

# The Position and Power of Women in Byzantine Society

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## Introduction

The position and power of women in Byzantine society is of vital concern to feminist historians and theologians seeking to recover the role for women. For them, unless the past is understood, it is difficult to determine just when and how the position of women began to be subordinated and, hence, where and how to begin to reclaim their rightful heritage. Feminists clearly see that women were active in the ministry of Christ and the early Church. However, during the Byzantine Empire, through the interaction of the State and Church, women had been reduced to a secondary role defined for them by men, and moreover generally accepted by women as their appropriate place. Indeed, how this hierarchical society in fact saw the second sex is one of the most intriguing aspects of Byzantine history.

This essay will explore and discuss the position and power of women in Byzantine society in an attempt to firstly capture the paradox that women represented to the Byzantine mind which was confronted and sometimes confounded by this second class sex<sup>1</sup>, and secondly to determine if it is, in any event, a realistic task to endeavour today to unravel their role in Byzantine history so as to be able to determine how that role was subverted and hence begin to reappropriate their proper role.

## The Byzantine Mind

In order to understand the role and position of women, it is important to discuss the general mindset of the Byzantine male that gave value to that role. It is true to say that "history is largely written by and about the powerful".<sup>2</sup> As the chroniclers and writers in Byzantine history were overwhelmingly men, who focused upon men in power, most references to women were, apart from some notable and isolated exceptions, incidental, tangential or otherwise insignificant. Further, as Mango states:

The main problem that occurred to the Byzantine mind with regard to the peoples of the earth concerned their status in the plan of divine providence.<sup>3</sup>

Hence the overwhelming content of Byzantine writings surviving today relate to hagiographical, liturgical, theological, exegetical and other religious commentaries. Their interpretation and understanding of the secular world was of little interest to them. Further, religion permeated every level of thought with fierce intensity throughout the life of the Empire. Although written at the end of the fourth century, the comments of St Gregory of Nyssa that:

If you ask a man for change, he will give you a piece of philosophy concerning the Begotten and the Unbegotten; if you enquire the price of a loaf, he replies: The Father is greater and the Son inferior; or if you ask whether the bath is ready, the answer you receive is that the Son was made out of nothing<sup>4</sup>.

are apposite, not for their content, but to demonstrate the centrality of religion to the Byzantine mindset as well as impact upon daily life.

Women represented a paradox to men. They were seen as representing the best and worst of human attributes. After all, was it not a woman, Eve, who caused the fall of mankind? Further, was it not through woman, Mary, that Paradise was opened?<sup>5</sup> All men had relationships with females, be they mother, wife, sister, or daughter who had to be protected as they were seen as inherently weak and with little capacity. It is little wonder that men were wary of the antinomical nature that women posed and had an ambivalent and uncertain response to them.

The problem of the role of women is specifically compounded further by the dearth of primary sources that are written by and about women in the surviving literature such as it is. Professor A. Laiou, in looking at the later centuries of the Empire when women, perhaps, had a measure of freedom, laments:

The extant writings of women are surprisingly few in a society which especially after the 11th century could boast a certain degree of female literacy and even at times of highly learned aristocratic women. Indeed, the writings of Anna Komnene are the only substantial surviving work written by a woman<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, to extract the role of women out of the male perspective by relying upon what women said about themselves and how they operated their own institutions has significant problems. For as Professor Laiou adds: "It remains to be seen whether Anna Komnene was a woman representative of her time or whether she was a very rare exception."<sup>7</sup>

The Byzantines, who received the Bible as the Word of God inherited the Judaic attitude to women contained therein, as well as Christ's teaching and relationship with them. Further, secular Hellenistic cultural ideas about woman, refined by Roman Law, also were inherited. It is this juxtaposition of temporal and secular ideas that impacted upon and shaped men's view towards women. Thus, by exploring how the Church and State saw and related to women, some understanding of their role and position in history can be actualised.

## **Women in the Temporal World**

The Judaic world saw "women as inferior to men."<sup>8</sup> One of the daily thanksgiving of the Jewish male was "Blessed be he who did not make [me] him a woman .. for a woman is not obliged to keep the Commandments."<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, women were not competent to act as witnesses, take an active part in the temple cultus, and their roles in society were limited to those of no authority over men.

