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Narses and the Birth of Byzantine Egypt:  
Imperial Policy in the Age of Justinian

By

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Honors Thesis

In the

Departments of History and Classical Studies  
University of Richmond  
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Advisor: Dr. Walter Stevenson

## Introduction

Late Antiquity has long been portrayed as a period of transition between the classical and médiieval worlds. Its history, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, has been forced to fit the contours of a transitional model, and no figure has been as ill-treated by this interpretive schema as the Emperor Justinian (r. 527-565 AD).

Justinian is known both as the last Roman and first Byzantine emperor; in fact he was neither. It is true that he ruled an empire which was both physically and intellectually the heir of Augustus' Rome and that he introduced wide-ranging reforms which were maintained by his Byzantine successors. Yet the character of his reign and the empire he commanded cannot be relegated to either the period before or after him, nor can they be dismissed as a transition from one great epoch to another. Like Charlemagne two centuries later, Justinian's reign was itself the beginning of a new epoch in the history of the Mediterranean, one which died in its infancy.

The character of Justinian's reign is indicative of the extent to which he was reinventing the culture, society, economy, and religion of the empire he inherited from his uncle Justin (r. 518-527). A true appreciation for the extent of Justinian's ambitions has only recently begun to emerge as a result of the rising tide of interdisciplinary approaches in the study of history.

Previously Justinian's reign was neatly divided along its major themes. Political historians followed Procopius' narrative of Justinian's wars, while religious historians examined the emperor's ill-fated attempts to resolve the Chalcedonian Schism, and economic historians focused on the development of the powerful central bureaucracy. These single-subject approaches gave rise to skewed understandings of the period from the conversion of Constantine

to the death of Heraclius (r. 610-641), and permitted historians working in different historiographic fields to make broad conclusions about the fundamental nature of the empire.<sup>1</sup>

More recent works have begun to emphasize just how connected all of Justinian's projects were. One need only look at the extensive theological justifications which preface so many of his laws or the blending of missionary work and diplomacy in his economic campaign against Persia to understand the limitations of approaching any component of his reign as distinct.

Justinian surrounded himself with capable men and women, many of whom were, like the emperor himself, from humble backgrounds. Through these agents he oversaw the codification of Roman law into the *Corpus Iurus Civilis*, which remained the standard of legal procedure into the Enlightenment. He also began to centralize the imperial bureaucracy, largely at the expense of the provincial elites who had traditionally dominated both public service and local administration. Additionally, he attacked the pagan culture of these elites and is most often remembered for closing the philosophical schools in Athens in 529, including Plato's Academy, which had operated without interruption from the fourth century BC. In place of the shared pagan intellectual culture that had traditionally united the empire, Justinian attempted to substitute Christianity. It was in this field that he met with one of the great problems and failures of his reign.

Since Constantine's legalization of Christianity in 313 doctrinal disputes had become commonplace as saints, monks, and bishops struggled to articulate a cohesive and sophisticated Christian theology. These disputes created tensions between regions in which different doctrines were predominant, they gave rise to urban violence, and they severely undermined the unity

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most striking of these is A.H.M. Jones' claim that "the later Roman empire was before all things a bureaucratic state." Jones 1964: 563.

which Rome had brought to the Mediterranean. Of all the schisms that arose from these religious disputes few had as profound an impact on the development of the late Roman Empire as the Chalcedonian controversy.

The Council of Chalcedon was called in 451 to settle the question of Christ's nature and the relationship between his divine and human aspects. The council eventually declared that Christ had two natures, one divine and one human, and its supporters came to be called Dyophysites. Their opponents, those who believed that Christ had a single divine nature, came to be called Monophysites. Despite the conclusions of the council the Monophysite sect continued to mature throughout the fifth and into the sixth century. By the reign of Justinian the issue had become the most divisive in the empire and had taken on a regional character. In general, peripheral territories such as Syria, Egypt, and Armenia were strongly Monophysite while the areas closer to Constantinople tended to be Dyophysite.

Justinian attempted, as had several emperors before him, to put an end to the Chalcedonian Schism. Aided by the empress Theodora, herself a Monophysite partisan, Justinian attempted to work out a doctrinal compromise between the two factions, a goal he never entirely set aside. Still, after years of failure in this endeavor, Justinian began to use force to support the resolutions of Chalcedon and persecuted the Monophysite communities of Syria and Palestine. Force proved to be no more successful than compromise and only served to deepen the rift. The Monophysite problem plagued Justinian until his death in 565 and drove the emperor to create his own heresy in his attempt to resolve the dispute.

The range of Justinian's ambitions reflects a key component of his reign and the imperial model he created. Justinian was the first emperor to synthesize the discordant elements of theology, bureaucracy, and personal authority into a coherent absolutist model. His imperial

synthesis established the ideal divine-right kingship and was imitated, often consciously, by European rulers into the modern period. The democratic and republican forms which emerged from the contests between king and aristocracy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance arose out of the same tensions which fueled the invective of Procopius and the disillusioned bitterness of John Lydus.

There was, however, a gulf between the rhetorical model of empire which Justinian founded, and the reality of his own time. All of Justinian's grand ambitions were built upon a society which was deeply divided along the lines of religion and culture. The failure of so many of his undertakings in the latter part of his reign can be largely attributed to the difficulties these factors introduced. The reasons Justinian's epoch failed to take root are important because they demonstrate what could not be achieved in late antiquity. Any understanding of the medieval civilizations which followed the utter collapse of Justinian's model during the reign of Heraclius depends on an appreciation of the successes and failures of the Age of Justinian.

It is surprising, then, to find that so little attention has been paid to events in Egypt between 535 and 537. During this period a military force under the command of Narses the *Cubicularius* was sent to Egypt with the ostensible goal of pacifying the Alexandrian populace in the wake of a contested patriarchal election. At the same time, Narses' eponymous subordinate, henceforth referred to as Narses the Deserter, was dispatched to the southernmost boundary of the Roman Empire to convert the pagan shrine at Philae near Elephantine into a Christian church. These two events were part of a larger initiative undertaken by Justinian to secure the wealth of Egypt against the divisiveness introduced by its strong Monophysite community and to lay the foundations for an economic program aimed at enhancing the tax revenue from trade with India and circumventing Persia's monopoly on eastern goods.

The actions of both Narses and Narses the Deserter in Egypt received the attention of French scholars early in the twentieth century. Jean Maspero initiated the study of Narses' mission to Alexandria during his discussion of the Alexandrian patriarchs.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent scholars have afforded Narses' mission only passing mention.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Pierre Nautin first addressed the role of Narses the Deserter at Philae based on photographs of inscriptions taken ahead of the construction of the Aswan High Dam, but scholars since then have made little mention of this curious event.<sup>4</sup> Despite the contributions of Maspero and Nautin, no work has ever approached these two events as connected components of a larger imperial program.

Taken as elements of a single event these two happenings stand at a crucial nexus in the history of late antiquity. They come just before Justinian's reign begins its long, slow decline into frustration and failure but at a moment when his goals seem closer at hand than at any previous or subsequent point in his reign. These actions intersect the quickening transition from the pagan intellectual life of antiquity to its monastic Christian counterpart and the partisan tensions which split the Christian community. Above all, these two events represent a new conception of imperial authority expressed through a new medium of imperial agency. In doing so they reveal the fundamental contrasts between Justinian's epoch and the period which preceded it, allowing a fleeting glimpse into that failed age whose impact would be felt from the Caliphate in Baghdad to the court at Versailles.

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<sup>2</sup> Maspero 1923.

<sup>3</sup> Frend 1972: 270 and Meyendorff 1989: 225. Edward Hardy gives the event a slightly longer treatment, but his account is filled with factual errors. Hardy 1968: 32-4.

<sup>4</sup> Nautin 1967: 3-6 and Török 1988: 70.

### Narses the Eunuch

The central figure in Justinian's Egyptian policy was Narses, an imperial steward who would become famous for his campaigns against the Goths in Italy. Narses was born in the Persian-controlled portion of Armenia, appropriately called Persarmenia, a perennially contested area in late antiquity.<sup>5</sup> As a young adult Narses was castrated and sent to the court where he was given an education in the skills necessary to serve as a court eunuch, which likely included basic literacy and arithmetic.<sup>6</sup> Narses was probably raised as a Monophysite from childhood given the strong Monophysite character of Armenia. Even if this was not the case, he was certainly a Monophysite by the time he reached adulthood.<sup>7</sup> At some point Narses entered the *cursus* of the *cubiculum* or the chain of offices within the royal bedchamber, positions which offered easy access to both the emperor and empress.<sup>8</sup>

It is known from several sources, and from the nature of his early positions, that Narses was a eunuch, and it is worth considering the implications of his eunuchism for his career.<sup>9</sup> Though eunuchs had been known in the Roman empire since the late Republic and were found in the Persian Empire from the days of Herodotus, they had always occupied a conflicted space in

<sup>5</sup> Procopius *History of the Wars*. I.XV.31.

<sup>6</sup> Agathius. *Histories*. I.16. Agathius' disdain for Narses' education is clearly a manifestation of his aristocratic attitudes. Arithmetic based on his later service as *sacellarius*. For the late antique program of education and aristocratic views thereof, see Watts 2006: 2-5 and Brown 1992: 35-70. The date of Narses' castration cannot be fixed with any certainty; however, Agathius mentions specifically that Narses was slim and energetic. Considering the biology of castration this argues for a post-pubescent date for Narses' castration, as boys castrated before puberty tended to be corpulent and lethargic. Hopkins 1978: 193-4 and Galen. *De Usu Partium*. 4.190.16. We have no evidence for the psychological effects of such a procedure on a young boy; however, it is difficult to believe that they were not substantial.

<sup>7</sup> John of Ephesus records that Narses built an "orthodox" monastery to which he had intended to retire until he was called upon to serve in Italy in the early 550's. In John's history the term orthodox is synonymous with Monophysite. John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. I.39.

<sup>8</sup> John Malalas. *Chronicle*. 18.66. He was clearly a member of the *Cubiculum* by 531 and, considering he was being sent abroad, we may assume he had begun his service as a *cubicularius* some years earlier. For the significance of posts within the royal bedchamber, see Jones 1964: 566-7.

<sup>9</sup> Agathius. *Histories*. I.16. Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xxv.24. John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. I.39



the hyper-masculine culture of Rome. The Romans understood sexuality as a dichotomy and attached strong value judgments to sex. Women were, in general, considered to be inferior to men by virtue of their womanhood. Eunuchs, then, served as awkward evidence for the variability of human sexuality, at least in respect to form.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, traditional Roman morality, and the Roman state itself, placed a high value on the role of the father as the head of the family. All power, including the emperor's, was at least partially understood in terms of the father's absolute sovereignty over his family.<sup>11</sup> Eunuchs, as men who could not participate in this fatherly authority, were widely ostracized from mainstream society and politics.<sup>12</sup> This social ostracism was reinforced by the cultural otherness which resulted from a law, introduced by the emperor Domitian and reissued sporadically, forbidding the production of eunuchs inside the bounds of the empire.<sup>13</sup>

In the early Empire eunuchs did not play any significant or specialized role in government. In fact, they were most often associated with the sexual habits of Roman women, who took advantage of the sexual capacity and infertility of post-pubescent eunuchs.<sup>14</sup> However, following the near collapse of the Roman state during the third century, eunuchs began to assume important positions in and around the emperor. Perhaps the most famous example of this new role was the career of the eunuch Eusebius who served as the chief chamberlain, a position

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<sup>10</sup> Brown 1988: 10.

<sup>11</sup> The connection between fatherhood and political authority is reflected in the language used to describe important figures. Consider the phrase used to refer to senators, *patres conscripti*, or the honorary title of a national hero, *pater patriae*.

<sup>12</sup> Stevenson 1995: 498.

<sup>13</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus. *Res Gestae*. 18.4.

<sup>14</sup> This is known principally through comedies, Stevenson 1995: 499-502. The use of eunuchs as infertile lovers continued into the late Empire and was known to Christian leaders through the confessions of Roman women, Brown 1988: 268. The retention of sexual desire and capacity by eunuchs castrated after puberty was well known in antiquity, Galen. *De Usu Partium*. 4.190.16.

Nurses would later hold, to the emperor Constantius II (r. 337-361). Ammianus Marcellinus, the major Latin historian of the fourth century, comments ironically that Constantius had a great deal of influence over Eusebius.<sup>15</sup>

The fragmentary and unreliable nature of our sources from the third century makes it impossible to reconstruct in any meaningful way the rise of eunuchs to positions of power in the imperial court. Still, it is not difficult to imagine how men with no connections to the outside world as a result of their social and sexual ostracism came to be used as personal attendants during a period that witnessed no fewer than twenty emperors in the space of thirty years. In fact, surveys of the nationalities of important eunuchs throughout the later Empire inevitably call attention to their foreign backgrounds.<sup>16</sup>

The introduction of eunuchs into the imperial court, and especially into close proximity to the emperor, was the source of their power in late antiquity. As time progressed and the emperor became increasingly removed from his subjects, especially his generals and public officials, eunuchs played an important role in mediating contact with the emperor and absorbing the blame for failed policies. In the words of Keith Hopkins, “eunuchs met a distinct need, the need of a divine emperor for human information and contact.”<sup>17</sup> This role was slowly formalized and, by the reign of Justinian, there existed a clear progression of offices open only to eunuchs which revolved around the persons and financial resources of the emperor and empress.

Following Constantine’s legalization of and subsequent conversion to Christianity the Empire became a Christian state, notwithstanding the brief reign of Julian. As Christianity, and in particular Christian asceticism, began to enter the mainstream culture of the empire it brought

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<sup>15</sup> “apud quem si vere dici debeat multa Constantius posuit” Ammianus Marcellinus. *Res Gestae*. 18.4.3.

<sup>16</sup> Tougher 2002: 144.

<sup>17</sup> Hopkins 1978: 187.

with it an association between sexual renunciation and holiness.<sup>18</sup> This association initiated a dramatic shift in the perception of eunuchs both individually and institutionally, especially in the imperial court..

Attention has previously been called to the tension between the continued use of eunuchs in a Christian Empire and their reputation for sexual excess or deviance.<sup>19</sup> This tension was present outside the court, and can even be found in the attitudes of early Christians who frequently denounced eunuchs as agents of sin but compared men that were conspicuous for their continence to eunuchs.<sup>20</sup> The resolution of this contradiction in its political context may be found in Justinian's imperial rhetoric. As mentioned before, Justinian was deeply concerned with integrating theology and law to justify his rule. As a result he, more than any of the other emperors of his era, emphasized the role of the Christian emperor as God's representative on earth. This rhetorical tendency is particularly interesting in light of the angelic imagery which came to be associated with eunuchs as early as the reign of Justin II (r. 565-578), Justinian's immediate successor.<sup>21</sup> Taken together these facts point toward a logical conclusion: the same rhetoric which associated Justinian with God implicitly associated those closest to the emperor, the eunuchs, with the agents of God, the angels. Additionally, Justinian's movement toward a Christian rationale for empire based on analogy to God's command of the universe weakened the correspondence between his authority and the model of fatherly authority in society. This, taken together with Christian attitudes concerning sexual renunciation, lessened the sexual ostracism of

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<sup>18</sup> For a thorough discussion of sexual renunciation and Christianity in late antiquity, see Brown 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Stevenson 1995: 510-511.

