

PROCOPIUS

The Secret History

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with an Introduction and Notes by PETER SARRIS

PENGUIN BOOKS

PROEMIUM

[1] In recording everything that the Roman people has experienced in successive wars up to the time of writing, I have followed this plan – of arranging all the events described as far as possible in accordance with the actual times and places. But from now on I shall no longer keep to that method: from here on in I shall set down every single thing that has happened in every part of the Roman Empire.¹ The reason for this is that it was out of the question to tell the story in the way that it should have been recorded as long as those responsible for what happened were still alive. For it was impossible either to avoid detection by swarms of spies or if caught to escape death in its most agonizing form. Indeed, even in the company of my nearest relations I felt far from safe. Moreover, in the case of many of the events which in my previous writings I did venture to relate, I dared not reveal the causes for what happened. So in this part of my work I feel it is my duty to reveal both the events hitherto passed over in silence and the causes for the events already described.

But as I embark on a new undertaking of a difficult and extraordinarily baffling character, concerned as it is with Justinian and Theodora and the lives they lived, my teeth chatter and I find myself recoiling as far as possible from the task; for I envisage the probability that what I am now about to write will appear incredible and unconvincing to future generations. And again, when in the long course of time the story seems to

1. This opening passage would appear to be the work of a later editorial hand and modelled on the *proemium* to Book 8 of Procopius' *History of the Wars*.

belong to a rather distant past, I am afraid that I shall be regarded as a mere teller of legends or listed among the tragic poets. One thing, however, gives me confidence to shoulder my heavy task without flinching: my account has no lack of witnesses to vouch for its truth. For my own contemporaries are witnesses fully acquainted with the incidents described and will pass on to future ages an incontrovertible conviction that these things have been faithfully recorded.

And yet there was something else which, when I was all agog to get to work on this account, again and again held me back for weeks on end. For I inclined to the view that the happiness of those of future generations would be endangered by my revelations, since it will be most advantageous that the deeds of blackest dye shall if possible be unknown to future times, rather than that they should come to the ears of tyrants as an example to be imitated. For most rulers invariably, through sheer ignorance, slip readily into imitation of their predecessors' vices, and it is to the misdeeds of earlier rulers that they invariably find it easier and less troublesome to turn. But later on I was encouraged to write the narrative of these events by this reflection – it will surely be evident to those tyrants of the future that the penalty for their misdeeds is almost certain to overtake them, just as it fell upon the persons described here. Then again, their own conduct and character will in turn be recorded for all time, and that will perhaps make them less ready to transgress. For how could the licentious life of Semiramis or the dementia of Sardanapaulus and Nero have been known to anyone in later days if contemporary historians had not left these things on record? Apart from this, those who in the future, if it so happens, are similarly ill used at the hands of tyrants will not find this record altogether useless; for it is always comforting for those in distress to know that they are not the only ones on whom these blows have fallen. For these reasons, then, I shall proceed to recount all the wicked deeds committed by Belisarius first, and then I shall reveal all the wicked deeds committed by Justinian and Theodora.

PART II

JUSTINIAN AND THEODORA

[6] What sort of people Justinian and Theodora were and how it came about that they destroyed the fortunes of the Roman Empire I shall now proceed to tell. When Leo occupied the imperial throne of Byzantium,²⁹ three peasant lads of Illyrian origin – Zimarchus, Dityvistus and Justin (who came from Vederiana) – men who at home had to contend ceaselessly with conditions of grinding poverty and all that went with it, set out to join the army in an effort to better their lot. They covered the whole distance to Byzantium on foot, carrying on their shoulders cloaks in which on their arrival they had nothing but a few dry biscuits which they had put there before they had left home. Their names were entered on the muster roll, and the Emperor picked them out to serve in the Palace guard as they were men of exceptional physique.

Some time later, when Anastasius had succeeded to the imperial power,³⁰ he was involved in a war with the Isaurians, who had taken up arms against him. He sent an army of considerable size to deal with them, the commander being John the Hunchback. This John had locked Justin up in prison because of some misdemeanour, intending to dispatch him on the following day. This he would have done but for a dream-vision which came to him in time to prevent it. The general said that in a dream he was confronted by a being of colossal size, too powerful in every way to be taken for a man. This being ordered him to release the man whom he had that day imprisoned: he

29. Leo I (457-74).

30. Anastasius (491-518).

himself on waking from sleep dismissed the vision from his mind. But when the next night came, he dreamt that he again heard the same words as before but remained just as unwilling to carry out the order. Then for the third time the vision stood over him, threatening total ruin unless he did as he was told and adding that one day he would be in a great rage, and then he would need this man and his family.

This occurrence enabled Justin to survive his immediate danger, and as time went on he acquired great power. The Emperor Anastasius gave him command of the Palace guards, and when he himself passed away, Justin on the strength of this command succeeded to the throne, though he was by now a doddering old man, totally illiterate – in popular parlance, he didn't know his ABC – an unheard of thing amongst the Romans. It was the invariable custom that the Emperor should append his own signature to all documents embodying decrees defined by him. Justin, however, was incapable of either drafting his own decrees or taking an intelligent interest in the measures contemplated: the official whose luck it was to be his chief adviser – a man called Proclus, who held the rank of Quaestor, as it is called – used to decide all measures as he himself thought fit. But to secure authority for these in the Emperor's own handwriting, the men responsible for this business proceeded as follows. On a short strip of polished wood they cut a stencil in the shape of four letters spelling the Latin for *I HAVE READ*.³¹ Then they used to dip a pen in the special ink reserved for emperors and place it in the hands of the Emperor Justin. Next they took the strip of wood I have described and laid it on the document, grasped the Emperor's hand and, while he held the pen, guided it along the pattern of the four letters, taking it round all the bends cut in the wooden stencil. Then away they went, carrying the Emperor's writing, such as it was.

That was the kind of Emperor the Romans had in Justin. He was married to a woman called Lupicina, a slave and barbarian who had previously been purchased by another man and had

31. *LEGI*.

become his concubine. But in the evening of her days she became joint ruler with Justin of the Roman Empire. Justin was not capable of doing any harm to his subjects or any good either. He was uncouth in the extreme, utterly inarticulate and incredibly boorish. His nephew Justinian, though still quite young, used to manage all the affairs of state, and he brought on the Romans disasters which surely surpassed both in gravity and in number all that had ever been heard of at any period of history. For without the slightest hesitation he used to embark on the inexcusable murdering of his fellow-men and the plundering of other people's property, and it did not matter to him how many thousands lost their lives, although they had given him no provocation whatever. The maintenance of established institutions meant nothing to him: endless innovations were his constant preoccupation. In a word, he was a great destroyer of well-established institutions.

Now, the plague, which was described by me in my earlier writings, fell upon the whole world, yet just as many people escaped as had the misfortune to succumb – either because they escaped the infection altogether, or because they got over it if they happened to be infected.³² But this man not a single person in the whole Roman Empire could escape: like any other visitation from heaven falling on the entire human race, he left no one completely untouched. Some he killed without any justification; others he reduced to penury, making them even more wretched than those who had died. In fact, they begged him to put an end to their misery, by any death however painful. Some he deprived of their possessions and of life as well. But it gave him no satisfaction merely to ruin the Roman Empire: he insisted on making himself the master of Libya and Italy for the sole purpose of destroying their inhabitants along with those already subject to him. He had not been ten days in office before he executed Amantius, controller of the Palace eunuchs, with several others, for no reason at all, charging him with nothing more than an injudicious joke about John, the

32. Originating in Central Africa, the plague first reached the Empire via Egypt in 541 before spreading throughout the Mediterranean.

archpriest of the city. This outrage made him more feared than any man alive. His next step was to send for the pretender Vitalian, whose safety he had previously guaranteed by taking part with him in the Christian sacraments. But a little later Justinian took offence through groundless suspicion and put him to death in the Palace along with his closest friends without the slightest justification, making no attempt to honour his pledges, the most solemn imaginable.

[7] The people have long been divided into two factions, as I explained in my earlier account.³³ Justinian attached himself to one of them, the Blues, to whom he had already given enthusiastic support, and so contrived to produce universal chaos. By doing so he brought the Roman state to its knees. However, not all the Blues were prepared to follow the lead of Justinian, only the most militant of the factionalists. Yet even these, as things went from bad to worse, appeared to be the most self-disciplined of men, for the licence given them went far beyond the misdemeanours which they actually committed. Needless to say the Green factionalists did not stay quiet either: they too pursued an uninterrupted career of crime, as far as they were permitted, although at every moment one or other was paying the penalty. As a result they were constantly provoked to commit crimes far more audacious still; for when people are unfairly treated, they naturally turn to desperate courses. So now that he was fanning the flames and openly spurring on the Blues, the entire Roman Empire was shaken to the foundations as if an earthquake or deluge had struck it, or as if every city had fallen to the enemy. For everywhere there was utter chaos, and nothing was the same ever again: in the confusion that followed, the laws and the orderly structure of the state were turned upside down.

To begin with, the factionalists changed the style of their hair to a quite novel fashion, having it cut very differently from the other Romans. They did not touch the moustache or beard at all but were always anxious to let them grow as long as possible, like the Persians. But the hair on the front of the head they cut

33. *Wars* I.24.2.

right back to the temples, allowing the growth behind to hang down to its full length in a disorderly mass, like the Massagetae do. This is why they sometimes called this the Hunnish look.³⁴ Then, as regards dress, they all thought it necessary to be luxuriously turned out, donning attire too ostentatious for their particular station. For they were in a position to obtain such garments at other people's expense. The part of the tunic covering their arms was drawn in very tight at the wrists, while from there to the shoulders it spread out to an enormous width. Whenever they waved their arms as they shouted in the theatre or the hippodrome and encouraged their favourites in the usual way, up in the air went this part of their tunics, giving silly people the notion that their bodies were so splendidly sturdy that they had to be covered with garments of this size: they did not realize that the transparency and emptiness of their attire served rather to show up their miserable physiques. Their capes and breeches too, and in most cases their shoes, were classed as Hunnish in name and fashion.

At first the great majority carried weapons at night quite openly, while in the daytime they concealed short two-edged swords along their thighs under their cloaks. They used to collect in gangs at nightfall and rob members of the upper class in the open forum or in narrow alleys, despoiling any they met of cloaks, belts, gold brooches and anything else they had with them. Some they thought it better to murder as well as rob, since dead men told no tales. These outrages caused universal indignation, especially among those Blues who were not militant factionalists, since they suffered as badly as the rest. Consequently from then on most people wore belts and brooches of bronze, and cloaks of much poorer quality than their station warranted, for fear that their love of the beautiful would cost them their lives, and even before sunset they hurried back home

34. The factionalists wore what in modern slang would be called 'mulletts'. The long hair of the tribes of the Eurasian steppes was something of a preoccupation amongst Roman authors of a conservative mindset: Procopius' contemporary, the poet Corippus, describes an embassy of Avars that arrived at the court of Justin II as 'shabby with their snake-like hair'.

and got under cover. As this shocking state of affairs continued and no notice was taken of the offenders by the authorities in charge of the city, the audacity of these men increased by leaps and bounds. For when nothing is done to discourage wrongdoing, there is of course no limit to its growth: even when punishment does follow offences, it does not often put an end to them altogether: it is natural for most people to turn easily to wrongdoing.

