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*Édité par Jean-Michel Spieser  
et Élisabeth Yota*

# Donation et donateurs dans le monde byzantin

RÉALITÉS BYZANTINES

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**RÉALITÉS BYZANTINES**

Desclée de Brouwer

## FEMALE PIETY, DEVOTION AND PATRONAGE: MARIA ANGELINA DOUKAINA PALAIOLOGINA OF IOANNINA AND HELENA UGLJEŠA OF SERRES\*

Maria VASSILAKI

This paper compares the personal patterns of piety, devotion and patronage of two women: Maria Angelina Doukaina Palaiologina of Ioannina<sup>1</sup> and Helena Uglješa of Serres<sup>2</sup>. They were both daughters of powerful governors; Maria was the daughter of the Serbian emperor of Thessaly, Symeon Uroš Palaiologos, and Helena of the Serbian ruler of Drama, Caesar Vojihna. Maria married Thomas Preljubović, who was to become the despot of Ioannina<sup>3</sup>; Helena married the Serbian ruler of Serres, John (Jovan) Uglješa. Through their marriages they both gained the title of *basilissa*. When it was arranged that Maria Palaiologina should be betrothed to Thomas Preljubović she was only ten years old and the wedding had to wait for two years. Subsequently, when, in 1367, Maria's father assigned the city of Ioannina and its district to his son-in-law, Thomas Preljubović, she was already 18. She was known as Maria *basilissa* Angelina Doukaina Palaiologina, and, if we are to believe the famous 15<sup>th</sup> century Chronicle of Ioannina<sup>4</sup>, she became the most virtuous and pious *basilissa* ever, and her husband the most impious and hated of the city's governors. Preljubović's title as despot of Ioannina received official recognition only in 1382 that is fifteen years after he had established himself as governor of the city. In fact, it was Manuel II Palaiologos, who sent from Thessaloniki the *regalia* of a Byzantine despot to Preljubović<sup>5</sup>. Two years later, on 23 December 1384, Preljubović was murdered by his bodyguards, and it was resolved almost immediately that his widow should marry the Florentine Esau Buondelmonti, who was a relative of the Acciajuoli, but also connected through his sister Maddalena with the count of Cephallonia, Leonardo Tocco. Maria's life ended on 28 December 1394 at the age of 45<sup>6</sup>.

\*. *Donation et donateurs dans le monde byzantin* (Réalités Byzantines 14), Paris, 2012, p. 221-234.

\* I want to thank warmly my colleague Nikos Dionyssopoulos, who helped me in obtaining the Serbian bibliography that was not accessible to me.

1. *PLP* 7, n° 21393; SOULIS 1995, p. 221-222, 227, 235, 243-245, 248-249; SUBOTIĆ 1996, p. 173-177; SOFIANOS 1996, p. 194.

2. *PLP*, 3, n° 5997; SOULIS 1995, p. 163, 171 n. 73; SUBOTIĆ 1996, p. 171-172. PARHARIDOU-ANAGNOSTOU 2006, p. 181-198.

