

# MARIA PALEOLOGINA AND THE IL-KHANATE OF PERSIA. A BYZANTINE PRINCESS IN AN EMPIRE BETWEEN ISLAM AND CHRISTENDOM

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## ABSTRACT

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persia, dominated by the Mongols, a Byzantine princess, Maria Paleologina, stood out greatly in the court of Abaqa Khan, her husband. The Il-Khanate of Persia was then an empire precariously balanced between Islam, dominant in its territories and Christianity that was prevailing in its court and in the diplomatic relations. The role of Maria, a fervent Christian, was decisive in her husband's policy and in that of any of his successors. Her figure deserves a detailed study and that is what we propose in this paper.

## KEYWORDS

Maria Paleologina, Il-khanate of Persia, Abaqa, Michel VIII, Mongols.

## CAPITALIA VERBA

Maria Paleologa, Ilkhanatus Persiae, Abaqa, Michael VIII, Mongoles.

## 1. Introduction

The great expansion of Genghis Khan's hordes to the west swept away the Islamic states and encouraged for a while the hopes of the Christian states of the East. The latter tried to ally themselves with the powerful Mongols and in this attempt they played the religion card.<sup>1</sup> Although most of the Mongols who entered Persia, Iraq and Syria were shamanists, Nestorian Christianity exerted a strong influence among elites, especially in the court. That was why during some crucial decades for the history of the East, the Il-Khanate of Persia fluctuated between the consolidation of Christian influence and the approach to Islam, that despite the devastation brought by the Mongols in Persia,<sup>2</sup> Iraq and Syria remained the dominant factor within the Il-khanate.

## 2. The Latins, Byzantium and the alliance with the Mongols

Constantinople, Acropolis of the Universe, capital of the Roman Empire, that had been, by God's will, under the power of the Latins, finds itself again under the power of the Romans, and this was granted through us.<sup>3</sup>

The year was 1261 and the sovereign so expressed, arrogant and proud was the future Michael VIII Palaeologus, who had just accomplished the dream long shared by the Greeks: reconquer Constantinople and throw the Latins out of it. But this arrogant ruler had ahead of him an even more titanic task than the one done so far: to restore and maintain the Byzantine Empire against its many enemies. He had much to fear; therefore he used to resort to divination worried about what fate might bring to his dynasty and his Empire.<sup>4</sup> An Empire which at that time was nothing more than *un corps grêle, disloqué, misérable, sur lequel se posait une tête énorme, Constantinople*.<sup>5</sup> From each one of the cardinal points, there were predators lurking, and the Empire in the centre like a wounded animal; East in Asia the Turks and the Mongols, the Serbs and the Bulgarians North in the Balkans; the Venetians in the Archipelago, the Genoese in the Black Sea and the Latins West.<sup>6</sup> At this

1. Foltz, Richard. *Religions of the Silk Road*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

2. Morgan, David. *The Mongols*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

3. Gregoras, Nicephorus (Γρηγόρας, Νικηφόρος). *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία. Α' Περίοδος: 1204-1341*, ed. and trans. Dimitrios Moschos (Διμιτρίος Μόσχος). Athens: Νέα Σύνορα, 1997: 103-109.

4. Ducas. *Historia Turco-Bizantina*, ed. Francisco Javier Ortolá, Fernando Alconchel. Madrid: Antonio Machado Libros, 2006: 66, 2643-264; *La Gran Conquista de Ultramar*, ed. Louis Cooper. Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1989: 255.

5. "a weak, emaciated and miserable body with a huge head: Constantinople". Diehl, Charles. *Etudes byzantines*. Paris: A. Picard et fils, 1905: 220 ("L'Empire byzantin sous les Paléologues").

6. Marcos Hierro, Ernest. *La Croada Catalana. L'exèrcit de Jaume I a Terra Santa*. Barcelona: L'esfera dels llibres, 2007; Marcos Hierro, Ernest. "La croada a Terra Santa de 1269 i la política internacional de Jaume I", *Jaume I. Commemoració del VIII centenari del naixement de Jaume I*, Ferrer i Mallol, Maria Teresa, ed. Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2011: I, 509-522.



juncture was forged a masterful diplomat, Michael: stubborn, crafty, unscrupulous and so skilful that was able to carry out a complicated foreign policy that managed to neutralize the enemies of the Empire and to expand its borders.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile the Byzantine Emperor was trying to regain his capital and his empire and was facing his Western enemies; the Mongols had settled in Persia and Iraq and were trying to take over Syria.<sup>8</sup> This led to a new division of strategy and powers in the East, where Mamelukes, Turks and Mongols were fighting to gain control of the region. The Byzantine ruler decided to use the diplomatic roads opened by the new situation and sent two embassies, one to the Mamluk sultan and another one to Hulagu, prince of the Tartars.<sup>9</sup> By the first embassy was not established any alliance, the second will have more positive and lasting outcomes as the Mongols and the Byzantines forged a lasting, but of a complex character, political and military alliance between two very different political and cultural worlds.<sup>10</sup> The emperor sent numerous gifts and sealed alliances signed by two imperial marriages, one with the Khan of the Golden Horde and the other with the first Khan of the Il-Khanate: Hulagu.<sup>11</sup> Two illegitimate daughters of Michael VIII, Maria and Euphrosyne,<sup>12</sup> gotten with one of his mistresses whose name is unknown, although we know that she lived in Constantinople between 1224-1307 and belonged to the family of Diplovatatzoi or Diplobatatzés.<sup>13</sup>

