Adolescent Behavior in Byzantine Sources? 
Some Observations on Young Byzantine Women Pursuing their Goals

While searching the sources for information on adolescent women, I was intrigued by the goals they chose to pursue and the behavior they adopted in order to achieve them. Based on the presupposition that behavioral patterns accompanying each stage of human development remain constant throughout history, I focused on the aims and actions of seven Byzantine teenage women captured in the primary sources. I attempted to interpret them in the light of elementary findings of psychological research in order to see whether such treatment would render new readings of these passages and/or a better understanding of the female protagonists.

Unlike young men, whom the chronicles typically depict as running after court offices or eager to prove their military skills, the goals of Byzantine adolescent women seem to have been mostly connected with relationships. Among these the *relationship with God* played an important role. Embraced and promoted by the Byzantine society, family and culture, it often figures especially in the hagiographic texts.

The present study has been completed as part of the project Foreign Bride, Negotiator and a Pious Woman: Empresses in Late Byzantium (project nr. 14–08304P) funded by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic (GAČR).

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1 Byzantine sources provide very little information on young women who rarely influenced the public life of their society. As the passages often offered no clues as to whether the woman in question was a child, an adolescent or a young woman, a number of women could not be included in the present study.

2 The youth and childhood of the Byzantines has been discussed in various studies such as D. ARIANTZI, Kindheit in Byzanz. Emotionale, geistige und materielle Entwicklung im familiären Umfeld vom 6. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert (*Millennium-Studien* 36). Berlin–Boston 2012; EADEM, Terminologische und sozialhistorische Untersuchungen zur Adoleszenz in Byzanz (6.–11. Jahrhundert). Teil 1 Theorien, Konzepte Narrative Quellen. *JÖB* 63 (2013) 1–31. D. DE ABRAHAMSE, Images of Childhood in Early Byzantine Hagiography. *The Journal of Psychohistory* 6/4 (1979) 497–517. P. HATIE, The Religious Lives of Children and Adolescents, in: Byzantine Christianity (*People's History of Christianity* 3), ed. D. KRUEGER. Minneapolis 2006, 182–200. C. HENNESSY, Young People in Byzantium, in: Companion to Byzantium, ed. L. James. Chichester 2010, 81–92. R. GREENFIELD, Children in Byzantine Monasteries: Innocent Hearts or Vessels in the Harbor of the Devil?; in: Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium, ed. A. PAPACONSTANTINOU – A.-M. TALBOT. Washington, D.C. 2009, 253–282. A. PAPACONSTANTINOU – A.-M. TALBOT (ed.), Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium. Washington, D.C. 2009. É. PATLAGEAN, L’entrée dans l’âge adult à Byzance aux XIIIe – XIVe siècles, in: Historicité de l’enfance et de la jeunesse: Actes du colloque international, Athèn 1–5 Octobre 1984. Athèn 1986, 261–270.
The *Life of Matrona of Chios*, a fourteenth-century saint, describes the young heroine’s early yearning to become a bride of Christ:

(...) when the time came for her parents to give her in marriage she refused wishing instead to maintain her virginity and purity in order to become a beautiful and blameless bride of the immortal bridegroom Christ (...). She secretly left her family, forsaking her father, mother and sisters and came to the hills called Katabasis where she opened a stadium of ascetic fights (...). Her parents not knowing what had happened and where she was were overcome with grief and did not cease to search for her until they found her. When they discovered her whereabouts, they did not deem it right to leave her there alone but persuaded her to return to their house. A servant of God, she obeyed the blessed order of her parents and returned home.

Though runaway saints were a relatively common sight in earlier Byzantine vitae, the above description does not exactly fit the established topos. For one thing, the fugitives usually did not return home. As the passage does not concur with an earlier depiction of the saint’s youth, it seems that Matrona, at that time still the teenage Maria, left home after a fight with her parents over a less-than-desirable marriage and was later reconciled to them, due perhaps to the protracted discomfort on the Katabasis heights. Her behavior reflects not only the tendency to impulsive and radical\(^5\) behavior and the desire to acquire her goal immediately\(^7\) but also the need for security and protection\(^8\) which finally brought her back home. Her ensuing life in the house of her parents offered excellent conditions to the young adolescent, who lived as a nun following the monastic regimen; she acquired the necessary freedom as well as the support and protection vital to this phase of her development. When Maria’s parents died some years later, she was a mature adult well prepared to leave her home and launch a successful monastic career.

