

Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium, by Judith Herrin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. Pp. 392. ISBN: Pbk: 9780691166704; Hbk: 9780691153018; e-bk: 9781400845224.

DESPITE THE important work of scholars such as the late Angeliki Laiou, Leslie Brubaker, Lynda Garland, and the present Judith Herrin, certain beliefs about Byzantine women (and the research on them) have persisted in medieval studies. Due to the general neglect of Byzantine women among prominent classicists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the relative paucity of sources about these women, it has been rather easy for modern readers to assume that little can be ascertained about their experiences, education, or cultural contributions; Byzantine women would therefore appear to resist any formal, intensive study. This neglect has been strangely compounded by our knowledge of only a few powerful Byzantine empresses and princesses, who have been remembered (thanks to the highly unflattering writings of a few contemporary authors) as eccentric—and even immoral—aberrations in the otherwise patriarchal megalith that was the Eastern Roman Empire.

In *Unrivalled Influence*, a compendium of fourteen essays spanning her nearly four decades of scholarship on women in Byzantium, Judith Herrin successfully dismantles these misperceptions, bringing together evidence about Byzantine women from a variety of sources, including saints' lives, funerary art, chronicles, church councils, architecture, liturgy, and miscellaneous contemporary writings.

Over the course of these chapters Herrin touches on a broad range of topics related to Byzantine women, including methodological approaches to their study; female religious life and forms of devotion; marriage, motherhood, and gendered family relationships; women's work; canon law; empresses and women's space at the imperial court; elite women's education; and individual imperial women. Though each essay was originally intended as an independent piece—many of which were delivered as lectures over Herrin's long career—the work nevertheless stands together well as a single unit, offering a simultaneously broad and articulated view of what we can know about aspects of women's life in Byzantium.

Herrin generally argues that, despite the very genuine limitations imposed on women by Byzantine patriarchy, sources reveal not only women's agency, but also their persistent impact in many spheres of Byzantine society. Though all of the essays cannot be individually recounted here, one seminal essay from 1983 that treats Byzantine women's unique devotion to icons offers a fitting example

of Herrin's stimulating approach. Taking up contemporary eighth-century iconoclasts' complaints that women venerated icons due to their theological "simple-mindedness," Herrin convincingly argues that private icon devotion offered many women the religious agency denied to them in church, where canon law expressly forbade them from participating in liturgy. This private devotion consequently influenced members of the household, specifically the children women bore, raised, and educated. As a result of women's unwillingness to heed the admonitions of the iconoclasts, icon veneration ultimately prevailed, and became a central feature of eastern orthodoxy. Byzantine women's seemingly indirect but critical influence in shaping the Byzantine world is a theme that runs through all of this volume's essays. With her approach, Herrin demonstrates that the study of medieval women repays a creative and discerning eye.

Those who have followed Herrin's work in the past will doubtless welcome having this collection of essays in a single, inexpensive volume. Likewise, those who are newer to the study of Byzantine women, including those who focus more on the western Middle Ages, will find these classic essays a valuable, and highly readable, introduction to the rich sources of Byzantine gender history.

Both new and seasoned readers of Herrin's work will especially appreciate her brief prefaces to each of her essays, in which she provides personal, professional, and theoretical context to her past research. Consequently, she tells the story of her own scholarship and the many researchers who influenced her, as well as the changing trends in the study of medieval women over the last forty years. For instance, Herrin often remarks on the manner in which she couched her work in contemporary feminist theory, and even comments, given the benefit and wisdom of hindsight, on the limits and advantages of particular methodologies in examining Byzantine women and gender.

A single complaint to be lodged against this anthology is its conspicuous repetition of particular subjects and theories. Topics such as women's icon veneration, the role of eunuchs at the imperial court, or even Irene's blinding of her son Constantine (to name a few), are freshly—and sometimes nearly identically—reintroduced in several chapters, despite having been similarly discussed in the preceding. This is, however, forgivable, as each essay was originally meant to stand on its own, and, as Herrin admits in her introduction, the essays have only been "lightly edited," primarily to account for recent scholarship. While the repetition may annoy a cover-to-cover reader, it will likely go unnoticed by those consulting individual chapters.

Given the understandably growing scholarly interest in both the study of

medieval women and of the Byzantine East outside of those specialized fields, this will be an especially welcome volume which offers many of Herrin's valuable contributions, and indeed, a glimpse of her illustrious scholarly trajectory, in one place.

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