

Perspectives of Power: Byzantine Imperial Women

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Abstract: This paper offers a brief overview of my preliminary M.A. thesis research into the lives of Byzantine imperial women and their political authority and influence. While identifying the lack of attention Byzantinists past and present have paid to these women, and redefining the notion of what constitutes “power,” this article aims to incorporate the important experiences of Byzantine imperial women into the larger historical narrative.

When examining the political power and position of Byzantine imperial women from the sixth until the twelfth century, it becomes quite apparent that there is a clear omission of powerful imperial women within contemporary Byzantine historiography. Despite their visibility within the primary sources, the traditional definition of “power” within the current field overwhelmingly places legitimate authority solely in the hands of a male, while the lives of imperial women remain absent within most texts.¹ Through this exclusion a distorted version of history has been created, where the considerable position and influence of imperial women in politics has been largely ignored. Rather than being relegated to a specialized field, or chronological compilations of biographies, the lives of imperial women need to be made visible once again and incorporated into the larger historical narrative.² It is in this way that their authority and political involvement can finally be recognized as being integral to the history of the Byzantine Empire as a whole.

When a field of historical study has been carved out, the frameworks chosen to represent it are arguably more important than the material itself. Analytical structures can either provide a path into an expanded understanding of the subject or they can misrepresent the material by subordinating it to the scholar’s preconceived ideas. This can lead to the unfortunate result of a field remaining saturated by an exclusive mentality and a narrowly defined perspective. It is from the inception of the Byzantine historical discipline that the Byzantines and their Empire

¹ See, for example: George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Jersey, 1957); Cyril Mango, *Byzantium, The Empire of New Rome 324 A.D. – 1453 A.D.* (London, 1980); and Alexander Kazhdan, *People and Power of Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies* (Washington, 1982).

² Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium A.D. 527-1204* (London, 1999), which is written in a chronological biography style, with each chapter devoted to a different empress. Focusing exclusively on the lives of the empresses she has chosen to represent, Garland fails to situate them in a larger historical context.

began to be constructed as something other than what they actually were.³

The “Byzantine Empire” is a historiographical label that was created in the seventeenth century, and has been used since that time to describe the fluctuating territory of the Eastern Roman Empire. The people of this Empire, which existed from 330 A.D. to 1453 A.D., considered themselves to be Romans, called themselves Romans, and believed their Empire to be the Roman Empire. However, much scholarship has worked to separate the Byzantines and their history from its Roman legacy and has created an image of the Empire as a creatively sterile, Orthodox Christian, military state. However, there exist today many Byzantinists who are working hard to refashion a more accurate representation of the Byzantine Empire and its people. Although their success has been tremendous, the lives of imperial women and women in general continue to be underexplored and are still in serious need of acknowledgement.

Byzantine imperial women have been situated in a vague and shadowy private sphere, which has resulted in the assumption that they were absent within the realm of politics. Ann-Louise Shapiro, a social and cultural historian, calls for historical narratives that are more integrated, and which open up categories of analysis.⁴ The public/private dichotomy becomes problematic as it overlooks a range of power relations by maintaining “the private” as being separate from political analysis.⁵ The language of the public and the private must be discarded from Byzantine historiography, since it insists on perpetuating a narrowly defined perspective of Byzantine women’s mobility throughout history. Unfortunately, the public/private dichotomy has become so ingrained in the field that not only has it influenced earlier texts, but it seamlessly continues to be used in the work of Byzantinists studying women’s and gender history today.

When examining primary sources, both literary and material, it becomes clear that there is a wealth of evidence that suggests empresses wielded enormous amounts of power and influence, quite contrary to what many Byzantine historians of the field, past and present, have imputed in their work.⁶ The field carries with it a tradition of being

³ See Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, (London, 1960). Originally published from 1776-1789, Gibbon’s work demonstrated a decidedly Orientalist viewpoint of the Byzantine Empire. His work continues to be influential today.