This is how things went with the Blues. Of their opponents some came over to their faction through a desire to join in their criminal activities without paying any penalty, others took flight and slipped away to other lands; many who were caught in the city were put out of the way by their opponents or executed by the authorities. Many other young men poured into this organization: they had never before shown any interest in such things, but ambition for power and unrestrained licence attracted them to it. For there is not one revolting crime known to men which was not at that time committed and left unpunished. They began by destroying the partisans of the opposite faction, then went on to murder those who had given them no provocation whatever. Many also won them over with bribes, then implicated their own enemies; these the factionalists got rid of at once, labelling them Greens though they knew nothing at all about them. All this went on no longer in darkness or out of sight but at any moment of the day and in every part of the city, and the most eminent citizens as often as not were eyewitnesses to what was happening. There was no need to keep the crimes concealed, since the criminals were not troubled by any fear of punishment; in fact they were actually moved by a spirit of rivalry, so that they organized displays of brawn and toughness to show that with a single blow they could kill anyone they met unarmed, and no one now could expect to live much longer amid the dangers that daily threatened him. Constant fear made everyone expect that death was just round the corner: no place seemed safe, no time could guarantee security, since even in the most revered sanctuaries and at public festivals people were being senselessly murdered, and

confidence in kith and kin was a thing of the past. For many perished through the machinations of their nearest relatives.

No inquiry, however, was held into the crimes committed: the blow invariably fell without warning, and the fallen had no one to avenge them. No law or contract retained any force on the secure basis of the established order, but everything turned to growing violence and confusion, and the government was indistinguishable from a tyranny – not, however, a stable tyranny but one that changed every day and was forever starting afresh. The decisions of the magistrates suggested the paralysis of fear – their minds were dominated by dread of a single man – and those who sat in judgement, when settling questions in dispute, based their verdicts not on their notions of what was just and lawful but on the relations, hostile or friendly, which each of the disputants had with the partisans. For any judge who disregarded their injunctions would pay the price with his life.

And many creditors were under irresistible pressure to return promissory notes to their debtors without recovering any of the debt, and many people to their chagrin had to free their household slaves, and it is said that a number of women were forced by their own slaves to yield to many acts most repugnant to them. And by now the sons of men in high positions, after associating with these young criminals, compelled their fathers to do a number of things they were most reluctant to do, particularly to hand over their money to them. Many unwilling boys, with the full knowledge of their fathers, were forced to have unholy intercourse with faction members, and women who were happily married suffered the same treatment. It is said that one woman, very elegantly attired, was travelling by boat with her husband to one of the suburbs on the mainland opposite, and during this crossing the partisans intercepted them, tore the lady from her husband's arms and carried her into their own boat. Before going on board with the young men, she whispered encouragement to her husband and told him to have no fear on her account: she would never submit to physical outrage. Then, while her husband was still watching

her through his tears, she jumped overboard and from that moment was never seen again.

Such were the acts of violence of which the factionalists in Byzantium were guilty at that period. But these things caused less misery to the victims than the wrongs which the community suffered at Justinian's hands, because those whom miscreants have injured the most cruelly are relieved of most of the misery resulting from a disordered society by the constant expectation that the laws and the government will punish the offenders. For when people are confident of the future they find their present troubles more tolerable and easier to bear; but when they are subjected to violence by the state authorities they are naturally more distressed by the wrongs they have suffered, and fall into utter despair through the hopelessness of expecting justice. Justinian betrayed his subjects not only because he absolutely refused to uphold the victims of wrong, but because he was perfectly prepared to set himself up as the recognized champion of the factionalists; for he lavished great sums of money on these young men and kept many of them in his entourage, actually promoting some to magistracies and other official positions.

[8] Such, then, was the state of affairs in Byzantium and every other city. For like any other disease the infection that began in the capital rapidly spread all over the Roman Empire. The Emperor Justin took no notice at all of what was going on, since he was a man incapable of perception, although he was invariably an eyewitness to all that happened in the Hippodrome. For he was extremely simple, with no more sense than a donkey, ready to follow anyone who pulls its rein, waving its ears all the time. And Justinian both did the things described and threw everything else into confusion too. No sooner had he seized control of his uncle's authority than he eagerly began to squander the tax revenues in the most reckless manner, now that he had become master of them. From time to time he came into contact with some of the Huns and kept showering money on them for services to the state. The inevitable result was that Roman territory was exposed to constant incursions. For after tasting the wealth of the Romans these

barbarians could never again keep away from the road that led to the capital.

Again, he did not hesitate to throw vast sums into erecting buildings along the seafront in the hope of checking the constant surge of the waves. He pushed forward from the shore by heaping up stones in his determination to defeat the onrush of water, and in his efforts to rival, as it were, the strength of the sea by the power of wealth.³⁵ And he gathered into his own hands the private property of all the Romans in every land, either accusing them of some crime which they had not committed or coaxing them into the belief that they had made him a free gift. Many who had been convicted of murders and other capital crimes made their entire property over to him and so escaped without paying the penalty of their offences. Others, who were perhaps laying claim without any justification to lands belonging to their neighbours and finding it impossible to win judgement in arbitration against their opponents because they had no legal case, would actually make the Emperor a present of the property in dispute and got clear of the whole business; they themselves by generosity that cost them nothing secured an introduction to His Majesty, and by the most unlawful means managed to best their legal adversaries.

Now would not be an inopportune moment, it seems to me, to describe Justinian's personal appearance. In build he was neither tall nor unusually short but of medium height; not at all skinny but rather plump with a round face that was not unattractive, for it retained its healthy complexion even after a two-day fast. To describe his general appearance in a word, he bore a strong resemblance to Domitian, Vespasian's son, whose monstrous behaviour left such a mark upon the Romans that even when they carved up his whole body they did not feel that they had exhausted their indignation against him: the Senate passed a decree that not even the name of this Emperor should appear in writing, nor any statue or portrait of him be preserved. Certainly from the inscriptions everywhere in Rome,

35. See *Buildings* 1.5-9 for a more positive account of Justinian's building work along the Constantinopolitan coastline.

and wherever else his name had been inscribed, it was chiselled out, as can be seen, leaving all the rest intact, and nowhere in the Roman Empire is there a single likeness of him except for a solitary bronze statue, which survived in the following way.

Domitian had a wife, a woman of dignified and decorous birth and general bearing, who had herself never done the least wrong to any man alive or approved of a single one of her husband's actions. Accordingly she was very highly esteemed, and the Senate at this time sent for her and invited her to ask for anything she liked. She made only one request – that she might take Domitian's body and bury it, and set up a bronze statue of him in a place of her own choosing. The Senate agreed to this, and the widow, wishing to leave to later generations a monument to the inhumanity of those who had carved up her husband, devised the following plan. Having collected Domitian's flesh, she put the pieces together carefully and fitted them to each other; then she stitched the whole body together and showed it to the sculptors, asking them to make a bronze statue portraying the tragic end of the dead man. The artists produced the statue with no loss of time, and the widow took it and erected it on the street that leads up to the Capitol, on the right-hand side as you go there from the Forum: it showed the appearance and tragic end of Domitian, and does so to this day. It would seem likely that Justinian's general build, his actual expression and all the characteristic details of his visage are clearly portrayed in this statue.

Such, then, was his outward appearance; his character was beyond my powers of accurate description. For he was both prone to evil-doing and easily led astray – 'both knave and fool' as they say. Nor did he ever speak the truth to those he happened to be with, but in everything that he said or did there was always a dishonest purpose; yet to anyone who wanted to deceive him he was easy prey. He was by nature an extraordinary mixture of folly and wickedness inseparably blended. This perhaps was an instance of what one of the Peripatetic philosophers suggested long ago – that exactly opposite qualities may be combined in Man's nature just as in the blending of colours.

But here I write of matters which I have proven incapable of mastering.³⁶

Well, then, this Emperor was dissembling, crafty, hypocritical, secretive by temperament, two-faced; a clever fellow with a marvellous ability to conceal his real opinion, and able to shed tears, not from joy or sorrow but employing them artfully when required in accordance with the immediate need, lying all the time, not carelessly, however, but confirming his undertakings both with his signature and with the most dread oaths, even when dealing with his own subjects. But he promptly disregarded both agreements and solemn oaths, like the most contemptible slaves, who by fear of the tortures hanging over them are driven to confess misdeeds they have denied on oath. A treacherous friend and an inexorable enemy, he was passionately devoted to murder and plunder; quarrelsome and above all an innovator; easily led astray into evil ways but refusing every suggestion that he should follow the right path; quick to devise vile schemes and to carry them out; and with an instinctive aversion to the mere mention of anything good.

How could anyone find words to describe Justinian's character? These vices and many yet greater he clearly possessed to an inhuman degree; it seemed as if nature had removed every tendency to evil from the rest of mankind and deposited it in the soul of this man. In addition to everything else, he was far too ready to listen to false accusations and quick to inflict punishment. For he never made thorough investigation of the facts before passing judgement but on hearing the accusations immediately had his verdict announced. Without hesitation he wrote orders for the seizure of villages, the burning of cities and the enslavement of whole nations, for no reason at all. So that if one chose to add up all the calamities which have befallen the Romans from the beginning and to weigh them against

36. This reeks of false humility, suggesting that Procopius may have regarded himself as something of a philosopher, as A. Kaldellis has argued he was (*Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004)). Note that I restore the 'not' introduced by Haury and omitted by Williamson.

those for which Justinian was responsible, I feel sure that he would find that a greater slaughter of human beings was brought about by this one man than took place in all the preceding centuries. As for other people's money, he seized it by stealth without the slightest hesitation, for he did not even think it necessary to put forward any excuse or justification before taking possession of a thing to which he had no claim. Yet when he had secured the money he was quite prepared to show his contempt for it by reckless prodigality, or to throw it to barbarians without the slightest need. In short, he kept no money, and allowed no one else in the world to keep any, as if he were not overcome by avarice but held fast by envy of those who had acquired money. Thus he cheerfully banished wealth from Roman soil and became the architect of poverty for all.

[9] The features of Justinian's character, then, as far as I am in a position to state them, were roughly as suggested above. And he married a wife whose origin and upbringing I shall now reveal, as also how, after becoming his consort, she utterly overthrew the Roman state. In Byzantium there was a man called Acacius, a keeper of the circus animals, belonging to the Green faction and called the Master of Bears. This man died of natural causes during the reign of Anastasius, leaving three daughters, Comito, Theodora and Anastasia, of whom the eldest had not yet completed her seventh year. The widow married again, hoping that her new husband would from then on share in the management of her house and the care of the animals. But the Greens' Dancing-master, a man called Asterius, was offered a bribe to remove these two from their office, in which he installed his Paymaster without any difficulty, for the Dancing-masters were allowed to arrange such matters just as they chose. But when the woman saw the whole populace congregated in the circus, she put wreaths on the heads of the little girls and in both their hands, and made them sit down as suppliants. The Greens refused absolutely to admit the supplication, but the Blues gave them a similar office, as their Master of Bears too had died.

When the children were old enough, they were at once put on the stage by their mother, as their appearance was very

attractive – not all at the same time, however, but as each one seemed to her to be up to the task. Now the eldest one, Comito, was already famous amongst the harlots of her cohort. Theodora, who came next, clad in a little sleeved number fit for a slave girl, used to assist her in various ways, following her about and invariably carrying on her shoulders the bench on which her sister habitually sat in public. For the time being, Theodora was still too immature physically to be capable of intercourse with a man – that is, to take it as a woman. But she would perform a certain more ‘male’ lewd favour for those who were hard up, or for slaves, who, when following their owners to the theatre, would seize the opportunity to divert themselves in this revolting manner, and she spent much time in the brothel, engaged in this unnatural physical pursuit. But as soon as she reached puberty and at last was ripe for it, she joined the women on the stage and promptly became a prostitute of the type the ancients called a ‘trooper’.³⁷ For she was not a flautist or harpist; indeed she could not even dance well enough to make it on to the line-up; rather she just sold her youth to passers-by, working with nearly her entire body.

