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## Imperial Women as Emissaries, Intermediaries, and Conciliators in the Palaiologan Era\*

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**Abstract:** The activities of female emissaries in late Byzantium offer an interesting perspective from which to view the transformation of the late Byzantine court and state as the multinational power gradually diminishing to a small principality. As the position of the imperial family stabilized and the fortunes of the empire dwindled, noble and imperial women were able (or perhaps were forced) to leave the female quarters of the palace or the safety of the nunnery and enter the political arena to secure peace at the borders, inside the empire, and even within the Orthodox Church itself. The present study considers sixteen missions headed by female ambassadors and subsequently suggests the circumstances and motives which transformed nine empresses, princesses, and noble nuns into ambassadors of the late Byzantine court.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Byzantine scholars have focused on the subject of diplomacy, inquiring into the missions dispatched by Byzantine emperors. Studies have considered negotiating methods, various aspects of the ambassadorial craft, and even the lives and personalities of important legates.<sup>1</sup> As Kazhdan noted in his seminal article, the choice of ambassadors marked the gradual transformation of the Byzantine Empire.<sup>2</sup> In earlier centuries, emperors had increased their prestige by remaining unapproachable to foreign legates; however, in the fourteenth century, several emperors traveled in person to Western courts to acquire military support against mounting Turkish pressure at the borders.

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<sup>1</sup> The bibliography related to this subject is extensive; therefore, I mention only some of the most important works: N. DROCOURT, *Diplomatie dur le Bosphore: Les ambassadeurs étrangers dans l'empire byzantin des années 640 à 1204, I–II*. Leuven 2015; *Byzantine Diplomacy. Papers from the Twenty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, Cambridge, March 1990, ed. J. Shepard – S. Franklin (*Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies, Publications* 1). Aldershot – Brookfield 1992; *La figure de l'ambassadeur entre mondes éloignés: Ambassadeurs, envoyés officiels et représentations diplomatiques entre Orient islamique, Occident latin et Orient chrétien XIe–XVIe siècle*, ed. N. Drocourt (*Enquetes et documents* 51). Rennes 2015; É. MALAMUT, *De 1299 à 1451 au coeur des ambassades byzantines*, in: *Bisanzio, Venezia e il mondo franco-greco (XIII – XV secolo)*, ed. Ch. Maltezou – P. Schreiner. Venezia 2002, 79–124; A. KAPLONY, *Konstantinopel und Damaskus, Gesandtschaften und Verträge zwischen Kaisern und Kalifen, 639–750. Untersuchungen zum Gewohnheits- und Völkerrecht und zur interkulturellen Diplomatie*. Berlin 1996; D. NERLICH, *Diplomatische Gesandtschaften zwischen Ost- und Westkaisern, 756–1002*. Bern 1999; S. MERGIALI-SAHAS, *A Byzantine ambassador to the West and his office during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: A Profile*. *BZ* 94 (2001) 588–604; T. C. LOUNGHIS, *Les ambassades Byzantines en Occident depuis la fondation des états barbares jusqu'aux Croisades (407–1096)*. Athena 1980; J. SHEPARD, *Byzantine Diplomacy, A.D. 800–1204: Means and Ends*, in: *Byzantine Diplomacy* 41–71; N. OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine Diplomacy, A.D. 1204–1453: Means and Ends*, in: *Byzantine Diplomacy* 73–88; T. LOUNGHIS, *Byzantine Diplomacy*, in: *Byzantine Diplomacy. A Seminar*, ed. S. Lampakis – M. Leontsini – T. Lounghis – V. Vlysidou. Athens 2007, 17–82. For further works, see the footnotes below.

<sup>2</sup> A. KAZHDAN, *The notion of Byzantine diplomacy*, in: *Byzantine Diplomacy* 17: “one cannot imagine a Byzantine emperor, before the fourteenth century, voyaging to a foreign capital for diplomatic negotiations or in order to be granted a title. The Palaeologan period brought a drastic change in the perception of the emperor’s diplomatic mobility.”

Besides these ‘petitioning emperors’,<sup>3</sup> late Byzantium produced yet another unexpected kind of ambassador: empresses, princesses, and noble women who journeyed to distant cities and neighboring realms to negotiate peace, disperse foreign armies, and acquire military allies for the emperor. As these embassies have not yet been subject to scholarly research,<sup>4</sup> the aim of the present study is to establish what the sources tell us about individual diplomatic missions led by women and to suggest reasons for the emergence of female ambassadors on the late Byzantine political scene.

In the context of diplomatic missions, women have so far been mentioned only as the objects of marital policies, and matrimony did actually produce a peculiar form of ambassador. Though strictly condemned by Constantine Porphyrogenetos,<sup>5</sup> marriages between Byzantine princesses and foreign rulers took place throughout the middle and late Byzantine periods.<sup>6</sup> Such unions endeavored to effect, if possible, the conversion of the husband, promote Byzantine political interests, and spread the Orthodox faith at foreign courts.<sup>7</sup> The most notorious examples of such dynastic marriages include the cases of the purple-born Anna, sister of Basil II, to the Russian Prince Vladimir (c. 988); the betrothal of Theophano, the niece of John I Tsimiskes, to Otto II (972); the scandalous marriage of the six-year-old Simonis to the aged Serbian *kral* Stephen Uroš II Milutin (1299); and the no less controversial union of Theodora Kantakouzene, daughter of John VI Kantakouzenos, to Sultan Orhan I (1346).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the sources reveal very little regarding any ambassadorial activities on the part of these brides, perhaps because historiographers did not (and often could not) follow the princesses’ actions beyond the borders of the empire.

Even though these marriages sometimes achieved goals similar to those of regular embassies (the release of prisoners and hostages, military support, or at least the signing of a peace treaty), these ‘political’ brides can only be considered ambassadors in a very general, cultural sense. Unlike the conventional negotiations carried out by Byzantine legates, these women’s missions often lasted as

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘petitioning emperor’ was coined by KAZHDAN, *The notion of Byzantine diplomacy* 21.

<sup>4</sup> These missions also had their counterpart in the West. In her study, Le Jan mentions, in passing, the mediation effected by western princesses and empresses (R. LE JAN, *Mariage et relations internationales: l’amitié en question?* In: *Le relazioni internazionali nell’alto medioevo* [Settimane di studio della fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo 58]. Spoleto 2011, 189–222, see especially 219–221).

<sup>5</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio* 13 (ed. G. MORAVCSIK, transl. R. J. H. JENKINS, *De administrando imperio* [CFHB 1]. Washington, D.C. 1967, 70, 72): τοῦ μηδέποτε βασιλέα Ῥωμαίων συμπενθεριάσαι μετὰ ἔθνους παρῆλλαγαμένοις καὶ ξένοις ἔθεσι χρωμένον τῆς Ῥωμαϊκῆς καταστάσεως, μάλιστα δὲ ἀλλοπίστου καὶ ἀβαπτίστου, εἰ μὴ μετὰ μόνων τῶν Φράγγων. Τούτους γὰρ μόνους ὑπεξείλετο ὁ μέγας ἐκεῖνος ἀνὴρ, Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ ἅγιος, ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς τὴν γένεσιν ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων ἔσχε μερῶν ... Μετ’ ἄλλου δὲ τοῦ οἰουδήποτε ἔθνους μὴ δυναμένους τοῦτο ποιεῖν, ἀλλ’ ὁ τοῦτο ποιῆσαι τολμήσας ἵνα, ὡς παραβάτης πατρικῶν εἰσηγήσεων καὶ βασιλείων θεσμῶν, ἀλλότριος κρίνοιτο τῶν Χριστιανῶν καταλόγων καὶ τῷ ἀναθέματι παραδίδοιτο. (Never shall an emperor of the Romans ally himself in marriage with a nation of customs differing from and alien to those of the Roman order, especially with one that is infidel and unbaptized, unless it be with the Franks alone; for they alone were excepted by that great man, the holy Constantine, because he himself drew his origin from those parts; ... But with any other nation whatsoever it was not to be in the power (of the emperors) to do this, and he who dared to do it was to be condemned as an alien from the ranks of the Christians and subject to the anathema, as a transgressor of the imperial laws and ordinances.)

<sup>6</sup> Also see KAZHDAN, *The notion of Byzantine diplomacy* 17f. For a detailed discussion of foreign marriages, especially in the middle Byzantine period, see R. MACRIDES, *Dynastic marriages and political kinship*, in: *Byzantine Diplomacy 263–280*; A. G. PANAGOPOULOU, *Οἱ διπλωματικοὶ γάμοι στο Βυζάντιο (6<sup>ος</sup> – 12<sup>ος</sup> αἰώνας)*. Athena 2006; P. SCHREINER, *Die kaiserliche Familie: Ideologie und Praxis im Rahmen des internationalen Beziehungen in Byzanz*, in: *Le relazioni nell’alto medioevo 735–773*; A. J. SIMPSON, *Marriage Alliances between Byzantine and Western Courts: Affinity or Political Expediency?* *Byzantinos Domos* 12 (2001) 39–47.

<sup>7</sup> Studies describing Byzantine brides as ambassadors include, for example, J. HERRIN, *Theophano: Considerations on the education of a Byzantine princess*, in: *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium*, ed. J. Herrin. Princeton 2013, 238–260, and (in the same volume) EADEM, *Marriage: A Fundamental Element of Imperial Statecraft* 302–320.

<sup>8</sup> For details, see A. A. M. BRYER, *Greek Historians on the Turks: The Case of the First Byzantine-Ottoman Marriage*, in: *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern*, ed. R. H. C. Davis – J. M. Wallace-Hadrill. Oxford 1981, 471–493.

long as their marriages. Additionally, the princesses lacked the qualifications of official ambassadors in that they generally did not speak the local language on entering the foreign court and often knew little of the culture, ceremony, or political system of the country to which they had been sent. In order to meaningfully impact the political situation of their new home, they first had to create a network of relationships and establish rapport with their spouses. While it may be expected that the Byzantine princesses eventually adjusted to foreign cultures and customs, their most important role lay in the fact that they created a familial bond between their husbands and the emperor, who could then expect his sons-in-law to provide military assistance and diligently fulfill any mutual agreements.

In addition to these bride-ambassadors, the late Byzantine sources mention nine female emissaries of noble origin dispatched on official or semi-official missions to members of their families or even to rival courts. Using the categorization of Nicholas Oikonomides, some of their journeys qualify as simple missions undertaken “in order to communicate to the other party an important letter or document”; however, some of these women set out on full-size missions empowered to “negotiate arrangements between two countries.”<sup>9</sup>

Noble and imperial women who thus assumed the role of imperial ambassador did not appear on the Byzantine political scene out of nowhere. In recent decades, scholars have frequently remarked on the social status and prominent position of the Palaiologan princesses and noble women,<sup>10</sup> who repeatedly engaged in political, artistic, religious, and social affairs. The two sisters of Michael VIII, Maria and Eirene, opposed the union with the Catholic Church; Empress Theodora Palaiologina became an important founder and supporter of monasteries and a generous patroness of *de luxe* manuscripts;<sup>11</sup> Empress Eirene (Jolanta of Montferrat) exercised an independent policy from her court in

<sup>9</sup> OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine Diplomacy* 79.

<sup>10</sup> The list of works is rapidly expanding. See, for example, A. E. LAIOU, *The role of women in Byzantine society*. *JÖB* 31/1 (1981) 233–260 (reprint in: EADEM, *Gender, society and economic life in Byzantium*. Aldershot 1992, nr. XI); C. L. CONNOR, *Women of Byzantium*. New Haven 2004; A. E. LAIOU, *Observations on the Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women*. *BF* 9 (1985) 60–102; *Cambridge History of Byzantium*, ed. J. Shepard. Cambridge 2008, 67–68; S. T. BROOKS, *Sculpture and the Late Byzantine Tomb*, in: *Byzantium: Faith and Power, 1261–1557*, ed. H. C. Evans. New York – New Haven 2007, 95–103; S. T. BROOKS, *Poetry and Female Patronage in Late Byzantine Tomb Decoration: Two Epigrams by Manuel Philes*. *DOP* 60 (2006) 223–248; A. EFFENBERGER, *Die Klöster der beiden Kyrai Marthai und die Kirche des Bebaia Elpis-Klosters in Konstantinopel*. *Mill* 3 (2006) 255–293; S. E. J. GERSTEL – A.-M. TALBOT, *The Culture of Lay Piety in Medieval Byzantium 1054–1453*, in: *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Eastern Christianity*, ed. M. Angold. Cambridge 2006, 79–100; S. KALOPISSI-VERTI, *Dedicatory Inscriptions and Donor Portraits in Thirteenth-Century Churches of Greece* (*Österr. Akad. der Wiss., phil.-hist. Kl., Denkschriften* 226). Wien 1992; F. KIANKA, *The Letters of Demetrios Kydones to Empress Helena Kantakouzene Palaiologina*. *DOP* 46 (1996) 155–164; S. KOTZABASSI, *Scholarly Friendship in the Thirteenth Century: Patriarch Gregorios II Kyprios and Theodora Raoulaina*. *Parekbolai* 1 (2011) 115–170; K. KYRRIS, *Le rôle de la femme dans la société byzantine particulièrement pendant les derniers siècles*. *JÖB* 32/2 (1982) 463–472; D. M. NICOL, *The Byzantine Lady: Ten Portraits, 1250–1500*. Cambridge<sup>2</sup> 1996; A.-M. TALBOT, *Bluestocking Nuns: Intellectual Life in the Convents of Late Byzantium*. *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 (1983) 604–618; EADEM, *Byzantine Women, Saints’ Lives, and Social Welfare*, in: *Through the Eye of a Needle*, ed. E. Hanawalt *et alii*. Kirkeville 1994, 105–122; EADEM, *Building Activity in Constantinople under Andronikos II: The Role of Women Patrons in the Construction and Restoration of Monasteries*, in: *Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography and Everyday Life*, ed. N. Necipoglu (*The Medieval Mediterranean* 33). Leiden – Boston – Cologne 2001, 329–342.

<sup>11</sup> *Wife of Michael VIII (1258 – 1282)*. For details on Theodora’s life, see A.-M. TALBOT, *Empress Theodora Palaiologina, Wife of Michael VIII*. *DOP* 46 (1992) 295–303 (reprint in: EADEM, *Women and Religious Life in Byzantium*. Aldershot 2001, nr. XV). For an overview of the sources and literature, consult *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit (PLP)*, ed. E. Trapp – R. Walter – H.-V. Beyer *et alii*, 12 volumes. Wien 1976–1996, n. 21380. Theodora founded the Convent of Lips and the Nunnery of the Anargyroi. For the edition of the typica, see *Deux typica byzantins de l’époque des Paléologues (Mémoires de l’Académie de Belgique, Classe des lettres ser. II 13/4)*, ed. H. DELEHAYE. Bruxelles 1921, see 106–136 (Lips), 136–140 (Anargyroi). For translation and commentaries on the texts, see *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: a complete translation of the surviving founders’ typika and testaments*, vols. I–V, ed. A. Constantinides Hero – G. Constable – R. Allison – J. Thomas (*DOS* 35). Washington, D.C. 2001, see 1254–1286 (Lips), 1287–1293 (Anargyroi). E. MITSIU, *Regaining the true faith: the confession of faith of Theodora Palaiologina*, in: *L’Union à l’épreuve du formulaire: Professions*

Thessalonike (1303 – 1317);<sup>12</sup> and Empress Anna (Johanna of Savoy) governed the empire on behalf of her son (John V), who was a minor at the time (1341 – 1347),<sup>13</sup> to mention at least a few examples. Women of means frequently patronized artists and scholars, rebuilt monastic houses, sponsored poetry, and commissioned icons and copies of manuscripts. As the nunnery rules which have been preserved reveal, noble women became involved in the social issues of their day by enabling poor women to enter their monastic foundations, providing free medical care, and distributing food to the poor on certain feast days.

