The early Byzantine empress Theodora is usually first associated with the mosaics in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna. This single surviving depiction of the empress shows her as an imperial donor or patron with the communion chalice, which she offers in the direction of Christ, and the attributes of the three Magi – the ultimate “imperial donors” – who appear in a similar gesture on the hem of her chlamys and thus underscore the intended message. Yet we still know little about Theodora’s contemporary image as patron. Scholarly attention on patronage during Justinian’s reign has focused almost exclusively on deeds of the emperor, while questions about the empress were concerned with her supposedly dubious past and her purported personality. Reasons for this can be found in the historical understanding of and research on empresses and their role in Byzantine society, and the long-lasting scholarly tradition of valuing certain written sources – chronicles or works written by historians – to be historically more reliable than others, for example hagiographies.

The three-sixth-century authors most often cited in regard to the patronage of this imperial couple are John Malalas, John of Ephesos and Prokopios of Caesarea, who particularly shaped our understanding of Justinian’s reign and Theodora’s role and became the most common point of reference for this period. Yet all works by these authors – except for the first half of Malalas’s *Chronicle* – were composed after the empress’s death in 548, an aspect most studies fail to elaborate on. This includes the works of Liz James and Anne McClanan, who produced the first studies on early Byzantine empresses and their patronage that diverged from the tendency of past decades towards a focus on individual and prestigious objects and on linking empresses to grand churches, precious ivories and the like. James’s

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1 The word “patron”, though gendered in its etymology, was chosen as a way to refer neutrally to the idea of a person engaged in the act of patronage. Also the expression “emperors” – as in contemporary Byzantine texts βασιλεῖς – is in certain situations used to refer to both emperor and empress.

2 As has been analyzed by L. James, Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium, London 2001, esp. “Will the Real Byzantine Empress Please Stand Up”, pp. 1–10.


critical approach to the study of empresses, her analytical accomplishments and the contextualisation of actions into a structured framework are great aids to the understanding of Byzantine empresses. Yet she only takes religious imperial patronage into account and her approach also does not allow for an in-depth analysis of individual patrons and the abundant sources associated with them. McClanan on the other hand manages to collect a large amount of varying evidence connected to Theodora in order to establish a profile of the empress as patron, but in her own assumptions she fails to employ the needed source-criticism and relies almost exclusively on literary sources, neglecting to analyse the physical evidence. While James has already pointed out the active political dimension of patronage in Byzantium and argued against the practice of reducing women’s patronage to “cultural patronage”, McClanan still refers to Theodora’s “capabilities as a cultural patron”. Moreover, McClanan’s assessment of Theodora and her patronage is highly contradictory, and she fails to reconcile her initial statement of how “banal the fulfilment of her role was” and her conclusion that Theodora was “a fascinating example of the display of female basileia” who “pursued a distinct agenda of building and cultural support”, which relies solely on the Monophysite community within the Hormisdas palace and Mango’s ascription of the church of Sts Sergios and Bacchos to Theodora. McClanan states that only some of Theodora’s projects were joint foundations with Justinian, while James explicitly names this emperor and empress as representative for the development of church building into an action performed by imperial couples, although the only example she offers for Theodora and Justinian is also the church of Sts Sergios and Bacchos.

In order to shed light on the politics of imperial female patronage during Theodora’s time as augusta 527–548, it is necessary and valuable to complement the material gathered by McClanan and thus creating a larger corpus of acts of patronage that includes only sources written or produced by her contemporaries. While critically re-evaluating the evidence, this article will lay particular emphasis on distinguishing between sources from before the empress’s death in 548, and those composed posthumously, and will reconcile these with the material evidence.

