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# Gendered Souls: Female Religious and Imperial Power in Early Byzantium

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GENDERED SOULS: FEMALE RELIGIOUS AND IMPERIAL POWER  
IN EARLY BYZANTIUM

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and  
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## ABSTRACT

The scholarship on female *basileia* in the Byzantine Empire is generally spilt into two polarized camps, divided over how to reconcile female agency within a patriarchal society. The crux of the issue is how these women achieved power and how their power was perceived. Did the emulation of men elevate these women or was their imperial worth tied exclusively to their aspects of their femininity? The disparity in contemporary scholarship often ignores the idea of a middle ground. Imperial women achieved a remarkable degree of power, yet they still existed within a male centered, almost misogynistic context. The frequency and relative consistency with which these powerful women appear in the historical record bars them from being categorized as anomalies.

In approaching the issue of early Byzantine empresses, I was very aware of the parallels in gender construction with female saints. The simultaneous masculinization and feminization of these women served to further distinguish them from women as a whole. They were unattainable paragons, their success largely determined by their adherence to a feminine version of the imperial persona. While emperors had long since developed a public persona to favorably communicate their imperial power, it wasn't until the advent of the Christian Empire in the East that we see a pattern of imperial women with access to genuine imperial power. Though still existing within a relentlessly androcentric society, imperial women were able to negotiate rather than negate their gender to secure power within a Christian imperial structure. I examine three empresses, Pulcheria (398-453 CE), Theodora (500-548 CE), and Irene (752-803 CE), in the hopes of illuminating their claims to imperial power while also placing them in the context of a larger historical tradition.

*The Soul of a Man, The Purpose of a Woman:  
An Overview of the Female Imperial Persona in Context*

Early Byzantinists, like Charles Diehl and Edward Gibbon, have portrayed imperial women as largely ornamental and without any consistent function.<sup>1</sup> They took textual sources at face value with little analysis and explained away any degree of agency by stressing extenuating circumstances that allowed individual imperial women to wrestle away power from weak and emasculated counterparts. The most visible empresses in the historical record thus become caricatures, random apparitions showcasing the worse traits of their sex. They were in turns manipulative, sexual, and masculine. There is no sense of continuity in terms of female imperial power in early scholarship; it's a freakish occurrence rather than a historical trend. Scholarship within the last thirty years has made a concerted effort to dispel that notion, examining the influence of imperial women through a renewed feminist lens. There are still many challenges for recent scholars; many remain informed by their predecessors while others fail to navigate the line between acknowledging power and appropriating it. It is crucial to keep in mind the larger historical context in which these women existed, something that can easily be lost while focusing on the individual in her particular circumstance or depicting the seemingly empowered exploits of imperial women. Considering the consistent reoccurrence of important imperial women in the historical record, women who would have had to exist and function within a patriarchal society, polarizing interpretations can no longer further our understanding. Imperial women existed

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<sup>1</sup> See Diehl, Charles. *Byzantine Portraits*. New York: A.A. Knopf, (1927).

within the androcentric framework of Byzantine politics, but more importantly they had to have an established, articulated place in that sphere, otherwise a historical pattern wouldn't be evident. The question remains, what allowed this specific group of women to function, partake, and flourish in the ruling system of a misogynistic society?

In the 6th-century account of St. Matrona of Perge, the titular character is described as “no ordinary woman”, and in fact greater than all other women who had similarly sought to distinguish themselves through asceticism.<sup>2</sup> Matrona is a woman who, after a period of domestic obedience, leaves her family for salvation. She shakes off the confines of female domestic roles, dresses herself as a man, and embraces monastic life. Yet, for all her accomplishments and dedication to her faith, Matrona is still a woman in man's clothes playing a man's role. The language encountered in the story of St. Matrona reflects a clear and pervasive habit of articulating female success, be it imperial or ecclesiastical, via masculinity. Holy women are described as surpassing other members of their sex and having the souls of men. Yet amidst this kind of language of evolution female saints are still tied to their femininity through comparisons to holy men or allusions to gendered roles. In the case of St. Mary/Marinos, who similarly lived her life as a monk in a male monastery, motherhood is thrust upon her when she is accused of fathering a child who is then left in her care.<sup>3</sup> This kind of gendered tension is indicative of the conflict inherent in hagiographies of female saints. In a Church dominated by men

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<sup>2</sup> Talbot, Alice-Mary, ed. *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*. Dumbarton Oaks (1996). “Life of St. Matrona of Perge”, trans. Jeffrey Featherstone and Cyril Mango. pp. 12-64

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, “Life of St. Mary/Marinos”, trans. Nicholas Constas. pp. 1-12



that afforded extremely limited opportunities for women, the advent of holy women was confusing. Byzantium was an androcentric culture, just as Christianity developed into a largely androcentric religion. The instances of female saints, though comparatively few<sup>4</sup>, are challenging to reconcile with the world in which they not only existed but were venerated. Their hagiographies illustrate an active discussion of women's ability to advance in patriarchal spheres, a discussion we see mirrored in accounts of imperial women. Stephanie Cobb argues that essentially to be a successful Christian was to be male, and that female martyrs, when confronted with external forces were characterized in masculine ways to appear superior.<sup>5</sup> Yet when considered within Christian communities the hierarchy of gender had to be maintained and thus their femininity was stressed, simultaneously challenging and reaffirming existing gender constructs. They were masculinized and in equal turns feminized; they rejected aspects of traditional gender roles while embracing others. They were distinct and inaccessible to women as a whole, yet they were similarly distinguished from their male counterparts.

Imperial women are likewise ascribed both masculine and feminine traits; they become judged by a set of criteria nearly identical to their male counterparts, but their access to power is defined by those men to whom they are attached. They exist as paragons within a larger society, yet are unrealizable to the larger female population. They flourish because they aren't women in the traditional sense; their remarkable achievements are rooted in adherence to established, if evolving,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, See the general introduction, pp. vii-xvi

<sup>5</sup> Cobb, L. Stephanie. *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts (Gender, Theory, and Religion)*. Columbia University Press, (2012).

guidelines for their behavior and character. Rather than existing as challengers to an androcentric system, imperial women, like their sanctified counterparts, were the exceptions that proved the rule.

Though limited by our extant sources, we still possess a wealth of ecclesiastical histories, hagiographies, and imperial publications to draw upon. In addition to textual primary sources, numismatic, sigillographic, and artistic evidence has proved vital in creating a fuller understanding of how imperial women were viewed and characterized, particularly by the imperial house. The solidus of Eudocia (423-460) has all the markers of imperial status and power.<sup>6</sup> The fibula resembles the triple pendant fibulae that characterize emperors; her headgear is not the *stephane* generally worn by noble women, but an imperial diadem worn by emperors. The reverse side depicts an angel with a jewel studded cross, representing Christian imperial victory. These are just a few of the distinctions that align her with imperial power, the same imperial power her male counterparts presented and utilized. This is part of a larger trend in numismatic evidence seen after Constantine, not a standalone example. Imperial women were presented to the wider society as bearers of imperial power, tapping into traditionally male symbols of power. Yet, they had to retain certain feminine functions and their position was dependent, to varying degrees, on the men in their family. They were sources of imperial power, but they still had to maintain the roles that defined them in relation to imperial men: as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. The most recognizable of the early Byzantine empresses result from deviations, however slight, from the

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<sup>6</sup> See *Fig. 2*

traditional scope of these roles. Theodora rose from infamy to become a partner to Justinian I, Irene blinded her son to secure sole power, and Justa Grata Honoria aligned herself with Attila the Hun in an attempt to outmaneuver her brother, Valentinian III. But though these remarkable imperial women stand out, they are still part of a larger historical trend and the tenants of Cobb's argument can be applied to them just as readily as it can be applied to Eudocia, a lesser known but by no means less influential or less important Augusta.

The importance of individual imperial women has been largely determined by their portrayal in primary sources. These sources inevitably carry biases and often serve a particular agenda. While bias cannot exclude a source from study (all texts are biased to some degree), it does necessitate thoughtful analysis as opposed to ready acceptance. As with countless emperors since Augustus, primary texts are prone to create caricatures of 'bad' empresses and it is these sources we have to debate in order to glean some truth. The concept of 'good' and 'bad' empresses has been thoroughly explored in recent decades. Kenneth Holum was among the first to develop a framework within the context of the Theodosian dynasty. Since then, numerous articles have been published examining Helena's role as a model empress and more developed texts have explored these characterizations as they relate to presentations of imperial power.<sup>7</sup> The habit of linking power to specific

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<sup>7</sup> James, Liz. *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*. Continuum, (2001). McClanan, Anne. *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses: Image and Empire*. Palgrave Macmillan, (2002); Holum, Kenneth. *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*. University of California Press, (1982); Holum, Kenneth G. "Pulcheria's Crusade A.D. 421-22 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* (1977).

circumstances or individual personalities, still fairly prevalent in recent scholarship, makes the position personal rather than official. Liz James argues this point, stressing that, while trying to reconcile the weak woman and the powerful empress with arguments centered on individuals and circumstance is natural, the title of Empress was truly an official role with a sense of imperial power and prestige.

While the idea of an imperial persona was modeled on the famous mimicry presented by Augustus<sup>8</sup>, by the reign of Constantine I the construction had evolved from recalling the Roman Republic to strengthening a new Christian empire. Classic Roman characteristics were adapted to fit within a Christian dynastic structure. As a result imperial women became more visible and influential, with more routinely tangible power. Helena and Constantine I become the archetypical imperial examples. The 'good' empress receives praise as a 'new Helena' or is associated with any number of popular imperial or religious role models. Conversely, the 'bad' empress is labeled as a return of any number of biblical female villains, such as Jezebel, Eve, or Herodias. Emperors are subject to parallel comparisons ranging from Constantine and Theodosius I to Herod and Nero. What made Helena so appealing as a paragon of female imperial virtue was her public displays of her faith and orthodoxy. As the first Christian Augusta, the example by which all subsequent empresses would be judged, Helena established more than the standard for a 'good' empress' characteristics, and thus she began to define their imperial function. Helena clearly displayed her humility, piety, generosity, and virtue on a public stage.

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<sup>8</sup> Augustus' alleged last words were "have I performed my mime well?" Suetonius. "Life of Augustus". *The Lives of the Caesars*. Trans. Catharine Edwards. Oxford University Press, (2009). Oxford World's Classics. 99.1

She endowed churches, gave lavish gifts, and went on pilgrimage, all actions which reflected on both her and the emperor, broadcasting their divine favor and their right to rule.

