Understanding Theodora: The Role of the Empress in Sixth Century Imperial Religious Policy

Susan E. Dils

Follow this and additional works at: https://louis.uah.edu/honors-capstones

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Capstone Projects and Theses by an authorized administrator of LOUIS.
Understanding Theodora: The Role of the Empress
in Sixth Century Imperial Religious Policy

Susan E. Dils
Senior Honors Project
The University of Alabama in Huntsville
1993
Understanding Theodora: The Role of the Empress in Sixth Century Imperial Religious Policy

Anyone who has studied the Late Roman Empire or Byzantine history knows of Procopius' description of the illustrious Empress Theodora. In his *Secret History*, Procopius painted a picture of a lascivious, imperious and vindictive woman who stopped at nothing to secure the ends of her desires. She was the epitome of feminine evil and influence. Procopius' tales are so shocking that for a long time many scholars refused to believe that an educated official of the empire could have written such a work.¹ Today historians largely agree that Procopius did write it, and much scholarly research has been conducted in order to understand the reasons for Procopius' bitter invective.²

Procopius employed standard rhetorical techniques to wage his war against the emperor Justinian and the empress Theodora, who ruled the Roman Empire from A.D. 527 to 565. Procopius included exaggerations, generalizations, repetition and a generous amount of superlatives to describe the personal history, appearance and deeds of the imperial couple.³ He compared them to another couple he knew best: the famous general Belisarius, for whom Procopius served as secretary, and his wife Antonina. Procopius hated Antonina and had lost respect for Belisarius sometime during the Gothic wars.⁴ He used these descriptive techniques to compose a single argument: the imperial couple and their court embodied every kind of evil and directed all their energies for the purpose of destroying the greatness of the Roman empire.⁵
Procopius, a member of the conservative, educated elite in Byzantium, disagreed entirely with the imperial administration and innovation under Justinian and Theodora. He disapproved of Theodora's participation in imperial affairs and railed against Justinian's administrative reforms which affected the members of Procopius' class. Procopius' *History* was not meant to be an historically accurate account of the royal couple. It was a personal attack on the imperial court, and it is full of exaggeration and misrepresentation.

The image of Theodora in the *Secret History* is a distorted one; nevertheless, it is the only literature of the time which contains a complete picture of the empress. Because of Procopius' outlandish accounts of the empress, it is difficult to determine from his work Theodora's actual role in the administration of the empire. To what extent did she exercise power, and what was the nature of her authority? Did she, as Procopius suggests, wield power to pursue her own interests, or were her actions part of an overall imperial policy?

The study of Theodora's role in the empire is also hampered by the work of historians like William Gordon Holmes, Percy Ure, and Charles Diehl, who perpetuate Procopius' image of the empress by focusing on her alleged life as a prostitute, her personal vendetta against John of Cappadocia, a powerful official in the empire, and her friendship with Antonina, whom Procopius also accused of leading a life of prostitution. Diehl describes the current level of scholarship on Theodora in his introduction to *Theodora, Empress of Byzantium*: "Thanks to this lurid reputation [from Procopius], it is Theodora alone, among the many
princesses who graced the throne of Byzantium, who remains well known and almost popular today.\(^7\)

One historian has argued that the image of Theodora created by historians like Diehl, Holmes and Ure is a romantic image that succeeds only in trivializing the empress' role in the government of the empire.\(^8\) Averil Cameron argues that by concentrating on Theodora's "lurid reputation," historians have reduced Theodora to the role of an exceptional character worthy only of attention by playwrights and novelists, rather than a woman worthy of serious academic inquiry.\(^9\)

It is possible to consider the Secret History and Theodora from another perspective. Procopius despised Theodora for the power and authority she possessed. Procopius included descriptions of her personal habits, friendships and methods of intrigue in order to reduce her public actions to the level of petty, selfish conduct based on private motivations. She, like all Procopius' enemies, was incapable of acting within the interest of the empire. As a woman, he argued, Theodora had no business in the public affairs of the empire. His descriptions of Theodora were meant to underscore that fact.

Beneath its bitter attacks, the Secret History contains many references to particular aspects of the empress' imperial power. Theodora commanded military generals, conducted foreign and provincial affairs and participated in forming imperial policy and legislation. Other sources point to a significant area of imperial policy in which Theodora was most active: religious policy. "One God, one Empire, one religion" were the cornerstones of Byzantine political philosophy in late
During the fifth and sixth centuries, however, the empire shook with controversy over the doctrinal dispute concerning the nature of Christ. Theodora supported the monophysites, who maintained that the humanity of Christ was inextricably united to His divinity, thus forming one nature. Justinian supported the members of the orthodox church, headed by the pope in Rome. The orthodox leaders held that Christ's humanity and divinity coexisted within His body as two separate but united natures.

W. H. C. Frend has concluded that Theodora's support for the monophysites interfered with Justinian's plans for religious reunification of the empire. It is possible, however, to understand Theodora's support for the dissenting faction as an important aspect of a unified imperial plan. Theodora acted as a representative of a religious sect that claimed a substantial membership within the eastern half of the empire. Without the support of the eastern populations, the hope for a united empire was lost. Theodora worked with Justinian to maintain the loyalties of the provinces in the east while he concentrated on returning the west to imperial control.

