



Eirini Artemi<sup>1</sup>

## **Powerful Women in Byzantine Empire: The Life and Ideology of the Empress Theophano (941-after 978)**

### **1. Introduction**

In Christian theology, women are thought equal to men. Christ's teaching and later Church Fathers' preaching did not assume or recognize any inferiority of women to men. Despite the Christian teaching about the role of women, the majority of them were obliged to live in their houses and deal with the housework. P.C. Miller underlines that

Contemporary historians do not have much direct access to women's perspectives on their lives and roles as Christians because so few documents written by women have been preserved. However, there are many kinds of texts that can be used both to reconstruct the history of actual women in Christianity as well as to analyze the ideologies of gender that affected how women were perceived in social and religious terms in Graeco-Roman culture<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Eirini Artemi, Adjunct Professor at the Hellenic Open University, Greece; email: eartemi@theol.uoa.gr; ORCID: 0000-0002-8852-9907.

<sup>2</sup> *Women in early Christianity. Translations from Greek Texts*, ed. P.C. Miller, Washington 2005, p. 1. M. Alexandre, *Early Christian Women*, in: *A History of Women in the West*, v. 1: *From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, ed. P. Schmitt Pantel, Harvard 1992, p. 412.

Their chief role was to give birth to children<sup>3</sup> Of course, the position of women in the Byzantine Empire was much better than that of ancient Greece<sup>4</sup> but worse than it was in Minoan Crete,

Minoan Crete held a very different role for women than the typical male-dominated society the woman was ubiquitous. Not only were women involved in the religious and social life of Minoan civilization but it would be more correct to say that they were the centre of it. The strength, bravery, grace and beauty of the women rulers of Crete were an ideal ensemble that represented the culture of Crete and created feelings of respect and pride<sup>5</sup>.

In the Byzantine Empire women, in general, did not have independent significance and were imprisoned in a gynaeceum. Only noble women had the freedom to act in the social and religious life and could have a catalytic role on the political stage. They were empresses, leaders or influencers to the roman Emperors<sup>6</sup>.

The powerful women of the Byzantine Empire contributed not only to the shaping of this Christian Empire<sup>7</sup>; many of them were distinguished for their strong character, intelligence and involvement in political intrigue<sup>8</sup>. One of these powerful women in Byzantine society was Theophano, the mother of Basil II Porphyrogenitus, the Macedonian and the Bulgar Slayer (976-1025)<sup>9</sup> Constantine VIII (962-1028) and the princess Anna Porphyrogenita (963-1011), who later married the Russian Prince, Vladimir. Also,

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<sup>3</sup> E. Goodman – W. Goodman, *The family, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, New York 1975, p. 22-37. E.A. Clark, *Early Christian Women: Sources and Interpretation*, in: *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. L.L. Coon – K.J. Haldane – E.W. Sommer, Charlottesville 1990, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> S. Blundell, *Women in ancient Greece*, Cambridge – Massachusetts 1995, p. 15-21.

<sup>5</sup> S. Alexiou, *The Minoan Civilization*, Heraklion 1996, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> K. Nikolaou, *Ἐπιθεσῆ τες γυναῖκας στῆ Βυζαντινῆ Κοινωνία* (=Η θέση της γυναίκας στη Βυζαντινή Κοινωνία = *The position of woman in Byzantine Society*), Athens 1993, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Nikolaou, *Ἐπιθεσῆ τες γυναῖκας στῆ Βυζαντινῆ Κοινωνία*, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. Christophilopoulou, *Byzantine Empire. Modern Hellenism*, v. 1, Athens 2006, p. 262-263.

<sup>9</sup> E. Artemi, *Basileios II ο Μακεδών, ο επονομαζόμενος Βουλγαροκτόνος* (= *Βασίλειος II ο Μακεδών, ο επονομαζόμενος Βουλγαροκτόνος* = *Basilus II the Macedonian, the Bulgar Slayer*), “Enomeni Romiosini” 15 (2013) p. 14. See also A.A. Vasiliev, *Arabs, II.1: La dynastie macédonienne (867-959)*, Bruxelles 1968, p. 1-114; N. Tobias, *Basil I, (867-886), the founder of the Macedonian dynasty: a study of the political and military history of the Byzantine Empire in the ninth century*, New Jersey 1969, p. 48-53.

