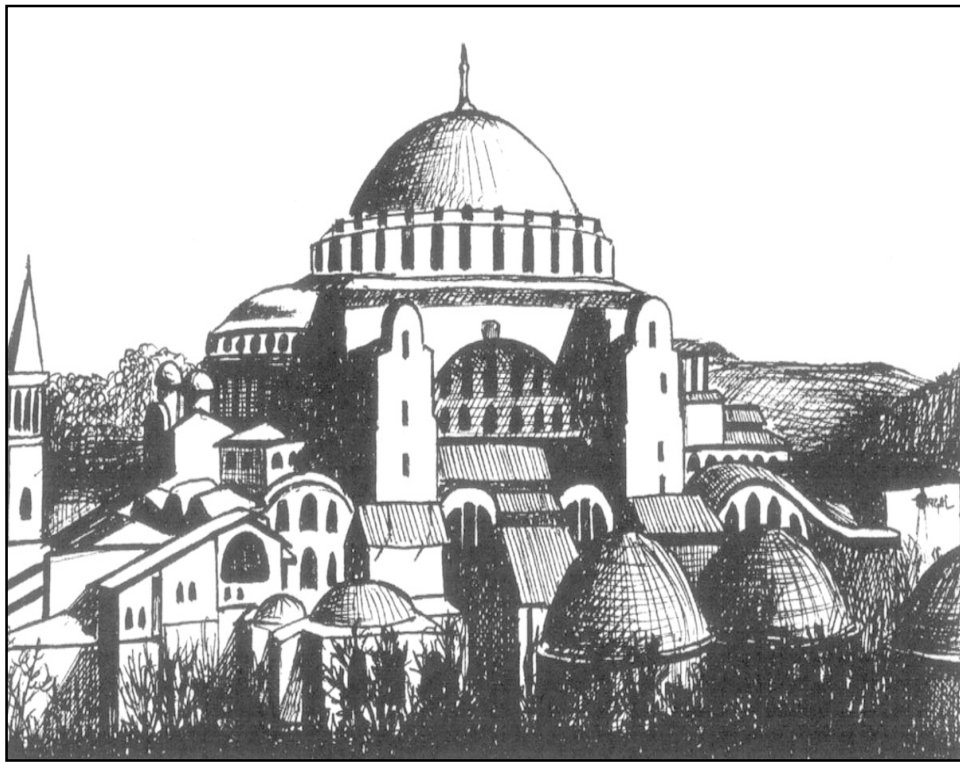


The Byzantine Empire in the Age of Justinian

A Unit of Study for Grades 7-10

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Approach and Rationale	1
Content and Organization	1

Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview	3
II. Unit Context	4
III. Correlation to the National Standards for History	4
IV. Unit Objectives	4
V. Lesson Plans	5

Dramatic Moment	6
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Table of Dates	7
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Lessons

Lesson One: Geography of the Empire	11
Lesson Two: The Nika Revolt	19
Lesson Three: The Vandal War in Africa	27
Lesson Four: Justinian as a Law Reformer	35
Lesson Five: Byzantine Architecture	43
Lesson Six: Justinian and Theodora	51

Bibliography	61
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TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit consists of lessons focused on selected topics during the sixth century of the Eastern Roman Empire, now known by historians as the Byzantine Empire. The emperor Justinian (527–565 C.E.) dominated this century of Roman rule. His reign marked the climax of the Christian Roman Empire. His religious policy established the emperor as a theological dictator. In foreign affairs, one of his tasks was to recover, with the help of his generals Belisarius and Narses, former Roman territories now held by Barbarians. Conquering Africa from the Vandals and Italy from the Ostrogoths once more made the Mediterranean a Roman lake and revived Roman rule in the West. As a Christian emperor he made it his mission to propagate the faith among the infidels. In domestic affairs, he collated and revised the existing system of Roman Law and issued his Code in 529. He also beautified his capital by constructing many buildings, notably the Hagia Sophia, (Church of the Holy Wisdom), in the new Byzantine style of architecture. With this church at the center, Justinian transformed the Near Eastern world in accord with the principles of Christianity. In all his work he had the help of his remarkable wife Theodora, whose firmness during the Nika Revolt helped him prevent the loss of his throne.

During Justinian's reign, characteristics of Byzantine culture were being shaped. This age represented an important transition from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages. Justinian accomplished great deeds in many fields: he carried out major legal reforms, erected buildings, fought and won wars against powers in Africa and Italy, and changed the role of Christianity in the empire. During his reign, the capital, Constantinople served as a place in which government, literature, art, and architecture found full expression. The restoration of Roman law was a monumental achievement. We owe an immense debt to Justinian and the ideals for which he stood.