7. Beihammer, Alexander; Parani, Maria; Schabel, Chris. *Diplomatics in the Eastern Mediterranean 1000-1500. Aspects of Cross-Cultural Communication*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008; *La Crónica de Morea*, ed. José M. Egea. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1996: 295; Bar Hebraeus. "Chronicles". *Syri.ac. An annotated Bibliography of Syriac resources online*. 12 September 2015 <<http://syri.ac/bhchronicles#CSpage>>, see especially chapter 10; Gregoras, Nicephorus (Γρηγόρας, Νικηφόρος). *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία...*: 116-117; Pachymère. "Histoire des Empereurs Michel et Andronique". *L'antiquité grecque et latine Du moyen âge*. 12 June 2016 <<http://remacle.org/bloodwolf/histoireconstantinople/table1.htm>>, see book IV: chapter II; chapter XXXII, part 1; chapter XXXV, part 2; chapter IV and chapter XXIX (from the version: Pachymère. "Histoire des Empereurs Michel et Andronique". *Histoire de Constantinople depuis le règne de l'Ancien Justin, jusqu'à la fin de l'Empire. Traduite sur les originaux grecs par Mr Cousin, VI*. Paris: Chez Damien Foucault, 1674); Runciman, Steven. *Vísperas Sicilianas. Una historia del mundo mediterráneo a finales del siglo XIII*, trad. Alicia Bleiberg. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1979: 139-140.

8. Jackson, Peter. *The Mongols and the West: 1221-1410*. London: Routledge, 2005.

9. Pachymère. "Histoire des Empereurs...": book IV, chapter III, part 1.

10. Mansouri, Mohamed Tahar. "Byzantins, Mamluks et Mongols aux alentours de 1265", *Byzantiaka XII* (1992): 317-324; *Mongols, Turks and others. Euroasian nomads and the Sedentary World*, ed. Reuven Amitai, Michal Biran. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2005.

11. Richard, Jean. "Älgigidäi à Gazan: la continuité d'une politique franque chez les Mongols d'Iran", *L'Iran face à la domination mongole*, Denise Aigle, ed. Teheran: Institut français de recherche en Iran, 1997: 57-69; Gregoras, Nicephorus (Γρηγόρας, Νικηφόρος). *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία...*: 62; Amitai-Preiss, Reuven. "Hulagu Khan", *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Ehsan Yarshater, Ahmad Ashraf, eds. New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2001: X, 554-557. Online version available in: Amitai-Preiss, Reuven. "Ġāzān Khan, Maḥmūd (1271-1304)". *Encyclopædia Iranica*. 3 February 2012. 12 June 2016 <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gazan-khan-mahmud>>.

12. Pachymère. "Histoire des Empereurs...": book IV, chapter III, part 2.

13. Hunger, Herbert, ed. *Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit, 3 Faszikel: A...-Hούχιος*. Viena: Erstellt von E. Trapp, 1978: 50-51.



Maria Paleologina (1258/9-1282) was the first to arrive in 1265 to mongol lands being the future wife of Hulagu, as part of an ambitious plan of political and military cooperation between the Byzantines and the Mongols. For both Hulagu and Michael VIII being allies suited them at the time.<sup>14</sup> The Byzantine emperor in this way overcame his ineffectiveness to protect the eastern borders of the Empire, using the Mongols to hold the Turkish threat.<sup>15</sup> Michael wanted to protect his empire at all of its costs, and so he acted oblivious to religious or ethnic prejudices, as did in his time John Vatatzes (emperor of Nicaea) when he allied himself with the Seljuks of Iconium to guard against the threatening Mongolian expedition that was then progressing unstoppable in Russia, Hungary and Poland.<sup>16</sup> In addition to strategic and defensive considerations, Michael had to think about the profitability of the location of the Hulagu's states that were cutting the land route between the Mamluks and the Kiptchaks (Cumans), this route was not only of economic importance to the Mamluks and Italian merchants, but also of political and military one. It was among the Cumans that slaves were drawn, and once arrived in Egypt, were becoming Mamluks forming the military and political elite of the country.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the control of the land route by the Byzantine emperor together with his control of the Hellespont, the Bosphorus and the Black Sea gave him a powerful tool of pressure on the Mamluks of Egypt.

To Hulagu, the conqueror of Persia and Baghdad, who dreamed of conquering the entire Muslim East, coalition with the Byzantines, also appeared very fruitful.<sup>18</sup> The Christian sovereigns were not strangers to him, because even before agreeing with Michael he had been in contact with Louis IX of France to whom he offered a coalition to conquer Jerusalem for the benefit of the 'Holy Man' (Pope),<sup>19</sup> a conquest that failed due to the extreme heat and the lack of provisions. Despite this setback Khan continued in his efforts to form a connection between the Christians and the Mongols against the Muslims, hence he was trying continually to partner with the Christians: Latins and Byzantines, against whom he had no prejudices as it was demonstrated after the tough and bloody invasion of Persia, which led the region in

14. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, ed. John Andrew Boyle. New York-London: Persian Heritage Series, 1971: 233.

15. Geanakoplos, Deno John. *Emperor Michael Palaeologus and the West*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1959: 81.

16. Acropolites, Jorge. *Narración Histórica*, ed. Teresa Vila Vilar. Granada: Centro de Estudios Bizantinos, Neogriegos y Chipriotas, 2012: III, 41, 133.

17. Amitai-Preiss, Reuven. *Mongols and Mamluks. The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War, 1260-1281*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1995.

