

# Christianity during the Worst Year in Human History - 536 CE

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**ABSTRACT:** Modern scholars consider that the worst year in the history of humankind was 536 CE. Since there was no separation between the Church and the State in the Byzantine Empire, the predominantly Christian population who had endured the calamities of the year was let down by both religious and political central institutions. When centralized institutions fail, local chaos often ensues. As is most often the case, the first to suffer are those most vulnerable – the poor and the lowly. Moreover, in the vacuum created by the disregard of the Church, masses of people looked for answers in religious superstition, while showing a disinclination to trust the science of the day. Others developed a sense of hatred and suspicion towards foreigners, whom they blamed for the ongoing calamities. The safety measures that saved the lives of many came from the local administrators or the people themselves, not from the central institutions.

**KEYWORDS:** 536 CE, calamities, Justinian, Church leadership, Christianity, religion and politics, social tensions, superstition

## Introduction

Modern scholars consider 536 CE to be the worst year so far in human history. In this paper, some of the major events that took place during the year will be examined, within the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire. Since there was no separation between the Church and the State, the calamities, which were endured by the predominantly Christian population, were compounded by the failure of both the religious and political central institutions. Several ways in which the centralized institutions failed the people during this most horrific of years will be emphasised. Another emphasis will be on how their disregard affected the general public – economically, socially, and religiously.

## 1. 536 CE, the worst year in human history

According to medieval historian Michael McCormick, chair of the Initiative for the Science of the Human Past at Harvard University, „the worst year to be alive” was 536 CE (Gibbons 2018). It should be noted from the outset that, while McCormick’s assessment covers several continents, as do various other subsequent studies, the scope of this paper is limited to Europe, Northern Africa, and the Near East – the domain of what then comprised the Byzantine Empire.

First, during 536 CE, the entire European continent was plunged into a thick darkness. Several volcanoes in Iceland, North America, and Indonesia had experienced massive and simultaneous eruptions during the previous year. Volcanic ash covered the sky of the northern hemisphere and dimmed the sun for 18 months, turning day to night and summer to winter (Büntgen *et al.* 2016). Thus, the sun was barely visible in Europe throughout the whole year of 536 CE. Some historians have called it the “year without sun” or the “year without summer” (Harper 2017, 218). The Byzantine historian, Procopius of Caesarea (*c.* 500–565), an eyewitness to the events of 536 CE, describes the impact of this darkness:

It came about during this year that a most dread portent took place. During the whole year the sun gave forth its light without brightness, like the moon, and it seemed extremely like the sun in eclipse,

for the beams it emitted were not clear nor like those it usually makes. From the time when this thing happened men were free neither from war nor pestilence nor any other thing that brings death. It was the time when Justinian was in the tenth year of his reign [536]. (Prokopios, *Wars* 4.14, 220–221)

The reduced sunlight dropped the average temperature in Europe by 2.5°C. This sudden cooling triggered the coldest decade (536–545 CE) of the previous 2300 years, a decade that has often been referred to as “the little Ice Age of Late Antiquity” (Büntgen *et al.* 2016). It was a time when life was immersed not only in darkness, but also in cold (Harper 2017, 219 and 253).

Furthermore, the cooling of the planet affected most of the crops in the northern hemisphere, which led to the great famine of 536–539 CE. In the West, the Irish Annals of Ulster and Inisfallen mention a severe „failure of bread” (e.g., Mac Airt 1951, 70) and state that during those three years more than 90 percent of the islanders did not even see bread, let alone taste it. In the Near East, John of Ephesus (*c.* 507–588) gives a similar eyewitness account: “The sun darkened and stayed covered with darkness a year and a half, that is eighteen months. Although rays were visible around it for two or three hours [a day], they were as if diseased, with the result that fruits did not reach full ripeness. All the wine had the taste of reject grapes” (Harper 2017, 251). It is estimated that the famine killed millions throughout Europe (Arjava 2005, 73–94).