The measures Theodora took to strengthen the monophysite position within the church and to bring opposing religious leaders to a compromise mark her as an exceptional human being. But her freedom and ability to take such actions were also a mark of over a century of development in the female half of the imperial office. Theodora combined personal strength and initiative with an expanded imperial authority to play a decisive part in the administration of the empire. This paper will
examine the rise of the empress' office in late antiquity, references to Theodora's power in Procopius' works and her role in the monophysite controversy. It will show that Theodora exercised a very real and legitimate power as empress of the Roman empire. She utilized her position to achieve the goals of a cohesive plan to reunite the empire under one church. Thus she acted as much in the interests of the state as Justinian.

Procopius' stories about the empress were intended to undermine her position by portraying her as a woman solely motivated by an evil and selfish nature. It is difficult, therefore, to determine Theodora's actual background from them. Each account can be placed within a larger context in order to draw a general picture of Theodora. Procopius wrote that Theodora was the daughter of Acacius, a bearkeeper for one of the sporting factions in Constantinople.12 Another source traced the empress' history to Syria and claimed she was the daughter of a monophysite priest.13 Whatever her origins, she apparently found her way to Constantinople and entered the world of the theater. Plays were performed alongside chariot races in the Hippodrome, and the Green and Blue sporting factions chose favorite actors as well as favorite charioteers.14

In the eyes of the church and the imperial administration, employees of the theater ranked lowest in the social hierarchy.15 Despite their official social standing, actors often traveled within the upper circles of Byzantine society. Procopius' accusations of Theodora's prostitution may reflect the attitude of a conservative member of the elite who was shocked by the social company his fellow elites kept.16 Theodora traveled
within these circles and became the concubine of a high Syrian official, Hecebolus. She accompanied him to Africa when he became governor of the cities of Pentapolis.\textsuperscript{17}

While Theodora was in Africa, she may have met the spiritual leader of the monophysites, Severus of Antioch, and converted to the monophysite faith.\textsuperscript{18} When Theodora became estranged from Hecebolus she returned to Constantinople and met Justinian. Justinian raised her to the rank of a patrician and eventually married Theodora. In 527, they both ascended to the imperial office.\textsuperscript{19}

According to the \textit{Secret History}, Theodora exercised imperial power with Justinian.\textsuperscript{20} Procopius' assertion is supported by Zonaras, who wrote that "[i]n the time of Justinian there was not a monarchy, but a dual reign."\textsuperscript{21} Further support can be found in Justinian's \textit{Novels}.\textsuperscript{22} The empress is mentioned in at least four of them. Justinian honored her for her help in devising reforms; she possessed the power and authority to govern the financial affairs of the provinces; and she received ambassadors from other countries and collected tribute from subject kingdoms. Procopius hated that she had so much power, and railed that Theodora acted "as if she were mistress of the Roman Empire."\textsuperscript{23}

Theodora helped to create the office of the Praetor of the People,\textsuperscript{24} Justinian's revival of the ancient Roman office of Praetor of the Watch. The office established a police and fire system in Constantinople. This local police force may have been Theodora's secret spy system that Procopius complained of in his \textit{History}.\textsuperscript{25} The office was especially charged with finding and punishing men who bought young girls (often younger than the age
of ten) from poor families for the purpose of prostitution in the
capital. Procopius noted that ending prostitution was a special
concern for Theodora. She provided considerable sums of money to
finance programs against agents of prostitution, and she
sponsored the construction of an institution to house and educate
former prostitutes. 26

The protection of women and their property was a major focus
in Justinianic legislation. Justinian and Theodora restored
Roman laws which had not been applied to the eastern empire. 27
Women had the right to divorce their husbands; they could become
guardians to children who owed them money; and their rights to
their dowry and personal property were protected. "Procurers" of
prostitutes suffered no less than the death penalty. Laws freed
prostitutes' from honoring contracts (presumably to give them the
right to withdraw from the contracts they unwittingly made with
their "procurers"). 28 Procopius thought such legislation gave
women too much authority, and he blamed Theodora for the
legislation, arguing that her interference and license made
"almost all women...morally depraved." 29

Procopius' aversion to the empress' position reflects a
conservative reaction to eastern developments in the female
imperial office. From the late fourth century to the time of
Theodora, Byzantine empresses exercised an increasing influence
and authority within the imperial administration. Two factors
contributed to this development. First, the vast palace complex
in Constantinople gradually encompassed the offices of the
imperial bureaucracy. Emperors became more reclusive, and rarely
vented from behind the palace walls. 30 The palace was the
empress' domain, as she commanded the army of servants and officials who made up the palace staff. Petitioners knew that they could gain the emperor's ear if they first won the favor of his consort. By Theodora's reign, the empress held court herself, either with the emperor or in his absence.