The function of imperial women would be further fleshed out during the reign of Theodosius I (379-395). Holum argues that, seeking to strengthen his legacy, Theodosius established a Christian dynastic structure that empowered imperial women by necessity. To illustrate this point he uses the case of Aelia Flavia Flaccilla (356-385), specifically the praise of Gregory of Nyssa (335 – 395) who depicts Flaccilla's key imperial role as well as her principal characteristics. These were the characteristics, Holum argues, with which subsequent Theodosian empresses secured their power.<sup>9</sup> The female imperial persona has largely been characterized by four qualities. First and foremost amongst these traits was piety. Displaying piety not only established a standard for imperial orthodoxy, but also established an empress as occupying a sacred realm reserved for the imperial family. Despite their status and power, humility, or at least the appearance of it, was a second, crucial part of the female imperial persona. Caring for the poor and marginalized within the capital or expressing restraint in finery were common ways for empresses to articulate their humility. Doing so garnered popular support and created a tangible connection between the empress and the troubles of her people. Third: Philanthropy had long been a crucial aspect of the imperial persona, in the advent of a Christian empire the Roman ideal of *philanthropia* merged with Christian values of charity. Imperial philanthropy had the potential to work on a

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<sup>9</sup> Holum, Kenneth. *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*. pp. 6- 47.

grand scale and benefit those on the extreme margins of Byzantine society. Projects cultivated specific imperial themes that would then create lasting impressions of a reign. The fourth and final key quality is slightly harder to pin down. In the most general sense it relates to fulfilling gendered roles within the imperial family, a kind of sexual propriety. Producing heirs was a key function and necessary to ensure the continuation of a dynasty, but imperial women without children could be heralded for their chastity or their virtue as it related to imperial men. This rubric served to ensure God's favor and secured the Emperor and Empress as divinely appointed rulers. These characteristics, or some variation of them, appear frequently in primary sources and are being discussed more and more in scholarship. Judith Herrin dubs this unique resource of empresses as the 'Imperial Feminine', something based on a "rich vein of traditions, images and customs, which all manifest a relationship of women with authority and power; in a subordinate and supporting role, to be sure, but one that was nonetheless imperial."<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the qualities that characterized a 'good' empress, there were also specific functions and actions in which successful empresses appear to routinely engage. In some cases these actions speak to an aspect of the imperial persona, but they seem to make up a distinct, if parallel, pattern. Imperial women consistently exerted authority through the cultivation of political marriages; each of the empresses discussed in detail in this study arranged (and in some cases forced) marriages directly affecting the imperial household. Empresses were similarly purveyors of ceremony. Ceremony functioned as a key platform to express the

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<sup>10</sup> Herrin, Judith. "The Imperial Feminine" *Past & Present*, No. 169 (Nov., 2000). pp. 3-35. p. 5

imperial persona, and the role of the empress in court and ceremony inextricably ties her to an expression of imperial power. Imperial women expanded on their claims of piety by becoming active in debates of orthodoxy. Vested with a kind of religious power, empresses routinely involved themselves in Church affairs and enacted political maneuvers to fill the ecclesiastical hierarchy with clergy who shared their version of orthodoxy.

By examining three empresses (Pulcheria, Theodora, and Irene), I hope to illuminate the ways in which these women functioned within a larger historical trend and embodied and utilized the Christian imperial system to exert power in political and religious matters. These women appear in conversation with the narratives of imperial women and female saints, they work within that structure to negotiate rather than negate their gender within established power structures. They can be reduced to the virgin, the wife, and the mother. Each negotiated their title to their own advantage and was part of the centuries long evolution of the female imperial persona. Pulcheria guided her brother through his reign while ardently securing the doctrine of *Theotokos*. Pulcheria's vow of virginity aligned her with the Virgin Mary; she became the virgin mother of Constantinople. While adhering to all the tenets of a 'good' empress, Pulcheria used religious archetypes to increase her power and prestige in both imperial and ecclesiastical spheres. By guiding the debate over *Theotokos* and zealously advocating for Mary as the virgin mother of God, Pulcheria secured and increased her own power as the earthly emulation of Mary. She functioned within the Christian imperial structure; building upon the

examples of other Theodosian empresses as she displayed her own imperial importance.

Theodora is perhaps the more notorious of Byzantine empresses, certainly more widely known beyond the realm of academia than any other. She captures imaginations as the repentant harlot, the actress turned empress. Her relationship with Justinian is elevated to either an epic romance or disparaged as the rise of a manipulative Jezebel. She is depicted in early scholarship as someone who used sexual manipulation to ascend to power and whose domineering personality overpowered her husband, allowing her to dictate matters of state. Rather than this oversexed dominator, a balanced portrayal of Theodora examines her within context of the trend of powerful imperial women. In reality, the Theodora depicted in Diehl isn't supported by a careful reading of the sources. Procopius' gender and class-based biases produced a highly political text that is more often than not left uninterpreted. The paradigms of the 'good' and 'bad' empress were continuously engaged in these sources, with authors often shaping the actions of empresses to fit within those parameters. These sources provide a highly interpretable bias, something that can and should be considered. Theodora, though personally interesting, was a more standard example of a successful empress. She fit within the historical tradition of influential empresses and adhered to the imperial persona, but the degree of imperial power she had was average in comparison to other empresses both before and after her.

The final chapter deals with Irene of Athens, an empress who, after her husband's death, became regent for her young son. Irene rose to infamy when her



son reached maturity and she was still hesitant to release the reigns of government. Ultimately, Irene had her son blinded in the culmination of years of tension and back and forth. The act of blinding her own son to secure imperial power has led early scholars to depict her as the perpetrator of a crime against womanhood, God, and the empire. She becomes an extreme portrayal of a woman's all-consuming lust for power, indicative of her sex's general rejection of the greater good in favor of personal gain. Irene, and imperial women, deserve more than the ready acceptance of such extreme portrayals. While she certainly appears as a powerful, politically savvy woman in primary texts, the focus on Irene needs to shift from her personality to her place within the historical record. Her actions need to be examined in context and from more than one perspective; when we do this, Irene becomes a fascinating example within a larger tradition rather than an evil deviation from the norm.

While not all empresses achieved lasting success or influence, those who did adhered to a tradition that cultivated a public persona specific to imperial women. Without a constitutional definition of their power, many have dismissed the tradition of influential imperial women as a series of anomalies dependent on "appropriate circumstances"<sup>11</sup>. Though paradoxical on the surface, empresses occupied uniquely gendered roles that imbued them with legitimate imperial authority. Empresses were distinguished from other elite women; their gender and character were defined, first and foremost, by their imperial function. There was a consistent baseline that gave imperial women an inherent degree of imperial power, their success beyond that was determined by how well they negotiated their gender

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<sup>11</sup> Garland, Lynda. *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium*. Routledge, (1999). p. 1

and purpose within that imperial structure. Just as individual emperors succeeded or failed based upon their adherence to traditions of the imperial persona, empresses were also held to a specific imperial standard. Looking beyond the individual and their circumstances is necessary to achieve a fuller understanding of how women were able to exercise imperial power within an emphatically androcentric system.

*The Virgin Empress: Aelia Pulcheria Augusta*

Aelia Pulcheria Augusta (398 CE-453 CE), the first individual example to which our attention turns, provides a case in which true imperial power is evident and clearly exercised. Though the discussion of Pulcheria is ongoing, the evidence bars us from dismissing her or the tradition to which she belonged. In the last chapter there was a discussion of the characterizations of imperial power and sanctity, and we will see those patterns emerge in the treatment of Pulcheria.

Though her power was in some ways limited by her sex, Pulcheria was heir to a rich tradition of powerful female empresses. Continuing the work of Constantine I and her grandfather, Theodosius the Great, Pulcheria utilized existing structures while further securing her power by aligning herself with Marian ideology.

Though Constantine endorsed Christianity in the later half of his reign and has become an archetype for the Christian emperor, the true creation of a Christian empire came with Theodosius I's founding of the Theodosian dynasty. In 394 CE, Theodosius I, or Theodosius the Great, faced off against Eugenius, a usurper to the West who represented a renewal of traditional Roman paganism. The battle appeared to be in Eugenius' favor, Theodosius' forces were surrounded and outnumbered; yet in the final hour his tearful prayer was answered. Soldiers from Eugenius' ranks defected and cyclonic winds rendered the remaining forces obsolete:

A tremendous wind descended into the face of the enemy. It was such a one as we have never before recorded, and broke up the ranks of the enemies. The arrows and darts which were sent against the Romans, as if projected by the opposing ranks, were turned upon the bodies of those who had cast

them; and their shields were wrenched from their hands, and whirled against them with filth and dust.<sup>12</sup>

So the battle was won, a usurper defeated, and Christianity maintained as the sole state religion. Theodosius became a champion of orthodoxy and founded his dynasty upon his victory. He broke completely with the “pagan aristocracy”, actively enforcing legislation forbidding the practice or expression of traditional Roman religion.<sup>13</sup> From this moment on, Christianity became an inextricable part of the imperial cult and the characterization of Aelia Flavia Flaccilla, Theodosius’ wife, became the foundation on which a dynasty was built<sup>14</sup>. Gregory of Nyssa’s *Oratio funebris in Flacillam Imperatricem* focuses on several virtues that allowed Flaccilla to be described as Theodosius’ “partner in the *basileia*,” ‘functioning with him in the same *arche* ’”. The principal characteristics Gregory attributes to Flaccilla, chiefly piety and philanthropy, create a framework for her descendants and constitute the calculated creation of a continuous imperial image for women.<sup>15</sup>

In 408 CE the Emperor Arcadius, the son of Theodosius I to the East, died, orphaning his four children, including his only son Theodosius II and his eldest daughter Pulcheria. Theodosius had been proclaimed co-emperor when he was barely a year old and at seven became the only emperor to the east. For several years following the death of Arcadius, Antiochus, a prominent eunuch within the palace, and Anthemius, the praetorian prefect of the East, oversaw the reign of

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<sup>12</sup> Socrates Scholasticus, and Sozomen. *Socrates & Sozomenus: Ecclesiastical Histories*. Ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers. Vol. 2. Sozomen. *EH* 7.24

<sup>13</sup> Holum, Kenneth G. *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*. University of California Press, (1982). p. 20

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 22-44

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23

Theodosius. However, conflicts between Pulcheria and her brother's regents led to her increased role in Theodosius' reign and in 412, at the age of fourteen, Pulcheria assumed regency over her brother and "became the protector of him and his government"<sup>16</sup>. Pulcheria was then further elevated in 414, when she received the title of Augusta, a title that had lain dormant between the Constantinian and Theodosian dynasties, and presented a tangible link between the two heights of Christian imperial power. She was further presented with the distinction of Aelia, a dynastic gift from her grandmother, Aelia Flaccilla, which aligned Pulcheria with a specific tradition that elevated royal women through the articulation of imperial characteristics with a Christian spin. The ideal empress paralleled her male counterpart in terms of philanthropy, education, and piety, but was also subject to gendered standards, particularly concerning virginity and marriage, that imperial men largely avoided.<sup>17</sup>

Aelia Pulcheria Augusta has been the subject of a fair amount of debate. Though lesser known amongst empresses, Pulcheria remains one of the most influential women in Early Byzantium, and one more than deserving of study. She is a prime example of an imperial woman whose power and agency have historically been attributed to special circumstances and weak men. Her access to imperial power has traditionally been explained away due to a forceful nature and the lack of strong male figures, but this limited perception does not do her or the historical

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<sup>16</sup> Sozomen. *EH*. 9.1

See also Holum, *Theodosian Empresses* 1982. p. 91

<sup>17</sup> Liz James and Kenneth Holum are both useful and relevant sources for the discussion of defining characteristics of a "good" empress. Primary sources likewise reveal ideals in the characteristics they stress, consider Sozomen's extensive passages on Pulcheria's piety, virginity, and philanthropy in book 9

trend she represents any justice<sup>18</sup>. To some extent, Pulcheria was someone who made the most of a particular set of circumstances, but she was also a member of the Theodosian dynasty, an imperial woman forged by a specific Christian imperial tradition. It is within this tradition that Pulcheria's individual nature was able to flourish. Kenneth Holum and Liz James are two scholars whose treatment of Pulcheria has worked to correct previous misjudgments. Holum described Pulcheria as the culmination of Theodosius I's dynastic impetus, one who "brought female *basileia* to full fruition and employed it to change the course of history"<sup>19</sup>. Yet numerous scholars since Holum's seminal work have argued that Holum's take on Pulcheria is "overly-generous"<sup>20</sup> or even misleading<sup>21</sup>.