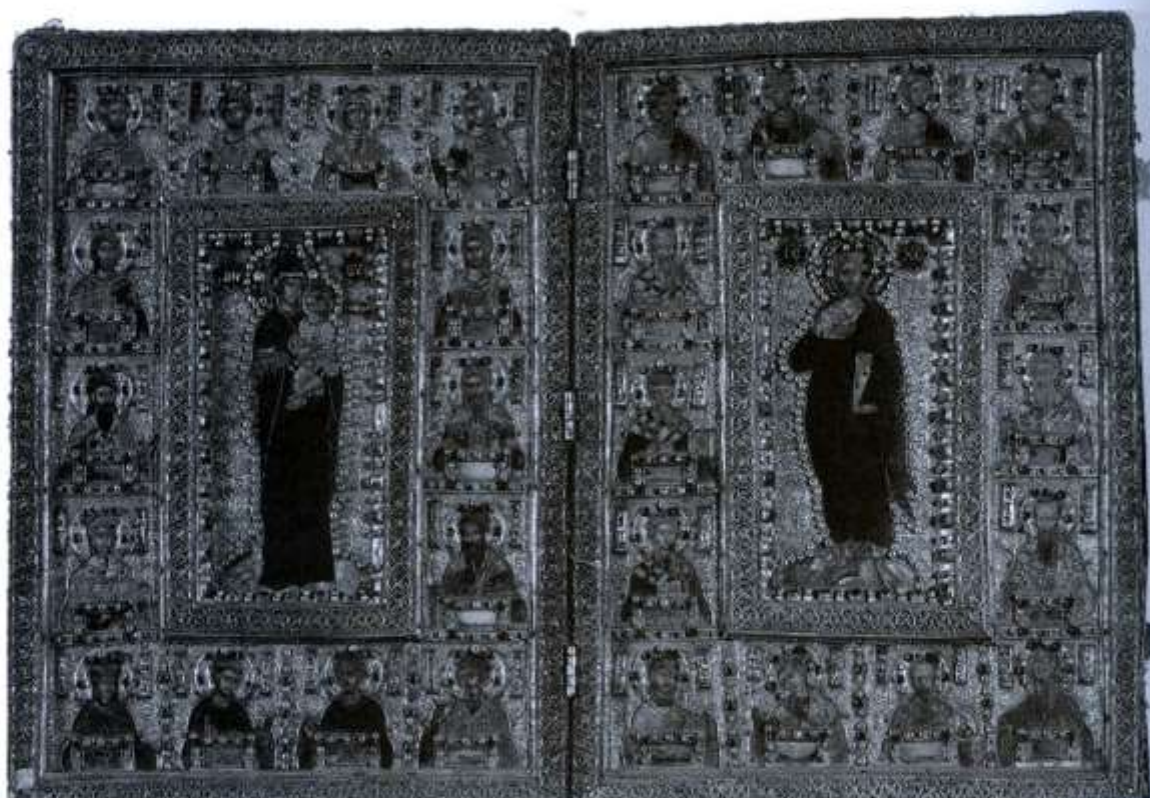
3. NICOL 1972, p. 298; MATANOV 1992, p. 63-68.

4. VRANOUSIS 1965, p. 57-115.

5. *ODB* 3, p. 2078; DENNIS 1960, 105-106; NICOL 1984, p. 152-153.

6. Esau Buondelmonti survived the death of his wife, married two more times and remained the ruler of Ioannina till his own death in 1411.

Helena Uglješa of Serres was born around 1349 and died in 1405. In 1366, at the age of seventeen, she married the Serbian despot of Serres, John (Jovan) Uglješa and gave birth to a son, Uglješa Despotović, who was to die at a very young age (between four and six). In 1371, while fighting against the Ottoman Turks at the battle of Černomen in the valley of the Maritsa River, her husband got killed<sup>7</sup>. After the loss of her husband, Helena remained in Serres for a while. She then moved to Thessaloniki and finally went to Kruševac, to the court of Prince Lazar<sup>8</sup>, and lived under his protection and spiritual guidance for some years. But Prince Lazar was killed in 1389 at the battle of Kosovo<sup>9</sup>. Helena then took the monastic vows becoming the nun Euphemia (Jefimija), and settled initially at the Županja monastery near Kruševac and then at the Ljubostinja monastery.



*Fig. 1 The Cuenca diptych.*

Both these women, Maria Palaiologina of Ioannina and Helena Uglješa of Serres, commissioned works of art, which still survive, and so allow us to investigate their initiatives as donors. A close reading of these works will help us to understand better the personality of each of the two women and to compare the patterns of their piety, patronage and devotion.

7. MIHALIČIĆ 1996, p. 97-109.

8. On Prince (knez) Lazar Hrebeljanović (1329-1389) who, after being killed at the battle of Kosovo (28 June 1389), became a national hero of the Serbs and a saint of the Serbian Orthodox Church, *O knezu Lazaru* 1975; MIHALIČIĆ 1984.

