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Sex and Political Legitimacy: An Examination of Byzantine Empresses (399-1056 c.e.)

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The breadth and depth of academic work relating to the Byzantine Empire is copious. With the exception of author and historian Charles Diehl, who examined the lives of Byzantine Empresses as early as 1906, women in Byzantium have recently come to the forefront of scholarly work in this field. Previously, the role of women had been over looked and under examined. With the work of such historians as Judith Herrin, Lynda Garland and Liz James, the lives of women in Byzantium, and more importantly, the lives of Empresses in Byzantium have become a subject of academic attention. An analysis of the state of the field at this time proved that, while women's issues were indeed being addressed and acknowledged, the majority of the subject focused around gender roles and the society's concept of the female. The intent of this paper was to examine another aspect of the life of Byzantine Empresses: their ability to assert political power. Through an examination of primary sources and recent scholarly work, it became clear that Empresses were able to assert political power three ways within the Byzantine Empire and thereby take part in the political process.

An Empress, or Augusta, could assume political power through inheritance, or the bloodline, through marriage, and through co-regency which occurred when a mother would come to power if the heir to the throne was too young to rule. Pulcheria (399-453) and the sisters, Zoe (978-1050) and Theodora (984-1056), the last of the Macedonians, were able to establish the succession to the throne. For Pulcheria, when her brother the Emperor Theodosius II died suddenly she was able to arrange a fictive marriage to the army general Marcian and the imperial power remained with the Theodosian dynasty. Upon the death of their father, Constantine VIII, the aged sisters Zoe and Theodora asserted their power in the years following. Zoe removed her husband from the position of emperor when he no longer suited her. The sisters ruled for a short time with no emperor at all, and upon the death of Zoe and her third husband, Theodora ruled for

a year unchallenged. One of the most famous imperial couples, Justinian and Theodora (527-565) exhibit the second assertion of female political power. In contemporary accounts, it is evidenced that Theodora exhibited significant power over her husband and was thereby able to accomplish political goals. The last category of female assertion of political power examined exhibits Irene (780-802). Upon the death of her husband, the Emperor Leo, her young son Constantine VI was only ten years old. She assumed power and would continue to rule after her son attained majority.

When working in medieval history, it is important to remember to examine primary sources with discretion. In the instance of court historian, Michael Psellus, who gives us an account of court life within the time period of Zoe and Theodora, students of history are warned to examine his work with an editing eye. Flattery, egoism and embellishments are all present in his work. Procopius, who offers an account of Justinian and Theodora's reign, authored both an "official" version and his own *Secret Histories*, enumerating the things he hated about the imperial couple. Theophanes, church historian and primary source for Irene often attributed Irene's actions to her gender and her inability to think like a man.

The glamour and allure of the imperial Byzantine lifestyle will continue to attract academic attention and Empresses will remain a topic to be examined. The intent of this paper is to explore the ways in which imperial women, namely Empresses, could exercise legitimate political power. Gender roles of the time period create a significant portion of the academia; however, gender in the societal context is not addressed here. The framework in which political legitimacy was studied within this paper simply considered the biological fact that the Empresses ere female. Hence the title, "Sex and Political Legitimacy," referring to sex rather than gender, in order to avoid invoking an examination of gender roles

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INTRODUCTION

Colloquially, the term "byzantine" has come to mean a system operating in a devious or covert manner, as well as, intricately involved or complicated.[1] The term has negative connotations and one could argue this stems from the initial characterization of the Byzantine Empire in Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which the Byzantines are seen as a stain on the Roman Empire and unworthy of academic attention. Gibbon states, "The empire of the Caesars undoubtedly checked the activity and progress of the human mind; its magnitude might indeed allow some scope for domestic competition; but when it was gradually reduced, at first to the east and at last to Greece and Constantinople, the Byzantine subjects were degraded to an abject and languid temper, the natural effect of their solitary and insulated state"[2] While the scholarly literature on Byzantium has grown exponentially, the legacy of the term "byzantine" endures. That, however, is not the purpose of this paper. Instead, its intention is to recognize that despite the accessible wealth of knowledge, the role of women in Byzantine society remains woefully under-examined. The focus on women in Byzantium has recently come to light throughout the 1990s and continuing on to present day. One could argue that the global advent of feminism has had an implication on the historical study of women for the better. Historical fields that may have been considered completed could be analyzed through the lens of a woman's experience. While traditional gender roles prevailed, occasionally the political landscape of medieval Byzantium provided fertile ground for women to assert political power. The scarcity of attention paid to the subject of women in Byzantium leaves an opening for reinterpretation of the role women played in imperial politics, how they

[1] S. v. "Byzantine," Merriam-Webster
[2] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Volume 1* (Cinncinati: J.A. James, 1844), p 281.

were able to establish legitimacy, as well as a reexamination of the gender and sexual roles in place.

