Distinguished by piety as well as generosity, late medieval female founders had reasons to expect public approval and acclaim. The primary sources however mention some who despite their donations, foundations and monastic vows compromised their pious images by “controversial” political or moral choices. The following six stories gleaned from a variety of late Byzantine chronicles, letters and documents reflect what the emperor, the church authorities, the narrator and, possibly, public opinion considered inappropriate behavior in a female founder.

Let us now inquire into the nature of the founders’ transgressions and if the written evidence permits, their connection with the monastic establishments.

OPPOSING IMPERIAL DECISIONS

Following the chronological line, we must begin our survey with Martha Palaiologina, founder of the Kyra Martha convent, who played an important role in the Arsenite move-

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2 In order to fit the ascribed space, the stories of the six founders had to be discussed in an abbreviated form focusing mainly on the “controversial” parts of their lives. I hope that readers will find the works cited in the footnotes a helpful link to further details on the lives and actions of the princesses.

3 For more information and sources see PLP, no. 21589; Georgios Pachymeres, Chronikon, ed. A. Failler, Rela-
ment protesting against the emperor's deposition of patriarch Arsenios Autoreianos. She supported an important leader of the Arsenite movement, Hyakinthos, whom she provided with food and a hiding place. A document addressed to the Pope informs us that Martha was also involved in protests against the Union of Lyons for which she was strictly punished by the emperor.4

Thwarting the Emperor's Political Aims Through Subversive Activities and Written Work

Another founder, Theodora Raoulaina, became a prominent figure among those opposing the Union with the Catholic Church.6 Along with her mother Irene-Eulogia Palaiologina,7 the princess separated herself from the unionist communion and by her imperial status protected numerous refugees and dissidents.8 Very effective in her efforts, the emperor Michael VIII depicted Theodora as one of the ringleaders in a list of those who challenged his endeavour to implement the decrees of the Council of Lyons (1274) into the Orthodox ritual.9 In order to prove to the Pope the sincerity of his intentions, he had her imprisoned in Nikomedia where she wrote the Lives of Sts Theodore and Theophanes10 tortured by emperor Theophilos for refusing to obey the iconoclast edict. The heroes of her work created a tacit parallel with her own brothers-in-law, Isaac and Manuel Raoul, blinded and imprisoned by Michael for resisting the Union. Drawing a link between the emperor and his iconoclast predecessor, Theodora proved her determination to defy Michael with her pen in absence of other means.

After the emperor's death (1282), she returned to the capital and lived as the nun Kyriake in her foundation of St Andrew en te Krisei.11

4 The re-installation of Arsenios was not the only aim of this group, which officially existed until 1310, several decades after the death of the ex-patriarch. Outlining the motives of the Arsenites, Donald M. Nicol registers "high ideals of canon law, of moral scruple and of the precedence of church over state confused with loyalty to the house of Laskaris and antipathy to the policies of Michael VIII." (D. M. Nicol, The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261–1453, New York 1972, p. 50.) For further information and literature on the movement see ODB, II, p. 1259.


7 PLP, no. 21360.

8 Pachymeres, Chronikon (cit. n. 3), p. 545.

9 See n. 4.

10 A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, Ανάλεκτα Ιεροσολυμιτικής σταχυολογίας, St Petersburg 1897, IV, pp. 185–223, V, pp. 397–399.


12 Nicol, The Byzantine Lady (cit. n. 3), pp. 37–47. On her learning see Kugeas, Zur Geschichte der Münchner Thukydideshandschrift (cit. n. 11), pp. 594–607; S. Lampros, Επιγράμματα Μαξίμου Πλανούδη, in: Νέος Ελληνικός, 13,
reputation newly without blemish, the princess could afford to offer support to the ex-patriarch Gregory II of Cyprus\(^{14}\) (1283–1289), friend and fellow scholar, forced to resign his office.