Instead of considering Pulcheria to be the exception within a patriarchal society or the woman who outsmarted the patriarchy, it is crucial to keep the context in mind. She did not exist outside or in opposition to the imperial system and Byzantine society, rather Pulcheria worked and flourished within these structures. She demonstrated genuine imperial power through the brilliant utilization of constructs of female sanctity within the framework of a Christian empire to solidify her own individual power. Pulcheria drew on a well-articulated tradition of powerful imperial women, employing gender constructs and religious

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<sup>18</sup> For examples of such scholarship consider Diehl, Charles. *Byzantine Portraits*. Knopf, (1927); Norwich, John Julius. *Byzantium: The Early Centuries*. Knopf, (1989); Duckett, Eleanor Shipley. *Medieval Portraits from East and West*. University of Michigan Press, (1972).

<sup>19</sup> Holum. *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*. p. 79

<sup>20</sup> McClanan, Anne L. *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses: Image and Empire*. Palgrave Macmillan, (2002). p. 198

<sup>21</sup> Burgess, Richard. "The Accession of Marcian in the Light of Chalcedonian Apologetic and Monophysite Polemic." *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 86/87 (1993). p. 68

narratives to secure her position and power within the imperial government. In aligning herself with Marian narratives and other elements of religious archetypes, Pulcheria presented herself as more than a woman. This sentiment is reiterated through a dynastic system that empowered imperial women by highlighting their difference and a culture of presentation that stressed the imperial rather than the feminine<sup>22</sup>. Pulcheria, like all imperial women, was limited by the constructs of her gender. Though her influence and genuine imperial power are clearly outlined in the historical record, her access to power and the extent to which she could utilize it was limited by the patriarchal context of Early Byzantium. Female imperial power existed insofar as imperial women could be considered distinct from women as a whole. In aligning herself with Christian ideals of virginity and gender, notably the *Theotokos*, Pulcheria was further distinguished from females within the existing gender system.

Examining sources on Pulcheria provides a familiar set of problems in terms of both the study of Late Antiquity and empresses. Male viewpoints overwhelmingly shape extant sources and examples of female imperial perspectives are extremely limited. In the case of Pulcheria, only her letters, which are in themselves limited, allow us access to her perspective. There are no secret diaries in which Pulcheria gives us the answers to our modern questions; she does not describe herself or her own place within imperial society.

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<sup>22</sup> See Anne McClanan's *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses: Image and Empire* for a fuller exploration of the presentation of imperial women as a historical trend that emphasized rank rather than gender.

As scholars, we need to both consider the limits and biases of our sources and accept that our arguments rarely provide definitive answers. Existing scholarship has largely accepted the male-centric primary sources, creating embellished portrayals of Pulcheria as either a domineering conniver or as a subservient nun. When the sixth-century chronicler Ioannes Malalas, or John Malalas, tries to make sense of Pulcheria's marriage to Marcian, he does so in a way that reinscribed Pulcheria without any agency in the matter. Meanwhile other sources stress Pulcheria's choice and deliberation in the matter. Ultimately, these sources cannot be considered without context, without examining motives. Pulcheria was a powerful woman within a man's world and that is evident in her treatment within primary texts.

There is a tendency within secondary scholarship to stress that Theodosius' weakness and femininity allowed Pulcheria's power<sup>23</sup>. However, Pulcheria was heir to a tradition of visible and influential imperial women, and it was their relationship, not Theodosius' weakness, that granted Pulcheria agency. Pulcheria's influence with Theodosius, particularly concerning his education and marriage, is evident in nearly all the sources. Sozomen, (c.400 - c.450 CE), a contemporary within the court and one of the chief resources for arguments concerning Pulcheria's access to genuine power, writes extensively on how Pulcheria fostered piety within her siblings and protected her brother and his government from various evils, not the least of which

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<sup>23</sup> Duckett, Eleanor. *Medieval Portraits of the East and West*. pp. 122-124  
Notably Duckett's description (drawing on John of Antioch) of Theodosius' kind and easily led nature as well as his preference for the fine arts. Duckett masculinizes Pulcheria, giving her the "spirit of Theodosius the Great" (p. 124) and depicting her as almost excessively decisive.



were heresies.<sup>24</sup> The imperial palace became a monastic space of strict religious observation<sup>25</sup>, and it was in this setting that Theodosius grew into his reign and Pulcheria continued her expression of power. Brother and sister worked together in a relationship based on mutual need and benefits.<sup>26</sup> The historical record is clear on the presence of Pulcheria in state and doctrinal issues, though the interpretation or presentation of that presence varies between sources.<sup>27</sup> “[Pulcheria] must be considered the co-regent of the empire until her death in 453. In fact it can be said without exaggeration that Pulcheria gave the identity to her brother's reign.”<sup>28</sup>

Included in the team supervising a young Theodosius was the Armenian Patriarch Atticus, who provided spiritual guidance to the imperial family. As part of his guidance he wrote a treatise for the young princesses entitled *On Faith and Virginity*. Though the text itself has not survived, references to it as well as estimations based on Atticus' other works leads us to believe that the work exalted women and provided the Virgin Mary as a archetype in whose emulation the

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<sup>24</sup> Sozomen. *EH*. 9.1-3

<sup>25</sup> Socrates. *EH*. 12.22

<sup>26</sup> Holum, Kenneth G. “Pulcheria’s Crusade A.D. 421-22 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory.” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* (1977) p. 153

<sup>27</sup> Council of Chalcedon. *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*. Liverpool University Press, (2005). Translated Texts for Historians v. 45.

See for a discussion of the presence versus presentation at the sixth session of the council (pp. 205-212), in which Pulcheria was physical present and originally addressed in the proceedings, but edited out of the final presentation. Also, Liz James’ *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*, where Pulcheria’s visibility and influence are portrayed as particularly noteworthy. “We have already seen empresses from the fourth to eighth centuries acting in an official capacity when they joined their husbands in ceremonial affairs. Only one empress is recorded as playing a direct part in imperial councils during the lifetime of the emperor. That was Pulcheria” (p. 66)

<sup>28</sup> Limberis, Vasiliki. *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople*. Routledge, (1994). p. 42

princesses could in essence re-enact the birth of Christ<sup>29</sup>. This notion clearly appears in the following quote from one of Atticus' homilies:

You women who have been renewed in Christ, and who have cast off every stain of sin, and have been blessed in the most-holy Mary, you also may receive Christ in the womb of faith, the one who is born today of the Virgin. For even the blessed Mary first opened herself through faith, and when she made her body worthy of the kingdom she received the king of the universe in her womb<sup>30</sup>

This began a tradition of rhetoric by which the empress was, by virtue of her vow and asceticism, able to fully emulate the Virgin Mary and become a vessel for God. The idea of a woman, be it Mary or Pulcheria, being a vessel for God led to one of the major doctrinal debates of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. *Theotokos*, which translates into "God-bearer", was positioned in contrast to *Christokos*, or "Christ-bearer". One stressed Mary's role in carrying the divine within her, while the other presented Mary as the vessel for only the profane, human aspect of Jesus. In Constantinople, a city rife with devotion to Mary and who under Atticus saw the addition of a Marian feast to the liturgical calendar<sup>31</sup>, the popular consensus was clear.

The appointment of Nestorius of Antioch in 428 as Patriarch of Constantinople, however, led to enormous conflicts and numerous accusations of heresy. Constantinople became a city divided between popular belief and ecclesiastical decrees. Nestorius was in ardent opposition to the title of *Theotokos*,

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<sup>29</sup> Constat. "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh" p172

<sup>30</sup> Atticus. Ed. Joseph Lebon, "Discours d'Atticus d'Constantinople". Mus 46, (1933). p. 190

<sup>31</sup> Socrates. *EH*. 7.22 ; Sozomen. *EH*. 9.1

Discussed in Holum's *Theodossian Empresses*, p. 145

believing that the implications of a human woman being the mother of God would mean that the nature of Christ was indivisible and melded, both human and God, but combined in such a way as to be con-substantial with neither God nor humans. The conflict between Pulcheria and Nestorius was immediate given that Pulcheria's life was cultivating herself as the embodiment of Marian ideals. Judith Herrin suggests that Pulcheria's aggressive campaign of Virgin-related philanthropy speeded Constantinople's transition from Tyche<sup>32</sup> to Mary<sup>33</sup>; this sentiment is echoed by Vasiliki Limberis, who argues that the ideology of *Theotokos* had swiftly become a defining attribute of Constantinople<sup>34</sup>. Yet Nestorius ignored the opinions of the masses and the will of the empire, devoting his ministry to attacks on the *Theotokos* while Pulcheria similarly fought against Nestorius and what she deemed to be heresy. Kate Cooper argues against the simple, yet reoccurring structure of a willful empress attacking a pious bishop. Instead she suggests that the conflict between Nestorius and Pulcheria was rooted in Nestorius' displeasure at the "imperial family's dominant role in the early Byzantine liturgy"<sup>35</sup>. By attacking the title of *Theotokos* and veneration of Mary, Nestorius was attacking Pulcheria's prominent and symbolic role as the virgin empress. Ultimately, the conflict had less to do with doctrine and more to do with the creation of a "divinized empress" and by extension

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<sup>32</sup> Tyche is the Greco-Roman Goddess responsible for the fortune and fate of a city. In Constantinople she acted as a tutelary spirit and the personification of the city. Limberis and Herrin both examine the transition of Constantinople from Tyche to Mary (see below footnotes).

