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Justinian and sexual diseases. Hagiography and prophylaxis in early Byzantium

Abstract:

This research compares collected data from texts regarding the life of Emperor Justinian, with information on cases of sexual diseases in the context of Early Byzantium. A hagiographical text, *The Life of Saint Samson*, recounts that a serious illness affected Emperor Justinian's genital organs for which the Byzantine physicians of the time failed to find a cure. The disease was only abated through a miracle of Saint Samson. This *adynaton* placed the Emperor in a "coverage space". Afterwards, in the 23rd or 24th year of his reign, Justinian suffered a leg pain, accompanied by pain during urination. Körbler hypothesizes that these symptoms were owed to syphilis. The affliction of the Emperor's leg was cured through the intercession of Saints Cosmas and Damian. Rather the Emperor's illness can be detected as a literary *locus* of hagiography; moreover, the *adynaton* confirms the foundation of the imperial institution, and reaffirms the adequacy of the sovereign.

Key word: *adynata*, Justinian, syphilis, sexual disease, Saints Cosmas and Damian, Theodora

Introduction

The present research stems from data extrapolated from the different sources covering the life of Emperor Justinian (482-565), such as the *Life of St Samson* (?-530) or the *Historia Arcana* by Procopius of Cesarea (490-565). Those sources contain important information that historians have even used to evaluate the degree of medical proficiency in Early Byzantium. In this way, the current research aims to compare Justinian's biographical data with information provided by medical texts, which investigate cases of sexual disease in the context of Early Byzantium¹.

Yet there is more to it than that. The unofficial texts concerning Justinian's life introduce a further theme to the audience: the miracle. Indeed, the miracle was extremely necessary for the Byzantine Christian Monarchy: it served to explain and justify the sovereign's adequacy to hold the Empire. The working of miracles was clear proof that the Roman Emperor had the blessing of the Divine, and in this context, it became very useful indeed for any apologies in support of the Monarchy, and was also indispensable for the cyclical re-foundation of the Empire. Nevertheless, the miracle was a traditional *locus* in any imperial biography, and consequently it did not compromise the credibility of the historical data: it was very difficult to argue that the various authors invented eccentric medical treatments in comparison to the usual treatments employed by the public. Nevertheless, the credibility of the miraculous event, when compared to the available medical knowledge of the period, was confirmed by a malevolent narration known as the *Historia Arcana*. This text shows that this fact was universally known and, therefore, the author couldn't hide it.

Concurrently, the Emperor's illness became a *locus* for hagiography and allowed to the saints, who did wonderful things. It was used to communicate the values of the Church as well. Therefore, it was not only the Church that stood to gain something from the accidents of imperial life. Nevertheless, the same Empire gained something from these diseases because it recovered its authoritativeness started from the ideological point of view.

However, this reality involves some caution. The venereal disease afflicting by Emperor Justinian became a rhetorical expedient of the *Kaiserkritik*. At the same time, the mention of this *locus* constituted an occasion where we can find the expression of dissent by the aristocracy.

¹ Kaldellys, 2004.

Early Byzantium, gonorrhoea and, syphilis: medical care and medical knowledge

Byzantine doctors had an extensive and refined knowledge of sexual diseases, but this was in contrast to the technical means they possessed. Firstly, physicians suffered from the absence of endoscopic instruments and lacked the means to analyse the secretions of the genital organs; nevertheless, many symptoms of diseases, such as the markers for urethritis, were well-known to doctors. It is equally important, however, that we consider that the same symptoms could have had many origins. For example, urethritis is caused by both gonococcus and other germs alike. Therefore, Byzantines' knowledge of particular symptoms was independent of its precise etiological agents.

The Emperor's precise symptoms, which evoked gonorrhoea², were mentioned in the Bible and were later also described by Celsus in the 1st century BC and by Galen in the 2nd century BC. The symptoms themselves had been recognized as far back as the treatises of Hippocrates in the 4th century BC, who also described parasitic leucorrhoea, mycotic leucorrhoea, and bacterial leucorrhoea as well.

