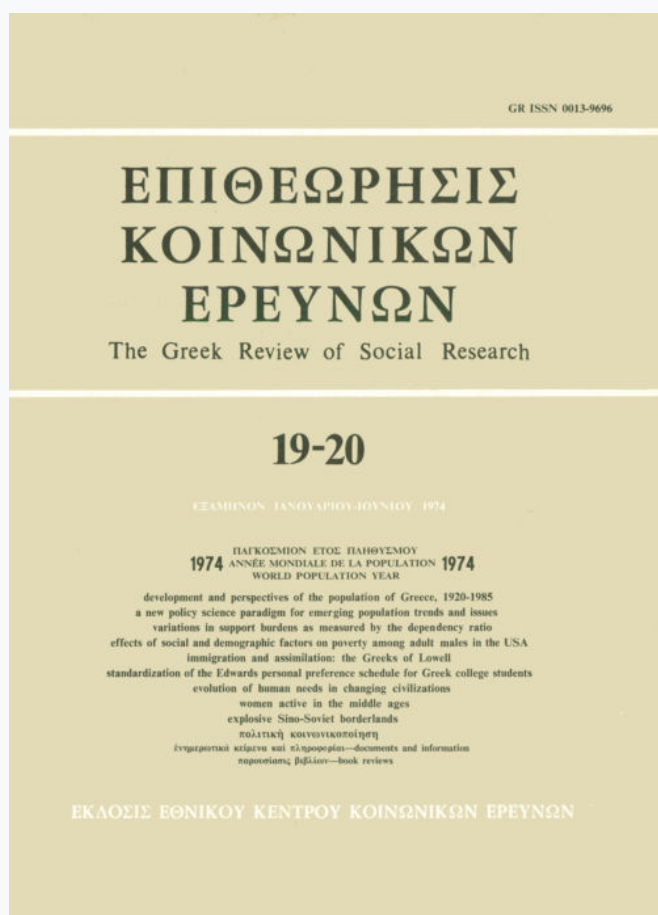


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**Women active in the middle ages: (Of women knight, regents and political leaders)**

Michael J. Kyriakis

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## women active in the middle ages

(of women knights,  
regents and political  
leaders)

by

**Michael J. Kyriakis**

*Professor of Medieval History  
and Civilization,  
Maryland University,  
Winston Salem University, etc.  
Research Associate, EKKE*

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 Choniates<sup>1</sup> 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 «...<sup>2</sup> 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 manly than the Amazons.»<sup>3</sup> («...οἷς καὶ θήλειαι κατελέγοντο ὡς ἄρρενες ἐφιππάζουσαι καὶ ἐφ'εστρίσιν οὐ συμβάδην τῷ πόδε διχαλῶσαι ἀλλὰ περιβάδην ἀνέδην ἐποχοῦμεναι καὶ κοντοφόροι καὶ ὀπλοφόροι κατ' ἄνδρας ὁρώμεναι, καὶ τὴν ἀνδρείαν στολὴν περικείμεναι, αἱ καί, ὅλως ἀρεϊκὸν ἐβλεπον... καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰς Ἀμαζόννας ἡρρένοντο...»)<sup>4</sup>

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 Penthesilea [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 *Ἱστορία* 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 3rd 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.»

4. See Nikitas Choniates text, ed. Bonn, 1835, vol XXIII *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, ed. Em. Bekker

garments were woven with so much gold, from head to toe, that she might have been nicknamed Golden-feet...» («...μία δὲ καὶ ὑπεξήρετο παρ' ἐκείναις καθάπερ ἄλλη τις Πενθεσίλεια, ἥτις ἐκ τοῦ στίζοντος χρυσοῦ καὶ περιτρέχοντος τὰς ὥας καὶ τὰ λόματα τοῦ ἐσθλήματος Χρυσόπους παρωνομάζετο...»).

