THE IDEOLOGY OF THE FEMININE IN BYZANTINE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE:

THE ROLE OF JOHN SKYLITZES' *SYNOPSIS OF HISTORIES*

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Abstract

The medieval Eastern Roman Empire (commonly referred to as the Byzantine Empire) is the least well documented of all the early medieval Christian societies. Modern historians studying the Byzantine world are inordinately dependent on a small number of histories and chronicles that are themselves secondary products. As a further impediment to modern scholars, Byzantine authors made no secret of their view that history, in all its forms, was primarily a tool of persuasion.

Feminist historians have examined the effects of this tradition of didactic scholarship on the portrayals of women in the Byzantine histories and chronicles. They have proposed that Byzantine historians and chroniclers were engaged in the transmission of an ideology of the feminine and the feminine exercise of power that may or may not have reflected historical reality. They further propose that this ideology is a cultural construct can be discerned through a close examination of the narrative sources for Byzantine history and that it can be deconstructed because it is not natural. What has not been explored up to now is the extent to which the portrayal of women according to an accepted ideology by Byzantine historians obscures what actually occurred and how this may influence modern interpretations of Byzantine history.

This thesis explores the transmission of the Byzantine ideology of feminine behaviour with particular reference to John Skylitzes' *Synopsis of Histories*. Skylitzes' portrayals of imperial women can be seen to conform to an

ideology of imperial women that has been articulated in the documentary and other sources for Byzantine history (and that has been perceived and described by other modern scholars). This ideology consists of a system of images, ideas and beliefs that articulates an ideal that has an historical effect. It can also be shown that in conforming to an acceptable ideology of feminine behaviour, Skylitzes may have perpetuated the ideology rather than a more accurate representation of reality.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction and Rationale

Who once sliced men more sharply than the sword
Is victim of a woman...[1]

Epitaph for
Emperor Nicephoros II Phocas

According to John Skylitzes, the author of the 11th century historical narrative *A Synopsis of Histories*, these lines began the inscription found on the sarcophagus of the great Byzantine general and later emperor Nicephoros II Phocas (963-969). This emperor was cruelly dispatched as he lay sleeping in his chamber at the heart of the imperial palace complex in Constantinople on the night of 11 December 969. Nicephoros's murder was the culmination of a plot probably masterminded by the general John Tzimisces, scion of an aristocratic Anatolian family and one of the most outstanding military leaders of his day. Once the companion in arms of Nicephoros, Tzimisces had recently fallen out with his relative and mentor, had been relieved of his commands and exiled to his estates where, as Skylitzes put it, he was "kicking his heels."[2] Although the mortal blow was struck by Tzimisces or one of his co-conspirators, it was logical that they could not have gained entry to the tightly guarded palace compound without help from someone inside. Suspicion quickly fell on Nicephoros's

[1] John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Histories (811-1057 A.D.)* English trans. John Wortley (Winnipeg: Centre for Hellenic Civilization, 2000), p. 153. Prof. Wortley has also generously made available to the author of this paper the annotated version of the English translation of *A Synopsis of Histories*, with annotations by Jean-Claude Cheynet, in advance of general publication.
[2] John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Histories*, trans. John Wortley (hereafter given as SH), p. 151.

beautiful widow, the Empress Theophano. Skylitzes calls her an "adulteress"[3] and she was suspected of having begun an affair with the handsome Tzimisces. According to Skylitzes' account, Theophano summoned her lover to Constantinople, providing him with a safe conduct that she had arranged. Once Tzimisces was in the capital, Skylitzes asserts that it was Theophano herself who smuggled Tzimisces into the palace's private quarters.[4] Thus the reputation of one of the great 'bad women' of history is confirmed. With his portrayal of Theophano Skylitzes had perpetuated a powerful archetype, a *topos*, of feminine betrayal. The question is, however, how much of this description was based in reality and how much was the product of a deliberately constructed ideology of the feminine in Byzantine historical narrative.

Empresses of the Eastern Roman Empire, such as Theophano, are highly visible in the narrative sources.[5] Skylitzes mentions several in his *A Synopsis of Histories*. They feature as actors in significant events and frequently they assume control of the imperial administration. On first impression, it would appear from this that Byzantine historians such as Skylitzes were particularly inclusive and enlightened in their portrayal of women when compared to their contemporaries

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[3] SH, p. 151.

[4] SH, p. 151. "...the Empress sent and brought him into the port that had been hollowed out below the palace, from which she had him and all those who were with him brought up in a basket."

[5] In the context of this paper a narrative source is the type of written narration of connected events commonly referred to as a history or a historical chronicle. The term 'narrative source' has been deliberately chosen over the term 'literary source' as the term literary source can also be applied to poems, plays and novels, and often implies a fictionalised treatment of the subject matter. Even though much can be learned about ideologies from an examination of these types of sources, they are not the subject of this paper. Narrative source has also been chosen over the term documentary source as documentary sources include all types of documents, not just written historical narratives.

in Western European or Muslim societies.[6] Scratching below the surface, however, reveals a more complex portrait. Those studying Byzantine history soon come to understand that Byzantine historical narratives are the product of a tradition of didactic scholarship dating back hundreds of years. While invariably stating their respect for truth and accuracy, Byzantine historians make no secret of their view of history, in all forms, primarily as a tool of persuasion.[7] Thus the tale of Nicephoros and Theophano was more than the relation of facts. It is an object lesson in human nature and the inclusion of a woman serves a didactic purpose. Skylitzes' portrayal of Theophano was fulfilling a function as a bad example, as the opposite of the ideal.

The objectivity (or lack thereof) of Byzantine historical narrative has been the focus of much debate.[8] In many cases *topoi* and dubious incidents have found their way into modern histories without question. As Mark Whittow asserts the "obvious unreliability" of the sources is still ignored by many modern Byzantinists.[9] This lack of objectivity is especially apparent in the treatment of women by the narrative sources of Byzantine history. Several modern Byzantine

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[6] Judith Herrin, "In Search of Byzantine Women: Three Avenues of Approach," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt (Kent: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 185. Ms. Herrin observes that women featured more prominently in the Byzantine historical narrative than women in the historical narratives of the Muslim, Jewish and Western Christian traditions.

[7] See for example Roger Scott, "The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography" in *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*, eds. Margaret Mullett and Roger Scott (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1981), p. 65; and Mark Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 9.

[8] See for example Mark Whittow's essay on "Sources for Early Medieval Byzantium" in *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025*, especially p. 9-10; Herbert Hunger, "On the Imitation of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature" in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23 & 24 (1969-1970), especially p. 27; Cyril Mango, "Discontinuity with the Classical Past" in *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*, especially p. 50; and Romilly Jenkins, "The Classical Background of the *Scriptores Post Theophanem*" in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954).

[9] Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025*, p. 9.

scholars, including Angeliki Laiou and Lynda Garland, have noted a divergence between the actual conditions of women's lives, as far as they can be discerned, and the ideologies that are presented in the historical narratives.[10] Others, such as Averil Cameron and Catia S. Galatariotou have noted the strongly misogynistic tone of the Byzantine written tradition.[11] This written tradition includes the main narrative sources of Byzantine history which, as far as can be determined, were almost exclusively created by males.

Laiou and Garland along with other modern scholars have suggested that Byzantine historians were engaged in the creation and/or transmission of an ideology of the feminine and the feminine exercise of power that may or may not have reflected historical reality. That said, it is important to define what is meant by ideology, at least in the context of this study. Ideology is notoriously difficult to define unambiguously and agreement among scholars as to a definition has been perennially elusive. Georges Duby, who has studied the role of ideologies in social history, has adopted Althusser's definition of ideology,

> ...a system (possessing its own logic and structure) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts) existing and playing a historical role within a given society.[12]

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[10] See for example A. E. Laiou, "Observations on the Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women" in Byzantinische Forschungen IX (1985); and Lynda Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women: A Further Note on Conventions of Behaviour and Social Reality as Reflected in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Historical Sources." *Byzantion* 58 (1988).

[11] See for example Averil Cameron, "Sacred and Profane Love: Thoughts on Byzantine Gender" in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (London; New York: Routledge, 1997); and Catia S. Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches: Aspects of Byzantine Conceptions of Gender" in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 9 (1984/85).

[12] L. Althusser, *For Marx* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 66 as cited by Georges Duby, "Ideologies in Social History" in *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology*, eds. Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 152.

In other words, ideology is a system of images, ideas and beliefs that articulates an ideal that has an historical effect. Barbara Hill, who has examined the operation of ideology as it relates to the exercise of power by women of the 12th century Comnenian dynasty, has defined ideology very simply as "the system of beliefs and practises by which people make sense of the world in which they live."[13] But it is more than that. As she herself notes, ideology is prescriptive rather than descriptive. It describes what people should be rather than what they are. Ideology is created by humans. Ideologies are, however, perceived by the society in which they operate as a reflection of the natural state of things or rather what would be the state of things if nature were allowed to assert itself. Hill asserts that "gender is constructed through the workings of ideology"[14] and that the ideal woman is "a construction of the dominant ideology."[15]

Some modern Byzantinists agree that it is possible to discern this ideology through a close examination of the narrative sources for Byzantine history and other Byzantine documents. Hill's work in this field has helped to give this line of inquiry a theoretical basis. There is, she writes, "a cultural construct of expectations built up around women in society, which can be deconstructed because it is not natural."[16] Hill further points out that gender systems are cultural constructs maintained through the control of knowledge[17] such as the historical

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[13] Barbara Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium, 1025-1204: Power, Patronage and Ideology* (Harlow: Longman, 1999), p. 72.
[14] Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*, p. 74.
[15] Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*, p. 77.
[16] Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*, p.28. This is in line with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's assertion that gender identities and roles assigned by different societies are historical facts that require historical analysis. (E. Fox-Genovese, "Placing Women's History in History," p. 14, as cited by Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*, p. 20).
[17] Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*, p. 12.

narratives that make up a large part of the literary sources for Byzantine history that have come down to us. Obviously, this has significant implications for the reliability of the narrative sources.

As Georges Duby notes, "men's behaviour is shaped not so much by their real condition as by their usually untruthful image of that condition, by behavioural models which are cultural productions bearing only a partial resemblance to material realities."[18] Duby asserts that the transmission of value systems and ideologies has its own history and that this can be discovered. He has proposed a basis for the reconstruction of ideological systems. He explains, "...in cultures which have a history, all ideological systems are based on a vision of that history: a projected future in which society will be closer to perfection is built on the memory, objective or mythical, of the [ideal] past."[19] The difficulties associated with this type of inquiry have to be acknowledged. Duby concedes that access to ideological systems is not easy. He writes,

> Unearthing ideological systems from the dust of the past involves identifying, linking, and interpreting a mass of unrelated signs...The more accessible and instructive documentary sources obviously include...all those texts where society gives direct expression to the virtues it reveres and the vices it deplores, texts whose function it is to defend and propagate the ethical system upon which its own sense of righteousness is based.[20]

Skylitzes' *Synopsis of Histories* was written in the Byzantine tradition of the popular chronicle. These chronicles were written with the purpose of relating for the reader the divinely ordained destiny of the Byzantine Empire as revealed in

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[18] Duby, "Ideologies in Social History," p. 151.
[19] Duby, "Ideologies in Social History," p. 154.
[20] Duby, "Ideologies in Social History," p. 156-157.

the empire's history.[21] Such documents are consistent with Duby's description of "texts whose function it is to defend and propagate the ethical system upon which its own sense of righteousness is based" and are clearly appropriate for the type of analysis he proposes.

Deconstruction of the narrative sources for Byzantine history as a technique of historical analysis is not a new direction in Byzantine studies. In their groundbreaking study *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies*, Alexander Kazhdan and Giles Constable encouraged a re-examination of these sources for what they can reveal beyond direct and explicit evidence. For example, modern views of Michael III were reassessed after "[Gregoire] revealed the prejudices of those who surrounded Constantine VII by examining closely their intentions and statements"[22] as they appeared in the histories of Michael's reign. Kazhdan and Constable have observed that the indirect information in Byzantine texts, where levels of imaginative content exist below direct content, may be challenging to uncover.[23] A. Laiou and others have closely examined surviving documents in an attempt to discern how the recorders of Byzantine society perceived women. This reveals much about that society's ideologies of feminine behaviour and gender relations, the reality of women's lives, and the consequences for the synthesis of modern Byzantine

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[21] See F. Dölger, "Byzantine Literature" in *The Byzantine Empire*. Vol. IV of *The Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. J. M. Hussey (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), p. 227.

[22] A. Kazhdan and G. Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), p. 165.

[23] See also A. Kazhdan in collaboration with Simon Franklin, "The social views of Michael Attaliates" in *Studies on Byzantine Literature from the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Kazhdan and Franklin undertook a systematic analysis of the text of Michael Attaliates' *Historia* in order to discern the author's views regarding social policy and political outlook. The result is a subtle and coherent re-assessment of Attaliates' work.

history.[24] Ideologies of the feminine in Byzantine historical narrative have influenced our perceptions of causation and agency and the construction of significance in historical explanation. The role of ideologies of the feminine in our conceptions of Byzantine history must, therefore, be examined. Steven Runciman touched on this when he said, "...the empress was always inevitably a figure of supreme importance; so we find trailing through Byzantine history an endless procession of magnificent, powerful princesses, giving it in uncomprehending manly western eyes a strange appearance that they took for vice."[25] As Joan Scott proposes, the use of gender as a tool for research and historical analysis may open up further possibilities for historians.[26] This means not just studying the construction of gender but its meanings as, for example, in the signification of power.

This thesis will explore the Byzantine ideology/ideologies of feminine behaviour that governed how the Byzantines thought about imperial women and the activities of imperial women in the public sphere with particular reference to John Skylitzes' *A Synopsis of Histories*. The extent to which Skylitzes' portrayal conforms to an ideology of imperial women as articulated in the documentary and other sources for Byzantine history (as perceived and described by modern scholars) will be assessed. The pitfalls of this type of thesis are not

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[24] See for example A. E. Laiou, "Imperial Marriages and Their Critics in the Eleventh Century: The Case of Skylitzes." in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers,* 46 (1992); L. Garland, "Morality Versus Politics at the Byzantine Court: The Charges Against Marie of Antioch and Euphrosyne." *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 21 (1997); and Averil Cameron, "Sacred and Profane Love: Thoughts on Byzantine Gender."

[25] Steven Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and his Reign: A Study of Tenth-Century Byzantium* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), p. 18.

[26] Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, p. 2-4; as cited by Liz James, "Introduction: Women's Studies, Gender Studies, Byzantine Studies" in *Women, Men and Eunuchs*, p. xvii.

unrecognised. Investigating a narrative source such as Skylitzes for what is not explicitly stated but implicitly implied leaves the investigator open to charges of speculation and unfounded conjecture. It has long been accepted, however, by even the most ardent traditionalists that Byzantine narrative historians exhibit obvious propagandist biases and outright literary fabrications in their descriptions of personalities and events.[27] That portrayals of feminine behaviour and gender relations could serve a didactic purpose is a logical progression. To question the Byzantine narrative sources in new ways opens up new pathways of inquiry and suggests alternative interpretations that may not have been considered previously.

Most of the studies of ideologies of the feminine and the feminine expression of power in Byzantine history have concentrated on the eleventh century or later largely due to the quality and greater number of source materials available for this period.[28] To the extent that *A Synopsis of Histories* was written during the eleventh century, this is also true for this essay. However, this investigation will concentrate on exploring the ideology of feminine Skylitzes associated with the Macedonian Dynasty which lasted from the ninth to eleventh centuries. The Macedonian era coincided with a period of Byzantine history sometimes described by modern historians as a 'Golden Age'. The growth of the

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[27] See, for example, Mango, "Discontinuity with the Classical Past in Byzantium," especially p. 50; Scott, "The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography," especially p. 64-65; and Jenkins, "The Classical Background of the *Scriptores Post Theophanem*," especially p. 18.

[28] For example Laiou's "Observations on the Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women" is limited to the period after the 11th century. Garland's study "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women..." concentrates on 11th and 12th century sources. Hill's *Imperial Women in Byzantium, 1025-1204* deals primarily with women of the Comnenus and Doucas dynastic families. Source materials include narrative histories as well as other documentary sources such as wills and laws and non-documentary sources such as mosaics and coins.

Orthodox Church through the conversion of the Bulgarians and the Rus beginning in the ninth century, the prodigious literary efforts of the tenth century under Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, and unprecedented military expansion under Basil II (976-1025) are only a few of its achievements. Included among the Macedonians were some of the most active and powerful of the Byzantine empresses, including the Empress Theophano already mentioned. However, theirs was also a time of transition and a period which the later eleventh century Byzantine historians likely viewed with ambivalence; an era that ended with what some saw as criminal incompetence in the imperial administration and a significant military defeat followed by a period of administrative instability with six emperors in less than thirty years. It is hoped that a close analysis of how a late eleventh century historian[29] portrayed the Macedonian era, an era of prominent empresses, will encourage the examination of modern assumptions concerning the Macedonian period.

This inquiry will begin with an examination of the source materials for the period which will include a detailed discussion of John Skylitzes' *A Synopsis of Histories* and the influences that may have operated on the author. Other available documentary sources that offer a gateway into the ninth to eleventh centuries will also be briefly surveyed and the main modern secondary works relevant to this thesis will be described. The Byzantine ideology of appropriate feminine behaviour as perceived from the documentary and other sources and described by modern scholars will be discussed as will the ideology of the

[29] John Skylitzes spent his working life under the successors to the Macedonians (the Ducas and Comnenus administrations) and wrote during the reign of the important emperor Alexius I Comnenus.

Byzantine imperial administration pertaining to empresses. The ideology associated with eunuchs has also been the subject of recent investigations and they will be considered in the context of their service to and relationships with empresses.

Skylitzes' portrayal of the Macedonian empresses will be analysed in light of the modern scholarship on the construction of ideological representations pertaining to Byzantine imperial women. The conventions of feminine behaviour employed by Skylitzes will be described and their conformity with the Byzantine ideology of feminine behaviour will be assessed. Skylitzes' portrayal of the Macedonian empresses will be compared as far as possible to that of other major sources for the Macedonian period. Possible implications for modern interpretations of Byzantine history will be explored briefly using specific examples.

Chapter 2 - Sources for the Ninth to Eleventh Centuries

Primary Sources

The main primary source for this study is John Skylitzes' *A Synopsis of Histories*. It is believed that the *Synopsis* was written in the late 11th century during the early years of the reign of Alexius I Comnenus (1081-1118).[30] Skylitzes himself is thought to have been a jurist, and thus an educated man familiar with both civil law and canonical regulations.[31] He also held the prestigious military titles of *Kouropalatês* and *Droungarios* of the Watch and he expends a great deal of ink on military tactics and strategy. This does not necessarily mean, however, that he held a military command.[32] It does mean that he was a member of the privileged classes of Constantinople. Skylitzes would have received his titles directly from the emperor and would have participated in the imperial ceremonial mandated to take place on feast days and religious holidays. As such he would likely have had access to credible information about imperial activities. It should be remembered, however, that this means his *Synopsis* is a history of the Byzantine Empire from the perspective of the governing elites.

Skylitzes may have had personal knowledge of the reigns of the last Macedonian Empresses, Zôê and Theodora. If he did not, he would have known people who did. He certainly would have had first hand experience of the period

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[30] John Wortley, "Translator's Introduction," SH, p. v.
[31] A. E. Laiou, "Imperial Marriages and Their Critics in the Eleventh Century: The Case of Skylitzes", p. 166.
[32] Wortley, "Translator's Introduction", p. v.

of accelerating decline that followed Theodora's death in 1057 during which revenues fell off drastically and territorial losses mounted. Skylitzes probably would have served most of his career during the chaotic period that preceded the proclamation of the talented general Alexius I Comnenus as emperor; a period during which imperial power oscillated between civil and military candidates ultimately ending with a severe reduction of civil influence.

The *Synopsis* is a 'primary source' in that it dates from the period under study. However, it is also an 'historical narrative' or secondary source in that information from other sources has been gathered together by an author or compiler. Also, while recognised as a narrative source, the *Synopsis* is considered a 'Chronicle' rather than a 'History'. Generally the Byzantines wrote two types of history. One, a presentation of events in a high Attic style conforming to and imitating the style and conventions of the classical historians is what is generally called 'history' by the Byzantines themselves. The other was the popular chronicle presenting world history in the context of the Christian Roman Empire.[33] The chronicles had the purpose of persuading the reader of the divinely ordained destiny of the Byzantine Empire and the Orthodox faith which, as F. Dölger explains, "[was] a fact clearly demonstrated by the course of world history" [34] as related by the chronicler. Skylitzes, as will be explained, draws heavily on the work of other historians in the creation of the *Synopsis*, even copying excerpts from older chronicles. This conforms to another characteristic of chronicles, described by F. Dölger as stitched together from excerpts from other

[33] F. Dölger, "Byzantine Literature," p. 227.
[34] F. Dölger, "Byzantine Literature", p. 234.

works.[35] Chronicles have generally been considered an inferior type of history both by the Byzantines and by modern historians. As Arnold Toynbee put it, "Byzantine Christian chronicles are a valuable source of historical information only for periods for which some better kind of source is not forthcoming."[36] For Toynbee, this is the period between 602 and 959 when no 'History' in the secular pre-Christian Hellenic form was produced.

This characterisation of the chronicles is, however, somewhat arbitrary. The distinction between the two forms becomes increasingly blurred by this point in the development of Byzantine historical narrative (ca.1080) as some characteristics of 'History' have by this time crept into the 'Chronicle' genre. These include the penchants, after Greek historians in the 'classical' tradition, to start new works where the work of a predecessor ended, of employing the organisational framework of reigns rather than simply listing events chronologically,[37] the occasional use of classical allusions and the imitation of passages from classical works. Also, chronicles had begun to employ a more sophisticated literary style influenced by classical humanism. Jenkins points to *Theophanes Continuatus*, a 10th century work also commonly categorised as a chronicle and on which Skylitzes depended heavily, as indicative of a revival of humanism.[38] As evidence he points to the trend towards the exploration of individual character and causation rather than the annalistic cataloguing of

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Arnold Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 606.

[37] See Astrid Möller and Nino Luraghi, "Time in the Writing of History: Perceptions and Structures" in *Storia della Storiografia*, 28 (1995), p.4-5; see also Scott. "The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography."

[38] Romilly J. H. Jenkins, "The Classical Background of the *Scriptores Post Theophanem*" in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), p. 13-14.

events that mark other 10th century works. Similar attempts to explore personality and motivation can also be discerned in Skylitzes' work.

Another way in which chronicles such as the *Synopsis* had become more like the classically inspired histories was in their descriptions of the operation of the principle of retribution. The principle of retribution, whereby the arrogant were made humble and the impious were chastised, was a recurrent device in Greek and later Byzantine histories. By the 10th century, the operation of retribution was also frequently seen in chronicles such as the *Synopsis*. Retribution could be exacted by men, by the Gods/God, or by the natural order of things. As Trompf notes, "for those upholding it, the moral order of affairs was maintained by principles of retributive justice...Thus certain interpreters of history were bent on demonstrating how the good were rewarded and the evil punished in the events of the past."[39] Skylitzes furnishes many examples of the operation of this principle in action and, as A. Laiou points out, these descriptions of the action of divine retribution in Skylitzes even function as a form of political criticism or *Kaiserkritik*.[40] In such cases "...private morals have a public expression and harm the state and the common good..."[41] Also, when imperial actions provoke divine

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[39] G. W. Trompf, *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought: From Antiquity to the Reformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 93. It is interesting to note that in the Greco-Roman historical tradition when the common good is threatened there is usually a woman involved. See also See Judith P. Hallett, "Feminist Theory, Historical Periods, Literary Canons, and the Study of Greco-Roman Antiquity" in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, eds. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin (New York: Routledge, 1993); see also Phyllis Culham, "Did Roman Women Have an Empire?" in *Inventing Ancient Culture: Historicism, Periodisation, and the Ancient World*, eds. Mark Golden and Peter Toohey (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

[40] As, for example, when Michael IV is criticised by Skylitzes for using public funds to expiate his private sin of alleged complicity in the murder of the Emperor Romanus III Agyrus, Empress Zôê's first husband (SH, p. 212-213).

[41] Laiou, "Imperial Marriages...", p. 176.

retribution "...the emperor or empress becomes subversive of order."[42] So, in the case of the *Synopsis*, such descriptions of the principle of retribution in action also function as a not so subtle commentary on the behaviour of the imperial personage whose actions provoked divine disapproval.

The Byzantines themselves were not unaware of the different literary forms available to them when writing history and commented on this both in their assessments of other writers and in explaining their own work. Choices about which model to follow and about the form and structure of the product were not accidental and depended on the purpose for which the work was being written.[43] Skylitzes himself states that his *Synopsis* is "an easily digestible" summary, a handbook for quick consultations or an introduction rather than a comprehensive document.[44] As such the form that he has chosen suits the task. This is in contrast to the view of some modern scholars that the Byzantines were not so much historians as copyists - copying the classics, transcribing their immediate predecessors and observing contemporary events[45] or, as F. Dolger describes it, stitching together excerpts with "no claim to any literary quality."[46] Though problems of accessibility may have restricted the sources available to the Byzantines they were not unthinking in their choice of text. Even copyists were making choices about significance and causation in what they chose to copy.

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Robert Browning. "The Language of Byzantine Literature", *The Past in Medieval and Modern Greek Culture*, ed. Speros Vryonis, Jr. (Byzantina kai Metabyzantina, 1) Malibu: Udena Publications, 1978 rpt. *History, Language and Literacy in the Byzantine World* (Northampton: Variorum Reprints, 1989), p. 103.
[44] SH, p. 2.
[45] See for example Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. "Clio and Chronos: An Essay on the Making and Breaking of History Book Time" in *History and Theory, Beiheft 6.* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1966) p. 51.
[46] Dölger, "Byzantine Literature", p. 234.

Roger Scott describes this situation succinctly in his discussion of the choices made by the 9th century chronicler Theophanes:

> ...although Theophanes appears to be an unoriginal compiler who simply links together large passages taken verbatim from earlier sources, his chronicle still has a deliberate theme. It is still a kind of propaganda, presenting a clear view of God's purpose which, in Byzantine fashion, is seen in the relationship between the successive emperors' piety and the fortunes of the empire.[47]

For Byzantine historians such as Skylitzes, for whom Theophanes was a model, the problem of reconciling this world view with the historian's duty of objectivity was not an issue. In fact, Skylitzes considered himself to be a more objective historian than most of those that he was familiar with and in fact he criticised several for their overt and obvious biases and lack of skill while describing the care he had taken not to fall into the same traps.[48]

Skylitzes, as he says himself, compiled his material using a number of sources.[49] This is significant. In attempting to discern the ideologies operating in *A Synopsis of Histories*, it is important to be aware of all the influences that operated on the author. Skylitzes has related not only his personal experiences and the results of his research but also relied on the work of authors whose opinions and interpretations have their genesis in other eras and under other reigns. Skylitzes was himself copied extensively by the chronicler George Cedrenus (active ca.1130) for the period after 811 and it is in this form that

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[47] Scott, "The Classical Tradition in Byzantine Historiography", p. 69.
[48] SH, p. 1. "These all set themselves their own goals: maybe to glorify an emperor, to censure a patriarch, or to sing the praises of a friend. Each attains his own ends under the guise of writing history and falls far short...For in comprising their prolix accounts...as though they were writing history, one writes a favourable account, another a critical one while a third writes whatever he please and a fourth sets down what he is ordered to write."
[49] SH, p.1.

Skylitzes was usually known to modern scholars until relatively recently when new editions of the Greek manuscript of Skylitzes made him more accessible. Skylitzes was also extensively copied by the chronicler Zonaras, whose work ended with 1118. It is important to keep this in mind as Skylitzes likely had a wider influence than the annotations of modern scholars would at first suggest.[50]

Skylitzes begins his narrative with the reign of Michael I Rangabê (811-813) and, in most editions, terminates in 1057 (a year after the death of the last remnant of the Macedonian house, the Empress Theodora). In some surviving versions a continuation, which is occasionally attributed to the same author but which is generally considered to be of inferior quality, carries the narrative to 1079. Modern scholars have determined that Skylitzes draws heavily on the history known as *Theophanes Continuatus* for the period from 811 up to 944.[51] *Theophanes Continuatus* was a history in six books written during the reign and possibly under the direct supervision of the Macedonian Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913-959). Constantine VII, excluded from participation in the imperial administration by his guardian Romanus I until well into middle age, filled his time with scholarly pursuits and exploration of the imperial archives. Modern scholars have speculated, not without foundation, that the Porphyrogenitus was motivated by a concern to rehabilitate the reputation of his father and grand-father. His grandfather, the first Macedonian emperor Basil I, was a usurper who murdered both his predecessor and a high government minister to reach the

[50] For example Romilly Jenkins cites Cedrenus extensively for his chapters on Constantine VII, Romanos II, Nicephoros II, John Tzimiskes, and Basil II while referencing Skylitzes not at all.
[51] See for example Mark Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 9.

throne. His father, Leo VI, married four times in contravention of church and civil law and provoked a dangerous conflict between his detractors and supporters in the Church.

Cyril Mango refers to *Theophanes Continuatus* as "the official myth of the Macedonian dynasty"[52] but this statement obscures that fact that *Theophanes Continuatus* was the work of several creators with different agendas. Books I to IV, by an anonymous author, are a straightforward chronicle that begins where the history of Theophanes the Confessor ends and cover the years from 813 to 867. Book IV deals with the reign of Michael III and its account is biased in favour of the Macedonian House in that it paints Michael in a very bad light. Book IV appears to draw on a common source with Book IV of the history of Joseph Genesius, also written during the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus and described by George Ostrogorsky as "the official account of the Macedonian dynasty."[53] Book V, also known as the *Vita Basilii*, covers the years from 867 to 886 (the reign of Basil I) and is believed to have been written by or at the direction of Constantine VII himself. Book V takes the form of a laudatory biography or *panegyric* of his grand-father, Basil I. Book VI consists of two parts. The first, covering the years between 886 and 948 and the reigns of Leo VI, Alexander, Romanus I Lecapenus (the minority of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus) and Constantine VII as sole emperor to 948, is said by

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[52] Cyril Mango, "Eudocia Ingerina, the Normans and the Macedonian Dynasty" originally published in *Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta XIV/XV*, 1973 and reproduced in *Byzantium and Its Image: History and Culture of the Byzantine Empire and Its Heritage* (Variorum Reprints, London 1984), p. 19.

[53] George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 2nd ed., trans. by J. Hussey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), p. 210.

Ostrogorsky to be "...of little value for it slavishly reproduces the chronicle of Symeon Logothetes."[54]

Symeon the Logothete, also writing during the 10th century, covers the period to 948 (963 in some versions).[55] He is considered by modern historians to be critical of the Macedonian rulers and to have given a sympathetic treatment to the usurper Romanos I Lecapenos and his family.[56] Writing during the reigns of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos and his son Romanos II, the Logothete is thought to provide a corrective to the self-serving propaganda that characterised other works produced under the patronage of Constantine VII. It is interesting that the 'official myth-maker' of the Macedonian dynasty would use a source ostensibly so critical of the Macedonian administration. For the reigns of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus and his son Romanus II, the period between 944 and 963, Skylitzes is thought to have drawn on an anti-Macedonian tract dating from the period[57] rather than *Theophanes Continuatus* (which continues to 961 and the reign of Romanus II).

For the period from 959 to 989 (covering the reigns of Romanus II, Nicephoros II Phocas, John I Tzimiskes and part of Basil II) Skylitzes

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[54] Ibid. It is interesting to note that Skylitzes is thought not to have used the second part of Book VI of *Theophanes Continuatus*, possibly written by Theodore Daphnopates, a contemporary of Constantine VII and his son Romanus II. In his *Prooemium*, Skylitzes condemns Daphnopates for displaying an obvious bias and furthering his own aim "under the guise of writing history and [falling] far short..." (SH, p. 1).

