

The Revolt of Vitalian and Anastasius I's Adjustment of Christian Policies

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Abstract: The Vitalian Revolt was one of the major events during the later years of Anastasius I's reign; at one point, it threatened the empire's rule. A key cause of this revolt was Anastasius's Christian policy—specifically, his strict adherence to Monophysitism. This aroused discontent in the regions of the Chalcedonian faith, and as religious conflicts between East and West continued to escalate, they eventually erupted in Thrace. Coupled with Thrace's unequal economic policies, its strategic geographical location, and the emergence of the powerful Vitalian, the revolt ultimately broke out. This uprising briefly shook the empire's Christian policies, but after its suppression, Anastasius I returned to his original path.

Keywords: Anastasius I; Vitalian; Christian policy

1. Introduction

The Vitalian Revolt was one of the most important events during the reign of Anastasius I, significantly influencing his Christian policies in the later years of his rule. Western scholars have conducted some research on the Vitalian Revolt. Peter Charanis, in *"The Church and State in the Late Roman Empire: The Religious Policies of Anastasius I"*, provides a detailed account of the Vitalian Revolt. F. K. Haarer, in *"Anastasius I: Politics and Empire in the Late Roman World"*, focuses on describing the background information of the Vitalian Revolt. Most other accounts of the Vitalians are found in general histories [1–5], with the Vitalian uprising being mentioned only briefly, and no dedicated research articles have been published. Most accounts of the Vitalian Rebellion are only briefly mentioned, with no dedicated research articles published. Since the beginning of the 21st century, domestic research on Anastasius I has focused on general histories [6,7], without specifically discussing the Vitalian Rebellion or deeply exploring the connection between the rebellion and national policies.

Toward the end of Anastasius I's reign, the empire's religious policies gradually became more stringent, ultimately shifting completely toward Monophysitism. This sparked strong discontent in Rome and in regions dominated by the Chalcedonians, who needed a powerful force and a strong leader to counter Anastasius I. In 514, the emergence of Vitalian reignited hope among the Chalcedonians, and his rebellion forced Anastasius I to resume negotiations with Rome.

2. The Main Causes of the Vitalian Revolt

Anastasius's religious policies were bound to provoke discontent among the Chalcedonians. This provided

an opportunity for those with ulterior motives, most notably the Thracian Vitalians. Economic inequality, barbarian invasions, and personal ambition, among other factors, contributed to the uprising.

2.1. Unequal Economic Policies

Unequal economic policies were a major contributing factor to the Vitalian Rebellion. Anastasius I was a diligent ruler whose fiscal policies were more impressive than others, accumulating substantial wealth for the empire. In contrast, the earlier Leo emperors did not accumulate significant funds for the nation. In 468 AD, Emperor Leo dispatched a large fleet to attack the Vandals who ruled North Africa. According to records, this expedition cost 13,000 pounds of gold [1]. Under Theodosius II of the Eastern Roman Empire... Rome was to immediately hand over its fugitives; Rome's outstanding tribute totaled 6000 pounds and was to be paid immediately; Rome's tribute was to be doubled to 2100 pounds per year; the ransom for Roman prisoners was also increased to 12 gold coins per person; and the Roman Empire was no longer allowed to harbor fugitives [8].

During Zeno's reign, the empire also faced barbarian invasions. Frequent wars and outdated economic policies continuously depleted the empire's strength, and by the time of Anastasius I, the financial situation had become even more critical, urgently requiring reforms.

In Byzantium, a major agricultural country, agricultural reforms were of paramount importance. Xu Jialing points out: "At the height of the Roman Empire, more than 80% of the population was engaged in agricultural and pastoral production. It was only when there was no arable land available at the end of the empire that the proportion of agricultural production declined significantly" [6]. Anastasius converted the bulk of the land tax into gold, levying in kind only so much as was needed in each area to supply the troops, and forbade compulsory purchase (*coemptio*, *owonp*) except in emergencies, and then only on his personal authorisation measure [9]. This policy of the emperor promoted the shift from in-kind taxes to monetary payments, which facilitated currency circulation and significantly reduced losses during the transportation of goods, thus benefiting agricultural development and the lives of farmers. The prohibition of forced purchases was highly beneficial for maintaining the strength of the populace, reviving agricultural development, and granting farmers certain rights, which helped restore public morale. However, this policy was not implemented in Thrace, where long-term barbarian raids had severely damaged agriculture, reduced the number of farmers, and resulted in insufficient tax revenue to support the army. Anastasius I's actions prevented Thracian farmers from enjoying the benefits of this policy and forced them to continue to endure the disadvantages of forced grain purchases. His forces were swelled by the local peasantry, and he marched on the capital with a huge host, said to have numbered 50,000 men [9].