The second factor helped to define the nature of the empress' authority, which was connected to the public's perception of the empress as a religious figure. Kenneth Holum has traced the growth of female imperial power in the fourth and fifth centuries, A.D. He concludes that a renewed emphasis on the sacral nature of the empress' position created a basis from which empresses could expand their authority "perilously near to the fullness of sovereignty," or male imperial authority based on military victory. An excellent example of this development is the Trier Ivory (see Appendix 1), which is now thought to have illustrated the transfer of the relics of St. Stephen to Constantinople in 420. The ivory depicts a holy procession ending its journey in front of the Sacred Palace. The scene simultaneously depicts a religious celebration and a triumphal procession, for the relics of St. Stephen were associated with the Roman victory over the Persians in 421. People line the streets and buildings as the carriage carrying members of the clergy pass through. A few ecclesiastical dignitaries hand a certificate, not to the emperor Theodosius II, but to his sister, the empress Pulcheria. Pulcheria stands with one hand outstretched; in the other hand she holds the cross of victory.
The focus on Pulcheria in the ivory exhibited her authority based on divine favor and military victory. These two factors created the same foundation for the emperor's legitimacy and authority. Military victory was essential in defining the nature of imperial authority, and Pulcheria, not Theodosius II, received the recognition for the victory. The ivory offers clear evidence that by the early fifth century, eastern empresses were beginning to possess very real power in their own right.

Theodora was also publicly associated with victory. After the Nika riots in January 532 were successfully put down by imperial troops, Theodora (without Justinian) conducted a triumphal procession from Constantinople to the province of Bithynia. The procession included stops at every city along the way, where Theodora bestowed gifts and endowments on churches, hospitals, and other public institutions of charity. Theodora also attended the circus games and celebrated triumphs in the Hippodrome with Justinian. She was, therefore, associated as much as Justinian with the victories of the imperial troops.

One development may have helped establish the sacral image of the empress as a source for victory: the rise of the cult of the Virgin. The cult of the Virgin was observed by all levels of Byzantine society. During the course of the fourth through seventh centuries, Mary became the great protectress of Constantinople and the population increasingly sought her aid in times of disaster. They celebrated her victories whenever disasters were averted. In the fifth century, the empress Pulcheria was able to make the connection between divine favor
and military success because she had dedicated her life to the
service of the Virgin Mary. According to one contemporary
source, it was her chaste holiness that brought St. Stephen to
Constantinople. Thus the empress, not the emperor, thwarted
the Persian invaders and protected the inhabitants of the empire.

Theodora was also seen as a great benefactress. Her name
appeared on plaques throughout the empire, and her image
along with Justinian's found its way onto the altar cloth in the
Sancta Sophia. Procopius was apparently surprised by the
enthusiasm people showed for the Theodora, and he complained
about their willingness to seek the empress' counsel or aid.
The enthusiasm may have been a result of the empress' role as a
religious figure, stemming from the cult of Mary.

In the teachings of the Eastern Fathers, Mary was associated
with the body of the Church. She was both mother and bride
to Christ. The emperor was Christ's representative on earth, the
Vicar of God. If the emperor was Christ's representative on
earth, then it is not difficult to conclude that the empress, his
bride, would have represented the body of the church, or the
people of the Roman empire. Although the writer could find no
direct evidence in time for this study, it is possible that a
connection between Mary and the empress existed in the minds of
the populace, and may have been a factor in establishing female
imperial authority.

The public's perception of the empress as a holy figure, if
not a typos of the Virgin Mary, is evident in the mosaic of
Theodora in San Vitale, Ravenna, an imperial church dedicated in
548 (see Appendix 2). One art historian describes the church and
its mosaics as a statement of Justinian's "proud anticipation of victory" against the Goths in Italy. Portraits of Justinian and Theodora flank the walls of the sanctuary proper. In the mosaic, the couple participates in an especially elaborate offertory procession of the Byzantine liturgical rite. Each person carries an instrument for the celebration of the eucharist: Justinian holds the paten and Theodora carries the sacred chalice. The rulers are dressed in costumes of victory and are accompanied by their proper retinues.

While Justinian is depicted in a fairly naturalistic fashion, Theodora's portrait is more stylistic and enigmatic. Justinian stands in the midst of his procession. The emperor is short, his face is round and pudgy, and his complexion is ruddy and unshaven. In contrast, Theodora stands apart from her retinue; her face is very pale, and she stands taller than her companions.

One scholar has interpreted a Byzantine misogynist view of the empress in this mosaic. He regards Theodora's height and position as evidence that the artists' disapproved of her position and did not know how to portray her according to the standard conceptions of male and female spheres. Theodora's height, he concludes, marked her as not quite human. The scholar argues that the empress' separation from the others in the mosaic betrays a perception that she was neither male nor female, and stood outside the accepted realms of male and female society.

Theodora's position was unique in Byzantine society. Whether her subjects viewed her with a misogynist attitude is debatable, however. Other scholars believe the mosaic in San
Vitale honored the empress. Theodora died shortly after the church was dedicated in 548. It is generally agreed that she suffered from a long illness, possibly cancer, and her imminent death was well known in Byzantium. The image of Theodora recalls portraits of Mary and other saints in early Christian funerary painting. A large halo envelopes Theodora's jeweled head, and her body is stretched tall. She stands apart from her retinue because she is ready to move from the temporal world into the eternal world of everlasting life.

