

# Justinian

**Born 483**  
**Died 565**

**Byzantine emperor**



**T**he Byzantine Empire, which grew out of the Eastern Roman Empire in Greece, carried Roman culture into the Middle Ages. It was a splendid and sometimes powerful realm, a stronghold of civilization in a dark time, and Justinian was perhaps its greatest ruler.

Justinian reconquered the Western Roman Empire, which had fallen to invading tribes in 476, and briefly reunited former Roman lands under his leadership. More lasting was his legal code, or system of laws, which provided the foundation for much of the law that exists today. Justinian built dozens of churches, most notably the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and under his reign, Byzantine arts—including mosaics, colored bits of glass or tile arranged to form a picture—reached a high point.

## In his uncle's care

The Byzantine (BIZ-un-teen) Empire, sometimes known as Byzantium (bi-ZAN-tee-um), controlled much of southeastern Europe, western Asia, and northern Africa from

"If you wish to save yourself, Sire, it can easily be done.... For my own part, I hold to the old saying that the imperial purple makes the best burial sheet!"

*Theodora, urging Justinian to take action during the Nika Revolt of 532*

**Portrait:** Reproduced by permission of Archive Photos, Inc.

its capital at Constantinople (kahn-stan-ti-NOH-pul), which today is the city of Istanbul in Turkey. Justinian, however, grew up far from the centers of power, in a village called Taurusium. His family had been humble farmers just a generation before, but his uncle Justin (c. 450–527) had changed their fortunes when he went to Constantinople and became a member of the imperial bodyguard charged with protecting the life of Emperor Leo I.

Eventually Justin became commander of the imperial guards and a military leader of distinction. Having no children of his own, Justin brought his nephews—including Justinian—to Constantinople, where he helped them gain an education and embark on careers. Justinian enjoyed the benefits of a superb education, something Justin, who never learned to read and write, did not have. As was the Roman custom (the Byzantines referred to themselves as “Romans”), Justinian proved his ability by service in the military.

### **Co-ruler and sole ruler**

In 518, the reigning emperor died, and Justin was chosen as his successor. Now the uncle called on his nephews, who had the education he lacked, to assist him in leading the empire, and none of these men distinguished himself more than Justinian. The latter became one of Justin’s key advisors, and early in Justin’s reign uncovered a plot against his uncle by one of the emperor’s rivals.

Although Justinian was in his late thirties by now, Justin formally adopted him at some point during the 520s as a means of preparing to pass on leadership to him. In 525, the emperor designated his nephew as his preferred successor, though under the Roman system, succession was far from automatic: the emperor’s chosen successor had to prove himself. Evidently Justinian did, because Justin promoted him to co-emperor on April 4, 527, and when the uncle died on August 1, Justinian became sole ruler.

### **Marriage to Theodora**

Justinian had passed the age of forty before marrying, and when he did marry, it required the changing of an an-

cient Roman law. The reason was that the woman with whom he chose to share his life, Theodora (see box), was an actress—and in the Byzantine world, actresses had positions in society similar to that of prostitutes (and in fact, many actresses *were* prostitutes). Men of Justinian’s class were forbidden from marrying women such as Theodora. Therefore Justinian, who fell deeply and passionately in love with the young woman (she was half his age) after meeting her in 522, had prevailed on Justin to strike down the old Roman law. Thus Justinian and Theodora were able to marry in 525.

Justinian and Theodora would gain enemies, among them the historian Procopius (pruh-KOH-pee-us), whose book *Secret History* portrays them as scheming villains. Although many aspects of Procopius’s book are unfair, it is true that they reigned as co-rulers, with the wife sometimes exercising more influence than the husband. Despite Theodora’s checkered past, to which Procopius devoted several gossipy, scandalous chapters, not even he could claim that she was ever unfaithful to Justinian after their marriage. It appears that they enjoyed a very happy married life, and that the empress proved a great asset to her husband.

## The turning point

Theodora demonstrated her importance to the emperor during the Nika Revolt of 532, when Constantinople was nearly destroyed by rioters. Byzantine society was dominated by two rival groups called the Greens and the Blues, distinguished by the colors of horse-racing teams that competed at the Hippodrome, or stadium. Justinian and Theodora favored the Blues, and when he made an appearance in their company at the Hippodrome on January 13, 532, this sparked a riot. Suddenly the Greens attacked the Blues, chanting a favorite cheer from the races: “*Nika!*” (Conquer!). Constantinople was plunged into five days of bloodshed, fires, and looting, which very nearly destroyed the city and toppled Justinian’s government. By January 18, leaders of the Blues and Greens, realizing that Justinian’s high taxes were the source of all their troubles, had joined forces against Justinian, and were ready to storm the palace.

