

Politics, Art and Cultural Interaction in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Relations Between Mystras (Mistra) and Cyprus in the 14th and 15th Centuries

Ortaçağ Akdenizi'nde Siyaset, Sanat ve Kültürel Etkileşim: 14. ve 15. Yüzyıllarda Mystras (Mistra) ve Kıbrıs Arasındaki İlişkiler


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Abstract: The Crusades which were launched at the end of the 11th century resulted in a new political diversity in the Mediterranean. Cyprus was captured by Richard I, the king of England. In 1192, he sold the island to Guy of Lusignan who had lost his throne in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. This resulted in the establishment of a Frankish Kingdom which would last nearly three hundred years. However, the states founded in Greece after the Fourth Crusade were less stable political entities. Mystras (Mistra) was founded as a Frankish settlement in 1249 under the Principality of Achaia, which was the longest lasting of these. The city captured by Michael VIII Palaiologos in 1261 maintained its importance as a cultural and intellectual center, as the capital of the despotate of Morea from the second half of the 14th century. This article concentrates on Isabelle de Lusignan, the wife of Manuel Kantakouzenos, the first despot of the despotate of Morea and Queen Helena Palaiologina, the wife of King John II of Cyprus. The article examines the relations between Mystras and Cyprus in the 14th and 15th centuries and the socio-cultural connotations of these relations through the deeds of these two influential women of the period who had organic relations with both regions.

Keywords: Isabelle de Lusignan • Mystras (Mistra) • Helena Palaiologina • The Lusignan Kingdom of Cyprus

Öz: 11. yüzyılın sonunda başlayan Haçlı Seferleri Akdeniz'de yeni bir siyasi çeşitliliğe yol açtı. Kıbrıs, III. Haçlı Seferi yolculuğu sırasında İngiltere Kralı I. Richard tarafından ele geçirildi. Kudüs tahtını kaybeden Guy de Lusignan'a satılan Kıbrıs'ta 1192 yılından itibaren yaklaşık üç yüzyıl sürecek bir Frank Krallığı kuruldu. IV. Haçlı Seferi'nin ardından Yunanistan'da kurulan devletler ise çok daha istikrarsız ve değişken siyasi teşekküllerdi. Mystras (Mistra) bunlar arasında en uzun ömürlü olan Akhaia Prinkepşliğı çatısı altında bir Frank yerleşimi olarak 1249 yılında kuruldu. VIII. Mikhail Palaiologos tarafından 1261 yılında ele geçirilen kent 14. yüzyılın ikinci yarısından sonra despotluk hâline gelen Mora'nın başkenti olarak imparatorluğun son zamanlarına kadar kültürel ve entelektüel bir merkez olarak önemini korudu. Bu çalışma Bizans Mora Despotluğu'nun ilk despotu Manuel Kantakouzenos'un eşi Isabelle de Lusignan ve Kıbrıs Kralı II. John'un eşi Kraliçe Helena Palaiologina'yı merkeze almaktadır. Her iki bölge ile organik bağları olan dönemin bu etkili kadınları üzerinden 14. ve 15. yüzyıllarda Kıbrıs ve Mystras arasındaki ilişkiler ile bunların sosyo-kültürel yansımaları incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Isabelle de Lusignan • Mystras (Mistra) • Helena Palaiologina • Kıbrıs Lusignan Krallığı

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Introduction

The crusades which began at the end of the 11th century turned the Mediterranean into a cluster of political entities in which people from different socio-cultural backgrounds were involved. The political unity of Greece, which was untouched until the Fourth Crusade, became disrupted after the unexpected attack on Constantinople by the Franks and Venetians in cooperation in 1204. The principality of Achaea, established by the Frankish knights Geoffrey (Geoffroi) of Villehardouin and William (Guillaume) of Champlitte in 1209 in the Morea, managed to survive until 1430, even though it began shrinking rapidly after it was founded. In 1249, William II of Villehardouin, the son of Geoffrey, ordered a castle to be built on a spur of Mount Taygetos to strengthen the Latin hegemony in the region. This Frankish stronghold, known as Mystras (Mistra) developed as a settlement around the castle. However, it was very short-lived as the castle, in addition to the Monemvasia and Maina, was handed to Manuel VIII Palaiologos, the savior of Constantinople from the Latins, in 1261 to ransom William, who had been taken prisoner during the Pelagonia War in 1259. After a period of administration by Byzantine governors until 1348, Manuel Kantakouzenos was sent to Mystras by his father, the Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos, as the first despot of the Despotate of Morea. The despotate surrounded by the Latin powers survived until its fall to the Ottomans in 1461 and its capital Mystras flourished as an intellectual and cultural center until that date¹.

On the other hand, Cyprus, which was being governed by a rebellious Byzantine governor, Isaakios Komnenos, was captured by the king of England, Richard the Lionheart, on his way to Jerusalem in the course of the Third Crusade. Richard sold the island to Guy of Lusignan, the overthrown king of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1192. This marked the beginning of the Lusignan Kingdom of Cyprus until its annexation by the Venetians in 1489². Although composed of a culturally diverse society, the majority of which were Greeks, Cyprus experienced a more stable and long-lasting domination by the Franks. Nonetheless, despite all these “virile” facts upon which the historical narrations are generally based, this article focuses on two elite female characters who were locally empowered agents in promoting artistic trends and cross-cultural dialogues: Isabelle de Lusignan, the wife of Manuel Kantakouzenos in Mystras and Queen Helena Palaiologina, the wife of King John II of Cyprus. It aims to examine the link between the Lusignan Kingdom of Cyprus and the Despotate of Morea and its political and cultural connotations in the 14th and 15th centuries through the deeds of these two women.

The Byzantine sources of the period are almost completely silent about Isabelle and Helena, in an interesting manner. However, the sources of Cypriot historiography, namely the *Exegesis* of Leontios Makhairas, the anonymous *Historia* belonging to Francesco Amadi, Florio Bustron's *Historia* and the *Diegesis* of Georgios Boustronios - although written in the 15th and 16th centuries - do provide information on their activities³. The papal letters also help to fill gaps in the narration. The chronicle of the Franciscan friar Jean Dardel, who met Leon V of Armenia, Isabelle's cousin in 1377 and became a friend and private counsellor to him while he was a prisoner in Cairo, is the only contemporary source providing details about Isabelle through her familial connections to the captive king of Armenia⁴. A

¹ Runciman 2014, 3-4.

² Edbury 1991, 1-12.

³ For a detailed presentation of these sources see Bozkuş 2018, 149-161.

⁴ Ghazarian 2000, 162-163.

comparative analysis of the artistic evidence both from Mystras and Cyprus presented by art historians will also be carried out for the probable artistic and cultural interactions between the two regions.