Already active in various areas of public life, it is not really surprising that late Byzantine women were repeatedly called on to assume an ambassadorial role. The sixteen missions carried out by nine female ambassadors between the years 1248/1250 and 1352 are related to Byzantine external policy (see the entries in **bold** in the list below), internal affairs (marked in *italics*), and peace missions among members of the imperial family (normal type):

Name of ambassador	Sent by	Sent to	Year
<b>1. Theodora Petraliphaina</b>	<b>Michael II</b>	<b>John III Batatzes</b>	<b>1248/1250</b>
<b>2. Theodora Petraliphaina</b>	<b>Michael II (?)</b>	<b>Theodore II Lascaris</b>	<b>1256</b>
<b>3. Theodora Petraliphaina</b>	<b>Michael II</b>	<b>Michael VIII</b>	<b>1261</b>
<i>4. Theodora Raoulaina</i>	<i>Andronikos II</i>	<i>Alexios Tarchaneiotes</i>	<i>1296</i>
<b>5. Maria Palaiologina</b>	<b>Andronikos II</b>	<b>Khan Kharbanda</b>	<b>1307</b>
6. Eudokia Palaiologina	Andronikos II	Alexios II	1301
<i>7. Tarchaneiotissa Nostongonissa</i>	<i>Andronikos II</i>	<i>the Arsenites</i>	<i>1303</i>
8. Eugenia Palaiologina	Andronikos II	Andronikos III	1321

de foi entre Églises d'Orient et d'Occident (XIIIe – XVIIIe s.), ed. M.-H. Blanchet – F. Gabriel. Paris 2016, 77–96. On the churches, see R. JANIN, *Les églises et les monastères des grands centres byzantins* (Bithynie, Hellespont, Latros, Galésios, Trébizonde, Athènes, Thessalonique). Paris 1975, 60; V. KIDONOPOULOS, *Bauten in Konstantinopel 1204 – 1328: Verfall und Zerstörung. Restaurierung, Umbau und Neubau von Profan- und Sakralbauten* (*Mainzer Veröffentlichungen zur Byzantinistik* 1). Wiesbaden 1994, for Anargyroi, see 1–4, for Lips, see XIII, 3, 29f., 52, 86f., 205f., 239. The documents that have been preserved indicate that she took a long-term interest in several private institutions: St. John the Theologian on Patmos (described as τὸ ἰδιόκτητον μοναστήριον), Theotokos Lembiotissa near Smyrna, which came to her through inheritance (γονικόθεν), other smaller monasteries in her private domain of Kos, Anabasion, Christ Savior, and a monastery known as τῶν Σπονδῶν. For these houses alone, the empress published at least nine documents in the period from 1259 to 1285. For details, see F. BARIŠIĆ, *Povelje vizantijskih carica*. ZRVI 13 (1971) 146–158. Βυζαντινὰ ἔγγραφα τῆς μονῆς Πάτμου, ed. E. L. Branouses. Athena 1980, I, ns. 31, 32, 34, 36. TALBOT, *Empress Theodora Palaiologina* 296f. F. DÖLGER, *Die Kaiserurkunden des Johannes-Theologos-Kloster auf Patmos*. BZ 28 (1928) 331–371. For the edited texts, see *Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevii*, I–VI, ed. F. Miklosich – I. Müller. Wien 1860–1890, IV 175–177, 260–261 VI 204–205, 217–219.

<sup>12</sup> The second wife of Andronikos II (1282–1328). For basic information and literature, see *PLP* n. 21361; H. CONSTANTINIDI-BIBIKOU, *Yolande de Montferrat, impératrice de Byzance*. *L'Hellenisme Contemporain* II 4/6 (1950) 425–442; NICOL, *The Byzantine Lady* 48–58; CH. DIEHL, *Figures byzantines*, II. Paris 1924, 226–245; E. MALAMUT, *Pouvoir et influence des impératrices de Thessalonique. Trois exemples célèbres du XIVe siècle*, in: *Villes méditerranéennes au Moyen Âge*, ed. E. Malamut – M. Ouerfelli. Aix-en-Provence 2014, 59–74, see esp. 64–69; S. RUNCIMAN, *Thessalonica and the Montferrat Inheritance*. *Gregorios o Palamas* 42 (1959) 27–34; M. LASKARIS, *Vizantiske princeze u srednjevekovnoj Srbiji*. Beograd 1926, 70–76.

<sup>13</sup> Johanna of Savoy, renamed Anna Palaiologina, second wife of Andronikos III (1328–1341). For works written on Anna, see S. ORIGONE, *Giovanna di Savoia alias Anna Paleologina: Latina a Bisanzio (c. 1306– c. 1365)* (*Donne d'Oriente e d'Occidente* 8). Milano 1999; É. MALAMUT, *Jeanne-Anne princesse de Savoie et impératrice de Byzance*, in: *Impératrices, princesses, aristocrates et saintes souveraines: De l'Orient chrétien et musulman au Moyen Âge et au début des Temps modernes*, ed. É. Malamut – A. Nicolaidis. Aix-en-Provence 2014, 85–117; NICOL, *The Byzantine Lady* 82–95; D. MURATORE, *Una principessa Sabauda sul trono di Bisanzio: Giovanna di Savoia imperatrice Anna Paleologina*. Chambéry 1906 (reprint in: *Mémoires de l'Académie des sciences, belles lettres et arts de Savoie*, IVe série 11 [1909] 223–474); F. DÖLGER, *Zum Kaisertum der Anna von Savoyen*. BZ 38 (1938) 193–196 (reprint in: IDEM, *Aufsätze zur Geschichte, Kultur und Sprache des byzantinischen Reiches* [*Paraspora* 30]. Ettal 1961, 208–221). For further sources and literature, see *PLP* n. 21347.



9. Eugenia Palaiologina	Andronikos III	Andronikos II	1321
10. Eugenia Palaiologina	Andronikos II	Andronikos III	1321
11. Maria-Xene Palaiologina	Andronikos II	Andronikos III	1322
12. Eirene Asenina	John VI	John and Manuel Asen	1341
13. Eirene Asenina	John VI	Matthew Kant.	1347
14. Anna of Savoy	John VI	John V	1351
<b>15. Anna of Savoy</b>	<b>John VI</b>	<b>Helene of Serbia</b>	<b>1351</b>
16. Eirene Asenina	John VI	John V	1352

These women are naturally not ambassadors by profession as their missions are usually of short duration.<sup>14</sup> Only one of these legates is given the official title of an ambassador (πρεσβύς), which however does not indicate that the other princesses would not have acted officially.<sup>15</sup> As clear-cut categorization of individual missions is problematic, due to the paucity of information, the English terms ‘ambassador,’ ‘negotiator,’ ‘messenger,’ ‘mediator,’ and ‘legate’ appear interchangeably in the present study in order to avoid unnecessary repetition.

## II. CROSSING BORDERS: MISSIONS RELATED TO FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Three late Byzantine female ambassadors were charged with missions to the rulers of Nicea, Constantinople, Serbia, and the Mongols during which they negotiated marital unions, peace treaties, the withdrawal of enemy forces, and military alliances. Though female ambassadors were extremely rare in the diplomatic field, these missions, as captured in the sources, testify that diplomacy in Byzantium was not exclusively a male domain.

### II.1 BETWEEN EPIROS AND NICEA (1–3)<sup>16</sup>

St. Theodora<sup>17</sup> of Arta was the wife of the Epirot Despot Michael II and probably Byzantium’s first female ambassador. Her story is set in a period of struggle waged by the successor states of Nicaea and Epiros for the renovation of the Byzantine Empire. Contemporary chronicles reveal that she was involved in no fewer than three diplomatic missions. She is portrayed as a pro-active personality who, often at personal risk, negotiated with three different emperors of the rival realm and ratified three ‘international’ agreements that promoted Nicene-Epirot relations even if they failed to inaugurate a lasting peace. These achievements do not appear in her legend, a deficiency which must be ascribed to the hagiographer’s eagerness to dissociate his heroine from political power, traditionally considered inappropriate in a (holy) woman.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The missions of their male colleagues were often also limited to very few occasions. In fact, professional ambassadors only appear in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. For details see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 18f.

<sup>15</sup> For the various terms used for ambassadors in Byzantium in 7<sup>th</sup>–early 13<sup>th</sup> century, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 20–24.

<sup>16</sup> Numbers refer to the numbers in the above table.

<sup>17</sup> For further literature and details on Theodora, see *PLP* n. 5664.

<sup>18</sup> For details about Theodora’s life and legend, see *BHG* 1736 and Job monachi Vita S. Theodorae, *PG* 127, 904–908; Life of St. Theodora of Arta, transl. A.-M. Talbot, in: *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints’ Lives in English Translation*, ed. A.-M. Talbot. Washington, D.C. 2006, 323–333; also see the critical notes by Talbot, *op. cit.* 323–325; E. PATLAGEAN, Une sainte souveraine grecque: Theodora impératrice d’Épire (XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle). *BSI* 56 (1995) 453–460. For a discussion of the saint’s legend versus the reality of her life, see P. MELICHOVÁ, Crown, Veil and Halo: Confronting Ideals of Royal Female Sanctity in the West and in the Byzantine East in Late Middle Ages (13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> Century). *Byz* 77 (2007) 315–344; S. CONSTANTINOIU,

The first embassy took place sometime between 1248 and 1250<sup>19</sup> when Michael sent Theodora to the court of John III Batatzes to witness the engagement of their eldest son, Nikephoros, to John's granddaughter, Maria, and to ratify an agreement (presumably a peace treaty) between the two rulers. According to a contemporary of these events, George Akropolites, Theodora and her son met with the emperor in the region of Pegai, located on the south Anatolian shore of the Sea of Marmara, where the official betrothal took place. The Epirot party then returned home.<sup>20</sup>

Theodora's first mission is also mentioned by three other sources. While the account of Theodore Skoutariotes follows verbatim the text of Akropolites,<sup>21</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras and Ephraim<sup>22</sup> claim that the initiative did not come from John, as suggested by Akropolites, but from Michael II. Gregoras's chronicle also informs us that Theodora ratified an official treaty or agreement. It is not certain how much actual negotiating took place in Pegai. The princess may have been authorized to make important decisions or she may have merely confirmed documents that had been settled upon in advance. Whatever the case, the sources agree that before her departure for Epiros, Theodora received the emperor's promise that the wedding would take place the following year.<sup>23</sup> Considering these facts, the princess's mission seems to have been mainly of representative character even though her presence could also have been required to fulfill her parental duties to the young groom, who was around nine years old at the time.

The promise of peace between Nicea and Epiros was abruptly thwarted when Michael II seized several cities in western Macedonia belonging to the Nicene emperor (1251). As he could not defend his conquest, he soon had to sign a new peace treaty with his opponent (1252).<sup>24</sup> The conflict, however, did not end there. After John III's death (October 1254), the Bulgarian tsar invaded Nicene territory. One year later, Michael II used the opportunity to occupy the borderlands belonging to his

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Generic Hybrids: The 'Life' of Synkletike and the 'Life' of Theodora of Arta. *JÖB* 56 (2006) 113–133. For details on the circumstances of the reign of Michael II, see D. M. NICOL, *The Despotate of Epiros 1267–1479: A Contribution to the History of Greece in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge 1984, chap. 7, 9.

<sup>19</sup> For information on dating this event, see George Akropolites (transl. and commentary R. MACRIDES, *George Akropolites, The History: Introduction, translation and commentary*. Oxford 2007, 251).

<sup>20</sup> George Akropolites 49 (ed. A. HEISENBERG, *Georgii Acropolitae Opera, I–VII*. Leipzig 1903, I 88f.): Ὁ μὲν οὖν βασιλεὺς Ἰωάννης μετὰ τοῦ δεσπότης Μιχαὴλ συνθήκας πεποίηκε καὶ εἰς κήδους κοινωνίαν συνήλθε· τὸν γὰρ τοῦ Μιχαὴλ υἱὸν Νικηφόρον ἐπὶ τῇ θυγατέρα τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ βασιλέως Θεοδώρου τὴν Μαρίαν γαμβρὸν ἠγάγετο. καὶ ἡ τοῦτου γαμετὴ Θεοδώρα τὸν Νικηφόρον μεθ' ἑαυτῆς λαβοῦσα εἰς τὴν ἔω διαπεραιούται, καὶ περὶ τὰ μέρη τῶν Πηγῶν τῷ βασιλεὶ διάγοντι ἐντυγχάνει, καὶ ἡ τῶν παιδῶν μνηστεία γεγένηται. καὶ ἡ Θεοδώρα αὐτῆς τὸν αὐτῆς υἱὸν λαβοῦσα οἴκαδε ὑπεχώρησε παρὰ τὸν αὐτῆς σύζυγον Μιχαὴλ, προσηκόντως φιλοφρονηθέντες παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως. MACRIDES 249.

<sup>21</sup> Theodoros Skoutariotes (ed. K. SATHAS, *Σύνοψις χρονική. Μεσαιωνική βιβλιοθήκη VII*. Venezia 1894, 500).

<sup>22</sup> Ephraim, *PG* 143, 318 D.

<sup>23</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras II 8 (ed. L. SCHOPEN, *Nicephori Gregorae Byzantinae historiae, I–II*. Bonn 1829, I 47–48): τέως μὲν οὖν πρέσβεις ἀποστείλας πρὸς βασιλέα Ἰωάννην, ἐζήτηι νύμφην ἀγαγέσθαι τῷ ἑαυτῷ υἱῷ Νικηφόρῳ τὴν τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ βασιλέως Θεοδώρου τοῦ Λάσκαρι θυγατέρα Μαρίαν· καὶ ἤνυσε τὸ ζητούμενον. ἐγένοντο γὰρ τῆς μνηστείας καὶ συμφωνίας, οἷα δὴ καὶ γεγόνασι, συμπαραγενομένης τῷ υἱῷ Νικηφόρῳ καὶ τῆς μητρὸς Θεοδώρας κατὰ τὴν ἔω, ἅμα μὲν καὶ πρὸς ἐπίσκεψιν τῆς μνηστευομένης νύμφης, ἅμα δὲ καὶ πρὸς βεβαίωσιν τῶν ἐν τούτοις συμφωνιῶν. ὃν δὴ γενομένων, τὴν νύμφην αὐτόθι παρὰ τὰ οἴκοι καταλιπούσα, ἐπανέστρεφεν οἴκαδε σὺν τῷ υἱῷ Νικηφόρῳ Θεοδώρα ἡ τοῦ Μιχαὴλ σύζυγος, ἐγγύας λαβοῦσα παρὰ τῶν κηδεστῶν βασιλέων, ἐς τοῦπιόν ἔτος τοὺς γάμους τελείσθαι. For further information on the circumstances of the treaty, see NICOL, *The Despotate of Epiros* 149f.

