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SOPHIA OF MONTFERRAT
OR THE HISTORY OF ONE FACE

Faced with the epoch of late Byzantium, the historian cannot complain about the lack of data concerning the Emperors. By way of contrast, there seems to be no material on the ladies who accompanied the Palaiologoi. Apart from a few exceptions, the lives of women were eclipsed by the politics which always acted as a matchmaker for their marriages. An eligible candidate that was chosen on the marriage market was supposed to bring in particular diplomatic assets. Such was the case of Sophia of Montferrat who played the role of political hostage in the negotiations between Byzantium and the Papacy.

In the first half of the 15th century Byzantium found itself at the mercy of fate or rather the Turks. But for Timur's invasion on Asia Minor and his victory over the Turks at Ankara in 1402, Byzantium would have fallen. After a brief political respite for the Empire, the Turkish revival became a fact. In the reign of Sultan Mehmed I (1413–1421) the relations with the Byzantine neighbour were quite correct. Mehmed succeeded to the throne due to the support offered by Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, who sided with him in the conflict with other pretenders to the rule. He did not attack. Manuel II profited by the time of agreement and he took care of the Byzantine possessions in the Peloponnese, where they bordered on the Latin ones. The Latins had settled down there as a result of the Fourth Crusade in 1204; their presence had nearly been accepted. Byzantium had relied on trade links with Venice and Genoa for quite some time then. Serenissima gained conspicuous advantage due to the Fourth Crusade whereas Genoa obtained great privileges after the restoration of Byzantine rule in Constantinople in 1261. Located on the bank of Golden Horn, Pera, a distinguished Latin district of Constantinople had in fact a status of a separate political organism.

Byzantium would have liked to get rid of an unwanted cohabitor. Still, financially and economically weak as it was, the Empire depended on

the Latins. The dependence increased when Byzantium had to seek the military ally against the Turks in the Latin camp. Caught between the Latin Scylla and Ottoman Charibdis, the Empire found itself in the precarious political position. When the Turkish aggression became more than apparent, the Byzantine diplomacy sought the Western support and turned to the Pope, whose authority might have been a factor in gaining help of the Christendom. The Emperor promised a Church Union in return. Rome was ready to welcome the attractive proposal even though its sincerity was doubtful. The reservations proved to be well based because the proposal of union functioned as a political argument in a game for political survival and did not express the Byzantines' real need for the union with Rome. All the endeavours became less and less marked as the Turkish grip on the Byzantine future weakened. Such was the case this time. After Mehmed I had succeeded to the throne, Byzantium had a moment's rest before the next confrontation. At that time the Papacy was trying hard to regain its political authority. In 1414 the Council gathered in Constance and put an end to the Western Schism by electing Martin V the Pope in 1417. A Byzantine delegation put an appearance at this Council. Its presence in Constance is not easy to understand. Relations between the Turks and Byzantines were correct, Manuel II strengthened fortifications in the Peloponnese. Why did he attempt to seek papal support? Did he anticipate another conflict with the Turks?

Manuel was 65 years old at that time¹. He was famous as a diplomat and respected as an intellectual. He saw his eldest son John VIII as an heir to his legacy. John was born in 1392. His political education started very early. Some historians are prepared to assume that he gained the status of co-Emperor as early as in 1407 or even in 1403². This is a significant correction of the story offered by the chroniclers of those times, who claimed that John had been promoted to this dignity as a result of his marriage to Sophia of Montferrat in 1421. At that time Byzantium profited by the financial support of Moscow which had been persuaded to act as the saviour of the Second Rome³. The first marriage of John to

¹ On Manuel II see: J. W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologus (1391–1425). A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship*, New Brunswick N. J. 1968.

² After the death of Theodore I Palaiologos, Despot at Mistra (1407), Manuel II went to Peloponnese, leaving in Constantinople John VIII as his representative. It seems that John was already a co-Emperor.

³ Cf. D. Obolensky, *Some Notes Concerning a Byzantine Portrait of John VIII Palaiologos*, „*Eastern Churches Review*” 1972, t. 4, p. 142. The view clashes with that of J. Gill, *Personalities of the Council of Florence*, Oxford 1964, p. 106, who follows F. Dölger, *Die Krönung Johannis VIII. zum Mitkaiser*, „*Byzantinische Zeitschrift*” 1936, Bd. 36, p. 318–319. According to them, a coronation took place in 1421.

Anna, daughter of Moscovian Prince Basil I was the expression of these links. Some time later (the marriage was concluded in 1414) the young wife reached Constantinople and died there as a result of pestilence in 1417. Being aware of the political role of his son's marriage, Manuel began to consider another match for the young widower. Political advantages were supposed to follow from that. Also, an heir to the throne was expected. Manuel had other sons too, but only John's descendant was entitled to the legacy.

In the meantime Manuel hoped for the end of the conflict between Venice and Hungary. As he wanted to distract the attention of Venice from Hungary and gain Serenissima's support, the Emperor sent an embassy to Constance to mediate in the Hungarian-Venetian conflict. He also came up with the proposal of Church Union even though the political situation did not warrant it. Hence the Emperor's initiative meets with surprise; there is no adequate interpretation of such a move in literature of the subject. As a result of the Byzantine mission to Constance, the Pope agreed to accept marriages of Manuel's sons to Catholic ladies⁴. Was it Manuel himself who turned to the Pope with such a request? Or, was it Martin V who, on his succession to the papal throne in 1417, came up with the conciliatory initiative himself in order to make the Union possible? The Pope recommended two ladies: Cleope Malatesta and Sophia of Montferrat. The names were not prominent on the Italian political stage but they were not insignificant either. The papal protection promoted them. Putting aside Cleope's case, I would like to focus on Sophia. It was by no means the first appearance of Montferrat family on the political stage. The Marquisate of Montferrat was located in the area around the upper river Po, at the foothills of the Alps, in north-western Italy. Situated on the way from Germany to Italy, it had often been in the centre of attention of Roman-German Emperors. They wanted to secure Montferrat's support in case of a conflict with the papacy.