18. Sudheim, Ludolph de. "Le Chemin de la Terre Sainte", *Croisades et Pèlerinages. Récits, Chroniques et Voyages en Terre Sainte XIIe-XVIe siècle*, Danielle Régner-Bohler, ed. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997: 1029-1056, especially, XXXI-XXXII, 1054; 'Abd Az-Zahir, Ibn. "Baibars against Tripoli and Antioch. His Letter to Bohemond VI", *Arab Historians of the Crusades*, ed. and trans. Francesco Gabrieli. London: Routledge-Kegan Paul, 1957: 308; Sparapet, Smbat. *Chronicle*, ed. Robert Bedrosian. New Jersey: Long Branch, 2005: 110, 114, 116; Nicolle, David. *The Mongol Warlords: Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, Hülägü, Tamerlane*. New York: Richard Hook, 1990.

19. Meyvaert, Paul. "An Unknown Letter of Hulagu, Il-khan of Persia, to King Louis IX of France". *Viator* 11 (1980): 258.



a period of prosperity and freedom for Christians.<sup>20</sup> Definitely and as shown later, this prosperity was due to the influence of his Christian mother Sarkutti Bagi and his favorite wife Khatun Dokuk a stubborn Nestorian from the Khereid people, both decisive in their political and religious decisions.<sup>21</sup> The influence of Christian wives over the rulers of Persia was not new, like the Persian Queen Shirin, wife of Chosroes II, who occasionally determined his political and religious decisions.<sup>22</sup> While the majority of the Mongols were shamanists and Buddhist, many Mongolian women had been attracted by the Nestorian Christianity that had entered in some of their tribes, like in that of the Naimans and the Khereids, since the XI century. The arrival of Christian missionaries and ambassadors from the West since 1245 to the Mongol lands reinforced the Christian influence among the Mongols and especially among the women of the court. These succeeded at influencing their ruling husbands and sons as it had already occurred earlier in Europe with the Christianisation of the wives and mothers of the pagan kings which determined the fate of entire nations.<sup>23</sup> In Persia, the role played by Dokuk Khatun was especially prominent.<sup>24</sup> Her husband was consulting with her about everything; the Mongols respected her and the Christians revered her.<sup>25</sup> Hulagu's wife was a devout and determined Christian who was not afraid the Islamism of the vast majority of the subjects of her husband. So, she ordered the destruction of more than a few mosques, forbade the celebration of feasts in the name of Allah, built numerous churches, granted many privileges to the Christians at the expense of Muslims who condemned to servitude, and even saved the lives of the Christians of Baghdad and

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20. De Nicola, Bruno. "Las mujeres mongolas en los siglos XII y XIII. Un análisis sobre el rol de la madre y la esposa de Ghinggis Khan". *Acta Histórica y Arqueológica Medievalia*, 27-28 (2008): 37-64.

21. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 100, 106.

22. Al-Tha'ālibī, 'Abd al-Malik b. Muhammad b. Ismā'il. *Histoire des rois des perses*, ed. Hermann Zotenberg. Amsterdam: Academic Publishers Associated Oriental Press, 1979: 671, 691; Greatrex, Geoffrey; Lieu, Samuel, eds. *The Roman Eastern frontier and the Persian Wars: Part. II, ad 363-630: A narrative Source Book*. New York: Routledge, 2002: 229 ("The Khuzistan Chronicle"); Ryan, James D. "Christian wives of Mongol Khans: tartar queens and missionary expectations in Asia". *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 8-9 (1998): 411-421.

23. Ryan, James D. "Christian Wives of Mongol Khans: Tartar Queens and Missionary Expectations in Asia". *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 8/3 (1998): 411-421; Weatherford, Jack. *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*. New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2010; Buell, Paul D. "Some Royal Mongol Ladies: Alaqa-Beki, Ergene-Qatun and Others". *World History Connected*. 20 March 2016 <<http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/7.1/buell.html>>; Runciman, Steven. "The Ladies of the Mongols", Εἰς Μνήμην Κ. Αμάντου, Nikolaos V. Tomadakes (Νικόλαος Β. Τομαδάκης), ed. Athens: Μυρτιδίη, 1960: 47-50.

24. Fiey, Jean Maurice. "Iconographie Syriaque, Hulagu, Doquz Khatun... et six ambons?". *Le Museon*, 87 (1975): 59-64; Melville, Charles P. "Dokuz (Doquz) Katun", *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Ehsan Yarshater, Ahmad Ashraf, eds. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1996: VII, 475-476; Melville, Charles. P. "Bologan (Bulugan) Katun", *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Ehsan Yarshater, Ahmad Ashraf, eds. New York-London: Routledge-Kegan Paul, 1990: IV, 338-339. Online version in: Melville, Charles. P. "Bologan (Bulugan) Katun". *Encyclopædia Iranica*. 15 December 1989. 26 January 2016 <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bologan-katun-the-name-of-three-of-the-royal-wives-of-the-mongol-il-khans-in-iran>>.

25. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 145.



Aleppo when these cities were taken by the army of her husband.<sup>26</sup> The footsteps of this tremendous Christian queen will follow another woman no less obstinate in her deep religious beliefs: Maria Paleologina.<sup>27</sup>

The winter of 1265 a new Christian queen came to Persia as part of a diplomatic marriage destined to seal the alliance of the Khan with Michael VIII, which would provide a new wife to fill the bed of the old Hulagu. The Byzantine imperial entourage had left Constantinople towards Tabriz led by the Patriarch of Antioch and Euthymius Theodosius de Villehardouin, abbot of the Monastery of Pantocrator, escorting the very young fiancée and his magnificent imperial baggage that included among others a splendid chapel with curtains embellished with images of Saints and the Holy Cross and enriched with lots of drinks prepared for the celebration of the sacred mysteries.<sup>28</sup> Being in Kayseri (Caesarea in Cappadocia) the members of the entourage of Maria Paleologina were informed of the death of Khan in February,<sup>29</sup> just when he planned to march against Egypt as part of his coalitions with the Christians.<sup>30</sup> This death far from breaking the Byzantine-Mongol alliance led to Maria being asked to marry his successor: Abaqa, favourite son of Hulagu, governor of Turkestan and his heir. He in this way consolidated his father's association with the Christians against the Muslims of Egypt and Syria.<sup>31</sup>

