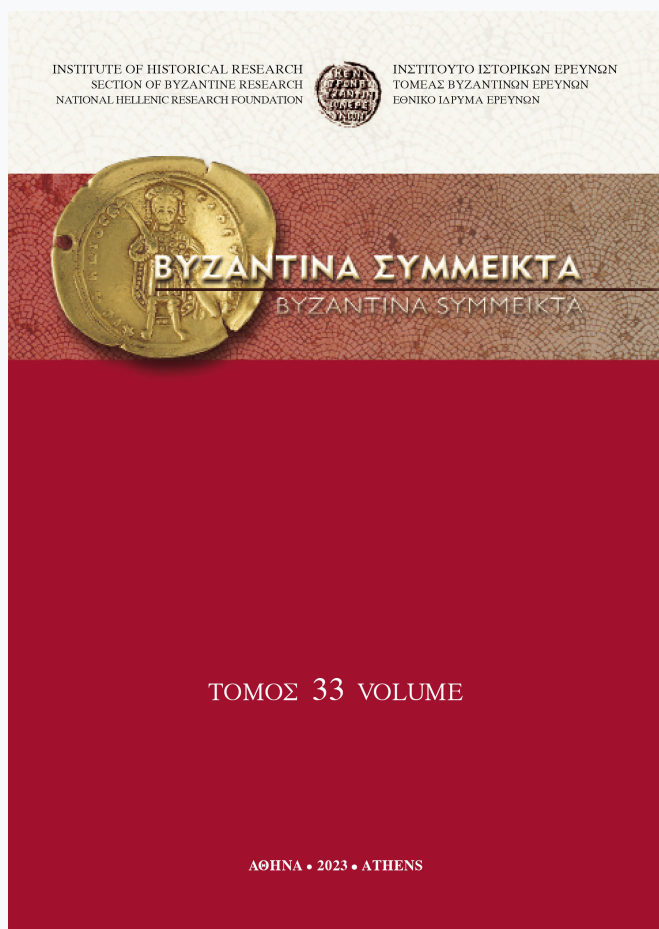


# Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 33 (2023)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 33



## Ensuring Childbirth in Byzantium: Deviant and non-deviant practices

Eirini PANOU

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.33351](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.33351)

Copyright © 2023, Eirini PANOU



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

PANOU, E. (2023). Ensuring Childbirth in Byzantium: Deviant and non-deviant practices. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 33, 165–181. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.33351>

INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH  
SECTION OF BYZANTINE RESEARCH  
NATIONAL HELLENIC RESEARCH FOUNDATION



ΙΝΣΤΙΤΟΥΤΟ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ  
ΤΟΜΕΑΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΩΝ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ  
ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΡΕΥΝΩΝ



# BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA

ΤΟΜΟΣ 33 VOLUME

EIRINI PANOU

ENSURING CHILDBIRTH IN BYZANTIUM:  
DEVIANT AND NON-DEVIANT PRACTICES

ΑΘΗΝΑ • 2023 • ATHENS

# ENSURING CHILDBIRTH IN BYZANTIUM: DEVIANT AND NON-DEVIANT PRACTICES

Marriage in Byzantium was a socially acceptable means of ensuring procreation<sup>1</sup>. Apart from prayers, relics, and works of the minor arts<sup>2</sup>, anxiety about childbirth impelled people to employ methods which the Church expressly forbade, such as magical practices that were ‘global’ in the ancient world and at the same ‘a citizen of nowhere’<sup>3</sup>. Written sources suggest that in Byzantium, magic was employed by all social classes, as it could ensure marriage and children, which had been a significant index of success and social prosperity since antiquity<sup>4</sup>. In pursuing this goal, however, the boundary between occult practices and methods sanctioned by the Church became blurred by those practicing magic<sup>5</sup>. For Church and state, an antithesis is a fact, which is why the Church explicitly required the

---

1. C. KYRRIS, Le rôle de la femme dans la société Byzantine particulièrement pendant les derniers siècles, *JÖB* 32/2 (1982), 463-472 (465); J. HERRIN, Toleration and Repression within the Byzantine Family, in: *Toleration and Repression in the Middle Ages: In Memory of Lenos Maurommatis*, ed. K. NIKOLAOU, Athens 2002, 173-178 (178 and n. 19).

2. Marriage belts were frequently inscribed *health*, expressing a wish for successful conception and childbirth; see A. WALKER, Wife and Husband: ‘a Golden Team’, in: *Byzantine Women and Their World*, ed. I. KALAVREZOU, Cambridge, MA. – New Haven, CT. 2003, 215-231 (218).

3. H. MAGUIRE, Magical Signs in Christian Byzantium, Judaism, and Islam. A Global Language, in: *Global Byzantium: Papers from the Fiftieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, ed. L. BRUBAKER – R. DARLEY – D. REYNOLDS, London – New York 2022, 172-190 (187).

4. M. LELO, Η γυναικολογία στην αρχαιότητα: γυναικείες ασθένειες, διάγνωση, θεραπεία, τοκετός, in: *ΙΑΣΙΣ. Υγεία, νόσος, θεραπεία από τον Όμηρο στον Γαληνό*, ed. N. STAMPOLIDES – G. TASOULAS, Athens 2014, 86-97.

5. P. KAMBANIS, Christians against the Forces of Evil, in: *Εξορκίζοντας το κακό. Πίστη και δεισιδαιμονίες στο Βυζάντιο*, ed. D. ZAFEIROPOULOU, Athens 2006, 11-30 (12).

population to refrain from practices that involved magic<sup>6</sup>. And although hagiographical, historical, and historiographical texts testify to the wide range of means available to the Byzantines for ensuring procreation without the use of magic, 10th -12th-century amulets, ‘the most conspicuous means by which individuals sought to ward off the unseen evil around them’<sup>7</sup>, demonstrate that less accepted ways of encouraging childbirth remained very popular<sup>8</sup>. Material culture and texts reflect the anxiety of Byzantine society about procreation, expressed not only through prayers, *ex voto* offerings, and church patronage, but also through magic. As it was a societal requirement that women have children, 10th-12th-century amulets were used to exorcise demons who threatened children<sup>9</sup>. The Church ‘responded’ to this need with the emergence of a saint who protected childbirth: St Anne. As she was the most widely recognized of the female saints facilitating procreation, her imagery permeated the iconography of 10th-12th century magical amulets. Faith, despair and hope produced a binary response to religious imagery, which could be easily transmuted from sacred to occult, from holy icon to magic amulet.

