Mothers and Sons, Fathers and Daughters
The Byzantine Family of Michael Psellos

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General Introduction

The study of Byzantine women has been seriously underway for the past twenty-five years or so, yet it suffers from a debilitating lack of evidence. The vast majority of studies focus on empresses and saints (or at any rate nuns) for the simple reason that they are the only women we know much about. Alternately, they scrutinize the provisions of the various legal codes, though admitting the limitations of this kind of evidence, which is normative, often highly ideological rather than descriptive, and sometimes very much out of date. One is reminded of the man searching for his keys at night under a lamppost not because he dropped them right there but because that was the only place where he could see to look. Empresses and saints, however, were statistically insignificant and their lives were characteristically and even purposefully different from that of the majority of the population. “We admire rare things more than common ones,” Psellos wrote in a playful treatise.1 That majority, however, which consisted of agricultural families and the poor, will probably forever remain beyond our reach, with the exceptions, perhaps, of Egypt in late antiquity and of Makedonia in the Palaiologan period. Evidence about them in other times and places may be laboriously gleaned from archaeology or by searching through hundreds of texts for scattered references, but this will probably never yield a systematic picture because of its wide geographical and chronological distribution.

It is here that Psellos comes to our rescue, by casting some light outside the relatively narrow circle of hagiography and court history. Though there has been no systematic treatment of his life and his importance as a source for

Byzantine history and culture, Psellos’ name nonetheless appears in discussions of almost every aspect of Byzantine civilization. In particular, he often takes center stage in discussions of the family, although, because these discussions are almost always focused on the court or the upper levels of the aristocracy, he does so through his historical work, the *Chronographia*, and the letters and orations that he wrote to and for members of the court and aristocracy. Our focus here will be different. In a number of writings Psellos discussed many of the women in his own life, including his mother, his prematurely deceased first daughter, and his second (adopted) daughter (though, oddly, never his own wife). Taken together, as they are for the first time in this volume, these texts present, through a variety of literary perspectives, the history over the course of a century of a Byzantine family belonging to what we may call the upper middle class of Constantinople. These were not members of the imperial family or great lords who commanded armies and provinces; rather, we are dealing with the class of court functionaries, high officials in the civil bureaucracy, and intellectuals. They were relatively wealthy (they employed servants and owned slaves) and cultivated an ideal of bourgeois respectability. The evidence that Psellos offers is crucially important because it enables us to understand the norms taken for granted by almost all writers during the apogee of Byzantine power, the standard, in other words, against which they measured the aberrant eccentricities of empresses and saints. The women and children we encounter in these texts led, by the standards of their own class, relatively unexceptional lives.

Certainly, it is ironic that we should find an exposition of this norm in Psellos, who otherwise conformed to few of the norms of his society. And yet it is only here that we may obtain a sustained look at the life of an average Byzantine family of this most important class, a topic that has received little to no attention in scholarship. Psellos’ evidence, coming as it does from the mid-eleventh century, is important as a corrective in another way as well. Too often historians assume that the paranoid and highly restrictive views about women expressed by the rather bitter Kekaumenos, a writer of advice-maxims of the exact same period, are indicative of Byzantine views in general. Like the works of Psellos presented here, Kekaumenos’ treatise remains untranslated into the major languages of modern research; nevertheless, his simple Greek and aphoristic style have ensured that he is quoted often by way of illustration of prevailing social *mores*, especially in discussions of women and the family. Psellos, as will be seen, not only had a very different attitude toward women, his account of the circumstances of their lives is very different in tenor.
The order in which the present texts have been placed reflects the chronology of their subjects rather than their dates of composition; the same is true of the letters that have been included here, though they are gathered together in one chapter toward the end of the volume. Thus we move from Psellos’ mother and childhood to the premature death of his daughter Styliane, the engagement of his second (adopted) daughter, and the birth of his grandson. Each of these texts, which vary greatly in size, purpose, and genre, is prefaced by a separate introduction. The introduction to the collection as a whole provides an overview of the background information that will be required by readers who are not specialists on Psellos. The topics covered here are (i) the life of Psellos; (ii) the history of his family from his grandparents to his grandchildren, so covering five generations; and (iii) a composite picture of the lives of women and children in eleventh-century Constantinople, with which topic all the following texts are concerned in one way or another. It is from these works that we obtain a more detailed and comprehensive picture of their lives than from virtually any other Byzantine source.

A Brief Biography of Michael Psellos

No biography of Michael Psellos exists in any language, though at least one has been formally announced and brief surveys of his life preface studies of specific aspects of his career and writings. None of these, however, is in English. It was therefore decided to begin this volume with a brief biography, which will provide the necessary context against which to discuss his family life.

Konstantinos Psellos—the baptismal name of the later monk Michael—was born in 1018, so during the reign of Basileios II and the apogee of Byzantine power, to a “middle-class” family in Constantinople. Early on his mother Theodote perceived that he was a prodigy and encouraged his studies, possibly at the local monastery of ta Narsou, with which Psellos maintained a lifelong connection. He later boasted that school lessons were child’s play for him and that by the age of ten he could recite and expound the entire Iliad. He was also

2. For the state of the field, see Kaldellis (2006). The following survey of Psellos’ life was originally written for my study on Hellenism in Byzantium (in preparation).
3. Psellos, Encomium for his Mother 5b, 6b–c. In the Chronographia 4.4 he implies that he started to study Homer when he was sixteen, but this is unlikely. For ta Narsou, see Hondridou (2002) 159–160, citing previous scholarship.
a purely urban creature, sixteen years old before he even set eyes on the fields outside the walls (probably only in Constantinople could this happen in all of Christendom). By that age he had begun to study rhetoric and joined the staff of a provincial judge, but this internship was cut short by the death of his beloved sister. Psellos’ instructors in rhetoric were Ioannes Mauropous, who was famous as a teacher but would not make his mark as a writer until after Psellos’ rise at the court, and Niketas, who would later serve under Psellos in the reformed educational system. As far as philosophy was concerned, Psellos claimed to have studied it largely on his own: whereas he was “a perfect philosopher,” his friends were only “lovers of philosophy.”

