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# Marrying the Mongol Khans: Byzantine Imperial Women and the Diplomacy of Religious Conversion in the 13th and 14th Centuries

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Concerning this matter also a dread and authentic charge and ordinance of the great and holy Constantine is engraved upon the sacred table of the universal church of the Christians, St Sophia, that never shall an emperor of the Romans ally himself in marriage with a nation of customs differing from and alien to those of the Roman order, especially with one that is infidel and unbaptized, unless it be with the Franks alone, for they alone were excepted by that great man, the holy Constantine, because he drew his origin from those parts; for there is much relationship and converse between Franks and Romans.<sup>1</sup>

This familiar passage from the *De Administrando Imperio* amply demonstrates that Byzantine imperial rhetoric consistently frowns upon the practice of marrying women of Byzantine imperial and noble houses to foreign rulers. Nevertheless, the *DAI* is an idealized – and thus never-achieved – model of imperial statecraft, and such marriages occurred frequently. So frequently, in fact, that the historiography of Byzantine foreign relations contains the foreign marriage as a standard category.<sup>2</sup>

Byzantine emperors contracted foreign marriages out of political necessity. The marriages secured military alliances, guaranteed peaceful

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<sup>1</sup> *De Administrando Imperio*, 71-3.

<sup>2</sup> Ohnsorge 1958: 155; but see also Macrides 1992 for a complicating view on marriage as a category of diplomacy.

relations, and reinforced open trade agreements – in essence, they preserved or created Byzantine influence outside Byzantine-controlled territories. Most of these foreign marriages were contracted with Western sovereigns – and in those cases where the recipient of a Byzantine noble bride was not a Frankish lord, as Constantine VII and the compilers of the *DAI* would prefer, he was at least a Christian one.<sup>3</sup> However, the political turmoil of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries necessitated an expansion of the practice of foreign marriage of Byzantine imperial brides to include men who were at best, pagan, and at worst, Muslim: the Mongol khans of the Il-khanate and the Golden Horde of the Ukrainian steppe (a Mongolo-Turkic polity ruled by the descendants of Chinggis Khan's son Jochi).

The *De Administrando*'s prohibition represents the Byzantine ideological position on exportation of Byzantine brides – but it is an ideological position stated at the height of Byzantium's temporal power. The sorts of marriage which Constantine VII expressly forbids are alliances with the 'infidel and dishonorable tribes of the north' – which, during the time of his composition in the tenth century, comprise the peoples of the steppe (Cumans, Pechenegs, Khazars, Turks) and also the Kievan 'Rus. All of these peoples were non-Christian, but nevertheless significant players in the regional politics of the era – tribes who could demand Byzantine attention and appeasement. Nevertheless, the prohibition relied on the precedent of antiquity and the continuity of Roman practice, and it was backed by a ban on marriage to infidels which existed in contemporaneous common law. "For how is it admissible that Christians should form marriage associations and ally themselves by marriage with infidels when the canon forbids it and the whole church regards it as alien to and outside the Christian order?"<sup>4</sup> claims the *DAI*. Marriage

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<sup>3</sup> Between the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and the mid-10<sup>th</sup> when Constantine VII composed this passage, approximately ten marriages were negotiated with Western sovereigns, of which three were consummated. See Macrides 1992: 268; von Collenberg 1964: 59-60; and Davids 1995.

<sup>4</sup> *DAI*, 72-4. The canon law in question is canon 72 of the Trullo council (*Syntagma ton theion kai hieron kanonon*: 471). See also the *Commentary* to the *DAI*, ed. R.J.M. Jenkins, 68.

between believers and non-believers was not possessed of legal force; such a union was equivalent to concubinage.<sup>5</sup> In an ideological sense, debasing a Byzantine woman with such a marriage for political gain would do nothing but reveal the weakness of Byzantine authority. In the tenth century, it could be forbidden with the expectation that, with rare exceptions attributed to the aberrations of wicked emperors, this advice would be enshrined as ideologically-backed policy.

By the thirteenth century, however, the situation on the ground was far more precarious, and the types of foreign marriage in which the Byzantines were willing to engage had become substantially more outré. Not only had exporting Byzantine women to Western kingdoms become standard diplomatic practice,<sup>6</sup> but the Byzantines also agreed to enter into marriage alliances with non-Christian polities who were actively threatening their eastern borders: namely, the Mongol khanates of the Golden Horde on the Russian steppe and the il-Khanate in Iran and eastern Anatolia. These peoples are precisely the ‘infidel tribes of the north’ with whom Constantine VII was so vehemently opposed to marriage.

