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Two Weddings and a Funeral **Marriage and Death in the House of Germanus¹**

ABSTRACT: The marriage of Germanus, nephew of Emperor Justin I (r. 518–527), to Matasuinthia, former Gothic queen and granddaughter of Theoderic the Great (r. 475–526), in late 549 or early 550, was a significant yet often overlooked moment in the later stages of the Gothic War. Scholars generally interpret the marriage as a pragmatic alliance shaped by immediate strategic concerns – either a political manoeuvre by Justinian or a personal initiative by Germanus following his appointment as commander in Italy. This article revisits that assumption by exploring three related questions. First, did the marriage and military appointment signal a reconciliation between Justinian and Germanus, or a calculated attempt by the emperor to stabilize a deteriorating political situation? Second, how did their relationship evolve in the years leading up to the union, particularly after Theodora’s death in 548? Finally, more speculatively, was Germanus’ earlier decision to marry his daughter to the general John in 545 connected to his own dynastic ambitions?

KEYWORDS: Marriage, Germanus, Matasuinthia, Goths, Romans

Matasuinthia, however, his spouse, was joined by the emperor to his cousin Germanus, the patrician. After the death of his father Germanus, a son, also called Germanus, was born from this union,

¹ I dedicate this paper to the memory of Dariusz Brodka. Our shared passion for Procopius – and especially for the eunuch Narses – sparked a sense of intellectual kinship that I had previously encountered only in the letters of Sidonius.

through which the family of the Anicii, joined to the descendants of the Amals, still offers hope for both families, if the Lord permits.²
Jord. *Get.* 314

The marriage between the Roman Germanus,³ nephew of the Emperor Justin I (r. 518–527),⁴ and the former Gothic Queen Matasuinthia,⁵ granddaughter of King Theoderic (r. 475–526), in Constantinople in late 549 or early 550,⁶ was a significant but often overlooked event during the Gothic War (535–554). With the war in Italy dragging into its fifteenth year with no end in sight, many contemporaries saw the marriage with its merging of two royal houses – one Roman one Goth – as a pathway out of the conflict.⁷ Both the bridegroom, in his late fifties or early sixties, and the bride, in her early thirties, were entering their second marriages.⁸ Germanus' first wife, Passara, had died years earlier after bearing three children,⁹ while Matasuinthia's first husband, the Gothic king Vitigis (r. 536–540) had died around 542 (Jord. *Get.* 313) – two or so years after surrendering to Justinian's top general Belisarius in Ravenna. Vitigis' and

² Mathesuentham vero iugalem eius fratri suo Germano patricio coniunxit imperator. De quibus post humatum patris Germani natus est filius idem Germanus. In quo coniuncta Aniciorum genus cum Amala stirpe spem adhuc utriusque generi domino praestante promittit (van Hoof, van Nuffelen 2017: 294).

³ PLRE II Germanus 4: 505–507.

⁴ For Germanus' biological relationship to Justin and Justinian, see Croke 2007: 20–21, 24 and Croke 2021: 174–175. As Marco Cristini (2024: 243, n. 2) points out, the persistent yet erroneous claim by some scholars (e.g., van Hoof, van Nuffelen 2017: 277) that Germanus was Justinian's nephew stems from a mistaken modern interpolation, where Justinian is substituted for Justin in *Bella* VII 40, 5 – a reading that is consistent across all ancient manuscripts.

⁵ PLRE III Matasuinthia: 851–852.

⁶ Cosentino 2016: 116; Croke 2023: 82; Cristini 2024: 252.

⁷ For Jordanes' focus on the merging of the royal Eastern Roman Anicii with the Gothic Amals, see Cameron (2012: 161) and van Hoof, van Nuffelen (2017: 295). An illuminating discussion on the increasing frequency of mixed marriages between Romans and non-Romans in the later Roman Empire can be found in Mathisen (2009: 140–155).

⁸ Second marriages were common in the sixth-century Roman world. For Justinian's extensive legislation concerning second marriages, see Just. *Nov.* 22.

⁹ Proc. *Bella* VII 39, 14.

Matasuinthā's five-year marriage was, however, childless (Jord. *Get.* 81), potentially indicating friction between the pair.

The union of the scions of the Roman Emperor Justin and the Gothic *rex* Theoderic realized a fusion/alliance of two warrior-Christian peoples, Goths and Romans – a vision advocated by Mediterranean intellectuals such as the Goth Jordanes,¹⁰ and in various forms, by earlier authors like the Roman Orosius, and the Italo-Romans Ennodius and Cassiodorus who wrote in Ostrogothic Italy.¹¹

Although no detailed account of the wedding survives, a sense of renewed optimism must have swept through the capital on the day of the ceremony. It likely took place either in the Church of St. Stephen, adjacent to the imperial palace, or in a private chapel within one of Germanus' nearby palatial residences. The guest list would have included the emperor, along with other prominent members of the court then present in the city – figures such as the generals Belisarius and the eunuch Narses, and various other elites. This group included East Romans, foreign dignitaries, Goths, and Italo-Romans, many of whom had come to the capital from Ravenna as captives of Belisarius in 540.

The ceremony followed traditions common to other imperial and aristocratic weddings of the time, as seen in our sources.¹² The bride and groom would have been escorted into the chapel by chosen relatives – perhaps the emperor himself or, in Germanus' case, his eldest son, Justin. Although it is unclear who led the ceremony, given the role of the Patriarch in imperial weddings by the end of the sixth century¹³ –

¹⁰ For a discussion on the likelihood that Jordanes was part of Matasuinthā's social network and potentially hostile toward Germanus, see Cristini (2024: 253).

¹¹ Oros. *Adv. Pag.* 7, 39. Liebeschuetz 2011: 299. For various modern interpretations of Jordanes' depiction of the Goths and Romans in *Getica* and *Romana*, see Goffart (1988: 20–111, especially 102); Liebeschuetz (2011: 301); Bjornlie (2013: 112).

¹² My recreation is derived primarily from extensive coverage of the wedding between Emperor Maurice and Empress Constantina (Theoph. *Sim. Hist.* 1.9 and Evag. *Hist.* V.1) as well as the depiction of the celebrations in Rome in 467, when the Emperor Anthemius' daughter Alypia married the *magister militum* Ricimer, see Sid. *Epist.* 1.5.10–11. For the gradual Christianisation of marriage ceremonies in Late Antiquity, see Radle (2020). On the persistence of non-Christian elements – such as the veiling of the bride and lively celebrations featuring music, dancing, and singing – see Rollinger 2024: 315–316.

¹³ Rollinger 2024: 316–317.

and in light of Justinian's emphasis on Christian ceremonial – it is likely that the Patriarch of Constantinople at the time, Menas, officiated the wedding. Once Menas was summoned, Germanus would have entered first, followed by Matasuinha. The Patriarch then invoked God's blessing upon the couple. As an important part of the Christian ceremony, the bride and groom lit candles – an act both ceremonial and deeply symbolic, representing their shared future and the divine light guiding their union. Lighting candles and offering incense were traditional elements of a sixth-century wedding ritual. In the Christian Roman tradition, candlelight symbolized divine truth and the presence of God. The incense, on the other hand, represented the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven and the purification of the soul. Both elements were closely associated with the presence and blessing of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ Either the Patriarch or the couple's godparents would have simultaneously placed the bridal crowns upon the couple's heads.¹⁵ Writing at the close of the fourth century, John Chrysostom explained the Christian significance of wedding crowns: "Garlands (στέφανοι) are wont to be worn on the heads of bridegrooms, as a symbol of victory, betokening that they approach the marriage bed unconquered by pleasure."¹⁶ Menas would have completed the ceremony with a final prayer calling on God's blessing and then joined the new couple's right hands together.

