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„Τῆ καλλίστη”: *Do Najpiękniejszej.* Ceremonia wyboru cesarskiej żony na dworze bizantyńskim (788–882)

“Τῆ καλλίστη”: *To the Fairest One.*
The ceremony for electing an imperial wife
at the Byzantine court (788–882)

Abstrakt

W Cesarstwie Bizantyńskim wyłonienie żony cesarza odbywało się w formie konkursu piękności, który stanowił jeden z elementów ogólnej mistyki otaczającej władców Konstantynopola i ich dwór oraz zapobiegał zdobywaniu przez lokalne elity nadmiernych wpływów w otoczeniu władcy państwa. Konkursy te, organizowane wyłącznie dla pierwszych zaślubin pierwotnych synów cesarza, wyłaniały najpiękniejsze i najbardziej cnotliwe kobiety do roli przyszłej cesarzowej. Ceremoniał tego zwyczaju podnosił rangę cesarskich ślubów. Oryginalne źródła bizantyńskie wskazują, że konkursy te odbywały się w latach 788–882, a pierwszy z nich został oficjalnie zorganizowany przez Irenę dla jej syna Konstantyna VI. Kryteria stosowane do wyłonienia zwycięzcy opierały się na kombinacji czynników: wieku, wyglądu, postawy, idealnych rysów twarzy, pełnych wdzięku ruchów i chodu oraz skromnej postawy. Rzymskiemu cesarzowi mogła dorównać jedynie kobieta posiadająca odpowiednie kwalifikacje, a przede wszystkim najbardziej cenioną cnotę tamtych czasów – urodę. Tylko najpiękniejsza

kobieta miała przywilej stanąć u boku cesarza. Dwa symbole używane do przypiętowania wyboru panny młodej to złote jabłko i złoty pierścień. Bizantyńskie konkursy piękności wywierały czarujący wpływ na poddanych cesarstwa w trakcie i po ich istnieniu. Nawet świat kościelny był urzeczony ich blaskiem, a najbardziej intrygujące informacje na ich temat można znaleźć w kronikach świętych. Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie sposobu przedstawiania tej ceremonii w oryginalnych źródłach bizantyńskich oraz we współczesnej historiografii. Ponadto zostaną omówione wpływy tego zwyczaju na politykę oraz okoliczności jego zniknięcia.

Słowa kluczowe: Cesarstwo Bizantyńskie, konkursy piękności, źródło historyczne, Augusta, ślub cesarski

Abstract

Beauty pageants were used as a ceremonial mechanism during the Byzantine Empire to select the emperor's bride. This practice aimed to maintain the mystique surrounding Constantinople's rulers and prevent local elites from gaining undue influence. These contests were exclusively held for the emperor's firstborn sons during their initial marriages, and they aimed to identify the most beautiful and virtuous women to become empresses, adding magnificence to royal weddings. Primary Byzantine sources indicate that these contests took place between 788 and 882, with the first one officially held by Irene for her son Constantine VI. The criteria used to determine the winner were based on a combination of factors: age, appearance, demeanour, ideal facial features, graceful movements and gait, and modest posture. The Roman emperor could only be matched by a woman possessing the corresponding qualifications and, above all, the most appreciated virtue of the time – beauty. Only the most beautiful woman had the privilege of standing beside the emperor. The two symbols used to seal the bride's choice were the golden apple and the golden ring. The Byzantine bridal pageants exerted their enchanting influence on the subjects of the empire during and after their existence. Even the ecclesiastical world was captivated by their glamour, and the most intriguing information about them can be found in the saints' chronicles. This study aims to explore the portrayal of these bride shows in primary Byzantine sources and other contemporary scholars. Furthermore, it examines the impact of this custom on politics and the reasons behind its eventual extinction.

Keywords: Byzantine Empire, bride-shows, beauty pageants, primary sources, Augustas, imperial weddings

In the Byzantine Empire, selecting a bride for the emperor was quite different from the Western tradition of political alliances. Rather than relying on political interests, a beauty contest was held at the imperial palace to find a suitable match. Empress Irene followed this tradition when selecting a wife for her son Constantine VI (770–797?), sending delegates throughout the empire to find a candidate who met specific criteria, including being of high birth and exceptionally beautiful, as well as a virgin and in excellent health. In addition, details such as height and shoe size were also considered.¹

There have been times, however, when no attention was paid to whether the chosen one was noble but only to whether she was beautiful. As a result, women of low social class and even those from the lowest classes became empresses because of their good looks and the emperor's feelings for them, undermining the importance of their origin. As examples of this, we can consider Theodora, the wife of Justinian I, and Theophano, the wife of Roman II.²

Many were daughters of nobles but not from highly affluent and influential families. It was believed that these requirements were intended to ensure that the emperors' parents could find a daughter-in-law who lacked independent and solid political power. The emphasis on physical beauty allowed them to bypass the local elite, preventing them from gaining privileges through proximity to the throne and avoiding potential conspiracies against the ruling dynasty. Their primary role was to enhance the grandeur of royal weddings through beauty pageants and elevate the prestige of the throne and their dynasties.

According to primary sources, beauty contests, also known as *διαγωνισμοί ομορφιάς* or *καλλιστεία*, have existed since the 8th century and survived until the 9th century, gaining popularity among royal dynasties and the people. The biblical figure of Esther may have inspired this method of selecting a bride: "Let a search be done for beautiful young virgins for the king, and let the king appoint commissioners in each province of his kingdom to assemble all the beautiful young women

1 Κάρολος Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, trans. by Σ. Βουρδούμπα (Αθήνα: Μπεργάδη, 1969), 23; Αναστασία Δ. Βακαλούδη, *Καλλιστεία και Γάμος στο Βυζάντιο* (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδοτικός Οίκος Αδελφών Κυριακίδη Α. Ε., 1998), 55; Warren T. Treadgold, "The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors", *Byzantion* 49 (1979): 398; Fourmy Marie-Henriette, Leroy Maurice (eds.), "La vie de S. Philarète", *Byzantion* 9 (Bruxelles: Revue Internationale des Etudes Byzantines, 1934), 141.

2 There is a debate surrounding whether Roman II selected his wife, Theophano, through a bridal beauty contest. Charles Diehl supports this theory, while W.T. Treadgold rejects it due to Theophano's low birth.

into the harem at the citadel of Susa” [...] “Then let the young woman who pleases the king become queen in place of Vashti”³ or the mythical figure of Paris who handed the apple to Aphrodite, thus gaining Helen, the most beautiful woman. It can be related to this myth through the example of emperor Theophilos choosing Theodora as his bride by giving her a golden apple.