The marriages to the khans fulfilled the same political goals as the previous instances of foreign marriage: affirming and assuring alliance between Byzantium and a dangerous ally.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, despite assurances in imperially-produced literature that marriages were key to the stability of the empire, marriage to a non-Christian sovereign remained fundamentally problematic in both the rhetoric of Byzantine imperial power and the tenets of the Byzantine orthodox church.<sup>8</sup> This tension between political necessity and ideological consistency required a creative normalization of the representation of these marriages in contemporary chronicle accounts. This normalization was employed in order to maintain the illusion of Byzantine superiority which derived from the vision of *taxis* which placed the empire at the apex of a group of

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<sup>5</sup> Hopwood 1997: 233.

<sup>6</sup> Macrides 1992: 267.

<sup>7</sup> Herrin 2013: 302-305.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Manuel II Palaiologos’s *Dialogue on Marriage*, which both emphasized the necessity of imperial marriages and disavowed foreign marriage as a diplomatic strategy. See Hilsdale 2014: 284-285.

subordinate polities.<sup>9</sup> This normalization was accomplished via the presentation of the Mongol marriages as being opportunities to bring these non-Christian rulers into the fold of Chalcedonian Christianity – and thereby include them in the Byzantine sphere of rightful influence – *whether or not* this Christianization ever actually occurred.

The possibility of representing the Mongol marriages in this way derives from an understanding that the power of Byzantine women in foreign territory is to render that territory Byzantine: in religion, acculturation, and loyalties. This power does not resolve the tension which emerges out of the ideological conflict between marriage to foreign, non-Christian rulers and the preservation of Byzantine hegemony, but it does defuse it. Portraying these brides as agents of Christianization transforms them from the tools of political necessity, reflections of the weakness of Byzantine prestige on the foreign stage, into projections of Byzantine power and authority, in service to the divine cause which is the preservation of the Empire.

Thus, we see the brides of the khans portrayed in the chronicles as being exemplars of that traditional role of Byzantine imperial women: guardians of the Orthodox Christian faith. They are founders of monasteries, convents, and churches; more significantly, these women are held up as paragons of persevering faith. They remain Christian despite all odds and hardships inflicted upon them by marriage to a foreign, non-Christian sovereign. Further, these brides act as vectors of conversion – it is within their expected sphere of influence to convert their husbands (and through them, their courts) to the Christian faith – and through that faith, towards subordination to the Byzantine imperial ideal. The Byzantine bride becomes a locus of Byzantinization, and her portrayal as such is an ideological method of normalizing a problematic practice.<sup>10</sup>

This representation traded in on the idealized role of the Byzantine noblewoman: that is, her role as a bastion of Christian faith in the household, an example of that faith to her community, and a conveyor of it to others. The Byzantine woman's primary normative role in her society

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<sup>9</sup> Angelov and Herrin 2012: 149-170.

<sup>10</sup> Hilsdale 2014: 280.

was within the family: to marry and have children. It is through this role that she could become sanctified – by the 9<sup>th</sup> century, an ideal female saint was a ‘holy housewife’ like St Thomais of Lesbos, married and a mother to multiple children, who stayed with her husband despite his abuse<sup>11</sup>. Profound religious power was invested in the role of motherhood and marriage for a Byzantine woman. Furthermore, when praised and idealized, a Byzantine woman was recognized for the quality of her faith and her performance of Christian charitable obligations. This positioning of Byzantine female authority as founded in purity of faith and performance of Christian virtue was also of long standing: its beginnings can be clearly seen as early as the claims to power of the Theodosian empresses in the fifth century.<sup>12</sup> The *basileia* – imperial power – of the empress resided in her godly resolve, ascetic and philanthropic achievement, and a spectacular piety. Encomia of empresses and other noble women presented them as bastions of Orthodox Christianity. The rhetorical power of women in middle and late Byzantine society, then, is rooted in these two entwined roles – that of the married mother and that of the defender of the faith within the household.

When the woman in question was aristocratic and wealthy, these two roles enabled her to have a significant amount of actualized power. To begin with, as Angeliki Laiou has pointed out, a profound slippage existed between the idea of the *family* and that of the *convent*. In the late Byzantine period, women often entered convents at the time of widowhood, and past marriage was no obstacle to present sanctity. The primary female virtues were charity, humility, love, and obedience – all social virtues, equally applicable within the household and within the convent.<sup>13</sup> Further, the convent itself at a very early stage had become a primary location for expressions of female piety. Not only was it the eventual destination of most noble and imperial women, the foundation of convents and monasteries was closely associated with Christian charity as expressed by these same women. Monastic foundations by imperial

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<sup>11</sup> James 2008: 645.

<sup>12</sup> Holum 1982.

