



[WebChron Home](#) | [WebChron Introduction](#) | [WebChron Glossary](#) | [Then Again Home...](#)

Slavic Origins

The Byzantine Empire

Kyivan Rus

Appanage Russia

Muscovite Russia

Imperial Russia

The Soviet Union



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## Russia and Eastern Europe Chronology

# The Empress Theodora



Theodora was the wife of Justinian I who was crowned Emperor of the Byzantine Empire in 527 AD. As his wife, she ruled by his side, as his partner, and her intelligence helped to advance the Empire.

The exact place of her birth has not been agreed upon. While some historians say she was born on the island of Crete off the coast of Greece, others speculate that she might have been born in Syria. Whichever the case, she was brought up as the daughter of a bear trainer who worked at the Hippodrome (a huge stadium-like circus), in Constantinople. She worked there as a mime, and later as a full time actress. At the time, acting was not a highly esteemed occupation especially for women, so the term 'actress' was considered synonymous with the term 'prostitute'. While on stage she was remembered for her daring entertainment skills, off stage however, she lived a normal youthful life and was most remembered for her wild parties.

At the age of 16, she traveled to northern Africa as the companion of an official. She stayed

there for 4 years before returning to Constantinople. She stopped by Alexandria, the capital of Egypt and here she adopted Monophysitism. This was a form of Christianity that believed that Jesus Christ was wholly divine and not both human and divine as was the orthodox Christian belief. Monophysites were thus not liked by orthodox Christians since their teachings did not conform to those of the orthodox church. On conversion to Monophysitism, she gave up her former lifestyle, and upon reaching Constantinople in 522, settled down as a wool spinner in a house near the palace of the Emperor. It was while in this humble lifestyle, at the age of 20, that she drew the attention of Justinian, then a government official.

[Back to "Restoration of the Roman Empire in the East" Chronology](#)

Theodora was not only beautiful, but intelligent, witty and amusing, which is perhaps why she won Justinian's love so much that he appealed against an old Roman law that forbade officials from marrying actresses in order to marry her. Justinian and Theodora were married in 525. In 527, Justin, the emperor of Byzantium, and Justinian's father died. The couple assumed control of the Empire and were crowned Emperor and Empress on 4th April of that same year. They ruled unofficially as joint monarchs with Justinian allowing Theodora to share his throne and take active part in decision making.

Perhaps the most significant event during Empress Theodora's rule was the Nika revolt in which she proved herself a worthy and able leader. During this event, two rival political groups started a riot at the Hippodrome. They set many public buildings on fire and proclaimed a new emperor. Justinian and his officials, unable to control the crowd prepared to flee, but Theodora spoke up and gave a moving speech about the greater significance of the life of someone who died as a ruler, over that of someone who lived but was nothing. Her determined speech convinced Justinian and his officials and they attacked the Hippodrome, killing over 30,000 rebels and emerging victorious. Historians agree that it was Theodora's courage and determination that saved Justinian's empire.

Throughout the rest of her life, Theodora and Justinian transformed the city of Constantinople, building it into a city that for many centuries was known as one of the most wonderful cities in the world. They built aqueducts, bridges, and more than 25 churches, the most significant of these being the Hagia Sophia - 'Church of Holy Wisdom'. To women, Theodora may well be considered a noble pioneer of the women's liberation movement. She passed on laws prohibiting forced prostitution and established homes for prostitutes, passed rights that granted women more rights in divorce cases, instituted the death penalty for rape and established laws allowing women to own and inherit property. She also provided safe shelter for Monophysite leaders who faced opposition from the majority orthodox Christians, even though her husband Justinian was an orthodox Christian.

Empress Theodora died on 28th June, 548. Her body was buried in the Church of the Holy Apostle, one of the splendid churches that she and Justinian had built in Constantinople. Beautiful mosaics in Empress Theodora's remembrance exist to this day at the Church of San Vitale at Ravenna in Northern Italy. Even after her death, her spirit lived on, and in this way she was able to have influence on the Empire. Through what she had began, Justinian was able to bring harmony between the Monophysites and the Orthodox Christians, and the status of women in the Byzantine Empire was elevated high above that of the women in the Middle East and Europe.

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