

INTRODUCTION



AT FIRST THERE WAS WOMEN'S HISTORY, then the history of gender, and now a vastly more sophisticated theory and methodology of studying historical men and women. When I first started working on women in Byzantium in 1976, there was very little research published specifically on the female half of its society. Only a few empresses, princesses, nuns, and other famous (or infamous) individuals received attention. And most of it was scurrilous, designed to illustrate their weak characters and dangerous impulses, as male authors perceived them. Yet women not only accounted for 50 percent of the population in the Byzantine Empire and, however restricted, must have influenced their male relatives, they could also be studied in their own terms. The moment I started to look for them, I found frequent records of women taking initiatives in a wide range of sources, which indicated a far greater visibility than had been assumed of women outside the imperial court, as well as within.

Forty years of researching and writing about the distinctive features of Byzantium are presented in this book and its companion volume, *Margins and Metropolis: Authority across the Byzantine Empire*. Each chapter has been lightly edited to remove the particularities of the original version, but I have not tried to rewrite them. At the same time, at my editor's suggestion I've added a personal account of how I came to write each chapter and who and what influenced me in doing so. A selection of the most important and relevant new publications are noted. Each volume traces a historian's journey across the Byzantine Empire, traveling on different but related paths. This trek began in the 1960s, at Cambridge, when I chose to become a historian, and those very radical times naturally left their influence. I still feel myself a part of that period, am proud to have contributed to its radicalism, and am happy to say that it has marked my work ever since.

Through family circumstances I grew up in a house surrounded by active women who worked, earned, and enjoyed living. So I felt an

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immediate affinity with the feminism of the 1960s, with its egalitarian openness to immediate experience, which was rooted in the anti-authoritarianism of the period. Feminism is a different “ism” from Marxism, which makes a claim on history and provides an explanatory tool for its study. Feminism, especially in its early forms, was concerned with inequality, and this has influenced approaches to medieval societies where women were not only unequal but also denigrated. Undoing the prejudice of past centuries became a current need. In Byzantium, however, I found an unrivalled influence of women and evidence for it in many different fields: religious practice, legal status, shared Greek education, and political influence through the ruling dynasty. Women might even claim the imperial throne through the combined pressure of Christian monogamy, which allowed them not to remarry, and Roman law, which guaranteed their inheritance. Despite the context of an entirely patriarchal society heavily dominated by male prejudice, every century of Byzantium’s existence reveals at least one empress of remarkable power and many independent women. I was privileged to be among the first to explore the new fields that were opening up—the great joy of being a pioneer. I contrast this with my experience of Marxism in the Introduction to my companion volume, *Margins and Metropolis across the Byzantine Empire*.

Another explorer trying to fill this black hole in Byzantine Studies was Angeliki Laiou, who presented a plenary paper on women at the International Congress held in 1981 in Vienna. It was accompanied by a number of short communications mainly devoted to collecting references. More useful for the study of women was Cyril Mango’s plenary paper on “Daily Life in Byzantium,” which emphasized the significance of archaeological data. Although I could not attend the Congress, I realized from the publications that it had advanced the study of women. Unfortunately, it proved difficult to harness this movement in a collaborative fashion. In a fulsome review of Laiou’s important book on *Peasant Society*, I had pointed to the fact that walnut or hazelnut production could keep a peasant family for years. By failing to separate nut from fruit trees in her computerized investigation, this economic marker had been overlooked. Although I made clear how much I admired the path-breaking work that went into her study made in the era before computers, she took offense at this critical remark and was a bit brusque at our subsequent meetings. Only decades later when she came to give the Runciman Lecture at King’s College London, at my suggestion, could we discuss our shared interests.

As a feminist engaged in the women's movement of the 1960s I had a thoroughly antagonistic attitude toward the male depreciation of "the weaker sex," a slur commonly found in medieval records. My instinctive reading of Byzantine documents was suspicious and wary. But I identified ways of getting around the prejudice of male authors, which I laid out in a seminar paper in 1980, "In Search of Byzantine Women: Three Avenues of Approach," chapter 2 in this volume. Postmodernism and the "Linguistic Turn" took this problem into high-flown theory by dissolving any connection between the female figures constructed by male authors according to literary narratives and actual women. Liz Clark's articles "The Construction of Women" (1994) and "The Lady Vanishes" (1998) famously applied this theory to early Christian women like Macrina, the sister of Gregory of Nyssa, and concluded that his representation of Macrina owed more to his own preoccupations, both familial and theological, than to any real woman. Yet despite announcing the lady's disappearance, Clark admitted that Macrina "has left traces and lives on imbedded in a larger socio-linguistic framework."¹