After serving in a judicial capacity in Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, around 1040 Psellos appears as a secretary at the court of Michael IV. Though only twenty, he already displayed a knack for making friends in high places, including Alousianos, son of the last Bulgarian tsar (Ivan Vladislav), who joined Deljan’s revolt against the empire, deposed its leader, and betrayed it to Michael IV in exchange for titles; and the captain of the guard sent against Michael V in the popular riot of 1042, an event of which Psellos later wrote a dramatic firsthand account. His standing at the court rose sharply under Konstantinos IX Monomachos (1042–1055), a charming if rather frivolous patron of the arts and of education whose wanton expenditures and neglect of the army would soon prove disastrous for the empire. Psellos became one of his intimate advisors and personal secretaries, a position earned largely by “the grace of my language…. For I am told that my speech is beautiful, even when making routine statements.” He also acted as the emperor’s spokesman, writing eloquent speeches in his praise and in support of his policies (regardless of whether he agreed with them personally). He had by then been befriended by Konstantinos Leichoudes,

Monomachos’ “prime minister” and later a patriarch (1059–1063), whom Psellus admired for his urbane, philosophical, and flexible statesmanship. He had also facilitated the introduction to the court of his teacher Mauropous and his friend Ioannes Xiphilinos, another future patriarch (1064–1075), alongside whom he continued to teach privately. When a dispute broke out in 1047 among their students, the emperor intervened and granted official recognition to both schools. Psellus assumed the lofty title of Consul of Philosophers and seems to have exercised some supervision over higher education in the capital, though the institutional aspects of his position are unclear. Xiphilinos was made nomophylax (guardian of the laws) in charge of the new law school, whose foundation was chartered in a novel probably authored by Mauropous. Discussing these new foundations thirty years later, the historian Michael Attaleiates claims that Psellus “surpassed all of our contemporaries in knowledge.” The late 1040s witnessed the reign of the philosophers at Monomachos’ court.¹⁰

In those years Psellus laid the foundations of his philosophical revolution. He delivered hundreds of lectures on philosophical, theological, scientific, and exegetical topics, taking charge of the education of many who would go on to serve in the administration and the Church. He boasted of the diverse origin of the students who attended his classes: “I have made Celts and Arabs yield to me and on account of my fame they come here . . . While the Nile irrigates the land of the Egyptians, my speech irrigates their souls. If you ask a Persian or an Ethiopian they will say that they have known me and admired me and sought me out.”¹¹ Psellus projected an ideal of vast polymathy subordinated to the queen of sciences, philosophy, and often barely discriminated between pagan and Christian wisdom. He also began to wield influence at the court, contracting an advantageous marriage and amassing patrons, clients, titles, a fine town house, and enemies against whom he wrote defensive tracts. Yet for unknown reasons he was forced to resign from the powerful and prestigious position of protasêkrêtis (head of the college of imperial secretaries) and settle for the title of vestarchês. The regime of the philosophers began to


unravel around 1050, under pressure by forces that we cannot identify: Leichoudes was dismissed; Mauropous was sent off against his will to serve as bishop of Euchaïta on the Black Sea coast; Xiphilinos became a monk on Mt. Olympos in Bithynia; Pséllos clung to the court, but came under increasing fire and suspicion for his beliefs. In late 1054 he was tonsured and took the name Michael, while Monomachos’ death in early 1055 only raised further suspicions: had Pséllos predicted his death through astrology?12

Pséllos detested both the false premises and hypocritical practice of Christian asceticism and so it is no surprise that his brief stay on Mt. Olympos (1055–1056) was not happy. He had previously composed a witty parody of the liturgy exposing one of the holy mountain’s heavy drinkers. While there he composed a philosophical funeral oration for his monastery’s recently deceased founder and a eulogy of the mountain itself, praising its natural beauties and defensively noting in the first few lines that the many stars of its night sky were only lifeless bodies! Unlike Xiphilinos, Pséllos was not sincere in his new vocation and quickly returned to the capital when the empress Theodora (1055–1056) allowed it. For years afterwards he exchanged acerbic letters and poems with some of the monks on Olympos. “Father Zeus,” wrote a wit among the latter, “you could not endure Olympos even briefly, your goddesses weren’t there with you,” to which Pséllos responded with a torrent of abuse.13 Yet his friendship with Xiphilinos seems also to have been damaged.

Pséllos’ return led to years of intrigue for him. Mistrusted at the court of Theodora, which was dominated by his enemies, he was appointed by Michael VI the Old (1056–1057) to head an embassy to the rebel Isaakios Komnenos. After two trips to Nikomedeia, Pséllos finally negotiated an agreement, but meanwhile a faction in the capital, including the ambitious patriarch Michael Keroularios, deposed the weak emperor. After this was announced, Psél-
los spent the night in terror at the rebel camp, but the next day Isaakios made him one of his advisors and appointed him a President of the Senate before they entered the city together in triumph. Some, of course, suspected that Psellos had simply betrayed Michael VI and joined forces with Isaakios.14

The first Komnenos to rule Byzantium tried desperately to restore the army and finances. What endeared him to Psellos was his confiscation of monastic wealth and, above all, his deposition of Keroularios, an arrogant, contentious, and bigoted prelate—in fact a failed claimant to the throne in 1040—who had wrecked the empire’s relations with the West in 1054, and who was now encroaching on imperial authority. Keroularios was likely among those who had undermined Monomachos’ cabinet of intellectuals in the early 1050s and had humiliated Psellos by forcing him to produce a public confession of faith.15 Philosophy now went on the offensive. In a heavily sarcastic letter Psellos cast Keroularios as the embodiment of “angelic” obscurantism, inflexibility, and boorishness that he associated with Christian asceticism. Isaakios appointed Psellos to direct the prosecution of the recalcitrant patriarch, who, however, died before the trial could begin. Psellos greeted this piece of news as an evangelia and went on to write a long prosecution anyway (probably to cancel the odium of having to write a panegyric epitaph for Keroularios, whose memory was popular in the capital and therefore a matter of concern and appeasement for the emperor). Keroularios was replaced by Leichoudes, Psellos’ old friend and ally.16

In 1059 Isaakios fell ill and abdicated under mysterious circumstances. As his personal physician, Psellos encouraged this decision against the wishes of the emperor’s wife and went so far as to personally invest his successor,


Konstantinos X Doukas (1059–1067), even before Isaakios had made up his mind. Psello then wrote the proclamation of the new emperor’s accession to be distributed to the provinces. Psello was a close friend of the Doukai, especially the emperor’s brother, the Kaisar Ioannes. The good-natured, deeply pious, but unwarlike new emperor did little to halt the empire’s rapid decline as the Seljuks raided Asia Minor and sacked major cities. Psello, now in his forties, spent the 1060s as an honored member of the imperial family, wielding considerable influence behind the throne. He was appointed to tutor Doukas’ son and heir, Michael, for whom he composed a number of didactic and relatively superficial works on legal, historical, and scientific topics, sometimes rededicating to him works originally presented to Konstantinos IX. We can safely detect his hand at work in the choice of Xiphilinos to replace Leichoudes as patriarch in 1064. In the early years of the reign he also completed the first edition of his Chronographia, covering the emperors from Basileios II to Isaakios. Beyond its ambitious philosophical message, this text employs masterly and virtually unprecedented literary techniques verging on the postmodern to demythologize the imperial position and expose the all-too-human qualities of God’s anointed. This by itself implies a political theory, as Psello did not believe that “ideal” emperors were possible—all were both good and bad—but there is also a more subversive theme running through the work: the empire must be governed by soldiers, not civilians, and its resources should be used to support the army, not the civilian administration, the Church, or the monasteries.

