Women active in the middle ages: (Of women knight, regents and political leaders)

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When dealing with the Middle Ages, in Europe and the Near East, the general impression seems to be that they were full of warfare, continuous invasions, movements of people and agitation of all kinds. That there was violence, monks, church-building, etc. As for women, it is thought they were generally inconspicuous, and remained for the most part in their homes or in the women’s quarters of manors or palaces. But: who were those women riding forth in full armour «...most warlike in their bearing and arrogance...?» Such women are mentioned by Byzantine sources and the thirteenth century historian Nikitas Choniates¹ among them. After telling about the great armed force of crusaders, descending on the Byzantine frontiers «...threatening, fearful and destructive... like a cloud...» Choniates adds that «...² there were also females among them who rode horses in the manner of men... They did not sit side-saddle, with both legs covered by their dress; but rode without shame, bearing lances and weapons like men... and dressed like them... casting martial glances about..., and were more manlike than the Amazons.»³ ⁴

Since these women had horses, armament and presumably retainers, they belonged to the upper (feudal) classes. Some of them were the wives of feudal lords, others their daughters, and some were widows; and each had joined the expedition for particular reasons. Most of them, however, had left the West since they did not care to remain at home to look after their manor and properties. The Byzantine historian explains that formerly, in their own country, these women had been docile and rather inconspicuous; but now under the influence of War, they had become manlike and brazen. Yet, there was one among them [who stood out] like another Penthesileia [the mythical queen of the Amazons]... whose

1. The Byzantine historian was from Chonia (Asia Minor), and his family name: Akominatos. Nikitas Choniates died in 1220. His work Ιστορία covers the period 1081-1204. When the Fourth Crusade took Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire, Choniates fled with his family to Nikaia. There, in the Greek kingdom in exile, he held an important post under Theodore I Laskaris. His historical work deals with events of the 1st, 2nd and 4th crusades; as they were related to Byzantium.
2. The translations here and elsewhere in this study are the author’s.
3. Note: here, in other Byzantine and in some Western texts, women warriors are usually referred to as «Amazons.»
garments were woven with so much gold, from head to toe, that she might have been nicknamed Goldenfeet...» («...μια δὲ και ὑπεζήμη φυρ' ἱπιίσας κυθήσας ἀλλ' τις Πενθαλίπαι, πητ' ἐκ τοῦ στύλοντος χρυσοῦ και περιπρέχοντος τῶν ὁώκων καὶ τὰ λώματα τοῦ ἱσθήματος Χρυσόσκος παρονομάζετο...»).

Obviously such ornate garments, even if worn under the woman's suit of armour, were not those of the battlefield, and their role in the Crusader's army may be explained by Nikitas Chômâtes' notation,1 that women formed part of the Security Corps: «...ἐς τὸ σῶμα ἀσφαλίας κομιδή μετέχον τῶν οὕσιν ἅμα καὶ γυναῖς...» As to whether women actually took part in military action during that period, there are no precise details. However in his work Histoire des Croisades:2 Josef F. Michaud wrote «...la première fois que nous trouvons des femmes sur la champ de bataille c'est à Dorylée [in Asia Minor, S.E. of Nikaia]3... les épouses et les filles des chevaliers et des barons...» IV, page 135. Yet, prior to the battle of Dorylaeon (or before 1097) we find Western women taking part in battles between Byzantine forces and Normans. The princess Anna Komneni, in her historical work Alexias, tells about the battle of Dyrrachion (on the E. coast of the Adriatic) in 1081, where two women were involved in warfare and political intrigue.

In book I, p. 45, Alexias:4 Anna Komneni gives an account of Normans aggression and their attempts to seize Byzantine territory in southern Italy; and of her father's (Alexios I) campaigns against them. She tells of the «most scheming» («ραδιουργώτατος») Robert Guiscard (1015-1085, Duke of Apulia and Calabria) who «...had been planning war against the Romans5... and for a long time prepared himself for those hostilities...» But, the woman historian adds «...since he intended to wage war against Christians... he was restrained by persons of high rank in his retinue... also by his wife Gaeta («Γαίτα»)6...»