9. MIHALIČIĆ 1996, p. 97-109.



Fig. 2 Meteora, Monastery of the Transfiguration,  
The Doubting of Thomas.

The case of Maria Angelina Doukaina Palaiologina will be considered first. There are three panels bearing evidence which suggests that they were commissioned either by Maria and her husband Thomas Preljubović or by Maria alone<sup>10</sup>. Namely, a sumptuous reliquary diptych – the Cuenca diptych (fig. 1), an icon with the Doubting of Thomas (fig. 2), and a panel with Maria prostrating herself at the feet of the Virgin (fig. 5). The first of these works found its way to Spain through members of the Castagnola family and has, since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, been housed in the Episcopal Museum of Cuenca cathedral<sup>11</sup>. The other two, were donated by Maria to the Transfiguration monastery at Meteora and are still there<sup>12</sup>. Maria was especially connected with this monastery through her brother, John Uroš who, under the name Joasaph, became the second *ktetor* and abbot of the monastery of the Transfiguration<sup>13</sup>. The panel with Maria prostrating herself at the feet of the Virgin has always been thought to be the only surviving leaf of a diptych and is identical to the left wing in the complete Cuenca diptych.

10. MIJOVIĆ 1966, p. 185-194; SUBOTIĆ 1996, p. 169-179.

11. CIRAC ESTOPAÑAN 1943; *Mother of God* 2000, n° 30, p. 320-321 (L. DERIZIOTIS); *Byzantium: Faith and Power* 2004, n° 24C, p. 52-54 (A.W. CARR); CARR 2006, p. 189-190, fig. 1.

12. Namely, a panel with Maria prostrating herself at the feet of the Virgin and an icon of the Incredulity of Thomas. CHATZIDAKIS – SOFIANOS 1990, p. 33-34, pl. on p. 53 and 55; SOFIANOS 1990, p. 132, 138, pl. on p. 135. *Byzantium: Faith and Power* 2004, n° 24A-24B, p. 51-52 (A.W. CARR); ŠEVČENKO 1993-94, p. 162-163, fig. 7.

13. SOFIANOS 1996, p. 180-194 with previous bibliography.



Fig. 3 Detail of Fig. 1 Thomas Preljubović.



Fig. 4 Detail of Fig. 1 Maria Palaiologina.

All three works allow us to speculate on the conditions under which they were commissioned and to draw some conclusions. The Cuenca diptych shows Maria Palaiologina and Thomas Preljubović, each on separate panels, prostrating themselves at the feet of the Virgin and Christ. The inscription that accompanies the prostrate figure of Thomas on the right leaf of the Cuenca diptych (fig. 3) clearly reads: ΘΩΜΑC ΔΕCΠΟΤΗC ΚΟΜΝΗΝΟC Ο ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΟC (The despot Thomas Komnenos Palaiologos). The inscription that accompanies the prostrate figure of his wife on the left leaf of the diptych (fig. 4) reads: ΜΑΡΙΑ ΒΑCΙΛΙΚΑ ΑΓΓΕΛΙΝΑ ΔΟΥΚΑΙΝΑ Η ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΝΑ (The *basilissa* Maria Angelina, Doukaina Palaiologina). The inscription that accompanies the prostrate figure of Thomas on the Cuenca diptych makes a clear reference to Thomas as despot. The official recognition and investiture of Thomas as despot of Ioannina came in 1382 from Manuel II Palaiologos, and this special moment in Thomas's life would have constituted an appropriate occasion for the commission of such a sumptuous work<sup>14</sup>. It is reasonable therefore to accept the year 1382 as the *terminus post quem* for the commission of the diptych, while 1384, the year in which Thomas was murdered, should stand as the *terminus ante quem*. The figure of Thomas has been erased from the diptych's leaf, something that was undoubtedly done to it after Thomas's assassination. If we are to accept that this diptych was commissioned by Thomas and his wife for their own use and that it remained in Maria's hands even after her husband's assassination, we have every reason to believe that she may have asked for her first husband's figure to be erased after her marriage to Esau Buondelmonti, at which time the diptych was presumably being used by the newly married couple.