Before examining such a corpus, we must first define which activities qualify as imperial patronage: building a home for the poor or a lavish church, having a precious cross manufactured or giving but one nomisma to a “fallen woman” – all these acts can be seen as imperial patronage if linked to the right person and understood in a specific context. Patronage associated with the empress could be undertaken by the empress herself or in her name, could be a joint action with the emperor or undertaken solely by the emperor and later linked to her

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5 James, Empresses and Power (cit. n. 2), p. 149.
6 McClanan, Representations (cit. n. 4), p. 106.
7 McClanan, Representations (cit. n. 4), p. 93.
8 McClanan, Representations (cit. n. 4), p. 106.
9 See McClanan, Representations (cit. n. 4), p. 102. Both acts of patronage can also be traced back to a single literary origin, the 47th history of John of Ephesos’s Lives of the Eastern Saints.
11 See James, Building and Rebuilding (cit. n. 4), pp. 55–56. James further states that “in the sixth century at least, [Theodora] possessed a reputation for church building”, an assertion James bases on the observation that Prokopios’s Buildings mentions “other religious foundations” of the empress; James, Building and Rebuilding (cit. n. 4), p. 63. It has to be noted though that Theodora’s sole religious foundation is the convent of Repentance, and that she is not mentioned as a founder or co-founder of any church.
name or could be an act of a third party as thanks to the empress for her patronage or to possibly woo her into becoming a patron. Acts of philanthropy such as public building or the support of persons – from individuals to larger communities and even whole towns – are interwoven with pious acts in a religious context like building churches and monasteries or donating money or objects to persons and institutions, and together form specific profiles or build images of imperial patrons.

The political dimension of all patronage in Byzantine society, especially of imperial patronage, has already been shown and for a sixth-century empress it was a well-established possibility of acting in public. All documented acts of patronage can be classified according to their nature: patronage could be civic or religious; in the form of countable units like the donation of money or construction of specific objects, or immaterial and uncountable like the support from an influential position. Patronage could establish new, or build on existing structures such as bestowing monetary or other charity upon an institution, or restoring or re-founding an institution and thus establishing a link with previous patrons, could have a larger or smaller audience, could be publicly accessible or only to a restricted group, or only at specific times, could be well known, much heard of and prestigious or only of minor importance or of importance to only a few. While these differentiations are already important in order to analyse critically a corpus of material connected with the empress as patron, they are absolutely indispensable when comparing the deeds of one empress or patron to another in an attempt to establish a pattern of (imperial) female patronage and to discuss aspects of a possible mimesis.

In regard to the literary sources we must keep in mind how we know about a certain foundation or act of patronage and not another – what made a sixth-century author decide that it was important, inevitable or possible to report or write about a certain occasion and omit another – and of the audience that had access to a text or for whom a text was created. The

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12 For example a city, an institution or a monument which was graced with imperial patronage and subsequently named after the empress.


14 Religious treatises dedicated to the empress also form part of her religious patronage, such as *Theodosios of Alexandria’s Tome against Themistios* or a similar treatise by Constantine of Laodikeia both composed while living in Constantinople under Theodora’s protection. See L. Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium*, AD 527–1204, London/New York 1999, p. 24.

15 Other instances such as diplomatic gift-giving (e.g. the gifts Theodora is said to have sent to the sister of the Persian emperor, *Malalas, Chronicle*, Book 18.61) or consular diptychs bearing the empress’s image do not qualify as imperial patronage.


17 McClanan utterly neglects this possibility, for example in her comparison to the Theodosian empresses, whose actions ‘Theodora supposedly “mirrors” in her display of philanthropia, and does not show how this suggested mimesis consists of more than just superficial similarities. See McClanan, *Representations* (cit. n. 4), pp. 94, 105.

18 JAMES, Empresses and Power (cit. n. 2), p. 19, has shown how authors have “redacted” history by omitting supposedly bad empresses and their actions. Similarly it seems possible that acts of patronage found inappropriate for an empress could suffer the same fate.
location of a certain act of patronage was another important issue, whether at the periphery or the centre of the empire and thus in immediate proximity to the emperors, at a renowned place, possibly with former imperial patronage, or a location with less obvious significance.¹⁹

A map featuring all securely located donations and foundations connected with Theodora (Fig. 1) provides an overview of her image as patron throughout the empire. Outside of Constantinople acts of patronage in a civic or profane context were mostly the erection or restoration of city walls and fortifications, especially in the border regions and newly conquered territories: epigrams on such structures can be found at the eastern border in Bostra²⁰ and Kyrrhos²¹, and in North Africa where Jean Durliat documented as many as fourteen epigrams on defensive walls in ten settlements, erected by the prefect Solomon between 539 and 544.²² Prokopios adds a few more acts of imperial patronage in these newly conquered territories in North

