DOI: https://doi.org/10.2298/GEI2102365O
UDC 141.72:821.14'04.09
Original research paper

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Contextualizing Gender in XII century Byzantine discourse: Women and Power in Ioannes Zonaras' Epitome Historiarum

The paper investigates Ioannes Zonaras' *Epitome Historiarum*, a Byzantine XII century world chronicle for normative conceptions of gender in Byzantium. The article explores two gender-appropriate women's roles in Byzantine society. It focuses on the behaviors, activities, and attributes attached to and prescribed for the widows and mothers to reiterate the patriarchal social structures. Also, this research intends to uncover the interplay between text and language through crucial gender signifiers, which influenced the balance of social and political power in the Medieval Roman Empire.

Key words: Byzantine Gender, widowhood, motherhood, Ioannes Zonaras, Byzantine sexuality, sophrosyne

Читање и интерпретација родних стереотипа у Византији 12. века: Жене и моћ у *Хроници* Јована Зонаре

Тему истраживања представљају нормативни концепти рода у *Хроници* Јована Зонаре из 12. века. Рад испитује две родно одговарајуће женске улоге у Византијском друштву, фокусирајући се на понашања, активности и атрибуте који су били везивани и очекивани за мајке и удовице, а све у циљу реитерације патријархалне друштвене структуре. Такође, овај рад има за циљ да разоткрије динамику између текста и језика кроз главне родне означитеље, који су утицали на равнотежу друштвене и политичке моћи у средњовековном римском друштву.

Кључне речи: Византија, род, удовиштво, мајчинство, Јован Зонара, сексуалност, σωφροσύνη

Over ninety percent of the world's literary output throughout History has been produced by men. Such alarming discursive gender dissonance had constituted a man as a "sole philosophical, cultural and political Subject" (Mitić 2017, 174–175). As Irigaray stresses, understanding the power of discourse does not entail a new theory in which a woman will turn into a subject from an object. The goal of my research lies in the uncovering of the masculine logic, which constructed discourses that claimed to produce "the truth and meaning that are excessively univocal" (Irigaray 1985, 78).

The perusal of the Byzantine/Medieval Roman discourses intends to pin down the basic tenets of womanhood in Byzantium regarding its relation to the power structures. Motherhood, virginity, and widowhood were three crucial masculine and institutional reconfigurations of women's lived experiences in the later Roman Empire that served to support a composite social hierarchy with the *vir Romanus* on the top of it as its authoritative Subject.

The discourses of the elite men of means who more often than not occupied high administrative, military, or ecclesiastic positions were constituting and reconstituting the power structures of the Medieval Roman society. In such discourses, directed primarily to other men, the normative and authoritative bodies were formed against the "production and projection of the abject other" (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009, 108).

Public speeches, and subsequently, written words and texts, which, in the Greek world, developed from the oratory — an essentially male political practice — used women in their discourses mainly as narrative tropes to address the issues of social mores. Rhetorical texts were vehicles for developing the authoritative institutions and the construction of the concept of the ideal citizen, always a masculine authority (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009, 95 et sq.).

The gender discrepancy within the bodies of ancient and medieval texts remains steady throughout all narrative genres. Such was the case with Greco-Roman historiography, a genre tacitly reserved only for men. In over a millennium of Byzantine literature, there is only one example of a female historian — Anna Komnene. She spent a non-negligible portion of her *Alexiad* conforming to societal gender expectations while proving her ability to write a work of History (Neville 2013; Neville 2014; Neville 2016; Vilimonović 2019). In turn, this means that the projection of women's lived experiences was conducted almost exclusively by men who used gender relations to suit their agendas in constructing and perpetuating patriarchal discourses of power.

Narrative texts enable us to understand how the medieval Romans conceptualized the binary gender relations – masculinity and femininity. Also, texts allow us to deconstruct the process of gender normativization. As well as ancient, the medieval Romans made a clear distinction between biological sex assigned at birth and gender as a social construct, that is, *nature* vs. *nurture* (Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 98–101: φύσιν μὲν θήλειαν, τρόπον δὲ ἄρρενα). Individuals would learn how to perform proper gender roles and what those roles meant concerning values, prejudices, and worldviews embedded in them (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009, 57–58). Since the Late Roman Republic, Romans lived in a system that promoted the idea that men and women should adhere to strict mores defining their masculinity and femininity. In this highly stratified social system, proper gender performance and proper sexual protocol were bound to the concept of an ideal Roman citizen, the *Vir Romanus*, an adult freeborn citizen from the top of the Roman social hierarchy, who controlled the system of domination (Walters 1997, 30–32). In such a system in which proper performance of gender intersected with the social class, we encounter a plurality of masculinities and femininities, where only one masculinity was in the

center of power cartography. Simultaneously, all the rest were pushed to the periphery, serving their marginality to strengthen the normative values.

To showcase the techniques used by men to craft normative femininity, we use the *Epitome Historion* written by a twelfth-century monk Ioannes Zonaras. His historiographical narrative contains relevant gender-driven episodes that serve as suitable case studies for the overall argument. Women depicted in Zonaras' narrative are analyzed not as individuals but as symbols of femininity authorized by the power structures. As Suzanne Dixon pointed out "each text is designed to project ideology (e.g. of proper womanly behavior) rather than circumstantial information about any given woman, even when it purports to record a specific, historicized woman" (Dixon 2001, ix).

The deeds of women in the narratives help us identify the categories of femininities present in the *Epitome,* used as indicators of the state of Roman politics (cf. Joshel 1997, 222, 228; James 2013, 107). Looking at the gendered constructs in the selected episodes of the *Epitome* also allows us to uncover the internal logic of Zonaras' text, which tells us a lot about the projection of these episodes into his own lived experiences.

Another aspect that makes Zonaras' work suitable for this analysis is its intended purpose. Despite its length, the *Epitome Historian* was a didactic piece intended to instruct young men in morality through relevant episodes from biblical and Roman histories (Kampianaki 2017, 59–60). Such stories were almost without any exceptions written to appraise commendable virtues by focusing on the good deeds of emperors, kings, and private individuals, or, on the other hand, to condemn the vices and immoral behavior of the morally corrupt and evil characters. Didactic purpose of narratives such as Zonaras' ambitious millennia-spanning Roman History attuned to the values of the Roman social order, emphasizing the virtues cherished by the senatorial and ecclesiastic elites (cf. Kaldellis 2015, 29–30, 43). Women had a meager political role within this discursive sphere, and they seldom feature in historical narratives. Even when they do, they serve as a control scale of the proper performance of Roman masculinity and the proper social order (Joshel 1997, 236 et sq.).

