

Byzantium Project

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Thesis/Hypothesis

How did the status of women change during the Byzantine Era and what contributions did Byzantine women make to modern feminism?

- Women of Society – Social Status, Gender, and Rights
- Women of Power – Irene, Theodora, and Euphrosyne
- Links to Feminism

Primary and Secondary Sources

The primary sources gathered for this paper include a few pictures of some influential Byzantium women. These were chosen as sources as an attempt to show people how women were represented in the Byzantium era. Therefore, encouraging people to think about the differences and similarities between the Byzantium era and the world that one currently knows. Primary sources are important information to obtain in order for one to gain a true perspective on a particular culture or era. That being said, the amounts of primary sources pertaining to women in the Byzantium era are definitely limited.

The secondary sources that were included in this project are books, journals, and research papers on the experiences of women in Byzantium society. Some of the specific information concerning that proper names and societal positions of Byzantine empresses and emperors were found and confirmed using scholarly websites. There seems to be less specific information concerning the status of women during the Byzantium Era. This may be because many ancient historians lived and recorded information during a time when a patriarchal society was in place. We begin to see a shift in the perspectives of women, in particular with that

of some empresses, as some went on to rule and influenced some of the changes to the laws regarding women's rights.

Limitations of Study

As there is with many research studies, there are limitations within this particular study. First of all, the perspectives taken may have been biased, one reason being the fact that the majority of historians in Ancient Rome were men. Also, awareness of the fact that we did not look at the issue from many different perspectives may not have been considered. Throughout this paper there was only one view taken on Byzantium women. Most importantly, there is always the possibility that more sources could have been used to gather the information, although, the amount of primary sources available containing information from the Byzantium era are scarce.

Argument

Throughout the Byzantine Era, significant advances were made in regards to the importance of women's rights and freedoms in Ancient Roman society. This research will help to identify the events and people which contributed to the changes in women's social, economic, and political status during the Byzantine empires. By identifying the experiences of Byzantine women we can connect the progresses made in women's rights today.

The women of the Byzantine era lived in a patriarchal society. Women were not treated as equals to men and within the ruling class the emperor ultimately held the power over the empire. However, a few notable empresses played an important role within the empire and assumed control when necessary. It is also important to outline the experiences of the women of society in general during this period of history in order to understand the context and status of women during the Byzantine era and their contributions to feminism. By identifying the women who contributed to the changes in the status and significance of Byzantine women, we can begin to see where the early roots of feminism had begun.

Discussion and Evidence

Women of Society

Throughout the Byzantine Empire there were various social constraints, ones pertaining mostly towards gender. These constraints not only affect gender itself but other areas such as power and status. There was vast difference between males and females not just biologically; but through roles they took on and how they were perceived in society. In fact gender was seen “as equally fundamental to the ways in which Byzantine society operate” as Garland suggests. (2006) This being said men had the power and control over women.

With gender having an impact on the way society is operated “it was increasingly recognized that women needed to be set into their social, economic, and historic contexts – and that these were not automatically the same as men’s.” (James, 2009, p. 34) Women during this time were considered inferior to men. Men held all the power and control over the state and the household. Women on the other hand were very limited with what they could do outside the house hold and in the community. Even though women were respected as the keepers of the household, they were rarely informed or concerned with matters outside the home.

Women were to go through four stages throughout life and if not they were considered a bad woman for not following the norms and also perceived as a prostitute. (James, 2009, p. 35) The stages are as followed: a virgin, wife, mother and widow. Based on these stages it becomes evident what was expected of them. They were to take on the duties of childcare and house wives, which involved all the household cooking and cleaning. When it came to meals women for the most they part had to eat in another room unless it just immediate family in the room. If the women left their homes they had to be accompanied, although though most could only leave to run errands, go to church, certain festivals and to the bath house.

It becomes evident that many women did not have an outside life outside of their homes. This most likely is due to the Byzantine society being both misogynist and patriarchal. (James, 2009, p.35) It even got to the point where women were considered to be bad because of their bodies. They were seen as sexual icons that bring on temptation and seduction which gets in the way of the men’s decisions especially those of the Emperor. It becomes evident that women’s public rights did not exist, which makes it nearly impossible to change the view and roles of women throughout society.

