

The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian

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Whether or not Michael Maas is right that ‘many excellent studies of Justinian and his age’ exist (p. 23, n.1), there is certainly now an excellent introduction to the ‘long sixth century’—from the Council of Chalcedon (451) and the passing of the western empire (476), to setting the scene for the rise of Islam in the mid-seventh century—which can be recommended both to beginning and more advanced students. (Here I must declare an interest: Professor Maas kindly sent me a pre-publication copy during the last stages of my DPhil; I found it invaluable; I have learnt still more from it in preparing this review.) It is attractively produced; well illustrated, annotated and indexed; with a guide to the main Latin and Greek sources—though these are so varied and problematic that a separate chapter would have helped—and with a generous bibliography not confined to publications in English. It is, moreover, wide ranging, covering the whole Mediterranean region; easy to read; avoids foreign languages; and is produced by well-known scholars, including Maas himself.

Its twenty chapters fall into four parts: the first and longest entitled ‘Structures and Ideologies of Empire’. Its strengths—we will come to the weaknesses—lie in its detailed characterization of a sophisticated pre-industrial state which, at Justinian’s death in 565, comprised the whole Mediterranean basin, bar Francia and Northern Spain. This was mutating, as Maas puts it, in his panoramic, scene-setting introduction (‘Roman Questions; Byzantine Answers’, pp. 3–27), from an ancient to a medieval society, and into an ever more intensely Christian, ‘Byzantine’, autocracy, ‘whose focal point ... [was] the city of Constantinople and the emperor who dominated its life’ (p. 21).

John Haldon (‘Economy and Administration’, pp. 28–59) then sketches in the society, economy, and

government of the empire, with its complex social hierarchies and the economic—and political—predominance of its upper, landowning classes; its ‘immensely complex pattern of intersecting local, regional, and supraregional networks of exchange, focussed around the shores and major ports of the Mediterranean, the Adriatic and the Aegean ...’ (p. 37); and whose bureaucratic structure is illustrated through organization charts—a joy to a former civil servant like me. But notwithstanding these strengths, Justinian’s ambitious policies led to what we now would call ‘imperial overstretch’.

Brian Croke (‘Justinian’s Constantinople’, pp. 60–86) imaginatively makes the reader visualize Justinian’s procession through the capital on Monday 11 August 529, of which a contemporary account survives, as he returned to the palace from an extended visit to Selymbria (modern Silivri), and comments on the significance of the buildings that the emperor passed, whom he met, and what he did, including praying at the tomb of his late wife, Theodora. This leads into a more systematic account of Justinian’s colossal building activity—whether of charitable institutions, churches, palaces, or simply monuments—and how it had become a spectacular and symbolically-charged backdrop for the ever more intensely theatrical, and religious, self-projection of the emperor.

But other cities are not ignored. Kenneth Holum (‘The Classical City in the Sixth Century’, pp. 87–112) meets current controversies about their importance head on by showing *both* their continuing economic and administrative centrality—many remained large and flourishing—in the empire’s life; *and* also recognizing that they had changed with, for example, the increasing loss of local political autonomy and institutions, and the rise of the churches and the bishop as major local economic and political players, along with the dominance of unaccountable local notables. Cities even looked different as their classical design was slowly superseded by something less formal.

The two closely-related papers by Caroline Humfress (‘Law and Legal Practice in the Age of Justinian’, pp. 161–84) and Charles Padzernik (‘Justinianic Ideology and the Power of the Past’, pp. 185–214) are among the highlights of the collection. They would provide a tiro with a first-class (and well-sourced) introduction to the central, politically important, legal innovations of the age, to which the emperor attached, as Padzernik shows, enormous ideological importance, but which so often are left, in rebarbative texts, to Roman Law specialists. Humfress provides an exemplary exegesis of the structure and execution of Justinian’s legal programme: how—in ideological terms—it both Christianized a legal system centred on the emperor as never before, but also how it worked throughout the empire and was capable of exploitation, at least in principle, by humbler members of society. Padzernik illuminates in greater detail, also following closely his legal sources, the ideological logic of these reforms and, in particular, how Justinian strove to reconcile a traditional concept of Roman Law as something which even emperors ought to respect with Justinian’s own vision of the emperor as, under God, both the sole source of law and a source of innovation - which entailed departing from that tradition. He does so the more effectively by analysing the contrasting views of law and empire in Ammianus Marcellinus (fourth century) and two-sixth century writers, the anonymous *On Political Science* and John Lydus. He may have gone too far, however, in seeing John as more supportive of the emperor, as opposed to his ministers, than he was—but dared not say.