A commission consisting of an imperial family member, a dignitary, and a court advisor evaluated pre-selected candidates based on various criteria such as body posture, grace in movement, age, facial appearance, symmetry, modesty, and religiosity. In addition, candidates had to undergo a medical examination to ensure their virginity and overall health. Finally, the emperor’s mother or a female relative assessed the girls’ beauty and proportions during the final selection. Likewise, when selecting potential brides for her son Leo VI, Eudokia, the spouse of Basil I: “ταύτας εἰς τὰ βασιλεία μετ’ αὐτῆς ἀγαγοῦσα τὴν ἀπόπειραν τούτων ἐν γυμνασίῳ ἐποίει”⁴ (trans. *To ensure their suitability, Eudokia took the remaining candidates to the baths to confirm their physical condition and purity*⁵). The chosen one was taken to and presented to the father of the future groom: “ταύτην βασιλικοῖς ἀμφιάσμασιν ἀμφιάζει καὶ ἐκ τῆς δεξιᾶς χειρὸς αὐτὴν συλλαβοῦσα πρὸς τὸν ἄνακτα καὶ σύνευνον αὐτῆς Βασιλείον εἰσήλθεν· καὶ ταύτην εἰς τοὺς ἐκείνου πόδας βαλοῦσα, ἀξίαν εἶναι νύμφην εἰς τὸν υἱὸν ἐξεφώνει. ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς καὶ αὐτὸς ἐπὶ τῷ ἀμωμήτῳ κάλλει τῆς κόρης θαυμάσας, ἐξαγαγὼν ἐκ τοῦ κόλπου αὐτοῦ τὸ ἐξ ἱασπίνου λίθου κατασκευασθὲν αὐτῷ δακτυλίδιον εἰς τὴν χεῖρα τῆς νεάνιδος ἐπεμβάλλει”⁶ (trans. *After dressing Theophano in imperial robes, Eudocia led her by the right hand to meet her husband, Basil. Eudocia was captivated by the girl’s unparalleled beauty and made her kneel before the king to declare her a worthy companion for their son. Enchanted by the maiden’s breathtaking beauty, the emperor took his jasper ring from the fold of his robe and placed it on her finger*⁷).

3 *Holy Bible*, Esther 2:3. Retrieved from: <https://biblehub.com/bsb/esther/2.htm> (15.11.2023).

4 *Βίος Θεοφανούς* (Vita Theophanus) (BHG 1794), *Zwei griechische Texte über die hl. Theophano, die Gemahlin Kaisers Leo VI.*, Memoires de l’Academie Imperiale, ed. Eduard Kurtz (St. Petersburg: J. Glasounof, 1898), 6; Φαίδων Κουκουλές, *Βυζαντινὸν Βίος καὶ Πολιτισμὸς*, vol. 4 (Αθήνα: Παπαζήση, 1951), 122.

5 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

6 *Vita Theophanus* (BHG 1794), 6.

7 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

Those who did not reach the final stage: “καλή μὲν ὑπάρχεις καὶ ὠραία, ἀλλὰ πρὸς βασιλέαν οὐ ποιεῖς”⁸ (trans. *You may be beautiful and gentle but unsuitable for a king*⁹) were often married off with generous gifts: “δῶσαντες δὲ αὐτὴν δόματα ἀπέλυσαν αὐτήν. ὁμοίως δὲ κατόρδινα θεασάμενοι καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς, οὐκ ἠρέσθησαν, δόσαντες καὶ αὐτὰς δῶρα, ἀπέλυσαν αὐτάς”¹⁰ (trans. *They gave her gifts and dismissed her. They also saw the other candidates; they did not like them, so they gave them gifts and dismissed them*¹¹), “τὰς δὲ λοιπὰς πάσας δώροις καὶ χρήμασι πολλοῖς φιλοτιμησαμένη, πρὸς τὰ οἰκεῖα ταύτας ἀποστραφῆναι κελεύει”¹² (trans. *They gave gifts and money to the others before sending them home*¹³) while others chose to pursue a monastic life.

According to some scholars, the beauty contests during imperial weddings were simply a customary practice meant to enhance the spectacle of the occasion, even though the winner had already been chosen in advance. On the other hand, F. Koukoules presents a different argument and suggests that families would not have allowed their daughters to compete if they knew they would be turned down.¹⁴ Even if the runners-up were given generous presents upon returning home, it would not ease the disappointment of rejection. However, it is possible that being nominated for the royal bridal pageant was considered the ultimate honour among the Byzantines.

The contests were exclusively organised for the emperor’s firstborn sons during their initial marriages. The imperial brides were meticulously chosen for their exceptional beauty and devotion, with Theophano, the wife of Leo VI, and Theodora, the wife of Theophilos, being regarded as saints in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The bride shows demonstrated that only the most beautiful and virtuous women were deemed worthy of becoming empresses.

The tradition of selecting a royal bride through beauty pageants is connected to the mystical allure surrounding Constantinople’s kings and the belief in their holiness and superiority over others. The royal couple was often compared to the sun and the moon, with the emperor embodying the highest male grace and virtue qualities. At the same time,

8 „La vie de S. Philarète,” 143.

9 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

10 „La vie de S. Philarète,” 143.

11 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

12 *Vita Theophanus* (BHG 1794), 6.

13 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

14 Koukoules, *Βυζαντινὴν Βίος καὶ Πολιτισμὸς*, 122.

the empress was expected to embody the pinnacle of physical beauty for women. Additionally, the beauty pageant may have been a way to showcase the emperor to his vast territory and demonstrate that only the ideal woman could stand by his side. During the funeral of Basil I, Leo VI gave a speech that exemplified this belief. In his retrospective of the late emperor's life, Leo spoke at length about his marriage to Eudokia Ingerina, praising her dignity and beauty. He also explained that her loss in the beauty pageants organised for Michael III was ultimately due to divine Providence, which reserved her for Basil.¹⁵

It is acknowledged that the tradition, though with some changes, was also present in France. Louis the Pious, who ruled the Franks in the 9th century, married his second wife Judith using a method that appears to have been modelled after how royal bridal pageants were organised. Scholars support this hypothesis because the Frankish leader lived during the same time as Theophilos and Michael III. Moreover, the practice was also observed in the Russian court, which drew inspiration from Byzantine culture, even up to the 17th century.¹⁶

The custom's impact on politics in various situations

From 788 to 882, beauty pageants were officially held to select brides for the throne. Many candidates were not only chosen for their beauty but also for their social status. Those of noble birth were often preferred, as they could cohabit with large families. For instance, Constantine VI married Maria of Amnia, who hailed from a noble provincial family in Paphlagonia. Theophilos married Theodora, the daughter and niece of Armenian military officials. The wife chosen for Staurakios, Theophano, by Nikephoros was related to Empress Irene.

On the other hand, Theophano, picked by Basil I for his son Leo VI, came from the renowned Martinaki family. Pulcheria, who wanted to marry her brother Theodosius II, started this tradition by searching for daughters of noble origin who were beautiful and pure. However, she

15 Photeini P. Bourboulis, *Studies in the History of Modern Greek Story Motives*, vol. 8 (Thessaloniki: Etaireia Makedonikon Spoudon, 1953), 36–37.

16 Bourboulis, *Studies in the History of Modern Greek Story Motives*, 32; John Bagnell Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire: From the Fall of Irene to the Accession of Basil I (A.D. 802–867)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 82; Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 324.

ended her search early upon meeting Athenais, who came to Constantinople from Athens.

