



## Woman's Position in Byzantine Society

Marina Nasaina<sup>1</sup>

*National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, School of Philosophy*

Received 13 July 2018 ▪ Revised 28 July 2018 ▪ Accepted 4 August 2018

### *Abstract*

Although Byzantine society was a society of inequality both between the social strata and the rights of the two sexes, woman in Byzantine times plays an important role. She directs business, participates in the church as a nun or church clerk, and plays an active role in political affairs. It also has equal rights with men to bequeath and inherit their property. Of course, it is still excluded from public offices with unique, perhaps allowed, occupations of engaging with family, religion and charity. Basic attributes of the perfect woman and husband are virginity, silence and tolerance. Byzantine education has ensured elementary education for many girls. The Byzantine woman married early and was considered the head of the family and the protector of her children especially if she was a widow and her children were still very young.

**Keywords:** woman, family, religion, education, daughter, divorce, widowhood, slave, Augusta, society.

### 1. Introduction

In the course of time, Byzantium changed its form, as the borders grew, the political, administrative, economic and military structures were diversified and its character constantly adjusted to the new circumstances. Also, the different peoples, who composed the population of the Empire, brought with them separate customs and traditions, which the Roman administration had not unified. These changes, undoubtedly, affected the position of the woman in society. After all, the cultural heritage of Rome differed from that of the woman of the East or of Egypt, with the result, for the first few centuries, that the image of the female presence appeared different in different places.

Then, the state organization, combined with the Greek education, which was the cultural background of Byzantium, and the Christianity that all its citizens embraced, contributed to the unification of conditions and conditions, but did not entirely eliminate the differences. Thus, the role of woman in Byzantium does not present a single image in space and time.

And of course we cannot ignore the fact that the nature of the sources, i.e. the texts of the historians and chronographers or the hagiological texts, are all products of male expression. Nevertheless, we will try to present a complete picture of the woman of the Byzantine period (Mamagakis, 2008: 53), referring mainly to empresses and women of the lower social strata in relation to the rest.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author is employed at the Music Senior High school of Argolida, Greece.

## 2. The private life of Byzantine

According to the Byzantine concepts, the role of the woman had to be interwoven with the interior of the house, which she ruled and was under the control of her husband (James, 2009: 35). According to the ideal pattern of women's behavior, their activities were confined to the boundaries of the house, often in the women's land, where only family members could enter (Imbriotis, 2002: 14; Vakaloudis, 1998: 44).

### 2.1 *Childhood and adulthood of Byzantine*

Initially, the birth of a daughter in Byzantium was not a delightful event, as it marked an additional expense and special care for the preservation of virginity (Clark, 1993: 119; Lai, 1993: 133) and the securing of her dowry. Common practices that threatened the purity of girls were rape and weariness of virginity, which was associated with the insulting of the woman's honor. In particular, grabbing is considered as a serious misconduct for the Byzantines, who legally equate it with murder. For this reason, the limitation of women to the *gynekonite*, known as "thalamism" (Rowlandson, 1998: 218), was intended to protect her from immoral men's proposals.

They were always leaving the house accompanied by maids whenever they wanted to attend religious ceremonies or visit religious feasts or go to women's baths. When this happened, having lowered eyes, they were looking to cover their face with a blanket (Rautman, 2006: 47-48).

The education of girls began at the age of six, it lasted three years and included teaching writing, reading, arithmetic, sacred history and music. Teaching, actually, took place in the girl's house, while teacher's duties were mainly performed by their mothers.

### 2.2 *Wedding and birth of children of Byzantine woman*

For Byzantine, marriage and monasticism are the two socially acceptable ways. The marriage for the Byzantines (men) is considered necessary and is related to the role that men are called to play as a dominant gender (Eco, 1994: 55). On the contrary, marriage to women was totally related to the father of the family (*pater familias*), who as the absolute master chooses his daughter's future wife (Flaceliere, 1995: 77; Clark, 1997: 43). Indeed, in the case of the reaction of the daughter to the fatherly desires, there was always the threat of father's curse.

