

ABSTRACT

This particular historical-intertextual study that delves into the life and work of the empress Theodora, wife of Justinian I, have as its fundamental source the testimony of the historian Procopius of Caesarea, contemporary of this “Augusta”. Procopius’ main information is contained in the *Anekdotia* or *Secret History*, a work generally acknowledged by historians and scholars as one of slander. Nevertheless, it is believed to be the most important source of information of Theodora’s controversial and eventful life.

The purpose of this study is to examine *The Treatment of Theodora, empress of Byzantium*. We have selected the works of five modern writers, namely *Theodora* by the French historian-byzantinist C. Diehl, *Theodora Augusta* by novelist K. Theocharous, *Theodora* by the Italian historian P. Cezaretti, *Theodora* by French novelist Guy Rachet and *Flaming Purple* by the historical writer G. Roussos. Our research has examined whether these above-mentioned biographers of Theodora have brought to light new and important explanations. These, compared to older or more recent historical documentation, have made it possible to collect as much ‘data’ as possible on Theodora and, by comparing this ‘data’, convey the best appreciation possible about the ‘disputed’ and ‘multifarious’ personality of this empress.

In **Chapter I of Part I**, while Procopius does not at all refer to Theodora’s roots of descent nor to her birthplace (c. 499-500 A.D.), nevertheless, the above-mentioned modern writers speculate that the most probable place of her father’s origins was the coastal city of Paphos, in Cyprus whereas Theodora’s birthplace was Antioch of Syria. Furthermore, in this same chapter, according to Procopius, Theodora was the second of the three daughters of Acacius, the bear-keeper for the Green faction in the Hippodrome at Constantinople and, according to G. Rachet, of Veneria, a former circus dancer and courtesan. On this point, C. Diehl, K. Theocharous and P. Cezaretti are all in agreement with the exception of G. Rachet and G. Roussos who have not dealt at all with the roots of descent or with the birth of the subsequent empress. In conclusion, Procopius insinuates that Theodora’s parents were of “loose” unscrupulous morals, so that Theodora was raised in an environment far from ideal

and which was rather precarious. The aforementioned modern writers also verify this fact.

In **Chapter II, Part I**, although Procopius, in a very laconic manner, scorns the disgraceful situation in which Theodora's parents, and especially her mother, found themselves in, contrastingly C. Diehl, as well as the rest of the modern writers with the exception of G. Roussos, justify the situation. They also give detailed descriptions of the humiliating concessions, made by Theodora's mother Veneria, not only as regards the finding of work for her husband but also as regards the increasing of their meagre income. To make matters worse, as Procopius and the modern historians and novelists of this study claim, at an unfortunate moment, the father of the three girls, Comito, Theodora and Anastasia, is fatally wounded by a bear and dies thereby abandoning his daughters and spouse, now destitute and helpless, to a most cruel fate.

In **Chapter III of Part I**, all the writers referred to, including Procopius but excluding G. Roussos and without exceptional or objectionable differences, describe a scene of beseeching on the part of the three girls along with their mother at the 'Kynigesio', an arena of sport where wild animals and humans were thrown into battle. There, in front of the emperor and the people, the four supplicants gave a moving performance thereby immediately gaining the sympathy of 'Caesar' as well as that of the Hippodrome's Blues faction who, having lost in death their own bear-keeper, willingly appointed the girls' stepfather to the vacant post, who, according to G. Rachtel, was named Tornicius.

In **Chapter IV of Part I**, Procopius mentions that when Theodora and her sisters 'came of age', their mother put them on the stage of theatre with the resulting consequences, and in particular, Theodora's giving birth to a daughter, and possibly a son, out of wedlock due to her promiscuous sexual behaviour and long before her marriage to Justinian. The modern writers referred to in this study, with the exception of G. Roussos, each one by way of his own personal style of writing and individual approach; agree with the Caesarean historian on, at least, the fundamental issues.

In due time, after achieving success as a most popular and financially independent courtesan, Theodora became the mistress of a Syrian Hecebolus who was a native of Tyre and, trusting in various prophecies of her attaining a 'bright' future,

accompanied him when he went to Pentapolis in the Byzantine province of Kyrini, the northern part of modern-day Libya.

In **Chapter V of Part I**, Procopius makes brief mention of Theodora's journey to Pentapolis with her lover Hecebolus at the time of his imperial appointment as prefect of the Byzantine province of Kyrini as well as the fact that, at some point in time, she failed to please him and, as a result, was 'dismissed'. On this specific point, C. Diehl, K. Theoharous, P. Cezaretti and G. Rachet are in general agreement with Procopius. Furthermore, and having almost identical points of view, they offer detailed descriptions regarding the sojourn and adventures of Theodora in Alexandria of Egypt.