2.2. Political and Religious Reasons

Political factors were undoubtedly another key element triggering the uprising. Vitalian astutely grasped the widespread discontent among the Thracian populace towards the empire's existing Christian policies, skillfully exploiting this to successfully mobilize the local population, leading them to respond to and follow him in launching the rebellion. He further capitalized on the unwavering faith in orthodox doctrine in several regions, using this as an opportunity to legitimize his uprising under the banner of upholding orthodoxy. However, the Vitalian Rebellion was not merely a political issue; it also involved religious factors. Theophanes's Chronicle clearly records the Vitalians' terms for peace, including the restoration of orthodox bishops and the convening of a synod [10]. It can also be seen that the Vitalian Rebellion was not only driven by personal ambition, but also by a desire to uphold orthodox doctrine and resolve religious issues.

2.3. The Balkans, Which Are Frequently Invaded

Thrace, located on the Balkan Peninsula, is bordered by the Balkan Mountains to the north, the Aegean Sea to the south, and the Black Sea to the east, making its strategic location extremely important. Since the Roman Empire moved its capital to Constantinople in 330 AD, Thrace has gained a status comparable to that of Rome, and the importance of the Balkan region has increased accordingly. From a historical perspective, the Crisis of

the Third Century changed the fate of the Balkan Peninsula. The Balkan Peninsula, which was fully developed and integrated by the Romans into an important province of the empire, became the core region of the Byzantine Empire, whose main territory was the eastern Mediterranean [11]. For Thrace, which guarded the land fortress of Constantinople, it was of paramount importance in the Balkans. Constantinople, surrounded by water on three sides, was an impregnable city by sea. Thrace became a crucial passage for enemies attempting to capture Constantinople, and during the reign of Anastasius I, the region was frequently invaded, as recorded in Marcellinus's *"Chronicles"* [12]:

1 September 492–31 August 493: Julian, the Master of the Soldiery, was struck by a Scythian sword while fighting in a night battle in Thrace, and died.

1 September 498–31 August 499: The Master of the Illyrian Soldiery, Aristus, with fifteen thousand armed men and five hundred and twenty wagons, weighed down with the arms necessary for fighting, set out against the Bulgars who were invading Thrace. They engaged in battle beside the river Tzurta where more than four thousand of our men were killed, either in flight or in the collapse of the river's bank.

1 September 501–31 August 502: The familiar race of the Bulgars again devastated the oft-ravaged Thrace as there was no Roman soldiery to resist them.

Marcellinus's account reveals frequent barbarian invasions of Thrace, and the empire's lax defenses. The Bulgarian invasion of 501 explicitly states that Thrace was frequently ravaged because of the lack of Roman soldiers to resist. This clearly demonstrates the empire's failure in defending Thrace. Against this backdrop, agriculture and the lives of the Thracian people stagnated, leading to widespread discontent. Given the right opportunity and a powerful leader, the masses were poised for rebellion.

2.4. Discontent with the Emperor's Christian Policies in the West and Other Regions

The fourth and fifth centuries were a period of intense doctrinal debate between East and West. Zeno's *"Henotikon"* failed to resolve the conflict and instead concealed a deeper crisis. In the West, the Pope remained unyielding on the Arcassius question. During his papacy, Gelasius I strictly upheld his authority, demanding absolute obedience, further straining relations between East and West. First, though the Byzantines were anxious to heal the breach, as Gelasius admitted, the Pope offered no compromise [1]. During the reign of Pope Anastasius II, although tensions eased, there was still no sign of compromise regarding Monophysitism. Relations with the emperor were even more strained during the reign of Symmachus. Symmachus only addressed Anastasius as "Emperor", without any of the usual honorifics. He rebuts Anastasius' charges against him and justifies the continuation of the schism [2]. Rome's stance has always been very clear: it will not make any concessions on doctrine.