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26. Sawma, Rabba. *The Monks of Kublai Khan Emperor of China*, ed. Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge. London: Religious Tract Society, 1928: 63 (chapter 8); Conrad, Philippe. *Las Civilizaciones de las Estepas*. Geneva: Editions Forni, 1977; Vine, Aubrey R. *The Nestorian Churches*. London: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1937: 141-147; Knobler, Adam. "Pseudo-Conversions and Patchwork Pedigrees: The Christianization of Muslim Princes and the Diplomacy of Holy War". *Journal of World History*, 7/2 (1992): 181-197.

27. De Nicola, Bruno. "Women's role and participation in warfare in the Mongol Empire", *Soldatinnen. Gewalt und Geschlecht im Krieg vom Mittelalter bis Heute*, Klaus Latzel, Silke Satjukow, Franka Maubach, eds. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010: 95-112; De Nicola, Bruno. "Ruling from tents: the existence and structure of women' ordos in Ilkhanid Iran", *The Mongols and Iranian History: Art, Literature and Culture from early Islam to Qajar Persia*, Robert Hillenbrand, Andrew Peacock, Firuza Abdullaeva, eds. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013: 116-136.

28. Grigor of Akner. "History of the Nation of Archers. Translated from Classical Armenian by Robert Bedrosian". *Attalus: sources for Greek & Roman history*. 12 November 2015 <<http://www.attalus.org/armenian/gatoc.html>>, especially chapter 17; Pachymère. "Histoire des Empereurs...": book IV, chapter III, parts 1-2.

29. Bar Hebraeus. "Chronicles...": see especially chapter 11.

30. Hayton, Prince. "La Fleur des histoires de la terre d'Orient", *Croisades et Pèlerinages. Récits, Chroniques et Voyages en Terre Sainte XIII-XVIIe siècle*, Danielle Régnier-Bohler, ed. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997: 803-878, especially 841 (chapter 26).

31. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 153-154; Hayton, Prince. "La Fleur des histoires...": 839 (chapter 22); Grousset, René. *El Imperio de las Estepas. Atila, Gengis Kan, Tamerlán*. Madrid: Edaf, 1991: 407.



### 3. Maria Paleologina and Abaqa Khan: a Christian and a Shamanist against Islam

The new Ilkhan ruled very prosperously Persia advised, especially, by his Greek wife.<sup>32</sup> However it would take some time for this to happen. For when Maria came to Persia was just seven or eight years old, so its direct influence on the Khan in the early years had to be absent or exercised by the emissaries of her father Michael VIII, or by the servants the latter had positioned in Khan's court to take care of his interests and those of his daughter. Maria will grow in the harem of her husband under the shadow of his powerful and influential wife: Padshah Khatun, daughter of Sultan Terken<sup>33</sup> and will cohabit in it with other Nestorian Christian wives as Nukdan Khatun, mother of Karkatuchani. In other words the little Byzantine princess will grow in a Mongolian environment and the maintenance of her Byzantine identity in such an environment can only be explained by the existence of a small Byzantine court beside her responsible to deal with her training and through this, with her future influence on the Mongol court in favour of Byzantium. But then, an education of Maria under the supervision of the Nestorian wives of Khan explains her seamless integration and harmony with the Nestorian Christians and her little influence among other Eastern Christian communities like the Monophysite Armenians. In any case, as the years went by, this young girl succeeded in turning Abaqa into a protector of Christians until his death. A role, that of the protector of Christians, that had been instilled already by his mother Dokuk Khatun.<sup>34</sup> She died in the summer of 1265 just when Maria appeared in the Mongol court and her death together with the one of her husband a few months ago, cause great consternation among Christians who regarded the couple as a new Constantine and Helen, instruments of vengeance against the enemies of Christ. She was remembered with sorrow and nostalgia, the devout Dokuk, traveling with her church in a tent, ringing the bell during religious ceremonies and accompanied by Armenian and Syrian clerics.<sup>35</sup> The broken hearts of the Christians in Persia soon found solace in a new benefactor and protector: Maria Paleologina. She would be known in the region as Despina Khatun or Bulaghan Khatun.<sup>36</sup> This led to the replacement of a protector with another, a replacement that was perfect to such a degree, that as we have found, the sources sometimes confuse the two of them.<sup>37</sup>

Despina Khatun was revered for her kindness, wisdom and strong leadership by Christians and Mongols in Persia, a great part of them Nestorians. Sources portrayed her as leading a pious life and being quite influential in politics and the religious

32. Grigor of Akner. "History of the Nation of Archers...": see especially, chapter 14; Sawma, Rabba. *The Monks of Kublai Khan...*: 45-46 (chapter 3).

33. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 305.

34. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 136; Bar Hebraeus. "Chronicles...": see especially chapter 11.

35. Grigor of Akner. "History of the Nation of Archers...": see especially chapters 12 and 13.

36. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 102.