The links between Montferrat and Byzantium date back to the reign of Manuel I Komnenos, i.e. the second half of the 12th century. However, they did not result from the constraints of the political cohabitation which fell to the lot of the Byzantines after the Fourth Crusade. In 1176 Manuel Komnenos was defeated by the Turks at Myriokephalon. Soon afterwards he found himself threatened by the alliance of the Turks and Roman-German Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. It was then that Manuel made an appeal to Montferrat, hoping the Marquisate would attract the attention of

⁴ O. Raynaldus, *Annales Ecclesiastici*, XVIII, Roma 1659, ad anno 1418, no 17. The Pope addressed six imperial sons.

Barbarossa to northern Italy. In return, Renier Montferrat married Manuel's daughter Maria⁵. Father-in-law promised him Thessalonica as a kind of western feud. The promise gave rise to the claims voiced by Boniface, Renier's brother, one of the leaders of the Fourth Crusade⁶. When the participants of the crusade started to divide the Byzantine territories they had conquered in 1204, Boniface claimed Thessalonica. He became its King as a result. The Kingdom had been governed by him and his son Demetrios till 1224, i.e. till the moment when the ruler of Epiros put an end to this ephemeral state⁷.

At the same time, William, Boniface's son from the first marriage held sway over Montferrat. It was this family branch that gave birth to Yolanda who was married to Andronikos II Palaiologos in 1284. Arranging this marriage Andronikos had an occasion to raise the question of Montferrat's hereditary claims to Thessalonica. In fact Yolanda brought the city in her dowry. In return, the Emperor gave a large sum of money to her father⁸. After Yolanda's brother had died heirless, Montferrat was given to Theodore, her son by Andronikos II. Theodore created the new family branch called Palaiologos-Montferrat⁹. He married Argentina Spino-la, who represented one of the most powerful Genoese homes. The Palaiologos-Montferrat embraced Catholicism and yielded to Latinisation¹⁰. They held sway over the Marquisate till 1533 and their names testified to the Byzantine connections of the family. The tradition is reflected in typically Greek names like Theodore and Sophia. The links between Montferrat and Genoa were particularly strong, which was echoed in the fact that Theodore II Montferrat became the Genoese ruler in 1409. He only managed to keep his position till 1413. After a brief period of independence Genoa was captured by Philip of Visconti who ruled there till 1435¹¹.

⁵ Ch. Brand, *Byzantium Confronts the West 1180-1204*, Cambridge Mass. 1968, p. 19.

⁶ Apart from Renier and Boniface, William and Conrad Montferrat also made a political career in the East, reaching for the crown of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Cf. S. Runciman, *History of the Crusades*, London 1965, t. 2, p. 411; t. 3, p. 64. The same author remarks that the sources do not mention the fact that Thessalonica was given Byzantium to Montferrat family. Cf. idem, *Thessalonica and the Montferrat Inheritance*, „Gregorios o Palamas”, 1959, t. 42, p. 28.

⁷ D. M. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros*, Oxford 1957, p. 63.

⁸ D. M. Nicol, *The Byzantine Lady. Ten Portraits 1250-1500*, Cambridge 1994, p. 49. I am indebted to D. M. Nicol, who kindly let me use the typescript of his book.

⁹ A. Laiou, *Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II 1282-1328*, Cambridge Mass. 1972, p. 48.

¹⁰ A. Laiou, *A Byzantine Prince Latinized: Theodore Paleologus, Marquis of Montferrat*, „Byzantion” 1968, t. 38, p. 368-410.

¹¹ T. O. De Negri, *Storia di Genova*, Milano 1968, p. 544.

Sophia of Montferrat was Theodore II's daughter and she belonged to the Palaiologos-Montferrat branch¹². Sophia's marriage to John VIII was the result of papal policy after the end of the Western Schism in 1417. The historians who deal with that matter i.e. S. Runciman and I. Djurić say that Sophia and Cleope, the wife of Theodore II Palaiologos, were chosen on the Pope's explicit suggestion¹³. What could be the wider political background for these endeavours? What factors guided Byzantium in its choice, and what did Marquisate of Montferrat hope for? The exact date of Sophia's birth is not known. However, genealogical testimony indirectly suggests that she was born in 1394. The same data let us infer that she was engaged to Philip of Visconti from Milan in 1405 but the marriage was not arranged¹⁴. In 1420 she was chosen as John VIII's wife. She was 26 years old, and her future husband was nearly her age. A mature bride was a rarity in Byzantine customs – women got married much earlier¹⁵. However, in the West marriage at this age was by no means extraordinary. The fact that the Empress's age was ignored by the Byzantines raises the question of political advantages connected with this match.

Tempted by the proposal of the Union, Pope Martin V wrote to Manuel's sons in 1418, encouraging them to marry Latin ladies on condition that their Catholic Creed would be respected¹⁶. What made the Pope choose Sophia of Montferrat? After all, Montferrat was the leader of Ghibelline party, i.e. the Roman-German Emperor's allies, traditionally opposed to the Guelfs, the papal partisans. Was it the Pope's goal to secure the Italian Ghibellines' support, when he asked for Sophia as an eligible candidate? Avignon crisis and the Western Schism undermined the Pope's authority. As a result, the Ghibellines gained the conspicuous advantage. The fact that the Marquisate found itself in the Pope's camp suggests that it had changed its political allegiance. This in turn may have resulted from the crisis of western imperial power which could no longer offer reliable support. Papal choice of Sophia raised the prestige of Montferrat in the eyes of the Byzantines. Even though Byzantium was in a very precarious political situation, the *éclat* of imperial title was not diminished. The

¹² Theodore of Montferrat, son of Yolanda and Andronikos II, and at the same time grandfather of Theodore II, took over the Marquisate in 1305.

¹³ S. Runciman, *The Mariages of the Sons of the Emperor Manuel II*, „Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi”, *Miscellanea Agostino Pertusi* (Bologna) 1980, t. 1, p. 276–277. I. Djurić, *Sumrak Vizantije. Vreme Jovana VIII Paleologa 1392–1448*, Beograd 1984, p. 215.