It is possible that Theodora was portrayed as a saint to commemorate her efforts to bring about a reunion of the church under one holy doctrine. In June 547, one year before San Vitale was dedicated and Theodora died, the empress had succeeded in reuniting the Roman bishop with the patriarch of Constantinople. Their separation had threatened to undo all of Justinian and Theodora's efforts to reunite the empire under one doctrine and one church. The empress helped to bring the feuding churches together to reach a compromise at the Second Council of Chalcedon in 553.

The roots of the conflict date back to the fourth century. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381, church leaders closed the chapter on one dispute only to open another. In response to the Arian heresy, officials at the two councils agreed on the doctrine that Christ the Son is of the same substance of God the Father. He was born of the same substance and possessed the same divine nature within his human body. This doctrine led fifth century theologians to a new
question: what was the relationship between the divine and human natures in the body of Christ?

Two doctrines emerged. The church at Antioch taught that Christ possessed two separate natures, which coexisted in one body. The church at Alexandria held that the divine and human natures formed one nature through a mystical union within the body of Christ. The former emphasized the humanity of Christ, while Alexandria emphasized Christ's divine nature.53

The dispute turned into a power struggle between the patriarchs of the two cities. Nestorius, formerly a priest of Antioch, became patriarch of Constantinople in 428. With the emperor Theodosius II's support, Nestorius imposed his teaching on the capital and other cities in the east. He taught that Mary was not theotokos, the mother of God, but only christotokos, the mother of Christ, and banned any references to Mary as the mother of God.54 Congregations were in an uproar. Clerical leaders forced the emperor to call a council. Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria, challenged Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus in 431. As bishop of Alexandria, Cyril had greater prestige and ecclesiastical authority than Nestorius. Despite the emperor's support, Nestorius was condemned as a heretic. The patriarch at Constantinople was humiliated. The dispute established Cyril and the church at Alexandria as the uncontested leaders of the eastern church.55

The imperial court firmly adhered to Alexandrine doctrine, and Eutyches, the representative of the Egyptian see at Constantinople, wielded considerable influence. Dioscorus replaced Cyril as patriarch in 444, and he and Eutyches used
their authority to push Cyril's doctrine further. They concluded that the two natures of Christ joined to form a single divine nature at the point of Christ's incarnation. This single, divine nature in monophysite teaching apparently nullified the existence of a human nature or human soul in Christ. The churches at Rome and Constantinople saw their opportunity to attack Dioscorus and Eutyches on this point, and they called for a synod in the eastern capital. The synod condemned Eutyches as a heretic.

Not long after, the Council of Ephesus in 449 reversed the ruling and declared for the monophysite doctrine of Dioscorus and Eutyches. Pope Leo I's letter to the council, his Tome condemning the doctrine of Eutyches, was ignored. But the Council of Chalcedon in 451 ruled in favor of Leo's doctrine: two natures, separate but indivisible, existed in Christ. Dioscorus and anyone holding to the monophysite view were condemned. Rome and Constantinople had joined forces to end the power of Alexandria. The council declared that Rome was the first authority in ecclesiastical and doctrinal affairs, and Constantinople was second.

The Council of Chalcedon ought to have been the final word on the matter. Councils themselves were supposed to be infallible, but the rulings of Chalcedon were tainted by the fact that they superseded the decisions of the Council of Ephesus in 449. The dispute raged through the end of the fifth century and into the sixth. Emperors Zeno (474-491) and Anastasius I (491-518) tried to effect a compromise between the supporters of Chalcedon and the monophysites, but both groups were implacable.
Justin I (518-527) and his adopted co-ruler, Justinian returned to a strict policy of orthodoxy in order to restore peace in Constantinople. All dissenters of Chalcedon were anathematized and banned from the cities of the empire. But three years after his accession in 527, Justinian relaxed his persecution of the monophysites. In 532, almost immediately after the Nika riots, Justinian sent out letters to leaders of the monophysite sect, requesting them to come to Constantinople to open discussions with the church.

What were the reasons for the sudden turnaround? Many historians have attributed it to the influence of Theodora. One historian argues that Justinian was always a follower of the orthodox faith, but that Theodora forced him to recognize the sectarian leaders by raising the threat of the deceased emperor Anastasius I's two sons, who were both monophysites. Another states that Justinian understood the importance of honoring Rome, but couldn't decide on the doctrinal issues. The emperor fell under the influence of Theodora, who followed a separate religious policy of her own. Justinian ended his persecutions almost as soon as he ascended the throne, but returned to them in 540. The historian cites these events to mark Justinian's inability to take any decisive action.

Procopius actually proposed a good explanation for Justinian's apparent policy reversal:
For a long time it was universally believed that they were exact opposites in their ideas and interests; but later it was recognized that this false impression had been deliberately fostered to make sure that their subjects did not put their own differences aside and rebel against them, but were all divided in their feelings about them.64

The possible kernel of truth in Procopius' statement is not that Justinian and Theodora pursued a policy of "divide and rule," but that they attempted to win a compromise union between the two religious factions by offering support to both. Justinian officially favored the orthodox church. The orthodox church, headed by the pope in Rome, would not compromise with the dissenters. Justinian depended on the pope's aid during the early years of his campaign in Italy. He could not afford to lose the pontiff's favor by openly supporting the heretical monophysites.