Things are markedly different in the case of syphilis; indeed, many hypotheses circulate regarding the origin of the disease in Europe. These arguments were of great interest and at the same time a source for fierce division between medical historians. Early doctrine held that syphilis was introduced to Europe no earlier than the final decade of the 15th century, by the sailors of Christopher Columbus. Today, eminent specialists have put forward biological arguments that demonstrate the disease spread throughout the world in ancient times. According to Hudson's point of view, syphilis originated as an endemic affliction during the Palaeolithic, and transformed into venereal syphilis in a multitude of places at different times, as rural life became more and more urbanized³. Indigenous and venereal forms coexisted in Mesopotamia and Egypt as early as between 4000 and 6000 BC. According to this theory, indigenous syphilis spread throughout Western Europe during the Roman period and persisted throughout the Middle Ages. This hypothesis, based on biological, sociological and cultural criteria, was however never confirmed by osteoarchaeological data. For example, no trace of syphilis was ever found

² Oriel, 2012; Brondy, 1937, pp. 2-106; Sigerist, 1961; Wortley, 2004, pp. 91-107; Angeletti, 1992, pp. 207-218; Grmek, 1989, pp. 133-151.

³ Hudson, 1965, pp. 885-901.

on mortal remains exhumed in Greece and in its environs⁴; and, therefore, the biological data collected appears to show that syphilis was not present in the ancient Greek world, unlike leprosy and tuberculosis whose traces have been attested to in human remains⁵. In the absence of further data, the idea syphilis' extensive presence in Europe becomes difficult to support, in particular for the period under review. The symptoms that affected Justinian were also very generic, and hardly demonstrate that the Emperor did indeed contract this disease.

Theodora, the aristocracy and prejudice: a strange marriage and malicious anecdotes

Justinian's choice of bride, a dancer, aroused both curiosity and ridicule among the aristocracy; if nothing else, it served as an opportune pretext for an incisive *Kaiserkritik*: the Emperor's choice appeared as a denial of the values of traditional hierarchy. The aristocracy preferred endogenous forms of marriage, since their aim was to preserve the attributes of class. A point of view even more amusing, if we consider that it was Emperor Justinian who abolished the law prohibiting marriage between members of the senatorial class and people of a lower social status – and, specifically, with prostitutes⁶. This change in the perception of the values of hierarchy allowed the creation of imaginative anecdotes and justified the consolidation of a *locus* in hagiographic literature. It encouraged the aristocratic re-interpretation of the episodes of Justinian's life, all the more so given that the aristocracy perceived the accession of a person of humble origins to high office as a destabilizing hazard.

The obvious solution was to denigrate the Emperor's chosen, and to evoke situations which highlighted Theodora's lack of credibility and of moral integrity. This virtue was considered an attribute of Roman noblewomen, and was the greatest quality distinguishing them from commoners.

This judgment censured the role of Theodora (497-548), as the first woman who directly intervened in the Imperial government. Procopius regretted this claim: "she believed that she had to regulate everything in the State, on her own initiative". After all, her conduct was

⁴ Vertue, 1983, pp. 277-302.

⁵ Grmek, 1989, pp. 133-151.

⁶ C. J. V, 4, 23; Potter, 2015; Ziche, 2012-2013, pp. 311-323; Browning, 1987, pp. 165-178; Mantellou, 1990, pp. 330-339; Ostrogorsky, 1986, pp. 69-78; Hunger, 1992, pp. 81-82.

stigmatized because it violated the prerogatives of her husband: in particular, her reception of foreign delegations in her private apartments in the absence of her husband. This unprecedented practice opened the doors for numerous tendentious interpretations⁷.

Procopius continues:

“For even Theodora was not disposed to forego this testimony to her dignity, she who acted as though the Roman Empire lay at her feet, but was by no means averse to receiving even the ambassadors of the Persians and of the other barbarians and to bestowing upon them gifts of money, a thing which had never happened since the beginning of time”⁸.

