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# The Empress Sophia and East Roman Foreign Policy

*Lewis Dagnall*

Barbarian wars shall increase the triumphs of Rome and the strongest kingdoms shall come beneath your feet. See, the leaders of the state are treading the threshold of your doorway, asking Justin and Sophia to succeed to their father.<sup>1</sup>

The emperor Justin II (565–578) made bold threats to his enemies upon coming to power.<sup>2</sup> Within days of his accession, he began demolishing the intricate diplomatic edifice bequeathed by his uncle, the emperor Justinian (527–565).<sup>3</sup> In decrying the payment of φόρος, ‘tribute’, to barbarian kings, Justin adopted the rhetoric of Justinian’s bitterest critics against what was, in fairness, merely the latest instance of a long-standing instrument of Roman foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> Justin’s uncompromising approach led to war: the Avars attacked across the Danube in 568 and 573/74, the Lombards invaded Italy in 568, and the Sāsānian Persians invaded Syria in 572. Fighting on three fronts, the Romans suffered dramatic defeats. In the winter of 573/74 Justin is said to have suffered a sharp decline in his health, allegedly experiencing

<sup>1</sup> Corippus, *Iust.* 1.62–65: *barbara Romanos augebunt bella triumphos regnaque sub vestris venient fortissima plantis. ecce tuae proceres pulsantes limina portae Iustinum Sophiamque rogant succedere patri* (trans. Av. Cameron 1970, 88). For discussion of this passage, see McEvoy 2018, 107–15. On Corippus, see Av. Cameron 1980a.

<sup>2</sup> On Justin II: *PLRE* 3b (Iustinus 5), 754–56. Bury 1889, II 67–82. Mi. Whitby 2001. Main 2019. For discussion of primary sources, see below.

<sup>3</sup> On Justinian’s foreign policy: Bury 1889, I 333–482. Rubin 1986, 48–49. Halsall 2007, 499–506. Sarris 2011, 145–68. Heather 2020, 303–311. Mi. Whitby 2021, 115–280.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of Roman/East Roman use of subsidies in Late Antiquity: Gordon 1949, 65–69. Hendy 1985, 260–64. Blockley 1985b, 62–63. Blockley 1992, 108. Heather 2001, 25–27. Lee 2007, 105–22. For Justinian’s use of subsidies: Gordon 1959, 24–26. Blockley 1985b, 69–71. Sarantis 2016, 325–74.

catastrophic mental illness after hearing of the loss of the fortress of Dara to the Persians.<sup>5</sup> For the next four years Justin lived on, while apparently unable to govern the empire. The resultant power vacuum gives us a unique insight into the performance of power by a Late Antique empress, with the highest political stakes for herself and her empire.

Several, but not all, of our primary sources evidence that the empress Sophia rose to play a central role, or perhaps indeed *the* central role, in determining foreign policy in this period. One-by-one, the subsidy arrangements that Justin had cancelled were restored. Sophia's supposed influence coincides, therefore, with a crucial change of course: the abandonment of Justin's radical foreign policy and the reinstatement of key elements of the Justinianic system. When Justin died and was succeeded as emperor Augustus by Tiberius II (578–582),<sup>6</sup> and then by Maurice (582–602),<sup>7</sup> Sophia retained her title of Augusta but was by all accounts marginalised from day-to-day decisions. As will be shown, though, even when sharing Justin's rhetorical denunciations of tribute, these emperors continued the Justinianic approach that had been restored under Sophia.

Much of the historiography has done a disservice to Sophia, portraying her in the sexist image of the 'domineering wife'.<sup>8</sup> She has often been compared unfavourably with her aunt, the empress Theodora,<sup>9</sup> and received relatively modest interest in comparison.<sup>10</sup> However, following a groundbreaking study by Averil Cameron, several more sympathetic studies have sought to correct the record and instead emphasize Sophia's influence and agency.<sup>11</sup> In Cameron's judgement:

For forty years she had been a dominant influence in politics. During the reign of Justin she exercised a power no less than the emperor's and almost

<sup>5</sup> The report of Justin's 'insanity' has been taken at face value in much of the scholarship: see Av. Cameron 1970, 11. Blockley 1985b, 73. Mi. Whitby 1988, 6. Isaac 1995, 126–27. Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 151. For a somewhat problematic attempt to understand Justin's illness using modern psychiatry, see Kroll and Bachrach 1993, 40–67. For defences of this methodology, see Kroll and Bachrach 2005, 5–6. Kroll and Pouncey 2016, 226–35.

<sup>6</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Tiberius Constantinus 1), 1323–26.

<sup>7</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Fl. Mauricius Tiberius 4), 855–60.

<sup>8</sup> Mi. Whitby 1988, 6–7, describes the "domineering wife Sophia".

<sup>9</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Theodora 1), 1240–41.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Bury 1889, II 71: "Sophia had the ambition, without the genius, of her aunt Theodora".

<sup>11</sup> Av. Cameron 1975c, 5–21. Garland 1999, 40–58. McClanan 2002, 149–78.

succeeded in making the Imperial power into a collegiality. Once Justin's illness had set in she came into her own...<sup>12</sup>

While it is now recognized that this perhaps overstates the case,<sup>13</sup> it remains clear that Sophia had an unusual level of involvement in the governance of the empire.

In this chapter I want to look beyond the usual debate about Sophia's constitutional role, instead considering both the ways in which she was involved in foreign policy and the scale of the resultant changes. We shall see how Sophia could not have been the co-author of Justin's dogmatic rejection of subsidies, as Cameron's interpretation would imply, because of the sheer contrast in the substance of their policies. We shall also see how the machinations of the imperial court shaped the way the empire looked outwards and interacted with its neighbours. In this way, this chapter suggests that the serious study of empresses, often treated as a discrete field within the historiography of the later Roman Empire, can also be of vital importance to 'mainstream' political topics, in this case, the dynamics of foreign policy.

The chapter proceeds by first establishing the complex legacies of Justinian and Theodora, which formed the political context for the accession of Justin and Sophia. The second part then presents an analysis of foreign policy under Justin's leadership in the period 565 to 573/74, demonstrating the radicalism of his deliberate and dogmatic rejection of 'tribute payments'. I also show that, contrary to images of Sophia as the 'power behind the throne', the sources for this period provide no direct evidence for the empress' close involvement in foreign policy decisions before her husband's decline. Once Justin was incapacitated, however, that changed: in the third part, discussing the period of Justin's illness (573/74–78), we find that the empire dramatically overturned Justin's foreign policy and reinstated the system inherited from Justinian. The decision making in these years is explicitly associated with the empress, even if she worked closely with Tiberius as *comes excubitorum* and later Caesar. After the death of Justin, upon whom Sophia's position depended, she was marginalized, but the continuities between her foreign policy and that of Tiberius and then Maurice show that she had a greater influence in the long-term than her husband's brief and garish reign.

<sup>12</sup> Av. Cameron 1975c, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Pfeilschifter 2013, 142–47. See also Roggo, this volume.