<sup>33</sup> Herrin, Judith. "The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium", Past and Present 169, (2000). pp. 3-35)

<sup>34</sup> Limberis, Vasiliki. Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople. Routledge, (1994). p. 128

<sup>35</sup> Cooper, Kate. "Contesting the Nativity: Wives, virgins, and Pulcheria's imitatio Mariae". Scottish Journal of Religious Studies, 19 (1998). p. 31

a divinized imperial house. As Cooper writes, “Mariology developed from a grounding in both tradition and lay piety, and that Christology was adjusted to accommodate it. Pulcheria would then be seen as an entrepreneur of popular momentum, while Nestorius defied it to his own ruin”<sup>36</sup>

Pulcheria’s defense of *Theotokos* was also a defense of the power that she gained through aligning herself with such religious archetypes. Following the defeat of Nestorius at Ephesus in 431, that power was secure. Proclus, who had served under Atticus, then became the archbishop of Constantinople. His appointment signaled a continuation of the specific Marian ideology promoted by Atticus and Pulcheria. He further encouraged Pulcheria, arguing that through the emulation of the Mother of God, Pulcheria herself could access the divine:

Stand in awe before the magnanimity of the empress who is a source of all spiritual blessings. As a virgin she blossoms forth Christ, and by mortifying her flesh she embraced within the bride-chamber of her soul the Crucified one. And she herself stands in awe before the baptismal font that is both a virgin and the mother of many, and from whose depths shining lights have ascended.<sup>37</sup>

While Pulcheria was utilizing the narrative of the *Theotokos*, she was also fashioning herself as a bride of Christ paralleling narratives of female sanctity such as that of Macrina the Younger. Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Macrina*, written about Gregory of Nyssa’s older sister, presents situation that in many ways mirrors Pulcheria’s. Macrina is a sister whose vow of virginity and spiritual wisdom guided

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 43

<sup>37</sup> Proclus, hom. 12 (PG 65.788) as quoted in Constan, Nicholas P. “Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh”. p. 173

all in her life, particularly her brothers<sup>38</sup>, and whose superiority protected her from female weakness<sup>39</sup>. The text stresses virginity as Macrina's route to holiness as well as the key to her independence<sup>40</sup>. As this text was circulating around the time of Pulcheria's birth, her lauded education and commitment to her faith leaves little doubt that Pulcheria was well aware of Macrina and other narratives centered on virginity.

In Sozomen's Ecclesiastical History, the account of Pulcheria's discovery of the Tomb of the Forty Martyrs emerges as significant. Though God had hidden the tomb using all measures of natural phenomenon, Pulcheria, guided by dreams and apparitions, finds it. It is depicted as a miracle, a sign of her divine appointment:

It appears probable that God designedly willed the aforesaid place to as more marvelous and a more conspicuous event, and as a proof of the Divine favor towards the discoverer. The discoverer was, in fact, no other than the Empress Pulcheria, the sister of the emperor.<sup>41</sup>

While it can be argued that Sozomen restricts or makes sense of Pulcheria's imperial

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<sup>38</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. *Life of St. Macrina*. Trans. Roger Pearse. Clay & Sons, (2003).

"Macrina took him in hand, and with such speed did she draw him also toward the mark of philosophy that he forsook the glories of this world and despised fame gained by speaking, and deserted it for this busy life where one toils with one's hands. His renunciation of property was complete, lest anything should impede the life of virtue." Note similarities in how Pulcheria was depicted teaching and shaping the education of Theodosius II.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. *Life of St. Macrina*. See in particular the account of the death of Naucratus and Macrina's support of her mother thereafter. Notable in the language is the way Macrina is contrasted with her weak and feminine mother, and how she, with her "rational spirit", overcomes nature as well as "ignoble and womanish" impulses.

<sup>40</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. *Life of St. Macrina*. See "Death of a Young Man", in which Macrina refuses to marry after her betrothed dies. She becomes a bride awaiting the hope of a resurrection, a bride of Christ.

<sup>41</sup> Sozomen. EH. 9.2

power by placing her in a religious context, in reality stressing Pulcheria as God's chosen one creates numerous parallels with male narratives of power. Throughout the sources Pulcheria is referred to in terms of her piety, as a defender of the faith, and as someone God has chosen.

Nearly identical rhetoric emerges when examining accounts of Constantine I or Theodosius I, the two great Christian emperors within Pulcheria's world. Following the creation of a true Christian empire, demonstrations of God's favor became increasingly important in imperial rhetoric. Consider again Theodosius' battle with Eugenius: The only reason Theodosius won, against all odds, was because of his faith and God's favor. The entire Theodosian line is gifted with "Divine love"<sup>42</sup> as a marker of their imperial status. Pulcheria functions within this tradition. According to Sozomen, it was Pulcheria's favor with God, a product of her immense piety and vow of virginity, which caused "every threat and war raised against her brother to disperse spontaneously"<sup>43</sup>. Further examples of Pulcheria's alignment with this tradition emerge from numismatic evidence, in which coins bearing Pulcheria's image were minted with the image of victory holding a long, jeweled cross (*fig. 3*), a widely understood symbol of Christian imperial victory. As Holum writes "these coins assimilated the Augusta with her male counterparts... they declared that a woman might claim to be "master of victory"<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Hartranft, Chester D. "Memoir of Sozomen" Prefacing his translation of Sozomen's Ecclesiastical History in the previously cited edition of Socrates and Sozomen from the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers collection. p. 472

<sup>43</sup> Sozomen. *EH*. 9.3

<sup>44</sup> Holum, Kenneth G. *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*. p. 110

After the death of her brother in 450, Pulcheria was left in a unique position. She had displaced her brother's wife, a woman she herself had picked as Theodosius' bride, and was now the only member of the imperial household left in Constantinople. After a very brief time as the sole ruler, Pulcheria secured her position through a political marriage with Marcian, a military man within the imperial court. In regards to Pulcheria's marriage to Marcian, there is a great deal of discussion in both primary and secondary sources. The deciding factor seems to be religious inclinations and, particularly in the case of secondary scholarship, what sources were deemed trustworthy. In terms of primary sources, the divide is easily characterized by the polarized views of John of Nikiu and John Malalas, two scholars writing in the centuries following Pulcheria's death. On one hand Malalas attributes the match to a deathbed decree by Theodosius, "It was revealed to me that you must become emperor after me".<sup>45</sup> Opposite to that we have Nikiu's account, which holds Pulcheria solely responsible and attributes the match to lust rather than political acumen.

Pulcheria audaciously promulgated an imperial decree without taking the advice of Valentinian, the emperor of Rome, or that of the chief officers and Senate, and married Marcian ... and placed the imperial crown on his head and made him emperor. And she became his wife and sacrificed her virginity.<sup>46</sup>

These sources can and should be read in a kind of reactionary light, as later sources trying to make sense of Pulcheria within restrictive constructs. Contemporary texts,

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<sup>45</sup> Malalas. *The Chronicle of John Malalas*. Translated by Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys and Roger Scott Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, Melbourne (1986). 14.27

<sup>46</sup> *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*. trans. by R. II. Charles. (1916). iv and v

including a letter from Pope Leo, still define Pulcheria in terms of her piety and purity, which leads one to believe that the issue of Pulcheria honoring her vow in marriage is one divided by religious and political camps. Richard Burgess makes the case that Pulcheria's imperial power died with Theodosius and that she was then a ceremonial tool used by the men around her to promote their careers.<sup>47</sup> Holum, on the other hand stands in stark contrast, with his argument that Pulcheria chose to invest Marcian in order to safeguard her power from Western forces.<sup>48</sup> According to Holum, as well as other feminist scholarship, Pulcheria "put the purple on him, put the crown on his head, and led him up the throne."<sup>49</sup> The truth likely lies somewhere between these two polarities: That Pulcheria needed a relationship to a man in order to secure her power is a fact. But this in itself does not diminish the power to which she had access to; it simply places it within context.

Pulcheria provides a remarkable example of an imperial woman with real imperial power, and all the political and religious influence that true imperial status implies. Pulcheria worked within the framework of the Christian dynasty, she utilized narratives of sanctity and power to cement her position. She presided "over all the political and ecclesiastical events of the first half of the fifth century"<sup>50</sup>, including the Council of Chalcedon during which she guided her new husband and

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<sup>47</sup> Burgess. *The Accession of Marcian in the Light of Chalcedonian Apologetic and Monophysite Polemic*. p. 68

<sup>48</sup> Holum. *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*. pp. 208-209

<sup>49</sup> Burgess. "The Accession of Marcian in the Light of Chalcedonian Apologetic and Monophysite Polemic". p. 51

<sup>50</sup> Limberis, Vasiliki. *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople*. p. 42



fashioned herself as the “New Helena”<sup>51</sup>. While Pulcheria is a definite example of access to genuine imperial power, she was still burdened by her gender. Though she can and needs to be considered distinct and separate from women as a whole, her power was limited; her ability to exercise genuine imperial power was rooted in her relationships with imperial men.

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<sup>51</sup> Acts of the Council of Chalcedon. Session IV. p. 240



Figure 1  
 Gold Solidus of Theodosius I (379-395)  
 379-383, Constantinople  
 Dumbarton Oaks



Figure 2  
 Gold Solidus of Eudocia (423-460)  
 430, Constantinople  
 Dumbarton Oaks



Figure 3  
 Gold Solidus of Pulcheria (414-453)  
 420-422, Constantinople  
 Dumbarton Oaks



Figure 4  
 Gold Solidus of Leo IV the Khazar (775-780)  
 776-778, Constantinople  
 Dumbarton Oaks



Figure 5  
 Gold Solidus of Constantine VI (780-797)  
 792-797, Constantinople  
 Dumbarton Oaks



Figure 6  
 Gold Solidus of Irene (797-802)  
 797-802, Constantinople  
 Dumbarton Oaks

*“Adorned with Piety”: Reassessing Theodora’s Basileia*

Though Theodora remains one of the most visible and widely known examples of female imperial power, due in no small part to the scandalous portrayal within the *Secret History* and the eternal allure of the repentant harlot, the true extent of her power is debatable. While infamous and largely considered powerful by earlier scholars like Diehl and McCabe, the truth of Theodora’s *basileia* is far more nuanced and, frankly, average. Looking beyond the exaggerated rhetoric of Procopius, the sources don’t support the perception of Theodora as a radical, emasculating, powerhouse of an empress. Robert Browning writes that Theodora “remains an enigmatic and rather alarming figure, a woman enjoying immense power in an age which had no institutional structure for such exercise of power. Later tradition tended to close its eyes to her.”<sup>52</sup> While there is certainly truth in the mystery and intrigue of Theodora, as well as problems with her subsequent treatment, this chapter endeavors to illuminate how she fit into an institutional structure. In seeking a balanced portrayal of Theodora, as an empress of importance, but not of the infamy or devastating stature with which she is so often credited, it is necessary to see her as part of an established system. She functioned within a larger tradition of Byzantine empresses, one that necessitated a specific brand of patronage and religious involvement. Theodora, though fascinating and worthy of further study, didn’t break the mold. Instead, she succeeded in meeting the base requirements of a ‘good empress.’ She certainly surpassed her predecessor, the much-ridiculed Euphemia, but when considered in comparison to any of the

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<sup>52</sup> Browning, Robert. *Justinian and Theodora*. Frederick A. Praeger, (1971). p. 257

Theodosian empresses or even her nearest successors, Theodora emerges as a standard, if colorful, addition to the tradition of influential empresses.

