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# INTRODUCTION

## I. APPROACH AND RATIONALE

This teaching unit, *The Byzantine Empire in the Age of Justinian*, is one of over seventy learning units published by the National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS). The fruits of collaboration between history professors and experienced teachers of American history, the units represent specific issues and dramatic episodes in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning point in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected issues and dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow's history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, magazines, newspapers, films, private correspondence, literature, contemporary photographs, and paintings from the period under study. What we hope you achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to have your students connect more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of being there, a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian's craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

## II. CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: Teaching Background Materials, including Unit Overview, Unit Context, Correlation to the National Standards for History, Unit Objectives, and Historical Background; a Dramatic Moment; and Lesson Plans with Documents. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 7–10, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

The Historical Background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific Dramatic Moment to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The Lesson Plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher, which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources that accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any handouts or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each unit can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories, and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.

# TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

## I. UNIT OVERVIEW

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

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

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

## II. UNIT CONTEXT

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

## III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

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

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

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

**Standard 2: Historical Comprehension:** Appreciate historical perspectives.

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

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

## IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

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

**V. LESSON PLANS**

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