

SANJA MEŠANOVIĆ

THE FEMALE DESIRE FOR IMPERIAL AUTHORITY IN BYZANTIUM: THE CASE OF ZOE AND THEODORA

Female desire for imperial power was present during the entire Byzantine era. It was manifested in a variety of forms by women close to emperors, who were their mothers, sisters, daughters or even mistresses. In the 11th and 12th centuries the presence of strong women from the imperial family in political life was particularly significant and often crucial. Such was the case of Zoe and Theodora, the women from the Doukas family and of the Comnenian court. On this occasion, we intend to focus on Zoe and Theodora and the aspect of their mutual relationship, during the years of their political engagement¹.

After the death of their father, Constantine VIII, Zoe and Theodora became central political figures due to their non-contested heritage to the throne in the society that, theoretically, was non-hereditary². Since the heirs were women, this non-contested right to the throne of Zoe and Theodora created an ideological gap. However, the practical Byzantines found the solution according to which the elder sister, Zoe became a legitimazer of the mail rulers by marriages or adoption³. But this didn't give the so much wanted political stability to the Byzantine state. One of the reasons for this was the very same Zoe and Theodora. They fought one another driven by their desire for imperial authority and supremacy, which each of them expressed in a different way.

Zoe aspired to gain imperial authority and seized it by using some well-established rights and duties of the emperess: through legitimazation of the new rule by marriage

1. The present paper is a part of a larger research in progress about the imperial women in the XIth century, with the emphasis on the historical testimonies of Michael Psellos. The complete study will be presented as a part of the Ph.D. thesis on Michael Psellos as politician and historiographer.

2. See Barbara Hill, *The Imperial Women and the Ideology of Womanhood in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, *Women, Men and Eunuchs. Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James, London - New York 1997, 79.

3. For Zoe's role of legitimazer see Barbara Hill, Liz James, D.Smyth, *Zoe: The Rythm Method of Imperial Renewal*, *New Constantines. The Rythm Method of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th-13th Centuries*, ed. P. Magdalino, Cambridge 1994, 215-229.

and adoption. That choice gave her a certain advantage in comparison with Theodora, mainly for two reasons. First, by accepting to marry Romanos III and legalize his reign, Zoe became an exponent of the dynastic heritage and obtained hierarchical superiority over Theodora, displayed in court ceremonies⁴, numismatic material⁵ and the joint portrait with Constantine IX on a manuscript from mount Sinai, dated after June 1042⁶. Second, she expressed her desire for imperial authority in a way which was more acceptable for the Byzantine society and the predominant political ideology.

Zoe's power, influence and position grew and strengthened with the passage of time. This phenomenon is brought to our attention by the three miniatures depicting her weddings in the twelfth-century Madrid Skylitzes. In the scene of her marriage with Romanos, it is difficult to recognize even Zoe's role of legitimizer. She wears a simple women's dress, standing behind her husband, who is clad in an imperial garment while being crowned. The inscription βασιλεύς is written above his head. In the miniature of depicting her wedding with Michael IV, Zoe is still in women's dress and her husband in imperial, but the couple is shown on a more equal basis: full frontal position, and joint through the veil and dextarum junctio. Finally, on the third miniature Zoe's right to the imperial authority is not only recognized but also emphasised. While Constantine IX is being crowned, she is standing in front of him a little wearing an imperial dress and the crown, designated as βασιλίς⁷.

In the course of all these years, Zoe also exercised different kind of imperial rights she was invested with. One of them was the already mentioned legitimization of the new rule. Between 1028 and 1050 Zoe legitimized four new emperors: Romanos III, Michael IV and Constantine IX by marriage and Michael V by adoption. The case of her marriage to Michael IV shows that she could exercise other rights, as well. As it is known, in 1034 Zoe married Michael IV, the same night after the death of Romanos III, without observing a obligatory year of mourning. According to our knowledge,

4. Michel Psellos, *Chronographie* I, ed. E. Renauld, Paris 1926, 118.

5. P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in Dumbarton Oaks Collection* III/2, Washington 1993, 731-732, pl. LVIII.

6. I. Spatharakis, *Corpus of Dated Illuminated Greek Manuscripts of the Year 1453* II, Leiden 1981, pl. 97.

7. The above mentioned twelfth century illuminated manuscript deserves our special attention because of the ideological problems it raises. Despite the fact that Zoe had been proclaimed empress since the time of her first marriage with Romanos III, in the miniatures depicting her weddings, she is designated as βασιλίς only in the case of her marriage to Constantine IX. Although, up to now we didn't find a satisfactory explanation of this phenomenon, we firmly believe that these miniatures explicitly shows the growth of Zoe's power and importance. For the miniatures see A. Grabar - M. Manoussacas, *L'illustration du manuscrit de Skylitzès de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Madrid*, Venise 1979; Hill, James, Smyth, Zoe, 218-219.

historical sources do not mention that the absence of obligatory mourning represents a problem of any kind, which is something that makes us believe that she may have possessed the power to bridge this legal gap. Zoe may have applied the Basilica 21.2.10 and 21.2.11, which allowed the emperor to permit a woman to marry without the one-year mourning, and simply issue a dispensation for herself⁸.