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 Choniates' notation,<sup>1</sup> that women formed part of the Security Corps: «...ἐς τὸ σῶμα ἀσφαλείας κομιδῇ μετέχων τοῖς οὖσιν ἅμα καὶ γυναιξί...». 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*:<sup>2</sup> 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]<sup>3</sup>... 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*,<sup>4</sup> 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 Romans<sup>5</sup>... 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 («Γαῖτα»)<sup>6</sup>...»

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...» («...καὶ χρῆμα ἡ γυνὴ ἦν φοβερόν ἐπειδὴν ἐξοπλισαίτο...» [but when she arrived] Robert embraced her, and they left... to join his forces at Brindisi...» («...ὥς ἐνηγκαλίσαιο ταύτην ἐπελθοῦσαν... 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,<sup>7</sup> 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!<sup>8</sup> 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] Kondostephanos<sup>9</sup> 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 embassy sent to [Admiral] 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...» («...ἐμυχανᾶτο τῆνικαὶ τὴν σκηνὴν καθάπερ τοὺς τραγικούς...»). 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

1. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 138, col. 971, ff.

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.

4. See: E. Leib (text and French translation) *Anna Comnène Alexiade, Règne de l'empereur Alexios Ier Comnène 1018-1118*; 3 Vols. Paris (1937, 1943, 1945) Collection Byzantine Budé.

5. Note: the Byzantines referred to themselves as «Romans», («Ρωμαῖοι») while the Westerners called them «Greeks.»

6. Elsewhere her name is given as Sichelgaeta (or Gaeta of Sicily).

7. The comment is interesting; but it is known that Anna Komneni was not fond of the West.

8. See: *Iliad* (Homeric epic): E. verse 529; Z. v. 112.

9. Alexios Kondostephanos was an admiral of Alexios I Komnenos.

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 Froimont, in which he recounts the military achievements of his sister Marguerite «...Cette amazon de la Croix»<sup>1</sup> 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 Laon. 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)<sup>2</sup>; 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<sup>3</sup> wrote about the daughter of Soliman, an Emir of Asia Minor. This Moslem girl, whose name was said to be «Melas,» 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 Froimont) poem in «Bibliothèque des Croisades» (under word Thomas).

2. Their names were:—A. de Carmendina—M. de Grimaldi—C. de Faneta—A. de Auriá—S. de Spinula—S. and P. de Gibo and —P. de Caris.

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<sup>4</sup> 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 Fakhr 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, Académie des Inscriptions 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: «djachnequir»)<sup>5</sup> 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 Yarmūk [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 'Utbalh, and mother of Mu' āiyah Ibn-abi Sufyān...»<sup>6</sup>

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

4. Her name sometimes appears in texts as Chajar ad-Durr.

5. This is a Persian word and is applied to a Palace official, a «food-taster» whose function was to taste the food prepared for the Sultan, before he ate it.

6. See: Speros Vryonis Jr. (ed.), *Readings in Medieval Histrography*, Boston, 1968, Houghton Mifflin Co., pp. 458.

warriors in legends and romances of Byzantium<sup>1</sup> 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 amazon Clorinda.

The history of Byzantium mentions a number of women who took part in its cultural, religious and political life, from the fourth to the fifteenth century; from Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, to Hypatia, teacher of Philosophy, to Theodora (of Justinian), to Martina, Procopia, Kassiani the hymn-writer, Anna Komneni, and many others, including Anna of Savoy. The empress Martina was Heraklios' second wife, who accompanied him on his military campaigns in the East, against Persian and other enemies of Byzantium. Whether her active character and ambitions were in-born, or influenced by other sources, we cannot tell for certain; but the former are reflected in her words and actions; that stirred up opposition among the Byzantine Court and populace.

