

BYZANTIUM – Gender Relations

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Overview Male dominance proving to be the default condition in human society, by and large, one notes with interest those ancient bows toward female brilliance, occasionally to be found tucked in the archives of the oldest histories: one reads of women physicians in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamian priestesses whose scientific knowledge--to mention only that--put them at the peak of their culture, or of a Sappho, whose sizzling and elegant lines still haunt us. The examples are of course legion, and continually growing--as, for instance, we learn by the day about the critical roles women played in ancient business life. Precisely this kind of 'awe of the female' shakes us, as we read of the (as too often) unexpected richness of women's positions in the Byzantine Empire.

The middle class woman's early life From what we can deduce, the life of 'ordinary women' changed relatively little over the millennium long course of the Byzantine Empire. (Constant military incursions, frequent food shortages, internecine strife: all these factors will have guaranteed sufficient insecurity, as always, in the lives of mothers and daughters, as we need hardly say.) Our lady of the house is likely to have been raised according to the respected maxim of Kekavminos, in his *Strategikos*: 'keep your daughters as prisoners, confined and inconspicuous.' Prior to marriage, at 12 or 13, young women never went out unaccompanied, never ate their meals in the presence of men, rarely went to school--although with luck they were tutored at home, at least to the level of reading and writing and memorizing the Psalms of David, plus, as the last suggests, mastering (and accepting) the fundamentals of Orthodox Christian belief. It goes without saying that absolute chastity was required, of any girl aspiring to a decent marriage.

The middle class woman's married life. Except for those cases in which the young woman followed her heart into a convent, she usually followed her parents' decision, in taking her mate. (There were well-known occasions when an abduction--resulting from an ardent couple's conspiracy--would trigger parental agreement to a bride's innermost passions.) From that point on the woman was subject to two authorities, that of the Church, in which she will have been indoctrinated since baptism, and that of her husband. Within the former relation she will have been born and will die, while within the latter she is likely--if she is lucky, and as custom enjoined--to be relatively content, exchanging child bearing and child care for a marital relation in which a variety of freedoms were guaranteed, freedom to go to the baths, on pilgrimage, to visit with her lady friends, to walk around the city, as well as the important freedoms to manage her own business, arrange and sign contracts, retain her own dowry, and inherit fully from a predeceased husband.

The example that breaks the mold. The Empress Theodora (500-548 C.E.), wife and colleague of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (482-565 C.E.), exceeds all Byzantine women in power, and not only in power but in determination to use some of her power to support the lives of women in the Empire. (The fact that her husband was the greatest law giver since Hammurabi helped her in this.) This humbly born daughter of a bear trainer is known to us (for good and bad both) by the historian Procopius, who has described both her extravagant gifts and her extravagant vices--in two different books. In 525, after a public life that included both stage acting and prostitution--each interpretable in two different ways--this married Lady of Imperial Power did a great deal to introduce legal measures of assistance to women. Women's rights, under Theodora, were legalized and enforced: measures to illegalize brothels, to support women who were being victimized in marriage; to free the daughters of female slaves; to help actresses to transition from their 'dubious profession' into the dignity of Christian marriage.

Reading

Garland, Lynda, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, A.D. 527-1204*, London, 1999.

Evans, James A.S., *The Empress Theodora, Partner of Justinian*, Austin, 2002.

Discussion questions

What was the condition of life for women in the West, the old Roman Empire, during the Byzantine period? Had mediaeval 'western women' the advantage of any such advocate as Theodora?

What would a contemporary Feminist say to the 'protection of women's rights' fought for by Theodora? What major 'women's rights' were not covered In Byzantine society?

How was the Byzantine woman indoctrinated into her Orthodox Christian belief? Did she go to mass? Did she received religious instruction in the home? From whom?