Theofano had relations with four great emperors of this period. She was the daughter-in-law of Constantine VII (905-959), the wife of Romanos II (938-963) and Nikephorus II Phokas (912-969) and the lover of Ioannis Tzimiskis (925-976).

In this paper through a bibliographical review, we will try to present the character of this woman who managed from being the daughter of a poor tavern-keeper named Krateros, to become the wife of Emperor Romanos II and finally one of the most powerful and vicious women in the Byzantine Empire. However, every historical story including Theophano is not plain black and white with one side being all good and the other side being all evil. Finally, we will try to answer the question of how Christian teaching was compromised by these vicious actions. Were all these important and powerful Christians only on the thought of the name “Christians” to cover their evil way of life through the curtain of pure Christian teaching? But which was the attitude of the Orthodox Church toward this woman? Was there any discrimination among men and women in byzantine society and Christian Church as far as their ethical life according to social laws and religion?

## 2. The life of Theophano

The ruling class of the Byzantine Empire, protecting its privileges and ensuring their perpetuation, strictly forbade marriages between persons of different social classes. Of course, every rule has its exception. So some women in the Byzantine Empire, although they were born very poor, managed to get married to Emperors. They became empresses and they had a very important role in the Byzantine Society as female regents such as Theophano, who married Romanos II, or as political advisors of their husbands, most famously Theodora, the wife of Justinian I.

Theophano was born in 941 in Constantinople. She was one of the members of a very poor family<sup>10</sup>. Her father was a poor tavern-keeper named Krateros:

The new ruler, Romanos II [...] took possession of the government, or rather handed it over to his wife Theophano. We have already seen who this wife

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<sup>10</sup> J.B. Bury – H.M. Gwatkin – J.P. Whitney – J.R. Tanner – Ch.W. Previt -Orton – Z.N. Brookem, *The Cambridge medieval history*, Cambridge 1923, p. 67-68.

was. The daughter of Craterus, a poor tavern-keeper of Laconian origin, she owed the unhoped-for honour of ascending the throne solely to her beauty and her vices<sup>11</sup>.

Her name was Anastasia or Anastaso<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, after her marriage to Romanos II, she became Theophano<sup>13</sup>. All the historians referred to the poor generation of Theophano<sup>14</sup>. The only exception was the history of Theophanes Continuatus, in which Theophano was presented as a woman from a noble generation, “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”<sup>15</sup>. But this source is not though as reliable, because some scholars support that Theophanes Continuatus wrote the history according to the instructions of the Emperors who related to Theophano. The latter was a very beautiful woman<sup>16</sup> and with her beauty,

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Theophanes Continuatus names “Anastasiam [...] Crateri filiam” as wife of “Romano filio suo” (referring to Emperor Konstantinos VII), stating that she adopted the name Theofano on her marriage (Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia* VI, *Constantini imperium* 39, ed. I. Bekker, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* 45, Bonn 1838, p. 458). Cedrenus records in his history that Romanos married secondly “genere [...] plebeio, ortam parentibus cauponibus [...] Anastasiam”, and he underlines that this woman adopted the name “Theophano” (Georgius Cedrenus, *Historiarum Compendium* II, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* 35, Bonn 1839, p. 329). Leo Diaconus says that “Theophano, obscuro loco nata” when recording that she was regent for “filii eius Basilii et Constantinus infantes” after the death of her first husband, recording her second marriage in a later passage. Leo describes her as a woman who came from non – famous family but she was the most beautiful of the all women in the Byzantine Empire. Leo continues and writes that Theophano was regent in 963 for her infant sons Emperors Basileios II and Konstantinos VII, they were set aside by Nikeforos Phokas who was crowned emperor and married Theofano as her second husband (Leo Diaconus, *Historia* II, PG 117, 705BC).

<sup>12</sup> L. Garland, *Byzantine Empresses Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204*, London 2002, p. 135.

<sup>13</sup> J. Herrin, *Unrivalled influence: women and empire in Byzantium*, Princeton 2013, p. 250: “In fact, Theophano was quite a common name in the tenth century, particularly among the Macedonian dynasty, which produced a saint in the first wife of Leo VI, whose relics were treasured in the palace”.