Konstantinos’ death in 1067 precipitated a crisis in the Doukas regime. His widow, Eudokia Makrembolitissa, a niece of Keroularios and opponent of Ioannes Doukas and Psello, broke her oath to her husband, marrying and elevating to the throne the handsome general and former plotter Romanos Diogenes (1068–1071). Romanos tried to restore the military situation by conducting long and determined albeit poorly planned and indecisive campaigns against the Seljuks. Ioannes Doukas was forced to the sidelines and Psello

17. For Psello’s medical knowledge and practice, see Volk (1990). Isaakios’ wife, Aikaterina, was the sister of Psello’s friend Alousianos. Proclamation: Or. Min. 5. For Ioannes Doukas, see D.I. Polemis (1968) 34–41; Ljubarskij (2004) 111–119.

himself was distrusted, despite the fact that he continued, as always, to praise the emperor in public orations and to draft his pronouncements. Romanos even compelled him to accompany his second expedition to Syria in 1069, joining Michael Attaleiates in the emperor’s council of advisors. Psellos disagreed utterly with Romanos’ strategy and tactics and proffered his own, based on his superior understanding of the “science” of war. But it was intrigue that restored the Doukai and sealed the fate of Byzantine Asia Minor. Many suspected that Ioannes’ son Andronikos betrayed Romanos at the battle of Manzikert in 1071 (though there were additional reasons for the defeat). Psellos and Ioannes promptly deposed Eudokia, elevated her son Michael VII Doukas (1071‒1078) to the throne, and declared Romanos an outlaw, refusing to recognize his surprisingly favorable agreement with Alp Arslan. A civil war conducted by the Doukai resulted in the surrender, tonsure, and brutal—in fact, fatal—blinding of Romanos. In the brief supplement to the Chronographia that he wrote in 1075, whose purpose was to expose the frivolity of his patrons the Doukai through sarcastic praise, Psellos boasted of the power that he personally wielded at the court in those critical days. A moving letter of consolation to the blinded Romanos—that referred to God as the “Sleepless Eye that watches over all,” encouraged him to find his “inner sight,” and that was written soon after a bombastic congratulatory letter to his conqueror Andronikos—cannot divert our attention from the damage done to the empire by the Psellos-Doukas regime, nor does Psellos’ devastating sarcasm regarding his patrons mitigate his role in those events.

Michael VII was an utterly incompetent and corrupt ruler. Attaleiates said that he was fit only to be a bishop! Psellos continued to write various treatises for his education and edification and to draft his diplomatic correspondence, but little seems to have been done to halt the decline of imperial authority.

19. Psellos, Chronographia 7B.12–16. Panegyrics for Romanos: Or. Pan. 18–21. For philosophers as armchair generals, see When he resigned from the rank of protasêkrêtis 33 ff. (Or. Min. 8); see also his On Military Formation (De oper. daem. pp. 120–124). For an anguished letter that Psellos wrote during the campaign of 1069, see Snipes (1981). De Vries-van der Velden (1997) has a different view of the relationship between Psellos and Romanos; the matter certainly requires further study: see Ljubarskij (2004) 55–56.


Certainly, we do not know what kind of influence Psellos had at this time as the court politics of the period remain very little understood, yet contemporaries did complain that the emperor was spending all his time “on the vain and useless study of letters, trying constantly to compose iambic and anapestic verses . . . deceived in this by the Consul of the Philosophers.” To this ignoble end had Psellos, charmed by the mystique of the palace, led a career that had promised so much for philosophical renewal under Monomachos, ultimately betraying his own astute analysis of the empire’s practical needs. Moreover, the consul’s days were numbered. The emperor’s favor was usurped by a crafty and hugely corrupt eunuch named Nikephoros, who led the empire to the nadir of its fortunes. The position of Consul of the Philosophers was eventually given to Psellos’ student Ioannes Italos. Psellos himself is not heard from again after 1075–1076, when he left off writing his sarcastic account of the Doukas regime, delivered a funeral oration for Xiphilinos, and welcomed back to the capital his old teacher Mauropous. By his own arrangement, he was buried at a famous monastery of the Theotokos, the Ζωοδόχος Πέγη situated just outside the walls of the city.

The Family History of Michael Psellos

We know very little about Psellos’ grandparents and have only hints about ancestors prior to them. Our information comes from the Encomium for Psellos’ mother. His maternal grandparents were native Constantinopolitans who came into life and died at roughly the same time (2b), though Theodote, their first child (2c), died after her father but before her mother (24d). The dates of these deaths cannot, however, be established precisely (see the introduction to

23. Italos: Anna Komnene, Alexiad 5.8.5. The latest discussion of Psellos’ death places it in ca. 1078: Karpozelos (2003), examining previous proposals (but see the next section below). Mauropous’ return: Karpozelos (1982) 46. For the last section of the Chronographia, see the notes of the Karalis tr., as well as Criscuolo (1982b) 201–206. Various pieces of evidence have been put forward to show that Psellos lived past 1080, e.g., by Ljubarskij (2004) 58–63, but all are dubious and none may be accepted at this time.
the *Encomium*, below). This side of the family, Psellos broadly hints, was not socially distinguished (2a). Theodote had at least two brothers, given that Psellos refers at one point to the youngest of them (5d).

Psellos’ father, on the other hand, came from a more distinguished family, which included both consuls and *patrikioi* among its ancestors (4b)—or so his son boasted. In this connection, we should note that a younger contemporary, the historian Michael Attaleiates, refers to the death in 1078 of “the monk and *hypertimos* Michael, who had been in charge of political affairs.” He goes on to characterize him as an “unpleasant” man whose family originated in Nikomedeia (296—297). Some historians—including the latest discussion—have taken this as a reference to Michael Psellos. But the identification is doubtful. First, Attaleiates refers to this man elsewhere as Michael of Nikomedeia (181), though no source refers to Psellos in this way. Second, Attaleiates does refer to Psellos elsewhere in his *History*, in connection with his assumption of the post of President (i.e., Consul) of the Philosophers. Without naming him, which itself additionally militates against the identification, he says that he “surpassed all of our contemporaries in knowledge” and claims that he was a good teacher (21). This does not accord with the negative portrayal of Michael of Nikomedeia later in the work. In fact, Attaleiates may have studied under Psellos during the reign of Monomachos. Third, in his voluminous and autobiographical corpus, Psellos never refers to a family link with Nikomedeia, not even in the treatise that he wrote regarding a puzzling natural phenomenon that occurred in that city which he claims to have witnessed personally. In short, it may be a sheer coincidence that the monk Michael of Nikomedeia was politically active and held the title of *hypertimos* (which was not uncommon).

Allusions in the *Encomium* indicate that Psellos’ parents were affluent (4b, 11d), though we know nothing of the source of their wealth. It was probably not agricultural, for Psellos claims that he was sixteen before he even set eyes on the fields outside the city (15a).

