

Thesis / Hypothesis

Throughout our research, we will examine the roles of the Empress Theodora during the Justinian age. In particular, our research will investigate Theodora's power and influence and the degree to which she advocated for women. We hypothesize that Theodora played a minimal role during her time as empress and that she failed to encourage the rights of women when she was in a position to do so. In addition we believe that her deplorable circus years and immoral past had the potential to jeopardize the Justinian Empire.

Sources / Limitations of Study

Secondary:

James, Liz. *Empresses And Power In Early Byzantium*. New York: Leicester University Press, 2001. 5-165. Print.

Mallet, C E. "The Empress Theodora." *The English Historical Review* (1887): 1-20. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.

Nilsson, Carina. "Perspectives of Power: Byzantine Emperor Women." *Preteritus* 1 (2009): 4-13. Web. 10 Feb. 2010.

Tuomo, Lankila. "The Unkown Empress: Theodora as a Victim of Distorted Images." *Language and the Scientific Imagination* (2008): 1-13. Web. 3 Feb. 2010.

Warren, Zach. "Empress Theodora Where Circus and Church Meet." *Between Divinity & Humanity* (2007): 1-22. Web. 24 Feb. 2010. <<http://zwarren.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/THEODORA-ch-5.pdf>>.

Primary:



<http://faculty.cua.edu/Pennington/ChurchHistory220/LectureTwo/theodora.htm>

We are limited in our study because so little is known about the private lives of these women to know what power they actually possessed. Women during this time period were generally thought of as insignificant, or at least, that is the perception that is produced through the work of most historians. As such, though a lot is written about males in a state of power and what their roles entailed, not much is written about women and their roles if in a position of power. We are therefore limited into an accurate understanding of the realities of what women empresses duties were.

Images provided in this study are limited because they are not authentic photographs of the individual, but rather are artworks produced by artists, and as such are the open interpretation of the artist. In addition, much of the information we know about Theodora is documented from Procopius' written works. Our views therefore are construed based on the information he provides for us which may limit our understanding of the Empress' contributions to the Justinian Era (Tumo, 2008).

Argument / Discussion / Evidence

We believe that Theodora despite her rise to power at the hand of Justinian did not advocate for women to the best of her ability. Procopius argues that she was a heretic and an immoral woman, while Mallet refutes this, on the basis that he was biased in his discussion of her. Through our research we found details of the following:

Her rise from low economic status:

Theodora's father passed away when she was three years old and she was forced by her mother to join the circus. Through this lifestyle was exposed to the realities of her lower class upbringing and quickly developed abilities that allowed her to please wealthy men. At the age of sixteen, Theodora had the courage to flee from the circus in search of something better. Credit must be given to Theodora for breaking the mold of her lower-class upbringing and being brave enough to leave her home and her lifestyle. (Warren, 2007)

An Advocate for women:

A large aspect of debate concerns the marriage law. Theodora abolished a law that prevented actresses to marry men of high rank. Accusations surrounding the motive of this law stem from Theodora's desire for succession. Still further is the question of when it was actually enacted, which removes the credit from Theodora. Upon further investigation however, as he determines, this was not just an exception made for her behalf, instead it was a law that was upheld throughout the Justinian age, and according to Mallet, was instituted after Theodora took the throne. As such, her personal motives did not come into play; rather her influence over her husband was for the benefit of other women in unfortunate circumstances.

Mallet furthers our understanding regarding her aid in bringing women off the streets of Constantinople and advocating for their rights. According to Nilsson before Theodora, “the act of raping a woman of the lower classes and slaves was legal; but she enacted a law making the rape of any woman punishable by death” (Nilsson, 10). As such she stands as a great example contrary to the stereotype that women held no influence during this time. Not only did she incorporate this law, but several others including one that outlawed the owner of a slave to force her to appear on stage against her will. This law helped to break down the strong restraints upon women in the profession of acting, because at this time such a profession was considered immoral. Immoral or not, Theodora utilized her position to advocated and to legalize the marriages of persons of unequal rank (Mallet, 12). As such, not only did she advocate for women, but for those of the lower class. She labored to end prostitution and according to Nilsson, paid for young girls to be free from brothels and pimps (Nilsson, 10).

Religion: Monophysite vs. Christian Orthodox

A major issue of debate surrounding Theodora’s life was the controversy of her religion. Despite her husband’s religious belief, Theodora maintained true to her own religious views and proved to be tenacious and strong-willed. Instead of conforming to the views of her husband and empire, Theodora chose to incorporate her religion of Monophysite by winning over the hearts of its members and including them into a Christian Orthodox empire. (Warren, 2007) Though her “virtues had been obscured by grave religious errors, and her attitude towards the popes had proved her to be a lost and impenitent heretic” (Mallet, 2), she upheld her beliefs and pursued her religion to the fullest extent. Despite this obvious strike against her, even her greatest religious critique who calls her a “impious enemy of the church ... utters no word against her concerning her private life” (Mallet 14), suggesting that although her opinions differed in this regard, she was still a good ruler and advocate for justice within the public sphere.

