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**Shedding New Light on the Ties of Mara Branković
 to the Holy Mountain of Athos and the Translation of Relics**

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Mara Branković descended from four South-East European dynasties – the Brankovići, Nemanjići, Kantakuzēnoi and Palaiologoi. She was born between 1417 and 1420, possibly in 1418, and was the third child of the Serbian despot George Branković and of Eirēnē Palaiologina Kantakuzēnē. After 1428 – following her engagement to the Ottoman Sultan Murad II – she emerges from anonymity. In 1433 her father George Branković was still preparing her dowry, but in August / September 1436 the marriage finally took place in Adrianople (Edirne). During her first stay in the Ottoman Empire – between 1436 and 1451 – she got to know her stepson Mehmed II, thus establishing the framework for her later role in South-East Europe. What connected them, cannot be answered with certainty on the basis of the available sources. It seems that the future Ottoman Sultan regarded the Serbian princess as his “surrogate mother” after the death of his physical mother in 1449. Recently, Oliver Jens Schmitt has found evidence for a cooperation between Mehmed, Mara and Skanderbeg in the wake of the latter’s vendetta against Ali, Murad’s most preferred son. After the death of her husband Murad II in 1451 Mara was released from the harem by Mehmed II, which indeed is a remarkable fact, and she returned to Serbia to her father George Branković.

The most important event in Mara’s life occurred in 1457, when she supported her elder brother Grgur against her younger brother Lazar in their struggle for power after the death of her father in 1456 and finally she had to flee to her stepson Mehmed II in the Ottoman Empire. As a widow of a former Sultan she was admitted to the Ottoman court. Mehmed II donated to her landed property in today’s northern Greece (the villages Ezeba / today Dafni, Marabintzion / not localised and Doxompos / today Myrkinos in the valley of the river Strymon), which facilitated her initiatives financially. The sources show numerous interactions between Mara Branković, her stepson Sultan Mehmed and his subjects in the period from 1457 until 1487. Mara Branković died on the Feast of the Elevation of the Cross, on 14 September 1487, in

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Ezeba (Dafni) and was most probably buried in the Monastery of Kosinitza near the valley of the river Strymon.

In the international academia the name of the princess Mara Branković is closely linked to the Holy Mountain of Athos. The written sources attest that the princess supported different monasteries on Mount Athos, especially the monasteries of Hilandar and of Saint Paul, with rich gifts and landed property. One aspect of her donations has regularly been discussed by scholars worldwide, that is her bestowal of holy relics to the monks.

In fact, she united three roles in one, being a protector, a diplomat and a donator. In my outline to come I will focus on two of her roles, namely the diplomat and the donator. As a diplomat Mara Branković used the neutral ground of the Holy Mountain of Athos as a meeting point for her emissaries and the Venetian Republic. In 1470 war was waging between the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire, which had begun in 1463 and should last until 1479. After conquering the island of Negroponte (Euboea) on 12 July 1470, Mehmed II was eager to initiate negotiations with Venice, recognising the menace emerging in the person of Uzun Hasan in the East and the diplomatic activities by Pope Paul II in the West. According to the Venetian annals written by the Senator Domenico Malipiero (1428–1515) this very initiative was fostered by Mara Branković, Mehmed's stepmother:

[...] *La maregna del Signor Turco, sorella [sic!] del Despoto Zorzi de Servia* [i. e. George Branković], *se offerisse de intrometterse per la conclusion della pace, et esorta che se manda Ambassador alla Porta* [...]

Two emissaries sent by Mara and her sister Katarina arrived in Venice in the beginning of October 1470. They reported to the Venetians on Mehmed's offer to send their own envoys to his Empire in order to conduct peace negotiations. Thus, the Republic nominated Francesco Capello and Niccolò Cocco giving to them instructions in November 1470. The aim of the negotiations was to keep the *status quo*, meaning to accept the loss of the island of Negroponte (Euboea).

Capello and Cocco travelled to Corfu, continued their journey to Crete and then sailed on a ship to Mara Branković. Together with her and her sister they travelled to Constantinople:

[...] *li soy Oratori erano zonti ala porta del Turcho in Constantinopoli, con quelle done, cioe la matregna del turcho et ta sorela contesa de Cizli, che ambe due funo figle del Despoto de Servia, et per mezo de esse Done la Signoria sie mossa a mandar soy Oratori al turcho* [...]

