LEO I, ETHNIC POLITICS AND THE BEGINNING OF JUSTIN I’S CAREER

The humble origins of Justin I (ca. 450–527) are known primarily from the Secret History of Prokopios, who was writing almost a century later and not interested in elaborating on how and why Justin walked from his village to join the imperial guard in Constantinople. We can, however, contextualize that move within the ethnic politics of the capital in the 460s and 470s, as the emperor Leo I tried to play Gothic and Isaurian factions against each other and created a new imperial guard, the excubitors, to protect himself. Like Justin, Leo was of Thracian-Illyrian origin and wanted to man this corps with “brawny” people from his own home region. Ethnic preferences explain a puzzle in the story: how a poor peasant was enrolled immediately in the imperial guard.

Keywords: Justin I, Leo I, ethnicity, Goths, Isaurians

The year 2018 marked the 1500th anniversary of Justin I’s accession to the imperial throne of New Rome. It is appropriate to commemorate the 70th anniversary of this learned journal with a new investigation of his origins, which took him from the hills of what is today southern Serbia to Constantinople and the palace.

Some sources call Justin an Illyrian, others a Thracian, and they name his home town as Bederiana, but we do not know exactly where it was. Prokopios says that it was in the province of Dardania, near his nephew Justinian’s home village of Tauresium. At or near Tauresium Justinian founded the city of Justiniana Prima, which is likely Caričin Grad (southern Serbia).1 Ioannes of Antioch says that Bederiana was near Naissos in Illyria (modern Niš).2

1 Prokopios, Secret History, 6.2; and Buildings, 4.1.17; see now Sarantis, Justinian’s Balkan Wars, ch. 2.6; Turlej, Justiniana Prima, who appears to have doubts; for all the sources on Justin’s origins, see the entry in PLRE II, 648: Iustinus 4.

2 Ioannes of Antioch, History, fr. 239 (Mariev) = fr. 308 (Roberto). The fragment is from the Excerpta of Konstantinos VII Porphyrogennetos, specifically from the volume De insidiis.
Justin was born in 450–452, and so our earliest extant sources about his origin come from the next century. Like us, those later authors were more concerned with the origins of Justinian than of his uncle, viewing Justin as but a prelude to his nephew’s far more dramatic reign. By the mid-sixth century, Justin’s humble origins in the obscure town of Bederiana were part of a distant past that had become largely irrelevant – except for the dynasty to which it gave rise. The only full-length modern treatment of Justin’s life and reign is still A. A. Vasiliev’s *Justin the First*, whose subtitle, *An Introduction to the Epoch of Justinian the Great*, nicely captures this persistent bias. The present paper will try to shed more light on Justin’s early life by situating his origins against the backdrop of events that were shaking the empire when he trekked from Bederiana to Constantinople. When seen in its proper context, the origin of Justin reveals imperial contacts and an ethnic politics that Prokopios’ account occludes. We can recuperate more of Justin’s early career.

Let us start with Prokopios’ famous account of Justin’s origins.

When Leo [= Leo I, 457–474 AD] held imperial power in Byzantion [= Constantinople], three young Illyrian farmers named Zimarchos, Ditybistas, and Justin (who was from Bederiana), set out to join the army because at home they had to struggle constantly against the hardships of poverty, and they wanted to be rid of all that. They even walked on foot all the way to Byzantion carrying on their own shoulders sacks made of goat’s hair that, by the time they arrived, contained only some baked bread that they had packed at home. They enlisted in the military rolls and were selected by the emperor to serve in the palace guard, for all three were tall and brawny.

Prokopios chooses the imagery and material texture of this passage to highlight how uncouth, poor, and boorish Justin was at the beginning of his career. There could be no greater contrast to the throne of gold and ivory to which he ascended than the peasant sacks of goat-hair full of rusk that he carried on his walk to Constantinople. Prokopios also claims that Justin was illiterate – the first time in history that a Roman emperor could not read. Modern historians tend to dismiss this report, preferring to see in it a lack of a formal education that has been twisted polemically. However, a Syriac chronicle also says that Justin was illiterate. To be sure, that chronicle is hostile to Justin’s regime on religious grounds, and should be read with caution. It also claims that Justin’s hometown had bad water that turned to blood when it was boiled.

