

Kassia

Thesis/Hypothesis:

Kassia was a respected and influential woman of her time whose work is still recognized and honored in contemporary times. At a period in Byzantine history when women in positions of power were largely underrepresented within their society, Kassia was an educated, powerful, and influential woman whose spiritual works can still be found in modern society.

Sources

Articles:

Touliatos-Miles, D. (2000.). *Woman Composers in Byzantium*. Retrieved February 19, 2010
From: <http://www.hellenicnest.com/dianeII.html>

This reference was chosen because Diane Touliatos studied Ancient Greek Music for many years and focused on Kassia. She discovered much of Kassia's work. She is an American scholar, researcher and teacher. She has released many articles, books and other references.

Books:.

Baynes H., N, & Moss L.B., H.St.(1958). *Byzantium an introduction to east roman civilization*. London: Oxford University Press.

Authors Baynes and Moss merge their expertise on the history of the late Byzantine Empire. Information gathered from this text accredited the lack of primary sources in regard to educated women. With little sources, authors Baynes and Moss infer the absence of women in Byzantine schools and universities.



Finlay, George. *History of the Byzantine and Greek Empires from DCCXVI to MCCCCLIII*

(London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1856), http://books.google.com/books?id=X1RoUAAAAMAAJ&dq=Eikasia+byzantine&source=gbs_navlinks_s (accessed February 10, 2006)

This book provides an early male perspective on the history and culture of Byzantium.



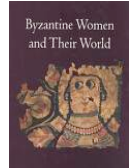
Haldon, John. "A social history of Byzantium". Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2009.

This source was used because it provided a social history of women and the difficulty of trying to piece together their lives. The author Liz James in the section "Women: Life histories" takes a feminist approach when looking at the history of Byzantium women.



Kalavrezou, Ioli. "Byzantine Women and their world". Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums.

Kalavrezou's book provides a look at women in Byzantium through primary sources such as; jewellery, paintings and cloths. She also provides a feminist view in that the histories of women in Byzantium are largely influenced and recorded by men.



Alice-Mary Talbot, "Women," in *The Byzantines*, ed. Cavallo, Guglielmo (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997) , 117-143

Alice-Mary Talbot has written numerous books and articles on Byzantium often focusing on the lives of women. She is the director of [Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection](#), an institution of Harvard University, which is dedicated to Byzantine, Garden and Landscape, and Pre-Columbian studies.



Silvas, A., Garland, L. (2006.). *Byzantine Woman: Varieties of Experience Ad 800-1200*. Great Britain: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

This reference was selected because there was a great deal of information about Kassia, from actual book that was published through King's College in London which has a center for Hellenic studies and specializes in its culture.



Tripolitis, Antonia. (1992) *Kassia: The Legend, the Woman, and Her Work*. New York: Garland Publishing.

This book provides a compilation of Kassia's written work in addition to a historical biography of the woman herself. Antonia Tripolitis is a professor of Late Antiquity at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Websites:

Vocame. (2009.). *Kassia: Byzantine Hymns from the first female composer*. Retrieved February 19, 2010 from: www.vocame.de

This is the music website of a group who released a CD with 18 of Kassia's hymns. Here you can listen to samples of the CD. Recording Label Company is Christophorus, Germany 2009. (<http://www.christophorus-records.de/>)

Disse, D. (2009.). Other Woman's voices: Translations of Women's writing before 1700. Retrieved February 19, 2010 from: <http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/kassia.html>

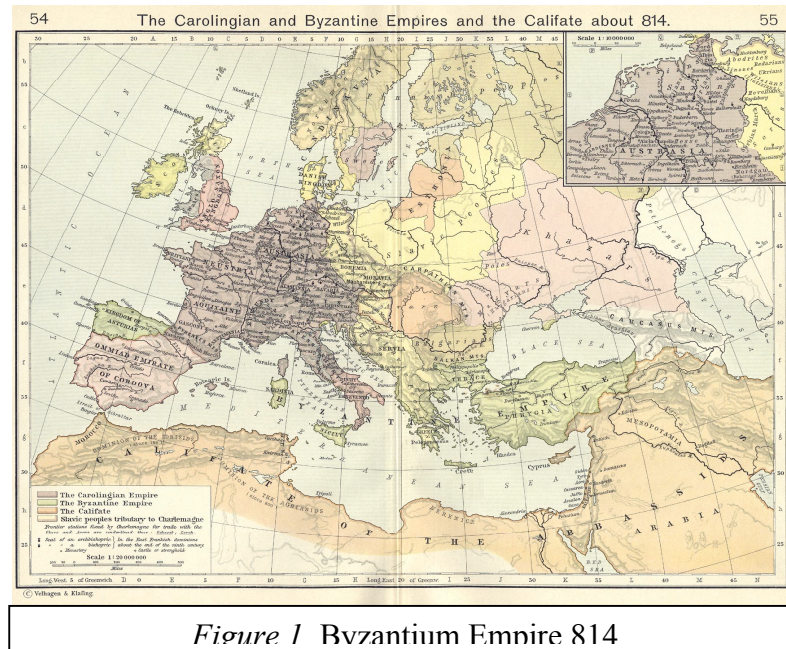
This reference contains a sample of Kassia's poem.