[55] The Logothete's *Chronicle* is usually known from manuscripts which include the Chronicle as part of a later compilation or as a continuation of George the Monk...these include George Monachus' *Vitae imperatorum recentiorum* in *Theophanes Continuatus* and Leo Grammaticus' *Chronographia* (Whittow, *The Making of Bzyantium*, p. 391, note 12) Pseudo-Symeon *magistros* is also a 10th century compilation based on the Logothete but with "chaotic interpolations" from a variety of sources including *Theophanes Continuatus* (Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, p. 8).

[56] Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 210; also Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, p. 7.

[57] Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025*, p. 9.

incorporated the *History* of Leo the Deacon (active ca.992) or perhaps a common source also used by Leo. Leo wrote a history in ten books describing the military achievements of the generals Nicephoros II Phocas and John I Tzimiskes (who assumed power during the minority of Basil II) and is considered by modern scholars to be sympathetic to them.[58]

For the period after 989, Skylitzes relied on sources that have not survived. Thus, the *Synopsis* is a main primary source for the 11th century along with Michael Psellus' *Chronographia*. The *Chronographia*, written between 1059 and 1078, continued Leo the Deacon from 976 to 1077. Psellos is a major source for the reigns of the Empresses Zôê and Theodora, whom Psellos knew personally at the end of their careers. Ostrogorsky describes the *Chronographia* as, "the outstanding memoirs of the middle ages, unparalleled in its intellectual vigour, its lively descriptions, its discriminating psychological insight and its clear-cut and brilliant characterisation."[59] However, as Ostrogorsky also notes, Psellus's account is widely agreed to be highly subjective containing obvious omissions and distortions stemming from his outlook as a member of the bureaucratic elite of the imperial capital. He makes no secret of his support for the Doukas dynasty. Psellus' *Chronographia* is, unlike Skylitzes' *Synopsis*, considered to be a 'History' in the classical mould. This does not, however, assure the reader of a more objective approach.

Other major historians of the 11th century include Michael Attaliatês, a contemporary of Skylitzes' who wrote during the reign of Nikephoros Botaneiates

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[58] Ibid.
[59] Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 316.

(1078-1081) about the period between 1034 and 1079. Attaliatês was a high court official and eyewitness to the events of the period who has been described as a supporter of the military aristocracy which rose to prominence under Romanos Diogenes in the later eleventh century.[60] Only excerpts of his work have been translated into modern languages.

In addition to the *Synopsis* and the other historical narratives already mentioned there are a number of other important documentary sources that provide clues to a Byzantine ideology of feminine behaviour in the ninth to eleventh centuries and they have been mined extensively by modern scholars working in this area. For the purposes of this study, these sources are most useful in providing an alternative account to that of Skylitzes and for offering more information where Skylitzes' account is sketchy or silent. Important for insight into the reign of Leo VI and the controversy surrounding his multiple marriages is the biographical narrative known as the *Vita Euthymii*[61] describing the career of the Patriarch Euthymius. Ostogorsky considers the *Vita Euthymii* "...one of the most informative historical sources for this period."[62] The collected letters of Nicholas I, Patriarch of Constantinople[63] and the surviving letters of Arethas, later Archbishop of Caesarea, on the matter of Leo's marriages (ca.907)[64] also bear witness to the controversy that Leo's actions provoked.

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[60] Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 317.
[61] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, text, trans., introduction and commentary by Patricia Karlin-Hayter (Bruxelles: Éditions de *Byzantion*, 1970).
[62] Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 214.
[63] Nicholas I Patriarch of Constantinople: *Letters*, Greek text and English trans. by R. J. H. Jenkins and L. G. Westerink (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1973).
[64] Romilly Jenkins and Basil Laourdas, "Eight Letters of Arethas on the Fourth Marriage of Leo the Wise" *Hellenika* 14 (1956), rpt. Romilly H. Jenkins, *Studies on Byzantine History of the 9th and 10th Centuries* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1970).

'Lives' including that of the Empress Theodora,[65] who was credited by Skylitzes with ending "the heresy of the enemies of the icons,"[66] and the other Empress Theophano, the saintly and rejected first wife of Leo VI, have also survived and they have been used extensively by modern historians.

Other important documentary sources include two 'manuals for government' produced under the direction of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. These and other valuable sources were compiled during a 10th century rediscovery of the Byzantine literary heritage that took place under the patronage of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. Constantine's influence on Skylitzes through *Theophanes Continuatus* has already been noted. For this study, these sources are most valuable as examples of the self-conscious creation of an ideology of imperial rule by the Macedonian dynasty. *De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*[67] is a handbook for the correct conduct of imperial ceremonial. This work, commonly known as *De cerimoniis*, is valuable for its description of ceremonies associated with the office of the empress and the female members of the imperial court. These ceremonies were an important component in the creation of an ideology of appropriate behaviour for empresses. *De administrando imperio [DAI]*[68] is believed to have been written for Romanus II by, or under the direction of, his father Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus using materials found in the imperial

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[65] See "Life of St. Theodora The Empress", introduction and translation by Martha P. Vinson in *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998).
[66] SH, p. 48-52.
[67] Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. *De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*, french trans. Albert Vogt, *Constantin VII Porphyrogénète : Le livre des cérémonies* (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres", 1935).
[68] Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. *De administrando imperio*, edited and English trans. Gy. Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins, rev. ed. (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1967).

archives. A lengthy brief on the foreign relations of the Byzantine Empire, *DAI* also contains valuable insights into Byzantine views on other aspects of the imperial administration, including marriage alliances.

As Judith Herrin[69] points out, other sources that have proved useful for uncovering ideologies operating in the lives of Byzantine women include legal texts (marriage contracts and wills as well as surviving collections of case law and the laws themselves)[70] and *typika* (rules) associated with the administration of religious institutions for women. Georges Duby and Barbara Hill both mention *encomia*, funeral orations and epitaphs as a particularly rich source for discovering the ideology of the period.[71] In this vein is Psellos' eulogy for his daughter Styliane in which, according to Michael Kyrakis, Psellos "constructed a representation of an idealized Byzantine maiden."[72] Psellos' eulogy for his mother, Theodotê, in which he gives us a representation of an ideal Byzantine wife and mother, also survives.

In spite of those documents mentioned, Mark Whittow has noted in his thorough essay on the sources for early and middle Byzantine history that of all the early medieval Christian societies the Byzantine Empire is the least well documented.[73] It stands to reason that as an imperial power with a professional

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[69] See, for example, Herrin, "In Search of Byzantine Women...."

[70] This includes the *Procheiron*, a handbook of legal precepts, and the *Epanagoge*, which includes many new sections on the imperial administration, both compiled during the reign of Basil I. Also important are the *Novels* of Leo VI, which included new laws on marriage. Also important are a collection of legal rulings by the Magister Eustathius Romaius known as the *Peira* and dating from after 1034.

[71] Duby, "Ideologies in Social History," p. 156-157; and Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*, p. 76-77.

[72] Michael J. Kyriakis, "Medieval European Society as seen in Two Eleventh Century Texts of Michael Psellos (Part III)" *Byzantine Studies* Vol. 4, Part 2 (1977), p. 158.

[73] Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025*, p.1-4.

and centralised bureaucracy, extensive administrative archives must have existed, yet only a tiny portion of that documentation has survived.[74] This has impeded the study of Byzantine society. Important recent advances in the study of European and Anglo-Saxon English societies have resulted from the analysis of but a few of the documentary records preserved in monastic and episcopal archives. It is especially true that this lack of source material has been an impediment for the study of the lives of Byzantine women. There are few alternative and independent accounts, in some cases none, against which to compare the main narrative sources such as *A Synopsis of Histories*. The dearth of other documents means that historians are inordinately dependent on histories and chronicles that have a number of deficiencies, not the least of which as Whittow notes, is that "...they are frequently distorted by a propagandist bias."[75]

Source documents for Byzantine history were originally written in Greek or, less frequently, Latin. Linguistic deficiencies have necessitated the use of English translations. If the sources cannot be consulted in the original Greek or Latin, we are forced to trust the skill – and honesty – of the translator for an accurate reproduction that is faithful to the spirit of the original work. The limitations of this must be acknowledged. As Georges Duby explains, in the search for data - the signs on which a description of ideological systems is based – all text is significant, "not only words, but turns of phrase, metaphors,

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[74] Ibid. That large numbers of documents once existed can be deduced from the evidence of surviving lead seals. Of 40,000 seals now housed in public and private collections, one quarter pre-date 1025. As lead seals were likely re-used many times, this represents but a tiny portion of the vast archives that have since vanished.

[75] Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025*, p. 7.

word associations. This is the unconscious expression of a particular group's perception of itself and others at a particular moment in history."[76]

Secondary Sources

The numerous references to women in the Byzantine narrative sources are undoubtedly the reason for the frequent appearance of Byzantine women, albeit almost exclusively of the imperial class, in modern historical works dealing with the Byzantine Empire. Modern secondary works beginning with Gibbon[77] were heavily dependent on the well-known narrative sources and have generally conformed to a similar pattern. There was a tendency for these early surveys to focus on significant military campaigns and foreign relations with occasional forays into palace intrigue (where imperial women have traditionally featured prominently). The picture may or may not be rounded out with supplementary chapters on imperial administration, intellectual endeavours and spiritual life. The assertions of the sources were not questioned too closely, if at all.

Imperial women feature prominently in the early twentieth century political surveys of J. B. Bury[78] and A. A. Vasiliev[79] While these works have since been superseded, other survey works dating from the middle of the twentieth century are still considered reliable and significant. Foremost among these is George Ostrogorsky's *History of the Byzantine State,* first published in 1940. Ostrogorsky is sympathetic in his treatment of imperial women in that he appears alert for

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[76] Duby, "Ideologies in Social History," p. 157.
[77] Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, first published in 1794.
[78] J. B. Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1912)
[79] A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, English trans. by Mrs. S. Ragozin (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1928).

examples of the feminine exercise of power, actual as well as perceived or symbolic. The parts played by eunuchs, for good or ill, are also acknowledged. Still, one has the impression that military achievements and the acquisition of territory are considered more admirable than diplomatic successes, where imperial women may feature more prominently. Romilly Jenkins,[80] first published in 1966, also acknowledges the important role played by the women in the various imperial administrations. He often portrays them as actors in their own right, perhaps even more so than Ostrogorsky. However, while Jenkins depicts women taking action, their actions are not especially effective or successful. Jenkins particularly draws attention to the use of the dynastic marriage as a diplomatic tool, especially by the Macedonian Emperor Basil II.

Other important survey works include Mark Whittow's *The Making of Byzantium: 600-1025,*[81] published in 1996, and Warren Treadgold's *A History of the Byzantine State and Society,*[82] which appeared one year later. Mark Whittow's study was groundbreaking in that it challenged some long held assumptions about the writing of Byzantine history. Most pertinent for this study is Whittow's willingness to challenge what he sees as the uncritical acceptance of the Byzantine narrative sources by some modern Byzantinists. As noted earlier, Whittow cautions against an easy acceptance of biased narrative accounts that, in the case of Byzantium, cannot be corroborated by other documentary

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[80] Jenkins, R.J.H. *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries AD 610-1071* (1966; rpt. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
[81] Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025.*
[82] Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

materials.[83] For example, Whittow questions the traditional narrative that portrays Empress Theophano as an archetype of feminine betrayal and suggests that she was "conveniently" blamed for the murder Nicephoros Phocas.[84] Mark Whittow's sceptical approach was not shared by Warren Treadgold. For example, Treadgold uncritically accepts the chronicler's version of Phocas' murder and reproduces it in detail.[85] Treadgold criticises Whittow for what he characterises as a careless rejection of the narrative sources "on the basis of arbitrary conjectures."[86] This disagreement between Whittow and Treadgold highlights a recent phenomenon in Byzantine history; an increased willingness on the part of some younger scholars to openly question the documentary sources. Thus we have Shaun Tougher's treatment of the debate over the parentage of Leo VI.[87] Another example is Lennart Rydén's insightful deconstruction of the narratives pertaining to bride-shows at the Byzantine court.[88] These differences of opinion highlight the problems that occur when the major sources for Byzantine history are themselves secondary sources.

Many early works which made imperial women their main subject matter took the form of historical biography. The best known of these was Charles

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[83] Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, p. 7.
[84] Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, p. 355.
[85] Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, p. 505.
[86] Warren Treadgold, rev. of *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium: 600-1025*, by Mark Whittow, *International History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (November, 1997), p. 889-891.
[87] Tougher vigorously disputes the statements made by the respected chronicler Symeon Logothetes that Leo was natural son of Michel III rather than Basil I, to whom his mother was married when he was born. See Shaun Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI (886-912): Politics and People* (Leiden; New York; Köln: Koninklÿke Brill, 1997).
[88] Rydén disagrees with Treadgold's contention that the bride-shows are based on actual historical incidents. Lennart Rydén, "The Bride-shows at the Byzantine Court – History or Fiction?" *Eranos* 83 (1985), p. 175-191.

Diehl's *Figures byzantines*,[89] first published in 1906. *Figures byzantines* is notable for its evocative portraits of imperial personages, among whom several Macedonian Empresses feature prominently. Diehl's work is most significant for bringing together all that was known from the sources about his imperial subjects.[90] It is, unfortunately, not foot-noted. Other examples of this type include Steven Runciman's *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and his Reign: A Study of Tenth-Century Byzantium*[91], first published in 1929, which includes a landmark study of the regency of the important Macedonian empress Zôê Carbonopsina. Runciman openly acknowledges the power exercised by a reigning empress. Kenneth Holum's *Theodosian Empresses*[92] describes the strong women who surrounded 5th century emperor Theodosius II and their influence on historical events. Holum's work is also notable for his exploration of the fourth century contributions to the creation of a Byzantine ideology of the ideal empress.[93]

The study of Byzantine history, as with other areas of historical inquiry, has been influenced by major late twentieth century developments in historical study – explorations of *mentalité*, semiotics and linguistic analysis as well as feminism. Several recent works have broken with the traditional narration of wars and political events to explore and describe Byzantine culture.[94] These new works have done much to illuminate the *mentalité* of Byzantine society and to

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[89] Charles Diehl, *Byzantine Portraits*, English trans. Harold Bell (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927).
[90] Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*, p. 3-4.
[91] Runciman,*The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and his Reign...*"
[92] Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empreses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).
[93] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, p. 21-30; 43-44.
[94] See especially A. Kazhdan, "In Search for the Heart of Byzantium: About Several Recent Books on Byzantine Civilisation" in *Byzantion* 51 (1981).

create, as Alexander Kazhdan explains: "a coherent, functioning model"[95] that incorporates all aspects of Byzantine life. However, the study of aspects of 'man' in society - material surroundings, economic life, literature and scholarly pursuits, government and administration, spirituality - has tended to concentrate on those topics from a male-centred perspective. Kazhdan's collaborative books *People and Power in Byzantium,*[96] published in 1982, and *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,*[97] published in 1985, are considered seminal works. However, the mention of women in *Change in Byzantine Culture* is limited to a discussion of the Byzantine family. *People and Power* includes little more. Mango's *Byzantium: the Empire of New Rome,*[98] published in 1980, is in a similar vein. Mango includes chapters on aspects of life, the Byzantine thought world and the material legacy. However, there is a similar neglect of women. For example, Mango includes an index entry for emperor and the concept of emperorship is discussed (for example, sub-headings include authority and succession, definition of the ideal emperor); however, in spite of the often demonstrated role of empresses in legitimising the succession, 'empresship' is not listed as a distinct topic in the index nor is it mentioned in the text. Women are discussed only as an impediment to an 'ideal life' of celibacy or as individuals mentioned in passing. These modern scholars provide a superior description of the Byzantine thought world but it is somewhat incomplete; half the Byzantine population is virtually ignored.

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[95] Kazhdan, "In Search for the Heart of Byzantium...", p. 320-321.
[96] A. Kazhdan and G. Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1982).
[97] A. Kazhdan and A. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).
[98] Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980).

Synchronous with this exploration of the Byzantine *mentalité* has been an explosion in feminist scholarship in Byzantine studies, with a move towards a greater analysis and the exploration of thematic treatments of women's lives in the belief that this was superior to traditional narrative treatments. Unfortunately, it also seems to have been accompanied by a *de facto* segregation of the sexes in Byzantine historical scholarship. Significant new work about Byzantine women and on the function of gender ideologies in Byzantine society has become the almost exclusive province of women authors. There are exceptions, such as Warren Treadgold's "The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors"[99] which describes what he perceives as a woman-centred (and woman-controlled) tradition while making the case for significant political implications arising from the outcomes of this custom. However, such cases are infrequent. Most of the significant work exploring the lives of Byzantine women has been done almost exclusively by female Byzantinists.

As feminist scholars began to look at the lives of Byzantine women it was soon apparent that there was a dissonance between the lives of women as portrayed in the historical narratives and what could be deduced about the actual conditions of their lives from other documentary sources (such as wills and property contracts). Thus, much of the work over the last twenty years has concentrated on analysing the operation of ideology in the lives of Byzantine women. As already noted almost all of this work has concentrated on women of

[99] Warren Treadgold, "The Bride-Shows of Byzantine Emperors" in *Byzantion* 49 (1979). Warren Treadgold's interpretation of the bride-show narratives has been challenged, most recently by Lennart Ryden in his paper "The Bride-shows at the Byzantine Court-History or Fiction?" *Eranos* 83 (1985), 175-191.

the eleventh centuries and later due to the availability of sources. The view that an ideology of Byzantine women was promulgated by the narrative sources and that this was at odds with the actual circumstances of their lives has been explored in detail in the work of A. E. Laiou.[100] As she explains, the "sources are replete with *topoi* when they treat the subject of women thereby obscuring or distorting reality."[101] Laiou makes clear how the narrative sources describe a convention of seclusion for women that is incompatible with descriptions of the active economic lives that many women of the upper classes apparently enjoyed as indicated by legal documents dealing with inheritance.[102] Laiou also proposes that the creation of ideologies actually gave rise to opportunities for women to exercise power. For instance, the ideology of motherhood as woman's greatest role was related to the development of opportunities for the exercise of economic power by women within the family structure, including empresses acting as regents. Opportunities arose from the fact that a woman's dowry was designated for the support of the family, specifically children, and could seldom be alienated..."ownership remained vested in the women, [while] the usufruct belonged to the husband..."[103] While having the use of the dowry, a husband was required to maintain the capital and if he did not his wife could seek legal redress and the right to administer her own property from the courts although this was still considered by the eleventh century *Piera*, or law code, to be "...a

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[100] A. E. Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society" in *Jarbuch der Osterreichischen Byzantinistik* 31.1 (1981); and A. E. Laiou, "Observations on the Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women" in *Byzantinische Forschungen* 9 (1985).
[101] A. E. Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society", p. 233.
[102] Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society", p. 249.
[103] Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society", p. 237.

reversal of the correct order of authority..."[104] This was a case where the accepted order of things could be altered as when an empress could rule as regent for a minor child in order to safeguard his inheritance.

Whereas Laiou concentrates on the upper class and imperial women who figure most prominently in the narrative sources for Byzantine history, Judith Herrin[105] follows a different path. Her work takes issue with historians such as Diehl who have been "seduced by the 'grandes dames et belles dames' of Byzantium in a way that is both misleading and deceptive for any study of [Byzantine] women in general." She examines narrative sources, legal documents and the records of religious institutions in order to discern the place of 'ordinary' Byzantine women in their society. Herrin supports the traditional view of women as secluded and mentions the role of eunuchs in maintaining this separation. However, she also points to factors specific to the Byzantine Empire (i.e. the control of inherited and dowry wealth, the impact of women on religious ideology and practice) as indicators of the unusual extent of feminine influence as demonstrated by acceptance of female heads of state. She writes, "for the fact that such exceptions were admitted perhaps demonstrates the wider extent of feminine influence...which was in turn reinforced by the empresses themselves."[106] Herrin stresses, however, that empresses were exceptional and that the position of women was, "manifestly subordinate."

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[104] Ibid.
[105] Judith Herrin, "In Search of Byzantine Women: Three Avenues of Approach" in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, eds. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt (Kent: Croom Helm, 1983).
[106] Herrin, "In Search of Byzantine Women...", p. 185.

This is a view that is borne out by Catia Galatariotou[107] whose work illustrates how one type of narrative source can be deconstructed to reveal concepts of gender. Galatariotou examined the works of the monk Neophytos the Recluse (1134-after 1214) describing and analysing his conception of gender by examining the forms women assume in his writings. Galatariotou concludes that Neophytos' writings present a negative depiction of women holding power as well as illustrating what she calls the essential misogyny of Byzantine culture.[108] It is important to keep in mind, however, that religious such as Neophytos were representative of a small and vociferously anti-female segment of society and his extreme misogynistic viewpoint may not accurately reflect that of Byzantine society as a whole.

Lynda Garland[109] is also concerned with the contrast between ideology and reality, specifically as it pertains to the convention of secluding women. She notes, for instance, that the convention of female seclusion as described in the sources is incompatible with the obvious ease with which imperial women seemed to conduct extramarital adventures.[110] She proposes that the convention of female seclusion as portrayed in the sources was, "a paradigm of ideal behaviour"[111] that women were expected to admire and emulate rather than an accurate representation of women's lives. In Garland's view conventions of feminine behaviour contributed to a woman's freedom of action,

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[107] Catia S. Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches: Aspects of Byzantine Conceptions of Gender" in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 9 (1984/85).
[108] Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches...", p. 65-66.
[109] L. Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women: A Further Note on Conventions of Behaviour and Social Reality as Reflected in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Historical Sources" in *Byzantion* 58 (1988).
[110] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...", p. 370.
[111] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...", p. 373.

> ...by encasing her in a protective stereotype which defines her behaviour while leaving her free to wield social and political power at will. Such ambivalence between reality and imagination, such 'double-think', is confusing to the modern mind. To the Byzantines it was a normal feature of life and thought...[112]

She further proposes that this dissonance may reveal an attempt to mould or model the behaviour of Byzantine women. Garland notes that the apparent social freedom of imperial women was not approved of by the Byzantine historians.[113] In Garland's view, the open exercise of power by women was not ideologically acceptable to Byzantine society, thus the need to hide behind a veil of conventional behaviour. This view acknowledges the ambivalence often evident in narrative sources such as Skylitzes when women are portrayed as exercising imperial power or otherwise acting independently in the public arena. It is, however, somewhat simplistic and does not do justice to the complexity of Byzantine society and the ideologies operating in relation to Byzantine women.

Barbara Hill[114] has explored the relationship between ideologies of the feminine and the exercise of power in lives of imperial women of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. With the publication of her book *Imperial Women in Byzantium 1025-1204* in 1999 Hill fulfilled her promise of a "theoretically viable explanation for the power of women of the eleventh and twelfth centuries...."[115] Hill proposes that more than one ideology could operate concurrently and asserts that women exercising power were operating within an accepted ideology rather

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[112] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...", p. 393.
[113] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...", p. 368.
[114] Barbara Hill, "Imperial Women and the Ideology of Womanhood in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*; and Barbara Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*.
[115] Hill, "Imperial Women and the Ideology of Womanhood in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," p. 77.

than concealing their activities behind an ideology of conventional behaviour, as suggested by Lynda Garland. Hill notes that while Byzantine monks and other churchmen often praised characteristics such as submission for women, imperial women were celebrated in other sources for the different attributes such as beauty and piety. This conflicting interpretation of the role of ideology in women's lives is one of the great issues in Byzantine feminist scholarship.

What Hill describes as differing ideologies operating concurrently may also be viewed as components of one complex ideology defining appropriate roles and behaviour for Byzantine imperial women. As will be shown, the ideal Byzantine empress was modest and retiring as well as beautiful and pious and could also exercise the supreme imperial power if certain clearly defined conditions were met, such as in the case of a regency. However, ambivalence is always present in that the Byzantine 'ideal' most worthy of praise was that of the woman out of the public eye. Hill recognizes this in the work of both Michael Psellos and Skylitzes. According to Hill, these authors make it plain, while not disputing the legal right of women to accede to the imperial authority, there was something profoundly 'wrong' about women rulers.[116]

The last twenty years have also seen the first attempts, since R. Guilland's works on the topic,[117] of a scholarly analysis of the position of eunuchs in Byzantine society.[118] Kathryn Ringrose has examined references to eunuchs in

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[116] Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*, p. 54-55.
[117] R. Guilland, *Recherches sur les institutions Byzantines* (Berlin : Academie-Verlag, 1967).
[118] For example see K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Kathryn Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium," *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. G. Herdt (New York: MIT Press, 1994).; Kathryn Ringrose, "Passing The Test of Sanctity: Denial of Sexuality and Involuntary Castration," *Desire and Denial in Byzantium,* ed. Liz James (Aldershot:

the narrative sources for Byzantine history and the role of their portrayals in the creation of gender ideologies, not just for eunuchs but for women as well. She has argued convincingly that the idea of eunuchs filling "distinctive and exclusive roles" coupled with distinctive physiology, "learned behaviours, mannerisms and distinctive sexual status" serves to define eunuchs as a "distinct gender".[119] Ringrose also describes a pejorative ideology of associated with eunuchs, which can be discerned from narrative and other sources. Although distinctive, this ideology was similar to that which was associated with women and in fact was based on the 'similarity' of eunuchs to women. Eunuchs were raised 'in the shade' in the women's quarters, under the guidance of older eunuchs. Like women, they were associated with darkness and seclusion and, like women, they were consequently pale and soft. Men, who lived their lives 'in the open' out of doors were of a contrastingly ruddy complexion. There was a prevailing view in Byzantine society that castration made eunuchs more like women and both genders were frequently associated with practises that took place 'in the shadows'. As with women, there is a similar disconnect between the portrayals of eunuchs and their true position in the Byzantine social order. Ringrose asserts that later Byzantine authors repeated negative stereotypes about eunuchs that originated with the classical world and which did not reflect the real power and influence exercised by eunuchs in their distinctive and exclusive roles in Byzantine society. Eunuchs have been marginalised as a curiosity by modern as

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Ashgate Publishing, 1999); and Shaun F. Tougher, "Byzantine Eunuchs: An Overview, With Special Reference to Their Creation and Origin" in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (London, New York: Routledge, 1997).

[119] Ringrose , "Living in the Shadows," p. 94.

well as Byzantine historians and this has obscured their often crucial role in important incidents of Byzantine history.[120] Ringrose's work is extremely valuable for moving towards a description of the characteristics of the social and cultural world of Byzantine eunuchs and of their organisational structures.[121]

[120] As with the tale of Theophano, many modern scholars are obsessed with the sexuality of empresses to the extent that they may be missing the less 'attractive' influence of eunuchs.

[121] For example, Skylitzes describes an organised and coherent response on the part of the eunuch community to the attempts of Michael V to remove Zôê from power in 1042. Skylitzes' narrative shows both Zôê and Theodora to be skilled exploiters of the power of Byzantium's eunuch community, as were several usurpers, such as John Tzimiskes.

Chapter 3 - The Byzantine Ideology of Feminine Behaviour

It has been suggested that the narrative sources for Byzantine history present an ideology of feminine behaviour that is at odds with what can be discovered about the nature of the lives of Byzantine women from other documentary sources.[122] This ideology is constructed through representations of women and female behaviour and has observable characteristics that modern scholars have noted and described. Foremost among these is the essentially misogynistic tone of representations of women in the surviving sources for Byzantine history. One of the best descriptions of how this misogyny is transmitted is provided by Cyril Mango. He describes "anti-feminism" as a "...fundamental tenet of Byzantine thinking until the sporadic introduction of western ideas of romantic love in about the twelfth century."[123] In the writings of religious scholars, such as the early fifth century theologian John Chrysostom, Byzantine women were depicted as the repository of all temptation. As Mango writes,

> Generally...she was a crawling worm, the daughter of mendacity, the enemy of [spiritual] peace. The catalogue of her vices and weaknesses is endless: she was frivolous, garrulous and licentious. Above all she was addicted to luxury and expense. She loaded herself with jewellery, powdered her face, painted her cheeks with rouge, scented her garments and thus made herself into a deadly trap to seduce young men with all their senses.[124]

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[122] See for example Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society."
[123] Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*, p. 225-226.
[124] Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*, p. 226.

The idea of woman thus represented is as the embodiment of sexual temptation and as an impediment to the 'ideal' pious life. The presence of women was disturbing and distracted men from God.

Catia Galatariotou, in her analysis of the writings of the monk Neophytos, uncovers many examples of the misogynistic viewpoint that still permeated Byzantine thinking in the twelfth century (including the lasting influence of the writings of St. John Chrysostom). She also provides illustrations of the same way of thinking from other sources ranging from the sixth century 'Secret History' of Procopius, who portrays the Empress Theodora as a witch, to the eleventh century memoir and manual of advice by the provincial magnate Cecaumenus, who repeatedly warns his son "never to trust or befriend women but to avoid them altogether".[125] Virginity, or at least a denial of sexuality through voluntary celibacy, is presented by Neophytos as the ideal. In Neophytos' writings, whenever a contest between good and evil takes place, the form that evil takes is always female. Women in a position to exercise power over men receive special condemnation.[126] Writings such as this reinforce the recurring idea that, according to the Byzantine ideologies for women, the exercise of power by

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[125] Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches...", p. 66-67. For a further discussion of this view of the Byzantine attitude towards women see also Grosdidier de Matons, "La Femme dans l'Empire Byzantin" in *Histoire Mondiale de la Femme*, ed. P. Grimal, III (Paris 1967) and Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*, p. 225-226 (as cited by Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches...", p. 66).

[126] As was Aelia Eudoxia Augusta (d.404), the wife of Arcadius (395-408), in relation to the Patriarch John Chrysostom. Aelia Eudoxia Augusta exhibited many of the characteristics of an ideal empress and her acts of piety and philanthropy are described in the sources for her life. She was also, however, criticised by the Patriarch, John Chrysostom (398-404), and others for her imperiousness and extravagance – perhaps serving as a substitute for her husband who could not be criticised directly. The imperial response to the Patriarch's repeated and vociferous criticism of the conspicuous consumption of the wealthy as represented by Eudoxia from the Patriarchal pulpit was Chrysostom's removal from the Patriarchy and exile in 404. See Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, p. 58 and Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia Univeristy Press, 1988), p. 318.

women was not appropriate. As portrayed by Neophytos 'good' women appear exclusively in the context of the family, where they would normally be constrained in the exercise of power by the patriarchal authority structure of that institution.[127] Galatariotou suggests that Neophytos' outlook may have been a reaction to the increased presence of Byzantine women in the power structures of the twelfth century.[128] However, as Mango and even Galatariotou herself have observed, these types of misogynistic beliefs are expressed in Byzantine culture from the earliest days of Christianity.[129]

That Byzantine women were sequestered in a *gynaecium* (a section of the home reserved exclusively for their use) and prevented from having contact with all members of the opposite sex except members of their immediate family, is a convention commonly encountered in the narrative sources and another component of the Byzantine ideology of appropriate feminine behaviour. This convention is implied in passages from the narrative sources such as that from the history of Michael Attaliates, an eleventh century contemporary of Skylitzes'. In describing the effects of the earthquake of 1064 he relates that "...women, usually kept at home, were shaken by fear, forgot their shame, and ran into open places."[130] Explicit references to this behaviour are also found. According to informants about her life Theophano, the saintly first wife of the Macedonian emperor Leo VI, was described as never having been allowed to go out, "except

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[127] Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches...", p. 78.
[128] Laiou, Herrin and others have described the real economic power exercised by Byzantine women, especially in the context of administering family estates. See also Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches...," p. 62; and note 17.
[129] Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches...", p. 66.
[130] Michael Attaliates, *Historia*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1853), 88, 13-15 as cited by A. Kazhdan, "Women at Home," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998) p. 2.

to the bathhouse, to which she was sent late in the evening or early in the morning, accompanied by numerous servants and maids."[131] Cecaumenus' advice to his son on the proper conduct of family life recommends "It is...prudent to keep daughters locked up and unseen to save all possible causes of misfortune and dishonour."[132] This representation of girls and women is consistent with the misogynistic view that the presence of females in the wider community was disturbing to men and a source of sexual temptation.