In the light of these sources, this article first presents a historical overview of the complex political status quo in these regions, which would allow the contextualization and positioning of the the main characters, Isabelle de Lusignan and Helena Palaiologina, and provides a preliminary explanation of their importance within the general political framework of the period. Then, the way the two women were involved in the politics of the Mediterranean is dealt with. In the last part of each section, their roles in cultural and artistic interjections are examined.

Political Overview

It seems that what *deus veult* had changed with the Fourth Crusade, which targeted the lands of the Orthodox Christian Byzantine Empire rather than those of the “infidel” Muslims. On the 13th of April 1204, Constantinople fell to the Frankish and Venetian Crusaders, and this started an almost sixty-year Latin period in the history of the city. However, the Latin conquest was not a takeover of the whole empire, as it was destined to be shared among the participants in line with the *Partitio Romaniae*, as agreed in March 1204. According to this, one-quarter of the lands were given to Baldwin, the count of Flanders and Hainault, elected as the emperor of the newly established Latin Empire of Constantinople. The remaining three parts were to be divided in half between the Venetians and the Frankish Crusaders⁵. In addition to the partitioning of Constantinople, the individual expeditions of the conquerors on Byzantine lands in the Aegean (*Romania*) created several political entities in the region. Owing allegiance to the emperor in Constantinople, they, rather than being strict vassals, acted as autonomous Crusader states or colonial territories. Although Constantinople was recaptured by Michael VIII Palaiologos, the Byzantine emperor in Nicaea in 1261, the political and social structure of Greece, which was characterized by the involvement of a large number of invaders with conflicting interests, had irreversibly changed⁶.

Boniface, the Marquis of Monferrat and the leader of the Frankish Crusader army succeeded in taking Thessalonica and founded what was later known as the Kingdom of Thessalonica⁷, even though he had lost the contest for the throne of Constantinople against Baldwin. He conquered Thessaly in Northern Greece and proceeded towards the south-east. He was accompanied by his French, German, Flemish and German supporters - each in the pursuit of obtaining a fiefdom - such as William of Champlitte, the viscount of Dijon, Othon de la Grande, the son of a Burgundian noble, Jacques d’Avesnes, the son of a Flemish crusader. Othon de la Roche became duke of the Duchy of Athens and Thebes in 1205. The Marquisate of Boudanitsa and the Lordship of Salona surrounding it served as the strongholds between the north and south for nearly two hundred years. Euboea or Negroponte, as known by the Latins, was divided equally among three Veronese lords as small feudal units. Ravano delle Carcari, one of the lords, managed to control the whole island between 1209-1216, and placed himself under the suzerainty of the Venetians⁸. However, the acquisition of the Venetians was not limited to this. They held Corfu from 1207 until their defeat by the Byzantines in 1215. The ports Modon (Methone) and Coron on the southern coast of the Peloponnese were valuable points

⁵ Queller & Madden 1997, 192-203; Angold 2003, 22, 129-131; Andrea 2008, 141-144.

⁶ Chrissis & Carr 2016, 4.

⁷ For his struggle on Thessalonica against Baldwin, see Koçuk 2021, 89-96.

⁸ Miller 1908, 27-36; Lock 1995, 68-69; Jacoby 1999, 528.

in terms of maritime trade in addition to Crete which was held by them until the island was captured by the Ottomans in 1669. The nephew of the doge Marco I Sanudo also founded the Duchy of the Archipelago with its capital in Naxos in 1204 or 1205⁹.

Geoffrey of Villehardouin, the nephew of the Marshal of Champagne and a well-known chronicler, joined William of Champlitte on his campaign when he had to take shelter at Modon harbor due to a storm on his way from Syria to Constantinople. By 1249, the conquest of nearly the whole of the Peloponnese was completed under the Villehardouin dynasty, as princes of the Principality of Achaëa. William II (1246-1278), the son of Geoffrey, wished to strengthen Latin hegemony and protect the southern Peloponnese from the Melings – a Slav tribe - and built a castle in the foothills of Mount Taygetos, naming it Mystras, probably without guessing it would turn less than a century later into the capital of the Byzantine Despotate¹⁰.

However, the status of the new states was far from being stable and solid. The Byzantines of Epiros subdued the kingdom of Thessalonica in 1224 but they did not give up their claim to the throne of Constantinople against their rivals in Nicaea. The dispute among them lasted until they acknowledged John III Vatatzes as emperor in 1253. Michael VIII Palaiologos, re-establishing Byzantine power in Constantinople in 1261, increased the pressure on the Latins of Peloponnese after taking the important castles of Maina, Monemvasia and Mystras in 1262¹¹. At the beginning of the century, the Byzantines expelled the Latins from islands such as Chios, Mytilene, Kos, Samos, and Rhodes, and confined them to the north and west coast of the peninsula. The Principality of Achaëa which had been under the suzerainty of the Angevin Dynasty since 1267, only comprised Patras and Glarentza within a century¹². The Catalan mercaneries who had come to the forefront as merchants and pirates in the Western Mediterranean since the second half of the 13th century, turned into rulers from adventurers in Greece as of the 14th century. They conquered the Duchy of Athens and Thebes in 1311. They acknowledged Manfred, the son of Frederick II of Sicily as their leader for the sake of the legitimacy of their conquest and they settled there until 1388 when they were replaced by the Florentine adventurer Nerio Acciaiuoli¹³. The web of interests, conflicts and alliances was highly complicated and even the advent of the Ottoman Turks and the Turkish Principalities on the Aegean coasts could not provide a basis for unity. The Latins and Greeks used the Turks as allies against each other, which eased and accelerated the invasion and incursions of the Turks into the region. The migration of Turkoman into Western Anatolia, beginning in the 11th century, accelerated when Byzantine authority moved from Nicaea to Constantinople in 1262. As the line of defense between the Seljuk Turks and Byzantines had collapsed during this shift, the Turkoman tribes, which escaped from the Mongolian invasion in Anatolia, came and settled in the western coastal areas without facing any significant resistance. At the beginning of the 14th century, the Turks captured nearly the whole of the Anatolian territory and Western Anatolia was divided among many Turkish principalities. During the reign of Andronikos II Palaiologos, Ephesos and Karia were captured by Menteşe Bey, Lydia and Aydın as far as İzmir (Smyrna) by Aydınoğlu Mehmed Bey, Bergama, Manisa and Macedonia (Megdon)

⁹ Thiriet 1959, 106-107; Gertwagen 2014, 5-12; Tsougarakis 2015, 2.

¹⁰ *Crusaders as Conquerors: Chronicle of Morea*, lines 2949-2989, 2990-3007; Geoffroi de Villehardouin *IV. Haçlı Seferi Kronikleri*, 73-74, 97; Longnon 1949, 237-239; Bon 1969, 696.