Before the wedding, the engagement preceded (Nicholas, 2005: 73; Laiou, 1992: 280; Papadatos, 1984: 74). It is a mutual promise of man and woman, that is, the *memory and promise of the marriages that are to come*, without any time limitation on its realization (Vakaloudis, 1998: 38). In fact, according to its type of constitution, it was divided into imperfect or civil or legal engagement and mainly or sacred engagement. The engagement, like the marriage, could be concluded either in writing or unwritten.

The average age of marriage for girls is the 12th and 13th year (Mansouri, 2000: 172), while the social standards of the time were the same as a good husband with a virgin, polite, wealthy, loyal and competent hostess.

However, in order to be able to marry, the woman had to fulfill a prerequisite, that of the dowry. The economic factor was very important, since a marriage was also a financial transaction between the two families, followed by careful financial settlements recorded in a contract (Clark, 1997: 42). The institution of the dowry (White, 1981: 547) is part of the marriage agreement and obligation of the bride's parents to the groom in order to preserve the family. The dowry, together with the premarital donation of the groom, formed the basis of family property.

In fact, by improving the role of the Church, Leo VI's made compulsory the blessing of the marriage by the Church (Cooks, 1951: 85). In conclusion, except of the strengthening of the institution of marriage, the woman's role in married life has indirectly improved.

After marriage, the basic pursuit of the Byzantine family is the acquisition of offspring, while agelessness is considered as a shame and a cause of great sadness for a family. Consequently, the childless woman is subject to contempt and is often isolated from her social environment (Walker, 2003: 227; Vikan, 1984: 78).

Adultery is considered as the main reason for a divorce. It is defined as a "female offense" that has to do with marital infidelity and illegal love relationships. Penalties for the misconduct of adultery were many (Beaucamp, 1990: 139). A fairly popular punishment was mowing or spoofing. But since humiliation was not enough to punish the adulterers, they were lashed, scratched, and smoothed with soot or tar even before they were scorned (Gardikas, 1925: 40).

### *2.3 Divorce and widowhood*

In Byzantine law divorce is permitted, although there is a negative attitude towards it. Of course, the right of divorce was set on a different basis for each sex. More specifically, the husband had the right to ask for a divorce, when his wife committed adultery or when his wife was paying his life or knew others who threatened her and did not notify them to him, as well as if his wife was suffering from leprosy.

Accordingly, the woman could ask for a divorce from her husband if her husband had committed adultery with a married woman (Girtzis, 2009: 58). In addition, other cases of divorce were the following: the presence of adultery in the home, the imprisonment of her life, the man's absconding of his marital duties for more than three years, the class also for criminal offenses, her abuse, the case of the insanity of her husband. Finally, when one of the two spouses was to be a monk, both genders were allowed to make a request for the dissolution of the marriage.

On the issue of widowhood, losing a wife leads a woman to a higher position than a man (Beaucamp, 1990: 11). The widow of the lower classes in Byzantium is considered to be a socially weak person. For the middle-class and upper-class woman, things are clearly better. In particular, the widow is obliged to mourn her husband for one year before she remarries, so that she does not qualify as "dishonest", although the widow did not have such a legal commitment. She returned to her father's house, who had to marry her again, since she had not only reached the age of twenty-five. When the widow had a dowry from her father, she was in a position to keep her with what her husband had left her. Otherwise, she had the right to inherit a quarter of her husband's estate, provided she did not remarry (Kiousopoulou, 1990: 52).

The widow becomes the heir of the family property, and can acquire legal status. Moreover, by making use of this right, she founded monasteries and managed businesses if she had property. In addition, her job was to raise, educate and marry her children.

### *2.4 The activities of Byzantine*

Woman in the lower and middle classes is mainly engaged in home care. Byzantine is the "queen" of the house, because only within her house she was able to have some autonomy in her actions. So, within the household she prepares the food, and she takes care of the cleanliness of the house. Also, she is involved in the knitting, the making of clothes, the grinding of the wheat, the kneading, in order to cover the needs of the family (Nikolaou, 1994: 27). At the same time, she

is responsible for bringing up children, such as the education of the daughters, but also the study of the Scriptures.