However, her constant presence in government affairs and her readiness helped defuse the crisis generated by the ‘Nika revolt’. The same Procopius reported Theodora’s heartfelt appeal, which violated every social convention of the time. Theodora is claimed to have said: “I believe that in the present situation it is irrelevant to take into account the impropriety that a woman shows courage among men and proposes bold solutions...”. This bold woman closed her intervention with a suggestive remark: “I like an ancient proverb, which said: the royal garment is a nice shroud”⁹.

It is common knowledge that actors and dancers were considered people of dubious morality in the Ancient World. The imperial purple and the crown did not constitute an absolute warranty of imperial virtue, despite the fact that the *peri basileias* used this rhetorical *locus* and attempted to colonize the public subconscious. The political machinations of the period supported this metaphor, and so the imperial insignia, like the royal purple and the crown, embodied the virtues required of any good sovereign. A good Emperor had to gird himself with the “crown of temperance, clothe the purple of justice (...) [and] parry himself with the purple of love for the poor”¹⁰.

Empress Theodora did, in fact, perform such morally dubious activities in her youth, and therefore the Empress herself could not escape from this prejudice¹¹. Little wonder, then, this presumption of her dubious

⁷ Ravegnani, 1989, p. 50.

⁸ Proc. Caes., *Hist. Arc.* XXX, 21-26.

⁹ Proc. Caes., *De bell. Pers.*, I, 24.

¹⁰ Agap. Diac., *Expositio admonitorium*, PG 86, cap. 18; cap. 60; Carile, 2000, pp. 127-149; Patlagean, 1992; Cavarra, 1990, pp. 28-40.

¹¹ Ravegnani, 2016, pp. 25-33.

morality, especially coming from the landed aristocracy. Consequently, this doubt was also extended to her government actions, favouring the creation of specious inferences – and was pervasive enough to arise even when Empress Theodora did works of mercy and penance¹² such as the release and conversion of the whores that had been admitted to the Monastery of Repentance. Procopius malevolently asserted that those women killed themselves, by throwing themselves from the walls of the convent.

He claims:

“Harlots, for instance, to the number of more than five hundred who plied their trade in the midst of the market-place at the rate of three obols – just enough to live on – she gathered together and, sending them over to the opposite mainland, she confined them in the Convent of Repentance, as it is called, trying there to compel them to adopt a new manner of life. And some of them threw themselves down from a height at night and thus escaped the unwelcome transformation”¹³.

Other embarrassing anecdotes also circulated regarding the Empress, which were not limited to her previous activity as a dancer. In fact, the young Theodora was known to have recited in the hippodrome’s theatre and worked in many oriental whorehouses as well, especially in Alexandria.

During her activity across the many cities of the Levant, Theodora almost certainly contracted certain venereal diseases. Nevertheless, Theodora’s father, Acacius – a tamer of wild beasts – forced his two daughters, Comitusa and Theodora, into prostitution. Therefore, when Theodora was little, she likely entertained sexual relationships with customers comparable to pederasty as well. In his work, *Historia Arcana*, Procopius of Caesarea offers a series of scandalous details about Theodora’s life before her imperial marriage¹⁴. He launches a misogynistic attack on the Empress:

“On one occasion she entered the house of one of the notables during the feast, and they said that in the sight of all the banqueters she mounted the projecting part of the banqueting

¹² Mal., 440-441.

¹³ Proc. Caes., *Hist. Arc.* XVIII, 56; XXX, 24.

¹⁴ Wirth & Haury, 1963, pp. 283-284.

couch where their feet lay, and there drew up her clothing in a shameless way, not hesitating to display her licentiousness. And though she made use of three openings, she used to take Nature to task, complaining that it had not pierced her breasts with larger holes so that it might be possible for her to contrive another method of copulation there [...]. And often, even in the theatre, before the eyes of the whole people, she stripped off her clothing and moved about naked through their midst, having only a girdle about her private parts and her groins – not, however, that she was ashamed to display these too to the populace, but because no person is permitted to enter there entirely naked, but must have at least a girdle about the groins. Clothed in this manner, she sprawled out and lay on her back on the ground. And some slaves, whose duty this was, sprinkled grains of barley over her private parts, and geese, which happened to have been provided for this very purpose, picked them off with their beaks, one by one, and ate them. And when she got up, she not only did not blush, but even acted as if she took pride in this strange performance. For she was not merely shameless herself, but also a contriver of shameless deeds above all others”¹⁵.

