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JUSTINIAN AS A BUILDER

GLANVILLE DOWNEY

JUSTINIAN's work as a builder is, happily, known to us in greater detail than the building activity of any other ancient ruler. His greatest achievement, St. Sophia, still stands; his second greatest church, the Holy Apostles, is well known from literary sources; and many other important monuments are preserved. In the *De aedificiis* of Procopius we possess the most detailed single record to come down to us of any ancient monarch's buildings; and from other literary and epigraphic sources we are able to gather much valuable information. A complete survey and study of all this material would exceed the limits appropriate to the present occasion. It will be useful, however, to discuss certain points of interest which either seem to have escaped the attention of scholars in general, or have remained somewhat inaccessible.

It is significant, for our estimate of Justinian's interest in buildings, that there is a very distinct possibility that the plans for St. Sophia were studied—possibly even prepared and waiting—for some time before the building of the church was begun. This important consideration, which has been pointed out by E. H. Swift,¹ does not seem to have been generally taken into account by scholars, though the evidence which suggests it is plain. The site on which St. Sophia was constructed was cleared by the fire which occurred on January 13, 532, during the Nika Insurrection. The disorders came to an end on January 18, and the construction of the new church was begun on February 23.² It is conceivable, of course, that the design for the church, or alternatively, tentative plans sufficient merely to allow work to be begun on the foundations, can have been prepared during the brief interval between the clearing of the site and the beginning of the work. However, the shortness of the time which elapsed between the clearing of the site and the commencement of the construction might well be taken to show that the project of building such a church was in Justinian's mind for some time before 532, and that the design had been laid out, and plans drawn, before that year.³ The accidental clearing of the site gave the opportunity, and the confiscation of the property of the senators which followed the riot (both as a punitive measure and as a precaution against another insurrection) provided the financial means.⁴ Without these two totally unexpected aids, the construction of the church might have had to be postponed for some time; but it is significant that Justinian was ready to begin work almost instantly when the opportunity came.

The source of the financial means with which St. Sophia was built illustrates a larger question, which is of fundamental importance for our estimate of Justinian as a builder. It is plain that the sums spent on all of his buildings during his long reign must have been substantial (on this point, more below). If any large portion of this money was taken from revenue that ought to have been used for other purposes, we should have to conclude that the emperor's building program was an unwise drain on the resources of the state. That some of Justinian's enemies felt this to be the case is indicated by remarks made by Procopius in the *Anecdota*, some of which suggest also that the emperor persecuted individuals, and confiscated their property, in order to obtain money for his

1. E. H. Swift, *Hagia Sophia*, New York, 1940, p. 12.

2. On the insurrection, see E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, II, Paris, 1949, pp. 449-458; cf. also J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 2nd ed., London, 1923, II, pp. 39-49.

3. Our view of this problem is affected by the question of the number and nature of the drawings and models necessary for the construction of such a building. In particular, it would be interesting to know whether detailed drawings of all parts of such a building would have to be prepared. The evidence at present available unfortunately does not permit any definitive answers. For some of the literary evidence for the use of draw-

ings and models, see my paper, "Byzantine Architects, Their Training and Methods," *Byzantion*, XVIII, 1946-48, pp. 114-117. In speaking of the construction of St. Sophia, Procopius writes (*De aed.*, I, 1, 24) that Anthemius, while the work was going on, "prepared in advance *indalmata* [which could mean either plans or models] of the future construction."