Following a procession arranged according to the rank of those present, the newlyweds would have proceeded to the Bridal Chamber, likely situated just outside the church or chapel where the ceremony had taken place. For weddings of the time the chamber was lavishly adorned with magnificent tapestries, gold, and precious stones. Matasuinha would have entered first, accompanied by her attendants, and concealed behind a curtain. Only after a suspenseful interlude, during which her makeup, clothing, and jewellery were further enhanced, would the new bride be revealed to the select attendees. Germanus

¹⁴ ACO2 3, II, 474; Price, *The Acts*, 352.

¹⁵ Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6102. On the bestowal of the nuptial crown in Christian weddings, see Ellison 2024: 91–95.

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilia in Genesim* 9 on 1 Timothy 2, PG 62, 546, quoted in Ellison 2024: 93.

next entered the chamber, before escorting her into the room to join the gathered crowd.

While it is unclear whether Germanus and Matasuinha strictly adhered to imperial protocol – since at this point, they were not being crowned as emperor and empress¹⁷ – it is possible that the newlyweds then proceeded to the hippodrome to distribute gifts. There, faction members would have chanted the bridal hymn before an enthusiastic crowd, which included the general populace, Roman and non-Roman soldiers, and various units of the palace guards (*scholae palatinae*) many of whom could be expected to join them on the forthcoming campaign.¹⁸ Celebrations were not confined to the elite but included the urban populace as well. After the new couple retreated to the confines of their palace, spectators from diverse social levels enjoyed seven days of spectacles and feasting across the city. Musicians roamed the streets, playing flutes and lyres, while actors performed in the open. Meanwhile, crowds in the hippodrome cheered for their favored faction colour during the week-long chariot races.¹⁹ Once the festivities concluded, Germanus and his new bride perhaps finalized preparations for their journey to Italy.

News of the newly formed power couple and their formidable army quickly spread throughout the Mediterranean. Procopius notes (*Bella* VII 39, 2) that when the Goths in Italy learned of the marriage, they grew anxious, unsettled by Germanus' reputation as an exceptional general. However, this optimism did not last. Matasuinha, was left pregnant with Germanus' posthumous child, Germanus junior,²⁰ when two days after ordering his troops to prepare to march on Italy (*Bella* VII

¹⁷ As Cristini (2024: 255–256) hypothesizes, it is possible that Justinian granted Matasuinha the title *patricia ordinaria*, a rank just below the imperial title, as a wedding gift. He further adds that it offers evidence that she was expected to be the next empress.

¹⁸ For this hymn, see Cantarella 1948, Poeti 82. For Germanus' significant recruitment drive both within and outside of Constantinople, see Proc. *Bella* VII 39, 17.

¹⁹ Evag. *Hist* VI 1; Theoph. Sim. *Hist* I. 10.10.11.

²⁰ PLRE III Germanus 3: 528.

(*Bella* VII 40, 8) Germanus suddenly died, perhaps of a heart attack, in Serdica in the summer of 550.²¹

It is usual to assume that the marriage was a political union of convenience, shaped by the immediate needs of Justinian and Germanus. This perspective finds support in Jordanes, who suggests that the marriage was a political maneuver designed to strengthen the emperor's position in the conflict (*Jord. Get.* 314, *Rom.* 383). Procopius, however, offers a different perspective, suggesting that the union was a personal decision by Germanus. With the military campaign looming and with Justinian placing the bulk of the financing and recruitment for the forthcoming campaign on his shoulders, Germanus hoped to leverage Matasuinthas's status to recruit additional soldiers and funds, as well as to strategically divide and undermine the resolve of the Gothic forces (including Roman deserters) still resisting in Italy. Here, Procopius' own words are instructive, "The Goths were both frightened and perplexed at the same time being faced with the prospects of making war against the family of Theoderic (*Bella* VII 39, 15)." As Clemens Koehn observes, "From this perspective, the marriage is less about winning the loyalty of the Goths and more about dividing their resistance, thereby ensuring the success of the military campaign."²²

While historians continue to debate whether the marriage was a strategic initiative driven by Justinian or a personal decision by Germanus' motivated by his financial, logistical, and political needs shortly after his appointment as supreme commander,²³ most agree that it was a political union of convenience, shaped by contemporary needs. In this article, I will challenge some aspects of this position, by addressing three key questions. First, did Justinian's decision to grant Germanus both the military command of Italy and the hand of Matasuinthas in marriage signify a reconciliation between the emperor and his cousin, or was it a calculated political move on Justinian's part during a low point in his reign? The second question builds on the first, delving

²¹ Croke 2023: 127. Though no contemporary source mentions any rumours of foul play, Robert Graves (1938: 522) in his novel *Count Belisarius* has Matasuinthas more dramatically poisoning Germanus.

²² Koehn forthcoming.

²³ On Procopius' use of the unofficial title of *autokrator tou polemou* as a way of signifying a general who was superior to other *magistri militum*, see Koehn forthcoming.

deeper into Justinian's relationship with his cousin in the years leading up to Germanus' military appointment and second marriage. Finally, and admittedly more speculatively, I will explore whether Germanus' decision to offer his daughter's hand in marriage to the general John in 545 was linked to his earlier desire to remarry following the death of his first wife, Passara. To investigate these issues, let us open by discussing the long personal and political relationship between Justinian and Germanus.

The Cousins

Like most individuals in the ancient world, little information is available about key aspects of Germanus' life. For instance, his birth year is unknown, but based on the progression of his military career, it seems most likely that he was born sometime between the mid-480s and the early 490s. This would suggest that he was born in Thrace, with both of his parents likely being native Thracians, rather than one having Anician blood, as some have argued. Following a well-established path taken by many martial Thracians to Constantinople before them, it has been speculated that Justin I's rise to the position of senior commander in Anastasius' army in the 490s led to Justinian, Germanus and his brother Boraïdes, joining him as hired swords sometime shortly after 500.²⁴ Unfortunately, we cannot be sure when they arrived, or if they emigrated together, and if not, who arrived first.

The identity of Germanus' parents remains uncertain. However, considering his age and the fact that we know the names of Justinian's nephews and nieces, it is reasonable to assume that his family was closely related to Justin I. Brian Croke's assertion that Germanus was the son of one of Justin's brothers is to be preferred over Alan Cameron's idea that Germanus' father was an unidentified eastern *Anicius* who married a sister of Justin,²⁵ which is based on Jordanes associating Germanus with the blue-blooded Anicii seen in the quote at the opening of this chapter. So too should we be cautious about Mommsen's old

²⁴ Here I largely follow Croke 2007: 20.

²⁵ Croke 2021: 175; Mommsen 1882: 147; Cameron 2012: 161.

claim that Germanus' mother may have been an unknown daughter of the blue-blooded Anicia Juliana.²⁶

In fact, despite all the scholarly attention, Germanus' connection to the Anicii – suspiciously not mentioned in any other extant source – may be spurious or, if real, more tenuous than Jordanes makes it.²⁷ It is noteworthy that Procopius, who greatly admired Germanus, never mentions this in *Wars (Bella)* or *Secret History (Anecdota)*, where such a connection would have provided a powerful means of contrasting the “noble” Germanus with the “lowborn” Justinian.²⁸ Thus, I agree with Salvatore Cosentino that, if it was not merely a rhetorical exaggeration by Jordanes, the Anician connection may be weaker – possibly linked not directly to Germanus, but rather to one of his sons. After Theodora's death but before Jordanes wrote *Getica*, one of them may have married into an Eastern Anician family.

