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BYZANTINE BRIDE-SHOWS AND THE RESTORATION OF ICONS

A Tale of Four Iconophile Empresses

by Mother Nectaria McLees

The *Life* of St. Philaret the Almsgiver

A decade ago I found myself disturbed by the fairy-tale ending of the *Life of St. Philaret the Almsgiver*, a wealthy Byzantine landowner reduced to penury by his own extreme generosity. At the darkest moment of the *Life* as the family verges on starvation, couriers from the emperor arrive in Paphlagonia seeking candidates for an imperial bridal show. Saint Philaret's granddaughter Maria, a celebrated beauty, is not only unmarried but fulfills all of the imperial requirements, including a lovely foot—a match for the requisite-size slipper carried by the emperor's emissary. In the company of her sisters, Maria proceeds to the bridal show in the capital along with other contestants (a vain and shrewish lot) and by her humility and kindness proves herself their superior in virtue as well as beauty. Chosen as the young emperor's bride, her impoverished family is given titles, positions and great houses near the Great Palace, living "happily ever after" until St. Philaret's repose, where the narrative ends.ⁱ

When I read this I was uneasy to find what seemed to be Cinderella-type fantasy in the *Life* of an Orthodox saint. While even noted ecclesiastical authors and scribes made unintentional factual errors or embroidered details as part of a stylized genre of Byzantine hagiography, most Orthodox accounts seem sober compared to some far-fetched details of late medieval western Lives, and I wondered if in St. Philaret's *Life* I had now found an equally fanciful Orthodox narrative. A decade ago, the internet was not so sophisticated as to include details of late antique history, so I began digging through the handful of English-language books available where I lived abroad. From the abridged translation of the *Life* I knew only that St. Philaret was from Paphlagonia, a region of Asia Minor (today's Turkey) on the Black Sea Coast, and that he had died in 789.

The search turned into a sleuth. Lists of Byzantine emperors could be easily obtained, but wives and consorts were less frequently mentioned, until finally, I came across a reference to one "Maria of Amnia," married to Emperor Constantine VI in Warren Treadgold's giant volume of Byzantine history, and was able to verify that Amnia was a town in Paphlagonia.ⁱⁱ

In time, I found historical sources that confirmed that St. Philaret's granddaughter was indeed Maria of Amnia, wife of Emperor Constantine VI. Not

Opposite: 14th-century Constantinople icon of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, portraying the Seventh Ecumenical Council reestablishing icon veneration. British Museum.

only was the fairy-tale marriage based in history, but Maria's mother-in-law was none other than Empress Irene, the Byzantine regent who had summoned the Seventh Ecumenical Council that overturned iconoclasm. And, as I was to discover, over the subsequent decades empress followed empress, like links on a bracelet, until a clear pattern of intentional relationship emerged between these remarkable iconophile women – Empresses Irene, Maria of Amnia, Euphrosyne, and Theodora – the first and the last responsible for publicly bringing down iconoclasm, and the middle two acting as dynastic links by maintaining outward acquiescence to their spouses' iconoclastic policies while privately supporting icon veneration and raising up iconophile brides for their sons. Without the influence of these four women, their bride shows and their clerical supporters, eastern Christianity might look very different today.

One Byzantinist writes succinctly: "Seven Byzantine sources record that five times in the eighth and ninth centuries the winner in a competition of beautiful women became the bride of an emperor or future emperor." These sources, four written by contemporaries, include two major chronicles, an oration by the Byzantine emperor Leo VI (882-912), an account of the reign of Empress Irene (775-802) and four of saints.ⁱⁱⁱ The chronicles and the narrative of Empress Irene's reign are by St. Theophanes the Confessor and Patriarch (St.) Nikephoros I, and the saints' *Lives* are those of Philaret the Merciful, Empress Theodora, Cassiane the Hymnographer, and the nun Irene Chrysovolantou.

In addition, in the first of her three essays in *Studies in the History of Modern Greek Story-Motives*, Photeine Bourboulis has found traces of the imperial bride-show in Russia and perhaps even China. The custom passed from fact to fancy, and from the folk-story domain of Greek popular fiction to later central and eastern European versions of the fairy-tale that the English-speaking world knows as Cinderella.^{iv}

Empress Irene of Athens (775-802)

The sole surviving contemporary account of Irene's life is a Chronicle (*Chronographia*) covering the years 284-813 by Theophanes the Confessor, abbot of the Megas Agros monastery. Subsequent compilations of her life after the triumph of Orthodoxy in 843 all rely heavily on Theophanes' work.

The earliest announcement of Irene's arrival in Byzantium is reported by Patriarch Nikephoros I in his *Short History*: "In the 8th indiction Constantine brought from Hellas a wife for his son Leo, namely Irene, and in the month of December he crowned her Augusta and, after uniting her with his son, celebrated their wedding."^v

Irene was about fifteen years old when she arrived in the capitol in 769 to wed Leo IV, son of Emperor Constantine V and his first wife Çiçek (Irene), a baptized Khazar princess.^{1 vi} From the landed Sarandapechys family of Hellas (mainland Greece), the liaison between Irene and Leo was a well-judged move to strengthen Constantinople's ties with native Byzantine rulers of central Greece, now heavily populated after a century of Slavic immigration. The betrothal, celebrated shortly after Irene's arrival, was followed on December 17, 769 by the imperial wedding and her acclamation as empress. Thirteen months later, in January of 771, Irene gave birth to a son, Constantine VI, in the Porphyry Chamber of the palace. Born "in the purple," that is, an imperial child born during his father's reign, the boy stood third in line for the succession to the throne still occupied by his grandfather, Constantine V.

A strong military campaigner against the Arabs and Bulgars, Constantine V had followed in the theological footsteps of his father, Leo III (the Isaurian), the first iconoclast emperor. Leo III's motive for overturning traditional Christian icon veneration had been to curtail the "worship" of graven images, a distorted interpretation of the Second Commandment, which had perhaps arisen as a superstition among Byzantine soldiers who feared that icon veneration had incurred God's displeasure and brought about natural disasters and a long string of losses against the Arabs and Bulgars.² Persecution added

1 Constantine V's Three Marriages: Çiçek (Irene) the Khazar, Constantine V's first wife is described thus by Theophanes the Chronicler: "She learned Holy Scripture and lived piously, thus reproving the impiety of those men [Leo III and Constantine V]," implying that she was an iconophile. Married in 731, Çiçek gave birth to the heir, Leo IV, in 750, dying that same year, presumably from childbirth complications. Constantine's second wife Maria, married soon after, died the following year in 751, perhaps also in childbirth. Constantine's third wife was Eudokia, who married in 751 and bore him six children, one of whom was St. Anthousa the Younger, named after St. Anthousa the Elder, an iconophile abbess whom Constantine persecuted, but who foretold his daughter's birth as one of a set of twins. Eudokia supported Anthousa's monastery and probably held iconophile beliefs as certainly did her daughter. Although a third marriage was uncanonical in that period, Constantine V's three marriages were never addressed by the Orthodox Church, in contrast to the later alliances of Leo VI the Wise (886-912) which led to the Tetragamist Controversy.