The Meteora panel (fig. 5) with Maria alone prostrating herself at the feet of the Virgin (fig. 6) had always been thought to be the only leaf surviving from a diptych identical to the Cuenca one. More recent examination of the Meteora piece, however, has established that this was never commissioned as a diptych and was never a left panel accompanying a now missing right one. There are no traces of hinges at all on the inner right side of the frame. The inscription accompanying the prostrate figure of Maria on the Meteora panel (fig. 6) reads: ΜΑΡΙΑ ΕΥCΕΒΕCΤΑΤΗ ΒΑCΙΛΙΚΑ ΑΓΓΕΛΙΝΑ ΚΟΜΝΗΝΗ ΔΟΥΚΑΙΝΑ Η ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΝΑ (The most pious *basilissa* Maria Angelina Komnene Doukaina Palaiologina), which is slightly different from the inscription, ΜΑΡΙΑ ΒΑCΙΛΙΚΑ ΑΓΓΕΛΙΝΑ ΔΟΥΚΑΙΝΑ Η ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΝΑ (The

14. See n. 5.



Fig. 5 The Meteora panel, Monastery of the Transfiguration.



Fig. 6 Detail of Fig. 5 Maria Palaiologina.

*basilissa* Maria Angelina, Doukaina Palaiologina), that exists on the Cuenca diptych (fig. 4). If the Meteora work was designed from the very beginning as an independent panel, this was most likely to have been after the assassination of Thomas Preljubović in 1384 and especially from 1385 to 1386 when Maria became the ruler of Ioannina. It is obvious that the Meteora inscription gives a much grander title to Maria than the Cuenca one, something that would make better sense if again associated with the period immediately after Thomas' assassination. The claim to royal status that this work would seem in that event to subserve is reinforced by the second panel, which is deposited at Meteora and shows the Doubting of Thomas (fig. 2). Andreas Xyngopoulos was able to identify Maria Palaiologina as the female figure standing amongst the apostles of the left group<sup>15</sup>. He also identified Thomas Preljubović with the male figure that is standing beside her, but there is no convincing evidence to support this identification. Thomas Preljubović is, after all, metaphorically included in the figure of his namesake, the apostle Thomas. But I would like to suggest that this icon was commissioned after Thomas' assassination, when Maria as the ruler of Ioannina was seeking royal status. The gesture of Christ, in which he touches Maria's crown with his right hand, is one deliberately suggesting approval, something she definitely needed after her husband's death, when she had to lay claim to the title and powers of the *basilissa* of Ioannina.

15. XYNGOPOULOS 1964-1965, p. 53-70.

16. *Treasures of Mount Athos* 1997, n° 9.25, p. 349-351 (K. LOVERDOU-TSIGARIDA); PARHARIDOU-ANAGNOSTOU 2006, p. 183-185, fig. 1-3.