Later on, however, Robert Guiscard left Salerno and returned to Otranto «...where he rested for several days while waiting for his wife... for she intended to campaign with him...» Then Anna Komneni describes Gaeta's arrival: «...it was a frightening [sight to see] this woman dressed in armour...» («...καί χρήσα χαϊνή ἡν φυλαρόν ἐξειδέαν ξαπλήσαιτο...» [but when she arrived] Robert embraced her, and they left... to join his forces at Brindisi...» («...δὲς ἐνηγκαλίσατο ταύτην ἐπελθόσαν... εἰς Βρεντήσιον...»).

Subsequently there is a brief passage on the fighting at Dyrrachion, where the Emperor led his forces against the Normans (VI, 4, 5). It was then, as the din of battle increased, Gaeta, the wife of Robert Guiscard, who had been campaigning with him [took action] «...like another Pallas; although hardly like Athena,7 at the sight of those [soldiers] who took flight [in battle], she cast an angry glance at them and shouted in a loud voice: saying in her own tongue, something like the verses of Homer: How long will you continue to flee! Stand up... be men!8 But since their flight continued under her very eyes, she seized a long spear and hurled it at those in flight. Seeing this [the soldiers] took hold of themselves and returned [to battle]...»

Another woman of the West mentioned by Anna Komneni in her Alexias (vol. III, 11, 2, p. 17) is Emma, who may have been a daughter of Robert Guiscard. We are told that Emma was left behind with forces to hold the port-city of Otranto in Lombardy; but that city was surprised by the Byzantine fleet: «...Arriving there [the Admiral] Kondostephanos9 attacked [overwhelmed] the ramparts and succeeded in conquering the city. But this woman [Emma] was of stubborn character and in a frenzy. Thus while she sent a messenger to her son [Tancred II]... for the city could not hold out; she at the same time began negotiations [with the Byzantines]. But the embasssy sent to [Admiral] K kondostephanos, swearing submission to the Byzantine Emperor and seeking peace...was only a ruse...» For as the woman-historian explains: «...The Normans were only playing a scene, like tragedians on stage...» («...ἔθησαν την ιποκρίσια τῇ νοµὶ καθήσας τοῖς τραγῳδοῖς...»)... Those delaying tactics nonetheless favored the Normans; as their re-enforcements and help from Venice, defeated the armies of Alexios I at Otranto.

Generally Byzantine, Occidental and Moslem sources dealing with the Crusades, tell us very little, or supply the scantiest details about women who took part in battle. However, the historian J. F. Michaud (op. cit., p. 2 and fn. 6), in the section dealing with oriental sources (Extraits des auteurs Arabes, 1, pp. 45, 48 and 58), points out that: «...on trouva...»

7. The comment is interesting; but it is known that Anna Komneni was not fond of the West.
8. See: Iliad (Homer epic): E. verse 529; Z. v. 112.
9. Alexios Kondostephanos was an admiral of Alexios I Komnenos.

2. The work is in 4 volumes, 1854, Paris, Desobry -E. Magdeleine.
3. Dorylaeon: a town in SE Asia Minor, where battles of First Crusade (1097), of Second Crusade (1299), etc. took place.
5. Note: the Byzantines referred to themselves as «Ῥωμαίοι» while the Westerners called them «Greeks.»
6. Elsewhere her name is given as Sichelgaeta (or Gaeta of Sicily).
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plusieurs fois, parmi les mortes, des femmes, qui avaient combattu avec les croisés et qui portaient d’armure et les vêtements des guerriers de l’Occident ...» (vol. III, p. 345). It is likely, however, in the above and other instances, that western women, the wives, daughters of knights and other women, who did not set forth in the beginning, to actually fight battles with the crusading forces, were obliged under desperate circumstances, an attack or desperate engagement, with slavery or death facing them, to don armour to help or die in a disastrous defeat, along with the others.

