

## *Chapter 10*

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# Two Christian Civilizations

## Byzantium and Western Europe

Contrary to popular belief, the Roman Empire was not a European civilization, and the Romans did not think of themselves as Europeans. Yes, the city of Rome was located in Italy, which is a European peninsula, and a portion of its empire lay in lands that later became part of the community known as Europe. Nevertheless, the Roman Empire was a Mediterranean civilization that encompassed the coastlands and peoples of three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. Given this fact, it is best to think of the Roman Empire as the last and largest of the Hellenistic empires, with all of the cultural variety that the term connotes.

During the period from roughly 235 to 600, this Mediterranean civilization underwent a transformation. Many modern historians have characterized this era as the period of “the decline and fall of the Roman Empire,” but the phrase and all that it suggests misses the mark. Rome and its empire did not fall in the sense of a sudden collapse. What happened was more subtle and profound. The Roman Empire, which embraced the cultures of so many diverse peoples, was metamorphosed over a period of centuries into three new civilizations: Byzantium, Europe, and Islam.

Islam originated in Arabia, a land beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire, and in the mid eighth century it established its capital at Baghdad, in the heart of the former Persian Empire. Nevertheless, by conquering the lands of Syria-Palestine, all of North Africa, and most of the Iberian Peninsula, Islam inherited a good deal of Hellenistic culture, including Greek science and philosophy, and in that sense it was an heir of the Roman Empire. We have already studied Islam in Chapters 8 and 9, and it needs no further comment here. Byzantium and Europe, Rome’s other two heirs, are an-

other matter. It is to these two new civilizations that we now must turn.

The civilization that we term *Byzantium* receives its name from the eastern Mediterranean city of that name (*Byzantion* in Greek; *Byzantium* in Latin), which Emperor Constantine the Great transformed into the capital of the newly Christianized Roman Empire in 330. The fact that Constantine chose to locate *New Rome*, as he styled the city, in the East is testimony to the increasing unimportance of the West to the fourth-century empire. Although the city came to be called *Constantinople* (Constantine's city), modern scholars have favored using the older name — Byzantium — to delineate the civilization that centered on this East Roman capital. Actually, the Byzantines never called themselves anything other than *Romatoi* (Romans). From the early fourth century to 1453, when the city and its empire finally succumbed to the advances of the Ottoman Turks, Constantinople was the center of an empire and a civilization whose members viewed it as the legitimate heir of Roman imperial traditions. In fact, however, already by the late sixth century, Byzantium had become a distinctive civilization — a Greek-speaking civilization that retained many Hellenistic qualities but which also developed many new forms of expression and organization.

Byzantine civilization resulted from the fusion of three key elements. First there were the traditions of the late Roman Empire in which the emperor had been transformed into an autocratic ruler along the lines of the Persian *shahs*, or emperors. Then there was *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*. *Orthodox* is a Greek term that means “correct thinking,” and in this context it means the time-honored traditions of Eastern Mediterranean Christianity, which included folk practices as well as the teachings of theologians and church councils. The third element was the cultural heritage of the Hellenistic past, itself a fusion of Greek, western Asiatic, and Egyptian elements.

Although Byzantium was an empire, with definite boundaries that expanded and contracted over the centuries, as a civilization it transcended political boundaries. Byzantine traditions deeply influenced the cultures of a number of neighboring peoples, especially the Russians, Bulgars, and Serbs. In a real sense, even after the Byzantine Empire collapsed in the face of Ottoman Turkish assaults, its civilization lived on, in somewhat altered form, among such Orthodox Christian cultures as Russia, Bulgaria, and Serbia.

The story in the western half of the Roman Empire was different. Continuities were less evident, and dramatic changes were more the norm. Whereas the empire's eastern half

## Justinian: God's Deputy or a Devil?

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Justinian's largely unsuccessful attempt to reconquer the West was not his only misstep. A sincerely but narrowly pious man who took seriously his duties as God-anointed emperor, Justinian also promoted the cause of Christian *Orthodoxy* (correct thinking) in a cosmopolitan empire that contained many variant Christian beliefs and ways of interpreting the faith. The result was deep alienation, especially among Egyptian and Syrian subjects of the empire, and a consequent weakness that Islamic Arab forces exploited in the next century.