2 Theophanes chronicles the coronation of Leo III's wife Maria as Augusta in 718, the same day that her infant son Constantine V disgraced himself (and according to iconophile writers foretold his unorthodox rule) by defecating in his baptismal font. Married before the birth of her first daughter in 704, Theophanes records that Maria prayed in front of the sanctuary doors of Hagia Sophia prior to the ceremony and speaks of her neutrally and with respect, as opposed to his references to her husband and son as impious. Although not cited in his Chronicle, perhaps he felt that she retained iconophile beliefs. (Theophanes Chronographia, AM 6211 / AD 718).

to the theological fracas when Byzantine generals began actively pursuing iconophiles. Prominent monks, particularly those near the capital who refused to accept Leo III's edict, and later the definition of faith issued by Constantine V's iconoclast council of 754 at Hieria, were tortured, blinded, or exiled. Those who agreed to abide by the decrees were sometimes forced to show their good faith by publicly parading hand in hand with women (including nuns). In Byzantine society this signaled a public declaration of marriage; yet marriage with a tonsured monastic was an excommunicable offense for both parties.



*Constantine V,
Mutinensis graecus,
Biblioteca Estense,
Modena.*

A further affront to Orthodox belief that went beyond the ruling of the Council of Hieria was Constantine's increasing disparagement of the saints and the Mother of God. A pamphlet by Patriarch Nikephoros reads "He abolished the use of the title Saint and said the Theotokos could help no one after death, and that the saints had no power of intercession, their martyrdom helping only themselves and saving their own souls from punishment."^{vii} It was veneration of the Virgin, however, that most incensed the emperor, until finally it became a punishable offense to even use the common exclamation, "Mother of God, help me."^{viii} A contemporary anecdote about Emperor Constantine V by Theosteriktos, author of the *Life of St. Nicetas of Medikion*, relates: "Taking in his hand a purse full of gold and showing it to all he asked, 'What is it worth?' They replied that it had a great value. He then emptied out the gold and asked, 'What is it worth now?' They said, 'Nothing.' 'So,' he said, 'Mary (for the atheist would not call her Theotokos), while she carried Christ within was to be honored, but after she was delivered she differed in no way from other women.'^{ix}

As sacred images of Christ, the Mother of God, saints, and angels were banned under Constantine V's rule, many Constantinopolitan churches were closed or desecrated, and priceless frescoes and mosaics covered over or chipped from the walls. At Blachernae, the principle Constantinopolitan shrine to the Virgin, scenes of the life of Christ were destroyed and, according to a contemporary source, the emperor converted the famous church "into a storehouse of fruit and an aviary, for he covered it with mosaics representing trees and all kinds of birds and beasts...." At the Milion, the central

milestone of the capital from which all distances in the empire were calculated, scenes of the six ecumenical councils were replaced with portrayals of horse racing and a picture of the emperor's own favorite charioteer.^x Cities and towns throughout the empire suffered similar desecration.

Constantine V was resisted by much of the Church, but he was also resisted, not as predictably, by his own family who generally disobeyed his iconoclast policies in the subversive but practical spirit of the iconophile-hymnographer St. Cassiane: "Don't kick against the pricks with your bare feet."^{xi}

An exception to this quiet disregard was when Constantine's sister Anna openly supported a bid for the throne by her iconophile husband Artabasdos. Styling himself "Protector of the Holy Icons," Artabasdos reigned in Constantinople until Constantine returned from a military campaign on the eastern borders and swept him from power.

Constantine's third wife, Eudokia, also supported iconophiles, in particular the saintly abbess Anthousa the Elder whom Constantine had tortured and persecuted. His own iconodule daughter Anthousa (named after the abbess) refused his attempts to marry her off, devoting herself instead to philanthropy. Anthousa the Younger not only ransomed prisoners of war and donated to the repair of churches and monasteries—perhaps even those ravaged by her father's iconoclast followers—but personally rescued orphans and foundlings from the streets of Constantinople and found ways to raise them. Tonsured a nun after her father's death, she spent years as an ascetic in an iconophile monastery and was later canonized.^{xii}

In 775, Constantine V died in battle and Irene's young husband was acclaimed Leo IV, sole emperor. Leo continued his father's iconoclasm and contemporaries record that when Leo was informed of a plot to make icons available to certain eunuch court officials, he had them "arrested, scourged and marched through the city in chains." Their hair was lopped off to signify that they were criminals, and one of their number died during the harsh imprisonment.^{ix} A later twelfth-century account by Kedrenos adds Irene's name to the conspirators, and portrays a gripping confrontation between the husband and wife, whom the emperor accuses of breaking a vow of iconoclasm she had taken to his father before their marriage.^x In denouncing her he declares that he will never sleep with her again. A recent reevaluation claims that this was based on a nearly contemporary account, suggesting that Irene may have been a secret iconophile all along.^{xi}

Many historians insist that Constantine V would never have chosen an iconophile bride for his son, nor would she have dared renege on her vow. He was, after all, “the most powerful man in the Byzantine Empire, and she the extremely fortunate young woman selected to join the court.”^{xii} Still, Kedrenos’ account of the confrontation and the emperor’s refusal to cohabit with Irene is not impossible. Although she had conceived within four months of her wedding, Irene had no further pregnancies in the decade between giving birth and her husband’s death in 780. Some modern historians have attributed this lapse to gynecological problems. While this is possible, it seems too easy an answer. There are no accounts of Irene being chronically ill during her reign, and as there was great pressure on young empresses to give birth at two- to three-year intervals any physical impediment would have been common knowledge at a court whose stability depended on the continuation of the dynasty.

Although this twelfth-century account of Irene’s early iconophile leanings is often dismissed as iconodule propaganda, it is not impossible that a young girl, brought to court on the basis of her family connections, beauty, and manners, and expected to fall into line with dynastic policy, may have held a private belief that was very different. At the time of Irene and Leo’s marriage iconoclasm had only been in place for fifteen years and both Irene’s parents and grandparents would have grown up venerating icons. As we’ve seen from the twentieth-century’s failed Soviet experiment, tradition does not die easily and it is quite believable that many pious Orthodox outwardly acquiesced to legislated iconoclasm while hoping for an eventual change of policy. Another possibility is that the young empress learned icon veneration from the court’s eunuch officials who were later dismissed by her iconoclast husband. Eunuchs were ever-present in the women’s quarters, and it is likely that some of Irene’s personal attendants were secret iconophiles.

The sudden death of Emperor Leo IV in 780, ostensibly from a fever caused by his insistence on wearing a heavy antique jeweled crown that belonged to the Church of Hagia Sophia, left Irene as regent for their nine-year-old son. Leo’s brothers quickly rose up to depose the young heir and his mother, but the twenty-five-year-old Irene effectively put down the attempt, arresting and exiling the iconoclast military officers and key civil functionaries who had sided with the conspirators and replaced them with members of her own household. Particularly important to her reign were two eunuchs, Theophilos and Staurakios, who would later lead army and naval campaigns against



Gold Byzantine solidus coin depicting Empress Irene of Athens.