In western medieval sources there is a poem composed by a monk of Froidmont, in which he recounts the military achievements of his sister Marguerite «... œuvre d'amazon de la Croisade» was in Jerusalem when Saladin laid siege to the Holy City [1187]. We are told that she took part in the defence of Jerusalem, and fled after its fall (1187). After great difficulties the young woman, Marguerite, managed to return to France, where she entered a convent at Lison. Other western sources, and documents including papal bulls, like those of Boniface VIII (1294-1303), mention women who wanted to take arms and «help free the Holy Lands.» Among these were the women of Genoa, whose names have come down to us (J.F. Michaud, op. cit., vol. III, 345); but we have no further information about them, nor know if they took part in any crusading expedition.

As to the women of the Moslem world, during the Middle Ages, it is generally thought that their religion and social customs restricted them from public affairs and War. But this was not so in many instances; for we find Moslem women active not only in the political life of the Near East, but also that some took part in battle. Oderic Vital, French historian of the twelfth century wrote about the daughter of Soliman, an Emir of Asia Minor. This Moslem girl, whose name was said to be «Mêlas,» would go visit and talk with Bohemond II, the former prince of Antioch, who had been taken prisoner.

The story of another Moslem woman, a former slave «of Armenian origin» named Shadjar ad-Durr, is complex and dramatic as any of those dealing with political intrigue, assassination and violence. Our sources (Abu al Fida; J. F. Michaud; S. Runciman, etc.) refer to her as «...the most powerful woman in the history of Egypt...» who occupied the throne, as Sultana in the thirteenth century.

1. See fragments of monk’s (of Froidmont) poem in «Bibliothèque des Croisades» (under word Thomas).
2. Their names were:—A. de Carmendina—M. de Grimaldi—C. de Faneta—A. de Auria—S. de Spinula—S. and P.de Gibo and other names.
3. He was from England and went to France where he became a monk, then deacon and priest (at Rouen, 1107). He wrote L’ Histoire Ecclésiastique (completed in 1141).

Shadjar ad-Durr was the wife of the Sultan of Egypt, El Malek es-Saleh, who had been active during the Seventh Crusade, when the Crusaders had taken Damietta (1249); but were subsequently defeated at Mansourah, where the French king Louis IX, was taken prisoner (1250). That same year, however, the Sultan died at Mansourah. But his death was kept secret by his widow, with the help of the eunuch Jamal ad-Din. Together those two, along with the aged general Fakhir ad-Din controlled the Palace and ruled Egypt until the Sultan’s heir, Turanshah, arrived. His reign was short-lived, for not only did he treat the Sultana shabbily, but he also scorned the Mameluk troops. Turanshah was assassinated two months after his enthronement.

Then, the Arab historian Abu al-Fida, tells: (Recueil des Historiens des Croisades, vol. I (Historiens Orientaux) Paris, 1872, Academie des Incriptions et Belles Lettres; pp. 128, 129, 154, 165, 745), «... The Emirs gathered and placed at the head of the government of Egypt the princess Shadjar ad-Durr, widow of El Malek es-Saleh Nedjm ed-Din Ayoub. They also appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the army (the former Food-taster: «djachnequin») Eizz ed-Din Aïbec [El Moëzz Aïbec Turcoman], But the Regency for the young Ayubite prince El Ahref Moussa, was hounded by trouble and disaster. By 1255 ( heg. 652) the Commander-in-Chief of the army, El Moëzz Aïbec, usurped supreme power in Egypt, took the title of Sultan, deposed the young Ayubite prince and quarreled with the Sultana Shadjar ad-Durr. Thereupon the usurper was assassinated in his bath. «...At the news of Aïbec’s death, the Mameluks would have killed the Sultana [but she was saved by her partisans]...» She was allowed to live in the Red Tower; but in April, 1257 Shadjar ad-Durr was brutally murdered.

Another Moslem historian, Al-Baladhuri (d. 892), writing about the seventh century, mentions that «... in the battle of Yarmûk [636], between Moslem forces and the Byzantine army, certain Moslem women took part and fought violently. Among them was one named Hind, the daughter of ‘Ubath, and mother of Mu’ â‘yab Ibn-abî Sufyân...»