---

6. For the ambiguous attitude towards amulets in Christianity, see J. L. CROW, *Miracle or Magic? The Problematic Status of Christian Amulets*, in: *Van Discussie tot Beleving: Religiestudies aan de UvA. From Discussion to Experience: Religious Studies at the University of Amsterdam*, ed. J. BRAAK – D. MALONE, Amsterdam 2009, 97-112; A. VAKALOUDI, Δεισιδαιμονία and the Role of the Apotropaic Magic Amulets in the Early Byzantine Empire, *Byz.* 70 (2000), 182-210.

7. J. RUSSELL, *The Archaeological Context of Magic in the Early Byzantine Period*, in: *Byzantine Magic*, ed. H. MAGUIRE, Washington, D.C., 1995, 35-50 (41).

8. M. MEYER, *An Obscure Portrait: Imaging Women's Reality in Byzantine Art*, London 2009, 25, 34-35.

9. For practices and ideas associated with ‘uterine magic’ in antiquity and early Christianity see J.-J. AUBERT, *Threatened Wombs: Aspects of Ancient Uterine Magic*, *GRBS* 30 (1989), 421-449; E. TSATSOU, *Uterine Amulets: Amulets that Protect the Uterus or that Reinforce Erotic Desire*, *Magical gems in their contexts: proceedings of the International Workshop held in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 16-18 February 2012*, ed. K. ENDRETTY – Á. M. NAGY – J. SPIER, Rome 2019, 271-283; N. G. POLITES, Ὠκυτόκια, *Λαογραφία* 6 (1918), 299-346, repr. in *Id.*, *Λαογραφικά Σύμμεικτα Β΄*, Ακαδημία Αθηνών, Κέντρο Ερευνής της Ελληνικής Λαογραφίας 13, Athens 1975, 284-316 (298-299); B. PITRAKIS, *Objects of Devotion and Protection*, in: *Byzantine Christianity*, ed. D. KRUEGER, Minneapolis 2006, 164-181, (165-168); MEYER, *An Obscure Portrait*, 44.

## I. THE SOCIAL PRACTICE

a) *Amulets in imperial circles*

Alicia Walker distinguishes occult practices in Byzantium according to social class. She speaks of ‘individuals of lower social echelons typically being associated with what might be labeled as superstitious activities’, ‘whereas educated people engaged in the exploration of more esoteric, book-based occult knowledge’<sup>10</sup>. Interestingly, this difference was less marked when it came to the use of amulets<sup>11</sup>. Michael Psellos tells us that the empress Zoe Porphyrogennētē resorted to amulets in order to provide an heir for Romanos III Argyros (1028-1034). Psellos characterizes magic as ‘nonsense’<sup>12</sup>, though, as Walker notes, ‘These allusions must be read [...] in relation to Psellos’ broader attitude toward Zoe, which was not favorable. Thus, the suggestion of her involvement in occult practices may be part of his wider intention to demonstrate her unfitness to rule’<sup>13</sup>. The same information is repeated by Ioannis Zonaras, who tells us that Romanos III Argyros hang (προσήρτα) Zoe little stones, which, ‘allegedly, facilitated pregnancy’,<sup>14</sup> however that Zoe was putting up with it (ἡνεύχετο).<sup>15</sup> These references clearly indicate that male and female members of the imperial family made use of a practice that had started in the tenth century, when Spier sees ‘a revival of amulet usage beginning in the tenth century among the wealthier classes or even imperial circles in Constantinople itself’<sup>16</sup>.

---

10. A. WALKER, Magic in Medieval Byzantium, in: *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. D. J. COLLINS, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. 2015, 209-234 (210). For the use of magic in imperial circles, see P. MAGDALINO, Occult Sciences and Imperial Power in Byzantine History and Historiography, in: *The Occult Sciences in Byzantium*, ed. P. MAGDALINO – M. MAVROUDI, Geneva 2006, 119-162.

11. WALKER, Magic in Medieval Byzantium, 10.

12. MICHAEL PSELLOS, *Chronographia* III.5, ed. D. R. REINSCH, *Michaelis Pselli Chronographia*, Millennium-Studien / Millennium Studies 51, Berlin – Munich – Boston 2014, 33.

13. WALKER, Magic in Medieval Byzantium, 222.

14. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae historiarum libri xviii*, XVII 13,3, ed. T. BÜTTNER-WOBST [CSHB], Bonn 1897, v. 3, 581.13-14: τῇ συνοίκῳ προσήρτα λιθίδια, ὡς δὴ τι ἐνεργοῦντα περὶ τὴν κύησιν.

15. *Ioannis Zonarae epitomae*, XVII 13,4, v. 3, 581.14-15.

16. J. SPIER, Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets and their Tradition, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993), 25-62 (50).

The pressure associated with the demands of imperial succession was not new, but from the tenth century onwards the use of amulets increased noticeably<sup>17</sup>, with the growth in interest in means of conception. This shift was not unrelated to the cult of Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, who was known as a protector of pregnancy and childbirth, and who enjoyed great devotion, especially from the tenth century onwards, as attested by the introduction in the Constantinopolitan calendar of three feasts related to the early years of the Virgin (Conception of the Virgin, Nativity of the Virgin, Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple), preceded by related homiletic activity from the eighth century onwards and the translation of St Anne's relics to Constantinople by the tenth century<sup>18</sup>.

b) *Amulets for individuals outside the imperial family*

Despite the fact that magic was condemned from the early years of Christianity by both Church and state<sup>19</sup>, the large number of amulets that survive from between the tenth and the twelfth century, and the *hystera* amulets in particular, testify to their widespread use. The *hystera* amulets (from the Greek word *ὑστέρα* meaning womb) depict on the front and reverse such figures as the pagan Greek demon Medusa, Christ and saints such as the Virgin, or her mother St Anne holding the baby Mary<sup>20</sup>. It

---

17. For *hystera* amulets that date from after the tenth century, see A. BOSSELMANN-RUICKBIE, A Byzantine Casting Mould for a *hystera* (Womb) Amulet and a Cross in the Museum Schnütgen, Cologne. A Contribution to the Cultural and Religious History of Byzantium and the Material Culture of Byzantine Magic, in: *Lebenswelten zwischen Archäologie und Geschichte, Festschrift für Falko Daim zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. J. DRAUSCHKE – K. KUHTREIBER – E. KISLINGER – G. SCHARRER-LISKA – T. VIDA, Mainz 2018, 629-644. For magical practices in imperial circles of the late antiquity, see S. TROIANOS, Η θέση των μάγων στη βυζαντινή κοινωνία, in: *Οι περιθωριακοί στο Βυζάντιο, Πρακτικά Ημερίδας, 9 Μαΐου 1992*, ed. C. MALTEZOU, Athens 1993, 271-295.