<sup>14</sup> Georgius Cedrenus, *Historiarum Compendium* II, p. 329; Leo Diaconus, *Historia* II, PG 117, 708A.

<sup>15</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia* VI, *Constantini imperium* 39, p. 458. See also L.L. White, *The ideology of the feminine in the byzantine historical narrative: the role of John Skylitzes' Synopsis of Histories*, Winnipeg-Manitoba 2003, p. 120-121.

<sup>16</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia* VI, *Constantini imperium* 39, p. 458. Michaelis Pselli, *Historia Syntomos*, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 30, Berlin 1990, p. 94.

she managed to get married to Romanos II in 955. Before this marriage, Romanos II had been affianced or married to the daughter of a Frankish king but she died in 949. Skylitzes says that Theophano was of lowly origins:

When the fiancée of Romanos, the daughter of Hugh, 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 name was Anastaso but [the Emperor] changed it to Theophano<sup>17</sup>.

The low origin of Theophano was presented by Leo Diacone, too<sup>18</sup>. Many modern historians have adopted a more romantic opinion of the love of Theophano with Romanos II and they have expressed scepticism about the hostility of Skylitzes against Theophano<sup>19</sup>. Except for these scholars who were fond of Theophano, many others agreed that Theophano was a vicious and opportunist woman<sup>20</sup>. Warren Treadgold underlines in a characteristic way:

Then the emperor's son Romanos, 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 afterwards. Out of passivity or wisdom, Constantine let his son marry the woman he loved; blandly pretending that she was wellborn. The bride took the name of Leo VI's first wife Saint Theophano, whom she in no way resembled<sup>21</sup>.

It is said that Anastaso-Theophano, brought her mother, Maria, to the palace to have someone to support and help her<sup>22</sup>. In 959, Theophano be-

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<sup>17</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 11, 7, tr. J. Wortley, New York 2010, p. 232.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Diaconus, *Historia* II, PG 117, 709A.

<sup>19</sup> G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, translated by Joan Hussey, Oxford 1956, p. 283-284. See also R. Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries (A.D. 610-1071)*, London 1966, p. 270; M. Whitlow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium 600-1025*, London 1996, p. 341-343; Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, p. 126-127.

<sup>20</sup> M. McCormick, *Emperors*, in: *The Byzantines*, ed. G. Cavallo, Chicago 1997, p. 243: "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".

<sup>21</sup> W. Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford 1997, p. 492.

<sup>22</sup> J. Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium*, Princeton 2013, p. 228.

came the empress because her father-in-law, Constantine VII, died at the age of 55, and Romanos II became emperor<sup>23</sup>. Theophano tried to get rid of her mother-in-law and her sisters-in-law. Therefore, she tried to persuade her husband to banish his mother and sisters from the Great Palace. His sisters were removed to a monastery, although they did not take their monastic status seriously, Helena, his mother, refused to go, and after much pleading Romanos allowed her to stay<sup>24</sup>. The relations between the two empresses Theophano and her mother-in-law, Helena, were very difficult, although Helena with eunuchs educated Theophano to become “suitable” for the role of empress<sup>25</sup>. When Helena died, her tomb was at her father’s foundation, rather than with her husband Constantine VII in the imperial mausoleum<sup>26</sup>. This shows Theophano’s attempt to devalue her mother-in-law even when the latter was dead.

Skylitzes supports that Constantine VII died because of a poison which was given to him some months before his death. The historian accuses Romanos II and Theophano as responsible for Emperor’s death, although Constantine VII died of a fever which lasted several months, not showing evidence of poisoning. Skylitzes writes:

Romanos the son of Constantine had now reached the age of maturity; he could not bear seeing how 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 Niketas the butler to serve it to the Emperor. It was standing before the sacred icons when Niketas was about to take it up and – perhaps accidentally, perhaps on purpose – he knocked it over and spilt 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<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia* VI, *Constantini imperium* 39, p. 469.

<sup>24</sup> Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, p. 230.

<sup>25</sup> Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence*, p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 11, 16, p. 237.

