

CHAPTER
11

Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *from Secret History*
by Procopius

In 533 the Byzantine army led by General Belisarius wrested North Africa from the Vandals. Byzantine court historian Procopius, who accompanied the general, wrote the Histories in support of his campaigns. But, in 550, Procopius also wrote Secret History, which he intended to be published after his death. As you read this excerpt from Secret History, think about the portrait that Procopius paints of the Byzantine emperor Justinian.

That Justinian was not a man, but a demon, as I have said, in human form, one might prove by considering the enormity of the evils he brought upon mankind. For in the monstrousness of his actions the power of a fiend is manifest. Certainly an accurate reckoning of all those whom he destroyed would be impossible, I think, for anyone but God to make. Sooner could one number, I fancy, the sands of the sea than the men this Emperor murdered. Examining the countries that he made desolate of inhabitants, I would say he slew a trillion people. For Libya [North Africa], vast as it is, he so devastated that you would have to go a long way to find a single man, and he would be remarkable. Yet eighty thousand Vandals capable of bearing arms had dwelt there, and as for their wives and children and servants, who could guess their number? Yet still more numerous than these were the Mauretians, who with their wives and children were all exterminated. And again, many Roman soldiers and those who followed them to Constantinople, the earth now covers; so that if one should venture to say that five million men perished in Libya alone, he would not, I imagine, be telling the half of it.

The reason for this was that after the Vandals were defeated, Justinian planned, not how he might best strengthen his hold on the country, nor how by safeguarding the interests of those who were loyal to him he might have the goodwill of his subjects: but instead he foolishly recalled Belisarius

at once, on the charge that the latter intended to make himself King (an idea of which Belisarius was utterly incapable), and so that he might manage affairs there himself and be able to plunder the whole of Libya. Sending commissioners to value the province, he imposed grievous taxes where before there had been none. Whatever lands were most valuable, he seized; and prohibited the Arians from observing their religious ceremonies. Negligent toward sending necessary supplies to the soldiers, he was overstrict with them in other ways; wherefore mutinies arose resulting in the deaths of many. For he was never able to abide by established customs, but naturally threw everything into confusion and disturbance. . . .

So while he was Emperor, the whole earth ran red with . . . blood. . . .

from Procopius, Secret History, translated by Richard Atwater. Reprinted in Alvin M. Josephy, ed., The Horizon History of Africa (American Heritage, 1971), 124.

Discussion Questions

Analyzing Issues

1. How would you characterize Procopius' opinion of Justinian?
2. What evidence does Procopius offer to support his opinions of Justinian?
3. **Forming and Supporting Opinions** Do you think that Procopius' depiction of Justinian in this excerpt is accurate? Why or why not?

Theodora

Woman of Will

Answer questions on a separate sheet of paper with your name and period on it.

"... I think that flight, even if it brings us to safety, is not in our interest. Every man born to see the light of day must die. But that one who has been emperor should become an exile I cannot bear. . . . But consider whether if you reach safety you may not desire to exchange that safety for death. . . ."—Theodora, speech to Justinian during the Nika revolt (532)

A fateful encounter transformed Theodora from a reformed actress to the wife of the heir apparent to the Byzantine throne. Intelligent and beautiful, she shed her humble beginnings and rose to the heights of power in Byzantium. She served the emperor Justinian as both his political adviser and wife—and saved his throne.

Theodora's early life is shrouded in mystery. Her exact birth date is unknown, although it is believed that she was born around A.D. 500. Her father, Acacius, worked in the famous Hippodrome in Constantinople. This was the huge arena where events such as chariot races and animal fights were held. Two groups struggled for victory in these contests: the Blues and the Greens. These groups also held considerable political power.

Theodora became an actress like her older sister, and by her teens she was well-known. Like other actresses of the time, she had a well-deserved reputation for immoral living. After traveling to North Africa with an important politician, she eventually found her way back to Constantinople. She returned as a convert to Christianity but did not adopt the standard form of that religion. She joined a sect called the Monophysites. They believed that Jesus had a mixture of both God-like and human-like natures.

Conversion changed Theodora's life. She abandoned her old ways and began to live quietly and modestly. It was then that the fateful encounter with Justinian occurred. The future ruler met her and fell in love. However, a law banned actresses from marrying anyone. Nevertheless, he had Theodora officially named a patrician, or member of the noble class, and ruled that the law no longer applied to former actresses. In 525, he and Theodora married. Two years later, they became emperor and empress.

For more than 20 years, Theodora worked alongside Justinian to strengthen Byzantine power and lead the empire. She also took some steps to improve the position of women. For instance, she

made divorce laws more favorable to them.

Theodora also tried to win tolerance for the Monophysites. Justinian wanted to restore the empire to its former size, which meant recapturing lands in western Europe. To help achieve this, he believed he needed to favor Orthodox Christianity, which was powerful in the west. Theodora thought that the future of the Byzantine Empire lay in the east, where Monophysitism was popular. She persuaded him to practice toleration to keep the Monophysite subjects in those provinces happy.

In 532, during the terrible Nika rebellion, Theodora showed her great strength and supreme loyalty to Justinian. The Blues and the Greens had stopped arguing with each other to join forces against the government. They rioted throughout Constantinople, burning much of the city and threatening to topple the emperor from his throne. Justinian, Theodora, and their advisers gathered in the palace. The emperor was ready to flee the city, giving up his position to save his life. Then Theodora made the famous speech quoted above. When she finished, the room was briefly filled with silence. In response to her words, the generals quickly prepared plans to regain control of the city.

Once the revolt was ended, the imperial couple began to rebuild the city. They made Constantinople a glittering jewel and built 25 religious structures and countless other impressive buildings. In 548, Theodora died of cancer. She was buried in one of the churches they had built. Justinian joined her when he died years later.

Answer questions on a separate sheet of paper with your name and period on it.

1. How did conversion to Christianity change Theodora's life?
2. Why did Theodora urge toleration of the Monophysite sect of Christianity?
3. To what extent did Theodora save her husband's (the emperor Justinian) throne?
4. Why did Justinian want to favor Orthodox Christianity?
5. Why, according to the passage at the top of the page, did Theodora urge Justinian not to flee Constantinople?
6. How might building churches and beautifying Constantinople have helped the imperial couple regain influence after the Nika Rebellion?