We do not know much about Germanus before Justin became emperor in 518. Though since we know he followed in Justin and Justinian's footsteps in pursuing a military career, we can suppose that he served in the army and, like Justinian who was a member of the elite forty-man guard unit known as the *candidatii* may have served in one of the units within the *scholae palatinae*.²⁹ Given Justinian's position and Justin I's role at the time of his ascension, as head of another elite guard unit, the excubitores (*comes excubitorum*, κόμης τῶν ἐξκουβίτων), it is likely that Germanus also served in the palace guards or as an officer in the army. Once Justin became emperor, he appointed Germanus as *magister militum per Thraciam* in 518.³⁰

Germanus, perhaps five to ten years younger than Justinian, stood just a notch below Justinian in the power-dynamics of c. 520

²⁶ Mommsen 1882: 146.

²⁷ Cosentino 2016: 117.

²⁸ For the instructive theme of a “heroic” Germanus versus a “villainous” Justinian in *Anecdota*, see Signes Codoñer (2003). Procopius' remarks on Germanus' charms as a host (*Bella* VII 40, 9) imply that he may have been entertained by the general at his residence.

²⁹ *De ceremoniis* I 93.

³⁰ As Sarris (2023: 444, n. 19) points out it is possible that this appointment was in 520 rather 518.

Constantinople.³¹ This near equality is emphasized by the fact that, when seeking to end the Acacian schism in 519, Pope Hormisdas wrote to both Justinian and Germanus. His appointment as *magister militum* also provides a clue about Germanus' age, as most field commanders typically first obtained this position in their late twenties or early thirties. This appointment was more than mere nepotism on the emperor's part. Procopius (*Bella* VIII 40, 7) describes Germanus' decisive victory over the Antae in 518 shortly after this appointment.³² Germanus' career continued to flourish under Justin. In early 526, Justin sent Germanus to Thessalonica (*Bella* III 40, 5), where he successfully repelled an attack by the Slavs. By 519, he had attained the prestigious rank of *vir illustris*, a highly sought-after honor among the senatorial aristocracy in Constantinople. With his star rising and now in his late twenties or early thirties, it is likely that Germanus began searching for a suitable wife.

Sometime in the early to the mid-520s Germanus married a woman of unknown social origins, Passara. Germanus and Passara had two sons, Justin and Justinian, likely born in the mid-520s, and a daughter, Justina, whose birth can be more precisely dated to 527 or 528 at the latest. The names of his children reflect the high regard in which Germanus held the patriarch of his house, his uncle Justin. As Brian Croke aptly highlighted in a landmark article, Justin was undoubtedly a more formidable, independent, and respected ruler than Procopius or many modern scholars have sometime suggested.³³ Though neither became emperor, Germanus' two sons, Justin and Justinian would become leading contenders for the purple.³⁴ The fact his famous cousin had not one, but two sons who could legitimately claim the throne would increasingly become a source of contention for Justinian and especially Theodora in the 540s. Despite the best efforts of Justinian and Theodora, they were unable to have children of their own. However, the empress

³¹ For Germanus' high standing in relation to Justinian during the early days of Justin I's reign, see Croke 2021: 175.

³² Proc. *Bella* VII, 40, 3–6.

³³ Croke 2007; cf. Sarris 2023: 444, n. 19.

³⁴ PLRE III Iustinus 5: 754; PLRE III Iustinianus: 744–747. Cf. Cosentino 2016: 122–124; Lin 2021: 130–141.

had at least one daughter, and possibly a son, from a previous marriage.³⁵

But this is to anticipate. There is no hint in contemporary sources of any rivalry or tensions between Germanus and Justinian in the 520s and 530s. Justin's death on 1 August 527, did little to hinder Germanus' steady ascent; through a series of significant military appointments and honors, Justinian continued to promote Germanus' career and those of his sons throughout these years. This favoritism was part of a broader pattern in which Justinian appointed family members to key positions in both the military and the civilian spheres.³⁶

Germanus appears to have been relieved of his command in Thrace or, at the very least, recalled to Constantinople around 527. This move was likely not punitive, but rather a strategic decision, allowing Justinian to retain an experienced general and trusted relative at his side during the early months of his reign. As a result, during the Hunnic invasion of Thrace in 528, it was the *dux* of Mysia, Constantiolus, and the *magister militum per Illyricum*, Ascum, who confronted the threat – rather than Germanus.³⁷

While this identification is uncertain, Germanus may be the cavalry commander mentioned as fighting at Dara in 530.³⁸ This command would explain Germanus' later close relationship with the future *comes excubitorum* Marcellus, who played a key role in exonerating Germanus in a plot to overthrow Justinian in 548, since Procopius describes the two as fighting along the same line at Dara. Thus, their trust in one another was rooted in their earlier military service together.³⁹ This also functions as a temporal indicator, as Germanus' presence at Dara may help explain his replacement by Chilbudius as *magister militum per Thraciam* in 530.⁴⁰

³⁵ Cameron 1978: 269–271; Moorhead 1994: 174, n. 13.

³⁶ Parnell 2017: 139–142; Koehn forthcoming.

³⁷ Mal. 18.21 366; Theoph. AM 6031 217–218.

³⁸ Proc. *Bella* I 13, 21.

³⁹ Stewart 2020: 186; cf. Cameron 1985: 141.

⁴⁰ Proc. *Bella* VII 14, 1–3. For ambiguity regarding just whom Chilbudius succeeded as *magister militum per Thraciam*, see Kardaras, Charakampakis (2019: 130, n. 5). They rightly note that Martindale was mistaken in his assertion in PLRE III, 286 (Chilbudius 1), where he claims Chilbudius replaced Mundus. At the time, however,

By 536 at the latest, Germanus had obtained the title of *patricius* (Jord. *Rom.* 376, 383; *Get.* 81, 314) and the top military command available, the rank of *magister militum praesentalis*, a command that Justinian had previously held under Justin.⁴¹ Though some have viewed this command of the armies in and around Constantinople as increasingly ceremonial, we should not discount the possibility that Justinian needed a trusted and skilled general near the capital in case trouble erupted, as it had in January 532 during the Nika Revolt. During that unrest, some units of the *scholae* had sided with the rebels, while others remained on the sidelines, waiting to see which side would emerge victorious.⁴² At the time of the uprising, the *magister militum praesentalis* Sittas was operating in Armenia, where he had been stationed since 530.⁴³ Though we lack the precise date of his appointment, Justinian's naming of Germanus as *magister militum praesentalis* could be linked to Justinian recognizing after the revolt that he needed someone to lead the remaining praesental armies in the capital, which had been increasingly drained of soldiers to support Justinian's many battlefronts.⁴⁴

This trust might explain why Germanus was one of six of Justinian's highest officials to whom copies of the novel (Just. *Nov.* 22 [536 March 1]) dealing with among other things inheritance, divorce, slavery, and marriage was sent. The other general to receive the novel was not Belisarius as we might expect but Sittas.

Keeping Germanus near his side paid dividends for the emperor. In 536, Justinian sent him with what Procopius tells us was a small force to North Africa to crush a mutiny led by one of Belisarius' former soldiers, Stotzas (Proc. *Bella* IV 16, 1–4; Marc. Com. 536.2, 537.3; Jord.

Mundus held – and would continue to hold – the position of *magister militum per Illyricum*, rather than *magister militum per Thraciam*.

⁴¹ On the evolution of the *magister militum praesentalis*, see Jones 1964: 124–125; Treadgold 1995: 54–63; Kruse, Kaldellis 2023: 92–97; Salway, Greatrex 2024: 312–313.

⁴² Proc. *Bella* I, 24.39, 47; *Chron. Pasch.* 626.12–14. No source tells us where Germanus was during the Nika Revolt. However, the fact that he is not mentioned in any surviving account suggests that Germanus was not in the capital at the time.

⁴³ Jo. Mal. XVIII.60. As Clemens Koehn pointed out to me (pers. comms.), Sittas is still listed as *magister militum per praesentalis* in the subscription of *Novella* 22, dated to 536.