Later she teamed up with the sketch actors at the theatre and took part in their shows there, playing up to their ‘get-a-laugh’ antics. She was extremely sharp and had a biting wit, and quickly became popular as a result. For there was not an ounce of modesty in the little hussy, and no one ever saw her shocked: she rendered the most shocking services without the slightest hesitation, and she was the sort of girl who, for instance, if somebody beat her up or punched her in the face, would crack a joke about it and roar with laughter; and she would throw off her clothes and exhibit to passers-by both full-frontal nudity and her naked rear – that is, those parts of the female anatomy which the rules of decency require should be kept veiled and hidden from the eyes of men.

She used to tease her lovers by lounging around with them, and by constantly toying with novel methods of intercourse she could always draw the attention of the lascivious to her; so far

37. The Greek refers to the lowest rank of foot-soldier.

from waiting to be approached by anyone she encountered, she herself by cracking dirty jokes and wiggling her hips suggestively would invite all who came her way, especially if they were beardless youths. Never was anyone so completely given up to unlimited self-indulgence. Often she would go to a bring-your-own-food dinner party with ten or more youths, all at the peak of their physical prowess and with sex their trade, and she would lie with all her fellow-diners the whole night through; and when she had worn them all out she would turn to their servants, as many as thirty on occasion, and copulate with every one of them – but even so could not satisfy her lust.

One night she went into the house of a notable during the drinking, and, it is said, before the eyes of all the guests she mounted the protruding part of the couch near their feet and forthwith pulled up her dress in the most disgraceful manner, and did not shy away from displaying her lasciviousness. And though she made full use of three orifices, she often found fault with Nature, complaining that Nature had not made the holes in her nipples larger so that she could devise another variety of intercourse there. Of course, she was frequently pregnant, but by using pretty well all the tricks of the trade she was able to induce an immediate abortion.

Often in the theatre too, in the full view of the people, she would throw off her clothes and stand naked in their midst, having only a pair of knickers over her private parts and her groin – not, however, because she was ashamed to expose these also to the public, but because no one is allowed to appear there absolutely naked: underwear over the groin is compulsory. And with this costume she would spread herself out and lie on her back on the floor. Certain menials on whom this task had been imposed would sprinkle barley grains over her private parts, and geese trained for the purpose used to pick them off with their beaks one by one and swallow them. Theodora, far from blushing when she stood up again, actually seemed to be proud of this performance. For she was not only shameless herself but did more than anyone else to encourage shamelessness. And many times she threw off her clothes and stood in the middle of the actors on the stage, leaning over backwards or pushing

out her rear to invite both those who had already enjoyed her and those who had not been intimate as yet, parading her own special brand of gymnastics. With such lasciviousness did she misuse her own body that she appeared to have her privates not like other women in the place intended by nature but in her face!³⁸ And again, those who were intimate with her showed by so doing that they were not having intercourse in accordance with the laws of nature, and a person of any decency who happened to meet her in public would swing round and beat a hasty retreat, for fear he might come into contact with any of the hussy's garments and so appear tainted with this pollution. For to those who saw her, especially in the early hours of the day, she was a bird of ill omen. As for her fellow performers, she habitually and constantly stormed at them like a fury, for she was malicious in the extreme.

Later she accompanied Hecebolus, a Tyrian who had taken over the governorship of Pentapolis,³⁹ in order to serve him in the most revolting capacity, but she got into bad odour with him and was kicked out without more ado; as a result she found herself without even the necessities of life, which from then on she provided in her customary fashion by making her body the tool of her illegal trade. First she came to Alexandria; then, after making a tour round the whole East, she returned to Byzantium, in every city following an occupation which a man had better not name, I think, if he hopes ever to enjoy the mercy of God. It was as if the unseen powers could not allow any spot on earth to be unacquainted with Theodora's depravity.

Such, then, were the birth and upbringing of this woman, the subject of common talk amongst the women of the streets and among people of every kind. But when she arrived back in Byzantium Justinian conceived an overwhelming passion for her. At first he consorted with her only as his mistress, though he did promote her to Patrician rank. This at once enabled Theodora to obtain vast influence and very considerable wealth.

38. An apparent allusion, now obscure, to a pagan fertility cult in Procopius' native Palestine, where statuettes of a goddess with genitalia in place of her face have been discovered.

39. A group of five cities in Libya.

For, as so often happens to men consumed with passion, it seemed to Justinian's eyes the most delightful thing in the world to lavish all his favours and all his wealth upon the object of his passion. And the whole state became the fuel for this love. With Theodora to help him, he impoverished the people far more than before, not only in the capital but in every part of the Empire. As both had long been supporters of the Blue faction, they gave its members immense powers over affairs of state. It was a very long time before the evil was mitigated to any great extent. It happened in this way.

Justinian suffered from a prolonged illness, which brought him into such extreme danger that he was even reported to be dead. All the time the factionists were misbehaving in the ways already described, and one Hypatius, a man of some distinction, was murdered by them in full daylight in the sanctuary of Sophia. When this crime had been committed, the disorders it provoked were reported to the Emperor, and all those about him, seizing the opportunity provided by Justinian's absence from public affairs, did everything they could to emphasize the gravity of what had occurred, giving him a complete account of all the happenings from beginning to end. At that the Emperor instructed the Prefect of the City to bring all the offenders to justice. This official was named Theodotus but was generally referred to as 'The Pumpkin'. He made a thorough examination of all concerned and was able to arrest many of the perpetrators and sentence them to execution according to the law, although many of them slipped through his fingers and escaped. At a later date they were to rise to prominence in Roman affairs.⁴⁰

Contrary to expectation the Emperor suddenly recovered and actually took steps to get rid of Theodotus as a poisoner and a magician. But as he could invent no possible pretext to justify his destroying him, he subjected some of the man's friends to the most horrible torments and drove them to make accusations against him that were without foundation. Whilst all the others kept out of his way and remained discreetly silent about their distress at Justinian's machinations against Theodotus, Proclus

40. The Greek here is corrupt and cannot be emended with any certainty.

alone, who held the Quaestorship, as it was called, openly asserted that the accused man was innocent of the charge and had done nothing to deserve death. In consequence Theodotus, on the suggestion of the Emperor, conveyed himself away to Jerusalem. But it came to his knowledge that men had arrived there who were bent on his destruction; so ever after that he remained hidden in the sanctuary and never emerged till the day of his death.

Of Theodotus there is no more to be said. But the factionists from this time on became the most prudent people in the world. They no longer ventured to misbehave in such shocking ways, though they had every opportunity to follow their career of lawlessness with even greater impunity. Here is evidence enough: when a few of them later showed similar audacity, they suffered no penalty whatsoever. For those authorized to inflict punishment invariably provided the perpetrators of crimes with every opportunity to evade it, encouraging them by this connivance to trample on the laws.

As long as the Empress⁴¹ was still alive, it was quite impossible for Justinian to make Theodora his lawful wife. On this one point the Empress opposed him, though she objected to none of his other actions. For the old lady abhorred wickedness, although she was a peasant and a barbarian by birth, as stated earlier. She was quite incapable of contributing to government and remained utterly ignorant of state affairs; in fact she dropped her real name, which she felt to be ridiculous, before entering the Palace, and assumed the new name Euphemia. But some time later it happened that the Empress died. Justin was in his dotage and quite senile, so that he became the laughing-stock of his subjects, treated by everyone with complete contempt because of his ignorance of what was happening and left out of account; Justinian on the other hand was greatly feared and assiduously courted, for he stirred up trouble all the time, producing universal turmoil and confusion. This was the moment he chose for arranging his engagement to Theodora. But as it was impossible for a man who had reached the rank

41. I.e. Lupicina, wife of Justin.

of senator to make a harlot his wife, such a thing being prohibited from the beginning by the most venerable laws, he forced the Emperor to abrogate the laws by establishing a new one.⁴² From that moment he lived with Theodora as his legal spouse, thereby enabling everyone else to get engaged to a harlot. Then as a tyrant he immediately seized upon the imperial office, fabricating an excuse to disguise the high-handedness of his action. He was proclaimed Emperor of the Romans, in conjunction with his uncle, by each of the notables whom overpowering fear compelled to vote in this way. Imperial authority was assumed by Justinian and Theodora three days before the Feast,⁴³ a time when one is not allowed to greet any of one's friends or to wish him a good day. A few days later, Justin died from natural causes after reigning for nine years,⁴⁴ and Justinian alone in conjunction with Theodora took over the empire.

[10] So it came about that Theodora – born, brought up and educated as described – despite all obstacles attained imperial rank. For it never even occurred to her husband that his conduct was shocking, though he was in a position to take his pick of the Roman Empire and select for his bride the most nobly born woman in the world who had enjoyed the most exclusive upbringing, and was thoroughly acquainted with the claims of modesty, and had lived in an atmosphere of chastity, and in addition was superbly beautiful and still a virgin – or, as they say, pert of breast. No: he must needs make the common bane of all mankind his very own, oblivious of all the facts which we have previously disclosed, and consort with a woman double-dyed with every kind of horrible pollution and guilty over and over again of infanticide by wilful abortion.

Not one thing more needs to be mentioned, I think, regarding the character of this man: this marriage would be quite enough to reveal only too clearly all his moral sickness; it was interpreter, witness and chronicler of the course he followed. For when a man cares nothing for the infamy of his actions, and does not hesitate to be known to all and sundry as a

42. Preserved at *Codex Iustinianus* 5.23 (AD 520–23).

43. I.e. Easter.

44. AD 518–27.

revolting character, no path of lawlessness is closed to him, but, armed with the shamelessness visible at every moment in his face, he advances cheerfully and without any misgivings to the most loathsome deeds.

Nor indeed did even one member of the Senate, seeing the state saddling itself with this disgrace, see fit to protest and to oppose such proceedings, though they would all have to fall down before her as if she were a goddess. There was not even one priest who showed any disgust, though they would be obliged to address her as 'Mistress'. And the people who had previously watched her performances in the theatre instantly and disgracefully demanded with upturned hands to be her grovelling slaves in both fact and name. Nor did one soldier resent being called on to face danger on the battlefield for Theodora's benefit; nor did any other living person oppose her. All of them, I imagine, were subdued by the thought that this was the fate assigned to them and accordingly lifted no finger to prevent this revolting state of affairs, as though Fortune had given a demonstration of her power; for as she controls all human affairs it is a matter of complete indifference to her that what is done shall be justifiable, or that men shall feel that there was reason behind what has happened already. Suddenly by an unreasoning display of power she uplifts to a lofty eminence a man who seems to have been entangled hitherto in one difficulty after another; she offers no resistance to anything on earth that he takes in hand, and all things conspire to hurry him along to whatever goal she has seen fit to choose for him, while all mankind stands back without hesitation and makes way for Fortune as she goes ahead.⁴⁵ But we must leave it to God to decide how these things shall be and how they shall be spoken of.