Justin could have been no older than twenty-four when he set out with his companions for Constantinople, because Leo I died in 474; possibly he was even younger.

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3 *Croke*, Justinian under Justin, 13–56, pushes back against this bias, but looking at Justin’s reign, not his origins.
4 *Vasiliev*, Justin the First.
5 Prokopios, Secret History 6.2–3.
6 Prokopios, Secret History 6.11–16.
7 Pseudo-Zacharias, Chronicle, 7.14b, 8.1a.
Prokopios says that Leo personally enrolled them in the palace guard because they were tall and brawny. When Prokopios was writing, in 550, there were two guard corps: the *scholarii*, seven units of 500 men each, who had become largely ceremonial; and the smaller unit of the more combat-worthy *excubitores*, who guarded the emperor personally (their name means “those who stand outside the bedchamber”). It is almost certain that Justin joined the excubitors. Wherever Prokopios refers to the palace guard without qualification, he means them. When he wants to refer to the *scholarii*, he qualifies the expression.8

Now, it seems odd that some random poor lads from the mountains of Illyria, with no prior military experience, would be able to enlist immediately in the elite palace guard, much less that they would be specifically chosen by the emperor himself. It is likely that there was more going on than is evident in Prokopios’ compressed account, specifically a connection between the emperor’s recruiters and Justin’s village. Leo had the same geographical-ethnic origin as Justin, being called a Thracian, Bessian (also a Thracian ethnicity), Dacian, and Illyrian in the sources, and his career had also been in the army. His immediate predecessor on the throne, Marcianus (450–457), was also a Thracian-Illyrian who had enlisted in the army at Philippopolis and, like Leo and Justin, had risen through the ranks.9 Both emperors were former clients of the powerful half-Goth half-Alan general Aspar, an Arian Christian and Roman senator, who hoped to play them as puppets while he ruled behind the scenes.

Justin’s arrival at Constantinople in ca. 470 coincided with an overhaul of the palace guard, which we know from different sources. Leo was preoccupied with his personal safety, seeing as he was surrounded by powerful and dangerous generals such as Aspar and Zeno, who had military followings affiliated to them through ethnic ties (i.e., Goths and Isaurians respectively). With security on his mind, Leo reorganized the excubitors, perhaps reconstituting the corps from the ground up. Specifically, he fixed their number at 300 and set them to guard the palace passageways. A poem of 565 praises their physique, comparing them to massive oaks, and seems to say that they wore tall black boots.10 Given the context of intense ethnic tensions at the court and in the capital, Leo may well have wanted to be personally guarded by fellow Illyrians, especially “tall and brawny” Illyrians.

Leo’s excubitors, likely including the young Justin, were soon fighting to defend the palace against an attack by a Gothic army. How this came about requires some explanation, for Leo’s reorganization of the excubitors was not a routine act of

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8 Prokopios, Wars, 1.25.24, 7.32.22; Secret History, 6.11; scholarii: Wars, 8.27.2; Secret History, 24.15; unclear: ibid., 24.8. All modern scholars I have checked believe he means the excubitors in this instance too, except Croke, Leo I and the Palace Guard, 117–151, here 145. He believes that it would have been too prestigious a position to assume at once, but see the discussion below.

9 Leo in PLRE II: 663–664 (Leo 6); Marcianus in PLRE II: 714–715 (Marcianus 8).

administration but part of a bloody struggle for control over the eastern empire. Specifically, the tension had long been growing between Leo and his handler Aspar. In the summer of 471, Leo took a drastic step to regain his independence, raising the stakes of the political struggle. The emperor ordered his eunuchs to ambush and murder Aspar and his sons in the palace. For this Leo earned the name “the Butcher” (Makelles in Greek), though there is no sign that his subjects disapproved of his action. Besides, Leo alleged self-defense: Aspar was going to move against him first.11

What happened next revealed the ethnic tensions that had been contained in the standoff between the emperor and his chief general. Aspar’s Goths began to riot in Constantinople, and one of his henchmen, Ostrys, attacked the palace with a Gothic army. They were defeated by the excubitors. Ostrys withdrew to Thrace where he began to plunder estates. His devotion to Aspar gave rise to a saying, “No dead man had a better friend than Ostrys.”12 Aspar’s murder also caused the Goths in Thrace under Theoderic Strabo to attack the empire (Strabo was Aspar’s in-law and may have been closely related to Ostrys, even his son).13 This kicked off years of war between the Romans and their Gothic “allies” in Thrace. The murder of Aspar and his family revealed that his standing at the court was based in part on the threat of Gothic arms.

