# *JUSTINIAN - DISCREDITED BY PROCOPIUS AND GLORIFIED BY HISTORY*

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***Abstract***: *St. Justinian the Great, who reigned from 527-565, is everywhere recognized as the greatest of the Byzantine emperors. Justinian's portrait imagined by Procopius is one of the bitterest portraits in literature, having concentrated in few lines a lot of features. Procopius's aversion can be explained partly by the long experience of nearly twenty years in the senior circles of the imperial court officials. On the other hand, Father Asterios Gerostergios in his book "Justinian the Great the Emperor and saint", proposes a Christian image, depicting a Roman absolutist, a fundamentalist orthodox emperor, example of religious and political intolerance. Justinian was the living law of Byzantium and was anointed of God on earth and as such he enjoyed the divine protection and guidance. In his conception, the head of the state had both secular and spiritual powers.*

***Keywords***: *Byzantium, emperor, power*

Procopius's main work was written between 545 and 553 and was entitled *Wars of Justinian*. In the next two years, the author writes *The buildings of Justinian* (*De Aedificiis*), a tribute to the work of Justinian in the field of civil and military architecture. *Secret History* is an addition to *Wars of Justinian* and was completed in 555. The finishing touches have been made, in secret, up to 558. All of his works are primary sources, the texts being full of vivid images.

If in *Wars of Justinian*, the criticism of how the king let the laws be violated is still veiled and indirect, in the *Secret History* accusations are brought to Justinian in person. The accusations are no longer concerned with the Christian side, as one may expect, but are kind of supernatural, looking funny in the eyes of the modern reader. For example, Justinian used to walk around the palace with no head.

> Justinian was totally unlike all its predecessors, the principles of the 5th century [...] The former Macedonian peasant appeared as an eminent exponent of two main ideas: the imperial idea and the Christian idea. Because he had these two ideas, his name became immortal down in history. (Diehl, C., 1999: 37)

Procopius of Caesarea is a follower of Ammianus Marcellinus and Zosimus. As a historian, he was influenced by Thucydides, from whom he borrows the narrative model, the technical writing, visible in the exordium, which exposes the nature of the subject and the method. From Herodotus he borrows the tendency towards digressions.

The portrayal of Justinian imagined by Procopius is one of the bitterest portraits of political opponents in literature, having concentrated in a few lines a lot of features. Still, the political image of the Emperor who conquered and reconquered seems not to be shaken by this portrayal that has some personal touches from time to time. Procopius' opinion on Justinian changes from admiration to blaming, most likely as a result of some kind of disillusion. Justinian, as Procopius portrays him, is very intelligent, smart, hard-working (the author states that he barely slept), and deals with different things at the same time: architecture, church, law.

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Procopius's aversion (it can be seen form the work that in fact the hatefulness is towards Theodora, a woman who enjoyed luxury and who supported the Monophysites) can be explained partly by his long experience in the circles of the senior officials from the imperial court. "As the representative of the rulers of the lands Procopius sees in Justinian a personal enemy." (Mihăescu, H., 1972:81)

The beginning of the reign of Justinian was associated with the emergence of a different political orientations than the one of the predecessors. An important step was the reconciliation with Rome and the sealing of the alliance expressed by persecutions of the Monophysites throughout the East.

In 525, two years before Justin's death and his leaving all the power to Justinian, the latter held a glamorous reception in the capital for Pope John, perceiving the advantages of such a behavior that would emphasize the difference between a king from Constantinople and an Arian leader from Africa.

Justinian wanted, following the example of Caesar, to be the image of the law, to own the power and to be the reformer who hoped to improve the functioning of the monarchy, so that his imperial dignity could not be sustained but with lavish constructions of fortresses, a ceremonial courtyard able to capture all the glory for history.

Being chosen by God to be the guardian of orthodoxy, Justinian had to combat heresies both through wars and by preaching the Orthodox law.

These heresies went beyond being simple theological disputes of scholars, having deeper meanings and even disturbing the Church and the whole Eastern Empire, in a worrying manner comparable with the anxiety given by the proximity of the barbarians.