<sup>13</sup> Laiou 1981b: 199.

women were predominant in the late Byzantine period.<sup>14</sup> In addition to providing the funds and the impetus for the founding of convents, monasteries, and churches, these same women then performed the extremely important economic function of running their fiscal administration.<sup>15</sup> The expression of piety which existed in the founding and administration of religious institutions was fundamental to the Byzantine idea of and rhetoric about the virtuous aristocratic woman. Her primary mode of societal interaction outside her household was profoundly linked to her religious generosity.<sup>16</sup>

These imperial and noble women of the middle and late periods were not secluded away from men and society. Many of them were educated and active in politics in their own right – and the form of their activity more often than not involved them in religious matters, particularly religious controversies. The central presence of empresses in the iconoclastic controversies is well-known and well-commented upon. However, this tendency of imperial women to inject themselves into the prominent religious conflicts of the day persists through to the period of the Mongol conquests and beyond. Maria, wife of Michael IX, opposed her husband in the Arsenite controversy, and both Theodora Komnena Raoulaina and Anna of Epirus were both vehemently against the question of union with the Western church, in hostility to the positions of their male relatives.<sup>17</sup> The close association of feminine power, particularly the power of aristocratic women, with the defense and preservation of the church and its orthodoxy, marks the position of such women in Byzantine thought. An aristocratic woman's means to power was consistently through her piety; thus, her piety became an acceptable method of demonstration of her power.

The representation of the wives of the Mongol khans as particularly pious, engaged in Christian charity and Christian example by means of their marriages, therefore emerges as an acceptable way to frame the ideological disaster of diplomatic marriage to not only a foreigner, but

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<sup>14</sup> Herrin 2000: 13.

<sup>15</sup> Laiou 1981a: 252; Connor 2004: 272-3.

<sup>16</sup> Galatariotou 1988: 263-90; Weyl Carr 1985: 1-15; Stathakopoulos 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Laiou 1981a: 251.

an infidel. This representation had historical precedents as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when Constantine VII's normative vision of the propriety of foreign marriages was still contemporary. The use of Byzantine brides as cultural-religious vectors, and the clear representation of this role as a function of foreign marriage even at such an early date as the tenth century is most explicit in the letter of Arethas of Caesarea to Romanos I Lekapenos<sup>18</sup> concerning the post-nuptial activities of Maria Lekapena, married to Peter of Bulgaria as part of the conclusion of multiple years of active armed conflict between Byzantium and Bulgaria in the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century – the very marriage to which Constantine VII so objected to in the *DAI*, and took such pains to ideologically oppose.<sup>19</sup> While Peter was a practicing Orthodox Christian, Arethas nevertheless expresses hope and expectation that Maria might ‘transform’ her new people to ‘the virtuous life of humankind’ as part of her activities as Peter’s bride. She is idealized as a civilizing agent, an actor in a Byzantine *mission civilisatrice* to the Bulgarians.<sup>20</sup> Arethas regards the Bulgarians as members of the ‘barbarian nations’ who, while nominally Christian and thus within the sphere of the Byzantine commonwealth, were also necessarily students of Byzantine culture, in need of the guiding hand of an educated, cultured, and particularly *Byzantine* queen to lead them forward into the ‘virtuous life’. Marrying the daughter of a ruling emperor to a foreigner is justified by explaining and extolling the ability of a Byzantine woman to civilize and Byzantinize her new foreign family and nation.

Similarly, in 988 CE, Anna, the daughter of Romanos II, was married to Vladimir, the prince of the Kievan Rus’. While Vladimir’s conversion to Orthodox Christianity – and in fact, the conversion of the Kievan Rus’ as a whole people – was a requirement for the consummation of the marriage contract, both the Byzantine and Russian chronicle sources state that the negotiations for the marriage took place while Vladimir was still a pagan.<sup>21</sup> The marriage itself was an Orthodox one.

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<sup>18</sup> Arethas, *Scripta minora*: 265.

<sup>19</sup> Shepard 1995: 134.

<sup>20</sup> Shepard 1995: 135-6.

<sup>21</sup> Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*: 336.89-90; Zonaras, *Epitome historiarum III*: 553.1-

Nevertheless, Anna and Vladimir's union was the first example of a Byzantine imperial woman being married to a pagan foreigner – and it is explicitly linked to the Christianization and Byzantinization of that foreigner. Anna herself appears as an agent of Byzantine cultural capital, at least in some sources. Yahya ibn Sa'id of Antioch attributes to her 'the building of many churches in the land of the Rus'<sup>22</sup> and Yahya is fairly well-informed about the process of Rus' conversion. While Anna may not have had wide cultural influence on the Rus' outside of these church foundations,<sup>23</sup> her marriage, however ideologically unsuitable, symbolically brings the Kievan Rus' into the orbit of Byzantine cultural-religious influence.

