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A BYZANTINE LADY'S DAUGHTERS IN POLAND

A Byzantine lady, the wife of the Hungarian King, did not want her daughter to marry a Polish prince¹. Did she know anything about Poland? Did she have other plans for her children? We do not know. However, because of this piece of information, she entered Polish history. From the perspective of Polish genealogy, this seems to be an accidental connection between Poland and Byzantium. But the presence of the Byzantine lady at the Hungarian court was natural enough in those times. The presence of Maria Lascaris was the result of the following circumstances.

The throne of the Latin Empire in Constantinople, which had existed since the Fourth Crusade, became vacant in 1217². The King of Hungary, Andrew II, hoped to gain it. It was only the choice of Peter de Courtenay that frustrated his plans³. At that time the King was involved in the crusade not due to his affection for the Holy Land, but rather from the fact that he wanted the crown of Constantinople. His hopes were boosted by past events in Hungary. His father, Bela III had been engaged to the daughter of Manuel Komnenos and was supposed to become Byzantine Emperor. However, after some time a son was born to Manuel and Bela was excluded from succession⁴. Nevertheless, the situation boosted Hungarian aspirations. Even though Andrew II did not manage to gain the throne of Constantinople, he connected his family with the Byzantine dynasty. On his way back from the Holy Land he visited the Nicean Empire and took home a bride for his

¹ *Vita et miracula Sanctae Kyngae ducissae Cracoviensis*, ed. W. KĘTRZYŃSKI, MPH, vol. IV, Lwów 1884, p. 685.

² J. LONGNON, *L'Empire Latin de Constantinople et la principauté de Morée*, Paris 1949, pp. 157-160.

³ Z. J. KOSZTOLNYIK, *Hungary in the Thirteenth Century*, New York 1996, p. 60.

⁴ Cf. G. MORAVCSIK, *Pour une alliance byzantino-hongroise. Seconde moitié du XII^e siècle*, (in:) *Studia Byzantina*, Budapest 1967, pp. 305-313; F. MAKK, *Les relations hungaro-byzantines aux X-XII^e siècles*, (in:) *European Intellectual Trends and Hungary*, ed. F. GLOTZ, *Etudes Historiques Hongroises* 4 (1990), pp. 20-21.

son⁵. In this way, Maria, daughter of Theodore Lascaris, came to Buda in 1218⁶. From then on the Hungarian court was in charge of her upbringing. She was to marry Bela IV, the heir to the throne. The moment she left the Byzantine world, the door was closed and the connection with her motherland was severed. It is as difficult to define the attitude of Theodore Lascaris to this match, as it is to fathom what Andrew expected. The only thing Acropolites says is that Theodore Lascaris did not have a son but had married off three daughters successfully⁷. The eldest daughter's husband, John Vatatzes, was supposed to come to the Nicean throne⁸. We can only speculate that Andrew might have hoped for that throne, if Vatatzes' successors had not lived long enough. Could Bela IV have been interested in such an outcome? His own politics do not show that, even though he saw the object of his father's aspirations. In 1220 Robert de Courtenay, the future Latin Emperor of Constantinople, was staying in Buda; his aunt Yolanda de Courtenay was the Queen of Hungary at that time. Bela joined Robert in his trip to Constantinople and was present during the crowning ceremony in 1221. His presence seems to prove that he had no designs on the Constantinopolitan throne. He came along as a cousin.

It is noteworthy that the connection between Hungary and the Byzantine Emperor in exile displeased Andrew, so he tried to break the engagement⁹. On the other hand there is a note in the sources stating that after two years of marriage, Bela was separated from his Byzantine wife because of his "bad counsellors"¹⁰. The Pope requested that Bela should accept his wife again, which happened after some time¹¹. The marital consent provoked Andrew's anger which made the couple escape to Austria. Many barons took Bela's side and Andrew might have feared rebellion.

