ISSUE 7

Did the Byzantine Empire Benefit from the Rule of Justinian and Theodora?

YES: **Paolo Cesaretti,** from *Theodora: Empress of Byzantium* (Transworld Publishers, 2002)

NO: **Procopius,** from *Secret History,* trans. by Richard Atwater (P. Covici, 1927; Covici Friede, 1927; University of Michigan Press, 1961)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of Byzantine studies, Paolo Cesaretti, presents a balanced view of the accomplishments of Justinian and Theodora in the Byzantine Empire of the sixth century.

NO: Procopius, a contemporary of the Byzantine rulers, offers a "secret history" of their personal and administrative failings.

Accurate and reliable historical accounts depend on good sources. In this issue we confront the dilemma posed by an "insider's" account that was kept secret by its author and that contrasts sharply with published historical accounts by the same author. Which more accurately reflects reality—the open or the secret history of the Byzantine Empire, both written by Procopius?

The Roman Emperor Constantine had established an eastern capital on the strait of Bosporus, where Europe and Asia meet, in 330. Endowed with his name, Constantinople was a fortress city, built to repel attacks from land and sea. After the fall of Rome and the elevation of a Germanic ruler in 476, power shifted to the eastern capital, which had been built on the ancient Greek city of Byzantium. The Byzantine emperors claimed succession from their counterparts in ancient Rome, and their Christian empire had preserved both the brilliance of Greek culture and the administrative genius of the Romans.

Justinian, who had been groomed by his uncle Justin I, became emperor in 527. He codified the laws of ancient Rome, preserving principles of reason and justice. However, he did press Justin to amend the law forbidding a patrician to marry an actress, when he fell in love with Theodora, a former actress who would become the empress. Byzantine emperors claimed divine right of

sovereignty, and the emperor had a quasi-priestly role in some religious services. Justinian and Theodora used the ancient Roman term, referring to themselves as Augusti (plural of Augustus), the absolute rulers of Byzantium.

Under the leadership of his able general Belisarius, Justinian reclaimed North Africa from the Vandals, part of southern Spain from the Visigoths, and Italy from the Ostrogoths. Procopius was advisor to Belisarius, accompanying the general on many military campaigns. His eight-volume *History of the Wars* is ambitious, adopting a sophisticated tone of impartiality and hinting at criticisms of the royal sovereigns. A later commentary *On the Buildings* was filled with praise for the emperor, as builder of magnificent sacred and secular edifices.

The *Secret History,* begun at the same time as his published works [the 550s], was intended by Procopius to be published after the death of Justinian. Unfortunately for Procopius, he pre-deceased his emperor. It purports to be the history of "what really happened," and he fears that disparities between this work and the public ones might cause future generations to "think me a writer of fiction." Both the Augusti are portrayed in the *Secret History* as ambitious, cruel, arrogant, and two-faced. He presents "evidence" that both were "fiends" in the literal sense of demonically driven. Little wonder then that he feared discovery of this work would merit him "a most horrible death."

Virtually all biographies of Justinian and Theodora, as well as histories of the Byzantine Empire of this period, have relied on this first-hand account, at least since 1623 when it was found in the Vatican Library and published for the first time. Professor Cesaretti quotes extensively from Procopius, although he offers a balanced portrayal of both Justinian and Theodora. And, Procopius is the source for Theodora's dramatic speech, during the Nika rebellion. As events unfold in the Hippodrome, where the Blue and Green factions contend in chariot races, imagine 100,000 people engrossed in, sometimes, 24 races in a single day, interspersed with wild animal acts. Theodora's father had been a bear trainer and her early life in the theatre was probably by necessity, to put food on the family table. As you read these two accounts, ask yourself whether it is possible to have an "unbiased" historical account.

YES

Paolo Cesaretti

Theodora: Empress of Byzantium

Like every great story, the events of the Nika rebellion have been told an infinite number of times; each retelling prompts new interpretations and debates. . . . The Nika rebellion actually sprung from the grass roots of society, and it was prompted not by nostalgia for the past but by present needs; as was always the case in Constantinople, the truth was a complex mosaic of elements.

Some dignitaries of the empire had already likened Justinian to a sea monster that sucked up water and money. Others criticized his policies regarding the many nomadic tribes that moved along the dangerous borders of the empire from the Danube to Arabia: he had purchased their nonbelligerence at too high a price, they said. Even Khosrow I, the new king of Persia, demanded gold before he would consider the possibility of peace along the eastern frontier. In addition, the emperor's imitation of God did not seem to be particularly welcome "in the high heavens." The tragic Antioch earthquake of 526 was followed by a second one in 528. In 530, yet another earthquake had shaken Antioch's historical rival, Laodikeia, one of the best ports of the Levant and the capital of the new province of Theodorias (recently established in honor of Theodora Augusta).

The two sovereigns had dug deep into the imperial coffers to help with post-earthquake reconstruction, displaying dedication and generosity, but their actions had not served to dispel concerns and suspicions aroused by the behavior of some of their closest collaborators. It was rumored, for example, that the jurist Tribonian, who supervised the great project of rewriting the body of laws and was quaestor of the sacred palace (a sort of minister of justice), "was always ready to sell justice for gain." The perception of judicial disarray enraged the masses, who were already bitter about John the Cappadocian's fiscal policies. Capping a swift series of promotions, John had become praetorian prefect of the East, the most influential of ministers. Justinian relied heavily on his skills, and for ten years, from 531 to 541, John exerted great power throughout the empire.