Notwithstanding these references and while not disputing the essentially subservient position of Byzantine women, modern Byzantinists have debated the extent of feminine seclusion.[133] Some modern Byzantine scholars have pointed out that the active economic and social lives apparently enjoyed by many Byzantine women presupposed a dynamic involvement in society that was at odds with the concept of seclusion for women.[134] Yet, seclusion is frequently presented as an ideal in the sources. Kazhdan labels such descriptions of the extreme isolation of women, "[a] rhetorical figure of speech – hyperbole...that should not be taken at face value."[135] Lynda Garland agrees. It was, she states "a paradigm of ideal behaviour," that women should admire and emulate but that

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[131] *BHG* 1794, ed. E. Kurtz, "Zwei griechische Texte über die hl. Theophano, die Gemahlin Kaisers Leo VI," *Zapiski Akademii nauk* 8, isor.-filol., 3.2 (1898), 3.25-30 as cited by Kazhdan, "Women at Home," p. 2.

[132] *Cecaumeni strategicon et incerti scriptoris de officiis regiis libellus*, ed. B. Wasseliewsky and V. Jernstedt (St. Petersburg, 1896; rpt. Amsterdam, 1965), p. 51 as cited by Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...", p. 369-370.

[133] See for example Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women..."; Kazhdan, "Women at Home"; Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society;" Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...;" and Herrin, "In Search of Byzantine Women...".

[134] See for example Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society," p. 249; see also Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus...*, p. 17-18, 28.

[135] Kazhdan, "Women at Home," p. 5.

they did not necessarily live.[136] This is one aspect of women's lives where the narrative sources have portrayed an ideology rather than a representation approximating reality and where modern historians have discerned the operation of ideology in the narrative sources for Byzantine history. The persistence of this convention is intriguing and may be tied to the characterisation of women as a disorderly influence. The inappropriate appearances of women in public in the narrative sources often occur in conjunction with social turmoil and unrest or natural disasters and their appearance could be perceived as a harbinger.

Another characteristic of women that is perpetuated in the narrative sources for Byzantine history is related to the convention of seclusion – that is of women as shy and modest. One of the ways in which this is conveyed is the usual depiction of women as veiled and, in fact, it was portrayed as shocking for a woman to be out in public without one.[137] That the woman's veil was a symbolic representation of modesty and restraint is borne out in Psellos' *encomium* for his mother Theodotê.[138] Psellos' portrayal of his mother includes many components of the ideal feminine stereotype, one of which is that Theodotê never raised her veil in public or betrayed overt emotion. Psellos also composed a funeral oration for his beloved daughter, Styliane,[139] who died before reaching her teens. Of her he writes, "after infancy she advanced towards Perfection, while her good looks also increased with the years. She was radiant in her behaviour and modesty,

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[136] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 373.
[137] Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium*, p. 16.
[138] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 372ff.
[139] The name Styliane does not actually appear in Psellos' funeral oration for his daughter but, according to Michael Kyriakis' "Medieval European Society as Seen in Two Eleventh-Century Texts of Michael Psellos" is supplied by K. N. Sathas, the editor of the *Bibliotheca graeca medii aevi* in which Psellos' work is found in its modern edition.

while at the same time she developed shyness."[140] Psellos thus equates shyness and modesty with perfection in feminine deportment.

Lynda Garland asserts that in Psellos' eulogies for his mother and his daughter, "...whatever the reality, he...must be painting an ideal of personality and behaviour, and attributing to the women of his family all the Byzantine concepts of female perfection."[141] His mother was a paragon, "an ideal picture of the middle-class wife and mother...an ideal woman, a saint incarnate, a good wife and a beloved mother, who fills woman's most important role...talented, beautiful, educated in theology, an expert at all household tasks...."[142] Psellos' depiction of his lamented daughter is described by Michael Kyriakis as "a model (an ideal) of a perfect Byzantine maiden"[143] in which Psellos adorns his daughter Styliane "with Platonic and Christian virtues of modesty, [and] beauty, along with temperance and goodness."[144] Still, Kyriakis characterises Psellos' portrayals of Byzantine women, in these eulogies as well as his other works as flatly "two-dimensional", as though he were conforming to a formula, an 'ideology', rather than rendering representations of actual individuals.

Psellos' eulogistic praise of his daughter does in fact follow a formula very similar to that mandated for the funeral speech or *epitaphios* by the fourth century teacher and orator Menander of Laodicea in the treatises known to us as *Menander Rhetor.* Menander stipulates that the funeral speech "should be

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[140] Michael Psellos, "A Funeral Oration Michael Psellos wrote for his daughter 'who passed away prior to her time of marriage'," trans. and ed. Michael Kyriakis, *Byzantine Studies*, Vol. 3, Part 2 (1976), p. 84.
[141] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 364.
[142] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 375-376.
[143] Michael J. Kyriakis, "Medieval European Society as Seen in Two Eleventh-Century Texts of Michael Psellos," Byzantine Studies, Vol. 3, Part 2 (1976), p. 80.
[144] Kyriakis, "Medieval European Society...," p. 78.

divided according to the headings of *encomia*"[145] these being family, birth, nature (including physical beauty and mental endowment), nurture and accomplishments – the superior nature of the subject being confirmed by the succeeding headings. Psellos follows this formula. He describes Styliane's family, alluding to her imperial antecedents, and the celebration that followed her birth. He speaks of Styliane's physical endowments saying "...she was like a rose...surpassing girls her own age in beauty."[146] Psellos describes how Styliane was raised by a mother "who loved modesty and who concerned herself with propriety"[147] and states that as Styliane grew and "advanced towards Perfection"[148] she developed shyness. Psellos affectionately details her intellectual abilities, including an eloquence and love of learning far beyond her years. Styliane's skill at intellectual pastimes did not, however, prevent her from excelling at the womanly arts, as was proper. Psellos states emphatically,

> [One might ask however] but did she have any experience or difficulty working the loom? No! No one could say that; for she used her time well: devoting a portion to learning and the rest to weaving, thus occupying herself with both....for she understood by nature what she was being taught. It was as if these things had already been imprinted on her mind...[149]

Psellos' additions to Menander's standard formula for *encomia* include declarations about Styliane's frequent displays of filial affection, her pure and pious observance of her religious devotions, and her selfless acts of

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[145] Menander of Laodica, *Menander Rhetor,* edited with translation and commentary by D. A. Russell and N. G. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 171ff.
[146] Michael Psellos, "A Funeral Oration...," p. 84.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Psellos, "A Funeral Oration...," p. 85-86.

philanthropy. Thus Psellos portrays an ideal of the behaviour to be expected of an unmarried Byzantine girl of the eleventh century.

By way of stressing Styliane's attributes, Psellos also relates what she avoids and through this communicates the antithesis of the ideal. Styliane scorned embellishments to her natural beauty such as necklaces, earrings, kerchiefs and hair ribbons as well as magic charms and wigs which "can decorate after a fashion beyond the decent and decorous, but [will reveal] those who employ them as being false and vain."[150] She avoided "the erotic schemes of youth" and was not led on "by strong emotions" or led into such things by "those who were consumed by strong passions."[151] Still, Styliane's parents were "filled with expectations for her marriage...along with all the other things life has to offer maidens."[152]

Closely related to modest deportment, dignified decorum as an ideal behaviour also features in the Byzantine narrative sources. Like Styliane and Psellos' mother, the idealised Byzantine woman never lost her dignity or gave in to vulgar displays of passion. For example, Skylitzes has almost nothing to say about Leo VI's first wife Theophano other than that, when Leo's close relationship with Zôê Zaoutzês became known, Theophano "saw and heard everything that was going on but did not in the least allow herself to give way to the passion of jealousy."[153] In a similar vein Psellos describes the demeanour of

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[150] Psellos, "A Funeral Oration...," p. 89-90.
[151] Psellos, "A Funeral Oration...," p. 91.
[152] Psellos, "A Funeral Oration...," p. 92.
[153] SH, p. 95. Skylitzes may have been following an older source, such as *Theophanes Continuatus*, in this description of Theophano's reaction to her husband's apparent infidelity. What is significant is that he chose to repeat a description of Theophano's behaviour that conformed to the ideal rather than a less flattering portrayal from another source.

the Empress Maria, wife of Michael VII Ducas: "if, as the tragic poet says 'silence is a woman's glory' then she above all women is worthy of honour, for she speaks to no one but her husband...."[154] Thus, like an icon of the Virgin mother, the ideal Byzantine woman was modest, dignified and, above all, silent.

Going out in public and open displays of emotion were portrayed as inappropriate - except in the very specific instance of advocating for one's children. Notwithstanding her conventional portrayal, Theodotê is also favourably described as a tireless advocate on behalf of her talented son and this was seen as in no way inconsistent with the qualities of an ideal matron as already described. Anna Comnena, in describing the achievements of Michael Psellos, pays homage to the very public efforts of his mother in securing his success,

> This man had not studied very much under learned professors, but through his natural cleverness and quick intelligence and further by the help of God (which he had obtained by his mother's ardent supplications, for she often spent whole nights in the church of God weeping and making invocations to the holy picture of the Virgin on her son's behalf) he had reached the summit of all knowledge...and grew famous in those days for his wisdom.[155]

Psellos' eulogy for his mother gives credit to Theodotê's tireless advocacy for improving his prospects for success. It was her unwavering belief in his talent and her willingness to campaign on his behalf that led to his receiving a classical

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[154] Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, p. 177 as cited by Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 372.

[155] Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena: Being the History of the Reign of Her Father, Emperor Alexius I, Emperor of the Romans, 1081-1118 A.D.*, english trans. Elizabeth A. S. Dawes. (1928; rpt. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1967), p. 133.

education rather than his being trained for a more profitable occupation, as the rest of his family wanted.[156]

This is consistent with the findings of Barbara Hill. She notes that women who entered into public affairs in any way did not escape criticism. However, those who acted as regents for minor sons generally achieved the most approval. There was an expectation that "...the ideal mother should be a skilled *intrigueuse*..."[157] in order to safeguard the rights of her offspring. Motherhood was extolled as an ideal in Byzantine society and while this ideology could be "...criticised as both oppressive and patriarchal, it opened great vistas of influence to the woman who fulfilled the ideal..."[158]

Their written documents leave no doubt that the early Christians esteemed virginity as the ideal state.[159] This is borne out by the *vitae* (lives) of saintly women, one of the main sources for ideal representations of feminine behaviour. A. E. Laiou observes that this was, however, "potentially damaging to the institutions of marriage and the family."[160] She notes that by the ninth and tenth centuries the social virtues of charity, humility, love, obedience had somewhat replaced virginity as the pre-eminent virtue of the ideal woman in the *vitae*.[161] This coincided with the re-assertion of an ideology of women where motherhood

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[156] Psellos, "Eulogy [for his mother]" in *Bibliotheca Graeca*, V, ed. K. N. Sathas (Paris: 1876), 12-14, and 21 as cited by Garland, "Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 376.
[157] Barbara Hill, "Imperial Women and the Ideology of Womanhood...," p. 82-83.
[158] Hill, "Imperial Women and the Ideology of Womanhood...," p. 84.
[159] See for example Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*, p. 226-227; A. E. Laiou, "Addendum to the Report on the Role of Women in Byzantine Society," in *Gender, Society and Economic Life in Byzantium* (1982; rpt. Hampshire, GB; Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1992), p. 199; and Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), especially p. 259ff.
[160] A. E. Laiou, "Addendum to the Report...," p. 198.
[161] Laiou, "Addendum to the Report...," p. 199.

was the most glorious function and everything a woman did contributed to the welfare of her children and family. As Lynda Garland notes, "except by theologians, virginity and celibacy are not generally regarded as suitable alternatives to matrimony, especially in the imperial family, where princesses function as significantly useful matrimonial pawns."[162] Women might have a measure of economic autonomy but they could not refuse to marry where family alliances demanded it, though it might be against their own wishes. Even the relatives of a reigning emperor were not spared. In a desperate move to save his administration, Basil II traded off his own sister Anna in exchange for an alliance with the pagan Prince Vladimir of the Rus'.[163] While it might appear that economic autonomy was not compatible with a complete lack of control over one's person, this is consistent with an ideology that first and foremost supports the economic, political, and dynastic goals of the family.

As noted by Catia Galatariotou, good women are always depicted in the context of the family and patriarchal structures.[164] Gugliemo Cavallo explains that the dignity of a woman's conventional role as defined by the ideology was recognised in the family, by law and tradition. Women were the centre of domestic administration, often administering family assets. However, outside the family, women were portrayed as temptresses leading men to sin. He writes, "for Byzantine culture, women hung in the balance between the Virgin Mary, mother

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[162] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 365.
[163] This transaction brought Basil several thousand seasoned soldiers with which he defeated a rebel force and secured his hold on the imperial throne. For her part, Anna is credited with serving as the conduit by which Christianity was widely diffused among the Russian people.
[164] Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches...," p. 78.

of Christ, and Eve, the seductress, who had led Adam and the entire human race into temptation."[165]

The stereotypes discussed above have a long history and are echoing the qualities associated with the virtuous Roman matron.[166] As Eva Cantarella observes of Roman women, "The eulogies for women...highlight their qualities: *lanifica, pia, pudica, casta, domiseda* (wool worker, faithful, modest, chaste, stay-at-home) are the adjectives that appear with greatest frequency – stylised praises that underscore the persistence of the model."[167] This is in harmony with A. E. Laiou's description of the ideology of behaviour for Byzantine women. She writes that, "Byzantine ideology, consistent with its exaltation of the woman in the family, allowed her one primary occupation, that of running the household. Within the household, the model occupation for a woman was spinning, weaving, and making cloth...[it is] the most common *topos* applied to females."[168] Confirmation of this is seen is Psellos' description of his daughter's 'natural' ability at spinning, weaving, and embroidery and the manufacture of delicate fabrics[169] and his portrayal of his mother as "devoted to charity and household chores, particularly weaving, for she made clothes not only for the family and servants but for the poor as well."[170]

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[165] Guglielmo Cavallo, "Editor's Introduction" in *The Byzantines*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo, trans. Thomas Dunlap, Teresa Lavender Fagan, and Charles Lambert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) p. 11.
[166] Eva Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, trans. Maureen B. Fant (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987),p. 132.
[167] Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters*, p. 132.
[168] Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society," p. 243.
[169] Psellos, "A Funeral Oration...," p. 85-86.
[170] Psellos, "Eulogy [for his mother]", 10 as cited by Lynda Garland, "Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 377.

It should be noted that the representation of women as manufacturers of textiles is not only a common *topos* but, unlike the *topos* of seclusion, it appears to have been a fairly accurate representation of women's lives. This would have been expected as a financial necessity for poor and even middle-class women such as Psellos' relatives but spinning and weaving was also seen as a typical occupation for upper class women and even members of the imperial family.[171] Imperial women would even be depicted with a spinning wheel on imperial coinage.[172] The *topos* does diverge from the reality in one important respect, however. The typical portrayal of women working with spindles and looms usually implies textile manufacture as a pastime or for family use. Apparently it was not unusual, however, for women to engage in manufacture for the wider commercial market, even women in religious communities.[173] The rich widow Danielis, whose early support was so useful for the first Macedonian Basil I in his quest for imperial power, was said to have made her fortune in the commercial manufacture of textiles.[174] Steven Runciman asserts that the silk cloth for which the Byzantine Empire was justly famous was largely manufactured in the women's quarters of the imperial palace complex and "sold by the court to the silk corporation to retail."[175] In this instance, the *topos* of women as producers of textiles is an approximate representation of reality; however, the ideology still

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[171] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 379.
[172] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, p. 36.
[173] Laiou, "Observations on the Life and Ideology...," p. 90.
[174] H. Gregoire, "The Amorians and Macedonians," in *The Byzantine Empire*, Vol. IV (Part I) of *The Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. J. M. Hussey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 117.
[175] Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus...*, p. 22.

obscures the real picture of women using their talent and resources to achieve economic goals beyond the clothing of their immediate family.

The ideal Byzantine woman of the ninth to eleventh centuries can therefore be described as conforming to the following conventions as portrayed in the narrative sources (the extent to which those sources represent reality is debatable). The model maiden was of refined lineage and well brought up. She was beautiful, in a natural and unadorned way. She was intelligent and loved learning but not to such an extent as to turn her back on her 'natural' facility for the loom. She was virginal and not contaminated by erotic 'intrigues' prior to marriage. Chaste behaviour and seclusion was the conventional ideal for unmarried girls who nonetheless looked forward to married life. After marriage, the Byzantine matron behaved with modesty and dignified propriety. Ideal women were decorous in their behaviour. They did not go about in public unless it was absolutely necessary and were never seen without a veil. Calm, dignified silence was the ideal and passionate emotional displays were frowned upon. For unmarried girls and for matrons overt displays of sexuality in the form of make-up and other adornment were considered 'against nature'. Ideally the feminine members of a household were secluded from men and thus defeating temptation and mitigating the possibility of family dishonour. Byzantine girls and women were pious in their religious observances and practiced philanthropy without resentment. They were happy and content in their family life, as testified by the displays of loving affection between family members, and in the occupations and activities usually associated with the household. An ideal woman did not push

herself forward in public life or seek to exercise power over a man. Active participation in public affairs was viewed with disapproval except in the context of protecting the interests of the family, as in the case of safeguarding the rights of minor children.

The Ideal Byzantine Empress

As with other Byzantine narrative sources, the women portrayed in *A Synopsis of Histories* are dominated by those of the imperial class. However, according to Lynda Garland, "it is likely at least that the ideology expressed through them is representative of their society as a whole: that certainly in part they speak for the opinions and expectations and conventional attitudes of Byzantine women in general."[176] In fact, the representations of imperial women in the narrative sources would have been one of the avenues whereby the paradigm of ideal feminine behaviour was communicated to a wider Byzantine society. Nevertheless, one question comes to mind. Was the ideology associated with empresses the same as that for all women or was there an ideology of appropriate conduct for empresses that differed significantly from that of other women?

It is true that there are no explicit descriptions of the 'ideal empress' in the Byzantine literary tradition of the 'Mirror of Princes' or the 'Imperial Oration' (*Basilikos Logos*) as described by Menander. However, this does not mean that the ideal cannot be discerned from other documentary sources. As Barbara Hill has shown, an ideal can be constructed from the speeches and orations

[176] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...", p. 363.

composed for or about imperial women, especially funeral orations. Such works "provide an insight into the ideal because they were written to compliment the recipient or to call to the minds of others their good qualities."[177] As with *encomium* or *panegyric* composed for men,[178] works praising women follow a 'formula for praise'. Good family, auspicious birth, beauty and intelligence, nurture and good deeds are praised. Hill observes that the orations composed for or about *Comnenian* women in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries praise the positive virtues of "...beauty, a rejection of vanity, piety, fertility, *philanthropeia*, love for husband and control of family..."[179] in their subjects. The characteristics of the ideal thus described are remarkably consistent with those noted by Eva Cantarella in her study of the eulogies of Roman women. Other studies have observed a similar formula of praise for women at other periods of Byzantine history.

Liz James documents the early Byzantine expressions of this ideal in her study of the imperial women of Byzantium from the fourth to the eighth centuries.[180] Among her examples of orations praising empresses are a number of fourth century works - Julian's *Speech of Thanks* to Eusebia; Gregory of Nyssa's funeral orations (*oratio consolatoria*) for Flacilla, wife of Theodosius I, and Pulcheria, the daughter of Flacilla and Theodosius; and Claudian's *laus Serenae* in praise of Serena, niece of Theodosius I and wife of the great general

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[177] Hill, "The Ideal Imperial Komnenian Woman," *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 23 (1996), p. 7-8.
[178] For a description of the form to be used when praising emperors see, for example, "The Imperial Oration" in *Menander Rhetor,* (Oxford: 1981), p. 77ff; also Kazhdan and Franklin, "The social views of Michael Attaliates," p. 24-31. For a discussion on the adaption of the formula for praising emperors to the praise of empresses, see James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (London; New York: Leicester University Press, 2001) p. 12-13.
[179] Hill, "The Ideal Imperial Komnenian Woman," p. 8.
[180] See James, *Empresses and Power...*

Stilicho. James notes that the formula followed by Julian's *Speech of Thanks* is very similar to that followed by Menander's *basilikos logos* including sections on native land, noble birth, marriage and deeds.[181] Positive qualities attributed to Eusebia include noble lineage, wit, wisdom and beauty. Her deeds speak to her virtues of wifely devotion, her encouragement of mercy and justice on the part of the emperor, and her philanthropy. Serena's virtues were similarly enumerated. Following the usual formula for *encomia*, her noble lineage was praised. She was portrayed as pious, chaste, and devoted to her family and her husband.[182]

The *oratio consolatoria* composed by Gregory of Nyssa in honour of Aelia Flavia Flacilla, who died in 387, is considered to be a superior example of the form. Kenneth Holum, in his study of the exercise of power by empresses of the Theodosian House (ca.379-455), has proposed that Gregory of Nyssa "articulated a new official ideology for imperial women."[183] This was taking place at a time when concepts of sovereignty and the ideology of imperial rule were being transformed by pressures from within and without the empire. Gregory praised Flacilla as follows,

> This ornament of the empire has gone from us, this rudder of justice, the image of philanthropy or, rather, its archetype. This model of wifely love has been taken away, this undefiled monument of chastity, dignified but approachable, clement but not to be despised, humble but exalted, modest but ready to speak boldly – a harmonious mixture of all the virtues. This zeal for the faith has departed from us, this pillar of the church, decoration of altars, wealth of the needy, the right hand which satisfied many, the common haven of those who are heavy laden. Let virgins mourn, widows

[181] James, *Empresses and Power*, p. 12.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, p. 44.

> grieve, and orphans lament: let them know what they had now that they have her no more![184]

Of all her qualities, Gregory chose to emphasise Flacilla's philanthropy, going so far as to describe her as the 'archetype.' He also praised her wifely affection, which Holum interprets as an acknowledgement of her success in child-bearing in that she produced two male heirs for Theodisius. Flacilla is dignified, merciful, modest, pious – the virtues personified.

Examples from the intervening years are few but a further instance shows the persistence of the archetypical portrayal of the ideal empress. When Leo VI included a digression praising the virtues of his mother, Eudokia Ingerina, into his ninth century funeral oration for his father Basil I, he was following Menander's instructions for the proper composition of the *basilikos logos.* Menander suggested that praise for an empress could appropriately be included after those passages which extolled the emperor's just and temperate behaviour in times of peace. Thus, Menander can be said to associate an empress with the expression of those virtues. His instructions on the proper form for praising an empress are as follows,

> What is to be said here? 'Because of the emperor, marriages are chaste, fathers have legitimate offspring, spectacles, festivals, and competitions are conducted with proper splendour and due moderation.' 'People choose a style of life like that which they observe in the emperor.' If the empress is of great worth and honour, you can conveniently mention her also here: 'The lady he admired and loved, he has also made the only sharer of his throne. For the rest of womankind, he does not so much as know they exist.'[185]

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[184] Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio funebris in Flacillam Imperatricem*, ed. Spira (Jaeger-Langerbeck, Vil. IX), p. 481 as cited by Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, p. 23.
[185] *Menander Rhetor,* (Oxford: 1981), p. 91.

Leo's praise for Eudokia elaborates on these suggestions and praises his mother according to the formal pattern for *encomia*.[186] Leo praises her character (in that any woman who would be a life companion for Basil I must be his equal), her lineage and her family's high rank. Eudokia's beauty was such that 'it made one dizzy just to think of it'. The symmetry of her limbs and the perfection of her nature were such that she required no superfluous adornment. Others who might be considered beautiful appeared ugly beside her. Omens of Eudokia's future greatness were associated with her birth. God had ordained that she, and no other, would be the life companion of Basil I.

Through the centuries the virtues associated with empresses in the documentary sources for Byzantine history remained remarkably consistent. However, at different periods of Byzantine history, some virtues were stressed while others were given less emphasis. In her examination of the ideology associated with empresses between the fourth and eight centuries, Liz James notes that,

> Thus the paradigmatic good empress was pious and philanthropic, humble and chaste...she was also expected to display marital devotion...an account of her physical appearance does not invariably and automatically feature in the praise of an empress; beauty is not stressed to the extent that one might anticipate.[187]

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[186] See Oraison funèbre de Basile I par son fils Léon VI le Sage. Éditée avec Introduction et Traduction par A. Vogt et I. Hausherr S. I. *Orientalia Christiana*. Vol. XXVI.-I., Num. 77 (April 1932), p. 53-54.

[187] James, *Empresses and Power...*, p. 12-13.

During this period, piety and philanthropy were the dominant virtues of the ideal empress. Judith Herrin explains that through the patronage of empresses such as Pulcheria, who in the fifth century established feast days and commemorations as well as shrines later used to house Marian relics, the Byzantine empresses came to be identified with the cult of the Virgin. Pulcheria's activities also established the authority of empresses to found shrines and religious institutions.[188] However, as shown by Leo VI's praise of his mother, by the late ninth century the praise of an empress adhered more closely to formal *encomia*. Leo stressed his mother's family, birth, and superior nature - especially her outstanding and incredible beauty – rather than her philanthropy or piety.

Anna Comnena's descriptions of her mother, the Empress Irene Doucania, provide a further example of the persistence of the conventional representations of the ideal empress. These descriptions are not found in formal orations, however, but rather as digressions in Anna's well known and admired twelfth century history of the reign of her father, Alexios I. Still, Anna's portrayal of her mother contains many of the characteristics of formal *encomium* and Anna herself describes her narrative as following the "laws of oratory".[189] First Anna speaks of her mother's family and praises her lineage. Anna then praises her mother's superior nature, enumerating her physical and intellectual attributes. Her mother was like a young, blooming plant and "...all her limbs and features were perfectly symmetrical...."[190] The rosy bloom of her cheeks was visible from

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[188] Judith Herrin, "The imperial feminine in Byzantium." *Past & Present* 169 (November 2000), p. 12.
[189] Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 135.
[190] Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 77.

far off and she had striking blue eyes [Styliane also had blue eyes]. As Psellos had admired the silence of the Empress Maria, wife of Michael VII Ducas, so Irene was also praised for her quiet and calm demeanour. According to Anna, her mother's "...lips were generally closed, and thus silent she resembled a living statue of beauty, a breathing pillar of grace."[191] Anna's mother Irene is portrayed as "...poring over the writings of the didactic fathers...[at breakfast]...because she wished to gain true wisdom."[192] Appropriate modesty and shyness were also part of Irene's nature. Anna relates that Irene accompanied her husband on campaign, but against her will "for her disposition was of such a nature that she did not willingly appear in public, but generally kept at home and attended to her duties..."[193] which primarily consisted of acts of piety and philanthropy. Anna asserts that, "whenever it behoved her [Irene] to appear in public as Empress...she was overcome with shyness and her cheeks were mantled with blushes."[194] The Empress was "...the image of dignity...Such a wonderful example of modesty was she!"[195]

Anna asserts that even though Irene went on campaign with Alexios, her mother adhered to the convention of seclusion. When Irene travelled it was in a curtained litter and "...for the rest her divine body was concealed from view."[196] Still, on the journey Irene exercised philanthropy "...with lavish hand..."[197] and notwithstanding her seclusion "...threw it [her tent] open and gave the beggars

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[191] Ibid.
[192] Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 135.
[193] Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 305.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 306.
[197] Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 307.

free access. For to this class she was very accessible...."[198] Related to philanthropy are acts of mercy. Anna describes an incident where she and her sisters implore their mother to plead with the Emperor for mercy on behalf of, Michael Anemandes, a participant in a usurper's plot. Anna (and her mother) were ostensibly moved to pity by the spectacle of Michael being humiliated before the mob along with his fellow conspirators and only moments away from losing his eyes.[199] Anna also describes evidence of tender family affection. For example, Irene's "...natural modesty would have kept her at home in the palace, but her devotion and ardent love for the Emperor drove her out of it even against her will..."[200] to accompany Alexios on campaign. One of the most affecting passages in medieval literature is Anna's description of her father's last illness and the devotion with which her mother nurses him to the end.[201]

According to Lynda Garland[202] and Barbara Hill,[203] the narrative sources for Byzantine history of the eleventh and twelfth centuries mentioned an empress's beauty as her dominant admirable virtue (although other positive qualities were still mentioned). As Barbara Hill notes in her examination of rhetoric composed in praise of Comnenian women, " 'Beautiful' was the most common epithet applied to imperial women of all ages and roles, excepting only mothers...It is clear that the Byzantines deduced inner qualities from outer characteristics, which explains the emphasis on beautiful women."[204] This is also

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[198] Ibid.
[199] Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 313-315.
[200] Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 305.
[201] Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 420ff.
[202] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 387-388.
[203] Barbara Hill, "The Ideal Imperial...," p. 8-9.
[204] Ibid.

evident in Psellos' description of the beauty of his daughter, Styliane. It is apparent from his oration that he considers her physical beauty to be a reflection of her inner qualities of modesty, shyness, honesty, piety, and so on.[205] Psellos demonstrates this viewpoint in his other works as well. In his *Chronographia* Psellos describes the elder sister of the Empresses Zôê and Theodora as 'marred' in her looks after experiencing some infectious disease in childhood [probably smallpox].[206] This daughter entered a convent at a young age and it is often speculated that this was because her destroyed looks made her unfit for public life as an empress. Hill observed that Basil of Ochrid, who composed a funeral oration for Manuel Comnenus' first empress, Bertha-Eirene of Salzbach, "states that the outer form is important because the inner person shines through it."[207] As Lynda Garland writes,

> Presumably the fact that beauty is the characteristic most lauded of Empresses and other female members of the imperial family implies that conventionally dignity and regality of appearance is the most important of their imperial duties, and that seldom would contact with the Empress be other than formal and at a distance. The Empress ought, by convention, to be silent. The ceremonial role of the Empress implies her subordinate status...[208]

From the documentary sources it is appropriate to conclude that Empresses were thus expected to affect "a certain resplendence of apparel and an untouchable dignity of demeanour."[209] Garaland suggests that this preoccupation with an empress's appearance and the convention that she be seen and not

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[205] Psellos, "A Funeral Oration...," p. 84-86.
[206] Michael Psellos, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers: The Chronographia of Michael Psellos*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) p. 55.
[207] Hill, "The Ideal Imperial...," p. 9 (n. 14).
[208] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 387-388.
[209] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 392.

heard could serve as an indicator of the empress's inferior status. Garland asserts, however, that this conventional image belies the important role that an empress served in court ceremonial and in other avenues of Byzantine life. She asserts that demeanour and appearances, which were so integral to the construction of an ideology of the Byzantine female, had no effect on "women's occupations, the wielding of political power, social influence or even physical mobility."[210]

The narratives detailing the 'Bride-Show' custom, which appears in Byzantine documentary sources dating from the ninth and tenth centuries, provide several archetypical depictions of the Byzantine obsession with the beauty and other personal qualities of empress candidates. Warren Treadgold has analysed the five occasions in Byzantine history when the consort of an emperor was chosen in a type of beauty competition.[211] He asserts that the bride-show was "...unquestionably historical: but many historians seem to have trouble taking it seriously."[212] Treadgold contends the all the bride-shows that appear in the historical record had important political impacts that were obscured behind a quaint folkloric custom. In Treadgold's interpretation, the 'Bride-Show' may be viewed as an example of an ideological convention masking the exercise of real social and political influence on the part of women.[213] Treadgold notes that common qualities of the candidates included beauty, modest demeanour, piety,

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[210] Ibid.
[211] See Warren Treadgold, "The Brideshows of Byzantine Emperors."
[212] Treadgold, "Brideshows," p. 395.
[213] In this respect Treadgold's views can be said to be consistent with those of Lynda Garland. See p. 26 of this paper.

and noble birth.[214] If he is aware of it, he does not comment that these qualities are among those conventionally attributed to 'the ideal empress' in many Byzantine narrative sources. Treadgold also observes that bride-shows were only held for the senior emperor or his heir, never for junior emperors, but he does not conjecture why this should be so.[215] A possible explanation is that only the wives of senior emperors were usually proclaimed *augousta* and it was important that the wife of the senior emperor, at least, be seen to conform to the ideology.