¹¹ Longnon 1949, 223-230; Nicol 1984, 2-5; 2009, 44-48; Vasiliev 2017, 570-572.

¹² Bon 1969, 136-137; Lock 1995, 109.

¹³ Setton 1975, 178-183; Lewis 1980, 363-364; Dourou Eliopoulou 2000, 88-90.

by Saruhan Bey, Phrygia by Germiyan and the whole of Bithynia and a part of Paphlagonia by Osman Bey. These were all emirs of the Muslim Turks. The invasion of the Turks spread to the Morea, and they pillaged Monemvasia and Mystras in 1333 and 1334¹⁴.

So, by the the end of the first half of the 14th century, the situation in the Peloponnese was far from being stable and safe, as was narrated by the Emperor John Kantakouzenos in his *Historia*: “*Peloponnesus was ravaged not only by Turks (a Persis) but also the Achaean Latins and local inhabitants who were in a constant war against each other plundering their lands. The defenseless villages were subject to the attacks of the external enemies and the cities were harmed by their inhabitants. They were about to disappear*”¹⁵. The emperor appointed in 1348 his younger son Manuel as the despot of Morea to ensure an effective administration in the region. Manuel who followed a balanced policy against Frank and Greek neighbors and the *archontes*, managed to strengthen the despotate despite the endeavors of the new Palaiologan dynasty to displace him. During his thirty-two-year reign, he secured a sensitive peace which was based on alliances and managed to restore order in the Peloponnese, as the ablest despot of the Morea¹⁶.

A Half-Blood Bride in Mystras: Isabelle de Lusignan

A monogram on a marble fragment which is now in Mistra Museum carries the name of a Latin lady in Greek letters: ZAMΠEIA HTE ΛEZINAΩ (Zampea de Lezanao) (Fig. 1). This lady, whose coat of arms was represented by a rampant lion and the Cross of Jerusalem on the middle of the templon epistyle, was the wife of the despot Manuel Kantakouzenos. Despite the representation of a Latin identity through her coat of arms and family name, her familial affiliations were much more complex. She was born in Constantinople in 1333 or 1334. Her father, Guy of Lusignan, was the son of Amaury de Lusignan, who usurped the throne from his brother King Henry II of Cyprus, between 1306-1310. When King Henry was restored to the throne on the murder of Amaury, his wife Isabelle (Zapel), the daughter of King Leon II of Armenia¹⁷, returned to Armenia with her one daughter and five sons, one whom was Guy¹⁸. After passing eight years in the Armenian court, he went to Constantinople to stay with his aunt Marguerite-Rita-Xeni, the wife of Emperor Michael IX Palaiologos. He supported his

¹⁴ Doukas *Tarih*, 4-5; Destān d’Umūr Pacha, 935-940. For the dates of the invasion, see the Introduction of *Destan* by Mélikoff Sayar, 40; Ostrogorsky 2011, 454-455. The reaction of the Christian powers against the Turks was to form a naval league which was an allied Christian fleet of galleys established with the help of the papacy. Venice, acting as the head of the league for the purpose of defending its territories in Greece, attempted to include Byzantium in the coalition in 1331. Cyprus participated in the *societas* in 1344, undertaking to provide six galleys. Despite the lack of the Byzantines, the fleet of the Venetians, Hospitallers and Cypriots, in addition to the Franco-papal forces, launched attacks against the emirates of Aydın, Karasi and Saruhan from 1334. Although they gained success against the Turks during the 1334 and 1348 attacks, the spread of the Black Death in 1348 and the outbreak of war between Venice and Genoa hampered the possibility of any permanent success in the Aegean Sea, Carr 2015, 66-78.

¹⁵ Kantakouzenos *Historiarum*, III, 85.

¹⁶ Zakythinis 1932, I, 95-113.

¹⁷ The intermarriages between the élite classes of Armenia and Cyprus had been a prevalent phenomenon since the 12th century. For marriages between the members of the ruling dynasties of Armenia and the Ibelins, the most prominent family of Cyprus in the 13th century see, Coureas 2015, 62-66.

¹⁸ Ghazarian 2000, 168; Coureas 2017, 22-23.

cousin Andronikos III, against Andronikos II, in their conflict for the throne and served as the Governor of Serres in Northern Greece. In 1333, his second wife Theodora Syrgiannes, who was the daughter of Syrgiannes also known as Syrgiannes Palaiologos Philanthropenos, a dynamic and treacherous military governor gave birth to Isabelle¹⁹. However, as understood from a papal dispensation this was not a legitimate marriage as Guy and Theodora were related with a third and fourth degree of affinity²⁰. He requested the pope to legitimize his marriage and his only child Isabelle as his heir. In 1342 he was invited to take the crown of Armenia and left the Byzantine court leaving Isabelle and her mother in Constantinople. His reign as the king of Armenia was short as he was murdered in 1344, due to his devotion to the Catholic faith. He always remained loyal to the Latin faith despite his close familial and military relations to the Kantakouzenoi and the Palaiologoi families²¹.



Fig. 1. Monogram and the coat of arms of Isabelle de Lusignan (Kalopissi-Verti 2013, 238)

Three letters from Pope Clement VI, dated the 30th of June 1347, show that Isabelle had arrived at the age of marriage by then and she demanded her estate accrued from her father in Cyprus from King Hugh IV of Cyprus²². In one of the letters, the Pope referred to Theodora as the Queen of Armenia, probably emphasizing the relations between the dynasties rather than her Byzantine roots. However, the king would have been ignorant to this demand as another letter dated the 26th of February 1349 repeated the demand for her estate to be able to marry with whom the king would approve as well²³. Having lost her mother in 1349 too, she must have obtained her dowry at some point and in 1355 she married Manuel Kantanouzenos, who had already been the despote at Mystras for seven years²⁴.

It is unclear whether she ever visited Cyprus before her marriage. However, she always wished to maintain her relations with Cyprus. Not only Isabelle but her husband must have considered Cyprus a probable supporter or ally when in need, as understood from the support given by Manuel for Hugh of Lusignan, Isabelle's cousin, against Philip III of Tarente, for the throne of the Principality of Achaia in 1364²⁵. In 1368, King Peter I of Cyprus visited Isabelle in Modon while he was returning from his second European travels, which he had set out on to collect resources for a crusade²⁶. There, Isabelle welcomed him together with her barons and provided him with gifts. She demanded a fiefdom in Cyprus to have shelter in the event that she outlived her husband. She also wished her cousin Leon of Lusignan to be sent to Mystras to share her loneliness in the Greek lands, guaranteeing to arrange a

¹⁹ Kazhdan 1991, III, 1997; Coureas 1995, 42; Louvi Kizi 2022a, 9.

²⁰ Collenberg 1977; 74-75.

²¹ Boase 1977, 30-31; Coureas 1993, 105-107.

²² *Bullarium Cyprium* III, t-224, t-225, t-226.

