

EASTERN EUROPE: BYZANTIUM AND RUSSIA

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THE EARLY STAGES OF THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

Two selections by the Palestinian historian Procopius deal with the formative period of the Byzantine Empire under the Emperor Justinian. Justinian ruled in the 6th century, becoming one of the Empire's leading historical figures though offering an interesting mixture of failure and success. Procopius, a Christian and a subject of the Emperor, obviously wrote to please but maintained a critical sense: he admired Justinian's ambition but did not find him terribly intelligent and, in other writing, noted Justinian's subjection to the will of his wife, Theodora.

Justinian eagerly attempted to recover many of the Western territories of the Roman Empire, and the first passage deals with some of his negotiations with Germanic and religious leaders in Italy toward this end. The complications suggest some of the aftermath of the fall of the Empire in the West, as well as Justinian's own ambitions. But the effort failed, after a few brief conquests in parts of Italy and North Africa.

More important was the tone Justinian set for the vigorous eastern portion of the empire, centered around Constantinople (Byzantium) in southeastern Europe and Asia Minor. Justinian codified the Roman legal system, introduced financial and administrative reforms, and tightened imperial control of the Eastern Orthodox Church. His desire to recapture Roman splendor prompted great expenditure on a public building program, particularly at Constantinople. Fearing that "posterity, beholding the enormous size and number of [buildings], should deny their being the work of one man," Justinian ordered a Palestinian historian, Procopius, to compose a treatise on his new program.

Selection II is taken from Procopius's *On Justinian's Buildings*. Written in 555 C.E., it predictably exaggerated Justinian's prowess, but it did capture the emperor's ambition. Procopius focused on the Church of the Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) in Constantinople, completed in 537 as Christendom's largest and most beautiful edifice. (The church would later be converted to a mosque, when Turks captured Constantinople [Istanbul] in 1453; it is now a museum.) Justinian is said to have boasted of the great church, "Solomon, I have surpassed you!" Like the Byzantine Empire itself, the new building

Selection I from Procopius, *History of the Wars*, translated by H.B. Dewing, v. III (London: William Heinemann, 1919); pp. 23-33. Selection II from Procopius, *Of the Buildings of Justinian*, translated by Aubrey Stewart (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, 1888), pp. 2-5, 9-11.

combined Roman and Middle Eastern (particularly Persian) styles, setting up a new culture closely related to that of the late Roman Empire.

The second selection suggests key elements of the political as well as artistic program of early Byzantium. How does Byzantium compare with ancient Rome (see Chapter 18)? Why would Byzantium prove to be such an important cultural and political example to other East European peoples, particularly the Slavs as they established their civilization to the north? What elements of Byzantine civilization would these imitators be most likely to copy?

PROCOPIUS

SELECTION I: PROCOPIUS, THE HISTORY

There was among the Goths (Germanic tribe) one Theodatus, a man already of mature years, versed in the Latin literature and the teachings of Plato but without any experience whatsoever in war and taking no part in active life, and yet extraordinarily devoted to the pursuits of money. This Theodatus had gained possession of (many lands in the Tuscan region of Italy) and he was eager by violent methods to wrest the remainder from their owners. (The ruler) Amalasuntha was exerting herself to curb this desire of his, and consequently he was always vexed with her and resentful. He formed the plan, therefore, of handing over Tuscany to the Emperor Justinian, in order that, on receiving from him a great sum of money and an office in the Senate, he might pass the rest of his life in Byzantium. After Theodatus had formed this plan, two envoys from Byzantium came to the chief priest of Rome . . . to confer about a doctrine of faith, which is the subject of disagreement and controversy among the Christians. As for the points in dispute . . . I shall by no means make mention of them; for I consider it a sort of insane folly to investigate the nature of God, enquiring of what sort it is. For man cannot, I think, apprehend even human affairs with accuracy, much less those things which pertain to the nature of God . . . For I will say nothing whatever about God save that He is altogether good and has all things in His power . . . As for Theodatus, he met these envoys secretly and directed them to report to the Emperor Justinian what he had planned.

(But at this juncture Amalasuntha lost confidence in her son, now drunk and diseased, and worried that other Goths would attack her.) For this reason she was desirous of handing over the power of the Goths and Italians to the Emperor Justinian, in order that she herself might be saved. (But Justinian was angry with Amalasuntha, whom he accused of supporting troops fighting him in North Africa. Responding to his envoy, Amalasuntha claimed that she had not interfered when the Emperor was fighting the Vandals, another Germanic tribe, and also let his fleet resupply in Sicily). "Therefore (she wrote to Justinian) thou art indebted to us for the chief cause of thy victory . . . and now that art claiming the right to despoil us of our territory in Sicily, which has belonged to the Goths from ancient times." Such was the message which Amalasuntha wrote openly to the emperor; but secretly she agreed to put the whole of Italy into his hands . . . And the emperor, overjoyed at this situation, immediately sent (an envoy) to Italy, a discreet and gentle person and fitted by nature to persuade men.