While empresses can be considered largely in contrast to other non-imperial women, as paragons of imperial power and apparent anomalies within a repressive patriarchy, it is vital that they be understood as actors within that very societal system. Just as women were confined and defined by their function within society, empresses too functioned within a system that, while initially seeming incongruous with the larger society, was an ingrained part of the Mediterranean East. With regards to the secondary scholarship, however, Theodora is a perfect example of a powerful imperial woman whose influence and visibility have been traditionally explained away through ill-imagined tropes. Diehl and McCabe both write of Theodora as the oversexed dominator of her husband, a man so reduced by her sexual cunning, he virtually hands her the reins of government. Their accounts trivialize and sexualize Theodora while simultaneously denying the historical importance of empresses. They explain away the visibility of empresses in the historical record by focusing on the individual, depicting anomalies rather than a larger pattern. These tendencies have been hard to escape, even for more modern scholars. While one cannot talk about Theodora without discussing and drawing from Procopius, the habit of taking Procopius' highly political works, whether the *Secret History* or *Buildings*, as unbiased truth has continually hampered scholars. Lynda Garland, though she endeavors to inform readers to the possible biases of Procopius, fails to adjust her reading of the *Secret History*, taking him largely at his word. In the same vein, John Julius Norwich, who contests to some degree the

veracity of Procopius, still portrays Theodora as fount of imperial power who had complete control of her husband and his government. By and large the pattern of scholarship is to superficially contest the reliability of Procopius and then adhere largely to the portrait he presents in *Secret History*.

One of the chief issues when examining gender in regards to empresses is that there are few to no sources from a feminine lens. Instead historians are left to grapple with, or in many cases blindly accept, the opinions of a narrow stratum of elite men. That is not to say that these sources should be neglected, but rather that they deserve to be taken as what they are rather than a portrayal of historical truth. The case of Theodora and Procopius provides a perfect example of these principles in action. While Theodora appears in various forms across the historical record, from Malalas to Cassiodorus, much of what people understand of Theodora comes from Procopius, particularly the *Secret History*. While his other works, *Wars* and *Buildings*, were closely associated with the imperial court and as such failed to provide Procopius with complete freedom of expression, the *Secret History* allowed Procopius to expand on his class- and gender-based biases against Theodora. Procopius grounds the accusations of the *Secret History* by setting Theodora up as a prime example of the depravity of women as a whole, a depravity Theodora helped to foster:

It was during this time that the morals of almost all women were corrupted. For they were given full license to cheat on their husbands and no risk or harm could come to them because of their behavior. Even those convicted of adultery remained unpunished, because they would go straight to the empress and turn the tables by hauling their husbands into court though a countersuit, despite the fact that the men had been charged with no crime.

All the men could do, even though they had not been convicted of anything, was to pay back their wives the dowries that they had received, only twofold, to be whipped and then, for most of them, led off to prison. After this, they had to look on again as these adulteresses preened and lusted after their seducers, only more flagrantly this time.<sup>53</sup>

Procopius relies on traditional stereotypes of women that characterize females as predisposed to evil and wickedness. These constructions are neither unique nor original in the Greco-Roman East, as has been discussed in the introductory chapter. His class biases are clearly visible not only in his treatment of Theodora, but in his remarks concerning Antonina, the wife of Justinian's general Belisarios, and the empress Euphemia, wife of Justinian's predecessor Justin I. Euphemia's poor background and "barbarian stock" ill-equipped her for a life as empress; Procopius takes particular pleasure in noting that her given name, Lipicina, was so ridiculous and indicative of her low birth that it necessitated changing.<sup>54</sup> Antonina's faults of character were likewise associated with her social standing and practices prior to her marriage. Emerging from a family of charioteers and actors<sup>55</sup>, Antonina is immediately associated with all manner of wanton and deplorable behavior.

In his attack on Theodora, Procopius takes an almost systematic approach to discrediting her qualifications as an empress. Piece by piece, he discredits each facet of her *basileia*. Her lack of piety, humility, education, generosity, and womanly virtue (all of which are chief components in the creation of a successful imperial persona)

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<sup>53</sup> Prokopios. *The Secret History*. Trans. Anthony Kaldellis. Hackett Publishing Co., (2011). 17.24-25

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 45 2.9.47-2.9.49

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 1.11 Her mother is described as one "of those types who whore themselves on stage", referring to the interchangeability of acting and prostitution at the time.



are continually emphasized in the *Secret History*. Her lack of formal education and status as an actress from a family of similarly low regard negates any claim to *paideia*, the cultural inheritance of all Greco-Roman elites. Her graphically described sexual exploits and routine abortions<sup>56</sup> effectively dismiss the notion of Theodora's womanly virtue, something that encompasses not only chastity but also the classic ideals of a wife and mother. Once empress, Procopius' depictions of Theodora's extravagance, greed, and all together deplorable behavior paint her as someone ill prepared for the lofty office of empress.

The narrative of Belisarios and Antonina, which precedes that of Justinian and Theodora in the *Secret History*, works in tandem with that of the imperial couple. In Belisarios and Antonina we see the ultimate reversal of roles, the emasculation of a once powerful general under the heel of yet another lowborn seductress. Belisarios is so degraded through his wife's treachery and manipulations that he loses all claims to agency or masculinity, "not even remembering that he had once been a man" he becomes "her devoted slave and not her husband".<sup>57</sup>

The complete reversal of gender roles, while quite explicit in the case of Belisarios and Antonina, appears less directly in the account of Theodora. While prior to marriage she is depicted as reaching, and arguably surpassing, Antonina's level of lust and debauchery, within her marriage to Justinian the issue becomes the 'partnership' she had with her husband. In the case of both Justinian and Belisarius, the chief charge, other than perhaps Justinian being the "Lord of Demons"<sup>58</sup>, was the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 919

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 4.22, 4.30

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 12.26-32

degree of influence which they allowed their wives to exert. While Procopius makes it clear that lowborn women bring scandal and ruin wherever they climb the social ladder, the partnership he describes between the imperial couple is an indictment of both their characters and intentions. Together they sought ways to divide and cripple the empire: "In these schemes they were always working together, but in public they would pretend to disagree with each other in order to divide their subjects and solidify their hold on the throne."<sup>59</sup> According to Procopius, they took opposite sides of doctrinal issues, not because of any strong personal belief, but rather because they sought to destroy "all nations and the works of men as efficiently and quickly as possible."<sup>60</sup> In describing their relationship, Procopius writes that Justinian, as a result of this charade, appeared "unable to oppose his wife directly."<sup>61</sup>

While Procopius would lead readers to believe that no decision in the empire was made without Theodora's input, that none of her husband's rulings were without her mark, the imperial evidence offers little support of such strong sentiments. Even Procopius, on closer consideration attributes Theodora with the classic female powers of "intrigue, sex, and manipulation"<sup>62</sup> rather than the kind of masculine imperial clout with which she is so often associated. Though Theodora was certainly an empress, with the degree of power and influence such status entailed, her power was secondary and derivative. She met each requirement of a

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.10.23

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.12.14

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.10.17

<sup>62</sup> Cameron, Averil. *Procopius and the Sixth Century*. University of California Press, (1985). p. 71

functional empress. While Theodora maintained a carefully cultivated imperial character and had a reputation among her contemporaries for her political prowess, her role was indeed one of partnership, her power dependent on a mutually beneficial relationship.

While secondary scholarship has been dominated by a dependence on Procopius, Theodora does in fact appear in numerous primary sources. Syriac sources, like that of John of Ephesus, are generally positive accounts, while Greek and Latin sources are often negative or, if positive, mention Theodora as little as possible. Though the *Secret History* is largely a political attack, there are facts to be gleaned from it, insights that can be corroborated by other sources. Procopius bases the bulk of his criticism on Theodora's past in the theater and the reprehensible nature of her partnership with Justinian. John of Ephesus, a prominent Monophysite bishop and close acquaintance of Theodora, introduced her as "Theodora who came from the brothel"<sup>63</sup>. He includes the term in Greek rather than Syriac, which comprises the body of his text, suggesting that he was making use of a popular epithet, something not referenced in malice but rather indicative of common knowledge. In the same vein Evagrius, in book four of his *Ecclesiastical History*, corroborates the supposition that Theodora and Justinian were purposely divided in terms of religious affiliation:

Now, whereas Justinian most resolutely supported those who had gathered at Chalcedon and what had been expounded by them, his consort Theodora upheld those who speak of one nature, whether because they did in truth hold these views -for when there is a proposal to discuss the faith, fathers

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<sup>63</sup> John of Ephesus. *Lives of the Eastern Saints*. Trans. E.W. Brooks. *Patrologia Orientalis*, Vol. 17. Paris Firmin-Didot, (1923). 13

are at odds with children, and children in turn with those who begat them, a wife with her own spouse and in turn again a husband with his own spouse- or because they had reached some sort of accommodation, so that he would support those who speak of two natures in Christ our God whereas she would do the same for those who advocate one nature. At any rate, then, neither made any concession to the other: but he most enthusiastically upheld what had been agreed at Chalcedon, while she sided with those on the opposite side and made every provision for those who speak of one nature; she both looked after local people and welcomed outsiders with considerable sums of money.<sup>64</sup>

So, while the available sources differ on multiple counts, at the very least it is clear that Theodora, an actress turned empress, regularly exerted her power and influence for the Monophysite cause. The Monophysite- Chalcedonian controversy revisits familiar Christological ground. Monophysitism is the belief that, after the Incarnation, Christ had a single, divine nature. This conflicts with the dyophysite beliefs that were legitimized by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Chalcedonians believed in the dual nature of Christ, at once both human and divine, yet united within one person (an important distinction to steer clear of Nestorianism, which overemphasized the division between human and divine natures). The chief difference between sides being that Chalcedonians supported hypostatic union, a union of human and divine natures within one person or hypostasis, while the point of union for Monophysites was within a single nature.