In order to maintain the good will of the eastern provinces and Egypt, where most of the monophysites lived, Theodora followed an "unofficial" policy of support and protection for the dissenting clergy. By courting the favor of both sides, Justinian and Theodora hoped to effect a compromise that would reunite the empire under one church and one ecclesiastical system.

Their strategy was not new. Emperor Zeno attempted to reach a compromise through his Henoticon, or Edict of Union in 482. Anastasius I, a monophysite, professed orthodoxy upon his accession in hopes that it would quell the uprisings and factional fighting.65 Justinian attempted both measures. He first professed orthodoxy and persecuted heretics, then issued
edicts that resembled Zeno's statement of doctrine. He finally succeeded in convincing the pope to sign a compromise "Confession of Faith" in 548. A council finally met to discuss the compromise in 553. Theodora's efforts were essential to the success of the strategy.

Justinian's efforts at religious unity were hindered by his plan to reconquer the western provinces of the empire. The western half of the empire was unanimously orthodox and pro-Chalcedon. Justinian needed the support of the pope and the church if he hoped to be successful in retaking the western provinces from the barbarian kings. Italy itself had regained some of its prosperity under the Gothic rulers, and Justinian could not succeed if local magistrates were reluctant to aid his troops.

In the east, supporters of Chalcedon and the monophysites were fairly evenly divided. But the populations in Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia were largely monophysite. Egypt was almost unanimously against the orthodox church. Many of the former pagan kingdoms to the east and south, such as the Armenian kingdom to the north and Nubia to the south, had either converted to the Christian faith by monophysite missionaries, or they contained large populations of monophysites.

Maintaining the loyalty of the people in these areas was important for economic prosperity and military safety. Constantinople's principal trade lay to the east, with India and China. Justinian and Theodora sought better trade routes to India and China through the northeastern regions and the kingdoms of Africa. Current routes ran through the Persian empire.
The routes were costly, for Persian tolls were high and Roman merchants risked their lives whenever they travelled through enemy territory.

The first half of Procopius' Wars is concerned with the constant battles between Chosroes, the shahinshah of the Persian empire and the Romans. Justinian signed an "Eternal Peace" with the shah in 532, but peace treaties had been signed before between the empires. The current treaty required Justinian to pay a large tribute to the Persians. In return the shah ceded Lazica, a region to the north that the emperor hoped to utilize for the lucrative silk trade. Skirmishes continued however, and persecuted heretics were known to make up part of the ranks of the shah's forces. Constantinople could not afford to have its own people fighting against them, nor could it occupy its imperial forces in the east when they were needed in the reconquest of the west.

The causes of the Nika riot in 532 were partly based on discontented provincial in the east, who were tired of being harassed by war, local magistrates and tax collectors. Many swarmed into the capital to seek redress from the emperor in 531 and to attend the consular games in January, 532. Religious tension, economic frustration, and general fighting between the sports factions of the games added to the general frustration among the crowds. The riot lasted for five days. Mobs burned Constantinople and elected Hypatius, one of Anastasius' sons as emperor. Revolts had been successful before in the deposition of an emperor. The lesson was clear: Justinian and Theodora could
not neglect the eastern provinces while they pursued the reconquest of the west.

During the Nika riots in 532, Theodora was reported to have given a stirring speech in front of the senate. Procopius described the situation and the speech in his Wars, a panegyric of Justinian's military victories. While Constantinople burned around them, the senators debated whether Justinian should stay and fight or flee the capital. Theodora apparently stood up and said:

As to whether it is unseemly for a woman to be bold among men, or to be daring when others are full of fear, I do not think that the present crisis allows us to consider the matter....I consider that now of all times flight would be bad...May I never be parted from this purple...I agree with the old saying, 'Royalty is a good winding sheet.'"77

Byzantine scholars have hailed this speech as an indication of Theodora's unique and forceful character.78 One scholar however, has questioned the historical accuracy of the speech and Procopius' reasons for including it in the Wars. J. A. S. Evans traced the roots of the "old saying" and found that "[r]oyalty is a good winding sheet" was a twist on a popular phrase from the story about the wicked Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse.79 Procopius substituted the Greek word for royalty, basileia, for the original word tyrannis. Although the word was changed, Evans argues that the phrase was too well known among Byzantine literary circles for the connection between the tyrant of Syracuse and the imperial couple to be missed.80

Procopius' version of Theodora's speech is perhaps the best example of Theodora's power and Procopius' disapproval of it.
Rather than brave and decisive, Procopius portrayed Theodora as the voice of disaster. Those senators who counselled swift action with Theodora were "impetuous," while Origen, the opposing senator, was wise. "[I]mportant actions are not such as to be settled by a momentary crisis," Origen said, "but only by wise counsels and physical effort, displayed by men over a long period." The implication was that those who followed the advice of the bold and brazen empress were unmanly and unwise and thus ultimately responsible for the disasters that followed.

Theodora's "apology" for speaking in the senate and giving counsel to men only underscores the fact that Procopius believed she was not even supposed to be there. To Procopius, Theodora exhibited power which she had usurped over men. As a result, the advice she gave was rash and destructive. The massacre of 30,000 people by Justinian's troops on that day made up a part of the "million millions" killed during the imperial couple's evil rule.

