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Zoe Porphyrogenita and the Varangians

Zoe Porfirogenetka i Waregowie

Streszczenie

Głównym celem tego artykułu jest przedstawienie relacji cesarzowej Zoe Porfirogenetki (978–1050) ze światem Waregów – z punktu widzenia źródeł bizantyńskich i skandynawskich. Zoe była jedną ze spadkobierczyń dynastii macedońskiej, która odcisnęła swoje piętno na historii Bizancjum w IX-XI w. Najczęściej jej związki ze Skandynawią przedstawiane są w korelacji z bytnością Haralda Hardrada, króla Norwegii w Cesarstwie Bizantyńskim. Ten punkt widzenia zawdzięczamy głównie sagom, które nie są tak wiarygodne jak materiały pisane przez bizantyńskich autorów z XI wieku, a zwłaszcza: Michała Psellosa, Michała Attaliatesa, Jana Skylitzesa – oraz Kekaumenosa. Relacje tych autorów zostały skonfrontowane z informacjami o Zoe z sag, aby ukazać jej rolę w budowaniu legendy żądnej władzy cesarzowej na północnych rubieżach Europy.

Abstract

The main aim of the article is to present the relations of Empress Zoe Porphyrogenita (978–1050) with the world of Varangians, from the point of view of Byzantine and Scandinavian sources. Zoe was one of the heirs of the Macedonian dynasty, which left its mark on the history of Byzantium in the 9th-11th centuries. Her connections with Scandinavia are mostly presented in correlation with Harald Hardrada, king of Norway's sojourns in the Byzantine Empire.

We mainly owe this point of view to the sagas, which are not as credible as the materials written by Byzantine authors from the 11th century, in particular: Michaels Psellos, Michaels Attaliates, John Skylitzes, and Kekaumenos. The accounts of these authors were confronted with information about Zoe from the sagas, in order to present her role in building the legend of a power-hungry empress in the northern frontiers of Europe.

Słowa kluczowe: Cesarzowa Zoe, Norwegia, Bizancjum, Harald Hardrada, Waregowie

Keywords: Empress Zoe, Norway, Byzantium, Harald Hardrada, Varangians

The main aim of this paper is to present the relations of Empress Zoe Porphyrogenita (978-1050) during her lifetime with the world of Varangians-Vikings, from the point of view of Byzantine and Scandinavian sources. Zoe was one of the heirs of the Macedonian dynasty, which left its mark on the history of Byzantium in the IX-XI centuries. In the context of her connections with Scandinavia, this basilisa is mostly associated with Harald Hardrada, king of Norway. We mainly owe this point of view to the sagas, which are not as credible as the materials written by Byzantine authors from the 11th century, especially: The Chronography of Michaels Psellos, The Histories of Michaels Attaliates and John Skylitzes, and finally Logos Nouthetetikos, or Oration of Admonition to an Emperor written by Kekaumenos. The accounts of these authors that will be confronted with the data about Zoe from the sagas¹. However, before we move further on, it is necessary to briefly present the person of Empress Zoe and her way to imperial power.

Zoe was the child of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VIII (976-1028) and Helena, daughter of Alypius². Her father co-ruled with his older brother Basil II (976-1025), one of the most eminent emperors and representatives of the Macedonian dynasty. Most of Zoe's youth ran under the rule of her influen-

¹ The inspiration for this work is the paper by Lars Lönnroth who previously dealt with the image of Zoe in the Old Norse tradition. L. Lönnroth, *The Man-Eating Mama of Miklagard: Empress Zoe in Old Norse Saga Tradition*, [in:] *Kairos: Studies in Art History and Literature in Honour of Professor Gunilla Åkerström-Hougen*, ed. E. Piltz, P. Åström, Jonsered 1998, p. 37–49.

