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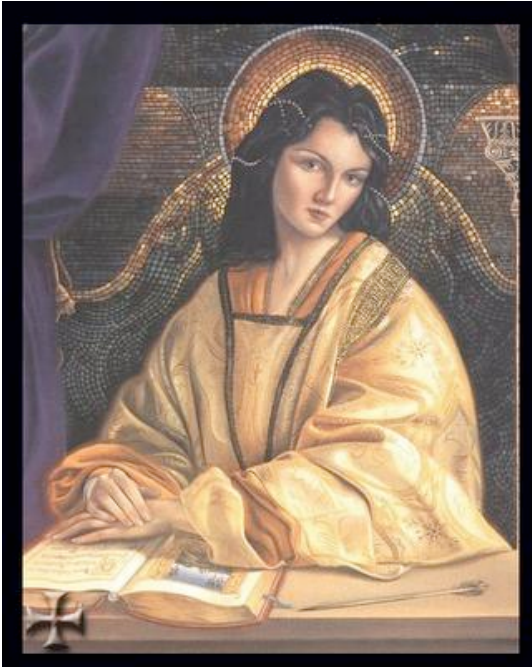
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Thesis

This research examines the thesis that women in Byzantine society were not treated as equals within the educational, political and social realms.

Sources

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Geanakoplos, D.J. *Byzantine Church, Society, and Civilization Seen through Contemporary Eyes*. 1984. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, US.

James, L. 'Men, Women, Eunuchs: Gender, Sex, and Power' pp 31-50 *A Social History of Byzantium*, 2009 Blackwell Publishing, UK

Laiou, A.E., 'Family Structure and the Transmission of Property', pp 51-75 *A Social History of Byzantium*, 2009 Blackwell Publishing, UK

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/AnnaComnena-Alexiad03.html>

<http://courses.wcupa.edu/jones/his101%5Cweb%5C24byzant.htm>

The sources used came from secondary sources with limited primary sources.

The time period examined is broad, roughly covering the 8th-12th centuries and therefore includes mainly secondary sources with some exceptions being information from the *Alexiad*, and two photos.

Perspectives

Until recently, most historical findings have been written about and focused on men, so significant information about women is essentially missing, and therefore, any information provided involves women being “spoken for, rather than to speak for themselves” (Geanakoplos. p. 38, 1984) In this regard, the perspectives offered in this paper will be limited and coming predominantly from the male viewpoint. The first comprehensive look at Byzantine society from a female perspective came from Anna Comnena, the daughter of Alexius in her 15 volume historical account of her father’s rule in *Alexiad*. This paper will examine women’s role in Byzantine society generally as it relates to their educational, social and political involvement, and more specifically, how these roles were perceived and played out by Anna Comnena herself.

Argument

During Byzantine rule, women were regarded as having one of two main roles in society; either married with a family or belonging to a convent. As such ‘good’ women were placed into four specific roles or groups during their life time including the virgin, wife, mother and widow. According to Liz James, the dominant “ideologies towards women regarded them as men’s inferiors, weak and

untrustworthy, and ranked with children, the mentally deranged, and slaves as unfit to give public testimony.” (Ibid, p. 35) In relation to the research for this paper, it appears that women had only limited control and power at least in the public sphere of their lives, but there were ways around this, at least for those women belonging to the aristocracy.

Formal education was given primarily to the elite which included only the males, while girls if educated at all, received it at home by their parents or tutors. “With few exceptions, education for girls was limited to learning to read and write, memorizing the Psalms, and studying the Scriptures.” (Talbot. p. 120, 1997) Ironically, orphans likely received more formal education at convents where they were raised, or young women who intended on taking their vows and remaining in service to the church. Widows also had more access to literature or educational resources than the average female in Byzantine by entering convents, and this of course depended upon the particular resources available at any given convent. The few known females that received a broad exposure to literature and various disciplines were those females from elite families such as Anna Comnena.

Women were also restricted socially, as it was considered necessary to protect their ‘virtue’ by way of controlling their access to men outside their own families. Females spent much of their time in the house and were only permitted outside for special occasions or for worship. As such, “young girls devoted most of their youth to learning domestic skills in preparation for married life and running a household.” (Ibid. p. 120) Marriage and the continuation of the family name was the social norm by which females were readied and groomed, so girls were taught the

standard domestic skills. “They would learn to spin, weave and embroider at a young age”, (Ibid. p. 120) as these were essential for meeting the needs of household members.

Women during the Byzantine era experienced many forms of discrimination for “they were permitted no place in the hierarchies of state, church, or the military” (Geanakoplos. p. 35, 1984) and so their voices were not considered in any political decisions or policies. Legally however, “women of all classes and backgrounds did possess important personal, economic, and property rights, guaranteed by law”, (Ibid. p. 35) and both male and female offspring were to inherit equal portions of their parent’s estate. Although controlled by the husband, the wife did keep her dowry and could transmit family property as wanted after the husband’s death. “This right to inherit and transmit family property enabled many women to amass considerable wealth, which they could use for patronage of the arts, for charitable purposes, to found a monastery, to buy more land, or to invest in a business.” (Talbot. 1997, p. 119) In this way, women in Byzantine played an important economic and legal role through their property rights, which in turn gave women considerable influence within their family and cultural spheres.