The death of Justinian allowed an intellectual thaw in which critical discussion of the late emperor's policies became permissible. This is evident in how two continuators of Procopius' history, Agathias<sup>23</sup> and Menander,<sup>24</sup> included far stronger criticism than the original author had dared. Agathias gave a stark portrait of the late emperor relying on subsidies due to old age:

At an earlier date the emperor had reduced Africa and the whole of Italy, becoming as a result of those epoch-making campaigns almost the first of the rulers of Byzantium to be Emperor of the Romans in fact as well as in name. He had accomplished these and similar feats when he was still in the full vigour of his youth, but now in his declining years when old age was upon him, he seemed to have wearied of vigorous policies and to prefer to play off his enemies against one another and, if necessary, to coax them away with gifts rather than rely on his own powers and expose himself to the hazards of a sustained struggle.<sup>25</sup>

Menander offered a similar picture:

Justinian's body was weak and his strength, of course, had diminished from the time when, as a young man, he had made captive both Gelimer the Vandal and Vittigis the Goth. Now he was an old man, and his bold and warlike spirit had become feeble, and he sought ways other than war to ward off the power of the barbarians. He would have crushed and utterly destroyed them, if not by war than by wisdom, if he had not met his destined end first.<sup>26</sup>

ἡλικίῳ δὲ ὄντι κηλοῦντι δὲ ἄλλοις δὲ ἄλλοις (trans. Payne Smith 1860, 429). Cf. Joh. Ant. *fr.* 312.

<sup>23</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Agathias), 23–25. For dating of Agathias' *Histories*, see Av. Cameron 1970, 11; 124.

<sup>24</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Menander 1 [Menander Protector]), 873. See Blockley 1985a, 1–30.

<sup>25</sup> Agath. 5.14.1: ὁ γὰρ βασιλεὺς ἐπειδὴ πρότερον Ἰταλίαν ξύμπασαν ἐχειρώσατο καὶ Λιβύην, καὶ τοὺς μεγίστους ἐχεῖνους πολέμους διήνυσε, καὶ πρῶτος ὡς εἰπεῖν ἐν τοῖς κατὰ τὸ Βυζάντιον βεβασιλευκόσι Ῥωμαίων αὐτοκράτωρ ὀνόματί τε καὶ πράγματι ἀπεδέδεικτο· ἐπειδὴ οὖν αὐτῷ ταῦτά τε καὶ ἄλλα ὅμοια τούτοις νεάζοντι ἐτι καὶ ἐρρώμενῳ ἐξείρωσατο, τότε δὴ ἀμφὶ τὴν ἐσχάτην τοῦ βίου πορείαν, (ἤδη γὰρ καὶ ἐγγηγάκει.) ἀπειρηκέναι τοῖς νόμοις ἐδόκει, καὶ μᾶλλον τι αὐτὸν ἤρεσκε ξυγκρούειν ἐν σφίσι τοὺς πολεμίους, δῶροις τε αὐτοὺς, εἴπη δεήσοι, καταθωπεύειν, καὶ ταύτη ἀμωσγέπως ἀποκρούεσθαι, ἢ ἐφ' ἑαυτῷ πεποιθέναι καὶ μέχρι παντός διακινδυνεύειν (trans. Frendo 1975, 149). See Av. Cameron 1970, 126. Treadgold 2007, 290.

<sup>26</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 5.1.17–26: οὐ γὰρ ἐσφρίγα οἱ τὸ σῶμα οὐδὲ ἡκμαζεν ἢ ἀλκή, ὥσπερ ἀμέλει ἠνίκα Γελίμερά τε τὸν Βάνδηλον καὶ Οὐίτιγιν τὸν Γότθον ἀμφῶ ἐτι νεάζων ἔθετο δοριαλώτω, ἀλλ' ἤδη γηραλέος τε ἦν καὶ τὸ ἀνδρεῖον ἐκεῖνο φρόνημα καὶ φιλοπόλεμον μετεβέβλητο ἐς τὸ ῥαθυμότερον, ταῦτα ἐγνώ ἐτέρῳ τρόπῳ καὶ οὐχὶ πολέμῳ τὴν βαρβαρικὴν ἀποκρούεσθαι δύναμιν. καὶ κατηγωνίσαστο ἄν καὶ ἄρδην ἠφάνισεν, εἰ καὶ μὴ πολέμῳ, ἀλλ' οὖν εὐβουλία, εἴ γε μὴ τῷ ὀφειλομένῳ τέλει πρότερον ἠφάνισθη αὐτός (trans. Blockley

This criticism was not limited to intellectuals. In making such arguments, both writers exactly echoed the rhetoric attributed to Justin himself by Corippus:

Let the world rejoice that whatever was not done or put into practice because of our father's old age has been corrected in the time of Justin.<sup>27</sup>

As Sarris has highlighted, the public deprecation of Justinian's policies in such a "highly critical" manner can only be understood as Justin deliberately courting those disillusioned with the late emperor.<sup>28</sup>

It must, however, be said that others have found these writers to have been not wholly unsympathetic to Justinian.<sup>29</sup> By labouring the emperor's old age and presenting a parallel with the passivity of the elderly Khosrow, Menander may have been seeking to excuse policies that looked unwise in retrospect.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in the different context of subsidies to Arab kings, Menander comfortably employed the rhetoric of a "generous and noble Emperor", suggesting he might not have been opposed to subsidies in all circumstances.<sup>31</sup> That Corippus, Agathias, and Menander hedged their critique of Justinian's foreign policy perhaps reveals that the tide of opinion had not gone quite as far as Justin believed: educated Romans still despised tribute, but when it worked they understood the logic of Justinian's actions. We are safe to conclude, though, that contemporary and later sources all point to a growing disquiet about Justinian's policies among the intellectual elite that Justin sought to respond to.<sup>32</sup>

Before we proceed though, there is one further legacy from the reign of Justinian of relevance to our present inquiry: the role of Sophia's aunt, the empress Augusta Theodora.<sup>33</sup> While it is infamous that amidst the wide-ranging invective of the *Secret History*, Procopius particularly deplored Theodora,<sup>34</sup> we must not downplay his evidence. Justinian himself was

1985a, 49). Note that Menander still regards it as a victory of sorts to defeat an enemy "if not by war by wisdom": he was not amongst the most rabid opponents of 'tribute'.

<sup>27</sup> Corippus, *Iust.* 2.263–4: *quod minus ob senium factumve actumve parentis, tempore Iustini correctum gaudeat orbis* (trans. Av. Cameron 1976b, 99).

<sup>28</sup> Sarris 2011, 162. See also Sarris 2006, 226.

<sup>29</sup> Corippus: Av. Cameron 1976b, 170. Agathias: Av. Cameron 1970, 126. Menander: Baldwin 1978, 112–13. Blockley 1985a, 22. Treadgold 2007, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 16.1.12–16. As noted by Blockley 1985a, 22 n. 98. On the discourses surrounding Justinian's policy of subsidies, see also Rollinger (forthcoming a).

<sup>31</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 9.1.34–35: *μεγαλόφρων ἀνὴρ καὶ βασιλικώτατος* (trans. Blockley 1985a, 99).

<sup>32</sup> Börm 2008, 327–46.

<sup>33</sup> On their relationship, see Potter 2015, 201–202.

<sup>34</sup> Procop. *Anecd.* 10.14.

candid about the influence of the empress, explaining in one law that he reached his conclusions after “taking our God-given and most pious consort into consultation”.<sup>35</sup> Theodora played a notable role in several episodes of foreign relations.<sup>36</sup> Taking one example, the empress made a personal appeal to Khosrow for peace in the 540s. She met personally with the Sāsānian ambassador, Zabergan,<sup>37</sup> and sent him with a letter urging Khosrow to come to terms. In this instance, Theodora was actively trying to further Justinian’s own objective of peace.<sup>38</sup> She did not, however, limit herself to shoring up her husband’s position. John of Ephesus relates how Theodora sent a rival Miaphysite mission to the Sudan, competing against the official orthodox missionaries dispatched by her husband.<sup>39</sup> When we come to consider Sophia’s role, Theodora’s involvement in foreign policy provides instructive context.