The account of Theodora in the chronicle of John Malalas, her contemporary, omits all of Procopius' overt attacks on her character. While Malalas is an overwhelmingly positive account of the empress, praising her generosity and piety,

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<sup>64</sup> Evagrius Scholasticus. *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*. Trans. Michael Whitby. Liverpool University Press, (2000). 4.10

he does offhandedly reference attacks on her character during her reign. For example, he notes that Priscus, a consul, had his property confiscated and was banished, but readers must rely on other means to understand that it was a result of slandering Theodora.<sup>65</sup> We can, to some extent, contextualize Malalas' account by understanding his own history. Though the name Malalas comes from the Syriac for rhetor, and as such would suggest John Malalas had achieved the level of education required for a professor of rhetoric, in truth his style and language suggest a somewhat limited secondary education.<sup>66</sup> As a native of Antioch, which though considered the birthplace of Nestorianism, was under the care of the Monophysite patriarch Severus, Malalas was in all likelihood sympathetic to the Monophysite cause. Though he refrains from approaching theology or dogma, his treatment of the Council of Chalcedon, whom he dubbed Nestorians<sup>67</sup>, and his consideration of Monophysites as orthodox<sup>68</sup> can certainly be taken as evidence of his leanings. Grouping Chalcedonians with Nestorians, who in stressing the human nature of Christ can be seen as the antithesis to Monophysite beliefs, speaks fairly strongly to his own opinions. Such inclinations would logically cast the Monophysite empress in a favorable light. Still, Malalas' account is not extreme in the degree or type of attention he pays to Theodora. Instead she appears in a familiar way, in the same manner as countless empresses before her, praised for her piety and generosity. As an interesting sort of parallel to Helena and the true cross, Malalas describes

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<sup>65</sup> Malalas, John. *Chronicle of John Malalas*. Trans. Elizabeth Jefferys, Michael Jefferys, and Roger Scott. Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, (1986). 18.23

<sup>66</sup> Treadgold, Warren T. *The Early Byzantine Historians*. Palgrave Macmillan, (2007). p. 235

<sup>67</sup> Malalas 17.6

<sup>68</sup> Malalas 17. 11

Theodora's commission of a "very costly cross, set with pearls" which she gifted to the city of Jerusalem.<sup>69</sup> Even her extravagant and somewhat gaudy trip to Pythion receives the benefit of a description of her piety and generosity: "The Augusta Theodora set out for the place known as Pythion with patricians and cubicularii<sup>70</sup>, accompanied by 4,000 people. After giving generously to the churches in each place, she returned to Constantinople."<sup>71</sup> Evagrius, a firmly Chalcedonian Christian, similarly praised Theodora; in his Ecclesiastical History he writes that Theodora was good to "our people", perhaps referring to those living beyond Constantinople.<sup>72</sup> Despite their significant doctrinal differences, Evagrius recognized Theodora's generosity and compassion.

Theodora's philanthropy is well documented, appearing prominently in almost all of the sources that mention her. She adhered strictly to the model of Christian philanthropy established by Helena and the Theodosian empresses. We see in Theodora a continuation of Pulcheria's patronage: She stays true to the tenets that guided all successful empresses before and after her, participating within the distinctly Christian imperial system. Her charities affirmed her piety and a special care for the downtrodden. Her war against prostitution in Constantinople, particularly the practices of pimps and exploitation of young girls, was widely

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<sup>69</sup> Malalas 17.19

<sup>70</sup> *Cubicularii*, in its most literal translation refers to chamberlains. Tending to the emperor's *sacrum cubiculum*, or sacred bedchamber, these eunuchs were not only included in the emperor's or empress' immediate entourage, but they often held administrative positions within the palace and sometimes even in the provinces. For a more detailed explanation of official ranks and functions see Cosenza, Mario Emilio. *Official Positions After the Time of Constantine*. New era printing Company, (1905).

<sup>71</sup> Malalas 18.25

<sup>72</sup> Evagrius *EH* 4.10

recognized. Malalas writes of one such attempt to quell the practice of forced prostitution:

At that time the pious Theodora added the following to her other good works. Those known as brothel-keepers used to go about in every district on the look-out for poor men who had daughters and giving them, it is said, their oath and a few nomismata, they used to take the girls as though under contract; they used to make them into public prostitutes, dressing them up as their wretched lot required and, receiving from them the miserable price of their bodies, they forced them into prostitution. She ordered that all such brothel-keepers should be arrested as a matter of urgency. When they had been brought in with the girls, she ordered each of them to declare on oath what they had paid the girls' parents. They said they had given them five nomismata each. When they had all given information on oath, the pious empress returned the money and freed the girls from the yoke of their wretched slavery, ordering henceforth that there should be no more brothel-keepers. She presented the girls with a set of clothes and dismissed them with one nomisma each.<sup>73</sup>

The Convent of Repentance, which she and Justinian established for former prostitutes, is further evidence of their particular attentions. Procopius, of course, offers two different accounts of the convent. In the *Secret History*, Theodora forced women who “sold themselves” into a confined, religious life so odious that they regularly throw themselves off the convent’s walls.<sup>74</sup> Conversely, in *Buildings* Procopius portrays what can reasonably be assumed as the imperial couple’s own view of the convent, a safe haven for women forced into a life of prostitution and extreme poverty. The passage in *Buildings* makes reference to many of the pieces of

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<sup>73</sup> Malalas 18.24

<sup>74</sup> *Secret History* 17.5-6

legislation enacted to protect women and combat prostitution<sup>75</sup>; Procopius describes these as joint endeavors. The imperial couple, by this account, through their careful and consistent attentions to the deplorable conditions “set virtue itself free”.<sup>76</sup>

Theodora’s patronage and piety are further attested in numerous appearances in ecclesiastical architecture. Theodora’s monogram is visible in the Hagia Sophia, though she is not listed as a founder. Malalas lists the various churches she founded, waxing eloquent about “The Most devout Theodora” who “provided much for the city”.<sup>77</sup> Most notable perhaps is the inscription beneath the dome of Saints Sergius and Bacchus which reads: “May he in all things guard the rule of the sleepless sovereign and increase the power of the God-crowned Theodora whose mind is adorned with piety, whose constant toil lies in unsparing efforts to nourish the destitute.”<sup>78</sup> This inscription not only displays Theodora’s most important claims to *basileia*, it also reflects with surprising clarity the public

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<sup>75</sup> Blume, Fred H., trans. *Justinian’s Novels*. University of Wyoming, (1943). Nov. 14, Nov. 51

<sup>76</sup> Procopius. *Buildings*. Trans. H. B. Dewing. Harvard University Press, (1940). 1.9.1-10

<sup>77</sup> Malalas 17.19

<sup>78</sup> Still visible in the Küçük Aya Sofya Camii, or the mosque of Little Hagia Sophia, the full inscription reads: “Other sovereigns gave honored dead men whose labor was unprofitable, but our sceptered Justinian, fostering piety, honors with a splendid abode Sergius the Servant of Christ, Begetter of all things, whom not the burning breath of fire, nor the sword, nor any other constraint of torments disturbed; but who endured to be slain for the sake of Christ God, gaining by his blood heaven as his home. May he in all things guard the rule of the sleepless sovereign and increase the power of the God-crowned Theodora whose mind is adorned with piety, whose constant toil lies in unsparing efforts to nourish the destitute.” from Fowden, Elizabeth Key. *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius Between Rome and Iran*. University of California Press, (1999). p. 130



persona she crafted as a defender of the destitute. Theodora was bound in this way to both extremes within society, the elite and the marginalized.

Theodora, though clearly present in the aforementioned textual sources, appears famously in the artistic record. Images of the mosaics at Ravenna have become indicative of Byzantine empresses as a whole, and have been used in some context in almost every work on empresses in the last fifty years. In addition to our consideration of textual sources we can see the importance of artistic and numismatic sources. These sources are displays that articulate specific messages and themes in a largely public context. In each instance of patronage, in every church she founds or lavishes gift upon, Theodora is declaring her piety and generosity in the most accessible and public of ways. As Liz James writes, “Byzantine images do not simply illustrate; they also encapsulate ideology.”<sup>79</sup>

While Justinian acknowledged seeking Theodora’s counsel<sup>80</sup> and appointed her Augusta, he never gave her the imperial distinction of being represented on coinage, a marker of imperial power in the most public of spheres. Her claim to *basileia* relied largely in her demonstrations of philanthropy and piety; her adherence to the imperial persona communicated her right and ability to rule. Theodora is often read as one of the more exciting and powerful empresses of the Early Byzantine period, in large part due to her colorful background and the numerous and extravagant artistic portrayals of her. While she still made clear use

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<sup>79</sup> James, Liz. *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*. Leicester University Press, (2001). p. 27

<sup>80</sup> “Having considered all these things, and having taken our well-beloved spouse, given us by God, into our counsel, and having also communicated with Your Sublimity in reference thereto and having sought your advice to some extent, we have undertaken to make this imperial law” *Nov.* 8.1

of imperial power, the access demonstrated is standard rather than extraordinary. Theodora was not exceptional in her access to power or her utilization of it; rather she worked within a tradition of imperial women and largely adhered to the idealized role of an empress. Her contributions to monophysitism and the outrageous rhetoric of Procopius clearly mark Theodora as a subject worthy of attention, but as we will continue to see, the role of imperial women was so ingrained with religion that absence from religious controversies should be considered atypical.

*Irene: The Extremes of Motherhood and Power*

The eighth-century empress Irene has often been used as an example of an imperial woman discarding her gender for the power of masculinity. She is classically depicted as forceful and ruthless, with a selfish need for power.<sup>81</sup> As a regent and later sole ruler, Irene seems to be a study of contrasts. She appears as both the pious preserver of icons and the filicidal, power-minded tyrant. Though an objective history will forever prove illusive, we can come to a fuller, more balanced understanding of Irene's reign. From a variety of sources, from the coins Irene herself produced to her treatment in Greek and Arabic sources, it is certain there is more to Irene than the hyper-masculinized anomaly she is so often interpreted as. It wasn't the weakness of the men around her that allowed Irene's prominence in the historical record. Irene's claim to *basileia* was rooted in her religious importance,

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<sup>81</sup> Irene is often said to have used the title of *basileus* (emperor) rather than *basilissa* (empress), but there are only three highly contested instances in which *basileus* was used. *Basilissa* is what appears in the vast majority of sources, seals, and coins. See Liz James. "Men, Women, Eunuchs: Gender, Sex, and Power". *A Social History of Byzantium*. Ed. John Haldon. Blackwell, (2009). pp. 45-46

Some examples of scholarship depicting Irene as power-hungry and ruthless: "His ambitious mother exposed to the public censure the vices which she had nourished and the actions which she had secretly advised" and "In the mind of Irene ambition had stifled every sentiment of humanity and nature" from Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Vol. 6. J. Murray, (1887). pp. 86, 87; "she was the most worldly of women, and that love of power was a fundamental trait of her character" from Bury, John Bagnell. *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire from the Fall of Irene to the Accession of Basil I. (A. D. 802-867)*. Macmillan & Co., (1912). p. 2; "But Irene was ambitious also, and keenly desirous of ruling; her whole life long she was led by one dominating idea, a lust for power amounting to an obsession. IN pursuit of this end she allowed no obstacle to stay her and no scruple to turn her aside." Charles Diehl. "Leo III and the Isaurian Dynasty (717-802)." *Cambridge Medieval History*. Ed. John Bagnell Bury. Vol. 4. Cambridge University Press, (1923). p. 19

how she utilized her position to influence the evolution of Church doctrine. Irene is a naturally divisive figure; getting past the polarized approaches is vital. Irene gained power through an established system, a system that she challenged, changed, and reaffirmed. Like previous empresses, Irene was to become a template for future imperial women; she served as a key reference for subsequent empresses battling iconoclasm.