Women however did have limited rights within the household itself. Women regardless of their class and background did receive some personal, economic and property rights within the family guaranteed by law. “A woman retained possession of her dowry, though her husband administered it, and could alienate inherited property; widows retained the right of ownership and administration of family property, including dowry goods.” (James, 2009, p.35) The estate did not just go to the sons if the father died, in fact women had control over their sons. In fact “daughters as well as sons had the right to share the inheritance of their parents and property was transferred along female lines.” (James, 2009, p.35) Regardless if the father/husband of the household was alive, women were expected to be active in economic issues however only within the household. They could share ideas and concerns with their husbands and then the husbands would take it out into the community but it would still be seen as a man’s idea.

Women of Power

It became increasingly apparent that in this sort of society, women’s roles changed over time and place. We see this with the roles of the emperors and empresses. We see how the men have the power and how the empresses are seen as inferior, but do hold the same rights of the family estate, however there are some empresses that rose up to power based on their husbands passing away, which helped paved the way for early feminism.

The title of “Augusta” was just one of the many formal names given to the empress, and on rare occasion it was awarded to the wives of emperors. It becomes more common after the 6th Century. This may have become more common as women gained more significance and power within the empire, and it was important for empresses to be seen as having the same noble qualities as her husband did. For instance, if her husband died and there was no one to take over the empire right away, the empress could assume much of the same responsibilities and status as her husband. “While the empress’s constitutional importance was never defined, it was accepted that by her coronation, which was performed by her husband after the patriarch had prayed over the crown, an Augusta acquired something of imperial power.” (Garland, 1999, p.2)

Some empresses could rule if their husbands died or if they had young sons who were heirs to the throne. In rare cases some empresses could even rule in their own right, but it was usually thought to be more acceptable for a woman to take a husband in order to make him emperor. That way important decisions made by the Empire came from the Emperor, and not only from the ruling Empress. When we consider the example of Irene, we can see how a woman went on to rule despite what was thought to be acceptable in Byzantine society.

Irene



Empress Irene, Found at,

http://images.google.ca/imgres?imgurl=http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/medieval/history/byzantine/pictures/irenehagiasophia.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/medieval/history/byzantine/irene.htm&usg=__NW31bZyRwrcAcAAMXzDD5519Ks8=&h=241&w=200&sz=31&hl=en&start=29&um=1&itbs=1&tbnid=1veMqikg9OWGmM:&tbnh=110&tbnw=91&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dwomen%2Bin%2Bthe%2Bbyzantine%2Bempire.%2BIrene%26start%3D18%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN%26rlz%3D1T4TSHC_enCA307CA308%26ndsp%3D18%26tbs%3Disch:1, on March 17th, 2010

According to Ambrosio and his contributions towards “Explore Byzantium”, there were few ways that women in power were able to rule. One way was made possible only when a notable man could not be found to fill the position of emperor. Until a suitable emperor was found, a woman of high family status could rule temporarily. For example a widowed mother would be expected to give up much of her power once her child reached adulthood. Or if she was remarried, she would be expected to adhere to the wishes of her new husband. Some women, like that of the eighth century Empress Irene, were reluctant to cooperate with this loss of independence and refused to follow these social norms.

When Irene’s husband Leo IV died in 780, she was left to rule the empire as a regent and to look after their young son Constantine VI. Irene ruled confidently and successfully for 10 years and among her supporters had much respect for her empire and government. When her son grew older and tried to take his rightful place as emperor, Irene rejected and fought against him. They ruled together unsuccessfully for a short period of time, until Irene’s supporters eventually murdered him. This allowed Irene to rule solely as an empress.

“As an empress, Irene can only be understood in gendered terms: as a woman and as someone who was not an emperor, playing out different gender roles in her desire to retain power.” (James, 2009, p. 46) This may be why Irene adopted the title of *Basileus* (official title for a male emperor) instead of the official female title. “Thinking about gender questions in the context of empresses suggests that within the misogynist structure of the Byzantine Empire, empresses had to juggle two contradictory elements: their status as women and their position as rulers.” (James, 2009, p.46) After all, she was one of the first female Byzantine empresses to rule in her own right and as a result she gained more power and popularity because of her actions against her own son.

