

**David Potter, *Theodora. Actress, Empress, Saint.*** New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-19-974076-5, hardback, 277 p., 19 figures, 3 maps, \$26,49

After an introduction, the book is subdivided into twelve chapters with the following titles: 1: "Constantinople", 2: "Telling Nasty Stories", 3: "Sex and the Stage", 4: "Factions and Networks", 5: "Patrician", 6: "The Succession", 7: "Augusta: The First Five Years", 8: "Revolution", 9: "War and Religion", 10: "Plots and Plague", 11: "Last Years", and 12: "Legacy". This main narration of the book is framed by the usual acknowledgements at the beginning and a list of "Dramatis Personae", a timeline, abbreviations, notes, a bibliography, and an index at the end.

Right from the outset, the author (D.P.) tries to illustrate the historical setting, that is the social, cultural and political surroundings of his female protagonist, as lavishly and vividly as possible. In order to achieve this goal, he necessarily has to draw to a certain extent upon his vast and profound knowledge of Late Antiquity and the time between the 1st and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. on the one hand (see e.g. pp. 42–44, 50–53) and upon our knowledge of neighbouring peoples and cultures such as the Persians and the western Germanic kingdoms on the other (see e.g. pp. 32–34). The use of such diachronic and synchronic cultural comparisons and analogies for the historical reconstruction is of course well established in order to make up for the lack of primary sources but it also bears some risk of misinterpretations and wrong conclusions.

In addition to that, D.P. tries to fill the gaps of our knowledge with some rather hypothetical assumptions which have no real basis in the sources. For example, when he ponders the question why Justinian had remained unmarried for so long, he arrives at the conclusion, that this "was probably attributable to the unwillingness of members of the aristocracy to hand over their daughters to the son of a peasant" (p. 89). This is a typical case of "maybe or maybe not" with absolutely no support in the sources. Also the whole passage about the rise of Severus to the patriarchal see of Antioch between 508 and 511 A.D., elaborated on more than five full pages of the book (pp. 62–68), has got nothing to do with Theodora herself but looks at her only as a possible witness of the events which she "might" have noticed, "may" have been there, "would" possibly have done this or that. The passage was probably supposed to be an enlightening illustration of the ideological-theological background of the time, but it has absolutely no reference to the main character of the book.

Some of D.P.'s conclusions or interpretations also seem somewhat peculiar. When he cites for example the very famous passage of Procopius and "his claim that Theodora wished her nipples had holes large enough to accommodate penises, for she would then have five orifices available" (p. 46), this seems to be a slight misinterpretation of the original text of Procopius, which literally goes as follows: "Although she had three openings for her work (sc. prostitution) she accused nature for her bad shape, because she (sc. mother nature) did not also make her tits a larger opening than they were, so that it would be possible to have

yet another kind of intercourse” (Procop. *Anekdotai* 9,18). As far as Procopius is concerned, four orifices would apparently do. Furthermore, it is the *communis opinio* in Byzantine Studies that Kallinikos of Heliupolis (Baalbek in modern Lebanon) is regarded as the true inventor of Greek Fire which was first used in a naval battle against the Arabs in 678 A.D. and not Proclus of Athens, as claimed by D.P. (p. 85). (Cf. John H. Pryor and Elizabeth M. Jeffreys, *The Age of the ΔΡΟΜΩΝ. The Byzantine Navy ca 500–1204*, Leiden and Boston 2006, p. 607). Proclus had probably developed only a precursor of this weapon at the beginning of the 6th century.

Apart from these minor points of criticism in detail, the book has of course its general value and its advantages. All in all, D.P. draws a very colourful and impressive picture of the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and his female protagonist. Theodora was not only a woman of humble origin, a simple bearkeeper’s daughter, but moreover had a relatively difficult childhood. She lost her father at an early age, and her mother had to struggle hard to keep the family in the circus business. But due to her beauty and attractiveness Theodora made her way as an actress as well as a courtesan and lover of influential men of her time. It was in this function or role that she also met Justinian, the ruling emperor’s nephew and designated future emperor and probably the most important figure at the Byzantine court in Constantinople besides the emperor Justin himself. Justinian must have known about her past but nevertheless he obviously fell truly in love with Theodora. He probably could have kept her simply as his concubine without any further problems, but instead he chose the more difficult way of removing the existing legal obstacles in order to make her his lawful wife and practically promote her to the senatorial rank. After Justinian had become ruling emperor in 527 A.D. she became his strong support, adviser and co-emperor although she remained largely in the background in spite of the rather fantastic role Procopius ascribed to Theodora in the context of the Nika revolt. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly remarkable traces of her influence on Justinian’s legislation and in other fields of imperial decisions and activities. She was a very important advocate for the Monophysite Christians of the eastern provinces at the court in Constantinople, although she of course could not solve the theological controversy between the Chalcedonians and Monophysitism. That is why she has a remarkably good reputation among Syrian (Monophysite) Christians up to the present day. When she died at the age of about 50 on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 548, she left a husband behind who never married again, venerated her tomb still eleven years after her departure and ordered her commemoration in the church as a saint. Justinian probably never really recovered fully from that loss and showed increasing signs of depression and disappointment after her death.

Theodora’s remembrance was largely influenced and overshadowed by the depiction of her youth in Procopius’ *Secret History*. His (fictitious!) explicit description of her scandalous behaviour and sexual escapades have attracted many a historian who very uncritically and unconditionally believed and repeated Procopius’ steamy fantasies. For quite some time this went well together with general contempt of women and the female regarded as weak and vicious also in

western industrialized countries with a Jewish-Christian tradition up to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when female self-liberation and emancipation gathered momentum in these cultures. It was only as late as in 1986 that Hans-Georg Beck made the first attempt of a serious reassessment of Theodora and her life. D.P.'s very readable and learned book is another step in this direction towards a just and sober historical acknowledgement of this at the same time glamorous and important Byzantine imperatrix.

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