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3 *PLP*, no. 17399.

4 Nikephoros of Chios, Ākolouthiā τῆς ὀσίας καὶ θεοφόρου μητρὸς ἡμῶν Ματρόνης, in: Νέος Λεμοναρόν. Athens 1819, 373 – 394, see 379 – 380: ὅταν ἦλθε καιρὸς να τὴν υπαναδεύσουσι οἱ γονεῖς της, δὲν ἦθελεν, ἀλλ’ ἐπρόκρινεν, ὡς φρονίμη, νὰ φυλάξῃ παρθενίαν καὶ καθαρότητα, διὰ νὰ γένῃ νύμφη καλή καὶ ἄμωμος τοῦ ἀδανάτου νυμφίου Χριστοῦ. (...) ἀναχωρεὶ κρυφῶς ἐκ τῆς συγγενείας της, ἀφίνει τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ τὰς ἀδελφὰς της, καὶ ἔρχεται εἰς τὰ βουνὰ τοῦ χωρίου, ὅπου καλεῖται Κατάβασις, καὶ ἐκεὶ ἄνοιξε το στάδιον τῶν ἀσκητικῶν τῆς ἄγωνων (...) οἱ δὲ γονεῖς της ἀγνοοῦντες τι ἤγινε, καὶ ποὺ ἐκατήγγεισεν, ἐλυποῦντο μὲ ύπερβολὴν, καὶ δὲν ἔπαινον ἀπὸ τὸ νὰ τὴν ζητοῦν νὰ τὴν εὔρουν· καὶ λοιπὸν εὐρόντες αὐτὴν δὲν ἔκριναν εὐλογον νὰ τὴν ἀφῆσουν ἐκεῖ μόνη, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐπαρακάτησαν νὰ ἔλθῃ εἰς τὸ ὀσπήττων των, καὶ αὐτὴ ὑπήκουσεν ὡς Θεοῦ δούλη, εἰς τὸ εὐλογοφανὲς πρόσταγμα τῶν γονέων της, καὶ ἤλθεν εἰς τὴν πατρικὴν της οἰκίαν (...). Also see ARSENIJ, Nila, mitropolita Rodosskago, Četyle neizdannyja proizvedenija. Moscow 1891, 1–54, see 13f.

5 The text notes that her flight took place at a time when her parents would ‘give her in marriage’ that is probably around or sometime after she reached her twelfth year, the canonical age for women to get married.

6 M. VÁGNEROVÁ, Vývojová psychologie, děství a dospívání (Developmental psychology; childhood and adolescence). Prague 2012, 388, 390.

7 Ibidem 468.

8 VÁGNEROVÁ, Vývojová psychologie 387.
While reflecting a teenage solution to a difficult situation, Matrona’s story underlines the complicated position of young women within the Byzantine society. As the well-known stereotype implies, these adolescents stood under constant pressure to adjust to the social norm and assume a subordinate place within the family and community being frequently denied the right to choose their spouse. Whatever the circumstances of Matrona’s adolescent life, the relationship with God and his saints, maintained through public and private worship offered teenage girls, who were often kept under strict supervision in the parental home, a personal space in which they could develop their self-image and self-confidence and loosen filial bonds; all crucial milestones of this developmental stage. Orthodox faith had apparently much to offer to girls who found themselves in Matrona’s situation. God, depicted as a loving Father, could replace the angry earthly parents still very important to a teenage person, while a commitment to Christ freed young women from the dreaded prospect of an unwanted union and gave them an opportunity to decide their own fate.

As the sources indicate, the relationship with parents, though often complicated in their teenage years, was still crucial to Byzantine adolescent women. Even if they may have wished to acquire more freedom, losing the support and protection represented by this bond⁹ was another matter. At the beginning of the *Vita of Mary-Marinos*, the hagiographer includes a scene in which the widowed father of Mary announces his decision to enter a monastery.¹⁰ Mary, who refuses to be separated from him, is willing to brave the harshness of monastic life and follow him dressed as a boy.