37. Bar Hebraeus. "Chronicles...": see especially chapter 11.



perspectives of her husband Abaqa, who was also interested in protecting Christians in his kingdom.<sup>38</sup> Yet the devout Maria come to Persia in praise of holiness and demanding that Abaqa had to be baptized before their marriage, failed totally to convert him, only achieving to make her a pagan spouse: *καλοί τε καί ἀγαθοί* expression that was used by Homer to refer to the gods. Abaqa was a convinced shamanist and while felt great sympathy for the Christians he did not want to become one.<sup>39</sup> But he needed the Christians to maintain his power and independence against the Islamic powers that he was fighting. Beyond the religious dimension he had clearly seen the political and economic potential around Christianity. Indeed, the main trade routes of his time linking China with the Mediterranean through Persia had their four great stations of arrival in Trabzon, Ayas, Constantinople and Tripoli, cities, all under the control of Christian power united by the Mongol Khanate of Persia either by ties of allegiance, or by political and business alliances. In addition, and like most of the Mongols the Khan did not make any discrimination among Latins, Greeks, Armenians, Nestorians, Jacobites, etc., for him they all worshiped the Cross.<sup>40</sup> This is why he did not hesitate to pact with the Byzantine Michael VIII and with the Latin rulers, while making war with his own race to defend his territories.<sup>41</sup> Above all, he would fight the Seljuk Turks of Anatolia, the real enemy in the East of the Empire,<sup>42</sup> the ones that the Mongol ruler always had to held off to fulfil his treaty with his father.<sup>43</sup>

The political ambitions and the influence of his wife Despina Khatun determined the government of this Mongol Khan in political, religious, economic and social issues. Thus, Khan limited and in some cases even banned the practice of Islam, promoted Christianity, and ordered that all positions in the government offices were occupied by Christians and Jews (clearly excluding Muslims). His affinity towards Christianity and his interest in its development came to a point where he appointed as Patriarch of the Christians of his empire the Nestorian Uighur of China, Markos.<sup>44</sup> The importance of Christianity in this first phase of the history of the Ilkhanate of Persia can be seen as well through numismatics, as the Khan minted coins that showed a Christian cross with an inscription in Arabic that read in the "Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God".<sup>45</sup>

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38. Sparapet, Smbat. *Chronicle...*: 110, 118, 119.

39. Sawma, Rabba. *The Monks of Kublai Khan...*: 50 (chapter 4); Hayton, Prince. "La Fleur des histoires...": 841 (chapter 27).

40. Fiey, Jean Maurice. *Chrétiens Syriaques sous les Mongols (Il-Khanat de Perse, XIIIe-XIVe s.)*. Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1975: 13.

41. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 20, 23, 24, 123, 124, 136, 139, 140, 142, 143, 152, 153, 175.

42. Savvides, Alexis G. C. *Byzantium in the near East: its Relations with the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum in Asia Minor. The Armenians of Cilicia and the Mongols. A. D. c. 1192-1237*. Thessaloniki: Byzantine Research Centre, 1981.

43. Runciman, Steven. *Vísperas Sicilianas...*: 197.

44. Vine, Aubrey R. *The Nestorian Churches...*: 147.

45. Luisetto, Frédéric. *Arméniens et autres Chrétiens d'Orient sous la domination Mongole*. Montpellier: Geuthner, 2006: 233. See also: Jackson, Peter. *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*. Cambridge (UK):





Although the Mongols generally showed great tolerance toward all religions in their vast domains and could get to practice a number of them without finding any contradiction in it, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century most of them remained shamanists. Although it is true that Buddhism, Islam and Christianity were becoming increasingly important. Therefore it is not surprising that this religious tolerance linked to the political interests of the Khanate determine the Mongolic tolerance toward the Nestorian missions that penetrated through Turkestan, Mongolia and reached even China and that many Mongols were converted into Christians just when they began to collaborate militarily with the Byzantines.<sup>46</sup> In times of Doquz Khatun and Despina Khatun tolerance towards Christianity was transformed into a very clear inclination towards this religion something that allowed new churches and convents to be built in Tabriz, Bartelli, Maragha, Baghdad and Arbil decorated by western Syrians and Greeks with Byzantine paintings.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, as Maria settled in Persia, with some reluctance, like the one shown by the Armenians who feared the influence and power of the “dirty apostate nation of the Greeks” in the domain of Abaqa,<sup>48</sup> her sister Euphrosyne arrived in Mongol lands just a year after marrying Nogai Khan, chief of the Golden Horde.<sup>49</sup> Finally the Byzantine emperor made it in the East protecting the backs of his empire in Asia. Meanwhile, the other Mongol alliance of Michael VIII, the one linking his empire with the Golden Horde that dominated the steppes of the black Sea, also began to bear fruit. Shortly before locking the alliance, Khan Nogai had crossed the Danube with his men making the Byzantine forces flee and devastating the cities of Thrace. But now, finally by achieving the marriage of another of his bastard children with Nogai, the Byzantine sovereign secured the tranquillity against the Mongolic incursions into the Balkans and at the same time he made Khan of the Golden Horde a possible ally against to Venetians and Genoese, whose business interests in Black Sea could be damaged in case they provoked the lord of the Golden Horde. Now, thanks to one of his wives that was a Christian, Djaylak, the Khan of the Golden Horde, also begun to show favour to the Christians.<sup>50</sup> This alliance was very profitable for the Empire. Nogai helped militarily the Empire in 1273 and 1279 by defending it from the Bulgarians and in 1282 when he sent 4,000 soldiers to Constantinople to fight the Despot of Thessaly, John. Only sporadically the relationship between son in law and father in law was spoiled when the latter remained closer to Hulagu and his other son: Abaqa. Nogai did not consider any of the two Mongol leaders as his friends as the former had led to the death of his father

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Cambridge University Press, 2005.

46. Gregoras, Nicephorus (Γρηγοράς, Νικηφόρος). *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία...*: 119-121.

47. Fiey, Jean Maurice. *Chrétiens Syriaques...*: 85-97.

48. Grigor of Akner. “History of the Nation of Archers...”: see especially, chapter 17.

49. Vásáry, István. *Cumans and Tatars. Oriental Military in the Pre-Ottoman Balkans, 1185-1365*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2005: 79; Pachymère. “Histoire des Empereurs...”: chapter III, part V.