4. On the confiscations and their importance in making the construction of the church possible, see Stein, *op.cit.*, II, p. 456, and Bury, *op.cit.*, II, p. 53 n. 1. The confiscations are described by Procopius, *Anecdota*, XII, 12.

buildings.⁵ In the case of St. Sophia, however, the emperor, as we have seen, made use of a windfall, and it is illuminating to find indications that this was also true at least in the case of his second great church, the Holy Apostles. The construction of this church was begun in 536, before the completion of St. Sophia, which was dedicated on December 27, 537.⁶ If the building of the Holy Apostles were paid for out of current revenue, it would seem extravagant to undertake a second project of this magnitude before the first was completed. However, there is reason to believe that the Holy Apostles, like St. Sophia, was partly or wholly financed by a windfall. Late in 534 Belisarius had returned from his successful African campaign bringing with him a fabulous treasure, and was rewarded with a triumph.⁷ This notable addition to the wealth of the state may well have provided the means for the construction of the great new church; and the interval of either one year, or possibly nearly two, which would have elapsed between Belisarius' return to Constantinople and the commencement of the building operations might well represent the time needed for the planning of the building. In at least one instance, treasure captured from an enemy was used to pay for new fortifications. Justinian's general, Solomon, employed the money he took from Iaudas in Africa in 536 to fortify the cities of Libya.⁸

What sums Justinian actually spent on buildings like St. Sophia and the Church of the Holy Apostles we do not know. However, the magnificence of St. Sophia gave rise in antiquity to exaggerated reports of its cost which are sometimes reflected in the writings of modern scholars. The late and unreliable *Narratio de S. Sophia* states that the cost of the church, exclusive of the holy vessels and offerings, was 320,000 pounds of gold (23,040,000 solidi), which Bury in 1923 reckoned had a purchasing power of £14,500,000.⁹ This figure, however, has not won acceptance, since, by a curious "coincidence," it corresponds exactly with the surplus which the Emperor Anastasius (491-518), the predecessor of Justinus I and Justinian, left in the treasury at his death.¹⁰ Apparently the figure of 320,000 pounds of gold was attached to the story of the building of St. Sophia in an effort to suggest that Justinian spent on this church all of the money found in the treasury when his uncle Justinus ascended the throne. Bury (writing in terms of 1923) remarks, "I should be surprised if the total expenses amounted to a million sterling."¹¹ More recently, E. Stein concluded that the cost of St. Sophia probably came to something like 1,440,000 or 1,800,000 solidi,¹² which according to the accepted reckoning of the purchasing power of the solidus as the equivalent of £2 in terms of 1900, would put the cost of St. Sophia at about £2,880,000 or £3,600,000.¹³ Two comparisons may be noted. First, the cost of the construction and decoration of St. Vitale at Ravenna was 26,000 solidi,¹⁴ which, reckoning the solidus as worth £2 in terms of 1900, would put the cost of St. Vitale at £72,000 (in terms of 1900).¹⁵ Second, the annual money budget of the state (as distinguished from expenditures and revenue paid in kind) during the reign of Anastasius had been about 7,000,000 solidi.¹⁶

There may be a question whether Justinian's building activity was merely an exuberant and

5. Cf. *Anecdota*, VIII, 7-8; XI, 3; XIX, 6; XXVI, 23-24.

6. *Narratio de S. Sophia*, 32, in *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum*, ed. Th. Preger, Leipzig, 1901-07, p. 287, 7-8; Zonaras, XIV, 7, 6-7, ed. Th. Büttner-Wobst, Bonn, 1897, III, pp. 159, 14-160, 2.

7. Procopius, *Wars*, IV, 9; cf. Bury, *op.cit.*, II, p. 139, and Stein, *op.cit.*, II, p. 320.

8. Procopius, *Wars*, IV, 20, 29; cf. Stein, *op.cit.*, II, p. 328.

9. *Narratio*, 25, p. 102, 6, ed. Preger (cited above, n. 6); see Bury, *op.cit.*, II, pp. 36, 53 n. 1.

10. Procopius, *Anecdota*, XIX, 7.

11. *Op.cit.*, II, p. 53 n. 1.

12. *Op.cit.*, II, pp. 459-460.

13. On the purchasing power of the solidus, see Bury, *op.cit.*, I, p. 50 n. 4. The conversion of Stein's estimate to terms of sterling in 1900 has been made by the present writer since Stein refrains from indicating his belief as to the purchasing power

of the solidus in terms of modern currency.

