

# BYZANTINE SOCIAL HISTORY

*Frederic Will, Ph.D.*

## Contents

Part I : Social Structure

Part II : Gender Relations

Part I : SOCIAL STRUCTURE

**Overview** Like the class structure of many early western societies, Byzantine class society was built around a top heavy power structure. The Emperor of the Byzantine Empire enjoyed great power, as the Ruler of a Christian Empire, who was thus both a spiritual and a secular controller. Under him--though on a few occasions the Emperor was an Empress--deployed a rich pyramid of subordinate 'classes,' from aristocrats down to peasants and slaves, all members of one polity. While the Empire lasted a millennium, we will here content ourselves with brief generalized biopsies of each of the major social strata that made up the Empire.

**The classes** The Emperor stood alone on top. Under him, rarely her, stood first of all what we might call the strongest power-holders: aristocrats of old lineage, frequently relatives of the Emperor; large landholders, who were constantly on the lookout to increase their territory; retired military of the highest ranks; numerous higher bureaucrats, functionaries of the higher Departments of State. Below these wealthier strata of Byzantine society--the occupants of, it seems, five. thousand or more sumptuous mansions, scattered throughout the capital--came the quarters of the largely commercial group of artisans, merchants, craftsmen, and market employees, the little people who kept the movement of commerce active. Below this 'lower class,' which by the way was upwardly mobile, and on many occasions proved to be permeable, ranged the truly poor, the peasants, and the slaves, none of whom--this was nominally a 'Christian Empire,' was allowed to fall below the concerns of charity and grace. On the outside of this congeries of competing groups arrayed those (sometimes numerous) monks and nuns who prayed for the whole.

## What made this class-conscious society work?

**Imperial might** At the top of this society--as at the 'top' of British society today--stands the Emperor. This deeply revered figure, though in close 'touch with God,' like a Mesopotamian ruler millennia earlier, was in fact a figure closely in touch with the secular running of the Empire--making laws, establishing treaties, demonstrating his usefulness to the people. This superman held the keys to a top heavy but vital social structure.

**A city fascinating to and for all** Constantinople was the most sophisticated city of its time, greatly urbane and (superficially, from the outside) there to be enjoyed by every class of citizen. A walk around the city would provide ample purviews of great mansions, royal palaces--of which there were four gigantic examples--deer parks to eyeball, as well as a Hippodrome--twin to the Roman Coliseum--in which the little people of the street could watch circuses, public games, juggling contests, and feats of acrobatics. For guys thirsting for a simple brew and never closer than distant spectators to the Emperor's Malmsey-gushing imperial fountains, there were café's, taverns, and bars aplenty, with tables set up for lively parties of chess, and for high living little guys, with stomachs hungry enough to eat a stallion. Here was a city in which people could 'forget to complain.'

**Another thought about 'what made it work'** The Byzantine Empire survived on the same firm structures--of political governance, law, and military strength--which had carried the West through to its fall. Two unique features, though, were working on behalf of the Byzantines. Christianity, meaning 'monotheistic religion' in this case, gave the Empire a firm consolidating credo to work from. Point one. The second unique feature of Byzantium is this. Byzantium was more strongly placed, even than imperial Rome, for trading in all directions, and was able to enrich itself, from its geopolitical position onto the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Red Sea, more lastingly and potently than was its sister in Italy.

## Reading

Babinger, Franz, *Mehmet the Conqueror and his Time*, Princeton, 1992.

Fletcher, Richard, *The Cross and the Crescent*, London, 2005.

## Discussion questions

How does the class structure of ancient Rome compare with that of the Byzantine Empire? What are the essential differences, both in the early Western and in the later, Byzantine period?

How much secular power did the Orthodox Church, the Church that thrived under the supervision of the Patriarch, exercise in the secular affairs of the Byzantine state? How powerful were the clergy?

How badly was the Byzantine Empire harassed by 'barbarian tribes,' as it developed over a millennium? How was it finally possible for the Ottomans to 'bring the Empire down'?

## Part II : GENDER RELATIONS

**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 legalize 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 receive religious instruction in the home? From whom?