Arab invaders and the Slavic tribes raiding the Peloponnese. Judith Herin remarks, “Her handling of the challenge displayed a skill that few would have predicted in the young ‘Irene from Athens’. She had had no previous experience of politics, although over the past eleven years she must have observed how emperors dealt with opposition. On Leo’s death in 780, many high-ranking officials thought that they could dispose of her quickly...[but] by her decisive action against the plotters... she demonstrated sound judgment and a determination to protect the imperial inheritance for her son.”^{xiii}

Soon after, Irene sent an embassy to negotiate a proffered marriage contract between the young Constantine VI and Charlemagne’s six-year-old daughter Rotrud, anticipating an alliance that would deter Charlemagne’s military ambitions in the south of Italy and ease tensions with Rome, where Pope Hadrian openly opposed iconoclasm. The marriage arrangements were accepted on both sides, and Irene sent the educated eunuch Elisaio to teach Rotrud “Greek letters and language and educate her in the customs of the Roman Empire.” The engagement, however, did not last.^{xiv} While political factors may have played a part, it is also true that Charlemagne, a devoted father, found himself unable to part with any of his five daughters, even to Western suitors. His sons and daughters traveled with him wherever he went, and the family ate all of their meals together. All of his daughters remained unmarried, and after her father’s death Rotrud herself became a nun.^{xv} Treadgold believes that Irene’s perception of the broken engagement as a personal slight led her to break the peace and attack Benevento in southern Italy.^{xvi} Years on, however, the broken engagement would be succeeded by a fascinating rematch.

The Seventh Ecumenical Council

For the first four years of Irene’s regency, there is no indication of her attitude toward icon veneration. Iconoclasts remained in civic and military positions and the state’s official policy remained unchallenged until an event in the summer of 784 convinced her to reverse the doctrine. When Patriarch Paul IV of Constantinople fell ill and resigned his position, Irene and her fourteen-year-old son visited the monastery of his retirement to protest his decision. There, the patriarch told them that although he had sworn not to venerate icons as a condition of his enthronement under Leo IV, he was actually an iconophile and deeply disturbed over the schism that iconoclasm had created between Constantinople and the other Orthodox churches.^{xvii}

Pope Gregory II (715-731) had excommunicated the first iconoclast emperor Leo III, and the Roman pope's seven immediate successors including the Syrian Gregory III (731-741) and the contemporary Pope Hadrian I (772-795) had each restated Rome's disapproval of iconoclasm. Neither patriarchs nor legates of Alexandria, Antioch or Jerusalem had ratified the council at Hiera and, according to Theophanes, Patriarch Paul IV told Irene and Constantine: "Unless an ecumenical council takes place and the error that is in your midst is corrected, you will not find salvation."^{xviii} He requested that the layman Tarasios, a former imperial secretary who had taken monastic vows, be appointed his successor, and that he himself might be left alone to repent and die in peace. Theophanes adds: "Both the public and the imperial government had great confidence in him. So from that time onward the question of the holy icons began to be openly discussed and disputed by everyone."^{xix} Whether the empress was already an iconodule or the patriarch had persuaded her to this position, Irene came to the conclusion that it was time to end the bitter wrangling. The power to do so was now in her hands, with Patriarch Paul's moral authority now an additional safeguard for her regency.^{xx} Tarasios accepted the nomination as patriarch on the condition that an ecumenical council would be called.

This first attempt at a council was held a year and a half after Tarasios' consecration, in September of 786 in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. The participants included two legates from Rome and two from Egypt representing the patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem, which were already under Islamic rule. The empress and the patriarch, however, underestimated the iconoclast sentiments of old-guard bishops, laymen, and soldiers loyal to the former emperors. As the council convened, a mob of armed troops from the garrison of Constantinople gathered in the forecourt and, pounding on the doors, shouted threats against the council. The meeting ended in chaos and Irene and Constantine returned to the palace, offering no public response. Biding her time, Irene understood that success depended on finding a way to secure the military defense of the city and to draw the teeth of the iconoclast troops. This she managed peacefully by the masterful stroke of ordering the iconoclast army units to Malagina, a traditional meeting place for troops starting off on Arab campaigns. Once there, she had the iconoclast ringleaders paid off and dismissed to their native places, informing them that she had already sent their families home from the capital.^{xxi}



*Marriage of Theophobos to sister of Emperor Theophilos, crowned by patriarch.
12th-century Chronicle of John Skylitzes, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid.*

Next, Irene appointed commanders loyal to herself, and within eight months she had quenched the most fierce support for her husband and father-in-law's policies. She proceeded with the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, this time carefully held outside of Constantinople at Nicaea. Presided over by Patriarch Tarasios, the council was attended by 400 bishops, monks, and laymen, with 308 bishops signing the declaration of faith by which icon veneration was restored.

One of Irene's first actions was to commission a mosaic icon of Christ for the Chalke Gate, the ceremonial entrance leading to the Great Palace of Constantinople, as well as restoring the churches of the Virgin of the Spring and St. Euphemia, which her father-in-law had used as an arms depot. She welcomed back exiled clergy and monastics, liberally endowed the monasteries and shrines that had suffered most under iconoclasm, and raised support for the Church's extensive social programs. These included: provision for the sick, needy, orphans and widows; erecting new hostels for foreigners; supporting orphanages, homes for the elderly, dining halls for the poor; and maintaining cemeteries for foreigners and the indigent, while legislating a general reduction in taxes. This undoubtedly added to her popularity, but there is no reason to believe that these weren't real acts of philanthropy.

The First Bride Show: Empress Maria of Amnia (788-795)

In 788 Irene turned her attention to arranging the first known bride-show for her son Constantine VI. According to Niketas, who wrote the *Life* of his illustrious relative, St. Philaret, thirty-four years after the event, imperial officials were sent throughout the empire to find beautiful girls of properly placed families. "Equipped with an ideal portrait (*lavraton*), a measure to establish vital statistics, and even a slipper to check foot-size," they made their way through the region, collecting a train of eligible and hopeful young women to make the trek back to Constantinople.³ ^{xxiii} In Paphlagonia, they stopped at Philaret of Amnia's imposing villa, not realizing that the family had been impoverished by Philaret's extreme charity. Willing neighbors came forth with the makings of a lavish banquet so that the family would not be shamed, and the imperial representatives picked Philaret's three granddaughters as potential brides. Escorted back to Constantinople with the other hopefuls, Irene and Leo VI selected Maria as the new empress. Initially pleased with his bride, the young emperor showered court positions

3 In the *Life* of St. Philaret, the Greek is translated as, "the sandal on the foot".

and gifts on her family. Maria's sisters, Myranthia and Euanthia, also married well, with Euanthia wedding Grimoald, Duke of Benevento, to fortify a new alliance between Byzantium and the Lombards.^{xxiii}

Although some scholars now doubt the historical existence of the bride shows, claiming that the narratives are simply a symbolic *topos* or theme, the evidence for the shows is both extensive and contemporary. Irene's motives for the first bride-show are unknown. It may have reflected her desire to strengthen ties with provincial ruling families, as had happened in her own case, or it was perhaps a salve for the young headstrong emperor after his broken engagement to Rotrud. In any case, Irene oversaw the selection of the candidates and Leo made his choice from among them, although he was probably carefully guided.

While there is no evidence in the *Vita Philaretos* to indicate that Philaret's family was iconoclast or iconophile, it is hardly possible that a year after convening the Seventh Ecumenical Council, Irene would have overlooked her daughter-in-law's beliefs. Further, Maria's life-long friendship and correspondence with St. Theodore the Studite is compelling confirmation of her iconodule position.