### Justin’s Foreign Policy (565–573)

Given the rising disquiet, there was a weight of expectation that the new emperor would signal an immediate break with Justinian’s most unpopular policies. One first example is Agathias’ short panegyric to Justin,<sup>40</sup> which offered a warlike depiction of the new emperor:

Let no barbarian, freeing himself from the yoke-strap that passes under his neck, dare to fix his gaze on our king, the mighty warrior.<sup>41</sup>

The barbarians threatened by Agathias were enumerated in another source, an anonymous epigram:

Another statue loaded with spoils shall the bold Persian erect within Susa to the Emperor for his victory, and yet another the host of the long-haired Avars beyond the Danube shearing the locks from their squalid heads...

<sup>35</sup> *Nov.* 8.1: *hic quoque participem consilii sumentes eam quae a deo data nobis est reverentissimam coniugem* (trans. Miller and Sarris 2018, I 130).

<sup>36</sup> Evans 2002, 59–66.

<sup>37</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Zabergan 2), 1410.

<sup>38</sup> Evans 2002, 60–61.

<sup>39</sup> Joh. Eph. *Hist. eccl.* 3.4.6–7. However, it has been argued that John over-emphasized the mission to flatter his Miaphysite Church; for a critical evaluation of this passage, see Zacharopoulou 2016, 75–76. For Theodora and Justinian’s divergent theological views, see also Procop. *Anecd.* 10.13–5 and Evagr. *Hist. eccl.* 4.10.

<sup>40</sup> The subject of the panegyric was established as Justin II by Cameron and Cameron 1966 and McCail 1969, notwithstanding the scepticism of Baldwin 1977 and 1980.

<sup>41</sup> *Anth. Gr.* 4.3 (Agathias *Cycle*, 47–48): μή τις ύπαυχενίοιο λυτών ζωστήρα λεπάδνου βάρβαρος ές βασιληα βημάχον όμμα τανύσση (trans. Paton 1916, 119).

But mayst thou stand firm, O fortunate Byzantine Rome, who hast rewarded the god-given might of Justin.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, these sources, written early in the new emperor's reign and in the panegyric form, cannot be taken literally. It has been said of Agathias' panegyric that "not much could yet be said about Justin himself, so the poet has recourse to the set themes of Byzantine imperial ideology".<sup>43</sup> That is precisely its value. These sources give us a sense of the general expectations among the senatorial elite for the new emperor – and in the case of foreign policy, they were hungry for "victory and triumph".<sup>44</sup>

If commentators had found martial vigour wanting in the ageing Justinian, they also resented his attempts to stabilize imperial finances by raising taxes and demanding compulsory loans. Justin quickly acted to relieve the pressure on taxpayers by remitting taxes and repaying public debt.<sup>45</sup> There was a role too for Sophia in this effort: according to the later chronicler Theophanes, the empress met with bankers to instruct them to absolve their debtors, in what Cameron described as "an extraordinary intervention by an empress in financial affairs".<sup>46</sup> Besides being perceived as burdensome, Justinian's fiscal policies were also regarded as failing in their stated aim: a concern Justin recognized in law by declaring his horror "on finding the public treasury burdened with numerous debts and heading towards utter destruction".<sup>47</sup> So although easing the burden on taxpayers was welcomed, the new emperor was still expected to balance the books, and the combination of reducing income and expenditure necessitated finding economies elsewhere.

Conveniently, there was an obvious way that Justin could both demonstrate austerity and prove how he favoured 'martial virtue' over diplomacy.<sup>48</sup> The belief that the extra money raised to the treasury simply drained to the barbarians, as exemplified by the John of Ephesus quote

<sup>42</sup> *Anth. Plan.* 72: Ἄλλον ὑπὲρ νικας ἐναρηφόρον ἐνδοθι Σούσων ὁ θρασὺς ἀνστήσει Μῆδος ἄνακτι τύπον· ἄλλον ἀκειρεκόμας Ἀβάρων στρατὸς ἐκτοθεν Ἰστρου, κείρας ἐκ κεφαλῆς βόστρυχον αὐσταλέης... ἔμπεδος ἀλλὰ μένοις, Βυζαντιάς ἔμπορε Ῥώμα, θεῖον Ἰουστίνου κάρτος ἀμειφαμένα (trans. Paton 1927, 197 and 199).

<sup>43</sup> Av. Cameron 1977, 4.

<sup>44</sup> Av. Cameron 1977, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Corippus, *Iust.* 2.361. See Sarris 2011, 227–32, on Justin's placation of his senatorial supporters.

<sup>46</sup> Theoph. Conf. AM 6060. Av. Cameron 1975c, 9–10.

<sup>47</sup> *Nov.* 148.pr: *fiscum enim cum multis debitis oneratum et ad extremam inopiam adactum inveniremus...* (trans. Miller and Sarris 2018, II 957).

<sup>48</sup> For the discussion of 'martial virtue' in the Late Roman Empire see Stewart 2016, 1–11 and *passim*.

earlier,<sup>49</sup> shows how the failures of foreign and fiscal policy were understood to be closely bound together. Cutting foreign subsidies would therefore demonstrate Justin's commitments to austerity and to martial prowess over diplomacy. The first opportunity for this came in the days following his accession.

Justin received a delegation of Avars, nomads who had reached the Danube frontier in the previous decade and secured accommodation with Justinian in return for subsidies.<sup>50</sup> This famous embassy was recorded in multiple sources of different genres, thereby widely advertising Justin's actions. The first and most prominent of these was Corippus' panegyric, *In Praise of Justin the Younger*. Bound by convention to offer a supportive presentation of imperial authority, its date (566/67)<sup>51</sup> means it was also written without full knowledge of how Justin's foreign policy would eventually unwind. The source therefore provides good insight into how Justin wished his policy to be presented at the opening of his reign. One important element was the presentation of the imperial couple together as joint bearers of a holy duty to restore the might of the empire, as exemplified in the quote from Corippus taken as this chapter's epigram. Despite this, however, Corippus gives no direct account of Sophia's involvement in foreign policy, as do our sources for the 570s.

Corippus has the Avars enter the imperial audience and after a long speech, request that Justin "send our king the gifts that are his due".<sup>52</sup> Corippus insists that the emperor was "tranquil" and "not moved in anger",<sup>53</sup> yet he responded forcefully:

'Do you think my father did it through fear, because he gave gifts to the needy and exiled out of pity?'<sup>54</sup>

Justin made an explicit threat to wage war on the Avars:

'Against those we find ungrateful, we go to war. Are we to stand in the way of kings, yet open our doors to exiled slaves?... I tell you the truth. We are

<sup>49</sup> Joh. Eph. *Hist. eccl.* 3.6.24: *ἵνα ἴδωμεν ὅτι ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἐπιβουλεύομεν αὐτῷ, ἀλλὰ ὅτι ἐπιβουλεύομεν αὐτῷ, ὅτι ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἐπιβουλεύομεν αὐτῷ, ἀλλὰ ὅτι ἐπιβουλεύομεν αὐτῷ.* (trans. Payne Smith 1860, 429). Cf. Joh. Ant. *fr.* 312.

<sup>50</sup> Sarantis 2016, 325–74.

<sup>51</sup> Av. Cameron 1967, 12–13.

<sup>52</sup> Corippus, *Iust.* 3.305: *debita quaerenti transmittes munera regi* (trans. Av. Cameron 1976b, 108).

<sup>53</sup> Corippus, *Iust.* 3.308–10: *nulla commotus in ira, tranquillus princeps oculis pietate serenis aspexit iuvenem* (trans. Av. Cameron 1976b, 108).

