

CHAPTER
11

Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *from Secret History*
by Procopius

In 533 the Byzantine army led by General Belisarius wrested North Africa from the Vandals. Byzantine court historian Procopius, who accompanied the general, wrote the Histories in support of his campaigns. But, in 550, Procopius also wrote Secret History, which he intended to be published after his death. As you read this excerpt from Secret History, think about the portrait that Procopius paints of the Byzantine emperor Justinian.

That Justinian was not a man, but a demon, as I have said, in human form, one might prove by considering the enormity of the evils he brought upon mankind. For in the monstrosity of his actions the power of a fiend is manifest. Certainly an accurate reckoning of all those whom he destroyed would be impossible, I think, for anyone but God to make. Sooner could one number, I fancy, the sands of the sea than the men this Emperor murdered. Examining the countries that he made desolate of inhabitants, I would say he slew a trillion people. For Libya [North Africa], vast as it is, he so devastated that you would have to go a long way to find a single man, and he would be remarkable. Yet eighty thousand Vandals capable of bearing arms had dwelt there, and as for their wives and children and servants, who could guess their number? Yet still more numerous than these were the Mauretanians, who with their wives and children were all exterminated. And again, many Roman soldiers and those who followed them to Constantinople, the earth now covers; so that if one should venture to say that five million men perished in Libya alone, he would not, I imagine, be telling the half of it.

The reason for this was that after the Vandals were defeated, Justinian planned, not how he might best strengthen his hold on the country, nor how by safeguarding the interests of those who were loyal to him he might have the goodwill of his subjects: but instead he foolishly recalled Belisarius

at once, on the charge that the latter intended to make himself King (an idea of which Belisarius was utterly incapable), and so that he might manage affairs there himself and be able to plunder the whole of Libya. Sending commissioners to value the province, he imposed grievous taxes where before there had been none. Whatever lands were most valuable, he seized, and prohibited the Arians from observing their religious ceremonies. Negligent toward sending necessary supplies to the soldiers, he was overstrict with them in other ways; wherefore mutinies arose resulting in the deaths of many. For he was never able to abide by established customs, but naturally threw everything into confusion and disturbance. . . .

So while he was Emperor, the whole earth ran red with . . . blood. . . .

from Procopius, Secret History, translated by Richard Atwater. Reprinted in Alvin M. Josephy, ed., The Horizon History of Africa (American Heritage, 1971), 124.

Discussion Questions

Analyzing Issues

1. How would you characterize Procopius' opinion of Justinian?
2. What evidence does Procopius offer to support his opinions of Justinian?
3. **Forming and Supporting Opinions** Do you think that Procopius' depiction of Justinian in this excerpt is accurate? Why or why not?