In view of the above details, of the participation of Moslem women in battles and in events of the Middle Ages, it is interesting to remember that from the tenth century on, Moslem women appear as...
women active in the middle ages

warriors in legends and romances of Byzantium¹ and of the West. In the sixteenth century, the Italian poet Torquato Tasso (1544-1595) has as principal foes in his work La Gerusalemme Liberata: Tancred II (Prince of Antioch, 1111-1112), representing the epic hero of the West and Christendom, confronted by the Eastern, Moslem heroine and amaz­

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1. I.e. the «Arkítica tragoudia», etc. also the various Western romances, legends, verses, etc.
2. Their names were —Constantine (the elder) and —Heraklios (the younger, or Heraklios). 
3. The text is from Theophanes’ Chronographia (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae) ed. Bonn, 1841, ed. E. Weber. 

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In his Chronographia, I, 28, 29, p. 43¹ Michael Psellos tells of a meeting between Basil II and the senior rebel Bardas Skleros. During their talk, the emperor Basil asked the rebellious general’s opinion on government. Skleros replied: «...Let no gener­

The empress Martina was Heraklios’ second wife, who accompanied him on his military campaigns in the East, against Persian and other enemies of Byzantium.

The first, John Kantakouzenos was Great Domestikos (Chief of the armed forces),5 and close advisor to her hus­

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Those present desired [to see] the princes Constantine, and [young] Heraklios. Martina brought them forth; but in her discussion, she made it evident that she, as Empress, should be the leading authority in the Empire...»² («...Μετά τάστα Μαρτίνα ἡ Ἀθηναία έκκλησιασάσα καὶ τόν περί το Βυζάντιον λαόν, τάς [τε] διάθέκας 'Η­

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It was after Heraklios’ death (642) that Martina, then acting as Regent for her sons,² demanded a larger and more active participation in the affairs of the Empire. We are told that «...Following these events [i.e. the death of Heraklios] the Augusta called together the people... and read them the Will of Heraklios [the section] referring to herself and their children. All who were present desired [to see] the princes Constantine, and [young] Heraklios. Martina brought them forth; but in her discussion, she made it evident that she, as Empress, should be the leading authority in the Empire...»² («...Metà tâsta Mærtína ἡ Ἀθηναία ἐκκλησιασάσα καὶ τόν περί το Βυζάντιον λαόν, τάς [τε] διάθεκας 'Η­

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knew Anna from direct day-to-day contacts with her. In his work Ιστορίαν βιβλία Α (Bonn ed. Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, 1828, 3 vols) he tells about Anna’s arrival at Constantinople: «...During that year [1326] and in February, there came from Savoy to Constantinople Anna...» («... τού δε ἐπιόντος έτους κατά μήνα Φεβρουάριον ἐνάτης ίνδικτιών ήκεν ἦν και Ἀννα...»). We are further told that she came with a large following, colorful and opulent, with ladies, knights and their so called squires («... καί σκουερίων λεγομένων...»). Anna, however, whose age is given as being eight, fell sick upon arrival and the wedding had to be postponed until October. Her husband to be was the twenty-eight year old Andronikos III, who had lost his first wife.1 She had been, like Anna, another westerner. This pro-Western policy was pursued by the Paleologoi; as the Komnenoi had done before them.

The imperial wedding of Anna of Savoy and Andronikos III took place in October of that same year (1326), and thereupon the child-bride was introduced into the Court atmosphere of Byzantium, whose customs and outlook were entirely different from her own. From Jeanne she became Anna and from a Roman Catholic to a follower of the Eastern Orthodox Church, at least on the surface; as it was said in the Court. For actually she never became «Byzantine; although as she grew up in that atmosphere, she inevitably took over a number of elements; those suiting her personality and interests. At the same time she cherished and kept alive much of her own background; and also kept a number of her countrymen close to her. Among these was Anna’s closest confidant, an Italian woman named Isabella; who it was said had great influence on her.