<sup>54</sup> Corippus, *Iust.* 3.347–49: *terrore putatis id nostrum fecisse patrem, miseratus egenis et profugis quod dona dedit?* (trans. Av. Cameron 1976b, 109).

offering aid to the unworthy. Does the Cagan think that he is feared and dare to assail my standards in war? Very well, go. Prepare your battles, dispositions and encampments, and wait with certainty for the generals of my army.<sup>55</sup>

As would be expected in a panegyric, Corippus wrote that the Avar ambassador “trembled in horror and stiffened in great fear”.<sup>56</sup> Yet it was not only panegyrists, bound by convention to laud imperial policy and diminish barbarians, who celebrated Justin’s new approach.

In Menander’s record of the embassy, he bemoaned Justinian’s policy and celebrated Justin’s treatment of the Avars:

During the reign of the younger Justin the envoys of the Avars came to Byzantium to receive the usual gifts which the previous emperor, Justinian, had given to their tribe... On this occasion the envoys of the Avars wished to come to try the Emperor and see if they would in the same way be able to obtain gifts, make mock of the Romans’ inertia and turn their negligence to their own profit.<sup>57</sup>

He reported how Justin dismissed this entreaty in the strongest terms:

‘Depart, therefore, having purchased from us a gift of the greatest value – your lives – and having received, instead of Roman gold, a terror of us which will ensure your survival. I shall never need an alliance with you, nor shall you receive from us anything other than we wish to give, and that as a free gift for your service, not, as you expect, a tax upon us.’<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Corippus, *Iust.* 3.393–98: *quos contra ingratos offendimus, arma paramus. obstamus dominis, profugis damus ostia servis? legibus hoc nostris non convenit. arguo factum. Indignis praebemus opem. Caganque timeri se putat, et bello mea signa lacessere temptat? ite, licet. campos acies et castra parate, signorumque duces certo sperate meorum* (trans. Av. Cameron 1976b, 110).

<sup>56</sup> Corippus, *Iust.* 3.399–400: *contremuit stupefactus Avar, magnoque timore dirigit* (trans. Av. Cameron 1976b, 110).

<sup>57</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 8.1–3 and 5–10: Ὅτι ἐπὶ Ἰουστίνου τοῦ νέου οἱ τῶν Ἀβάρων πρέσβεις παρεγένοντο ἐν Βυζαντίῳ τὰ συνήθη δῶρα ληφόμενοι, ἅπερ τῷ κατ’ αὐτοὺς ἔθνεϊ Ἰουστινιανὸς ὁ πρὸ τοῦ βασιλεὺς ἐδίδου ... τότε δὴ οὖν οἱ πρέσβεις τῶν Ἀβάρων ἐς πείραν ἰέναι τοῦ βασιλέως ἐβούλοντο, εἰ γε οὐκ ἄλλως <ένειν> δῶρα λαμβάνειν αὐτοῖς καὶ τῇ Ῥωμαίων ῥαθυμία ἐπειτρυνῶν καὶ τὸ ἀμελές αὐτῶν οἰκεῖον τίθεσθαι κέρδος· καὶ δὴ παρὰ βασιλέα φοιτᾶν ἤξιουν (trans. Blockley 1985a, 93).

<sup>58</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 8.53–55: ἅπιτε τοιγαροῦν πλείστου πριάμενοι παρ’ ἡμῶν κᾶν γοῦν ἐν ζῶσι τελεῖν καὶ ἀντὶ τῶν Ῥωμαϊκῶν χρημάτων τὸν καθ’ ἡμᾶς φόβον εἰς σωτηρίαν εἰληφότες. οὔτε γὰρ δεηθεῖν ποτὲ τῆς καθ’ ὑμᾶς συμμαχίας, οὔτε τι λήψεσθε παρ’ ἡμῶν ἢ καθ’ ὅσον ἡμῖν δοκεῖ, ὡς περ δουλείας ἐπανον, καὶ οὐχ, ὡς οἴεσθε, φορολογίαν τινά (trans. Blockley 1985a, 95).

The embassy is also described in John of Ephesus' *Ecclesiastical History*. He names Justin as "one of those who were vexed and grumbled at the amount which these barbarians received".<sup>59</sup> In an echo of the epigram discussed above, John wrote that Justin threatened to "shave off those locks of yours"<sup>60</sup> – an instance of Romans' recurrent fascination with the Avar hairstyle and a bait for chauvinistic attitudes to ethnicity and gender. All in all, the ambassadors who had expected a resumption of the payments they had received from Justinian had a rude awakening.

This diplomatic rebuke soon had consequences. First, the Avar *khagan* Bayan<sup>61</sup> joined with the Lombards to invade and destroy the kingdom of the Gepids in the north-west of the Danube frontier. The Gepids were imperial clients, albeit unreliable ones, and Menander says Justin's cancellation of subsidies motivated the Avars to attack.<sup>62</sup> The Gepid king Cunimund<sup>63</sup> sent a plea for aid to Justin which was refused.<sup>64</sup> Instead, the Romans took the opportunity of the crumbling Gepid kingdom to reoccupy the city of Sirmium, a former imperial capital that had been under their control. After destroying the Gepids, however, in spring 568, the Avars turned their attention south of the Danube and laid siege to Sirmium.<sup>65</sup> Early in the siege Bayan sought to negotiate with the city's commander, the *magister militum* Bonus,<sup>66</sup> and offered to withdraw upon the receipt of gifts. This lends weight to the idea that the Avar rampage was self-inflicted by Justin's refusal to pay subsidies. To Bayan's fury, however, Bonus insisted that he could only make such gifts with the express approval of Justin, knowing full well the stance the emperor had taken.<sup>67</sup>

Following this, Bayan sent Targitius,<sup>68</sup> the ambassador who had been rebuked in 565, on two embassies to Justin (likely in 567/8)<sup>69</sup> to make a direct request for Sirmium and annual subsidies. In the meantime, he convinced another Roman authority, the prefect of Illyricum, to give him 800 *nomismata* in return for the Avars not pillaging his territory.<sup>70</sup> When Targitius met Justin, he made his case legalistically: since the Avars had subjugated the Utigur, Cutrigur, and Gepid groups, who had been

<sup>59</sup> Joh. Eph. *Hist. eccl.* 3.6.24 (trans. Payne Smith 1860, 429).

<sup>60</sup> Joh. Eph. *Hist. eccl.* 3.6.24 (trans. Payne Smith 1860, 429).

<sup>61</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Baianus), 167–69.

<sup>62</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 12.2.1–12.

<sup>63</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Cunimundus), 364–65.

<sup>64</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 12.2.12–31.

<sup>65</sup> See Mi. Whitby 1988, 86–88.

<sup>66</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Bonus 4), 241–42.

<sup>67</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 12.5.64–83. Pohl <sup>2</sup>2018, 222.

<sup>68</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Targitius), 1217.

<sup>69</sup> Pohl 2018, 76.

<sup>70</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 12.6.1–5.

subsidized by Justinian, the Avar *khagan* could lay claim to those subsidies.<sup>71</sup> Regardless of the irony that those groups had received subsidies to defend the Danube from the Avars themselves, Justin would have had no intention of paying even a legitimate request and dismissed the question of subsidies. Justin did, however, agree to send the future emperor Tiberius to negotiate directly with Bayan.<sup>72</sup>

The Avars' destruction of the Gepids had knock-on effects. Rather than stay within striking distance of his erstwhile allies, the Lombard king Alboin<sup>73</sup> decided to make his own move west. In 568 the Lombards invaded Roman Italy and quickly seized territory across the north of the peninsula. Whereas previous invaders had largely maintained Roman administrative structures, the Lombards instead began carving out duchies.<sup>74</sup> Italy, which Justinian's armies had fought long and hard to reclaim, once again became the scene of war.