⁴⁴ Kruse, Kaldellis 2023: 70.

Get. 310; Coripp. *Iohannes* III 317) led a major mutiny in North Africa.⁴⁵ After some initial difficulties, Procopius describes how Germanus worked to win over many of the disaffected soldiers through a mix of persuasion and, more importantly, by granting amnesty to deserters who joined him and paying them the back wages they were owed. This strengthening of his numbers helped Germanus to defeat Stozas and the more “stubborn” Roman and Vandal rebels at the Battle of Cellae Veteres, in 537. This challenging and risky command, which had tempted others to rebel, speaks volumes about Justinian’s trust in Germanus. Though we need to be on the lookout for a degree of exaggeration, Procopius tells us that these victories in Thrace and North Africa had earned Germanus great acclaim (*Bella* VII 39, 12). As partly a reward for his service, Justinian honored Germanus by having his son Justin named ordinary consul in 540 (Marc. Com. 540; Proc. *Bella* II 6, 10). Though it had become a purely symbolic title by this stage, it offers firm proof that Justinian and Germanus were closely allied at the time, and Germanus was likely high on the list of men who might succeed Justinian, not an unthinkable thought since the emperor was nearing sixty, well past the average life expectancy of the time.

It appears that Justinian continued to lean upon Germanus to deal with dangerous military situations.⁴⁶ Following his practice of constantly rotating his favored commanders from the various fronts to service in the capital,⁴⁷ Justinian recalled Germanus from North Africa in 539, possibly anticipating trouble brewing in the East from the Persians.⁴⁸ However, Procopius offers a different account, portraying Justinian as being caught off guard by the Persian Shah Chosroes’ sudden advance into the sparsely defended Roman East. Emphasizing once again the limited forces available to Germanus, Procopius notes that his cavalry unit numbered only 300 men – perhaps explaining how he

⁴⁵ This force probably included Germanus’ own private bodyguards as well as some soldiers from the *praesental* army, as suggested by Kruse, Kaldellis 2023: 71.

⁴⁶ Proc. *Bella* VII 39, 12–13.

⁴⁷ As explained in Koehn forthcoming.

⁴⁸ The emperor at this time likely rewarded Germanus for his success in quelling these threatening rebellions with grants of lands in North Africa, which would explain his sons’ and (possible) grandson’s connection to the area discussed at the close of this chapter.

was able to reach Antioch ahead of the slower-moving Persian army. It is also possible that Procopius exaggerates the small size of Germanus' force to further deflect blame from his hero. Regardless of the unit's true strength, Germanus was unable to prevent the Persians from sacking Antioch – a devastating blow that led to his recall to Constantinople in early 541. There, he was relieved of his command and replaced by Belisarius.

Germanus' performance against the Persians received mixed reviews from contemporaries. Procopius attempts to deflect blame from Germanus onto Justinian, implying that the emperor's failure to dispatch a relieving force contributed to Germanus' decision to abandon Antioch before the arrival of the large Persian army. In Procopius' account, Germanus explains that remaining in the city in a futile attempt to defend it would have only resulted in his capture – making him a valuable prize for the Persian Shah, Chosroes (*Bella* II 6, 14–15).⁴⁹ Others were less forgiving. John Malalas, a sixth-century historian known for voicing the positions of Justinian's regime, mentions Germanus only once, and in that instance, he emphasizes Germanus' military failure in allowing the Persians to sack Antioch (Jo. Mal. XVIII 87 [480]; Cf. Marc. Com. 541; Jord. Rom. 376). Perhaps suggesting anti-Germanus propaganda circulating in Constantinople during the 540s, Malalas goes much further than Procopius, condemning Germanus for exploiting the desperate situation by “buying silver for two or three *nomismata litra* from the Antiochenes.”

We are not sure what if any official command Germanus held at this time, but having served over three different decades and under three emperors he may have been in semi-retirement rather than disgrace. During these “lost” years Germanus appears to have spent time growing his wealth and expanding his social networks amongst Constantinople's civilian elites (*Bella* VII 39, 16, 40, 9). Germanus was the rare Roman man who had it all, pedigree, riches, charm, and martial accomplishments second at the time only to Belisarius. Little wonder then that Germanus was a major political player in Constantinople throughout the 540s.

⁴⁹ For Procopius deep admiration of Germanus, see Signes Codoñer 2003: 78; Rance 2022: 102.

When rumours spread in the capital during the early summer of 542 that Justinian had contracted the deadly bubonic plague, Germanus was surely considered one of the leading candidates to replace his cousin should he die, as I have discussed elsewhere.⁵⁰ Although our sources are silent on this matter, once the emperor recovered, tensions between the two may have emerged. This shift could explain why Germanus received no further commands for the next seven years.⁵¹ While we are never told about Justinian's feelings toward his cousin, Procopius (*Anec.* V 8) notes that by the mid-540s, Theodora's animosity toward Germanus had become well known.⁵² If we are to believe Procopius, Theodora obstructed Germanus in his search for suitable marriage partners – not only for himself, but also for his daughter and sons. It was in this context that John arrived in Constantinople, having been sent by Belisarius, with whom he had a long but difficult relationship.⁵³ Desperate to find a husband for his daughter, Germanus, in a situation of considerable urgency, opened negotiations with John, despite what Procopius describes as John's lower rank. Procopius notes that the marriage was arranged amidst the exchange of harsh oaths by the desperate Germanus and an eager John, looking to further his social status. Though Justinian and Theodora would likely have attended the wedding of Justina and John, most scholars argue that tensions between Theodora, John, and Germanus persisted. This may help explain why it appears that Germanus' two sons, Justin and Justinian, only married after Theodora's death in June 548. However, as seen in the cases of both Germanus and the Emperor Justinian, first marriages in a man's mid to late twenties or even thirties were not as unusual for Roman elites at the time as Procopius implies.

Nevertheless, modern historians – often, in my view, too uncritically – have accepted Procopius' portrayal of a domineering Theodora pressuring Germanus into marrying his daughter to her social

⁵⁰ Stewart 2023c: 171–172.

⁵¹ Lin 2021:129.

⁵² Ἐς τοῦτο ἀπεχθείας Γερμανῷ ἡ βασιλὶς ἦλθεν ἐπιδηλότατόν τε ἅπασι τὸ ἔχθος ἐποίει, ὥστε αὐτῷ κηδεύειν, καίπερ βασιλέως ἀνεπιῶ ὄντι, ἐτόλμα οὐδεὶς, ἀνυμφοί τε αὐτῷ οἱ παῖδες διαγεγόνασι, μέχρις αὐτὴ ἀπελύθη τοῦ βίου. ἢ τε θυγάτηρ αὐτῷ Ἰουστίνῃ ἐπὶ ὀκτωκαίδεκα ἔτη ἡβήσασα ἔτι ἀνυμέναιος ἦν.

⁵³ See Stewart forthcoming.

inferior, John.⁵⁴ However, the highly rhetorical nature of Procopius' account – comparable to his inaccurate marginalization of Emperor Justin I – should caution historians against accepting it as a fully accurate portrayal of Theodora's power dynamic with Germanus or as a true reflection of the motivations behind, and the likely more protracted and complex negotiations surrounding, Germanus' selection of John as a suitable match for Justina.⁵⁵

As we will discuss in more detail below, John was a far more eligible bachelor than Procopius implies, and possibly even a competitor for Germanus in his own marital pursuits. Moreover, as a wealthy war hero closely connected with the senatorial aristocracy and the military units in Constantinople, Germanus was surely not as helpless a victim of Theodora's machinations as Procopius portrays him. In the highly rhetorical *Anecdota*, Procopius aims to present Germanus favorably as an unfair victim of Theodora's abuse.⁵⁶

One interesting detail that Procopius omits – both in his account of John and Justina's marriage in the *Anecdota* and in his description of Germanus' later marriage to Matasuintha at the close of *Wars* in Book VII – is the earlier connection he himself establishes between John and the Gothic queen in *Wars* Book VI. There, Procopius recounts how, in early 538, John captured Rimini without resistance. Shortly afterward, while in Ravenna, Matasuintha initiated secret political – and possibly marital – negotiations with him. With her unwanted husband Vitigis still besieging Belisarius in Rome, the queen appears to have sought a means of escaping her unhappy marriage by reaching out to the then-unmarried John. The words Procopius attributes to her are as intriguing as they are revealing, shedding needed light on the personal and political dynamics that would resurface in 549/550:

⁵⁴ Lin 2021; Potter 2015: 201.

