

Empresses Zoe and Theodora

Michael Psellus, Byzantine court historian, from his *Chronographia*, *Book Six*,
on Empresses Zoe and Theodora, 12th century CE

So the Empire passed into the hands of the two sisters, and for the first time in our lives we saw the transformation of the women's quarters into an emperor's council chamber. What is more, both the civilian population and the military caste were working in harmony under empresses, and more obedient to them than to any proud overlord issuing arrogant orders. In fact, I doubt if any other family was ever so favored by God as theirs was -- a surprising thing, when one reflects on the unlawful manner in which the family fortune was, so to speak, rooted and planted in the ground, with murder and bloodshed. For a while the sisters preferred to govern alone. The Empire was administered without the appointment of new officials, and no immediate reforms were brought in to affect the constitution already established. After dismissing only the members of the rebel family, Zoe and Theodora maintained in their position of authority the other ministers of state, who were men of proved loyalty and known for their traditional allegiance to themselves. These men, because they were afraid lest at some future time they should be accused of introducing new ideas into the constitution, or of making foolish decisions, or of acting illegally, were meticulously careful in their conduct of state affairs, both military and civil, and as far as possible, they treated the empresses with all due honor. Court procedure, in the case of the sisters, was made to conform exactly to the usual observance of the sovereigns who had ruled before them. Most of the talking was done by the officials concerned, but sometimes, when it was necessary, the empresses also gave their instructions, in a calm voice, or made their replies, sometimes being prompted and taking their cue from the experts, sometimes using their own discretion. The elder, Zoe, was the quicker to understand ideas, but slower to give them utterance. With Theodora, on the other hand, it was just the reverse in both respects, for she did not readily show her inmost thoughts, but once she had embarked on a conversation, she would chatter away with an expert and lively tongue. Zoe was a woman of passionate interests, prepared with equal enthusiasm for both alternatives -- death or life. To put it quite candidly (for my present purpose is not to compose a eulogy, but to write an accurate history) neither of them was fitted by temperament to govern. They neither knew how to administer nor were they capable of serious argument on the subject of politics. For the most part they confused the trifles of the harem with important matters of state.

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