Thus Maria Lascaris lived in a situation that was far from a kindergarten idyll. Staying in Buda, she was involved in a purely Hungarian policy and we do not know whether she had any direct contact with Nicea and Constantinople then. (There may be Hungarian materials on the subject but I do not have access to them.) Maria's first child was born before Bela became independent sovereign in 1235. The Hungarian court was a mixture of bon-vivant style, typical for Andrew, and ascetic morality propagated by the Franciscan friars. Paradoxically, it was Andrew's daughter, Elisabeth of Thuringia who was canonised

⁵ On the Nicean Empire see: A. GARDNER, *The Lascarids of Nicea. The Story of an Empire in Exile*, London 1912; M. ANGOLD, *A Byzantine Government in Exile. Government and Society under the Laskarids of Nicea (1204-1261)*, Oxford 1975.

⁶ Z. J. KOSZTOLNYIK, *Hungary*, p. 68.

⁷ GEORGIOS ACROPOLITES, *Annales*, ed. I. BEKKER, Bonn 1837, p.12 = GEORGII ACROPOLITAE *Opera*, vol. I, ed. A. Heisenberg, Lipsiae 1903, p. 10.

⁸ They married in 1212. Cf. D. I. POLEMIS, *The Doukai. A Contribution to Byzantine Prosopography*, London 1968, p.108.

⁹ Z. J. KOSZTOLNYIK, *Hungary*, p. 69.

¹⁰ Z. J. KOSZTOLNYIK, *Hungary*, p. 86.

¹¹ Z. J. KOSZTOLNYIK, *Hungary*, p. 87. On the previous intervention into Hungarian family affairs see: C. M. ROUSSEAU, *Kinship Ties, Behavioral Norms, and Family Counselling in the Pontificate of Innocent III*, (in:) *Women, Marriage and Family in Medieval Christendon. Essays in Memory of Michael M. Shenan CSB*, ed. C. ROUSSEAU and J. ROSENTHAL, Kalamazoo Michigan 1998, pp. 332-337.

in 1235 because of her ascetic merits¹². Thus, she became famous and her lifestyle affected the Hungarian court. It is clear that Maria Lascaris was also influenced by this atmosphere. If it is true that one of Bela's sisters-in-law asked Maria to discipline her, then the Hungarian court was completely different from Byzantine gaiety. We can only guess that this was a chasm for Maria if she remembered Nicea at all. In Hungary she became a strict and demanding queen.

Her strong will manifested itself in her objection to the marriage between Kynga and a Polish prince. Her consent was only given on the request of Salome, the prince's sister and Bela's sister-in-law¹³. Whom she saw in the role of Kynga's husband, we do not know. Whatever her plans may have been, Kynga left Buda at the age of 5 and was brought to Cracow in 1239. In order to complete the image of Maria, we should stress that in 1241, during the Tartar invasion, Bela entrusted Maria with the custody of crown jewels and saints' relics, and provided her with the safe refuge¹⁴. We also know that in 1259 her husband gave her the fortress of Vyšegrad, which she restored at her own expense. She may have been the reason why Hungarian troops supported Michael Palaiologos in the battle of Pelagonia in 1259¹⁵. Bela IV died in 1270 and Maria followed him soon. She was buried in a Franciscan monastery in Esztergom, beside her husband. All this means that in her lifetime she identified herself with the Hungarian *raison d'état* and she was a Latin. I would like to stress this point, because despite the fact that Kynga and her sister were born to a Byzantine mother, they came to Poland as Latin ladies, probably oblivious of their Byzantine heritage. Their mother may have been right in thinking that Poland was not a place to go to. The country had been divided into principalities for about one hundred years. Kynga was to marry the prince of Cracow, who was in charge of Little Poland, and Yolanda, her sister, was to marry the prince of Gniezno, who was in charge of Great Poland. (I realise that the description is rather sketchy but I do not want to go into details.)

Let us take a closer look at Kynga. Her husband, Boleslas hoped that the marriage would strengthen his position in the contacts with his opponent Conrad of Mazovia¹⁶. In this he shared his sister Salome's hope. In 1239 he was 13 and Kynga was 5. We do not know when they got married. If they waited until she reached maturity, the match took place in 1246¹⁷. Salome, who returned to Poland after her husband's death in 1241, certainly influenced Kynga in her upbringing. The girl was well educated, being able to

¹² Z. J. KOSZTOLNYIK, *Hungary*, p. 87.

