

Semester Project

Justinian as the Cause of the Fall of the Byzantine Empire

By

Melanie Powers, Alicia Porter,

Heather Kierstead, and Annie Martin

Professor Ted Christou

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Section 1B

Emperor Justinian and the Fall of the Byzantine Empire

The Emperor Justinian was a major contributor to the fall of the Byzantine Empire. It was not in one specific way, there were four main factors that contributed to his role in the downfall. These factors included Justinian's plan to expand borders, his many different building projects which lead to increased taxes and his contributions to the Nika riots.

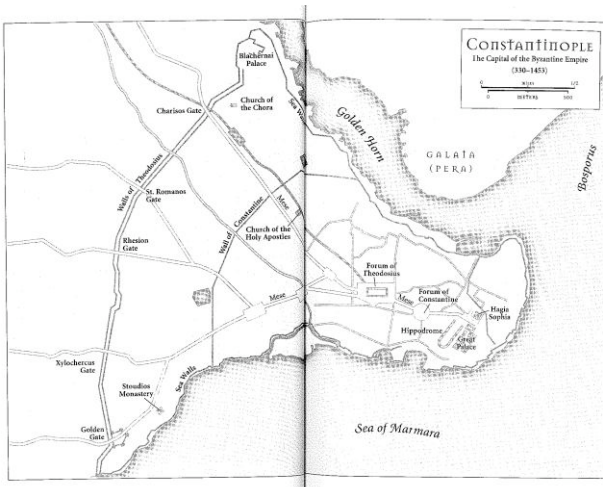
Discussion about our Thesis

We feel that our thesis is an accurate representation of the events leading to the fall of this great empire. Out of the four topics listed we feel as though the large expansion of the empire and the enemies Justinian made in the process were the main cause of the fall. This being said even though he was not the person in power during the time the empire fell. However he is the one who made enemies with all of these different tribes of people after attacking and taking land from them. These tribes kept attacking an already vulnerable empire until it finally fell as an act of revenge for the deeds of the past. We say the empire was vulnerable based on the other three causes we list in our thesis.

Expansion of the Empires Borders by Justinian

Emperor Justinian led to the down fall of the Byzantine Empire by expanding the empires borders too far. In doing so he left large sections of the empire unguarded and open to attack

and concur by one of the many enemies he had made through his war campaigns. His rationale for this expansion was that he wanted to re-conquer ancient Rome so they could go back to the “glory days” of the empire.



¹Figure 1 This is a map of the Byzantine Empire before Justinian's expansion conquest.

“It was noted that Justinian had an army fighting in a war somewhere in or around the empire for almost every year of his reign. His army was comprised of up to 400 troops who were divided into five groups based on their economic status.”² He was able to convince the barbarians to fight for him as their tribal leaders were given a bribe; land for their involvement in the cause. Justinian was unhappy with the fact that the people of many Barbarian tribes were the ones who inhabited the land of the old empire. The land was considered too prestigious for Barbarians to be living on and as such was considered insulting to Justinian. “In Africa they faced the problem of the Vandal tribe on their old land, and they were having trouble with the Berber tribe. So in order to regain their lost land the Byzantines had to in some way deal with both tribes.”³ Mean while the Ostrogoths were on their land in Italy where the natural resources

¹ Wells, Colin, *Sailing from Byzantium How a Lost Empire Shaped the World*. (United States of America: Delta publishing, 2006)

² James Allen Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*. (United States of America: Greenwood Press. 2005)

were being sold off for immense profit, as a result these people were becoming extremely wealthy. This angered Justinian as that money could have been well used by himself in various building projects. “The campaign to take back Africa was started in 533 and it was a year later that the Vandals were defeated. However part of an army had to stay in Africa as the problem of the Berbers became increasingly difficult. The army stayed and fought for 10 years before the soldiers could not take it anymore until a new military leader was chosen.”⁴ After the Duke of Mesopotamia was appointed to position of Military Leader he arrived in Africa and quickly solved the conflict with the Berbers. Italy became the next spot on the agenda, and as result the Ostrogoths were quickly defeated and the land was redistributed to the “original owners”. From Italy Justinian then set his sights on Spain as he knew there was infighting among the royal family. “He took advantage of that by sending an army to go and take over. Once a different King took over the Byzantines refused to leave Spain and gained a province there.”⁵ With all of his fighting Justinian made more enemies the Huns, and the Slavs kept attacking the Byzantines but were unable to cause any real damage, but did remain a constant threat. “Justinian also caused the Avars to take notice of the Byzantines during his life he was able to distract them with bigger enemies, however upon his death they went after his land.”⁶

The wars were expensive and with the rest of the empire’s money going to building projects they were strapped for money. “Fighting was proving to be too costly, in 541 the plague