The oppressive volcanic cloud not only darkened the skies for 18 months, it also contained lead and other toxic substances, requiring over 100 years for the planet to heal from the pollution caused by the volcanic ash. Thus, the increased pollution to which humanity was not adapted, the effects of the sudden climate change, the severe lack of vitamin D from the sun, and the ensuing malnutrition, created the ideal conditions for a major health crisis: “If there was an immediate effect of the sharp climate anomaly, it might be the hidden ecological trigger that led the plague bacterium to disperse in the years just following the spasm of volcanic activity” (Harper 2017, 254). As a result of these conditions, epidemics of the plague began to break out across several regions of the empire: “[humans] were free neither from war nor pestilence nor any other thing that brings death. It was the time when Justinian was in the tenth year of his reign [536 CE]” (Prokopios, *Wars* 4.14, 221). In 541 CE, these the local epidemics morphed into the pandemic known as “the Justinian plague”, named after the reigning Byzantine emperor, Justinian I (*r.* 527–565 CE). It is said that the bubonic plague alone killed over 100 million people (*cf.* Rosen 2007, 209), prompting Procopius of Caesarea to write: „During those times there was a plague that came close to wiping out the whole of mankind” (Prokopios, *Wars* 2.22, 120). For modern historian Kyle Harper, “The Plague of Justinian was the greatest mortality event up to that point in human history” (Harper 2017, 248).

Darkness, cold, famine, plague, and death. These catastrophic events led to a trail of consequences that so damaged public health and the economy that they only fully recovered in 660 CE. It took humanity 120 years to move beyond the fateful year of 536 CE (Büntgen *et al.* 2016).

## 2. The institution of the Church during „the worst of times”

In times of great distress, when uncertainty and anxiety prevail, people often look to the political and religious leadership for guidance. In 536 CE, the institution of the Church held both religious and political powers, since Emperor Justinian was the *de facto* head of Christendom. A plausible reading of the accounts of 536 CE shows that these events illustrate how central institutions can fail their people at the most critical of times.

### 2.1. Buildings matter, people do not

In contrast to the widespread deprivation and despair among the populace, the year 536 CE was one of restoration and expansion for the great cathedrals of Constantinople. As the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople was home to two dominant cathedrals, of which the more

important was Hagia Sophia. During “the worst year to be alive,” Hagia Sophia was undergoing a process of refurbishment of such magnitude that it depleted the Imperial treasury. This took place on the backdrop of crop failures and the ominous warnings of an impending famine. In the midst of this crisis, Justinian initiated in that very year, 536 CE, the demolition and reconstruction of the second great cathedral of Constantinople, the Cathedral of the Holy Apostles. The new building had to be, by necessity, much larger and more luxurious than the former edifice erected by Constantine the Great (c. 330 CE), as it was designated to become the Imperial Crypt, the burial place of the Byzantine emperors, beginning with Constantine the Great and including Justinian and his wife, Empress Theodora.

The reconstruction of the Cathedral of the Holy Apostles lasted fourteen years (536–550 CE), spanning the infamous hibernal decade when famine killed millions (536–545 CE). The same historian, Procopius of Caesarea, notes that Justinian procured the money for his extravagant building project by raising taxes, including the egregious practice of charging the survivors extortionate rates, to compensate for their relatives and neighbors who had died and hence were no longer contributing to the Imperial treasury (Prokopios, *History* 23.20–21, 104). By acting in this manner, Justinian, as head of Christendom, sent the very clear message that the Church is the building, and not its congregants. People do not matter. They are dispensable, and can be left out in the cold and darkness, suffering in hunger and sickness.

## 2.2. *Not administrators of the “general good”*

This same message was reinforced at a local level. In 535 CE, Justinian issued his sixth *Novel* (part of the *Novellae Constitutiones*), a civil and ecclesiastical law by which he partitioned the vast territories of the empire to the five major patriarchies (Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria) and distributed property and wealth to the churches, monasteries, priests, bishops, and patriarchs according to the Church’s hierarchy (Meyendorff 1968). The text of the *Novel* begins with this preface:

