

“Vasilissa, ergo gaude...”.

Cleopa Malatesta’s Byzantine CV¹

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“Empress Cleofe, rejoice, for you are worthy of all praise” – sang Guillaume Dufay to commemorate the wedding of an Italian lady to Theodore II Palaiologos, the Despot in Mistra on Peloponnese, the second son of the Byzantine Emperor, Manuel II. Dufay was a gifted musician from Cambrai in northern France, hired by different European courts in the first half of the 15th century. Well-paid, he glorified his benefactors, mainly the nouveaux-riches families like Malatesta from Pesaro and Rimini. His colleague, Hugo de Lantins from Liege did the same, commending the ancient Sparta, that is Mistra, for choosing “divine” Cleopa Malatesta as the wife of its ruler.² They probably exaggerated in flattering Cleopa, which makes their compositions difficult to analyze for historians who doubt the objectivity of such sources. But, paradoxically, texts of itinerant musicians reconstruct the emotional context of this event. Typical narrative sources are very scant. The archives in Rimini treasure little information about Cleopa’s wedding.³ The same can be said about Byzantine historians, who only noted the joint arrival of Cleopa Malatesta and Sophia of Montferrat from Italy to Constantinople to marry Theodore II Palaiologos and his brother, the future Emperor John VIII respectively.⁴ The idea of two weddings at the Byzantine court came from Pope Martin V, who took the opportunity offered by the old Emperor Manuel II, seeking moral and military assistance in the West against the Turks.

¹ I am very grateful to my sister, Dr Dorota Filipczak, for her kind correction of my English. This paper was presented on 22 March 2005 at the conference: “Unities and disunities in the late medieval eastern Mediterranean world”, organized by Dr Catherine Holmes at the University College in Oxford.

² Dr Margaret Bent, interested in my research on the Latin ladies in the Byzantine imperial family, drew my attention to the two composers, especially to Dufay. In this way I found a common field of studies with the eminent authority in medieval music. Dr Bent’s French collaborator, Mr Thierry Grandemange, shared with me the results of his studies on the compositions of Hugo de Lantins. I much appreciate the exchange of opinions with both scholars.

³ I owe much to Professor Anna Falcioni, who kindly sent me the copies of manuscripts containing the information about Cleopa’s Byzantine marriage. Cf. Biblioteca di Rimini, Schede Garampi, ms. 206, n. 77; Biblioteca Chiveriana di Pesaro, ms 1063, f. 221. Professor Falcioni prepares with Mr Bruno Ghigi a great edition of Malatesti Studies (24 volumes, 18 of them already published). I am also grateful to Professor Silvia Ronchey, who deals with the vicissitudes of Malatesta family.

The political relations between Byzantium and Osmanlis were quite correct during the reign of Mehmed I (1413-1421), who owed much to the Byzantine protection in the fratricidal conflict after the disaster at Ankara (1402).⁵ Fourteen years of his rule could not however put Manuel's vigilance to sleep. His intuition was perfect. Mehmed's successor, Murad II quickly showed his hostility towards Byzantium. Being aware of the permanent Turkish danger, Manuel II looked for assistance in the West. His first western voyage to Italy, France and England in 1399-1403 was very disappointing but he did not give up.⁶ He counted mainly on the papal authority but the situation was complicated by the Great Western Schism, the result of which was the election of two Popes. One resided in Rome, the other in Avignon. During his first mission Manuel tried to gain the support of both, but without result. Three Popes, who appeared on the political scene after the Council in Pisa in 1409, would have been even greater an obstacle for him, but, fortunately, he did not need to seek their protection as the Osmanlis were plunged in their fratricidal war. When the information of the Council in Constance in 1414 reached Manuel, he sent immediately his embassy to keep his Imperial finger on the political pulse. The strategy of the Empire was always the same. Devoted to the religious independence, it played a card of the Church union only in the time of great danger.⁷ Its first intention was, as always, to look for money in the Venetian wallet and, at that time, to distract the Republic from the conflict with Hungary. Constance was well chosen address and Manuel II could kill two birds with one stone. Hungarian and German ruler, Sigismund of Luxemburg, was the initiator of gathering the Council in Constance. His intention was to put an end to the schism as he surely counted on the coronation as a Holy Roman Emperor by a newly appoint-