It was after Heraklios' death (642) that Martina, then acting as Regent for her sons,<sup>2</sup> 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...»<sup>3</sup> («... Μετά ταῦτα Μαρτίνα ἡ Αὐγούστα ἐκκλησιάσασα καὶ τὸν περὶ τὸ Βυζάντιον λαόν, τὰς [τε] διαθήκας Ἡρακλείου ὑπεδείκνυεν ὡς περὶ αὐτῆς καὶ τέκνων διέθετο. ὁ δὲ παρὼν ἅπας δῆμος Κωνσταντίνον καὶ Ἡράκλειον τοὺς βασιλεῖς ἐπεζήτην· ἡ δὲ ἤγεν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἅμα διελογίζετο νομίζουσα ὅτε βασιλίσα τὰ πρῶτα εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν φέρεσθαι...»).

In the reaction that followed these words, one among those present, replied to the Empress in the following manner: «...We honor you as mother of our princes, and them as emperors and rulers. [Then] they accorded allegiance first to Constantine, as being the elder and having been crowned co-emperor,

first. [As to you, O Empress] they said: 'You could not sustain the rule... for how could you answer the barbarian, or others who come from foreign lands... nor is it possible for a woman to govern the Roman State'; and they departed cheering the [two young] rulers. When Martina heard these words she retired to the imperial palace...» («... τινὲς δὲ τοῦ συνεστότου λαοῦ ἀνεφώνουν πρὸς αὐτὴν «σὺ μὲν τιμὴν ἔχεις ὡς μήτηρ βασιλέων, οὗτοι δὲ ὡς βασιλεῖς καὶ δεσπότες», ἐξαίρετον δὲ ἐδίδουν γέρας Κωνσταντίνῳ ὡς πρῶτῳ εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν κατὰ τὴν ἡλικίαν τοῦ παιδὸς προχειρισθέντι. «Οὐδὲ γὰρ βαρβάρου ἢ ἀλλοφύλου πρὸς τὰ βασίλεια εἰσερχομένων, ὧ δέσποινα», ἔφασκον, «δύνασθαι ὑποδέχασθαι ἢ λόγοις ἀμείβεσθαι, μηδὲ δοῖν θεὸς ἐν τούτῳ τάξῃ τῶν Ρωμαϊκῶν ἐλθεῖν πολιτείας» καὶ κατήρχοντο ἀνευφημοῦντες τοὺς βασιλεῖς. Ταῦτα ἀκούσασα πρὸς τὸ ἐαυτῆς ἀπεχώρει παλάτιον...»).

Note the commentary on politics and women, in government, made by the Xth century rebel, Byzantine general, Bardas Skleros.

In his *Chronographia*, I, 28, 29, p. 434 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 generals on campaign have too many resources... share your most intimate plans with few... [and] admit no woman to your imperial councils...»

To a later century belong Anna of Savoy, Andronikos III Paleologos and John Kantakouzenos. During the closing centuries of Byzantium's history, when it was shrinking, torn by internal strife, and struggling desperately for survival, we find several women, of Greek and west-European origin, active in the political affairs of the Empire. Among them were Eirene Kantakouzeni; Yolanda of Montferrat, renamed Einene when she married Andronikos II (Paleologos); and Anna of Savoy, whose name had been Jeanne prior to her marriage to Andronikos III (grandson of the above ruler).

We know much about Anna of Savoy, since two important Byzantine writers, and contemporaries: John Kantakouzenos and Nikiforos Gregoras, mention her at length in their historical works (dealing with the fourteenth century). The first, John Kantakouzenos was Great Domesticos (Chief of the armed forces),<sup>4</sup> and close advisor to her husband Andronikos III (1328-1341). Kantakouzenos

1. I.e. the «Akritika tragoudia», etc. also the various Western romances, legends, verses, etc.

2. Their names were:—Constantine (the elder) and—Heraklios (the younger, or Heraklonas).

3. The text is from Theophanes' *Chronographia* (*Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*) ed. Bonn, 1841, ed. E. Weberi.

4. See: E.R.A. Sewter: *Michael Psellus. Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, London, New York, etc., 1966 (pb. ed.) Penguin, pp. 397.