But while these things were going on, Theodatus was denounced before Amalasuntha by many Italians, who stated that he had done violence to all the

people of Tuscany and had without cause seized their estates. (Amalsuntha found him guilty) and compelled him to pay back everything which he has wrongfully seized and then dismissed him. And since in this way she had given the greatest offense to the man, from that time she was on hostile terms with him, exceedingly vexed as he was by reason of his fondness for money, because he was unable to continue his unlawful and violent practices . . .

(Later, Amalsuntha had to make Theodotus king, because her son was no longer able to perform these duties; she did not realize his hatred of her. He allied with relatives of prominent Goths she had earlier killed, and ultimately killed her himself. Though Theodotus claimed that other Goths had done this, against his will, the emperor decided to send a force of 7,000 men to try to conquer Sicily.) And if it should be possible to reduce it to subjection without any trouble, they were to take possession and not let it go again; but if they should meet with any obstacle, they were to sail with all speed to North Africa . . .

And he also sent a letter to the leaders to the Franks (another Germanic tribe) as follows: "The Goths, having seized Italy by violence, which was ours, have not only refused absolutely to give it back, but have committed further acts of injustice against us which are unendurable and pass beyond all bounds. For this reason we have been compelled to take the field against them, and it is proper that you should join with us in waging this war, which is rendered yours as well as ours not only by the orthodox faith, which reject the current heresies, but also by the enmity we both feel toward the Goths." Such was the emperor's letter; and making a gift of money to them, he agreed to give more as soon as they should take an active part. . . .

II. ON JUSTINIAN'S BUILDINGS

The lowest dregs of the people in Byzantium once assailed the Emperor Justinian in the rebellion called Nika, which I have clearly described in my "History of the Wars." To prove that it was not merely against the Emperor, but no less against God that they took up arms, they ventured to burn the church of the Christians. (This church the people of Byzantium call Sophia, *i.e.*, . . . *Wisdom*; a name most worthy of God.) God permitted them to effect this crime, knowing how great the beauty of this church would be when restored. Thus the church was entirely reduced to ashes; but the Emperor Justinian not long afterwards adorned it in such a fashion, that if anyone had asked the Christians in former times if they wished their church to be destroyed and thus restored, showing them the appearance of the church which we now see, I think it probable that they would have prayed that they might as soon as possible behold their church destroyed, in order that it might be turned into its present form.

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The Emperor Justinian was born in our time, and succeeding to the throne when the state was decayed, added greatly to its extent and glory by driving out from it the barbarians, who for so long a time had forced their way into it, as I have briefly narrated in my "History of the Wars." They say that Themistocles, the son of Neocles, prided himself on his power of making a small state great, but our Emperor has the power of adding others states to his own, for he has annexed to

the Roman Empire many other states which at his accession were independent, and has founded innumerable cities which had no previous existence. As for religion, which he found uncertain and torn by various heresies, he destroyed everything which could lead to error, and securely established the true faith upon one solid foundation. Moreover, finding the laws obscure through their unnecessary multitude, and confused by their conflict with one another, he firmly established them by reducing the number of those which were unnecessary, and in the case of those that were contradictory, by confirming better ones. He forgave of his own accord those who plotted against him, and, by loading with wealth those who were in want, and relieving them from the misfortunes which had afflicted them, he rendered the empire stable and its members happy. By increasing his armies he strengthened the Roman Empire, which lay everywhere exposed to the attacks of barbarians, and fortified its entire frontier by building strong places.

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Now, as I said before, we must turn our attention to the buildings of this monarch, lest posterity, beholding the enormous size and number of them, should deny their being the work of one man; for the works of many men of former times, not being confirmed by history, have been disbelieved through their own excessive greatness.

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It is, indeed, a proof of the esteem with which God regarded the Emperor, that He furnished him with men who would be so useful in effecting his designs, and we are compelled to admire the intelligence of the Emperor, in being able to choose the most suitable of mankind to carry out the noblest of his works.

The church consequently presented a most glorious spectacle, extraordinary to those who beheld it, and altogether incredible to those who are told of it. In height it rises to the very heavens, and overtops the neighbouring buildings like a ship anchored among them: it rises above the rest of the city, which it adorns, while it forms a part of it, and it is one of its beauties that being a part of the city, and growing out of it, it stands so high above it, that from it the whole city can be beheld as from a watchtower. Its length and breadth are so judiciously arranged that it appears to be both long and wide without being disproportioned. It is distinguished by indescribable beauty, for it excels both in its size and in the harmony of its proportion, having no part excessive and none deficient; being more magnificent than ordinary buildings, and much more elegant than those which are out of proportion. It is singularly full of light and sunshine; you would declare that the place is not lighted by the sun from without, but that the rays are produced within itself, such an abundance of light is poured into this church. . . . Thus far I imagine the building is not incapable of being described, even by a weak and feeble tongue. As the arches are arranged in a quadrangular figure, the stonework between them takes the shape of a triangle; the lower angle of each triangle, being compressed between the shoulders of the arches, is slender, while the upper part becomes wider as it rises in the space between them, and ends against the circle which rises from thence, forming there its remaining angles. A spherical-shaped