But her main occupation is dealing with the thread. The processing of the yarn, the weaving and the manufacture of the clothing used by a family, was par excellence the work of the woman, regardless of her social position (Frontisi-Ducroux & Vernant, 1997: 98).

They were seldom educated, and when this happened, the level of education was lower than that of men. The education of women in the urban class was limited to the study of manuscripts and hagiographies by combining some basic knowledge. Depending on the possibilities offered by her social class, she devoted time to cosmetic and myrrh care.

Although Byzantine society did not allow many freedoms for women, the 11<sup>th</sup> century social changes, namely economic and intellectual development as well as the expansion of the nuclear family, gradually contributed to the liberalization of society and the widening of the role of the female sex on the basis of similar social reality (Kazhdan & Epstein, 1997: 163).

Thus, in addition to the domestic occupation and the upbringing of her children, the woman, depending on her social status, her education and her place of residence, could be active both professionally and socially (Cavallo, 2001: 129). Women of the lower social class had greater freedom of movement, since they were treated with more elastic ethical criteria.

Usually, they were mostly assisting their husbands for mostly living reasons. More specifically, women either worked in daily work, as in the case of doctors or in the family shop as a monger and stationery. In addition, women also worked in rural areas. Besides, there were also female professionals who worked autonomously as doctors, calligraphers and shop owners. (Medzou-Meimari, 1982: 241).

Finally, a common phenomenon in Byzantine society was monasticism. Women of the upper class were usually nuns after a child's waking or death, while in the poorer classes monasticism was the result of coercion by their parents due to the inability to provide a dowry. Generally, in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, women were always low, poor, and inconspicuous (Penna, 2001: 246).

### *2.5 The Byzantine slave*

The institution of slavery and the Byzantine period accepted the influences of the ancient Greek heritage, the Roman tradition and the principles of Christianity. Mostly, however, Justinian legislation lowers the position of slaves, forbidding the separation of members of a family of slaves, putting restrictions on their deportation and ultimately making their release easier (Kopstein, 1989: 409).

Thus, in public life, the slave was more free than in private life. The lady saw in the face of the slave the opponent who claimed her position and her husband. In fact, women's behavior towards servants is just as tough as that of men. Probably, this behavior of the lady towards her servant expresses the oppression she suffers from the male-dominated society.

Interpersonal relations of slaves and bosses also include erotic relationships and the resulting two-way relationship of slavery and prostitution. Indeed, many are the cases where servants were forced by their masters into prostitution. Besides, the value of a slave was directly related to its sexuality. This includes her virginity, her ability to provide erotic services to her master and her reproductive capacity. The slave has no choice but to become mistress of his master. This kind of love affair was socially acceptable and common in Byzantine society, since the slave was an asset that its owner could treat as he wished (Papayiannis, 1991: 426).

The legal sanctions, which resulted in the marriage of a married man with his servant or servants, were essentially assets. If the slave belongs to the possession of a rich man, the law provides for the forced sale of the slave to another province, for the benefit of the State. But if the perpetrator was lousy and had no property, the penalty imposed was corporal punishment (Hatzinicolau-Marava, 1950: 76). Similar sexual exploitation with slaves had the servants. Even a supreme lord with a wife, concubines, and mistresses, did not consider it deplorable to be in love with the women who served him.

Sexual relations with slaves, however, were also free women, except that the sentences were much stricter than those imposed on men for the corresponding offense. In Justinian law, for example, the punishment for the lady was one of the capital punishment and for slave death in the fire.

Different dimensions are taken by the love relations of master and slave, if he is unmarried and expresses the desire to marry her (Evans, 2002: 145). The law of M. Constantine banned marriage between men of superior order and underwhelmed women.

