

# KASSIA

*Byzantine hymns of the earliest female composer in the Occident.*

## Biography in brief

Kassia was born into an aristocratic family in Constantinople between 805 and 810. Her father held the high military rank of a kandidatos at the imperial Byzantine court. Kassia was highly educated and extremely self-confident.

She must have been an exceptional beauty as well. In ca. 826, Kassia was among the contending noble maidens at the traditional “bride show” for Byzantine Emperor Theophilos. But the young emperor, though smitten with her beauty, was perturbed by her boldness and chose to wed Theodora instead.

Kassia’s correspondence with the abbot St. Theodore the Studite – three of whose letters have survived – dates back to the period before 826. She was also actively involved in the iconoclastic controversy during the 2nd Iconoclasm (813-43). The fierce dispute over the right use of icons caused a massive rift in Byzantine society. Kassia helped various monks imprisoned for iconodulism (i.e. iconolatriy, the veneration of images) and iconodule exiles, for which she was persecuted and even lashed.

Some time after 843 Kassia founded a monastery on Xerolophos, the seventh hill on the western outskirts of Constantinople, where she served as its first abbess. She wrote liturgical and secular verse for her monastery and friends and composed troparia (short hymns of praise used in the Byzantine liturgy) for various saints’ days. Almost 50 hymns are now attributed to Kassia. Many of them are still used in Greek Orthodox liturgy. Kassia died some time before 867.