Lennart Rydén[216] disputes that the descriptions of bride-shows are historically accurate. He proposes an examination of the phenomenon from a literary rather than a historical perspective and suggests that the Byzantine authors had a literary reason for inserting a bride-show in their narratives. Rydén explains how Byzantine authors, most notably in the Life of Philaretos, the Life of St. Theophano and the Life of St. Irene, employed the bride-show motif. They used the bride-show device to create a positive portrayal of the empress-candidates in their stories. They added attributes of the ideal empress to their depictions of their heroines – noble birth, omens of future greatness, beauty, piety, philanthropy, and so on. In Rydén's interpretation Byzantine authors exploit an ideological convention for its potential as a literary device in order to associate their heroes and heroines with a positive ideology. Rydén attributes the appearance and disappearance of bride-shows from the narratives to changing literary fashions between the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. During that

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[214] Treadgold, "Brideshows," p. 409-410.
[215] Treadgold, "Brideshows," p. 409.
[216] See Lennart Rydén, "The Bride-shows at the Byzantine Court – History or Fiction?"

period the vogue changed from anonymous forms that stressed an ideal over accuracy, like hagiography, to attributed works like the *Chronographia* of Michael Psellos.[217] Whether the bride-shows are based in historical occurrences or not they played a role in the creation of the ideology of the 'ideal' empress. The brides chosen generally conformed to the ideological conventions of appropriate personal qualities and behaviour for empresses or, if they did not, the obverse accentuated the ideal.

Signs of the creation and reinforcement of a Byzantine ideology of feminine behaviour are not only found in documentary sources but can also be discovered in other evidence. Georges Duby has affirmed the value of non-verbal documents in the discovery of information about ideology, "since ideology sometimes finds more direct and richer expression through visual signs. Emblems, costumes, ornament, insignia, gestures, the setting and organisation of festivals and ceremonies, the arrangement of the social space: all these testify to a certain dream of order." [218] The Romans of the Principate, and later the Byzantines, engaged in a self-conscious creation of an ideology of imperial administration that included a role for imperial women from the very beginning.[219] An important part of that process involved the creation of visual products, such as coins, mosaics and sculptures, which promulgated the ideology of imperial government and the role of the empress in that government. The Macedonians, beginning with Basil I, showed themselves to be skilled propagandists in

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[217] Rydén, "The Bride-shows at the Byzantine Court...," p. 191.
[218] Duby, "Ideologies in Social History," p. 157.
[219] See, for example, Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters...*, op. cit.; Elaine Fantham, et al., *Women in the Classical World; Image and Text* (New York: Oxford University Presss, 1994); see also Kenneth Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, op. cit.

legitimising and aggrandising the Macedonian dynasty, largely through written documents but also displaying an understanding of the potential of non-verbal signs. This included festivals and ceremonies as well as the more tangible visual cues.

As Shaun Tougher observes: "one of the most striking features of the history of the early Macedonian dynasty [was] a developed mythology of its own creation."[220] This mythology is exemplified by the *Life of Basil* written under the supervision of Constantine VII but also by earlier works such as Leo VI's funeral oration for his father (which included a digression on the virtues of his mother) as well as art and literature from Basil's reign. As with their predecessors, it is apparent that the Macedonians recognised the importance of the feminine aspect in the construction of the imperial ideology. An example of the prominent position of the imperial Macedonian women in non-verbal mythologizing efforts is provided by a description in the *Life of Basil* of mosaics that adorned the imperial apartment known as the Kainourgion, erected during the reign of Basil I. According to the description from the *Life*,

> This is followed by another adornment of golden tesserae exhibiting the Emperor...enthroned together with his wife Eudocia, both clad in imperial costume and wearing crowns. The children they had in common are represented round the building like shining stars, they, too, adorned with imperial vestments and crowns. The male ones among them are shown holding codices that contain the divine commandments (which they were taught to follow), while the female ones also carry books of the divine laws; in this way the artist wished to show that not only the male, but also the female progeniture had been initiated into holy writ and shared in divine wisdom...This is what he wanted to show by the painter's art independently of history. [Another mosaic on

[220] Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 25.

> the ceiling depicts]...the illustrious Emperor himself, his wife and all their children raising their arms to God and the life-giving sign of the Cross and all but crying out that 'on account of this victorious Symbol everything that is good and agreeable to God has been accomplished and achieved in our reign.'[221]

As Tougher observes, mosaics such as this "present a strong image of family unity and solidarity, an image of righteousness and God-appointed dynasty. They are undoubtedly propagandistic, but reveal exactly how Basil wished his family to be seen."[222] It was an image in which the imperial women had an integral role and which persisted as long as the Byzantine Empire existed.

The lessons learned by the Macedonians about the power of the 'painter's art' were not lost on their successors. One famous example is the 'Zôê Panel' in the south gallery of the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Zôê is depicted giving gifts to Christ with her last husband Constantine IX Monomachos. However, investigation has shown that the face of the emperor has been changed from that of Zôê's first husband, Romanos III Agyrus. Barbara Hill has proposed that this panel, and its altered images, illustrates the role of the Macedonian heir Zôê in conferring imperial legitimacy on her husbands.[223] As Judith Herrin notes in her study of imperial women of all periods, images of Christ blessing the imperial couple on coins and other objects represented the emperor and empress sharing responsibility for the continued order and prosperity of the Christian empire. She asserts that "surviving examples of such depictions

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[221] Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 197-198.
[222] Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 49.
[223] Barbara Hill, et al, "Zoe: The Rhythm Method for Imperial Renewal," *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th-13th* Centuries, ed. Paul Magdalino (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), p. 223ff.

indicate that in Byzantium the female partner of the ruler shared in the supreme authority invested in his office."[224] Thus the ideology of the empress included her sharing in the imperial authority as the consort of the emperor and mother of his children and this was promulgated and reinforced by non-verbal signs as well as documentary sources. As Herrin further observes, "in the great ceremonial events the roles of the imperial couple are clearly gendered and complimentary, and, however subordinate, the female part became essential to the expression of the male imperial role."[225]

Visual products were also important in propagating other aspects of the feminine ideology including the physical image of the ideal empress. Barbara Hill observes that the mosaics depicting imperial women, such as Zôê Porphyrogenita and Eirene Piroska, in the church of Hagia Sophia are a pictorial representation of the descriptions of the physical features of empresses found in funeral orations and other documentary sources. The mosaics depict a face perfectly round, arched eyebrows, a nose neither flat nor tilted but pointing straight downward towards lips the colour of roses, blond hair, blue eyes, and pale skin with a 'rosy bloom' on the cheeks.[226] This description echoes that of any one of a number of imperial women as described in the documentary sources, including that of Anna's mother. Such mosaic representations reinforced

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[224] Herrin, "The imperial feminine in Byzantium," p. 20-21.
[225] Herrin, "The imperial feminine in Byzantium," p. 22.
[226] Hill, "The Ideal Imperial Komnenian Woman," p. 10; also Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 77 and Psellos, "A Funeral Oration...," p. 87-88.

the ideal image of the empress as resplendent, dignified, and untouchable;[227] "a living statue of beauty, a breathing pillar of grace."[228]

The ideology of imperial administration as well as the ideology for imperial women was also reinforced by the visual clues found in Byzantine imperial ceremonial. The Macedonians especially are credited with a profound understanding of the propaganda power of imperial ceremonial but they were not alone.[229] Participation in certain ceremonies was the requisite to legitimisation for an emperor or empress. A number of ceremonies had the empress at the centre, the most important of which was the coronation of the *augousta.* While the emperor was crowned by the Patriarch from 457 onwards, the empress was crowned by the emperor. However, as Steven Runciman notes, the Patriarch attended the ceremony of an *augousta's* coronation, which gave it a religious sanction and supported the creation of an ideology whereby the empress achieved a constitutional authority and shared in the imperial mystery, which she would then be capable of transmitting to a successor or exercising on behalf of a minor child.[230] Runciman writes, "the constitutional importance of the Empress

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[227] Garland, "The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women...," p. 392.
[228] Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, p. 77.
[229] Shaun Tougher notes that the *Kletorologion* of Philotheos, a manual of ceremonial which was compiled during the reign of Leo VI, "reveals the high proportion of feasts celebrated throughout the year that had as their focus the glorification of the Macedonian dynasty." (*The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 11) and *De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae*, the definitive manual of Byzantine imperial ceremonial was compiled during the reign of Leo's son Constantine VII. However, other rulers also employed ceremonial to good effect. The Empress Irene showed herself skillful at adapting ceremonial for a female ruler and she made effective use of ceremonial procession (Liz James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*, p. 54-56). Anna Comnena describes how her father Alexios crowned her mother *augousta* soon after he himself had achieved the emperor's throne. He knew that such a visible symbol of Irene Doucania's authority would secure him the loyalty of her Ducas kinsmen, who were becoming restive (Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, p. 73-76).
[230] See Steven Runciman, "Women in Byzantine Aristocratic Society," *The Byzantine Aristocracy IX to XIII Centuries*, ed. M. Angold (Oxford, 1984), p. 12; See also Steven Runciman, "Some Notes on the Role of the Empress," *Eastern Churches Review* IV (1972), p. 122-123. There are

was never defined and was based on public sentiment rather than on law...[but] by her coronation she acquired something of the imperial power...She was so to speak, in the apostolic succession from Constantine...of great practical importance if there were need for a regency."[231] In this way, the ideology of the empress-mother having the authority to legitimately act in the public sphere on behalf of a minor child was reinforced by public ceremonial. In fact, it was in her role as a mother that an empress would command the most prestige.

The empress was the head of a parallel court that consisted of the wives of male dignitaries, whose rank and status was linked to that of their husbands,[232] and a few women *zostai* (girdled) who held rank in their own right.[233] The empress's position as head of this court was established and reinforced by public ceremonial. For instance according to *De cerimoniis*, the manual of imperial ceremonial, separate ceremonies by male dignitaries and by the 'court of women' paid homage to the newly crowned empress.[234] Empresses were publicly acclaimed as the 'new Helena,'[235] calling to mind the first Christian empress. Helena was associated with the recovery of the true cross and the founding of religious institutions. Thus the empress was associated with the housing and veneration of relics and through this the ideals of piety and

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many examples of an empress exercising her authority to transfer imperial power to a successor emperor, only one of which is Zôê and the four emperors who derived their imperial authority from her, either through marriage or adoption.

[231] Runciman, S. "Some Notes on the Role of the Empress," p. 122.

[232] Ann Moffatt, "Variations in Byzantine Imperial Ceremonial: The De Ceremoniis of Constantine Porphyrogennetos" in *Conformity and Non-Conformity in Byzantium*, ed. Lynda Garland (Amsterdam: Verlag Adolf M. Hakkert, 1997), p. 223.

[233] Runciman, "Some Notes on the Role of the Empress," p. 120. Leo VI was said to have made his daughter Anna *augousta* after the death of his second wife for this reason.

[234] A. Kazhdan and M. McCormick, "The Social World of the Byzantine Court" *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. Henry McGuire (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), p. 183-184.

[235] James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*, p. 14.

philanthropy. *De cerimoniis* also describes an independent role for the empress and this parallel court on the feasts of Pentecost and Palm Sunday and the empress's court also had a role in the entertainment of female members of foreign delegations. The most famous incidence of this was the independent feminine ceremonial that attended the visit to Constantinople of Olga of Kiev in the tenth century.

Other non-verbal signs attested to the unique position of the *augousta* and reinforced her authority. Colour was a powerful propaganda tool and certain colours such as purple and gold were reserved for imperial use. Michael McCormick points out the echo of ancient solar ideologies in imperial ceremonial where the emperor and empress were arrayed in garments of "brilliant purple and glittering gold" designed to reflect the sun and direct all eyes to the key figures. He continues,

> Purple was the emperor's colour par excellence. His most solemn diplomatic documents were dyed in it; purple floor markings organised the movements of participants in the elaborate ballet of imperial audiences; purple ribbons were attached to property confiscated by the emperor's agent. Legitimate emperors were quite literally born to the purple: the chamber of the Great Palace in which medieval empresses gave birth was paved with porphyry, so that the newborn infant's first experience of this world was infused with his unique, divinely acknowledged status.[236]

The use of purple, so identified with imperial power, was restricted to the emperor and his closest associates, which included the *augoustai*. Perhaps the most tangible sign of imperial status and power were the purple boots or shoes donned by the emperor at investiture (or by rebels as a sign they intended to

[236] Michael McCormick, "Emperors," in *The Byzantines*, p. 231.

move to usurp the imperial authority). This powerful imperial symbol was also presented to an empress on her coronation.[237] When Theodora was brought forward by the mob as an alternative to the hated Michael V in 1042, as an indication of her imperial authority she was arrayed in the symbolic imperial clothing before being acclaimed by the senate and the mob, crowned by the Patriarch in St. Sophia, and then with Zôê's agreement to share power, installed in the palace.[238]

One of the most authoritative symbols of imperial authority was the ceremonial procession during which the imperial couple could be seen by the population of Constantinople in all their symbolic glory. According to Guglielmo Cavallo, the ideology of Byzantine society is mirrored in the ceremonial imperial procession. Each segment of Byzantine society had a role to play, even the poor and outcasts. As Cavallo explains, "in society as in the ceremonial procession, each person had a particular place in the 'order' of the world."[239] While social mobility was not unknown, the structure remained unchanged. Thus the word for ceremony – *taxis* – was the same as for 'order'. The Byzantines believed that terrestrial order was a reflection of celestial order and that the emperor's court mirrored that of heaven. As Cavallo notes, for Byzantines "the ideal was *mimēsis*, or the imitation of models."[240] Just as the emperor served as a model for all men so imperial women acted as a model for all women. The greatest role for all

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[237] Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, AD 527-1204.* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 2.
[238] Speros Vryonis, Jr., "Byzantine Imperial Authority: Theory and Practice in the Eleventh Century" in *La notion d'autorité au Moyen Age Islam, Byzance, Occident: Colloques Internationaux de la Nappoule*, ed. G. Makdisi, et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982) p. 145.
[239] Cavallo, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Byzantines*, p. 2.
[240] Cavallo, "Editor's Introduction," p. 7.

women was thus that of wife and mother; the centre of the earthly family as Mary was the centre of the heavenly one.

To summarise, the ideologies for empresses had many characteristics in common with the ideology for all women. This is not surprising for without a doubt the ideal qualities that were modelled by empresses in the narrative histories and in non-verbal sources also came to be integrated into the ideologies associated with non-imperial women. For instance, by the eleventh century it had become a *topos* when praising all women, not just those of the imperial house, to mention their esteemed lineage including imperial antecedents. Thus Psellos states that his daughter had inherited the refinement of imperial blood through her mother, "...since her ancestors were related to emperors...."[241] Psellos does not, however, name Styliane's mother as one assumes he would if she were related to the imperial family. In addition to being of good family and noble lineage, the ideal empress was also beautiful (but not vain), intelligent, wise, dignified, modest, shy, pious, philanthropic and devoted to their families (as was any woman). However, in spite of these similarities the ideology associated with empresses was not the same as that for all women. While the ideal for all women shared qualities in common, the ideal empress was the model. The empress was the archetype. She was the centre of the ideology, as was Flacilla in Gregory of Nyssa's praise of her – "This ornament of the empire has gone from us, this rudder of justice, the image of philanthropy or, rather, its archetype...this model of wifely love... this undefiled monument of chastity...This zeal for the faith...this

[241] Psellos, "A Funeral Oration...," p. 84.

pillar of the church, decoration of altars, wealth of the needy."[242] Gregory's use of words such as rudder, image, archetype, model, pillar and monument signified the central position of the empress in the portrayal of the ideal.

Empresses were also distinguished from other women in that they shared in the imperial authority of the emperor. This was strongly reinforced by non-verbal as well as documentary images. Those images show that the empress also had a distinctive and complimentary role to play in the promulgation of the ideology of imperial administration in which the imperial family operated as a symbol of order for the Empire. The empress could not share the virtue of courage in war. She could not lead the army nor was she seen, except in the case of a regency, as a dispenser of justice and good government in peace (the emperor was the source of all justice). The empress did, however, possess unique and complimentary virtues of her own. The ideal empress was the symbol of wifely love and support. She gave birth to the heir in a chamber lined with purple porphyry marble hence the title porphyrogenitus/porphyrogenita for the children born to a reigning emperor. While not the source of justice herself, the empress's role was to encourage the emperor in the exercise of temperance and mercy. This was an attribute unique to the *augoustai* and their good influence might modify the more bloodthirsty impulses of their emperor.

What was the ideal empress not? As criticism or invective tended to reverse imperial virtues and turn them into vices, a bad empress could be just as useful for the construction of ideology as a good one. As Jacqueline Long explains, invective was the exactly inverted form of encomium, "organised in the

[242] Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio funebris*..., p. 481 as cited by Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, p. 23.

same way but with the topics turned to vituperation instead of praise."[243] Liz James notes that Justinian's consort Theodora was described by Procopius in his *Anecdota* (or *Secret History*) as licentious and depraved, spiteful, greedy, an intriguer, and a demon thus reversing the imperial virtues of chastity, justice, mercy, piety, and philanthropy.[244] Where the encouragement of temperance and mercy was one of the main virtues associated with the ideal empress it was also the one most often inverted in invective. As Jacqueline Long notes, one form of invective inverted "encomium's praise for good wives who are helpmates sometimes able to intercede for mercy beyond strict justice"[245] If the object of invective was the emperor, the evil consort encouraged him in his evil deeds. Again, the most striking example of this is Theodora. She was portrayed as encouraging Justinian's greed. She manufactured false charges against those who opposed her and manipulated judges. According to Long, in Procopius' *Anecdota* she shamefully put herself about in public receiving *proskynesis* and welcoming foreign embassies. Theodora "incites and embodies Justinian's despotism."[246] Procopius portrays Theodora as spectacularly promiscuous. As Liz James notes, "sexual intrigue and adultery were always a good and very popular weapon to use against overambitious empresses who needed to be put in their place"[247] whether the accusations were true or not. In the tradition of

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[243] Jacqueline Long, *Claudian's In Eutropium: Or, How, When, and Why to Slander a Eunuch* (Chapel Hill; London:University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 78.
[244] James, *Empresses and Power*, p. 16. James also notes that the same stereotypes were used to criticise Roman empresses.
[245] Long, *Claudian's In Eutropium*, p. 97.
[246] Long, *Claudian's In Eutropium*, p. 99.
[247] James, *Empresses and Power*, p. 16.

invective the adjective most commonly used when insulting a woman was that she was 'whorish.'[248]

An association with eunuchs contributes to the negative ideologies connected with imperial women. Eunuchs and empresses frequently appear acting in concert in the narrative sources such as *A Synopsis of Histories*. As Jacqueline Long notes: "much the same prejudices that make a wife who impels her husband to commit evil into an effective invective device also operate against what was seen as the relentlessly malign backstairs influence of eunuchs."[249] Eunuchs were seen as operating in the same sphere as women and sharing similar unattractive traits.[250] A common image of eunuchs was that they were raised in the women's quarters under the guidance of older eunuchs ('in the shade') and like women were associated with darkness and seclusion. Men, on the other hand, lived their lives out of doors and were associated with light and openness.

The same misogynistic tone that often coloured representations of women in the narrative sources also frequently figured in portrayals of eunuchs. This is understandable for, as Kathryn Ringrose explains, "observers and commentators characterised [eunuchs] by using [the same] negative stereotypes that classical culture applied to women."[251] The negative stereotypes of eunuchs and women

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[248] Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humour* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 97.
[249] Long, *Claudian's In Eutropium*, p. 104.
[250] Kathryn Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows...," p. 87-90.
[251] K. Ringrose, "Passing The Test of Sanctity: Denial of Sexuality and Involuntary Castration" in *Desire and Denial in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), p. 124. See also Kathryn Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows...," p. 85.

have proven remarkably persistent and even modern histories of Byzantium are coloured by them. As Runciman notes,

> Of the effect of these many eunuchs on Byzantine society little need be said. It is not the place here to discuss the psychological results of castration...It has long been the custom to talk of eunuchs as always having a demoralising influence all around, and historians that seem otherwise sane talk Gibbonesque cant about the intrigues and cowardice rampant in a life so full of eunuchs and women...Such generalisations are a disgrace to the historians that make them.[252]

[252] Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus...*," p. 31.

Chapter 4 - Skylitzes' Portrayals of Imperial Women

An analysis of Skylitzes' views about imperial women should include consideration of several questions. What is the image of Byzantine imperial women constructed by Skylitzes in *A Synopsis of Histories*? What is the extent to which his portrayals of imperial women conform to an ideology for the behaviour of imperial women as also observed in other sources for Byzantine history and previously discussed in this paper? Does the image change with Skylitzes' source material or are his portrayals consistent? Have Skylitzes' portrayals of imperial women been carried forward into modern secondary works? These questions will be considered as Skylitzes' treatment of each of the Macedonian empresses is analysed. However, if a contention of this study is that Skylitzes constructed his portrayals of imperial women in order to be consistent with the conventions of an established ideology, this leads to further questions that should be addressed.

If Skylitzes' portrayals of imperial women consist of conventions and stereotypes does it necessarily follow that they do not give an accurate representation of reality? Liz James observes,

> This is not to say that the portraits we have of empresses are necessarily inaccurate, rather that they are biased and that this bias is reflected in particular ways and in a particular kind of approbation or hostility in areas which readers would have understood as praise or criticism of the empress or emperor.[253]

[253] Liz James, *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (London; New York: Leicster University Press, 2001) p. 20.

So, while portraits of empresses are not necessarily wrong, they are always prejudiced. As James further observes: "...often all that is recorded are actions and events which fit the paradigm of 'good' or 'bad' empress."[254] As explained by James, every action that an empress was portrayed as having taken relates in some way to a display of her virtues or an exposure of her vices. This does not necessarily mean that the incidents related in the narrative sources are false; only that the incidents were chosen to serve the didactic purposes of the author. Can anything of value be learned from such a work? As observed by A. Kazhdan in his analysis of the social views of Michael Attaliatês, "An idealized portrait may reveal little of its 'real' subject, but much about its creator, for it reflects and embodies the historian's own view of what a 'good' ruler [or empress] should be."[255] So, while an idealised portrait may not be strictly representational there is still much to be learned from it about the views of the author and the segment of society to which he belongs. Even in 'ideal' portrayals there are remnants of 'truth'.

Skylitzes' particular biases may also be revealed in ways other than through his portrayals of women. As noted in the "Translator's Introduction", it is obvious from his own preface and from the text of the *Synopsis* that Skylitzes has created a "scissors and paste"[256] work. Still, as the translator has noted, even if only in his choice of what excerpts to include, Skylitzes has left his "personal stamp" on the product.[257] This is most obvious in Skylitzes' lengthy descriptions

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[254] Ibid.
[255] See note 22.
[256] John Wortley, "Translator's Introduction," p. v.
[257] Ibid. See also the discussion on pages 12 and 13 of this paper.

of battles but also in his preoccupation with certain families and individuals. For instance, Skylitzes does not conceal his admiration for the great Byzantine general, the Catacalon Cecaumenus, about whom he seems to be particularly well informed.[258] Cecaumenus was an ally of the military usurper Isaac Comnenus. While this is by no means a unanimous view among Byzantine scholars, it is thought that the Catacalon was also likely to have been the same person who wrote the *Strategicon* of Cecaumenus (ca.1075-1078).

The *Strategicon*[259] is a book of advice for Cecaumenus' sons. It includes advice for every aspect of living from etiquette through choosing a career to managing one's property - and managing the women of one's household. In fact, this work is also notorious for its conservative and misogynistic attitude towards women.[260] For example, Cecaumenus advocated almost complete seclusion of women in order to save them "from their own evil propensities and from the attacks of unscrupulous outsiders"[261] Cecaumenus and his contemporaries Attaliatês and Psellos were among the last Byzantine authors to portray the seclusion of women in a gynaecium as a part of social convention.[262] A. Laiou contends that even as these men were writing, the reality for eleventh and twelfth century women was quite different that what these narrative sources portrayed. She further contends that the narrative sources were presenting what was for them an 'ideal' that had ceased to have relevance for most women. Laiou asserts

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[258] See J. Shepard, "A Suspected Source of Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion*: The Great Catacalon Cecaumenos." *BMGS*, 16 (1992).
[259] *Cecaumeni Strategicon et incerti scriptoris de officiis regiis libellus*, ed. B. Wasseliewsky and V. Jernstedt (St. Petersburg, 1896; rpt. Amsterdam, 1965).
[260] Garland, "Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women," p. 369-370. See also Diehl, *Byzantine Portraits*, p. 326.
[261] Garland, "Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women," p. 370.
[262] Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society," p. 249.

that, on the contrary, "the aristocratic woman emerged as an important element in the society and politics of the Empire in the late 11th century...[and that this was part of] the increased interference of a whole class of women in public life."[263] For instance Anna Dalassena, the mother of Alexius I Comnenus (1081-1118),[264] was her son's most trusted advisor. It was to her that he entrusted administrative control, including raising funds, while he was on military campaigns.[265]

Charles Diehl characterises the author of the *Strategicon* as "fundamentally and ineradicably provincial" and suspicious of the "pleasures of society, the sophisticated refinements of the capital."[266] For Cecaumenus, the only honourable career was the army. The imperial service was fraught with danger and the idea of mixing in imperial society filled Cecaumenus with terror. His advice was: "If you serve the emperor...be very careful; keep the vision of your downfall ever before your eyes – you cannot know all the plots that are woven behind your back."[267] Dealing with the empress was especially nerve-racking. Cecaumenus advises: "As regards the Empress, respect her as your sovereign, as a mother, as a sister; and if she seeks...to descend to your level, escape, retire; never speak to her save with lowered eyes."[268] According to Cecaumenus it was "better to live independent and respected upon one's estates

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[263] Laiou, "The Role of Women in Byzantine Society," p. 250.
[264] Alexius I Comnenus was the nephew of the usurper Isaac Comnenus, a close ally of the Catacalon Cecaumenus.
[265] Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, p. 613. See also Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, p. 80 and p. 86.
[266] Diehl, *Byzantine Portraits*, p. 326.
[267] *Strategicon of Cecaumenus*, no page number given, as cited by Charles Diehl, *Byzantine Portraits*, p. 329.
[268] Ibid.

that to expose oneself to humiliation and calumny in the imperial household."[269] L. Garland sees Cecaumenus' reaction as a possibly justifiable reaction to "the obvious ways in which Empresses and women of the imperial family were seen both to be easily susceptible to passion and to enjoy their relative social freedom in a manner which even their biographers were unable to approve."[270] Criticism of the behaviour of imperial women was common during this period. For instance, even the court official Michael Psellos does not hide his disapproval of Zôê's intemperate behaviour with the future Michael IV, which took place under the nose of her (soon-to-be-late) husband Romanus III Argyrus.[271]

Even if the author of the *Strategicon* is not the same Cecaumenus as the ally of Isaac Comnenos of whom Skylitzes writes, the views and attitudes of the author of the *Strategicon* are probably representative of the provincial military aristocracy to which both he and the Catacalon Cecaumenus belonged. These men were conservative in outlook and distrustful of the civil aristocracy, which they saw as corrupt and profligate, squandering the imperial resources on amusements and titles for themselves while the military institutions of the empire disintegrated.[272] While there is no particular indication that Skylitzes shares Cecaumenus' views on any particular topic, his obvious admiration of Cecaumenus gives weight to this possibility. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Skylitzes' admiration of Cecaumenus also indicates some sympathy with the social views and outlook of the provincial military aristocracy. This would include

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[269] Diehl, *Byzantine Portraits*, p. 330.
[270] Garland, "Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women," p. 370.
[271] Psellos, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, p. 75-80.
[272] See, for example, Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 331-339.

a deep-seated suspicion of women acting openly in the public sphere to exercise imperial authority.

Skylitzes' views about empresses may be discerned from an examination of the incidents of their lives that he chooses to portray and how he portrays them.[273] One thing that is immediately obvious is that Skylitzes' portrayals of imperial women are 'uneven.' Some empresses receive extensive treatment while others are almost completely ignored. Further examination reveals that those empresses who receive the most attention from Skylitzes are the ones who exercised imperial authority in some capacity. This is not to say that empresses who did not exercise imperial authority, either as regents or in their own right, did not have a public role to play. As indicated earlier, the empress had a distinct role in imperial ceremonial and she performed acts of piety, philanthropy, and mercy that did not always take place in the context of government. However, Skylitzes does not generally portray empresses engaged in those activities. Still, it will be seen that in what he does portray Skylitzes adheres closely to the ideology. Even while they may be mentioned only briefly empresses either display characteristics that conform to the ideal as acknowledged by standard forms of praise or they display characteristics antithetical to the ideal criticised in the tradition of invective.

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[273] As this essay is primarily concerned with how Skylitzes' portrayals of imperial women conform to an ideology for Byzantine women, Skylitzes' portrayals will by analysed on a case by case basis and their conformity (or not) with the ideology assessed. It is also hoped that this type of analysis will avoid the type of de facto segregation of the sexes that has recently characterised Byzantine scholarship by keeping imperial women within the historical context in which they participated and in which they exercised influence on the outcome of important events in Byzantine history.

The Not Quite Ideal - The Blessed Theodora

It may seem inconsistent that the analysis of Skylitzes' portrayal of the imperial women of the Macedonian House begins with the last empress of the preceding (Amorian) dynasty. The Empress Theodora, however, casts a long shadow over her Macedonian successors. Theodora, the wife of the last iconoclast emperor, Theophilus (829-842), was one of those empresses who did exercise imperial authority and one to whom Skylitzes gives a lot of space. He expends more ink on Theodora than on any other empress, except perhaps Zôê Porphyrogenita. With his depiction of Theodora, Skylitzes comes closest to articulating a representation of the ideal 'good' empress. It will also be observed, however, that while Theodora exhibits many of the characteristics of the 'ideal', she was not an uncompromised ideal – neither for Skylitzes nor for his sources.

Skylitzes portrays Theodora as exhibiting the most important characteristic of the ideal 'good' empress by relating incontrovertible evidence for her orthodox piety,[274] even in the face of fierce opposition from her iconoclast husband. In one instance, he relates how the revelation that his mother-in-law[275] had been "kindling a favourable attitude to the sacred icons in her grandchildren...put the

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[274] Theodora was the Byzantine empress under whose regency iconoclasm was ended and the veneration of icons was restored for a second and ultimately final time in March 843.

[275] This story first appears in Pseudo-Symeon, but with Euphrosynê (Theophilus' step-mother) as the one influencing the grand-children not Theodora's mother, Theoctista. Euphrosynê was the daughter of Constantine VI (later blinded by his mother Irene) and Maria of Amnia. She was consigned along with her mother to the convent on Prinkipo in 795, where she remained until summoned to marry Michael II in 820. It is not known why Skylitzes chose to follow the narrative of *Theophanes Continuatus*, which substitutes Theoctista for Euphrosynê. Treadgold (*Byzantine Revival*, p. 446-47, n. 427) asserts that Theoctista and Euphrosynê had retired to the same convent at the Gastria, but that, by the time of this incident ca. 839, Theoctista may already have been dead. Skylitzes may have concurred with the views of other narrative sources, including George the Monk, who had voiced their disapproval of the removal of Euphrosynê from her convent and the abrogation of her original vows to Christ (see Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 158 and p. 281, n. 64). Skylitzes thus dealt with that uncomfortable association by removing Euphrosynê from the narrative.