Two daughters followed the marriage: Irene around 789 and Euphrosyne a few years later. As the young Constantine matured, however, his relations with Irene became increasingly strained. According to Theophanes, his conduct was so unruly that entrusting him with imperial responsibility would have been disastrous for the empire. Neither was Irene ready to relinquish her consolidated rule, and the thwarted young emperor did not attain power until 790 when he gained support from soldiers of the Armeniac theme to take over as sole ruler. In 793, soon after the birth of a second daughter instead of the hoped-for male heir, Constantine turned against his young wife. Complaining that he had been forced to marry Maria, and that she was now attempting to poison him (a crime punishable by divorce and, if *lèse-majesté* could be proved, even death), Constantine had in fact fallen in love with his wife's lady-in-waiting.

Within weeks of the birth, Constantine exiled Maria and his small daughters to an iconophile monastery founded by his mother on the island of Prinkipio. Theophanes reports in the *Chronographia* that Maria was forced to become a nun, stating, "He hated her because of the insinuations of his mother, who was aiming at the rule: Irene did this to make everyone accuse him."^{xxiv} In the *Life of Tarasios* the patriarch found the accusation of poisoning "shameful



St. Theodore the Studite

and untrue,” and refused to tonsure Maria against her will. He could not, however, save her from life-long exile, and Theophanes reports that the patriarch did tonsure her within the year, presumably with her consent. Seven months after the controversial divorce, Constantine married his mistress, Theodote, and crowned her empress, an honor that Maria had never been given. Constantine’s second marriage (the Moechian Controversy) was most loudly denounced as illegitimate and adulterous by influential relatives of Theodote herself: Platon, abbot of the Sakkoudion monastery and his nephew, the future St. Theodore the Studite. Theodore, in fact, would continue to act as spiritual advisor to Maria and her daughters for the rest of his life. The marriage to Theodote was so unpopular that it helped bring about Constantine’s deposition the following year.^{xxv}

This first overthrow of his mother’s influence, however, led to years of struggle between Irene and Constantine for control of the court, and it wasn’t until 797, after a series of military defeats under Constantine’s rash leadership, that Irene regained the throne. Discovering that her son was again plotting against her, she had him blinded in the Porphyry Chamber in which he was born: once maimed, he was no longer eligible for the throne. Despite its horrible nature, blinding was considered a merciful option to execution for treason and had been used by Constantine himself in putting down a series of threatened coups by his uncles. It was probably for this act that Irene was denied the Church canonization bestowed upon her later successor Empress Theodora.^{xxvi} 4 Constantine lived on in exile until his death in 805, cared for by Theodote and outliving his mother by several years.

Once Irene became sole ruler in 797, she began new building and restoration in earnest. In 798 she sent envoys to the Arabs and the Franks, but a string of Byzantine defeats and an ensuing costly treaty with the Arabs began to undermine her position. Irene’s reluctance to settle the succession and her possible acceptance of an unexpected (and to us intriguing) offer of marriage from Charlemagne propelled the opposition into action.⁵ Nikephoros I, one of the empress’s treasury officials, replaced Irene in the bloodless coup of October 802 and she was exiled to the island of Lesbos.

Nonetheless, Irene’s achievements were remarkable. As the first sole woman ruler of Byzantium, she had not only maintained control of the govern-

4 Although in a letter, Theodore the Studite praises Irene as a saint for her zeal in restoring icon veneration and the desecrated monasteries, she was never canonized and does not appear in the *Menaion* or later collections of Lives of Saints of the Orthodox Church. Some westerners, including Treadgold, write of her as an eastern saint based on the writings of the Bollandists, who mistook Theodore the Studite’s letter to indicate canonization.

ment and army, but had managed the intricate duties of imperial power, including negotiations with two of the world's most prominent statesmen: Charlemagne in the West and the Muslim Abbasid caliph, Harun Al-Rashid, later immortalized in the fictional work, *One Thousand and One Nights*. Irene's accomplishments included the Seventh Ecumenical Council and the reestablishment of icon veneration, along with her encouragement of a new generation of iconodules who would take on the second period of iconoclasm.

The Bride Shows Continue...

The Byzantine bride-show initiated by Irene appears again in the reign of her successor Nikephoros I (802-811). On December 20, 807, the Athenian Theophano, a relative of deposed Empress Irene, and thus possibly of an iconophile family, was selected by the widowed Nikephoros as his son Staurakios' wife from a company of young ladies assembled from around the empire and the two were married the same day.⁶ After Nikephoros' death at the Battle of Pliska in 811, the gravely wounded and paralyzed Staurakios was acclaimed emperor in the hope that he would recover, but instead grew increasingly ill, was deposed, and died a few months later.

The childless Theophano hoped to take the throne after him as had Irene, which was also Staurakios' intent, but this was not allowed by his family, who persuaded her to retire to a monastery, and it was Staurakios' iconophile brother-in-law who came briefly to the throne as Michael I (Rangabe). Patriarch Nikephoros I had Michael sign a vow to uphold Orthodoxy before crowning him, and during his short reign the sincerely iconophile emperor allowed the return of prisoners and exiles, restored icons and frescoes, and gave generous donations to churches and individuals wronged by Emperor Nikephoros I. We can assume that his wife Prokopia, daughter of Nikepho-

5 According to a brief four-word fragment in the Latin text *Kölner Notiz*, in 798, fourteen years after the broken engagement with Rotrud, a Byzantine embassy arrived at the Frankish Court from Sicily, "proposing to hand the empire over to Charles." While some modern historians have insinuated that this was a marriage proposal from Irene, we know neither who sent the embassy nor what their aim was. A more likely possibility is that they were disgruntled Byzantine nobles who hoped to depose the empress with Charlemagne's aid.

About a later proposal, however, there is no confusion. Eighteen months after his coronation in 800 as emperor of the West, an embassy arrived in Constantinople with an open proposal of marriage from Charlemagne to Irene. His motives may have been to cement his claims by creating an alliance with the empress in which each would rule their respective parts of Christendom. Irene was not adverse to the idea of an alliance, but her court and advisors were so alarmed that it hastened her overthrow in October, 802. (Herrin, pg.78,117-8,125.)

6 That Nicephoros I had preselected Theophano as his son's bride to connect his reign with that of the previous dynasty seems credible, as he brought her to the capitol from Athens after separating her from her betrothed husband. We have no evidence as to whether she was an iconophile or not, but as we have seen, empresses' private beliefs did not always match their husbands and Theophano was from Empress Irene's family.