Theodote’s first child was a daughter. If we assume that the latter was some five years older than Psellos (cf. 13b–c), we may place her birth in ca. 1013. Psellos claims that his mother was only “a few years older” than this sister and

that it was difficult to tell them apart (13b)—a universal compliment, it seems—so we may place Theodote’s own birth in ca. 998. Her husband seems likewise to have been a teenager when they married (4a), though we do not know for how many years, if any, they remained childless together. Her second child was also a daughter (4d), but given that nothing more is said of her we may assume that she died in infancy. Psellos was the third child and the first son, though it is not clear whether there were any more after him. He does not mention any in the Encomium, but his own death is the subject of a brief letter of consolation addressed by his student Theophylaktos Hephaistos, later archbishop of Bulgaria, to “the brother of Psellos.” Theophylaktos’ modern editor maintained that this is a mistake, as Psellos does not mention brothers in the Encomium. But the contents of the letter, especially its many uses of adelphos, indicate that a literal relationship is meant (see below, p. 176) and, besides, we should not rely too much on the silences of the Encomium.28 In Letter S 17, Psellos mentions how he took care of his parents in old age, loved his brothers, and treated his friends fittingly (see below, p. 169). The term “brother” in Byzantium, as in many other societies, was often used in a non-literal sense—this very letter in fact is addressed to a “brother” who is clearly only a friend—but here these “brothers” are clearly differentiated from friends and come between them and Psellos’ natural parents, so it is possible that natural brothers are meant. Can this refer only to a sole sister who had died decades ago? It is not impossible, as Psellos is speaking in very general terms, but it does seem unlikely.

Psellos’ sister was married (13a) and delivered a baby (14d) shortly before dying in Psellos’ sixteenth year (15a), so in 1034. We do not know her name or that of her husband or anything about the fate of Psellos’ nephew. Psellos’ father died “soon” after the death of his daughter (18b), his mother long afterwards (22d), but it is impossible to fix these dates with any greater precision (see the introduction to the Encomium, below).

It is odd that the woman in Psellos’ life we know the least about is his wife.29 She is mentioned (though not by name) in the Funeral Oration that Psellos composed for their daughter Styliane, who died around the age of nine (68). What we have for the most part are generic references to her moral qualities, but one passage stands out: Psellos claims that Styliane was descended from em-

29. De Vries-van der Velden (1996b) 244–245 has argued that she is the subject of Letter KD 34. The case, though quite plausible, is not conclusive.
perors on her mother’s side, specifically from “the fathers of emperors” (63), i.e., presumably from the father of an imperial bride. Various suggestions about his identity have been made, including that of Stylianos Zaoutzes, one of the fathers-in-law of Leon VI (886–912), who gave his name to Styliane. At the end of the text, Psellos notes that he and his wife had long been without children (87), and twice suggests that Styliane was their only child (80, 81), but he also hints that she had siblings (86). It is, however, difficult to be certain about the latter passage given the rhetorical nature of the praise that it contains (and we will see below that shortly after Styliane’s death Psellos had no other children left to him). His wife was certainly alive when Styliane died, as numerous references in the oration attest.

It is difficult to assign dates to Psellos’ marriage and the life of Styliane. It is likely that the girl’s death occurred before Psellos left the court of Monomachos in late 1054 to become a monk, because his account of her sickness suggests a normal household life and conjugal relationship. In a letter written probably soon after his tonsure, and possibly on Mt. Olympos in Bithynia, Psellos wrote that new monks do miss their wives and native lands. As we saw, he himself would later be compared to Zeus and ridiculed by a fellow monk for being unable to endure Olympos without his “goddesses.” Though Psellos did take up politics after his return from Bithynia, it is unlikely that he took up residence with his wife. Still, in a letter from the 1060s to his friend Konstantinos, nephew of the former patriarch Keroularios, he sends the greetings of his “women,” children, free dependents, and slaves, including his oven-man and baker. It is unclear who these “women and children” are. Another letter to Konstantinos, in which Psellos contrasts his friend’s household to his own lack of conjugal company, dates to an even later period. This is shown both by what we know of the career of Konstantinos, whose elevation to the post of epítôn kriséôn (a

30. Leroy-Molinghen and Karlin-Hayter (1968). Sathas (1874) xxxvii n. 5 suggested the family of Argyros on the ground that Psellos refers to one of its members as an anêpsios (“nephew”). But he uses this term as well for Konstantinos, the nephew of the patriarch Keroularios: Volk (1990) 20–21 n. 69, e.g., Psellos, Letter KD 31 and 214 (Kurtz and Drexel 46 and 254). Anêpsios is a term that he seems to have used for the sons of his dear friends: de Vries-van der Velden (1996) 112.


32. Psellos, Letter S 54 (Sathas 285).

judicial office) occurred after 1074, and by Psellos’ reference to his dear ones, some of whom were dead—was Styliane on his mind twenty-five years later?—while others—his wife?—were lost to him. This letter, in any case, cannot be used to question the historicity of his marriage and, by extension, the authenticity of the *Funeral Oration.* After all, in the *Encomium* Psellos admits that he has not conformed to his mother’s exaltation of virginity (8b), which may refer only to marriage.

Moreover, Psellos’ (feigned) concern in the *Encomium* to avoid praising his mother’s physical beauty on the ground that such non-spiritual topics must be avoided now that he has become a monk (see the introduction to that text, below), has no counterpart in the *Funeral Oration,* which, in sharp contrast to the *Encomium,* gives no rhetorical sign that Psellos has formally renounced worldly life. This allows us to conclude that the *Oration* was written prior to 1054. Subtracting nine years and, say, five years of childless marriage, we arrive at 1041 as the latest date for Psellos’ marriage. He would then have been about twenty-two, so an even earlier date may be postulated given the early date of marriage among the Byzantines (e.g., Psellos’ father was probably in his mid-teens when he married Theodote). By 1040 Psellos had already secured a post as secretary at the court of Michael IV, a secure enough position from which to plan a marriage and obtain a good match (to say nothing of the possibly independent financial standing of his parents). This means that the death of Styliane may have occurred as early as 1050.

The third text translated in the present collection is a *hypomnêma,* a court memorandum regarding the dissolution of the engagement of Psellos’ adopted daughter to a certain Elpidios Kenchres, the son of the high official Ioannes Kenchres. This is perhaps not the only text in which we hear of this daughter, who unfortunately also remains anonymous, as the three texts that relate to Psellos’ newborn grandson probably refer to her as well (see below). The details regarding her engagement, its dissolution, and her fiancé, may be found in the *hypomnêma* and the introduction below. What interest us here are chiefly questions of chronology and family history. The memorandum, then,


35. For adoption in Byzantium, see Macrides (1990), for this case 116; Kiousopoulou (1990) 158–162; for engagements, ibid. 31–36; Papadatos (1984), 231–233 for this case.
specifies that Psellos had no other children when he made the adoption (144), late in the reign of Monomachos. Pained by the death of Styliane before the age of marriage, a fact plaintively noted in the very title of her Funeral Oration, Psellos moved quickly to arrange the engagement of his new daughter, as he notes, “when she was still a child and not yet old enough to marry.” Her fiancé was exactly twice her age (144). From the fact that Psellos used his influence to obtain titles and posts for him, we may postulate their ages at about nine and eighteen. In other words, after the death of Styliane, Psellos immediately adopted a daughter of exactly the same age and rushed to arrange for her marriage, a sequence of events that affords curious insights into his state of mind. The memorandum, interestingly, makes no mention of his wife, from whom he would have been separated when he was tonsured. There is no reason to believe that she had died in the meantime.

