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EMPRESSES' MEDIATIONS IN THE FEUDS BETWEEN THE PALAIOLOGOI (14TH–15TH CENTURIES)

I have selected the example of three Empresses and their role at the court to illustrate the perspective of a Byzantinist analyzing the resolution of conflicts in the Eastern Empire. I will focus on three eminent female peacemakers: Eirene Asenina Kantakouzena, Helena Kantakouzena Palaiologina and Helena Dragas Palaiologina. The first Empress was of Bulgarian origin, the second came from Byzantium and the third was Serbian. All of them were Orthodox. Their belonging to the “Byzantine Commonwealth”¹ united by the same religion and culture was of great importance. They knew how to conduct themselves in the world of diplomacy familiar to them from an early age. In comparison with the Imperial spouses who arrived in Constantinople from the West, they were in a better position to assess the political situation and carry out their plans either by force or by trick. The main aim was efficiency. Before telling their stories, I would like to recreate a picture of the Empire after the Fourth Crusade. What happened afterwards is very important in explaining the role of the three ladies in the mixed Byzantine-Latin world on the Bosphorus.

For many historians, the Fourth Crusade in 1204 represented the end of the Byzantine Empire.² The traditional world of the proud medieval Romans was over. The Latins established their rule and they changed Constantinople into a capital of their own – a Latin Empire. Being charmed by the court ceremonial, they quickly became its snobbish followers.³ The remnants of Byzantium

¹ An adequate expression of Sir Dimitri Obolensky. Cf. Idem, *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe 500–1453*, London 1971.

² Cf. K. Zakrzewski, *Historia Bizancjum*, [in:] *Wielka historia powszechna*, vol. 4, p. 1, Warszawa 1938. Second edition as a separate volume – Kraków 2007.

³ Cf. Z. Pentek, *Cesarstwo Łacińskie 1204–1261. Kolonialne państwo krzyżowców czy Neobizancjum?*, Poznań 2004.

were just a trace of its former glory. This glory however, was still too powerful for Greek leaders to surrender their ambitions of reconstructing the Roman State on the Bosphorus. The main claimant to the disrupted tradition was the Nicaean Empire. In 1261, the army of Michael Palaiologos, a brave soldier and gifted diplomat, re-established Byzantine rule in Constantinople. Following victory, he became Emperor Michael VIII⁴ and founded the dynasty which survived until 1453.

The conflict began immediately as Baldwin II, the last Latin Emperor, complained to Pope Urban IV and launched aggressive propaganda against Palaiologos, using the ecclesiastical schism as an argument against the *perfidis* Greeks. The real threat arose when Charles d'Anjou became the ambitious King of Sicily and joined forces with Baldwin and the Pope. This *trio* was a mortal danger for the newly reconstructed Byzantine state. Michael VIII, whose forces were too weak to combat the enemy on the military field, turned to risky diplomacy. He made vague promises of a Church union with Rome, which was not accepted by his people but his *raison d'état* was to avoid the repetition of the Fourth Crusade. He had no choice.⁵ The Union was finally signed in Lyon in 1274 but did not last long as Charles d'Anjou employed everything in his power to discredit Michael in the West. The Union was broken in 1282 and the Byzantine Empire only gained sad notoriety.⁶

Having lost the Union asset, Michael began to promote mixed marriages as a form of efficient diplomacy. This was not completely new in Byzantine policy but it was against the old tradition, according to which the Byzantines, (the Romans), were obliged to intermarry. The Franks, (the Westerners), were tolerable as husbands for imperial daughters or nieces who were sent abroad. The time of

⁴ D. J. Geanakoplos, *Michael Paleologus and the West 1258–1282. A Study in Byzantine-Western Relations*, Cambridge Mass. 1959 remains still the most important book on this ruler.

⁵ M. Dąbrowska, *Bizancjum, Francja i Stolica Apostolska w drugiej połowie XIII wieku*, Łódź 1986, pp. 9–28.