Charles Diehl, author of *Byzantine Empresses,* was a noted Byzantine historian whose work contributed to the destruction of previous ideas regarding Byzantine history, notably formed by the influential writings of Montesquieu and Gibbon.[3] The book used in this essay was originally written in French and titled *Figures Byzantines*. It was first published in France in 1906. The English translation was published in 1927, translated by Harold Bell and Theresa de Kerpely. The relevance of Diehl's work lies in the fact that it was written during a time period when women and their place in a historic setting often were overlooked. That Diehl devoted an entire book to the topic of Byzantine Empresses as early as 1906 sets the stage for the growth and progress that would come close to a century later. His work is often cited in more current books on the subject as part of an acknowledgment of the achievements that have occurred in the field from his first ground breaking effort.

Very little academic attention has been devoted to the subject at hand between the time of Diehl's work and the present. Starting in the 1990s and continuing on to present day, scholars have begun to devote entire tomes to the subject of women rulers in this Empire. Historians such as Lynda Garland, Judith Herrin, and Liz James have come to the forefront of academia on the subject of women, gender roles and imperial power in Byzantine society. Lynda Garland has authored numerous articles on the subject.[4] Her article on Irene provides insight on the Empress and public opinion of her. Garland's other notable work in the field is *Byzantine Empresses.*

[3] Charles Diehl, *Byzantine Empresses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), Introduction.
[4] The online database "De Imperatoribus Romanis: An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Rulers and Their Families" which can be found at www.roman-emperors.org, provides a wealth of articles on Byzantine history.

Women and Power in Byzantium, AD 527–1204,[5] which has been reviewed by Liz James, Christine Senecal, and Barbara Hill, among others. Judith Herrin, author of *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire, Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium,* and the article, *The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium,* has also contributed extensively to the topic of women in Byzantium.[6]

While a beautiful resource, *The Oxford History of Byzantium,* edited by Cyril Mango, and published in 2002 bypasses the importance of Empresses in imperial politics. Zoe, of the Macedonian dynasty is mentioned in passing, along with her sister Theodora. In the chapter *The Medieval Empire (780-1204)* author Paul Magdalino states, "Byzantine empresses are currently receiving much attention, and it is clear that in the Middle Ages, as well as in Late Antiquity, the women's quarters of the palace played an important part behind the scenes of imperial and dynastic politics."[7] Besides this brief acknowledgment, women's place in imperial politics is largely overlooked. In his trilogy of Byzantine history, John Julius Norwich mentions Byzantine empresses in greater detail, although, Irene (775-802) is the only empress with an entire chapter devoted to her. [8]

Controversies that exist in the field stem from primary sources. One account of the rule of Justinian and his Empress, Theodora, by Procopius leaves students of history stymied. The so-called *Secret Histories* of Procopius enumerate myriad undesirable and even demonic qualities of

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[5]Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, AD 527-1204* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
[6]Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); eadem, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); eadem, "The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium," *Past & Present,* no. 169 (2000): pp. 3-35, http://www.jstor.org/stable/651262 (accessed January 16, 2010).
[7] Paul Magdalino, "The Medieval Empire (780-1204)," in *The Oxford History of Byzantium,* edited by Cyril Mango (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 206.
[8] The first book of the trilogy is *Byzantium: The Early Centuries,* followed by *Byzantium: The Apogee,* and then *Byzantium: The Decline and Fall;* all published by Alfred A. Knopf. For full bibliographical information see Works Cited.

the imperial couple. One must question Procopius' own prejudices and secret hate for the couple.[9] While we must be appreciative of any extant works from the medieval time period, it is also just as important to interpret them with a discerning eye.[10]

Accounts from noted, educated, court personality, Michael Psellus are tinged clearly with his own self interest and his ego.[11] Michael Psellus (1018-1096) was a Byzantine government official and court historian during the eleventh century. E.R.A. Sewter's introduction to his translation of the *Chronographia,* states that Psellus was Secretary of State, Grand Chamberlain, and Prime Minister.[12] Psellus provides students of history with a primary source of Byzantine court life during the eleventh century. Psellus' *Chronographia* is generally agreed among Byzantine scholars to hold a very high place in the catalogue of medieval histories.[13] However, it is also necessary, as educated readers, to maintain a degree of discernment when using this primary source. According to Joan Hussey, "The second part of the *Chronographia* is quite different in tone from the first, and its unrestrained flattery is often used as a reproach to Psellus' capacity as an historian."[14]

Common approaches to the topic of imperial women in medieval Byzantium center around traditional gender roles. Empresses' use of eunuchs has been a popular topic in much recent scholarly publication. While the presence and use of eunuchs certainly has important

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[9] In his account, Procopius argues that Justinian had killed more people than the number of sand on the shore. He also dug in quite deeply to the Empress Theodora's past, asserting that she was more than sexually promiscuous and that men who were known to sleep with her were thereafter considered perverts of the worst kind, so wanton was her desires.

[10] For an English translation of the text see: Procopius of Caesarea: *The Secret History,* Chapter 8 *(selections from* Procopius: *Secret History*, translated by Richard Atwater, (Chicago: P. Covici, 1927; New York: Covici Friede, 1927), reprinted, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1961, with indication that copyright had expired on the text of the translation.) *http://procopius.net/secrethistorycontents.html*.

