Justinian I

One of the greatest emperors in the history of the Byzantine Empire, Justinian I made a profound and lasting imprint on the course of the empire’s subsequent development. Justinian’s codification of the law, involvement in religious disputes, and rebuilding of Constantinople provided the foundation for later intellectual, legal, and cultural development. His most ambitious effort, however, was the reconquest of the west and the reunification of the empire under his authority. Justinian’s wars in Italy led to the successful restoration of Byzantine power in Italy and the destruction of the kingdom of the Ostrogoths, but his success was short-lived.

Originally named Petrus Sabbatius and later called Flavius Petrus Sabbatius Justinianus, Justinian was born ca. 483 CE in Tauresium, Dardania (in present-day Serbia and Montenegro). Rising to power as the nephew of the reigning emperor, Justin I, Justinian first reached Constantinople as a boy to receive an education. Later, when his uncle took power, he joined Justin in the capital and played an important role in government. He was rewarded by promotion as well as with a special dispensation to marry the actress and courtesan Theodora in 525. Justin made his nephew caesar (deputy emperor) in 525 and coemperor in 527. After Justin’s death that summer, Justinian became sole emperor.

Justinian reached a major turning point early in his reign when he faced the Nika revolt in 532. The revolt broke out over the arrest of the leaders of two rival factions in Constantinople. The rebellion was so severe that it nearly toppled the emperor, who was on the verge of fleeing the city with members of the imperial court. Theodora, however, gave an impassioned speech that persuaded her husband to stand his ground. He then gave the order for a detachment of troops to enter the city and put down the revolt. According to contemporary accounts, the troops entered the Hippodrome, the arena in which the rebels concentrated, and massacred about 30,000 people. The leaders of the rebellion were also executed, and Justinian remained in firm control of the empire.

There were two immediate consequences of Justinian’s suppression of the revolt: the completion of the reform and codification of Roman law and the rebuilding of the city of Constantinople. Indeed, one of the most pressing needs the emperor faced after the Nika revolt was the restoration of the city after the great destruction caused by the rebellion. Along with aqueducts and a number of public buildings, Justinian built a great new church, Hagia Sophia. It became the imperial church, the head of all Christian churches in the empire. It was also a repository and model for late imperial art and asserted the close association between politics and religious belief in the empire. Its lavish decoration, including mosaics and colored marble,
and massive structure reportedly inspired Justinian to declare, "Solomon, I have outdone you!" when he first saw the completed church.

Justinian also was a great lawgiver, and he was able to complete the codification of the law he began in 529. The *Corpus Juris Civilis* ("Body of the Civil Law") was compiled by the jurist Tribonian and several committees organized by Justinian or Tribonian. On completion, it was organized in four main sections: the *Codex Constitutionum* ("Constitutional Code"), the Digest, the Institutes, and the Novels. The codification of the law, completed in 565, was intended not only to organize the law, which had been in a confused state, but also to create a bond of unity in the empire in the same way that Hagia Sophia was designed to do.

Justinian's activities in law and building were those of a traditional Roman emperor, and indeed he saw himself in that tradition. As a result, he also saw it as his duty to rule over a united empire that included the old Roman heartland of Italy and Rome, the ancient capital. Therefore, beginning in the 530s and continuing for some two decades, Justinian's armies undertook the reconquest of parts of the old Western Roman Empire.

The first step came with the invasion and rapid conquest of Vandal North Africa. Justinian had originally hoped to secure the aid of the Vandal king Hilderic, but his overthrow and replacement by Gelimer forced the emperor to change plans. In 533–534, Justinian’s loyal and talented general, Belisarius, led Byzantine armies into North Africa, where he managed to defeat Gelimer and the Vandals. The kingdom was quickly restored to imperial rule.

Justinian next turned his eyes to Italy, where King Theodoric the Great had ruled an Ostrogothic kingdom from the 490s until his death in 526. Theodoric's successors, however, were not his equal, and the kingdom itself was rent by conflict between those who supported an alliance with the empire and those who rejected any ties to the empire or its traditions. Justinian exploited those divisions, especially as they involved Theodoric’s daughter and regent, Amalasuntha. According to Byzantine historian Procopius, Theodora, deeply jealous of Amalasuntha, secretly plotted against her and encouraged the Gothic opposition to kill the princess. Her murder, after Justinian had declared that he would defend the Gothic princess, gave the emperor a pretext to invade Italy. It is possible that Justinian and Theodora indulged in a dangerous diplomatic game that led to the death of Amalasuntha but that also provided them the opportunity to restore imperial control over Italy.

The war began with a feint into Sicily, which Belisarius quickly conquered. The rapidity of the general’s success inspired Justinian to proceed more aggressively, and although he enjoyed early success—including the capture of the city of Ravenna in 540 and the establishment of imperial administration in Italy—the Gothic War dragged on for nearly 25 years. Byzantine commander Narses gradually restored Byzantine authority throughout all of Italy, but the conquest did not long survive Justinian’s death; the Lombards began their conquest of Italy in 568.
Justinian's reign was a pivotal one for both the old eastern and western empires. Although his codification of the law would greatly influence later medieval Europe, his conquest of Italy came at great cost for the Byzantine Empire, and his successors proved less suited to the challenges at hand than Justinian. The emperor died on November 14, 565 in Constantinople.

Further Reading


MLA Citation


View all citation styles.