

Byzantium Research Project

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Research Question: How did the way Byzantine society viewed and constructed gender influence the capabilities and capacities of empresses?

Hypothesis: The ways in which Byzantine society viewed and constructed gender had no influence on the power empresses were able to obtain in their positions.

Sources:

Garland, Lynda. *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium*. New York: Rutledge, 1999.

This book explores the topic of women and power in Byzantium, focusing specifically on the role of empresses. Each chapter in this book focuses on a particular empress, and explores her history in her role as empress. In my paper, I chose to focus on empress Irene and empress Theodora to explore my topic, since it would be too great of a task to consider all empresses in my study. Therefore, from this book, I focused on the sections dedicated to Irene and Theodora and how their experiences reveal how gender played a role in their positions of power. However, I found this book to be almost solely focused on what empresses did, providing a lot of valuable facts, but no real critique on power and how women's gender may have played a role in their experiences. In this way, this source was not as helpful to me as other sources I have found that delve deeper into the issue of power and how it relates to gender.

Herren, Judith. "The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium." *Past and Present*, 169 (Nov. 2000):

3-35.

This article explores the ways in which women adopted and exercised power through their connections to imperial authority, coining the term “imperial feminism.” This article not only explores how empresses were able to obtain power, but also how wives and mothers of emperors were able to exert power through their husbands and sons positions of authority. The best example of this is emperor Justinian and his wife empress Theodora. My paper also points to this, and therefore this article was useful in providing me information specifically regarding the ways in which women were able to obtain power through additional ways besides being empress.

James, Liz. “Men, Women, Eunuchs: Gender, Sex and Power.” *A Social History of Byzantium*. Ed. John Haldon, 31-50. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009.

This source is an article within a larger book. The book explores the social history of Byzantium, and I used the article by Liz James, which specifically deals with how gender and power were connected in Byzantine society and how this relationship affected women, men and eunuchs. I found this article very useful as it dealt more directly with my topic than other sources. In particular, the article provided a good introduction to the study of gender in sociological study, which I drew from in order to introduce this same idea in my paper.

Procopius of Caesarea, *The Secret History* as cited in: **“Procopius The Secret History.”** *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, 1996 < <http://procopius.net/secrethistorycontents.html>>, accessed February 20, 2010

This source is the one primary source that I found that had information pertaining to my topic. Written by Procopius of Caesarea, a prominent Byzantine scholar, this source gives us the opportunity to learn about Byzantine society and history from the perspective of a contemporary Byzantine scholar. In this source, I am most concerned with the section on Theodora and Justinian. More specifically, I am concerned with how Theodora and the power she had was

perceived in Byzantine society.

Vasiliev, Alexander A. *History of the Byzantine Empire*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958.

This source explores the history of the Byzantine Empire. This is quite a broad topic, which spans a wide range of time and encompasses many sub topics. The book organizes history according to dynasties, and as a result I was most concerned with the sections featuring empresses Theodora and Eirene, looking specifically at how they were able to obtain and exercise their power.

Limitations of Study:

I am aware of the limitations within my research and the alternate perspectives on my topic that I have not included. My secondary sources are limited in that I am only using a sample. I have not read every source about my topic, and have therefore not considered those author's arguments in my paper. I am also aware that authors bring their own beliefs and arguments into their writing. In using my secondary sources, I did not take what the authors were arguing to be absolute truth, but instead used what was said in their writing to help support my own claims.

In regards to primary sources, there are many limitations present due to the nature of my topic. I could not find any written accounts from Byzantine women and empresses about their role in society in relation to power and how they believed their gender influenced what they could and could not do. This is largely due to the fact that women were not encouraged to write, and if they did it was done in private and not published. In addition, the history of the Byzantine Empire passed down through things like written accounts and art, like Procopius' *The Secret*

History, were mostly produced by men. In her article, Liz James cites this issue when she writes, “Crucial in our understanding of the role of Byzantine women is that virtually all of our information about women in Byzantium comes through the filter of male sources, written or visual.”¹ As a result, it is important to keep in mind that the primary sources that are cited in my paper may be somewhat biased because of this.

In her article, James also points to another limitation when studying Byzantine history, especially the history of women. James points to idea that many scholars wish to research women of past societies, whose stories were in essence “lost” because they were not told, or told through the perspectives of others, and not the women themselves.² James says this is also true for Byzantine society, and we need to be mindful of this when researching women and their places in history, paying close attention to the fact that we are not producing history in contemporary Byzantine society, but instead creating a history from a 21st century perspective.