Several episodes analyzed in this paper focus on women's agency within precisely delineated borders of motherhood and widowhood and their relation to political power. These episodes indicate how women's agency was perceived in the androcentric world of power and politics in 12th century Byzantium. Overall, the episodes provide us with space to engage in a conversation about how women were described, perceived, and objectified by the elite men to serve, fit, and, importantly, perpetuate the patriarchal social order and the Roman power structures of the XII century.

Reading Byzantine Widowhood: The Act of the 'Manly' Heroine

From the onset of his *magnum opus,* Zonaras announces the material he intends to present to his audience. In the Prologue, he reveals the reasons for his copious endeavor by bringing forth a plethora of legendary male figures from Hebrew, Hellenistic, and Roman History. The only two women who break the masculine gender cohesion in the Prologue – save for Cleopatra, tightly connected to male protagonists – are Esther and Judith, heroines from the deuterocanonical texts (Zonaras, Prooimion, 27: περὶ τε τῆς Ἐσθὴρ καὶ ὅπως τὸ τῶν Ἑβραίων γένος πανωλεθρίας αὔτη ἐρρύσατο. Καὶ περὶ Ἰουδίθ, ἣ τὸν Ὀλοφέρνην κατασφισαμένη ἀνεῖλε καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ στρατιὰν παρέδωκεν εἰς ἀπώλειαν).

Zonaras' choice to deliver two biblical heroines as manifest examples of women's exploits could have been inspired by the tradition established in the Ante-Nicene Fathers. Namely, Clement of Rome had singled out Judith and Esther as paragons of the female heroes of faith (Clem 55: 3–5; cf. Zsengellér 2015, 186).

Nevertheless, apart from being led by patristic tradition, Zonaras might have had a particular interest in placing Judith and Esther on the center stage of the *Prooimion*. The early XI century to the early XII century was marked by the renowned and influential imperial women – Zoe and Theodora from the Macedonian dynasty, Eudokia Makrembolitissa, Maria of Alania, Eirene Doukaina, Anna Dalassene. The period of Zonaras' secular career at the court of Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) was particularly distinguished by the all-powerful Anna Dalassene, the Emperor's mother. Focusing on the two biblical heroines might reflect the ruptures in the strict gender division within the sphere of politics that marked this period. In order to contextualize the importance of Judith in XII-century Constantinople, we need to understand crucial tenets of this conspicuous text.

The status of the book of Judith within the Hebrew and Christian canon, as well as the values and worldviews embedded in the narrative plot, are of the main interest in the approach focusing on gender perspective. The polyvalent status of Judith's story within Jewish and Christian tradition testify to its ambiguous agenda. Namely, within the Hebrew tradition, the Book of Judith is considered an Apocrypha, which means that it is not part of the Hebrew Bible (Brine 2010, 13). On the other hand, Christian Orthodox tradition had included this text in the Septuagint, providing it with the canonical status, while the Roman Catholic church considers it "deuterocanonical" (Crawford 2003, 61). Apart from Judith's canonicity, it is also essential to have in mind that Judith's characterization varied. Judith from the Septuagint differed from the Judith from Vulgata version, where Jerome presented her as "a humble, more self-effacing heroine" (Levine Gera 2010, 29). This clearly shows how one story is attuned to the social mores of the audience. It also enables us to understand the discursive gendered peculiarities that were liable to change in order to conform to the normative discourses.

Out of the Old Testament's four prominent female characters (Ruth, Ester, Judith, and Sussane), Judith, as a character, is "far more complex, politically engaged and spiritually accomplished" (Brine 2010, 9). The book of Judith was a per-

fect trope for the case of women's interference into the affairs traditionally reserved for men, such as war and politics. The Book of Judith could be perceived as a disruptive voice that challenges the patriarchal structures of the Hebrew canon (Crawford 2003, 69–76). Judith came too close to sacerdotal role, with peculiar relation to the Divine. Such extraordinary status was decisively asserting the women's authority. As we have pointed out, some traditions were ready to accept such authority, while some were not prepared for such challenges (Craven 1983, 118). The acceptance of Judith into the Old Testament Christian canon did not mean that Christians were less patriarchal-oriented. The characterization of Judith conformed strictly to normative conceptions of femininity. The insistence on her widowhood, piety, and chastity should be perceived as a code for the normative femininity which maintained the masculine power structures.

The emergence of the image of too independent, dominant, bold, and wise woman Judith was contextualized by a biblical scholar Tal Illan. Illan suggested that the case of Judith, could be placed within the political context of the coronation of the queen Shelamzion (Alexandra) of Jerusalem (141–67 B.C.E.), along with the Book of Esther, and festival Purim as the "propaganda of the queen's reign" (Illan 1999, 153).

From the onset, Judith's story was bound to the idea of females' exertion of power over men, the women's salvific role against the oppressors' tyranny, and the professing of the agenda of female authority and active agency God through the female mediator. Judith's intertextual reading suggests strong narrative similarities to the David and Goliath story (Zsengeller 2015, 187–188). It is interesting to see how this trope was used and adapted in two Byzantine historical narratives. The earlier source is that of the sixth-century author Ioannes Malalas — who introduces a shorter and significantly altered version of events. The second is Zonaras' version, which delivers a longer and more detailed account.

Even though he was an epitomator, Zonaras was not an ordinary copyist of the previous authors. Instead, he deliberately made exciting additions, omissions, and rearrangements. Among Zonaras' sources for Jewish History were the Old Testament and Joseph Flavius' *Jewish Antiquities*. Theofili Kampianaki noticed that Zonaras' mainly relies on Flavius' *Jewish Antiquities*, which is interrupted solely in several episodes − in Tobit and Judith's case, although "heavily abridged" (Kampianaki 2017, 63). Such compiling strategy clearly shows that Zonaras was making deliberate choices and had chosen to include Judith's story for its "edifying" purpose (Kampianaki 2017, 67).