⁴ Ann-Louise Shapiro, “Introduction: History and Feminist Theory, or Talking Back to the Beadle,” *History and Theory* 31, no. 4 (December 1992), 14.

⁵ Shapiro, “Introduction,” 5.

⁶ “Material” refers to sources such as artwork, statuary and numismatic evidence.

nearly impervious to incorporating any additional theories or explanations within its traditional frameworks. In this way, it becomes quite clear how much the existing frameworks of the field are in need of an overhaul. The absence of women of power is plainly evident within works that have become the canon texts of the area, where either excuses are made for a woman's ability to rise to power, or they are left out of the narrative altogether. Three of the most prominent works that continue to influence the field today are George Ostrogorsky's *History of the Byzantine State* (1957), Cyril Mango's *Byzantium, The Empire of New Rome* (1980), and Alexander Kazhdan's *People and Power of Byzantium* (1982).

The works of these historians are often the starting point from which subsequent literature on Byzantine history is read and understood. What does it mean then when the lives of women, noble or otherwise, do not exist in these preparatory texts? It implies that women's and gender history are not significant or important enough to be treated as knowledge worthy of serious analysis. Not one of the three major texts mentioned even vaguely touches upon issues of gender or women's history. Instead, they consistently retell a story of an Eastern state whose people existed in an atmosphere of somber religious devotion, horrific wars, Marxist economics, and an abundance of power-hungry emperors.⁷ Ostrogorsky, Mango, and Kazhdan make no effort to study women within their texts. Rather, it seems that considerable effort is taken to deny the significance of women's experience, importance and existence, whether they be peasants, saints, foreigners, nobles, or imperial women.

George Ostrogorsky's *The Byzantine State* is a Marxist examination of Byzantine economics and laws in which women, art and architecture are absent. His work is incredibly detailed in terms of currency figures, provincial grain supplies, wages, the emperors' reigns, and economic concerns, but it is devoid of human experience. The faceless working peasants are male, and allegedly the women do not work so there is no need to write about them. It contains a bevy of information on various emperors, the wars they fought and the laws they passed, but empresses are rarely named or mentioned. In the section titled "The Disintegration of the Political System of the Middle Byzantine Period," Ostrogorsky finally refers to a woman: the Empress Zoe, who along with her sister Theodora was the last of the Macedonian dynasty and ruled the

⁷ The Marxist framework used within the field of Byzantine history primarily consists of perpetuating the notion that important historical information is that which deals with agriculture, economic activity, and imperial men. It internalized the public/private dichotomy, resulting in the assumption that women were part of the private sphere and not essential to the economy.

Byzantine Empire from 1028 to 1050 A.D. She held legitimate political power, married three times during her reign, and received exceptional loyalty from the people of Constantinople – the city capital of the Byzantine Empire, and the site of the imperial seat and palace. Ostrogorsky places Zoe in the background, dismissively labeling her as “elderly,” “long past (her) prime,” and “aged.”⁸ Rather than commenting on any of her political autonomy or accomplishments, Ostrogorsky creates a picture of an old woman guided by an embarrassing lust for new husbands and concludes by stating that “the incompetence of the two Empresses, and their hatred for each other, very soon made it clear that it was essential to have a man at the head of the government.”⁹ Clearly, men held the ability to lead the Empire, and by leaving out any mention of the empresses own exercise of political power, Ostrogorsky silences any opposition to this assumption.