Argument/Discussion/Evidence:

In every society, gender arguably plays a significant role in how men and women are perceived and therefore expected to act. This was no different in the Byzantine Empire. As James comments in her article, gender was “equally fundamental to the ways in which Byzantine society operated.”³ In particular, the ways in which gender was constructed and viewed in the Byzantine Empire affected what female empresses were able to do in comparison to male emperors.

In the study of Byzantine history, James suggests that there has been a focus on the

¹ James, Liz. “Men, Women, Eunuchs: Gender, Sex and Power.” *A Social History of Byzantium*. Ed. John Haldon, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009, 38.

² Ibid., 33-34.

³ Ibid., 31.

rediscovery of women and in particular, their roles within society.⁴ This sociological perspective of women and gender is the angle to which I also will be exploring the topic of women and gender in Byzantine society.

In her article, James explores the ways gender, sex and power played out in Byzantine society. James offers a clear explanation of gender and how it is constructed in society. Gender refers to the differences between men and women that are constructed by society, rather than biological differences.⁵ Through society's construction of gender, a gender binary is formed which outlines specific roles that women and men are expected to acquire. In Byzantine society, and frequently in today's society, women were expected to adopt the role of mother and caregiver, whereas men were encouraged to adopt the role of provider. In addition, there are certain feminine and masculine characteristics that are associated with the female and male gender. This will be further explored later, and the ways in which these expectations played a part in how empresses were perceived will be uncovered.

Although empresses gained power through their position as empress, this power was limited compared to their male counterparts. According to Garland however, female empresses were able to obtain significant power despite their disadvantages: "In the Byzantine empire power was technically vested in the emperor. Nevertheless a number of empresses played an important part in government and even took control of the empire in appropriate circumstances" (Garland, 1).⁶ James also points to this issue in her article when she states, "Politically, an empress's official standing gave her power but her operation of that power was limited, again, by

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁶ Garland, Lynda. *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium*. New York: Rutledge, 1999, 1.

her sex.”⁷

The process by which empresses came to be empresses reveals a lot about how women were perceived in the Byzantine society. According to James, “Byzantine society was both misogynist and patriarchal. Prevailing ideologies towards women regarded them as men’s inferiors, weak and untrustworthy.”⁸ Nevertheless, when the emperor was incapacitated or died, and left an underage heir, a woman replaced him and she became empress.⁹ So, women were not appointed to the position of emperor because of their capabilities and potential, but rather due to taking on responsibility in an effort to help their husbands and sons. So, it is the empress’ role as mother and wife that is perceived in society as her primary role, and therefore her potential as a true ruler is overlooked because of this. According to Herren, “a considerable number of empresses attained greater powers than they otherwise might have done by exercising their legitimate role as guardian, in defence of their sons' rights to rule.”¹⁰

In order to understand the capabilities and capacities of empresses in the Byzantine Empire, and the way gender influenced this, it is valuable to look into the lives of empresses themselves, and examine both what they were able to do, and how history has perceived their position in power. This paper will explore the experiences of the empresses Theodora and Eirene, and look specifically at how these women were able to obtain power, and how they were not, and how this is connected to gender.

The empress Theodora is probably the most well known and remembered of all the Byzantine empresses. There is a great deal of history written about her, specifically highlighting her “rags to riches” story, coming from a poor family and working as an actress, to becoming a

⁷ James, 40-41.

⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁹ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰ Judith Herren. “The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium.” *Past and Present*, 169 (Nov. 2000), 29.

wealthy and influential empress.¹¹ This was mainly due to her marrying Justinian the Great, who became emperor in 527 AD.¹² Although Theodora was able to acquire a great deal of power in her position as Justinian's wife, and later as empress, this was mainly because of her husband. He respected and valued Theodora's opinion on state matters, and included her in a lot of his decision making as emperor. Procopius, a Byzantine scholar points to this relationship in his *The Secret History*, when he writes, "for neither did anything without the consent of the other."¹³ As empress, Theodora continued to be powerful, and "had occupied an exceptional position of influence upon political affairs."¹⁴

Theodora is particularly known for her influence on her husband Justinian in regards to reforms and legislations concerning the status of women.¹⁵ As Garland writes, "Much of Justinian's legislation was concerned with protecting women and their rights".¹⁶ These included reforms on regulating prostitution, changes in marrying laws so there was less restriction on marrying into different social classes, and also setting up establishments for women on the street where they could receive help and guidance.¹⁷ There is no doubt that Theodora and the experiences of her past influenced these actions by Justinian.