This section comprises two further essays: A D Lee, ‘The Empire at War’ (pp. 113–33), and Peregrine Hordern, ‘Mediterranean Plague in the Age of Justinian’ (pp. 139-60). The former spares us detailed military history, focussing instead on both the military infrastructure—including the dependence on ‘barbarian’ allies, the continuing importance of infantry, and finance—and on the army’s effectiveness, whose successes in the field, he claims—while, however, passing over the traumatic fall of Antioch in 540—were not wholly matched in siegecraft or in dealing with irregular forces.

For Hordern, the ‘Early Medieval Pandemic (EMP)’, first recorded in 542, remains a scholarly ‘black hole ... it absorbs a great deal of our energy. It gives very little out’ (p.157). Indeed, most of his chapter is devoted to explaining how little we do know, including whether it was bubonic plague at all! Whether or not his scepticism is overdone—some recent work plausibly relates the disease to Byzantine trading links with East Africa where a plague-infected rat population apparently existed close to the coast—he might usefully have dedicated more of his limited space to assessing the disputed impact of the EMP, whatever it was, in

religious and cultural as well as in economic terms (1).

My reservations, therefore, about this key, initial section do not derive from what the contributors say, but what they either ignore or underplay. The picture presented here of the late empire—the same holds of later contributions—is largely confined to the surfaces of imperial life. Examples make this clearer. This section is explicitly about ‘ideology’. Padzernik’s definition of the concept, however, shows what is lacking. He defines ideology as ‘an articulated and disseminated vision of “the way things ought to be”’ (p. 188). But this omits how ideologies ‘reflect and advance *the aims and interests of significant social groups* with the aims of justifying, contesting, or changing social and political arrangements’ (2). Thus Maas and Padzernik, for instance, are not wrong in the motivations that they ascribe to Justinian’s policies, but they do not systematically address the equally salient and complementary issues of what deeper conflicts and struggles those policies *also* addressed. These included, as we can see from the narrative of the Nika Riots (p. 532), much senatorial disaffection (combined with popular resentments), and the rise of ever-richer notables during our period, whose social position was buttressed by the operations of the monetary system. It also passes over the intense conflicts in the provinces. Haldon, all too briefly, mentions agricultural exploitation—but you would not guess of the existence of what, with a little pardonable exaggeration perhaps, the distinguished French scholar, Kaplan (3), described as *l’anarchie justinienne*. For this we have copious evidence in, for example, *Novels* 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31 dealing with military and administrative reform in Asia Minor alone. Here the mischiefs addressed include landowners preying on smaller landowners, imperial estates, the church, and everyone else; ‘big villages’ resisting tax-collectors; and widespread banditry. Also official corruption was so serious in, for instance, Egypt (the richest province of the empire) that, following military intervention there in the late 530s, the emperor could describe it as ‘threatening the very cohesion of our state’ (*Edict* 13). The emperor had, as a minimum, to restore and maintain public order; but of greater long-term importance, through the measures and rhetoric described here, was *legitimizing* his rule. (Environmental disasters and foreign invasion eased neither this task nor the collection of taxation, with the intense resentments this generated, needed both for building works, defence, and expansionary military policies.) A book entitled *A Companion to Roman Society in the Sixth Century* might not sell as well, but with its present title—and the foregrounding of the emperor it entails—and through taking insufficient account of a growing body of scholarship associated now, for instance, with Jairus Banaji, Peter Sarris, and Chris Wickham (who feature, however, in the bibliography), the picture of the empire it offers is avoidably bland. It is, in fact, a back-handed compliment to Justinian and his spin doctors that *their* ideological view of the world and their activities can still be taken largely at face value.