This historian further reveals her participation in banquets and orgies. Procopius argues that during those orgies the future Empress would copulate with ten or more men. Consequently, the story alleges, she was often pregnant and would attempt to interrupt her pregnancy in various ways. Procopius claims that she failed an abortion and gave birth to a boy, called John, who conveniently disappeared when she became Empress. It is therefore not difficult to imagine that Justinian contracted afflictions from his future wife, whom he probably met in a whorehouse, ranging from a simple bacterial infection to serious venereal diseases such as gonorrhoea.

Neither did the aristocracy forgive Theodora her faith: heretical Nestorianism. Another of Procopius’ malicious anecdotes claims that the holy monk Saba rejected the miracle of an heir for the Empress because the Empress was a heretic. This information was also recorded in the *Vita Sancti Saba*. The monk said: “God (...) will supervise your Empire”¹⁶. The rejection of the miracle demonstrated the woman’s inadequacy for the imperial charge. To the faults of her humble origins, were added

¹⁵ Proc. Caes., *Hist. Arc.* IX, 24-26.

¹⁶ *Vit. S. Sab.* 71.

Theodora's irreverent interference in matters reserved to men, and her error in matters of faith, as damnable testimonies of a vile character.

Procopius didn't forgive her taste for spectacularizing absolute power either, most evident during an ironic repartee against an anonymous patrician, who was named "Patrician So-and-So". The Empress goes on to taunt the patrician's hernia:

"And the woman replied, in sing-song, "O Patrician So-and-So" (naming him), and the chorus of eunuchs, catching up the strain, said responsively, "It's a large hernia you have!" And when the man again made supplication and uttered words resembling what he had said before, the woman replied again in the same vein and the chorus chanted the response, until the poor wretch in despair made his obeisance in the customary manner and departing thence went home"¹⁷.

Therefore, the hatred of the aristocracy for Theodora was perhaps justified. Through the circulation of elitist manuscript copies such as the *Historia Arcana*, the nobility put the absolute monarchy under subdued attack, targeting the most vulnerable representative of the institution foremost. Thus, Theodora also became the 'scapegoat' of a sustained strategy of self-representation, one which did not hide the implications of the absolute system of government.

***Kaiserkritik* and embarrassing anecdotes: the disease as an ambiguous rhetorical formula**

Embarrassing anecdotes are contained in the *Historia Arcana*, a work with an elitist circulation primarily among the aristocracy that suffered the Emperor's increasing interference¹⁸. Here we find a critical intent by the aristocracy against the absolutist politics of Justinian, especially after the Emperor took the title of *despotes* and the Empress that of *despoina*¹⁹. This was the death knell of the last formal limits to the omnipotence of the monarchic institution, which now definitively lost the 'democratic mask' of the principedom²⁰. And so, the 'comedy' of power which began with Augustus finally ended its charade with the monarchy

¹⁷ Proc. Caes., *Hist. Arc.* XV, 25-35.

¹⁸ Wirth & Haury, 1963, pp. 283-284.

¹⁹ Proc. Caes., *Hist. Arc.* XXX, 21-26.

²⁰ Gibbon, 1967, p. 346; Teja, 1993, p. 613.

showing its absolute form²¹. For his part, Procopius directly attacked the absolute monarchy:

“In ancient times, the Senate, as it came into the Emperor’s presence, was accustomed to do obeisance in the following manner: any man of patrician rank saluted him on the right breast. And the Emperor would kiss him on the head and then dismiss him; but all the rest first bent the right knee to the Emperor, and then withdrew. It was not at all customary, however, to salute the Empress. But in the case of Justinian and Theodora, all other members of the Senate as well as those who held the rank of Patricians, whenever they entered into their presence, would prostrate themselves to the floor, flat on their faces, and holding their hands and feet stretched far out they would touch one foot of each monarch with their lips before rising”²².