² Michael Psellos, *Chronographie (976-1077)*, ed. E. Renauld, vol. I, Paris 1928, II 4, p. 27.

tial uncle, where she was a pawn in his plans. At the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries, as a result of a diplomatic mission led by Arnulf, archbishop of Milan, Zoe was sent as a wife for the young German ruler, Otto III (980-1002). She even went to Italy together with the above-mentioned archbishops, where she learned in Bari that her fiancée had died, and then returned to Constantinople³. It was the first and, in fact, the only consent for her marriage, which Basil II expressed because it was him and not her father, Constantine, who was the head of the family. Fearing the possible claims of the Byzantine aristocracy in case one of its representatives could marry Zoe or one of her sisters, Basil locked them in a kind of golden cage, isolating them from politics for many years. Zoe and her sisters were the only descendants of the great Macedonian dynasty because their uncle never married. That is why, when Constantine took over independent power, he decided to have his over forty-year-old daughter married to maintain the unity of the state. When the proposal was made by another German Emperor, Conrad II, that Zoe should marry his successor Henry, her father considered this until he was informed that the bridegroom was ten years old and the negotiations were discontinued. Therefore, he decided to choose for her a partner from the Byzantine aristocracy. Zoe wanted to marry Constantine Dalassenos, the former dux of Antioch, but her father did not agree to such an act of wedlock, oblivious to this military man, to marital unhappiness of his daughter. The Emperor chose her as the husband Romanos Argyros, the prefect of the city of Constantinople, whom he even divorced with his previous wife for this purpose. At his deathbed, Constantine VIII deluded himself that he was leaving Byzantium in good hands.⁴

At first, Zoe's marriage with her husband was going normally, but it was spoiled by the inability of the Empress to become pregnant, which is why her husband moved away from her, focusing his attention mainly on politics⁵. Zoe hated also her sister Theodora. She immediately put her under control under

³ J. Strzelczyk, *Otton III*, Wrocław 2009, p.180-181.

⁴ Psellos, t. I, II 10, p. 30-31; *Histoire de Yahya ibn Sa'id d'Antioche*, ed. I. Kratchkovsky et alii, *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol. 47.4 (n. 212), 1997, p. 488; Ioannis Skylitzae *Synopsis Historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn, Berlin-New York 1973, p. 374; *Lupi Protospatarii annales*, G. H. Pertz, MGH SS 5, Hannover 1844, p. 57; Ioannis Zonarae *Epitome Historiarum libri XIII-XVIII*, ed. T. Buttner-Wobst, Leipzig 1897, XVII 10, 15-22, p. 572-573; Constantini Manassis *Breviarium chronicum*, ed. O. Lampsidis, vol. I, Athens 1996, 5965-5968, p. 322.

⁵ Psellos, vol. I, III 5-6, p. 34-35 and IV 1-2, p. 53-54.

of new basilisa people after taking power, and later accused her of conspiracy against the Emperor and also locked her in a monastery in Petron⁶. One of the eunuchs, John Orphanotrophos, helped Zoe to get rid of her sister and her alleged allies. In the surroundings of the empress, John placed his brother Michael, with whom the empress made an affair⁷. This feeling was so strong that at the beginning of 1034 she decided to kill her first husband, who was drowned in a bath, and the same day, due to a bribe of 50 pounds of gold handed over to Alexios I, Patriarch of Constantinople, Zoe married and crowned her lover Michael as the Emperor⁸. As the new ruler, Michael IV rightly feared that he could end up in a similar way to his predecessor Romanos because Zoe was unpredictable. That is why, together with his brother John, he locked her in the palace and removed her from politics, surrounding her with people who followed every step of the empress⁹. Zoe blamed John for the whole situation, and she formed an unsuccessful conspiracy to poison him¹⁰. The news reached the emperor, increasing his dislike for his wife. There was nothing left of the great feeling that this pair had had earlier.

When Michael IV was dying in 1041, he did not even allow Zoe to say goodbye to him and he rejected her request to see him. In the meantime, John secured the interests of his family by forcing Zoe to adopt his and Michael's nephew, his namesake, Michael V, who became his successor¹¹. The new ruler promised to respect the position of Zoe, but after his coronation, he decided to get rid of her from the capital and sent her on a trusted warship to the islands of Prinkipios, located in the Sea of Marmara. Then he announced it in public¹².

⁶ Skylitzes, 9, p. 384-385; Zonaras, XVII 12, 6, p. 579.

⁷ Skylitzes, 17, p. 390; Manasses, 5986-5991, p. 323; Zonaras, XVII 13,10, p. 582.

