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# GEORGE PACHYMERES ON KING MILUTIN'S BRIDES AND THE ROLE OF QUEEN HELEN

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*Abstract.* The importance of diplomatic marriages for position and politics of Serbian King Milutin found its significant place in the vast historical work of the learned Byzantine scholar George Pachymeres. Of particular significance is Pachymeres' information of the role and the influence of Milutin's mother, Queen Helen, which demonstrates her unique position within the Serbian ruling family, and his superb understanding of the relations within the Serbian royal family.

The learned George Pachymeres is one of the least studied, and at the same time, one of the most misunderstood Byzantine authors. His voluminous, detailed, and highly idiosyncratic historical work—bearing the somewhat metaphysical title *Compositions of Histories* (Συγγραφικῶν Ἱστοριῶν), which betrays his profound philosophical knowledge—represents a unique collection of information on internal Byzantine history, and on the relations of the empire with the Serbs and the Bulgarians in the last third of the thirteenth and the first eight years of the fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup> High dignitary of the clerical hierarchy of the patriarchal church of Saint Sophia in Constantinople (but not a monk), an expert in Roman/Byzantine law, a philosopher who owned, read, and commented on the works not only of Aristotle, but of Plato, as well, Pachymeres was the intellectual whose attitudes and worldview escape any narrow qualifications.

The same can be said of his peculiar historical work. Stretching over eight hundred pages in the modern edition, Pachymeres' *Compositions of Histories* defies narrow categorizations, providing unique information on the fight between the supporters of the policy of the union of the Churches with Rome, whose leader was the emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, and their opponents within the restored Byzantine empire, and, not least important, on Constantinople's relation with its Balkan neighbors during the reigns of the same emperor, and the time of his son Andronikos II Palaiologos, who had radically changed his father's policy toward Rome. In one aspect, however, George Pachymeres' specific attitudes have no match in Byzantine historiography—his detailed accounts of the empire's relations with the Serbian and Bulgarian states depict in an unmatched detail the close connections within the specific community of the Orthodox polities, established, nurtured, and strengthened in the aftermath of the Crusaders' capture of Constantinople in 1204 (Stanković, 2015, pp. 35–48; Stanković, 2016, pp. 89–100).

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<sup>2</sup> Critical edition of Pachymeres' historical work: *Pachymères Georges, Relations historiques I–IV*, vol V (indices), ed. A. Failler, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, Institut français d'études byzantines, vol. I–II (1984), vol. III–IV (1999), vol. V (2000) in the series *Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae* 24/1–5. All translations in English from Pachymeres' History are mine.

Pachymeres was almost unbelievably well informed about the minutiae of Byzantine diplomatic efforts to bring both the Serbs and the Bulgarians into alliance with Constantinople, and the accompanying negotiations between, in particular, Byzantium and Serbia, during the time of the supreme power of Serbian King Milutin (1282–1321).<sup>3</sup> A contemporary of Serbian King Milutin, George Pachymeres had his own sources who had provided him with details on the empire's long-term relations with King Milutin, one of whom was his life-long friend, despite his unionist policy, John Bekkos, who became a patriarch of Constantinople in 1275, half a decade after leading a diplomatic mission to Serbia, which had achieved a deal for the then young Serbian prince Milutin to become the emperor Michael VIII's son-in-law, and owing to that alliance, the heir of his father King Uroš in Serbia (Станковић, 2022, pp. 79–103).

