

Justinian I – Biography

Justinian was born in Tauresium in the Roman province of Dardania, AD 483. To a Latin speaking peasant family. He was adopted by his uncle Justin. Justin, who was in the imperial guard (the Excubitors) before he became emperor, adopted Justinian, brought him to Constantinople, and ensured the boy's education. As a result, Justinian was well educated in law, religion and Roman history. Justinian served for some time with the Excubitors but the details of his early career are unknown. Chronicler John Malalas, who lived during the reign of Justinian, tells of his appearance that he was short, fair skinned, curly haired, round faced and handsome.

Who was Justinian raised by?

What did Justinian study in school?

How would these subjects help him to be a good leader?

When Emperor Anastasius died in 518, Justin (Justinian's uncle) was proclaimed the new Emperor, with significant help from Justinian. During Justin's reign (518–527), Justinian was the Emperor's close advisor. Justinian showed much ambition, and it has been thought that he was functioning as a leader long before Justin made him associate Emperor on 1 April 527, although there is no conclusive evidence for this. As Justin went crazy near the end of his reign, Justinian became the de facto ruler. Justinian was appointed consul in 521, and later commander of the army of the east. Upon Justin I's death on 1 August 527, Justinian became the only leader.

Who was emperor before Justinian?

Why did Justinian become emperor?

As a ruler, Justinian showed great energy. He was known as "the Emperor who never sleeps" on account of his work habits. Nevertheless, he seems to have been amenable and easy to approach. Justinian's family came from a lowly and provincial background, and therefore he had no power base in the traditional aristocracy of Constantinople. Instead, he surrounded himself with men and women of extraordinary talent, whom he selected not on the basis of aristocratic origin, but on the basis of merit.

How do you think Justinian's background, being from a lower class, help him to be a great leader?

Around 525 he married in Constantinople Theodora, who was by profession a courtesan about 20 years younger than him. Justinian would have, in earlier times, been unable to marry her because of her class, but his uncle Emperor Justin I had passed a law allowing intermarriage between social classes. Theodora would become very influential in the politics of the Empire, and later emperors would follow Justinian's precedent in marrying

outside the aristocratic class. The marriage caused a scandal, but Theodora would prove to be very intelligent, "street smart", a good judge of character and Justinian's greatest supporter.

Why was Justinian and Theodora's marriage a scandal?

How did Theodora help Justinian?

Justinian's rule was not universally popular; early in his reign he almost lost his throne during the Nika riots, and a conspiracy against the Emperor's life by dissatisfied businessmen was discovered as late as 562.

Justinian was struck by the plague in the early 540s but recovered. Theodora died in 548, perhaps of cancer, at a relatively young age; Justinian outlived her by almost twenty years. Justinian, who had always had a keen interest in religious matters and actively participated in debates on Christian doctrine, became even more devoted to religion during the later years of his life. When he died, on the night of November 13–14 of the year 565, he left no children. He was succeeded by Justin II, who was the son of his sister Vigilantia, and married to Sophia, the niece of Empress Theodora. Justinian's body was entombed in a specially built mausoleum in the Church of the Holy Apostles.

Do you think that Justinian was a good or bad leader? Make sure to explain why.