⁵⁵ Stewart 2023a: 198–199.

⁵⁶ As Signes Codoñer (2003) has suggested Procopius composed *Anecdota* at a time c. 549/550 when rebellion was in the air and Germanus was increasingly seen as an alternative to Justinian. The now safely dead Theodora made a convenient target for Procopius, to explain Germanus' exasperation with the imperial couple who had hoped to rob him and his children of their rightful places in the upper stratum of Constantinople's ruling elite.

Now Matasuinthia, the wife of Vitigis, who was extremely hostile to her husband because he had, from the start, come to her marriage-bed by an act of violence, upon learning that John had come to Rimini was absolutely overjoyed; and sending a messenger to him she opened secret negotiations with him concerning marriage and betrayal of the city. These two kept sending messages to each other without the knowledge of the others (*Bella* VI 10, 11).⁵⁷

If, as many scholars believe, John was considering marrying Matasuinthia, he needed to step carefully so as not to be seen as betraying Justinian.⁵⁸ Especially since he was the nephew of the notorious rebel Vitalian,⁵⁹ John would have risked being perceived as a usurper or rebel had he taken such a step without Justinian's explicit approval. However, as Procopius repeatedly shows, John was never one to shy away from high-stakes gambles in pursuit of significant rewards. Indeed, he had already demonstrated his willingness to defy authority when he famously disobeyed Belisarius' orders, when he seized Rimini. Moreover, had he succeeded in persuading Matasuinthia to surrender Ravenna and align herself with him, it could well have brought the Gothic War to a swift conclusion – an outcome the emperor would surely have welcomed.⁶⁰ In that case, Justinian might at least have considered the strategic advantages of such a marriage. It would not only have removed some of the glory from Belisarius' hands, but, unlike the earlier and more singular triumph over the Vandals in North Africa, ensured that credit for victory in Italy was more evenly distributed among his generals. Hence, John might not have been seen as a rebel by the

⁵⁷ Ματασοῦνθα δέ, ἡ τοῦ Οὐιττίγιδος γυνή, δεινῶς τῷ ἀνδρὶ ἀχθομένη, ὅτι δὴ οἱ βία τὸ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐς κοίτην ἦλθεν, ἐπειδὴ τὸν Ἰωάννην ἐς Ἀρίμινον ἦκειν ἐπύθετο, περιχαρὴς τε ἀτεχνῶς γέγονε καὶ πέμψασα παρ' αὐτὸν λάθρα γάμου τε καὶ προδοσίας περὶ ἐς λόγους ἦλθε.

⁵⁸ Moorhead 1994: 83.

⁵⁹ For Vitalian's three attempts to overthrow Anastasius, and possibly another attempt to overthrow Justin I in 520 – which ultimately led to the emperor having him assassinated – see Croke 2025.

⁶⁰ Procopius indeed suggested (*Bella* VI 18, 23–24) that the Goths were on the brink of total defeat in 538.

crafty Justinian who knew how to manipulate his generals. However, the negotiations never moved past the initial stages.

Recognizing the threat posed by John's army to Ravenna – and possibly aware of Matasuinth's "betrayal" – Vitigis abandoned his siege of Rome to defend the Gothic capital. After a brief return to Ravenna, he shifted his focus to besieging Rimini. Although eventually forced back to Ravenna by a coordinated three-pronged Roman assault by land and sea, Vitigis ensured that Matasuinth remained close to him, thereafter, never allowing her out of his close proximity until his death in Constantinople five or six years later.

Writing retrospectively in his *History* published in 550, Procopius referred to these events with an awareness his contemporary readers would have shared – namely, that Matasuinth was destined to become John's mother-in-law, not his bride. His portrayal of Matasuinth as resisting Vitigis and the Gothic cause from the outset of her reign may in fact have been an attempt to present the new bride of his hero, Germanus, in a more favorable light.

Marco Cristini has recently questioned the notion that John and Matasuinth discussed a possible marriage, arguing that Procopius, by using *peri gamou*, was merely implying that John and the queen were contemplating the possibility of dissolving her marriage to Vitigis.⁶¹ However, given the wider context of this episode as presented by Procopius, this seems implausible.⁶² Moreover, if, as Cristini argues, Matasuinth was seeking an annulment or divorce in 538 on the grounds that Vitigis had still been married to his first wife when he "forcibly" married her in early 537, then why did she not petition the imperial couple for an annulment once she was safely in Constantinople in 540? Justinian was a known stickler for legal procedure, and Theodora was a vocal defender of the rights of first wives. For example, in 546, when General Artabanes became betrothed to Justinian's niece Praeiecta, Theodora blocked the marriage after discovering that Artabanes still had a wife in Armenia (*Bella* VII 32, 11–14). Yet in the case of Matasuinth and Vitigis, there is no indication of acrimony after

⁶¹ Cristini 2024: 250.

⁶² For a more detailed analysis of this topic, see Stewart forthcoming.

their arrival in Constantinople. On the contrary, they were honored by the imperial couple and remained married until Vitigis' death.

By 543, Matasuintha – no more than twenty-four or twenty-five years old – would, after an appropriate period of mourning, have been one of the most sought-after women in Constantinople, especially given the limited pool of eligible brides and grooms at the time. This raises an intriguing question: Who would have been considered an appropriate husband for such a powerful woman? Justinian and Theodora certainly would not have allowed her to marry a non-Roman Goth, and despite a recent attempt, there is little indication that she sought out a religious life either then or before. Among the eligible Romans at the time, John and Germanus come to mind. If John had considered himself a contender for Matasuintha's hand in 538, why would not the still-single John have been a candidate around 543/544, when he had achieved even greater military successes? In addition, could Matasuintha have been one of the high-born brides whom Theodora sought to prevent Germanus from pursuing – either for himself or for one of his sons? Certainly, both Justinian and Theodora had a well-established track record of arranging strategic marriages for close relatives and trusted generals, while also obstructing unions that might disrupt their carefully laid plans for advancing their chosen favorites.⁶³

These various scenarios may shed light on why Germanus orchestrated what Procopius describes as the “desperate” and “mismatched” marriage between John and his daughter, Justina. In a single strategic stroke, Germanus eliminated a strong rival for Matasuintha's and other prospective brides' hands, forged alliances with the influential networks of Narses and John, and countered Theodora's efforts to curb his family's growing financial and political power – an increasing threat to the imperial couple. Of course, without concrete evidence, this must remain speculative. However, by providing plausible historical context for Procopius' seemingly mismatched details concerning John, Germanus, and Matasuintha in *Wars* Books VI and VII and in the *Anecdota*, we can begin to fill in some of the missing pieces in the puzzle of Germanus' increasingly strained relationship with the imperial couple in the mid-540s. This context also suggests a possible link between

⁶³ Stewart 2023b; Stewart 2023c.

John's and Justina's marriage in 545 and the young general's earlier interactions with Matasuinthia in 538.

