

Judith Herrin. *Unrivalled Influence. Women and Empire in Byzantium.*

Marina Voronina. Review.

I am not a specialist in the Middle Ages, moreover Medieval Byzantium, but I have been studying gender and mental characteristic features of the Russian Empire (1861-1917) and Soviet Ukraine (1917-1939) for many years, that is why my interest in the history of the millennium beginning of the state, out of which Christianity has come (its Eastern, i.e. Byzantine, rite) is the foreground of the root depth. As ethnic and psychological features are transformed too slowly and their female constituent is much more conservative, my main aim is to find in this work new and general in the “women’s issue”, what impression Byzantium took, and what became acceptable out of those for both Kyiv Rus and Moscow Kingdom.

The book is a paper collection aimed at specialists in Medieval Byzantium history. If you are interested in history of women in general as I am, these texts are too complicated for comprehension: terminology and names of the particular documents (the Peira of Eustathios Romaios) – the author juggles with them so that you do not part with Google, moreover Wikipedia often keeps deceitful silence. That is why you are forced to read papers by specialists in Law, e.g. Charles Diehl)<sup>1</sup>, for general intelligence, to review Judith Herrin.

Introduction was very promising: female monkhood was presented as a gender challenge - p. XV “...thus rose above the normal constraints of womanhood, to surpass them in a way that was not womanly. This is the other common trope of women who become like men, manly in the courage...”. Nevertheless, later the author characterizes the majority of examples as a type of repression. What is paradoxical towards my study aim: female monkhood was hardly widespread in Kyiv Rus as it was in Ukraine (with the very Kyiv as the centre), which was formed on the given territory in about the 16<sup>th</sup> century, while in Moscow Kingdom in the 15-16<sup>th</sup> centuries there happened taking the veil of mothers, wives, sisters of kings and

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<sup>1</sup>Шарль Диль. Византийские портреты. Перевод с французского М. Безобразовой. М.: Искусство. 1994.

female part of the palace – terem (gynaecium) and also bride shows – this is the Byzantium Renaissance. (By the way, what puts me on my guard is that Judith Herrin calls the country Vladimir of Kiev - Russia in Chapter 11, pp. 242-243. The term appeared during Peter I in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To correct this political and philological mistake my country is shedding its blood. Moreover, scientific ethics obliges to know quite a big part of Eastern Europe.)

You can find a lot of study methodology details in every essay, which is interesting to be heard from either a teacher as a kind of professional anecdotes or like-minded people at a conference, but it is boring to read about this hardship. Because of the fact that these papers were prepared for different conferences in due time – the same problems are constantly repeated. The work can probably be interesting for women's studies researchers in the direction of historiography and source study. Sometimes she seems to provide citation index to her colleagues. The author's feminist conviction can be also doubted, because general non-gender topics are covered better and more extensional, but state of affairs was likely to be different and to match it the texts were chosen, in which there were at least any women's marker and the constant repetition of a stock phrase like: "for historians willing to read against the grain and around the intention of male authors who created them" p. 262. The artificial character of this approach is revealed in e.g. Chapter 9. "Moving Bones: Evidence of Political Burials from Medieval Constantinople" - here neither "her story" nor gender problems are represented, imperial family members of a different sex are mentioned only. It looks like a museum attendance with a guide who does not like his or her profession.

The most repeated problem is obviously iconoclasm and a significant role of impresses Irene and Theodora. Nevertheless even in iconoclasm itself she seems as though to be caught in a trap of male authors, who are constantly blamed in misogyny ... less educated that is why they worshiped icons, briefly about politics p. 66 and again the same but with different words. Indeed, history has ignored "silent" majority and described rulers, the military, etc. over millenniums, but it is not the reason to go to limits – to ignore politics: Judith Herrin does not mention at all economic grounds

and diarchy overcoming during iconoclasm and the fact that the impresses got back only the visual constituent – icons, but the state control over the church remained.

I should admit that the author really succeeds in non-political history. I can recommend Chapter 4 “Mothers and Daughters in the Medieval Greek Word”, which is written in not so much an everyday history style as household history – but there is a lack of material and the author does not make up her mind to offer challenging hypotheses, moreover to answer the question “Why?”. In addition, the title does not totally highlight the Chapter content that is typical for every essay: the titles are much brighter and in case with Chapter 11 Theophano appears only on p. 250 (the text itself is p. 238-253). Furthermore, even I being a non-specialist did not learn something new as the whole information is facts of common knowledge.

Nevertheless, interesting facts can be found, e.g. steelyards in the form of an empress (p. 166) and especially about semidalis (p.127), this meal is called “kutya” in Ukraine and up until now before Christmas godchildren bring it to their godmothers and godfathers, it is cooked by one’s own or is bought in a supermarket. A lot of people think it is a pre-Christian tradition, but Chapter 5 proves, and what is more important explains its prehistory. So, I recommend to read the book selectively.