**Supporting the heretical policy of the Emperor**

The third lady to be introduced, Theodora Palaiologina,\(^{15}\) wife of Michael VIII, had, unlike the two above-mentioned princesses, little freedom to choose her side. While during her husband’s life she was compelled to support the Union, once the opposing clique took over, she had to reject it in writing in order to protect her son’s position as well as her own.\(^{16}\) She rebuilt two nunneries and took the veil in one of them, the convent of Lips.\(^{17}\) Having reclaimed her pious image, the empress also saw her son established on the Byzantine throne.\(^{18}\) Her victories, however, seem meagre in comparison with another empress Theodora\(^{19}\) who reinstalled Orthodoxy (843) after her iconoclast husband’s death. Not only was her trespass fully forgiven but this formidable predecessor also secured a full absolution for her spouse and a halo for herself, both of which remained out of reach for the late Byzantine basilissa.

**Supporting the excommunicated opponents of an orthodox saint and arguing against his teachings**

Not unlike Theodora, Irene Choumnaina,\(^{20}\) “the most influential abbess of the Palaiologan period”,\(^{21}\) learned the consequences of associating with the “wrong” set. An imperial princess

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13 The text says that the patriarch moved to the small monastery of Aristenos, which was close to Theodora’s convent: Καὶ γε τῷ τῆς Ἀριστηνῆς μονυδρίῳ, ἐχόμενα που κειμένῳ τῆς τοῦ Ἀγίου Ἄνδρέου τοῦ ἐν τῇ Κρίσει μονῆς ἐκεῖ ἡ πρωτοβεστιάρισσα Αἰαούλαινα συνῆγεν, ἔξωπες περιδῆλπουσα τὰ μεγάλα –, φέρων ἑαυτὸν δίδωσιν. Pachymeres, Chronikon (cit. n. 3), III, p. 151.
14 For details on the patriarch see ODB, II, p. 876.
15 PLP, no. 21380. I would like to thank Alice-Mary Talbot for reminding me of this important founder.
18 Talbot, Empress Theodora (cit. n. 17), pp. 297–298.
20 For further details and literature see PLP, no. 30936.
by marriage widowed at an early age, Irene established the double monastery of Christ Philanthropos Soter in Constantinople and as the nun Eulogia assumed leadership of a large community of nuns. However, as Vitalien Laurent points out, “prisons, even the voluntary ones, are not made for fiery characters.” An important figure of the anti-hesychast movement, Eulogia supported Akindynos and Gregoras in their struggle against the teachings of Gregory Palamas.

Palamas, for his part, had little love for this highborn abbess. In his writings, he called her Eudoxia, the adversary of John Chrysostom, and mainly Jezebel, the evil Old Testament queen, enemy of the prophet Elijah.

Eulogia certainly was a formidable foe; intelligent, outspoken and powerful, the letters of her mentors censure her outbursts of temper and lack of patience.

Of the six women, this abbess was also the only one known to have used her foundation as a base for her party. After Gregory Akindynos was condemned (1341), Eulogia’s nunnery became his hiding place for several years.

Choumnainnai’s support of Akindynos, however, could not be tolerated by Palamas who in one of his works depicted her as Jezebel entertaining false prophets, his opponents, at her table. The convent also witnessed some of the exchanges of the two cliques for in his 7th Antirrhetic the future saint mentions that whenever the hesychasts arrived looking for Akindynos, Eulogia arrived instead and engaged in theological discussion with them.

Rather than Jezebel, the abbess resembles another formidable Byzantine founder, the empress Theodora, known for her charity and support of the Monophysite monks whom she concealed in a Constantinopolitan monastery and even offered their patriarch a safe refuge in the women’s quarters of the Sacred palace. Like this famous spouse of Justinian, Eulogia found herself defending the losing side. Her family background and imperial marriage could shield the princess-nun from excommunication imposed on several of her partisans but the defeat embittered the end of her life. Despite the fact that she built a nunnery, was praised for her generosity to the poor and prison-
ers of war, and her followers revered her grave as miracle-working, the worthy abbess never became a saint of the Orthodox Church. In one of his writings, Palamas commented that Eulogia was not like St. Theodora, the ninth-century empress who re-established Orthodoxy. Indeed she was not; failing to prevail over the hesychasts, the historian may only speculate what would have happened if, instead of Akindynos and Gregoras, the great abbess had joined the Palamite side.