¹³ Salome was the wife of Koloman, Bela's younger brother. On Salome's influence see: *Vita et miracula Sanctae Kyngae*, p. 685.

¹⁴ Z. J. KOSZTOLNYIK, *Hungary*, p. 168.

¹⁵ E. DARKÓ, *Byzantinisch-ungarische Beziehungen in der zweiten Hälfte des XIII. Jahrhunderts*, Weimar 1933, pp. 8-19 (Kap. 1: *Ungarische Hilfe für die Byzantiner in der Schlacht von Pelagonia*).

¹⁶ JOANNES DLUGOSSIUS, *Annales seu Cronicae Incliti Regni Poloniae, liber VI*, Varsaviae 1973, pp. 284-285.

¹⁷ A. WITKOWSKA, "*Vita Sanctae Kyngae ducissae Cracoviensis*" jako źródło hagiograficzne, *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 10 (1961) 12, p. 111.

read and speak Polish, Hungarian and Latin¹⁸. She was brought up in the Franciscan spirit, which has a lasting influence on her personality. Even as a child she was regarded as a saint and as a future wife she vowed chastity. She brought in a large dowry, from which Boleslas profited while reconstructing his country after the Tartar invasion. Kynga had quite a status at the Polish court. She was offered a territory at Sącz, on the border with Hungary, which gave her an independent position¹⁹. As a result of his connection with Hungary, Boleslas took part in many military operations, initiated by Bela²⁰. This is how he was involved in the war of the Babenberg succession in Austria, which is beyond the scope of this paper. The fight started in the year of his wedding, which took place in 1246.

Kynga tried to strengthen Cracow's authority by promoting the canonisation of Bishop Stanislas of Szczepanow, which took place in 1257²¹. Polish Franciscan custody developed within the Hungarian Franciscan province as a result of Kynga's influence²². She had her own chancellery and issued her own documents²³. As a result of her matchmaking, her sister Yolanda came to Poland in order to marry another Polish prince²⁴. Yolanda was 8 years her junior. An explanation that is sometimes provided, that she was a surrogate of Kynga's daughter, may be true. Yolanda was brought up in Cracow. However, after some time the sisters separated and Yolanda went her own way. She married Boleslas in 1256. Unlike Kynga's marriage, Yolanda's match did not give any spectacular profit to Hungary. Her husband was a strong personality, a mature man of 25, and he did not allow himself to be swayed. His country had different enemies and different *raison d'état*. Kynga was a role-model for Yolanda just as Salome had been for Kynga. Cut off from politics, Yolanda followed the Franciscan ethos. She promoted the Franciscan monasteries and nunneries in her principality²⁵. She gave birth to three daughters, which probably did not satisfy her husband: he wanted an heir. It is striking, however, that when her husband died, Yolanda went to the nunnery, leaving her children behind. The eldest was already married, the second was 13 and the youngest was 3 years old²⁶. Her husband's nephew became their custodian. What is most interesting here is that the second daughter was later married to Ladislas the Short, the future King of Poland.

During their life, Kynga and Yolanda visited Hungary at least once, in 1266 for a family reunion in Buda²⁷. We do not know whether they ever had any closer contact with

¹⁸ *Vita Sanctae Kyngae*, p. 687.

¹⁹ Cf. A. RUTKOWSKA-PLACHCIŃSKA, *Sądceczyzna w XIII i XIV wieku. Przemiany gospodarcze i społeczne*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1961, p.1 43.

²⁰ JOANNES DLUGOSSIUS, *Annales*, liber VII, Varsoviae 1975, p. 94.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 95-96.

²² Cf. K. KANTAK, *Franciszkanie polscy*, vol. I (1237-1517), Kraków 1937.

²³ *Kodeks Dyplomatyczny Małopolski*, vol. II, ed. F. PIEKOSIŃSKI, Kraków 1886, pp. 127, 128, 132, 138, etc.

²⁴ JOANNES DLUGOSSIUS, *Annales*, liber VII, p. 108.

²⁵ K. KANTAK, *Franciszkanie*, p. 32.

²⁶ JOANNES DLUGOSSIUS, *Annales*, liber VII, pp. 205-206.

