The last Serbian queen: Helena Palaiologina (*1431 - +1473)

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“In October of the same year [1446], Lady Helene, Lord Thomas’ daughter, departed from Glarentza to travel to Serbia in order to marry Lazar, the son of despot Lord George. The marriage was celebrated.”

George Sphrantzes, *Chronicle.*¹

This was not the first time a Byzantine married a Serbian. On February 7, 1392, the young lady Jelena Dragaš arrived in Constantinople, the bride-to-be of Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1391-1425). A grand-niece of the great Serbian Emperor Stefan Dušan, and daughter of one of the last great lords of the remnants of the Serbian Empire in Central Greece, she would be the last empress-mother of Byzantium, and the mother of the last Palaeologi.² Her granddaughter, following her example, would become the last Despoina of Serbia.³

Helena’s father, Thomas, was the youngest son of Manuel II Palaiologos and the last Byzantine Despot to rule over the Morea, as well as a fierce advocate of the Union between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, which he considered was the path for the ultimate salvation of Byzantium. Her mother, Aikaterine Asanina-Zaccaria, was the daughter of the last ruler of Latin Achaea, Centurione Zaccaria, vassal of Ladislas d’Anjou-Durazzo, King of Naples and lord of what remained of Frankish Morea.⁴

Serbo-Byzantine marriages had occurred many times in the past years, when the Empire was still vast and powerful. Eudokia, daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Alexios III Angelos (1195-1203), had married Stefan II Nemanja, “The First Crowned” King of Serbia, and divorced him after a shameful event that took place in June 1198. Two Kings of Serbia married daughters of the Komnen-Doukai princes of Epiros and Thessaly. Perhaps the most famous Byzantine Queen of Serbia was Simonis Palaiologina, daughter of Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1328) and wife of the famous King Milutin (1282-1321) at the age of 8-years-old. Finally, Maria Palaiologina, daughter of the rebellious Panhypersebastos John Palaiologos, grandson of Michael VIII, first Palaeologi emperor, become the

³ Despoina is the female version of the title Despotes (Despot), second to the Imperial title (Basileus). For more references on Byzantine Courtesy Titles, see PSEUDO-KODINOS. Pseudo-Kodinos: Traité des Offices. Introduction, texte et traduction par Jean Verpeaux. Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris, 1966), pp. 133.
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stepmother of Stefan Dušan due to her marriage with Stefan III DečANSki (1322-1331), when she was merely 10-years-old.⁵

The marriage between Helena Palaiologina to the Serbian prince Lazar Branković, heir to the Serbian Despotate, was orchestrated by her uncle, Emperor John VIII Palaiologos (1425-1448). During her travel, the Byzantine ambassador, George Philanthropenos, bestowed upon Lazar the Byzantine court title of Despot, only second to that of Emperor. Thus, Helena became consort to the heir of one of the lasts Christian outposts in the Balkans, during the period of the Ottoman conquest.⁶

After two years of reign (1456-1458), Lazar died for unknown reasons. He and Helena had three daughters: Maria, who would become the last Queen of Bosnia due to her marriage with King Stephen Tomašević; Milica, who would become wife of Leonardo III Tocco, count of Cephalonia and Zante, as well as ruler of what remained of the Despotate of Epiros; and Jerina, who married the son of Skanderbeg, hero of the Albanian resistance to the Ottoman invasion.⁷

After husband’s death and the Ottoman invasion to Serbia, Helena seized the power with the help of her brother-in-law, Stephen. Trying to maintain the independence of Serbia from the Ottoman onslaught, she allied with the King of Bosnia, and married her eldest daughter to the latter’s heir. Despite all her political maneuvers to keep a Free Serbia, the Despotate fell on 1459 after the conquest of Smederevo by the armies of Mehmed II, who had previously laid waste to the hinterland.⁸

With all hopes already vanished, Helena took the path of exile. In 1462, when her father Thomas, returned to Venetian territory after being at the Papal Court, he found her daughter already established in Ancona, and stayed with her for

⁶ SPHRANTZES, Chronicle, p. 56.
⁷ For Helena’s children with Lazar, see NICOL, Last Centuries, p. 400.
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a few days, before he departed to Rome and Helena to Ragusa. That same year, Aikaterine Palaiologina, mother of Helena, died at Corfu, due to an illness.9

The second haven for Helena during her exile was the Isle of Santa Maura (now Leukas, Greece), with her son-in-law Leonardo III Tocco, who was also lord of the island, in the year 1467. The following year, the dispossessed Queen of Serbia travelled to Venice, and in front of the Senate she presented charges to those who had appropriated her property at Corfu, according to Sphrantzes, and by 1472, she had already taken the veil under the name of Hypomone, which means “Patience,” following the example of her venerable grandmother, the Saintly Empress Helena.10

What can be said about the last Serbian Queen? It is a fact that the last Palaiologoi had a mixture of bloods and breeds, being descendants through an unbroken male line of the Byzantine Emperors from old, and through their female lines, to the most prestigious noble houses of Europe, like the Árpads, Montferrats, Savoys, and others. Thanks to Jelena Dragaš, they even had a blood relation to the famous Dušan, the mightiest Serbian ruler in history!11

For that reason, perhaps, due to her grandmother’s Serbian blood, Helena Palaiologina adapted well to the Serbian costumes and culture, and she definitely was an ardent supporter of Serbian Independence against the Ottoman threat. The alliances she forged were destined to prevent Serbia’s ultimate fall, but in the end the Ottoman manpower and resources granted the victory to the so-called “sons of Hagar.”

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9 SPHRANTZES, Chronicle, 85.
10 SPHRANTZES, Chronicle, 89-90, 93-94.
11 PAPADOPoulos, Averkios. Versuch eine Genealogie der Palaiologen 1259-1453. Adolf Hakkert Verlag (Amsterdam, 1962). This book was a thesis by Archimandrite Papadopoulos in the year 1932, in the University of Munich, a year before Hitler’s ascension to government in Germany.