⁴ Only Pseudo-Sphrantzes, that is Melisseonos' chronicle from the 16th century gives the exact date of their arrival on the board a Venetian ship in November 1420. Cf. G. Phrantzes (i.e. Pseudo-Sphrantzes), *Annales*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonn 1838, 110, 22.

⁵ The treaty signed in 1403, after Turkish defeat at Ankara gave back to Byzantium its political independence, lost in 1372/73, when the Empire became "the vassal" of the Turks. Now, the Osmanlis were submitted to the Emperor. Cf. G. DENNIS, *The Byzantine-Turkish Treaty of 1403*, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* XXXIII (1967) 72-88. I am aware that some footnotes concerning Byzantine political life are banal for the specialists of the epoch. I hope, however, that we do not write for the hermetic milieu, which would deprive the wider audience of the important background of the events.

⁶ J. W. BARKER, *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391-1425). A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship*, New Brunswick, N.J. 1968, pp. 167-199.

⁷ Manuel's father, John V failed in this politics as his personal acceptance of the Catholic Creed in 1369 showed only Papal helplessness in Byzantine searching for western military assistance. Cf. O. HALECKI, *Un empereur de Byzance à Rome. Vingt ans de travail pour l'union des églises et pour la défense de l'empire d'Orient 1355-1375*, Varsovie 1930, pp. 188-199. Still useful, as it is written from the perspective of western sources.

ed Pope. The main task of Manuel’s envoys was to observe the situation. The Council lasted four years and in 1417 the new Pope, Martin V, was elected. Sigismund was not crowned which is another story, but the Byzantine delegation discovered immediately that the true political pulse was not in Luxemburg’s or Venetian veins but in Martin V’s circulation. To gain his friendly attitude and to show their good intentions, they asked the Pope for the permission to arrange marriages between Latin princesses and Manuel’s adult sons: John VIII and Theodore II respectively. Martin, in his generosity, gave his permission to all the six Imperial sons.⁸

Cardinal Odo Colonna, that is Martin V, belonged to a noble, old Roman family. In the time of his election he was almost fifty years old, which does not lessen sensitivity to female charm. His choice of the Latin fiancées seems however to deny this argument. As an Empress for the future John VIII, already a co-Emperor, Martin suggested Sophia of Montferrat, from the family well connected with the Byzantine court. She was not a teenager as it was typical for a fiancée at that time. Sophia was already 26 years old, had a nicely shaped body and golden hair but her face was drastically disfigured which could have been the result of a mascaron illness in her childhood, but we can only speculate.⁹ John VIII, 28 year old widower, married her in January 1421 and crowned as an Empress but avoided her because of the physical repulsion. From the point of view of dynastic policy, her choice as an Empress was a diplomatic disaster. John VIII tolerated her while his father, old Manuel I, was alive. Sophia was a guarantee of the Papal protection for Byzantium in the time of Turkish threat. For the Pope this marriage and that of Cleopa was a naïve perspective of a future union of the Churches. Martin expected that two ladies will keep their Catholic faith and gain their husbands for it.

Cleopa arrived in Mistra with her chaplain and Italian ladies-in-waiting.¹⁰ Her husband, Theodore II Palaiologos, ruled there as a Despot, which was the highest rank at the Byzantine court after the Emperor. Theodore was sharing Peloponnese with the Latins settled there from the time of the Fourth Crusade, and was afraid of Turkish invasion, as were his father and brother in Constantinople. In the unforgettable year 1420, when he saw his fiancée and his future sister-in-law, he was 21. We do not know what Cleopa looked like. In comparison with her companion, Sophia, she was not so ugly, but probably not beautiful either, otherwise

⁸ O. RAYNALDUS, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, XVIII, Roma 1659, ad annum 1418, no 17.