After Constantine's death, Romanos and his mother became the rulers of the Empire<sup>28</sup>. Then, Theophano was 18 years old<sup>29</sup>. Romanos' total dependence upon his wife for advice and support allowed her to dominate the empire during his short reign<sup>30</sup>. Romanos showed a great interest in the issues of the Empire and he managed to create important laws for the economy, defence and agriculture. Unfortunately, he died on 15<sup>th</sup> March 963 at the age of 24<sup>31</sup>. Theophano became a widow. She was thought as responsible for her husband Romanos' II death. Theophano was rumoured to have poisoned him, although she had nothing to gain and everything to lose from this action. Of course, the causes of the death of Romanos could be poisoning or the immoral and corrupt way of his life.

Their sons Basil II and Constantine VIII were heirs and Theophano was named regent<sup>32</sup>. However, she realized that to secure power she needed to align her interest with the strongest general at the time, Nikephorus II Phokas<sup>33</sup>. As the army had already proclaimed him as an Emperor in Caesarea, Nikephorus entered Constantinople on August 15, broke the resistance of Joseph Bringas, the eunuch palace official who had become Romanos' chief counsellor, in bloody street fights, and on 16 August 963 he was crowned emperor by Patriarch Polyeuctus in the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia<sup>34</sup>. Although he was an ascetic and a deeply religious man, he married the widow empress Theophano on 20<sup>th</sup> September, over the objections of the patriarch<sup>35</sup> but until their marriage, they did not have sexual rela-

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<sup>28</sup> Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia* VI, *Constantini imperium* 39, p. 468-469.

<sup>29</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 12, 1, p. 239.

<sup>30</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 12, 3, p. 239: "[Romanos] was young and devoted to pleasure; he abandoned the oversight of every matter to Joseph Bringas, the Praepositus and Parakoimomenos for he would have nothing to do with anything but the pursuit of ribaid behaviour in the company of silly young men who frequented prostitutes, wantons, actors and comedians".

<sup>31</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 13, 1, p. 243; Michaelis Pselli, *Historia Syntomos*, p. 94, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 13, 1, p. 243. Michaelis Pselli, *Historia Syntomos*, p. 98, 60-81.

<sup>33</sup> Skylitzes refers that Theophano had sexual relations with Nikephorus II Phokas, before the coronation of Phokas. See Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 13, 7, p. 247.

<sup>34</sup> Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 284.

<sup>35</sup> J.J. Norwich, *Byzantium: The Apogee*, New York 1992, p. 192-194: "Polyeuctus excommunicated Nikephoros II for having married Theophano on the grounds that he had been the godfather to one or more of her sons. He had previously refused Nikephoras com-

tions<sup>36</sup>. This marriage there was legitimizing his reign by marrying into the Macedonian dynasty<sup>37</sup>. Theophano had a protector for her and her children, although Nikephorus was thought of as ugly<sup>38</sup>.

munion for a whole year for the sin of having contracted a second marriage. Nikephoros' first wife had been dead several years when he married Theophano, but in the religious views prevalent in the Eastern Roman Empire, especially in the 10th Century, remarriage after the death of one the first wife was a sin only begrudgingly tolerated. Polyeuctus banned Nikephoros from kissing the holy altar on the grounds that he must first perform the penance for remarrying. In the issue of his role as godfather, however, Nikephoros organised a council at which it was declared that since the relevant rules had been pronounced by the iconoclast Constantine V Copronymus, it was of no effect. Polyeuctus did not accept the council as legitimate and proceeded to excommunicate Nikephoros and insist that he would not relent until Nikephoros put away Theophano. In response, Bardas Phokas and another person testified Nikephoros was not in fact godfather to any of Theophano's children, at which Polyeuctus relented and allowed Nikephoros to return to full communion and keep Theophano as his wife". See also Leo Diaconus, *Historia* II, PG 117, 733A. Canon 53 of Quinisext Ecumenical Council: "Since familiarity with respect to the spirit is superior to the association of bodies, while, on the other hand, we have learned that some persons, after becoming sponsors to children subjected to the formalities of a holy and salvatory baptism, have entered into a marriage contract with the widowed mothers of those children, we decree that henceforth nothing of the kind shall be done. If any persons be detected doing this hereafter, first and foremost let such persons desist from such unlawful state of matrimony, and afterwards let them be compelled to undergo the penances prescribed to be suffered by those guilty of fornication".