In Mary’s case, the physical changes occurring in adolescence play an important role in establishing that she was in her teenage years at this point in her life, a fact which the *Vita* does not explicitly mention. As children under the age of ten¹¹ were not easily admitted to Byzantine monasteries and her father apparently considered her old enough to take care of herself, Mary could not have been a minor. The author makes this circumstance clear when he no longer calls her a child (παιδίον) in the passage following the demise of her mother but a ‘young woman’ (νεανις).¹²

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⁹ Ibidem 387.
¹⁰ Vita of Mary-Marinos 2 (ed. M. Richard, La vie Ancienne de Sainte Marie surnommé Marinos, in: Corona Gratiarum. Miscellanea patristica, historica et liturgica Eligio Dekkers O.S.B. XII Lustra complenti obiata, I. Brugge 1975, 83–94, here 9–11, 87f. [repr. M. Richard, Opera minora, III. Leuven, 1977]). See Translation: N. Constans, The Life of Saint Mary/Marinos, in: Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints’ Lived in English Translation, ed. A.-M. Talbot. Washington, D.C. 1996, 1–12, see 8. For further information and literature on Mary-Marinos see the footnotes in ibidem 1–5. For aspects of a child’s life in Byzantine monasteries see Greenfield, Children (as in n. 2).
¹¹ Ζύνταμα τῶν θείων καὶ ιερῶν κανόνων, II, ed. G.A. Rhalles – M. Potles. Athens 1852–1859 (repr. 1966), 398. Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: a complete translation of the surviving founders’ typika and testaments, I-V (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 35.), ed. A. Constantinides Hero – G. Constable – R. Allison – J. Thomas. Washington, D.C. 2001, III, 1202f.
¹² Vita of Mary-Marinos 2 (8–11, 87 Richard).
further states that “after she lived for a few years in the monastery, some of the monks considered her to be a eunuch, for she was beardless and of delicate voice”. Had Mary entered the monastic community as a grown woman, she would have been considered a eunuch immediately. The text, however, suggests that she came at an age when the transformation into manhood was expected – and did not occur.

While Mary’s wish to remain close to her father is naturally interpreted by the hagiographer as a sign of love, obedience and humility very proper in a future saint, considering Mary’s behavior from the perspective of her age gives her story a new dimension. Instead of the faultless and perfect woman sketched by the author, it reveals a teenage girl insecure about assuming adult responsibilities and desiring stability, continued protection, and contact with her parent, all very natural feelings in an adolescent.

Young Byzantine women who for various reasons entered monastic life often wished for a relationship with a spiritual father who would stimulate their spiritual growth, give them a sense of protection and advise them in their ascetic struggles. While late Byzantine nuns commonly received such care in the convents, as the contemporary typika (monastic rules) inform us, the written sources preserve little evidence on specifically teenage recipients of such instruction. In at least one case, however, such guidance was bestowed in writing, due to the preoccupation of the spiritual father. The pupil was Eulogia Choumnaina, daughter of the famous Nikephoros Choumnos, and her guide was Theoleptos, bishop of Philadelphia, a well-known statesman and theologian. Early in her adolescence (spring 1303), the noble Eirene became the wife of John, third son of Andronikos II. Their marriage was ended prematurely by the prince’s death four years later (1307). Soon after John’s demise, Theoleptos cut the golden locks of the then sixteen-year-old basilissa who on this occasion took the monastic name Eulogia. As she refused even the comfort of her own family, it was Theoleptos who guided her through the first months of her untimely widowhood. At this time she became abbess of the female part of the

13 Vita of Mary-Marinos 5 (35–37, 88 RICHARD): Ποήσας δέ τινας χρόνους ἐν τῷ μοναστηρίῳ, ἐνόμισεν εὐνοϊκός ἔστιν, διὰ τὸ ἀγένειον καὶ τὸ λεπτὸν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτῆς. Translation: CONSTANS, The Life 8.