<sup>20</sup> Sidéris 2002: 161 and Brown 1988: 67-8.

<sup>21</sup> Sidéris 2002: 165-8.

eunuchs. Thus the reign of Justinian marked an important turning point in the perceptions of eunuchs, at least in the society of the court.

The career of Narses the *Cubicularius* was largely influenced by his eunuchism. The opportunities open to Narses were dependent on his foreign birth and eunuchism, as was his proximity to the emperor. It will be demonstrated below that Narses' ability to operate outside the limitations normally placed on a eunuch is a direct result of this proximity. Additionally, it should be remembered that although Narses' career is situated at a dramatic turning point in the perception of eunuchs, he would still have faced a wide variety of attitudes, both positive and negative, toward his eunuchism. It is equally important not to view Narses as a passive participant in his identity as a eunuch.

Some measure of Narses influence on contemporary perceptions of his eunuchism can be gleaned from the account of Procopius, whose *History of the Wars* records several episodes involving Narses. In his earlier appearances Procopius subtly mocks Narses, contrasting him with Belisarius who is called a "man-general."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Narses is portrayed as a stereotypically conniving eunuch bent on twisting the emperor's commands in order to gain authority in Italy.<sup>23</sup> Procopius' dismissive and insulting characterization of Narses eventually gives way until, in his description of the battle of Busta Gallorum, he cannot help but admit a slight admiration for the eunuch.<sup>24</sup> That Narses was able to win over Procopius, even to such a slight degree, is remarkable considering the character of that author's works. Furthermore, the fact that Narses is portrayed as the hero in the early portion of Agathius' history indicates that a

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<sup>22</sup> στρατηγῶ ἀνδρῶ. Procopius. *History of the Wars*. VI.xviii.4.

<sup>23</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. VI.xviii.29.

<sup>24</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. VIII.xxvi.8-10 and VIII.xxxi-xxxii.

major shift in the perception of Narses' eunuchism has taken place. Clearly, Narses' accomplishments influenced contemporary opinions of him as an individual and, as the empire's most prominent eunuch, it is likely that he was involved in the evolution of attitudes toward eunuchism in general. For these reasons it is important to bear Narses' eunuchism in mind when considering his career and his actions in Egypt in 535.

### The Career of Narses to 535

The first of many missions Narses undertook on behalf of the emperor came in 530 when he was sent to receive Narses the Deserter and his brother Aratius immediately following their desertion from the Persians. He was chosen for this assignment because of his common heritage with the deserters and because he held the position of *sacellarius*.<sup>25</sup> It is likely that a patron-client relationship, though perhaps an informal one, was established at this point between Narses the Eunuch and Narses the Deserter.<sup>26</sup> Despite Procopius' treatment of the subject, the desertion of Narses and his brother Aratius was an important coup for Justinian's foreign policy. Not only were the brothers native to, and thus familiar with, a hotly contested area, they were also successful generals who three years before had defeated an invasion led by Belisarius and Sittas, two of Justinian's most capable generals.<sup>27</sup>

In the following year Narses was again sent to Armenia, this time to take command of the riches the general Dorotheus had captured from a Persian fortress.<sup>28</sup> Given the nature of the task

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<sup>25</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xv.31. Procopius' phrase is ὁ βασιλέως ταμίης.

<sup>26</sup> A judgment supported by Nautin. Nautin 1967: 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars* I.xii.21-2. Procopius' offhanded treatment of both of these events is understandable given his strong bias towards his employer Belisarius. Sittas would go on to become the preeminent figure in Justinian's Armenian policy until his death in the field.

<sup>28</sup> John Malalas. *Chronicle*. 18.66.

it is evident that Narses was again chosen based on his position as *sacellarius*. These two episodes give clear indications of the level of trust Justinian had in Narses. The opportunities for corruption were legion, particularly in the latter case, and it is worth emphasizing that Justinian preferred to send Narses to Armenia rather than have the military convey the treasure back to Constantinople unsupervised.

These episodes illustrate the faith Justinian had in Narses' loyalty and discretion, but despite the wide latitude Justinian gave Narses, allowing him to travel well beyond the confines of the court, that the capacities in which Narses served Justinian were determined by his status as a eunuch. The outbreak of the Nika Revolt in 532 would permanently change Justinian's perception of Narses' abilities and cement the emperor's confidence in his loyalty. Following the suppression of the revolt Narses would find himself involved in tasks well beyond the limits traditionally placed on eunuchs.

The origins of the Nika Revolt are difficult to pin down as they vary from source to source. However, two dominant causes do emerge: the agitation of the Blues and the Greens for the release of several prisoners and the agitation of the people against a number of Justinian's ministers and officials.<sup>29</sup> Although Justinian immediately dismissed the ministers in question, the riot proceeded apace. Large sections of the city were burnt and Justinian's available generals

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<sup>29</sup> Both Malalas and Procopius record that the trouble started as a result of the unsuccessful execution of several Blues and Greens. Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xxiv.7-8 and John Malalas *Chronicle* 18.71. The *Chronicon Paschale* on the other hand indicates that a eunuch named Calopodius who, like Narses, was both a *cubicularius* and *spatharius* was the original source of the trouble. Due to a lacuna in the manuscript we do not know what happened to Calopodius during the course of the revolt, however given the prompt dismissal of John, Tribonian, and Eudaimon it seems likely that the eunuch suffered a similar fate. *Chronicon Paschale*. 620 and note 345. However, the accounts all agree that the factions eventually united against John the Cappadocian and Tribonian. Both of the chronicles add Eudaimon, the city prefect, to that list. Procopius *History of the Wars*. I.xxiv.11, John Malalas. *Chronicle* 18.71 and *Chronicon Paschale*. 621.

and soldiers fought a vicious running battle against the mob, resorting to the torch in order to dislodge entrenched rioters.<sup>30</sup>

After several days of rioting the factions seized Hypatius and sought to make him emperor, probably because of his close relationship to Anastasius, a previous emperor.<sup>31</sup> Carrying Hypatius into the Hippodrome, the mob blockaded Justinian inside of his own palace. It was at this point that, according to Procopius, Justinian wished to flee the city, only to be shamed into bravery by Theodora.<sup>32</sup> Having resolved upon action, Justinian sent Narses out to bribe some members of the Blue faction into chanting for the emperor, members of the Green faction responded by throwing stones at the Blues.<sup>33</sup> This action shattered the fragile alliance between the Green and Blue factions and threw the Hippodrome into confusion. Seizing this opportunity several generals, including Narses, led forces into the Hippodrome through the various gates. These set to work against the rioters while another force under Belisarius apprehended Hypatius.<sup>34</sup> Though the precise numbers vary from author to author, the common impression is that virtually every rioter in the Hippodrome was killed during the course of the ensuing battle.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Malalas records two sallies, one by Moundus, Constaniolus, and Basilides and another by Belisarius with his Gothic bodyguards, however the *Chronicon Paschale*'s fuller account details subsequent skirmishes involving reinforcements drawn from outside the city. These skirmishes ended with the burning of the Octagon by the soldiers. John Malalas. *Chronicle*. 18.71 and *Chronicon Paschale* 621-3.

<sup>31</sup> Hypatius was Anastasius' nephew. Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xxiv.19.

<sup>32</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xxiv.32-8.

<sup>33</sup> *Chronicon Paschale*. 626 and John Malalas *Chronicle* 18.71.

<sup>34</sup> Malalas and the *Chronicon Paschale* differ slightly in their accounts. Both agree that Narses bribed faction members to agitate for Justinian, but Malalas makes no mention of Narses leading a force into the Hippodrome. Both accounts, however, make clear that Narses was by this point a *spatharius* or a member of the emperor's eunuch bodyguard. The *spatharii* were among the few guards who remained actively loyal to the emperor, and it is difficult to imagine Justinian not making use of them against the vastly greater number of rioters.

<sup>35</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xxiv.53, John Malalas. *Chronicle*. 18.71 and *Chronicon Paschale*. 626.

It is difficult to overestimate the effect the Nika Revolt had on Justinian. Even with all the setbacks and frustrations he would face during the course of his reign, the revolt stands out as the absolute nadir of Justinian's fortunes. It is not surprising then that the people upon whom the emperor was able to depend at this juncture came to form his inner circle.<sup>36</sup> Even before the revolt Justinian's trust in Narses was evident, but Narses' service during the crisis was characterized by steadfast loyalty and intrepidity. Not only did Narses place himself in grave personal danger by venturing out to bribe members of the Blue faction, he also proved himself capable of commanding men in combat, a task never before entrusted to a eunuch.

The qualities Narses demonstrated in the two years between his first emergence in the sources in 530 and his service in the revolt in 532 are exactly the qualities Justinian would have need of in 535 when the first city of Egypt, Alexandria, descended into chaos.

### **Later Roman Egypt: Economy and Society**

Egypt's role in the empire of the sixth century had evolved relatively little from its role in Augustus' principate. Its most essential function is eloquently demonstrated by the sole building project undertaken by Justinian in the province:

But, against the people frequently setting themselves to rebellion, and it happened then that they destroyed the grain, the emperor Justinian, surrounding that district with a wall, seized by the hair the conspiracy against the grain.<sup>37</sup>

Like Augustus' Rome, Justinian's Constantinople was supplied chiefly by Egyptian grain.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, the military capacity of the empire was largely dependent on Alexandria for the

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<sup>36</sup> A phenomenon first observed by Robert Browning. Browning 1971: 76-77.

<sup>37</sup> Procopius. *De Aedificia*. VI.i.4. My translation.

<sup>38</sup> John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. I.33.



stockpiling of grain.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the whole empire depended to some extent on the grain exported from Egypt, the yearly value of which has been estimated to be 89 *centenaria*, or 8,900 pounds of gold.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, a representative from Antioch persuaded the Persian Emperor Chosroes I to spare the city in return for 20 *centenaria* of silver, and even negotiated his withdrawal from Roman territory in return for a payment of ten *centenaria* of gold.<sup>41</sup> It is evident, then, that the value of Egypt's yearly crop of grain was tremendous.

However, Egypt's contributions to the empire's wealth did not end with its grain production. By the reign of Justinian, Egypt was dominated by large private estates, some of which even comprised whole villages.<sup>42</sup> The owners of these large estates formed the upper class of Egyptian society and dominated the antiquated tax system which was still based on administrative divisions, called *nomes*, that predated the Ptolemies.<sup>43</sup> Despite the outmoded organization of its tax structure, Egypt prior to 535 contributed roughly a fifth of the annual imperial revenue in gold.<sup>44</sup>

Some insight into the revenues generated by these large estates can be gained by examining the career of Cyril, the patriarch of Alexandria in the first half of the fifth century. During the Council of Ephesus in 431 Cyril spent 2,500 pounds, or 25 *centenaria*, in bribes in

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<sup>39</sup> Lee 1989: 259.

<sup>40</sup> Jones 1964: 463-4. Jones bases his estimate on a statement in Procopius' *Anecdota*, which reports that the imperial treasury received four thousand *centenaria* during the reign of Justin. It must be admitted that this number is likely inflated, however it would have to be inflated nine fold in order for the yearly grain production to rival the value of a season's worth of depredations on the wealthy province of Syria. Procopius. *Anecdota*. xix.8. All measurements are in Roman pounds, one of which was equivalent to ~11.5 modern ounces, see Jones 1964: xv.

<sup>41</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. II.vi.24-5.

<sup>42</sup> Banaji 2001: 173.

<sup>43</sup> Bagnall 1993: 62.

<sup>44</sup> Jones 1964: 463-4. Again this is based on the passage from the *Anecdota*; however, in this case, the total percentage of Egypt's contribution would only increase if the number given by Procopius is inflated.

order to secure a favorable outcome. Despite this expenditure, Dioscorus, his successor, inherited 1,400 pounds from Cyril's personal fortune.<sup>45</sup> Given Cyril's background these funds must have come from his estates. While Cyril is likely an extreme example, his wealth gives some indication of the potential revenue being generated in Egypt.<sup>46</sup>

One of Justinian's first, and most bitterly opposed, acts as emperor was to begin the overhauling of the traditional system of taxation. Prior to Justinian, the curial class, composed of those families that met the requirements for membership in the local senate, had been responsible for the administration of taxes. Justinian, under his praetorian prefect John the Cappadocian, attempted to centralize the system of taxation, a move which ran counter both to the prestige of the curial class and to its economic interests.<sup>47</sup> While these reforms had gone forward in the rest of the empire, including the hometowns of both John Lydus and Procopius whose membership in the curial class may explain their endless hostility towards John, they had not yet touched Egypt for reasons which will become apparent.

The Nile had always been the blessing of Egypt, the source of the marvelous fertility which fueled its agrarian economy. However, for a Roman emperor ruling the province from across the Mediterranean, the Nile was a mixed blessing. The nearly exclusive concentration of arable land along the river valley, combined with the river's navigability, created an extremely efficient central corridor along which the province's grain production could be shipped to Alexandria for wider distribution. However, the functionality of Egypt as the empire's bread basket depended entirely on the maintenance of travel along the corridor of the Nile and

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<sup>45</sup> Frend 1972: 83.

<sup>46</sup> It is worth pointing out that the wealth of Egypt was by no means limited to the revenue generated by large estates. The province also boasted a large textile industry and an imperial mint. Bagnall 1993: 82-5 and Jones 1964: 437.

<sup>47</sup> Maas 1992: 18-23.

continuous shipping out of Alexandria. Hence the system's greatest weakness was the pivotal role played by Egypt's chief city. When Alexandria functioned the empire remained supplied. But if, for whatever reason, the ports of Alexandria closed, the empire as a whole, and not least of all Constantinople, risked famine.

Alexandria had long been famous for the excitability of its populace. Records of Alexandrian riots go back to the time of Philo and certainly had not abated by the sixth century.<sup>48</sup> By the time of Justinian, religious issues had become the leading source of civil unrest in the city.<sup>49</sup> The religiously charged atmosphere of Alexandria was especially dangerous to imperial interests because of the patriarch's extensive involvement in managing the grain supply.<sup>50</sup>

Egypt had a long history of siding against imperial authority on religious issues even before the sixth century. Christianity flourished in Egypt in the face of Diocletian's (r. 285-305) persecution, and the city of Alexandria supported the orthodoxy of Athanasius despite Constantius II's (r. 337-361) adoption of Arianism. In the fifth and sixth centuries Egypt was once again a heretical bastion, this time of Monophysite Christianity, a heresy resulting from the controversial Council of Chalcedon in 451 and accepted by all but one emperor between 451 and 527. Predictably, the focal point for this split between the people of Egypt and the imperial office was the appointment of the patriarch of Alexandria.