9th-century folio of Chludov Psalter, D 129, depicting the iconoclast council of 815 awash with blood. Moscow State Historical Museum.

ros I, was also an iconophile: in the *Chronographia* Theophanes praises Emperor Michael I as a “great soul and not avaricious”, and “pious and orthodox” and commends the couple for their generosity. Michael, in fact, would abdicate two years later to receive the monastic tonsure.^{xxvii xxviii}

Michael I was succeeded by Leo V (the Armenian) who seized the throne in 813, believing that he had “a divine mandate to return to the iconoclast policies of Leo III and Constantine V, during whose lengthy reigns the Byzantines had successfully held foreign enemies at bay”.^{xxix} Upon his accession Leo convened the Council of 815 to repudiate the Seventh Ecumenical Council, forbade the installation of images on church walls low enough to be venerated, and removed Irene’s icon of Christ from the Chalke Gate. Iconophile monastics such as Sts. Theodore the Studite and Symeon of Lesbos were again exiled or imprisoned. Once Leo revealed himself as an iconoclast, Patriarch Nikephoros I wrote to Leo’s wife, Theodosia, daughter of the Armenian patrician and rebel Arsaber, reminding her of correct belief and practice in worship and appealing to her to persuade the emperor to refrain from his iconoclast undertakings. Whether she was able to temper Leo’s plans we don’t know, but after Leo was assassinated in 820 during the Christmas liturgy, she went into exile on the island of Chalcita with her sons, where Theodore the Studite wrote to congratulate Theodosia and her son Basil on their return to iconophile Orthodoxy and requested that they assist iconophile monastics who had been exiled to the island. Presumably, Theodosia and her sons had declared their Orthodoxy publicly after Leo’s death.^{xxx}

Leo’s successor was Michael II of Amorion, a popular former army officer who theoretically supported iconoclasm and was almost certainly complicit in Leo’s assassination. Although Michael went so far as to write Charlemagne’s eldest son, King Louis the Pious, in support of iconoclasm, he pursued a moderate policy at home. Although prohibiting public discussion of icons, he released iconophile prisoners, permitted exiles to return and allowed icon veneration in churches and monasteries outside of Constantinople.^{xxxi}

Empress Euphrosyne: A Recovered Kingdom (824-829)

From her birth around 793, Euphrosyne and her sister Irene had lived with their mother Maria, the deposed wife of Constantine VI, in the Prinkipio convent founded by their grandmother, Empress Irene. With a good wind, the island of Prinkipio was a long morning’s sail from the city, and Euphrosyne had grown up with stories of court life while imbibing the piety and

iconophile traditions of the Prinkipio sisterhood. Maria had certainly accepted tonsure, but there is no clear evidence that Euphrosyne or her sister Irene ever made an official commitment to monastic life on Prinkipio. Irene, in fact, seems to have died young.

Soon after Michael II came to power, his wife Thekla, the mother of his young son Theophilos, died and the disconsolate emperor vowed that he would never marry again. His ministers, however, pressured him to remarry, insisting that an empress was needed to carry on the ceremonial aspects of court life and to rule over the women's quarters. Acceding to their wishes, Michael cast around for a suitable wife, and found in Euphrosyne a noblewoman who would link him to the Isaurian dynasty back to Euphrosyne's great-grandfather Leo III. As Judith Herrin remarks, "Her genes were her fortune."^{xxxii}

Once the emperor offered his hand, however, an epistolatory furor ensued when St. Theodore the Studite wrote to Maria from exile to not allow the marriage and that Euphrosyne should not even consider the proposal. Most historians assume that she had taken religious vows, but it is not clear to what degree of monasticism she was committed—whether she had simply lived the life of a novice in the monastery with her mother or was fully tonsured.

If she had not taken vows, St. Theodore's advice could simply reflect an experienced monastic acutely aware of the vagaries of court life who wanted to spare Euphrosyne the defilement and heartache that her mother had experienced. In any case, marrying a tonsured monastic was a grave ecclesiastical offense for both parties, much more so than divorce. The only possible dispensation would have been if the canonical requirements for tonsure had been violated and it could be proven that the tonsure had been forced. It is difficult to imagine Emperor Michael II risking excommunication and the condemnation of the Christian world in order to marry a tonsured nun, no matter how advantageous the match. It is impossible to see Euphrosyne doing so.⁷

In any case, it is not hard to imagine the attraction that life at court would have for a young isolated woman, and Euphrosyne, now about twenty-five, left Prinkipio in 824 to become the new empress consort. Around this time St. Theodore wrote again to Maria, urging her to decline her imperial son-in-law's invitation to live at court.^{xxxiii} We do not have Maria's response, but she did spend her remaining years on the Prince's Islands.^{xxxiv} A possible context for the marriage between Euphrosyne and Michael II that has been

⁷ Canon XVI of the Fourth Ecumenical Council prescribes excommunication for marrying a vowed nun.



*10th-century post-iconoclast Byzantine enkolpion.
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.*

overlooked is that if Euphrosyne was indeed tonsured, the couple may have agreed to marriage in name only, as did Pulcheria and Marcion centuries earlier. Circumstantial evidence for this is strong. Euphrosyne was a healthy young woman in the prime of life, yet the marriage remained barren and there is no record of miscarriage. Michael II may also have been loath to break the vow made over his wife's deathbed, and only agreed to the legal union in order to satisfy the court and anchor his unsteady position by marrying into the preceding dynasty. Being privy to this arrangement would also explain the subsequent public silence of Theodore the Studite, who was not noted for backing down from even lesser controversies. Finally, while married to Euphrosyne, Michael II pre-arranged his own burial next to the tomb of his first wife in the Church of the Holy Apostles. There was never a third tomb for Euphrosyne, and after her husband's death, when her stepson Theophilos came of age to rule, she returned immediately to monastic life.

Another intriguing factor in the union was Euphrosyne's iconophile upbringing. Michael II's predecessors had slid back into iconoclasm at least partly to placate the army and upon his accession he refused to revoke the Iconoclast Council of 815, although in practice he mitigated sentences of iconodule imprisonment and exile. While ordering ex-Patriarch Nikephoros I to refrain from publicly mentioning icons, the emperor also told petitioning iconophiles that matters of faith were based on individual belief. There was no further persecution of iconophiles during his reign and this may have been partly due to Euphrosyne's influence.

Like her mother and grandmother, Euphrosyne did not protest against iconoclast policy during her husband's lifetime, nor do contemporary iconophiles seem to view her as a rallying point. When Michael II died in October of 829, he was succeeded by Theophilos I, his son by his first wife Thekla. Although Euphrosyne was named as regent (actually, as "co-ruler" by Michael II on his deathbed), Theophilos had been tutored by John the Grammarian, a leading iconoclast intellectual, and once in power the young emperor ordered the arrest of prominent iconophile clergy, several of whom died in prison.

Nevertheless, Theophilos and his stepmother seem to have been on good terms, as at sixteen and on the verge of taking up his imperial inheritance, Theophilos acquiesced to Euphrosyne's selection of candidates at the bride show she arranged for him in 830. The show was later described by Symeon the Logothete, George the Monk and Leo the Grammarian. Probably held in the fabulous hall of the Triclinium of the Pearl, two of the young women

selected are still well-known Church figures: the future saints, Cassiane of Constantinople and Theodora of Paphlagonia.^{xxxv}

Born in Constantinople around 805-810 to a good family, exceptionally beautiful and intelligent, Cassiane was among those candidates selected by Euphrosyne. According to one tradition, as the young women assembled, Euphrosyne gave Theophilus a golden apple, telling him to offer it to whom-ever he chose. First drawn to Cassiane, the young emperor approached her saying, “Through a woman came forth the baser things,” implying the sin of Eve, to which Cassiane responded, “And through a woman came forth the better things,” recalling the Incarnation. In Greek, the dialogue ran:

“-Εκ γυναικός τα χείρω.” (Ek gynaikós tá cheirō)

“-Καί εκ γυναικός τα κρείττω.” (Kaí ek gynaikós tá kreíttō)

Displeased by her wit, Theophilus turned to Theodora and offered her the apple.^{xxxvi}

The sudden turn-about was a boon for Cassiane who, according to chroniclers, had already set her sights on monasticism, and she became a renowned Byzantine abbess, poet, composer, and hymnographer.⁸ She was later canonized. The marriage of Theophilus and Theodora was successful as imperial marriages go: the couple lived in seeming harmony and had seven children, including Emperor Michael III (842-867).⁹ Yet, after her husband’s death, Theodora became fourth in the line of empresses who were instrumental in bringing iconoclasm to a close.