²³ *Bullarium Cyprium* III, t-389.

²⁴ Louvi Kizi 2022a, 11-12.

²⁵ Zakythinis 1932, I, 109-110.

²⁶ For the travels of Peter I to Europe see Hakalmaz 2022, 114-166, 221-226.

marriage between him and a wealthy woman in the region. Accepting her demands, Peter gave her Aradippou, near Larnaka, the yearly revenues of which equaled 12,000 white besants²⁷. The lady that Isabelle de Lusignan considered as the bride for his cousin Leon was Catherine, the younger sister of the seigneur of Arkadia, Erard III (d'Aunoy) Mavros. He had been one of the most powerful barons of the Frankish Morea since 1344²⁸. This arrangement shows that Isabelle developed strong relations with the Latin élite of the Peloponnese, most probably using her Latin roots through Cyprus. It is an interesting point, though, since, as a woman who had grown up in the Byzantine court, she had probably never been in Cyprus or Armenia until her age of marriage. Despite her father being a fervent supporter of the Catholic faith, she was only ten when he left Constantinople to take the crown of the Armenian Kingdom. Thus, she must have been more inclined to Byzantine culture and identity, internally. However, the diverse traits of her familial background enabled her to act in accord with the political and social dynamics of the period and the region to secure both her interests and that of her husband. This marriage did not take place, as on the murder of Peter I of Lusignan by his barons in 1369, the regent of the kingdom John of Lusignan on behalf of King Peter II, did not allow Leon to leave the island and he married a noble woman, Marguerite de Soissons in 1369 in Cyprus, instead. The regent also annulled the fiefdom of Isabelle de Lusignan, which made her set out for Cyprus to take back her estate²⁹.

She attended the coronation ceremony of Peter II on the 8th of November 1372 with a crowded retinue and gifts. She demanded her fiefdom from the regent, but her efforts were fruitless. She decided to go to Jerusalem but had to stay in Cyprus due to adverse weather conditions. During this time, she must have continued her insistence in her claims by appealing to Pope for assistance. This is because there is a letter from Gregory XI, dated the 8th of March 1371, inviting the archbishop of Nicosia to ensure that Isabelle obtained an annual payment of 10,000 white bezants, accrued from her estate, Aradhippou (Rasippo)³⁰. And she was given a fiefdom, although more modest than the previous one - Saint George de Tunbé providing 3000 (or 4000) white bezants yearly. She gave the administration of this fiefdom to her cousin Leon³¹. According to the Cypriot chronicles, while she was in Cyprus, ambassadors came from Cyprus to arrange a marriage between the daughter of Emperor John V Palaiologos and Peter II. This marriage did not take place with the excuse of the conflict with the Genoese. However, Leontios Makhairas, writing in the 15th century, recorded that Isabelle also supported this marriage and tried to secure it as it was her main objective to be present on the island³². It seems highly probable that she made another marital intervention. John Laskaris Kalopheros, an exile from Constantinople and a convert to Catholicism, spent his time in Cyprus as a close friend and ally of Peter I of Lusignan, participating in his military operations until his death. In 1372 or 1373, he entered into his second marriage with Lucie, the daughter of Erard III Mavros. He must have met Isabelle either during her stay in Cyprus or his stop in the Morea while heading to Europe

²⁷ Dardel 1906, 37.

²⁸ Zakythinos 1936, 69; Longnon 1949, 326; Jacoby 1968, 199-200.

²⁹ Dardel 1906, 39; Zakythinos 1936, 70.

³⁰ *Bullarium Cyprium* III, w-18.

³¹ Bustron 1886, 292; Strambaldi 1893, 139-140; Dardel 1906, 39-41; Makhairas 1932, § 345; *The Chronicle of Amadi* 2015, § 882.

³² Makhairas 1932, § 347.

in 1372. When considering the previous arrangement between another daughter of Erard and Isabelle's cousin, she could have been effective in this marriage in order to find herself an ally through Kalopheros³³. During her stay in Cyprus, she made a visit to Jerusalem and participated in the wedding ceremony of Peter II with Valentina, the daughter of the duke of Milan and then went to Constantinople, if we are to rely on the narration of Makhairas³⁴.

She remained involved in Mediterranean politics, playing an intermediary role. When her cousin Leon V, king of Armenia fell captive to the Mamluks in 1375-1377, she demanded help from Emperor John V Palaiologos to rescue him from the sultan of Egypt³⁵. In 1379, she paid 9 500 ducats for the release of the master of the Knights of St. John, Juan Fernandes de Heredia, who had been taken prisoner by the Albanians and sold to the Ottoman Turks during his campaign to the Peloponnese in 1377. However, she was not reimbursed for a sum of 6,500 ducats according to a document dated the 6th of April 1382, which was the reason for her presence in Rhodes on that date. On the 21st of October of the same year, she also met here with her cousin Leon, who had been released from captivity but had to go to Europe on not being accepted in Cyprus³⁶.

In 1380, she lost her husband, and maintained her efforts to secure herself in financial terms. A notarial record from 1390 proves her presence in Crete. She demanded her jewellery and money she had pledged, from a certain Giorgio Dervaso. This piece of information is also proof that she had left Mystras permanently, after Manuel passed away³⁷. In 1407, Manuel II Palaiologos enquired from the Venetian authorities about the fortune of his aunt Isabelle, which she had deposited in Camera Crete, the principal banking center of Venice in the East³⁸. This is the last known record concerning her and she probably passed away a little before Manuel's demand. However, the Cypriot chronicle continues to remind us of her. In 1426, during their invasion of Cyprus, the Mamluks completely burnt down Aradippou, *la casa della despotissa*. Her husband Manuel is also referred to as *the lord of the Greeks and Aradippou*, which may stem from either the possibility of the restitution of a part of the casal to her together with Saint George de Tunbé or the reflections of her dynamic activities in the politics of Mystras and Cyprus in the history of the island³⁹.

Interactions Beyond Politics

As a dynamic and ambitious woman actively participating in Eastern Mediterranean politics, Isabelle de Lusignan continued her balanced policy through the patronage enterprises that she had assumed in Mystras in the second half of the 14th century. Though she never abandoned her Catholic faith, as deduced from her intimate relations with the papacy and the Lusignan dynasty, she still managed to cleverly use her mixed identity attributes to adapt to the socio-political conditions of the regions. A donor inscription from the Church of St. George in Longanikos which dates from 1374-1375 is an excellent example of this attitude. This is because Isabelle is referred to as *Maria Kantakouzenos*⁴⁰,

³³ Jacoby 1986, 189-190, 199-200.

³⁴ Makhairas 1932, §§ 350-351.

³⁵ Daldel 1906, 92-93.

³⁶ Dardel 1906, 103; Zakythinos 1936, 73-76.

