

DID BYZANTINE WOMEN HOLD POWER?

BY HEATHER DOHERTY & KATTIE COMEAU

THESIS/HYPOTHESIS

Women in Byzantium during 400 – 1200 AD did not hold any power. The purpose of this research is to not only falsify this hypothesis but also to further examine the theory that women during this time period held considerable influence over the rulers of the government and various empires. We will also attempt to compare/contrast the role of women and their influence during this time to the role of women in the 21st Century.

SOURCES/LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

PRIMARY



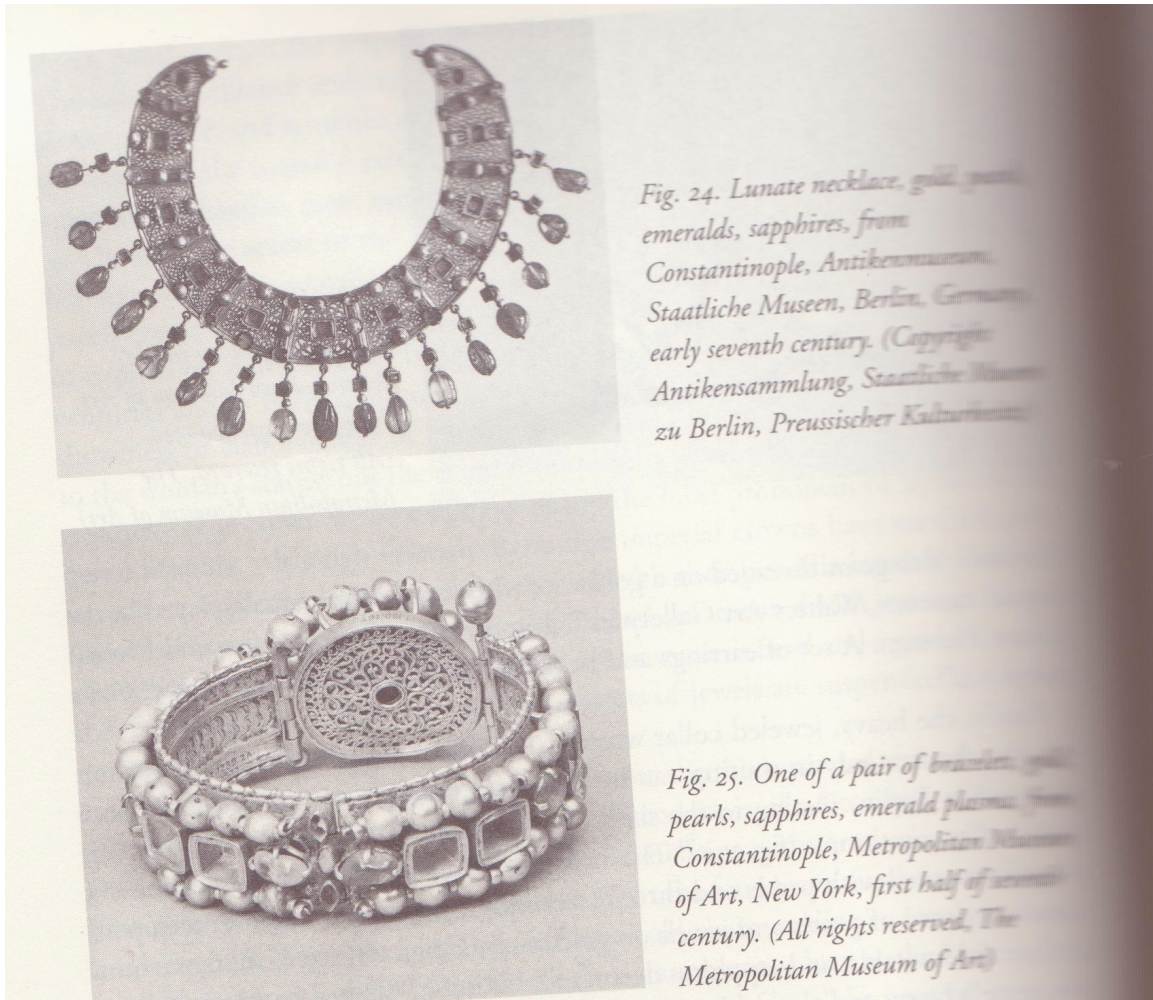
*Fig. 26. Head of Theodora (?),
marble, from Castello Sforzesco,
Civico Museo d'Arte Antica,
Milan, Italy, ca. 530-40.
(Copyright Scala/Art Resource,
N.Y.)*

This photo depicts a statue of the head of the Empress Theodora. The very fact that Theodora had a statue created in her honour defines her influence and power in Byzantium. The head of Theodora statue is held in Milan, Italy. (Copyright Scale/Art Resource N.Y.)