Both Anna's and Maria's foreign marriages, however rhetorically justifiable as part of Byzantine civilizing missions, were nonetheless undertaken while Byzantium was politically, militarily, and economically powerful – all of which does not describe the Byzantine position during the period where Byzantine imperial women were married to Mongol khans.

In the thirteenth century, the advance of the Mongols into Anatolia at the conclusion of their first and widest expansion under Chinggis Khan and his sons brought them into the orbit of Byzantine political design. It also placed the Byzantines in reach of Mongol power. Therefore they were forced to engage with both a direct Mongolian threat and also the unbalancing of pre-existing alliances and relations in the Near East which the Mongol presence caused. An illustrative example is visible in the interdependence which developed between the Mongol il-Khanate in Eastern Anatolia and Byzantium during the thirteenth century. Byzantine hostility toward the il-Khanate, expressed via Byzantine support of Turkmen and Seljuk tribesmen, would have necessitated more military presence in Anatolia than the il-Khanate could muster; similarly, Byzantium was dependent on the cooperation and amity of the il-Khans to preserve what was left of their own Anatolian territories.<sup>24</sup> Thus, main-

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2; and *The Russian Primary Chronicle*: 113. See also Khazdan 1989: 416.

<sup>22</sup> Yahya, I, 423.

<sup>23</sup> Shepard 2003, 25-26.

<sup>24</sup> Lippard 1984: 37.

taining good diplomatic and intercultural relations with the il-Khanate was essential to Byzantine interests, especially as a counterweight to the continuously-advancing Turkic polities. Marriage ties with the Mongols became politically advantageous. Pachymeres, writing contemporaneously with the Mongol advance into Anatolia, mentions his expectations that the il-Khans, *now joined in marriage with the Palaiologoi!*, would pressure the Turkmen into reducing hostilities with Byzantium.<sup>25</sup> Despite the ideological prohibitions against such marriages, Pachymeres represents an alliance of this type as being necessary to preserve Byzantine power in Anatolia.

A similar relationship existed between Byzantium and the Mongols who ruled over the Golden Horde on the Ukrainian steppe. The two polities were economically interdependent, both being involved in the flourishing Black Sea trade, whose most significant commercial nodes were Caffa and Tana on the northern side, Mamluk Cairo at the terminus, and Constantinople as the central pivot. Maintaining good diplomatic relations with the Golden Horde kept the Black Sea trade centered in Byzantium; and it was Byzantine sanction of the treaty of Nymphaion and thus Genoese commercial lanes which enabled the Golden Horde port cities to flourish.<sup>26</sup> Without stable diplomatic relations between Byzantium and the Mongols to the north, Byzantine revenue and its capability to properly provision Constantinople with grain from the Russian steppe would have been substantially reduced.

Thus, the Palaiologan emperors endeavored to maintain friendly relations with both the il-Khanate and the Golden Horde, and these attempts were formalized in marriages several times. The first marriage alliance with the il-Khanate occurred in 1264 CE, when Michael VIII Palaiologos married his illegitimate daughter Maria to the il-Khan Abaqa. Foreign marriage with the Golden Horde did not occur until 1273 CE, when Michael VIII sent another illegitimate daughter north to the khan Noghai. In exchange, Michael was able to use Mongol military clout to pressure Bulgaria, whose sovereign was threatening the Byz-

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<sup>25</sup> Pachymeres, II, 402-3, 456, 588, 620-1, 651.

<sup>26</sup> Lippard 1984:133; see also di Cosmo 2005: 393-395.

antine border in 1272-3 CE.<sup>27</sup> However, after Michael's death relations with both the Golden Horde and the il-Khanate became more fraught. In 1284-5 and 1297 CE the Golden Horde made territorial inroads into Byzantine-controlled Thrace. In an attempt to again normalize relations between the powers, the Byzantine emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos again offered illegitimate daughters in marriage to the Golden Horde khans – but this effort did not prevent the khan Özbeğ from attacking Thrace in the latter years of Andronikos' reign (1320, 1321, and 1324 CE).<sup>28</sup> Thus, marriage alliance remained a dominant diplomatic tactic which the Byzantines employed in their dealings with the Mongols, despite its eventual failure in either maintaining stable relations or bringing the Mongols under Byzantine influence.