5. See: L. Brehier (Le Monde byzantin), vol. III: *Les institutions de l'Empire byzantin*, Paris, 1949, A. Michel; and pages: 140, 145, 396-7.

knew Anna from direct day-to-day contacts with her. In his work *Ἱστοριῶν βιβλία Δ* (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...» («... τοῦ δὲ ἐπιόντος ἔτους κατὰ μῆνα Φεβρουάριον ἐνάτης ἰνδικτιῶνος ἐκ Σαβοΐας εἰς Βυζάντιον ἦκεν ἡ Ἄννα...»). We are further told that she came with a large following, colorful and opulent, with ladies, knights and their so called squires («... καὶ σκουερῖον 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.<sup>1</sup> 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, medieval 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 disliked 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 Patriarch 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,<sup>3</sup> 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, *op. cit.* vol. 1, 2, pages 559, 560.

helped plunge the Empire into a newer,<sup>1</sup> 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 gynaeconite» 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...» («...τοῦ δ' ἀνδρὸς τούτου καὶ ἡ σιωπὴ ἔργων μεγάλων ἐστὶν αὐτοῦργός. πολλὴν γὰρ ὁ ἀνὴρ πλουτεῖ τὴν μεγαλοφύαν καὶ τὴν περίνοιαν, βαθεῖαν αὐλάκα διὰ φρενὸς ὡς ἀληθῶς καρπούμενος...»). Then further on (II, 11, page 609), when referring to the disastrous civil-war (1341), brought on by the empress Anna and her councillors, Gregoras points out that: others were blamed for that calamity, and adds, «... He [John Kantakouzenos] could have been the best of emperors and resolved at the same time, the affairs of the State in a worthy manner. But now, because of the wickedness of others... it turned out that the most good-natured person was held responsible for the disaster...» («... [Καντακουζηνός] κράτιστος ἂν βασιλεὺς ἐγίνετο, καὶ ἅμα τὰ τῶν Ῥωμαίων πράγματα μεγίστην ἂν δι' αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐπίδοσιν ἀνελάμβανε. νῦν δὲ διὰ κακίαν ἄλλων αἴτιος ὁ πραΰτατος τῆς τῶν ὄλων ἔδοξεν εἶναι φθοράς...»).

It has been mentioned that during the reign of Andronikos III (and Anna of Savoy), John Kantakouzenos, and his wife Eirene were active in the Court; but the Empress hated them, and considered Eirene Kantakouzeni a rival. Information about these details is found in Gregoras' work (*op. cit.* II, 14, 4); while Kantakouzenos ignores these matters nor is he critical of Anna. He refers to her as Empress and as Regent; and although she played a prominent role in events of 1341, Kantakouzenos has little to say about her.

1. The first of those fourteenth century civil wars in Byzantium was between (grandfather and grandson) Andronikos II and Andronikos III (1301-1328). The second between the Regency (Anna of Savoy, Apokaukos, etc.) and John (VI) Kantakouzenos (1341-1347).

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, 1331-1355] promising to deliver him as many cities as possible; if he would [capture and] send Kantakouzenos in chains...» («... [Ἄννα, 1342] πρεσβευτὰς ἐπεμπευεν εἰς Κράλην καὶ ἐπηγγέλλετο πόλεις παραδόσσειν, ὅσας ἂν συμβῶσιν, εἰ μόνον Καντακουζηνὸν πέμψει δεσμώτην πρὸς αὐτὴν...»).

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],<sup>2</sup> in the presence of empress Anna and of the emperor John [Vth] his son-in-law<sup>3</sup>» («...Βλαχερνῶν βασιλεὺς ὁ Καντακουζηνὸς ὑπὸ Ἰσιδώρου τοῦ Πατριάρχου ἐστῆθη αὐθὶς Ἀννης τε τῆς βασιλίδος παρούσης καὶ Ἰωάννου τοῦ γαμβροῦ...»).

