LEARNED WOMEN OF BYZANTIUM
AND THE SURVIVING RECORD

Maria Mavroudi

The narrative sources that inform us about learned women in Greek-speaking antiquity and the medieval period are in their overwhelming majority the result of late antique and subsequently also Byzantine selection and preservation. Since we recognize that the attitude of a society regarding aspects of its past reveals its views about the present, the following fact calls for some reflection: Greek narrative sources created or preserved during the Byzantine period seem to convey a significantly greater amount of information about learned women of the ancient than of the Byzantine period. Indeed, already in the early modern period, it was possible to collect a mine of information on learned women (for example, philosophers, poets, doctors, alchemists) who were active in Graeco-Roman antiquity and use them in order to argue in favor of female participation in public intellectual life in the seventeenth century, a period for which female authors are relatively well recorded and studied by modern researchers. Likewise—and closer to our own frame of reference—the study of women in earlier historic periods was intensified since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the time when “women’s studies” took shape as an academic discipline and employed various tools, including the exploration of historic precedent, in order to argue in favor of a new place for contemporary women in academia and society at large. By the same token, could we interpret the Byzantine collection and preservation of information

1 A well-known such work is by Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653), The nobility and excellence of women, and the defects and vices of men, ed. and trans. Dunhill (1999); it was based on earlier works on famous women, the earliest of which was Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris (1374), the collected biographies of 106 women. Boccaccio seems to have intended this as an imitation of known works from Roman antiquity on illustrious men [Kolsky (2003)] and was unaware of Plutarch’s Noble Deeds of Women (= Moralia 17) [Franklin (2006) 1]. Later authors reference Boccaccio’s work, such as Christine de Pisan in The Book of the City of Ladies (1405) [Lawson (1985) 21]. For other works on famous women, see Dunhill (1999) xvi ff. and the not always adequate McLeod (1991).

2 Findlen (2002).
about learned women in antiquity as a contemplation by the Byzantines (whether men or women) on equivalent roles potentially played by Byzantine women in their contemporary societies? A brief answer to this large question is possible by looking at the associations three Byzantine writers evoke when mentioning Aspasia, one of the most famous female figures of Greek antiquity. The ancient sources read by the Byzantines offer a range of positive as well as negative evaluations for Aspasia ranging between a prostitute and a respectable woman; this is also reflected in Aspasia’s mention by Byzantine authors, who chose depending on whether they wanted to convey a positive or negative example of womanhood as it applied to the point they wished to make regarding their own society. In the tenth century, Euthymios Protasecretis wrote an *encomium* on St. Mary the Egyptian praising her asceticism in which he compared her with a number of virtuous men and women from antiquity. The female examples include not only Aspasia, but also Antigone, Pheretima, Phemonoe, Pantheia, Thargelia, and Theano the Pythagorean. The modern editor of the text, F. Halkin, registered surprise at this seemingly incongruous catalogue, but Euthymios’ choices become perfectly intelligible when we realize that he identified these figures as philosophers following a definition of philosophy current in a number of ninth to eleventh century texts such as the *Suda* and the Lexicon of Zonaras as “moral perfection based on the true gnosis of Being.” In a world that had known Christian revelation, such a definition can only lead to the identification of philosophy with Christianity and of a monk or nun with a philosopher; accordingly, Euthymios compared the ascetic Mary with non-Christian models of virtue, since all of them are philosophers; of course, Mary far surpasses the others because of being a Christian. A positive

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3 Henry (1995); Taylor (2003) 182–86. Both Henry and Taylor discuss the seventeenth-century drawing of a gemstone thought to depict Aspasia because of its inscription ΑΣΠΑΣΟΥ, seemingly a Byzantine version of her name. Since this would have been a unique such instance, a correction is in order: this is a first-century BC gem depicting the gold and ivory statue of Athena by Pheidias. The inscription (ΑΣΠΑ-ΣΙΟΥ) gives the name of the engraver. See Zwierlein-Diehl (2007) 111–12, 408–9, plate 96, fig. 436. I am grateful to Professor Nikos Papazarkadas for the correction and reference.


5 On the appearance of the term in other texts, see Ševčenko (1956) 449.


7 Ed. Halkin (1981) 7. 12–15: Τί πρὸς ταῦτα ἡμῖν Ἑσσαίοι καὶ γυμνοσοφισται; Τί δὲ βραχιάνες οἱ τροχλοῦται, ἀντισθένεις τε καὶ Διογένεις καὶ Κράτητες τὰ τῆς κενῆς