<sup>36</sup> N. Koutrakou, *La propagande imperiale byzantine. Persuasion et reaction (VIIIe siècles)*, Athènes 1994, p. 74-75: "D'autre part le gouvernement imperial s'adonnait parfois à des formes de désinformation. Tel fut le cas de la résidence surveillée de l'impératrice Theophanô au palais de Pétrion. En effet Nicéphore Phocas y relégua l'impératrice de son mariage avec Phocas. C'était une mesure de prudence qui visait à donner impression qu'il n'existait pas de rapport entre le nouvel empereur et l'impératrice-régente. Toutefois, l'intention de désinformation fut immédiatement perçue".

<sup>37</sup> Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, p. 284.

<sup>38</sup> Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana* 3, *Liutprandi Cremonensis Opera*, ed. P. Chiesa, Turnhout 1998, p. 186: *Legatio*: "[...] ante Nicheporum sum deductus, hominen satis monstruosum, pygmaeum, capite pinguem atque oculorum parvitate talpinum, barba curta, lata spissa et semicana foedatum, cervice digitali turpatum, prolixitate et densitate comarum satis hyopam, colore Aethiopem, 'cui per mediam nolis occurrere noctem', ventre extensum, natibus siccum, coxis ad mensuram ipsam brevem longissimum, cruribus parvum, calcaneis pedibusque aequalem, villino, sed nimis veterioso vel diuturnitate ipsa foetido et pallido ornamento inductum, Sicioniis calcamentis calcatum, lingua procacem, ingenio vulpem, periurio seu mendacio Ulyxem". This description should be thought of in doubt because Liutprandus disliked Nikiforos II Phokas.



The ascetic way of Phokas' life, his absence from the palace to fight the enemies of the Empire, the great difference between his age and Theophano, and the fact that he did not have sexual relations with his wife for too many months, all these became the cause for Theophano to organize a conspiracy against him<sup>39</sup>. She was afraid that Nikephorus was influenced by his brother Leo. So if Nikephorus had decided to become a monk, perhaps his nephews would become emperors and not her children<sup>40</sup>.

Soon, Theophano fell in love with John Tzimiskes, the nephew of Nikephorus II Phokas. She confessed her love to him and after their sexual bond, they decided to kill Nikephorus<sup>41</sup>. Theophano's and Tzimiskes' adulterous relationship began when Tzimiskes' ambitions for military power had been refuted. Tzimiskes knew that only with the help of Theophano could enter as a ruler to the palace and the conspiracy would have the effect of legitimacy. Michael Psellos notes that Theophano had seen John Tzimiskes several times in the palace<sup>42</sup>. He was a charming man and the empress fell in love with him and became his mistress. So she wanted to find a way to get rid of Nikephorus. So she advised the young man to organize the murder of Nikephorus II Phokas. Many historians underline the affair between Theophano and John Tzimiskes, although they cannot specify its beginning<sup>43</sup>.

M. Whittow narrates the murder of Nikephorus II Phokas:

On the night of 10/11 December (969) John Tzimiskes, Michael Bourtzes, Isaac Brachamios and a small group of their supporters, presumably with the help of the empress Theophano, climbed into Nikephorus' Boukoleon palace from the side facing the sea [...]. The emperor was slaughtered at once and John Tzimiskes as his successor to a startled palace<sup>44</sup>.

The conspirators treated with an immoral and desecrated way the headless body of the emperor. The corpse of the great General lay for a whole day in public view at outdoors and only in the afternoon of December 11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Michaelis Pselli, *Historia Syntomos* 105, p. 100.

<sup>40</sup> Michaelis Pselli, *Historia Syntomos* 105, p. 100.

<sup>41</sup> Michaelis Pselli, *Historia Syntomos* 105, p. 102.

<sup>42</sup> Michaelis Pselli, *Historia Syntomos* 105, p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> M. Whittow, *The making of Byzantium, 600-1025*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 1996, p. 352-354.

<sup>44</sup> Whittow, *The making of Byzantium*, p. 354.

Tzimiskis ordered his burial with great secrecy in the church of the Holy Apostles<sup>45</sup>.

H.L. Garland supports that Theophano helped the conspiracy against Nikephorus because she was afraid that her husband would make her son Eunuchs. So the children would not become emperors and the new emperor would be one of the nephews of Nikephorus II Phokas<sup>46</sup>. A historian of that era Matthew of Edessa writes that the most dangerous enemy for the two sons of Theophano was the empress herself, their mother. For this reason, after the success of the conspiracy Tzimiskes sent the two children to Armenia right away<sup>47</sup>.