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¹⁹ See also James, Empresses and Power (cit. n. 2), pp. 153–154, for remarks on the importance of locations of imperial patronage.
²⁰ See McClanan, Representations (cit. n. 4), p. 94.
²² All the epigrams name Justinian, Theodora, and the prefect Solomon, during whose second prefecture the structures were erected. See J. Durliat, Les dédicaces d’ouvrages de défense dans l’Afrique byzantine, Rome 1981: Ain Bou Dries (no. 11), Bagai (no. 16), Bordj Hellal (nos. 1, 2), Calama (no. 14), Capsa (nos. 12, 13), Gadiaufala (no. 17), Madaura (no. 6), Thagura (no. 10), Thamugadi (nos. 19, 20, 21), Theveste (no. 8). For Solomon and the dates of his prefecture see p. 7.
Africa, namely a public bath in Carthage built by Justinian named Theodorianae\textsuperscript{23} and the city Vaga being surrounded by defence walls and subsequently called Theodoria in honour of the empress.\textsuperscript{24} Naming towns after the empress was a common practice: in today's Qasr Libya, Northern Libya, a floor mosaic from the sixth-century basilica features the inscription ΠΟΛΙΣ ΝΕΑ ΘΕΟΔΩΡΙΑΣ, that refers to the re-foundation of the city in honour of the empress; Malalas notes that the fortress Anasarthon in today's Syria was elevated to a town and renamed Theodorias,\textsuperscript{25} and Prokopios writes about the foundation of a city called Theodoropolis in Thrace\textsuperscript{26} and further lists two fortresses with the same name and another fortress called Pulchra Theodora in the same region.\textsuperscript{27} The author also speaks of another new city called Theodoropolis erected close to the Danube, and while he explicitly states that the settlement Theodora on the other side of the river did not receive any imperial support, sixth-century structures can also be found there.\textsuperscript{28} According to Malalas, Justinian created a new province near Antioch that he called Theodoria\textsuperscript{29} and we also know of a diocese in Thrace called Theodoroupolis.\textsuperscript{30}

In a theocracy like Byzantium, religious foundations were especially important, and building, funding and embellishing churches and monasteries were a primary imperial duty.\textsuperscript{31} Outside of Constantinople material evidence for religious foundations connected to the empress survives in three places: in Ravenna with its well-known mosaics, at St John near Ephesos and in Germa. In Ephesos, a traditional place of worship since antiquity, Justinian and Theodora re-founded the church of St John; the capitals on the colonnades still bear their monograms and also an epigram describing a (now lost) pictorial scene of Christ crowning the imperial couple has survived.\textsuperscript{32} The second location outside of Constantinople where Theodora’s monogram on a capital has been found is Germa, today’s Gümüşkonak in Turkey, which at times bore the name Theodoriaton after the empress.\textsuperscript{33} The capital, featuring her monogram on one side and Justinian’s on the other was found in the remains of what was probably the church of the Archangel Michael.\textsuperscript{34} Malalas’s Chronicle reports her to have founded two churches in the author’s hometown Antioch, another church dedicated to the Archangel Michael and the basilica of Anatolios, for which the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Prokopios, Buildings, VI. 5. 10.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Prokopios, Buildings, VI. 5.12–14. Theodorias can be identified with today’s Beja in Tunisia.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Malalas, Chronicle, Book 18. 31.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Prokopios, Buildings, IV.7.5.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Prokopios, Buildings, IV.11.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Prokopios, Buildings, IV. 6.15–18. Prokopios states that Justinian did not consider Theodora worthy of his attention as it was exposed to barbarians on the other side of the river, yet during the time of Justinian’s reign a defensive tower was constructed on the ruins of ancient Drobeta that was at the time – possibly subsequently – called Theodora. See “Drobeta Romania”, in: Stillwell, The Princeton Encyclopedia (cit. n. 21), p. 284.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Malalas, Chronicle, Book 18. 39.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Although the diocese is not identified with the foundation mentioned by Prokopios (see n. 26 above), the parallel in names should be noted. The earliest sources published in relation to this diocese are dated to the eighth century. See A. Küützer, Ostrakrien (Tabula Imperii Byzantini, 12), Vienna 2008, p. 671.
\item \textsuperscript{31} On the importance of religious patronage see James, Empresses and Power (cit. n. 2), p. 6.
\item \textsuperscript{33} See K. Belke, Galatien und Lykaonien (Tabula Imperii Byzantini, 4), Vienna 1984, p. 167.
\item \textsuperscript{34} See Belke, Galatien und Lykaonien (cit. n. 33), p. 168.
\end{itemize}
columns are said to have been sent from Constantinople.\textsuperscript{35} Another building supposedly erected by the empress is mentioned by John of Ephesos, who writes about a ξενοδόχη in Chios where Theodora also established monks and where many banished bishops resided... from time to time.\textsuperscript{36} Portable objects mentioned in the sources are a precious cross set with pearls Theodora had made and sent to Jerusalem, a donation Malalas describes immediately after the church foundations in Antioch,\textsuperscript{37} and another cross, given to the city of Sergiopolis by Justinian and Theodora, Evagrios Scholastikos mentions in his account of the siege of the city by Chosroes.\textsuperscript{38}

