

People in World History Activity 9

Profile 1

Theodora (c. 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

The Byzantine civilization flourished under Emperor Justinian. His legal reforms have influenced Western law ever since. Scholarship, art, and architecture thrived. Impressive public works projects were completed. But Justinian may not deserve sole 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. Her father specialized in training bears for circus work. As a young girl, Theodora participated in circus performances, and in her early teens, she became an actress. At that time performers were held in generally low regard. It seemed unlikely that this daughter of an animal trainer would become an empress.

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

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 could keep their children, instead of having to surrender them to a male relative. All of these major reforms were the result of Theodora's influence. She was involved in nearly every aspect of Justinian's reign: the opinions of advisers were often accepted or rejected by Justinian based on Theodora's opinion.

Theodora's most famous contribution came in 532, when government officials organized a revolt among the common people. Justinian panicked and was preparing to flee but Theodora persuaded him to stay and fight. He won and did not 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.



Detail from
mosaic of Theodora

REVIEWING THE PROFILE

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