

tial successors so close at hand. Justinian and Theodora wanted only those people around them whom they could trust. The atmosphere within the palace was paranoid. To Procopius,¹¹ it seemed that the appointed destiny of Hypatius and Pompeius had at last caught up with them.

Flavius Hypatius, the eldest nephew of Anastasius, had had a long military career, although hardly a distinguished one. He was a cautious officer of only moderate ability but had never lost the confidence of the emperors he served. When his uncle died, he was in Antioch serving as Master of the Soldiers, and no one seems to have considered him seriously as Anastasius' successor. His theology seems to have been flexible; his career, begun under the pro-Monophysite Anastasius, continued under the Chalcedonian Justin I. Only in 529 did Justinian replace him as commander of the armed forces in Oriens by Belisarius.¹² Hypatius had hitherto shown no signs either of ambition or of disloyalty to Justinian, though some must have thought him open to suggestion. When the mob learned that he had been sent home from the palace, they rushed there to drag him out and make him emperor. His first reaction was terror, and his wife made a desperate effort to pull him out of the rioters' hands, but willy-nilly he was carried off to the oval forum of Constantine, nowadays marked by the stump of Constantine's column, and there the people crowned him with a gold torque. Meanwhile the senators gathered in the city's second senate house, which had escaped burning. Many of them disliked Justinian and hated Theodora, and now they shifted to what they perceived as the winning side. Hypatius had the sort of background they trusted. Justinian's expulsion of the senators from the palace had backfired. He began to consider flight.

Thus far he had retreated, attempting to conciliate the mob. It was an ineffective policy that may even have inflamed the situation. But he had little choice. The state was ill-equipped to maintain public order. Cities lacked anything like a modern police force, and in a crisis imperial officials had to turn to the army, which was trained for the battlefield, not for street fighting.¹³ The troops who arrived from Thrace had failed to restore order. Fortunately there were two able commanders in the palace with Justinian, Mundo, a Gepid prince in Justinian's service, who led a corps of Herulians, and Belisarius, who had returned from the Persian front with his bodyguard of veteran soldiers. But the situation was grim. Justinian lost his nerve. He was about to load money on a fast ship and escape from the city. At this point,

Procopius, our main source for the riot, who may have been besieged in the palace himself and witnessed the incident he describes, gives Theodora a great dramatic scene that brings her vividly to life. Perhaps it possesses more poetic than historical truth, but nonetheless it is a vivid illustration of her prestige at court.¹⁴

Hypatius, who had been acclaimed in the Hippodrome, was at first reluctant but recovered his courage once he got word that Justinian had fled and the way was clear. The senators no longer debated whether to support the rioters. Rather the question now was how to act effectively to bring down Justinian. Procopius describes their debate with vivid imagination. Origenes rose to speak. This is his sole appearance in history, and if he is not merely a literary construct, all we can say about him is that he held the rank of *illustris*, for only *illustris* could speak in the senate, but that is all we know.¹⁵ He was the spokesman for senatorial opinion. He advised caution, pointing out that an attack on the Daphne Palace where Justinian and his court were besieged was unnecessary as well as dangerous: Hypatius could just as well be installed in some other palace in Constantinople and make it his base for the struggle. Origenes represented the sort of cautious prudence that lets zero hour pass by and loses the struggle by default. In the drama that Procopius describes, he serves as a foil for Theodora, whom the crisis stimulated to a moment of glory.

Within the Daphne Palace, the arguments went back and forth. Justinian was badly frightened. Then Theodora stood up and spoke. There is a rhetorical flavor to her speech that can hardly reproduce exactly the words she uttered, but she was an alumna of the theater and must have appreciated the drama of the moment.

As for the belief that a woman ought not show daring in the presence of men, or act boldly when men hesitate, in the present crisis, I think, we have no time left to ask if we accept it or not. For when what we hold is in extreme peril, we are left with no course of action except to make the best plan we can to deal with the plight we face. As for me, I believe that flight is not the correct course to take now, if ever, even if it serves to save our lives. For no person who has been born can escape death, but for a man who has once been emperor to become a runaway—that we cannot bear! I hope I never have the imperial purple stripped from me nor live to the day when the people I meet fail to address me as empress!