## **Women in the Priesthood**

Christianity, if anything, is clearly a religion that is based on no differentiation between male and female. Thus, in the life of the nascent church women had a real and valuable role to play. In the apostolic church women held leadership roles. As Swan states: "ancient tombstones reveal a history of women bearing titles such as ruler of the synagogue, deacon, presbyter and honourable woman bishop."<sup>10</sup>

Whether those descriptions mean the same then as now, it is clear that woman received relative freedom in Christianity. They were welcomed as deaconesses and both the Councils of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (481) contributed to and clarified the qualifications of deaconesses so that they had to be at least 40 years, unmarried or widowed with no dependent children, and of the Orthodox faith. Women were ordained in that role until the eighth or ninth centuries when it was stopped as men viewed women as incompetent to serve at the altar. However, there were women in the service of the church over time such as Basilina at Agia Sofia, Dionysia at Melitene, Domnika at Constantinople, Eusebeia at Mylassa and Gorgonia of Nazianzus, the sister of Gregory the Theologian.

One particular deaconess, Olympia, who served as deaconess at Agia Sofia, was the chief defender of St John Chrysostom when he was exiled in 404CE. Chrysostom saw affection and cheer coming from this particular member of the female sex that he otherwise generically viewed as naturally servile, superficial, fickle, garrulous and lacking capacity to reason. Indeed, as Hill comments, Chrysostom generally "portrays them (women) in a poor light relative to their male associates."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in this one church father there is encapsulated the tension between a particular female, be they mother, or, as here, Olympia, and the goodness they manifested as individuals, and the otherwise general misogynistic views of their gender held by men as a whole.

The emulation of manly virtues was generally met with approval by the church. If a saintly woman was seen as having "manly" traits, then that was acceptable as the further away from the "fleshy" Eve the better. Hence, hagiographers would emphasise the male attributes of

virtue, bravery under suffering, virginity, or the suppression of their gender as being the hallmarks of saintliness. Notwithstanding, there are listed in the Synexarion of Constantinople fifty five individual women as being martyred during the persecution of the third and early fourth century, fourteen from the fourth and the fifth century, four from the sixth century, eight from the eighth and ninth centuries, five from the tenth century, one from each of the eleventh through to the fourteenth century and none from the fifteenth.<sup>12</sup> These numbers are significantly less than the male saints that were recognised over the period. Therefore, to men, the difference in numbers clearly reflected and confirmed the inferiority of the feminine gender.

### **The Mother of God**

One woman however, the Mother of God, was venerated above all the saints. The Virgin Mary was seen as the instrument of mankind's salvation by giving birth to the Son of God. There are countless icons and churches dedicated to her as well as miracles ascribed to her. She was credited with saving Constantinople in 626, which city was known as the Queen city in her honour, and her person was seen as the refuge for all. Hymnographers dealt with the gender of Mary by ascribing her as descending from Adam and not Eve. At Ephesus in 431 she was recognised as the Mother of God.

The Patriarchal Church accordingly struggled with the idea of women and their place. It saw the femininity of Panayia as being the reason she was above all the male saints and yet insisted that sin was the province of the feminine in Eve. Thus, the feminine both saved and destroyed mankind - all within the framework of each male having a loving personal relationship with at least one female in their lives. No wonder their struggle was real, personal, ongoing and above all confusing.

### **Women in a Secular World**

The State reflected the secondary role that was the role of women in the temporal world. Women were seen to be under the power of a male, generally their fathers. The laws relating to marriage and divorce were underpinned by the notion that property was to be protected for the benefit of legitimate heirs. Thus, complex rules as to usage, alienation and control of property were designed to ensure that proper controls were in place for the preservation of wealth.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> April 529 Justinian I issued the Corpus Juris Civilis. This reaffirmed the legal foundations affecting relationships and property. Thus, fathers chose husbands for their daughters, who continued to be under paternal direction in his lifetime. Although a woman could divorce her husband, it was much easier for a man as he could, inter alia, divorce her if

she bathed with strangers, attended banquets, circuses, theatres or other entertainment against husband's wishes.

Women could take power of their own finances upon widowhood. As Talbot states:

many of the more generous Byzantine patronesses were in fact widows at the time when they founded churches, monasteries or commissioned works of art. Danelis who owned vast estates in Peleponnese in the ninth century, is an example of an extremely wealthy widow<sup>13</sup>

Generally speaking, however, women were seen as being responsible for child rearing and for their households with their total focus being to help their children get on in life. Sons were highly prized and daughters seen as a burden. Even within the walls of the palace, women generally held their titles through their husbands. The Book of Ceremonies, setting out Court etiquette, specified female roles only in exceptional cases such as Empress. Indeed:

Females of all ranks are almost totally absent from Court treatises. ... This glaring absence is particularly acute for the most powerful woman at court, the Byzantine Empress, who remains enveloped in even more obscurity than the gender segregation of her times warrants. We lack even a basic list: the most recent catalogue of Byzantine empresses that we know of dates from the ninth century<sup>14</sup>

### **Some “Special” Women**

Notwithstanding their inferior role there were some special women from time to time throughout the history of the Empire.