The common understanding of Irene has been informed by numerous examples of scholarship that sought to explain away her historical importance by stressing her extreme character and the perfect storm of environmental factors. She is reduced to a base, power-hungry individual surrounded by feeble, gullible men. Irene becomes the emasculator, a capable woman only because of incapable men<sup>82</sup>. There is no sense of historical continuity in the narratives of 18th- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholars like Henry Milman or Edward Gibbon. Instead the last two hundred years of secondary scholarship has seen the imposition of contemporary judgments on an ancient individual. While her political prowess is acknowledged, it comes at the price of her femininity and even humanity. Milman describes Irene as “un-natural”, her actions portrayed with all the drama and horror of a true-crime story. Her story is treated like an aberration with all positive interpretations attributed to shameful, religiously motivated revisionists:

But it is even more awful and humiliating that religious passions should be so inextinguishable that a churchman of profound learning, of unimpeachable character, should, many centuries after, be so bewildered by

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<sup>82</sup> Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Vol. 6. J. Murray, (1887).

zeal for the orthodox Empress, as to palliate, extenuate, as far as possible apologize, for this appalling deed.<sup>83</sup>

Before 1980, the most positive mention of Irene in secondary scholarship fell along the lines of “a woman of considerable talent still greater ambition and of a spirit rarely found in her sex.”<sup>84</sup> While complimentary on the surface, such comments belie a deeper dismissal of empresses as a whole. This is further illustrated by John Bagnell Bury’s description of Irene’s career as “unusually brilliant.”<sup>85</sup>

Irene was brought from Athens, from a relatively unknown, yet aristocratic provincial family, in order to secure Byzantine relations with the area. Her selection by Constantine V (r. 741-775) to marry his heir Leo IV in 768 was an incredible stroke of luck for Irene, who was then only sixteen. While later iconodule sources, sources which supported the veneration of icons, tried to portray Irene as the perpetual defender of icons, it is extremely unlikely that a young woman from an iconoclast family would harbor independent iconodule sentiments and still be selected by an emperor defined by iconoclasm.<sup>86</sup> It is reasonable to say then, that Irene came to Constantinople without the claim to religious orthodoxy that would later characterize her rule. Constantine V was largely described as impious and corrupt. Often gifted with the deprecating epithet *Kopronymos*, meaning ‘dung-named’, in iconodule sources, Constantine V served as an exaggerated contrast to

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<sup>83</sup> Milman, Henry Hart. *History of Latin Christianity: Including that of the Popes to the Pontificate of Nicolas V*. Vol. 2. W.J. Widdleton, (1870). p. 854

<sup>84</sup> Stebbing, Henry. *History of the Christian Church*. Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green & Longman, (1834). p. 37

<sup>85</sup> Bury, John Bagnell. *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire from the Fall of Irene to the Accession of Basil I. (A. D. 802-867)*. Macmillan & Co., (1912). p. 1

<sup>86</sup> Iconodule comes from the Greek for ‘one who serves images’, conversely iconoclast and iconoclasm derive from the Greek for “icon breaker”. I use the terms iconodule and iconophile interchangeably.

Irene. While the information on Constantine V shouldn't be considered without a good dose of salt due to the controversy of his strong iconoclast beliefs, it does offer some insight into how Irene's imperial image was crafted. Irene, at her best, is portrayed as the antithesis of her brutish, heretical father-in-law, the strong pious counterpart to her unmemorable iconoclast husband, and the righteous deciding force for her young son. Theophanes the Confessor (750-818) is our primary source for Irene and her contemporaries. His *Chronicle* covers the Eastern Empire from Diocletian to the end of the Nikephorian dynasty. A monk and ardent iconodule, Theophanes' work is heavily slanted in favor of iconodule rulers. He writes "because he was an enemy of the church, Constantine [V] has appropriated this sacred precinct and turned it into an armory and a latrine. But Constantine [VI] and Irene cleansed and resanctified it to condemn his atheism and demonstrate their piety".<sup>87</sup> Judging by Theophanes, many of Irene's greatest achievements were the corrections of Constantine V's political and religious misdeeds. Beyond the restoration of icons, Irene also made peace where Constantine had waged costly war and attempted to alleviate the heavy taxation that had been implemented to finance his numerous campaigns. Though Irene's judgment in regards to these economic matters can be called into question, she did moderately improve the unfortunate economic state of the empire.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Theophanes. *The Chronicle of Theophanes: An English Translation of Anni Mundi 6095-6305 (A.D. 602-813)*. Trans. Harry Turtledove. University of Pennsylvania Press, (1982). AM 6258

<sup>88</sup> See Treadgold, Warren T. "The Revival of Byzantine Learning and the Revival of the Byzantine State." *The American Historical Review* 84.5 (1979)

The controversy over icons dominated the Byzantine political and religious spheres from the reign of Leo III (717-741) until the final restoration of icons by the empress Theodora (the Paphlagonian) in 843. As the vast majority of extant sources are from iconodule perspectives, it is difficult to fully understand the driving forces behind Byzantine iconoclasm. It's been theorized that, following a series of natural disasters, Leo III interpreted the veneration of icons as responsible for God's wrath and began a series of reforms associating religious icons with idolatry. How true this is, especially considering the maintenance of other forms of iconography, is debatable. We can, however, glean elements of iconoclastic views through the answers provided by the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in defense of icons.<sup>89</sup> John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite, the latter a beneficiary of Irene's patronage, were two of the more prominent thinkers to emerge from the iconodules. John of Damascus explains the iconophile position thusly:

I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. I will not cease from honouring that matter which works my salvation. I venerate it, though not as God. How could God be born out of lifeless things? And if God's body is God by union, it is immutable. The nature of God remains the same as before, the flesh created in time is quickened by, a logical and reasoning soul.<sup>90</sup>

Irene, as co-ruler with her son, is given the credit for the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which restored the veneration of icons. Though emperors would challenge

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<sup>89</sup> For examples see the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, Session IV in Schaff, Philip, and Henry Wace, eds. *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*. Vol. 14. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Print. Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers 2.

<sup>90</sup> John of Damascus. *On Holy Images*. Trans. Mary H. Allies. London: Thomas Baker, 1898. p. 17

her accomplishments for the next forty years, Irene remains known for her orthodoxy. While the root of her fierce iconodule tendencies is shrouded in mystery, she quickly began to display her orthodoxy after the death of Constantine V in 775. After the death of her husband and the beginning of Irene's role as regent in 780, there was no longer any reason to check her iconodule tendencies and Irene began her zealous campaign against iconoclasm. Though her philanthropy was not as great as some previous empresses, perhaps due to a depleted treasury and increased pressure from foreign forces, Irene was still responsible for the foundation of numerous convents and was a particular patron of Theodore the Studite. According to Theophanes and other iconodule writers, Irene's ascension was divine will:

God unexpectedly entrusted the rule to the most pious Irene and her son Constantine, so He could work a miracle through a widow-woman and an orphan child. By this means He intended to destroy the boundless impiety against Him and His helpers, as well as His enemy Constantine's tyranny over all the churches<sup>91</sup>

Irene is consistently depicted as an exacting and decisive ruler. She protects the throne from the schemes of her husband's half-brothers, forcing all five into holy orders just forty days into her regency. She appears with almost laughable frequency to "beat and tonsure" all who oppose her. Simultaneously, Irene corrects the misdeeds of previous members of the Isaurian dynasty, including her husband. It was widely believed that Leo IV's death was the result of a fever caused by excessively wearing a crown he had removed<sup>92</sup> from the Hagia Sophia. Irene

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<sup>91</sup> Theophanes AM 5961

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. Theophanes describes the crown as "stolen away"



counters these perceptions by returning the crown with newly inlaid jewels and pearls.

She draws comparisons to Helena as the pious mother, providing an example of orthodoxy for both son and empire. The Seventh Ecumenical Council addresses her as the 'New Helena' and her son, Constantine VI, as the 'New Constantine', though perhaps considering Constantine I's role in calling the First Ecumenical Council both comparisons would be applicable.<sup>93</sup> In the majority of extant sources Irene is depicted as a dutiful imperial widow tasked with the guidance of an empire and a son until suddenly she becomes, momentarily in some cases, the exact opposite. Constantine came of age and still Irene remained as co-ruler, even taking precedence in oaths and coinage. Growing support for Constantine as sole ruler led to Irene's eventual 'retirement' and Constantine's accession in 790. Yet, after a short tenure peppered with military and political disappointments, Constantine reinstated his mother as co-ruler in 792.

These conflicts regarding shared power are clearly visible in the numismatic record. Depictions of the current emperor on the obverse and their predecessor on the reverse characterized the coins of the Isaurian dynasty. In this tradition, the solidus produced by Leo IV portrays him and his son on the obverse with his father and grandfather on the reverse (*fig.4*). This custom, along with their naming practices (i.e., each heir named after their grandfather) was a public display of dynastic continuity. Irene, who was only aligned with the dynasty through marriage, couldn't claim the same kind of dynastic power, yet she still functioned within that

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<sup>93</sup> Acts of The Seventh Ecumenical Council, Session IV

system as both a wife and mother. As regent, Irene's power was dependent on her son's claim to the throne. Yet her bold actions in regards to Constantine, even as regent, highlight her refusal to accept her power as derivative. In coins issued early in her regency, Irene takes precedence over her son. Even when Irene was exiled and confined to Eleutherios, Constantine continued to issue her image on coins. Following her reinstatement as co-ruler in 792, she appears again on Constantine's gold solidus (*fig. 5*). She is pictured on the obverse, the traditional placement of the ruler, with the title of Augusta restored to her along with the key symbols of imperial power. Constantine, however, appears on the reverse as a beardless youth (though he would have been anywhere from 21-26 at the time), nonetheless titled *basileus* (emperor). In her own coinage, Irene further deviated from the Isaurian norm; where her husband felt secure in his power through references to his forefathers and the dynasty, Irene depicts herself on both sides of the solidus, each bearing the title of *basilissa* (empress). Her portrait almost replicates that from Constantine's solidus after 792, in it she wears a richly embellished crown and holds both the globus cruciger and a long cross in her hands.<sup>94</sup> The globus cruciger was a hybrid of Christian and Roman iconography introduced in its final form by Justinian I. Roman audiences had long read the image of a globe as signifying Rome's dominance over the world, the addition of a cross atop the globe represented God's dominion over the world. Depicting the globus cruciger in a ruler's hand signified that God had placed the world under their dominion and protection.