So if what you want is to save yourself, O Emperor, it's no problem. We have plenty of money; over yonder is the sea, and here are the boats. Yet ask yourself if the time will come, once you are safe, when you would gladly give up security for death. As for me, there is an ancient maxim I hold true, that says kingship makes a good burial shroud.

It was a splendid speech. This was a proud empress who had climbed from the dregs of society to the peak of the social order, and she would die rather than slide down the ladder again. She would be *despoinis* and *basissa* or she would be nothing! If the choice was between slaughtering the mob or laying aside the purple, she was for slaughter. To be sure, the proverb she quotes is not quite right, and Procopius may himself have made the emendation with concealed irony. The old maxim said that *tyranny* made a good winding sheet,¹⁶ and "tyranny" was very different from "kingship." But it would never do to call Justinian's regime a tyranny, although massacring one's enemies was the mark of a tyrant rather than a true king.

In any case, whatever words Theodora may actually have used in the moment of crisis, she rallied the beleaguered cadre of loyalists. Belisarius with the battle-hardened veterans of his guard and Mundo with his corps of barbarian Herulians attacked the mob that had gathered in the Hippodrome to acclaim Hypatius. The Blue and Green alliance was already beginning to crack, for the eunuch Narses, one of the ablest tacticians the empire was to produce, had been judiciously distributing bribes. But it was the massacre in the Hippodrome that saved the regime. It was ruthless and bloody, and it worked. Some thirty-five thousand were killed.

Hypatius and Pompeius were seized as they gazed down on the blood-bath from the imperial loge, and they were brought before the emperor who found their protestations unconvincing. He condemned them to death. Hypatius made a pitiful attempt at a defense: he claimed he had brought the mob to the Hippodrome so that Justinian could massacre them, but Justinian, with some sarcasm, asked why he had waited to do it until half the city was burned. By Tuesday, 20 January, exactly a week after the riot began, a stunned quiet pervaded the city. People stayed off the streets and only a few shops selling food staples were open. It was several days before the markets returned to normal.

Our chief account of the riot comes from Procopius, who recognized the key role Theodora's courage played, even though he did not like her. Other

accounts add details. Count Marcellinus, who was adding a sequela Latin chronicle at this time and writes as a contemporary, claims that tasius' nephews, Hypatius, Pompeius, and Probus, were the ringleaders and there was a legend that got as far west as the land of the Franks: the revolt was a protest against Theodora whose mere presence in the marked a social revolution and offended the old elite.¹⁸ From the provinces there is the Syriac *Chronicle* of Zachariah of Mytilene, who blames John the Cappadocian, the praetorian prefect.¹⁹ He had been pointed to his office less than a year before, but he had set about his work with alarming vigor, and in Constantinople people were loud with their complaints and wanted John dismissed. Their outcries were constant, reports in the *Chronicle*, and violence escalated to the point that the workshops were closed and the palace doors shut. The Blues and Greens gathered in the Hippodrome and made Hypatius emperor. Mundo was the general who led the slaughter in the Hippodrome; Belisarius is not mentioned. Distant Constantinople has exaggerated the number of victims; "Zachariah reports that more than eighty thousand. He also reported that when Antheus' nephews were brought before Justinian, he would have spared them if not been for Theodora. "His [Justinian's] consort grew angry, and she said to God and by him, and also adjured him to have the men put to death if they were sent to the seashore and killed and thrown into the sea." They were sent to the seashore and killed and thrown into the sea. "They may have sought to display a compassionate public image, but let us not threaten her grasp on power and she could be merciless. In the *Niketa* she showed her steely side. Justinian must have regarded her there as a new respect. He himself was more inclined to leniency; he pardoned Pompeius posthumously and no doubt Pompeius too and restored their property to their children."²¹