

The Byzantine Empire

The Reign of Justinian: In the sixth century CE, the empire in the east (the Byzantine Empire) came under the control of one of its most remarkable rulers, the emperor Justinian. As the nephew and heir of the previous emperor, Justinian had been well trained in imperial administration. He was determined to reestablish the Roman Empire in the entire Mediterranean world and began his attempt to reconquer the west in 533 CE.

Justinian's army was led by Belisarius, probably the best general of the late Roman world. Belisarius sailed to North Africa and quickly destroyed the Vandals, a group of Barbarians living in the region, in two major battles. From North Africa, he sailed north and occupied Sicily in 535 CE, and then set his sights on the Italian peninsula. In 552 CE, he defeated the Ostrogoths, another Barbarian tribe. The struggle between Justinian's forces under Belisarius devastated Italy. Justinian's forces damaged Italy far worse than any previous barbarian invasion had.

Justinian has been criticized for overextending his resources and bankrupting his empire. Historians now think, however, that a devastating plague in 542 CE and long-term economic troubles were far more damaging to the Byzantine Empire than Justinian's conquests. Before he died, Justinian appeared to have achieved his goals. He had restored the imperial Mediterranean world under one ruler; his empire included Italy, part of Spain, North Africa, Asia Minor, Palestine, and Syria. But the conquest of the Western Empire proved fleeting. Only three years after Justinian's death, the Lombards, another barbarian tribe entered Italy and took control.

The Codification of Roman Law Though his territorial conquests proved short-lived, Justinian made a lasting contribution to Western civilization through his codification of Roman law. Since the Byzantine Empire had once been part of the great Roman Empire, they were subject to the same set of laws. These laws had been established over the course of hundreds of years and had been influenced by members of the senate and other assemblies as well as by emperors themselves. Justinian knew Roman law inside and out. He wished to codify (meaning, to organize and write down) and simplify this mass of materials.

To accomplish his goal, Justinian authorized a legal expert named Trebonian to make a systematic compilation of imperial laws. The result was the Code of Law. The first part of the *Corpus Juris Civilis* (Body of Civil Law), was completed in 529 CE. Four years later, in 533 CE, two other parts of the *Corpus* appeared: the *Digest*, a collection of writings of Roman legal scholars, and the *Institutes*, a brief summary of the chief principles of Roman law that could be used as a textbook on Roman law. The fourth part of the *Corpus* was the *Novels*, a compilation of the most important new edicts (laws) issued during Justinian's reign. Justinian's codification of Roman law became the basis of imperial law in the Byzantine Empire until its end in 1453 CE. More important, however, since it was written in Latin, it was also eventually used in the west and in fact became the basis of the legal system of all of continental Europe.

Intellectual Life Under Justinian The Byzantine Empire was highly influenced by the traditions of classical civilization. Scholars in the Byzantine Empire based many of their works on models from Classical Greece. Initially, however, the most outstanding literary achievements of the Byzantine Empire were historical and religious works. Procopius was the best known Byzantine historian. Procopius served as secretary to the great general Belisarius and accompanied him on his wars on behalf of Justinian. Procopius' best historical work, the *Wars*, is a firsthand account of Justinian's wars of reconquest in the western Mediterranean and his wars against the Persians in the east. Deliberately modeled after the work of his hero, the Greek historian Thucydides, Procopius' narrative features vivid descriptions of battle scenes, clear judgment, and noteworthy objectivity. Procopius also wrote a work that many historians consider mostly scandalous gossip, his infamous *Secret History*. At the beginning of this work, Procopius informed his readers that "what I shall write now follows a different plan, supplementing the previous formal chronicle with a disclosure of what really happened throughout the Roman Empire." What he revealed constituted a scathing attack on Justinian and his wife Theodora for their alleged misdeeds.

The Empress Theodora Theodora was the daughter of the "keeper of bears" for the games at Constantinople, who died when she was a child. Theodora followed in her mother's footsteps by becoming an actress, which at that time was considered a lowborn activity. Often actresses also worked as prostitutes, and Theodora was no exception. At the age of twenty-five, she met Justinian, who was forty. His father, the Emperor Justin, had to change the law to allow an aristocratic

senator to marry a woman who had been an actress. After his father died in 527 CE, Justinian became emperor and Theodora empress, a remarkable achievement for a woman from the lower classes. Justinian and Theodora were close and loving companions. She also influenced her husband in both church and state affairs. A strong-willed and intelligent woman, she proved especially valuable in 532 CE, when the two factions of charioteer supporters in Constantinople joined forces and rioted against the emperor. The riots soon became a revolt as the rioters burned and looted the center of the city, shouting “Nika!” (“Win!”), a word normally used to cheer on their favorite charioteer teams. Justinian seemed ready to flee, but Theodora strengthened his resolve by saying, “My opinion then is that the present time, above all others, is inopportune for flight, even though it bring safety... For one who has been emperor it is unendurable to be a fugitive, ... and may I not live that day on which those who meet me shall not address me as mistress.” Justinian resolved to fight. Many of the protesters were killed, and the so-called Nika Revolt was ended.

The Emperors Building Program After the riots destroyed much of Constantinople, the capital city of the Byzantine Empire, Justinian rebuilt the city and gave it the appearance it would keep for almost a thousand years. Earlier, Emperor Theodosius II had constructed an enormous defensive wall to protect the city on its land side. The city was dominated by an immense palace complex, a huge arena known as the Hippodrome, and hundreds of churches. No residential district was particularly fashionable; palaces, tenements, and slums ranged alongside one another. Justinian added many new buildings. His public works projects included roads, bridges, walls, public baths, law courts, and colossal underground reservoirs to hold the city’s water supply. He also built hospitals, schools, monasteries, and churches. Churches were his special passion, and in Constantinople alone he built or rebuilt thirty-four of them. His greatest achievement was the famous *Hagia Sophia*, the Church of the Holy Wisdom.

Completed in 537 CE, Hagia Sophia was designed by a Greek architect who departed radically from the simple, flat-roofed basilica of Western architecture. The center of Hagia Sophia consisted of four huge piers crowned by an enormous dome, which seemed to be floating in space. This effect was emphasized by Procopius, the court historian, who, at Justinian’s request, wrote a treatise on the emperor’s building projects: “From the lightness of the building, it does not appear to rest upon a solid foundation, but to cover the place beneath as though it were suspended from heaven by the fabled golden chain.” In part, this impression was created by putting forty-two windows around the base of the dome, which allowed an incredible play of light within the cathedral. Light served to remind the worshippers of God. As darkness is illumined by invisible light, so too it was believed the world is illumined by the invisible spirit.

The royal palace complex, Hagia Sophia, and the Hippodrome were the three greatest buildings in Constantinople. This last was a huge amphitheater, constructed of brick covered by marble, holding as many as 60,000 spectators. Although gladiator fights were held there, the main events were the chariot races; twenty-four would usually be presented in one day. The citizens of Constantinople were passionate fans of chariot racing. Successful charioteers were acclaimed as heroes and honored with public statues. Crowds in the Hippodrome also took on political significance. Being a member of the two chief factions of charioteers—the Blues or the Greens—was the only real outlet for political expression. Even emperors had to be aware of their demands and attitudes: the loss of a race in the Hippodrome frequently resulted in bloody riots, and rioting could threaten the emperor’s power.