Several years after the Council of Chalcedon an attempt was made to depose Cyril's successor, the Monophysite Dioscorus. In his place, the emperor Leo I (r. 457-474) set up a Chalcedonian patriarch named Proterius. A mob of monks and laymen, led by Longinus, the

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<sup>48</sup> Isaac 1992: 277-9 and Procopius. *De Aedificia*. VI.i.4.

<sup>49</sup> For instance, on the ascension of Cyril to the patriarchate in 412 over an archdeacon of the previous patriarch, Cyril's uncle Theophilus, the city was plunged into three days of riots. Watts 2006: 196-7.

<sup>50</sup> Hollerich 1982: 199.

abbot of the nearby monastery of Enaton, revolted against this imposition.<sup>51</sup> The local troops were called upon to pacify the populace but were routed by rioters wielding stones. In the ensuing riot Longinus and his associates lynched Proterius and publicly burned his body. It took six days and the arrival of 2,000 troops from Constantinople to quell the revolt.<sup>52</sup>

After the death of Leo an attempt to heal the rift between the Monophysites and Chalcedonians was made by the Emperor Zeno (r. 474-491), himself an adherent of Chalcedon. Zeno's *Henotikon*, while resolving nothing, gave the appearance of uniformity across the empire and was vague enough to allow each side to interpret the document as a confirmation of its own beliefs.<sup>53</sup> Despite the ambiguity of the *Henotikon*, it was strongly opposed by many elements within the Alexandrian church. The internal divisions the document introduced into the church became apparent when the Monophysite patriarch Peter Mongus accepted the *Henotikon*, precipitating a break between Peter and Enaton, and eroding popular support for his patriarchate.<sup>54</sup>

Following the death of Zeno in 491 the Monophysite Anastasius (r. 491-518) came to the throne and the Monophysites of the empire enjoyed a respite from imperial harassment. However, Anastasius was succeeded upon his death by Justin I, a member of his bodyguard. Justin, under the influence of his eventual successor Justinian, adopted a staunch Chalcedonian stance, and his reign was characterized by the persecution of Monophysites both inside and outside the church hierarchy. A major component of this persecution was the deposition of the

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<sup>51</sup> For the involvement of the monks from Enaton, see Frend 1972: 155.

<sup>52</sup> Frend 1972: 155 and Evagrius Scholasticus. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. 2.5.51. According to Evagrius the troops were able to arrive from Constantinople in six days because of an uncommonly fair wind.

<sup>53</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius attributes the Monophysite interpretation of the *Henotikon* to Severus, the deposed patriarch of Antioch. Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre. *Chronicle*, III. 14.

<sup>54</sup> For a complete discussion of the effect of the *Henotikon* on the Egyptian church, see chapter 4 of Frend 1972.

Monophysite bishops who had been recognized by Anastasius. While we do not know where all of these bishops went, a fair number of them found their way to Alexandria, which became the destination of choice for Monophysite exiles.<sup>55</sup> The most famous of these was Severus, the former Bishop of Antioch, who became closely associated with the militant Monophysite monastery of Enaton.<sup>56</sup>

Alexandria and Egypt became the stronghold of Monophysitism in the Roman Empire. However, the sheer number of Monophysite clergymen in the city fomented theological inquiry and debate, which ultimately led to the division of the Monophysite heresy into two sects: the Julianists, who followed the teachings of Julian of Halicarnassus, and the Severans, who supported the teachings of Severus of Antioch.<sup>57</sup> These two camps were well established by the 520's and the city of Alexandria became a powder keg, divided between two antagonistic and organized religious factions. The spark which would eventually ignite the situation was the death, in 535, of the patriarch Timothy.

### The Egyptian Expedition of 535

The year 535 witnessed a unique moment in Justinian's reign. His armies under Belisarius had conducted a successful, whirlwind campaign which finally achieved the Roman reconquest of North Africa, a task several of Justinian's predecessors had attempted

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<sup>55</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius does not mention the eventual destination of every deposed bishop, but more go to Alexandria than he mentions. One notable example is Julian of Halicarnassus. Pseudo-Dionysius. *Chronicle, III.* 17-8. Permission for some of these bishops to travel to Alexandria was secured by the Empress Theodora. Pseudo-Dionysius. *Chronicle, III.* 32.

<sup>56</sup> According to one account Severus was buried at Enaton. Youssef 2004: 513.

<sup>57</sup> Frend 1972: 269-70.

unsuccessfully.<sup>58</sup> However, the easy war in North Africa was followed by a difficult peace as the Moorish tribes along its southern border began to raid the recovered territory. Furthermore, after the unexpected success of his generals in Africa, Justinian had begun to turn his thoughts towards Italy, where he was already deeply involved in the politicking that would eventually lead to the most protracted and expensive campaign of his rule.<sup>59</sup> Faced by the prospect of maintaining two armies far away from the capital, under pressure from the costs of his building program, and confronting the perennial threat posed by Sassanian Persia, Justinian must have faced mounting pressure to put his financial house in order.<sup>60</sup> That meant dealing with Egypt.

It is not entirely clear why Egypt was allowed to fall behind the rest of the empire in terms of its system of taxation, though several salient issues do present themselves. The province was contributing a great deal to the empire, both in grain and gold, even with an outmoded system. Also, the restiveness of the Alexandrians may have been a factor, especially as the curial large estate owners, who stood to lose the most from an updating of the tax system, maintained residences in the city and often employed their own private bodyguards, or *bucelarii*.<sup>61</sup> And, of course, any trouble in Alexandria threatened the grain supply without which the capital faced starvation.

Regardless of the reasons for Egypt's special treatment, Justinian was no longer content to allow the province free rein. Even prior to the events of 535 Justinian had attempted to involve himself militarily in the city of Alexandria. A seventh century source, the *Chronicle of*

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<sup>58</sup> For a full account of the campaign, see Procopius. *History of the Wars*. III.

<sup>59</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. V.iii.15-30.

<sup>60</sup> Given Alexandria's pivotal role in provisioning the empire's armies the looming Italian campaign must have been a major consideration when the riots broke out in 535.

<sup>61</sup> Bagnall 1993: 224 and Maspero 1912: 66-8.

John of Nikiu, reports that the emperor sent soldiers to surround the city during the patriarchate of Timothy.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, representatives sent by Timothy and the entreaties of Theodora dissuaded Justinian from executing his plans, whatever they might have been. However, John's account preserves an intriguing fact: after being dissuaded from attacking the city Justinian ordered the troops to return to Africa.<sup>63</sup>

Justinian had the motive, the desire, and the resources to forcibly restructure the administration of Egypt. The financial pressures of his current and looming undertakings made the unexploited wealth of Egypt an attractive target. The momentary lull in his campaigns of reconquest, as well as his recent occupation of North Africa, provided the necessary forces to support such an undertaking. All Justinian needed was an excuse to send troops into the province. That excuse came on February 7, 535 when the death of Timothy and the question of patriarchal succession ignited tensions between the Severans and Julianists of Alexandria.

Immediately following the death of Timothy, the Severan faction, aided by one of Theodora's eunuchs named Calotychius, established Timothy's secretary Theodosius as patriarch.<sup>64</sup> However, Theodosius was forced into exile after an attempt on his life by an Ethiopian, presumably of the Julianist party.<sup>65</sup> The Julianists then rallied around the figure of Gaianus, the major leader since Julian's death, and established him as patriarch. For a little over a hundred days Gaianus reigned as patriarch, until a force under Narses arrived and reestablished Theodosius on the patriarchal throne.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The same Timothy who would die in 535.

<sup>63</sup> John of Nikiu. *Chronicle*. XC.88.

<sup>64</sup> Frend 1972: 270.

<sup>65</sup> John of Nikiu. *Chronicle*. XCII.1.

<sup>66</sup> Meyendorff. 1989: 225.

Two major sources exist for the mission of Narses to Alexandria. The first is a Syriac chronicle composed by Michael the Syrian in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and based on sources no longer extant. The second is the *Breviarium* of Liberatus, an African archdeacon who was serving as an envoy to Rome in 535.<sup>67</sup> Both of these sources record the arrival of Narses and his suppression of the riots in the city. Yet, there is another important source which contradicts this portrayal of the affair, the *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu. According to John, Justinian ordered Aristomachus the *dux* of Egypt and his civilian counterpart, the prefect Dioscorus, to reestablish Theodosius. Nowhere does John make any mention of Narses. However, his account of this episode is interrupted by a lacuna of unclear size, which may have contained information on Narses. Furthermore, if the *dux* and prefect had been able to restore Theodosius how would Gaianus have been able to remain as patriarch for over a hundred days? It is most likely that John is referring to an initial, failed attempt to restore Theodosius. Perhaps it was even the actions of Aristomachus and Dioscorus against the apparently victorious Gaianists which resulted in a state of chaos severe enough to merit direct imperial intervention. Regardless, the accounts of Liberatus and Michael the Syrian, coming as they do from two distinct traditions originating on opposite sides of the Mediterranean, are the more reliable sources, and this has certainly been the view of the majority of scholars.<sup>68</sup>

The question facing the emperor in 535 was who to send to Alexandria. It is clear that Theodora was exerting considerable influence on affairs in Egypt and, according to John of Nikiu, had previously convinced Justinian to spare the city. It is unlikely, then, that any commander could be sent who was not amenable to her. Additionally, the task was not one for a

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<sup>67</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. "Liberatus of Carthage".

<sup>68</sup> Frend's support is implicit in his citation of Liberatus and Maspero; Frend 1972: 270n3. Hardy supports this account, though he misdates the happenings and misidentifies the Narses as Narses the Deserter. Hardy 1968: 33. Jarry 1965: 121-3, Maspero 1923: 110-7, Meyendorff 1989: 225 and Nautin 1967: 3-6.



mere military commander. The theater of operations was a city, not a field, and the complex system of political and religious allegiances operating inside that city required a subtle hand. Belisarius may have been a suitable choice, but he was preoccupied by the invasion of Sicily. Justinian's capable and discrete general Sittas was either dead or occupied by the fighting in Armenia.<sup>69</sup> There was one man available who had served Justinian loyally and tactfully for years and gained experience in urban warfare in his defense of the emperor during the Nika Revolt: Narses. Narses had also served as one of the emperor's chief financial officials, making him qualified to address the problem of Egypt's outdated tax structure. Perhaps of equal importance was Narses' Monophysite affiliation and common service with both the emperor and empress, qualifications which would have made him acceptable to Theodora.

So it was Narses who arrived in Alexandria in 535 with a contingent of 6,000 men to suppress the rioting, restore the grain supply, depose Gaianus in favor of Theodosius, and restructure the financial administration of the province.<sup>70</sup> A measure of the ensuing battle's ferocity can be found in Liberatus' account; Narses burned sections of the city to force women, who were throwing stones at the soldiers, from the roofs.<sup>71</sup> All told, 4,770 civilians died in the fighting, Theodosius was returned to his see, the grain shipments were resumed, and the process of overhauling the financial system was begun.<sup>72</sup>

One of the most curious questions raised by this event is why Justinian, a staunch Chalcedonian, would wish to reinstall a Monophysite in the patriarchal office of Alexandria, especially when he had the means to impose a Chalcedonian bishop. Some of his motivation can

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<sup>69</sup> Procopius is not entirely clear on this point. Procopius. *History of the Wars*. II.iii.25.

<sup>70</sup> The figure of 6,000 troops comes from Michael the Syrian. Michael the Syrian. *Chronicle*. IX.xxi.279.

<sup>71</sup> Liberatus. *Breviarium*. XX.xx.

<sup>72</sup> Michael the Syrian. *Chronicle*. IX.xxi.279.

be ascribed to Theodora whose Monophysite allegiances moderated Justinian's religious policy, either through mollification or subversion.<sup>73</sup> Another possible explanation can be found in Justinian's religious undertakings during this period. Just prior to the death of Theodosius, Severus of Antioch had been recalled to Constantinople from Alexandria in order to discuss theology with Justinian. This was done in the wake of an edict which declared in explicit detail the emperor's faith, and which was vague enough to win support from both Monophysites and Chalcedonians.<sup>74</sup> Theodosius was likely restored because, with the prospect of unification imminent, there was little reason to antagonize the Alexandrians. Moreover, the emperor could expect a greater degree of obedience from Theodosius, who owed his post to Justinian's intervention, than he had received from previous patriarchs.

Like so much else in Justinian's reign, events did not live up to expectations. Instead of being more malleable, Theodosius, who was treated with suspicion on account of Justinian's aid, was unable to offer any concessions without risking his support within the Monophysite community.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Justinian's attempts at reconciliation never bore fruit, though numerous meetings were held between the emperor and holy men on both sides of the divide. Following a failed attempt to win over Theodosius in the winter of 536-7 Justinian detained the patriarch in Constantinople for the remainder of his life.<sup>76</sup> In his place, Justinian established a succession of Chalcedonian patriarchs in Alexandria, a stark indication of the emperor's increased control over the city.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> For a famous example of the latter, see John of Ephesus on the Christian mission to Nubia. John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. IV.6-7.

<sup>74</sup> Frend 1972: 267-269.

<sup>75</sup> Frend 1972: 270.

<sup>76</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. "Theodosius, Monophysite Patriarch of Alexandria".

<sup>77</sup> Frend 1972: 293.

Of course, the most problematic component in any account of ancient military activity is numbers. Given the continually shrinking size of armies during the fifth and sixth centuries, 6,000 soldiers is a tremendous force. By comparison, Narses would only bring 5,000 men to Italy to reinforce Belisarius in 538.<sup>78</sup> Belisarius himself began the Italian campaign with only 7,000 men, and his campaign in North Africa was completed with only 15,000.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, under similar circumstances following the lynching of Proterius only 2,000 soldiers were used to restore order to Alexandria.<sup>80</sup> It is easy to dismiss Michael's number as a gross exaggeration; however, his estimate for the number of people killed in the fighting is remarkably moderate, especially when compared to numbers for the Nika Revolt.<sup>81</sup> Even if Michael's number is assumed to be an exaggeration, it is much too large an exaggeration to be explained simply by a desire to restore order to the city.

There were two major reasons for the size of the force sent to Alexandria. The first was the restructuring of the financial system, a move which would require contact with each of Egypt's *nomes*. Also, as mentioned before, the curial classes who stood to lose the most from these reforms had come to depend on private bodyguards, *bucelarii*, for security, and there may have been some fear of armed resistance in the countryside. The other, and likely more significant, reason for the large force were the actions of Narses the Deserter on the southernmost boundary of the empire.