The first official bridal pageants were organised by Irene, the wife of Leo IV, for the wedding of her son Constantine VI in 788. Irene intentionally chose Maria of Amnia, the granddaughter of Saint Philaretos, for her son's wedding. Her family's lack of political influence suited Irene's desire for power, as she wanted a bride who would not overshadow her power. Maria may have come from an aristocratic background. Still, she did not have much financial support and lacked influential relatives who could have helped Constantine if he ever faced conflicts with his mother. Unfortunately, when Constantine decided to leave Mary and marry someone else, his decision proved very unpopular and ultimately led to his downfall.¹⁷

In 807, Nikephoros I arranged a marriage for his son Staurakios, following the example set by Irene. Given Staurakios's physical and mental weakness, his father sought an experienced wife. After careful consideration, they chose Theophano, a betrothed woman from Athens and a relative of former Empress Irene. She was separated from her suitor to be betrothed to Staurakios.¹⁸

Theophilos, Michael III and Leo VI chose their wives through beauty contests. Following Theophilos' death, his wife Theodora, who venerated the icons, ended the Byzantine Iconoclasm (814–843), and is recognized as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church.¹⁹ Michael III, the son of the empress above, disregarded the beauty pageant winner chosen for him and instead had a relationship with his mistress, leading to unclear consequences for the dynasty.²⁰ Leo VI entered into a marriage with Theophano Martinakia, who was selected through a similar competition process, but the two had vastly different personalities, which resulted in significant issues. Adding to this, Leo also had a mistress. Unfortunately, this was the first of four unsuccessful marriages for Leo.²¹

17 Bourboulis, *Studies in the History of Modern Greek Story Motives*, 13; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 400.

18 *Theophanis Chronographia*, CSHB, ed. Ioannis Classen (Bonnae: Impensis Ed. Weberi, 1839), 750; Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire*, 15.

19 Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 409.

20 *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum*, CSHB, vols. IV, ed. Ludovicus Dindorfius (Lipsiae: Aedibus B. G. Teubneri, 1871), 22; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 406.

21 Κουκουλές, *Βυζαντινών Βίος και Πολιτισμός*, 121; Bourboulis, *Studies in the History of Modern Greek Story Motives*, 12; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 407–408.

Theories on why the custom became extinct

Based on historical records, the tradition mentioned was last documented during the weddings of Leo VI in 881.²² After that, it gradually disappeared, and the marriage of Leo VI and Theophano is believed to be the last instance. There are speculations that the tumultuous consequences of Leo VI's controversial Tetragamy, which caused upheaval in both the Church and the empire, may have played a role in the decline of these beauty competitions.²³

According to certain scholars, Emperor Leo may have ended a particular tradition by organising a new beauty pageant for his third marriage to Eudokia Baïana in 900.²⁴ This belief is backed up by a passage in Theophanes Continuatus, which details the third wife of the emperor: “ἠγάγετο δὲ καὶ κόρην ἐκ τοῦ Ὀψικίου, ὠραίαν τε καὶ περικαλλῆ, τοῦνομα Εὐδοκίαν, ἦν δὴ καὶ ἔστεψεν. ἐγκύμων δὲ γενομένη καὶ μέλλουσα τίκτειν ἀπέθανε καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ τὸ ἔμβρυον”²⁵ (trans. *He also brought and married a beautiful and graceful girl from the Opsikion theme, Eudocia, and proclaimed her empress. However, she became pregnant, and during childbirth, she and the child died*²⁶). The text suggests that Eudokia's rise to the throne was due to her physical attractiveness. In addition, a beauty pageant for a third marriage would carry a different weight than one for a first marriage.

Both society and the Eastern Orthodox Church looked down upon second and third marriages. In the ninth century, Theodore of Stoudios criticized Emperor Constantine V Copronymos for setting a negative example by marrying three times.²⁷ This situation could have made parents hesitant to offer their daughters for the emperor's third marriage, as parental consent was required for participation in the pageant.

While some scholars believe that strict social and religious views led to the decline of multiple marriages, it takes work to pinpoint the exact cause. However, others argue that even Leo VI understood the

22 Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 406.

23 Timothy E. Gregory, *A History of Byzantium* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 228; Steven Runciman, *Schizma Wschodnia*, trans. J. Gawroński (Warszawa: PAX, 1963), 38.

24 Bourboulis, *Studies in the History of Modern Greek Story Motives*, 37.

25 *Theophanes continuatus*, CSHB, ed. Immanuelis Bekker (Bonnae: Impensis Ed. Weberi, 1838), 364; *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, CFHB, ed. Ioannes Thurn (Berlin – New York: Series Berolinensis, 1973), 180.

26 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

27 John Meyendorff, „Christian Marriage in Byzantium: The Canonical and Liturgical Tradition,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990), 103.

seriousness of trigamy and would not have taken any action that could cause a scandal. The Church strictly enforced punishment for this behaviour, and there was no evidence that organising a beauty pageant was necessary for the emperor to find a suitable spouse.²⁸

Accounts of beauty contests held for brides during the Byzantine era

Theodosius II and Athenais – Eudocia

Theodosius, who would later ascend to the throne as emperor, was brought up under the care of his sister, Pulcheria. At sixteen, Pulcheria was honoured with the title of Augusta in 414 and assumed the role of governing her brother. She supervised his upbringing, education, conduct, and religious instruction. When Theodosius was prepared for marriage, he turned to Pulcheria for assistance in selecting a suitable spouse. Despite her role in raising and governing the empire on her brother's behalf, Pulcheria agreed to aid him in perpetuating the dynasty.

Theodosius was open to marrying someone from an imperial or patrician family but was not overly eager or insistent. He placed great importance on the virtue of his potential wife and sought a pure and morally upright partner. While financial status was not a concern for him, he desired a woman of exceptional beauty who would stand out from all others in Byzantium: “Εγώ θέλω εὐρεῖν νεωτέρα νευμορφον πάνυ, ἵνα τοιοῦτον κάλλος μὴ ἔχη ἄλλη γυνή ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει, καὶ ἐξ αἵματος βασιλικοῦ. Εἰ δέ μὴ ἔστιν καλή εἰς ὑπερβολήν, οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχω οὔτε ἀξιωματικοῦ οὔτε βασιλικοῦ αἵματος οὔτε πλουσίαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰ τινος δήποτε εἰάν ἐστι θυγάτηρ, μόνον εὐπρεπῆς πάνυ, αὐτήν λαμβάνω”²⁹ (trans. *I want to find a young girl who is morally impeccable and irreproachably beautiful, with a beauty that no other girl can match in Constantinople. I do not care whether she is royal, patrician, or wealthy; all I want is her unparalleled beauty, and I will marry her*³⁰).

Pulcheria and Paulinos, a dear friend of Theodosius, embarked on a quest to find a virgin of noble lineage, possessing unparalleled beauty

28 Βακαλούδη, *Καλλιστεία και Γάμος στο Βυζάντιο*, 109.

29 *Chronicon paschale*, CSHB, vols. I-II, ed. Ludovicus Dindorfius (Bonnae: Impensis Ed. Weberi, 1832), 575–576; *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, CSHB, ed. Ludovicus Dindorfius (Bonnae: Impensis Ed. Weberi, 1831), 352–353.

30 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

and unwavering purity, who would be deemed worthy of the royal throne. Their search took them among the aristocracy of the realm and the empire, but their messengers had yet to discover the chosen one.

When Athenais arrived in Constantinople from Athens, she faced a challenging situation. Despite her education and dignified behaviour, her father, a wealthy pagan philosopher teaching at the Academy of Athens, left all his property to his sons after his passing, leaving Athenais with no inheritance except the hope that her beauty would bring her success.

Undeterred, Athenais bravely left her father's home and sought refuge with her mother's sister. Together, they travelled to Constantinople to stay with another aunt. The two women encouraged Athenais to take action and claim her rightful inheritance by seeking refuge in the palaces. With their unwavering support, Athenais secured an audience with Augusta and explained her plight.