Pl. 6. Detail of figure 22, the empress Theodora, Antonina, and Joannina, mosaic, south wall of sanctuary, San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, ca. 545–47. (Copyright Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.)

This photo depicts Theodore and her court – the photo gives evidence to Theodora's power in the empire. We learned through our research that Empresses and Emperors in Byzantine courts were adorned with gowns and jewels of similar opulence and value. The primary photo is located in the San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. (Copyright Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.)



This photo depicts the jewellery worn by some of the Empresses in the Byzantine era. We chose this photo because it depicts the opulence and wealth of the Byzantine Empresses.

SECONDARY

Connor, Carolyn. "Women of Byzantium" Yale University. United States of America. 2004

Garland, Lynda. "Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience 800-1200" Ashgate Publishing Limited. Aldershot, Hampshire. 2006.

Garland, Lynda. "Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204" Routledge, London, 1999.

James, Liz. "Women, Men and Eunuchs, Gender in Byzantium" Routledge, London, 1997.

James, Liz. "The Role of Women". The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies. Ed E.Jefferys, J.Haldon & R. Cormack. New York: Oxford Uni. Press, 2008. 643- 651.

AWARENESS OF PERSPECTIVES NOT TAKEN

We are aware that from the sources we have gathered the primary bias may be female. It is by coincidence only that all of the authors who are cited in our secondary sources are female. We are assuming that female authors typically have a greater ability to relate to issues surrounding women. This is not to suggest that male authors would not be capable of this but the female authors offered an additional dimension in their research.

PERSPECTIVES

While looking through the many sources of information about Women in Byzantium we need to keep in mind that many sources may be male influences and not fully represent the women's history in Byzantium.

Throughout the Liz James' article "The Role of Women" she discusses, since feminism became accepted in the academic field the way women's roles were studied has changed. Women are now set along side Byzantine men in the context of their roles but it must be remembered that a large majority of the information is filtered through male sources (643). Through this male filtration of sources, male behaviour was seen as the norm and the woman's role was conditioned by this norm (644).

As an audience we need to be consciously aware that the many sources available do not simply tell us what women did but what is told is informed by the attitudes towards women and female behaviours (649).

ARGUMENT/ DISCUSSION/ EVIDENCE

It is true that not all women held power but there were exceptions and some women were born into power or married into the position of power.

During the 4th and 5th century, women's participation in society took on a new role as they were no longer controlled and confined to their homes and through education and training, they were able to interact with greater influence with government and the rulers of their time. Women who came from wealthy backgrounds were able to gain greater influence and power through their interactions within the public domain. Because of this, it was still

important for society to control them otherwise they could use their wealth to sway public opinion and affect social change (Conner 15-16).

All women whether they were rich or poor still had to deal with the gender stereotypes outlined by the church. Nonetheless, they could choose whether they wanted to marry or not. Society depended a great deal on the wealth of aristocratic women because it was this wealth and social stature that aided in the building of churches, hospitals. They used their wealth and family names to protect those who could not protect themselves (Conner 18). But however restrained they may have been, from holding true political power, they still enjoyed a social liberation, meaning that they could choose a religious career over married life and as empresses they yielded remarkable influence over men's assenting to the throne. (Conner 19)

Byzantium was a traditional society in which one would not expect women to have had a visibly active position in public life. Within Byzantine history there is an indirect influence of women in a male oriented society (James 2). Within the Byzantine Empire the emperors usually held power but a number of empresses played an important part in many aspects (Garland 1). Empresses were known by many different names including, Augusta, basilis(sa) and despoina being those most common, while empresses ruling in their own right could adopt the masculine titles of basilus or autokrator (Garland 2). It must be stated at this point that we could not find evidence to explain why or if Empresses changed their name to reflect power once crowned.