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<sup>94</sup> *Fig. 6*

Irene's return as co-emperor created further problems for Constantine as the troops who had supported his desire for dominance balked at the reintroduction of Irene.<sup>95</sup> While focused on quelling new waves of unrest, Constantine managed to repeatedly alienate key elements of the military and court. He then further jeopardized his position by divorcing his wife, Maria of Amnia (a wife of Irene's choice), on no legal grounds and forcing her to become a nun. He exiled Maria and their two daughters to a convent on Prinkipo in 795. Shortly thereafter Constantine married his mistress, Theodote, and elevated her to Augusta. The stigma of divorce was not what it would be in later centuries, but the ignominy of remarriage was well established. This caused a fierce outcry, particularly from Irene's monastic supporters who declared it an attempt at legalized adultery. The Church became divided over the legality of the union, leading to the 'Moicheian schism.'<sup>96</sup> Two prominent members of Theodote's own family, Plato of Sakkoudion and Theodore the Studite, sided against the imperial couple, even calling for the excommunication of the priest who officiated their wedding and by extension all the members of court. Constantine was not able to redeem himself and lacked the support to counter his mother's plots, which in 797 caused him to abandon Constantinople and the throne. He was apprehended, however, and suffered the traditional punishment of blinding. Theophanes describes their ill-fated relationship as something caused by the devil,

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<sup>95</sup> The Armeniakon army, which had refused to swear an oath with Irene taking precedence, supported Constantine's bid for power. Following Constantine's success they were made to swear an oath to never accept Irene as emperor. The reinstatement of Irene produced a new oath demanding loyalty to both emperors, perhaps asking too much. Constantine detained the general of the Armeniakon forces, but ultimately they still declared all out war against his regime.

<sup>96</sup> From the Greek for adultery, *moicheia*.

but doesn't excuse Irene's part in it. Her classic epithet, 'pious', is dropped in the discussion of these events and Theophanes stresses Irene's initiative in everything that befell her son, including his blinding.<sup>97</sup>

Though abhorrent by modern standards, blinding was not uncommon or unmerciful as a political maneuver in the Byzantine court. Constantine had blinded one of his uncles and had the tongues of four others removed when they threatened his rule. Anyone who harbored imperial aspirations, even passively, was liable to be blinded if not killed. Though Irene's actions do reveal a certain intolerance, they weren't out of place or nearly as demonic as scholars like Milman and Gibbon seem to believe. Certainly Irene's actions do not qualify as such "not easily paralleled in the history of crimes."<sup>98</sup>

In the Early Byzantine Church, motherhood, like gender, appears to be a study of contradictions. There are clear, visible paragons of pious motherhood (the Virgin Mary, Helena), but at the same time hagiographies laud female saints for rejecting their maternal instincts in favor of service to God. Maternal attachment was seen as something intrinsically tied to a woman's being, the neglect of which was either done in the service of God or indicative of a fundamentally corrupt person. Examples of these extremes survive in both political attacks and hagiography. Procopius, for instance, alleges that Theodora had her son killed; an unlikely charge intended to further illustrate her deplorable character.<sup>99</sup> In the

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<sup>97</sup> Theophanes AM 6289

<sup>98</sup> Gibbon *Decline and Fall* v.6 p87

<sup>99</sup> Procopius. *The Secret History*. Trans. Anthony Kaldellis. Hackett Publishing Co., (2011). 17.21-23 Unlikely to be true given Theodora's open acceptance of her

Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas we see not only the assertion of masculine authority (through the rejection of Perpetua's father), we also witness the rejection of motherhood in favor of martyrdom. Religious narratives, while often depicting the forceful rejection of family as a whole, pay particular attention to the bond between a parent and their child. 4 Maccabees and Genesis 22 are two biblical examples of parents accepting God's call to sacrifice their children. In 4 Maccabees the rejection of motherhood signifies the choice of pious rationality rather than worldly passion. The willingness to sacrifice family, figuratively or literally, is proof of loyalty to God above all else. In rejecting motherhood female saints were rejecting their feminine ties to the physical world. In Perpetua's case she relegates the care of her baby to her father before abruptly ceasing to lactate without incident. It is possible to consider Irene's actions as a demonstration of loyalty to God and Empire, a violent rejection of the binds of motherhood.

While our view of the incident is largely informed by Theophanes, who imbues his depiction with all the dramatic signs of God's displeasure<sup>100</sup>, there also was a quite opposite reaction to the blinding as evidenced in Arabic sources. The evident acceptance of Irene's right to rule is rather surprising given the position on female leadership in the Arab-Islamic tradition. Furthermore, Nadia M. El-Cheikh concludes from her analysis of the sources that the blinding was seen as a political necessity given Constantine's shortcomings:

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illegitimate daughter and her constant endeavors on behalf of her family. Also, Procopius appears to be the only source to mention the son's existence.

<sup>100</sup> For example an eclipse lasting 17 days

Irene's act was not seen as one reflecting her own political ambitions. Rather it was the act of an able states-woman who placed the interest of the Empire above everything else. The Arab authors did not condemn the cruel act of blinding and in fact seemed to condone it in view of Constantine's tyrannical rule and more to the point, because of his aggressive policy against the Arab.<sup>101</sup>

While this sentiment was certainly not universal and emerges from a particular political viewpoint, it does challenge the notion that Irene's actions were universally abhorred.

Instead, it is possible to view the negotiation of gender present in imperial politics. Irene, while still dependent on marriage and motherhood for her initial access to imperial power, was able to exert her will in the most public of ways. Though not fated for a long tenure as sole ruler, Irene set an example for subsequent empresses in the continuing battle over icons. Her overthrow was due in large part to the Empire's economic troubles and the issues raised by a proposed alliance with Charlemagne. Theophanes, of course, greatly lamented the upheaval and viewed it as a disaster for the Byzantine state. Irene is a confusing character; she does complicate the ideals of imperial females. Still, the ideals of piety, philanthropy, humility, and female function were still the virtues that defined the female imperial persona. Irene still had to engage that imperial persona in order to access and express power. Ultimately, we have to bear in mind that allowing an empress individuality or the capacity for error does not negate their placement within a larger historical tradition. In engaging previous scholarship, the point isn't to say

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<sup>101</sup> El-Cheikh, Nadia M. "Describing the Other to Get at the Self: Byzantine Women in Arabic Sources (8th-11thCenturies)" *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1997), pp.239-250. p243

that Irene, or any of the other imperial women mentioned, weren't unique and in possession of individual strengths or character flaws that make them stand out in the historical record. Instead, the point is that these women took an active role in Byzantine history for reasons that extend beyond a single person's capabilities. They were part of a tradition, part of a larger historical pattern that is often confusing, with its apparent paradoxes. Irene lived an extraordinary life, but her role in history wasn't solely determined through chance or personality. She was given access to imperial power as an empress consort and then regent, and it was her utilization of that *basileia* that enabled her to later act as an empress in her own right. She, like empresses before and after her, fought for her view of orthodoxy, competed with political rivals, and negotiated her own version of the imperial persona.

### *Conclusion*

Gender in the Late Antique world was not as strictly binary as it is today. There was a spectrum that separated the most masculine of men from effeminate men and enabled women to be considered malformed, incomplete men. The gender hierarchy was well in place, but gender itself was, at least in theory, a more fluid construction. Galen and Aristotle both contend that women were lesser forms, naturally ranked beneath men. Heat was what ultimately determined sex and characteristics, men were hot and women were cold, the lack of heat accounting the vice and weakness inherent in women. Heat was critical in understanding this. Galen argued that female reproductive system simply consisted of male sex organs, which failed to emerge due to a lack of heat<sup>102</sup>. Effeminate men were thus perceived as lacking heat, while some women could likewise be perceived as warmer and thus more masculine. This theory existed and was generally accepted, but it is crucial to remember that the construction existed to biologically enforce a preconceived hierarchy. Men alone were capable of mastering themselves and those around them. Even with the theoretical possibility of gender fluidity, society remained rigidly androcentric.

This is the classical Roman background from which Christianity emerged. The hierarchy of being remained but took on a slightly different connotation. Full personhood was still something reserved for men; women were still attributed with

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<sup>102</sup> See Galen. *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*. Trans. Margret Tallmadge May. Cornell University Press, (1968). Cornell Publication on the History of Science. 14.6-7; Aristotle. *Generation of Animals*. Trans. A. L. Peck. Harvard University Press, (1969). Loeb Classical Library.



all the inherent weakness and vice. Yet the focus shifted from a hierarchy of heat to one of spiritual superiority. While, theoretically, women were equal to men in terms of soul, the language that floods the narratives of holy women is rife with references to the lesser souls of women, exceedingly susceptible to vice, and the exceptional, different, and often masculine souls of the sanctified heroines. Within the gendered hierarchy that existed in and out of the Christian Church, holy women posed a challenge. As a result, female saints were masculinized in relation to external groups, yet within the Christian communities they were feminized and associated with traditional gender roles. As women, they were fundamentally inferior regardless of the level of sanctity they had achieved.

Imperial women occupy a similar position. Their fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers defined their access to power. Pulcheria's family background and connections enabled her to exercise imperial authority. Theodora's power was derived from the reign of her husband while Irene came to power through a marriage and was further elevated via her son. Each empress discussed proved their political acumen and utilized existing traditions to secure their *basilica*. Their influence wasn't unusual in the grand scheme of things; rather they worked within a system and made a tangible difference. Imperial women had a hand in guiding nearly every doctrinal debate in Early Byzantium, and the example they set would be upheld well past the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Through evolving demonstrations of piety, generosity, and other imperial virtues, empresses were able to negotiate their place within an otherwise misogynistic structure.

Within the Christian imperial system, women were capable of achieving genuine power. Like emperors, their success was articulated through their adherence to a specific cache of virtues. Either by emulating their successful predecessors, or by emulating religious role models, they strengthened their attachment to power via the imperial persona. Empresses were defined by their imperial function, they were consistently given the opportunity to use existing construct to secure and articulate their own brand of imperial power. The three empresses examined existed within this larger tradition and provide key examples of how imperial women were able to negotiate their gender and draw on existing models to assure their *basiliea*. By understanding the context, which produced these powerful women, we may finally be able to do them justice.

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