<sup>24</sup> George Akropolites 49 (I 88–92 HEISENBERG). In 1251, Michael II set out to conquer all of northern Greece. He reunited to his principality most of the territories occupied by Bulgaria after the Battle of Klokotnica in 1230 and he crossed the border to Thessaly. John III Batatzes nevertheless responded promptly to Michael's attack bringing to Europe a large army commanded by Nikephoros Tarchaneiotes. The Niceans gradually captured the cities of Vodena and Ostrovos, and, after Theodore Petraliphas, brother-in-law of Michael II, passed over to the emperor, Kastoria and the surrounding cities also opened their gates to the emperor. Cornered by the Nicene army, Michael II sent an embassy headed by Xeros, the Metropolitan of Nau-paktos to negotiate peace. The two parties soon reached an agreement and Michael II signed a new treaty in Larissa by which he relinquished the towns Prilep and Veles and the fortress Kroai in Albania.

rival (early 1256).<sup>25</sup> The new emperor, Theodore II, first conducted a successful military operation against the Bulgarians and then turned his army to Thrace. Aware that the hostilities between Nicea and Epiros could erupt in full strength, Theodora set out on her second mission in September 1256.<sup>26</sup> An eyewitness of her journey, George Akropolites, testifies:

Since it was the month of September and the wife of the despot Michael, Theodora, came to the emperor [Theodore II Laskaris] with her son Nikephoros in order to complete the marriage ties with the emperor (...) the emperor was hurrying to reach Thessalonike, where he intended to celebrate the wedding. And so, leaving the region where he was [Regina on the Bulgarian border], he started on the road to Thessalonike. On the way he made an agreement with the despot's wife. Theodora (...) agreed (...) to the emperor's terms, for she was in his hands, almost as if in prison (...). She agreed to give the emperor the fortress of Servia and, with it, Dyrrhachion also. In addition, oaths were advanced in writing and were sent to the despot Michael. He (...) agreed to the terms sworn (...). When the emperor arrived in Thessalonike, he completed the marriage of his daughter Maria with (...) Nikephoros.<sup>27</sup>

Akropolites's text indicates that in the course of her mission in 1256, Theodora had negotiating powers and was able to make binding decisions. Theodore II did not simply take her hostage and send an ultimatum to his opponent; instead, he negotiated an agreement with the princess and then sent the document to Michael for ratification. Theodore Skoutariotes mentions that the meeting of Theodore and Theodora took place by Boleron in the land of Lentza (north of Thessalonike) around the Feast of the Exaltation of the Life-Giving Cross (September 14) and that Patriarch Arsenios himself, who was with the emperor, celebrated the wedding of Maria and Nikephoros.<sup>28</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras, writing a generation later and drawing on an unknown source, informs us that

Immediately after the fall equinox, the emperor and the Roman army turned to Thessaly. He had not yet come to Macedonia when Theodora, the wife of the renegade Michael, came to him in order to conclude the marriage of her son with Maria, the daughter of the emperor, and to return all Roman territories which her husband had usurped as booty. Her request was prompt-

<sup>25</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras III 1 (I 56–57 SCHOPEN).

<sup>26</sup> D. M. NICOL, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261–1453*. New York 1972, 32.

<sup>27</sup> George Akropolites 63–64 (I 132–134 HEISENBERG): Ἐπει δὲ καὶ ὁ Σεπτέβριος ἐφεστήκει μὴν καὶ ἡ τοῦ δεσπότητος Μιχαὴλ σύζυγος Θεοδώρα παρὰ τὸν βασιλέα ἀφίκετο μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς Νικηφόρου, τὸ πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα κηδος ἀποπληρώσοντες ὅπερ ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἰωάννης ὁ τοῦ βασιλεύοντος πατὴρ πρὸ χρόνων τινῶν συμπεφώνηκεν, ὁ μὲν βασιλεὺς ἐσπευδε τὴν Θεσσαλονίκην καταλαβεῖν, ἔνθα καὶ τοὺς γάμους ποιῆσαι βεβούληται. καὶ δὴ περ ἀπάρας ἐξ οὐπερ ἔκειτο τόπου τῆς εἰς τὴν Θεσσαλονίκην φερούσης ἤπτετο· καθ' ὁδὸν δὲ μετὰ τῆς τοῦ δεσπότητος συζύγου τὰς συμβιβάσεις ἐποίησε. ἡ μὲν οὖν τοῦ δεσπότητος σύζυγος Θεοδώρα καὶ ἄκουσα τοῖς τοῦ βασιλέως λόγοις συνήρχετο· ἐντὸς γὰρ τῶν ἐκείνου χειρῶν οὕσα καὶ μικροῦ δεῖν ὡς ἐν εἰρκετῇ τυγχάνουσα οὐκ εἶχε τι ἄλλο δρᾶσαι. Συμπεφώνηκε γοῦν δοῦναι πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα τὸ κάστρον τὰ Σέρβια καὶ σὺν αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ Δυρράχιον. ἐπὶ τούτοις καὶ ὄρκοι ἐγγράφως προέβησαν καὶ ἀπεστάλησαν πρὸς τὸν δεσπότην Μιχαὴλ. ὁ δὲ, (...) τοῖς ὁμοιοσημένιοις συνῆλθεν· (...). Ἐπει δὲ ὁ βασιλεὺς τὴν Θεσσαλονίκην κατέειλε, τοὺς ἐπὶ τῇ θυγατρὶ Μαρίας γάμους μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ δεσπότητος Μιχαὴλ Νικηφόρου, ὃν καὶ δεσπότην τετίμηκεν, ἐκπεπλήρωκεν. MACRIDES 308. Also see M. NUSTAZOPOULOU, Γράμμα τοῦ ἱερέως καὶ νομικοῦ τῶν Παλατιῶν Νικήτα Καραντηνοῦ πρὸς τὸν ἡγούμενον τῆς ἐν Πάτμῳ μονῆς Ἰωάννου τοῦ Θεολόγου (1256), in: *Charisterion eis Anastasion K. Orlandon*, II. Athena 1966, 286–308.

<sup>28</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras III 1 (I 57 SCHOPEN): ... ἄρτι τοῦ ἡλίου περὶ τροπὰς τυγχάνοντος φθινοπωρινὰς, ἀναλαβὼν τὰ Ῥωμαϊκὰ στρατεύματα εὐθὺς Θετταλίας ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐπορεύετο. ἀλλὰ γὰρ οὐπω Μακεδονία τὰ βασικὰ στρατόπεδα ὑπεδέδεχτο καὶ Θεοδώρα ἡ τοῦ ἀποστάτου Μιχαὴλ γυνὴ ἐφοῖτα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐκτελεσοῦσα τε τοὺς γάμους τοῦ τε υἱοῦ Νικηφόρου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς τοῦ βασιλέως θυγατρὸς, καὶ ἀποδώσουσα ὅσα παρεξίων ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς ἐν λείας τρόπῳ ὑπηγάγετο μέρη τῆς τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἐπικρατείας. καὶ ἦν ταῦτα μετὰ μικρὸν ῥαδίως τῷ βασιλεῖ τελεσθέντα καὶ ἡ Θεοδώρα ἀπῆει πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα Μιχαὴλ καὶ Μαρίαν ἤδη μεθ' ἑαυτῆς ἐπαγομένη τὴν ἐπὶ τῷ υἱῷ νύμφην.

ly and without delay granted by the emperor, and Theodora, accompanied by Maria, the bride of her son, returned to her husband.<sup>29</sup>

While the chroniclers generally agree on the place and time of the meeting,<sup>30</sup> the interpretation of the circumstances is less straightforward. The texts somewhat unexpectedly suggest that Emperor Theodore II arrived in Macedonia with an army and a patriarch to celebrate the wedding of his daughter. One plausible explanation is that the marriage had been planned in advance, perhaps already in the course of the Pegai meeting, for the time when both spouses would have reached the canonical age for marriage. If Theodora was born around 1225,<sup>31</sup> Nikephoros (born around 1240) was probably nine years old on his first visit to the imperial court. In 1256, he would have been of an age to marry; however, his father's military actions that same year would have jeopardized the Pegai agreements, and Theodore's arrival in Thessaly with an army certainly appears more like a punitive expedition than the festive arrival of the father of the bride. Theodora, eager to prevent new hostilities and promote a union that she hoped would bring lasting peace to both countries, hurried to meet the emperor before he reached the city. Under the circumstances, she must have been prepared to surrender the territories recently occupied by Michael; however, the emperor's request for her native Servia (the fortress) and also Dyrrhachion must have been unexpected. The princess decided to sacrifice the strategic fortresses in order to prevent an immediate military conflict, but the loss did not exactly promote harmonious relations between Nicea and Epiros.

By 1257, Michael II had concluded military alliances with his sons-in-law, the prince of Achaia and the Sicilian king, and reopened the conflict with Nicea.<sup>32</sup> The response of the new Nicene emperor, Michael Palaiologos, was to dispatch an army led by his brother, John. Between January and June 1259, the Nicene troops gradually neutralized the armies allied with Epiros in a campaign concluded by the well-known Battle of Pelagonia. According to George Akropolites, Theodora followed her husband to war and was present in Kastoria (June 1259) on the night when the Epirot troops dispersed at a mere report of approaching enemy forces.<sup>33</sup>

While Michael II may have held his wife responsible for the forfeit of Servia and Dyrrhachion, he must have valued her as a mediator, for he remembered her abilities in the autumn of 1261<sup>34</sup> when he gave up hope of reconquering Constantinople and decided to come to terms with Michael VIII. George Pachymeres informs us that Michael II "sent his wife, Theodora, and his son, John, to the emperor: her to negotiate peace and his son to serve as a hostage as long as he lived and to marry, according to his rank, a woman whom the emperor would give him."<sup>35</sup> Theodora was thus appoint-

<sup>29</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras III 1 (I 57 SCHOPEN): ... ἄρτι τοῦ ἡλίου περὶ τροπὰς τυγχάνοντος φθινοπωρινὰς, ἀναλαβὸν τὰ Ῥωμαϊκὰ στρατεύματα εὐθὺς Θεσσαλίας ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐπορεύετο. ἀλλὰ γὰρ οὐπω Μακεδονία τὰ βασιλικά στρατόπεδα ὑπεδεδέγετο καὶ Θεοδώρα ἡ τοῦ ἀποστάτου Μιχαὴλ γυνὴ ἐφοῖτα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐκτελέσουσά τε τοὺς γάμους τοῦ τε υἱοῦ Νικηφόρου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς τοῦ βασιλέως θυγατρὸς, καὶ ἀποδώσουσα ὅσα παρεξίων ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς ἐν λείας τρόπῳ ὑπηγάγετο μέρη τῆς τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἐπικρατείας. καὶ ἦν ταῦτα μετὰ μικρὸν ῥαδίως τῷ βασιλεῖ τελεσθέντα καὶ ἡ Θεοδώρα ἀπῆει πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα Μιχαὴλ καὶ Μαρὶαν ἤδη μεθ' ἐαυτῆς ἐπαγομένη τὴν ἐπὶ τῷ υἱῷ νύμφην.

<sup>30</sup> MACRIDES 311–312, n. 31, identified this place as "the area of Langadas which is a place near Thessalonike", apparently north or northeast of the city.

<sup>31</sup> For details, see *Holy Women of Byzantium* 323

<sup>32</sup> George Akropolites ch. 7, 9 (HEISENBERG).

<sup>33</sup> George Akropolites 80 (I 165 HEISENBERG). MACRIDES 358.

<sup>34</sup> The passage describing Theodora's final mission precedes the triumphant return of John Palaiologos, brother of the emperor, to Constantinople after concluding the negotiations which followed the Pelagonian victory. The text, however, states that Michael II made the decision to recognize the emperor after the taking of Constantinople. For details, see the following quotation.

<sup>35</sup> George Pachymeres II 12 (ed. A. FAILLER, *Rérelations historiques*, I–V [CFHB 24/I–V]. Paris 1984–2000, I 151–153): Ὁ δὲ Μιχαὴλ ... νοῦν λαβὼν, ἀλούσης τῆς πόλεως, πέμπει πρὸς βασιλέα τὴν τε σύζυγον Θεοδώραν καὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν παῖδα,



ed once more to assume the role of diplomat under very unfavorable circumstances and, endowed with plenipotentiary powers, to negotiate a new agreement.<sup>36</sup> As far as we know, her embassy was a success although leaving her son behind in Constantinople as a permanent hostage must have been a bitter end to her career as an ambassador.

In the summer of 1264, after the imperial army had overpowered its western opponents and forced the Epirot despot to recognize the Byzantine emperor as his sovereign, Nicea and Epirus signed yet another treaty. Michael's son Nikephoros, previously married to Maria Laskarina (who had died in the meantime), then wed the emperor's niece, Anna Palaiologina.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, the sources do not mention whether Theodora played a role in negotiating this final treaty.

## II.2 THE LADY AND THE MONGOL KHAN (8)

Though the Nicene rulers returned to the ancient capital of Constantinople and restored the Byzantine Empire in 1261, the eastern border of the new state remained insecure. Hoping to create a counterweight to the expansionist activities of the Turkish princes, Michael VIII gave his illegitimate daughter, Maria,<sup>38</sup> in marriage to the Mongol Khan Abaqa in 1265. After the khan's death in 1282, the princess, along with her daughter Theodora, returned to Constantinople where she re-founded the nunnery of the *Theotokos of the Mongols*<sup>39</sup> and where she may have taken the veil. In 1307, her brother Andronikos persuaded her to leave her foundation and lead an army to Nicea. Once there, she was also to negotiate a marriage alliance with the Mongol ruler, Kharbanda, and, as a sort of permanent legate, take up residence in the East to help contain the Turks.<sup>40</sup>

Maria's embassy was certainly a most extraordinary one. She is the only known late Byzantine female legate sent to negotiate with a Mongol ruler and also the only one associated with the movement of an army. Her status as the widow of a Mongol khan and her knowledge of the Mongol language and culture clearly recommended her for the post of ambassador. On the other hand, the condition that she negotiate a marriage raises some questions as the chronicler does not mention that she brought along a prospective bride. Was the author ill-informed as to her mission? Did negotiations fail? Was Maria herself the intended bride? Or did Andronikos plan to send an eligible lady only after the negotiations came to a successful conclusion? It has been assumed that she herself was to be the bride,<sup>41</sup> but this seems rather unlikely. If Maria was around twelve years old when sent to

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ἐκείνην μὲν τὰς εἰρηνικὰς πρεσβεύουσας, τὸν δ' υἱὸν ἐσόμενον ὄμηρον πλὴν ἐς διηνεκές, ἐφ' ὅσον ζῶη, ἀξόμενον καὶ τὴν συνοικήσουσαν προσηκόντως, ἦν δὴ καὶ δώσει ὁ βασιλεὺς. This mission is later mentioned by the same author: see *ibidem* I 315. For the fate of this nobleman, see George Pachymeres VI 24 (II 613–614 FAILLER).