### 3. The public life of Byzantine

In Byzantine society, according to their political theory, women are excluded from public offices and are limited to practicing their religious duties, attending festivals, charitable activities, and visiting the baths. Women of the upper class (*Augusta*) and women of the margin live completely opposite lives and situations.

#### 3.1 *The life of Augusta*

When the emperor was unmarried, he had to marry in order to obtain a possible successor. The succession was the result of the approval of the army, the senate and the municipalities (Beck, 1996: 92). In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, the choice of the imperial bride was done with a process that reminded beauty (Connor, 2004: 210), since the emperors went to the various provinces of Byzantine territory in order to find the appropriate bride, the Emperor made the final choice. The bridal selection criteria was unparalleled, natural beauty, impeccable ethics and noble origin (Treadgold, 1979: 409). Often, however, the criterion of natural beauty was more burdensome than the bride's gentle origins. Of course, the bride's choice was often made on the basis of political criteria.

Throughout the 11th century, the emperors sought mainly spouses within the Byzantine empire, but the marriage of Byzantines with foreign brides was a frequent phenomenon because of political expediency. In the courtyard of the future bride, Greeks were sent to teach the Greek language and tradition. Upon her arrival in Constantinople for the marriage, the foreign princess now belonged to the Byzantine courtyard. In conclusion, the foreign princess was baptized Christian, if it was not, and acquired a Greek name (Panagopoulou, 2006: 468).

Thus, throughout the Byzantine period, the crowned Princess could participate in political affairs. The title of crowned women uses the names *Augusta* (Missiou, 1982: 129), *Queen* and *respected* with predominant the first name, which means the imperial wife, mother, sister or daughter, but also the member of the conventions. In the first Byzantine ages, the *Augusta* and *Queen* titles created some confusion when referring to the same person, but then they come to be identified and mean either the imperial wife or the crowned empress. Lastly, the address of *respected* has a variety of meanings. First means the lady, the house the free woman from the slave, the wife of the throne successor, the queen and the contract, even one who exercises power without being crowned as a regent.

The power and privileges of an imperial spouse are directly dependent on the emperor. The conditions by which a woman of the imperial environment acquires the position of the *Augusta* do not remain stable. In the early and middle age, the right to coronation is acquired by the imperial spouses only after childbirth. In the later years, if the emperor already possessed the throne, crowning and marriage became at the same time on the wedding day. If he was already married, the husband was crowned with the emperor's crown on the day of his ascension to the throne.

The model of “good” *Augusta* has been shaped in Byzantium on the basis of moral and political criteria and is characterized by the following traits: apart from the external attributes, the candidate royal spouse should have a noble origin, spiritual culture, be a philanthropist, and characterized by modesty, marital belief and religious reverence. On the contrary, negative features are political ambition, loose sexual morals and erotic scandals, ruthlessness, the moment of luxury and laziness, arrogance, lack of education, and the skill in illicit intrigue (Garland, 2000: 76). The primary role of an *Augusta* is to help preserve the legitimacy of power. Therefore, her most important concern is childbirth. The role of the mother is the strongest ideological role in Byzantium and on this issue the *Augusta* does not differ from other women. The only difference is that she gains access to power through childbirth. Particular emphasis is placed on the birth of a male child, since he would be the successor to the throne. Indeed, according to the perceived concepts, a boy is always welcomed by every family, let alone the royal family. On the other hand, the daughters who were crowned had the right to succession. However, the birth of a boy is one that fully assures dynastic continuity. Agelessness, if and why it is not considered a reason for divorce, to a ruler creates a problem in its succession, as the illegitimate children have no right to power.

The primacy of the *Augusta*, compared to other love comrades, is indisputable, being the wife of the emperor and the mother of the throne successor. However, the coexistence of the legal husband with the concubine was a reality for the Byzantines, common mortals and kings (Garland, 2000: 160). According to the imperial protocol, the place of living of the *Augusta* is the imperial woman's. In fact, however, the *Augusta* is freely circulating in the palace and has full control of its habitats for reasons imposed by the ceremonial ritual or personal life. The selection of the people who will surround the imperial court and become the imperial couple's trustworthy, requires special attention to avoid intriguing phenomena.