Emperor into a rage."[276] On another occasion, when he was informed that the court fool had surprised Theodora kissing the 'pretty dolls' she kept under her pillow, "the Emperor took the point: in great wrath he...went to her immediately. He hurled verbal abuse at her, calling her (with his unbridled tongue,) amongst other things, idolatress...."[277] Although both these incidents also appear in Pseudo-Symeon and *Theophanes Continuatus*[278] modern historians are doubtful that these incidents are based in reality. L. Garland doubts that Theophlius would have tolerated such open disobedience at court.[279] Treadgold believes that the first story may be based in reality but that the second story is invented. What is significant, however, is not whether these incidents ever actually occurred but that the chroniclers deemed it appropriate to assign such pious activity to the empress. Herrin notes that "the sources emphasise the role of imperial women in countering [iconoclast repression]"[280] and there is a general identification of women with resistance to iconoclasm.[281] Also, where such unwifely disobedience would normally earn the condemnation of the historian, it is portrayed with admiration in these instances. Words expressing this point of view are put into the mouth of Theoctistê, Theophilus' mother-in-law:

> Then, taking them [her grandchildren] aside, she would earnestly entreat them not to be soft, nor to remain the women they were, but to play the man and to think the kind of thoughts which were worthy of and appropriate to their

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[276] SH, p. 32.
[277] SH, p. 32.
[278] Warren Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 446-47, n. 427.
[279] Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 100.
[280] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 193 and ff.
[281] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 166-168.

> mother's breast. They were to hold in abomination their father's heresy, embracing the outward forms of the icons.[282]

Also consistent with the characteristics of the ideal 'good' empress, is the portrayal of Theodora by Skylitzes and his sources as acting as an influence for mercy and temperance on the emperor and others. Skylitzes relates one incident where Theophilus has caused an icon painter to be tortured to the point of death but "bowing to the entreaties of the empress and of others close to him, the tyrant [Theophilus] released him [the icon painter Lazaros] from prison and hid him in the Church of the Forerunner known as Phoberos'."[283] Some time later, after Theophilus' death, Theodora is then portrayed encouraging Lazaros to exercise mercy towards her husband, asking him "to grant pardon to her husband and to intercede for him." In fact, Theodora is portrayed as entreating her husband's former victims for forgiveness on her husband's behalf on more than one occasion. Some time after her husband's death, during a celebration commemorating the restoration of the icons, Theodora came face to face with two other victims of her husband's persecution. Two brothers, known as the *graptoi* because of the lines of verse condemning them for their superstition and foolishness that Theophilus ordered tattooed on their foreheads, declared to Theodora that they were determined to have Theophilus answer for his crimes before the "implacable judgement-seat of God."[284] After entreaties from the Empress the *graptoi* promised that, while their statements about Theophilus' crimes were immutable, they would

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[282] SH, p. 31.
[283] SH, p. 36.
[284] SH, p. 52.

not exaggerate Theophilus' sins and "thus was the Empress' pain alleviated."[285] It has been suggested that Theodora was not in fear for Theophilus' mortal soul, but rather for the fate of her son Michael III if public accusations were brought against the deceased emperor by the iconophile clergy who were in the ascendancy after the restoration of icons.[286] Even if this were so, it is still significant that this impulse for reconciliation and temperance comes from the mouth of the empress who, according to the ideology, should properly espouse such sentiments rather than some other member of the imperial family or government official.[287]

As Skylitzes explains, "After Theophilus had departed this life it was his son, Michael, who, together with his mother, Theodora, succeeded to the sceptre of the Empire."[288] The incidents of courageous piety described above support a portrayal of Theodora as acting forcefully to restore the veneration of icons following the death of her husband, even in the face of powerful opposition. As Skylitzes observes, "...nobody dared to speak out boldly and make a speech expressly calling for the abolition of this heresy for the greater part of the Senate and of the Synod, including the Patriarch himself, remained faithful to it."[289] In her capacity as regent, Theodora also responded forcefully and unambiguously to threats from the Bulgarians:

> When Bogoris, the ruler of the Bulgars, heard that it was a woman, together with a tender child, who was ruling the Romans, he became insolent. He sent messengers to the

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[285] SH, p. 52.
[286] SH, Jean Claude Cheynet annotation (Hereafter SH-annotated) (Michael III, paragraph 5, note 28).
[287] The *Vita Theodorae* also mentions similar apocryphal tales where Theophilus is apparently forgiven because of the intercession of Theodora with Christ. (*Vita Theodorae*, ed. Halkin, 32-3 as cited by Garland, Byzantine Empresses, p. 101).
[288] SH, p. 48.
[289] SH, p. 48.

> imperial city threatening to break the treaties and to attack the Romans' territory. There was nothing ignoble or womanly about the reply of the Empress: "You will have to reckon with me fighting against you and, if it be God's will, getting the better of you. And even if it is you who gets the upper hand (which is by no means impossible) the victory will still be mine. For it will be a woman, not a man, whom you will have overcome." These words took the wind out of the barbarian's sails; he fell silent and renewed the former treaties.[290]

According to the ideology, such open and decisive public behaviour on the part of empresses was only acceptable in certain tightly defined situations. This would include championing orthodoxy in the face of heresy or the case of a mother acting to protect the empire from enemies in her capacity of regent.

However, not all incidents of Theodora acting forcefully in the public sphere earn the admiration of the historians. This is the case with an odd and surprisingly persistent anecdote which appears in several major sources[291] as well as Skylitzes. This story has puzzled many modern observers; not least because it casts the iconophile heroine Theodora in a rather bad light. The various versions of this anecdote portray Theodora as so publicly engaged in a large scale commercial shipping venture that many people knew of it. This was a source of much annoyance and embarrassment to her husband. He is portrayed by Skylitzes as putting her ship and its cargo to the torch in order to emphasise his disapproval of this very public commercial activity on Theodora's part.[292] As Skylitzes relates, "As for the sovereign lady, he [Theophilus] assailed her with

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[290] SH, p. 52.
[291] Genesios 53 (as cited by Bury, *Eastern Roman Empire*, p. 123; also Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 101, n. 4); Symeon Magister 328 (as cited by Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 192 & 284; p. 287, n. 17); Pseudo-Symeon 628 and *Theophanes Continuatus* 88-89 (as cited by Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, p. 438, n. 394).
[292] SH, *A Synopsis of Histories*, p. 31.

reproaches and threatened to take her life if she was ever detected doing any such thing again."[293]

Gibbon[294] and J. B. Bury[295] repeated this story without query or question while later survey works have largely ignored it. Treadgold[296] mentions the anecdote but states that he thinks it was invented. Some feminist historians have touched on the incident while also questioning the veracity of the story. Judith Herrin doubts whether, "if any credence can be given to this...,"[297] Theodora was carrying on with the commercial activities of her family,[298] an activity the emperor found beneath the imperial dignity. "However, it seems more likely that the story is invented to demonstrate the emperor's lack of judgement."[299] Garland also discusses this story in the context of Theophilus acting to preserve the imperial dignity.[300] She later proposes that such stories of Theodora's open disobedience toward her husband are related by the Macedonian narrative sources in order to blacken Theodora's name along with that of her son.[301] It may be a more

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[293] SH, p. 31. While Genesios mentions the incident, the threat of death was apparently added later by *Theophanes Continuatus* (see Bury, *Eastern Roman Empire*, p. 123, note 1) and repeated by Skylitzes.
[294] Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall*, p. 37.
[295] Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire*, p. 122-123.
[296] Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, p. 289.
[297] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 192.
[298] Theodora's family came from the village of Ebissa in the largely rural province of Paphlagonia, where people were proud of their entrepreneurial traditions. Her father had served as a military official, however, by the time of her marriage he had probably passed away. Theodora's family were allied with other prominent Armenian military families and it is possible that were involved in the Black Sea trade. (Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 187-188) Treadgold asserts that "her family was wealthy and splendidly connected in the capital" (Treadgold, *Byzantine Revival*, p. 269).
[299] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 192.
[300] Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 101.
[301] Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 108. Theodora's son was Michael III, who would be murdered by the first Macedonian, Basil I, in order to take the throne. The Macedonian sources, which include *Theophanes Continuatus* produced under Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus and the *Life of Basil*, also produced under Constantine's auspices, are widely accepted to have been biased in favour of Basil I and thus portray Michael as dangerously evil and his murder as justified.

plausible contention that Skylitzes, following his sources, included the anecdote to illustrate the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable public activities by empresses. Pious disobedience of an unorthodox heretic was acceptable. Forceful defence of the rights of a minor child by the regent was acceptable. Publicly carrying on large-scale trading ventures was not.[302]

This is not the only case in which Skylitzes portrays Theodora with less than undiluted approval or as deviating from the ideal. Theodora's commitment to orthodoxy and to rooting out heresy in all its forms is generally praised. She is even portrayed as facilitating the conversion of the Bulgars to Christianity.[303] However, her commitment to orthodoxy also leads her to move against the heretic Paulicians with a single-minded ferocity that was, to say the least, intemperate and unmerciful:

> The western regions now lived under cloudless skies and in stable piety. The Empress rejoiced and was glad in this state of affairs; with the intention of improving it yet further, she addressed herself to the task of bringing back to true religion those Manichees in the east commonly called Paulicians after the founders of the heresy. Otherwise, if she failed to convert them, she would completely obliterate them from among mankind; a decision which filled the world with many woes. For, far from discharging their commission with moderation, those who were sent to carry out the order (Leo son of Argyros, Andronikos son of Doukas and Soudalês) acted with great savagery.[304]

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[302] As with the convention of seclusion of all women, it appears that the convention of imperial women not engaging in trade and commercial activities was not an accurate representation of reality. Runciman ("Some Notes on the Role of the Empress", p. 121; *Romanus Lecapenus...*, p. 22) notes that it would not have been unusual for Theodora to be involved in trading ventures. She would have headed her own staff of controllers and chamberlains who would have assisted her in managing her personal financial assets, which would have included business interests. See also Herrin ("In Search of Byzantine Women," p. 170) on the ownership of businesses by aristocratic women.

[303] SH, p. 52-53.

[304] SH, p. 53-54.

Although some responsibility was deflected to those sent to carry out her orders, it was Theodora's resolve to convert the Paulicians otherwise, if she could not, to "completely obliterate them from among mankind; a decision which filled the world with many woes." The Paulicians were provoked into a large-scale revolt and the consequences for the empire were disastrous.

Skyltitzes also relates other incidents that portray Theodora as engaging in displays of passion inappropriate for an empress, although perhaps excusable under the circumstances (even Psellos' mother lost her composure in the face of great grief).[305] When Theodora's trusted counsellor and ally, Theoctistos, was killed at the instigation of her brother Bardas,[306] she did not maintain a dignified and impassionate demeanour:

> When the Empress Theodora perceived what had happened, she let down her hair and filled the palace with lamentation, hurling reproaches and curses at both her son and her brother, calling down a similar death upon them. Finding her reproaches intolerable (and Bardas not deviating in the least from his goal) they decided to rid themselves of her too, so that in future they could do whatever they liked without let or hindrance. This she perceived (for she was well able to observe and to conjecture) but she did not think she should take any counter-measures, because she had a horror of killing and bloodshed.[307]

As related, Theodora did stop short of taking more violent action that would have placed her firmly in 'bad' empress territory. She is also portrayed as passionately

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[305] Psellos maintained that his mother, Theodotê, avoided all displays of public emotion "except at her husband's death when convention demanded it." (Garland, "Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women," p. 376)

[306] Theodora, acting in co-operation with Theoctistos, had excluded her brothers Bardas and Petronas from effective participation in the regency government. This in spite of their military triumphs and their demonstrated role in the restoration of orthodoxy. According to SH, Bardas was restricted to his role as guardian of Michael III, a position which he exploited to his own advantage rather than discouraging Michael in his evil propensities. (SH, p. 54ff, p. 64)

[307] SH, p. 55-56.

and vocally opposing her son's blasphemous behaviour. According to Skylitzes, when Theodora discovered herself to be the victim of one of her son's profane practical jokes, "she protested vigorously against what had happened, hurling curses at her son and uttering a prophecy that, before very long, he would fall out of the good graces of God."[308]

In spite of Theodora's less than perfectly ideal behaviour, Garland's contention that Theodora is portrayed as a less than ideal empress by the Macedonian sources (and, by extension, Skylitzes) in order to blacken her reputation along with that of her son must be disputed. Skylitzes' portrayal, in the main based on the pro-Macedonian source *Theophanes Continuatus*, is generally approving and makes a fine distinction between this most pious of empresses and her villainous progeny. When Bardas has removed Theoctistos and consolidated his influence over Michael III, Theodora does not attempt to cling to power in an unseemly and unwomanly fashion. She exhibits the dignity expected of an empress (while being distanced from the evil administration which was to follow) and relinquishes power gracefully:

> But she did decide to reveal to the Senate the wealth which was deposited in the palace in order to restrict the prodigal expenditure of the son and to make known her prudent stewardship. She convened the Senate and rose to address it, rendering her account in words like these: "Fathers, lying in the imperial treasury there are nineteen hundred kentênaria of gold and about three thousand of silver which my husband acquired, or which I was able to accumulate after his death, in addition to many other assets of various kinds. I am communicating this information to you so that if my son, your emperor, should claim after I have departed from the palace that I left it destitute of riches, you will not readily believe him." When she had said this she summoned the persons in charge

[308] SH, p. 64.

> of the imperial treasury who confirmed what she had said. The Empress bid the Senate farewell, renounced all power and decision-making authority, then departed from the palace.[309]

Skylitzes drives the point home by describing Theodora and her sisters thus - "All [the women] were beautiful and good-looking, falling only a little short of the apogee of virtue." Her brothers, on the other hand, are described as "crafty and scheming."[310]

It is not unusual for the Byzantine historians to be ambivalent about empresses exercising imperial authority, even though the empresses may have been acting from appropriate motives.[311] James notes that historians can be "pulled by conflicting agenda[s]"[312] as was Skylitzes, caught between praising the restorer of orthodoxy and vilifying her son, the last member of an evil iconoclast dynasty. Skylitzes may have been ambivalent about Theodora's exercise of imperial authority but he also acknowledged her positive qualities. Skylitzes' portrayal of Theodora generally associates her with the traditional virtues of the empress - piety and mercy. There was no such ambivalence in his portrayal of Michael III, which follows the form of classical invective.[313] Skylitzes' portrayal of Theodora has

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[309] SH, p. 56.
[310] SH, p. 57.
[311] For example, Liz James describes the ambivalent treatment accorded Pulcheria by the historians. She is praised by some historians for her forceful actions as regent and vilified by others for her unwomanly forcefulness (James, *Empresses and Power*, p. 18).
[312] James, *Empresses and Power*, p. 17.
[313] See especially SH, p. 62-64. Michael III is presented as a wastrel, mindless of his duties as emperor (good stewardship of the treasury, to conduct imperial ceremonies and rituals correctly, bravely and competently to lead the armies in battle against the enemies of the empire) and not displaying any of the good qualities of an emperor (love of learning, etc.). Michael was vulgar and disrespectful of the Empire's image. He was unworthy of the imperial dignity. As a result, disasters befell the empire, especially the capital. Still, while portrayals of Michael as too fond of wine, women and horse-racing are generally considered accurate, he is now widely believed to have been a victim of Macedonian propaganda and not to have been as irredeemably immoral as depicted by Skylitzes and his sources. (See Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 107). Michael's

many characteristics of the ideal but she is not a paragon. By portraying her with some un-empress like faults and with her passion intact, Skylitzes has given us an uncharacteristically human portrait of an empress rather than a two dimensional ideal.

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fondness of horse-racing would eventually lead to his downfall. The usurper Basil I first came to Michael's notice in his capacity as a groom.

The Footnote Empress - Eudocia Dekapolitissa

Michael III's wife, Eudocia Dekapolitissa, is mentioned by Skylitzes only once and then only as a footnote in one manuscript of the *Synopsis*.[314] Skylitzes' lack of comment, which echoes that of most other narrative sources for the period, may stem from the fact there were no children of the marriage and thus no role for Eudocia Dekapolitissa to play in imperial administration after Michael's death. However, there are other reasons for the omission of an empress from the historical narrative. In this case, Skylitzes' silence covers an embarrassing association for the first Macedonian emperor, Basil I.

According to other historians for the period,[315] Eudocia Dekapolitissa was the choice of Michael's mother. While still quite young, Michael had apparently formed a liaison with another woman named Eudocia Ingerina, of whom his mother disapproved "on account of her impudence or shamelessness."[316] Theodora was determined to end the relationship by marrying Michael to someone else. Eudocia Dekapolitissa was said to have been chosen for Michael as a result of a bride-show organised by Theodora in 855 in which Eudocia Ingerina also took part.[317] Michael apparently resented the interference in his private affairs and was said to have continued to maintain a close relationship with Eudocia Ingerina until his murder in 867.[318] This was in spite of his having arranged for Eudocia Ingerina to marry his

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[314] "His wife was Eudocia." (SH-annotated, Michael III, paragraph 24).
[315] Leo Grammaticus 229-230 and Geo. Monk. Cont. 816 as cited by Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 104.
[316] Ibid.
[317] Treadgold, "Bride-shows," p. 404-406.
[318] Bury, *Eastern Roman Empire*, p. 157; see also Mango, "Eudocia Ingerina, the Normans and the Macedonian Dynasty."

close companion, Basil, following Basil's elevation to the offices of Caesar and Parakoimômenos (Chamberlain) around 864.

Images of Eudocia Ingerina

Once again with Basil's wife we have an empress with no public role in the *Synopsis* other than the minimum and, true to form, Skylitzes offers very little information about her life. He relates,

> Some time later the Emperor [Michael III] appointed Basil to be chamberlain [between 864 and 866], promoted him to the rank of patrician and married him to a woman who exceeded all other women of her age in physical elegance, beauty and sobriety. She was the daughter of Inger, renowned for his astuteness and nobility, a scion of the house of the Martiniakioi.[319]

As noted earlier noble lineage, physical elegance and beauty are standard terms of praise for an empress. Sobriety, on the other hand, is a more unusual compliment. It becomes more meaningful when one considers what is known of Eudocia Ingerina from sources other than Skylitzes.

As previously mentioned, Eudocia Ingerina's name was linked to that of Michael III early on and, even though he was married to another woman, the relationship is said to have continued throughout Michael's life.[320] Michael's fondness for drinking, practical jokes and horse-racing was well known and it is reasonable to assume his companions shared his interests. Sober is not an

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[319] SH, p. 73.

[320] Although there is no explicit evidence for this. Mango states that, "we know nothing of Eudocia's life between the years 855 and 865. Presumably she remained the emperor's mistress...Certainly, he did not repudiate his legitimate wife, Eudocia Decapolitissa..." (Mango, "Eudocia Ingeria," p. 22)

adjective that could be applied to this type of life-style. Further, the Logothete alleges that when Eudocia became pregnant, Michael arranged to have her marry Basil so that the child would be legitimate.[321] The relationship between Basil and Eudocia Ingerina was expected be platonic and, as a consolation, Basil was given the emperor's own sister, Thecla (who had been in a convent for a number of years) as a mistress! In due course Eudocia was delivered of a boy, the future Leo VI. Two other children born before or soon after Michael's death, Alexander and Stephen, were also said by the Logothete to be Michael's sons rather than Basil's.[322]

As a source, the Logothete is recognised as being biased against, if not downright hostile to, the Macedonian house.[323] The Logothete does not give *his* source for the story of Eudocia and Michael, but it has been suggested that the informant was a highly critical biography or *psogos* of Basil I, since lost.[324] Accusations of sexual impropriety are a standard technique of invective as, for example, the charges that Michael pimped his own sister, that Basil willingly participated in the corruption of a nun and some sort of travesty of holy matrimony with Eudocia. Many modern scholars accept this version of events;[325] however, acceptance is not unanimous. Shaun Tougher contends that the basis

[321] Mango, "Eudocia Ingerina," p. 22-23.
[322] Mango, "Eudocia Ingerina," p. 23.
[323] See 'Sources for the Ninth to Eleventh Centuries'.
[324] Mango, "Eudocia Ingerina," p. 19.
[325] Mango makes a compelling case in "Eudocia Ingerina" and cites the Annals of Eutychius of Alexandria (trans. M. Canard in Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes*, II/2, Brussels: 1950) as a source of independent corroboration, p. 23.

for this story is a rumour that circulated before Michael's death and that it was intended to humiliate the new favourite, Basil I.[326]

Skylitzes has, on the other hand, apparently followed the pro-Macedonian sources (such as *Theophanes Continuatus*) very closely in his favourable depiction of Basil's reign. His praise of Eudocia Ingerina for her sobriety can be seen as a deliberate contrast to the depictions of Eudocia's racy life that appear in the works of other historians. The polishing of Eudocia's image, however, had begun long before Skylitzes, or even the continuator of Theophanes, put pen to paper. While Basil was still alive mosaics depicting Basil and Eudocia with their children in happy family situations were said to have graced the imperial apartments. Later, Leo VI's funeral oration for his father included a classically encomiastic digression on the virtues of Eudocia Ingerina.[327] In his brief portrayal of Eudocia Ingerina's virtues Skylitzes conforms to the ideology for 'good' empresses. He chose to follow the pro-Macedonian sources in his portrayal of Basil and as a result there could be no suggestion that Eudocia Ingerina was anything other than completely praiseworthy. He was unlikely to include criticism of Basil's empress as criticism of the empress was considered to be, by implication, criticism of the emperor.[328]

Studies in Contrast - The Wives of Leo VI

Leo VI is significant as the emperor who, in the quest for a legitimate male heir, entered into an uncanonical fourth marriage, provoked a destructive conflict

[326] Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 42-43.
[327] See p. 49 this paper.
[328] James, *Empresses and Power*, p. 20.

with the Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus and split the church. Leo's first wife was Theophano. She too is said to have been chosen as a result of a bride-show, this one organised by Eudocia Ingerina in 882[329] although Skylitzes does not mention it.[330] Theophano was not Leo's choice and all the narrative sources agree it was not a happy marriage.[331]

As with other empresses who did not share in the imperial administration, Skylitzes has almost nothing to say about Theophano. This could not be because he had trouble finding something nice to say for, by all accounts, she lived a singularly blameless life.[332] He mentions Theophano only once,

> Stylianus Zaoutzês he promoted Magister and Logothete of the Drome. [The Emperor] had already begun to frequent this man's daughter, even though the woman to whom he was legally married, the Augousta Theophano, was still alive. For her part, she saw and heard everything that was going on but did not in the least allow herself to give way to the passion of jealousy.[333]

Thus Skylitzes' portrayal of Theophano as dignified, composed and in control of her passions is consistent with the ideology of appropriate behaviour for empresses. Unfortunately, it may not be a fair representation of what actually occurred.

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[329] Treadgold, "Bride-Shows," p. 406-408.
[330] As he does not mention any of the imperial bride-shows that were purported to have occurred.
[331] As Leo was said to have described it, "All the Senate knows it was not at my own wish I married her, but in fear of my father [Basil I] and in utter distress." (*Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 40).
[332] Theophano was elevated to sainthood by Leo VI soon after her death. (SH-annotated, Leo VI, paragraph 20, note 63).
[333] SH, p. 95.

A completely different picture emerges from the *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae*, the Life of the Patriarch Euthymius.[334] Patricia Karlin-Hayter, the editor and translator of the *Vita*, points to evidence that the author had access to documents that were not widely available. That the author was an 'insider' is deduced from the fact that the scenes in which Leo "takes part are described with a series of extraordinarily life-like details."[335] Karlin-Hayter suggests that the author of the *Vita* entered the monastery after a long period at court and his descriptions of events at court suggest "the personal reminiscences of an eyewitness."[336] This source is considered valuable, however, it should not be forgotten that the source is primarily concerned with explaining how Euthymios came to replace Nicholas as Patriarch and why he was justified in granting economy to the emperor in the matter of his fourth marriage.[337]

The *Vita Euthymii* contains much information about Theophano and her relationship with Leo, some of which is found nowhere else. This includes the following account of a visit by Euthymius to the imperial couple. After a number of years of marriage and after Leo had succeeded his father to the throne,[338] an unhappy Theophano summons Euthymius, Leo's spiritual father, to return to the capital. As the author of the *Vita* relates, Theophano "exposed to him the griefs inflicted on her, and that she purposed to leave, and had informed the emperor

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[334] Euthymius was Patriarch under Leo VI from 907-912. Leo forced the abdication of Nicholas Mysticos, who was appointed in 901, after Nicholas refused to sanction Leo's fourth marriage to the mother of his son, the future Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. After Leo died in 912, his brother Alexander deposed Euthymius and recalled Nicholas who remained in office until his death in 925.

[335] Patricia Karlin-Hayter, "Translator's Introduction," *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Patricia Karlin-Hayter (Bruxelles: Éditions de *Byzantion*, 1970), p. 34.

[336] Karlin-Hayter, "Translator's Introduction," p. 37.

[337] Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 9.

[338] Possibly as early as 893 (Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 139).

himself. 'For bereft of my beloved child,[339] there is no further use in my staying here, heartsick...'"[340] Theophano informed Euthymius that she had offered the emperor a divorce and wished wholeheartedly to retire to a convent. Euthymius discourages Theophano telling her, "'My child, you must not talk like this; you may not leave him, and become to him occasion of adultery...'"[341] Theophano acceded to Euthymius' entreaties "...promising she would not say such a thing again."[342] Euthymius then confronts the emperor who appears quite willing to let Theophano go. Euthymius reminds him of the consequence of adulterous remarriage and Leo answers, "'Your holiness would seem ignorant how abominably I have been treated by her; she went to my late father and made trouble with a trumped up tale that I had been unfaithful to her with Zaoutzes' daughter, Zôê. How he treated me...immediately seized me by the hair and threw me to the ground, with blows and abuse, beating me until I streamed blood...As for that innocent girl, he ordered her to be married against her will. Nor shall I ever forget her...'" [343] With this Euthymius realises the rift between the imperial couple is irreparable and he informs Theophano, urging her to bear her future trials bravely.

In this more plausible version, Theophano did not bear the humiliation of her husband's dalliance with Zôê Zaoutzes in the dignified and composed silence of the ideal 'good' empress. She made her displeasure known to Leo's father, the

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[339] Leo and Theophano had one child soon after their marriage, a daughter, who had died in childhood.
[340] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 37.
[341] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 37-38.
[342] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 38.
[343] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 39-40. At Basil's orders, Zôê was married to Theodore Gouzouniatis.

one person she believed was in a position to do something about it. Understandable perhaps, but, as a result any chance of a future relationship between Leo and Theophano was irredeemably damaged. This is not, however, the version Skylitzes chose to portray. In the instance of Theophano, Skylitzes chose to portray the ideal.[344] Why? The answer lies in Skylitzes' portrayal of Zôê Zaoutza. Zôê is cast as an unmitigated bad actor and in order to highlight her villainy there could be no suggestion that Theophano might possibly have done anything that encouraged the relationship between Zôê and Leo. Skylitzes' portrayals of Theophano and Zôê have been constructed as contrasting opposites.

Theophano died around 895 or 896 and according to the *Vita Euthymii* Zôê's husband, the patrician Theodore Gouzouniatus, also passed away around the same time.[345] Leo and Zôê were likely married in 898[346] and Zôê was proclaimed *augousta* by Leo. In the pattern of invective Skylitzes' portrayal of Theophano's rival, Zôê Zaoutza, is completely antithetical to the ideal. He doesn't have one nice thing to say about Zôê. He repeats the accusations of sexual promiscuity and alludes to allegations of murder by poison that have been made about Zôê in other sources.[347] Nothing more need be said to establish her as an irredeemably bad empress.[348] Skylitzes relates,

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[344] In portraying Theophano as conforming to the ideal of dignified silence, Skylitzes is following the lead of earlier sources such as Geo. Monk. Cont. 856 and the Vita of Theophano 23.30 (Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 137).

[345] "It was on the tenth of the month of November that the worthy empress...departed to the presence of God. Shortly after Theodore Gouzouniatus also...reached the end of his life..." *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 44.

[346] Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 142.

[347] Accusations about Zôê's behaviour are made by Euthymius (*Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 44-46) and Geo. Monk. Cont. 852 (as cited by Tougher, *The Reign of Leo*

> Prompted by his passion for Zoê, the daughter of Zaoutzes; the Emperor honoured her father with the new-fangled title (which did not exist before) of Basileopatôr [father of the emperor]. Zoê was then in the full flower of her charm and beauty; she had previously been married to the Patrician Theodore Gouniatzitzês but he was treacherously poisoned. She, moreover, became the Emperor's concubine while his wife was still living.[349]

Also consistent with the traditional invective, Skylitzes has portrayed Zôê as encouraging Leo in the unjust and intemperate behaviour of inventing a new title for her father.[350] Like Euthymius' biographer,[351] Skylitzes seems to have no use for Zôê's father either. He also criticises the father using the traditional insults of invective,[352] the vilest being that Zaoutzes was a procurer for his daughter, attempting to trade her for some sort of influence or consideration with a powerful man:[353]

> When the Basileopatôr Zaoutzês realised in what good stead Nicephoros Phocas, the Domestic, stood with the Emperor, he sought to make him his son-in-law. Suspecting this would anger the Emperor, Phocas would have nothing to do with it, which enraged Zaoutzês. So he trumped up a charge against Phocas and had him relieved of his command, replacing him with Magister Katakalôn Abidêlas.[354]

VI, p. 141). According to the *Vita Euthymii* "...it is said that she [Zôê] was responsible for the deaths of the empress and of her own husband." (p.44)

[348] See p. 55-56 this paper.

[349] SH, p. 97.

[350] This was actually not the case as Zôê's father had held this title for some time prior to her marriage (SH-annotated, Leo VI, paragraph 10, note 25). The *Vita Euthymii* also notes that as Basil neared death (886) "it was Stylianios, called Zaoutzes in the Armenian dialect, seeing he was a Macedonian of Armenian descent like himself, whom he left in charge, committing to him the direction in all matters, ecclesiastical and political." (*Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 4).

[351] See *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 16ff for the genesis of Euthymius' quarrel with Zaoutzes.

[352] See Long, *Claudian's In Eutropium*, p. 97-99 for a discussion of a similar form of invective where the initiative for an evil deed is transferred from the actor to another close family member, such as a wife or mother.

[353] See James, *Empresses and Power*, p. 16 for a similar example of this type of invective.

[354] SH, p. 98.

This story is similar to one that appears in the *Vita Euthymii* which relates that immediately following Theophano's departure from the capital, Zaoutzes took his daughter to the palace in order to marry her to the emperor. Euthymius was summoned to perform the ceremony but he refused, not because it was illegal or forbidden for the emperor to marry twice, but because "it must not be this woman whose evil conduct is notorious."[355]

In spite of Euthymius' refusal, Leo would not be thwarted in his desire. Euthymius was exiled from the capital for a period for his principles and Leo found a more amenable clergyman:

> After the Augousta Theophano died, the Emperor Leo crowned Zoê, Zaoutzê's daughter and [his marriage with her] was blessed by a clergyman of the palace -- who was promptly degraded. She lived one year and eight months after being proclaimed and then died [899]. When the sarcophagus in which her body was to be laid was being prepared, they found an incised inscription which read: "Daughter of Babylon, wasted with misery."[356]

The inscription on Zôê's sarcophagus was obviously a reference to her immoral life but Skylitzes and the other narrative sources[357] who mention this incident are silent on who might have put the inscription in place. Was it graffiti from a critic or an act of repentance by Zôê?[358] Whatever the case, the repetition of this cold epitaph by Skylitzes affirms his damning portrayal of Zôê Zaoutza as the antithesis of the ideal.

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[355] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 46.
[356] SH, p. 99.
[357] Geo. Monk. Cont. 857 as cited by Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 144.
[358] See Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 144-145.

