The Legacy of Justinian

Using the documents below, develop arguments in response to the question, “Was Justinian a good emperor?” If you are on the Blue Team, you must argue FOR Justinian. If you are on the Green Team, you must argue AGAINST Justinian. While some quotes may seem to help one side more than the other, be as creative as you can to “spin” them in favor of your own side.

CONFLICTING ACCOUNTS

Emperor Justinian is described differently in two different accounts by his official court historian Procopius. In the first account from the book Buildings, written during Justinian's life, Procopius says...

Justinian created countless cities which did not exist before. And finding that the belief in God was... straying into errors... he brought it about that it stood on the firm foundation of a single faith. Moreover, finding the laws obscure because they had become far more numerous than they should be, and obvious confusion because they disagreed with each other, he preserved them [in the Law Code of Emperor Justinian, 529 CE]... by controlling their discrepancies with the greatest firmness.

However, after Justinian died, Procopius wrote a different book, the Secret History, in which he presented this different picture of the great Emperor...

Justinian was... crusty, critical, secretive by temperament, two-faced: A clever fellow with marvelous ability to conceal his real opinion... lying all the time...

BLUE: Argue FOR Justinian
GREEN: Argue AGAINST Justinian

RAISING FUNDS

Justinian was known for using trickery to collect more money for his military campaigns to reconquer the Western Roman Empire from the Germanic kings. In one account by the court historian Procopius, John, a Byzantine soldier, was taken captive by the enemy, who demanded payment to set John free...

So his [grandmother], who was still living, got together a ransom not less than two thousand pounds of silver, and was ready to purchase her grandson's liberty. But... the Emperor heard of the bargain and forbade it: saying that Roman wealth must not be given to the barbarians. Not long after this, John fell ill and departed from this world, whereupon the Governor of the city forged a letter which, he said, John had written him as a friend not long before, to the effect that he wished his estate to go to the Emperor.
THEODORA AND THE NIKA RIOTS

Five year’s into his reign, at a chariot match between the Blue team and the Green team, angry sports fans in the Hippodrome began a riot against the Emperor that destroyed the city of Constantinople. They cried “Nika” meaning “Conquer,” from which the riots get their name. According to Professor Thomas Martin PhD of the College of the Holy Cross...

Justinian was so terrified that he was literally on the docks, ready to go into exile... at which point his wife, the beautiful and formidable Theodora, says, “I’m not going.”... She says, “I’m an empress, I’m not running away... Purple is a great color for a funeral. I’m staying.” Justinian was so shocked, [that] he didn't go. With Theodora’s advice, he called in the shock troops, and slaughtered 30,000 fans who they had lured to the horse racing stadium. She saved him from throwing away his empire.

JUSTINIAN’S CODE

Justinian realized the laws of the Roman Empire were long, confusing, and sometimes contradictory. He created a commission to collect, organize, and revise them into a new body of law called the Corpus Juris Civilis, commonly known as Justinian’s Code. The introduction states...

The precepts (principles) of the law are these: to live honestly, to injure no one, and to give every man his due. The study of the law consists of two branches, public law and private law. The former relates to the welfare of the Roman State; the latter to the advantage of the individual citizen. The private law... [is] collected from the precepts of nature, from those of the law of nations, or from those of the civil law of Rome.
PLAGUE OF JUSTINIAN

While Justinian was busy fighting enemies in the West, there was a more powerful enemy already in his midst: the Bubonic Plague, a devastating disease that even infected Emperor Justinian. According to Ishaan Tharoor of TIME magazine...

... Justinian is remembered for having tried to restore the fallen glory of ancient Rome by waging a series of military campaigns to retake lands that had been overrun by barbarian tribes. But, while Justinian's armies were fleetingly successful, another scourge bearing his name was far deadlier. Around A.D. 540, a disease borne by rats in Egypt — long the breadbasket of the Mediterranean world — spread to the Byzantine capital at Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) where, by some accounts, it claimed 5,000 lives a day and killed nearly half the ancient metropolis' population. From there, the plague moved east and west, becoming antiquity's most lethal known pandemic. Half a century after it began, between 25 million and 100 million in Europe and Asia had died. Some historians say the damage was so great to the Persian and Byzantine empires that it made them vulnerable to the Muslim conquests of the next century. The devastation the plague wrought may have also ushered in the period now known as the Dark Ages in Europe.

Procopius writes about Justinian's response to the Plague in the Secret History, saying...

When [plague] swept through the whole known world and notably the Roman Empire, wiping out most of the farming community and... leaving a trail of desolation in its wake, Justinian showed no mercy towards the ruined [farmers]. Even then, he did not refrain (hold back) from demanding the annual tax, not only the amount [of] each individual, but also the amount for which his deceased neighbors [owed].
THE HAGIA SOPHIA

One of the most well-known accomplishments of Justinian’s reign is the building of the magnificent domed cathedral, the Hagia Sophia or “Holy Wisdom.” It became the symbol of Byzantine architecture, imitated throughout the ages. When the Hagia Sophia was completed in 537 CE, Procopius wrote the following...

In height it rises to the very heavens... A spherical-shaped dome... makes it exceedingly beautiful: from the lightness of the building it does not appear to rest upon solid foundation, but to... be suspended from heaven... The entire ceiling is covered with pure gold, which adds glory to the beauty, though the rays of light reflected upon the gold from the marble surpass it in beauty... And whenever anyone enters this church to pray, he understands at once that it is not by any human strength or skill, but by the influence of God, that this work has been perfected. And so his mind is lifted up toward God... Moreover, it is impossible to describe the treasure of gold and silver plate and gems, which the Emperor Justinian has presented to it.

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ANSWER THE QUAESTIO, _______________________________________________________________?