They arrived in Constantinople on 12 March 1471, where Mara and her sister Katarina handed over their presents to the Ottoman Sultan, which were given to them by Venice. No result could be achieved, because the Ottoman side demanded the island of Lemnos and the payment of a tribute of 100,000 Venetian ducats.

In the beginning of 1472 Mara and her sister sent another envoy called Theodore to Venice asking the Republic to send an ambassador to Ezeba (Dafni). Hence, Marco Aurelio was elected by the Venetian authorities. It was in May 1472 that Aurelio reached Corfu. Things did not evolve at all, because Venice had hoped to gain Uzun Hasan's support. Finally, the Republic decided not to send its ambassadors to Constantinople.

Until the autumn of 1474 Mara's name does not appear in the respective Venetian sources, namely the *Deliberazioni Senato Secreta*. In the meantime, Uzun Hasan had been defeated by Mehmed II in August 1473, thus smashing Venetian hopes for relief. In September 1474 the Republic contacted a certain Nikašin, who was *molto familiar de la dicta Madona Amirissa, per esser lui habitante in caxa del despoti de servia, et uso a spesso andar da quella madona* and who happened to be in Venice. The Senate urged him to speak with Mara and to report to her on their will for peace.

Venice wanted Nikašin to travel to Mara and to find out to what extent authorisation had been given to her by Mehmed II to conduct negotiations. Moreover, the Republic was not willing to await Nikašin's return. Instead, it was decided to send a Venetian envoy to the Ottoman Empire, who should meet Nikašin on the Holy Mountain of Athos in order to hear Mehmed's conditions:

[...] *Che al Ambassador da esser mandato per la materia de la pace a monte Sancto sia commesso questo effecto et sosstantia. Che zonto a monte Sancto et abochatosse cum Nichassino secondo lordine dato fazi ogni possibel experientia de praticar et concluder la pace li cum madona Amirissa o, cum chi dal Signor turcho havesse tal facultai secondo come qui de soto se dira: [...]*

It is exactly at this point that we are able to discern the Holy Mountain of Athos as contact zone between Mara Branković, Venice and the Ottoman Empire for the first time in the course of the described negotiations. Nikašin left Venice on 1 October 1474 and reached Dubrovnik on 12 October 1474. In the meantime, Geronimo Zorzi was chosen as envoy to meet Mara as secretly as possible:

[...] *è stà preso de far elettion per Colegio de un Nobile [...] che debba andar per la più secreta via che 'l poderà, a trovar la maregna del Turco [...]*

Zorzi had to travel via Modon on the Peloponnesus to the Holy Mountain of Athos, to encounter Nikašin there and then to meet a person – Mara or somebody else, who had the authorisation to accomplish a peace treaty on the basis of *uti possidetis*:

[...] *Chel sia facto Commission a quello che die andar a monte Sancto per ordene de quaesto conseio in quaestaforma. Tu anderai a monte Sancto dove trovato Nichasim mandato a quella Illustrissima amerissa del Signor turcho, secondo lordene de la littera sua facta scriver a corphu per zorzi lascari: et intexo da lui de mente et ordene daquella Illustrissima Madona la mente del Signor turcho esser ben disposta de vignir a bona pace [...]*

Nikašin and Zorzi missed each other. That is why the latter was requested by his authorities to travel to Mara and to ask her to accompany him to Constantinople. Zorzi arrived in Constantinople on 27 March 1475, but peace negotiations failed due to Ottoman territorial claims. Hence, the Republic of Venice gave order to Zorzi to return to Corfu and decided to continue the war. In vain, Mara tried to convince the Venetians to resume the negotiations. Starting with the year 1476 she definitely disappears in the records of the *Deliberazioni Senato Secreta*. It seems that she had decided to retire from the ungrateful task of being a mediator and so she was replaced by Leonardo III Tocco in the course of the same year.