On one occasion, Zoe almost stepped out of the ideological pattern she followed. With the adoption of Michael V she reserved for herself the most acceptable and respectable role for imperial women in the Byzantine society: the role of the mother who preserves the imperial authority and hands it over to her son⁹. However, Zoe's involvement in the reign of Michael V didn't finish in a simple legitimization. Sources hinted that she openly showed the strong desire to govern as a supreme ruler. According to Psellos Zoe agreed with John Orphanotrophos that Michael V was to be an emperor in name only, who was simply to obey her, and that she would be in charge of the Empire¹⁰. Presumably, during the same period the preparations for issuing Zoe's own imperial coin were on their way, but were never realised because of the forthcoming uprising, brought about by Michael V's breach of the arrangement¹¹. The riot, resulting in a temporary change in balance of power between Zoe and Theodora, put Zoe in a completely new and different situation. After the riot was over on 21st of April 1042, the Empire had two empresses and two governments, one headed by Zoe in the Palace, and the other by Theodora in St. Sophia. It seems that the crisis was very serious and profound: it confronted and divided the members of the Senate and ordinary people. Psellos stressed that the state was torn apart between two alternatives: one was Zoe, the older, respected and more experienced in the statesmanship; the other was Theodora, the saviour of the Empire from an unscrupulous tyrant. Zoe's weakened position forced her to make a political deal with her sister which took the form of a short joint rule. The co-ruling lasted a few months only; it ended with Zoe's coup aimed at taking power from Theodora. Soon afterwards, she returned to the old ideological pattern, by marrying a new husband and legitimizing his reign¹².

During Zoe's lifetime, Theodora, after refusing to marry Romanos III, was put,

8. *Basilicorum Libri LX. Series a Volumen III textus librorum XVII-XXV*, ed. H. J. Scheltema - N. Van Der Wal, Groningen 1960, 21.2.10; 21.2.11; Angeliki E. Laiou, *Imperial Marriages and Their Critics in the Eleventh Century: The Case of Skylitzes*, *DOP* 46 (1992), 170.

9. For the role of mother as the most powerful ideological role of women in the XIth centuries see James, *Imperial Women*, 82-91.

10. *Psellos, Chronographie I*, 187-188.

11. *DOC III/2*, 730, pl. LVIII.

12. *Psellos, Chronographie I*, 115-125.

hierarchically, in an inferior position¹³. According to the sources, until the night of the rebellion against Michael V in April 1042, she was simply called Theodora, Zoe's sister. On her imperial proclamation she appeared in historical texts as *augousta*¹⁴. The inferior position gave a completely different dimension to Theodora's desire for imperial authority as well as to her approach to it. One of the means of her political influence was the participation in various complots, especially during the reign of Zoe's first husband, Romanos III. Between November 1028 and the same month the following year, Theodora took part in the uprising of the strategos Prousianos and in 1029 possibly conspired with emperor's nephew Constantine Dalassinos¹⁵. In the spring of 1032, during Romanos' expedition in Asia Minor, she plotted again with the same Dalassinos, preparing a rebellion in Illyricum. In the Emperors' absence, it was Zoe who faced the rebels and punished them. Theodora was sent to Petriion and was told to stop with conspiracies and scandals¹⁶.

At every opportunity Theodora openly and decisively expressed her desire for imperial authority, following a different ideological pattern from Zoe's. It seems that Theodora aspired to the ideal of the absolute ruler. By the refusals to marry in 1028 and in 1055 she rejected the role of legitimizer, and when energetically seizing power twice in 1042 and in 1055, she showed that she preferred to govern on her own. In the revolt in April 1042, after the crowd rejected Zoe and proclaimed Theodora empress in St. Sophia, Theodora controlled and directed the course of the events. She immediately deprived Michael V of his imperial rights, gathered the Court officials and invested them with new privileges and titles. Following her order, the rebels blinded Michael V and the riot was over¹⁷. Her first attempt to rule alone ended in the previously mentioned joint rule with Zoe.

After the death of Constantine IX, Theodora again manifested the determination to seize the power. Constantine IX, after the death of his legitimizer Zoe, assumed the

13. Theodora's refusal to marry Romanos III is mentioned by Skylitzes and Zonaras. According to Skylitzes Theodora refused Romanos' hand either because of kinship, as they say, or because his wife was still alive (*Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. H. Thurn, Berlin 1973, 373-374). Zonaras says that Theodora did not wish to marry Romanos because she had heard that his wife was divorced from him involuntarily (*Ioannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum III*, ed. M. Bütnner-Wobst, Bonn 1897, 573).