Regardless of his failures, Justinian achieved many successes. Among his accomplishments, he ordered and saw to completion the codification of imperial Roman law, and he commissioned the rebuilding of many of Constantinople's churches and public buildings following an especially destructive urban riot in 532. The greatest of all these edifices was the massive domed church of *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom), the first great example of a distinctly Byzantine style of architecture.

To celebrate Justinian's building projects, a Palestinian courtier named Procopius (d. after 562?) composed a work entitled *On the Buildings* around 553–554. Earlier he had composed the first seven books of his *History in Eight Books*, also known as *The Wars*, a largely eyewitness account of Justinian's wars against the Persians, Vandals, and Goths, which he waged between 527 and 553. Both of these works were meant for widespread distribution and praised the emperor's actions and character in a most obsequious manner. Unknown to Justinian and the imperial censors, Procopius also wrote, probably in the year 550, a work he never intended to be seen in his own lifetime. Known today as *The Secret History*, this work purports to be a corrective to the laudatory *Wars*, the inside story of court life and policy-making, and a true description of the characters of the emperor and his empress, Theodora.

Our two excerpts come respectively from the *Buildings* and the slightly earlier *Secret History*. Together they illustrate how and why Justinian the Great was and still is such a controversial ruler and individual.

## QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. According to *On the Buildings*, what were Justinian's greatest accomplishments?
2. According to *The Secret History*, what specific evils was Justinian guilty of?
3. Consider Justinian's supposed character flaws and vices. How would a partisan of Justinian interpret those qualities?
4. How useful does *The Secret History* appear to be as a source? What about *On the Buildings*? Please be specific in your answer.

5. Assume the *Barberini Ivory* (source 50) represents Justinian (as it probably does). Compose Procopius's commentary on it — first in the spirit of *On the Buildings* and then in the spirit of *The Secret History*.

## ON THE BUILDINGS

In our time Justinian became emperor. He took over the state when it was tottering dangerously. He increased its size and made it far more glorious by driving from it the barbarians who had violated it from ancient times, as I have described in detail in my work on the wars. . . . Justinian did not refuse to acquire other states as well. At any rate, he won over many which in his time were already foreign to the Roman Empire, and he built innumerable new cities. And finding doctrine about God before his time wavering and being forced into many directions, he checked all the pathways leading to error and caused the faith to stand on one secure foundation. Besides, this, he found that the laws were obscure because they had been multiplied unnecessarily and were in confusion because of their obvious contradiction. So he purified them of the mass of quibbles, and by greatly strengthening them, preserved them from contradiction.<sup>1</sup> By using his own initiative to remove possible causes of conspiracy and by satisfying those in need of a livelihood with gifts of money and by forcibly removing the fate which threatened them, he brought the state to blessedness. Further, he strengthened the Roman Empire, which was subject everywhere to barbarians, with large numbers of soldiers and fortified all its furthest points by building strongholds. As for the rest, most of it has been recorded in my other works: The good that was done by his building shall be my present subject. . . .

As I have just said, he more than doubled the state in area and increased its power in other ways: And those who plotted against him, even to the extent of wanting his death, have not only lived to this day in the enjoyment of their property, even though they were openly caught, but actually still serve as Roman generals and enjoy the rank of consuls.<sup>2</sup> But now, as I said, I must go on to the buildings of this emperor, so that it may not come about that those who look upon them in the future may fail to believe because of their number and size that they are the work of one man. For many achievements of our ancestors are discredited because of their outstanding merits, if they have not been recorded in writing. The buildings in Byzantium will naturally be the foundation of the record. . . .