In the prelude to the whole story, Zonaras bestows upon Judith's character a rare quality of a "man's mind" and continues −"I will now speak of the woman Judith, of the mindset of a man (τὴν ἀρρενόφρονα) who annihilated Holophernes and saved her city and her people" (Zonaras, *Epitome*, III.11, 247).[1] Zonaras' pecu-

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[1] All translations of Zonaras' text are my own, except for the parts that are available in the translation provided by Banchich&Lane 2009, that cover the period form Alexander Severus' reign to the death of Theodosius the I.

liar compound word αρρενόφρων impresses into the minds of the audiences a notion that the realm of intellectual achievements belongs to men alone. It also places Judith in line with Debborah, the first "manly woman" of the Old Testament. The first use of this word belongs to Andrew of Crete, who deployed it precisely in his characterization of Debborah, the mother of Israel (*Canon Magnus*, VI.22.3). We find the same use in Sudae lexicon in an entry on Debborah "ἡ προφῆτις καὶ ἀρρενόφρων" (*Sudae*, D.136). The usage of this term testifies to the formation of the female political models within the biblical canon. Reinscription of Judith as a *manly* woman (in the tradition of Debborah's power exertion) soothed the destabilizing force of the gender-transgressive behavior in the prominent women. The *manliness* of Judith served to ascertain the exclusivity of the patriarchal power structures.

This view was by no means unique to Zonaras. His predecessors had neatly articulated it. The patristic thought reconfigured Greco-Roman ethical discourse on men's intellectual superiority through Judaic additions about the monistic "masculine" God and Christian ideas on divinized masculinity of the embodied Christ (Boyarin 1997, 13–15). Femininity was closely connected to sensuality and earthly passions, while "power and intellectual perception" were considered innately masculine (Meletius, *De Natura Hominis* 24, 83–84). Such gender epistemology implied that one's ascent to the Divine necessarily entailed transgression into the masculine (Purpura 2019, 10).

In Zonaras' description, the affirmative relationship between women and power is rendered through linguistic masculinization of her intellect, making Judith inevitably androgynous in the realm of political achievements. Had she remained thoroughly feminine in the narrative, the author could not have explained her "superiority" over Hebrew men and the Assyrian army. Judith breaks beyond the normative expectations of her gender, of which the most significant was transgression into the male spaces, conducted through certain rites of passage.

Zonaras presents Judith, as "a widow, the most temperate and wise and beautiful in appearance (Zonaras, *Annale*s, III.12, 249: ἡ γυνὴ χήρα, καὶ αὔτη σώφρων καὶ συνετὴ καὶ ὥραία τῇ ὄψει). He delivers an almost verbatim story from the Septuagint, which accentuates Judith's intercessory role between God and the people of Israel. Judith's widow robe (τῆν πενθήρη στολὴν τῆς χηρεύσεως) plays an essential role in the narrative as a visual marker of her chastity and status, which was laid aside during her visit to Holophernes. The changing of the garment along with the ritual washing (τὸ σῶμα περικλύσασα ὕδατι) present "symbols of conversion" and announce the change of her status (Xeravits 2013, 276; Zonaras, *Annales*, III.12, 250). The anthropology of the widow's robe was tightly intertwined with the cartography of gendered spaces and performances. The robe, which denotes chastity, was intertwined with the private space, protected from the penetrating male gaze. The ritual washing as a rite of passage was closely connected with the ascent to the Divine. The washing was also a form of religious immunization (Douglas 1984, 30). Judith's washing ritual might also be seen as an immunity measure from the upcoming challenge and as a ritual dissolution of her former identity (Douglas 1984, 162). The whole ritual denotes the performative aspect of each separate iden-

tity within the social system and the possible fluctuations between them. Judith's beautification (*kallōpistheisa*) presents another important rite of passage between various forms of womanhood: "After having put away the mourning widow robe, having washed her body and anointed it with scented oil, she put on the merry garment and jewelry. She beautified her face, gave her maiden buckets of wine and olive oil, and took a sufficient amount of meal, dry fruit, and a loaf of wheat bread. Leaving the city chaperoned by the young girl, she went to the enemy's encampment." (Zonaras, *Annales*, III.12, 250: εἶτα ἀποθεμένη τὴν πενθήρη στολὴν τῆς χηρεύσεως, καὶ τὸ σῶμα περικλύσασα ὕδατι καὶ μύρῳ χρισαμένη, στολὴν μετενέδυ εὐφρόσυνον καὶ κόσμον ἑαυτῇ περιέθετο).

The use of cosmetics in the Greco-Roman discourse was inherently tied to the deceitful and sexual practices of a prostitute or *adultera* (Richlin 2014, 181). According to Tertullian, the purpose of makeup was the arousal of sexual desire in men (2.12; Richlin 2014, 182). For him, the women who used makeup were "committing adultery" in their "appearance" (2.5.5; Richlin 2014, 182). The dissolution of Judith's former identity of a chaste widow was conducted through several rites of passage – washing, taking off the widow's robe, and decorating the body – enabled the performance of a new temporary identity – of a beautiful and lethal seductress. Both feminine identities reinforced the patriarchal order in which the female body was in constant threat of masculine penetration. Each identity served to either prevent the threatening penetration or induce it (Richlin 2014, 189). The tension of two mutually contrasted identities in Judith is evident from Zonaras' account in which he concludes the whole story by confirming Judith's chastity. The main issue was the question of preserved chastity during the temporary identity of a seductress when Judith offered her body to the tyrant. Perfect Christian modesty, of which Judith was a paragon, was epistemologically contrasted to any form of corporeal beauty: "Christian modesty (*christianae pudicitiae*), requires not only that you never desire to be an object of desire on the part of others, but that you even hate to be one" (Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum*, 2.2; Tertullian, *The Apparel of Women*, 131).

While Judith had successfully killed the tyrant, her triumph was acknowledged only after the patriarchal approbation of her sexual chastity. Zonaras had to provide an answer to Achior's questions on how Judith achieved the deed: "How God had acted through her in such manner that she kept her chastity undefiled and widowhood intact?" (Zonaras, *Annales* III.12, 252–253: κἀκείνη πάντων ἐνωπιον διηγήσατο ἃ ὁ θεὸς πεποίηκε δι'αὐτῆς, καὶ ὡς ἀμίαντον τὴν αὐτῆς σωφροσύνην καὶ χηρείαν ἐτήρησε). This peculiar sentence presents a point of slight but significant departure of Zonaras from the Septuagint's narrative, where no such dialogue can be found (cf. Jud. 14.6: καὶ ἐκάλεσαν τὸν Αχιωρ ἐκ τοῦ οἴκου Οζια· ὡς δὲ ἦλθεν καὶ εἶδεν τὴν κεφαλὴν Ολοφέρνου ἐν χειρὶ ἀνδρὸς ἑνὸς ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ λαοῦ, ἔπεσεν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον). The dialogue is used for theatrical purposes to stress the peculiar emphasis on the preserved bodily integrity of Judith. As a divine intercessor and a symbol of Israel, Judith's undefiled body becomes a token of Israel's ritual purity before God. Judith's beauty is also a figurative beauty of Israel and its "wholesomeness" (Zsengellér 2015, 188–189).