Cyril Mango’s *Byzantium, The Empire of New Rome* is primarily concerned with the allegedly inseparable relationship between the Byzantines and Orthodox Christianity. Like Ostrogorsky, he turns to the lives of emperors as a gauge for the success of the Byzantine Empire politically. Unlike Ostrogorsky, Mango attempts to incorporate the ideology and personality of the Byzantine people into his narrative; however, his remarks consist more of sweeping generalizations than specific observations. He remarks that the Byzantines were “people of the land” who were “distrustful and unenterprising.”¹⁰ He denies any existence of non-Christian influences in Byzantine life, and chooses to ignore many of the most significant Byzantine writers, historians, and philosophers, because they do not fit the Christian mold. He also insists on using an Orthodox interpretation of the Bible as a literal representation of how every single Byzantine lived their lives, relating that the Christian life was the Byzantine life. While Ostrogorsky at least briefly acknowledged the existence of an empress, Mango does not give a single substantial reference to an imperial woman of power. This is especially perplexing seeing as he concentrates on the reign of the sixth century Emperor Justinian I, and his many imperial deeds. Empress Theodora, Justinian’s wife, was one of the most powerful imperial women of the Empire, and acted as a co-ruler. Again we see the perpetuation of an incomplete historical narrative by the exclusion of the very real lives of imperial women in the Byzantine Empire.

Our third Byzantinist is Alexander Kazhdan who, in his work *People and Power of Byzantium*, restricts his examinations of Byzantine

⁸ Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 286.

⁹ Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 289.

¹⁰ Mango, *Byzantium*, 83.

literature to conform to a Christian lens. He echoes Ostrogorsky and Mango's descriptions of Byzantine life, claiming that Byzantium lacked any sort of social life, and that its inhabitants lived in fear of their surroundings and of the imperial government.¹¹ What I find to be most interesting about Alexander Kazhdan is the fact that his sources consist primarily of Byzantine literature, his favorite being hagiographies. Byzantine saints' lives, when read historically, are a treasure trove of information into the vibrancy of Byzantine culture and society. There is a vast multitude of these sources, including an abundance of stories of female saints' lives of which Kazhdan curiously speaks nothing of. Alice-Mary Talbot has edited more than one comprehensible volume of female saints' lives in which one can find a wonderful variety of Byzantine women ranging from prostitutes to noble women: women who travel independently on pilgrimages, find and make their own money, and experience the diverse culture of the different provinces and towns they visit.¹² Kazhdan makes no mention of this wealth of sources or women contained within them.

The absence of women of power in the works of these historians has led to the incomplete recreation of the Byzantine world. This sort of history needs to stop, and a revision of the concept of "power" must be undertaken. Gerda Lerner, a women's historian, argues that patriarchal conceptions are built into the "mental constructs" of an area and that this construction is so thorough that its mechanism are nearly undetectable.¹³ It is in this way that foundational texts seem able to get away with an unfinished representation of a civilization's population. With reference to historical misrepresentation, Lerner argues that:

if historical studies, as we traditionally know them, were actually focused on men and women alike, then there would be no need for a separate subject. Men and women built civilizations and culture and one would assume that any historical account written about any given period would recognize that basic fact.¹⁴

Historical narratives of the Byzantine Empire have largely assumed that women were not important in the construction of this civilization. This inaccurate representation of the history of the Empire is particularly

¹¹ Kazhdan, *People and Power of Byzantium*, 31.

¹² See Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* (Washington, 1996) and Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints' Lives in English Translation* (Washington, 1998).

¹³ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York, 1993), 3.

¹⁴ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Chapel Hill, 2005), xiii-xiv.

perplexing since there exists such a plentitude of primary sources that tell quite a different story than what is being reflected within the discipline.

The field of Byzantine history remains behind in its approaches towards gender and women. It is only in the late 1990s that scholarship on such subjects really began to be tackled, and only a small group of women's and gender historians work in this field. Liz James, Barbara Hill, and Dion C. Smythe are a group of Byzantine gender historians who are attempting to introduce alternative perspectives of power in Byzantine women, primarily with regards to empresses. While their work is certainly encouraging, their conclusions are of restricted significance due to their continued reliance on the hegemonic concept of the private sphere.

Liz James and Barbara Hill co-wrote a chapter in the edited text *Women in Medieval Western European Culture* titled "Women and Politics in the Byzantine Empire: Imperial Women" (1999), in which they argue that "the careers of these empresses reveal...that women had access to political power through their relationship with the emperor."¹⁵ James and Hill attempt to explore imperial women's alternative power, but their conclusions support the idea that they ultimately had none. They go on to state that "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."¹⁶ How can one reconcile the fact that women, who apparently had no involvement or experience in the political system and its procedures, could so flawlessly assume the role of ruler of the Byzantine Empire? It is the limitations of the public/private dichotomy that prevents further speculation as to what the reality might actually have been.