Pulcheria was immediately taken with Athenais' striking appearance. At twenty years old, Athenais possessed a statuesque elegance, with curly blonde locks and a rosy complexion. Her lively, intelligent eyes, delicate Greek nose, and poised demeanour complemented her graceful gait. The author of the *Chronicon Paschale* emphasizes Athenais' stunning beauty through his use of descriptive language: “νεωτέρα καθάραν, εὔστολον, λεπτοχάρακτρον, εὔρινα, ἀσπροτάτην ὡσεὶ χιών, μεγαλόφθαλμον, ὑποκεχαρισμένην, οὐλοξανθόκομον, σεμνόποδα, ἐλλόγιμον, Ἑλλαδικήν, παρθένον”³¹ (trans. *I met a young Greek woman who is tall, has curly blonde hair, fair skin as white as snow, large bright eyes, and a thin nose. She is also eloquent, carries herself with grace and has a dignified gait*³²).

Athenais's fluent Greek and pagan upbringing had piqued Pulcheria's interest. Intrigued by Athenais's story, Pulcheria made inquiries with her aunts and ultimately decided to keep Athenais in the palace. Excited to relay this development to her brother, Pulcheria was eager to share the news.³³ Athenais's charm seemed to have effectively halted the search for a suitable royal bride. However, some suggested that Pulcheria had chosen Athenais as a safe option that would not undermine her power or influence.³⁴

Theodosius was intrigued by his sister's story and became fascinated by the mysterious woman. He asked Augusta to arrange a secret

31 *Chronicon paschale*, CSHB, 577–578; *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, CSHB, 354–355.

32 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

33 *Chronicon paschale*, CSHB, 577–578; *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, CSHB, 354–355.

34 Θόδωρος Καρζής, *Η Γυναίκα στο Μεσαίωνα: Χριστιανισμός, Δυτική Ευρώπη, Βυζάντιο, Ισλαμισμός* (Αθήνα: Φιλιππούτη, 1989), 272.

meeting with her. Accompanied by his friend Paulinos, they sneaked into Pulcheria's rooms and, hidden behind a curtain, caught a glimpse of Athenais. Paulinos was filled with admiration, while Theodosius was captivated by her. Several weeks later, after the patriarch had converted the bride-to-be to Christianity and given her the name Eudocia, she married the emperor in 421: “ὁ δε ἀκούσας, ὡς νεώτερος, ἀνήφθη· καὶ μεταστειλόμενος τὸν συμπράκτορα αὐτοῦ καὶ φίλον Παυλῖνον ἤτησε τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀδελφὴν ὡς ἐπ’ ἄλλῳ τινὶ εἰσαγαγεῖν τὴν Ἀθηναΐδα τὴν καὶ Εὐδοκίαν ἐν τῷ αὐτῆς κουβικλίῳ, ἵνα διὰ τοῦ βήλου θεάσῃται αὐτὴν ἅμα Παυλίνου δὲ θαυμάσαντος αὐτήν. καὶ εἰσήχθη· καὶ ἑωρακῶς αὐτὴν ἠράσθη αὐτῆς, καὶ χριστιανὴν ποιήσας, ἦν γὰρ Ἕλλην, καὶ μετονομάσας αὐτὴν Εὐδοκίαν, ἔλαβεν αὐτὴν εἰς γυναῖκα, ποιήσας αὐτῇ βασιλικούς γάμους”³⁵ (trans. *Theodosius was captivated by the unknown beauty and felt attracted to her. He pleaded with his sister to secretly show him the young girl. Behind a curtain, he and Paulinus watched Athenais unnoticed in Pulcheria's quarters. Paulinus was amazed, and Theodosius fell deeply in love with her. Shortly after, the royal weddings were celebrated, but before that, the bride was baptized as a Christian because she was Greek. She was given the name Eudocia*³⁶).

When Theodosius married Athenais, her humble origins did not concern him. The wedding likely occurred in the imperial church of Eudomos or Hagia Sophia, officiated by Patriarch Atticus. Although there is no evidence of a grand ceremony, chroniclers noted that imperial weddings in Constantinople were celebrated with public spectacles and horse races.³⁷ After giving birth to her daughter Eudoxia, named after Theodosius' mother, in 423, Athenais-Eudocia was crowned Augusta.³⁸

Despite her conversion to Christianity and involvement in religious poetry, Athenais's pagan inclinations persisted. She likely modified the strict monastic atmosphere enforced by Pulcheria in the court once she gained influence in the palaces. Disagreements between Athenais and Pulcheria were not uncommon, as both possessed strong personalities. Theodosius' previous obedience to Pulcheria had diminished, and it was evident that two opposing forces were at play within the palace, creating an environment where courtiers and church officials

35 *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia*, CSHB, 355.

36 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

37 Kenneth G. Holm, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1989), 115.

38 *Ibidem*, 123.

could employ cunning tactics to influence the situation. Additionally, the tension between Hellenism and Christianity exacerbated the growth of Nestorianism.³⁹

The union of Theodosius and Athenais-Eudocia held great importance for the empire, signifying a historic moment. For the first time, a woman from Athens – the birthplace of Greek civilisation – ascended to the throne of Constantinople. Moreover, this occasion marked the beginning of the full Hellenization of the Royal Court of Constantinople.⁴⁰

However, the marriage did not end happily, as chronicled by Leo Grammaticus.⁴¹ According to his writings, Theodosius sent Augusta a giant apple to symbolise love or a test of loyalty. Augusta gave the apple to Paulinos as a gift since he was ill. Unaware of its significance, Paulinos gave the apple to the emperor. Out of jealousy, Theodosius demanded that Augusta reveal the apple's fate. However, Augusta claimed to have eaten it. The couple became distant and cold, and the emperor eventually murdered Paulinos.⁴² When Athenais learned of this, she was profoundly saddened and left for the Holy Land, where she passed away in Jerusalem.⁴³

Constantine VI and Maria of Amnia

Constantine VI was initially betrothed to Rotrud, Charlemagne's eldest daughter. During their engagement, the two corresponded, and Rotrud prepared for her future role as a Byzantine empress by studying the Greek language and Byzantine protocol. However, Irene, Constantine's mother, ultimately annulled the engagement and instead organized a beauty pageant. The purpose of the beauty pageant was to uphold the tradition of weddings started by Pulcheria for Theodosius II and to demonstrate that the legitimacy of the Roman emperor rested solely

39 Κωνσταντίνος Παπαρρηγόπουλος, *Ιστορία του ελληνικού έθνους*, vols. 4, 9 (Αθήνα: Ν. Δ. Νίκας, 1930), 619–621; Ιωάννης Ε. Καραγιαννόπουλος, *Ιστορία Βυζαντινού Κράτους. Ιστορία μέσης βυζαντινής περιόδου (565–1081)*, vols. 1–2 (Θεσσαλονίκη: Σάκκουλας, 1981), 255.

40 Παπαρρηγόπουλος, *Ιστορία του ελληνικού έθνους*, 618–619.

41 *Leonis Grammatici Chronographia*, CSHB, ed. Immanuelis Bekker (Bonnae: Impensis Ed. Weberi, 1842), 107.

42 *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum*, CSHB, vol. III, 111.