Holophernes' decapitation visually corroborates the fall of the masculine domineering Subject. This beheading carries a significant sexual valence embedded in the verb *apotemno* as it reminds of castration – *τῆν αὐτοῦ ἀπέτεμε κεφαλήν* (Zonaras, *Annales,* III.12, 252).[2] As Cristopher Livanos suggests in his analysis of Digenes Akrites severing of serpent's head as a form of castration, deployed verb *apotemno* "reinforces the phallic symbolism" (Livanos 2011, 133).[3] In both narratives, on Judith and Digenes Akritas, the cutting of the head is a medium of preventing the potential rape. In the case of Judith, the rape by Holophernes, in the case of Akritas, the rape of his wife by the three-headed serpent. The triumph of Judith marked in the beheading of tyrant's head without sexual intercourse stands as a symbolic reversal of the previously distorted order in which the people of Israel – as subjugated – were "politically in the cultural position of women"(Crawford 2003, 65).

For the Byzantine audience of the 12th century, a plot where women and men spent time conjointly resounded heavily with sexual intercourse. In the rhetorical exercises of Nikepohoros Basilakes from about the same period when Zonaras composed his narrative, we encounter a peculiar story on the mythical Atalanta's gender-transgressive behavior, who was born female but raised a male. In Atalanta's story, we find the prescript for nurturing a virtuous female. Growing young virgin was conditioned by seclusion from the public gaze and complete separation from the company of men until she passes from her mother's to her husband's hands: "these are the deeds of the chaste woman" (Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 100-101: Ταῦτα γυναικὸς σωφροσούνης ἔργα).[4] Virginity was tightly connected to spatial confinement, and Judith's breach into the enemy's tent presents the utmost trial of her *sophrosyne* – prudence. Even spending time with men was a lifestyle hostile to virginity (Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 104-105: ἀνδράσι συνδιῇγε καὶ τὸ χρῆμα παρθενίᾳ πολέμιον). The virginity of such women, Basilakes explains, is not unquestionable. Answering his own time's expectations, Zonaras explains the circumstances through vivid dialogue between Judith and Achior.

The attention to Judiths's *sophrosyne* in Zonaras version is absent from Ioannes Malalas' text. In his sixth-century *Chronicle*, which covers the period from the Creation to the end of Justinian reign (565), Malalas significantly alters the story of Judith from the Septuagint's narrative and does not include the ethical tensions of Judith's victory. On the contrary, it is relatively straightforward about the sexual act happening:

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[2] John Malalas, for instance, uses a different phrase for Holophernes beheading: τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ ἀφείλετο (Malalas, *Chronographia*, VI.14, 159).

[3] Hesiod uses the epic form of the verb *apotemno* - *apotmēgo* - with reference to Uranus' castration (Hes. Th. 188).

[4] Also, Kekaumenos pieces of advice about the proper safekeeping of daughters is telling for our case: "A shameless daughter has hurt, not only herself, but also her parents and her relations. Keep your daughters shut in and out of sight, like convicts, so that you may not be bitten as if by an asp" (Kekaumenos, *Concilia et Narationes*, 51.9-51.11)

> Judith was a Hebrew woman who plotted against the Persian exarch Holofernes, pretending, it is said, that she wished to betray the Jewish people. She came to Holofernes in secret, and when he saw her beauty, he was consumed with desire for her. She said to him, "Do not allow anyone here near me, for my sake, because they will attack me, wishing to seduce me". He was persuaded and spent the time alone with her. She bided her time with him for three days, then, while she was in bed with him at night, she got up and cut off his head. At midnight she left and entered Jerusalem through the postern gate, carrying his head, and gave orders for it to be hung up, for Holofernes had set up his pavilion near the wall for her sake. So the Jews took the head from her and before dawn set it on a spear above the wall, displaying it to his army. At daybreak the Persians saw Holofernes' head impaled on the spear and, suspecting that this had been done by some spirit, they fled. The war came to an end and the Jews were victorious over the Persians (Malalas, *Chronicle,* VI.14, 84–85).

According to Malalas, Judith "was a Hebrew woman who plotted against the Persian exarch Holofernes" (ἐμεχανήσατο κατὰ τοῦ ἐξάρχου) and after having spent the night with him (τρεῖς δὲ αὕτη προσκαρτερήσασα αὐτῷ ἡμέρας, ὡς καθεύδει μετ' αὐτοῦ νυκτός ἐγερθεῖσα τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ ἀφείλετο) she finally cut his head off (Malalas, *Chronographia*, VI.14, 159). Any observant reader could tell that Malalas' and Zonaras' accounts on Judith are two distinct discourses. In Malalas' account, the portrayal of Judith is couched in negative gender stereotypes. Judith shows her feminine character by scheming a plot to secretly go to Holofernes' camp and spends the nights with him before she decapitates him. Malalas' reconfiguration of this episode suggests of the sexual act happening since in the sentence preceding Judith's intercourse with Holophernes, Judith asks him to prevent anyone approaching, that is, sexually violating her (ὅτι ἐπέρχονταί μοι πορνεῦσαί με βουλομενοί).

In Malalas' *Chronicle*, Judith relies upon and employs fully gender-negative feminine traits – scheming and erotic seduction – to achieve her goals. Malalas' discourse disables the clear-cut distinction between the hero and anti-hero.

On the other hand, Zonaras' story follows more closely and accurately the account from the Septuagint. He stresses Judith's importance and active role, her peculiar relationship with God, her leading role among her people. Also, he insists on her prudence, wit, and impeccable chastity, all of which are tightly connected to her widowhood. Thus, Judith manages to rise above the limitations of her gender and embraces the qualities reserved for men to achieve her goals. She finally masters her enemy by deceptive speech (Crawford 2003, 64). In Malalas' narrative, the Jews soon take up Judith's role as an active agent while losing her focal place. In Zonaras' story, Judith is the one who commands her people. The story ends in her triumphal entrance to Jerusalem. The sexual moral of the story focused on the issue of *sophrosyne* is absent from Malalas.

The relevance of Judith's story for gender history rests in its symbolic reconfiguration of Judith as the mother and embodiment of the whole of Israel. Ju-

dith's beautiful body served to denote the wholesome body of the people of Israel and her gender served to convey their subjugated political status. Judith's status as a widow, which implied her uncorrupted virtue, served to denote the impregnability of Israel against the penetrating forces of the dominant enemy.