¹⁴ M. D. Sturdza, *Grandes familles de Grèce, d'Albanie et de Constantinople. Dictionnaire historique et généalogique*, Paris 1983, p. 540.

¹⁵ Women were regarded as nubile starting from the age of twelve. Cf. E. Patlagean, *L'enfant et son avenir dans la famille byzantine (IV^e–XII^e siècles)*, „Annales de la démographie historique” 1973, „Enfant et sociétés” (Paris-La Haye) 1973, p. 86.

¹⁶ Raynaldus, *op. cit.*, ad anno 1418, no 17.

promotion to a high dignity satisfied Montferrat's expectations anew, and secured an ally for the Pope. It is rather difficult to fully accept Runciman's claim that Emperor Manuel wanted to secure Genoa's support due to the marriage of his son John with Sophia¹⁷. The Republic was politically divided. The fact that Theodore, Sophia's father, was deprived of his rule there in 1413 proves that he had had quite a few opponents in Genoa. It cannot be ruled out that the Pope wanted to gain the favours of Montferrat against the Visconti whose expansion threatened the Church state. It should be stressed that there had been links between Montferrat and the Visconti from Milan due to the planned marriage of Sophia with Philip Maria Visconti. However, the links were quickly severed. In 1412 Philip married the widow of the condotier Facino Cane, who had ruled over the territory adjacent to the Genoese possessions. Such advantages naturally prompted him to pursue his policy of expansion at the cost of Genoa, among others. By breaking up the engagement, the Visconti found themselves in the opposition against Montferrat, which in turn slid into the role of the Pope's ally¹⁸. It is difficult to state what were the political options of the Genoese who inhabited Pera in Constantinople or Crimean Caffa. However, it can be assumed that at least a substantial group looked at Sophia's marriage favourably.

The political background lets me suppose that the West could derive greater advantages from the marriage than Byzantium. What was in it for Manuel who looked for the wife for his son? In 1420 the Pope urged the European rulers to join the crusade against the Turks, specifically he made an appeal to the King of Hungary, Sigismund of Luxemburg. The appeal let the Byzantines hope that Hungary would give up its argument with Venice and that both powers would fight against Islam. Still, at that time Mehmed I was loyal to Byzantium, so no threat seemed to loom on horizon. What counted in the matrimonial policy was the bride's position and connections, and that might have been instrumental in Manuel's decision¹⁹. Sophia represented the connections between Montferrat and some powerful families of Genoa, moreover, she was supported by the Pope, whose status Manuel could not ignore²⁰.

¹⁷ Runciman, *The Marriages...*, p. 277.

¹⁸ I did not manage to get hold of all the editions that present detailed history of Genoa, Milan and Montferrat in this particular period of time. I do not think that I would revise my views on reading the materials that are unavailable at the moment. However, I reserve the right to reexamine certain questions anew if the need arises.

¹⁹ Cf. R. Macrides, *Dynastic Marriages and Political Kinship*, [in:] *Byzantine Diplomacy*, ed. J. Shepard, S. Franklin, London 1992, p. 264–280.

²⁰ Papal support for the rescue of the Peloponnese was at stake in the first place. John's marriage seemed to be kept in the background. Cf. R. Loenertz, *Les dominicains byzantins Théodore et André Chrysobergès et les négociations pour l'union des Eglises grecque et latine de 1415 à 1430*, „Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum” 1939, t. 9, p. 31.

Marriage negotiations were probably conducted by Sophia's younger brother, John James, who inherited Montferrat after his father's death in 1418. Sophia's mother was dead at that time. Michael Eudajmonojoannes negotiated on behalf of Byzantium. The meaning of his name is -nomen omen – Lucky John. However, his participation in the delicate mission did not bring anybody good luck. The phrasing of marriage contract probably concluded in 1420 is not known. It can only be assumed that the treaty ensured freedom of Creed for Sophia in accordance with the papal explicit wish. As for Cleope, she was entitled to the services of her chaplain and her Italian ladies-in-waiting²¹. The same must have gone for Sophia. Is there anything that throws light on the 26 years of Sophia's life before she actually faced her marriage? Is it possible that she spent some time at the court in Milan as Visconti's fiancée?²² The engagement might have been arranged „per procura” and broken so early that Sophia never reached Milan. The court of Montferrat did not reject the new cultural ideas which had been in circulation in Italy for some time. The new trend was reflected in education of ladies, too. Nothing can really be said about Sophia's education. It can only be suggested that Sophia was familiar with the code of manners. It was reconstructed for Florentine ladies by D. Herlihy and Ch. Klapisch-Zuber for the years 1422–1429, which overlapped with Sophia's own lifetime. Young Italian ladies were supposed to read or listen to texts by ancient authors and manuals of *savoir-vivre*. Some of them learnt Greek, too²³. Such education could prove quite useful for Sophia, not only because of snobbery, but first of all because she was to marry a Byzantine. The court of Montferrat might have fostered a Byzantine tradition connected with Sophia's great-grandfather, Theodore I of Montferrat, Andronikos II's son. Still, it was a Latin milieu, and it is difficult to say whether Greek was actually taught there. However, such a possibility cannot be ruled out. After all, Sophia descended from the Latinized Greeks. The model of woman held up for imitation in the code involved modesty, self-effacement and moderation²⁴. Sophia's Byzantine experience was to confirm this life-style. However, the ideal of *savoir-vivre* manuals was far from everyday behaviour of Italian women. In fact, they wanted to step forward and take

²¹ D. A. Zakythinos, *Le Despotat grec de Morée (1262–1460)*, t. 1: *Histoire politique*, Paris 1932, p. 189.

²² Cf. H. Brèse, *L'Europe des villes et des campagnes XIII^e–XV^e siècles*, [in:] *Histoire de la famille*, ed. A. Burgière, Ch. Klapisch-Zuber, M. Segden, F. Sonabend, t. 1: *Mondes lointains, mondes anciens*, Paris 1986, p. 414: „Les documents attestent que, dans le cas des fiançailles d'enfants, la fillette est en effet conduite dans la maison de ses beaux-parents „afin de l'apprendre et de l'endoctriner”.