It is known that the pro-Western orientation of the fourteenth century Byzantine Court, brought an influx of Italians along with many Occidental customs. The Italians who went to Constantinople, to the Court of Andronikos III and Anna (1326-1341) were well received by the imperial couple. John Kantakouzenos mentions in his historical work that there were always visitors at Constantinople from Savoy. Their presence no doubt delighted the young empress; while the coming and going of those Westerners, had a considerable influence on the habits and interests of the Byzantine Court. Among other customs the Westerners introduced a number of games; and we are told that the Emperor himself took part in their tournaments, and in other events. Yet, this interest and enthusiasm was limited to the Court, for beyond it existed a veiled, deep dislike and reaction to Italianization.

As to the young empress Anna of Savoy, medi eval and later historians have written that she was «... very mediocre... difficult to evaluate... ‘peu intelligent... ’ etc.» But these evaluations must seem curious when we consider that the person judged was immature, an orphan married at a tender age, who later on had two children; and who probably had neither the time, nor interest to improve her knowledge or character. Was it not also the fault of the Byzantine Court; that had no concern in helping this young woman? Furthermore the environment she entered was a troubled one; of an Empire torn by civil wars and in decline.2 There political disintegration, intrigue and selfish interests were rampant; and none actually cared for the fate of Byzantium. These conditions only exacerbated the worst characteristics of the young woman. At the same time, when Andronikos III died (1341) Anna of Savoy was used and exploited by a number of ambitious men, in order to serve their own personal ambitions.

Contemporary, modern, historians have written that Anna of Savoy was violent in her moods, jealous, resentful and superstitious. Whether all these traits were actually part of Anna’s character, one could not say for certain. Yet, judging from her course of action after 1341, and from those she chose as partisans and advisors, her opposition to John Kantakouzenos, her demoting some and raising others (Apokaukos) to the highest positions, etc., it appears that she was highly emotional, petty, open to flattery and avaricious. At the same time she obviously dis liked and distrusted persons of ability and intelligence. So it was that in 1341 when the Byzantine Empire was filled with unrest and threatened by vigorous enemies, that young, widowed empress chose a most deplorable course. But while she was unable to exert any sober, or mature influence on the Court, and events, this was also the case with the mature and the intelligent (Apokaukos, Kantakouzenos, the Patiarch Kalekas, etc.). These men found it impossible to set aside their personal interests and ambitions, in order to help a sorrowful and disintegrating Empire. Instead, soon after Andronikos III died, and his Great Domestikos, and confidant, had promised the Empress, he would stand by her, her children and the Empire,3 Anna acted heedlessly. She threw out John Kantakouzenos, joined sides with Alexios Apokaukos and the Patriarch John Kalekas, and

1. Her name was Irene (and formerly Adelheid of Brunswick).
2. A state in economic and political decline; but the contrary was true in arts and letters. During the time of the Paleologoi Byzantium entered a newer «Golden Age».
3. See John Kantakouzenos, οπ. cit. vol. 1, 2, pages 559, 560.
helped plunge the Empire into a newer, destructive, civil war. At the same time that internal conflict revealed the Empire's vulnerability to its surrounding enemies (Turks, Serbs, Bulgars, and Westerners). At this most crucial period Byzantium was ruled from the gennaikon or women's quarters; by the emotions of an immature person, who knew nothing about government, and cared less about problems confronting the Empire.

Our principle source for the period is John Kantakouzenos (ca. 1293-1383), who reigned as emperor (John VI) 1347-1354. He was a man of ability and intellectual capacities. In his own times John Kantakouzenos was a controversial personality, while there is hardly a modern historian who likes him. He was nevertheless interesting, and while his political activities and decisions are open to questioning and criticism, he was a man of his times and (aristocratic) class. His contemporary and opponent in the Hesychast (religious and political) controversy, Nikiforos Gregoras (1295-1359), has written (op. cit. II, 1, 10, page 554) «...this man [Kantakouzenos] was one of few words... greatly gifted and was wise...» («...τού δ' ἄνδρός τουτου καί ἡ σιωπή ἑρων μεγάλων ἔστιν αὐτουργός. πολλὴν γὰρ ὁ ἄνη πλούτου τὴν μεγάλουν καί τὴν περίμοιον, βαθείαν αὐλάκα διὰ θράνος ὡς ἀλήθης καρπαθμόνος...»). Then further on (II, 11, page 609), when referring to the disastrous civil-war (1341), brought on by the empress Anna of Savoy for her role in the civil war (1341-1347). He refers to her as Empress and accuses her of being critical of Anna. He refers to her as Empress and considers Eirene the best of emperors and resolved at the same time, it was one of few words... greatly gifted and was wise...» («...τού δ' ἄνδρός τουτου καί ἡ σιωπή ἑρων μεγάλων ἔστιν αὐτουργός. πολλὴν γὰρ ὁ ἄνη πλούτου τὴν μεγάλουν καί τὴν περίμοιον, βαθείαν αὐλάκα διὰ θράνος ὡς ἀλήθης καρπαθμόνος...»).