⁶ The literature on the Union of Lyon is abundant. As I was the last PhD student of Professor Halina Evert-Kappesowa, the founder of Byzantine Studies in Lodz, I have been allowed to mention her PhD dissertation defended during WW2 at the Clandestine University of Warsaw in 1942 and then published in articles in Prague. Eadem, *La societe Byzantine et l'union de Lyon*, *Byzantinoslavica* 10 (1949), pp. 28–41; Eadem, *Une page de l'histoire des relations byzantino-latines. Le clerge byzantin et l'union de Lyon (1274–1282)*, *Byzantinoslavica* 12 (1952–1953), p. 68, 92; Eadem, *Byzance et le Saint Siege a l'epoque de l'union de Lyon*, *Byzantinoslavica* 16 (1955), pp. 297–317; Eadem, *La fin de l'union de Lyon*, *Byzantinoslavica*, 17 (1956), pp. 1–18; Eadem, *Bizancjum a Kuria Rzymska w okresie unii lyońskiej (1274–1282)*, *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis*, 1983, *Folia Historica* 14, pp. 3–25. All great syntheses devoted to Byzantium and Rome deal with this subject not speaking about particular articles and studies.

the Komnenoi changed a great deal. Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180) introduced Latin wives into his court. His first spouse was Bertha von Sulzbach, the second – Maria of Antioch, of French origin.⁷ He continued his pro-Latin policy by marrying his son, Alexios II off to Agnes of France, daughter of Louis VII.⁸ It seemed that the disaster caused by the Fourth Crusade changed this western tendency for good. But the danger of Charles' invasion impelled Michael Palaiologos to consider marrying his son and successor Andronikos II off to a Catholic princess. Anna of Hungary became the young co-Emperor's first wife. After her death, Andronikos married Yolanda of Montferrat.⁹ The Church union was broken but the Latin marriage was still useful as a diplomatic instrument. Both sides pretended to ignore the religious obstacles. This tendency was upheld in the next generation when Michael IX and Andronikos III, son and grandson of Andronikos II respectively, also married Latin princesses. As J. W. Barker states in his still unpublished article,¹⁰ the Byzantine imperial family was becoming half Italian. This was an impressive change of tradition. The Latin ladies, who tried to adapt very quickly to the Byzantine reality, were still foreign at the court, even if they immediately converted their creed into the Orthodox one.¹¹ They simply remained strangers.

The 14th century witnessed the emergence of a new factor in the Byzantine world. The Osmanlis, Turks, who emerged as one of the modest emirates in Western Asia Minor, conquered the last Byzantine territories there and were like a tiger ready to pounce on the European sectors of the Empire. The civil war which broke out between Andronikos II and his grandson Andronikos III (1321–1328) suited the Turkish expansion in Bithynia.¹² The court concentrated on the family feud, in which the eminent role was played by a rich and influential aristocrat, John Kantakouzenos, who allied himself with the young emperor. He was quickly rewarded. When his master seized power, Kantakouzenos be-

⁷ L. Garland, *Women and Power in Byzantium, AD 527–1204*, London–New York, 1999, pp. 199–209. On Mary of Antioch's husband cf. P. Magdalino, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143–1180*, Cambridge 1993.

⁸ M. Dąbrowska, *Agnieszka z Francji w Konstantynopolu*, [in:] *Niebem i sercem okryta. Studia historyczne dedykowane dr Jolancie Malinowskiej*, ed. M. Malinowski, Toruń 2002, pp. 41–63.

⁹ A. E. Laiou, *Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign policy of Andronikos II (1282–1328)*, Cambridge Mass. 1972, pp. 27, 47–48. Cf. M. Dąbrowska, *Family Ethos at the Byzantine Court of the Palaiologos in the Light of the Testimony of Theodore of Montferrat*, [in:] *Byzantina et Slavica Cracoviensia*, vol. 2, ed. A. Różycka-Bryzek, M. Salamon, Cracow 1994, pp. 75–76.

¹⁰ The draft is at my disposal but the text has not been published yet.

¹¹ M. Dąbrowska, *Łacinniczki nad Bosforem. Małżeństwa bizantyńsko-łacinińskie w cesarskiej rodzinie Paleologów (XIII–XV w.)*, Łódź 1996, pp. 91–92.