18. E. PANOU, *The Cult of St Anne in Byzantium*, London – New York 2018.

19. For negative views on magic and the laws forbidding it see S. TROIANOS, Μαγεία και διάβολος από τη Ρώμη στο Βυζάντιο, *Digesta* 3 (2000), 1-33; J. VAN DER VLIET, Roman and Byzantine Egypt, in: *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. D. FRANKFURTER, [Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 189], Leiden 2019, 244-247.

20. SPIER, Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets, 28-29, 59; A. VAKALOUDI, Αποτροπαϊκά φυλακτά της πρώτης βυζαντινής περιόδου: η λειτουργία των απεικονίσεων και των επωδών. Ο ρόλος των χριστιανών αγίων, *Βυζαντινά* 19 (1998), 207-224 (212).



has been suggested that the snakes on Medusa's head allude to the seven female demons that appeared to King Solomon (known as the vanquisher of demons<sup>21</sup>) in the apocryphal 'Testament of Solomon'<sup>22</sup>. In pregnancy amulets the Medusa represents all the demons exorcised from the womb<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, the presence of the Virgin and her mother on these amulets emphasize their maternal function in particular. They form the visual equivalent of the reverence the Virgin and St Anne received in hagiography as the guardian of childbirth<sup>24</sup>. Thus, the *hystera* amulets carry a text intended to exorcise demons from a wandering womb<sup>25</sup>, to calm it and return it to its proper place<sup>26</sup>: 'Womb, black, blackening, as a snake you coil and as a serpent you hiss and

---

21. A. COSENTINO, La tradizione del re Salomone come mago ed esorcista, in *Gemme gnostiche e cultura ellenistica, Atti dell'Incontro di studio*, Verona 22-23/10/1999, ed. A. MASTROCINQUE, Bologna 2002, 41-59; C. WALTER, The Intaglio of Solomon in the Benaki Museum and the Origins of the Iconography of Warrior Saints, *ΔΧΑΕ* 15 (1989-1990), 33-42 (36). For the iconography of the Solomon amulets, see E. CHEPEL, Invocations of the Blood of Christ in Greek Magical Amulets, *Scrinium* 13 (2017), 53-71 (60-61).

22. Καὶ ἦλθον πνεύματα ἐπὶ τὰ συνδεδεμένα καὶ συμπεπλεγμένα... ἡ Ἀπάτη... ἡ Ἐρις... ἡ Κλωθώ... ἡ Ζάλη... ἡ Πλάνη... ἡ Δύναμις... ἡ Κακίστη, Testamentum Salomonis (recensiones A et B) (mss. HILPO), ed. C. C. McCOWN, *The Testament of Solomon, edited from manuscripts at Mount Athos, Bologna, Holkham Hall, Jerusalem, London, Milan, Paris and Vienna*, Leipzig 1922, 31-32. The text could date as early as the first century, see S. I. JOHNSTON, The Testament of Solomon from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance, in: *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period (Groningen Studies in Cultural Change)*, ed. J. BREMMER – J. R. VEENSTRA, Leuven 2002, v. 1, 37 and n. 6. For the significance of the number seven (7) on amulets, see VAKALOUDI, Αποτροπαϊκά, 212.

23. M. LEONTSINI – A. PANOPOULOU, «Μαγικά» και αποτροπαϊκά τεκμήρια από τη βυζαντινή Κόρινθο. Συμβολικές χρήσεις και συλλογικές συμπεριφορές, in: *ΑΝΤΙΚΗΝΣΩΡ. Τιμητικός Τόμος Σπύρου Ν. Τρωιάνου για τα ογδοηκοστά γενέθλιά του*, ed. V. A. LEONTARITOU – K. A. BOURDARA – E. S. PAPAGIANNI, Athens 2013, 855-880 (863). Apart from iconography, it seems that the material of the *hystera* amulets itself (lead) had apotropaic function, see D. S. GEORGIOUSAKIS, Binding Power of Lead: Magical and Amuletic Uses of Lead in Late Antique and Byzantine Periods, *TARE Journal of the Turkish Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Heritage* 2 (2022), 199-224.

24. The issue is discussed below.

25. SPIER, Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets, 43.

26. Ibid.

as a lion you roar, and as a lamb, lie down'<sup>27</sup>, or the name of the saint<sup>28</sup>. But there are contradictory views on how closely the reference to the taming of the 'wandering womb' relates solely to problems with pregnancy. On the one hand, it has been argued that it 'was never perceived as a gynecological complaint per se, primarily because it was not signaled by gynecological or obstetrical dysfunctions, such as abnormal menorrhea or the inability to conceive'<sup>29</sup>. On the other hand, however, while acknowledging the above argument, Gary Vikan has suggested that the calmness of the womb "would enhance the organ's fertility" and that a uterus in place was one in a state of "health", and accordingly more effective for procreation, but a uterus in place was also one that could not "gnaw at the heart", and thus could not [...] create in the heart that irrational hatred which [...] could inhibit procreation<sup>30</sup>.

