

## “Have To” History: Justinian I (Byzantine Emperor)

### *Stuff You Don’t Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To) About Justinian I*

#### Three Big Things:

1. He remains in many ways a convenient personification of the Byzantine Empire (which lasted over a thousand years) and came closer than any other ruler to rebuilding the Roman Empire, both in terms of geographical reach and monumental architecture like the Hagia Sophia – a massive, beautiful Greek Orthodox church which later became a mosque and is now a museum and one of Turkey’s most-visited tourist destinations.
2. He compiled, edited, and rewrote centuries of Roman statutes and case law to bring order and predictability to the courts and law schools. “Justinian’s Code” stabilized and standardized law across the empire and shaped the future of European jurisprudence.
3. He married Theodora, a former child actress and prostitute. Together they were reform-minded and brutal, progressive and vicious. Whatever their naughty-to-nice ratios, they certainly accomplished plenty of stuff.



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#### Background

The Roman Empire reached its peak in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, around 150 years after its transformation from a republic to a rather exuberant dictatorship. By the closing decades of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, however, it had become too large and difficult to manage effectively from its Italian capital. The empire was thus split into four parts to be ruled by four emperors – a plan which worked for roughly fifteen minutes. For the next few decades, various rulers controlled quarters, thirds, or whatever marbled fractions they could cobble together of the former glories of Rome.

Out of this mess emerged Constantine, succeeding his father as undisputed sovereign over the eastern half of the still-technically-an-empire, and eventually reuniting all of what remained of Rome before realizing it simply wasn’t worth the trouble after all. Emperor Constantine I instead chose a completely *new* capital, relatively easy to defend and strategically located between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean – Byzantium.

Over the next several centuries, the western half of what had been the Roman Empire was gradually worn away by invading Goths (basically early Germans, none of whom were depressed teens wearing too much eye makeup) and internal decay. It wasn’t overthrown so much as it simply eroded, until one day someone noticed and changed all the maps. In retrospect this was just as well, since out of the chaos grew the embryos of what would eventually become France, England, Germany, and the rest of Western Europe.

Not so the east, which flourished for another thousand years until it fell to the Turks in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The legacy of Rome continued proudly there, but historians prefer to delineate this eastern kingdom from all that preceded it by calling it something completely new – the Byzantine Empire.

Its capital was eventually renamed “Constantinople,” a name which stuck until a century or so ago when the descendants of its eventual conquerors set their foot down and insisted on the far more Turkish-sounding “Istanbul.” Today it’s the most populated, economically vibrant, and tourist-laden site in Turkey – so if you had a date in Constantinople, please be aware that as of 1928 or so, they’ll be waiting in Istanbul.

Only once in that thousand years did the Byzantine sequel come close to recapturing the scope and glory of imperial Rome. It happened in the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century under Emperor Justinian I.

## This Justinian

Justinian was born into a peasant family and given the name Flavius, which translates into “Blondie” or “Yellow-Head.” Like so many future notables (Andrew Jackson and Little Orphan Annie come to mind) he had an opulent uncle who secured him a strong education and who generally trained him for bigger things. In this case, Sunny-Dome’s uncle went on to become Emperor Justin I – so, *bonus*. Whether by design or craftiness, Flavius stuck close throughout his uncle’s reign, and even changed his name to “Justinian,” which doesn’t seem sycophantic at all. Over time, he became one of the emperor’s most intimate and trusted advisors, and as Justin I aged, Justinian increasingly acted as a natural proxy, making him the obvious successor to the throne upon his uncle’s death in 518.

Well, that and he had his only serious rival brutally murdered right there in the middle of the royal court. So *that* sends a message.



Emperor Justinian surrounded himself with talented people and was comfortable relying on their expertise. He was neither irresolute nor easily manipulated, but his preferred style was diplomatic, even when his decisions were harsh. “An approachable and gentle man who never showed his anger and who, in a quiet voice,

would order the death of thousands of innocent men,” wrote Procopius, his official biographer.

## Beside Every Good Man

It’s impossible to discuss Justinian’s reign without first discussing Theodora. The daughter of an acrobat and a bear-keeper (yes, that was a real job), young Theodora became an actress. In practical terms, this meant that by her earliest teens she was both an erotic dancer and a prostitute. Even the accounts of her detractors agree she was *stunning*, not to mention particularly gifted at what seems to translate as “sexy mime” – an amusing but historically inadequate description of what was no doubt some wonderfully salacious silent theatre.

It was not so uncommon for women stifled by low birth and entrenched patriarchy to use their sexuality to secure influence, resources, or protection. Whether Theodora’s eventual marriage to Justinian was driven by mutual love and respect or simply “working it if you got it,” Theodora would become inseparable from his throne – effectively a co-ruler with the same powers and functions of his in all but the most technical sense. His accomplishments were thus hers as well, as were many of his failings.

## Justinian’s Reign (527 – 565 AD)

One of Justinian’s first priorities was legal and judicial reform. Roman law had been evolving for centuries, through both statutes and precedents, and had developed irregularities and internal contradictions which made consistent jurisprudence impossible.

The emperor oversaw extensive editing and updating of the entire mess. The resulting Code of Justinian standardized Byzantine law and laid the foundation for many modern European legal codes as well. It dictated religious matters as well as secular, so that heresy or paganism were punishable by the state. In other ways,

however, it was quite progressive. Justinian's Code reduced the number of crimes punishable by death, and gave more rights and protections to women, including making it harder for men to divorce them.