John the Cappadocian did not have a classical education, but he knew accounting very well. Justinian expected him to generate the income, or the savings, which he needed to pursue his "Great Idea" of renewal and restoration, and John met his expectations. He made sure that fiscal laws were obeyed. He supervised the landowners, the merchants, and the shopkeepers. Revenues were routed directly to him by his inspectors, instead of passing through the provincial élites, the curiae, as they once had. John the Cappadocian was pivotal in the process of

centralization required by Justinian's plan. A manager with a sharp eye for cutting costs, John reduced and even eliminated part of the postal service, which is the essential glue of any polity. The post had been among the empire's traditional glories—one of the services that set the Roman civilized world "of the thousand cities" apart from the "barbarian" no-man's-lands.

. . . The public post not only guaranteed speedy communications, but also affected the supply of all kinds of raw materials and staples. The results of its elimination were disastrous for rural industry, a productive base that contributed food and tax revenue to the empire. The owners of large estates, who had been accustomed to "sell[ing] their excess crops," now saw "their crops rotting on their hands and going to waste." The small landowners bore the brunt of the new situation, since they supplied the city markets. Unable to afford the cost of private transportation, the farmers (both men and women) trudged along the roads of the empire carrying their crops on their backs. . . . Overcome by fatigue, many lay down and died on the road. Others abandoned their crops and moved to the city, trusting in some form of Providence, whether divine or imperial.

When the food supply is irregular, life gets harder in a capital over-crowded with mouths to feed. Besides, hungry people talk. . . . And so before long John the Cappadocian was being blamed on moral and Christian grounds, instead of being judged simply by bureaucratic or political criteria. It was rumored that he was an evil man who kept Roman citizens in secret chambers, forcing them to pay taxes he claimed were overdue by threatening them with the same humiliating torture inflicted on slaves or highway robbers. All this, to channel money into Justinian's coffers. Or was it for personal gain?—some swore that John embezzled most of the taxes that the citizens believed they were contributing to the welfare of the empire.

The slanderous rumors intensified: John was getting rich; John was a drunk; John had an infamous retinue of jesters and prostitutes both male and female; he was a heathen who pretended to say Christian prayers while actually reciting magical pagan formulas. The rumors and accusations were not so different from those that once circulated about Theodora. In time, John and the empress would grow to be enemies, but they were both victims (for different reasons) of hostile preconceptions among those who considered themselves decent and upright citizens.

Because the factions were so active in the Hippodrome, that place became a natural sounding board for economic and political tensions. After the violent urban riots of 523–24, after Justinian's arbitrary protection of the Blue radical fringe, the Greens had even chanted:

> Would that Sabbatius [Justinian's father] had never been born! That he might not have a murderer [Justinian] for a son!

The year 532 began with new trouble between the Blues and the Greens. Now focused on military issues in the west, Justinian ordered that the situation be

brought under control with the same measures he had used in 524 against *his* Blues; such measures were now to be applied impartially to the extremists of both factions. Eudaemon, the city prefect, ordered the militia to arrest anyone engaged in violence, no matter what faction they belonged to. The Greens saw this as a continuation of the unjustified persecution of their group, while the Blues felt betrayed by their longtime patron, especially when they heard that the investigations and arrests were culminating in death sentences for members of *both* factions. Four rebel leaders, both Green and Blue, were sentenced to be hanged.

The scaffold where the sentences were carried out was in Sykae (Galata), beyond the Golden Horn, in a square near one of the many monasteries where religious men tried to merge heavenly and earthly life through prayer and exercise, without meddling in politics. Tensions were running high, and the hangman's hand was unsteady: two of the prisoners, one Blue and one Green, survived the first attempt. The noose was wound more tightly, but the two men fell from the scaffold still alive. Shouting, the public proclaimed it a miracle, a sign of God's favor.

With the help of the nearby monks, the two prisoners were ferried over to the city and brought to a church that had the right of asylum. Eudaemon stationed a circle of militiamen around the edifice, while the crowd demanded freedom for the two men who had been saved by the hand of God. It was Saturday, January 10, 532.

A few days later, Tuesday, January 13, was a day for the emperor to preside over chariot races at the Hippodrome. Both factions took the floor: the spokesman for the Greens talked with devout respect, but the Blues' spokesman had a more colloquial tone. They both asked for pardons, but Justinian rejected their pleas with the customary arrogance of the potentate who receives a supplication. He may have wanted to show how firm he was, but his stubbornness seemed unjustified and arrogant more than authoritative.

After twenty-two chariot races, the short winter day was coming to a close. It was then that an unheard-of, new shout rose from the Hippodrome crowd:

Long live the benevolent Greens and Blues!

It was shocking to hear the two names pronounced together: never before had one faction recognized the other's "benevolence" or humanity (*philanthropia*). Indeed, this virtue had always been considered a uniquely imperial prerogative. So here was a brand-new situation: the established power no longer appeared to be completely sacred.

For their part, the emperors of the past had always set the factions against each other so as to avoid potentially threatening coalitions. They simply applied the divide-and-conquer strategy learned from that ancient Roman culture whose glory Justinian sought to renew. But now events were conspiring against him. His great vision of the Mediterranean scenario had neglected some essential elements of the urban scene right under his nose. Meanwhile, the Greens and Blues were setting aside their reciprocal hostility and turning jointly against the palace. Maybe it was good medicine for healing the "disease of the soul" that affected them.