The womb is 'credited with unusual capacities, such as an independent will and uncontrolled, usually dangerous, movements'<sup>31</sup>. In his second-century *Gynecology*, Soranus included amulets as part of medical and psychological treatment and did not consider them to be magic<sup>32</sup>. The *hystera* amulets target the primary female reproductive organ, the uterus, and aimed at safeguarding its normal functions and resulting in pregnancy. Moreover, since procreation was expected to take place under the auspices of marriage, both men and women would turn to magical amulets, which accord with

---

27. SPIER, *Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets*, 29: Ὑστέρα μελάνη μελανομένη ὡς ὄφις εἰλύσαι καὶ ὡς δράκον· συρίζησε καὶ ὡς λέων βρυχᾶσαι καὶ ὡς ἀρνίον κοιμοῦν. For its non-Christian roots, see J. SPIER, *An Antique Magical Book Used for Making Sixth-Century Byzantine Amulets?* in: *Les savoirs magiques et leur transmission de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, ed. V. DASEN – J.-M. SPIESER, Florence 2014, 43-66 (55-57).

28. SPIER, *Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets*, 28-30 (St Anne). For the date of the intaglio in the Middle Byzantine period, see *ibid.* 31, 56, no 56 and pl. 5a.

29. C. A. FARAONE, *Magical and Medical Approaches to the Wandering Womb in the Ancient Greek World*, *Classical Antiquity* 30/1 (2011), 1-32 (26).

30. G. VIKAN, *Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium*, *DOP* 44 (1990), 145-163 (157-158).

31. V. DASEN, *Healing Images. Gems and Medicine*, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 33/2 (2014), 177-191 (179).

32. J. TUERK, *An Early Byzantine Inscribed Amulet and its Narratives*, *BMGS* 23 (1999), 25-42 (29).



the fact that uterine phylacteries have both female and male names<sup>33</sup>. This indicates that childbearing was not only the concern of women, as men also adopted practices that they believed would help realize their intention to create a family. By social definition, the creation of a healthy family is the successful result of marriage. This notion is underlined by the words OMONOIA (concordia) and YTEIA (sanitas) found on wedding rings, which ‘under the umbrella of marriage, could at once be complementary and amuletic’<sup>34</sup>.

Popular early Byzantine amulets show St Sissinios slaying a baby-killing woman<sup>35</sup>, who could also take the form of a serpent or a dragon<sup>36</sup>. According to Bolus or Pseudo-Demokritos (third to second century BC), snakes were regarded as particularly dangerous for pregnant women because if they stepped over a snake they would miscarry<sup>37</sup>. The terrifying figure of a female baby-killing demon in the form of a snake, dragon or reptile was primarily represented in Byzantine thought by Gylou, the most notorious of all the female demons who sought to prevent childbirth<sup>38</sup>. We are aware

---

33. V. FOSKOLOU, *The Magic of the Written Word: the Evidence of Inscriptions on Byzantine Magical Amulets*, *ΔΧΑΕ* 35 (2014), 329-348 (334).

34. VIKAN, *Art and Marriage*, 157-158; WALKER, *Wife and Husband*, 218.

35. VAKALOUE, *Αποτροπαϊκά*, 211; H. MAGUIRE, *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and Their Images in Byzantium*, Princeton 1999, 120-121.

36. J. VERHEYDEN, *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition: King, Sage, and Architect*, Leiden 2012, 117.

37. Γυνή ἔγκυος ὄφιν οἰονδηποτοῦν ὑπερβᾶσα ἐκτιπρώσκει, Bolus of Mendes (Pseudo-Demokritos) 40, ed. W. GEMOLL, *Nepualii fragmentum Περὶ τῶν κατὰ ἀντιπάθειαν καὶ συμπάθειαν et Democriti Περὶ συμπαθειῶν καὶ ἀντιπαθειῶν*, Städtisches Realprogymnasium zu Striegau, Ostern 1884, 4. On amulets against snake bites in late antiquity, see TH. DE BRUYN, *Making Amulets Christian. Artefacts, Scribes, and Contexts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, 90-98. Nevertheless, inscriptions from ancient Greek oracles point to the fact that snakes aided conception, see L. WELLS, *The Greek Language of Healing from Homer to New Testament Times*, Berlin – New York 1998, 34.

38. For Gylou, see A. DELATTE – CH. JOSSEAND, *Contribution à l'étude de la démonologie byzantine, Mélanges Bidez*, Brussels 1934, 230-232; D. B. OIKONOMIDES, Ἡ Γελλῶ εἰς τὴν ἑλληνικὴν καὶ ρουμανικὴν λαογραφίαν, *Λαογραφία* 30 (1975-1976), 246-278; R. P. H. GREENFIELD, Saint Sisinnios, the Archangel Michael and the Female Demon Gylou: the Typology of the Greek Literary Stories, *Βυζαντινά* 15 (1989), 83-142; I. SORLIN, Striges et Geloues. Histoire d'une croyance et d'une tradition, *TM* 11 (1991), 411-436; T. MATANTSEVA, Les amulettes byzantines contre le mauvais œil du Cabinet des Médailles, *Jahrbuch für*

of a fifteenth-century account of a dialogue between her and the Archangel Michael<sup>39</sup>: “The archangel Michael said to her, ‘Where have you come from and where are you going?’ The abominable one answered and said, ‘I am going off to a house and, entering it like a snake, like a dragon, or like some reptile, I will destroy the animals. I am going to strike down women; I will make their hearts ache; I will dry up their milk... I will strangle [their] children, or I will let them live for a while and then kill them’”<sup>40</sup>. The monstrous nature of Gylou personified the fear within Byzantine society of miscarriage, troubled pregnancy or unhealthy children, and the fusion of Christian and pagan imagery mattered little to those who resorted to amulets. No doubt many did not consider them to be magical at all, as the presence of saints in both imagery and inscriptions obscured the forbidden nature of the practice. In other words, through a combination of magical words and religious images the power of evil was eliminated<sup>41</sup>. Thus, the depiction of St Anne on magical amulets wards off the demons which threaten childbirth in the same way that she herself had been cured of infertility through prayer, which remained the most widely propagated method in Byzantium for ensuring conception. Indeed, the belief that Anna was able to conceive Mary through prayer alone is firmly upheld in Byzantine homilies<sup>42</sup>.

---

*Antike und Christentum* 37 (1994), 116-118; M. PATERA, Gylou, démon et sorcière du monde byzantin au monde néo-grec, *REB* 64-65 (2006-2007), 311-327.