Justinian also worked to recover the lost territories of the Roman Empire at its height. North Africa, much of the Mediterranean, and the southern part of Spain were brought under his purview, thanks largely to the talents of commander Belisarius and a military steeped in the grandeur of Rome's glorious past. Sources record endless accounts of Justinian's military conquests and diplomatic success – no doubt quite exciting at the time (but honestly a bit dry in the retelling).

### Let's Get Theological

Back home, the Emperor spent much of his time debating the details of his Christian faith. Another 500 years would pass before the Great Schism (in which the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faiths split and their respective leaders excommunicated one another), but that didn't mean there weren't doctrinal disputes aplenty in the meantime.



While the Emperor's right to inject himself into spiritual issues was never seriously challenged, the church was apparently quite comfortable respectfully ignoring his opinions in such situations. Church-state separation was never what it would become in the west, but the Byzantines weren't a theocracy. Justinian's commitment to his faith never wavered, however, and he oversaw the prosecution and punishment of multiple heretics and other "enemies of the faith" throughout this reign. As far as he was concerned, part of his obligation to his people and his God was to make life better for Christians and worse for everyone else.

### Put Your Riot Shoes On

The greatest threat to Justinian's nearly forty years in power came not from theological disputes or external enemies, but from rebellious athletes and their fans. The resulting riots and Justinian's response were a defining moment in his rule.



Chariot-racing was huge at the capital. The emperor himself was often in attendance via private tunnel from the palace to his box at the Hippodrome. Traditionally, there had been four teams, designated by their chosen colors, but by the early 6<sup>th</sup> century there were only the "Blues" and the "Greens."

It's difficult to pin down just what the Blues and the Greens meant to the citizenry both *during* and *beyond* the races, but they were clearly socio-political factions as much as anything sports-related. Whether correlated primarily with social class, religious dissent, or political leanings, loyalty to one team or the other involved far more than which t-shirt to wear on racing day. The dynamics had much more in common with European soccer, Rollerball, or the Hunger Games.

But in January of 532, the Blues and Greens were temporarily united. There are multiple conflicting accounts of what brought about this shift, but the tension came to a head in the Hippodrome with members and fans of both teams shouting towards the emperor's box, "Nika! Nika!" (Conquer! Conquer! – a variation on "Nike," like the shoes or the Greek Goddess of Victory.)

Justinian offered some concessions – firing an unpopular advisor or two and expressing a willingness to hear them out on some of their concerns – but it was soon clear that either the issues were too large or the mob mentality too overwhelming for such gestures. Justinian retreated to his palace while the crowds spilled into the streets.

The unpleasantness ebbed and flowed for several days, until surrounding building began to burn and there was talk of choosing a new emperor. Justinian and his top advisors – including his best military men – were preparing to flee the city when Theodora busted out some serious man-shaming:

“If you wish safety, my Lord, that is an easy matter. We are rich, and there is the sea, and yonder our ships... As for me, I like the old saying, that the purple is the noblest shroud.”

Give me autocracy, or give me death! It’s like Patrick Henry and Marie Antoinette had a time-traveling love child.

Theodora’s speech worked – they stayed. Justinian’s men herded the bulk of the crowd back into the Hippodrome, blocked off the exits, and slaughtered as many as they could – Blue or Green, young or old, guilty or innocent. Some 30,000 in all.

There were no more chariot races after that, and no more protests, either.

### **Monumental Achievements**

After the Nika Riots, Justinian’s building projects hit their zenith. He wanted for Constantinople to be rebuilt as the most impressive city in the world – a statement of both secular power and spiritual commitment. Dozens of convents and churches were erected or remodeled, and none were more glorious than the Hagia Sophia.

It was the largest church ever constructed, with a rectangular floor plan of over 200 feet each direction. Its dome rises nearly 180 feet from the ground and measures 100 feet across – an architectural coup which remained unmatched for generations.



Even more than the dome, however, visitors were in awe of the seemingly innumerable windows, drawing sunlight from every possible angle and bringing to life the rich colors and vibrant details of the church and its mosaics. At such moments it was not so difficult to imagine that God himself must have descended to have a quick look around and that His presence still echoed within the holy walls.

Today the Hagia Sophia is a museum and one of the biggest tourist attractions in Turkey. It is both glorious and imposing, noble and self-indulgent – an appropriate legacy for the couple who, whatever their moral complexities, oversaw the Byzantine Empire’s grandest era and helped perpetuate its place as a major player in Eurasia for centuries thereafter.

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### **You Wanna Sound REALLY Smart? {Extra Stuff}**

Most of what we know about Justinian and his times comes from Procopius, a scholar often considered the last major historian of the ancient Western world. He was Justinian’s official biographer and traveled with his top general, Belisarius, on several campaigns, giving us extensive documentation of both royal life in Constantinople and extensive military accomplishments from the point of view of those in the field. The most detailed and positive things we know about Justinian and Theodora come from the pen of Procopius.

Then again, so do the most scandalous and negative things. His *Secret History* was published after his death and suggests an author who’d either turned against the royal family or who’d been afraid to tell “the full story” while they lived. Certainly more interesting than his official histories, many details are nevertheless suspect as he seems to exaggerate the most scandalous elements beyond all plausibility. The result is that historians have two extensive and detailed histories of Emperor Justinian’s reign – contrasting views, neither one of which can be embraced uncritically, but which taken together paint a fascinating picture of the Byzantine Empire’s most glorious days.