Justinian's ears ("donkey ears," according to his critics) heard the acclamation that was being shouted over and over, louder and louder. It rose like thunder, shouted by tens of thousands of voices. The emperor, the "Chosen One," could not bear it. He left the Kathisma and retreated to the sacred palace, the glorious public institution that was also his personal haven.

Now a new shout was heard in the Hippodrome, terrifying in its brevity:

Nika! Nika! Nika!

"May you win! May you win! May you win!" *Nika* was the Greek version of the Latin *Tu vincas,* the cheer from the crowds that usually greeted the Augustus in his role as military chief. The crowd's change of language signaled a change in meaning. The phrase no longer exhorted the emperor to prevail over an enemy; now one faction was exhorting the other, one citizen wishing another, "may *you* be victorious!" Thus, the emperor was no longer "benevolent" and "humane" or "victorious." Strengthened by its size and its everyday language, the crowd had seized those prerogatives for itself, without any partisan distinctions. Being able to speak out meant being able to act.

The emperor did not lower himself to a verbal confrontation, for it would have meant recognizing the opposing party. Just as Asterius gave no answer when the little girls pleaded with him in the Kynêgion years before, the prefect Eudaemon, who was in charge of public order, gave no answer to the crowds that flocked to his palace to hear the fate of the two men who had survived the hanging. His refusal was the legendary straw that broke the camel's back. The crowd went on a rampage: it killed soldiers and officers, set fire to the prefecture, and threw open the jail doors. The factions joined against one common enemy, one oppressor: Eudaemon. (Ironically, the Greek root of his name refers to happiness.)

Then the crowd attacked the doors of the sacred palace. The elegant and decorative guards were not warriors: they put up no opposition. The crowd set fire to the palace vestibule (the Chalkê), to the senate building, and to the basilica of the Holy wisdom (Hagia Sophia). These were some of the most distinctive building of Constantine's city: the palatial symbol of power; the home of the senate that had raised up the second Rome to equal the first; and the church that kept the city under God's protection were all lost in a single night of fire. . . .

On Sunday, January 18, the emperor made an appearance in the imperial box at the Hippodrome. In his hands he reportedly carried the Gospel, and in his mind must have been two political, personal precedents. The first was from the time of the civilian uprising against Anastasius. In response to his critics, Anastasius had provocatively appeared in public without the imperial crown and invited the arena to choose a new monarch. Taken by surprise, the crowd did nothing but reconfirm his position and their trust in him. The second precedent was from Easter 527, when for the first time Justinian had blessed the crowd as the Augustus.

As he had done on that occasion, he now assumed a priestly role. Then he made himself into a sacrificial lamb, saying, "I forgive you the offense you have committed against me. I shall order no arrests as long as calm returns.

You are not to blame for what happened. I am, for my sins." . . . [T]he Christian reference to his sins backfired, for the crowd grasped his weakness. . . . The jeering grew, and the emperor began descending the stairs of the Kathisma. The doors closed behind him, hiding him again in the protective shell of his palace. Instead of a possible arbiter and moderator in the dispute between ministers and factions, he had become an enemy, the greatest enemy. . . .

The right gesture might be taken as a sign, so Justinian's secret council considered all kinds of possible actions. A "true Roman male" in ancient times—even someone as abominable as Nero—would have killed himself to save his honor, but suicide was an unsuitable choice for a Christian. Flight seemed to be the only option left. The southern coast of the Black Sea (or Pontos Euxeinos) offered a safe haven, with lands and palaces still faithful to the crown. This would be a good temporary solution, a fine place from which to later recapture the city. But Justinian knew his ancient history, and he knew that such a solution was rarely successful.

Like a great ship, the *restitutio* seemed to have run aground even before setting sail; the restoration seemed to be sunk, and it looked as if the Augusti would never reach their glorious destination. But a real boat was at the palace quay, waiting to take the sovereigns on a far shorter crossing, to safety.

At this point—according to Procopius, who probably got an eyewitness account from Belisarius—Theodora stepped in. Her speech to the emperor's secret council is the longest one of hers ever recorded, and while her biographer may have polished it and added erudite allusions to suit his rhetorical purpose, it remains unique. It may not reflect the actual form of speech, but it testifies to Theodora's intentions and her logical argument. She took the floor before the highest dignitaries of the empire and said:

> As to the belief that a woman ought not to be daring among men or to assert herself boldly among those who are holding back from fear, I consider that the present crisis most certainly does not permit us to discuss whether the matter should be regarded in this or in some other way.
>
> For in the case of those whose interests have come into the greatest danger nothing else seems best except to settle the issue immediately before them in the best possible way.
>
> My opinion then is that the present time, above all others, is inopportune for flight, even though it bring safety.
>
> For while it is impossible for a man who has seen the light not also to die, for one who has been an emperor it is unendurable to be a fugitive. May I never be separated from this purple, and may I not live that day on which those who meet me shall not address me as mistress.
>
> If, now, it is your wish to save yourself, O Emperor, there is no difficulty. For we have much money, and there is the sea, here the boats. However, consider whether it will not come about after you have been saved that you would gladly exchange that safety for death.
>
> For as for myself, I approve a certain ancient saying that royalty is a good burial-shroud.

She was not speaking in abstractions, in general statements for the whole group; she spoke to Justinian, her preferred interlocutor. She looked only into the eyes of God's "Chosen One." The other characters had suddenly fallen to the back of the stage; they were mere extras, and the close-up was now on the two rulers.