⁸ Skylitzes, 17, p. 391; Psellos, vol. I, III 26, p. 50-51; Zonaras, XVII 13, 27, p. 585 and XVII 14, 4, p. 585-586; Michael Glycas, *Annales*, ed. I. Bekker, Bonn 1836, p. 585; S. Wierzbiński, *Dopóki śmierć nas nie rozłączy – wybrane postawy małżonków ze świata Lewantu w okresie X–XI wieku*, „Łódzkie Studia Teologiczne” 2017, vol. 26/1, p. 118-119; M. V. Anastos, *The Coronation of Emperor Michael IV in 1034 by Empress Zoe and Its Significance*, [in:] *To Ellenikon. Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis Jr.*, vol. I, ed. J. S. Langdon et alii, New York 1993, p. 23-43.

⁹ Skylitzes, 2, p. 392; Psellos, vol. I, IV 16, p. 61-62.

¹⁰ Skylitzes, 15, p. 403; Zonaras, XVII 15, 32, p. 595.

¹¹ Skylitzes, 1, p. 416-417; Psellos, vol. I, IV 22-23, p. 66-67; Michael Attaliates, *The History*, ed. and transl. A. Kaldellis, D. Krallis, London 2012, V, p. 28-30.

¹² Skylitzes, 1, p. 418; Psellos, vol. I, V 17-23, p. 96-100; Manasses, 6065-6091, p. 327-328;

On this news, in April 1042 an uprising broke out in Constantinople, which overthrew the new emperor, smashing his guards and storming the palace. Over three thousand people were killed in bloody clashes, while Michael V himself fled to the monastery in Stoudios, from where he was dragged and blinded¹³. The uprising also brought to power, the hated sister of the Empress, Theodora, whom the crowd proclaimed as co-empress along with Zoe's returning from exile¹⁴.

Zoe decided to get married again. Her first candidate was again Constantine Dalassenos, but it did not work¹⁵. The second candidate was katepan Constantine Artoklines, her other secret lover, but before the plan was put into effect, his wife, with the help of poison, deprived him of life¹⁶. With the loss of her last lover, Zoe recalled from exile one of her previous favourites, Constantine Monomachos, who became her new husband¹⁷. The pair were married on 11 June 1042, but Monomachos brought his lover, Maria Sklerina into the palace, which he made almost equal to his wife and her sister, which scandalized and led to another uprising of a mob of Byzantine capital in 1044¹⁸. During Monomachos' reign, Zoe handed over to him all imperial power and responsibility. Zoe died on 11 June 1050 in the age of 72, and her last husband survived her by five years¹⁹.

This is what Zoe's life looked like in a nutshell. So what do Byzantine sources from that era say about her relations to the Varangians? The first of the authors, Michael Attaliates, does not pay special attention to the person of Empress Zoe and her policy. In the aspect of action against Emperor Michael V, he even denies the presence of Zoe, devoting the main attention to Theodora, who, after being pulled out of the monastery by the people of the capital, was to play a decisive role in the rebellion. It was she who, in the author's opinion, issued the order

Glycas, p. 590; Attaliates, IV, 16-20; Zonaras, XVII 19, 2-3, p. 609.

¹³ Skylitzes, 1, p. 419-420, 2, p. 420-421; Psellos, vol. I, V, 27-33, p.103-106 and V 38-49, p. 106-115; Lupus, p. 58; Zonaras, XVII 19, 13, p. 610.

¹⁴ Skylitzes, 2, p. 420-421; Psellos, vol. I, V, 34-37, p. 106-107; Attaliates, V, p. 28-30.

¹⁵ Psellos, vol. I, VI 12, p. 122-123.

¹⁶ Skylitzes, 1, p. 422-423; Psellos, vol. I, VI 12, p. 122-123; Glycas, p. 593.

¹⁷ Skylitzes, 1, p. 422-423; Psellos, vol. I, VI 14-21, p.124-127; Attaliates, V, p. 28-30; Glycas, p. 593; Zonaras, XVII 20, 18, p. 616.

¹⁸ Psellos, vol. I, VI 58-68, p.145-150; Glycas, p. 596; Skylitzaes, p. 434.

¹⁹ Psellos, vol. II, VI, 160, p. 50; Zonaras, XVII 28, 1-3, p. 647-648; Skylitzes, p. 437; Glycas, p. 599; Lupus, p. 59; S. Wierzbiński, *Dopóki...*, p. 119.

to blind the adopted son of her sister²⁰. However, he further informs that Zoe is responsible for the mutilation of her adopted son, who was taken out of the monastery at Studios²¹. According to Attaliates, also Theodora later agreed to marry Zoe to Monomachos²². Therefore in his work, we have no mention of the presence of Varangians in the Empress Zoe's surroundings.

