

The last emperor of byzantium, justinian, and his influence on the development of...

[History](#)



Justinian's Impact on Byzantine Society and his Legacy to Western Civilizations

Justinian was Emperor of the Byzantine Empire from 527 to 565. Ruling on the cusp of antiquity and the Middle Ages, he is often considered the last Roman Emperor. Justinian's goal was to restore the Roman Empire to its previous glory by reconquering the western half of the empire, promoting the arts, and establishing his new code of laws, the Corpus Juris Civilis.

After the fall of Rome in the West, the Ostrogoths, Visigoths and Franks had control over Western Europe. Justinian sought to reclaim those territories to Roman rule by sending out armies. At first, this proved to be successful. Justinian's general Belisarius was able to conquer Northwest Africa by 533 and Italy by 536. However, Justinian's goal to reclaim these territories became a burden to the Empire. While Justinian had the army focusing on conquering Italy, much of Italy was destroyed in the process. Aqueducts were damaged, leaving much of the countryside to become marshes that wouldn't be drained for centuries. During the time that Justinian's armies were conquering Italy, the Persians were regaining strength and posed a threat to the Eastern Roman Empire since Persian armies would be able to march to the waters that bordered Constantinople. Justinian's general, Belisarius rarely had the troops needed to carry out Justinian's goals in the west because Justinian could only allow his generals sufficient troops by overtaxing his people. This meant Justinian was forced to withdraw troops from the west to protect the East from Persian invasion. Eventually, Justinian's plan to reclaim the western territories was a failure. Only three years after Justinian died, the Lombards (a Germanic tribe) invaded Italy and

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took much of the land back from the Eastern Roman Empire. As a result, Italy was split between the Lombards and Eastern Romans while the rest of the peninsula became papal territories. A few generations later, the Eastern Romans lost control of Northern Africa.

Although Justinian's goal to reclaim the West was futile, he was able to improve the Byzantine Empire with the codification of Roman law. Justinian wanted codification of law for several reasons. He sought to use law as a way to "emphasize continuities with earlier imperial Rome" and to establish himself as an absolute ruler. It was also necessary, because the laws of the time included so many contradictory and obsolete components. To correct the law into what Justinian wanted, he appointed lawyers to revise the law under the supervision of his minister, Tribonian. This resulted in the Code, which was the revised version of statutory laws issued by Hadrian (a second century Roman emperor). Later on, the Novels and the Digest were added to the Code. The Novels included the laws added by Justinian and his immediate successors, while the Digest summarized the writings of great jurists. Codification of Roman law was completed with the Institutes, which was a legal textbook of the principles explained in the Code and Digest. Together, these four volumes became the Corpus Juris Civilis (the body of civil law).

The Corpus has to be Justinian's most significant contribution not only to the Byzantines, but to western civilization as a whole. There are only a few components of Justinian law are no longer influential to western law. This includes absolutism, with Justinian establishing "what pleases the prince has

the force of the law". But even the absolutism of the Corpus is relevant to modern western law, stating that an emperor's power is derived from the people and not God. This shows that Justinian's code was able to establish an early form of separation of church and state, even in an officially Christian society. In the eleventh century, his laws were restudied and reinstated in Western Europe. Eventually, France enacted the Napoleonic Code in 1804. It was based on Justinian's laws and stated that citizens have freedom of religion. It forbade privileges based on birth and that government jobs should be based on merit. The Napoleonic code provides a foundation for laws in modern day Europe and Latin America.

In addition to revising Roman law, Justinian sought to promote the arts in Byzantine society, especially through architecture. Some of the most well-known monuments commissioned include the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, or modern day Istanbul. It was an Eastern Orthodox cathedral that later served as a mosque. It is a prime example of the Byzantine architecture that Justinian had significant influence over. The Hagia Sophia features several architectural components of the Roman Empire Justinian aimed to revive, including Hellenistic columns, mosaics, and the large dome that tops the cathedral. Justinian's preferred style of architecture became what later buildings in both the east and west drew inspiration from. Both Gothic and Islamic architecture were significantly influenced by Byzantine architecture, which shows that Justinian had notable influence to both Christian and Muslim societies alike. Although the architecture was beautiful, the lavish monuments commissioned by Justinian

were financially demanding. Byzantine citizens were taxed heavily as a result.

Justinian had several goals, some of which failed while others succeeded. But everything he did to reach his goals had a significant impact on Byzantine society and the rest of the western world as a whole. His attempt to reclaim the lands of the Western Roman Empire were largely a failure, leaving Byzantine citizens over taxed and land he tried to conquer damaged. But the architecture he commissioned established the image of Byzantine architecture, with tourists visiting his beautiful monuments to this day. More importantly, his Corpus Juris Civilis was a legal masterpiece that continues to be the foundation for law in westernized countries, even in modern times. It made governments more secular, and valued merit over birthright even in his government of absolutism. So he didn't exactly reunite the Roman Empire to its former glory. Instead, his influence gave rise to a new empire with distinctly Roman roots, the Byzantine Empire. This ensured that Justinian's legacy would live on in Western society.