

Justinian, Byzantium, and the Dawn of the Middle Ages

Born in 482, becomes emperor in 527 and dies in 565, Justinian is the focus of Procopius' critical and accusing eyes. Justinian was a well-educated (in both Greek and Latin) autocrat that believed in his own righteous divinity. "The Byzantine emperor was the representative of God, to who he alone was answerable, and just as the Kingdom of God was an unquestionable monarchy, so the Byzantine Empire was to be ruled by an emperor with autocratic power" (Gregory, 130). During his reign, Justinian grappled with imperial tasks such as conquest, law, religion and building programs. Procopius argues that he grappled with these issues in an unprecedentedly evil and corrupt manner – perhaps even with the intention to ruin the empire. However, true evaluation of his reign must also consider the state in which he left the Empire – on the eve of the Islamic conquest.

Referring to Justinian as the "destroyer" on page 107, Procopius accuses Justinian of ruining Rome out right. As he claims on page 57, "...he employed all his natural powers for the ruin of the Romans and succeeded in bringing the whole political edifice crashing to the ground". As Procopius discusses on page 58:

For he would not permit anybody in the Roman Empire to decide any dispute in accordance with his independent judgment but, obstinately going his own way with insane arrogance, himself settled what verdicts were to be given, accepting hearsay evidence from one of the litigants, and without proper investigation promptly cancelled decisions already given, not swayed by any law or principle of justice but undisguisedly succumbing to sordid covetousness.

From depopulating Italy to using Roman money to pay tribute to Persia and the Huns, Procopius blames the rule of Justinian. What's more is that the Byzantine armies carrying out the conquests are ruined and turned to poverty as a result of Justinian reforms and strenuous campaigns. Procopius also views the decline of cities as a symptom of the emperor's despotic reign. With grain becoming unfit for bread (no longer free) and increased taxes – especially on farmers –, cities are shrinking and slipping from the classical world they were born in. In addition, Procopius blames Justinian for allowing the Huns and Slavs to settle and control the Balkans. As for the union between Theodora and Justinian, Procopius deems it a moral sickness between low born people who entered into governance for personal reasons. On the whole Procopius isn't fond of women, claiming that women intrigue, interfere, lust for sex and vengeance and abuse power. In this way, Procopius also faults Justinian for being so weak in resisting Theodora's demands. Procopius believes Justinian sincerely wanted to destroy Byzantium.

Personally, I would argue that Procopius' contempt for Justinian was more a reflection of his awareness that the world was changing from the classical era of early Rome. While not fully being aware of this transition, he was an astute observer of these medieval era changes. The passing classical world marked a time of shrinking cities, less theatres, hippodromes and baths. Old central squares of ancient Rome give way to smaller winding streets, and bishops replace town councils. As the classical world fades, and medieval sensibility becomes more prevalent, Rome witnesses a growing popularity of holy men, icons, books as holy items – not merely for reading – and divine music. These things would come to be Procopius' proof that Justinian's reign was crushing Roman culture and society. In addition, the plague, a catastrophic blight on humanity which claimed as much as one third of the population in Constantinople alone – a

major depopulator – cannot be attributed to the rule of Justinian. Justinian also waged many years of war across the Empire. There is no doubt that these wars were taxing on the Empire and army, but were these not the attempts of an emperor trying to take back old Roman territory? This is to say, Justinian was an emperor who made mistakes and may have been corrupt, but for what purpose? I would not go so far as to accuse Justinian of attempting to ruin the empire – devastating as his reign was. I argue that Justinian's reign marked the passing of the classical world, and that the decisions he made were in an attempt to restore Rome to its classical glory. To Justinian, this meant waging expensive and largely ineffective wars across the empire, creating new law code (which he could/did exploit and manipulate) and new building programs. Not to say that I believe Procopius to be wrong in accusing Justinian for his abuses of power, but I would claim that Justinian had intended (but ultimately failed) to rule in favor of his kingdom. Unfortunately for Byzantium, Justinian's failures would prove costly during the Islamic conquest.

In the west, Justinian waged war to try and take back the territory that the Roman Empire lost. From 533-548, Rome was engaged with the Vandals in North Africa. In the 5th Century, the Vandals sacked Rome and had since settled and urbanized Carthage. Justinian referred to this war as a war of liberty and freedom for his subjects. After capturing the city of Carthage, Byzantine soldiers were weakened by the plague and defeated by the Moors in 544. Although minor progress had been made here by 548, war with the Vandals would resume in 563 – two years before Justinian's death. The Gothic Wars against the Ostrogoths in Italy (535-554) was another example of Justinian trying to reestablish Roman rule in old territory. Since the Arian Ostrogoths had taken Italy, they seized one third of Catholic estates. The conquests in Italy that follow will eventually have devastating results but seem to have been borne from an ambition to

restore Roman control in the original Roman lands. In 536, Belisarios, Justinian's most trusted general, captured the city of Rome. In 537-8 the Goths attempt to siege the city, but fail; however, they destroyed the aqueduct system – a staple of classical Roman Empire. Later in this struggle, the Goths kill members of the Roman senate in Ravenna – also marking the end of the senate. By 546, the Goths attempt a second siege on Rome and succeed. At this point Rome is a ghost town, allegedly containing 500 people. Attempts were made to repopulate and rebuild Rome, but in 553-554 the Franks invade Italy. This led to the development of the Exarch Office in Italy – a system to combine military and civil authority. To summarize, the aqueducts of classical Roman infrastructure are destroyed, the Senate – a link to classical governance – is attacked and disbanded, and the leadership is a military commander who has civil jurisdiction. At this point, Rome is perhaps the epitome of what Procopius views as deliberate destruction. In Italy, Justinian's efforts fell short of success when in 568 (two years after Justinian's death), the Lombards invaded and conquered significant portions of Italy. Procopius is especially critical of Justinian's military failures in the Balkans. As Justinian is engaged in conquest in Italy, North Africa and Spain, the Balkans are over run and controlled by Slavs and Avars. These tribes eventually attacked Constantinople in but are pushed back by Belisarios.