Malalas also provides us with one of the most interesting cases of patronage by Theodora, her profectio to the thermal springs in Pythia in 528. It is the only occasion known on which the empress supposedly left the city, accompanied by 4,000 people including patricians and cubiculii.\textsuperscript{39} The region of Bithynia, which she travelled through on her way to Pythia, is noteworthy for two reasons: firstly Bithynia is the only place in which Prokopios lets Theodora partake in any act of patronage outside of Constantinople, namely in securing a road together with Justinian leading into the Phrygian territory.\textsuperscript{40} More importantly though, Malalas’s account states that the empress [gave] generously to the churches in each place on her way,\textsuperscript{41} thus engaging in multiple acts of patronage during her journey. Looking at the path she might have taken (Fig. 2), one town is of special importance in regard to imperial patronage: Helenopolis, the empress Helena’s supposed place of birth, only a few kilometres away from Pythia. Prokopios is the only literary source to describe the imperial (if we are to believe Prokopios, Justinian’s) initiative of giving Helenopolis the appearance of a prosperous city in great detail; an aqueduct, public baths, churches, a palace, stoas and lodgings for the magistrates were built, thus making it a city worthy to bear the name of Helena. This step marks a certain triumph over Constantine, who had elevated the village to the

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig2.png}
\caption{Possible route for Theodora’s journey from Constantinople to Pythia in 528}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{35} Malalas, Chronicle, Book 17. 19. One can presume that such columns also bore capitals featuring the empress’s monogram.


\textsuperscript{37} Malalas, Chronicle, Book 17. 19.

\textsuperscript{38} Evagrios Scholastikos, Historia Ecclesiastica, 4. 28.

\textsuperscript{39} Malalas, Chronicle, Book 18. 25.

\textsuperscript{40} Prokopios, Buildings, V.3.12–15.

rank of a city and bestowed it with his mother’s name but then failed to erect any buildings of significance—out of his want of propriety Prokopios adds. Considering the tradition of female imperial patronage, the general association of empresses with Helena, and Prokopios’s notorious omission of Theodora from any more illustrious act of building patronage, it could be asked whether the revitalisation of Helenopolis should not be seen as an act of patronage initiated by the empress rather than the emperor.

While several acts of patronage in a religious context can be found in the literary sources, non-religious foundations outside of Constantinople are nearly absent in contemporary texts and are almost exclusively known through material evidence. As James has pointed out, one of the difficulties with literary sources is that rather than focusing on what empresses actually did, authors often represented what they thought was right for them to do or what they needed them to have done. A study of omission and representation of the empress Theodora as patron, confronting literary sources and material evidence, can best be undertaken in the capital of the empire and residence of the emperors, as it has the highest density of sources. Constantinople thus also serves as a good example to reflect on the three most cited authors in regard to the patronage of Theodora and Justinian: Prokopios, John of Ephesos, and John Malalas.