As for Theodora, she had an attractive face and a good figure but was short and pallid, though not to an extreme degree, for there was just a trace of colour about her. Her glance was invariably fierce and intensely hard. If I were to attempt a

45. Procopius' musings on Fate bear comparison to those contained in the treatise *On the Consolation of Philosophy* by his Italian contemporary the statesman and scholar Boethius.

detailed account of her life upon the stage, I could go on for the rest of time, but the few incidents picked out for inclusion in the preceding account should be enough to give a complete picture of this woman's character for the enlightenment of future generations. But now we must sketch the outlines of what she and her husband did in unison, for neither did anything apart from the other to the end of their joint lives. For a long time it was universally believed that they were exact opposites in their ideas and interests, but later it was recognized that this false impression had been deliberately fostered to make sure that their subjects did not put their own differences aside and rebel against them, but were all divided in their feelings about them. They began by creating a division between the Christians, and by pretending to take opposite sides in religious disputes they split the whole body in two, as will shortly be made clear. Then they kept the factions at loggerheads. The Empress made out that she was throwing her full weight behind the Blues, and by extending to them full authority to assail the opposite faction she made it possible for them to disregard all restrictions and perform outrageous deeds of criminal violence. Her husband replied by behaving as if he were boiling over with bottled-up resentment but was unable to stand up to his wife overtly, and often they transformed the outward appearance of policy and swapped roles. He, for instance, would insist on punishing the Blues as criminal offenders, while she in a faked rage would complain bitterly that, as they say, she had 'yielded to her husband under protest'.

And yet the Blue partisans, as I said before, seemed to be the most orderly; for they were satisfied that it was quite unjustifiable to go to the limit in doing violence to one's neighbours. Again, in the bitter animosities aroused by lawsuits, each of the partners appeared to be backing one of the litigants, and it was so arranged that victory should go to the one who championed the unjust cause,⁴⁶ and that in this way the two of them should purloin most of the property of both disputants.

Finally, many were included in this Emperor's list of intimate

46. A reminiscence of Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

friends and raised to positions which enabled them to violate the laws and commit offences against the state to their heart's content, but as soon as it was evident that they had made their pile, they promptly came into collision with Theodora and found themselves in her bad books. At first Justinian was perfectly prepared to declare himself their enthusiastic supporter, but later on his sympathy for the poor fellows would dry up, and his zeal on their behalf would become very uncertain. That would be the signal for his partner to damage them beyond recovery while he, shutting his eyes tight to what was going on, opened his arms to receive their entire possessions, thus shamelessly acquired. In practising these tricks they invariably collaborated, though in public they acted as if they were at variance; thus they succeeded in dividing their subjects, and in so doing strengthened their hold that it could never be shaken off.

[11] Accordingly, when Justinian ascended the throne it took him a very little while to bring everything into confusion. Things hitherto forbidden by law were one by one brought into public life, while established customs were swept away wholesale, as if he had been invested with the mantle of imperial majesty on condition that he would change all things to new forms. Long-established offices were abolished, and new ones set up to run the state's business; the laws of the land and the organization of the army were treated in the same way, not because justice required it or the general interest urged him to it, but merely so that everything might have a new look and might be associated with his name. If there was anything which he was not in a position to transform there and then, even so he would at least attach his own name to it.

Of the forcible seizure of property and the murder of his subjects he could never have enough: when he had looted innumerable households of wealthy people he was constantly on the lookout for others, immediately squandering on one barbarian tribe or another, or on crazy building schemes, all that had been amassed by his earlier looting. And when he had without any excuse got rid of thousands and thousands of people, or so it would seem, he promptly devised schemes for doing the same to others more numerous still.

At that time the Romans were at peace with all mankind, so – not knowing how to satisfy his lust for blood – Justinian kept propelling all the barbarians into collision with one another and, sending for the chieftains of the Huns, though he had no reason at all, with senseless prodigality he flung vast sums into their laps, making out, if you please, that these were pledges of friendship. This he was stated to have done even when Justin was on the throne. They for their part, having received this windfall, used to send some of their brother-chieftains at the head of their men, urging them to make sudden raids into the Emperor's territory, so that they too might be in a position to exact a price for peace from the man who for no reason at all was prepared to pay for it. These chiefs at once began the enslavement of the Roman Empire, and all the time they were in the Emperor's pay. Their example was immediately followed by others who joined in the pillaging of the unfortunate Romans, and on top of that pillage received as a reward for their inroads the extravagant largesse of the Emperor. Thus, in short, from year's end to year's end they all took turns to plunder and pillage everything within their reach. For these barbarians have many groups of chieftains, and the war was passed from one group to another in rotation as a result of Justinian's inexcusable prodigality; it could never come to an end but went on circling around itself month after month, year after year. And so no single patch of ground, mountain, cave or anything else on Roman soil escaped being pillaged at this time, and many places were actually overrun five times or more. These calamities, however, and all those suffered at the hands of Medes, Saracens, Slavs, Antae and the other barbarians have been recounted in my earlier writings; but as I said at the beginning of this present volume, it is essential that I should make clear now where the responsibility lay for all that happened.

To Chosroes Justinian handed over vast sums in gold to secure peace; then with inexcusable disregard of anyone else's opinion he made himself responsible for the breaking of the truce by his determination to effect an alliance with Alemandarus⁴⁷ and

47. Al-Mundhir, King of the Empire's Arab clients after Al-Harith.

the Huns who were in alliance with the Persians, a matter which I believe to have been discussed without concealment in the account relating to them.⁴⁸ While he was stirring up the faction riots and wars which brought such misery to the Romans, and fanning the blaze with this one object only, that – by all possible means – the earth should be filled with human blood and that still more plunder should fall into his hands, he devised yet another horrible massacre of his subjects. It happened in this way.

Throughout the Roman Empire there are many discarded doctrines of the Christians which they are accustomed to call 'heresies' – those of the Montanists and Sabbatarians and numerous others which are wont to cause the judgement of mankind to err. All the adherents of these were ordered to renounce their former beliefs under threat of many penalties for disobedience, above all the withdrawal of the right to bequeath their property to their children or relations. The shrines of these 'heretics', as they are called, especially those who professed the doctrines of Arius, possessed unheard-of riches. Neither the whole Senate nor any other corporate body within the Roman state could compete in wealth with these sanctuaries. They possessed treasures of gold and silver, and ornaments covered with precious stones, beyond description and beyond counting, and houses and large villages in great numbers, and a large amount of land in all quarters of the world, and every other kind of wealth that exists and is named anywhere on earth, since none of the long line of emperors had ever interfered with them. A great many others, even though of orthodox beliefs, depended upon them at all times for their livelihood, justifying themselves on the grounds that they were merely following their regular occupations. So by first of all confiscating the property of these sanctuaries the Emperor Justinian suddenly robbed them of all they possessed. The result was that from that moment most of the men were deprived of their only means of support.

An army of officials was at once sent out in all directions to

force everyone they met to renounce his ancestral beliefs. In the eyes of the peasantry such a suggestion was blasphemous, so they resolved one and all to stand their ground against the men who made these demands. Many in consequence perished at the hands of the soldiers; many even put an end to their own lives, being foolish enough to think this the most pious course; and the great majority abandoned the land of their birth and went into exile. But the Montanists, who were established in Phrygia, shut themselves up in their own sanctuaries and at once set these buildings on fire, perishing with them for no reason at all. The result was that the whole Roman Empire was one great scene of slaughter and exile.⁴⁹

A similar law being next passed in respect of the Samaritans, tumultuous disorders descended upon Palestine.⁵⁰ All who lived in my own Caesarea and the other cities, thinking it foolish to endure any sort of distress for the sake of a senseless creed, discarded their old name and called themselves Christians, managing by this pretence to shake off the danger threatened by the law.⁵¹ Those among them who were at all prudent and reasonable were quite agreeable to remaining loyal to their new faith, but the majority, apparently feeling indignant that in defiance of their wishes they were being compelled by this law to abandon the beliefs they had inherited, very soon defected to the Manicheans and to the Polytheists, as they are called. But all the agricultural labourers at a mass meeting resolved as one man to take up arms against the Emperor, putting forward as the Emperor of their own choice a bandit named Julian, son of Savarus. They joined battle with the soldiers and held out for some time, but in the end they lost the fight and were cut to pieces together with their leader. It is said that a hundred thousand men lost their lives in this engagement, and the most fertile land in the world was left with no one to till it. And for the great landowners, Christians one and all, this affair had

49. For Justinian's persecution of heretics, see *Codex Iustinianus* I.5.12-22, and *J.Nov.* 3, 37, 42, 43, 45, 109, 131 and 132.

50. Legislation on Samaritans is to be found in *Codex Iustinianus* I.5.12, I.5.17, I.5.18, and *J.Nov.* 45, 103 and 129.

51. See *Codex Iustinianus* I.5.18.5.

disastrous consequences; for though the land was yielding them no profit at all, they were compelled to pay annual taxes on a crippling scale to the Emperor in perpetuity, since these demands were pressed home relentlessly.

Next he turned the persecution against the 'Hellenes', as they are called,⁵² torturing their bodies and looting their property.⁵³ Many of these decided to assume the name of Christian for appearance's sake in order to avert the immediate threat, but it was not long before they were for the most part caught at their libations and sacrifices and other unholy rites . . .⁵⁴ What was done in respect of the Christians I shall explain in an account hereafter.

After that he passed a law forbidding pederasty,⁵⁵ not inquiring closely into those acts committed after the passing of the law but seeking out men who had succumbed to this malady some time in the past. The prosecution of these cases was conducted in the most irregular fashion, since the penalty was imposed even where there was no accuser, and the word of a single man or boy, even if he happened to be a slave forced to give evidence most unwillingly against his owner, was accepted as final proof. Men convicted in this way were castrated and paraded through the streets. At first, however, not everyone was treated in this shocking manner, only those who were thought to be either Greens or exceptionally wealthy, or who happened to have offended the rulers in some other way.

Again, they were bitterly hostile to astrologers. Accordingly the official appointed to deal with burglaries made a point of ill-treating them simply because they were astrologers, flogging the backs of many of them and setting them on camels to be shown to jeering crowds all over the city, though they were old men and respectable in every way. Yet he had nothing against them except that they wished to be authorities on the stars in such a place as this. As a result, great numbers of people were constantly slipping away, not only to the barbarians but also

52. Adherents of traditional forms of Greco-Roman religion.

53. See *Codex Iustinianus* I.5.18.4-5.

54. Lacuna in the text.

55. *J.Nov.* 77 and 141, and *Institutes* 4.18.4.

to distant regions under Roman occupation, and so in both countryside and city it was possible to see great masses of strangers. For to avoid being caught, every man was glad to exchange his homeland for another country, as if his own had fallen into enemy hands.

So it was that the possessions of those considered to be prosperous in Byzantium and every other city – that is, after the members of the Senate – were plundered, in the way described, by Justinian and Theodora. How they managed to rob the senators too of all their wealth I will now explain.

[12] There was in Byzantium a man called Zeno, grandson of the Anthemius who had earlier held the imperial office in the West. To serve their own ends they appointed this man Prefect of Egypt and dispatched him there. But Zeno packed all his most valuable effects on board ship and got ready to sail, for he had an immeasurable weight of silver, and vessels of solid gold embellished with pearls and emeralds, and with other stones equally precious. Their majesties then bribed some of those who seemed most trustworthy to remove the precious cargo with all speed and drop firebrands into the hold of the ship, after which they were to inform Zeno that the blaze had broken out spontaneously on the vessel and the entire cargo had been lost. Not long after, as it happened, Zeno died very suddenly, and the two of them promptly took over his estate as his lawful heirs, for they produced a will of sorts, which it was openly rumoured was not of his making.