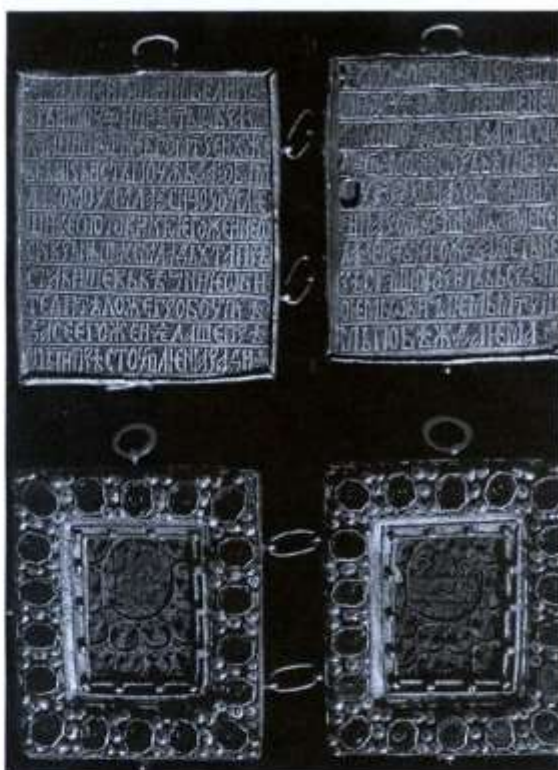


Fig. 7 Mount Athos Chilandar Monastery, Diptych

I would now like to move to the second *basilissa* of this paper, Helena Uglješa of Serres, and throw light on the patterns of her piety, devotion and patronage. Her case is quite unique not only because she commissioned some unusual works of art but also because she composed poems the verses of some of which are either engraved or embroidered on the works that she commissioned. Her earliest surviving commission is an *encolpion* in the form of a diptych (fig. 7), which she donated in 1371 to the monastery of Chilandar on Mount Athos<sup>16</sup>, where both her father and her son were buried<sup>17</sup>. The front side of the diptych shows two wood-carved icons in ornate gemmed mounts. The back of the diptych is composed of two silver gilt plaques with a dedicatory inscription in Serbian, which contains words of prayer of the grieving mother Helena at the loss of her only son. The two wooden carved

icons which survive today date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and replaced the original ones, which were the gift of the Metropolitan of Serres Theodosios to the now deceased son of Helena, Ugljesa Despotović, on the occasion of his christening. This donation of Helena's was brought to Chilandar by her husband, the despot Uglješa, when he visited the graves of his son and of his father-in-law in April 1371. He then went off to the battle of Maritsa from which he never returned.

A famous double sided icon (fig. 8), the so called Poganovo icon, is believed to have been commissioned by Helena after she lost her husband in 1371<sup>18</sup>. The icon shows the Virgin Kataphyge (=the refuge) and St. John the Theologian on one side and the Vision of the prophet Ezekiel on the other. Traces of a dedicatory inscription on the golden background between the Virgin and St. John the Theologian read: EN XPICTΩ TΩ ΘΕΩ ΠICTH BACIAICCA (In Christ God the faithful *basilissa*) and then only the faint traces of the two letters NH, which may support a reading as ELENH. An important hypothesis regarding the identity of the *basilissa* Helena of the Poganovo icon was proposed by Gordana Babić in 1987<sup>19</sup>. She argued that the title *basilissa* used

17. KNEŽEVIĆ 2000, p. 596-600, 610, pl. 1-2.

18. The icon was first published by T. Gerasimov and A. Grabar (GERASIMOV 1959, p. 279-288; GRABAR 1959, p. 289-304). The bibliography on this icon is vast but one should mention: XYNGOPOULOS 1962, p. 341-350; GRABAR 1962, p. 363-380; BABIĆ 1987, p. 57-65; SUBOTIĆ 1993, p. 25-40; PENTCHEVA 2000, p. 139-153; *Mother of God* 2000, n° 86, p. 490-492 (E. BAKALOVA) and *Byzantium: Faith and Power* 2004, n° 117, p. 198-199 (M. VAKLINOVA).

19. BABIĆ 1987, p. 57-65.





Fig. 8 The Poganovo Icon.

in the inscription could not refer to a Constantinopolitan empress, as Todor Gerasimov and others had previously believed, but instead was applied to a wife of a despot. Therefore Babić proposed that Helena Uglješa of Serres and not Helena Dragaš (1395-1425) the wife of Manuel II Palaiologos, as Gerasimov had argued<sup>20</sup>, had commissioned this icon in 1371 to commemorate both her dead son and husband. Babić then tried to interpret the iconography of the compositions depicted on both sides of the icon with the life of Helena Uglješa. She also associated the text on Christ's scroll, which comes from the book of Isaiah (XXV: 9-11), with the fate of Helena. It reads in translation: *Behold this is our God. In him we trust and hope for our salvation. Give rest to this house.* This identification has been given further support by Gojko Subotić<sup>21</sup>. There are reasons to believe that this icon was commissioned in Thessaloniki not only because its style is reminiscent of the art of Thessaloniki but also because the composition with the Vision of the prophet Ezekiel copies the late fifth-early sixth century mosaic in the apse of the *katholikon* at the Latomos monastery in Thessaloniki<sup>22</sup>. An inscription on either side of the figure of Christ reads: ΤΟ ΕΝ ΤΩ ΛΑΤΟΜΟΥ ΘΑΥΜΑ (The miracle in Latomos).