¹² Laiou (as n. 9), pp. 247–249.

came megas domestikos, the commander-in-chief of the army. I do not share D.M. Nicol's opinion that he was loyal and without ambitions to rule independently. His aspirations were already visible and became very clear after Andronikos III's death.¹³ He pretended to be a regent on behalf of John V, the nine-year-old son of Andronikos III and Anne of Savoy. The Empress-Dowager also turned out to be very ambitious. When John Kantakouzenos left Constantinople for Didimoteichon and, his followers proclaimed him the Emperor there on 26 October 1341, she immediately managed to have her son crowned in Hagia Sophia as John V Palaiologos on 19 November 1341. Earlier, Kantakouzenos had offered his daughter Helena as a future wife for the young John but Anne of Savoy did not accept this.¹⁴ Helena was supposed to be a hostage of peace but this quickly proved to be a fallacy. The second civil war broke out (1341–1347). Kantakouzenos was victorious and became Emperor for the period 1347–1354. His strategic timing was a masterpiece.¹⁵

This is the appropriate point at which to present the first character of my story John Kantakouzenos' wife, Eirene Asenina. She belonged to the Asen family ruling Bulgaria from the end of the 12th century but the Asens were already so integrated with the Byzantines that she was more Greek than Bulgarian.¹⁶ Eirene was educated in Constantinople and was carefully selected as a wife for John Kantakouzenos.¹⁷ She was brave, a staunch supporter of her husband and an active protagonist in Byzantine policy. When the conflict with the Empress Dowager broke out, Kantakouzenos and his wife were about 45 years old. Married in 1318, they had two ambitious sons, Matthew and Manuel. They were 7 and 6 years older than their opponent, John V but the young Palaiologos had already been crowned by the Patriarch of Constantinople. During the conflict with the official dynasty, Kantakouzenos turned to Thessalonica for support but his endeavours failed and upheaval ensued. Eirene remained in Didimoteichon with her brother Manuel Asen for two years. Didimoteichon was a strong for-

¹³ D. M. Nicol, *The reluctant emperor. A biography of John Cantacuzene, Byzantine emperor and monk, c. 1295–1383*, Cambridge 1996, p. 48; Rev: M. Dąbrowska, *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 104 (1997), 3, pp. 96–101; Eadem, *The Long Farewell*, *History Today*, May 1997, pp. 58–59 (together with the review of J. J. Norwich's book, *Byzantium: the Decline and Fall*, London 1995).

¹⁴ J. Cantacuzenus, *Historia*, vol. 3, ed. L. Schoen, Bonnae 1932, pp. 82–87.

¹⁵ M. Dąbrowska, *Jana Kantakuzena przepis na wygraną. Przejęcie władzy w Bizancjum w 1347 r.*, [in:] *Zamach stanu w dawnych społecznościach*, ed. A. Sołtysik, J. Olko, Warszawa 2004, pp. 375–383.

¹⁶ I. Božilov, *Familijata na Asenevci (1185–1460). Genealogia i prosopografija*, Sofia 1994, pp. 307–310.

¹⁷ D. M. Nicol, *The Byzantine Lady. Ten portraits*, Cambridge 1994, p. 71.

treasury at Maritza river, in the middle of Kantakouzenos' territories but its situation was difficult. Eirene implored John Alexander, the ruler of Bulgaria, to help but instead of giving support, he blocked the city.¹⁸ The only close ally appeared to be Umur, Emir of Aydin, who expelled the Bulgarians.¹⁹

Eirene's patience in supporting her husband was rewarded. After he gained Constantinople, they were crowned by the Patriarch in Hagia Sophia in 1347, which confirmed that their rule was legal. John V, already 15 years old, celebrated his marriage with Helena Kantakouzena. The two rival families were thus connected through marital ties. The war appeared to be over. However, Matthew Kantakouzenos soon saw his opportunity to become his father's successor. He did not accept Palaiologos' rights to the throne and John Kantakouzenos expressed his loyalty by naming himself John VI, giving his favor to John V.²⁰ The new conflict was on the horizon but Eirene intervened immediately and convinced Matthew to relent in return for receiving a territory in Thrace.²¹ In 1348, John VI conducted the expedition against the Bulgarians, who profited by the instability of the Empire. Eirene stayed in Constantinople with her son Manuel and her son-in-law Nikephoros II of Epiros. It was the time of rebuilding the Byzantine fleet. For the Genoese it meant the loss of their maritime monopoly. They attacked Constantinople but Eirene managed to mobilize the citizens to defend the capital.²² Once again she showed her strength.