³⁷ Louvi Kizi 2022a, 19.

³⁸ Louvi Kizi 2022a, 20.

³⁹ Strambaldi 1893, 26 and n. 4.

⁴⁰ Zakythinos 1936, 62-63; Chassoura 2002, 19-20.

among the names of the other donors. The Cypriot chronicles also refer to her as Maria or Marguerite⁴¹, which shows her successful self-representation while sticking with her Latin identity, as reflected through the morphological and decorative Frankish features included in the construction activities undertaken by her⁴².

The second building phase of the Pantanassa Monastery which was originally built as a cross-in-square church with a single-storey narthex before 1355, dated between the years 1361-1365, is attributed to her. The Peribleptos Monastery predicted to have been completed in the same period, was also built by Isabelle and her husband Manuel. The belfry of the Pantanassa belongs to this second construction phase and the tower at the entrance of the Peribleptos display Frankish artistic features. Although the masonry of both monasteries is of a Byzantine cloissoné technique, a large blind circular oculus of cut stone blocks and a trefoil opening inscribed in a triangle with curving sides on the façade of the Peribleptos tower (Figs. 2-3-4) find its examples on the western side of the 14th century Cathedral of St. Sophia and the chapel of the Augustinians in Nicosia, Cyprus (Figs. 5-6). The same trefoil openings in circles of bricks exists on the façade of the Pantanassa belfry over the portico of the church with other examples on the north and south tympanum not being inscribed in circular frames on this occasion (Fig. 7)⁴³.

The pinnacles of the belfry comprised of four zones of Gothic belltowers which were used as the decorative elements adorning the west entrance to the Church of St. Catherine in Nicosia, as their miniature-sized versions as well (Fig. 8). Moreover, the Gothic garlands used in harmony with palmettes, and the Western style pointed arcade on the east façade of the Pantanassa Monastery katholikon provide another artistic link with Cyprus (Fig. 9). The decorative blind arcades are displayed in

⁴¹ The anonymous Cypriot chronicle Amadi gives her name as Margaret while introducing her as the daughter of the King Leon V of Armenia, who was indeed her cousin. *The Chronicle of Amadi* 2015 § 396, n. 8. Though correctly stating that Margaret (Μαργαρίτα) de Lusignan, the wife of *Kyr Manuel Katakouzenos* was the granddaughter of Amaury, lord of Tyre, Leontios Makhairas made a mistake by referring to her as the sister of King Leon, Makhairas 1932, I, §345 and II, §345, n. 1. The same chronicler refers to her as Marie in another passage, § 63. Strambaldi follows Makhairas when mistaking her for the daughter of Amaury, Strambaldi 1893, 26. However, Jean Dardel, the confessor of King Leon V of Armenia from 1377, introduces her as the daughter of King Guy of Armenia, Isabelle de Lusignan (Ysabel de Lisegnan), a cousin of King Peter I of Cyprus, Dardel 1906, 37. Moreover, she is referred to as *Isabella nata clare memorie Guidonis regis Armenie neptis tua* in a letter from Pope Clement VI, see. R. Dawkins' note in Makhairas 1932, II, §345.

⁴² Louvi Kizi whose excellent PhD dissertation on the Monasteries of Pantanassa and Peribleptos and the role of Isabelle de Lusignan as an intermediary between Byzantine and Frankish art was also published as a book in French in 2022, is of the opinion that this appellation of Isabelle as Mary is different from the tradition where Latin brides adopted Greek names after marrying a Byzantine ruler, as in the example of the wife of the despot Constantine Palaiologos (1443-1449) and Madeleine Tocco who changed her name to Theodora; Zakyntos 1936, 65 n.1; Louvi Kizi 2022b, 410-411. However, I still believe that, even though she did not change her rite, she must have wished to adopt a Byzantine name to present herself as also a part of the Byzantine world, maybe referring to her Byzantine roots through her mother. It should not be a coincidence that she was referred to as Maria on the donor inscription in Langoniko, where her name was accompanied by her husband's name as well as the names of the Byzantine emperor and empress, while preferring to represent herself with her Latin name and the coats of arms, in an individualistic manner.

⁴³ Louvi Kizi 2022b, 400-401.

the tympanum over the central entrance and the adjacent small south door of the Cathedral of St. Sophia. The same decorative program created by the identical sequence of elements along with palmettes in the cornice below the roof of St. Sophia provides a strong link between Mystras and Cyprus in terms of artistic and architectural interaction (fig. 10). The fact that the Monastery of St. Sophia of Mystras, built by Manuel before his marriage to Isabelle does not carry any Western morphological and decorative elements strongly proves Isabelle's role in promoting Frankish elements in these construction activities⁴⁴. Louvi Kizi explains this interaction through the employment of Byzantine craftsmen working under the guidance of Cypriot masters, bringing new forms and models to Mystras, as experts in building Gothic churches in Cyprus⁴⁵.

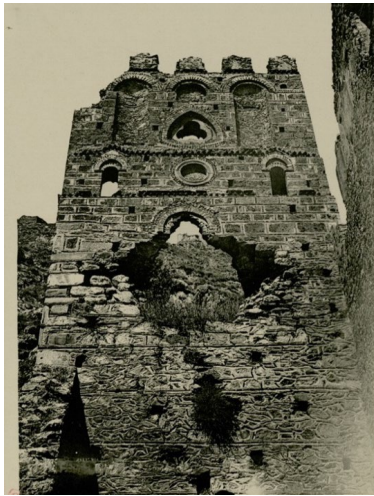


Fig. 2. The Tower of the Peribleptos Monastery, Mystras (Millet 1910, Pl. 30)



Fig. 3. Peribleptos Monastery, Tower, Circular Blind Oculus (Louvi-Kizi 2022b, 419)



Fig. 4. Peribleptos Monastery, Tower, Trefoil Opening (Louvi-Kizi 2022b, 420)



Fig. 5. Nicosia, Cathedral of St Sophia. Circular Oculus on the West Side of the Church (Louvi-Kizi 2022b, 421)



Fig. 6. Nicosia, Chapel of the Augustinians (Louvi-Kizi 2022b, 421)

⁴⁴ Louvi Kizi 2022b, 402-403, 406.

⁴⁵ Louvi Kizi 2022b, 402.