As the general point of reference for the “Age of Justinian” Prokopios of Caesarea is the most influential literary source for that period. His most relevant work in the context of imperial patronage is the encomium to the emperor, Buildings, in its preserved state probably written around 554 and unfinished. Prokopios belonged to the (male) Byzantine elite, and with the higher stratum of society being his aspired target audience for his works, Brubaker’s appraisal that he “imposed the hierarchy of Byzantine gender on his distribution of imperial patronage” is not surprising. On several occasions Prokopios lets Theodora act alongside Justinian: they convert a palace into a convent for former prostitutes, found the House of Isidoros and the House of Arkadios, two hospices near the church of Hagia Irene, and another large hospice for the temporary lodging of visitors to the capital. Prokopios further locates a depiction of Theodora on the mosaics at the Chalke gate, with the emperor and empress side by side rejoicing in the victories over the Goths and Vandals and mentions a statue on a purple column which the city dedicated to her in gratitude for a court built by Justinian at the public baths of Arkadianai. By reducing Theodora’s presence to an utmost minimum, Buildings had a vast impact on our modern perception of this empress as patron: out of the over thirty churches he describes as being erected or restored by the emperor in Const-

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42 Studied by L. Brubaker, Memories of Helena: Patterns in Imperial Female Matronage in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries, in: L. James (ed.), Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium, London/New York 1997, pp. 52–75, who claims that the association of imperial women with Helena would continue intermittently throughout the Byzantine period (p. 62).
43 See James, Empresses and Power (cit. n. 2), p. 67. It must be noted that this phenomenon can also be observed in modern scholarship, especially in regard to the range of action and capacities of women, including empresses.
44 For the date see A. Cameron, Procopius and the Sixth Century, London 1985, pp. 10–12.
46 Prokopios, Buildings, I. 9.5–10, the Convent of Repentance or Metanoia, a building also prominently featured in the Secret History, XXVII. 5–6.
47 Prokopios, Buildings, I. 2.17.
48 Prokopios, Buildings, I. 11.27.
49 Prokopios, Buildings, I. 10.15–19.
tinople, not a single one is associated with the empress, leaving the Metanoia as the only religious foundation attributed to her.\textsuperscript{51}

The Monophysite John of Ephesos draws a distinctly different picture of Theodora’s patronage in the capital: in the hagiographic \textit{Lives of the Eastern Saints} as well as his \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica} he speaks of numerous acts of supporting and protecting Monophysites, offering houses and money to holy men. Theodora supposedly also established monasteries for both men and women, inside and outside the city,\textsuperscript{52} most prominently the congregation at the palace of Hormisdas,\textsuperscript{53} where she and Justinian resided before moving to the Great palace in 527. What John of Ephesos and Prokopios have in common is that they both create an image of Theodora after her death, exploiting her figure posthumously for their own aims.

John Malalas’s \textit{Chronicle} is the only source written during Theodora’s lifetime to depict her as an independent donor. She first appears in Book 17, covering the reign of Justin I, as the patron of the two churches in Antioch and the cross sent to Jerusalem, shortly after having been made \textit{augousta} as the wife of the co-emperor in 527. The only philanthropic deed the author ascribes to the empress in the capital is her personal freeing of all Constantinople’s prostitutes by buying them off their brothel-keepers and afterwards presenting the girls with a set of clothes and dismissing them with one \textit{nomisma} each.\textsuperscript{54} As of the year 532, when a notable shift in emphasis from Antioch to Constantinople occurred,\textsuperscript{55} there are no more accounts of any acts of patronage of Theodora, although she appears as sending a diplomatic gift to the sister of the king of Persia.\textsuperscript{56} Possible explanations for this lack of her representation as an active patron after 532 are Malalas’s use of different source material, most likely the \textit{City Chronicle} of Constantinople, or the later composition of this part of the text,\textsuperscript{57} potentially even after the empress’s death in 548.

The material evidence in the former capital suggests yet another image of Theodora as patron. Capitals bearing her monogram can be found in conjunction with four different buildings, all of them churches: the church of Hagia Sophia; the church of Hagia Irene; the church of the Sts Sergios and Bacchos, which also features a dedicatory epigram of Justinian and Theodora; and an unspecified church, a capital from which was found at the Hebdomon.\textsuperscript{58} Comparing the three major literary sources with other evidence (Fig. 3) shows how many different images of the empress as patron were created and could be experienced in Constantinople. If we are to believe John of Ephesos, the city was filled with Monophysites and their monasteries, whereas Prokopios has Theodora engage only in the co-foun-
Theodora’s patronage in Constantinople according to the authors Prokopios, John of Ephesus, and John Malalas, other contemporary literary sources and material findings.


