

DRAMATIC MOMENT – NIKA
REBELLION

Name: _____

Date: _____ Block: ___ #4

The ancient Roman and Byzantine Empires had well developed associations of sports fans, especially for chariot racing, a popular diversion for the poor. There were four major factions of chariot racing fans, signified by the color of the uniform of their favorite racing team. These were the Blues, the Reds, the Greens, and the Whites, although by the Byzantine era the only teams with any influence were the Blues and Greens. The teams had aspects of street gangs and political parties, grouping people by social class and religion. The emperors tended to support one faction over the other; Justinian I was, until the riots, a supporter of the Blues.

In 531, some members of the Blues and Greens had been arrested for murder, but had survived their hanging sentences. Justinian commuted their sentences to imprisonment, but the Blues and Greens demanded that they be pardoned entirely. Justinian ignored them, so on January 11 they broke into the prison and set free all the prisoners, then set fire to parts of Constantinople, using the racing cheer *nika* ("victory") as a rallying cry. They demanded the dismissal of the City Prefect and other officials.

Justinian appeared the next morning in the imperial box carrying the gospel and declared that he was to blame for what happened. Meanwhile behind closed doors Justinian and his associates were in earnest debate. A fast galley was waiting at the private harbor of the palace and the emperor was resolved to flee to Herakiaia in Thrace. After Belisarius' mission to capture one of the crowd's leaders failed, Justinian ordered an immediate flight to the harbor. Then Theodora, who had sat silent as men argued this way and that, rose to her feet:

*Whether or not a woman should give an example of courage to men, is neither here nor there. At a moment of desperate danger one must do what one can. I think that flight, even if it brings us to safety, is not in our interest. Every man born to see the light of day must die. But that one who has been emperor should become an exile I cannot bear. May I never be without the purple I wear, nor live to see the day when men do not call me "Your Majesty". If you wish safety, my Lord, that is an easy matter. We are rich, and there is the sea, and yonder our ships. But consider whether if you reach safety you may not desire to exchange that safety for death. As for me, I like the old saying, that the purple is the noblest shroud. (Procopius, *History of the Wars*, vol. 1, Sec. 24, 33-37. In Robert Browning, *Justinian and Theodora*.)*

She sat down. The men looked at one another nervously. Belisarius began discussing military plans. He and his other generals and their mercenaries went to the Hippodrome. They cut down every civilian within reach. The benches dripped with blood and the Hippodrome resounded with the echoes of the screams of the wounded and dying. When it was over thirty thousand men had been killed. But Justinian's position was confirmed. Now he knew whom he could trust—Belisarius, Mundus, Narses, and above all Theodora.

Directions: On the back, create a four scene comic that illustrates the events of the Nika Rebellion as described here. A one sentence caption (in your own words) should accompany each of the four illustrations. Use color and fill space.