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<sup>78</sup> Procopius calls it πολλῆ στρατιᾶ Procopius. *History of the Wars*. VI.xiii.16-18.

<sup>79</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. V.v.2 and III.xi.2.

<sup>80</sup> Evagrius Scholasticus. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. 2.5.51.

<sup>81</sup> On the low end the Nika Revolt is said to have claimed 30,000 to 35,000 lives. 30,000 in Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xxiv.54. 35,000 in Malalas. John Malalas. *Chronicle*. 18.71.

In a digression outside the datable narrative, Procopius tells the story of Philae, a temple constructed by Diocletian to be a common cultic space for Roman pagans in Egypt and their neighbors to the south and west. It was hoped that this temple, which was devoted to gods the groups held in common, would foster friendship between Rome and its neighbors and stop the constant depredations of the Blemmyes in particular.<sup>82</sup> According to Procopius, this shrine was torn down by Narses the Deserter under orders from Justinian and both its idols and its priests were sent back to Constantinople.<sup>83</sup>

While Procopius gives no date for these events, modern scholars have presented a range of theories, which can be grouped into two potential periods: 530-537 and 540-541.<sup>84</sup> Any date after 538 can be thrown out as Narses the Deserter accompanied Narses the *Cubicularius* to Italy. Furthermore, based on travel times between Philae, Constantinople, and Italy the range can be reduced by another six months to a year. Nautin supports a date between 535 and 537 based on inscriptions from the site.<sup>85</sup>

It strains credibility to assume that this event was unrelated to Narses' presence in Alexandria beginning in 535, especially given the close relationship between the two commanders.<sup>86</sup> It is more likely that the presence of Narses the Deserter was part of a larger plan connected with the imperial program in Alexandria. If this is the case, what was Narses the Deserter doing in Philae, on the very edge of Roman territory? Some insight can be gained from

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<sup>82</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xix.34-5.

<sup>83</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xix.37.

<sup>84</sup> Martindale lists those dates as the possible range. Martindale 1992: 929. Shinnie favors 539. Shinnie 1996: 120. Török proposes 535-538. Török 1988: 70. Nautin is the most specific with 535-537. Nautin 1967: 6. Welsby agrees with Nautin. Welsby 2002: 36.

<sup>85</sup> Nautin 1967: 6.

<sup>86</sup> Procopius *History of the Wars*. VI.xviii.10-1 and Nautin 1967: 3-4.

the photographic survey of the site performed prior to its submersion by the Aswan High Dam. Based on the evidence preserved by his photographs Nautin argues that the temple was not destroyed as Procopius reports but immediately converted into a church.<sup>87</sup>

From the time of its conversion into a Church of St. Stephen through the end of Justinian's reign, Philae remained under the control of a Monophysite Bishop, long after Chalcedonian patriarchs had been imposed on Alexandria. This may be related to the conversion of Nubia to Monophysite Christianity in the 540's, which was instigated by the Monophysite church of Egypt.<sup>88</sup> Following the conversion of the Nubians, missionary work was continued by Theodore, the bishop of Philae, until after the death of Justinian.<sup>89</sup> The motivations for Justinian's mission, to which the conversion of Philae appears to be connected, are too complex to address here. However, given the deliberateness of Justinian's religious and foreign policies the persistence of a Monophysite church along the border with Monophysite Nubia cannot be viewed as coincidental.

Whatever its role in Justinian's relations with Nubia, the conversion of the temple could not have been undertaken lightly. The shrine of Philae was extremely important to the Blemmyes, the nomadic tribe which dominated the deserts on either side of the Nile River Valley in Upper Egypt. In fact, when negotiating a truce with the Roman commander Maximinus in 452 the Blemmyes specifically mentioned Philae.<sup>90</sup> Nor were the Blemmyes a minor force. Procopius reports that attempts were made as early as the reign of Diocletian to pacify Egypt's southern frontier through a combination of bribery and the ceding of land to the Nubians.

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<sup>87</sup> Nautin 1967: 1.

<sup>88</sup> John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. IV.6-7.

<sup>89</sup> Török 1988: 72.

<sup>90</sup> As preserved by Priscus. Török 1988: 54.

However, Procopius' account is highly problematic, and his portrayal of the Nubians cannot be reconciled with the presence of an advanced and settled Nubian civilization, known as the Kingdom of Meroe, which dates back to the third century BCE.<sup>91</sup> It is likely that Procopius misrepresented a formal cession of land by Rome to Meroe in return for security against the Blemmyes. It is even possible that relations between Rome and Meroe were formalized by a *foedus* during the reign of Constantine.<sup>92</sup>

Procopius' cynicism aside, this arrangement seems to have had its intended effect, as is evident from the reemergence of the Blemmyes during the decline of the Meroitic Kingdom in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>93</sup> It was likely this decline which allowed Blemmyan raids, prior to 452, to become severe enough to merit the campaign launched by either Florus or Maximinus, or perhaps both in unison.<sup>94</sup> This campaign was successful and terms, including those relating to Philae, were negotiated, but the Blemmyes perceived the treaty to be specific to the administration of Maximinus and so the agreement dissolved upon his death in 453.<sup>95</sup>

It cannot help but be noticed that the dissolution of the treaty with the Blemmyes came five years before the lynching of Proterius and the ensuing riots. It is feasible that the need for troops from Constantinople was precipitated by the deployment of most of the province's

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<sup>91</sup> Török 1997: 421-423. Meroe was developed both politically and commercially. Its ceramic products are considered to be among the finest produced in antiquity and Meroe City boasted several dedicated bronze workshops. Shinnie 1967: 114-6 and 127.

<sup>92</sup> Török 1988: 31

<sup>93</sup> Evagrius famously reports the abduction of the exiled heretic Nestorius by the Blemmyes in this period. Evagrius. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. I.13.

<sup>94</sup> Rubin argues that the campaigns were separate with Florus' occurring after the violation of the treaty following Maximinus' death. Rubin 1989: 385-6.

<sup>95</sup> Török 1988: 54-55.

soldiers against the Blemmyes along the southern frontier. A similar situation may explain the inability of Aristomachus, the *dux* of Lower Egypt, to restore order in 535.<sup>96</sup>

Even if the failure of Aristomachus was not related to trouble along the southern frontier, the dismantling and conversion of Philae would certainly have incited a conflict. What motivation would Justinian have for ordering Narses the Deserter to convert a single pagan shrine on the very edge of Roman territory? The answer may be found in Justinian's Red Sea policy, a confusing mix of religious, political, and economic projects aimed at the development and taxation of trade with the east via Egypt's Red Sea ports.<sup>97</sup> The most efficient way to transport goods brought into ports on the Red Sea to Alexandria would be to take them across the eastern desert and load them onto ships on the Nile. However, the eastern desert was dominated by the Blemmyes, and their raiding would have driven the costs of such a trade to untenable heights.<sup>98</sup>

Thus it seems likely that the destruction of Philae was a conscious move on the part of Justinian to draw the Blemmyes into open conflict, presumably centered on the site of the temple itself, and allow Roman forces under Narses the Deserter to break their power in the region.<sup>99</sup> In such a scenario the 6,000 troops recorded by Michael the Syrian becomes a reasonable force to accomplish the dual tasks of reorganizing Egypt and pacifying its southern frontier.

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<sup>96</sup> Although the district of Upper Egypt likely had a larger contingent of soldiers due to the imperial frontier, it is hard to imagine that it was easier to send troops from Constantinople than to ship them down the Nile. There are two likely explanations. Either the troops could not be spared from their duties in the Thebaid or Justinian wanted troops from Constantinople, rather than local troops, to respond to the crisis.

<sup>97</sup> One example of this is Justinian's attempt to circumvent the Persian monopoly on silk. Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xx.9.

<sup>98</sup> Rubin argues that the frequency of Blemmyan raids were greater than the written record indicates. Rubin 1989: 385.

<sup>99</sup> Welsby argues that the toleration of Pagan worship at Philae is indicative of the lengths to which the Romans would go to avoid conflict with the Blemmyes. Welsby 2002: 31.

Narses the Deserter, like his commander in Alexandria, was particularly well-suited to the task assigned him. Narses had spent most of his career fighting over the rough terrain of Armenia, and his tactical proficiency in such a setting is attested by his victory over Belisarius and Sittas in 527, which was achieved largely through the element of surprise.<sup>100</sup> Procopius also reports that, during Narses the Deserter's service in the Italian campaign, several Armenians under his command distinguished themselves for their performance over rough ground.<sup>101</sup> Thus, he would have been a good choice for a campaign against a nomadic foe in the rugged setting of Upper Egypt and the eastern desert.

Between the Christianization of Nubia and the willful antagonizing of the Blemmyes the conversion of Philae takes on a deliberate character, despite Procopius' pigeonholing of the event as a digression. This only adds to the evidence arguing for a connection between the conversion of Philae and the occupation of Alexandria, which in turn argues more strongly for a coherent imperial strategy for administering and reforming the province.

The success of Narses' expedition to Egypt is evident from the remarkable change in the city's role in the empire. Egypt remained a stronghold of Monophysite sentiment, but for the remainder of Justinian's reign a Chalcedonian patriarch was imposed on the province by Constantinople. Moreover, what Monophysite infrastructure remained after 537 would be gradually eroded until, on the death of Justinian, the province could boast only four Monophysite bishops.<sup>102</sup> The deposition of Monophysite clergymen was only one aspect of a larger campaign to root out Monophysitism in the province. Procopius' *Anecdota* reports that Justinian

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<sup>100</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xii.21-2. Procopius may have exaggerated the extent to which Belisarius and Sittas were surprised in order to moderate the embarrassment of the defeat for his hero and benefactor.

<sup>101</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. VI.xxvii.16.

<sup>102</sup> Frend 1972: 293. Nubia, on the other hand, had a succession of Monophysite bishops during Justinian's reign. John of Ephesus. *Ecclesiastical History*. IV.6-9.



commanded his administrators to support the anti-Monophysite efforts of the Dyophysite patriarch Paul, appointed to replace Theodosius in 536, even to the point of murder.<sup>103</sup> In addition to religious affairs, the control of the grain supply, Egypt's most precious export and Alexandria's most effective bargaining chip, came under imperial authority in 537 and remained so throughout Justinian's reign. So effective was imperial control over the supply that the *Augustalis* of Alexandria, a man named Hephaestus, was able to exploit his monopoly on the grain supply for great personal profit, even going so far as to deny the dole traditionally granted to the poor.<sup>104</sup> It is difficult to imagine turn-of-the-century Alexandria enduring such a situation without resorting to violence. In fact, there is only one parallel to this situation and that is the cancellation of the Alexandrian grain dole following the suppression of the riots in 457.<sup>105</sup>

Yet, even more striking than either of these is the complete overhaul of the Egyptian administration mandated by Justinian's Edict XIII, promulgated in 538-539.<sup>106</sup> Edict XIII represented a complete departure from Egypt's earlier, privileged status and made even middling officials accountable directly to the government in Constantinople.<sup>107</sup> It is impossible to gauge the extent to which this change would have benefited the imperial treasury, but it seems safe to

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<sup>103</sup> Procopius. *Anecdota*. xxvii.1-25. Procopius also reports that Paul, after being deposed for this action, was able to buy back his patriarchate for seven *centenaria* of gold. Given the invective character of the *Anecdota* this assertion should be approached cautiously. For the *Anecdota* as invective, see Cameron 1985: 58-61.

<sup>104</sup> Procopius. *Anecdota*. xxvi.35-44. Procopius claims that Justinian also benefited from this arrangement in the form of payments from Hephaestus. Again, Procopius' account must be approached cautiously however, it is likely that a strict control over the grain supply would have generated profits for the state, and Justinian's need for funds only increased in the years after 535. For the dating of Hephaestus' tenure, see Hollerich 1982: 193.

<sup>105</sup> Evagrius Scholasticus. *Historia Ecclesiastica*. II.5. Interestingly enough, Evagrius also mentions that the prefect whom the Alexandrians begged for the restoration of the dole was Florus, presumably the same man who had been associated with the earlier Blemmyan campaigns. Evagrius says the Florus was executing both civil and military authority in the city, whereas prior to 535 civil and military authority were divided between the *dux* and the prefect of the city as is clear from the presence of both Aristomachus and Dioscorus in the events leading up to Narses' arrival.

<sup>106</sup> Hardy 1968: 34-5.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

say that Egypt, already the dominant contributor, became far and away the preeminent source of imperial revenue.

### **John Philoponus and the Origins of Egyptian Identity**

If the expedition of 535 came at a crucial moment for Justinian's reign and Egypt's Monophysite community, it also came at a critical juncture in the intellectual development of the ancient world. From the time of the Ptolemies, Alexandria had been one of the preeminent centers of learning in the Mediterranean. Mathematics, science, philosophy, and medicine were all practiced and studied into the imperial period. Yet in the centuries following Augustus' annexation of Egypt, the province came to harbor one of the strongest and most active Christian communities in the world. As a result, Constantine's legalization and eventual endorsement of Christianity gave rise to a conflict between traditional pagan learning and the nascent disciplines of Christian theology and philosophy.

By the sixth century, Christianity was undoubtedly the dominant religion in the eastern Mediterranean, yet pockets of pagan culture, clustered around the philosophical schools, remained. With the closing of Plato's Academy in 529, Alexandria became the last great center of pagan culture and learning in the east. Narses' expedition in 535 interrupted the ongoing philosophical and cultural dialogue between Christianity and paganism and precipitated a new synthesis of Christian and pagan learning. Elements of this synthesis would form the basis of the dominant academic model in the Christian east for the next eight centuries.

The dynamics of the shift from pagan to Christian academic models are elegantly encapsulated in the life and writings of John Philoponus, an Alexandrian Christian who studied under pagan Neo-Platonists and was closely associated with the powerful monastic community

of Enaton. During the course of his career, Philoponus ran the gamut from a mild commentator on Aristotle to a heretic whose writings attracted the attention of the emperor Justinian himself.<sup>108</sup> When taken together with his intellectual and historical context, Philoponus' career highlights the issues and tensions that drove the academic transition and the role the expedition of 535 played in bringing about a new Christian intellectual tradition in the east.

Education in the eastern Mediterranean during late antiquity was largely driven by the *paideia*. The term itself is vague and its definition changed over time; however, in this period it can be essentially defined as a fellowship among upper class men who had received a traditional pagan education. The *paideia* bound together wealthy citizens from across the empire with a common cultural context and, in the process, produced one of the few major unifying forces in late antiquity. It has even been suggested that the unity introduced by the *paideia* helped to ease the transition from curial to imperial rule.<sup>109</sup> But if the *paideia* did facilitate centralization, it also provided the shared cultural context required for the production of subversive literature.<sup>110</sup>

The importance of the *paideia* to upper class identity guaranteed widespread support for pagan learning among the curial classes, well after their ostensible conversion to Christianity. The ironic tension between the religious beliefs and educational systems of the upper class is perhaps best demonstrated by a passage from the history of Ammianus Marcellinus. Ammianus, in one of his few critiques of Julian (r. 361-363 AD), rebukes that emperor for prohibiting the teaching of pagan works by Christian instructors and says that this deed ought to be obscured by

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<sup>108</sup> *Spicilegium Romanum*. III.xiii.