The priesthood and the Empire are the two greatest gifts which God, in His infinite clemency, has bestowed upon mortals; the former has reference to divine matters, the latter presides over and directs human affairs, and both, proceeding from the same principle, adorn the life of mankind; hence nothing should be such a source of care to the emperors as the honor of the priests who constantly pray to God for their salvation. For if the priesthood is, everywhere free from blame, and the Empire full of confidence in God is administered equitably and judiciously, general good will result, and whatever is beneficial will be bestowed upon the human race. (Justinian, *Novel* 6, 30)

In reality, this *Novel* shows how greedy and corrupt the servants of “divine matters” had become. The many squabbles between clerics over territory and authority forced the emperor to intervene and issue this law to quell the disputes. More often than not, it was through extortion of the rightful owners that the clerics, the Church, and the emperor were enriched. Notable, in this regard, is Justinian’s *Novel* 8 (535/6 CE), which was to be read by all bishops to their congregations on festival days: “all persons may regard their magistrates as fathers, rather than as thieves and persons plotting to deprive them of their property” (Humfress 2006, 170 *et passim*).

That which the emperor communicated from Constantinople through his colossal building projects and his *Novellae* (Rotaru 2014, 65), was echoed at a local level a year later, in 536 CE, by the clerics, through their preoccupation with grabbing control and worldly wealth. To the suffering, famished, and dying masses of people, the representatives of the Church made a mockery of the claim that they were God’s “greatest gifts”, “free from blame” and equitable and judicious administrators of the “general good... and whatever is beneficial [to] be bestowed upon the human race”.

## 2.3. *When leadership changes, nothing changes*

While the Church’s edifices were undergoing demolition and reconstruction, similar turmoil agitated the political and religious leadership in both Rome and Constantinople. On the political

front, while Justinian firmly ruled the vast Byzantine Empire, Italy was under the relatively weak control of the Ostrogoths. At the same time, Christendom was roiled by the Monophysite controversy, which crossed political boundaries. To further complicate matters, Justinian and his wife, Empress Theodora, stood on opposing sides of this controversy with one assisting and protecting those very clerics targeted by the other (e.g., Evans 2005, 40–45). Briefly, the Monophysites rejected the Council of Nicaea's (325 CE) teaching that Jesus Christ was fully divine and fully human. For them, there was only one nature – the divine. This dispute drove much of the political and religious intrigue throughout the empire.

(1) In 536 CE, Theodahad (or Theodatus), the Ostrogothic king in Rome, appealed to Pope Agapetus I to travel to Constantinople in the hope of appealing to Justinian to desist from invading Italy. General Belisarius, the commander of the Byzantine army, had been sent on a military campaign to recapture the territories of the former Western Roman Empire. Agapetus arrived in Constantinople, but was unsuccessful in persuading Justinian to change his plans. Agapetus then changed his focus to Anthimus, the Monophysite Patriarch of Constantinople and Theodora's protégé. When they were unable to come to an agreement, Agapetus deposed Anthimus from his see on the grounds of heresy. This did not go well with Theodora, and on April 22, 536, Pope Agapetus I passed away under suspicious circumstances, having held the papal see for a period of only eleven months, between May 13, 535 and April 22, 536 (Evans 2005, 43–44).

On June 8, 536, Pope Silverius was ordained Bishop of Rome, as the successor of Agapetus. Jeffrey Richards attributes Silverius' rapid rise to power, from the diaconate to the papacy, to the purchase of the see from the King Theodahad (Richards 1979, 133). As with Agapetus, Silverius' papacy was also short-lived. Pope Silverius followed the position of Agapetus and refused to restore Anthimus to the patriarchy of Constantinople. In retaliation, General Belisarius, who had since arrived in Italy, deposed Silverius from the papal see in March 537 CE on the orders of Empress Theodora. Silverius, having been stripped of his papal dignity and demoted to the status of a monk, was immediately exiled, first to Lycia, in Anatolia, then to the island of Palmaria, where he died of starvation a few months later, on June 20, 537 CE (Evans 2000, 145).

Regrettably, the brief papacy of Silverius was consumed by religious and political intrigues. There is little evidence of any interest or efforts outside the circles of the elite of his day. The poor and lowly soldiered helplessly on in their miserable deprivation, with no assistance, compassion or comfort from the headship of the Western Church.

