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HIST58: The Byzantines and Their World

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Pulcheria

Throughout the history of the Byzantine Empire, there has been a group of powerful women that ruled from behind the throne. These women helped the emperor maintain order and gain support of the citizens. This line of powerful women started with Helena, who was Empress for Constantine I, and ended with Pulcheria, who was empress for Theodosius II. Between these two empresses, there were also other women like Aelia Flaccilla and Eudoxia who also took advantage of their influence over the emperor. These women had significant role in politics and in the church. Pulcheria became the greatest and most influential empress of the Theodosian Dynasty by following the precedent of the previous empresses and by taking on more responsibilities of the emperor.

Helena was the first empress of the Byzantine Empire and her actions set the precedent for future empresses. Unlike Emperor Constantine I, who ruled from the throne, Empress Helena was a woman of the people. She interacted closely with the people in the cities and was known for her generosity. She listened to the needs of the people and “abundant were the gifts she bestowed on the naked and unprotected poor” (Eusebius 10). Therefore, Helena established that the role of the empress had more direct impact on the people.

Helena also established that the role of empress also has a significant impact on the church. Since Christianity still wasn’t widespread during her rule, Helena had the responsibility to help spread the religion throughout the empire. She did so by building churches because “without delay she dedicated two churches to the God whom she adored” (Eusebius 9). By building more churches, she was giving the people access to learn about the teachings of Christianity and giving the Christians a better place to practice their faith.

Aelia Flaccilla, the empress of Theodosius I, was also an influential empress that had a huge impact on the Church. With her rule, it can be seen that Aelia Flaccilla was using her influence over the emperor to her advantage. As a Nicaean Christian, Aelia Flaccilla’s “main accomplishment seems to have been that she prevented Theodosius from compromising with the Arian bishop” (Gregory 106). Since she believed in the Nicene Creed, she didn’t want the emperor to be influenced by an Arian bishop. Therefore, Aelia Flaccilla was able to protect the church by imparting her influence on Emperor Theodosius I and preventing him from someone that didn’t share the same beliefs.

Eudoxia, Pulcheria’s mother and empress under Arcadius, also used her influence over the emperor to her advantage. During her rule, she got into conflict with archbishop John because he compared her to Jezebel. She was able to use her political power and influence over her husband to exile archbishop John twice (Theodosius I—Empire and Church; Theodosius II & Pulcheria, 09/18/17). In this instance, Eudoxia exhibits political power, which isn’t seen in the rule of previous empresses.

Pulcheria, even though she became empress at a very young age, she was able to become one of the most influential figures in Byzantine history. When Pulcheria was crowned empress, “This princess was not yet 15 years of age, but had received a mind most wise and divine above her years” (Sozomen 17). With her rule, she exhibited more political rule than any previous empress. Even though Theodosius II sat on the throne, she was the mind that influenced every decision that he made. Unlike previous empresses that only pushed the emperor into supporting policies that they were in favor of, Pulcheria wrote the new laws and edicts (Theodosius II & Pulcheria, 09/20/17). Much like Helena, Pulcheria was the empress of the people. She would interact and listen to the people by having open forums. This allowed her to make laws and edicts that were best for the people. The political power that Pulcheria had over her brother was unprecedented.

Pulcheria also had a significant role in the church. When she became empress, Pulcheria took the vow of virginity in order to help protect Theodosius’s lineage. In doing so, she became compared to Virgin Mary, who was a very important figure in the Christian faith. This comparison made people more supportive of her. There was also an emergence of the cult of the Virgin Mary, which “reflected the piety of women and the acknowledgement of a female element in Christiantiy” (Gregory 98). Pulcheria’s reign as empress definitely empowered the women of this time period because she had more power and influence than any empress before her. Her role in church can also be demonstrated by the churches that built—“With how much fear she worshipped God, it would take long for anyone to say; and how many houses of prayer she built magnificently, and how many hostelries and monastic communities she established” (Sozomen 18). Even though Pulcheria had more political power than previous empresses, she also had more religious power than previous empresses.

After the death of Theodosius II, Pulcheria held the throne by herself for a brief period of time. This was the first time during the Byzantine Empire that a woman was on the throne as sole ruler. She later married Marcian to legitimize her rule but she remained as the senior ruler even when Marcian was named emperor (Theodosius II & Pulcheria, 09/20/17). No one questioned Pulcheria’s reign because she proved that she was more than qualified for the job. She had the support of the government, the church, and the people.

The empresses of the Byzantine Emperor and the Theodosian Dynasty exhibited great wisdom and power that was worthy of their title. Without Helena, Aelia Flaccillia, Eudoxia, and Pulcheria, their respective emperors wouldn’t have been able to rule well. The empress’s role first started as a representative of the church, as shown by Helena, but there was a shift that allowed the empress to have more political power, as exhibited by Aelia Flaccillia and Eudoxia. Pulcheria’s reign demonstrated that the empress could have an impactful role in both church and government. Pulcheria was such a great empress because she was able to continue the legacy of the empresses before her while making a lasting legacy of her own.

Works Cited

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