14. *Michaelis Attaliotae historia*, ed. I. Bekkerus, Bonn 1853, 17.

15. *Skyl.*, 376-377, 384; *Zon.* III, 574-575. See also Kalliope Bourdara, *Καθοσίωσις και Τυραννίς κατά τους Μέσους Βυζαντινούς Χρόνους I: Μακεδονική Δυναστεία 867-156*, Athens - Komotini 1981, 106-107; J. - C. Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestation à Byzance (963-1210)*, Paris 1990, 42.

16. *Skyl.*, 385; *Zon.* III, 579. Bourdara, *Τυραννίς I*, 107; Cheynet, *Pouvoir*, 43-44.

17. *Skyl.*, 418-420; *Psellos*, *Chronographie I*, 101-115; *Zon.* III, 609-612; *Att.*, 13-17. Bourdara, *Τυραννίς I*, 115-117; Cheynet, *Pouvoir*, 54-55.

right to choose the next emperor, neglecting the existence of the last living member of the Macedonian dynasty, Theodora. On his deathbed, he named Nikeofos Proteuon his heir. As soon as Constantine IX died, Theodora managed to arrest Nikeforos Proteuon, on his way to Constantinople and prevent him from ascending the throne¹⁸. Finally, from January 1055 until her death in August next year, she reigned as an absolute ruler, issuing gold, silver and copper coins in her own right. She was accepted as the supreme ruler and considered immortal. Before she died she turned the crown over to Michael VI¹⁹.

The behaviour and aspirations of Zoe and Theodora created antagonism between them, which was reflected in the whole society. Their serious and great differences left a trace in historical texts from the epoch. Psellos wrote that Zoe was extremely jealous on her younger sister and she would rather see anyone else on the Byzantine throne but Theodora²⁰. Having in mind Zoe's desire for imperial authority and the ideological pattern she followed to exercise it, we could logically explain her animosity towards Theodora. Theodora was a real threat to Zoe because, she was the only one who, apart from Zoe, possessed inherited and independent right to the throne. On the other hand, Theodora, despite the existing antagonism, showed more loyalty towards the dynastic house and her sister. During Zoe's lifetime and afterwards, she emerged as a protector of their imperial heritage, especially in the years 1042, 1044 and during Romanos Boilas' attempted coup.

Despite the antagonism, which was the prevailing characteristic of Zoe's and Theodora's relationship, once they acted together in order to protect Zoe's endangered imperial right²¹. In March 1044, for the first and the last time they formed a united front to confront the aspirations of the emperor's mistress' Sklerena.

With the death of Theodora, in 1056, the Macedonian era ended, but the search for political stability did not. In this search the imperial women were to continue playing an important role mostly through the ideological pattern of widowed mother. But in contrast with the cases which followed, the case of Zoe and Theodora was harshly criticized and often distorted by historiographers. We can't but mention the words of E. Gibbons which influenced many researchers after him: *I have hastily reviewed, and gladly dismiss this shameful and destructive period of twenty-eight years, in which the Greeks, degraded below the common level of servitude, were transferred like a*

18. *Skyl.*, 477-478; *Zon.* III, 650; *Att.*, 51; Cheynet, *Pouvoir*, 65.

19. For the rule of Theodora see *Skyl.*, 470sq; *Psellos*, *Chronographie* II, 72sq. Also, for the coinage of her period see *DOC* III/2, 748-753, pl. LXIII.

20. *Psellos*, *Chronographie* I, 113.

21. *Skyl.*, 434.

*herd of cattle by choice or caprice of two impotent females*²². The period between 1028 and 1056 was a period of serious political instability but also of increased ideological changes, variations, tolerance and coexistence of parallel ideological patterns. The variety of those patterns was manifested through Zoe's and Theodora's right to the throne, position in the society, people's reaction toward them and through the emperesses' mutual relationship. In this diversity the predominant ideological pattern of the time was the principle of non-contested hereditary rule. This principle was followed by the legitimization of the male ruler by the woman heir. Along with those two patterns the crucial component was the social climate and the peoples' acceptance of the non-contested hereditary right to a woman. Zoe's and Theodora's imperial right enjoyed great acceptance so that any attempt to undermine it was opposed with strong resistance. Eventually it ended in belief that the emperess Theodora was immortal. But it is crucial to be mentioned that the peoples' loyalty to Zoe and Theodora was not the result of a conscious acceptance of a female ruler but an inevitable political need. The Byzantines tolerate and support the last emperesses of the Macedonian dynasty simply because they didn't have any other choice. Under these historical circumstances, in which they were given a prominent political role, Zoe and Theodora were not simple bystanders. They expressed their desire for imperial power and the will to exercise it, exploring the ideological possibilities and the tolerance of the Byzantine people and State.

22. E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire V*, ed. J. B. Bury, London 1898, 220.