20. GERASIMOV 1959, p. 279-288. See also PENTCHEVA 2000, p. 139-140, n. 1. Pentcheva gives a detailed account of all the identifications suggested for EAENH.

21. SUBOTIĆ 1993, p. 25-40.

22. I'm not giving here a complete bibliography on this mosaic, which was discovered under thick plaster in 1921 and subsequently published by A. Xyngopoulos, cf. XYNGOPOULOS 1929, p. 142-180. For good colour reproductions KOURKOUTIDOU-NIKOLAIDOU – TOURTA 1997, pl. 104-107.



Fig. 9 Mount Athos Chilandar Monastery, *Katapetasma*.

In 1399, almost thirty years after Helena's first donation to the monastery of Chilandar, she made a second donation in the form of a gold embroidered veil (fig. 9) for the royal doors of its *katholikon*<sup>23</sup>. The veil shows a blessing Christ dressed as an archpriest flanked by two officiating angels and St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great officiating too. The whole composition is, therefore, tightly connected with the Liturgy. Embroidered on the lower part of the veil, on either side of Christ, is a poem by Helena, who by that time had become the nun Euphemia/Jefimija, alluding to the memory of her deceased father and son but also to the salvation of her soul. In the literature concerning the poems of the nun Euphemia/Jefimija this poem is described as being inspired by Symeon the New Theologian and Symeon Metaphrastes and composed as a prayer but also as a nostalgic memento of the past<sup>24</sup>.

In 1402, that is thirteen years after the death of Prince Lazar at the battle of Kossovo (1389), Euphemia/Jefimija embroidered a pall (fig. 10)

that is a shroud for the head of this saintly Prince, which is today preserved in the Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade<sup>25</sup>. It is a poetic text in twenty-six lines in Old Church Slavonic, in which Euphemia/Jefimija implores Prince Lazar, in his capacity as a saint, to protect his two sons Stefan and Vuk, who participated as Turkish vassals in the Battle of Ankara (1402). I am giving here the full text translated into English<sup>26</sup>:

In the beauty of this world you raised yourself from your youth / O, New Martyr, Knez Lazar, / And God's strong and glorious hand / Pointed at you, among all the lords of the earth. / You lorded over your fatherland / And with your goodness delighted / The Christians under your wing. / And with a martyr's heart and a wish for blessing / You went against the dragon / And against the enemies of the holy churches, / Having deemed it unbearable for your heart / To see the Christians of your fatherland / Be conquered by the Turks / In order to achieve these: / To leave the unstable height of earthly lordship / And to spill your blood / And to join the soldiers of the heavenly emperor. / And so you achieved two wishes; / You killed the dragon / And received a martyr's wreath from God.

23. SMOLČIĆ-MAKULEVIĆ 2000, p. 693-701, pl. 1-3. PARHARIDOU-ANAGNOSTOU 2006, p. 187, fig. 8-9.

24. ŠPADIZER 1998, p. 111.