Thus, Procopius' account of Theodora successfully preventing the marriages of Germanus and his heirs to suitable partners – and forcing him to marry beneath his station – should not be taken as literal truth, though it should not be dismissed outright either. The tension between Germanus and Theodora was likely genuine, as was the empress' concern that his family might obstruct her own lineage's path to succession. Even so, her ability to impede Germanus was probably more limited than Procopius suggests. Given his rhetorical tendencies, it is likely that Procopius exaggerated or omitted significant details about the circumstances surrounding these marital manoeuvres. Moreover, if the rivalry between Theodora and Germanus was as pronounced as Procopius suggests, it is plausible that Justinian shared at least some of her concerns and sought to ensure that, should Germanus remarry, it would be to someone of the emperor's own choosing.

Further evidence of tension between the two cousins appears in an episode recounted by Procopius in the *Wars*, shortly after Theodora's death in June 548. That same year, following the death of Germanus' brother Boraïdes (*Bella* VII 31, 17–18) it was revealed that Boraïdes had left the bulk of his estate to Germanus and his sons, bypassing his wife and daughter – a decision that ran counter to Justinian's legal reforms. Notably, Justinian had enacted several laws (including some addressed directly to Germanus in 536, as discussed earlier in this paper) aimed at protecting the inheritance rights of wives and children. In this case, Justinian intervened on behalf of Boraïdes' wife and daughter – an action that, according to Procopius, angered Germanus. The emperor's direct involvement in what Germanus may have regarded as a private family matter was perceived as an affront. This very tension was later exploited by the conspirators behind the plot to assassinate Justinian in late 548 or early 549, as they attempted to draw Germanus and his sons into their scheme (*Bella* VII 32, 4–51). Although Procopius exonerates Germanus of any wrongdoing, he also notes that Justinian eventually overcame his initial anger, particularly after Germanus reported

the plot (*Bella* VII 32, 47–51).⁶⁴ How deeply Germanus was personally involved in the conspiracy to replace him likely mattered little to the astute emperor. Consequently, Justinian had to manage his powerful cousin with great caution. Sending Germanus as the commander of a conquering army to Italy served both to satisfy what Procopius describes as his cousin's consuming ambition and to function, in effect, as a form of exile.

Unfortunately, no source tells us what the precise nature of Germanus and Matasuintha's regime would have been if Germanus had defeated Totila. The Gothic and Roman sides may have had different views of things. As Lieve Van Hoof and Peter Van Nuffelen explain, this marriage between high-ranking individuals had differing political implications "resulting from the differing ethnicities of the parties involved."⁶⁵ This was particularly relevant in the case of the Amal Matasuintha who had previously ruled in Italy, as Queen of the Goths and the Italians. The likelihood is that the couple promised to remain in the West to create a new Dynasty of Romans and Goths. Once again, Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen's insights are instructive:

The marriage raised the prospects of the exiled Italians, many of whom, like Cassiodorus, had served Theodoric. Indeed, with Matasuntha at Germanus' side, they could hope for a return to positions of power. For Jordanes, the union would replicate on a grander scale the social situation in which he had been raised and to which he had dedicated his professional life: the integration of the Gothic élite into that of the Roman Empire.⁶⁶

Once the pacification of Italy had been achieved, it is reasonable to suggest – following James O'Donnell – that the plan may have been to grant Germanus the title of *Augustus*.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ For recent interpretations of this plot and some of the suspicious aspects of Procopius' account of it, see Meier 2003: 261–263; Stewart 2020: 176–191.

⁶⁵ Mathisen 2009: 154.

⁶⁶ Van Hoof, van Nuffelen 2017: 295.

⁶⁷ O'Donnell 1981: 65. Cf. Moorhead 1994: 174, who suspects, 'Germanus was to become a junior emperor, technically a "caesar", residing in Italy, with a view to assuming responsibility for the entire empire when the senior emperor died.'

Others, however, disagree. Cristini has recently argued that no official title was to be granted during Justinian's lifetime; rather, there was merely an understanding that Germanus would be designated as his successor.⁶⁸ Yet, Germanus was already seen as the likely successor at the time (*Bella* VII 32, 10–40). More importantly, it is difficult to believe that Matasuinthia and her Gothic allies would have accepted such a limitation on her influence – particularly given that she would be based in Ravenna and backed by Germanus' formidable coalition of Roman and Gothic warriors. In other words, how long was the former Queen of the Goths and Italians expected to wait patiently for Justinian's death before regaining her former titles and power? Failing to grant Germanus and Matasuinthia some form of title was, in effect, an invitation to rebellion.

It is likely that both Justinian and Germanus recognized the broader implications of these unfolding developments. Yet, in Procopius' account, Germanus is only officially named by Justinian as the supreme commander of the campaign. Initially, Justinian appoints Germanus to lead what was intended to be a smaller Italian expeditionary force, only to change his mind and instead assign command to the elderly Italo-Roman Liberius. Then, supposedly just as Liberius set sail, Justinian reverses course again, reappointing Artabanes to replace Liberius – despite his involvement in the failed conspiracy against the emperor the previous year.

Later, after Liberius failed to lift the Gothic siege of Syracuse in Sicily and his replacement, Artabanes, narrowly survived a shipwreck, Justinian once again changed his mind – this time for the fourth time – and reappointed Germanus. It is generally believed that it was at this point he also gave his blessing for Germanus to marry Matasuinthia – seeing the union as a strategic move to both pacify the Goths and neutralize his ambitious cousin. Procopius suggests that Germanus longed for the fame a victory in Italy would bring him, a desire that may well have raised concern for the emperor. Though his account is famously garbled,⁶⁹ Procopius likely captures Justinian's cautious maneuvering trying to cement an alliance with his powerful cousin while mitigating

⁶⁸ Cristini 2024: 255; Signes Codoñer 2017: 11.

⁶⁹ O'Donnell 1981: 66–67.

the risks of granting him such wide-ranging military authority. It is also possible that Germanus was pushing the emperor to support a larger campaign after years of sending insufficient forces to defeat Totila and the Goths – something Justinian may have been reluctant to do for both financial and political reasons. After all, once Germanus had completed recruitment in Thrace, had he turned his army on Constantinople instead of marching on Italy, the consequences for Justinian could have been catastrophic.

Given this threat and the recent history between them, it is likely that, as Germanus departed Constantinople, the two cousins – now the wealthiest and most powerful men in the Roman, and likely Mediterranean world – remained mutually wary. Though Germanus and Justinian would certainly have sworn oaths to solidify their agreement, the rebellion of Germanus' bodyguard, Maximinos (*Bella* IV 18, 17–18), reveals that such oaths were far from absolute guarantees of loyalty in the high-stakes politics of sixth-century Constantinople.

Thus, Justinian's appointment of Germanus and his approval of the marriage to Matasuinthia – perhaps a prospect Germanus had considered for longer than is commonly acknowledged – served a deeper personal and political purpose. Rather than merely indicating that Justinian had grown closer to Germanus after Theodora's death, this decision should be viewed as a calculated act of political maneuvering at a particularly perilous time for the emperor.

First, it placated Germanus – possibly by granting him the title of *Augustus*, or at the very least by further positioning him as the leading candidate to succeed Justinian. Second, it removed two potential threats from Constantinople. By sending Germanus, Matasuinthia, and the influential members of their respective social networks to Italy, Justinian effectively neutralized two powerful factions with the political influence and military resources that could have posed a serious threat in the event of another coup attempt by the emperor's many enemies.

The importance Justinian placed on his personal safety during this period is further underscored by his decision to retain his chief protector and supporter, Belisarius, in the capital after 549, rather than sending him on campaign. Prior to Germanus' death, this move ensured that Justinian had a reliable and capable military force at his disposal should

further unrest erupt in Constantinople – or should Germanus decide to turn his army against the emperor. Belisarius possessed not only the skill and manpower to respond effectively, but also the loyalty of many among Germanus’ newly recruited soldiers, making any such move against Justinian both risky and potentially costly.

