

Theodora (497-548) was a Byzantine empress, wife of the emperor Justinian I and the most powerful woman in Byzantine history.



THEODORA

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WHO WERE THEY AND WHY WERE THEY FAMOUS AND HER EARLY LIFE?

Theodora, (born c. 497 CE—died June 28, 548, Constantinople) was the Byzantine empress, wife of the emperor Justinian I (reigned 527–565) and was probably the most powerful woman in Byzantine history. Her intelligence and political presence made her Justinian's most trusted adviser and enabled her to use the power and influence of her office to promote religious and social policies that favoured her interests. Little is known of Theodora's early life, but her father, Acacius, was a bear keeper at the Hippodrome (circus) in Constantinople and my sources says that she became an actress and prostitute while still young, therefore leading an unconventional life that included giving birth to at least one child out of wedlock. For a time, she made her living as a wool spinner. When Justinian met her, she had been converted to miaphysitism, a nonorthodox doctrine. Attracted by her beauty and intelligence, he made her his mistress and married her in 525. Her unfortunate background meant that prior to the marriage, special legislation had to be passed legalizing unions between actresses and men of senatorial rank or higher. When Justinian succeeded to the throne in 527, she was proclaimed augusta. Her superior intelligence and deft handling of political affairs caused many to think that it was she, rather than Justinian, who ruled Byzantium. Her name is mentioned in nearly all the laws passed during that period. She received foreign envoys and corresponded with foreign rulers, functions usually reserved for the emperor. Theodora is remembered as one of the first rulers to recognize the rights of women passing strict laws to prohibit the traffic in young girls and altering the divorce laws to give greater benefits to women. She spent much of her reign trying to mitigate the laws against the miaphysites. She was an incredibly powerful and successful women.



Theodora



Born from humble origins, Theodora reigned over the Byzantine Empire alongside her husband from 527 until her death in 548. They would rule together in a golden period of Byzantine history.

Highly intelligent and political astute, she would use her influence to promote religious and social policies and significantly expand the rights of women.

EXPLAIN SOMETHING THAT YOU FOUND SURPRISING DURING YOUR RESEARCH

1. **She was an ardent supporter of women's rights.** Theodora could in many ways be described as an early feminist. She is remembered as one of the first rulers to recognise the rights of women. As empress, she set up a house where prostitutes could live in peace. She worked for women's marriage and dowry rights, championed anti-rape legislation, and was supportive of young girls who had been sold into sexual slavery. However although she did a great deal to help women and girls in need, Theodora was known to attack women of higher standing who threatened her position, including the empress Euphemia.
2. **Her death dealt a severe blow to Byzantine politics.** Theodora died in 548 at the age of 48, possibly of cancer of gangrene. Her death had a visible impact on Justinian, who never remarried. After a period of deep mourning, Justinian would rule for another 17 years. Theodora's importance in Byzantine political life can be demonstrated by the fact that little significant legislation dates from the period between her death and that of her husband's in 548.

Theodora's daughter (from before her marriage to Justinian) would go on to have three sons, all of who became prominent figures in Byzantine politics.

- **Justinian changed the law to marry her.**

Theodora's background meant she was not legally allowed to marry Justinian. Roman law from Constantine's time prevented anyone of senatorial rank from marrying actresses. In order to legalise their marriage, Justinian had a law changed to raise her status and created another to allow her to marry. Their marriage was against the express wishes of Justinian's aunt, the empress Euphemia, who was herself a former slave and prostitute. The couple were said to have matched each other in intelligence, ambition and energy. Together, they heralded a new era for the Byzantine Empire and its people.

- **She converted to an early form of Christianity**

After her relationship with Hecebolus broke down, Theodora joined an ascetic community in the desert near Alexandria, where she converted to a branch of early Christianity, Monophysitism.

- **She was overlooked and misunderstood by historians**

Despite playing a key role in Byzantine history, Theodora was largely overlooked by historians and scholars. Most of what we know about her comes from Procopius' 'Secret History', which was written after her death and regarded by many as exaggerated gossip.

She is described as being vulgar, jealous, filled with insatiable lust as well as possessing cold-blooded self-interest, shrewishness and mean-spiritedness. She is described as being vulgar, jealous, filled with insatiable lust as well as possessing cold-blooded self-interest, shrewishness and mean-spiritedness.

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FUN FACTS

- Born a slave
- Became the most popular actress because of her willingness to strip
- Ran off with her lover then she managed to get kick out
- Married Justinian and became the most power woman in the byzantine empire
- Had Breast cancer and her liver shut down with to many cells

Women faced minor discrimination due to their diversity (gender.)

