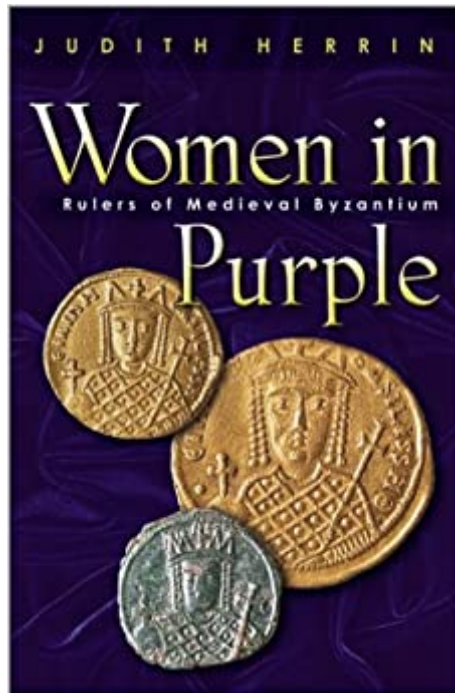




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# Women In Purple: Rulers Of Medieval Byzantium



## Synopsis

In the eighth and ninth centuries, three Byzantine empresses--Irene, Euphrosyne, and Theodora--changed history. Their combined efforts restored the veneration of icons, saving Byzantium from a purely symbolic and decorative art and ensuring its influence for centuries to come. In this exhilarating and highly entertaining account, one of the foremost historians of the medieval period tells the story of how these fascinating women exercised imperial sovereignty with consummate skill and sometimes ruthless tactics. Though they gained access to the all-pervasive authority of the Byzantine ruling dynasty through marriage, all three continued to wear the imperial purple and wield tremendous power as widows. From Constantinople, their own Queen City, the empresses undermined competitors and governed like men. They conducted diplomacy across the known world, negotiating with the likes of Charlemagne, Roman popes, and the great Arab caliph Harun al Rashid. Vehemently rejecting the ban on holy images instituted by their male relatives, Irene and Theodora used craft and power to reverse the official iconoclasm and restore icons to their place of adoration in the Eastern Church. In so doing, they profoundly altered the course of history. The art--and not only the art--of Byzantium, of Islam, and of the West would have been very different without them. As Judith Herrin traces the surviving evidence, she evokes the complex and deeply religious world of Constantinople in the aftermath of Arab conquest. She brings to life its monuments and palaces, its court ceremonies and rituals, the role of eunuchs (the "third sex"), bride shows, and the influence of warring monks and patriarchs. Based on new research and written for a general audience, *Women in Purple* reshapes our understanding of an empire that lasted a thousand years and splashes fresh light on the relationship of women to power.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 288 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; New Ed edition (January 1, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691095000

ISBN-13: 978-0691095004

Product Dimensions: 9.6 x 6.5 x 1.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #950,986 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #113 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Gender Studies > Women in History #9367 in Books > Politics &

## Customer Reviews

Although female rulers were an anomaly during the Middle Ages, Herrin (*The Formation of Christendom*) chronicles the lives of three eighth- and ninth-century Byzantine women who proved to be exceptions. As emperors' wives, Irene, Euphrosyne and Theodora "exercised imperial power and changed the course of the empire's history in a purposive, deliberate, and connected fashion." Their commitment to preserving the role of Christian icons in worship was especially significant, Herrin argues, since they defied years of opposing edicts and eventually succeeded. Most Byzantine emperors in this period practiced a policy of "iconoclasm": they removed religious icons from churches and monasteries and persecuted those who prayed to them (iconophiles). But in various ways, these women engaged in sweeping reforms of iconoclasm: Irene, the first female emperor of Byzantium, sponsored a 787 council that restored icons to places of worship. Though this was later reversed, Theodora, from her position as widow of the emperor Theophilus, succeeded in 843 in restoring icons to the prominent place to which early Byzantine society had elevated them. Herrin contends that three factors the growing cult of the Virgin as a symbol of female power, a new role for women in establishing claims to the throne and the development of certain court structures such as the role of eunuchs, who were servants of imperial women provided new opportunities for women to rule. Herrin's study provides important glimpses into medieval history as well as the daily lives and rituals of Byzantine imperial women. 8 pages of color illus. (Feb.) Forecast: Though Herrin's tone tends toward the scholarly, her book is the most accessible of the few currently available on this topic. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

