



Byzantium, Justinian and Arthur: Historical High Fantasy

by Kenneth Hite

"It was said that the Emperor's own mother told some of her close friends that he was not the son of her husband Sabbatios or of any man at all. For when she was about to conceive she was visited by a demon, who was invisible . . ."
- - Procopius, *Anekdotia*, Book XIII

Now *there's* a concept for a fantasy game. The Emperor, seemingly merely a former barbarian, is actually a prince of the demons in disguise, raised to the throne with the help of a profligate user of sex-magick, poisons and diabolism who now reigns as Empress. While they drain the treasury dry and launch ceaseless wars on the neighboring kingdoms, the very Earth rebels against them, as riots, floods, earthquakes and a devastating plague run rampant through the cities of the Empire. The only hope of humanity, a noble paladin, is enslaved by his wife, also a sorceress, and held captive by his oath of allegiance to the demonic Emperor. By a fortunate coincidence, our paladin's army is made up of professional soldiers from every corner of the known world. By an equally charming coincidence, the evil demonic Emperor goes to great lengths to destroy and exile the good magicians who guard knowledge from previous centuries, and to drive out holy clerics whose only sin is to disagree with the corrupt puppets he places in the temples. This kind of behavior is just the thing for creating parties of do-gooding PCs.

Of course, you're all way ahead of me. I'm not talking about some sword-and-sandal epic or some multivolume fantasy series, but about Real History, or at least about Real Historical Libels About Real History. The demonic Emperor is Justinian, his sorcerous Empress is Theodora, the paladin is Belisarius, and the Empire is the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire. The cool demon stuff is courtesy of Procopius, the private secretary to general Belisarius until he got a soft job as Prefect of the City thanks to his *other* book, *The Buildings*, which is just as fulsomely flattering of the Emperor Justinian as the *Anekdotia* is vituperatively slanderous.

Conventional historians have trouble reconciling the two views of Justinian, and it's a useful corrective to conventional history to reflect that the only reason we might have to suspect Justinian and Theodora of such awfulness is that Procopius went to the very great trouble to write a book which would have meant slow death by torture if it had gotten out while Justinian was alive. Perhaps he meant to publish it after the next Emperor took over and get in on the ground floor that way; unfortunately for this plan he died the same year that Justinian did, in 565 A.D. (It wasn't a bad gamble on his part; very few Byzantine emperors died peacefully in bed at advanced ages, and Procopius was 20 years younger to boot.) One place Procopius comes in handy is as a practical demonstration of the art of secret history in roleplaying

games, the *Anekdotia* (which means "Unpublished Writings") is even usually titled *The Secret History* in modern translations. If a great patron of art and architecture, defender of Christianity, and general bulwark of civilization like Justinian can turn out to be a demon in disguise, a GM looking for demons can certainly say the same thing about anyone else from Akhenaten to FDR.

"I envisage the probability that what I am now about to write will appear incredible and unconvincing to future generations. And again, when in the long course of time the story seems to belong to a rather distant past, I am afraid that I shall be regarded as a mere teller of fairy tales . . ."

- - Procopius, *Anekdotia*, Book I

Unfortunately, there is no *GURPS Byzantium*. Yet. All there is is a paragraph in [GURPS Imperial Rome](#) and a half page in [GURPS Vikings](#). Mighty thin gruel for turning the mightiest military for half a millennium, the richest culture west of the Himalayas, and a level of intrigue that redefines (or rather predefines) the word "byzantine" into a proper roleplaying supplement. White Wolf does have *Constantinople by Night*, which will be a help if you want Justinian to be a vampire rather than a demon (and don't mind that it's set 700 years later). John M. Ford does both of those things in the awesomely cool alternate-historical fantasy *The Dragon Waiting*, only one of the surprisingly hefty crop of fantasy and science fiction works centering on the Byzantine Empire.