39. The merging of the two is also supported in the iconography of *hystera* amulets, where the Archangel Michael is depicted on one side and Gylou on the other. See K. HORNICKOVA, The Power of the Word and the Power of the Image: Towards an Anthropological Interpretation of Byzantine Magical Amulets, *BSI* 59/2 (1998), 239-246 (243-245).

40. SPIER, *Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets*, 35.

41. ἅγια ὀνόματα καὶ σύμβολα καὶ φοβεροὶ χαρακτῆρες φυλάξατε τὸν φοροῦντα ἢ τὴν φοροῦσα τὰς θείας ἡμῶν δυνάμεις ἀπὸ πάντων κινδύνων (Holy names and symbols and terrible characters, with your power protect him or her who wears it from danger), see text and trans. in C. BONNER, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, Ann Arbor 1950, 215.

42. E. PANOU, The Theological Substance of St Anna's Motherhood in Byzantine Homilies, in: *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium: Marian Narratives in Texts and Images*, ed. T. ARENTZEN – M. B. CUNNINGHAM, Cambridge 2019, 62-76.

## II. THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH

Despite the fact that amulets were used by the imperial family and the lay population alike, they were denounced by the Church on the grounds that the creation of a family should result from God's blessing and not a magical formula<sup>43</sup>. In the ninth century Theodore of Stoudios praised his mother because unlike other women she had never resorted to amulets or spells to protect her children, and this was proof of her virtue<sup>44</sup>. Between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Theophylaktos, Metropolitan of Ochrid, testified to the magical methods available to women in his time. He referred to infertile couples turning to astrology<sup>45</sup>, and praises the mother of the Virgin Mary, St Anne, because she did not seek a medical cure for her infertility – as recorded in the second-century *Protoevangelion of James* (ἐλιπάνευσεν τὸν Δεσπότην [...] ἐπάκουσον τῆς δεήσεώς μου<sup>46</sup>)– nor did she wear an amulet, drink a potion (πόμα) or resort to magic, but simply prayed<sup>47</sup>. Theophylaktos speaks disparagingly of both magical and medical practices, as both apparently demonstrated lack of faith in God. So which practices were acceptable by the Church?

a) *Members of the Imperial family - Ex voto offerings, prayers, patronage and St Anne*

An epigram written on a Marian icon dedicated to the Virgin by (as Pentcheva suggests) Theodora Komnene (niece of Manuel I Komnenos,

---

43. See below.

44. Theodore of Stoudios, *Oratio 13, Laudatio funebris in matrem suam*, PG 99, cols 884-885; see the new edition by St. EFTHYMIADIS – J. M. FEATHERSTONE, Establishing a Holy Lineage: Theodore Studite's Funerary Catechism for His Mother (BHG 2422), in: *Theatron: Rhetorische Kultur in Spätantike und Mittelalter*, ed. M. GRUNBART, Berlin 2007, 26.11-14.

45. P. HATLIE, The Religious Lives of Children and Adolescents, in: *Byzantine Christianity*, ed. D. KRUEGER, Minneapolis 2006, 182-200 (184).

46. *Prot. Jas* II.5, ed. and trans. É. DE STRYCKER, *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques: recherches sur le papyrus Bodmer 5 avec une édition critique du texte grec et une traduction annotée* [SubsHag 33], Brussels 1961, 74.

47. Theophylaktos of Ochrid, *Oratio in Praesentationem Beatae Mariae*, PG 126, col. 133B-C. In Jericho, infertile women drank water from fountains to aid conception, as the pilgrim from Bordeaux (d. 333) informs us, see *Itinera et descriptiones Terrae sanctae*, ed. T. TOBLER – A. MOLINIER, Geneva 1877, 19.

reigned 1143-1180), refers to the salvation of Anne through the birth of her daughter. The epigram is a plea for a child: “In the past, O Maiden, by being wondrously born, you extracted Anne from the affliction of bareness”<sup>48</sup>. Theodora’s commission shows that icons were believed to ensure pregnancy, just as Marian relics did<sup>49</sup>. The use of amulets bearing images of the saints was prohibited, but wrapping a woman’s loins with a cloth girdle was encouraged<sup>50</sup>. According to Maximos the Confessor (seventh century), the girdle of the Virgin was first placed in the church of the Chalkoprateia in the seventh century<sup>51</sup>, where it was still to be found during the Patriarchate of Germanos (715-730), as his homily *On Mary’s Girdle* implies. According to Germanos the girdle was associated with childbirth because Mary wore it when she carried Christ in her womb<sup>52</sup>. Thus, women hoping to conceive had to place the veil on their abdomen, in imitation of the Virgin. The account of a tenth-century miracle which occurred in the church of Pege in Constantinople, famous for its healing qualities, reflects Leo VI’s (886-912) anxiety about a male heir, when his wife Zoe visited the church because of her difficulty with conceiving, and soon after gave birth to Konstantinos VII Porphyrogennetos:

And the Augusta Zoe, attempting to flee the shame of childlessness and anxious about bearing children, received a reminder about the miracles of the All-Pure Lady. Thereupon she measured out a skein of silk equal in length to the icon of the Mother of God which is to the

---

48. B. V. PENTCHEVA, Epigrams on Icons, in: *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture*, ed. L. JAMES, Cambridge 2007, 120-38 (126, 209), Appendix: *Στεῖρα πρὶν Ἄννα· σὺ δὲ τεχθεῖσα ξένως στεριώσεως τὴν θλίψιν ἐξήρας, κόρη*.

49. D. KRAUSMULLER, Making the Most of Mary: the Cult of the Virgin in the Chalkoprateia from Late Antiquity to the Tenth Century, in: *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images*, ed. M. CUNNINGHAM – L. BRUBAKER, London – New York 2011, 219-245.

50. B. PITARAKIS, The Material Culture of Childhood in Byzantium, in: *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, ed. A. PAPACONSTANTINOU – A. M. TALBOT, Washington, D.C. 2009, 167-252 (196, n. 107).

51. S. J. SHOEMAKER, The Cult of Fashion: the Earliest Life of the Virgin and Constantinople’s Marian Relics, *DOP* 62 (2008), 53-74 (61).