60 The latter translation was suggested by R. Krautheimer, Again Saints Sergius and Bacchus at Constantinople, in: Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik, 23, 1974, p. 252.

61 Cyril Mango attributes the foundation of the church to Theodora in the context of the Monophysite monastery established by her in this palace and dates the building as late as the 530s, thus making it contemporary to the Hagia Sophia. See Mango, The Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus (cit. n. 3), and Mango, The Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus Once Again (cit. n. 3). Recently Mango’s conclusions have been strongly questioned by B. Croke, Justinian, Theodora, and the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, in: Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 60, 2006, pp. 25–63, who suggests an earlier date in the mid 520s and in his conclusive statement even ascribes the initiative for the construction to Justinian alone. Although his arguments for a date around 527, shortly after the coronation of Justinian and Theodora, are compelling (the epigram refers to Theodora as God-crowned, thus making 527 the earliest possible year for its completion), Croke’s apparent neglect for the presence of both the emperor and empress as patrons in...
The Hagia Sophia however, the “Great Church”, is rarely discussed in regard to Theodora despite the similarity of evidence to the church of Sts Sergios and Bacchos. Her name is present throughout the church alongside her husband Justinian’s; numerous monograms of Theodora (ΘΕΟΔΩΡΑΣ) and of the empress (ΔΙΑ ΚΟΥΣΤΑΣ) are carved into capitals and also appear on the plates of the bronze rings around the sixteen larger columns in the naos. In his description of the church written around the time of the second dedication in December 562, following the reconstruction due to the collapse of the first dome, Paul Silentiarios tells us of two more occurrences where the imperial couple is presented jointly as patrons of the church: Their names – probably also in form of a monogram – were featured on the middle panels of the chancel screen, one of the most prominent places in the church. Additionally he describes some altar cloths of the church, undoubtedly also an imperial gift, that the priests should unfold… along its four sides and show to the countless crowd, with one of them depicting the countless deeds of the Emperors, guardians of the city on its hem, including hospitals for the sick and churches, while others showed the monarchs joined together, here by the hand of Mary, the Mother of God, there by that of Christ.

Through its proximity to the erection of the church another text, written in the 530s and itself an imperial commission, surpasses other literary sources in describing the church and its foundation: Romanos the Melode's fifty-fourth kontakion On Earthquakes and Fires. Kontakion 54 was to be sung on the Wednesdays of the third week of Lent and is the only one of Romanos’s surviving kontakia that was composed in direct response to historical events, namely the Nika revolt of 532 and its consequences. Internal evidence suggests that it was completed before the dedication of the church, and while Johannes Koder assumes that it was recited only once before, during Lent 537, Eva Catafygiotu Topping argues for a date as early as 532 or 533. The kontakion consists of a proem and 25 stanzas, each of ten verses, with the imperial couple appearing in nearly each of the last eight stanzas.

While there are fewer capitals with monograms of the empress than of the emperor, the bronze plates show an equal number of monograms, all stating of Justinian on the one side and of Theodora on the other, alternately facing the naos. This observation was first published by E.M. Antoniades, Ekphrasis tes Hagias Sophias, II, Leipzig 1908, p. 32. One monogram stating ΔΙΑ ΚΟΥΣΤΑΣ can also be found in the church of Sts Sergios and Bacchos, see Kraemer, Kampferkapitelle mit den Monogrammen Kaiser Justinus II. (cit. n. 32), p. 185.


Tr. by Mango, Art of the Byzantine Empire (cit. n. 61), p. 89.

Kontakion 54 has the number 23 in J. Koder, Romanos Melodos: Die Hymnen, 1, Stuttgart 2005, as his counting is derived from the hymns’ position in the church year. For a summary of the translations and editions of his hymns see Koder, Romanos Melodos, pp. 49–51.

Stanza 22 and 23 speak of the church as still being in a state of reconstruction.

Koder, Romanos Melodos (cit. n. 65), p. 413.