[11] Often times, Michael Psellus is also referred to as "Psellos". The reason for the use of the "–us" version in this work is none other than in the text I have used, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers* published by Penguin Classics, his name is given as such.

[12] Michael Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers, The Chronografia of Michael Psellus,* translated by E. R. A. Sewter (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 14.

[13] ibid, p. 15.

[14] Joan Hussey, "Michael Psellus, the Byzantine Historian," *Speculum,* Vol. 10, No. 1 (1935): 83.

implications for women in imperial power, instead of gender roles, it may be more effective to concentrate on how women were able to establish imperial legitimacy in the first place. To do this, it becomes necessary to examine the reigns of powerful, as well as less significant Empresses. For example, Empress Pulcheria (399-453) was able to assert her political power through establishing legitimacy by her virginity. Empress Irene (775-802) firstly ruled as regent for her under aged son and was able to maintain her power after he attained majority. Zoe (d. 1050) and Theodora (d.1056), the last of the Macedonians, were the legitimate heirs to the throne and were able to manipulate succession by their bloodline.

While recently the role of women in imperial politics has come to the forefront of Byzantine studies, this spotlight shines heavily on sex and gender roles. Rather than focus on this subject exclusively, it may be more fruitful to focus on how women were able to assert political power by establishing legitimacy, whether truthfully so or not. By examining the influence of Pulcheria (399-453), Zoe (978-1050) and Theodora (984-1056), and the reigns of Justinian and Theodora (527-565), and Constantine VI and Irene (775-802); it becomes clear that imperial women were able to establish political legitimacy through three main avenues: marriage, co-regency, and inheritance. Sex and gender roles certainly are a facet in the establishment of legitimacy, however, to approach the subject from the point of view of legitimacy is both under examined and ripe at this time.

In the Byzantine Empire, an Augusta was the title granted to certain imperial women in certain circumstances. However, to rule solely as an empress or Augusta was a rare occurrence. The title of Augusta was first employed by the emperor Augustus who invented the title for his wife, Livia, and his successors made use of this rank for mothers, wives and sisters.[15] According

[15]Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 31.

to another source, "It should be remembered that an Augusta was not simply an Emperor's wife; she was the holder of a recognized rank, which carried considerable power and for which a special coronation was necessary. Once crowned, she had a court of her own and absolute control over her own immense revenues; and she played an indispensable part in many of the chief ceremonies of the Empire."[16] It is also important to note that not all imperial wives were granted this title. While explaining the marriage of Constantine VI(son of Irene) and Maria in 788, Judith Herrin asserts that Constantine's bride was not raised to the status of empress.[17] She states, "Imperial wives often had to wait for this honour, which was sometimes bestowed after the successful delivery of a male child."[18] As such, Coronation often was reliant on the birth of an heir, preferably male. Generally, empresses were able to establish legitimacy as heiresses due to the bloodline and lack of a male heir, through marriage or as co-rulers for a young heir.

LEGITIMACY THROUGH INHERITANCE (BLOODLINE)

Pulcheria (399-453) was born in January of 399 to Emperor Arkadios and Eudoxia. She was the elder sister of the Emperor Theodosius II. Arkadios died in 408 when Pulcheria was 9 and Theodosius II was 7.[19] Upon the death of the Emperor Arkadios, the young imperial children were left in the hands of eunuchs who arranged their educations.[20] Pulcheria exercised a heavy hand in her younger brother's education. In 412, Pulcheria fought with the eunuch Antiochus and influenced her brother to dismiss him.[21] According to Holum, after this event

[16]John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium The Apogee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 127n.
[17] Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*,(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 131.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Timothy E. Gregory, *A History of Byzantium*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 98.
[20]Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 81.
[21]Ibid., 91.

Pulcheria took control of the imperial family. She also "exercised enormous influence on her brother Theodosius for considerable periods of his reign."[22]

A defining characteristic of Pulcheria was the vow of virginity that she took at the age of fourteen. Historians assert that her reasoning was twofold. First that she had a deep piety and the pledge of her virginity was one way to declare her beliefs. Sozomen, who was an ecclesiastical historian, serves as a source of information on Pulcheria during this event. According to Holum, "Sozomen reports that in her fourteenth year (before July 1, 413) Pulcheria 'devoted her virginity to God' and impressed the same resolution upon her sisters. This was no private vow but one entered into in the full light of publicity."[23] For Pulcheria to willing dismiss her right to bear imperial children leads historians to believe the second reason for her pledge. It is generally acknowledged that Pulcheria's virginity was part of a political agenda. According to Holum, Sozomen describes that one of Pulcheria's motives for pledging her virginity was "to avoid bringing another male into the palace and to remove any opportunity for the plots of ambitious men."[24]

Shortly after her pledge of virginity, Pulcheria was crowned Augusta on 4 July, 414 by her younger brother, Theodosius II. [25] One source marks this as the beginning of her domination at court.[26] Being crowned Augusta would prove significant when her brother, Emperor Theodosius II died suddenly. On July 26, 450, Theodosius II was injured while hunting and died two days later.[27] Pulcheria was able to determine the succession to throne as an important member of the Theodosian dynasty. According to Herrin, upon the death of a ruler with no heir,

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[22] Geoffrey Greatrex, "Pulcheria (Wife of the Emperor Marcian," *De Imperatoribus Romanis,* 2004, http://www.roman-emperors.org/pulcheria.htm.
[23] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses,* 93.
[24] Ibid.
[25]Greatrex, "Pulcheria (Wife of the Emperor Marcian," http://www.roman-emperors.org/pulcheria.htm.
[26] Gregory, *Byzantium,* 98.
[27]Holum, *Theodosian Empresses,* 208.