Even though this may have been a rare case where a woman was respected and highly regarded as an empress, we can begin to see how women began to be treated differently than in the past. Irene had many supporters among her government and within the church, which contributed to her successful reign. Nevertheless, Irene was still a woman, and perhaps more notably, a woman who killed her own son in order to maintain power over the Byzantine Empire for an extended period of time. This could be seen as a step towards equality for men and women long ago, and perhaps more important to the context of the Byzantine Era, it gave value to women and their political views.



Gold Coin of empress Irene, found at www.guide2womenleaders.com/womeninpower/Women..., on March 17th, 2010.

Theodora



Empress Theodora, found at: www.thenagain.info/.../easteurope/Theodora.html, on March 17th, 2010

Theodora who was born in 497 AD was one of a few women who have been influential within the Byzantine Empire. It may come to a shock that one she is a woman and two based on her past. Before becoming an Empress Theodora lived a very different life. With her father dying at a young age her mother was left to look after the children. Theodora's mother started helping her daughters act, and eventually they became prostitutes to help make ends meet. During this time prostitutes were seen as bad women, and this had gotten Theodora in trouble throughout different cities.

Once becoming a Monophysite and meeting Justinian, who is nephew and heir of Emperor Justin; Theodora's life began to change. However the law had to be changed in order for her to marry Justinian. He was considered to be a man of senatorial rank. (Garland, 1999, p. 11) Justin changed this for Justinian, and when Justinian became Emperor he turned to Theodora for help in making political decisions. "She is credited with influencing many reforms, including some which expanded the rights of women in divorce and property ownership, forbid exposure of unwanted infants, gave mothers some guardianship rights over their children, and forbid the killing of a wife who committed adultery. She closed brothels and created convents where the ex-prostitutes could support themselves." (Lewis, 2009) Based on all the impact she has made to the law it becomes evident how she has changed the law to help women gain and protect their rights. Many believe she wanted to make such a difference based on her earlier life experiences, and all the things she went through while she grew up. She was not alone in dealing with these issues she was supported by her husband and many others until she died in 548 AD.

Theodora (Justinian's Law and Significance for Women)

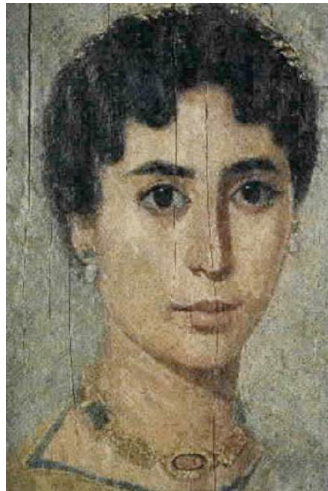
In relation to Justinian Law, although new laws were created during his reign as emperor, the only intention Justinian had was to organize the existing laws and delete the laws that no longer applied. However, resulting from his attempt to organize the laws he created a document at least twice the size of the Bible. He made these laws mainly to benefit himself and his wife, but regardless of the reason it did have an impact on the status of women during that time. Justinian Law is interesting when considering how status of women may have changed because some of his laws were put in place to make women and men more equal. A few examples of laws created that were clearly beneficial to women had to do with marriage, divorce and concubines (Thomas, 2005).

Marriage could not take place without consent from both the woman and the man, therefore, no woman could be forced to marry any man. Both sexes could end the marriage, however, divorce was not as easy to get as it was in previous times. Justinian limited the reasons a woman and a man could get a divorce. A few reasons a woman could divorce her husband were; treason, killing her without warning and falsely accusing her of adultery. A few reasons a man could divorce his wife were; if she committed adultery, was away from the house and not with her parents and treason. Although the reasons a man was allowed to divorce his wife seem absolutely ridiculous to us, they certainly were beneficial for the women of in that time period. If a woman wanted to stay with her husband she would just have to live by a few guidelines. So, because husbands could not just simply decide one day to divorce their wives it allowed the women greater opportunity to obtain status. With regards to the final law stated above, a man could not be married and have a concubine. This law was hugely beneficial for the respect of women and it helped men to view them more as human beings (Thomas, 2005).