For an analysis of the structure of the kontakion see Catafygiotou Topping, On Earthquakes and Fires (cit. n. 68),
Justinian and Theodora – referred to as the emperor (βασιλεύων) and his wife (σύνευνος) or simply the emperors (βασιλεῖς) – are shown as saviours of the city through their prayers and subsequently, in stanza 23, as the patrons re-building the city and the church of Hagia Sophia:

Today the royal pair, piously discharging their imperial duties, have done things truly magnificent, brilliant, worthy of wonder, far surpassing the accomplishments of previous emperors.

In a very short time they have raised up the entire city (…).

Holy Sophia, the very home of our church, is being reconstructed with such skill that it imitates Heaven, the throne of God (…).70

The preceding stanzas name certain previous emperors whose accomplishments Justinian and Theodora have surpassed: first Solomon in stanza 21, who was by that time an established topos of Christian rhetoric for the patronage of churches and who had built and adorned a temple only for it to be destroyed and ridiculed.71

In stanza 22 Constantine and the faithful Helena built on the same location the churches of the Resurrection and Sion two hundred and fifty years after the destruction of the temple, only to be surpassed in the same stanza by the pace in which in Constantinople the rebuilding started only one day after its fall – with the imperial couple described as generous donors. Thus, after re-founding the city of Helenopolis some years earlier, the imperial couple – the emperor Justinian and his wife andaugousta Theodora – triumphs once more over the emperor Constantine and his mother and augousta Helena. Unlike the empress’s predecessors, who, since Pulcheria, were referred to as “New”, “Second” or “Orthodox” Helenas,72 Theodora is not just another “New Helena” just as Justinian is not a “New Constantine”.73 By showing their triumph over these idealized rulers, they at once distance themselves from the claim of any descendant of this imperial line74 and at the same time create a new imagery of the ideal imperial female and male patrons and founders, acting together as the imperial couple. While kontakion 54 has been studied only in regard to its significance to the emperor Justinian,75 it might be the most important source for our understanding of the contemporary view of Theodora as patron. An imperial commission itself, it can be seen as an instruction of how the foundation of Hagia Sophia was to be understood, having a far greater impact than any epigram, monogram, or other literary source as it was recited during the liturgy and was thus “legible” even to the illiterate, both within the church of Hagia Sophia and in churches all over the empire.76

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71 For the use of Solomon as topos from the fourth century see J. Koder, Justinians Sieg über Salomon, in: Thymiama ste mneme tes Laskarinas Boura, Athens 1994, pp. 135–142, esp. p. 136.
72 For empresses being hailed as “New”, “Second” or “Orthodox” Helenas see James, Empresses and Power (cit. n. 2), pp. 14, 91, 152.
74 One might think of Juliana Anicia and her epigram in the church of St Polyeuktos, see e.g. C. L. Connor, The Epigram in the Church of Hagios Polyeuktos in Constantinople and its Byzantine Response, in: Byzantion, 69, 1999, pp. 479–527.
75 Barkhuizen, for example, completely ignores Theodora’s presence in this kontakion, see J. H. Barkhuizen, Romanos Melodos: On Earthquakes and Fires, in: Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik, 45, 1995, pp. 1–18.
Despite the diversity of her actions and engagement, Theodora’s importance as a patron is still underrated by comparison with her husband Justinian’s, in a tradition of relying on Prokopios as the most valuable source for the mid-sixth century. Yet other evidence for her patronage, especially the sources predating the empress’s death in 548 and the presence of her name throughout the empire, show a completely different picture, strongly suggesting a reassessment not only of the image of Theodora as patron but also of Justinian for the years 527 to 548. Although the image of Theodora as patron has often been redrawn, surviving glimpses of its original appearance present the empress as a great donor, an active patron and the co-founder of many churches, including the most splendid of all, the Hagia Sophia.

Illustration credits: Fig. 1: Map by M. Breier, University of Vienna, Department of Geography and Regional Research, with additions by the author. – Fig. 2: Map drawn by K. Bichler, University of Applied Arts Vienna, by instruction of the author. – Fig. 3: Original map from Prokopios, The Anecdota or Secret History, ed. H. B. Dewing, London 1935, p. 361, with additions by the author.