After the riot, Justinian and Theodora embarked on a program of sweeping provincial reforms. The emperor and empress simplified the government structure; they combined the military and civilian commands under the office of the rector, a civilian who reported to the emperor directly. The long established custom of selling offices was abolished by law, and laws protecting the rights of farmers and debtors were promulgated to ease their monetary burdens. Bishops were given the right to oversee the rectors' conduct, and could sit on the bench whenever anyone appealed a decision made by the provincial head.
A separate organization had begun to develop in the provinces that threatened the emperor's hold over the eastern populations. Hermits and ascetic monks who wandered through the desert towns of Syria and the east had gained a reputation for their patronage of local townspeople against imperial officials, and many of them were outspoken critics of the emperor and his administration. The mass of people flocked to their care and demanded to have priests who could baptize them into the faith. A separate ecclesiastical system in the east would divide the loyalties of the population if the imperial court could not find some way to reunite the schismatic leaders on both sides. By January 532, it was clear that persecution had not helped the situation.

Justinian began to relax his persecution, and in 532 he called orthodox bishops and monophysite leaders to hold a conference in Constantinople. Theodora promised the monophysites protection, but Severus, the leader of the sect, declined to come anyway, citing complications of age. Both sides met in the winter of 532-533. Justinian hoped that through discussion, the Severan monophysites might be persuaded to return to communion with the established church.

In a 533 edict, Justinian proclaimed his "Confession of Faith." Like Zeno's compromise doctrine, Justinian's statement declared a belief in a "consubstantial Trinity of one substance in three hypostaseis." It condemned Eutyches, who was hateful to Rome, and Nestorius, who was hateful to the monophysites. His sentence, "For we know not God the Word to one and Christ to be another, but one and the same person
consubstantial with the Father could be interpreted satisfactorily by either group. Pope John II accepted the edict on March 25, 534.

The same year, the monophysites tacitly entered into communion with the orthodox church, and Severus journeyed to meet the imperial couple in Constantinople. When the patriarch of Alexandria died, a monophysite, Theodosius, rose to the position. Theodora ensured his installation by ordering the military commander in Egypt to provide for Theodosius' protection and success. At the capital, Theodora supported the candidacy of the orthodox bishop Anthimus of Trebizond for the patriarchate. Anthimus was sympathetic to the monophysite position, and after meeting with Severus, he converted to the monophysite faith.

The sees were more balanced by the end of 535, but the pope in Rome was not pleased. Pope Agapetus went himself to Constantinople under the pretext to appeal on behalf of the Gothic king Theodohad for peace. While at the capital, he launched an attack on Theodosius and Anthimus. Anthimus was deposed in a synod in May-June 536, but Theodosius held onto his see until 537. Agapetus exercised his authority to secure the selection of Menas, an unbending orthodox, to the patriarchate of Constantinople.

In 536, in the face of escalating war in the west and papal pressure after the Home Synod, Justinian recanted his 533 edict and issued another edict condemning Anthimus, Severus and another outspoken monk named Zooras. Severus was accused of waging war on the unity of the church and was banned from the city.
Anthimus entered the Sacred Palace under Theodora's protection. The empress gave land in Sykae to Zooras and his disciples. The monophysites were once again anathematized by the official church, but through Theodora's aid, the imperial administration continued to support its leaders.

Theodora surrounded herself with monks and hermits from the provinces. She brought Theodosius to Constantinople and established a monastery in her palace of Hormisdas. Theodosius brought over 500 monks with him, and despite the ban on monophysites, both the emperor and the empress visited the palace monastery for daily blessing. When a monophysite monk, Maras, died in 542, Justinian and Theodora held a state funeral for him. The imperial couple received monks at the Sacred Palace and continued to employ monophysite leaders in the imperial administration.

The imperial couple made efforts to renew talks between the two churches. Without Severus in the church, however, the monophysites would not agree to compromise. Rome was equally unwilling to compromise. When Pope Agapetus died in 536, Theodora attempted to install a more sympathetic bishop in his place. She secured a promise from Vigilius, the Roman pontiff's emissary in Constantinople, to rescind the anathema if he were elected pope in Agapetus' place. Unfortunately, another bishop was elected. The importance to the imperial court of securing a compromise with the monophysites is evidenced most strongly in the events that followed. Theodora ordered general Belisarius to remove the current pope by force. Vigilius succeeded to the holy see in December 537, but the western bishops were adamantly
against compromise, and Vigilius recanted his promise to Theodora.

In 540, Justinian issued a statement of compromise. It supported Chalcedon but also accepted the works of Cyril and "the unique incarnate nature of God the Word," which came out of the union of the two separate divine and human natures. The statement was similar to that which was proposed in 533, when both sides were close to an agreement. The compromise doctrine had gained support in Constantinople, but the orthodox west and the monophysites in the east refused to accept it.

Finally in 545, an imperial aid convinced Justinian that if the church would anathematize the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theoderet and Ibas, three men who were critical of the works of Cyril, the monophysites would reenter into discussions with the church. Justinian had Vigilius kidnapped and brought to Constantinople. Justinian condemned the Three Chapters, or works against Cyril, and called for a council. The patriarch Menas of Constantinople signed the edict, and the other patriarchs agreed to sign it on the condition that Vigilius gave his approval.