However, the issue of taking power from the woman is not particularly paradoxical. Generally speaking, the Byzantines have treated the power of women in moderation, yet they do not abandon the view that positions of authority are a man's affair (Karagiannopoulos, 1993: 160). The only connection with power is that her role as a mother is called upon to defend the rights of the minor successor as a member of the convention. However, there are many times that the political actions of imperial women are the result of their personal aspirations with positive or negative impressions.

Finally, regarding the issue of social mobility in Byzantium, there are no restrictions and therefore all women have the right of access to the post, regardless of social order and origin.

### 3.2 *Woman’s life on the sidelines*

With the founding of the Byzantine state and the prevalence of Christianity, the model of ethics affects the formation of state and social norms. An exemplary example is Rule 86 of the Troullsh Council, which imposes very strict penalties: “women who have been engaged in prostitution are deprived of Divine Communion for six to nine years, even in extreme cases they are even subject to apostasy” (Ralli & Poutli, 1852: 325). Prostitution, however, is not only characterized by the relationship with professionals of the kind, but also by the relationship with

a free (non-slave) woman. Prostitute, however, is not only characterized by the relationship with professionals of the kind, but also by the relationship with a free (non-slave) woman. Prostitute is the woman who lives with a man outside marriage, the married woman who deceives her husband and her daughter who is the victim of abduction, seduction or even rape.

Over time, the main causes of women's prostitution are captivity, slavery and poverty. Prostitution was not only an important fun for men, it was also a key element of their lives. A woman, however, was turning to prostitution, and because of the moment of lust.

It was also common for parents themselves to sell or rent their children to pimples, even those who were under the age of ten. We suppose that the motivation of these parents was their total impoverishment. In addition to parents for pimping, husbands have also been accused.

Finally, the concubine at Byzantium did not enjoy the same appreciation as they had in antiquity, and therefore the use of the word from the sources seems to be weak. The majority of them had extensive education, they were particularly beautiful, sophisticated and managed their own property. From the poor prostitutes who plow the streets to find a customer, to the privileged prostitutes who are constantly changing "patrons", it is hard to talk about stagnation. Their main feature was the adoption of bright colors, strong fragrances and intense grooming, which served as a means of attracting customers. Indeed, this fancy dress and sexy grooming was not only part of the professional appearance of public women, it also served as a distinctive difference from the honest. With the passage of time, the adversity faced by women in the process of development is intensifying as they face old age and physical decline. The most lucky ones managed to make a legal marriage or live as a couple with a mate.

#### Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

#### References

- Beucamp, J. (1990). *Le statut de la femme a Byzance*, Travaux et Memoirs, Monographies 5, Paris.
- Beck, H. (1996). *The Byzantine millennium*, Ms. D. Kourtovik, Athens (I) as byzantinische Jahrtausend, Miinchen.
- Cavallo, G. (2001). *Women*. In: A. M. Talbot, *Women and religious life in Byzantium*. Hampshire-Vermont.
- Clark, G. (1997). *Women in late antiquity*. London, 1993. Trans. Stathis Komninos, *Women in late antiquity*. Athens.
- Connor, C. L. (2004). *Women of Byzantium*. London.
- Eco, U. (1994). *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington, 1976. Trans. Efi Kallifatidi, *Semitic theory*. Athens.
- Evans Grubbs, J. (2002). *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A source book on marriage, divorce and widowhood*. New York.
- Flaceliere, R. (1995). *La vie quotidienne en Grèce au siècle de Pericles*. Paris, 1971. Trans. G. Vandorou, *Public and private life of Ancient Greeks*. Athens.
- Frontisi-Ducroux, V. M. (2001). *In the mirror's eye*. Athens.