"the female relatives of the deceased may be expected to play a vital role in the transmission of imperial power. The tradition had been developed in Rome and was employed throughout the Roman world. Thus Pulcheria, whose commitment to everlasting virginity characterized her adult life, agreed to a fictive marriage to an elderly general Marcian, on the death of Theodosius II."[28] Despite pledging her virginity as an adolescent, upon the death of her brother, she reacted quickly. She chose Marcian, a tribune with significant connections, to marry in name only and elevated him to the rank of Emperor through her own blood ties to the throne. Holum states, "Soon after the wedding, on November 25, 450, Pulcheria herself conferred upon Marcian the imperial diadem and *paludamentum*[29], and the troops acclaimed him Augustus at the Hebdomon."[30] The fact that Pulcheria was able to coronate Marcian as emperor solely based on her own political position exhibits her legitimacy as the heir to the throne.

As often seen in Byzantine history, the imperial marriage was recognized with the issue of *nomismata*. *Nomismata* is the Greek term for the gold coins that were minted and distributed by the state and used mainly for the payment of taxes and for large transactions.[31] One source asserts that these coins were used to further legitimize the imperial marriage. Since the marriage of Marcian and Pulcheria was unusual in the fact that the Augusta performed the coronation the usage of the commemorative coins was especially important. "It is surely no coincidence that these *nomismata* commemorated marriages whereby the empress legitimized the emperor. When Theodosios II died without issue in 450, his sister Pulcheria (an *augusta* since 414, as we have

[28] Judith Herrin, "The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium," *Past & Present*, no. 169 (2000): pp. 3-35, http://www.jstor.org/stable/651262 (accessed January 16, 2010).
[29] Defined by Holum as a military cloak of purple fastened on the right shoulder with a jeweled imperial *fibula.* This costume also signified the emperor's status as the supreme commander of the army.
[30] Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 208.
[31] Leslie Brubaker and Helen Tobler, "The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324-802)," *Gender & History*, Vol. 12 No. 3 (2000): 572.

seen) selected and married Marcian and thereby legitimized his succession to the throne."[32] Their reign continued until Marcian's death in 457. "Pulcheria had predeceased her husband, and in 457 the dynasty of Theodosius I came to an end."[33]

Zoe (978-1050) and Theodora (984-1056) had a similar position politically to Pulcheria. The sisters were able to assert political power as the legitimate heirs to the throne. Any man they married only had power through and because of them. This position of the sister empresses made it simple for both Zoe and Theodora to exercise their position as legitimate heirs. When Constantine VIII died in 1028, he left his two daughters, Zoe and Theodora, as the only legitimate heirs.[34] "In November of 1028 Constantine arranged for Zoe to marry Romanos Argyros, the Prefect of the City, and in December the last Macedonian emperor died."[35] Subsequently, the throne passed to the aged Zoe and the sixty-something general. It seems that the imperial couple attempted to produce an heir to the throne without success. Unfortunately for the new emperor, he made this mistake of ignoring Zoe, who was indeed, "the ultimate source of his political authority."[36] Psellus' contemporary account states that,

> Romanos came to despise the Empress Zoe. Not only did he abstain from sexual intercourse with her, but he was loath to consort with her in any way at all. She, on her side, was stirred to hate him, not only because the blood royal, meaning herself, was treated with such little respect, but, above all considerations, by her own longing for intercourse, and that was due not to her age, but to the soft and sensual manner of her life at the palace.[37]

[32] Ibid., 581.
[33]Gregory, *Byzantium*, 107.
[34]Gregory, *Byzantium*, 247.
[35]Gregory, *Byzantium*, 247.
[36]Gregory, *Byzantium*, 247.
[37]Psellus, *Chronografia*, 75.

Due to this treatment, Zoe was inclined to fall in love with the young handsome man newly introduced at court. According to Timothy Gregory, Zoe formed a liaison with Michael, a young man of no considerable wealth or standing who was brought to the palace by his brother, the eunuch John the Orphanotrophos.[38]

According to Psellus, Romanos III was killed in his baths and may have also been the victim of poisoning through a mixture of hellebore.[39] Psellus also asserts that he maintains that "Zoe and Michael were the cause of his death."[40] So, regardless of where the blame lies, Romanos III died and after Zoe was able to ascend Michael IV to the throne. According to Diehl, Michael IV began to exile all those whom Zoe had showed favor towards.[41] Michael IV served as a harsh master to Zoe and she was restricted to her apartments, not able to leave without the express consent of the Emperor.[42]