50. Grousset, René. *El Imperio de las Estepas...*: 441.



and the second caused him to lose an eye in Tbilisi.<sup>51</sup> Years later it would be Nogai himself who initiated an approach to Abaqa sending to his court his wife Chubei and his son Torai with an emir to ask one of his daughters as a wife for Torai, an attempt for a matrimonial bond and an alliance that ended successfully.<sup>52</sup>

Behind the political arrangements and diplomatic manoeuvres of Abaqa can be seen the long hand of his father in law Michael VIII acting through his pious daughter Maria. The Byzantine-Mongol alliance was always in force until the death of the Mongol Khan although more than a few enemies of Byzantium tried to end it, as was the case of Charles of Anjou. He, fearing an alliance of the Byzantines with the Turks approached Abaqa who received his embassy politely, but luckily for Constantinople nothing more than this. The Mongol ruler wanted to establish relations with the Latins, but provided that these should not hurt his relationship with his father in law. Along with Michael and upon request of the king of Armenia, the King of Aragon and Pope Clement IV, Abaqa offered to help the passage of the Eighth Crusade to the Holy Land.<sup>53</sup> Via the king of Armenia, Khan sent letters to the Pope and the Christian kings of the West asking for troops to carry out the crusade mission, but they always responded indecisively.<sup>54</sup>

Anyway, Abaqa could not engage in any business as he was too busy holding off the Golden Horde.<sup>55</sup> In 1268 he went further in his pro-Christian diplomatic gamble and promised an alliance of perpetual peace between himself and the Holy Roman Church and he also offered to conquer the Holy Land.<sup>56</sup> The truth is that his promise was unrealistic because in that moment he was totally unable to help as it was demonstrated by his disastrous attempt to rescue Alexandria and his embarrassing attempt to assist the small Catalan crusade arrived at Acre in 1269. Mongol Khan despite his wish to ingratiate himself with the Christians had to face serious dangers threatening his status, like the war that his cousins had started from the house of Jagatai invading his eastern lands, and also he had to ingratiate himself with his uncle and master, the great Kublai Khan of China. After defeating his cousins in 1270, Abaqa wrote to Louis to assure him of his military aid as soon as the crusade came to Palestine but the French went to Tunisia where the Mongols were unable to help. He did, however, help Prince Edward of England who alarmed by the luck of the French king, requested assistance from the Mongols. In mid-October 1271 the Mongol ruler sent a detachment of twenty thousand

51. Vásáry, István. *Cumans and Tatars...*: 79; Gregoras, Nicephorus (Γρηγοράς, Νικηφόρος). *Ρομαϊκή Ιστορία...*: 164.

52. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 129.

53. *La Gran Conquista de Ultramar...*: 257.

54. Hayton, Prince. "La Fleur des histoires...": 844; Aigle, Denise. "The Letters of Eljigidei, Hülegü, and Abaqa: Mongol overtures or Christian Ventriloquism?". *Inner Asia*, 7/2 (2005): 143-162; Runciman, Steven. *A History of the Crusades*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1995 (3 volumes); Richard, Jean. *The Crusades, c. 1071- c. 1291*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1999.

55. D'Ohsson, Abraham Constantin Mouradgèa. *Histoire des Mongols depuis Tchinguiz Khan jusqu'a Timur Béc*. La Haye-Amsterdam: Les frères Van Cleef, 1834-35: III, 539-542; Atwood, Christopher Pratt. *The Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*. New York: Facts On File, 2004.

56. Tisserant, Eugène. "Une lettre de l'Ilkhan de Perse Abaga adressee en 1268 au Pape Clément IV". *Le Muséon*, 59 (1946): 547-556.



horsemen of the Anatolian corps that advanced into Syria, defeating the Turkoman troops that were protecting Aleppo and passing like a simoom on Maarath an-Numan and Apamea. The Muslims of the area were alarmed of the Mongol advance but the head of the Mamluks, Baibars, was not. Baibars requested reinforcements from Egypt and when he advanced northward on November 12 the Mongols turned around as they were not strong enough to face all the Mamluk army, even less after being betrayed by their Anatolian Turks vassals who fled loaded with a big booty leaving the Mongols alone literally in a moment of danger.

In the *modus operandi* of Abaqa's diplomacy can be observed the repetition of a single pattern, he always used to act in response to the calls for alliance or partnership of the Christians, but in 1273 the one looking for a coalition was him, fearing a possible attack by Baibars. He sent a letter to Edward now the King of England asking for a new crusade, the response was polite but negative. In 1274 Mongol emissaries arrived at the Council of Lyon and they barely received a friendly response from the Pope and his Curia who failed to see that the kingdom of Abaqa, secretly from Islam, opened them two interesting possibilities: to press the Muslims from both fronts and to evangelise many of his subjects. The Mongol Khan's offer to provide assistance to Michael VIII, facilitating the passage of Christian troops through the Turkish Asia Minor to recover the Holy Land was ignored. In 1276 the ruler of Persia carried out a new attempt to approach the Latins through two Georgian brothers, John and James Vaseli. They landed in Rome and in the courts of France and England with a letter in which Khan apologized for not being more effective in 1271 but despite the good Mongol provision neither the English ruler Edward nor Philip III of France and even less the Pope showed interest in organizing a new holy war in the East.<sup>57</sup> The most suitable for initiating one: the Pope was under the dark influence of Charles of Anjou who was then negotiating with the Mamluks and hated the Mongols, allies of his sworn enemies: the Byzantines and the Genoese. In the meantime, while Abaqa displayed his diplomatic mantle at the foot of most Christians more to fight the Mamluks and safeguard his territories than to become himself or let the conversion of his people to Christianity, Maria Paleologina, his wife, was the centre of many miraculous events that did nothing but increase her devotion to the Eastern Christians. In 1279 the 'Great Queen' realizing that Christians had stopped practicing the procession of Maragha, by which the waters were blessed on the banks of the river Safi the day of Epiphany, because of the intense cold and the disputes that her subjects had with the Arabs, she went in person to the city of Maragha. Once there, she ordered the procession of the Christians according to the custom, with crosses hanging from the lances of their leaders, and it seems that after the procession had started, the 'Divine Grace' visited the believers. As if a miracle had happened, suddenly the force of the cold decreased and the grass began to grow causing great joy among the Mongols concerned about the fate of their hungry horses and among the Christians satisfied by the miraculous triumph of their faith.<sup>58</sup> For some researchers, this event did not happen with Despina but with Qutai Khatun, one of the