Also in the works of the next author, Kekaumenos, we will not find any mention of Zoe's relationship with the Scandinavians. It is strange, because to Harald Hardrada this author devotes a lot of space, describing a detailed account of his military service in Byzantium, including his presence in the courts of two emperors, Michael IV and his nephew Michael V²³. This paragraph of Kekaumenos work is even stranger, because he related that Harald had a court title of manglabites, which the future king of Norway received for his services in Sicily. Thanks to that title, Hardrada was in the special detachment of the imperial bodyguard. Harald later participated in the years 1040-1041 in the suppression of Piotr Deljan's uprising in Bulgaria, for which he received the title spatharocandidatos from Michael V²⁴. So Hardrada must have known most of the imperial courtiers, as well as Empress Zoe himself. Why did Kekaumenos skip the thread of Hardrada's relationship with the imperial family? It is difficult to give an unambiguous answer to this question, because Kekaumenos himself mentions the escape of Harold from Constantinople, saying also that later he was kind to the Romans and did not get too proud of the titles he gained in their service²⁵.

Another of the authors, John Skylitzes, is as enigmatic as the two previous ones in showing the attitude of Empress Zoe to the Varangians. While he provides us with a lot of detailed information about Zoe's life, her relationships with her husbands and sister Theodora, we are once again encountering a wall in the form of missing data regarding her relationship with the Varangians. Sky-

²⁰ Attaliates, V, 8-9, p. 24-28.

²¹ Attaliates, 8-9, p. 26-28.

²² Attaliates, V, 1, p. 28-31.

²³ Kekavmen, *Sovety i rasskazy*, ed. G. G. Litavrin, Sankt-Peterburg 2003, § 81, p. 296-301.

²⁴ *Ibidem*; S. Blöndal, B. S. Benedikz, *The Varangians of Byzantium*, Cambridge 1981, p. 62; M. Lubik, *Zasłużony najemnik w konstantynopolitańskim więzieniu: zagadkowa rola Haraldra Hardrada w rewolucji 1042 roku*, „In Gremium: studia nad historią, kulturą i polityką” 2013, vol. 7, p. 42.

²⁵ Kekavmen, § 81, p. 301; S. Blöndal, B. S. Benedikz, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

litzes knew activities of these Scandinavian mercenaries, and to some extent he admired them. He proved it in the context of the Varangians and he had written in his work an interesting story related to them:

In that year something else worthy of note took place. There were some Varangians dispersed in the Thrakesion theme for the winter. One of them coming across a woman of the region in the wilderness put the quality of her virtue to the test. When persuasion failed he resorted to violence, but she seized his Persian-type short sword, struck him in the heart and promptly killed him. When the deed became known in the surrounding area, the Varangians held an assembly and crowned the woman, presenting her with all the possessions of her violator, whom they threw aside, unburied, according to the law concerning assassins, unburied, according to the law concerning assassins²⁶.

The most important Byzantine author who somehow can illuminate the relationship between Zoe and Varangians is Michael Psellos. The first data about it, we found in chapter 25 of his book, when he describes the rise against Michael V. The uprising began when he sent Zoe out from the capital. This author suggests that after this decision against emperor were also his allies, whose Byzantine rulers always kept close to them. Those allies were Scythians from the Taurus Mountains, and they were always ready to sacrifice their lives for the Empress²⁷. In the next paragraph, Psellos mentions that in the crowd who moved against the emperor, there were Varangian wielding axes with one blade, called *romphaia* in Greek²⁸. Later when Zoe and Theodora embrace independent power after the overthrow of Michael V, there are guards around them who have kept their axes on their right shoulder²⁹. But in the Psellos' description of the last military expedition of Rus from the year 1043 against Constantinople, there is also no thread connecting them with Zoe. In Psellos' opinion, Zoe was

²⁶ Skylitzes, 4, p. 394. This translation from John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057*, ed. and transl. J. Wortley, Cambridge 2010, p. 372.

²⁷ Psellos, vol. I, V 25, p. 101-102; Later scholars see this act as a division in the Guard because the Scandinavians supported Zoe, while the Russians serving in the same formation were to plead for her adoptive son. S. Blöndal, B. S. Benedikz, *op. cit.*, p. 89-90; S. Wierzbński, *Dopóki...*, p. 119.