At one period some of the common people and the dregs of the mob rose against the Emperor Justinian in Byzantium and caused the so-called Nika Revolt,<sup>3</sup> as I have described in detail without hiding anything in my work on the wars. Showing that they had taken up arms, not only against the emperor, but just as much against God in their wickedness, they dared to burn the Christian church (the Byzantines call this temple Wisdom,<sup>4</sup> thinking this name most appropriate to God), and God allowed them to accomplish this impiety in the foreknowledge of the beauty which this shrine was destined to attain when restored. So the whole church was burned down and lay in ruins. Not long after, the Emperor Justinian rounded it off so beautifully that if anyone had asked the Christians earlier whether they

<sup>1</sup>Justinian's *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Body of Civil Law), which codified and clarified imperial Roman law.

<sup>2</sup>Consuls were originally the two annually elected chief magistrates of the Roman Republic. In the age of the empire, the rank became honorific.

<sup>3</sup>January 532. The riot received its name from the fact that

the rioters cried out "Nika" (Win!), the traditional chant of the crowds at the chariot races in the Hippodrome, where the riot began and ended. See note 33 for further information.

<sup>4</sup>Hagia Sophia.

wanted the church to be destroyed and rebuilt like this, and had shown them the outlines of what can now be seen, I think they would have immediately prayed to see the church in ruins so that it could be changed into its present form. In the event, the Emperor proceeded with all haste to the building, with no heed to expense, and collected all the craftsmen from all over the world. . . . This, too, was a sign of the honor in which God held the Emperor, in that he procured in advance those who would be best to help him in his undertakings. One might reasonably admire the Emperor's own good sense also, in that he was able to select from all men those best adapted for the most serious tasks. . . .

And whenever anyone enters this church to pray, he perceives at once that this edifice has been so finely crafted not by any human power or skill but by the agency of God. Therefore his mind is lifted up toward God and exalted.

## THE SECRET HISTORY

### *Deceptive Affability and Piety of a Tyrant*

Justinian, while otherwise of such character as I have shown, did make himself easy of access and affable to his visitors; nobody of all those who sought audience with him was ever denied: even those who confronted him improperly or noisily never made him angry. On the other hand, he never blushed at the murders he committed. Thus he never revealed a sign of wrath or irritation at any offender, but with a gentle countenance and unruffled brow gave the order to destroy myriads of innocent men, to sack cities, to confiscate any amount of properties.

One would think from this manner that the man had the mind of a lamb. If, however, anyone tried to propitiate him and in supplication begged him to forgive his victims, he would grin like a wild beast, and woe betide those who saw his teeth thus bared!

The priests he permitted fearlessly to outrage their neighbors, and even took sympathetic pleasure in their robberies, fancying he was thus shar-

ing their divine piety. When he judged such cases, he thought he was doing the holy thing when he gave the decision to the priest and let him go free with his ill-gotten booty: justice, in his mind, meant the priests' getting the better of their opponents. When he himself thus illegally got possession of estates of people alive or dead, he would straightway make them over to one of the churches, gilding his violence with the color of piety—and so that his victims could not possibly get their property back. Furthermore he committed an inconceivable number of murders for the same cause: for in his zeal to gather all men into one Christian doctrine, he recklessly killed all who dissented, and this too he did in the name of piety. For he did not call it homicide, when those who perished happened to be of a belief that was different from his own. . . .

He was unctious; and hardly slept at all, generally speaking; he had no appetite for food or drink, but picking up a morsel with the tips of his fingers, tasted it and left the table, as if eating were a duty imposed upon him by nature and of no more interest than a courier takes in delivering a letter. Indeed, he would often go without food for two days and nights, especially when the time before the festival called Easter enjoins such fasting. Then, as I have said, he often went without food for two days, living only on a little water and a few wild herbs, sleeping perhaps a single hour, and then spending the rest of the time walking up and down.

If, mark you, he had spent these periods in good works, matters might have been considerably alleviated. Instead, he devoted the full strength of his nature to the ruin of the Romans, and succeeded in razing the state to its foundation. For his constant wakefulness, his privations and his labors were undergone for no other reason than to contrive each day ever more exaggerated calamities for his people. For he was, as I said, unusually keen at inventing and quick at accomplishing unholy acts, so that even the good in him transpired to be answerable for the downfall of his subjects. . . .