Education

Born in Constantinople 1083 AD, Princess Anna Comnena is presented not only as the world’s first female historian but also as the most educated and cultured woman in her time (Rae Dalven, 1972). She was born during the reign of her father Alexios Comnenus I and Anna was expected to inherit the throne. However, once her

brother John Comnenus was born Anna's dreams of claiming the throne were shattered.

With inspiration from her grandmother Anna Dalassena, Anna strived to acquire an education. Anna Dalassena was granted absolute power to rule in Alexios' absence whenever he was forced out of Constantinople for military purposes. It has been stated that it was Anna Dalassena who was the power behind the throne and first among the women in the imperial household in rule of an empire (Rae Dalven, 1972). It was her ambitious, dominating and matriarchal personality that was the inspiration for Anna Comnena's passion for knowledge.

It was rare during the Byzantium period for females to obtain an education, as women were not to be seen in public, they were to remain in the home attending solely to family matters. Anna however, was strong willed and encompassed true passion for knowledge. She studied the areas of literature, philosophy, geography, astronomy, and medicine. One of Anna's most documented accomplishments is the *Alexiad*, which is a series of books written by Anna, based on her father's life as emperor. There are fifteen volumes of *Alexiad* that are circulated throughout the world formulating historical representations of how life was during the Byzantine era. Nowhere in *Alexiad* did Anna refer to any formal education nor was there any mention of schools for girls therefore it is believed that Anna was educated primarily by private tutors.

Anna's passion for education became the entirety of her life. She felt so strongly about the importance of teachers and formal education that "she truly believed that the lack of formal schooling was the basic cause of the heresy that was

mushrooming all over Byzantium during her father's reign" (Rae Dalven, pg. 73, 1972). Although her depiction of those that weren't well educated may seem limited, it cannot be denied that Anna was educated to the degree that she could recognize the difference between the amateur and the true intellect.

Political and Social

When Anna was born she was an only child and was thought to be the next in line for the crown. At a young age she was promised in marriage to her mother's cousin, Constantine Doucas, the son of a former emperor. At a young age he was considered co-emperor of the empire, however in 1087 Alexius (Anna's father) produced a blood heir. Anna's hopes of having political and social influence and power were lost. Shortly after the birth of Anna's brother, Constantine died and Anna wasted no time in remarrying. This time she married a Caesar from a noble family that had previously contested the throne. Anna claims that it was a marriage not of love but of political union. Anna had always assumed as a child that she would rule, but the birth of her brother greatly upset her and she began to scheme of ways to gain what she felt was rightly hers. This began with Anna and her mother trying to disinherit her brother John, and have her and her husband Nikephoros assume the throne. Although Alexius was weak with illness, this plot still did not succeed and her brother came into power in 1118. Anna once again tried in vain to overthrow the crown. This may have worked had Nikephoros not pulled out and refused to cooperate. The plot was discovered and Anna and Nikephoros left the court. After Nikephoros died Anna and her mother were sent away to a convent out of the city.

During the time of Justinian rule, it was an absolute monarchy with the emperor in power. The emperor ran a very efficient bureaucracy. It ran so smoothly because it had well educated people to fill the positions within it. This is why the Byzantines promoted education and viewed it as an asset for all people. Despite some of the research that we found on education for women, we found one article which stated that education was freely available for both men and women, for during Byzantine rule, the empire even had female doctors.

Although women were not given the same access to the throne as men, in that they could not solely rule, women from aristocracy found ways around this as was the case with Alexius' mother, Anna Dalassena. In her writings Anna repeatedly mentioned how Dalassena was the true political voice behind Alexius' decisions. In Anna's *Alexiad* the third book states, "Men may perhaps marvel that my father, the Emperor, should have shown so much honor to his mother in it, and handed over everything to her, whilst he himself, so to speak, took his hands off the reins of Government and whilst she metaphorically drove the chariot of state, he only ran alongside and merely shared with her the title of ruler." (*Alexiad*, Book 3)

Significance

Although not to the obvious extreme as apparent in Byzantine society, many gender biases still remain within our educational system today. As future teachers we need to be acutely aware of how we may perpetuate gender specific roles and the impact this has on our students. We need to be conscious of the subtle ways in which we perpetuate differences and we can do this by critically examining the past as well as present pedagogical practices in our social studies classroom.

Conclusion

Surprisingly much of the research confirmed our thesis with the exception of one article that stated that education was freely available for both men and women. This conflict of information makes further research into this topic necessary, and as such this paper provides only a brief and preliminary glimpse into the lives of Byzantine women.