<sup>109</sup> Brown 1992: 40-1.

<sup>110</sup> The most outstanding example is obviously Procopius. For Procopius' subversive use of allusion, see Kaldellis 2004.

eternal silence.<sup>111</sup> This tension did not ease in the centuries between Julian and Justinian, and by the sixth century it is possible to find Christians, such as John Philoponus, attending and holding teaching positions within pagan schools.

Though the *paideia* lacked any formalized criteria, there was a generally recognized progression which a young man, or on rare occasions woman, would follow. The standard education began with instruction by a grammarian, who was responsible for communicating the basics of Greek grammar and introducing the student to major literary works. The reading of these works was supplemented by a thorough investigation of classical ideas and references. Eventually, some students would be allowed to participate in compositional exercises, known as the *protogymnasmata*. Following their training under a grammarian, talented and wealthy students would continue their work under a rhetor. They would first continue the *protogymnasmata* under a rhetor's assistant, before proceeding to the rhetor to learn rhetorical techniques and practice independent composition. While this was as far as the vast majority of students went, a small number continued on to philosophical schools, where they would engage in line-by-line analyses of prominent works and, if they were sufficiently talented, produce commentaries.<sup>112</sup>

The instruction offered by philosophers was considerably influenced by the particular tradition to which they subscribed. This prompted students to travel between schools in order to be exposed to a variety of philosophical ideologies.<sup>113</sup> The peregrinations of philosophy students also facilitated dialogue between the different schools scattered throughout the empire. Of these

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<sup>111</sup> "Illud autem erat inclemens, obruendum perenni silentio, quod arcebat docere magistros rhetoricos et grammaticos, ritus Christiani cultus." Ammianus Marcellinus. *Res Gestae*. XXII.10.7.

<sup>112</sup> Watts 2006: 2-4.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

the most influential by far was the Academy at Athens, which had continued the tradition of pagan philosophy without interruption from its foundation by Plato in the fourth century BC. The Academy's influence on the schools of Alexandria, combined with the closing of the Academy in 529 AD, fomented the charged intellectual climate that prevailed in Alexandria during the 530's.

The sources of Athenian influence on the Alexandrian schools can be traced back to the policies of Athanasius, the patriarch of the city during the middle of the fourth century. Athanasius began the tradition of close cooperation between the Alexandrian patriarchate and the developing monastic movement by legitimizing and lionizing its founding figures. Most notably, Athanasius composed a saint's life for Antony the Anchorite and ordained Pachomius, both of whom were foundational figures in Egyptian monasticism. The traditional alliance between the patriarch and the monastic communities of Egypt became increasingly important as monasticism developed into an organized movement and grew in influence, eventually becoming "the heart and soul of popular Christianity in the east."<sup>114</sup>

Although relations between the patriarch of Alexandria and the monks were generally good, the monastic movement remained outside the traditional church hierarchy. Moreover, the ties which bound together the various monastic centers were often just as tenuous as those that connected them to the patriarchate. The lack of control and uniformity among the monastic centers, as well as their significant influence over local populations, made them dangerous and influential wild cards in ecclesiastical politics, and, outside of Egypt, led to strained relations with the church hierarchy. Inside Egypt, it made monastic support crucial to controlling the Egyptian church and securing patriarchal authority.

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<sup>114</sup> Frend 1972: 82.

As previously mentioned, when Cyril of Alexandria became patriarch in 412 three days of rioting ensued and pitted his supporters against those of his rival Theophilus.<sup>115</sup> Cyril prevailed in part because of his monastic connections, and his tenure as patriarch came to be defined by his opposition to the theology of Nestorius. Cyril's conflict with Nestorius was not only incited by a monastic petition, it was also brought to a close at the first Council of Ephesus with the help of Shenouda, the most influential Egyptian monk of Cyril's day.<sup>116</sup> The support of the monks also played a crucial role in Cyril's domestic policies. Following his victory over Theophilus, an opposition movement quickly arose among moderate Christians of the upper classes. These Christians, bound together by the shared culture of the *paideia*, chose the pagan philosopher Hypatia as their spokeswoman.<sup>117</sup> Ultimately, Hypatia was murdered for her opposition to Cyril, and the pagan exodus from Alexandria to Athens, already underway, was accelerated.<sup>118</sup>

The climate which the Alexandrian philosophers found in Athens was vastly different from the one they left behind; the Christian population of Athens was smaller, less active, and less violent than its Alexandrian counterpart. Although there was still opposition to pagan philosophy, it took the form of a gradual marginalization of paganism in public life.<sup>119</sup> As a result, the Athenian students who began to immigrate to Alexandria in the generation after Cyril were significantly more aggressive in their paganism and remained so through their continued

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<sup>115</sup> Watts 2006: 196-7.

<sup>116</sup> Frend 1972: 82.

<sup>117</sup> The participation of philosophers and academics in public life was not uncommon in Alexandria. The corrupt *Augustalis* Hephaestus, mentioned above, began his career as a rhetor. Procopius. *Anecdota*. xxvi.35.

<sup>118</sup> Watts 2006: 204. The murder of Hypatia was attributed to a man named Peter. Watts 2006: 198. However, Cyril has often been implicated and his uses of strongmen, including the infamous *parabalanoi*, are well documented. Brown 1992: 102.

<sup>119</sup> Rothaus 1996: 299-305.

connections to the Athenian schools.<sup>120</sup> The renewed vigor of the pagan intellectual community in Alexandria was at least partially responsible for the development of a group known as the *philoponoi*, a network of Christian students in the pagan schools who maintained close connections with local monasteries and from whom John Philoponus derived his epithet.<sup>121</sup>

There is no clear consensus on how to regard the *philoponoi*, and they have previously been dismissed as a “ginger group bent on sniffing out the remains of paganism.”<sup>122</sup> However, this attitude underestimates the extent to which paganism was still present in the Alexandrian schools. More recent scholarship has viewed the *philoponoi* as a link between the Christian intellectual tradition, which was gradually concentrating itself on monastic centers, and Christian students inside the urban philosophical schools.<sup>123</sup> This interpretation is supported by the close relationship between the *philoponoi* and the monastic center of Enaton.

Enaton, located nine miles outside of Alexandria, was easily the most influential monastery in the area. Some measure of its influence, and that of the *philoponoi*, can be gleaned from Zacharius Scholasticus’ *Life of Severus*.<sup>124</sup> Zacharius’ work includes a frequently neglected section dealing with a pagan student named Paralius, who converted to Christianity and was attacked by his fellow students for denouncing a pagan miracle, only to be rescued by members of the *philoponoi*. Severus was not involved in any of these happening, and their inclusion in Zacharius’ work is an attempt to implicitly link Severus with the anti-pagan activities of the

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<sup>120</sup> Recent statistical studies have confirmed both the privileged relationship between Alexandria and Athens and the continuance of that relationship into the sixth century. Ruffini 2004: 241-254.

<sup>121</sup> The word *philoponus* and its plural form *philoponoi* mean “lover(s) of toil”.

<sup>122</sup> Frend 1972: 203.

<sup>123</sup> Watts 2006: 215.

<sup>124</sup> Severus of Antioch, the same man whose conflict with Julian of Halicarnassus gave rise to the riots that preceded Narses’ expedition.

*philoponoi* and the powerful monastery of Enaton.<sup>125</sup> In another *Life of Severus*, this one surviving in the Arabic tradition and attributed to a seventh century Antiochene patriarch, the author makes a point of mentioning Severus' burial at Enaton, even though Severus' actions in Egypt are largely omitted from the account.<sup>126</sup> The impulse of both of these writers to link Severus, the most powerful Monophysite clergyman of the sixth century, to Enaton and the *philoponoi* underscores the influence of the monastery in contemporary ecclesiastical politics.

The influence of the *philoponoi* and Enaton was such that they were able to organize a raid on a local shrine to Isis in response to the attack on Paralius mentioned above. The raid resulted in the complete destruction of the shrine and a second, though significantly smaller, pagan exodus from the city.<sup>127</sup> The most prominent pagan philosopher to remain following the raid was Ammonius, who negotiated a deal with the patriarch Peter Mongus to continue teaching pagan philosophy but in a more neutral tone. As a result, every level of the Ammonian school was composed of both pagan and Christian students. Of these students, the most important was John Philoponus.

Little is known about Philoponus' early life, and whether he was born into a Christian family or converted later is still the subject of debate. Although the latter view is relatively common, the weight of current scholarship argues for him being born Christian.<sup>128</sup> His early career was influenced largely by his relationship with his teacher Ammonius, and it is unclear if his early publications were independent works or merely his teacher's edited lectures. The general consensus is that these publications were a mixture of edited and independent

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<sup>125</sup> Watts 2005: 441 and 464.

<sup>126</sup> Youssef 2004: 513.

<sup>127</sup> Watts 2006: 216-220.

<sup>128</sup> For a detailed survey of the debate and its principal scholars, see Verrycken 1990: 233-274.



contributions, with the earlier works being composed primarily of the former and the later works being dominated by the latter.<sup>129</sup>

At some point in the 520's Philoponus broke with the Ammonian school for reasons which remain obscure. Three major theories have been put forward. First, that Philoponus began to appreciate more fully the implications of his religion and wanted to defend his Christian beliefs. Second, that Philoponus acted opportunistically, forsaking his personal convictions for protection or prestige.<sup>130</sup> A third option is that Philoponus' break with Ammonius was not motivated by religious considerations but rather by a zeal for his new and unique conception of the universe.<sup>131</sup> Of these three options the first two seem most feasible, but neither one accounts for the nonreligious factors which may have been influencing Philoponus. Philoponus' philosophical realignment was likely motivated by contemporary events and an understandable, even healthy, self-interest.

Philoponus' early commentaries occasionally differed from the views of Ammonius, but the number and degree of differences become more pronounced after 525. This is significant as Eutocius, Ammonius' successor, died at some point in the mid to late 520's, perhaps even as early as 525. Ammonius was quite old at the time of his death and Eutocius' succession had probably been decided well beforehand. Eutocius' death, however, was unexpected, and it is unlikely that he was able to designate a successor.<sup>132</sup> Under such circumstances, Philoponus was well-placed to succeed Eutocius as he was a member of the school's inner circle, had edited

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<sup>129</sup> Both Watts and Verrycken agree on this pattern though they differ in their interpretations of specific works. Watts 2006: 237-9 and Verrycken 1990: 237-240.

<sup>130</sup> Verrycken 1990: 241.

<sup>131</sup> Sambursky 1962: 157.

<sup>132</sup> Watts 2006: 233-4.

Ammonius' works, and published some of his own. The selection of Olympiodorus, a younger contemporary of Philoponus, to replace Eutocius must have made clear to Philoponus that he would not be given a chance to lead the school, at least not in the foreseeable future. The effect of this appointment was only increased by Olympiodorus' age; it was likely that Olympiodorus would outlive Philoponus, thereby permanently denying him the leadership of the school.

In addition to seeing his professional ambitions dashed, the 520's were an unsettling period for Philoponus as they were for Alexandria and Egypt as a whole. In 521, after several decades of tolerance and support from the Monophysite emperor Anastasius, the Monophysite population of the empire was once again the subject of persecution. As mentioned above, the persecution largely spared Egypt, but the province became a haven for deposed clergymen whose presence would have communicated the severity of the current threat. Matters were only complicated in 528 when Justinian launched a renewed persecution of pagans, which was followed, a year later, by the closing of the Athenian schools.<sup>133</sup> Philoponus, as a Monophysite working inside the pagan schools, was doubly vulnerable to these imperial initiatives.

Between the frustration of his professional ambitions and the danger inherent in his association with two persecuted groups, Philoponus' break with the Ammonian school and close association with the *philoponoï* becomes understandable. Whether or not he acted in the spirit of opportunism is open to debate but, given the circumstances, it is feasible that he acted in good faith. Still, this moderate reading of Philoponus' defection must be tempered by the vitriolic attacks he leveled against his former associates later in his career.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, his decision

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<sup>133</sup> John Malalas. *Chronicle*. 18.42. For a discussion of the reasons for Justinian's renewed persecutions, see Maas 1992: 75-6.

<sup>134</sup> John Philoponus. *De Aeternitate Contra Proclum*. 61.5-9. Philoponus reproaches his pagan contemporaries for "taking up arms against the truth" and attempting to "mislead those who are inexperienced in the subtleties of logical argument". Trans. Michael Share.

to associate with the *philoponoï* indicates a willingness to participate in an anti-pagan campaign so severe that it was used to supplement Severus' anti-pagan credentials. Regardless of his motivations, Philoponus' ideological realignment is evident in the works he produced beginning in the late 520's.

Philoponus' break with the Ammonian school was driven home by the publication of his *De Aeternitate Contra Proclum* in 529. That year was an eventful one. In addition to the closing of the Athenian schools the first Samaritan revolt broke out, an event which would have been noticed in a city plagued by poor relations with its Jewish population since the principate. This occurred alongside the typical disasters of late antiquity: a riot in Antioch as well as earthquakes in Amaseia and Myra, the metropolis of Lykia.<sup>135</sup> While the *De Aeternitate* could not have been written in response to any of these events, they form an appropriate context for a work whose influence, along with Philoponus' subsequent writings, would be felt long after Constantinople lost control of Egypt.

Aside from the philosophical and scientific implications of the work, the *De Aeternitate* also provides valuable insight into the way in which Philoponus viewed himself and his contemporaries. On the whole, the work is a straightforward commentary focused on refuting the interpretations of Proclus; however, Philoponus occasionally inserts personal comments into the work. What emerges from these comments is a strong sense of dichotomy, a division between "us" and "them." Philoponus is explicit in his identification of the two factions: "[Proclus] has made it his one goal to arm himself by all available means against the truth of our Scriptures."<sup>136</sup> Division is an important theme in the development of Philoponus' work and it is

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<sup>135</sup> John Malalas. *Chronicle*. 18.35, 37 and 40-1.

<sup>136</sup> John Philoponus. *De Aeternitate Contra Proclum*. 75.5-10. Trans. Michael Share.

not difficult to see why life in a cosmopolitan city like Alexandria, which was at the heart of the Monophysite controversy as well as the conflict between paganism and Christianity, would have fostered a need for identification. It is important to keep this impulse in mind when examining the works of Philoponus, as well as Narses' expedition.