Instead of remaining at court with her traditional precedence over the new bride as had previous empresses, Euphrosyne moved to a formerly ruined monastery that she had bought and restored. Though circumstantial, this is yet more evidence for an arranged marriage with Michael II. Not only did her stepson Theophilus not perceive her as a threat, but she was so disinterested in retaining power that she left the court for a monastery as soon as he married. Indeed, perhaps this was the life that she had yearned for all along. The foundation became known as *Kyra (Lady) Euphrosyne*, and here she built tombs for herself and her family, including her mother Maria, her

8 Approximately fifty of Cassiane’s hymns are extant and twenty-three are included in Orthodox services, including the most famous, the hymn of the repentant harlot washing the feet of Christ, which is sung on Tuesday night, the service for Wednesday of Holy Week. In addition, 789 of her non-liturgical verses still exist.

9 Theophilus was viewed favorably by his subjects. Once a week he would ride from the Great Palace to Blachernae Monastery; enroute, people could wave him down to tell him their woes and to demand justice. The emperor frequently visited the agora in disguise to check that merchants were using fair weights in their sales. It was Theophilus who instituted the throne room that impressed foreign visitors with its golden organ, mechanical birds singing in a tree, mechanical roaring lions, and a throne that ascended to and descended from the ceiling.



Iconoclast cross in apse of Church of St. Irene (Holy Peace), Constantinople.

father Constantine VI, and her sister Irene, thus reuniting after death the family blighted by divorce.

Theodora's iconophile mother, Theoktiste, although granted the title *zoste patricia* by her son-in-law, which placed her fifth in rank among the titled positions of the empire, also chose not to live at court and entered *Ta Gastria*, a second monastery associated with Euphrosyne. The two women became close friends and after 830 visited one another frequently. By living away from the court in their respective monasteries, it was perhaps less difficult to include icon veneration in their daily prayers.^{xxxvii}

Although iconoclast persecution was reinstated by Emperor Theophilus, neither Theodora nor Euphrosyne commented publicly on imperial policy, perhaps to avoid antagonizing Theophilus or his iconoclast tutor, who had been enthroned as Patriarch John VII in 838. Under the patriarch's leadership, Theodore and Theophanes, two Palestinian iconodule monks from St. Sabbas Monastery, were punished in a macabre manner by having iambic verses describing their iconophile "crimes" tattooed on their faces.^{10 xxxviii} At the same time, Lazar, a Khazar monk and icon-painter, was so harshly branded that he never painted again, and less than a year after his marriage in 831, Theophilus ordered the beating of the 77 year-old iconophile Euthymius of Sardis, who died of the abuse and was later canonized. In 838, at the Synod of Blachernae, with Theophilus' support, Patriarch John the Grammarian anathematized leading iconophiles and all icons were ordered destroyed and frescos plastered over.

This seeming victory of iconoclasm was not as final as it appeared. August 15, 838 saw the capture of Amorion by the Arabs, and forty-two of the leading citizens were martyred after refusing to convert to Islam. Although Amorion was later reclaimed for a short period by the Byzantines, this devastating defeat marked the end of iconoclasm as a totem of military victory.

Two accounts, however, show that Euphrosyne was clearly iconophile. In one, we hear that she privately succored Michael of Synkellos, another iconophile saint, who confirmed that the dowager empress had offered him food, drink and clothing during his imprisonment in 836. In a further instance, recorded in the *Patria Konstantinoupoleos*, she and Theoktiste, the empress's mother, were implicated when it was discovered that Empress Theodora had often taken her young daughters to visit their grandmothers

10 The sense of the verses was: "These men have appeared at Jerusalem as vessels full of the iniquity of superstitious error, and were driven thence for their crimes. Having fled to Constantinople they forsook not their iniquity. Wherefore they have been banished from thence, and thus stigmatized on their faces." (Butler, 214.)

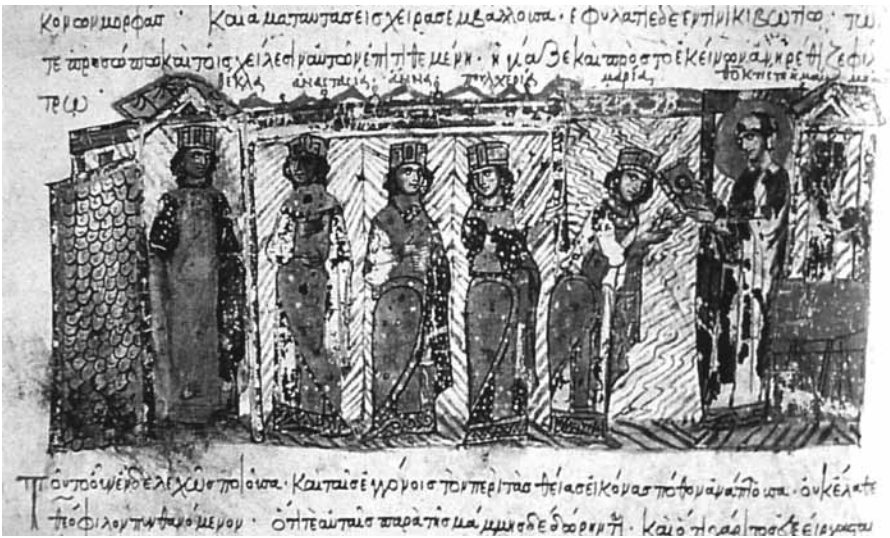
at *Ta Gastria*, where they were encouraged in icon-veneration. When the youngest daughter Pulcheria let slip that she and her sisters had been playing with Theoktiste's "dolls," (that is, "dolls" painted on boards), Theophilos forbade any such further activity. He accused Euphrosyne of complicity in the teaching, and ordered her to leave *Ta Gastria* where she had been staying with his mother and return to her monastery of *Kyra Euphrosyne*. Later, one of his royal daughters, Anna, was buried at *Kyra Euphrosyne* next to her step-grandmother, which can be viewed either as an act of personal affection or evidence that she had joined Euphrosyne in monasticism.^{xxxix}

While noted Byzantinist Judith Herrin regards this story as improbable because three- year-olds are "barely of an age to prattle about dolls," one wonders if she has spent much time around young children, most of whom are articulate and chatty by three or four. Objecting to "the notion that these women had sustained a particularly fervent devotion to the holy images," Herrin maintains that contemporary chroniclers reflect the "patriarchal expectations of the female sex" to participate in icon veneration. Here she seems to have overlooked the real evidence of the empresses' iconophile beliefs, and views them through a more modern lens.^{xi}

