

Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society. Edited by Bronwen Neil and Lynda Garland. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. x+218. ISBN: 9781409474494.

THIS EDITED VOLUME originated at the 2010 conference of the Australian Association for Byzantine Studies entitled “Gender and Class in Byzantine Society.” It offers a fresh perspective on how the “social indicators of gender” operated in Byzantium (ca. 300-1453), a society that recognized three genders and where a certain fluidity characterized the understanding of masculine and feminine roles. The introductory and concluding studies of Bronwen Neil and Damien Casey provide a conceptual framework by defining the methodology, delineating the limitations of the evidence, and demonstrating the potential of a theoretical approach to the study of gender in Byzantium. Chapters 3 to 8 center on female monasticism, literacy, and imperial women, while chapters 2 and 9 focus on male virtues, masculinity, and eunuchs.

Lynda Garland explores how family ties lived on in Byzantine monasteries. Unlike in the West, Byzantine married men and women often took monastic vows, and many imperial and aristocratic monasteries were founded as family trusts, retirement homes, refuges, and dynastic memorials. Although forty Byzantine monastic foundation documents survive, Garland focuses on the five written by women (ca. 1100-1310), all belonging to foundations of imperial women. Strongly hierarchical organization and robust intergenerational family bonds characterize these convents. Garland explores the potential for female agency and exercise of authority within these institutions and portrays the *typikon* (foundation document) as an embodiment of the founder’s female voice.

Female literacy from the fourth through the fifteenth century is the focus of Amelia Brown’s study. She highlights various factors impacting female literacy, such as education, Christianity, social class, and locale. She charts a drop in female literacy during the seventh and eighth centuries and then a pronounced increase ca. 1100. Brown recognizes the strongly biased nature of the scanty evidence, which is concentrated on urban upper-class women.

Bronwen Neil investigates divergent perspectives emerging from Frankish, papal, and Byzantine sources to interrogate whether Irene (r. 897-902) was perceived as a “real emperor” by her contemporaries; while Byzantine and papal sources recognize Irene as ruler, Frankish chroniclers embed negative views about her position into the discourse on Charlemagne’s imperial coronation. Neil argues that although the Frankish antipathy to Irene’s rule was couched in gendered language, it ultimately reflected objections to her iconophile policy. This is an important corrective to scholarly views, which assume that negative

Western perceptions were primarily motivated by Irene's gender and that Leo III crowned Charlemagne emperor because the pope perceived the Byzantine imperial throne to be vacant.

Liz James examines the role of imperial women within the power structure of the late Roman Empire (ca. 284-337) and explores what, if anything, the textual and visual sources reveal about their actual lives. She argues that women served in imperial networks as links between men. Representations of women functioned primarily as "ciphers" that articulated the political and religious agendas of the men related to them, revealing little about the women and their lives. Significantly, James shows that the belief that Fausta received *damnatio memoriae* upon her death, widely accepted in scholarship, rests on inconclusive evidence.

Diana Wright analyzes the marriage alliances contracted between two Byzantine rulers (John VIII, Theodoros of Morea) to Italian brides (Sophia of Montferrat, Cleofe Malatesta) in 1420 to foster union between the Byzantine and Roman Churches and to encourage Western military aid to Byzantium against the Turks. The relatively abundant evidence yields conclusions simply inconceivable in earlier periods (e.g., the fourth century): beyond recognizing the women's political roles as signifiers of the agendas of "their men," Wright exposes the personal costs they incurred during their marriages. The sources are particularly informative about Cleofe. She negotiated the competing demands of her native customs and religion and the expectations of her orthodox husband with combined distress and success. Although she converted publicly and donned monastic dress, her private correspondence suggests that internally she never renounced her Catholic faith. Upon her death, Cleofe was celebrated as the personification of resistance against the Turks, an impressive achievement for a foreign bride.

The varied imagery applied to the Virgin Mary (e.g., theotokos, protector, intercessor, and ordinary mother) in the sixth-century hymns of Romanos the Melodist is under investigation by Sarah Gador-Whyte. Romanos's textual images emphasize diverse yet closely related aspects of Mary's role, which, Gador-Whyte notes, mutually enhance one another; the imagery interweaves extreme poles of masculine (e.g., military protection) and feminine (e.g., vulnerable motherhood) characteristics to underscore the importance and effectiveness of Mary's role for the faithful.

Paul Brown demonstrates that Lombard and Norman sources did not typically portray Byzantine men as effeminate before the twelfth century, contrary to scholarly assumptions. Although this charge occurred occasionally, the most

persistent negative stereotype leveled against Byzantine men was cunning and treachery. Brown links the characterization of Byzantine figures in texts of the eighth through the eleventh centuries to the shifting Lombard and Norman political alliances to Byzantium. He underscores the significant, and perhaps unexpected, role Paul the Deacon (eighth century) assigned to the eunuch general Narses, in charge of Justinian's reconquest of Italy, as a model of masculine virtue, yet the implications of this observation could be developed more fully.

Shaun Tougher examines the role of beards in articulating Byzantine masculinity and explores how beardlessness impacted the gender identity, social role, and life course of eunuchs. He emphasizes the positive conceptual connections between eunuchs, angels, and military victory and notes the abundance of successful eunuch generals (e.g., Narses). While Tougher intimates that the life course of eunuchs was perceived to be different from those of men and women, he also presents evidence that complicates this view. His conclusion that the increased prominence of the beard (as an indispensable attribute of adult males) in seventh-century Byzantium may be related to the new proliferation of native eunuchs is not based on the argument advanced here but on his previous work.

The current volume makes a much needed contribution to Byzantine studies where the study of gender remains neglected. Important handbooks, such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (1991), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (2008), and *A Companion to Byzantium* (2010) lack entries on gender, although they include chapters on women and eunuchs; exceptional is *Palgrave Advances in Byzantine History* (2005), which does contain a chapter on gender. There is also important recent work drawing on gender analysis by Stavroula Constantinou, Leonora Neville, and Dion Smythe. Yet, the first foray into Byzantine gender studies, *Women, Men, and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium* (1997), has remained the sole volume dedicated exclusively to gender analysis in Byzantium until the publication of the current book. The studies in this collection illuminate how the roles, lives, and perceptions of men and women interlocked in the religious, political, and personal realms and how gender roles could morph and shift. A somewhat firmer editorial hand and a greater interweaving of themes among the various essays would have benefited the volume. The extensive bibliography and ample index are useful, yet the lack of illustrations is disappointing, particularly since several chapters draw on visual evidence. Nonetheless, scholars of Byzantium and beyond will find this stimulating book useful for research and graduate-level teaching.

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