The violence in Alexandria in 535 must have made a deep impression on Philoponus. Even though Narses was sent to support the Severan faction, with which Philoponus was associated through his connections to Enaton and the *philoponoi*, it is unlikely that Philoponus' conceptions of "us" and "them" were based solely on religious affiliations. Some indication of his reaction to the expedition can be found in his *De Opificio Mundi*, one of his greatest works, which was published in 540. Although the work is primarily concerned with the creation of the world, it also contains, like Philoponus' earlier works, personal comments and tangents. In one of these, Philoponus openly attacked Justinian's right to kingship and the authority of the emperor.<sup>137</sup> The implications of this attack are as simple as they are profound. By the end of the 530's Philoponus was openly identifying the emperor as one of "them" and implicitly contrasting the imperial court, and the authority it represented, with the power structures at work in Egypt, namely the Monophysite church. The dichotomy Philoponus communicated in the *De Opificio* is the beginning of a distinct Egyptian identity.

At first glance Philoponus' writings may appear to be of minor importance. He was, after all, a member of a persecuted religious minority, writing on the southern fringe of a Christian empire in an essentially pagan style. Yet Philoponus' ideas and the movements he was involved in were being discussed across the empire and perhaps even beyond. It is a testament to the strength and ubiquity of the *paideia* that a man who could have been so easily marginalized was

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<sup>137</sup> John Philoponus. *De Opificio Mundi*. VI.16.

able to influence so many of his contemporaries across so vast an area. Two major, non-philosophical works in which Philoponus' ideas appear are Agathius' *The Histories* and John Lydus' *De Magistratibus*. By examining the authors, their works, and the context of the references it is possible to gauge the extent of Philoponus' influence on the intellectual world of late antiquity.

Agathius' *The Histories* are a conscious continuation of Procopius' narrative of Justinian's wars. Like many classical or classically inspired historians, Agathius includes a number of apparently unrelated anecdotes and tangents. One of these deals with a man named Uranius, who was able to attach himself to a diplomatic mission to the court of the Sassanian Persian Shah, Chosroes I. Although Agathius brands Uranius as a braggart and charlatan, the diplomat is able to ingratiate himself with the Shah by masquerading as a philosopher. Uranius' act is so convincing that Chosroes "after giving [Uranius] a most cordial reception...summoned the magi to join with him in discussing such questions as the origin of the physical world, whether the universe will last forever, and whether one should posit a single first principle for all things."<sup>138</sup> The overlap between Philoponus' writings and the major topics of discussion at the Persian court is striking. A degree of skepticism must be maintained when approaching Agathius' report as his sources are unclear. However, the factual accuracy of the anecdote is unimportant. What is significant is that Agathius, whose membership in the *paideia* is certain based on his scattered self-references, believed the topics on which Philoponus was writing were significant and ubiquitous enough to be the subjects of debate in the court of Chosroes. Agathius would not have included these issues unless he felt that they were plausible topics of

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<sup>138</sup> Agathius. *The Histories*. II.29.11. Trans. Joseph Frendo.

conversation, or believed that they would be sufficiently relevant to his audience to make their plausibility a moot point.

Philoponus' ideas can be seen more directly in John Lydus' *De Magistratibus*. Lydus was a career bureaucrat in the increasingly powerful, and to Lydus' mind corrupt, imperial administration of the sixth century. His membership in the *paideia* can be established based on his knowledge of Latin, which was the reason for his employment in the Praetorian Prefecture, and his teaching career.<sup>139</sup> Lydus' *De Magistratibus* is a treatise on the history of the Praetorian Prefecture, the office in which he worked, from its origins in the Republic through his own time. The work is primarily concerned with demonstrating the superiority of the prefecture and decrying the erosion of its prestige in Lydus' own day.<sup>140</sup> In the midst of this discussion, however, Lydus inserts a curious passage:

All the things that exist both come into being and exist conformably to the nature of the good. The things that exist exist, as they exist, while the things that come into being do not exist perpetually, nor do they exist in the same manner, but they revolve through generation to corruption, then from the latter to generation, and with respect to existing they are perdurative, but with respect to undergoing change they are somewhat different; for, whenever they retire into themselves, they exist by means of substance but come into being by means of corruption because nature preserves them with itself and brings them forth again into manifestations in accordance with the conditions of existence set down by the Creator.<sup>141</sup>

This passage is ill at ease with the rest of Lydus' work but would be at home in any of Philoponus' later philosophical texts. Lydus is attempting to use contemporary philosophy to argue for the rejuvenation of the prefecture based on its inherent and irrevocable nature. The

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<sup>139</sup> Maas 1992: 28-9.

<sup>140</sup> Maas 1992: 83-4.

<sup>141</sup> John Lydus. *De Magistratibus*. II.23. Trans. Anastasius C. Bandy.

inclusion of such a passage not only indicates the level of comfort a member of the *paideia* would have had with contemporary philosophical issues but also argues strongly for Lydus' familiarity with Philoponus' work. Thus it may be inferred that Philoponus was known among the classically educated men of Constantinople by the late 540's, the likely date of composition for the *De Magistratibus*.<sup>142</sup> If this was the case, the importance and implications of Philoponus' works were recognized well beyond the limits of Alexandria's Monophysite community.

The presence of Philoponus' ideas in the works of Agathius and Lydus argues strongly for their general appeal among members of the *paideia*. The ability of a philosopher to write from a Christian point of view and remain relevant in a community composed of classically educated men is a new development in the history of the ancient world. Philoponus bridged the gap between the theologically driven Christian tradition and the philosophically motivated pagan tradition. In doing so he demonstrated the ways in which Christian and pagan thought could be reconciled. The product of this reconciliation was a new Christian intellectual movement in which monastic centers adopted the role previously played by the great philosophical schools.

The pressures which motivated the creation of this new intellectual synthesis were religious and political as much as they were academic. The persecutions of the early sixth century only deepened the established divides between pagan and Christian, Dyophysite and Monophysite. The long tradition of Christian interaction with pagan learning was made difficult, if not impossible, to maintain without risking some sort of official backlash. This setting could not have been helped by the arrival of more aggressively pagan teachers and students following the closing of the Athenian schools in 529 and Justinian's persecution of 528. The arrival of Narses in 535, and the violence which followed, was traumatic evidence of the emperor's

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<sup>142</sup> For the debate over the order and dating of Lydus' works, see Maas 1992: 9-10.

willingness and ability to exert his authority in Egypt. The expedition acted as the final blow to the tradition of academic coexistence among pagans and Christians by providing immediate evidence of the consequences associated with being on the wrong side of the imperial agenda. The synthesis Philoponus supported and exemplified was a way for the classically educated elites of antiquity to maintain their connection to pagan culture without hazarding the risks associated with that culture. The presence of his ideas in works from different genres and generations clearly shows that his synthesis was known to members of the *paideia* living across the empire.

The pagan-Christian divide was not the only distinction driven home by the expedition. As is evident from Philoponus' comments in his *De Opificio*, the expedition contributed to a dichotomous perception of the empire in which the emperor and his agents were emphatically understood as being "them." The attitudes expressed by Philoponus can be taken as representing those of the *philoponoi* and, through them, the prevailing attitudes of Enaton. As was Egypt's most influential monastery, so was a large proportion of the people in the province. The monastery served as the crucial link between the ideas expressed by the philosopher and the attitudes preached to a populace that revered and honored monasticism. Thus, religious and regional distinctions, which had already existed in the minds of many Egyptians, were conflated into an Egyptian identity, a perception of the province as being something not only separate from, but also opposed to the imperial government.

The changes wrought by Narses between 535 and 537 would extend far beyond the objectives assigned by Justinian. His actions not only changed the reality of Egypt's role in the empire, but also Egypt's perception of itself inside that empire. The events of 535 and Narses' expedition sowed the seeds of an Egyptian identity and opened the way for the Persian and



Islamic conquests of the seventh century. In doing so they reveal the ways in which the expedition of 535 represents both the culmination of Justinian's new model of imperial control, the one which largely defined his epoch, and the beginning of the end of his imperial synthesis.

### **A Telling Silence: Procopius and the Historiography of 535**

Much of what made the expedition of 535 important would not have been evident to a contemporary observer. The beginnings of a distinct Egyptian identity would not manifest themselves plainly for another century, the increased central control over the province was inline with a program being carried out across the empire, and urban violence in Alexandria was nothing new, nor was it especially exciting in the wake of the Nika Revolt. Moreover, Alexandria was far from the centers of attention in the sixth century. Syria was the focus of the bitterest contests between Monophysites and Dyophysites as well as the front line in Justinian's continuing conflicts with Persia, North Africa and Italy were the scenes of wars and difficult occupations, and the imperial capital was unquestionably the political epicenter of the entire Mediterranean. Yet the very issues which might have overshadowed the expedition in the minds of its contemporaries argue for its importance by throwing into sharp relief the quantity of resources diverted to Egypt from other endeavors. While some omissions might be expected, the complete silence of the major sources for the period is deafening.

Clearly, a comprehensive survey of the major contemporary works, their authors, and the specific issues attached to both is desirable. Such a survey, however, has yet to be conducted and is well beyond the scope of the current study. Any attempt to compress the necessary information into the available space would inevitably result in generalizations so broad and explanations so imprecise that they could only obfuscate the topic further. A focused

examination of a single author, on the other hand, allows for a nuanced understanding of their work and insights into the larger trends of sixth century historiography. No author is better suited to this sort of analysis than Procopius of Caesarea.

Procopius was an eyewitness to many of the most important events in Justinian's reign. He spent much of his adult life serving as a secretary to Belisarius and accompanied the general on many of his campaigns. Because of this, he was in a position to observe Justinian's reign in the court as well as in the field, giving him unique insight into the ideology and reality of imperial policy. Under normal circumstances a historian writing with Procopius' advantages would be a welcome respite in a period plagued by inconsistent sources; however, the range of his writings profoundly complicates their use. Procopius authored three works, each of which was written on a topic and with an attitude so distinct that their common authorship was often questioned.<sup>143</sup> The three works were a history of Justinian's wars, collectively referred to as his *History of the Wars*, a survey of Justinian's building program entitled *De Aedificia*, and a polemical indictment of Justinian and several of his chief associates known as the *Anecdota*.

Two major attempts have been made to reconcile these three works. The first was by Averil Cameron, who explained each work by placing it within the context of the literary genre it represented. Procopius, she argued, was limited in his expression by the constraints of these various genres, and his apparent inconsistencies are a direct result of those constraints.<sup>144</sup> According to Cameron's framework, the *History of the Wars* is a classicizing Thucydidean history which adopts a style, vocabulary, and subject parallel to those found in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The *De Aedificia*, on the other hand, is a panegyric dedicated to praising

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<sup>143</sup> Cameron 1985: ix.

<sup>144</sup> Cameron 1985: 17-8.

Justinian's achievements, particularly those related to the conversion of pagans and heretics, and establishing the emperor as a surrogate for God's will on earth.<sup>145</sup> The *Anecdota*, easily the most problematic of the three works, she categorized as an invective and emphasized that Procopius is not criticizing Justinian's model of imperial authority, but rather his inability to effectively manage the empire. On the whole, Cameron dismisses the *Anecdota* as ineffective and literarily unremarkable, save for its shock value.<sup>146</sup>

The fundamental flaw with Cameron's interpretation is her willingness to subordinate Procopius' agency as a writer to the genres in which he was writing. Cameron's failure to allow for the possibility that Procopius was interacting with these genres, rather than passively accepting their traditional forms and limitations, effectively nullifies the importance of the works' common authorship. Yet it is precisely that shared authorship which elevates Procopius' corpus from a series of dubious and contradictory fact books to a comprehensive commentary on the age in which he lived. If Procopius passively received the genres in which he wrote, the implication is that he was neither intelligent nor daring enough to actively engage with the classical tradition. This image of the author cannot be reconciled with a man who risked his life in writing the *Anecdota* and upon whose critical observations much of the existing work on the sixth century depends.<sup>147</sup>

Cameron's attitude is symptomatic of a widespread disregard among the historians of late antiquity and Byzantium for the literature of the civilization they study.<sup>148</sup> If this mindset is adopted, then one must concede that a lettered civilization that existed for more than 800 years,

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<sup>145</sup> Cameron 1985: 86-9.

<sup>146</sup> Cameron 1985: 65-6.

<sup>147</sup> Note on dates for works

<sup>148</sup> An attitude highlighted by Kaldellis. Kaldellis 2002: 13

experienced declines and resurgences, acted as a cultural bridge between Europe and the Middle East, and preserved a vast quantity of the classical works which survive to the present day failed to produce a meaningful literary tradition. Such a position is simply untenable. If the products of late antiquity and the Byzantine period appear to lack literary merit, it is because modern scholars have not yet begun to examine these works on their own terms.

A more recent attempt to reconcile the works of Procopius was made by Anthony Kaldellis, who argued that Procopius used classical models as a “way of talking about the present by using ancient paradigms whose store of accumulated meaning could be modulated to respond to new circumstances.”<sup>149</sup> Kaldellis restricted his work to a number of specific episodes, focusing on programmatic passages and recurring themes. His work is a compelling proof-of-concept for reading Procopius as an active participant in the classical tradition. Kaldellis’ model portrays Procopius’ works as three expressions of the same fundamental interpretation of Justinian’s reign. Procopius uses the classical genres of his works in order to construct a background of expectations against which his variations stand out, though only to readers equally well-versed in the classics. Something Justinian and most of his closest associates were not.

Though Kaldellis identifies the single most important aspect of Procopius’ work, his ability to discuss topics frankly yet without attracting imperial scrutiny, he stops short of examining the full implications of this capacity. This oversight is the result of the perspective of Kaldellis’ monograph, which is so tightly focused on Procopius himself that it neglects the role of the audience. As a result, Kaldellis interprets Procopius as a man who holds firmly to his beliefs in the face of unprecedented autocratic rule, a view that, like Cameron’s, portrays

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<sup>149</sup> Kaldellis 2002: 15.

Procopius as passive.<sup>150</sup> Procopius was anything but passive. His works were designed to communicate to his audience an active opposition to the defining elements of the Age of Justinian.

Evidence of Procopius' intentions can be found in the opening lines of his *History of the Wars*. In his introduction, Procopius included an account of the differences between Homeric bowmen and those of his time, stressing that contemporary bowmen should not be remembered with the same disdain and dishonor the *Iliad* associated with ancient archers. Procopius' digression on archers would have immediately called to the mind of a classically educated contemporary the Homeric discourse on worldly glory and the immortality of remembrance. There is also an ironic tension, first identified by Kaldellis, between Procopius' stated desire to valorize contemporary archers and the actual effect of his discussion, which is the exact opposite.<sup>151</sup> The invocation of Homeric conceptions of honor and remembrance and the inversion of the expected glorification of contemporary warfare serve as a statement of intent for Procopius' work. Procopius used these passages to explain to the reader that the *History of the Wars* is an account, among other things, of the shortcomings and failures of Justinian's reign.