Nevertheless, there were responsibilities, such as an emperor's role in military affairs and wars, that empresses like Theodora and Eirene were unable to carry out. Garland writes, Eirene

¹¹ Garland, 11.

¹² Alexander A. Vasiliev. *History of the Byzantine Empire*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958, 182.

¹³ Procopius of Caesarea, *The Secret History* as cited in: "Procopius The Secret History." *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, 1996 < <http://procopius.net/secrethistorycontents.html>>, accessed February 20, 2010.

¹⁴ Vasiliev, 182.

¹⁵ Garland, 15.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

“was severely handicapped by being unable to lead an army”.¹⁸ According to Herren, this is due to the fact that the Byzantine society “assumed that the power to rule should be restricted to the male sex.”¹⁹ Overall, one could argue that Theodora’s power and respect did not grow out of her individual capabilities and potential as a ruler, but from her husband and his legacy.

The empress Eirene is another well known and written about empress of the Byzantine Empire. She had great respect as a ruler, and was able to obtain a great deal of power in her position. Unlike Theodora, who relied on her husband to obtain power, Eirene was able to acquire respect and power on her own. According to Vasiliev, Eirene is “the first instance in Byzantine history of a woman ruling with full authority of supreme power. She was a true autocrat, ruling in her own right.”²⁰ However, Garland argues that Eirene was only able to acquire this power by adopting masculine qualities, those that are expected of an emperor²¹. In other words, Eirene had to “gender herself or be gendered as masculine,”²² essentially abandoning her female role in order to take up a more masculine role to be successful.

Through looking at the experiences of Theodora and Eirene as empresses, it is evident how gender relations in their society were connected to power and how much or little they were able to do within their positions of power. As James states, “within the misogynist structure of the Byzantine Empire, empresses had to juggle two contradictory elements: their status as women and their position as rulers.”²³ The ways in which the Byzantine society viewed gender made it very difficult for empresses to acquire the same amount of power and fulfill the same responsibilities as emperors, while maintaining their role as women.

¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹ Herren, 28.

²⁰ Vasiliev, 182.

²¹ James, 45.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 46.

Relation / Significance for contemporary society or education:

This topic relates to contemporary society in that gender still plays a significant role in how men and women are perceived, and in the expectations that are created for men and women and their roles in our society. Although often subtle, there are many cues in our society that tell us how we should act in our appropriate gender “role.” In addition, anyone who deviates from this role is often labeled as abnormal or “other” and becomes isolated from our communities.

This issue has significant importance when considering the education system. Gender continues to be a prevalent issue in our schools. From birth, girls and boys are assigned their gender, male or female, and are steered into accepting the qualities and behaviours that are associated with this role. Children are taught this through many different things, such as television, toys, and the clothes they wear. There is a certain way boys and girls are supposed to act and present themselves, and this is alleged in society as being the norm. In schools, these strict gender roles can create problems of inequality among the sexes, and also create pressure for children and unrealistic expectations. By placing ourselves into strict gender roles, we limit our capabilities and potential, like what happened to empresses in the Byzantine Empire. If the idea of gender, and the strict expectations that go along with it were erased, there would arguably be more equality among men and women, and both groups would be able to fulfill their own potential and expectations, instead of those of society.

Conclusions:

Overall, it is evident that gender and power were closely connected in the Byzantine Empire. From this paper, it is evident that the ways in which Byzantine society viewed and constructed gender did have influence on the power empresses were able to obtain and exercise,

thus falsifying my original hypothesis. However, for future study, it would be valuable to consider other empress' stories and perspectives, besides Theodora and Eirene, to assess the ways in which gender and power played out in their experiences. Nevertheless, from my research, it can be argued that gender limited what empress' could do in their positions of power, and also influenced the ways in which they were perceived in their societies and in history. Through considering this topic in light of today's society, it is interesting to see how gender still plays an important part in defining our roles in society. For future study, it would be valuable to look into other societies beside the Byzantine society at different time periods and assess whether or not gender and power played a similar role. Overall, considering the relationship between gender and power in Byzantium has proved to be a valuable way to explore the ways in which roles and expectations were set in Byzantine society, and how these influenced the capabilities and capacities of the Byzantine people, specifically empresses.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Theodora, detail of a Byzantine mosaic: Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna

Source: < <http://images.encyclopedia.com/getimage.aspx?id=2806088&hero=yes>>, accessed February 25, 2010.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Mosaic, built by Emperor Justinian in 532 AD: Aya Sofya museum

Source: <<http://www.classicalmosaics.com/images/EmpIrene.jpg>> , accessed February 25, 2010.