²⁷ *Kodeks Dyplomatyczny Małopolski*, vol. II, ed. F. PIEKOSIŃSKI, Kraków 1886, p. 127. The later documents prove Kynga's travels to Hungary.

their mother. It would be interesting to know how she felt about Kynga's unconsummated marriage, which was completely against the Byzantine mentality. Byzantine women had two options: one was marriage and childbirth, the other was to enter a nunnery²⁸. There was no third way. She could not be a nun at the court while being married. Even more striking is that, in her devotion for God, she resisted the temptation even though she shared a bedroom with her husband. Boleslas did not object, earning himself the nickname Boleslas the Bashful, and they adopted a son as a solution. His brother-in-law, Boleslas of Gniezno, waited for his first child for 8 years. He accepted his wife's saintly attitude and got the nickname: Boleslas the Pious. Just like her sister, Yolanda went to the nunnery and they both lived there till their deaths: Kynga's in 1292 and Yolanda's in 1298. Each of them stayed in their principalities²⁹. During their long life they could see the decadency of the Hungarian dynasty, which died out in 1301. At that time, Polish principalities were progressing towards reunion and were on the way to forming a kingdom. Far away from this area, in their motherland, Constantinople regained its Byzantine identity. Whether it bothered them at all is a great question. They lived their lives outside this world. This testifies the power of Franciscan ideology, which spread to the secular domain. Such an intrusion of the Sacred into the Profane would have been rather incomprehensible to the Byzantine court.

Długosz praises Kynga for her lifestyle and very rarely mentions the name of her mother, who appears in the source as the Greek Emperor's daughter. The author of *Vitae* stresses that Kynga's mother was descended from emperors whose origin went back to Nero. He does it in order to provide Kynga with an ancient and honourable pedigree. It is also important in light of the fact that Kynga's role-model was Saint Catherine of Alexandria, a paragon of the virgin saint³⁰.

Feminists may say that Kynga was cut off from her own body and its needs. Having been denied genuine contact with her mother, she never developed the maternal instinct. Kynga and Yolanda tried to assert themselves as independent women, who chose God in order to evade the patriarchal male influence³¹. Women scholars who deal with similar cases in other countries but who do not define themselves as strong feminists would probably say that Kynga represented the ideal of maidenhood, which is described by chastity, being desired and intact³². Thus Kynga might be a model-girl for them. But the features of maidenhood in early years, generally youth, seem out of place in a mature woman of Kynga's political position. We do not know whether Kynga could have had children, as she denied her husband that possibility. And it was not merely a question of her private life, but also a public matter and Polish *raison d'état*. Alienated from her

²⁸ Cf. A. M. TALBOT, *Women* (in:) *The Byzantines*, ed. G. CAVALLO, Chicago 1992, pp. 117-143.

²⁹ More about their activity: Z. BUDKOWA, *Kunegunda*, (in:) *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. XVI, Wrocław 1971, pp. 186-189; O. ŁASZCZYŃSKA, *Jolanta* (in:) *Ibidem*, vol. XI, Wrocław 1964-1965, pp. 264-265.

³⁰ *Vita Sanctae Kyngae*, p. 684.

³¹ Perhaps N. PARTNER would say it. Cf. N. PARTNER, *No Sex, No Gender*, *Speculum* 68 (1993), pp. 389-443.

³² K. M. PHILLIPS, *Maidenhood as the Perfect Age of Woman's Life*, (in:) *Young Medieval Women*, ed. K. J. LEWIS, N. J. MENUGE, K. M. PHILLIPS, New York 1999.

Byzantine background, Kynga never brought Byzantine heritage into Poland. This was not new, because her mother also broke her connections with Byzantium. Due to their merits in the Latin world, Kynga was canonised some years ago and Yolanda is a blessed lady of the Church.

When faced with Prof. Salamon's question as to whether Byzantine and Latin influences met in Poland, I can say "yes" from the genealogical point of view. But I would say "no", if I consider the biographies of the two ladies. The only Byzantine trace may be seen in the icon of Our Lady preserved in the Franciscan nunnery in Cracow. This icon was once shown to us by Prof. Różycka-Bryzek. It seems to be an object, which was brought to Poland from Byzantium via Hungary through the aforementioned connections. This is certainly something of note for a Byzantine scholar.