In the months following Germanus’ death, Belisarius’ continued presence near Justinian likely served to deter those contemplating the emperor’s overthrow. While Procopius, in *Wars* Book VIII (published around 554), expressed confusion and disappointment that Belisarius was not granted another opportunity to lead the Italian campaign, it is plausible that Justinian – mindful of the ongoing assassination plots that Procopius himself notes were still active even after Germanus’ death (*Bella* VII 40, 9) – chose instead to keep his most trusted general close at hand. Although Belisarius still officially held the title *magister militum per Orientem*, Justinian’s designation of him as “commander of the imperial bodyguards” (*Bella* VIII 21, 1–2: τῶν βασιλικῶν σωματοφυλάκων ἄρχοντα) strongly suggests that his proximity to the emperor was intentional and strategic – rather than a punishment for his earlier failures in Italy or an act of “restraint” (κατεῖχεν αὐτοῦ) on his Eastern command, as Procopius implies.

Aftermath

With the death of Germanus, Justinian’s more conciliatory stance toward the Goths continuing to resist imperial rule in Italy came to an end. Procopius records that, in 551, the emperor ignored an embassy sent by Totila to Constantinople. To borrow the words of Procopius, “But the emperor paid no attention to what they said and dismissed the envoys one and all, hating as he did the Gothic name and intending to drive it out absolutely from the Roman domain (*Bella* VIII 24, 5).” In his new vision for a post-war Italy, there would be no compromise or coexistence between Roman and Gothic authority. As Agathias, the continuer of Procopius’ history, relates, the remaining Goths were left

with only two choices: to submit to the Roman emperor and accept the supremacy of the new Roman regime in Italy – or to die.⁷⁰

To accomplish this goal, Justinian leaned heavily on the heirs of Germanus. Immediately after Germanus' death, the emperor appointed his cousin's son-in-law, John, along with Germanus' son, Justinian, as co-commanders of the renewed campaign. It was John, however, and not his sons who had inherited Germanus' extensive retinue of personal bodyguards and clearly held command of the Roman army when it arrived in Salona in the autumn of 551 (*Bella* VII 40, 10–110. It was only in the winter of 551/552 that Justinian once again changed course, replacing John with the widely respected Narses as supreme commander (*autokrator tou polemou*). Meanwhile, Germanus's two sons played a crucial role in defending Thrace. Justin and Justinian were tasked with safeguarding Narses' supply lines, employing hit-and-run tactics to disrupt Slav raiders in the region (*Bella* VII 25, 1–4), and later assisting the Lombards in a battle against the Gepids (*Bella* VIII 25, 10–11).

In Italy, John was the clear second-in-command. Narses relied heavily on his military experience and his intimate knowledge of the Italian terrain, where John had fought nearly without interruption for the past fifteen years. Tellingly, when the Romans captured Rome for the fifth and final time in 552, the victorious armies marched under the standards of both John and Narses (*Bella* VIII 33, 21). Although John disappears from the historical record after 559, the careers of Germanus' sons, Justin and Justinian, are far better documented, as they continued to rise in prominence during the final years of Justinian's reign and beyond.

Justin and Justinian

Throughout the 550s and early 560s, the sons of Germanus distinguished themselves as capable generals.⁷¹ Justin, by then *magister mili-*

⁷⁰ See, e.g., Agath. *Hist.* 1.20.3 (transl. Frendo), where Aligern – the brother of the former Gothic king Teias – is given a stark choice: death by starvation, or renounce 'his barbarian connections, and secure his future by becoming a subject of the Empire.'

⁷¹ For an account of these Balkan campaigns, see Sarantis 2016.

tum per Illyricum, played a key part in Justinian's attempts to prevent the Avars in 559/560 from settling in an area that might threaten Thrace (Men. Prot. frag. 5.6).⁷² As the Emperor Justinian entered his twilight years in the early 560s, two figures emerged as the leading contenders to succeed him: Germanus' eldest son, Justin, and his nephew – Vigilantia's son – also named Justin. As Michael Whitby notes, Theophanes (*Chronographia* 244.4) "accords Justin the title of *augustalis*," suggesting that Germanus' son may have been granted an exalted position of Governor of a Province by Justinian himself, perhaps for his diplomatic and military achievements against the Avars.

Although Lin has recently highlighted some of the advantages held by Vigilantia's son, the selection of the civilian Justin over the general Justin appears to have unsettled some near contemporaries. Writing from the vantage point of the early 590s, Evagrius (*Hist.* V.1) underscores the contested nature of Justin II's accession (r. 565–578) and emphasizes the "comparable prestige" of both Justins as candidates for the purple at the time of Justinian's death in 565. In fact, most modern scholars go even further. Reflecting the broader scholarly consensus, Michael Whitby regards Germanus's son Justin as the stronger candidate, observing that 'the son of Vigilantia, while a member of the imperial family, was "definitely inferior in life's illusions," having served only as honorary consul and holding the largely ceremonial title of *curopalatus*.' However, in the end, proximity to the palace – and to power – proved more decisive than pedigree or military experience.⁷³ Indeed, it has also been suggested that Justin's friendship with the future emperor Tiberius II – who, at the time, held the influential position of *comes excubitorum* – may have contributed to Vigilantia's son obtaining the purple.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, even the treacherous murder of Justin in North Africa in 566 – ordered by Justin II and Sophia – did little to halt the continued ascent of his younger brother, Justinian.⁷⁵ Throughout the remainder

⁷² Blockley 1985: 253, n. 29.

⁷³ See Whitby 2000: 256, n. 6; Cosentino 2016: 122. Cf., however, Lin (2021) regarding the increasing power and influence of the office of *curopalatus* during Justinian's reign.

⁷⁴ Moorhead 1994: 175.

⁷⁵ Evag. HE 5.3; cf. John of Bicl (sa. 568?).

of the troubled reign of Justin II and Empress Sophia, Justinian served loyally and with distinction, eventually earning the imperial couple's trust. By 572, he held the honorific of *patricius* (Joh. Eph. III 2, 20), and it was likely around this time that he was also appointed *magister militum per Armeniam*. In 574, he was elevated to *magister militum per Orientem* a command he would hold until 578.⁷⁶ Although the reliability of the sources has been debated, there appears to have been two separate attempts to elevate Justinian – either as emperor or, more likely, as co-Augustus or Caesar⁷⁷ – following Justin II's death in October of 578.⁷⁸ The same source also reports that, although these plans did not come to fruition, Tiberius sought to solidify ties with Justinian by arranging marriages between his own son and daughter and Justinian's children.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Regarding Tiberius' dismissal of Justinian, Evagrius (HE V.19) explicitly states – contrary to the date preferred by PLRE III, 747, which suggests 577 – that it occurred sometime after Tiberius became Augustus on 26 September 578 (for this date, see Johannes Ephesius, HE III.6). The dismissal was ostensibly due to Justinian's defeat by the Persians in Armenia the previous year (Evag. HE V.19). Justinian's poor conduct during this battle led to the loss of support from the officer corps (Jo. Eph. VI.8). For Justinian's possible death shortly thereafter, see Jo. Eph. VI.27. Contrary to Whitby (1988: 6), the PLRE considers John's account of Justinian's death to be unreliable.

⁷⁷ Cameron 1975b: 426; Cameron 1976: 269.

⁷⁸ Alan Cameron (1976: 269) suggests plausibly that the first of these usurpation attempts backed by the dowager empress Sophia occurred shortly after the death of Justin II on October 5th, at a time when Tiberius was attempting to make his first public appearance as sole Augustus. He also emphasizes the significant role that Tiberius' refusal to marry Sophia after Justin's death played in prompting her attempt to challenge his authority.

