

## BOOK REVIEW

*Theodora: Actress, Empress, Saint.* By DAVID POTTER. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 277. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-19-974076-5.

The Empress Theodora has always attracted a great deal of attention, both among scholars and among the more general public: Justinian's mentions of her in Roman laws (*Just., Nov.* 8, 1), her iconic portrait in the mosaics of S. Vitale in Ravenna, her connections to the "hero" Belisarius were already sufficient reasons to ensure her success, but it was the rediscovery and publication, in 1623, of Procopius' *Secret History*, with its substantial slander against her, which transformed the Empress into a model and a reference for both progressive and chauvinistic minds when thinking of women and (political) power. So, scholars and artists alike paid tribute to Theodora, from Edward Gibbon to Benjamin Constant, from Victorien Sardou to Charles Diehl, from Hans Beck to Milo Manara.

And still, the current political situation, with a growing amount of women in positions of power or candidating to them, from Angela Merkel to Hillary Clinton, to whom Theodora has been compared in a significant piece of scholarship,<sup>1</sup> makes it no surprise to realize that Theodora's popularity is again growing in a significant way. It is in this context, marked for instance recently by the publication of a new biography of Theodora in German, too,<sup>2</sup> that Potter's book has appeared, as a part of the series "Women in Antiquity".

It will be evident, from what has been said, that it is really hard to write something new and original about Theodora (at least from the scholarly perspective—the fantasy of other approaches, combined to her popularity, opens an infinite range of possibilities, including claims that Evita Peron was her reincarnation).<sup>3</sup> But this is also not the scope of the volume, which is a comprehensive and well-informed presentation of the Empress in her historical, political, social and

<sup>1</sup> A. McClanan, *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses. Image and Empire*, New York 2002.

<sup>2</sup> T. Pratsch, *Theodora von Byzanz. Kurtisane und Kaiserin*, Stuttgart 2011.

<sup>3</sup> L. Fischer-Pap, *Eva, Theodora: Evita Peron, Empress Theodora Reincarnated*, Rockford 1982.

cultural context, readable and extremely enjoyable to a much broader public than the community of classicists.

In this sense, this book covers an important gap: while biographies of Theodora were until now available in German (as already mentioned), in Italian and in other languages, the only publication of this kind in English was J.A. Evans' *The Empress Theodora* (Austin 2002), significantly undertitled "Partner of Justinian" and still very bound to quite old-fashioned interpretations of the character of the Empress (for instance in claiming that she did not have any lovers after marrying Justinian simply because her lust for power was bigger than her sexual lust, and she would not therefore risk the throne for an affair). Potter's book is therefore extremely welcome and represents a text which will be absolutely useful also in teaching modules on Late Antiquity.

The character of the book forces the author to move sometimes in the direction of psychological (or even almost psychoanalytical) interpretations of Theodora, her growth years, her experiences and their impact of following decisions, and it is quite obvious that this is, from the scholarly perspective, the weakest part of the book. The greatest strength lies, on the other side, on the author's knowledge of Eastern (and particularly Syriac) sources, which are absolutely indispensable to provide a balanced and comprehensive image of the Empress, especially in relation to her engagement in the religious struggles of the time. While this is also no novelty, Potter does it in a much more systematic and complete way than the other biographers of Theodora.

Additionally, Potter provides plenty of information about the broader cultural context, e.g. reflecting on the basis of contemporary sources what Theodora might have eaten, or discussing pregnancy and abortion in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This is a particularly important asset for anybody who wishes to suggest this volume to students. Last but not least, it is once again very relevant for didactic purposes, or for a broader public that the final chapter sketches in a short and very clear way what the main milestones in the reception of Theodora have been, presenting historical novels, paintings, plays and films centered on the Byzantine Empress. The reader gains an immediate insight into the relevance of Theodora, as a symbol and a model, for Western art and thought.

With a book of such high quality, and appearing for such a prestigious and renowned publisher, it is a pity to have to remark in concluding that typos are quite abundant—the declining attention for such revisions, even among the "big", traditional publishers is clearly visible to anybody and should be fought

against strongly, especially considering that we want these to be the books read and studied by our students.

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