*How Justinian Killed a Trillion People*

That Justinian was not a man, but a demon, as I have said, in human form,<sup>5</sup> one might prove by considering the enormity of the evils he brought upon mankind. For in the monstrosity of his actions the power of a fiend is manifest. Certainly an accurate reckoning of all those whom he destroyed would be impossible, I think, for anyone but God to make. Sooner could one number, I fancy, the sands of the sea than the men this emperor murdered. Examining the countries that he made desolate of inhabitants, I would say he slew a trillion people. For Libya,<sup>6</sup> vast as it is, he so devastated that you would have to go a long way to find a single man, and he would be remarkable. Yet eighty thousand Vandals<sup>7</sup> capable of bearing arms had dwelt there, and as for their wives and children and servants, who could guess their number? Yet still more numerous than these were the Mauretanians,<sup>8</sup> who with their wives and children were all exterminated. And again, many Roman soldiers and those who followed them to Constantinople, the Earth now covers; so that if one should venture to say that five million men perished in Libya alone, he would not, I imagine, be telling the half of it.

The reason for this was that after the Vandals were defeated,<sup>9</sup> Justinian planned, not how he might best strengthen his hold on the country, nor how by safe-guarding the interests of those who were loyal to him he might have the goodwill of his subjects: but instead he foolishly re-

called Belisarius<sup>10</sup> at once, on the charge that the latter intended to make himself king (an idea of which Belisarius was utterly incapable),<sup>11</sup> and so that he might manage affairs there himself and be able to plunder the whole of Libya. Sending commissioners to value the province, he imposed grievous taxes where before there had been none. Whatever lands were most valuable, he seized, and prohibited the Arians<sup>12</sup> from observing their religious ceremonies. Negligent toward sending necessary supplies to the soldiers, he was over-strict with them in other ways; wherefore mutinies arose resulting in the deaths of many. For he was never able to abide by established customs, but naturally threw everything into confusion and disturbance.

Italy, which is not less than thrice as large as Libya,<sup>13</sup> was everywhere desolated of men, even worse than the other country,<sup>14</sup> and from this the count of those who perished there may be imagined. The reason for what happened in Italy I have already made plain.<sup>15</sup> All of his crimes in Libya were repeated here; sending his auditors to Italy, he soon upset and ruined everything.

The rule of the Goths, before this war, had extended from the land of the Gauls to the boundaries of Dacia.<sup>16</sup> . . . The Germans held Cisalpine Gaul<sup>17</sup> and most of the land of the Venetians,<sup>18</sup> when the Roman army arrived in Italy. Sirmium and the neighboring country was in the hands of the Gepidae.<sup>19</sup> All of these he utterly depopulated. For those who did not die in battle perished

<sup>5</sup>Procopius did not mean this in a metaphorical sense. Contemporary Christians believed that demons in human form inhabited the world.

<sup>6</sup>Western North Africa.

<sup>7</sup>A Germanic people who had occupied the western regions of North Africa.

<sup>8</sup>The people of western North Africa.

<sup>9</sup>This war lasted from 533 to 534.

<sup>10</sup>Constantinople's best general, Belisarius (ca. 505–565) had suppressed the Nika riot, conquered North Africa, and captured Rome in 536.

<sup>11</sup>Procopius had served as Belisarius's secretary and was quite loyal to the man. Apparently, he is correct. Despite contrary rumors, Belisarius was totally loyal to Justinian.

<sup>12</sup>The Vandals belonged to the *Arian* branch of Christianity.

<sup>13</sup>Named after Arius, a priest of Alexandria, this sect believed Jesus was God only by divine adoption and was not coetern-

nal with God the Father. Their doctrine was declared heretical in 325 at the Council of Nicaea, which Constantine I convened to settle the issue of Christ's divinity and several other problems confronting the new imperial Church.

<sup>14</sup>Hardly.

<sup>15</sup>The Italian, or Gothic, War began in 536 and dragged on to 561.

<sup>16</sup>In his earlier history of the Gothic War.