<sup>36</sup> On missions which mark the submission of a foreign power to the Byzantine emperor, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 38–49.

<sup>37</sup> F. DÖLGER – P. WIRTH, *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des oströmischen Reiches von 565–1453*, III: *Regesten von 1204–1282*. München <sup>2</sup>1977, n. 1931.

<sup>38</sup> *PLP* n. 21395. See esp. George Pachymeres III 9 (I 235 FAILLER). NICOL, *Last Centuries of Byzantium* 210. CONNOR, *Women of Byzantium* 312–316. For the tradition of Maria as the re-founder of Theotokos Panagiotissa in Constantinople, see R. JANIN, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire Byzantine*, I. *Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat oecuménique*, III: *Les églises et les monastères*. Paris <sup>2</sup>1969, 213f. N. TETERIATNIKOV, *The Dedication of the Chora Monastery in the Time of Andronikos II Palaiologos*. *Byz* 66 (1996) 188–207.

<sup>39</sup> *Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevii* I 312.

<sup>40</sup> George Pachymeres XIII 26 (IV 683 FAILLER): Τὸ δὲ πρὸς τὸν Χαρμπαντᾶν κῆδος καὶ λίαν ἐξητοιμάζετο. Καὶ τὰ τῆς Νικαίας μέρη κακούμενα πυνθανόμενος, τὴν οἰκίαν ἀνταδέλφην Μαρίαν, τὴν καὶ δέσποιναν τῶν Μουγουλίων θρυλλομένην, συνάμα λαφ' τῷ ἀρκοῦντι πέμπει πρὸς Νικαίαν. Ἐπήγγειλε δὲ καὶ αὐτὴν, καθημένην τῆδε, καθιστάειν τὸ πρὸς τὸν Χαρμπαντᾶν κῆδος καὶ τὰ τῶν Περσῶν δουλαγωγεῖν ὡς οἶόν τε πράγματα. Maria's mission, interestingly, has echoes in the later mission of the Russian tsarina Catherine I, wife of Peter I, who negotiated peace conditions with the Turkish vizier in the course of the Russian-Turkish War in June 1711.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, CONNOR, *Women of Byzantium* 315 or *PLP* n. 21395.

marry Khan Abaqa in 1265, she would have been in her fifties in 1307, an unusual age for marriage.<sup>42</sup> Whatever the emperor's objective, Maria was apparently to remain in the East as a sort of permanent ambassador.

As Catherine Connor has suggested in her study, it is possible that Maria did return to the capital. The *Deesis* mosaic of the Chora Monastery, created between 1313 and 1321, contains an image of a lady dressed in monastic attire accompanied by an inscription "[...] of Andronikos Palaiologos the lady of the Mongols, Melane the nun."<sup>43</sup> Considering the Mongol connection, the lady depicted in the image could only have been the half-sister or the daughter of said emperor. However, while Andronikos's daughter Maria was also married to a Mongol khan, the fresco is usually identified with the image of his half-sister. If the identification is correct, then Maria probably returned safely to her nunnery, took the veil there along with the name Melane, and perhaps even financially supported the reconstruction of the Chora Monastery, which was rebuilt by her relative, Theodore Metochites.

### II.3 ANNA PALAIOLOGINA: AUTOKRATORISSA IN THE SERBIAN CAMP (15)

While historians mostly describe Anna Palaiologina (also known as Johanna of Savoy) as a weak and insecure ruler, she proved an energetic ambassador, who saved the empire from a Serbian invasion and perhaps a new period of civil war. In 1341, the sound rule of Andronikos III was cut short by his premature death. The government that was formed to reign in the name of his young son, John V, (led by Anna of Savoy<sup>44</sup>, Patriarch John Kalekas, John Kantakouzenos, and Alexios Apokaukos) soon became divided, and a new conflict ensued with Anna, Kalekas, and Apokaukos standing in opposition to the closest associate of the late emperor, John Kantakouzenos.<sup>45</sup> Following a devastating civil war (1341–1347), Kantakouzenos ascended the throne as John VI and became the senior emperor and father-in-law of John Palaiologos. Their relationship was filled with tension and soon required an ambassador to prevent further bloodshed.

As ruler of Thessalonike, the young emperor became discontented with the limited share of power that his in-laws had allowed him. He therefore sought an alliance with the great Serbian emperor, Stephen Dušan, who welcomed an opportunity to interfere with the politics of the empire he hoped to conquer. To further separate the young emperor from his rival, Dušan offered John the hand of a Bulgarian princess, the younger sister of his wife, in return for John's repudiating his present consort, Helene Kantakouzene.<sup>46</sup> It was under these circumstances that John Kantakouzenos, at that time himself involved in the Genoese–Venetian war, persuaded Empress Anna to intervene (1352).<sup>47</sup> According to Nikephoros Gregoras, Kantakouzenos swore an oath to Anna before the divine icon Hodegetria, promising to cede to John V immediate control of the empire if only the latter would break his agreement with the Serbian king and return to his wife. Kantakouzenos would then either

<sup>42</sup> The fact that Maria's death is placed between 1307 and 1320 further advances the argument that by the time she set out on her embassy, she was already of an advanced age.

<sup>43</sup> P. A. UNDERWOOD, *The Karyie Djami*, I. New York 1966, 45:

[...Α]νδ[ρ]ων[ι]κού τοῦ Πα  
λαιολόγου ἡ κυρὰ τῶν  
Μουγουλίων Μελάνη ἡ  
μοναχὴ

<sup>44</sup> *PLP* n. 21347.

<sup>45</sup> For details on this period, see NICOL, *Last Centuries* 191–212.

<sup>46</sup> See Nikephoros Gregoras XXVII 27 (III 148 SCHOPEN).

<sup>47</sup> NICOL, *Byzantine Lady* 92. IDEM, *Last Centuries* 244f. A. FAILLER, *La déposition du patriarche Calliste Ier (1353)*. *REB* 31 (1973) 5–163, see esp. 78.

rule only Constantinople and its suburbs as far as Selymbria or become a monk. Kantakouzenos allegedly gave this oath to the empress in writing as well.

John VI's promises persuaded the empress, who departed for Thessalonike; once there, she quickly prevailed on her son to discard the Serbian alliance.<sup>48</sup> Anna also made her way to the Serbian camp and spoke at length with the tsarina. She allegedly complained about the deceitfulness of the Serbians, threatened them with heavenly punishments, and predicted their destruction unless they abandoned the expedition.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, the empress succeeded in convincing the Serbians to leave and commanded the assembled allies to disperse. She then induced the young emperor to request from his father-in-law sole authority over Ainos and the cities of Chalkidike. His wishes granted, John left for Thrace<sup>50</sup> while the empress remained in Thessalonike and wisely governed the city until her death.

The empress's mission to the Serbian camp is the only occasion during which a female legate negotiated with the wife of a foreign ruler. Whether Anna chose to address the tsarina out of modesty, because she believed that a woman would more readily accept her message, or to avoid embarrassing the Serbian ruler is unclear. The idea that empresses did communicate with the wives of foreign rulers even as their husbands negotiated with their male counterparts is nevertheless evidenced by the fact that Empress Theodora, wife of Justinian I, sent presents to the wife of the Persian shah and by the reception of the Russian ruler Olga by Helene of Byzantium in the course of the celebrations and rituals surrounding Olga's baptism in 955/7<sup>51</sup>. While it is probable that there were translators present (though the text mentions none), the fact that Helene of Bulgaria spoke Greek<sup>52</sup> may have played a role in Anna's decision to meet with her.<sup>53</sup> Though the exact content of these particular negotiations remains unknown, the notion entertained by Kantakouzenos that Anna intimidated the tsar's wife into leaving mentioned above is improbable. The intelligent and learned Helene of Bulgaria, fluent

<sup>48</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XXVII 28 (III 149 BEKKER): *καὶ παραλαβὼν Ἄνναν τὴν ἐκείνου μητέρα, τηρουμένην τέως ἐν Βυζαντίῳ, ἐς τὴν τῶν ὁδηγῶν ἀπήει μονὴν, κάκει τῆς θείας εἰκόνας ἔμπροσθεν αὐτίκα μάλα δώσειν ὑπισχεῖται τῷ ταύτης μὲν υἱῷ, γαμβρῷ δὲ αὐτοῦ, τὸν ἅπαντα κληρὸν τῆς βασιλείας, ἀφεμένῳ μὲν τὰς τοῦ Κράλη συνθήκας ἐκείνας, ἐλληλοῦσι δ' ἐς Βυζάντιον εὐθὺς παρὰ τὴν νόμιμον σύζυγον, αὐτὸς δὲ δυσὶν θάτερον, ἢ τῷ Βυζαντίῳ διὰ βίου ἐνδιατρίβων βασιλικῶς καὶ αὐτὸς τὰ μέχρι Σηλυμβρίας ἐντεῦθεν διοικεῖν πράγματα κατὰ γνώμην τοῦ γαμβροῦ, ἢ τὸν ἡσύχιον ἐλόμενος καὶ ἀπράγμονα βίον οἴκοι καθῆσθαι. καὶ ἅμα ἐγγραφὸν ταῖν χεροῖν αὐτῆς ἐνετίθει τὴν γνώμην φρικωδεστάτους ὄρκους ἡσφαλισμένην τε καὶ ἀπαραλόγιστον τὴν ὑπέραγνον θεομήτορα προβαλλομένους ἐγγυητήν. ἢ δ' εὐθὺς ἀπιστεῖν οὐδαμῇ ἔχουσα τὰ τε τῶν οὕτως ἐχόντων ἐγγράφων ὄρκων βιβλία εἰλήφει, καὶ ἅμα ὅλη σπουδῇ κατέπλευσεν ἐς Θεσσαλονίκην, κάκει τῷ υἱῷ τὰ εἰκότα ὠμίληκῦα καὶ τοὺς φρικώδεις ἐκείνους ἐμφανίσασα ὄρκους, τῶν τοῦ Κράλη συνθηκῶν τελέως ἀποσχέσθαι πέπεικεν εὐθύς. (Translation mine.) The same story is told later on (Nikephoros Gregoras XXVII 52 [III 169–170 BEKKER]), this time from the perspective of John V as he recounts the wrongs he has suffered at the hands of his father-in-law.*

<sup>49</sup> John Kantakouzenos IV 27 (ed. L. SCHOPEN, Ioannis Cantacuzeni Historiarum libri IV, I–III. Bonn 1828–1832, III 208): *πρὸς τε Κράλην ἐξεληθοῦσα καὶ διαλεχθεῖσα μετὰ τῆς γυναικός, ἀδίκους καὶ παρανόμους ἀπεδείκνυεν ἐπιχειροῦντας, καὶ κεραυνοὺς ἐπανετείνοτο καὶ ἄλλας ἐξ οὐρανοῦ πληγὰς, ὅτι πρὸς τῷ Ῥωμαίους τοσαῦτα ἀδίκους ἐπιποροῦντας καὶ παρασπονδοῦντας ἔτι καὶ πολέμους αὐτοῖς ἐμφυλίους ἐπεγείρουσιν, ἐξ ὧν ἐκείνοι μὲν διαφθαρήσονται ἀλλήλοισι περιπίπτοντες, αὐτοῖς δ' ἐξέσται τὴν ἐκείνων καρποῦσθαι ἀδεῶς.*

<sup>50</sup> For the complete account of Anna's meeting with John Kantakouzenos and her actions in Thessalonike, see John Kantakouzenos IV 27 (III 200–209 SCHOPEN).

<sup>51</sup> John Malalas XVIII 61 (ed. J. THURN, Ioannis Malalae Chronographia [CFHB 35]. Berlin 2000, 390): *ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἡ Αὔγουστα κατέπεμψε τῇ βασιλίσει Περσῶν τῇ οὐσῇ αὐτοῦ ἀδελφῇ.* For translation, see The Chronicle of John Malalas. A Translation by E. JEFFREYS – M. JEFFREYS – R. SCOTT *et alii* (Byzantina Australiensia 4). Melbourne 1986, 18.61. Also see R. SCOTT, Diplomacy in the sixth century, in: Byzantine Diplomacy 164; Constantine Porphyrogenetos, De cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae II 15 (ed. J. J. REISKE. Bonn 1831, II 594–598).

<sup>52</sup> It seems that Helene lived in an environment where Greek was spoken in parallel with Bulgarian/Serbian. Greek was apparently often used at the Bulgarian court where she may have learned the basics as a young child. Helene's husband, Stephen Dušan, on the other hand, spent seven years in Constantinople in his youth, and Greek was often spoken at his court. It is thus plausible that the tsarina, who is known to have sponsored the copying of Greek manuscripts (for details, see L. POLITIS, Griechische Handschriften der serbischen Kaiserin Elisabeth. BSl 2 [1930] 288–304), spoke Greek rather well.

<sup>53</sup> On the importance of linguistic competence, see MERGHIALI-SAHAS, Byzantine ambassador 594f.

in both Greek and Serbian, a woman who visited Athos with her husband and actively participated in his political decisions, was certainly not one to allow herself to be bullied. Nevertheless, she may have reconsidered the risks of the Serbian operation and understood the difficult position of a woman married into a foreign court and fighting to preserve the throne for her son, a position which was soon to be her own.

### III. NEGOTIATING INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF THE EMPIRE

The sources mention two occasions when prominent Byzantine nuns were called on to intervene in political and church-political affairs of the late empire. In the first case, the female ambassador was to negotiate peace with a rebellious general; in the second, another ambassador was charged with persuading the emperor's ecclesiastical opponents to come to the negotiating table.