The lessons contained here examine Justinian's contributions to world history in various fields. Through a dramatic reading of an account of the Nika Revolt, students realize that Justinian might have lost his empire if it had not been for his strong wife Theodora, who was his partner until 548, when she died of cancer. The expensive Vandal Wars in Africa were one of the concerns of the people that triggered the Nika Riots. Students will examine an account of the war by the historian Procopius. After his success in Africa, Justinian turned to reforming the law. This was his most notable achievement. It supplied an underlying unity to the state. Justinian was a Christian ruler and the triumph of the faith was a sacred mission for him. His writings reveal his religious beliefs. No Roman emperor since Theodosius the Great had made such an effort to convert the empire and root out paganism. The ruler as builder was an established practice in ancient times. The new style of Greek Christian architecture, a square plan laid out under a central dome was glorified in the rebuilding of the Hagia Sophia, which had been burned to the ground during the Nika revolt. Finally, the other side of the emperor and empress is revealed in an unfavorable account by the historian Procopius in *The Secret History*.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit may be taught as part of either the Middle Ages or the later Roman Empire. Not all scholars are in agreement as to when Byzantine history began. Some place its origins at the time of Constantine the Great, 324–337 C.E., while others suggest the reign of Justinian (527–565 C.E.). This unit looks at the sixth century of an empire that would finally fall to the Turks in 1453 C.E.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

The Byzantine Empire in the Age of Justinian provides teaching materials that address the *National Standards for History*, Basic Edition (National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA, 1996), World History Era 4, “Expanding Zones of Exchange and Encounter, 300–1000 C.E.” Lessons specifically address **Standard 1A** on the decline of the Roman Empire and the consolidation of the Byzantine state, and **Standard 1B** on the expansion of Christianity.

This unit also highlights a number of the “Standards in Historical Thinking” including:

Standard 1: Chronological Thinking: Reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration.

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension: Appreciate historical perspectives.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation: Analyze cause-and-effect relationships bearing in mind the importance of the individual in history.

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities: Formulate historical questions from encounters with historical documents, eye-witness accounts, letters, diaries, artifacts, photos, historical sites, art, architecture, and other records from the past.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

- ✦ To examine the extent of the Roman Empire in the 6th century.
- ✦ To explain the need for a written code of law.
- ✦ To identify the Byzantine style of architecture.
- ✦ To examine the roles of the Emperor Justinian as a reformer.
- ✦ To study primary source documents in order to think like historians.
- ✦ To examine points of view in documents.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. Geography of the Empire
2. The Nika Revolt
3. The Vandal War in Africa
4. Justinian as a Law Reformer
5. Byzantine Architecture
6. Justinian and Theodora

DRAMATIC MOMENT

In January 532 an event occurred in Constantinople that nearly brought Justinian down from his throne. Two opposing political factions, the Blues and Greens, went to the Hippodrome to make common cause against the government. Their traditional rivalry forgotten, both factions surged from the Hippodrome chanting Nika! (Win!). They forced their way into the palace of the City Prefect, killed the police and set free all the prisoners. They set fire to public buildings, including churches. They demanded the dismissal of the City Prefect and other officials.

Justinian appeared the next morning in the imperial box carrying the gospel and declared that he was to blame for what happened. Meanwhile behind closed doors Justinian and his associates were in earnest debate. A fast galley was waiting at the private harbor of the palace and the emperor was resolved to flee to Herakiaia in Thrace.

After Belisarius' mission to capture one of the crowd's leaders failed, Justinian ordered an immediate flight to the harbor. Then Theodora, who had sat silent as men argued this way and that, rose to her feet:

*Whether or not a woman should give an example of courage to men, is neither here nor there. At a moment of desperate danger one must do what one can. I think that flight, even if it brings us to safety, is not in our interest. Every man born to see the light of day must die. But that one who has been emperor should become an exile I cannot bear. May I never be without the purple I wear, nor live to see the day when men do not call me "Your Majesty". If you wish safety, my Lord, that is an easy matter. We are rich, and there is the sea, and yonder our ships. But consider whether if you reach safety you may not desire to exchange that safety for death. As for me, I like the old saying, that the purple is the noblest shroud. (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, vol. 1, Sec. 24, 33-37. In Robert Browning, *Justinian and Theodora*.)*

She sat down. The men looked at one another nervously. Belisarius began discussing military plans. He and his other generals and their mercenaries went to the Hippodrome. They cut down every civilian within reach. The benches dripped with blood and the Hippodrome resounded with the echoes of the screams of the wounded and dying. When it was over thirty thousand men had been killed. But Justinian's position was confirmed. Now he knew whom he could trust—Belisarius, Mundus, Narses, and above all Theodora.