14 Marie Delcourt, on the other hand, interprets Maria’s change of clothes as self-mutilation and her desire to enter a male monastery as an expression of her longing to attain ‘male’ perfection. M. DELCOURT, Le complexe de Diane dans l’hagiographie chrétienne? Revue de l’histoire des religions 153 (1958) 1–33. Eadem, Female Saints in Masculine Clothing, in: Hermaphrodite: Myths and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity. London 1961, 84–102.

15 See H. DELEHAYE, Deux typica byzantins de l’époque des Paléologues (Mémoires de l’Académie de Belgique, Classe des lettres, ser. II, 13/4). Brussels 1920, 109, 5; 112–113, 11. A. CONSTANTINIDES HERO, Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents p. 1292, 5; 1269, VI/11–13; 1476, 15; 1479, 9. S. PÉTRIDES, Le typikon de Nil Damilas pour le monastère de femmes de Baeonia en Crète. IRAIK 15 (1911) 92–111, see here 103, 107.

16 For a list of sources and literature on Eirene see PLP, no. 30936.
double monastery of Christ Philanthropos Soter, which she renovated and provided for from her own property. To Theoleptos fell the uneasy task of supervising the transformation of a pampered teenage princess into an ascetic leader of a monastic community, an example of virtue and source of guidance to her nuns. As his letters to her witness, it was not an easy assignment. His first preserved missive from spring 1307, which finds her already in the nunnery, contains the following recommendations:

Since therefore you lost the pleasure of the body and are walking in the land of mourners, take pains to make your rational soul suitable to God the Word, to attach yourself to Christ and to establish with Him the spiritual marriage. Give up the frequent visits at the palace, let go of the multitude of servants and run from the vanity of all flattery.¹

While Eulogia’s moods apparently remained volatile throughout her life, the survey of her behavior described above reflects the extremes well known to contemporary parents and psychologists: on one hand the refusal to see her family² and the decision to become a nun, on the other an unwillingness to submit to the discipline and austerity of convent life, profound depression followed by the decision to give up the world one day and longing for her former home the next. The premature death of her husband, her inability to re-marry without losing her status and her marred ambition, which she apparently never internally resolved, offer a new avenue of understanding Eulogia’s problems in her later life; her longing to leave the nunnery, her difficult adjustment to monastic rule, conflicts with her nuns and her desperate insistence on personal contact with her second spiritual guide, expressed in her own preserved letters.

Her strong relationship with Theoleptos also deserves attention as it reflects the need to find a replacement of sorts for the parent, a person “who would impress [her], represent a natural authority [to her] and treat [her] as [an equal]”.² It seems that the bishop was able to create such a bond with his young charge, which then enabled him also to correct and guide her.

Though not frequently described in Byzantine chronicles, romantic relationships, endowed with the dramatic passion of adolescent love, form another group of goals

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¹ Theoleptos of Philadelphia, Letter 1 (ed. A. CONSTANTINIDES HERO, The Life and Letters of Theoleptos of Philadelphia. Brookline 1994, 34, 10 – 16): ἐπεὶ οὖν τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀπόλαυσιν ἀπόλεσας καὶ ἐν τῷ τῶν πενθοῦστων βαδίζεις χώρα, σπούδασον τὴν λογικὴν ψυχὴν οἰκεῖοσα τῷ Θεῷ Δόξῃ καὶ σαυτὴν συνάψαι τῷ Χριστῷ καὶ τὸ κατά πνεῦμα σωτήρισθαι συνοικίσσαι. κατάλειψον τάς ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ πυκνὰς διατριβάς· ἔασον τὸν ὑπηρετῶν· παράδραμε πάσης κολακείας τὴν ματαιότητα (...). Translation 35.

² VÁGEVÁROVÁ, Vývojová psychologie 395. Conflicts with family and refusal to subordinate and show one’s feelings to parents are common in adolescents.

³ VÁGEVÁROVÁ, Vývojová psychologie 410 (Translation mine).