> In the Byzantine Empire, the Church was closely linked to the state, so Justinian found in it the most docile means of political domination, in its fight against the senatorial aristocracy that usually had a rationalist attitude and was based on the glorious tradition of the ancient culture. (Ibid: 115)

He organized large commandments that he entrusted to *magistri militum*, he created military alignments at all the occupied frontiers, reconstructing before the barbarians what was called "the roof of the monarchy" (*praetentura empires*), he raised a common line of fortresses, all these things demonstrating a huge effort that indeed, as Procopius highlight, "saved the monarchy." Even his opponents acknowledged the role played by Justinian, that one of "a king with a big heart" who wants "to enlarge the empire and to increase the glory."

Father Asterios Gerostergios in his book entitled *Justinian the Great, the emperor and saint*, proposed a Christian image, depicting an absolutist Roman emperor, fundamentally Orthodox, an example of religious and political intolerance:

> To show is pious zest, he had bitterly opposed the heretics: in 529 he had ordered the closing of the University of Athens, where serveral pagan professors were leading an obscure existence, and he had vigorously persecuted dissenters. [...] He proposed to rule the Church as its master, and in exchange for his protection and for the favors he had heaped upon it, he despotically and brutally imposed his will upon it, proclaiming himself curtly „emperor and priest". (Diehl, C., *op.cit.*:51)

The new situation inaugurated by Justinian I was theoretically inspired by the dogmatic formulations of the ecumenical councils. At the beginning of his reign he promulgated of law the belief in the Trinity and the Incarnation, and later said that he



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will punish by law all disturbers of orthodoxy. He made the Nicene Creed the unique symbol of the church, and gave legal force to the canons of the four ecumenical councils. At the command of the sovereign, the Fifth Ecumenical Council was set to take place in 553, to censure the teachings of Origen and to affirm the definitions of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon.

Considering himself a Roman Emperor, he also called himself a Christian emperor. In this dual capacity, he had expressed interest in the missionary work, donated a lot to the Church, demonstrating the sincerity of his faith and his genuine interest in religion.

The relations between the Church and the State, according to the Justinian model, are described by Charles Diehl as the *Justinian symphony* or *imperial tyranny*. His initiative is highly expressed in Novellae VI, where he states that the sacerdotium and the Imperium are the two precious gifts given by God to people. The Justinian Novels are considered one of the four major parts of the Roman law initiated by Justinian.

"The wellness of the Church is the Empire's strength", these Justinian's words are the key stone to his theory. Justinian established religious treats, led religious congregation, set up his own episcopacy, *Justiniana prima* and built the church Hagia Sophia.

One of the greatest achievements of Justinian's is the codification of the Roman law began in 529. Justinian sought to revive the Roman society by means of a huge piece of classical and postclassical systematization of law, so that it can be applied to the realities of the sixth century Roman Empire.

Justinian entrusted his Minister Trebonius a large administrative work, entitled *Codex Iustinianus*, published in 529 and followed by the *Digesta* or *Pandectae* completed in 533, the most important collection of Roman law divided into 50 books, including 150,000 lines extracted from the most important legal Romans consultants and linked with the contemporary socio-political structure. The *Institutiones* summed the principles of the new law, being a textbook for students. The *Corpus juris civilis* (527-565) - aimed at defending the private property relations, the king's legislators thus finding in the text the legal support. The Emperor is a servant of the law, but he is at the same time the master of the law, the absolute power.

His legislation is sometimes influenced by the Christian morality, for Justinian had always stated in official documents that he was pious (*pius*). Hence, hid motivations and explanations based on honesty (*honestum*) humanity (*humanitas*), fairness (*probum*), mercy (*benignitas*), chastity (*pudicitia*), etc. (Hanga, V., 1977: 136-137)

Under the influence of Justinian I, and since the beginning of the reign of Justin, there was a new political orientation. Imposing Orthodoxy in the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) was the biggest act that the Emperor left to the Christianity.

Justinian wanted to establish the inalienable right of Byzantium as a follower of Rome, over all barbarian states on his former territory from the West and to restore the unity of the Roman world.