The Byzantine Empire is portrayed as a state in which only men exercise political, administrative, and legislative powers. As a result, the lives of women of power have been suppressed. The most common way to trivialize women's access to power is to describe their authority as resulting from exceptional circumstances. And yet, it seems that exceptional circumstances were quite commonplace in Byzantine history. The evidence shows numerous empresses exercising political power, enacting reforms, and implementing fiscal revisions independently from the emperor.¹⁷ It is a historical creation that imperial women only ruled

¹⁵ Liz James and Barbara Hill, "Women and Politics in the Byzantine Empire: Imperial Women," in *Women in Medieval Western European Culture*, ed. Linda E. Mitchell (New York, 1999), 162.

¹⁶ James and Hill, "Women and Politics," 163.

¹⁷ One such example is found in Lynda Garland's descriptions of Empress Helena and Empress Theophano. She cites the eleventh century historian Skylitzes who criticized Empress Helena's choices in provincial governorship and civil office appointments. See

substantially as regents, or assumed the emperor's power when a weakened male failed to defend his own authority. Imperial women's power and the responsibilities that came with the office of empress need to be explored.

What we find in the primary sources are examples of imperial women ruling alongside their husbands or as sole ruler of the Byzantine Empire in the absence of special circumstances.¹⁸ These are women who exercised the political power in accordance with their position or office. The sixth century Empress Theodora implemented a number of legal and spiritual reforms during her rule alongside her husband Justinian. Most noticeable is her involvement in increasing the rights of women, especially by introducing laws concerning rape and prostitution. Before her, the act of raping a woman of the lower classes and slaves was legal; but she enacted a law making the rape of any woman punishable by death. She also worked hard to wipe out prostitution, and paid for young girls to be freed from brothels and their pimps.¹⁹ Theodora also created shelter and a monastery for Chalcedonian Christians, a form of Christianity that was in direct opposition to her husband Justinian's Orthodox Christianity.²⁰ Despite this enormous conflict of interest, Theodora had the power to authorize such acts because of her position as empress. Such an example of the mobility and visibility of the empress contradicts the stereotype of seclusion propounded by many Byzantine historians.

The eleventh century sisters Zoe and Theodora were sole rulers of the Empire, being the last of the respected Macedonian bloodline. Although Zoe married three times during her rule, she remained the dominant ruler of the Empire, and it was she who legitimized the power of her husbands through marriage.²¹ The Byzantines were loyal to Zoe

Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, 128. She also references Zonaras, a twelfth century chronicler, who commented on Empress Theophano's order that Nikephoros II Phokas come to Constantinople to be crowned Emperor (Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, 129). These sources are not translated into English, and I am planning on examining them further during my PhD.

¹⁸ For examples of rich sources that offer insight into imperial women's lives and power see Procopius' sixth century texts *History of the Wars*, *On Buildings*, and *The Secret History*, which are all contained within *Procopius*, trans. by H.B. Dewing (Cambridge, 1914-1940); Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* contained within *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, trans. by E.R.A. Sewter (London, 1966); Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, contained within *The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena*, trans. by Elizabeth A.S. Dawes (London, 1967).

¹⁹ Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, 16-18.

²⁰ Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, 23-25.

