

PETRA MELICHAR, *Empresses of Late Byzantium: Foreign Brides, Mediators and Pious Women*. Berlin: Peter Lang 2019. 497 pp. – ISBN: 978-3-631-74667-7 (€ 96,95)

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The present volume is divided into two parts: the first and most important part (“The Lives”) contains biographies of the fifteen Byzantine empresses of the Palaiologan dynasty, the longest-serving and ultimately last dynasty, covering the period from the middle of the thirteenth century (the birth of Theodora Doukaina Palaiologina around 1240) to the middle of the fifteenth (the death of Maria Komnene Kantakouzene Palaiologina in 1439). The second part (“Roles and Rituals”) is a more general survey of how these women operated within the broader political and cultural contexts in which they lived. From theoretical and methodological perspectives, such an approach is somewhat conservative: by focusing on biographies of individual members of the political elite, the book reinscribes a great (wo)man theory of history from which Byzantine Studies has only recently begun to extricate itself (most recently in ANTHONY KALDELLIS’ *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* [Cambridge, MA 2015]). Nevertheless, in distilling the biographies of Byzantine women through a detailed and comprehensive reading of primary and secondary sources, the volume is a welcome and significant complement to the growing bibliography on elite women (most notably JUDITH HERRIN’s *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium* [Princeton 2013] and *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*, [Princeton 2004]) and an effective challenge to androcentric views of history in Byzantium (Michael Psellos’ tenth-century *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*) and now (Lars and Andrew Brownworth’s podcast *12 Byzantine Rulers: The History of the Byzantine Empire* <https://12byzantinerulers.com/>).

The volume is most clearly a successor to DONALD NICOL’s *The Byzantine Lady: Ten Portraits 1250–1500* (Cambridge 2004). While NICOL and MELICHAR cover some of the same women (Anna of Savoy, Yolanda of Montferrat, and Eirene Asenina Kantakouzene, for instance), there are two substantive differences. The more obvious one is the inclusion of Part 2:

Roles and Rituals, which has no equivalent in NICOL. Perhaps more subtly, there is also a difference in method. Whereas NICOL offers seemingly complete narratives, MELICHAR is much more attuned to the gaps in the historical record, as frequently emphasizing what is known about these women as what is unknowable (more about this later). If there is a feminist argument in this book beyond its focus on women, then, it is this making visible of the contingent nature of historical knowledge about them.

These two sections are preceded by an introduction which summarizes what MELICHAR views as the historical developments that led to the rise of the Palaiologan dynasty and the ensuing shift in gendered power dynamics that allowed these women to accrue and exercise such power. MELICHAR refers to these changes as a result of “the empire moving away from the legacy of Late Antiquity and acquiring the features of a medieval state” (p. 43), for which, for the purposes of this volume, the most significant trend was the concentration of imperial power away from a sprawling (and proto-meritocratic) bureaucracy and into the hands of the imperial Palaiologan family. In what serves as a kind of thesis for the book, MELICHAR writes that the emergence of family ties as the most important measure for appointment to high office meant that “public matters often became family matters. [...] This blurred boundary between the private and the public spheres frequently brought the women of the imperial family [...] into new roles in the political arena” (p. 44).

Though the subtitle of the volume (“foreign brides, mediators and pious women”) positions women under these three broad roles, what stands out when reading the biographies themselves in Part 1 and the analysis in Part 2 is the sheer variety of the roles they fulfilled, their adaptability to changing circumstances, and the diversity of their experiences despite sharing the same official title. They came from Italy, Armenia, Savoy, Bulgaria, Serbia, Rus, and from within Byzantium itself; they were child-brides and dowager empresses; pious nuns, conniving social climbers, astute political actors; drivers of imperial policy and pawns of international great power diplomacy. Indeed, many of them were all of these things and more during their often eventful and tumultuous lives. The future Empress Maria of Bulgaria, for instance, was born to a Jewish woman named Sara, the second wife of the Bulgarian tsar Ivan Alexander, who, upon her conversion, took the name Theodora – the same name as the first wife whom he had left for her. Maria herself was betrothed to Andronikos IV – when they were around seven years old (and he was already emperor). Andronikos’

failed uprising against his father and the Ottoman sultan in 1373 resulted in the imprisonment of the whole family, from which they escaped three years later. By contrast with wandering Maria, who had but one child, her successor as empress, Helen Dragaš “may have had as many as ten” (p. 284), and outlived her husband into a long widowhood of 25 years and is today venerated as a saint.

In a sense, however, the remarkable achievement of the volume in tracing the lives of these women also highlights its great limitation – though this limitation is imposed by the sources themselves rather than through any failure of MELICHAR’s. The simple fact is that the historical sources themselves are by and large written by elite men about other, more elite men. (with the notable exception of Anna Komnene, who lived earlier than this book’s period of coverage). As a result, women’s lives and experiences only meet a minimum threshold of narratability when they intersect with the lives of the men who are the Byzantine historian’s primary subject. Thus, not only are we unable to recuperate the voices of the women themselves, what we do hear are the ventriloquized voices of women through the mediation of male writers.

Thus, MELICHAR consistently runs up against the limits of our knowledge of the past as regards even these most elite and well-documented women; about Theodora Doukaina Palaiologina, for instance, MELICHAR notes that “the sources do not indicate how Theodora felt about her husband’s behavior towards the orphaned Laskarid prince” (p. 75); “these documents may represent only a fraction of Theodora’s orders, for some monasteries were later destroyed along with their archives” (p. 82); “the sources rarely mention Theodora’s involvement in public affairs” (p. 85); “though the sources do not provide information about Theodora’s formal education” (p. 92); “the passage of time has obscured many of the details concerning the second of Theodora’s Constantinopolitan foundations” (p. 99). About the empress Eirene-Yolanda, for instance, “very little is known about [her] life in Montserrat” (p. 119) and “the sources do not mention further details concerning [her] marriage negotiations” (p. 119). The frustrating absence of the archive is a recurring feature of these and all women’s lives that echoes through the cavernous void of the historical record as a whole.

Indeed, one of the unspoken and recurring themes of the volume is the way in which these women’s lives can only be understood through the narrated histories of their husbands. Take, for instance, the case of Maria of Bulgaria (born Keratsa in 1349), whose rise to throne MELICHAR intro-

duces against the background of the conclusion of the Second Civil War in 1347 and the ongoing dynastic struggles between the Palaiologos and Kantakouzenos families. MELICHAR is long on the interfamilial politics and dynastic and imperial competition among these men but short on information about the future empress herself during this period: “Little is known about the princess’s childhood” (p. 261), though the political activities of her brothers, fathers and future male-in-laws during the same period are well-documented. It is frustrating, if perhaps unavoidable, then, that much of the narrative of the Lives actually is devoted to what is knowable, namely, the actions of their husbands and male relatives.

In this way, however, the volume accomplishes what the best and most durable academic studies should: collect, present, and analyze all the existing primary source evidence and secondary scholarship currently available. In so doing, such books necessarily also highlight the seams, lacunae, and fault lines within the subject – and thus point the way towards future research as much as they cement and distill what has come before. Given the monumental achievement of this volume in both these regards, it seems inevitable that it will serve as the foundational work for future studies of elite women in late Byzantium.

#### **Keywords**

empress; late Byzantine empire; rulership; woman