They were separated from the group, and Theodora—in a move worthy of an Attic tragedy—separated her destiny from that of the emperor. The emperor could save himself if he chose: there was no dearth of money, the sea was open, the ships were ready to welcome whoever wanted to flee. But Theodora saw flight not as salvation but as a "second death," in the words of the Gospel—a fate even worse than death.

She was accustomed to defying the world's customs and conventions: she would not run. Should Justinian choose to retreat, she would not share his fate; he would prove himself unworthy of the throne. In spite of his ego, his studies of antiquity, even his concept of messianic power, he might choose to flee, doing something that no Roman emperor had ever considered suitable or possible. *She* would remain faithful to her purple. She would carry on the traditions of antiquity, in the present, in her deeds—not just in words, not just in plans for the future. She would do so by resisting, even dying, because there was no life without the purple cloak of power. To avoid being separated from her purple, Theodora was saying, she was even willing to lose Justinian and marry death instead, to choose the purple over the man who had granted it to her.

Belisarius entered the Hippodrome from the western gate, which had direct access to the Blues's section; Mundus and his men used the entrance ominously called the "Deadman's Gate." The large crowd assembled in the huge arena was armed with only primitive weapons and it could not resist the two select corps of military professionals. A ferocious slaughter ensued; this was perhaps the bloodiest Sunday of the first Christian millennium.

The palace guard, which had been hesitating between the rebels and the legitimate ruler, opened the doors of the imperial gallery and easily captured the frightened Hypatius and his followers, including his brother Pompeius. There was no resistance.

The uprising was defined as a crime of high treason, which was punished by beheading. The rebels were immediately led before the emperor. Hypatius told Justinian that he had given him proof in writing of his fealty.

"Your message never reached us," was the answer.

He added that he had been forced to act under duress.

"But you did not have to wait such a long time to show your loyalty to the emperor."

At this point Hypatius began begging for his life.

Since the two men knew each other well, the emperor was inclined to spare Hypatius in a generous act of clemency. Justinian may have thought about all the Christian blood had already been shed that day; he may have considered the lofty concept of "benevolence" that the rebels had wanted to grab away from the emperor. And, of course, he may have recalled the recent blame over his treatment of Vitalian. He was not eager to hear the same accusations again in the future.

Just as in the previous council, when debating between resistance and fight, the emperor's thinking was worlds away from the blunt realism of the daughter of the Hippodrome. She knew the arena habitat all too well. Theodora knew that a wounded beast has to be killed immediately.

Letting the two brothers live would be seen as proof of weakness, she argued; it would undermine the continuity of power, dim the splendor of the emperor's majesty, and rekindle the conspiracies. A few hours earlier, the emperor had appeared before the rebels with the Gospels in his hand–and what had been the result? Theodora insisted that the law be applied. She disregarded her family ties to Hypatius and Pompeius (through her daughter, who had married into the house of Anastasius). Theodora put aside her private life and reacted to public events. And in one stroke she implicitly shifted Justinian's personal, private position: from that moment on, he had to acknowledge that *he* owed his purple to *her*.

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Like a meridian, Easter Day, 542, marked fifteen years of Justinian and Theodora's reign. They must have reviewed a list of their accomplishments and of the other initiatives still in the planning stage or already under construction, from the most remote borders of the empire to the heart of Constantinople. After the destruction wrought by the Nika rebellion, they had completely rebuilt Constantinople in just ten years, transforming it from a city of late antiquity into an imperial capital. A jewel of the Byzantine age, it was to be admired by medieval visitors from both West and East (the Slavs called it Tsargrad), raided by invaders in the second millennium (the Crusaders first, then the Ottoman Turks), and celebrated by poets such as W. B. Yeats. All of this made Constantinople a universal city of the soul. None of this would have transpired without Theodora's unforgettable speech on that bloody Sunday in 532, in the midst of the raging rebellion.

The emperors' architectural and urban planning policy did not aim to revive the art of previous centuries. Constantine's and Theodosius's achievements inspired Justinian's politics, but their art and architecture did not inspire his. The Augusti leaned toward the new and the grandiose, fusing classical elements with oriental seduction, three-dimensional naturalism with geometric abstraction, urban tradition with Christian touches; they even indulged in personal whims. They rediscovered the daring, insouciant, lighthearted quality that had blessed their early years together, the boldness of those intricate laws that seemed to be written for everyone but were really conceived only for the two of them. They were inimitable. There were no other comparable patrons of art and architecture until the Renaissance.

After the Nika—which was a political phenomenon that impacted the urban fabric—Justinian and Theodora focused on secular architecture, starting with a redefinition of the facade of power: the facade of the palace. They totally redesigned the vestibule, the Chalkê or "bronze house" (a little building with a golden bronze roof). From the palace, the Chalkê opened onto the imperial square (the Augustaeum), with access to the basilica of the Holy Wisdom—the celebrated Hagia Sophia. The Chalkê was the visual threshold of power, its projection upon the city. After the fires of the rebellion, Justinian and Theodora set out to make the new incarnation of the Chalkê more splendid and precious. So the interior of the new dome was decorated with mosaics celebrating Belisarius's victories over the Vandals and the Goths. Nearby were the baths of Zeuxippus and the Senate palace; they were also destroyed in the flames of 532. Now they were rebuilt "in more beautiful form" than before.