The account of that diplomatic mission to the court of the future King Milutin's father in 1270 is but one unique piece of information conveyed by George Pachymeres in his historical work pertaining to the oftentimes complex, but almost always friendly and conflict-free relations between the Byzantine empire and the Kingdom of Serbia in the last third of the thirteenth century. Pachymeres was so well informed about the details of marital arrangements between Constantinople and its Balkan Orthodox neighbors that he must have had among his sources some of the highest placed officials closest to both the emperor Michael VIII and his son, Andronikos II Palaiologoi. If John Bekkos, for whom Pachymeres reserves the highest praise in his works despite the former's acceptance of the unionist policy of Michael VIII, could be recognized as his source for the 1270 mission that launched then fifteen-year-old prince Milutin into the high politics of that time in the Orthodox Balkans dominated by the resurgent Byzantine empire, then his sources for the negotiations between now forty-five-year-old Serbian King Milutin and the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos in 1298–1299 are not as easily discernible. George Pachymeres was, without a doubt, very well connected in the Byzantine capital, highly respected within the circle of Byzantine intellectuals who were close to the imperial court, but his sources remain obscure, and the quality of his information unrivaled in this, and not only in this, period of Byzantine history. Pachymeres' interests for the details of the empire's diplomacy and, in particular, his understanding of the importance of the empire's alliances with the Orthodox states in the Balkans, namely Serbia and Bulgaria, reveal in no uncertain terms his comprehension of the dominant political trends in the Europe and the Muslim world of his time. All the above position George Pachymeres as one of the most important, and

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<sup>3</sup> On Pachymeres' unique information on Bulgaria and the negotiations between the emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos and the Bulgarian tsar Constantine Tich, see: Stanković, 2012, pp. 127–138. On his account of the relations in Serbia see: Станковић & Ердељан, 2021; Станковић, 2022.

the most profound Byzantine thinkers of the post-1204 Byzantine, and wider Orthodox world.

Pachymeres' in-depth knowledge and understanding of the relationships and dealings between the Byzantine Empire and its Balkan neighbors showcase the importance of diplomatic marriages as the preferred tool of Byzantine diplomacy, stretching all the way back to the beginning of the twelfth century and the reign of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos (Stanković, 2022). At the sunset of the thirteenth century, the marriage alliance with the leader of the Christian, and in particular, the Orthodox world, *the emperor of the Romans* (the Byzantine emperor) Andronikos II Palaiologos, was of the utmost importance for the position, and the realization of political goals of Serbian King Milutin: a) for his position within Serbia and the prevalence he would thus gain over his older brother Dragutin and b) for his rise in the hierarchy of the Christian rulers in the Orthodox Balkans and beyond. That is why Pachymeres' insistence on the importance of King Milutin's mother, Queen Helen, as a guarantor of the marriage union between her son and Emperor Andronikos II's five-year-old daughter Simonis is so significant, offering once again a unique piece of information into prolonged, sensitive, and not always easy negotiations between Constantinople and King Milutin, which would eventually enable the Serbian king to finally become the son-in-law of the emperor of the Romans (Станковић, 2022, pp. 181–211).

The importance of King Milutin's mother, Queen Helen, and her influence over her sons as late as the end of the thirteenth century, is evident from the unique intelligence conveyed by George Pachymeres.<sup>4</sup> In this long paragraph, Pachymeres summarizes the marital status of the Serbian king, already explained earlier in his work in greater detail, his previous unions, spicing his account

<sup>4</sup> *Pachymérés*, IV/X.1, pp. 307–309: Βασιλεὺς μὲν γάρ, ἐπεὶ πόλλ' ἄττα τὰ προσιστάμενα τῷ συναλλάγματι κατεφαίνετο, τό τ' ἐφ' ὀρκωμοσίαις τὸν κράλην φρικταῖς τὴν τοῦ Τερτερῆ προσλαβέσθαι. τό τε νομίμως δοκεῖν συνεξεῦχθαι, ἢ τ' ἀφελικίωσις τῆς νεάνιδος καὶ τὸ φθάσαι τὸν Σέρβον τὴν τὰδελοφου Στεφάνου γυναικαδέλφην, εἴτ' οὖν καὶ αὐτοῦ βασιλέως, τὴν τοῦ ῥηγὸς Οὐγγρίας κόρην, κατὰ χρεῖαν τοῖς τῆς Σερβίας τόποις ἐπιστάσαν καὶ τὰ μοναχικὰ ἠμφιεσμένην, πορνικῶς γνῶναι — ταῦτ' εἰς ἓν συναγόμενα αὐτάρκη τῇ πράξει προσίστασθαι κατεφαίνοντο —, ὁ γοῦν βασιλεὺς διὰ ταῦτα. ἅμα μὲν τὰ πολλὰ θεραπεύων, ἅμα δέ γε καὶ λογιζόμενος ὡς, εἴ τι καὶ παρασπονδοίη ὁ κράλης ἐπὶ τοῖς συγκεϊμένοις αὐτῷ τε καὶ Τερτερῆ, οὐδὲν ἐσεῖται μῖσος τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, μὴ ἀνάγκην ἐχούση καθ' ἱεράς τελετὰς διὰ τὴν ἀμιξίαν ἐκεῖνου μνησκεισθαι, διὰ ταῦτα θαρρῶν οἷς ἐλογίζετο, οὗτ' ἐκοινοῦτο τῷ πατριάρχῃ τὴν πρᾶξιν καὶ ὅλαις ὀρμαῖς ἐχώρει διαπραξόμενος τὸ συνάλλαγμα.