Part 2, ‘Religion and Philosophy’, is more focussed. The first three papers: ‘The Legacy of Chalcedon: Christological Problems and their Significance’ (pp. 215–38) by Patrick Gray; ‘Society and Community in the Christian East’ (pp. 239 - 66) by Lucas van Rompay; and ‘Emperors and Popes in the Sixth Century’ (pp. 267–90) by Claire Sotinel provide collectively a wide-ranging and lucid introduction to a subject, theological conflict, that students can find off-putting, and whose political salience, in our secular, European society, can be hard to understand. You want to know the basic issue at Chalcedon—Christ’s having one or two natures—and how the dispute engrossed the Mediterranean world? Gray will tell you. Interested in learning how ‘anti-Chalcedonian’ communities were formed, which still exist, or how these disputes spilled over the Roman borders into Persia and Africa? Van Rompay’s your man. How successive bishops of Rome, notwithstanding imperial pressure, played consistently—and hard—to secure Roman doctrinal primacy at the expense, if necessary, of Justinian’s aim of achieving ‘the peace of the church’ (and internal political concord), is well described by Sotinel in a contribution which both sticks closely to the sources, and, in contrast to the two ecclesiastical historians, takes fuller account of the wider geo-political context, although Gray understands the political character of that emperor’s ecclesiastical policies—‘a pragmatic power broker’ (p. 228). She also brings out the western dimension of these theological conflicts, often occluded by concentration on religious developments in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Unfortunately, neither Gray nor van Rompay always link their narratives as closely to their primary sources as they might. This is a loss to the student who needs the type of detailed guide to the turbid oceans of the theological literature that Humphress and Padzernik provide for the law. It also encourages

misinterpretation. Thus Gray (p. 229) has needlessly to explain away a joint law of Justin and Justinian (527) allegedly condemning anti-Chalcedonians (or Miaphysites) as running counter to what he had earlier, correctly, identified as Justinian's intention to reach an accommodation with them—as well as with Rome. However, while this enactment, *Codex Justinianus* 1.5.12, artfully condemns 'heretics' in very general terms—unlike Jews, Samaritans, 'Hellenes' (= Pagans) and Manichaeans—it nowhere singles out anti-Chalcedonians as such. Nor does the other anti-heretical legislation in CJ 1.5: they were not specifically targeted by imperial legislation until Novel 42 (537), after Pope Agapetus had visited Constantinople. For Gray, he was then a refugee (p. 232) while van Rompay almost ignores him (p. 246). But this would have crippled his negotiating position, thus reducing the importance of his visit as the turning point it was turning point in church politics. Sotinel, correctly, describes him as an ambassador of the Gothic King Theodahad (p. 278) at a time when Justinian's foreign policy was focussed on winning the West, and when securing papal support was accordingly especially important—even if this antagonized anti-Chalcedonians.

But religion is more than theology. We can be grateful, therefore, to Derek Krueger for his 'Christian Piety and Practice in the Sixth Century' (pp. 291–315). What he says, for example, about the increasing magnificence of the imperial liturgy in particular, the tangible and therapeutic elements of Christian cult generally, or the more intense involvement of the worshipper through, for example, pilgrimage, penitence, or the increasing importance of icons, is valuable. Unfortunately, forgetting that ideology is also a matter of social practice, he too fails to relate liturgical development, including the ever-greater sacralization of the emperor, and iconography to the political and cultural conflicts of the age.

The value of this section would also have been greater had it addressed the Paganism that, Gibbon noted (4), 'still lurked in the most refined and rustic sections of mankind'—and which Justinian strove to extirpate. The most we get is in Wildberg's interesting article on 'Philosophy in the Age of Justinian', which perhaps assumes too much previous knowledge of what Plato or Aristotle stood for, let alone of Neo-Platonism. Nevertheless, he does bring out just how much philosophy was produced in this era, mainly in commentaries—a livelier genre then than today. Unsurprisingly, Wildberg reaches no definite conclusion on the legal basis for the destruction of the (private) pagan philosophical 'School of Athens', though it clearly received a devastating blow. This was in keeping, however, with the regime's consistent hostility *both* to 'heretics'—Pagans, Jews, and Manichaeans—displayed in legislation which, as was characteristic of imperial legislation more generally, effectively gave local activists the right to take action; *and*, one must add, to classical, 'Hellenic' culture and the elites it sustained more generally, even if classical philosophy retained an ambivalent place in Christian theology.