Vigilius answered Justinian's request by condemning Menas. Menas returned the favor by excommunicating the pope. Concern over real schism between Rome and Constantinople raised tensions in the capital. Vigilius, bitter over his imprisonment, told the emperor in 546 he would sign the edict if it was presented in a council. The emperor called for a council, but Vigilius refused to attend. Theodora is credited for reconciling the religious leaders on June 29, 547. One year later, Vigilius signed
the edict condemning the Three Chapters. He still refused to attend the council, and when the council met in Constantinople in 553, it condemned the pope. Vigilius could only return to the fold by officially accepting the council's condemnation of the Three Chapters. He had little choice but to accept the council's decisions.

Theodora died shortly after achieving the reconciliation between Menas and Vigilius, but her efforts with Justinian to bring about a compromise between the monophysites and the orthodox church translated into success in 553. The condemnation of the Three Chapters was effectively a statement of compromise by the orthodox church. Once the edict was signed, Constantinople committed itself to the new doctrine.

Without Theodora's support for the monophysite church, the imperial administration would not have been able to secure the level of compromise it achieved. Through her personal protection the leaders came to Constantinople to open discussions. She secured the election of influential bishops in Constantinople and Alexandria. The empress commanded military officers to depose and install popes in Rome and Alexandria. Through Theodora the combatting bishops of Rome and Constantinople were reconciled and a new compromise was reached.

Throughout her reign, the empress exercised a considerable amount of power in the area of religious policy. Procopius resented her support of the monophysites, but only criticized her for her stance in ambiguous terms, although he did complain that she took control of "every branch of public affairs according to her own personal ideas," including the responsibility of
appointing officials to positions in both "Church and State." Procopius' (and historians') arguments that the empress acted solely in her own interest do not fit the context of the religious and political situations during Justinian and Theodora's reign. The empire needed the support of the east as much as it needed the support of the west. Rome would not support an emperor whose official religious policy veered away from orthodox doctrine. But the eastern provinces had to be placated and unity had to be maintained. Justinian and Theodora worked together to achieve these ends.

Theodora's role in the monophysite controversy strengthens the evidence in Procopius' works concerning Theodora's imperial power and authority. She exercised a very public role in the administration of the government. She possessed military, administrative and religious authority. Female imperial power developed over the course of the late third through fifth centuries, and by her time, Theodora was able to exercise real power. The mosaic of San Vitale reflects the public perception of her unique position in the imperial government. Further study is required in order to fully understand the role of the empress in imperial rulership, but it is clear that the traditional interpretations of Procopius' work and Byzantine attitudes toward female imperial power need to be reconsidered.
Endnotes

1. Averil Cameron, Procopius and the Sixth Century, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage, ed. Peter Brown, no. 10 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 49. Because two sources for this study have the same last name, subsequent endnotes will use both the first and last name when citing their works.


7. Diehl, Theodora, 1.

8. Averil Cameron, Procopius, 67-69.

9. Ibid., 69. Averil Cameron writes: "Surprisingly...even now Theodora suffers from approaches limited by prejudice or romanticism...and the great Diehl's romantic vignettes have yet to find a satisfactory replacement." She attributes the deficiency to the late arrival of women's studies into the field of Byzantine history. Some of the plays and novels are: Elbert Hubbard, Justinian and Theodora: A Drama, Being a Chapter of History and the One Gleam of Light During the Dark Ages (n.p.:


15. Ibid., 81. Charioteers and actors ranked even lower than "useless people": old women, the infirm, etc.

16. Ibid., 75-76, 84.


28. Legislation for women can be found in Justinian's *Novellae*, especially 22.1-48.


33. Ibid., 102.

34. Hussey, *Cambridge Medieval History*, 16, although by the fifth and sixth centuries, emperors distanced themselves from the violence of battle. Justinian never ventured on a military campaign. Sabine MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony*, and Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity*, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West are more recent studies on the importance of ceremony and military victory in late antiquity. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 4, 65-66, 69, 109-111, stresses the transformation of military victory from active participation to victory based on the imperial ruler's piety. This change in the concept of imperial victory enabled empresses to employ a claim for legitimacy previously limited to the male half of the imperial office.


38. Averil Cameron, "Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-Century Byzantium," *Past & Present* 84 (August 1979): 5, 6, 19-24, 34.

40. "Stephen/the victory crown is in the palace, for the virgin empress has brought him into her bride-chamber," Migne 63.933; quoted by Holum, Theodosian Empresses, 108.

41. Theodora funded and dedicated many buildings, including the rebuilding of Constantine's Church of the Holy Apostles in 536, which was crumbling. Theodora laid the cornerstone for the new foundation. Diehl, Theodora, 157. Justinian's Novellae refer to her name on plaques indicating her sponsorship or special protection, particularly novels 28 and 29.

42. Diehl, Theodora, 156.

43. "Sad to say, not even one member of the Senate, seeing the State saddling itself with this disgrace [Theodora], saw fit to protest...though they would have to fall down before her as if she were a goddess...not even one priest who showed disgust...people...thought fit to be her grovelling slaves..." Procopius, Secret History, 90.