The value of the *Deliberazioni Senato Secreta* cannot be overestimated in this respect. Owing to the late Ivan Božić the scholarly community became aware of the

archive material concerning Mara Branković in the *Archivio di Stato di Venezia* in the 1970s. He succeeded in finding all the relevant parts in the books of the *Deliberazioni Senato Secreta* and, what is more, he published summaries of them in Serbian language. About thirty years later, I had the opportunity to expand his scholarly work by extracting the entire evidence on Mara from the *Deliberazioni Senato Secreta*. All relevant parts were edited for the first time in my monograph on the princess Mara Branković. In the meantime, the *Deliberazioni Senato Secreta* of the *Archivio di Stato di Venezia* from the 14th until the 16th century have been made accessible on-line as scanned images.

This group of sources shows clearly that the Holy Mountain of Athos did not serve only as a centre of prayer and monasticism, but also as a venue of diplomatic contacts between East and West, which we cannot comprehend entirely and in detail for the time being. I hope that further archive material deriving from Venice will shed additional light on this issue, since it could prove to be a new cornerstone in the rich history of the Holy Mountain of Athos.

Let us now take a closer look at Mara as a donator of holy relics. According to the written sources her first contact with relics seems to have occurred, when the relics of Saint Luke the Evangelist arrived on 12 January 1453 in Smederevo, then the capital of the Serbian despotate.

Saint Luke the Evangelist was a physician and painter, who died in Achaia about 63 AD. Initially his holy relics were to be found in the town of Thebes in today's central Greece. From there they were translated in 357 by Saint Artemios during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Constantius II to the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. It remains unclear, when and how the relics of Saint Luke were taken from the Byzantine capital and transferred via Santa Maura (that is the island of Lefkada in the Ionian Sea) to the town of Rogoi, which lies 12 km to the west of Arta in Epirus. Since the Tocco took over control in Rogoi in October 1416, it is quite probable that the relics of Saint Luke were brought to this town between 1416 and 1436, when the Italian humanist Cyriac of Ancona paid his first reverence to the Saint.

Rogoi was most probably conquered by the Ottomans in 1449. The Serbian despot George Branković decided not to leave the holy relics in the hands of the Ottomans and therefore expressed his wish to buy them (*el qual castello [Rogoi] da poi fò prexo per li Turchi. El detto corpo rimaxe in man de Turchi, e psentando el suo avo despote Zorzi esser quella reliquia in mano de Turchi el mandò a comprar*).

The awareness of the danger posed by the Ottoman expansion led the Serbian despot George Branković to seek heavenly protection and support for his country and his people, which he found in the relics of Saint Luke the Evangelist. After the Protos of Mount Athos (*lo proth de monte sancto*) had confirmed their genuineness to the Serbian despot, he acquired the relics at the price of 30,000 Venetian ducats. They were transferred from Rogoi to the Serbian despotate, arrived in Smederevo in January 1453 and were solemnly welcomed by the despot himself, his wife and his children.

The first-born daughter of the despot, Mara Branković, made a cloak of silk embroidered with gold for the Saint's body. A description of the translation of the relics from Rogoi to Smederevo is provided by two manuscripts in Old Church Slavonic from the third quarter of the 15th century. The first manuscript was kept in the Serbian monastery of Vrdnik in the 19th century and is today manuscript no. 165 of the Library of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate in Belgrade, while the second manuscript was sold to Paris in the course of the 19th century and is now Codex slave 46 of the Bibliothèque Nationale. Both include an eyewitness account of the arrival of the relics of Saint Luke the Evangelist in Smederevo, which was most probably composed between 1453 and 1458. In a solemn procession the relics were carried around the walls of the city of Smederevo and were finally treasured in the Metropolitan church of the Annunciation.

When the George Branković died well advanced in years in Smederevo on 24 December 1456, his youngest son Lazar became his successor and ruled until January 1458.

In March or April 1459 Mara Branković-Palaiologina, Lazar's daughter, was married to Steven Tomašević, the son of the king of Bosnia Steven Tomaš. Thus, Steven Tomašević was the Bosnian crown prince and the Serbian despot at the same time. He took control of the fortress of Smederevo, but his reign was doomed to be only of short duration. In the summer of 1459 the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II waged war against the Serbian despotate, the territorial remains of which he subdued quickly. The fortress of Smederevo itself surrendered on 20 June 1459 without a fight, which brought the existence of the medieval Serbian state to an end.