A recent school of thought, exemplified in this case by a seminal article by Brian Croke, has argued that ethnicity had nothing to do with these events, that they were just bloody politics-as-usual among Roman military elites struggling to dominate the political system. Croke provides an excellent political reconstruction of the events. But his exclusion of ethnicity as a factor is not justified, especially in the face of the explicit testimony of the sources, which see these events as heavily inflected by ethnic differences. In his otherwise magisterial discussion of Aspar’s career, Croke merely asserts that ethnicity was irrelevant. He offers no argument to that effect. But managing to produce a coherent narrative that excludes ethnicity as a factor is not an argument (the same exercise can be performed with any event).14 Ethnicity has therefore been restored as a factor by subsequent studies of the career of Aspar and his fatal rivalry with Leo.15 In addition to being an Alan, Aspar is identified in Roman sources as a

11 Kandidos, History; Marcellinus Comes, Chronicle, s.a. 471; Jordanes, Getica, 239, Romana, 338; Ioannes Malalas, Chronographia, 14.40; Prokopios, Wars, 3.6.27; Theophanes, Chronographia, 117.
12 Malalas, Chronographia, 14.40.
13 Heather, Goths and Romans, 259–261.
14 Croke, Dynasty and Ethnicity, 147–203. After World War II, historical thinking based on fixed racial groups was rightly abandoned, but this recent school of “ethnodenialism” wants to project modern post-racial thinking onto the past, assuming that people in late antiquity did not view their world in terms of ethnic groups but were somehow required to write about it that way by literary tradition. As a result, ethnodenialists are perpetually attacking the sources, accusing them of inventing ethnic groups for rhetorical purposes. This requires them to postulate an unbridgeable gap between the ideology of the sources and the social values and outlook of their society, often of the same elite groups that the sources were addressing. It all goes too far and is unnecessary. For this school of thought, see Gillett, On Barbarian Ethnicity.
15 Laniado, Aspar and his phoiertai, 1–18; McEvoy, Becoming Roman?, 483–511 (seems to vacillate); for Gothic ethnic identity, see now Pohl, Goths and Huns, 555–568; Swain, Goths and Gothic Identity, 203–233.
leader of the Goths.\textsuperscript{16} This was because his power-base, and likely the source of his military standing within the Roman system, were Gothic client-armies stationed in and near the capital. These forces may have been allied to the empire under his sponsorship, but they could not be trusted to remain at peace otherwise. Aspar had also married into the family of Theoderic Strabo, the leader of the Goths settled in Thrace, and he had a Gothic concubine, a pretty one, it was said. Roman sources emphasized these connections because they established a pattern of ethnic difference.\textsuperscript{17}

Another group with whom Leo had to cope were the Isaurians, specifically the general Zeno (né Tarasis-son-of-Kodissa), whom the emperor married to his daughter Ariadne and tried, at times, to use as a counter-weight to Aspar and his Goths.\textsuperscript{18} Isaurians were members of the empire and Roman citizens, and many of them served in the administration and army with distinction. But they were also perceived as unassimilated to Roman norms and were often regarded as “internal” barbarians. “Isaurians and Romans” could be juxtaposed as different categories.\textsuperscript{19} In this respect, they were not unlike the Goths who were attached to the Roman army but retained their own separate ethnic identity. The people of Constantinople seem to have disliked the Isaurians as much as they disliked the Goths. In the 460s, some Isaurians on Rhodes engaged in robbery and murder until they were attacked by the local soldiers and fled to Zeno in Constantinople. There they harassed some merchants, whereupon the populace attacked them with stones. It was possibly this incident that led Leo, in 468, to issue a law against private persons having armed slaves, private armies, and Isaurians – a revealing use of their name.\textsuperscript{20}