⁹ The dramatic description of Sophia’s face was given by Dukas, *Historia Byzantina*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonnæ 1834, 100, pp. 9-16. Cf. M. DĄBROWSKA, *Sophia of Montferrat or the History of One Face*, in: *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis, Folia Historica*, 1996, pp. 186-187. I presented Sophia’s vicissitudes on the meeting of Polish Medical Society (2002) and some participants suggested mascaron illness.

¹⁰ D. A. ZAKYTHINOS, *Le Despotat grec de Morée (1262-1460)*, t. 1, *Histoire politique*, Paris 1932, p. 189.

the chroniclers would have written it. We also do not know how old she was. Modern, detailed prosopographical edition by E. TRAPP does not give her date of birth.¹¹ Dealing with Latin wives of the Byzantine Emperors, whose age was unknown, I suggested with great caution that they were at least 12-13 years old, taking into consideration the nubile age of women according to the canon law.¹² I would rather keep this point of view for Cleopa's case, but to my surprise I found her date of birth in David FALLOWS' book devoted to her admirer, the French musician Dufay. The author does not give the source of his information but he states that Cleopa was born approximately in 1388.¹³ This is rather difficult to accept, as it would mean that she was 11 years elder her husband, which, however, cannot be excluded. Being 32 years old, she was not an attractive match; her family background was not attractive either. She came from Malatesta of Pesaro, which was a younger branch of Malatesta of Rimini. The family was quite new on the political stage but connected with Colonna, as Cleopa's brother, Carlo, was a fiancé to Vittoria Colonna, niece of Pope Martin V.¹⁴ This is the key to her promotion in Byzantium by the Pope. We know nothing about her childhood and youth. Was she betrothed to anybody else, as was Sophia to Philippo Visconti, who then married another lady?¹⁵ Malatesta of Pesaro was a very young family and it seems that they gained their position due to Odo de Colonna whose election they supported. They had their possessions in the Papal State. Byzantium did its best to gain Martin's friendly attitude, announcing in the chrysobulle of 1419 that Cleopa's Catholicism would be accepted by her Orthodox husband. In case of Theodore's death she had a choice of staying in Byzantium or coming home. Venice was not worse in its kindness and financial assistance. It offered one galley for transferring two ladies and their retinues from Italy to the Empire.¹⁶ The fiancées appeared in Constantinople probably in autumn 1420 and their weddings took place probably at the same time that is on 19 January 1421. What was the reaction of John VIII to Sophia we already know. His sacrifice was great but he was already a politician and knew that gaining supporters had its price. He paid well. If Cleopa was really 32 and eleven years older than

¹¹ *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, ed. E. Trapp, Bd. 9, Wien 1989, no 21459.

¹² M. DĄBROWSKA, *Łacinniczki nad Bosforem. Matżeństwa bizantyńsko-łacińskie w cesarskiej rodzinie Paleologów (XIII-XV w.)* [The Latin Ladies on the Bosphoros. Byzantine-Latin Marriages in the Imperial Family of the Palaiologoi (13th-15th Centuries)], Łódź 1996, p. 51.

¹³ D. FALLOWS, *Dufay*, London 1987, p. 252.

¹⁴ G. FRANCESCHINI, *I Malatesta*, Varese 1973, p. 283.

¹⁵ M. DĄBROWSKA, *Sophia of Montferrat...*, p. 182.

¹⁶ *Laonikos Chalcocondyles, Historiarum libri decem*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonnae 1843, p. 206. D. M. ZAKYTHINOS, op. cit., p. 189.