#### III.1 THEODORA RAOULAINA: NOBLE LADY AND USURPER (4)

Theodora Raoulaina,<sup>54</sup> the niece of emperor Michael VIII and an accomplished writer and scholar, was long imprisoned for her opposition to the Union of Lyons (1274). After the abolition of the union in 1283, her contemporaries honored the princess for her firm resistance and willingness to endure persecution. In 1296, Andronikos decided to send this intelligent and renowned lady to negotiate with the self-appointed emperor Alexios Tarchaniotes Philanthropenos.<sup>55</sup>

In his chronicle, George Pachymeres describes how Alexios, a young relative of the emperor, received the title of *pinkernes* along with a command in Asia Minor. Audacious and clever, he conquered the fortress of *Duo Bounoi* close to Melanoudion, providing himself with a fortune and his soldiers with a large booty. The success brought him considerable fame and popularity not only with the army but also with local monks thankful for the presence of a powerful protector. Despite being a successful general, Alexios was unable to avoid the pitfall of vainglory and was persuaded by his troops to rebel against Andronikos in the fall of 1295.<sup>56</sup>

In early January 1296, Andronikos II received news of the insurrection and commanded his widowed cousin, *protobestiarissa* Theodora, and (perhaps to imply the possible consequences of imperial displeasure)<sup>57</sup> her brother-in-law, the blinded Isaac Raoul, to negotiate with the rebel general. In the words of the annalist: "They had the order, once they had sailed and arrived, to promise an imperial pardon along with the title of *kaisar*, accompanied by the appropriate *oikonomiai* [remunerations], if only he would revert to sentiments friendly to the emperor and his former submission to him."<sup>58</sup>

The general's pretensions, however, had proved to be short-lived. His subordinates accepted bribes in return for betraying him to his colleague, *protobestarios* Libadarios, who destroyed Alexios's military base, seized his property, and had his eyes put out (December 25, 1295). Apparently shortly after entrusting Theodora with leading an embassy to Asia Minor, the emperor received

<sup>54</sup> See *PLP* n. 10943 for sources and literature.

<sup>55</sup> For further details, see A. E. LAIOU, *Constantinople and the Latins: The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II, 1282–1328*. Cambridge, Mass. 1972, 80–84.

<sup>56</sup> George Pachymeres IX 9–IX 12 (III 237–255 FAILLER). Nikephoros Gregoras VII 6, VI 8 (I 190–191, 196–197, 200 SCHOPEN). For details on Alexios Philanthropenos, see *PLP* n. 29752.

<sup>57</sup> Isaac Raoul and his brother Manuel were blinded at the order of Andronikos's father, Michael VIII, for their opposition to the Union of Lyons (1274). For further details, see *PLP* n. 29752.

<sup>58</sup> George Pachymeres IX 12–13 (III 255 FAILLER): Ἦν δὲ σφίσι τὸ ἀνακείμενον, πλὴν χρησαμένους καὶ ἐπιστάντας, συγγνώμην τὴν παρὰ βασιλέως καθυπισχνεῖσθαι καὶ τὸ τοῦ καίσαρος ἀξίωμα ἐπαγγέλλεσθαι καὶ πρεπούσας οἰκονομίας τῷ ἀξιώματι εἰ μόνον μεταπεισθεῖν πρὸς τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως εὐνοίαν καὶ τῇ ἐξ ἀρχῆς καθυπαχθεῖν δουλείᾳ.



the news that the rebellion had been suppressed. He ascribed it to the grace of the Mother of God and promptly set out to worship her in the *Hodegoi* Monastery, sending congratulations and a promise of promotion to Libadarios. If Theodora did indeed journey to Asia Minor, she may have arrived to find that the aim of her negotiations had already been achieved, allowing her to return to the capital.<sup>59</sup> The fact that the emperor selected her as an ambassador and conferred on her powers of negotiation nevertheless places her in the ranks of female ambassadors even though she may never have been given the opportunity to put her skills to the test.

### III. 2 TARCHANEIOTISSA NOSTONGONISSA: THE PRINCESS-NUN AND THE ECCLESIASTICAL OPPONENTS OF THE EMPEROR (7)

The only woman known to have negotiated in an ecclesiastical controversy was Tarchaneiotissa Nostongonissa<sup>60</sup> (1266–1303). A member of a prominent Byzantine family, she apparently grew up in a nunnery after the death of her mother even though she became a respected member of her father's new family. Her embassy was connected with the Arsenites, a group promoting the rights of ex-Patriarch Arsenios, who had been deposed by Andronikos's father Michael VIII. Even after Arsenios's death (1273), the schism within the Orthodox Church continued and threatened to destabilize the rule of the Palaiologan dynasty.<sup>61</sup> Tarchaneiotissa Nostongonissa was herself closely associated with her pro-Arsenite stepmother, Maria-Martha Palaiologina, and Maria's like-minded children, John and Theodora, and became deeply involved in the movement. After its split into a radical and a more moderate party,<sup>62</sup> she joined the former group, which was led by her half-brother, John.<sup>63</sup>

When Andronikos II took another step to resolve the conflict in 1303, he requested Tarchaneiotissa's assistance in gaining the trust of the movement's leaders:

and he [Andronikos II] sent secretly for Tarchaneiotissa from the Nostongos family, communicating to her his scheme that she would mediate with them [the Arsenites] for him and seek their leaders, especially the blind Lazaros Gorianites and Makarios Peristera so that [he could] examine these matters along with them. The nun presented herself to the rejoicing monks, and they chose, along with the blinded, the most important among themselves and sent five [to the emperor].<sup>64</sup>

The sources do not preserve any more information about Tarchaneiotissa's mission though it was clearly successful. In the ensuing meeting with his opponents, Andronikos requested that none

<sup>59</sup> In his study of Theodora's life, Nicol suggests that Theodora's mission did take place (NICOL, *Byzantine Lady* 47). Also see another summary of the event in NICOL, *Last Centuries* 130–132. To end the story of Alexios Tarchaneiotis Philanthropenos on a more positive note, the sources reveal that the capable general's career did not end with his unfortunate revolt. He was later reconciled with the emperor and, despite his handicap, led several other successful military operations in the East.

<sup>60</sup> *PLP* n. 27512.

<sup>61</sup> Besides asking that the former patriarch be re-installed (impossible after his death in 1273), the Arsenites originally demanded that the emperor be replaced and that Arsenios's successors be discredited as well.

<sup>62</sup> George Pachymeres VIII 12 (III 155 FAILLER).

<sup>63</sup> For details, see George Pachymeres IV 18, 19, VII 12 (II 381, 385, III 49 FAILLER).

<sup>64</sup> George Pachymeres X 33 (IV 389 FAILLER): και πέμψας ἐν ἀπορρήτοις τὴν ἐκ Νοστόγγων Ταρχανειώτισσαν ὁμαιμονοῦσαν τῷ Κομνηνῷ Ἰωάννῃ καὶ τὰ ἐκείνων ἐξ ἀρχῆς φρονοῦσαν ἄγει παρ' ἐαυτῷ, καὶ κοινοῦται αὐτῇ τὸ σκέμμα, καὶ πρὸς ἐκεῖνους διὰ ταύτης πρεσβεύεται, καὶ ζητεῖ τοὺς ἐκείνων πρότους, καὶ μάλιστα τοὺς τυφλοὺς, Λάζαρόν τε τὸν Γοριανίτην καὶ τὸν Περιστερίην Μακάριον, ἐφ' ᾧ καὶ περὶ τούτων σφίσι συνδιασκέψασθαι. Καὶ δὴ ἐφίσταται μὲν ἡ μοναχὴ γραῦς ἀσμένοις τοῖς μοναχοῖς, ἐκλέγονται δὲ παρ' αὐτῶν τοῖς τυφλοῖς συνάμα οἱ τῶν ἄλλων προέχοντες καὶ εἰς πέντε ποσωθέντες, ἐξαποστέλλονται ... .

of the bishops consecrated by Patriarch Joseph II be forced to abdicate while the Arsenites insisted on choosing the metropolitan's successor. Unfortunately, the agreement, which was signed by both parties, did not end the controversy. Facing excommunication from ex-Patriarch Athanasios, Andronikos went back on his promise and chose the metropolitan himself, re-installing Athanasios to the Constantinopolitan see.<sup>65</sup>

#### IV. PEACE MISSIONS TO WARRING RELATIVES<sup>66</sup>

The following seven embassies are also linked to the internal politics of the late empire. The emergence of female legates closely related to either the sender or the receiver of the embassy is perhaps most peculiar to the character of the late Byzantine state. The idea of a dynasty which was uniquely entitled to rule was, in the fourteenth century, a stronger 'cement' than any institutional structures, loyalties, or continuities.<sup>67</sup> But precisely for this reason, there was now no bureaucratic nor truly substantial military counterweight to the Palaiologan family and so, when riven with internal rivalries, women of the family were best placed to mediate and conciliate almost as a default setting.<sup>68</sup> The fact that these princesses escaped criticism from contemporary Byzantine writers suggests that they were not perceived as out of place in the ambassadorial role. The reasons for this indulgence may have been the fact that they acted at the request of the ruler and in order to promote peace within the family and the empire.<sup>69</sup> While the idea of women as peacemakers or peace weavers was common in the medieval West, it clearly existed in late Byzantium as well, for imperial brides repeatedly received the name 'Eirene'—*peace* (e.g. Yolanda of Montferrat, Adelheid of Braunschweig-Grubenhagen, Eirene Gattilusio?<sup>70</sup>) and emperors, on at least two occasions, engaged women as their legates to political opponents and unruly relatives.

##### IV.1 THE ESCAPEE LEGATE: EUDOKIA PALAIOLOGINA (6)

In the dynastic conflicts of the fourteenth century, Palaiologan princesses and empresses were often sent as mediators to their close relatives (husbands, sons, and sons-in-law) in order to invoke family loyalties, a circumstance which may have gradually obscured the idea that the empire was worth preserving for its own sake. Andronikos II was the first ruler to recognize the negotiating abilities of noble women more or less closely related to the imperial family and, on various occasions, selected them as his legates. His first female deputy was his youngest sister, Eudokia Palaiologina,<sup>71</sup> the widow of John II Komnenos of Trebizond. During Eudokia's visit to Constantinople in 1298,<sup>72</sup> Andronikos, who was eager to secure peace and stability on the Serbian border, attempted to persuade

<sup>65</sup> For details see F. TINNEFELD, *Das Schisma zwischen Anhängern und Gegnern des Patriarchen Arsenios in der orthodoxen Kirche von Byzanz (1265–1310)*. *BZ* 105/1 (2012) 143–166, esp. 157f. P. GOUNARIDES, *Τὸ κίνημα τῶν Ἀρσενιατῶν (1261–1310)*, in: *Ideologikes diamaches ten epoche ton proton Palaiologon*. Athena 1999, 167.

<sup>66</sup> On embassies inside the empire in earlier periods, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 244–247.

<sup>67</sup> On the tendency to involve members of the imperial family in the government of the empire, see SCHREINER, *Die kaiserliche Familie: Ideologie und Praxis* 744f.

<sup>68</sup> I would like to express my thanks to Jonathan Shepard for helping me reformulate this passage.

<sup>69</sup> On the importance of marriage as a "fundamental instrument of Byzantine diplomacy" in late Byzantium, see KAZHDAN, *The notion of Byzantine diplomacy* 18.

<sup>70</sup> For details, see KAZHDAN, *The notion of Byzantine diplomacy* 11.

<sup>71</sup> *PLP* n. 12061.

<sup>72</sup> George Pachymeres IX 24, 29 (III 297, 299 FAILLER). Nikephoros Gregoras VI 9 (I 202 SCHOPEN).

her to marry the Serbian king, Stephen Uroš II Milutin.<sup>73</sup> Eudokia adamantly refused the proposal, and Andronikos had to give his own six-year-old daughter, Simonis, to the aging king as a bride.<sup>74</sup>

Sometime later, Nikephoros Choumnos, Andronikos's prime minister, requested that his daughter Eirene marry Alexios II of Trebizond, Eudokia's elder son. Andronikos had some authority in the matter because (the deceased) John II had made his brother-in-law the guardian of the young emperor. Difficulties arose when the intended groom rejected the Byzantine bride and married the daughter of a Georgian prince instead. Eudokia, who was still in Constantinople, offered to persuade her son to have the marriage annulled. Intrigued by her proposal, Andronikos allowed her to sail to Trebizond in March 1301;<sup>75</sup> however, her mission was unsuccessful, and Eirene Choumnaina was eventually wed to Andronikos's son John. The late Byzantine historian Pachymeres claims that Eudokia never intended to pressure her son into divorcing his wife but that her sole object in undertaking the mission was to escape her brother, whom she perceived as being too eager to use her as marriageable goods in his foreign policy.<sup>76</sup>

#### IV.2 THE TRIPLE MISSION OF EUGENIA KOMNENE PALAIOLOGINA (8–10)

When the guards of Andronikos III accidentally killed his younger brother Manuel, the event seriously damaged relationships between members of the imperial family, a circumstance which necessarily had a negative impact on the entire empire. The father of the two princes, Michael IX, allegedly succumbed to his grief while their grandfather, Andronikos II, decided to disinherit his grandson. Supported by a group of noblemen, the younger Andronikos rebelled. He fled from the capital and made his way to Thrace (Easter 1321), which initiated the first phase of the First Civil War (1321–1327). Months later, with his grandson's army marching on Constantinople, the senior emperor decided to seek reconciliation.<sup>77</sup>

As his legate, Andronikos II chose his cousin, the otherwise obscure Eugenia Komnene Palaiologina.<sup>78</sup> Formerly a *megale domestikissa*, wife of the general-in-chief of the imperial armies, and one of the most important officials of the court, she was certainly a woman of status. By the time she entered the camp of her grandnephew on the Melas River near Selymbria in June 1321 Eugenia was also widowed and wore the monastic veil.<sup>79</sup> During her first meeting with Andronikos III, she presented the older emperor's request that he be granted time to enter a monastery before his grandson took the city, a wish which was readily granted by the younger emperor.

Andronikos then sent his aunt back to Constantinople, requesting confirmation of his position as heir to the throne and suggesting that he and his grandfather rule in their respective parts of the empire: Andronikos II in the capital and Andronikos III in Adrianople.<sup>80</sup> This agreement was duly

<sup>73</sup> George Pachymeres IX 30 (III 301 FAILLER). Nikephoros Gregoras VI 9 (I 202–203 SCHOPEN).

<sup>74</sup> George Pachymeres IX 31 (III 303 FAILLER).

<sup>75</sup> Michael Panaretos 63 (ed. O. LAMPSIDIS, *Μιχαήλ τοῦ Παναρέτου περὶ τῶν Μεγάλων Κομνηνῶν. Εἰσαγωγή-ἔκδοσις-σχόλια [Pontikai Ereunai 2]*. Athena 1958). George Pachymeres X 7 (IV 316, n. 32 FAILLER).

<sup>76</sup> George Pachymeres X 7 (IV 317, 319 FAILLER).

<sup>77</sup> NICOL, *Last Centuries* 161–165. Also see F. DÖLGER, *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des oströmischen Reiches von 565–1453*, IV: *Regesten von 1282–1341*. München 1960, 126f, n. 2660. For details and further circumstances, see U. BOSCH, *Kaiser Andronikos III. Palaiologos. Versuch einer Darstellung der byzantinischen Geschichte in den Jahren 1321–1341*. Amsterdam 1965, 24f.

<sup>78</sup> *PLP* n. 21368. She was probably a sister of Theodora Raoulaina.