Πατριάρχης δ' αὐθις ὕβριοπαθῶν ἴσως ὑπερφρονούμενος ἐν τοιοῦτοις οἷς καὶ μᾶλλον ἔδει τῆς αὐτοῦ γνώμης, δοκῶν δὲ καὶ τι λέγειν ἄξιον εἰς τὸ καὶ ἑαυτὸν δεικνύναι μετεῖναι τῶν τοιοῦτων οὐχ ἦττον, καίτοι γε καὶ τῶν ἐνοχῶν ἀνεῖς τὴν τοῦ κράλη μητέρα, ἀξιώσασαν πρότερον ἐφ' οἷς ἐπὶ τῇ τοῦ Τερτερῆ ἐνειχετο, εὐλογα λέγειν ἐδόκει. Ὡς τοίνυν βασιλεὺς ἦδει εἰς τοῦτ' ὄντα τὸν πατριάρχη, προῆγε τοῦτον εἰς Σηλυβρίαν, αὐτὸς ἐν Δριπεΐα καὶ ἔτι παρακαθήμενος.

with the gossip about Milutin's second wife, the Hungarian princess Elizabeth, of whom the Serbian church supposedly disapproved. That Pachymeres' skewed account should be taken in this regard with the grain of salt is clear from the detailed analysis of this time, and in particular of the inter-connected kinship networks: for the long time, both Dragutin and Milutin, and the future emperor Andronikos II were married to three sisters, Hungarian princesses, Catherine, Elizabeth, and Anna respectively.<sup>5</sup> The novel information that Pachymeres conveys in this passage, however, relates to the role of Queen Helen, to her importance within Serbia, and to one of the main demands by the Byzantine side: that the Queen Mother gives her written permission for the planned marriage between her younger son and the Byzantine purple-born princes Simonis.

Pachymeres provides the crucial point of his understanding of the situation within the Kingdom of Serbia by the end of this paragraph. Mentioning that the patriarch of Constantinople was feeling sidelined from the entire process of negotiations, the author stresses the emperor Andronikos II's argument that the current negotiations will result in a lawful union once Queen Helen approves the arrangements, since the *Queen Mother had previously dignified the arrangement with the daughter of Terter with her consent*.

Two important conclusions should be drawn from Pachymeres' unique insight:

- first, that the main demand by the Byzantines was that Queen Helen accepted the new marriage alliance, and with it the new policy of her younger son Milutin, the one that would certainly lead him on the course of political collusion with the older brother Dragutin;

- and second, that Queen Helen gave her approval for the previous marriage of King Milutin in the summer of 1284, with Anna, the young, at the time no more than five-year-old daughter of the new and mighty emperor of Bulgaria, George Terter. As Ivan Božilov had shown, Anna Terter, the daughter of the Bulgarian emperor George Terter and his second wife Maria, was – at the most – five years old when she married then thirty-year-old Serbian King Milutin in 1284 (Божилов, 1985 / 1994<sup>2</sup>, pp. 257–259).<sup>6</sup>

According to Pachymeres' passage quoted above, Queen Helen had played an important and 'honorable' role in the negotiations that led to Milutin's marriage alliance with Anna Terter in 1284, and was expected to do the same for the

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<sup>5</sup> Both Dragutin and Milutin were in that way brothers-in-law with Andronikos II Palaiologos between 1274/5, when Milutin married Elizabeth, while the future Byzantine emperor was married with the Hungarian princess Anna from 1272 until her death in 1281 (Станковић, 2022, pp. 79–103). By marrying Symonis in the spring of 1299, King Milutin will become the *beloved son-in-law* of his one-time brother-in-law, Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, see: Stanković, 2013, pp. 57–68.