Theodora did face discrimination due to her gender (but many details of the discrimination against women are a matter of debate.) as we know because family was so significant and because of this, women and mothers were seen as important members of the family unit. Although moral attitudes about women dictated that they should be secluded in segregated spaces and avoid being outspoken, but this was not always the case. Alas, Theodora defied the social injustices and used her intelligence and willpower to use her voice in-order to promote women's rights and mould the political aspect of society. Despite this, women did have their own spaces, called gynaikonitis, where they engaged in activities like spinning and weaving, but other locations were not sharply segregated between men and women. Despite some restrictions, many women had a role in public life and engaged in commercial activities. Women also had the right to inherit and often had independent wealth, which was frequently in the form of a dowry.

Women were seen by the church as spiritually equal to their male partners, and they played roles in convents. However, women could not become priests in the church or have similar high roles.

Among royalty, the empresses Theodora was notable for her power and influence. Theodora in particular is known for having influenced a series of reforms that were beneficial to women. She instituted policies banning prostitution, creating convents, and instituting harsh punishments for rape and other forms of violence against women. The reforms also expanded divorce, child guardianship, and property ownership rights for women. Although Byzantine society was a society of inequality both between the social strata and the rights of the two sexes, woman in Byzantine times plays an important role. She directs business, participates in the church as a nun or church clerk, and plays an active role in political affairs. Byzantine education has ensured elementary education for many girls. The Byzantine woman married early and was considered the head of the family and the protector of her children especially if she was a widow and her children were still very young. Theodora most probably didn't face the same discrimination as a working-class women due to her status and her being married to Justin I. (A rich and powerful man.)



Do you think these historical figures are good role models?



Theodora was strong willed, opinionated, and believed that women should have rights. This view of women in itself was controversial in what was primarily a patriarchal society

Theodora is in-fact a good role-model for girls and women who face unfair treatment due to their gender. Theodora not only represents a strong inspiring ruler but also a woman who fought the norms. As Theodora speaks not only for girls and women in choruses but also for the whole community. Theodora creates an excellent example by showing us as women that we too can be successful in a role that was once dominated by males! When Theodora proves that minorities achieve great things, sometimes far greater than those who are given advantages by the system (who helps those deemed as normal) she is not only giving women equal chances but also educating our population on how women are and can be just as smart, successful and powerful as any other. Therefore, this further proves that Theodora is a great role model for those who are afraid to speak out against injustice and challenge the sexist system that disempowers them to live an equal life filled with the same opportunities as men. Theodora's hard work, dedication, and sacrifices to get ahead in her career paid off in the wonderful life she had. Theodora is an inspiring model of success for women and girls around the world today.



To what extent was their diversity accepted into the ancient world?

I have come across contradicting websites therefore altering my opinions on the acceptance of gender. Although women did have some justice and freedom within their restrictive lives. Alas women were thought to be inferior, irrational, highly emotional, and unable to control their impulses. Byzantine women did not seem to have an identity of their own; they were always thought to be a reflection of a male. Although as said in my other slides above women did in-fact feel freedoms but Byzantine authors believed that the normal behaviour for women was to remain secluded in their houses, but when presented with individual women, these women were almost always those who did not confine themselves to women's quarters. Although, women did face freedoms despite contradicting websites and information..

“Worldwide, nearly 1 in 4 girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are neither employed nor in education or training – compared to 1 in 10 boys.”

Do you think their diversity would be more or less accepted today?

Theodora and her gender would still face unfair treatment due to females still facing issues in the world of gender such as unequal pay, and In the UK women earn 2% less than men and 13.7% in their 40s, Uneven access to education. Around the world, women still have less access to education than men, Lack of employment equality, Job segregation, Lack of legal protections, Lack of bodily autonomy, poor medical care, Lack of religious freedom, Lack of political representation. Although, despite the unfair treatment that is still prominent in today's era, Theodora would most definitely feel more accepted and empowered in society in this current century because we as a society have set up organizations, marches and are striving for woman's rights and have seen results! such as women gaining the right to vote and use their voices in the political world. But of course the treatment of Theodora would vary depending on where she would live due to some countries giving women no choice, power or freedom at all! Sadly, women will always remain a hated minority in some people's eyes. In conclusion, Theodora would face fairer treatment and her diversity would be more accepted!





[HTTPS://WOMENINANTIQUITY.WORDPRESS.COM/2018/11/27/T
HEODORA-EMPRESS-OF-THE-BYZANTINES/](https://womeninantiquity.wordpress.com/2018/11/27/theodora-empress-of-the-byzantines/)

[HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=GxGwIAFXANE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxGwIAFXANE)

**THANK YOU
FOR
WATCHING!**