The betrothal was finally dissolved in court in August of 1056, following the intervention of the empress Theodora. Psellos’ adopted daughter would then have been about thirteen. It would seem that Psellos did subsequently manage to find her a more acceptable husband than Eligios Kenchres, as she produced a son whose birth Psellos announced in Letter S 72 to the Kaisar Ioannes Doukas (see p. 172) and whose infancy he described in the charming address To his grandson and then again later in Letter S 157 to his friend Konstantinos (these are translated below, pp. 162 and 173). We know of no other child by Psellos to whom this grandson can be assigned; such a child would have to have been born between the adoption of Psellos’ second daughter in the early 1050s and 1054, which seems unlikely and is in any case unattested. A recent study has argued that Psellos’ son-in-law was Basileios Maleses, a close friend and colleague of the historian Michael Attaleiates who made his career in the 1060s as a provincial judge, benefiting from Psellos’ patronage at the court of Konstantinos X Doukas. Though Maleses was away for most of that decade at his posts in Anatolia and the Peloponnese, he may have fathered children in the mid to late 1060s. In his Letter S 157 to Konstantinos from the mid-1070s, Psellos alludes to the children (plural) of the vestarchês, probably a reference to the grandchildren fathered by his son-in-law. This use of the plural may be only a rhetorical trope, but Psellos refers to his great concern for the “children of the vestarchês” in Letter KD 268 as well (for the circumstances, see p. 160).

36. The argument was made by de Vries-van der Velde (1996a), esp. 142 n. 74 for the date (see also pp. 157–160, below, for a discussion).
In Letter S 146, probably from the 1060s, Psellos informs his son-in-law that the magistrissa—the wife of a magistros—was both physically sick and worried about the slanders being spread about her husband. The casual manner in which Psellos here discusses his close relationship to another man’s wife indicates that she was almost certainly his own daughter. There is no reference to children in this letter, though there is no reason why there should be. The history of the relationship of the two men is a matter of ongoing speculation and need not detain us here (see below, p. 159). What matters for our purposes is that from Psellos’ loving address To his grandson, who was still an infant, we may infer that the child was born into a fairly prosperous household, with a nursery, servants, a doting grandfather, and, through Psellos, a connection to the court, most probably that of Konstantinos X Doukas and Eudokia Makrembolitissa; the latter in fact sponsored the child’s baptism.

If Maleses really was Psellos’ son-in-law, Maleses’ son would have been involved in Maleses’ own disgrace by the emperor Michael VII in 1074 and the gradual destruction of the faction of Psellos and the Kaisar Ioannes Doukas. Attaleiates specifically states that Maleses was deprived of his property and children, probably for being captured by and then seeming to join the renegade mercenary Roussel de Bailleul (see below, p. 159). We have no way of knowing exactly how harmful and how permanent this turn of events was for Psellos and his grandchildren. By 1093–1094, his grandson had fallen on hard times or was seeking advancement by evoking pity (a common enough solicitation). A letter of the aforementioned Theophylaktos Hephaistos, archbishop of Bulgaria, pleads with the official Gregorios Kamateros to find a job for the son of the daughter of the great Psellos, to whom Theophylaktos felt that he owed a debt. This, then, is the last reference in the record to the family of Michael Psellos, whose fortunes we have traced for exactly a century. There is unfortunately no way to know whether the teacher and philosopher Michael Psellos, active in Constantinople in the mid-twelfth century, was descended from his illustrious namesake. He is mentioned fondly in a letter of Ioannes Apokaukos, bishop of Naupaktos in the early thirteenth century.

37. See Margarou (2000) 72–74 for this and other attestations.
38. Theophylaktos Hephaistos, Letter 27 (Gautier 218–221; for Gregorios and the letter, see 73–75, but Gautier wrongly assumes that Psellos’ grandson was born of the union between his adopted daughter and Elpidios Kenchris). For the letter, see Leroy-Molinghen (1969b) 295–296; and Mullett (1997) 136, 138.
Daughters and Wives in Eleventh-Century Constantinople

The aim of this section is not to draw together sources that relate to women and children in Byzantium in general, but to offer a composite picture of their lives in eleventh-century Constantinople based on the texts translated in this volume. This exercise is justified by the fact that these texts deal with the same family and social class and come from the same author. We therefore avoid the danger of blurring the differences among periods, regions, and levels of society. Moreover, the majority of evidence that we have for the lives of women in Byzantium relates either to saints or to empresses. We are here offered the unique opportunity to study in detail the life and history of a family of the upper middle class in the capital in a time of peace and relative prosperity (the closest parallel to this multi-generational family portrait is probably the *Life of St. Philaretos* written by the saint’s grandson Niketas, though this text reflects a very different setting and period and is informed by a different set of concerns). Besides, there already exist many general surveys of women in Byzantium and interested readers may consult those.40

In the case of Psellos’ family, we are probably dealing at all times with an extended household, including, as he notes at the end of a letter to his friend Konstantinos, women, children, free dependents, and slaves, including skilled workers and craftsmen such as oven-makers and bakers and, probably, their families.

40. For a compound picture of the life of a Byzantine woman, albeit indiscriminate in its use of evidence and drawing heavily on the Church Fathers, see Koukoules (1948–1955) vol. 2.2, 163–218. For prolegomena to the study of Byzantine women, focusing on social and economic questions, see Herrin (1983); for a brief and entertaining survey of women in late antiquity, Clark (1993); for the middle and late periods, see the lucid summaries of Laiou (1981) and Talbot (1997); for the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Garland (1988) and Nardi (2002) (though both rely on uncritical reporting of the sources; the latter offers mostly typologies); for an attempt on the basis of monastic *typika* to discover how Byzantine women of the middle and late period thought of themselves, Laiou (1985); for women in Epeiros in the early thirteenth century, see Kioussopoulou (1990) 115–130, based on legal sources. Connor (2004) covers the entire period, alternating between brief syntheses and biographical portraits (mostly of the usual empresses, nuns, and saints). Though well-written, the book is probably intended for a general audience and approaches its subjects piously, even whitewashing some of them. For the catalogue of an exhibition devoted to Byzantine women, with visual imagery and discussions of many aspects of their lives, see Kalavrezou (2003). Bibliography on more specific issues will be cited at the relevant points of the discussion below.
as well (Letter KD 31). Psellos’ own class, then, were people who could not easily live without servants. His mother still had an attendant waiting on her even after she had entered a convent (though she had not yet taken the habit: Enc. 22a–b). It was a sign of humility and charity on her part that she made clothes for her servants with her own hands (4b). The extended household (οικόσ), then, could comprise upwards of twenty people and perhaps many more. Unfortunately, we know little about its physical setting, as we know little in general about Byzantine housing. In the Chronographia, Psellos notes that his advancement at the court under Monomachos brought with it a fine town house (7A.7), more likely a compound housing a small community of men, women, and children whose fortunes depended largely on Psellos’ ability to gain and keep the emperor’s favor.