(2) In the world of institutionalized religion, Constantinople was second only to Rome in importance and prestige, but in the Eastern part of Christendom, the religious leadership was no more stable. As in Rome, the year 536 CE brought the appointment of a new head of the church in Constantinople. Anthimus, who had been condemned as Monophysite and deposed by Pope Agapetus, was replaced by Menas. On March 13, 536, Menas was appointed patriarch by Emperor Justinian and consecrated to the see by Agapetus himself (Hardy 1968, 32–33). It was the first time that a pope had consecrated a patriarch of Constantinople.

As the political and religious head of the empire, Justinian divided his attention between the West, where he launched a military campaign to reconquer Rome and the territories of the Western Empire from the Goths, and the East, where he sought to quench the theological disputes incited around Monophysitism. Almost immediately upon his appointment, Menas was ordered by Justinian to summon a Church council in Constantinople and examine the case of Anthimus as well as the tenets of Monophysitism. The council took place between May 2 and June 4, 536 (Millar 2008, 71). More on this will be considered in the next section.

For now, it should be noted that the two most important and influential centers of Christianity in 536 CE, Rome and Constantinople, both received new religious leaders during this year. Both bishops came to power in the midst of complex political schemes and maneuvers, and they both spent much of the year deeply involved in and pre-occupied with ever more entangled religious and political conflicts and disputes. Sadly, any reaction or

response on their part to the catastrophic events that were decimating Europe around them is either obscure or utterly absent.

However, Agapetus and Anthimus were not the only patriarchs deposed and replaced in 536 CE. In fact, the same fate befell Patriarch Severus of Antioch and Pope Theodosius I of Alexandria (Antioch and Alexandria being two other members of the Pentarchy, i.e., the five major patriarchies), as well as Bishop Peter of Apamea, and others. This shall be explored briefly in the next section.

#### 2.4. *The unity that led to schism*

The above-mentioned troubles could be seen, on one level, as a matter of “local” internal power struggles. However, they laid the groundwork for an escalation of events with lasting institutional ramifications for the Church worldwide, because alongside the other calamities of 536 CE, this year saw the first major schism of the Christian Church. Patrick Gray states that, “the disintegration of the one Christian Church of the one Christian Empire” was “perhaps the most astonishing failure of the Age of Justinian” (Gray 2006, 215). Hoping to resolve the theological disputes over Monophysitism and bring the theological beliefs of the Near East in line with those in Rome, Emperor Justinian convoked two Church councils: one in Constantinople (between May 2 and June 4, 536) and one in Jerusalem (19 September, 536). Unfortunately, his attempts to condemn and excommunicate several prominent Monophysite clerics in Syria and Egypt, and still somehow maintain the unity of the Church (and Empire), ended in failure (Millar 2008, 69 and 81). Ironically enough, the Church was split as the result of the theological disputes over the unity of the divine and human nature of Christ.

Following the council of Constantinople, Justinian decided to expel from the capital city several prominent Monophysite bishops, such as Patriarch Anthimus I, Patriarch Severus of Antioch, Bishop Peter of Apamea, and imprison or exile others, such as Pope Theodosius I of Alexandria (Evans 2000, 184). The decision to excommunicate and depose Theodosius I of his see was completely rejected by the Copts, who continued to recognize him as pope. This breaking point led to the separation of the Coptic Church from the rest of Christianity, a split that endures from 536 CE until present day (Van Rompay 2006, 247).

That same year was also a landmark in terms of the alienation of the Syriac Church (Menze 2008, 100, 118 *et passim*). The party that won the theological disputes, i.e., the Imperial Church, with Justinian at its helm, sent Bishop Ephrem of Antioch, a former military commander, on an aggressive campaign to purge the Syrian church of those who had opposed the decisions taken by the Council of Constantinople. This campaign, remembered by John of Ephesus as “Ephrem’s descent to the East” (Menze 2008, 110 and 118), took place in 536/7 CE, and covered the Near Eastern regions of Amida, Batnae, Beroea, Callinicum, Chalcis, Constantina, Edessa, Hierapolis, Sura, and Theodosiupolis (Tate 2004, 416). To the modern man, the Monophysite controversy may seem a senseless dispute over slight etymological and esoteric differences. Nevertheless, at the time, this was the burning issue of the day, and which for many, became a matter of life or death. Tragically, countless Christians whose beliefs differed from those of the ruling party were persecuted, and many were barbarically tortured and killed (Ps.-Dionysius, *Chronicle*, 37; cf. Menze 2008, 110–111).