In view of Anna's petty, jealous and vengeful nature, along with the enmity of Alexios Apokaukos and that of the Patriarch John XIV Kalekas, it is dreadful to think what might have happened to John Kantakouzenos if he had been delivered to them. Elsewhere (in his work: III, book 4, page 29) Kantakouzenos tells that at «...[the church of] Blachernes, Kantakouzenos the emperor was crowned [a second time in 1347], in the presence of empress Anna and of the emperor John [Vth] his son-in-law» (επηγγέλλετο πόλεις παραδώσειν, ὁπόσας αὐτός επιμήκους τρόπους δίωκεν τῷ τιγάνῳ τού...)).

Following these events there were many disorders in Byzantium; and in Salonica occurred the complex and interesting, in political history, uprising of the Zealots. One of the main reasons for those conditions was that many among the populace refused to acknowledge the reign of Kantakouzenos (1347-1354), or the central government. Among the measures taken at that time by Kantakouzenos, was to send the young emperor John V with a naval force to Salonica (1349). But there was considerable opposition to this plan, as Kantakouzenos mentions in his work (op. cit. III, 4, 16: 112-113) «...These matters were not liked at all by the empress Anna, and she pleaded with the Emperor [i.e. John VI Kantakouzenos] and urged him not to abandon her son there; but to bring him back. She was afraid she said, not so much for her son's [young] age; but that he might be misled... by the wickedness and tendencies toward novelities, of the westerners [whom he might meet there]» («...τῇ βασιλέως καί Ἡ τῆς βασιλέως...»).

Throughout his work John Kantakouzenos is restrained. He neither criticises the imperial family, nor Anna of Savoy for her role in the civil war (1341-1347). He merely mentions her and the events and leaves the reader draw his own conclusions. As for example in the passage touching on the civil-war (op. cit. Kantakouz. vol. II, book 3, page 52): «... the empress [Anna] kept sending ambassadors to the king [of Serbia: Stephanos Dushan, 1313-1355] promising to deliver him as many cities as possible; if he would capture and send Kantakouzenos in chains...» («...Ἀννα, 1342) προσβαίνεται ἐπανά καὶ ἐπαγγέλλετο πόλεις παραδώσειν, ὡς δὲ ἀνα­βεσαίνει, εἰ μόνον Καντακουζηνὸν πάρηκε δέχθην τρόπος αὐτήν...»).

The first time (officially) at Adrianople (31 May 1346). On 26 October 1341, John Kantakouzenos, at Didymoteicho (Thrace) had assumed the title as emperor. The second between the Regency (Anna of Savoy, Apokaukos, etc.) and John (VI) Kantakouzenos (1341-1347).