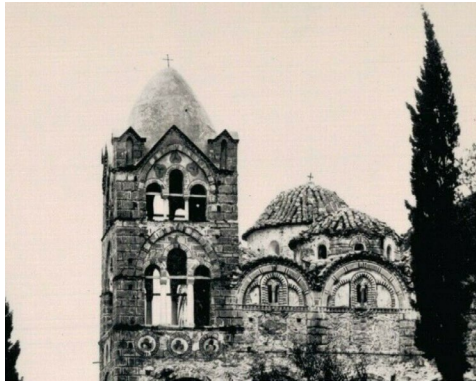


Fig. 7. Pantanassa Monastery, Belfry.
(<https://www.ebay.com/itm/266096780212>)
Erişim Tarihi: 18.4.2023



Fig. 8. St. Catherine Church of Nicosia
(Louvi-Kizi 2022b, 422)

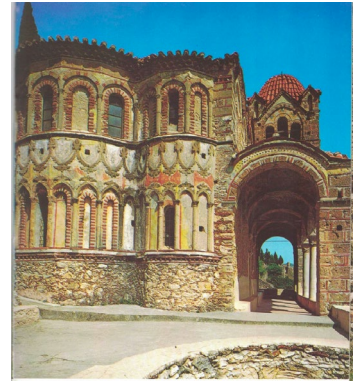


Fig. 9. Pantanassa Monastery Katholikon, east façade
(Chatzidakis 1996, 99)



Fig. 10. Cathedral of St. Sophia, Nicosia, Tympanum over the Main Entrance (Pirlanta 2014, 54)



Fig. 11. Holy Cross, Pelendri, Cyprus, Joseph Takes Leave of the Virgin (Christoforaki 1996, 253)

In the iconographic program of the south-eastern chapel of the Hagia Sophia in Mystras, the construction of which is dated later at 1366 and assigned to Isabelle, the great emphasis given to the scene of the *Birth of the Virgin* on the west wall is interpreted as Isabelle's wish to have a child, as she had been married to Manuel more than ten years at this time and was still childless⁴⁶. The same scene is also displayed in the fresco of the *katholikon* of the Peribleptos Monastery. However, the murals of the Peribleptos tells more than Isabelle's personal wishes. Of the three iconographic programmes dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the Cycle of the Life of the Virgin is the most extraordinary one in terms of its extensiveness, including twenty-five scenes⁴⁷. Another example of such a large Cycle of the Life of the Virgin with fifteen panels exists in the Holy Cross Church of Pelendri, Cyprus. Of the

⁴⁶ Emmanuel 2007, 121-122.

⁴⁷ Christoforaki 1996, 216; Emmanuel 2007, 122.

murals dated to the 14th century, two scenes which are rarely depicted in the Cycle, *The Marriage (or Mary Entrusted to Joseph)* and *Joseph Takes Leave of the Virgin*, are common to Pelendri and Peribleptos (Figs. 11, 12a-b)⁴⁸. A. W. Carr suggests that the employment of the skilled painters of the Peribleptos for the Palaiologan frescoes of the dome of Pelendri was proposed by Isabelle⁴⁹. The most interesting part, as Christoforaki suggests, is that the representations in the cycle take their sources from the illuminated manuscripts. The depiction of the second scene in Pelendri is closer to the Homilies of the monk James⁵⁰. She suggests that the possibility of an illuminated manuscript arriving from Byzantium to Cyprus, through Mystras considering the examples above, could be the inspiration for the wall paintings in both regions⁵¹.

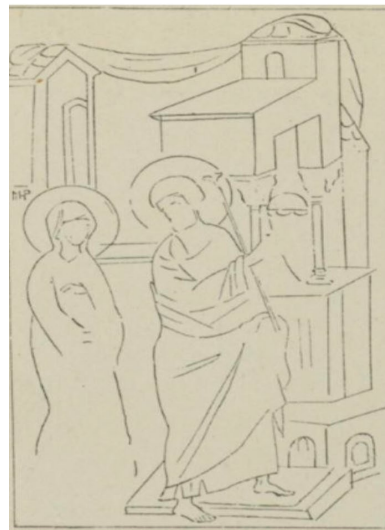


Fig. 12a-b Peribleptos Monastery, Joseph Takes Leave of the Virgin (Bilici 2021, 221)

The central areas for artistic production, including manuscripts in that period, were Mystras and Cyprus. Manuel's father, Emperor John VI gifted many high-quality books to the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos between 1347 and 1354. He also accepted the patronage of an illustrated copy of his own theological writings in 1373. A manuscript of the Book of John was copied by Manuel Tyzkandeles in Mystras in 1362. The Byzantine manuscripts were also used as models, as in the example of a Gospel book copied in Armenian Cilicia, based on a late 13th century Byzantine model⁵². One last comparison can be made between the Pyrga Chapel in Cyprus and Pantanassa Church in terms of the depiction of the painted figures. M. Emmanuel draws attention to the similarity of the figure of Paul in the Dormition of the Virgin with some figures in the Pantanassa⁵³. Pyrga Chapel has traditionally been dated to 1421. However, S. J. Lucey has convincingly offered a new dating of the chapel in the 14th century. It exactly corresponds to the period when Isabelle de Lusignan was in connection with King Peter I of Cyprus who is offered as the patron of the chapel with his wife Queen

⁴⁸ Christoforaki 1996, 234, 235. The latter is also displayed at the Chora Monastery.

⁴⁹ Carr 2005, 318.

⁵⁰ Dufrenne 1970, 16; Christoforaki 1996, 235.

⁵¹ Christoforaki 1996, 243.

⁵² Lowden 2004, 259, 263, 281; Andrews 2014, 39-44.

⁵³ Emmanuel 2007, 243.

Eleanora⁵⁴.

Playing an intentional/unintentional political and artistic intermediary role among different actors in the late Medieval Mediterranean, Isabelle could not despite all her efforts, find a secure shelter in Mystras, as can be understood from her slashed coat of arms as a *damnatio memoriae* when the rule of the Palaiologan dynasty replaced Isabelle and her father's reign after Manuel passed away⁵⁵.

A Queen of Cyprus from the Morea: Helena Palaiologina

In the 15th century, the political conditions were more adverse for both Mystras and Cyprus. After the battle of Khirokitia in 1426 between Cyprus and the Mamluk Sultanate in which King Janus of Cyprus was taken prisoner by the Muslims, the island became a tributary of the Mamluk Sultans. The Cypriots were already suffering from economic and political troubles resulting from the Genoese invasion of Famagusta in 1373. This suzerainty under the Mamluks placed heavy tax burdens paid in cash and kind upon the kingdom.⁵⁶ Mystras no longer remained untouched by the Ottoman invasions which were marked by the attacks of Turahan (Turhan) Bey, one of the emirs of Murad II, into the Peloponnese in 1426. The famous Hexamilion wall across the Isthmus of Corinth (Germe Hisar), restored by Manuel II, could not prevent the Turkish invasions crossing it in 1426 and 1446.⁵⁷

Emperor Manuel II arranged marriages between his sons and Latin brides. Under these circumstances, the marriages between Latins and Greeks must have been regarded as a hope of forming a defense before the advent of the Turks. The bride for his eldest son John VIII was Sophia of Montferat, who had a familial connection with the King of France. In 1421, Theodore II, the despot of the Morea married Cleope Malatesta, the daughter of Malatesta dei Malatesti, the lord of Pesaro and Fano, whose father had good relations with the Venetian government.⁵⁸ Their daughter Helena Palaiologina came to Cyprus on the 3rd of February 1442 and married King John II of Cyprus on the very next day, as his second wife⁵⁹. It is recorded that no other western ruler consented to give their daughters to King John, who was described as simple, effeminate and someone who lacked the wisdom to reign. He was guided by Cardinal Hugh until his death in 1422, and by his aunt Agnes in the government of the Kingdom⁶⁰.

