

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

BYZANTINE
STUDIES

Edited by

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with

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS



III.13. SOCIETY

CHAPTER III.13.1

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

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THE study of the roles of women in Byzantium can be seen to date back as far as Edward Gibbon with his low opinion of the empress Theodora, based on the more lurid passages of Prokopios and repeated in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* 'veiled in the obscurity of a learned language' (Gibbon, ed. Bury, 1897). The focus on the lives of individual women, above all empresses, has tended to dominate work on women, from Charles Diehl's *Figures byzantines* (1906) to Lynda Garland's *Byzantine Empresses* (1999). However, as feminism became increasingly accepted in the academic field, so the study of women's roles changed. Scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by both feminism and Marxism, was concerned to uncover individual non-imperial women and their life histories, to set women in Byzantium into their legal and socio-economic contexts, and to explore the practical aspects of their lives (Cameron 1975; Beaucamp 1977; Laiou 1981, 1985; Herrin 1982, 1983; Talbot 1985; Garland 1988). In the late 1980s and 1990s, emphasis shifted to considering the ideologies surrounding women, what it meant to be a woman in Byzantium and what the Byzantines thought of women (Galatariotou 1984–5; Brown 1988; Harvey 1990; Hill 1999). More recently, scholarship has concerned itself with questions of gender and gendering, with setting Byzantine women into context alongside Byzantine men (papers in James 1997) and with rereading primary sources for mentalities about women (Peltomaa 2005).

These different approaches have provided us with a reasonable amount of information about women in Byzantium. Most crucial in our understanding of the role

of Byzantine women is that virtually all of our information comes through the filter of male sources, written or visual. Women tend to be spoken for rather than to speak for themselves and so their appearance in the historical record needs to be considered in this light. In looking for women's roles, we need to not only read and look at what the sources, visual and written, tell us but what they do not tell us and the influences that colour their perceptions (Smythe 1997).

It is fair to say that Byzantine society was misogynist and patriarchal, in our terms, for the prevailing ideology towards women regarded them as inferior beings to men, weak, untrustworthy, and ranked with children, the mentally deranged, and slaves as unfit to give public testimony. They were licentious temptresses, possessing an uncontrolled and uncontrollable sexuality, and their proper place was in the home, away from any form of public life (Brown 1988). Men and male behaviour was the norm; women's roles were conditioned by this.

This was an ideology based on the teachings of the Church. The Fathers described women as inferior and weak in comparison to men, for they were responsible, via Eve, for the Fall of Man. Women were also liable either to indulge in witchcraft and sorcery or to be possessed by demons. They were credulous to a fault. They also were ever-present sources of temptation, and instruments of the devil. However, thanks to being created in God's image and thanks to the redeeming actions of the Virgin Mary, women were also perceived by the Church as spiritually equal to men. These two mutually contradictory roles underpin their roles in Byzantine society (Galatariotou 1984–5).

Based simply on this, one might assume that women's roles in Byzantium were severely circumscribed. The issue here is that ideologies represent an ideal state of affairs. Despite the established ideology, women did succeed in taking a greater role in Byzantine society than it might suggest (Hill 1997; Smythe 1997).

Prevailing dogma suggested that because woman was the cause of Man's Fall and an ever-present source of temptation, her greatest threat was through her sexuality and the undermining thereby of male chastity and virtue. To overcome this perceived danger, a variety of female role models were sanctified by the early Church: the virgin, the transvestite, the repentant whore, the woman denying her husband. These models argued a rejection of sexuality (Galatariotou 1984–5). However, the 'normal' life of a woman involved marriage and then motherhood, placing ideals and reality into conflict, a tension between a controlled and productive sexuality and its total denial. So, ideology shifted, and increasingly, marriage was perceived as the appropriate role for a woman, closely followed by motherhood. Virgin, wife, mother, and widow were, essentially, the few acceptable Christian roles for women. This changing ideology can be traced in several ways; one is in the changing nature of female sanctity. In the Early Christian period, female saints tended to be martyrs, virgins, transvestites, repentant prostitutes such as Mary of Egypt and Pelagia, and women, like Matrona, who had left their husbands to dedicate their lives to

Christ (Patlagean 1976; Harvey 1990). By the ninth century, these role models had changed and the ideal female saint was the holy housewife, women such as St Mary the Younger or Thomais of Lesbos who were trapped in abusive marriages with children, but who nevertheless remained, practising piety within that marriage.

