WOMEN IN BYZANTINE HISTORY IN THE TENTH AND ELEVENTH CENTURIES: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Understanding the role of gender in Byzantine society is a task that has drawn the attention of scholars systematically since the 1980's. A number of different methodological approaches have been employed in the interpretation of women in literary, historical, hagiographical and theological texts, as well as, in art and music.¹ These most valuable contributions have advanced our concept of women and most importantly gender in Byzantium. Teasing out what authors intended when they included women in their stories helps us reveal not only the writer’s philosophical and political agenda but also more deep rooted concepts of social structure, authority and patriarchy.² Elizabeth Clark’s notion that literary, philosophical, and theoretical critique of premodern texts is a fruitful avenue of study and that ‘the social logic of the text’ is one of the tools that aids researchers in examining the literary production of the past offer the ideological framework for this paper.³ I propose the examination of Skylitzes’ history with a focus on revealing the social concerns of the Byzantine society in the eleventh century specifically in the realm of women’s involvement in public life. This type of examination of texts is most revealing at times of societal change when the strain of the conflict between one ideology and another reveals the weak points in a society’s ideology.

In Byzantium, one such time of change was the eleventh century.⁴ Among the historians of this time John Skylitzes has received particular attention for his connection with the ruling dynasty, his legal expertise, moralizing tendencies and negative attitudes toward women.⁵

⁴ Kazhdan and Epstein (1990); Harvey (1989); Kazhdan and Franklin (1984); Laiou and Simon (1994).
Going beyond these types of examination, his history is a most valuable resource for the closer assessment not of Skylitzes as a man and a historian, but as a spokesman for the ideology of the Byzantine educated elite. Writing during a turning point in Byzantine society, when the nobility’s claim to power coupled with economic expansion signaled societal change, Skylitzes vocalized in his work the views of his society through the incorporation of long established ideological concepts. The ideological construction of womanhood in eleventh century Byzantium clashed with developing societal realities. Women played a significant role as representatives, transmitters and legitimators of lineage and wealth. In this role many had access and power in the public sphere unsettling the balance achieved in previous centuries. Skylitzes illuminated this conflict by stereotyping and censuring the behavior of women that exceeded accepted societal norms.

**Skylitzes and History Writing**

Skylitzes wrote in his proemium that the finest histories available were the works of George Synkellos and Theophanes the Confessor. He praised the work of these historians for the ‘simple language and unadorned style’ used to synthesize these historical works and offer the essence of past events to the reader. It was his intention that his own work would continue where the history of Theophanes left off. Skylitzes’ history covered the period from 811 to 1057, however, his account did not become independent from the Continuator of Theophanes until 920 and Constantine VII’s accession to the throne. Given this dependence on Theophanes Continuatus it seems logical to focus attention on the period between 920 and 1057 when the history appears to synthesize a number of no longer extant works. It is in this section of the text that we can best study what Ruth Macrides referred to as “the historian in the history” and see the ways in which Byzantine historians of the eleventh century wove into their works their own

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6 Holmes (2005) 66–119 on Skylitzes as a historian of the elite.
7 I agree with Wortley (2010), 1, who translates this portion of the text as “simple, unaffected language” and disagree with Grigoriadis (1998), 331 n. 14, who seems to read criticism in Skylitzes’ description of the language of George the Synkellos and Theophanes the Confessor by translating the Greek as “unpolished and artless.” Skylitzes has "λόγῳ μὲν ἀφελεῖ καὶ ἀπεριέργῳ." Skylitzes, 3.10, ed. Thurn (1973).