



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation of

**David Rockwell**

on

**Justinian's Conniving Bankers Lobbying and the Imperial Bureaucracy in  
Sixth-Century Byzantium**

will be held on

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online defense

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## **Dissertation Abstract**

Petitioning—whether for favours, for justice, or for new law-making—was no epiphenomenon to the governance of the sixth-century emperor Justinian but fundamental to its design and operation. The evidence of that emperor’s legislation suggests that few constituencies were as adept at petitioning as the bankers and other financiers of the city of Constantinople. In a series of constitutions—Novels—issued over the period from 535 to 542 CE, Justinian responded to their various petitions with new legislation responsive to their interests. The terms of this legislation describe the petitions in terms that allow us to reconstruct their contents in large part, even if the petitions themselves do not survive. In the financiers of Constantinople as portrayed in the Novels we have sophisticated actors, as well-versed in the laws applicable to their business as they were well-organised to lobby for changes to them.

This dissertation examines finance-related Novels of the 530s and 540s in light of the system of imperial petition-and-response as it operated in Justinian’s reign. It then applies the knowledge of petitioning so gained to the interpretation of the substantive legal provisions, challenging existing interpretations thereof. Chapter 1 examines the practice of petitioning the emperor as portrayed in Justinian’s Novels generally, supplemented by information from papyri, epigraphy, and hagiography. Among other contributions, this chapter classifies each reference to petitions and petitioning in the Novels by function and context. This chapter demonstrates that many individuals and groups throughout the empire were by no

means passive recipients of new law-making but rather sophisticated users—and sometimes abusers—of it.

Chapter 2 then applies those findings to the interpretation of Novel 136—issued in response to a petition by Constantinople’s bankers—examining each of its requests for relief and Justinian’s response to them. Among other things, it finds that the bureaucratic practice of lifting wording from petition to legislative text makes the manuscript dating of that law to April 535—which many scholars have doubted—entirely plausible.

Chapter 3 then applies that same methodology to Edict 7 of March 542. It establishes that many of the Edict’s provisions do not, as is often assumed, provide evidence for the effects of the so-called Plague of Justinian. Even those provisions that do plausibly relate to plague are better explained as responses to its expected effects than to its actual ones as at the Edict’s promulgation. Edict 7 therefore cannot serve as evidence for the date of the plague’s arrival at Constantinople.

Chapter 4 then turns attention away from bankers to maritime lenders. Together, Novel 106 of September 540 and its reversal just eight months later in Novel 110 reveal the iterative nature of petition-and-response and how it handled conflicts between the interests of different constituencies. This chapter argues that Novel 106 was the result a lobbying gambit by the maritime lenders to bamboozle the shippers and merchants that were their customers by a lobbying subterfuge that left the headline rate intact but increased effective interest charges by changing

the basis of calculation. The success of the maritime lenders was, however, short-lived. Justinian repealed the change with retroactive effect just eight months later. The Conclusion then summarises the findings of earlier chapters, highlighting how each one shows that Justinian's subjects, at least sophisticated ones such as the bankers and maritime lenders of the capital, were no mere passive recipients of his successive waves of new legislation. They were instead sophisticated consumers of it, possessed of agency in its interpretation, ready to exploit its silences, ambiguities, and contradictions in application, and prepared where need to be to lobby for its amendment.

*Keywords:* Justinian, bankers/ἀργυροπρᾶται, petition, lobbying, maritime loans/*pecunia traiecticia*

## CURRICULUM VITAE

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**December 2019:** University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Postgraduate Certificate in Greek and Latin, with Distinction.

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1) International Medieval Congress (3 July 2023, Leeds): “A Law unto Themselves: The Disputes of Justinian’s Bankers” for the panel on “Moving Byzantium.”

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- 3) Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies, Central European Studies (20 October 2022, Vienna): “Looking for Plague in All the Wrong Places: On Using Legislation as Evidence for the Sixth-Century Epidemic).”
- 4) Graduate Workshop in Late Antique and Byzantine Studies, University of Vienna and Central European University (April 2022, Vienna): “Justinian’s Conniving Bankers: Lobbying and the Imperial Bureaucracy in Sixth-Century Byzantium.”
- 5) International Medieval Congress (July 2021, Leeds): “Justinian’s Legal Erasures” for the panel “Erasure, Law and the Late Roman Court.”
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## **ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS**

- 1) “A Law unto Themselves: The Disputes of Justinian’s Bankers” (under peer review).
- 2) “Justinian’s Legal Erasures,” *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 29 (2023): 11–36 [in print].
- 3) “Emphyteusis in a Time of Death: What Can Laws about Church Property Really Tell Us About the Sixth-Century Plague?,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 7 no. 4 (Winter 2023): 561–586.
- 4) “Bureaucratic Identity in John Lydos”, in *Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> International Symposium “Days of Justinian I”*, M. Panov, ed. (2020): 65–81.

5) “The Protection of Innocents in Augustine’s Laws of War”,  
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## **TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

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**January 2000 to June 2018**, Sullivan & Cromwell LLP (London and Frankfurt offices): Partner: Responsible for corporate finance practice in Germany and Northern Europe. Lead partner on numerous high-profile capital markets transactions, with particular depth in the banking, chemicals, real estate, retail and media sectors.

**March 1991 to December 1999**, Sullivan & Cromwell (New York, London, and Frankfurt office): Attorney, with increasing levels of responsibility for the securities practice.

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