In this crucial period for the Byzantine Empire, the patriarch Polyektus had a catalytic role in the coronation of Tzimiskes. Polyektus would agree to crown Tzimiskes, only if had Tzimiskes punished the murderer of Nikephorus. Then he had to send Theophano to exile and withdraw the tome of Nikephorus with which the Emperor had the right to interfere with the ecclesiastic things<sup>48</sup>. Polyektus forgave Tzimiskes and the patriarch accepted that Tzimiskes had no relation to the murder of Phokas. The power of authority was stronger than the love for Theophano. Tzimiskes preferred the power of being a ruler of the Byzantine Empire and he sent Theophano to exile<sup>49</sup>.

Tzimiskes betrayed Theophano again when he married Theodora, one of the five sisters of Romanos II, who had been sent to the monastery<sup>50</sup>. Theophano was accused of everything about the conspiracy against Nikephorus and his murder. Tzimiskes was presented innocently of these accusations. The death of the emperor Tzimiskes took place on 10<sup>th</sup> January 976. After his death, the only emperors for the Byzantine Empire were the sons of Romanos II and Theophano, Basil and Constantine<sup>51</sup>. Theophano was called back from exile. The Eunuch Basil Lakapenos gave this order for his benefit. In this way, he would get rid of any suspicions about the death of Tzimiskes and he would

<sup>45</sup> Leo Diaconus, *Historia* V, PG 117, 792A.

<sup>46</sup> L. Garland, *Byzantine women: Varieties of experience (800-1200)*, London 2006, p. 143.

<sup>47</sup> Mattheus Edessae, *Chronicon*, tr. A. Edmonton Dostourian, Lanham – New York – London 1993, p. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 15, 2, p. 272.

<sup>49</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 15, 2, p. 272.

<sup>50</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 15, 8, p. 281.

<sup>51</sup> Johannes Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 16, 1, p. 298.

have a strong alliance between him, Theophano and her son Basil II the Macedonian<sup>52</sup>.

There is no information about the life of Theophano during the reign of her son Basil. The only thing that was said is that Theophano supported her son in any manner she could. She preferred to remain backstage on the political scene. She rather died on 15th June 991. To sum up, according to the English author Frederic Harrison<sup>53</sup> who wrote that Theophano was portrayed as the arch-schemer of Constantinople who manipulated the court to make powerful her role and position in the Byzantine Empire. She had to fight against her father-in-law, her drunkard husband Romanos II, and the possible danger that her sons had to face up because of Nicephorus Phocas. Perhaps we could support that Theophano did all these things to protect herself and her children and she was accused of everything because she was a woman and she was the victim who was presented as a vicious woman.

### **3. The Roles for Women in Christianity and in the Byzantine Empire. The different behaviour of people against a vicious woman of a lower social class and an evil Empress**

Everyone remembers that in the Byzantine Empire the emperor was thought of as the temporary representative of God on earth. His reign was perceived as the intervention of the Holy Spirit and as the revelation of the divine will. So the Emperor or the Empress, when she acted as regent, must serve God and the people of the Empire. They should imitate God and should rule with justice, charity, generosity, purity, philanthropy, benevolence and piety. They had to respect laws and live according to them and judge everyone based on legislation<sup>54</sup>.

Emperor and Empress should put into practice the Christian teaching and obey the laws. For Christ all people were equal in front of Him: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male

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<sup>52</sup> Ch. Sifonas, *Basile II et l' aristocratie Byzantine*, "Byzantion" 64 (1994) p. 118-133.

<sup>53</sup> D. Harrison, *Theophano: The Crusade Of The Tenth Century; A Romantic Monograph*, New York 1904, p. 135-140.

<sup>54</sup> D.J. Geanakoplos, *Church and State in the Byzantine Empire: A Reconsideration of the Problem of Caesaropapism*, "Church History" 34/4 (1965) p. 385.

and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”<sup>55</sup>. Many Church fathers as Gregory Nazianzen strongly criticized the laws that forgave the man for adultery and punished and condemned the woman as an adulteress<sup>56</sup>. This discrimination of the civil law against women was repeatedly condemned by the Christian Church<sup>57</sup>. Women should have the same rights and dignity in Christianity as men but this many times remained only as theory.