52. Germanos I of Constantinople, *In S. Mariae zonam*, PG 98, col. 376B. See also KRAUSMULLER, Making the Most of Mary.

right of the Savior in the Refuge and wrapped it around her loins and through the providence of our Lady she conceived Constantine the emperor of late renown<sup>53</sup>.

More critical comments about Leo's desire for a male heir 'tend[s] to dominate accounts of his reign, for his quest for an heir led him into conflict with the church and resulted in his excommunication'<sup>54</sup>. The same emperor built a chapel dedicated to St Anne in the Great Palace, which 'approaches the chamber of the Augusta', as the *Theophanis Continuatus* tells us<sup>55</sup>. The higher social classes would express their piety through regular visits to churches, as encouraged in hagiography (discussed shortly), using the relics of the Virgin, the dedication of epigrams on icons (as we saw earlier), and of course, through patronage. In fact, the association between patronage, women, childbirth and the name Anne is highlighted in the *Patria of Constantinople*.

Although miracle accounts and histories clearly demonstrate how imperial women confronted the problem of infertility, three stories in the tenth-century *Patria of Constantinople* serve the imperial ideology by showing that the Byzantine ruling families fulfilled all the necessary requirements for the creation of family, and therefore infertility did not

---

53. Καὶ ἡ Αὐγούστα Ζωὴ φεύγουσα τὸν τῆς ἀτεκνίας ὄνειδισμὸν καὶ περὶ γέννησιν τέκνων ἀγωνιώσα, ὑπόμνησιν ἔλαβε περὶ τῶν τῆς Πανάγνου θαυμάτων, καὶ πλέγμα τι ἐκ μετὰξῃς ἰσομήκης τῆς εἰκόνης τῆς Θεομήτορος, τῆς ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ Σωτῆρος εἰς τὴν Καταφυγὴν, διαμετρήσασα καὶ περιζωσαμένη τοῦτο, τῇ προμηθείᾳ ταύτης Κωνσταντῖνον τὸν αἰοίδιμον βασιλέα συνέλαβεν. H. DELEHAYE, *Acta Sanctorum (Novembris)*, III, Brussels 1910, 885E. See also A. M. TALBOT, Anonymous Miracles of the Pege, in: *Miracle Tales from Byzantium*, ed. A.M TALBOT – S. FITZGERALD JOHNSON [Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 12], Cambridge, MA. – London 2012, 266-267.

54. S. TOUGHER, *The Reign of Leo VI (886-912): Politics and People*, Leiden 1997, 37, 154-155.

55. Theophanis Continuatus, III. 43, 107-112, ed. and trans. J. M. FEATHERSTONE – J. SIGNES CODONER, *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur libri I-IV* [CFHB, 53], Boston – Berlin 2015, 208: ἕτερον δὲ πρὸς πόδας τούτου ἐστίν, εἰς δύο μὲν δόμους διηρημένον, τῷ Αὐγουστιακῷ δὲ πλησιάζον κοιτῶνι. ἔνθα καὶ Λέων ὁ φιλόχριστος βασιλεὺς εὐκτήριον τῆς ἀγίας Ἄννης ἐδείματο καὶ αὐτὸ ἐκ τεσσάρων μὲν κιόνων [...] ἀλλὰ τοῦτο μὲν τῷ τῆς Αὐγούστης πλησιάζει κοιτῶνι, ὡς ἔφαμεν. For the translation of this excerpt, see *ibid.* 209.

exist among them<sup>56</sup>. According to the text, Justinian II (reigned between 685 to 695 and 705 to 711) dedicated a church to St Anne in Constantinople after his wife became pregnant and was granted a vision of the saint<sup>57</sup>. Secondly, Anne, the pregnant wife of Leo III, on a return journey from the Blachernai, was going down to the house of a *protospatharios* when she gave birth. Third, Theophilos' wife, Theodora, also while returning from the Blachernai, realized she was pregnant when her horse flinched, and was inspired her to build the church of St Anne in the *Ta Dagistheou* area<sup>58</sup>. In contrast with saints' lives and histories, in the *Patria* the empresses associated with Anne were never infertile, for it was essential that they produced offspring. However, the underlying association of St Anne with childbirth shows that the imperial family had embraced the most important fertility practice recorded in the lives of saints: that of prayer.

b) *Those outside the imperial family: prayer and St Anne*

After the eighth century, female saints named Anne, such as Anne of Leukate and Anne after Euphemianos, made their appearance<sup>59</sup>. There were also mothers of saints called Anne, such as the mother of St Philaretos in the first half of the eighth century<sup>60</sup>, of St Euthymios the Younger (†898)<sup>61</sup>, of St Theophano<sup>62</sup>, and of Nikolaos of Oraia Pege (965-1054)<sup>63</sup>. Some of these women seem to have had difficulties with childbearing, and prayed to the Virgin Mary to be healed<sup>64</sup>. Because the initially infertile St Anne eventually

56. On the importance of childbirth in Byzantium and on the belief that infertility was a sin, see PH. KOUKOULES, *Βυζαντινῶν βίος καὶ πολιτισμὸς*, v. 4, Athens 1951, 9-10.

57. *Patria* of Constantinople, ed. T. PREGER *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum*, Leipzig 1907, 244; A. BERGER, *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos* [Poikila Byzantina 8], Bonn 1988, 524-525.

58. *Patria* of Constantinople, ed. PREGER, 232-233.

59. Anna (of Leukate), *PmbZ* # 459; Anna (Euphemianos), *PmbZ* # 448.

60. Anna (mother of Philaretos), *PmbZ* # 444.

61. Anna (mother of Euthymios the Younger), *PmbZ* # 458; K. ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΥ, *Η γυναίκα στη μέση βυζαντινή εποχή. Κοινωνικά πρότυπα και καθημερινός βίος στα αγιολογικά κείμενα* [Monographs 6], Institute of Byzantine Research, National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens 2016, 70.

62. ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΥ, *Η γυναίκα*, 30, 44, 72.

63. *Ibid.*, 72.