Theodore it must have been a difficult challenge to cope with, for he quickly discovered his vocation to the monastic life. The perspective of dynastic development for John and Theodore seemed to be ruined from the very beginning of their marital life. Both men despaired but their spouses showed the exemplary determination in their mission and Cleopa became a paragon of true patience. She just waited. The couple could not have children for some years but fortunately in 1427 she bore a daughter called Helena. Paradoxically, in the years 1427-1428 Theodore, already a gentleman of 28-29, still thought to withdraw to monastery.¹⁷ The information that he became a father may have changed his mind. According to the contemporary Greek author, Cleopa was young, however we cannot estimate her age.¹⁸ If we take a risk and accept her mature age, this motherhood was rather late. Helena was her only child. It seems that Cleopa Malatesta gained her husband’s feelings due to her conversion to Orthodoxy. It is suggested that she was forced to convert. Knowing only some details about her character we can assume that it was her own will and the only good move in this stalemate situation. She was spied on by one of her ladies-in-waiting, her cousin, Battista Malatesta de Montefeltro, who wrote a letter to the Pope asking him to help Cleopa in the religious conflict with Theodore.¹⁹ If she really needed to write anything, it would have been better to draw Martin’s attention to the Turks. Battista addressed the Pope’s vain ambitions of gaining Byzantium over to Catholicism. The letter is undated but it must have been sent in the time when the Latins kept their privileged position on the Peloponnese.²⁰ Martin promoted them and the manifestation of his attitude was the appointment of Pandolfo Malatesta, Cleopa’s brother as archbishop of Patras in 1424. Pandolfo reached his destination at the age of 34 and Cleopa could surely feel his support in the Byzantine milieu. But the sky was darkening over the peninsula. In 1423 the Turks had broken the walls built across the Isthmus of Corinth and devastated Morea. The Latin ruler of Cephalonia, Carlo Tocco, had occupied the northwestern side of Peloponnese in 1426. The new Emperor, John VIII, who in the meantime, managed to send his ugly wife back to Italy, entered Morea with his

¹⁷ George Sphrantzes, *The Fall of Byzantine Empire* (so called Chronicon minus), trans. by M. Philippides, Amherst 1980, p. 33.

¹⁸ Nikephoros Cheilas, *Monodia epi Kleope Palaiologine*, in: *Palaiologea kai Peloponesiaka* (PP), ed. Sp. Lambros, t. IV, Athenai 1930, p. 149.

¹⁹ D. A. ZAKYTHINOS, op. cit., p. 189.

²⁰ Zakythinos (l. cit.) accepts N. Jorga’s opinion that the letter must have been written before 1431 that is before Martin’s death, which is an unconvincing explanation if one takes into account the political situation on the Peloponnese. Cf. N. JORGA, *Notes et extraits pour servir à l’histoire des croisades au XIV^e siècle*, t. I, Paris – Bucarest 1899, p. 197. The tone of the letter deserves to be quoted: “Sanctissime Pater, consurge in defensionem constantissime filie, que tibi sanguine et spiritu coniuncta est...”.

brother Constantine and won Tocco in 1428.²¹ They did not stop at that and attacked Patras in 1429, supported by the youngest brother, Thomas. Theodore remained in Mistra, loyal to his brother-in-law. The Byzantine coalition turned out to be very effective. Pandolfo was desperate and went to Italy to seek assistance. He even alarmed Turks, complaining about his situation. Sultan Murad II did not accept Byzantine victory. Venetians also protested but in vain. Patras surrendered to Constantine in 1430. In the same year, the other Latin ruler, Centurione Zaccaria, was defeated.²² Peloponnese was taken by the Palaiologoi in a spectacular way. It was a total disaster of Papal dreams. Pandolfo came back to Italy where he died in 1441.²³ He left his sister completely hellenized, which was to be foreseen. Mistra became her home. Her husband's court was a great intellectual center, surely more refined than her nouveau-riche Pesaro. Taking into consideration the Latin expansion, one has to admit that Cleopa and Pandolfo Malatesta arrived in Byzantium too late. Paradoxically, at the end of its existence, the Empire found force to put an end to the depressing memory of the Fourth Crusade. So, the Latins were defeated but the name of Malatesta remained in history, however not in the circumstances that the Pope might have wished for. It seems that his policy failed, but the Byzantines, aware of the Turkish danger strove for his support. John VIII's envoy was sent to Martin V in the same year 1430 assuring him about the readiness for the Church Council.²⁴ Byzantium did not have any other way out, and signed the Union in Florence in 1439.²⁵

