



Justinian the Great and his efforts to Re-unite the Empire

JUSTINIAN I. (483-565). Flavius Anicius Justinianus, surnamed the Great, the most famous of all the emperors of the Eastern Roman Empire (the Byzantine empire is the name traditionally given to this eastern half) was by birth a barbarian, native of the region of Illyricum (modern-day Yugoslavia) and was born in 483. His own name was originally Uprauda. Justinianus was a Roman name which he took from his uncle Justin I., who adopted him, and to whom his advancement in life was due. Of his early life we know nothing except that he went to Constantinople while still a young man, and received there an excellent education. Doubtless he knew Latin before Greek; it is alleged that he always spoke Greek with a barbarian accent. On Justin's death in 527, having been a few months earlier associated with him as coemperor, Justinian succeeded without opposition to the throne. About 523 he had married the famous Theodora, who was closely associated in all his actions till her death in 547. Justinian's reign was filled with great events, both at home and abroad, both in peace and in war. They may be classed under four heads: (1) his legal reforms; (2) his administration of the empire; (3) his ecclesiastical policy; and (4) his wars and foreign policy generally.

1. Justinian Code

It is as a legislator and codifier of the law that Justinian's name is most familiar to the modern world; The centralized empire envisaged by Justinian required a uniform legal system. Therefore an imperial commission headed by the renowned jurist Trebonianus worked for ten years to collect and systematize existing Roman law. Their work was incorporated into the enormous Corpus Juris Civilis (Body of Civil Law), also called the Justinian Code, promulgated in 534 and kept up to date by the addition of new decrees, or *Novellae*. This formidable legislative codification still remains the basis for the law of most European countries. Simultaneously with this legal reform, attempts were made to

rectify administrative abuses.

2. Financial Measures

Justinian is represented to us as rapacious and extravagant. His unwearied activity and inordinate vanity led him to undertake a great many costly public works, many of them, such as the erection of palaces and churches, not self-paying or -supporting. The money needed for these, for his wars, and for buying off the barbarians who threatened the frontiers, had to be obtained by increasing the burdens of the people. They suffered, not only from the regular taxes, which were seldom remitted even after bad seasons, but also from monopolies; and Procopius goes so far as to allege that the emperor made a practice of further recruiting his treasury by confiscating on slight or fictitious pretexts the property of persons who had displeased Theodora or himself. Fiscal severities were no doubt one cause of the insurrections which now and then broke out, and in the gravest of which, in 532 AD, thirty thousand persons are said to have perished in the capital. It is not always easy to discover, putting together the trustworthy evidence of Justinian's own laws and the angry complaints of Procopius (a contemporary writer), what was the nature and justification of the changes made in the civil administration. But the general conclusion seems to be that these changes were always in the direction of further centralization, increasing the power of the chief ministers and their offices, bringing all more directly under the control of the Crown, and in some cases limiting the powers and appropriating the funds of local municipalities. A certain number of offices were suppressed altogether, much to the disgust of the office-holding class, which was numerous and wealthy, and had almost come to look on the civil service as its hereditary possession. The most remarkable instance of this policy was the discontinuance of the traditional Roman office of consulship. This great office had remained a dignity centuries after it had ceased to exert any real power; but it was a very costly dignity, the holder being expected to spend large sums in public displays. As these sums were provided by the state, Justinian saved considerable funds by doing away with this office. The last named consul was in 541.

In a bureaucratic despotism the greatest merit of a sovereign is to choose capable and honest ministers. Justinian's selections were usually capable, but not so often honest; probably it was hard to

find thoroughly upright officials; possibly they would not have been most serviceable in carrying out the imperial will, and especially in replenishing the imperial treasury. Even the great Tribonian labours under the reproach of corruption, while the fact that Justinian maintained John of Cappadocia in power long after his greed, his unscrupulousness, and the excesses of his private life had excited the anger of the whole empire, reflects little credit on his own principles of government and sense of duty to his subjects.