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57. Sparapet, Smbat. *Chronicle...*: 120.

58. Bar Hebraeus. "Chronicles...": see especially chapter 11.



women of Hulagu and mother of Tekuder.<sup>59</sup> But according to our opinion, it should be remembered that on the date on which the event occurred, the 'great dame' of the Khanate of Persia was Despina Khatun, or Maria Paleologina, not Qutai Khatun who became important in the Mongol court when her son ascended to the throne in 1282.

Then Baibars died, the greatest enemy of the Latins and the Mongols. Both could have taken advantage of the fact that he was succeeded by his weak son Baraqa, but they did not.<sup>60</sup> Although Abaqa and his vassal Leo III of Armenia continued to beg the Latins asking them to form an alliance and a new crusade, his pleas barely resonated in the West where they were only answered by the Order of Malta and the lands of Edward I, who anyway had no funds to do anything. Meanwhile, Charles of Anjou echoed and attempted a partnership with the Venetians, the Templars and the court of the Mamluks. Finally, a true Christian-Mongol expedition was launched, composed of 200 Hospitaller Knights, some Cypriots Knights and two Mongol armies, one commanded by Abaqa himself and another by his brother Mangu Timur. They all moved to Syria in September 1281 managing to invade the land of Aleppo, Hamas and Emesa and causing great damage to the Saracens.<sup>61</sup> This was the last Latin-Mongol military partnership, as Abaqa retired after this to his homeland and the 1st of April, 1282 he died. According to some sources this happened while he was in a state of delirium tremens, induced by excessive consumption of alcohol (something common among the Mongol chiefs) and according to others, he was poisoned for his intolerance towards Islam.<sup>62</sup> With this death the plans of partnership between the Khanate of Persia, the Byzantines and the Latins are over, the situation of the Christians in the region takes a radical turn and the life of Maria Paleologina is back to the hands of fate.

#### 4. The Il-khanate of Persia: from the preponderance of Christianity to the triumph of Islam

In order to seize the power, the brother of Abaqa, the Muslim Tekuder, began to persecute the Christians that until then were protected by Abaqa and Maria.<sup>63</sup> Such was the cruelty with which they were treated thereafter that Arghun, son of Abaqa, did not hesitate to go to Kublai and inform the Great Khan of the Tartars that his uncle had left the path of his ancestors to be a Saracen, with many Tartars

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59. Fiey, Jean Maurice. *Chrétiens Syriaques...*: 38.

60. Winter, Michael; Levanoni, Amalia, eds. *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2004.

61. Tyr, Guillaume de. "Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum (History of deeds done beyond the Sea)". *Fordham University*. September 1998. 14 May 2016 <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/GuillaumeTyr5.asp>>.

62. Boyle, John Andrew, ed. *The History of Iran. Vol. 5. The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1968: 364; Hayton, Prince. "La Fleur des histoires...": 845.

63. Grigor of Akner. "History of the Nation of Archers...": see especially, chapter 16.



following him.<sup>64</sup> But nothing and nobody stopped Tekuder. The Mongol court of Persia is full of tense moments now and Persian sources mention the wedding of Maria Paleologina with her stepson Arghun, whom he had to protect from the lust of his uncle with a purely nominal marriage.<sup>65</sup>

However it is known that for some time Maria was enclosed, but there is also evidence that she was frequently visited by her nephew Baidu Khan in her ordo (nomadic palace) who was very interested in the stories about Christianity. After all, Arghun, the stepson of Maria, after winning back the power from his uncle, rebuilt numerous churches and at the request of the kings of Armenia, Georgia and other Christians ensured that he would recover the Holy Places of Christendom with the help of the Eastern Christians.<sup>66</sup> It was a return to the policy of alliance with the Christians, launched by his father who consolidated it under the influence of Maria Paleologina. For this reason he wrote to Pope Honorius IV in 1285 for common action but without receiving any response.<sup>67</sup> Two years later the Il-khanate of Persia decided to send an embassy to the West with Rabban Sauma that passed through Constantinople where at that time Maria was still living, and was very well received. In Rome it was ignored, the Genoese praised it and in France and England nobody assured them of anything.<sup>68</sup> By then, the Mamluks were preparing to extinguish the last Crusaders states in Syria and in the West no one was doing anything. Finally Arghun, the 'friend of the Christians',<sup>69</sup> disappointed by the lack of interest of the West to preserve the Latin East, did nothing more.