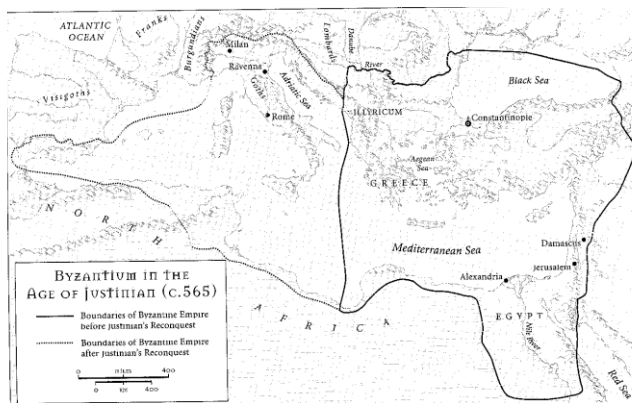
³ James Allen Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*. (United States of America: Greenwood Press. 2005)

⁴ James Allen Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*. (United States of America: Greenwood Press. 2005)

⁵ James Allen Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*. (United States of America: Greenwood Press. 2005)

⁶ James Allen Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*. (United States of America: Greenwood Press. 2005)

hit and as result there was hardly anyone left able and willing to fight in Justinian's battles."⁷ By the end of his reign Justinian had indeed expanded the empire but many say he had stretched it too far, as there was no one to protect it and there was not enough money to go around. Especially with all of the enemies he made through his expansion project attacks on the empire were inevitable and it was just a matter of time before it all fell apart.



⁸Figure 2 Map of Byzantium During the Reign of Justinian.

⁷ James Allen Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*. (United States of America: Greenwood Press. 2005)

⁸ Wells, Colin, *Sailing from Byzantium How a Lost Empire Shaped the World*. (United States of America: Delta publishing, 2006)

Emperor Justinian - Building Projects.

Through the time of Justinian's reign as Emperor, he was responsible for and oversaw several different building projects. Justinian reasoned that these new structures would benefit citizens in a helpful and positive way.⁹

Some of Emperor Justinian's projects included:¹

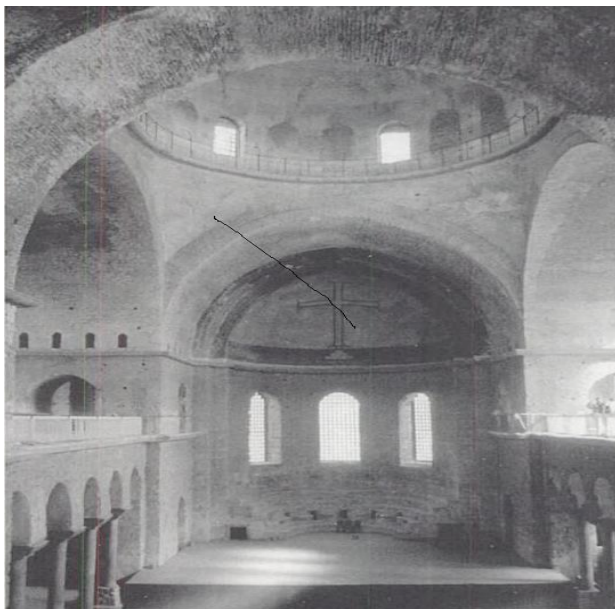
- Churches - Most famously, Hagia Sophia
- Aqueducts
- Roads
- Bridges
- Monasteries
- Orphanages
- Hostels
- Law Courts

Emperor Justinian was motivated to build. He concentrated on cities that were devastated by earthquakes or other forms of disaster. Some of his building projects proved that this time period was capable of producing great types of building advances.¹ These projects were unfortunately not embraced by all members of Justinian's society. These buildings were lavish and were built through extravagant costs. The funds that went into these projects consequently led in part to the raising of taxes for the people of Emperor Justinian's society. Once this order came into effect it proceeded to create more hostility between Justinian and his citizens, this in turn leading to more unfortunate events during the Emperor's reign.²

⁹James Allen Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*. (United States of America: Greenwood Press. 2005)



The Monastery of St. Katherine, built under Justinian's command. It is the oldest continuously inhabited monastery in the world. St.Katherine.net, _ 2006



Hagia Sophia, a church Justinian ordered the rebuilding of after it was destroyed by riots.

James Allen Evans, _ 2005

² Jackson J. Spielvogel. Western Civilization: To 1500, Volume 1. (Canada: Thompson Wadsworth. 2009)

Nika Riot

Emperor Justinian had a bad habit of choosing efficient advisors, but advisors who were not very popular among the people of Constantinople. The Nika Riot involved a group of Chariot racing fanatics who joined together and revolted against Justinian. Many nobles were also involved who were angry at the fiscal policies of Justinian's prefect, John the Cappadocian. These nobles also disliked the public prosecutor Tribonian because he created a reform that did away with certain tax-exemptions, and he also reorganized the laws of inheritance and succession.¹⁰

The Nika riot was sparked when crowds in Constantinople took the streets eager for vengeance on the city prefect, Eudaimon. As the crowd continued to rage and riot an aristocratic clique led by Justinian's nephews attempted to seize the throne. The crowd demanded that three officials be removed, Tribonian, Eudaimon, and John the Cappadocian, and gained temporary victory with this dismissal. During this time the emperor nearly fled the country.

