

# Byzantine times: the effect on women



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An average woman in the fifth and sixth centuries of the Byzantine Empire did not have a big role in public society.[1]In fact, it was common for her to not be seen in public at all. It was standard for Byzantine women to get married around twelve to thirteen years old due to an arranged marriage chosen by her parents. Once married she spent most of her time at home. Occasionally a woman was allowed to leave her home to attend to church, festivals, marriages, births, visit relations, or go to public baths. These were the only activities in society acceptable where a woman could to leave her house.[2]However, if a woman must venture outside, she must have her face covered by a veil at all times and be accompanied by a man. Though veils were rarely shown in Byzantine artwork, this was a social standard for women. The wearing of veils often represented the difference between an honest women and a prostitute.[3]

Even in her own home, a Byzantine woman had to endure gender inequalities. During meals she was not allowed to dine with men foreign of her relations. More often than not, she would be eating alone separate from men.[4]For her education, she was taught skills only useful for a house wife. If a woman was in middle to upper class, she was usually taught to read, write, and sing.[5]Women of royalty however, were given the opportunity to study medicine and natural sciences with scholars in their courts. [6]Nevertheless education was usually second quality compared to the education given to men. Women could easily be described as “ cloistered as prisoners,” though her prison walls were only the invisible judgments and rules cast by society.[7]

Most women could not participate in politics. A woman could not even testify in court for fear that her testimonial would be easily influenced by her husband or brother. It is only in rare cases where a man was not involved that a woman could testify.[8]Despite what little influence and respect women had in public society, through home life a woman could still easily influence her own husband, sons, brothers, and other male relations in her home life.[9]This influence could be subtle in a small Byzantine family or extremely considerable if she was the wife of the emperor. Unlike men who could rise up to a political position through military, or the church, for a woman to gain political power she had either be born or marry into aristocracy.

Born in 399 A. D, Empress Pulcheria was the eldest daughter of Emperor Arcadius.[10]She was a devoted Christian that paved her way into power through her influence over her younger brother Theodosios II. She eventually received the title of Augusta (Empress) which was the highest position a woman of relation to the Emperor could aspire to.[11]Pulcheria was just two years older than Theodosios II but had a great influence over him all his life. Though Pulcheria was the eldest born into royalty, she did not have much power as she would if she had been born male. Even with this gender disadvantage, she was extremely intelligent. At the age of 16, she swore a vow of chastity and also influenced her younger sisters to do the same. [12]This was a way to sustain power that would be lost if she was forced into marriage as well as stop the competition to her brother's throne.[13]The reasoning she gave for her actions was due to her Christian fate, comparing the Virgin Mary as her heavenly counterpart.[14]Figure 1 depicts an ivory

relief known as The Translation of Relics Ivory dating around the year 420 A. D.[15]and was acquired by the Trier Cathedral in 1844.[16]The carving measure 13. 1 x 26. 1 x 2. 3 cm and has been cut to a depth of 2 cm[17]. The Byzantines loved ivory and usually imported it from India and Africa. The ivory of this specific piece has been speculated to have been imported from Africa do to its larger size.[18]The Translation of Relics Ivory depicts a procession of people in the streets followed by two priests riding a chariot pulled by mules. Leading this procession is an Emperor holding a candle and ready to receive the relics is an Empress holding a cross in front of church doors. In the background are onlookers cheering waving incense and a church which is still under construction, still being complete for the relics to be place into. For many years, the protagonists in this relief have been unidentifiable. Historians have compared the lives of Justin II, Maurice, and Phocas and their wives but found no historical evidence which relates them to this scene.[19]In the late 70s, The Translation of Relics Ivory has been identified by historians, Kenneth G. Holum and Gary Vikan that the characters in this relief are likely Empress Pulcheria, her brother Emperor Theodosios II and the relics given are the bones of Saint Stephen. The historians deducted this from written evidence of a chronicler of the ninth century named Theophanes Confessor. In his narrative he wrote:

Under the influence of the blessed Pulcheria, the pious Theodosius sent a rich donation to the archbishop of Jerusalem for distribution to the needy, and also a golden cross studded with precious stones to be erected on Golgotha. In exchange for these gifts, the archbishop dispatched relics of the right arm of Stephen Protomaryr, in the care of St. Passarion... [Pulcheria]

arose taking her brother with her and went to greet the holy relics. Receiving them into the palace, she founded a splendid chapel for the holy Protomartyr, and in it she deposited the holy relics.[20]

The narrative matched perfectly with the description of The Translation of Relics Ivory as well as another found narrative which proved that the bones of Saint Stephen had in fact appeared outside Jerusalem that time in December 416 and later went under control of the bishop.[21]The church under construction is believed to be a church of St. Stephen.[22]An interesting detail to The Translation of Relics Ivory is the composition of the piece. The entire focus of the image is on Pulcheria rather than the Emperor Theodosios II, her brother. Even Theodosios' relief is still a bit further back than hers, as he is standing right next to her. This is a huge representation of Pulcheria's power as she is the center of attention opposed to the Emperor himself.

