

JUSTINIAN AND THEODORA



JUSTINIAN...At the height of the Byzantine Empire, a talented and hard working emperor by the name of Justinian came to the throne at the age of 44. Prior to his rise to the throne, Justinian spent countless hours studying everything from music, to architecture, to politics. These studies paid off, and would help Justinian become one of the greatest emperors to sit on the Byzantine throne.

Justinian was a wise ruler, who wanted his people to be successful, and comfortable. He instituted a number of reforms to help make the lives of his subjects better. One of these important reforms had to do with the rights of women.

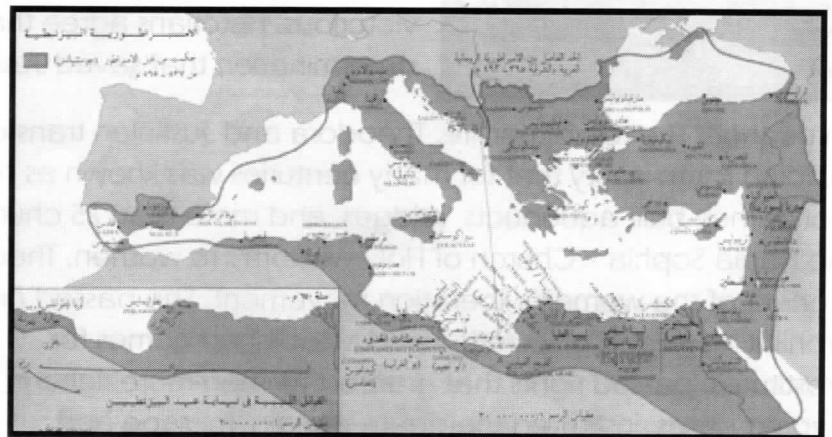
Justinian granted women the right to buy land, and own property. This insured that widows would have the ability to care for their families after the death of their husbands.

The Byzantines inherited their legal system from the Romans. The Byzantine emperor Justinian hired a commission to review all the laws that had accumulated over the centuries and to simplify them. This commission combined many similar laws, made complex laws more simple, while getting rid of many outdated laws. This new system of laws were all recorded in a single book known as the Justinian Code. The Justinian Code would become the basis for the laws of many western civilizations.

Under the leadership of the emperor Justinian, the arts flourished in the Byzantine Empire. He encouraged music, art, and drama. Justinian also was a masterful builder. He commissioned new roads, bridges, aqueducts, baths, and a variety of other public works. One of his greatest building projects was a church in the heart of Constantinople which he named Hagia Sophia. This massive cathedral still stands today, as one of the largest churches in the world.

One of Justinian's greatest goals was to reestablish the great Roman Empire. He believed that it was his mission from God to bring strength and power back to the empire that God had established, and used to spread Christianity throughout the world.

Using the strength of his armies, Justinian engaged in a series of wars that would last for decades, and that would spread the territory of Byzantium outward eventually taking in most of what was originally Roman territory.



However, the many years of war had a disastrous effect on the Byzantines. Their treasuries had been exhausted, meaning that they could not afford to defend their new territory. Within a few decades of Justinian's death, most of the new territories had been lost.

THEODORA...Theodora was the wife of Justinian I who was crowned Emperor of the Byzantine Empire in 527 AD. As his wife, she ruled by his side, as his partner, and her intelligence helped to advance the Empire. She was brought up as the daughter of a bear trainer who worked at the Hippodrome (a huge stadium-like circus), in Constantinople. She worked there as a mime, and later as a full time actress. At the time, acting was not a highly esteemed occupation especially for women, so the term 'actress' was considered synonymous with the term 'prostitute'. While on stage she was remembered for her daring entertainment skills, off stage however, she lived a normal youthful life and was most remembered for her wild parties.

On conversion to Christianity, she gave up her former lifestyle, and upon reaching Constantinople in 522, settled down as a wool spinner in a house near the palace of the Emperor. It was while in this humble lifestyle, at the age of 20, that she drew the attention of Justinian, then a government official.

Theodora was not only beautiful, but intelligent, witty and amusing, which is perhaps why she won Justinian's love so much that he appealed against an old Roman law that forbade officials from marrying actresses in order to marry her. Justinian and Theodora were married in 525. In 527, Justin, the emperor of Byzantium, and Justinian's father died. The couple assumed control of the Empire and were crowned Emperor and Empress on 4th April of that same year. They ruled unofficially as joint monarchs with Justinian allowing Theodora to share his throne and take active part in decision making.



Perhaps the most significant event during Empress Theodora's rule was the Nika revolt in which she proved herself a worthy and able leader. During this event, two rival political groups started a riot at the Hippodrome. They set many public buildings on fire and proclaimed a new emperor. Justinian and his officials, unable to control the crowd prepared to flee, but Theodora spoke up and gave a moving speech about the greater significance of the life of someone who died as a ruler, over that of someone who lived but was nothing. Her determined speech convinced Justinian and his officials and they attacked the Hippodrome, killing over 30,000 rebels and emerging victorious. Historians agree that it was Theodora's courage and determination that saved Justinian's empire.

Throughout the rest of her life, Theodora and Justinian transformed the city of Constantinople, building it into a city that for many centuries was known as one of the most wonderful cities in the world. They built aqueducts, bridges, and more than 25 churches, the most significant of these being the Hagia Sophia - 'Church of Holy Wisdom'. To women, Theodora may well be considered a noble pioneer of the women's liberation movement. She passed on laws prohibiting forced prostitution and established homes for prostitutes, passed rights that granted women more rights in divorce cases, instituted the death penalty for rape and established laws allowing women to own and inherit property.

Empress Theodora died on 28th June, 548. Even after her death, her spirit lived on, and in this way she was able to have influence on the Empire. The status of women in the Byzantine Empire was elevated high above that of the women in the Middle East and Europe.