²³ D. Herlihy, Ch. Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles, Une étude du catasto florentin de 1427*, Paris 1978, p. 566.

²⁴ R. Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, Illinois 1956, p. 44.

an active part in social life. Commenting on Cleope, Plethon, a Byzantine intellectual, praises her for abandoning Italian liberties and adjusting to the severity of Greek customs²⁵.

It is not known what Sophia obtained from the Emperor as a wedding gift. Bearing in mind the convention of the epoch, it can be assumed that the gift consisted of dresses, coats, ornaments; the above items were also a standard element of the bride's trousseau²⁶. Sophia was destined to face the legend epitomized by Byzantium with the glamour of the imperial title. She followed in the footsteps of her ancestors, i.e. Boniface of Montferrat, the hero of the Fourth Crusade and Yolanda of Montferrat, Andronikos II's wife. This is how Sophia fulfilled the dynastic ambitions of her family. Sophia's father Theodore II was fascinated by the East, which may have sprung from the tradition preserved in troubadour songs. They glorified famous deeds of Boniface of Montferrat in Byzantium²⁷. He might have been influenced not only by the songs but also by the legend about the beautiful Giordana. Its traces survived in the local chronicle and they are worth mentioning. Giordana was to have married Alexios, Manuel I Komnenos' son. The information is completely fictitious; it only proves that Montferrat's attention was still directed towards Byzantium even in the 14th–15th centuries. The legend spread a powerful conviction that the lady of Montferrat family had been a Byzantine Empress as early as in the time of the Komnenoi²⁸.

Sophia and Cleope were brought to Byzantium on board a Venetian ship. Sophia reached Constantinople in autumn 1420²⁹. The project of her marriage to John VIII was criticized by the bishop of Thessalonica, who was afraid of Latinization³⁰. He probably was not alone in his critical

²⁵ Plethon, *Monody*, [in:] *Palaiologeia kai Peloponesiaka*, ed. S. Lambros, t. 4, Athens 1930, p. 167, v. 3–6. The Savoyard chronicler points out that the Byzantine life was far from severity that was held up as a model. Cf. *Chronique de Savoye*, ed. G. Paradin, Lyon 1852, p. 245–246.

²⁶ D. Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia. The Social History of an Italian Town 1200–1430*, Yale University, New Haven 1967, p. 265.

²⁷ A. Barbero, *La corte dei Marchesi di Monferrato allo specchio della poesia trobadorica. Ambizioni signorili e ideologia cavalleresca fra XII e XIII secolo*, „Bolletino Storico-Bibliografico Subalpino” 1983, t. 81, p. 663.

²⁸ W. Haberstumpf, *Continuità di rapporti fra Bisanzio et la corte dei Paleologi di Monferrato nei secoli XIV–XVI: realtà e leggende*, „Studi Piemontesi” (marzo) 1986, t. 15, fasc. 1, p. 77–80. Giordana was to have been Renier of Montferrat's sister.

²⁹ Only Sphrantzes gives us an exact date i.e. November 1420. G. Phrantzes, *Annales*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonnae 1838, p. 110, v. 22.

³⁰ Runciman, *The Marriages...*, p. 278. Thessalonica had evolved a long tradition of Latin rule, to mention only Boniface of Montferrat, Yolanda of Montferrat, Andronikos II's wife, Anne of Savoy, Andronikos III's wife. For Greeks there was no formal obstacle that could prevent the ruler from marrying a Latin lady. No Council termed the Latins heretics

attitude; still it was decided that the marriage had to be concluded, and the wedding as well as coronation ceremonies were held on 19 January 1421³¹. Sophia did not change her name which came from the Greek calendar. Besides, the freedom of Creed had been guaranteed for her. John VIII, who had been crowned earlier, now crowned his wife himself³². The coronation ceremony as such had been recorded by Pseudo-Kodinos. Accompanied by his court, the Emperor went out to welcome Sophia. The ladies-in-waiting dressed her in ceremonial robes and put the purple shoes on her feet, as a sign of the highest dignity. In Hagia Sophia the Emperor crowned his Empress himself³³. According to the etiquette, the bride's relatives were supposed to be present at the ceremony but Sophia was an orphan. Even if her parents had been alive, it is doubtful whether they or their relatives would have come. Therefore during the ceremony she was surrounded by the eunuchs. Coronation and marriage ushered Sophia into the sacred dimension of Byzantium. From that moment onwards she was to enjoy the imperial dignity. After the ceremony the Empress customarily received Communion³⁴. It is not known whether Sophia was given Communion in accordance with the Roman ritual. When the ceremony was over, she had to appear in front of the people, as was the custom. According to Pseudo-Kodinos, feasts and festivals lasted a few days longer³⁵. Sphrantzes confirms the fact, mentioning the celebrations which involved a great number of participants³⁶.

In spite of the dramatic financial situation of the Byzantine state, coronation ritual was still sumptuous. Sophia must have been impressed. But she may have been disappointed by the city. The descriptions of contemporary travellers prove that it was sparsely populated, and inhabitants were rather sad and poor³⁷. Filelfo, a young Italian humanist who visited Constantinople, remarks that streets are badly lit; he also mentions women's

— who they were in fact in the light of Byzantine religion, though the epithet was never officially applied to them. Cf. D. M. Nicol, *Mixed Marriages in Byzantium in the Thirteenth Century*, „Studies in Church History” (London) 1964, t. 1 reprinted in: *Byzantium: Its Ecclesiastical History and Relations with the Western World*, chap. 4, London 1972, p. 171–172.

³¹ Phrantzes, *op. cit.*, p. 111, v. 1–2.

³² S. Runciman, *Some Notes on the Role of Empress*, [in:] *Medieval Woman*, ed. D. Baker, Dedicated and Presented to Professor Rosalind M. T. Hill on the Occasion of Her Seventieth Birthday, Oxford 1978, p. 119.

