The Reign of Justinian I (HA)

One of the greatest Byzantine emperors was Justinian I, whose long reign lasted from 527 to 565. But Justinian’s reign nearly came to an abrupt end much sooner. In January 532, the emperor and his beautiful wife, Theodora, were attending chariot races at the Hippodrome. In the past, Blues and Greens among the spectators had often fought with each other. This time, however, both groups were upset over the arrests of some of their members. To Justinian’s horror, they united in denouncing him. **Fighting broke out, spilled into the streets, and escalated into a full-scale rebellion.**

The rioting continued for a week while Justinian and Theodora hid in the palace. Much of the city was in flames. Justinian’s advisors wanted him to flee the city. Theodora, however, urged him to stay and fight. With her encouragement, Justinian put down the revolt **[revolt: a violent action in opposition to a government or law]**. According to the official court historian, Procopius (pro-KOH-pee-us), 30,000 people were killed in the fighting. The city of Constantinople lay in ruins.

During a revolt in Constantinople, the empress Theodora (third from the left) encouraged her husband, Justinian I, to stay and fight for his city.

**Justinian was determined to rebuild the city on a grand scale.** He put huge sums of money into public works. Soon, Constantinople had new bridges, public baths, parks, roads, and hospitals. The emperor also built many grand churches, including the magnificent Hagia Sophia (AH-ee-yah SOH-fee-uh). Its name is Greek for “Holy Wisdom.” Today, this great structure is one of the most famous buildings in the world.
Besides rebuilding Constantinople, Justinian tried to reclaim some of the Roman Empire’s lost territory. He launched military campaigns that, for a time, took back parts of North Africa, Italy, and Spain.

Justinian is most famous, however, for creating a systematic body of law. Under his direction, a committee studied the thousands of laws the Byzantines had inherited from the Roman Empire. They revised outdated and confusing laws. They also made improvements, such as extending women’s property rights. The result of their work is known as Justinian’s Code. It became the basis for many legal codes in the western world.

Procopius, the court historian, wrote glowing accounts of Justinian’s achievements. But he also wrote the *Secret History*, in which he called the emperor “a treacherous enemy, insane for murder and plunder.” Throughout Byzantine history, distrust and divisions often plagued the imperial court. Justinian’s court was no exception.