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 novelties, of the westerners [whom he might meet there]»<sup>4</sup> («...ἂ τῇ βασιλίδι Ἀννῇ οὐκ ἤρεσκε παντά-

2. The first time (officially) at Adrianople (31 May 1346). On 26 October 1341, John Kantakouzenos, at Didymoteicho (Thrace) had assumed the title as emperor.

3. John V (Paleologos) had been married to Eleni Kantakouzeni.

4. Anna of Savoy's remark and its implication about persons of the West (morals, habits behaviour, etc. perhaps) are of particular interest.

πασιν ἀλλὰ ἐδεῖτο βασιλέως καὶ παρῆναι, μὴ τὸν υἱὸν ἐκείσε καταλείπειν ἀλλὰ ἔχοντα ἐπαναστρέφειν. δεδιέναι γὰρ ἔφρασκεν οὐ μᾶλλον τοῦ παιδὸς τὴν ἡλικίαν οὐσαν ἐδεξαπάτητον, ὅσον τῶν ἐσπερίων τὴν μοχθηρίαν καὶ τὴν ἐτοιμότητα πρὸς νεο-τερισμοὺς ...»).

Nikiforos Gregoras<sup>1</sup> 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 Domesticos. 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 ἦν μὲν θρήνων καὶ δακρύων ἄξια τὰ δρώμενα καὶ θέατρον ἀνόσιον τῇ βασιλευσῇ ταύτῃ τῶν πόλεων, οὐδεὶς δὲ ἐτόλμα τοῖς ὁρῶμένοις ἢ τοῖς νεκροῖς ἐκείνοις ἐπιδεκρῆσαι ἢ στεναγμὸν ἀποδοῦναι, οὔτε τις τῶν συγγενῶν

οὔτε μὲν οὐδεὶς τῶν ἄλλων φίλοιον ἐχόντων καρδίαν... πάντα γὰρ ἦν εὐφροσύνη λαμπρά τις καὶ τέρψις ἄρρητος ἐκείνη τὰ δρώμενα, καὶ πάνυ τοι σφόδρα κατὰ γνώμης ἐντρυφήμα...»).

«... These things [Gregoras adds, *op. cit.*, II, 14, 4 702] caused stupefaction even to those [who did not take sides]<sup>2</sup>... and the situation seemed senseless; for Anna surrendered control of the State [and all its affairs] to the frenzied [Apokaukos]. Then she withdrew as if she had been completely blinded by jealousy;<sup>3</sup> and acted as if the destruction going on around her was taking place beyond the Pillars of Hercules.<sup>4</sup> And she hoped, because of love<sup>5</sup> that convinces...<sup>6</sup> to spend the rest of her life without difficulties and free from cares. This [was so] because the soul,<sup>7</sup> when it concerns itself with [external] appearances and remains uncultivated, then, often and unconsciously, it is led away prisoner, to a war without weapons, of secret meditations...» («... Ταῦθ' ὁρῶσι μακρὰν τοῖς συνετοτέροις ἐκπλήξιν ἐνεποιεῖ καὶ ἀσυλλόγιστον ἐδόκει τὸ πρᾶγμα πῶς τῷ μανιώδει τῆς γνώμης ἡ Ἄννα προδοκονῶσα τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων ἡγεμονίαν πάντων ἀπέπατο, τυφλωθεῖσα καθάπαξ ὑπὸ ζήλουτιπας καὶ μηδενὸς τῶν πραττομένων αἰσθάνεσθαι θέλουσα, ἀλλὰ καθάπερ ἔξω στηλῶν Ἡρακλείων τῆς τοσαύτης ἀπολείας καθισταμένης οὕτω διακειμένη. ἦν γὰρ ἐν ἐλπίσι τοῦ ἔρωτος πείθοντος... σα βίον τοῦντεῦθεν ἄλυπον ἔξιν καὶ φροντίδος ἀπάσης τὸ παράπαν ἀπηλλαγμένην. ψυχὴ γὰρ ἀπαιδαγώγητον ἄγνοῦσα βίον καὶ ὄντι οὐ μάλ' αὐτῇ ἐπιδεκρῆσαι, ἐλάβε πολλὰς αἰχμάλωτος ἀπαρθεῖσα καθάπερ λάφυρον ἀπροόπτως ἐαυτὴν εἰς ἀλκαὶν ἐμβαλοῦσα πόλεμον λογισμῶν ἀφανεῖα κεκαλυμμένον...»)<sup>8</sup>