In conclusion, the image of Judith presents an ideally constructed heteronormative model of women's participation in politics. The model which emerged in the Hellenistic period served as a pattern of women's potential negotiations with the male power structures. Essential in such a system, especially after the merging of Hellenistic and Roman traditions, was the corporeal inviolability tightly connected to social status (Walters 1997, 30).

As the virginal post-marital status of women, it was considered that widowhood asserted chastity (*sophrosyne*). Thus, it fulfilled a prerequisite for women's participation in the political life of the Roman world.

Reading Byzantine Motherhood: The Trial Of The Power-Hungry Mothers

In her discussion on motherhood in Biblical stories of Deborah and Miriam, Dvora Lederman-Daniely has singled out two forms of motherhood based on gender approach. One form is motherhood as a men's culture, and another is motherhood as a women's culture, or more precisely, as a women's lived experience (Lederman-Daniely 2017, 10). Such division conforms to the anthropological reading of motherhood as a patriarchal institution and motherhood as a life-giving experience with high spiritual capacity (Lederman-Daniely 2017, 14–15). In the transformative period of the Roman Empire, the concept of motherhood had changed. However, it is hardly possible to discern between the ideas of *Roman* and *Byzantine*, that is, medieval Roman motherhood. Several well-known cases from Zonaras' *Epitome* will be used to discuss and read motherhood as a "men's culture" with its clearly defined relation to power and politics. This example will point out the main pillars of the patriarchal construction of the institution of motherhood relevant to the Roman period.

In his short review on the motherhood in Byzantium, Anthony Kaldellis implied that the status of motherhood gained an increasingly influential role in the middle Byzantine period, based on the preserved funeral orations and encomia for mothers that "reveal affection and gratitude by *sons* toward *mothers*" (Kaldellis 2010, 67). Such social practice – of funeral speeches dedicated to mothers –was not recorded (or not preserved) for the earlier Roman periods. Nevertheless, this discursive turn between the antique and medieval Roman periods does not necessarily mean that the bonds between mothers and sons changed. It could mark only a shift in the discursive sphere in which the topic of the *holy motherhood* gained a remarkable place. Of course, it is reasonable to think that establishing the cult of Theotokos, especially in the period 5–7th centuries, had led to the prominence of the maternal bonds in both textual and visual narratives. It was a peculiar Christian reconfiguration of the main task of motherhood to "regard the spiritual well-being and

moral health of her children as her imperative responsibility" to participate in a shared Christian community (Greeley 2017, 37).

Notwithstanding the increased importance of the cult of Theotokos and the possible change in the social construction of the new Christian motherhood, some of the typical Roman perceptions of the relationship between mothers and sons had defied these seismic changes Mariology had brought.

The renowned Roman mothers−Cornelia, Aurelia, and Atia −were praised for their success in instilling into their sons traditional moral values, based on *discipline ac severitas* (Dixon 1988, 109). On the other hand, the overindulgent mothers with uncontrollable political ambition were considered a severe threat to the construction of the ideal of *vir Romanus*. One such model was Agrippina Minor, the mother of Emperor Nero. Other renowned models were mothers from the Severan dynasty.

In Zonaras's discursive world, a particular place was reserved for the dominant mothers with their ruling couplets. One such narrative landscape was provided by Cassius Dio's presentation of the Severan dynasty, which was particularly renowned for the powerful Julias – Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemis, and Julia Avita Mamea. Cassius Dio was Zonaras' primary source for the Roman republican and early imperial period.

Julia Domna, the wife of Septimius Severus (r. 193–211) and mother of Caracalla, was presented as a particularly ambitious woman who had tried to reconcile her sons Caracalla and Gaeta. Unfortunately, she witnessed the death of her son Gaeta (212 A.D.), whose assassination was conducted before her eyes. The passage filled with gruesome details from Cassius Dio was epitomized by Zonaras. Cassius Dio writes that at the sight of his approaching death by the executors, Geta had run to his mother, hung about her neck and clung to her bosom and breasts,

> lamenting and crying: "Mother that didst bear me, mother that didst bear me, help ! I am being murdered." And so she, tricked in this way, saw her son perishing in most impious fashion in her arms, and received him at his death into the very womb, as it were, whence he had been born; for she was all covered with his blood, so that she took no note of the wound she had received on her hand. But she was not permitted to mourn or weep for her son, though he had met so miserable an end before his time (he was only twenty-two years and nine months old), but, on the contrary, she was compelled to rejoice and laugh as though at some great good fortune; so closely were all her words, gestures, and changes of colour observed. Thus she alone, the Augusta, wife of the Emperor and mother of the emperors, was not permitted to shed tears even in private over so great a sorrow. (Cassius Dio, LXXVIII, 282–283).

Zonaras abridges the version in the following manners:

> after he had entered the room, the centurions subjected to Antoninus had fiercely struck him [Geta] with the sword, while he hung to his

> mother's neck, and fell into her bosom, and her breasts, covering her all over with his blood. She herself had also received the blow into the arm. But out of fear, she did not feel the wound. She could not even mourn her son who had ended his life before his time in such a miserable way (he was twenty two years old and nine months old), to avoid sharing her son's destiny. (Zonaras, *Epitome*, XII. 12, 560).

Zonaras account shortens the dramatic dialogue between the dying Geta and the mourning mother, which in both passages testify to the failed motherhood which could not prevent the retribution of elder son, the blood-thirsty Caracalla. Both stories witness the lack of crucial prerogatives of motherhood – the moral influence over her children and the right to mourn her dead son. Zonaras stresses that she abstained from lament – which was a moral duty for which Sophocles' Antigone sacrificed her own life. Sophocles' tragedy is an ethical canon against which this episode should be read. The conclusion of Zonaras story suggests that the care for her own life was far greater than the vast ritual implications of the absence of the funeral rites in which the women had a pivotal role. Zonaras conclusion on Julia Domna strengthens the image of the ambitious mother, who upon her son's Caracalla's death "was greatly disturbed, not because of her son, but because she was worried that she might become a private citizen" (ἀλλὰ δεδοικυῖα περὶ ἑαυτῇ μὲ ἰδιωτεύσῃ, Zonaras, *Annales*, XIII.13, 565).

Domna's sister, Julia Maesa, played an important political role in the ensuing years. The female members of her family, her daughters Julia Soaemis and Julia Mamaea, had brought to the throne two last Severan rulers, Elagabalus (r. 218–222) and Alexander Severus (r. 222–235).