As it became evident that the emperor Michael was dying, questions of his successor arose. Zoe had been convinced by Michael and his brother, the eunuch John Orphanotrophus, to adopt Michael's nephew, also named Michael. Despite the unkind treatment Zoe had received at the hands of her once beloved emperor she conceded to the arrangement. Norwich recounts, "The old Empress, enthroned at the side of her pathetic young husband, declared her formal adoption of Michael the Caulker[43] as her son, sitting him down – symbolically if somewhat ridiculously – upon her lap."[44] Michael IV died in 1041 leaving his nephew and adopted son as his successor. The public did not consent to Michael V as emperor and his reign was short lived, lasting only 1041-1042

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[38] Gregory, *Byzantium,* 247.
[39] Psellus, *Chronografia,* 81.
[40] Psellus, *Chronografia,* 81.
[41] Diehl, *Byzantine Empresses,* 148.
[42] Diehl, *Byzantine Empresses,* 148.
[43] He was known as this because his father had worked as a ships' caulker in the harbor of Constantinople. The Greek term is *Calaphates.*
[44] John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium The Apogee* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 287.

It transpired that Michael V created false accusations against Zoe and exiled her to an island off the coast of Byzantium called Prinkipo, according to Psellus' account. Once the public learned of their empress' fate Psellus states that the indignation was universal and the people were prepared to "lay down their lives for Zoe."[45] A revolt ensued and the emperor Michael V fled the imperial palace for his own safety. Michael V was blinded and the sisters, the Senate unable to choose between them, embraced and settled the question of government. The sisters, through their bloodline and legitimate claim to the throne, were able to assume the imperial position without argument. The empresses ruled jointly for a short time in 1042 before Zoe decided to marry once again.

Her choice in this matter was a man attributed as the "last scion of the ancient family of the Monomachi in the male line."[46] His name was Constantine Monamachus, or Constantine IX. He had held high rank and great wealth within the Empire. Psellus also recounts Constantine IX as "an extraordinarily handsome man, and it seemed that Nature herself had prepared him for the supreme position in the Empire."[47] Constantine IX reigned for twelve years (1042-1055) beside the imperial sisters. It is true that he pursued and elevated his mistresses, but Zoe in her advanced age did not show jealously. In 1050, at the age of 72 Zoe died and Constantine ruled the Empire. Theodora had abandoned state affairs and was in retirement. Due to this fact, Constantine had thought the future of the throne relied on his plans solely.

Upon his death in 1055, Theodora came out of her alleged retirement and claimed the throne. According to Diehl, "while Constantine Monomachus lay dying, she resolutely took possession of the Great Palace, strong in her right of birth and in the prestige which the

[45] Psellus, *Chronografia*, 138.
[46] Psellus, *Chronografia*, 162.
[47] Psellus, *Chronografia*, 160.

sufferings of her long life had given her among the people."[48] Theodora had the opportunity to assert absolute political power for a short time after the death of Zoe's husband. She ruled as sole empress for a year following the death of Constantine IX in 1055.[49] Among political murmurings that a man was needed to govern the state Theodora passed away on the 31st of August 1056.[50] This marked the end of the Macedonian dynasty, and the end of the rule of the empresses. According to Michael Psellus, "both the civilian population and the military caste were working in harmony under empresses, and more obedient to them than to any proud overlord issuing arrogant commands."[51]

LEGITIMACY THROUGH MARRIAGE

The reign of Justinian and Theodora, (527-565) exhibits complete power and rule over the populace. On April 4, 527 the Patriarch crowned Justinian emperor and Theodora empress.[52] Justinian and Theodora are an example of a true imperial couple. Even in present times, it is difficult to acknowledge Justinian without Theodora, and vice versa. While some may argue that Theodora never achieved legitimacy, the fact remains that she was able to exercise considerable political power through her marriage.

Theodora's beginnings are portrayed as exceedingly humble. Her rise to the throne can be seen as an accident of history. Certainly in ordinary circumstances, an individual such as Theodora would not have a chance at becoming Empress. She was born into a circus family, her father being a bear trainer in the Hippodrome for the Green faction. According to Procopius, "The population in every city has for a long been divided into two groups, the Greens and the

[48] Diehl, *Byzantine Empresses*, 172.
[49] Gregory, *Byzantium*, 252-3.
[50] Diehl, *Byzantine Empresses*, 173.
[51] Psellus, *Chronografia*, 155.
[52] Robert Browning, *Justinian and Theodora* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2003), 41.