It is interesting to note her extraordinary intuition. She knew when the time was not conducive to the war between the younger generation, that is, between her son Matthew and her son-in-law, John V. When these two became close neighbours in Thrace and John incited conflict, she intervened once again, gathering the bishops to persuade both sides to prevent another civil war. In 1353, John V, reigning from Tenedos island, tried to gain Constantinople, and Eirene managed to protect the city for a second time.²³ At the time of this confrontation, Matthew fulfilled his ambitions to become the Emperor in February 1354. The work on the new dynasty was visible. John V was ignored but he had already experienced the taste of power. On 22 November 1354 John V Palaiolog-

¹⁸ Cantacuzenus (as n. 14), III, pp. 336–344.

¹⁹ Nicol (as n. 13), p. 66.

²⁰ Idem, *The Byzantine Family of the Kantakouzenos (Cantacuzenus) ca. 1100–1460. A Genealogical and Prosopographical Study*, Washington D.C. 1968, 110–111; Idem, *The reluctant emperor* (as n. 13), p. 88.

²¹ Idem, *The Byzantine* (as n. 20), p. 76.

²² Ibidem, p. 77.

²³ Idem, *The reluctant emperor* (as n. 13), p. 121.

os entered Constantinople. John VI surrendered and withdrew to a monastery.²⁴ Eirene followed him and became a nun, according to the Byzantine tradition. Nicol underlines that John VI Kantakouzenos owed the good treatment received from his rival to his reasonable wife's intervention²⁵ but Matthew cherished his ambitions and did not surrender until December 1357. His mother left the convent with the express intention of convincing him to stop the hopeless feud.²⁶ Nicol likes to quote John VI who admitted that his wife had a strong hand.²⁷ She was undoubtedly stronger than him. Although Matthew was her favorite son, Eirene acted cautiously to protect the entire family and protect her men from their opponent's revenge. They all survived. Manuel ruled Peloponnese from 1348 until 1380. Matthew succeeded him and reigned until 1383.²⁸ Their father, John VI, visited them as a monk in this ideal landscape. Another factor here is that John V was not keen to sever contact with his father-in-law to whom he turned many times, greatly profiting from his political experience.

During all these years, Helena Kantakouzena Palaiologina, John V's wife, learned the bitter lessons of a fictitious idyllic family life. At the very beginning of her marriage she bore her husband two sons: Andronikos IV, who was intended to be a successor to the throne, and Manuel who waited for his historical opportunity for a long time.²⁹ Her marriage, arranged to end the civil war between John Kantakouzenos and Anne of Savoy appears to be a diplomatic treaty without any trace of tenderness. The couple appears to have lived their lives apart but there is a scarcity of historical sources, and we have no description of John V's rule documented at the time of his reign.³⁰ A certain insight is provided by the

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 131.

²⁵ Ibidem, pp. 132–133.

²⁶ Idem, *The Byzantine family* (as n. 20), pp. 117–118; Idem, *The reluctant emperor* (as n. 13), p. 137.

²⁷ Cantacuzenus, (as n. 14), III, p. 336.

²⁸ D. A. Zakithynos, *Le despotat grec de Moree (1262–1460)*, vol. 1: *Histoire politique*, Paris 1932, pp. 115–116. Matthew stayed in Constantinople till 1361, then after the plague he went to Peloponnese.

²⁹ The huge book on John V was written by R. Radić, *Vreme Jovana V Paleologa*, Beograd 1993. Andronikos IV is waiting for his biography. His son's, John VII's life was described by S. Mesanović, *Jovan VII Paleolog*, Beograd 1996. It is interesting to mention the important Serbian contribution to the history of the Palaiologoi. See also: I. Djurić, *Sumrak Vizantija. Vreme Jovana VIII Paleologa, 1392–1448*, Beograd 1984. As for Manuel II cf. J. W. Barker, *Manuel II Paleologus 1391–1425. A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship*, New Brunswick NJ 1968. Helena and John V had more children. Among the sons Theodore I Palaiologos distinguished himself as despot of Morea (1383–1407). Cf. D. A. Zakythinos, (as n. 28), pp. 117–165.

