

Empress Theodora

[Dr Amanda Foreman]

Empress Theodora, who in a spectacular rise to power transforms herself from street performer and prostitute to Empress and co-ruler of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

In an era when Christianity teaches that marriage is merely a refuge from sin, Theodora saw it as a means to power. She creates an entirely new narrative for women, one where gender and class play an inferior role to ambition and ability.

Together they created an enduring legacy, shaping our very concept of the modern western state, the power of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the basis of European law.

Justinian ordered a thorough compiling and modernization of Roman law, known as the Codex. The sections which refer to women reveal Theodora's influence, in particular when it comes to their legal status

It's in the laws that follow the issuing of the codex that we find her real influence particularly in the form of a more Christian influence in the relations between the sexes, in marriage, causes of divorce, when not to be divorced on the basis of no grounds whatsoever, protection of children and women allowed to be the guardians of their children.

She also insisted that there should not be the recruitment of women for prostitution, particularly going out into the country and bringing in innocent young girls and putting them into brothels, so the Christian influence is very clear and that's where Theodora would have seen her own trajectory reflected in very much sympathetic attitude towards women.

Theodora's own political and religious triumphs are recorded inside the sister church, the Little Hagia Sofia, now a mosque.

Theodora knew that history is written by the victors - she had already re-written the rule book on gender relations and now she was determined to write her own epitaph - the inscription around the walls of the church read:

May he who in all things guards the rule of the sleepless sovereign and increase the power of the God crowned Theodora, whose mind is adorned with piety and whose constant toil lies in unsparing efforts to nourish the destitute.

This inscription was Theodora's valedictory speech to posterity - it was her insurance that no matter what historians may later write about her - she had insured that her name would never be erased.