On the other hand, the character of Helena, who was intelligent, clever, prudent, and ambitious despite her young age⁶¹, was the opposite of her husband⁶². Her presence on the island and involvement in the affairs of the kingdom has long posed controversy, mainly based on the account of Pope Pius II. He gives a pro-Greek portrait of her in his *Commentarii*, claiming that she assumed the government of the kingdom, abolished the Latin rite in favour of the Greek and replaced the Greek officers with the Latins. The power was assigned to the Greeks again by the enemy of the Latins⁶³. Although

⁵⁴ Lucey 2018, 63-91.

⁵⁵ Kalopissi Verti 2013, 235; Louvi Kizi 2022b, 411.

⁵⁶ Coureas 2013, 363-364.

⁵⁷ Necipoğlu 2009, 272-273.

⁵⁸ Zakythinos 1936, I, 189; Runciman 2014, 64-65.

⁵⁹ Makhairas 1932, §§ 709-710; *The Chronicle of Amadi* 2015, § 1085, 1087.

⁶⁰ Jorga 1902, 58, n.4; Hill 2000, 497-498, 527.

⁶¹ She was probably born in 1428, Gonchou 2014, 109 n. 26.

⁶² Florio Boustron 1886, 372; Gonchou 2014, 115 and n. 50.

⁶³ Jorga 1902, 58 n.4; Kaoulla 2006, 112.

this anti-Latin policy attributed to her, stemming from the tense relations between the pope and the kingdom, was refuted by historians, it is true that she had influence over her weak husband and was involved in the politics of the kingdom⁶⁴. The 16th century chronicler Florio Boustron states that she ruled the kingdom however she wanted, and reign was bestowed on her with an official document issued by the Haut Court⁶⁵. The existence of such an act is open to question. Yet, two more testimonies provided by Andrea Navagero (1483-1529) in his *Storia di Venezia* and Bartolomeo da Levanto, the Genoese capitano of Famagusta in a report assert that the kingdom was being ruled by the queen⁶⁶.

Despite her strong character, she was more sensitive when it came to her physical condition. She was always accompanied by a doctor. Moreover, after giving birth to Charlotte, the future queen of the kingdom in 1444, she immediately became pregnant again. However, she was unable to cope with this and became confined to bed for life as a paraplegic. Her second daughter Cleopa passed away in 1448⁶⁷. As Charlotte was the sole legitimate heir to throne, the choices made by her husband required attention, in particular with regard to the interests of the kingdom and James, the illegitimate son of King John by his mistress, Marietta of Patras. King John was very fond of him, and he would have loved to leave the throne to him if it wasn't for his fear of the queen. The famous narration about the quarrel between Helena and Marietta, which ended up with Helena cutting off her rival's nose, shows her jealousy of and discomfort with the *comomutene* (crop-nosed) mistress and her son⁶⁸. The High Court was divided between the supporters of John of Coimbria, the son of the duke of Coimbria and the cousin of the king of Portugal, King Alfonso and Louis the son of the duke of Savoy who was also the first cousin of Charlotte. The parties were mainly characterized by their attitude against the Genoese. King Alfonso V was one of their greatest opponents. The pro-Genoese party, on the other hand, supported the Duke of Savoy⁶⁹. Helena did not wish Charlotte to marry her cousin and an ally of the Genoese. Prince John did come to Cyprus in 1456 and the marriage was concluded. However, it was a short-lived union as her husband died shortly afterwards, leaving Charlotte a widow⁷⁰.

The suspicions were concentrated on Thomas of Morea, the chamberlain of the kingdom, who was the foster brother of Helena, brought by her on her arrival to the island and knighted by the King. He was murdered by James⁷¹. It must have been highly disappointing for the queen to lose someone who was such a close relation particularly as she was already feeling insecure and possibly alone, as can be understood from the information provided by George Sphrantzes. According to this, the queen needed something important, but she did not have a loyal servant in her entourage to transmit her message to emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos. He wanted Georgo to go to Cyprus to learn his niece's request. But this mission could not be realised due to the imminent attacks of the Ottomans on Constantinople⁷². Queen Helena died in 1458 while still endeavoring on her deathbed to prevent

⁶⁴ Richard 1992, 401-403. For a detailed refutation of the allegations about her see Kaoulla 2006, 128-140.

⁶⁵ Florio Boustron 1886, 372.

⁶⁶ Kaoulla 2006, 112-113; Ganchou 2014, 114 n. 45.

⁶⁷ Florio Boustron 1886, 372; Georgios Boustronios 2005, § 1; Conchou 2014, 116; Grivaud 2016, 328, 330.

⁶⁸ Florio Boustron 1886, 372; Hill 2000, 528-530.

⁶⁹ Richard 1992, 402-403; Kaoulla 2006, 116-119.

⁷⁰ Georgios Boustronios 2005, § 4.

⁷¹ Georgios Boustronios 2005, §§ 4-6.

⁷² A Chronicle by George Sphrantzes 1980, XXXIII, 8, 65.

the marriage between Charlotte and her cousin Louis. She was buried in the Dominican Monastery and was lucky enough not to witness the struggle for the throne between Charlotte and her step-brother James the Bastard⁷³.

Artistic Interactions in the 15th Century

Her influence on the island was not restricted to the political scene. She contributed to the socio-cultural life on the island. She renovated or re-founded the monastery of St. George of Mangana of Nicosia to provide shelter for the monks arriving on the island after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. She gave them land and annual income as well as donations. She must have been highly generous in terms of her donations or the rebuilding of the monastery since she was referred to as the founder of the monastery, which was indeed established in the 11th or 12th century⁷⁴. She was said to have been the founder of the church of Panagia Chrysolaniotissa in Nicosia and to have restored the cathedral of St. George of the Greeks of Famagusta.

Her benevolence had indirect effects as well. Among the people seeking refuge on the island were artists carrying their artistic styles with them. For example, the frescoes in the narthex of the church of St. Herakleidos in the monastery of St. John Lampadistis at Kalopanagiotis, dated after 1453, is attributed to a painter from Constantinople as the inscription at the southern entrance to the narthex records⁷⁵. M. Emmanuel suggests that the frescoes dated to the middle of the 15th century painted in the Palaiologan style convey the influence of Helena Palaiologina⁷⁶. It is true that the Palaiologan effects in the Cypriot mural decorations can be traced to earlier, until the 14th century, as A. W Carr states⁷⁷. However, the strong link between the churches of Mystras and Cyprus cannot be ignored either.