³⁰ O. Jurewicz, *Historia literatury bizantyńskiej*, Wrocław 1984, pp. 273–276. Kantakouzenos

correspondence of Demetrios Kydones, an outstanding intellectual, a secretary to John VI and Helena's long-time tutor and counsellor.³¹ It seems that the Imperial couple distributed their parental favors between Andronikos, who was his father's son and Manuel, promoted by Helena. In this case it is difficult to estimate to what extent she acted as an indifferent or neutral mediator as her interventions were always favorable for the second son, Manuel, who resembled his grandfather John VI, Helena's father.

In 1356 the Osmanlis settled in Gallipoli. Their progress in conquering the European remnants of Byzantium was rapid. In 1365, they took Adrianople in Thrace which soon became their new capital. Constantinople was in mortal danger and John V sought diplomatic help from the Pope using the trump card of the Church union in the negotiations. In 1367, his wife Helena participated in the meeting with the papal envoys. In 1369, John V travelled to Rome and accepted the Catholic Creed.³² On his return via Venice, he was intercepted because of debts owed. These were especially incurred by his mother during the war with Kantakouzenos. *Serenissima* sought profit from the situation and demanded that the money be repaid or that he be granted rule over the strategically valuable island of Tenedos. Andronikos IV, residing in Constantinople at the time, refused to rescue his father. It was Manuel who appeared in Venice with the money. It was not a great sum but it made the return of John V possible.³³ In 1371, the Turks defeated the Serbs at Maritza river and it became evident that Byzantium was not powerful enough to defend itself against the Osmanlis. In 1372/1373, John V signed a treaty with Murad I, as a result of which the Empire yielded to the Turks. It was a form of vassalage.³⁴

wrote his story about 1369. Doukas (died in 1470), who, in a certain sense continued his oeuvre, described John V's rule from later perspective. There is no contemporary chronicle concerning this long reign.

³¹ Demetrios Kydones *Correspondence*, ed. R. J. Loenertz, vol. 1-2, Citta del Vaticano 1956-1960. Demetrios Kydones, *Briefe*, ed. F. Tinnefeld, Stuttgart 1981-82. On Kydones as Helena Palaiologina's tutor see: F. Kianka, *The letters of Demetrios Kydones to empress Helena Kantakouzene Palaiologina*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 46 (1992), pp. 155-164. On his support for John V cf: Eadem, *Demetrios Kydones in Italy*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1995), pp. 105-109.

³² More on these negotiations: O. Halecki, *Un empereur de Byzance a Rome. Vingt ans de travail pour l'union des Eglises et la defense de l'Orient 1355-1375*, Varsovie 1930, pp. 188-199.

³³ D. M. Nicol, *Byzantium and Venice. A study in diplomatic and cultural relations*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 305-307.

³⁴ The only Byzantine writer who speaks about it is Laonikos Chalkokondyles. Cf. Laonikos Chalcocondyles, *Historiarum libri decem*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonnae 1843; Barker (as n. 29), p. 18, point out that the chronicler cannot be reliable in his chronology. For the Polish aspect of this question see: M. Dabrowska, *Could Poland have reacted to the submission of Byzantium*

The temptation of power is stronger than reason, even under difficult circumstances. Time was passing by and Andronikos IV was longing for the throne. In 1376, he arranged a coup d'état with his son John VII.³⁵ As the new ruler, he imprisoned his father John V, his grandfather, John VI and his brother Manuel. Murad was undoubtedly pleased to see Palaiologoi so divided. Andronikos IV also incarcerated his mother, the Empress Helena. At the time of the family feud she was about 45 years old, almost the same age as her mother was when she intervened in the Kantakouzenoi matters. She had no doubts who should succeed her husband. Manuel was trustworthy and she favored him. After three years, the usurper was overthrown and John V regained power.³⁶ It was another bitter lesson in Byzantine history. It represented the perspective of a new form of civil war demanding a consolidation of forces instead of family divisions provoked by an ambitious and self-serving Andronikos IV. He died in 1385 but his son upheld his aspirations to the throne and in 1390, he overthrew and imprisoned his grandfather John V. John VII's reign was short-lived. After just a few months,³⁷ the Turks assisted the aging John V in regaining power. The many years of grotesque family conflict presented a serious threat to the survival of the Empire but Manuel's position in politics was steadily growing and the time had come to secure his succession to the throne.