⁴ A Woman’s Quest for Spiritual Guidance: The Correspondence of Princess Irene Eulogia Choumnaina, ed. A. CONSTANTINIDES HERO. Brookline, Massachusetts 1986.
pursued by Byzantine adolescent women. Theodora Palaiologina,²¹ niece of Michael Palaiologos (later Michael VIII), was engaged by Emperor Theodore II Laskaris to a man of rather modest origin named Balaneidotes who, according to the sources, nevertheless won the heart of this exalted lady. After he had become well acquainted with his fiancée and her family, the emperor suddenly changed his mind and forced Theodora to marry another nobleman, Basileios Kaballarios. In the words of George Pachymeres “those ladies [Theodora and her mother, Martha Palaiologina²²] who preferred the previous union and considered it a shame to change it, despised the [new] fiancé. According to the order of the emperor, the usual rituals none-the-less took place along with a splendid wedding”.²³ In the following days the young groom did not consummate the union, a fact which he ascribed to the sorcery of his mother-in-law. Soon afterwards, however, Theodore II Laskaris died and the uncle of the unhappy bride, Michael, assumed his place. At the request of his sister, he allowed Theodora to separate from Kaballarios and marry Balaneidiotis, who on this occasion rose to the honor of grand stratopedarch.²⁴

Though the sources do not explicitly state the precise age of the bride, we know that her mother, Martha Palaiologina, married in 1237 and her uncle, Michael VIII, came to power in 1258. Theodora is known to have had at least three siblings, of whom she may not have been the eldest. Thus, by the time of her engagement and first marriage, she would have been in the second half of her adolescence.

Theodora’s willingness to brave the anger of the emperor and even endanger her family’s fortunes seems an unusual behavior in a well-bred Byzantine lady but not in a teenage girl able to fall violently in love, as the novelists put it, without regard for the established system.²⁵ It is not very likely, therefore, that the clever and subtle plan which resulted in the annulment of Theodora’s marriage came from the princess’s own head. In fact, as the groom blames his failure not on his bride but on his mother-in-law, it must have been this formidable lady herself who decided to aid Theodora, possibly in order to prevent some scandalous or desperate action. Such an image also fits within the framework of the mother-daughter relationship, often characterized, also in the adolescent phase, by a tendency to mutual support.²⁶

What puzzled me as I reread the above story was the question of how to reconcile the princess, determined to take a serious risk, with the later grave and rather silent nun standing, at least from the perspective of the primary sources, in the shadow of her mother Martha and half-sister Nostongonissa as they took their place in the front lines of the Arsenite controversy, or her aunt Eirene and cousin Theodora Raoulaina, who very effectively opposed the Union of Lyons (1274). Could the psycholog-

²¹ For sources and literature see PLP, no. 27510.
²² Ibidem no. 21389.
²³ George Pachymèrés I, 55. (ed. A. FAILLER, Relations historiques [CFHB 24/I-IV]. Paris 1984).
²⁴ George Pachymèrés I, 55. (ed. A. FAILLER, Relations historiques [CFHB 24/I-IV]. Paris 1984).
²⁵ On the willingness to risk common in adolescents see VÁGNEROVÁ, Vývojová psychologie 372.
²⁶ Ibidem 405.
ical changes which temporarily occur in adolescence\textsuperscript{27} have been co-responsible for the above-described ‘misconduct’?

The Life of St. Irene of Chrysobalanton includes another case of youthful passion, which concerns a nun under the guidance of this formidable abbess. Her age is once more not specified, but the fact that she is called a ‘girl,’ \textit{kore}, suggests that she was in her adolescent years. Of noble Cappadocian descent, she entered Eirene convent and took the monastic vows. Her distant lover did not forget her, however, and with the aid of a sorcerer rekindled the girl’s love for him:

(...) the girl was unexpectedly attacked by a seething passion which maddened her with a frantic lust for her former suitor and did not allow her to control herself. Violently leaping, screaming, moaning, crying, and calling out his name in a loud voice, she assured with fearful oaths that unless someone let her see him with her eyes and enjoy to excess his sight and conversation, she would hang herself. One could see her continually running to the gateway, urging her escape and with inarticulate screams and shameless gestures ordering the door-keeper to let her out.\textsuperscript{29}

The abbess reacted promptly, ordering the sisters to pray, fast and make a thousand genuflexions a day, and set a constant guard over the bewitched girl. Through several dreams, she then received instructions as to how to proceed and miraculously procured “two idols made of lead, one resembling the suitor, the other the sick nun, embracing each other and bound together with hairs and threads (...) inscribed on them [was] the name of the author of the evil and appellations of servant demons”.\textsuperscript{30} Needless to say, once these objects were destroyed, the Cappadocian nun quickly recovered both her wits and her passion for the spiritual calling.