³³ Pseudo-Kodinos, *Traité des offices*, ed. J. Verpeaux, Paris 1966, p. 261, v. 3–21.

³⁴ Ch. Diehl, *Etudes byzantines*, Paris 1905, p. 228.

³⁵ Pseudo-Kodinos, *op. cit.*, p. 270, v. 13; p. 272, v. 10.

³⁶ Phrantzes, *op. cit.*, p. 111, v. 4–5.

³⁷ Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures 1435–1439*, ed. and trans. by M. Letts, New York–London 1926. After A. Vasiliev, *Pero Tafur, A Spanish Traveller of the Fifteenth Century and His Visit to Constantinople, Trebizond and Italy*, „Byzantion” 1932, t. 7, p. 113.

isolation – they were rarely seen in the streets, and if they showed up at all, they had to be veiled. Filelfo noticed the good points about it – isolated women certainly preserved the purity of Greek language³⁸. However, in the opinion of A. Laiou, the isolation did not have modesty as its purpose; it sprang from down-to-earth economic factors. Poverty eliminated the possibility of social life³⁹. A very observant traveller, Pero Tafur, notices that the imperial palace was in a deplorable state and only a part of its interior was fit for human habitation. The imperial family occupied a severely limited space which was the reason for John VIII's frequent complaints⁴⁰. Still, the traveller was greatly impressed by the library which seemed to be the only thing that resisted the flow of time. Tafur emphasizes the great liveliness of Pera, mostly inhabited by the Genoese. The buildings were nearly as elegant as in Genoa, which he notices with appreciation⁴¹. Sophia was going to face a world of such contrasts, but she remained completely alienated from it.

The reason for the social ostracism was most delicately put by Sphrantzes, who said that the Empress's face was not marked by beauty⁴². Chalkokondyles paid attention to Sophia's proper lifestyle but he did not hide the fact that her appearance was very unpleasant, not to say disgusting⁴³. The third chronicler, Doukas, goes even further in his sincerity when describing Sophia's appearance. He admits that the Empress was perfectly made; she had a shapely neck and yellowish hair which went down to her ankles in curls, sparkling like gold. Her back was well formed and so were her shoulders, breast and arms. Her palms attracted his attention because he even compared Sophia's fingers to crystal. However, her face was deformed in all its elements, for he enumerates: eyes, eyebrows, nose and lips⁴⁴. The Empress's figure was dismissed by a brief comment: „From the back she looked like Easter, from the front like Lent”⁴⁵. Further descriptions of

³⁸ J. Gill, *Matrons and Brides of Fourteenth Century Byzantium*, „Byzantinische Forschungen” 1985, Bd. 10, p. 39; S. Runciman, *Women in Byzantine Aristocratic Society*, [in:] *The Byzantine Aristocracy IX–XIII Centuries*, ed. M. Angold, Oxford 1984, p. 17. Filelfo's observation marks him out as a stranger to a Byzantine world which presupposed the natural separation of men from women illustrated by the existence of gynaikion.

³⁹ A. Laiou, *The Role of Women in Byzantine Society*, „Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik”, XVI Internationaler Byzantinistenkongress. Akten. Wien 1981 Bd. 1, H. 1, p. 260.

⁴⁰ Vasiliev, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

⁴² Sphrantzes, *op. cit.*, p. 122, v. 20–21.

⁴³ L. Chalcocondyles, *Historiarum libri decem*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonnae 1843, p. 205, v. 11–12.

⁴⁴ M. Ducas, *Historia Byzantina*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonnae 1834, p. 100, v. 9–16.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 100, v. 16–17. I do not know the reasons which brought about disfigurement in Sophia's face. It may have been congenital defect or the result of disease. We can only speculate.

Byzantine chroniclers are more or less precise accounts of the repulsion that never let John VIII know his wife. Doukas says that the Emperor did not love her, and Sphrantzes adds that there was no cordiality, love or peace between them⁴⁶. Sphrantzes also says that the Emperor loved other women⁴⁷. Chalkokondyles makes it obvious that John did not live with his wife⁴⁸. Doukas says openly that the Emperor did not share the bed with Sophia⁴⁹. She lived in loneliness because the Emperor was filled with disgust towards her⁵⁰.

This is how the private drama of two people is unfolded; their marriage was probably never consummated. Why did not John remove Sophia as the bride? After all, the ugliness of her face was conspicuous at the first meeting. He need not have crowned her as his Empress, which would have made the annulment of marriage possible⁵¹. Doukas adds that the thought of removing the Empress was on John's mind but he did not dare to do it because of his father Manuel II⁵². Was this personal disaster a necessary sacrifice on the political altar? Further circumstances were favourable to Sophia's stay at the court as she was a token of the papal support. In 1421 Mehmed I died and he was succeeded by young and militant Murad II. In 1422 he started to besiege Constantinople which he fortunately gave up in the autumn of the same year. This year marks John's correspondence with the Pope, in which the Emperor mentions the stay of papal nuncio in partibus Graeciae and comments on the conditions of the Union. The question of marriage to Sophia is discreetly overlooked⁵³. In the autumn of 1423 John went to Hungary to seek help. It was also an opportunity to avoid his unattractive wife⁵⁴. He came back a year later. In 1425 the old Emperor Manuel died. John finally gained full independence. Time came for the change, especially the change in his bedroom. Sophia of Montferrat left Constantinople in August 1426. Nothing can be said about

⁴⁶ Ducas, *op. cit.*, p. 100, v. 8; Phrantzes, *op. cit.*, p. 122, v. 17-19.

⁴⁷ Phrantzes, *op. cit.*, p. 122, v. 19-20.

⁴⁸ Chalcocondyles, *op. cit.*, p. 205, v. 12-13.

⁴⁹ Ducas, *op. cit.*, p. 100, v. 20.

⁵⁰ Chalcocondyles, *op. cit.*, p. 205, v. 16.

⁵¹ Runciman, *Some Notes...*, p. 120.

⁵² Ducas, *op. cit.*, p. 100, v. 21-22; p. 101, v. 1.

⁵³ Raynaldus, *op. cit.*, ad anno 1422, no 15.