The actual failure of marriage alliance and the exportation of Byzantine brides to the Mongol khans to maintain amicable and advantageous relations between the two polities did not prevent Byzantine sovereigns from finding this method of diplomacy necessary – but neither did the necessity of exporting imperial women excuse the ideological distaste associated with the practice. Byzantine ideology in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was continuously shaken by Byzantium's lessened status and weakened capabilities; in response to consistent ideological ruptures, Byzantine chroniclers had to find new ways of reconciling unacceptable actions to political reality, while maintaining the scrim of ideological coherency which extended all the way back to classical authority.<sup>29</sup> In the case of foreign marriages to non-Christian sovereigns, this reconciliation emerges in a positioning of the brides as agents of religious conversion. Examining each of the marriages to the Mongol khans in turn demonstrates how Byzantine historiographers interpreted the roles of these exported women as agents of Christianization and Byzantinization.<sup>30</sup>

As mentioned above, the first of these marriages occurred when Michael VIII Palaiologos sent a woman named Maria Palaiologina (most

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<sup>27</sup> Vásáry 2005: 119-129.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson, 2005: 202-3.

<sup>29</sup> Angelov 2007: 2-10.

<sup>30</sup> Eastmond 2012: 112-113.

likely either his illegitimate daughter, or the illegitimate daughter of his son, Andronikos II<sup>31</sup>) to the il-Khanid court to be married to the il-Khan Hülegü in 1265. By the time she arrived, however, Hülegü had died, and her marriage was instead contracted with his son and successor, Abaqa. Michael VIII had good reason to consider that a marriage alliance with Hülegü would further the cause of Christianization (and therefore Byzantinization) in Mongol territory. Hülegü's first wife, Doquz Khatun, was a Nestorian Christian with strong pro-Christian sympathies, who requested Christian clergy of multiple denominations to celebrate Mass for the soul of her husband.<sup>32</sup> The Armenian historian Vardan Arewelc'i, who visited the il-Khanid court in 1264, wrote that Hülegü himself claimed that he had been a Christian since birth. Similar claims of Hülegü's Christian leanings were reported by David of Ashby, chaplain to the bishop of Bethlehem and attached to Hülegü's court since 1260, in his account of the Mongols, *Les fais des Tartares*.<sup>33</sup> Further, in letters to the Western Christian kingdoms, Hülegü described himself as a 'kindly exalted of the Christian faith'<sup>34</sup>, and described his favorable treatment of those Orthodox Christians who resided within his territories. Hülegü's self-presentation as either a Christian or at least a khan who was favorably disposed toward Christians was, of course, part of the Mongol diplomatic programme<sup>35</sup>, and does not necessarily suggest a genuine conversion or Christian sympathies. The il-Khanate in the mid-thirteenth century certainly employed Christians (usually from the Kereyid and Onggud tribes) in its administration, but this was an example of the Mongol tendency to make use of all available talent, rather than any particular ideological commitment.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Michael VII may have believed, much like other Western Christian sovereigns who corresponded with him, that diplomatic negotiations with Hülegü might be profitably inflected toward greater Christianization. By the time Mi-

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<sup>31</sup> Connor 2004: 314.

<sup>32</sup> Vardan Arewelc'i: 222. Spuler 177.

<sup>33</sup> Jackson 2005b: 168.

<sup>34</sup> Meyavert 1980: 253.

<sup>35</sup> Jackson 2005a: 249-250.

<sup>36</sup> Allsen 2001: 203.

chael VIII sent his daughter to him, Hülegü had already acceded to a particularly pro-Byzantine and pro-Orthodox request: he had installed a Greek Christian, Euthymius, as Patriarch of Antioch, against the wishes of the Latin prince of Antioch, Bohemond VI, who was forced to submit to his demands.<sup>37</sup> Byzantine interests seem to have been favored, at least in part, by the il-Khan. Michael VIII had a considerable amount to gain by marrying Maria to Hülegü – and the Byzantine rhetorical assumption that she could be a vector for Orthodox conversion does not seem to have been unfounded at this moment.

The Byzantine source for description of Maria's marriage and subsequent activities is primarily found in Pachymeres, who portrays her first and foremost as a champion of Orthodoxy to the Mongols. Maria's expedition outside of Byzantine territory on the way to her promised husband is portrayed as a pious journey, nearly a pilgrimage, and she is accompanied by religious officials and religious material. The archimandrite of the Pantokrator monastery, Theodosios Prinkips, travels with her; and in her baggage train are a portable chapel decorated with sacred symbols, crosses, golden icons, and vessels for use in the Mass.<sup>38</sup> Maria's exit from Byzantium is an exodus but not an exile; she carried orthodoxy with her, both personally and symbolically. Pachymeres, in describing her progress out of Byzantine territory in this fashion, frames her marriage as an act of pious necessity, one which carries Byzantium and Byzantine Christianity outside the Empire's borders for the benefit of both the Empire and the infidel.

Once Maria arrived in the il-Khanate and her marriage with Abaqa was consummated, her activities resembled those of any Byzantine aristocratic woman: in short, she founded churches and monasteries. She accomplished these foundations via both her considerable amount of personal funds and by exerting her pious influence upon her husband and his companions, though she may not have acted as a missionary so much as attempted to support Christians who lived already in the il-Khanate.<sup>39</sup> Maria encouraged the construction of a Greek Orthodox church

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<sup>37</sup> *Les gestes des Chiprois*, 161 (no.303), cited in Lippard 1984: 159.

