Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire

Mosaics are made from pieces of glass or stone and glued together. They are most commonly found on the floor or ceiling.

Emperor Justinian

One famous Byzantine Emperor was Justinian I. Justinian ruled from AD 527 to 565. Justinian created a set of laws called the Justinian Code. This code said that the emperor made all of the laws and interpreted the laws as well. The Justinian Code was law throughout the empire. Many of our modern laws can be traced back to the Justinian Code.

Justinian had a goal of re-uniting the Roman Empire. He sent out armies to battle the barbarians who had taken control in the West. Justinian's Roman armies were very successful, taking back parts of Africa and most of Italy.

On these two maps, you can see the conquests of the Byzantine armies during the reign of Emperor Justinian. Belisarius was the commander who led these armies in an attempt to win back the old Western Roman Empire.

The war effort to take back the western part of the empire forced Justinian to raise taxes on the people of the Byzantine Empire. The Roman citizens were angry with Justinian about the high taxes for the war effort, and he was becoming unpopular. Even more unpopular was Empress Theodora, Justinian's wife, because she was originally a circus performer and came from the lower class of Romans.

"Who was this woman, who had such control over the decisions of her husband?" They
thought to themselves. Not one to take a back seat to her husband, Theodora proposed laws that protected the rights of women in the empire.

The Byzantines, like the old Romans in the West, enjoyed chariot races at the hippodrome, a large oval stadium designed for races. Like our modern sports, the Byzantines had teams they supported. The Byzantine chariot teams were named after colors: The Blues, Reds, Greens, and Whites. After a race, riots would, at times, break out in the stands and overflow into streets, as the fans got into arguments. During Justinian’s reign, the Blues and Greens were the dominant teams.

After a particular riot, a fan of the Blues and a fan of the Greens were arrested. Justinian, noticing how unhappy people were with him, decided to free these two people and hold a chariot race on January 13, 532. During the race, fans got out of control, and started to shout insults at the emperor. Rather than cheering for their teams, fans of both the Greens and Blues shouted Nike, meaning win or conquer. Next, the fans stormed Justinian’s luxury box, which was connected to his palace grounds. Justinian fled to the palace as the Nika Riot spilled out into the streets. The palace was under siege as most of the city, including the church called the Hagia Sophia (Church of Holy Wisdom), was destroyed.

A prisoner in his own palace, Justinian decided to board a ship and sail away from Constantinople, stepping down as emperor, but saving his life. As he started to leave, he looked behind him to find his wife, Theodora, stubbornly refusing. “I would rather die an empress, than live on the run, and besides, purple makes a wonderful burial veil,” she said. Seeing his wife’s courage, Justinian decided to stay. The riot was controlled, and Justinian continued to rule the Byzantine Empire.

Empress Theodora refused to leave Constantinople in the wake of the Nika Riot.

Justinian set out to rebuild the city after the the Nika Riots. Justinian rebuilt the Hagia Sophia, which, after the rebuilding, had the largest dome in the world. The building is still standing today, although it is now a mosque, since the conquering Ottoman Turks were Muslim.

The Hagia Sophia, rebuilt, with its grand dome, by Justinian, whom you can see with Theodora in the insert.

(Here is the melody of the song "Norwegian Wood," the lyrics describe the life of Empress Theodora. Amy Burvall, and Herb Mahelons, are two teachers from Hawaii who create short videos to help their students remember highlights of history topics.)