In looking at actual women, we gain a clearer idea of how ideology and reality interacted in daily life. The nature of the Byzantine state offered little, if any, access to public life for women. Below the emperor, there were three key political and public components: church, army, and the civil administration. In all of these, women were prevented from holding positions because of their sex. As in Rome, women did not operate in public office: a woman with power over a man was an object of grave suspicion. Women's political, or 'public' life was thus severely restricted. At home, however, in the so-called 'private' sphere of the family, women held a larger role. The single monogamous marriage was privileged by both State and Church and the family born of marriage became an increasingly important social institution. Praise of the good wife and mother involved in pious works increases in the writings of Byzantine men, suggesting an increase in the ideological status of these roles. Women were responsible for the upbringing of children, sons as well as daughters in their formative years, and for training these children appropriately (Laiou 1992). After motherhood, the next most important role of the woman, of whatever class, was household maintenance. Women of all classes and backgrounds did possess important personal, economic, and property rights, guaranteed by law. A woman retained possession of her dowry (though her husband administered it) and could alienate inherited property; widows retained the right of ownership and administration of family property, including dowry goods (Beaucamp 1977, 1990; Laiou 1985). They also had authority over their sons. Judicial acts reveal women appearing in courts to testify and plead successfully for divorce, for the resolution of property disputes, and for control over property. Daughters as well as sons had the right to share the inheritance of their parents and property was transferred along female lines (Beaucamp 1977, 1990). Within the family, women were expected to be active in economic issues and the reality of women's ownership of property is a key factor in understanding Byzantine family life.

In describing what women could do, however, one must always be conscious of what women could not do in relation to what men could and did. Domestically, the honour of the home was vested in women so that the virginity of daughters and the virtue of wives were highly prized and protected. Where male sexuality was acceptable, the sexual misbehaviour of young women was punished; any girl who lost her virginity to a man other than her betrothed after her betrothal could be repudiated by her fiancé. Nevertheless, rape was increasingly recognized as a crime in which the rapist should be punished, as distinct from adultery, where both parties were considered equally guilty (Laiou 1993). The role of wife and mother was a restricted role; it was under the control of Church, State, and parents, all of whom

played a part in constructing the marriage bond. What say, if any, the individual woman might have had in the choice of her life's partner is very uncertain.

To understand women's roles in Byzantium, it is always important to keep the two aspects of ideology and factual information in balance. Thus, whilst evidence exists for women fulfilling practical roles in terms of economic activity, this has to be balanced against the question of whether sources record what it was appropriate or inappropriate for women to do, rather than what they actually did do. Whilst little is known specifically about the lives of female peasants, women seem to have participated in agricultural labour but only in certain areas: harvesting, but not ploughing or shepherding (Bryer 2002). Is this because they could only undertake roles that kept them near the home or because it was only acceptable to record them as performing such activities as kept them near the home? In towns, they seem to have been involved in a variety of trades, ranging from doctors and midwives to tavern keepers, bath-keepers, washerwomen, servants, bakers, sellers of food, dancers, and prostitutes (Kalavrezou 2003). However, many of these were roles not highly respected and indeed were perceived simply as variants on prostitution.

Women could be involved in trade, and indeed, it was because they owned property that they could be involved in trade above the level of the street-seller, investing their money in shops and even able to act as money-lenders (Laiou 1999). The major trade we really see them participating in is cloth manufacturing and selling; the ideological expectation that a good woman was only involved in spinning and weaving is perhaps an underlying factor here. The other major trade for women recorded in our male sources is prostitution. Although at least two empresses may have been prostitutes, this did not make it a creditable way of life but rather an exemplar. Repentant whores still featured as heroines of spectacular conversions and the charitable building of 'houses of repentance' for those who wished to leave this way of life indicated that prostitution was a lifestyle to regret.