14. The figure, given by Agnellus, *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*, 59, p. 319, 1, ed. O. Holder-Egger in *MGH, Scriptores rerum Langobadicarum et Italicarum*, Hanover, 1878, may be considered reliable.

15. Stein, *op.cit.*, II, pp. 459-460; Bury, *op.cit.*, I, p. 50, with n. 4. E. H. Swift, *loc.cit.* (above, n. 1) takes the figure 320,000, as given for the cost of St. Sophia, to mean pounds sterling instead of Byzantine gold pounds. Thinking Gibbon's estimate of £1,000,000 (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, London, 1901, IV, p. 248) too low, Swift suggests that the cost of the church was £13,000,000, which he reckons as worth \$75,000,000 in the "depreciated currency" of 1940. Swift was evidently not acquainted with Bury's calculations, and Stein's figures were of course not yet available to him.

16. Stein, *op.cit.*, II, p. 195.

uncontrolled expression of the keen interest in building which the emperor and Theodora undoubtedly possessed, or whether there may have lain behind the work some overall plan or guiding principle. In an empire of the magnitude of Justinian's it would (with the evidence now available) be difficult to look for traces of what today would be called a master plan, and the number of buildings enumerated by Procopius in the *De aedificiis* seems at first sight to be so overwhelming that one might be inclined to suppose that buildings—predominantly churches and fortifications—were merely erected at random or (at best) as needed. It will be of some interest to inquire into the significance, in this respect, of the emperor's buildings in his capital.

Procopius' account of Justinian's buildings at Constantinople, which occupies the first book of the *De aedificiis*, suggests indeed that these structures were not simply erected at random but that they represent a considered effort to construct in the capital a balanced and representative group of churches and public buildings. Whether one can speak here of a carefully planned program, completely thought out before any of the work was begun, or whether merely some attention was paid to the general character of buildings erected from time to time, is a question which it may not be possible to answer. The really significant point is that it is plain that some thought was given to the matter.

According to Procopius' account, Justinian's buildings at Constantinople can be listed as follows (references are to the *De aed.*):¹⁷

A. CHURCHES

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| <p>(1) Principal churches: St. Sophia (I, I, 20-78),
St. Eirene (I, 2, 13).</p> <p>(2) Churches of the Virgin (I, 3, 1-11).</p> <p>(3) Church of the Archangel Michael (I, 3,
14-18).</p> <p>(4) Churches of the Apostles and of St. Sergius
and St. Bacchus (I, 4, 1-24).</p> <p>(5) Churches of martyrs (I, 4, 25-30). These
are primarily dedications to martyrs who were
especially revered in, or had close associations
with, Byzantium: St. Acacius,¹⁸ St. Plato,¹⁹</p> | <p>St. Mocius,²⁰ St. Thyrsus,²¹ St. Theodore, St.
Thecla, St. Theodota,²² St. Agathonicus.²³</p> <p>(6) Churches on the shores about the city and
in the suburbs (I, 5, 1 to I, 9, 16). These are
of various dedications: the Virgin, St. Priscus
and St. Nicholas, St. Cosmas and St. Damian,
St. Anthimus, St. Eirene, the Archangel Mi-
chael, St. John the Baptist, St. Panteleëmon,
St. Tryphon, St. Menas and St. Menaëus,
St. Ia.</p> |
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B. OTHER BUILDINGS

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| <p>(1) Statue of Justinian in the Augustaeum (I,
2, 1-12).²⁴</p> <p>(2) Hospice for indigent sick people (I, 2, 14
16).</p> | <p>(3) Two more hospices (I, 2, 17).</p> <p>(4) Palace of Hormisdas, rebuilt by Justinian
for his own use during the reign of Justinus
(I, 4, 1-3 and I, 10, 4).²⁵</p> |
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17. The arrangement of the material in the first book of the *De aedificiis* will be studied in greater detail under the aspect of literary technique in an article, "Notes on Procopius, *De aedificiis*, Book I," which will soon be published in another place. In that paper an attempt is made to show that Book I does not merely represent the opening and principal part of the whole treatise on Justinian's buildings, but was written as a literary show-piece or panegyric to be presented orally before the emperor and the court.