Theodora sat by in silence while Justinian’s advisors suggested that he try to escape the city. Then she stood and



Detail of a mosaic of empress Theodora from the Church of San Vitale at Ravenna, Italy. Byzantine arts—particularly mosaics—flourished under Justinian’s rule. *Reproduced by permission of the Library of Congress.*

addressed the imperial council with one of the most remarkable speeches in history. “It is impossible for a man, once born, not to die,” she said, and went on to remind her husband that with the great wealth of the imperial court, they could easily escape. But, she said, she agreed with a saying of the ancient orator Isocrates (eye-SAHK-ruh-teez; 436–338 B.C.) “that the imperial purple makes the best burial sheet”—in other words, that it is better to die a king than to live as a coward. Justinian was moved to action by Theodora’s speech, and he sent an army led by his great general Belisarius (c. 505–565) to crush the rioters. The soldiers ruthlessly slaughtered more than thirty thousand people in the Hippodrome.

The Nika Revolt was a critical turning point in Justinian’s reign because his response to it (thanks to his wife and his general) helped him gain

a firm grip on power. Also in 532, Byzantium signed a peace agreement with an age-old enemy to the east, Persia (modern-day Iran). This gave Justinian the freedom to turn westward and pursue his greatest ambition: the reunification of the Roman Empire.

## Wars of conquest

Led by Belisarius, the Byzantine armies in 534 won back North Africa from the Vandals, a tribe who had taken the region from Rome more than a century before. Thus he prepared the way for Justinian’s primary aim, the reconquest of Italy from another tribe, the Ostrogoths. In 535, Belisarius conquered the island of Sicily, just off the Italian coast, and by 536, controlled the city of Rome itself.

After four bitter years of war, the Ostrogoths tried to crown Belisarius himself as “Emperor of the Western Empire,”

but Belisarius double-crossed them, and claimed all of Italy for Justinian in 540. The Ostrogoths responded by sending a message to Khosrow (kawz-ROW; ruled 531–79), the king of Persia, initiating a two-pronged offensive against the Byzantines. The Persians took several key cities, and this forced Justinian to send Belisarius eastward to deal with the Persian threat.

Without Belisarius in Italy, Rome and other cities fell back into the hands of the Ostrogoths. In 550, however, Justinian sent a new general, Narses (NAR-seez; c. 480–574), to conquer Italy. Over the course of the next thirteen years, he subdued the Ostrogoths and their allies, but in so doing he practically destroyed Italy; nevertheless, the Byzantines, who had also won back southern Spain, now controlled a large part of the former Roman Empire.

Though Justinian spent most of his energy waging his wars of conquest, those wars were far from clear-cut successes. Not only did he cause great destruction to Italy itself, but he became intensely involved in the religious politics there, removing one pope in favor of another, and ordering the deaths of people who opposed his views on religion. Furthermore, the effort was hardly worth it: except for parts of Italy, the Byzantines lost most of the reconquered lands within a few years of Justinian's death.

## Laws and buildings

Justinian's importance as a leader lies not in his record as a conqueror, but in his contributions to civilization. Early in his reign, he had begun the project of reforming Byzantine law, which had become hopelessly complicated over the centuries. Looking back to ancient Roman models, Justinian's appointed legal authority, Tribonian, greatly sim-



**Detail of a famous mosaic of Justinian from the Church of San Vitale in Italy.**

*Reproduced by permission of the Granger Collection Ltd.*



## Theodora

The empress Theodora (c. 500–548) came from far more humble beginnings than her husband, Justinian. Born somewhere in the east, perhaps Syria, she grew up in Constantinople. Her family was extremely poor and had to rely on the kindness of others to survive.

In the Byzantine rivalry between two opposing groups, the Greens and the Blues, Theodora became a lifelong supporter of the Blues, but not for any political reasons. Her father Athanasius had worked in the Hippodrome as a bear-keeper for the Greens, but he died when Theodora and her two sisters were very young. Her mother quickly remarried, and Theodora's stepfather tried to take over Athanasius's old job. The man in charge of assigning the positions, however, had accepted a bribe to give it to someone else, and no amount of pleading on the mother's part could sway the Greens. The Blues, however, saw this as an opportunity to shame the Greens, and gave the stepfather a job.

Times were extremely hard for Theodora and her family, but she was a tal-

ented and extraordinarily beautiful young woman. She started out acting in mime shows at the Hippodrome, but soon she was performing in the nude, and eventually she followed her older sister in becoming a prostitute. Unlike modern America, where actors and actresses are respected members of society, in Byzantium actresses were lowly members of society, partly because many of them were prostitutes.