Part 3 addresses 'Literature and the Arts' (pp. 343–400). Joseph Alchermes ('Art and Architecture', pp. 343–77) might have said more about what the arts—including the survival of pagan iconography—reveal about contemporary mentalités. He is, however, well aware, for example, that the church of Hagia Sophia, rebuilt by Justinian after the near catastrophe of the Nika riots, and other elements of his extensive building programmes, were as much works of imperial (and ideological) self promotion and legitimation as anything we find in the legislation analysed by Padzernik. But what he does have to say in reviewing the artistic and architectural achievement of the period, including technical innovation, provides, too, an excellent introduction.

Claudia Rapp ('Literary Culture under Justinian'), by contrast, is less sensitive to the ideological dimensions of her subject matter. She contends that the period was not—despite Justinian's policies to enforce orthodox Christian conformity with concomitant persecution of intellectuals, book burnings, or the harassment of 'deviants' of all kinds—one of 'rustic boorishness', as the later Byzantine writer, Zonaras, put it. Classicizing literature, she claims, flourished (though it barely outlived the century). But her case is only made plausible by an almost-complete omission of what was perhaps, after the law, the most characteristic literary product of the age, and one practised by the emperor himself—theology. She omits from her discussion, for instance, the greatest (anti-Chalcedonian) theologian, Severus, or the important church histories of John of Ephesus, both of which survive only in Syriac; she ignores the excoriation of classical culture and philosophy in, most strikingly, the hymns of Romanus and the *Akathistos Hymn*, which she cites on other grounds; she has relatively little to say about the rise of other non-classical genres, including saints' *Lives*

and chronicles (whose popularity she, however, recognizes). Such oversights are not wholly compensated for by her valuable explanation of why literature was an elite pursuit and why people could not ‘curl up in a corner and get blissfully lost in a cheap paperback ...’ (p. 377).

The final part, ‘Peoples and Communities’ (pp. 401–534), is about life at the margins: literally, in the case of Walter Pohl (‘Justinian and the Barbarian Kingdoms’, pp. 448–76), Geoffrey Greatrex (‘Byzantium and the East in the Sixth Century’, pp. 477–509), and Fred Donner (‘The Background to Islam’, pp. 510–34); metaphorically for Walter de Lange (‘Jews in the Age of Justinian’, pp. 401–26), and Leslie Brubaker (‘The Age of Justinian: Gender and Society’, pp. 427–47). The former are excellent, straightforward overviews of their subjects, and Maas should be congratulated on opting for a vision of the ‘long’ late antiquity that can accommodate Islam. De Lange is equally straightforward in chronicling the widening gulf between an aggressively Christian regime and the Jews, whose deteriorating legal status he describes. Brubaker, by contrast, provides a stimulating analysis of how Procopius exploited contemporary gender stereotypes to savage the Empress Theodora. This segues into a general introduction to the relationship between gender and language in Byzantium. In a book not conspicuous for methodological originality, this is a treat, even if Juliana Anicias’s paeon to her relatives inscribed on the walls of the church of S. Polyeuctos (which she built) can be read not simply, à la Brubaker, as an assertion of female, family values but as a political statement, from a scion of the highest aristocracy, challenging the ‘upstart’ Justinian near the vulnerable beginning of his reign.

Everyone brings to history their own experience and points of view. Mine reflect a civil service career mainly in Northern Ireland, with forays into the Middle East and Colombia. I am perhaps more sensitized, therefore, to the problems of securing and maintaining public order and establishing the legitimate institutions that underpin it than those who have spent their days in less troubled academe. Yet Justinian had these problems. Acutely. In underplaying them, this *Companion* blunts the sharp edges of reality. But this is far from denying that it remains a most useful book, fact-rich, for which countless readers and students, including myself, will remain grateful.

Notes

1. For the former, M. Meier, *Das Andere Zeitalter Justinians: Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Göttingen, 2003). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For this definition: M. Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2003). My italics. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. M. Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance de VI^{me} au XI^{me} siècles* (Paris, 1992). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, c. 47, ed. Womersley (London, 1994). [Back to \(4\)](#)

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