The description of Elagabalus reign is an ethical treatise on Roman sexual morals. A greatly abridged version of Cassius Dio in Zonaras's account focuses only on the sexual deviations of the young Emperor. Deviations are introduced through Elagabalus' body modifications, which served him to put his body on display and use (Zonaras, *Annales,* XII.14, 568; cf. Cassius Dio, LXXX, 460–461). According to Roman ethics, the exposed body offered to sexual pleasures was both gender and class-exclusive, and it was by definition feminine, sexually passive, and subordinated. The body put on display was the purpose of a feminine and slave body. In such an ethical code we should read the passages about Elagabalus:

> The young Emperor would put the wig on and play the role of the female tavern-keeper. Also, he would go to the most renowned brothels and act as a prostitute himself." (εἰς τὰ περιοβοήτα τῶν πορνείων ἐφοίτα καὶ τάς ἑταίρας ἑξελαύνων ἐπορνεύε, Zonaras, *Annales*, XII.14, 568).[5]

Furthermore, Zonaras proceeds by the almost verbatim quotation of Cassius Dio:

[5] Cf. Cassius Dio, LXXX, 462–463.

> He set aside room in the palace, in front of which he stood naked, in the fashion of the prostitutes shaked the curtain, and like a woman, in a delicate and effeminate voice, he associated with the passersby, asking them for a money (καὶ ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ οἴκημά τε ἀποτάξας, γυμνός τε ἐπὶ τὰς θύρας τούτου ἑστως ὡς αἱ πόρναι καὶ τὸ σινδόνιον διασείων, γυναικώδει καὶ ἁβρᾷ καὶ κεκλασμένῃ φωνῇ τοῦς παριόντας προσεταιρίζετο, χρήματά τε συνέλεγε παρ'αὐτῶν, Zonaras, *Annales,* XII.14, 568).

Zonaras addition to this whole passage was the word *gynaikodei* to enhance the overwhelming effeminacy of the already debauched feminine behavior of the Emperor.

Curiously, Zonaras omits the opposition of Elagabalus' grandmother to his behavior, which Cassius renders in the following way:

> he even threatened his grandmother when she opposed him in this matter, and he became at odds with the soldiers largely of this man's account. This was one of the things that was destined to lead to his destruction. (Cassius Dio, LXXX, 466–467).

Also, the information that Alexander Severus' proclamation as Elagabalus successor in the senate was conducted in the company of his grandmother Maesa and mother Soemis is omitted from Zonaras (Cassius Dio, LXXX, 472-473). The appearance of Soemis in Zonaras comes in the passage about his death. Mother and son were slain together, and their naked bodies were thrown in the center of the city. (Zonaras, *Annales*, XII.14, 570; Cassius Dio, LXXX, 478–479).

Elagabalus gender-transgressive behavior, his overwhelming effeminacy, transvestism and homoeroticism had been used in narratives to homogenize a coherent slander of the state of Roman politics during the Severan reign. Elagabalus was a typical anti-hero of the story, the Emperor who ruled with imperial freedmen, grandmother, mother, and women (Cassius, LIII, 465; Zonaras, *Epitome*, XII.14, 568–569).

Elagabalus had officially failed in each part of proper masculine gender performance – behavior, look, and attire (Baughman, 110–111). Such an irregular and illicit state of affairs (*paranomia*), along with his debauchery (*miaria*) had led to his slaughter very soon (Dio Cassius, LXXX, 470–471; Zonaras, *Epitome*, XII.15, 570: Διὰ ταῦτα ἐμισήθη ὑπὸ πάντων ὁ Σαρδανάπαλος, μὴ στεγόντων τὰς μιαρίας καὶ αίσχροπαθείας αὐτοῦ). Zonaras' abridged version bypasses passages on Elagabalus' murders of the governors of provinces. It focuses solely on the gender and sexual aspect of his personality, which escalates in the passage of Elagabalus intention to undergo the operation and even change his sex.

The influence of women on Elagabalus is implicit. Much more pervasive slander was his trespassing of gender borders, always in connection to licentiousness, adultery and sexual insatiety, which were altogether a paradigm for the"(lewd) feminine behaviour" (Zonaras, *Annales*, XII.14, 569; Cassius Dio, LXXX, 466–467).

On the other hand, the mother's political influence on Alexander Severus (222–235) was explicit and remained a paradigmatic example of the failed motherhood of men's culture, with its disastrous effects on the Roman polity.

> Alexander, the son of Mamaea […] immediately proclaimed Augusta his own mother, Mamaea, who had handled affairs of state, and she gathered wise men around her son in order that his mores be modulated by them, and from the senate she selected the best counselors, with whom she shared all that had to be done. When the command of the guardsmen and the administration of the treasury had been entrusted to Domitius Ulpianus, he corrected many of Sardanapalus' deeds […] (Banchich & Lane 2009, 40).[6]

> Alexander's mother, addicted to riches, amassed wealth from all quarters. She presented her son a bride, whom she did not approve to be called Augusta, but whom, after a brief interval, she detached from her son and relegated to Libya, though she was the object of his affection. He was unable to oppose his mother, who controlled him, […](Banchich & Lane 2009, 40)[7]

> When Maximinus approached, Alexander assembled his army and ordered it to attack Maximinus men. But they both reproached and disparaged his mother for her greed, and insolently turning on him they abandoned him as a coward and began to depart. When he saw himself bereft of aid, he withdrew to his tent, embraced his mother, and began weeping. Maximinus sent a centurion and killed Mamea, Alexander and those with him, and he came into control of the realm (Banchich & Lane 2009, 42).[8]

This explicit meddling of Mamaea into her son's government presents, within the narrative of all Severan women, a tragic conclusion of the tragic beginning with Julia Domna's rule. Zonaras epitomized version of vast Cassius Dio's account of which he was a living witness, had preserved important passages about Severan women, which all together construct a didactic narrative on the improper gender behavior and its fatal consequences.

The relationship of Alexander Severus and his mother Mamaea had also been chosen by, Zonaras predecessor, Michael Psellos in the XI century for his Short History (*Historia Syntomos*) as an epitomized presentation of the essential aspect of the last Severan reign:

> Alexander, the son of Mamea. This Emperor was still a young man and more dependent on his mother than was suitable. He did nothing of his own initiative but always listened to his imperious mother […] What she wanted was more than could be realized: she tamed her son,

[6] For the greek text see Zonaras, *Annales*, XII.15, 571.