It would be hoped that during “the worst year to be alive”, the Church would have put aside, at least temporarily, its internal theological disputes and come together in unity for the sake of helping the hurting people. Unfortunately, exactly the opposite happened: not only did the Church split, but it also became the very agent through which even more pain and death was inflicted upon an already suffering world. Instead of bringing relief, the Church became a source of deeper pain and chaos.

### 3. Christians during (and after) the worst year in the history of humankind

Undoubtedly, the events of 536 CE are more complex than can be developed in this study (Millar 2008, 82). However, this brief overview should suffice to illustrate how the institution

of the Church failed the masses of people during the worst of times. When centralized institutions fail, local chaos often ensues. Up to this point, the focus was mainly on the experiences of the privileged few, the ones whose actions history records. The focus will now shift from these privileged few to the many poor and downtrodden, those whose stories can be uncovered mainly by reading between the lines of the historical record. At the same time, it is worth noting that when a study encompasses such a diverse array of people, from such a vast geographical territory, it is very difficult to strike the balance between aspects that are generally valid, on the one hand, and the particularities of each group or individual, on the other. The same is true in this case. Accordingly, only broad lines will be drawn, yet with the hope of avoiding fallacious generalizations.

As for the masses of Christians of 536 CE, in the vacuum created by the disregard of the Church, many looked for answers in superstition, developed hatred and suspicions towards their perceived enemies, and showed reluctance in trusting the science of the day.

### 3.1. *Lacking education, embracing fear*

Unsurprisingly, a deep and abiding “apocalyptic” fear began to grip the masses of the uneducated people, beginning in 536, as the dimmed sun was considered a powerful and menacing omen. A few intellectuals, such as John Lydus and Cassiodorus, made attempts to offer naturalistic explanations for the calamities of that year (Harper 2017, 251–252). “What seems mysterious to the stupefied masses should be reasonable to you,” wrote Cassiodorus (*Var.* 12.25). Among their explanations, was that a very cold winter had produced a lasting dense air that filled the atmosphere and obscured the sun: “The sun becomes dim because the air is dense from rising moisture – as happened in the course of the recently passed fourteenth indiction [i.e., 535–536 CE] for nearly a whole year” (John Lydus, *De portentis* 9c; Harper 2017, 251).

Of course, the scientific explanations of the scholars did not reach “the stupefied masses” (cf. Prokopios, *Wars* 2.22), whom Cassiodorus sets in contrast to the educated “you” that could benefit from his writings. Thus, the masses of uneducated people easily fell victim to the ambulant preachers who traveled from city to city and from village to village, declaring the ongoing judgment of God upon the earth and the imminent end of the world (Rosen 2007, 219–223). This fatalistic and fear-inducing message would soon spread to influence the whole of Europe (Harper 2017, 246–249).

### 3.2. *Demonizing “the other”*

It has been mentioned that 536 CE was the year of the Church’s first major schism. Yet it was also the year that deepened not only the religious, but also the economic and social chasms existing at the time. In the midst of the ongoing catastrophes, a search began for those morally culpable:

During those times there was a plague that came close to wiping out the whole of mankind. Now for all the calamities that fall upon us from the heavens it might be possible for some bold man to venture a theory regarding their causes, like the many marvelous theories about causes that the experts in these fields tend to dream up which are, in reality, utterly incomprehensible to mankind. Still, they make up outlandish theories of natural science, knowing well that they are saying nothing sound and they are content with themselves if only they manage to deceive a few people whom they meet into accepting their argument. But about this calamity there is no way to find any justification, to give a rational account, or even to cope with it mentally, except by referring it to God. For it did not afflict a specific part of the earth only or one group of people, nor did it strike during one season of the year, based on which facts it might have been possible to contrive some subtle explanation regarding its cause; instead, it embraced the entire earth and wrecked the lives of all people, even when those lives were as different from each other in quality as can be imagined, nor did it respect either sex or age. (Prokopios, *Wars* 2.22, 120)