43 Βλάσιος Ι. Φειδάς, *Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία: Απ' αρχής μέχρι την Εικονομαχία*, vol. 1 (Αθήνα: Αποστολική Διακονία, 2022), 660.

with her son, Constantinople, and the East. Despite this, Constantine had developed feelings for Rotrud from afar.⁴⁴

Irene embarked on a quest to find a suitable wife for her son, dispatching emissaries throughout the empire to seek out the most beautiful women and bring them to Constantinople:

“[...] κατά δὲ τὸν καιρὸν ἐκεῖνον, βασιλεύοντος τῆς φιλοχρίστου Εἰρήνης αὐγούστης σὺν ἀνακτι τῷ υἱῷ αὐτῆς Κωνσταντίνῳ, ἐζήτει ἢ βασίλισσα κόρην ἐπιλέξασθαι ἐν πάσῃ τῇ τῶν Ῥωμαίων χώρα ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν ἕως δυσμᾶς πρὸς τὸ ζεῦξαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν βασιλέα”⁴⁵ (trans. *During the reign of Augusta Irene and her son Constantine, the empress decided to find a suitable bride for her son, who would be chosen from across the country of the Romans, from east to west*⁴⁶).

The empress established specific requirements, including age, height, physique, and shoe size, to narrow the search for potential candidates. Every eligible young woman was included in this competition.⁴⁷

The envoys journeyed to the village of Amnia, near Gangre in Paphlagonia, and were welcomed into the home of a local lord, Philaretos, who had three granddaughters of marriageable age and exceptional beauty. Following the empress's directives, the envoys conducted a series of assessments on the granddaughters, including height measurements, comparison of facial features to an ideal portrait, and evaluation of proportions against an ideal figure. All three granddaughters met the criteria for participating in the competition, with Maria meeting the empress's exacting standards.⁴⁸

The delegates identified ten additional contestants, all equally beautiful and hailing from noble and affluent families. However, despite their best efforts, the contestants still needed to meet the judges' expectations fully in Constantinople and were dismissed with generous gifts.⁴⁹

The grace and modesty of Philaretos' three granddaughters made a lasting impression on everyone present. Constantine was engaged to the eldest daughter, Maria, while the patrician Constantinakios was promised to the second daughter, Myranthia. The third daughter, Evanthia,

44 *Theophanis Chronographia*, CSHB, 718; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 396; Βακαλοῦδη, *Καλλιστεία και Γάμος στο Βυζάντιο*, 140–141.

45 „La vie de S. Philarète,” 135.

46 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

47 „La vie de S. Philarète,” 135; *Vita Theophanus* (BHG 1794), 52; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 23; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 398.

48 „La vie de S. Philarète,” 141; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 24; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 398.

49 „La vie de S. Philarète,” 143.

solidified a strong alliance between Byzantium and the Lombards by marrying the Prince of Benevento.⁵⁰

When Constantine married Mary, he graciously welcomed her family to meet them. He was impressed by their appearance and decided to gift them with estates, clothing, gold, silver, priceless objects adorned with precious stones, and magnificent buildings near the palaces.⁵¹

Saint Philaretus' biography, believed to have been written by Nikitas, the cousin of Maria of Amnia, is the primary source of this beauty contest. However, it does not include specific essential details mentioned in Theophanes's Chronography. According to the chronicler, Emperor Constantine was pressured by Irene to marry Mary despite his love for Rotrud. Constantine's lack of affection for Mary eventually led to his downfall. After having two daughters with Mary, Constantine divorced her and confined her to a convent.⁵² He then fell in love with Theodote, a lady-in-waiting of Irene, and married her, crowning her empress.⁵³ This caused a scandal and severely damaged his popularity, ultimately leading to his tragic fate. Irene took absolute power and had Constantine arrested and blinded in the very same room he was born in, the Purple Chamber of the imperial palace.⁵⁴

Staurakios and Theophano of Athens

In December 807, Nikephoros I held the second known bridal pageant for his son and future heir, Staurakios. Young women from all over the Byzantine territory gathered at the palace, and the contest ended with Theophano being chosen from Athens. This selection may appear unorthodox given the typical requirements for a potential bride, as mentioned by Theophanes in his Chronography. However, it is essential to consider that Theophanes, the only source of these events, had a prejudice against Nikephoros, raising doubts about the impartiality of the recorded events.⁵⁵

50 *Ibidem*.

51 *Ibidem*, 145.

52 *Theophanis Chronographia*, CSHB, 718.

53 George Ostrogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*, vol. 2 (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 49.

54 Παπαρρηγόπουλος, *Ιστορία του ελληνικού έθνους*, 463–465; Καραγιαννόπουλος, *Ιστορία Βυζαντινού Κράτους*, 182; Στήβεν Ράνσιμαν, *Βυζαντινός Πολιτισμός* (Αθήνα: Ερμείας, 1993), 78; Ostrogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*, 50.

55 *Theophanis Chronographia*, CSHB, 750; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 401.

“[...] τῆ δὲ εἰκάδι τοῦ Δεκεμβρίου μηνὸς Νικηφόρος μετὰ πολλὴν ἐκλογὴν παρθένων ἐκ πάσης τῆς ὑπ’ αὐτὸν ἐξουσίας εἰς τὸ ζευῆσαι Σταυράκιον, τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ, ποιησάμενος, Θεοφανῶ τὴν Ἀθηναίαν, προσγενῆ τῆς μακαρίας Εἰρήνης, μεμνηστευμένην ἀνδρὶ καὶ πολλάκις αὐτῷ συγκοιτασθεῖσαν, χωρίσας αὐτὴν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ τῷ ἀθλίῳ Σταυρακίῳ συνέζευξεν”⁵⁶ (trans. *During December, Nikephoros decided to marry off his son, Staurakios. He gathered many young women in the palace and finally chose Theophano of Athens. Theophano was already betrothed to someone else, but Nikephoros separated her from her fiancé and married her off to his son. Theophano was a relative of the late Empress Irene*⁵⁷).

Theophano was chosen as a wife for Staurakios, not for her beauty or moral character, as she was already engaged. Instead, her selection likely aimed to legitimize Nikephoros’ new dynasty due to her relation to Empress Irene of Athens and her status as the only link to the previous Isaurian dynasty. Theophano’s connection to Irene was her most significant advantage, and this marriage was viewed as a means to legitimize Nikephoros’ dynasty and garner support from both the people and the church. However, this decision did create tension within the church.⁵⁸

Following Nikephoros’s death in a battle against the Bulgarians, the marriage ended abruptly. Staurakios sustained severe injuries during the battle and attempted to designate Theophano as empress.⁵⁹ However, his efforts were foiled by a coup, resulting in Michael I Ragaves being proclaimed emperor. Both Staurakios and Theophano probably withdrew to a monastery.⁶⁰

Theophilos and Theodora

The story of Theophilos is brimming with captivating details, such as the emperor’s tradition of bestowing a golden apple upon the victor of his contest. This aspect should not be dismissed as mere mythological adornment, as the apple likely held significance in Byzantine wedding processions, serving as a widely acknowledged symbol of love in common traditions.

56 *Theophanis Chronographia*, CSHB, 750.

57 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

58 Βακαλούδη, *Καλλιστεία και Γάμος στο Βυζάντιο*, 159; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 401.

59 Ράνσιμαν, *Βυζαντινός Πολιτισμός*, 78.

60 Παπαρρηγόπουλος, *Ιστορία του ελληνικού έθνους*, 500–502; Καραγιαννόπουλος, *Ιστορία Βυζαντινού Κράτους*, 200–201; *Theophanis Chronographia*, CSHB, 768.