I also identified such opposition when women stepped outside the framework to take initiatives. In the case of Macrina, Gregory reported that she chose to reject marriage for virginity (and at a relatively young age), and thus rose above the normal constraints of womanhood, to surpass them in a way that was not womanly. This is the other common trope of women who become like men, manly in their courage, dedication, and exceptional devotion to the faith. Yet Macrina made a certain choice in refusing to marry, which allowed her to create her own domestic religious environment within the family home, employing inherited wealth. What Gregory chose to report about her may say more about him and his concerns than hers. But we can discern her decision through the veil of his prejudice. A similar case can be made for the other Gregory, Gregory of Nazianzos, whose construction of his sister Gorgonia may be modeled on their mother, Nonna.² While many Late Antique texts apparently about women turn out to be ways men found to compete with each other,³ they sometimes let slip instances of those women voicing opposition. In 1994 Clark drew attention to these "counterhegemonic discourses" by which women created "small openings for their own projects and expressions of value" and thus "subverted the Church Fathers' patristic ideology from within."⁴ Analyzing these slips, often asides and throw-away remarks not essential to the narrative helped me to write the history of three astonishing Byzantine empresses in *Women in Purple*.

My study of Byzantine gender was further enriched by the existence of eunuchs, castrated males, in prominent social positions. Whether they served in the court hierarchy, in the church, or in wealthy households, or were foreigners enslaved and castrated beyond the empire or raised as eunuchs by Byzantine families, their presence created an in-between gender, neither male nor female. Their prominence in ceremonial activities made them guardians of some of the unwritten court traditions, an activity paralleled on the female side by young women employed as ladies-in-waiting to the empress. Recently, attention has been drawn to the possibility of envisaging female as well as male eunuchs, and there is no doubt that the importance of eunuchs in Byzantium adds another layer of complexity to the analysis of gender.

In my brief history *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*, I regularly note the exceptional influence of women. Compared to their known roles in the classical Roman period, lowly status in early medieval Europe and subordinate position in the Islamic societies that became established in the seventh century, women exercised an unusual influence in Byzantium. This can be traced in the prominence of many empresses and elite women who left their mark, their contributions to ceremonial, their economic activity traceable in wills and legal cases, and their written legacy, demonstrating the quality of their education. Beyond the ruling circles, my search for Byzantine women led me to re-read many texts and to analyze the forces, normally controlled by men, that shaped their world. The Byzantine church provided a large repertoire of prejudices as well as appreciations. Women were to avoid the sin of the first mother (Eve) and emulate the ever-virgin Mother of God, Mary. But since no normal woman could measure up to the positive role model of the latter, many were almost automatically assumed by men to belong to the condemned state of the former. They were treated as essentially liable to slide from the royal road of virtue, or worse, were simply considered prostitutes. Against these constructed stereotypes, the statements made by women in legal documents such as wills, court records, and other first-person quotations seemed more likely to reflect their actual concerns and intentions.

From my first effort to understand the specific role of women in the reproduction of the originally pagan tradition of icon veneration in 1983, I continued to explore this remarkable aspect of Byzantium. Since men also venerated holy images, it was a shared element of religious observance. But I argued that it might have been more meaningful to women, who had no official position within the church, apart from the role of

deaconess or widow, which died out after Late Antiquity. They might assist as doorkeepers and lamplighters but had no liturgical function. Where Byzantine authors (male) found female devotion to icons a confirmation of women's inadequate intellectual grasp of theology and corresponding reliance on visual aids, I posited an element of reception theory that suggested their structural response to painted portraits of holy people. Rather than attributing this attention to weakness, I interpreted it as empowering. Within the private space created in front of the holy image, women could express their belief in an unmediated, direct engagement under their own control, in which their own words and thoughts could predominate. This was generally a domestic and private veneration of Christian images.

In this work the group of feminist historians who met at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands to study "Women in the Christian Tradition from Late Antiquity to the Reformation" proved immensely stimulating. Peter Hatlie, then teaching at the university, ensured that the East Christian world was fully represented. With funding from the European Science Foundation (ESF), discussions on the public/private divide, the theories of Mary Douglas, and their development by Ross Kraemer informed our research. Numerous examples of women acting alone, or with their husbands and children, demonstrated their individual responsibilities and achievements. Although they are often not identified by name, it's clear that mothers raised their children, produced goods for sale in markets, and had a certain influence even as anonymous individuals. During the iconoclast persecution of the eighth and ninth centuries, some women clung to their icons and men acknowledged their support in resisting imperial policy. By examining the origins of the icon corner, I traced the feminine role in maintaining the protection of the hearth, which passed from ancient gods to icons of Christian figures, both venerated as household protectors and guarantors of safety.