Blues."[53] These circus factions were constantly at loggerheads and would prove important later on in Theodora's life. And so, our future Empress was born into the low society of the Hippodrome. As soon as she was of age, she participated in the intrigues of the theater. Theodora started as an actress, a term synonymous with a prostitute in modern day terms.[54]

Procopius' *Secret Histories* described Theodora's experiences before entering the imperial palace. When describing Theodora, Procopius makes no effort to censor himself. Only the baldest terms are used while discussing Theodora and her background. Procopius describes how Theodora, "became a courtesan … a common one, at that: for she was not a flute or harp player, nor was she even trained to dance, but only gave her youth to anyone she met, in utter abandonment."[55] Procopius alleges that, "so perverse was her wantonness … those who were intimate with her were straightaway recognized from that very fact to be perverts."[56] While the activities of a common prostitute normally would not be of any concern to Procopius, Justinian falling in love with her was. Procopius states that "Justinian fell violently in love with her … she seemed to him the sweetest thing in the world, and like all lovers, he desired to please his charmer with every possible favor and requite her with all his wealth."[57] The event that stunned those of senatorial rank occurred when Justinian created a new law which allowed him to marry a courtesan, as it was illegal before. When confronted with this event, Procopius states that "not a single member of even the Senate, seeing this disgrace befalling the State, dared to complain of

[53] Procopius, *History of the Wars*, Loeb Classical Library, (London: 1914), Vol 1, 218-220.
[54] Gregory, *Byzantium*, 123.
[55] Procopius of Caesarea: *The Secret History*, Chapter 9 *(selections from* Procopius: *Secret History*, translated by Richard Atwater, (Chicago: P. Covici, 1927; New York: Covici Friede, 1927), reprinted, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1961, with indication that copyright had expired on the text of the translation.) *http://procopius.net/secrethistorycontents.html*
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

forbid the event; but all of them bowed down before her as if she were a goddess."[58] And thus, Theodora became empress.

Justinian and Theodora's reign was known as an autocracy. According to Gregory, this attribute stemmed from Justinian's belief in "Eusebios of Caesarea's ideal of the God-protected emperor and, just as there was only one God, there could only be one emperor, whose rule was absolute."[59] Justinian's style of rule earned him many enemies and contributed to him being hated by his contemporaries. The populace's opinion of this reign came to a boiling point with the Nika Revolt in January of 532.

While street violence was the norm, the Nika Revolt proved to be more than the usual. Two of the circus factions joined forces and released prisoners. Chaos ensued on the streets and Justinian, Theodora and other senators retreated to the sanctuary of the palace. The safety of the imperial couple and the senatorial aristocracy was in jeopardy. As the crowds raged outside the palace, within its walls a debate ensued. The court was contemplating whether to stay or flee. At this time, Theodora boldly stated, "My opinion then is that the present time, above all others, is inopportune for flight, even though it bring safety … For one who has been an emperor it is unendurable to be a fugitive. May I never be separated from this purple … royalty is a good burial shroud."[60] One source acknowledges Theodora's assertion during the Nika Revolt as the "passionate sentiments of a woman who had clawed her way up from a life among the dregs of human society to the peak of human ambition, and who was determined not to lose in the panic of a moment all she had won."[61] This event is relevant because it exemplifies Theodora's power over Justinian. According to Diehl, Theodora maintained the calm demeanor one might expect

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[58] Procopius of Caesarea: *The Secret History*, Chapter 13.
[59] Gregory, *Byzantium*, 146.
[60] Procopius, *Justinian Suppresses the Nika Revolt,* from *History of the Wars, I.* trans. H.B. Dewing, in the Medieval Sourcebook. http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/procop-wars1.html
[61] John W. Barker, *Justinian and the Later Roman Empire* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 87.

from their political leader. He states, "She alone maintained calmness and courage on that tragic day when Justinian, half mad, had lost his head." [62] After Theodora's proclamation, Justinian rallied and turned instead towards resistance.

The Nika Revolt is just one instance in which Theodora exhibited her powerful influence over the Emperor Justinian. In November of 528 the city of Antioch in Syria was hit by a destructive earthquake. According to Browning, "Justinian and Theodora – she is expressly associated with her husband in contemporary accounts of the matter – hastened to send lavish aid for its restoration."[63] This exhibits how the empress was considered an active part of the diplomatic landscape. Theodora's personality asserted her force as a legitimate influence on Justinian. Whether or not the imperial couple had a symbiotic relationship, one can assert that Theodora's potent impact enhanced Justinian's reign. It is stated that on many occasions, Theodora's "indomitable willpower more than once gave Justinian backbone. Not only did she bring him a stabilizing, clarifying influence but she also helped him shape his policies more firmly and practically."[64] Procopious alleged that the imperial couple would purposefully choose opposite sides of arguments to control situations from both sides.[65] However, it was clear that although they might appear at odds, "in the last resort they would stand together, and anyone or anything which stood between them would be sacrificed without a thought." [66]

Theodora's birth and status hardly was indicative of the life she would lead and the influence she would have over the Byzantine Empire as Justinian's Empress. Theodora exemplifies the ability of a woman to assert political power through her marriage. Theodora's

[62] Charles Diehl, *Theodora Empress of Byzantium* (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1972), 87.
[63] Browning, *Justinian and Theodora*, 61.
[64] Barker, *Justinian and the Later Roman Empire*, 71.
[65] Gregory, *Byzantium*, 125.
[66] Browning, *Justinian and Theodora*, 104.

influence on Justinian is well documented and accepted. She was able to establish and maintain political power through her marriage.

