

PEOPLE IN WORLD HISTORY PROFILE 17

Theodora (c. A.D. 500–548)

There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.

—From “Vesalius in Zante,” *Artemis to Actaeon* (1909) by Edith Wharton

Emperor Justinian of the Byzantine Empire ruled one of the most impressive empires in history, and the Byzantine civilization flourished under his leadership. The legal reforms he commanded have influenced Western law ever since. Art and architecture thrived. Impressive public works projects were completed. Important scholarship was supported. But it wasn't only Justinian who deserves credit for these triumphs. His wife, Theodora, is considered by many historians to be fundamentally responsible for the success of his reign.

Theodora was probably born on the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea. Her father was an animal trainer who specialized in training bears for circus work. As a young girl, Theodora participated in circus performances. When she was still in her early teens, she became an actress. At that time circus performers and actors were held in generally low social regard. It seemed unlikely that this daughter of an animal trainer would someday become an empress.

But Theodora was by all accounts exceptionally intelligent, beautiful, and charming. She married Justinian in 523. The laws of the time forbade such a marriage between classes. Justinian, however, ignored the law. Theodora would become his principal ally and adviser for



Detail from mosaic of Theodora

the rest of her life.

As empress, Theodora championed the rights of women. At her behest, Justinian issued laws against husbands beating their wives. Other new laws allowed women to divorce their husbands and to own property. Widows were now allowed to keep their children, instead of having to surrender them to a male relative. All of these major reforms, and many smaller ones, were the direct result of Theodora's influence. She was intrinsically involved in nearly every aspect of Justinian's reign: the opinions of advisers and other officials were often accepted or rejected by Justinian based on Theodora's opinion.

Theodora's most famous contribution came during the Nika Rebellion in 532. Government officials had organized a revolt among the common people, who shared their hatred of the high taxes of Justinian's reign. The emperor panicked and was preparing to flee when Theodora stopped him and persuaded him to stay and fight. He won and didn't face a serious challenge to his reign thereafter.

Theodora died of cancer at about the age of 48. Some historians note a lack of direction and intensity in Justinian's rule after the death of his beloved wife.

Reviewing the Profile

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Describe Theodora's origins.
2. How did Theodora help the women of the Byzantine Empire?

Critical Thinking

3. **Making Inferences** Do you think most of Justinian's subjects knew, or approved, of Theodora's influence? Explain your answer.