While these events unfolded in the west of the empire, Justin's hard-line policy against subsidies caused upset in the east, too. We understand the Arab tribes bordering Rome and Persia as having increasingly cohered into rival federations: successive sixth-century Roman emperors promoting the Jafnid dynasty to rule over Ghassanid tribes, while the Sāsānians had long favoured the Nasrid rulers of the Lakhmid federation.<sup>75</sup> Justinian's subsidies cut across such spheres of influence, however: he made gifts of gold to al-Mundhir III,<sup>76</sup> the pro-Sāsānian Nasrid king, just as he did to the Jafnid king al-Harith,<sup>77</sup> a Roman ally.<sup>78</sup>

In keeping with his policy against subsidies, Justin spurned Arab requests for money. In response, 'Amr,<sup>79</sup> the Nasrid successor to al-Mundhir, persuaded his Sāsānian benefactors to intervene. In July 567 Khosrow raised the matter with Justin's ambassador, John,<sup>80</sup> only to be rebuffed.<sup>81</sup> John lamented Justinian's "excess of generosity" and explained that rather than hand out donatives, "the present emperor wishes to be an object of

<sup>71</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 12.6.14–86. Curta 2006, 63–65. Sarantis 2016, 333–52.

<sup>72</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 12.7.15–19.

<sup>73</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Alboin), 38–40.

<sup>74</sup> Christie 1995, 73–90. Sarris 2011, 179–80.

<sup>75</sup> Fisher 2011, 49–70.

<sup>76</sup> *PLRE* 2 (Alamundarus 2), 40–43.

<sup>77</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Arethas), 111–13.

<sup>78</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 6.1.288–91 and *fr.* 9.1.34–36. See Fisher 2011, 122–23.

<sup>79</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Ambros [‘Amr] 2), 54–55. Note that while Justinian had subsidized al-Mundhir III, he apparently declined to send money to ‘Amr. See Men. Prot. *fr.* 6.1.288–91 and Blockley 1985a, 255 n. 46, *contra* Stein 1949, 521.

<sup>80</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Ioannes 81), 672–74.

<sup>81</sup> Dated by Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 135.

the greatest fear to all”.<sup>82</sup> This explanation did not satisfy the Persians, who allowed a Nasrid delegation to accompany a subsequent Sāsānian embassy to Constantinople later that year.<sup>83</sup> Justin refused to receive the Arab envoys, declaring:

‘He says that he wishes to receive the usual payment from us, instead of which, I think, the accursed criminal will receive misfortune. It would be laughable if we, the Romans, became tributary to the Saracen race, nomads at that.’<sup>84</sup>

This response was both significant and revealing. Not only did Justin demolish his uncle’s policy, but he adopted exactly the line of attack that critics had used against his uncle – that making diplomatic payments reduced the empire to tributary status.

If this was the response to the Persian-aligned Nasrids, there was an even worse reception to the request for money by the Romans’ own clients, the Jafnid dynasty. After being rebuffed by Justin, the Nasrids had recommenced raids against Jafnid lands. The Jafnid king al-Mundhir sent to Justin in 572 to request gold to fund his defences.<sup>85</sup> Justin responded furiously, ordering an assassination attempt on the Jafnid king. This plot was bungled and consequently, during what was to be a crucial period for the defence of the Roman East, al-Mundhir withdrew his cooperation with Roman security for three years.<sup>86</sup>

Alongside the Arab alliance system, other sources of tension between Rome and Persia began flaring up in the borderlands of Armenia, Yemen, and the Eurasian steppe. In one case Yazan, the Himyarite king of Yemen, had his request for Justin’s support dismissed, so instead submitted as a vassal of the Sāsānian *Šāhansāh*.<sup>87</sup> In and of themselves, these conflicts were not certain to precipitate direct conflict between the great powers: under Justinian, Roman and Persian forces had fought directly and through proxies in peripheral regions, while maintaining peace in Mesopotamia.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 9.1.86–87: ὁ δὲ νῦν Ῥωμαίων αὐτοκράτωρ πρὸς πάντας εἶναι βούλεται φοβερώτατος (trans. Blockley 1985a, 101).

<sup>83</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 9.3.30.

<sup>84</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 9.3.105–10: φησί γὰρ ὡς ἐθέλοι τὰ συνήθη χρήματα κομίσασθαι πρὸς ἡμῶν, ἀνθ’ ὧν, οἶμαι κομιεῖται ξυμφορὰς ὁ κατάρατος τε καὶ ἀπολουμένος. γελοιώδες γάρ, εἰ Σαρακηνῶν ἔθνει, καὶ ταῦτα νομάδων, Ῥωμαῖοι γε ὄντες τεταξόμεθα ἐς φόρων ἀπαγωγὴν (trans. Blockley 1985a, 110).

<sup>85</sup> Joh. Eph. *Hist. eccl.* 3.6.3. See Edwell et al. 2015, 255–57. *PLRE* 3a (Alamundarus), 34–37.

<sup>86</sup> Joh. Eph. *Hist. eccl.* 3.6.4. See Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 136, and Fisher 2011, 72.

<sup>87</sup> Al-Tabari *History*, 949–50.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Lazica was excluded from Justinian’s truces of 545 and 551: see Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 113 and 124.

Crucial to that peace, however, was the Roman willingness to underwrite treaties with payments.

Given this, Justin's refusal to send money to Persia was tantamount to a declaration of war. After several bouts of warfare in the early and middle decades of the century, Justinian and the Persian *Šāhanšāh* had reached a position of grudging stability.<sup>89</sup> In Persia, the receipt of money from the Roman emperor had ideological significance. Regular payments were used by the *Šāhanšāh* as evidence that the Roman emperor was but another subject king.<sup>90</sup> For this reason, Roman negotiators tried to avoid formally agreeing to annual payments. Even when payment terms were written in secret annexes to treaties or paid as a lump sum to avoid the appearance of an annual obligation, they were derided by Romans, as we have seen.

It was such an arrangement that shielded Justin in the early years of his reign. Justinian's treaty of 562 had committed to annual payments of 30,000 *solidi*, with a lump sum for the first seven years paid immediately in advance.<sup>91</sup> A further payment of 90,000 *solidi* should have been due in 568/69, but whether payments were ever started by Justin is not made clear in our sources.<sup>92</sup> What we do know is that in 572 a Persian embassy to Justin requested the commencement of annual payments of 30,000 *solidi* agreed by the treaty. Justin refused to honour the agreement. He lectured the Sāsānian ambassador Sebokht<sup>93</sup> that "a friendship secured by money was not good (for such a thing when bought was shameful and servile)".<sup>94</sup>

The toughening of the stance between 569 and 572 may well have been encouraged by geopolitical shifts. Menander wrote that the prospect of an alliance with Turks in Central Asia, which could enable the envelopment of the Sāsānian empire, was the consideration that "most encouraged" Justin to challenge Persia directly, a view shared by other writers.<sup>95</sup> Building on his refusal, Justin boasted that he was "confident that were he to make war, he would destroy Khosrow and himself give a king to the Persians" – a threat that would soon be shown to be empty.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Mi. Whitby 2021, 115–172.

<sup>90</sup> Payne 2013, 3–33. Also Canepa 2009, 22.

<sup>91</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 6.1.134–54. Turtledove 1983. Also Turtledove 1977.

<sup>92</sup> Mi. Whitby 1988, 251, and 2001, 88, argues that this must have been paid if war did not break out that year, but there is no positive evidence. Indeed, John of Epiphania, *Chron.* 3 = *FHG* IV.274 states that this embassy was sent at the conclusion of the advance payment; see Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 142 and 282.