In 473, there was a massacre of Isaurians in Constantinople arising from an incident in the hippodrome.\textsuperscript{21} Zeno’s Isaurian background was also a liability to him. The people of Constantinople at first refused to associate him in the imperial power when Leo requested it, and in the end it was possible to do so only because he was, through his marriage to Ariadne, the father of Leo’s grandson, the short-lived Leo II. But within a year after his own accession, in 475, Zeno had been deposed by rivals and Constantinople erupted in another massacre of Isaurians.\textsuperscript{22} These massacres implied that the populace could tell who was an Isaurian and who was not, which indicates that they were treated as a distinct ethnic group. A slightly later chronicle states

\textsuperscript{16} E.g., Damaskios in Photios, Bibliotheca, 242 (340b); Jordanes, Getica, 239.
\textsuperscript{17} E.g., Malalas, Chronographia, 14.40 (also on his concubine).
\textsuperscript{18} Kandidos, History, fr. 1.
\textsuperscript{19} E.g., Ioannes of Antioch, History, fr. 239.5 (Mariev) = 308 (Roberto). There are many studies of the Isaurians and of Roman perceptions of Isaurian difference, including Burgess, Isaurian Names, 109–121; Shaw, Bandit Highlands, 199–270; Burgess, Isaurian Factions, 874–880; Lenski, Assimilation and Revolt, 413–465; Elton, Ilus and the Imperial Aristocracy, 394–407; Idem, Nature of the Sixth-Century Isaurians, 293–307; Feld, Barbarische Bürger; Wood, Invention of History, 151–162.
\textsuperscript{20} Ioannes of Antioch, History, fr. 229 (Mariev) = 298 (Roberto); Codex Justinianus, 9.12.10.
\textsuperscript{21} Marcellinus Comes, Chronicle, s.a. 473.
\textsuperscript{22} Kandidos, History, fr. 1.
bluntly that the palace officials hated the emperor Zeno "because he was an Isaurian by birth." 23 When Zeno died, the people in the hippodrome demanded that the next emperor be a true Roman, not a foreigner. 24

Therefore, Leo’s decision to recruit tall and brawny Illyrian-Thracians into his personal guard makes all the more sense in this fraught political context that was tense with ethnic animosities. Justin and his companions set out for Constantinople possibly because they had received word that the emperor wanted to recruit fellow Illyrians into his personal guard. Previous emperors had practiced similar regional politics. For example, Jovian (363–364) had also favored fellow Illyrians in the army, and his Pannonian successors Valentinian and Valens had likewise favored Pannonians. 25 Zeno famously based his regime on fellow Isaurians – some of whom turned against him. Conversely, provinces of the empire could be punished when their leading men at the court were defeated in the politics of the court: Lycians were briefly banned from holding high offices when the praetorian prefect Rufinus exiled his enemy Tatianus and executed his son Proculus in 392 (the ban was lifted in 395, when Rufinus was assassinated). 26 Court politics were riven by both geographical and ethnic affiliations. Indeed, such conflicts framed Justin’s early career, from the war against the Goths in the 470s to the war waged by the emperor Anastasius to pacify the Isaurians in the 490s, in which Justin served as a second-tier general. 27 But in contrast to the Goths (who were basically foreigners and usually enemies) and the Isaurians (who were internal “others”), Illyrian-Thracians had provided the backbone of imperial Roman military leadership since the third century and were staunch Roman traditionalists, as both Justin and Justinian turned out to be.