Steven Tomašević, Mara Branković-Palaiologina and their court fled from Smederevo to Bosnia, where they settled for a short time in the fortress of Teočak, 46 km to the north-west of Zvornik. Together with them they were carrying the relics of Saint Luke the Evangelist. From Teočak the relics of Saint Luke were translated to the church of Saint Catherine in Jajce, after 1463 to Dalmatia and from there to the church of San Giobbe in Venice.

Evidence dated to the year 1469/70 shows clearly that Mara and her sister Katarina had access to holy relics in the Ottoman Empire. On 11 March 1469 Katarina contacted the Republic of Venice in order to offer the Venetians relics for sale, which included a robe of Jesus Christ (*Proposuit nostro dominio Magnifica Comitissa Cilie materiam vestis domini nostri Iesu Christi et certarum aliarum setarum reliquiarum praeterito recuperandarum de manibus turci*).

In the second half of the year 1470 the two above-mentioned Venetian ambassadors stayed at Mara's court and asked for the price of the garment. However, no agreement could be reached, and so this valuable relic remained in Mara's possession, the fate of which is not known to us.

Last but not least an oral tradition from the beginning of the 20th century reports how Mara Branković travelled to the monastery of Saint Paul by ship in 1470. With her she was carrying the gifts of the three Kings of the East, which they had offered to the newborn Jesus Christ. After leaving the ship and while heading towards the monastery, she was stopped by the voice of the Mother of God urging

her to return and to leave the Holy Mountain, to which she obeyed after handing over her gifts to the monks approaching her. To commemorate this event, the monks built a small chapel at this very place of their encounter. Mara returned to the ship and continued her journey to Ezeba (Dafni).

The authenticity of this story is much disputed amongst scholars, but in my opinion some of the evidence could speak for its accuracy. Firstly, the relics of the gifts of the three Kings of the East are still kept in the monastery of Saint Paul.

The second argument in favour of the story is the existence of the chapel in commemoration of the translation of the relics to the monks of the above-mentioned monastery. The original building was destroyed by a torrent at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1928 the chapel was re-erected and exists until today.

Thirdly, we have witnessed on the basis of the above-mentioned Venetian sources that Mara Banković was not exclusively confined to her landed property in Ezeba (Dafni). Her diplomatic efforts in the 1470s led her to Constantinople, and that is why it cannot be excluded that she had access to relics kept in the Sultan's palace or in the Orthodox churches and monasteries in the Ottoman capital. It is by no means a coincidence that the story related to the monastery of Saint Paul is dated to the year 1470 according to the oral tradition. Diplomacy and the translation of relics seem to interact in a triangle between Ezeba (Dafni), the Holy Mountain of Athos and Constantinople.

The strongest counter-argument is without doubt the fact that access to the Holy Mountain of Athos was and still is denied to women. However, throughout history there have been exceptions to this rule: When, for example, the Serbian ruler Stefan Uroš IV Dušan was fleeing from the plague and therefore spent the period from August 1347 until April 1348 on the Holy Mountain, he was accompanied by his wife Jelena and his son Stefan Uroš V. On this occasion Jelena even visited the monastery of Hilandar.

Hints by the scholars Ruža Ćuk and Vančo Boškov added further to the confusion concerning the alleged visit of Mara Branković to Saint Paul. Both of them claimed that an unpublished written Ottoman permission exists in the archives of this monastery, which was issued to Mara in order to enable her to land on Mount Athos and visit the monasteries of Saint Paul, Hilandar and Zografu. Ćuk based her statement on the then unpublished manuscript of Boškov, which after its publication did no longer contain this very passage on the existence of the Ottoman permission. Aleksandar Fotić has correctly observed that the story of Mara's visit on the Holy Mountain Athos cannot be confirmed on the basis of the available written sources. Only the emergence of the permission, the existence of which is uncertain, would finally resolve the ongoing discussion among scholars. From my viewpoint the characterisation of this event as mere legend does not uphold, because there exists strong evidence, which points towards the accuracy of this story.

By combining different layers of sources I ventured to trace and to reconstruct the complex picture of a South-East European princess in times of transition, whose focal point on the Holy Mountain of Athos seems to have been even more stronger than we might have initially thought.