<sup>93</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Sebochthes), 1119–20.

<sup>94</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 16.1.28–30: ἔφη τοιγαροῦν ὡς αὐτὸν ὡς ἡ φιλότις χρήμασι βεβαιουμένη οὐκ ἀγαθὴ (αἰσχρὰ γὰρ καὶ ἀνδραποδώδης ὄνητή τε ἢ τοιάδε) (trans. Blockley 1985a, 153).

<sup>95</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 13.5.2 μᾶλλον ἀναπτερώσαν. See also John of Epiphania, *Chron.* 2 = *FHG* IV.273–4 in Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 141. Joh. Eph. *Hist. eccl.* 3.6.22.

<sup>96</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 16.1.53–55: θαρρεῖν τε ὡς, εἰ πρὸς πόλεμον ὀρμήσοι, καθελεῖ τε Χοσρόην

In these ways, Justin inherited a stable empire from Justinian and plunged it into war on multiple frontiers at once. By adopting the scathing criticism of Justinian's diplomatic manoeuvres and ruling out making diplomatic payments, whether to tribal kings or the Sāsānian *Šāhanšāh*, Justin dramatically destabilized East Roman foreign policy for short-term political gain at home. This was, it seems, very much Justin's own policy. While sources emphasized the partnership between Justin and Sophia, none attribute a direct role in these decisions to Sophia or give any reason to think she fully subscribed to her husband's views.

### Sophia's Foreign Policy? (574–578)

As we have seen, Justin's hard-line refusal to honour treaties and pay subsidies brought an end to the stable system of foreign relations he had inherited from Justinian. By provoking direct confrontation with the Persians, Justin courted disaster. Any expectation that the Persian armies would be locked down on multiple fronts proved vain. For six decades the fortress of Dara had been the keystone of Roman defences in Mesopotamia and, after a major reconstruction under Justinian, it was believed to be impregnable.<sup>97</sup> Yet when Persian forces massed to besiege Dara in the autumn of 573, the Arab allies whom Justin had scorned did not arrive to the city's defence.<sup>98</sup> In November 573 the Persians overwhelmed the fort, allowing their forces to directly threaten the prosperous Roman Levant and thereby achieving an enormous strategic victory.

This military setback triggered a political crisis. The story given by several sources is that Justin experienced acute mental illness. In the view of Evagrius, this was directly triggered by the news from Dara:

When Justin heard of these events, after such delusion and pretension he had no healthy or sane thoughts, nor did he endure what had happened like a mortal, but fell into mental disorder and madness, and thereafter had no understanding of events.<sup>99</sup>

For a critic like John of Ephesus, this was a fitting and divine punishment for Justin. John includes a lengthy account of how the emperor was reduced

καὶ αὐτὸς βασιλέα χειροτονήσοι Πέρσαις (trans. Blockley 1985a, 155).

<sup>97</sup> Procop. *Aed.* 2.1.14–21. Croke and Crow 1983. Croke 1984. Nicholson 1985. Keser-Kayaalp and Erdoğan 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Mi. Whitby 1988, 210–11.

<sup>99</sup> Evagr. *Hist. eccl.* 5.11: ἄπερ ἐπειδὴ ἠκηκόει ὁ Ἰουστινός, ἐκ τοσούτου τύφου καὶ ὄγκου οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς ἢ φρενήρες ἐνόησας οὐδὲ ἀνθρωπίνως τὸ συνενεχθὲν ἀνατλάς ἐς φρενίτιδα νόσον καὶ μακίαν ἐπιπίπτει, οὐδὲν λοιπὸν τῶν γιγνομένων συνείς (trans. Mi. Whitby 2001, 270). On Evagrius, see Allen 1981. This claim is backed by Men. Prot. *fr.* 18.1.1.

to being towed around the palace in a wagon, only soothed by constant organ music.<sup>100</sup> While Justin could have lucid moments – presiding over the appointment of Tiberius to Caesar in 574 and Augustus in 578 – our sources concur that he was unable to maintain a day-to-day role in the governance of the empire.

Had Justin died, a new emperor Augustus would have immediately arisen. With the emperor alive but incapacitated, the empress Augusta was left in an unusual position to act on the authority of her husband. Some sources, such as John of Epiphania, omit Sophia and imply Tiberius was immediately elevated to Caesar after Justin’s collapse.<sup>101</sup> This was not the case: there was almost a full year between Justin’s incapacitation in the winter of 573/74 and the appointment of Tiberius as Caesar in November 574.

At the other extreme, however, Gregory of Tours describes Sophia as having “assumed sole power”.<sup>102</sup> While this was once accepted by Cameron and others working on Sophia, the value of Gregory’s testimony about events in Constantinople has since been downgraded.<sup>103</sup> Most important, as Pfeilschifter has observed, is that there was no conception of an “empress regent” in the Late Roman Empire except for mothers of underage children.<sup>104</sup> There could not be “sole power”, as Gregory suggested. Indeed, as per Justinian’s *Digest*, it was “emperors [who] give the empress the same privileges as they have themselves”;<sup>105</sup> that is to say, empresses held no authority independent of their emperor.<sup>106</sup> This makes the question of regency somewhat of a red herring: rather than focusing on the legal role, we should instead seek to evaluate the role that Sophia is attested to have played.

In our most reliable sources it is made clear that Sophia did step up to manage the empire’s affairs, with the assistance of Tiberius, acting from his

<sup>100</sup> Joh. Eph. *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.2–5. For John’s biases regarding Justin II, see van Ginkel 2020, 35–36.

<sup>101</sup> John of Epiphania, *Chron.* 5 = *FHG* IV.275–6 (trans. Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 151).

<sup>102</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Hist.* 5.19: *Cum autem Iustinus imperator, amisso sensu, amens effectus esset et per solam Sophiam augustam eius imperium regiretur, populi, ut in superiore libro iam diximus* (trans. Thorpe 1974, 283).

<sup>103</sup> Av. Cameron 1975c, 18–19. Garland 1999, 54–57. McClanan 2002, 157. See Pfeilschifter 2013, 142 n. 46 and Roggo, this volume, for further discussion.

<sup>104</sup> Pfeilschifter 2013, 495: “So etwas wie eine Regentschaft konnten Frauen nicht als Witwen oder Gattinnen erlangen. Sie vermochten es nur als Mütter unmündiger Kinder.”

<sup>105</sup> *Dig.* 1.3.31: *Princeps legibus solutus est: Augusta autem licet legibus soluta non est, principes tamen eadem illi privilegia tribuunt, quae ipsi habent* (trans. Watson 1998, I 13).

<sup>106</sup> McCormick 1991, 694.

powerful position of *comes excubitorum*.<sup>107</sup> Even Menander describes how, at the outset of Justin's illness, "Tiberius and the empress Sophia were at a loss how to manage the war", acknowledging Sophia's role.<sup>108</sup> The relationship became increasingly fractious, but while Sophia is supposed to have criticized Tiberius's lavish donatives or where he housed his wife,<sup>109</sup> she is never reported as criticizing his foreign policy. Given, as we shall see, how dramatically the empire changed its position on the key question of foreign subsidies in the period from 574 to 578 and beyond, might she not have had good reason to? Had she indeed been the joint author of Justin's hard-line policy or, at the very least, felt any loyalty to it, such criticism would have been natural. Instead, Sophia is best understood to have taken an active role in undoing Justin's doctrine and restoring a pragmatic approach that owed much more to Justinian.