<sup>79</sup> John Kantakouzenos I 22 (I 109 SCHOPEN): ἐνταῦθα δὴ ἀφικνεῖται πρὸς τὸν νέον βασιλέα Εὐγενία μοναχὴ Παλαιολογίνα, ἡ βασιλέως ἀδελφῆς Μιχαήλ, τοῦ πρώτου τῶν Παλαιολόγων, παῖς, μεγάλῃ δομestικίσσα. διεπρεσβεύετο δὲ παρὰ τοῦ βασιλέως τοιαῦτα: . . . .

<sup>80</sup> John Kantakouzenos I 23 (I 113–116 SCHOPEN).

written down and sent with Eugenia to the elder emperor. According to Kantakouzenos's perhaps somewhat exaggerated report, Andronikos II was pleased with his grandson's suggestion and fulfilled all of his conditions. His only frustration concerned Alexios Apokaukos, a man of low birth whom Andronikos III had chosen to witness the imperial oath.<sup>81</sup> Eugenia allegedly answered these objections in a conciliatory manner, saying that she did not believe that Apokaukos had been chosen to humiliate the elder emperor.<sup>82</sup>

Her second embassy concluded, Andronikos II sent the *megale domestikissa* back to his grandson, along with *protoasekretis* Bardales and a certain Kallikrinites, to witness his oaths. When the worthy nun re-entered her grandnephew's camp, she reported on her meeting with his grandfather and mentioned also the latter's displeasure over Apokaukos's commission. In his reply, Andronikos confirmed the diplomatic position of his aunt: "Apokaukos was certainly not sent as a legate to corroborate peace – that was the role of my aunt – but only as a carrier of the letter. For it is known that one uses the least important servants to deliver letters of highest importance."<sup>83</sup> After this final meeting, the young emperor signed the oaths and the legates returned to Constantinople. And it is here that Eugenia disappears from the historical record, never to embark on another mission as far as the Byzantine sources are concerned. Nevertheless, her negotiations produced a season of peace during a period of civil war.

#### IV.3 PRISONER TURNED AMBASSADOR: MARIA-XENE PALAIOLOGINA (11)

Despite a semblance of peace, the political balance between Andronikos II and his grandson remained fragile. When an important nobleman named Syrgiannes Palaiologos decided to change allegiance in December 1321, the balance was once again upset. Disappointed by the younger emperor's affinity for John Kantakouzenos, Syrgiannes managed to turn his new master, Andronikos II, against his grandson. The conflict lasted until July 1322 when the elder Andronikos decided to negotiate a new agreement.<sup>84</sup> He again dispatched a female ambassador, the dowager empress of Armenian origin and mother of Andronikos III, Maria, who in her widowhood had taken the veil and the monastic name Xene.<sup>85</sup> As far as the information offered by the sources is concerned, Maria-Xene had a taste for politics. The chronicle of Nikephoros Gregoras reports that "after he [Andronikos III] accepted the invitation and came to Rhegion, he met there his mother, the lady, who was released from prison<sup>86</sup> and sent to him to mediate an agreement. He [Andronikos III] laid down rules with her and through her arranged everything that was to take place."<sup>87</sup> According to Kantakouzenos, Andronikos II instructed Xene to thank his grandson for his honorable behavior towards the elder emperor and to confirm the

<sup>81</sup> For details, see John Kantakouzenos I 23 (I 116–118 SCHOPEN). On ambassadors and oaths, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 304–309.

<sup>82</sup> John Kantakouzenos I 23 (I 118 SCHOPEN): πολλὰς τῆς εἰς σὲ, βασιλεῦ, αἰδοῦς τε καὶ εὐλαβείας δεδωκότος τὰς ἀποδείξεις.

<sup>83</sup> John Kantakouzenos I 23 (I 118–119 SCHOPEN): Ἀπόκαυχος δὲ οὐχ ὡς πρέσβις, οὐδὲ τῆς εἰρήνης βεβαιωτής, ταῦτα γὰρ τῇ ἐμῇ θείᾳ προσῆκεν, ἀλλ' ὡς γραμματοκομιστής ἀπεστάλη μόνον. ἴσμεν δ', ὅτι καὶ μεγάλων ἔνεκα καὶ ἀναγκαιοτάτων πέμποντές τινα γράμματα, καὶ τοῖς φαυλοτάτοις τῶν οἰκετῶν χρώμεθα πρὸς μετακομιδὴν.

<sup>84</sup> NICOL, *Last Centuries* 165.

<sup>85</sup> *PLP* n. 21394.

<sup>86</sup> Maria was taken prisoner in Thessalonike by her brother-in-law, Despot Constantine, who brought her to Constantinople to be guarded. Nikephoros Gregoras VIII 11 (I 354 SCHOPEN). John Kantakouzenos I 26 (I 129–130 SCHOPEN).

<sup>87</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras VIII 11 (I 358–359 SCHOPEN): ὁμῶς ἐπειδήπερ ἐν τῷ παρόντι κληθεὶς ἦκε πρῶτον περὶ τὸ Ῥήγιον κακεῖ τῇ μητρὶ καὶ δεσποίνῃ ἐντετυχῆκει προαπολυθείσῃ τε τῆς εἰρκτῆς καὶ πεμφθείσῃ ἐκεῖ τῶν γενησομένων σπονδῶν ἔνεκα, ἐκεῖθεν μετὰ τῆς μητρὸς καὶ διὰ τῆς μητρὸς θεμιστεύει πάντα τὰ γενησόμενα. Translation mine. For further details on the meeting and its dating see J. L. VAN DIETEN, Nikephoros Gregoras. *Rhömische Geschichte, I–IV (Bibliothek der griechischen Literatur* 4, 8–9, 24, 39, 59). Stuttgart 1973–2003, II 168f.



new treaty. At their meeting in Epibatai, mother and son mourned their husband/father, Michael IX.<sup>88</sup> The empress then performed her ambassadorial duties, discussing various matters with her son, and returned to her father-in-law.<sup>89</sup> Despite this new agreement, enmities between grandfather and grandson continued until May 1328 when Andronikos III entered the imperial city and seized power.<sup>90</sup>

#### IV.4 GENERALS FOR HIS MAJESTY: EIRENE ASENINA (12)

Eirene Asenina Kantakouzene<sup>91</sup> (1347–1363/79?), wife of John VI Kantakouzenos and granddaughter of the Bulgarian tsar, was another late Byzantine empress who was repeatedly charged with mediation between family members. The accounts of Eirene's contemporaries depict her as being a persuasive speaker who was well-informed with regard to Byzantine politics. She was also reputed to be a capable negotiator and the annals mention three occasions on which the empress assumed an ambassadorial role.

Eirene's first known mission took place at the beginning of the Second Civil War (1341–1347). In 1335, Andronikos III condemned Eirene's brothers, John and Manuel Asen,<sup>92</sup> for high treason and interned them in the Monastery of Bera.<sup>93</sup> When war broke out between John Kantakouzenos and Anna of Savoy in 1341, both parties attempted to bring these capable military leaders over to their side. The brothers, fearing they could make their plight even worse, nevertheless ignored the overtures of the messengers until Eirene arrived in Bera as her husband's ambassador. She encouraged John and Manuel to believe in John Kantakouzenos and returned part of their confiscated property to them. In the end, the generals allowed themselves to be persuaded and escaped to Didymoteichon to join the Kantakouzene party.<sup>94</sup>

#### IV.5 EIRENE AGAIN: APPEASING A REBELLIOUS PRINCE (13)

The empress's second mission took place more than a decade later. After being proclaimed emperor (Adrianople, 1346), John Kantakouzenos refused to elevate his son Matthew to the honor of *basileus*, a decision he did not change even after his victorious entry into Constantinople in Feb-

<sup>88</sup> As the chronicler reminds us, Maria and Andronikos had not seen each other since Michael IX's death in October 1320. At the end of 1321, when war again broke out between the two emperors, the widowed Maria was forced to leave Thessalonike for the capital where her father-in-law accused her of being an ally of his grandson and kept her under lock and key.

<sup>89</sup> John Kantakouzenos I 34 (I 166 SCHOPEN): Εἰς τάχος τε ἐκέλευε τριήρεις δύο πληροῦν· ἐπεὶ δὲ ἐπεπλήρωντο, σὺν τάχει καὶ προθυμίᾳ πολλῇ τὴν βασιλίδι Ξένην τὴν Ἀνδρονίκου μητέρα τοῦ νέου πέμπει πρὸς τὸν υἱὸν· ἅμα μὲν τῆς εἰς αὐτὸν καλοκάγαθίας καὶ τῆς τιμῆς καὶ εὐπειθείας πρεπούσας ἀποδώσουσαν εὐχαριστίας ἅμα δὲ καὶ τὴν κυρωθεῖσαν εἰρήνην ἐγγράφοις βεβαιώσουσαν ὄρκοις. ἔλθοῦσαν δὲ εἰς τὸ περὶ Σηλυβρίαν Ἐπιβάτας προσαγορευόμενον χωρίον ἔτι τότε ἀτείχιστον ὄν, βασιλεὺς ὁ υἱὸς αὐτῆς ἐλθὼν προσεκύνησέ τε ὁμοῦ τὴν μητέρα· καὶ ἐθρήνησαν ἐφ' ἱκανόν, ἡ μὲν τὴν χηρείαν, ὁ δὲ τὴν ὀρφανίαν ὀδυρόμενος τοῦ πατρὸς· οὕτω γὰρ ἄχρι τότε μετὰ τὴν βασιλέως τελευτὴν εἰς ἓν βασιλεὺς ὁ νέος τῇ μητρὶ καὶ βασιλίδι συνῆλθεν· ἔπειτα ἡ βασιλὶς τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ υἱῷ τὰς τε τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ πάππου ἀπαγγέιλασα εὐχαριστίας, καὶ ἕτερ ἄττα ὁμιλήσασα ὅσα ἦν αὐτῇ βουλομένη, τὰ ὁμωσμένα παρὰ βασιλέως τοῦ υἱοῦ ἐγγράφως παραλαβοῦσα, ἐπανῆκεν αὐθις ὡς βασιλέα τὸν κηδεστὴν. Translation mine.

<sup>90</sup> For further details see NICOL, *Last Centuries* 168f. For further details on Andronikos's meeting with the Arsenites, see TINNEFELD, *Schisma* 157f.

<sup>91</sup> *PLP* n. 10935.

<sup>92</sup> For John, see *PLP* n. 1499, for Manuel, see *PLP* n. 1509.

<sup>93</sup> Gregoras mistakenly calls the monastery Abdera. For details, see VAN DIETEN, Nikephoros Gregoras. *Rhömäische Geschichte* I 274, commentary n. 126.

<sup>94</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XII 16 (II 624–625 SCHOPEN). Eirene's mission must have taken place before John Kantakouzenos was proclaimed emperor in October of the same year because he notes in his *Memoirs* that the brothers had waited on him and his wife during the festive reception which took place in the palace of Didymoteichon following the ceremony (Nikephoros Gregoras XII 16 [II 626 SCHOPEN]).

ruary 1347. His son-in-law, John V, thus remained his successor, a situation which could hardly have pleased Matthew. At the end of the same year, persuaded by his uncle, John Asen,<sup>95</sup> Matthew surrounded himself with those who wished the Kantakouzenos dynasty to permanently replace its Palaiologan rival and entered into open rebellion against John V. In an attempt to prevent an escalation of hostilities, Empress Eirene went to reason with her son (at the request of her husband) in the fall of 1347.<sup>96</sup>

Nikephoros Gregoras describes the content of this meeting in his chronicle, ascribing to the empress a rather lengthy speech. Not all of the speech should be discarded as fiction, for Gregoras was an intimate friend of the Kantakouzenos family despite his later disagreement with John VI over the hesychast teaching. It is therefore not unlikely that the empress had occasion to relate to him the details of her interview with Matthew. Gregoras reports that when she met her son in Orestias, he performed the *proskynesis* and promised to obey her in everything.<sup>97</sup> After a long and lofty prologue about the advantages and joys of a simpler life over the pomp and riches of the ruling class,<sup>98</sup> the empress warned her son about bad advisers, reminded him of his parents' love, and explained that she had come to save him from falling into misfortune.<sup>99</sup> She then pointed out that while the empire had shrunk considerably and the family fortunes had all but disappeared in the struggles of civil war, soldiers did not enjoy peace, for to them it meant loss of booty and generous pay. The empress ended her speech with a promise that if her son should submit, his father would forgive him and supply all his needs. According to the chronicler, Matthew quickly came around.<sup>100</sup>

The account of John Kantakouzenos is much shorter, perhaps due to the author's reluctance to describe in detail the private matters of his family. He blames his son's rebellion solely on the influence of wicked advisers and mentions sending his wife to effect reconciliation and stop the revolt, an aim which she apparently accomplished with ease. After Eirene had rebuked those who had caused the sedition (apparently her relatives), threatening them with terrible consequences should they continue their evil counsels, and convinced her son to submit to his father's authority, she returned to Constantinople.<sup>101</sup> Interestingly, this account of Eirene's mission contrasts with the description of similar negotiations led by the emperor himself. When John VI visited his son some time later, he gave him the region from Didymoteichon to Christoupolis and from the seacoast to the town of Xantheia as a permanent possession, an area allegedly under constant attack from surrounding nations. He also gave a lengthy speech on the importance of learning to govern a small territory before taking on greater responsibilities.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XVI 2 (II 798–804 SCHOPEN).

<sup>96</sup> For a detailed overview of Matthew's life, see Nicol, *Family of Kantakouzenos* 110–122. For the passage related to Eirene's first embassy, see *ibidem* 110f. For the dating of the mission, see VAN DIETEN, Nikephoros Gregoras. *Rhömäische Geschichte* II 389, n. 554. NICOL, *Family of Kantakouzenos* 105.

<sup>97</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XVI 2 (II 798–804 SCHOPEN). Also see NICOL, *Byzantine Lady* 75f.

<sup>98</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XVI 3 (II 805–808 SCHOPEN).

<sup>99</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XVI 3 (II 808–811 SCHOPEN).

<sup>100</sup> Gregoras XVI 3 (II 811–813 SCHOPEN). For further details, see *Family of Kantakouzenos* 79.

<sup>101</sup> For the whole of Eirene's mission as described by her husband, see *ibid.*, also see John Kantakouzenos IV 7–8 (III 47–49 SCHOPEN). Kantakouzenos mentions the first embassy of his wife one more time just before describing Eirene's second journey (this time to her son-in-law); however, the brief note offers no new details relevant to the present study. John Kantakouzenos IV 32–33 (III 239–241 SCHOPEN).

<sup>102</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XVI 4 (II 814–819 SCHOPEN).