⁷⁹ Greg. Tour. *Hist.* 5.1, 30; see also Paul. Diac. *Hist. Lang.* III.12. See the discussions in Cameron (1975b: 424–426); Cameron (1976: 268–269); Cosentino (2016: 120) regarding Gregory's likely reliance on an Eastern Greek source – whether oral or written – for what both scholars consider valuable and plausible evidence concerning the obscure events surrounding the early reign of Tiberius II. Cf., however, the dissenting perspectives of Roggo (2024: 100–101) and Whitby (1988: 8–9), who interpret the account as little more than court gossip. Whatever the true circumstances under which Gregory obtained this information, it nonetheless offers compelling evidence that the younger Justinian was widely perceived as a serious contender for the imperial throne.

Matasuintha and Germanus junior

After Germanus' death, a now pregnant Matasuintha seems to have returned to Constantinople to deliver Germanus junior. As we detect in Jordanes' passage from the opening of the chapter, this birth renewed the hopes of the Gothic diaspora in the capital. Despite the Church's disapproval of third marriages, Matasuintha continued to attract suitors. Her refusal to marry a third time (Jord. *Getica* 81) likely reflected a desire to safeguard the future interests of her son, Germanus, rather than an inclination toward a religious vocation.⁸⁰ With the war in Italy approaching its final and bloody resolution – in 552, both Totila and his successor Teias were decisively defeated and both killed – it must have become increasingly clear that Matasuintha's hopes for the future rested not in her son's Gothic lineage, but in his Roman heritage. Whereas ruling in Ravenna would have meant partly reigning as an Amal, her life in Constantinople after 552 likely marked a definitive break with her Ostrogothic Italian past. Now in her early thirties and twice widowed, she was a senior member of one of Constantinople's most prominent and affluent families. Although she disappears from the historical record at this point, it is likely that she continued to oversee Germanus' education and manage the substantial estate she inherited from her two late husbands, Vitigis and Germanus. As the mother of their half-brother, she likely remained in contact with Justin, Justinian, Justina, and John. How closely Matasuintha continued to associate with other exiles from the Ostrogothic court is unclear, though as it became evident, she would never return to Italy, such ties likely faded over time.

Her disappearance from the historical record – which is not unusual for most high-born women of late antiquity – leaves us only to speculate about her fate in the years that followed.⁸¹ This blending into Constantinopolitan society helps explain, at least in part, why we remain uncertain about the subsequent career of Germanus junior. It is possible that like many infants and children of the time he did not make it out of

⁸⁰ Contra Cristini 2024: 256.

⁸¹ Hillner, MacCarron, Vihervalli 2022.

childhood alive. Yet, there are intriguing clues that Germanus may have not only had survived but risen to the heights of Roman high society.

Though we are venturing even further into the realm of speculation, it is possible – as Michael Whitby has argued – that it was Matasuinthas’s son, and not Germanus’ grandson as argued by other scholars,⁸² who was the Germanus referred to in the *Chronicon Paschale* and Theophanes (Chron. Pasch. 690.8–9; Theoph. 252.1–13 AM 6074). During the reign of Tiberius II (r. 578–582), this Germanus was elevated to the rank of Caesar alongside Maurice (r. 582–602) in 582, and betrothed to the emperor’s daughter, Charito. Whitby further reasons that Tiberius may have been considering a division of the empire, “with Maurice commanding the East and Germanus the West.” As the son of Matasuinthas and Germanus senior, Germanus, after all, carried the blood of the Eastern Roman imperial House of Justin, the aristocratic Anician family – long associated with the Western imperial tradition – and the royal Gothic Amal line.⁸³

I concur with Cosentino and Lin that it is far more likely this Germanus was the son of the younger Justinian and thus the grandson of Germanus, reflecting Tiberius’ intent to maintain ties with the lineage of Justin I. Although these earlier plans ultimately did not materialize, if Cosentino is correct in identifying Germanus 5 and Germanus 11 in the *PLRE* as the same individual, then – despite never becoming emperor – Germanus remained deeply involved in the turbulent court politics of the period.⁸⁴ His unnamed daughter married Maurice’s son, the *porphyrogennetos* (purple-born) Augustus,⁸⁵ in either 601 or 602 (Theoph. Sim. Hist. VIII.4.10, *Chron. Pasch.* s.a. 602), further strengthening his dynastic connections. He continued to be regarded as a prime candidate for the throne: first, in 602, when the Roman army in Thrace rebelled (Theoph. Sim. Hist. VIII.8.3–5; Theoph. Chron. AM 6094, 287.25–26); and again, following the brutal execution of Maurice and his sons, a moment which may have seen Germanus refuse the imperial title under such horrific circumstances – an opening

⁸² See Cosentino 2016: 122–124; Lin 2021:131–132.

⁸³ Whitby 1988: 7. Cf. Brandes 2009: 303–316. Contra *PLRE* III Germanus 5: 529. Cosentino 2016: 123.

⁸⁵ *PLRE* III Theodosius 13: 1293–1294.

Phokas to seize power (Theoph. Sim. *Hist.* VIII.10.4–5; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6094, p. 289.16–17). Finally, in 605, after being forced into monastic life, Germanus was accused of conspiring with the dowager empress Constantina to overthrow Phokas. This alleged plot prompted another bloody purge in which Germanus and his daughter, along with Constantina, and the remaining members of the former imperial family were executed (Theoph. Sim. *Hist.* VIII). Thus, it is possible that it was only after more than half a century after Germanus's death in Serdica in the summer of 550 that the considerable influence of his family in Roman politics was finally extinguished.

Conclusion

Despite the ongoing uncertainty regarding the exact relationship between the African *patricius* Germanus and Germanus Senior, the figures of Germanus, Matasuintha, and their descendants warrant closer examination by historians investigating the complex social and political dynamics of the sixth-century Roman world. The marriage between Matasuintha and Germanus is often treated as just another episode in the long reign of Justinian. Yet, in this article, I have sought to demonstrate that it offers significant insights into the complex web of marital and political alliances that shaped Constantinopolitan politics in the 540s and beyond.

Germanus' relationship with Justinian and Theodora was complex and fluid, shaped by the shifting social and political landscape of Constantinople from Justin I's accession in 518 to Germanus' death in 550. The early decades of Justinian's reign (527–542) marked a period of cooperation between the two talented cousins. However, Justinian's near-fatal encounter with the bubonic plague appears to have introduced new strains into their relationship. As Germanus and his sons grew in stature – both as military commanders and political figures – the House of Germanus increasingly posed a potential threat to the childless imperial couple.

In the mid-540s, likely with Justinian's support, Theodora became deeply involved in arranging advantageous marriages for members of

their extended family, while simultaneously seeking to prevent Germanus and his children from forging alliances that might challenge the position of the imperial household. Theodora's death in June 548 marked a turning point in the relationship between Justinian and Germanus. Contrary to the view that her absence drew the two men closer, I have argued here that tensions between them only deepened. Justinian employed all his political acumen to neutralize the perceived threat posed by his cousin's continued prominence in Constantinopolitan society – a threat made even more real when Germanus was identified as the preferred successor during the failed plot of 549.

These tensions only intensified as Justinian aged, and the issue of succession became increasingly urgent. Even after Germanus' death in 550, his son-in-law John, his sons Justin and Justinian, and possibly Germanus Junior remained significant players in the political life of the empire. The House of Germanus, with its wide-reaching social networks and deep-rooted connections across Constantinople, Italy, Thrace, and North Africa, remained a force to be reckoned with. Indeed, had a few twists of fate unfolded differently, we might today speak not of the Age of Justinian and Theodora, but of the Age of Germanus and Matasuinthia.

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