When Anastasius I changed his policies and fully embraced Monophysitism, the situation in the Balkans differed from other regions; it was an important stronghold of the Chalcedonian faith. When the break between Constantinople and Rome occurred, the bishop of Thessalonica, who had jurisdiction over Illyricum and Greece, followed the leadership of Constantinople, but does not seem to have been put under the jurisdiction of that see [3]. On the opposite side of the peninsula, in Scythia and Thrace, where the Chalcedonian element was equally strong, the orthodox spirit was nourished by the excessive religious zeal of the Scythian monks, who throughout the Acacian schism maintained communion with Rome [3]. The region was marked by a profound religious fervor, and it was precisely this fervor that fueled the flame of Chalcedon. The region of Syria also became a key stronghold for the Chalcedonians in their opposition to the emperor's policy of Monophysitism. Coupled with the pope's continuous promotion of orthodox faith in the region, when Vitalian raised the banner of opposition to Monophysitism, he quickly gained the support of the Chalcedonian forces there.

3. Other Reasons for the Vitalian Rebellion

The conflict between the Vitalians and the royal family mainly stemmed from the emperor's nephew, Hypatius, who was the military leader of Thrace. F. K. Haarer once suggested that Vitalian was particularly cruel to the emperor's nephew Hippateus because the latter had insulted his wife [2]. According to Marcellinus' account, Vitalian had him placed in "chains" and accepted nine hundred pounds of gold as ransom [12]. In the

Church History by Theodore Lector and John Diakrinomenos, it is mentioned that Vitalian threw Hypatius, who was bound with bronze shackles, into an iron cage and then had him dragged around [13]. There may be other conflicts between the two. But it is undeniable that the Vitalian initially targeted the emperor's nephew, defeated Hippateus's army, and captured him. In addition, the empire's policy towards Thrace made Hippateus unpopular there, making the Vitalian even more "in his element" in the region.

Vitalian's personal talent also played a role in his rebellion. John of Antioch described him as a short, stuttering man. He did not seem to be a charismatic general. However, Peter Charanis noted that although Vitalian had certain physical shortcomings, his extraordinary courage and military prowess earned him the admiration of even his opponents [3]. It was Vitalian's talent and personal charisma that enabled him to unite the army and even bring the emperor to the brink of Constantinople on several occasions, forcing him to negotiate peace.

The Chronicles of Theophanes state that the Vitalian Rebellion was caused by an invitation from Orthodox bishops in Scythia and other regions to rise up against the ungodly Anastasius [10]. The support of the Chalcedonian faction played a significant role in the Vitalian Revolt.

4. The Process and Outcome of the Vitalian Rebellion and the Emperor's Adjustment of Christian Policy

The Vitalians organized two uprisings, the first of which was more intense and had a greater impact than the second. The Vitalian uprisings directly influenced the Empire's religious policy.

4.1. The First Uprising, the Emperor Resumed Dialogue with Rome

In this year (514) Vitalian, after occupying all of Thrace, Scythia, and Mysia and having with him a host of Huns and Bulgars, captured Anchialos and Odysopolis [10]. Anastasius declared Vitalian an enemy of Rome and assembled an army of 80,000, appointing Hippetius as commander. Initially, the fighting was very favorable for the empire, but the tide turned as key figures were captured. Ultimately, Vitalian defeated and captured the emperor's nephew, Hippetius. These successive defeats shook the court and the country, and as Marcellinus noted, Vitalian became Anastasius's most dangerous enemy [12]. Under these circumstances, the emperor had no choice but to sue for peace.

Anastasius I sent senators to negotiate peace with the Vitalians. Theophanes's Chronicle records the Vitalians' demands [10].

Vitalian added that the commanders of each unit of the scholae should also swear this, and that Makedonios and Flavian, who had been unjustly expelled, should get back their thrones, and likewise all the other bishops, and that then the synod be held so that, with the bishop of Rome and all the other bishops attending, the outrages against the orthodox would be subjected to a common judgement.