Argument/Discussion/Evidence

Byzantine women and the retelling of their histories

Most, if not all, of the histories of women were recorded by men during the Byzantine empire; "the prevailing image is of women who dressed modestly, with their heads covered, and who were deprived of worldly experience, committed to bearing and raising children as their primary occupations, and confined to the home for most of their lives" (Kalavrezou, 2003). Women have been historically silent in turn "this historical silence has created a distorted view of the role of women in Byzantium" (Kalavrezou, 2003).

Thus historians rely on the recorded information of women who were well-educated and held high positions in society (Kalavrezou, 2003). Historians also rely on pictures, art, music, and jewellery in order piece together the everyday lives of women (Kalavrezou, 2003). Kassia is an example of a strong woman who left her mark during the Byzantine Empire. Her poems and music are still around today and she may have very well been one of the first women activists.



Kassia: Family and Education

Information on Kassia's personal life is quite limited. She was born between 805 -810 AD to an aristocratic family of Constantinople, and father held a noble military position of the Imperial Court. Like most children of her social standing, Kassia was formerly educated. Schooling was made available to many members of Byzantium society but the level of education received was varied in relation to wealth, social class, and gender (Tripolitis 1992).



Authors, Norman Baynes and St. L.B Moss (1953) regard the access to adequate education throughout Byzantine history as candidly affiliated with income, slavery, sex, and location. Byzantine peoples born into wealthy families were privileged to receive a degree of education through instruction from selected scholars, and monks. Not only did wealthy Byzantines receive instruction, so did middleclass landowning citizens. Prostitutes generated sufficient wealth to cover the cost of tuition for their children's

education. In certain situations, slaves became adept to fine motor skills as well as fluency in the Greek language under rule of their oppressors. Authors Baynes and Moss portray John Bagwell Bury's quote "In the Eastern Empire every boy and girl whose parents could afford to pay was educated" (Baynes & Moss, 1953) as valid. Baynes and Moss resume acknowledging the differences of Western Byzantine education where students encountered rote instruction confined to sacred scriptures from the bible (Baynes & Moss, 1953). The authors contradict the equality of who can and cannot afford to receive education by stating "East Roman girls apparently went neither to school nor to university" (Baynes & Moss, 1953). The boundary between the east and west Roman Empire is obscure and the notion that girls did not receive formal education is debateable. What is clarified is that a great deal of female knowledge was indoctrinated by parents at home. Kassia, born and raised in Constantinople, capitol of the Byzantine Empire, to a wealthy family, successfully acquired quality education.

Kassia: Life and Religion

Kassia, like many women of her time, was actively resistant to the imperial mandate proscribing the use of icons in the churches of Eastern Rome. The iconoclastic controversy had been ongoing for almost a century at the time of Kassia's birth. Many women were harmed or martyred as a result of their defiance of the edict. Kassia herself was once whipped for aiding resistant monks and other religious exiles. (Tripolitis 1992)



Figure 3. Emperor Theophilos

However, it was her reportedly bold behavior at the bride ball of Emperor Theophilos that gained Kassia notoriety as an atypically defiant woman of her time. When Theophilos approached her, and attempting to engage her in conversation, made the statement, "a woman was the fount and source of all man's tribulation."

Kassia immediately defended her gender replying, "and from a woman sprang the course of man's regeneration." (Talbot, 1997) At this period of Byzantium, such a response made by a

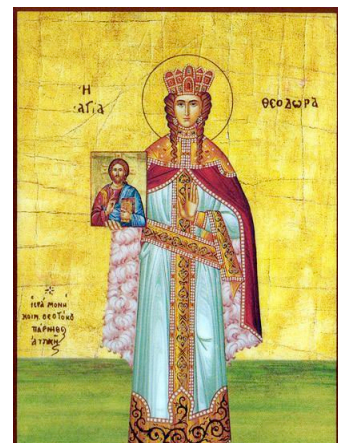


Figure 4. Saint Theodora

woman would have been considered quite socially inappropriate. Although this exchange has been discussed in many historical accounts, the exact content of the conversation cannot be fully verified. However, the abrasive and direct tone often taken in many of Kassia's own works suggest that this response would not have been out of character. (Tripolitis 1992)