Although women's lives may not have been as secluded as prevailing ideologies might have desired, still they were restricted. We see women leaving the home for a variety of legitimate, but limited and ideologically sound, reasons, including attendance at church services, visits to the baths, to shrines, to family members, to the poor, buying and selling, and participating in celebrations marking civil or imperial events and even in riots. How far women were educated is unclear. Female literacy was not common and tended to be the preserve of the upper classes. Although there are many references to mothers teaching their children the Psalms and bible stories, these women may well have known such texts by heart rather than through reading. Female writers remain exceptions. We know of very few after the fifth century: Kassia the hymnographer in the ninth century and Anna Komnene, the sole female historian from Byzantium, in the twelfth. Only imperial and aristocratic women are known as bibliophiles.

The ideology of womanhood had an effect on the religious lives of women. In religious terms, women could not hold any of the priestly offices, for this would

have involved her holding superiority over a male. Indeed, stories of female saints are forced to confront and deal with this problem in a variety of ways. Within the Church, women, usually of noble birth, could found monasteries, rule convents, and hold all offices within the convent apart from that of priest. For noblewomen, the nunnery could become a family centre and place of power, passed down the generations (Talbot 1985; Weyl Carr 1985; Galatariotou 1988). For the non-aristocrat, the nunnery might represent a haven away from the roles of wife and mother; it might also represent a prison for unwanted or unsuitable daughters, where these served as drudges to the aristocratic lady. Although it is possible that women were a significant force in Iconoclasm and were particularly devoted to the use of icons in religious worship, it is also possible that their appearance in the historical record at this point is fictional, designed to make a point about the unnatural nature of events (Herrin 1982, 2000; Cormack 1997).

As has been noted, women's political power in Byzantium was limited. Princesses were useful for diplomatic marriages. Nuns and abbesses, the latter usually noble by birth, might influence religious activity and very occasionally interfere in court politics, usually with little result. Noble ladies held high positions at court in the empress's household, they founded monasteries, organized literary circles, served as patrons of the arts (Runciman 1984). The sixth-century noblewoman Anicia Juliana, who had close imperial connections, succeeded, through her wealth and connections, in disturbing the authority of the emperor Justinian (Harrison 1989).

Nevertheless, we should continue to read across the grain of the sources (Harvey 1990). Why do empresses and holy women feature in the historical sources, both visual and written? Part of the answer is that they did in fact wield some sort of power or influence, that they were significant in the events that histories describe and that images depict. Another part is that, as women, they could be used as role models to illustrate success, failure, appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Thus one eighth-century historian could cite the empress Eirene, who restored the icons in 787, as an example of God operating through the weak and virtuous—a widow-woman and her orphaned son—whilst the Iconoclasts could denounce her restoration of icons as 'female frivolity' (James 2001). In this way, Eirene serves as a symbol as well as a guide to actual historical events.

Empresses do appear to have held some form of political power. It seems clear that 'empress' was an official position in the organizational structure of the empire. Like the emperor, the empress had no place in law, and all that entailed. If an emperor died leaving a young heir, then it was expected that the child's mother would act as regent; if an emperor was unable to carry out his duties, then his wife stepped in: no emperor ever had a regent who was not a female relative. The office of empress appeared in other areas of public life. Empresses appeared on coins, that most public demonstration of the imperial self-image. The representation of the empress in art also served to emphasize her official role.

The extent of an empress's power is, however, unclear. Although women's influence in the public domain was often exercised through their access to more powerful male figures, it should be stressed that this was the way in which less powerful men also operated. What the careers of empresses reveal is that, unsurprisingly, women had access to political power through their relationship with men. This might be as sister (Pulcheria), as mother (Eirene, the second Theodora, Theophano), as wife (Ariadne, Theodora, Sophia), or as daughter (Ariadne, whose husbands became emperor through marriage to her) (Garland 1999; James 2001; McClanan 2002). Throughout Byzantine history there are many examples where the empress survived her husband and the passing of power depended in large part on her, thanks not to her birth but to her position as imperial widow. This suggests a formalized role for the empress, an official access to political power that depended on her position, not her personality. In the absence of an imperial male (the only figure in the Byzantine political system who outranked the empress), the office of empress was the most important in hierarchical terms. As a result, the role of regent was a part of the empress's position, either when the emperor left an under-age heir (as with Eirene, for example; Herrin 2001) or, as in the case of Sophia, when the emperor was incapable of ruling (Cameron 1975). Then civil government was in her hands: the empress-regent appointed and dismissed officials and had some control over taxes and the judiciary.