18. A centurion from Cappadocia, martyred at Byzantium in 303: *Bibliotheca hagiographica graeca*, 2nd ed., Brussels, 1909 (cited below as *BHG*), p. 3. On the martyrs who were especially venerated at Constantinople, see H. Delehay, *Les origines du culte des martyrs*, 2nd ed., Brussels, 1933, pp. 232-241.

19. Martyred at Ancyra under Diocletian: *BHG*, pp. 216-217.

20. With Acacius, one of the first martyrs of Byzantium, under Diocletian: *BHG*, p. 180.

21. A martyr of Nicomedia: *BHG*, p. 260.

22. Either the Theodota who was martyred with St. Socrates at Nicaea ca. 230 or the martyr of the same name who suffered under Diocletian, likewise at Nicaea: *BHG*, p. 252.

23. Martyred in Thrace under Diocletian: *BHG*, p. 7.

24. See G. Downey, "Justinian as Achilles," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, LXXI, 1940, pp. 68-77, and M. P. Charlesworth, "Pietas and Victoria: The Emperor and the Citizen," *Journal of Roman Studies*, XXXIII, 1943, pp. 1-10.

25. On the text of this passage, see G. Downey, "Procopius, *De aedificiis*, I, 4, 3," *Classical Philology*, XLIII, 1948, pp. 44-45, with further remarks by A. Frolov in *Byzantinoslavica*, X, 1948, pp. 131-132.

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| (5) Reformatory for fallen women (I, 9, 1-10). | Arcadianae (I, 11, 1-9). |
| (6) Refuge for indigent sick people (I, 9, 12-14). | (14) Storage cistern at the Imperial Portico (I, 11, 10-15). |
| (7) Propylaea of the Palace (I, 10, 3). | (15) Palaces at Heraeum and Jucundianae (I, 11, 16-17). |
| (8) The Bronze Gate (<i>Chalkê</i>) (<i>ibid.</i>). | (16) Sheltered harbor at the Hebdomon (I, 11, 18-20). |
| (9) Baths of Zeuxippus (<i>ibid.</i>). | (17) Churches and public buildings (stoas, markets, baths) at the Hebdomon (I, 11, 21). ²⁶ |
| (10) "The great colonnaded stoas" (near the baths) (<i>ibid.</i>). | (18) Harbor on the opposite mainland (I, 11, 22). |
| (11) Senate-house on the Augustaeum (I, 10, 5-9). | (19) Public guest-house (I, 11, 23-27). |
| (12) Enlargement of the Great Palace (I, 10, 10-20). | |
| (13) Park or garden (<i>aulê</i>) containing statue of Theodora on the shore near the baths of | |

From this enumeration it is plain that at least in the case of Constantinople and its suburbs the buildings erected under Justinian represented a balanced group of structures of all types. In the churches, all members of the celestial hierarchy are represented. As we should expect of sovereigns as pious as Justinian and Theodora, the number of churches is impressive; but in those times the observance of religious duties played a greater part in the daily lives of the people as a whole than in some countries today, and if allowance is made for this difference, the number of Justinian's churches may not seem disproportionate.

A further factor which must be kept in mind in our estimate of Justinian as a builder is that Procopius' account of the emperor's buildings, rich in information as it is, does not give us a complete picture of Justinian's accomplishments. Procopius does not record some buildings which are known to us from archaeological or literary evidence. Some of these may have escaped his notice or may not have been listed in the sources he used, while others may have been built after the *De aedificiis* was completed, or after Procopius had ceased to work on the treatise.²⁷ In important instances we learn from other sources details which show that some building activities of Justinian were more valuable, from the utilitarian point of view, than Procopius' account suggests. In the *De aedificiis* (v, 6, 25) Procopius records simply that Justinian erected a hospital at Jerusalem. From the *Vita Sabae* of Cyril of Scythopolis, however, we learn that this was a hospital of two hundred beds, intended for the accommodation of pilgrims to the holy city who became ill, and that it was endowed with an annual revenue of 3,700 solidi, the equivalent in purchasing power of £7,400 in 1900.²⁸ This surely was a public health measure of the first importance, the significance of which was passed over by Procopius in favor of an elaborate description of the new Church of the Virgin which Justinian built in Jerusalem (*De aed.*, v, 6, 1-25). Again, Malalas informs us (p. 445, 8-9 Bonn ed.) that Justinian rebuilt the aqueduct of Alexandria, which Procopius does not mention.