[7] Zonaras, *Annales*, XII.15, 571.

[8] Zonaras, *Annales*, XII.15, 571.

> who was eager to rule the Empire, as if he were a foal and she kept a tight reign on him. And he obeyed every jerk of the reins in her hand. Even when he had set out on a campaign, she drew up the army for him. No wonder, then, that he lost a battle against the Persians, after which he rushed back to the palace and was soothed at the bosom of his mother. He was butchered by the soldiers after a reign of thirteen years and six months (Psellos, *Historia Syntomos*, 40, 26–27).

The ethic of this episode shows recurrent cultural tension on the extent and boundaries of the mother's influence. According to the stoic Seneca, over-ambitious mothers should be held in contempt, while on the other side, caring and loving mothers who could help and encourage their sons were welcome (Seneca, *Ad Helviam*, 14.2–3). Psellos' attitude toward imperial mothers in politics was closest to Seneca's perceptions. Mothers who raised their sons in proper masculinity were praised. In the careful choice of Mamea, we can easily read Psellos' lived experience of the Empire that the Augusta Eudokia Makrembolitisa governed. A work conceived as a didactic manual to the future Emperor Michael VII rendered an episode of what a proper ruler had to avoid.

Zonaras' interest in Severan mothers might have been precisely the reflection of the 11th century politics remembered for the political prominence of many aristocratic and imperial women. In such surroundings, and especially in the time when Zonaras was probably finishing his *Epitome*, the mid-12th century, the story of Julia Avita Mamea must have had a resounding and poignant political effect.

Zonaras' adaptations of Cassius Dio's *History* keep a significant presence of Severan women. Mothers from the Severan dynasty are deeply concerned for their power, as the case of Julia Domna clearly shows. Even in the expected narrative landscape of the tragic aspect of motherhood in which the son dies, Julia Domna cares for her own life and her imperial position. A typical gender stereotype of the power-hungry mother always includes either the story of a feeble and effeminate son or of a licentious tyrant. Geta dies in the bosom of his mother Domna, while Domna dies because she did not want to relinquish her power. Elagabalus dies in his mother's embrace with her, and also Alexander is executed together with his powerful mother Mamea.

Power-hungry women are markers of political tyranny. In that sense, the effeminate nature of Elagabalus' rule self-evidently stresses its tyrannical *ethos*. According to Roman political ethics, the mothers who had brought to power their tyrannical sons were doomed to fail.

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The motive of the power-hungry mother as a symptom of a failed form of governance is the driving motive in the final book of *Epitome Historiarum*. Zonaras used his *History* to criticize the rule of Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118), under whose reign he enjoyed high secular rank (Magdalino 1983, 329–333). Zonaras had accused Alexios of being an owner (*oikodespotes)* instead of steward (*oikonomos)*

of the Empire, which meant that he had privatized the Empire (Zonaras, *Epitome*, 18.29.19–25, 766–67). Privatization of the *res publica* was tightly connected to tyranny, and such form of government was usually presented in the reversed gender order. Transgression of proper gender behavior was a signal of the institutional crisis (Joshel 1997, 242 et sq.). That is, it was a signal of the masculinity crisis:

> Immediately upon his ascendance to the throne, the mother of the autocrator [Alexios Komnenos], handled the of the state for a long time. The ill-treatment of the subjects that came to pass at that time many writers ascribe to her. The Emperor regretted that his power was almost exclusively limited to the royal title, but he respected his mother and did not want to take her power by force. After she realized that her son was vexed, fearing not to be pushed away by force, she seemed to resign herself. She ceded all the power to the Emperor and abandoned the palace, retreating to the monastery of Christ Pantepoptes, which she had built. There she lived royally and honorably for several more years, dying in very old age (Zonaras*,* *Epitome*, XVIII.24, 746).

Zonaras' social reality was colored by the imprint which the all-powerful Anna Dalassene left in the internal politics and, after her, not even slightly less ambitious Eirene Doukaina. Zonaras *Epitome*, in its very end, focuses once more on the mother and son relationship:

> Regarding his wife, the Emperor, initially, was not too much excited about her, nor he disregarded her completely. However, being fond of love affairs and not wholly faithful to her made the Empress burn with jealousy. However, the lapse of time diminished his erotic desires, and he turned all his love and affection toward Augusta, wanting to be near her constantly. Such was the later status of the Empress, and she acquired great power while Alexios still had his bodily strength preserved. After his feet started to hurt him, and he lost the ability to walk, his joints were swollen, becoming bed-ridden, the Empress started to rule, while the Emperor succumbed to almost all her wishes. Indeed, there was an opinion that she wished all the power and management of state affairs in her hands after Alexios' withdrawal and that she wanted to subject her son and Emperor. The latter, however, did not tolerate this scheme. Being already a grown man, and married to the daughter of the Hungarian king, he had his own children. He feared for his rule and life, seeing that his mother nurtured affection towards the eldest of her daughters and for her son-in-law, Bryennios. So he addressed his relatives, and everyone in particular, reminding each of them secretly of the given oaths, that they will not show allegiance to any other emperor after his father's death. They have encouraged him and promised him that when the time comes, they will protect him. They enhanced their promises with new vows. This, however, did not escape the Empress' notice, who was angry with her son because of this. She forbid anyone from coming close to him and send spies to follow him. Nevertheless, he did not stop gathering supporters, some personally and others with the help of his men. His

> younger brother supported him, whereas Andronikos was against his brother and his Emperor. (Zonaras, *Epitome*, XVIII.24, 747–748)

The author displays the reversed political gender order. Eirene Doukaina wanted to rule instead of her son, John Komnenos, backed by her daughter Anna Komnene and son-in-law, Nikephoros Bryennios. Such ill-performed motherhood and breach beyond the constraints of proper gender behavior self-evidently deteriorated the Roman *politeia*.

The didactic purpose of Zonaras's narrative was to teach the audience about the forgotten Roman virtue. For Romans, women were more significant shareholders in maintaining the virtue since their nature was considered wild and uncontrollable, and their power over men was potentially calamitous. As Julia Smith put it, women's role was essential in cultural reproduction, in the transmission of the hegemonic masculinity from one generation to another (Smith 2000, 564). Women's role in Roman and Byzantine society was also essential in preserving the patriarchal order and nurturing virtuous Roman citizens. In the subversive cases of the dominant mothers, the concept of hegemonic masculinity was called into question.