Sofia Matzarioti-Kostara argues that

Although Christianity was the decisive element in the formation of Byzantium, the practical application of the Christian ethos as a way of life met with the resistance of the old cultural principles that were deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people. Accordingly, the theology of gender as expressed before faced two opposing extremes: the chauvinism of the Roman civilization, which pushed women into the background, on the one hand, and the pagan liberality that was a danger for the social ethos, on the other<sup>58</sup>.

The Christian teaching was put into practice only for women of lower social class but there were exceptions for men and women of aristocracy and mainly for the Empress. In early Christian material, ethics were the single standard of sexual morality and the condemnation of divorce and remarriage<sup>59</sup>. Adultery was condemned and the penalties for the misconduct of adultery were a lot of. Women of a lower social class who were adul-

<sup>55</sup> Gal 3:28.

<sup>56</sup> *Gregorius Nazianzenus, Oratio 37, 7*, PG 36, 289AB: “The question which you have put seems to me to do honour to chastity, and to demand a kind reply. Chastity, in respect of which I see that the majority of men are ill-disposed and that their laws are unequal and irregular. For what was the reason why they restrained the woman, but indulged the man, and that a woman who practises evil against her husband’s bed is an adulteress, and the penalties of the law for this are very severe; but if the husband commits fornication against his wife, he has no account to give? I do not accept this legislation; I do not approve of this custom. They who made the Law were men, and therefore their legislation is hard on women since they have placed children also under the authority of their fathers while leaving the weaker sex uncared for. God does not so.

<sup>57</sup> *Gregorius Nazianzenus, Oratio 37, 7*.

<sup>58</sup> S. Matzarioti-Kostara, *The Theology of Gender – The Place of Women in Byzantine Society*, 3 April 2017, in: <https://pemptousia.com/2017/04/the-theology-of-gender-7-the-place-of-women-in-byzantine-society/> (accessed: 20.07.2021).

<sup>59</sup> E. Clark, *Early Christian Women: Sources and Interpretation*, in: *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. L.L. Coon – K.J. Haldane – E.W. Sommer, Charlottesville 1990, p. 20.

teresses were punished with mowing or spoofing and they were scratched, lashed and were scorned<sup>60</sup>. These punishments did not refer to higher social class women, and of course, there was the exception for Empresses. The rape of a virgin, or even an adulterous affair with one, was punished heavily by civil legislation, but only if the woman was a free citizen. Unfortunately, the punishment was not always taken place<sup>61</sup>.

Especially, in Byzantine society, according to the law, adultery was concerned with the breach of marital fidelity, but only on the part of the woman spouse. In the period of Constantine the Great, adultery was punished with the penalty of death<sup>62</sup>. In the time of Justinian, the adulteress was forbidden to be remarried, while a man was in danger of being sentenced to death if he had an affair with a married woman<sup>63</sup>. Many times, an adulteress was forced to be isolated in a monastery for repentance<sup>64</sup>.

As we presented above, Theophano was not punished for her adultery or the possible connection to the murders of her husbands. Her only punishment was her isolation in the monastery because Tzimiskes had loved the power of the authority more than her. So he had to obey the order of Bishop Polyeuktus. Her punishment was not very strict if someone had to think about all her illegal actions. Later, the punishment of seduction in a monastery stopped existing when her son Basil II became emperor<sup>65</sup>.

General, a woman of the lower social class had to dedicate her life to domestic skills which remained an archetypal part of woman's status and function<sup>66</sup>. Such activities were also expected to be practised by members of the imperial family, although this remained only in theory for women as

<sup>60</sup> M. Nasaina, *Woman's Position in Byzantine Society*, "Open Journal for Studies in History" 1 (2018) p. 29-38, esp. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Matzarioti-Kostara, *The Theology of Gender – The Place of Women in Byzantine Society*.

<sup>62</sup> J. Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme a Byzance (4e-7e siècle). I. le droit imperial*, Travaux et memoires du Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, College de France. Venographies 5, Paris 1990, p. 139-140.

<sup>63</sup> *Codex Justinianus* IX 9, 28.