⁵⁴ K. M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571)*, t. 2: *The Fifteenth Century*, Philadelphia 1978, p. 25. Sigismund of Luxemburg, King of Hungary, could offer no support because he was involved in the conflict with the Hussites in Bohemia. During his journey in 1424, John went to Venice and to Milan. This second visit is interesting for me. It concerned Philip-Maria Visconti, since 1421 Lord of Genoa and former fiancé of Sophia. I wonder whether they ever talked about her. In 1424 Venice gained Visconti as its ally against the Turks but for a short time. Cf. D. M. Nicol, *Byzantium and Venice. A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations*, Cambridge 1988, p. 364-367.

the five years of her stay in Byzantium. Silence of the sources finds explanation in the account by Doukas, who describes Sophia as a model on display. Rejected by the Emperor and his milieu, which seemed to sympathize with him, Sophia was destined to taste solitude. In contrast to Cleope's situation, we can find no trace of the attempt to convert Sophia to Orthodoxy. This probably did not spring from the respect for papal wish but rather from the circumstances. There was no room for Sophia in the world of the Greek aesthetic order, thus there was no point in winning her over to Orthodoxy. Did Sophia do anything for the Church Union because she had been sent by the Pope himself? There is no evidence for that. Her face could only discourage. Byzantine Empresses were famous for their beneficial actions for the nunneries. There is no trace of Sophia's activity of that sort, not even in Catholic Pera. The Orthodox nunneries would not have accepted the donations anyway. It is difficult to say who accompanied her apart from eunuchs. She might have kept some Italian ladies-in-waiting but she also had to accept the company of Byzantine statesmen's wives. The lady who took care of imperial wardrobe was closest to the Empress, as she had the right to dine with her⁵⁵. But could this Byzantine possibly share the humiliation of the rejected Empress? It seems that Sophia was able to resort to Pera, which was not only a trade centre but also an intellectual one, because of the Dominican activity. Sophia's confessor was Friar William from Pera, supposedly her spiritual guide⁵⁶. After all, the arrangement was customary for Empresses. However, everything seems to confirm the assumption that in spite of her Byzantine-Latin connections she was a stranger in that world, deprived of company, separated from others by her ugliness. It is impossible to accept the traditional view voiced by M. Viller who claimed that it was the difference of Creeds that had brought about the conflict between Sophia and John⁵⁷. The reason was different. It can be said that Doukas was the mediator between Pera and Byzantine court, because he was the secretary to John Adorno, Genoese podesta of Pera since 1421⁵⁸. Doukas might have played a role in Sophia's contacts with the fellow-countrymen from Pera. Therefore

⁵⁵ Runciman, *Some Notes...*, p. 121.

⁵⁶ M. Balard, *La Romanie génoise XII – début XV siècle*, Rome 1978, p. 322–323. M. Viller, *La question de l'union des Eglises entre Grecs et Latins depuis le Concile de Lyon jusqu'à celui de Florence*, „Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique” 1922, t. 18, p. 44.

⁵⁷ M. Viller, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁸ According to M. Balard there occurred a substantial emigration from Montferrat to the East. It is difficult to say whether Sophia's milieu included any member of this group. The essential thing however is that she went to the country her fellow-countrymen had visited before. Cf. M. Balard, *L'emigrazione monferrino-piemontese in Oriente (secc. XII–XIV)*, [in:] *Dai Feudi Monferrini e dal Piemonte ai nuovi mondi oltre gli oceani*, ed. L. Balletto, Alessandria 1993, 249–261.

it is not surprising that he offered the most detailed description of the Empress, as well as an account of her departure in 1426. The Genoese from Pera helped her to leave Byzantium.

Sophia's departure could not be thought of as an escape. Estranged from her husband, she must have reckoned with the possibility of return. Her voyage to Italy could have taken place earlier. Still, she did not want to leave Byzantium of her own accord, in spite of humiliations she had experienced. It can be suggested that John was the real author of the idea of departure. Besides, Sophia may have been afraid of seclusion in Constantinople and she preferred then to face it in Italy. Manuel, her protector, was dead. The Genoese from Pera prepared a farewell celebration for her. Her forehead uplifted, she did not manifest her humiliation to the public⁵⁹. On the basis of Sophia's words noted by Doukas it can be inferred that the Emperor presented his ex-Empress with a substantial sum of money by way of redress. Supposedly she said that the most important thing she was taking away was the glamour of the imperial diadem she had worn during the coronation ceremony⁶⁰. It was only Doukas, as the well informed person, who described the scene of departure, otherwise ignored. The account is essential for two reasons. It proves that the Byzantine crown had kept its importance under western eyes, even though the Empire was in decline. Also, it points to the marriage contract which involved the financial commitments undertaken by husband.

The Genoese annals recorded Sophia's arrival in Genoa on board the ship that belonged to the Spinola family. The account suggests that the ex-Empress was given a warm and dignified welcome. Riders escorted her ceremonially to the house of Spinola which had been connected with her own family throughout the centuries⁶¹. Sophia enjoyed their hospitality for four days and then she went away to meet her brother John James. The Genoese chronicler stated that Sophia had been repudiated by her husband who was schismatic and the adherent to the Greek Creed⁶². Such was then the official version spread on the Latin side. The source never mentions Sophia's defects but it blames the dissolution of marriage on John implying that as a schismatic he could not be reliable anyway. Difference of Creeds was emphasized; the fact that Sophia did not meet her husband's aesthetic needs was completely ignored. However, it is difficult to make an assumption that the aesthetic views presented by Byzantium and the West respectively differed so greatly. Sophia was destined to spend the rest of her life in

⁵⁹ Ducas, *op. cit.*, p. 101, v. 7-11.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 102, v. 1-3.