dome standing upon this circle makes it exceedingly beautiful; from the lightness of the building it does not appear to rest upon a solid foundation, but to cover the place beneath as though it were suspended from heaven by the fabled golden chain. All these parts surprisingly joined to one another in the air, suspended one from another, and resting only on that which is next to them, form the work into one admirably harmonious whole, which spectators do not care to dwell upon for long in the mass, as each individual part attracts the eye and turns it to itself. The sight causes men to constantly change their point of view, and the spectator can nowhere point to any part, which he admires more than the rest, but having viewed the art which appears everywhere, men contract their eyebrows as they look at each point, and are unable to comprehend such workmanship, but always depart thence stupified through their incapacity to comprehend it.

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The entire ceiling is covered with pure gold, which adds glory to its beauty, though the rays of light reflected upon the gold from the marble surpass it in beauty; there are two porticos on each side, which do not in any way dwarf the size of the church, but add to its width. In length they reach quite to the ends, but in height they fall short of it; these also have a domed ceiling and are adorned with gold. Of these two porticos, the one is set apart for male, and the other for female worshippers; there is no variety in them, nor do they differ in any respect from one another, but their very equality and similarity add to the beauty of the church. Who could describe the galleries of the portion set apart for women, or the numerous porticos and cloistered courts with which the church is surrounded? who could tell of the beauty of the columns and marbles with which the church is adorned? One would think that one had come upon a meadow full of flowers in bloom: who would not admire the purple tints of some and the green of others, the glowing red and glittering white, and those, too, which nature, like a painter, has marked with the strongest contrasts of colour? Whoever enters there to worship perceives at once that it is not by any human strength or skill, but by the favour of God that this work has been perfected; his mind rises sublime to commune with God, feeling that He cannot be far off, but must especially love to dwell in the place which He has chosen; and this takes place not only when a man sees it for the first time, but it always makes the same impression upon him, as though he had never beheld it before. No one ever became weary of this spectacle, but those who are in the Church delight in what they see, and, when they leave it, magnify it in their talk about it; moreover, it is impossible accurately to describe the treasure of gold and silver plate and gems, which the Emperor Justinian has presented to it; but by the description of one of them, I leave the rest to be inferred. That part of the church which is especially sacred, and where the priests alone are allowed to enter, which is called the Sanctuary, contains forty thousand pounds' weight of silver.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What were some of the complications in Justinian's efforts to recapture Italy? Why was it even possible to envisage a reconquest?

2. What does Procopius' history suggest about the nature of Germanic rule in Italy? What does it suggest about religious issues beginning to emerge between eastern and western Christianity, as well as about his own reactions?
3. Does Procopius' description of the situation in Italy help explain why Justinian and his eastern empire could not reconquer the Western Mediterranean?
4. What were the main architectural features of Justinian's great church? What did the building suggest about religious attitudes among Byzantine leaders? Why would such a church be built?
5. How did Procopius link the cathedral's opulence to true Christian values?
6. What relationship between church and state does the passage suggest?
7. What was the relationship of the Byzantine Empire to the Roman Empire? In what sense was it a continuation, and in what sense did it change?

THE GREATEST CATHEDRAL IN BYZANTIUM

Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, and renamed it Istanbul. They converted the great cathedral to a mosque, and copied this kind of design in other mosque buildings (such as the great Blue Mosque, also in Istanbul). After the Ottoman Empire collapsed and a more secular government took over in Turkey, in the 1920s, Saint Sophia became a museum, an obvious tourist attraction from that point onward.



Interior of Saint Sophia. This is the great cathedral built by the Early Byzantine Emperor Justinian, described in the passage by Procopius. It was built in the domed style characteristic of Orthodox churches and cathedrals. It was one of the great wonders of East European Christianity, sure to strike awe in visitors, including merchants and travelers from Slavic regions like Russia, who would later convert to Orthodox Christianity. The style was also quite different from characteristic church buildings in Western Europe, at least until the Renaissance reintroduced a passion for classical styles including great domes and ornate decoration. (Giraudon/Art Resource, NY)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How did Saint Sophia reflect earlier Roman architectural styles?
2. Why would an emperor like Justinian want to build a structure like this?
3. What does the cathedral suggest about Byzantine attitudes toward God?
4. What does it suggest about the Byzantine state and economy, and about the power of the Emperor?
5. How do the basic architectural features compare with Procopius' description?
6. What impression would this cathedral make on visitors?
7. What changes in the cathedral were needed to convert it to a mosque?