²¹ These men were Romanos III, Michael IV, and Constantine IX Monomachos; their marriages are described in Psellos, *Chronographia*, 63-121 and 165-261.

and Theodora, not the men they allowed into their lives, and, when those men stepped out of line, the people let them know either through complaints or riots.²²

Anna Komnene, a Byzantine princess from the twelfth century and the first female historian, writes extensively of the imperial women in her family. She herself was expected to inherit the crown from her father until the birth of her young brother, John II Komnenos.²³ She writes extensively about her grandmother Anna Dalassena, the emperor Alexios Komnenos' mother, who, according to Anna, held greater authority and influence than her son. Anna Dalassena kept the surname of her mother's family since it was a more powerful family than her father's, and held an incredible amount of power in the palace. It was her son who was emperor, but it was Anna who ruled the Empire as Empress Augusta (Empress Mother). Anna Komnene wrote:

He [her father Emperor Alexios Komnenos] did certainly himself undertake the wars against the barbarians and all the labours and difficulties connected with those, but the whole administration of affairs, the choice of civil officers and the accounts of the income and expenditure of the Empire he entrusted to his mother...For my grandmother was so clever in business and so skilful in guiding a State, and setting it in order, that she was capable of not only administering the Roman Empire, but any other of all the countries the sun shines upon.²⁴

Essentially, the Emperor Alexios spent much of his reign away at war, and it was Anna who held the authority to administer the Empire as she saw fit.

Evidence of powerful women also abounds when one takes into consideration material history. There are in existence several Byzantine coins, which display the image of an empress as the ruler of the Empire, such as the sisters Zoe and Theodora, and the Empress Irene of the eighth century. The coin was a symbol of economic and political stability in the Empire, and to have the empress' image imprinted on these coins meant that she personified strength. There were also numerous shipyard weights that were cast in the bust of Byzantine empresses, most of which are from the fifth and sixth centuries. These weights were used in large-scale trade or transactions throughout the Empire. Therefore, it was the

²² Psellos, *Chronographia*, 137-150.

²³ Dion C. Smythe, "Middle Byzantine Family Values and Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*," in *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience 800-1200*, ed. Lynda Garland (Burlington, 2006), 125.

²⁴ Komnene, *Alexiad*, 84-85.

empress, and not the emperor, who represented fairness and justice in trade economy. This belief was firmly held until the latest years of the Byzantine Empire.²⁵

Another example of this type of material evidence is the representations of empresses in the forms of mosaics. In the San Vitale, in Ravenna, are two of the most elaborate Byzantine imperial mosaics still in existence. The first mosaic depicts the Empress Theodora of the sixth century dressed in her imperial regalia and flanked by her retinue. The other portrays her husband the Emperor Justinian, in his imperial regalia, also standing with his retinue. The mosaics are displayed opposite each other, and each is identical in height, size, and embellishment. It seems reasonable to surmise that if the empress was not an important player in the management of the Empire, then there would be no reason to include her in an imperial portrait; even less so to represent her as a ruler comparable to the emperor.

What is quickly apparent is that the definition of power is in desperate need of revision. Pauline Stafford, an English medievalist, works within an innovative framework of perceptions of power that can be applied to the study of Byzantine imperial women. She defines power as “the ability to act, to take part in events, to have a strategy and to pursue it, to be in a position to influence others, and to use their labors for one’s own prestige...Authority gives one the right to act, gaining obedience without force.”²⁶ The empresses possessed power in their own right, and in accordance with their office had their own duties and functions. The notion of a private sphere simply did not exist. The empresses’ roles were public and they required visibility and involvement in official life. Empresses were not cloistered or secluded, as the dominant opinion seems to relay. They were part of public processions, they held court with diplomats and palace officials, and enacted their own orders independently of the emperor.

In my work, I am attempting to expand upon our understanding of imperial women’s political authority, and reinstate imperial women as participants in the political realm. Conventional ideas on what is historically important must be redefined, allowing gender concepts and women a place in the larger historical narrative, rather than being relegated to a specialist category. To separate these women’s experiences and their influences from the larger narrative is to construct an image of the Byzantine Empire that did not exist, and is therefore incomplete.

²⁵ Angeliki E. Laiou and Cecile Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy* (New York, 2007), 61.

²⁶ Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King’s Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1983), 12.

Through an examination of many of the sources that previous historians have used in their own work, I hope to provide insight into the way imperial women may have actually utilized their office and authority, and rectify the historiographical gap that exists within the field of Byzantine history from the denial of imperial women's significant presence.