The first challenge faced following Justin's incapacitation was how to respond to the Sāsānian capture of Dara. This was eased by Khosrow's decision to send an embassy following the fall of the fortress; he sought to consolidate Persian gains and end the war on favourable terms. Sophia alone gave a formal audience to this embassy, not accompanied by Justin or Tiberius.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, she responded by sending a personal ambassador in her name back to the Sāsānian *Šāhanšāh*, who would be competent "to discuss all the points at dispute" towards reaching a ceasefire.<sup>111</sup>

The choice of ambassador was "one of the palace physicians", Zacharias.<sup>112</sup> Menander explicitly states that Zachariah was chosen and dispatched by Sophia.<sup>113</sup> The choice of a doctor was not as unusual as it might first seem. Of course, the palace doctor would have intimate contact and a direct relationship with the imperial couple.<sup>114</sup> The palace physicians were also senior administrative officers who ranked as senators.<sup>115</sup> It was an approach that had been well received on previous occasions: Khosrow's father Kavādh had formally requested the ministrations of a Roman doctor in one episode of negotiations,<sup>116</sup> and Khosrow met doctor-ambassadors on

<sup>107</sup> Lin 2021, 128. Discussed further below.

<sup>108</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 18.1.2–4: ἐν ἀπόρῳ ἦσαν αὐτός τε Τιβέριος καὶ ἡ βασιλις Σοφία ὅπως διάθουιντο τὰ τῶν πολέμων (trans. Blockley 1985a, 157).

<sup>109</sup> See Roggo, this volume.

<sup>110</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 18.1.26–31.

<sup>111</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 18.1.29–30: καὶ ἀμφὶ τῶν ὅπως οὖν κεκινημένων διαλεχθησόμενον (trans. Blockley 1985a, 159). See Nechaeva 2014, 107.

<sup>112</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 18.1.30–31: ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις καταταττόμενος ἰατροῖς (trans. Blockley 1985a, 159). Also Men. Prot. fr. 18.2.1–2. *PLRE* 3b (Zacharias 2), 1411–12.

<sup>113</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 18.2.1–3.

<sup>114</sup> Blockley 1980, 94.

<sup>115</sup> Blockley 1980, 89–90, on palace physicians and 91–92 on Zacharias in particular.

<sup>116</sup> Procop. *Bell.* 2.31. Discussed in Blockley 1980, 89–90.

two occasions under Justinian.<sup>117</sup> However, it is clear that Zacharias was an important figure to Justin and Sophia, and indeed later to Tiberius.

Zacharias's task was to totally reverse the policy of Justin that had led to the war. While Sophia's husband had insisted that no Roman emperor would pay tribute to barbarians, her envoy carried 45,000 gold coins to buy a one-year truce, from 574 to 575.<sup>118</sup> The Sāsānians agreed, giving Sophia time to prepare a further embassy. The decision to pay for a truce has been criticized: Whitby calls it an act of "desperation".<sup>119</sup> Taken in the wider context of restoring a Justinianic approach to foreign policy, however, it seems far from desperate, but deliberate and considered.

This deferment also allowed the imperial court to stabilize. Had Justin have suffered a further decline in health without a clear successor, a political crisis would have consumed the court at a perilous moment. This risk was resolved with the appointment of a Caesar, whom by sixth-century convention would serve as the presumptive successor. The appointment of a favourable Caesar ought to have served Sophia's advantage, by offering a guarantee of longevity for her position beyond her ailing husband. The emperor alighted on Tiberius, apparently – according to John of Ephesus – on the "counsel of the queen".<sup>120</sup> Tiberius had long been an ally of the imperial couple.<sup>121</sup> Having served as *comes excubitorum*, commander of the imperial guard, in Justinian's last years,<sup>122</sup> Tiberius would have worked closely alongside, and perhaps under the direction of, Justin as *curopalates*.<sup>123</sup> The weight of the imperial guard was crucial to a smooth succession. Following Justin's accession, Tiberius continued as *comes excubitorum* alongside serving as a *magister militum*, in which role he campaigned on the Danube frontier and conducted negotiations with the Avars.<sup>124</sup> All in all, upon his appointment by Justin in December 574 he was well placed to assist with foreign policy.

In the winter of 574/75, the Romans moved to settle relations on the Danube and in Italy. The Romans and Avars agreed a treaty predicated on the payment of 80,000 *nomismata* (*solidi*) per annum,<sup>125</sup> reversing Justin's dramatic rejection of the Avar embassy in the first days of his reign. This decision acknowledged Avar hegemony over the north bank of the Danube, accepting it was better to return to diplomatic relations if the war could not

<sup>117</sup> Blockley 1980, 90–91.

<sup>118</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 18.2.1–5.

<sup>119</sup> Mi. Whitby 2001, 94.

<sup>120</sup> Joh. Eph. *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.5.

<sup>121</sup> Lin 2021, 128.

<sup>122</sup> Corippus, *Iust.* 1.212–25.

<sup>123</sup> Lin 2021, 128.

<sup>124</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 12.7.15–19.

<sup>125</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 15.5.1–6 and 27.3.27–29. See Pohl <sup>2</sup>2018, 77–78.

be won. The political situation in Italy was different: in 574 the Lombard kingdom had split into multiple, competing duchies following the death of King Cleph,<sup>126</sup> who had succeeded Alboin upon the latter's assassination in 572.<sup>127</sup> After a dismal military expedition led by Baduarius,<sup>128</sup> Justin and Sophia's son-in-law, Tiberius tried two alternative approaches. Firstly, he sent the patrician Pamphronius<sup>129</sup> with "a large amount of gold, about thirty *centenaria*" (3,000 lbs of gold) to buy peace from Lombard dukes.<sup>130</sup> In a further passage, Menander attests to another embassy conveying gifts in 579, as a result of which "very many of the chiefs did accept the Emperor's generosity and came over to the Romans".<sup>131</sup> The second approach revived Justinian's frequent stratagem in the Gothic Wars: drawing the Franks into Italy to fight the Lombards.<sup>132</sup> The Frankish kingdom of Burgundy had emerged in 561 from the division of Merovingian territories.<sup>133</sup> They were persuaded to mount a campaign in 575 that imposed tribute on Lombard duchies in northern Italy.<sup>134</sup>

With Persia, the approach taken under Sophia was deepened. Tiberius recommissioned Zacharias as ambassador in late 574, this time accompanied by a senior senator, Trajan.<sup>135</sup> Menander specifically states that Tiberius and Zachariah reported back to Tiberius for instruction.<sup>136</sup> The Roman ambassadors offered a three-year truce, underwritten by 30,000 *nomismata* per year. While the Persians had sought a minimum term of five years, they ultimately agreed to the Roman proposal. The truce excluded Armenia, so fighting continued in the North.

This truce bought time to negotiate a full peace treaty. In early 575 Khosrow received an embassy led by the *silentarius* Theodore<sup>137</sup> seeking to progress talks. After accompanying Khosrow on an ill-fated attack on

<sup>126</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Cleph), 318–19.

<sup>127</sup> Wickham 1981, 28–32.

<sup>128</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Baduarius 2), 164–65. See Goffart 1957, 80–81.

<sup>129</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Pamphronius), 962–63.

<sup>130</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 22, 1–2: χρυσίον συχνὸν ἄχρι κεντηναρίων τριάκοντα (trans. Blockley 1985a, 197, amended by Dagnall).

<sup>131</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 24.10–15: τῶν ἡγουμένων τοῦ Λογγιβάρδων ἔθνους δεξιῶσηται δώροισ ὑποπέιθων καὶ μεγίστας ἐπαγγελλόμενος χάριτας, ἥδη τε πλείστοι τῶν δυνατῶν μετετίθεντο ὡς Ῥωμαίους τὴν ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος ὠφέλειαν προσδεχόμενοι (trans. Blockley 1985, 217).