But the emperor and empress did not stop here. They had inherited a complex metropolis with an urban administration and police force of more than a thousand men. This required premises for the supply and management of food staples and the channeling of water through aqueducts that still astonish us fifteen hundred years later. Like the ancient provincial benefactors of the earliest pagan tradition (the "Euergeti"), the two emperors undertook other initiatives "for the welfare of their subjects." Some, like the hospitals and almshouses, were Christian institutions; but the porticoed streets, roads, and cisterns were secular public works that stand to this day as masterpieces of ancient architecture (the Basilike Cistern is one shining example). The rulers who commissioned them, and the skilled engineers and architects, both knew how to "enhance the monumental significance even of those buildings that had a purely functional purpose." Edward Gibbon was wrong to disparage this period: it was not a time dominated simply "by the darkest shadows of shame." . . .

The Augusti intended the church of the Holy Apostles to be their final resting place; they poured their deepest feelings into the church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus; but their pride and joy—especially the emperor's—was the Holy Wisdom. Fifteen hundred years after it was built, after acting as a mosque and then a museum, it is still among the most famous and admired buildings in the world—though, paradoxically, it is famous for what it was *not* meant to be: an architectural space, a temple of light, the final wonder of Christian antiquity.

Medieval visitors might have come closest to the spirit of the place since they recognized Constantinople as the Mother of all cities. Admiring the Holy Wisdom, they found renewed faith in Paradise; they were surrounded by objects, colors, visions, and scents (lost to us now) that they perceived as promises and prefigurations. If the city rebuilt by the emperor and the empress in the light of Christianity was a sacred shell, then the Holy Wisdom was its pearl. It was the most visible, most flaunted treasure of Justinian and Theodora.

The two rulers used the Holy Wisdom to express their power fully. They were not building but *re*building a city that had risen against them. They wanted the result to be a total redemption, a gesture of great daring that would fully display their personal and institutional arrogance. Perhaps because of this, there is no great church less mystical than the Holy Wisdom. It was not

meant to be the church of a monastic order or a district or a guild, nor was it built by an individual suppliant. It was the basilica where the emperor of Constantinople, the thirteenth apostle, the Viceroy of Christ on Earth, the highest, noblest man of all, attended sacred ceremonies. In the symmetrical, inverted projection of roles between imperial Constantinople and papal Rome, the only worthy comparison is the basilica of Saint Peter's at the time of the universalist popes of the Renaissance.

Richard Atwater

NO

Procopius of Caesarea: The Secret History

Character and Appearance of Justinian

As soon as he took over the rule from his uncle, his measure was to spend the public money without restraint, now that he had control of it. He gave much of it to the Huns who, from time to time, entered the state; and in consequence the Roman provinces were subject to constant incursions, for these barbarians, having once tasted Roman wealth, never forgot the road that led to it. And he threw much money into the sea in the form of moles, as if to master the eternal roaring of the breakers. For he jealously hurled stone breakwaters far out from the mainland against the onset of the sea, as if by the power of wealth he could outmatch the might of ocean.

He gathered to himself the private estates of Roman citizens from all over the Empire: some by accusing their possessors of crimes of which they were innocent, others by juggling their owners' words into the semblance of a gift to him of their property. And many, caught in the act of murder and other crimes, turned their possessions over to him and thus escaped the penalty for their sins.

Others, fraudulently disputing title to lands happening to adjoin their own, when they saw they had no chance of getting the best of the argument, with the law against them, gave him their equity in the claim so as to be released from court. Thus, by a gesture that cost him nothing, they gained his favor and were able illegally to get the better of their opponents.

I think this is as good a time as any to describe the personal appearance of the man. Now in physique he was neither tall nor short, but of average height; not thin, but moderately plump; his face was round, and not bad looking, for he had good color, even when he fasted for two days. To make a long description short, he much resembled Domitian, Vespasian's son. He was the one whom the Romans so hated that even tearing him into pieces did not satisfy their wrath against him. . . .

Now such was Justinian in appearance; but his character was something I could not fully describe. For he was at once villainous and amenable; as people say colloquially, a moron. He was never truthful with anyone, but always guileful in what he said and did, yet easily hoodwinked by any who wanted to deceive him. His nature was an unnatural mixture of folly and wickedness.

From *Secret History*, 1927. (Chicago: Covici Friede, 1927; reprinted at University of Michigan Press, 1961).

What in olden times a peripatetic philosopher said was also true of him, that opposite qualities combine in a man as in the mixing of colors. I will try to portray him, however, insofar as I can fathom his complexity.

This Emperor, then, was deceitful, devious, false, hypocritical, two-faced, cruel, skilled in dissembling his thought, never moved to tears by either joy or pain, though he could summon them artfully at will when the occasion demanded, a liar always, not only offhand, but in writing, and when he swore sacred oaths to his subjects in their very hearing. Then he would immediately break his agreements and pledges, like the vilest of slaves, whom indeed only the fear of torture drives to confess their perjury. A faithless friend, he was a treacherous enemy, insane for murder and plunder, quarrelsome and revolutionary, easily led to anything evil, but never willing to listen to good counsel, quick to plan mischief and carry it out, but finding even the hearing of anything good distasteful to his ears.

How could anyone put Justinian's ways into words? These and many even worse vices were disclosed in him as in no other mortal nature seemed to have taken the wickedness of all other men combined and planted it in this man's soul. And besides this, he was too prone to listen to accusations; and too quick to punish. For he decided such cases without full examination, naming the punishment when he had heard only the accuser's side of the matter. Without hesitation he wrote decrees for the plundering of countries, sacking of cities, and slavery of whole nations, for no cause whatever. So that if one wished to take all the calamities which had befallen the Romans before this time and weigh them against his crimes, I think it would be found that more men had been murdered by this single man than in all previous history.