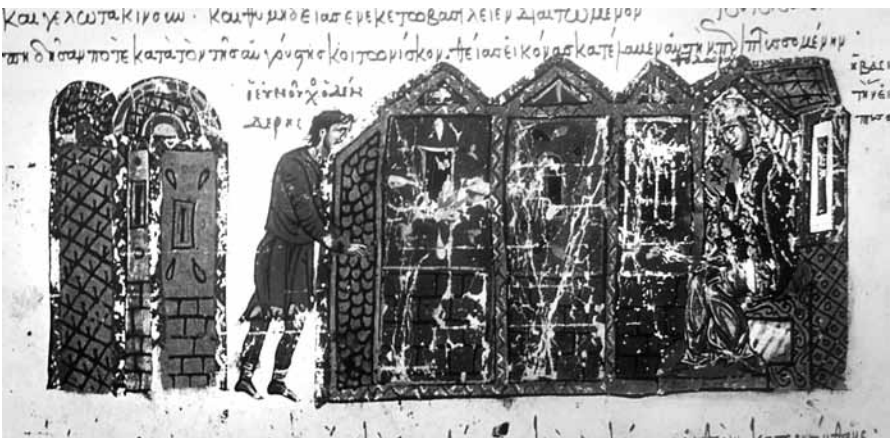
Even after the scandal over the children's training, Euphrosyne remained on peaceful terms with the emperor, and, in fact, it was her quick intervention that saved his throne in 838. When a rumor reached Constantinople that Theophilos had been killed in the campaign against the Arabs, senior court officials readied their own candidates for the succession. Aware of the maneuvers, Euphrosyne sent a swift messenger urging the return of her stepson. According to later Arabic and Syriac sources, the message read, "The Romans who have come report that you are killed and they wish to appoint another king; come quickly." Theophilos received the message in time and returned to secure his reign.^{xli}

Empress Theodora of Paphlagonia (842-56)

It is not surprising that Theodora, the emperor's young bride, maintained a public and marital silence while quietly holding to her own iconophile beliefs, as had her mother and stepmother-in-law. This policy seemed to work: her marriage, by any evaluation, was a success, and contemporaries report that the exceedingly beautiful empress was loved and admired by her husband, with none of the regrets that plagued Constantine VI. Theodora bore seven children in less than twelve years, including two sons, one of whom



Five daughters of Theophilos and Theodora instructed in icon veneration by their grandmother, Theoktiste.
12th-century Chronicle of John Skylitzes, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid.



Empress Theodora venerates an icon in the palace.
12th-century Chronicle of John Skylitzes, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid.

would die in infancy while the other succeeded his father as Michael III (842-67). Theophilus also linked her name to his elaborate additions to the capital. Outlying palaces, churches and even the city walls were built anew, restored, or strengthened, and a plan to beautify the grounds and buildings of the Great Palace was launched. After Theophilus' death, Theodora is credited with the restoration of the Monastery of St. Panteleimon, which had been turned into an arms depot 250 years earlier.^{xiii}

Even in the midst of her husband's reign, Theodora's private beliefs shone through. One occasion on which the empress is recorded as having been particularly upset was when the 77-year-old iconophile bishop Euthymius of Sardis died of a beating after claiming that Theodora's mother Theoktiste had visited him in prison. This small window into Theoktiste's iconophile charities is mirrored a few years later in her daughter's plea that Theophilus allow a tortured and maimed Khazar icon-painter to recuperate in a less severe prison.^{xliii}

In one account, however, Theodora does come into conflict with her husband. In *Theophanes Continuatus*, Deneris, a court jester, reports to the emperor that Theodora has secreted icons in her private apartments. When the emperor confronts her, Theodora replies that the jester had simply glimpsed the reflection of one of her ladies-in-waiting in a mirror, mistaking it for an icon. Again, Herrin paints this as a fable, but such a domestic scene doesn't seem so improbable.^{xliv}

Theodora finally comes into her own after Theophilus' death from dysentery in 842, and when the twenty-seven year-old iconophile empress stepped up as regent for her two-year-old son Michael III, the iconoclast wind began to shift once again. With mounting losses to the Arabs, the military confidence in iconoclasm as a banner of victory was waning and iconoclast policies had begun to seem old-fashioned.

Within a year of Theophilus' death, iconophiles are again recalled from exile. A local Church council is summoned in which Patriarch John VII (the Grammarian) is deposed and the future St. Methodius, a well-educated Bithynian abbot, is raised to the patriarchate. A week later, on March 11, 843, Empress Theodora, Michael III, and the new Patriarch Methodius I lead a triumphal procession from the Church of Blachernae to Hagia Sophia, upholding the Seventh Ecumenical Council and restoring the icons to the Church, an event still celebrated on the first Sunday of Great Lent as the Triumph of Orthodoxy.

Within days of his death, a report circulates that Theophilus had undergone a death-bed conversion, kissing an enameled icon *encolpion* of Christ brought to his bedside by his eunuch attendant Theoktistos. Although today's historians usually see the rumor as a plot cooked up by Theoktistos and Theodora to spare the emperor's reputation, the deconstruction itself seems guesswork. The conversion may not have happened, but it could have.

For thirteen years after her husband's death, Theodora ably governed the empire, first as regent with her son, Michael III, then as co-ruler. After replenishing the treasury, which had been depleted through fruitless military campaigns and Theophilus' massive building projects, Theodora foiled an attempted invasion by the Bulgarians and set the stage for the eventual Orthodox conversion of Bulgaria. As Michael III came into his majority, he also came under the influence of Theodora's brother Bardas, who progressively undermined the empress' authority until she was deposed in 855 and retired to *Ta Gastria* with her mother, dying there around 867.^{xiv}

The Last Bride Shows

The bride-show survived for two more generations and involved two new saints. Thirteen years after Theophilus' death, with fifteen-year-old Michael III deeply in love with his mistress Eudocia Ingerina, Theodora decided to hold a bride show to end the dalliance and marry her son off suitably. When Michael insisted on Eudocia Ingerina being included as a contestant, Theodora and her co-regent, the Logothete Theoctistos, agreed but compelled the choice of another Eudocia (Decapolitissa), a quiet iconophile who is hardly heard of again during the twelve years of her husband's reign, although she is lauded as virtuous and charitable in the Synodikon for the Sunday of Orthodoxy service. Also among the defeated contestants was Irene Guberina, a provincial beauty who later became abbess of the Convent of Chrysovalantum (possibly located in Constantinople above the Phanar), and later a saint. Irene's sister, who had accompanied her to Constantinople, married Bardas Phokas, Michael III's uncle.

According to a persuasive argument put forth by Cyril Mango and seconded by Warren Treadgold, Michael III arranged for the legitimacy of his first child by Eudocia Ingerina by marrying the pregnant Eudocia to Basil the Macedonian, whom he made co-emperor. Consequently, when Basil became emperor in 867, he was already married to Eudocia, and her son Leo the VI (the Wise) by Michael III became heir to the throne.