The communal environment of the household marked virtually every aspect of life. Psellos’ sister gave birth while surrounded by a team of midwives who “assisted in the delivery, tended to her needs, and comforted her, by stimulating and relaxing the labor pains.” Presumably men were excluded, as were other pregnant or young married women (14d). The omphalotomos presumably specialized in cutting the umbilical cord, and fathers either rushed in to embrace their newborn child immediately, covered in blood as it would have been, or waited for it to be washed and swaddled first (Letter S 157, which concerns the birth of a son to Psellos’ friend Konstantinos). Labor was very dangerous for the mother. It is not clear whether Psellos’ sister died as a result of such complications, but at the very moment that his adopted daughter was giving birth some forty years later, Psellos was writing a letter on truffles to the Kaisar Ioannes Doukas, in which he pauses to remark fearfully that “my baby daughter is pouring her life out” (Letter KD 233). When he was told that it was not going well, he says he nearly died; he began to pace outside her room,

41. For this practice in late antiquity, see Clark (1993) 103; in the middle and late periods, Laiou (1981) 242.


43. For midwives in the Roman empire, see French (1987); in late antiquity, Clark (1993) 67, 69–70; in the middle and late periods, Laiou (1981) 245 and n. 62; Margarou (2000) 235–236. For various sources describing birth, see Koukoules (1948–1955) v. 4, 21–29, who concludes that Psellos’ sister may have given birth while standing up, supported on either side.

44. See de Vries-van der Velden (1996a) 141–142, esp. n. 74, who rightly corrects Leroy-Molinghen (1969b).
hanging on her cries. When the women about the new mother announced the birth, adding that the baby looked just like him—a lie, he knew, but a pleasant one—Psellos rushed in to hug and kiss his grandson (Letter S 72). Newborns were washed by the balaneutria with hot water and swaddled as the midwife (maia) sang a lullaby (Letter S 157).45

Male children were certainly preferred. Perhaps the entire household was required to pray that Theodote deliver a boy after giving birth to two girls, and many would have joined in the hymns of thanks when she did (Enc. 4d). Regarding the birth of a son to his friend Konstantinos, Psellos claims that he himself, at any rate, was indifferent to the gender of infants—“male or female: what’s the difference?”—but nevertheless admitted that he was more pleased that it was male and congratulated his friend accordingly (Letter S 157). To be sure, Psellos really liked babies and wrote about making baby-faces at them, calling this his feminine side.46

These babies enjoyed specialized care. They were breast-fed by wet nurses (tèthê, thêlazousa), swaddled and bathed in tubs regularly, and, at least in the case of Psellos’ grandson, doted upon by adoring grandfathers who burst into the women’s chambers in order to kiss and play with them (Letter S 157; To his grandson, passim). In his Funeral Oration for Styliane, Psellos mentions as being present at her death “friends, relatives, male and female slaves, free dependents, nurses and wet nurses, who . . . had swaddled her and breast-fed her and nourished her and raised her to this age, everything short of actually giving birth to her” (79–80). It is unclear how much contact such children actually had with their parents. Psellos’ daughter appears in the work that he addressed to her son only to dress the baby in fancy clothes (To his grandson 154); everything else seems to have been taken care of by others, except, of course, the audience with the empress. It seems, however, that it was considered a good sign if a baby did not accept a wet nurse, only its mother’s teat (Enc. 5a). These texts afford us rare and precious glimpses into the Byzantine nursery.47

Girls were educated chiefly in piety and in the practical skills and authority of household management. As mentioned above, we are not dealing here with the atomized, suburban, nuclear household of the 1950s that did so much to spark the feminist movement in the U.S. The *oikos* had the size of a small village and being confined to it hardly amounted to boredom and isolation. When Psellos says that as she grew up his daughter Styliane talked with her wet nurses, spent time with children her own age, and played with the servant-women (63–64), he need not imply that she ever stepped foot outside the *oikos*. Practical skills learned by girls, often from their own mothers, included working the loom, embroidery, and weaving fine textiles with silk threads (*Fun. Or. 66; Enc. 3b*).48 From one of Psellos’ brief works we learn of a festival named Agathê that was celebrated every year in Constantinople on the day after the commemoration of the city’s foundation and that involved song and dance. The participants were chiefly women who seem to have been professional weavers. It is unclear whether private women such as his own mother could participate or whether it was reserved for members of a guild, as has been proposed (see below, p. 179 for a translation and discussion). From a very early age, girls were also habituated to the practices of the Orthodox Church, attending service regularly, learning the Psalms, and joining in the chanting of hymns (*Enc. 3c; Fun. Or. 67, 74–76*), none of which required literacy.

As mothers, they would later teach their children stories from Bible, as Theodote did to Psellos; she also forbade his nurse from telling him fables about Greek monsters (*Enc. 8a*). In general, religious inculcation seems to have been more thorough and systematic with girls than with boys. These two aspects of girls’ education, which Psellos philosophically viewed as the active and the contemplative parts of their lives respectively (*Enc. 4a*), came together in the practice of charity. Theodote wove beautiful garments that she gave to servants and the poor (*Enc. 4b, 12a–b*) and attended to the needs of monks and nuns (11c–d, 12c). Styliane did the same even before the age of eight (*Fun. Or. 75*).

Opinions differed regarding the degree of affection that should be shown to children. Theodote apparently believed that too much was not good, and hugged and kissed Psellos only when she thought he was asleep (*Enc. 8b; cf. 13c*). It is hard to believe that Psellos himself maintained such a stance toward

his daughters, given his behavior toward his grandson later (To his grandson, passim; Letter S 157). And it does in fact seem that he and his wife were very affectionate toward Styliane (Fun. Or. 75). It should be noted that one aspect of family life in the middle Byzantine period, the castration of boys, is never mentioned in connection with any member of Psellos’ family.49

There was also in general no consensus about the literary education of girls. Theodote, for instance, was not allowed to learn how to read on the explicit grounds that she was woman; nevertheless, she secretly found someone to teach her the letters and then made her own way from there (Enc. 3b). Her parents’ attitude would be shared by Alexios I Komnenos and Eirene Doukaina toward their daughter Anna, while Theodote’s initiative in learning how to read finds a much earlier parallel in Theoktiste, the mother of Theodorus Stoudites, who taught herself to read at night so as not to upset her husband or allow education to interfere with her household duties.50 Later Theodote became very active in Psellos’ education, testing him after school, listening to him recite his lessons, and staying up with him at night as he studied (10a–b). Most importantly, it was she who finally persuaded the family to allow Psellos to continue his studies and make a career of them (5b–6d). It seems that, like many other mothers in Byzantium (and modern Greece), she pushed him to acquire an education by which he could then secure a well-paying job in the state bureaucracy (cf. Chronographia 1.29). More generally one can say that the personal influence of mothers was greater upon their children than that of their fathers, though this is difficult to quantify and access. Still, one does gain the impression that many sons in Byzantium worshipped their mothers more than they idolized their fathers, which testifies to the strength of these women’s personalities and, often,