Leo did not let his grief stand in the way of a swift re-marriage. By the following year [ca.900] he was married to Eudocia Baïanê described by Skylitzes thus,

> He married a beautiful and gracious maiden from the Opsikion [theme] named Eudocia and crowned her too. She was expecting and about to give birth to a child when both she and the embryo died.[359]

In this brief mention of Leo's third wife and in contrast to the preceding portrayal of Zôê Zaoutza, Skylitzes once again constructs a portrayal that conforms to the ideal. Eudocia Baïanê is beautiful and fertile. However, as with the brief idealised description of Eudocia Ingerina, the brevity of this description belies a deeper significance. Patricia Karlin-Hayter, the translator of the *Vita Euthymii* points to a puzzling lack of comment about this marriage in the sources,[360] a silence shared by Skylitzes. Opposition would not have been unusual because third marriages were almost as frowned upon as fourth marriages.[361]

The lone written explanation for the apparent approval of this third marriage is offered by Nicholas Mysticos, Patriarch around the time of Leo's fourth marriage, in a letter to Pope Anastasius III,

> [Nicholas is relating a conversation with Leo VI] Even the third was perhaps unworthy of your Majesty. But that perhaps found its excuse in the treaty made with the Frank, because it was agreed by you that your only daughter should be sent to him as his bride...and since it was agreed that your daughter should go to Francia, and since there must be a Lady in the Palace to manage ceremonies affecting the wives of your nobles, there is a condonation of the third marriage...Moreover, the sacred canons do not wholly reject

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[359] SH, p. 100.
[360] Karlin-Hayter , "Commentary", *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, p. 183.
[361] Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 150-151.

> the third marriage, but condone it, even though averting their eyes - as it were – from a 'smear on the Church.'[362]

So, the justification for Leo's third marriage was the need for an *augousta* to preside at imperial ceremonial.[363] However, Leo's bother Alexander was also married and his wife could have served as *augousta* if one was needed. What Nicholas does not mention is that, shortly after Zôê's death, Leo accused his brother Alexander of plotting against him and, as the *Vita Euthymii* relates, "he [Leo] took away his [Alexander's] wife, leaving him to be carried about by every wind."[364] No amount of exhortation from Euthymius could convince Leo to change his mind and "pity the woman he had unjustly punished."[365]

Karlin-Hayter sees unspoken disapproval of the third marriage in the problems that accompanied Leo's attempts to bury his third wife.[366] As the *Vita Euthymii* relates,

> But when the Day of days arrived, the holy day of Easter, the wife of the sovereign, Eudocia Baianē, expired in the pains of childbirth – a pitiful spectacle, to the inconsolable grief of the emperor, to whom she had been married one year; and the Senate spent this great and glorious holy-day as a day of mourning, condoling with the emperor. But when he would have taken her to bury in his new-built monastery of St. Lazarus, he was prevented of his purpose by the holy man who was abbot at the time, Hierotheos, who sent the body back from the very gate to the palace...[367]

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[362] Nicholas I Patriarch of Constantinople: *Letters*. Greek text and English trans. R. J. H. Jenkins and L. G. Westerink (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1973), p. 219-221.

[363] Leo was said to have made his daughter Anna *augousta* shortly after Zôê Zaoutza died in 899 (SH, p. 100). Apparently, she did not enjoy her new honour for long as she was betrothed to Louis of Provence in 900.

[364] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 54.

[365] Ibid.

[366] Karlin-Hayter , "Commentary", *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, p. 183-184.

[367] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 62. Leo was determined that, Easter or not, Eudocia Baïanê would be buried with the ceremony due to a Roman empress and two days later she was. Euthymius was invited to officiate but refused, leaving within days for St. Agathos

Another possible explanation for the lack of opposition to Leo's third marriage is that it was actually thought of as only his second 'legal' marriage. There are several reasons why it is very likely that Leo's marriage with Zôê Zaoutza was not considered legal. The priest who performed the ceremony was 'promptly degraded' and a second marriage was not considered legal if it was to legalise a former concubinage.[368] Also, Zôê Zaoutza was crowned *augousta* by Leo but not in the presence of the Patriarch. As already noted, the presence of the Patriarch gave the ceremony a religious sanction that conferred on the empress a constitutional authority to exercise imperial power in the event of regency.[369] It would not be the first time that Leo would exercise the expedient of dispensing with the presence of a disapproving Patriarch at the coronation of an *augousta* and it would create difficulties for his fourth wife, the mother of his heir, after his death. Skylitzes' innocuous portrayal of Eudocia Baïanê gives weight to the suggestion that Leo's third marriage was accepted. Her characterisation as 'beautiful and gracious' certainly highlights the contrast between Eudocia Baïanê and the immoral Zôê Zaoutza who preceded her. Skylitzes' portrayal of Zôê Carbonopsina, the mother of the future emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus is best described as neutral.

It seems that Leo was determined to continue his quest to father a legitimate heir and by 903 he was in a close relationship with the aristocratic Zôê

"to avoid any unpleasantness". Soon after, Patriarch Anthony died [901] and Nicholas "received the helm of the church in his [Euthymius'] stead" (*Vita Euthymii*, p. 62-64)

[368] R. Guilland, *Études byzantines* (Paris: 1959), p. 234 as cited by Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 141.

[369] See p. 51 this paper.

Carbonopsina[370] described by Skylitzes as "in the full flower of her charm and beauty."[371] Her agnomen 'Carbonopsina' or 'coal black eyes' suggests a beauty renowned in her life-time. The long awaited son, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, was born in 905. As Skylitzes relates,

> The Emperor Leo took a fourth wife, Zoê Carbonôpsina who lived with him some considerable time uncrowned.[372]...A boy-child was born to the Emperor by his fourth wife, Zoê. At his birth a comet appeared, its tail towards the east, and it shone for forty days. The Patriarch Nicholas baptised the child in Hagia Sophia; Alexander, the Emperor's brother, the Patrician Samonas and the leading senators received him from the holy font. The marriage of Leo with Zoê was solemnised by Thomas the Priest (who was also degraded for this) and [the Emperor] proclaimed her Augousta. This is the reason why the Patriarch forbade the Emperor to enter the church; hence he traversed the right-hand section [of the church] to reach the mitatôrion.[373]

The accepted chronology is that Constantine was baptised in January of 906, Zôê was married and proclaimed by Leo in the spring of 906 and as a result of this marriage Leo was denied entry to the church by Patriarch Nicholas at Christmas 906 and in January 907. By February 907, Leo had deposed Nicholas and installed Euthymius in his stead. Skylitzes glosses over the controversy that surrounded the Constantine's baptism and once again, the omission serves to obscure an unpleasant episode that reflects badly on an empress who is not to be portrayed to be bad. As Nicholas' letter to Pope Anastasius relates,

> But this was before the baptism of the boy: for all the archpriests and priests resolved that I should not even

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[370] Zôê was related to several leading families of the empire (Tougher, *The Reign of Leo VI*, p. 153.
[371] SH, p. 97.
[372] SH, p. 100.
[373] SH, p. 102.

> baptize the child, far less with the imperial honours demanded by his father, unless I obtained his promise in advance that he would renounce the woman...but he hid the design of his heart, and by giving a verbal assurance, an oath, that he had rejected the woman, he obtained his desire regarding the boy, who was baptised in the manner he wished. But hear what followed. The third day after the baptism was not passed when the mother was introduced into the palace with an escort of imperial guards, just like an emperor's wife...[374]

Some time following the baptism, Zôê and Leo were married and Zôê was proclaimed, although in an irregular manner (a detail that Skylitzes also fails to mention). As Nicholas relates, "the very crown was set on the woman's head, though neither I nor any other archpriest had made the accustomed prayer."[375] After Nicholas was deposed, Zôê and her influential relatives pushed very hard to have her proclaimed in the church, but, Euthymius steadfastly refused. As described in the *Vita Euthymii*, Zôê reacted with rage saying,

> Are you unaware, father, what you were before, and to what honour you have acceded, through me? Then why do you not proclaim me in church...[I] who am joined to a prince and an emperor, and have a son likewise crowned and born in the purple?...Therefore be pleased to proclaim me, as the Senate has done. For you too, like your predecessor, will have much to repent when you become useless.[376]

That Zôê's proclamation as *augousta* by Leo and the Senate but not by the Patriarch had significant implications is borne out by what happened on Leo's death in 912. As soon as Leo's brother Alexander 'succeeded to the sceptre of the Empire' with his nephew as co-emperor, Zôê was expelled from the palace. By all

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[374] Nicholas, *Letters*, trans. R. J. H. Jenkins and L. G. Westerink, p. 219.
[375] Ibid.
[376] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 110.

accounts, Constantine barely survived the regency of his uncle intact.[377] When Alexander died in 913, Zôê was once again excluded from the regency headed by the Patriarch Nicholas, although, as the legitimate empress-mother, she would usually be the first choice for regent. One wonders if this would have been the case if she had been proclaimed legitimately. One of Zôê's first acts on mounting a successful coup d'état and wresting control of the regency away from Nicholas[378] was to secure from him a promise "that he would proclaim her in church with her imperial son, and acclaim her empress"[379] in return for allowing him to remain in office.

While generally Skylitzes omits any episodes that might reflect badly on Zôê, there is a case where he does not. He relates the accusation that Zôê had become "too familiar" with the eunuch Constantine. Accusations of over familiarity with eunuchs were a standard way to cast aspersions on the sexual morality of imperial women.[380] However, Skylitzes is careful to point out that the accusation was part of a conspiracy by another eunuch and court official to discredit Constantine, who had become a favourite of the imperial couple. Still,

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[377] "They say it was his intention (if God had not intervened) to...make a eunuch of Constantine, his own nephew. This he would have done too if God first and then those who remained faithful to Leo, the child's father, had not stood in his way." (SH, p. 107)

[378] According to Skylitzes "the Emperor Constantine was constantly complaining and calling for his mother (she had been expelled from the palace by Alexander) so they brought her back in, against their better judgement. Once she was in, she seized the reigns of government [February, 914] ... (SH, p. 111).

[379] *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP.*, trans. Karlin-Hayter, p. 136.

[380] Eunuchs were often associated with immoral sexual behaviour (Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows", p. 103; Tougher, "Byzantine Eunuchs: An Overview," p. 174). As Kathryn Ringrose explains, castration was believed to have affected the eunuch's 'moral fibre', they were 'unstable' and 'changeable' – like women (Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows", p. 92; Ringrose, "Passing the Test of Sanctity," p. 124). Both women and eunuchs were often the victims of negative stereotyping. See also p. 56 and 57 this paper.

as related by Skylitzes, it is Zôê's association with this eunuch that brought about her downfall in 919:

> The Emperor Constantine was left an orphan in very early childhood; affairs of state were conducted by Zôê his mother and the regents whom we listed above. Constantine the Parakoimômenos exercised considerable influence over the Empress and the Magister Leo Phôkas, Domestic of the Scholae for the east, was his brother-in-law, having married his sister. Besides this, he held all the reins of state and could direct it wherever he wished. Night and day he searched for a way of getting rid of Constantine and transferring the imperial office to his own brother-in-law. When Theodore, the tutor of the Porphyrogenitos, realised this, he endeavoured (as we said above) to appropriate the elder Romanos who was then Droungarios of the Admiralty and bring him into the palace in the hope that he would be the protector and defender of the Emperor. He was brought in and, little by little, gained possession of all the levers of power. Not content with the powers assigned to him, he broke his oaths (and he had bound himself with the most awesome oaths that he would never aspire to be emperor) and proclaimed himself emperor. It was the Porphyrogenitos who placed the diadem on his brow, willingly to all appearances," but with a most unwilling heart" ...[381]

Ironically, Skylitzes has earlier mentioned how Zôê mercifully intervened to prevent this same Romanus Lecapenus from being blinded after he was found guilty of causing the loss of many men in a battle with the Bulgarian, Symeon.[382]

According to Lynda Garland Zôê's administrative executive was dominated by eunuchs consisting of "Constantine the Parakoimômenos as head of government, his relatives the brothers Constantine and Anastasios Gongylios, who were also eunuchs, and a fourth eunuch Constantine Malelias, the

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[381] SH, p. 128.
[382] SH, p. 113.

protosekretis, head of the imperial chancellery."[383] Another eunuch Damian was made Droungarios of the Watch.[384] There is evidence that this situation was viewed with contempt by Symeon, the Bulgarian ruler, and by Nicholas, with whom Symeon corresponded. In 921, after Zôê's regency was toppled, Nicholas wrote to Symeon, "Your letter also mentioned the 'eunuchs' as the cause of evils from our side: and this is obvious and notorious to everybody..."[385] Should there be any doubt that Skylitzes also placed the blame for the rise of Romanus Lecapenus on the ambition of the imperial favourite Constantine for his brother-in-law, Leô Phôkas, he makes it plain with this assessment of the situation,

> Early next morning the Empress came down to the Boukoleôn, sent for her son and questioned his retinue how this insurrection had come about. When nobody said anything, the Emperor's tutor, said: "This uprising took place because Leô Phôkas has destroyed the army while Constantine the Parakoimômenos has destroyed the palace, Sovereign Lady."[386]

Although she was not removed immediately when Romanus took power, Skylitzes relates that eventually, "The Empress Zôê was accused of plotting against the life of Rômanos too. She was expelled from the palace and tonsured at Saint Euphêmia's monastery."[387]

Skylitzes portrays only one incident where Zôê loses control of her emotions and behaves with less than imperial decorum,

> Intending to take over the reins of government from his mother, the Emperor brought Nicholas the Patriarch and the

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[383] Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 119.
[384] SH, p. 111.
[385] Nicholas, *Letters*. trans. R. J. H. Jenkins and L. G. Westerink, p. 123.
[386] SH, p. 114.
[387] SH, p. 116.

> Magister Stephen back into the palace. Next day they sent John Toubakês to remove the Augousta from there but she clung to her son with shrieks and tears and moved him to feel the compassion and pity one ought to have for his mother. He said to those who were taking her away: "Let my mother be with me," and they let her be as soon as he said that.[388]

This is a significant lapse for, unlike Theodora who 'renounced all power and decision-making authority' and departed the palace with dignity, Zôê attempted to cling to her son (the source of imperial power) with undignified 'shrieks and tears'. Generally, however, Skylitzes' portrayal of Zôê Carbonopsina, is kinder than it might have been. This is puzzling, for Skylitzes does not seem to admire either Leo VI or Constantine VII a great deal.[389] Skylitzes cannot have been concerned that he would damage their reputations by portraying Zôê in a bad light. He certainly seems unconcerned for Leo's reputation when he blackens the reputation of Zôê Zaoutza. Generally, Skylitzes does not insult Zôê but neither does he praise her.[390] One can only speculate that, as Skylitzes was not concerned about the reputations of her husband or son, there must have been other important relatives whom Skylitzes did not wish to offend with a completely unflattering portrait. A portrayal worthy of praise, however, was apparently more than Skylitzes could manage for Zôê Carbonopsina, the concubine who became empress.

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[388] SH, p. 114.

[389] See SH, p. 130. See Timothy E. Gregory. "The Political Program of Constantine Porphyrogenitus" in *Actes du XVe Congrès international d'études Byzantines* (1980), vol. iv. (Imperial Admin.) for an exploration of how Skylitzes negative assessment of Constantine VII's character and administrative abilities have influenced modern evaluations of Constantine's reign.

[390] However, in what he does mention Skylitzes' portrayal follows the ideal (or its obverse). His empresses are good or bad but seldom completely neutral.

The Lecapenid Women

When dealing with the reign of Romanus I Lecapenus (919-944), Skylitzes is thought to have followed Symeon Logothete (or a portion of *Theophanes Continuatus* that was closely following Symeon).[391] Symeon is considered by modern scholars to have been biased in favour of Romanus and it is true that Skylitzes' portrayal of that emperor is frequently positive. However, Skylitzes does not hesitate to criticise Romanus, especially for succumbing to a lust for power and having himself proclaimed emperor after he had sworn that was not his design.[392] In Skylites' portrayal of the Lecapenid women, we have ciphers. He has less to say about them than any of the imperial women he mentions, with the possible exception of Basil II's sister, Anna. With one exception, the Lecapenid ladies are not described in any way. They are not said to be beautiful, or educated, or pious, or merciful; or conversely, sexually wanton or giving in to public displays of emotion. All we have of Romanus' daughters and daughters-in-law is their names, although Skylitzes is careful to note their marriages.

Modern historians have noted the skill with which Romanus moved to consolidate his power and secure the succession for his family after taking control of the palace.[393] To this end, Romanus was very clever in the marriages of his children; the first and most important being the child marriage of his daughter Helena to Constantine, then around thirteen, within a month of seizing the palace in the spring of 919 after which "Rômanos was proclaimed "Father of the Emperor" and his son, Christopher, replaced him as Commander of the

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[391] See p. 14-15 this paper.
[392] SH, p. 128.
[393] Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus*, p. 64-67.

Hetaireiai." [394] From this point on, Romanus steadily advanced his plan. In September of 919, he was appointed Caesar by his son-in-law, and by December he was made co-emperor with Constantine. Almost immediately, Romanus also proclaimed his wife *augousta*, and his eldest son was made a co-emperor by the child-emperor Constantine VII not long after.[395] Romanus also moved to ally himself with the leading families of the Empire:

> That was the year in which the Emperor Romanos made Leo Argyros his son-in-law by marriage to his daughter, Agatha. Leo was a man of great nobility and distinguished appearance, endowed with wisdom and intelligence.[396]

Apparently, Romanus also had an appreciation of the importance of the role of the *augousta* in securing the succession. When his wife Theodora died in 922, he immediately promoted Sophia, the wife of his eldest son Christopher. When his second son Stephen was married to a member of a leading family[397] in 933, his wife was also proclaimed.

Only one Lecapenid woman is given a more lengthy treatment. Skylitzes describes the marriage of Romanus' grand-daughter to Peter, the son of Symeon. This is a rare example of the legitimate daughter of a reigning emperor being given in marriage to a non-Roman ruler. Maria, the daughter of Romanus' eldest son Christopher, was married to "Peter the Bulgar chieftan" in 927, the marriage

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[394] SH, p. 115.

[395] "...he had his son Christopher crowned by Constantine [VII], who managed to give the appearance of doing it willingly although he was being coerced; but he was distraught when not in the public eye and deeply lamented this misfortune in private." (SH, p. 117)

[396] Ibid. In fact Agatha married Romanos, the son of Leo Argyros. Romanos was the grandfather of the future Emperor Romanos II. (SH, Jean Claude Cheynet annotated version, Romanus Lecapenus, paragraph 2, note 10)

[397] Skylitzes gives us her name, Anna, and her parentage only.

alliance cementing a peace agreement with the Bulgars.[398] Skylitzes includes a lengthy and fairly positive portrayal of the negotiations with the Bulgars and the marriage festivities that is probably taken from *Theophanes Continuatus.*[399] It is in the context of this description that Skylitzes makes his one positive statement about a Lecapenid woman. While in the capital to negotiate a peace treaty and marriage agreement, the Bulgarian delegation spotted Christopher's daughter Maria:

> While they were in the presence of the Emperor, they saw Maria, the daughter of the Emperor Christopher, and were highly pleased with her; she was indeed of outstanding beauty. They wrote asking Peter to come with all haste (this after they had reached a peace-agreement.)[400]

Skylitzes' positive portrayal of the convivial ceremony is in marked contrast to the negative assessment of the affair later offered by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus in his manual of advice to his son Romanus II:

> 'But come, now, turn', and to meet another sort of demand, monstrous and unseemly...For if any nation of these infidel and dishonourable tribes of the north shall ever demand a marriage alliance with the emperor of the Romans...this monstrous demand of theirs also you shall rebut with these words saying: 'Concerning this matter also a dread and authentic charge of the great and holy Constantine is engraved upon the sacred table of the universal church...St. Sophia, that never shall an emperor of the Romans ally himself in marriage with a nation of customs differing from and alien to those of the Roman order'...But if they reply: 'How then did the lord Romanus, the emperor, ally himself in marriage with the Bulgarians...' this must be the defence: 'The lord Romanus, the emperor, was a common, illiterate fellow, and not from among those who have been bred up in

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[398] SH, p. 122. See also Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus*, p. 67.
[399] *Theophanes Continuatus*, *Chronographia*, C.S.H.B., 1838, pp. 411-412 as cited by Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus*, p. 97.
[400] SH, p. 122.

> the palace...nor was he of imperial and noble stock...but out of a temper arrogant and self-willed and untaught in virtue and refusing to follow what was right and good...he dared to do this thing...And because he did this...the aforesaid lord Romanus was in his lifetime much abused, and was slandered and hated by the senatorial council and all the commons and the church herself, so that their hatred became abundantly clear in the end to which he came...[401]

Constantine's negative assessment of foreign marriages can perhaps be attributed to the unhappy experiences of himself and his son as marriage pawns themselves, a situation more usual for an empress than an emperor. While regent, Nicholas had previously agreed to engage Constantine VII to the Bulgarian Symeon's daughter in order to extricate the Empire from a tight spot.[402] Later, in 944, Romanus Lecapenus would marry Constantine's son Romanus II to the illegitimate five-year-old daughter of Hugh of Provence, King of Italy.[403] According to Treadgold, Romanus "repented of this humiliating match" and considered marrying Romanus II to the daughter of the great general John Curcuas Instead. The Lecapeni however, fearful that they would be displaced by such an alliance, insisted that Romanus adhere to the original plan.[404]

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[401] Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. *De administrando imperio*, edited and English trans. Gy. Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Centre for Byzantine Studies, rev. edn. 1967), p. 71-75. Constantine's diatribe on this topic runs to several pages.

[402] Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus*, p. 51.

[403] "In the second year of the indiction the Emperor sent Paschal, Prôtospatharius and Commander of Longobardia, to Hugh, King of Francia, hoping to engage his daughter to Romanos, the son of [Constantine] Porphyrogenitus. She was brought with great wealth and married Romanos; she lived with him for five years and then died." (SH, p. 126-127) Apparently with this incident in mind, Constantine allows one exception to the injunction 'that never shall an emperor of the Romans ally himself in marriage with a nation of customs differing from and alien to those of the Roman order' by saying "unless it be with the Franks alone...for there is much relationship and converse between Franks and Romans" (DAI, trans. Gy. Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins, p. 71).

[404] Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State*, p. 485; Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus*, p. 230-231.

Still, all of Romanus' deals in the marriage stakes did not secure the succession for his family. His eldest and main hope as heir, Christopher, had died in 931. Before Christmas 944, Romanus himself was pushed aside by his middle sons, Stephen and Constantine. Describing them as "debauched, unbridled and undesirable,"[405] Runciman contends that their father had never promoted them beyond Constantine VII in the order of precedence.[406] Skylitzes relates that the Porphyrogenitus was able, with the help of an old friend in the Corps of the Hetaireiai, to win over Stephen to a plan to overthrow his father.[407] Before the end of January 945 Stephen and Constantine were themselves arrested and exiled by Constantine VII as they planned to do away with *him*. Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus had finally made his move for sole power at the age of forty.

The New Helena

There is a consensus among modern historians that Helena Lecapena was the strong-willed and effective partner throughout her long marriage with Constantine VII.[408] Skylitzes gives support to the contention that she masterminded Constantine's coup against his brothers-in-law and co-emperors: "Once Constantine [Porphyrogenitos] realised that *he* was under attack, he did not hesitate to set his plan in motion and his wife, Helen, strongly encouraged him to

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[405] Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus*, p. 78.
[406] While Runciman contends that only Zonaras placed Constantine behind Stephen and Christopher, Skylitzes does also: "His sons ranked after him and Constantine [VII] came last of all." (SH, p. 128).
[407] SH, p. 128.
[408] Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State*, p. 486; Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus*, p. 79 & 234.

depose the brothers."[409] Assumptions that Helena was the true 'power behind the throne' are given strength by portrayals of Constantine VII as a weak-willed intellectual. It is ironic that the emperor who had done so much to burnish the reputation of his grand-parents[410] would be so badly treated by posterity, an assessment that Skylitzes did much to create:[411]

> Once he had purged his circle of suspicious elements, now girded with exclusive imperial authority, at Easter of the same year of the indiction Constantine placed the diadem on the brow of his son, Romanos, while the Patriarch Theophylact offered prayers. It had been expected that he [Constantine VII] would be a capable and energetic ruler, one who would devote himself to state affairs with diligence once he became sole ruler. In the event he proved to be weaker than anticipated and achieved nothing that measured up to the expectations one had of him. He was addicted to wine and always preferred to take the easier way. He was implacable towards defaults and merciless in inflicting punishment. He was indifferent to the promotion of officials, unwilling to appoint or promote according to birth or merit (which is the function of a truly admirable government). He entrusted a command -- military or civil -- indiscriminately to whomsoever happened to be on hand. Thus it invariably happened that some base and suspicious character would be appointed to the highest of civil offices. Helen his wife was much engaged in this with him and so was Basil the Parakoimômenos; they were responsible for the buying and selling of offices.[412]

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[409] SH, p. 129.

[410] *Theophanes Continuatus*, of which the *Vita Basili* forms a part, is viewed as extremely biased in its portrayal of the virtues of the founder of the Macedonian dynasty, Basil I, and his wife. It was produced under the close direction (or even dictation) of Constantine VII. See also p. 14 of this paper.

[411] See Gregory, "The Political Program of Constantine Porphyrogenitus," p. 124-126. Gregory asserts that the generally negative appraisal of Constantine's administration is based on this one passage from Skylitzes – an assessment which Gregory disputes forcefully. Gregory maintains that the reasons for Skylitzes criticisms of Constantine VII lie in the effect of Constantine's legislative reforms in agrarian law on the land-owning aristocratic class to which Skylitzes belonged. The great landowners were opposed to the actions of Constantine's officials in protecting the rights of their poorer neighbours.

[412] SH, p. 130.

This portrayal of Constantine VII follows the pattern of classic invective. In the area of accomplishments he was 'weaker than anticipated and achieved nothing that measured up to the expectations one had of him'. Rather than displaying qualities of temperance, Constantine was 'addicted to wine'. Instead of being a just and merciful ruler, he 'was implacable towards defaults and merciless in inflicting punishment' and 'indifferent to the promotion of officials'. Skylitzes acknowledges Constantine's achievements in the areas of education, 'practical arts' and ceremonial.[413] However, this only serves to highlight his deficiencies in the traditional imperial virtues of courage in battle and wisdom in government.[414] Helena his wife is not spared. Skylitzes' portrayal of her is consistent with a technique often seen in invective, and described in detail by Jacqueline Long, that "transfers the initiative for an evil action from the actor to his wife."[415] The praise for a good wife or helpmeet who, according to encomium, encourages her consort in temperate and merciful acts is reversed. Helena was not only indifferent in the promotion of officials; she was actively engaged in the selling of offices.[416] Helena is also seen to be closely allied with a eunuch, her half-brother Basil the Parakoimômenos,[417] who is portrayed as her partner in crime. L. Garland has

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[413] Ibid.
[414] *Menander Rhetor,* (Oxford: 1981), p. 85.
[415] Long, *Claudian's In Eutropium*, p. 97.
[416] Whittow asserts that by the tenth century, the sale of titles was common. A title came with an annual salary that represented a return on one's investment of 3%. Titles with higher salaries, returning ca.10%, could be purchased for higher sums. Whittow calls this a "system of investment by the political community in the finances of the state..." Whittow gives as his source for this information P. Lemerle, "Roga et rente d'état aux x^{e}-xi^{e} siècles, *Revue des études Byzantines*, xxv (1967), 77-100 (Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, p. 111). The selling of offices was a way of raising funds that was similar to what the sale of government bonds is now and probably more accepted than Skylitzes' statement would indicate.
[417] As explained by Skylitzes, Basil was "born of a slave-woman to Romanos the Elder, [and] came to the support of his [step-] sister Helen..." (SH, p. 133). From this point on (945) Basil became an extremely powerful and influential member of the imperial administration. He became so incredibly

observed that the "historians' greatest criticism is generally reserved for [those whom they consider to be] overtly dominant and domineering women."[418]

A number of modern historians[419] have speculated that it was Constantine's land reform policies that provoked such an insulting assessment of his administration. In his portrayal of Constantine VII and his wife, Skylitzes has created a portrayal consistent with the ideal, but, in the inverted form of invective. With his portrayal of Helena's daughter-in-law and the wife of Romanus II, Theophano, Skylitzes carries his invective to new heights.

Theophano - The Archetypical 'Bad' Empress

Romanus II, the only son of Helena and Constantine VII, was made co-emperor by his father in 945 when he was around six or seven years of age. As a child in 944, Romanus had been affianced or married to the daughter of a Frankish king but she died in 949. He was then married to Theophano in 955 or 956, apparently while still in his teens. While Skylitzes' portrayals of empresses (e.g. Zôê Zaoutza), could be quite negative, he reaches new heights of vituperation in his portrayal of Theophano. In the pattern of true invective Skylitzes begins with a disparagement of her origins:

> When the fiancée of Romanos, the daughter of Hughes, died still a virgin (as we said,) his father the Emperor engaged him to another woman, not the scion of a distinguished family, but one born of humble folk whose trade was inn-keeping. Her

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wealthy that his acquisition of lands earned unwelcome scrutiny from John Tzimisces (see SH, p. 168-169). After the death of Tzimisces in 976, Basil became de facto ruler for a time while the young Basil II and Constantine VII reigned in name only.

[418] Garland, "Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women," p. 374; n.50.

[419] See note 154; see also Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State*, p. 487-494.

> name was Anastasô but [the Emperor] changed it to Theophano.[420]

As noted by Jean Claude Cheynet,[421] there are two versions of the origins of Theophano; this one, followed by Skylitzes and Leo the Deacon, and another, followed by *Theophanes Continuatus.*[422] In the Continuator's version, Theophano is the daughter of Crateros, a member of a high ranking family with connections to the Macedonian house; a much more likely origin for the wife of an emperor. Many modern historians[423] choose to follow the more romantic account that gives Theophano common antecedents, often adding further embellishments to the story. Warren Treadgold's rendering is typical:

> Then the emperor's son Romanus, who had been widowed at the age of ten, fell in love with the statuesque daughter of the owner of a tavern. To end much less shocking liaisons, the empress Theodora and emperor Basil had forced marriages on their heirs that brought ruin to themselves and plagued the empire long afterward. Out of passivity or wisdom, Constantine let his son marry the woman he loved, blandly pretending that she was well born. The bride took the name of Leo VI's first wife Saint Theophano, who she in no way resembled.[424]

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[420] SH, p. 131.
[421] SH-annotated (Constantine VII, paragraph 7, note 29).
[422] As has been noted, the Continuator was sympathetic in his portrayal of the Macedonians and had no interest in insulting them or their empresses. Leo the Deacon, on the other hand, is thought to be more sympathetic to the military usurpers who took the throne during the minority of Basil II, the son of Romanus II and Theophano. See p. 14-15 this paper.
[423] For example, Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 283-284; Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, p. 270. On the other hand Mark Whittow (*The Making of Byzantium*), does not repeat the invective against Theophano. Garland (*Byzantine Empresses, p.* 126-127) urges scepticism about what she calls Skylitzes' "invariable hostile" account while still citing Leo the Deacon (Leo the Deacon 31) who "tells us that she was more beautiful than any other woman of her time" as evidence that Theophano may have been chosen for her looks at a bride-show where "appearance, rather than high birth, may have been an important factor in the choice of a potential empress."
[424] Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State*, p. 492.

Michael McCormick's version, which appears in the context of describing the sexual adventures of the members of Byzantine court, is even more salacious: "Romanos II had been bewitched by a tavern keeper's daughter who took the name of Theophano when she climbed out of bed and into the throne."[425] This view of Theophano as a sexual adventuress suits the purposes of historians, Byzantine and modern, who would have her fit the archetype of the 'bad', or even 'evil', empress.