The Constantinian dynasty (312-364) produced the first and arguably the most venerable female, St Helena. In 327-328 she undertook a pilgrimage to Palestine and was credited with the finding of the true Cross. She is also credited with the establishment of Churches and undertaking of charitable works. Helena, together with the Mother of God, became paragons for later Byzantine women to emulate and were held up as ideals of how a mother should be in the secular world.

The Theodosian dynasty (364 -518) produced several notable women who were given through marriage for political and economic profit or who were able to manipulate the situation for their own ends. For instance, in January 417 the Emperor of the West Honorius forced his sister Galla Placidia to marry Constantinus III. Saint Pulcheria, the elder sister of Theodosius II who avoided marriage through a vow of chastity, did upon her brother's death in 450 marry Marcian to remain in power. She helped organise the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and is recognised as a saint of the Church.

The Justinian dynasty (518-610) had a great empress in Theodora, the wife of Justinian I, who as women did for the first time advocate for the rights of women to be protected. Theodora, according to Eusebius, gave bold counsel and saved her husband's rule during the Nika riots in Constantinople of 532 thus allowing for the reign of Justinian I to continue, expanding of the Empire, and making Orthodoxy the faith of all in the Empire, the Chalcedonian controversy notwithstanding.

The Heraclian dynasty (610-717) is noted for Heraclius, who introduced Greek throughout the Empire. His second wife Martina was banished and had her tongue cut out after she was suspected of murdering Constantine III, hence affirming to men the treacherous nature of women.

The Isaurian dynasty (717-820) produced the Empress Irene (797-802) who exercised power initially as Empress of Leo IV (775-780). She later exercised power as the Regent for her son Constantine VI before disposing of him in 797 and exercised power in her own right as Basileus. Despite being responsible for killing her son, her defence of icons and her zeal for monasteries made her a saint of the Orthodox Church. Irene represents the paradox of women to men - in her private life treacherous, yet rewarded for her manly virtues in defending the faith.

The Amorian dynasty (820-867) produced Theodora the wife of Theophilus II as Basilisa who overrode her husband's ecclesiastical policy and finally restored images. Appointed guardian of her son Michael III she carried on government until she was displaced as regent in 855. She too is venerated as saint for her zeal for icons.

The Macedonian dynasty (867-1057) produced several strong women. In 958, Olga the princess of the Kievan Russians, was baptised with the name Helena and began her peoples' conversion to Orthodoxy. Theophane, the daughter of Romanus II, married Otto II emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 972 to seal a treaty between the two empires. Further, Zoe, the daughter of Constantine VIII, married Romanus II in 1028, and in 1034 after his death married Michael IV, whom she reigned with until his death in 1041. She then co-ruled with her adoptive son Michael V and later in 1042 shared government with her sister Theodora for a few months. She then remarried for the third time, to Constantine IX with whom she ruled until her death in 1050. Although Zoe's story demonstrates there was no principle of agnatic primogeniture in the Byzantine mindset, it also represents the determination of a woman holding on to power. To the Byzantine, whatever occurred in the lives of their Emperors was God's will and hence accepted far easier than it was in the West, which had difficulties with the notion of women rulers.

The Proto-Comnenean dynasty (1057-1081) was significant for Eudocia Macrembolitissa, the wife of Constantine X, who after his death in 1067 realised the only way to defend the embattled Empire was to remarry, which she did to Romanus IV. Not all marriages are successful and this pairing was a near disaster, according to chronicler Michael Psellus (The Younger) who claimed that "they were unable to distinguish between serious affairs of state and the most futile distractions of the gynaceum".<sup>15</sup> What Eudocia demonstrates is her willingness to hold onto power in the context of acting to save the State.

The Comnenan dynasty (1081-1185) produced no women of real power nor did the Angelan period (1185-1204) or the Lascaran dynasty (1204-1261). The Palaelogan dynasty (1259-1453) produced no powerful women but the starkest example of the use of females as exchange. In 1299, Andronicus II needed a marriage to cement his treaty with Urosch II of Serbia. As consent by the female to a marriage was required, he was in a quandary as his widowed sister Eudocia refused. This caused him to send his 5-year-old daughter Simonis to marry the 40-year-old Emperor. This marriage was officiated by the Archbishop of Orchid. In Constantinople, Patriarch John XII resigned but then resumed his Patriarchy over the marriage. This little girl was used to cement an alliance and provide benefit for the State. That this little girl was "injured by premature sexual intercourse so that she was rendered incapable of childbearing"<sup>16</sup> was subsumed by the need for women to obey the males they were protected by.