⁶¹ G., J. Stella, *Annales Genuenses*, ed. G. Petti Balbi, [in:] *Rerum Italicarum Scriptorum*, t. 17, fasc. 2, Bologna 1975, p. 302.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

the nunnery though it is not known whether she joined it immediately after her return to Italy⁶³. At that time the nunnery functioned as a refuge for quite a few ladies who were not happy in their marriages⁶⁴. Sophia died in Trino near Casale in 1437, when she was nearly 43 years old⁶⁵. Till the very end of her life ugliness had been her greatest burden. It can be assumed that it was the lack of beauty and not political circumstances that proved decisive in the break-up of her engagement with Philip Visconti. Contemptible to men, unfulfilled in her marriage to John VIII, she left the political stage where she could no longer play any role.

In 1427, a year after her departure, John VIII finally met the woman of his life. He married beautiful Maria Komnena, daughter of Alexios IV, Emperor of Trebizond⁶⁶. The Patriarch gave his blessing to the marriage even though in the light of Byzantine canonical law the third match was badly seen. The Patriarch's attitude proves that the matrimonial custom of imperial court had changed by that time⁶⁷. John VIII was made happy by the company of his wife, whose beauty was generally praised⁶⁸. Still, he seems to have been rather unfortunate in his relations with women. Pero Tafur spread a suggestive gossip implying that Maria showed more than sisterly affection to her brother Alexander who came to Constantinople from Trebizond⁶⁹. Whatever was the case, Maria was the lady of Imperial heart and after her death in 1439, the Emperor mourned her deeply. He never married again, even though he was only 47. He did not leave an heir, and it was his brother Constantine who took over the crown, as the last of the Emperors.

During the negotiations over the Church Union at the Council in Ferrara and Florence in 1438–1439, the Emperor may have met the relatives of Sophia – her family connections reached far. Did he ever think about her drama? Did her ugly face prevent him from having at least one pleasant memory? Did Sophia ever enter his thoughts when he heard about beautiful Ricciarda of Montferrat, married to Marquis d'Este, the owner of Ferrara? Ricciarda was so young and glamorous that she won the heart of her stepson, which caused the father to stand up against

⁶³ Ducas, *op. cit.*, v. 7–9, p. 102.

⁶⁴ A. M. Talbot, *Late Byzantine Nuns: By Choice or Necessity?*, „Byzantinische Forschngen” 1985, Bd. 9, p. 109.

⁶⁵ Sturdza, *op. cit.*, p. 540. Additional evidence might be necessary because there are some mistakes in the genealogical tables, for example – the wrong date of Sophia's marriage to John VIII.

⁶⁶ Ducas, *op. cit.*, p. 102, v. 9–12. Cf. *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit*, ed. E. Trapp, fasc. 9, Wien 1989, p. 75 (21 397).

⁶⁷ R. Guiland, *Les nocces plurales à Byzance*, [in:] *Etudes byzantines*, Paris 1959, p. 261.

⁶⁸ B. de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer*, ed. C. H. A. Shefer, Paris 1892, p. 156–157.

⁶⁹ Vasiliev, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

the son⁷⁰. Yet, the associations could only lead to the conclusion that Sophia's looks could not be an object of rivalry.

Was there any political advantage that could possibly atone for Sophia and John's marital drama which lasted five years? If Sophia's stay in Constantinople was meant as an argument for the Church Union, there is no evidence suggesting that such was a case. Pope Martin V set his heart on the union. He was ready to offer financial advantages to make it real. However, when in 1426 the Turkish danger became less tangible, Byzantium preferred to postpone the matter⁷¹. Martin V was destined to put an end to the Western Schism and reunite Latin Christendom. Therefore it can be stated that his dream was to finish the Eastern Schism, thereby fulfilling the biblical ideal of unity. Sophia's presence in Byzantium did not seem to be instrumental in supporting anti-Turkish activities either. Those who caused John to marry Sophia, i.e. the Pope himself and probably a group of Genoese soon realised that it was bound to be a disaster. There was no political bargain in for John so he need not have made such a sacrifice. Sophia did not distinguish herself in any sense even though she did not lack ambition. The scene of her departure seems to be a sufficient proof.

This marriage was a total failure for Byzantium. It did not bring political advantages, not to mention an heir to the throne. It was an unfortunate union of two people whose lives had been dominated by *raison d'état*. Apart from Sophia's ugliness, there is no trace of this marriage. This leaves room for historians' speculations. Sophia's character may have been full of advantages but nobody took trouble to discover that. The absence of visible beauty meant unkind soul for John himself. The defects in the Empress's looks could not be hidden in the East. Her duties involved participation in official celebration at her husband's side. For the Byzantines, the Imperial couple embodied the state. Thus the lack of beauty was not only the Empress's private disaster. Marriage with Sophia was a great mistake on the part of the Byzantine diplomacy; its leaders seemed to have forgotten about the old-time tradition of the bride-show when the Emperor chose the most beautiful lady – his wife to be. Did the pressure of Papacy mean so much that it was decided to put the young Emperor to an ethical and aesthetic test?

⁷⁰ Chalcocondyles, *op. cit.*, p. 288, v. 9; p. 290, v. 22. Cf. Sturdza, *op. cit.*, p. 541.

⁷¹ The Pope was preoccupied with the idea of the Union Council to the extent of suggesting year 1422 as the appropriate time. His plan was disrupted by the Turkish siege of Constantinople. Thus, there exists ample evidence that points to the Pope as originator of mixed marriages, his Union project being another argument. Cf. Loenertz, *op. cit.*, p. 51, 58. In 1424 when Sigismund of Luxemburg was prepared to start hostilities against the Turks, the Genoese, led by Prince of Milan, expressed their disapproval. No wonder then, that Sophia's involvement in politics during her stay in Constantinople proved useless. Clearly, she spoke on behalf of the least influential political faction. The association actually occurred to me in the course of discussion on the battle of Varna in History Department of the University of Poznań in November 1994.

The cognition of beauty gives love – such was the conviction voiced by the Byzantine intellectual Nicolas Kabasilas. He pointed out that it was difficult to love good not seeing its beauty⁷². John VIII was the follower of this view, for he never tried to seek good behind the ugly façade of his wife. The obstacle did not lie so much in the absence of good will, as in the mere physical repulsion. The story of this marriage is a record of Sophia's personal failure, as she only played the role of the hostage in the political relations between Byzantium and the Pope. It is a story of absence of love, humiliation and loneliness. The political matches cover up individual human vicissitudes of frequently ill-assorted couples.