After casting aspersions on Theophano's family, Skylitzes next mentions her in the context of that most serious of insults for women, as a user of poison and murder in order to achieve power:

> Romanos the son of Constantine had now reached the age of maturity; he could not bear seeing the way in which the affairs of state were handled by his father, so he decided to get rid of him by poison and this with the full knowledge of his wife, the inn-keeper [-'s daughter]. When Constantine was about to take a purgative drink they secretly mixed a noxious substance with it and prevailed upon Nicetas the butler to serve it to the Emperor. It was standing before the sacred icons when Nicetas was about to take it up and -- perhaps accidentally, perhaps on purpose -- he knocked it over and spilled most of it. The remainder (which Constantine drank) proved itself inert and ineffectual, deprived of its power because there was so little of it. Nevertheless, Constantine was only just able to survive, for the poison lodged in his lung and tormented him considerably.[426]

According to Skylitzes, Constantine VII died some months later, never having regained his health. Romanos came to power in 960 and he immediately made his son Basil, who was around two at the time, co-emperor. Skylitzes' portrayal of Romanos' reign is no more favourable than that of his father's.

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[425] Michael McCormick, "Emperors," p. 243.
[426] SH, p. 134-135.

> [Romanos] was young and devoted to pleasure; he abandoned the oversight of every matter to Joseph Bringas, the Praepositus and Parakoimômenos for he himself would have nothing to do with anything but the pursuit of ribald behaviour in the company of silly young men who frequented prostitutes, wantons, actors and comedians.[427]

Skylitzes next takes the opportunity to insult Helena, Theophano and Romanos' sisters with the same anecdote,

> Romanos was urged by his own wife to try to expel Helen, his mother, and his sisters from the palace and to banish them to the Palace of Antiochos. When Helen learnt of this she managed to change his mind by using tears and threats, for he was afraid of her curses. He let *her* remain where she was, but he had his sisters taken out and tonsured as nuns by John, higoumen of Stoudios' Monastery. Once [their brother] was no more, they put aside both the monastic habit and vegetarianism.[428]

The behaviour of all the women here is antithetical to the ideal. Theophano has given in to the emotion of jealousy and urged Romanos' to expel all of his female relatives from the palace. His mother's public outbursts, however, were so fearful that he dare not remove her. His sisters renounced their monastic vows as soon as they were able. Contrary to Skylitzes' portrayal, however, it is likely that Romanos' sisters were removed to a convent at his instructions, rather than Theophano's. As can be seen from the example of the other Macedonian princesses,[429] it was more common for the sisters of reigning emperors not to

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[427] SH, p. 136. Joseph Bringas was a eunuch initially appointed to high office by Constantine VII and entrusted with the role of advisor to Romanos II by Constantine.

[428] SH, p. 138.

[429] Michael III's sister, Thecla, had never married when she was ostensibly removed from a convent by her bother to become Basil I's mistress. All of Basil I's daughters, the sisters of Leo VI, entered a convent. Leo only had one daughter who some contend was sent west to be married around 900, where she died soon after. Romanos I was the exception in marrying all his daughters to leading families. However, they had not been born to a *reigning* emperor and

marry than the alternative. The sisters and daughters of emperors, whether they were formally made *augousta* or not, were considered to be touched with the imperial mystery[430] and many times a usurper solidified his claim to the throne by marriage to a member of the imperial family.[431]

Romanos did not have long to enjoy his life of pleasure. He was only twenty-four when he died in 963. According to Skylitzes: "some say he had precociously worn out his constitution with debauchery and excess but, according to another report, he was carried off by poison."[432] As he had already cast Theophano as a user of poison and the murderer of Constantine VII, Skylitzes need not say who did the poisoning in order for the reader to assume it was Theophano. Still, there was no question that Theophano was the legally crowned *augousta* and there was no question that: "Romanos was succeeded as emperor by his sons, Basil and Constantine, together with Theophano, their mother, who bore a daughter whom they named Anna, two days before [Romanos'] death."[433] Although Theophano was the legally recognised regent her sons were still very young. She was in a weak position and potential candidates for the throne began to make their moves almost immediately. Some believed this included her husband's uncle Stephen, crowned emperor by Romanos I and still

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Romanos may have thought they were more valuable to him politically as the spouses of powerful men. Basil's sister Anna was still unmarried at twenty-five when he sent her to Prince Vladimir of the Rus' in exchange for military assistance. Zôê and Theodora reached middle age still unmarried, although they were not compelled to enter a convent by their father.

[430] The idea that all imperial women shared in the imperial mystery is supported by the significance attached to the marriage of Byzantine princesses to foreigners.

[431] The most famous example of this is Pulcheria, the sister of Theodosius II, conferring legitimacy on his successor, Marcian, by marrying him even though she was a middle-aged consecrated virgin well past her child-bearing years. Closer to the period discussed here, the usurper (and murderer) John Tzimisces would solidify his claim to the throne through marriage to one of Romanus II's sisters, described by that point as 'no longer young'.

[432] SH, p. 138.

[433] SH, p. 139.

alive. If there was still any doubt as to Theophano's villainy, Skylitzes hammers the point home:

> But Bringas[434] was suspicious of the Emperor Stephan, still in the land of the living, exiled to Mêthymnê, and endeavoured to have him imprisoned more securely. He, however, after receiving the Holy Mysteries on the feast of Holy Saturday, suddenly and unexpectedly died, for no apparent reason. Yet even though she was living far away, it was Theophano who procured his death.[435]

Another candidate for the imperial throne was Nicephoros II Phocas and Skylitzes gives a detailed portrayal of Nicephoros's rise to power; a portrayal in which Theophano plays an important part. Skylitzes' apparent sympathies for the military aristocracy have already been noted, however, his portrayal of Nicephoros II Phocas contains a distinct tone of disapproval. According to Skylitzes, Nicephoros was invited to the capital by Theophano to celebrate his victories in Crete and Berroia. This was done over the objections of the Parakoimômenos, Joseph Bringas, who had control of the imperial administration and was suspicious of Nicephoros' motives. Joseph's fears were temporarily allayed when Nicephoros convinces Joseph that his true ambition was to take monastic vows.[436] Bringas soon returned to his original way of thinking but Nicephoros had escaped his grasp. Leo the Deacon's version of events has Nicephoros proclaimed by the army of the east,[437] under his nephew John Tzimisces, in response to attempts by Joseph Bringas to remove him from

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[434] Joseph Bringas was Praepositus and Parakoimômenos under Romanos II and the official to whom Romanos "committed the oversight of everything" (SH, p. 136)
[435] SH, p. 139.
[436] Ibid.
[437] SH-annotated, Basil [II] and Constantine [VIII], paragraph 6, note 35.

power. Skylitzes portrays Nicephoros as hungry for power and lusting after Theophano from the beginning,

> There is another version which is more likely to be true, according to which Phocas had long been labouring under the impression that he ought to be emperor, and that he burned not only with this passion, but also with desire for the Empress whom he had encountered while he was staying in the capital. He frequently sent his most trusted servant, Michael, to her; which fact Bringas noted and, consequently, became suspicious of him.[438]

Nicephoros was able to take the capital with the help of Basil, the powerful eunuch and half-brother of Helena who was antagonistic to Joseph Bringas. Although Theophano was immediately expelled from the imperial palace, she was not long away. Within the month Nicephoros, "put aside all pretence and play-acting by taking Theophano to be his lawful wife. It was then that he started eating meat again; he had been abstaining from it ever since the death of Bardas, the son born to him by his first wife."[439] There is a suggestion by Skylitzes that Nicephoros was corrupted by his lust for Theophano or that he had been dissembling all along: "Only Nicephoros and God know whether this was really an abstinence or merely an affectation to deceive those in power." [440]

Skylitzes describes Theophano as suddenly terminating relations with Nicephoros some time later (ca.969). Considering Skylitzes' description of Nicephoros' behaviour as emperor, this would have been understandable.[441] John Tzimisces moved against his uncle and a pivotal part in the conspiracy was

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[438] SH, p. 140.
[439] SH, p. 142.
[440] Ibid.
[441] The military had free reign in the capital, frightening the populace. Food prices were inflated due to speculation in grain by Nicephoros and his family.

assigned to Theophano, not just by Skylitzes but by Cedrenus and Leo the Deacon as well.[442] Thus Skylitzes relates:

> Having terminated her relations with Nicephoros, the Empress Theophano sent one of Tzimisces' men to summon him. Tzimisces was kicking his heels on his own estate, the Emperor having previously relieved him of his command as Domestic on suspicion of something or other and commanded him to remain confined to his own estates. The messenger brought him from there, for the adulteress had arranged for him to receive letters permitting him to make the journey.[443]

By labelling Theophano an adulteress, without actually saying so Skylitzes leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that Theophano and Tzimisces planned together to remove Nicephoros from power. Then, according to Skylitzes, the empress facilitated the entry of Tzimisces and his fellow conspirators into the heavily guarded palace. A eunuch from the women's quarters led Tzimisces to the room where Nicephoros was sleeping and the end came quickly:

> They cut off his head and showed it through a window to those who were rushing to his assistance. These were so taken aback by it that time was given for Tzimisces' party to do all they would without fear or danger of reprisals.[444]

If there is any question as to who was ultimately responsible for Nicephoros' downfall, the point is driven home when Skylitzes reproduces an epitaph by an admirer of the late emperor that includes the lines,

> Who once sliced men more sharply than the sword
> Is victim of a woman and a glaive [blade].
> Who once retained the whole world in his power
> Now small, is housed in but a yard of earth.
> Whom once it seems by wild beasts was revered

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[442] Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, p. 289-290.
[443] SH, p. 151.
[444] SH, p. 152.

His wife has slain as though he were a sheep.

and ends with the line,

Nicephoros, who vanquished all but Eve.[445]

Skylitzes relates that one of John Tzimisces' first acts was to ally himself with Basil the Parakoimômenos. In all probability, this alliance took place much sooner.[446] According to narrative sources other than Skylitzes, Tzimisces was proclaimed by Basil (supported by an armed force) immediately following Nicephoros' death.[447] The eunuch who came to guide the conspirators was just as likely to have been sent by Basil as by Theophano. Basil's superior political skill was recognised by Skylitzes:

> After Nicephoros died John Tzimisces assumed responsibility for the Roman government...[John] immediately summoned Basil the Parakoimômenos by night and made him his associate in power. It was in no small measure owing to this man that the Emperor Nicephoros gained the imperial throne...[John made this man his associate] because he had been involved in affairs of state for many years...Many times he had campaigned against the Hagarenes and he was especially skilled in smoothly adapting himself to difficult situations. He quickly took matters in hand and expelled all those who remained in favour of Nicephoros.[448]

However, even though Skylitzes acknowledges Basil's power he casts Theophano as the villain in the plot to remove Nicephoros.

If Theophano had aided Tzimisces to attain power, he turned on her most unchivalrously. Proceeding almost immediately following the death of Nicephoros

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[445] SH, p. 153.
[446] Although Leo the Deacon disputes that Basil the Parakoimômenos had any part in the plot to replace Nicephoros (Leo the Deacon, p. 94 as cited by SH-annotated, John Tzimisces, paragraph 1, note 1).
[447] Leo the Deacon 87-88 cited by Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, p. 291.
[448] SH, p. 154.

to St. Sophia in order to be crowned by the Patriarch Polyeuctus, Tzimisces was refused entry. The Patriarch demanded that he do penance for his crime; to which he immediately agreed. Tzimisces is then portrayed as qualifying his guilt and deflecting the blame onto Theophano:

> He did however advance the justification that it was not by him that Nicephoros had been killed, but by Balantês and Atzypotheodôros; and they at the instigation of the Sovereign Lady. On hearing this, the Patriarch ordered her to be ejected from the palace and sent to some island; Nicephoros' murderers to be banished and the bill by which Nicephoros sought to throw church affairs into disarray to be torn up. John immediately expelled [the two men] from the city and banished Theophano to the Proconnesos. She subsequently escaped from there and secretly fled to the Great Church, from which she was expelled by Basil the Patakoimômenos and exiled to the Damideia monastery, newly founded by the Emperor, in the Armeniac theme, but not before she had roundly upbraided the Emperor and Basil...leaving the marks of her knuckles on his temple...The bill was brought in and ripped up; the church then enjoyed her former liberties."[449]

Theophano was also speedily abandoned by Polyeuctus, who traded his support of Tzimisces for concessions to the church. It is obvious that Tzimisces soon realised that the real power in the imperial administration lay not with Theophano but with others. Theophano lacked the skill to counteract the political manipulation and manoeuvring of masters of the game like Basil the Parakoimômenos and John Tzimisces. If Theophano knew what was about to take place, she was used by the conspirators as a scapegoat to deflect attention from themselves and the people of the capital were only to willing to believe in

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[449] Ibid. See also Rosemary Morris, "Succession and Usurpation: Politics and Rhetoric in the Late Tenth Century" in *New Constantines*. Morris notes that usurpation was not an issue for John Tzimisces (his claim to legitimacy was in opposing an emperor who had acted illegally) but complicity in murder was. It had to be John's first priority to distance himself from that crime.

her complicity.[450] A little while later Tzimisces married "Theodora, the sister of Romanos [II] and daughter of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, which pleased the citizens greatly for it kept the imperial power within the family [of Basil I]."[451]

Tzimisces had been in power for about six years when, according to Skylitzes, he ran afoul of Basil the Parakoimômenos. John was returning to the capital after campaigning in the east when he passed by a number of prosperous estates. On asking to whom the estates belonged, John was informed that they had been diverted from the public treasury by Basil the Parakoimômenos and:

> ...He was deeply troubled and heaved a great sigh saying: "Oh, gentlemen, what a terrible thing it is if when public funds are expended, the Roman armies are reduced to penury, the emperors endure hardships beyond the borders and the fruits of all this effort become the property of one -- eunuch!" Thus spake the Emperor and one of those present reported what the Emperor had said to Basil, which provoked him to wrath; so that, henceforth, he was looking for an opportunity to rid himself of the Emperor. In due course he won over the Emperor's usual wine-pourer with flattery and bribed him with gifts. He prepared some poison, not the most deadly or one which speedily brings on ill effects, but one of those that gradually sap the strength of those who drink them. This toxin was served to the Emperor in wine; he drank it and gradually fell ill, losing his energy. Finally boils broke out on his shoulders and there was a copious haemorrhaging from the eyes. He returned to the capital and departed this life after reigning a little more than six years and as many months; he left to succeed him in life Basil and Constantine, the sons of Romanos.[452]

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[450] Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, p. 353-355 states unequivocally that "by 969, John Tzimiskes was plotting to murder the emperor." Theophano is portrayed by Whittow as a convenient scapegoat.
[451] SH, p. 159.
[452] SH, p. 168-169.

Ostrogorsky suggests that it is more likely that Tzimisces succumbed to typhoid.[453] At least no one blamed Theophano. After the death of Tzimisces, Theophano was swiftly recalled from exile,

> As soon as the right to rule had passed to the sons of Romanos [II] [the President-Basil the Parakoimômenos] sent messengers speeding to bring their mother back from exile and into the palace.[454]

Garland asserts that Theophano "almost certainly did not murder her father-in-law Constantine VII or her first husband"[455] and disputes her portrayals by modern historians as sexually promiscuous.[456] She nonetheless states that "her involvement in the murder of her second husband, Phocas, on the other hand is well documented, and she clearly had it in mind to become empress for the third time by marrying her second husband's assassin, said by all to have been her lover."[457] As evidence for this Garland cites Leo the Deacon, Skylitzes, Zonaras, Psellos' *Historia Syntomos*, and the obscure 'Chronicle of Salerno', which apparently also mentions the affair between Theophano and John.[458] These cannot, however, be considered as several independent verifications. Skylitzes has followed Leo the Deacon, or a common source to Leo. Psellos has also followed Leo. Zonaras has followed Skylitzes. All of these sources are closely related to each other and/or have relied on the same common sources for their information.

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[453] Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 298.
[454] SH, p. 170.
[455] Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 135.
[456] See, for example, Michael McCormick's characterisation mentioned earlier.
[457] Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 135. It has also been noted by others that one of the only people not to benefit from Romanos II's death was Theophano.
[458] Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 131, n. 37.

There have also been suggestions that Nicephoros Phocas may not have been as unpopular before his death as Skylitzes would have us believe and that Theophano was the victim of some very bad contemporary press.[459] Admirers of Nicephoros such as John the Geometrician composed contemporary epitaphs and songs that cast Theophano as the villain; a romantic version that the wider populace accepted as true. Such songs and poems proved remarkably popular and enduring, still being repeated and performed into the late medieval period.[460]

The true extent of Theophano's involvement in the assassination of Nicephoros Phocas may never be known. What is certain is that of all the players in this drama, she had the least to gain and lost the most. It is puzzling that sources such as Skylitzes acknowledge the political skill and ruthlessness of Basil the Parakoimômenos, yet, no one speculates what part he might have played in this crime. However, what is truly hard to believe is the credulousness with which modern historians, with very few exceptions, accept the portrayals of Theophano's villainy wholesale.

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[459] Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 134.

[460] One satirical song preserved in a late sixteenth century Cretan manuscript tells how Theophano was exiled by her lover, with Polyeuctus and Basil the Nothos or 'matchmaker' [Basil the Parakoimômenos] depicted as the main agents of her downfall (Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 135).

Anna Porphyrogenita - The Marriage Pawn

Following the death of John Tzimisces in 976, Romanos' sons Basil II and Constantine VIII acceded to the throne as co-emperors but Basil the Parakoimômenos was the real power.[461] As Skylitzes notes, "but they only became emperors in appearance and name for the administration of the affairs of state was undertaken by Basil the President on account of the youth of the emperors, their immaturity and their as yet undeveloped aptitude."[462] Basil was already eighteen years old and his brother was sixteen but it was not until 985 that Basil II threw off the Parakoimômenos' influence and moved to take control on his own. Even then he had to fend off numerous challenges by potential usurpers, including those mounted by Bardas Scleros and Bradas Phocas in 987. One or the other would have probably been successful had not Basil bartered off his sister Anna, 'the purple-born princess' for several thousand Russian mercenaries, a force which turned the tide in his favour in 988.[463] As Skylitzes writes, "...he had been able to enlist allies among the Russians and he had made their leader, Vladimir, his kinsman by marrying him to his sister, Anna."[464] According to Osrogorsky, the marriage of Anna to Vladimir "was a very great concession: no Byzantine princess born in the purple had ever before been

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[461] Eventually the Parakoimômenos provoked the resentment of Basil II who removed him from office and confiscated his property (985-986). Basil II's anger was shown by his Novel whereby all edicts promulgated during the Parakoimômenos' tenure had to be personally endorsed by Basil II to remain valid (Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 300). Basil II also moved to circumscribe the rights of eunuchs to pass on their wealth through inheritance. That right that had been given to them by Leo VI, who had enacted a law that allowed eunuchs to form kinship groups through adoption and thus pass on property (Kazhdan and McCormick, "The Social World of the Byzantine Court," p. 179).

[462] SH, p. 170.

[463] Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 300-304; Treadgold, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 517-518.

[464] SH, p. 181.

married to a foreigner."[465] The marriage alliance was made on the condition that the Rus' receive baptism.[466] Thus the marriage of Anna is credited with bringing Christianity to the Rus' and saving the imperial throne for her brother.

Basil, who never married himself, made great use of marriage alliances. Skylitzes also relates that "at that time [1005/1006] the Emperor gave the daughter of Argyros (sister of the Romanos [III Argyros] who later reigned as emperor) in lawful marriage to the Doge of Venice to conciliate the Venetians."[467] Romilly Jenkins also describes how Basil attempted to negotiate a marriage between his niece, Zôê, and the heir to Otto II.[468] The plan foundered when the potential groom died. As a result, Zôê found herself still unmarried and middle-aged when her uncle died in 1025.

Zôê and Theodora - The Last Macedonians

Why the successful soldier and emperor, Basil II, did not provide for his succession is one of the great mysteries of Byzantine history. He left the throne, instead, to a dissolute brother who had never played any part in the imperial administration. According to Skylitzes,

> [Constantine] neither accomplished nor planned to accomplish any of the things he ought to have done but rather entertained himself with horse-races, actors and comedy-shows and passed his nights playing silly games while he appointed to civil and military positions not those who had

[465] Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 304. Maria Lecapena was not 'born in the purple'.
[466] Andrzej Poppe, "The Political Background of the to the Baptism of the Rus': Byzantine Russian Relations Between 986-89," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, No. 30 (1976), p. 228.
[467] SH, p. 184. The marriage was actually with John, son of Peter II Orseolo, Doge of Venice. Maria was apparently criticised for her luxurious habits, such as the use of forks, and her death from plague soon after was seen as divine retribution (Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 137).
[468] Jenkins, *Imperial Centuries*, p. 324-325.

> demonstrated their worth by deed or word, but wine-sodden, servile eunuchs, bloated with every kind of disgusting abomination. These he collated to the most conspicuous and highest offices, cursorily passing over those distinguished by birth, virtue and experience.[469]

Skylitzes views about the corps of eunuchs who achieved influence and high office under Constantine VIII, the father of Zôê and Theodora, could not be plainer. Basil's brother, Constantine VIII, had three spinster daughters that he had not tried to marry off until he was near death.

> Constantine suddenly fell ill and when the doctors despaired of his life, he set his mind to designating someone to succeed him on the throne. Romanus was brought into the palace. When he arrived, he was confronted with two alternatives: either to divorce his legitimate wife, marry the Emperor's daughter and be proclaimed emperor, or to lose his eyes. He was speechless and undecided before this choice but his wife, fearing lest her man suffer pain, willingly accepted monastic tonsure, thus obtaining for her husband both his sight and the Empire. Constantine had three daughters by the daughter of the Patrician Alypios whom he married while Basil was still living. Eudocia, the first in age, had received the monastic tonsure; the third, Theodora, refused to marry Romanus, either because he was a relative or because his wife was still living. But Zoê, the second in age, gladly accepted when the proposal of marriage was put to her. The question of consanguinity arose but the Patriarch and the church dispensed with the impediment; Romanus was married to Zoê and proclaimed ruler and emperor. Constantine died three days later ....[470]

In this way Skylitzes introduces Zôê to his readers. She is portrayed in a rather bad light, especially as compared to her sister, Theodora. Zôê was prepared to 'gladly' ignore an existing marriage and the taint of consanguinity, both considered severe impediments to marriage. The new emperor immediately set

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[469] SH, p. 198.
[470] SH, p. 199-200.

about rewarding all his friends with generous gifts.[471] Apparently Theodora did not retire quietly from the scene but was involved in plots to unseat her sister and Romanos III Argyros, eventually provoking retaliation. Zôê had her sister tonsured "for (she said) there was no other way to put an end to her plots and her scandalous behaviour."[472]

Whittow asserts that Basil II had countered the influence of the military elites by appointing his own hand-picked commanders, men from undistinguished families who had no other allegiances. In this way, the eunuch John the Orphanotrophos[473] came into imperial service.[474] John had assisted Zôê in uncovering the plots of her sister and he had become a trusted servant of Romanus III Argyros. In this way, he was able to introduce his handsome brother onto the emperor's staff where he came to the notice of Zôê. Skylitzes describes Zôê's scandalous behaviour and John's treachery in sensational detail:

> But [Romanus III Argyros] was afflicted by a chronic disease; his beard and his hair fell out and it was said he had been poisoned by John who later became Orphanotrophos. This John had served Romanus before he became emperor and, when he acceded to the throne, the other became very powerful. He had brothers: Michael, Nicetas, Constantine and George, of whom John, Constantine and George were eunuchs by nature and rascals by profession. Nicetas still had his genitals intact and was showing the first down of a beard but Michael had already achieved maturity and was a fine figure of a man to look at. They were both money-changers by trade; they used to adulterate the coin. Through John they were all familiar to the Emperor and fate having designated them to wield power in the future, constantly increased their influence. The others were assigned various offices while

[471] SH, p. 201.
[472] SH, p. 206.
[473] 'Orphanotrophos' means 'orphan feeder' and probably refers to John's initial position as the administrator of the imperial orphanage.
[474] Psellos, *Chronographia*, I, pp.19, 44-5 as cited by Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, p. 375-376.

> Michael was appointed Governor of Pantheon by the Emperor. The Empress fell madly and demonically in love with this man; she used to have secret meetings with him and shady intercourse. They say this is why the Emperor wasted away with a painful disease under the influence of slow poison, the Empress taking the opportunity of getting rid of him without attracting suspicion so that she could raise up Michael to the imperial throne. That is why (as we said) the Emperor dragged out his wretched and excruciating life contaminated not with poisons that obtain an early demise, but with those that bring on a leisurely and lingering death. He was bed-ridden and praying with all his soul for extinction. He lasted until the eleventh of April...he expressed a desire to bathe in the baths of the Great Palace. He went in and was pitilessly suffocated by Michael's henchmen in the swimming pool of the baths...And that very night, while they were singing of the Saviour's sufferings, the Patriarch Alexios was summoned, allegedly by the Emperor Romanus, to come up to the Palace. When he got there, he found the Emperor Romanus dead. The Chrysotriklinos was all decked out; sitting on a throne, Zôê brought in Michael and would have the Patriarch marry him to her. Alexios was astounded at her demand and stood there speechless, at a loss whether or not to comply. But John, together with Zôê, gave fifty pounds of gold to the Patriarch and fifty to the clergy -- which convinced them to perform the priestly office.[475]

No one in this little drama at the imperial palace comes off very well, not Michael's companions and certainly not the Patriarch. Skylitzes, however, reserves a special condemnation for Zôê. She "fell madly and demonically in love with this man" – her love is portrayed as demonic as though she were possessed by the devil. As noted by Liz James "the reverse of the pious empress was the impious and ungodly witch, in league with the powers of evil and the devil."[476] This is the worst type of insult. In the *Synopisis*, only the iconoclast emperors were

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[475] SH, p. 208.
[476] C. Galatariotou, "Holy Women and Witches," p. 55-94 as cited by Liz James, *Empresses and Power*, p. 16.

subjected to similar contumely.[477] Skylitzes says some other nasty things about Zôê. She was an adulteress and a user of poison. This is pretty strong invective, but classic insult for women and Skylitzes says the same about Theophano. It is also likely that this sordid vignette of imperial intrigue and its consequences as portrayed by Skylitzes reveals something of his disapproval of palace behaviour under Zôê and her associated emperors. One has very little difficulty imagining the distaste with which Cecaumenus would have contemplated this episode.

According to Skylitzes, this bad behaviour on the part of Zôê and Michael was followed by retribution from God, endangering the continued prosperity of the Empire. He gives examples of plagues, earthquakes and visions of worse to come.[478] Lest the reader doubt why these things have come to pass (or be unsure of Skylitzes' views on the topic), Skylitzes puts these words in the mouth of an angel,

> These came and will come upon you because of your transgression of God's commandments and the desecration of the Emperor Romanos which has taken place and the violation of his marriage-bed.[479]

Skylitzes notes Michael's attempts to propitiate God for his crimes but condemns his efforts as false and, therefore, ineffective. He does not repudiate Zôê or leave the imperial palace. Instead:

> ...he continued to live with her, wholeheartedly enjoying his imperial role. And he financed what were supposed to be his good works out of the common and public purse, expecting to

[477] Michael II embraced *porneia* or sexual deviance (SH, p. 18). Theophilus was a cruel, blood-thirsty and brutal tyrant (SH, p. 35-38). This was a serious condemnation of his performance as a ruler as the ideology of imperial administration held justice and temperance on the part of the emperor as highly praiseworthy.
[478] SH, p. 211; p. 212; p. 214.
[479] SH, p. 211.

> receive absolution as though from a mindless and unjust God from whom repentance could be purchased with the money of others.[480]

Skylitzes portrays Zôê as having placed Michael IV on the throne in order to exercise power herself, but, things did not work out quite as she had planned:

> Zôê thought that once she had established Michael on the imperial throne she would have a slave and servant rather than a husband and an emperor. She had already moved her father's eunuchs into the palace and was taking a closer interest in state affairs but, in the event, everything turned out for her in a strikingly different way. John, the Emperor's brother, was an energetic man of action. He was concerned for his brother's safety from when he first set foot in the palace for he had the example of Romanos before his eyes. He expelled the Empress' eunuchs from the palace and packed off the most faithful of her servants, appointing women who were related to him to be her warders and guardians. There was nothing that she could do, great or small, without his permission. She could neither go for a walk nor visit the baths unless he gave assent; he deprived her of all recreation.[481]

With this anecdote, Zôê's great power was acknowledged. John felt it was necessary for her to be completely isolated in order to neutralise her. Zôê attempted to rid herself of John by poisoning him, but he discovered the plot and became even more suspicious of the empress.[482] After Michael's death in 1041, Zôê once more attempted to administer the empire alone. However:

> After Michael met his end in that way the supreme power passed to the Empress Zôê, she being the heir. She addressed herself with youthful vigour to state business in cooperation with her father's eunuchs whom the narrative has frequently touched on above. But she did not remain in the

[480] SH, p. 212-213. Cf. Skylitzes' portrayal of John Tzimisces who exiled Theophano as instructed by the Patriarch and "promised that, in propitiation for his sin, he would distribute among the poor whatever he had possessed as a private citizen..." (SH, p. 154)
[481] SH, p. 210.
[482] SH, p. 215.

> same state of mind. Faced with the enormous responsibility of the Empire, she realised she could not adequately administer the public business all alone. She thought it was detrimental for such a dominion to be without ruler and director and judged it necessary to procure an emperor capable of dealing with matters in the various circumstances which might arise. For three whole days she considered this matter then she received as her adoptive son and proclaimed emperor of the Romans the [late] emperor's nephew and namesake, the son of that Stephan who had ruined the situation in Sicily. [This Michael was already] Caesar and seemed to be both a man of action and a capable administrator. She had previously bound him with awesome oaths to hold her as his mistress, his Sovereign-Lady and mother for as long as she lived and to do whatever she commanded. She placed the imperial diadem on his brow...[483]

It is clear from Skylitzes' description of what occurred prior to the accession of the two Michaels that, as the heir, the imperial authority was Zôê's to bestow. What's more, she knew it. Zôê had a very good grasp of her prerogatives. Zôê "addressed herself with youthful vigour to state business" until, overwhelmed by the task, she "judged it necessary to procure an emperor capable of dealing with matters." She made the choice of emperor and "placed the imperial diadem on his brow." Unfortunately, she was a poor judge of character and was induced by the Orphanotrophos to make his nephew (also called Michael) the next emperor after securing his oath "to hold her as his mistress, his Sovereign-Lady and mother for as long as she lived and to do whatever she commanded."[484]

As insurance of Michael's compliance, Zôê had his uncle, the Orphanotrophos exiled. Although not on the scene, John's warnings to his nephew to beware of the empress caused Michael V to take action that would

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[483] SH, p. 223.
[484] Ibid.

soon cost him his life. He banished Zôê to a convent and the Patriarch to a monastery:

> When the Eparch[485] had read the proclamation in the hearing of the people, a voice was heard (and it was never discovered who called out): "We don't want a cross-trampling caulker[486] for emperor, but the original and hereditary [ruler]: our mother Zôê" and the entire people immediately broke out into shouts of: "Let the bones of the caulker be broken" and each one picking up stones, pedestals and left-over pieces of wood they all but killed the Eparch. This was the Patrician Anastasios who had served Zôê's father; he only just saved his life by taking to his heels. The crowd then went running to the Great Church where the Patriarch happened to be (having bribed his way back to the city), denigrating the Emperor and demanding the restoration of the Empress. All her father's eunuchs now came running together with the Patrician Constantine Kabasilas and all the rest of the Senate. By common consent they despatched persons to bring Theodora from Petrion to the Great Church where they dressed her in imperial purple and proclaimed her empress [*anassa*] together with Zôê her sister. Then they charged to the palace, in eager haste to drag Michael down from the imperial residence. He, terrified by the rage and uprising of the people, immediately sent and brought Zôê into the palace, stripped off the monastic habit and clothed her with imperial robes. Looking out from the imperial box at the Hippodrome, he attempted to address the people [saying] that he had brought back the Empress and that everything was the way they wanted it to be; but they would have none of it.[487]

In this description Skylitzes has portrayed a spontaneous outburst of public support for the last heirs of the Macedonian dynasty. Modern historians take this as evidence that there was strong acceptance among the citizens of the Empire, or at least of the capital, for the idea of hereditary succession.[488] While this may be true,

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[485] The mayor of the city.
[486] This was a reference to the surname of Michael's family, Kalaphatês.
[487] SH, p. 223.
[488] Hill, "Imperial Women and the Ideology of Womanhood", p. 54; Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 7.

this display of support also probably depended to large extent on the imperial largesse. An *augousta* had her own staff, who were traditionally eunuchs (as were most palace personnel), and she could exercise real independent authority through the control of vast revenues and the exercise of patronage. It was no accident that one of the first acts of Michael IV and John, his brother, was to deprive Zôê of her staff and constrain her movements and, thus, her ability to distribute gifts and largesse. Michael V had also made the mistake of moving against the Patriarch who was one of the city's power elite, with his own staff at his disposal. Finally, coherent and united action on the part of Zôê's father's eunuchs reflected their organisational aptitude and their ability to manipulate the mob [public opinion] and coordinate demonstrations as much as a spontaneous outburst of affection for Zôê. Unfortunately for Michael V, bringing back Zôê to produce for the masses did not save him or his brother, John. Although they sought refuge in the Stoudios monastery and Zôê would have shown them mercy, Theodora "filled with wrath and determination, ordered the newly appointed Eparch...to go and make sure that he plucked out the emperor's eyes and *his* uncle's too."[489]

Zôê ruled for a short time, albeit reluctantly, with her sister. Skylitzes portrayed their administration as reasonably competent:

> The Senate was rewarded with promotions to honours, the people with distributions of gifts. The administration found itself conducted with befitting foresight; letters and directives were sent out promising that offices would not be for sale and could no longer be purchased the way they used to be; also stipulating that all injustice was to be cast out from among them. When these regulations had come into effect to the

[489] SH, p. 225.