25. See most recently *Byzantium: Faith and Power* 2004, n° 193, p. 320-321 (S. MILEUSNIĆ) with previous bibliography.

26. The translation is given by S. Mileusnić in the above entry.

/ And now do not forget your beloved children / Whom you left orphaned by your transition. / For since you achieved the bliss in the eternal celestial joy / Many hardships and suffering fell upon your children / And in many misfortunes they spend their lives, / Because they are conquered by the Turks / And they need your help. / For this I beg you, / Pray to the universal ruler for your beloved children, / And for all those who serve them with love and faith, / For they are fettered with worries, your beloved children. / Those who ate their bread raised a conspiracy against them / And forgot your goodness, O Martyr. / But since you passed from this life, / You know the worries and sufferings of your children / And as a martyr you are free before God. / Kneel before the Lord who wreathed you, / Pray that your children live long lives / In happiness pleasing to God. / Pray that Orthodox Christian faith amply endures in your fatherland. / Ask the victorious God to grant victory / To your beloved children, Knez Stefan and Vuk, / Against visible and invisible enemies. / For if we receive God's help / We will give you praise and gratitude. / Call for a meeting of your fellow martyrs / And pray with them to the glorifying God, / Warn George / Move Demetrios / Persuade both Theodores / Take Merkourios and Prokopios / And do not leave out the forty Martyrs of Sebasteia / In whose suffering now fight your children, / Knez Stefan and Vuk. / Pray that the help from God be given them. / Come then to our aid, wherever you are. / Consider my small contribution and count it among many, / For I did not grant you the praise you deserve, / But only as far as my small mind allowed, / And so I expect but small rewards. / For you were not selfish, My Lord and Martyr, / In this decaying and short lasting world, / But you are more generous in the everlasting and magnificent / That you received from God. / For you fed me profusely / When I was foreign in a foreign land / And now I beg you both: / To feed me and to assuage the fierce storm in my soul and body. / Jefimija humbly offers you this, O Holy One".



Fig. 10 Pall of Prince Lazar.

The last work that is related to Euphemia/Jefimija is an embroidered *epitaphios* (fig. 11) dated in 1405, which is held at the Putna monastery in Bukovina, Romania<sup>27</sup>. Christ is surrounded by twelve angels, four with fans and eight weeping or praising God while a *pericope* from the *troparion* of Holy Saturday is embroidered above his body. A second inscription close to the lower border reads in translation: *Remember, Lord, the souls of thy servants the kaisarissa of Serbia, Euphemia, nun, with the daughter of the basilissa of Serbia, Eupraxia, nun.*

27. MILLET 1947, p. 99-102, pl. CLXXXV; JOHNSTONE 1967, p. 119-120, fig. 97. PARHARIDOU-ANAGNOSTOU 2006, p. 188, fig. 11.