In her lifetime, Pulcheria had commissioned several new churches, most dedicated to her patron saint the Virgin Mary. It was well known that Virgin Mary deeply impacted her life to staying openly celibate for God. However during the fifth century the Virgin Mary was not a major figure in Constantinople.[23]Her choice for the Virgin Mary as her patron was not to advance women but simply get rid of the stigma that women were the "curse of Eve", a curse which claimed that women were responsible for original sin.[24]It was also due to Pulcheria's influence that the Virgin Mary would be again be known not just as the "Mother of Christ" (christotokos) but the "Mother of God" (theotokos) when the statement was overturned.[25]Pulcheria's most well-known church to the Virgin Mary is the Church of <https://assignbuster.com/byzantine-times-the-effect-on-women/>

Saint Mary of Blacherne , which has also been depicted in literature with names such as the Panagia of Blachernae and the Blachernae Monastery. The church started construction in 450 A. D. and was finished by her husband Marcian after Pulcheria's death in 453 A. D.[26]The church was built around a pre-existing sacred spring called the Ayazma of Blacherne.[27]It is also said that Christians of Jerusalem had contributed a robe that belonged to the Virgin Mary as a relic for the church,[28]though other sources state that the robe was stolen.[29]Figure 2 shows the church before its second fire, and Figure 3 shows the current modern church after being rebuilt. The church focused around images of the Virgin Mary, which led to much destruction of its icons during the reign of Constantine V.[30]The church first burnt down in 1070 from a fire but was rebuilt again using its old floor plans. [31]The church was completely burnt down yet again in 1434, this time from a careless fire caused by children chasing pigeons on its roofs.[32]By the time Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the Church of Saint Mary of Blachernae no longer existed and the people of Constantinople had to turn to different mediums for the protection Virgin Mary's icons.[33]

Figure 3 shows Icon of the Virgin Blachernitissa. In 626 A. D., the Blachernitissa was credited for the protecting the city from an Avar attack as well as an Arab siege in 717. Thus this relic's reputation grew to be known as a powerful Byzantine talisman of protection and was kept in the Church of Saint Mary of Blachernae.[34]Though the figure head of this icon was a woman, it had huge veneration. The term Blachernitissa was a type of representation of the Virgin Mary named after the Church of Saint Mary of Blachernae.[35]The icon shows Mary within it and was held in the Church of

Saint Mary of Blachernae. The piece was also within the church during its 1434 fire and was thought to be destroyed. It was a talisman that represented the protection of the city's walls.[36]Its absence was believed to be the reason why the Ottoman Turks succeeded their invasion only 19 years later.

The year 730 was the start of the first iconoclastic period lasting until 787. [37]It started with Emperor Leo III, who reigned from 717-740. The Iconoclasts believed that icons were evil and led to the misinterpretation of the Catholic religion. As the Iconoclasts resorted back into symbols and scripture, they tore down icons, thinking them as heresy to their religion. When Leo III died in 740, his son Constantine V continued the ban of during his reign in 741-775.[38]It was during Constantine V's reign, that the Church of St. Mary of Blachernae was attacked by iconoclasts. Constantine V ordered the destruction of the interior mosaics that represented a New Testament cycle and replaced them with vegetal ornaments and pictures of birds.[39]It was fortunate however that the Icon of the Virgin Blachernitissa was hidden from destruction at this time.

This first Iconoclastic period was stopped by Empress Irene. Irene acted in the name of her son Constantine VI, who was too young to rule at the time. She created and ordered the Second Council of Nicaea, which supported Iconophiles.[40]As Iconophiles, they believed that images were also representing their religion and they were not wrong in using them. The Council condemned the opposition to icons as heresy. It is through Irene's actions of the revival of icons that she earned the title of Saint in the Greek Orthodox Church.

The second iconoclastic period lasted 814-842. This time it was Emperor Leo V (reigning from 813-820) who instated this new wave of iconoclasm. It was speculated that it was to cure the recent military failure. Emperors Michael II and Theophilus who succeeded him were also iconoclasts. However after Theophilus died, he was succeeded by his son Michael III. Michael at the time was too young to reign so his mother Theodora acted as a regent for him. Similar to Irene, Theodora was an iconodule and was able to proclaim the restoration of icons. Now ever since the revival of icons, the first Sunday of Lent is celebrated as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy." Figure 4 shows the Icon of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, a painting that was painted on a wooden panel covered with gesso and linen. Its medium was egg tempera and gold leaf. [41]The center of the painting is a portrait of the Virgin Mary, said to be painted by St. Luke. Empress Theodora and her son, Emperor Michael III, appear on the left of the portrait. On the right are three monks with the Patriarch Methodios. This painting was painted more than 500 years after the end of iconoclasm during the time when the Byzantine Empire was under threat of invasion by the Ottoman Turks.[42]Again as it is not usually common for a woman to be in the painting, Empress Theodora is shown next to her son in royal robes. Though she is not next to them, Theodora is shown at the same level as the bishops. In the center of the painting is the Blachernitissa, the Virgin Mary and child. The Virgin Mary was a celebrated icon of her woman status. It is not surprising that Irene and Theodora were iconophiles. Since the average Byzantine woman was housebound for the majority of their lives, most had a special dedication to religious practices involving icons.[43]It might be due to their life style that women where the most affected when their precious icons where taken away.



The influence women had and their relations to art during the Byzantine Empire shown to be very important. It is through the influence of the empresses Pulcheria, Irene and Theodora that impacted artwork despite a judgmental and men-driven environment that shadowed their lives. It is as fascinating and influential as the works themselves that these women were able to influence the Byzantine public and the artwork.