Multiple Byzantine chroniclers extensively recorded Theophilos's marriage process. They chronicled the careful selection process for the royal bride, which involved sending messengers to the provinces to find girls of unparalleled beauty and exceptional spiritual grace who were deemed worthy to become Augusta. After carefully choosing the best candidates, they brought them to the palace for the final judgment. Theophilos initially selected six or seven women and outlined the decisive selection process for the next round. The following day, his stepmother Euphrosyne gave him a golden apple to deliver to the chosen bride.⁶¹

Theophilos was entranced by the beauty of one of the candidates, Kassiani. Intrigued, he decided to test her by discussing the origin of sin and suffering being linked to Eve's transgression. However, Kassiani quickly countered with a reference to the hope of salvation brought about by the Incarnation of Christ through the Virgin Mary, emphasizing the positive impact of women: [...] – “Ὡς ἄρα διὰ γυναικός ἐρρῦη τὰ φαῦλα. – Ἄλλα καὶ διὰ γυναικός πηγάζει τὰ κρείττω”⁶² (trans. *From woman came the worst. – From woman also came the best*⁶³).

Theophilos was deeply troubled by the young woman's intelligence and assertiveness. Due to the woman's unacceptable level of feminist audacity, he chose to offer the apple to another candidate, Theodora. After her disappointment, Kassiani retreated from the world and established a monastery, where she found inspiration to compose poems and epigrams that are still revered today.

The monk who wrote *The Life of Theophilos' wife, Theodora*, did not find the story of Theophilos' pageants with Kassiani in the leading role suitable. He disagreed with the idea that Theodora was chosen because the emperor rejected a rival who dared to challenge him. As a result, he presented a different version of events in which Kassiani was ignored entirely. According to the biographer of *The Life of Theodora*, the bride's events were sealed by God's providence. The emperor chose seven candidates and gave each of them an apple. The next day, he called them back and asked for the apples to be returned. Only Theodora had two apples, the first being the royal apple and the second symbolizing a reward, representing

61 *Theophanes continuatus*, CSHB, 789–790; *Leonis Grammatici Chronographia*, CSHB, 213–214; *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome Historiarum*, CSHB, vol. IV, 354; *Michaelis Glycae Annales*, CSHB, vol. IV, ed. Immanuel Bekker (Bonn: Impensis Ed. Weberi, 1836), 535.

62 *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum*, CSHB, vol. III, 354; *Theophanes continuatus*, CSHB, 790.

63 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

a son for Theophilos.⁶⁴ On her way to Constantinople, a holy man gave her the second apple and prophesied her future election as empress.

The wedding celebrations for Theodora and Theophilos were magnificent events, including a grand procession at the church of Agios Stefanos and the palace of Daphne. Theodora was bestowed with the title of Augusta, and her family received various benefits and appointments following tradition. Furthermore, her mother, Theoktiste, was granted the prestigious title of *zoste patrikia*.⁶⁵

Theodora was raised in a home that upheld the veneration of icons, while Theophilos strongly opposed icon worship, influenced by his father's beliefs. It is suggested that Theophilos' stepmother, Euphrosyne, who organized the beauty contest, played a significant role in selecting participants and strongly influenced his election. Multiple factors influenced her selection of Theodora. First, Theodora's background, originating from the provincial aristocracy of Paphlagonia, created a sense of shared heritage with the empress. Second, and most importantly, Theodora's alignment as an iconophile, similar to Euphrosyne, likely influenced her selection by Theophilos. This choice ultimately led to the restoration of icons in 843 after Theophilos' death, marking the end of Byzantine Iconoclasm.⁶⁶

The two Eudokias and Michael III

Following the death of Theophilos in 842, his three-year-old son and successor, Michael III, was placed under the regency of his mother, Theodora. In 855, Theodora and her advisors orchestrated a marriage between the 16-year-old Michael and Eudokia Dekapolitissa to prevent him from marrying another woman, particularly his mistress, Eudokia Ingerina, whom Theodora strongly opposed. Theodora's disapproval of Michael's mistress is vividly depicted in the writings of the chronographers, as recorded in the Chronicle of Leo Grammatikos:

“Βουλήν ουν ποιήσασα Θεοδώρα Αύγουστο μετά του λογοθέτου Θεοκτίστου δούναι γυναίκα Μιχαήλ τω υιώ αυτής· εγνω γαρ ως συνεφιλιώθη Ευδοκία τη τοῦ “Ιγγερος, μισουμένη τῆ λογοθέτῃ καὶ τη

64 *Βίος τῆς ἀυτοκράτειρας Θεοδώρας* (BHG 1731), ed. Αθανάσιος Μαρκόπουλος, vol. 5, *Byzantina Symmeikta* (1983): 259.

65 *Theophanes continuatus*, CSHB, 90.

66 Βακαλοῦδη, *Καλλιστεία και Γάμος στο Βυζάντιο*, 176; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 404.

δεσποίνη σφοδρῶς δι' ὀναιδειαν⁶⁷ (trans. *Augusta Theodora sought to find a wife for her son Michael with the assistance of the logothetes Theoktistos. They were aware of Eudocia, the daughter of Inger, whom they detested due to her impudence*⁶⁸).

Leo Grammatikos supports this information, stating that Eudokia's rejection was a result of her impudence (*ἀναιδειαν*), which indicated her strong character and potential threat to Theodora's influence. Additionally, Eudokia Ingerina's background from an iconoclast family likely played a role in the negative perception of her. In 855, Theodora organized a beauty contest for her son, as described by Leo VI in his parents' Epitaph, suggesting that the event was a legitimate method of selecting a wife for the young basileus once he was of marriageable age.⁶⁹

It is interesting to note that information about royal beauty contests is often found in the lives of saints. In this case, the source for organising beauty contests in honour of Michael is the Life of Agia Irini of Neotera. The anonymous hagiographer recounts that Theodora and her son Michael, who was heir to the throne, decided that he should marry a woman from a pious family known for its Orthodox faith. The chosen woman was to be distinguished for her virtue, noble soul, and physical beauty, surpassing her peers. Proclamations were sent throughout the Byzantine Empire, inviting beautiful candidates for the throne to gather at the imperial palaces on a specific day.⁷⁰

Families from various places with young daughters prepared them and sent them to the capital. Among them were the parents of the beautiful Irene, famous for her soul's beauty and her body's grace. They decided to send her, accompanied by her sister, from her birthplace of Cappadocia to Constantinople, equipping her with expensive and suitable luggage for the occasion. On her way to Basileuousa, however, she was visited by a holy man who prophesied that she would become a nun and then abbess of the Chrysovalantou monastery in Constantinople, and indeed she did. Despite her provincial background, Irene came from the noble and wealthy family of Gouveria.⁷¹

Eudokia Ingerina eventually gained entry into the bridal contest, possibly thanks to Michael's involvement in organising the pageants. However, Theodora could reject Eudokia Ingerina and instead choose

67 *Leonis Grammatici Chronographia*, CSHB, 229–230.

68 The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

69 Βακαλούδη, *Καλλιστεία και Γάμος στο Βυζάντιο*, 190.

70 *Vita Irenes* (BHG 952): vol. Julii VI (Acta Sanctorum, 1729), 603–605.

71 *Ibidem*.