Convinced by his wife Theodora, Justinian decided to stay in the country. His revolt against the crowd was a cruel one. Thirty thousand or more unarmed civilians died at the hands of Justinian's body guards. Even after the Nika Riot was over Justinian still awarded the people of Constantinople their demands. He removed the three officials Tribonian, Eudaimon, and John the Cappadocian from office.

¹⁰ Michsael, M. (1992). John Lydus and The Roman Past: Antiquarianism and Politics in the age of Justinian. London and New York: Routledge

The Cappadocian was a very evil man and was mainly responsible for the Nika riot.¹ He was a cruel and wicked man who created policies and never considered the people of Constantinople when doing so. The people hated him and his fiscal policies. Many people believe that Justinian was unaware of what the Cappadocian was doing. His wife knew of these evils and approached him, letting him know about these affairs.¹ She said that there was a risk that not only would the citizenry be destroyed by such evil machinations, but that there was also a possibility that the empire itself was on the verge of collapse.¹ The emperor Justinian was seen as a gentle man who tried to help his subjects so far as was humanly possible, such as removing the three officials from office that the Nika Rioters had asked him to remove, once the riot was over.



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- ¹ Michael, M. (1992). John Lydus and The Roman Past: Antiquarianism and Politics in the age of Justinian. London and New York: Routledge
 - ² byzantineempire.info/Hippodrome.htm

From the first foundation, of the city the rivalry of the factions (*demes*) "Blues" and the "Greens" was one of the most striking features of the life of the place. It was carried far beyond the circus, and spread into all branches of life. We often hear of the "Green" faction identifying itself with Arianism, or of the "Blue" supporting a pretender to the throne. Not merely men of sporting interests, but persons of all ranks and professions, chose their colour and backed their faction.



Ruins of the Hippodrome

This exciting incident proved the commencement of six days of desperate rioting. The Blues and Greens united, and taking as their watchword, Nika "conquer," swept through the city, crying for the deposition of John of Cappadocia, the unpopular finance minister, and of Eudemius, Praefect of the city, who was immediately responsible for the executions. ²

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Justinian's Taxation Policy

The fall of Constantinople can be directly related to Justinian's relentless aspirations to create the ideal empire; greater unity and a centralization of authority. After the Nika riots, Justinian needed to make some much needed improvements to his empire and decided to introduce his administrative reforms, insisting that these reforms were nothing new but more simply reversions to an older order. During his wars with the west, Justinian bought peace with the Persians with regular payments of gold. While the Byzantines poured money, material and men into their wars with the west, the Persians sat back and watched the Byzantine gold fill their treasury. The Byzantine economy began to weaken as the empire was steadily being drained of coinage, thus leading to the most hated facet of Justinian's reign; his crippling taxation over the

² byzantineempire.info/Hippodrome.htm

citizens of Constantinople. Both the rich and the poor citizens of the political factions of Constantinople tried to make a case to Justinian concerning the drastic rise in taxes in hopes that he may lower them if not get rid of them all together. The increase in taxes helped fund Justinian's war campaign in the attempt to re-claim Rome's lost territory. As a result of the increased taxation, the citizens of Constantinople lost confidence in their leader and his plans for further expansion.

Connection to Today's Society

Our government raises taxes to support or to offset costs of new infrastructures or to cover deficits due to overspending. This can easily be compared to the time of Justinian and the consequences that came from his many building projects and many wars.

Defending Our Sources

We are happy with the sources we have chosen because they both defend and enhance our hypothesis. Through the research process we were able to verify that this source information was indeed correct. As we read different facts pertaining to our topic we would stop and question if that could be possible based on our prior knowledge. When we ran across something that did not sound accurate we would always double check with another resource just to make sure. Unfortunately all of our sources were second hand information as we did not have the resources to obtain written first hand sources. However we feel that including maps and photos give first hand insight into our topic. We were thrilled to find the two maps showing the borders of the empire before Justinian's reign and then the one showing how the borders were expanded

during his reign. This addition of the maps we feel added evidence to our thesis by physically showing how greatly the borders were expanded. Also the photos of the hippodrome give us a visual to be able to imagine the scene at the massacre following the Nika Riot, and what it must have felt like running around in circles with nowhere to go. Overall we feel confident in the fact that our sources are accurate and up to date.

Additional Photo



Figure 3 Mosaic of Emperor Justinian

www.monachos.net/.../images/icons/justinian.jpg

Sources

Evans, James Allen. The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire. United States of America: Greenwood Press. 2005.

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