64. Prayers to goddesses who facilitated childbirth and miraculous pregnancies of



gave birth to the Virgin, as recounted in the *Protoevangelion of James*<sup>65</sup>, St Anne became the healer of infertility and childlessness in hagiography. St Theodora of Kaisareia (tenth century) was born after her parents had for long time been unable to conceive. According to her biographer, when Theodora reached a suitable age, she was dedicated to the monastery of St Anne in Rigidion. The hagiographer wrote that when her mother conceived, she ‘accepted the grace of Anne, the mother of the Theotokos’<sup>66</sup>. St Thomais of Lesbos did not pray to Mary for a child, but to St Anne, and her own parents’ story is comparable to that of Anne and Joachim recounted in the *Protoevangelion of James*<sup>67</sup>.

Probably the most widely known association of St Anne with pregnancy in hagiography is made in the Life of Stephanos the Younger. His mother, Anne, having been unable to conceive a male child for many years, visited the church of the Blachernai in Constantinople to pray to the Virgin for intercession<sup>68</sup>. Stephanos’ hagiographer writes that ‘this Anne prays to the Virgin to release her from infertility as Mary had done with her mother’<sup>69</sup>, a parallel we also find in fifth- and sixth-century Syriac homilies: ‘The young maid gave healing medicine to her aged mother, bitten by the serpent, the bitter poison was wrenched from her limbs and the death that had slain her proved no longer effective: the daughter had acted as physician to her mother,

---

deities are known in ancient Greece, see N. ROBERTSON, Greek Ritual Begging in Aid of Women’s Fertility and Childbirth, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 113 (1983), 143-169 (146, 153-54, 157).

65. DE STRYCKER, *La forme*, 84.

66. NIKOLAOU, *H γυναίκα*, 43.

67. *Life of St Thomais of Lesbos*, trans. P. HALSALL, in: *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints’ Lives in English Translation*, ed. A.-M. TALBOT [Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection], Washington, D.C. 1996, 298-300.

68. *Life of Stephanos the Younger*, ed. M.-F. AUZÉPY, *La vie d’Étienne le Jeune par Étienne le Diacre, introduction, édition et traduction* Aldershot 1997, 92, 183, n. 16. The Blachernai Church also cured illnesses, as we see in the incident where Leo’s VI first wife, Theophano, was nursed and died in the Church of Blachernai, see P. KARLIN-HAYTER, Vita S. Euthymii, *Byz* 25-27 (1955-1957), 50: καὶ ἡ αἰοίδιμος βασιλὶς Θεοφανὼν ἐν τῇ τῆς Θεομήτορος ναῷ τῷ ἐν Βλαχέρναις νοσηλευομένη παρεγένετο [...] ἐν δὲ τῇ δεκάτῃ νοεμβρίου μηνὸς ἡ τιμία βασιλὶς τῶν ἐπιγείων ἀνταλλάξασα τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις πρὸς κύριον ἐξεδήμησεν. On the preference of male children as opposed to female ones see KOUKOULES, *Βυζαντινὸν βίος*, 14-15.

69. AUZÉPY, *La vie d’Étienne*, 92.

and healed her'<sup>70</sup>. Apart from Mary's ability to cure Anne's infertility, the frequent visits of Stephanos' mother to the Blachernai resemble the story of Hanna, mother of Samuel, who could not conceive and only did so after long periods of prayer<sup>71</sup>. In the *Vita*, Stephanos' mother is called the 'new Anne' (ὡς ἐπ' ἀληθείας αὐτὴ νέα Ἄννα)<sup>72</sup>, who wandered from church to church, and the Blachernai in particular, in imitation of her model Hanna, praying for a child<sup>73</sup>. In the Life of Peter of Atroa, his mother promised 'like another Hanna' (ὡς ἄλλη Ἄννα) to dedicate her child to the temple if she should conceive<sup>74</sup>. The association between the two women in the Life of Stephanos the Younger is made clear with the appellation 'new Anne', as the hagiographer explains: 'Because her (Stephanos' mother) name is also Anne' (Ἄννα γὰρ καὶ ταύτη τὸ ὄνομα)<sup>75</sup>. Thus, the hagiographer refers to the infertility of the apocryphal Anne and the ceaseless prayers of the biblical Hanna, attributing both to Stephanos' mother. The repetition of the same name (Hanna, Anne) elevates Stephanos' mother to the status of a saint, whose sanctity is demonstrated both through her name and through her imitation of biblical women, an idea which was perpetuated in texts of the Middle and Late Byzantine period. In his homily on Mary's Nativity, Andrew of Crete (eighth century) writes that after the rejection of gifts the apocryphal Anne imitated the biblical Hanna and went to the church and prayed: 'And indeed, emulating the [earlier] (H)Anna who had been heard [by God], they each (= Joachim and Anne) devoted themselves to the

70. *Bride of Light. Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches*, Trans. S. BROCK [Moran Etho 6], Kottayam 1994, 98.

71. AUZÉPY, *La vie d'Étienne*, 95.

72. Ibid., 94.

73. Ibid., 92.

74. V. LAURENT, *La vie merveilleuse de saint Pierre d'Atroa*, [SubsHag 29], Brussels 1956, 68-69. That it is Samuel's mother, see ibid. 71.27. In the Life of St Eutychios, the dedication of a child to God was an act of imitating Hanna, mother of Samuel, see *Life of Eutychios I*, ed. C. LAGA, *Eustratii Presbyteri, Vita Eutychii Patriarchae Constantinopolitano* [CCSG 25], Turnhout 1992, 150-156: Μακαρία ἡ βαστάσασα, ὅτι τοιοῦτον πατρὸς γέγονε μήτηρ, οὐκ ἔλαττον τῆς Ἄννης ὁφθεῖσα, καθότι καὶ πλεόν Σαμουὴλ ᾤδε. Ἡ μὲν γὰρ ὑπέσχετο λαμβάνουσα διδόναι θεῷ τὸν ἐξ αὐτῆς τικτόμενον νιόν· εἶπε γὰρ ἀνθομολογουμένη τῷ κυρίῳ ὅτι ἂν δώῃς μοι σπέρμα ἀνδρός, δώσω αὐτὸν δοτὸν ἐνώπιόν σου πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας αὐτοῦ.