²⁸ Psellos, vol. I, V, 27, p. 103; S. Blöndal, B. S. Benedikz, *op. cit.*, p. 90; M. Lubik, *Zastużony...*, p. 45.

²⁹ Psellos, vol. I, VI 3, p. 118.

the most generous of all women, lightly distributing gold, while at the same time she enjoys the punishment of depriving her opponents of their eyes³⁰. Nor did she deal with the governance of the Empire and the administration of the state, but she paid a lot of attention to sacrifice to God, made from very expensive products imported into Byzantium from India and Egypt³¹. We can wonder why Michael Psellos, who knew Zoe personally and served at her court during the reign of Michael IV and his nephew, does not devote much space to Varangians in his description of the reign of this empress? Why are the other authors cited above also silent? We can search for answers in sagas.

Before we look for the answer to these questions, we must stop for a moment and go to a brief presentation of Zoe in the sagas and other historical sources associated with King of Norway, Harald Hardrada. Authors of chronicles from Northern Europe related to us that Hardrada found himself in prison at the beginning of the reign of Emperor Michael V. Wilhelm from Malsbury sees in this action a penalty for the rape that the future king of Norway was to allow, while Saxo Grammaticus would rather assign the penalty to murder (*A cuius rege homicidii crimine damnatus domestico draconi lacerandus obiectari praecipitur; nihil enim eius morsu ad necandos reos valentius ducebatur*)³². However, much more data is provided by sagas and other written materials related to them. Hardrada takes part in the blinding of Emperor Michael V, as evidenced by the strophes from Sexstefja, a source which is the basis for all other saga accounts related to Harald's stay in Byzantium:

³⁰ Psellos, vol. II, VI, 158, p. 49; L. Garland, "The eye of the Beholder": *Byzantine imperial women and their public image from Zoe Porphyrogenita to Euphrosyne Kamaterissa Doukaina (1028-1203)*, „Byzantion” 1994, vol. 64/1, p. 31-33.

³¹ Psellos, vol. II, VI, 159, p. 49; G. Zulian, *Reconstructing the Image of an Empress in Middle Byzantine Constantinople: Gender in Byzantium, Psellos' Empress Zoe and the Chapel of Christ Antiphonites*, „Rosetta” 2007, vol. 2, p. 37.

³² Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. T. D. Hardy, vol. II, London 1840, III, 260, p. 436; *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum*, ed. J. Olrik et H. Ræder, Copenhagen 1931, XI, p. 305; K. DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion of England in 1066*, Woodbridge 1999, p. 34-35; S. Blöndal, B. S. Benedikz, *op. cit.*, p. 99; S. Wierzbński, *Szlachetni, odważni, dzicy? Obraz Waregów i Franków w oczach Bizantyńczyków w X-XI w.*, „Vox Patrum” 2018, vol. 69, p. 663.

7. Stólþengils lét stinga
 — styrjöld vas þá byrjuð —
 eyðir augu bæði
 út heiðingja sútar.
 Lagði allvaldr Egða
 austr á bragning hraustan
 gráligt mark, en Girkja
 gøtu illa för stillir.

*The destroyer of the care [GLADDENER] of the wolf [lit. heath-goer] [WARRIOR] had both eyes of the emperor stabbed out; a war was underway then. The overlord of the Egðir [NORWEGIAN KING = Haraldr] placed a hostile mark on the daring prince in the east, and the ruler of the Greeks [= Michael] traveled a dire road.*³³

The blinding thread appears further in this source:

8. Ok hertoga hneykir
 herfingnum lét stinga
 — leyfð berk hans — ór hofði
 haugs skundaði augu.

And the confounder of war-leaders [RULER] had the eyes stabbed out of the head of the war-captured impeller of the mound [GENEROUS RULER]; I proffer a eulogy of him [Haraldr]³⁴.

Unfortunately, Sexstefja, like two previous chroniclers, does not mention a word about the relationship between Zoe and the Varangians, in particular with Hardrada. Perhaps the most comprehensive account of the stay of Harald Hardrada in Byzantium is left by Heimskringla, whose relation is linked to the

³³ Text and the translation from D. Whaley, 'Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, Sexstefja 7', [in:] *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300. Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 2*, ed. K. E. Gade, Turnhout 2009, p. 118-19; S. Wierzbński, *Szlachetni...*, p. 663.