In this way, the *Historia Arcana* was intrinsically a product for the use and consumption of the aristocracy. Above all, it aimed to demolish of the figure of the Emperor in the public eye. It relentlessly attacked the Emperor’s ‘weaker side’: his wife and her humble origins. All in all, these were malicious exaggerations which could always be traced back to a political design and went far beyond mere narrative intent. They were clearly directed against the monarchy, and returned the point of view of the disgruntled aristocracy, which commanded Procopius to write a polemical work.

Little wonder then that such embarrassing anecdotes were transposed into the Byzantine hagiography, and were later reinterpreted for the use and consumption of the Church – a repetition of the malicious *locus*, which affirmed the plausibility of the hypothesis of sexual disease contracted by the Emperor. Here, then, is our malicious intent. Nevertheless, these same anecdotes paradoxically served to affirm the values of the Monarchy and of Divine consent. Through the miraculous occurrence, the adequacy of the sovereign was Divinely guaranteed, and the Emperor entered a ‘sheltered space’, wherein worked Divine Favour was at work. The mention of venereal diseases was obviously not in the interest of the official imperial biography, yet proved highly useful for hagiographic literature, which paradoxically denied the critics of the aristocracy and

²¹ Teja, 1993, p. 613.

²² Proc. Caes., *Hist. Arc.* XXX, 21-24.

confirmed the Emperor in his role.

We know that a hagiographic text, the *Life of St Samson*, recounted: “a serious illness afflicted Justinian around the genital organs, and he suffered incurable ulcers to the bladder”²³. Many doctors visited the Emperor, but they couldn’t offer a cure; and the disease was ultimately only resolved through a miracle of St Samson. This miracle was of the utmost importance in the narrative of St Samson’s life, since it demonstrated the saint’s thaumaturgic power against an unknown sexual disease and bladder ulcers. It was most important to the Monarchy as well, since, as mentioned above, it placed the Emperor in a ‘sheltered space’.

Körbler tentatively supposes that the Justinian’s disease was a type of gonococcal or saprophytic urethritis, from which the emperor recovered spontaneously, without any dedicated care²⁴. Körbler’s theory posits a series of subsequent problems. First of all, this particular illness implied the presence of a bladder ulcer. The absence of any endoscopic instruments suggested that the presence of bladder ulcers was merely supposed through symptomatology – and so the hagiographer adds this detail since he considered it appropriate. Therefore, Körbler’s hypothesis places us in the field of mere presumptions. In fact, the eminent Byzantine physician Leo, who lived and worked in the 9th century, stated that ulcers appeared in the bladder when patients had dysuria or when they urinated painfully²⁵. The biography of St Samson later described the unknown disease of the Emperor’s genitals, which Körbler likened to the symptoms of dysuria²⁶.

At the same time, Procopius’ *Historia Arcana* posits the hypothesis of another unspecified disease which eventually took the life of the Empress. Procopius described the pale face of the Empress during her later years. Theodora, in fact, lost her beauty – a development was confirmed by contemporary portraits such as the famous mosaic in the Church of St Vital in Ravenna, where the Empress was depicted as melancholy, wearing an expression of fatigue²⁷. Procopius insinuated that Theodora’s chronic illness at death’s door did naught to improve her bad character. Nevertheless, it is still very difficult to claim that her death was unequivocally a consequence of sexual diseases. So too Körbler’s theory

²³ *Vit. S. Sam.*, 283-284.

²⁴ Körbler, 1974, pp. 15-22.

²⁵ *Leonis Philosophi conspectus medicinae*. In Ermerins, 1963, p. 193.

²⁶ Körbler, 1974, pp. 15-22.