<sup>132</sup> Goffart 1957, 75–77. Sarantis 2018, 7–8. Reimitz 2019.

<sup>133</sup> Wood 1994, 55–57.

<sup>134</sup> Fredegar, *Chron.* 45. Discussed by Goffart 1957, 82. See Fisher 2019.

<sup>135</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Traianus 3), 1334. Evagr. *Hist. eccl.* 5.12. Men. Prot. *fr.* 18.3 and 18.4. Blockley 1980, 92. For dates, see Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 285.

<sup>136</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 18.4.1–2.

<sup>137</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Theodorus 33), 1254–55.

Roman-aligned Armenia, which had been excluded from the previous truce, Theodore returned to Constantinople to convey that the Persians wished to enter full peace talks. A further embassy was dispatched for this purpose in 576 led by Justin's former *magister officiorum*, the patrician Theodore,<sup>138</sup> and accompanied by the doctor Zacharias and the senators John<sup>139</sup> and Peter.<sup>140</sup> The Persian negotiator Mebodes<sup>141</sup> sought a return to annual payments of 30,000 *solidi* amongst other measures, but during negotiations he withdrew that demand and conceded "that peace must come on equal terms".<sup>142</sup> Instead the Romans recognized Persian suzerainty over Eastern Armenia and Iberia, while their ambition to buy back Dara was never concluded.<sup>143</sup> The ultimate conclusion of a peace treaty without payments was the fruit of the pragmatism of Sophia and Tiberius, in contrast to Justin's bellicose dogmatism.

Indeed, as we have seen, such an approach bore fruit across the empire. Money bought ceasefires in the East, while an annual subsidy was also agreed with the very Avars whom Justin had humiliated in court. An embassy was sent with money to Italy, to seek allies amongst Lombard dukes or Frankish kings. Roman ambassadors maintained a preference to make deals without subsidies, even at the expense of territorial concessions, as in the case of negotiations with Persia in 576/77. However, the willingness to concede subsidies or one-off payments as necessary demonstrates that foreign policy in the period 574–578 reflected far more the legacy of Justinian than it did the agenda set by Justin.

Although Sophia was to maintain her title of empress Augusta until her last recorded mention in 601,<sup>144</sup> she became politically marginalized after her husband's death in 578. Her claim to pre-eminence was compromised when Tiberius's wife Ino,<sup>145</sup> taking the regal name Aelia Anastasia, took the title empress Augusta as well.<sup>146</sup> In policy terms, however, both Tiberius and his successor Maurice showed continuity with the course charted under Sophia, rather than the dogmatic approach of Justin. It is true they still regarded the idea of 'tribute' as poisonous. Even during the talks with the Persians in 576, Tiberius insisted that "this could not be called a peace if the Persians hoped to receive payment from the Romans and to have

<sup>138</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Theodorus 34), 1254–56.

<sup>139</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Ioannes 90), 676–77. John was the empress Theodora's grandson.

<sup>140</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Petrus 17), 1003.

<sup>141</sup> *PLRE* 3b (Mebodes 2), 868–70.

<sup>142</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 20.2.79–80: *περὶ μὲν οὖν τοῦ χριῆναι ἐξ ἰσοτιμίας τὴν εἰρήνην προελθεῖν* (trans. Blockley 1985a, 187).

<sup>143</sup> Men. Prot. *fr.* 20.2.68–78. Mi. Whitby 1988, 219.

<sup>144</sup> Theoph. Conf. AM. 6093.

<sup>145</sup> *PLRE* 3a (Ino), 622, and (Aelia Anastasia 2), 60–61.

<sup>146</sup> For Sophia and Ino's relationship, see Roggo, this volume.

them as tributaries, as it were".<sup>147</sup> This position was reprised when Tiberius negotiated with the Persians in 578.<sup>148</sup> Yet despite expressing this view, both men eschewed the dogmatic position of Justin for the pragmatic approach that Sophia had reinstated. The emperors made payments to the Avars for peace,<sup>149</sup> and to the Franks in a failed attempt to lure them to Italy.<sup>150</sup> This is significant: it shows Justin's attempt to mark a clear break with Justinian's system of subsidies had been undone by Sophia's diplomacy.

Given this change of policy, it seems impossible to conclude that Sophia had co-authored Justin's hard-line policy of non-payment of subsidies from 565 to 573. Her readiness to abandon this principle makes it seem likely that Sophia harboured doubts about her husband's approach. Why would this be? Perhaps an empress was less beguiled by the sabre-rattling of intellectuals safely ensconced in Constantinople. However, we should not read too much into a gender distinction and follow the chauvinistic primary sources which disparage Sophia (just like they had disparaged Theodora). The use of religious missions or subsidy payments was not to resort to 'softer' options than military might, but to pursue alternative stratagems of imperial expansion. The empresses were just as committed imperialists: they sought to achieve Roman aims by exploiting the religious and fiscal hegemony of the empire instead of raw force. Moreover, while Justin's uncompromising approach was a radical break, it was Sophia who oversaw a return to more traditional imperial foreign policy.

## Conclusion

Previous studies have, either sympathetically or chauvinistically, implied that Sophia was the mastermind behind Justin's disastrous policies. The corollary of this interpretation is that she must have shared the dogmatic rejection of 'tribute' attributed to her husband. In contrast, I have argued that the rapid retreat from Justin's approach during Sophia's regency and the return to paying for peace must be taken as evidence that, at the very least, she did not share such hard-line views. In the crucial year of 574, between the onset of Justin's illness and the appointment of Tiberius as Caesar, Sophia personally engaged in diplomatic relations to restore

<sup>147</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 20.2.15: αὐτίκε οἶγε τοῦτο αὐτὸ οὐδὲ τοῦνομα προσίεσθαι ἔφασαω τῆς εἰρήνης, εἶπερ ἐπὶ συντελείᾳ τινὶ καὶ ἄτε ἐξ φόρου ἀπαγωγὴν Πέρσαι ἐλπίζοιεν Ῥωμαίουσ ἔξεν τοῦ λοιποῦ (trans. Blockley 1985a, 183).

<sup>148</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 26.1.25–34.

<sup>149</sup> For the years 582–84 see Men. Prot. fr. 27.3; for 575–97 see Theophylact, *Hist.* 1.3.7 and 1.5.4–6; for 598–603 see Theophylact, *Hist.* 7.15. Discussed by Pohl <sup>2</sup>2018, 163–98.

<sup>150</sup> To Childebert II, king of Austrasia in 584, 585, and 590. See *PLRE* 3a (Childebertus 2), 287–91, and Wood 1994, 167–68.

subsidies and bring about a truce with Persia. The Sāsānian ambassador was received in her audience, and she sent a senior palace official to negotiate and carry correspondence in her name. These actions were not unprecedented: her own aunt, the empress Theodora, had also engaged in diplomacy to supplement, and sometimes undermine, Justinian's strategy. In the period after Justin's death, Sophia was marginalized by Tiberius and Maurice, but the approach she had re-established was nonetheless preferred to that of Justin.

These arguments underline the value and opportunities of studying Late Antique empresses. Sophia has been shown to have had agency, not necessarily sharing the views of her husband, and to be worthy of study in her own right. Re-evaluating Sophia in this way thus changes the narrative of foreign policy in the 570s. Therefore, the study of empresses can be shown to be of interest not only for its own sake, but also to help answer the broad questions of foreign policy in Late Antiquity that we continue to debate.

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