About the disastrous civil war (1341-1347) Gregoras (*op. cit.* I, 15, page 789) wrote: «... The causes for this civil and destruction were: first the civil war and the turbulence that followed. Then, the avarice and greed for gold, of the empress Anna... and of Alexios Apokaukos...» But the Byzantine historian was terrified greatly by the Empress' revenge and ferocious treatment of Kantakouzenos' partisans, that followed the assassination (1345) of Apokaukos. Of Kantakouzenos' mother, whose name is not given, Gregoras (*op. cit.* II, 12, p. 617) tells about her imprisonment and that [the people] «... were stirred up and joined in the outcry and accusations against Kanta-

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

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

4. Meaning: beyond the Straits of Gibraltar.

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.

8. See: N. Gregoras (*op. cit.*) vol. II, 14, 4, page 701.

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.

kouzenos and his mother. The expressions [used] were very obscene, and not to be heard by descent persons... [Yet] all these things were heard by the mother of Kantakouzenos, 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...» («... ἀλλὰ συνεκέκρατο καὶ ταῖς κατὰ τοῦ Καντακουζηνοῦ καὶ ἅμα τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ λοιδορίαις, λίαν οὖσαις αἰσχυραῖς καὶ οὐ πάντοις σώφρονος ἀκοῆς ἄξιας, ὑποκάνοντας τοῦ Ἀποκαύκου... Καὶ ἦν αὐτῆς κοῦς τούτων ἀπάντων ἡ τοῦ Καντακουζηνοῦ μήτηρ, δεσποτικὸν οἰκοῦσα τῆς βασιλείου ἀλλῆς... μετὰ δύο καὶ δέκα ἡμέρας... ἔκειτο ἡ Καντακουζηνὴ νεκρά πρὸς τὸ δεσποτικὸν ἐρριμμένη καὶ ἐπιλεησμένη καὶ πάντοις σφοδρῶς ἀποκισμένη τῆς πάλας εὐδαιμονίας καὶ δόξης ἐκεῖνης... δέισασα γὰρ οἶμαι, ἡ ψυχὴ, μὴ πρὸς τὴν τῶν ὁμοίων αὐτῆς ἐμπέση λοιδοριῶν τρικυμίαν, συνεστάλη τε πρὸς ἐαυτὴν καὶ προαπερράγη τοῦ σώματος...»).

While Nikiforos Gregoras is extremely critical of the empress Anna of Savoy, in his work *Romaiki Istoria*, on the other hand he writes of two other contemporary women with much care and esteem. The first is the above mentioned mother of Kantakouzenos. He tells that she was «...judicious and her character adorned with modesty. Her intelligence was broad and rich and she was very capable when confronted by calamities...» («...βουλευτικὴν γυναῖκα καὶ σεμνότητος ἡθεσι κοσμουμένην καὶ βαθεῖαν πλουτοῦσαν σύνεσιν καὶ πάντοις σφόδρα ἐν τοῖς ἀπόροις εὐμήχανον...»).

However, despite her capabilities, the misfortunes brought upon her by the enemies of her son, were insurmountable and she passed away, as it was noted above; much to the sorrow of all who knew her.