Sophia's story is indeed a story of one face which survived in the memory of history because of its ugliness. It is also a contribution to the debate on human cognition, based mostly on the sensory perception of physical characteristics. The innermost values remain hidden from view. The point can be illustrated by a poem of W. B. Yeats. Let it be a conclusion to Sophia's unfortunate story. „Yellow hair” evoked by the poet is a symbol of physicality, perceived through the senses. Says the man:

Never shall a young man,
Thrown into despair
By those great honey-coloured
Ramparts at your ear,
Love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair

The woman answers:

But I can get a hair-dye
And set such colour there,
Brown, or black, or carrot,
That young men in despair
May love me for myself alone
And not my yellow hair

The man's answer does not leave any doubts:

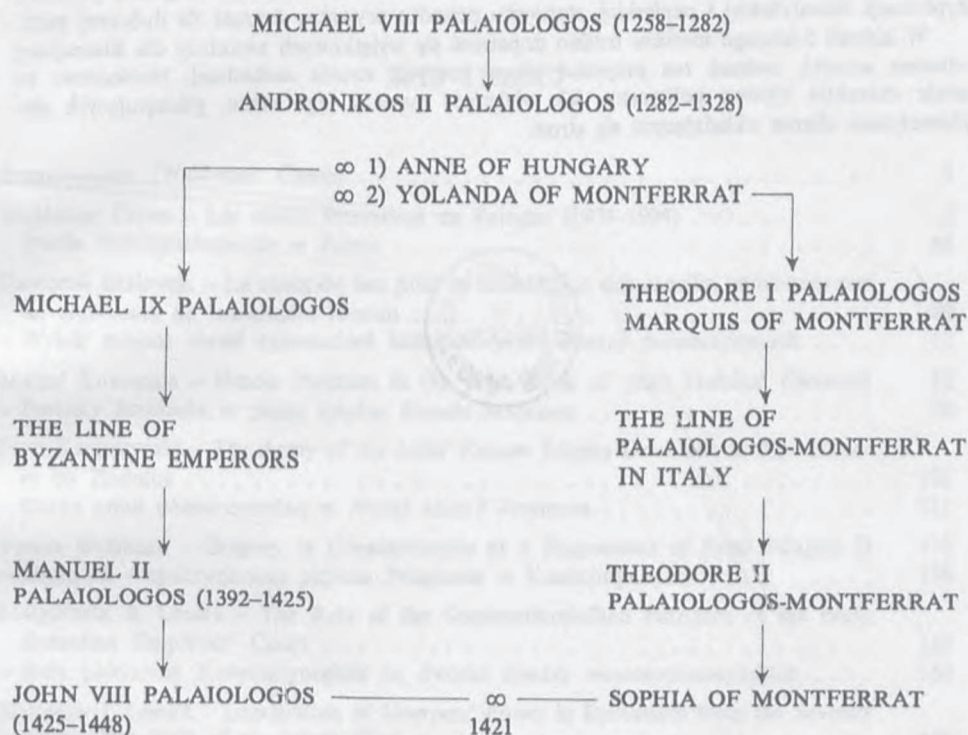
I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair⁷³

John VIII Palaiologos would have subscribed to this.

⁷² After V. V. Byčkov, *Vizantijskaja esitika v XIII–XV vv.*, [in:] *Kultura Vizantii XIII – piervaja polovina XV v.*, ed. G. G. Litavrin, Moskva 1991, p. 435.

⁷³ W. B. Yeats, *For Anne Gregory*, [in:] *Collected Poems*, London 1973, p. 277. I was inspired by the book by J. Bronovski, *Źródła wiedzy i wyobraźni* [The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination], trans. from English by S. Amsterdamski, Warszawa 1984, p. 17–18.

PALAIOLOGOS-MONTFERRAT CONNECTIONS



Małgorzata Dąbrowska

ZOFIA Z MONTFERRAT
ALBO HISTORIA JEDNEJ TWARZY

Zofia z Montferrat, żona przedostatniego cesarza Bizancjum Jana VIII Paleologa, nie doczekała się dotąd zainteresowania historyków. Ich uwagę zatrzymał tylko jej brzydki wygląd, o którym napisali dziejopisarze bizantyńscy. Autorka rekonstruuje losy Zofii z Montferrat, analizując środowisko dworskie, z którego się wywodziła i wskazuje na ambicje polityczne rodu Montferrat, związanego z Bizancjum już od XII w. M. Dąbrowska podkreśla rolę papieża Marcina V w kreowaniu małżeństwa Jana z Zofią, przyglądając się motywom zawarcia tego związku i korzyściom, jakie miały z niego wynikać.

Zofia z Montferrat została żoną Jana VIII i cesarzową bizantyńską w styczniu 1421 r., a opuściła Bizancjum w sierpniu 1426 r. Jej związek małżeński nie został przypuszczalnie zrealizowany. Analizując pobyt Zofii w Bizancjum, M. Dąbrowska podważa tradycyjny pogląd, że przyczyną odrzucenia Zofii przez Jana były różnice religijne między małżonkami (Zofia

była katoliczką, jej mąż wyznawał prawosławie). Analiza źródeł prowadzi autorkę do wniosku, że powodem niezrealizowania małżeństwa była niechęć fizyczna wywołana brzydkim wyglądem Włoszki. M. Dąbrowska zwraca uwagę, że małżeństwo Jana z Zofią było tragiczną pomyłką dyplomacji bizantyńskiej i papieskiej, stanowiło ponadto prywatny dramat źle dobranej pary.

W historii 5-letniego mariażu trudno dopatrzeć się wyjątkowych awantury dla Bizancjum; zdaniem autorki, związek ten przyniósł więcej korzyści stronie zachodniej. Małżeństwo to miało charakter typowo polityczny, jak większość mariaży tego czasu, pieczętujących dyplomatyczne alianse układających się stron.