<sup>6</sup> Божилов, 1995, no. 448, p. 354 determines the year 1279 as the *terminus post quem* for the birth of Anna Terter.

planned marriage of the Serbian king with the five-year-old princess Simonis, the daughter of Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos. At the beginning of the negotiations, the Byzantines had actually demanded the physical presence of the Queen Helen at the official wedding ceremony and the accompanying celebrations, but King Milutin managed to wrangle out of that unpleasant obligation. The Byzantines needed and asked for Queen Helen's blessing in order to secure King Milutin's loyalty to his newest father-in-law, Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, who was four or five years the experienced king's junior, and to the Byzantine imperial family, in general.

But even though they did not manage to obtain the official approval of Queen Helen, the Byzantines needed not worry about the Serbian king's loyalty in the wake of his marriage with Symonis, short time after Easter, April 19, 1299. Milutin cherished his new status as the emperor's son-in-law and did not only remain loyal to Andronikos II but had radically changed the status of Serbian Kingdom in Byzantine politics and ideology. As Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, together with his son and co-ruler Michael IX were eager to stress, Serbian king had with his marriage not only become the beloved son-in-law of the former, and the brother-in-law of the latter, but had also entered into *union* with the Byzantine emperor. And both his son Stefan and grandson Stefan Dušan benefited from that special status and exploited it for strengthening their own position, but they never again managed to reach an alliance between Serbia and Byzantium as close as the one that was established with the marriage of Milutin and Simonis in 1299.

Byzantine concession to Milutin regarding Queen Helen's presence at the official wedding ceremony was the only request from which the Byzantines have walked away relatively at the beginning of the months-long negotiations. Queen Helen's acceptance of the new marriage of her younger son Milutin was, on the other hand, for months the main condition of the Byzantine side, since her acceptance, and acquiescence to the marriage of Milutin to Simonis would, for all the practical purposes, confirm the new political balance in Serbia, in which Milutin would take official and undisputed prevalence over his older brother Dragutin and his offspring, in the first place Dragutin's son Vladislav, the designated heir of both his father's and his uncle Milutin's lands.

That the marriage and political alliance were forged despite the lack of the formal sanction by Queen Helen is the testimony that both sides fully realized the importance of the establishment of the new alliance. In official Byzantine documents, therefore, it was referred not as a simple alliance (συνμαχία), but a true *union* (ἔνωσις) between the emperor of the Romans, Andronikos II Palaiologos and the Serbian King Milutin (Станковић & Ердељан, 2021, pp. 68–73; Станковић, 2022, pp. 207–211). That is why this seemingly *off the record, en passant* mention of Queen Helen and her role in Milutin's marriage alliances with two young princesses, the Bulgarian Ana Terter in 1284 and

Simonis Palaiologina in 1299 is of utmost importance, showing the highest level of Pachymeres' first-hand knowledge of the intricacies and details of Byzantine imperial diplomacy, but confirming both the importance of the Serbian Queen Helen for the internal Serbian matter and her understanding of the radical political shifts that will occur with her younger son's absolute *union* with the emperor of the Romans in Constantinople.

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## Георгије Пахимер о невестама краља Милутина и улози краљице Јелене

### Резиме

Значај политичких бракова за положај и укупну политику српског краља Милутина заузима истакнуто место у обимном историјском делу ученог византијског писца, мислиоца и филозофа Георгија Пахимера. Од посебне важности је Пахимеров јединствени податак о позицији и улози Милутинове мајке, краљице Јелене, који потврђује њено специфично место у оквиру српске владајуће породице, уз синове Драгутина и Милутина, као и Пахимерово непревазиђено познавање односа унутар српског владајућег рода.

*Кључне речи:* краљ Милутин; Георгије Пахимер; краљица Јелена; политички бракови; Симонида; византијско-српски односи; уједињење.



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