Empress Theodora - Ancient Champion of Women's Rights

Theodora was one of the most-influential women of the ancient world. She was a champion of women's rights. She had laws passed which prohibited the trafficking of young girls and changed existing laws impacting divorce to give more benefits to women.

Born into a lower class than her husband, Theodora would not have been able to marry Justinian (who was the Emperor's nephew) under the laws as they existed at the time. Using his influence, as a member of the Byzantine royal family, Justinian worked to change the law.

Successful in that endeavor, he and Theodora married in 525 AD. Two years later, they were crowned as Emperor Justinian I and Empress Theodora I.

Justinian, who was much older than Theodora, relied on his wife for advice and counsel. Although they never co-ruled the Byzantine Empire, history tells us that she was very influential. She ended-up being her husband's most-trusted advisor.

After their city of Constantinople (today's Istanbul) was severely damaged in a revolt, Justinian and Theodora rebuilt it into one of the most-beautiful cities in the world. With bridges, aqueducts and many churches - at least 25 of them (including the Hagia Sophia, which is now a mosque) - the city became a place of splendor.

Then ... Theodora became ill. We can't be sure whether she had cancer, or gangrene, but we do know that the Empress died on the 28th of June in 548.

Justinian was devastated by the loss of his wife. Legend tells us that for twenty years he visited her grave every day.

Today Theodora is remembered as one of the first leaders to champion the rights of women. Justinian, who had a keen legal mind, is remembered for his *Corpus Juris Civilis* ("Body of Civil Law").

This image depicts a famous mosaic of Empress Theodora. It is located in the San Vitale Basilica in Ravenna, Italy. During Roman times, the town was known as Classe).

Click on the image for a much better view.

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

Empress Theodora was one of the ancient-world's strongest advocates of women's rights. Before reading this story, had you ever heard of her? Why do you suppose her story is not widely known?

Theodora, who lived in the 6th century, had laws passed to prevent trafficking of young girls. She also had existing laws changed to give more benefits to divorced women. Does it surprise (or not surprise) you that problems of the 6th century are still problems in the 21st century? Explain your answer.

Credits:

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