Final conclusion: Women in Byzantium between Discipline and Punishment

Apart from being a didactic piece that instructed young men of high social standing the valid Roman values, Zonaras' *Epitome Historiarum* served particular political agenda. As stated in the introduction, Zonaras worldview corresponded to the specific form of "Byzantine republicanism" (Kaldellis 2015, 43–48). It was a political ethic that derived from the Greco-Roman political epistemology on the best type of governance. Such a political system was based on the sovereignty of three crucial republican pillars – the senate, people of Rome, and the army. As we might infer, all these institutions were exclusively masculine spheres, wherefore, the proper performance of masculinity was a key to their immutability and longevity.

Investigation into the discursive technology of gender stereotyping unravels two categories of womanhood admitted into the Roman power structures. As we tended to show in the case of Judith, the most highly praised status of a single mature woman was chaste widowhood, which was assimilated to the Roman concept of *univira* (cf. Walcot 1991, 21–22; Dixon 2014, 22–23). Anthropological readings of Judith's story enable us to understand why chaste widowhood was crucial in this period. Within Roman sexuality discourse, a chaste widowhood held as non-menacing femininity to roman masculinity, was among the fundamental pillars of the societal power structure. Roman widowhood, which we might define as "widowhood as a manly culture," was antithetical to popular conceptions of widowhood in ancient Greece that was perceived as an untamed feminine force. An anthropological study of a modern Greek village might add clarity to our case. This study shows that sexually experienced widows were considered sexually threatening and

therefore “dangerous and disruptive embodiments of the darker powers of feminine nature” (Du Boulay 1974, 135). In antiquity, it was considered that sexually insatiable widows were threats to the innocent youth (Walcot 1991, 16–17). The uncontrollable widows reverse the norm and threaten the social fabric of society. In Aristophanes, as Walcot stresses, the ugliness of older women is matched by their sexual voracity (Walcot 1991, 19). Contrary to these cultural presuppositions, Judith is a young, wealthy, beautiful, and chaste widow. She is the antithesis to the old, ugly, and sexually insatiable widow. Judith’s *sophrosyne* is a signifier of her “non-threatening” status to the norms of her society. Thus, the emergence and acceptance of Judith’s story within the Greco-Roman discourse present yet another model of the acculturation of feminine lived experiences. The discursive formation of the concept of chaste widowhood operated as a disciplining tool to all potential individualistic and independent forms of woman’s existence. Women living beyond the institutional constraints of marriage were acculturated through sexual renunciation and masculinization. Thus they were able to participate in the reiteration of the Roman patriarchal power structure.

The relationship between women and power was codified through Roman’s sexual protocol. As already stressed, sexuality was a powerful marker of domination and subordination (Skinner 1997, 3). Sexual relations lie at the foundation of the patriarchal hierarchy, which was institutionalized through marriage. To attain a share in the power, women had to abstain from sexual relations and renounce their sexuality, which was considered an entry into social and cultural subordination.

The episodes of the power-hungry mothers presented a didactic example of the dichotomy between social expectations and lived experiences, between motherhood as man’s culture and motherhood as woman’s culture. Zonaras disciplining narrative enables us to deconstruct the forms of “patriarchal motherhood,” which Adrienne Rich defined as “motherhood that speaks in the symbolic father language, thus alienating women from their bodies while diminishing the female powers” (Rich 1995, 43)

The lethal influence of mothers over their sons lies at the core of this trope. It invests the world of politics with the gender stereotypes based on the gender transgressive behavior in women, namely mothers. Mother’s influence is lethal because it makes their sons “monster-like creatures”, such as Elagabalus, codified as corrupt femininity. In the same vein, tyranny was the “monstrous-like political creature”, the effeminate system of the licentious tyrants, in which women held an unequal proportion of political power. In contrast to that, preservation of *sophrosyne* in women was a warranty itself that the Roman Republic will continue to live, and along with it, the masculinity of the Romans. Tyrants and tyrannical mothers, and unrestrained wives challenged and seriously threatened Roman’s masculinity and the whole social order (Joshel 1997, 241–247; Matthes 2000, 33–34).

One should look at these episodes as timeless, the episodes that make sense throughout times and epochs, since they enable us to understand the technology of gender stereotyping in more than two millennia spanning Roman History. The case

of Zonaras is just one case out of an enormous amount of narratives that were created and perpetuated by men, pegged into the grand narrative of androcentric masculine precedence. The undisputable trait of this binary value system is the formation of masculinity as the achieving, valuable and dominant in contrast to femininity as passive and subordinate.

Women could be praiseworthily related to power in several ways: by acquiring manly characteristics and maintaining chaste widowhood as in the case of Judith, by embracing virginity, or by performing the institutional form of motherhood which none of our chosen examples fulfilled. The selected episodes show a limited set of models that women could have emulated in their ascent to political power and the positions of social influence. Also, these socially sanctioned femininities show precisely the borders of proper gender performance.

Virtuous masculinity was a signifier of the Roman political order. Everything beyond this very concept was a paradox, reversal, and tyranny. Women's relationship to power was considered a paradox of its kind. Women's connection to power had to be subdued to the crucial paradox of symbiosis of motherhood and virginity, with the essential binding element – *sophrosyne*–chastity.

The case of Byzantium allows us to see how the people of the Eastern Roman Empire (re)produced a series of gender values and ideologies in the narratives to support the dominant power structures (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009, 37). It helps us detangle the possible implications of such views and to assess the durability and stiffness of gender stereotypes present in contemporary society, heavily influenced and shaped by the Greco-Roman civilization of the Mediterranean basin. Zonaras' *History* was peculiar for its afterlife even after the Empire's downfall in the XV century. Meticulous scribes situated in Cyprus at the end of the 14th century diligently translated Zonaras' chronicle into Aragonese. This version had traveled to Spain to begin its afterlife in the entirely new surrounding at the Aragonese court (Álvarez Rodríguez 2006).

Meanwhile, a very similar undertaking was accomplished in the Balkans, where the Old Church Slavonic version of Zonaras's *History* emerged, enabling the continuity of his tradition even in two completely different discursive spheres. The afterlife of Zonaras chronicle remains yet to be explored. Nevertheless, it shows that some discursive worlds were not confined solely to the elite audience of the Constantinopolitan court.

Narratives of this kind had shaped and perpetuated the Graeco-Roman discourse on gender and power. They were serving as a masculine disciplining tool against the threat of non-normative femininities that could thwart the supreme domination of the *vir Romanus* in the premodern Mediterranean world.

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Примљено / Received: 23. 02. 2021.
Прихваћено / Accepted: 31. 08. 2021.