Much of this crop springs from seed planted by L. Sprague de Camp's classic Connecticut-Yankee-in-Dark-Ages-Italy book *Lest Darkness Fall*, which caused a young Harry Turtledove to eventually become a Byzantine historian. The inexplicably low demand for professional Byzantine historians then caused Turtledove to become a prolific science fiction and fantasy author; his *Videssos* cycle is a classic example of "how to turn a historical period into a fantasy world"; *Videssos* is an extraordinarily thinly-disguised Byzantium circa 1050 A.D. or so. Reading a good Byzantine history (Isaac Asimov's *The Forgotten Empire* is the best introduction, but good luck finding it) alongside the *Videssos* cycle will do more to teach you how to convert historical [GURPS](#) books into fantastic ones than anything else I know. Turtledove has also written a stellar alternate history wherein Mohammed becomes an Orthodox saint and the Byzantines are still going strong in 1300 A.D. or thereabouts; the short stories are collected as *Agent of Byzantium*, and darn well worth reading.

Turtledove is likely to have the Byzantines as the good guys, or at least as sympathetic characters (the good guys in the *Videssos* books are a bunch of Roman legionnaires magically transported to the future, I mean *Videssos*). David Drake and Eric Flint's brand new novel *An Oblique Approach* continues this trend. It features Belisarius as an action hero and spy teamed with Ethiopian warriors against fanatic skin-removing Evil Hindu Heretics who seem (to the best of my limited knowledge of early medieval Indian history) to be drawn from the "black legends" of the Hunnish invasion of India in the early 6th century A.D. They're also in league with reptile-men from the future, I think. Unfortunately, there's no *GURPS India* yet, either, so if you want to engage in such derring-do in your game, you're on your own.

"When the Emperor understood their coming, he made ready his Romans and all the people between him and Flanders. Also he had gotten with him fifty giants which had been engendered of fiends; and they were ordained to guard his person, and to break the front of the battle of King Arthur."

- - Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, V:ii

Of course, there's a whole book on [GURPS Camelot](#). King Arthur (the "historical" version who *isn't* Riothamus) turns out to have been an almost exact contemporary of Justinian's. (Robert Graves makes just that point in the introduction to his novel *Count Belisarius*, which is based on Procopius' *Anekdotai*. A devotee of the strange can do worse than follow Robert Graves around for a couple of months, literarily speaking.) And, as we learn from this extract from Malory, King Arthur not only invaded the Roman Empire, he fought an Emperor (named "Lucius" in Malory) who was bodyguarded by fifty demonic giants. Now, it all comes together. Use the Byzantine notes from [GURPS Vikings](#) and the "historical Arthur" notes from [GURPS Camelot](#) to fake up your PC group; set them out on the wild frontier border between Arthur's Britain and the Byzantine Empire. (No, there wasn't any such border in Real History. I've got news for you; there weren't any demons in Real History, and there probably wasn't any King Arthur, either.)

As the PCs find out more and more about Justinian's demonic plans, they can work with Arthur's spies, be harassed by the Unseelie Court of Morgan Le Fay (just in case you needed to get some more use out of [GURPS Celtic Myth](#)), and generally skulk around dodging fiend-engendered ogre Nazgul enforcer types. If you feel up to it, you can run urban adventures in Byzantium itself (use Robert Silverberg's fantastic time-travel novel of Byzantine tourism *Up the Line* for local color) to chase vampiric monsters in the sewers and black magicians in the seraglio. Finally, they uncover Justinian's plan - - to find the Holy Grail and pervert it for his diabolical ends! Warning Arthur just in time, the PCs must keep the Grail safe from Justinian's demon-giants and distract Belisarius (or convince him that Justinian is a demon; no small task given that his wife is in the same coven as the Empress Theodora) so that Arthur can defeat the evil Romans and save the day. This is the sort of thing you can call "historical high fantasy;" it has the advantages of historical games (evocatively familiar and wonderful names and places, conveniently assembled background materials for research at your whim) without the disadvantages (having to do research to get things perfect, having to stay true to history, having to risk a player who knows more about the period than you do). When you add the cool fantasy trappings like giants, monsters, demons, magic swords, sorcery and poison, you got game.

Oh, and *do* make time and read Procopius. The bit with the demon-Emperor's disappearing head is a *hoot*.

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