## **Conclusions**

What conclusions can be drawn from the above? It would appear that over the life of the Empire of over eleven hundred years, and from half of the population, only a handful of women were powerful or notable enough to have made their mark. To the extent that they did, it was generally at the expense of their femininity and by the assumption of masculine traits that made them admired or feared as if they were men.

The role of women in Byzantine society was historically inherited and further defined by the Church Fathers. Those Fathers overwhelmingly saw women as weaker, stupid and suited to undemanding domestic roles. To now characterise the Fathers as being men of their own time influenced by their then world view does not meet the proposition that throughout Byzantine history and to date the church saw the "Fleshly Eve" as epitomising women. Although the "Panayia" was venerated she was seen as the descendant of Adam rather than of Eve thus separating her from the rest of her gender.

Byzantine society saw women as being for the perpetuation of the family and expected to be obedient and subservient. Their chief roles were to produce heirs and run the household. Their education was focused on this and their married life reinforced their secondary role. In widowhood, women achieved their most esteemed role. However, they still were expected to advance the fortunes of their menfolk to their own detriment. The State also saw women as second-class citizens by declaring them as being under their husbands and incapable of taking responsibility for themselves. Hence the Church and the State similarly saw women as necessary subservient and for the advancement of men.

The question now arises, can any further valid observations be made as to the role of women? It is true some women came into power, however, it is at first instance invariably through men that gave them this opportunity and it was by manifesting ruthlessness that gave them hold on this power. In other words, they went from a female to a male stereotype and acted accordingly. As an example, in considering Irene, Euphrosyne and Theodora, Herrin states:

they played their role not because they were women but because they mastered and deployed imperial power. Their careers have been a study of this aspect, of how they exercised their authority. They were less true to their sex than to the purple<sup>17</sup>

Herrin herself however laments that in writing about these powerful women she "had to speculate and make certain assumptions"<sup>18</sup> due to the little material available.

Here is the problem in a nutshell. Given the dearth of material, is there in any event, sufficient to comprise a representation sample to form a view about the role of women? Was an Irene or Theodora or Anna Komnene representative of their gender or are they instances of powerful persons who happen to be women? Further, if they are representative of gender, how realistic is that given the vast majority of women, did not belong to the elite class and were thus not recorded, they being of no interest to anyone.

Such a vital and important topic as the role and position of women requires that it be viewed through the lens of the "big picture". The Empire itself underwent almost constant expansion and contraction through conquest and reconquest over its lifetime. It covered a diversity of peoples with diverse backgrounds. The Church and State which shared the control of people's existence both exerted control on the body and mind of the people. The attitude to women developed within the Church by the exegetics and treatises of the Church Fathers generally were misogynistic in attitude. This negative attitude was reflected in the hymnography and the way women saints, monastics and deaconesses were viewed by men. This attitude was further reflected in the laws of the State who saw women as the second sex to be provided for by men. Even women in power appeared to exercise their power at least at first instance as a

result of a relational existence of a powerful male. Thus, the recovery of the role of women may well be beyond the feminists in their endeavour to re-appropriate for woman their initial apostolic role.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 E. Catafygiotu Tapping, *Orthodox Eve and her Church Mary Martha*. Vol 3
- 2 G Jentyen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester University Press, 1998) p. 19
- 3 C. Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of the New Rome* (London: Phoenix Books, 1998) p. 183
- 4 J.J. Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (Penguin Books, 1990) 1:139
- 5 Akathist Hymn (Ihos 8)
- 6 A. Laiou, *Gender, Society and Economic Life in Byzantium* (Vermont, USA: Ashgate Publishing Co, 1992) p. 60-61
- 7 *Ibid*, p. 61
- 8 E. Lohse, *The New Testament Environment: Express*, Trans. J. E. Steely (London, Express Reprints, 1994) p. 149
- 9 *Ibid*, p. 150
- 10 L. Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers* (Paulist Press, 2001) p. 6
- 11 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hannah* 45.4, Trans. R.C. Hill (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001) p. 327
- 12 A.M. Talbot (ed.), *Holy Women in Byzantium* (Dunbarton Oakes, 1966) p. 11
- 13 "*The Byzantines*" ed. by Guglielmo Cavallo Ch 5 *Woman*, A. M. Talbot (University of Chicago Press, 1997) p. 129
- 14 "*Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*" ed. by H. Maguire: "*The Social World of the Byzantine Court*" A.P. Kazhdan and M. McCormick, p. 182
- 15 J.J. Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee* (Penguin Books, London, 1993) p. 305
- 16 A.M. Talbot, *The Byzantines*, ed. by G. Cavello Ch5, p. 122
- 17 J. Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantine* (Phoenix Press, London, 2002) p. 256
- 18 *Ibid*, p. 261

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