

Theodora and the Politics of Sex

Claire

Who would have thought that a girl of the lowest class growing up in the slums of Byzantium would later become Empress and one of the most powerful women of medieval history? Theodora, wife of the Emperor Justinian, was no ordinary woman. Not for a moment was she in the background of imperial life - she ruled Byzantium as an equal alongside Justinian and was his chief adviser. Besides this she also worked hard for many causes of her own, making her own significant contributions to the government of the Roman Empire. In the past, Emperors had tended to be uninvolved in the running of the country and in affairs of state (Norwich, p194) Theodora brought about a unique change to this tradition. Her intelligence and strong will enabled her to use the power of her high position to great effect. These traits also allowed her to exercise influence over her husband in times of crisis, and on at least on occasion she became the decision maker due to sheer decisiveness and strength of courage. What she achieved as Empress, particularly in the case of furthering women's rights, was nothing short of incredible. Her achievements are especially interesting for the light they shed on her attitude towards her early life. One may suspect that the causes she fought for were of special significance to her due to her early life where she lived in the slums and discovered more than once the disadvantages of being lower class and female.

When Justinian and Theodora married in 527, Justinian had expressed his wishes for the two of them to rule together legally. They were crowned on a double throne; the consuls and magistrates took the legal and religious oath which officially declared them equal rulers of Byzantium:

"I swear on the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost and on the Virgin Mary and on the four gospels which I hold in my hand, and on the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, to keep faith with pure conscience to our most sacred Lord Justinian and Theodora his consort." (Bridge p54)

The words of the oath prove that Theodora, legally, was co-ruler with her husband. She was not just a figurehead. She proved her worth and strong character in a very famous event, the Nike riots. In AD 532 the people of Constantinople revolted against the Imperial Palace and began to rampage through the city. Justinian, terrified, wanted to abandon the city and go into hiding, but it was Theodora who insisted they stay where they were and honour their positions:

"Every man must sooner or later die; and how could an Emperor ever allow himself to be a fugitive? when you reach safety, will you not regret that you did not choose death in preference? I stand by the saying: the purple is the noblest winding-sheet." (Norwich p199)

Theodora was obviously not planning to relinquish her position and power without a fight, in contrast to Justinian, who was ready to abandon his throne. This story is given by Procopius of Caesarea, who wrote very critically about Theodora, so the impression of her strong will and determination is unlikely to be made up. Her strong will is shown in another incident. When Justinian fell ill with the plague, Theodora, according to Norwich (p233), exercised the supreme power alone during his illness, although her position was threatened by some of the army commanders. When Justinian had recovered, Theodora sought out her chief opponents and according to Norwich, had one locked in the dungeons and the other accused of committing a false crime (Norwich, p233 and 234).

The sources generally agree that Theodora, around age 11, took to the stage and later to prostitution. She was said to be the drawcard of Byzantium's theatre, her vivacity, charisma and immense beauty bringing her immense adoration. But according to Antony Bridge, it was more her seductive and shameless antics on stage that heralded her success. She seemed to think nothing of stripping almost naked and revelling in the crowd's response. Later, at about age 16 she when allegedly became a prostitute, she was said to have an insatiable hunger for sex. She was absolutely tireless. According to Procopius, she slept with 30 men in one night and was still unsatisfied. From her apparent enjoyment in these activities it seems that she liked this kind of life. This is certainly the idea behind the gossip about her early life. However, as Empress, her most interesting and probably most extensive work was her fight for the rights of females - certainly a unique area to be tackling in Theodora's time where the deprived usually continued to be deprived, lower class females suffering the worst. She lashed out against the unfair laws concerning stage girls and prostitutes, who were often trapped in their professions with no other way of earning an income. They were tied to unscrupulous employers who, especially in the case of prostitutes, took immense advantage of them. The stage girls often became hopelessly bound to their professions and employers, and were unable to leave the job even if they wanted to. Theodora passed new laws which freed girls from their positions, and under these laws 227 actresses left the stage for a new and freer life (Bridge p73) Prostitutes were even worse off. Pimps encouraged young girls to sign contracts that many of them didn't understand - by signing them the girls effectively signed away their freedom, and when they were no longer useful they were discarded with no further assistance from their employers. Theodora obviously sympathised with these women, having been in a similar situation herself (all sources claim that Theodora took to the stage at around age 11 and by age 16 was working as a prostitute), and began working towards gaining more rights for females. She issued an edict which banned brothels and the unethical actions of pimps in Byzantium and all other major cities in the Roman Empire. She bought back the prostitutes with her own money so that the brothel owners would not be ruined, and set up a refuge for the girls in an old castle (Bridge p75). (according to Procopius, many of the girls were taken to this refuge against their will, and some even committed suicide because they felt more trapped there than they had in their professions. However, it is common knowledge that Procopius hated Theodora and Justinian with a passion, and no other sources support his statements so it is unlikely that they are true).

Theodora issued further edicts to protect lower class females. Firstly, a daughter whose father had died was to receive as much money as any sons of the family. Secondly, a widow was allowed to reclaim her dowry if her husband had died, and thirdly, children born to a female slave were not bound to become slaves themselves (Bridge p 77). All her work towards women's rights certainly seems to indicate a dislike of her early days where, as an alleged stage girl, prostitute, female and lower class citizen, she was ultimately in one of the worst social positions possible.

Theodora was one of the most powerful women of her time, and it is true to say that, as co-ruler of Byzantium with Justinian, she made many very significant changes to the Roman Empire and its government. As an opponent she was a force to be reckoned with; according to Procopius, Theodora held grudges forever. Even after an enemy had died, their family was still subject to her wrath. As a friend she was the epitome of loyalty and support who 'showered favours' on those she cared about. Ultimately, as an alleged stage girl/prostitute/lower class citizen/female, Theodora was in one of the worst social positions possible, and she grew up in the atmosphere of the Hippodrome, Byzantium's chariot racing track and the heart of Byzantine entertainment; a place "dedicated to violence, group

aggression, mob excitement and the shedding of blood (Bridge p3) She quickly learnt to stand up for herself; self defence was a necessity in a place like this. According to one source, Theodora possessed notable courage, wit and judgement, (Bridge p4) while another source claims she had a ruthless mind (Francesco, p13). These qualities and her loyalties - Theodora never forgot her background, family or friends - were the basis of her whole character throughout her life, most prominently whilst she was Empress. Obviously her attitude was influenced by her past experiences on society's other side, but this could only be a good thing as she could see which aspects needed changing for the better of the lower classes and in particular, woman kind.

Bibliography

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