The significance of Helena's role in gaining the throne for Manuel is evident in his treaty on marriage, composed as a dialogue between him and his mother.³⁸ With the ambitions of her grandson John VII in sight, she was actively encouraging Manuel to marry and have children. In contrast to his nephew, Helena considered Manuel to be the rightful and responsible successor to the state. Manuel, almost forty, was still a bachelor. This was a distinct disadvantage in comparison with the already married John VII who had a perspective for a successor.³⁹ When John V died in 1391, Helena withdrew to the nunnery but

to the Turks in 1372–1373?, [in:] *Captain and Scholar. Papers in Memory of Demetrios Polemis*, ed. E. Chrysos, E. Zachariadou, Andros 2009, pp. 79–92.

³⁵ Radić (as n. 29), pp. 393–403.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 405. Cf. R. Korczak, *Ingerencja Turków osmańskich w wewnętrzne sprawy Bizancjum za panowania Murada I i Bajazeta I*, Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis, Folia Historica 80 (2005), pp. 161–170.

³⁷ Radić (as n. 29), 458–460.

³⁸ Manuel Palaiologos, *Dialogue with the Empress-Mother on Marriage*, ed. A. Angelou, Wien 1991; Cf. M. Dąbrowska, *Ought one to Marry? Manuel II Palaiologos' point of view*, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 31 (2007), 2, pp. 146–156.

³⁹ On John VII's son cf. G. Dennis, *An Unknown Byzantine Emperor Andronikos V Palaeologus (1400–1407?)*, *Jahrbuch der Byzantinischen Oesterreichischen Gesellschaft* 16 (1967), pp. 175–187.

still continued to strongly support Manuel's aspirations to the throne. After his father's death, Manuel left the Turkish camp in Brusa, arrived in Constantinople and took over. He married a young lady, also named Helena, a daughter of the Serbian governor of Serres, Constantine Dragaš.⁴⁰ After the battle at Kosovo in 1389, Serbia had been defeated by the Turks and humiliated. Some princes, including Dragas were still hoping for revenge and this sad marriage alliance was a testimony to this. The new Empress quickly bore the first two sons to Manuel. The succession was protected and even if the danger of a confrontation with John VII still existed, the Empress-Dowager, now a nun, could be assured that the uncertain future of Byzantium was in good hands. She died in 1396, supporting Manuel to her very last day. This proved to be necessary as Bayezid, Murad's successor, organized a disastrous blockade of Constantinople in 1394 which marked the coming of an end. The battle at Nikopolis in 1396 showed the weakness of the Christian army in confrontation with the Turks. It was only the aggression of the Mongol army in Asia Minor and the battle at Ankara in 1402 between Tamerlane and Bayezid which destroyed the Turkish power and saved Constantinople for another half a century.

The new situation was an advantage for Byzantium. The Osmanlis were waging their own war for succession. It provided the Emperor with the opportunity to regain independent status in his relations with the Turks. Manuel was no longer their vassal and his contacts with the new sultan Mehmed I (1413–1421) were friendly. He was a respected partner but already an old ruler. Manuel suffered a debilitating stroke in 1422, preventing him from any further political activity. The state had already been taken over by his eldest son, John VIII Palaiologos.⁴¹ Mehmed I's successor, Murad II (1421–1451), was not so diplomatic in his dealings with Byzantium. In 1422, he started the siege of Constantinople and only the difficulties in Asia Minor thwarted his intentions. John VIII signed a humiliating treaty which once again placed the State in the position of dependence on the Turks.⁴² The fall was imminent. Unfortunately, the family situation was also far from idyllic. In 1430 the Palaiologoi managed to bring the whole Peloponnese under their rule⁴³ but the fraternal conflicts flared up im-

⁴⁰ Barker (as n. 29), pp. 99–100.