LEGITIMACY THROUGH CO-REGENCY

We first meet Irene as she is chosen as a bride for the heir to the imperial throne, Leo. Leo was crowned co-emperor as a child and his fate was cemented when he was designated future emperor in 769.[67] Due to this fact, Irene was crowned empress, or Augusta, upon her marriage to Leo.[68] Irene (780-802) came to power as regent and co-ruler for her son, Constantine VI, who was ten years old at the time of his father Leo's death in 780. While Irene's son was her only avenue of legitimacy to the throne, she worked tirelessly to obtain power for herself. Irene was able to rule legitimately through co-regency, however she systematically endeavored to undermine her son's reputation to accomplish her ultimate goal of ruling the Empire singly. Garland examines the interesting relationship dynamic that existed between Irene and her son Constantine. Their relationship was described as tumultuous by Michael Psellus who stated that, "they went for each other, hit and hit back in turn, and now Irene exercised absolute power, now Constantine took possession of the palace alone, again the mother, again the son, until their conflict resulted in a disaster for both."[69] It seems that, even when he came of age, Constantine was reluctant to seize power for any significant period of time from his mother. He may have attempted to do so, but his efforts were undermined, presumably by his own psychological complexes. Perhaps, Constantine had been trained to believe that he could not rule without the assistance of his mother. The evidence shows that Irene manipulated many aspects of her son's life to accomplish her own goals.

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[67] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 59.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Lynda Garland, "Constantine VI (780-797 A.D.) and Irene (797-802 A.D.)," *De Imperatoribus Romanis*, 2002, http://www.roman-emperors.org/irene.htm.

One source recounts Irene's use of eunuchs as proof of her political prowess. Often referred to as the "third sex" at imperial court, eunuchs were used by emperors and empresses when they came to power. From the beginning of her Regency in 780 Irene placed eunuchs in key positions.[70] In previous reigns, few eunuch officials are recorded as participating in the political processes of the Empire. However, Irene used these beardless men to occupy important military and civilian roles.[71] Irene felt she could rely on eunuchs' loyalty "because they owed everything to her alone."[72] According to Herrin, "References to 'the eunuchs of her household' indicate that she promoted these representatives of the third sex and used them to reinforce her authority."[73] While Garland also maintains that Irene depended on eunuchs in many aspects of government, the historian asserts that this, instead of exhibiting political dexterity, showed her "inability to select competent and trustworthy staff: Stauracius (one of Irene's eunuchs) in particular was to prove a bane to the empire."[74] According to Herrin, "The dominance of eunuchs at the Byzantine court established a third sex, a neutered as well as neutral sector between men and women."[75] General consensus among historians alludes to two main reasons for the use of eunuchs, "first that eunuchs could never aspire to be emperors themselves, and second that they were safe to have around females. These, in essence, boil down to the same fact: you can trust them."[76]

Part of Irene's systematic undermining of her son's power manifested itself in the portrayal of Constantine on coins. He was shown as a youth regardless of his true age and manhood. According to one source, "Even in the coins struck in 790, by which point he was

[70] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 110.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 80.
[73] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 77.
[74] Garland, "Constantine VI (780-797 A.D.) and Irene (797-802 A.D.)," http://www.roman-emperors.org/irene.htm.
[75] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 17.
[76] Shaun F. Tougher, "Byzantine Eunuchs: An Overview, with Special Reference to their Creation and Origin," in *Women, Men, and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, edited by Liz James (New York: Routledge, 1997), 170.

nineteen years old, he is shown beardless to signal his relative immaturity."[77] According to the standard conventions of the empire, the more important figure was placed on the obverse (front) of the coin, with the subordinate placed on the reverse or back.[78] To further establish her status as supreme ruler between 792 and 797 coins showed Irene, "labeled *augusta*, on the obverse and relegate Constantine (labeled *basileus*) to the reverse. Despite his age (twenty-one in 792, twenty-six by 797), he is still shown beardless, with the implication that he is too young to rule."[79] By maintaining her status publicly, Irene worked to establish her legitimacy and assert her power. When Irene was established as the sole ruler in 797, a series of coins were issued commemorating the event. She became the first Byzantine empress to strike coins as a sole ruler.[80] Also, she is labeled "*basilissa,* the first time that this designation appears on coins."[81] According to Brubaker and Tobler, "Symbols of legitimization are always important, and particularly so during crises of succession, which, as we have seen, regularly called forth imperial female images on coins."[82] Irene used the coins to establish her legitimacy and authorize her claim to the throne.