By similar methods they made themselves the heirs of Tatian, Demosthenes and Hilara, who in rank and all other respects were leading members of the Roman Senate. The property of certain others they acquired by forging not wills but letters.⁵⁶ This was how they became the heirs of Dionysius who lived in Lebanon, and of John, the son of Basilius. John had been quite the most distinguished man in all Edessa, but Belisarius had handed him over willy-nilly as a hostage to the Persians, as recounted by me in the previous narrative.⁵⁷ Chosroes finally

56. By which Procopius means codicils – see *Digest* 29.7.

57. *Wars* 2.21.27.

refused to let this man go, accusing the Romans of breaking all the agreements under which Belisarius had handed him over; however, he was prepared to sell him as being now a prisoner of war. And the man's grandmother, who was still alive, furnished the ransom, amounting to 2,000 pounds' weight of silver, in the full expectation of redeeming her grandson. But when this ransom had arrived at Dara, the Emperor got to know of it and forbade the completion of the transaction – in order, he said, that Roman wealth might not be transferred to the barbarians. Shortly after this, John fell sick and departed this life; whereupon the chief administrator of the city concocted a letter of sorts which he said John had recently written to him as a friend, to inform him that he desired his whole estate to go to the Emperor. It would be beyond me to list the names of all the others whose heirs they contrived to become.

Until what is known as the 'Nika' insurrection took place,⁵⁸ they were content to annex the estates of notables one at a time; but after it took place, as I related in an earlier account, from then on they confiscated at a single stroke the possessions of nearly all the senators. On all moveable property and on the most attractive estate properties they laid their hands just as they fancied, but they set aside those which were liable to oppressive and crushing taxation, and with sham generosity returned them to their previous owners. These people in consequence were throttled by tax collectors and reduced to penury by the ever-mounting interest on their debts, and thus unwillingly dragged out a miserable existence that was no more than a lingering death.

It was for this reason that to me and to most of us these two persons never seemed to be human beings, but rather a pair of blood-thirsty demons of some sort and, as the poets say, 'plaguers of mortal men'.⁵⁹ For they plotted together to find the

58. In AD 532 elements within the Constantinopolitan Senate sought to take advantage of a dramatic escalation of factional violence to dismiss Justinian's chief officers, John the Cappadocian and Tribonian, and ultimately to depose the Emperor himself. The revolt was quashed by Belisarius amidst much slaughter. See *Wars* 1.24.

59. Homer, *Iliad* 5.31, and Aeschylus, *Suppliants* 664.

easiest and swiftest means of destroying all races of men and all their works and, assuming human form, became man-demons, and in this way convulsed the whole world. Proof of this could be found in many things but especially in the power manifested in their actions. For demons are discerned as distinct from human beings by a marked difference. In the long course of time there have doubtless been many men who by chance or by nature have inspired the utmost fear, and by their unaided efforts have ruined cities or countries or whatever it might be; but to bring destruction on all mankind and calamities on the whole world has been beyond the power of any but these two, who were, it is true, aided in their endeavours by Fortune, which collaborated in the ruin of mankind, for earthquakes, pestilences and rivers that burst their banks brought widespread destruction at this time, as I shall explain shortly. Thus it was not by human but by some very different power that they wrought such havoc.

It is said that Justinian's own mother told some of her close friends that he was not the son of her husband Sabbatius or any man at all. For when she was about to conceive him she was visited by a demon, who was invisible but who gave her the distinct impression that he was really there with her as a man giving a woman her fill. Then he vanished as in a dream. And some of those who were present with the Emperor late at night, conversing with him (evidently in the Palace) – men of the highest possible character – thought that they saw a strange demonic form in his place. One of them declared that he more than once rose suddenly from the imperial throne and walked round and round the room, for he was not in the habit of remaining seated for long. And Justinian's head would momentarily disappear while the rest of his body seemed to continue making these long circuits. The witness himself, thinking that something had gone seriously wrong with his eyesight, stood for a long time distressed and quite at a loss. But later the head returned to the body, and he thought that what a moment before had been lacking was, contrary to expectation, filling out again. A second man said that he stood by the Emperor's side as he sat and saw his face suddenly transformed to a

shapeless lump of flesh: neither eyebrows nor eyes were in their normal position, and it showed no other distinguishing feature at all; gradually, however, he saw the face return to its usual shape. I did not myself witness the events I am describing, but I heard about them from men who insist they saw them at the time.

It is also related that a certain monk highly favoured by God was persuaded by those who lived with him in the desert to set out for Byzantium in order to speak on behalf of their nearest neighbours, who were suffering violence and injustice beyond bearing. On his arrival there he was at once admitted to the Emperor's presence, but when he was on the point of entering the audience chamber and had put one foot across the threshold, he suddenly drew it back and retreated. The eunuch who was escorting him and others who were present urged and encouraged him to go on, but he gave no answer, and as if he had suddenly gone crazy he dashed away back to the apartment where he was lodging. And when his attendants asked him to explain this strange behaviour, we understand that he said straight out that he had seen the Head of the Demons in the Palace, sitting on the throne, and he was not prepared to meet him or ask any favour of him. After all, how could this man be other than a wicked demon, when he never satisfied his natural appetite for drink, food or sleep but took a casual bite of what was set before him and then wandered about the Palace at untimely hours of the night, whilst having a demonic passion for erotic pursuits?

Some of Theodora's lovers, too, say that, while she was still treading the boards, a demon of some sort swooped on them in the night and drove them from the bedroom where they were spending the night with her. And there was a dancing-girl called Macedonia who belonged to the Blues in Antioch and had acquired great influence, for by writing letters to Justinian while Justin was still master of the Empire she could easily destroy any she wished amongst the notables of the East, causing their property to be confiscated for the Treasury. This woman, they say, while welcoming Theodora on her return from Egypt and Libya, saw that she was very annoyed and put out by the insults

she had received at the hands of Hecebolius, and by the loss of her money during that trip. So Macedonia decided to console her and cheer her up, reminding her that Fortune was quite capable of playing the benefactress and showering wealth upon her. Then, they say, Theodora declared that actually during the previous night she had had a vivid dream which told her not to worry about money any more: when she reached Byzantium she would go to bed with the Head of the Demons, and would live with him as his wedded wife in every respect, and as a result would become mistress of all the money she could desire.

[13] Such at any rate were the facts as they appeared to most people. The general character of Justinian was such as I have portrayed, but he showed himself approachable and affable to those with whom he came into contact; not a single person found himself denied access to the Emperor, and even those who broke the rules of etiquette by the way they stood or spoke in his presence never incurred his wrath. That, however, did not make him blush when confronting those whom he intended to destroy. In fact he never gave even a hint of anger or irritation to show how he felt towards those who had offended him, but – with a friendly expression on his face and without raising an eyebrow – in a gentle voice he would order tens of thousands of quite innocent people to be put to death, cities to be overturned and the confiscation of all their money by the Treasury. This characteristic would have made anybody imagine that he had the disposition of a lamb. But if anyone attempted to conciliate him and by humble supplication to beg forgiveness for those who had incurred his displeasure, then, ‘baring his teeth and raging like a beast’,⁶⁰ he would seem to be on the point of exploding, so that none of his supposed intimates could nurse any further hope of persuading him to grant the desired pardon.

He seemed to be a convinced believer in Christ, but this too meant ruin for his subjects; for he allowed the priests to use violence against their neighbours almost with impunity, and when they looted estates next to their own he wished them joy,

60. Quoted from Aristophanes’ *Peace* 620.

thinking that in so doing he was honouring the Divinity. When he judged such cases he thought he was showing his piety if anyone for allegedly religious purposes grabbed something that did not belong to him and, after winning his case, went scot-free. For in his view justice consisted in the priests getting the better of their antagonists. And when he himself got possession by unscrupulous methods of the estates of persons living or dead, and gave these as an offering to one of the churches, he would congratulate himself on this cloak of piety – but only to make sure that title to these estates should not revert to their former owners who had been robbed of them.

But he went much further, and to achieve his aims he engineered an incalculable number of murders. His ambition being to force everybody into one form of Christian belief, he wantonly destroyed everyone who would not conform, and that while keeping up a pretence of piety. For he did not regard it as murder so long as those who died did not happen to share his beliefs. Thus he had completely set his heart on the continual slaughter of his fellow-men, and together with his wife he was constantly engaged in fabricating charges in order to satisfy this ambition. The pair of them were almost indistinguishable in their aims, and where there did happen to be some real difference in their characters they were equally wicked, though they displayed exactly opposite traits in destroying their subjects. For in his judgement he was extraordinarily inclined to vacillate, at the mercy of those who at any moment wished to lead him in whatever direction they thought fit – so long as their plans did not involve generosity or loss of profit – and he perpetually exposed himself to gusts of flattery. His fawning courtiers could with the utmost ease convince him that he was soaring aloft and ‘walking on air’.⁶¹

And once as he sat beside him on the Bench, Tribonian said he was quite terrified that sooner or later as a reward for his piety the Emperor would be carried off to heaven and vanish from men’s sight. Such laudations, or rather gibes, he interpreted according to his own preconceived notions. Yet if ever

61. An allusion to Socrates in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* 225.

by any chance he complimented some person on his virtues, a moment later he would be denouncing him as a scoundrel. On the other hand, when he had poured abuse on one of his subjects, he would veer round and shower compliments on him – or so it appeared – changing about without the slightest provocation. For his thoughts ran counter to his own words and the impression he wished to give.

What his temperament was in regard to friendship and enmity I have already indicated, evidencing for the most part the man's own actions. As an enemy he was determined and undeviating, to his friends most inconstant, so that he actually brought ruin on numbers of people who had been in his favour but never showed friendship to any man he had once hated. Those whom he seemed to know best and to esteem most he soon betrayed, graciously presenting them to his spouse or whoever it might be, to be put to death, though he knew quite well that it was because of their devotion to himself and that alone that they would die. For he could not be trusted in anything except inhumanity and avarice, as all the world could see: to wean him from the latter was beyond the power of any man. For in cases when he refused to listen even to his wife's persuasions, by throwing into the scales the prospect of a big profit to be made from the business she could lead her husband by the nose into any scheme she fancied, however loudly he might protest. For if there were any ill-gotten gain in sight he was always ready to establish laws and to rescind them again.

And his judicial decisions were made not in accordance with the laws he himself had enacted but as he was led by the prospect of a bigger and more splendid promise of monetary advantage. To commit a succession of petty thefts and so deprive his subjects of their property seemed to him to involve him in no discredit at all – that is to say, in cases where he could not grab the lot in one go on some pretext or other, such as by advancing an unexpected accusation or on the pretext of a nonexistent will. And while he ruled the Romans, neither faith nor doctrine about God continued stable, no law had any permanence, no business dealing could be trusted, no contract meant anything. When he dispatched his intimates on some

mission, if they happened to do away with a number of those they came up against and to plunder some great sum of money, they immediately seemed to him fit both to be and to be called men of distinction, since they had carried out all their instructions to the letter. But if they treated men with any clemency, when they reported back to him he was ill disposed to them from then on, and indeed actively hostile, and, writing off men of this kind as hopelessly old-fashioned, he called on them for no further service. The consequence was that many made strenuous efforts to convince him of their villainous character, although their regular behaviour was as different as could be. After promising certain people again and again and confirming the promise with an oath or in writing, he immediately contrived to forget it, supposing that such behaviour won him admiration. Justinian regularly behaved in this way, not only to his subjects but also to many of his enemies, as I have stated previously.