One intriguing possibility is that Justin’s residence as a guardsman in the palace overlapped partially with the ten-year stay at the court of Theoderic the Amal Goth, an honored guest and hostage prince, who would later be the king of Italy when Justin took the throne. The two were exact contemporaries who also died more or less at the same time. Had they overlapped in the palace, they would certainly have met. Unfortunately we do not know exactly when Justin joined the guard (ca. 468–474) or when Theoderic left the court (ca. 469–471). 28

I close by returning to Prokopios’ graphic image of a poor Justin walking to Constantinople with a sack of goat’s hair. Soon after his accession to the throne in 518, Justin’s rise from obscurity was depicted in the capital in a work of art, a mural painted

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23 Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, 12.
24 Konstantinos VII, Book of Ceremonies, 1.91 (pp. 419–420), from the sixth-century manual of Petros the Patrician.
25 Jovian: Lenski, Failure of Empire, 56–57; the Pannonian slant of the Valentinianic dynasty is discussed throughout.
26 Kelly, Ruling the Later Roman Empire, 48–49.
28 For Theoderic at the eastern court, see Shepard, Manners maketh Romans?, 135–158.
in a public bath-house, which showed how he advanced from one rank to the next until he became emperor. It was commissioned by one Marinus of Apameia (in Syria), the emperor Anastasius’ former advisor and praetorian prefect. Inevitably, Marinus came under criticism for depicting Justin’s humble origins. He defended himself by arguing that this image warned the aristocracy not to trust in their wealth, power, and noble ancestry because God can apparently make anyone emperor, “even the poorest man from the bottom of the dung heap” (quoting Psalm 112[113].7). This appeased Marinus’ accusers, or at least it did Justin.29 Under the empire, praise and criticism of the emperor were often so closely entwined it was hard to tell them apart. Presumably the mural remained in place, and it is possible that Prokopios’ literary image of the three companions “walking on foot all the way to Byzantion carrying on their own shoulders sacks made of goat’s hair” was lifted or inspired by it.

In the past, Roman leaders had boasted about their distinguished pedigree, and manuals of rhetoric explained how an emperor’s ancestors should properly be praised. If there was nothing special about his birth, one such text advised, then “make something up, so long as you do it plausibly, because your audience is required to accept the praise without subjecting it to critical scrutiny.”30 By 518, it was apparently acceptable to publically call attention to the fact that an emperor had come from the “dung heap,” and for this to count as a kind of praise. The dynasty of Justin and Justinian never bothered to invent a prestigious ancestry. But its origins were wrapped up in the eastern empire’s struggle to avoid domination by barbarian armies, a fate that overtook the western empire only a few years after Justin walked to Constantinople. It was fate that his nephew never forgot.

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ANTHONY KALDELLIS: Leo I, ethnic politics and the beginning of Justin I's career


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ЛАВ I, ЕТНИЧКА ПОЛИТИКА
И ПОЧЕЦИ КАРИЈЕРЕ ЈУСТИНА I

О скромном пореклу Јустина I (о. 450–527) зна се пре свега на основу Тај-не истиорије Прокопија, коју је писао скоро век каснije, без намере да подробније изложи како и зашто је Јустин дошао из свог села да се придружи царској гарди у Константинопољу. Ипак, тај корак је могуће посматрати у контексту етничке политике у престоници током седме и осме деценије V века, пошто је цар Лав I (457–474) покушао да супротстави готску и исавријску струју једну другој и створио нову царску гарду, екскубиторе, ради сопствене заштите. Јустин је врло вероватно био међу њеним првим припадницима. Новији приступ догађajima тог времена тежи да умањи значај етничке припадности у политици, али се не налази ниједан аргумент који би захтевао да је искључимо као чиниоца, пошто сами извори инсистирају на њој. Заповедника Аспара су сасвим јасно посматрали као некога ко је повезан са готском војском, док је Зенон био повезан са Исавријцима. Цариградско становништво је, штавише, гајило етнички анимозитет према обема групама, које је посматрало као неримске и често нападало у немирима и погромима. Како је један цар могао да заштити себе у тако напетим приликама? Као и Јустин, Лав је био трачко-илирског порекла и очито је био одлучио да попуни своју нову телесну стражу „мишићавим“ људима из свог завичаја. Етничка повлашћеност објашњава загонетку у причи која је углавном остала неопажена: како су сирамашни сељаци прихватили да је Јустинов скроман пореклу се, заправо, расправљало у време његовог успона на царски престо 518. године, када је бивши префект наложио израду зидног мурала који приказује његов успон из „ништавне беде“. Међутим, до тада је Цариград Готе и Исавријце већ био или претерао или укрутио, тако да је изворни контекст Јустиновог приступања гарди постао небитан.