<sup>38</sup> Pachymeres, *Relations Historiques*, III.3, 235.

<sup>39</sup> Ryan 1998; but see also Eastmond 2012: 114.

in Tabriz, founded a convent in Bartelli, and may have been responsible for the Church of Our Lady Mary in Urmiya.<sup>40</sup> She also convinced one of Abaqa's retainers, Baidu, to keep a Christian chapel in his camp.<sup>41</sup> The sources portray Maria's activities while married to a foreign, infidel prince as being almost identical to what her activities would have been had she remained in Byzantium. She acted as an economic source for the promotion of Orthodoxy; her patronage of Christian churches and monasteries not only demonstrated her own piety, but created Byzantine influence amongst her husband's people by promoting Byzantine modes of religion and the Byzantine schematic of imperial order which was intimately linked to that religious practice. She remained at the il-Khanid court until her husband Abaqa's death in 1282, and her long tenure there can in fact be considered an indication of friendly relations between Byzantium and the Mongols in Iran. This state of friendly relations did not result in the conversion of any of the il-Khans; what it did accomplish, however, was the maintenance of a diplomatic alliance which extended for much of the second half of the thirteenth century.<sup>42</sup> The ideological programme of Maria's presence at the il-Khanate court, and the presentation of that programme in internal-Byzantine sources, must be considered *separately* from the material effects of Maria's marriage, which seems to have been primarily that of creating a relatively sustained peace between Byzantium and the il-Khanate.

After Abaqa's death, Maria returned from the il-Khanate to Constantinople. Even once safely re-ensconced in the Byzantine capital, Maria continued to behave in the manner expected of a powerful aristocratic woman. As her husband was dead, she took up the habit and joined a convent – associating herself with the primary locus of Byzantine aristocratic female piety. She used her considerable remaining wealth to found a convent and associated chapel, the Church of the Theotokos of the Mongols, more commonly known as the Church of Saint Maria of the Mongols – conceivably in reference to her own name as well as

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<sup>40</sup> Chabot 1894: 586; Fiey 1965: II, 430, 433-4; Budge 162.

<sup>41</sup> Bar Hebraeus: 505.

<sup>42</sup> Korobeinikov: 210-215.

to the memory of the Virgin.<sup>43</sup> She also donated an eleventh-century gospel book to the Chora church, alongside golden textiles – a donation commemorated in a 46-line epigram by Manuel Philes.<sup>44</sup> Maria's pious exploits after her return to Byzantium are commemorated in the only extant visual image of her: she appears in the Deesis mosaic in the Chora church, in the inner narthex. Maria appears in the habit of a nun, and she is labeled with an inscription of her monastic name, Melania.<sup>45</sup> These actions place her squarely in the tradition of other Palaiologan female patrons, whose donations of manuscripts and foundations of smaller churches were characteristic of aristocratic female piety.<sup>46</sup>

Maria is represented by her contemporaries in both visual and textual media as an exemplary Byzantine aristocratic woman, who expresses her virtue and power through pious activities. She is portrayed as a defender of Orthodoxy, a representative of piety when surrounded by the heathens of her husband's court; she exercises her power via charitable, philanthropic activities which extend the Orthodox (and therefore the Byzantine) cause. Maria's marriage to Abaqa is ideologically inappropriate, but her actions as his wife are represented as being correct for a woman of her stature and breeding. Some of the tension between the political necessity of foreign marriage and the ideological standards of Byzantine supremacy are resolved via Maria's propriety and pious work.

The political reality of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, however, did not allow Maria to be the last Byzantine aristocratic woman to be married to a Mongol khan in hopes of producing favorable Byzantine-Mongol relations. Michael VIII's successor, Andronikos II, also married an illegitimate daughter (most likely called Irene) to the il-Khan: Abaqa's successor and son, Ghazan. The marriage alliance was arranged by a Byzantine embassy in 1302 and Irene was sent out of Constantinople toward Tabriz in 1305. Andronikos II seems to have believed that this marriage would secure il-Khanate military aid in Ana-

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<sup>43</sup> Runciman 52.

<sup>44</sup> The poem was first edited by P. N. Papageorgiou in *BZ* 3 (1894); on Maria and the Chora church see Teteriatnikov 1995 and Talbot 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Raymond 111.

<sup>46</sup> Talbot 2012.

tolia against the Seljuks<sup>47</sup> – a hope that is characteristic of Byzantine diplomatic habits, whether backed by marriage alliance or by some other means of security.