<sup>17</sup>From eastern Gaul (today southeastern France, western Switzerland, and western Germany) to the region that is today Romania (Dacia).

<sup>18</sup>Literally, "Gaul this side of the Alps." This refers to Italy north of the Po River, especially northwestern Italy, which ancient Celtic tribes had inhabited.

<sup>19</sup>Northeastern Italy.

<sup>20</sup>A Gothic people.

of disease and famine, which as usual followed in the train of war. Illyria<sup>20</sup> and all of Thrace,<sup>21</sup> that is, from the Ionian Gulf<sup>22</sup> to the suburbs of Constantinople, including Greece and the Chersonese,<sup>23</sup> were overrun by the Huns,<sup>24</sup> Slavs<sup>25</sup> and Avars,<sup>26</sup> almost every year, from the time when Justinian took over the Roman Empire; and intolerable things they did to the inhabitants. For in each of these incursions, I should say, more than two hundred thousand Romans were slain or enslaved, so that all this country became a desert like that of Scythia.<sup>27</sup>

Such were the results of the wars in Libya and in Europe. Meanwhile the Saracens<sup>28</sup> were continuously making inroads on the Romans of the East, from the land of Egypt to the boundaries of Persia; and so completely did their work, that in all this country few were left, and it will never be possible, I fear, to find out how many thus perished. Also the Persians under Chosroes<sup>29</sup> three times invaded the rest of this Roman territory, sacked the cities, and either killing or carrying away the men they captured in the cities and country, emptied the land of inhabitants every time they invaded it. . . .

For neither the Persians nor the Saracens, the Huns or the Slavs or the rest of the barbarians, were able to withdraw from Roman territory undamaged. In their inroads, and still more in their sieges of cities and in battles, where they prevailed over opposing forces, they shared in disastrous losses quite as much. Not only the Romans, but nearly all the barbarians thus felt Justinian's

<sup>20</sup>The western, or Adriatic, shore of the Balkans.

<sup>21</sup>The eastern, or Black Sea, region of the Balkans.

<sup>22</sup>The Mediterranean region between southern Italy and Greece.

<sup>23</sup>A narrow peninsula in Thrace that extends along the European side of the Dardanelles, the strait that separates modern European Turkey from Asiatic Turkey.

<sup>24</sup>The so-called Corrigar Huns and also the Avars, both of whom were Turkic horsepeople out of the steppes of Central Asia.

<sup>25</sup>Various Slavic-speaking pagan peoples who were moving into the northern Balkans.

<sup>26</sup>A conglomeration of people, possibly Indo-Iranians or Slavs, from north of the Black Sea. Justinian made them allies in 545; they disappear from history after 602.

bloodthirstiness. For while Chosroes himself was bad enough, as I have duly shown elsewhere, Justinian was the one who each time gave him an occasion for the war. For he took no heed to fit his policies to an appropriate time, but did everything at the wrong moment: in time of peace or truce he ever craftily contrived to find pretext for war with his neighbors; while in time of war, he unreasonably lost interest, and hesitated too long in preparing for the campaign, grudging the necessary expenses; and instead of putting his mind on the war, gave his attention to stargazing and research as to the nature of God.<sup>30</sup> Yet he would not abandon hostilities, since he was so bloodthirsty and tyrannical, even when thus unable to conquer the enemy because of his negligence in meeting the situation.

So while he was emperor, the whole Earth rained with the blood of nearly all the Romans and the barbarians. Such were the results of the wars throughout the whole empire during this time. But the civil strife in Constantinople and in every other city, if the dead were reckoned, would total no smaller number of slain than those who perished in the wars, I believe. Since justice and impartial punishment were seldom directed against offenders, and each of the two factions<sup>31</sup> tried to win the favor of the emperor over the other, neither party kept the peace. Each, according to his smile or his frown, was now terrified, now encouraged. Sometimes they attacked each other in full strength, sometimes in smaller groups, or even lay in ambush against the first single man of

<sup>30</sup>The desolate steppes of Central Asia.

<sup>31</sup>Arabs.

