

The glory of the Byzantine empire

This highly readable biography of the life and times of the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (527–565 AD) is a masterful synthesis of the ancient sources with personal recollections of the author's experiences of both the standing monuments and the archaeological remains surviving from Justinian's time. Written by one of the leading Byzantine historians and an expert on Justinian, it starts with Justinian's extraordinary rags to riches tale of his uncle Justin, who preceded him as emperor, making his way from his home in the Balkans – with little more than the clothes he stood up in – to join the army in Constantinople. Justin rose through the ranks to become emperor, and Justinian spent much of his early life manoeuvring to succeed to the throne, which he achieved on the death of his uncle in 527 AD. Justinian, supported throughout his life by his beloved empress Theodora, soon set about codifying the unruly mass of classical law. The resultant law codes, which ran into many volumes, formed the cornerstone of European legal systems until the age of Napoleon – although many laws

made life hell for non-Christians, for Justinian was a Christian zealot. But Justinian did not have it all his own way, only narrowly surviving a popular uprising in the 530s, before he was undone in the middle of the 5th century by a combination of military catastrophes and natural disasters including a devastating bubonic plague. But in the interim, Justinian reconquered both Italy and North Africa, and built one of the most extraordinary cathedrals surviving from the ancient world: Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (modern Istanbul). This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to learn more about one of the most extraordinary individuals to have bestridden the ancient world stage.

Richard Hobbs
Senior curator, Romano-British and late Roman collections

Justinian – Emperor, Soldier, Saint, by Peter Sarris, John Murray, £30



Gold solidus of Justinian I, 527–565.



Thomas Lawrence, Thomas Young, 1830.

Prolific polymath

Andrew Robinson, the excellent author of this enlightened and fluently readable volume, outlines his subject's principal achievements on the title page in 18th-century style:

‘Thomas Young, the Anonymous Polymath Who Proved Newton Wrong, Explained How We See, Cured the Sick, and Deciphered the Rosetta Stone, Among Other Feats of Genius.’

The term polymath, seldom encountered or attributed meaningfully in life today, applies par excellence to Thomas Young, whose exceptional abilities, character and achievements make him a type example in history. His personal and intellectual curriculum vitae unrolls in this volume with elegant lucidity, drawing in the reader who might be scared of physics, mathematics, linguistics or even ‘hard ideas’, in such a way that Young as polymath becomes a self-evident truth. Those who visited the recent British Museum exhibition *Hieroglyphs: unlocking ancient Egypt* will have encountered Young's exquisite Egyptological papers and detailed investigations at first hand, side by

side with those of J.-F. Champollion, in considering the enduring problem of the so-called ‘race’ to decipherment. Robinson's treatment of hieroglyphic and demotic decipherment in this volume is the best and most satisfactory assessment, and it is a matter of congratulation that his book, first published in 2006 and sadly out of print during the exhibition, has now reappeared in this revised edition. The name of Thomas Young should everywhere be honoured and revered, and this sympathetic and penetrating study goes far in achieving that exalted aim.

Irving Finkel
Senior Assistant Keeper,
Middle East Department

The Last Man Who Knew Everything by Andrew Robinson, revised edition, Open Book Publishers. Digital edition available on publisher's website free; £34.95 (hardback); £24.95 paperback