Anastasius I did not "bargain" with Vitalian and agreed to all his demands, but this seemed to be merely a delaying tactic. Vitalian returned to Thrace and was appointed its leader. By this time, Bishop Hinmarcus of Rome had died in 514, and Hormisdas had become Pope. Anastasius I wrote to Hormisdas inviting him to a synod. However, the emperor seemed unwilling for the Pope to attend, as the first letter was delayed in reaching Rome; the only satisfactory explanation was that it was carefully orchestrated. When it was at last delivered it was too late for the pope to make the necessary preparations to attend so important a gathering [3]. The Pope, too, seemed to have lost hope for complete unification, continuing to firmly demand the East's unconditional acceptance of the Council of Chalcedon and the Book of Leo, and condemning Arcassius. During the council, both sides harbored their own agendas, with no ultimate goal of unification. Hormisdas simply wanted Rome's supreme status confirmed, while Anastasius I aimed to curb the further advance of the Vitalian Rebellion and maintain peace within his country. Indeed, the council did not proceed as expected, and arguments erupted between the two sides. The first phase of negotiations ended, but the second phase, as events unfolded, presented a completely different picture.

4.2. *The Second Rebellion: The Complete Failure of the Reconciliation Between Constantinople and Rome*

1 September 515–31 August 516. The emperor Anastasius went back on his word, relieved Vitalian and nominated Rufinus as his successor [12]. The academic community has not reached a definitive conclusion as to why the emperor would attack this dangerous enemy again. Peter Charanis speculated that it might be because Vitalian's close relationship with the barbarian leader Theodoric led Anastasius I to become wary [3].

Vitalian launched another uprising, and the emperor appointed Cyril as a military officer to suppress it. Cyril failed, and Vitalian defeated him through a stratagem [4]. The Empire's military victory was brought about by the Empire's outstanding finance minister, Marinus, who led his army to a complete defeat. John Malalas's *Chronicle* recounts that Malalas used a special substance, which he sprinkled on ships and buildings, and that this substance would ignite [4]. The victory in this war was not only due to the correct leadership of Marinus, but also to the assistance of Greek fire, which enabled the empire to win and its policies were no longer hampered by the Vitalians.

Vitalian's defeat allowed the emperor to shake off external pressure and resume negotiations with the pope. These negotiations differed significantly from previous ones, as the emperor hoped to reach an agreement with Rome on Monophysitism, thereby ensuring that religion would no longer threaten domestic peace. However, the situation in Rome had changed. Powerful pro-imperial factions, such as those led by Festus, no longer existed, nor did those supporting the Edict of Union. The pope, now supported by Theodoric, insisted that reconciliation with Rome required condemnation of Arcadius and submission to Roman authority. Neither side yielded, and Hormisdas' second attempt to reconcile Rome and Constantinople ended. The pope's insistence meant the emperor not only refused to yield but preferred the division to continue. By early 517, Hormisdas had completely lost hope of dismantling Anastasius's resistance.

The Vitalian Revolt was also coming to an end. This uprising did not re-establish the status of orthodox doctrine, nor did it achieve religious peace in the country. On the contrary, the Vitalian Rebellion caused severe damage to the empire. Gibbon's *"The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire"* [5] records that 65,000 soldiers died in the Vitalian Rebellion, resulting in a sharp decline in population and making agricultural development even more difficult. Chen Zhiqiang's *"A Comprehensive History of the Byzantine Empire"* also records that the Vitalian Rebellion caused a serious disaster, severely damaging the empire's military strength in this civil war, which in turn seriously affected Anastasius I's military operations against the Bulgarians who entered Macedonia at the end of his reign [7].

5. Conclusions

The Vitalian Revolt was a consequence of the empire's religious policy adjustments towards the end of Anastasius I's reign and the escalating tensions between East and West. Thrace's strategic geographical location, constant barbarian invasions, unequal economic policies compared to other regions, the influence of orthodox forces, and the emergence of powerful figures made it the epicenter of the rebellion against the emperor. Simultaneously, fundamental cultural differences between East and West, along with irreconcilable doctrinal conflicts, made Thrace an arena for power struggles between Rome and the emperor. Numerous peace talks were held amidst the ebb and flow of power, but due to neither side's unwillingness to compromise, many negotiations failed to reach a settlement. The Pope's attempt to control the empire failed, and the emperor's authority remained dominant. Neither side achieved its objectives, but the revolt severely weakened the empire's military strength, causing significant damage.

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