At the age of sixteen, Theodora became the lover of a powerful man named Hecebolus (hek-EB-uh-lus). Appointed governor of a province in North Africa, Hecebolus took her with him, but after four years he left her, penniless and far from home. She spent the next year working her way back home, once again plying her trade as a prostitute.

But something remarkable happened in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, where she came in contact with a form of Christianity called the Monophysite (muh-NAH-fu-syt) faith. Whereas mainstream Christianity taught that Jesus Christ was both God and man, the Monophysites be-

plified the system, creating a code that established the basis for much of modern law.

Another area of great achievement during Justinian's reign was in the arts. Among the few lasting reminders of the Byzantine presence in Italy, for instance, is the Church of San Vitale in Italy, a gorgeous piece of architecture that later inspired **Charlemagne** (see entry) in the building of his own

lieved that he was *only* God. Theodora did not care about religious distinctions, however: what drew her to the Monophysites was that, unlike many mainstream Christians at the time, their ministers preached directly to women. She became a Christian, renounced her former lifestyle, and in 522 returned to Constantinople. There she settled in a house near the palace, and made a living spinning wool.

Also in 522, she met Justinian, a man old enough to be her father. He fell madly in love with her and arranged for his uncle, the emperor Justin, to change the laws preventing men of the upper classes from marrying actresses and prostitutes. They were married in 525, and appear to have had an extremely happy married life. When Justinian became co-emperor with Justin on April 4, 527, Theodora accompanied her husband to the Hippodrome, where they were greeted by cheering crowds. It must have been a moving experience for her, now an empress, to visit that place where, as a girl, she had been a lowly performer.

Throughout the two decades that followed, Theodora exercised considerable influence over Justinian, and sometimes seemed to hold greater power than he. She rightly saw that the empire's real interests lay in the east, rather than in Italy, which Justinian reconquered at great cost. She also pushed for laws that improved the status of women, for instance by prohibiting forced prostitution. Furthermore, she helped protect the Monophysites from persecution by mainstream Christians; but perhaps the greatest example of Theodora's leadership was her role during the Nika Revolt.

Theodora's advice about how to handle the rioters moved Justinian to order his general Belisarius to put down the revolt. In the bloody aftermath, Justinian emerged as absolute ruler over Byzantium. He could never have enjoyed such great power without his wife, a woman as renowned for her wisdom as for her beauty. When she died of cancer on June 28, 548, Justinian was heartbroken.

chapel at Aachen. The interior of San Vitale contains mosaics depicting Justinian and Theodora, and these portraits are perhaps the two most famous artworks from Byzantium's 1,100-year history.

Certainly the most well-known Byzantine structure is the Hagia (HAH-juh) Sophia, one of more than thirty churches in Constantinople built under Justinian's orders following



**An aerial view of the Hagia Sophia, completed in 537 under Justinian's orders, in what is now Istanbul, Turkey.** *Photograph by Yann Arthus-Bertrand. Reproduced by permission of the Corbis Corporation.*

the Nika Revolt. Completed in 537, the church is dominated by a dome that, despite its enormous size—184 feet high and 102 feet wide—seemed to one observer in Justinian's time as though it were “suspended by a gold chain from heaven.”

### **Justinian's last years**

Between his wars and his building projects, Justinian ran up enormous expenses, which he attempted to pay for through high taxes on his people. Taxes under Justinian were so high that many people lost everything—another cause for bitterness on the part of Procopius and others.

In 548, Justinian lost his beloved Theodora to cancer, and his last years were lonely ones. In 562, the uncovering of an assassination plot against him made him aware of the need to choose a successor; but like Justin, he had no children of his own. Therefore he promoted his second cousin



and nephew, both named Justin, into positions from which either could succeed him as emperor. After he died on November 14, 565, at the age of eighty-three—extraordinarily old for the time—his nephew took the throne.

## For More Information

### Books

Chrisp, Peter. *The World of the Roman Emperor*. New York: P. Bedrick Books, 1999.

Nardo, Don. *Rulers of Ancient Rome*. San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1999.

### Web Sites

"The Empress Theodora." [Online] Available <http://www.campus.north-park.edu/history/Webchron/EastEurope/Theodora.html> (last accessed July 26, 2000).

*Imperium*. [Online] Available <http://www.ghgcorp.com/shetler/oldimp/> (last accessed July 26, 2000).

"Theodora." [Online] Available <http://www.komets.k12.mn.us/faculty/Simmon's%20Students/Rhoten's%20Internet%20Page/Theodora.html> (last accessed July 26, 2000).

"Theodora (500–548)." [Online] Available <http://members.home.com/cheree/theo.html> (last accessed July 26, 2000).