<sup>32</sup>Chosroes I (r. 531–578/579), king of kings of the Sassanian Empire of Persia, which encompassed Mesopotamia and Iran. He inherited a war with Justinian that had been raging since 527. In 532 he and Justinian negotiated an Eternal Peace. Chosroes broke the peace in 540 when he invaded Byzantine Mesopotamia and Syria. In 561 both exhausted parties concluded a fifty-year truce.

<sup>33</sup>Justinian was avidly interested in subtle points of theology and believed himself to be a theologian.

<sup>34</sup>The two major circus factions — the Blues and the Greens. They were much more than just fans of chariot-racing teams. Their rivalries and, at times, mutual frustrations often resulted in mob violence.

the opposite party who came along. For thirty-two years, without ever ceasing, they performed outrages against each other, many of them being punished with death by the municipal prefect.<sup>32</sup>

However, punishment for these offenses was mostly directed against the Greens.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore the persecution of the Samaritans<sup>34</sup> and the so-called heretics filled the Roman realm with blood. Let this present recapitulation suffice to recall what I have described more fully a little while since. Such were the things done to all mankind by the demon in flesh for which Justinian, as emperor, was responsible. But what evils he wrought against men by some hidden power and diabolic force I shall now relate.

During his rule over the Romans, many disasters of various kinds occurred: which some said were due to the presence and artifices of the Devil, and others considered were effected by the Divinity. Who, disgusted with the Roman Empire, had turned away from it and given the country up to the Old One.<sup>35</sup> The Scirtus River flooded Edessa,<sup>36</sup> creating countless sufferings

among the inhabitants, as I have elsewhere written. The Nile, rising as usual, but not subsiding in the customary season, brought terrible calamities to the people there, as I have also previously recounted. . . .

Earthquakes destroyed Antioch,<sup>37</sup> the leading city of the East; Seleucia, which is situated nearby; and Anazarbus, most renowned city in Cilicia. Who could number those that perished in these metropolises? Yet one must add also those who lived in Iborá; in Amasea, the chief city of Pontus; in Polybotus in Phrygia, called Polymede by the Pisidians; in Lychnidus in Epirus; and in Corinth: all thickly inhabited cities from of old. All of these were destroyed by earthquakes during this time, with a loss of almost all their inhabitants.<sup>38</sup> And then came the plague, which I have previously mentioned, killing half at least of those who had survived the earthquakes.<sup>39</sup> To so many men came their doom, when Justinian first came to direct the Roman state and later possessed the throne of autocracy.

<sup>32</sup>Constantinople's chief municipal official.

<sup>33</sup>See note 31. The Greens were especially troublesome for Justinian. They precipitated the Nika riot of 532 (note 3) when they staged a demonstration in the Hippodrome in which they complained of the arbitrary actions of imperial authorities, including the emperor.

<sup>34</sup>A nonorthodox Jewish sect with settlements in Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and Constantinople, they were centered in the hills of Samaria in central Israel. Rebellions against Byzantine authority in 529, they were ruthlessly crushed.

<sup>35</sup>The Devil.

<sup>36</sup>A city in what is today southeast Turkey.

<sup>37</sup>The chief city of northern Syria.

<sup>38</sup>These cities were located throughout the eastern empire. Nine major earthquakes are recorded in this entire region during the period 526–537. The death toll was staggering.

<sup>39</sup>A Mediterranean-wide pandemic of bubonic plague broke out in Egypt in 541 and reached Constantinople by May 542. Justinian himself contracted the plague but survived. Justinian's invading armies introduced the plague into Italy, where it proved quite devastating. By 600 the plague had essentially burnt itself out, but only after reducing the total population of the Mediterranean to 60 percent or less of its preplague numbers.



## Charles the Great: Europe's First Emperor

Although Byzantine cultural influences spread beyond the territorial limits of the Eastern Roman Empire, Byzantium was largely a civilization centered upon a single empire. In the West, to the contrary, a new civilization arose that was not identified with any single political entity, even though the West created its own empire in the year 800 and then recreated it in 962. Despite having its own *Holy Roman*