49. For this practice, see Ringrose (2003) 61ff. and passim.

50. Georgios Tornikes, Funeral Oration for Anna Komnene (Darrouzès 245). For the same attitude, see Jeffreys (1984) 205 for the monk Iakobos; for a general survey, see Reinsch (2000), here 87. In the Preface to her Diataxis 16 (Kurtz 99), Anna says that her parents did not prohibit her from learning, but her testimony on family issues is not necessarily preferable to that of Tornikes (or any other source, for that matter) and is, moreover, suspiciously defensive in this case. For the authorship of this text, see Buckler (1929) 9–10. Theoktiste: Theodorus Stoudites, Funeral Oration for his Mother 3 (= Or. 13 in PG 99, col. 885b). For education of women in late antiquity, see Clark (1993) 135–138; in the middle and late periods, Laiou (1981) 253–257; Nardi (2002) 46–55 (mostly reporting what the texts say); for Psellos on his mother’s education, with an eye on patristic models, see Vergari (1987b) 217–221.
their dominant position in the household.\textsuperscript{51} This impression of matriarchy is certainly the one that we gain from the \textit{Encomium}.

Psellos’ own attitude toward female education was the opposite of that of his maternal grandparents. When he states that men are stronger or superior to women what he almost always has in mind are their bodies (e.g., \textit{Enc.} 7b, 13b). As a Platonist philosopher, he was entirely convinced that women are in no way inferior to men as moral agents and rational beings.\textsuperscript{52} He affirms this strongly toward the end of the \textit{Encomium}: “if the two genders differ in the tenor of their bodies, nevertheless they possess reason equally and indistinguishably” (25b). This notion, which seems to have been gaining ground in the middle and late Byzantine periods,\textsuperscript{53} may explain Psellos’ generally favorable portrayal of the sole reign of the empress Theodora (1055–1056) in the \textit{Chronographia} and, more relevant to our theme, the provisions that he made for the education of Styliane. By her sixth year she could read and began her study of the Psalms; we hear of teachers and female classmates over whom she excelled (\textit{Fun. Or.} 65–66). These teachers were no doubt privately hired and the reference to classmates implies that at least some other parents in the city took a similar approach to the education of their daughters as did the Consul of the Philosophers.\textsuperscript{54}

In general, the education of girls had two goals that were usually, though not always, in agreement. The first was to produce women who could effectively run the household of their husbands by acquiring and allocating resources so as to increase the prosperity of the \textit{oikos} (\textit{Enc.} 4a). In Letter KD 70,
probably addressed to his son-in-law Maleses stationed in Greece, Psellus refers to his daughter as the “mistress (despotis) of your oikos” and indicates that she was making independent decisions about her husband’s finances. This kind of administration was no mean feat and was probably only a few steps away from governing the empire itself, as the empire discovered when Alexios I turned it over to his mother Anna Dalassene.

Second, children were expected to become virtuous, something that to most parents today is merely an abstraction. Girls in particular had to learn piety, charity, humility, and moderation, to say nothing of celibacy before marriage. Psellus presents this moral dimension of education in Platonic language, but was probably only expressing what his contemporaries understood in equivalent Christian terms when raising their daughters. A reputation for virtue was required to secure a favorable match. It also enabled girls to become efficient household managers and honorable wives. However, the pursuit of virtue could take on a life of its own and undermine the social ambitions of this bourgeois class. From St. Thekla onward, girls could refuse to marry out of devotion to ascetic ideals (or exploit them to evade undesirable unions), which inevitably led to conflict with their parents. This is a common theme in the hagiography of female saints. Though Psellus was embellishing his mother’s biography to enhance her reputation for piety (see p. 34), he mentions precisely such a conflict between Theodote and her father regarding marriage: in the end, she submitted piously (3d). Styliane died before she ever faced this choice, but Psellus, as her father, was very eager for her to marry and even made her Funeral Oration into something of a tragic advertisement for the perfect bride (74–77).

At an early age daughters went from being girls to being wives and mothers. For Psellus, nine was apparently not the age of childhood but the age that came immediately before that of marriage. Girls were married away as early as

55. For the context, see de Vries-van der Velden (1996a) 123. For the practical responsibilities of such wives, see Xenophon, Oikonomikos; Apuleius, Apology 87; Christophoros Mytilenaios, Poem 57 (Kurtz 33–34).
57. Cf. Ioannes Chrysostomos, Encomium for Maximos and regarding the kinds of women that one ought to marry (in PG 51 cols. 225–242). For a typology of feminine virtues in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, see Nardi (2002) c. 5.
the age of twelve, and sometimes even earlier, and soon began having children of their own. There is every indication that this is what Psellos’ mother and older sister did. He himself betrothed his second (adopted) daughter to Elpidios Kenchres when she was perhaps nine and he eighteen (see p. 140). The choice of groom was made very carefully. The daughters of well-to-do families, especially if they had ties to the court, were highly prized, particularly if they were known or believed to be beautiful (personal attraction certainly played a role in these decisions, at least for the grooms). Psellos managed to secure a range of highly lucrative and prestigious titles and positions for Elpidios before the contract was broken. A number of suitors applied and competed for the hand of Theodote (Enc. 3d); their wealth, connections, and morals were scrutinized, probably in that order. Psellos likewise expected many to sue for the hand of Styliane and mentions the services of professional matchmakers (Fun. Or. 76: nymphagógoi), though he had no intention of using them. Engagement involved a detailed contract that specified the dowry to be provided by the father of the bride and the penalties to be paid by either party in the event of termination. The legal memorandum (hypomnêma) translated in this volume that documents the dissolution of the agreement between Psellos and the Kenchres family constitutes unique evidence regarding the legal aspects of such transactions in the period before 1204.