If we admit the possibility that the girl was not acting under a spell, we behold a tragic story of a young woman who completely forgot her vows before she was completely certain of her heart or under the pressure of material circumstances. In her case, however, there was no way back as the sacred promises could not be undone.

\textsuperscript{27} The general characteristics of adolescence include also refusal to compromise, a tendency to radical solutions and a need to instantly achieve one’s goals. See ibidem 385f.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{PmbZ} I, Nr. 1452.

\textsuperscript{29} The Life of St. Irene Abbess of Chrysobalanton 13 (ed. O. ROSENQUIST, The Life of St. Irene Abbess of Chrysothalon: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Notes and Indices. Uppsala 1986, 22, 52, 6, 54): Τὴν κόρην δὲ ξέοις καρδίας ἐπιευχεσάσα παρ’ ἑλπίδα καὶ ὅλην ἐκφρενὴ μανικῶ τῶν πρὸς τὸν ποτε μνηστὴρα τῶτης ἔρωτ ἡθέσα αὐτὴν καθέκετην εἶναι συνεχώρει τῇ βία πηδώσαν, βοώσαν, στένουσαν, κλαίοντας, μεγάλῃ φωνῇ τὸ εκεῖνον ὄνωμα ἀνακαλομένην καὶ εἰ μὴ τοῦτον δόξη τις αὐτὴ τοῖς ὀρθολογίοις ἱδεῖν καὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ κατὰ κόρον δύνεος ἐπαισθαύναι καὶ κοινωνικὰς, διαβεβαιοῦσαν ὅρκοις φιλικώδεις ἐκτὸς ἄπαγχονήσαι, εἰτα καὶ πρὸς τὴν πυλῶν πυκνά θέσων ἄν τις αὐτὴν ὄραν καὶ τὴν ἔξοδὸν ἐπισπευδόουσαν καὶ ταυτὴν ἀσύμηκος κραυγαῖς καὶ σχῆμασιν ἀναδέσσαι πιτάττουσαν τὴ θυρῳρα. Translation 53, 55.

\textsuperscript{30} The Life of St. Irene Abbess of Chrysobalanton 13 (29, 60, 1–2, 62 ROSENQUIST): Καὶ εἴδολα μολιθρίου κατεσκευασμένα δύο, τὸ μὲν τὸ μνηστήρος, τὸ δ’ ἐτέρον τῆς κακοῦ ἔχούσης ἔοικότα μοναχῆς, περιπλοκήν πρὸς ἄλληλα ποιοῦμενα καὶ ὑμίκας καταδεδεσμένα, (...) καὶ τὸ δῆμουργὸ τῆς κακίας ὄνωμα καὶ δαιμόνων ύπασπιστῶν αὐτοῦ κηθήσεις ἐγγεγραμμένα. Translation 61, 63.
The girl’s violent entreaties, screams and threats fit well the model of adolescent behavior. The young nun did not have another nearby to help her devise a stratagem and so she struggled loudly but in vain. While the Byzantines did have a sense of adolescence as an age of seeking and testing one’s calling, the monastic founders nevertheless had the final word in deciding at what age the novices could take the veil. Once this ritual had taken place, the Orthodox Church considered the vows irreversible.