Cleopa died in 1433 and was buried in Mistra.²⁶ Theodore did not marry once again. He gave up his inclination for the monastic life and got involved in politics. As a result he changed his place and settled in Selymbria near the capital, counting on scraps of Imperial power. He died in June 1448, four months before John VIII. Their brother Constantine XI became the winner and the last Emperor of the Romans. All of them witnessed Helena's marriage to John Lusignan, the King of Cyprus, in 1442. At that time Cleopa's daughter was about 15 years old and became

²¹ D. M. NICOL, *The Immortal Emperor. The Life and Legend of Constantine Palaiologos, Last Emperor of the Romans*, Cambridge 1992, p. 8.

²² A. BON, *La Morée franque. Recherches historiques, topographiques et archéologiques sur la principauté d'Achaïe (1204-1430)*, t. I, Paris 1969, p. 292.

²³ Cf. Pandolfo's picturesque CV in: A. FALCIONI, *Pandolfo Malatesti arcivescovo di Patrasso (1390-1441)*, *Bizantinistica. Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi*, serie seconda, I (1999) 73-89.

²⁴ RAYNALDUS, op. cit., XXV, ad annum 1430, no 8.

²⁵ The details in: J. GILL, *The Council of Florence*, Cambridge 1959.

²⁶ She was buried in the monastery of Christ Zoodotes. The archeologists discovered well-preserved „mummy” of Mistra. Cf. S. RONCHEY, *Malatesta/Paleologhi. Un'allezanza dinastica per rifondare Bisanzio nel quindicesimo secolo*, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 93 (2000) 521-567. Professor David Jacoby informed me that according to Professor Falcioni, abortion might have been the reason of Cleopa's death.

the second wife of John.²⁷ She bore him two daughters: Carlotta (probably after her Italian uncle’s name) and Cleopa, which seems to be a short version of Cleopatra, after her mother’s name. Although Helena married a Latin ruler, she remained attached to the Orthodox background and offered a shelter to many Byzantines after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. She died five years later.

Cleopa Malatesta remained in history due to the literary sources. When she died, George Gemistos Plethon, the most eminent scholar at Mistra court, wrote a pretentious funeral oration extolling to the skies her extraordinary virtues. He mentioned that many people underline their merits and need to be flattered all the time. Unlike them, Cleopa was modest, beautiful, intelligent, magnanimous, kind, but mainly pious. He stressed that she left frivolous Italian customs and accepted a severe way of Byzantine life style. She properly prayed with the court and fasted.²⁸ Bessarion, the other intellectual, wrote not only monody but also a poem for her.²⁹ The point is that the first of the flatterers was a clandestine pagan, who wanted to convince the Byzantine people to revert to the ancient polytheism. The latter became a cardinal of Roman Church.³⁰ Whatever one can say about their objectivity, we must admit that they did their best in praising Cleopa. Unfortunately, Byzantinists based their image of Cleopa on Byzantine sources only, mostly the ones connected with funeral.

The Malatesta family employed many people of art who flattered their snobbery. The famous court painter of Pandolfo Malatesta, Cleopa’s brother, was Gentile de Fabriano, who worked for him in Brescia. Pope Martin V wanted Fabriano to work in Rome but finally the artist settled in Florence in 1420. He could have painted Cleopa’s image for Theodore but there is no evidence for it.³¹

²⁷ N. IORGA, *La France de Chypre*, Paris 1931, pp. 195-196.

²⁸ *Plethonos tou sofotatou monodia epi te aoidimo Basilidi Kleope*, in: PP, t. IV, Athenai 1930, p. 167.