"[Herrin] has succeeded in writing a scholarly study [that] opens up a new perspective on a vital period of Byzantine history, [and] one that is eminently accessible to a wider public. It is also superbly illustrated."--Michael Angold, *Times Literary Supplement* "A work of remarkable scholarship. . . . Throughout her book, the author explains the court intrigues and theological debates with outstanding clarity."--Bart McDowell, *WashingtonTimes* "Herrin's study provides important glimpses into medieval history as well as the daily lives and rituals of Byzantine imperial women. . . . [Her] book is the most accessible of the few currently available on this topic."--*Publishers Weekly* "Throughout history, the dynastic and political role of ruler has been the prerogative of men, with some notable exceptions. In medieval Byzantium, there were three such rarities: Irene, Euphrosyne and Theodora. Gaining considerable power as emperors' wives, they

continued to wield authority as widows and helped alter what is now a singular aspect of Byzantine culture its iconography. Reversing the ban on holy images that was fashionable at the time, they helped restore icons to a prominent position in Eastern Christian worship."--The Washington Post Book World "Herrin traces the lives of three Byzantine empresses of the late eighth and early ninth centuries. . . . [She] deals with the contradictions inherent in being a female ruler and the ways in which the three women used and manipulated the structures and symbols of Byzantine power. . . . The book is lightly footnoted, has an excellent discussion of the problems of finding sources about women during this period, and is written in a clear style accessible to general readers interested in historical biography."--Choice

This is a very good book. It is academic and well researched, but also very readable. The author focuses in on the lives of three empresses and their importance to the history of the Byzantium Empire, as well as their impact on West European history. There is a very good introductory chapter that lays the historical backdrop of the Byzantium Empire and the city of Constantinople. From there, the author provides a triple biography of the three empresses, highlighting their characters, importance to politics and religion, and the other main characters in their lives. The author makes a compelling case for the importance of the empresses' efforts to restore the veneration of religious icons, while also highlighting their achievements in both domestic political concerns and foreign relations. The book also contains several excellent maps and beautiful color plates. For anyone interested in women's history, the medieval period, and the Byzantium Empire, this book should greatly satisfy.

The lives of women rulers of most nations prior to the modern era were not well documented. In the past history was essentially written by men for men, and showed little interest in the experiences of women, whether they were powerful or not. In this book Judith Herrin has reconstructed the lives of three Byzantine empresses of the 8th and 9th Centuries. The lives we are presented with here are those of the empresses Irene, her grand daughter Euphrosyne and Theodora. The lives of these women represent significant episodes in Byzantine history, but it isn't until you read a book like this that you realise how much of Byzantine history has simply been lost and distorted over the centuries. So much so, that it has been difficult to reconstruct the lives of these women in any great detail, especially that of Euphrosyne. Thankfully for those of us who have not read much about Byzantine history the author provides a lengthy introductory section which explains the city history and layout. The hierarchy of the court and the importance of eunuchs to both the empress and the

empire and the public rituals important officials were expected to participate in. Empress Irene came from Athens as a young woman and after her husband's death was regent for her son for over 10 years and eventually ruled in her own name for 5 years, an unprecedented act in royal circles in that time. Her grand daughter Euphrosyne was "born in the purple", suffered exile in her youth only to be bought back as empress later in life. Her successor was Theodora who has come down to us as a saint for the re-instating of icons as a tool of worship in Byzantine churches, something which persists to this day. This book covers the years when the veneration of icons ripped the church and Byzantine society apart for close to a century. These empresses were instrumental in the re-instatement of icons as a central item of worship in the Byzantine church. This is an easy to read book, but one that is obviously full of researched depth. It has impressive notes and sources at the back. If you have any curiosity about female rulers of Byzantium this book is a must.

For anyone with an interest in Byzantine History then this is a must. Herrin's style is very digestible and the subject matter enthralling. You really do get a great insight into these three impressive women and a very vivid picture of the imperial court in Constantinople and all the pomp and ceremony that went with it. Very good.

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