²⁷ Galavaris, 1978, pp. 390-391; Deichmann, 1958.

attributing the death of Theodora to a syphilitic attack which affected her mammary glands. This illness was accompanied by an eruption of pustules, a symptom traced back to a syphilitic rupee attack²⁸.

Conversely, a 5th-century African bishop, Victor Tonnennenses, affirmed in his *Chronicles* that Theodora died from breast cancer, which had metastasized throughout her body: “*Theodora Augusta Calchedonensis Synodi inimica canceris plaga corpore toto perfusa vitam prodigiose finivit*”²⁹. Breast cancer was indeed the most probable cause. Byzantine doctors were aware of this disease and its symptomatology; it was therefore difficult to believe that an erudite man such as Victor Tonnennenses would have confused it. Aetius of Byzantium, a 6th-century physician and Paul of Aegina, living in the 7th century, were aware of breast cancer and considered it the most common of all women’s diseases, alongside uterine cancer³⁰. They also described techniques for the partial or total removal of this type of breast cancer. In particular, Aetius knew those situations particularly well, and described appropriate treatments at length. He said that breast cancer was inoperable when it adhered to the thorax, which made its removal a dangerous operation³¹. Instead, an eminent Byzantine doctor of the 4th century, Oribasius, only recommended conservative treatments³². Therefore, we can safely assume without doubt that the Palace’s doctors knew the disease very well, and that they were able to offer surgical treatments. The silence of historical sources on this topic would likely indicate that Teodora’s cancer was inoperable. This information, by itself, lays to rest defeated the thesis of Empress’ death by syphilis³³. Moreover, is Körbler’s hypothesis even credible, in truth? Did Justinian contract syphilis in a specific period, such as the end of Late Antiquity?³⁴

Nicephorus Callistus Anthropolos, an ecclesiastic scholar of the 14th century who drew his information from the most ancient sources available, stated that Justinian’s disease was “bladder lithiasis caused by his unhealthy diet and fatigue”³⁵. This statement clears any lingering doubt over the contraction of sexual illness. The diseases “caused dysuria, difficulty, and pain in urinating, and the Emperor’s doctors didn’t heal his

²⁸ Körbler, 1974, pp. 15-22.

²⁹ *Victoris Tonnennensis episcopi Chronica*. In Mommsen, 1894, p. 202.

³⁰ Briau, 1855, pp. 210-213.

³¹ *Aetii Sermo Sextidecimus et Ultimius*. In Zervos, 1901, pp. 60-68.

³² *Oribasii Collectionum Medicorum Reliquiae*, Vol. IV. In Raeder, 1933, pp. 299-300.

³³ Diehl, 1908, pp. 51-52; Nicol, 1993, p. 124.

³⁴ Lascaratos & Poulakou-Rebelakou, 1999, pp. 789-791.

³⁵ Pamperis, 1802, pp. 14-15.

unbearable pain”³⁶. And so, we are left to think that the pain was caused by colic. We have no information on whether the pain during urination was accompanied by the emission of pus; the lack thereof excluded any one bacterium in particular. In combination, the available data affirmed that colic was the more likely and credible explanation.

In the latter years of his reign, Justinian suffered from a leg disease accompanied by pain during urination. Körbler’s hypothesis started from these symptoms, and argued that it was either edema or nodules which affected the Emperor’s legs, both of which were due to syphilis. In addition to these, the Emperor was known to have suffered from dysuria³⁷.

The Emperor’s leg condition was treated through the intercession of Saints Cosmas and Damian, via the practice of *incubatio*³⁸. We must here clarify that Byzantine historians did not link this leg disease to either edema or knots. Consequently, Körbler’s hypothesis of a syphilitic gum was pure conjecture. In addition, the gums – typical of tertiary syphilis – normally appear between the third and fifth year after infection, and no more than 28 years after the contraction of the disease³⁹. This reason alone denies the credibility of Körbler’s hypothesis.

