The Legacy of Justinian

The goal of this activity is to determine, overall, whether Justinian was a good emperor for the Byzantine Empire. As a group, analyze and discuss the text and documents in each section to decide whether you feel it shows Justinian in a mostly positive or mostly negative light. Keep in mind that often the same information can be “spun” to support either side, so feel free to think outside the box. Either answer can be correct if you have an evidence-based argument to support it. Remember that everyone should follow his or her chosen group roles. After discussing each section for a few minutes, we will pause to vote as a class on whether the example shows Justinian as good or bad. Envoys will hold up their signs on behalf of the group, and will be ready to explain their reasoning.

Religious Unity

Emperor Justinian’s efforts to create an empire united by a single faith is described by his official court historian Procopius. In the book Buildings, written during Justinian’s life, Procopius says...

...And finding that the belief in God was... straying into errors (i.e. heresy, unorthodox beliefs)... he brought it about that it stood on the firm foundation of a single faith.

However, this was generally achieved through suppression and persecution of various heretical groups throughout the Empire. Among the heretical groups persecuted were the Monophysites, Arians, and especially Manichaeans. According to John of Ephesus, who wrote during the lifetime of Justinian...

Many people adhered to (followed) the deadly error of the Manichaeans. They used to meet in houses and hear the mysteries of that impure doctrine. When they were arrested, they were taken into the presence of
the Emperor who hoped to convert them. He disputed with them but could not convince them. [At the command of the Emperor, they] were burned... and their property was confiscated (taken). There were among them illustrious (well-respected) women, nobles, and senators.

RAISING FUNDS

After Justinian died, his court historian Procopius wrote a new book, the Secret History, in which he presented a 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...

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, a Byzantine soldier named John was taken captive by the enemy, who demanded payment to free him...

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 (faked) a letter which, he said, John had written him as a friend not long before, [saying] that he wished his estate (all his wealth) to go to the Emperor.

THEODORA

The wife of Justinian, the Empress Theodora, came from the lower class in society. In fact, she was a dancer and a courtesan (high-level prostitute), but she captured the heart of the Emperor, and soon became a tremendous power behind the throne. In fact, Justinian described her as his co-equal ruler.

According to Professor Thomas Martin PhD of the College of the Holy Cross...
Her act was so popular, the Emperor Justinian fell in love with Theodora, and in fact he changed the law of the empire so he could marry this woman. Why? She was beautiful. Even her enemies say she was... oh-so-beautiful, but she was also oh-so-smart. That’s clearly one of the reasons Justinian fell so deeply in love with her and remained in love with her.

**THE NIKA RIOTS**

Five year’s into his reign, at a chariot race between the Blue team and the Green team, angry sports fans in the Hippodrome, unhappy with the Emperor’s rule, began a riot against the Emperor that destroyed the city of Constantinople. They cried “Nika” meaning “Conquer.” The teams represented more than just sports. They were also similar to political parties. According to Professor Philip Daileader PhD of the College of William and Mary, “It’s as if Yankees and Mets fans decided to overthrow the mayor of New York (City).” 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.

**THE HAGIA SOPHIA**

One of the most well-known accomplishments of Justinian’s reign is the building of the magnificient 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...
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.

**JUSTINIAN’S CODE**

One of Justinian’s most famous accomplishments was his Law 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*. Although Justinian himself died in 565, his code served the Byzantine Empire for 900 years. His official court historian Procopius wrote about the reorganized law code, saying...

> Finding the laws obscure (confusing) 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.

The introduction to the *Code of Justinian* states...

> The precepts (principles) of the law are these: to live honestly, to injure no one, and to give every man his due.

**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].

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<th>BLUE: Argue FOR Justinian</th>
<th>GREEN: Argue AGAINST Justinian</th>
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**Summary:** Considering all the evidence, was Justinian a good emperor?

**Reflection:** What qualities and actions make someone a good ruler?