

On this day in 1056 AD, Byzantine Empress Theodora passes away



On this day, August 31, in 1056 AD, Byzantine Empress Theodora Porphyrogenita passed away.

Theodora was the youngest daughter of Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII and Empress Helena, born in 980 AD.

“Born in purple” (a term that refers to babies born during the reign of their parent) with strong, ambitious traits, Theodora at the age of sixteen was her father’s first choice as a possible bride for the Holy Roman Emperor in the west, Otto III. However, Otto III died before they wed and from then, she chose to live a life of obscurity in the gynaeceum (an inner section in an ancient Greek house that is used as a women’s quarters).

After her uncle Byzantine Emperor Basil II died childless, her father, Constantine VII became the ruler of the empire. Without having conceived a son, her father wanted Theodora to marry the man he had chosen to succeed him, Romanos Argyros. However, she defied her father on the basis that he had a wife who became a nun to allow Romanos to marry into the imperial family and they were also third cousins. Constantine VII then forced his eldest daughter and Theodora’s sister, Zoe,

to marry, which occurred in 1028.

When Constantine VII died, Romanos and Zoe were the rulers of the empire, until Romanos' death in 1034. Zoe then remarried Michael IV in the same year and they governed until his death in 1041.

In 1042, Theodora became co-empress of the Byzantine empire with her sister Zoe for two months. Still jealous that her father had favoured her younger sister over her, Zoe assumed power and tried to force Theodora back to her monastery, but the Senate demanded that the two sisters would reign together. Zoe remarried Constantine IX Monomachos and the control of the empire was given to him.

With the passing of Zoe in 1050 and Constantine IX in 1055, at the age of seventy Theodora strongly asserted her rights to rule again, and became sole empress.

In 1056 she suddenly became gravely ill with an intestinal disorder and died a few days later. Having no children and being the last member of her dynasty, she chose the former military finance minister, Michael VI Bringas as her successor. However, upon her death conflicts unravelled as Michael VI was not related to the dynasty, with various noble families wanting the throne, until the beginning of the Komnenian dynasty under the accession of Alexios I Komnenos in 1081.

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