44. Theodora's image as a religious figure may have benefitted from an eastern "fusion" of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene into one person by the eastern Fathers. Robert Murray, "The Theme of the Second Eve in the Early Syriac Fathers," Eastern Churches Review 3 (1971): 382-384. Murray does not make the connection between the two Marys and Theodora.

45. Ibid., 380-382.

46. Otto von Simson, Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948), 27. The entire composition surrounding the mosaics contains many references to religious and triumphal ceremony. For more detailed information about the mosaics, please see Susan Dils, "The Contest for Power in Ravenna: Imperial Imagery and the Christian and Roman Perceptions of Time in the Mosaics of San Vitale and Sant' Apollinare Nuovo" (Honors Art History independent study paper for Dr. Carol Farr, University of Alabama in Huntsville, 1992).


48. Ibid., 35-38.

49. MacCormack, Art and Ceremony, 263; Simson, Sacred Fortress, 27.

50. J. Fitton challenges this long established conclusion about Theodora in a short study, "The Death of Theodora" Byzantion 46 (1976): 119. He thinks she may have died from the plague. This is the only dissenting opinion the writer has found about Theodora's death.


54. Philip Hughes, The Church in Crisis, 50. One has to wonder if Nestorius' condemnation of Mary as theotokos had anything to do with the empress Pulcheria's devotion to the Virgin, and the empress' popularity and influence compared to Theodosius.


56. Hughes, Church in Crisis, 72.

57. Ostrogorsky, Byzantine State, 59.


59. Ostrogorsky, Byzantine State, 45, 66-69.

60. Frend, Monophysite Movement, 263-264.


62. Frend, Monophysite Movement, 263.

63. Runciman, Byzantine Theocracy, 45-46.

64. Procopius, Secret History, 91.

65. Ostrogorsky, Byzantine State, 64, 66.


67. McCormick, Eternal Victory, 274-278. McCormick's evidence of the Italian aristocracy's growing acceptance of Gothic rulership goes against the standard view that the Italians "still turned their eyes to Constantinople" and secretly longed for the end of Gothic rule. See Vasiliev, Byzantine Empire, 134.

68. Jones, Later Roman Empire, 936-937.

70. Ibid., 951.


78. "The magnificent arrogance of this speech is surely something beyond the range of Procopius' invention...the speech of Theodora decided the issue," Percy Neville Ure, *Justinian and His Age* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1951; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 202-203.

79. Evans, "The 'Nika' Rebellion and the Empress Theodora," 381.

80. Ibid., 382.


82. Ibid., 64.


85. David Talbot Rice, *The Byzantines* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 49-50, describes the system as a military structure which imposed martial law on the provinces. This doesn't fit with the civil office of the rector.

86. The *novellae* of Justinian record the new offices of Justinian's reform administration, new laws concerning land, property, taxes, legal recourse for grievances in the provinces. For a general listing of Justinian's civil reforms, see Holmes, *Age of Justinian and Theodora*, 412-476.

87. Ibid., 476; Justinian *Novellae* 8, 86.2, 3, 4.


89. Ibid., 265.

90. Ibid; also, evidence in a Syrian record of the conference suggests that Justinian was far more interested in persuading the two sides to enter into communion with each other than he was about points of doctrine. The tone in the record is that of frustration on all sides. Sebastian Brock, "The Conversations with the Syrian Orthodox Under Justinian (532)," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 47, no. 1 (1981): 87-121.


93. Ibid, 270.

94. Runciman reflects the general attitude of historians when he writes that Justinian "allowed" Theodora to support Anthimus' candidacy. 'Allowance' implies knowledge and agreement with Theodora's actions. And allowance or no, Theodora had enough power to get a religious candidate elected to the patriarchate of the capital; see Runciman, *Byzantine Theocracy*, 47.


96. Ibid.

97. Justinian *Novellae*, 42.1.2, 3. The writer could not find any evidence of Theodora's support for Severus after his condemnation. He died in exile one year later. Perhaps Severus had gone too far in his criticisms against the efforts of the imperial couple. It is curious that Theodora would support other monophysites with land and protection, but not Severus.

99. Ibid., 153-156.

100. Averil Cameron, *Procopius*, 78, footnote 74.


102. In particular, Justinian and Theodora sent John of Ephesus, one of the great leaders of the monophysite sect, to evangelize the pagan regions surrounding the empire, including Lydia, Phrygia, Caria, and parts of Asia; see Holmes, *Age of Justinian and Theodora*, 699-700; Frend, *Monophysite Movement*, 275.


106. Ibid.


Bibliography

Primary Sources


Justinian Novellae


Secondary Sources


Works Consulted But Not Cited


THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IN HUNTSVILLE

Honors Program

HONORS SENIOR PROJECT APPROVAL FORM

(To be submitted by the student to the Honors Program with a copy of the Honors Project suitable for binding. All signatures must be obtained.)

Name of Candidate: Susan Elisabeth Dils

Department: History

Degree: B.A.

Full Title of Project: Understanding Theodora: The Role of the Empress in Imperial Religious Policy

Approved by:

[Signatures and dates]

Project Advisor

Department Chair

Honors Program Director for Honors Council