²⁹ *Bessarionos Stichoi Epitymbioi Iambikou epi to tafo tes makaritidos Basilisses kyras Kleopes tes Palaiologines*, in: ibidem, p. 176.

³⁰ On Plethon and his religious system see: C. M. WOODHOUSE, *Gemistos Plethon. The Last of the Hellenes*, Oxford 1986. On Bessarion: J. GILL, *Personalities of the Council of Florence*, Oxford 1964, pp. 45-54. Plethon was so much venerated by the contemporary elite that Sigismondo Malatesta of Rimini encouraged him to join his court, which did not happen. Plethon died in 1452. When the Turks captured Mistra in 1460, Sigismondo transferred the remains of the philosopher to a sumptuous tomb in Rimini. C. M. WOODHOUSE, op. cit., p. 228. On Sigismondo’s great career see: *Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta e il suo tempo*, ed. F. Arduini – G. S. Menghi – F. Panvini Rosati – P. G. Pasini – P. Sanpaolesi – A. Vasina, Rimini 1970.

³¹ I am grateful to Dr Piotr Michałowski who tried to help me in finding any trace of Cleopa’s painting by Fabriano. On the painter see the important monograph by E. MICHELETTI, *L’opera completa di Gentile da Fabriano*, Milano 1976.

Due to the texts of western medieval musicians we can reconstruct the atmosphere of Pesaro court at the time of Cleopa's departure to the unknown future. Hugo de Lantins in his motet: "Tra quante regione" reminds the audience that Sparta, which was the fatherland of beautiful Helena, will now receive a more divine person, Lady Cleopa Malatesta. Everybody can see how privileged is Constantinople gaining such an eminent support (of House of Pesaro)".³² One should appreciate Hugo's efforts to flatter his patron and to earn some money. The composer underlined the splendour of Italian connections.

In comparison with him, Dufay was great and subtle master, who encouraged Cleopa in her mission and stressed the position, which was waiting for her. He called her Basilissa, which also means the lady of the ruler not only the Empress but we should forgive him this explosion of enthusiasm. The text of the motet goes as follows:

"Empress Cleope, rejoice, for you are worthy of all praise, renowned for the deeds of your family, the Malatesta, great and noble princes in Italy! You are even more renowned by virtue of your husband, for he is nobler than all, the lord of Greeks whom the whole world reveres, born in the purple and sent from God in heaven. Flourishing in your youth, possessed of beauty, abounding in talents, eloquent in both tongues, you are more renowned for your virtues than all the others".³³ Dufay did not fail to show his knowledge of Biblical quotations: "The King has desired your beauty. For he is your Lord". He surely received a nice fee for these words. They are very interesting for historian because of the political propaganda of Malatesta's court and the great attraction of Byzantine titles, still magical, even at the time of decadence. Life corrected Dufay's wishful thinking, as, after the first glance on his fiancée, the Despot in Mistra desired monastic solitude rather than his wife's problematical beauty. It is more probable that Cleopa really enjoyed the perspective of wedding with a young porfirogenetus, son of the Byzantine Emperor, born in the purple. How long this joy lasted – we cannot say...

³² I owe the French translation to Mr T. Grandemange, sent in 2003. My own translation is not so fine.

³³ See the folder attached to the disc: "Venice, splendour of the world. Music for Popes and Doges from the 15th-century Italy", performed by The Dufay Consort, Dervogilla Ltd, Oxford 1995. The author of the translation into English is not mentioned. I am particularly grateful to M. Bent for lending me this disc and other great pieces of medieval music during my stay as Visiting Fellow at All Souls College in Oxford in autumn 2001.

On Papal musical patronage see: M. BENT, *Early Papal Motets*, in: *Papal Music and Musicians in Late Medieval and Renaissance Rome*, ed. R. Sherr, Oxford 1988, pp. 5-42.

I hope that one day Italian scholars and historians of medieval musical manuscripts will discover Cleopa's date of birth.