Procopius prefaced his discussion of Homeric and contemporary archers with an opening statement of the sort endemic to classical Greek historiography. These openings were used to express an author's historical philosophy, their intended audience, and the topic of their work. Procopius' introduction is noteworthy because it blended Herodotean and Thucydidean concerns, but added to this synthesis a unique twist that must inform any reading of the history. The reason Procopius gave for the composition of his history was decidedly Herodotean: ὡς μὴ ἔργα

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<sup>150</sup> Kaldellis 2002: 221.

<sup>151</sup> Kaldellis 2002: 21-2.

ὑπερμεγέθη ὁ μέγας αἰὼν λόγου ἔρημα χειρωσάμενος τῇ τε λήθῃ αὐτὰ καταπρόηται καὶ πανταπάσιν ἐξίτηλα θῆται.<sup>152</sup> Procopius, like Herodotus, was concerned with preserving a record of important deeds (ἔργα) so that they would not be forgotten with time. For Herodotus, this goal was itself a rationale for writing a history, but Procopius went a step beyond. Using the word μνήμην, a typically Thucydidean word, to indicate his shift in models, Procopius proceeded to declare that his history would be for the benefit of both the present and future generations:

ὦνπερ τὴν μνήμην αὐτὸς ᾤετο μέγα τι ἔσεσθαι καὶ ξυνοῖσον ἐς τὰ μάλιστα τοῖς τε νῦν οὔσι καὶ τοῖς ἐς τὸ ἔπειτα γενησομένοις, εἴ ποτε καὶ αὐθις ὁ χρόνος ἐς ὁμοίαν τινὰ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἀνάγκην διάθοιτο.<sup>153</sup>

Procopius copied Thucydides' goal of providing useful information for people experiencing similar events, but distinguished himself from Thucydides in respect to his audience.

Thucydides, in what is perhaps the most famous line of Greek ever written, emphatically dismissed the idea that he was writing for the sake of his contemporaries and claimed that his work was intended for posterity.<sup>154</sup> By invoking Thucydides and immediately modifying his predecessor's target audience Procopius made that contradiction the focus of the passage. Thus, in a single line, Procopius was able to situate himself and his history in the context of the two great classical Greek historians. Moreover, he was able to play off of the expectations created by his stylistic and thematic mimicry in order to state one of the major aims of his work.

<sup>152</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.i.1.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> ὅσοι δὲ βουλήσονται τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφὲς σκοπεῖν καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὐθις κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον τοιούτων καὶ παραπλησίων ἔσεσθαι, ὠφέλιμα κρίνειν αὐτὰ ἀρκούντως ἔξει. κτῆμά τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν ξύγκειται. Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. I.xxii.4.

Procopius encoded a vital aspect of his history in the contrast he drew between the audience of his work and that of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The final clause of Procopius' first sentence explained that his history would be of use to future generations, if they ever faced similar circumstances. The word Procopius uses is ἀνάγκη, which literally means circumstances or necessities but was often used to express physical violence, bodily pain, and torture. The issue could rest there if it were not for Procopius' claim that he was writing his history for his contemporaries as well as future generations. By claiming his contemporaries as an audience Procopius implied that his history was also for the benefit of those people facing ἀνάγκη in his own day. Given the whole of Procopius' corpus the source of contemporary problems could only be Justinian. In this way, Procopius outlined a historical goal, and a method of achieving it, which would have escaped the notice of anyone not familiar with the works of Herodotus and Thucydides. He was, in effect, declaring to classically educated men of the sixth century, his fellow members of the *paideia*, his intention to convey not only the events of recent history agreeable to the emperor, but also facts and opinions Justinian did not wish to see expressed. The first line of Procopius' history was the manifesto of a subversive writer composing an honest work under the nose of a repressive regime. In order to appreciate Procopius' works and their references to Narses' expedition, his subversive methodology and intent must inform the reading of every passage, particularly in his *History of the Wars* and *De Aedificia*.

Such an approach is essential to understanding Procopius' apparent omission of the expedition of 535. In truth, evidence of the expedition can be found throughout Procopius' works, even if he did not address the topic directly. The ways in which Procopius communicated his awareness of the events of 535 and his perceived need to conceal that awareness not only add

to the evidence for the expedition, but also give voice to contemporary attitudes towards the event. The expedition of 535 is a valuable case study in Procopian historiography because it elucidates his unique ability to say more than expected without appearing to say anything at all.

Procopius' first mention of the Egyptian expedition does not include Alexandria and focuses instead on the activities of Narses the Deserter at Philae. The discussion of Philae comes at the end of a chapter dedicated to every aspect of Justinian's Red Sea policy, from his alliances with the Saracens in Palestine to his dealings with the Himyarites and Axumites, two groups whose aid he wanted to enlist against Persia.<sup>155</sup> The passage itself contains a curious theme which is introduced by the name of the temple, for which Procopius is our only source. Φίλαι, the Greek name of the sanctuary, is a feminine, nominative plural noun which literally refers to a group of female friends, but is also reminiscent of the ἐταῖραι, the prostitutes employed in ancient symposia. By itself this name would not be interesting as the names of many cities, Athens for instances, are feminine plurals in Greek, and the association with prostitution is not definite. The name of the temple, however, becomes more intriguing when Procopius lists the gods who were revered there:

ἄμφω δὲ ταῦτα τὰ ἔθνη, οἳ τε Βλέμυες καὶ οἱ Νοβάται, τοὺς τε ἄλλους θεοὺς οὐσπερ Ἕλληνες νομίζουσι πάντας, καὶ τὴν τε Ἴσιν τὸν τε Ὅσιριν σέβουσι, καὶ οὐχ ἥκιστα γε τὸν Πρίαπον.<sup>156</sup>

The structure of the connectives places equal emphasis on the whole pantheon of Greek gods, Isis and Osiris, and Priapus, but the placement of Priapus at the end of the sentence and the use of the article γε, not to mention the phrase “οὐχ ἥκιστα,” adds a great deal of emphasis. Two questions arise from this passage: why would the Blemmyes and Nubians worship a Greek god

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<sup>155</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xix.1-26.

<sup>156</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. I.xix.35.



most often associated with comic sexuality, and why would Procopius go to such lengths to point it out?

Taken separately the name of the sanctuary and the worship of Priapus are simple curiosities, but when examined together they reveal a sexual subtext to Procopius' account. One of Priapus' most common actions in ancient literature is the sexual violation of men and women who trespass into his domains.<sup>157</sup> The emperor, through the agency of Narses the Deserter, is doing just that and, in the process, is assuming control of a temple whose name invokes female prostitution.<sup>158</sup> The passage is, in effect, a joke aimed at Justinian, and it may even refer to the eventual collapse of his Red Sea system, though that interpretation cannot be argued convincingly on account of the uncertain date of the passage's composition.<sup>159</sup> In making his account of Philae a lewd joke, Procopius attacks the religious policy that motivated Justinian to dismantle a pagan sanctuary on the very edge of his empire.<sup>160</sup> Procopius' opposition to Justinian's push for doctrinal unity in the empire is well established, and it stands to reason that Procopius was equally unimpressed with Justinian's aggressive measures against paganism.<sup>161</sup> Procopius used the episode at Philae to elucidate a component of Justinian's Red Sea policy and mock his religious policy throughout the empire.

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<sup>157</sup> *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. "Priapus".

<sup>158</sup> This is a particularly biting rebuke in light of Procopius' own perception of gender roles, see Brubaker 2005.

<sup>159</sup> Kaldellis argues convincingly that Procopius was willing to use levity to make a point. Kaldellis 2002: 21-2.

<sup>160</sup> This is according to Procopius' account. Of course, we know that the sanctuary was not destroyed but converted and that the conversion was likely related to a larger political agenda. However, Procopius either chose to ignore these facts or was unaware of them. In either case, his intentions in the passage must be assessed based on the narrative he relates, especially as it is impossible to say whether or not the events at Philae were common knowledge.

<sup>161</sup> Cameron 1985: 119-20.

Procopius' next allusion to the Egyptian expedition comes in his account Narses and Narses the Deserter joining Belisarius in Italy. Procopius reports that a feud arose between the two generals, which prompted the intimates (ἐπιτήδαιοι) of Narses to encourage him to assume command:

διὸ δὴ οὐδὲ Ναρσῆν εἶων οἱ ἐπιτήδαιοι ξὺν Βελισσαρίῳ  
στρατεύεσθαι, ἀλλ' ἀνέπειθον ὅσον αἰσχρὸν εἶη τῷ τῶν  
ἀπορρήτων βασιλεῖ κοινωνοῦντι μὴ οὐχὶ αὐτοκράτορι τοῦ  
στρατοῦ εἶναι, ἀλλὰ στρατηγῷ ἀνδρὶ ὑπακούειν.<sup>162</sup>

Procopius used word order very effectively in these lines to associate the emperor with secret actions and exploits the ambiguity of the two datives to give the appearance that τῶν ἀπορρήτων is in the attributive position modifying βασιλεῖ. The effect is to plant the image of Justinian as the “emperor of secrets” in the reader’s mind, a characterization which is too scandalous and unexpected to be erased when the grammar is clarified at the end of the line.

The precise nature of the secrets Narses shared with the emperor is not revealed, but Narses’ claim to authority and the extensive list of commanders whom the conspirators thought would follow him are revelatory. So too is the letter from Justinian which settled, at least to Procopius’ mind, the command of the army.<sup>163</sup> Procopius, as Belisarius’ secretary, would have had direct access to any letter written by Justinian to the general, which makes it possible that this passage is a verbatim copy of the imperial letter, though it is likely that Procopius edited or manipulated the content in some way. Regardless, the forcefulness with which Justinian rebukes

<sup>162</sup> “It was for this reason that the intimates withheld Narses from marching with Belisarius, and were persuading him how disgraceful it was for a man partaking of secrets with the emperor not to be the commander-in-chief of the army, but to obey the general-man. Procopius. *History of the Wars*. VI.xviii.4. My translation.

<sup>163</sup> Ναρσῆν τὸν ἡμέτερον ταμίαν οὐκ ἐφ' ᾧ ἄρξαι τοῦ στρατοπέδου ἐς Ἰταλίαν ἐπέμψαμεν· μόνον γὰρ Βελισσάριον παντὶ τῷ στρατῷ ἐξηγεῖσθαι βουλόμεθα ὅπη ἂν αὐτῷ δοκῆ ὡς ἄριστα ἔχειν, αὐτῷ τε ὑμᾶς ἔπεσθαι ἅπαντας ἐπὶ τῷ συμφέροντι τῇ ἡμέτερα πολιτεία προσήκει. Procopius. *History of the Wars*. VI.xviii.28.

Narses indicates that there was a tangible and compelling reason to take his bid for command seriously.<sup>164</sup> Procopius' narrative, excluding as it does all of Narses' military actions, including his service in the Nika revolt, fails to explain why an imperial eunuch would consider himself entitled or competent to take command of an imperial army operating on the far side of the Mediterranean, an action without precedent in all of Roman history. The mere existence of Narses' claim, taken together with the loyalty of his soldiers and the seriousness with which Justinian's letter treats the question, points towards Narses' previous service as a military commander. In this setting the ἀπόρητα which Narses shared with the emperor, and upon which his subordinates based his right to command, must refer to the Egyptian expedition of 535.

Procopius' account of the feud between Narses and Belisarius is also of interest because it reveals something of contemporary attitudes towards the expedition. Procopius may have neglected the subject for a variety of reasons, and his failure to bring it up amidst his discussion of the feud could have been a conscious attempt to undermine Narses' claim. Yet he does refer to the expedition, albeit euphemistically. The choice of the substantive adjective τό ἀπορήτων to refer to Narses' actions in Egypt shows that the expedition was either a secret or, in Procopius' opinion, ought to have been. Given the extent of the expedition, it seems unlikely that any serious attempt could have been made to keep it a secret, even if there was a limited level of interaction between Egypt and the rest of the empire. The more likely option is that Procopius' word choice was intended to communicate the shameful nature of the expedition, a sentiment he could not voice more explicitly without tempting Justinian's wrath.

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<sup>164</sup> Whether or not Justinian perceived Narses as a serious contender for command depends on the provenance of the letter. Procopius' attitude, on the other hand, is certain either way. The decision to include the letter, edited or not, shows that he perceived the harsh tone to be necessary. Thus the episode demonstrates that Procopius believed Narses' claim to be credible, if not legitimate.

Procopius' allusions to the expedition of 535 are not limited to the *History of the Wars*, in fact Procopius' most direct mention of the events in Alexandria is found in his *De Aedificia*. The *De Aedificia* is ostensibly concerned with recounting all of the building projects undertaken by Justinian, but like all of Procopius' texts there is more at work than the surface narrative. The section of the *De Aedificia* dedicated to Alexandria, which is the only city discussed in the section on Egypt, is almost comically short and mentions only one object built by Justinian: a wall designed to protect the grain from rioters. This brevity is certainly disingenuous as John Malalas, working from imperial sources also used by Procopius, records the reconstruction of an aqueduct in Alexandria.<sup>165</sup> On the whole, the passage is prosaic to the point of sloppiness, but it concludes with a sentence of startling vividness:

ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴ τῷ δήμῳ ἐς στάσιν πολάκις καθισταμένῳ ἐνταῦθα  
 διολωλέναι τῷ σίτῳ ξυνέβη, βασιλεὺς Ἰουστινιανὸς τειχίσματι  
 τόνδε τὸν χώρον περιβαλὼν τὴν ἐπὶ τῷ σίτῳ ἐπιβουλήν  
 ἀνεχαίτισε.<sup>166</sup>

The sudden movement from bland narrative to this striking image of Justinian pacifying the rioting people of Alexandria by grabbing them by the hair (ἀναχαιτίζω) in the manner one would use to settle a horse is vivid and jarring. The simple severity of the verb argues for its connection to a specific event, and no contemporary event matched the violence of the expedition of 535. Yet by all appearances the passage is aggrandizing Justinian, praising his protection of the grain and his firmness in dealing with the Alexandrians. How can this be reconciled with Procopius' hatred of Justinian and his description of the expedition as shameful?

<sup>165</sup> John Malalas. *Chronicle*. 18.33. Recent archaeological work has made clear that Procopius credited Justinian with the construction of buildings he only repaired.

<sup>166</sup> "But, against the people frequently setting themselves to rebellion, and it happened then that they destroyed the grain, the emperor Justinian, surrounding that district with a wall, seized by the hair the conspiracy against the grain." Procopius. *De Aedificia*. VI.4. My translation.