He had little need of sleep as a rule, and his appetite for food and drink was unusually small: he did little more than sample a morsel, picked up with his fingertips, before leaving the table. Such things seemed to him an irrelevance, a mere imposition of Nature: time after time he went without food for two days and nights, especially when the days before the festival known as Easter led him in that direction. Then, as I have said, he often went two days without food and chose to live on a little water and a few wild plants, and after sleeping for perhaps one hour he would pass the rest of the night walking round and round. Yet had he been prepared to spend just that amount of time in good works, affairs of state could have enjoyed a very high degree of prosperity. Instead he employed all his natural powers for the ruin of the Romans and succeeded in bringing the whole political edifice crashing to the ground. His prolonged vigils, privations and painful efforts were undergone with this object alone – always and every day to devise bigger calamities for his subjects. For, as observed before, he was extraordinarily keen to invent and swift to execute unholy crimes, so that ultimately even the good qualities in his nature were instrumental in ruining his subjects.

[14] For in the governance of public affairs it was a time of great disorder, and of established customs nothing remained. I will mention a few instances, but all the rest must be passed over in silence, that my account may not go on forever. In the first place, he himself neither possessed any quality likely to enhance the dignity of an Emperor nor attempted to give the impression of possessing it: in speech, dress and mode of thought he was utterly uncouth. Whenever he wished a rescript to be published in his name, he did not send it in the usual way to the holder of the Quaestor's office to be promulgated but thought fit in most cases, in spite of the poorness of his speech, to read it out himself, while a large crowd of bystanders . . . ,⁶² so that there was no one against whom those wronged thereby could lodge a complaint.

The officials known as *a secretis*⁶³ were not allowed the privilege of writing the Emperor's secret dispatches – the task for which they had originally been appointed – but he wrote almost everything himself; for instance, whenever it was necessary to commission the public arbitrators, he would lay down the course they must follow in giving judgement. For he would not permit anybody in the Roman Empire to decide any dispute in accordance with his independent judgement but, obstinately going his own way with insane arrogance, himself settled what verdicts were to be given, accepting hearsay evidence from one of the litigants, and without proper investigation promptly cancelled decisions already given, not swayed by any law or principle of justice but undisguisedly succumbing to sordid covetousness. For the Emperor accepted bribes without a blush, since his insatiate greed had robbed him of all sense of shame.

Frequently matters that had been agreed between Senate and Emperor came up for a second and final judgement. For the Senate sat as if in a picture, in a position to control neither its own vote nor its ability to do any good, assembling for the sake of appearance and in fulfilment of an ancient law, since no member of that assembly was permitted even to raise a voice.

62. A verb appears to have got lost here.

63. Confidential clerks.

Rather the Emperor and his consort for the most part made a show of taking sides in the questions at issue, but victory went to the side upon which they had already agreed. If a man had broken the law and felt that victory was not securely his, he had only to fling more gold to this Emperor in order to obtain the passage of a law going clean contrary to all existing statutes. Then if somebody else should appeal to the first law, which had now been repealed, the Emperor was perfectly prepared to re-enact it and substitute it for the new one. There was nothing that remained permanently in force, but the scales of justice wandered at random all over the place, whichever way the greater mass of gold weighing them down succeeded in pulling them. The abode of Justice was now the marketplace, though it had once been the Palace, and there stalls flaunted themselves where not only the administration of justice but even the making of laws too was sold to the highest bidder.

Again, the *Referendarii*,⁶⁴ as they are called, were no longer content to convey to the Emperor the petitions of suppliants and merely report to the magistrates as usual what his decision was about the petitioners. Instead they collected the 'unjust reason'⁶⁵ from every side and with various impostures and fallacies⁶⁶ regularly deceived Justinian, whose temperament laid him open to such cunning ruses. Then as soon as they came out and had barred the litigant from any contact with those with whom they themselves had conferred, they proceeded to extort from these defenceless people as much money as they needed without laying themselves open to retaliation. The soldiers on guard at the Palace used to place themselves alongside the arbitrators in the Imperial Portico and by brute force secure the verdicts they wanted. At the same time all with few exceptions had left their posts and were wandering just as they pleased down ways hitherto barred to them and not to be trodden; things were all rushing along in utter disorder and had ceased to be called by their proper names, and the state resembled one huge gang of

64. Officials who acted as interlocutors between Emperor and petitioners. See *J. Nov.* 10.

65. Borrowed from Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

66. Adapted from Aristophanes' *Knights*.

children playing 'King of the Castle'. I must leave a great deal out, as I indicated at the beginning of this account, but I must make clear who was the first man to persuade the Emperor to accept a bribe whilst sitting in judgement.

There was a certain Leo, a native of Cilicia, madly devoted to money-making. This Leo became a master of flattery, with an uncanny ability for imposing his will on the minds of the ignorant, and he possessed powers of persuasion which assisted him to turn the crass stupidity of the tyrant to the destruction of his fellow-men. This man was the first to persuade Justinian to sell his legal decisions for money. When His Majesty once made up his mind to steal in the manner described, he never looked back; this scandal went on and on and grew bigger and bigger, and anyone who had made it his aim to bring an unjust accusation against some honest citizen went straight to Leo, and by agreeing that a share of the property in dispute should fall to the tyrant and to Leo, he had as good as won his case, in defiance of all justice, before leaving the Palace. This business enabled Leo to pile up riches on an immense scale, and he became the master of much land and did more than anyone else to bring the Roman state to its knees.

Indeed there was no security for those who had entered into contracts, no law, no oath, no written guarantees, no legal penalty, no other safeguard whatsoever except to toss money into the laps of Leo and the Emperor. But not even this could ensure that Leo's opinion would remain constant: he was quite prepared to sell his services to the other side as well. For since he invariably robbed both sides, it never crossed his mind that to treat with supreme indifference those who had put their trust in him and to act against their interests was in any way discreditable. In his eyes, so long as profit came his way, there was no discredit in playing a double game.

[15] So much for Justinian. As for Theodora, her mind was firmly and perpetually fixed upon inhumanity. No one ever persuaded her or forced her to do anything: she herself with stubborn self-will fulfilled her own purposes with all the powers at her disposal, and nobody dared to ask mercy for anyone who incurred her displeasure. Neither the passage of time, nor

surfeit of punishment, nor any kind of appeal, nor any threat of death, though all mankind lives in expectation that it will fall from heaven, could induce her to abate her wrath in the slightest. In short, Theodora was never once known to come to terms with anyone who had aroused her ire, even when he had departed from this life. The dead man's heir inherited the hatred of the Empress like anything else belonging to his father, and bequeathed it to the third generation. For her animosity was ever ready to be aroused to the destruction of other people, and no power on earth could mitigate it.

To her bodily needs she devoted quite unnecessary attention, though never enough to satisfy herself. She was in a great hurry to get into her bath, and very unwilling to get out again. When she had finished her ablutions, she would go down to breakfast, and after a light breakfast she would take a rest. But at lunch and dinner she indulged her taste for every kind of food and drink. Again and again she would sleep for hours on end, by day till nightfall and by night till sunrise. And though she had strayed thus into every path of self-indulgence for so great a part of the day, she thought fit to run the whole of the Roman Empire! If the Emperor entrusted any business to a man without first seeking her approval, such a change of fortune would come upon that man's affairs that very soon after he would be removed from his position with the utmost ignominy and die a most shameful death.

Justinian found it easy to cope with everything, not only because of his tranquil temperament, but because, as remarked before, he had little need of sleep as a rule, and was approachable in the extreme. For there was almost complete freedom for people, even if they were obscure or completely unknown, not only to come into the presence of the tyrant but to converse with him quite freely and be closeted with him in private. But to the Empress's presence even for one of the magistrates there was no admission except at the cost of much time and effort: on every occasion they all had to await her pleasure, waiting like slaves in a small, stuffy anteroom all the time. For it was impossibly risky for any of the magistrates to be absent. Hour after hour they stood on tiptoes, each straining to hold his head

higher than those near him in order to catch the eye of the eunuchs emerging from within. At long last and after days of waiting a few of them were called for: they went into her presence trembling with fear and hurried out again as quickly as they could, having merely prostrated themselves and touched the instep of each imperial foot with the edge of their lips. To make any comment or request unbidden by her was completely ruled out. For the state had become a community of slaves with Theodora as slave-driver. To such an extent was the Roman state being brought to nothing, what with the tyrant's temperament, which seemed too easy-going, and Theodora's, which was harsh and implacable. For an easy-going temperament meant instability, whilst an implacable one made action impossible.

If in their attitude of mind and way of life the difference between them was apparent, they were at one in their rapacity, their bloodlust and their utter contempt for the truth. Both of them were the most practised liars, and if anyone who aroused Theodora's ire was alleged to be committing any offence however trivial and insignificant, she promptly fabricated charges which had nothing to do with the accused and blew the matter up to criminal proportions. Endless indictments received a hearing, and a special court was set up to dispose of them.⁶⁷ The judges appointed were of Theodora's choosing, and it was their function to contend with each other to see which of them by the inhumanity of his verdict could succeed better than the others in satisfying the Empress's desire. Thus she saw to it that the property of anyone who had offended her should be immediately pocketed by the Treasury, and after having him most cruelly flogged, though he might well be descended from a long line of noble ancestors, she did not hesitate to punish him with either banishment or death. But if by any chance one of her favourites was known to have committed homicide or any other of the major crimes, she mocked and ridiculed the efforts of the prosecutors, and forced them much against their will to shut up about what had occurred.

67. The Greek is unintelligible, and no emendation is convincing.

Moreover, when the fancy took her, she amused herself by turning the most serious matters into a subject for laughter, as if a comedy were being performed on the theatrical stage. For instance, there was one of the Patricians, an old man who had long held public office. I am well aware of his name, but I shall on no account mention it for fear of keeping alive indefinitely the ridicule that befell him. He was unable to collect a large sum owed to him by one of the Empress's servants, and so he went to her in order to accuse the other party to the transaction and to petition her for help in securing his due. But Theodora had advance information and gave instructions to her eunuchs that when the Patrician appeared before her they were to form a circle round him and listen carefully to what she said, indicating what they must say in response. When the Patrician was admitted to the women's quarters, he prostrated himself in the way she always insisted on and, as if on the point of weeping, spoke thus:

Mistress, it is a painful thing for a Patrician to be short of money. For what in other men brings sympathy and compassion is regarded as ridiculous in one of my rank. Anybody else in extreme financial difficulties can inform his creditors of his position and escape immediately from his predicament; but if a Patrician should find himself unable to meet his obligations, he would be terribly ashamed to disclose the situation, and if he did disclose it he would never convince his creditors, who would think it incredible that poverty could be known in such a class of society. If he does convince them, he will inevitably suffer the most shameful and agonizing misery. Well, Mistress, I have both creditors who have lent their money to me and debtors who have borrowed mine. Those who have lent to me are perpetually pressing for payment, and respect for my position in society makes it impossible for me to put them off, while those who are in my debt, not happening to be Patricians, resort to inhuman excuses. I appeal to you therefore, I beg you and implore you to help me secure my due and escape from my present unhappy predicament.

Such was his statement. And the woman replied by intoning, 'Patrician So-and-So', and the chorus of eunuchs chanted their response: 'That's a mighty big hernia you've got there!' When the suppliant renewed his appeal and spoke in very much the same terms as before, the woman repeated her former reply and the chorus their former response, until the poor fellow gave up in despair, prostrated himself in the regulation way, and departing from there returned home.

For most of the year, the Empress spent her time in the suburbs overlooking the sea, chiefly in the place called Herion.⁶⁸ This meant a great deal of discomfort for her huge retinue of attendants, for provisions were in short supply, and they were exposed to dangers from the sea, especially if a storm happened to break, or the whale made a sudden attack somewhere in the area.⁶⁹ But they⁷⁰ were indifferent to the sufferings of all men alive, so long as they themselves could live in luxurious comfort. Theodora's method of dealing with those who had offended her shall be my next subject. Of course I shall mention only a few cases, that I may not seem to be toiling at an interminable task.