75. AUZÉPY, *La vie d'Étienne*, 92.

temple<sup>76</sup>. The connection was recognized not only in the tenth century, when the homilist Peter of Argos compares Anne to Hanna and Sarah<sup>77</sup>, but survives well into the fourteenth century. Nikephoros Kallistos in his *Ecclesiastical History*, writes: ‘And because she (mother of Mary) was barren [...] like the mother of Samuel, she became suppliant in the church of God’<sup>78</sup>. Although the ninth-century hagiographer of St Stephanos could have employed the prayers of St Anne as an example of the faith of Stephanos’ mother, a biblical figure like Hanna was much more imprinted on the mind of the Byzantines than the apocryphal Anne, who had only begun to take her first steps into the pantheon of Christian saints from the eighth century onwards<sup>79</sup>. Despite the much greater preponderance of Hanna compared with St Anne, Nikolaou notes that the name Anne in hagiographies is not by chance, as it is commonly associated with women afflicted by infertility<sup>80</sup>, Pitarakis also sees a clear connection between St Anne and the problem of infertility in Byzantine society<sup>81</sup>, since from the ninth century onwards it was associated with the cult of the saint, which made the invocation of her name equivalent to its cure. The model of the childless biblical Hanna was more widespread, but after Iconoclasm and the emphasis placed upon Christ’s genealogy and the recognition of the *Protoevangelion* narrative as equivalent to the Holy Scriptures<sup>82</sup>, the desire of women to have a child also focused on the apocryphal Anne.

---

76. St Andrew of Crete, *Encomium in Nativitatem B. Mariae, Oratio I*, PG 97, col. 816C: *Καὶ δὴ τὴν ἐξάκουστον Ἄνναν παραζηλοῦντες ἐκάτεροι, τῷ ἱερῷ προσανείχον*. For the translation, see M. B. CUNNINGHAM, *Wider than Heaven: Eighth-century Homilies on the Mother of God*, Crestwood, N.Y. 2008, 79.

77. *The Life of Peter of Argos*, ed. K. KYRIAKOPOULOS, *Αγίου Πέτρου επισκόπου Ἀργους Βίος καὶ Λόγοι*, Athens 1976, 166.279-287.

78. Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, PG 145, col. 652: *καὶ ἐπεὶ ὡς ἄγονος [...], κατὰ τὴν τοῦ Σαμουὴλ μητέρα καὶ αὕτη ἰκέτις ἐγένετο τοῦ Θεοῦ τῷ νεῷ παραδεδρεύουσα*.

79. PANOU, *The Cult*.

80. *Ibid.*, 72.

81. B. PITARAKIS, *Female Piety in Context: Understanding Developments in Private Devotional Practices*, in: *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. M. VASSILAKI, Aldershot 2005, 153-166 (156-157).

82. In the tenth century; Niketas Paphlagon noted that *only someone who had not studied (literally ‘visited’) the Holy Scriptures did not know Joachim and Anne* (Niketas David

To conclude, childbearing in Byzantium was a two-sided coin. On the one hand, the Church wished to remove magic from models of female sanctity by condemning any forbidden practice of this sort. On the other hand, although the early Christian apotropaic symbols in amulets were gradually being substituted by images of saints<sup>83</sup>, material evidence shows that amulets were often used and were sanctioned by their inclusion of Christian iconography. Ancient Greek demons such as the Medusa or Gylou, combined with images of Christ, the Virgin or St Anne holding the baby Mary merge occult iconography with the established apotropaic images of saints so that the birth of a child is ensured. Between Christian and pagan iconography were men and women who, anxious to have a child, relied on the power of prayer while also welcoming magical practices. The Church's 'strong card' against magical practices was the success stories of the apocryphal Anne and the biblical Hanna, who acted as models of sanctity for contemporaneous women and who only had to be imitated. In this aspect, the quality of St Anne as protector of childbirth emerged after the abolition of Iconoclasm, when her story had become widely diffused. Women could relate to her personal struggle and imitate her constant prayers and patience to achieve conception and healthy pregnancy. St Anne appears in amulets at a time when her cult had been established in Constantinople and now as a symbol of hope for procreation, she intensified the magical power of the amulet. Although the resort to amulets shows the widespread use of magical practices in Byzantium between the tenth and twelfth centuries, their iconography testifies simultaneously to the establishment of images of St Anne as an apotropaic symbol for all social classes of the protection of pregnancy and childbirth.

---

Paphlagon, *Oratio I*, In *Diem Natalem Sanctissime Dei Genetricis*, PG 105, col. 20A-B) and James of Kokkinobaphos title of his Third Homily on Mary's Presentation to the Temple was *Chosen from the Holy Scriptures* (Jacobus Monachus, *Oratio III*, PG 127, col. 600A). See also E. PANOU, Mary's Parents in Homilies Before and After James Kokkinobaphos, in: *Wonderful Things: Byzantium through its Art: Papers from the 42nd Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, London, 20-22 March 2009*, ed. A. EASTMOND – L. JAMES, Routledge 2016, 303-314.

83. KAMBANIS, *Christians*, 26-27.

## ΔΙΑΦΥΛΑΣΣΟΝΤΑΣ ΤΟΝ ΤΟΚΕΤΟ ΣΤΟ BYZANTIO

Εκτός από προσευχές και αφιερώματα, η εναγώνια προσπάθεια για την κυοφορία και τον επιτυχημένο τοκετό στο Βυζάντιο ωθούσε στην εφαρμογή πρακτικών που καταδίκασε η Εκκλησία, όπως η μαγεία. Τα γραπτά μνημεία και ο υλικός πολιτισμός μαρτυρούν το ευρύ φάσμα των μέσων που διέθεταν οι Βυζαντινοί για τη διασφάλιση της τεκνοποίησης. Η μελέτη εξετάζει την αντιμετώπιση των μαγικών πρακτικών στο Βυζάντιο μέσα από την αφιέρωση και την τιμή προς την αγία Άννα. Στην ιδιότητά της ως προστάτιδας της εγκυμοσύνης, που έβρισκε απήχηση σε όλα τα κοινωνικά στρώματα, αναγνωρίζουμε τις κοινωνικές αντιλήψεις γύρω από τη μητρότητα αλλά και τα μέσα για την επίτευξή της.