Eudokia Dekapolitissa. The young prince had no choice but to go along with the decision and marry the chosen bride, even though it meant temporary separation from the woman he truly loved. The winning bride may have been of little significance, which could have been Theodora's reason for selecting her. Throughout her twelve-year marriage to Michael, Eudokia Dekapolitissa remained humble and unassuming, never seeking attention or recognition.⁷²

In 855, Michael III and Eudokia exchanged vows at the chapel of St. Stephen in the Palace of Daphne within the Great Palace. Despite this union, Michael maintained his relationship with his mistress, Eudokia Ingerina, as if his marriage to Eudokia Dekapolitissa had not occurred. His affection for her persisted until his passing. To keep her close, he orchestrated her marriage to Basil the Macedonian, who had grown close to the emperor and was gaining influence at court.⁷³

Leo VI the Wise and Theophano Martinakia

When Leo, the son of Basil I and Eudokia Ingerina, reached the age of sixteen, Basil I took it upon himself to seek a suitable wife for his son.⁷⁴ In keeping with tradition, twelve of the most stunning women in the empire were assembled under the watchful eye of Empress Eudokia at the palace of Magnaura. It is important to note that Eudokia did not strongly prefer beauty pageants to choose a royal bride, as Theodora had previously utilised this method to distance herself from Michael III. However, over the years, this custom became firmly established.⁷⁵

The sole account of bride selection for Leo is documented in the Life of Saint Theophano. The author of the biography describes the meticulous process of identifying young women with both beauty and virtue to potentially become Leo's bride, the eldest son of Basileios and co-emperor. Basil sent out messengers across the empire to locate suitable candidates. Empress Eudokia also sought out girls from her own country to participate in the selection process, with Theophano among

72 Βακαλούδη, *Καλλιστεία και Γάμος στο Βυζάντιο*, 192; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 405; Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire*, 156.

73 Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 182; *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum*, CSHB, vol. III, 414.

74 *Vita Theophanus* (BHG 1794), 5.

75 *Ibidem*, 5–6; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 201; Κουκουλές, *Βυζαντινών Βίος και Πολιτισμός*, 121; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 406.

those chosen. Twelve candidates were ultimately chosen to convene at the Palace of Magnaura, where they awaited the royal couple's arrival.⁷⁶

The biography contains a noteworthy event that foreshadows future occurrences. During this event, a young woman from Athens who could foresee the future through omens suggested a lighthearted competition. All participants were to sit on the floor and place their shoes before them. The winner would be the first to stand up, put on her shoes, and bow to the emperor as soon as he entered. All agreed, and the following day, when the royal couple arrived, Theophano from the esteemed Martinaki family was the first to execute the agreed-upon actions.⁷⁷

Admiring her beauty and grace, Eudokia approached Theophano, inquired about her lineage and homeland, and handpicked her, along with the girl from Athens and another known as the "daughter of Trivounos". She then presented them to the emperor. The rest of the women were returned to their homelands, each rewarded with gifts and money. The three chosen women were escorted to the royal chambers, where they were carefully examined in the bath. Theophano's beauty far surpassed the others, and she was adorned in imperial robes and escorted by Eudokia to Basil. The emperor, enchanted by her incomparable beauty, placed a ring made of jasper on her finger and declared her a fitting companion for his son.⁷⁸

The winter wedding ceremony of 881–882 was a lavish affair, complete with opulent feasts, charitable donations, prisoner pardons, and the bestowing of honours and positions. The public rejoiced with cheers and hymns as Patriarch Photius blessed the newly married couple.⁷⁹

Leo had never met Theophano prior to their arranged marriage by his parents. He harboured feelings for Zoe, the daughter of Stylianos Zaoutzis, a respected figure at court and a close family friend of the emperor. Leo's affection for Zoe made him hesitant to marry Theophano, but he complied with his father's wishes out of filial concern. Leo's resentment towards his arranged marriage fueled his bitterness, which was evident in his response to Patriarch Euthymius' accusation of an illicit relationship with Zoe. Leo defended himself by explaining that his marriage was not by choice.⁸⁰

76 *Vita Theophanus* (BHG 1794), 5–6.

77 *Vita Theophanus* (BHG 1794), 5–6; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 201.

78 *Ibidem*.

79 *Ibidem*, 5–6, 52; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 408; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 202.

80 Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 408.

Theophano had concerns about her husband's fidelity and turned to Basil for comfort. The emperor orchestrated a marriage between Zoe and Theodoros Yunatzitzis to address the situation.⁸¹ While Basil was alive, the couple's relationship remained harmonious. However, after Basil died in 886, Theophano's and Leo's relationship began to decline, particularly after the loss of their only child, Eudokia, in the winter of 892. After the tragic loss of her child, Theophano, due to her asceticism, became seriously ill. So, it is easy to understand that Leo was tired of his wife and life with her.⁸² That is why he decided to reconnect with his old lover. The man whom Basil had obligingly given to Zoe was murdered by poisoning, and since then, Zoe has been openly living with Leo.⁸³ For the sake of her father, Stylianos Zaoutzes, Leo invented the unique title of *basileopator*, which he gave him to honour him and entrusted him with the complete management of the affairs of the state.⁸⁴

After learning of her husband's unfaithfulness, Theophano turned to the esteemed holy man, Euthymius, for counsel. She expressed her desire to enter a monastery and seek a divorce, citing her husband's adultery as the reason. Euthymius subsequently approached the emperor, Leo, to admonish him for his actions and appeal to his sense of fairness. However, Leo was satisfied with the situation, as it would allow him to marry his mistress.⁸⁵

Leo's deep affection for Zoe and his intense yearning for a male heir to solidify the Macedonian dynasty's future prompted him to end his marriage. As his health deteriorated and his brother Alexander lived a solitary existence, the urgency of a third person guaranteeing the succession of the throne became paramount. This political imperative was deemed essential to rationalize Leo's infidelity in the eyes of his peers and Theophano's advocates.⁸⁶

Theophano suffered in silence and ultimately passed away on November 10, 893, before reaching the age of 30. Leo honoured her with a lavish burial, and she was interred next to her daughter in the imperial chapel

81 Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 202.

82 *Ibidem*.

83 *Theophanes continuatus*, CSHB, 357; *Ιωάννου Σκυλίτζη: Σύνοψις Ιστοριών*, Βασιλική Σπυροπούλου (ed.), vol. 1 (Αθήνα: Κανάκη, 2011), 510; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 206.

84 *Ibidem*; *Ιωάννου Σκυλίτζη: Σύνοψις Ιστοριών*, 510–511; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 207; Καραγιαννόπουλος, *Ιστορία Βυζαντινού Κράτους*, vol. II, 322.

85 Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 204–205.

86 *Ibidem*, 205.

of the Holy Apostles.⁸⁷ The Church later canonized her as a Saint. Following Theophano's passing, Leo ultimately wed Zoe in 894. Unfortunately, Zoe succumbed to a mysterious illness towards the end of 896, leaving behind their only daughter, Princess Anna.⁸⁸

Leo's choice to marry for a third time was motivated by dynastic considerations. However, it was a decision that required careful thought due to the Church's disapproval of such unions and the negative public perception of them for an emperor. Despite his deep love for Zoe and genuine grief over her passing, Leo hesitated to enter another relationship for some time. Finally, in 899, he decided to marry for the third time in the summer of 900, selecting Eudokia Baïana as his new wife.⁸⁹

Some scholars⁹⁰ have suggested that Eudokia Baïana was selected through another bridal beauty contest based on a passage from the chronicles,⁹¹ but there is no historical evidence to support the idea of organizing a beauty pageant to choose a bride.

Following the tragic death of his third wife, Eudokia Baïana, and their newborn son during childbirth on April 12, 901,⁹² Leo decided to take up residence in the palace with Zoe Karbonopsina. In 905, Zoe gave birth to their son, Constantine VII. Despite facing opposition, Leo was resolute in his determination to marry Zoe, a choice that stirred controversy within the Church and led to the persecution and exile of

87 *Theophanes continuatus*, CSHB, 361; *Leonis Grammatici Chronographia*, CSHB, 269–270; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 204–206; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 408; Ostrogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*, 134.