Arghun would be succeeded by his brother Gaykhatu. The latter would in turn be succeeded by his cousin Baidu as Khan in 1295 and although he ruled only five months he showed an excellent disposition toward Christians largely thanks to Despina Khatun whom he knew and respected for many years and thanks to her influence he formed a good opinion of Christians, allowing them to have chapels and sound the bells in their tents during his government. It even seems that he used to say in his inner circle that he was a Christian and as proof he used to wear a cross around his neck, but did not dare to show his preference for the Christians too openly. The Muslims did not appreciate him less for his inclination towards Christians as under his reign they were not underprivileged.<sup>70</sup> The Ilkhan that succeeded him, Ghazzan, the grandson of Abaqa adopted Islam as the official

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64. Hayton, Prince. "La Fleur des histoires...": 846.

65. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 102.

66. Sawma, Rabba. *The Monks of Kublai Khan...*: 42-61, 72-75; Hayton, Prince. "La Fleur des histoires...": 847.

67. Lupprian, Karl-Ernst. *Die Beziehungen der Päpste zu islamischen und mongolischen Herrschern im 13. Jahrhundert anhand ihres Briefwechsels*. Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1981: 229, 239, 246.

68. Sawma, Rabba. *The Monks of Kublai Khan...*: 53-61.

69. Montecroce, Ricoldo of. "Itinerarium", *Peregrinatores medii aevi quatuor*, ed. Johann Christian Moritz Laurent. Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1873: 121.

70. Bar Hebraeus. "Chronicles...": see especially chapter 11.



religion for his state despite having been educated by Despina Khatun.<sup>71</sup> Despite his conversion, the new Mongol ruler remained a friend of the Christians, distrusting Egyptians and Turks, but no more embassies were sent to or received from the West. The West due to its lack of interest not only lost the opportunity to save the last crusader states, but also to evangelize much of the East. And what seemed to be the chance at the time of Despina Khatun, for Persia to turn into a Christian power was lost. Persia eventually became an intolerant Muslim state.<sup>72</sup> 1291 was the end of the crusades and the Mongols considered this event as a final victory of Islam over Christianity and tended to renounce Christianity and all the figures that represented it so well as Despina Khatun.

But back to Maria Paleologina or Despina Khatun and her delicate situation in the Mongol court after the death of her husband and the rise of his brother, the Muslim Tekuder, who saw Maria as part of his rightful inheritance, therefore, she had no doubts to flee to Constantinople the moment she could. Her brother in law, apart from distributing everything he found among his barons, did not hesitate to take and make his all the women of his brother, something that deproved even many of his own people.<sup>73</sup> But Maria escaped in time from his control and return to Constantinople.

## 5. A Mongol Khatun in Constantinople: Maria Paleologina and the founding of Saint Mary of the Mongols

Fifteen years after her departure young Khatun returned to her home in the Byzantine capital to learn of the death of her father Michael VIII and the accession to the throne of her brother Andronicus II Palaeologus. According to some sources Andronicus tried to marry her again with another Mongol khan, something she refused joining a monastery. Actually, her brother married another Maria, his own illegitimate daughter, with Tokhta or Tojta, Khan of the Golden Horde, but not his sister. He received his sister with great honors in the Byzantine capital and he also granted her the title of 'Princess of the Mongols'. She was unmoved by the pageantry of the court in Constantinople and decided to embrace the religious life. Over an old church she restored, she founded the Monastery of Theotokos Panaghiótissa (literally: "All Saint Maria") in 1285, known as Saint Mary of the Mongols (Panagia Mouchliótissa) where she remained as Ktētorissa, 'founder' of it until her death.<sup>74</sup> It

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71. Savory, Roger M. "Relations between the Safavid State and its Non-Muslim Minorities". *Islam and Christian. Muslim Relations*, 14/4 (2013): 435-458.

72. Frothingham, Octavius Brooks. *Oriental Religions and their relation to universal religion. Persia*. London: Trubner and Co., 1885: 526.

73. Polo, Marco. *Viajes*, ed. María de Cardona, Suzanne Dobelmann. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1998: 204-205.

74. Van Millingen, Alexander. *Byzantine Churches of Constantinople*. London: J. Murray, 1912; Nicol, Donald. *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261-1453*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1993;



is known that she donated a valuable fortune to the monastery, endless land rents, product of the dowry with which she came back from Persia and all of the benefits provided by her brother. And the convent she founded was full of chapels, cells, gardens, orchards, vineyards and of a great charm it remained active until 1453. Nowadays still remains a part of the church and an ancient icon of the time Maria Paleologina which depicts the Virgin Mary known as Panagia Mouchliōtissa that for security reasons has been transferred to Greek Patriarchate.<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, an image of Maria Paleologina survived through the centuries preserved in the narthex of the Chora Monastery in the lower right corner of the scene of the Deesis. In that image, Maria appears bearing nun habits and the image comes with an inscription reading her monastic name: Melania.

## 6. Conclusion

It can be said that Maria Paleologina or Despina Khatun, as the Mongols called her, had a great influence over politics and the religious views of the Mongols in Abaqa times.<sup>76</sup> And even after her escape from Persia and her death her influence looms large in the son and grandson of her husband Arghun and Ghazan and his nephew by marriage Baidu.<sup>77</sup> Maria Paleologina was the main protagonist of a period of pacts and alliances against a common enemy, both Christians and Mongols. She was high on the international politics of the time pawn.

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75. Aguado, Francisco A. *Guía de Constantinopla. Un viaje a Estambul en busca de Bizancio*. Aviles: Spania-Bizas, 2007: 460.

76. Khanbaghi, Aptin. *The Fire, the Start and the Cross. Minority religions in Medieval and Early Modern Iran*. London-New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006.

77. Al-Dīn, Rashīd. *The Successors of Genghis Khan...*: 98, 105.

