

Representations of the Roman Empress Theodora (500-548 C.E.) contradict the idea that women were excluded from power in the predominantly male political sphere of the Roman Empire. As the wife of Justinian, who is considered both the last Roman and the first Byzantine Emperor, Theodora held a position of remarkable power, which she used overtly to re-shape Roman society as a respected advisor and partner in her husband's comprehensive social reforms and re-centralization of power to a single emperor. The main ancient source for Theodora's life is Procopius, an Eastern Roman historian who had ready access to the royal court, who worked as an advisor to Justinian's chief military commander Belisarius, and who wrote two official works – the *History of the Wars* and *Buildings* – and a third unofficial work, titled *Secret History*. Although all three works mention the Empress Theodora, it is the unofficial work, an attack on the imperial court, which has the most comprehensive account of Theodora's deeds as an empress and best illustrates the power that she held (Garland 1999; Evans 2002).

As an author, Procopius was faced with a new kind of powerful female who did not fit the mold of previous Roman matrona and empresses, as described by historians such as Tacitus and Suetonius. In his descriptions of Theodora in the *Secret History*, Procopius calls on the usual stereotypes of powerful Roman women used by Latin historians and writers, such as an association with magic, a history on the stage, general lasciviousness, and perverse domestic practices; however, he fails to show that any of these qualities were detrimental to her status. In fact, Procopius' account of her past as a performer and prostitute underscores Theodora's early influence over her husband Justinian and the law: in order to marry her, Justinian had to change the Julian law prohibiting marriage between a man of senatorial rank and a woman who was formerly on the stage. Similarly, in his official history, Procopius presents Theodora as Justinian's chief advisor and the protector of imperial power during the Nika Revolt (532 C.E.), the main internal threat to Justinian's rule (*History of the Wars* I, 24.33-37). Further evidence of Theodora's influence comes from Justinian legal sources, especially those aimed at promoting women's rights. In *Novellae Constitutiones* 8.1 (535 C.E.), new laws of the *Corpus Juris*, which were added to Justinian's law code, Justinian remarks that he was advised in his plans by his partner and wife Theodora (*haec omnia apud nos cogitantes et hic quoque participem consilii sumentes eam quae a deo data nobis est reverentissimam coniugem*). In addition to these overt references in the legal code, Theodora's power was displayed overtly in the well-known mosaic in San Vitale, Ravenna, where she is depicted as a ruler bringing gifts to Christ in an image which exactly mirrors that of Justinian, who is also bringing gifts.

In this paper, I argue that Theodora's power and influence were real and openly advertised by the court for political ends. I further argue that, in Procopius' *Secret History*, we see an author struggling to fit Theodora within the generic tradition of imperial biography and the stereotypes of powerful women that go back to Cicero's Clodia, Tacitus' Livia, and Suetonius' Agrippina the Younger. Moreover, we see Procopius failing miserably in this attempt because, unlike these other women, she held power that was openly sanctioned, supported, and enforced by the imperial and religious power structures of the day.