³⁴ Text and the translation from D. Whaley, 'Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, Sexstefja 8', [in:] *Poetry from the Kings...*, p. 120.

other two sagas: *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*. And here the Zoe thread appears quite extensively. *Heimskringla*, at the beginning of the description of Harald Hardrad's stay in Byzantium after 1034, informs us that: *At this time Queen Zoe in ríka (the Great/ Zoe drottning hin ríka) was ruling over Grikland, along with Michael kátalaktús (Moneychanger)*³⁵. *Morkinskinna* also adds some strange words in correlation with Zoe: *Ok einn dag er þeir Norðbrikt sátu á vollum nokkrum í þrimr bringum þá gekk Zóe dróttning þar hjá þeim ok sá hversu rembiliga þeir létu. Þá gekk hon at Norðbrikt ok mælti: „Þú, Norðmaðr, gef mér lokk ór hári þínu.“ Hann segir: „Dróttning,“ segir hann, „jafnmæli skal með okkr. Gef mér hár ór magaskeggi þínu.“ Þetta þótti bloegliga mælt vera, ok þó djarfliga við þvílíka konu. Hon gaf ekki gaum at ok gekk leið sína.*³⁶

Further in the story of a future king of Norway, Zoe escapes the attention of the sagas, which devote some place to describing Harald's war activities and adventures in Byzantine service. The situation changes when Harald returns to Constantinople and wants to leave it going to Kievan Rus.

Sagas suggest us, that:

when Queen Zoë got to know of this, she got very angry and raised charges against Haraldr, reckoning that he had acted dishonestly with the king of the Greeks' wealth that had been gained in raiding expeditions while Haraldr had been leader over the army. There was a girl called Maria, young and fair. She was Queen Zoë's brother's daughter. Haraldr had asked for this girl's hand in marriage, but the queen had refused. Væringjar that have been in Mikligarðr as mercenaries have come back here to the north saying that the story had gone around among well-informed people there that Queen Zoë herself wanted to have Haraldr as her husband and that this was really her main complaint against Haraldr when he wanted to leave Mikligarðr, though this was not the one made public to the

³⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* vol. III: *Magnús Ólafsson to Magnús Erlingsson*, transl. A. Finlay, A. Faulkes, London 2015, ch. III, p. 42; *Morkinskinna. Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur*, ed. F. Jónsson Copenhagen 1932, p. 11; *Morkinskinna*, ed. J. Kristjánsson, Þ. I. Guðjónsson, Reykjavík 2011, p. 88; A. Finlay, *Fagrskinna, a Catalogue of the Kings of Norway: A Translation With Introduction and Notes*, Boston 2003, p. 183; J. Shepard, *A Note on Harold Hardrada: The Date of his Arrival at Byzantium*, „Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik“ 1973, vol. 22, p. 145-150.

³⁶ This dialogue between Harald and Zoe shows the humbleness of the future ruler of Norway, who casts a sharp comment to the empress when she asks for a strand of his hair; *Morkinskinna*, ed. J. Kristjánsson, p. 89.

ordinary people. The king of the Greeks at this time was the one called Konstantinus Monomachus. He was ruling the kingdom along with Queen Zoë. For these reasons the king of the Greeks had Harald taken prisoner and put in a dungeon.³⁷

According to data from sagas, captivity and prison did not stop Harald for long because: ...Harald went straight to the Veringjar, and they all stood up to receive him and welcomed him. After that the whole troop armed themselves and went to where the king was sleeping. They took the king prisoner and put out both his eyes³⁸. After this act Harald succeeds in escaping from Constantinople and shows his unusual cunning by kidnapping the aforementioned Maria, whom the king of Norway later freed and sends back to the capital of Byzantium, informing the empress of little power over him³⁹.

Heimskringla makes a few mistakes here:

- Harald blinded Emperor, not Constantine but Michael V
- Zoe did not have a brother, but sisters who didn't have children
- Constantine Monomachos's concubine was Maria Sklerina, and she could be the progenitor of that woman from the aforementioned saga. But she was unrelated to Zoe or Emperor, and also young and attractive at that time.
- Zoe never planned to marry Harald⁴⁰.