The Churches:

Theodora was a strong advocate for the establishment and construction of churches. Where Procopius suggests that the churches were created out of her desire for excess, Mallet points out that they also “strengthened and embellished the empire” (Mallet, 6). Her religiosity therefore was a positive contributing factor in the Empire, and perhaps she did indeed use what little power and influence she possessed to the benefit of Justinian’s reign. Not only this but as Mallet suggests it was not uncommon for her to be seen “journeying to the warm baths at Pythos and leaving liberal donations on the way to be given to the poor” (Mallet, 19).

The Nika Revolt:

During Justinian’s ruling, a riot broke out and Justinian as an Emperor was failing to portray confidence in his ruling due to the horrible outcomes that was putting his

empire at stake. Justinian was prepared to flee the throne and run away from his terrible mess that laid before him, however, his wife Theodora convinced and encouraged her husband to fight for his people and their throne by saying “Death is a necessity which we all must face; but those who once have ruled an Empire should never live in exile and survive its loss” (Mallet, 20) Though this statement could reveal a bold and arrogant attitude it is her leadership however, that ultimately secured Justinian’s rule. Resultantly, the trust that Justinian had for Theodora credits her directorship and gives her power into a state of equality as a decision maker. As Nilsson points out she was “one of the most powerful imperial women of the Empire and acted as co-ruler” (Nilsson, 7). Theodora’s success came from her determined and strong-willed personality has been credited due to her life in the circus. Justinian ultimately rewarded her by permitting her decision making powers that would have been foreign to other Empresses. Theodora’s leadership allowed Justinian to make her co-ruler of his empire where she was able to then spear-head further important decisions. (Warren, 2007) (Tumo, 2008)

Link to Procopius’ views:

Tuomo (2008) states that Procopius’ unfortunate views on Theodora could come from the social ideology surrounding members of lower class in addition to pre-existing unfavorable views of women. These factors might have motivated Procopius to be hostile towards Theodora and any success that she had. Given this knowledge we are hesitant to judge Theodora to such a harsh extent in relation to her ethics and motives. Credit must be given to her for advancing her plot in life, by attaching herself to the most powerful man during this era, without great protest from the wider society and church. If there indeed was any protest, it is unknown to us given this current research.

Mosaic Artwork

Mosaics of the Emperor and the Empress stand in the Basilica of San Vitale. Research shows that this artwork showcases gender equality because two separate mosaics exist (one for Justinian and one for Theodora) and they were created in identical size, height and décor, displaying power in both works. This source represents the power that Theodora had and how she was appreciated as a ruler equivalent to that of her husband.

<http://faculty.cua.edu/Pennington/ChurchHistory220/LectureTwo/theodora.htm>

Relation / Significance for Contemporary Society or Education

As Mallet writes, Procopius’ writing was “prompted by the malice of a disappointed man” (Mallet, 4) due to his static position as representative of the emperor and his inability to rise to power himself. There is also a discrepancy as to when the *Secret History* was actually written, which raises questions as to the authenticity of the document. This concept speaks to the need to question history, as is written, “from motives of fear or prudence, [Procopius] had deliberately misrepresented or

suppressed" (Mallet, 6) certain details regarding Theodora. As educators we need to be critical thinkers and should question the credibility of other documents as well. Certainly concerning history we must be cognoscente of who wrote and shaped these accounts and the limitations of this perspective.

We believe that Theodora's low birth status should stand as an important reminder to society today. Despite her upbringing and position as a woman, in what was a male dominated society of war and power, she was able to use her strengths to transform the society in which she lived for the benefit of herself, other women and society more generally. This is important to consider when we unconsciously place restrictions on our students due to their life circumstances. As teachers we need to recognize and encourage students to be independent and strong willed. Students should not be afraid of judgment and they should know that like Theodora, they too have the ability to make a difference despite obstacles and hardships that may be present.

In the classroom, Theodora could be used as a role model for students. We could use her example to discuss contemporary issues of women's rights, while using her as an example of someone who overcame many obstacles that were against her, including poverty and gender. In addition to studying Emperors we feel it is just as important to focus on the lives of the women and empresses during this reign, despite the fact that history is often written from the male perspective. We ultimately believe that we should teach history through a gender inclusive lens while being conscious of dominant discourses that may be present in our society.

Conclusions

According to Procopius in his *Secret History*, Theodora was "a woman of the lowest birth and worst character, whose public conduct was signalized by tyranny and excess" (Mallet, 2), however, in reflection of the evidence collected, we conclude that she excelled despite her stigmatized reputation. Her character was in actuality of great benefit to her, in securing aid for those less fortunate, especially advocating for women. Although our hypothesis states that Theodora did little to encourage the rights of women, our research suggests that our theory is false and that more credit should be given to the Empress who helped save the Justinian Empire. Theodora used her power of persuasion and her political influence to secure rights for women during a time where legitimate authority was typically exclusively given to men.