

Helen Nemanjić (1250–1314)

Subjects: Art

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Queen Helen Nemanjić (?–Brnjaci near Zubin Potok, February 8, 1314) was a Serbian medieval queen and consort of King Stefan Uroš I (r. 1243–1276), the fifth ruler of the Serbian Nemanide dynasty. She was the mother of the kings Stefan Dragutin and Stefan Uroš II Milutin. Today, she is known as Helen of Anjou (Jelena Anžuska in Serbian) although her real name was most probably Heleni Angelina (Ελένη Αγγελίνα). She was the founder of the Serbian Orthodox monastery of Gradac as well as four Franciscan abbeys in Kotor, Bar, Ulcinj, and Shkodër. Together with her sons, Kings Stefan Dragutin and Stefan Uroš II Milutin she helped renovation of Benedictine abbey of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus near Shkodër on Boyana river in present-day Albania. After the death of her husband, she ruled Zeta and Travunija until 1306. She was known for her religious tolerance and charitable and educational endeavors. She was elevated to sainthood by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Along with Empress Helen, the wife of Serbian Emperor Stefan Uroš IV Dušan, Queen Helen was the most frequently painted woman of Serbian medieval art. Six of her portraits can be found in the monumental painting ensembles of the Serbian medieval monasteries of Sopoćani, Gradac, Arilje, Đurđevi Stupovi (Pillars of St. George), and Gračanica, as well as on two icons and one seal. Queen Helen is also the only female Serbian medieval ruler whose vita was included in the famous collection of the “Lives of Serbian Kings and Archbishops” by Archbishop Danilo II, a prominent church leader, warrior, and writer.

Keywords: Helen of Anjou ; Nemanide dynasty ; Sopoćani Monastery ; Gradac Monastery ; Queen Helen's seal ; Vatican icon ; Gračanica Monastery.

Queen Helen is popularly known as Helen of Anjou. This identification is based on the statement of her biographer, Archbishop Danilo II, who, as her contemporary, interlocutor, and admirer, writes that Helen was of French origin. Queen Helen was indeed, in the charters of Charles I and Charles II of Anjou, kings of Sicily and Naples, called a *dear cousin—consanguinea nostra carissima, cognata nostra, affinis nostra carissima* ^[1] (p. 46). There is proof that Helen's sister Maria was married to Anselm de Keu (in some documents also spelled as de Chau), Captain General of Charles I of Anjou in Albania. However, based on the latest research, Helen's origins are connected with the French and Hungarian nobility in Slavonia and Srem. In 1984, Gordon McDaniel made a very convincing case that Helen and Maria were daughters of the Hungarian nobleman, ruler of Srem and Count of Kovin, John Angelos (Ἰωάννης Ἄγγελος) also known as Good John (Καλοῖωάννης), the son of the Byzantine Emperor Isaac II and the French Matildis Vianden of Posaga (Požega), granddaughter of Peter II Courtenay, the Latin ruler of Constantinople ^[2] (p. 43). This assumption is still valid today and according to the most recent research, it reflects the very complex political relations between Byzantium, Hungary, and Serbia around the mid-13th century ^[2] (p. 53).

Princess Heleni Angelina married the Serbian king Stefan Uroš I Nemanjić (r. 1243–1276) probably in mid-1250. They had three children: two sons, subsequently kings, Stefan Uroš Dragutin (r. 1276–1282) and Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282–1321), and one daughter, Brnj(a)ča (Berenice). Recently, during the excavation of the Church of the Holy Virgin in the Studenica Monastery, the mausoleum of the first generations of the Nemanide family, an intriguing yet still not completely explained tombstone—built into the floor alongside the tomb of St. Symeon (Stefan Nemanja)—was found. Its inscription reads: +СТѢФАНЪ СИНЪКРАЛІАУРОША УНОУКЪСТГОСИМОНАМНАХА ИПРАУНОУКЪСТГО СИМЕѠНА [+Stefan, son of King Uroš, grandson of Saint Simon the Monk (Stefan the First-crowned), great-grandson of Saint Symeon]. The bones of the two-year-old boy were found in the grave below the tombstone. Because of the inscription, the location of the tomb, and the fact that the buried person bore the name Stefan, it is assumed that the mentioned person was the first child of Queen Helen and King Uroš I ^[3] (p. 94). If this is to be accepted, Prince Stefan was born and passed away a few years before the birth of his brother Stefan Dragutin (born around 1250) ^[4] (p. 11).

In 1276, a conflict broke out between Queen Helen's husband Uroš I and their eldest son Stefan Uroš Dragutin. King Uroš I abdicated, and less than two years later died in Hum. He was buried in his endowment, the Sopoćani Monastery. During the reign of her sons, Stefan Uroš Dragutin (r. 1276–1282) and Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282–1321) Queen Helen maintained provincial administration in the Zeta and Travunija until 1306 ^[5] (p. 357). Travunija (Latin Tribunia) was a South Slavic medieval principality that was part of medieval Serbia (850–1355). Travunija stretched from the city of Dubrovnik to

the Bay of Kotor. It bordered Zahumlje in the northwest and Duklja in the southeast. During the second part of the 12th century, Travunija was fully incorporated into the united Serbian medieval states (Raška and Zeta) under the rule of the Nemanide dynasty. From that time on Travunija existed as a semi-separate principality within the Serbian lands. Under the same name, sometimes also called the *Trebigne of the Ragusans*, this region belonged to the Serbian medieval kingdom, later empire, until 1355.

In Zeta (present-day Montenegro) and Travunija, Queen Helen had her own army and chancellery. She proved to be a very successful administrator, governing regions with a mixed Serbian Orthodox and Roman Catholic population. She helped renovation of four Franciscan abbeys in Kotor, Bar, Ulcinj, and Shkodër (present-day Albania). Together with her sons, Kings Dragutin and Milutin, she also helped the renovation of the Benedictine abbey of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus on Boyana river. Today, the church is almost destroyed, but the inscription, written in Latin and kept today at the Historical Museum in Shkodër, testifies to their ktetorship. Queen Helen became a nun around 1295 in the Church of St. Nicholas in Shkodër. She died at her court in Brnjaci on 8 February 1314. She was canonized by the Serbian Orthodox Church three years later. Even though her feast day is still celebrated on November 12 (October 30), some authors are questioning her conversion to Orthodoxy ^[6] (pp. 104–106).

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