

# Marriage impediments during the byzantine era



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The Byzantine era was rather typical, when one considers the lowly status assigned to women and the shoddy treatment they received. But for women belonging to the aristocracy, the situation was not quite as dismal as might be expected under the circumstances, as they were better protected than their less fortunate contemporaries. According to Grubbs, "The law determined, according to status, the sexual relationships and roles open to a woman, and the amount of protection from violence or exploitation she could expect"(221). Marriage likewise enhanced the status of aristocratic ladies by giving them a share in the power wielded by their consorts and sometimes to exercise power themselves. It may be argued that this is an absurd notion, given that the institution of marriage largely subscribed to the repressive atmosphere of the time and was designed to subjugate women. However a study of intrepid ladies of the time reveals that using marriage as a tool, they were able to siphon off the lion's share of power enjoyed by men. A study of the prevailing conditions for women in the Byzantine era and the role played by marriage in giving them new opportunities to empower themselves will help support the thesis outlined above.

About the Byzantine Empire, Nicol says, "Its people and their rules were conservative by instinct" (1). Thus in keeping with the spirit of the times, women, regardless of their status were usually treated like commodities. The lowliest male slave had more advantages and prestige in the eyes of society than the highest - born lady. Most women had their feminine spirit destroyed by a life of unceasing servitude to their male masters, religious rigidity and a lack of opportunity to develop their talents. The church played a powerful role in subjugating women, "Canon law often contains legal stipulations

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limiting the actions of women in order to prevent defilement and impurity” (Viscuso 317). By dint of law and religious tradition, women were seen as nothing more than empty vessels to be filled and used by men.

Given the situation, for aristocratic ladies marriage opened an avenue for all kinds of possibilities, besides providing financial security for life. Ladies, who married into royalty, could choose to live an indolent life of pleasure or make their mark in politics, subtly or directly. The empress though recognized as a luminous presence had to bow down before the authority of her husband.

But there have been instances, where she assumed the duties of the emperor, when he was off waging wars and thereby served in an executive capacity. She could also serve as a regent, if the emperor died. Her sphere of influence could extend to religious as well as legal matters and of course to matters directly pertaining to affairs of the throne. According to Garland, “While the empress’s constitutional importance was never defined, it was accepted that by her coronation, which was performed by her husband after the patriarch had prayed over the crown, an Augusta acquired something of imperial power...” (2). The church despite curtailing the rights and privileges of women protected them from their philandering husbands - “One result of the Christian influence on Roman marriage law was to make bigamy for the first time a crime in the empire” (Brundage 87). Thus the ties of marriage provided women with real security.

The most acclaimed women of this period were the empresses Theodora, Eirene, Euphrosyne, Sophia. Thus despite the inferior status accorded to women, this era had its fair share of powerful, dominant women, who made their presence felt in the pages of history.

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