In problematic families and with girls of strong character, the need for relationship, essentially the need for love, may have transpired in a socially undesirable way. The sinful youth of St Mary of Egypt, as recounted by Sophronios, is a notorious example. In her confession to Father Zosimas, she admits that at the age of twelve she left her parents and went to Alexandria, where she led a debauched life for seventeen years, stressing that her reasons for immorality were not material. Though Mary’s figure has been reshaped by Sophronios and her despicable youth creates the plot of the legend and counterpart to her later ascetic lifestyle, it does not describe a wholly improbable event. A young woman would run from home, like the above Mary-Matrona of Chios, most probably after a fight or misunderstanding with her parents. More problematic is the detail confessed to Father Zosimas, that she led a promiscuous life without material necessity, which would indicate a need to rebel against the values of her parents or a desire to receive love and recognition, which the latter failed to confer. Whether due to the miraculous intervention of the Theotokos on her own journey to maturity, Mary later became a holy woman and a famous ascetic – an extreme example of the more common transformation of a wild teenager into a balanced and responsible individual.

In its description of adolescence, the World Health Organization depicts this phase as “movement toward social and economic independence,” in which “development of identity and the acquisition of skills needed to carry out adult relation-

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31 Strong emotional reactions are typical in adolescents: VÁGNEROVÁ, Vývojová psychologie 390f.
32 The Council of Carthage for example only allowed women of 25 to take the monastic vows (Les canons des Pères Grecs [= Discipline générale antique], ed. P.-P. JOANNOU. Grottaferrata 1962, I/1, 175–177). This wise precept was nevertheless later changed by the Council in Trullo (962) to seventeen (JOANNOU, Les canons I/1, 176/13–16).
33 There are three different versions of the vita: the first by John Moschos presents Mary as a pious nun in a monastery who left for the desert after a young man fell in love with her in order to avoid sin (see PG, 87, 3049). Another story is presented by Cyril of Scythopolis, who introduces Mary as a singer at the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem who, on account of her great beauty, did not want to become a snare for men and therefore left for the desert (ed. E. SCHWARTZ, Cyril of Scythopolis’s Life of of Cyriacus. Leipzig 1939). The third version is that of Sophronios, used above, who depicts Mary as a repentant harlot.
34 For Mary’s Vita (Sophronios version) see (BHG 1042) PG 87, 3697–3726, (leaving home, 3709D) for translation and further literature see M. KOULI (transl.), Life of St. Mary of Egypt, in: Holy Women 70–93, see 65–93 (as in n. 10); ODB 2, 1310.
35 VÁGNEROVÁ, Vývojová psychologie 394, 449.
ships and roles take place. While most, if not all, Byzantine women received instruction in domestic tasks and sometimes in the family trade, the eulogy of Michael Psellos dedicated to his mother confirms that at least some of them also desired *education*. Following the description of her childhood and directly preceding the depiction of her marriage, the adolescent Theodote, according to her son, regretted that “she happened not to be a man by nature and that she was not allowed to study literature freely”. Determined woman that she was, she nevertheless managed to overcome this handicap:

Evading the attention of her mother whenever she could, she picked up the basic principles of letters from someone and soon began through her own efforts to join them together and to form syllables and then sentences, without having any need for an instructor in the basics.

Psellos’s text offers a testimony not only to the scholarly interests of his mother but also to the difficulties faced by gifted Byzantine women of unprivileged background who desired knowledge as a means of personal growth. On the other hand, it is encouraging to see that Theodote, and perhaps others, had the perseverance to teach themselves to read and write. If not absolutely exceptional, Theodote’s story may indicate that basic education among the Byzantine female population was not as rare as the preserved sources would have us believe.

**Conclusion**

Despite the paucity of examples, the above sources indicate that Byzantine adolescent women focused primarily on relationships of various kinds. Upon inspection, the texts also reveal the tendencies and emotions typical of this age group, including willingness to risk, internal turmoil, egocentrism and the need to immediately achieve their goals.

