

Chapter 10 Viewpoint Activity

As you have seen in reading about the Byzantine empress Theodora, historians sometimes disagree about a person's character and influence. While many admired Theodora's courage, the Byzantine historian Procopius showed her as totally evil. Another, less famous, figure about whom writers disagree is Sophia-Zoe Paleologus, the Byzantine princess who married Ivan the Great (textbook page 247). Here a cultural historian and a biographer of Ivan III give sharply conflicting descriptions of this interesting but little-known woman. ♦ *As you read, think about the different points each writer makes. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Two Views of the Czarina Sophia

Suzanne Massie: Zoe, who took the name Sophia, was both intelligent and ambitious and in her twenty-one years as Ivan's wife she exercised a great influence on the arts at the court. . . . When she arrived in Moscow she spoke not only her native Greek, but had mastered Latin and Italian as well. With her she brought from Rome and Constantinople a large retinue of priests, scholars, artists and architects. She carried to Russia her Greek and Latin books, priceless manuscripts, icons and art. For Ivan she brought a magnificent ivory throne made in Persia as well as the emblem of the Byzantine emperors for a thousand years—the Double Eagle—which Ivan adopted as the symbol of Russia. Sophia . . . introduced into the court the elaborate court etiquette, full of the pomp and glitter of Byzantium. . . .

To emphasize Moscow's new position as the center of the true faith, Sophia enthusiastically urged her husband to embark on a vast building program of new and magnificent churches in the Kremlin. . . . Spurred by Sophia, Ivan sent a mission to Italy to recruit the best architectural talent to be found.

J.L.I. Fennell: In 1469 Cardinal Bessarion wrote from Rome offering Ivan the hand of his ward and pupil, Zoe Palaeologus, niece of the last emperor of Byzantium. It took three years before . . . Zoe, who, on entering Moscow, changed her name to Sofia (and perhaps her faith to Orthodoxy), was married to Ivan in the Kremlin.

“She carried to Russia her Greek and Latin books, priceless manuscripts, icons, and art.”

She remained in Muscovy until her death in 1503. Nineteenth-century historians portray her as the haughty Byzantine princess. . . . whose marriage initiated cultural and diplomatic relations with the West, who introduced Byzantine ceremony into the court of Moscow, and who strengthened the conception of autocracy in Ivan. This picture is now believed to be far from true. In 1480 she ignominiously fled the capital; relations with the West and the refurbishing of Ivan's drab court had nothing to do with her presence; and she would have been the last person to wish to see Ivan's absolutist tendencies increased.

Sources: (1) *Land of the Firebird*, by Suzanne Massie (Simon & Schuster, 1982); (2) “Ivan III the Great,” by J.L.I. Fennell, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (15th edition, 1979).

Questions to Discuss

1. What facts do the two writers agree on?
2. What does Fennell say about the historical view of Sophia's influence? What phrase does he use that allows room for other interpretations?
3. **Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment**
How are such different pictures possible about one historical figure? What kinds of sources would you have to consult to find out the truth? Might it be possible never to be sure about Sophia's real influence on Ivan III?