[16] When Amalasuntha,⁷¹ in her anxiety to part company with the Goths, made up her mind to change her whole way of life and was thinking of migrating to Byzantium, as has been stated in the previous account,⁷² Theodora reflected that the woman was of proud descent and a Queen, besides being extremely attractive in appearance and swift as lightning to find means to her ends, and became suspicious of her splendid and extraordinarily virile bearing, the fickle spirit of her own husband giving her further cause for alarm. She made her jealousy apparent in a far from inconsequential fashion; rather, she

68. On the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus.

69. Nicknamed Porphyryon, this huge creature was a menace to shipping for half a century.

70. Meaning the imperial pair.

71. Amalasuntha (493-534), daughter of Theoderic the Ostrogoth, succeeded her father in 526 first as regent and then as Queen in Italy, where she found herself locked in a power struggle with her cousin Theodahad that opened the way to Justinian's reconquest of the peninsula.

72. *Wars* 5.2.22.

schemed to ensnare the woman and bring her to her death. Forthwith she induced her husband to send Peter to Italy by himself to act as an ambassador. At his departure the Emperor gave him the instructions detailed in the appropriate section of my work,⁷³ where through fear of the Empress it was quite impossible for me to tell the true story of what happened. She herself gave him this single command – to remove the woman from this world at the earliest possible moment; and she saw to it that the man was swept off his feet by the hope of ample rewards if he carried out her commands. When he arrived in Italy – for man is incapable by nature of proceeding with hesitation to a brutal murder when he has hopes of some office, perhaps, or a big monetary reward – he approached Theodahad with an offer of some sort and persuaded him to do away with Amalasuntha.⁷⁴ As recompense he was awarded the rank of *Magister*⁷⁵ and became immensely powerful and hated more than any man alive.

So ended the story of Amalasuntha. In Justinian's employment was a letter-writer named Priscus, utterly villainous and as blustering as any Paphlagonian,⁷⁶ just the man to fit in with the character of his master, and only too anxious to please him in the expectation of receiving similar treatment in return. Consequently he very soon accumulated a huge fortune by very shady means. However, on the grounds that he treated her with scorn and put obstacles in her way, Theodora denounced him to her husband. Her first attempts produced no result, but it was not long before she put her enemy on board a ship and dispatched him in mid-winter to a destination of her own choosing. There she had his head shaved and, though he was most unwilling, compelled him to become a priest! The Emperor himself behaved as if he knew nothing at all of what was going on: he made no attempt to discover the whereabouts of Priscus, nor did he ever give him another thought, but sat in silence as

73. *Wars* 5.4.17.

74. She was strangled in her bath.

75. *Magister officiorum* – commander of the Palace Guards.

76. An allusion to the punning gibe often applied by Aristophanes to Cleon.

if lost in lethargy whilst not omitting to pocket all that remained of the money that Priscus had left behind.

Suspicion fell upon Theodora of being in love with one of her servants called Areobindus, a lad of barbarian stock but handsome and young, whom she had personally appointed, it so happened, to be her steward. Wishing to refute the charge (though, as they say, she was madly smitten with him), for the moment she made up her mind to maltreat him in the most harsh manner for no reason at all. What happened to him after we have no idea, nor has anyone seen him to this day. For if she chose to conceal anything that was going on, that thing remained unspoken and no reference was ever made to it; anyone who knew the facts was no longer allowed to report them to any of his closest friends, nor might the man who wished to learn of them ask any questions, however curious he might be. For since mankind's first appearance on the earth, no tyrant has ever been regarded with such fear. No one who had given offence stood any chance of escaping detection: an army of spies kept her informed of all that was said or done both in public and in private. In cases where she did not wish the punishment of the offender to be generally known, this is what she used to do. She first sent for the man; then, if he happened to be a person of rank, she would with the strictest secrecy hand him over to one of her attendants with instructions to convey him to the farthest limits of the Roman Empire. At dead of night the attendant would put the offender on board ship shrouded and fettered, and go on board with him. Then at the place appointed by the Empress he would furtively hand him over to someone well qualified for this task, impressing on him that he must keep the prisoner absolutely safe, and forbidding him to say a word to anyone until the Empress felt sorry for the unfortunate creature, or, after dying a lingering death and wasting away for many years as a result of the hardships which he suffered there, he reached the end of his days.

Vassianus, again, one of the Greens, a young man of some distinction, made such uncomplimentary remarks about her that she was furious with him. News of her displeasure soon came to his ears, so he took refuge in the Church of the Arch-

angel.⁷⁷ She at once detailed the officer in charge of the people⁷⁸ to deal with him, giving instruction that he was not to charge Vassianus for his abuse of her, but rather for sodomy.⁷⁹ The officer soon had him out of the sanctuary and tortured him with an unendurable form of punishment. When the people saw a member of the upper classes who had been surrounded with luxury all his life overwhelmed with such agonies, they were immediately cut to the heart, and their groans and laments rose to high heaven as they pleaded for the young man. But Theodora made his punishment even worse: she had him castrated and killed, though he had never been brought to trial, and finished by confiscating his estate for the Treasury. Thus whenever this damned woman worked herself up, no sanctuary was inviolate, no law offered any protection, nor was the intercession of a city's entire population sufficient to save the offender from his doom, nor could anything else on earth overcome her determination.

In the same way Diogenes, because he was a Green, roused Theodora's fury, although he was a charming fellow, very popular with everyone, including the Emperor himself. But that fact did not weaken her determination to charge him slanderously with sexual relations with men. She suborned two of his household slaves and produced them at court to serve both as prosecutors and witnesses against their owner. He was not examined secretly and behind locked doors, as was usual with her, but in open court, with many judges appointed who were men of distinction, in deference to the high standing of Diogenes. The judges, after investigating the case with great thoroughness, came to the conclusion that the evidence of the household servants was not weighty enough to enable them to reach a verdict, especially as they were slave boys. So the Empress locked up Theodore, one of Diogenes' closest friends, in her favourite cells. There she set about her victim with many flattering enticements, and finally with prolonged physical torture.

77. St Michael.

78. The *Quaesitor* – an office established by Justinian; see *J.Nov* 80.

79. That is to say, he was not arraigned for *iniuria* but fell foul of Justinian's crackdown on pederasty. See *J.Nov* 77 and 141.

Since this treatment produced no result, she ordered a strip of leather to be wound round the prisoner's head about his ears and then twisted and tightened. Theodore imagined that his eyes had left their sockets and had jumped out of his head, but he resolutely declined to confess to anything that he had not done. Accordingly the judges ruled that the evidence had failed to substantiate the charge and found Diogenes Not Guilty, and the city with one accord celebrated a holiday in honour of the event.

[17] That was the end of that. But at the beginning of this account I described what Belisarius and Photius and Buzes suffered at her hands. In addition, two members of the Blue faction, of Cilician origin, at the head of a riotous crowd, set upon Callinicus, Governor of the Second Cilicia, and subjected him to physical assault. His groom, who was standing by his side and tried to shield his master, was murdered before the eyes of the governor and the whole populace. The factionalists were convicted of a series of murders culminating in this one, and in accordance with the law the governor sentenced them to death; but when Theodora heard of it, she flaunted her support of the Blues by seizing Callinicus while he was still in office, and without the slightest pretext impaled him over the murderers' grave. And the Emperor, pretending to cry and lament for the murdered man, sat there squealing like a pig,⁸⁰ and though he uttered dire threats against those who had perpetrated the outrage he did nothing at all. But the money of the dead man he plundered without the slightest hesitation.

But Theodora also made it her business to devise punishments for sins of the flesh. Prostitutes – more than 500 in all – were rounded up, women who sold their services in public at three coppers a time, just enough to keep body and soul together. They were dispatched to the mainland opposite and were confined in the Convent known as Repentance in an attempt to force them into a better way of life.⁸¹ However, some of them from time to time threw themselves down from the parapet

80. Borrowed from Aristophanes' *Acharnians*.

81. See *Buildings* 1.9.3.

during the night and so escaped being transmogrified against their will.

In Byzantium there were two young sisters. Not only had their father – and his father and grandfather before him – attained the consulship, but their remote ancestors had been some of the most distinguished members of the Senate. These girls had already been married, but the unfortunate deaths of their husbands had left them widowed. Thereupon Theodora picked out two vulgar, revolting creatures with the firm intention of pairing them off with the girls, whom she accused of improper living. Terrified by the prospect, they took refuge in the church of Sophia and, making for the holy baptistery, held on to the font with their hands. But such privations and sufferings did the Empress inflict upon them that in their anxiety to escape from the miseries of their confinement they became reconciled to the lesser evil of the proposed marriages. So it was that for Theodora no place remained unsullied or inviolate. Thus these girls were coerced into matrimony with a pair of beggarly louts far beneath them in station, though there were young aristocrats who would have been delighted to marry them. Their mother, a widow herself, dared not voice her grief or shed a tear over this calamity but steeled herself to attend the betrothal. Later Theodora, anxious to shake off the guilt of her loathsome conduct, resolved to make amends to the young wives at the cost of injury to the public good. She bestowed an office of authority on each of the husbands. But the girls found no consolation even in this, and incurable, intolerable distresses were brought by these men on almost all their subordinates, as I shall show in later accounts. For Theodora had no respect either for office or for the state, nor did anything else matter so long as she accomplished her purpose.

Now it happened that while she was on the stage Theodora had become pregnant by one of her lovers, and, being unusually slow to recognize her unfortunate condition, she tried by all her usual means to procure an abortion; but, try as she might, she could not get rid of the untimely infant, since by now it was not far from acquiring perfect human shape. So, as she was achieving nothing, she was compelled to abandon her efforts

and give birth to the child. When the baby's father saw that she was upset and annoyed because now that she was a mother she would no longer be able to employ her body as before, he rightly suspected that she would resort to infanticide, so he took up the child in acknowledgement that it was his and named it John, since it was a boy. Then he went off to Arabia for which he was bound. When he was himself on the point of death and John was in his early teens, the boy learnt from his father's lips the whole story about his mother and, when his father departed this life, performed all the customary rites over him. A little while later he came to Byzantium and made his arrival known to those who at all times had access to his mother. They, never imagining that she would feel any differently from the generality of mankind, reported to the mother that her son John had arrived. Fearing that the story would come to the ears of her husband, Theodora gave instructions that the boy was to come into her presence. When he appeared, she took one look at him and put him in the hands of one of her household whom she regularly entrusted with such commissions. By what means the poor lad was removed from the world of the living I am unable to say, but no one to this day has ever set eyes on him, even since the decease of the Empress.

At that period almost all women had become morally depraved. For they sinned against their husbands with complete impunity, since such behaviour involved them in no danger or harm. Wives proved guilty of adultery were exempt from penalty, as they had only to go straight to the Empress and turn the tables by bringing a countersuit against their husbands – who had not been charged with any offence – and dragging them into court. All that was left to the husbands, against whom nothing had been proved, was to pay twice the amount of the dowry they had received, and as a rule to be scourged and led away to prison – and then once more to watch their faithless partners showing off and inviting the attentions of their paramours more brazenly than before. Many of the paramours actually gained promotion by rendering this service. Small wonder that from then on most husbands, however shocking their wives' behaviour might be, were only too glad to keep

their mouths shut and avoid being scourged, conceding every licence to their wives by letting them believe that they had not been found out.

