

FOURTEEN
BYZANTINE RULERS

The *Chronographia* of
Michael Psellus

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TRANSLATED,
WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY
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PENGUIN BOOKS

traditional allegiance to themselves.¹ These men, because they were afraid lest at some future time they should be accused of introducing new ideas into the constitution, or of making foolish decisions, or of acting illegally, were meticulously careful in their conduct of state affairs, both military and civil, and as far as possible they treated the empresses with all due honour.

Court procedure, in the case of the sisters, was made to conform exactly to the usual observance of the sovereigns who had ruled before them. Both of them sat in front of the royal tribunal, so aligned that Theodora was slightly behind her sister. Near them were the Rods and Sword-bearers and the officials armed with the *rhomphaia*.² Inside this circle were the special favourites and court officials, while round them, on the outside of the circle, was the second rank of the personal bodyguard, all with eyes fixed on the ground in an attitude of respect. Behind them came the Senate and the privileged class, then persons of the second class and the tribes, all in ranks and drawn up at proper intervals. When all was ready, the other business was carried on. There were lawsuits to be settled, questions of public interest, or contributions of money, audiences with foreign ambassadors, controversies or agreements, and all the other duties that go to the up an emperor's time. Most of the talking was done by the officials concerned, but sometimes, when it was necessary, the empresses also gave their instructions, in a calm voice, made their replies, sometimes being prompted and taking their cue from the experts, sometimes using their own discretion. For those who did not know them it may be instructive to give here some description of the two sisters. The elder was the quicker to understand ideas, but slower to give them

utterance. With Theodora it was just the reverse in both respects, for she did not readily show her inmost thoughts, but once she had embarked on a conversation, she would chatter away with an expert and lively tongue. Zoe was a woman of passionate interests, prepared with equal enthusiasm for both alternatives - death or life, I mean. In that she reminded me of sea-waves, now lifting a ship on high and then again plunging it down to the depths. Such characteristics were certainly not found in Theodora; in fact, she had a placid disposition, and in one way, if I may put it so, a dull one. Zoe was open-handed, the sort of woman who could exhaust a sea-teening with gold-dust in one day; the other counted her *staters* when she gave away money, partly no doubt because her limited resources forbade any reckless spending, and partly because inherently she was more self-controlled in this matter.

To put it quite candidly (for my present purpose is not to compose a eulogy, but to write an accurate history) neither of them was fitted by temperament to govern. They neither knew how to administer nor were they capable of serious argument on the subject of politics. For the most part they confined the trifles of the harem with important matters of state. Even the very trait in the elder sister which is commended among many folk today, namely, her ungrudging liberality, dispensed very widely over a long period of time, was employed it because of the benefits they received from her, and not all the sole cause, in the first place, of the universal admiration and of the reduction of Roman fortunes to their present state. The virtue of well-doing is most characteristic of those who govern, and where discrimination is made, the particular circumstances and the fortune of the individual and their differing personal qualities are taken into account, where the distribution of largess is to be commended, there the distribution of largess is to be commended, where the spending of money is wasted.

1. Nicolaus was appointed to high office in the east and Cabasilas in the west. George Maniaces became *magister* and was back to Italy as supreme commander (Cedrenus, *ibid.*)

2. See Glossary.

Such were the differences that marked the sisters in character. In personal appearance there was an even greater divergence. The elder was naturally more plump, although she was not strikingly tall. Her eyes were large, set wide apart, with imposing eyebrows. Her nose was inclined to be aquiline without being altogether so. She had golden hair, and her whole body was radiant with the whiteness of her skin. There were few signs of age in her; in fact, if you marked well the perfect harmony of her limbs, not knowing who she was, you would have said that here was a young woman, for no part of her skin was wrinkled, but all smooth and taut, and no furrows anywhere. Theodora, on the other hand, was taller, more taper of form. Her head was small, and out of proportion with the rest of her body. She was more ready with her tongue than Zoe, as I have said, and quicker in her movements. There was nothing stern in her glance: on the contrary, she was cheerful and smiling, eager to find any opportunity for talk.

So much for the character and physical appearance of the two empresses. I will return to the government. In those days, it seems to me, a peculiar magnificence, and an added prestige, attached to the executive power. The majority of the officials underwent a sudden change, as if they were playing parts on a stage and had been promoted to a role more glorious than any they had acted before. Largess was poured out as never in the past. Zoe, in particular, opened the coffers of the imperial treasury. Any trifles hidden away there were distributed by her with generous abandon. These monies had not been contributed by volunteers, but were the fruit of robbery and plunder. In fact, all this squandering, together with the high standard of living, was the beginning of the utter decline in our national affairs and the cause of our subsequent humiliation. But that was clear only to the prophets; only the wise saw what was really happening.