<sup>64</sup> J.A. Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire*, London 2005, p. 28; E. Artemi, *Male homosexuality, adultery and concubinage in the Byzantine Society*, "Ekklesiastikos Faros" 89 (2018-2019) p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> 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*, "Byzantion" 58/2 (1988) p. 381.

<sup>66</sup> Garland, *The life and ideology of byzantine women*, p. 379.

Theophano<sup>67</sup>. Many women of the upper and middle classes were obliged to live in seclusion but they could not always have to face up to the punishments for their illegal acts. On the opposite hand, women of lower classes had to work and were not often isolated but they had to face up to the punishments according to law and to Church<sup>68</sup>.

When Theophano became a widow after Romanos' death, she married again in the same year 963. According to tradition the widow was obliged to mourn her husband for one year before she remarries. She had the right to inherit a quarter of her husband's property with the presupposition that she would not be remarried<sup>69</sup>. These ethical rules were not put into practice by Theophano and nobody expressed an objection to her.

To sum up, the imperial women, including Theophano, were faced up with more different and not so strict criteria for their morality or immorality than women of lower or sometimes upper classes. Of course, in the case of Theophano was accused of many things and we do not know if she was responsible for all of them. She was banished for the conspiracy and the murder against Nikephorus, although John Tzimiskes had led a conspiracy to overthrow a ruler and he was responsible for the murderer of Phokas.

So society and unfortunately the Church did not behave differently toward women depending on their class but they expressed a more forgiving attitude toward any man, and mainly to an Emperor or a man of the upper class. Christianity influenced society and legislation but money, social position and gender created discrimination against the attitude of people among men and women.

#### 4. Conclusions

Theophano was a poor and beautiful woman who managed to be married to the successor of the byzantine throne and finally, she became empress. Perhaps, nobody in the imperial family forgave her poor background. Soon, she gained the reputation of a clever, ambitious and ruthless woman in achieving her goals. She was accused of murders, although she was not responsible for all.

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<sup>67</sup> Garland, *The life and ideology of byzantine women*, p. 380.

<sup>68</sup> Garland, *The life and ideology of byzantine women*, p. 375.

<sup>69</sup> A. Kiousopoulou, *The institution of the family in Epirus in the 13th century*, Athens 1990, p. 52.

Theophano was portrayed as the arch-schemer of Constantinople who manipulated the court to make powerful her role and position in the Byzantine Empire. She had to fight against her father-in-law, her drunkard husband Romanos II, and the possible danger that her sons had to face up because of Nikephorus Phocas. Some other scholars support that Theophano did all these things to protect herself and her children and she was accused of everything because she was a woman and she was the victim who was presented as a vicious woman.

Of course, her actions were not punished in a strict way as it would happen to another woman. Nobody could say if she had exploited Nikephorus and Tzimiskes for the protection of her children or if the historians created the portrait of a vicious woman. The fact is that throughout her life, anyone could observe the discrimination of people according to their status and gender. This separation of people existed and it continues to exist not in the teaching of law and the ethic of Christianity but in people who put into practice the social and religious orders of a Christian society.

### **Powerful Women in Byzantine Empire: The Life and Ideology of the Empress Theophano (941-after 978)**

(summary)

In this paper we present the life and the character of Theophano, the mother of Basil II Porphyrogenitus, the Macedonian. Some women made spectacular progress up the social ladder by marrying into higher-class families, even sometimes into the imperial family itself and to become empresses as Theophano did. So, social advancement could be achieved through marriage. The power and privileges of an imperial spouse were directly dependent on the emperor. Did it have a catalytic role in the life of Theophano? Through her life we will examine woman's position in Byzantine Empire. It will be searched if there was any discrimination among women according to their classes and if the byzantine society faced with the same way a vicious life of an imperial woman and of a poor one. Which was the position of the Christian Church for woman? Had Church Fathers forgiven rich and powerful women and had they condemned poor women from lower social class? All these questions are going to be answered through the life and the actions of Theophano, a woman who managed from being the daughter of a poor tavern-keeper, to become the Empress and one of the most powerful and vicious women in the Byzantine history.

**Keywords:** Theophano; Nikephorus Phocas; Romanos II; Basil II Porphyrogenitus the Macedonian and the Bulgar Slayer

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