The department of administration in which he seems to have felt most personal interest was that of public works. He spent immense sums on buildings of all sorts, on quays and harbors, on fortifications, repairing the walls of cities and erecting castles in Thrace to check the inroads of the barbarians, on aqueducts, on monasteries, above all, upon churches. The most famous of these is the Church of St. Sophia in Constantinople (most often known as the Hagia Sophia), now a mosque, and one of the architectural wonders of the world.

3. Justinian's ecclesiastical policy For many years before the accession of his uncle Justin, the Eastern world had been vexed by the struggles of the Monophysite¹ party, who recognized only one nature in Christ, against what has become known as the orthodox view, which sees two natures, divine and human, in Jesus (this is the view proclaimed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD). Although the entire western Mediterranean held to the Chalcedonian doctrine of two natures, as did much of the East, Egypt, a great part of Syria and Asia Minor, and a considerable minority even in Constantinople clung to Monophysitism. One of Justinian's first public acts (before he became emperor) was to put an end to this schism by inducing his uncle Justin (still reigning) to make the patriarch of Constantinople (the leader, the bishop of all the Christian churches in Constantinople) renounce monophysitism and declare his full adhesion to the creed of Chalcedon. When Justinian himself came to the throne he endeavoured to persuade the Monophysites to come in by summoning some of their leaders to a conference. This failing, he ejected suspected prelates, and occasionally persecuted them.

At the very end of his long career of theological discussion, Justinian himself lapsed into heresy, by

1 The term *Monophysite* comes from the Greek words *monos* (one) and *physis* (nature).

accepting the doctrine that the earthly body of Christ was incorruptible, insensible to the weaknesses of the flesh, a doctrine which had been advanced by Julian, bishop of Halicarnassus, and went by the name of Aphotodocetism. According to his usual practice, he issued an edict enforcing this view, and requiring all patriarchs, metropolitans, and bishops to subscribe to it. Some, who not unnaturally held that it was rank Monophysitism, refused at once, and were deprived of their positions as bishop, including the most powerful one in the eastern church, Eutychius, the patriarch of Constantinople.

As no preceding sovereign had been so much interested in church affairs, so none seems to have shown so much activity as a persecutor both of pagans and of heretics. He renewed with additional stringency the laws against both these classes. The former embraced a large part of the rural population in certain secluded districts, such as parts of Asia Minor and Greece; and we are told that the efforts directed against them resulted in the forcible baptism of 70,000 persons in Asia Minor alone. Paganism, however, survived; we find it in Greece in the end of the 9th century, and in northern Syria as well. There were also a good many closet pagans among the educated population of the capital, including Procopius, a renowned ancient historian who lived at this time. Inquiries made in the third year of Justinian's reign drove nearly all of these persons into an outward conformity, and their offspring seem to have become ordinary Christians. At Athens, the philosophers who taught in the schools hallowed by memories of Plato still openly professed what passed for Paganism. Justinian, partly from religious motives, partly because he discountenanced all rivals to the imperial university of Constantinople, closed these Athenian schools in 529. The professors sought refuge at the court of Chosroes, king of Persia, but were soon so much disgusted by the ideas and practices of the fire-worshippers that they returned to the empire, Chosroes having magnanimously obtained from Justinian a promise that they should be suffered to pass the rest of their days unmolested.

Heresy proved more obstinate. The severities directed against the Montanists of Phrygia led to a furious war, in which most of the Montanists perished, while the doctrine was not extinguished. Harsh laws provoked the Samaritans to a revolt, from whose effects Palestine had not recovered when conquered by the Arabs in the following century. The Nestorians and the Eutychian Monophysites were not threatened with such severe civil penalties, although their worship was interdicted, and their

bishops were sometimes banished; but this persecution was quite enough to keep them disaffected, and the rapidity of the Islamic conquests may be partly traced to that alienation of the bulk of the Egyptian and a large part of the Syrian population which dates from Justinian's persecutions.