The position of Augusta itself was not automatically awarded by marriage and had to be formally granted by the emperor, either on his consent, or on their marriage, if he was already on the throne at the time, or after the birth of their first child (Garland 2). Empresses could also in outstanding circumstances rule in their own right, though it was considered more standard that they should take the occasion to choose a new husband and make him emperor (Garland 1). Empresses who chose not to remarry ruled as an emperor but they could not personally lead an army, which was seen as a disadvantage (Garland 4).

Empress Zoe Porphyrogenneta was heir to the throne four times in her own right with three husbands and an adopted son. She yielded a huge influence over the government in all accounts, as she was to determine imperial succession to the throne. It must be mentioned that in some circumstances although unusual, empresses were not obligated to marry the successors to the throne. Empress Sophia nominated the heir and successor, Tiberios, to the throne once her husband went insane. (Garland 3)

Historical writings express surprise at the very thought of women holding power but in fact between 527 and 1204 7 empresses held a position of power while preparing their sons to assume the throne. Empress Irene and Theodora The Macedonian ruled in their own right despite much criticism and support regarding the gendered biased role of women during this time. (Garland 3)

During the reign of her husband the sole purpose of an Augusta was the orchestration of ceremonial at the imperial court (Garland 4). The empress was also in charge of the gynaikonitis, the women's quarters in the palace, here she had her own staff that were above all though not entirely composed of eunuchs (Garland 5). An Augusta acquired something of majestic power, and empresses had their own royal paraphernalia, they wore their own crowns, often with jewelled pendilia, the red shoes and had their own sceptres (Garland 2). There still seemed to be a prerequisite of beauty for an empress (Garland 6).

Elite women were able to share a form of public communication with men; noble women and men were able to commission images and monuments (James 53). Monuments were a type of public communication considered suitable for wealthy women; they were commissioned by Roman women and could provide a fairly overt form of public dialogue in ways that women's words did (or could) not (James 53).

Lives of women who were not empresses consisted of marriage, motherhood; virgin, wife, mother and widow were acceptable Christian roles for women (James, Oxford 644). Women were the sole provider of upbringing to their children both male and female; training them appropriately for their later roles. After the children were grown the woman's role was household maintenance (644). The women had very little if any access to public life, when a woman held power over a man it was seen as great suspicion (644).

A famous Byzantine woman of Power was Theodora, wife of Justinian. Theodora's life began as an actress, with all the nuances of sexual immorality and offensive entertainment. A special law had to be put into place to allow Theodora to marry Justinian, a man of rank (Garland 11). Many, many individuals were against the marriage of Theodora and Justinian but once completed she was moved up to the uppermost position in a class-conscious society (19). Theodora was able to influence Justinian; persuading him to give more rights to women, even prostitutes; she wanted to remove some of the hardships that women of the lower class face (18). Theodora also gave to the city; building churches and sending a cross to Jerusalem; she was constantly active in religion (21).

RELATION/SIGNIFICANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY OR EDUCATION

Looking into the lives of the Byzantium women really puts 2010 into perspective. For a woman to hold any sort of power in 2010 they do not have to be married to an Emperor or a male individual in power; they can gain power and wealth on their own, without the help of men.

No matter how much time has passed and no matter how much we would like to believe our society has overcome gender barriers, as female teachers we've noticed that there is still a lack of equality in manager and administration functions within the education system.

Within the classroom, we need to change the paradigm and ways of thinking for future generations; we will accomplish this by teaching our students to have a voice, to question the traditional pedagogy and rules of society. They need to be educated with a perspective that all children can learn, all children can influence, and all children can develop into citizens who are productive and progressive regardless of their gender.

CONCLUSION

“One recent explanation for the power of these imperial women is that they escaped from the restrictive ideology of their society, using it as a cloak behind which they exercised power in a fashion defined as masculine, without affecting their femininity” (James 76)

With respect to the above quote, we found it interesting that there were common similarities between the struggles women face due to gender bias. The ability to truly gain power is suppressed for solely one reason, because they are women. In most cases women were born into wealth just as their male counterparts and sometimes they would direct heirs to a Byzantine Empire but yet they were unable to hold power because they were women and often were persuaded to marry suitors simply for political gain. However, what we found interesting was the amount of influence these women held over the choices of governments or Emperors. The women could choose their spouse and they could also remove their spouse from office in a very calculating and manipulative way.