He had no scruples about appropriating other people's property, and did not even think any excuse necessary, legal or illegal, for confiscating what did not belong to him. And when it was his, he was more than ready to squander it in insane display, or give it as an unnecessary bribe to the barbarians. In short, he neither held on to any money himself nor let anyone else keep any: as if his reason were not avarice, but jealousy of those who had riches. Driving all wealth from the country of the Romans in this manner, he became the cause of universal poverty.

Now this was the character of Justinian, so far as I can portray it.

How Theodora, Most Depraved of All Courtesans, Won His Love

He took a wife: and in what manner she was born and bred, and, wedded to this man, tore up the Roman Empire by the very roots, I shall now relate.

Acacius was the keeper of wild beasts used in the amphitheater in Constantinople; he belonged to the Green faction and was nicknamed the Bear-keeper. This man, during the rule of Anastasius, fell sick and died, leaving three daughters named Comito, Theodora and Anastasia: of whom the eldest was not yet seven years old. His widow took a second husband, who with her undertook to keep up Acacius's family and profession. But Asterius, the dancing master of the Greens, on being bribed by another removed this office from them and assigned it to the man who gave him the money. For the dancing masters had the power of distributing such positions as they wished.

When this woman saw the populace assembled in the amphitheater, she placed laurel wreaths on her daughters' heads and in their hands, and sent them out to sit on the ground in the attitude of suppliants. The Greens eyed this mute appeal with indifference; but the Blues were moved to bestow on the children an equal office, since their own animal-keeper had just died.

When these children reached the age of girlhood, their mother put them on the local stage, for they were fair to look upon. . . .

. . . Now Theodora was still too young to know the normal relation of man with maid, but consented to the unnatural violence of villainous slaves who, following their masters to the theater, employed their leisure in this infamous manner. And for some time in a brothel she suffered such misuse.

But as soon as she arrived at the age of youth, and was now ready for the world, her mother put her on the stage. Forthwith, she became a courtesan, and such as the ancient Greeks used to call a common one, at that: for she was not a flute or harp player, nor was she even trained to dance, but only gave her youth to anyone she met, in utter abandonment. Her general favors included, of course, the actors in the theater; and in their productions she took part in the low comedy scenes. For she was very funny and a good mimic, and immediately became popular in this art. There was no shame in the girl, and no one ever saw her dismayed: no role was too scandalous for her to accept without a blush. . . .

Thus was this woman born and bred, and her name was a byword beyond that of other common wenches on the tongues of all men.

But when she came back to Constantinople, Justinian fell violently in love with her. At first he kept her only as a mistress, though he raised her to patrician rank. Through him Theodora was able immediately to acquire an unholy power and exceedingly great riches. She seemed to him the sweetest thing in the world, and like all lovers, he desired to please his charmer with every possible favor and requite her with all his wealth. The extravagance added fuel to the flames of passion. With her now to help spend his money he plundered the people more than ever, not only in the capital, but throughout the Roman Empire. As both of them had for a long time been of the Blue party, they gave this faction almost complete control of the affairs of state. . . .

How Justinian Created a New Law Permitting Him to Marry a Courtesan

Now as long as the former Empress was alive, Justinian was unable to find a way to make Theodora his wedded wife. In this one matter she opposed him as in nothing else. . . . But finally her death removed this obstacle to Justinian's desire.

Justin, doting and utterly senile, was now the laughing stock of his subjects . . . but Justinian they all served with considerable awe. His hand was in everything, and his passion for turmoil created universal consternation.

It was then that he undertook to complete his marriage with Theodora. But as it was impossible for a man of senatorial rank to make a courtesan his wife, this being forbidden by ancient law, he made the Emperor nullify this ordinance by creating a new one, permitting him to wed Theodora, and consequently making it possible for anyone else to marry a courtesan. Immediately after this he seized the power of the Emperor, veiling his usurpation with a transparent pretext: for he was proclaimed colleague of his uncle as Emperor of the Romans by the questionable legality of an election inspired by terror.

So Justinian and Theodora ascended the imperial throne three days before Easter, a time, indeed, when even making visits or greeting one's friends is forbidden. And not many days later Justin died of an illness, after a reign of nine years. Justinian was now sole monarch, together, of course, with Theodora.

Thus it was that Theodora, though born and brought up as I have related, rose to royal dignity over all obstacles. For no thought of shame came to Justinian in marrying her, though he might have taken his pick of the noblest born, most highly educated, most modest, carefully nurtured, virtuous and beautiful virgins of all the ladies in the whole Roman Empire: a maiden, as they say, with upstanding breasts. Instead, he preferred to make his own what had been common to all men, alike, careless of all her revealed history, took in wedlock a woman who was not only guilty of every other contamination but boasted of her many abortions.

I need hardly mention any other proof of the character of this man: for all the perversity of his soul was completely displayed in this union; which alone was ample interpreter, witness, and historian of his shamelessness. For when a man once disregards the disgrace of his actions and is willing to brave the contempt of society, no path of lawlessness is thereafter taboo to him; but with unflinching countenance he advances, easily and without a scruple, to acts of the deepest infamy.