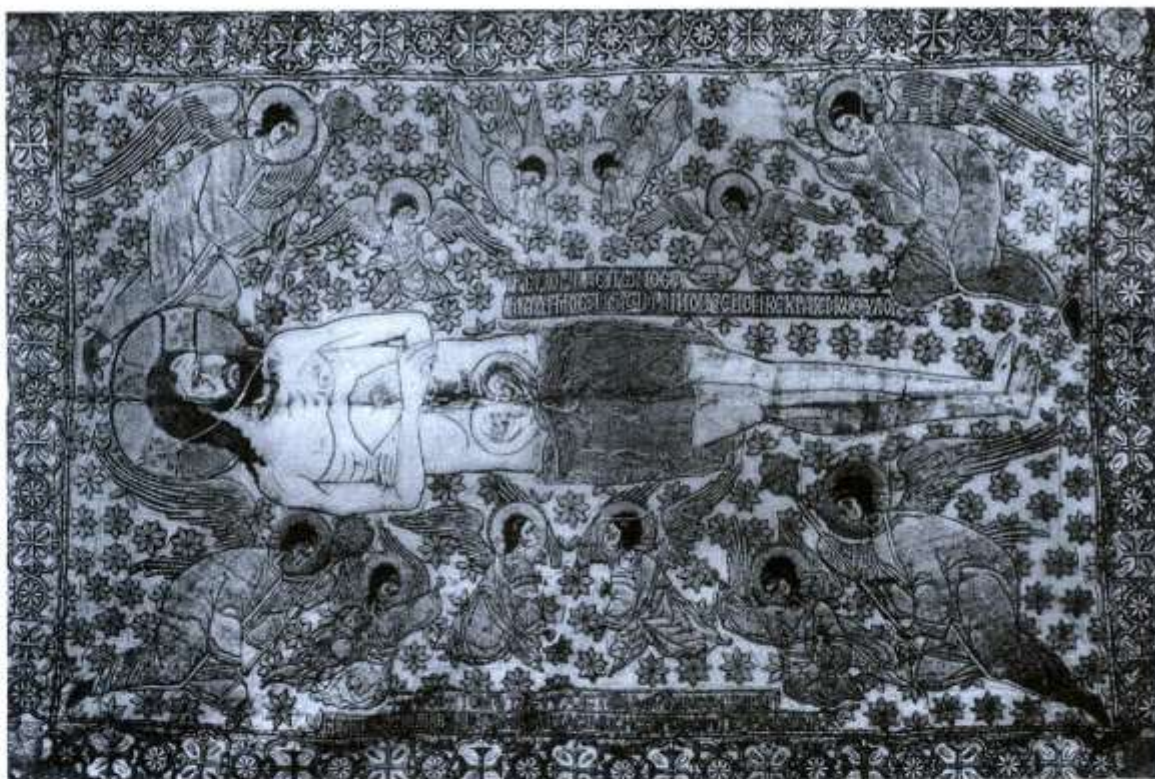


Fig. 11 Epitaphios Bukovina, Putna Monastery.

One might reasonably ask whether there is any evidence to support the hypothesis that all these embroideries donated by Euphemia/Jefimija were made with her own hands<sup>28</sup>. Some scholars seem to believe that “she embroidered them herself, patiently and over the years as a special monastic deed”<sup>29</sup>. One might feel tempted to accept this hypothesis, but I am afraid that there is no conclusive evidence for it, fascinating though it may be.

The two *basilissae*, Maria Palaiologina of Ioannina and Helena Uglješa of Serres that I have chosen to illustrate in this paper seem to represent two different patterns of female piety, devotion and patronage. All three works associated with Maria Palaiologina include her own representation. Furthermore, even when she is prostrating herself at the feet of the Virgin, her full name and title clearly appear above her. She is dressed in richly embroidered garments bearing the sign of the double headed eagle and a crown on her head studded with pearls. These are all symbols of power. Every commission of Maria’s seems to reinforce her image as an especially powerful woman. More remarkably still, in the icon of the Doubting of Thomas, she dares to make herself a participant in a Christological event<sup>30</sup>. She is walking straight into the holy scene, while

28. On the technique of Helena’s embroidery CURK 2005, p. 435-465. This study offers a detailed analysis of the Chilandar curtain and the pall of Prince Lazar conducted on the occasion of the conservation of these two textiles, which was undertaken by the author.

29. ŠPADIZER 1998, p. 111.

30. ŠEVČENKO 1993-94, p. 162.

the blessing right hand of Christ is touching her crown or even her forehead. Does this gesture of Christ's suggest approval at a time, after her husband's assassination, when she needed it to support her claim to the title and powers of the *basilissa* of Ioannina? Obviously, it does.

None of the works that Maria commissioned allow us to check the level of her literacy or the level of her piety and devotion. Helena of Serres, on the other hand, represents a completely different case: that of a pious and educated woman. In fact of a very pious and a well educated woman. We cannot say where and from whom she received her education. What degree of literacy might she have had when she married Jovan Uglješa? When did she start reading the theological writings of Romanos Melodos, Symeon the New Theologian or Symeon Metaphrastes, all of which she is paraphrasing in her poems? When was it she started composing poems and what contribution did Prince Lazar make to her poetic talent? If we are to take into account the suggestion made by Dj. Radojičić that, as the name of Helena can be read in a Psalter, once in Chilandar, dated 1370-71, she must have been the scribe of this Psalter, then her case becomes even more unique<sup>31</sup>. This paper, however, is treating the case of Helena as a donor and with trying through the works she commissioned, to arrive at a better understanding of her personality. It is interesting that in none of the works that she commissioned does she have her own representation included. These works document her life and fate alone. Her physical appearance remains invisible to us. That being the case, her poems, and perhaps her stitches, must represent her substance for us. That is all we have of her, but it is more than enough to allow us understand the character underlying her initiatives as a donor.

University of Thessaly  
Benaki Museum, Athens

31. RADOJIČIĆ 1955, p. 123-124.

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