Female concern with religion went much further than icons. Women committed themselves to the ecclesiastical life (as nuns and dedicated virgins) and helped to shape it as patrons of monasteries. Thanks to an invitation from Kari Børresen, I was able to participate in her ESF project, *Gender and Religion*, followed by the encyclopedic undertaking, *The Bible and Women*, currently being published in four languages, with more comparative work and meetings in Oslo, Rome, and Florence. We used these meetings to discuss a wide range of issues, including the role of queens and empresses, the powers assumed by mothers in families (which may have become most notable when they were widowed), and women's

use of the legal system for support in the case of separation and divorce. Within the family the mother often emerged as the most important person, directing the children's education and arranging their marriages. In the case of Byzantine empresses the activities of their Late Antique predecessors seem to have established a framework that I characterized as "The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium," chapter 7 in this volume. In *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*, I extended this into the eighth and ninth century when empresses played a significant role in the defeat of iconoclasm. Once widowed Irene and Theodora abandoned their husbands' policy, changed the patriarch to ensure ecclesiastical support, and restored religious images to their hallowed place. Whatever the impetus behind these daring reversals, the "Triumph of Orthodoxy" is forever associated with them.

In addition to their relationship with the established church it was interesting to compare Byzantine and Western medieval women's attitudes to secular education. Basic literacy seems to have been higher in the East than the West, and some women were clearly educated to a high standard in classical Greek thought. While Anna Komnene is the most outstanding example, other less imperial women also mastered classical Greek and composed poems and hymns. Among Byzantine princesses who were sent abroad in diplomatic alliances designed to sustain the empire's policy toward foreign powers, it's possible to examine their education and preparation for this role. Theophano was not "born in the purple," but she succeeded in spreading an awareness of Byzantine culture in Western Europe, which was later resented. In this way, teenage girls often performed a heavy ambassadorial function, which was part of the empire's use of marriage as a diplomatic tool.

These essays range from the third to the fifteenth centuries. In putting them together and adding to them for this volume I have sought to achieve three things. For historians of other periods and societies, and for those interested in the historical potential of issues of gender, I have put in place a rough mosaic of the range of issues where Byzantine studies can add to our overall understanding. Much of this evidence is anecdotal and requires closer analysis of the source material dominated by male authors and the constraints of genre. Second, for those interested in Byzantium itself, I hope to draw attention to a wide range of little-known source material, which deserves further investigation. Third, by setting out this exploration I want to lay down a challenge to historians for whom comparison should be a basic requirement: *why* did Byzantium offer such exceptional opportunities for women?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the writing and preparation for republication of these essays I want to thank many who have supported my work: the A. G. Leventis Foundation, the Hellenic Foundation and the Michael Marks Charitable Trust; Anthony Barnett (a feminist before the arrival of Feminism), Alexandros Kedros, Edmée Leventis, Marina Marks, and Rick Trainor, the Principal of King's College London; and my colleagues in the departments of Classics, Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, and History at King's.

This collection is a companion to *Margins and Metropolis: Authority across the Byzantine Empire*. New bibliography in both volumes is signaled in the notes by **Update**. In preparing the text, I thank Andreia Carvalho and Rupert Smith for their skill in scanning and editing the originals and entering Greek text, and Alessandra Bucossi and Alex Rodrigues for introducing me to the wonders of Endnote. It is also a pleasure to recall how Maria Hatjigeorgiou first proposed this volume and collected the material. I am grateful to the Dumbarton Oaks Museum (Washington, DC), the British Museum (London), the Bode Museum (Berlin), the University of Michigan, and the Holy Orthodox Monastery of St. John the Theologian on Patmos (Greece) for permission to reproduce their photographs, and I thank Larissa Klein for her help in putting them together. Jennifer Harris's careful copyediting and Heather Roberts's attentive indexing saved me from many inconsistencies and non sequiturs. Above all I'm most grateful to Brigitta van Rheinberg for her enthusiastic acceptance of the idea of these volumes and her skill in steering them through the Press.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the Linguistic Turn," *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998), 1–31.
2. Ray Van Dam, *Families and Friends in Late Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia, 2003) 87–96.
3. Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA/London, 1996).
4. Elizabeth Clark, "Ideology, History and Gender: The Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," *J ECS* 2 (1994), 155–84, esp. 183; cf. eadem, "Rewriting the History of Early Christianity," in C. Straw and R. Lim, eds., *The Past before Us: The Challenge of Historiographies of Late Antiquity* (Turnhout, 2004), 61–68; and the modifications suggested by Anthony Kaldellis, "The Study of Women and Children: Methodological Challenges and New Directions," in *The Byzantine World*, ed. Paul Stephenson (London/New York 2010), 61–71.