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36 World Health Organization on adolescent development: http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/adolescence/dev/en/# (seen 12.8.2014).
37 Michael Psellos, Encomio per la madre (ed. U. CRISCUOLO, Michele Psello: Autobiografia, Encomio per la madre, (Testo critico, introduzione, traduzione e commentario). Naples 1989. Tranl. A. KALDELLIS, Mothers and Sons, Fathers and Daughters: The Byzantine Family of Michael Psellos. Notre Dame 2006. Also see J. GOUILLARD, La femme de qualité dans les lettres de Théodore Stoudite. JÖB 32/2 (1982) 445–452.
38 Michael Psellos, Encomio per la madre 3 (136–138, 90 CRISCUOLO: (...) ὅτι δὲ μὴ ἄρρενα τὴν φύσιν ἔλαχε, μηδὲ ἐξὴν ταύτῃ ἀδεώς λόγοις προσομιλεῖν, ἐν δεινῷ ἐποιεῖτο. Transl.) KALDELLIS, Mothers and Sons 55.
39 Michael Psellos, Encomio per la madre 3 (138–141, 90 CRISCUOLO): ὅπου δὲ τὴν μητέρα λάθος, τὰς τῶν γραμμάτων ἄρχας παρὰ τοῦ μόνας λαβόντα, εἰτα δὴ ἄφ’ ἐαυτῆς συνετίθει καὶ συλλαβάς ἐποίει καὶ λόγους, μηδὲν προσδομένη τοῖς στοιχεῖοις.
40 Modern research confirms the development of cognitive processes in adolescence, which frequently stimulate teenagers’ desire to learn. VÁGNEROVÁ, Vývojová psychologie 371–390.
Regarding family, though adolescence in Byzantium was apparently likewise marked by parent-child conflicts and a tendency to explore new ideas rather than quickly accept adult authority, a stable family background had a crucial impact on teenagers’ future choices and success in life. Its importance is apparent in the successes of Matrona of Chios, Theodora Tarchaneiotissa or Mary-Marinos, while its lack brought Mary of Egypt as well as the nameless nun from the monastery of Eirene of Chrysobalanton into serious difficulties.

The seven descriptions also reflect tensions related to the social expectations which were placed on young women. The approved or ideal desires clearly included serving God, obeying parents, maintaining chastity, remaining faithful to one’s fiancé and keeping sacred vows. Conversely, they reveal the problems faced by teenaged females. Among these, the inability to choose partners, enter or leave the monastery, remain with parents, escape difficult circumstances, or acquire basic knowledge obviously ranked high on the list.

The idealized aims of Byzantine adolescent women interestingly stand in direct contrast to those of their male counterparts established by the recent study of Despoina Arianzti. While men desired good looks, recognition and strength, young women were expected to completely negate such wishes by remaining hidden within their homes or monasteries, neglecting their beauty and cherishing no other ambition than piety. In pursuing their dreams which went beyond the approved limited sphere they almost always had to take irregular and often ingenious paths.

Surprisingly, several patterns connected with contemporary adolescent women do not appear in the above sources. One of them is the tendency to become a member of a peer group. The dearth of information about these groupings may certainly be ascribed in part to a lack of interest of the Byzantine authors. Nevertheless, their existence may have been limited by the expectation that the more prominent women would spend most of their time in their homes, while extensive help in the household may have kept their less fortunate peers from attending.

Missing in the above examples is also any note of the adolescent focus on appearance. It is, of course, not likely that young Byzantine women would have neglected their looks as both the preserved images of Byzantine women and archeological finds of jewelry indicate. Whether due to lack of financial means or lack of social significance, they apparently failed to make the result of their efforts provocative enough to capture the attention of contemporary authors who after all perhaps were not as opposed to female beauty as the lives of the Byzantine female saints would have us believe.

In applying developmental psychology on literary figures, which were not even based on real personalities, one must, of course exercise caution. While constructing

41 ARIANZTI, Adolescent 19 – 21 (as in n. 2). On gender-oriented needs also see VÁGNEROVÁ, Vývojová psychologie 471 – 482.
42 For the peer groups in Byzantium see in this volume the paper of D. ARIANZTI, Soziale Identitätsbildung im Jugendalter.
completely fictive characters, the authors may have more or less projected their own fears, ideas and expectations into the (female) figures in order to achieve their purposes, which most frequently entailed issuing a warning or encouragement to their audiences. Such ‘figments of imagination’ were not meant to resemble human beings – and they did not. On the other hand, with sources describing historical women (and men) who had to pass through the elementary processes of infancy, adolescence, adulthood and aging, the findings of modern psychologists may provide much insight. Though their individual experiences of these seasons may have differed to a certain degree, they always shaped their stories – and left a mark on the texts.