During the same negotiations, Gregory Chioniades, an Orthodox priest who had studied astronomy in the il-Khanate in the 1290s, was installed as the bishop of Tabriz on Andronikos II's recommendation. Lippard has suggested that this aspect of Byzantine-Mongol diplomacy, the appointment of Orthodox clergy in the il-Khanate as directed by Byzantine sovereign power, demonstrates the continuing concern of Byzantine emperors with the Christianization of the Mongols.<sup>48</sup> The proposed marriage of Irene to Ghazan may have been part of this Christianization effort. Such an interpretation is supported by the emergence of the above-discussed Maria, Abaqa's widow, from her convent in order to tutor Irene in what she might expect from her new husband's court and culture.<sup>49</sup> Maria's role is consistently represented as Christianizing; her influence on Irene suggests that Irene was also meant to be an instrument of Orthodox piety in the il-Khanate, serving the Byzantine goal of religious assimilation while being, necessarily, a political bargaining chip in Byzantine-Mongol relations.

Of the Byzantine women married off to Mongol khans, the Greek sources are least clear about a woman who was likely wife of the Khan of the Qipchak-Mongol principality (also known as the Golden Horde), Özbek. This woman, presumably an illegitimate daughter of Andronikos III, is mentioned in a 1341 letter from Gregory Akindynos to his friend David Dishypatos at the monastery of Mesomilion.<sup>50</sup> Gregory reports that a communiqué from "the natural daughter" of Andronikos III, married to the khan of the Golden Horde, had arrived in Constantinople. This letter stated that over sixty thousand Golden Horde troops were preparing to march across the Danube. Raymond J. Loenertz, in his analysis of the letter, points out that this is the only Greek source

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<sup>47</sup> Pachymeres, II, 402-3.

<sup>48</sup> Lippard 161.

<sup>49</sup> Hopwood, 235; Eastmond 115.

<sup>50</sup> Gregory Akindynos. *Letter to David Dishypatos*. Cod. Ambr. Gr. E 64 sup., f. 74-75v, ep. 3, ed. Angela Constantinides Hero, in *Letters of Gregory Akindynos*, CFHB 21.

for this particular daughter of Andronikos III, or, for that matter, any other woman married to Özbek Khan.<sup>51</sup> The Akindynos letter does not make explicit mention of any of the works or deeds of this Byzantine princess, and is therefore not useful in corroborating the representation of the wives of the Mongol khans as particularly pious defenders of Orthodoxy. It does, however, corroborate in a Greek source the existence of such a Byzantine bride of Özbek, who appears in a far more extensive fashion in an episode of the *Rihla* of the Tunisian traveler Ibn Battuta.

In this particular sequence of events in the *Rihla*, Battuta finds a Byzantine princess – “the daughter of the king of Constantinople the Great” – at the court of the Golden Horde, where she had become the third wife of the khan. Ibn Battuta does not record her Greek name, but notes that the Golden Horde referred to her as Bayalun.<sup>52</sup> He finds her surrounded by vast wealth and riches, and makes especial note of her kindness and generosity towards him. Considering that Byzantine political involvement with the Golden Horde was extensive during the fourteenth century, as the Byzantines attempted to negotiate their Mongolian-led presence amongst the Slavic polities to the Empire’s north<sup>53</sup>, it is certainly not impossible that Andronikos III could have, mid-century, chosen to perform as his two immediate predecessors did, and sent an illegitimate daughter out of Byzantium to be married to a Mongol khan in hopes of securing political alliance and allegiance.

Ibn Battuta, after spending some time with the Golden Horde, accompanies Bayalun on a journey back to Constantinople, in order that she might give birth to her impending child there.<sup>54</sup> It is in his account of their expedition that Ibn Battuta’s description of this Byzantine princess becomes notable for its concern with Bayalun’s Orthodox Christian conduct and piety. While the *Rihla* cannot be read as evidence for any Byzantine attempt at ideological normalization of the Mongol marriage of Andronikos III’s illegitimate daughter – it is not a Byzantine text – nor as substantive evidence for the power ‘Bayalun’ might or might not have

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<sup>51</sup> Loenertz 1954: 124.

<sup>52</sup> *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 488 (§395).

<sup>53</sup> di Cosmo 2005.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 497 (§412).

had in protecting Christians in the Golden Horde's territory, let alone acting as a vector for Christianity herself – it does stand as evidence of a fourteenth-century non-Byzantine who understood Byzantine persons, particularly Byzantine noblewomen, as being coded Christian above all other concerns. We can therefore see Ibn Battuta's account of Bayalun's stay with Özbek as a non-Byzantine witness to the dominant image of a Byzantine noblewoman outside of Orthodox territory.