## IV.6 ANNA OF SAVOY: PREVENTING FURTHER CIVIL STRIFE (14)

The mission of Anna Palaiologina (of Savoy) to the Serbians, which was described earlier, was preceded by an embassy to her own son. Brought to Thessalonike, a city which throughout Zealot rule had claimed loyalty to the Palaiologans, John V assumed control. He soon became discontented with his limited authority, realizing that it was his in-laws who now wielded the real power in the empire, and sought an alliance with the Serbian ruler. Kantakouzenos persuaded Empress Anna to intervene (1352),<sup>103</sup> promising to cede to John immediate control of the empire if only he would break his agreement with the Serbs and return to his wife. Kantakouzenos would either rule Constantinople and its suburbs as far as Selymbria or become a monk. Kantakouzenos allegedly swore an oath and gave it to the empress in writing. Anna then “took the documents along with the written oaths and speedily sailed to Thessalonike. There she discussed them [the documents] with her son and showed him the terrible oaths.<sup>104</sup> Having been persuaded, John instantly abandoned his agreement with the *kral*.”<sup>105</sup>

The chronicle of John VI Kantakouzenos offers further details on the event. He explains his decision to engage Anna as his legate by his preparations for a military expedition against the Latins.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, he fails to mention an oath, referring only to a meeting during which Kantakouzenos complained to Anna about John V’s bad advisers and enemies of the empire who had turned his son-in-law against him. While he prepared to fight the Latins, he requested Anna sail to Thessalonike to “put an end to devastation and prevent the pending war.”<sup>107</sup> Further, she was to admonish her son not to destroy land that would soon be his<sup>108</sup> and to remain with John in order to shield him from further negative influence.

Though the empress would have been more likely to act after she had received written guarantees, both accounts agree that she departed for Thessalonike. As she entered the city, the war preparations being supervised by her son were already in full swing. The young emperor had gathered his allies, and the Serbian tsar and his wife were camped nearby with their army. Anna rose to the occasion, reminding her son of the importance of honoring and obeying his parents, whereby she secured his submission.<sup>109</sup> The empress’s mission to her son is only a minor episode in history, overshadowed by her more significant embassy to the Serbians. Nevertheless, it is one of the events which show the important role played by noble women in the late empire.

<sup>103</sup> NICOL, *Byzantine Lady* 92. IDEM, *Last Centuries* 244f. FAILLER, *La déposition du patriarche Calliste* 78.

<sup>104</sup> Apparently oaths, by which Kantakouzenos called terrible punishment on himself should he break his promises.

<sup>105</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XXVII 26–29 (III 149 BEKKER): και παραλαβὼν Ἄνναν τὴν ἐκείνου μητέρα, τηρουμένην τέως ἐν Βυζαντίῳ, ἐς τὴν τῶν ὁδηγῶν ἀπήει μονὴν, κάκει τῆς θείας εἰκόνας ἔμπροσθεν αὐτίκα μάλα δώσειν ὑπισχνεῖται τῷ ταύτης μὲν υἱῷ, γαμβρῷ δὲ αὐτοῦ, τὸν ἅπαντα κληρὸν τῆς βασιλείας, ἀφεμένῳ μὲν τὰς τοῦ Κράλη συνθήκας ἐκεῖνας, ἐλληλυθῶτι δ’ ἐς Βυζάντιον εὐθὺς παρὰ τὴν νόμιμον σύζυγον, αὐτὸς δὲ δυοῖν θάτερον, ἢ τῷ Βυζαντίῳ διὰ βίου ἐνδιατρίβων βασιλικῶς και αὐτὸς τὰ μέχρι Σηλυμβρίας ἐντεῦθεν διοικεῖν πράγματα κατὰ γνώμην τοῦ γαμβροῦ, ἢ τὸν ἡσύχιον ἐλόμενος και ἀπράγμονα βίον οἴκοι καθῆσθαι. και ἅμα ἔγγραφον ταῖν χεροῖν αὐτῆς ἐνετίθει τὴν γνώμην φρικωδεστάτοις ὄρκους ἡσφαλισμένην τε και ἀπαραλόγιστον τὴν ὑπέραγνον θεομήτορα προβαλλομένοις ἔγγυητήν. ἢ δ’ εὐθὺς ἀπιστεῖν οὐδαμῆ ἔχουσα τὰ τε τῶν οὕτως ἐχόντων ἔγγράφων ὄρκων βιβλία εἰλήφει, και ἅμα ὄλη σπουδῆ κατέπλευσεν ἐς Θεσσαλονίκην, κάκει τῷ υἱῷ τὰ εἰκότα ὠμληκυῖα και τοὺς φρικώδεις ἐκεῖνους ἐφανίσασα ὄρκους, τῶν τοῦ Κράλη συνθηκῶν τελέως ἀποσχέσθαι πέπεικεν εὐθὺς. Translation mine. The same story is told later on (Nikephoros Gregoras XXVII 51–53 [III 168–171 BEKKER]) this time from the perspective of John V as he recounts the wrongs his father-in-law has committed against him.

<sup>106</sup> For background information, see John Kantakouzenos IV 27 (III 200–204 SCHOPEN).

<sup>107</sup> John Kantakouzenos IV 27 (III 206 SCHOPEN): ... διαλύειν τὰς διαφορὰς και τὸν προσδοκώμενον πόλεμον παύειν ...

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>109</sup> John Kantakouzenos IV 27 (III 208 SCHOPEN): πρὸς τε Κράλην ἐξελοῦσα και διαλεχθεῖσα μετὰ τῆς γυναικός, ἀδίκους και παρανόμους ἀπεδείκνυν ἐπιχειροῦντας, και κεραυνοὺς ἐπανετείετο και ἄλλας ἐξ οὐρανοῦ πληγὰς, ὅτι πρὸς τῷ Ῥωμαίῳ τοσαῦτα ἀδικεῖν ἐπιποροῦντας και παρασπονδοῦντας ἔτι και πολέμους αὐτοῖς ἐμφυλίους ἐπεγείρουσιν, ἐξ ὧν ἐκεῖνοι μὲν διαφθαρήσονται ἀλλήλοις περιπίπτοντες, αὐτοῖς δ’ ἐξέσται τὴν ἐκείνων καρποῦσθαι ἀδεῶς.

## IV.7 THE LAST MISSION: EIRENE ASENINA AND HER SON-IN-LAW (16)

The newly arranged peace did not last long, for as early as 1352, Matthew had to relinquish part of his domain to his brother-in-law, which resulted in a new wave of enmities between them.<sup>110</sup> Gregoras paints a vivid image of another embassy that took place in the spring of 1352. Accompanied by two bishops<sup>111</sup> and a certain Angelos, who were to witness the meeting,<sup>112</sup> Eirene traveled to Didymoteichon and attempted to persuade John to leave Matthew the region from Orestias to Bizye along with the surrounding towns and villages.<sup>113</sup> John would rule the area from Didymoteichon to Thessalonike while John VI would govern the rest of the Byzantine territory, including Constantinople. The empress further called on her son-in-law to trust her husband,<sup>114</sup> a condition he rejected absolutely, reminding her of the insults, traps, and betrayals he had suffered at the hands of his father-in-law.<sup>115</sup> Eirene, not wishing to hear more, hastily returned to the capital. A more moderate account of the meeting is offered by Kantakouzenos, who claims the initiative for Eirene's mission,<sup>116</sup> informing us that he sent along Philotheon (bishop of Herakleia), Metrophanes (bishop of Melenikos), and John Philes, "all virtuous and pious men," to help the empress reconcile the brothers-in-law, witness the negotiations, and prevent calumniators from criticizing Eirene.<sup>117</sup>

## V. NO MORE FEMALE AMBASSADORS IN THE FINAL CENTURY?

Embassies headed by women appear in the primary sources between 1248/50 and 1352, beginning with the representative mission of Theodora Petraliphaina to the Nicene court and ending with Eirene's mission to her son-in-law, John V Palaiologos. Curiously, the sources make no mention of an embassy led by a female legate after 1352.<sup>118</sup> This abrupt disappearance from the historical record does not necessarily prove the departure of female legates from the diplomatic scene and may actually be connected with the fact that two important sources, the *Memoirs* of Kantakouzenos and the chronicle of Gregoras, end in the 1350s. While the generation of historiographers preceding Gregoras and Kantakouzenos, mainly Akropolites and Pachymeres, were sufficiently close to the imperial court to report on the missions carried out by female emissaries, the generation that followed (Doukas, Chalkokondyles, and Kritoboulos) wrote their works at the periphery of the empire or from abroad with a significant time lag and little knowledge of what was happening in the Byzantine capital. The fact that the history of George Sphrantzes, a court official of the last three emperors, also has nothing to say about female legates may be explained by the fact that the author spent extended periods of time on official missions abroad and could not regularly observe what went on in Constantinople.

Although historiographers were not in a position to report on their mediations, it seems that Palaiologan women continued to negotiate political matters within their realm and families until the end

<sup>110</sup> For the circumstances surrounding John's leaving Thessalonike, see the passage on Anna Palaiologina (of Savoy).

<sup>111</sup> For the role of representatives of the church in imperial missions, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 92–123.

<sup>112</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XXVII 31 (III 152 BEKKER).

<sup>113</sup> Kantakouzenos's information about the particulars of the proposal generally agrees with that of Gregoras except that the territory requested from John concerns Adrianople and the surrounding towns. John Kantakouzenos IV 32 (III 240 SCHOPEN). Also see NICOL, *Last Centuries* 245.

<sup>114</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XXVII 31–32 (III 153–154 BEKKER).

<sup>115</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XXVII 43–54 (III 163–171 BEKKER).

<sup>116</sup> John Kantakouzenos IV 32 (III 239 SCHOPEN): μετὰ μικρὸν δὲ καὶ τὴν βασιλίδα Εἰρήνην τὴν γαμετὴν ἐκέλευεν εἰς Διδυμότειχον ἀφικομένην, διαλλάττειν τὸν υἱὸν γαμβρῶ τῷ βασιλεῖ.

<sup>117</sup> John Kantakouzenos IV 32–33 (III 239–241 SCHOPEN).

<sup>118</sup> For the Byzantine ambassadors charged with embassies to the Ottomans in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> c., see É. MALAMUT, *La figure de l'ambassadeur byzantin auprès des Ottomans dans la première moitié du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in: *La figure de l'ambassadeur* 79–95.



of the empire. Despite a lack of evidence preserved in the chronicles, a letter by Demetrios Kydones suggests that Empress Helene,<sup>119</sup> wife of John V, mediated a dispute between her husband, John V, and her son, Andronikos IV, in 1376 after the latter had seized the throne.<sup>120</sup> Another example concerns the mother of the last two emperors, Helene Dragaš,<sup>121</sup> who probably conducted negotiations among her sons and, after the death of the eldest, John VIII, in 1448, secured the peaceful succession of Constantine XI to the throne.<sup>122</sup>

## VI. 'AND HE SENT THE LADY': CHARACTERISTICS, QUALIFICATIONS, AND ADVANTAGES OF FEMALE LEGATES

In his writings, Nikephoros Gregoras enumerates virtue, experience with embassies and public affairs, theological knowledge, expertise in classical Greek, and wisdom in general as important prerequisites of a successful (male) ambassador.<sup>123</sup> Based on previous research, male legates were also selected for their advanced age, which commanded respect, and for their wisdom<sup>124</sup> while social status, language competence, and confessional affiliation (in the cases of diplomats chosen by John V) also played a certain role.<sup>125</sup>

The above female ambassadors possessed several of these attributes. As all of them were of imperial, royal, or at least noble background, social status seems to have been one of the chief qualities which recommended them to their sovereigns.<sup>126</sup> The sender (an emperor or a despot) naturally would have wished to select a woman he knew and trusted, and this could not have been anyone from outside the imperial family. Also, as the receiver of the embassy was in all cases an emperor or a prince, the female ambassador's high rank was a crucial prerequisite, granting her authority as a negotiator while precluding embarrassment or insult to the receiver (as happened when Andronikos II complained about the low birth of Alexios Apokaukos). In some cases, dispatching a wife or a member of the (extended) imperial household may have been intended to honor the receiver,<sup>127</sup> which was certainly the case in selecting Maria Palaiologina to carry out negotiations with the Mongols and in the representative embassies of Theodora Petraliphaina. The recruitment of ambassadors from among the noble and imperial women may also be connected with the legate being an image of the emperor pointed out by Nicolas Drocourt.<sup>128</sup> The fact that these high-ranking female ambassadors were closely related in every case to the sender or receiver of the embassy contrasts with the cases

<sup>119</sup> *PLP* n. 21365.

<sup>120</sup> Demetrios Kydones I 103–110 (ed. R. LOENERTZ, *Correspondance I–II* [*SrT* 186, 208]. Vatican 1956–1960).

<sup>121</sup> *PLP* n. 21366. For details on the life of the empress and the role she played in the politics of the late empire, see S. MARJANOVIĆ-DUŠANIĆ, Hélène Dragaš, princesse serbe et impératrice de Byzance, in: *Impératrices, princesses, aristocrates et saintes souveraines* 119–130.

<sup>122</sup> *Die byzantinischen Kleinchroniken I* 187 n. 45f. (ed. P. SCHREINER, *Chronica byzantina breviora I–III* [*CFHB* XII/1–3]. Wien 1975–1979), Georgios Sphrantzes *XXIX*, 3, 100 (ed. R. MAISANO, *Cronaca* [*CFHB* 29]. Roma 1990). Also see É. MALAMUT, *Les ambassades du dernier empereur de Byzance*. *TM* 14 (2002) 429–448, see esp. 444.

<sup>123</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras VI 8 (I 194 SCHOPEN).

<sup>124</sup> DROCOURT, *La mort de l'ambassadeur* 68–71. OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine diplomacy* 79–83; IDEM, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore*. 139–203.

<sup>125</sup> MERGHIALI-SAHAS, *Byzantine ambassador* 593. For a detailed outline of the criteria used by the ambassadors, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 139–254.

<sup>126</sup> While Byzantine ambassadors came from various backgrounds, those of the late empire were mostly of noble or imperial origin. Cf. OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine Diplomacy* 82 and esp. 83: “ambassadors (...) mostly came from a well defined social group, the great families, and one has the impression that they were selected more on the basis of their origins than on the position that they held in court or in the administration.” DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 91–139.

<sup>127</sup> MALAMUT, *De 1299 à 1451*, 92.

<sup>128</sup> DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 70–77, 82–86.

of male legates, in whose commissions, in the late Byzantine period, kinship did not always play an important role.<sup>129</sup>

Connected with the unequal status of men and women in Byzantine society gender also played a role in the senders' choices. Although female emissaries had no direct advantage at the negotiating table, it was certainly less dangerous to be indebted to them than to their ambitious male counterparts (who could accumulate wealth, build up a following and, eventually, threaten the position of the ruler).<sup>130</sup> As women could not hold public office, their profit was often bound up in their association with the sender or receiver, which further guaranteed the women's dedication to the successful completion of their missions.