4. Justinian was engaged in three great foreign wars, two of them of his own seeking, the third a legacy which nearly every emperor had come into for three centuries prior to his reign, the continual struggles between Rome and Persia. The Sassanid kings of Persia ruled a dominion which extended from the confines of Syria to those of India, and from the straits of Oman (along the Arabian Sea) to the Caucasus mountains between Turkey and Russia. The Persians were formidable enemies to the Byzantines, whose troops were at this epoch mainly barbarians. When Justinian came to the throne, his troops were maintaining a fight with the Persians, although a peace was concluded in 533. This lasted till 539, when the Persian emperor declared war, doubtless moved by alarm and envy at the victories which the Byzantines had been gaining in Italy. The emperor was too much occupied in the West to be able adequately to defend his eastern frontier. Chosroes, the Persian emperor, advanced into Syria with little resistance, and in 540 captured Antioch, then the greatest city in Asia, carrying off its inhabitants into captivity. The war continued with varying fortunes. After 22 years of fighting no substantial advantage had been gained by either party, Chosroes agreed in 562 to a peace which left the Byzantines with much of the disputed territory, but under the dishonorable condition of their paying 30,000 pieces of gold annually to the Persian king. Thus no result of permanent importance flowed from these Persian wars, except that they greatly weakened the Byzantine Empire, increased Justinian's financial embarrassments, and prevented him from prosecuting with sufficient vigor his enterprises in the West.

The wars in the west began in 533 with an attack on the Vandals, who were then reigning in Africa. Belisarius, a competent general sent from Constantinople with a large fleet and army, landed without opposition, and destroyed the barbarian power in two engagements. North Africa from beyond the straits of Gibraltar to the Mediterranean coast of Tunisia became again a Roman (Byzantine) province, and part of southern Spain was also recovered for the empire. The ease with which so important a

conquest had been effected encouraged Justinian to attack the Ostrogoths of Italy, whose kingdom, though vast in extent, for it included part of south-eastern Gaul, as well as the territory making up modern-day Austria and Yugoslavia, as well as Italy, Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica. This kingdom had been grievously weakened by the death first of the great Theodoric, and some years later of his grandson Athalaric, so that the Gothic nation was practically without a head.

Justinian began the war in 535. Belisarius, who had been made commander of the Italian expedition, overran Sicily, reduced southern Italy, and in 536 occupied Rome. Here he was attacked in the following year by Vitiges, who had been chosen king by the Goths, with a greatly superior force. After a siege of over a year, the energy, skill, and courage of Belisarius, and the sickness which was preying on the Gothic troops, obliged Vitiges to retire. Belisarius pursued his diminished army northwards, shut him up in Ravenna (a major city in northern Italy) and ultimately received its surrender. Vitiges was sent prisoner to Constantinople, where Justinian treated him, as he had previously treated the captive Vandal king, with clemency. The imperial administration was established through Italy, but its rapacity soon began to excite discontent. A subsequent Gothic king by degrees drove the imperial generals and governors out of Italy. Belisarius was sent against him, but with forces too small for the gravity of the situation. He moved from place to place during several years, but saw city after city captured by or open its gates to Totila (the Gothic king), till only Ravenna, and a couple other cities remained to the Byzantines.

Justinian was occupied by church controversies, and had not the money to fit out a proper army and fleet; indeed, it may be doubted whether he would ever have roused himself to the necessary exertions but for the presence at Constantinople of a group of Roman exiles, who kept urging him to reconquer Italy, representing that with their help and the sympathy of the people it would not be a difficult enterprise. The emperor at last complied, and in 552 a powerful army was sent under Narses, an Armenian eunuch now advanced in life, but reputed the most skillful general of the age, as Belisarius was the hottest soldier. He encountered the army of Totila, and in the ensuing battle, Totila was slain, and the Gothic cause irretrievably lost.

Italy was recovered for the empire, but it was an Italy terribly impoverished and depopulated, whose possession carried little strength with it. Justinian's policy both in the Vandal and in the Gothic War stands condemned by the result. The resources of the state, which might better have been spent in defending the northern frontier against Slavs and Huns and the eastern frontier against Persians, were consumed in the conquest of two countries which had suffered too much to be of any substantial value, and which, separated by language as well as by intervening seas, could not be permanently retained. However, Justinian would have to have been supernaturally wise to have foreseen this--his conduct was what one can expect from an ambitious prince who perceived an opportunity of recovering territories that had formerly belonged to the empire.