Elsewhere, Procopius claims that the Emperor suffered from repeated bouts of pain in the knee. Therefore, we may suppose that Justinian was affected by arthritic pain. Procopius informed his audience about the Emperor’s strict diet, consisting of water and wild herbs, and which excluded the consumption of wine. This diet was widely recommended by Byzantine doctors for patients who suffered from gout. Gout was widespread in Byzantium, and so it was well-known to doctors, which described its symptoms in detail in their studies. The doctors’ treatments seem to evoke a gout attack, and do not suggest a generic bacterial infection. Both gout and lithiasis of the urinary tract were very common in the period and coexisted in between 25% and 50% of cases, according to different statistics⁴⁰.

Reasonably, this *dysuria* was attributed to newly-formed accretions in the urinary tract. These urinary disorders were treated with water from the Monastery of the Holy Spring⁴¹. Nicephorus states that Justinian was

³⁶ Pamperis, 1802, pp. 14-15; Poulakou-Rebelakou *et al.*, 2011b, pp. 269-273.

³⁷ Körbler, 1974, pp. 15-22.

³⁸ Wirth & Haury, 1963, pp. 56-68, 107-108; Cuscito, 2007, pp. 99-111; Bucci, 2016; Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945.

³⁹ James *et al.*, 1990, pp. 405-422.

⁴⁰ Lascaratos, 1995, pp. 951-957.

⁴¹ Pamperis, 1802, pp. 14-15.

visited by the *Theotokos* in his dream, and the Virgin advised him to drink large quantities of water from the spring of her Monastery: the Zoodochus Pege. Indeed, this therapy occasioned the dissolution of the Emperor's kidney stones, which were expelled with the urine and from which the Emperor subsequently healed. This text also clearly states that Justinian's condition was lithiasis of the bladder, which was systematically treated with hydrops⁴².

Procopius described the final years of Justinian's reign in his usual polemical tone. In fact, the author claims that Justinian exhibited curious behaviours towards the end of his life: the Emperor would appear in the night and walk around the Palace as if a ghost or a sleepless demon.

Procopius states:

“And some of those who were present with the Emperor, presumably at very late hours of the night, and held conference with him, obviously in the Palace, men whose souls were pure, seemed to see a sort of phantom spirit unfamiliar to them in place of him”⁴³.

Later, Procopius asserts that a holy monk who visited the Emperor at the Sacred Palace saw the prince of demons on the imperial throne, instead of the *pius* Emperor.

Once again attacking the absolute monarchy, Procopius writes:

“... a certain monk, very dear to God, being persuaded by those who lived with him in the wilderness, set out to Byzantium in order to plead the cause of the people who lived very near the monastery and were being mistreated and wronged in an unbearable manner; and straight away upon his arrival, he received admittance to the Emperor. But when he was about to go into his presence, he stepped over the threshold with one foot, but suddenly recoiled and stepped back. Now, the eunuch who was his conductor and the others present besought the man earnestly to go forward, but he, making no answer, but acting like a man who had suffered a stroke, departed thence and went to the room where he was lodged. And when his attendants inquired for which reason he had acted thus, they said that he declared outright that he had seen the Lord of the Demons in the

⁴² Lascaratos *et al.*, 2001, pp. 631-634.

⁴³ Proc. Caes., *Hist. Arc.* XII, 20.

Palace sitting on the throne, and he would not care to associate with him or ask anything from him”⁴⁴.

This was another *locus* of the *Kaiserkritik*, which directly invested the ‘Theology of Power’, importantly denying the divine origin of the Monarchy. Therefore, this affirmation contradicts the postulates of the official theory of power, proposed by Deacon Agapitos, who systematized all the various different elaborations on this subject. Conversely, Agapitos stated that the Roman Emperor was an emanation of the Christian God: “granted by God to collaborate with him in the accomplishment of what is advantageous (...). It is an image of piety made by God, (...) a living image of God (...)”⁴⁵.

Instead, Procopius aimed to express the moral superiority of aristocracy together with the demonization of absolute monarchy to his audience. Therefore, we hardly believe that these anecdotes represent the actual reality that transpired. In particular, the Emperor’s conduct, such as his nightly roams, suggest the symptoms of senile dementia⁴⁶. Procopius wished to demonstrate Justinian’s inadequacy to govern the Empire.