**Broken Monastic Vows**

The following story involves Anna Anachoutlou Komnene, whom the primary sources identify as founder of a monydrion in Jerusalem. After emperor Basil I of Trebizond died without legitimate heirs, only one obstacle separated his sister Anna from the throne; her monastic vows. The chronicle of Michael Panaretos tells us that the princess was by no means daunted by this impediment. Putting off the veil and enlisting the help of an armed force, she assumed the imperial title for a period of thirteen months (1340–1341). In the end, however, she was not able to stabilize the political situation of the country, the opposition took over and the new emperor John III gave his supporters a free hand regarding the fate of his predecessor. Not backed by the popularity of the dynasty like the two middle Byzantine empress-nuns Zoe and Theodora the Macedonians, Anna was strangled in prison.

In order to understand the seriousness of her breaking the monastic vows, it is necessary to remember the stress put by the Palaiologan founders on the period of novitiate. As no provisions were made for women wishing to cancel their sacred promises or permanently leave the convent, the typika sought to make sure that the prospective nuns weighed carefully the consequences of tonsure. Although the chronicler did not openly castigate her, a similar case mentioned in the patriarchal register of Constantinople indicates the gravity of Anna’s trespass. Wishing to return into the world, a nun called Pepagomene left...
the convent, putting off the veil. She was immediately excommunicated and her punishment was not lifted until she returned to the nunnery and completed the necessary penance.

ADULTERY

Theodora Komnene and her husband, Alexios IV of Trebizond, are known as founders of the Pharos monastery. Their story, however, was apparently not a happy one. The historiographer accuses the empress of adultery with one of her husband’s officials, an event which marked the beginning of a family tragedy. Forced to flee upon killing Theodora’s lover, her eldest son John only returned three years later, when his mother was already dead. Perhaps it was better so; at least she did not witness how he had his father murdered in order to ascend the throne.41

If the account of the empress’s failing is true, the foundation may have been a semi-public act of repentance. Unfortunately, although the original chrysobull of the imperial couple exists, it was never signed and thus does not provide any date that would specify the circumstances under which the monastery was established.42 Neither the text of the document nor the name Pantokrator reveals anything specific about its founders’ motivation, except, as Laurent notes, the wish to introduce a famous name from Theodora’s homeland into the Trebizond environment.43 On the other hand, the fact that the document was ready but not yet signed by the time Alexios was assassinated in 1429 (three years or less after the death of his wife) indicates a possible connection between the foundation and the sad events preceeding John’s flight.44

In her study “Holy Women and Witches: Aspects of Byzantine Conceptions of Gender”, Catia Galatariotou concludes that “the good woman is denied power; power becomes a characteristic of the evil female.”45 Juxtaposed to this model, the misplaced nature of the founders’ deeds becomes evident. Unrelated to foundation and charity, their initiative in private, religious and political matters was censured in the judgment of the emperor, the wording of the document condemning the Union, in Palamas’s choice of epithets and the chronicler’s between-the-lines con-

39 PLP, no. 12069.
42 Or rather renovated as the sources report that it was built on the ruins of a former convent. For further information regarding the foundation documents see Laurent, Deux chrysobulles (cit. n. 40), pp. 250–255. For texts ibid., pp. 258–270.
43 Laurent, Deux chrysobulles (cit. n. 40), p. 247.
44 For reconstruction of the circumstances of signing the document see Laurent, Deux chrysobulles (cit. n. 40), pp. 254–255.
nection of the queen’s adultery with the violent death of her husband.

The stories of the six princesses, all members of imperial families, confirm that even though establishment and renovation of religious institutions certainly brought the founders prestige and recognition of their contemporaries, they did not safely shield their persons and reputations when they pursued their private beliefs, and personal or political goals. By social status naturally endowed with power and greater freedom, the main challenges for these women involved choosing the “right” side in the ecclesiastical and political controversies and remaining faithful to their marital or monastic vows. For those who failed in either were disapproved of and almost always punished.