Thus, the daughter of Acacius, abandoned and maltreated by Hecebolus, as stated by Procopius, C. Diehl, K. Theoharous, P. Cezaretti and G. Rachet, made her way to Alexandria. It is surmised that there she met the patriarch, Timothy III, a Monophysite prelate whose position was powerful enough that he was able to give refuge to Monophysite churchmen such as Severus, the patriarch of Antioch, during a time, indeed, when the persecution initiated by Justin I drove them from their sees. Monophysite legend has it that Theodora considered 'Bishop Timothy' her spiritual father, and this 'Timothy' may well have been Timothy III who became patriarch in 517 A.D., one year before the accession of Justin I. It is of interest to note that Theodora's religious conversion which took place in Alexandria was sincere and long-lasting. Therefore, the repentant courtesan remained a devout Monophysite until her death.

In **Chapter VI of Part I**, Procopius refers to Theodora's acquaintance with Justinian. This historian, a contemporary of Theodora, tells the story of the penitent courtesan who, at a certain point in time, leaves Alexandria and, after a brief stay in Antioch, travels to Constantinople where she meets the heir apparent, Justinian. Thus, Theodora and Justinian met, became emotionally attached to each other and eventually were joined with the bonds of matrimony. With this version of Procopius, C. Diehl, K. Theoharous, and P. Cezaretti are all in agreement, especially regarding the marriage. However, G. Rachet is the exception. In his scandalous, divergent novel on Theodora, he places her acquaintance with Justinian at the time of her being a courtesan.

For that particular purpose, it is mentioned that new legislation would be necessary since the old laws forbade a consul to marry an actress. Justin, Justinian's uncle, seems to have been fond of Theodora and was willing to oblige but the heir apparent encountered an unexpected obstacle in his aunt, the empress Euphemia. She was not at all willing to acquiesce to the marriage of her nephew with an actress. However, once the elderly empress died (ca. 523 A.D.), Justin promulgated the necessary legislation which, as it appears in the Justinianic Code, freed truly penitent actresses from all blemishes to their reputation and gave them the same rights as those of their reputable female compatriots. Soon thereafter, the patriarch Epiphanius joined Justinian and Theodora with the bonds of matrimony in the cathedral church of the Holy Wisdom.

In **Part II** of this comparative study on Theodora and **Chapter I**, Procopius gives quite a detailed description of the life of the daughter of Acacius as empress at the 'Holy Palace'. On this particular point, C. Diehl, K. Theoharous, P. Cezaretti and G. Roussos, with the exception of G. Rachet, agree with him, besides certain minor differences, while, at the same time, all make claim that this imperial couple, especially Theodora, behaved in a cruel and arrogant manner to their staff officers and that the 'Augusta' had the rule of the country essentially in her hands.

In **Chapter II of Part II**, Procopius makes an appraisal of both the empress' virtues and also of her 'feminism', that is the interest, support and solidarity which Theodora, during the whole of her imperial reign, manifested toward her female subjects. In fact, Procopius himself gives several outstanding examples of the venerable and impeccable stance taken by the 'Augusta' at the side of her husband as well as several instances where she made manifest her support for her underprivileged female compatriots. It is worthy of note that, generally, the same view is also taken by the modern writers referred to in this study, except for G. Rachet who ends his novel with the imperial coronation of Theodora and Justinian.

In **Chapter III, Part II**, reference is made to how Procopius, in his *Secret History*, quite succinctly and without much criticism, mentions the 'Nika' revolt (early in 532 A.D.). In contrast, the modern writers referred to in this study, with the exception of G. Rachet, emphasize with outstanding descriptions and appraisals, both the valuable presence of Theodora on Justinian's side during the revolt as well as her will of steel,

her unyielding determination and her devotion to the ruling royal authority, something which she also eventually imparted to the emperor.

In **Chapter IV of Part II**, deals with the paradoxical relationship of hate, competitiveness and of even the rare cooperation between Theodora and Justinian's finance minister, John the Cappadocian. In the relevant text, Procopius along with the other modern writers referred to in this study, with the exception of G. Rachtel; outline in detail, so to speak, both the disloyal character as well as the scheming acts of this plotting prefect of the Praetorium. Moreover, the historians and novelists themselves describe fully the trap set by Theodora and her friend Antonina in order to destroy the career of this deceitful and ambitious economist resulting in his decisive 'elimination' from the palace and from the foreground of political authority in general. In conclusion, therefore, the sly and treacherously inclined Cappadocian, on the promise of potentially usurping the Byzantine throne, conspired, was arrested and, thereby, lost his privileged position in c. 541 A.D.