However, not a single member of even the Senate, seeing this disgrace befalling the State, dared to complain or forbid the event; but all of them bowed down before her as if she were a goddess. Nor was there a priest who showed any resentment, but all hastened to greet her as Highness. And the populace who had seen her before on the stage, directly raised its hands to proclaim itself her slave in fact and in name. Nor did any soldier grumble at being ordered to risk the perils of war for the benefit of Theodora: nor was there any man on earth who ventured to oppose her.

Confronted with this disgrace, they all yielded, I suppose, to necessity, for it was as if Fate were giving proof of its power to control mortal affairs as malignantly as it pleases: showing that its decrees need not always be according to reason or human propriety. Thus does Destiny sometimes raise mortals suddenly to lofty heights in defiance of reason, in challenge to all outcries of injustice; but admits no obstacle, urging on his favorites to the appointed goal without let or hindrance. But as this is the will of God, so let it befall and be written.

Now Theodora was fair of face and of a very graceful, though small, person; her complexion was moderately colorful, if somewhat pale; and her eyes were dazzling and vivacious. All eternity would not be long enough to allow

one to tell her escapades while she was on the stage, but the few details I have mentioned above should be sufficient to demonstrate the woman's character to future generations.

What she and her husband did together must now be briefly described: for neither did anything without the consent of the other. For some time it was generally supposed they were totally different in mind and action; but later it was revealed that their apparent disagreement had been arranged so that their subjects might not unanimously revolt against them, but instead be divided in opinion.

Thus they split the Christians into two parties, each pretending to take the part of one side, thus confusing both, as I shall soon show; and then they ruined both political factions. Theodora feigned to support the Blues with all her power, encouraging them to take the offensive against the opposing party and perform the most outrageous deeds of violence; while Justinian, affecting to be vexed and secretly jealous of her, also pretended he could not openly oppose her orders. And thus they gave the impression often that they were acting in opposition. Then he would rule that the Blues must be punished for their crimes, and she would angrily complain that against her will she was defeated by her husband. However, the Blue partisans, as I have said, seemed cautious, for they did not violate their neighbors as much as they might have done.

And in legal disputes each of the two would pretend to favor one of the litigants, and compel the man with the worse case to win: and so they robbed both disputants of most of the property at issue.

In the same way, the Emperor, taking many persons into his intimacy, gave them offices by power of which they could defraud the State to the limits of their ambition. And as soon as they had collected enough plunder, they would fall out of favor with Theodora, and straightway be ruined. At first he would affect great sympathy in their behalf, but soon he would somehow lose his confidence in them, and an air of doubt would darken his zeal in their behalf. Then Theodora would use them shamefully, while he, unconscious as it were of what was being done to them, confiscated their properties and boldly enjoyed their wealth. By such well-planned hypocrisies they confused the public and, pretending to be at variance with each other, were able to establish a firm and mutual tyranny.

How the Defender of the Faith Ruined His Subjects

As soon as Justinian came into power he turned everything upside down. Whatever had been before by law, he now introduced into the government, while he revoked all established customs: as if he had been given the robes of an Emperor on the condition he would turn everything topsy-turvy. Existing offices he abolished, and invented new ones for the management of public affairs. He did the same thing to the laws and to the regulations of the army; and his reason was not any improvement of justice or any advantage, but simply that everything might be new and named after himself. And whatever was beyond his power to abolish, he renamed after himself anyway.

Of the plundering of property or the murder of men, no weariness ever overtook him. As soon as he had looted all the houses of the wealthy, he looked around for others; meanwhile throwing away the spoils of his previous robberies in subsidies to barbarians or senseless building extravagances. And when he had ruined perhaps myriads in this mad looting, he immediately sat down to plan how he could do likewise to others in even greater number.

As the Romans were now at peace with all the world and he had no other means of satisfying his lust for slaughter, he set the barbarians all to fighting each other. And for no reason at all he sent for the Hun chieftains, and with idiotic magnanimity gave them large sums of money, alleging he did this to secure their friendship. This, as I have said, he had also done in Justin's time. These Huns, as soon as they had got this money, sent it together with their soldiers to others of their chieftains, with the word to make inroads into the land of the Emperor: so that they might collect further tribute from him, to buy them off in a second peace. Thus the Huns enslaved the Roman Empire, and were paid by the Emperor to keep on doing it.

This encouraged still others of them to rob the poor Romans; and after their pillaging, they too were further rewarded by the gracious Emperor. In this way all the Huns, for when it was not one tribe of them it was another, continuously overran and laid waste the Empire. For the barbarians were led by many different chieftains, and the war, thanks to Justinian's senseless generosity, was thus endlessly protracted. Consequently no place, mountain or cave, or any other spot in Roman territory, during this time remained uninjured; and many regions were pillaged more than five times. . . .

Proving That Justinian and Theodora Were Actually Fiends in Human Form

Now the wealth of those in Constantinople and each other city who were considered second in prosperity only to members of the Senate was brutally confiscated, in the ways I have described, by Justinian and Theodora. But how they were able to rob even the Senate of all its property I shall now reveal.

There was in Constantinople a man by the name of Zeno, grandson of that Anthamius who had formerly been Emperor of the West. This man they appointed, with malice aforethought, Governor of Egypt, and commanded his immediate departure. But he delayed his voyage long enough to load his ship with his most valuable effects; for he had a countless amount of silver and gold plate inlaid with pearls, emeralds and other such precious stones. Whereupon they bribed some of his most trusted servants to remove these valuables from the ship as fast as they could carry them, set fire to the interior of the vessel, and inform Zeno that his ship had burst into flames of spontaneous combustion, with the loss of all his property. Later, when Zeno died suddenly, they took possession of his estate immediately as his legal heirs; for they produced a will which, it is whispered, he did not really make.