88 *Leonis Grammatici Chronographia*, CSHB, 270–271: It is said that her tombstone read “θυγάτηρ Βαβυλωνῶνος ἢ ταλαίπωρος” (trans. *The poor woman was a daughter of Babylon*). The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 209.

89 Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 408; *Theophanes continuatus*, CSHB, 364; *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum*, CSHB, vol. III, 445; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 209; Ostrogorski, *History of the Byzantine State*, 135.

90 Bourboulis, *Studies in the History of Modern Greek Story Motives*, 37; Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries, A. D. 610–1071* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), 214.

91 *Ιωάννου Σκυλίτζη: Σύνοψις Ιστοριών*, 524: “ἠγάγετο δὲ καὶ κόρην ἐκ τοῦ Ὀψικίου, ὠραίαν τε καὶ περικαλλῆ, τοῦνομα Εὐδοκίαν, ἣν δὲ καὶ ἔστεπεν. ἐγκύμων δὲ γενομένη καὶ μέλλουσα τίκτειν ἀπέθανε καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ τὸ ἔμβρυον” (trans. *He also brought and married a beautiful and graceful girl from the Opsikion theme, Eudocia, and proclaimed her empress. However, she became pregnant, and during childbirth, she and the child died*). The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English; *Theophanes Continuatus*, CSHB, 364.

92 *Theophanes continuatus*, CSHB, 364; *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum*, CSHB, vol. III, 445; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 209; Καραγιαννόπουλος, *Ιστορία Βυζαντινοῦ Κράτους*, vol. II, 332–333.

dissenters. The Roman Catholic Church also became involved, further deepening the divisions within the Church. Despite these challenges, Leo married Zoe, granting her the title of Augusta and crowning his son as co-emperor on May 15, 908.⁹³

Fourmy-Leroy, in the introduction to the biography of Saint Philaretos the Merciful, highlighted the significant impact of Leo's multiple marriages on the tradition of choosing royal brides. This controversy ultimately resulted in the perception that the process was frivolous, leading to the decline of the tradition.⁹⁴

Conclusions

The Byzantine bridal beauty contests held great sway in the empire and the ecclesiastical world, as evidenced in hagiographies and monks' chronicles, demonstrating the impact that the captivating tales of royal beauty contests had on the lives of Byzantines.⁹⁵ These competitions were intended to elevate the Byzantine ruler as a figure of holiness and superiority over the ordinary people. The Roman emperor was seen as the embodiment of the highest human attributes, and candidates for these competitions were selected based on ideal measurements and descriptions from the palace. Officially, marriages between Greek emperors and foreign dynasties to strengthen alliances were prohibited.⁹⁶ At that

93 *Theophanes continuatus*, CSHB, 370; *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome historiarum*, CSHB, vol. III, 446; Ντιλ, *Βυζαντινές Μορφές*, 210–215; Καραγιαννόπουλος, *Ιστορία Βυζαντινού Κράτους*, vol. II, 333.

94 „La vie de S. Philarète,” 104; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 408; Βακαλούδη, *Καλλιστεία και Γάμος στο Βυζάντιο*, 215; Lennart Rydén, „The Bride Shows at the Byzantine Court—History or Fiction,” *Eranos* 83 (1985): 178.

95 Κουκουλές, *Βυζαντινών Βίος και Πολιτισμός*, 122; Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 411, 413.

96 *Constantine Porphyrogenitus De administrando imperio*, CFHB, ed. Gyula Moravcsik (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967), 70–72: “Καὶ περὶ ταύτης τῆς ὑποθέσεως παραγγελία καὶ διάταξις φοβερὰ καὶ ἀπαραποίητος τοῦ μεγάλου καὶ ἀγίου Κωνσταντίνου ἐναπογεγραπταὶ ἐν τῇ ἱερᾷ τραπέζῃ τῆς καθολικῆς τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἐκκλησίας τῆς Ἁγίας Σοφίας” τοῦ μηδέποτε βασιλέα Ρωμαίων συμπενθερίασαν μετὰ ἔθνους μάλιστα δὲ ἀλλοπίστου καὶ ἀβαπτίστου, εἰ μὴ μετὰ μόνων τῶν Φράγγων, τούτους γὰρ μόνους ὑπεξείλετο ὁ μέγας ἐχθίνος ἀνὴρ, Κωνσταντίνος ὁ ἅγιος, ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς τὴν γένεσιν ἀπὸ τῶν τοιοῦτων ἔσχε μερῶν, ὡς συγγενείας καὶ ἐπιμιξίας πολλῆς τυγχανούσης Φράγγους τε καὶ Ρωμαίων. Καὶ διὰ τί μετὰ τούτων μόνων προετρέψατο συνιστᾶν γαμικὰ συναλλάγια τοὺς βασιλεῖς Ρωμαίων. Διὰ τὴν ἄνωθεν τῶν μερῶν ἐκείνων καὶ γενῶν περιφάνειαν καὶ εὐγένειαν. Μετ’ ἄλλου δὲ τοῦ οἰουδήποτε ἔθνους μὴ δυναμένου τοῦτο ποιεῖν, ἀλλ’ ὁ τοῦτο ποιῆσαι τολμήσας ἵνα, ὡς παραβάτης πατρικῶν εἰσηγήσεων καὶ βασιλείων θεσμῶν, ἀλλότριος κρίνοιτο τῶν Χριστιανῶν

time, the main criterion for choosing an emperor's wife was her beauty, possibly due to internal politics and dynasty strengthening.⁹⁷

Most marriages arranged through bride shows were unhappy, except for Theophilos and Theodora's. These marriages resulted from a competition in which the groom had no say in choosing his wife. Even the exceptional beauty of the winner could not make him forget his true love. These unhappy marriages often destroyed those involved.

The imperial bride-shows took place between 788 and 882 for the first marriage of an emperor or heir to the throne, but the custom eventually fell out of practice. Subsequent emperors could not hold pageants for various reasons, such as existing marriages or dynastic issues. During the Komnenos dynasty, closer relations with Europe became necessary due to political expediency and the gradual weakening of Byzantium. Although the custom of bridal beauty contests would be remembered, it no longer had significant influence.⁹⁸

Abbreviations

CFHB: Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae

CSHB: Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae

Teubneriana: Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana

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καταλόγων καὶ τῷ ἀναθέματι παραδίδοιτο” (trans. *There is a rule engraved on the sacred table of St. Sophia, the universal church of the Christians, which was put in place by Emperor Constantine. According to this rule, no emperor of the Romans should marry a person from a nation with customs that differ from and are alien to those of the Roman order, especially if they are infidel and unbaptized. The only exception is the Franks because Constantine came from that region and felt a kinship with them. He believed the Franks were famous, noble, and worthy of intermarrying with Roman emperors. However, this rule applies to no other nation, and anyone who violates it will be considered an outsider and subject to anathema*). The author of the paper translated and paraphrased the passage into English.

97 Βακαλοῦδη, *Καλλιστεία και Γάμος στο Βυζάντιο*, 243.

98 Treadgold, „The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors,” 413; Πλάτων Ροδοκανάκης, *Η Βασίλισσα και οι Βυζαντινές Αρχόντισσες* (Αθήνα: Μιχαήλ Σ. Ζηκάκης, 1920), 40.

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