There was yet another important reason for preferring female ambassadors to their male colleagues, especially where family affairs were at stake. Expressing emotion was deemed appropriate in women, who, allowed to voice their feelings without losing dignity, held a powerful weapon not readily accessible to their male colleagues.<sup>131</sup> Based on the testimony of the sources, several female legates effectively used their emotions to achieve their goals. Maria Palaiologina could cry with her son Andronikos over the death of her husband while Eirene Kantakouzene could speak freely (albeit in words fashioned by Gregoras) of her love for her son and regard for her son-in-law. On the other hand, these scenes (described above) contrast with a similar mission undertaken by John VI Kantakouzenos to his son Matthew in the course of his rebellion. On this occasion, the emperor was reduced to pointing out the facts of his own difficult position and the complex situation of the empire (at least in his description of his meeting with his eldest son and important supporter captured in his *Memoirs*).

While Byzantine authors could have presumably (consciously or subconsciously) constructed a 'female' style of negotiating, these emotional scenes appear only in the descriptions of encounters between mothers and sons and so should not be understood as a basic tool of female ambassadors. In fact, when describing the specific qualities which recommended Eirene Kantakouzene for the ambassadorial role, the chroniclers do not mention emotion or any other gender-specific characteristics as being significant to the selection process. John Kantakouzenos claims that his wife was predisposed to her role, being "not only a wise woman but also able to achieve great things or change at will" and without lengthy speeches.<sup>132</sup> Gregoras, for his part, explains that Eirene "possessed an excellent understanding (depth of spirit) and was both by experience and personality well suited to be an ambassador."<sup>133</sup> While the authors certainly wished to detach the empress from any allusion to weakness, which could have put her suitability for the ambassadorial office in question, women sent to negotiate with their close relatives (sons and sons-in-law) could and certainly did enlist their relationship in achieving the goal of their missions.

While we do not possess information for a comparable number of embassies led by women as for those carried out by men, another incentive for the senders to employ female legates may have been the fact that female emissaries seem to have seldom invited violence from the receiver. A recent

<sup>129</sup> MALAMUT, De 1299 à 1451, 91. In the middle Byzantine period, the relationship between the ambassador and the ruler seems to have played a more important role. For details, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 140–144.

<sup>130</sup> Apparently, ambassadors did not receive direct payment for their services, but the sources do suggest that successful missions had an impact on their careers. OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine diplomacy* 84. For consequences of a diplomatic mission on the career, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 247–255.

<sup>131</sup> For comparison, see an interesting study on the showing of emotion in the West: D. BOUQUET – P. NAGY, *Sensible Moyen Âge. Une histoire des émotions dans l'Occident médiéval*. Paris 2015, see esp. 307–309.

<sup>132</sup> John Kantakouzenos VI 8 (III 49 SCHOPEN): ἦν γὰρ οὐ συνεπὴ μόνον καὶ δεινὴ χρήσασθαι πράγμασι μεγάλοις καὶ μεταποιήσαι, ἢ ἐβούλετο.

<sup>133</sup> Nikephoros Gregoras XVI 3 (II 805 SCHOPEN): βαθείαις τε χωμένην ταῖς τῆς συνέσεως αὐλαξί καὶ ἅμα οἰκονομικὴν ἐς τὰ μάλιστα οὐσαν ἔκ τε πείρας καὶ φύσεως (...).

study implies that (male) ambassadors sometimes received violent treatment or were even murdered on their diplomatic missions.<sup>134</sup> The fact that his male legates had been attacked and threatened by his grandson's followers in Adrianople<sup>135</sup> thus may have impacted Andronikos's choice of Eulogia Palaiologina as emissary (though her attributes as a princess, nun, and relative of both parties should not be underestimated). While male ambassadors occasionally succumbed to old age, natural catastrophes, the discomforts of the journey, illness, piracy, or brigands in the course of their missions,<sup>136</sup> the known female legates, mostly dealing with their relatives and posing no personal threat, seem to have carried out their missions in relative safety. However, the case of Theodora Doukaina demonstrates why the wives of rulers were only rarely sent outside the realm of their spouses. While a skilled ambassador was a valued asset, he was replaceable. On the other hand, it was impossible for a ruler not to ransom his wife, and the person who held her hostage could, therefore, request almost any price for her return.

Personal trust and experience must also be mentioned as factors that influenced rulers in their choice of female legates. In his pioneering study on late Byzantine diplomacy, Oikonomides notes that Byzantine rulers usually favored their trusted servants over high court officials when selecting their ambassadors.<sup>137</sup> Female legates, who on all occasions functioned as *empsychos epistole* (ambassadors who presented the sender's message to the receiver of the embassy)<sup>138</sup> and who held no official court titles that would prefer them for the ambassadorial position, also belonged to this group of imperial confidants even though only two of them, Eirene Kantakouzene and perhaps Theodora Petraliphaina, were intimate associates and collaborators of the sovereign in question.

In several cases, the rulers' confidence<sup>139</sup> resulted from the personal qualities and history of a female legate. Theodora Raoulaina, Theodora Petraliphaina, and Eirene Kantakouzene all possessed exceptional intelligence and advanced negotiating skills. Moreover, Theodora Raoulaina was renowned for enduring persecution for her opposition to the ecclesiastical union with the Catholic Church, for which she, the niece of Emperor Michael VIII, had been deprived of her property and subjected to long imprisonment. Her fame and position as one who had suffered for opposing the emperor were both calculated to impress the receiver of the embassy, the seditious general Philanthropenos.

Other qualifications, typical of male ambassadors, did not always play a significant role in their female counterparts. In most of the above cases, female emissaries were moving within the Greek-speaking world, which made foreign language proficiency<sup>140</sup> irrelevant. Language skills, on the other hand, played a central role in the choice of Maria Palaiologina, whose command of Mongolian along with her status as the widow of Abaqa, made her an ideal ambassador to the Mongol khan. In respect of Anna Palaiologina (of Savoy) and her dealings with the Serbian tsarina, the historical account mentions no translators in Anna's train on this somewhat spontaneous mission. While they were probably present, there are reasons to think that the empress and the tsarina, an Italian and a Bulgarian, were able to negotiate, at least partially, directly in Greek. After twenty-five years spent

<sup>134</sup> For details, see N. DROCOURT, *La mort de l'ambassadeur: faits, causes, enjeux (7<sup>e</sup>–12<sup>e</sup> siècles)*. *REB* 71 (2013) 67–104, here 85–88. On the lack of diplomatic immunity in the Middle Ages, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 68f., 326–331.

<sup>135</sup> NICOL, *Family of Kantakouzenos* 110f.

<sup>136</sup> DROCOURT, *La mort de l'ambassadeur* 76–84.

<sup>137</sup> OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine diplomacy* 78. DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 140–149, 156–160.

<sup>138</sup> M. MULLETT, *The language of diplomacy*, in: *Byzantine diplomacy* 213.

<sup>139</sup> On confidence between the sovereign and his ambassador, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 156–161.

<sup>140</sup> On diplomacy and language, see N. DROCOURT, *Une diplomatie sans langue ? La question des échanges linguistiques dans la diplomatie médio-byzantine*, in: *Les langues de la négociation* 25–61. On language skills, see e.g. MALAMUT, *De 1299 à 1451*, 95–102. DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 161–187. C. J. HILSDALE, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy in an Age of Decline*. Cambridge 2014. On interpreters, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 369–398.

at the Byzantine court Anna certainly had a good command of the Greek language while the Serbian tsarina, who had grown up at the bilingual Bulgarian court,<sup>141</sup> lived at the Serbian court where Greek seems to have been frequently spoken<sup>142</sup> and who ordered Greek manuscripts to be copied for her at Athos<sup>143</sup> must have been sufficiently versed in Greek as well. The origin of female legates seems to have been of lesser significance. Though Byzantine princesses and noble women were more likely to be dispatched, Byzantine emperors did utilize foreign ambassadors on at least two occasions. While the general preference for native Byzantine women as diplomats probably derived from their flawless command of the language, their knowledge of the Byzantine environment, and their contacts and relationships to the receiving parties, the success of negotiations led by Maria (Rita of Armenia) and Anna Palaiologina (Johanna of Savoy) indicate that foreign women could make effective diplomats as well.

While advanced age<sup>144</sup> was by no means the rule (the sources do contain references to younger and middle-aged ambassadors), late Byzantine female legates were mostly well past their youth when they embarked on their diplomatic journeys. (Theodora of Arta was apparently the youngest ambassador, being around twenty years old at the time of her first mission.)

## VII. FEMALE AMBASSADORS AND THE PARAPHERNALIA OF THE DIPLOMATIC CRAFT

As dress, gifts, letters, entourage and titles mostly play an important role in official missions dispatched by the Byzantine court, their place in missions headed by women should also be addressed. The apparel and gifts that the Byzantine legates brought to their hosts at foreign courts, were usually carefully selected and prepared;<sup>145</sup> however, the sources never take note of what the female ambassadors themselves were wearing. It is quite likely that Theodora of Arta was finely dressed on her representative embassy to Nicea in 1248/50, while the nuns presumably embarked on their missions in their somber black attire.

In connection with the above embassies, the sources also do not mention gifts and only seldom reveal that female legates carried letters.<sup>146</sup> This meager textual evidence nevertheless does not imply that Theodora Petraliphaina, Maria Palaiologina, and Anna Palaiologina arrived empty-handed on their missions to foreign rulers as some display of generosity and good will was mandatory on such occasions. As far as letters or written instructions are concerned, none of the female ambassadors mentioned above was a mere courier.<sup>147</sup> Even though diplomatic letters or documents requiring a signature are mentioned several times (examples include the cases of Eugenia Palaiologina, Theodora

<sup>141</sup> The Bulgarian ambassadors' proficiency in Greek has recently been remarked on by DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 181f.

<sup>142</sup> Her husband Stephen Dušan, had spend part of his youth in the Byzantine capital and, consequently, was fluent in Greek. For further details on the role of language in negotiations, see DROCOURT, *Une diplomatie sans langue* 52–58.

<sup>143</sup> POLITIS, *Griechische Handschriften* 288–304.

<sup>144</sup> Male ambassadors seem usually to have been men of ripe age, for details see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 190.

<sup>145</sup> On gifts, see R. CORMACK, *But is it art?* In: *Byzantine diplomacy* 219–236. S. MERGIALI-SAHAS, *Byzantine Emperors and Holy Relics: Use and Misuse of Sanctity and Authority*. *JÖB* 51 (2001) 41–60, see esp. 55–60. EADEM, *Ultimate Wealth for Inauspicious Times: Holy Relics in Rescue of Manuel II Paleologus' Reign*. *Byz* 76 (2006) 264–275. DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 545–555.

<sup>146</sup> On ambassadors and gifts, see, for example, Cf. OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine Diplomacy* 84f. DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 63–66.

<sup>147</sup> For various types of ambassadorial letters, see É. MALAMUT, *La lettre diplomatique et l'ambassadeur à Byzance sous le règne d'Andronic II*, in: *La correspondance entre souverains, princes et cités-États. Approches croisées entre l'Orient musulman, l'Occident latin et Byzance (XIII<sup>e</sup> – début XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, ed. D. Aigle – S. Péquignot (*Miroir de l'Orient musulman* 2). Turnhout 2013, 147–163. DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 66–69.

Petraliphaina, and Maria-Rita), they generally played a secondary role in the above embassies.<sup>148</sup> In many cases female legates were charged to carry out the negotiations and transmit to the receiver the wishes of the sender.

As to the composition of individual missions, the sources rarely mention anyone besides the female legate, thus confirming that she was the official head of the embassy in each case.<sup>149</sup> Despite the paucity of information, it is impossible that these women would have traveled alone. Female legates sent outside of the city were certainly accompanied by a retinue for reasons of safety as well as modesty, and their entourage must have included guards, servants, and baggage carriers. Theodora of Arta probably arrived at the Nicene court accompanied by a sizeable retinue of noble men and women to add luster to her representative journey while Maria Palaiologina traveled to the East in the company of an army. In affairs related to the imperial family, church officials may have joined the missions to act as witnesses and to protect the good name of the female legates. (Gregoras and Kantakouzenos mention clerics sent along with Eirene Palaiologina in order to prevent possible slander).

In respect of titles, only one of the women mentioned in this study, Eugenia Palaiologina, was indirectly given the official title of ambassador, *πρεσβύς*.<sup>150</sup> This does not mean that the other ladies and empresses were not “real” ambassadors, for in late Byzantium it was not unusual even for male envoys to be referred to by name, civil or military office, or relationship to the ruler rather than by the official ambassadorial title.<sup>151</sup> Although noblemen and imperial servants needed titles and letters of recommendation to confirm their status to the receiver of the embassy, female relatives of the emperor accompanied by an appropriate suite probably seldom required such recommendations.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

While emperors throughout the centuries commonly dispatched male envoys, clerics, scholars, relatives, and trusted officials on missions to conclude treaties with foreign powers, political emergencies of the late empire drove John V, Manuel II, John VII, and John VIII to journey to foreign courts as ‘humble supplicants’.<sup>152</sup> But before the first of these sovereigns ventured forth, nine late Byzantine noble and imperial women were dispatched to negotiate with foreign rulers, ecclesiastical opponents of the emperor, a pretender to the throne, and their imperial relatives, another indicator of Byzantium’s difficult internal and external situation. This emergence of female ambassadors in the ranks of imperial diplomats further enhances our knowledge of the involvement of Palaiologan empresses, princesses, and aristocrats in both public and cultural life in the late empire as established by recent scholarship. Though repeatedly dispatched on missions similar to those of their male colleagues, these women were obvious outsiders in the diplomatic world of their day. Nevertheless, their social status, cultural and linguistic knowledge, intelligence, and contacts placed them at the head of diplomatic missions concerned with issues of peace as well as marital and military alliances. Promoting peace inside and outside the Byzantine borders and the imperial family and negotiating marriages, female legates acted in accordance with the traditional gender roles but the fact that, at the same time, they trod on the political stage indicates that public life and government of the empire were not completely devoid of female presence and influence.

<sup>148</sup> See the conclusions of the article of MALAMUT, *La lettre diplomatique* 160. Cf. OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine Diplomacy* 80.

<sup>149</sup> See MALAMUT, *De 1299 à 1451*, 109. On the leaders of embassies, see DROCOURT, *Diplomatie sur le Bosphore* 210–216.

<sup>150</sup> For further details on the titles of the Byzantine ambassadors, see MERGIALI-SAHAS, *Byzantine ambassador* 592. OIKONOMIDES, *Byzantine diplomacy* 81f.

<sup>151</sup> MERGIALI-SAHAS, *Byzantine ambassador* 589.

<sup>152</sup> The phrase used by KAZHDAN, *The notion of Byzantine diplomacy* 21.



In the final part of her study on the language of diplomacy, Margaret Mullett claims that “diplomacy was regarded as a normal human activity, just as much a concern of the *strategos* and the *toparch* on the border, or the official and the tax-payer in the province, as of the setpiece embassies to foreign rulers.”<sup>153</sup> So why not – we may ask – of the noble woman, the imperial princess, or better still, the Byzantine empress herself?

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<sup>153</sup> MULLETT, *The language of diplomacy* 216.