2. The first time (officially) at Adrianople (31 May 1346).
πασιν ἄλλη ἐδάφῳ βασιλέως καὶ παρῆν, μη τὸν ὦν ἐκδίκησα καταλαίπων ἄλλα ἔργα ἐπαναστρέψαν, δεδινὰ γὰρ ἐφάσεων οὐ μᾶλλον τοῦ παιδὸς τὴν ἥλικιαν οὔσαν εὐφάζεσθαι, ὅσαν τοῦ ἐσπερίῳ τῆς μνημής καὶ τὴν ἐπομένην πρὸς ναυτηρίας...» 2

Nikiforos Gregoras' treatment of empress Anna of Savoy is entirely different from that of Kantakouzenos. Although Gregoras belonged to the same aristocratic class as Kantakouzenos, his interests and views differed radically on a number of issues. He was neither a courtier, nor held any high post in the imperial administration; but came to know Anna through her activities after 1341. He had been appalled by her behaviour towards John Kantakouzenos and his wife. Gregoras mentions (op. cit. II, 14, 9, p. 761) that Anna would feel «...great joy and strange pleasure when she abused, or heard others speak against Kantakouzenos and his wife...»

In his own work (op. cit. I, book 2, p. 396) Kantakouzenos explains events leading up to the civil war of 1341. When Andronikos III was on his death-bed, he called Anna to his side and told her to place herself, children and Empire in the trustworthy hands of his Great Domestikos. The Empress, however, out of jealousy and opposition to John Kantakouzenos, did precisely the opposite. And taking up the thread of the narrative, as it were, Gregoras added that: she [Anna of Savoy] placed all, and the control of the State in the hands of «... the scheming, ambitious [Alexios] Apokaukos...» who may have been her lover. He who had been a minor official, and friend of Kantakouzenos, turned against him. Then as Apokaukos was elevated to the post of Magnus Dux, at that time the highest official position in the Empire, ruled along with Anna and the Patriarch (John Kalekas); Kantakouzenos was cast out of the government. His property was confiscated, his house was pillaged and burned (by a mob, stirred up it is said by Apokaukos) while his mother was thrown into jail.

«... These events which took place in the imperial capital were worthy of lamentation and tears yet the evil done was so great that no one dared, whether relatives, friends or any other person, who felt pity, to shed tears or sigh for the living or the dead...» [Gregoras II, 14, p. 739]. («...καὶ ἢν μὲν θρήνων καὶ δακρυῶν ἔχει τὰ ὀραματα ἢ διάσωμα ἢ προσφορὰν ἡ βασιλεία ταύτη τῶν πάλιν, οὔτε δὲ πέλμα τῶν ἐρωτούμενοι ἢ τῶν νεκρῶν ἡκίνης ἢ ἀποκρίσις ἢ στεναχωμάτων ὑπόλογοι, οὔτε τῶν συγγενῶν...»

1. Nikiforos Gregoras (1295-1360) is known as a «scientist and upon occasions a theologian.» He was one of the intellectual leaders of the fourteenth century; and taught at different schools of Constantinople. He flourished during the time of Andronikos II; and was a friend of John Kantakouzenos, as he mentioned in his historical work.

2. The expression in the Byzantine text is «... μακρὰν τοῖς νεοτστατηρίοις...».

3. Jealous of whom? This is not too clear, unless of Apokaukos among others.


5. Do these lines refer to Alexios Apokaukos?

6. There is here a lacuna in the Byzantine text.

7. The passage seems to refer to Anna of Savoy. It is complicated, discreet and allusive.

were insurmountable and she passed away, as it was broad and rich and she was very capable when decisions she stood out by the sharpness of her mind, and among women she was superior by her knowledge and the harmony of her character. She resolved all matters quickly and with competence. Her intelligence and respect (II, 12, p. 625) was Eirene Kantakouzena, who had been imprisoned in a dungeon of the imperial Palace.

In twelve days she died in that prison-cell, where she had been thrown and forgotten; far from her earlier life of ease and well-being...I believe [Gregoras added II, 12, p. 618] that she died because her soul was overwhelmed by shame and it was fearful lest it be caught again in the tempest [of further] accusations. Thus it broke away from her body...» («...άλλα συνεκέκρατο καί ταΐς κατά τοῦ Καντακουζήνος καί άμα τῆς μητρός αὐτοῦ λοιπόν, έλα τό αδελφό της αίσχρα καί άφικεν τό σώματος...»). 

The first is the above mentioned mother of Kantakouzenos, who had been imprisoned in a dungeon of the imperial Palace.