The consequences of the discussion between Kassia and Theophilos are also debatable. Early accounts suggest that he was offended by Kassia's forwardness and passed her over for Theodora, his future wife, resulting in Kassia's extreme embarrassment and prompting her to choose a life of a nun. (Finlay 1856) More recent accounts, however, suggest that Kassia had made the decision to become a nun at an early age. (Tripolitis 1992)

During her teenage years Kassia was very spiritual and had a high commitment to God. She looked for Theodore Studite, for he was known as the "Church Father of time", who was a defender of the church icon. She wanted him to be her spiritual guide. This is when she became actively involved in the iconoclastic controversy during the second Iconoclasm (813-843). Iconoclasm is the banning and destroying of icons, which are images used in religious worship, in churches and homes. She was in protest of the iconoclastic controversy and was beaten for aiding iconodule exile monks. (Silvas & Garland, 2006)



Figure 5. St. Theodore of Studion

Through Diane Touliato's research, letters between Theodore and Kassia, revealed her intention of becoming a nun. In the Byzantine culture women typically got married or became a nun; Kassia chose the life of a nun committing herself to God. In 843, Kassia founded her own convent in Constantinople. (Silvas & Garland, L. 2006) (Touliatos-Miles, D. 2000)

While in the convent she composed most of her sacred music; they were epigrams, gnomic verses and moral sayings.

Kassia is recognized as being one of the earliest female composers in history whose music has been preserved through manuscripts. All her compositions were written during the reign of

Theophilos (829-842.) She also wrote music to accompany her poems and prose in works such as Byzantios, Georgio's, Kryprianos and Marcos Monachos. (Touliatos-Miles, D. 2000)

Relation/ Significance for Contemporary Society or Education

Many years later in the 21st century, Kassia's work is still present. It is still used in the Greek orthodox liturgy and every holy Wednesday her hymn "The fallen Woman" is sung. (Touliatos-Miles, D. 2000) This was written about Mary Magdelene, and also refers to the love that Emperor Theophilos had for Kassia.

Vocame, a music group from Germany, recently released an album which consists of 18 hymns written by Kassia. After taking on a new project and examining the work done by the American scholar, Diane Touliatos, they made a remarkable "*rediscovery*" of Kassia's music. They felt that it would be a shame that this beautiful but haunting music be forgotten. (Vocame, 2009)

Kassia's music reflects Byzantine culture and history and much about Byzantium can be learned through her work. A teacher can easily introduce her music and poetry in a unit in social studies. Students can find translations of her work and through deciphering their meaning can gain a greater appreciation of Byzantine culture. Her music can also be used crossed curricular with art education. An example of this would be engaging students to produce art while listening to the original hymns reproduced by Vocame.

Despite the long march of human history since the Byzantine period, it is sobering to see that access to quality education continues to reflect social class. The wealthy continue to be able afford and enjoy private schooling, private tutors, and a "wealth" of quality higher education opportunities.

Over the past two hundred years, some changes have occurred in many countries, including Canada. "Universal" publicly financed education is available to people who are less

financially fortunate, and it is based on the principle of equity in access, regardless of socioeconomic class or cultural group membership. Another improvement has been the development of diversity and critical pedagogy, including widely accepted theories such as active constructivism (Piaget), awareness of cultural/societal worldviews (Vygotsky), and multiple intelligences (Gardner). Of special concern is that education today is largely exclusionary of Indigenous learners, because of its persistent Eurocentric (individualistic) orientation. For example, despite the valuable humanizing impact of human development educational theorists, their theories are based on appreciation of individualism as important to learning. The individual learner is very important, but from the Indigenous worldview, a very important part of learning is developing a sense of belonging, inclusion, loyalty, and social and environmental responsibility.

Sample of one of Kassia's Poems (Disse, D. 2009)

[From "Concerning monachoi," one of Kassia's poems on the monastic life:]

Monachos is having only yourself.

Monachos is a single-thought life.

Monachos having worldly concerns has been called many names
but not monachos....

Monachos is a restrained tongue.

Monachos is a non-wandering eye.

Monachos is a completely shut door.

Monachos is a support of the unsupported.

Monachos is an established book

showing the model to be imitated

and teaching at the same time.... [ll.1-4, 10-16; p.137]

Conclusion

Although information on the life of Kassia is relatively limited, what has been documented presents the image of an individualistic, powerful, and spiritual woman who was unafraid to express her opinions in spite of social disapproval. She dedicated her life to her religion through the formation of her own convent and the composition of numerous spiritual works, many of which remain prevalent today. Kassia was truly a remarkable woman of her time.

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