

An Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse During the Byzantine Empire

By

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Thesis

During the Byzantine Empire, child sexual abuse was more prevalent and less stigmatized than it is today.

Sources and Limitations

Sources

The primary source included in this paper is a fresco in the Gratsanitsa Monastery (Serbia) of Princess Simonis. It is used to illustrate the youth and status of Princess Simonis as an example for the arguments in this paper.

The secondary sources include a variety of published articles from the journal *Child Abuse & Neglect* as well as a highly influential book detailing different aspects of children and childhood of the Byzantine Empire.

Limitations

In researching for this particular issue of interest, my sources indicate some definite limitations to my findings. Having up to date information about today's child abuse patterns from strictly Canada and the United Kingdom is the first limitation. Although this information gives us good indications of the prevalence of child abuse in our society, there are many different societies left unrepresented. In reality, there are some cultures in which some of the abuse promoting activities discussed in this article are practiced today. Considering this information, it might be more appropriate to state that: in Byzantium, child abuse was more prevalent and less stigmatized than it is today in Canada (or whichever place you determine).

Also limiting is the amount of information researched and collected about child abuse and neglect in the Byzantium time period. The information referenced in this article is small bits of information collected about a vast period in time; it would be impossible to suggest that it

encompassed all areas and time periods of Byzantium. Perhaps child abuse and neglect was abundant and not stigmatized in certain areas or only during a specific time period.

Finally of all the information gathered, a pattern emerged. It makes sense that due to the nature of the topic of this article, the majority of sources come from the journal of *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Although it is wonderful that this resource exists and that it encompasses a vast amount of information, spanning time periods and areas, it still limits the information to one collective source. Had there been many other sources, it would have demonstrated a broader perspective of the issue at hand.

Discussion

In researching the children of a time period you can learn a lot about the culture and happenings of that time. When researching the Byzantine children, an issue of regular presence is that of abuse. This should make one ponder the idea that, in researching children of today, it is unlikely that the issue of abuse is what will present as the prominent idea of the information you find. This leads to the hypothesis that in Byzantium, child sexual abuse was more prevalent and less stigmatized than it is today.

There are many ways that the Byzantium time period and our time period differ, therefore it would be extremely challenging to pin point any one reason that child abuse would be more prevalent and less stigmatized at that time versus now. Also, like many issues in any society the antecedent to the issue is much more likely to be a combination of things versus one single stimulus. Because it would be difficult to acquire literature stating that indeed during the Byzantine Empire, child sexual abuse was more prevalent and less stigmatized than today, I will instead analyse information from different sources to bring light to and discuss some different activities that could possibly encourage the sexual abuse of children. In doing so, and comparing

it to some research from modern society, I hope to strengthen why or why not the thesis statement of this article might be true.

Like many time periods in history, there was a lot of responsibility on children to be adult-like and most times, these children were viewed and treated as adults. Papaconstantinou (2009) writes “Behaving like grown-ups was the sign of exceptional children.” She goes further by suggesting that children were more of an asset to a family/society in the need to provide an heir and/or aid in providing for the family in some way. Also mentioned in *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*, is the idea that children were legally and criminally responsible at the age of 7 (sometimes varying from age 7-15) and their penalties for criminal acts reflected the same as adults. Viewing a child as an adult could be a huge influence as to the amount of abuse in Byzantium.

Another influencing factor for child sexual abuse in Byzantium is the demonstration and acceptance of this behaviour in society members of high respect and authority. Not only was this behaviour being modelled, it was also *law* that the age of marriage was 12 for females and 14 for males (Lascaratos et al., 2000). This is not simply ignoring child sexual abuse, it is facilitating it. Compared to a modern society in which the majority (90% in the United Kingdom for example) provide that they come from a warm and loving background (May-Chahal et al., 2005), it is easy to speculate that sexual abuse was far more prevalent and almost accepted in Byzantium. If in our society we accept something as tolerable then it becomes easy to lose ourselves in the pattern.

What is worse than the age of marriage being so young is the idea that the law was not often followed. Lascaratos et al. (2000) provides an excellent example: Princess Simonis (Figure 1), daughter of Emperor Andronicus II, Palaeologous (1282-1328), was given in marriage to 40-



Figure 1. The Princess Simonis (14th century fresco of Gratsanitsa Monastery, Serbia).

year-old Sovereign of the Serbs, Stephan Milutin at the unbelievable age of 5. The Sovereign did not follow the law and instead raped her at the age of 8. It seems obvious that because of the prevalence of these cases, the law was only lightly enforced, although the punishments were quite severe. The punishments being so severe would serve as motivation enough to not commit the offence only if they were constantly enforced.

Another issue that possibly influenced the amount of child sexual abuse in Byzantium was economy. In times of poverty, families would prostitute their children for money (Lascaratos et al., 2000). In contrast to modern society, because of our understandings of unique child development and the strongly enforced laws of protection for children and citizens, this type of behaviour is not extinct but almost non-existent in the majority of areas.

If we unite the ideas mentioned above, it's easy to see how they could merge together to encourage and facilitate the sexual abuse of children. Our society undertakes a combination of preventative strategies to minimize and eliminate child sexual and general abuse such as prevention strategies and awareness programs (Ungar et al., 2009), protective laws such as child welfare legislature and their enforcement (Trocme et al., 2003) and more generally our view of children as developmentally different from adults. Because of these strategies and the lack there of these strategies in the Byzantium time period, it would appear that the factors mentioned above do play an important role in the prevention and stigmatism of child sexual abuse.

Contemporary Significance

The whole idea of child sexual abuse is still an issue modern societies struggle with. We have come a long way in determining that children are emotionally and developmentally different from adults and finding ways to prevent abuse and manage abuse that has occurred in a child's life. It is important to study and review the history of these issues to learn from them. By doing so, we can recognize our similarities and differences from our predecessors to determine what works, what doesn't work and what motions can be made to inspire positive change.

As previously mentioned, the sexual abuse of children is still an issue modern societies struggle with today, so although we have made some great movements we are still not finished with this battle. Learning from past experiences is a significant tool for educators and for child

sexual abuse it is no different. Using the classroom to analyze histories triumphs and defeats can be monumental for the future, as educating students is the most vital component to evoking positive changes.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion throughout this article, it is concluded that indeed child abuse was more prevalent and frequently over-looked in Byzantium versus modern day. Combining different views of the issues aided in determining that a multitude of societal influences possibly combined to cause a significant amount of sexual abuse of byzantine children.

Works Cited

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