Gold Coin of Empress Theodora, found at: www.guide2womenleaders.com/womeninpower/Europ..., on March 17th, 2010

Euphrosyne



From Euphrosyne Doxiadis (1995): [The Mysterious Fayum Portraits](#): Faces from Ancient Egypt, Portrait of a woman, probably from er-Rubayat, c. 160-170 AD British Museum, London, An idea of how Hypatia might have looked. Found on March 17th, 2010

In the prolonged absence of the emperor, it was acceptable for the empress to make important decisions when it was necessary. An example of this can be applied to that of Euphrosyne. Euphrosyne was the wife of Alexios III Angelos. Euphrosyne came from a wealthy political family and as an empress she was interested in political life. Unlike other notable women, she was given some independence to consult with ministers, clerics and in some cases would even meet with foreign ambassadors without the assistance or approval of her husband. (Garland, 1999, p.2) According to Choniates, a Byzantine historian, as an emperor Alexios was weak and was not concerned with matters of the empire. Alexios' lack of concern seemed to have given Euphrosyne some independence to explore her political desires and imperial influence within the empire.

Both Euphrosyne and Alexios enjoyed their lavish lifestyles, but in much different ways. While Alexios cared more about spending state money on personal pleasures and generously rewarding only his family and supporters, Euphrosyne used this power to highlight her imperial status. (Garland, 1999, p. 213) Euphrosyne even held her own court and was highly regarded for her role within the government. Even though this was only made possible by her husband, it shows how women gained importance and respect within the empire. Her contributions and decision making were an important factor for considering how the status of women and the importance of women in public society may have begun to change.

Relation/Significance for Contemporary Society or Education

Links to Feminism

As we have discussed, a dominant portion of the information regarding status of women and their roles within society come from the viewpoints of men. It is necessary to research the lives of Byzantium women in order to gain a better understanding of how they were portrayed in a patriarchal society. By looking at the advances made by notable empresses we can see how they struggled to achieve power and equality within the empire and how this may be linked to modern ideologies of feminism.

Women have come a long way in society over the years. From getting the right to vote, pursuing more jobs, to becoming perceived equal to men in society; women have fought and protected their rights. Having the right to vote was one of first steps for women being noticed as being a person. Nelly McClung brought forth this notion and continued to fight for women's rights throughout. She became a Liberal member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta where she fought for mother's allowances, public health nursing, free medical and dental care for children, liberalised birth control, divorce laws, and improved property rights for married women.(The Center of Canadian Studies, 2001) Based on this it becomes evident that women did not have the rights or power, but certainly fought to gain it.

Today women are not staying home, looking after the children and doing the house work. They are now out in the working world. They are able to make their own money and pursue jobs that are in interest to them. In fact men are now accepted to stay home and look after the kids and also work in hospitals as nurses. There has been a growth in having equal pay rate as men and women not hitting what are known as a ceiling effect. What is meant by that is women are not stopping at a certain level in their employment (assistant, vice president, president) and starting to receive equal pay according to what men would make in that position. It becomes evident that women have come a long ways in the aspects of roles in society.

Today women are able to take part in political decisions. They have the right to run in elections to help better society. Women now are able to take on a more world leader approach, like becoming a mayor, or running various organizations to maybe at some point down the road to sometime running for prime minister. Based on what was stated about women during the Byzantine period and women today in society it becomes evident that there has been some important significance to the women's movement, pertaining to rights and roles within society. In comparison to the Byzantine era today, women are now considered to be equal to men.

Conclusions

“The unique role of women was to bear children to ensure the continuation of the family. They were excluded from the public fields of politics, war and church that rewarded and engaged men. Women from non-elite backgrounds enter the historical record only when they are prominent at court or acquire wealth and influence.” (Garland, 2006, Introduction) In conclusion, by looking at the experiences of Byzantine women, in society and in power, we are able to connect their social status, gender, rights and power relations to modern ideas of women’s value and equality within society. We have seen how women who lived during the Byzantine era may have contributed to modern day feminism.

Women in Ancient Rome had limited rights and freedoms because they were influenced by a patriarchal society. Women in Byzantine society, although patriarchal and misogynist, did manage to enjoy freedoms within the household and even some legal rights to property in specific circumstances. It is important to note that even though men held much of the control over women, women still were expected to contribute ideas concerning economic issues to their husbands in some shape or form. Even within the ruling class only a few notable empresses actually challenged the traditional role of women. This may have been a factor in the shift of perspective of women during that time, because their own experiences attracted attention and made equality between men and women more conceivable.

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