The second woman treated by Gregoras with gentility and respect (II, 12, p. 625) was Eirene Kantakouzeni; the wife of John Kantakouzenos. Referring to the year 1342, he wrote: «... The empress Eirene was richly endowed with ability and wisdom. In 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 indigenous abilities, cultivated [further] by herself we might say, were of the greatest help to her husband and Emperor in these difficult times [i.e. the civil war]» («... Ἡ βασιλὶς Εἰρήνη, πολλὴν πλουτοῦσα τὴν σύνεσιν καὶ ἀγχίνουσαν τοσοῦτον νικῶσα τῇ τῶν φρενῶν ἐν ταῖς βουλαῖς δέχεται, ὅσον ἐν γυναιξί

τῇ κράτει τῆς γνώσεως καὶ τῇ τῶν ἡθῶν ἀρμονίᾳ, πάντα καλῶς τὴν ταχίστην διέθετο. φρόνημα γὰρ αὐτοφύεες καὶ αὐτογάλλεοντες εἰπεῖν κεκτημένη ἐμπρακτον παρέιχε τῇ σὺνύγῳ καὶ βασιλεῖ καὶ μερίστην ἐν τοιαύταις γενομένῳ ταῖς περιστάσεσι τὴν ἐπικουρίαν...»).

Elsewhere and referring to a later period (1347) Gregoras wrote (II, 12, 3, page 805) «... the empress Eirene had a [great] depth of thought and at the same time was very capable [in political matters] by nature and experience.» These abilities are reiterated by John Kantakouzenos (III, 4, p. 49) «... The empress [Eirene] was not only greatly judicious, but was also able to deal with important issues and reshape them if necessary...» («... ἦν γὰρ ἡ βασιλὶς [Εἰρήνη] οὐ συνετὴ μόνον καὶ δεινὴ χρήσασθαι πράγμασι μέγαλοις καὶ μεταποιῆσαι ἢ ἐβούλετο...»). He then tells of several occasions when the empress Eirene conducted political negotiations, with the king («kral» of the Serbs, the Seljuk Emir Oumour and others. In III, 56, page 345 we are told that the Emir Oumour «... sent envoys to Eirene [when she was acting in the Emperor's absence] informing her of his consent to the agreement... [while] she sent as many soldiers who were there, and... higher officials<sup>1</sup> to welcome him...» («... πέμψας δὲ ἐκεῖνος [Οὔμουρ] πρέσβεις πρὸς τὴν Εἰρήνην τὴν βασιλίδι ἀπήγγειλε τὰ ἴσα... Εἰρήνην δὲ ἡ βασιλὶς τούτοις τε στρατιώτας ἐπεμπε, ὅσοι ἦσαν, καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους τῶν εὐγενεστέρων εἰς ὑπάντησιν ἐκείνου...»).

When bringing together the above examples and details, one may well wonder what became of all these individuals, the women and the others, who were active during the Middle Ages? Anna of Savoy passed away in 1359, five years after John Kantakouzenos was dethroned (1354); while he had already retired to the monastery of Manganes, in Constantinople; and taken the name of monk Ioasaph. Kantakouzenos intended, as he tells in his work (*Ἱστορία*, III, 4, 42, p. 307) to leave for Mount Athos and the monastery of Vatopaedi; but was detained by the emperor John V Paleologos; who had asked him to remain in the capital awhile longer. Subsequently, however, Kantakouzenos went to Mistra, where his son Manuel was «Despotes» of that principality. It is probable that John Kantakouzenos died there in 1383.

Kantakouzenos' wife, the former empress Eirene, entered the convent Μονὴ τῆς Μάρθας, in Constantinople, and took the monastic name of Eugenia. It was noted above that Alexios Apokaukos was assassinated (June 1345) while the other partisan of Anna of Savoy, the Patriarch John Kalekas, was deposed (1347) and disappeared from the scene.

1. The word used in the Byzantine text is «εὐγενῶν» (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,<sup>1</sup> 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 «Despotes» 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 shopkeeper, 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 - Athenais, 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 (*Anekdotai*, 45) «... δούλων καὶ βαρβάρων γένος;» also Kedrinios (*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.