How can we relate this to the Byzantine sources from the era that provide us with first-hand information? Michaels Attaliates had to remember Zoe quite well because the end of her reign fell on the days of his law studies in Constantinople. He wrote his history at the end of his life in the period of Dukas family rule in Constantinople but represented in his book the point of view of the supporters of her sister Teodora. The second author, Kekaumenos sympathized with Hardrada, and he knew why he was arrested and what the real reasons for it were. As noted by Maciej Lubik, Kekaumenos therefore emphasized Harold's

³⁷ Snorri Sturluson, ch. XIII, p. 50-51; *Fagrskinna*, p. 188; S. Blöndal, S. A. Benedikz, *op. cit.*, p. 77; *Morkinskinna*, ed. J. Kristjánsson, p. 106 and 109; M. Lubik, *Zastużony...*, p. 48; B. Bandlien, *Strategies of passion. Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway*, Turnhout 2005, p. 129; L. Lönnroth, *op. cit.*, p. 37-40.

³⁸ Snorri Sturluson, ch. XIV, p. 51-52; *Fagrskinna*, p. 189.

³⁹ Snorii Sturluson, ch. XV, p. 52; *Fagrskinna*, p. 190; *Morkinskinna*, ed. J. Kristjánsson, p. 114; M. Lubik, *Zastużony...*, p. 49.

⁴⁰ S. Blöndal, S. A. Benedikz, *op. cit.*, p. 97-98; M. Lubik, *Zastużony...*, p. 52; T. Wolińska, *Wareg w Bizancjum. Sycylijska przygoda Haralda Hardraade*, „Balcanica Posnanensia” 2009, vol. 15, p. 82.

loyalty to the empire, after his escape from Constantinople, especially in the time of his further rule in Norway⁴¹. John Skylitzes, the latest of the authors whose work I referred to in this paper, looks at the reign of Zoe from the face of several decades, which is why his view of Zoe is very balanced but selective at the same time. The most important of the Byzantine authors of that period, Psellos, who knew the Empress personally, was more interested in her manner of being, including the magical practices that she devoted herself to, rather than the actual description of her rule. Particularly brightly Psellos presented Zoe's actions to regain and maintain youth⁴². Zoe came from the Macedonian dynasty, which enjoyed great respect in the Byzantine Empire. Therefore, the above-mentioned authors (except perhaps Psellos) approached the issues selectively linked with her, not wanting to harm the nimbus of the dynasty. Let us remember that Zoe was a very beautiful woman, which is why the Byzantine historians who described her reign perhaps looked at her through the prism of her beauty and not the intellect or ambition to rule⁴³. Based on this, we can dump such a small amount of information certifying the relationship of the empress with great politics, and also in our case with the Varangians.

Perhaps from this byzantine respect developed for the Macedonian dynasty, a Scandinavian tradition was also flowing, in which Zoe is treated as a great and powerful ruler, and thus she was a good background for the story of Harald Hardrada. The Scandinavians at her court probably had to praise her generosity, as seen in Psellos' accounts, but they also know of her three marriages of a late age, of which one was out of love and two out of reason. Sagas accounts provide us with data on her two last husbands, Michael IV and Constantine IX, placing them in chronological order. Of course, they are wrong about the blinding of Constantine, but it still shows the great quality of Byzantine realities, which their creators showed, writing them down after a few centuries of oral tradition. However, their late time perspective also raises several problems. That is why we get the topic of an alleged plan for a wedding with Hardrada, a plan that would

⁴¹ M. Lubik, *Zastużony...*, p. 61.

⁴² M. Panas, E. Poulakou-Rebelakou, N. Kalfakis, D. Vassilopoulos, *The Byzantine Empress Zoe Porphyrogenita and the quest for eternal youth*, „Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology” 2012, vol. 11/3, p. 245-248.

⁴³ T. Whitmore, *A Portrait of the Empress Zoe and the Constantine IX*, „Byzantion” 1946-1948, vol. 18, p. 223-227.

never have had a chance to realize in the Byzantine realities of the eleventh century. The other one is an introduction to the account of the King of Norway, a young woman named Maria, daughter of Zoe's brother, whose hand Hardrada was to try to win. It was a poetic procedure that emphasized the superiority of youth over age, in this case, to the disadvantage of the empress. Zoe was very well aware that she was the only person able to extend the Macedonian dynasty, only her age would not allow it. That is why she deliberately threw herself at the romances with many men, which also could not escape the attention of the Varangians' guards in her circle, closely following the imperial court.

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