(1) In this search for the culpable, the Orthodox blamed the Monophysites, the poor blamed the rich, and the Europeans blamed the North Africans. Thus, the cruelty of Ephrem’s

“descend to the East” should be viewed within this context: the Monophysites were considered by many of the Orthodox to be responsible for the apocalyptic events in progress (Menze 2008, 110–111). A similar reasoning stands behind the deposition of all the Monophysite bishops in the East. However, this very thing was simultaneously true from the perspective of the Monophysites: for them, these events were not only the “wine-press of the fury of the wrath of God”, but also a call to repentance, that is, it was the Orthodox who needed to repent and thus soften the wrath of God (Rosen 2007, 222–223). For the Monophysites, having lived through the purges in the aftermath of the councils of Constantinople and Jerusalem, the “very pit of the abyss was opened again” (Van Rompay 2006, 247). This time, however, the two Christian parties would remain in perpetuity on the opposing edges of the pit.

(2) When Procopius accused Emperor Justinian (and his wife, Theodora) of having provoked God’s wrath upon the empire, he verbalized the thoughts of many, including the Monophysites and the impoverished tax payers. He goes as far as to call Justinian an “anthropomorphic demon” (Prokopios, *History* 18.1, 80; Evans 2000, 64). Yet the people suffered not only under Justinian, as collateral victims of God’s judgment upon the emperor, but also because of Justinian and his disregard for them. Once it became obvious that the drought and famine would persist, Justinian eventually built cisterns, granaries and transport depots; however, these were perceived by the population at large not only as insufficient but also distributed in a preferential or discriminatory manner. Since the construction of these emergency repositories was financed through funds derived from taxation of the public, the neglected population became even more outraged at the privilege granted to entitled few (Prokopios, *History* 26, 113–119; Harper 2017, 258–259).

As is often the case, in times of great distress, the underprivileged are the most vulnerable and the most affected. During the years of famine, the rate of inflation grew dramatically, making grain and bread inaccessible to the poor (cf. Prokopios, *History* 26.18–22; *War* 2.23.19). By the same token, although Procopius saw the plague as the great equalizer, the poor were the first to be exposed to the infection:

When it arrived in a town, the plague “eagerly began to assault the class of the poor, who lay in the streets.” Hungry and vulnerable, the poor may have been more biologically susceptible to the contagion, and the squalid conditions of life for the urban poor brought them into close quarters with rats. Ultimately, though, the plague was indiscriminate, and for Procopius, this was the most telling feature of the pandemic. “People differ from each other in the places that they live, the customs that govern their lifestyle, the manner of their personality, their professions, and many other ways, but none of these factors made the slightest difference when it came to this disease – and to this disease alone.” (Harper 2021, 211)

From the poor and lowly, the plague went on to spread throughout all levels of society, including to the emperor himself. Ironically, the elite’s disregard for the vulnerable paved the way by which the plague reached the high society.

(3) The continental Europeans, especially those in Constantinople, had known for two years in advance that the bubonic plague was wreaking havoc in Northern Africa and was sure to come their way, and yet no preparations were made to mitigate the coming disaster (Ps.-Dionysius, *Chronicle*, 86; Harper 2017, 226). The central administration had failed them again. Instead of finding solutions, some looked for the culprit. So, when the plague predictably ravaged Europe, the North Africans were literally demonized for this. In the words of John of Ephesus,

When this plague was passing from one land to another, many people saw shapes of bronze boats and [figures] sitting in them resembling people with their heads cut off. Holding staves, also of bronze, they moved along on the sea and could be seen going whithersoever they headed. These figures were seen everywhere in a frightening fashion, especially at night. Like flashing bronze and like fire did they appear, black people without heads sitting in a glistening boat and traveling swiftly on the sea, so that this sight almost caused the souls of the people who saw it to expire. (Ps.-Dionysius, *Chronicle*, 77; Rosen 2007, 222)

In the view of some, the demons of the plague had been sent to the continent by the Coptic apostates, as a vengeful curse for the events of 536 CE and their aftermath.