Justinian's dream was to rebuild the Roman Empire (a Christian one, though) by the union of the two kingdoms, from the East and the West. He partly succeeded with the help of his general Belisarius who conquered the Italian peninsula and northern Africa. The rough militarily and financially attempts to conquer Italy, started by Belisarius and completed by Narses (another general) did not have a lasting effect. The



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first sign of the impaired balance was the war with the Persians (527-532), a war ending with a compromise peace in 532.

The most important domestic event was the *Nika* riot (532) in Constantinople during the reign of Justinian and his wife Theodora and which took its name from the cry of the rebels: Nika (Greek = victory) and which was caused by the negligence of the Byzantine Emperor.

Through the edict of 527, Justinian equated the Jews, the Samaritans and the Greeks. During his time in Constantinople there were two rival political factions, the Blues (Venetoi) and the Greens (Prasinoi), who took their name from the color with which they competed in the Hippodrome. Procopius indicates the affinity of the Emperor for one of the factions, the Blue one.

In 531, Justinian changes policy radically: he abandons the use of force in exchange for a compromise policy. From a religious perspective, the Blues supported the Orthodox and the Greens supported the belief of the Monophysites.

In a fight, imperial guards captured several insurgents; two remained unreleased and were subsequently hanged. One of them belonged to the Greens and the other one to the Blues so that the two factions saw themselves both threatened and created an alliance. In this alliance the entire population of Constantinople took part, demanding the abdication of Justinian and burning nearly a quarter of the city in the six days that the riot lasted. The revolt did not cease but only after the intervention of the army, led by General Belisarius, who killed over 30,000 people, belonging to both parties.

The riot was stopped by Narses' negotiations with the people and by the surprise attack of Belisarius troops.

In ruling the Empire, Justinian pursued two goals: restoring the integrity of the Empire by rebuilding Rome's old borders and imposing a single religion, reason for being intolerant of the heretics, whom he considered *animarum hostess et corporum* (enemies of the souls and the bodies). His whole policy was focused on trying to recapture the West, having as a model the Roman glorious past. Justinian will not be able to restore any of the old borders of Rome, but will make again the Mediterranean Sea a Roman lake.

> We hope – he said in a *Novella* from 536, after having obtained some success - that the Lord will allow us to possess even other parts of the empire, that the former Romans have ruled to the margins of the two oceans, but which they then carelessly lost. (Hanga, V., op. cit.: 109-110)

His reign did not accomplish, as he would have liked, the beginning of a new era, but the end of a dying one.

Justinian died on November the 14th 565, leaving the Empire pretty fragile. The period 565-610 brings delicate situations for his successors: Justin II the Younger (565-578), Tiberius II (578-582), Maurice (582-602) and Phocas (602 -610).

On the throne of the Byzantine Empire in 610 arrives the son of the exarch of Carthage, Heraclius, whose reign marks the beginning of the Byzantine era.

At the time of his death in 565, the empire was militarily and financially in a lamentable state. There is no denying of the grandeur which had been associated with his reign, but his ambitions and egos affected, to some extent, the Empire and the end of a rich era was accomplished by Justinian's descendants, his nephew Justin II, Tiberius and Maurice.

Inheriting from his uncle Justinian a large empire, Justin's II refusal to pay its potential enemies, as his uncle used to do, led to a war throughout the extended borders



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of the empire. The most important event of his reign was the invasion of the Lombards in Italy in 568, when the Empire had lost two-thirds of Italy. After losing Italy, he fought unsuccessfully against the Avars. In 572, he started the war with Persia, resulting in the loss of Syria. His last four years of his reign were marked by a progressive dementia, being forced to give the actual leadership to his wife Sophia and his adopted son, Tiberius, the appointed successor.

Over centuries, a great reproach was brought to Justinian: his inability to anchor his targets to the reality, to better weigh the available measures of achieving his goals.

The Justinian's concept stated that the ruler had to be king and high priest, to have both secular and spiritual power. The emergence of some sects as Manichaeism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism prevented the formation of an Orthodox and religious unit that Justinian hoped for, and the religious changes deepened the failure of the emperor who governed by an unwritten law entitled *a monarch, a state, a church*.

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