The full intent of this passage only becomes clear in the proem to Procopius' discussion of North Africa, which follows immediately. The proem continues the use of elevated and vivid language to outline the pending narrative and calls specific attention to what makes the conquest and conversion of North Africa distinct: ἐπεὶ καὶ Λιβύην ξύμπασαν ὁ βασιλεὺς οὗτος ὑπὸ βαρβάροις κειμένην εὐρῶν τῇ ἄλλῃ ἐνήψε Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῇ.<sup>167</sup> The aspect of the North African campaign which Procopius chose to emphasize was that the territory had been controlled by foreigners (ὑπὸ βαρβάροις κειμένην). This is in sharp contrast to the preceding discussion of Alexandria, in which Justinian reins in his fellow Romans. The contrast is only heightened by the verbs used in the two passages. Justinian ἀνεχαίτισε, or "grabbed by the hair", the Alexandrians while he merely ἐνήψε, or "attached", the foreign territory to that of the Romans. The connection between these two lines is further strengthened by the word οὗτος, which identifies the emperor from the proem as identical to the emperor most recently mentioned in the narrative, namely Justinian, whose name is in the center of the sentence describing his treatment of the Alexandrians. The grammar of the proem literally draws the reader's attention back to the sentence on Alexandria and forces a comparison between Justinian's expansion of the empire and his violent suppression of his own people. The effect is an elegant critique of Justinian's actions in Alexandria, which undermines the panegyric tone not only of his section on Egypt, but of the remainder of the sixth book of the *De Aedificia*.

The omission of the Egyptian expedition from Procopius' final work, the *Anecdota*, is difficult to explain. The work is, after all, designed to be a thorough character assassination of Justinian and several of his closest associates. If Procopius believed that the expedition of 535

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<sup>167</sup> "And then this emperor finding the whole of Libya lying beneath the foreigners joined it to the rest of the empire of the Romans." Procopius. *De Aedificia*. VI.5. My translation.

was shameful or to Justinian's discredit, then it stands to reason that he would have included it in the *Anecdota*. The reasons for Procopius' oversight are fundamentally connected to the genre and goals of the work. In undertaking an examination of the genre of the *Anecdota* it is crucial to avoid Cameron's mistake of portraying Procopius as a passive recipient of preexisting forms. It should be clear by now that he was actively engaging with the genres in which he wrote.

Procopius made a decision to write the *Anecdota* as an invective and to confine himself within some of the limitations of that genre in order to more fully express certain ideas, even if they came at the expense of others. In examining his failure to mention the expedition of 535, the key questions to ask are what he gained from his neglect, and what his willingness to forego direct mention of the expedition communicates about his attitude towards it.

In writing the *Anecdota*, Procopius adopted the general structure of ancient invective and chose a single major theme as the basis of his criticism of Justinian. According to a logic common in invective and satire, Procopius chose to belittle the aspect of Justinian's reign he most feared, the absolute nature of the emperor's authority.<sup>168</sup> Procopius uses a variety of avenues to reach the same conclusion. The explicitly sexual sections dealing with Theodora, Justinian's wife, and her time as a prostitute serve to emasculate Justinian and thereby challenge both his sexual and temporal authority. The anecdotes concerning Belisarius achieve the same end by drawing an inverse correlation between the points at which Justinian is willing to trust Belisarius and the times when the general is effective in the field.<sup>169</sup> The numerous instances of corruption, which Procopius never tires of recounting, portray Justinian as incapable of effectively managing his own empire, especially when the proper management of that empire is

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<sup>168</sup> For a discussion of the *Anecdota* as a satire, see Cameron 1985: 60.

<sup>169</sup> Take, for example, Justinian's decision to return to Belisarius the command of the Italian campaigns only to have his general sail aimlessly around the peninsula for five years. Procopius. *Anecdota*. iv.39-45 and v.1.

pitted against his insatiable greed. Perhaps the most striking example is that, for all of the effort Procopius expends in painting Justinian as demonic, he never records an episode in which Justinian exercised his supernatural powers to further his own ends. The ability to go without sleep and walk through the palace headless appear to be the most tangible benefits Justinian derived from his mother's congress with a demon.<sup>170</sup> All of these episodes are included for other reasons, but they all serve the same essential purpose: they trivialize Justinian's very real and very potent imperial authority.

In order to maintain the work's focus on Justinian's supposed impotence, Procopius must pass over episodes which lend themselves to a different sort of criticism. Accounts of Justinian's management of the empire that stress his overbearing use of his authority would only obscure the core concern of the *Anecdota*. The expedition of 535, at least to Procopius' way of thinking, fell into this category, as can be seen from his treatment of the subject in the *De Aedificia*. Procopius could not include an account of the events of 535 without portraying Justinian as a capable ruler, so he chose to omit such an account rather than jeopardize the integrity of the work's central argument. Still, Procopius did not neglect the campaign entirely, and several of the stories he used to emphasize Justinian's mismanagement of the empire offer insight into the realities of life in Alexandria after 535.<sup>171</sup> Procopius' unwillingness to sacrifice the coherence of the *Anecdota* in order to discuss Narses' campaign is useful because it indicates an upper bound for his interest in the topic. If Procopius perceived the expedition to be sufficiently important there is no doubt that he would have incorporated it, regardless of its effect on the work as a whole. His decision not to do so demonstrates that the expedition was not considered exceedingly important by its

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<sup>170</sup> For the story of Justinian's demonic conception, see Procopius. *Anecdota*. xii.18-9. For the rest, see Procopius. *Anecdota*. xii.20-3 and xiii.28-33.

<sup>171</sup> These episodes, specifically the tenure of the *Augustalis* Hephaestus and the patriarch Paul, are summarized above and do not merit repeating here.

contemporaries in Constantinople. This conclusion is born out by the close connection between relevant places and figures, such as Alexandria and Narses, and allusions to the expedition in the *History of the Wars* and *De Aedificia*.

The portrait of 535 painted by Procopius is complex and comprehensive. Despite the complete lack of direct references to the expedition in his corpus, Procopius is able to communicate crucial details about both the action itself and the contemporary response. The circuitous way in which Procopius approaches the topic also provides insight into the possible reasons for the broader silence of the sources. It appears that there was a prohibition, explicit or understood, on the discussion of the event. Moreover, the expedition was not perceived at the time to be an especially important event, otherwise Procopius would have modified his *Anecdota* to contain a fuller account. Much of what makes the expedition interesting only emerges when it is placed in a historical context that takes into account the centuries preceding and following it. Imperial dissuasion, in whatever form, combined with a low opinion of the episode's importance would have been a strong argument for neglecting the topic. When these factors are added to other considerations, such as regional bias and access to sources, which limited much of the historiography of the sixth century, it is easy to understand why a decision to record the expedition was the exception and not the rule. This line of thought also explains why the two direct accounts which survive come from the traditions they do. As an envoy to Italy, Liberatus was more closely connected to Rome than to Constantinople and would have been less susceptible, and likely even ignorant of, the emperor's attitudes towards the expedition. Similarly, Michael the Syrian's history was based on earlier works, a majority of which must have come from the Syriac tradition. That tradition arose out of the Monophysite culture of



Syria and Egypt and would have been profoundly unconcerned with what was amenable to Justinian.

The dominant theme that emerges from an analysis of Procopius' references to the expedition is the uniformity of his attitude throughout his three works. Procopius is conspicuous for his creative use of the classical tradition and his willingness to interact with traditional genres, rather than receive and emulate them passively. The most important facet of Procopius' corpus which a study of the expedition of 535 brings to light is his activity. Procopius was not "out of his depth" as Cameron has claimed.<sup>172</sup> Nor was he content with writing a work solely to validate his own virtues and record Justinian's actions, both heroic and villainous, for posterity, as Kaldellis asserts. Procopius recognized at some level the nexus of changes Justinian's reign represented and chose to speak out against them not for himself or for future generations, but for the benefit of the contemporary community opposed to the emperor's agenda. His decision to use classical forms was not indicative of a lack of creativity but rather a logical and savvy choice based both on his target audience and his own familiarity with the products of classical culture. Procopius' intent in all of his works was fundamentally subversive, yet he was not blind to the need for a factual account of Justinian's actions. The true brilliance of Procopius, a brilliance which is fully at work in his discussion of Narses' expedition, is his ability to reconcile subversive and documentary agendas without compromising either.

### **Conclusion: Empire and Epoch**

There is no positive evidence for when the two Narses were recalled from Egypt or what activities they might have been engaged in before they arrived in Italy in 538. Justinian had

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<sup>172</sup> Cameron 1985: 264.

ordered Belisarius to invade the peninsula in the same year that Narses was sent to Alexandria and, despite initial success in Sicily and the south, the campaign had stalled.<sup>173</sup> During the next two decades Italy would be the scene of ceaseless conflict and the city of Rome itself would endure siege and famine, and change hands no fewer than five times. By the time of Narses' victory over Totila at Busta Gallorum in 553, which coincided with the final eradication of the Gothic state, the birthplace of the civilization that had dominated the Mediterranean for more than five centuries was little more than a depopulated ruin.<sup>174</sup>

The unity which made Justinian's imperial synthesis so unique was at the heart of its own failure. Rather than take on a single project, Justinian attempted to pursue all of his agendas simultaneously. The result was incessant warfare and difficult occupations spread across three continents, a deepening of doctrinal partisanship and curial disaffection, and a thorough depletion of the empire's treasury. What Justinian's ambitions failed to account for were the limits of his empire's resources, a problem which only became more salient in the wake of the devastation wrought by the plague in 542. Yet, Justinian's failure to recognize the disparity between what his empire and imperial administration was capable of accomplishing and what he demanded of it was the source not only of his systematic failures, but also his greatest contributions to the empire that emerged following the death of Heraclius.

The disparity between aims and means that plagued Justinian's reign forced the emperor to develop more efficient imperial strategies. Where Diocletian had divided the empire among four emperors in order to lessen the burdens of rule, Justinian instead used personal agents of certain loyalty and proven discretion. Narses was the most important of these and through his

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<sup>173</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. VI.viii.16.

<sup>174</sup> Procopius. *History of the Wars*. VIII.xxxii.5-32.

peculiar and unprecedented career Justinian stumbled upon a model of imperial agency that would be employed throughout the Middle Ages in the courts of the Byzantine emperors and the Islamic caliphs: the imperial eunuch. The same economizing impulse can be seen in Justinian's religious policy, which demanded a doctrinal consensus to serve as the basis for the religious rhetoric of temporal authority. Ideally, this rhetoric would have won for Justinian the obedience and loyalty of his subjects not by exploiting the same sentiments that fueled the religious conflicts of his period. Like the eunuch agent, Justinian's rhetoric would have a long career in the courts of the Byzantine emperors, after the loss of the Monophysite territories, and of early modern Europe. The list of Justinian's contributions to the development of the theory and practice of absolutist government is extensive, and it is unfortunate that he is most remembered for his heavy-handed use of violence when his most meaningful innovations were paragons of subtlety.

The inescapable irony of Justinian's reign was that he failed to effectively implement his own imperial program. How, then, should his imperial policies, and his reign as a whole, be judged? The answer to that question is well beyond to scope of the current study, yet the expedition of 535 has a great deal to offer anyone attempting to understand Justinian's imperial model and agenda. The expedition is an intersection of every major component of Justinian's reign, from laws to administration, from religious policy to economic, from military force to cultural imperialism. All of it can be seen at work in Narses' mission. Egypt represents a singular opportunity to view the full width and breadth of Justinian's imperial synthesis in action at the peak of its powers. Regardless of how Justinian and his tenure as emperor are judged, Egypt and the events of 535 must inform that judgment as a rare example of a wholly successful undertaking.

It would be easy to view the expedition as important only as a tool for understanding Justinian's imperial policy. However, such an attitude neglects the historical importance of the expedition for the sixth century and beyond. When Narses arrived in Alexandria he not only set in motion the emperor's reforms for the province, he also set off an intellectual tumult that culminated in a major revision of the role of monasteries in the ancient and medieval Near East. The metamorphosis of the monastic tradition in the east ensured that pagan learning, the traditional enemy of Christian learning, would be preserved. The debt which the study of the ancient world owes to the classical works preserved by Byzantine monks and Islamic philosophers is beyond measuring. Furthermore, the inheritance of the classical tradition by the Islamic civilizations of the medieval period can be traced back to Egypt in the year 535. So too, then, can the remarkable developments those civilizations made in mathematics and science. Modern scholarship stands to learn a great deal from examining the classical and Christian heritages of Islamic learning.

Nor would a narrow association of the expedition and Justinian's imperial policy do justice to the historiographic importance of 535. The way in which Procopius discussed Narses' mission provides valuable clues into how his works ought to be read. In doing so, they reveal to the modern reader a personality which is at once dynamic, inventive, and daring and whose merits are reflected throughout the pages of his histories. Through a more complete appreciation of Procopius' subversive qualities modern scholars are able to penetrate the curial classes of late antiquity which, despite their numerous writings, are largely missing from recent works on the age of Justinian. Moreover, by reading Procopius' works as the product of a single author with a single intent the modern reader stands to gain access to contemporary attitudes towards virtually every major component of Justinian's reign. Finally, the interpretive strategies which reveal

Procopius' subversive content also highlight a point of origin for the reexamination of the maligned and dismissed literature of the Byzantine period. Perhaps it is in this capacity, as an instructional tool for literary analysis, that Procopius will fulfill his goal of being a benefit to future generations.

Justinian is ill-served by analytical models that interpret him as a transitional figure. The picture that emerges from the study of his policies is not one of a ruler adapting to changing realities, but rather that of an emperor unwilling to reconcile his conception of imperial authority with the realities of his empire. Justinian's imperial synthesis, for all its originality and sophistication, could not function in the Roman Empire of the sixth century. The political unity Rome had brought to the Mediterranean, and upon which Justinian's model implicitly relied, had been too badly fractured by religious and regional divisions to serve the emperor's purpose.

While many of Justinian's innovations survived, they only came into their own in the Byzantine period, when the Islamic conquests and the loss of more than half the empire had drastically changed the political realities of the imperial office. Yet it must always be remembered that Justinian was not a Byzantine emperor, he was emphatically Roman. His conception of his dominions, as is evident from his wars, included all of the territories controlled by the empire of Augustus. Justinian perceived his Roman empire as the military and economic superpower it had been for the five hundred years preceding his reign. For that reason, it is deeply ironic that his policies contributed so heavily to the loss of Egypt, without whose resources the Roman Empire was unable to function as a superpower. While Justinian was not a transitional emperor, it is fair to say that his policies set in motion the events which would culminate in the fall of Rome and the rise of Byzantium.

Justinian's epoch stood on the cusp of a discontinuity that would separate the medieval world from the ancient. In his attempts to resolve what he perceived to be the problems of his age, Justinian inadvertently shaped and fueled the coming crisis. The failure of the Age of Justinian was the failure to adapt a theory of imperial authority to the realities of the empire. The consequences of this failure were no less dramatic than the decline and fall of Roman civilization.

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