We may now return to the question of how far the emperor's buildings (including those erected in the reign of Justinus I, when Justinian played an important part in shaping the policy of the state) merely represented the indulgence of a passion for building. Scholars, on reading only Procopius' accounts of the emperor's work in the *Anecdota* and the *De aedificiis*, might naturally be

26. On the work of Justinian at the Hebdomon, see R. Demangel, *Contribution à la topographie de l'Hebdomon*, Paris, 1945.

27. Omissions in Procopius' account are noted, for example, by J. Sauvaget, *Alep*, Paris, 1941, p. 65 n. 182, and by R. Mouterde and A. Poidebard, *Le limes de Chalcis*, Paris, 1945, p. 6. On the writing of the *De aedificiis*, and the dates when Procopius was at work on it, see G. Downey, "The Composition of Procopius, *De aedificiis*," *Transactions of the American*

Philological Association, LXXVIII, 1947, pp. 171-183. See also J. Sauvaget in *Byzantion*, XIV, 1939, p. 122.

28. Cyril, *Vita Sabae*, 73, p. 177, ed. E. Schwartz in *Texte und Untersuchungen*, XLIX, 2 (1939). Cyril writes that the hospital, as planned by Justinian, originally contained one hundred beds and had an annual revenue of 1,850 solidi, but that the emperor subsequently doubled the size and the income of the establishment.

inclined to feel that while a substantial portion of Justinian's undertakings were undoubtedly of a utilitarian character, the very number of his enterprises would suggest that the emperor at least on some occasions built simply in order to gratify his own and Theodora's desires. There is, however, one factor to be kept in mind here. Anastasius, the predecessor of Justinus I and Justinian, had found the state menaced by bankruptcy. By means of a brilliant series of reforms Anastasius contrived to place the state finances on a sound footing, so that at his death (as has already been remarked) the treasury contained 23,040,000 solidi, a sum more than three times as great as the government's annual money budget (as distinguished from revenue and expenditure paid in kind), which normally was about 7,000,000 solidi.²⁹ The building up of a surplus of this size must have been achieved not only by administrative and financial reform but by the practice of fairly strict economy; Justinus I writes of the *parca subtilitas*, the "ingenious parsimony," of his predecessor.³⁰ It seems not unlikely that at least some of this *parca subtilitas* may have taken the form of a systematic prudence—perhaps more than prudence—in the upkeep, repair and replacement of public buildings. Thus it may well have been that when Justinus and Justinian took over the affairs of the state they found that a more than normal amount of work needed to be done in this department.³¹ In this case we should have to conclude that Justinian is not wholly deserving of censure for extravagance as a builder.

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29. On the financial administration of Anastasius, see Stein, *op.cit.*, II, pp. 192-215.

30. *Cod. Just.*, II, 7, 25, pr.

31. The evidence for the public building activities of the reign of Justinus I (for some of which Justinian was responsible) is collected by A. A. Vasiliev, *Justin the First*, Cambridge, 1950, pp. 376-382.



1. London, British Museum. Obverse of gold medallion of Justinian I (from an electrotype of the original)



2. Rome, Vatican Library. Detail of the Joshua Roll, *Joshua Staying the Sun and Moon* (after Vatican facsimile, Sheet XIII)



3 and 4. New York, Metropolitan Museum. Silver plates found in Cyprus: (left) *David Anointed by Samuel*; (right) *Saul Arming David with His Armor*