In the east, the Persian Empire was engaged in an agreement with Justinian referred to as "Endless Peace". Perhaps this was supposed to be a test of how endless Justinian's finances were, as 11,000 pounds of gold was sent to Persia as tribute – a point Procopius faults Justinian for. However a treaty with Persia might have been a part of Justinian's military strategy which would have allowed him to focus more on the western areas which Rome had previously lost. In an interesting turn of events, Persia wages war from 539-45, raising questions of Persian-Ostrogoth links. War between Persia and Byzantium resolves in a treaty in 562. Conditions of

this treaty were that 30,000 gold pieces were to be paid to Persia per year. Yet another military expense draining the Empire.

Justinian's creation of the Codex Justinianus in 529 along with other religious laws may been a tactic on his part to supply himself with financial and religious power during a variety of conquests across the Empire. I argue that Justinian intentionally stole from the Empires government and people in order to afford the military campaigns (including the tribute to Persia and the Huns) that he had hoped would restore Rome. It doesn't need to be over said that power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Justinian has the ability to rewrite laws and one of the first things he does is marry Theodora – a union previously forbidden. Much of his corruption is highlighted when one considers the money he was able to gather from both the government, in the form of tax revenues, and the people, by constricting the market with monopolies to reap the benefits. It makes sense to me that Justinian took advantage of his position as a way to finance both his wars and religious buildings program. However Procopius, an observer of Justinian's corruption, characterizes his reign as acts of a raging demon tyrant bent on destroying the Empire. "For if there were any ill-gotten gain in sight he was always ready to establish laws and to rescind them again. And his judicial decisions were made not in accordance with the laws he himself had enacted but as he was led by the prospect of a bigger and more splendid promise of monetary advantage" (56). I also believe that Procopius validly emphasizes Justinian's use of monopolies in order to gather money directly from the source, so to say.

His second step was to establish many 'monopolies', as they were called, selling the welfare of his subjects to those who were prepared to operate this monstrosity. He himself went off with the payment which he had extracted as his share of the bargain,

while those who had come to this arrangement with him were allowed to run their business just as they pleased (81).

Justinian was spending vastly more than he was able to gather, and was willing resort to such corruption in the name of restoring his empire. Emperors and kings will continue this tradition well into the modern era with the Vatican. However I would argue that Justinian's religious efforts would also indicate a personal closeness with the Empire – being that he was trying to salvage a Christian Roman Empire. I believe this point is reflected in Justinian's devotion to religion by his building over 30 churches including the Hagia Sophia. It may also be noteworthy that Justinian's Caesaropapism role is an indication of his effort to reshape religion in the Empire.

One might evaluate Justinian's reign by the longevity and effectiveness of Empire dominance. Although I wouldn't make the claim that Justinian intentionally hurt the Empire, the ineffectiveness of his campaigns, along with his crippling corruption, had left the Empire vulnerable at an unfortunate time. On the eve of the Islamic conquest, the Empire is fighting on multiple fronts: Lombards in Italy, Avars and Slavs in the Balkans, Berbers in North Africa and Persia. In addition, the Black Death continues to depopulate the Empire. In 636, the Byzantine army is defeated by the Muslim army at the Battle of Yarmuk. At this point, the Muslim army is stronger than the Byzantine army. The Islamic conquest expands across the seas and defeats the Byzantine Navy in 655 at the Battle of Masts. It is arguable that military campaigns that Justinian began were so costly that the Islamic army was able to gain control of the sea. Justinian indirectly provided the Muslim army the opportunity to establish a major geographic advantage over Byzantium. As the Islamic conquest continued, a Muslim siege was laid on Constantinople in 717. Although the Muslim army fails to take the city, these attacks are profoundly significant.

The Muslim siege in 717, as well as the Battle of Tours and Poitiers in 732, decided whether the Islamic conquest would have extended into Europe. The Islamic conquest did not take Byzantium, and Europe remained Christian territory.

I believe that Justinian was corrupt, ineffective, costly, and ultimately damaging. His reign had accomplished little more than nothing and made Byzantium vulnerable. I would also argue that he did this in the name of the Empire, as well as himself at times. But he was a failure. And Procopius was a critical contemporary observer who claimed Justinian was responsible for all of Byzantium's new medieval sensibility. However, considering the Islamic conquest, Justinian left the Empire in a condition which allowed the Muslim army make tremendous advances – diminishing Roman Empire dominance. In review, Justinian's reign may have damaged the Empire, but as the Empire passes into the medieval era, much of the classical Roman world was fading away.