

Byzantium: Justinian and the Roman Empire

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Flavius Petrus Sabbatius Justinianus, otherwise known as Justinian, was one of the most successful Emperors of East Rome. He was an ambitious man, and he continually wished to see the reconstruction of the Roman Empire. When he was placed on the throne in 527, Justinian put this task at the head of the aims he set himself. However, before he could expand his borders in the west, he had to assert his control over the eastern borders. This was done in a matter of years. The entire recovery of the Roman Empire took a little longer. Throughout his reign, Justinian gradually took back that which was once the Empire's. Justinian continued to expand his borders until his death in 565.

When Justinian was crowned in 527, his troops were already fighting the Persians in the east. When the King of Persia died four years later, a truce was made with the new King. In 532, The Treaty Of Eternal Peace was ratified with the Persians. This was in the favour of the Byzantines, who had gained the key district of Lazica in Asia Minor. However, the Persians attacked the key cities of Mesopotamia, Northern Syria, and Byzantine Armenia in 540. This war lasted five years, ending in a truce. This truce was renewed twice more in 551 and 557. By 561, a 50-year truce was agreed upon. In this, the Persians renounced all claim to the city of Lazica, which they had won back earlier, in exchange for an annual sum of 30,000 gold coins. So, despite the continual attacks from the Persians, Justinian managed to maintain his Eastern Provinces. While this was not a gain to the Empire, it was not a loss either.

As for the more challenging western region, Justinian took many years to conquer the lost Roman Empire. Procopius, a member of Justinian's court, claims that: Justinian was obsessed by the dream of restoring the original Roman Empire in all its integrity.(1) The first part of the campaign was to reconquer North Africa from the Vandals. In June, 533, against the opinions of his advisers and councillors, Justinian sent out an armada to Northern Africa. This fleet, lead by Justinian's leading general, Belisarius, consisted of 500 vessels, 92 warships, 15,000 regular troops, 1,000 barbarian allies, and Belisarius's own bodyguard. Belisarius landed unopposed in August, and within a year the Vandal kingdom was destroyed, their king surrendering to Belisarius in March 534.(2) Northern Africa was reorganised as part of the Empire and now included Sardinia, Corsica, the Balearic Islands, and Septem.

In 535, the Gothic Queen of Italy, Amalasantha, was murdered by her cousin Theodahad. The Queen was a friend and ally of the Roman Empire. As the Goths had taken control of Italy and Sicily the century before, Justinian took the opportunity to intervene and take back the land. Once again, Belisarius commanded the army. In June of 535, he took a fleet to Sicily, while an army marched overland from Dalmatia. Justinian also sent an embassy to gain the support of the Franks, who had now settled in Gaul. Within a few months, Sicily had fallen, and on the last day of the year, Belisarius entered Syracuse, the capital. Sicily could now be added to the list of conquests of the regained Roman Empire.(3)

In 536, Justinian said: 'God has granted us...to win back the whole of Africa and Sicily; and we are confident that the Lord will now grant us the power to recover the rest of our Empire.....' (4) This he did. Over the next four years, in a series of brilliant campaigns, Justinian, through Belisarius, overran Italy and took control of Rome. This, added to the fall

of Ravenna and the capture of the Gothic King in 540, was '...Justinian's moment of glory.' Yet this was not to last. (5)

In 540, the Persians broke the treaty and invaded Syria, and attacked and destroyed the great city of Antioch. Belisarius was rushed to the east, while the Goths in Italy, who were in touch with the Persian King, rose in rebellion. Justinian then sent his general back to Italy with an inadequate force, and made a truce with the Persians in 545. Italy had been retaken by the Goths, and conquering it the second time was to be harder than the first. The new Gothic King, Totila, occupied Rome from 546 to 549, when Belisarius recovered it. However, in the same year, the Commander was recalled back to Constantinople. For a further six years, Italy was to remain in Gothic hands. Totila took over the administration of the country and asked to come to terms with Justinian. However, in 552, Justinian sent his other great commander, the eunuch Narses, into battle.(6) Narses led the largest army ever to appear in Justinian's reign into battle with the Goths. Totila was eventually defeated and killed through superior numbers and excellent strategy. (7)

Narses entered Rome and soon defeated the Ostrogothic resistance. However small pockets of resistance lingered until 562 when the Byzantines had control of the whole country.

Meanwhile, Justinian found reason to conquer the Gothic Kingdom of Spain. In 550 a fleet was set out from Sicily, and before the next year had passed, the area was in Roman hands. By 562, the Mediterranean was '...once again a Roman lake.' (8) Justinian, through the help of his great commanders Belisarius and Narses, had re-taken Northern Africa, Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Septem, the Balearic Islands, and a part of South-East Spain. As well as this, he kept control of Constantinople and all the lands he had received at his succession.

From 550 to 561, Justinian had severe problems inside his own territory. Continual attacks from the Slavs led to the invaders getting as far as the wall protecting Constantinople. Only when the veteran Belisarius mustered the civilian population was the situation saved. In 561 the invading troops settled inside Justinian's borders. This failure to keep them out is listed as one of Justinian's defeats.

Justinian, through ambition, his commanders Belisarius and Narses, and luck, managed to regain all the lost territory of the Roman Empire. His constant love of the old Roman Empire inspired him to continue. Justinian saw it that God Himself wanted Justinian to regain the lost Empire. While many of Justinian's victories came from the ingenuity of his commanders and his huge forces, a certain amount of chance always was a part of the victory.

Bibliography

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