In **Chapter V of Part II**, both the fundamental source of information, that is Procopius, as well as the modern writers referred to in this study, make mention of Theodora's relationship with the long-time, undefeated military general Belisarius who, as generally acknowledged, was a courageous, honest and capable military man. During most of his lifetime, he fought for and conducted to both the expansion of the empire as well as to the 'glorious' sovereign rule of Theodora and Justinian. Belisarius, old-time acquaintance of the empress, was married to the much older Antonina, former courtesan and friend of the 'Augusta' and known for her deceit and machinations, such as her 'unprecedented' erotic escapades that would compromise her husband's reputation and, moreover, make him a 'laughingstock' to friends, soldiers and the people. Furthermore, in this same text, the general's devotion to the throne is overly emphasized but in contradistinction to Theodora and Justinian's ingratitude toward their loyal, humble and valuable collaborator.

In **Chapter I of the Third and Final Part** of this study, reference is made to Theodora's *devoutness and piety* that is her love, faith and awe for the Lord. In this specific text, notwithstanding the characteristically scornful silence of Procopius, we are informed by the other modern writers that Theodora, albeit devout and pious as a formality, would adhere diligently to her religious and devotional duties whilst,

throughout the whole duration of her monarchy, she would present herself as friend and beneficent of the underprivileged. In fact, there is a record, in the same chapter, of quite a large number of cases regarding the empress' devotion to God as well as her compassionate and beneficial activity toward orphaned children, the elderly, the infirm, the homeless and, in general, her helpless subjects. Thus, it is considered of dire necessity to quote the inscription on the icon screen of the church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople, which proclaims: "*Theodora crowned by God, the devout and pious, whose tireless efforts and constant care are toward the support of the destitute citizens of her people*".

Chapter II, Part III deals with Theodora's initiation into theology, her religious conversion as well as the policies she herself implemented on the realities and activities of the Churches. In this particular text, through a simple reference to the time of her sojourn in Alexandria, the reader is informed that Theodora, 'spiritual daughter' of Timothy, Patriarch of Alexandria, was converted to the belief that Christ has only one nature and, for that reason, later, as empress, brought under her protection certain Monophysite church leaders such as Severus, the patriarch of Antioch and Theodosius, the patriarch of Alexandria. When the latter was deposed, Theodora offered him her hospitality at the Hormisdas Palace on the Propontis, or Sea of Marmaras, across from Constantinople, and allowed him to ordain many Monophysite bishops who, in turn, were sent to the East. Among them was Jacob Baradaeus who visited the eastern provinces of the empire and preached about God's works but who also indoctrinated and converted many Orthodox Christians to the Monophysite creed. Therefore, he is justly considered to be the founder of the so-called Jacobite (Monophysite) Church.

At this point in the text, one could argue that Theodora fostered heresy and thus, in reality, undermined the unity of Christendom. But it would be equally fair to say that it was the non-negotiable position taken by Rome that, in substance, undermined unity and that Theodora championed the Monophysite creed as well as the peaceful co-existence of the two creeds while, at the same time, delaying the alienation of the Eastern Church. Indeed, she might have postponed it indefinitely had it not been for certain sudden, external events not related to the Church, which she could not control nor foresee.

In **Chapter III of Part III**, the texts belonging to the five modern writers used in our study, juxtaposed to that of Procopius' quite laconic statement, initially refer to the 'accursed' disease which affected Theodora, then to the breakdown of her bodily organs and finally to her death and burial at the Church of the Holy Apostles (c. 548 A.D.). Furthermore, in this same chapter are included the moments of grief, both those of Justinian as well as those of his subjects, and the 'magnificent' ritual of her burial. Nevertheless, to be able to stress the significance of Theodora's moderate, diplomatic and political ability in Church affairs, we cite the information that, before she died, Theodora made a last contribution, in a unifying and admonitory way, to the growing schism in Christendom resulting, at least, in its temporary recession and displacement for a period of time. On her deathbed, Theodora made Justinian promise that he would protect her small, 'precious' community of Monophysite refugees there, and he kept his promise until the end of his life.

In **Chapter IV of Part III**, as far as the legend of Theodora is concerned and from all the writers referred to in this particular study, with the exception of Procopius, the following conclusion can be drawn: Although various traditions hold that Theodora had an elevated and respected descent, nevertheless, the version chosen as the most probable one of origin is that of the brazen courtesan and 'mimic' who, however, at some point in time, met and married the heir apparent, Justinian and had, from that point forward, repented and dedicated herself to a venerable and virtuous life.