Nevertheless, the prevailing ideology of inferior woman served to restrict her ability to act. To be successful, an empress-regent was obliged to be on good terms with her patriarch; those who were not tended to run into problems, as Theophano discovered. As for the army, since women did not command armies, an empress was obliged to keep her successful generals sweet or run the risk of being overthrown. For a woman, the easiest way round this issue was to marry a general or appoint a loyal general but the drawback was that the general might take power for himself. Theophano, who attempted to retain her position by marrying a successful general, was promptly superseded by her new husband; Sophia, who hoped to rule through nominees, was relegated by them to a secondary role. Only Eirene successfully negotiated this issue, by appointing eunuchs to the chief positions of both civil and military authorities. As castrated men, eunuchs were disbarred from seeking imperial power for themselves, since the emperor had to be bodily intact, and thus presented a limited threat to the empress's authority.

Changing patterns in female imperial power may reflect a change in women's roles, though there is not enough evidence to be certain of this. In the early period, there is more evidence for empresses involving themselves in the running of the empire, with women such as Eudoxia, Pulcheria, Verina, Theodora, Sophia, and Martina leaving a mark on events of the fifth to seventh centuries. This is also a period with evidence of female involvement in intellectual circles (the philosopher Hypatia) and when the image of female sanctity was that of virgins resisting the advances of their affianced husbands and prostitutes repenting spectacularly of

their way of life. Women founded churches and commissioned manuscripts, as did Anicia Juliana; they built hospitals.

Between the seventh and eleventh centuries, the surviving evidence for empresses is much less, perhaps because the empire was concerned above all with its military survival. Two empresses were responsible for the restoration of icons during the periods of Iconoclasm, one of whom, the empress Eirene, was the only ruling Byzantine empress. However, one of the dominant images of empresses from this period is as wives and mothers. The other iconophile empress, Theodora, is portrayed in written sources as anxious for the salvation of her iconoclast husband and regent for her son (Herrin 2001): it is in this period that the holy housewife comes to the fore. Although the empress Eirene was responsible for buildings, much less evidence survives of women's patronage from this period, though the same is, to an extent, true of men's.

From the early eleventh century, empresses and imperial women more generally held an increasingly significant role. From the empress Zoe through to the women of the Komnenian dynasty, women did on occasion wield imperial power for themselves and certainly provided a force to be reckoned with (Hill 1999). Women's patronage of buildings was considerable and their presence in literary circles notable. Increasingly as an aristocratic class emerged within Byzantium from the eleventh century, noblewomen appear to have had an increasing role to play within the prevailing ideology as bearers of lineage and property. Female literacy and patronage of the arts among the upper classes seems to have increased in this period. Women even feature in literary romances, indicating a certain exaltation of femininity and love. New female saints are rare however, in this period, and tend to fit the holy mother model. Nevertheless, however we might see women's roles as changing, the ideology that ranked them as second to men did not. That a class of aristocratic women might arise says more about the rise of an aristocracy than a rise of women (Hill 1997).

In understanding women's roles in Byzantium, we have always to remember that our sources do not simply tell us what women did. What they choose to tell us is informed by attitudes to women and to female behaviour and to the role that authors and patrons see specific women fulfilling in the text or image. We are allowed to see certain aspects of women's lives, but we need always to remind ourselves that this is a partial and biased picture and to understand it in terms of male ideologies about women.

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Further Reading

General introductory books and articles on women in Byzantium include Grosdidier de Matons 1967; Clark 1993; Laiou 1999. There has been a recent spate of publications on empresses: Garland 1999; Hill 1999; James 2001; Herrin 2001; McClanan 2002. For ideologies surrounding women, see Galatariotou 1984–5; Clark 1994; Hill 1997; and Smythe 1997, and for law, Beaucamp 1990. Kalavrezou 2003 is the catalogue with introductory essays from an exhibition about women's daily life in Byzantium.