1. The word used in the Byzantine text is «εύγενών» (i.e. nobles).
These individuals, along with the armed women riding on horses, those who fought on battlefields, who defended cities, or played political roles, as Regents in Byzantium, or rulers in the Moslem East, the others, the women active in divers domains, were all part of the colorful, dynamic but agitated medieval world. While the above examples of women active in that environment are summarily treated above, and this only for the lack of further information, they mirror nevertheless the conditions, wherein the women were able to play a part. These few examples also show that not all the women, of the Middle Ages, stayed at home, to occupy themselves with «menial tasks,» caring for children, home and property. Although it may be pointed out that the «active women,» mentioned in this study (the women knights, Gaeta, Emma, Anna of Savoy, Eirene Kantakouzeni, etc.) belonged to the upper classes; yet, the «Armenian-born» Shadjar ad-Durr, had been a slave. The histories of Byzantium and of the Latin West, are dotted with prominent women (Saint Helena; Euphemia,¹ wife of Justin I; Theodora, wife of Justinian, Joan of Arc, etc.) who issued from the lower classes, or the peasantry.

Generally, however, and in view of the Age, the social conditions, etc. the great majority of women in Europe and the East, played ordinary, passive roles. At the same time, many women were used in the Middle Ages to further the interests of their fathers or their families. John Kantakouzenos for example married his daughters to different rulers and princes, to enhance his own position and gain their military assistance. Eleni (Kantakouzeni) was married to John V Paleologos, and Maria to Nikiforos II, Doukas (ruler «Despotos» of Epiros); while Theodora was given in marriage to Orchan (Turk) Sultan of Brusa.

Generalizations about the «role of women in the Middle Ages» are, for the most part, incomplete and restricted to place and time. Actually that «role,» like the environment and spirit of the Age the women lived in, were never static. At the same time, attitudes toward Woman, kept changing, as her social status changed; while it was also influenced by Religion; and in the Christian world by Dogma and by Law. These developments can be followed in various literary expressions and cultural phenomena in Byzantium, from the fourth down to the fifteenth century. Because of these developments, it is not easy to discuss the «place of women» in the Middle Ages, without considering the social class, the family background and the society itself, along with historical happenings exerting their influence thereupon. At the same time, any closer study will show that, during certain periods, medieval social organization was not divided into air-tight or «closed» compartments; for individuals and families could pass from one level to the other. This was particularly true of Byzantine society.

Nevertheless it is undeniable that women of the lower classes, the wife of the farmer, of the shop-keeper, the wife of the local parish-priest, of the teacher, of the professional literary-man, etc. led an existence of drudgery, working often at two jobs, while looking after her family at the same time. On the other hand, in Byzantium, women of the aristocracy, and upper classes (Eudokia - Athenaïs, Kassiani, the wife of Michael Psellos, the Sevastokratorissa Eirene, Eireni Kantakouzeni and many others) led comfortable lives and had the opportunity to study and patronize the arts. On the whole those upper-class women in Byzantium, culturally and intellectually were in more favorable conditions than their counterparts in Occidental Europe.

Might it therefore be said, when studying the social history of those Middle Ages, that the women who were active, or who arose to prominence (political, cultural, or other) were favored by events and the society, or atmosphere in which they moved? Undoubtedly their own character and family background were important factors in the roles they undertook. But it might also be noted that the times and circumstances were equally important, as they provided the occasion for their action. It has been seen above that these conditions were evident in the cases of the women-knights from the West; of the empress Martina; of Shadjar ad-Durr; of Anna of Savoy, and of so many others.

Furthermore, in view of the above and other examples, it appears that in human societies the interplay of influences (internal and external) in any given situation, press heavily upon individuals (men and women) and consequently, actions under stress, or calamities, become distorted and erratic. It happens therefore that these actions often bring about, and for further reasons to be sought out, the opposite results from those originally intended.

¹ See: Prokopios (Anecdota, 45) «... δούλων καί βαρβά­ρων γένεσις;» also Kedrinos (Chronicle, I 637). This woman had been the mistress of Justin I, and her name had been Lu­picina; but when she became Augusta, it was changed to Eup­hemia.