The prize-money for the soldiers and the revenues derived

to army expenditure were quite unnecessarily diverted and put aside for the use of other persons - a crowd of sycophants and those who at that time were deputed to guard the empresses - as if the Emperor Basil had filled the treasuries with riches for this very purpose.

Most men are convinced that the nations around us have made their sudden incursions against our borders, these wild unexpected invasions, for the first time in our day, but I myself hold a different view. I believe the house is doomed when the mortar that binds its bricks together becomes loose, and, although the start of the trouble passed unnoticed by the majority, there is no doubt that it developed and gathered strength from that first cause. In fact, the gathering of the clouds in those days presaged the mighty deluge we are suffering today. But I must not speak of that yet.

THE AUGUSTA ZOE DELIBERATES WHOM TO PROMOTE TO THE IMPERIAL THRONE

In the description of the events that follow I will speak with greater authority and more personal knowledge. The affairs of state urgently demanded vigorous and skilful direction, and the country needed a man's supervision - a man at once strong-handed and very experienced in government, one who not only understood the present situation, but also any mistakes that had been made in the past, with their probable results. We wanted a man who would make provision for the future and prepare long beforehand against all possible attacks or likely invasions from abroad. But the love of power, or the lack of power, the apparent freedom and the absence of supervision, and the desire for ever greater power - these were the things that made the emperor's apartment into a *gynecontitis*. For by most people had no settled convictions. One man after another was bribed about, either favourable or hostile to Zoe (for there were some who thought that

dwarf olives and the whitest sort of bays. The younger sister daily gloated over her collection of *darics*, for which she had had bronze coffers made. Knowing their hobbies, therefore, the Augusta won the gratitude of them both by giving the presents they liked best. It was no difficult matter, for Zoe no longer felt jealous of her rival (she was past the age for that) and there was no ill-will on her side. As the years passed, too, she had lost her capacity for vehement hatred. And as for Theodora, since her own desires were satisfied, she showed even less resentment than her sister.

Thus the wealth which the Emperor Basil had accumulated in the imperial treasury, at the cost of much sweat and labour, became the plaything of these women, to be expended on their pleasures. Presents were exchanged or given as rewards one after another. Some of the money was even paid out to strangers, and soon all was spent and exhausted. However, that is a subject which I must deal with later. Now I must finish the present story. When Constantine and the women had decided which apartments each was to occupy in the palace, the emperor had the room in the centre, with the sisters on either side of him, but it was Sclerena who had the most private quarters. And Zoe never visited the emperor's room, unless she had first made sure that he was alone and his lady-love far away. Otherwise she occupied herself with her own affairs. I must now explain what these activities were.

The tasks that women normally perform had no appeal whatever for Zoe. Her hands never busied themselves with a distaff, nor did she ever work at a loom or any other feminine occupation. Still more surprising, she affected scorn for the beautiful dresses of her rank, though I cannot tell whether she was so negligent in the prime of life. Certainly in her old age she lost all desire to charm. Her one and only concern at this time, the thing on which she spent all her energy, was the development of new species of perfumes, or the preparation of unguents. Some she would invent, others she impressed

Her own private bedroom was no more impressive than the workshops in the market where the artisans and the blacksmiths toil, for all round the room were burning braziers, a host of them. Each of her servants had a particular task to perform: one was allotted the duty of bottling the perfumes, another of mixing them, while a third had some other task of the same kind. In winter, of course, these operations were demonstrably of some benefit, as the great heat from the fires served to warm the cold air, but in the summer-time the others found the temperature near the braziers almost unbearable. Zoe herself, however, surrounded by a whole bodyguard of these fires, was apparently unaffected by the scorching heat. In fact, both she and her sister seemed to be by nature perverse. They despised fresh air, fine houses, meadows, gardens; the charm of all such things meant nothing to them. On the other hand, once they were inside their own private rooms, one sealing off the flow of the golden stream, the other cleaning out the channels to make it flow faster, then they really enjoyed themselves.

With regard to Zoe's other peculiarities - I must speak of her at rather greater length, while the emperor is still taking his ease with the beloved Augusta - there is not much that I can commend, but one trait never fails to excite my admiration: her piety. In this she surpassed all others, both women and men. Some men lose themselves in the contemplation of God; their whole being is directed to one perfect object, and so that object they depend entirely. Others, with still greater devotion, and truly inspired with the Divine Spirit, are even more identified with the object of their worship. So it was with Zoe. Her passionate veneration for the things of God had really brought her into contact, so to speak, with the First and Eternal Light. Certainly there was no moment when the Name of God was not on her lips.