



Section 1

HISTORYMAKERS Theodora

Woman of Will

“ . . . 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. . . . But consider whether if you reach safety you may not desire to exchange that safety for death. . . .”—Theodora, speech to Justinian during the Nika revolt (532)

A fateful encounter transformed Theodora from a reformed actress to the wife of the heir apparent to the Byzantine throne. Intelligent and beautiful, she shed her humble beginnings and rose to the heights of power in Byzantium. She served the emperor Justinian as both his political adviser and wife—and saved his throne.

Theodora’s early life is shrouded in mystery. Her exact birth date is unknown, although it is believed that she was born around A.D. 500. Her father, Acacius, worked in the famous Hippodrome in Constantinople. This was the huge arena where events such as chariot races and animal fights were held. Two groups struggled for victory in these contests: the Blues and the Greens. These groups also held considerable political power.

Theodora became an actress like her older sister, and by her teens she was well-known. Like other actresses of the time, she had a well-deserved reputation for immoral living. After traveling to North Africa with an important politician, she eventually found her way back to Constantinople. She returned as a convert to Christianity but did not adopt the standard form of that religion. She joined a sect called the Monophysites. They believed that Jesus had a mixture of both God-like and human-like natures.

Conversion changed Theodora’s life. She abandoned her old ways and began to live quietly and modestly. It was then that the fateful encounter with Justinian occurred. The future ruler met her and fell in love. However, a law banned actresses from marrying anyone. Nevertheless, he had Theodora officially named a patrician, or member of the noble class, and ruled that the law no longer applied to former actresses. In 525, he and Theodora married. Two years later, they became emperor and empress.

For more than 20 years, Theodora worked alongside Justinian to strengthen Byzantine power and lead the empire. She also took some steps to improve the position of women. For instance, she

made divorce laws more favorable to them.

Theodora also tried to win tolerance for the Monophysites. Justinian wanted to restore the empire to its former size, which meant recapturing lands in western Europe. To help achieve this, he believed he needed to favor Orthodox Christianity, which was powerful in the west. Theodora thought that the future of the Byzantine Empire lay in the east, where Monophysitism was popular. She persuaded him to practice toleration to keep the Monophysite subjects in those provinces happy.

In 532, during the terrible Nika rebellion, Theodora showed her great strength and supreme loyalty to Justinian. The Blues and the Greens had stopped arguing with each other to join forces against the government. They rioted throughout Constantinople, burning much of the city and threatening to topple the emperor from his throne. Justinian, Theodora, and their advisers gathered in the palace. The emperor was ready to flee the city, giving up his position to save his life. Then Theodora made the famous speech quoted above. When she finished, the room was briefly filled with silence. In response to her words, the generals quickly prepared plans to regain control of the city.

Once the revolt was ended, the imperial couple began to rebuild the city. They made Constantinople a glittering jewel and built 25 religious structures and countless other impressive buildings. In 548, Theodora died of cancer. She was buried in one of the churches they had built. Justinian joined her when he died years later.

Questions

- Determining Main Ideas** What does Theodora mean by the last sentence in the quotation?
- Analyzing Issues** What obstacles did Theodora have to overcome to rise in society?
- Drawing Conclusions** What divisions split Byzantine society during Theodora’s time?