7.

[85] Al-Ṭabarī, 1999, p. 257.

[86] *The Bundahišn*, 2020, 33.24; Daryaee, 2021, pp. 194–195. See also Al-Ṭabarī, 1999, p. 160; Firdausí, 1915a, 4–6.



responsible for committing acts of extreme violence and barbarity. Agathias wanted to tear down the image that Xusrō I had built of himself over the years. That Agathias hated Xusrō I should not surprise anyone. Xusrō I's forces destroyed Antioch in 540, and Agathias wrote his *Histories* in the milieu of Antioch's destruction. Procopius' observations indicate the heightened emotional reaction to the city's fall:

> I become dizzy as I write of such a great calamity and transmit it to future times, and I am unable to understand why indeed it is the will of God to exalt in high the misfortunes of a man or of a place, and then to cast them down and destroy them for no cause which appears to us. For it is wrong to say that with Him all things are not always done with reason, though he then endured to see Antioch brought down to the ground at the hands of a most unholy man, a city whose beauty and grandeur in every respect could not even so be utterly concealed.[87]

Procopius' musings on the fall of Antioch suggest that the event left a mark on those who lived through it, including Agathias himself.

Xusrō I is but one part of the puzzle in understanding the full context and deeper meaning of Agathias and his work. While the Lazic War had ended, more horrors awaited Agathias, which reveals the persistent nature of the traumatizing events he experienced. The Tzani raided Roman forts, a dreadful earthquake struck Constantinople, spreading fear and terror with every shake of the ground, and a wave of the bubonic plague killed thousands of people.[88] Agathias wrote that this period "was followed by others of an equally horrifying and alarming nature"[89] in which the Kutrigurs, a nomadic Turkic people, rampaged in a show of force, striking Constantinople itself. Agathias tells us the horrors of this raid:

> Finding themselves unopposed, the Cortrigurs [Kutrigurs] plundered and ravaged the land without mercy. They seized quantities of booty and took a huge number of prisoners. Among the captives many ladies of noble birth who had chosen a life of chastity were cruelly dragged away and suffered the worst of all misfortunes, being forced to serve as the instruments of unbridled lust. Some of them had from their youth renounced marriage together with the love of material things and the cares of worldly society… Even these were forcibly abducted from their cells and brutally raped. And many married women who happened to be pregnant at the time were dragged away too. Then, when their babies were due, they gave birth to them on the march, unable to enjoy the privacy of a normal confinement or even to pick up and wrap the new-born babes. In spite of everything they were hauled along and hardly given time even to feel their pain, while the wretched infants were abandoned and torn to pieces by dogs and birds, as they had been brought into the world expressly for this and had tasted life in vain.[90]

Agathias' words seem to cry out for justice for those women and babies; it is not hard to imagine him grappling with the mental images of what these people endured at the hands of the Kutrigurs. James Dawes explains the human urge to narrate atrocities. He helps to shed light on Agathias and his trauma and his need to shine a light on the victims of the Kurtigur raid: "The argument that we must bear witness to atrocity, that we must tell the stories… because we are morally bound to do so."[91] If Dawes is any indication, Agathias felt a similar pull to record the experiences of the Kurigurs' victimes and to discover why they had to suffer such tribulations. Agathias then turned his attention toward Emperor Justinian.

Recall that for Xusrō I, Agathias chose to highlight the *šahanšah*'s supposed idiocy, cruelty, and barbarity; with Justinian, Agathias blames Justinian's apathy and attention to matters far away from the Empire that led to the Kutrigurs' devastating raid. According to Agathias, no sentries were available upon the defensive walls that protected

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[87] Procopius, 2006b, 2.10.4–5; Dignas and Winter, 2007, pp. 108–109. A contemporary of Procopius, John Lydus, also called Xusrō I an "evil genius" for invading Roman territory and sacking Antioch. See John Lydus, 1982, 3.54. For John Lydus's postulations on the cause of the sacking of Antioch, see Maas, 1992, p. 108.

[88] Agathias, 1975, 5.10.1–7. For more information on "Justinian's Plague," see Allen, 1979, pp. 5–20; Horden, 2005, pp. 135–156; Evans, 2000, pp. 34, 160–165. For an eyewitness account of the effects of the plague, see Evagrius Scholasticus, 2000, 4.29–30.

[89] Agathias, 1975, 5.11.1.

[90] Agathias, 1975, 5.13.1–4. See also Theophanes Confessor, 1997, AM 6051.

[91] Dawes, 2013, p. 8.