Ibn Battuta describes how, upon approaching the vicinity of Byzantine territory, Bayalun discontinued the Islamic practices which she had apparently put on during her stay with Özbek, leaving off the prescription of the call to prayer and consuming both wine and pork. All of her attendants, most of whom seem to have been Byzantines who accompanied her to the Golden Horde, also ceased to follow Islamic practice at the same time.<sup>55</sup> Upon reaching the capital, Bayalun reverts completely to her native religion and customs, being accepted into the bosom of her imperial family and refusing to return to the Golden Horde, due to her “professing her father's religion”.<sup>56</sup> Ibn Battuta does not seem to disparage Bayalun on either a personal nor a political level for her heretofore concealed Christianity. He repeatedly mentions her generosity and kindness, both toward him and toward her Muslim attendants. He is, however, convinced that she has always been secretly a Christian: “Inner sentiments concealed,” he writes of her return to Christian practice, “suffered a change through our entry into the land of infidelity.”<sup>57</sup>

Bayalun, while certainly not being able to spread Byzantine Christianity amongst the Golden Horde<sup>58</sup>, seems to have acted to preserve her own Christian practice and that of her Greek companions, despite having to outwardly adhere to the strictures of her husband's Islamic faith. In foreign, infidel territory, she creates a hidden Orthodox world, one in

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 501 (§419).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 514 (§445).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 501 (§419).

<sup>58</sup> See DeWeese 1994 for an extensive discussion of the religious practices of the Golden Horde and their eventual Islamization. It is exceptionally unlikely that Bayalun could have Christianized her husband or his companions – but also quite plausible that she might have retained her own practices.

which she and her companions can dwell, despite being political pawns for the alliance between her father Andronikos III and her husband Özbek. The political reality of the mid-fourteenth century required Byzantine sovereigns to disregard the ideological prohibition of marrying their daughters and sisters to infidel foreigners, but Bayalun's persistence in her faith, which appears even in an Arabic source, demonstrates the rhetorical reconstruction of such foreign brides: they become keepers of Orthodox Christianity outside the borders of Byzantine power. Ibn Battuta is not engaged in any of the normative projects of Byzantine historiography, but his portrayal of Bayalun still reflects the construction of the Byzantine imperial bride as a locus of Christian-oriented Byzantine cultural power.

By the mid-fourteenth century, the rhetoric of the foreign bride, a Byzantine noblewoman married to an infidel who is represented as an exemplary vector of Christianity despite her situation, had so pervaded Byzantine ideological conceptions that the emperor John VI Kantakouzenos himself could use it as a defense of his necessary political action of marrying his (entirely legitimate!) daughter Theodosia to Orhan, the Ottoman sultan, in 1346 CE. The marriage appears in Kantakouzenos' own account of his reign as a retelling of Theodosia's virtuous deeds.<sup>59</sup> There was little to no chance of Theodosia having a Christianizing influence on the Ottoman court, but her father the Emperor nevertheless portrays her as ransoming Christian captives and attempting to make Christian converts. The precedent which had been set by Maria, Irene, and Bayalun seems to have sufficiently diffused and refocused Byzantine rhetoric on foreign marriage that the brides of the Mongol khans have become a new model for Byzantine imperial women and their roles outside of the Empire, whether or not they have the luxury of marriage to a Christian.

We must however bear in mind that Byzantine position in the Near East had continued to deteriorate during the remainder of the fourteenth century, and the Empire was forced to make more and greater concessions to the vicissitudes of local power in its efforts to survive. That

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<sup>59</sup> Kantakouzenos, II, 588-9.

Kantakouzenos regarded with pride the marriage of his daughter to an Ottoman sultan demonstrates the degree of weakness to which the imperial office had descended; the mid-fourteenth-century Palaiologoi were tributaries (if not yet vassals) of the Ottomans. Contracting a marriage like that of Theodosia to Orhan was a *success* for Kantakouzenos – it provided him political gain, or at least some measure of basic political stability. This level of willingness to perform actions which would have been previously unthinkable for an emperor of Byzantium is in line with similar acts of desperation common in the fourteenth century: i.e. the willingness of emperors to go on long, personal journeys to the West in search of military and financial aid, when this quite supplicatory practice had never before been conceivable.<sup>60</sup> In a sense, the marriage of Byzantine imperial brides to Mongol khans – or to non-Christians in general – can be read as a barometer of the efficacy of Byzantine diplomacy, and of the distance which the normativizing ideology of the empire could manage to bend under pressure. As the decline of Byzantine temporal power proceeded in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the strategies for managing what little authority remained ventured ever farther from the norms of the Middle Byzantine period as enshrined in Constantine VII's compilation of statecraft.

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<sup>60</sup> Oikonomedes 1992; Hilsdale 2014: 268-275.

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