Although Eudocia had no reason to love the bride show that Theodora had staged to separate her from Emperor Michael, she held one herself in 882 for the fifteen year-old Leo. Eudocia and Basil selected twelve initial finalists and then narrowed the choice down to Theophano, a member of Eudocia's own family, the Martinacii. Leo acquiesced in the choice, but soon took a mistress, Zoe Zaoutzaina. After seven years of marriage—of which three years may have been spent by Theophano and Leo imprisoned by Basil II in the palace dungeon because of Leo's rumored designs on the throne—Theophano, an educated and devout ascetic, seems to have left her husband to his mistress in 893.¹¹ It is commonly believed that Theophano entered a convent in the Blachernae suburb, although the couple's saintly spiritual father, Euthymius, convinced her not to ask for a separation. After her death in 897, Leo married Zoe, the second of four marriages (both Zoe and his third wife dying tragically young) that would land him in the midst of the Tetragamist Controversy. Although his first marriage had not been a happy one, after miracles began being worked at her tomb, Leo built a church that he intended to dedicate to Theophano, believing her to be a saint. When he was forbidden to do so, he changed the dedication to "All Saints," so that his wife would be honored whenever this feast was celebrated. According to tradition, it was Leo VI who expanded the celebration on the Sunday following Pentecost from a commemoration of All Martyrs to a general commemoration of All Saints. Theophano was canonized soon after by the Church, and her *Life* was composed by Theophanes Continuatus and Symeon Metaphrastes.^{xlvi}

Conclusion

Discernable patterns emerge from the bride shows. All were held for the first marriage of a young reigning emperor or the heir to the throne; and the shows were overseen by the mothers of the emperors (except in the case of Stauracius' father). In most cases the choice of winner was carefully guided by the parents. The bride show was not only a beauty contest; moral character was equally as important, and two of the winners, Theodora and Theophano, would later be canonized as saints, while the virtuous Maria of Amnia was related to St. Philaret the Almsgiver. Noble birth was necessary, although wealth was not; in fact, a dependent, grateful girl would probably be more malleable than a rich, independent one. Finally, the candidate's reli-

¹¹ During her reign, Empress Theophano built the Monastery of St. Anastasia, the Protector from Potions (Hagia Anastasia Pharmacolytria) on the island of Halki near Constantinople.

gious orthodoxy (though unknown to the father-emperors) was paramount. Irene, Euphrosyne, and Theodora appear to have quite deliberately picked iconophile girls for the bride show, while Nikephoros I seems to have done so accidentally.^{xlvii}

Also not to be forgotten are those who, although eclipsed in the bride-show and in history, left their own unique spiritual legacies. These include: Sts. Cassiane and Irene Chrysovalantou; the Empress Eudokia, wife of Constantine V and succorer of the abbess St. Anthusa the Elder; St. Anthusa the Younger, Eudokia's daughter by Constantine V; as well as Constantine V's sister Anna, wife of the usurping iconophile emperor Artabasdos (741-3), "Protector of the Holy Icons".

Also to be mentioned are the more shadowy empresses who to greater or lesser degrees seem to have had iconophile leanings: Maria, wife of Leo III; Çiçek-Irene, the first wife of Constantine V; Theophano, the wife of Staurakios; Prokopia, wife of iconophile Michael I; and Theodosia, wife of Leo V, who may have attempted to moderate her husband's iconoclasm under the influence of Patriarch Nikephoros I and St. Theodore the Studite.

In this article we have concentrated on four strongly iconophile empresses who consciously remade their world: Irene, the first sole woman ruler of Byzantium and daughter-in-law of the arch-iconoclast Constantine V, who picked Maria of Amnia, the iconophile granddaughter of St. Philaret the Merciful, as bride (or candidate) for her son, Constantine VI. Exiled with Maria to Principio, the royal couple's daughter Euphrosyne, the last surviving member of the Isaurian Dynasty, emerged two decades later as the wife of Michael II. Euphrosyne in turn handpicked Theodora during the bride-show of her stepson, Theophilos, and after Theophilos' death, Theodora put an end to iconoclasm. Strong iconophile convictions, a series of astutely planned bride-shows, and the passing down of icon veneration to daughters and granddaughters made these four women crucial links in convoking the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 and the restoration of icons in 843. Quite a satisfying end to St. Philaret's "fairy-tale".

Byzantine Emperors, Their Wives and Empresses During the Iconoclast Period

717-741 Leo III

= **Maria** (Probable iconophile as she married Leo before 704 and daughter Anna is certainly iconophile.)

741-775 Constantine V

= **Çiçek-Irene the Khazar** (Probable iconophile. Theophanes mentions her piety, as he does Constantine's impiety.)

= **Eudokia** (Probable iconophile. Patroness of persecuted iconophile St. Athousa the Elder and her monastery, mother of iconophile St. Athousa the Younger.)

742-743 Usurper Artabasdos

= **Anna** (daughter of Leo III, sister of Constantine V. An iconophile whose husband styles himself, "Protector of the Holy Icons").

775-780 Leo IV

= **Irene of Athens** (Iconophile. Calls 7th Ecumenical Council, chooses Maria of Amnia as bride for son Constantine VI)

776-797 Constantine VI (with Irene)

= **Maria of Amnia** (Iconophile, granddaughter of St. Philaret the Merciful.)

= **Theodote** (beliefs unknown, probably iconoclast.)

797-802 Irene rules alone. Iconophile.

802-811 Nikephoros I

= **wife deceased before enthronement.** (Chooses Theophano (belief unknown) in bride show for Staurakios.)

811 Staurakios

= **Theophano** (Belief unknown, although a relative of iconophile Empress Irene of Athens.)

811-813 Michael I (Rangabe)

= **Prokopia** (probable iconophile with husband. Couple are praised by Theophanes the Confessor).

813-820 Leo the V the Armenian

= **Theodosia** (Letter from Pat. Nikephoros I asks Theodosia to moderate Leo's iconoclasm; publicly iconophile after Leo's death per Theodore the Studite).

820-829 Michael II the Amorion

= **Thekla** (Beliefs unknown, dies soon after coronation.)

= **Euphrosyne** (Iconophile daughter of Maria of Amnia, daughter-in-law of Irene, spiritual daughter of Theodore the Studite before marriage; as regent chooses iconophile Theodora in bride-show for step-son Theophilos.)

829-842 Theophilos

= (St.) **Theodora** (Iconophile, as is mother Theoktiste; as regent chooses iconophile Eudocia Decapitolissa for son Michael III in bride show.)

842-867 Michael III (co-reigns with mother Empress (St.)

Theodora in youth)

= **Eudocia Decapolitissa** (Iconophile bride chosen by Theodora.)

843 END OF ICONOCLASM

867-886 Basil the Macedonian

= **Eudocia Ingerina** (Former mistress of Michael III by whom she bore Leo VI. Iconophile Eudocia Ingerina chooses St. Theophano in bride-show for son Leo VI.)

886-912 Leo VI (the Wise) = St. Theophano Martiniake

= **Zoe Zaoutzaina, Eudokia Baiana, Zoe Karbonopsina**
(Ending in Tetragamist Controversy) ✦

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xlvi Warren Treadgold, "The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors", pp 395-413.

xlvii *Ibid.*, pg. 409.