> rulers' satisfaction, the Nobilissimus Constantine was recalled from exile and questioned concerning public monies. Terrified by what he was threatened with, he showed the fifty-three kentênaria of gold hanging in a cistern at his house near Holy Apostles' Church. The sum was delivered to the Empress while he returned into exile. She appointed the Proedros Nicholas, her father's eunuch, Domestic of the Scholae for the east, the Patrician Constantine Kabasilas Duke of the west. She sent off George Maniaces,[490] already released from prison by Michael, to be Commander plenipotentiary of the army units in Italy with the honourary title of Magister.[491]

However, in spite of the appearance of order and competence,[492] it was soon decided that an emperor would have to be appointed. This time, it appears, Zôê's judgement was not to be trusted and the choice would not be her's alone for "then a conference was held concerning the [office of] emperor and the unanimous opinion was that an emperor ought to be appointed and married to Zôê."[493]

The man chosen, Constantine IX Monomachos, was a member of the city based elite. Skylitzes assessment of Constantine's rule is damning:

> He devised many other wicked and iniquitous taxes which it would be a disgrace to list; but there is one thing which has to be mentioned and I will say it: that it was from the time of this Emperor and on account of his prodigality and pretentiousness, that the fortunes of the Roman Empire began to waste away. From that time until now it has regressed into an all-encompassing debility. He simply sought to be open-handed yet he ended up being utterly profligate.[494]

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[490] George Maniaces was a talented general who secured many victories for the empire but he was very badly used by the imperial administration.
[491] SH, p. 226.
[492] Michael Psellos describes a situation where the sisters "neither of them...fitted by temperament to govern" quarrelled, each attempting to gain the ascendancy over the other and take sole power. In the end Zôê seized control again, but, it was still the consensus that she must marry in order to have an emperor to take control (Psellos, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter, p. 155-160).
[493] SH, p. 226.
[494] SH, p. 253.

Modern historians concur and the general opinion on his effectiveness as a ruler is that he was weak and incompetent.[495] He was, however, clever enough to outlive Zôê and to secure the empresses' acceptance in the imperial palace of his mistress, the sister of Romanus Sklêros, known as Skleraina. An interesting accommodation was devised whereby Skleraina was moved into the palace as Constantine's consort, honoured with the titles of *sebaste* and *despoina* and even given a place in the official ceremonies.[496] Constantine continued to be married to Zôê as the source of his imperial legitimacy, but in name only. Skylitzes' description of the following incident suggests that public acceptance of this arrangement may not have been total:

> The Emperor left the palace on foot, well guarded and accompanied by cheering; he had arrived at the Church of the Saviour at the Chalkê from where he was going to proceed on horseback to the Martyrs' shrine when a voice broke out in the crowd: "We don't want Skleraina for empress and we don't want our mamma, the porphyrogenetoi Zôê and Theodora, put to death on her account." Suddenly everything was confusion; the crowd was in tumult, trying to get its hands on the Emperor and if the Empresses had not promptly shown themselves up above and calmed the crowd many would have perished, possibly the Emperor himself. When the disturbance had quieted down he returned to the palace, abandoning the visit to the martyrs. {There was plenty of complaining by the people, the Senate and by the sisters, the Sovereign Ladies, about the daughter of Sclêros being the Emperor's mistress. A particularly eminent monk of that time whose name was Stêthatos reproved him but achieved nothing for the Emperor was completely under the spell of her beauty.[497]

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[495] Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State*, p. 590; Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 326.
[496] Psellos, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter, p. 183-184.
[497] SH, p. 232.

In fact, this portrayal may reflect Skylitzes' disapproval more than that of the people of the capital. Psellos, for example, does not describe such public disapproval but rather an extremely civil relationship. He does, however, depict a situation whereby Skleraina campaigned to secure the approval of the imperial sisters with the presentation of extravagant gifts: "Thus the wealth which the Emperor Basil had accumulated in the imperial treasury, at the cost of much sweat and labour, became the plaything of these women, to be expended on their pleasures."[498]

Zôê died in 1050 and Constantine IX Monomachos outlived her by five years. At his death, Theodora finally got the chance to do what she had apparently conspired for all her life. With the help of her loyal eunuchs, she seized and held the throne although another had been chosen to succeed as emperor. Skylitzes' description of the jockeying that went on at this time leaves no doubt that, during much of this period, it was impossible to make a move towards the supreme power without the support of powerful palace eunuchs who had large retinues at their disposal:

> ...the question of whom they should establish on the imperial throne was debated by those who held the highest positions in the palace. These were John the Logothete who was the Emperor's partner in government since he had expelled Leichoudês, Constantine the protonotary of the Drome, Basil the Prefect of the imperial inkstand and the rest of those [eunuchs] who were close to the Emperor in some way. They all thought that Nicephoros Prôteuôn was a suitable candidate so a courier was sent in haste to Bulgaria to bring him from there, for at that time he was functioning as governor of Bulgaria. When those who served the Empress Theodora learnt of this (Zôê had already departed this life), Nicetas Xylinitês, Theodore and Manuel took her aboard ship, brought

[498] Psellos, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter, p. 186.

> her to the imperial residence in the Great Palace and proclaimed her ruling emperor. The Emperor [Constantine IX] died in the Mangana and received a tomb like any other. They of the Empress' entourage sent and arrested Prôteuôn in Thessalonica, took him from there into the Tharcesiôn theme and exiled him to the monastery of Kouzênas which is there.[499]

Skylitzes would appear to be no great admirer of eunuchs although, not withstanding his portrayal of John the Orphanotrophos, he does mention many who served loyally and without treachery and others who were effective military leaders. Still, he does place the following statement in the mouth of the rebel Scleros (who had moved to seize power from Basil II when Basil was a young man):

> When Sclêrus heard Phôcas had set out, he thought that now for the first time the fight would be against a true soldier, one who well knew how to conduct military operations with courage and skill; not, as formerly, against pitiful fellows, eunuchs, fostered in chambers and raised in the shade.[500]

Skylitzes' views may also be discerned in his portrayal of Basil the Parakoimômenos, his illicit acquisition of riches and his ruthless elimination of John Tzimisces when his privileges were threatened. Skylitzes characterisation of the eunuchs who surrounded Constantine VIII (the very eunuchs who assisted Zôê and Theodora to take power from Michael V) as "wine-sodden, servile eunuchs, bloated with every kind of disgusting abomination"[501] can hardly be considered flattering.

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[499] SH, p. 253.
[500] SH, p. 175.
[501] SH, p. 198.

As Kathryn Ringrose explains eunuchs traditionally served the imperial family and, "especially during those periods when a women held the throne, eunuchs became trusted political advisors and powerful administrators."[502] The person in charge of the correct performance of imperial ceremonial was a eunuch and eunuchs tutored the imperial children. Eunuchs staffed the imperial apartments. They served closest to the emperor and empress's person and slept in their private quarters. As Michael McCormick notes, "their cooperation was indispensable for anyone who wished to reach the emperor's ear..."[503] Proximity to the emperor or empress was a source of wealth for eunuchs who might receive valuable gifts in order to allow such access. Court eunuchs had such a potential for career advancement that many families considered castration of a talented child as an asset to their future.[504] Little could be done without their co-operation and eunuchs were at the centre of more than one conspiracy to remove a reigning emperor.

Skylitzes portrayal of Zôê's sister, Theodora, did not include the level of insult and invective that he directed at Zôê. Actually, in his portrayal of Theodora, he describes her as displaying some very masculine characteristics. Even her eunuchs proclaimed her as the ruling *emperor*,[505] not as the *empress* (although Skylitzes *himself* always refers to her as empress). Theodora plots against her sister just like a man. Where Zôê "shrank" from punishing Michael V, Theodora was "filled with wrath and determination." However, although Theodora displays

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[502] Kathryn Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows," p. 96.
[503] Michael McCormick, "Emperors," in *The Byzantines*, p. 236.
[504] A. Kazhdan and Michael McCormick, "The Social World of the Byzantine Court," p. 178.
[505] SH, p. 253.

masculine qualities, they are not the ones that would normally be praised. She is wrathful, not just, and if her performance is judged according to the criteria for a male emperor, she does not come off well. According to Skylitzes, her reign was marred by acts of vengeance and intemperate government, which are the opposite of the acts of the just and temperate ruler praised by Menander:

> Once she had acquired her hereditary throne Theodora immediately pursued with vengeance those who had plotted to make the Prôteuôn ruler, depriving them of their property and sending them into exile. She promoted all her eunuchs to high office...[506]

After waiting for so long, Theodora reigned for only a year and then died. The eunuchs moved quickly to place another civil servant on the throne,

> Even while she was still taking her last breaths, the eunuchs together with Leo Syncellos elevated the patrician Michael Stratiôtikos to the imperial throne. He was a native of Byzantium, a simple and straightforward man who, from his youth up, had only been occupied with military matters; he knew nothing about anything else. He was already over the hill and entering old age, the age in which it is better to be retired (as the Poet Archilochos declares.) They took this action to ensure that he would only have the appearance and the name of emperor while they themselves conducted affairs of state as they wished and became master of all. He had previously sworn never to do anything contrary to their opinion and volition.[507]

Under Zôê and Theodora the corps of imperial eunuchs reached the apogee of their power and influence, but, their day was coming to an end. Under the

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[506] SH, p. 254.
[507] Ibid.

members of the military aristocracy who would soon seize power, the influence of eunuchs in imperial government would be drastically curtailed.[508]

[508] Kazhdan and McCormick, "The Social World of the Byzantine Court," p. 180. The number of eunuchs in high office, or even at court, declined precipitously under Alexios I, John II, and Manuel I.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions

As has been noted John Skylitzes' *Synopsis of Histories* conforms very closely to the dominant ideology for Byzantine women and thus conveys a great deal of information to the perceptive reader about Byzantine ideas regarding the feminine ideal and conventions of behaviour for women in the eleventh century. This can be summarised under the following headings: Women and Religion, Women and Sexuality, Women and Violence, and Women and Imperial Power.

Women and Religion

Piety had been a characteristic of the ideal empress from the adoption of Christianity by the empire in the fourth century. However, a supplementary aspect was added to the attribute of piety during the iconoclast controversy and Skylitzes' portrayal of the Blessed Theodora brings this out. Theodora was not simply pious. According to Skylitzes (and his sources) she kept her *orthodox* piety [in the sense of supporting the veneration of icons] even in the face of vociferous opposition from her iconoclast husband. This characteristic of the ideal as it pertained to imperial women has also been observed by Judith Herrin who noted the general identification of women with resistance to iconoclasm. For example, in letters written by the high profile iconophile monk Theodore of the Stoudios Monastery he praises nuns for their steadfastness when compared to monks and mentions wealthy women and widows who supported imprisoned and

exiled iconophiles with food and clothing.[509] Skylitzes conforms to this image when he portrays Theodora as instructing her children in icon worship and attempting on several occasions to alleviate the persecution of iconophiles. In this way he perpetuates the gendered stereotype of women as iconophile supporters. However, in adhering so closely to the ideology, Skylitzes may have obscured the roles of Theodora's advisor, Theoctistos, and her talented brothers, Petronas and Bardas, in the restoration of icon worship.

For Herrin, portrayals such as this "raise the question of whether icon veneration was specifically meaningful to women, whose roles in the organised church were so limited."[510] It has been suggested that as the worship of icons did not require the intervention of a priest and could be carried on within the privacy of one's own home that it was especially appealing to women. Conversely, there are others who maintained that the appeal of icons for women stemmed from the fact that they were so theologically unsophisticated they could not engage in worship without visual aids.[511] It is apparent from narrative sources such as Skylitzes that women obviously identified with the virgin mother and maintained a special relationship with icons of her image such as the Mother of God at Blachernai.[512] Skylitzes in fact portrays Theodora as accustomed to worship at this very spot.[513]

The role of the empress who, according to the standards of encomium, encourages the emperor on the path of temperance, justice and mercy is related to the ideal of the empress as the archetype of pious orthodoxy. In this regard,

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[509] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 166.
[510] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 167.
[511] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 196.
[512] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 167.
[513] "The Empress Theodora was in the habit of going to the sacred church of the Mother of God at Blachernae both to worship and to bathe with her daughters." (SH, p. 57).

the empress functions as an impetus for better behaviour by the emperor, encouraging him to return to the correct path of orthodoxy and to end his unjust persecution of the iconophiles (a role that Theodora is portrayed as filling on several occasions). Thus, her portrayal as apparently openly defiant of the emperor's authority (otherwise unthinkable) becomes acceptable in the context of the ideology.

Women and Sexuality

The convention for empresses, as with all women, was chastity and virginity before marriage, monogamy and family afterwards. Skylitzes' portrayals, whether expressed as an ideal or as invective, faithfully conform to this ideal. This is especially evident in his portrayals of Leo VI's wives, who are constructed as moral opposites. Leo's women were either chaste or they were not, there was no middle ground. The chaste behaviour of Theophano, who endured her husband's affair in silence, was contrasted with the sexual promiscuity of the imperial concubine Zôê Zaoutza.

As noted by Liz James, a standard component of the invective of imperial women was accusations of immoral sexual behaviour.[514] Jacqueline Long points to the many examples of "invective demonisation," where the subject is associated with demons or demonic behaviour (such as the use of poison or spells).[515] Thus invective reversed the virtues; chaste and pious became promiscuous and demonic. The plan to remove Nicephorus Phocas is portrayed

[514] James, *Empresses and Power*, p. 16.
[515] Long, *Claudian's In Eutropium*, p. 103.

as a plot hatched by the adulteress Theophano, who has already been established as a demonic user of poison and a sexual temptress who has distracted Nicephorus from his monastic path.[516] Alternative explanations for the removal of Nicephorus, such as the ambition of Basil the Parakoimomenos and the criminal incompetence of Nicephorus himself are scarcely mentioned. Similarly, Zôê Porphyrogenita is portrayed as 'demonic' in her adulterous obsession with Michael IV.

Skylitzes also conforms to the misogynistic aspects of the ideology, described by Kathryn Ringrose, which associated women and eunuchs in 'shady activities'.[517] Although he asserts the falseness of the tale, Skylitzes still relates attempts to associate Zôê Carbonopsina with the eunuch Constantine in an immoral relationship and he places the blame for the failure of her administration on her relationship with that eunuch. Zôê Porphyrogenita is described as engaging in 'shady intercourse' with Michael IV. This easy identification of women with sexual impropriety and immorality has been carried forward into the work of modern historians, such as Warren Treadgold and others who, for example, do not question the invective portrayals of Theophano.

It is also interesting to note that Skylitzes reflects an ideology that did not necessarily associate sexuality with marriage, which was primarily seen as a method of building kinship alliances and providing legitimate heirs. Imperial sisters and daughters generally remained unmarried, unless their marriage was required to further the interests of their family. This is most obvious in the

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[516] Although Skylitzes expresses doubts about the sincerity of Nicephoros' vocation (SH, p. 139).
[517] K. Ringrose, "Passing The Test of Sanctity...", p. 85.

portrayal of Constantine IX Monomachos who remained married to Zôê Porphyrogenita as the source of his imperial legitimacy while openly cohabitating with his mistress, Skleraina. While acknowledging the separation of sexuality and marriage and family life in this case, Skylitzes still makes plain his disapproval of Constantine's accommodations by having it voiced by a mob who threatened Constantine's life when they feared his mistress might displace Zôê.

Women and Violence

In his portrayals that conform to the ideal rather than to invective, Skylitzes represents empresses such as the Blessed Theodora as an influence for mercy and temperance and as naturally reluctant to resort to violence. Theodora is portrayed by Skylitzes as having 'a horror of killing and bloodshed' and as one who would not resort to violence even when grievously provoked.[518] This did not, however, stop Theodora from viciously persecuting the Paulicians; a fact that Skylitzes does not fail to mention although he attempts to deflect responsibility for the worst aspects of the persecution onto her generals. This is a further example of a situation where the conventional ideal of the empress apparently diverges from the historic reality. In the cases of Theophano and Zôê Porphyrogenita, where Skylitzes has employed invective, we have portrayals of empresses who, in contrast to the ideal, willingly support the use of violence to rid themselves of inconvenient husbands.

[518] SH, p. 55-56.

Women and Imperial Power

As the portrayals of women in the Synopsis are almost exclusively of imperial females, there is much to be learned about the ideologies of Byzantine society that pertain to empresses and other imperial women and their place in the imperial administration. Also found here are clues to the views and opinions that men like Skylitzes held about the imperial administration of the eleventh century and the role of women and eunuchs in that administration.

The ideology for Byzantine women perpetuated the convention of seclusion for females. Related to this was the view that an ideal woman did not push herself forward into public life or seek to exercise power over a man. Active participation in public affairs was viewed with disapproval except in the context of protecting the interests of the family, as in the case of safeguarding the rights of minor children or an inheritance. In this case, women could assert their prerogative to act independently, even to the extent of exercising imperial power, as did empresses acting as regents. In his portrayals of the empress-regents (Theodora, Zôê Carbonopsina, and Theophano), Skylitzes acknowledges that there are certain situations where women might legally exercise imperial power. However, that power is to be exercised within closely defined parameters and for a strictly limited period of time. Power should be handed off to a male emperor as soon as practicable, even one that was less than 'ideal' as was Michael III. An empress surrendered power with dignity, as did the Blessed Theodora to Michael III, and did not attempt to cling to power with undignified 'shrieks and tears', as did Zôê Carbonopsina. Women subsumed their interests to those of their families and

willingly entered into marriages that would serve the family interest, as did Maria Lecapena and Anna Porphyrogenita.

Skylitzes' portrayals of empresses also provide clues to his views about the exercise of power by imperial women. As already noted, it is obvious that Skylitzes gives more space in his narrative to certain empresses. Those are the empresses who have been actively involved in the administration of the empire, either as regents or in their own right. His portrayals of those who were not engaged in the imperial administration are cursory and consist of a line or two at best. It is interesting that his most positive portrayals, those that conform most closely to the standards for encomium, are reserved for those empresses who were not engaged in government. This would include Eudocia Ingerina, whom Skylitzes describes as "a woman who exceeded all other women of her age in physical elegance, beauty and sobriety,"[519] and Eudocia Baïanê described as "a beautiful and gracious maiden from the Opsikion".[520]

Skylitzes is not interested in empresses in and of themselves as, in most cases, it was inappropriate for women to take a public role. Like the jurist and government official that he is, Skylitzes is interested in the exercise of imperial power by empresses. Skylitzes' assessment of women exercising power is at best ambivalent or neutral. Those empresses most deserving of praise are dignified, beautiful, silent and out of the public eye. Even the sainted restorer of orthodoxy, Theodora, does not earn unqualified praise. However, as disapproving as Skylitzes appears to be about the behaviour of some empresses

[519] SH, p. 73.
[520] SH, p. 100.

and as ambivalent as he is about their exercise of power, there is still an acceptance of the principle of the legitimacy of feminine power in certain cases – and Skylitzes has the jurist's grasp of what is necessary in order for that power to be exercised legally. His descriptions of the assumption of power by empresses reveal this. For example, in order to legally exercise power as a regent, an *augousta* must have been proclaimed correctly. This means not just be the emperor but by the Patriarch as well. Because Leo VI did not conform to these constraints when he proclaimed Zôê Carbonopsina, she was prevented from assuming her role as regent and his long-awaited heir was placed in danger. Skylitzes further explains that Zôê's sister Theodora's right to rule was established when she was proclaimed by the Senate and the Patriarch, legalities that Zôê was unable to ignore and she was thus forced to share power.

Further, Skylitzes' portrayal of Zôê Porphyrogenita shows that he accepted the legality of imperial legitimacy stemming from a hereditary right to rule. He makes it plain that the imperial authority was within Zôê's purview to bestow. This acceptance was also apparently reflected in public opinion, as Skylitzes illustrates when he portrays the reaction of the people to Michael V's attempts to neutralise Zôê: "We don't want a cross-trampling caulker for emperor, but the original and hereditary [ruler]: our mother Zôê."[521] However, in spite of Skylitzes acceptance of Zôê's hereditary rights, he also makes it very clear that a male emperor was required for the efficient operation of the imperial administration. Also, while Skylitzes obviously accepted the principle of Zôê's

[521] SH, p. 224.

hereditary right to imperial legitimacy, he most certainly did not approve of what Zôê did with that right.

Skylitzes states that his purpose was to create "an easily-digestible nourishment,"[522] a handbook and reminder of the works of the historians, but, did Skylitzes have a purpose other than to simply relate 'a synopsis of histories'? With Zôê Porphyrogenita he has given us a portrayal of an imperial woman behaving in a manner that was not consistent with the ideology of appropriate behaviour for women. In his view her actions plainly endangered the common good and provoked divine retribution. Skylitzes portrays women such as Theophano and Zôê as weak and leading men into temptation, a typical Byzantine view of women but not the whole story. It is tempting to take Skylitzes' portrayals of imperial women exercising administrative power as evidence of a viewpoint that opposes the participation of women in the imperial administration. However, Skylitzes makes it clear that the rights of empress-regents and porphyrogenitai to exercise imperial power are supported in law. Skylitzes was not opposed to women exercising their legal right to participation in the imperial administration when the situation demanded it. What obviously disturbed him were the abuses that had taken place in conjunction with the involvement of women.

The empresses whom Skylitzes subjects to the most powerful invective, such as Theophano, are the ones who were most closely identified with extremely powerful (and, according to Skylitzes, ultimately seriously corrupt) eunuchs. Even Zôê Carbonopsina, whom Skylitzes portrays quite neutrally, was

[522] SH, p. 2.

revealed to have been under the influence of the corrupt and ambitious Constantine the Parakoimômenos, on whose shoulders Skylitzes squarely places the blame for the downfall of Zôê's regency government.[523] As portrayed by Skylitzes, Zôê Porphyrogenita was easily manipulated by John the Orphanotrophos into complicity in the most heinous crimes and placing his handsome brother on the throne. According to Skylitzes, massive abuse of imperial authority was the result.[524] A strong case can be made that, more than he objected to women in power, Skylitzes opposed the participation of eunuchs at the highest levels of imperial administration. It has already been noted that, although Skylitzes portrayed some eunuchs in a positive way, he more often depicted them as conforming to the negative stereotypes usually associated with their gender in the Byzantine sources.[525] Skylitzes apparent sympathy with the views of the military aristocracy who had come to power under Alexios I Comnenos (and of whom Catacalon Cecaumenus was a member) has also been noted. Skylitzes may have been constructing his portrayals to serve as a validation for the removal of the civil aristocracy, who depended heavily on talented and influential eunuchs, and the seizure of power by the military elite. Certainly the influence of eunuchs in imperial government was dramatically lessened under the Comneni.[526]

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[523] SH, p. 114. See p. 81 this paper. Constantine was only one of many eunuchs holding high office in Zôê's administration.

[524] "...the administration and the handling of public business rested entirely on John's shoulders and there was no imaginable form of impurity or criminality that he did not search out for the affliction and mistreatment of the subjects." (SH, p. 218)

[525] See Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows," p. 94.

[526] Although the Comneni still produced more than their share of strong and talented women, many of whom exercised considerable power. See Hill, *Imperial Women in Byzantium, 1025-1204*...

The preceding analysis provides evidence for the existence of an ideology that defined the ideal behaviour for Byzantine women. This was embodied in images, ideas and concepts that were transmitted to Byzantine society through a number of avenues, including documentary materials and non-verbal representations. The ideology was remarkably consistent, with the primary characteristics of the ideal varying only slightly from the earliest days of the Byzantine Empire. One of the primary means whereby the ideology of feminine behaviour was transmitted to the Byzantines was through historical narratives such John Skylitzes' *A Synopsis of Histories.*

The main components of the Byzantine ideology consisted of conventions of feminine behaviour that characterised an ideal and Skylitzes' portrayals reflect the ideology of his society as it pertains to the ideal behaviour for women. Briefly, the ideal Byzantine woman of the ninth to eleventh centuries can be described foremost as pious, beautiful and of a good family. Ideal women were also shy, modest, dignified and chaste. Skylitzes' portrayals, whether positive or negative reflected this ideology, as for example in the piety and mercy of Theodora, the beauty of Eudocia Ingerina, the dignity and emotional control of Leo VI's first wife Theophano or in the aggressiveness of Helena and the demonic sexuality of Zôê Porphyrogenita. Skylitzes perpetuates the ideology even in cases where alternative sources raise questions about how closely the historical behaviour of the empresses actually conformed to the ideology.

As noted, Skylitzes also conformed to the ideology even when his portrayals took the form of invective, as with Romanos II's wife, Theophano, and Zôê

Porphyrogenita. The antithesis still confirmed the ideal. However, the severity of the attack was such that it should lead one to question the veracity of the account. As noted by Amy Richlin, the repetition of the same insults "erodes the reader's belief that there is any connection at all [between invective and reality]."[527] Did Theophano really poison all those people? Did Zôê's behaviour with her husbands and heirs truly scandalise the Byzantine capital for thirty years or only those palace insiders privy to her private behaviour? It is also interesting to note that when Skylitzes moves from a dependence on the Macedonian sources to those that are more critical of the Macedonian emperors, there are no longer any praise-worthy empresses (for example, when Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus is portrayed as a poor ruler and his wife is portrayed as enabling him in that regard). Bad emperors are married to bad empresses.

The issue of the reliability of a portrayal that takes the form of invective highlights an important issue. Portrayals that so closely conform to an ideology may function to obscure reality. Skylitzes' concentration on the ideologically appropriate role of the empress Theodora as the champion of orthodox piety and the voice of temperance and reconciliation may obscure the role of her family, especially her brothers, and the eunuch Theoctistos[528] in formulating the successful government policy to peacefully end iconoclasm. Modern Byzantine historians sometimes lament that their discipline is not taken seriously, that people are distracted by the tales of palace intrigue and bride-shows, blindings

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[527] Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggresion in Roman Humour* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 102.

[528] See SH, p. 48-49. The Oxford Dictionary on Byzantium entry on "Triumph of Orthodoxy" (vol. III, pp.2122-3) credits Theoctistos with masterminding the restoration of the icons (as cited by Herrin, *Women in Purple*, p. 285), however, this is not the dominant interpretation.

and impalements, eunuchs and beautiful concubines. However, they perpetuate this view by picking out the most romantic portrayal from the sources or representing invective as fact. For instance, historians who do not question the portrayal of Theophano as a murderess and adulteress may underplay the role of Basil the Parakoimômenos in the conspiracy to remove Nicephoros II Phocas.

The ideal of feminine behaviour that is expressed by the Byzantine narrative sources such as Skylitzes' *Synopsis of Histories*, contradicts a public role for women. This is a contradiction which the Byzantines themselves resolve by portraying their women as conforming to strict conventions of behaviour while also acknowledging the necessity for women to take a public role if the situation demanded it; that is, when protecting the assets of the family and furthering the fortunes of one's children. The contradiction is resolved by an ideology that first and foremost supports the economic, political and dynastic goals of the family.

Duby proposed that ideologies play a historic role within a given society.[529] Some modern Byzantine scholars have proposed that the ideology for feminine behaviour had a historical effect on Byzantine civilization. For example, certain aspects of the ideology, such as the glorification of the female roles of wife and mother, may have had practical consequences in the acceptance of the exercise of imperial power by regents. Conversely, it might be suggested that the portrayals of imperial women that appeared in the narrative sources had an effect on the creation of ideologies, on ideas about what was acceptable for women and what was not. Herrin observes: "Throughout their society the histories of these women must have reinforced the powers accorded to widows, notable in

[529] Duby, "Ideologies in Social History," p. 152.

the guardianship of children, and their relatively privileged status."[530] Judith Herrin has pointed to factors specific to the Byzantine Empire (for example, the control of inherited and dowry wealth and the impact of women on religious ideology and practice) as indicators of the unusual extent of feminine influence as demonstrated by acceptance of female heads of state.[531] She writes, "for the fact that such exceptions were admitted perhaps demonstrates the wider extent of feminine influence...which was in turn reinforced by the empresses themselves."[532]

What was the role of John Skylitzes in the transmission of the ideology of appropriate behaviour for Byzantine women, especially imperial women? It has already been noted that, for the period prior to 944 (the fall of Romanus I Lecapenus), Skylitzes drew heavily on older historical narratives such as *Theophanes Continuatus* and the redactions of the Logothete (for example, the anecdotes from the Blessed Theodora's life appear in those older sources first). For the period between 944 and 963 (Constantine VII and Romanos II) and especially for the period between 989 and 1059, Skylitzes has relied on sources that have not survived. Skylitzes himself was copied extensively by George Cedrenus and John Zonaras, both working in the twelfth century. Although there were other historians, such as Leo the Deacon and Psellos, who covered some of the same period popular chronicles such as Skylitzes were generally more accessible to a wider readership (and, in fact, it was Skylitzes' goal to produce a widely accessible work). It would appear therefore, that Skylitzes was integral in

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[530] Herrin, "In Search of Byzantine Women...", p. 185.
[531] Ibid.
[532] Ibid.

perpetuating and refining an accepted ideology of feminine behaviour, the portrayal of which would thus remain consistent in its salient points from the tenth century *Theophanes Continuatus* to the works of twelfth century works of Cedrenus and Zonaras. The *Synopsis* is a good example of the type of text described by Duby: "where society gives direct expression to the virtues it reveres and the vices it deplores, texts whose function it is to defend and propagate the ethical system upon which its own sense of righteousness is based."[533] The *Synopsis* functions in this way not only for the Byzantines but also for the modern reader by transmitting the ideas and viewpoints, the ideology, of eleventh century Byzantium to us.

[533] Duby, "Ideologies in Social History," p. 156-157.

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