In the same manner they made themselves heirs of Tatian, Demosthenes, and Hilara, who were foremost in the Roman Senate. And others' estates they obtained by counterfeited letters instead of wills. . . .

I could hardly catalogue all the other people whose estates these two chose to inherit. However, up to the time when the insurrection named Nika took place, they seized rich men's properties one at a time; but when that happened, as I have told elsewhere, they sequestrated at one swoop the estates of nearly all the members of the Senate. On everything movable and on the fairest of the lands they laid their hands and kept what they wanted; but whatever was unproductive of more than the bitter and heavy taxes, they gave back to the previous owners with a philanthropic gesture. Consequently these unfortunates, oppressed by the tax collectors and eaten up by the never-ceasing interest on their debts, found life a burden compared to which death were preferable.

Wherefore to me, and many others of us, these two seemed not to be human beings, but veritable demons, and what the poets call vampires: who laid their heads together to see how they could most easily and quickly destroy the race and deeds of men; and assuming human bodies, became man-demons, and so convulsed the world. And one could find evidence of this in many things, but especially in the superhuman power with which they worked their will.

For when one examines closely, there is a clear difference between what is human and what is supernatural. There have been many enough men, during the whole course of history, who by chance or by nature have inspired great fear, ruining cities or countries or whatever else fell into their power; but to destroy all men and bring calamity on the whole inhabited earth remained for these two to accomplish, whom Fate aided in their schemes of corrupting all mankind. For by earthquakes, pestilences, and floods of river waters at this time came further ruin, as I shall presently show. Thus not by human, but by some other kind of power they accomplished their dreadful designs. . . .

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 suppliance beg 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 sharing 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.

So quenchless was his thirst for human blood; and with his wife, intent on this end, he neglected no possible excuse for slaughter. For these two were almost twins in their desires, though they pretended to differ: they were both scoundrels, however they affected to oppose each other, and thus destroyed their subjects. The man was lighter in character than a cloud of dust, and could be led to do anything any man wished him to do, so long as the matter did not require philanthropy or generosity. Flattery he swallowed whole, and his courtiers had no difficulty in persuading him that he was destined to rise as high as the sun and walk upon the clouds. . . .

There remained, while he ruled the Romans, no sure faith in God, no hope in religion, no defense in law, no security in business, no trust in a contract. When his officials were given any affair to handle for him, if they killed many of their victims and robbed the rest, they were looked upon by the Emperor with high favor, and given honorable mention for carrying out so perfectly his instructions. But if they showed any mercy and then returned to him, he frowned and was thenceforth their enemy.

Despising their qualms as old-fashioned, he called them no more to his service. Consequently many were eager to show him how wicked they were, even when they were really nothing of the sort. He made frequent promises, guaranteed with a sworn oath or by a written confirmation; and then purposely forgot them directly, thinking this summary negligence added to his importance. And Justinian acted thus not only to his subjects, but to many of the enemy, as I have already said.

He was untiring; 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.

POSTSCRIPT

Did the Byzantine Empire Benefit from the Rule of Justinian and Theodora?

Whatever else it might be, the rule of Justinian and Theodora is also a love story. From her humble and unsavory beginnings, Theodora rose to become the partner of her husband Justinian, during one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the Byzantine Empire. Procopius's *Secret History* is available in English translation on the Internet, as are his published works on the wars and buildings. All were written after Theodora's death in 548.

Even to Procopius's jaundiced eye, she was beautiful and clever. When Belisarius took back Italy, a western capital was established at Ravenna, in northeastern Italy. In the church of San Vitale, built during the sixth century, mosaics of Justinian and his entourage cover the left wall of the sanctuary, while mosaics of Theodora and her attendants cover the right. Most histories of Western art will have photos of these magnificent purple, green, and gold portraits, created from drawings the royal couple posed for in Constantinople.

In addition to the excellent biogaphy of Theodora that forms the "yes" election, see also James Allan Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire* (Greenwood Press, 2005) and *The Empress Theodora: Partner of Justinian* (University of Texas Press, 2002). On the magnificent structures, especially the churches of Hagia Sophia [Holy Wisdom], the Basilica of the Holy Apostles, and the church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, see Cyril Mango, *Byzantine Architecture* (Faber & Faber, 1986).

Omitted from this issue, but very prominent during the age of Justinian and Theodora was the Monophysite Controversy. In the early centuries of Christianity, councils met at Nicea and Chalcedon to establish the doctrine of the Trinity [that God is three persons in one nature or essence] and that Jesus had a dual nature—fully God and fully human. Theodora followed the Monophysites who contended that Jesus had a single, divine nature. Justinian held the orthodox dual-nature position most of his life, but converted to Monophysitism, long after Theodora's death and shortly before his own. For more on this controversy, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge University Press, 1972).

Finally, Judy Chicago chose Theodora as one of the women to occupy a seat at *The Dinner Party,* her massive art installation, in the form of an equilateral triangle, featuring 39 women omitted from history. In storage for decades, *The Dinner Party* has been bought and donated to The Brooklyn Museum, where it will be on display, beginning in early 2007. Theodora's biography and a photo of her magnificent purple, green, and gold mosaic-like porcelain plate can be found in Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (Penguin Books, 1986).