As the Byzantine Emperor, Justinian had goals to restore the empire to its former greatness by regaining lost land, rebuilding great cities, and streamlining government. During his reign he was successful in achieving these goals. Although he regained much of the former Roman Empire, he is best known for creating a unified set of rules for all of the empire. The revised body of law is called Justinian’s Code. This code is the foundation of law in the western world today.

Justinian was born in a Latin speaking part of the Balkans in A.D. 483. Bright and ambitious, he soon attracted the support of his uncle, a military commander in Constantinople. The uncle, Justin, became Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine) in 513. Justin relied heavily on the advice of Justinian. Justinian was adopted by his uncle and became the co-emperor in 527. Justinian’s wife, Theodora, became Empress.

Theodora, too, was strong willed and ambitious. She was the daughter of a bear trainer. Before marrying into royalty, she had been an actress. Historians credit her with giving Justinian the courage to put down a rebellion against him in 532. Justinian regularly relied on her advice.

Justinian surrounded himself with the finest generals and government administrators. Their leadership and advice restored much of the glory of the early Roman Empire. His generals reclaimed large sections of the Western Roman Empire and North Africa from the barbarian invaders who had claimed it. He continued to fight with the Persians to maintain control of the empire’s eastern borders.

Justinian found the collection of laws from the old Roman empire confusing and set about to streamline them. He appointed a ten-man commission to sort out outdated laws and recast the laws into contemporary language. Justinian explained his reasons for the creation of the code:

“Imperial majesty should not only be adorned with military might but also graced by laws, so that in times of peace and war alike the state may be governed aright and so that the Emperor by not only shine forth victories on the battlefield, but may also by every legal means cast out the wickedness of the perverters of justice, and thus at one and the same time prove as assiduous [dedicated] in upholding the law as he is triumphant over his vanquished foes.”

Justinian’s Code helped to establish the principle of government by laws, not people.

Questions

1. Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects
   In what way might the regaining of lands from the old Roman Empire have inspired Justinian’s need for a legal code?

2. Making Inferences
   Why did Justinian believe it was important to establish a government guided by written laws?

3. Drawing Conclusions
   How significant was Justinian’s Code in the developing ideas of democracy?