Irene, in her quest for unlimited power, worked to tarnish her son's image. In addition to portraying him as an adolescent on coins, she worked to orchestrate his "adulterous marriage." It seems that upon the birth of a second female child, Constantine began to tire of his wife, Maria, and began to explore his options of means to obtain a divorce. Other historians also assert that Constantine's distaste for his wife stemmed from the fact that Maria had been his mother's choice. As such, at the first hint that Constantine wished to divorce Maria, Irene supported her

[77] Brubaker and Tobler, "The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324-802)," 587.
[78] Ibid., 573.
[79] Ibid., 589-90.
[80] Garland, "Constantine VI (780-797 A.D.) and Irene (797-802 A.D.)," http://www.roman-emperors.org/irene.htm.
[81] Brubaker and Tobler, "The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324-802)," 589-90.
[82] Brubaker and Tobler, "The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324-802)," 590-1.

son, knowing it would prove detrimental to his image. Herrin recounts, "As Theophanes puts it, the emperor conceived an aversion to his wife Maria 'through the machinations of his mother' and looked for a way to divorce her."[83] Irene, at this point, seemed to have an ulterior motive. By damaging Constantine's image publicly, Irene sought to establish her own legitimacy as sole ruler. "Theophanes claims that Irene 'was yearning for power and wanted him [Constantine] to be universally condemned.'"[84] Eventually, at Irene's insistence and influence, Constantine was able to divorce his wife, Maria and remarry. According to Herrin, "Since there were no legal grounds for divorce, such as proven adultery or conspiracy to murder, this act was immediately criticized by the ecclesiastical authorities, who pointed out that marriage was for life."[85] Irene worked behind the scenes in this situation in order to manipulate the outcome to her advantage, her ever present goal of autocracy.

By asserting her political power, Irene was able to have an influence on society. Perhaps the greatest example of this was her restoration of icons. Garland argued that icon veneration was perhaps a gendered perspective.[86] Garland states, "Irene's restoration of icons in 787 should be seen in the context of women's spirituality in general, in that icon-worship was particularly a feature of women's religious practices in Byzantium. Indeed, women and monastics were traditionally the most enthusiastic venerators of both saints' relics and of icons."[87] Irene's other contributions to the society were that "she would commission iconographic art and she also acted as a monastic patron: under her rule there is evidence of the return of monastic investment of money in art. A number of churches can be attributed to her reign, such as St Sophia at

[83] Theophanes, AM 6287, de Boor I, 469; Efthymiadis, ed., *Life of Tarasios*, paras. 39-44. Cited by Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*,(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 96.
[84] Theophanes, AM 6287, de Boor I, 469. Cited by Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*,(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 97.
[85] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 96.
[86] Garland, "Constantine VI (780-797 A.D.) and Irene (797-802 A.D.)," http://www.roman-emperors.org/irene.htm.
[87] Ibid.

Thessalonica and Bizye in Thrace, and several monastery churches in Bithynia: St Sophia in Thessalonica can be dated by the monograms of Constantine and Irene."[88] Garland also states that Irene was an active philanthropist who established several homes for the aged, hospices for the poor, *xenodocheia* (hostels for travellers), and a cemetery for the poor.[89]

The most violent instance of Irene asserting her absolute political power occurred when she blinded her son. Garland states that Irene "was clearly aware of the decision to blind the emperor and indeed appears to have made it herself. Whatever the degree of Constantine's unpopularity, the deed was generally abhorred: Theophanes tells us that the sun was darkened for seventeen days and 'everyone acknowledged' that this was because the emperor had been blinded."[90]

This event led to the decline in popularity of Irene. She also lost her claim to the throne in the absence of her son. The interesting thing about the reign of Irene is that she seems to have ruled with no regard for the future of the empire. She made no provisions for a successor. According to Herrin, "Irene's refusal to settle the question of the succession proves her undoing."[91] The blinding of her son seems to be counter-intuitive; if she wanted her legacy to live on, it does not make sense for her to blind her own son. Her downfall, while significant, has no bearing on the political power she was able to assert through co-regency and later as sole ruler.

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[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Theophanes *AM* 6287 [AD 794/5] (tr. Mango & Scott (1997) 645); Leo Gramm. 198-9; *V. Taras.* 408-12. Cited by Garland, "Constantine VI (780-797 A.D.) and Irene (797-802 A.D.)," *De Imperatoribus Romanis,* 2002, http://www.roman-emperors.org/irene.htm.
[91] Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 126.

CONCLUSION

While this thesis started with the definition of "byzantine," perhaps now the implications of the word are different. For example, the assertion of female political power may not have been expected within the Byzantine Empire, but, as evidenced previously, these empresses left a tangible imprint on their collective community through their participation in political processes. Byzantine society, while at first glance may not have seemed like a significantly fertile ground for the assertion of feminine power, by examining the influence of Pulcheria, Zoe and Theodora, the last of the Macedonians, Theodora, and Irene; it becomes clear that these women were able to establish their legitimacy as political participants.

Pulcheria (399-453) and Zoe (978-1050) and Theodora (984-1056) established legitimacy as heiresses to the throne. Both Pulcheria and Zoe determined the succession to the throne through their choice of husbands. Theodora, Zoe's sister and the last of the Macedonians, was even able to rule on her own merit due to her bloodline. Theodora, wife of Justinian, rose from the very bottom of the social ladder to Empress. As Empress she exercised considerable power and influence over her husband the emperor and thereby was able to shape the political agenda of the Empire. Irene, the last Empress of this survey, who maintained power in one aspect or another from 780-802, claimed her legitimacy by ruling for her son. While her initial claim to the throne was established through her son, she was able to assert her rule singly and unchallenged upon his constructed demise. In an era and Empire where women hardly had a voice in the political process, the aforementioned Empresses were able to both establish legitimacy and assert political power.

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