Constantinople[92] and Roman armies were too bogged down, stationed in Italy, North Africa, Spain, Lazica, and on the Iranian frontier, to effectively defend the capital.[93] According to Agathias, imperial officials sensed Justinian's alleged apathy towards the military. So these corrupted officials began cheating soldiers out of their pay, leading to the desertion of entire garrisons.[94] Then, the only personnel that were available to defend the terror-stricken denizens of Constantinople[95] were the *Scholarii*, a once elite unit of bodyguards for the emperor who had degenerated into a band of civilians who dressed like military officers and performed ceremonial duties at court.[96] In the midst of this, the Kutrigurs were ravaging the countryside, and the "citizens of Constantinople were… conjuring up the horrors of a siege, the burnings, the scarcity of foodstuffs and finally the walls being breached."[97]

The terror of those in Constantinople, including Agathias himself, was nothing new for them; they had recently witnessed the horrors and destructive violence of the Nika riots and the thousands of people killed to suppress the insurrection,[98] and they, too, knew of Roman military operations abroad. However, this fear of the Kutrigurs was more palpable and acute for them because an immediate barbarian threat was endangering their safety. At this point in the narrative, Agathias drove events into a crescendo of suspense; he wants his reader to fear and panic like those people watching the Kutrigurs ravaging the countryside, waiting for them to breach the walls of Constantinople.

Agathias then, however, abruptly switches gears in his narrative from terror to hope. The climax of the *Histories*, surprisingly, is one of relief instead of trauma. Justinian ordered General Belisarius to repel the Kurtrigurs, which he successfully did.[99] After the Kutrigurs returned, however, another general named Germanus managed to repel them conclusively. Justinian then paid the Kutrigurs to cease hostilities,[100] which they accepted. Soon after, they left the borders of the Roman Empire. At the same time, Justinian began laying the groundwork of a disinformation campaign, playing the Kutrigurs and the Utigers, another Turkic nomadic group, against one another so they could destroy each other and leave the Romans in peace. Here, Agathias praise Justinian's plan:

> The complete annihilation of these two peoples occurred at a later date, so that I shall do my best to preserve a strict chronological order and provide a detailed account of this event in its proper place. When the dissension between the Cortrigurs [Kutrigurs] and Utigurs was still at its height the news of what had happened reached Constantinople and the wisdom and foresight of the Emperor was clearly and amply demonstrated to all. The barbarians were destroying one another whilst he without restoring to arms was, thanks to his brilliant diplomacy, the ultimate victor and was bound to profit whatever the outcome of the fighting. And so since they were continually embroiled in internal troubles they no longer had any idea of attacking the domain of the Romans, and indeed they sank into an almost total obscurity.[101]

This passage is the abrupt end of Agathias' *Histories* in which he exalted his emperor's decisions, despite criticizing him earlier, an about-turn for Agathias because he blamed Justinian and his decisions for leading to the suffering of untold numbers of people. However, Agathias stresses that Justinian's policy of paying off Rome's enemies was successful because two nomadic tribes were killing each other instead of harassing the Empire.

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[92] Agathias, 1975, 5.13.6.

[93] Agathias, 1975, 5.13.8.

[94] Agathias, 1975, 5.14.2–5. For Justinian himself suspending his soldiers' pay, see Procopius, 2006a, 18.11, 22.7, 24.2–6; Sewart and Lillinton-Martin, 2021, pp. 281, 300–304; Treadgold, 2007b, pp. 182, 188–193, 199, 207.

[95] Agathias, 1975, 5.14.6–8.

[96] Agathias, 1975, 5.15.2; Evans, 2000, p. 254.

[97] Agathias, 1975, 5.14.6.

[98] For an overview of the Nika Riots and the aftermath, see *Chronicon Paschale*, 1989, 531; Theophanes Confessor, 1997, AM 6024; Evans, 2000, pp. 119–123; Treadgold, 2007b, p. 181.

[99] For Agathias' treatment of Belisarius, see Cameron, 1970, pp. 49–50.

[100] Agathias, 1975, 5.23.7.

[101] Agathias, 1975, 5.25.5–6 See also Menander the Guardsman, 1985, 5.2.



When concluding his *Histories*, Agathias seemed to want to highlight something positive and hopeful. Recall that in the prologue, Agathias informed his audience that he would give an accurate account of time, including all of its horrors. Throughout the entire narrative, Agathias fulfilled his promise, but he emphasized something different at the end. He could not maintain the endurance necessary to keep focusing on the horror; it is as if he purposefully ended his *Histories* optimistically to bring hope and resolution to his reader. Here, Agathias has cut off his narrative, declaring to his reader that it is done because he declared it to be, and all is well.[102] Agathias abruptly ended his story because the trauma that affected him and plagued him was now on the page and was no longer plaguing his psyche. The past, which can become stuck in one's present due to trauma,[103] haunted Agathias no longer. According to Nigel Hunt, "Recovery from trauma means making sense of it all again, learning to understand the world as it is in the light of the traumatic event, incorporating the new trauma-related information into one's own narratives,"[104] which may explain the tonal shift of the *Histories*. Agathias, in other words, reached the "Integration" phase of his narrative in which

> Discrepancies, contradictions and inconsistencies are eventually resolved, and the various narrative elements are synthesised into a unified life story. Although complexity, ambiguity and differentiation may be used to indicate suspense, conflict or growth, the narrative ultimately reconciles these disparate story elements with one another.[105]

Regarding Agathias, this quote demonstrates that after completing his narrative, Agathias no longer had to touch the darkness of the human condition, which was the point of writing his *Histories*; he had purged that darkness, and how his narrative is done. The events that had haunted him were resolved, and that stagnant psychic "energy" of trauma had dissipated.