Fig. 13a Motifs in the Animal Forms Representing the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates, Panagia Katholiki, Kouklia, Cyprus (Sylianou & Stylianou 1997, 396)

Two monuments at Kouklia, Cyprus, the church of the Panagia Katholike and Palaia Enkleistra, bear traces of this interaction. For instance, two motifs in the form of an animal on the west wall of Panagia Katholike are displayed in the churches of Mystras, specifically in the Kyprianos chapel in the church of Hodegetria as a lion mask (Fig. 13a-c). Being the center for the revival of ancient culture in the 15th century, these forms, the source of which was the antique heritage to Mystras⁷⁸, must have been transferred to Cyprus. The fresco of the cave chapel of Palaia Enkleistra dated to 1442 which adorns the ceiling with the representation of the Holy Trinity poses a close affinity with the frescoes

⁷³ Makhairas 1932, § 713; Georgios Boustronios 2005, § 16; Hill 2000, 543-544.

⁷⁴ Makhairas 1932, I, § 711; Kyriacou & Schabel 2023, 3-4.

⁷⁵ Boase 1977, 175; Kaoulla 2014, 140-142.

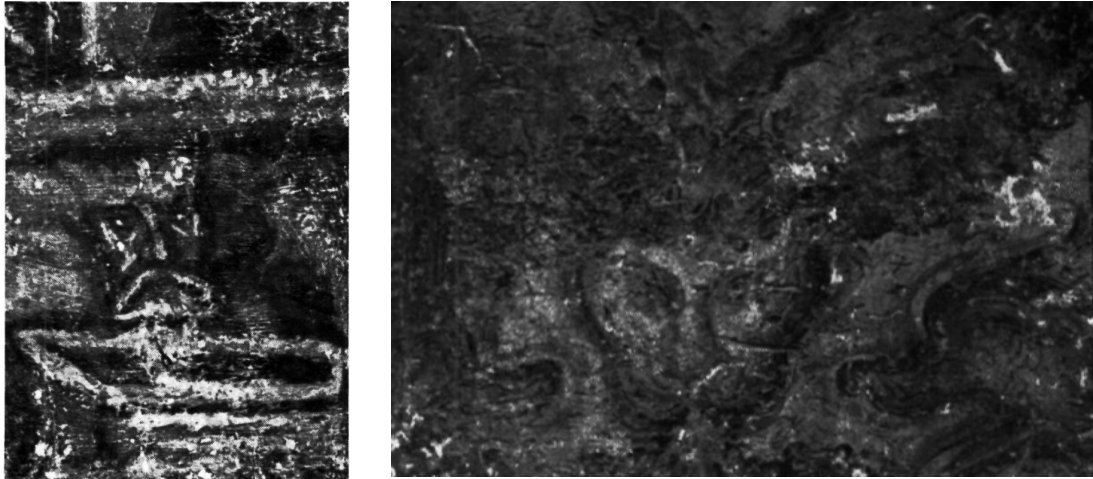
⁷⁶ Emmanuel 1999, 242-243.

⁷⁷ Carr 2005, 327.

⁷⁸ Mouriki 1981, 307-308; Emmanuel 1999, 244. For the intellectual life in Mystras see Zakythinis 1932, II, 310-376.

of the Hodegetria and the Pantanassa Churches at Mystras. Stylianou & Stylianou describe the similarity between the cave chapel and the Pantanassa church as:

*“The delicacy of execution, the softness of the colors the simplicity of the folds of the garments and the application of the highlights, are strikingly reminiscent of some of the paintings, especially of the individual saints in the church of the Pantanassa at Mystras”*⁷⁹.



Figs. 13b-c Mask motifs from Metropolis of Mistra and Afendiko of Mistra (Mouriki 1981, Pl. 10)

It also seems that the circulation of manuscripts between the regions continued in the 15th century. And the refugees from Constantinople must have brought manuscripts with them. The fact that Charlotte, the daughter of Helena Palaiologina, possessed three precious illuminated manuscripts two of which were of Constantinopolitan origin was not a coincidence⁸⁰. The monks of St. George of Mangana introduced to Cyprus a calligraphic script used in the monastery of Hodegon in Constantinople in the 14th century. *Scala Pradisi*, an ascetical treatise by John of Climax, which was copied in the Hodegon style by the famous scribe Ioasaph who worked at the *scriptorium* of the Hodegon, was taken to St. George of Mangana in Cyprus probably after 1453. This work was copied by the scribe Ambrosius in 1552 probably from this exemplar as understood from the use of the Hodegon style in other manuscripts⁸¹. This interaction, indeed, overreached Cyprus, as the script which continued to be used until the 18th century in Cyprus spread to other Orthodox areas via the Cypriot scribe Lukas Bezlau in the 17th century⁸².

Conclusion

Isabelle de Lusignan and Helena Palaiologina, two elite and powerful characters of the Late Medieval Mediterranean were the perfect representators of the political dynamics of their times and places. The disintegration of Byzantine territories resulted in the the establishment of the Latin states who ruled subjects, the majority of whom were Greek. These internal socio-cultural confrontations which

⁷⁹ Stylianou & Stylianou 1997, 400. They date the Pantanassa Church to 1428. For its three building phases and dating to the 14th century see, Louvi Kizi 2022b, 400.

⁸⁰ Constantinides & Browning 1993, 15.

⁸¹ Constantinides & Browning 1993, 15, 283-287; 271-274; Kaoulla 2014, 143.

⁸² Kaoulla 2014, 143.

already required a sensitive policy of balance became more complex with the involvement of external actors such as the Mamluks and the Genoese in the case of Cyprus and the Ottoman Turks along with the Turkish Principalities on the coast of the Aegean Sea for the despotate of Morea. Thus, each had to find an ally which constantly changed in accord with the political developments in the region. This turned the Mediterranean into a web of interests which endeavored to be protected, often with the crossing of religious and cultural boundaries by their opponents. Marital alliances were regarded as a means of establishing familial ties which eased access to the political realms of the sovereigns. In this context, Cyprus and Mystras, which was the second important city of Byzantium in the 15th century, was a place of shelter and support to be appealed to when in need of help. The two dynamic women, Isabelle and Helena, in pursuit of protecting their self-interests and the consolidation of the political entities of which they were a part, triggered a socio-cultural interaction between Cyprus and Mystras, which could have been both intentional or not. The political alliances dissolved through history, but their unintentional cultural and artistic side effects prevailed for longer periods, as these were experienced and adopted naturally as opposed to the artificially created political ties.

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