⁴¹ I. Djuric, *Sumrak Vizantije – vreme Jovana VIII Paleologa 1392–1448*, Beograd 2008, passim.

⁴² Barker (as n. 29), pp. 361–371.

⁴³ A. Bon, *La Moree franque. Recherches historiques, topographiques et archeologiques sur la principaute d'Achaie (1204–1430)*, vol. 1, Paris 1969, p. 272. Venice managed to keep the ports: Modon and Coron but the success was great. Mistra, the capital of the despots of Morea flourished and was the great hope for those who believed in Byzantine revival on Peloponnese, especially George Gemistos Plethon and his followers, Cf. M. Dąbrowska, *Hellenism at the*

mediately in the context of this success. John had younger brothers: Theodore, Constantine, Demetrios and Thomas. Theodore and then Demetrios neither concealed their ambitions concerning the Morea nor their aspirations to the throne in Constantinople.⁴⁴ The Empress Dowager, Helena Dragas was following the developments with considerable concern. She favored Constantine, who kept her family name as his own and it seemed reasonable that he should succeed John VIII who was childless. This was however, an internal issue of the State. The most pressing foreign policy issue was the prevention of the imminent Turkish invasion. Once again, the only rescue was perceived to be found in Papal support. The Emperor resolved to go to Italy on behalf of the council and there he signed a Church Union in Florence in 1439.⁴⁵

His compatriots were divided between the loyalty to Orthodoxy and the tough *raison d'état*, which maintained that Latin protection would be necessary in the confrontation with Islam. Their hopes were high, inspired by the victory of the young Polish-Hungarian King Ladislas in the so-called 'Winter War' with Murad II in 1443/1444. The truce was signed in Szegedyn on 4 August 1444, offering John VIII the comforting perspective of a ten-year peace pact. The battle of Varna on 10 November destroyed this illusion.⁴⁶ The Turks were victorious and there was nothing to prevent them from attacking Constantinople. John VIII died on 31 October 1448. Constantine Dragas was in Mistra but his brother Demetrios, residing in Selymbria, was closer to the capital and his appetite for power was great. Helena Dragas, the Empress-Dowager and a lady in a *certain age*, invested all her authority in preserving Constantinople for Constantine. For five months she managed to retain the throne for her favorite son who arrived at the Bosphorus on 12 March 1449.⁴⁷ He had already been crowned in Mistra and did not repeat the ceremony in Hagia Sophia. There was no time. Helena supported him till the end and her advice was vital. He was a two-time widower and childless. His advisers were considering a third marriage which might produce a successor to the throne but the whole concept was somewhat desperate and bizarre in the context of the impending disaster.⁴⁸ The Empress

Court of the Despots of Mistra in the First Half of the Fifteenth Century, [in:] *Byzantina et Slavica Cracoviensia*, I, ed. M. Salamon, Cracow 1991, pp. 157–167; Cf. I. P. Medvedev, *Mistra. Očerki istorii i kultury pozdnirwizantijskogo goroda*, Leningrad 1973, pp. 95–122.

⁴⁴ D. M. Nicol, *Konstantyn XI, ostatni cesarz Bizancjum*, trans. M. Dąbrowska, Gdańsk 2004, p. 37.

⁴⁵ J. Gill, *The Council of Florence*, Cambridge 1959; Idem, *Personalities of the Council of Florence and Other Essays*, London 1964, pp. 104–124 (on John VIII).

⁴⁶ M. Dąbrowska, *Hexamilion i Warna*, *Balkanica Posnaniensia* 8 (1997), pp. 61–71.

⁴⁷ Georgios Sfrantzes, *Memorii 1401–1477*, ed. V. Grecu, Bucarest 1966, p. 72.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 76–80. The chronicler launched the idea of Constantine's marriage to Mara Branković, Murad II's widow.