Others have used the power of narrative to exorcize their traumatic demons. Like Agathias, they sought to understand their trauma by writing it down as a narrative. The list is extensive. James Dawes, in his book *Evil Men*, describes how after interviewing Japanese war criminals, who had committed atrocities in the Second World War, including members of the infamous Unit 731, began "saying inappropriate things at inappropriate times in inappropriate ways" to people about the war criminals' stories when he came back home to the United States. Only after processing and writing down what he had heard into a narrative to get it out of his head did Dawes find a resolution to the trauma of hearing those men's stories.[106] American author and professor Norman Maclean wrote his semi-autobiographical short story, "A River Runs Through It," to better understand his brother as a person and the circumstances of his murder.[107] Navajo poet Lucy Tapahonso's body of work is inspired by the stories she heard from her family about the trauma of the Navajo people's collective past. In particular, she composed the poem "In 1864" as a meditation on the stories she heard from her family about the Long Walk of the Navajo, in which the American government forcibly relocated the Navajo people to Bosque Redondo, an inhospitable and desolate area in western New Mexico where one can hear the "pain and cries of his relatives/the confused and battered spirits of his own existence."[108] Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman made the 2008 rotoscoped documentary *Waltz with Bashir* to fill in the gaps in his memory of his experience as a soldier in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.[109] After interviewing his fellow veterans and trauma specialists, Folman's breakthrough happens. At the film's end, he remembers and comes to terms with his presence at the Sabra and Shatila Massacre, in which Christian Phalangists murdered 3500 Palestinian refugees in Lebnon.[110] Across time and space, people who have experienced traumatic events, events that disrupted their lives and left a mark on their psyche, created narratives and stories of that trauma in order to understand better what had happened in order to exorcise the demons of the past.

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[102] According to Hunt, the author of a narrative has total control in deciding how to tell the story, no matter how illogical it may seem. See Hunt, 2010, pp. 115, 125–126.
[103] Hunt, 2010, p. 108.
[104] Hunt, 2010, p. 126.
[105] Hunt, 2010, p. 130.
[106] Dawes, 2013, pp. 182–183.
[107] Maclean, 1976, p. 104; Maclean, 2008, p. 352.
[108] Tapahonso, 1993, p. 8.
[109] Kraemer, 2015, p 59.
[110] Kraemer, 2015, p. 65.



This is the primary purpose as to why Agathias wrote his *Histories*, with all of his moralizing judgments, contradictions, and inconsistencies that came along with it.

Levine has also noted that when it comes to resolving trauma by narrative creation, the truth does not necessarily matter when the ultimate goal is to heal. Instead, the human mind, according to Levine, evokes traumatic experiences and other images to create a rhythmic pulsation between trauma and healing to "synthesize a new reality while discharging and healing [the] traumatic reaction."[111] Agathias, in his attempt to write a history, inserted his judgments into the narrative to ultimately understand what traumatized him, which in turn stretched the truth of his *Histories*. What we do not know, however, is how Agathias would have treated the events that happened closer to the time in which he wrote his work, for he died after writing about Justinian's disinformation campaigns. Nevertheless, Agathias' pessimistic view of human nature and the horrors of the world he mentioned in his preface proved more prophetic than he would ever know.

After Agathias' work ended, the cycle of devastation started anew.[112] Justinian's successor, Justin II (r. 565–578), suspended payoffs to the Iranians and barbarian tribes, causing fury and anger on their part.[113] Then, the Caucasus again was a point of contention between the Romans and Iranians, as the two empires began fighting over the status of Suania, a client kingdom of Lazica.[114] It seems that Agathias was correct at the beginning of his *Histories* when he wrote that violence is as old as humanity itself; it will continue on and on, while people who had nothing to do with its machinations would suffer and feel its effects.

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[111] Levine, 1997, pp. *358–369.*

[112] Cameron, 1970, pp. 9, 11.

[113] Menander the Guardsman, 1985, 12.6; Evans, 2000, pp. 264–265; Treadgold, 2007b, pp. 219, 222.

[114] For the background to this war, see Menander the Guardsman, 1985, 6.1, 9.1; Evans, 2000, p. 259; Braund, 2004, pp. 311–314; Daryaee, 2009, p. 31.



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