- Frontisi, F., & Vernant, J.-P. (1997). *Dans l'oeil du miroir*, Paris.
- Garland, L. (2000). *Byzantine Empresses, women and power in Byzantium, A.D. 527-1204*. London, 1999. Trans. Nancy Kouvarakou, *Byzantine empires: Women in power, 527-1204 AD*. Athens.
- Gardiki, K. (1925). *The crime of adultery in the Byzantine empire right*. Athens.
- Girtzi, M. (2009). Wedding practices and the position of woman in marriage in Byzantium. *Archeology*, 109.
- Hadjinicolaou-Marava, A. (1950). *Rescherches sur la vie des esclaves dans le monde Byzantin*. Athens.
- Imvriotis, P. (2002). *The woman in Byzantium*. Athens.
- James, L. (2009). Men, women, eunuchs: Gender, sex, and power. In: J. Haldon, *A social history of Byzantium*. Chichester.
- Karagiannopoulos, I. (1993-99). *History of the Byzantine State*. 3 vol. Thessaloniki.
- Kazhdan, A., & Epstein, A. W. (1997). *Changes in Byzantine culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries*. Berkeley, 1985. Trans. Andreas Pappas, *Changes in Byzantine culture in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries*. Athens.
- Kiousopoulou, A. (1990). The institution of the family in Epirus in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Athens. Koukoules F., 1951, *Byzantine Life and Civilization*, vol. 2, D', Athens.
- Kopstein, H. (1989). Legal status of the slave in experience. In: *Everyday life in Byzantium: Sections and sequences in the Hellenistic and Roman tradition*. Athens.
- Laiou, A. (1993). Sex, consent and coercion in Byzantium. In: A. Laiou (Ed.), *Consent and coercion to sex and marriage in ancient and medieval societies*. Washington: DOP.
- Laiou, A. (1992). Imperial marriages and their critics in the eleventh century: The case of Skylitzes. *DOP*, 46.
- Mamagakis, D. (2008). *Woman and political action in Byzantium: The testimony of Anna Komnene. Four female portraits through Alexiaea*. Nicosia.
- Mansouri, T. (2000). Les femmes d'origine Byzantine –Les Roumiyyat – sous les Abbasides. *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*, 11.
- Megzou-Meimari, K. (1982). *The presence of the woman in the Greek inscriptions from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> AD*. Presence I.
- Missios, D. (1982). Two statutory terms (Augusta and queen). *Byzantine*, 2.
- Nikolaou, K. (1994). The position of woman in Byzantine society. *Views of Byzantine Society*, 6, Athens.
- Panagopoulou, A. (2006). *Diplomatic marriages in Byzantium (12th-12th century)*. Athens.
- Papadatos, A. (1984). *On the monument to the Byzantine law*. Treatise of Academy of Athens, Athenaens.
- Papagiannis, E. (1991). The problem of slaves in the work of the Canonologists of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In: N. Economidis (Ed.), *Byzantium in the 12<sup>th</sup> century: Ordinary law, state and society*. Athens.
- Penna, B. (2001). The Public, Economic and Social Life of the Byzantines. In: *Public and private life in Greece from antiquity to post Byzantine years, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC*. Patras.
- Rallis, G. A., & Potlis, M. (1852). *Constitution of the Divine and Holy Canons*. Athens.
- Rautman, M. (2006). *Daily life in the Byzantine Empire*. Westport Reinsberg.
- Rowlandon, J. (1998). (vers.), *Women and society in Greek and Roman Egypt*. Cambridge.
- Treadgold, W. (1979). The bride-shows of Byzantine Emperors. *Byzantine*, 49.
- Vakaloudis, A. (1998). *Kallistias and marriage in Byzantium*. Thessaloniki.
- Vikan, G. (1984). Art, medicine and magic in early Byzantium. *DOP*, 38



Walker, A. (2003). Marriage. In: Ioli Kalavrezou, *Byzantine women and their world*. Cambridge.

White, D. (1981). Property rights of women: The changes in the Justinian legislation regarding the dowry and the parapherna, *JOB*, 32.