We have already touched upon many aspects of married life for the women of eleventh-century Constantinople. How restricted were their lives? In general, the more respectable they were the less they were to be seen outside or by other men. Such, at any rate, was the ideal. In the eleventh century the gynaikônitis, the women’s quarters, is still attested but it was either going out of fashion or had already become a rhetorical commonplace with little relation to the

60. For betrothal in late antiquity, when the rules were established that were still valid in the eleventh century, see Clark (1993) 14; for the middle and late periods, Patlagean (1973) 87–88; Kiousopoulou (1990) 31–36; Talbot (1997) 121–122; for a comprehensive legal discussion of mnêsteia, Papadatos (1984), esp. 231–233 for this case; for nymphagógoi, Koukoules (1948–1955) vol. 4, 78–80. Various aspects of marriage in the middle period are treated by Patlagean (1987) 592–609 and Laiou (1992), esp. legal (c. 1) and the relations between spouses (c. 3), but the focus is almost always on the aristocracy and the imperial family. For the impact of Christianity on Roman marriage in late antiquity, see Nathan (2000), though the emphasis is on law and the West.
lives of actual women. There is evidence that women enjoyed considerable freedom of movement, which perhaps shocked only the most prudish. By no means were Byzantine women confined to the household. Modesty certainly required that a proper daughter or matron not be seen much, but it really could not be avoided. For instance, Psellos notes that a few did catch glimpses of his mother before her marriage and word of her beauty spread (Enc. 3c–d). At the funeral of her daughter, she was “possessed by madness and then for the first time displayed her beauty in public, indifferent to the gaze of men” (15d), which probably means that she allowed the scarf to fall from her head and reveal her hair. This behavior at funerals was specifically condemned by Ioannes Chrysostomos and frowned upon by other Fathers of the Church, as Psellos certainly knew. Furthermore, his sister, despite being married, managed to befriend and convert a prostitute from the neighborhood (14a), which would have required some degree of freedom of movement. Such conversion entailed the rejection of cosmetics and jewelry, which had long been associated in literature with actresses and prostitutes, and the wearing of a veil (14b; cf. 7b and Fun. Or. 76). Psellos claims that the latter “covered her entire face” and other sources indicate as much (though often in highly unusual contexts), but no representation of this has come down to us and there was probably a range of options. There is abundant evidence that Byzantine women dyed their hair or wore it down or in elaborate coiffures, all obviously meant to be seen. A veil was usually a scarf that framed the face, as we observe in so many images of female saints, but penitence may have called for extreme measures (the prostitute in the story eventually took up her old ways). It seems that with female dress we are dealing not with a strictly monitored and enforced system

61. Psellos (Chronographia 5.26) and Michael Attaleiates (History 88) discuss dramatic events such as revolutions and earthquakes that brought women out into the streets who had never been seen before (the latter passage, we should note, is modelled, as in other respects, on Agathias, Histories 5.3.7); gradual obsolescence of the gyaikônitis: Laiou (1981) 249, 252–253; no real evidence for it to begin with: Kazhdan (1998) 2–10; for relative freedom of movement, see A. Walker (2003). A century later, Anna Komnene boasted that she had not been brought up in the women’s quarters: Alexiad 14.7.4.


but with a range of options plotted on a complex grid denoting social class, personal piety, circumstance (e.g., at a funeral), and profession. Girls, women, and wives had many choices (and were judged accordingly and variously by the men).

Marital relationships were of course hardly equal. Theodote fully accepted the “divine decree” that women should be their husbands’ helpmates (9a) and regarded herself as inferior to him (9d). Some modern readers have concluded on the basis of a passage toward the end of the Encomium (25b) that Theodote held revolutionary views regarding gender equality, which they link to the undeniable impression that we gain from the text that she was the dominant force in the family. However, the views are probably Psellos’ own: the point of the passage is that Theodote’s life and virtue proved to be valid in practice. It should also be noted that Psellos praises her for looking after her own elderly parents (8c–d), not those of her husband, as would have been expected of a married woman in antiquity. Divorce her husband deemed tantamount to apostasy, even if only to enter the monastic life (11b). We have little evidence from the eleventh century for this practice. Legal sources of the early thirteenth century suggest that ordinary men and women were aware of their legal rights in this respect and initiated divorce proceedings under a variety of terms and pretexts, and obtained just and sympathetic verdicts from at least two bishops whose dossiers have been preserved. When Theodote finally made up her mind, she made arrangements that her husband take precedence in this respect too (16d). In Byzantium, it was not uncommon for married women to join convents (as did Theodote) or for couples to do this jointly when their children matured or died prematurely. Many entered monasteries in order to grow old and die in a community that would care for them in both body and soul (gérôkômia and prayer were thereby combined), though some lived there without actually taking the tonsure (as did Theodote for years before her death). No doubt the monks and nuns looked after some such people out of compassion and charity, but in many cases, as in this one, the resident

65. E.g., Garland (1988) 377 (“the unprecedented view of Theodote herself”); Angold (1995) 437 (“some of her opinions were extremely radical”).
“novice” brought property to the community and his or her own servants (22a–b; for skepticism regarding Psellos’ account of his parents’ conversion, see the introduction to the Encomium below.)

In times of relative peace and stability, women who never left the capital died usually of disease or old age. Psellos’ family never experienced wars or murders or feuds and was probably typical in this respect (history tends to record dramatic and aberrant cases). Still, death could come at any age. Theodote’s second baby daughter disappears in Psellos’ account immediately after birth (4d); Styliane died of disease, perhaps of smallpox, at around the age of nine (Psellos, a physician in his own right, gives a detailed and lengthy account of her illness and last days: Fun. Or. 77–79); Psellos’ elder sister died soon after giving birth, probably in her late teens; and Theodote seems to have destroyed her health and killed herself through excessive asceticism (though this may be an exaggeration by Psellos).

The moment of death was marked by an outpouring of lamentation on the part of everyone present. The body was washed, dressed for burial (Fun. Or. 80), and then placed on a bier (skimpodion) and carried to the cemetery where it was buried under a slab after those present had partaken of communion (82). The funerals of such respectable matrons were elaborate and drew crowds and onlookers even from the third floor of buildings along the processional route (Enc. 16c, 24c–d). There was more lamentation at the grave site on the day of burial as well as on the days of commemoration prescribed in Orthodox tradition (Psellos happened to return to the city when his parents were lamenting the death of his sister on the seventh day: Enc. 15c). Yet there was no rest for the virtuous: the deceased often appeared in dream-visions to assure those still living of their blessed state in the afterworld and promise to intercede on their behalf (Fun. Or. 86–87; Enc. 15d, 19b, 20a–d, 24b, 26b–27a; see the introduction to the Encomium below, p. 45); sometimes visions were granted to them soon before they died (Fun. Or. 82–85) or to

69. For such practices in late antiquity, see Clark (1993) 103; in the middle and late periods, Laiou (1981) 242; Connor (2004) 172.

70. See here Fun. Or. 79–82; Enc. 15d (sister), 19b-d (father), 24b (mother). For the ritual lament, see Alexiou (1974) and Derderian (2001); for rituals of death in the middle period, Spyridakis (1950); Koukoules (1948–1955) vol. 4, 148–227; J. Kyriakakis (1974); Abrahamse (1984); and Barbounis (1994) 75–81; for images and conceptions of death, Agapitos (2001). A detailed description, parallel to those in Psellos, can be found in Gregorios of Nyssa, Life of Makrina 28–34.
others who would then relay the dire, albeit in a different sense hopeful, message to them (Enc. 22d).

To conclude, it is from this handful of writings by a Byzantine intellectual that we may reconstruct the most comprehensive picture of the life of daughters and wives in average middle- to upper-class Byzantine households of the capital. It is our hope that the present translations will allow these fascinating texts to escape the obscurity to which they have been condemned by a learned language.