As can be observed, some of these events postdate the year in question, 536 CE. Yet, it is not hard to conclude that they are consequences of the religious, economic, and social tensions that were aggravated by this horrendous year.

### *3.3 Choosing superstition over science... or both*

If there was widespread belief that God's wrath was the source of the calamities experienced in the year 536 CE and afterwards, equally widespread was the belief that the remedy should be sought in religion. Unfortunately, the practice of religion embraced some very harmful syncretistic distortions, as it became a mixture of Christianity and ancient paganism. The practice of medicine also became a blend of science and superstition (Vikan 1984; Rosen 2007, 212). The sale of magic amulets grew exponentially, icons portraying the saints associated with the protection of health become more popular (Harper 2017, 280), and pilgrimages to pagan healing altars that had since been Christianized increased, as did the pilgrimages to the Holy Land (Krueger 2006, 305–311). With all its catastrophic events, 536 CE was a year that facilitated the ascendancy of superstition over science or promoted an amalgamation of the two. Thus, when the plague came to the continent, in 542 CE, legions relied on their belief that religious practices would grant them protection or secure healing, leading many to ignore the medical advice to self-isolate and maintain a social distance, resulting in the deaths of millions. One such example is the pilgrimage to the healing shrine of the Church of Cosmas and Damian, where it is said that Justinian himself was cured from the plague. The news of his cure led many sick people to flock to the shrine, which only served to further spread the infection. In the words of Procopius, "When any persons find themselves assailed by illnesses which are beyond the control of physicians, in despair of human assistance they take refuge in the one hope left to them, and getting on flat-boats they are carried up the bay to this very church" (Procopius, *Buildings* 1.6.7; Krueger 2006, 307).

Although the current state of medieval medicine rendered it largely ineffectual in stopping pandemic and curing the infections, several preventive solutions that helped to limit the spread were known and used: quarantine, the isolation of the sick in hospitals, travel restrictions, locking down the access to certain villages or cities (Rosen 2007, 211–215). When these measures of safety and survival were observed, countless lives were saved throughout Europe; however, they were initiated by provincial administrators, local doctors or by the people themselves, not by Justinian or by the Church's administrators (Rosen 2007, 214). As for the Emperor himself, he preferred not to be disturbed by personal and detailed accounts about the devastating effects of the plague: "The danger of death has penetrated to every place, and it is unnecessary for anyone to hear what each one has experienced... when so many unexpected things have happened, as hardly any other time brought about" (Justinian, *Edict 7*; Harper 2017, 226). Impersonal numbers are less disturbing than individual stories.

## **Conclusions**

During the worst year known to humankind, the centralized institutions which should have supported and protected those entrusted to their care, failed the population of the Byzantine Empire. As people suffered from hunger, cold, and sickness, the religious and political authorities exacerbated their misery by increasing taxes, depositing them of their wealth and property, and persecuting them for their beliefs.

When centralized institutions fail, chaos often ensues. As is often the case, the first to suffer were those most vulnerable – the poor and the lowly; however, the entire society was eventually affected by this neglect. In the vacuum created by the disregard of the Church, people sought for answers in religious superstition, and apocalyptic interpretations of current events. Many developed a disinclination to trust the science of the day. Others developed a hatred and

suspicion toward foreigners, whom they blamed for the relentless calamities. Social ruptures and religious schisms became the pattern of the times.

The Byzantine Empire, through the grand buildings of the Church and the person of Emperor Justinian, presented to the world a glorious and powerful public image; however, the pressures of the year 536 CE revealed that behind that façade dwelled avaricious greed, insular and discriminatory protectionism, and utter disregard for human life. An institution founded on the precepts of sacrificial love, respect for the foreigner and compassion for those less fortunate, revealed itself to be but a poor shadow of those original ideals.

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