The Empress felt herself entitled to assume control of every branch of public affairs according to her own personal ideas. It was she who filled the offices of Church and State, investigating one point alone and invariably insisting that no honourable or good man should be a candidate for high office – no one in fact who would be incapable of giving effect to her instructions. Again, she arranged all marriages as if by divine right. In her time no contracts of marriage were voluntarily entered into: a man would suddenly discover that he had a wife, not because he had any desire for one, which is the one thing that matters even among the barbarians, but because Theodora willed it. The women thus pushed into marriage found themselves in the same disagreeable situation: they were forced to live with men when they had not the slightest inclination that way. Often the Empress would even fetch the bride out of the bridal chamber at a mere whim, leaving the bridegroom still unmarried and merely declaring in a fit of anger that she disapproved of the match. Among the large number of men she treated this way were Leontius, who occupied the position of *Referendarius*, and Saturninus, son of Hermogenes the *Magister*, both of them just married.

This Saturninus had married a second cousin, a maiden of good birth and excellent character, whose father Cyril had approved the match, Hermogenes having died earlier. No sooner had they shut themselves in the bridal chamber than Theodora seized the groom and carried him off into another one, where in spite of his heartbroken protestations he was married to Chrysomallo's daughter. This Chrysomallo had once been a dancer and later a harlot, but at the time of this incident she was living in the Palace with another Chrysomallo and Indaro. For thence it was that after abandoning the penis and the life of the theatre they managed their affairs. When Saturninus had slept with his new bride and found that she had already been deflowered, he informed one of those close to him that the girl he had married was nothing but damaged goods.

When this comment came to Theodora's ears, she said that he was showing off and had no right to be so puffed up, and ordered her servants to bend him over like any schoolboy. Then she gave him behind a fearsome beating and told him not to talk such nonsense in the future.

What she did to John the Cappadocian has been related in an earlier account.⁸² Her actions sprang from her anger against him, which was not due to his offences against the state – she proved this later, when men who treated those under them more outrageously still in no case received such punishment at her hands – but to the temerity he showed in standing up to her in one matter after another, and above all to the damaging accusation which he brought against her to the Emperor, with the result that she and her husband were almost in a state of open war. As I said at the start, I must here at all costs make clear the true reasons for what happened.

When she had locked him up in Egypt after he had undergone all the miseries that I have already revealed, even then she was not satisfied with the punishments she had inflicted on him but kept up a relentless search for false witnesses to bring against him. Four years later she managed to find two Greens belonging to the faction in Cyzicus: they were believed to have taken part in the revolt against the bishop.⁸³ By means of flattery, arguments and threats she got these two so firmly in her power that one of them, terrified and at the same time elated with the expectations of profit, laid the horrible responsibility for the bishop's murder on the shoulders of John. The other man flatly refused to speak anything but the truth, even though he was stretched on the rack till he seemed certain to die at any moment. And so she was completely baffled in her efforts to get rid of John on this pretext; yet she cut off the right hands of these two young men – of one because he could not be coerced into giving false evidence, of the other for fear her scheming might become clear as daylight. And although this was all going on in public with no attempt at concealment, her

82. *Wars* 1.25.13.

83. Eusebius, Bishop of Cyzicus.

husband pretended that he knew nothing whatsoever about it.

[18] That the Emperor was not a human being but, as stated, a demon in human guise could be demonstrated by considering the magnitude of the calamities which he brought on the human race. For it is by this immensity that the power of the doer is manifested. To make any accurate estimate of the number of lives destroyed by this man would never, it seems to me, be within the power of any living being, or even of God. For sooner could one number all the sands than the hosts of men destroyed by this Emperor. But making a rough estimate of the area which has been denuded of its inhabitants, I suggest ten thousand times ten thousand times ten thousand lost their lives.⁸⁴ Libya, for instance, in spite of its enormous size, has been laid so utterly waste that however far one went it would be a difficult and remarkable achievement to find a single person there. Yet the Vandals who took part in the recent armed revolt in that country were 80,000 strong, and the number of their women and children and slaves can hardly be guessed. As for the Libyans who had once lived in the cities and those who worked the land and those who toiled on the sea – as I know only too well since I saw it with my own eyes – how could any man on earth begin to estimate their vast numbers? And even they were few in comparison with the Moorish inhabitants, who perished to a man along with their wives and little ones. Furthermore, many of the Roman soldiers and many of those who had accompanied them from Byzantium lie under the earth. Thus if one insisted that in Libya alone 5,000,000 people lost their lives, he would, I suspect, be understating the facts. The reason was that as soon as the Vandals had been crushed, Justinian took no steps to consolidate his hold over the country and made no plans to ensure that its resources should be secured for him by winning the firm loyalty of the inhabitants. Instead he immediately instructed Belisarius to return home without loss of time, accusing him of political ambitions of which he was entirely

84. Procopius' estimate is, of course, no more intended to be taken literally than is St John's *ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands*, or the *thousands of ten thousands* of Rebekah's progeny in the Bible.

innocent, so that from then on he could order things at his own sweet will and swallow up all the plunder of Libya.

He immediately sent out assessors, if you please, to value the land, and imposed crushing taxation unknown before, and assumed the ownership of all the most valuable estate properties. Then he turned his attention to the Arians, whom he barred from celebrating their customary sacraments.⁸⁵ Finally he kept his armed forces waiting for their pay and in other ways made life a burden for his soldiers. The result of all this was an outbreak of revolts that led to widespread destruction. For he could never bring himself to leave well alone: he had an innate passion for throwing everything into confusion and chaos.

Italy, which is at least three times as large as Libya, has been far more completely depopulated than the latter, so proof of the scale of destruction there too will not be far to seek. The responsibility for what happened in Italy has already been made clear earlier.⁸⁶ All the blunders that he made in Libya had their counterparts here. And by sending his 'Logothetes', as they are called, to swell the staff on the spot, he instantly overturned and ruined everything.

Before this war began, Gothic rule stretched from Gaul to the boundaries of Dacia, where stands the city of Sirmium. Gaul and Venetia were for the most part under Germanic occupation at the time when the Roman army arrived in Italy. Sirmium and its neighbourhood are in the hands of the Gepids, but all this region, roughly speaking, is completely depopulated. For some died in the war; others succumbed to disease and starvation, which war inevitably brings in its train. Illyricum and the whole of Thrace – that is to say, from the Ionian Gulf to the suburbs of Byzantium, an area that includes Greece and the Chersonnese – were overrun almost every year by Huns, Slavs and Antae, from the day that Justinian took charge of the Roman Empire. In these raids the local inhabitants suffered untold miseries. I believe that in every incursion more than 200,000 of the Romans residing there were killed or enslaved,

85. See *Codex Iustinianus* 1.5.14.

86. *Wars* 8.23.

so that the whole region was turned into a second Scythian desert.⁸⁷

Such were the consequences of the wars in Libya and in Europe. All this time the Saracens were continuously over-running Roman territory in the East from Egypt to the frontiers of Persia, doing their deadly work so thoroughly that the whole of that region was left almost uninhabited: I do not think it possible that any human being, however careful his investigation, will ever find out the numbers of those who perished in these raids. Again, the Persians under Chosroes thrice invaded the rest of Roman territory and razed the cities to the ground. Of the men and women they captured in the cities they stormed and in the various country districts, some they butchered, others they carried away with them, leaving the land completely uninhabited wherever they happened to swoop. And from the time when they first invaded Colchis, the destruction of the Colchians, the Lazi and the Romans has continued to this day.

However, neither Persians nor Saracens nor the Huns nor the Slav peoples nor any other of the barbarians were lucky enough to withdraw from Roman soil unscathed. During their incursions, and still more during sieges and battles, they came up against many obstacles, and their casualties were as heavy as those of their enemies. For not only Romans but nearly all the barbarians had the benefit of Justinian's bloodthirstiness. As if Chosroes was not bad enough a character himself, Justinian, as I made clear in the appropriate section,⁸⁸ provided him with every inducement to go to war. For he took no pains to fit his actions to the circumstance of the moment but did everything at the wrong time. In time of peace or truce he was always treacherously contriving pretexts for aggression against his neighbours; in time of war he slackened off in the most foolish way, showing a woeful lack of energy in preparing for the projected operations, simply because he hated to part with money. Instead of giving his mind to the task in hand, he went in for stargazing and for foolish attempts to determine the

87. An allusion to Aristophanes' *Acharnians*.

88. *Wars* I.23.1.

nature of God: he would not abandon the war because he was bloodthirsty and murderous by nature, nor could he overcome his enemies because sheer meanness prevented him from tackling essential problems. Thus it is that during his reign the whole earth was drenched with human blood, shed in an unending stream by both the Romans and almost all of the barbarians.

Such, in fine, was the toll of the wars that took place at this time in all parts of the Empire. And when I reckon up the toll of the civil strife that took place in Byzantium and every city besides, my conclusion is that as many lives were lost in this way as in the wars. Justice and impartial punishment for crimes committed were hardly ever seen, and the Emperor gave enthusiastic support to one of the two factions, so naturally their rivals did not lie down either. They all took to desperate courses, utterly heedless of the consequences, the one side because they were the underdogs, the other side because they had the upper hand. Sometimes they went for each other en masse, sometimes they fought in small groups, or again, from time to time they laid traps for individual opponents, and for thirty-two years they never missed one opportunity to practise frightful brutalities against each other, while at the same time they were constantly being sentenced to death by the magistrate responsible for public order. But even so, punishment for the crimes committed fell almost entirely on the Greens. Moreover, the punitive action against Samaritans and so-called heretics filled the Roman Empire with blood. This brief sketch is all that I propose to offer now: I gave a sufficiently detailed account a little earlier.

Such were the disasters which in the time of this demon in human form befell the entire human race, disasters for which Justinian, as the reigning Emperor, provided the causes. The immeasurable distress which some hidden power and demonic nature enabled him to bring upon his fellow-men I shall now go on to reveal. For while this man administered Roman affairs there was a continuous series of catastrophes, which as some maintained were due to the presence here of this wicked demon and to his machinations, though others argued that the Divinity, hating all that Justinian did and turning away from the Roman

Empire, granted the avenging demons licence to effect such things in this manner.

To begin with, the River Scirtus inundated Edessa, bringing on the inhabitants calamities without number, which I shall recount in a later volume.⁸⁹ Next the Nile rose in the usual way but failed to subside again at the proper time, bringing upon some of the inhabitants sufferings which I described earlier.⁹⁰ Thirdly, the Cydnus poured almost all round Tarsus, inundated the city for days on end and did not subside until it had done incalculable damage there. Again, earthquakes destroyed Antioch, the first city of the East, Seleucia, which is its nearest neighbour, and Anazarbus, the most famous city in Cilicia.⁹¹ The number of lives lost in these three cities it is impossible to estimate; and we must not forget Ibora and Amasia, the first city in Pontus, or Polybotus in Phrygia, and the city which the Pisidians call Philomede, or Lychnidus in Epirus, and Corinth, all of which had huge populations for centuries past. Every one of these cities has been overthrown by an earthquake during this short period, and the inhabitants almost without exception have perished with them. On top of the earthquakes came the plague which I mentioned before;⁹² this carried off almost half the survivors. On such a vast scale was the loss of life, first while this man was administering the Roman state and later when he held the imperial title.

89. A promise fulfilled in *Buildings* 2.7.2. The flood took place in 525.

90. *Wars* 7.29.6.

91. Major quakes occurred in 526 and 542.

92. *Wars* 2.22-3.