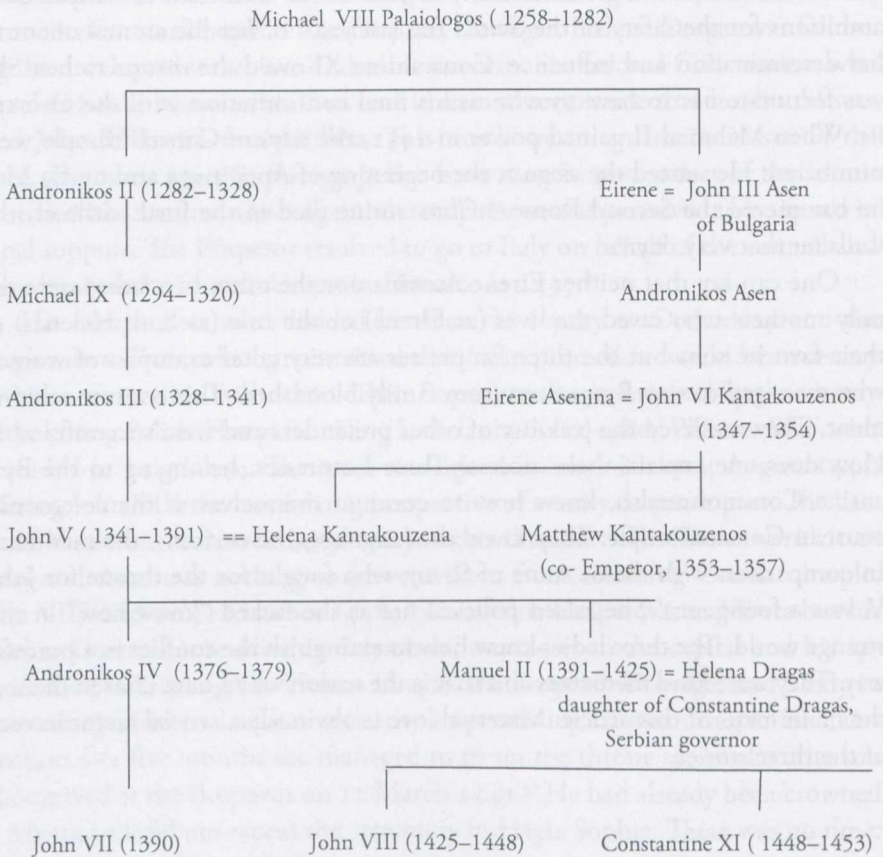
Mother died in 1450. Although, in accordance with custom, she had withdrawn to the nunnery after her husband's death in 1425, she remained actively involved. She was a great authority for her "boys" and tried to temper their ambitions for the safety of the State. The last years of her life are testament to her determination and influence. Constantine XI owed the throne to her. She was fortunate not to have to witness his final confrontation with the Osmanlis. When Mehmed II gained power in 1451, the days of Constantinople were numbered. He started the siege at the beginning of April 1453 and on 29 May he conquered the Second Rome.⁴⁹ Constantine died in the final battle on the walls on that very day.⁵⁰

One can say that neither Eirene Asenina nor the other two ladies were the only mothers who saved the lives (as Eirene) or the rule (as both Helenas) of their favorite sons but the three Empresses are very good examples of women who managed to save Byzantium from family bloodshed. This is a rare achievement. They mastered the jealousy of other pretenders and were successful at it. How does one explain their success? Three Empresses, belonging to the Byzantine Commonwealth, knew how to conduct themselves at the ceremonial court in Constantinople. They knew the language, the customs, the mentality. In comparison with them, Anne of Savoy, who fought for the throne for John V, was a foreigner.⁵¹ She raised political fire as she lacked "know how" in this strange world. The three ladies knew how to extinguish the conflict in a peaceful way. They were kind mediators and that is the reason why I have chosen them as the main focus of this article. Maternal love is obviously a crucial factor in each of the three stories.

⁴⁹ F. Babinger, *Z dziejów Imperium Osmanów. Sultan Mehmed Zdobywca i jego czasy*, trans. T. Zabłudowski, Warszawa 1977, pp. 96–108; S. Runciman, *Upadek Konstantynopola 1453*, trans. S. Dębicki, Warszawa 1968, pp. 136–202.

⁵⁰ D. M. Nicol, *Konstantyn XI* (as n. 44), pp. 70–89. The author collected many versions of the Emperor's heroic death.

⁵¹ M. Dąbrowska, *Lacinniczki* (as n. 11), p. 157. She distinguished herself only due to the regency.

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⁵² After: D. M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium (1261–1453)*, London 1972.