The Emperor’s mental decline was also reported by Nicolaus Alemannus, the first publisher of Procopius’ *Historia Arcana* in 1623, who referred to this symptom as *neurosyphilis*. This is the only instance of a specific mention of Justinian’s symptoms of early onset senility in Byzantine sources, as no other Byzantine historians make this claim. However, neither is there any specific information to this end available in the sources covering the health of the Emperor in his final days, and, therefore, this position itself cannot develop past mere conjecture either.

Nevertheless, we knew that sometime after 560 AD the Emperor began to be afflicted by general weakness and headaches. Even still, historians claim that Justinian died a sudden death, without any signs or markers of a particular illness; consequently, it is entirely possible that the Emperor died from natural causes.

As we have seen, Körbler believed – without evidence, as we have shown – that Justinian presented symptoms of senility and dementia during his later years⁴⁷. If we accept Körbler’s hypothesis of and believe

⁴⁴ Proc. Caes., *Hist. Arc.* XII, 24-26; Ravegnani, 1989, p. 41; Ravegnani, 2016, cap. IV, n. 12. Regarding the theme of Justinian as a demon: Proc. Caes., *Hist. Arc.* XXVI; XXVIII; XXXII.

⁴⁵ Agap. Diac., *Expositio capitum admonitorum*, PG 86, cap. 5; Carile, 2000, pp. 127-149; Patlagean, 1992; Cavarra, 1990, pp. 28-40.

⁴⁶ Poulakou-Rebelakou *et al.*, 2011a, pp. 405-412.

⁴⁷ Körbler, 1974, pp. 15-22.

in an elderly Justinian who showed symptoms of senility towards the end of his life, we must also consider whether this is an excessive interpretation of the actual situation. Justinian's symptoms didn't exemplify the signs of parenchymatous neurosyphilis or paresis. Nevertheless, we also fail to find any of the other symptoms of this disease, such as grandiose ideas, megalomania, deception, and hallucinations, all highly typical of neurosyphilis⁴⁸. Nor did we find a symptom of any other types of neurosyphilis in the available period sources.

Conclusion

The available sources, held under review, allowed for a cross-section of the intimate life of the imperial couple and, moreover, offered important information regarding the level of medical knowledge in Early Byzantium.

In conclusion, we may affirm that the symptoms suffered by Emperor Justinian were highly generic, and his urination pain could be associated with some bacterial infections as well, which the Emperor suffered from in his early years in government. At the same time, the argument for colic, which affected Justinian in his later years, appears eminently credible, certainly so if conjoined with gout. Gout was a very common disease across the Byzantine ruling classes, owed as it was to the very rich diet they subsisted on. Justinian himself likely suffered from this ailment, known as he was to have spent considerable resources on his meals. This argument is also supported by the later institution of his strict diet, based solely on water and vegetables.

Nevertheless, it is very difficult to claim that Justinian contracted syphilis with any certainty. In this light, Körbler's thesis appears highly excessive, and lack grounding in the facts documented by period sources. Therefore, we must dismiss it as a simple conjecture.

Rather, we may detect the real nature of the Emperor's 'illness': a literary *locus*, otherwise known as a formal solution, which saw particular success in the hagiography of the period. The miraculous healing confirmed the proper foundation of the Imperial institution, and served to reaffirm the adequacy of the individual sovereign to his new role. Consequently, the Emperor's ailments proved highly lucrative and important to the Byzantine unofficial strategy of imperial propaganda.

⁴⁸ Rook *et al.*, 1986, pp. 839-859; James *et al.*, 1990, pp. 405-422.

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Fig. 1. Emperor Justinian and his court.
Mosaic, Basilica di San Vitale, Ravenna, 6th century.



Fig. 2. Empress Theodora and her court.
Mosaic, Basilica di San Vitale, Ravenna, 6th century.



Fig. 3. The alleged head of Theodora.
Sculpture, Castello Sforzesco, Milan, 6th century.